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Review of *The Philosophy of the Western* edited by Jennifer L. McMahon and B. Steve Csaki

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The topic of this collection immediately raises a number of questions. In what sense do artworks have, or express, a “philosophy”? If they can be said to imply or assert propositional claims, why not just make the claims and argue for them? Do the films just serve as examples of philosophical ideas? (The majority of these essays seem to take this approach.) If so, how important is it that the examples are artworks? Would complex and imaginative thought experiments do? Are commercial Hollywood films and television shows artworks at all, and if so, in what sense? Is an artwork a better artwork if it is in some sense philosophically sophisticated?

Neither the editors nor the contributors address such questions very frequently or with any intensity. And the seventeen essays do not share any detectable common orientation about either what it is for “Westerns” to have a “philosophy” or what that “philosophy” might be. Many contributors rightly note that Westerns are about political foundings (indeed the nation’s second founding after the Civil War, and in the course of the great westward expansion of the country). So political philosophy is a frequent subject, especially the famous modern accounts of the need to exit the prelegal order, the state of nature, and found a civil order. So Hobbes, Locke, and Rousseau make their appearance. And there are discussions of the distinctive human virtues on display in Westerns and the fate of those virtues—self-sufficiency, masculinity, courage—in the transition to commercial republics. (Den Uyl notes the relevance of Aristotle, Spinoza, and Emerson in understanding the notion of self-sufficiency and the virtue of self-reliance, and that exhibits another connection between philosophy and the Western: the invocation of the former to help one understand the latter.) Sometimes a Western can help one see a philosophically important distinction (as in Paul Cantor’s demonstration of the relation between “order” and “law” in David Milch’s TV series Deadwood.)

But the political is not really a unifying thread, and all sorts of other philosophers—from Kant and Hegel and Nietzsche and Sartre to Slovoj Žižek and Martha Nussbaum—make their appearance. With a few exceptions, the films chosen for discussion by the contributors are among the more serious and weighty of Hollywood (and Italian) Westerns, and anyone interested in the mythic grip that Westerns have had and continue to have on the American imaginary will no doubt find something of interest in this collection.

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