

Nostalgia | Utopia | Spaghetti: utopian and anti-nostalgic time in the Italian Western

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The conventional Hollywood Western is founded on a nostalgic break with the past; it contemplates the end of the Old West and its chivalric codes with a bittersweet regret, even while acknowledging it was necessary for the world of law and order that came after. This radical break with the past was, of course, essential for the creation of the viewer's nostalgia. The Italian Western undid this nostalgia on two levels, however: first, at the level of the image, the Italian Western eradicated the white-hatted knight in favor of con-men and mercenaries whose trademark was dirt, sweat, facial hair, bloodstains, and execrable table manners. What was the viewer to be nostalgic about? More radically, the Italian Western undid the essential *structure* of nostalgia. The spaghetti Western repeatedly suggested a radical *continuity* with the past: the present is a continuation of the nineteenth-century robber-baron capitalism and state exploitation of the disenfranchised. While most Italian Westerns are 'simply' cynical about modernity (and cannot, as a result, imagine political or personal change), a few imagine a utopian rather than a nostalgic break with the past – one in which the future remains unknown, what the political philosopher Hannah Arendt termed a 'miracle'.

Western Nostalgia

That nostalgia is a fundamental part of the classic Hollywood Western goes almost without saying.¹ In the most formulaic and clichéd Western plot (i.e., the greatest Westerns), an aging and tired gunslinger rides into a frontier town. He is the last of his kind, the white-hatted knight who still fights for honor and civilization, despite the fact that his aristocratic code of dueling places him outside of the law – outside of the very civilization he will save for posterity. As the civilizing railroad approaches the Pacific and the era of the Old West draws to a close, our grizzled gunfighter will stop the bandits or rescue the little girl from the Indians, before riding off into the distance. Perhaps he is mortally wounded from his final conflict, like Shane, or perhaps he just clutches his arm in psychic pain like Ethan in *The Searchers*. Either way, there is no place for him in the homestead he secured – he must, as the soundtrack commands Ethan as the final credits roll, simply 'ride away, ride away'.

The nostalgia that is present in the Western is clear, and is perhaps the most elementary structure of nostalgia itself: we can only have what we have now, the civilization that we live in today, because of a loss in the past. The aim of the film, it would seem, is to maintain the pain of that loss in the present. In the Western, as in the etymological basis of nostalgia, the pain experienced in the present (over a loss in the past) is directly related to the return home. It is the impossibility of returning home for characters like

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Shane and Ethan that moves the spectator to experience a nostalgic twinge. If indeed the Western chronicles the mythic moment in which my domesticated modernity began (that is, the moment that the world of law, order and civilization that I recognize as my own came into being), the Western aims to provoke a literal pain for the spectator who leaves the theater to return home – I should now recognize the home that I come back to as the home that turned Ethan away, the one Shane couldn't go back to.

This operation – the surgical grafting of nostalgia for the Old West into the present-day viewer, yet another form of suture – contains a good deal of 'ideological surplus value', as Baudry would say. A sign of the ideology of nostalgia, of course, is that it allows me to 'have my cake and eat it, too': I get the pleasure of moral righteousness for siding with the cowboy who struggles to contain the wilderness that threatens civilization (Indians or rapacious rustlers), and also experience the concomitant disappearance of the wild frontier as a loss, but a curiously pleasurable one. In the Western, we are allowed to hold on to certain values, such as admiration for violent confrontation, that are out of place in modernity (and not congenial to modern capitalism), and experience their loss as an occasion for regret (such regret is particularly linked to gender, to the notion that we have lost a world in which 'men are men'). In much the same way, we can maintain values that are in fact totally opposed to American democratic principles, such as the aristocratic duel, a form of Old World chivalry embodied by the knight and his steed, as having been somehow essential for the foundation of America. Again, the 'loss' of these values can be experienced as a form of pleasure by the viewer through nostalgia.

Dominick LaCapra refers to this process as the conversion of absence into loss, and it is essential for certain forms of ideologically charged mythic narratives. One of his examples is the Freudian account of woman as castrated – the male child proceeds from an observation of absence (women don't have external genitalia) to a narrative of loss (they must have lost them!). Such narratives are charged with affect: fear, in the case of castration, or hope in the Christian narrative of the Fall: once we were one with the divinity; we lost that oneness, and hope that someday we will return to the innocence and oneness with the divine we once had. The unusual character of the Western's narrativization of absence into loss becomes immediately apparent here, however – unlike the Christian narrative, which imagines a possible return to that originary oneness (and is hence not strictly speaking nostalgic for Eden), the Western does not imagine that one could ever go back. As is ever the case with nostalgia, the loss of the wild West is structural, constitutive of the present day; it is not only absence as loss, but also the transformation of loss into lack: a continuing deficit for 'the present and the future' (703), as DiCapra notes, one with potentially problematic consequences (such as a lingering sense of regret, or even resentment, that men are no longer men).

