

## Transnationalism and the Italian Western

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All films, as products of national industries, are, of course, national in the sense that they are produced in a national language and are affected by national culture and imaginaries. The nature of the industry, however, with the goal of disseminating films all over the world for profit, makes any film into a transnational product, a product destined to travel beyond the borders of the original nation. We could assume that films therefore are, in some sense, all trans-national in nature and, in fact, this idea has been backed up recently by the debate about what constitutes a “nation.” Nation as a monolithic entity made of people speaking the same language, sharing the same geographical borders, the same customs and the same culture has been proved an obsolete concept; all nations seem to be made of a polyphony of social and ethnic voices within heteroglot cultures (Shohat and Stam 340). The term transnational originated in the historic field when, in the late 1990s, Ian Tyrrell wrote a seminal essay entitled “What is Transnational History?” and changed the course of the academic discipline, claiming that studying the history of a nation from inside its borders was outmoded because the study of history concerns the movements of peoples, ideas, technologies and institutions across national boundaries.<sup>1</sup> The study of cross-national influences and the focus on the

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<sup>1</sup> For new directions in historic research see the splendid volume *Beyond the Nation: Pushing the Boundaries of U.S. History from a Transatlantic Perspective* (Fasce et al., 2013).

relationship between nation and factors beyond the nation spilled over into many other fields, including into cinematic studies especially.

Today transnational refers to the impossibility of assigning a fixed national identity to much cinema, to the dissolution of any stable connection between film's place of production and the nationality of its makers and performers (Ezra et al. 1-70). The film industry, however, has long operated on a transnational basis. Since 1920 films have been made as co-productions, using the resources and experiences of different nations, and very often directors have been nomadic, going from one production base to another (Jackel 232).<sup>2</sup> Furthermore, cinema has always been transnational when it comes to distribution and reception. The meaning that an audience reads into a film is dependent on the "indigenous" culture of the viewers, with effects that can fall under cultural imperialism, liberating effects, or re-interpretations along indigenous frames of reference (see Higson). This essay, therefore, focuses on the birth of a particular cycle of Italian films, the so-called spaghetti westerns. My aim is to show if a prototype film like Sergio Leone's *A Fistful of Dollars* (1964) constitutes an example of transnational or national cinema at a time (the 1960s) when the globalized world did not exist yet and European cinema studies focused on historically specific national movements such as Italian Neorealism, French *nouvelle vague*, German Expressionism etc., or on individual *auteurs* and art cinema (Rossellini, Godard, Bergman, Resnais, etc.) (see Bergfelder).

At the beginning of the 1960s, the classic American western was still a commodity exported across national boundaries by the powerful Hollywood distribution machinery, even if it was no longer produced in numbers as high as in the 1940s and 1950s. Sergio Leone (Rome, 1929–1989), a profound *connoisseur* of classic westerns and an admirer of the genre, transported the American western into an Italian frame of reference that jettisoned the ideological foundation of the original, modified it, imbued it with a different value system, and redistributed it worldwide very successfully. The history of the creation of the first spaghetti western proves not only that cinema is transnational, but also that "cultural formations are invariably hybrid and impure" (Ezra and Rowden 19). As I will demonstrate, the Italian western reached the U.S. and was not treated

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<sup>2</sup> In particular, see the successful coproduction treaty signed between Italy and France in 1949, regularly revised and renewed through the years, so that by 1957 over 230 French-Italian films had been made (Jackel 232).

as an “exotic” commodity by the audience, but rather was translated into the local idiom. The hegemonic message of the spaghetti western was fused together with the revolutionary, iconoclast, violent, and rebellious message of the film, and the outcome was the birth of a new type of western. The influence of classic Hollywood westerns on Leone’s films is undeniable, but by the time his trilogy was distributed worldwide, he had become an established icon of world cinema and his films in turn became models for American western directors.<sup>3</sup>

As Hutcheon reminds readers “adaptation is how stories evolve and mutate to fit times and different places . . . Traveling stories adapt to local cultures just as populations of organisms adapt to local environments” (Hutcheon 176-77). If what the critic claims is certainly true, we, on the other hand, need to consider Leone’s reworking of Akira Kurosawa’s *Yojimbo* (1961) as a *sui generis* endeavor. While Kurosawa embedded Dashiell Hammett’s novel *Red Harvest* (1929) into an indigenous genre (the samurai film), Leone transferred the samurai’s story into a foreign genre (the western).

