

**'In a Moment of Brilliance':
Heidegger's Horsemen, HIGH NOON and the
Existential Sentiment of 'Westerns'**

**Evan Wm. Cameron
[and Barbara Hehner]**

**Professor Emeritus
Senior Scholar in Screenwriting**

**Graduate Programmes,
Film & Video and Philosophy**

York University

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But destiny – which is what must in life be or not be – destiny is not a question of discussion but must be accepted or not. If we accept it, we are authentic; if not, we live a negation, a falsification of ourselves. Destiny does not consist in what we feel like doing; rather, it is recognized by our being conscious that we *must* do what we do not feel like doing.

Ortega Y Gasset¹

In 1952 Gary Cooper won an Oscar for his performance as Sheriff Kane in HIGH NOON. Cooper, once the highest paid human being in North America, had been so taken with the rôle that he had agreed to forgo his salary and act in the low-budget western for only \$60,000 plus a percentage of the profits, an extraordinary arrangement at the time but perhaps the wisest financial move he ever made.

What did Cooper, suffering at the time from a combination of physical and psychological ailments, find so alluring about the story of an aging sheriff, past his prime, compelled one last time to clean a town of corruption, this time by himself and in the face of the unified opposition of everyone in the town? Why did he guess so accurately that he would fit into the part like a hand in a glove, embodying in his most memorable portrayal an aging existential hero facing the challenge of his life, a man uniquely attuned to the call of duty that seemingly only he can hear?

To answer that question is to come to understand much about Cooper, the design of western movies and the existential sentiments of fascism, for although few of his biographers have cared to mention the fact, Cooper, once a small-town boy from

¹ Ortega Y Gasset, José. *The Revolt of the Masses*, translated and annotated by Anthony Kerrigan (Notre Dame, Indiana: University of Notre Dame Press, 1985 [1930], page 91 and footnote.

Montana, was well-known in Hollywood for his unswerving commitment to the fascist myth of masculine power.²

In 1947, five years before, Cooper had agreed to testify as a "friendly witness" before the House Committee on Un-American Activities and gave one of the best performances of his career. While staunchly reaffirming his anti-communist credentials and his support for the work of the Committee, Cooper managed nonetheless to convince its members that, unlike Ronald Reagan or Robert Montgomery, he could no longer remember the authors of any of the screenplays he had rejected for being communistically inspired, nor the names of the screenplays themselves nor the names of any suspect coworkers, despite being capable, then and long afterwards, of citing from memory exact passages from the screenplays of the many films in which he had performed. He claimed, indeed, to be able to remember only a single character from the screenplays that he had rejected on political grounds:

... the leading character in the play was a man whose life's ambition was to organize an army in the United States, an army of soldiers who would never fight to defend their country. I don't remember any more details of the play, but that was enough of a basic idea for me to send it back quickly to its author.³

It was a wonderfully resonant comment, though I doubt if the members of the Committee recognized it. For Cooper had himself tried, a decade before, to form a neo-Fascist army in Los Angeles dedicated to the preservation of the American way. In the spring of 1935, Cooper had cofounded the Hollywood Hussars, a private legion of horsemen that, in the words of the *Motion Picture Herald*, was

...armed to the teeth and ready to gallop on horseback within an hour to cope with any emergency menacing the safety of the community – fights or strikes, floods or earthquakes, Japanese 'invasions', Communistic 'revolutions', or whatnot.⁴

² One looks in vain for any mention of Cooper's fascination with fascism within Stuart Kaminsky's *Coop: The Life and Legend of Gary Cooper* (St Martin's Press, 1979), for example, or within any of the other biographies of the man known to me.

³ *Thirty Years of Treason: Excerpts from Hearings before the House Committee on Un-American Activities, 1938-1968*, edited by Eric Bentley (New York: The Viking Press, 1971), page 149.

⁴ Quote by Anthony Slide in "Hollywood's Fascist Follies", *Film Comment*, July-August, 1991, page 63.

As Cooper explained it at the time,

Americanism is an unflinching love of country; loyalty to its institutions and ideals; eagerness to defend it against all enemies; undivided allegiance to the Flag; and a desire to secure the blessings of liberty to ourselves and our posterity. Therefore, Americanism is the foundation upon which we are building the Hollywood Hussars. We are solemnly pledged to uphold and to protect the sacred principles and ideals of our country.⁵

Cooper, however, was simply following the example of Victor McLaglen, winner of the Academy Award in 1935 for Best Actor for his role in John Ford's *THE INFORMER*, who, two years earlier, had begun to form the California Light Horse Regiment, a neo-Fascist organization, replete with motorcycle corps, arrayed to fight and dedicated, in McLaglen's words, to preserving "America for Americans". As McLaglen remarked in 1935, "Some say I'm a Nazi and some say I'm a Fascist, but here it is straight: I'm just a patriot of the good old-fashioned American kind."⁶

When exhibitors protested against Cooper's participation in the Hollywood Hussars, Paramount issued a statement in June of 1935 reassuring everyone that its contract star was withdrawing his support and endorsement of the group. By 1939, however, Cooper was visiting Germany, ostensibly as the guest of Hermann Göring's *brother*.⁷

What, then, did Cooper sense about the story of *HIGH NOON* that matched so exactly his conception of whom he would have liked to have been? How did its reaffirmation of the enterprise of the western hero, commonly encapsulated in the phrase "A man's gotta do what a man's gotta do", reconfirm his understanding of what the world was about and how a few good men ought to act within it? Let's look and see.

Wright's Thesis

By evidence and common consent, great western movies are mythical. They encompass, in the words of a dictionary, a "traditional story of ostensibly historical events that serves to unfold part of the world view of a people", a *Weltanschauung* that has

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ See Slide, *op. cit.*, page 63.

⁷ Or so his family claimed in hindsight when attempting in 1989 through right-wing columnist, William Safire, to divert attention from the suggestion that Cooper had travelled to Germany to visit Hitler himself. See *Ibid.*, page 62.

engaged viewers in diverse cultures for nearly a century.⁸ Questions recur, however. What makes great western movies mythical? And why have they proven so engaging to human beings within cultures so otherwise diverse?

I wish to answer these questions and to illuminate the consequences of the answers I give to them. Before doing so, however, I shall draw your attention to a contrary opinion, a judgment resting upon a sociological premise with which I disagree, for the contrast will sharpen the answers I shall give.