In any event, the basic structure necessary, if not sufficient, to nostalgia is a rupture – but a closed rupture, a finished rupture as it were. When Svetlana Boym writes about cinematic nostalgia in *Jurassic Park*, she notes that the film initially offers the promise of a restoration to an original harmony – we could have 'a total restoration of extinct creatures and a conflict resolution' (2001, 33) with our lost past. So far, such a film would not be properly speaking nostalgic, however. So as Boym continues, she notes that *Jurassic Park* actually chronicles the *impossibility* of such a harmonious restoration, and 'the attempt to make the past come alive turns into a horror movie' (33). The park must be shut down, the world of the past lost once again. Thus, *Jurassic Park* allows the viewer to re-enact the scene of environmental nostalgia, to witness the moment of the

loss of species in the present through the eyes of innocent children who cannot be implicated in the nostalgic tragedy being depicted. Such a structure is precisely what Slavoj Žižek characterizes as the nostalgia of the late Western in *Looking Awry*: there, he contends that a Western like *Shane* is already nostalgic at one remove, a sort of meta-nostalgia (1992, 113–114). It is not enough to see the lost past, but one must instead *witness someone else witnessing* the loss of the past. The one who we watch watching is a naïf, one who cannot be blamed for the tragic loss (of Shane, of the Old West, of the chivalric dueling cultures, of a time when men were men) that is about to unfold. In this view, then, we should re-watch *Jurassic Park* as a Western that waxes nostalgic about all of the species we have made extinct (including, by extension, the American Indian), resurrecting them only to regretfully put them down again – understanding that this time, at least, it was not our fault (and indeed, Boym notes a few pages later that ‘the hunt for the dinosaur was a belated cowboy adventure’ (36)).

In this view, what is one to make of the so-called spaghetti Western?² It is immediately clear that films like *For a Fistful of Dollars*, one of the first Italian Westerns, were not nostalgic for the Old West, however much they drew on Western iconography. The bulk of spaghetti Western (including virtually all of the great films not made by Leone, such as *Compañeros*, *Keoma*, *Django*, *The Big Gundown*, or especially *The Great Silence*) seem bent on the destruction of any nostalgic attitude toward the Old West, as a bygone moment with regrettable charms. In the most stereotypical view, this meant a revelation of the ‘dirty little secret’ that Hollywood had concealed about the West – quite literally *dirty*. In *Once upon a Time in the West*, Leone smeared an actor’s face with honey so that flies would crawl on it while he filmed. The iconography of the spaghetti Western is essentially identical in every respect to the conventional Hollywood Western – spurs, saddles, boots, horses, Stetsons, bandoliers – but now covered in mud, dust, blood, grime and worse. At times, even the actors are the same – Clint Eastwood, Lee Van Cleef, Henry Fonda, Jason Robards – just now covered in facial hair, sweat and dirt. At its most severe, as in *The Big Gundown* (*La resa dei conti*), one of the main characters, already wretched and filthy, is thrown into a pigsty and kicked around a slough of mud and swine excrement. He does not get to take a bath afterward, and we watch the goop slowly drying and caking over the next several scenes.

The honorable knights of yore are also revealed as a marauding group of penny-ante bandits – the most admirable of the bunch are laconic con-men (the character Eastwood plays throughout the Dollars trilogy). These creations really are admirable: they shoot better than their fellow cowboys from the Hollywood Western, often in bursts of pistol fire like a machine gun, too rapid for the eye to follow and stunning in their perfect accuracy. They speak only in rare one-liners, part of the elementary repertoire of masculine cool in post-war cinema (see particularly Tompkins on the ‘language of men’, 1992, 47–68), that often turn on simple math. In *Fistful of Dollars*, the Man with No Name strolls by the coffin-maker while eyeing the Baxter gang on the far end of town. ‘Get three coffins ready’, he rasps. On his way back, after killing them all, he temporizes with cool, gravelly irony: ‘My mistake – four’. In *Once upon a Time in the West*, Harmonica asks his three adversaries if they brought a horse for him. They chortle stupidly while looking back at their three steeds, and reply ‘One horse too few!’ Harmonica pauses, then growls ‘Two too many’ before taking them all down.

