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THE NEW SPAGHETTI WESTERN: THE SOUTHERN

"I like it when somebody tells me a story, and I actually really feel that that's becoming like a lost art in American cinema"

Quentin Tarantino

The release of Quentin Tarantino's *Django Unchained* in 2012 has stirred a renewed interest in Western films. The film pays homage to the Italian sub-genre of Spaghetti Westerns and has the ambition to create a completely new genre, the "Southern". This constitutes an important evolution in the history of the genre, especially after the transformation carried about by the "Eurowesterns" between the 1960s and the 1970s.

In this paper I will consider the importance of the Italian and European Westerns in the development of the genre in recent times, both in Europe and the rest of the world. With its blending of American Western and Spaghetti Western, *Django Unchained* is an innovative contribution to a tradition started in the 1960s and, at the same time, an anticipation of a potential development of the genre.

Tarantino's Southern is set in America's Deep South and deals with the emancipation of the oppressed black protagonist Django, who is Tarantino's demonstration that a slavery film can portray strong black characters who physically fight for their freedom. The Southern genre becomes, then, an attempt to revive the American and the European Western genre and an examination of the American past through new lens.

1. The Eurowestern

Between the 1960s and the 1970s many Italian filmmakers and screenwriters realized more than four hundred Spaghetti Westerns. The greatest innovation on the genre was accomplished by Sergio Leone, who aimed at revisiting the very myths that were at the basis of the classical American genre. His reinvention of the Western, as I will try to show, would affect the representation of the American West as well as have an impact on other Italian Westerns of the time and future American productions. The label "Spaghetti Western" was applied by American critics to the Western films made in Italy and Spain between 1963 and 1977, for either not being genuine Westerns, or for being excessively violent (Hughes vii).[1] The term *spaghetti* indeed refers to the homemade character and to the predominance of Italians in the production of these films. The most famous Spaghetti Westerns are Sergio Leone's Dollar Trilogy (*A Fistful of Dollars* [1964]; *For a Few Dollars More* [1965]; and *The Good, the Bad and the Ugly* [1966]), which made an icon of actor Clint Eastwood and brought international recognition to composer Ennio Morricone (Hughes vii).

The Spaghetti Westerns were the most emblematic and aesthetically successful example of a combination of the American Western and the European cinematographic productions. Taking advantage of the decadence of the American Western film productions at the end of the 1960s, European directors committed to the realization of the first "Eurowesterns." Far from being a unitary trend, the Eurowestern was comprised of a series of European Western productions whose common trait was the original desire to imitate the overseas model. Italian, British, French, German, Spanish, and Finnish filmmakers converged at least on one point: the inspiration came from John Ford and the other representatives of the classical genre, but European directors rapidly put their models aside and acquired their own force contrasting the genre that had been defined "the American cinema *par excellence*" (Bazin 262). They tried to antagonize it, to deprive it of its market and to contrast the hegemony that Hollywood productions had enjoyed from the 1910s onward (Della Casa 5).

The best Western cycles are those that have found more rapidly a mark of originality in their iconography as well as in their content and ideas. Also, the novelty of the European Western was in merging the foreign tradition with their local tradition and in the cultural and social events of their time. The Italian Westerns stood out, according to Stefano Della Casa, because they developed during an era of great political, social and cultural turmoil and were able to convey the complexity of the situation (5-7).

In France, the first representations of the Far West seem to date back to 1896, when Gabriel Veyre filmed Indians, cowboys, and their common life for the Lumière brothers. The other great exponent of French cinema of the origins is Joë Hamman, whose *Cow-Boy* (1906) is the first authentic French Western. Hamman also cooperated with Jean Durand in *Coeur Ardent* (*Burning Heart* 1912), a Western set in the Camargue, a wild region in the south of France intended to represent the American prairies. Later, the imitation of the American model was substituted by a more

regional and national point of view, which gave the films a more specific French style (Le Roy 17-18).

