



## The Essence, Artistry, and Philosophy of Movie Westerns

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**Abstract:** With primary reference to *Ride, Boldly Ride: The Evolution of the American Western*, this essay outlines some of the characteristics that have helped to define the traditional or classical movie Western and that have thereby established a standard (even if a loose one) against which post-classical or revisionist Westerns might gain clearer meaning in terms of their responses to the conventions of the genre. I suggest that this complex, diverse genre is better defined according to flexible boundaries and family resemblances than by strict conceptual parameters. I address several philosophical aspects of the Western, especially those evoked by the book, and consider the task of establishing criteria that may be used to assess a given movie's greatness. By providing an overview of the book, the essay highlights defining currents in the evolution of this film genre.

**Keywords:** Ford, John; Eastwood, Clint; Mann, Anthony; Boetticher, Budd; Gadamer, Hans-Georg; Hobbes, Thomas; dialectical; Socratic; authorial intention; manifest destiny; myth; national identity.

*Ride, Boldly Ride* was clearly not conceived in the tradition of what we now call "philosophy of film," and most especially if that phrase refers primarily to the activity of philosophizing about the medium of moving-image-projection *per se*.<sup>1</sup> It is far more of a work in film history and film studies, and yet there are certain aspects of the book that intersect with the field of "philosophy in film," which is to say that the co-authors tried at times to explore philosophical questions and problems that are evoked (however implicitly) by specific movies or movie genres—chiefly by their narrative components, but also by their various ways and styles of presenting philosophical ideas in an audiovisual format.

In the last decade, in the fields of philosophy of film as well as philosophy in film, there has been an almost obsessive concern on the part of certain "film-osophers" with whether movies can present a philosophical position or argument in a manner that is not simply the depiction of a character (a talking head) who articulates a chain of philosophical reasoning. Suffice it here to say that I find it valuable when film-philosophers get beyond such debate, if only because books like Robert Pippin's *Hollywood Westerns and American Myth* highlight the philosophical significance of cinematic art in a way that goes beyond the question of the mere argumentation of a particular film.<sup>2</sup> As a confession, my

<sup>1</sup> Mary Lea Bandy and Kevin L. Stoehr, *Ride, Boldly Ride: The Evolution of the American Western*, Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2012.

<sup>2</sup> 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.

own approach to film art borrows from Hans-Georg Gadamer: movies open up a world of questions and possible answers that invite a Socratic form of dialogue, a hermeneutic play of questioning and answering, and always with a recognition of a horizon-fusion involved in any act of interpretation. A movie is not some object-in-itself, an idea that is presupposed, I would argue, by such film-philosophers as Bruce Russell who ask whether a movie could possibly philosophize or make a philosophical argument.<sup>3</sup> A film should rather be viewed as a dialectical occasion and opportunity for a subject-related experience that involves the expectations and wonder of the audience as much as it involves the original intentions and craftsmanship of the filmmaker and screenwriter (and the screenwriter is all too often ignored in film studies as well as philosophy and film).

The chief goal of our book is to offer a renewed appreciation of the American Western movie as a form of cinematic art and as a well-established cinematic genre. Such an appreciation necessarily involves a history of the development of this type of film, no matter how selective a survey. There had not been a survey of the entire genre and its evolution from the early silent era onwards for more than a few decades. The co-authors also aimed to pay tribute to the Westerns directed by and starring Clint Eastwood, especially his masterpiece *Unforgiven* (1992), and to argue for ways in which his Westerns provide ways of reviving as well as subverting and transcending certain conventions of the genre. In addition, we wanted to discuss some of the intriguing ways in which recent movies such as *No Country for Old Men* (2007) by the Coen brothers and *There Will Be Blood* (2007) by Paul Thomas Anderson tend to utilize certain elements of the genre while remaining non-Westerns (or quasi-Westerns at best).

