

## **National identity in Italian Westerns and post-Westerns**

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### **Abstract**

Since Thomas Schatz defined the Western genre as ‘America’s foundation ritual’ (1981: 16), several film critics have emphasized the role of the Western as a ‘foundational fiction’. Interestingly enough, just like American Westerns deal with American identity and its foundational myth, one can find Westerns and post-Westerns made in other countries that are also concerned with these countries’ national identities. This article analyzes how Spaghetti Westerns set in the United States deal metaphorically with Italian identity and foundational myths, and how post-Western films set in Italy approach similar topics more directly. The article considers several films, by directors like Pietro Germi, Sergio Sollima, Florestano Vancini or Pasquale Squitieri, from the perspective of transnational post-Westerns in order to scrutinize the way they deal with the difficulties of integration of the North and the South of Italy, and present different perspectives on the Italian foundational myth of *Risorgimento*.

### **Keywords:**

Spaghetti Westerns

meridionalism

foundational myths

Pietro Germi

Sergio Sollima

transnational cinema

*Il brigante di Tacca del Lupo*

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## Introduction

Since Thomas Schatz defined the Western genre as ‘America’s foundation ritual’ (1981: 16), different scholars have highlighted the role of the Western as a foundational fiction of American identity (Cawelti 1999). The Western has thus been linked to European national epics -from *The Iliad* and *La chanson de Roland (The Song of Roland)* to *El Cantar del Mio Cid (The Song of my Cid)*,<sup>1</sup> which have helped solidify a national identity connected to specific national values (Sarf 1983:10). These texts are believed to capture and express the essence of a nation and tell the story of its origin, a part of its history that is considered a fundamental event in the development of its national identity. Doris Sommer researched the Latin American national romantic novels from the nineteenth century that helped create and consolidate national identity and coined the term ‘foundational fictions’ for these types of fictions. She followed Benedict Anderson’s idea of ‘imagined communities’ and gave ample evidence supporting the importance of national romances like *Amalia* (1851) or *Doña Bárbara (Lady Barbara)* (1929) in the development of Latin American national identities (Sommer 1993). These novels, written respectively by the Argentinian José Mármol and the Venezuelan Rómulo Gallegos, helped solidify the identity of their nations by developing romantic stories that served as allegories for national progress.

Interestingly enough, just as US Westerns deal with American identity and its foundational myths, Westerns and post-Westerns made in other countries also deal with these countries’ identities and foundational myths, as I show later. Following this transnational pattern, I investigate the situation of Westerns and post-Westerns in Italy and their role as ‘foundational fictions’ which scrutinize Italian foundational myths and national identity. First, I look briefly at a group of political Spaghetti Westerns that make metaphorical references to the *questione meridionale*<sup>2</sup> and its roots in the *Risorgimento*.<sup>3</sup> These films are *La resa dei conti (The Big Gundown)* (1966), *Faccia a faccia (Face to Face)* (1967), and *Corri, uomo,*

*corri* (*Run, Man, Run*) (1968), all of them directed by Sergio Sollima, as well as *Il buono, il brutto, il cattivo* (*The Good, the Bad and the Ugly*) (1966), directed by Sergio Leone. Secondly, I search for examples of Italian post-Westerns and analyze in more detail their cultural role as scrutinizers of Italian identity and foundational myths, specifically the birth of the Italian nation during the *Risorgimento* and the political, economic and cultural clash between the North and the South of Italy. I analyze two early examples of transnational post-Westerns directed by Pietro Germi in the 1940s and 1950s that consider the birth of the Italian state in the *Risorgimento* and its rebirth after fascism and the Second World War. I then proceed to examine two types of films closely related to Westerns that can also be considered transnational post-Westerns: films about the *Risorgimento* process, and *briganti* (bandits) films. Following Neil Campbell's theories about the post-Western and previous analyses of transnational post-Westerns, I identify the references to Westerns in these films as well as their political implications about Italian foundational myths and national identity.

### **Transnational Post-Westerns**

In order to define transnational post-Westerns, I start by considering an illustrative example: the French film *Les Cowboys* ('The cowboys') (Bidegain, 2015), which adapts *The Searchers* (Ford, 1956) to a contemporary French setting in order to better understand the French Republican identity and the problems which have arisen as Muslim minorities integrate into French society. As its director Thomas Bidegain has pointed out:

There is this idea that every Western shows the state of the nation. So when you watch a Western, you get to know the world of the farmers, or the world of the Indians, or the moment of democracy. Every time, it's a state of the nation. All the good Westerns do

this. And so I had this idea of showing a certain state of the nation and using this model to talk about us and relate how the situation has progressed. (Talu 2016: n.pag.)

In this case, the director wanted to show the state of the *French* nation regarding a contemporary issue, using the structural pattern of Westerns to explore this connection. *Les Cowboys* is then a pertinent example of a new type of Western-like film that has been termed ‘post-Westerns’. The concept of post-Western was first applied to cinema by Philip French in the 1970s and it has been employed by a variety of critics since then to refer to different books and films. Scholars such as Richard Slotkin (1992), John G. Cawelti (1999), Susan Kollin (2007), and Krista Comer (2011) have applied it successfully to the fields of Film or Western Studies, although they do not always agree on its features or on the films or books that can be included in the category. Philip French, for example, uses it exclusively for film Westerns *set* ‘in the present-day West where lawmen, rodeo riders, and Cadillac-driving ranchers are still in thrall to the frontier myth’ (1973: 19-20). Cawelti, instead, includes many other types of films *made* in the present that ‘draw on Western themes and imagery but treat the Western tradition in a subversive, ironic, or otherwise critical fashion’, such as films set in the contemporary West, films set ‘on the boundaries of civilization’ (like the inner city or futuristic settings) and, more generally, revisionist Westerns like *Little Big Man* (Penn, 1970) or *Unforgiven* (Eastwood, 1992) (1999: 119).

