

Thomas Klein / Ivo Ritzer / Peter W. Schulze (eds.)

Crossing Frontiers

Intercultural Perspectives on the Western

SCHÜREN

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Edward Buscombe

Is the Western about American History?

Is the Western genre essentially and always a discourse about American history? Many have argued that it is so. In *Horizons West*, Jim Kises states baldly (1969: 8): «First of all, the western is American history. Needless to say, this does not mean that the films are historically accurate or that they cannot be made by Italians. More simply, the statement means that American frontier life provides the milieu and *mores* of the western...».¹ Phil Hardy in his *Western encyclopedia*, claims that «the Western is fixed in history in a relatively straightforward way».² This is true in the narrow sense. Westerns often begin by identifying a time and a place; thus *The SEARCHERS* (1956) opens with the title: «Texas 1868». In many other films, while the time and place may not be identified quite so specifically, it's clear that we are in the middle of the nineteenth century (we can tell from the costumes and décor) and somewhere in the United States (we can tell from the landscape). More precisely, the action takes place, in the overwhelming majority of films, in the United States west of the Mississippi, and not just generally in the nineteenth century, but in a limited period identified roughly as that between the end of the Civil War in 1865, and the so-called «closing of the frontier» in 1890.

However, the Western presents a somewhat skewed version of American history. The Civil War, the single most traumatic event in America's past, is directly dealt with in only a handful of Westerns, despite occurring at a time almost contemporaneous with the action of most of the films. The real-life characters who people Western films, such as Billy the Kid, Jesse James or Wyatt Earp, rate scarcely a footnote in the standard histories of America. Even General Custer, the subject of several major Western films, was perhaps less important in the history of the Indian Wars than Generals Sheridan or Crook.

But it's not so much a question of specific events or individuals; rather, the Western, many critics have argued, is underpinned by a meta-narrative of history which focuses on the concept of the frontier, the line marking the furthest point west of white settlement. Concepts such as the clash between «civilisation» and «savagery», or the nature of law and order, or ideas of masculinity appropriate to such a frontier society, can all be found to inform a large number of films.

1 In the later, much expanded edition of this book, published in 2004, this statement does not appear.

2 Quoted in Langford 2005: 62.

The founding concept of the established version of the history of the West was Frederick Jackson Turner's formulation, advanced in 1903, of the frontier as an area of free land which functioned as a kind of safety valve for the pressures which acted upon American society. Social and economic tensions were relieved by the constant stream of migration westward, a migration that created a new kind of society, independent, creative, highly practical, egalitarian and, argued Turner, quintessentially American. The frontier was thus seen in a wholly optimistic and positive way, both the source and the manifestation of American exceptionalism, and its movement westward was a story of progress. It is this vision of the frontier which is central to America's conception of itself as a forward-looking, progressive society (cf. Turner 1961).

But soon after the time that film scholars were turning to issues around the Western and history, the history of the American west itself was undergoing a series of revisions. By the 1980s a new generation of historians was questioning Turner's thesis (cf. for example Limerick 1987). It depended, for instance, on the assumption that the land into which the whites were expanding was free and empty. This ignored the fact that most of it was already occupied, by a combination of indigenous people and Hispanics, whose prior claims to the land were then overturned by conquest. The Turnerian view of the frontier also paid scant attention to the position of women and minorities. And its easy assumptions that westward expansion was a success story were belied by many catastrophic failures and a rapacious capitalism which wreaked havoc on the natural environment.

From this perspective, if the Western expresses a Turnerian view of the frontier, then it can be attacked for its reactionary ideology, for promoting a myth of the West rather than portraying things as they really were, a fantasy, not true history.³ If it is indeed about America, it presents a distorted view of it. Westerns can be seen as supporting a racist, sexist, even homophobic view of American society, and on the surface that would seem to be self-evidently true. But a more subtle critique of some Westerns leads to the questioning of such easy assumptions. Some landmark films may be analysed in a more sophisticated manner, acknowledging perhaps their failure to confront full-on the politically reactionary nature of the genre, but finding ways in which they may nevertheless redeem themselves by undercurrents which run counter to the perceived ideological thrust. Thus for example John Ford's *THE SEARCHERS* (1956) has as its hero Ethan Edwards, a man implacably opposed to Indians, to the point that he resolves to murder his niece when he supposes her to have assimilated into the Comanche. But the word 'hero' is something of a misnomer, because it is clear that Ethan's behaviour is by no means endorsed by other characters in the film, nor is he himself able to sustain his murderous impulses. Ethan is a highly complex character, and his inconsistencies throw into relief the



1 John Wayne in *RIO BRAVO* (1959)

whole question of racial identity, challenging any easy assumption that the classical Western leans wholly towards a hostile view of Indians.