<sup>3</sup> Bruce Russell, "The Philosophical Limits of Film," *Film and Philosophy* Special Edition (2000), 163-7, as well as his subsequent essays "Film's Limits: The Sequel," *Film and Philosophy* 12 (2008), 1-16, and "Limits to Thinking on Screen," *Film and Philosophy* 14 (2010), 109-16. For my own overview and evaluation of Russell's argument and of the responses to this argument by major film philosophers see Kevin L. Stoehr, "'By Cinematic Means Alone:' The Russell-Wartenberg-Carroll Debate," *Film and Philosophy* 15 (2011), 111-26. The most comprehensive treatment of debating a film's capacity to philosophize, and more specifically, to make a philosophical argument, is in Thomas Wartenberg, *Thinking on Screen: Film as Philosophy*, London and New York: Routledge, 2007.

As co-authors, Mary Lea Bandy and I attempted to demonstrate what constitutes the task of giving proper due to the artistry involved in the best works of a cinematic genre. This task involves the presupposition of certain criteria that measure the vision and craftsmanship of such works. We focused chiefly upon the A-production Hollywood Westerns as examples of the best that the Western can be, though we do refer on occasion to Westerns that were crafted at lesser levels of artistry (so-called B-Westerns). With this in mind, several of the philosophical aspects of the book may be outlined as follows:

(1) The overall project evokes the fundamental question of what a proper appreciation of a cinematic genre entails. This question is obviously broader than the Western movie genre itself. Our book revolves around multiple elements of the genre, which are not always easily distinguished from one another. They are true of the literary genre of the American Western and the book focuses on the audiovisual presentation of such elements. Four elements of the genre serve as recurring focal points of the book, even though each of them is not an essential or absolutely necessary element of any particular Western:

- (a) A sense of bold adventure that is typically framed by stories of the building and expansion of America in a frontier landscape or community and/or by stories depicting struggles and conflicts in the face of adversity and within a frontier setting.
- (b) A sense of tragic loss or suffering resulting from the struggles, conflicts, and adventures mentioned above, most especially in stories of the exploration and settling of the Old West.
- (c) Emphasis on the rugged reality of the natural world, here in the form of various Western terrains, and where Nature serves as backdrop, setting, obstacle, metaphor, or source of inspiration (or all combined).
- (d) Recognition of the need for some type of justice (sometimes in the form of a moral awakening that leads to this recognition) as a form of narrative closure.

Of course, there are exceptions to these familiar expectations. For example, classic Westerns such as Wellman's *The Ox-Bow Incident* (1943) or Ford's *The Man Who Shot Liberty Valance* (1962) are atypical Westerns in that their visual and narrative references to frontier adventure and to the natural landscape are fairly scarce. They are much more about character development and moral-political ideas. Also, Western comedies rarely delve into the deep terrain of tragic loss in the way in which movies like Ford's *The Searchers* (1956) do.

Nonetheless, the above-mentioned elements give us a general sense of what may be typical or atypical in the genre.

There are additional elements that help to constitute the greatness of some of the best Western movies, but these factors go far beyond questions of the genre itself: effectively naturalistic performances in most cases, usually with a touch of folksy charm; stirring musical soundtracks, often using melodies and themes from traditional and familiar American folk songs; and a balance between stasis and motion, between dialogue and action, leading to a graceful sense of narrative as well as visual pacing, a type of cinematic rhythm or tempo, that results from thoughtful editing in conjunction with the vision of the director. And so the mission of the book evokes questions related to aesthetics and the philosophy of art: How do we evaluate the artistry of movies in a particular genre? What are the standards of evaluation that relate to the genre and what are the standards that relate to movie greatness in general? These are complex questions that entail narrative-governed elements of a film, such as storyline, dialogue, and character development, as well as non-narrative-governed elements, such as tempo or pacing (as established through montage), the physical nuances of an actor's performance, and the ways in which musical effects and the subtleties of cinematography combine to create a mood in a given scene.

(2) In the Epilogue of the book we raise questions about the idea of genre itself. There are strict genre guardians of the Western who maintain that certain essential characteristics need to be present to make a Western. Some of these characteristics or standards revolve around geography and time period: the true Western, according to some, should be set west of the Mississippi during the post-Civil War period when many Southerners went West to seek new lives and opportunities after the South had been defeated. Some scholars or thoughtful film fans might hold that a Western requires some version of a gun-slinging protagonist who must eventually confront a threat, usually an enemy or villain, in order to save someone in danger (perhaps himself).

