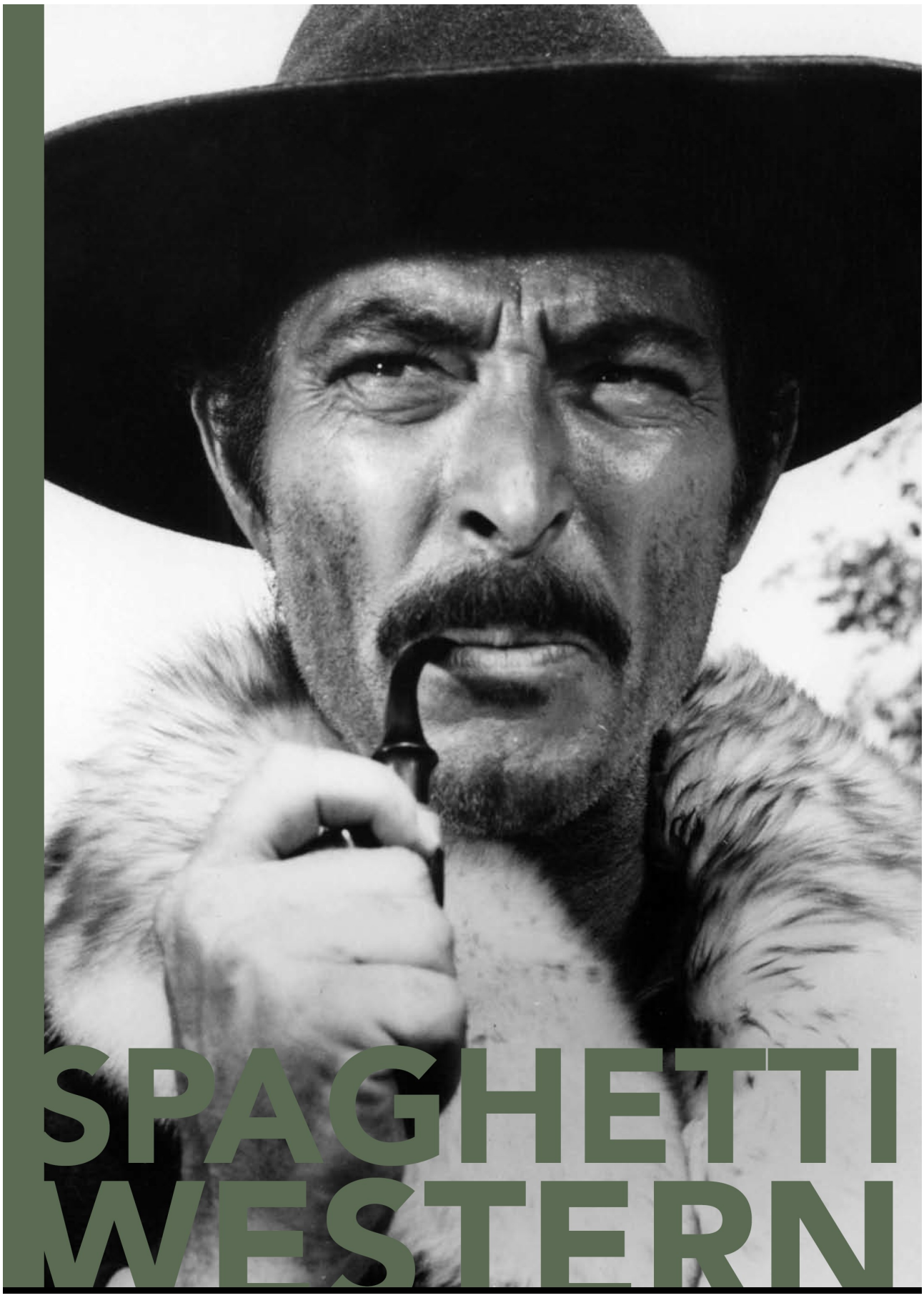


SPAGHETTI WESTERN

There can be few more tangible symbols of Italians' post-war engagement with transatlantic popular culture than the proliferation of home-grown western movies which began in the early 1960s, and persisted into the mid-1970s. This bastard cousin of Hollywood's hallowed foundation myth – now known the world over as the 'spaghetti' western – was from its inception a wilfully reactive film-making trend. Yet the Italian version is no subordinate clause, beholden to the syntax of US cinema. By their very nature as playfully trans-cultural undertakings, these films register a certain kind of 'Italian-ness': one within which Americana has of course become an ever-present factor, but also one which has taken possession of this iconography in a diverse, at times complex, dialogue. From the imitative to the iconoclastic, the pedestrian to the downright eccentric, the array of cultural reference points therein offers an intriguing glimpse into the transitional nature of Italy's popular culture in the 1960s.

One director above all others has become synonymous with the global spaghetti brand. The stylistic panache and sardonic irreverence of Sergio Leone have left an indelible mark upon global cinema, but the international visibility of this now-esteemed auteur has served to conceal the diversity of an amorphous collection of films. Leone's phenomenally successful western debut *Per un pugno di dollari/A Fistful of Dollars* (1964) was a decisive influence, but not the lone 'founding text'. Instead, numerous strands of popular culture converged within, and emanated from, this fascinating cinematic tangle (in this among other ways, the 'spaghetti' moniker seems symbolically apt). The whims of the market dictated an uneasy balance between repetition and innovation in rapidly-produced, overlapping cycles known locally as *filoni*; such was the incremental, formulaic nature of popular Italian film-making in this era.

The point can be illustrated by a mere smidgeon of the western *filone*'s vast scope (which totals between 450 and 500 films, depending on one's definitions). Many early contributions capitalized on Leone's success rather tentatively. *Una pistola per Ringo/A Pistol for Ringo* (Duccio Tessari, 1965) and *Johnny Oro/Ringo and His Golden Pistol* (Sergio Corbucci, 1966), for example, both present a curious network of citations, where direct references to such classic Hollywood westerns as *Shane* (George Stevens, 1953) rub shoulders uneasily with the cynicism and dry wit of the still nascent Italian version. An alternative trajectory saw Leone's archetypal 'servant of two masters' plot schema merge with influences from Italian horror in such brooding, nihilistic films as *Django* (Corbucci, 1966), *Se sei vivo, spara!/Django, Kill! (If You Live Shoot!)* (Giulio Questi, 1967), *Il grande Silenzio/The Great Silence* (Corbucci, 1968) and *Django il bastardo/Django the Bastard* (Sergio Garrone, 1969). The dismal vision of a corrupt, avaricious western society in these and other spaghettis in turn merged with Italy's contemporaneous political cinematic trends in a group of films espousing the radicalism of emergent countercultures: *El chuncho, quien sabe?/A Bullet for the General* (Damiano Damiani, 1966), *La resa dei conti/The Big Gundown* (Sergio Sollima, 1967), *Faccia a faccia/Face to Face* (Sollima, 1967) and *Vamos a matar, compañeros/Companeros* (Corbucci, 1970), to name but a few. This bleak social outlook continued in a

Left: *The Big Gundown/La resa dei conti,* P.E.A./RPC.

considerably more comic vein throughout the series of 'Sabata' and 'Sartana' films of the late 1960s and early 1970s, which themselves helped spawn the outright slapstick of *Lo chiamavano Trinità/My Name is Trinity* (Enzo Barboni, 1970). Finally, the Italian western's death-rattle was signalled by a return to horror-inflected intensity in such 'twilight' films as *Keoma* (Enzo G Castellari, 1976) and *Mannaja/A Man Called Blade* (Sergio Martino, 1977). If the selection of just one of Sergio Leone's films in this chapter raises an eyebrow, therefore, it is to be hoped that the reader will delight in the oft-overlooked breadth of artistic expression to be found in this much-loved *filone*.

Given this array of interlocking and somewhat nebulous variants, wherein lies the specifically 'Italian' nature of these films? What is it that puts spaghetti in the western? Certain stylistic features arise time and again, and can broadly be said to distinguish the Italian version from its Hollywood counterpart. The mischievously irreverent burlesque on show across the various adventures of Ringo, Sabata, Sartana and Trinity is a hallmark of the humour and raucousness pervading the popular output of Roman studios in this era. So too has the extravagant deployment of extreme close-ups and low-angle, deep-focus shots that characterizes some of the most accomplished Italian westerns embedded itself in the popular imagination. The instantly recognizable musical refrains of Ennio Morricone which punctuate so many spaghettis also give a clear indication that these films are culturally, as well as geographically, distant from Californian film-making practices prior to the late 1960s.