Among the sociologists who have attended to western movies, no one has presumed to answer our questions as forthrightly as Will Wright:⁹

A myth is a communication from a society to its members: the social concepts and attitudes determined by the history and institutions of a society are communicated to its members through its myths. (page 16)

A myth orders everyday experience ... and communicates this order through a formal structure that is understood like language. (page 17)

As a myth, the Western consists of ... conceptual oppositions and narrative functions. The oppositions create images of social types, which reflect basic social classifications of people. The narrative functions describe the interaction of these characters – both the actions and the situations of the narrative. I have argued that a myth provides a conceptual model of social actions and that, therefore, the narrative action of the myth relates to the everyday social actions of individuals. (page 124)

... the Western is a myth of contemporary American society. As such, it contains a conceptual analysis of society that provides a model of social action. (page 185)

⁸ *Webster's New Collegiate Dictionary* (Springfield, Massachusetts: G. & C. Merriam Company, 1973), page 762.

⁹ Will Wright, *Six Guns & Society: a Structural Study of the Western* (Berkeley: University of California, 1975). Although I shall be concerned here with issues sparked immediately by this work, four other texts have informed me in unobvious ways and deserve reference: John Cawelti, *The Six-Gun Mystique* (Bowling Green, Ohio: Bowling Green Popular Press, 1971); George N. Fenin & William K. Everson, *The Western: From Silents to the Seventies* (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books Ltd., 1977); Jim Kitses, *Horizons West* (London: Thames & Hudson, Ltd., 1969); Robert Warshow, *The Immediate Experience* (Garden City, New York: Anchor Books, Doubleday, 1964).

Wright's conclusion is fascinating, presumption presumed. A mythical story is a tool by which a society shows its members how to act in social situations. Mythical stories and thus western movies engage us because of our common entrapment in societal nets. The nets may vary from culture to culture, but they remain societal, however otherwise diverse. Our engagement with mythical stories, therefore, derives from our involvement with social choice and societal institutions.

I shall refrain from addressing Wright's arguments, for his study as a whole is irremediably flawed.¹⁰ We must attend, however, to the sociological presumption from which they derive, for if it too is flawed, then the design and importance of western movies have been misconstrued. Is the presumption true? I think not, indeed diametrically not. Let's look at the shape of the stories of great western movies and see why not.

The Existential Story

The stories of western movies may be nuanced in diverse ways. The great ones, however, embody (almost without exception, it seems to me) a single story of simple shape and remarkable depth that I shall call the *existential* story.¹¹

The existential story focuses upon three groupings of human beings: the community, the heroes and the villains.

¹⁰ (a) The works studied exclude those of widest audience and contrary content during the period (1955-70) crucial to Wright's thesis that plot and societal transformations parallel one another, namely the television programs for series such as GUNSMOKE or HAVE GUN, WILL TRAVEL; (b) Neither the narrative functions nor the codings specified, nor each with respect to the other (page 49), are independent of one another, violating the minimal formal requirements for any analytic tool unprejudiced in application (regardless of the precedents in Propp and Levi-Strauss); (c) When the narrative functions and codings prove inconvenient to the analysis, none are given even if the category being discussed, the 'transition' theme, encompasses one of the most famous western movies of all time, HIGH NOON, and is crucial to the argument that westerns mirror social transformations; lastly, and astonishingly, (d) Wright insists that his conclusions are in principle immune from empirical counterevidence! (pages 196ff). However provocative Wright's arguments may seem in passing, therefore, he has contrived to apply an 'immunising' strategy to a selective sample (the term is Popper's: see the first 100 pages of Karl Popper's *The Logic of Scientific Discovery* (New York: Harper & Row, 1965)). Rather than sociology, this is metaphysical speculation ineptly done.

¹¹ As you read the following, think of HIGH NOON, MY DARLING CLEMENTINE, THE WILD BUNCH, BUTCH CASSIDY & THE SUNDANCE KID or whatever other western movie of sustained power comes to mind. If the example doesn't conform to my remarks, read pp. before complaining.

The *community* is a grouping of human beings whose fortunes are interlocked: few if any of its members could survive long without the others, for the skills necessary for survival are possessed collectively, not individually;

The *heroes* are a grouping of human beings, often having only one member, each of whom has exceptional *noncommunal* skills sufficient for survival independent of the community, the villains or any other human beings;¹² and

The *villains* are a grouping of human beings, never fewer than the heroes, whose fortunes are interlocked, like the members of the community, but whose members, unlike the heroes, possess only *collectively the* exceptional noncommunal skills sufficiently powerful to threaten the existence of the community, the heroes or both.

The three groupings are distinguished from one another by what their members do, not where they do it. The heroes, for example, may live and move within the region of the community or the villains without thereby becoming members of either, for it is what the heroes do, not where they do it, that distinguishes them from the others.

The western story centres about the doings of the hero.¹³ The steps of the story at the crucial moments that delimit the genre are as follows:

(1) The hero *finds himself* in the place where the community and the villains are, having sought out the company of neither.

The initial encounters between the hero, the community and the villains may not be shown in the movie and may occur in diverse ways: for example, the hero may have been born in the town within which the community lives; the hero may stumble onto the community or the villains upon arriving in an unknown town; or a delegation from the community or the villains may seek out the hero. Crucially, however, the hero has sought out neither the community nor the villains, for the hero, able to survive without either of them, can have no (non-peripheral) reason to do so.

¹² A grouping of heroes having only one member may seem grammatically odd, but it is logically precise.

¹³ I shall henceforth speak of a single hero rather than heroes and shall assume that the hero is male, thereby accentuating the biases inherent in the genre and its sentiment. See the section of this essay 'In a Different Voice' by Barbara Hehner (pages 15-23 below), however, for a most interesting study of contrary possibilities.

(2) The villains harm (or threaten to harm) members of the community, the hero, or both.

(3) The hero *chooses* to remain in the place where the villains are (and hence where the community is).

The hero's choice must be unconstrained socially or physically; he can survive without either the community or the villains and escape is unimpeded. Why, then, does the hero choose to stay? Because the identity of the hero depends upon it. How so?