One of our arguments claims that the Western genre, like any long-running genre, should be defined more by loose boundaries and family resemblances than by rigid parameters. This obviously holds for literary as well as cinematic Westerns since proposed genre boundaries tend to be narrative-related. In addition, our selection of certain films as objects of

analysis, films that challenge the traditional definition of the Western in terms of setting and time period and even plotline, exemplifies our rejection of the strictly defined genre: movies such as Victor Seastrom's *The Wind* (1928), Leo McCarey's *Ruggles of Red Gap* (1935), and King Vidor's *Northwest Passage* (1940) are just a few examples. There must indeed be some type of line of demarcation that distinguishes genres, of course, but that line is a blurry and flexible one, our book argues, and must be defined by a cluster of characteristics such as the four elements spelled out previously. No singular characteristic is absolutely necessary, but when a few or several characteristics are present together, we start to get the whiff of a Western.

(3) In terms of the idea of the Western as a morality tale, the book explores various ways in which the protagonist confronts and resolves a moral dilemma. This is especially true of Chapter One, which categorizes different types of silent Western movies according to three broad themes, usually with the question of justice in play:

- (a) Conflicts between white Westerners and their Native American enemies;
- (b) Conflicts between white Westerners (heroes and villains) or between white communities or groups (typically ranchers versus homesteaders);
- (c) The evolving concern with the moral character of the white Westerner, especially in terms of one recurring feature of certain silent Westerns: a moment or situation of ethical awakening that transforms a morally questionable or ambiguous gunslinger into a true-blue hero, usually for the sake of saving a damsel in distress or a family of homesteaders in need, as for example in William S. Hart's and Thomas Ince's *Hell's Hinges* (1916) or John Ford's *Straight Shooting* (1917). These ethical awakenings are presented in typically sudden moments of self-illumination and self-transformation—almost jarringly sudden moments, as epitomized later on in American film history by Tom Dunson's switch to light-hearted empathy at the end of Howard Hawks' *Red River* (1948) or Ethan Edwards's act of rescuing his niece toward the end of Ford's *The Searchers*. And yet such moments are not entirely unrealistic, if only because Westerners had to be rapid-fire decision-makers at times, given the circumstances and (more importantly from a philosophical viewpoint) given that moral awakenings sometimes result more from emotion and intuition than from some process of deliberation.

(4) Later chapters in the book deal with the increasing concern with the moral psychology of the Westerner over the course of the evolution of the Western movie. Many post-WWII and 1950s Westerns may be labeled as psychological Westerns and John Ford even described his 1956 *The Searchers* as a psychological epic. The series of Westerns by Anthony Mann and starring James Stewart have even been categorized as neurotic or Freudian Westerns. What results from a study of this trajectory in the Western film has philosophical connotations: the exploration of a character's morality cannot be neatly divorced from a consideration of that character's psychology.

(5) The book also addresses the existential dimension of the Westerner, with a special focus on the lone bounty hunter played by Randolph Scott in the Ranown studio Westerns by Budd Boetticher, as well as a discussion of Peckinpah's group-oriented Western *The Wild Bunch* (1969). In the case of Boetticher's Westerns, the focus is on the individual's challenge to provide his own meaning or purpose in a situation that may suggest the idea of a morally indifferent universe. However, contrary to Jim Kitses' interpretation of the Boetticher protagonist as a passive pawn of fate or even a tragicomic clown in the face of an absurd reality, I show how the Boetticher hero is a true individualist and values-creator who, given the storyline, winds up being a champion of individual choice and self-creation, despite his many obstacles and challenges. The Boetticher films are anything but nihilistic, contra Kitses, who seems to conflate existentialism with nihilism.

(6) As our book indicates, the Western's recurring appreciation of the natural world is often reminiscent of the type of majestic and even sublime landscapes captured by such Romantic painters (both European and American) as Caspar David Friedrich, J. M. William Turner, Thomas Cole, Albert Bierstadt, Frederick Edwin Church, or George Caleb Bingham. Filmmakers like John Ford or Raoul Walsh admitted that they had been influenced by painters of life in the Old West such as Frederic Remington, Charles Russell, or Charles Schreyvogel. There is indeed a broad trail of Romanticism that leads from European nature-worship to American frontier paintings and then to the cinematic territory of directors like Ford and Walsh.