The key period in the English Western production was between 1908 and 1913, when the British tried to contrast the economic threat of the American cinema and its influence on the British audience. At first the British tried to exploit local myths such as Robin Hood, but the English settings seemed to be unable to convey the charm of the American West. From the 1940s on, the British would find their equivalent of the American frontier in the countries which were part of the Empire: Africa, Asia, Canada, and India. The best example is the series of Australian films produced by the Ealing Studios: *The Overlanders* (1946), directed by Harry Watt (McKernan 39-49).

The Spanish Western originated in 1954 with two important movies by director Joaquín Romero Marchent: *El Coyote* (*The Coyote* 1954) and *La Justicia del Coyote* (*Judgement of the Coyote* 1955), adapted from José Mallorquí's popular novels and representative of a typical Spanish view. Mallorquí had turned the Western novel into a Spanish product setting his epic in a hypothetical Spanish West: in this way the West was no longer an exclusively American adventure (Aguilar 90-94).

The best example of European Western cinematography was the West German production of films adapted from Karl May's novels. The success of these movies was due to the popularity of the novels themselves, which summed up all the elements that proved seductive to the audience: nostalgia for far away countries, the desire for adventure, the charm of the exotic and, above all, the friendship between the Mescalero Apache chief Winnetou and his white blood brother, Old Shatterhand. *Der Schatz im Silbersee* (*The Treasure of Silver Lake* 1962) was the most expensive film ever produced in West Germany and obtained a huge success at home and abroad (Habich 59-75).

The success of the 'Winnetou' films was the reason why Italian and Spanish producers decided to invest on the Western genre. Christopher Frayling recognizes the crucial role exercised by the films based on Karl May's novels in facilitating the rise of the Italian Westerns:

The Karl May films created a commercial context which made the Italian Westerns possible. Sergio Leone is in no doubt about this: "It was because of the success of the German 'Winnetou' series, directed by Harald Reinl, that the Western began to interest the Italian producers" [...]. After the Spaghetti Western genre had gained in self-confidence, however, it was clear that the Cinecittà product would be very different, in tone and style, from the 'Winnetou' films: the best Spaghetis were to demonstrate that, even within a co-production context, it was possible to retain some vestiges of a cultural identity, and to criticise what had until then been accepted internationally as *the* context within which to make Westerns, and *the* Protestant-liberal tradition which Westerns were expected to represent (Frayling 115-116).

Although some of the European Western productions reached a conspicuous popularity, it was above all through Sergio Leone's trilogy that the supremacy of the American Western genre was finally undermined. What Leone and the other Italian directors produced was a transposition of the most peculiar traits of the American Western genre into a specifically Italian product. The most important transformation concerned the depiction of history. If the epic of the West represented the foundational myth of the United States of America,^[2] the Western, as Sergio Leone declared, had nothing to do with the actual historical event of the conquest of the West by the Americans. The Western movie was, vice versa, a cinematic narrative that was absolutely metahistorical, independent of reality and without geographical or historical boundaries, to be set everywhere (Diliberto 7).

From a chronological point of view, Spaghetti Westerns were contemporary with U.S. revisionist movies, i.e., a group of "revisionist" films such as *Soldier Blue* (Ralph Nelson 1970), *A Man Called Horse* (Elliot Silverstein 1970), and *Little Big Man* (Arthur Penn 1970), which called into question the mythical image of the Native Americans and adopted a more sympathetic perspective in the presentation of these characters – even though the good Indian/bad Indian binarism would persist till recent times (Stam and Shohat 67). Despite this chronological overlapping, few Italian Westerns featured Indians in leading roles. For the most part, these films performed a different kind of re-reading, mainly regarding the Manichean opposition between good and bad characters who, in the classical movies, were embodied by whites versus Indians and thus made easily recognizable. In the Spaghetti Western this antagonism becomes less clear: heroic cowboys and cruel bandits superimpose and find their personification in the new figure of the *bounty killer*, epitomized by Clint Eastwood in *A Fistful of Dollars*—the stranger with no name who

kills self-confidently according to a personal moral code (Giovannini 37).

