



Article

The Western as a Genre of Cultural Mobility

Martin Holtz

Department of American Studies, University of Graz, Attemsgasse 25, 8010 Graz, Austria;
martin.holtz@uni-graz.at

Abstract: The Western is, in many respects, the essential American film genre, “a cornerstone of American identity” (Kitses). Yet, despite its distinctly American character, the genre has exerted a fascination all over the world. This contribution examines the Western as a site of transnational cultural exchange and as an illustration of what Stephen Greenblatt calls cultural mobility. In the work of Akira Kurosawa’s *Seven Samurai* (1954) and *Yojimbo* (1961), Western elements are evoked, which provide complex comments on the influence of American culture on Japan in the post-WWII years. While *Seven Samurai* appears to embrace the promise of class eradication as a result of Westernization, its American remake *The Magnificent Seven* (1960) shows a particular fascination for the decidedly Japanese aspects of the material, namely the idea of a warrior class dissociated from society. The Italian remake of *Yojimbo*, *Fistful of Dollars* (1964), shows how the Western can function not only as an external comment on American culture, in its cynical redefinition of the cowboy hero, but also as an amalgam of cultural practices and symbols, reaching from Japanese samurai codes to Christian Catholic redeemer imagery, that through their stylization expose the performativity of culture as such.

Keywords: Akira Kurosawa; *Seven Samurai*; *Yojimbo*; John Sturges; *The Magnificent Seven*; Sergio Leone; *Fistful of Dollars*; cultural mobility; western

1. Introduction

Clint Eastwood once said: “I feel very close to the western. There are not too many American art forms that are original. Most are derived from European art forms. Other than the western and jazz or blues, that’s all that’s really original” (Eastwood n.d.). Clint Eastwood is not the only one who considers the Western an original American art form. The French film critic André Bazin calls the Western “the American film par excellence” (Frayling 1981, p. 25), for Jim Kitses the western is “a cornerstone of American identity” (Kitses [1969] 1998, p. 16). Of course, postmodernity has rendered claims to “originality” and even “identity” problematic, and after all the United States, and certainly the United States that created the Western, are themselves largely “derived from Europe”, to use Eastwood’s formulation. Stephen Greenblatt argues that “culture” is best understood not as being expressed in an “identity”, which suggests a static and hermetic core, but rather as expressed in a “mobility”, permanently in flux and interactive, absorbing and passing on elements in a never-ending dialogue with other “mobilities” (Greenblatt 2010, pp. 1–4).

In this contribution, I want to show that the Western, for all its Americanness, is a perfect vehicle that not only demonstrates Greenblatt’s observation but also illustrates different forms of how such mobilities can be manifested. The genre has proven its transnational appeal as a popular export commodity. By that I do not only mean the popularity of American Westerns in countries around the globe, but more specifically the fact that other countries have been making Westerns for almost as long as Americans have made them. Christopher Frayling lists 1907 as the year in which the first non-American Westerns were made in France but set in America (Frayling 1981, p. 29). Fisher calls the Western a “transatlantic meeting place” (Fisher 2016, p. 8) and he draws attention to how recent scholarship has recognized how the structures, topics, and aesthetics of the genre have resonated “within a polycentric



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cultural landscape [. . .], revealing the Western to be a malleable space of cultural blending that has traversed national and political boundaries" (Fisher 2016, p. 9). Neil Campbell, for instance, regards the Western as "always already transnational [. . .] whose meanings move between cultures, crossing, bridging, and intruding simultaneously" (Campbell 2008, p. 4). With this insight, Campbell points to the fact that the genre is essentially about the negotiation of cultural exchange, as its central concept of the frontier promotes the formulation of a national identity at the interstices of a constructed "civilization vs. wilderness" paradigm, one which, following Jim Kitses' and before him, Leo Marx's influential work, sees the measured balance of the two as an ideal manifested in the "middle landscape" (Kitses [1969] 1998, p. 59; Marx 1973, p. 71). Regarding this central theme of cultural exchange, contact, and negotiated balance, Miller and Van Riper state that "those issues [. . .] are not, however, unique to the United States or to the late nineteenth century. They were, and are, part of the shared experience of all expansionist nations, and the international appeal of the Western, rests, in part, on the potential for the historical experiences of one culture to resonate with audiences from another" (Miller and Van Riper 2014, p. xiii). Limbrick argues correspondingly that the American Western is part of a "settler colonial cinema" which transcends national boundaries and which is in its specific national manifestations in constant dialogue with each other (Limbrick 2007, p. 69). Hence, the genre's characteristics are not only applicable in other cultural contexts, but they also lend themselves to reflections on cultural contact, particularly, because of the American Western's dominance as "settler colonial cinema", as a medium to comment on America, its culture, and its cultural influence on other countries particularly after World War II, most often in the form of criticism of the "dominance of Hollywood codes" (Frayling 1981, p. 29). Non-American Westerns thus more often than not embody the paradoxical position of adopting a critical stance toward America while at the same time perpetuating and thus renewing the genre used for this critique.