Of course, his operation was not a total novelty. Kurosawa’s *The Seven Samurai* (1954) had been translated into *The Magnificent Seven* in 1960 by John Sturges with very fortunate results (Yoshimoto 245).<sup>4</sup> We assume that Leone, a profound *connoisseur* of American cinema, must have been aware of Sturges’ success. As Mitsuhiro Yoshimoto remarks, the traditional samurai films (*jidaigeki*) and the Western had a lot in common (231). The critic claims that Hollywood cinema, starting in the 1920s with films like *The Mark of Zorro* (Fred Niblo, 1920) featuring Douglas Fairbanks as a swashbuckling hero, spawned imitations in the Japanese film industry. The Hollywood filmic conventions, however, were assimilated into Japanese culture and transformed to such a degree that the samurai films became a Japanese genre.

The source of the affinity can be found in the similarities of the national situation. The Western looks at a period of transition in American history, mostly between 1860 and 1890, in which the Western Expansion and the idea of Manifest Destiny are coming to a close. The frontier will

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<sup>3</sup> Leone’s western trilogy is: *Fistful of Dollars* (1964), *For a Few Dollars More* (1966), and *The Good, the Bad, and the Ugly* (1966). *A Fistful* was distributed in the U.S. only in 1967 because of a legal battle with Toho Films.

<sup>4</sup> Yoshimoto creates a wide historical panorama of Japanese society in which to set Kurosawa as an *auteur*, pointing out the great influence that American cinema had on Japanese culture.

cease to exist in 1890 and the railway, by then, will have reached the Pacific. The same is true for Japan: the samurai films register the crisis of passage from an agrarian society to a modern and urban society, a difficult and transitional moment in Japanese history that took place between the end of the nineteenth century and the 1950s, even if the samurai films are usually set in a feudal time (1600s and 1867, end of the Edo period). It is clear that the comparison between the Western and the traditional samurai films holds if we are talking about the American westerns made before Leone's *A Fistful of Dollars* (1964) and the samurai films made before Kurosawa's *Yojimbo* which, in 1961, revolutionized the samurai genre. If it is undeniable that Kurosawa altered the conventions of the *jidageiki* and changed the genre, the same is true for Leone's western as it extrapolated the story of *Yojimbo*, transferred it into the American western, then proceeded to alter the formula, thereby *Mediterraneanizing* it.

In 1963 Leone, after having watched *Yojimbo* in a theatre in Rome, started to work at a *moviola* machine to translate the dialogue of the film from Japanese into Italian "in order to be sure not to repeat a single word" (Frayling 118). Leone claimed that he undressed Kurosawa's characters of their samurai masks and redressed them as cowboys "to make them cross the ocean and return to their place of origin," in other words, back to the America of Dashiell Hammett (Frayling 120).<sup>5</sup> There would be no problem with his statement if *A Fistful* would be just a remake of the Japanese film, like, for example, *Last Man Standing* (Walter Hill, 1996), a transposed gangster story set during the days of Prohibition in the corrupt border town of Jericho, Texas. There, two crime syndicates (Italian and Irish mob) battle themselves till, one day, Joe Smith, an "amoral" gunslinger, happens upon the town and offers his services to both sides, pitting them against each other. But Leone's film does not fit the bill. Leone took the structure of *Yojimbo*, transferred it into a foreign genre, and then went on to modify the basic formula on which that very genre was based. *A Fistful*, therefore, is not a remake because Leone, while keeping the plot line of the Japanese film, eliminated some events and characters and altered the relevance of other characters and events. On one hand, we could say that Leone simplified the story line—the merchants affiliated with the criminal clans

