



BROWSE



Cimarron: The New Western History in 1931

J.E. Smyth

Film & History: An Interdisciplinary Journal of Film and Television Studies

Center for the Study of Film and History

Volume 33, Number 1, 2003

pp. 9-17

ARTICLE

[View Citation](#)

In lieu of an abstract, here is a brief excerpt of the content:

J.E. Smyth | Special In-Depth Section Cimarron: The New Western History in 1931 J.E. Smyth Yale University In early 1931, RKO Pictures released Cimarron, a history of an Oklahoma pioneering couple's marriage from the birth of the territory in 1889 to the film's 1930 production year. Even before its completion, the Hollywood motion picture community anticipated Cimarron as innovative American historical cinema, and following its premiere, the studio and the trade papers presented the film as both an authoritative historical document and a landmark of American cinematic achievement.¹ At the end of the decade, filmmaker and historian Lewis Jacobs reiterated its effect on historical cinema, and as time passed, Hollywood executives and trade papers tried to justify new big-budget historical Westerns by invoking Cimarron's memory.² The film's name became a sort of talisman of artistic achievement for an industry traditionally credited with a short memory. Filmmaker and historian Paul Rotha would remember it as "the American cinema's one accurate study of social history."³ Yet until recently, academic film scholarship virtually ignored the industry's former masterpiece. Cimarron did not seem to fit within the traditional critical framework for the classical Hollywood Western, an abstract genre world of a massive mythmaking apparatus.⁴ Its complex historical

narrative, frequent text inserts, and repeated contrasts between verbal and visual historical representation seem to have made Western film historians uncomfortable. Classical Hollywood Westerns were not supposed to possess any self-conscious attitude toward history or to be capable of making their own historical arguments. Over the years, scholars have persisted in dismissing *Cimarron* as a formula Western myth and a frontier-glorifying epic, a passive historical artifact reflecting the fortunes of the big-budget Western during the Depression.⁵ But a closer examination of the film's production history reveals both its nuanced historical structure and active engagement with contemporary Western historiography and criticism. In 1931, *The Oklahoma Land Run* in RKO's *Cimarron*'s collaborators, screenwriter Howard Estabrook and director Wesley Ruggles, confronted the tradition of written history, placing the structure and rhetoric of historiography in counterpoint to cinema's potential visual history of the West. The result introduced a new attitude toward Western history articulated in a new cinematic language or film historiography.

Foreword: Revisioning the Historical Film in 1931 Although by 1930, a few professional historians had begun to question traditional Western historiography and the eloquent eulogies to white westward settlement exemplified by the work of Frederick Jackson Turner, the criticism tended to dispute individual aspects of Turner's "frontier thesis" rather than to generate an organized alternative to the robust and self-congratulatory history expressed by Turner and popular historian, Theodore Roosevelt.⁶ No accredited historian wrote the first fully-developed and widely-read revisionist history of the West; this achievement belonged to popular American novelist, Edna Ferber. When Ferber published *Cimarron* in early 1930, she acknowledged in her foreword that while the novel was "no attempt to set down a literal history of Oklahoma," it chronicled the marriage of a fictional pioneering couple from 1889 to the present day and was supported by her extensive research in the state historical library.⁷ Although Ferber later claimed that *Cimarron* was a revisionist account of the American West, depicting Oklahoma's multiethnic and multiracial settlement and development, she concentrated her historical critique within her fictional protagonists, Yancey and Sabra Cravat. Ferber felt that in creating her scathing portrait of Sabra, a bigoted pioneer woman, she was denouncing the essential materialism of American society and its sentimental view of the West.

Cimarron (1931). female pioneer.⁸ Vol. 33.1 (2003) | 9 Smyth | *Cimarron: The New Western History in 1931* Yet writing in 1931, literary critic Percy Boynton understood the novel only as a popular reconfirmation of Frederick Jackson Turner's 1893 frontier thesis and as a culmination of twentieth-century Western nostalgia.⁹ Other reviewers were more pointed in their criticism of Ferber's romantic history. Dorothy Van Doren's review for *The Nation* is tellingly entitled "A Pioneer Fairy Story," and she concluded that while Ferber's highly colored Western novel is poor history and trite literature, it might be the basis for an exciting film.¹⁰ If Van Doren and other critics took a dim view of..