But perhaps the most admirable quality of the spaghetti Western ‘hero’ is the one that really finishes off the myth of the Old West: he is a cynical opportunist who never tires of taking advantage of innocence as much as corruption. The pleasure in *Fistful of Dollars* lies in watching the bravura of the subaltern in exploiting his heedless ‘betters’

for his own gain, in manipulating every form of authority for personal benefit. In *A Bullet for the General*, we are treated to a montage sequence in which the bandits (our heroes) repeatedly manage to rob the Mexican army of their weapons (which they will then sell for a profit) after massacring the soldiers. Sometimes they exploit the impartiality of this state institution, as when one bandit pretends to turn in another so they can get inside the army headquarters (he *also* collects the reward, of course, before they kill them all and steal their guns); at other times, they exploit the dirty secrets of the state by sending into a military base a female *bandita* who poses as a prostitute before setting off a bomb. The viewer's pleasure throughout is clearly anti-authoritarian, part of the 1960s counter-culture that the films both depicted and engaged with. But the anti-authoritarian pleasure of the spaghetti Western is assuredly doubled for the cinematic spectator who perceives the Italian Western as set against not only the institutions depicted in the film, but also against the filmic institution of the Hollywood Western. In other words, the pleasure of the spaghetti Western also lies in the ways that it manipulates, cheats and steals from the 'innocent', conventional Western of the previous decade. If *Shane* is indeed a meta-Western, incorporating the *mise-en-scène* of a spectator watching a Western, then spaghetti Westerns are clearly meta-meta-Westerns.

Certainly one of the items that the Italian Western 'steals' from the Hollywood Western is its nostalgia for the Old West. But it does in a way that is remarkable. To be sure, spaghetti Westerns repeatedly suggest that the Old West was in fact violent, venal, deeply corrupt, petty, mercenary, racist, exploitative, savage and profoundly unhygienic, a depiction that assuredly leaves the viewer little wiggle room for the pleasures of nostalgia – at least nostalgia of the noble kind that produces ideological surplus value. The real genius of the spaghetti Western is to fully undo not only the *image* of nostalgia but also its fundamental *structure*, which depends on a radical break between past and present: I have returned home, but it is no longer my home, sweet home, as I left it! No, the spaghetti Western is insistent not only that the Old West is dirty, but that the New West, the modern world that began circa 1870 (*The Searchers* places it in the years after 1868, for example) and in which I can still recognize my own surroundings, is *also* violent, venal, deeply corrupt, petty, mercenary, racist, exploitative, savage and profoundly unhygienic.³ Now one must wonder about the classic Hollywood Western, and the direction of its nostalgia and ideology: isn't the *real* sleight-of-hand the suggestion that the future that awaits little Joey in *Shane* will somehow *not* be unrestrained and unregulated robber baron-style capitalist exploitation? That state institutions such as the police in the future will no longer be complicit with the rich and powerful? In other words, the nostalgia in the classic Western is a nostalgia for a *present* that does not exist, rather than a mythical past that was lost – but this can only be seen after the spaghetti Western.

In turn, the anti-nostalgia of the spaghetti Western is based on presenting to the viewer a temporal *continuity* rather than a *rupture* between past and present. Frayling notes that most directors of spaghetti Westerns came from Italy's poor, exploited and largely agricultural South – unlike art house films by Northern directors such as Bertolucci, Pasolini and Antonioni (2006, 59) – and, relying on Banfield's notion of 'amoral familism', that many spaghetti Westerns in fact emblemize an all-too-comprehensible lack of confidence in state institutions in Southern Italy, as well as the value of getting what you can, while you can (60–62). For southern Italians, the putative great modernizing shift of the nineteenth century, of course, took place at exactly the same time as it did in *The Searchers*, namely the creation of 'Italy' as a modern nation-state. And yet, quite famously, this was an epochal transformation in which 'everything changed

precisely so everything could stay the same', to paraphrase Don Fabrizio's famous catchphrase about how Sicilians experience history in *The Leopard*. In short, the arrival of modernity was an experience of continuity, even in some instances of intensification, rather than the disappearance of 'the old ways'. Even as late as the 'economic miracle' of the 1950s, the experience of many Southerners was that of 'enduring poverty, state corruption and forced migration', in Fisher's terms (2011, 17). The world after the Risorgimento would turn out to *also* be violent, venal, deeply corrupt, petty, mercenary, racist, exploitative, savage and profoundly unhygienic, and Fisher claims that in fact the majority of Italian Westerns 'drain the myth of any pioneering doctrine' (58) – that is, remove the notion of *progress* from the narrative of the West.

In what follows, I will look primarily at two spaghetti Westerns directed by Sergio Corbucci, each emblematic of a larger group of Italian Western films, in order to analyze how they undo the basic structure of nostalgia, namely the rupture or break with the past that creates a time we tragically 'can never get back to'. The first is *The Great Silence*, perhaps the most extreme example of a core group of Italian Westerns that more or less explicitly thematize the definitive failure of historical change and progress, and thus destroy the classic Western's nostalgia for the present day, what Fisher has called 'the spaghetti Western's "RSA" narrative' that emphasizes the repression of official state institutions, especially the law (80–88). This group includes films such as *The Great Silence*, *Escondido*, *Keoma*, *El Puro* and *Django* (the last probably the most successful non-Leone Westerns). In the second part, I will look at Corbucci's *Compañeros*, typical of spaghetti Westerns that appear to offer to the viewer a space in which things might conceivably be different. Not surprisingly, this group includes some of the more explicitly political Italian Westerns, such as *The Big Gundown*, *A Bullet for the General* and *Compañeros*, but even some of the more esoteric Italian Western hybrids, such as the kung-fu spaghetti Western (*The Fighting Fists of Shanghai Joe*, or *The Stranger and the Gunfighter*). This second group maintains the anti-nostalgic stance of the tragic spaghetti Western, both toward the romanticized notion of the Old West as well as toward the new, mechanized and industrial society that is emerging, but also attempts to sketch out the possibility of a non-nostalgic historical break.