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<sup>5</sup> For the best biography on Sergio Leone see Christopher Frayling's monumental volume entitled *Sergio Leone: Something to Do with Death* (2000), especially pages 118-125.

disappear, together with the more layered structure of Japanese society.<sup>6</sup> On the other hand, if *Yojimbo*'s Hansuke—the meddling, corrupted, and greedy officer of the town—disappears, in the Italian film the coffin maker (Piripero) and the saloon keeper (Silvanito) acquire more screen time and therefore are more important from the very beginning.<sup>7</sup>

On the whole, the plot remains the same as that of Kurosawa's film: a Man with No Name/stranger/gringo/pistolero (Clint Eastwood) happens upon a Mexican village (San Miguel) that looks like a cemetery, not far from the United States border. The stranger also encounters the same cinematic tropes—a dead body sent home sitting on a horse with a sign saying “Adios, amigo!”; a crazy bell ringer that talks about killing, money, and death; and a lot of women dressed in black. When the stranger stops at a well to drink, he witnesses a puzzling scene: some thugs beat a small child and a man while a beautiful woman watches from a window. The stranger is ridiculed by the thugs and at this point he meets Silvanito, who explains to him why the town is so dead. Like Sanjuro the samurai, the stranger is interested in offering his gun for hire to both clans in order to make money, and in order to achieve his ploy he pits one group against the other.

It seems that all the ingredients (story line, characters, happy ending) have remained the same, except for the *mise-en-scène* and the weapon of the protagonist, which in this case is a gun and not a sword. However, the omission of the chance encounter between the samurai and the farmer's son in the opening sequence of the Japanese film alters completely the equivalence of the two films. Kurosawa, in depicting a son who chooses a life of crime over the hard-working life of his father, stresses the fact that society is in crisis. At the very end of the film, Sanjuro meets the farmer's son again and spares his life, sending him home to the farm and claiming that an honest, long life eating porridge is better than a short life of crime.

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<sup>6</sup> The corruption in *A Fistful* is circumscribed to two factions, the liquor smuggler bandits, the Mexican Rojos brothers (Ramon, Miguel and Esteban), and the Baxters, a family of Yankee gun smugglers whose leader, John Baxter, happens to be the local sheriff.

<sup>7</sup> The cooper in *Yojimbo* is a sympathetic character: he helps Gonji, the saké vendor, and the samurai, but he is a bit more ambivalent. At a certain point when he gets scared, he flees and abandons Gonji, who is left alone to carry the canister in which the wounded samurai is hidden. Piripero is more courageous and sides with the gringo from the beginning of the film.

The moralizing, almost didactic valence of the episode gives Kurosawa's film a different ideological spin. Kurosawa criticizes the greed brought about by capitalism at the expense of more traditional moral values. The samurai seems to be interested in making money, but he is even more interested in cleansing the town and, in order to succeed, pretends to be selling himself as a bodyguard. The violence of the samurai is justified because it is a moralizing force. He is there as an avenging angel sent to purge the town of men who are better off dead than alive. In this way Kurosawa shares with John Ford a strong ethical sense of what is right and wrong. Many great classic westerns like *Stagecoach* (1939), *Shane* (1953), *High Noon* (1952), and *The Searchers* (1956) all exhibit this unchallenged sense of justice. There are the good guys and the bad guys, and the bad guys are doomed, because justice always prevails.

The concern with the evils of modernity remains at the core of *Yojimbo* because Kurosawa frames Sanjuro's story as a departure from home and the returning to the family of the farmer's son. In so doing, the Japanese director prevents the destruction of the family unit and reaffirms the validity of the farmer's (and his wife's) values—i.e. hard work, sacrifice, and honesty in the face of modern greed. Leone, instead, has accepted modernity and its evils as inevitable. The war against greed and injustice cannot be won on a large scale but a few battles can be won by some super-human individuals like the Man with No Name. Leone's protagonist, while pursuing his capitalistic dream, can correct a few wrongs along the way. In this way, Leone's westerns are like adult fables in which injustice can be eliminated by way of the exceptional skills of a man who uses violence to change, almost unintentionally and momentarily, the world.

