

Out West, down South: Gazing at America in reverse shot through Damiano Damiani's *Quien sabe?**

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For a *flone* so vaunted for its stylistic panache, it is remarkable how seldom the Italian Western's cinematography is afforded serious academic attention. Time and again, such adjectives as 'operatic' or 'baroque' scratch the surface before the scholar returns to more pressing, narrative, issues. Where socio-historical or political readings are concerned the tendency is at its most marked, and it is here that this paper seeks to intervene by identifying and analysing intertextual, transcultural nuances in the camerawork of the Mexican Revolution fable, *¿El Chunchu, quién sabe?* (Damiano Damiani, 1966); henceforth abbreviated to *Quien sabe?*¹

Co-written by Marxist screenwriter par excellence Franco Solinas, this film is often read as a 'political' text in a linear or superficial sense: an exuberant, riotous application of revolutionary sentiment to the *Western all'italiana*. Ignacio Ramonet responds to *Quien sabe?* and its radicalized legacy with the question 'who says leftists never have fun?',² while academe's own Italian Western doyenne Christopher Frayling describes it as 'Frantz Fanon, Spaghetti-style'.³ Both writers focus on the allegorical nature of the narrative, and on its close structural and thematic resemblance to Solinas's later, more widely revered, screenplay for *Queimada!* (Gillo Pontecorvo, 1969). Anglophone critiques of *Quien sabe?*'s radicalism, indeed, have so far focused exclusively on these plot-based aspects (most overtly in Bert Fridlund's structuralist approach to the Italian Western, where the film is categorized within a 'social bandit' narrative schema).⁴ It is certainly not my intention to suggest that such readings are erroneous, since the most cursory summary of the film's storyline attests to the transparency of its allegory. More often than not, however, a synopsis alone is seen to be sufficient in asserting the 'political' nature of Damiani's film.

Briefly to join in with this expositional exercise, the narrative of *Quien sabe?* purposefully allegorizes and critiques US Cold War interventionism in antagonistic terms broadly pertaining to a global outlook characteristic of the nascent 'New Left'. A North American assassin named Bill Tate (played by Lou

Castel) enters the Mexican Revolution, hired by the country's government to track and kill a guerrilla leader named General Elias. To reach his prey, Tate befriends a native bandit named Chunchu (Gian Maria Volonté), and joins the Mexican's outlaw band, offering his technical expertise to ingratiate himself. After Tate's counterinsurgency mission is complete, Chunchu realizes that he has been manipulated. In the final scene his eyes are opened to the presumptuousness of the gringo's intrusion into native affairs, and he shoots Tate dead as the American boards his train home. As a resolute affirmation of Frantz Fanon's *The Wretched of the Earth* (1961),⁵ this violent, cathartic denouement is widely read as the film's key political moment. So far, so militant.

If, however, we wish to understand how the filmmakers used the cinematic medium to articulate these themes, we must look beyond mere synopsis. Indeed, to take *Quien sabe?*'s narrative unity for granted is to overlook the film's aspect as 'popular' cinema, along with the industrial, cultural and stylistic implications of that term. Christopher Wagstaff suggests that critical models associated with prestige Hollywood production practices do not suffice in analysing such formula cinema as the Spaghetti Western phenomenon, which was pitched primarily at audiences who were apt to wander in and out during the show, and talk during the boring bits.⁶ *Quien sabe?*, it must be stressed, was not a creation of the *terza visione* production line which Wagstaff describes, but a relatively large-scale, internationally-released film. What is clear, however, is that Damiani was operating within the conventions of a genre in which verisimilitude, narrative coherence and dialogue did not necessarily come before cinematic style in filmmakers' production practices.

This paper will argue that *Quien sabe?* is characterized by a didactic positioning of the film camera which, in conjunction with other elements of cinematic style and narrative construction, seeks to guide its audience through manipulation of shot, *mise-en-scène*, point-of-view and dramatic irony. Specifically, I locate the film as a cinematic counterpoint to *Vera Cruz* (Robert Aldrich, 1954), demonstrating how it offers a confrontational reworking of the Hollywood Western's representational practices in the Cold War years. The filmmakers' intentions thus identified, however, the concluding part of the paper will look at both the era and the political milieu from which *Quien sabe?* emerged, and posit a cultural anomaly in its agenda. A forum for resistance and a rejection of hegemonic texts: both of these readings are available and, doubtless, intended. Yet, upon analysing the film's deployment of cinematic devices, one senses the ambiguities surrounding Italy's intimate transatlantic encounter of the post-war era. Though seeking to register cognitive resistance to the codes of US popular culture, by so directly appropriating such a visible, and visual, manifestation of Americana as the Western, the film inadvertently records a considerably more nuanced cultural relationship than is apparent in its outwardly militant polemic.

Crossing the border

As Chunchu waits at Ciudad Juárez train station in *Quien sabe?*'s penultimate sequence, he turns to face the camera, and the carefree bandit's stare becomes fixated. A point-of-view shot reveals the subject of his attention to be Bill Tate (Figure 1). 'Get out of my way', the conspicuously affluent Westerner demands, pushing in at the front of a queue of peasants. 'Who does this gringo think he is?', asks one of them; 'it's always like this', complains another. As a reaction shot returns to Chunchu, the camera zooms in on his frowning visage, still staring in the direction of this spectacle (Figure 2), and an ominous musical refrain announces an impending confrontation.



Figure 1



Figure 2

As a framing device, this scene's formal construction performs an important cognitive function within the broader signifying practice which defines *Quien sabe?*'s attempt at political communication. The sequence described above narrates Chunchu's final revelation in an efficient, terse expositional progression. The Mexican's eyes are here opened to the pernicious nature of Tate's intrusion, swiftly preparing the viewer for the film's violent conclusion. Contextualized within the full arc of *Quien sabe?*'s epistemological and perceptual positioning of its audience, these shots themselves become a visual, stylistic and intertextual climax, completing the film's didactic journey.

