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On Westerns

Robert B. Pippin

University of Chicago

rbp1@uchicago.edu

Abstract: This paper is a response to questions and criticisms raised by the three commentators at the 2014 APA Pacific meetings about my book *Hollywood Westerns and American Myth*. I address questions raised about the role of genre in criticism, the status of a mythic form of universality, and especially the variations in, or even against, genre conventions, the complicated status of the notion of the "legendary" in John Ford's film, *The Man Who Shot Liberty Valance*, in what sense auteur theory is presupposed by my approach, and in what sense attention to films can be considered a form of philosophy.

Keywords: Genre; myth; Westerns; aesthetic; Schmitt, Carl; auteur; film philosophy.

In *Hollywood Westerns and American Myth*,¹ I argue for the importance of "political psychology" for any adequate political philosophy, and so I encourage a re-animation of a philosophical concern with those dynamics of the human soul relevant to any life in common. This was long a concern in the history of political philosophy, for example, in Plato, Aristotle, Niccolò Machiavelli, Thomas Hobbes, Jean-Jacques Rousseau, and G. F. W. Hegel, among others, but it has been largely overshadowed in liberal political thought by the single problem of the legitimacy and the limits of state power. But the problem of the distinctly political bond, and the willingness of citizens to work for, and even sacrifice for, the common good, is not based on the sophistication of a complex contractualist

argument, but is at bottom a social-psychological matter. Traditionally, such a psychology concerned the core political passions: among others, love (especially love of one's own), fear (fear of violent death, of suffering and insecurity), desires for ease and luxury and pleasure, and a powerful passion called by many names: *thymos*, *amour-propre*, vanity, self-love, the desire for recognition, the need to secure one's status with others—even to elevate one's status above and even at the expense of others. Furthermore, I argue that while these issues are not in the foreground of much modern political thought, they are treated in subtle and compelling ways by many of the great Hollywood Westerns. For many such films are about the founding of modern bourgeois, law-abiding, property owning, market economy, technologically advanced societies in transition situations of, mostly, lawlessness (or corrupt and ineffective law) that border on classic "state of nature" situations, and so such Westerns adopt what I argue is a mythic form of narration about founding,

¹ Robert B. Pippin, *Hollywood Westerns and American Myth: The Importance of Howard Hawks and John Ford for Political Philosophy*, New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2010.

and the complex conditions of its success. The question often raised is the question of how legal order (of a particular modern form, the form of liberal democratic capitalism) is psychologically possible, under what conditions it can be formed and command allegiance, how the bourgeois virtues, especially the domestic virtues, can be said to get a psychological grip in an environment where the heroic and martial virtues are so important.

The book singles out three classic films for special attention: *Red River* (1948), directed by Howard Hawks, *The Man Who Shot Liberty Valance* (1962), and *The Searchers* (1956) both directed by John Ford. These are shown to illuminate, respectively, the power and limits of charismatic forms of authority, the importance and inherently problematic status of a founding and common myth in political order, and the role of race in the American imaginary.

Shai Biderman raises what is the most important but also the most difficult question about such philosophical attention to film.² If we reject, as he agrees we should, the appeal to film as merely illustrative, instantiating or exemplifying philosophical claims, but instead claim that there is, in his words, "film philosophy," or "autonomous cinematic thinking," then what, exactly, is being expressed or explored or thought in a Western that could not, or could not very well, be expressed by a discursive account? He rightly notes that in this case (though not all) this will depend on the importance of the genre designation and so on the claim that the Western genre by and large comprises "mythic accounts." Now, as noted in the book, human beings make myths, tell stories about ancient times and great events, and they repetitively call such times and events to mind over many generations, for all sorts of reasons. But many of these reasons are political. One could say that mythic narrative attempts to domesticate, make familiar, the vastness of the world and the place of human beings in it. So people tell political stories of origins, foundings, liberation, unification or lost unity, heroic resistance, martyrdom, redemption, privileged election, and so forth. And they seek to achieve something by so narrating, even though this is rarely an explicitly set end.