This new figure, the *bounty killer*, is transcribed by Leone in a fantastic universe, and filled with significance and symbolic gestures that transcend the historical fact: Mexican for his poncho, American for his weapons, Latin for his posture, a human being with no name, mysterious and romantic, driven by his thirst for money and a sense of vengeance, without friends, misogynist, an anti-hero beyond the opposition good/evil (Beatrice 72).

So, if in the American Western Indians were the main antagonists of the “good”, in the Italian Western their presence is either substituted with this new kind of “hero” or with Mexican *gauchos* (cowboys) (Giovannini 38). Rather than stories of Anglos and Indians fighting in the prairie, the Italian Western chose Mexico as its setting. Stories primarily took place on the Mexican-U.S. border, because movies were mostly filmed in Almería, Spain, whose landscape was similar to the Mexican one (Fridlund 6).

Not only were choices based upon the preferences of directors or screenwriters but, as Claver Salizzato claims, originally the Spaghetti Western was nothing more than a business aiming at popular entertainment. A pure and simple attempt to make money was the main reason behind the choice on the part of many Italian filmmakers, who had grown up during the era of the mythological or “peplum” films, to adventure into a new genre. Although deriving from its American predecessor, the Italian Western was able to construct its originality and provided a new model for both the internal and the international market, creating canons and laws to which others would conform, even overseas (116-122). This is also explained by the changing attitude of critics and academics who produced, at the beginning of the 1970s, less prejudiced and more analytical essays, beginning to treat the Italian Western not as an object of abomination but as an intriguing object of study, thus re-evaluating the genre (Fridlund 7).

Although Italian directors who ventured into the Western genre, such as Sergio Corbucci, Duccio Tessari, Enzo Barboni, Sergio Sollima, Alberto De Martino, Damiano Damiani, and others, were considered Leone’s epigones, it is important to acknowledge the crucial role they had in the production of the Spaghetti Westerns. Leone’s ideas were not equally shared among his colleagues; for example, some preferred to concentrate on political matters, others were more preoccupied with historical accuracy and decided to offer positive representations of Native Americans, as Sergio Corbucci did in *Navajo Joe* (1966).

If Sergio Leone is the undisputed master of the Italian Western, the only one who has been canonized as “auteur” by critics (Salizzato 125), his heirs, often unfairly considered imitators, are those who guaranteed a massive production codifying those elements that allow us to call such works a genre (Beatrice 18). The Italian Western qualifies for unveiling the talent of a group of professionals whose work changed the characteristics of the classical genre forever. The Westerns that followed Italian films, regardless of their nationality, would never be the same again, especially due to the embarrassing and often copious violence elected as a fundamental ingredient in every plot (Salizzato 128).

The fascinating spectacle of violence, presented, for example, in Sam Peckinpah’s *The Wild Bunch* (1969), did not derive from the traditional Western, but was a consequence of the Italian contamination of the genre. The cowboy in the Hollywood tradition never appeared as a generator of turmoil and anarchy but, on the contrary, was ready to re-establish peace and order in a destabilizing situation. Influenced by the social events of its time, the Italian Western was, conversely, open to every kind of protest and culminated in an outmost desecration of the system itself (Salizzato 130).

From 1968, when the term “Spaghetti Western” was first applied by American critics to the European, and especially Italian, Westerns, the term was later adopted by fans and critics of the genre, thus gaining a new force over the years to such an extent that now it does not exclusively characterize the Italian Westerns anymore, but also all the Westerns inspired by it: a Western that is excessive, violent, deprived of every form of sentimentalism rooted in the American myth (Giusti xi). Almost every country tried to produce and invent its own Westerns, away from the original American model and inevitably imitating the Italian one. There are Turkish, Mexican, Russian, South African and Australian imitations, and one notable exemplar from Japan: *Sukiyaki Western Django* (2007), directed by Takashi Miike and co-starring Quentin Tarantino as Piringo. This is yet another homage paid by a director who was himself influenced by the Spaghetti Westerns and, as Marco Giusti states, an attempt to rejoin the world of the samurai and the world of the Western forty years after Leone plagiarized Akira Kurosawa’s *Yojimbo* (1961) in *A Fistful of Dollars*.