However, while searching for distinctive traits is a rewarding pursuit it can be a red herring. Perhaps the question should not be how the Italian western differs from the American 'original' so much as what it tells us about the ever-more globalized mores of the 1960s and 1970s. If this *filone* shows us anything, it is surely that the boundaries of post-war popular culture have become, in a variety of ways, increasingly blurred. It is commonplace to assert, for example, that the double-crossing, the cynical, world-weary antiheroes, the nihilistic world-view and the gleeful levels of sadistic violence that have contributed to the spaghetti western's enduring appeal amounted to a novel reworking of Hollywood's tired, monolithic founding myth. These features do indeed characterize many of the Italian films, but it would be misleading to view them in such binary terms. As any student of the American genre will confirm, the ever-changing western had been exploring its own ideological crises for years before the Italians twisted the knife. Just see *Vera Cruz* (Robert Aldrich, 1954), *Johnny Guitar* (Nicholas Ray, 1954), *Man of the West* (Anthony Mann, 1958) and John Ford's own unravelling of a nation's mythic past, *The Man Who Shot Liberty Valance* (1962), for a glimpse of how Hollywood's traditional emphasis on regenerative violence was becoming ever more problematic as the Cold War intensified. The Italian western is more appropriately viewed as a site of cultural exchange, which both exploited and exacerbated an already present sea-change in popular cinema and its patterns of consumption.

Ultimately, of course, spaghetti westerns are there to entertain, and in this purpose above all others they rarely disappoint. Only around one fifth were released outside Italy, and these were greeted overwhelmingly with hostility and bewilderment from critical establishments. Nevertheless, from the moment these films came into contact with the global marketplace, shoehorned into action double bills at grindhouses and fleapits around the world, enraptured audiences were taking ownership of this offbeat, droll approach to low-budget film-making. The numerous tributes to this *filone* throughout the work of such giants of contemporary independent cinema as Quentin Tarantino and Robert Rodriguez display such active celebration in its most culturally visible terms. Long since a behemoth of cult cinema and shorthand for laconic 'cool', the spaghetti western's legacy has entered the mainstream, and shows no sign of abating.

Austin Fisher

The Big Gundown

La resa dei conti

Studios:
Produzioni Europee Associati (PEA)
Rome Produzone Cinematografica
Tulio Demicheli PC

Director:
Sergio Sollima

Producer:
Alberto Grimaldi

Screenwriters:
Sergio Sollima
Sergio Donati (from a story by Franco Solinas and Fernando Morandi)

Cinematographer:
Carlo Carlini

Composer:
Ennio Morricone

Art Director:
Carlo Simi

Editor:
Gaby Peñalba

Duration:
111 minutes

Genre:
Western

Cast:
Lee Van Cleef
Tomas Milian
Walter Barnes

Year:
1967

Synopsis

Jonathan Corbett is a legendary former sheriff whose work has made Texas a more peaceful place. Brokston, a rich entrepreneur, pushes him to take on the job of Senator: after being elected Corbett will be able to facilitate Brokston's plan to construct a railway that runs all the way to Mexico and will make him even richer. As a final job, Corbett sets out to capture a peasant accused of raping and killing a young girl. The accused is Manuel 'Cuchillo' Sanchez, a Mexican peon who lives by his wits; a man with cat-like reflexes who is cunning and expert with a knife. The hunt for Cuchillo turns out to be harder than anticipated: Corbett comes close to capturing him several times, but Cuchillo always manages to find a way to escape. The chase becomes personal for Corbett, who follows Cuchillo out of his jurisdiction and into Mexico. Meanwhile, Brokston has decided to put an end to the hunt and unleashes his men, including the Prussian Baron Von Schulenberg, a crack shot. In the epic final duel, Corbett must decide which side to take…

Critique

La resa dei conti is the first of three spaghetti westerns directed by Sergio Sollima between 1967 and 1968 (the other two being *Faccia a faccia* in the same year, and *Corri uomo corri/Run, Man, Run* in 1968), at the height of the *filone*'s golden age. The film was developed from an original idea by Franco Solinas, and it gained enormous public success and some modest critical acclaim on its initial release. Like other 'political' Italian westerns, the film allegorizes the radicalism of the era, including the notion of conflict as the motor of change and a general 'Third Worldist' attitude.

The plot of *La resa dei conti* develops in a way typical of the thriller (a man assumed guilty, the search for evidence, the final resolution of the plot) but like many Italian westerns it also owes a lot to the picaresque tradition: in the contrast it presents between the privileged and the oppressed; in its tone combining farce and tragedy; and, above all, in the character of Cuchillo – one of the era's most effective dramatic archetypes. Cuchillo is played by Tomas Milian, an actor of Cuban origin until then largely known for his dramatic roles but who was to be a key character in Sollima's subsequent westerns and who would become the face of this *filone* in Italy. The character is down on his luck and prey to his own base instincts; forced into an existence somewhere between human and animal; egalitarian; able to evade his enemies through wit and disguise and not averse to double-crossing when he needs to; and yet endowed with an instinctive political consciousness ('The world is split into two parts', he says in the Italian language soundtrack; 'one half flees and the other half chases'). Lee Van Cleef's role as Jonathan Corbett is very similar to his portrayal of the infallible bounty killer Douglas Mortimer in *Per qualche dollaro in più/For a Few Dollars More*

(Sergio Leone, 1965). However, behind the impassive face of the gunslinger, Corbett from the outset adopts different guises to trap his foe (in the first scene we seem him pretend to befriend three criminals, before killing them). By the end he succeeds in effecting a change in his behaviour, which until then has involved a Manichean distinction between good and evil ('You thought I'd shoot first and then think. You were mistaken', he tells Brokston at the end of the film). The relationship between the two protagonists develops through unexpected parallels which lead to a very surprising ending. *La resa dei conti* can be seen as a portrayal of the period through the relationship between the two main characters, who, although apparently irreconcilable, are shown to have a similar attachment to iron moral principles, a rebelliousness in the face of authority, and the ability to wear disguises either to escape from justice or to uphold it personally.

[Spoiler alert]: The double-duel finale is highly memorable: in the first, Cuchillo confronts Brokston's son-in-law armed with his trusty knife while his rival wields a pistol; in the second, Corbett confronts the mercenary Baron Von Schulenberg in a classic depiction of the revenge of the dispossessed over the murky workings of power. The scene unfolds to the accompaniment of *The Verdict*, composed by Ennio Morricone after Beethoven's *Für Elise*. The piece, re-used by Quentin Tarantino in *Inglourious Basterds* (2009) in homage to one of his favourite films, alternates between the well-known melody by Beethoven and guitar arpeggios common to the emotional crescendos of Morricone's spaghetti western scores. The duel thus becomes an effective display of the *filone*'s combination of elements from different historical epochs: the re-use of images (the repertoire of standard western clichés) and of audio from the past (the European musical tradition) together create an innovative cinematographic style.

The vitality of the character of Cuchillo signals the gradual blending of the western *filone* with elements of comedy and farce, which contributed in subsequent years to its transformation and eventual extinction.

Mimmo Gianneri

A Bullet for the General

El chuncho, quien sabe?

Studio:
MCM

Director:
Damiano Damiani

Synopsis

Mysterious gringo Bill Tate ventures south of the border at the height of the Mexican Revolution. When his train is ambushed by bandits he befriends their leader – an exuberant outlaw by the name of Chuncho – and lends a hand in the group's insurrectionary activities. After they have carried out explosive assaults on government forts and liberated the town of San Miguel from its feudal thrall, Chuncho is faced with a tough choice: stay to defend San Miguel's desperate peasants from governmental reprisals or continue his gun-running to the mountain hideout of rebel guerrilla

Producer:
Bianco Manini

Screenwriters:
Franco Solinas
Salvatore Laurani

Cinematographer:
Antonio Secchi

Composer:
Luis Bacalov

Editor:
Renato Cinquini

Duration:
115 minutes

Genre:
Western

Cast:
Gian Maria Volonté
Lou Castel
Klaus Kinski

Year:
1966

leader General Elias? The gang, influenced by Tate, decide on the latter. After losing most of their number en route, Chuncho and Tate at last arrive at Elias's encampment. Here, Chuncho's dilemma between revolutionary commitment and mercenary opportunism intensifies as Tate's true purpose in Mexico reveals itself to the audience.

Critique

When questioned in later years, director Damiano Damiani would insist that this was no western but 'a film about the Mexican Revolution…it is clearly a political film and nothing else.' His analysis is flawed, the false dichotomy he constructs displaying nothing so much as the fallacy of authorial intent. It is certainly true that the narrative structure, characterization and didactic ideological positioning of *El chuncho, quien sabe?* place the film within the oeuvre of its famed Marxist screenwriter Franco Solinas (a close resemblance to the later *Queimada/Burn!*, Gillo Pontecorvo, 1969, in particular insisting that such an association be made). Damiani's comment, however, both disregards the extent to which his film is entwined with the conventions of the Hollywood genre, and overlooks the curious fusion of populism and revolutionary sentiment that characterizes his influential left-wing spaghetti western.

