

## 2a- 'The American epic': Hollywood's enduring love for the western

Ominous music, reminiscent of a horror movie, plays while a stranded priest waits alone in a dusty landscape. A lone horseman rides up, a scene out of a classic western. Despite occasional rumors of its demise – and two decades where memorable entries were the exception – the western is now surprisingly vibrant, thanks to a flexibility that allows movies and TV series to celebrate the genre's traditions, deconstruct its conventions or do both.

"The western has always been the American epic," says Robert Thompson, director of Syracuse University's Bleier Center for Television & Popular Culture. "It's exciting and violent and huge. We don't have a single text like *The Iliad* or *The Odyssey* but the western is our story." Westerns never died off but few were made from 1980 to 2003. They returned with a vengeance after 9/11 and the invasion of Iraq. "The movie has us re-examining the self-evident truths of America," Thompson says, tackling subjects like poverty's multi-generational stranglehold, the lingering impact of domestic violence; casual racism and even the pros and cons of a state loaded with guns. But it does so amid a landscape of bank robberies and getaway cars, stakeouts and shootouts.

The western has been a movie staple since the pioneering 1903 film, *The Great Train Robbery*. It became the dominant genre, especially after the second world war, creating an image – John Wayne – of rugged American self-reliance and manliness. From 1910 through 1960, approximately a quarter of all films featured hats and horses and the television landscape was similarly populated with cowboys. The classic westerns "celebrated American exceptionalism", Aquila says.

While most were "white hats and black hats, good versus evil", Stacy Keach recalls, the best were more nuanced. Sure, the good guys always won but in John Ford's *The Searchers*, Wayne's virulent racism makes him more an anti-hero and Jeff Bridges says, "there were dilemmas and moral complexities in movies like *High Noon*", a parable about McCarthyism. Radical change arrived in the 1960s with a young generation opposing the Vietnam war and supporting the civil rights and women's movements. "Old westerns were like a checklist of what their revolution was against," Thompson says – macho heroes, "might makes right" and manifest destiny against "savages".

"The western is flexible, that's why its alive still," says Aquila. "Every generation uses it for its own purposes." By the late 1970s, production of any westerns was in steep decline. Thompson and Keach say the dusty towns seemed alien to younger viewers, who preferred space, the final frontier, which allowed for western stories and characters – Captain Kirk as the sheriff – in a new setting. "Star Wars is a western in space," Keach says.

The freshest takes these days find new ways to subvert, escape or toy with the familiar cliches. "They are picking up on our traditional notions of the western but then playing with them," Aquila says, while remaining timely by exploring our anxiety about topics like artificial intelligence.

"This is still our historical epic," Thompson adds. "The western is going to be around for a long time

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