Neil Campbell’s monograph *Post-Westerns* (2013) is the most ambitious and thorough contribution toward the definition and application of the category. He uses the term for films produced after the Second World War which are ‘coming after and going beyond the traditional Western while engaging with and commenting on its deeply haunting assumptions and values’ (2013: 31). He relates his use of the prefix *post* to words like *postcolonialism*, *poststructuralism*, or *postmodernism*, both in a chronological sense and in the sense of opposing their antecedents, deconstructing them, and trying to go beyond them. Post-Western

films like John Sayles' *Lone Star* (1996) or the Coen brothers' *No Country for Old Men* (2007) take the classic structures and themes of the genre to interact, overlap and interrelate in complex dialogical ways. The concept of post-Western seems to be gaining currency both in the fields of Western Studies and in Film Studies, although it has also been contested by critics like Lee Clark Mitchell (2018) and Mathew Carter (2015), who resent the *posthumous* connotations of the prefix *post*, which might suggest a premature burial of a genre that continues to produce interesting films every year.

Previous studies (González 2016, 2019) have also examined the existence of *transnational* post-Westerns like *Les Cowboys*, films set and crafted in countries away from the United States dealing with issues of national identity, foundational myths, and the status of minorities. Two other relevant examples are Ireland's *Into the West* (Newell, 1992) and Spain's *800 balas* (*800 Bullets*) (de la Iglesia, 2002). *Into the West* deals with the problems of Irish national identity through the story of two children who belong to the 'travelling' community and believe that they are living inside a Western film when they leave the outskirts of Dublin to ride into the Irish West on the back of a magic stallion. The film uses this story to develop a discourse about the Irish foundational origins in the Celtic Western coast (as opposed to the English-dominated East represented by Dublin and its surroundings), as well as a reflection about the role of Ireland in the contemporary Western world. Similarly, *800 Bullets* presents the story of a group of former stuntmen in the abandoned Almería sets where many Spaghetti Westerns were made, but it also prompts the audience to consider Spanish national identity and the role of a nation forced to choose between an orientalist and 'occidental' identity model (González 2019). The Australian films *Mystery Road* (Sen, 2012) and *Goldstone* (Sen, 2016), are further examples of the post-Western phenomenon. Aboriginal director Ivan Sen captures the complexities behind Australian identity and origins using visual and thematic references to

both American and Australian Western films to highlight the importance of indigenous culture (González 2020).

### **Discourses of national identity in Spaghetti Westerns**

Christopher Frayling pointed out forty years ago that ‘many directors of Spaghetthis tended to come from further south’ (1981: 59) and that there was a relation between these films and the south of Italy: ‘the hostility to codified law (and to the encroachments of central government) [...] which was to become central to the Spaghetti Westerns, finds a parallel [...] in the equivalent hostilities of Southern Italian society’ (1981: 58). Other specialists have complemented these observations with references to the minorities portrayed in these films and their relation to Italy’s *questione meridionale*. Maggie Günsberg, for example, has established a link between ‘uncivilized, Southern Italian, peasant non-whiteness’ and ‘Mexican non-whiteness’ (2005: 210), while Lee Broughton has highlighted the parallel experiences of Southern Italians migrating to the North and African Americans, relating them to the portrayal of blacks in Italian Westerns (2016: 108).

Austin Fisher has developed this relation in detail in *Radical Frontiers in the Spaghetti Western*, pointing out the ‘important symbolic role played by the South in framing Italian national identity, which accords with the function of the Wild West in US culture’ (2011: 51). According to Fisher, both the American West and Italian South share a distrust of authority and a pastoral nostalgia for the agrarian days, as well as a desire to resist the central government manifested in the existence of romanticized bandits. Both regions have also been described by using the contrast between ‘civilization’ (associated with the outsiders) and ‘savagery’ (related to the natives). Fisher also reminds us that in both countries there were civil wars in the 1860s, ending with the victory of an industrialized North over the South and with the self-construction

of both Norths as ‘liberators’ of the ‘Southern masses’. As Dal Lago and Halpern also point out, ‘Both the United States and Italy emerged as unified nations in the course of the 1860s as a result of ideological and military conquests waged by the two norths against the two souths’ (2002: 18). As a result of these similarities, and of the fact that Spaghetti Westerns were consciously pitched to Southern audiences in the Italian market (Frayling 1981: 63), it is easy to understand that Italian Southern spectators were more than ready to relate their plight to the ‘darker’ subaltern characters of a ‘cinematic genre which frequently questions the wisdom of central government’s laws [...] which asserts the dignity of rural communities in the face of hardship and which conjures up avenging heroes to defend those communities against threats from outside’ (Fisher 2011: 54).

One of the examples chosen by Fisher is *La resa dei conti* (*The Big Gundown*) (1966), directed by Sergio Sollima and based on a short story written by Franco Solinas and Fernando Morandi. The original story was actually set in Sardinia and it told the story of a lawman hired by the local dignitaries to apprehend a Sardinian peasant, who was said to have attacked a young girl. The climax reveals that the peasant was innocent, and had been framed by corrupt local officials to cover up their own misdeeds. Awoken to the true nature of the system he had served, the police officer still sees no alternative but to shoot the innocent man in cold blood and protect himself. Helped by Sergio Donati in writing the script, Sollima moved the story to the Texas-Mexico border, where a bounty hunter played by Lee Van Cleef chases a Mexican character called Cuchillo (played by Cuban actor Tomás Milián) who is falsely accused of raping and murdering a young girl. The audience finds out that the real murderer is in fact the son-in-law of the Texas railway tycoon who had hired the bounty hunter.