I shall return to the finer points of this sequence, and demonstrate the processes by which the filmmakers lead the viewer towards it, in due course. Firstly, however, I must explain why *Quien sabe?*'s cinematic techniques, and this scene in particular, are important if we are fully to understand how the film operates. To do so, I turn my attention briefly across the Atlantic, to contemporaneous trends within the Hollywood Western. Damiani himself was at pains to distance his film from America's oldest genre: '*Quien sabe?* non è un western [...] Il western appartiene alla cultura protestante nord-americana [...] *Quien sabe?* è un film sulla rivoluzione messicana, ambiente nella rivoluzione messicana, e quindi è chiaramente un film politico e non poteva non esserlo'.⁷ Implicit in this assertion is a desire to avoid the intellectual stigma associated with the Cinecittà / Elios production line – by this time churning out Westerns at a rate

of over fifty a year – and to locate the film as part also of the revered oeuvre of Franco Solinas. Equally evident in Damiani's argument, however, is a statement of intent that *Quien sabe?* is an outright rejection of the formulations peddled by the Hollywood myth machine. Nowhere is the fallacy of authorial intent so apparent, for this film is intimately entwined in a dialogue with the narrative, ideological and cinematographic norms of the American format.

That the post-war Hollywood Western offered a rationalization for the USA's emergence as a superpower, a bastion of freedom and a 'global sheriff' as the Cold War intensified is well-travelled scholarly territory. Numerous writers, such as Stanley Corkin, Tom Engelhardt and – most notably – Richard Slotkin,⁸ emphasize in particular the extent to which white adventurers crossing the Mexican border became, in the context of Korea and Vietnam, a highly politicized paradigm, replete with signifiers of interventionism, containment and imperialism. A mythic Mexico fascinated by, and aspiring towards, North American freedom had been nurtured and promulgated as far back as *Viva Villa!* (Jack Conway, 1934) and *Juarez* (William Dieterle, 1939), and re-inscribed with overtly Cold War-era inflections in *Viva Zapata!* (Elia Kazan, 1952). By the 1960s, what Slotkin labels the 'counterinsurgency Western' had become a familiar and recurrent model within the Western genre.⁹ Oppressed peasants in an underdeveloped Third World Mexico are shown gratefully receiving assistance from their technologically and militarily superior neighbours to the north in films such as *Vera Cruz* (Robert Aldrich, 1954), *The Treasure of Pancho Villa* (George Sherman, 1955) and *Bandido* (Richard Fleischer, 1956).

Corkin argues that the pervasiveness of interventionism in the lead-up to the 1960 US election is especially palpable upon analysing two Westerns of that year whose political stances are at odds with one another, yet which share an affirmation of a benevolent USA spreading freedom through the world: *The Magnificent Seven* (John Sturges, 1960) and *The Alamo* (John Wayne, 1960).¹⁰ Amidst the intensification of nationalistic ideologies, Corkin holds, these films register widespread late-1950s assumptions of the legitimacy and beneficence of white rule which informed conceptions of 'modernization' theory both liberal (*The Magnificent Seven*) and conservative (*The Alamo*). Most importantly, for the purposes of this paper, Corkin's study also highlights the extent to which this ethnocentrism finds expression through each film's camerawork. In *The Magnificent Seven*, for example, low-angle, tracking and point-of-view shots establish Chris and Vin (Yul Brynner and Steve McQueen) as the audience's primary points of identification as they enter the narrative, while the Mexican peasants whom they rescue from tyranny are repeatedly dwarfed in comparison to their gringo saviours by the perspective and the angle of the film camera.

Before turning to the methods by which *Quien sabe?* critiques such cinematic language, I draw the reader's attention to one scene in particular, from

Vera Cruz, which distils the modes of representation against which Damiani's film reacts. Early on in the film, a pan shot follows Ben Trane (Gary Cooper) as he rides into a town, ties his horse up outside a bar and with a genial 'howdy' walks inside. Hollywood's 'A'-list cowboy star is going about his usual business, but the locale the camera registers is curiously alien. Instead of a saloon there is a cantina; instead of boardwalks and wooden façades, the buildings flanking this main street are made of ancient stone; instead of the industrious hustle of a boom-town there are peasants in sombreros leaning against walls and Latino women carrying food atop their heads. Both outside and inside the cantina, however, there are North American gunslingers, scowling at Trane's repeated attempts at politeness. A few choice words later, Donnegan (Ernest Borgnine) is sent flying courtesy of Trane's fist, and the camera follows his progress from inside the cantina, to the door, to peer out at the dusty street where a row of peasants stands watching the show.¹¹

The rough-and-tumble bar-room brawl, the gang of menacing outlaws and the virtuoso gunplay with which Joe Erin (Burt Lancaster) enters and defuses the situation are all familiar 'Western' spectacles displaced to this distinctly southern locale. As Erin approaches the camera, a low-angle shot emphasizes this Westerner's looming, powerful presence. When he then observes with amusement Borgnine's ample physique hurtling exaggeratedly outside and slumping unconscious, the camera's position inside the cantina allows the audience to share his point-of-view, and his broad grin. The Mexican peasants watching the show are literally a backdrop, gazing at the antics of white American supermen yet excluded from the cantina and denied their own point-of-view shot when the film cuts straight back to the protagonists and their affairs. In short, these peasants fit comfortably into Hollywood's 'counterinsurgency Western' format, reflecting back over the Rio Grande the manner in which a generous USA would like to be perceived by less advanced cultures.

