



Into the Wild (West): Philosophy and Cinematic Mythmaking

Shai Biderman

Tel Aviv University, Israel

bidermans@post.tau.ac.il

Abstract: Two recent monographs that demonstrate the power of philosophical engagement with cinematic genres and the cinematic capacity for mythmaking, *Hollywood Westerns and American Myth* and *Ride, Boldly Ride*, are here argued to make an innovative contribution to the view that film is "philosophy in action," and that the American Western is a crucial genre in which to see this at work. They do so by arguing both that philosophical practice can find a relevant object in this cinematic genre, and that the Western as a cinematic genre makes unique contributions to philosophical practice. Kevin Stoehr and Robert Pippin show that by raising questions of identity, self-manifestation, and the affirmation of existence, Westerns present us with an innovative form of philosophical scrutiny that reveals how the audience understands itself and creates a philosophical presentation of the American myth.

Keywords: Cavell, Stanley; film as philosophy; myth; cinematic genre; comedy of remarriage.

The cinematic genre of American Westerns has long been the focus of interdisciplinary interest. While usually fulfilling the scholarly passion of film-scholars, historians, and social scientists, the recent emergence of a philosophical engagement with the Western genre deserves renewed attention. For what, if anything, does philosophy have to say about the cinematic genre of the Westerns? What is it about this genre that begs for a philosophical handling, beyond the mere obviousness of text-analysis, the re-affirmation of philosophical arguments and cultural values, or the re-articulation (through an illustrative test case) of one film theory or another?

These questions are answered, in a most intriguing and innovative way, in two recently published monographs.¹ These publications, equally captivating

yet differently organized, expand on similar thematic grounds, which, as such, sets them apart from other more traditional works in philosophy of film. These works share the somewhat subversive understanding according to which any philosophy of the Western genre is, at the same time, a philosophy manifested by the Western genre. In other words, it is the cinematic genre itself – as a cinematic phenomenon of certain attributes and qualities – that philosophizes its various contents. The genre is not merely a subject matter in the hand of an inquisitive philosopher, but an active force – an aggregation of motions, images, camera angles, various shot types, landscapes, settings and narratological

Political Philosophy, New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2010 [henceforth cited as *HW*]; and Mary Lea Bandy and Kevin L. Stoehr, *Ride, Boldly Ride: The Evolution of the American Western*, Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2012. [Henceforth cited as *RBR*]

¹ Robert B. Pippin, *Hollywood Westerns and American Myth: The Importance of Howard Hawks and John Ford for*

tropes—which, as such, create an aesthetically formed stance, to be comprehended philosophically.

Triggered by Stephen Mulhall's controversial phrase according to which film is (or can be) "philosophy in action,"² the idea that cinema (or a cinematic genre), by nature of its predisposed attributes and artistic oeuvre, can exhibit thinking on its own course, has captured the attention of film scholars, filmmakers, and philosophers alike. This idea has become theoretical reality in the contemporary emergence of film-philosophy. As a challenge to the hegemony of grand theory and to the superiority of verbal (descriptive) discourse of analytic philosophy, film-philosophy rejects the asymmetric relations embedded in "the philosophy of X" paradigm. This paradigm, to quote Robert Sinnerbrink, is that according to which "philosophy conceptually analyzes and theorizes its object precisely because the latter cannot do so."³ Undermining this traditional misconception of art's power to philosophize, film-philosophers offer a new approach to the intersection between film and philosophy, in which one is liable to acknowledge an autonomous cinematic thinking, existing independently without the need to be translated into recognizable forms of philosophical argumentation in order to sustain a thought. The film-philosophers—the holders of this new approach—thus breaks away from the traditional view of film theory, and, correspondingly, from the conventional way by which philosophy of film has been practiced. They create a thematic barricade against the traditional questions and investigatory techniques, and present a new approach to the nature of film as well as to that of philosophy. By uttering substantially different presuppositions regarding both the uniqueness of cinema and the characteristics of the philosophical experience, film-philosophy becomes "an alternative approach that combines aesthetic receptivity to film with philosophically informed reflection", and, as such, is "a way of aesthetically disclosing, perhaps also transforming...our experience of the modern world" (NPF 3). Similarly, it is a way, an incentive (one can say), for philosophy itself "to reflect upon its own limits or even to experiment with new forms of philosophical expression" (NPF 7).

² Stephen Mulhall, *On Film*, New York, NY: Routledge 2008, p. 2.

