

Atlantic Monthly - How the West Was Lost

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***The Lone Ranger's* failure at the box office earlier this month not only dealt a blow to mega-budget Hollywood blockbusters, Johnny Depp's career, and Disney. The Jerry Bruckheimer-Gore Verbinski flop--which cost a reported \$250 million to make and brought in just \$50 million opening on a holiday weekend--also may mark a decisive chapter in the sad story of how the Western was lost.**

Since the dawn of film, the Western has been one of the great, durable movie genres, but its audience seems to be finally drying up. *The Lone Ranger* is the third Western to flop in four summers, and the most expensive, capping a trend set by *Cowboys & Aliens* and *Jonah Hex*. (Remember them? Exactly.) Western fans are getting older and whiter with respect to the overall population, and as any Republican political consultant will tell you, that doesn't bode well for the future. Other, newer genres like superhero movies and fighting-robot flicks have cowboy movies outgunned with younger generations and international audiences.

Now the genre finds itself in the ironic position of needing a hero to save it, and quick. If *The Lone Ranger* goes down in history as the last of the big-budget oaters, it'll be a sad milestone for moviemaking--and for America. For a century plus, we have relied on Westerns to teach us our history and reflect our current politics and our place in the world. We can ill afford to lose that mirror now, especially just because we don't like what we see staring back at us.

Westerns provide many timeless pleasures--tough guy heroes, action set pieces on horseback, adventures in magnificent landscapes, good triumphing over evil. It's all there already in arguably the first narrative film ever made, *The Great Train Robbery*.

But to discuss Westerns as if they just boiled down to heroic stories of saving the homestead from savages, tracking the bad guy through the wilderness, or finding the treasure in the mountains would be to miss the real meaning of the genre. Westerns have earned their place at the heart of the national culture and American iconography abroad because they've provided a reliable vehicle for filmmakers to explore thorny issues of American history and character. In the enduring examples of the genre, the real threat to the homestead, we learn, is an economic system that is being rigged for the wealthy, or the search for the bad guy becomes a search for meaning in a culture of violent retribution, or the treasure of the Sierra Madre is a diabolical mirage of the American dream.

Through the past century of Western movies, we can trace America's self-image as it evolved from a rough-and-tumble but morally confident outsider in world affairs to an all-powerful sheriff with a guilty conscience. After World War I and leading into World War II, Hollywood specialized in tales of heroes taking the good fight to savage enemies and

saving defenseless settlements in the process. In the Great Depression especially, as capitalism and American exceptionalism came under question, the cowboy hero was often mistaken for a criminal and forced to prove his own worthiness--which he inevitably did. Over the '50s, '60s, and '70s however, as America enforced its dominion over half the planet with a long series of coups, assassinations, and increasingly dubious wars, the figure of the cowboy grew darker and more complicated. If you love Westerns, most of your favorites are probably from this era--*Shane*, *The Searchers*, *Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid*, *McCabe & Mrs. Miller*, the spaghetti westerns, etc. By the height of the Vietnam protest era, cowboys were antiheroes as often as they were heroes.

The dawn of the 1980s brought the inauguration of Ronald Reagan and the box-office debacle of the artsy, overblown *Heaven's Gate*. There's a sense of disappointment to the decade that followed, as if the era of revisionist Westerns had failed and a less nuanced patriotism would have to carry the day. Few memorable Westerns were made in the '80s, and Reagan himself proudly associated himself with an old-fashioned, pre-Vietnam cowboy image. But victory in the Cold War coincided with a revival of the genre, including the revisionist strain, exemplified in Clint Eastwood's career-topping *Unforgiven*. A new, gentler star emerged in Kevin Costner, who scored a post-colonial

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mega-hit with *Dances With Wolves*. Later, in the 2000s, George W. Bush reclaimed the image of the cowboy for a foreign policy far less successful than Reagan's, and the genre retreated to the art house again.

Under the presidency of Barack Obama, there has been a short-lived Western revival that would seem to match America's tentative new moral authority. If the genre in this era can be said to have a unifying aim, it's to divest itself and its audiences of a strictly white, male, heterosexual perspective on history, and by extension on present day conflicts. *Cowboys & Aliens* is a cynical attempt at a post-racial Western--just take the Indians out of the equation so we can be good guys again!--but with more sincerity, *True Grit*, *Django Unchained*, and now *The Lone Ranger* have all put non-male, non-white perspectives front and center. (Two other notable movies from the past 15 years, the wonderful *Brokeback Mountain* and the awful *Wild Wild West*, also fit this model.) It's worth pointing out, however, that all of these examples (except *Brokeback Mountain*) were directed by white men, and *The Lone Ranger* has Tonto played by an actor with only the slightest claim to American Indian ancestry.