Quien sabe? offers a firm rebuke to such assumptions of benevolence as are manifest in the films discussed above. Bill Tate's mission south of the border is a direct and purposeful echo of this ideologically-laden scenario, which had been rehearsed on numerous big-budget occasions in post-war Hollywood. The 'counterinsurgency Western' is here appropriated and re-moulded into its own ideological antithesis, so that the gringo's intrusion is no longer welcomed. As Chunchu's revelatory point-of-view and reaction shots suggest, the filmmakers' manipulation of formal cinematic devices is an integral component of this agenda's articulation. The gaze of the marginalized yet aspirant subaltern at his affluent neighbour, summarized above in the case of *Vera Cruz*, is itself adopted then reversed in the service of this enterprise, mediating the cognitive relationship between Chunchu and Tate, and between each man and the audience. At every turn, the development of these relationships is carefully arranged by the framing of the shots, the timing of the cuts and the positioning of the film camera.

In the following pages I shall demonstrate both how these elements of the filmmaking process contribute to *Quien sabe?*'s political message, and how they are integrated into a larger structure of complementary stylistic devices. In a process closely related to what Murray Smith has termed a 'multifaceted alignment' of cinematic techniques,¹² director Damiano Damiani, editor Renato Cinquini, director of photography Antonio Secchi, production designer Sergio Canevari and composer Luis Bacalov work together to construct subjective points-of-view and dramatic irony, guiding the viewer towards the desired ideological position.

The film embarks on this didactic journey in its very first sequence, which works to establish Bill Tate as the audience's primary point of contact with the on-screen action. Firstly, a fast-moving tracking shot follows four men as they walk alongside a wall daubed with the revolutionary slogan 'viva Carranza el pacificador!', and follows them until they come to a halt. A montage of rapidly-spliced shots then ensues, showing in quick succession two of these men hugging, another covering his face with a cloth, peasant children gathering to watch, a firing squad solemnly obeying their orders, and a crowd of Mexican women yelling incomprehensibly. As the condemned men are then executed, one of their number defiantly bellows insurgent slogans as he dies (Figure 3). The rapidity of the editing and the increasingly cacophonous soundtrack in this brief sequence evoke a frenetic perceptual ambience in keeping with the exuberance, exoticism and danger of a cinematic 'Mexican Revolution' lifted directly from Hollywood. The viewer is both positioned as a curious but detached observer watching this recognizable spectacle unfold, and predisposed to view Mexico through recourse to the familiar tropes of the Western genre.

When, the moment after the firing squad have pulled their triggers, the camera cuts to zoom in on Bill Tate watching the grisly spectacle with an impassive detachment (Figure 4), his cognitive position therefore appears to mirror our own. The cutting and the soundtrack then combine actively to invite this impression. Immediately after Tate's reaction shot we cut back to the firing squad finishing off their wretched victims, with what now appears, by virtue of its positioning in the sequence, to be a point-of-view shot from Tate's perspective. A voice-over then affirms the sense that we are viewing an exotically turbulent culture: 'Scenes of this kind were commonplace, as the various factions tried to dominate the others and bring order out of chaos'. While this technique does not necessarily



Figure 3



Figure 4

align us with Tate in an ideological or epistemological sense, it does encourage the viewer to imagine how he perceives the events which are unfolding before his eyes: ‘imagining from the inside’ in Smith’s terminology.¹³ By the time the credits start to roll, announcing our formal point of entry into the cinematic world, the film has therefore already positioned Tate as our sole on-screen referent. The tracking shot which follows him as he crosses the rail tracks to board his train consequently appears further to confirm his status as the key protagonist. He is dressed in conspicuously urban clothes while the camerawork, following the conventions exemplified by Ben Trane’s pan shot in *Vera Cruz*, simultaneously frames the locals as a colourful cultural backdrop of sombreros, peasant overalls and *Rurales* (Figure 5).



Figure 5

As Tate’s train then heads into the Mexican interior, and he dozes beneath his prim trilby, the accompanying sequence further positions the viewer alongside the semi-conscious gringo on a perceptual level by depicting a colourful phantasm of the Western imagination. The array of slumbering sombreros, breast-feeding mothers and guitar-playing *Rurales* fill the overcrowded, Third World locomotive with all the trappings of a comic-book Mexico to Luis Bacalov’s uplifting Latino score. Chunchu’s own entry into the narrative merely assimilates him into this Occidental reverie, when gunfire rings out from the hills surrounding the munitions train. *Rurales* drop dead but, with no depiction of the guerrillas, they are disembodied, ethereal and at one with the landscape, framing Mexico as a recognizably dangerous and alien environment for the Western adventurer south of the border.

Having established this perceptual alignment with Tate as he enters Mexico, *Quien sabe?*’s narrative exposition then works to locate the viewer epistemologically close to the gringo. Again, this is not to say that we are compelled to sympathize with him ideologically. Indeed, that we see his disdainful attitude to the local culture very early on is itself an important factor in the film’s steady construction of dramatic irony. When Tate pushes to the front of a ticket queue in the first scene, foreshadowing his identical act in the last, we witness at the very beginning what it takes Chunchu the entire course of the narrative to see for himself (both literally – Tate pushing into the queue – and symbolically, that his presence in Mexico is presumptuous and arrogant).

Once Chuncho himself has entered the narrative over the lip of a hill, hollering and whooping in a manner thoroughly in keeping with a Hollywood 'Latino' stereotype, the filmmakers reveal a series of clues to the audience alone which, while not fully explaining the nature of Tate's counterinsurgency mission, clearly indicate that he has a hidden agenda. In each case, the *mise-en-scène* renders Chuncho blind to the information, placing him either out-of-shot or looking the wrong way. Firstly, when Chuncho's gang ambushes the train, it pulls away to escape, precipitating a brief chase sequence of tracking shots from the fleeing train and low-angle pan shots of pursuant bandits accompanied by a rhythmic, pounding score. Spliced with this exhilarating, if generic, action is a steady progression of close-up shots which employ dramatic irony to establish Tate as the principal protagonist, and place the audience on a higher level of understanding than Chuncho. We see Tate climbing onto the engine car, killing the driver, stopping the train and handcuffing himself to fool Chuncho into thinking that he is a prisoner. Once Chuncho has blasted Tate free of his bonds, the Mexican rides out of shot a split second before a further series of medium close-ups shows the gringo reaching for the hidden keys, unlocking the handcuffs himself and re-holstering his supposedly 'found' gun before disembarking.