³ Robert Sinnerbrink, *New Philosophies of Film: Thinking Images*, London; New York, Continuum International Pub. Group 2011, p. 7. [Henceforth cited as NPF]

In the case of cinematic genres, the idea of cinema exhibiting a new brand of thinking provokes a "shock to thought" (as Gilles Deleuze, a founding father of film-philosophy, puts it),⁴ as the unique powers of genre-qua-genre has often been overlooked or underappreciated. So far, the philosophical engagement with cinematic genres as such resided primarily to questions like those that enquire after the ontology of the genre, the classificatory nature of genre or genres, the idea of hybrid genres, the conditions of genre, and the role of viewer's expectations in the articulation of genres. With Stanley Cavell, an Anglo-American counterpart of Deleuze, the idea of genre as a medium—namely, the idea of genre as an independent and autonomous mode of contemplation in the realm of cinema—has taken center stage in contemporary debate.⁵ A genre, claims Cavell, is an independent medium, which, as such, conveys meaning, engages in aesthetic contemplation, and exhibits a distinctive grammar. For Cavell, the sub-genre of American comedy films of the 1930s and 1940s (which he calls "comedy of remarriage") and the genre of romantic melodrama (which he tags "the melodrama of the unknown woman") are those that exhibit the most engaging philosophical potential, and are therefore predominant cases of cinematic thinking.

Cavell's reasons for favoring these genres are most indicative to those supporting the philosophical reevaluation of the Western genre. According to Cavell, the comedy of remarriage recounts the coming back together of a couple that rekindles their love (which has always been there) by first facing, and then overcoming, divorce. The female protagonist in this genre undergoes what William Rothman articulates as a form of a "spiritual quest." Creating herself anew, she is then embraced by her renewed partnership, gaining a mutual acknowledgment throughout the process.⁶ Contrarily, in the genre of melodrama, the woman seeks fulfillment outside marriage. Hence, the melodrama, which is adjacent to the comedy of remarriage, can be seen as a mechanism of negation, undermining a theme

⁴ Gilles Deleuze, *Cinema 2: The Time-Image*, London: Athlone 1989, pp. 156, 189-224.

⁵ Stanley Cavell, *The World Viewed: Reflections on the Ontology of Film*, Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1979.

⁶ William Rothman, "Cavell on Film, Television, and Opera," in *Stanley Cavell*, ed. Richard Eldridge, New York, NY: Cambridge University Press 2003, pp. 206-38, here p. 212.

"that hinges on the threats of misunderstanding and violence" which embody the happiness of the comedies.⁷

What is tellingly unique in these two genres, according to Cavell, is their shared focus on human relationships and mutual acknowledgement. In remarriage comedies, the "war between the sexes" is a struggle for mutual recognition. The female protagonist takes on a quest of self-identity, which begins by her "thinking of her own existence," then "announcing of her *cogito ergo sum*," and finally, moving from "haunting the world to existing in it." Complementarily, in the "melodrama of the unknown woman," this quest takes a less comic, and somewhat more precarious, form. However so, these minute differences are nevertheless underlined by the goal that both genres share, namely, the unveiling and acknowledgment of the "power of transfiguration," as expressed in the woman's suffering creation (whether ending in triumph, as in the comedies, or not, as in the melodramas.) As it were, the focal point of the narrative of both these genres is the intense playing out of the relationship between an individual and a privileged other. This, for Cavell, is the most suited setting to accommodate the condition of philosophical skepticism, as it exposes the protagonists (and, correlatively, the viewers) to questions of identity, self-manifestation and the affirmation of existence.⁸

Following Cavell, also other writers have proposed a similar attempt to engage the cinematic genre as a work of philosophy, albeit in a different selection of cinematic genres and a different scope of philosophical content. Such is the case with discussions of the horror genre, for example by Noel Carroll,⁹ Cynthia Freeland,¹⁰ and Julian Hanich,¹¹ or engagement with the Sci-fi genre, for example by Vivian Sobchack.¹² The latter is, in

my mind, another most indicative reworking of Cavell's account, as it combines and conjoins our scientific knowledge with our tendency towards the imaginary fiction, thus reinventing the genre as a philosophical quest. Consequently, the unique collision between the substantially real and the imaginary fiction makes the Sci-Fi film genre, according to Vivian Sobchack, the best cinematic candidate to emphasize the "actual, extrapolative or speculative science and the empirical method" (SS 53). As such, this genre symbolizes "the radical alteration of our cultures' temporal and spatial consciousness" (SS 223), and for that reason, Daniel Shaw considers it "the most philosophical of...genres."¹³

As the main argument regarding the thinking powers of a cinematic genre is explored, we can now turn to a newly added item to this list of philosophical genres, namely, the American Western. In light of the previously discussed ways by which philosophers have explored their selected genres, it is reasonable to ask what possibly could be the philosophical output of Westerns? In other words, what is being philosophized within the Western genre? The most extensive answer – as offered by Pippin and Stoehr – maintains a Cavellian notion of self-expression, self-acknowledgment, and skepticism. However, instead of the female protagonist (which takes center stage in Cavell's analysis), it is the social domain, the political coming-to-be, and the birth of a nation, which occupies the analysis of Westerns. Much like the previously discussed genres, also Westerns predominantly philosophize human relationships and mutual acknowledgement. They dwell in questions of identity, self-manifestation, and the affirmation of existence. They present us with an innovative philosophical scrutiny, which unveils the way this genre thinks its subject matters, and creates (as can be extracted from the title of Pippin's book) a philosophical presentation of the American myth.