The hero is independent of the community or the villains, whether or not they know it; for the hero (like the villains) has exceptional noncommunal skills unshared by the members of the community and the freedom to use them as he wishes. With the skills and consequent freedom, however, the hero (unlike the villains) has a *moral* choice. Why moral? The hero and (collectively) the villains possess similar noncommunal skills denied the members of the community. But only the hero, having the skills, must choose how and when to use them in conformity with a standard, unsensed by either the community or the villains, having no pragmatic justification whatsoever. (The standard compels obedience regardless of any cost-benefit analysis of the consequences of the action for the hero, the community, or the villains and is therefore moral in at least one of Kant's senses.¹⁴)

Consequently, although the hero may live and move among the members of the community and the villains, the hero occupies a unique moral world – a world to which the community and the villains have no access (except by hearsay) and that distances them irreducibly from the hero. Unsurprisingly, therefore,

(a) The hero is uniquely *lonely*.

Neither the community nor the villains may share the loneliness of the hero. They may however recognize that the hero is different, for they may sense that the hero is seeking something beyond their ken: for, indeed,

(b) The hero has a unique *vocation*.

What calls to the hero and compels him to remain in the place where the villains are and where the community happens to be? What is the hero seeking, and what does the hero hope to find?

¹⁴ See Section I, for example, of Immanuel Kant's *Foundations of the Metaphysics of Morals*, translated by Lewis White Beck (Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill Company: 1959).

The hero's identity (that which makes the hero unique) consists in the capacity to exercise his exceptional noncommunal skills in conformity with the moral code that only he can sense. Only by exercising those skills in conformity with that code can the hero confirm that he is what he believe himself to be and thus assuage, however momentarily, the encompassing loneliness.

The hero therefore seeks a single and decisive moral action through which he may become, however momentarily, what he uniquely is. Attuned to this search,

(c) The hero has a unique *anticipation*.

The hero senses that soon, in this place, he will be called upon to perform a single act of moral courage that only he, as the hero, is competent to bring off.

A Heideggerian Digression

Before continuing the tale, let's pause to rethink (a) through (c) in phrases faintly Heideggerian.¹⁵ The hero finds himself within a world not of his choosing, a world of the community and the villains into which he has been *thrown* and within which he cannot feel *at home*. Why cannot the hero feel at home among the members of the community and the villains? Why is the hero uniquely lonely? Because the hero alone is estranged not only from the others but knowingly from himself. The hero alone senses a disparity between what he is and has been and what he could and should be. The hero alone knows the guilt of never having been who he ought to be – a loss of identity daily compounded.

The hero therefore faces a *dreadful* choice denied the members of community and the villains: the choice (in Heidegger's phrase) to put the question 'What does it mean to be?' – not in general but to be uniquely and authentically whomever the hero is. The hero senses that here, in the place where the community and the villains are, he may soon be *called* to a unique testing of himself, to a dreadful confrontation with death and with the possibility of being no longer (nothingness) and hence with the possibility of his own being. Soon, in this place, the hero will be challenged (in Tillich's phrase) to have

¹⁵ By 'phrases faintly Heideggerian', I refer to certain expressions that gained renown through Heidegger's *Being and Time* in 1927, but whose meanings have been tempered by the later fires of continental philosophy, especially those stoked by Sartre. (*Being and Time* was translated into English by John Macquarrie and Edward Robinson, and published by Harper & Row, New York, in 1962)

the courage to be and will either be found wanting or will react resolutely as only he, qua hero, can react.

What *in the world* calls to the hero? Of what *in the world* is the hero afraid? The Heideggerian answer echoes in the mind: *nothing*. The hero is afraid neither of dying nor of death, but he alone has the dreadful awareness of not knowing who he is, yet knowing what he has to do to find out – what he has to do to be, however momentarily, what he authentically could and should be.

Were the hero to refuse to answer the call, he would be rejecting himself and therewith the only authorisation of who he is. Ortega captured the sentiment neatly:

Abasement, degradation, is simply the only manner of life left to the man who has refused to be what he should be. His authentic being does not die, however, but becomes an accusing phantom which makes him forever feel the inferiority of the life he lives compared to the life he ought to have lived. The degraded man is a victim of suicide who has survived.¹⁶

Conversely, when the aging sheriff in Sam Peckinpah's *RIDE THE HIGH COUNTRY* is asked why he persists in pursuing his lonely, unremunerative, moral quest, he replies: "All I want is to enter my house justified". The phrase is atypically explicit for a hero of a western movie but expresses the key resonance of the genre.

The Existential Tale Resumed

Given the lonely vocation of the hero, his choice to remain where he is and his unique anticipation of the coming confrontation, the continuation of the existential story is hardly surprising.

(4) The villains challenge the community, the hero or both.

(5) The hero *chooses* to counter the villains.

The hero's choice, as always, is unconstrained socially and physically. If successful, the hero's action may benefit the community, but that cannot be the *reason* why the hero refuses to escape confrontation by going away or taking some other easy way out. The hero, by confronting the villains, is answering a call which only he, qua hero, hears.

¹⁶ Ortega, op. cit., page 91.

(6) The hero *alone* defeats the villains.

(7) The hero *removes himself* from the place where the community and the villains are.

The words italicized in steps (6) and (7) need not retain their common senses as the story concludes, save metaphorically. The members of the community may assist the hero in the battle, or the hero may die while the villains survive. Nothing however may prohibit the hero from completing *by himself* the moral act that distinguishes him from the members of the community and the villains and uniquely confirms his identity. Thereafter the hero, by dying, may *pass from the place* where the community and the villains are, for the existential story has already reached its goal.

Misconstruals Avoided

We may easily misconstrue the breadth and depth of the existential story and therewith the power and glory of the western movie, if we fail to distinguish two facets of it. Let's focus upon them, lest we misrepresent both the evolution of the cinema and the lines along which genres divide.

(A) The vocation of the hero must be *moral*, but it need not be *socially approvable*.

Vocation, I believe, is inseparable from mythical stories, permitting us to isolate the wheat among the chaff within genres overcut by critical harvesting. Vocation is why we take Philip Marlowe and George Smiley to be serious fictional characters, while James Bond is a fluff. To be mythical, however, the vocation must be unique to the hero, however compatible with social goals. The constraint must be imposed upon the hero by the hero *qua* the hero, not by either the community or the villains or both.

When the hero chooses to confront the villains, the choice must be *moral*: the hero must act, that is, from an *a priori* awareness of duty. Actions deriving from an *a priori* awareness, however, may well surpass the understanding of the members of the community. The members may, indeed, bluntly and quite rightly disapprove of them. Within the constraints of the existential story, therefore, the hero's actions may as easily be *antisocial* as otherwise, contra Wright.