Later, once Tate has joined the gang in a series of action-packed insurrectionary vignettes, the two men find themselves alone in the desert, where their interpersonal drama intensifies and develops as Chuncho tenderly nurses Tate through a bout of malaria. Hughes¹⁴ uses this scene to suggest that the filmmakers are depicting a sexual attraction between the characters. Certainly, the story of *Quien sabe?* is one of an intimate and complex relationship between two men, and such a reading is by no means alien to critiques of the Italian Western. Maggie Günsberg, for example, builds on the valuable work undertaken on the US genre by Lee Clark Mitchell, to identify a repressed homoerotic tension in the Western *filone's* obsessive focus on masculine prowess and sadomasochistic violence.¹⁵ I suggest, however, that such an ascription to the relationship between Tate and Chuncho is due largely to the filmmakers' preoccupation with the gaze of each man at the other, which is accentuated from the very point at which they are isolated in each other's company in the desert. Homoeroticism is clearly one available interpretation of the characters' fixation with one other, but this is to over-simplify the film's scopophilic nuances, whereby the spectator's gaze is aligned first with one man then the other. It is, indeed, from this point of the film onwards that the filmmakers most painstakingly mediate the relationship between the two characters through both cognitive positioning and subjective point-of-view.

At first, a series of further clues as to Tate's hidden agenda, to which Chuncho remains oblivious, is revealed to the audience. When Tate operates a machine gun to kill soldiers in pursuit of a messenger from General Elias, Chuncho takes a rifle to finish the fight in single combat, and we view his heroic act from Tate's point-of-



Figure 6



Figure 7

view behind the machine gun as Chuncho runs away from us (Figure 6). As soon as Chuncho has exited the frame and is otherwise engaged, the viewer sees Tate turning the machine gun on the rebel messenger, searching the messenger's corpse to find money brought to pay for armaments and surreptitiously hurling the coins over a cliff (a narrative device which ensures that he and Chuncho will now have to meet General Elias in person). The filmmakers then ensure that we remain cognitively, and literally, closer to Tate with the dramatic irony of Chuncho's meticulous, and vain, search for the money in the background of a deep-focus shot, as the Westerner nonchalantly reloads the gun in the foreground (Figure 7).



Figure 8

When Tate falls ill and Chuncho is nursing him back to health, the Mexican is given his first chance to share with the audience a clue as to Tate's purpose. Searching Tate's valise for quinine, he finds a single golden bullet (which will later be used to kill Elias). As Chuncho examines it an extreme close-up registers his curiosity while the bullet enters the frame in the foreground held delicately between his thumb and forefinger. The tense background music which accompanies the shot, however, gives a further clue to the viewer alone, and the bullet stays out-of-focus, its significance symbolically beyond Chuncho's comprehension (Figure 8). The spectator remains in a privileged position over him, and continues to be supplied with clues which he misses. When his curiosity resurfaces in the very next scene, for example, he asks a recovered Tate why the bullet is there, but his back is turned to both the camera and Tate when the gringo's expression shows brief alarm, which is registered in centre-frame close-up (Figures 9 and 10). By the time Chuncho has turned around, Tate has regained his composure and deflects suspicion by explaining 'it brings me good luck'.



Figure 9



Figure 10

The next scene shows the two men arriving at General Elias's mountain encampment. Here, Chunchu undergoes an abrupt realization, which coincides with the filmmakers communicating an increased level of understanding on his behalf. When he is told of the dire consequences of his mercenary neglect in leaving the rebel town of San Miguel to fend for itself, Volonté's bipolar portrayal – one moment comic-opera *bandido*, the next contemplative revolutionary – communicates the first stage of Chunchu's revelation. Narrative structure, aural and visual editing, and performance all now serve to relate the hero's awakening and lead the viewer towards the explosive climax. In the very next sequence, Tate's agenda once again becomes clear to the viewer before it does to Chunchu, as the Westerner loads the golden bullet into his rifle, the camera again placed behind him and sharing his point-of-view (Figure 11). Though we then see him taking aim, however, and another point-of-view shot emphasising his target to be General Elias, when the rifle is fired the viewer's position of aloofness over Chunchu begins to diminish. Firstly, there is no visualization of the General being hit by the bullet. Instead, the sound of the gunshot announces a cut back to Chunchu and his brother Santo, so that the audience hears the gunfire at the same time as they do. When another shot rings out, Chunchu once again has his back to the camera, but now turns around in time to see what the viewer cannot. It is only when Santo's dying hand enters the left of the frame that the audience discovers at whom the second gunshot was aimed (Figure 12). As the very first instance of Chunchu possessing a privileged position over the audience, albeit for a split second, this timing is significant. The Mexican's understanding of events now steadily approaches parity with that of the viewer.

Revelations which Chunchu sees directly, indeed, are now occurring for the audience only as they enter the camera's field of view, denying us prior knowledge of



Figure 11



Figure 12

their presence. Less than a minute after Santo's hand had entered from the left of the shot, the golden bullet enters from the right in close-up, to be held up to the gathered crowd (Figure 13). This exactly replicates the framing from earlier in the film, when Chunchu held the same object in a blur of confusion, but this time the bullet is in sharp focus. The contrast with the earlier shot indicates that Chunchu now understands Tate's plot. Accordingly, his back is no longer turned, and he is afforded a close-up reaction shot (Figure 14) demonstrating that his companion's betrayal is apparent to him as he looks up to the mountain top, where Tate had been hiding.