(7) There is an intriguing dialectic at play with the story of American expansionism that is the subject of many a Western, especially during the renaissance of the Western in the WWII era. The themes of frontier-settling and civilization-building that are central to the

Old West mythology are themes that derive from 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 (usually illustrated in many Westerns by the train or railway) to create a reason-governed nation, a society based on law and order, one that stretches from coast to coast. At the same time, many a Western has its Romantic side, as mentioned previously: a respect for the grandeur of raw Nature and, at times, a nostalgia for a simpler, folksy form of life that is soon to be superseded by the engines of an industrial nation.

(8) The Epilogue contains a discussion of various Westerns from the 1980s on and, more importantly, of what might be meant by references to the postmodern Western—a type of film that has its seeds in the post-classical Westerns of the post-WWII period and in the revisionist Westerns of the 1950s, 1960s, and early 1970s. I argue that it is much more meaningful to speak of a postmodern phase in the development of the Western than it is to speak of any single postmodern Western movie. This is due to the fact that, in our contemporary era of the Western that begins in many ways with Peckinpah's *The Wild Bunch* and with such Eastwood Westerns as *High Plains Drifter* (1973), *The Outlaw Josey Wales* (1976), and most especially *Unforgiven* (1992), there appears to be a tendency toward the creative fusion of a reverence for the classical Westerns and an urge to subvert and transcend the conventional standards and expectations of the genre. If post-modernism revolves around a tendency to reject any essentialist or universal standards of a given genre, then the current phase of Western movie-making, at least from the early 1990s onwards, is a mixture of revival and revisionism. This is shown by the fact that the most important uses of genre components in the last decade are demonstrated as much by Ed Harris' *Appaloosa* (2008) and the Coen brother's re-make (2010) of *True Grit* (1969), which were quite faithful to the conventions of the genre, as by those convention-shattering uses of Western elements as *Cowboys & Aliens* (2011), *No Country For Old Men* (2007), and *There Will Be Blood*.

In conclusion, I would like to thank the Karl Jaspers Society of North America for hosting this book session and thereby exploring the ways in which Jaspers' philosophy might help us in appreciating the intellectual as well as experiential aspects of various art forms, including cinematic art. One of Jaspers' central

concepts is that of the "limit situation," which refers to a moment or experience that provides an opportunity for an individual to recognize and confront the boundaries of one's current worldviews or mental frameworks. Limit situations are also opportunities for individuals to transcend confining worldviews or frameworks and to accept new modes of reflection, existential commitment, and self-consciousness. With this in mind, it might be argued that an exploration of the Western film genre is an especially fitting topic, at least in a symbolic manner, in that the Western has increasingly demonstrated the idea of boundary-crossing, both in terms of Western movie narratives (journeys, adventures, expansionism, and characters' moral transformations) and in terms of the evolution of the genre itself. In looking back over the history of the movie Western, we are reminded that the Western's clearest expression of journey, adventure, and expansionism has been the journey, adventure, and expansion of the genre itself.

### Responding to the Critics

I would like to thank my friend and colleague Tomoko Iwasawa of Reitaku University for her generous and insightful reflections on aspects of the book.<sup>4</sup> Her commentary centers upon the connection between the process of American myth-making and the development of an American sense of collective national identity. Iwasawa draws lessons from *Ride, Boldly Ride* as well as Robert Pippin's *Hollywood Westerns and American Myth*. She is especially interested in the ways in which the evolution of the myth of America has revolved around certain essential oppositions or dualities such as truth/deception, civilization/wilderness, violence/non-violence, rationality/irrationality, and to some minor extent also mind/body. Iwasawa views American myth as being rooted fundamentally in the ideal of Manifest Destiny, an ideal of expansionism and rational progress. She then explains that this ideal should be viewed from a broader perspective, and one that goes beyond the borders of America itself. In other words, the goal of Manifest Destiny was not completed once the project of American conquest and civilization-building reached the Pacific Ocean. The project extended beyond the West Coast and stretched to Japan, especially in terms of the conquests of Commodore Matthew Perry, in 1853, and

General Douglas MacArthur, leading to Japan's defeat at the end of World War II. Iwasawa makes clear that a better understanding of the American process of myth-making and collective self-identification can assist the Japanese with their own national self-understanding, especially given America's involvement, for good or ill, in Japan's modern history.