In order to demonstrate the manifestations of cultural mobility in the Western, I will focus on the period in which such processes were most productive and most relevant in the genre's history, namely the 1960s. My starting point is the two samurai films by director Akira Kurosawa, *Seven Samurai* (1954) and *Yojimbo* (1961), which not only reflected the Westernization of Japan during and following the American Occupation but in turn also served as the sources for Western remakes, *The Magnificent Seven* (1960) and *Fistful of Dollars* (1964), respectively. While *The Magnificent Seven* heralded the genre's turn to what Will Wright calls "professional Western" (Wright 1975, p. 85), focusing on groups rather than individuals, *Fistful of Dollars* marked the breakthrough for the Italian Western as the most distinct foreign variant of and comment on the genre. Thus, the two Japanese films are responsible for the genre's most pronounced developments during its period of greatest popularity from the late 1930s to the early 1970s. I want to show that *Seven Samurai*, *Yojimbo*, and *Fistful of Dollars* use elements of the Western genre to comment on the Westernization of Japan and the US influence on Italian culture, respectively, with all films negotiating a complex relationship to the cultural vicissitudes of the times, while *The Magnificent Seven* acknowledges and embraces cultural elements of "foreignness" and integrates these into the genre structure. In sum, the films turn the genre into a forum not just for the expression of cultural dialogue but also as a reflection of its processes.

2. *Seven Samurai* (1954)

Even though it would be unwise to call the samurai film the Japanese version of the Western, it is certainly useful to consider the similarities and differences between the two. Both are concerned with using the past to reflect on the present. Both deal with historical periods that are characterized by a state of instability and transition. Both are primarily concerned with charismatic men of violence, often loners, who live and fight by a strict code of honor and who are caught up in conflicts that concern a social group in need of protection, and both resolve their dramatic conflicts in acts of cathartic violence (Silver 2005, p. 43; see also Klein 2016, p. 149). Both also show an ambiguous attitude toward the idea of progress, being capable both of a nostalgic reverence for the past and/or a progressive belief in

modernization. The major distinction between the two genres lies in their decisive dramatic preoccupations. In the Western it is the wide open frontier environment that generates the conflicts revolving around wilderness vs. civilization (Kitses [1969] 1998, p. 59), while the Samurai film employs a much more closed environment and a rigidly class-stratified social arena (Prince 1991, p. 15), in which a major concern is the philosophical ramifications of the bushido, the code of the warrior. This code finds diverse interpretations in samurai films and features as a major conflict that of giri vs. ninjo. Giri can be understood as duty, and loyalty to your master, while ninjo refers to instinctive morality or natural conscience (Silver 2005, pp. 23–24). So the correct behavior of the warrior in a society founded upon strict class divisions is the ideological theme of the samurai film.

With its emphasis on self-sacrifice for the higher authority the classical samurai film was severely curtailed under the American Occupation between 1945 and 1952. After the Occupation it made a comeback, and Akira Kurosawa was one of the key directors who ushered in a new phase in the genre. Kurosawa has often been described as the most Western Japanese film director, an attribute that is variously justified by his interest in European literature (adaptations of Shakespeare, Dostoevsky, Hammett, Ed McBain), his predilection for Hollywood cinema (John Ford, Frank Capra, George Stevens), and his embrace of humanism, compassion, and the valuation of the individual in his films (Prince 1991, p. 10). Kurosawa embraced the freedom and democracy that the American Occupation brought to Japan. Yet he remained also very much obsessed with samurai culture, the perseverance of the hero, his dedication, single-mindedness, and his capability for self-sacrifice and respect for duty. In his films, Kurosawa fuses traditional Japanese values with Western ideas to reflect and form the culture of a modern post-Occupation Japan. Stephen Prince describes this fusion as Kurosawa's attempt to "establish the autonomous self as a positive value" (Prince 1991, p. 29), but at the same time to construct this self as an "interactionist one, whereby self and social groupings exist only in relation to each other" (Prince 1991, p. 30).