Figure 13



Figure 14

Two zoom shots – one of Tate watching the firing squad at the beginning, the other of Chunchu watching Tate at the end – articulate the filmmakers' didactic manipulation of perceptual alignment in its clearest terms. This cinematic technique, along with its corollary – the extreme close-up – is, of course, a commonplace in the Italian Western. In particular, a notable fixation with the protagonist's eyes (and with the reverse shot depicting the object of his gaze) emerges in Sergio Leone's *Per un pugno di dollari* (1964) and proliferates in this *filone* thereafter. The foregrounding of this practice in *Quien sabe?* can therefore at least in part be ascribed to the film's industrial and generic context. As a central component in a larger signifying structure, however, the point-of-view and reaction shots which frame Chunchu's gaze in the denouement at the train station also function as the culmination of the character's cognitive journey, and the consummation of *Quien sabe?*'s contrapuntal relationship with the Hollywood Western.

By this point of the film, Chunchu is apparently reconciled with Tate. Dressed in Western finery, infantilized by his gringo companion and preparing to leave his country behind for a life of decadent luxury, the Mexican appears every inch the compliant subaltern emulating the world north of the Rio Grande. His final revelation, however, is now articulated through a combination of cinematic technique and expressive performance which positions the viewer alongside the bandit. As Chunchu turns to admire a well-dressed woman, we see Tate walking to the front of the ticket queue ready to repeat the presumptuous intrusion to which we were party at the film's opening. Once again, the Mexican has his back to this spectacle and his demeanour is jovial, but as he then turns around to face

Tate, meeting the reverse camera angle in close-up, Gian Maria Volonté's features drop to a frown.

This stern point-glance shot, along with the steady arc of dramatic irony that has been constructed by the filmmakers up to this moment, allows the subsequent point-object shot to solicit, not only a perceptual, but an epistemological alignment between the viewer and Chuncho. As our gaze is drawn towards Tate's arrogant act, the framing immediately carries the message that Chuncho at last understands what we have known since the start of the film. The editing and the soundtrack combine to underscore this sense that the Mexican is undergoing a meaningful awakening and, through the manipulation of visual and aural point-of-view, to align the viewer's moral allegiance with this epiphany. Accompanying the point-object shot, we hear the conspicuously affluent Westerner ordering an elderly peasant to 'get out of my way'. 'But I was here first', protests the Mexican. 'Now I'm here', retorts Tate. The reaction shot that then returns to Chuncho and zooms in to a tight close-up to linger on his still frowning face, along with the tense musical refrain, indicates that he has registered this impertinence, and he departs from the frame having, it transpires, decided to kill Tate. That he is no longer looking at the ticket queue means that when we then return once again to the point-object shot, with the soundtrack registering more peasants' complaints – 'who does this gringo think he is?'; 'it's always like this' – we are no longer being invited to 'imagine from the inside'. Instead, we are now viewing a non-subjective expositional framing, which affirms Chuncho's newly-discovered ideological outlook, and encourages us do likewise. Portrayed as an oppressor, the impending demise of the Western adventurer down Mexico way is now imperative.

Contrast this to the aforementioned scene in *Vera Cruz*, which uses the film's expositional and ideological positioning to solicit a very different notion, that Mexican peasants are aspirant, grateful and cordial towards gringo intruders. Aldrich's film cumulatively places the narrative focus on complex North American characters, both fallible and heroic, while subordinating local concerns to normative 'Western' frames of reference: with the scrolling text announcing 'as the American Civil War ended, another was just beginning [...] Into this fight rode a handful of Americans'; with the opening shots framing Ben Trane as a lone rider in an alien country; with the uneasy interpersonal drama between Trane and Joe Erin; with the pan shot which follows Trane and registers Mexicans as picturesque scenery; and with the low-angle framing of Erin as he approaches the camera. The peasants who huddle together in the middle distance, staring at the exploits of these gringo superheroes arriving to rescue their nation from tyranny, therefore appear awe-struck and extraneous, positioned as spectators and reflecting the audience's admiration for the Western adventurers in Mexico.

By associating Chuncho's political realization with a didactic arrangement of elements of the filmmaking process designed to elicit subjective perceptual

alignment with the viewer, *Quien sabe?*'s climax performs a purposeful cognitive reversal. After Hollywood's familiar framings have been appropriated on behalf of Tate in the opening sequence, Chuncho's revelatory close-up and point-object shots offer a trenchant riposte to the assumptions of the 'Western' camera which peers out of *Vera Cruz*'s cantina. One might almost say that, in a figurative sense, they are spliced with that film's shot composition, offering the marginalized peasants of the earlier film their own point-of-view shot. More literally, they invert normative modes of ethnic representation fostered by Hollywood's myth machine to frame the Westerner down south as an oppressive and pernicious interloper. *Vera Cruz*'s fantasy of the aspirant subaltern is banished.

Chuncho's gaze in retrospect

The belligerent intentions of *Quien sabe?*'s makers thus identified, what is the scholar to extrapolate from this confrontational intertextual exchange with Hollywood's language of representation? In the remainder of this paper, I shall offer some conclusions concerning the film's engagement with these cinematic conventions and what this tells us about processes commonly referred to as 'Americanization' in 1960s Italy. *Quien sabe?* resides along a diverse spectrum of responses to those processes, which emerged from within the political Left around the time of its release. Clearly, on the one hand, the film registers a space for resistance against the ostensibly hegemonic codes of US cinema within what is commonly branded the 'popular' in Italy's post-war film industry. Paradoxically, however, by adopting, appropriating and re-working those same codes so carefully throughout its running time, the filmmakers' cinematic language can also be said to affirm the dominance of Hollywood in the semiotic marketplace.