In his response to the panelists at the book session, Robert Pippin replied that he did not necessarily view American myth-making as being defined essentially by the ideal of Manifest Destiny. To paraphrase Pippin, he views American myth as being determined more generally by the idea of having a second chance and being able to begin again. This is especially the case when one takes into account the Western's story of defeated Southerners beginning life anew in the Old West. And more generally, after the national disaster of the Civil War, America found an opportunity to construct its national identity anew in terms of transforming and integrating the Old West into a modern and unified civilization. Here I would add that the ideal of Manifest Destiny is one important component of American myth-making, but not the only component. In terms of the Western, there are certainly films that center upon the goal of territorial expansionism, wilderness settling, and civilization-building (*The Big Trail*, *Union Pacific*, *Northwest Passage*, *Red River*, and *The Man Who Shot Liberty Valance*, for example). But there are so many Westerns, even history-minded classical Westerns, that are centered upon other crucial themes: the story of revenge/retribution/justice, say, or the psychology and/or moral transformation of the Westerner.

In terms of her emphasized opposition between rationality and irrationality, Iwasawa remarks about American myth-making in her commentary: "American expansionism is based on the myth of the expansion of American rationality, but this mythologizing itself stems from irrational emotions, so it is very contradictory." I wonder if it can really be claimed so generally that this "mythologizing itself stems from irrational emotions." Some emotions may be deemed irrational and some may not, I would suggest. For example, a primitive urge toward violent revenge without any regard for the consequences might be categorized as irrational while the desire for justified violence within the context of community-sanctioned retribution might be deemed rational. Regardless of its emotional dimension, the human desire to mythologize may be quite conscious and reasonable and self-reflective, not unlike a passion for learning or a collective desire to form a social

<sup>4</sup> Tomoko Iwasawa, "Mythologizing and the American Self-Understanding," *Existenz* 9/2 (2014), 41-4. [Henceforth cited as MAS]

contract and build a nation. And this may especially be the case when the myth in question is connected with national self-identification and a collective sense of social-political-historical progress. So while I do view the Western as being connected essentially with American myth-making and while the mythologizing of the Old West does revolve many times around certain dichotomies or dualities, I do question whether all mythologizing is rooted in irrational emotions. Likewise, while the mind-body distinction may well be classified as a Western duality (which is already a very broad classification), I could not see how Iwasawa connects that distinction with her comments on myth-making and national self-understanding, particularly in light of the Western genre. Mind-body dualism may be connected with the dichotomy between rationality and irrationality, but these two sets of opposition are not simply identical.

Iwasawa also makes an interesting reference to Clint Eastwood's Westerns as offering an example of the way in which the genre has come to de-mythologize itself—and most especially as a way of somehow transcending a more classical myth that is built in part on a lie or deception (for example, the deception that American expansionism required heroic courage but did not require violent genocide or primitive revenge). If my interpretation of her commentary is correct, it seems that Iwasawa identifies Eastwoodian Westerns with an attempt to put the story of American expansionism (and thus the story of a rational progress from savage wilderness to the garden of modern civilization) behind us and to acknowledge the more irrational or even self-deceptive aspects of human nature that are supposedly concealed by this rationalist myth.

I do question whether traditional Westerns, and especially those that we now deem classical, can be broadly categorized as rationalist in the sense of typically concealing or repressing the more irrational aspects of human nature. If anything, the Western is one genre (perhaps along with the gangster genre) that seems to bring irrational elements to the fore in the most dramatic way, especially in terms of the Western as revenge tale. The fact that some Westerns (and most especially those in the WWII era) are framed by the larger story of an expansionist America does not mean that their characters are not driven at times by primal passions and by instinctual urges toward revenge or self-glorification.

