



Mythologizing and the American Self-Understanding Commentary on *Hollywood Westerns and American Myth and Ride, Boldly Ride*

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Abstract: The commentary shows how these two studies probe deeper into the core of the American Self by examining the depth psychology of the American Western. Following their analyses, the essay addresses, firstly, how the American Western, in its earlier stage, contributed to the myth making of never-ending American expansionism supported by the apparent victory of American civilization and modernization, and secondly, how this same myth has been critically re-examined in the subsequent development of American Westerns. The ultimate scope of inquiry by both authors' rigorous analyses of the American Western transcends the confinement of the genre, and presents a more universal, existential dilemma of modern humanity that struggles against the opposition of civilization and wilderness, the rational and the irrational, mind and body.

Keywords: American self-understanding; Japanese self-understanding; the American Western; American expansionism; Wayne, John; Eastwood, Clint; mythologizing; mind-body-dualism.

What does the American Western mean to us? My reading experience of Robert Pippin's and Kevin Stoehr's books has been an exciting exploration of this hermeneutical question that opens itself up to a multiplicity of meaning. Both studies start with the basic premise that Hollywood Westerns provide us with one of the best ways to understand the mythic forms of American self-understanding, and that this self-understanding has been developed on such various levels as historical, cultural, political, moral, psychological, and existential.

My commentary will focus on the problem of mythologizing and the American self-understanding. Before discussing this theme, however, let me explain why as a Japanese I developed interest in this topic. Professors Pippin's and Stoehr's studies show that

the general framework of the American Western myth consists in the ideal of what John O'Sullivan in 1845 called "manifest destiny,"¹ which is "a near-religious ideal" proclaiming American expansionism of frontier-settling and civilization-building.² In his presentation, Stoehr argues that, "what underlies this

¹ "...checking the fulfilment [sic] of our manifest destiny to overspread the continent allotted by Providence for the free development of our yearly multiplying millions." John L. O'Sullivan, "Annexation," *United States Magazine and Democratic Review* 17/85 (July-August 1845) 5-10, here p. 5.

² Mary Lea Bandy and Kevin L. Stoehr, *Ride, Boldly Ride: The Evolution of the American Western*, Berkeley, CA: University of California Press 2012, p. 117. [Henceforth cited as RBR]

American expansionism is the Enlightenment-inspired ideal of human social progress: the idea that humans can conquer the primitive wilderness, along with its native inhabitants who live amidst the wilderness, by using rationality and its resulting technology to create a reason-governed nation, a society based on law and order, one that stretches from coast to coast." However, this American expansionism did not stop at the American West coast as it expanded beyond the Pacific to the far West, which means that it expanded also to the islands of Japan. It may be said that Japan, another wilderness for America, was forced by Americans to "civilize" twice: in 1853 by Commodore Perry (when Japan opened itself to Western countries), and in 1945 by General MacArthur (when Japan was defeated in WWII). An American historian Bruce Cumings analyzes Perry's position in relation to then-popular manifest destiny:

Matthew Perry was "an awesome presence" on any quarterdeck, "ruthless, stiff-necked, the embodiment of Manifest Destiny." Not only a navy man but a diplomat with wide experience, Perry understood the historic importance of his mission from the beginning...and in typical midcentury fashion he linked his enterprise to the thread of westward progress which "broke in the hands of Columbus," but which he would again tie up to "the ball of destiny," rolling it forward until Japan is brought "within the influence of European civilization."³

In this historical background, the Japanese self-understanding cannot be irrelevant to the problem of American expansionism. Therefore, I appreciate this opportunity of discussing the spiritual depth of America by way of examining the American Western. It should be noted, however, that my analysis never means a "revenge by the Other," so to speak, but aims at a better understanding of our significant neighbor, America; for the hermeneutics of American self-understanding necessarily leads to a better self-understanding of the Japanese as well.

