



**Do Classic Films Present a Philosophical Argument?
Reflections on Robert Pippin's *Hollywood Westerns and American Myth*
and Mary Lea Bandy's and Kevin Stoehr's *Ride, Boldly Ride***

Carlin Romano
Ursinus College
cromano@ursinus.edu

Abstract: Although excellent philosophical critics of film such as Robert Pippin and Kevin Stoehr would prefer to sidestep what Stoehr deems the "obsessive" concern of some scholars over whether movies make philosophical arguments, or should count as "philosophy," end-running the issue is not so easy. Examining both Pippin's *Hollywood Westerns and American Myth* and *Ride, Boldly Ride* by Stoehr and Mary Lea Bandy, I suggest that heat around this matter arises from aspects of the auteur theory, its possibly implicit notion of a director's unitary authority and intentionality in regard to a film, and linguistic choices by critics, when describing a director's ambitions, that bolster that notion. Reflecting further on Pippin's view of intentionality and its link to auteur theory, I suggest that the concept of an "aesthetic fiction" might bring opposing positions closer together, though it could not eliminate the film-as-philosophy debate altogether.

Keywords: Film; movie; auteur; intentionality; Wittgenstein, Ludwig; Westerns; philosophy; critic.

Philosophers know that Ludwig Wittgenstein, perhaps the greatest of our ilk in the modern cinematic era, loved movies, and even jokingly said, before he came to the United States in the late 1940s, that he wanted to meet the American actress Betty Hutton. He sometimes invited a favorite student to go with him to "a flick," where he would munch on a pork pie or bun as he watched the movie.

In his famous memoir of Wittgenstein, Norman Malcolm, one of the students closest to the preternaturally intense Austrian thinker, described his mentor's demeanor at a movie. He wrote that Wittgenstein's

observation of the film was not relaxed or detached. He leaned tensely forward in his seat and rarely took his eyes off the screen. He hardly ever uttered comments on the episodes of the film no matter how trivial or artificial it was, in order to free his mind temporarily

from the philosophical thoughts that tortured and exhausted him.¹

According to Malcolm, Wittgenstein liked to sit in the front row, as close up as possible. Malcolm observes,

This way the screen would occupy his whole field of vision, and his mind would be turned away from the thoughts of the lecture and his feelings of revulsion. Once he whispered, "This is like a shower bath." [WM ix]

Two scholars of Wittgenstein's relation to film, Bela Szabados and Christina Stojanova, have written that "there is compelling biographical evidence that

¹ Quoted in *Wittgenstein at the Movies: Cinematic Investigations*, eds. Béla Szabados and Christina Stojanova, Lanham, MD: Lexington Books 2011, p. ix. [Henceforth cited as WM]

Wittgenstein went to the movies to get away from philosophy rather than to do philosophy" (WM x). While they do not accept this view completely, they note that he did write in his private notebooks in 1931,

I must be a very modern person since the cinema has such an extraordinarily beneficial effect on me. I cannot imagine any rest for the mind more adequate to me than an American movie. What I see & the music give me a blissful sensation perhaps in an infantile way, but therefore no less powerful. [WM xi]

To be sure, the pendulum in regard to philosophy's approach to American film—in the wake of scholars from Stanley Cavell to Thomas Wartenberg to Robert Pippin—has now swung very much the other way. And, in all fairness, Wittgenstein was not talking about the films of Howard Hawks and John Ford that are the focus of Robert Pippin's *Hollywood Westerns and American Myth*,² or the American Western genre in general as analyzed in *Ride, Boldly Ride* by Mary Lea Bandy and Kevin Stoehr.³ Both texts exemplify the forceful, energetic engagement with film as philosophically important, and maybe as philosophy itself, that characterizes the last couple of decades in our field.

As a longtime cultural and literary critic at the *Philadelphia Inquirer*, *Chronicle of Higher Education* and other publications, I found both books tremendously illuminating and a pleasure to read. I learned an enormous amount from them. Nonetheless I prefer to revisit an issue that Kevin Stoehr acknowledges, but marks as "obsessive," among some philosophical analysts of film: Whether movies can "present a philosophical argument," or, if I may expand on that, whether a given film constitutes an act of philosophy itself. Because for those who do not share my—or our—delight in sustained critical interpretation of works of art such as classic movies, the boom in philosophical interpretation of film can very much seem a prime example of what Susan Sontag famously derided as "the revenge of the intellect upon art."

Because the issue here is the scope of what we consider philosophy, or a philosophical text, let me

relate my concern to my own experience over the last two years as I have given more than fifty talks on my own book, *America the Philosophical*.⁴ That book argues for a broad notion of what constitutes philosophy in America, and philosophy generally. On almost every occasion in which I have participated in a subsequent Q&A session, someone has asked me whether I am dumbing down philosophy by not restricting it to classic argumentation in an article or treatise. Usually I respond by stating that I think philosophy is what Wittgenstein called a "blurred concept," with a number of recognizable elements, but not always in the same measure in one or another expert's definition. Among those elements might be: presentations construable as claims or assertions; openness to counterexample or discussion; sustained attention to a topic; concern with big ideas; presentations recognizable as a kind of evidence for claims; and so on.