Seven Samurai vividly demonstrates this urge for such a compromise and at the same time its limitations. Set in the Sengoku period, a time of civil wars, political instability, and class fluidity, the film depicts the plight of a farming village that is frequently raided by a band of masterless samurai, or ronin. As in a classical Western, the community is weak and in need of protection (Wright 1975, pp. 32–59). But as opposed to the classical Western, a stranger does not conveniently ride into the village to help, the farmers have to leave their village and actively search for protection. The film hence stresses the active participation of the community in their acquisition of services. They need to hire men. And note that it is not a single man. The protectors are a group. Only a group will be able to fulfill the mission to protect the farmers and defeat the enemy. Dessser argues that, given Kurosawa's professed inspiration from American films and particularly the Western, *Seven Samurai* in this way follows but also anticipates certain trends in the American Western, particularly in the immediate post-war films of John Ford and Howard Hawks such as *My Darling Clementine* (1946) and *Red River* (1948) and their interest in male groups and camaraderie (Dessser 2008, pp. 21, 35; cf. Martinez 2009, p. 123; Skoble 2010, p. 139), and crucially the film therefore also breaks with samurai genre traditions (Dessser 2008, p. 19). In fact, following Dessser, Klein affirms that "the sword film [along the lines of *Seven Samurai*] is a product of American cultural influence on Japan and therefore important elements of the Western were transformed" (Klein 2016, p. 151). The search for samurai also introduces as a major theme of the film the importance of class. Most samurai, even if they are without master, refuse to be associated with the peasants, as it would be an assault on their social status. However, the economic plight of the samurai class in this period, and symbolically the dearth of traditional Japanese feudalism in the face of American-introduced capitalism creates a situation in which due to the overriding law of supply and demand class differences crumble. Yet, despite the initial importance of the economic situation to allow an approach of farmers and samurai, the film attenuates this aspect in the depiction of the motivations of the samurai who join up for the cause. It is certainly not the meager material recompense, which consists

of a few healthy meals of rice, that convinces them. In fact, no one joins up for the sake of money. The leader Kambei demonstrates how certain ethical principles override any considerations of money or status. He renounces any samurai decorum in order to help the farmers because he simply feels that it is the right thing to do. This is a crucial redefinition of giri. It is not about loyalty to your master, as in a rigidly class-structured society, but about the obligation to deploy your abilities for the benefit of others, no matter what class they are from (Prince 1991, pp. 117–18, 207). Other ronin join out of good-naturedness, admiration for, or interest in Kambei because it is better (more samurai-like) than chopping wood to hone their skills or to prove their abilities even though they are not samurai by birth. In short, the economic situation fosters the breakdown of class differences without harming the humanist component of social interaction.

This sort of utilitarian reinterpretation of giri is demonstrated in Kambei's disciplining of the farmers to give up their huts outside the village in order to defend the village itself. Individualist demands must succumb to the greater good of the community. It is certainly significant that a samurai thus teaches the farmers the dictum of community. This only goes to show in what a flexible and therefore relevant way giri can be reinterpreted to serve the needs of a modern society.

As in the classical Western, the heroes and the villains share significant qualities. Both groups are ronin, and both are perceived as a threat by the farmers because they have always been the ones who exploited them, whether institutionally under feudalism or criminally in civil war conditions. In fact, Martinez draws a connection between the depiction of the ronin and the Occupation forces in contemporary Japan (Martinez 2009, p. 116). The villains can be seen as a corrupted product of modernization, remnants of the past that ravage the community of the future with the tools that the West introduced to Japan, namely muskets. Guns are important props in Kurosawa's films, symbolizing the most destructive aspects of modernization and Westernization. It is only with guns that the samurai heroes are killed in the film. The theme of the samurai, the epitome of traditional Japan, destroying themselves can also be applied to the heroes, who unwittingly participate in their own demise by assisting the population group that will supplant them. The promises of classlessness, which are also present in the burgeoning love affair of one samurai and a farmer's daughter and the rise of a farmer's son to the ranks of samurai status purely by the proof of his skill and selflessness, are frustrated at the end. In the end, when the bandits are killed, the threat is neutralized, and the three surviving samurai realize their outmodedness. "In the end, we lost this battle too. I mean, the victory belongs to the peasants. Not us", Kambei says. So for all its embrace of modernization, *Seven Samurai* also demonstrates what falls by the wayside, and the last image is one of lament over the inevitability of progress. Classlessness is in the end not achieved by assimilation or integration but by the eradication of the feudal class. Just like the eponymous gunfighter hero in *Shane*, the samurai realize that their time is over at the moment their skills ensure the establishment of the modern community.

Despite this tone of lament at the end of the film over the passing of a social order, the film can be said to echo not just structural elements of the Western but also the, however complex, ideological idealism of its classical incarnation by suggesting the confluence of a classless collectivity in a society governed by the dynamics of the free market (Wright 1975, pp. 130–52). As St. Jean argues, class barriers in the film stand in the way of a "human connection in an empty world", and the tragic tone of the ending is a result of their lingering presence rather than the promises of modernization (St. Jean 2002, pp. 79–81). The cultural mobility expressed in the film thus incorporates the American genre of the Western into samurai film conventions just as its content suggests the productive integration of Western economic processes into domestic social structures for a beneficial reformation of cultural values which can be simultaneously wistful for the past. Western influence is thus negotiated on two levels as a form of adaptation, which is founded on the flexibility and mobility of Japanese and American cultures.