2. From Leone to Tarantino: The (post)modern Spaghetti Western

“Great artists steal, they don't do homages”

Quentin Tarantino

Yojimbo tells the story of a samurai who finds himself in the middle of a warfare between two gangs in a small Japanese village and manages to get the better off both and to free the town. When the film was first shown in Italy in July 1963, Leone was already thinking about making Westerns after years spent working on the peplum genre. He instantly saw a potential Western movie in Kurosawa's story and devised the film that would later invent a completely new genre, *A Fistful of Dollars*. The accusation of plagiarism followed Leone for many years but, according to some of his colleagues, he had a particular inclination toward stories told by others that he would easily make his own. Rather than in plot creativeness, Leone's innovation was in his filmmaking, in his power to turn every story into an original product. The success of *A Fistful of Dollars* was, in fact, proclaimed not only by its narrative, but by a series of elements including the masterly soundtrack composed by Ennio Morricone (appearing in the credits under the alias of Don Savio), the cinematography by Massimo Dallamano and, above all, the skill of actors such as Clint Eastwood and Gian Maria Volonté.

The music, the setting in the Spanish region of Almería, the technical devices like the close ups on unshaven faces, boots and guns, together with the exaggeration of violence in every form, made the fortune of this film in terms of profits, audience, and fame all over the world (Giusti 356-371). Leone transposed into his films his childish relationship with the genre, projecting his fantasies on the screen and allowing the audience to live in this imaginary world and to identify with the gunfighters (Giusti viii). Not only did Leone reinvent the genre, but he also constructed a postmodern cinema: he re-enacted scenes from his favorite movies, revising them from a postmodern point of view, as Tarantino would do forty years later (Giusti ix). As a matter of fact, the Italian director was more interested in an erudite *mise en scène* than in the narration and the plot; what counted was not only violence and death but their stylistic representation. This is the reason why his cinema has been compared with the opera (Giusti xxxi). Through the metaphor of the genre and its codes and forms, Leone always followed his personal vision of cinema, which was based on a vocation for the story infused with elements derived from mythology, from Homer, from the Bible, as well as from themes such as the search for a father figure, male bonding, and others derived from the Italian neorealist cinema. Everything was aiming at a single goal: audience entertainment (Salizzato 124-130).

The few directors, like Sam Peckinpah, John Sturges, Gordon Douglas and, in the following years, Clint Eastwood, who tried to revitalize the American Western genre after its demise in the 60s and 70s, could not disregard the changes made by the Italian Spaghetts. They eventually incorporated these changes in their own films, contributing to the revitalization of a genre that, in America, had been supplanted by the Western TV series (Giusti xv).

The incorporation of Spaghetti-style elements applies to the above-cited *Sukiyaki Western Django*, which is neither the first Japanese Western, nor the first film to link the aesthetics of the Spaghetti Western to the Japanese samurai genre. As Tom Mes asserts, in the film:

There is a lot of Kurosawa and a lot of Leone, a generous sprinkling of Corbucci, a touch of Okamoto, and a whiff of Gosha. More than just a reminder of the debt the Italians owe the Japanese through the *Yojimbo-Fistful of Dollars* connection, the film adheres to the far wiser stance that cross-cultural pollination is the essence of cinema and that there is no such thing as a one-way street of influence.

