



Studia
Filmoznawcze
38
Wrocław 2017

Marek Paryż
University of Warsaw

CONTEMPORARY TRANSNATIONAL WESTERNS: TRAJECTORIES AND CONSTELLATIONS

DOI: 10.19195/0860-116X.38.1

Films exist in a global space of cultural exchange in which aesthetic borrowings and contextual reinventions have become something of a norm. Thanks to the advancement of media technologies, new channels of film circulation have opened and new, fluctuating audiences have emerged. Many national cinemas are strong today because they have found appealing ways of combining cultural specificity with issues of universal interest. At the same time, artistic cooperation across national borders has never been simpler, and international film productions often make a point of exposing their culturally diverse themes and forms. Contemporary global cinematography is a realm in which innumerable directions of exchange or influence can be identified. Important and symptomatic phenomena seem to be happening on a micro-scale, undermining the assumptions of hierarchical thinking. Of course, box office results testify to the significance of given films, but financial statistics will never do justice to the complexity of film culture. Kathleen Newman thus comments on the transnational aspect of contemporary films:

The assumption that the export of European and US cinema to the rest of the world, from the silent period onward, inspired only derivative image cultures has been replaced by a dynamic model of cinematic exchange, where filmmakers around the world are known to have been in dialogue with one another's work, and other cultural and political exchanges to form the dynamic context of these dialogues. Audiences outside the United States are understood to have long had access to at least more than one national cinematic tradition, if not several, and their viewing practices are understood to be active engagement, not to be passive reception. Changes in film

industries and in film style are now understood not merely to be a response to national conditions and pressures, but also to have, most always, multiple international determinants. Borders are seen to have always been permeable, societies always hybrid, and international film history to have been key to the processes of globalization. (4)

Film art has become dehierarchized and deterritorialized. Even entrenched cinematic traditions, including national film genres, are being renewed and need to be reassessed. The present special issue of *Studia Filmoznawcze* aims to examine the ways in which the globalization of film culture has affected the contemporary film Western. Some articles look at films made outside the United States which imitate the American convention, or combine recognizable elements of American and local genres, or allude to the Western through the choice of archetypal themes and characters. Other articles deal with American productions which refer to transnational contexts either explicitly or through symbolization. We have decided to focus on films made after the year 2000 to fill up a void in existing criticism. Recent years have seen the publication of a number of books exploring the transnational dimensions of the Western: *Any Gun Can Play: The Essential Guide to Euro-Westerns* by Kevin Grant (2011), *Radical Frontiers in the Spaghetti Western: Politics, Violence and Popular Italian Cinema* by Austin Fisher (2011), *Captivating Westerns: The Middle East in the American West* by Susan Kollin (2015), *The Euro-Western: Reframing Gender, Race and the 'Other' in Film* by Lee Broughton (2016), *Crossing Frontiers: Intercultural Perspectives on the Western*, edited by Thomas Klein, Ivo Ritzer and Peter W. Schulze (2012), *International Westerns: Re-Locating the Frontier*, edited by Cynthia J. Miller and A. Bowoin Van Riper (2014), *The Western in the Global South*, edited by MaryEllen Higgins, Rita Keresztesi and Dayna Oscherwitz (2015), *The Post-2000 Film Western: Contexts, Transnationality, Hybridity*, edited by Marek Paryż and John R. Leo (2015), *Spaghetti Westerns at the Crossroads: Studies in Re-location, Transition and Appropriation*, edited by Austin Fisher (2016), and a special issue of the online journal *Transformations* on “The Other Western,” edited by Grayson Cooke, Warwick Mules and David Baker (2014). In most cases, these contributions to the study of the Western cover mainly pre-2000 films. The new millennium has brought about at least a modest revival of the Western in the United States, with films such as *Open Range* (Kevin Costner, 2003), *3:10 to Yuma* (James Mangold, 2007), *True Grit* (Joel and Ethan Coen, 2010), *Django Unchained* (Quentin Tarantino, 2012), and *The Magnificent Seven* (Antoine Fuqua, 2016), to name just a few titles, as well as with films which transpose the Western’s iconography and plot variants into contemporary settings — from *The Three Burials of Melquiades Estrada* (Tommy Lee Jones, 2005) to *Hell or High Water* (David Mackenzie, 2016). Articles collected in this issue of *Studia Filmoznawcze* demonstrate that recent transnational Westerns have played a crucial role in energizing the Western genre, too.