Now let me come back to the main subject: the problem of mythologizing and the American self-understanding. Robert Pippin points out the essential function of myth-making in developing a nation's collective identity:

Human beings make myths, tell stories about ancient times and great events, and call such times and

events to mind over many generations, for all sorts of reasons. But many of these reasons are political. They help confirm a people's identity and help legitimate entitlements to territory and authority; they might orient a people with a sense of their unique mission.⁴

In the case of America, this myth has been the myth of never-ending American expansionism, supported by the undoubted victory of American civilization and modernization. As impressively expressed by the two studies, this Enlightenment-inspired American myth has been developed by creating an ideological dualism of civilization vs. wilderness, rationality vs. irrationality, non-violence vs. violence, democracy vs. aristocracy, and the egalitarian vs. the hierarchical: the former being the official ideal that Americans should pursue by all means, and the latter being the evil opponent that they should eradicate completely from the society.

Mythologizing is a psychological requirement necessary for a shared political identification. Or, it might be even said that a nation's history fundamentally consists, more or less, in this kind of mythologizing; for, insofar as a nation is a political unity, it always requires a plausible story, a legend, which can be held in common by its members as their original identity. However, "this glorifying legend," according to Pippin, "is also quite likely a fantasy, and there will come a time when the less glorious truth must out, or when it at least powerfully threatens to be revealed" (*HW* 97). Here, 'mythologizing' might be defined, following Jaspers, as a mental situation clouded by irrational emotions so as to completely lose its critical rationality; when this happens, one adheres to ideology as the unquestionable truth.⁵ The American expansionism

⁴ 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, p. 61. [Henceforth cited as *HW*]

⁵ In his essay, "Reason and Irrationality in Our Historic-Political Knowledge," Karl Jaspers calls our attention to the dilemma of never-ending ideological interpretations of reality: "The question always remains how ideologies are related to reality. Ideologies are products of thought; reality is the realm of action. Thinking itself is reality, though not unequivocally so; it detaches itself from reality, so as to produce two realities: the interpretation and that which is interpreted. In no case is an object of ideological interpretation identical with the reality occupied by its convinced protagonist.... The fact that we interpret reality and ourselves, and are human only by so doing, confronts

³ Bruce Cumings, *Dominion from Sea to Sea: Pacific Ascendancy and American Power*, New Haven, CT: Yale University Press 2009, p. 84.

is based on the myth of the expansion of American rationality, but this very act of mythologizing stems from irrational emotions, so it is very contradictory. This contradiction of mythologizing is impressively expressed in one of Hollywood's most famous lines in *The Man Who Shot Liberty Valance* (John Ford, 1962); the newspaperman proclaiming to Ransie Stoddard: "No, sir. This is the West, sir. When the legend becomes fact, print the legend." Kevin Stoehr asserts that "this line is a crystallization of the Western's perennial tension between myth and reality, between realism and romanticism; a dialectic that underlies the genre as a whole" (RBR 214). Indeed, this tension is never simple, for the newspaperman's statement reveals to us our own dilemma that we human beings, as being political, need myths (legends) for assuring our collective identity, but at the same time, we know that these myths contain untruths. The problem of myth and collective identity thus raises several psychological questions: As political beings, is it required that we keep living with a lie? Can we withstand it over time? What influences does it have on our collective consciousness (or sub-consciousness) if such a lie keeps suppressing our psyche? What, for example, happened in the American case? These questions, then, lead to a more general question of how to understand history: In the first place, can there be any objective interpretation of history – not distorted by a victor's justice, but founded on a truth?

As meticulously analyzed by the two studies, what is interesting about the American Western is that the genre itself, through its historical development, has expressed a deepening process of this psychological dilemma, and thus provided an opportunity of critically reflecting the American Self. *The Searchers* (John Ford,

1956), for example, leads us to "a direct confrontation with the fact that the origin of the territorial United States rests on a virulent racism and genocidal war against aboriginal peoples" (HW 104), by shockingly depicting the racist hatred of the John Wayne character. Also, *The Man Who Shot Liberty Valance* reveals the deception of American-modernization-myth by debunking the fact that "the establishment of any legal order, of whatever doctrine, even liberal-democratic and humanist, must be illegal, violent, unjust, and brutal, and a society must find a way to represent *that fact* to itself as a national memory" (HW 101). Thus the Hollywood Western, which was once a driving force of creating a rosy American myth, has turned out to criticizing their own myth-making, especially after WWII, by revealing "the intentional deceptions and falsehoods that lie behind the myth of the Western hero" (RBR 161). It is this self-debunking characteristic of the Hollywood Western, with a strong aversion to any hypocrisy, that has provided this genre with the powerfulness to delve into the psychological as well as the existential depth of humanity.