In a similar mode, Howard Hawks's *RIO BRAVO* (1959) would seem to present a wholly masculine world in which a small group of heroes unite in a common endeavour, one in which feminine virtues would appear to have little place. On the surface, the role of Feathers, the saloon singer played by Angie Dickinson who entrances Sheriff John T. Chance (John Wayne; fig. 1), would appear to be wholly stereotypical, another in the long line of women of easy virtue who populate the Western. But Feathers is very much her own woman, and manages to run rings round the Sheriff in the world of the emotions, where she takes all the initiatives and wins all the battles.

Looking for Westerns which directly challenge the pre-eminent role of men is not a particularly fruitful avenue to pursue, since such films are few and far between. *THE BALLAD OF LITTLE JO* (1993) is an honourable exception, but films like *BAD GIRLS* (1994) and *THE QUICK AND THE DEAD* (1995) offer no more than a comic-book approach. Nevertheless, it seems to me that it might be possible to write an alternative history of the Western which, far from castigating it for its perceived ideological shortcomings, would pay attention to subtexts which can be in contradiction with the overt politics of a film. A start has already been made on this work,

3 See the critique of the Western's view of women in Tompkins 1992.



2. Joan Crawford and Sterling Hayden in *JOHNNY GUITAR* (1954)

as I have indicated. Critics such as Pam Cook (1988) have suggested a series of alternative feminist readings of such films as *DODGE CITY* (1939), *PURSUED* (1947), *RANCHO NOTORIOUS* (1952) and *CALAMITY JANE* (1953). *JOHNNY GUITAR* (1954; fig. 2) has become something of a locus classicus of how women's roles in the Western may undercut the apparent domination of masculine values.

The same kind of strategy might be employed in dealing with the Western's seemingly exclusive pre-occupation with heterosexuality. Virtually no Westerns (with the exception of the eccentric Andy Warhol movie *LONESOME COWBOYS* [1968] and a number of pornographic features) have challenged head-on the anti-gay bias, at least not until *БРОКБАК MOUNTAIN* (2005). But in a genre that depends so heavily on relationships between men, the possibilities for readings which uncover gay sub-texts must surely be considerable.

The question of the Western's racial politics is a complex one. I have already suggested that some films can be read in ways that subvert easy assumptions about the Western being racist. But there is also a long history within the Western of films that consciously attempt to deal 'sympathetically' with the Indian. Some of D.W. Griffith's early Biograph films offer a view of a pre-conquest world in which Indians live in a happy idyll not yet threatened by white invasion. Occasional films of the

twenties and thirties, such as *THE VANISHING AMERICAN* (1925), tried to put a pro-Indian point of view, and *BROKEN ARROW* (1950) was just one of a number of films in the 1950s which adopted a 'liberal' perspective. It's interesting to trace, as some critics have done, the relationship between such films and changes in public discourse about the so-called 'Indian problem' in the US; see for example Steve Neale's essay on liberal Westerns (Neal 1998), and my own account of *BROKEN ARROW* in *Indians: Native Americans in the Movies* (Buscombe 2006). It's clear that liberal attitudes do not appear in the Western out of nowhere, and that the Western has frequently been responsive to changes in political discourse.

Critics of the Turner frontier thesis made much of the fact that Turner largely ignored the experience of the Hispanic people who inhabited the West before the arrival of Americans, and continued (and continue) to co-exist with them. But if on first viewing Western movies seem to exist in a WASP-world, in which the Hispanic heritage is excluded or at least marginalised, a closer look shows that there is much more influence than one might think. Ten years ago, in the introduction to a collection of essays entitled *Back in the Saddle Again*, I wrote:

«John Ford's Westerns are packed with Hispanic references. *MY DARLING CLEMENTINE* [fig. 3] is a film about Wyatt Earp, a quintessential WASP figure, at least as portrayed in the movies. But the entire town of Tombstone is pervaded by Hispanics. Not only is the Mexican woman Chihuahua central to the film's symbolic structure (East/West, garden/desert, respectability/open sexuality). At the town theatre, a Mexican woman sells enchi-ladas, the musicians in the saloon where the Earps drink are Mexicans, the actor Thomdike is tormented by the Clantons in a Mexican cantina, even the man who holds Wyatt Earp's horse as he mounts to ride off after Doc Holliday is a Mexican. The Spanish language and Mexican music are woven in and out of the soundtrack. Nor is this Ford's only film with such a strong Hispanic influence. *ГOДЪЯТНЕНС, ТВО РОДЕ ТOБЕГТНЕР* have equally strong

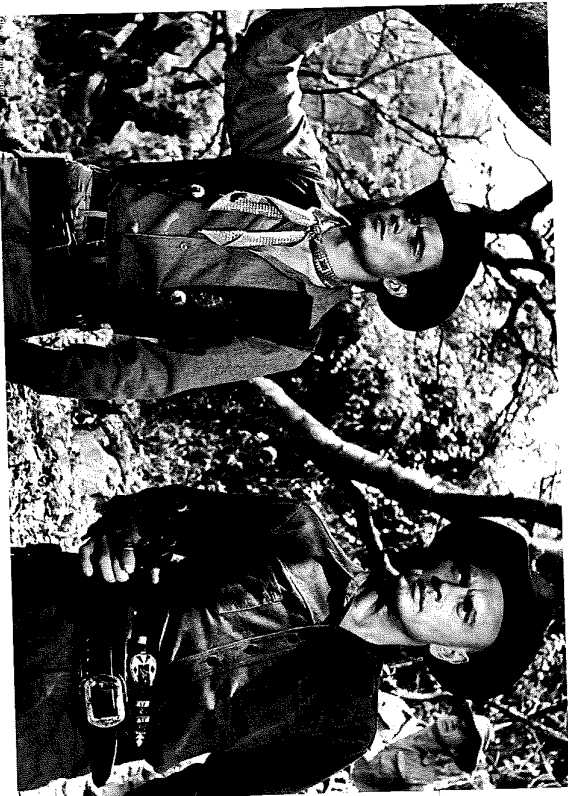


3. Henry Fonda and Cathy Downs in *MY DARLING CLEMENTINE* (1946)

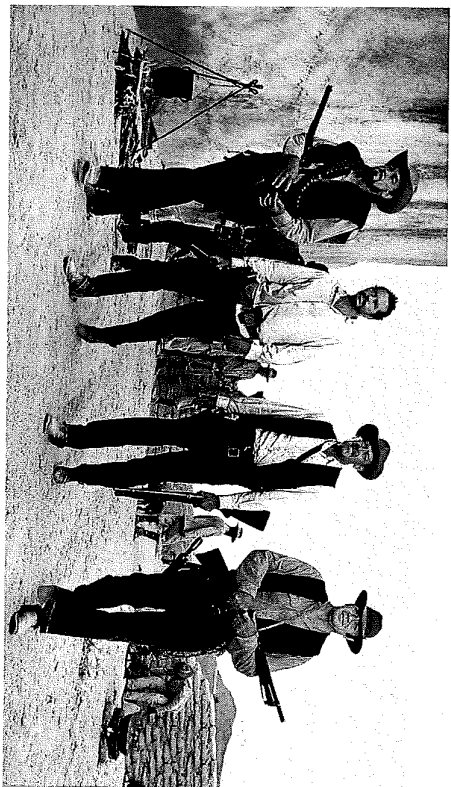
Hispanic elements. Indeed, there is a long essay if not a whole book to be written on what might be called the South-western, the Western as expressive of Hispanic cultural survival. The title of this volume, *Back in the Saddle Again*, is a reference to Gene Autry's theme song, first recorded in 1939. The following year Autry had another hit with *El Rancho Grande*. This song had previously featured in the Mexican film of 1936, *ALLA EN EL RANCHO GRANDE*, which inaugurated the Mexican sub-genre of the Western, the *comedia ranchera*. Half the words of the song Autry sings in the original Spanish, a fact not much noticed in all that has been written on the theme of multiculturalism in the cinema.» (Buscombe/Pearson 1998: 6-7)

If I may say so, that seems to me no less pertinent than it was ten years ago. Indeed, the Hispanic heritage of American cinema has become even more marked in such recent quasi-Westerns as *LONE STAR* (1996), *ALL THE PRETTY HORSES* (2000) and *THE THREE BURIALS OF MELQUIADES ESTRADA* (2005), all of them explorations of a cross-border culture, previously found not only in John Ford but in such significant Westerns as *THE WONDERFUL COUNTRY* (1959). Thus the contestation of what exactly constitutes America is an ongoing struggle. The long essay or book I called for is still there waiting to be written by someone with the right cross-cultural credentials.