That this is a distinctive way of making sense of things clearly depends on the notion of mythic universality. That is, the events in the narrative have a

form, or many possible forms, and the Westerns I am interested in are about a founding and transitional form. It is by appeal to such a form that we are to understand the reality of law, or the genuineness of the distinction between the legal and the rule of the powerful over the weaker, or the distinction between justice and vengeance, or the possibility of a distinction between a genuinely public and a private role. At a first glance this form of understanding appears at bottom simply classificatory. We understand an instance by understanding it as an instance of a narrative kind. But this does not get us very far. For one thing, it simply re-raises the question of whether there is a distinctly aesthetic, pre-discursive, sensible-affective modality of understanding such a putative transition, an artistic norm that invokes criteria of credibility, authenticity, genuineness and so forth, not argumentative rigor. Such an argumentative way of making these distinctions is important and unavoidable, but it must ascend to a level of abstraction that creates its own problems and leaves a great deal unclarified. The idea is to explore what a film or any narrative form of intelligibility can clarify, illuminate, and so forth that such discursive forms cannot. More importantly, what the genre-instance demonstrates, in a great film, is rather the variations, even the ultimate unclassifiability of a particular narrative, even as it also does fall under that kind.

What looks classifiable as the transition from a charismatic to a more democratic and rational form of authority in *Red River* is that, and also is not. Dunson (and all that he represents) is not displaced but enthroned in a different way. As the last image of the film—the new cattle brand bearing both their initials—makes clear, the new order is only a symbolic achievement and may not be a real one. In *The Searchers*, the basic narrative form is exclusion, wandering, and reconciliation, but Ethan is not reconciled with the community. Not killing Debbie as he had planned and returning her instead is not the resolution it appears to be, does and does not fit under the reconciliationist form of the ending. He remains outside and virtually ignored and forgotten by the community. To take an example not discussed in the book, in Anthony Mann's great film, *Bend of the River*, the unbelievably ambitious question posed is whether "character is destiny" or not. And we get our answer. Yes (for the Arthur Kennedy character), and No (for Jimmy Stewart's). Where does that leave us? Claims that aesthetic genres exist only to illuminate variations—or even to give us genre-instances that are anti-genre, as in Nicholas Ray's *Johnny Guitar* (1954)—only begin to

² Shai Biderman, "Into the Wild (West): Philosophy and Cinematic Mythmaking," *Existenz* 9/2 (2014), 45-49.

approach the subject broached by Biderman.

Tomoko Iwasawa notes that one element of the Western mythology in the American imaginary involves the narrative of expansion, based on an implicit claim of rationalization and modernization, and so some form of entitlement.³ This certainly plays a role in the Westerns discussed, and especially in the films of John Ford, although in his work there is also an ironic undercurrent in which the ideals of such an expansionist society, especially its commercial character, are treated ironically, in comparison with the culture of honor and the ideal of dignity associated with Native Americans and the white outsiders and supposed outlaws. Ethan in *The Searchers*, not only knows more about that culture than anyone, and not only carries, prominently, an Indian scabbard for his rifle, but his impatience with a Christian burial ritual contrasts with the seriousness with which he treats Indian beliefs about the afterlife, although this latter is expressed by shooting out the eyes of a corpse so he will not find peace in that afterlife. This is, nevertheless, some sort of expression of belief. For example, in Ford this issue comes to a kind of apotheosis, even apology, in *Cheyenne Autumn* (1964), and there are indications of this tone in *The Searchers* in the massacre of Martin's supposed bride and her people. Of course, invoking the idea of the noble savage is as stereotypical and ideological as the image of pure savagery, but, as I try to show in the book, the situation between Ethan and Scar ends up being far more complicated than either of these codes can capture. As Iwasawa notes, however, in the book I was more concerned with another aspect of such a founding myth, something quite central to the American self-understanding. This involves the idea that a new, founding beginning in historical time is possible – something that in America must occur twice, once again after the failure of the first attempt in the Civil War – and also that the founding is itself just, that the transition from a non-legal, revenge-based order (of sorts) to a legal order is a heroic accomplishment, not one that makes the forces of law look "just as bad" as the tactics of feudal cattle barons and terrorizing bandits. If that were so, then Max Weber's famous question – what distinguishes the rule by force of one group over another from the legitimate exercise of power by the state? – would seem very difficult to answer. And that