This latter point calls for further discussion. As noted, both books treat the Western genre as a work of cinematic philosophy. In addition, in both books the cinematic thinking in question is understood as a practice of mythologizing the American identity. The idea of myth (as a culturally introspective form of storytelling) is, by itself, an important philosophical recognition of the genre's merits. The famous lines

Science Fiction Film, New York, NY: Ungar Publishing, 1993. [Henceforth cited as SS]

¹³ Daniel Shaw, *Film and Philosophy: Taking Movies Seriously*, London & New York: Wallflower Press 2008, p. 44.

⁷ Stanley Cavell, *Contesting Tears: The Hollywood Melodrama of the Unknown Woman*, Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press 1996, p. 5.

⁸ Stanley Cavell, *In Quest of the Ordinary: Lines of Skepticism and Romanticism*, Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1988.

⁹ Noel Carroll, *The Philosophy of Horror, or, Paradoxes of the Heart*, New York, NY: Routledge, 1990.

¹⁰ Cynthia A. Freeland, "Realist Horror," in *Philosophy and Film*, eds. Cynthia A. Freeland and Thomas E. Wartenberg. New York, NY: Routledge 1995, pp. 126-42.

¹¹ Julian Hanich, *Cinematic Emotion in Horror Films and Thrillers: The Aesthetic Paradox of Pleasurable Fear*, New York, NY: Routledge, 2010.

¹² Vivian C. Sobchack, *Screening Space: The American*

from *The Man Who Shot Liberty Valance* (John Ford, 1962), which states, "This is the West. When the legend becomes the fact, print the legend," presides in both books, and is taken to be indicative to the philosophical tone of the Western genre. As Richard Slotkin wisely remarks, "myth is not only something given but something made, a product of human labor, one of the tools with which human beings do the work of making culture and society."¹⁴ Recall Irving Singer, whose book *Cinematic Mythmaking* understands films in general as "the definitive mythmaking art of the modern age," that is at once philosophical, poetic, and aesthetic. Following this, one can state that it is not that film does not simply rehearse mythical narratives or cultural tropes, but is in fact a form of argument combining the aesthetic (the visual, the sonic, and the technological) with the mythic, in order to foster what Singer refers to as "the transmittance of mythic themes"¹⁵ into a cohesive work of philosophical interpretation.

The mythmaking capacity of cinema—or, following Singer, "the cinematic ability to elicit an attitude of imaginative receptivity in its viewers towards narrative scenarios that are implicitly mythic or include mythic elements" (CM 10)—is evidently central to the understanding of the Western genre prompted by Pippin and Stoehr. For Pippin—whose book, I dare say, should have been titled "Hollywood Westerns as American Myth" instead of "Hollywood Westerns and American Myth"—the Westerns are the primary way by which American society remembers or mythologizes its founding (HW 20). Meanwhile, as Stoehr points out, the mythical role of the Western genre is amplified in the distinction it creates "between the factual truths of history and the ways in which those 'truths' have become conveyed in narrative form" (RBR 6). As such, the Western film helps to tell a story, usually more than a merely superficial one, about what it means to be and what it took to become an American.

For both Stoehr and Pippin, this mythical subtext places the Western genre within the thematic role of the cinematic capacity to philosophize its contents. Both adopt the premise—nicely phrased by Kathryn Morgan—according to which myth, as such, "is a 'pre-

philosophical *mirror* of existential thought,' a liberation from excessive abstraction and objectivism, a primal, original, and essential form of truth."¹⁶ As such, their respective monographs should not merely be read as a progressive work of film-philosophy, but also as profound attempts to disperse the cloud hanging over American mythology.

However, and despite commonalities, each author applies a different strategy in order to accomplish this task. For Stoehr, it is the extensive typological effort of classifying (and re-classifying) the Western genre, which fulfills the task. The typology he offers spans nicely over historical perspectives and thematically contextual ones. Historically analyzed, Stoehr classifies the Westerns of Hollywood's silent era, the Westerns of the 1930s, and the postwar psychological Westerns of the late 1940s and early 1950s, as predominant archetypes of the genre. Once switching perspectives, Stoehr extends his typology by adding the typical mannerisms of the comic Western and the serene (yet self-reflective) look of the existential Western to the list of genre archetypes. While switching between these two perspectives, Stoehr also supplies a fair analysis of the genre's masterpieces, for example *Stagecoach*, *Red River*, *The Searchers*, and *The Man Who Shot Liberty Valance*.