Iwasawa implies that Eastwood (as filmmaker) had such an agenda in mind when he chose his scripts

for production and made his films in a certain way. For example, and with implicit regard to Eastwood's own intentions in creating an entire body of work, she states:

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. [MAS 43]

While Eastwood as filmmaker has certainly tended to choose Western narratives that challenge and even subvert the genre in certain respects (but not in all respects), I am far from being convinced that he chose such material as a critical response to the problematic dualities and deceptions involved in American self-mythologizing. By reading or watching interviews with Eastwood, and paying attention to what is most emphatic in his Westerns, it becomes clear that he seems to be far more interested in the archetype and psychology of the lone revenge-driven Westerner—not for the reason of de-bunking the myth of Manifest Destiny, but rather for what appears to be a far humbler reason: Eastwood is interested in the type of character that is an individual hero whose larger-than-life qualities shine in the context of simpler times and primal adversity.

And so Eastwood's avoidance of the more history-minded Western that is centered on the story of expansionism and the ideal of Manifest Destiny may, I submit from the evidence, be more a matter of non-interest than critique. It is true that certain Eastwood Westerns such as *High Plains Drifter*, *Pale Rider*, and *Unforgiven* ignore, for the most part, the larger story of American expansionism. This does not mean that it is his intention, or even the intention of his screenwriters, to de-bunk some greater myth that involves broader cultural and philosophical goals. In addition, Eastwood's movie *The Outlaw Josey Wales*, while mainly being a revenge tale, is framed by an overt Civil War context, makes clear the horrors of that national conflict, and shows us the building of a small community out of this adversity. And while this director has maintained a mostly (but certainly not fully) revisionist attitude toward the classical conventions of the Western genre, he is not completely indifferent or averse to the historical aspects of American myth-making in general, as his later movies *Flags of our Fathers* (2006) and *Letters*

from *Iwo Jima* (2006) demonstrate. When it comes to his Westerns, however, I think that Eastwood is simply interested more in personality types, and ones that express either an archetype (the lone gunslinger) or a sense of inner conflict (as in *Unforgiven*).

Such speculation about Eastwood's possible directorial intentions, I think, is a proper segue to the concerns expressed by the two other respondents, Shai Biderman and Carlin Romano. Both share an interest in the broader questions as to whether movies can actually philosophize or do philosophy—or, perhaps most especially, make philosophical arguments—as opposed to merely illustrating a philosophical idea or position. If I understand Biderman correctly, it seems that we are in fairly basic agreement about these matters. Thus I will address in more detail Romano's critique.<sup>5</sup> He takes issue with the idea that films, especially when they are conceived in terms of the realm of representation, can do more than being philosophically interesting, thought-provoking, illustrative, and the like.

Romano refers to my comment at the outset of my presentation that certain film-osophers have become almost obsessed with the question of whether films can express philosophical argumentation in a manner that is not merely reduced to that of a character (a talking head) presenting such an argument in direct verbal form. He also refers to my comment that philosophers of film should move beyond that question and debate. Romano does not agree with my attempt at sidelining this question and views it, rather, as central to the entire enterprise of the philosophy of film. I do agree with Romano when he suggests, at least implicitly, that philosophers of film should take greater care when declaring in blanket statements that a particular movie or particular filmmaker espouses a definitive philosophical position or argument—and not merely raises an interesting philosophical question or issue that philosophers may later interpret or elaborate upon in their own fashion. On this point, we are dealing with the care we must take in discussing and trying to uncover the authorial intention that lies behind a given cinematic artwork.

Romano questions whether films can present a unified, definitive philosophical position or argument, and most especially when one considers the collaborative nature of filmmaking. This involves us in an evaluation of the auteur theory and I share this concern. Very few

directors, if any, have complete artistic control over their films and movies are often the result of combined talents working together and sometimes even in conflict: screenwriters, producers, actors, cinematographers, editors, etc. This implies, according to Romano, that it is difficult to say that a movie expresses a singular philosophical position on a given issue or that it makes a unified philosophical argument. The presupposition that he indicates is an important one: if a film can be said to do philosophy in any cogent manner, then this doing of philosophy must somehow be connected with the singular, unified intelligence of a given thinker (in this case, a philosophically minded filmmaker) and not with a group of thinkers/artists, all of whom may differ in various ways as to what the overall message of the film may be and how that message should be cinematically realized.