Although end-of-year prestige movies like *True Grit* and *Django Unchained* have broken through to achieve critical acclaim, Oscars, and substantial return on investment, the Obama era has not been kind to newfangled Westerns that aimed for large audiences. Exacerbating the problem is the rejection of cowboy movies by international audiences, particularly the Chinese. So even as filmmakers have become more interested in

incorporating a diversity of viewpoints, they have hit against what appears a global demographic ceiling. It's another reason why *The Lone Ranger* will probably be the last attempt to build a true summer tent-pole in the genre.

Nobody likes a weak ending, and this is especially true for cowboy movies. A sad outcome we can accept, even the death of a genre, but at least let our hero meet his challenge, fulfill his destiny, stand his (or her) ground. Watching *The Lone Ranger* slink off into the sunset, it's hard to feel any sense of resolution for the Western.

It's always difficult to diagnose the reason for a movie's success or failure. Did the audience dislike what *The Lone Ranger* tried to do, or the fact that it executed its aims poorly? Since it bombed definitively on opening weekend (long before China got a look at it, too) it seems safest to base conclusions in part on the movie's advertising and the media storylines surrounding its release.

Three contributing factors stand out. First, there was some coverage of an outcry about racism in Depp's portrayal of Tonto, which conceivably made audiences less comfortable laughing along with the pidgin English. Second, advertising leaned heavily on the association with the *Pirates of the Caribbean* franchise, touting the movie as a family-friendly adventure yarn, but word quickly spread that *The Lone Ranger* was not safe for kids. Finally, the 149-minute runtime can't have helped.

The irony is that the very factors that helped make *The Lone Ranger* a bomb also helped make it much more interesting than typical summer fare. (Mild spoilers follow.) The runtime ballooned because the filmmakers wouldn't dispense with a time-consuming framing story that shows Depp's Tonto, in old-man makeup and a historically inappropriate headdress, wilting away inside a Museum of Natural History-style display called "The Noble Savage in His Native Habitat." The scenes deemed unsafe for children included two graphic depictions of American Indian genocide. The character of Tonto came to the filmmakers with heavy racist baggage, and, rather than tossing him out altogether, they took on the challenge of trying to carry that baggage while walking the tightrope of commenting on a stereotype through the performance of that same stereotype.

This is not to say that any of these bold moves are executed adeptly. The framing story never goes anywhere; the Indian genocide scenes are distastefully incidental to the plot, especially one scene of mass slaughter that provides the heroes cover to get out of a pickle; Depp's winking performance is still fundamentally problematic, as if he or any other white actor had done a modern Mr. Bojangles, blackface and all, and tried to get actual laughs out of it.

Still, in simple terms, *The Lone Ranger* went there. And there. And over there. *The Lone Ranger* did not fail for being timid. In this cautious, sequel-dominated era of summer movies, that's a recommendation in itself. Even if they weren't particularly clever about it, Verbinski and his collaborators deserve credit for engaging critically with the history

involved, both the 19th-century Indian massacres and the legacy of racism from the early 20th-century source material.

This is also a tribute to the genre. The ground rules of the Western more or less forced Verbinski and company into that treacherous territory. They could make, say, a movie about Caribbean pirates without addressing the slave trade, even though such pirates often held slaves as cargo. That's fine, because pirate movies are about gold, not slaves. Everyone knows that. Westerns, on the contrary, are traditionally about cowboys and Indians, or at least homesteaders and land and railroad barons, the kinds of men who built the cities we live in today.

It's the task of Westerns to address that history, even as decade by decade that history becomes more and more embarrassing to us. In theory, it's a beautiful thing, though in practice it means cowboy movies are easy to bungle, because by now they all take place on contested ground. Every Western must find its own way reconcile itself to the founding contradictions of America. A certain kind of escapism becomes impossible.

Unless, of course, we stop making and watching Westerns. The genres that currently rule the box office do other things well--sci-fi movies can address the ecological crisis and challenges of new technology, for instance, and superhero movies can provide never-ending glosses on the core myth of American exceptionalism — but none are particularly engaged with history, especially pre-World War II. And none can boast the richness of symbolic language developed by Westerns over the course of a century at the heart of film culture.

It would be a terrible thing to give up on that language, especially now, in the wake of *The Lone Ranger's* failure. Isn't there anyone, perhaps a female or non-white director, capable of making a great mass-audience Western for the Obama era? Or, if it's too late for that, then for whatever era comes next? If neither, here's hoping that filmmakers will keep trying at the art-house level and on cable television.

The other great theme of the Western, after that of the conquering of native peoples and the establishment of civilization in the desert, is that of loss and of nostalgia for a certain way of life--the early freedoms of the West, the idea of riding across an unfenced landscape, the infinite possibilities of the frontier. That "West," of course, is already gone, fallen, conquered. It has been for decades, even though holding onto some sense of it seems crucial to our identity as Americans. Movie Westerns have been tracking that loss for a century.

Now, as *The Lone Ranger* leaves theaters this month, that sense of loss begins to expand to cowboy movies themselves. The train is leaving the station, and the thing we rely on to help make sense of ourselves in the world is tied to the tracks. Is there a hero on the horizon?