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***Radical Frontiers in the Spaghetti Western: Politics, Violence and Popular Italian Cinema*. Austin Fisher. London, New York: I.B. Tauris, 2011 (304 pages). ISBN: 1848855788.**

A Review by Mike Phillips, The Graduate Center, CUNY

The Western genre film has undergone innumerable variations over the history of global cinematic production. While widely regarded as an elegiac paean to a bygone era in which morality and progress presented few interpretive obstacles, the form is peculiarly amenable to radical reinscription, especially on the part of filmmakers from outside of the United States. Austin Fisher identifies the so-called Spaghetti Western as one among many *filoni* (sing.: *filone,* literally "vein") or generic cycles that are characteristic of Italian film production. As such, this subgenre includes manifold permutations, "from slapstick comedies to baroque tales of intrigue and horror film hybrids" (1). Such a variegated group of films belies the traditional conception of westerns in general and Spaghettis in particular as mere formulaic exercises, and Fisher wisely makes no claim to be comprehensive. His focus is a specific strand of Italian Westerns "whose locales—though lifted directly from Hollywood—barely concealed bravura, and at times militant, denunciations of advanced capitalism" (1).

Of course, the figure most closely associated with the Spaghetti Western is Sergio Leone, who is generally considered the master of the form. Moreover, his films often express the political orientation that Fisher emphasises here. In *Once Upon a Time in the West* (*C'era una volta il West,* 1968), the communitarian spirit of the citizens of Sweetwater triumphs over the unmitigated avarice of the railroad baron. This theme is amply demonstrated in the film's denouement: the villain, obsessed with reaching and symbolically possessing the Pacific Ocean, dies beside a meagre desert stream, as Jill (Claudia Cardinale) distributes drinking water to the railroad workers. Even more striking is the quotation from Mao that opens *Duck, You Sucker!* (*Giù la testa*, 1971): "The revolution is not a social dinner, a literary event, a drawing or an embroidery; it cannot be done with elegance and courtesy. The revolution is an act of violence."

Despite these evident affinities between Leone's work and Fisher's thesis, the director assumes a subsidiary role in *Radical Frontiers*. On the one hand, this relative bypassing of Leone is a quite logical reaction to the usual emphasis on his work in discussions of Spaghettis, as well as the existence of a relatively large body of scholarly work on his films and life. (Christopher Frayling, author of the canonical work on Spaghetti Westerns, has himself published two books on Leone.) Yet Fisher also argues that Leone, who described himself as a "disillusioned socialist" (68), was never as politically committed as others of his generic cohort and actually showed contempt for their intellectual tendencies (68). For Fisher, the revolutionary rhetoric of *Duck, You Sucker!* is presented in the service of critiquing the "pro-insurgency polemic" (159) of films

such as *Tepepa* (Giulio Petroni, 1969). The wholehearted advocacy of revolutionary violence found in the latter film is starkly undermined by Leone's protagonist, Sean Mallory (James Coburn), an Irish insurgent who becomes a disaffected mercenary in the Mexican Revolution: "When I started using dynamite, I believed many things. Finally, I believe only in dynamite" (159).

Conversely, *Tepepa* and several other Italian Westerns set during the Mexican Revolution that Fisher discusses in detail favour an aesthetic rhetoric of action over Leone's motivational ambiguity.[1] Unlike Leone's output, these films were intensely engaged with the question of the legitimacy of violence against state oppression that animated Italian student movements of the 1960s and later the terrorists of the Red Brigade. This subgeneric trend, which Fisher terms the "insurgency variant" (121), expresses its political agenda not only through its narrative content but also in its visual style, specifically forced spectator identification through manipulation of point of view. Fisher argues that "a film's advocacy of violent political acts is more likely to succeed in a narrative sense if sympathy for the perpetrator is first elicited from the audience" (159). For Fisher, Leone's entry in this subgenre as well as its Hollywood manifestations, such as *The Wild Bunch* (Sam Peckinpah, 1969), assimilate the Italian films' violent tendencies but foreclose their political efficacy by presenting violence as a spectacle rather than imbricating the viewer into the revolutionary situation, and thereby suggesting that violence is a legitimate means of overcoming oppression.

Fisher's examination of cinematic techniques and their ideological implications is thorough and generally convincing, and provides a welcome shift from the conventional scholarly approach to Western films, which has largely focused on structural narrative aspects. However, Fisher's emphasis on issues of identification occasionally tends to negate the possibility of oppositional or multivalent readings. This is most apparent in his analysis of *Face to Face* (*Faccia a faccia*, Sergio Sollima, 1967), in which a sickly history professor named Brad Fletcher (Gian Maria Volonté) travels West and joins a band of outlaws. In this new environment, Fletcher finds himself revitalised, though not in the sense of Richard Slotkin's "regeneration through violence" (352), where the rugged individual leading a strenuous life on the frontier makes the path safe for civilisation. Rather, Fletcher comes to consider himself a quasi-Nietzschean Übermensch, for whom any and all violent acts are permissible, including rape and murder.