The Italian western is charged with an anarchic and rebellious force that is lacking in its Japanese counterpart. Leone is a product of a certain society, culture, and era. It is important to note that there is twenty years' difference in age between Kurosawa and Leone. The former was an adult during the militarization of Japan that preceded the onset of World War II, and, having descended from samurais, by 1961 he had witnessed enough changes in Japanese society to realize that something important had been lost as a result of the rapid industrialization and modernization process. Kurosawa's filmography is based, as many critics point out, on the importance of the individual, his moral fiber, and his humanitarian values (Sato 15-123). Leone, by 1963, was a young man who had survived World War II and a fascist dictatorship practically unscathed thanks to his youth. After having built up his career in the 1950s, he began noticing the rapid

changes of a country that was becoming a modern and industrialized nation after the bleak years of the reconstruction. The world was becoming more affluent, but also it was transforming into a capitalist fight for survival and, with money as the supreme goal, many of the ideals of the Resistance, like constructing a more equal and just society for everybody, were being lost.

Leone eliminating the farmer's son episode from his film eliminates any ethical pretense. For Leone, San Miguel is a micro-capitalist society in which everybody would accept one "boss" as the norm: "Every town has a boss," claims the gringo. However, in this case, we have one too many bosses and, therefore, the competing economic interests create havoc and destruction. Leone accepts this capitalistic logic and his *pistolero* does too. In fact, the gringo, recognizing the anomalous situation of having two bosses in one town, sees a possible source of profit. The stranger, unlike the samurai, does not want to destroy the clans because they are evil but rather because their destruction will bring him wealth.<sup>8</sup> However, because he hates bullies and clearly favors the oppressed, he resorts to violence in order to eliminate the thugs (Frayling 163).

With *A Fistful*, Leone succeeds in creating a transcultural film, a domestication of the American genre that, like Kurosawa's, succeeds in giving birth to a new cinematic genre that was less a spin-off of the American western and more an evolution of it. In its aftermath, the American western will never be the same as the classic formula will be considered defunct.<sup>9</sup> *A Fistful* is, therefore, a permutation, a story retold

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<sup>8</sup> When Consuelo Baxter tells the stranger that he will soon be rich, implying that he seems to be always in the right place at the right time so he can get paid for his information/deeds, he replies that there is nothing wrong with getting rich. When he is hired by the Rojos clan, he warns them that he does not "work cheap." If we add to the above what he says to Silvanito, "There is money to be made in a place like this"—i.e. two bosses in competition leave space for a third party to throw a wrench in their doings—it is evident that the stranger has a fairly detailed understanding of how modern society works with respect to professionalism, information, money, and competing businesses. Unlike the samurai, who will leave town after having committed the good deed of liberating the town as poor as he was before, the stranger will leave after having committed the good deed of liberating the town and finding the government loot with lots of money in his pocket.

<sup>9</sup> See Dolores Martinez, who considers the impact that the Italian westerns had on the genre everlasting.

across borders, translated into an indigenous culture. What was produced is a new narrative despite the presumed connection with what had gone before. In this new narrative, Leone's gunman embodies the contradictions of postmodern man. He hates injustice and notices the flaws in the system but, at the same time, understands that he cannot change it. Leone's protagonists are multifaceted. They are anarchic and rebellious. They are capitalists. They are violent when they need to be, and they do not want to conform because they are outsiders. It is this hybridity that has made them so appealing. They cross borders, going back and forth from America to Japan and all over the globe. Their appeal is reflected in financial success at the box office. Leone imported the American model of the Western and anchored it to his Italian culture. He re-appropriated the translocal (*Yojimbo*) and transformed it into the local (*A Fistful*) and thereby modified the ideological valence of the American western by infusing it with the doubts and cynicism of a society in transition between consumerism and industrialization.

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