The presence of Quentin Tarantino in the film is proof of the influence of his postmodern style and his cinematographical in-jokes on director Takashi Miike (Mes). What is more, the strong female characters are reminiscent of Uma Thurman's Beatrix in *Kill Bill Vol. 1* (2003) and *Kill Bill Vol. 2* (2004), a series which, in its turn, constitutes one of the best revivals of the Western in recent years. According to Patrick McGee, the two films rearrange elements of the classical Hollywood Western along with others derived from the various genres of mass culture (such as Spaghetti Westerns, Asian horror and adventure films, female revenge movies, as suggested by Holm) in ways that imply an allegory appropriate to the age of globalization (236). Moreover, Tarantino's poetics of self-referencing, together with the non-chronological narrative and the openness of the filmic form, qualify his art as emblematically postmodern (Page 205-206). The relation to the Spaghetti Westerns and to Leone's films is particularly evident in *Kill Bill Vol. 2*, especially in the use of the soundtrack from *The Good, The Bad, and The Ugly*,

Tarantino's favorite movie, and the use of close-ups on characters' eyes: the former used to build up the action to the crucial moment and the latter to portray the feelings of the characters (Page 218-219). This tendency to ransack from other genres and films allowed Tarantino to create his own collection of references, in which he saved the best creations of the cinema of the past. What Page asserts about *Kill Bill* can furthermore be extended to every Tarantino movie:

These films show an excellently crafted blend of genres, providing the audience with a taste of a variety of filmic types in an original form that crosses generic boundaries like no other film before. [...] The self-generated vitality comes from the plethora of influences masterfully woven together, re-envisioned, and added to by Tarantino's love of cinema. (233)

The famous scene of the fight against the Crazy 88 gang explicates Tarantino's ambition that, like Beatrix's, is to exceed any previously filmed fight, entering the tradition and legitimizing himself in relation to his masters, in a final attempt to make his films become the most extreme outcome of such tradition.

This love for cinema, its history, its genres, and his persistent and extensive quotation game makes him one of the few contemporary directors interested in working on the filmic language and on the narration for the screen (Menarini 106-107). These same self-reflexive aspects in Tarantino's cinema, however, have often been the object of critique on the part of those scholars and film critics who accuse him of lack of invention.[3] Like Leone before him, Tarantino is generally considered a thief, a director who accumulates citations and creates hybrid combinations of forms and genres taken from the mass culture: from comic books to pulp literature, from B-movies to TV series (Zagarrio 7-9).

Despite such accusations, Tarantino's immense knowledge of cinema, his infinite citations and his experimentations on various genres – from noir, to crime, to samurai movies – are not to be considered an end to themselves. If on the one hand it is true that he derives elements from his sources, on the other he also redresses them with new connotations. This makes his experience of citation a "politics" of citation, which allows the audience to trust his authority and his encyclopedic knowledge (Menarini 109-110). According to this reading, the plethora of citations in Tarantino's movies does not have the mere effect of inciting a hunt on the part of the cinephile spectators, as some critics believe. The director does invite the audience to take an active part in every film; however, viewers do so not only by hunting for citations but also by filling the narrative gaps or revising their own ideas about the characters and the events presented on the screen. From the very first scene in *Reservoir Dogs* (1992), for example, we realize that this is not a traditional film noir. The inclusion of humor, popular culture references, and the presentation of the gangsters as ordinary people cause us to question the stereotypes about gangsters as previously seen in other films (Page 34-44). Moreover, the central event in the film, that is, the robbery in a jewelry shop, is never shown but is presented as an implied action, forcing the audience to create mental images of the events through extensive dialogue and full characterization of the criminals (Page 50-51). Tarantino's job consists therefore in contaminating genres, subjecting them to a process of hybridization and modernization through their immersion into the contemporary culture (Terribili 31). His recent endeavors to revive history appear particularly groundbreaking and innovative.