3. *The Magnificent Seven* (1960)

What *The Magnificent Seven* demonstrated was that the transplantation of a foreign scenario into an American institution like the Western was indeed possible and worked extremely well. On a more abstract level, the film demonstrated the permeability of cultures and the similarity of cultural concerns, made possible by Hollywood's ever-eager pursuit of profitable material. But what makes the remake remarkable is not the fact that it takes over so many elements that are already in the original noticeably compatible with the Western, but that it shows a particular fascination for the decidedly Japanese aspects of the material, namely the idea of an "aristocratic warrior caste" (Skoble 2010, p. 146) doomed to bow to progress. This emphasis on class in what would appear to be the classless environment of the American West is then precisely the opposite of what *Seven Samurai* sought to convey, the promise of class eradication as a result of modernization/Westernization. The films thus show a fascination with precisely those aspects that seem opposed to their cultural frames.

Richard Slotkin's reading of *The Magnificent Seven* as an anticipation of the ideology at work in America's interaction with Third World countries during the Cold War, particularly Vietnam, in the 1960s, is very useful in pointing out the film's intercultural dynamics and "its relation with the American zeitgeist" (Kerr 2020, p. 25). Slotkin identifies two basic transformations of the source for adaptation to the Western genre. 1. Class difference is translated into race difference. 2. The internal conflict of the original becomes an international conflict in the remake (Slotkin 1992, p. 475). In practice this means that the farmers are not only farmers, they are also Mexicans. And they are exploited by Mexicans too, not by desperate American gunmen, which would be the equivalent of *Seven Samurai*. As Slotkin points out, the charismatic head of the bandits Calvera appears, with his hypocritical paternalism, pretending to take care of his sheep while in effect shearing them of all their belongings, as a tyrannical warlord of a Third World country (Slotkin 1992, p. 479). Whether he can be seen as a product of American influence, like the ronin bandits of Kurosawa's film, is conveniently left out of the picture. Equally conveniently, it is the farmers who cross the border to appeal to the Americans for assistance, which is of course the ideal prerequisite for military involvement with a foreign country. As in *Seven Samurai*, the dire economic situation makes the interaction of gunmen and farmers possible, but as opposed to *Seven Samurai*, no gunman will refuse to join up for them because it could be an affront to the class status. Quite the contrary, most gunfighters join up because there is simply nothing better to do. Threatened with meager temporary jobs such as wood chopper, bouncer, and clerk, they rather go without their usual pay in order to preserve their unique status as professional gunmen. As Slotkin writes: "The Americans are a White aristocracy or elite whose caste-mark is their capacity for effective violence; the Mexicans are non-White peasants, technologically and militarily incompetent. Gunfighter professionalism is thus a metonymy of the class and ethnic superiority of Americans to Mexicans" (Slotkin 1992, p. 476). So they join up *because* of their class, rather than in spite of it. It is also important to note that the film presents a cross-section of Western hero types as a group and thus as a class of its own: "the 'wild' kid, the crazed neurotic, the aristocratic loner, the folksy populist, the ethnic outsider seeking acceptance" (Slotkin 1992, p. 477), and also the Zen-like warrior whose only existence appears to be focused on honing his skill. Granted the film shows considerable complexity as to the merits of this elite class: one member only appears to be after gold, and one member only joins up because he runs from the law and lives in constant fear as a result of his profession, all of them are drifters. Life as a gunfighter is neither glorious nor glamorous nor desirable, especially compared to the folkloric, communal life of the farmers if it were not for Calvera. At least that is what we are told throughout the film. Some gunfighters consider settling down in the village, one of them, who is half-Mexican teaches the admiring kids that their fathers are the true heroes, because "they carry responsibility" for others. But as Slotkin points out, the structure of the film clearly undermines the verbal self-denigration of the Americans, which becomes especially noteworthy in their interaction with the villagers.