These films (which are, by far, the most iconic, well-known and most quoted prototypes of the genre) lose their exemplary role, and become the anchor for a new structure and thematic strategy, in Pippin's monograph. In contrast with Stoehr's extensive survey, Pippin employs a more rigid (and definitely thinner) strategy, focusing solely on these four films and their iconic creators (Howard Hawks and John Ford). Despite impression, this scantiness should not minimize the efficacy of the project. On the contrary; this somewhat slimmer, and definitely shorter approach to the genre is, in a way, a more attuned to emphasize the mythical role (and, accordingly, the philosophical significance) of the genre as a whole. In other words, it is not the genre itself which captures Pippin's attention, but its fundamental role in a larger project, namely, that which maps the cinematic construction of American identity. In this light, one should read Pippin's work on the Western genre as a sort of prelude to his later monograph, published in 2012, which engages another distinctively American cinematic genre: the *film noir*. Both halves

¹⁴ Richard Slotkin, *Gunfighter Nation: The Myth of the Frontier in Twentieth-Century America*, New York, NY: HarperCollins 1993, p. 654.

¹⁵ Irving Singer, *Cinematic Mythmaking: Philosophy in Film*, Cambridge, MA: MIT Press 2008, p. 9. [Henceforth cited as CM]

¹⁶ Kathryn Morgan, *Myth and Philosophy From the Presocratics to Plato*, Cambridge, MA: Cambridge University Press 2000, p. 1.

of this greater project are similarly structured, as they are both restricted to the iconic (as exemplified in the genre's masterpieces). In his *film noir* undertaking, Pippin analyzes four masterpieces of the genre.¹⁷ Here too, he has an objective in mind, which stems clearly from the title: to explore and present the fatalism within American mythology, via *film noir* as an instance of cinematic philosophy.

For Stoehr, his current work is written in light of his previously stated position, according to which philosophers of film should relinquish their "almost obsessive concern" with conservative structures of philosophical argumentation, and should instead focus on the dialectical and pluralistic nature of what should be experienced as "cinematic argumentation." Stoehr calls for a renewed reception of the cinematic phenomenon as an aesthetic form of Socratic (or *aporetic*) philosophical experience.¹⁸ Elsewhere, Stoehr argues that in order to fully appreciate cinematic thinking we should go beyond the debilitating constraints of film theory—whether "formative, realist, psychoanalytic, [or] semiotic"—and so unveil the truly cinematic ways by which "movies generate truth and meaning."¹⁹ Following these claims, and in the course of offering "a renewed appreciation of the American Western movie as a form of cinematic art and as a well-established cinematic genre," *Ride, Boldly Ride* meets this objective for cinematic argumentation.

¹⁷ Robert B. Pippin, *Fatalism in American Film Noir: Some Cinematic Philosophy*, Charlottesville, University of Virginia Press, 2012.

¹⁸ Kevin L. Stoehr, "By Cinematic Means Alone: The Russell-Wartenberg-Carroll Debate," *Film and Philosophy* 15 (2011), 111-26, here p. 111.

¹⁹ Kevin L. Stoehr, "The Dialectical Approach to the Art of the Moving Image: Hegel, Eisenstein, and Kracauer," *Film and Philosophy* 10 (2006), 99-115, here p. 100.

A similar disposition toward cinematic thinking and the concept of cinematic genre is also found in Pippin's book when he suggests that Westerns are not simply artistic illustrations of days past, but, in fact, philosophical demonstrations of "the psychological dimensions of American modernization" (HW 14), namely, the artistic manifestation and recreation of the historical ideal of American's founding. For Pippin, philosophy, independent of the examples that inform our intuitions, is "ill-equipped on its own to answer a question about the true content of an historical ideal," and so we need a "more promising path" to unveil the nature and essence of such ideal, and the philosophical comprehension thereof.²⁰ Such a path can be formed through reflection on novels, drama, poetry, painting, and film. The American Western yields such reflection, and thus legitimates its relevance as an essential component to the overall argument.

More specifically, Pippin argues that the Western genre—viewed particularly through the classic films *Stagecoach*, *Red River*, *The Man Who Shot Liberty Valance*, and *The Searchers*—essentially, not incidentally, recreate "the first-personal dimension of political experience" (HW 15), and thus raises "the question of the political actuality within which political philosophy would have a point" (HW 16). As such, films, in general, are themselves philosophical works—esthetic instances of philosophical value, importance, and significance—insofar as they "represent the fundamental problems of the human condition" (HW 17). Westerns, in particular, philosophize insofar as they create, recreate, deconstruct, and reconstruct American political psychology—namely, the myth of American identity.

²⁰ Robert B. Pippin, "Philosophy Is Its Own Time Comprehended In Thought," *Topoi: An International Review of Philosophy* 25/1-2 (2006), 85-90, here pp. 85, 89.