These very issues surrounding perceived resistance and capitulation to transatlantic paradigms are entirely germane to contemporaneous debates among the Italian Left. For all the Cold War posturing of the Italian Communist Party's leadership,¹⁶ this subculture's relationship with American cultural imports was far from straightforwardly antagonistic. The vibrant mythologies of US culture exerted considerable appeal amongst the young in particular, and cinema was a key player in this phenomenon. In 1954, for example, Giuseppe Turrone interviewed a twenty three year old PCI member who admitted preferring Westerns and adventure films to the neorealism championed by his party, which was 'too intellectual and difficult'.¹⁷ The ubiquity of Hollywood imagery in post-war Italy dictated that the mythic 'America' of the silver screen could not be dismissed easily. In the course of the 1960s the problem of confronting the Americanized consumerism, the burgeoning mass media and the proliferation of transatlantic film genres which had arisen since the Economic Miracle became one of the most

pressing and divisive issues within the Left. Mino Argentieri, for one, condemned such filmmakers as Michelangelo Antonioni as ‘Hollywood collaborationists who do not even dare to denounce their own servitude’.¹⁸

These very issues surrounding US cultural hegemony and cognitive resistance to transatlantic formats remained hot topics of debate throughout Western Europe’s ‘New Left’ into the late 1960s, and once again cinema was co-opted into carrying this ideological burden. Most notably, from 1966 onwards Jean-Luc Godard incrementally rejected the generic frameworks, handed down from Hollywood, with which his earlier work had engaged. In *Week-end* (Jean-Luc Godard, 1967), *Le Gai Savoir* (Jean-Luc Godard, 1968), and to an even greater extent in his collaborations with Jean-Pierre Gorin as the Groupe Dziga Vertov, he purposefully unravelled received models of representation including, with *Vent d’Est* (Groupe Dziga Vertov, 1970), those of the Western. The adoption and subversion of Hollywood genre convention undertaken in these films is considerably more radical and far-reaching than that which we have seen practiced in *Quien sabe?*, and the popular aesthetic of Franco Solinas’s highly marketable political treatises consequently drew Godard’s ire: ‘[Hollywood studios] don’t even need to make movies themselves anymore, they have found slaves everywhere to make the movies they want’.¹⁹

Quien sabe?’s entwinement with the genre described by André Bazin as ‘the American film par excellence’ was therefore a contentious choice in this political milieu.²⁰ Indeed, closely related concerns to those outlined above are dramatized and negotiated through this film’s formal construction. The didacticism we have seen at work on the one hand problematizes the commonplace notion that *filone* cinema was characterized by transatlantic parasitism. Anglophone scholarship concerning Italian film, it is true, has begun to unburden itself of its neorealist yoke to shine a light into the academically murky world of the country’s popular cinematic forms, thanks largely to the travails of Christopher Wagstaff, Dimitris Eleftheriotis, Christopher Frayling and Catherine O’Rawe.²¹ Much work remains, however, to chart the heterogeneous ideological coordinates of the *filoni* of the 1960s and 1970s; specifically, those of the Italian Western.²² Though, amongst Italy’s political Left, the lure of Americana in the post-war years was widely inflected with misgivings over the socio-cultural impact of an increased transatlantic flow, on a cinematic level such disquiet is identified chiefly in films by the canonical post-war *auteurs* (*La dolce vita* (Federico Fellini, 1960) and *Rocco e i suoi fratelli* (Luchino Visconti, 1960) being two notable examples). It is telling that when Michalczyk works within the category ‘Italian Political Filmmakers’, his frame of reference is limited to Francesco Rosi, Gillo Pontecorvo, Elio Petri, Lina Wertmüller, Bernardo Bertolucci, Pier Paolo Pasolini and Marco Bellocchio.²³ Where discontent with the Economic Miracle and the onset of US-led modernity is concerned, the popular *filoni* of the 1960s are consistently overlooked.

Quien sabe? demonstrates that the superficially imitative category of *filone* filmmaking indeed offered a paradigm within which resistance to the codes of US popular culture could be inscribed. The semiotic term ‘codes’, indeed, is vital here, for I do not refer solely to the film’s extensive subversion of Hollywood plot, characterization and, to borrow a phrase from Richard Slotkin, ‘mythic space’²⁴ (though each of these is of course a key component of *Quien sabe?*’s agenda). In this paper we have seen that the filmmakers also register their cinematic mutiny through the adoption and ideological inversion of a normative Hollywood mode of representation. By literally turning the camera around to confront the Western’s role as ambassador for a US-oriented polity, they clearly seek to register an altogether less-than-awe-struck gaze at bourgeois culture, from the perspective of those discontented with American hegemony both in Italy and abroad. It is possible, for example, that one intention behind the bitterness of Chunchó’s revelatory gaze at his affluent and arrogant northern neighbour is to portray the alienation felt by those in the *Mezzogiorno* for whom the north’s Economic Miracle had been less a reality than a spectacle. Southerners as primitive peasants, northerners as industrious capitalists: the conceit would be neither subtle nor novel, fitting in comfortably with a rich tradition of stereotyped representation of the Italian peninsula stretching back to Montesquieu and Dumas.²⁵ Such an intervention on behalf of the wretched of the Earth would also, of course, accord with the film’s overt leanings towards Fanonism, signifying a stylistic and thematic unity of purpose running through *Quien sabe?*’s exposition.

