

ARUSHA

GALLERY

BYE BYE COWBOY

Christiana Spens

*Say a prayer for the cowboy
His mare's run away
And he'll walk til he finds her
His darling, his stray
But the river's in flood
And the roads are awash
And the bridges break up
In the panic of loss*

Leonard Cohen

The lone cowboy riding his horse, cigarette in his mouth, hands at the harness. His back is probably facing you as he stares into the sunset, brooding and intense, perhaps quite sad, but free. If he does turn to face you (the viewer, the fan, the voyeur, a lost love), he will probably still not look you in the eye, but somewhere just further afield, because you are not really there. Only *he* is there, at the centre of this vast, sublime landscape. He would not be such a vision of freedom if anyone else were in shot; all attention is on this handsome, troubled man, perpetually alone. You experience the landscape differently because you imagine you are seeing it through his eyes, or filtered through some desire for him, or all he symbolises; he mediates this awe of the sublime, and also becomes a fetishization of it. He's a man on a horse, but somehow this cowboy, this American male, absorbs a million childhood games, strange fantasies, American myths, Capitalist tools, patriarchal frustrations. And then he is gone — he has always been on the verge of leaving, galloping off — but he's never gone for long. The cowboy, for all the leaving, has stuck around a very long time. It's hard to imagine him gone forever. And yet, here we say, *bye bye cowboy...*

In many ways, our culture has been saying 'bye bye cowboy' for decades. This romantic figure has changed from the strong-but-silent bastion of brooding masculinity in John Wayne's Western films, to the seductive, macho Marlboro Man on a billboard in every American town, to the bratty, chaotic, petulantly sexist 'new Ken' in the recent *Barbie*

movie. The particular cowboy of any given decade or cultural phase is particular to that time, becoming a mirror of communal fantasies and desires about masculinity and our wider relationship to emotional life. Veering from stoical repression to dramatic, childish scenes, living in country songs and Hollywood films and cigarette adverts, he is a rebel without a cause — just many feelings, whether he shows them or not. In another sense, the cowboy and his horse is a much-loved childhood fantasy and game, and so the figure, even to grownups, stirs a sense of play and freedom that is innocent. Though such a figure, imagined by a child, was never real, those associations linger on for adults, merging with tropes of the American dream to create a compelling figure in the communal unconscious.

To track the cowboy through the ages is to see a tussle between masculinity and emotion, and its roots are primal. Carl Jung wrote about the archetype of the horse as symbolising one's emotional nature, and a feminine energy; in the figure of the cowboy, we see a man at one with his horse, and crucially, in control of it — representing a man in control and aligned with his emotions and his feminine, shadow side. Often the cowboy is smoking, too — or at least the famous Marlboro Man is — which suggests an oral fixation reminiscent of the infant desire for the breast, perhaps, or a more phallic inference is possible too. The smoke itself also creates a literal smoke screen, suggesting in the action of smoking a compulsive emotional detachment — a hiding away from whoever meets his brooding gaze. In the simple action of sitting on a horse and smoking a cigarette, the figure of the cowboy comes to synthesise, subliminally, these primal desires for attachment and nurturing, a sexual compulsion to repeat, and also the toxic reality of emotional detachment. The cowboy on the horse therefore embodies a stirring fusion of feminine and masculine archetypes, and within that the suggestion of intense codependency — as well as the more obvious performance of virility and death drive inherent in the precarious but exciting nature of riding, smoking, and running away.

And yet, in recent years, the horse has all but disappeared; we see many cowboys, but they are strutting around by themselves most of the time, often not in a breath-taking landscape either, but in a bar or the city streets. The cowboys in country songs are gun-slinging and whiskey-drinking, but we never see the horse! They might drift from bar to bar, breaking hearts, but they don't seem to work very much; they have lost touch with nature and with their emotional integrity, to take a Jungian view. Our era's cowboy has become a caricature of a romantic figure, far removed not only from the actual cowboys who once inspired the dream, but even from the Hollywood dreams of the past that inspired the pose of bravado. In a sense, the cowboy has simply morphed into the eponymous fuckboy; his promises fall apart in the time it takes for him to smoke a cigarette. And does he even smoke anymore? The cowboy in 2023 probably vapes if he does anything at all, filling the air with the sweet acrid scent of synthetic

watermelon. Even his oral fixation has become derivative, sanitised — and yet toxic all the same.

In *The Sopranos*, Tony Soprano would complain to his therapist that the ‘strong silent type’ was nowhere to be seen, disillusioned that his idols John Wayne and Gary Cooper — actors who played cowboys — did not exist anymore. Tony himself emulated this figure, and yet he complained and emoted more than anyone — to his therapist, no less! What is interesting about this relationship, though, is that it reveals a common, painful conflict between one’s aspirations and social pressures to be a certain way, and the reality of ourselves — and in particular how this relates to men. More recently, we’ve seen figures like Donald Trump and Alex Tate swagger around as if they are the new cowboys — genuinely outlawed, ostentatious, violent, and belligerent — and yet for all their repellent behaviours, they still attract large followings, spouting rhetoric about turning away from the establishment and the rules and the supposed softness of the current culture. Their popularity signals wider frustrations about how to be a man, how to exist in a world that seems to no longer dream of men riding around on horses. And so we end up with potential duels between Elon Musk and Mark Zuckerberg, sex traffickers turned self-help gurus, endemic chaos, and incels.

The modern cowboy, and all those he mirrors and represents, is in a strange crisis, then. As Capitalism falls very gradually and painfully around him, for all his bravado, he is out of work and out of luck; he is still being exploited by men wealthier than him. He has lost his horse — I think here of Leonard Cohen’s *Ballad of the Absent Mare*, and Emmy-Lou Harris’ version of that song, too — and I feel bad for him. Today’s cowboy is still a cowboy, but he has lost his job, his landscape, his *raison d’être*. He is no longer strong and silent and at one with his emotions and nature itself; he is angry and dissolute and petulant. His aloneness is no longer a symbol of freedom and independence, but of despair and failure. The system has crushed him; his horse is nowhere to be seen.

To say goodbye to this particular manifestation of the cowboy, perhaps we must welcome a new one. In recent years, artists have reclaimed the cowboy figure in subversive ways, invoking not only the reality of the original, real cowboys — often slaves or exploited workers, often Black — but also highlighting the counter-cultural imaginaries that have existed alongside the dominant, Capitalist, Hollywood cowboy narrative. We have Compton Cowboys, Cormac McCarthy’s *Blood Meridian*, *Brokeback Mountain*, gay cowboys; we have all the cowboys beyond America; we have cowgirls, too.

And on the question of masculinity, we have the opportunity to refocus of the original romanticised dream of the cowboy, and why it resonated. The cowboy was not alone in

the beginning; he had his horse, and he had the landscape. He had something to do other than smoke and drink. And perhaps these elements — which symbolise a man in tune with his emotions and the natural world — also need to be brought back into the picture, for he is lost without them.

The cowboy has been transformed into a symbol of the Capitalist, American dream, but has also been crushed by it. Real cowboys did and do exist, and their realities open up a chance to shake off the old narratives and trappings of the cowboy archetype, and to imagine something better and far more interesting. As Ken finally says in the *Barbie* movie, as his plans for patriarchy fall apart around him, “I didn’t even care about the patriarchy, I just wanted the horses.” The dream of the cowboy often represents a primal need, a childish but enduring need, to have the horse, to ride the horse, to explore the world. The cowboy needs to break out of the constraints of the myth of Americana and the hard reality of Capitalism — which always exploits and disappoints — to have any chance at all of being free.