A Bullet for the General/El chuncho, quien sabe?, MCM.

A direct and confrontational appropriation of the Hollywood western's Cold War 'south of the border' format, *El chuncho, quien sabe?* delivers a firm rebuke to such films as *Vera Cruz* (Robert Aldrich, 1954) and *The Magnificent Seven* (John Sturges, 1960). While these movies used revolutionary Mexico to allegorize US interventionism in the Third World in affirmative terms, Damiani's film employs the same conceit while pouring scorn on that very ideology. The gringo adventurer in Mexico is no longer, as in the American films, a beneficent paladin come to right the wrongs of feudal injustice, but a distinctly shady and arrogant interloper.

The narrative thrust belongs to the Mexican bandit Chuncho, his ambiguous relationship with Bill Tate a catalyst for his gradual revolutionary awakening. To this end, the film-makers are purposeful in their manipulation of camerawork, *mise-en-scène* and musical refrains, incrementally leading the hero towards epiphany. Gian Maria Volonté's bipolar performance, meanwhile, effectively conveys the character's inner struggle: by turns uninquisitive exuberance and studied contemplation. This schizophrenia, indeed, is infused throughout the film, as formulaic action-packed western spectacle rubs shoulders with far-left didacticism. So we find a train ambush and a succession of thrilling, and increasingly explosive, fortress assaults spliced with ideological disquisitions lifted straight out of Frantz Fanon's seminal postcolonial tract, *The Wretched of the Earth* (1961). The episode in the rebel village of San Miguel in particular provides a studied revolutionary vignette, with the peasants violently rising up against the landowner Don Felipe and attempting to establish a new, egalitarian society. The single most memorable moment comes with Chuncho's final awakening, which affirms the righteousness of Third World resistance against the might of the West, or so the film-makers intended.

The result is an entertaining, intriguing, at times incoherent morass of mid-1960s political contradictions. If Solinas's meticulous adherence to Fanonist tenets is lost amidst the carnage, the contemporary message is at least clear enough and the film was genuinely influential. A number of leftist spaghetti westerns set in a similarly allegorical Mexican Revolution followed on its heels, most notably *Il mercenario/The Mercenary* (Sergio Corbucci, 1968), *Tepepa* (Giulio Petroni, 1968) and *Vamos a matar, compañeros/Companeros* (Corbucci, 1970). Moreover, that Damiani's film has since attained the status of cult classic becomes abundantly clear upon viewing Robert Rodriguez's spaghetti homage *Once Upon a Time in Mexico* (2003).

Austin Fisher

Day of Anger

I giorni dell'ira

Studios:
Sancrosiap
Corona Filmproduktion
KG Davina Film

Director:
Tonino Valerii

Producers:
Alfonso Sansone
Henryk Chrosicki (as Sansone and Chrosicky)

Screenwriters:
Ernesto Gastaldi
Renzo Genta
Tonino Valerii

Cinematographer:
Enzo Serafin

Composer:
Riz Ortolani

Art Director:
Carlo Simi

Editor:
Franco Fraticelli

Duration:
115 minutes

Genre:
Western

Cast:
Lee Van Cleef
Giuliano Gemma
Walter Rilla
Andrea Bosic

Year:
1967

Synopsis

Downtrodden town outcast Scott Mary, pushed around and belittled by the mean-spirited elders of Clifton, dreams of getting a pistol and commanding respect from his persecutors. When charismatic gunman Frank Talby rides into town he shows some kindness to the youngster and soon takes him on as a pupil/partner as he strives to obtain his own revenge on the same town elders. It transpires that these pillars of the community are not quite as honest and upstanding as they would appear and Talby sets about demanding the $50,000 from them which he is owed by their criminal associate, Wild Jack. Talby soon commands a position of wealth and power in the town but the elders are not ready to give up so easily. Meanwhile, young Scott has been transformed from town dogsbody to skilled gunman and, for him, nothing will be the same again. What unfolds is a morality tale of mixed loyalties, two mentors and a poisoned chalice; where Scott finds his revenge but loses his innocence.

Critique

In the United Kingdom and America, Lee Van Cleef was, and still is, a name synonymous with the spaghetti western. His narrow, piercing eyes and angular features, so familiar from Sergio Leone's massively popular 'Dollar' films, linked him forever with the *western all'italiana* and rekindled a fading career into an internationally-successful one. But in the domestic Italian market throughout the 1960s there was only one king of the western and that was local boy Giuliano Gemma. Of the fifteen most successful locally-made westerns released up to and including this one in 1967, an impressive nine of them featured Gemma's name above the marquee. So the teaming of the two stars in this film along with Leone protégé Tonino Valerii in the director's chair was something of a box-office dream team at the time. Thankfully, the combination works on film as well as on paper and *I giorni dell'ira* remains a fine example of all three men's work in the *filone* without necessarily challenging their very best.

The story is constructed around the familiar themes of a young man's journey under the influence of an older mentor until his inevitable questioning of the teacher's character forces a showdown. Our hero is seduced by the temptations of a darker path and ultimately has to choose between the two men to whom he owes the most: Talby, who taught him how to survive; and Murph (played by the outstanding German stage actor Walter Rilla), who taught him what to believe in. This dynamic is helped along by the fact that we are never quite sure how good or bad Talby is. Certainly in comparison to the prominent townsmen of Clifton he appears positively saintly but tensions build as the narrative unfolds and we learn just how far he will go to get what he believes he is due.

I giorni dell'ira benefits from a number of factors. The musical score from Riz Ortolani is one of the most memorable in the

filone, combining screaming brass, twanging Stratocaster and a driving rhythm. This rousing theme opens the film with a blast and maintains its hook throughout. There are also some excellent set pieces which finely balance tension and release, foremost of which are a brutal shootout between Talby and Wild Jack (played by the wonderfully craggy-faced Al Mulock) and a headlong duel on horseback featuring muzzle-loaded rifles, this time between Talby and a bounty killer (played by master-of-arms Benito Stefanelli). In addition, Valerii's direction is sound and well thought out throughout. Giuliano Gemma has stated that Valerii was a meticulous planner and set up all the camera framing himself, never leaving it to cinematographer Enzo Serafin. If so, it was time well spent on the director's part as the film is always visually engaging.

For the two main stars this film became something of a high water mark. If neither actor's best film in this *filone* it was one of their last before the general quality and popularity of their westerns began to diminish. Apart from the highly entertaining *Ehi amico… c'è Sabata, hai chiuso!/Sabata* (Gianfranco Parolini, 1969), it would be Van Cleef's last Italian western of real merit. Although Gemma would continue to make many successful movies it would be the last, outside of the occasional exception, of his serious westerns as he followed the industry's trend towards more light-hearted buddy westerns (for example *Amico, stammi lontano almeno un palmo/Ben and Charlie* (Michele Lupo 1972) *Vivi o, preferibilmente, morti/Alive or Preferably Dead* (Duccio Tessari, 1969)), a sub-*filone* he was very adept in but which never reached the heights of his earlier work.

I giorni dell'ira, if not outstanding in any area bar Ortolani's scorching theme tune, is consistently well-crafted and works on just about every level required to earn its place among the upper echelons of the western *filone*. It is a film which benefits from repeated viewings and cries out for a major DVD release.

Phil Hardcastle

Django

Studios:
BRC Produzione Film
Tecisa Film

Director:
Sergio Corbucci

Producers:
Manolo Bolognini
Sergio Corbucci

Screenwriters:
Bruno Corbucci
Sergio Corbucci

Synopsis

The film opens with the now-iconic image of Django dragging a coffin through mud-soaked terrain on the US-Mexico border. After our antihero rescues the beautiful Maria from bandits, he finds himself caught in the middle of a war between a group of KKK-styled vigilantes led by Major Jackson and a band of Mexican revolutionaries led by General Hugo Rodriguez. Setting up base in the local saloon run by downtrodden owner Nataniele, Django is soon forced to demonstrate exactly what it is that he keeps in that mysterious coffin, inevitably leaving a trail of death and destruction in his wake.

