

Dean Symmonds: 2018 Research Award Entry Essay

The idea for this paper, and for the J-Term independent study for which I wrote it, came after I watched *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof* for the first time last December. In the film, Paul Newman as Brick Pollitt bears impossible, overwhelming secrets and struggles between protecting himself with silence and acting on his hatred for Southern culture's requisite lies and artifices. He calls this aspect of Southern culture "mendacity," or simply, untruthfulness. His struggle drives him to alcoholism and nearly kills him. It's only when his father tells Brick that he knows Brick is gay, and Brick lashes out by revealing that his father is dying, that Brick temporarily escapes mendacity's grip. As a Southern lesbian, I recognized this interplay between the necessity of the closet and the illusions that Southerners craft and maintain about their family history, their marriage, their faith, etc.. In a society where the lies you tell about yourself are more important than the truth of who you are—where "mendacity" reigns—it's even harder to escape the closet. This got me thinking about closeting in films, and how films like *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof* could use Southern mendacity to further closet their gay or gay-coded characters—to communicate their aberrant sexualities without owning up to it. With the help of Professor Anne Berke, I embarked on my J-Term independent study with that theory in mind. I came up with a list of 23 movies that featured characters who were Southern/lived in the South and who were LGBTQ, gay-coded, or received by the audience as gay and folded into gay culture (e.g., the Wicked Witch from *Wizard of Oz*). Representation of both of these status characteristics ranges from plain and obvious (maybe caricature-like) or hidden and unspoken. I watched 14 movies. I took notes about each of them, and combined those with notes I took from my various print sources, like *The Celluloid Closet* by Vito Russo and *The Matter of Images* by Richard Dyer. Almost all the movies I watched, I got from our library, with the exception of a few from Roanoke College; I found all my print sources through our library's website. I essentially checked out any book we had about queer cinema, plus two about Southern cinema. With such a broad range of sources, I struggled during the latter half of January to narrow my topic to something I could address in a single paper. During a conference with Professor Berke, we discussed the Western genre and I realized that *Thelma & Louise* counts as a Western, and it would complement the other Westerns I'd watched, *Red River* and *Brokeback Mountain*. All three are about gay-coded or explicitly gay pairs who are from or spend a significant amount of time in Texas. Upon closer analysis, I recognized that each pair used violence to express not only wrath and disdain for each other, but sexuality, friendship, and love. I'd found my topic. Although distant from the theory of mendacity that Brick describes, this focus allowed me to interrogate and deconstruct violence within the all-American Western genre, particularly how filmmakers have adapted hypermasculine, hyper-heterosexual, colonialist, destructive violence into a way to visualize and understand gay sexuality and love. I'm so thankful I pursued this scholarship and I'm proud of the paper I produced. I've kept all my research and I plan on revisiting it to write even more papers about gay Southerners on film.