No wonder, therefore, great western movies encompass outlaw as well as inlaw heroes. The existential story encompasses vocational heroes regardless of their societal

inclinations, including the heroes of great gangster movies as well – American stories one and all (see (B) below).

Movies of a human beings acting with supposed altruism on one or another the supposed 'frontiers of civilization' have often and profitably been made – films of members of the French Foreign Legion, for example, or of British squadrons in India, of colonisers of Africa or of soldiers within war films left, right and centre. Why have so few of them, unlike western movies, managed to be mythical? Because they try to make heroes of *socially* motivated human beings.

As Kant insisted long ago, however, social motivation cannot justify moral action.¹⁷ A moral hero may act in accordance with social duty, but cannot act *because* of it, or his action ceases to be moral. Moral agents in general and western heroes in particular may therefore as easily act contrary to social duty as otherwise. Indeed, the moral stature of their acts may be clearer if contrary to social duty than the reverse.

The second facet of the existential story has been implied above and should now be obvious:

(B) There is nothing uniquely *western* nor even American about the existential story.

The existential story, as existential analogy, may represent any human being refusing anywhere at any time to back away from a choice that seems uniquely moral. Americans on their western frontier, however, have for two reasons proven remarkably apt subjects for existential stories.

(1) Unlike Canadians, Americans on their western frontier were however briefly uncommonly free of societal constraints and thus able to pretend to act morally yet credibly without the confusing clutter of societal motivation.

(2) The internal moral decisions of a human being in the American west could often be represented credibly and naturally as a choice between whether or not to *move* freely from one place on the land to another and thus lent themselves

¹⁷ Kant, *op. cit.*, Section I. Note that I have made no use of Kant's universalizability criterion for moral actions. I could have done so by belittling the notion (by supposing, that is, that the hero acts as anyone at all ought to have acted in this exact situation – except that the hero and the situation in which he finds himself are unique and hence no one else could have been in that exact situation other than the hero). I prefer to appear to disagree with Kant, however, since this is not an essay on his ethics but an appropriation of a part of them, rather than trivialize his contention.

to photographic representation. (When Sheriff Kane in HIGH NOON decides to accept his calling, he turns a buckboard about and heads back into town; and the final confrontation, typically, occurs on the single street on which you are either walking in the right direction – toward the conflict – or running the other way in the wrong direction.) trivialise

The existential story, however, far transcends the American west. As Americans urbanized, went to war or projected themselves into space, the existential story went with them, transfiguring the hero from cowboy to detective to soldier to spy to planetary explorer. The archetypal novels of Hemingway and Chandler, for example, and those of many lesser writers who modelled themselves upon them were existential stories, as were the movies based upon them.¹⁸

One need only listen to the resonances of Raymond Chandler's description of his questing detective hero, "a lonely man" who finds himself compelled to walk "mean streets ... in search of a hidden truth", to catch the family resemblance:

In everything that can be called art there is a quality of redemption. It may be pure tragedy, if it is high tragedy, and it may be pity and irony, and it may be the raucous laughter of the strong man. But down these mean streets a man must go who is not himself mean, who is neither tarnished nor afraid. The detective in this kind of story must be such a man. He is the hero, he is everything. He must be a complete man and a common man and yet an unusual man. He must be, to use a rather weathered phrase, a man of honor – by instinct, by inevitability, without thought of it, and certainly without saying it. He must be the best man in his world and a good enough man for any world. I do not care much about his private life; he is neither a eunuch nor a satyr; I think he might seduce a duchess and I am quite sure he would not spoil a virgin; if he is a man of honor in one thing, he is that in all things.

He is relatively poor man, or he would not be a detective at all. He is a common man or he could not go among common people. He has a sense of character, or he would not know his job. He will take no man's money dishonestly and no man's insolence without a due and dispassionate revenge. He is a lonely man and his pride is that you will treat him as a proud man or be very sorry you ever

¹⁸ Compare FOR WHOM THE BELL TOLLS with Gary Cooper, or many of the films starring Humphrey Bogart: THE BIG SLEEP; CASABLANCA or KEY LARGO (but not TREASURE OF THE SIERRA MADRE). KEY LARGO, for example, is an existential story and hence generically akin to HIGH NOON regardless of its nonwestern time and place (as John Huston well knew, right down to the mistreatment of the Indians!)

saw him. He talks as the man of his age talks – that is, with rude wit, a lively sense of the grotesque, a disgust for sham, and contempt for pettiness.

The story is this man's adventure in search of a hidden truth, and it would be no adventure if it did not happen to a man fit for adventure. He has a range of awareness that startles you, but it belongs to him by right, because it belongs to the world he lives in. If there were enough like him, the world would be a very safe place to live in, without becoming too dull to be worth living in.¹⁹

Nuances aside, are we speaking here of Phillip Marlowe or Sheriff Kane? Of Los Angeles, Paris, Tokyo or London or of the mythical Dodge City, Abilene or Tombstone of the 1870s?

The lonely, nonsocial individual of great inner strength, compelled by a private moral code to react to situations from which he could have chosen to escape but does not, anchors more movies than most observers have cared to notice, whether cowboy, detective, soldier or spy and whether made by Americans in America or by others elsewhere.²⁰ Such movies have engaged human beings around the world as have few others.

The Existential Sentiment

Why then are great western movies mythical? Because they are *existentially* enticing. We need no deep analysis here; the surface will suffice.

Human beings, however social, are individually so. At the trying moments of our lives, especially moments of moral perplexity, we are often tempted to believe that we stand alone within a place to which other human beings, qua social beings, can have no access.

Were one, for example, to deny a life-support system to a parent dying painfully of a disease thought to be incurable, the isolation of one's grief might well compel one to think that two things must be true: one's choice could be right or wrong, and the rightness or wrongness would depend upon matters so deeply embedded in the unique trajectory of one's life vis a vis the life of the parent that no other human being could

¹⁹ Raymond Chandler in "The Simple Art of Murder" in the collection of the same name (New York: Ballantine Books, 1972 [1950], pages 19-21.