An endless present

All of Sergio Leone's 'Dollars' trilogy, as well as many other spaghetti Westerns, function as a kind of Lacanian 'traversing the fantasy' for the fan of the classic Hollywood Western. Effectively, they say to the viewer: you wished to experience the Old West as it really was, really live the life of these heroic gunslingers? Very well – so be it. That is to say, spaghetti Westerns maintain the setting and iconography of the Old West, as well as the standard repertoire of characters (bandits and lawmen) and scenes (shootouts and chases), while simultaneously de-romanticizing the experience, transforming it into physical suffering and petty larceny. (The great success of the Italian Western, however, was that it did not just didactically remove the West's romantic aura, but created a new sort of 'dirty glamour' – Eastwood's sweat and stubble-covered face, grimly chomping down on the cheroot that he hated – to maintain the viewer's fascination.) From the beginning, in *A Fistful of Dollars*, the viewer notices that the nature of the universe being depicted has changed. If the conventional Hollywood Western depicts a world in flux, in the midst of historical change and situated on a frontier whose boundary is also in movement, then *Fistful's* town of San Miguel appears as a *Twilight Zone*-like separate universe, encapsulated in a bubble, cellular and absolutely static. We know that – as in

so many spaghetti Westerns – it is a border town, more likely in Mexico than in the United States, but it is never apparent how it is situated geographically. The film always gives the impression that the world essentially ends beyond the edge of the town; it is not even clear how the three or four main locations in the film are physically situated with respect to each other.

But it is *time* in the film that is truly cellular and static – the war between the Baxters and the Rojos appears to have always been in progress. No character receives a backstory, nor does the town itself. How did the war between the Baxters and the Rojos begin? How did the dead man on the horse at the beginning of the film die? Where did Ramón acquire his sadistic streak? Why is he holding Marisol prisoner? Why hasn't he just killed the rest of her family? Where does Eastwood's character come from, and why does he come to San Miguel? And the list goes on. But the film's great accomplishment is that viewers tacitly are given to understand that *this is not the sort of universe that has a past*. The film contains only one line that breaks this rule: when Marisol asks Eastwood's character why he is helping them, he reluctantly says 'I knew a girl like you once'.

If there is virtually no past, there is equally little in the film that suggests a future. In the beginning of the film, Eastwood's character says: 'Rojos on one side. Baxters on the other. And me in the middle. There's money to be made in a town like San Miguel'. And he proceeds, indeed, to play the two families off against each other, creating problems for each that he then volunteers to solve – for a price. But the Man with No Name ends the film exactly where he began. He has lost or given away all the money he has made, acquired only scars and a bit of cynicism, and he leaves San Miguel when he realizes his essentially unchanged situation: 'American army on one side. Mexican army on the other. And me in the middle. No thanks'. There is no indication that a new era has dawned in San Miguel. The robber baron capitalism practiced by the Rojos and the Baxters, who made a living supplying guns and liquor, may be in a temporary lull (since they are all dead), but the arrival of state authority in the form of the army brings no solace. The railroad does not come to San Miguel; the former inhabitants do not return; the widows who supposedly are the only ones who live in San Miguel (we never see them) do not come out to celebrate in the streets. Eastwood rides away, and Silvanito returns to his empty saloon, leaving behind a plaza strewn with corpses.

Perhaps no spaghetti Western is as bleak or as beautiful as Corbucci's *The Great Silence* (made in 1966, but not released until 1968), and none insists so explicitly that the future will be the same as the past, only worse. After many dozens of films shot in central Spain with flat, dull landscapes of desert and scrub brush, *Silence* produces an almost shocking effect: it is set in Utah, and the entire film is snowbound. The opening shot, in fact, almost gives the impression that the projector has no film in it: it is a pure white field, and the soundtrack is – appropriately – silence. The film tells the story of a lone gunslinger so laconic he's called 'Silence'. He comes across a town in which bounty hunters have created a rich industry for themselves. With the full complicity of the town government and law enforcement, they ensure a steady supply of 'wanted criminals' (who have, in fact, done nothing) drawn from the oppressed, marginal or exiled members of the community. In short, they exploit the law in order to extract state funding in order to oppress the citizenry, a 'syndicate of violence which covertly controls society', as Fisher puts it nicely (85). Or, as Alex Cox says even more cynically, they are 'eager to exterminate the people [they've] impoverished' (2009, 188). One of their early victims is James Middleton, a young African-American man; *Silence* will eventually become romantically involved with his