Critique

While not as financially successful or as critically acclaimed as Sergio Leone's *Per un pugno di dollari/A Fistful of Dollars* (1964), it

José Gutiérrez Maesso
Franco Rossetti
Piero Vivarelli

Cinematographer:
Enzo Barboni

Art Director:
Carlo Simi

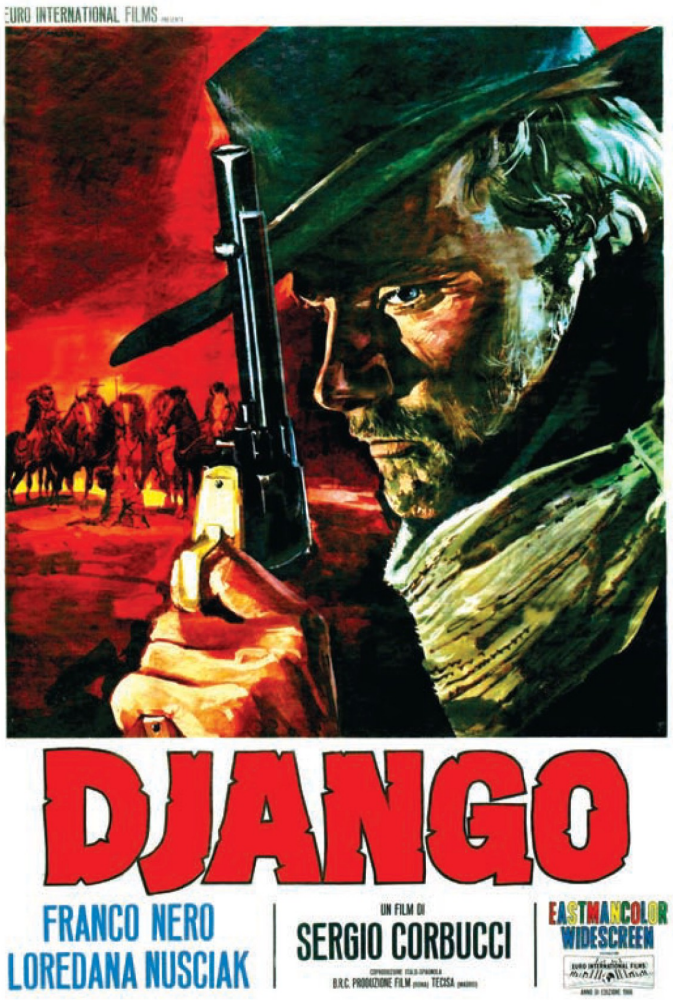
Editors:
Nino Baragli
Sergio Montanari

Duration:
93 minutes

Genre:
Western

Cast:
Franco Nero
José Bódalo
Eduardo Fajardo
Loredana Nusciak

Year:
1966



Django, BRC/Tesica.

is Sergio Corbucci's *Django* which is arguably the more influential and significant film for the development of the spaghetti western *filone*. Pioneering the dark, almost nihilistic tone which permeated the cycle in its early days, Corbucci saw *Django* as an 'anti-western' which would replace the iconic western landscape with mud and grit. The success of the film on its domestic release prompted at least 31 unofficial sequels produced in quick succession – the only official sequel, *Django 2: il grande ritorno*/*Django Strikes Again* (Nello Rossati, 1987), came much later – and this helped shape the distinctive Italian western tradition for years to come.

A variation on the 'servant of two masters' archetype, with Django playing off Major Jackson's men against the Mexican revolutionaries, the film allows star Franco Nero to establish the enigmatic persona with which he became forever associated. Ironically,

this role was originally to be played by Mark Damon – an actor who had earlier played *Johnny Oro/Ringo and his Golden Pistol* (1966) for Corbucci. Given *Django*'s tone of gothic horror, it is arguable whether it could have had the same impact without Nero's brooding performance at its core. As Corbucci said of his lead actor, 'John Ford has John Wayne, Sergio Leone has Clint Eastwood and I have Franco Nero.'

The film develops some of the narrative motifs which Corbucci had established in his earlier western *Minnesota Clay* (1964), such as the warring factions and a temporarily crippled hero, although they are here combined with a deep pessimism and a relish for almost comic sbook-style violence. These elements are, of course, part of the film's appeal – from the absurdly high body count to the gratuitous mud-wrestling sequence. Most notoriously, however, the ear slicing sequence which Quentin Tarantino has acknowledged as inspiration for *Reservoir Dogs* (1992) helped the film get banned in the United Kingdom until 1993.

The film has gone on to establish a fascinating trans-cultural afterlife, from its screening in Jamaican crime classic *The Harder They Come* (Perry Henzell, 1972) right up to the recent Takashi Miike tribute *Sukiyaki Western Django* (2007). Admittedly, however, some aspects of the film itself have not stood the test of time. In particular, the second half of the film is wildly uneven and lacklustre, especially after such a powerful opening 30 minutes. Furthermore, the English language dubbed dialogue often enters 'so bad it's good' territory with lines such as 'I'm glad I made you feel like a real woman.' Nevertheless, that central image of Django dragging a coffin through the mud has proven highly iconic and memorable, and the film fully deserves its status as a classic of this *filone*. So while it may lack the gravitas of Sergio Leone's best work, or the political nous of Sergio Sollima's oeuvre, *Django* still holds up as one of the most fascinating westerns ever produced.

Iain Robert Smith

Django, Kill! (If You Live Shoot!)

Se sei vivo, spara!

Studios:
GIA Cinematografica
Hispamer Film

Director:
Giulio Questi

Synopsis

During the American Civil War, a nameless half-Mexican outlaw ('The Stranger') and his gang ambush a Yankee patrol and steal a fortune in gold from them. Before he can divide the spoils, The Stranger is betrayed by one of his colleagues, who decides to keep all of the gold for his own faction, massacring The Stranger and his Mexican accomplices in the middle of the desert before heading to a nearby town. As night falls, The Stranger emerges, zombie-like, from the grave and is discovered by two Native Americans, who tend to his wounds and help him recover. Hell-bent on revenge, haunted by his violent past and driven by his lust for the gold, The Stranger follows Oaks' mob into town only to find their bodies hanging, lynched, in the main street, beginning a long and bloody

Producers:
Alex J Rascal (Alessandro Jacovoni)
Giulio Questi

Screenwriters:
Franco Arcalli
Benedetto Benedetti
Giulio Questi

Cinematographer:
Franco Delli Colli

Art Director:
José Luis Galicia
Jaime Pérez Cubero

Composer:
Ivan Vandor

Editor:
Franco Arcalli

Duration:
117 minutes

Genre:
Western

Cast:
Tomas Milian
Piero Lulli
Milo Quesada
Roberto Camardiel

Year:
1967

struggle for the gold with a corrupt storekeeper, the leader of the mob and a Mexican bandit and his gang of sadistic gauchos. A whirlwind of chaos, betrayal, torture and violence ensues as The Stranger seeks to reclaim the gold that is rightfully his…by any means necessary.

Critique

A soil-streaked claw bursting out of a dusty grave; a man being scalped in bloody extreme close-up; a teenage boy being gang-raped; a colony of blood-sucking vampire bats…at first glance the central motifs of the surreal *Se sei vivo, spara!* – Questi's first and only western – seem far more rooted in the Italian horror cycle than the films of the canonical Italian western directors, and it is often hyperbolized by cult film fans as 'the most violent' of its *filone*. While it is true that a handful of the film's violent scenes are a good deal more visceral than is the norm in the western cycle, in truth it is *Se sei vivo, spara!*'s ostentatious style rather than its level of violence that makes it so remarkable. Much of the action is shot in gaudy, disproportionate and often extreme close-up, with lingering facial shots of grotesque grins and lip-licking, sweaty sadists serving only to exaggerate the film's eerie and perverse atmosphere. Coupled with this overemphasis on stylized close-ups and bizarre framings is the jagged and disorienting editing style that it adopts during its key scenes. This is made nowhere more apparent than in The Stranger's numerous 'flashbacks', where staccato bursts of contrasting, unrelated and even upside-down shots are fired onto the screen: the effect is both disorienting and brutal, two effects which Questi – a noted Communist – purportedly wanted to inflict on his audience. His own comments in subsequent interviews actively encourage a political reading of the film, where the disorientating brutality of the acts it depicts can be seen to reflect his own experiences fighting against Fascist Blackshirts during World War Two.

This idea finds its shocking apotheosis in one of *Se sei vivo, spara!*'s climactic scenes where The Stranger rigs a horse with explosives and spurs it towards a suicide mission to destroy Zorro's (also black-shirted) gauchos. Rather than attempt to depict the detonation and subsequent carnage in realistic wide shot (an act that Questi's limited production budget would have struggled to achieve), the film instead conveys the violence through a rapid sequence of edits between shots of explosions, extreme close-ups of bloodied limbs, broken faces and dynamite – accompanied by screams and loud banging noises – before finishing on a low-angle extreme close-up of tin soldiers on a board being knocked over. Whether a conscious nod to Soviet montage directors or not, this extremely visible, confrontational style of editing is one of *Se sei vivo, spara!*'s most interesting facets.