The ending of the film departs from the story and shows not only Cuchillo’s innocence, but also the bounty hunter’s transformation from a rigid lawman into a more flexible frontiersman with a personal moral code who decides to let Cuchillo go free. The transposition



from the South of Italy to the American border works easily and so would the identification of Southern audiences with the character Cuchillo. As a bandit, he inherits the clownish features of the Arlecchino (Harlequin) figure from the *commedia dell'arte* in the way he manages to repeatedly escape the bounty hunter. Cuchillo in fact becomes the main focus of the film, a Southern 'darker' bandit and former revolutionary fighter in the Juárez army who could easily remind the audiences in the South of Italy of similar *briganti* who had fought against the conquering Piedmontese troops. Cuchillo playfully escapes the Northerners' chase and, despite his material disadvantages (a knife against all sorts of guns), manages not only to escape, but also to assert his innocence in the process.

The Cuchillo character became so popular that he reappeared in several Spaghetti Westerns, including the sequel *Corri, uomo, corri* (*Run, Man, Run*) (1968), also directed by Sollima. Cuchillo is again chased, in this case by French mercenaries serving Mexican president Porfirio Díaz, by revolutionary bandits, by an American gunslinger, and even by Cuchillo's fiancée, who simply wants Cuchillo to stop running and marry her. Fisher has pointed out how in this sequel Sollima, by filming several scenes with metafictional techniques,<sup>4</sup> 'not only placed the peasant at the centre of the plot', but he positioned him as a 'mediator between the audience and the action' (Fisher 2011: 141), thereby increasing the intended audience's identification with the character. Milián later speculated that his peasant roles were popular because 'the Third World figure could in some sense have also been an Italian sub proletarian' (quoted by Fisher 2011: 141), or indeed a peasant from the South of Italy, as I have argued before.

Aliza S. Wong has connected these two films with Emilio Salgari's *Sandokan* novels, which were adapted to television precisely under the direction of Sollima in the 1970s. The postcolonial framework that Wong applies, and the anti-imperialist message that she uncovers in Salgari's novels can in fact be easily adapted to Sollima's Cuchillo films and have also been

used to reinterpret the history of *Risorgimento* as a colonial war: ‘The *western all’italiana* expanded upon, appropriated and re-envisioned Salgarian stylings: the anti-imperialist renegade, the Other-ed, marginalized hero, fast-paced explosions of violence’ (Wong 2016: 69). This anti-imperialist message made perfect sense for leftist directors like Sollima who, ‘through a peculiar, sometimes vernacular and irreverent use of the American Western, repeatedly put on Italian screens [...] the multiple sometimes revolutionary Marxist discourses that circulated in Italy in the 1960s and 1970s’ (Trento 2015: 54). We need to remember that the late 1960s and early 1970s saw in Italy the emergence of leftist radical groups like the *Brigate Rosse* (‘Red Brigades’), who used terrorist tactics to fight against the government’s policy and against right-wing terrorist groups. These years, known as the *anni di piombo* (‘years of lead’) followed heated discussions in leftist groups about the legitimacy of violence, a subject particularly relevant in the Western genre. Italian filmmakers decided to address these issues in direct and uncompromising terms by using the tools provided by the Western genre.

*Faccia a faccia* (*Face to Face*) (1967), for example, was another Western directed by Sollima and portrays the unlikely partnership of Beau Bennet, a wanted outlaw played again by Tomás Milián, and Professor Fletcher, a Boston university lecturer played by Gian María Volonté. The plot is similar to *The Big Gundown*, involving a chase by an undercover Pinkerton agent and a succession of heists and raids. The focus, however, is less on the violent action and more on the dialogues and the evolution of the two main characters, which leads to their eventual exchange of roles: the professor ends up justifying the use of violence and cruelty while Beau discovers his moral conscience. Their conversations about the use of violence<sup>5</sup> reflect the ongoing debate in Italy’s leftist circles at the time, and they are probably the most remarkable feature of a film that has been dubbed ‘an intellectual Spaghetti Western’ (Hughes 2004: 181) as well as ‘the most loquacious and intellectually sophisticated of all Spaghetti Westerns’ (Fisher 2011: 78). In the end, the film reflects not only the contemporary discussions

in Italy about political violence, but also the implications about a Southern bandit who departs from the 'savage' stereotype and becomes the hero of the film.

Most of the examples chosen by Fisher are obviously political Spaghetti Westerns, but even films that are not overtly political, like Sergio Leone's, are 'unequivocally in dialogue' with the *Risorgimento*, as Joseph Pugliese has pointed out: 'Leone takes the violent colonial history that impacted on virtually every aspect of life in the South and cinematically transposes it to the Americas, specifically to the US Southwest, its border regions and Mexico' (2017: 23-24). *The Good, the Bad and the Ugly*, for example, is set in the middle of an American Civil War that is reminiscent of Italy's own civil war in the South during the *Risorgimento*. Pugliese establishes the connections between the destroyed US Southern town shown in the film and the descriptions of the ruins left by Northern troops in the South of Italy, as well as the similitudes between the Union's prison camp shown in the film and the prison camps established by the Piedmontese in the *Mezzogiorno*. In Pugliese's own words, 'the graphic scenes of indiscriminate violence and mass killing that inscribe Leone's films echo the historically documented slaughter of southern civilians by the Piedmontese invading forces' (2017: 28). We should also mention the presence in this film of another subaltern Southern bandit, Tuco (played by Eli Wallach), who explains the reasons to become an outlaw with these words: 'where we come from, if one did not want to die of poverty, one became a priest or a bandit'. If we added the choice of emigration to the North, these words could also perfectly reflect the situation of the audiences watching this film in the South of Italy during the 1960s.