According to Fisher, *Face to Face* "leaves an audience in limbo by nominating Brad Fletcher as its chief narrative conduit" (106). The resultant identification with this villainous but charismatic protofascist, he argues, is irresistible for the spectator accustomed to viewing Western heroes as exemplars of powerful masculinity. While affirming that Sollima intended this film to function as a critique of latent fascism in Italian society, Fisher sees these identificatory mechanisms as undermining this critique and thus relegating the film to the status of what Robin Wood defines as an "incoherent text" (105–6). Yet it seems entirely possible that the deployment of such techniques in relation to a clearly unsavoury character could disrupt spectatorial passivity and, in doing so, encourage a critically engaged viewing.

Nonetheless, Fisher considers *Face to Face* a failure in its "condemnation of the seductive, empowering nature of violence" (114). This film falls into the other major subgeneric category proposed by Fisher, the "Repressive State Apparatus" (or RSA) variant.[2] These films attempt to

"unmask an outwardly civilised society whose covert mechanisms are predicated on violent tyranny" (82). Fisher devotes considerable attention to the personal histories of the films' directors, especially to their shared experience as partisans during the fascist era and the Second World War. While these biographical details serve to illuminate some subtexts of this variant, the correlation between authorial intent and textual signification is occasionally overplayed. However, Fisher's auteurist leanings are understandable in light of the standard dismissal of genre films as repetitive and formulaic, and particularly in terms of his attempt to locate these films within the Italian sociopolitical context. The study of cinematic trends that are inherently transnational can sometimes blind scholars to cultural specificities, so this meticulous reframing of Spaghetti Westerns as a distinctly Italian phenomenon should provide a useful source for future scholars of the Western genre.

Of course, as involved as these films may be with the contemporary Italian political situation, they express their opposition through the narrative and iconic forms of American cinema. Fisher argues that the films of the RSA variant "consistently appropriate symbols of law and order, civilisation and propriety common to the Hollywood Western and reverse their significance so that they come to denote violence and dishonesty" (82). While certain American films such as *The Ox-Bow Incident* (William Wellman, 1943) and *High Noon* (Fred Zinnemann, 1952) had presaged the later development of leftist Westerns, the ideological requirements of industrial production hindered U.S. efforts from articulating such a fully realised critique of systemic injustice as we see in the RSA films. Likewise, Hollywood's adoption of certain stylistic elements of Spaghetti Westerns in the late 1960s did not indicate a wider embrace of their ideological discourses.

According to Fisher, the general lack of a clear political orientation in Hollywood Westerns also affected the reception of Italian Westerns by U.S. audiences as well as their influence on North American directors. Fisher traces a trajectory from Hollywood's ultraviolent and politically vacuous Westerns of the early 1970s, through the Spaghettis' closest analogues, both cinematically and rhetorically, in Blaxploitation Westerns, up to the postmodern, baroque exercises of Sam Raimi and Quentin Tarantino, which marry extreme formalism with a willful disavowal of ideological significance. Fisher considers this postmodernist strategy the logical result of the attempt to express oppositional political views through a dominant narrative form: "The political Italian Western's authorial capacity to dictate meaning is … inherently precarious. The very framework from within which [its directors] attempt to build didactic narratives is always already engaged in processes of ideological evacuation" (200).

Despite the Western form's resistance to radical appropriation, Fisher maintains that the generic experimentation of politically engaged Italian directors in the 1960s falls within what he designates a "radical spectrum" that includes such activist filmmakers as Jean-Luc Godard, whose Dziga Vertov Group produced an avant-garde deconstruction of the Western in *Wind from the East* (*Le Vent d'Est*, 1970). According to Fisher, this film succeeds where Sollima's failed by explicitly rejecting the kind of identificatory mechanisms discussed above. Fisher's detailed attention to the stylistic nuances and ideological quandaries of the political strand of the Italian Western convincingly demonstrates that these films—whatever their level of success in terms of radical advocacy—deserve to be considered active participants in the political discourse of the 1960s.

Notes

[1] *A Bullet for the General* (*El chuncho, quien sabe?*, Damiano Damiani, 1966), *Run, Man, Run!* (*Corri uomo corri*, Sergio Sollima, 1968) and *The Mercenary* (*Il mercenario*, Sergio Corbucci, 1968), and *Companeros* (*Vamos a matar, compañeros*, Corbucci, 1970).

[2] Other films in this category include *Django Kill… If You Live, Shoot!* (*Se sei vivo, spara!*, Giulio Questi, 1967), *The Big Gundown* (*La resa dei conti*, Sollima, 1966), and *The Great Silence* (*Il grande silenzio*, Corbucci, 1968).

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