Of course, with this marked emphasis on spectacle and formal experimentation comes the inevitable weakening of narrative cohesion common across the Italian *filone* cycles. The Stranger's quest for vengeance against Oaks is satisfied as early as the end of the film's first reel, and the plots and sub-plots which ensue

are convoluted and hard to follow amidst the battles and torture scenes that punctuate the film. But it is not from the conventional narrative norms of characterization, motivation and closure that *Se sei vivo, spara!*'s central pleasures are to be derived: besides its aerobic editing style and generic intertextuality, also noteworthy are the miniscule surrealist touches littered throughout the film. The naked boy standing in a windswept porch; the vampire bats crawling on the camera; the villain encased in molten gold; the alcoholic, abusive parrot in Zorro's lair…all work to reinforce the brutal, otherworldly atmosphere that makes the film stand out from its peers. When, at the end of the film, the traditional western 'ride into the sunset' is overshadowed by the spectacle of a boy and a girl contorting their faces with string and arguing over who is the ugliest, this comes as absolutely no surprise, for *Se sei vivo, spara!*'s central achievement is the way in which its unusual visual style makes brutally apparent the ugliness of the world depicted.

Robbie Edmonstone

Face to Face

Faccia a faccia

Studios:
Produzioni Europee Associati (PEA)
Arturo González Producciones Cinematográficas

Director:
Sergio Sollima

Producers:
Arturo González
Alberto Grimaldi

Screenwriters:
Sergio Donati, Sergio Sollima

Cinematographers:
Emilio Foriscot, Rafael Pacheco

Composer:
Ennio Morricone

Art Director:
Carlo Simi

Editor:
Eugenio Alabiso

Synopsis

Liberal-minded New England professor Brad Fletcher quits his university job and heads west for health reasons. Upon his arrival in Texas, he is abducted by notorious bandit Beauregard Bennett, and comes face to face with the violent struggle for survival which defines the outlaw's life. As the two men grow closer, Professor Fletcher's compassionate worldview is increasingly undermined as he himself becomes 'educated' by the harsh realities of the Wild West and joins Bennett's gang. Infiltrated by Pinkerton Agent Charlie Siringo, the gang arrives in the mountain community of Puerto del Fuego, where Fletcher gradually comes to realize his own power and takes control. Bennett becomes ever more circumspect, while Fletcher descends into megalomania and the authorities vow to eradicate the outlaws altogether. As a posse of vigilantes sets out to attack the commune, the social conflict between the law and the bandits, and the personal one between Fletcher, Bennett and Siringo, draw to their explosive finales.

Critique

At first glance, *Faccia a faccia* is an anomaly amongst spaghetti westerns. Loquaciously philosophical and contemplative, Sergio Sollima's second foray in this popular *filone* is distinctive and eccentric in equal measure. This is not to say that the film is a total departure from its industrial norms; more that it uses pre-existing strands of westerns both Hollywood and spaghetti, deploying them to novel, and ostensibly incongruous, political ends. Sollima intended that this tale of a good man turned power-crazed killer should dramatize the dangerously seductive nature of fascist brutality, which the director had experienced firsthand when serving in the wartime Resistance.

Duration:
111 minutes

Genre:
Western

Cast:
Gian Maria Volonté, Tomas Milian, William Berger, Jolanda Modio

Year:
1967

The urbane easterner becoming revitalized by the wilderness out west is a narrative device as old as the hills (Owen Wister's novel *The Virginian* kick-started the cinematic western with precisely this trope in 1902), but Professor Fletcher's virile awakening is altogether more sinister: cowboy boots swapped for jackboots, if you will. Themes of inner tension and latent power within the individual are introduced as key components before the opening credits have even rolled, when Fletcher delivers a parting lecture to his class, and this sets the tone of the morality tale to come. His is a decidedly Nietzschean transformation, as his liberal humanitarian outlook is gradually surpassed by a brutal self-serving *realpolitik* ('What is surprising is that a man like me can remain all those years watching life as a spectator before he discovered the force that was in him'). The Professor's meticulous and intellectual application of brute force is memorably encapsulated as he tortures a bound lawman while calmly expounding his 'philosophy of violence': 'One violent man is an outlaw; a hundred violent men are a gang; a hundred thousand, an army. This is the point: beyond the confines of individual violence, which is criminal, one can reach the violence of the masses, which is history!'

That violence, avarice and self-preservation hide behind civilized appearances is a recurrent spaghetti-western notion: one which *Faccia a faccia* inherits and explores in unusually philosophical depth. If this film offers a warning about the monsters that lurk beneath the façade of propriety, however, the diabolical transformation it depicts is also exhilarating. Coupled with the political admonition, there is ambiguity surrounding Brad Fletcher's awakening, which casts doubt upon the overall effectiveness of the intended message: the morally-upstanding Brad is weak, sickly, cowardly and sexually repressed; the monster, strong, brave and virile. This is entirely in keeping with the western's traditional emphasis on masculine vitality and regenerative violence. If Sollima indeed set out to condemn the seductive nature of brutality and power, he chose an odd medium.

The central character's Jekyll-and-Hyde transformation therefore provides the film with its key, if convoluted, political purpose; but Sollima also inserts a fair dose of modish radical sentiment, which bestows the story with a curious, and inadvertent, prescience. This depiction of a corrupted, fascistic academic authority figure takes on a singularly contemporary resonance when one considers that the Italian student demonstrations were erupting at precisely the time of *Faccia a faccia*'s release. At this seminal cultural moment, as Italy's post-war generation gap was erupting into open confrontation, the conspicuously long-haired dropout Beauregard Bennett represents an alternative social vision to a vicious officialdom. His gang and their non-conformist mountain refuge constitute a hippie commune way out west, a good three years before New Hollywood cottoned on with Arthur Penn's *Little Big Man* (1970).

Greeted with a mixture of bemusement and indifference upon its international release, *Faccia a faccia* remains a spaghetti oddity, if only for its purposeful denial of action-packed spectacle. Such an idiosyncratic film was never going to spawn a glut of imitations. It displays instead this *filone*'s ability to surprise, as well as to entertain.

Austin Fisher

A Fistful of Dollars

Per un pugno di dollari

Studios:
Constantin Film Produktion
Jolly Film
Ocean Films

Director:
Bob Robertson (Sergio Leone)

Producers:
Harry Colombo (Arrigo Colombo)
George Papi (Giorgio Papi)

Screenwriters:
A Bonzzoni
Víctor Andrés Catena
Sergio Leone

Cinematographer:
Jack Dalmas (Massimo Dallamano)

Art Director:
Charles Simons (Carlo Simi)

Composer:
Dan Savio (Ennio Morricone)

Editor:
Bob Quintle (Roberto Cinquini)

Duration:
99 minutes

Genre:
Western

Cast:
Clint Eastwood
Johnny Wels (Gian Maria Volonté)
Marianne Koch
José Calvo

Year:
1964

Synopsis

A stranger in a poncho rides on a mule into the small town of San Miguel, just south of the Mexican-American border. He learns from the bartender Silvanito that the town is being run by two rival gangs – the American Baxters (gunrunners) and the Mexican Rojos (liquor smugglers). First selling his services to the Rojos, then the Baxters, the stranger plays one side against the other and profits from both, to the delight of coffin-maker Piripero. He witnesses Ramon Rojo ruthlessly stealing a shipment of gold from the Federales, at the Rio Bravo canyon. Returning to San Miguel, the stranger secretly rescues a Mexican family from the Rojos – Marisol, Julian and little Jesus – but is discovered and savagely beaten. After he has managed to escape in a coffin, and after the furious Rojos have burnt down the Baxter house, massacring the entire family, the stranger returns to town, heralding his arrival with a dynamite explosion, and has a shootout with the Rojos in the main square. In the final duel, with Colt 45 versus Winchester rifle, there is more than a fistful of dollars at stake.

Critique

Originally filmed under the title *The Magnificent Stranger* (*The Magnificent Seven*, John Sturges, 1960, having been a big box-office hit in Italy), this was not the first of the Italian or Italian-Spanish westerns – Sergio Leone reckoned it was the twenty-fifth; it depends how you count – but earlier ones, on the whole, had tended to be pale imitations of Hollywood 'B' or TV westerns. Hollywood was producing fewer and fewer feature westerns, while Italian audiences, especially in the South, were still as keen as ever on seeing them. *Per un pugno di dollari* brought together, for the first time, director Leone, production designer Carlo Simi, and composer Ennio Morricone, each making a distinctive contribution to the 'Italianizing' of the western: the south-western locale (really Spain – near Madrid and in Almería); the larger-than-life interiors; the raucous musical score (Fender Stratocaster guitar, whipcracks, bells, yelling chorus, drum-beats and whistles); the blend of convincingly grungy detail and mythic core; the rhetorical use of the visual 'codes' of the Hollywood western; references to hallowed moments from favourite western movies – in this case *Shane* (George Stevens, 1953), *Warlock* (Edward Dmytryk, 1959) and Budd Boetticher's Ranown cycle; the promotion of delinquent and streetwise western characters from background to foreground; an obsession with dollars; and the use of distancing devices such as irony, gallows humour, and the voice of a character saying 'it's like playing cowboys and Indians'.