What I have found along the way is that there is great receptivity to construing philosophy as more than what professional philosophers do in journals and books, but also stiff resistance to the idea that it is anything that makes you *think* philosophical thoughts. And here is where I think the crux of the issue lies when philosophers reflect on movies—a deeply collaborative art if you pay any attention to the stream of credits at the end—whose creators span an incredible spectrum that includes such disparate types as Éric Rohmer and Adam Sandler.

As I read Robert Pippin's lovely book, with its complex and alluring thoughts on politics and psychology occasioned by his heavy thinking on Hawks and Ford, I could not help musing, "This is rich philosophical interpretation, but the movie itself is not a work of philosophy." This reaction, in part, stems from my own thirty years of writing as a newspaper critic, which included time as a movie critic and reporter, and endless interviews at one stage of my career with European directors as supposedly philosophical and "auteurish" as Francesco Rosi, Werner Herzog and Bertrand Blier. When I remember how many times I was told that a line or scene in a film was an actor's impromptu decision, or a film editor's call, or an investor's idea, or a studio head's demand—when I reflect on the enormously collaborative aspect of filmmaking—I find that the litany of examples shakes my confidence that even a classic film can rise to my

² 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. [Henceforth cited as *HW*]

³ 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*]

⁴ Carlin Romano, *America the Philosophical*, New York, NY: Alfred A. Knopf, 2012.

(perhaps ossified) sense of philosophy as a focused, individual, and intentional effort to state truth.

Certain lines and phrases in Pippin's book stood out to me. For example, when he writes in regard to *Stagecoach*, "We come to realize that Ford is asking whether a group of this sort could ever be said to form a nation" (HW 4), I am skeptical whether that is Ford's question, though I am fine with the idea that *Stagecoach* makes us ask that question. In general, when Pippin ascribes a kind of reflective intentionality to a film or its director, as when he writes that *Red River* and *The Man Who Shot Liberty Valence* "involve a multilayered reflection on what it would mean to submerge the drive to distinction, honor, glory, and aristocratic independence to the demands of security, cooperation and peace" (HW 25), I require greater evidence of directorial intention, of the "political logic," in Pippin's phrase, that is supposedly a part of the film. The same goes when he sees, in *Liberty Valence*, an "attempt to come to terms with a kind of point" (HW 103). And similarly when Pippin writes that, "Novels and films and other artworks are essential, not incidental or merely illustrative, elements" of the enormous interpretive task of realistic political philosophy (HW 15). I am not convinced of that necessity — yes, concreteness is essential, but that can also come from journalism and history.

Several other phrases in Pippin's book give me pause about the intentions of the work of art or its creator. I am not immediately persuaded by his claim that the films he deals with "aspire to a form of universality" (HW 21), though I think they may well raise universalist issues. And while I agree with him about the "ability" of great films "to represent the fundamental problems of the human condition" (HW 17), and thus spur excellent interpretive philosophy such as his own, I wonder whether representation itself, as an artistic feat, amounts to philosophy.

This sense of mine that the philosophy here is coming from the philosophers, and not from the moviemakers, was only bolstered when I happened upon what seemed gaps of interpretation between Pippin and Stoehr. In his own chapter on Ford, Stoehr writes that Ford's great mature works were the "results of Ford's later desire to complicate and demythologize the evolution of the Old West" (RBR 187). Pippin, however, sees these as mythologizing works. So do the movies mythologize or demythologize? The answer, I think, is not in the movies. Perhaps it is best, in writing about the philosophical themes of great Westerns, to use the sort of language that Stoehr does in his Ford chapter, for

instance, that *The Searchers*, in regard to racism, "invites the audience to reflect on such a theme" (RBR 195).

Yet Stoehr also sometimes falls into language that suggests a film makes assertions, as when he writes, in regard to the idea that "brutal violence is often required in removing obstacles to progress," that *Liberty Valence* "makes this point even more emphatically" (RBR 197), and that the film "presents an implicit argument that public and private happiness cannot be easily divorced" (RBR 202).

I realize that Pippin and Stoehr, as good scholars of the philosophy of film, are aware of everything I have pointed out, and doubtless have thought hard about this issue. Pippin writes that,

of course, myths, whether epic or romantic, or, as in the *High Noon* case, tragic, a story of a failed founding, are not arguments in defense of anything, nor are they premises in some claim about the best way to live. [HW 66]

Similarly, he observes later in the book,

Let us for a moment indulge the contentious and complicated notion that a film itself can, by virtue of the unitary vision of its author, be said to have a point of view on the events narrated, that we can be said in some sense to be guided toward a certain assessment of what we have seen and away from others. [HW 97]

In the real world of film, as he knows, that requires both absolute authority on the part of the director over final cut, and the requisite guiding intention.

Similarly, Stoehr seems sensitive to some of the criteria of philosophy bouncing around my head. In a draft of his presentation in San Diego, he addressed that by writing of how "movies open up a 'world' of questions and possible answers that invite a Socratic form of dialogue," and create "a dialectical occasion." I'm not sure, however, that the kind of feedback that follows a movie — reviews by critics, comments to friends on leaving the theater, essays by philosophers of film that go unanswered by directors — rise to the status of dialogue.