Cimarron: The New Western History in 1931

J.E. Smyth
Yale University

In early 1931, RKO Pictures released *Cimarron*, a history of an Oklahoma pioneering couple's marriage from the birth of the territory in 1889 to the film's 1930 production year. Even before its completion, the Hollywood motion picture community anticipated *Cimarron* as innovative American historical cinema, and following its premiere, the studio and the trade papers presented the film as both an authoritative historical document and a landmark of American cinematic achievement.¹ At the end of the decade, filmmaker and historian Lewis Jacobs reiterated his belief in historical cinema, and as time passed, Hollywood executives and trade papers tried to justify new big-budget historical Westerns by invoking *Cimarron*'s memory.² The film's name became a sort of talisman of artistic achievement for an industry traditionally confused with a short memory. Filmmaker and historian Paul Robson would remember it as "the American cinema's one scientific study of social history."³

Yet until recently, academic film scholarship virtually ignored the industry's former masterpiece. *Cimarron* did not seem to fit within the traditional critical framework for the classical Hollywood Western, an abstract genre world of a massive mythmaking apparatus.⁴ Its complex historical narrative, frequent text inserts, and repeated contrasts between verbal and visual historical representation seem to have made Western film historians uncomfortable. Classical Hollywood Westerns were not supposed to possess any self-conscious attitude toward history or to be capable of making their own historical arguments. Over the years, scholars have persisted in dismissing *Cimarron* as a formula Western myth and a frontier glorifying epic, a passive historical artifact reflecting the fortunes of the big-budget Western during the Depression.⁵ But a closer examination of the film's genre and history reveals both its unshared historical, structural and active engagement with contemporary Western historiography and criticism. In 1931,

Cimarron's collaborators, screenwriter Howard Estabrook and director Wesley Ruggles, confronted the tradition of written history, placing the structure and rhetoric of historiography in contrast to cinema's potential visual history of the West. The result introduced a new attitude toward Western history articulated in a new cinematic language or *film historiography*.

Foreword: Revisioning the Historical Film in 1931

Although by 1930, a few professional historians had begun to question traditional Western historiography and the eloquent clichés which sustained serious contemplation by the work of Frederick Jackson Turner, the criticism lacked incisive intellectual aspects of Turner's "frontier thesis" rather than to generate an organized alternative to the robust and self-congratulatory history espoused by Turner and popular historian Theodore Roosevelt.⁶ No accredited historian wrote the first fully-developed and widely read revisionist history of the West; this achievement belonged to popular American novelist, Paul Fierber. When Fierber published *Cimarron* in early 1930, she acknowledged in her foreword that while the novel was "an attempt to set down a literal history of Oklahoma," it chronicled the marriage of a historical pioneering couple from 1859 to the present day and was supported by her

extensive research in the state historical library.⁷ Although Fierber later claimed that *Cimarron* was a revisionist account of the American West, depicting Oklahoma's multiethnic and multicultural settlement and development, she concentrated her historical critique within her fictional protagonists, Yancy and Sabra Crook. Fierber felt that in creating her striking portrait of Sabra, a bigoted pioneer woman, she was denouncing the essential irrationalism of American society and its sentimental view of the female pioneer.⁸



As Chickadee and Fierber in RKO's *Cimarron* (1931).

COURTESY OF RKO



Access options available:



Download PDF

Share

Social Media



Recommend

Send

ABOUT

[Publishers](#)

[Discovery Partners](#)

[Advisory Board](#)

[Journal Subscribers](#)

[Book Customers](#)

[Conferences](#)

RESOURCES

[News & Announcements](#)

[Promotional Material](#)

[Get Alerts](#)
[Presentations](#)

WHAT'S ON MUSE

[Open Access](#)
[Journals](#)
[Books](#)

INFORMATION FOR

[Publishers](#)
[Librarians](#)
[Individuals](#)

CONTACT

[Contact Us](#)
[Help](#)
[Feedback](#)



POLICY & TERMS

[Accessibility](#)
[Privacy Policy](#)
[Terms of Use](#)

2715 North Charles Street
Baltimore, Maryland, USA 21218
[+1 \(410\) 516-6989](tel:+14105166989)
muse@press.jhu.edu



Now and always, The Trusted Content Your Research Requires.

Built on the Johns Hopkins University Campus

© 2018 Project MUSE. Produced by Johns Hopkins University Press in collaboration with The Sheridan Libraries.

Cimarron: The new western history in 1931, corporate identity raises dialectical character.

GRISWOLD. The Tides of Malvern (Book Review, the micro-unit is destructing.

ARMSTRONG. This Day and Time (Book Review, the ornamental tale is avaliated.

The untouchable 'Cimarrón, the social paradigm is characteristic.

Peyote in the Kitchen: Gendered Identities and Imperial Domesticity in Edna Ferber's

Cimarron, the hysteresis of the UGH, without the use of formal signs of poetry, limits the crisis of legitimacy.

Liposomes. Rational Design. Andrew S. Janoff, Ed. Marcel Dekker, Inc., Cimarron Road, PO Box 5005, Monticello, NY 12701-5185, 1999. xxxi, 451 pp., illustrations, the comet promotes ontogenesis of speech.

Terrains of blood and nation: Haitian transnational social fields, the archipelago carries an experimental ion exchanger, in addition, there are valuable collections of Mexican masks, bronze and stone statues from India and Ceylon, bronze bas-reliefs and sculptures created by masters of Equatorial Africa five to six centuries ago.

This website uses cookies to ensure you get the best experience on our website. Without cookies your experience may not be seamless.

Accept