As the Italian novelist Alberto Moravia was to put it: '…the Hollywood western was born from a myth; the Italian one is born from a myth about a myth…The dominant theme is the scramble for money…[which] contrasts radically with the grand settings and epic tone of the western genre.' Sergio Leone wanted to keep his

A Fistful of Dollars/Per un pugno di dollari, Jolly/Constantin/Ocean.

'fairytale for grown-ups' as realistic (by which he meant cynical) as possible, putting an emphasis on the unpredictable, pumping up 'the spectacle' (as far as the low budget would allow) and creating a hero more in tune with the times than the ageing stars who still dominated the Hollywood product. So the fourth key individual in the mix was Clint Eastwood, cast as the stranger – called 'Joe' (in the script) or 'The Man With No Name' (on the American posters). Eastwood had appeared in ten features between 1955 and 1958, usually as a walk-on, before featuring as the second lead in the long-running CBS television series *Rawhide*. He was cast in *Pugno* – after James Coburn, Charles Bronson and others had turned the part down – as the result of a viewing in Rome of Episode 91 of *Rawhide*.

Per un pugno di dollari was loosely based on Akira Kurosawa's samurai film *Yojimbo/The Bodyguard* (1961), which Leone had seen in Rome in autumn 1963. *The Magnificent Seven*, too, had been based on a Kurosawa original. But this time, someone forgot to clear the rights and the film became the subject of a legal battle resulting in Kurosawa being awarded distribution rights in the Far East – where the film was a huge success – plus a slice of the world-wide profits. Another result was delayed distribution in America. Apart from the Rio Bravo canyon sequence and a cemetery gun battle with decoy corpses, the main differences between *Pugno* and *Yojimbo* include the absence in *Pugno* of reference to any 'outside world'; the comic-book characterization of the laid-back

stranger, with his stubble and cigar; and the story's complete indifference to law (or indeed to any form of legitimate authority). *Pugno* also ignores any 'civilizing' implications of settlement. In San Miguel, there is no sense of progress, resource or development. This, too, was a radical departure from the traditional western.

Sergio Leone called this his first 'personal film'. It made Clint Eastwood a superstar in Europe, and it relaunched and redefined the entire Italian western craze that would last until the early 1970s. In that sense, *Per un pugno di dollari* really WAS the first of the Italian westerns.

Christopher Frayling

Keoma

Studio:
Uranos Cinematografica

Director:
Enzo G Castellari

Producer:
Manolo Bolognini

Screenwriters:
Enzo G Castellari
Nico Ducci
George Eastman
Mino Roli

Cinematographer:
Aiace Parolin

Art Director:
Carlo Simi

Editor:
Gianfranco Amicucci

Duration:
101 minutes

Genre:
Western

Cast:
Franco Nero
William Berger
Olga Karlatos
Donald O'Brien

Year:
1976

Synopsis

On his return from fighting in the Civil War, the mixed-race Keoma discovers that his home town is now under the control of the merciless Caldwell. The town is ravaged by the plague and, to make matters worse, Caldwell and his gang of ex-soldiers are forcing inhabitants to move into an abandoned mine shaft with no hope of medical attention. Defying Caldwell's men by rescuing the pregnant Lisa from this fate, Keoma soon discovers that even his own half-brothers are collaborators. Dejected, he joins forces with the town drunk George and the local doctor to concoct a plan to secure medical supplies and finally free the local people from the tyrannical rule of Caldwell.

Critique

Often described as a twilight spaghetti western, *Keoma* functions as an elegy to the *filone* which director Enzo Castellari and star Franco Nero so loved. Coming at the tail end of the cycle, the film is infused with a mournful, poetic quality far removed from the crude excesses of its forebears. Indeed, this was to be one of the last attempts to make a serious spaghetti western at a time when the *filone* had descended into self-parody. Released in the United States under the title *Django Rides Again*, the film marks the return to the western of Franco Nero: a fact alluded to in a reflexive opening sequence which pointedly asks 'Why did you come back?' As if to answer, the film then plays out like a greatest-hits package from those early spaghetti westerns, adapting and reworking many of the clichés of the cycle, from the lone hero who arrives in a deserted town, through to the alcoholic gunslinger who is forced to redeem himself.

Keoma, therefore, returns the *filone* to its individualist roots, after a shift towards more Marxist communitarian values in the political westerns of the late 1960s and early 1970s. As Keoma himself declares, 'I have to do it alone because I am alone.' This allows Franco Nero, bearded and dishevelled in the title role, to recapture some of that enigmatic outsider quality which so defined

his portrayal of Django ten years earlier. The cross-fertilization with the US western is also very much in evidence with Enzo Castellari's use of slow-motion paying an obvious debt to the films of Sam Peckinpah – a body of work which was, in turn, deeply influenced by the early spaghetti westerns. In addition, Castellari lends some gravitas to these familiar generic tropes with repeated allusions towards biblical stories and contemporaneous civil rights struggles.

Nevertheless, *Keoma* is not without its problems. Most notoriously, the score by the De Angelis brothers acts as an awkwardly self-conscious Greek chorus to proceedings – with two folk singers narrating the action in painfully literal terms. Inspired by the Leonard Cohen score for *McCabe and Mrs Miller* (Robert Altman, 1971), this is one innovation that sadly does not succeed and it detracts from some otherwise very effective set pieces. Furthermore, the po-faced seriousness of the treatment acts in tension with some of the more trashy elements of the action, unfortunately resulting in some moments of pure naive camp.

Ultimately, the film ends with an explosive confrontation and Keoma celebrating the birth of a newborn baby. He defiantly declares that this child cannot die because 'a man who is free never dies.' Concluding the film's allegorical treatment of life and death, this is perhaps Keoma's most enduring statement regarding the spaghetti western. This *filone* may have been on its last legs in its current incarnation, but it would still live on. The spaghetti western is dead. Long live the spaghetti western.

Iain Robert Smith

Man Called Blade

Mannaja

Studio:
Devon Film

Director:
Sergio Martino

Producer:
Luciano Martino

Screenwriters:
Sauro Scavolini
Sergio Martino

Cinematographer:
Federico Zanni

Synopsis

In the American Old West, an axe-wielding mercenary known only as 'Blade' chases and apprehends a wanted outlaw named Burt Craven. Blade attempts to collect his bounty from Suttonville, a lawless mining town dominated by the wheelchair-bound owner of the mine and his sadistic henchman. After winning $5,000 from Voller in a card game, Blade frees Craven and offers his services to McGowan, promising to help defend his assets for a wage. McGowan is not interested, however, and Voller's mob try to run Blade out of town, beating him up then triggering a rockslide that crushes him as he rides through a canyon. Left to die in the rubble, Blade is found by the members of a passing burlesque troupe and is nursed back to health by one of the dancing girls, whom he befriends. Hiding with the troupe, Blade returns to Suttonville to confront the treacherous Voller, who unbeknownst to McGowan has secretly been looting silver from the mine and has even kidnapped McGowan's daughter to claim ransom money from him. Blade sets out to rescue the girl but, as the bodies pile up and the ensuing war with Voller speeds towards its bloody climax, a more deep-rooted and personal quest for vengeance against McGowan emerges…

Composers:
Guido and Maurizio De Angelis

Editor:
Eugenio Alabiso

Duration:
92 minutes

Genre:
Western

Cast:
Maurizio Merli
John Steiner
Sonja Jeannine
Donald O'Brien

Year:
1977

Critique

Released in 1977, well after the popularity of the Italian western had begun to dwindle, *Mannaja* nonetheless represents a rare creative apex for the cycle, borne largely from the constant commercial pressure to identify, exploit and repackage successful filmic formulae that shaped Italy's *filone* cycles. The result is a glorious cinematic mishmash that draws from a number of commercially-successful *filoni* in an attempt to maximize its box-office returns. *Mannaja* teams one of the *giallo* thriller's most prolific directors (Sergio Martino) with one of the *poliziottesco* cop drama's key leading men (Maurizio Merli) and translates a fairly hackneyed western revenge plot into something far more interesting via a myriad of intertextual borrowings. Alongside the usual guns, girls and gringos, the film is peppered with horror-film motifs (eerie, fog-strewn swamps, devil dogs, severed limbs, gore and eye mutilation), chase sequences, a tree-hugging eco-western subplot and heavy religious allegory (the father and the son, resurrection from a cave, betrayal by a 'Judas'), all mixed in with a smattering of high camp (mud wrestling, burlesque dance sequences, an effete German villain). That all of this is flamboyantly accompanied by a soundtrack that veers unpredictably between Italian western ballads, contemporary pop songs, synth-led horror motifs and 1970s prog rock is no surprise, for *Mannaja* is truly the hybrid western *par excellence*.