This psychological and existential deepening has been significantly developed by what Stoehr calls the postmodern American Western, represented by Eastwood Westerns. He contends that,

Unlike John Wayne and his typical association with America's dominant ideas and values, Eastwood tended toward characters who were antiheroes, driven toward revenge and killing for reasons that had little to do with building or defending a growing civilization. [RBR 243]

The Eastwood Western is no longer interested in the big story of American civilization and modernization; rather, it debunks the hypocrisy lying behind such an Enlightenment-inspired ideal, severely criticizing the abstract, vacant ideology that humans can eventually conquer the primitive wilderness – the wilderness of natural world, of aboriginal peoples, and, above all, of their own inner nature, i.e., wild passions. It can be said that the Eastwood Western is a strong counterargument to the modern Western idea of mind-body dualism that presupposes the unshaken victory of the rational (= mind, the conscious) over the irrational (= body, the unconscious). Eastwood emphasizes throughout his films that such rationality-based understanding of humanity does not give us a truth, that it is a lie; if we seriously want to change ourselves and society, we need to confront the reality, not ideals, of humans who,

us with an abysmal dilemma – for interpretation never comes to an end" (Karl Jaspers, *The Atom Bomb and the Future of Man*, Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press 1963, p. 275). "Jaspers knows the frailty of our thinking that easily creates ideologies excluding other views than our own," to which the act of mythologizing also belongs. "Facing such reality, Jaspers contends that philosophical faith alone yields clarity to 'the perversion of reason,' the lack of critical rationality, or rationality perverted by emotions and propaganda" (Tomoko Iwasawa, "Philosophical Faith as the Will to Communicate: Two Case Studies in Intercultural Understanding," in *Philosophical Faith and the Future of Humanity*, eds. Helmut Wautischer, Alan M. Olson, and Gregory J. Walters, Dordrecht, Heidelberg, New York: Springer 2012, p. 350).

by nature, embody both the rational and the irrational, the latter being an indispensable source of giving birth to our autonomous life force. At this stage of thinking, the Eastwood Western has transcended the framework of the American self-understanding, but is posing a broader argument against the modern Western idea of rationality-based Enlightenment, civilization, and modernization.

Lastly, let me introduce a Japanese contemporary issue in relation to this Eastwoodian theme. At the beginning of this commentary, I mentioned the problem of Japan and its civilization occasioned by Americans. A contemporary issue related with this problem is that, after WWII, Japan established the Constitution made by the Allied Powers, which commands that Japan give up any use of military power forever. The Japanese have lived with this Peace Constitution for almost seventy years, as if they were emasculated, and now become torn between ideals and reality of what it means to be a political nation in the real international society. Given this actual situation, the message of the American Western is never irrelevant to the Japanese. Indeed, it might be said that the Japanese are now facing the same conflict caused by modern hypocrisy, the dualism

of mind and body, that the Eastwood Western has been struggling. I think that this complexity of the American Self that the Hollywood Western has long struggled is what the Japanese have not yet understood well, and therefore, should learn seriously to realize what it has meant for America to create a political unity, so that the Japanese can confront their own present dilemma.

In conclusion, the two studies *Hollywood Westerns and American Myth* and *Ride, Boldly Ride* probe deeper into the core of the American Self by examining the depth psychology of the American Western with unprecedented philosophical clarity. It should be emphasized that, while these studies are basically conducted by rigorous analyses of the American Western, their ultimate scope of inquiry, as we have seen so far, transcends the confinement of the genre, and presents a more universal, existential problem of modern humanity represented by the process that the American self-understanding has experienced. In this way, both studies do open the way not only for understanding what it means to be an American, but more profoundly and importantly, for recognizing the crucial dilemma that a modern human being has to confront.