### **Discourses of national identity in Italian post-Westerns**

These political discourses worked, as we have seen, on a metaphorical level to establish a relation between the realities of the American West and the Italian South, a relation that can

also be found in another type of film related to the Western that has been labeled transnational post-Westerns, as we have explained before. Unlike Spaghetti Westerns, these are films made *and set* in Italy that incorporate formal and narrative Western features (plot structure, camera use, *mise-en-scène*, music), but deal with Italian history and identity, with particular attention paid to the *Risorgimento*, and the forced integration of the South as the foundational myth of the Italian nation. In earlier studies on transnational post-Westerns, I have identified the following features:

- Clear references to the Western genre that take the spectator into a space of dialogue and reflection with the assumptions and values of the genre in a contemporary situation and a new context;
- The choice of a specific landscape and region in the new environment, reminiscent in different ways of the American West;
- The use of that landscape with a political intention, mainly to probe into national identity, foundational myths, and contemporary contradictions of the country where these films are set and produced;
- The difficulties of integration of racial, ethnic or social minorities, the ‘contemporary Others’ equivalent to Native Americans;
- The contradictions derived from the application of traditional models of masculinity to contemporary national situations;
- The contrast between death and regeneration: the use of the conventions of a ‘dead’ genre to explore the regenerative possibilities of a particular landscape and context (González 2016: 18)

Most of the transnational post-Westerns mentioned before have been produced in the last few decades, but when we look at the Italian context we find two films that can be considered very early examples of transnational post-Westerns, since they were produced in the 1940s and 1950s.<sup>6</sup> Both were directed by Pietro Germi (1914-1974), a film director who is usually considered a ‘genre specialist’, a craftsman rather than a personal ‘author’ in a country where *auteurs* like Fellini, Antonioni, Rossellini or Visconti made it difficult for genre directors to be equally acknowledged. In fact, it was Fellini himself who, after collaborating with him on several scripts, nicknamed Germi *il falegname* or ‘the carpenter’ (Iannone 2016: 51), a peculiar compliment for a director who did not fit the political or stylistic profile of more canonical directors of this period.<sup>7</sup>

*In nome della legge (In the Name of the Law)* (Germi, 1949) is credited as being one of the first films about the mafia in Sicily, telling the story of a young magistrate who travels to rural Sicily and struggles to apply the official law rather than the mafia’s. The film combines elements of neorealism with other genres- not only the Western, but also crime film and melodrama, although the Western elements are very prominent and particularly relevant to our analysis. The first scenes of the film make obvious references to the Western genre, as Pasquale Iannone has explained in detail (2016: 57-59). The opening shots offer a view of the Sicilian rugged sun-blasted landscape, accompanied by a voice-over that describes Sicily as ‘a bare, burnt land of blinding white walls, a hermetic society that the stranger cannot comprehend’, in anticipation of the hard task awaiting the young magistrate, Guido Schiavi, played by Massimo Girotti.

The next three sequences look like they came straight out of a Western. The first shows the ambush and robbery of a man leading two horses and a cart across the Sicilian landscape. When the victim uncovers one of the bandits’ faces and recognizes him, the bandit decides to kill him in cold blood. The final shot shows the body of the dead man in the foreground and

the bandits riding off into the valley in the distance. The second sequence is equally inspired by the Western genre: a train arrives at a remote station with a bush of prickly pear and cacti<sup>8</sup> in the vicinity. As it leaves the frame, a Western-sounding theme by Carlo Rustichelli plays, and a man (Guido) is shown standing on the platform. We then realize that there was another person sitting on one of his suitcases; it is Guido's predecessor, who tries unsuccessfully to persuade him to go back on the next train to Palermo. After Guido is driven into the town by the coach that had picked him up in the train station, the juxtaposition of shots of townspeople staring impassively at Guido, and the view of the magistrate alone in the street illustrate the difficulty of the task facing the young officer of the law by means of codes and *mise-en-scène* also derived from the Western genre.

By virtue of these visual and thematic references to the Western genre, spectators are taken into the post-Western 'space of reflection' described by Campbell in such a way that the lawless space of the West is superimposed onto a new chronotope: the Sicily of the post-Second World War period. We quickly realize we are not dealing with the traditional space of the American frontier: this is not the place where civilization and wilderness meet. This is a place where the law of the Italian State, represented by the magistrate, and the law of the mafia, represented by the mafia boss Turi Passalacqua, collide. This is further affirmed by Turi's arrival on the back of a beautiful white horse accompanied by his men, which is arranged to emulate a Western-like *mise-en-scène*.

The evolution of the plot shows the difficulty of Guido's task, but the final sequences seem revelatory and particularly surprising to a contemporary spectator who has witnessed the open war between the mafia and the Italian State in the last decades of the twentieth century. After a young collaborator of Guido's is shot to death, he confronts Passalacqua, telling him that their 'bloody and fierce' law only leads to death. When one of his men gets ready to shoot Guido, Passalacqua stops him, surprising the audience with a speech in which he

magnanimously accepts the arrival of the law of the State. The film ends with Passalacqua delivering the murderer to the magistrate - a happy ending that not only seems forced but also morally complicated. John Dickie has explained how these scenes reflect the existence of a tacit pact between 'conservatives, the mafia, and the police' by which the Italian State accepted coexistence with the mafia as a way to resolve the political unrest and to finish with the brigands that ruled the Sicilian countryside in the years following the end of the war. Dickie summarizes the spirit of the film's final scenes like this: 'better the mafia than the Communists' (2013: 31).

If we now return to the features that characterize other transnational post-Westerns, one can see how the choice of particular landscapes reminiscent of the West (relevantly, in the south of Italy) leads to a political discourse regarding the birth of the Italian Republic after the fascist period and the Second World War, justifying the integration of the mafia's structures into the official State. It is also now possible to see how people from the South are portrayed as the 'Other': strange, silent, and hostile to foreign interventions. Finally, we can consider the last two features that we have identified in transnational post-Westerns (the redefinition of masculinity and the possibility of regeneration) by observing the dynamic between Guido and Passalacqua, and the two models of masculinity they represent. As Danielle Hipkins has pointed out, Guido represents a feminine model in contrast to the 'real' masculinity associated with the Western genre and embodied by Passalacqua and his men, armed with guns and on horseback. Both models of masculinity are associated with models of political and legal systems: the new law of the State versus the old law of the mafia.<sup>9</sup> Hipkins has also uncovered an Oedipal reading of the film, since Passalacqua explicitly relates Guido to his own son on two different occasions, and the end of the film displays a positive resolution of the Oedipal complex, with the 'father' accepting the ascent of the 'son', representing a shameful political compromise (2019: 174). After the 'disappearance of masculine honour during the fascist

*ventennio* and the defeat of the Second World War' (2019: 172), national regeneration becomes possible, even if it is stained by association with a criminal organization.