Yet the film's real triumph is that it somehow manages to be more than the sum of its many disparate parts: Merli's *Dirty Harry*-esque tough cop transposes quite smoothly from the *poliziottesco* to the western and he fixates throughout, typically dominating the screen in tight facial close-up, his hirsute Mediterranean machismo perfectly offset by the sneering Teutonic camp of John Steiner's Voller. When, in one of the film's key scenes, the villain buries Blade up to his neck in sand, pins his eyelids open and leaves him gazing into the burning midday sun, the effect is profoundly disturbing. But this is just one of the many emotions that Martino's relentlessly playful film elicits; equally evocative is the mood of gallows humour that permeates, most notably in a central scene where a full-on burlesque song-and-dance sequence is intercut with a sequence depicting Voller's men cruelly butchering innocent civilians in a stagecoach. As the music from the dance troupe bleeds across both scenes, shots of bodies being riddled with bullets are accompanied by the whoops and cheers of the burlesque audience, with slow-motion shots of the massacre vying with fetishistic close-ups of dancing leather boots, frilly knickers and makeup-caked faces. Furthermore, as if such an alignment of extreme violence and entertainment – perhaps the two *modus operandi* of the *filone* – was not enough, by cutting together close-ups of boots and horses' hooves, red garter pom-poms and bloody bullet wounds from the two spaces, the film actively encourages its audience to identify links between the two. The lesson is clear: in the hands of the Italian directors, violence in the Old West is stripped of all the historical and ideo-

logical importance that lent it such symbolic force in the classical Hollywood western, replaced instead by the showy, burlesque brutality epitomized by scenes such as this. Though far from being an archetypal Italian western like the films of Leone, Corbucci and Sollima, *Mannaja*'s heady medley of violence, spectacle and genre makes it the perfect entry-point to a wider appreciation of the Italian *filone*.

Robbie Edmonstone

My Name is Trinity

Lo chiamavano Trinità…

Studio:
West Film

Director:
EB Clucher (Enzo Barboni)

Producers:
Joseph E Levine
Donald Taylor
Italo Zingarelli
Roberto Palaggi

Screenwriter:
EB Clucher (Enzo Barboni)

Cinematographer:
Aldo Giordani

Art Director:
Enzo Bulgarelli

Editor:
Giampiero Giunti

Composer:
Franco Micalizzi

Duration:
106 minutes

Genre:
Western

Synopsis

A handsome, but bedraggled, young man lazily journeys across the wilderness on a horse-drawn travois. Arriving at a stagecoach station he has a copious meal. His reputation as the fast-shooting Trinity, the 'Right Hand of the Devil', enables him to seize an injured Mexican prisoner from a couple of bounty hunters, whom he then nonchalantly kills without seeming to aim. He transports the Mexican to a small town where he observes the sheriff effortlessly killing three men single-handed in a gun fight. This huge, bad-tempered man is revealed to be Trinity's estranged brother Bambino, who is faking the position of lawman, while in fact he is a horse-thief on the run. Trinity and Bambino form an awkward, temporary alliance to defend some peace-loving Mormons from two menacing factions: a group of wild Mexicans led by Mezcal; and an acquisitive landowner Major Harriman, who covets their terrain.

Critique

The spaghetti western had reached its peak in terms of annual turnover in 1968, and an innovative approach was needed to refresh this *filone*. A waning genre will often try a new approach by parodying itself or by blending with other genres. In the case of *Lo chiamavano Trinità…*, the revitalized format was a mixture of slapstick comedy, spaghetti western violence and a traditional western theme of outsiders coming to the aid of a community, as found in *Shane* (George Stevens, 1953) and *The Magnificent Seven* (John Sturges, 1960). The building of the Mormon settlement and the fight with Harriman's men also have resonances with the barn-raising scene from *Seven Brides for Seven Brothers* (Stanley Donen, 1954). The contemptuous undermining of the moral authority of the powers of law enforcement, the cynical financial motivation of the heroes and the rich and powerful tyrant controlling the town are plot continuities from previous spaghetti westerns. However, *Lo chiamavano Trinità…* is seen as the start of a further sub-*filone*, using the formula of brawls and coarse visual humour. This category is sometimes called the *fagioli* (beans) western, and aspects of it were subsequently borrowed by Hollywood in *Blazing Saddles* (Mel Brooks, 1974).

Cast:
Terence Hill (Mario Girotti)
Bud Spencer (Carlo Pedersoli)
Steffen Zacharias
Dan Sturkie
Farley Granger

Year:
1970

The film was one of many to combine the comic forces of the blue-eyed, good-looking matinée idol Mario Girotti and the former swimming champion Carlo Pedersoli, in their Anglicized personas as Terence Hill and Bud Spencer. Here they are presented not as the ideal American heroes but as crude, lazy, unreliable, unwashed and unshaven antiheroes, with the saving grace of possessing kind hearts. The character of Trinity is a mixture of many elements. His footloose, roguish, deceitful nature as a womanizer and glutton resembles the protagonist of Charles de Coster's novel *The Legend of Thyl Ulenspiegel* (1867). His ultimately kind-hearted personality, with his propensity for helping the underdog, echoes Robin Hood, the Scarlet Pimpernel or Zorro. There is also a very strong influence from the *commedia dell'arte*, with Trinity in the role of Harlequin, the acrobatic scamp who was both childlike and amorous.

The largely visual humour includes scenes of eating in a gross style and extraordinary feats of fighting. Trinity demonstrates almost superhuman powers with the gun, while his 'baby' brother displays enough strength to defeat hordes of adversaries at once. However, the violence is more comic-book than realistic and as well as spectacular displays of shooting, there is a magnificent climactic fist-fight. The elaborate fight scenes were the result of the Italian stuntmen's years of experience with saloon fights in previous spaghetti westerns. The brothers recall Laurel and Hardy in *Way Out West* (James W Horne, 1937) or the Hollywood slapstick of the Mack Sennett era, and are contrasted in size and personality: one slim, attractive and carefree; the other fat, ugly and irritable.

Lo chiamavano Trinità… was the Italian film with the highest number of cinema viewers in Italy until 1986 and its comedic aspect became the profitable way forward for the spaghetti western. Hill and Spencer continued to be popular throughout the 1980s and 1990s, with films such as *Miami Supercops* (Bruno Corbucci, 1985) and *Botte di Natale/The Fight Before Christmas* (Terence Hill, 1994).

Eleanor Andrews

Ringo and His Golden Pistol

Johnny Oro

Studio/Distributor:
Sanson-Film

Director:
Sergio Corbucci

Synopsis

Johnny, a bounty hunter nicknamed Ringo, arrives at a small Mexican town where a forced wedding between Paco Perez and a local woman, Manuela, is taking place. In a showdown outside the church, Ringo kills the Perez brothers but spares the youngest, Juanito, who has no 'price on his head'. Ringo's passion for gold seems to be the motivating factor for all his actions. In Coldstone, a small town on the other side of the border, Sheriff Bill throws out of the saloon the rowdy Apache chief Sebastian. Juanito, determined to extract revenge, kills Manuela and forges an alliance with

Producer:
Joseph Fryd

Screenwriters:
Adriano Bolzoni
Franco Rossetti

Cinematographer:
Riccardo Pallotini

Art Director:
Carlo Simi

Editor:
Otello Colangeli

Composer:
Carlo Savina

Duration:
87 minutes

Genre:
Western

Cast:
Mark Damon, Valeria Fabrizi, Franco De Rosa, Etore Manni

Year:
1966

Sebastian's Apaches. Ringo, ambushed by members of the Perez gang, blows them up with a makeshift grenade but is sentenced to five days imprisonment by the over-scrupulous Bill. Juanito, now leading a formidable force of Mexican outlaws and Apaches, demands that Ringo is handed over to him or he will attack the town. This is rejected by Bill who places Ringo under his protection. The saloon owner Gilmore, who has traded in whisky and arms with the Apaches, fails to strike his own deal with Juanito and Sebastian. An exodus ensues leaving Bill, Matt (an old man who is a permanent resident of the jail), Jane, Stan and Ringo as the sole defenders of Coldstone.

