
Review

Hollywood Westerns and American myth: The importance of Howard Hawks and John Ford for political philosophy

Robert B. Pippin

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While those working in the field of cultural studies have long grasped the political character and potential of culture, political theorists have only lately begun to recognize the significant cultural dimensions of politics. The result is a new and exciting range of work that melds cultural and political theory. In particular, political theory has in the last decade or so begun to embrace and interrogate the relevance of visual culture, especially film and television, for contemporary politics. Political theorists such as Michael J. Shapiro, William E. Connolly and Samuel A. Chambers, among others, have thoughtfully engaged film and television in and through their political theorizing to illuminate a wide range of contemporary political phenomena, from geopolitics to neopolitics to queer politics. Such theorists address film and television in a variety of ways, not only using visual texts to illustrate theoretical points (and vice versa) but also analyzing visual media as political interventions in their own right. Similarly, at the level of method, political theorists have increasingly come to recognize that politics and culture are mutually imbricated. Anne Norton (2004, pp. 7, 9), for instance, has argued that ‘Politics is in culture’ and ‘Culture is political’ as part of her challenge to the reigning methodological orthodoxy of quantitative rationalism in the contemporary study of politics.

The book under review, however, engages none of this or similar work, even as the author makes a case for taking a specific set of films seriously for the sake of political (and philosophical) understanding. In the book, Robert B. Pippin offers extended readings of three films in the three central chapters – *Red River*, *The Man Who Shot Liberty Valance* and *The Searchers* – and bookends these with shorter readings of *Stagecoach* and *The Lusty Men* in the introduction and conclusion, respectively. While the readings staged in these

pages are very careful and thoughtful (and include some wonderful still photographs from each film), they will not likely surprise anyone familiar with Western genre studies from Warshaw and Bazin onward, as Pippin clearly is. Indeed, the readings add little to what we have learned of Westerns from major extended studies such as Lee Clark Mitchell's *Westerns: Making the Man in Fiction and Film* (1998) and Jane Tompkins' *West of Everything: The Inner Life of Westerns* (1993).

Even so, such a book could still be considered successful were it able to situate its readings of these films within a specific discourse and help the films speak to and through that discourse. Approaching film through the discourse of political philosophy rather than political theory, Pippin makes a case for engaging film that is in some ways refreshing, while frustrating in others. In part, the case he makes feels rather antediluvian, in two respects. First, it seems as though Pippin fears his audience of political philosophers has rarely given a serious thought to film, and he must convince them of its philosophical and cultural value: 'I shall assume that many twentieth-century films are the equal in esthetic quality of any of these works ["Shakespeare's histories, novels by Tolstoy or Dickens or Coetzee, plays by Ibsen or Arthur Miller"] in their ability to represent the fundamental problems of the human condition' (p. 17). Second, the problems he sees these films addressing, chiefly the problem of founding, are not very contemporary as political problems go. While Pippin argues that 'the great Hollywood Westerns present in a recognizably mythic form dimensions of an American self-understanding of great relevance to the question of the nature of the political in the American imaginary' (p. 141), he either assumes a constancy to the American imaginary or remains unconcerned with how these films connect with the contemporary American imaginary.

Still, on its own terms, the book is fairly effective, yet ultimately disappointing. For the author appears to be torn between two objectives, neither of which the book completely fulfills or satisfyingly connects together. As the title indicates, the author wants to argue that Hollywood Westerns are 'one of our mythic forms of self-understanding' because 'they deal with a past form of life that is self-consciously treated as gone, unrecoverable', and because they 'tell a basic and clearly troubling, complicated story of a traumatic, decisive political transition, the end of one sort of order and self-image and the beginning of another' (p. 62). Thus, while Pippin notes that Westerns deal thematically with 'the founding of modern bourgeois, law-abiding, property-owning, market-economy, technologically advanced societies in transition' (p. 20), the political and philosophical significance of such a founding is neither adequately defended nor criticized. Rather, such a transitional founding is treated as the context for an exploration of the author's second objective, political psychology.

Indeed, as the subtitle suggests, the author wants to argue for taking certain films seriously for the enterprise of political philosophy. His argument in this respect centers on the need to turn to (exceptional) films to aid in developing a better account of political psychology. He contends that film is useful in this respect because it provides more ‘situations and experiences [than those] imagined by a few philosophers’ (p. 17). This part of Pippin’s case for engaging film for political insight is refreshing. In an argument that resonates with recent critiques of rational choice political science as well as economics more generally, Pippin remarks that, ‘This claim about the relevance of political psychology to political philosophy assumes that there is something amiss in addressing the political question as if human beings were exclusively rational calculators or creatures of pure practical reason’ (p. 13). Still, while the psychological categories he employs – love, fear and ‘a powerful passion (perhaps the most problematic political passion) called by many names: *thymos*, *amour-propre*, vanity, self-love, the desire for recognition’ (p. 13) – will be familiar to readers of political philosophy, he does not do justice to these categories.

In particular, throughout the book, Pippin circles round and round the political need to overcome the masculine problem of self-sufficiency and what he calls ‘the difficult problem of “vainglory” or pride and honor [that] plays an important role in so many Westerns’ (p. 152). In the context of his concluding reading of Nicholas Ray’s *The Lusty Men*, for instance, Pippin claims the film illustrates ‘what the various foundings depicted by Westerns were *for*’ and ‘what so many films suggest must be sacrificed to achieve: vainglory, a putative radical independence and self-reliance, supposedly masculine virtues, an honor code’ (p. 154, italics in original). The problem of a belief in radical individualism is certainly an important and worthy problem for political philosophy and political theory, and yet Pippin’s investigations do not lead him to any definitive account of it. Worse yet, the problem has yet to be overcome, either politically or even mythically. The resurgent wave of libertarianism in today’s American politics is evidence enough of this. Yet Pippin concludes the book in this way: ‘Most great Westerns, that is, are about the end of the way of life pictured and sometimes glorified in film, and while the transitions they depict can be confusing, multidimensional, and hard to assess, there are few documents of American self-understanding in which the issues are posed in a more gripping and compelling way than in Westerns’ (p. 155). Such a conclusion is not sufficiently philosophical or psychological, much less political. Thus, while the book’s broader idea regarding the relevance of filmic Westerns to political philosophy via psychology is clear enough, the actual film readings just are not compelling enough nor are not connected well to the larger frames and claims the book makes.



References

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