I will first build upon Romano's criticism before responding to it in a more substantial way. There is also the question as to whether a film—and even one made by a director with total or near-total creative control over a movie production—presents a truly philosophical position or argument when there is so much that is symbolic and ambiguous and open to interpretation, like any artwork. There is also a challenge to any scholar's interpretation of authorial intention in the sense that a given director, even with a fair degree of control over the vision of a film, may be very unwilling to offer any interpretation of a film's message beyond the film itself and instead relies only the movie to deliver the message. And so we do not always get much in the way of outside assistance in attempting to pin down the authorial intention of a filmmaker. John Ford, for example, was notoriously cantankerous and almost always unwilling to offer any interpretation (let alone a philosophical interpretation) of his own movies.

There is another problem with the idea of a movie's capacity to philosophize, and one that Romano only mentions in very brief passing: the problem of a movie's inherent particularity and, therefore, its limitedness in expressing a universalizable meaning or message. This is a concern that is distinct from Romano's focus on problems related to the uncovering of authorial intention, particularly given his challenging of the auteur theory's assumption of the director as the sole author. Let us take Ford's *The Man Who Shot Liberty Valance*. One can easily use the film, for example, in illustrating a Hobbesian transition from a state of nature to a civilized political community via a collective social contract. One can also easily use the movie as an

<sup>5</sup> Carlin Romano, "Philosophical Argumentation in Classic Filmography," *Existenz* 9/2 (2014), 50-3.

opportunity to philosophize about the need for violence to eliminate violence, and especially in a manner that helps to make way for the creation and maintenance of a system of law and order. Finally, the film evokes questions about the deceptions that are sometimes involved in civilization-building and myth-making (one of Iwasawa's chief concerns in her commentary). Thinking about these fundamental needs and desires and also about the tension between truth telling and myth-making can certainly rise to a philosophical level.

Whether one can say that the film in and of itself expresses a definitive position or argument about the need for such a social-political-historical transition as well as the need for such violence is problematic. The film shows that there are dramatic costs and benefits involved in the satisfaction of these needs, and any judgment about how these costs and benefits might be weighed, especially in terms of the broader story of American self-identity, must be left to the viewer. Ford does not give us any easy answers as he (and his film, along with its screenwriter—not to mention the author of the original story on which the script was based) portrays the benefits as essential to the creation of modern civilization and the costs as tragically life destroying. And, in terms of authorial intention, in his interviews Ford said nothing beyond the film itself about how he perceived the message and lessons of his masterwork.

It is the particularity of the movie's plot and characters and their situations that makes it difficult to ascertain some (possibly) universal meaning. What if the lessons of the movie pertain only to this particular town (Shinbone), these particular characters (Tom, Ransom, Hallie, etc.), and their very unique circumstances? Who is to say otherwise, and with what justification? And though Ford was a very well-read and thoughtful man, we have no idea (and perhaps even certain reasons to doubt) whether he knew of Hobbes' philosophy or, even if he did, wished to express his knowledge of that philosophy in this special way. And then there is the fact, of course, that the larger ideas on which the film is based can be located very easily in the original pre-filmed script, not to mention the short story on which the script is based.

With all of that said, I would reiterate the point on which Romano and I would certainly agree: philosophers of film (as well as any film scholars/critics, for that matter) should try to be more cautious when they refer to films (or the artists responsible for their creation) as articulating singular positions or arguments, and especially if these happen to be (loosely

speaking) philosophical positions or arguments. That is due to the fact that films, like any type of artwork, can be so symbolic and open to interpretation—as well as the fact that authorial intention can be so difficult to decipher or determine. Romano points to an example of my own un-cautious formulation in this regard. On the other hand, he appreciates a type of language, using an example from *Ride, Boldly Ride*, in which we say that a movie invites reflection on a particular question, issue, position, or even argument.

