

2013

Review of *Gunfight at the Eco-Corral: Western Cinema and the Environment* By Robin L. Murray and Joseph K. Heumann.

Stephen Rust  
*University of Oregon*

Follow this and additional works at: <http://digitalcommons.unl.edu/greatplainsquarterly>

---

Rust, Stephen, "Review of *Gunfight at the Eco-Corral: Western Cinema and the Environment* By Robin L. Murray and Joseph K. Heumann." (2013). *Great Plains Quarterly*. 2483.  
<http://digitalcommons.unl.edu/greatplainsquarterly/2483>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Great Plains Studies, Center for at DigitalCommons@University of Nebraska - Lincoln. It has been accepted for inclusion in Great Plains Quarterly by an authorized administrator of DigitalCommons@University of Nebraska - Lincoln.

*Gunfight at the Eco-Corral: Western Cinema and the Environment.* By Robin L. Murray and Joseph K. Heumann. Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 2012. xii + 260 pp. Photographs, notes, filmography, works cited, index. \$24.95 paper.

Is there any image from Hollywood cinema more iconic than a lone cowboy riding across a Western landscape? While much has been written about such themes as individualism, empire, and landscape in Hollywood Westerns, until recently scholars have ignored the central trope underlying all others in these films—the ecological relationship between humans and their environment. The Western, as Robin Murray and Joseph Heumann explain, both masks and unmasks this trope by dramatizing and oversimplifying ecological issues while mythologizing the cowboy's relationship with the land. In this comprehensive study, the authors build on their previous work on popular cinema and animated films by approaching the Western from a postmodern, ecocentric perspective. They contend that such an approach can help scholars move beyond the essentialist, ahistorical conceptions of nature often espoused by nature writers and philosophers.

This approach can illuminate the real-world ecological and environmental justice concerns underlying cinematic texts. Each chapter thus combines textual analysis with environmental science and history to deconstruct Hollywood Westerns that portray such issues as mining, water rights, and the oil boom. Chapter 1, for example, analyzes the battle over free-range and fenced ranching as depicted in *Shane* (1953) and *Sea of Grass* (1947). *Shane* foregrounds the need for fencing to protect homesteaders and the environment from being trampled upon by corporate ranchers. *Sea of Grass* invokes images of the Dust Bowl to

argue for a free-range approach. The authors analyze this debate not only in terms of the historical periods depicted in the films but also in relation to scientific understandings at the time of their production, thus providing a model for future scholars in addressing issues like the debate between factory and organic meat production.

In chapter 5, the authors bring ecocriticism to bear on films like *Union Pacific* (1939), *Jesse James* (1939), and *The Last Hunt* (1956) to challenge the romantic view of the railroad held by historians like Stephen Ambrose. Instead, they argue that the introduction of transcontinental technologies brought changes to the Plains environment that effectively ended the American Indian way of life and decimated species like the bison. Although readers may find some chapters more effective than others, the writing throughout is clear, precise, and meticulously organized. The authors' ability to reference so many films while maintaining a sharp focus on individual texts is particularly impressive.

By effectively integrating environmental science and history into their textual analysis, Murray and Heumann have made another valuable contribution to the field of ecological media studies.

STEPHEN RUST  
Department of English  
University of Oregon