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Book Reviews

Radical Frontiers in the Spaghetti Western: Politics, Violence and Popular Italian Cinema. Austin Fisher. London: I.B. Tauris, 2011. h/bk 304pp. ISBN 978-1-84885-578-6. Price £62.50.

In the space of 10 years, between 1964 and 1975, the Italian film industry produced nearly 500 Westerns. 200 alone were made in 1966-68. The figures are staggering particularly when compared to American Westerns, which mustered less than half that number, 219, across the same decade and just 56 in 1966-8, but I'm not sure that comparison tells us much. The real story lies in coming to terms with an industry that was able to manufacture so many films in such a concentrated run. This is formulaic filmmaking of truly industrial proportions. That scholars have turned again and again to the same handful of movies - Leone-Eastwood collaborations for the most part - is understandable, but these films are no more representatives of the main body of the cycle than *Little Caesar*, *The Public Enemy* and *Scarface* are of 1930s gangster movies. They are a synecdoche - the part standing in for the whole - and, as Austin Fisher shows, barely adequate in that role.

Fisher describes the drivers behind post war Italian film production, particularly as it responded to imported American movies. The contradictory reception of these films, positively received by some as the promise of plenitude to come and resisted by others as an act of cultural and economic colonization, forms the core of Fisher's early chapters. His narrative of Americanization is coupled with an enquiry into the uneven distribution of the benefits of modernization along a north/south divide in postwar Italy. A division that Fisher argues is echoed in the Western, which often plays like a Janus-figure - a bell ringer for the modern and pallbearer for the pre-industrial past.

Fisher's focus, however, is not with the vast bulk of Italian westerns but a small corpus of films that he identifies as dramatizing and endorsing acts of insurrection. Films such as *Django Kill* (1967), *The Big Gundown*

(1966), *Face to Face* (1967), and *The Great Silence* (1968). Directed by Guilio Questa, Damiano Damiani, Sergio Sollima and Sergio Corbucci, these were overtly political films that were not designed for art house theatres or university film societies, but as iterations of a highly commercialized cinema that, Fisher contends, "warrant consideration within the cultural spectrum of the late 1960s European radicalism" (6). Credence for his argument is provided by close readings of the films informed by the immediate context of their production and reception (in diverse markets). By further situating these Westerns within contemporary political debates and alongside events in the public sphere, Fisher adds support for his thesis that these films exposed the "brutal mechanisms lying behind modern-day Western society" (8). The case made for an appreciation of the films' radical agendas is also substantiated by a consideration of the biographies of the filmmakers who, as often as not, were involved in antifascist activities during the war and remained politically active thereafter. Fisher does a remarkable job of bringing all of these elements together, but the section that impressed the most was his analysis of the conversation between Italian and American Westerns and the rich transatlantic trade in conventions of storytelling and myth making.

Fisher's knowledge of both Hollywood and Cinecitta Westerns is comprehensive and impressive. He has written a book that more than complements the work of Christopher Frayling and others who have published on the topic of Italian Westerns; indeed he has produced a benchmark study of politics and popular cinema. His is a commendable achievement and one that I highly recommend.

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