When one thinks about important tendencies in the history of the appropriations of the Western outside the United States, what immediately comes to mind are the

Italian and German varieties of the genre from the 1960s. The explanation for such an association is rather simple: these two trends of the European Western developed on a large scale and attracted the attention of international audiences. However, the beginning of the European fascination and preoccupation with the film Western goes back to the origins of the genre itself. Christopher Frayling enumerates a number of Westerns made by European filmmakers in the first two decades of the twentieth century: a series of twenty French films featuring Joë Hamman, “a Gallic cowboy who had spent his youth in the West,” released between 1907 and 1913, “a ‘Spaghetti’ filmed in Turin in 1909... starring Sergio Leone’s mother... as the heroine, who in the climactic scene appeared on a white horse surrounded by Redskin warriors,” and “a silent German version of *The Last of the Mohicans*... filmed in the forests of the Rhine, which starred the Hungarian actor Bela Lugosi in a pre-Dracula incarnation as the Indian hero Uncas” (29). For Frayling, the earliest truly symbolic expression of the overlapping of European and American imaginings about the West was the creation of four different versions, both literary and cinematic, of the story of Johann August Sutter, a Swiss traveler and entrepreneur who built a small business empire in California in the years preceding the Gold Rush. The four renditions of the Sutter story discussed by Frayling appeared between 1925 and 1936 and include: a novel by Blaise Cendrars, a screenplay by Sergei Eisenstein, “a Nazi propaganda film” by Luis Trenkner, and “a classic Hollywood Western by one of the founding fathers of the genre [James Cruze]” (5). As the critic observes, taken together, these works provide “a unique example of what happens to a classic Western in the hands of those who attempt to relate it to ‘alien’ views about politics and society” (5). It should be remembered, though, that it is European men of letters who first discovered the imaginative appeal and market value of the U.S. West. The German writer Friedrich Gerstäcker and the French writer Gustave Aimard laid the foundations for the literary Western in Europe in the mid-nineteenth century. The first Polish adaptations of American frontier romances, based on Robert Montgomery Bird’s *Nick of the Woods* (1837) and James Fenimore Cooper’s *Leatherstocking Tales* (1826–1841), appeared in the 1870s and 1880s (cf. Bobowski 21–22). Karl May began to publish the novels from his famous Winnetou cycle in the 1890s. Arguably, May was the first European writer who directly explored the transnational meanings of American frontier narratives: in one of the books from the cycle, he sent the eponymous Indian hero to Africa. Over the course of the twentieth century, writers from a number of European countries created their own variants of the popular Western novel. France and Belgium have been a home to a number of graphic artists who have helped to sustain the continuity of the European Western by producing long-running series of comics: *Lucky Luke*, *Blueberry* and *Comanche*.

After the year 2000 national cinemas in Europe have not brought out a sufficient number of film Westerns for one to talk about larger tendencies, nevertheless this number is big enough to justify a thorough critical examination. On the whole,

a contemporary European Western is likely to subscribe to one of the following models: a popular action/sensational formula, an artistic engagement with the convention, or a parody. Examples of the first variant can be found in the output of the French cinema: French co-productions *Blueberry* (Jan Kounen, 2004) and *Bandidas* (Joachim Roenning and Espen Sandberg, 2006), both shot in English and featuring star actors recognized in the United States, were obviously targeted at the American audience to which they tried to appeal through stunning visual effects, in the former case, or through the use of comedy, in the latter. It is worth mentioning that Luc Besson, who co-authored the script for *Bandidas*, contributed to the making of *The Homesman* (Tommy Lee Jones, 2014) as the film's producer. The French participation in this production would be completely invisible if it hadn't been for one subtle hint: the place of action, the Territory of Nebraska, is named in French in the opening shot of the film. The artistic variant is represented by the Austrian film *The Dark Valley* (Andreas Prochaska, 2014), which certainly does not ingratiate itself with American viewers and is dubbed in German. Its authors have succeeded in creating a unique mix of a formula-driven plot and a range of culturally specific references, which proves the viability of the Western genre for the examination of issues pertaining to very different communal experiences. Contemporary European parodies of the Western inevitably remain in the shadow of *Lemonade Joe* (Oldřich Lipský, 1964), but some of them are no less intriguing than their legendary Czechoslovak predecessor. Two post-2000 Polish films which imitate the iconography of American Westerns — *Eucalyptus* (Marcin Krzyształowicz, 2001) and *Summer Love* (Piotr Uklański, 2006) — fall into the category of parody. The former was advertised as an erotic Western, but it is impossible to verify whether it posed as serious a challenge to the convention because the film has been completely withdrawn from circulation. The latter Polish Western handles the genre with great daring, too, as it seems to derive its ideas from an unthinkable combination of *Lemonade Joe* and *Waiting for Godot*, portraying stock characters with utmost irreverence, on the one hand, and emanating an overwhelming sense of stasis and futility — in a word, absurdity — on the other.

