

# Undergraduate Research Symposium MAY 21, 2010 Mary Gates Hall

## Online Proceedings

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### SESSION 2M

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#### EMPIRE, IDENTITY AND INCORPORATION

*Session Moderator: Francisco Benitez, Comparative  
Literature*

**Mary Gates Hall Room 271**

*3:30 PM to 5:00 PM*

\* Note: Titles in order of presentation.

#### **No Pain No Gain; Violence and a Critique of American Identity in Contemporary Cinematic Incarnations of the Western**

*Brandon Weaver, Senior, Comparative History of Ideas,  
English*

*Mentor: Ryan Burt, English, Comparative History of Ideas*

The goal of this essay is to investigate the cultural work of contemporary incarnations of the "Western" through cinema. The essay is broken into two parts, the first of which considers the basis for such an investigation, demonstrating historically the cultural work of classical Western. The guiding questions that I attempt to address through this consideration concern the relation of culture productions to society: how have classical narratives depicted acts of violence and what is the relationship of violence to law? What framework or worldview makes these acts feasible? What role does religion, class, race and gender play in this framework? Without trying to exhaustively answer these questions, I hope to merely provide a frame of reference concerning the cultural and ideological function of the Western, which would enable a more informed analysis of its contemporary incarnations. Having established this frame of reference I will attempt, in the second part of the essay, to distinguish between two forms of contemporary Westerns. I will argue that the first, which I term neo-western, simply reiterates particular ideologies present in classic Western. The second, termed "post-Western," incorporates and considers several themes present in classical Western narratives but complicates and critiques their logic and ideologies in a variety of ways. Considerable analytical emphasis is placed on this last consideration wherein I have tried to address a second set of guiding questions: how have "post-Westerns" engaged and reworked classical Western narratives? To what end? How do these novels critique certain conceptions of American identity? To what extent do

post-westerns re-imagine American identity? What, if any, are the implications of this re-imagination? Finally, I conclude by exploring the possible reasons for the existence of these two largely antithetical forms of contemporary Westerns in terms of American identity.