is the situation in *The Man Who Shot Liberty Valance*. The myth or legend is that Ransom defeated Valance in a fair fight on Main Street. The fact or reality is that Valance was gunned down in an ambush carried out by our supposed man of honor, Tom, hiding in the dark in an alleyway. (This issue of what it takes to defeat the wholly unjust transcends the genre too; it is a frequent theme in film noir, perhaps most clear in Fritz Lang's *The Big Heat* (1953).)

In a way that parallels the notion of genre-variation mentioned above, what is so fascinating about the Ford film is that it would be simplistic to read all of this as only a de-legitimizing ideology critique (not that Iwasawa is suggesting this). Ransom certainly does act heroically, even if suicidally. He does not flee, as he is advised too, and he must know that his ability to use the decrepit firearm he has been practicing with is pathetic. He is going out to meet near certain death, can have no even faintly plausible chance against Valance.

So the myth is not based on a simple lie. Somehow Ransom has enacted, even if in a way symbolically, or in a way that is close to ritual, that a just social order is worth dying for, that human life is not rightly understood as an endless series of violent struggles for supremacy, for the ability to subject the will of others to one's own, and never to be subjected to the will of others. He will show them all that it is not. And herein lies the density of possible meaning in the editor's words at the end, that in the West, "when the legend becomes fact, print the legend." Of course, we are meant to contrast his decision with the heroism of the newspaper editor, for whom the truth was the truth, full stop. And there are those who think the editor is just expressing Ford's own view, a kind of Western esotericism, that it is alright for the elites to know the truth. They should just keep it from the masses. (The fact that we have just watched a commercial film that reveals the truth does not seem to bother such interpreters.) However, the formulation is quite peculiar and that peculiarity is in line with the discussion above. The editor does not say that it is pointless or not a good thing to reveal the facts once everyone comes to believe a legend. We need such fantasies. He says something strange. "When the legend becomes fact."

How can a legend become fact? Briefly, I think that the statement is a rejection of the premise assumed in the challenge posed above, as if there is some privileged, single moment of decision, which, if illegal, inevitably shadows the legitimacy of all that follows. There is a whole way of thinking behind such an assumption,

³ Tomoko Iwasawa, "The Problem of Mythologizing and the American Self-Understanding," *Existenz* 9/2 (2014), 41-44.

about decision, violence, fate and so forth, all of which calls up the name of the German political theorist Carl Schmitt. But Stoddard has become "the man who shot Liberty Valance," although he was not originally. He has helped (decisively, as governor and senator and maybe next vice-president) create the form of life that has contained and destroyed the Liberty Valance World. That destroyed, "shot," Valance and what he represents in a way Tom never could have. Tom's shooting of Valance would have just led to the cattle barons hiring another such outlaw, and Tom would have retreated to his ranch, indifferent to the public world, as he always had been. This final, ironic twist—that the editor's words are both an expression of his concern with marketing his paper to the masses, and at the same time the expression of a deeply true interpretation of events (the legend has become fact)—is the film's most brilliant achievement.

Carlin Romano's remarks return us to some of the issues raised by Biderman. Romano has two sorts of doubts.⁴ He clearly is suspicious of auteur theory, and is convinced that the authorship of any film is actually a tangled, messy matter of collaboration, marketing decisions, studio interference with the final cut, accidents on the set, actor improvisations, sudden inspiration by the screenwriter, and so forth. Secondly, while he admits that interesting films might serve as a kind of propaedeutic for philosophy, we ought to insist on a very clear demarcation: whatever other value they might have, films are not philosophy. We would need to know a great deal more than we do about what Romano thinks philosophy is, before we could respond in any detail, but even without knowing much about that, it is a fair enough challenge.