Inglorious Basterds (2009), whose title is once again reminiscent of an Italian film by Enzo G. Castellari, *Inglorious Bastards* (*Quel maledetto treno blindato* 1978), is the first film to use the war movie genre together with Spaghetti Westerns and to popular cinema in general, epitomized by the movie theatre that will be burnt down in the end. Most importantly, Tarantino provides World War II with an alternative ending, through the final revenge of the Jew character and the demise of the Nazis. This anticipates the attempt to manipulate history and to create a brand new genre that Tarantino will later expose in *Django Unchained*.

3. *Django Unchained*

At the end of the above-cited *Sukiyaki Western Django* we learn that Heihachi, the son of Akira (the valiant fighter murdered by the leader of the Heiki red-colored band opposed to the white-colored Genji), travels to Italy and becomes a gunslinger known as "Django". The film once again reiterates the connection and continuity of the tradition of the Spaghetti Western into the present, making the Django character a recurring element going all the way from Italy to Japan and, more recently, to America. With *Django Unchained*, Quentin Tarantino has, in fact, created his own unofficial Django sequel (Riggs 2), making Django the hero of a new story set in America's Deep South before the Civil War and presenting him as "the fastest gun in the South".

The original *Django* (Corbucci 1966), forerunner of a series of Italian Western films having a character named Django as the protagonist, was inspired by Akira Kurosawa's films, from which Corbucci's film differentiates for its cruelty,

violence, and somber tone. Played by Franco Nero, Django is a Civil War veteran who enters a town called Tombstone carrying a coffin that contains a machine gun. He is soon involved in a fight against two warring gangs: the Mexicans led by Hugo Rodriguez, and the Southerners, part of the Ku Klux Klan, led by Major Jackson. The latter, responsible for the death of Django's wife, is the object of his revenge. Django eventually defeats him during the final duel in the cemetery. In this muddy and rainy West the hero appears like a ghost, turning into a sepulchral gunman and macabre hero (Della Casa 68). Franco Nero's magnetism makes him stand out against a squalid setting, reminding us more of Peckinpah's themes than the more familiar Italian Westerns (Della Casa 25-26).

Tarantino's *Django Unchained* opens "somewhere in Texas in 1858, two years before the Civil War", and immediately introduces us to its main characters, Django (Jamie Foxx) and Dr. King Schultz (Christoph Waltz). Django is a black slave whom Schultz sets free in return for Django's help in finding and killing the Brittle brothers. They eventually become friends and partners in their bounty hunting and Schultz promises to help Django win back possession of his wife Broomhilda von Schaft (Kerry Washington).

In an interview on *Charlie Rose* in 2009, Tarantino had anticipated his plans to make a movie based on the life of abolitionist John Brown, defined his favourite American as a man who singlehandedly started the road to end slavery and who knew he had to kill people to do it. Tarantino then clarified that his idea was to make a genre film that would not follow the typical structure of a biopic exalting the solemn vision of history (Rose).

His following movie, in fact, did not turn out to be a biopic about John Brown. In *Django Unchained* Tarantino employs a new genre, a kind of Spaghetti Western set in America's Deep South, which he calls "a Southern":

I want to explore something that really hasn't been done [...] I want to do movies that deal with America's horrible past with slavery and stuff but do them like spaghetti westerns, not like big issue movies. I want to do them like they're genre films, but they deal with everything that America has never dealt with because it's ashamed of it, and other countries don't really deal with because they don't feel they have the right to (Hiscock).

The result is a "Southern" which includes homage to several other movie genres, above all the Spaghetti Westerns. As he says in another interview for the same TV show, he was working on a book about Sergio Corbucci, one of his favourite film directors, and he started thinking about the themes touched by the Italian director: Corbucci had described the most brutal and violent West, partly because he was still dealing with Fascism. The bad guys who took over the Western towns in his movies reminded Tarantino of the Fascist and Nazi occupation and inspired him a comparison with the true American equivalent of those historical events, the slavery in the South. Slavery had been "the bleakest time of America's history, its biggest sin, the one they (American people) haven't gone past yet and have to lie about" (Rose 2012).