²⁰ Note in particular Kurosawa's SEVEN SAMURAI and YOJIMBO, the first of which John Sturges had to mimic (THE MAGNIFICENT SEVEN) and the second of which Sergio Leone, an Italian, matched with A FISTFUL OF DOLLARS.

contribute essentially to one's deliberations on the choice. All social considerations, it might seem, would miss the moral point.

In these private moments, we are tempted to believe that we are unique – that the universe would miss us were we not around. We are tempted as well, however, to believe that our uniqueness is otherwise shadowed – that what we do most of the time could be done by anyone. Imaginatively, therefore, we often hope and fear that we shall be given a chance in life, a chance given to few, to engage in at least one action that would manifest and confirm our uniqueness – one event, that is, that would permit us to exercise those individuating but shadowed capacities in conformity with a standard that only we can sense, for only we have the exact capacities that render the standard intelligible, deep and unique. In our Sartrean fantasies, we hope for the chance and for the courage to take it.

Our sentiments are wrong, of course, and our hopes misdirected. Were the cosmic and comic truth known, we are as redundant as raindrops: had we never existed, the universe would miss us not at all. Nevertheless, our belief in the value of our own uniqueness, however unsupportable, conditions the deepest longings of our being and, I suspect, has initiated and sustained many of the extraordinary endeavours of humankind, the good, the bad and the ugly.

The existential story embodies the existential sentiment. Mythical stories and thus great western movies are hardly therefore communications from societies to their members about how *socially* to act. Quite the opposite. They manifest the existential sentiment that, whenever push comes to shove, makes communal concerns seem irrelevant. They engage us, not because we are socio-political animals, though Aristotle said it long ago, and Aristotle was right, but because, in moments of moral dilemma, we are tempted to assume that we are uniquely isolated, lonely and free and must either run away or act as we *alone* ought to act.²¹ Such stories are the stuff of which existential myths are made.

But to whom are they so enticing? And why are they made almost always by men about men? We must look again, and harder, at the presumptions of the existential story, for, as I was led by one of my students to see, the story is not only the purest American counter to the demonic Faustian fable of western Europe, but the dominant *masculine* fairy tale of our time.

²¹ See Aristotle's *Politics* circa 1253a.

**'In a Different Voice':
What are the Moral Concerns of Women in Westerns?**

by Barbara Hehner (1990)²²

I don't care what's right or wrong. There's got to be a better way for people to live!

Amy Kane to Will Kane, in HIGH NOON

As I read Will Wright's analyses of Western plots, I was struck by his seemingly eccentric response to DUEL IN THE SUN. He identifies Pearl as *the* hero of a "classical plot" Western. However, he writes, her "special skill" is not with a handgun or another weapon: "her remarkable ability is not demonstrated in fighting but in sex."²³ For Jon Tuska, Wright's wrenching of DUEL IN THE SUN plotline to fit his sixteen functions was a mark of how useless his structural analysis was. For instance, Wright's final function states that the hero gives up his special status, which usually involves giving up his special skill. *Pearl* could hardly be said to do this, Tuska argues, since at *the* end of the film she dies.²⁴ But if your special skill is a mode of being, not doing, how can *you* give it up except by ceasing *to* be? Of course, the contrast between the man who acts and the woman who simply is, has been seen by feminists, with good cause, as an excuse for patriarchal societies to limit and control women's activities. Westerns have been criticized by scholars with feminist concerns precisely because, it seems to them, Westerns give women no scope to form moral judgments and act upon them.

summation

²² As the title indicates, this section of the lecture (pages 15-23) is 'In a Different Voice'. In 1985, Barbara Hehner, already an accomplished author of books for young people who would later add to her renown as the co-author of David Suzuki's 'Looking At' series, entered the Master of Fine Arts programme in Film at York University. She had been born and raised within a Canadian military family posted to bases shared by American forces well-supplied with movies of their choice and had seen more 'westerns' than anyone whom I have ever met. After listening to an earlier version of this lecture on HIGH NOON, she decided to write a thesis on women in westerns, defending it to acclaim 1991 under the title 'Hearts of the West: Some Aspects of Women's Roles in American Westerns, 1939–1969'. From then on I required my students to read Section II of Chapter 2 of it – her reconsideration of how and why the women in HIGH NOON react as they do to the men imposing themselves upon them – and I included here a summary and commentary upon it. [Footnote continued next page]

Yet Wright, I think, is on to something. Men in Westerns are morally defined by whom they will kill/not kill. Women are defined by whom they will love/not love. In some films, such as *Duel in the Sun*, this is expressed in blatantly sexual terms: whom they will go to bed with/not go to bed with.. But usually it is played out in more idealistic terms. For instance, consider two of the films which are the subject of case studies at the end of this thesis. In *Westward the Women*, a group of brave pioneers, all of them women, head west; however, *they* are not going to conquer the land, but to forge new relationships. *True Grit* is a revenge Western in which it is a woman (a very young one) who seeks revenge. However, unlike the isolated men in revenge Westerns, who seem to tremble on the brink of irredeemable savagery, this heroine immediately acquires a nurturing quasi-family with a daddy and a big brother.

In fact, there is a remarkable consistency in the moral choices women are shown making in Westerns, and these are very much in keeping with the findings of Carol Gilligan. In her ground breaking study of moral development, *In a Different Voice* (1982), Gilligan provides both a summary of previous studies of human psychological development and the results of her own empirical studies of how college-age women make moral choices.

Gilligan concludes that most previous studies, based as they were on studies of boys and men, persistently and systematically misunderstood women's psychological growth and their view of what is important in life. She begins by looking at some of the earlier theories of human maturation which have "implicitly accepted male life as the norm."²⁵

Barbara died of cancer on 12 August 2018. Upon learning of her death, I asked Eric Zweig, her husband (a notable writer of books for young people as well) if I might reprint here in place of my synopsis the section of her thesis that I had assigned to my students and from which I had learned so much, convinced that other readers deserved to hear it 'in the different voice' that had made it memorable. He welcomed my request, permitting me as well to post the entirety of the thesis on my website, so readers could ponder the whole of it. I thank him – and Barbara!

I have inserted the phrase 'In a Different Voice' within the title to this section in tribute to her. (Her title read simply: 'What are the Moral Concerns of Women in Westerns?'). I have also capitalised rather than italicised the titles of movies that she cites to conform with other postings on the website.

²³ Will Wright, op. cit., page 42.