On the first point: this sort of question embodies a very common confusion about auteur theory. That theory has nothing to do with the facts of historical causation and so nothing to do with the mental history of an actual individual, the director. When we say that the showing of the new brand at the end of *Red River* means such and such, or has such and such an ambiguity, or that the editor's remarks at the end of *Liberty Valance* reveal a deep ambiguity about the relation between legend and fact, or that the narrative frame at the end of *The Searchers* suggests a reconciliationist narrative that is then undercut by the visual image we are left with, and so forth, then another way of saying just that is

that "we are being shown that by the director." This has absolutely nothing to do, zero, with what went on in the director's mind when he set up and filmed the scene. A director can film a scene in a way that shows us an almost unimaginable tangle of irony and interpretive complexity without him, as that individual, realizing that that is what he or she is doing. The brilliance in any artist is very often an intuitive brilliance. For example, when John Wayne, playing Ethan, manifests signs of a hidden, intense self-hatred, I have no doubt whatsoever that it would never have occurred to Wayne that that was what he was doing. (In fact there is evidence that Wayne thought he was playing a familiar Wayne-type hero; no dark side at all.) Ford just probably filmed him over and over until he got a shot that seemed right, without even Ford knowing exactly what he was aiming at. The director's intention is in the film, in what ended up as the film shown; it is not properly understood as some explicit ex ante formulation. If we have to expand "the director" or even "John Ford" to include other cooperating agents, then, with respect to interpreting the film intelligently, who cares? What we want to know is what the film means, and when we say this in another way, "what we are meant to see," that is all "that other way" amounts to.

Is such a "seeing" philosophy? For Romano, it appears, philosophy makes assertions, and defends them with arguments. Anything that does not do this is not philosophy. I am not sure what to say to this, or what it says about Platonic dialogues, Augustine's and Rousseau's *Confessions*, Michel de Montaigne's *Essays*, Blaise Pascal's *Pensées*, why René Descartes' *Meditations* are meditations, almost all of Søren Kierkegaard's writings, most of Hegel's *Phenomenology of Spirit*, Friedrich Nietzsche's oeuvre, or Ludwig Wittgenstein's *Investigations*. But the general point in response is a simple one. It is of course the case that part of what we want from philosophy is an assertion, and arguments. "Metaphysical Dualism is false, and here is why." That sort of thing. But are those the only sorts of questions available for a philosophical treatment? How could it be? Suppose we want to understand something, to come to an understanding of something. We are confused about what art is, and we want to understand what art is. First, we would need to make our way to find a plausible possible assertion. If there has been some assertion about this question, defended by some knockdown argument, then I missed that memo. We are confused about what thinking is, because we have heard that Big Blue beats humans at chess. Does

⁴ Carlin Romano, "Do Classic Films Present a Philosophical Argument?," *Existenz* 9/2 (2014), 50-3.

that mean it is thinking? We are confused about the deception perpetrated on Milly by Densher and Kate in Henry James' *The Wings of the Dove*, and we want to understand what sort of claim on us truth-telling has.

We need, as philosophers, a lot of help maneuvering around in these waters, appreciating ambiguities, understanding unanticipated consequences of a position, understanding what it would actually be to live out some alternative or other with respect to truth-telling. If we think of this in terms of concepts, then we can say that arguments about the necessary and sufficient conditions for some conceptual content might work fine for concepts like "triangle" or "month," but try that for "a free life" or "political equality." These

are so-called "thick concepts" and philosophy has no privileged access to these complexities; such content cannot be pulled out of conceptual thin air. Likewise with the notion of "coming to understand" something, especially understanding what it would be to live out a commitment to some ideal. Tremendous efforts of imagination, imaginative rigor, we can even say, are necessary to begin to get a handle on such issues. In my book on Hollywood Westerns, I tried to show that that there was a great deal of work done by these films in exploring concepts or norms like "citizen," "authority," "kinship," and even "law." I see no reason, or at least no reason in what Romano has offered, not to call this philosophical work.