In contrast with *In the Name of the Law*, *Il brigante di Tacca del Lupo* (*The Bandit of Tacca del Lupo*) (Germi, 1952) deals with a more potent foundational myth than the post-war efforts of reconstruction: the *Risorgimento* and the wars of unification against the Southern resistance, represented by the brigands. The film tells the story of a battalion of Piedmontese soldiers as they try to capture a southern bandit, Raffa Raffa (inspired by real *brigante* Carmine Crocco), from the craggy mountains of Basilicata. The battalion is led by Captain Giordani (played by Amedeo Nazzari), with the collaboration of a former Bourbon policeman (played by Saro Urzi) helping the Northern troops navigate the resistance of the South. The references to the Western genre are again obvious from the opening titles, which appear superimposed over some rugged cliffs, mirroring the American Southwest and accompanied by another Rustichelli theme: a version of the typical bugle call of the US cavalry. This call is repeated in the final charge of the Northern troops against the Southern rebels in a long sequence which follows the visual codes and *mise-en-scène* of a Western battle against Natives. The film has been related to John Ford's 'cavalry trilogy', more specifically to *Fort Apache* (Ford, 1948), not only because of the visual reminiscences, but also because of the likeness of the relationship between the characters played by Nazzari and Urzi in the Italian film, and Henry Fonda and John Wayne in *Fort Apache* (Iannone 2016: 62).

Once again, the formal and thematic references take the spectator into a post-Western 'space of reflection', allowing the spectator to contemplate the similarities between countries across the Atlantic from one another. This also allows for the audience to focus further on the foundational myth of the Italian nation. The political view presented by Germi is the traditional interpretation of the *Risorgimento* as a liberation from the yoke of the Bourbon King, resulting in the portrayal of the bandits as savages. An unbelievable 'happy end' to the film occurs when



Northern troops and the Southern bandits sing and dance together, in a visual metaphor of the ‘happy unification’ of all Italians into one Italian nation. As in other transnational post-Westerns, audiences can also establish a relationship between the native ‘Other’ seen in Western films, and the natives of the Italian South in this ‘Southern’ (rather than Western) film. These natives are portrayed as impassive, suspicious (based on *omertà* rules),<sup>10</sup> and filmed in ‘rigorously stylized’ compositions in order to emphasize their otherness (Iannone 2016: 63). In fact, it is one of the stereotypical traits of the Southern population (the traditional view of masculine honour and the need for *vendetta* when honour has been damaged) that allows the Northern troops to kill the *brigante*. Raffa Raffa had raped a Southern woman, causing her dishonoured husband to join the Piedmontese army in search of revenge. The affront is indeed avenged when, following the Southern policeman’s advice, the woman’s husband kills the brigand in a traditional knife duel.

In both films, Pietro Germi uses Western references to show a rather conservative view on two key moments in Italian history: the foundational myth of the *Risorgimento*, and the rebirth of the country after fascism and the Second World War. Iannone sees Germi as ‘progenitor of the Spaghetitis’, ‘having done more than any other Italian filmmaker in laying the groundwork for the genre’s celebrated hybridity’ (2016: 65). However, there are also other types of films inspired by Germi: Italian transnational post-Westerns, where we find Western traces and further political discourse on Italian national identity and foundational myths. There are several mafia films related to *In the Name of the Law* in both Italy and the United States, but they are not particularly connected to the Western genre. However, there are two Italian subgenres related to *The Bandit of Tacca del Lupo* where we can find Western traces: films about the *Risorgimento* process and films about brigands in different times of Italian history.

Pietro Cavallo has written about *Risorgimento* films in the 1950s and 1960s and explained how the mood of these films changed from ‘a sense of delusion and bitterness’ in the

early 1950s (2010: 14) to a more positive view of the process of unification around the centenary's commemoration in 1961. In fact, *The Bandit of Tacca del Lupo*, seems to be the exception among other 'disillusioned' films from the 1950s like *Senso* (Visconti, 1953). The numerous films made in the early 1960s, however (like Rossellini's *Viva l'Italia* (Garibaldi) [1961]), present a more optimistic view of the historical facts and consider the Italian 'economic miracle' and general well-being of the country to be a result of the unification that had occurred a century earlier (Cavallo 2010: 17).<sup>11</sup> With the exception of *The Bandit of Tacca del Lupo*, none of these films seem to be particularly influenced by the Western. It is only in the 1970s that a *Risorgimento* film appears with enough Western influences to be considered from a transnational post-Western perspective.

*Bronte, cronaca di un massacro che i libri di storia non hanno raccontato* (Bronte: *Chronicle of a Massacre that History Books did not Tell*) (Vancini, 1971) is inspired by Giovanni Verga's short story *Libertà* ('Freedom') (1882)<sup>12</sup> based on events that really occurred in Bronte, a small town in southern Sicily. In 1860, after Garibaldi had conquered the island, there was a popular revolt against the landowners, sixteen of whom were systematically slaughtered by angry peasants. Afterwards, Garibaldi sends a well-known Northern military man, General Bixio. This results in a harsh suppression of the revolt in which five people are sentenced to death and executed by means of a fast military trial. The references to Westerns are particularly evident in the filming of the revolt, when the peasants go from house to house killing the landowners. It cannot be forgotten that Florestano Vancini had directed the Spaghetti Western *I lunghi giorni della vendetta* (*Long Days of Vengeance*) in 1967, and he certainly films and edits these scenes using Spaghetti Westerns' visual and aural codes. For example, when the leader of the revolt confronts two landowners trying to save themselves by shouting their (fake) allegiance to Garibaldi, there is a succession of shot-reverse-shots of the scared faces of the landowners and the irate faces of the peasants. This sequence is accompanied by

isolated strums from a Sicilian mouth harp (*scacciapensieri*) and a close-up of the hand holding the gun, particularly reminiscent of Spaghetti Westerns about the Mexican Revolution, like Sollima's *Run, Man, Run* or Damiano Damiani's *Quién Sabe (A Bullet for the General)* (1966).