The relation to the farmers is paternal. At its most benevolent (and symptomatic), O'Reilly wins the hearts of the children, but the winning of the minds proves to be more complicated. Like in *Seven Samurai*, the gunmen teach the farmers how to fight, but where the crucial scene in *Seven Samurai* seals the collaboration of the two groups with stress on community before individuality, the crucial scene in *The Magnificent Seven* stresses the dissociation of farmers and gunmen. When the farmers hear after their first successful fight against Calvera that the bandits will come back, and most probably fueled with furious desperation, they become afraid and they do not want to fight anymore. Chris, the leader of the gunmen, tries to convince them that fighting Calvera is the only way to go, and if it means the death of many, then so be it. Hence, they are animated much more by the pride in their elite status than by communal care (St. Jean 2002, pp. 82–84). As Slotkin points out, with this kind of militaristic extremism Chris comes uncomfortably close to the destructive paternalism of Calvera (Slotkin 1992, p. 481). The professional American gunman teaches the Mexicans what is best for them, rather die fighting than succumb to the native warlord, destruction is preferable to submission. They also argue on professional grounds, that they took a contract they have to follow through no matter what the cost. The farmers, however, betray the gunfighters. They are not willing to fight to their deaths. So they admit Calvera to their village, who apprehends the Seven. Whether this is a sign of the sanity of the farmers, as opposed to the hell-bent fighting spirit of the Americans, or a sign of their cowardice is up to the viewer. The point is the clear split between farmers and gunmen at this mement.

Calvera lets the Seven go because he does not want any trouble from vengeful gringos and he expects rational, professional behavior from the gunmen. They were hired for a job, their services were refused, and they have no reason to come back. But they do. Against all logic. Purely out of a sense of honor and pride, a kind of class nobility detached from idealistic altruism. "Nobody takes my guns away and then hands them back to me... Nobody!", one of them says. Not the selfless sacrifice for the village compels the Seven to ride back, but the warrior ethos of the professional gunman. The final attack on the village moreover transforms this kind of class nobility into a "chivalric rescue" (Slotkin 1992, p. 482), by which the Seven prove their technical and moral superiority in a kind of redemptive action. With commando-style tactics, the Seven successfully infiltrate the village, isolate and dispatch the villains, and even incite the villagers to join the revolutionary upheaval of the bandit occupation. As in *Seven Samurai*, the bandits are defeated and four heroes die. Thus this kind of scenario appears like a theoretical run-through of how the military intervention in Vietnam may have been envisioned (the invitation, assistance, military and ideological training, persistence in the face of resistance, infiltration, inspiration of the native population, liberation, journey home, everything achieved by skill, moral superiority yet humility and respect) (Slotkin 1992, p. 485).

The classical Western is echoed when the Mexican member of the Seven decides to hang up his guns and stay in the village, something that *Seven Samurai* did not allow, but this appears in unison with the constellation of *The Magnificent Seven*. A Mexican can become a member of the elite class if he proves his adaptability to the warrior ethos, yet he loses this status when he returns to his people, where he belongs originally. At the same time, the tragedy of class incompatibility that closes *Seven Samurai* is turned into an act of choice. The two remaining gunmen, Chris and Vin, choose to leave the village so as to retain their special status. They may say "We always lose", reverting back to the verbal assertion of the triumph of the farmers, but there is a grandeur and nobility in this "loss" unparalleled in *Seven Samurai*. Thus if in *Seven Samurai* the temporary but ultimately tragically impossible class collaboration is the result of Westernization, then the very veneration of a warrior class in the depiction of the professional gunfighter is the impression that *The Magnificent Seven* creates. In fact, the impression proved to be so popular that it served as a template for a new trend in the genre that Will Wright termed the "professional western", which, as Kerr argues, captured the economic zeitgeist as much as the political (Kerr 2020, p. 29). Wright argues that, as Westerns mirror socio-

economic developments in the country from free market to corporate capitalism, by the early 1960s, the professional Western rejected the idealized conception of the integration of the individual into the community, as enacted by the classical Western, and instead championed the existence of isolated groups, “technocratic elites” along the lines of the aristocratic warrior class; who fight for their own interests (Wright 1975, pp. 85–86). As I hope to have shown, the germs for this kind of plot can be found in *The Magnificent Seven*’s evocation and transformation of the class issue in *Seven Samurai*. The ideal of the elite group that exists separately from society and that alone commands the allegiance of the individuals would go on to become the dominant pattern in the genre. Hence, in addition to Wright’s argument about the genre’s reflection of domestic economic conditions, I propose that the cultural mobility of *The Magnificent Seven*’s integration of the elite warrior trope taken from its Japanese source serves as an additional dynamic explaining the genre development. If *Seven Samurai* reflects the Westernization of Japan, then *The Magnificent Seven* introduces a “Samuraization” of the Western.