It goes without saying that the processes of the cultural appropriation of the Western have followed their own different courses in different countries. Importantly, some countries had generated narrative traditions that utilized archetypes and plotlines corresponding to the American Western prior to the influence of American popular culture, and such influence at a later stage did not necessarily undermine the specificity of Western-like national genres. A case in point is the Australian Western whose cinematic history is as long as that of the American Western. The first Australian feature film, *The Story of the Kelly Gang* (Charles Tait, 1906) followed Edwin S. Porter's *The Great Train Robbery* (1903) by three years only, establishing an outlaw hero in a recognizable Australian mold. Emma Hamilton points out a number of similarities between American and Australian Westerns, resulting from

analogous historical experiences of the two nations: “both were settled by the British; both have attempted to (re)negotiate a ‘frontier,’ with its multiple meanings, and reinstated the centrality of the frontier experience to nationhood via forms of cultural expression including film; and both societies have attempted to incorporate a diverse population, including original occupants of the land into a cohesive national identity, and both have struggled in this pursuit” (132). Using as an example *The Proposition* (John Hillcoat, 2005), one of the most internationally acclaimed contemporary Australian films, Hamilton argues that the Australian Western “sits beside the Hollywood Western”; it “may be informed by the conventions of the broader Western genre... [but] those conventions are deployed in such a way as to explore a distinctly Australian experience of the frontier and its subsequent impacts” (144–145).

Another national genre that has culture-specific origins and, at the same time, bears semblance to the American Western is the samurai film in Japan. While the affinity between the Australian and American varieties of the Western has been conditioned primarily by historical factors, the similarity between the samurai film and the Western has to do with the use of parallel archetypes. This is how Krzysztof Loska describes the heroes of classic samurai films: “Although they opposed the law, they did not deserve condemnation because they were embodiments of nobility, motivated by the dictates of honor, and their actions resulted from compassion or necessity. They were tragic characters who experienced undeserved suffering and whose lives were governed by destiny” (134, trans. M.P.). Loska also defines “an anti-heroic variant,” which “features a villain chased by the police, often lonely and estranged, at odds with the people and the world, who nevertheless makes attempts to reunite with the community” (134, trans. M.P.). The reliance on archetypal plots, alongside the construction of iconography foregrounding the prominence of weapons and fighting skills, possibly accounts for the ease with which the samurai film and the Western at some point began to merge, giving rise to a series of hybrid cultural representations. When John Sturges reworked Akira Kurosawa’s *Seven Samurai* (1954) into *The Magnificent Seven* (1960), he evidently tried his best to erase the alien cultural markers that would refer the viewer to the source narrative, but once a samurai, in the person of Toshiro Mifune himself, set his foot on the American soil — as it happens, in the French-Italian-Spanish co-production *Red Sun* (Terence Young, 1971) — a hybrid model was established. In recent years, this model has resurfaced in films such as *The Last Samurai* (Edward Zwick, 2003), in which an embittered American veteran of the Indian Wars, who accepts a job as a military instructor in Japan, joins the ranks of rebellious samurai, and *The Warrior’s Way* (Sngmoo Lee, 2010), in which, for a change, a former samurai, now settled in America and trying to live a normal, peaceful life, is forced to take out his hidden sword and confront a gang of cruel bandits. The combination of the Western and the samurai film finds a truly excessive expression in *Sukiyaki Western Django*