By focusing on one of the *Risorgimento*'s less known and less heroic events, the director uncovers the shortcomings of this historical process and the betrayal of the aspirations of the Sicilian peasants. We can see then how the film introduces not just a spatial discourse about the North and South in Italy, but also a socio-political discourse about the failure of Garibaldi's promises of agrarian reform and political justice. Giordana Poggiolo-Kaftan has analyzed both Verga's story and Vancini's film from a post-colonial perspective and has highlighted Verga's omission of some historical facts-like Garibaldi's promise to the peasants of the right to common land to gain their support. These omissions were the result of his 'subaltern position as a Sicilian writer working for Northern readers and publishers', moving in the 'difficult *in-between* terrain, as he is simultaneously "colonized" as Sicilian, and "colonizer", as a member of the land-owning class and a supporter of national unification' (original emphasis) (2019: 53-55). While Verga omits some historical facts in his story, Vancini's film is closer to history and is more straightforward in foregrounding not only Garibaldi's promise as trigger of the Bronte revolt but also the *Risorgimento*'s shortcomings to unite the North and the South.

The film develops the historical character of Nicolò Lombardi-a liberal lawyer who believed Garibaldi's promises and tried to prevent violence in Bronte, but was unable to stop the murder of innocents and was himself executed by General Bixio. Lombardi's words in his own defence are representative of Vancini's ideological position (similar to Gramsci's view of the *Risorgimento* as a failed revolution) when he denounces not just the injustice against himself, but also the 'injustice perpetrated against Sicilians, as a people, by Garibaldi's arrival in 1860' (Poggiolo-Kaftan 2019: 65). The film also highlights the differences and incomprehensibility between the Northerners and the Southerners, underlined by the use of

different dialects and even by the songs that accompany both groups: ‘the incomprehension between the two worlds passes through the tradition of the songs and, even more importantly, through the very style of musical performance of the vocal pieces which becomes the expression of two distant and irreconcilable worlds’ (Cosci 2017: 69). Finally, the film highlights the prejudice of the Piedmontese against Sicilians, who are portrayed as a savage racialized Other in the eyes of the invaders.<sup>13</sup>

The film’s political discourse is in line with the revision of the *Risorgimento* as the national founding myth that has gripped Italy since the end of the Second World War, and particularly in the last three decades. As John A. Davis put it:

Everyone, it seems, is busy rethinking, revisioning, revisiting, remaking, remapping or demythologizing the *Risorgimento*. However, it is not the *Risorgimento* that is being revisited but the changing images that have made it the potent founding myth of the Italian nation for successive generations of Italians. (2005: 27)

A group of contemporary historians and cultural analysts have questioned the traditional view of the *Risorgimento* as a process of unification and liberation, placing emphasis on the military conquest and the imposition of Northern political structures on Southerners. These writers and activists (sometimes called *neo-Bourbons*) go as far as to view these events as an act of colonization by a foreign power over a kingdom that had a higher level of political and economic development than previously admitted. They also highlight the importance of the popular resistance and the scope of the repression, transforming the stories of brigands from isolated acts of violence into parts of a real civil war between a conquering force and the resisting population.<sup>14</sup> The view presented by these historians and activists has become more and more popular in the South, particularly in the years around 2011, which celebrated the

150<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Italy's unification, as a response to the Northern independentist movements represented by political parties like the *Lega Nord* in the North of Italy.

This process of resistance and repression is addressed in several films about *briganti*, which also use Western references and which can therefore be considered from the perspective of transnational post-Westerns. Before going into the specific case of Italy, it is important to note that social banditry is not exclusive of the Italian peninsula, and that bandit films belong to a global subgenre closely related to Westerns and questions of national identity. Eric Hobsbawm defined social bandits as 'outlaws whom the lord and state regard as criminals, but who [...] are considered by their people as heroes, as champions, avengers, fighters for justice, perhaps even leaders of liberation' (2000: 20). Social banditry is a universal social phenomenon that can be found in a variety of countries and is often associated with sentiments of national identity against invaders or ruling elites. Bandits are used as vehicles to articulate what Benedict Anderson calls 'imagined communities' by means of 'national imaginations' (1991: 30), to the extent that in Australia Ned Kelly, for example, is considered a national hero that epitomizes the Australian character. As a result of this global presence, we can find examples of bandit films in countries like Australia (bushranger films), Brazil (*cangaço* films), the United States (outlaw films about Jesse James or Billy the Kid), Spain (*bandolero* films), and Italy. Thomas Klein has identified the Western as the most common generic framework used to tell these stories, specifically in the case of the United States (with Western outlaw films) and Australia (with Ned Kelly films) (2014: 249), and this is also the case for some of the Italian bandit films to be considered at present.