4. *Yojimbo* (1961)

Released one year after *The Magnificent Seven*, *Yojimbo* presents a much darker analogy for modern Japan than *Seven Samurai*. Where the predecessor hinted at the benefits gained from modernization, the modernized society in *Yojimbo* is beyond redemption. Stephen Prince points out that the reforms initiated by the American Occupation, while officially intended to democratize Japanese society, were first and foremost geared toward economic stimulation by the support of big business, and a film like *Yojimbo* can be seen as an expression of the frustration about such misguided priorities (Prince 1991, p. 176; see also Brizio-Skov 2016, p. 149; Schiff 2007, pp. 59–60, 66; Nowell-Smith and Sullivan 2004, p. 88). In order to express this critique, *Yojimbo* evokes two American cultural expressions. This is first of all the hard-boiled tradition of Dashiell Hammett (itself a subversive reply to the Western, whose structural elements are transplanted into an urban environment), in particular his novel *Red Harvest* and his short story “Corkscrew” (Martinez 2009, p. 141; Brizio-Skov 2016, p. 148). Texts and film depict a hopelessly corrupt town that is controlled by two rival gangs, which are played out against each other by a lone, laconic stranger. The eradication of crime and corruption by drastically bringing the capitalist logic of open market competition to its logical conclusion of complete annihilation was, in Hammett, the cynical fantasy of meeting the excesses of organized crime that the Roaring Twenties produced. It, therefore, seems only fitting to apply this scenario of America at its worst to a Japanese context in order to critique Americanization. Additionally, many scholars have pointed out the film’s clear indebtedness to American Westerns, the “visual grammar” of the setting but also the structural basis of the stranger entering a hostile town and confronting a numerically superior enemy, with *High Noon* (1952), *Shane* (1953), and *The Gunfighter* (1950) being notable templates (Martinez 2009, p. 141; Hutchinson 2007, p. 172).

Yojimbo is set toward the end of the Tokugawa period when the merchant class supplanted the Shogunate in terms of power. Accordingly, the town we encounter is controlled by two merchants, rival businessmen, who are aligned with warring gangster clans. Thus, an explicit connection between business and crime is established, something that would resonate strongly in 1960s Japan as a reference to the modern connection of monopoly trusts and yakuza gangsters (Nowell-Smith and Sullivan 2004, p. 88). An early scene depicts a farmer family whose son is sick of a life of eating gruel and decides to leave home to become a gangster. Read as a reference to *Seven Samurai*, this scene establishes that the farmer idyll that closed the earlier film did not work out and is supplanted by a much more questionable future (Richie 1998, p. 151). The gangsters themselves are portrayed as grotesque villains, physically deformed, full of empty swagger, sadistic, exploitative, without morals, constantly scheming and trying to deceive one another, and ultimately cowardly. Government officials are bribed from both sides, the law is ineffective, humans are reduced to commodities in recurrent scenes of hostage exchanges, families are torn apart (or their traditional structures subverted), and the appearance of a gun in the hands

of a gangster makes clear that Western influence is largely to blame for all of this. Visually the limitations of meaningful interaction are conveyed by the use of frames within frames and long lens photography that separates the characters from each other.

Into this hellish environment arrives the stranger Sanjuro, and this is where the film's second American influence can be felt, the Western. In Hammett, the hero is a Pinkerton detective, sent by the agency to clean up the town. In *Yojimbo*, he is a ronin drifter who happens upon the town by chance, initially associated with the stray dog looking for easy pickings, and in line with Western heroes such as Shane or the Seven, the difference being that the town is, as in *High Noon*, a film that is explicitly referenced (noise of the coffin maker), not worth saving (Richie 1998, pp. 147–48). He has no mission, no idealistic pretensions, he is what has become of the samurai in modern times, a ronin who sells his services to everyone who has money. With this self-centered attitude, this hero is a far cry from the bushido code of the classical samurai. In fact, he demonstratively violates the code when he leaves the gangster boss who just hired him right before a decisive battle with the enemy clan. This world, he seems to say, does not deserve noble behavior. Instead, he exposes to the world how rotten it is by emulating its deception, greed, and rigorous self-interest. As Donald Richie states, the only thing you can do in such a world is to do it one better and laugh at its corruption (Richie 1998, p. 149). And this is what he does: he hires himself out in turns to the two clans, arranges conflicts, decimates the gangsters, makes a profit, and entertains himself. Of course, he only can do all this because he is so incredibly skilled as a swordsman. He recognizes and exploits his own economic value.