Thus it is evident that the relationship between the Western and history is not a straightforward one. It's certainly not a matter of a simple reflection, of the West-



4 Horst Buchholz and Yul Brynner in *THE MAGNIFICENT SEVEN* (1960)



5 Ben Johnson, Warren Oates, William Holden and Ernest Borgnine in *THE WILD BUNCH* (1969)

ern seeking simply to recreate the past. You can be sure that if a Western begins by telling you that this is at last the 'real story' of Jesse James or Wyatt Earp, then what we are in for is yet another piece of myth-making. Moreover, if the Western often uses the facts of history as its raw material (the Indian wars, the construction of the railroad, the growth of the cattle industry), the significance of those facts, the meaning that is extracted from them, is likely to owe far more to social ideas current at the time the film was made than those typical of the time of its setting. As Jack Nachbar writes: «the subject matter of Westerns has usually been the historical West after 1850, but the real emotional and ideological subject matter has invariably been the issues of the era in which films were released.»⁴ Thus *THE SEARCHERS* has been read not as a discourse on relations between white settlers and Native Americans on the early frontier, but as a thinly disguised treatment of the struggle for civil rights in America in the 1950s.

There have already been a number of book-length studies of the Western which have read films not in terms of what they have to say about American society in the past, but rather in terms of the films' relation to what was happening in American society at the time of their production. One such study that comes to mind is Stanley Corkin's recent book *Cowboys as Cold Warriors: The Western and US History*, tracing connections between some of the Westerns produced in the forties and fifties and America's role in international politics at the time (Corkin 2004). Richard Slotkin's book *Gunslinger Nation* has a similar focus, if on a wider scale, on the connections between Westerns and American public policy, for example in

4 Jack Nachbar quoted in Langford 2005: 72.

his analysis of films like *THE MAGNIFICENT SEVEN* (fig. 4) and *THE WILD BUNCH* (fig. 5) in relation to the Vietnam war (Slotkin 1992).

Much of this work is genuinely illuminating. But all too often I find the theoretical model with which critics are working has serious defects. What is rarely explained is just how ideas which may be current in the wider society find their way into films. The assumption, somehow, is that they are simply absorbed by filmmakers, that certain ideas are 'in the wind' and get picked up by film-makers, who transfer them directly into films. Critical analysis seems to somehow short-circuit the specific organizational and institutional practices which must surely be involved and through which these ideas are mediated.

The history which makes its presence felt in the Western does not necessarily have to be political history in the narrow sense. I take it as axiomatic that all cultural products, including the Western genre, have a history; a history, moreover, that is produced by human beings, even if they often do so without full consciousness of what they are doing. I have in some of my own work tried to show how certain elements of the Western, such as the way landscape is used and what sort of meanings it has in films, can be understood as the result of a process whose origins lie in the historical past even before the Western film came into existence. Thus nineteenth-century American painting and photography was initially influenced by European ideas of the sublime. Artists went west to paint the Rocky Mountains because they found in them many of the qualities which European artists had found in the Alps or other European landscapes. But in the second half of the nineteenth century, under the pressure of an emerging nationalism, American artists sought to develop an authentic American landscape aesthetic based on scenery which was specific to America and not merely reminiscent of European vistas. Instead of mountains, American artists such as Thomas Moran began to paint the deserts and canyons of the southwest, producing a desert aesthetic which eventually fed into popular notions of what was a typical western American landscape. The best-selling novels of Zane Grey, whose *Riders of the Purple Sage* was published in 1912, were mostly set in the southwest and featured elaborate descriptions of scenery. Many of Grey's novels were filmed, mostly in the late teens and early 1920s, and did much to create the vogue for desert landscapes in the movie Western. Though mountains and plains do feature (for example in the Western of Anthony Mann), it is overwhelmingly the scenery of Arizona, Utah or Nevada which provides the most common and typical locations for Hollywood's Western films (Buscombe 1995).