After *The Bandit of Tacca del Lupo*, the next bandit films to use a Western framework are *briganti* films which come about at the end of the twentieth century.<sup>15</sup> *Li chiamarono Briganti! (Brigands!)* (Squitieri, 1999) is based on the exploits of Carmine Crocco (1830-1905), the same bandit which *The Bandit of Tacca del Lupo* is loosely based on. However, the

focus here is on the real bandit and his gang rather than on the troops fighting against him. Interestingly, Crocco, similarly to Ned Kelly in Australia, has become somewhat of a folk hero in the South of Italy, although on a lesser scale. There is a museum in his home town in Basilicata and also a spectacle that uses a combination of film, theatre, music, and hundreds of amateur actors to reproduce the rebellion of Carmine Crocco and his gang of two thousand men against the Piedmontese army.<sup>16</sup>

The film was directed by Pasquale Squitieri (1938-2017), a crime and social film director who began his career with two Spaghetti Westerns. The stylistic references to Westerns in the film are so clear that it has been called a western ‘antirisorgimentale’ (against the *Risorgimento*) (Marmo 2011). It is dedicated to Sergio Leone, and shot and edited following the formal conventions of a Spaghetti Western. The film remains true to these patterns, from the horse-riding scenes of the bandits in the landscape of the Basilicata mountains to the use of explicit violence and application of slow motion in violent death scenes. These references are so intrusive that they seem to be more than a simple stylistic choice, especially considering that Spaghetti Westerns had had their heyday more than two decades before this production. *Brigands!* is then a transnational post-Western that makes explicit the associations between the Italian South and the American West that Spaghetti Westerns had previously kept at a metaphorical level. By taking the spectators into Campbell’s theorized ‘space of reflection’, we see the combat and contrast between the natives and the invading army from a new point of view. Following the new revisionist approach to the *Risorgimento* that we have mentioned before, and in contrast to the more conventional view presented in *The Bandit of Tacca del Lupo*, the film emphasizes the leftist and ‘meridionalist’ political message of the film: this is a story of a violent conquest, making the rebels heroes and martyrs to their cause. They are manipulated by the Spanish Bourbon troops and later discarded when Southern liberal

politicians and the church make an alliance with the conquerors against the poor peasants and the bandits.

In contrast with the ‘Otherized’ Southerners that we have seen in previous films, *Brigands!* presents Southerners as scorned heroes portrayed by handsome actors (Enrico Lo Verso, Branko Tesanovic, Ennio Coltorti) and betrayed by evil Northerners and Southern elites. Even the women are portrayed in a new feminist light, when beautiful actresses (Claudia Cardinale, Roberta Armani, Lina Sistri) play empowered female bandits or peasants. The ending of the film connects the past with the contemporary issue of Southern migrants in the North by showing a group of peasants travelling away from their lands, as they explain their flight with this sentence: ‘Either brigand or emigrant’.<sup>17</sup> The film was extremely unsuccessful upon its release, and according to its producers this was due to censorship and an officious boycott. There are some interesting stylistic choices, like the songs and epic poem performed by Lina Sastri at the beginning and end of the film, which work as a Greek chorus emphasizing the political discourse implicit in the film. However, from a narrative and formal point of view we are in agreement with most contemporary reviewers that the film was, on the one hand too Manichean (with the bandits portrayed in an extremely good light and the villains depicted as simplistically evil) and, on the other, unevenly shot and edited, with broken camera movements and technical defects in the addition of dubbing and soundtrack, as remarked by Marmo (2011: 3). As proof of the deep sociocultural changes that are taking place in the South of Italy, the film is regularly shown at ‘meridionalist’ rallies, but it is probably more valuable and potent from a cultural than aesthetic perspective.

Finally, *La banda Grossi. Una storia vera quasi dimenticata* (*The Grossi Gang*) (Ripalti, 2018) is a recent film about another real bandit with a gang: Terenzio Grossi, who from 1861-1862 fought with his gang in the *Le Marche* region against the Piedmontese monarchy. The director himself has admitted the Western influences, by calling the film a

‘western marchigiano’, or a ‘western ad avancarica’, even though the references are more superficial than those in the films seen thus far. This film closely resembles an adventure film with a rather linear plot: Grossi and his band of rebels stand against the new King in protest of taxes and the military draft, and their fight continues until he is betrayed by one of his companions. As opposed to all the previous films, the setting is not in the south of Italy but in Le Marche, a region formerly belonging to the Papal States, proving that unhappiness with the conquest was not limited to the Bourbon kingdom but was also felt in other parts of Italy. While the view of *Risorgimento* is also critical, the film seems to be less interested in politics and more in the adventure and development of the characters, who are not presented as heroes, since they all rob, kill and rape.<sup>18</sup>

## Conclusions

In the same way that American Westerns and Irish, French or Australian post-Westerns can be considered ‘foundational fictions’ as described by Doris Sommer, I have shown that both Spaghetti Westerns and Italian post-Westerns can also be analysed as ‘foundational fictions’, since the Southern locations shared by both types of films could easily trigger audiences to reflect on Italian identity and its historical foundation in the Italian South in the *Risorgimento*.

On the one hand, I have shown how Spaghetti Westerns established a connection on a metaphorical level between the American West and the South of Italy. These connections incited the identification of Southern audiences with the ‘darker Others’ appearing in these films and with the bandits rebelling against external authority. As scholars like Fisher and Pugliese have shown, these films took advantage of the similarities between Italian history and that of the United States (a civil war won by an industrial North which led to the solidification of national identity at exactly the same point in history), to emphasize the connections between



the American West and the Italian South as spaces of conquest that shared not only a distrust of authority, but also similar processes of resistance and banditry against central governments.

On the other hand, I have also found examples of transnational post-Westerns both before and after the cycle of Spaghetti Westerns from the 1960s and 1970s. Germi's two early post-Westerns, as well as some films about *briganti* and the *Risorgimento* share the evident Western references identified in this paper, and use them to usher viewers into Campbell's theorized 'space of reflection'. The Southern location shared by all these films allows for the development of a political discourse about Italian identity, the *Risorgimento* process, and the rebirth of the nation after the fascist period and the Second World War. Since these films are not only about the past but also about contemporary situations, their specific political discourses are very different, from the traditional view of *Risorgimento* as liberation and unification in *The Bandit of Tacca del Lupo* to the 'meridionalist', critical messages of later films like *Brigands!*. These transnational post-Westerns work as cultural reflections of the deep sociocultural changes that have taken place in the South of Italy, where 'neo-Bourbon', 'meridionalist' approaches towards the *Risorgimento* seem to be gaining ground against the more traditional view of this process as a period of emancipation and nation-building. The appearance of films like *The Grossi Gang* and *Dogman* in 2018 are testaments not only to the present power of the Western as an influence for contemporary scriptwriters and directors, but also to its flexibility as a cultural tool to express complex cultural and political messages outside its traditional chronotope.