During the same interview, Tarantino explains how his main idea evolved: his intention was to show a modern day audience what the antebellum South and America looked like at that time, but he wanted to do it in an entertaining way. That is why he decided to distance himself from those films dealing with history in more traditional and celebrating tones. He was more inclined towards exploitation films like *Mandingo* (1975), or films presenting a more straightforward view of history, like *Goodbye Uncle Tom* (1971). His plan was to tell an exciting Western adventure through a genre movie that used slavery and the antebellum South as a backdrop and that gave prominence to a black male rising up, becoming a cowboy, a "Spaghetti Western hero", and a folkloric hero, during his mission to save his woman (Rose 2012). As Roger Ebert remarks, the audience knows that Tarantino has a penchant for exploitation films, using shocking material to grab people's attention. Tarantino combines this tendency with his desire to transform the dreadful aspects with something more daring. His purpose is to challenge taboos in our society in the most direct possible way, adding, at the same time, an element of parody or satire. Behind an apparently simple story "the film takes the painful, touchy subject of slavery and approaches it without the slightest restraint". The presentation of violence in such extreme ways is part of this poetics, because it reflects the director's desire "to break through the audience's comfort level for exploitation films" and expose the inhuman aspects of that particular society and culture (Ebert).

This also allows him to attack the Ku Klux Klan by parodying its members in a scene where they waste their time complaining about their uncomfortable cuffs. Just as he attacks white racism he also attacks black racism through the character of Stephen (Samuel L. Jackson), the faithful servant of Calvin Candie (Leonardo Di Caprio), the aristocratic owner of the Candyland plantation from where Django tries to rescue Broomhilda. When Stephen finds out Django and Schultz's intentions, he reveals it to Calvin betraying his own race because, as Ebert remarks, he sees himself as white.

Although the film has been accused of a superficial portrayal of slavery, and of a disrespectful treatment of black characters because of the use of the "n" word, it is important to acknowledge Tarantino's choice of the genre. The

definition of Southern genre in literature, according to Leslie Fiedler, is as follows:

The Southern does not avoid but seeks melodrama, a series of bloody events, sexual by implication at least, played out in the blood-heat of a 'long hot summer' against a background of miasmal swamps, live oak, Spanish moss, and the decaying plantation house so dear to the hearts of the moviemakers. Indeed, until there were ruined plantations - which is to say, until the Civil War, defeat, and Reconstruction - there could be no true Southern [...]. The mode of the Southern is Gothic, American Gothic [...]. Without the Negro, in any case, there is no true Southern (Fiedler 18-19).

The Southern films have, for the most part, concentrated on the Old South and on the wealthy planters class, representing values such as gentility, resistance to change, and a general belief that slaves were treated well and were vital to the southern way of life. Truthful presentations of the institution of slavery in Hollywood's films did not occur until after World War II (Langman and Ebner 1-11).

Tarantino's choice to present a black Django as the protagonist is the first subversion toward previous cinematographic portrayals of the South. Tarantino's Django is reminiscent of the protagonist in Mel Brook's hilarious film *Blazing Saddles* (1974), but he goes a step further in presenting the true empowerment of a black male at that time (Rose). As a matter of fact, what constitutes Tarantino's Southern is, basically, black Americans in the South fighting for their freedom (Riggs 1).

While the Western genre was set in the American West and followed the struggle for the new frontier, Tarantino's Southern is set in the South and represents the struggle against slavery (Riggs 3). In Tarantino's version of the Southern, the hero shoots and kills the leader of the Ku Klux Klan, Big Daddy (Don Johnson). This action could be seen as an attempt to do justice to those who historically opposed the KKK and whose cinematographical representation, for example in David W. Griffith's *The Birth of a Nation* (1915), did not take them into consideration.