Interestingly, Italian Westerns for the most part adopt the same type of scenery, arid, sun-drenched, rocky and hostile to settlement. Many of these films were of course shot in Spain, particularly in the semi-desert region around Almeria. To what extent it is the choice of location that influenced the landscape, and to what extent it is the desire for a particular kind of landscape that dictated the choice of location, is an interesting question that might repay further investigation. By

contrast, the West German Westerns of the 1960s preferred mountain scenery. One might pose the same question: which was cause and which was effect? It may be simply that mountains were the scenery to hand in the locations chosen, but the influence of an earlier generation of German mountain films surely cannot be overlooked. East German Westerns, on the other hand, employ both mountain and desert scenery, the former for those films based on the novels of James Fenimore Cooper (which are set in the wooded country of upper New York State, at the time of the action still frontier country), and deserts for films such as *ULZANA* (1974), set in the southwest of America.

Some kinds of Westerns appear to avoid history altogether, at least at first glance. The frontier thesis has no place in the B-Western, a sub-genre which played an important part in Hollywood production up until the 1950s. Peter Stanfield has produced two books which have contributed much to our understanding of the hitherto neglected and despised B-feature (Stanfield 2001 and Stanfield 2002). In doing so he has shown that the simple assertion that the Western genre as a whole is about the Turnerian view of American history is not sustainable. One or two of the Westerns starring Gene Autry or Roy Rogers (the two most successful B-Western stars of the thirties and forties) do have a setting in the historical past. But most of them take place in a never-never land in which the historical trappings of the Western such as horses and six-guns exist side by side with modern inventions such as the motor car and the telephone, and, most importantly for singing cowboys, the phonograph.

The B-feature Westerns which Stanfield examines are never about the historical themes which preoccupied the A-feature, themes we may group under the rubric of 'the winning of the west'. At first sight it seems the B-Western is innocent of any kind of historical discourse. But as Stanfield shows, it deals instead with issues highly pertinent to the time when they were made. Thus several of Gene Autry films of the 30s and early 40s concern families who are being dispossessed of their ranches or other property, or who are suffering economically through the unscrupulous activities of large, faceless corporations. In this way the B-Western reflects the concerns of a generation scarred by mass unemployment and the experience of the dustbowl. Thus, if not about history in the conventional sense, the B-Western is no less pertinent to America.

But what of the many hundreds of Westerns which have been made outside of the United States? Does the form of the genre dictate the themes? Is it necessarily the case that because a film follows the conventions of the Western that it is inevitably telling a story which relates to America? The first thing that needs to be said is that the idea of the West has had a profound influence on many different cultures. In Europe especially, the idea of the American West as a location of adventure and dramatic conflict spread rapidly during the nineteenth century. The concept of the 'mobile savage' living in an idyllic natural world also held great attraction to the

European, weary of his/her own hidebound and rigid society. Scores of European novelists, most famously the German Karl May, mined the West as a subject for stirring tales, while American authors such as James Fenimore Cooper were translated into several European languages, with great success. Real-life spectacles representing life in the West were hugely popular in Europe, with Buffalo Bills' Wild West travelling to Britain, France, Spain, Italy, Austria, Hungary and Germany around the turn of the century. Other such shows got as far as Russia and Sweden.

By the time the movies arrived, the Wild West was an established part of popular culture, in Europe and elsewhere. It's not surprising, therefore, that European film industries should have begun to produce Westerns of their own. There were already thirty or so Western films made in Britain before 1915. The French were particularly keen, and Pathé was soon producing Westerns which found great popularity even in the United States itself. Later episodes of Western production in Europe are well enough known: the (Indianerfilme) of DEFA, the East German film studio, the West German films based on the novels of Karl May, and of course the so-called (spaghetti) Westerns from Italy in the 1960s.

In what sense are these films representative of an authentic European culture, and to what extent are they merely imitations of Hollywood Westerns, with similar thematic concerns? If we look back to the nineteenth century, to the novels and dramas and pictorial representations that were consumed by Europeans in such huge quantities, it's apparent that what was being articulated was a kind of dialectical relationship between Europe and America. For the European reader, America functioned as an ideal, as in many ways the opposite of Europe. What these stories emphasised was, firstly, the emptiness of the United States. Its prairies and mountains and deserts seemed limitless, such a contrast to the tightly settled landscapes of most European countries. Secondly, the society of the frontier appeared, certainly in comparison to Europe, free and fluid. Instead of the hidebound, class-bound social structures of Europe, America seemed to offer a land full of opportunity, where people might build an independent life for themselves. That many were to be disillusioned when they discovered that America was not without its own distinctions, of race and colour, of sex or economic power, did not lessen the appeal of the myth.

