



Donald Trump The Cowboy



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Americans love film, a medium we've popularized across the globe. We're home to Hollywood; we pioneered cinema as an industry and an art form.

Film has enabled cultural memory and iconography to survive in residual form from generation to generation. Since early motion pictures, images that flashed across our screens have become part of our communicative coding, manifesting themselves in political discourse in subtle, unexpected ways.

Perhaps the most foundational figure in American cinema is the nomadic cowboy, that romantic hero of the frontier whose moral ambiguity thrills and troubles us. Frederick Jackson Turner announced his frontier thesis in 1893, drawing attention to the rugged individualism and westward expansion that characterized American liberty and differentiated the New World from Europe.

The masculine figure of the cowboy embodies this thesis. He's an archetype. Garbed in buckskins and

spurs, he conquers the wilderness and the Indians, exacting ruthless revenge on his foes and exercising his menacing skills to achieve justice, at least his notion of it.

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But he has a dark side. One is never certain whether he's a bad guy with good qualities or a good guy with bad qualities. He can be, like Wyatt Earp, both lawman and outlaw, and his very presence creates dysfunction, jeopardizing the harmony of the community and the stability of the nuclear family. Even Shane, the most impeccable of cowboys, endangers the affection between Joe Starrett and his wife and risks undermining the sense of corporate community he's fighting to uphold.

The cowboy is a paradox: heroic yet savage, mannered yet unruly, tamed yet wild, gentle yet violent. He's a beloved and mysterious loner, reckless in the pursuit of civilized life. There's dissonance in his desire to establish domestic settlement and close the frontier while exploring nature, roaming the open range, and maintaining noble independence. With his code of honor, he's the American version of the brave and chivalrous knight who rides off on quests and adventures.

Former presidents have sought to embed themselves in the Western genre, troping the image and lore of the cowboy. President Reagan, a friend of John Wayne, acted in Westerns and was known to clad himself in big shiny belt buckles and Stetson hats. George W. Bush played up his Texas swagger, wore boots and shot rifles, vacationed on his ranch and applied the pioneering spirit to foreign affairs.

Unlike his immediate predecessor, Donald Trump is a cowboy, or the semiotic mutation of one. That's why he appeals to so many Americans. This may come as a surprise. He might seem more like the cowboy's close cousin, the urban gangster. After all, he's a New York casino and real-estate magnate who wears dark suits and bright ties and displays his money and wealth. He's gaudy and flashy like Tony Montana, and a wealthy patriarch like Vito Corleone. He's charismatic and travels in groups, and there's a noirish quality to his messaging, which the media keeps calling "dark."

Yet his narrative arc is not one of dramatic rise and inevitable fall. Nor is he an immigrant figure with ties to drugs and organized crime. He is, instead, the brawling gunslinger, marked by vanity and bravado, irresponsible in his boastfulness. He speaks for a community not his own, glamorizing his triumphs and victories. His bombast and boisterousness have an inexplicably moral feel, as if he represents more than himself and speaks for others—the common man, the forgotten man, the ranchers and laborers.

The cowboy stands up to cattle-baron cronies, just as Trump takes on leading news outlets and the so-called “establishment.” He portrays himself as an outmatched Will Kane, ready to confront gangs of rivals against all odds—as he did in the election when he knocked off his primary opponents and then the presumptive Democratic president, proving an entire class of pollsters and the commentariat wrong.

Like Old Rough and Ready, Trump is vague on political positions and policy prescriptions. His supporters speak of the “Trump Train,” a phrase suggestive of the nineteenth-century railroad, which dominated American industry. His derogatory comments about Mexicans and immigrants are alike in kind if not degree to those of Ethan Edwards regarding the Comanche. Think John Wayne in *The Searchers*.

Trump is married, but not domesticated. He blurs the lines between truth and embellishment, decrying and creating fake news in the same breath. He harnesses the power of the maxim from *The Man Who Shot Liberty Valence*: “When the legend becomes fact, print the legend.”

Trump’s high-soaring rhetoric is reminiscent of an earlier moment in American history when there were, in the American psyche, clear winners and losers. The slightest insult can cause him to seek revenge that’s both personal and heedless, having something of the showdown about it.

He’s a tweet-dueler. The Internet being the new frontier, in an age when you can’t get away with gratuitous killing, he trades characters, not bullets. And he’s quick on the draw, able to unload rounds of tweets in mere seconds.

Like William Munny, the aging anti-hero in Clint Eastwood’s *Unforgiven*, Trump doesn’t drink. His infatuation with Mexico and insistence on building a wall across the Southern border recall the boundary disputes of a bygone era. Imagine Santa Anna and the Republic of Texas as historical antecedents to current border anxieties.

Trump’s carefully orchestrated press conferences, campaign rallies, and inaugural address suggest that he demands a spectacle that’s as visually magnificent as a John Ford film. He fancies the long-shot panorama with American flags in the background. He flies in and out of small towns, ever the roving myth, and he doesn’t have a single place to call home.

During a period of economic contraction, aging population, shifting demographics, and declining American power, ordinary Americans understandably look to a time of territorial growth, when heroes defeated “the Other,” solved their problems, and overcame adversity. With the advent of Google Maps and Street View, folks long for a past of exploration and geographic mystery—when there were borders between known and unknown lands. Trump talks about Greatness. Speaking in superlatives, he refers to things as Amazing, Huge, Tremendous, and Wonderful. His vision for America is as wide in scope as the Western landscape.

Trump is a construct of the mythic figure we’ve come to expect from viewing Western symbols, plots, and motifs. He reminds us of the William Faulkner line: “The past is never dead; it’s not even past.” The cowboy is indeed alive and well, even if he’s a sign of the past. He comes in the improbable, astonishing form of Donald Trump. And he wants to win.

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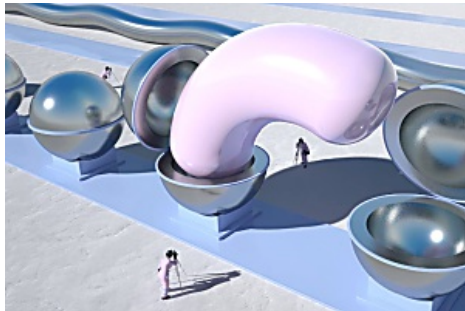
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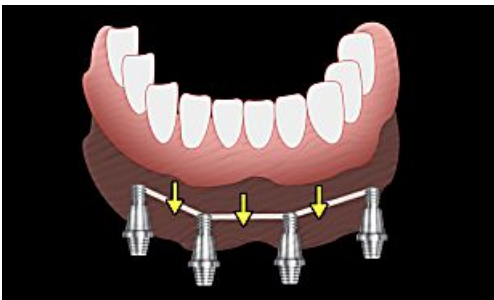
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