widow, Pauline. As an African-American woman, Pauline is of course doubly cut off from power – but it turns out that if there is one thing that Silence understands, it is symbolic castration. In the first moment in the film that suggests romantic attraction, he unwinds the scarf from his neck and reveals a massive scar across his throat; he is silent because he cannot speak. It is their shared victimhood that allows them to commit to each other romantically and erotically, but also in the Italian sense of committed, *impegnato*, or united in a shared political project – reclaiming the community from the tyranny of the bounty hunters.

One of the techniques that the Italian Western was happy to copy from Hollywood was the wry, laconic male hero, whose cool and self-control was perhaps most evident from his ability to remain silent, or confine his verbal expression to occasional one-liners. But Silence *cannot* speak; he functions almost as a grim parody of the classic Western hero's verbal reticence, another ironically fulfilled fantasy (you wanted men who didn't talk?). Repeatedly, Pauline sees Silence's scars and wounds, which (as we will learn in an extended flashback sequence) are psychic as well as physical, and her reaction is to become increasingly attracted to him. The scenario is reminiscent, of course, of those curious post-war American films that Kaja Silverman discusses in *Male Subjectivity at the Margins*, in which women gaze at male weakness, incapacity, even literal amputation, and respond with sympathy, love and even sexual attraction (1992, 52–121). Silverman reads these films as symptomatic of dominant culture attempting to respond to the 'historical trauma' that World War II produced in male subjectivity; she reads them psychoanalytically, relying on Freudian castration as the concept best suited to understand how male subjectivity might respond to a traumatic (and collective) deprivation of the usual power and privilege it has enjoyed. Certainly *The Great Silence* does not lack for symbolic forms of castration, from Silence's slit throat and exclusion from spoken language, to his punishment for those bounty hunters who surrender to him rather than fighting to the death: he shoots off their thumbs so they cannot 'cock' their guns. Indeed, it will eventually be revealed that the man responsible for Silence's slit throat – and who has since had his own thumbs shot off – is the man who has organized and profits most from the bounty hunters, a man with the exceedingly appropriate name of Pollicut.⁴

At this point, the stage is set for the kind of historical change one might expect in a classic Western. The film's political basis is the formation of affective and political alliances based on solidarity of different kinds. The new sheriff recognizes that the starving exiles who live on the edge of town are not real criminals, but were simply categorized as such to facilitate quick money for the bounty hunters, and he demands that the townsfolk recognize their common humanity, and leave food and supplies on the edge of town until the matter can be cleared up. To do so, the sheriff turns particularly to the abject and marginalized who still live in the town, particularly the prostitutes. This is essentially the film's political work at the collective level, but it also knows that the stories that really seduce us take place at the individual and affective level. Were a new order to emerge, it is clear that the effect would be quite different from the nostalgic Hollywood Western, and more typical of other Hollywood films: with a certain degree of self-satisfaction and complacency, we would recognize this moment as the foundation of our contemporary world, a world – one would be free to believe – of law and order, of racial equality, at least in theory, and of a certain minimal humanity accorded to the marginalized and oppressed.

It is quite easy to imagine the film's dramatic ending with a typically Hollywood twist. As the sheriff leads Loco to his trial, Loco shoots him. Loco and his men then

capture all of the exiles, who have ironically been persuaded to come to the edge of town *en masse* for the charitable supplies delivered by the new solidarity in the community. They use the captured exiles as hostages in the town saloon to draw Silence and Pauline out of hiding. Loco wounds Silence by shooting his hands so he cannot fight back, and prepares to dispatch him. But in the film's final moments, all is reversed – the sheriff turns out to be still alive and takes out Loco's men; Silence was indeed shot in the hands, but they were protected (as in the ending of *Fistful of Dollars*) by a prosthetic metal sheath or glove; Silence kills Loco, and he, Pauline, the hostages and the sheriff greet a new day.

It is easy to imagine because Corbucci actually shot this as an alternative ending, since distributors were so concerned about the horrifically grim actual ending. But no audio was ever recorded for this happy ending (it was intended, evidently, for release in Asian and North African markets, but not for Europe or the Americas), and in any event, it was never used. Instead, Loco really does kill the sheriff. After drawing Silence and Pauline out of hiding, he and his men kill both of them. Then they slaughter all of the hostages, who are tied together, in a bloodbath brutal even for the Italian Western. As they exit the saloon into the faint light of the new day, Loco exults that everything was done according to the letter of the law, and looks forward to the bounty he and his men will receive for so many 'wanted criminals' (he also stops to strip Silence's pistol off of his dead body). *This* is what is revealed as the foundational moment in which the viewer's world came into being: the world that we live in is a world in which the law exists not in order to protect, but to facilitate oppression and exploitation. Interracial romance, cross-class solidarity, and alliances and coalitions founded on the hope for a better future cannot survive in this emergent future – the foundation for our present.