Nevertheless, despite the fact that European Westerns capitalised on the already powerful appeal of the American frontier, it is possible to argue that they do display specific European features which make them more than just imitations of the American originals. Consider, for example, the role played by Indians in both German and Italian Westerns. In the latter, the original inhabitants of the frontier scarcely appear at all. In fact, with one or two exceptions, such as Leone's *ONCE UPON A TIME IN THE WEST*, a film at least half-Hollywood, the Italian Western is little concerned with historical themes relating to the nineteenth century West. In so far as there is an interest in ideological issues, they centre on the unequal struggle

of the weak against the strong, often represented as poor peasants, especially Mexicans, battling against unscrupulous landowners and their hired gunmen, a kind of class struggle which seems to relate more to contemporary Italian politics than to American, as perceived by predominantly leftist writers and directors, and with an occasional dose of anti-clericalism thrown in, something quite foreign to the American Western.

By contrast, German Westerns, both East and West, feature Indians prominently, following their dominant sources, the novels of James Fenimore Cooper and Karl May respectively. In the Hollywood Western, whether the films are liberal or reactionary, Indians are always a problem, the underlying concern being, how can they ultimately be integrated into American society? In the DEFA Westerns from East Germany, Indians function instead as representatives of the third world struggling against the imperialist Yankees. For German audiences, it has also been suggested, Indians can also stand as honorary Teutons, allowing Germans to «refuse the role of perpetrator in racial aggression. Indian impersonation [for identification] thus facilitated the work of [postwar] restitution, by allowing Germans to explore alternative [to Nazi] notions of ethnic differences and to reject learned concepts of Aryan supremacy» (Buscombe 2006: 216).

Indians have also been seen as «green», offering an alternative to consumer capitalism. Germans' fondness not only for watching Indians in the cinema, but going further by even dressing up as Indians in organised clubs «allowed club members to express fear of modernization, grief over geographical and social displacement, and mourning of lost indigenous traditions, but also to validate and celebrate a past marked by rural artisan lifeways and a primarily oral culture» (Buscombe 2006: 217).

This may be placing a heavier burden of representation on these films than they are able to bear. But it does show that the European Western, and by extension the Latin American and other geographically displaced Westerns, are capable of meanings which are not confined by American history, and in particular by its frontier myth.

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Ivo Ritzer

When the West(ern) Meets the East(ern)

The western all'italiana and its Asian Connections

«For it is by living on the borderline of history and language, on the limits of race and gender, that we are in a position to translate the differences between them into a kind of solidarity.»

Homi Bhabha

Globalising the western all'italiana

The western all'italiana never was a western all'italiana. To be more precise, the western all'italiana never exclusively was a western all'italiana. From the beginning, it was a project of transnational cooperations, mainly between different European countries: Italy, Spain, Germany and France. The western all'italiana is a highly hybrid product reminding us that the local always has to be seen against the background of the global. Instead of homogeneity, it produces heterogeneity, prefiguring a «new world-space of cultural production and national representation which is simultaneously becoming more globalized (unified around dynamics of capitalistic moving across borders) and more localized (fragmented into contestatory enclaves of difference, coalition, and resistance) in everyday texture and composition» (Wilson/Dissanayake 1996: 1). Let us consider three of the most interesting examples:

1. PER UN PUGNO DI DOLLARI / A FIRSTFUL OF DOLLARS (1964) was produced by a German company (Constantin Film), an Italian company (Jolly Film) and a Spanish company (Ocean Films), was shot in Spain and Italy (mainly in Almería and Rome), written by two Spaniards (Victor Andrés Catena, Jaime Comas Gil) and an Italian (Sergio Leone), directed by an Italian (Sergio Leone), starting an American (Clint Eastwood), several Austrians (Sieghardt Rupp, Joseph Egger), Germans (Marianne Koch, Wolfgang Lukschy), Spaniards (José Calvo, Antonio Prieto), and Italians (Gian Maria Volonté, Benito Stefanelli).
2. IL GRANDE SILENZIO / THE GREAT SILENCE (1968) was produced by an Italian company (Adelphia Compagnia Cinematografica) and a French company (Les Films Corona), was shot in Italy and Spain (Belluno, Rom and the Pyrenees), written by Italians (Mario Amendola, Bruno Corbucci, Sergio Corbucci, Vittorio Petrilii) directed by an Italian (Sergio Corbucci), starting a Frenchman