²⁴ Jon Tuska, *The American West in Film: Critical Approaches to the Western* (Westport, Connecticut: Greenwood Press, 1985), page 10.

²⁵ Carol Gilligan, *In a Different Voice: Psychological Theory and Women's Development* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1982), page 6.

For example, Lawrence Kohlberg has developed a six-stage model of moral development. For Kohlberg, the highest stages (stages five and six) of moral development are shown when his interview subject adopts

... a perspective outside that of his society, in which he identifies morality with justice (fairness, rights, the Golden Rule), with recognition of the rights of others as these are defined naturally or intrinsically. The human's being right to do as he pleases without interfering with somebody else's rights is a formula defining rights prior to social legislation.²⁶

At the more immature stage three, on the other hand,

... morality is conceived in interpersonal *terms* and goodness is equated with helping and pleasing others.²⁷

Kohlberg interviewed both male and female *students*, but female students, who tended to speak in terms of responsibility to others, were categorized by him as being stuck at level three, a much lower level of maturity. "Herein lies the paradox," writes Gilligan,

... for the very traits that traditionally have defined the 'goodness' of women, their care for and sensitivity to the needs of others, are those that mark them as deficient in moral development. In this version, of moral development, however, the conception of maturity is derived from a study of men's lives and reflects the importance of individuation in their development.²⁸

Women's moral judgments will always be devalued, Gilligan argues (and women themselves, knowing that the dominant culture devalues them, will easily lose confidence in the validity of their point of view), unless the stages of their moral development are defined in a different way.

When one begins with the study of women and derives developmental constructs from their lives, the outline of a moral conception different from that described by Freud, Piaget, or Kohlberg begins to emerge and informs a different description of development. In this conception, the moral problem arises from conflicting responsibilities rather than from competing rights and requires for its resolution a mode of thinking that is contextual and narrative

²⁶ Lawrence Kohlberg, "Continuities and Discontinuities in Childhood and Moral Development Revisited," in *Collected Papers on Moral Development and Moral Education* (Moral Education Research Foundation, Harvard University, 1973), cited in Gilligan, *A Different Voice*, page 20.

²⁷ Gilligan, *In a Different Voice*, page 18.

²⁸ *Ibid*, page 20.

rather than formal and abstract. The conception of morality as concerned with the activity of care centers moral development around the understanding of responsibility and relationships, just as the conception of morality as fairness ties moral development to the understanding of rights and rules. This different construction of the moral problem for women may be seen as the critical reason for their failure to develop within the constraints of Kohlberg's system. Regarding all constructions of responsibility as evidence of a conventional moral understanding, Kohlberg defines the highest stages of moral development as deriving from a reflective understanding of human rights. ...the morality of rights differs from the morality of responsibility in its emphasis on separation rather than connection, in its consideration of the individual rather than the relationship as primary.²⁹

Gilligan cites, as an alternative model for women's moral development, the work of Jane Loevinger, who proposes a fifth "autonomous stage" of women's ego development,

... where autonomy, placed in a context of relationships, is defined as modulating an excessive sense of responsibility through the recognition that other people have responsibility for their own destiny. [A woman at Stage 5] ...has a feeling for the complexity and multifaceted character of real people and real situations.³⁰

That is, although she can come to see that self-abnegation is not necessary for a moral life, she will still be acutely aware that one's acts do have consequences for other people.

Gilligan concludes:

Whereas the rights conception of morality that informs Kohlberg's principled level (stages 5 and 6) is geared to arriving at an objectively fair or just resolution to moral dilemmas upon which all rational persons could agree, the responsibility conception focuses instead on the limitations of any particular resolution and describes the conflicts that remain. ...³¹

Women in Westerns, as I have said, display a fairly consistent approach to moral judgments. If an action threatens the web of relationships that is essential to these

²⁹ Gilligan, *In a Different Voice*, page 19.

³⁰ Jane Loevinger and Ruth Wessler, *Measuring Ego Development* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1970), page 6, as cited by Gilligan, *In a Different Voice*, page 21. Stage 5 contrasts with an earlier moral stage in which the woman is so anxiously aware of the necessity of preserving relationships and pleasing everyone that any assertion of her own needs is extremely difficult.

³¹ Gilligan, *In a Different Voice*, page 22.

women – and particularly their primary relationship with a man – they will argue against it passionately. This often puts them at odds with the Law (by which I mean the occupation of law enforcement, whether community- or self-appointed) and the Army, both of which place duty above personal happiness, and which justify violence in support of principals of justice that are held to be universal and unswerving. ("What makes soldiers great is hateful to me," Army wife Kathleen Yorke/Maureen O'Hara tells her son in RIO GRANDE).

However, Western women 'themselves will take up arms in some circumstances: to save their honour (the decision about whom to love, as I have said, is crucial to the Western woman, and she will fight desperately against any attempt to take that decision away from her); and to save their loved ones. Thus Callie (Lee Remick) in THESE THOUSAND HILLS (Fleischer, 1959) shoots Jehu (Richard Egan) before he can kill Lat (Don Murray), the love of her life. Miss Cora (Jeannette Nolan) begins by counselling the other women of [THE GUNS OF] FORT PETTICOAT (Marshall, 1957) to lay down their arms because "the Lord was plain enough in his commands about violence and bloodshed." But when the Indian attack comes, and she sees the women who are her closest friends begin to fall around her, she takes up her rifle to defend them. She doesn't abandon God, she simply modifies her interpretation of His message to suit present conditions (adopting " ... a more contextual mode of judgment," as Gilligan puts it!): "The good Lord let me know that if there's something worth fighting for, a body better fight."

Feminist film critics have seen it as distressing that Amy in HIGH NOON is made to go against her own beliefs. Seen in relation to Gilligan's work, though, her moral struggle with her husband and the moral decisions she makes begin to look different. HIGH NOON opens with Will and Amy's wedding. However, their happiness is immediately threatened by the news that outlaw Frank Miller, whom Will had sent to prison, is on his way back to town. Amy urges Will to leave the town behind, since his job as Marshall has ended, but a short distance out of town, he turns the wagon around, over Amy's objections. Amy, who has clearly only known Will a short time, is still in the dark about what's wrong.

AMY:

Please, Will, if you'd just tell me what this is all about.

WILL:

I sent a man up five years ago for murder
He was supposed to hang. But up North
they commuted it to life. Now he's free. I
don't know how -- anyhow, it looks like he's
coming back.