What makes *The Great Silence* unusual is not that it is so grim. Many of the revenge narrative Italian Westerns end in ways that are nearly as bleak, and as Cox points out (2009, 192–193), *Escondido* and *El Puro* have similarly tragic endings in which the hero is gunned down by bounty hunters. In Fulci's quite dark *Four of the Apocalypse*, after a great deal of torture and misery, the one surviving protagonist walks off into the fog. There is often little left at the end of such films: the protagonist's beloved in *Keoma* dies (after giving birth to a child, but the old woman insists the baby, too, will die), and while Django survives, his beloved woman is dead, his gold is lost, and his hands are mutilated beyond repair. The unusual feature of *Silence* is that the *antagonists* survive – it is absolutely explicit that there has been no change in the world, not even the small world depicted in the film (according to Corbucci's widow (see Cox, 189), Corbucci was deeply influenced by the deaths of Che Guevara and Malcolm X while making *Silence*). Other spaghetti Westerns concede this point, just more tacitly: the world is not a better place at the end of *Django*, but at least the oppressive bad guys are now dead.

The surreal, cult film *Django, Kill!* depicts an uncanny town whose apparently normal façades conceal greed, religious hypocrisy and sexual perversion. A lot of bodies pile up over the course of the film, there's a scalping, a homosexual gang rape, and a man is killed by having molten gold poured over his face. There is no reason to believe that the nature of this disturbed world is in any way changed when the protagonist leaves the town at the end. He spies two children playing in the cemetery: the boy stretches string across his face and says to the girl proudly, 'I'm uglier than you', and they make strange grimaces and animal sounds at each other. This is the last shot of the film, and on some level, it is a direct expression of Italian Western's profound anti-nostalgia, a sense that the world can always get worse.

The moment before

Compañeros is another Corbucci film, now from 1970 as the Italian Western is beginning to get a little long in the tooth. Its full title is *Vamos a matar, compañeros!* or 'Let's go killing, comrades!' It is tonally quite different from *The Great Silence* in almost every respect: hot, sunny, with a good deal of comical banter and exaggerated silliness. In particular, it features a marijuana-fuelled, long-haired, cape-wearing Jack Palance sporting an artificial hand and a pet falcon named Marsha (she ate his missing hand to free him from a trap). Nonetheless, it is one of the most overtly political of the spaghetti Westerns: it takes place during an attempted Marxist revolution led by a pacifist intellectual, Professor Xantos (whose name is only part of his saintly and patient character). Its central pair, however, is the Mexican 'El Vasco' – played by Tomas Milian as a decidedly uneducated lumpen proletariat, but dressed and coiffed identically to Che Guevara's iconic image – and an opportunist Swede named Yodlaf Peterson (Franco Nero). For the clever match between the gringo capitalist exploiter and Mexican peasant in the midst of acquiring class consciousness, the film is obviously indebted to *A Bullet for the General* (or for that matter, to *The Big Gundown*), but the addition of the Professor allows the film to address even more explicitly its political concerns.

In many ways, *Compañeros* is really a re-writing of Damiani's *Bullet for the General*: not only does Vasco, like *Bullet's* El Chunchu, acquire class consciousness, but even the gringo Yodlaf begins to have misgivings about his own project, even real sympathy for the plight of ordinary Mexicans. After Jack Palance's final character has been destroyed, Yodlaf rides away only to discover the entire Mexican army is advancing on them. Escape for the rebels is impossible, and Yodlaf turns his horse back around. 'Vamos a matar, compañeros!' ('Let's go kill, comrades!'), he howls, exuberant, grinning; El Vasco grins back, and we watch Yodlaf charge straight at the Mexican army. As he crests the hill, he moves into slow motion, slower and slower until he is frozen, and his freeze frame dissolves into a graphic silhouette. This is the end of the film.

This ending would have been instantly recognizable to spectators in 1970, since *Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid* had been released the year before, and Franco Nero had already been styled to look as much like Redford as possible. *Butch Cassidy*, of course, ends with virtually the same scenario: the two heroes, whose companionable affection for each other is mostly displayed through hostile verbal barbs, must face the entire Mexican army. Escape is impossible, and so instead they charge in a (futile) affirmation of life. Before they can be gunned down, however, they go into slow motion, then a freeze frame that dissolves into a sepia-toned photograph. The similarities between these sequences are obvious – but so are the differences.