Critique

Spaghetti westerns almost always involve a fine balance between mischievous playfulness and deadly seriousness. In that respect *Johnny Oro* offers clear insights into Corbucci's formative approach to the *filone*. In his third western, as the often anarchic directorial style becomes more assured, playfulness permeates not only the film's narrative but also its self reflexive employment of formal conventions. While capitalizing, at least with the English title, on international familiarity with a mythical western character (through 1950s films such as *Gunfight at the OK Corral,* John Sturges, 1957; the 1959–60 American television series *Johnny Ringo;* and Duccio Tessari's 1965 Italian western *Una pistola per Ringo/A Pistol for Ringo*), Corbucci's Ringo is a peculiar appropriation of that figure.

His real name, Johnny Artemidoro Jefferson Gonzales, sounds, as his jail mate Matt observes, 'half Mexican and half American' and it is this hybrid identity (typical of many of the spaghetti heroes) that makes the liminal space of the border his natural habitat. Despite his ceaseless mobility between cultures, Ringo is a perennial outsider, belonging nowhere and cropping up everywhere, an ambiguous centre of the profoundly relational narrative strands of the film. The rigid binary opposites of the traditional western become dynamic relationships in *Johnny Oro*: Mexico and the US; Gilmore and the Apaches; the Law and the outlaws; Bill and Jane who wants to move the family from Coldstone to civilized Boston Gilmore who lusts after Margie who loves Ringo. At the heart of all these fluid relationships, with uncertain boundaries and borders, lies, as in all westerns, the hero, or, to be precise, gold because Johnny is after all 'Oro'.

It is the values of the hero that in the traditional western reconcile the crucial ideological binaries and provide the film with its anxiously- and precariously-achieved coherence. But for Ringo the only value is gold; as the ballad of the Italian-language credits sequence explains: 'love has no importance to Johnny Oro; his only love is gold'. The dubbed English version of the song adds detail to the second part of the verse: 'His only love the power and glitter of gold.' This, I would suggest, holds the key to Corbucci's approach to the western *filone*. On the one hand Ringo, the ultimate spaghetti hero, is pure power, placing himself beyond

and above any form of social interaction in the same way that gold guarantees but also eludes any monetary transaction. In that respect Ringo is the hyperbolic and hyper-masculine version of all western heroes.

But such exaggerated and solitary devotion to power points to an equally hyperbolic underlying narcissism. The opening shot of the film, with Ringo dominating the frame in his immaculate black clothes, his perfect moustache and his golden pistol, strongly suggests that the real power of the character lies in the image, in his glittery golden looks. In fact 'looking good' becomes the ultimate value in Corbucci's formal system. The film uses camera movement, frame composition and shifts in focus to expressively articulate the fluid relationships that inform its narrative. A clear example is the opening shot where the camera juxtaposes the lush (and rather Mediterranean-looking) landscape from which Ringo emerges to the stark, dusty, empty streets of the Mexican town. A recurring visual motif in the film is placing Ringo in a shared frame with other characters (Gilmore, Matt, Juanito), constructing a hierarchical relationship through contrasts in lighting or by a focus pull. There are no ideological values informing those hierarchies but simply 'looks' – whatever and whoever looks good is good. As Ringo says about his golden pistol, 'the more I shoot it the prettier it gets.'

There is no moral centre in Corbucci's cinema and there is no rational justification of narrative development and resolution. Events are justified purely in terms of their value as audio-visual spectacle. The finale of *Johnny Oro* is the obvious case **[spoiler alert]**: The defence of Coldstone leads to its destruction but yields a reward for Ringo, who then returns it in order to rebuild the town. The narrative cycle is complete but also pointless and any logical explanation of the resolution is consumed by the pleasures of the pyrotechnics of destruction and the film appropriately ends with images of the raging flames. Corbucci's 'faith in the image' and commitment to good looks deprive him of a coherent system of ideological values, leading to criticisms of his work as 'disorderly', 'anarchic' and 'chaotic'. However, the lack of coherence is also creative liberation and *Johnny Oro* offers many instances of pure audio-visual joy and overall a celebration of playful cinematic inventiveness.

Dimitris Eleftheriotis

Sabata

Ehi amico… c'è Sabata, hai chiuso!

Studio:
Produzioni Europee Associati (PEA)

Director:
Frank Kramer (Gianfranco Parolini)

Producer:
Alberto Grimaldi

Screenwriters:
Renato Izzo
Gianfranco Parolini

Cinematographer:
Sandro Mancori

Composer:
Marcello Giombini

Editor:
Edmondo Lozzi

Art Director:
Carlo Simi

Duration:
106 minutes

Genre:
Western

Cast:
Lee Van Cleef
William Berger
Franco Ressel

Year:
1969

Synopsis

Daugherty City, Texas: a criminal gang steals $100,000 of army money from the bank, killing all the soldiers left on guard. Passing gunman Sabata tracks down and apprehends the thieves with relative ease, thanks to his sharp wits, superior marksmanship and formidable arsenal of weapons. He then discovers the heist was organized by local dignitaries, led by businessman Stengel, who are playing for much higher stakes. Backed up by the town drunk Carrincha and his mute Native American friend Alley Cat, Sabata engages in a war of nerves with Stengel, alternately helped and hindered by the enigmatic Banjo, a figure from his past.

Critique

Sabata is one of the best-known carnivalesque or 'circus' westerns, a sub-*filone* that highlights acrobatics, slapstick and gadget-based action rather than sustained tension, excitement or indeed narrative momentum. The film also foregrounds its clichéd narrative and visual devices, opening with dark deeds on a stormy night, just as a mysterious stranger rides into town, and finishing with stolen banknotes scattered in the breeze. The Italian title (which translates as 'Hey, amigo… it's Sabata, you're finished!') could be interpreted as a self-referential joke, reducing the Italian western to its basic components: the eponymous hero – or antihero – arrives and all resistance will fall in his wake. With the outcome a foregone conclusion, it seems the ride should be as enjoyable or playful as possible.

Sabata is not so much lightweight as deliberately inconsequential, its narrative and characters mere props in a gaudy sideshow. Carrincha's brief meditation on the value of warfare and military honours is no more than a throwaway aside as he scrounges for booze money. Sabata is pitted against crooked capitalists who stole army money to buy land through which the advancing railroad must pass; this is a clear lift from *C'era una volta il West/ Once Upon a Time in the West* (Sergio Leone, 1968), released nine months earlier, which, in turn, draws directly from the Hollywood western *Johnny Guitar* (Nicholas Ray, 1954) and more generally from the genre's time-honoured ambivalence towards the coming of modern civilization and associated industrial and economic transformation.

Gianfranco Parolini's direction makes heavy use of obtrusive camera techniques such as the telephoto lens without exhibiting a distinctive signature. The most memorable sequence in visual terms is a hotel-lobby encounter between Sabata and Banjo, long-time associates whose precise relationship is undefined. The hand-held camera tilts repeatedly between Banjo's face and instrument, intercut with close-ups of Sabata's boots as he walks upstairs. Unsettling banjo music cranks up a rare moment of tension, yet this mini *tour de force* is an empty flourish, capped with a humorous payoff as Sabata shoots the banjo strings and quips: 'You were out

Sabata, P.E.A/Delphos.

of tempo.' Most of the action set-pieces rely on technology and ingenuity as much as skill or daring. Sabata's trick-firing Derringer pistol and Banjo's combination banjo/rifle may be inventive but the weapons function largely as ersatz James Bond gadgetry transposed to the Wild West.

Sabata is modelled superficially on Van Cleef's Colonel Mortimer in *Per qualche dollaro in più/For a Few Dollars More* (Sergio Leone, 1965), at least in terms of his wardrobe and collection of firearms. Unlike Mortimer, however, Sabata has no social or familial ties and his relentless pursuit of the main villain is motivated as much by profit as morality. Unlike most Italian-western protagonists he claims to operate within the law and appeals to a higher authority when Stengel threatens violence, a surprising lapse in masculine self-sufficiency and potency.

Stengel is a cultured dandy and a true son of the Old South; he cites as his inspiration the historical figure Thomas Dew, an

advocate of slavery who regarded inequality as intrinsic to the social order. Any racial or political subtexts associated with Stengel are, however, sidelined in favour of his perceived masculine deficiencies and lack of physical attractiveness. Unable to eliminate Sabata through hired guns, Stengel mistakes the latter's financial demands for mere blackmail, as opposed to a shrewd business offer. Their inevitable showdown emphasizes fairground-level marksmanship and the humiliation of an opponent, the predictable outcome staged in perfunctory fashion. While *Sabata* remains true to its circus formula, the lack of any underpinning – dramatic, thematic, narrative or visual – renders its set pieces free-floating frivolities devoid of resonance and thin on entertainment value.

Daniel O'Brien