That Italy’s post-war ‘Americanization’ was less a process of subordination to a hegemonic cultural imperialism than one of appropriation, negotiation and resistance is therefore a tangible premise when filtered through this film’s agenda. By reworking and subverting the signifiers of the Western genre, the film reflects processes of creative participation in the meanings of transatlantic artefacts which characterized much of the nation’s cultural output in this era. Indeed, the discourse of transculturation has become a familiar area of scholarly enquiry where the *Western all’italiana* is concerned. Eleftheriotis applies Mary Louise Pratt’s theories of ‘contact zones’ to this *filone*’s hybrid cultural dynamics,²⁶ and the peculiar blend of reference points to be found therein can equally be illuminated by Michel de Certeau’s formulation of a colonial society where ‘users make [...] innumerable and infinitesimal transformations of and within the dominant cultural economy in order to adapt it to their own interests and their own rules’.²⁷ The academy’s outlook on popular cinema more broadly, too, increasingly seeks to challenge commonplace assumptions concerning both its dichotomous relationship with ‘art’ cinema and the passive nature of its audiences.²⁸ *Quien sabe?*’s extensive requisitioning of Hollywood’s syntax, by registering an ideologically contrary audience constituency actively participating in a display of re-interpretation, certainly adds grist to this theoretical mill.

On the other hand, is there not inflected in *Chuncho's* revelatory gaze something more ambiguous concerning Italy's post-war encounter with US popular culture? The reading offered above may correctly identify the filmmakers' intentions, but these should certainly not be taken at face value. With hindsight, indeed, *Quien sabe?*'s manipulation of the medium communicates a considerably less assured message than that which was apparently planned. The meticulous care with which the filmmakers not only dismantle, but selectively re-formulate the Western's ethnic framings brings to mind Cesare Pavese's description of American culture in the post-war years as 'una sorta di grande laboratorio dove [...] si perseguiva [...] [il] compito di creare un gusto, uno stile, un mondo moderni'.²⁹ Pavese's metaphor, arising from the desolation of war, expresses a sense that Americana offered Europeans a source from which modern identities and outlooks could arise. Such an enthralled engagement with US culture is famously satirized in the comic film *Un americano a Roma* (Steno, 1954). When Nando Moriconi (Alberto Sordi) walks the late-night, deserted streets of Trastevere, he is immersed in a private world of Hollywood mythology, imaginary guns drawn as he darts between pillars and doorways to portentous *noir*-esque music. Returning home from his local cinema where, jostling for position with equally wide-eyed children he has just been engrossed in the latest Hopalong Cassidy Western, Sordi's endearing fool projects his transatlantic fantasies onto the familiar locale.

From this brief sketch one can extrapolate an apposite symbol for the level of engagement with US culture that is inadvertently reflected by *Quien sabe?*. Nando Moriconi is not a passive member of the audience, gazing longingly at America and its mythic codes. Once he leaves the cinema, he utilizes and re-moulds Hollywood's semantic structures to define his own outlook on the world which surrounds him. By no means, however, does this creative negotiation constitute a discourse of resistance, since Nando is obsessive in his emulation of US popular culture: an enraptured man-child playing with the building blocks of modernity. Nor should *Quien sabe?* be read in terms of linear rejection. Even while seeking to subvert the ideological inscriptions of Hollywood the filmmakers, like Nando Moriconi, adopt and play with its semiotic structures. The extent of borrowing is so ingrained in the making of this film, indeed, that Hollywood provides the very language through which it expresses its ostensibly subversive agenda. Appropriating the 'counterinsurgency' Western is one thing; meticulously re-formulating its syntax takes this transcultural borrowing to another level – one on which cognitive formulations are blended from, filtered through, and defined by, recourse to Americana.

The above conceit is perhaps somewhat whimsical, but it does demand that an alternative conclusion be offered concerning Damiani's attempted revolt against Hollywood: namely, that *Quien sabe?* is as informative for what it omits to say about America as it is for its intended contrary inscriptions. By formulating their

outlook through such close contact with the malleable signifiers of US popular culture, do the filmmakers not affirm both the normative status of Hollywood and the need to work within that dominant cultural economy? Certainly, as a snapshot of an Italy where the tropes of US culture are instantly recognizable reference points, *Quien sabe?* is no straightforward assertion of hostility towards the transatlantic myth machine.

Subtlety is an attribute rarely associated with the *Western all'italiana*: hardly surprising, one might reasonably protest, of a *filone* which embedded Django's spring-action coffin-cum-machine-gun in the popular imagination. *Quien sabe?*, too, is not found wanting where explosive set-pieces, cackling *bandidos* and three-figure body counts are concerned. Yet, behind both the generic motifs and the didactic approach of its makers, the film resides along a nuanced spectrum of responses to Italy's post-war transatlantic relationship: a space of cultural blending and semiotic negotiation whose formal construction offers the scholar a novel and intriguing route towards unlocking an inadvertent significance. Damiani was certainly vociferous in proclaiming his film to be an anti-American diatribe in keeping with the radicalism of his famed screenwriter, and purposeful in inscribing semantic structures to this end. At this crossroads in the communist subculture's outlook, however, his text is suffused with ambivalence towards transatlantic culture. Not only does this register the crisis occurring within the political Left; it renders any auteurist notion of the filmmaker bestowing meaning upon his audience entirely insufficient.

As *Quien sabe?* draws to a close and the hero's political awakening is at last realized, Chunchu casually informs Tate: 'I like you. It's a shame I have to kill you'. To the gringo's desperate cry of 'why should you want to kill me?' comes only the phrase 'quien sabe?' (Spanish for 'who knows?'). Damiani interprets the line, and the film's enigmatic title, thus: 'Non lo so perché non ho la cultura per razionalizzare tutto questo, però ti ammazzo perché sento che ti devo ammazzare'.³⁰ The intended meaning – that the ideological inarticulacy of the subaltern does not preclude a political awakening expressed solely through violence – is a clear nod to the central tenets of Frantz Fanon, so revered by Franco Solinas and glorified by sections of Europe's radical Left. There is, however, a hint of irony in this dramatic representation, for does not an inability to express ideological revulsion for America in a coherent, programmatic manner equally describe the confusions and obfuscations of the filmmakers themselves? Chunchu's crisis and indecision offers us a symbol for the film's own inner tensions, between a fascination with the codes of US cinema on the one hand, and unease towards those codes' attendant ideologies on the other.