AMY:

I still don't understand.

WILL:

He was always wild and crazy. He'll
probably make trouble.

AMY:

But that's no concern of yours, not any
more.

WILL:

I'm the one who sent him up.

AMY:

But that was part of your job. That's
finished now. They've got a new Marshal.

Will goes on to express his belief that Miller and his gang would pursue him and Amy if they left town, reiterating over her repeated protests that he must stay. He says that he'll swear in some deputies to help him, adding, "Maybe there won't be any trouble." Amy's voice, which has been anxious and pleading, takes on an angrier tone:

AMY:

You know there'll be trouble.

WILL:

Then -- it's better to have it here. I'm sorry,
honey, I know how you feel about it.

AMY:

Do you?

WILL:

Of course I do. I know it's against your religion and all, sure I know it.

AMY:

But you're doing it, just the same. Oh Will, we were married just a few minutes ago. We've got our whole lives ahead of us. Doesn't that mean anything to you?

WILL:

You know, I've only got an hour and I've got lots to do. Stay at the hotel until it's over.

AMY:

No, I won't be here when it's over. You're asking me to wait an hour to find out if I'm a wife or a widow.

They arrive at an impasse, Amy stating that she'll leave town on the noon train if Will won't go with her, Will repeating that he must stay.

This dialogue is an almost textbook example of the mutual incomprehension which must result when the man conceives of morality as (in Gilligan's words) "the understanding of rights and rules," while the woman sees it as "the understanding of responsibility and relationship." When Amy asks for an explanation of the emergency, Will tells what he thinks is the essence of it: Will rightly sent a murderer to jail and he has wrongly been set free. But Amy is still baffled, unable to figure out what this has to do with Will, now. Now, it seems clear to her, he has a personal responsibility to her, to the marriage vows they have pledged together. But when Amy alludes to this relationship, it's Will's turn to be baffled. When Amy asks, "Doesn't that mean anything to you?" it is as though Will doesn't hear her. His mind is already racing ahead to a consideration of how he will carry out the law.

The turning point in this conversation, when Amy's position hardens, comes when Will condescends to her by denying the obvious likelihood of violence. He compounds the insult by saying that he understands that it is "her religion and all" that makes her oppose his stand. But this treats her beliefs as an abstraction and ignores her fear for him; we don't really find out what Amy's personal code is until she talks to another woman, Helen Ramirez (Katy Jurado).

Helen is the other carefully drawn woman in HIGH NOON, and like Amy, she is given some intelligent things to say. She is a woman with a past; she has been Frank Miller's lover as well as Will Kane's, but the film treats her respectfully, showing her to be a shrewd but scrupulously honest businesswoman.

Amy, still unable to understand what is driving Will, and confused when she sees her husband visiting Helen, decides that perhaps Will is staying out of affection for Helen. This, at least, is a reason that fits with Amy's conception of morality as embedded in relationships. Yet, when she visits Helen, Helen tells her she is wrong. "Then why is he staying?" Amy asks helplessly. "If you do not know, I cannot explain it to you," Helen replies. This is usually taken by analysts of HIGH NOON to mean that the more experienced Helen is reproaching Amy for her lack of understanding. But it could mean something more subtle: 'Kane is acting in terms of a moral code that is different from ours. There's no point trying to put it into words.' And perhaps also there is the unstated implication that when Amy has more experience of men, she'll be more tolerant of the ways that their thinking differs from that of women.

Although their conversation begins in embarrassment and suspicion, the two women come to communicate more clearly than Will and Amy were able to. It is to Helen, not Will, that Amy expresses the heart of her opposition to violence: it doesn't come from the formal "rules" of her religion, but from the personal experience of seeing her father and brother gunned down. And Helen shows some sympathy and understanding when Amy explains this. Finally, Helen says: "If Kane were my man, I'd never leave him like this. I'd fight."

AMY:

Why don't you?

HELEN:

He is not my man. He's yours.

To Helen, it is clear: definitions of what is "right" must be decided in a context of relationships. In the end, when it will clearly save her husband's life, Amy does take up a gun and kill a man. But just as she accepted an existing structure of beliefs primarily because she hoped it would help her to make sense of crushing personal loss, she will not put an abstract codification of morality above the immediate and very specific threat to Will, her husband. Amy kills to preserve the ties of love.

In her study of women's roles in American films, Mollie Haskell deplored the absence of moral struggles in which women were engaged:

We can understand that the range of action open to women is limited, reflecting their limited operations in real life. But why have they so rarely experienced the moral dilemmas of real women?⁷

It isn't, in fact, uncommon for women to find themselves in moral quandaries; the probable reason that this is passed over by film scholars is that the woman's viewpoint is not *privileged*: she can rarely bring anyone else, especially the hero, to share her point of view. ANGEL AND THE BADMAN, considered in detail later in this thesis, is highly unusual in this regard. The heroine, like Amy Kane in HIGH NOON, is a Quaker, but far from changing her mind about her code of non-violence, she converts a gunfighter to her beliefs.³²

The Well-Spring of Fascism

What, then, explains the breadth and depth of the enticement of the existential story? Two things, and if we misunderstand the roots of either we shall misunderstand how pernicious at root it is.

I have spent much of this essay delineating how Will Wright was wrong to suggest that western movies are communications from a society to its members about how to act socially. As I conclude, however, let me reaffirm how closely Wright came to getting at least part of it rightly. The existential story indeed embodies the existential sentiment, and that surely has something to do with what many learn from western movies.

It is no secret that most human beings, most of the time, serve the social, political and economic interests of a relatively few others, and as I write the gap between the rich and the poor, and hence the powerful and the powerless, is everywhere deepening and widening throughout the world. Why? What enslaves the poor and the powerless? What prevents them from acting *communally* in their own interests rather than in the interests of others?

In a nutshell, there are no institutional tools available to them to accomplish the task. As Marx aptly saw, the poor and the powerless are hardly ignorant of their plight. They knew they are poor and powerless, and often know exactly who it is that is exploiting them. The problem is that there is no apparent way out of the morass, and hence it is *rational* to act conservatively, preserving the little they have, rather than risk the loss of everything in a struggle they are doomed to lose for want of tools.

³² This sentence concludes the section written by Barbara Hehner.