Yet he has a flaw, he feels compassion for the family in peril and helps them escape from their tormentors. This act simultaneously puts him in danger and secures our sympathy for him. It is like a remnant of samurai nobility, the warrior code that was the defining feature of *Seven Samurai's* Kambei, and because moral behavior is so out of place in this world, he is punished for it. The gangster clan apprehends him and tortures him cruelly. He manages to escape, is figuratively resurrected from the dead, and trains for his revenge, while one clan eradicates the other completely. The torture and symbolic death as punishment for his humanity of course also legitimizes his reincarnation as an uncompromising seeker of vengeance. It also elevates him to superhuman status. His knife will defeat the pistol in the showdown. As Stephen Prince argues, Sanjuro is finally a fantasy figure, the samurai ghost from the past who destroys the merchant class that made him extinct and leaves only post-apocalyptic desolation (Prince 1991, pp. 223, 229). As in *Red Harvest*, complete destruction is the only remedy for misguided modernity. Echoing the opening of the film, Sanjuro sends the farmer boy back to a life of eating gruel, which is still preferable to the evils of capitalism.

Yojimbo enacts its critique of Westernized Japan via the cultural expressions that America itself provides. Where the samurai were the tragic victims of modernization at the end of *Seven Samurai*, the samurai here becomes the punisher of modern Japan's transgressions. This constellation creates a paradoxical incarnation of cultural mobility: as a quasi-Western hero, Sanjuro punishes a Westernized Japan. Hence the film, for all its vilification of a Western economic regime also embraces Western culture as a vehicle of critique. In fact, it is precisely the "Western" quality of Sanjuro's ethics of individualism that redefines his understanding of giri and ninjo and enables him to see through corruption and help the disadvantaged, whereby the film appears to advocate a reflexive, measured incorporation of a hybrid and fluid cultural mobility in order to effectively navigate complex cultural interactions and conditions.

5. *Fistful of Dollars* (1964)

Fistful of Dollars came out three years after *Yojimbo* and marked the breakthrough of director Sergio Leone who singlehandedly defined the Italian Western as a distinct subgenre. Several discourses are brought together in the film, a Japanese source, an American genre, and an Italian context. How do these discourses relate to each other?

Regarding the source, it is notable how closely Leone's film follows Kurosawa's, not only regarding the plot but even as far as regarding the facial expressions of Clint Eastwood, which are clearly copying Toshiro Mifune's squinting and snarling. In fact, Kurosawa sued Leone for copying his film. Leone argued that the original story he adapted was Carlo Goldoni's 1745 play *The Servant of Two Masters* (Nowell-Smith and Sullivan 2004, p. 80), which gives an idea about the transferability and universal patterns in different cultural expressions (18th ct. Italy, 1920s US, 1960s Japan).

Once again, the transfer of Kurosawa's scenario to a Western context works extremely well, which is probably no surprise given the Western elements in *Yojimbo* and its critique of Westernization. As Klein writes, "The similarities between these modifications of the outlaw stereotype can be seen in the context of Italy's and Japan's experiences in and around the Second World War. Both countries, after losing the war, were occupied by the USA and thus became 'Americanised'" (Klein 2016, p. 148). Hence, both films use the American genre for a critique of American influences. By explicitly making a Western, Leone transforms this critique of Western influence into a critique of the Western as such, expressing the "disillusionment he and many Italians felt when the Americans who came to liberate them from Fascism in 1943–4 turned out not to be the comic-book heroes of legend" (Nowell-Smith and Sullivan 2004, p. 84). The progressive foundation myth of the genre's classical phase is turned into a revisionist account of how the West was won. The samurai avenger becomes the cynical anti-hero who undermines the idealistic chivalry of the classical Western hero. The result is, in the words of Christopher Frayling, "critical cinema, utilizing the internal conventions of the genre (and extending them), in order critically to examine not so much the ideology of the frontier itself, as a later cinematic mythology" (Frayling 1981, p. 40; see also Nowell-Smith and Sullivan 2004, p. 86). Criticism is performed by highlighting aspects of the westward expansion that are elided in the traditional Western. Frayling lists such elements as the Southwestern frontier with its confrontations between Anglos and Mexicans and the significance of the bounty hunter and the hired gun (Frayling 1981, pp. 127–28), elements that did play a role in films such as *Vera Cruz* (1954) or *The Magnificent Seven*, but that attain a particularly grim quality in Leone, due to the consistent cynicism of the story, the pervasive greed and corruption, the asocial quality of the setting, the treatment of humans as commodity, and the virulent egoism as only survival strategy.

Just as in the Japanese context, the reason for this kind of criticism can be found in the frustration with the discord between the mythic image of Americans as liberators particularly after WWII, an image that was perpetuated in the Westerns and other movies imported from Hollywood in the post-war years, and the disillusioning image of the evils of capitalism, warmongering, etc. that supplanted the idealized view in the wake of the 1960s turn to popular Marxism and Leftism. The Italian film industry, moreover, specialized in the production of cheap imitations of popular American genres. Many American film companies had shot films in Cinecittà in the 1950s and many Italian directors of the time had learned their craft by working in American productions (Frayling 1981, p. 66; Hutchinson 2007, p. 179).

