I See by Your Outfit: B Westerns and Some Recent Texts about Cowboys

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In lieu of an abstract, here is a brief excerpt of the content:

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Perry Nodelman (bio)
"Sputnik. Once the astronauts went up, children only wanted to play with space toys."

—Stinky Pete, in Toy Story 2

This is Stinky Pete the Prospector's explanation, in Disney Pixar's Toy Story 2, of why, after many decades, the long-term obsession with cowboys and the Wild West in American culture suffered a rapid decline from the mid-1950s onward. Since then, as Stinky Pete suggests, space toys and space stories have been far more prominent. But in the 1940s and 1950s, there were cowboys everywhere from lunch boxes and colouring books to Saturday morning TV series. A child of that time (as I was), Roderick McGillis has especially fond memories of the B westerns...
produced by lesser Hollywood studios from the 1930s on through the 1950s, memories he explores in his fine book *He Was Some Kind of a Man*.

Without ever removing the rose-coloured glasses of nostalgia, McGillis views B westerns with the steely-eyed gaze of a tough-minded cultural critic. "I have no desire to return to a childhood past that I remember as troubled and difficult," he writes. "If nostalgia is a feeling of loss and a desire to restore or renovate what is lost, then I have no nostalgia for my own past. And I certainly have no intention to lament the passing of the cowboys that are my subject" (45). Instead, borrowing a term from literary scholar Svetlana Boym, he indulges in what he calls "reflective nostalgia": "The past is of use when we use it to reflect upon the present and future" (47).

For McGillis, the cowboy is doubly evocative—the hero in a fantasy world that he feels nostalgia for and that is in itself inherently nostalgic: "no boy aspiring to become the hero he desires to emulate can accomplish such becoming because the hero is always a man of the past, always already out of touch with changing times, always a figure of regression, and paradoxically always already old even though he never ages. . . . He is, in short, a fantasy" (4). He is specifically a wish-fulfilling role model, a version of psychoanalytical theorist Jacques Lacan's "ideal-I" for young viewers.

He is also an ideal of masculinity in particular. As McGillis notes, the heroes of B westerns are "steadfast, independent, resourceful, self-reliant, aggressive, rational and controlling" (1). They...
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