(Takashi Miike, 2007), which A. Bowdoin Van Riper describes as “an exuberantly strange, deliberately kaleidoscopic work that mashes together elements of mythology and pulp fiction, history and legend, reaching freely across cultures, eras, and genres to plunder elements from a dozen different sources” so as to indicate that “the Hollywood Western, far from being a culturally specific ‘American’ story, is a specifically American manifestation of something more universal” (394–395). It comes as no surprise that the 2016 remake of *The Magnificent Seven* could not have dispensed with the figure of an Asian knife fighter, “a mysterious man of the Orient,” as he is called in the film. One can put forth a thesis that the Australian Western, with its relative autonomy, and the blatantly hybrid Western-cum-samurai film define the opposite ends of a spectrum of possibilities within which most of the national appropriations of the genre could be placed.

The reasons for the global appeal of the Western certainly are diverse, but there is no doubt that not the least important is the genre’s powerful iconography. Richard Maltby writes that the Western’s iconography “provide[s] a shorthand system enabling a knowledgeable viewer to glean a great deal of information about the characters and the situation simply from the way the characters are dressed, the tools they use, and the settings in which the action takes place, and this level of meaning provides viewers with another means of gaining pleasure from the movie” (86). The continuing reliance on a set of iconographic elements results in a ritualization of the types of action characteristic of the Western: “The narrative rituals of robbery, chase and retribution, of lawlessness and restoration of law, are iconographically inscribed in the Western right down to the very last detail and gesture” (Hayward 499). Therefore, it is not accidental that an action/adventure formula modeled on the Western has served as a vehicle for a few recent non-American blockbuster productions. The Korean film *The Good, the Bad, and the Weird* (Kim Ji-woon, 2008) evokes historical circumstances as a pretext for “action spectacles that draw inspiration from a variety of sources: martial arts, Jackie Chan-style comic kung-fu action, an Indiana Jones-like adventure plot and no less the Western’s classic moments of train robbery, gunfights on horseback and finally a three-point stand-off at the closing” (Lee 155). The Chinese *Let the Bullets Fly* (Jiang Wen, 2010) “utilizes conventional Western elements in a fictional historical epic set in 1930s China,” with “[t]he frontier town setting provid[ing] the necessary backdrop for a quick-paced, high-octane, CGI-enabled action drama” (Lee 157). The Turkish *Yahşi Bati* (Ömer Faruk Sorak, 2009) is less spectacular visually, but thanks to a successful employment of the comic Western convention it attracted huge audiences locally, becoming one of the highest grossing films of 2010 in Turkey.

The appeal of the Western also has to do with the ideological underpinnings of the genre. According to Cynthia J. Miller and A. Bowdoin Van Riper, the Western’s focus on various manifestations and consequences of colonizing processes accounts

for its currency in the present time (xiv). Indeed, the Western has developed cinematic paradigms of representing hegemony, subjugation and resistance to which contemporary audiences in former colonizing nations as well as in former colonized nations can relate. Given the international popularity of the Western, what is also at stake is the hegemony of the U.S. in the realm of popular culture. Thus, more often than not, transnational appropriations of the Western carry ideological implications with respect to local cultures, histories, social system etc., on the one hand, and the functioning of the global film market, on the other. In their entirety, contemporary transnational Westerns can be seen as repeated attempts to assert marginality as “an unprecedented source of creative energy” (Ashcroft, Griffiths and Tiffin 12). In their seminal work on post-colonial literatures, Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths and Helen Tiffin argue that “imperial expansion has had a radically destabilizing effect on its own preoccupations and power”: “the alienating process which initially served to relegate the post-colonial world to the ‘margin’ turned upon itself and acted to push that world through a kind of mental barrier into a position from which all experience could be seen as uncentered, pluralistic, and multifarious” (12). Contemporary Westerns from different parts of the world, especially those where the memory of colonization remains strong, keep reminding us about the fundamental role of frontier narratives in illuminating the issues of displacement, injustice and resistance. The British-New Zealand co-production *Tracker* (Ian Sharp, 2010) combines a pursuit plot, reminiscent of Westerns such as *Tell Them Willie Boy Is Here* (Abraham Polonsky, 1969), with a context that brings to mind Joseph Conrad. *Tracker* is a noteworthy achievement in how it investigates the problem of displacement in a colonial reality by featuring a Boer exiled to New Zealand, who finds himself in the service of the oppressors, and a Maori sailor, who appears to have adopted the European ways of conduct. Dayna Oscherwitz, describing Abderrahmane Sissako’s film *Bamako* (2006), writes that “[t]he Western figures prominently in this exploration, foregrounding the various forms of lived violence that characterize contemporary Mali, ranging from the deaths of adults and children from preventable illnesses, to the deaths of immigrants released to die in the Sahara, to the economic and cultural violence wrought by global trade and monetary policy” (82–83). Susan Kollin claims that the formula of captivity, one of the oldest and most entrenched narrative variants of the Western, resurfaces in contemporary productions related to the genre on an international scale, allowing for tracing the ways in which cultural exchange through cinema reflects the effect of global relations of power on symbolic imaginings in the aftermath of 9/11:

The Western gains power in the twenty-first century as a narrative form that *captivates* popular audiences. In some instances, the genre may speak to larger anxieties about America in the world and a perceived sense that U.S. innocence has been *held captive by terrorists* from the Middle East. In other cases, especially as it is reimagined by authors and filmmakers in the Middle East, the Western becomes a useful means of critically examining how the nation has

been *held captive to its own fears and anxieties*, with the war on terror resulting not in more freedom but in greater restrictions and fewer liberties. (3–4; original italics)

In *The Rhizomatic West: Representing the American West in a Transnational, Global, Media Age*, Neil Campbell describes the West as “less a distinct and definable location... than ‘an itinerary... a series of encounters and translations.’” Campbell wants his critical project to be seen as “*transmotional* ‘route work’ following connections, trails, traces, pathways and echoes, peeling back the layers of a complex unending palimpsest... but above all attempting to reflect upon and examine the presence of westness in its various, complex forms of mobility as it has traveled globally resting in certain forms, mutating into other, and disrupting still more” (37, original italics). The history of the appropriations of the American frontier narrative by other cultures, first in literature and then in film, attests that the Western has been a rhizomatic genre from the beginning. Nowadays, it often reaches into unexpected cinematic territories. In *The Legend of Kaspar Hauser* (Davide Manuli, 2012), a sheriff has been placed on a fantasy island in the company of a madwoman, a priest, a princess, a killer and a mysterious stranger with earphones in what some of the Internet commentators have boldly dubbed a science-fiction disco Western. Transnational Westerns oscillate between extreme irreverence and utmost seriousness in their ways of handling the genre, and it is their unlimited changeability of tones, forms, themes and contexts that has helped to keep the Western alive.

WORKS CITED

- Ashcroft, Bill, Gareth Griffiths, and Helen Tiffin. *The Empire Writes Back: Theory and Practice in Post-Colonial Literatures*. New York and London: Routledge, 1989. Print.
- Bobowski, Sławomir. *Nie tylko przygoda. Polskie powieści indiańskie dla młodzieży w perspektywie etnologicznej*. Wrocław: ATUT, 2012. Print.
- Broughton, Lee. *The Euro-Western: Reframing Gender, Race and the ‘Other’ in Film*. London and New York: I.B. Tauris, 2016. Print.
- Campbell, Neil. *The Rhizomatic West: Representing the American West in a Transnational, Global, Media Age*. Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2008. Print.
- Cooke, Grayson, Warwick Mules, and David Baker, eds. Special Issue on “The Other Western.” *Transformations* 24 (2014). Accessed 2 Oct 2016. Web.
- Frayling, Christopher. *Spaghetti Westerns: Cowboys and Europeans from Karl May to Sergio Leone*. London, Boston and Henley: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1981. Print.
- Grant, Kevin. *Any Gun Can Play: The Essential Guide to Euro-Westerns*. Godalming: FAB Press, 2011. Print.
- Fisher, Austin. *Radical Frontiers in the Spaghetti Western: Politics, Violence and Popular Italian Cinema*. London and New York: I.B. Tauris, 2014. Print.
- Fisher, Austin, ed. *Spaghetti Westerns at the Crossroads: Studies in Relocation, Transition and Appropriation*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2016. Print.