With this general agreement in mind, I disagree with Romano on a central assumption: that the philosophical content of a film (whether it be evocative, argumentative, or the like) must be connected solely with authorial intention. I think that we need to conceive of a movie and its possible meanings and lessons (including very philosophical ones) in a way that gets beyond the question of the intention of filmmaker(s)—and especially due to some of the problems and difficulties that Romano points out. The history of hermeneutics, from Friedrich Schleiermacher to Hans-Georg Gadamer and beyond, is in fact a history of the ways in which thinkers have pointed beyond the difficulties inherent in attempts to uncover authorial intention as the sole source of a text's or artwork's meaning and even truth. The question here is not whether philosophy itself should be reduced to forms of explicit argumentation. I am in agreement with Romano's comment that the philosophical can be defined according to several different possible elements—from the evocation of big ideas to explicit argumentation—but this does not mean that just anything can be deemed genuinely philosophical.

My view is that films in and of themselves do not philosophize or make philosophical arguments; that would be a mis-use (or at least a careless use) of language. Inasmuch as artists are responsible for their film's central meaning (primarily, I would suggest, screenwriters and directors as a collaborative force) they do philosophize at times and express such philosophizing through the creation of their script and the subsequent audiovisual realization of that script. Most crucially, the philosophical content of a movie (whether in terms of evoking questions and issues or even delivering positions and arguments) emerges in the interaction between the creative minds of the filmmakers and the receptive minds of their films' audiences. Philosophers who ask the question of whether a movie in and of itself can do philosophy or make an argument presuppose a conception of a



movie as a type of object-in-itself, one that is somehow divorced from the interplay between film artists who create a movie and the audience members who enjoy and then reflect upon it, sometimes philosophically. It is this way of conceiving a film as being in and of itself, I would suggest, that gets us into trouble and that generates a whole series of debates over the philosophical capacities of a film.

This type of mistaken conception, I would argue, goes beyond a mere mis-use of language in referring to the philosophical intentions of a film or film creator. In my mind, a film in-and-of-itself is nothing more than a particular reel of celluloid or a fixed (and replicable) pattern of digital information—or, at the very least, a moving pattern of shapes and colors on a screen that one is watching. A film acquires a meaningful artistic and at times philosophical content when it becomes a subject-related event on the part of both its creator(s) and its audience. As subject-related, a film offers a shared occasion of intelligence and interpretation on both sides of the creative process. Since a movie does not, on its own, constitute some type of unified and singular intelligence (a mind, as it were), then we can not go looking for philosophical capacities apart from the dynamic interplay between creator and viewer.

I would therefore argue that a film's capacity to present illustrations of philosophical ideas and also types of thought-experiments can, given the presence of relevant background knowledge on the part of the viewer, guide thoughtful viewers from plot-governed particulars to more general philosophical conclusions. The creation of a film involves a long and complicated

production process that can, giving the guiding and shared vision of its most essential collaborators (including, of course, the director and screenwriter), lead to the presentation of philosophical meaning. But a film also continues on in the mind of its viewer after its final credits roll, at least for a thoughtful viewer, until a new viewing, reflection, or discussion helps to continue in shaping it. That is because a film can be properly understood in terms of a dialectical relationship that arises out of a subject-related experience. A film might be viewed, above all, as a mutual interaction between thinking minds, a form of reciprocity between artist and viewer.

By defining certain films as relational occasions for philosophical reflection, any speculations about authorial intention come to the fore as an important factor, but certainly not the only factor. Following Gadamer's idea of interpretation and aesthetic judgment as a kind of Socratic *elenchus*—a kind of play or fusion between the horizon of the creator's vision and the horizon of the audience's context—our discovery of some definitive authorial intention is not only often unlikely, given our interpretive distance from the creator and his or her context, but it is also merely one element among others in our understanding and appreciation of an artwork. In this sense, philosophically motivated movie-watching is not unlike the kind of intellectual exchange that a reader experiences when reading a Platonic dialogue or watching a play by Shakespeare, where there is an exchange and co-presence of philosophical intelligences at work, occasioned by the text or artwork itself.