It may seem that my perspective in this reflection, as a tyro in the area of philosophy and film, is too controlled by my own obsession with the word philosophy and its practice, and by a perhaps excessive taxonomic resistance to crediting creative artists with philosophical observations that their works undoubtedly evoke. Yet the notion of "obsession" seems less apt than that of "necessary attention" to a conceptual roadblock on the way to open-armed acceptance of film as philosophy. It pays too little respect to a debate that has been going

on since Sergei Eisenstein argued that montage—the characteristic technique of film according to that distinguished director—could express abstract ideas by arranging particular scenes in a peculiar film syntax.

In a like spirit of mixed uncertainty and boosterish ardor, specialists in contemporary philosophy of film have both pushed the envelope in regard to film's ability to make philosophical points, and also noted its limitations, as pointed out by philosopher Amy Coplan in an overview article on the subject.⁵

Paisley Livingston, echoing Eisenstein, has written that "films can make independent, innovative, and significant contributions to philosophy by means unique to the cinematic medium (such as montage and sound image relations)" [CCA 187], while also raising, as noted above, the complication that a non-omnipotent auteur creates for the idea of philosophical expression. Stephen Mulhall, in his book, *On Film*, asserts apropos of the four *Alien* films that they are "not philosophy's raw material, not a source for their ornamentation; they are philosophical exercises, philosophy in action—film as philosophizing."⁶ Thomas Wartenberg, in his *Thinking on Screen*, rejects the idea that films may provide only illustrations of philosophical ideas, arguing that they can loom larger than that, and "need not be subordinated to that of which they are an illustration."⁷ At a more extreme rhetorical level, common to the style in which he perpetrates philosophy, the Italian thinker Giorgio Agamben (whose father ran a movie theater in Rome) writes of "the Messianic task of cinema."⁸

Such observations lead one to want to acknowledge the force of non-assertive representational acts—through poetry, film, music, comedy—when it comes to persuading people of philosophical positions. But is that force philosophical? It seems to me that the debate Stoehr would prefer to sideline—whether a film can present a philosophical argument—must remain at the heart of philosophy of film. If that is so, it requires

strong engagement from anyone who, like Pippin and Stoehr, wants to treat great directors as philosophers.

Pippin, in his "On Westerns" here,⁹ suggests one way of both stepping back and holding on to the notion of film as philosophy when faced with the skeptical angle I raise—holding on to auteur theory while letting go of the intentionality of the director in any ordinary sense of intentionality. As he puts it, we might proceed with the understanding that what "we are being shown" by "the director" has "absolutely nothing to do, zero, with what went on in the director's mind when he set up and filmed the scene" (OW30). As Pippin helpfully explains, "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" (OW30).

If that is Pippin's stance, I see a possible reconciliation between positions. One might view the "intentionality" of a film, or of its director, as a kind of "aesthetic fiction" analogous to the familiar concept of a "legal fiction," which allows us to accomplish a useful project—here, the kind of excellent philosophical illumination that Pippin, Cavell and others now bring to film. That project, I'd submit, would be strengthened by careful avoidance of language and verbs that point us back to a more street-level sense of auteurish intentionality that has, in fact, been abandoned—saying, for instance, that films "aspire" to some view, or "involve a multilayered reflection on" complex ideas. Since I agree with Pippin that the kinds of works he cites at the end of "On Westerns" (e.g., Montaigne's *Essays*, Pascal's *Pensees*)—works richer in considerations or presentations rather than assertions—should count as philosophy, I would be just about on board with film as philosophy.

But what do we do, then, with the recalcitrant crank who insists that a film—a work of art, a presentation, a "candidate for appreciation" in that phrase recalling Arthur Danto's quite relevant philosophy of art here—does *not* possess intentionality if it has "absolutely nothing to do, zero, with what went on in the director's mind" beforehand? If, on that view, it does not possess intentionality toward a particular meaning or interpretation rather than other meanings or interpretations, its directionless direction cuts against our sense of philosophy as necessarily heading one way rather than another.

That rude and arguably obnoxious move would, I am afraid, keep the film-as-philosophy debate alive.

⁵ Amy Coplan, "Film," in *The Continuum Companion to Aesthetics*, ed. Anna Christina Ribeiro, New York: Continuum 2012, pp. 184-200, here p. 187. [Henceforth cited as CCA]

⁶ Stephen Mulhall, *On Film*, New York, NY: Routledge 2002, p. 2.

⁷ Thomas Wartenberg, *Thinking on Screen: Film as Philosophy*, London: Routledge 2007, p. 44.

⁸ Henrik Gustafsson and Asbjørn Grønstad, eds., *Cinema and Agamben: Ethics, Biopolitics and the Moving Image*, New York, NY: Bloomsbury 2014, p. 4.

⁹ Robert B. Pippin, "On Westerns," *Existenz* 9/2 (2014), 27-31. [Henceforth cited as OW]