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From the beginning of the sound era to the end of the 1960s, Hollywood made more Westerns than any other kind of film. The iconography of the genre—from its ten-gallon hats and six guns to its endless plains and towering mountains—has become synonymous around the world with America itself. Small wonder. No film genre spoke so pointedly and eloquently to the hopes and fears of 20th century audiences, and even though few Westerns are made today, its power over the imagination continues.

The Western may tell tales set in a fabled 19th century, but to study its history is to learn more about the culture that produced it—what Americans dreamed, hoped, felt about themselves and their country—than about any actual West of old. Indeed, although dime novels and Wild West traveling shows first brought America's mythic concept of itself to the masses, our common idea of "the West" is impossible to imagine without the movies. You might say they grew up together. The first Western (and the first blockbuster), Edwin S. Porter's *The Great Train Robbery*, was made in 1903, only 10 years after Frederick Jackson Turner made his famous speech about the closing of the frontier. Film invented the mythic West almost as soon as the real one had died.

What made the Western so popular? In a time of rapid and often profoundly disturbing change, the genre pointed back toward a past that never quite existed but that provided a shared vision of American exceptionalism, as well as the perfect backdrop for defining a national identity. Sometimes the genre's vision of American history was reassuring, painting a nostalgic picture of certitude and stark choices. The rough-hewn cowboy rides into town on his horse and imposes order with his gun; once civilization has been established, he lights out again for the territory. Stories like King Vidor's *The Texas Rangers*, William Wyler's *The Westerner*, and Fritz Lang's *Western Union* are all variations on this theme of the lawless individual who must choose between the freedom of the frontier and the relative safety (read: boredom) of civilized society. John Ford's seminal *Stagecoach* opens the way for the genre to explore and define a new kind of society, where class and station are turned upside down and a true democracy based on natural goodness prevails. In all, the films' mythic landscapes—vast, forbidding, majestic—become a crucible in which notions of individualism, morality, and freedom were redefined in ways that promulgated the American dream during economic depression and war.

But at other times, the Western brutally interrogated America's origins in violence and genocide: the cowboy may actually be a homicidal maniac who leaves a trail of death and destruction in his path; civilization, it turns out, is anything but civilized. In the genre's heyday, which coincided with the height of Hollywood's studio system, a remarkable array of filmmakers used its protean form to explore explosive contemporary concerns, topics otherwise forbidden by censors and by the temper of the times. Made when Nazis were marching across Europe, William Wellman's *The Oxbow Incident* uncompromisingly explores the consequences of mob rule, boldly suggesting that democracy is not immune to its ravages. And few films so tellingly exposed the cowardice and venality of the anti-communist witch hunts of the Cold War like Fred Zinneman's *High Noon*. Later, in the shadow of Vietnam and after censorship had been lifted, the revisionist Westerns of the 1970s, like Philip Kaufman's *The Great Northfield Minnesota Raid*, thoroughly debunk any romantic notions of a pristine West full of hard-bitten but likeable desperadoes. The myth has died, or at least gone into hiding.

In the past 20 years, the Western, too, with few exceptions, seems to have ridden off into the sunset. But although its future is uncertain as a commercially viable film form, today no genre is more studied, more written about, more obsessed over by those who care about American film. As French film theorist Andre Bazin famously noted, the Western is the American film par excellence. It remains endlessly fascinating, and endlessly worthy of study.