No wonder the existential myth is so attractive, for it holds out the promise that the absence of *communal* action is unimportant. It reaffirms the only fantasy left to those who are compelled to live without access to the only tools of communication that might permit them to act communally, namely the illusion that if only you are sufficiently insightful and motivated, the day will come when you can win against all odds and against all comers, however lonely, isolated and communally unintegrated you may be.

Western movies, as Wright thought, are indeed *parables*, models of moral behaviour. But they are hardly lessons sent from a "society" to all of its members, for there is no such thing as a "society", and the poor and powerless are hardly members of that small community of the rich and powerful who present movies to them. The rich and powerful act communally to preserve their power, and the western movies that they make help them to do so, for they reinforce the temptation of the poor and powerless to think of themselves only as individuals constrained to act individually rather than collectively.

If the only powerful models one encounters are fantastical *individuals*, one will tend either, if thoughtful, to believe oneself unworthy or incapable of acting, or, if stupid, to try to mimic what one sees. In neither case will one be able to improve one's lot in the only way possible, namely by acting in communal concert with others.

But this only hints at the second and deeper difficulty with the existential story.

The existential myth in every one of its manifestations was authored by and for the benefit of *men* and has thereafter been promulgated by *men*, largely if not exclusively to sustain *men* in their misguided masculine fantasies of communally irresponsible power.

As Carol Gilligan suggested, men and women have as a rule differing moral senses because they have been differently trained. Girls are taught to seek moral awareness in questions of responsibility and relationship whereas boys are trained to look for rights and rules divorced from personal considerations.³³ Ms. Gilligan was right, but she was also being polite.

What she might have said was that the search for rights and rules is a masculine fantasy arising from a self-serving misconstrual of the scope and limits of humane behaviour, a fantastical over-estimation of the possibilities of individual achievement and hence an enervating underestimation of the potential of communal endeavour.

³³ See Barbara Hehner's unpacking of Gilligan's observation on pages 16-18 above.

Marx said that religion was "the opiate of the masses", and when he wrote, he was right, for religion was then the only stimulant to fantasy that the poorer and less powerful could afford. The mass media and especially movies changed all that. By the late-1950s, one could, whenever tempted to feel powerless, pay to *see* and *hear* one's fantasies in living colour, 40-feet wide and brilliant. And what did one see in the 'western' movies made by men?

One saw a self-reliant hero, free of communal restraints, responding decisively to a call unheard by those sharing the space within which he found himself. Unheard, that is, by everyone by *you!* For the space of an hour or two, however powerless you might be, you heard and felt the call of the hero as he heard it, as if you were capable of being as he was.

For a very brief time, you and the hero were members of an elite order of dominating males, uniquely competent and proficient, and uniquely free of communal responsibilities and constraints.

But that, in a nutshell, is the defining sentiment of *fascism*, the wish to belong to an elite core of human beings unbound by the constraints of communal morality and controlling the many who are unable to hear the call of duty. It is the appeal of the military (the SS, for example, or the U.S. Marines), of the hierarchies of church or corporation, of the club and the secret society. It masks the discomfiting awareness that individual genius, singular achievement and the self-made man are masculine, romantic myths, and, as the writers of Genesis warned, that individual initiative unconstrained by communal responsibility is the root of all evil.

Conclusion

In 1927 Heidegger articulated the seminal structures of existential thinking that undergird the 'western' myth. Six years later, in 1933, he was appointed by the Nazi's to serve as Rector of the University of Freiberg wherein he tried to carry those ideas to their inevitable conclusion, refining the baser impulses of National Socialism into a coherent programme of fascism for the academically elite. He failed but hardly for lack of effort. He remained resolutely a member of the party through 1945, claiming thereafter that the Nazis had been responsible for perverting the true aims of National

Socialism(!) and refusing to apologize either for the actions that he took in its support or for the atrocities that others perpetrated in its name.³⁴

As Heidegger withdrew from the post in 1934, Gary Cooper was forming his fascist brigade in Hollywood, later to visit Hitler in Germany. As Heidegger in 1953 was reaffirming the "inner truth and greatness" of National Socialism, Gary Cooper was basking in the glow of the reception of his preternatural portrayal of Sheriff Kane – as classic a fascist character as filmmaking has ever seen.³⁵

As I write, Heidegger's horsemen continue to ride, tempting us to ride with them through the mediated landscapes that we see and hear by means of film and to waste our time hoping for miracles or fantasizing about revolution rather than *working together*, bit by bit, to cleanse the water we drink and the air we breathe, to elevate the demeaning and stressful jobs we are forced to undertake, to save the plants, animals and people dying right and left in the name of progress, growth and the American way. The uniquely romantic, masculine sentiments of individual power continue to obliterate whatever intimations of communal value we retain.

Near the end of his life, Wittgenstein, perhaps the loneliest philosopher of all, remarked

I know that brilliance – the riches of the spirit – is not the ultimate good, and yet I wish now that I could die in a moment of brilliance.³⁶

I wish that I could die, that is, as would a hero within the romantic, masculine, existential myth of 'westerns', overcoming in "a moment of brilliance" the threat of impotence and insignificance by doing what only a few good men have been capable of doing, namely whatever it is at that moment that 'a man's gotta do' – regardless of what happens to everyone else!

³⁴ See "Only a God Can Save Use", interview for *Der Spiegel* of 23 September 1966, as reprinted in a translation by Maria P. Alter and John D. Caputo as pages 24-47 of *Martin Heidegger: Philosophical and Political Writings*, edited by Manfred Stassen (New York, New York: Continuum International Publishing Group, 2003).

³⁵ The phrase is from a lecture of 1935 by Martin Heidegger that was published for the first time in Germany in 1953 with his approval. See *An Introduction to Metaphysics*, translated by Ralph Mannheim (Garden City, New York: Doubleday, 1961), page 166.

³⁶ Following a talk on 11 February 1993 at York University, Ernest Gellner affirmed that "The *Tractatus* was mistitled. It should have been called 'Language and Loneliness'". Wittgenstein made the remark, as quoted on page 231 of Ray Monk's *Ludwig Wittgenstein: The Duty of Genius* (London, England: Jonathan Cape, 1990), in a letter of August 1925 to Paul Engelmann.

Wittgenstein loved the movies and no wonder, for, as I write, the romantic, masculine, existential story is alive and well in movies of the north, south, east and west, reinforcing everywhere the sentiments of fascism in every way possible.