Corbucci's move is toward the graphic image, while George Hill's is toward the photographic. But neither Corbucci's image nor Hill's photograph is in any way 'simple'. To begin with the final image of *Compañeros*, the graphic as a medium in general takes us out of time, while Roland Barthes made a now famous connection between the photographic and the time of those who are 'about to die' (1981, 95–96). As in *The Great Silence*, we end with an anti-nostalgic insistence that the past was just like the present: the revolution always fails (a sentiment particularly acute after 1968), and the exploiters always win. But there is a difference in *Compañeros*, *A Bullet for the General*, or even a silly kung-fu spaghetti Western like *The Stranger and the Gunfighter*. Such films do not depict the world as having changed (because we know it did not), but they end in a moment in which things might change. *The Stranger and the Gunfighter* is clear about the ugly anti-Asian racism of the West, and imagines at its ending

a utopian moment in which the white hero, Dakota (Lee Van Cleef), comes to China with the Asian hero (Ho Chiang, billed as Lo Lieh) simply in order to see this other country (it should be noted that the film's efforts at depicting a racial utopia are very much limited by the standards of 1974, and that it makes up for these utopian racial gestures in its copious misogyny). We don't see what comes after – no doubt it goes as badly as one might fear – but it ends precisely at the point in which a utopian space might be about to emerge.

In contrast to the 'timeless', unfinished expectation of the final graphic image in *Compañeros*, *Butch Cassidy's* solution is definitively nostalgic: it is not simply a freeze frame, but a sepia-tinted photograph. The difference between sepia and black-and-white is not age, but the stain of affect, specifically nostalgia. Stewart refers to this sepia staining as film's 'nostalgia for itself', noting that 'its sepia image recapitulates in reverse the history of photography become film' (1999, 49). Again, we recognize that our contemporary era of law and order depends on the prior age of lawlessness and banditry disappearing; but nostalgia provides the viewer with a means to experience that loss as pleasurable, bittersweet. Corbucci's graphic finale, on the other hand, is not only excerpted from the flow of time, but in a certain sense is also cyclical – any student of the spaghetti Western would, of course, recognize this image in black and red of a man on a horse with a gun as, in some sense, the start of the genre. Silhouettes in black and red of men on horses carrying guns form the iconic opening credit sequence of the first successful spaghetti Western, *For a Fistful of Dollars*. In other words, if time moves at all here, it is in a short circuit that goes from 1970 directly back to 1962 – Yodlaf's suicidal charge would appear (as in a Tom Stoppard play) to exit *Compañeros* only to show up in the opening credits of *For a Fistful of Dollars* as a different gringo, once again *about to begin*.

'Paradise absent is different from paradise lost', writes Dominick LaCapra: 'one must therefore turn to other, nonredemptive options in personal, social and political life – options other than an evacuated past and a vacuous and blank, yet somehow redemptive, future' (1999, 706). It is certainly true that the political spaghetti Western is relentlessly insistent on the present: the political moment is *now*, not lost in the past. In particular, by removing the notion of a rupture in the past, and relocating it potentially in the present, these more positive spaghetti Westerns would appear to indicate a properly 'utopian' space, a place where the world afterward might not be the same as the world before. When Yodlaf turns around and hails his *compañeros*, it is, in Hannah Arendt's terms, 'a "miracle" – that is, something which could not be expected ... every new beginning ... breaks into the world as an "infinite improbability", and yet it is precisely this infinitely improbable which actually constitutes the very texture of everything we call real' (1963, 169). One would have to recognize, of course, that the vast majority of Italian Westerns do not do this: they are effectively trapped by the same cynical realism that gave them a critical purchase on the classic Western. The spaghetti Western recognizes explicitly that institutions such as the army, the police and the government exist primarily in order to serve the vested interests of the ruling classes, and those who think otherwise are dupes. Hence the positive value accorded to the con man, the trickster or the lazy sybarite in the Italian Western, the one who gets everyone else to do his work for him – he (and it is always a man) is one of the 'non-duped'.

But this, of course, is also the great weakness of the spaghetti Western's cosmology, or world-view. It is, if you like, how 'the non-duped err', as Lacan says: in understanding every claim of change, every new idealism, every new law as simply another cynical maneuver for power (and no doubt it is), not only is any possible utopian space