Among the devices Tarantino uses to sustain his effort are the characterization of the Southern aristocracy and the practice of the Mandingo fight, as well as the myth of Siegfried and Brunhild, all orchestrated through a Spaghetti Western operatic view of the whole (Rose). The film is full of references to the Italian Western film genre, from the opening titles, whose style reminds us of the ones used by Corbucci in his *Django*, to the same musical theme, the beautiful song "Django" composed by Luis Bacalov and sung by Rocky Roberts, and, finally, to the cameo by Franco Nero as Amerigo Vassepi in the famous scene of the Mandingo fight.

It is in this very scene that the acknowledgement of the new hero is made evident. When, after the defeat of his Mandingo fighter, Amerigo Vassepi approaches the bar to have something to drink before he leaves, he pauses next to Django Freeman and asks:

Amerigo Vassepi: What's your name?

Django: Django.

Amerigo Vassepi: Can you spell it?

Django: D J A N G O. [Then, turning to Vassepi] The D is silent.

Amerigo Vassepi: I know.

This scene depicts the Italian Western meeting the new American Western which, according to Tarantino's new definition, is now a Southern. It is important to remark that the one who has facilitated this encounter, together with other events in the film, is Dr. King Schultz, a figure alluding to the German component in the Eurowesterns, whose popularity was mainly due to a couple of buddies in a way similar to the Django-Schultz pair: Winnetou and Old Shatterhand.

Like the history of America as a whole, the birth of the new Western, the Southern, cannot disregard its European origins. Together with the protagonists in Sergio Corbucci's *Django* (1966) and in Tarantino's *Django Unchained*, the Eurowestern and the Italian Spaghetti Western are revitalized by Tarantino's unique style, for the benefit of those among the audience who may not be informed about their development during the years, but who will hopefully find it appealing and noteworthy.

After the death of Dr. Schultz, Django is again on the road to the mining company where he will work as a slave, and is led by Frankie (Quentin Tarantino) and other slave drivers. Following the teachings of his German friend, he starts playing a new part, and convinces the slave drivers to set him free, before shooting them and blowing up Frankie and, metaphorically, his creator Tarantino.

When, on the notes of *They Called Me Trinity*, Django watches Candyland burn, he is wearing a fancy dress and dark glasses that make him look like a sophisticated blaxpotation hero from the 1970s, and his role is already clear. He is the protagonist of a story dealing with the way in which both the American and the European culture cope with the liberation of black people in search of their own identity, not only in the cinema (Giusti, Dagospia). The release of

Django from his chains goes hand in hand with an effort to free the Western genre from its overused schemes and to contribute to its renewal through the new Southern genre. This is made evident, at the end of the film, when the hero is finally free and, in a last Western-like flashback, he reminds himself of Dr. Schultz's words:

You know what they're going to call you, my boy?
"The fastest gun in the South."

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Django Unchained. Quentin Tarantino. 2012.

Yojimbo. Akira Kurosawa. 1961.

[1] The term "Spaghetti Western" was first coined by American critics of the Italian Western, and was intended as derogative, as were the terms later applied to the other European Westerns, such as those made in Germany ("Sauerkraut"), Spain ("Paella"), or France ("Camembert") (Frayling xi). Although the Italian directors didn't like this definition, it was nonetheless widely used by fans and critics alike, and acquired a different connotation over the years, becoming, in more recent times, a symbol of affection toward the genre (Giusti xi).

[2]The mythical view of the American history originated in the United States from the sense of melancholy toward the past as a consequence of/after the closing of the frontier, and was extended to the relationship toward American Indians who, from a cultural, geographical, and historical reality, were transposed into an eternal, mythical dimension (Leutrat and Liandrat-Guigues 36).

[3] For the purpose of filmic analysis, we need to differentiate the cinema made by Tarantino from the myths and legends surrounding him. Indeed, those critiques are often based on what D. K. Holm defines "the Mythology", that is the blending of true facts about his personal life and the elements derived from his public persona at times reaching mythical dimensions.

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