- Hamilton, Emma. “‘Australia. What Fresh Hell Is This?’: Conceptualizing the Australian Western in *The Proposition*.” *The Post-2000 Film Western: Contexts, Transnationality, Hybridity*. Ed. Marek Paryz and John R. Leo. 131–146. Print.
- Hayward, Susan. *Cinema Studies: The Key Concepts*. London and New York: Routledge, 2006. Print.
- Higgins, MaryEllen, Rita Keresztesi, and Dayna Oscherwitz, eds. *The Western in the Global South*. New York and London: Routledge, 2015. Print.
- Klein, Thomas, Ivo Ritzer, and Peter W. Schulze, eds. *Crossing Frontiers: Intercultural Perspectives on the Western*. Marburg: Schüren, 2012. Print.
- Kollin, Susan. *Captivating Westerns: The Middle East in the American West*. London and Lincoln: Nebraska University Press, 2015. Print.
- Lee, Vivian P.Y. “Staging the ‘Wild, Wild East’: Decoding the Western in East Asian Films.” *The Post-2000 Film Western: Contexts, Transnationality, Hybridity*. Ed. Marek Paryz and John R. Leo. 147–164. Print.
- Loska, Krzysztof. *Nowy film japoński*. Kraków: Universitas, 2013. Print.
- Maltby, Richard. *Hollywood Cinema*. Malden: Blackwell, 2003. Print.
- Miller, Cynthia J., and A. Bowdoin Van Riper. “Introduction.” *International Westerns: Re-Locating the Frontier*. Ed. Cynthia J. Miller and A. Bowdoin Van Riper. xi–xxviii. Print.
- Miller, Cynthia J., and A. Bowdoin Van Riper, eds. *International Westerns: Re-Locating the Frontier*. Lanham: Scarecrow Press, 2014. Print.
- Newman, Kathleen. “Notes on Transnational Film Theory: Decentered Subjectivity, Decentered Capitalism.” *World Cinemas, Transnational Perspectives*. Ed. Nataša Đurovičová and Kathleen Newman. New York and London: Routledge, 2010. 3–11. Print.
- Oscherwitz, Dayna. “In the Crossfire: Africa, Cinema, and Violence in Abderrahmane Sissako’s *Bamako* (2006).” *The Western in the Global South*. Ed. MaryEllen Higgins, Rita Keresztesi, and Dayna Oscherwitz. 81–95. Print.
- Paryz, Marek, and John R. Leo. *The Post-2000 Film Western: Contexts, Transnationality, Hybridity*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015. Print.
- Van Riper, A. Bowdoin. “The Sword and the Six-Shooter: *Sukiyaki Western Django* and the Universality of the Western.” *International Westerns: Re-Locating the Frontier*. Ed. Cynthia J. Miller and A. Bowdoin Van Riper. 394–415. Print.

CONTEMPORARY TRANSNATIONAL WESTERNS: TRAJECTORIES AND CONSTELLATIONS

Summary

This introductory article maps out the main directions to be observed in contemporary transnational Westerns. It looks specifically at three areas beyond the United States where the films in the Western genre have assumed the most symptomatic forms: Europe, Australia and Japan. European Westerns seem to comprise a wider scope of artistic possibilities offered by the genre than elsewhere, as they subscribe to one of the following models: a popular action/sensational formula, an artistic engagement with the convention, or a parody. The Australian Western is related to the American genre primarily through historical analogies, while the Japanese Western has developed thanks to the similarity of the archetypal plots of U.S. Westerns and Japanese samurai films.

WSPÓŁCZESNE WESTERNY TRANSNARODOWE: TRAJEKTORIE I KONSTELACJE

Streszczenie

Artykuł omawia pokrótce główne tendencje we współczesnych westernach transnarodowych. Szczególną uwagę zwrócono na trzy obszary geograficzne, gdzie gatunek przybrał w ostatnich kilkunastu latach najbardziej symptomatyczne formy: Europę, Australię i Japonię. Westerny europejskie dają najszerszy przegląd możliwości kreatywnych i oscylują między trzema modelami: film akcji, parodia i artystyczny dialog z konwencją. Westerny australijskie korespondują z amerykańskimi przede wszystkim z uwagi na analogie historyczne, a produkcje japońskie — z racji podobieństw archetypów obecnych w westernach i filmach samurajskich.

przeł. Kordian Bobowski