foreclosed, but any change or progress. It is remarkable how many spaghetti Westerns conclude with the same message, even those that are apparently ‘optimistic’, even comic, in tone. The bad guys may be dead, but nothing has really changed. The exclusion of the utopian appears actually rigorous in these films. ‘Objectively’, writes Arendt, ‘the chances that tomorrow will be like yesterday are always overwhelming’ (170). But a few Italian Westerns remain suspended in the present, the moment just before ... something. *A Bullet for the General* ends with the formerly ignorant Mexican character, El Chunchu, now politically enlightened. He has killed the emotionless and exploitive gringo character, and taken his gold. He is well set up to simply take over the other man’s life, to become another exploiter, another cynical abuser of power. Instead, he hands all the gold to a nearby peasant, exhorting him: ‘Don’t buy bread! Buy dynamite!’ Here is an exhortation to make anew the world, but without precisely knowing how. Fisher notes that the final shot is from the perspective of the peasant (205), watching El Chunchu run away, laughing maniacally, through the train yard – but he finds this moment ‘crowd-pleasing, yet politically anodyne’ (157). Fisher’s perspective, however, is interested primarily in the film’s revolutionary credentials (is it profound enough?), but misses the radical contingency of that last counter-shot: what the hell do we, looking through the eyes of the peasant, do *now*? Bread or dynamite? What would happen if we bought dynamite? In *A Bullet for the General*, the film’s final moment is an unknowable, suspended present – the moment before the future, rather than the past that led to where we are today. As much as the ending of *Compañeros* or *Bullet* strongly suggest that that future might very well hold further co-optation and defeat (‘the chances that tomorrow will be like yesterday are always overwhelming’), they also offer a glimmer the possibility of something else, an Arendtian miracle of a world that might hold some surprises, even for a cynical Italian Western.

Notes

1. See, for example, Scott Simmon, *The Invention of the Western Film: A Cultural History of the Genre’s First Half Century*, Part II (‘It’s Time for your History Lesson, Dear’), especially ‘Time, Space and the Western’ (2003, 178–192). Simmon argues that early Westerns were not always nostalgic (he confines this primarily to B-Westerns), but the classic Western that emerges in the late 1940s seems to depend categorically on nostalgia. He argues, for example, that *My Darling Clementine* is ‘calm and assured – “classic” especially in its nostalgia – and yet held within it are the seeds of collapse of all that it treasures’ (208), a view of the Western itself that is at least as nostalgic as *My Darling Clementine*. Arguably, the mere *idea* of the West has always been nostalgic – or at least since 1893, when Turner published ‘The Significance of the Frontier in American History’. See Slotkin, ‘Nostalgia and Progress’, who also isolates the myth of the cowboy as fundamentally a nostalgic evocation of the lost culture of the aristocratic duelist.
2. There is still some lingering controversy over the term, but its immense popularity and recognition makes it hard to resist. If at one time it was derogatory and culturally paternalistic, figuring the Italian Western as a lesser species and a curiosity, then surely one must enjoy its viciously ironic revenge: my students today are vastly more likely to have seen an Italian Western than an American one – and most of them acquired their taste for spaghetti Westerns from their fathers. I use ‘spaghetti Western’ and ‘Italian Western’ interchangeably here.
3. To be sure, *Once upon a Time in the West*, Leone’s most direct homage to the Westerns he loved, is an exception to this rule: it is, at least in this regard, a classic Western and not a spaghetti Western. And unlike his other films in which he insisted that the removal of female characters made them better, he must introduce a female character (Claudia Cardinale as Jill) here, since he wants to suggest at the end that there is a civilization that is about to emerge that is categorically different from what came before – this dimension is what also gives the

film its properly 'epic' character, since it effectively tells the story of the founding of a civilization, and the nostalgic disappearance of what came before.

4. Pollicut (many cuts?) has both cut Silence and been cut by Silence, but the film's iconography, the actor's physiognomy and the character's rapacious greed and sexual impotence seem intended to suggest that Pollicut is a Jew. And indeed, his lack of thumbs is concealed until late in the film, suggesting that he has been cut in some way that is not immediately visible, another, more primordial cut, such as the cut of circumcision.

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Filmography

- The Stranger and the Gunfighter* (*El karaté, el colt y el impostor*, dir. Antonio Margheriti, Spain, Italy, Hong Kong, USA, 1974). Also released as *Blood Money*.
- Compañeros* (*Vamos a matar, Compañeros!*, dir. Sergio Corbucci, Italy, West Germany and Spain, 1970)
- A Bullet for the General* (*El Chuncho, quién sabe?*, dir. Damiano Damiani, Italy, 1966)
- The Great Silence* (*Il grande silenzio*, dir. Sergio Corbucci)
- Shane* (dir. George Stevens, USA, 1953)
- The Searchers* (dir. John Ford, USA, 1956)

- For a Fistful of Dollars* (*Per un pugno di dollari*, dir. Sergio Leone, 1964)
Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid (dir. George Hill, USA, 1969)
Django (dir. Sergio Corbucci, Italy and Spain, 1966)
Django, Kill! (*Se sei vivo, spara!*, dir. Giulio Questi, Italy and Spain, 1967)
Keoma (dir. Enzo Castellari, Italy, 1976)
Four for the Apocalypse (*I quattro dell'apocalisse*, dir. Lucio Fulci, Italy, 1975)
The Big Gundown (*La resa dei conti*, dir. Sergio Sollima, Spain and Italy, 1966)
Once upon a Time in the West (*C'era una volta il West*, dir. Sergio Leone, Italy and USA, 1968)