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<sup>1</sup> *The Iliad* is considered to have been written down circa the eight century BCE. *The Song of Roland* is an eleventh-century epic poem based on the Frankish military leader Roland at the Battle of Roncevaux Pass in 778, during the reign of Charlemagne. It is the oldest surviving major work of French literature. *The Song of my Cid*, also known in English as *The Poem of the Cid* is the oldest preserved Castilian epic poem, composed sometime between 1140 and 1207.

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<sup>2</sup> The *questione meridionale* or ‘Italian Southern question’ is an expression used to refer to the coexistence and difficult integration of an industrialized North side by side with an underdeveloped South, a contrast which has been considered the biggest unresolved problem in the history of the Italian state.

<sup>3</sup> The *Risorgimento* is the movement for the liberation and unification of Italy in the nineteenth century, a historical movement whose features and meaning are being questioned recently, as I will show below.

<sup>4</sup> The examples provided by Fisher include Cuchillo positioning himself as a spectator inside the film, as well as breaking the ‘fourth wall’ by whistling the extradiegetic film’s theme.

<sup>5</sup> Before killing a prisoner he has been torturing, Fletcher declares, ‘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!’

<sup>6</sup> It could be argued that they should simply be considered ‘transnational Westerns’, since they were made at the time classical Westerns were being made in the United States, but I believe that applying the transnational post-Western’s framework helps uncover self-reflexive features that they share with a bigger corpus of films. A similar case could be *The Quiet Man* (Ford, 1952), which can also be considered an early example of Irish transnational post-Westerns (González 2016: 8).

<sup>7</sup> O’Leary and O’Rawe have highlighted that ‘Neorealism has come to be perceived as the ineluctable centre of Italian cinema for reasons that are as much ideological as aesthetic’ (2011: 110), a fact that has left the work of directors like Germi rather unexplored.

<sup>8</sup> Joseph Pugliese has highlighted the use of these two plants as a common signifier shared by the Italian (and Spanish) South and the American West (Pugliese 2017).

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<sup>9</sup> This contrast is very similar to the models of masculinity and law developed by John Ford in *The Man Who Shot Liberty Valance* (Ford, 1962). Ransom Stoddard (James Stewart) represents official law and state civilization in contrast with Liberty Valance (Lee Marvin) and Tom Doniphon (John Wayne). Stoddard's role is explicitly associated with a more feminine form of masculinity: not only cannot he use guns, but he is repeatedly shown cleaning dishes and wearing an apron. We need to remember that *In the Name of the Law* was made thirteen years *before* Ford's film (my own emphasis).

<sup>10</sup> *Omertà* is a Southern Italian code of silence and honor that stresses the importance of silence in the face of questioning by authorities or outsiders.

<sup>11</sup> The obvious anomaly is *Il Gattopardo* (*The Leopard*) (Visconti, 1963), which offers a more pessimistic view of the conquest of Sicily, of the Italian Southern question, and the historical notion of progress in general, as summarized in the well-known sentence from Di Lampedusa's novel: 'if we want everything to remain as it is, everything needs to change' ([1958] 1969: 41)

<sup>12</sup> The novella *Libertà* appeared in 1882 in 'Domenica Letteraria' and was later included in the collection *Novelle Rusticane*.

<sup>13</sup> The negative experiences of the Northerners 'were reported in books that amplified the South's 'black legend' all over Italy' (Poggiolo-Kaftan 2019: 55), and we can see an example of this prejudice in the way that General Bixio interacts not only with the rebels but also with Poulet, the Sicilian Colonel leading the revolt, and whose supposed incompetence is related to his Sicilianness by Bixio.

<sup>14</sup> This discourse is in line with the view of the American West presented by the so-called 'New Western Historians', like Patricia Nelson Limerick or Richard White, who in the 1980s revised the study of American frontier history to look at the Western conquest in the United States from different perspectives, including the point of view of the defeated.



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<sup>15</sup> There are two very interesting films about bandits from the early 60s that are completely unrelated to the Western genre: *Banditi a Orgosolo* (*Bandits of Orgosolo*) (De Seta, 1961), filmed in Sardinia with neorealist techniques, and *Salvatore Giuliano* (Rosi, 1962), based on the case of a real bandit in Sicily who was manipulated by the mafia and the right-wing forces after the Second World War.

<sup>16</sup> Crocco's record as a soldier is complex, since he first fought for the Bourbon King, then fought for Garibaldi, but ultimately led the rebellion against the Northerners for over ten years until he was betrayed and defeated.

<sup>17</sup> Unless otherwise indicated, all translations from the original Italian are mine.

<sup>18</sup> There is another recent film that shares with the films we have seen so far both the Western references and a Southern location. *Dogman* (Garrone, 2018) is a crime film set in a semi-abandoned urban development near Naples ('Villagio Coppola') clearly reminiscent of a Western ghost town. Matteo Garrone, director also of the acclaimed *Gomorrah* (2008), has explained that 'what led us to shoot there was that we needed a location that would be reminiscent of a Western' (Titmarsh 2018), and this Western-like setting is used as the lawless background for a duel reminiscent of the biblical story of David and Goliath. Garrone has also explained that the Western genre influenced him not just for the stylistic choices (like the shots of the deserted streets, or the characters framed in open backgrounds), but also to establish the relationships between characters in a frontier town where everybody knows each other and the protagonist is dependent on the support of the 'frontier community'.