As Frayling points out, precisely those elements that formulate a counter-mythology to the American Western are also the ones that locate the genre in a specifically Italian context (Frayling 1981, p. 126). This presents an important step for the genre: the idea that it has become so universally recognizable, and so recognizably mythic (divorced from actual history), that it can be refitted to national contexts outside of America as a "free code" (Frayling 1981, p. 125). Frayling suggests that the lawlessness of the frontier served as a fitting metaphor for the kind of political instability that Italy experienced in the early 1960s, and the hero who "never commits himself to any one 'cause' [...] symptomatic of the[se political] uncertainties" (Frayling 1981, pp. 55–56) or rather as the cynical result of a society whose political aspirations had made way to the realization that the exploitation of a chaotic situation to your own advantage is the only way to go. The hero is not a remnant of the past who punishes the corrupted present, as in *Yojimbo*, but the embodiment of a society on the brink of abandoning any social values. The ethnic conflict between the Mexican Rojos

and the Anglo Baxters that *Fistful of Dollars* introduces not only resonates strongly with the North/South divide that characterizes Italian society (with the white Baxters intruding into the Mexican territory for the sake of economic opportunity/exploitation, and the Rojos showing a distinct disregard for state authority in the massacre of the Mexican army troops), it also emphasizes family and clan allegiance as an overriding social structure that can be both the locus of corruption and protection. The Western hero is able to transcend clan allegiance, yet he also exhibits a moral stature by protecting the family in peril. The polyvalent centrality of the family also provides the link to another very Italian iconography that pervades *Fistful of Dollars*, that of Catholicism. The “angel” Clint Eastwood protects the holy family (Marisol, Jesus), the story takes place at Easter, there is a last supper before a betrayal, and the Clint Eastwood character resurrects from the dead after escaping in a coffin. Moreover, the showdown will play upon “Latin conceptions of chivalry” (Frayling 1981, p. 191), when the hero is able to defeat the villain by exploiting his pride with the rifle that he demonstrated by shooting a heart shape into a medieval knight armor. The hero taunts him to shoot at his heart which is protected by metal armor, and this allows him not only to rise from the dead repeatedly but also to get closer and kill the gang with the inferior pistol. So in a way the new wins out over the old, Yankee pragmatism over Latin machismo.

The fusion of various cultural registers, codes, and icons, all of which are recontextualized, emptied of their meaning, or curiously subverted, has the effect of destabilizing their validity in explaining, ordering, and fashioning cultural identities, history, myth, values, and beliefs (cf. Brizio-Skov 2016, p. 154; Hutchinson 2007, pp. 183–85). This meta-discourse is heightened by the exaggerated stylization of the film language, from the silhouette opening to the extreme contrast of long shots and close-ups, the flamboyant Morricone music, the eccentricity of characters expressed in gestures, physical features, and dialogue, and individual moments of self-reflexive excess. With *Fistful of Dollars*, the Western thus enters its baroque stage as a cultural artifact that is recognized as a Hollywood artifice. The genre becomes a signature code for the self-reflexive treatment of the medium by undermining the transparency of its aesthetic conventions in order to reflect on cinema culture’s ideological distortions of reality.

In terms of cultural mobility, the film echoes the critique of *Yojimbo* by using the Western as a vehicle to critically condemn a Westernized culture as corrupt at the same time as presenting it as a cathartic solution to corruption, thus complicating and expanding the dynamics of cultural mobility and exchange introduced by *Seven Samurai*. Additionally, it turns the Western into a self-reflexive vehicle that does not just reflect cultural exchange but becomes a signifier of it, a reminder of the mobility that is at the heart of culture, with the icons and symbols it employs becoming free-floating signifiers whose meanings change depending on their interactive contexts.

6. Conclusions

The intercultural exchange in the Western genre exemplifies diverse dynamics. The first instance has shown that the genre provides the means to explore what is attractive about another culture, while the second instance has shown how it provides the means to critique the very source of the cultural models that are utilized. In both instances, on the one hand, the “Americanness” of the Western is undermined by the adaptation of foreign material, the focus on intercultural dynamics in the storylines, and the fusion of icons and themes from diverse cultures. On the other hand, Americanness is the very theme of the films, and the Western becomes the expression of the concept of America. *Magnificent Seven* thus ends on a note of American exceptionalism, and *Fistful of Dollars* ends on a note of universal destruction as a result of the most cynical version of rugged individualism. The Western provides the icons, concepts, character types, and plots, in short, the symbols and the syntax to depict, comment on, celebrate, or critique America, American influence, or American conditions via its most salient cinematic expression, thereby illustrating how

culture exists in a constant dialogue between diverse national identities and is constantly in flux, mobile.

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