Bellissima (Luchino Visconti, 1951) critiques a perceived fixation with Americana, when Anna Magnani gazes longingly at the Hollywood Western *Red River* (Howard Hawks, 1948).³¹ Her awe-struck exclamation 'guarda

guarda' registers more than just a swoon for Montgomery Clift. The Western itself here symbolizes the aspirational significance of a mythic America. As the USA's altruistic veneer peels in the Vietnam era, Chuncho's gaze is similarly aimed squarely at Hollywood's oldest genre, but now foregrounds the brash arrogance of Western imperialism. Despite his intentions, however, Damiani does not reject what Slotkin calls the 'counterinsurgency Western'. Chuncho's acquisition of the gaze of the film camera is more appropriately read as a dialogue with the representational dynamics of Hollywood. The ideological, narrative and cinematographic norms of this format are appropriated and re-moulded, not discarded. In the film's didactic journey can therefore be gleaned processes of negotiation and re-inscription within the so-called 'Americanization' of post-war Italy. As a grand narrative, the film fails to fulfil its anti-American remit. As a meeting place of cultural reference points, however, it is a fascinating document of a tumultuous period in Italy's popular culture.

Notes

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¹ Throughout the article I refer to the original 115 minute cut, released in Italian cinemas in December 1966. This version of the film is currently available from Argent Films (2008), under its English-language title, *A Bullet for the General*.

² Ignacio Ramonet, 'Italian Westerns as Political Parables', *Cineaste*, 15 (1986), 30-35 (p. 31).

³ Christopher Frayling, *Spaghetti Westerns: Cowboys and Europeans from Karl May to Sergio Leone*, 2nd edn (London: I.B.Tauris, 1998), p. 227.

⁴ Bert Fridlund, *The Spaghetti Western: A Thematic Analysis* (Jefferson: MacFarland, 2006), pp. 173-81.

⁵ Frantz Fanon, *Les damnés de la terre* (Paris: François Maspéro éditeur, 1961); Frantz Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth*, trans. Constance Farrington (New York: Grove Press, 1963).

⁶ Christopher Wagstaff, 'A Forkful of Westerns: Industry, Audiences and the Italian Western', in *Popular European Cinema*, ed. by Richard Dyer and Ginette Vincendeau (London: Routledge, 1992), pp. 245-61 (p. 253).

⁷ Franca Faldini and Goffredo Fofi, *L'avventurosa storia del cinema italiano raccontata dai suoi protagonisti 1935-1959* (Milan: Mondadori, 1981), p. 300.

⁸ Stanley Corkin, *Cowboys as Cold Warriors: The Western and US History* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2004); Tom Engelhardt, *The End of Victory Culture: Cold War America and the Disillusioning of a Generation* (New York: BasicBooks, 1995); Richard Slotkin, *Gunfighter Nation: The Myth of the Frontier in Twentieth-Century America* (New York: Atheneum, 1992).

⁹ Slotkin, p. 405.

¹⁰ Corkin, pp. 179-80.

¹¹ Regretably, copyright permission for this film still was only available at prohibitive expense. I hope, therefore, that my description will suffice in relaying the scene to the reader.

¹² Murray Smith, 'Imagining from the Inside', in *Film Theory and Philosophy*, ed. by Richard Allen and Murray Smith (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997), pp. 412-30 (p. 417).

¹³ Smith, p. 412.

¹⁴ Howard Hughes, *Once Upon a Time in the Italian West* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2004), p. 98.

¹⁵ Lee Clark Mitchell, *Westerns: Making the Man in Fiction and Film* (London: University of Chicago Press, 1996); Maggie Günsberg, *Italian Cinema: Gender and Genre* (London: Palgrave, 2005), pp. 199-208.

¹⁶ For detailed examinations of the PCI's attitudes towards transatlantic culture see David Forgacs, 'The Italian Communist Party and Culture', in *Culture and Conflict in Postwar Italy: Essays on Mass and Popular Culture*, ed. by Zygmunt G. Barański and Robert Lumley (London: Macmillan, 1990), pp. 97-114, and Stephen Gundle, *Between Hollywood and Moscow: the Italian Communists and the Challenge of Mass Culture, 1943-1991* (London: Duke University Press, 2000).

¹⁷ Gundle, p. 66.

¹⁸ Gundle, p. 123.

¹⁹ Frayling, *Spaghetti Westerns*, p. 230.

²⁰ André Bazin, *What is Cinema?*, 2 vols (London: University of California Press, 2005), II, 140.

²¹ See: Wagstaff, 'A Forkful of Westerns'; Christopher Wagstaff, 'Italy in the Post-War International Cinema Market', in *Italy in the Cold War: Politics, Culture and Society 1948-1958*, ed. by Christopher Duggan and Christopher Wagstaff (Oxford: Berg, 1995), pp. 89-115; Christopher Wagstaff, 'Italian Genre Films in the World Market', in *Hollywood and Europe: Economics, Culture, National Identity 1945-95*, ed. by Geoffrey Nowell-Smith and Stephen Ricci (London: British Film Institute, 1998), pp. 74-85; Dimitris Eleftheriotis, *Popular Cinemas of Europe: Studies of Texts, Contexts and Frameworks* (London: Continuum, 2001), pp. 92-133; Dimitris Eleftheriotis, 'Spaghetti Western, Genre Criticism and National Cinema: Redefining the Frame of Reference', in *Action and Adventure Cinema*, ed. by Yvonne Tasker (London: Routledge, 2004), pp. 309-27; Frayling, *Spaghetti Westerns*; Christopher Frayling, *Sergio Leone: Something To Do With Death* (London: Faber and Faber, 2000); Catherine O'Rawe, "'I padri e i maestri": Genre, Auteurs, and Absences in Italian Film Studies', *Italian Studies*, 63: 2 (2008), 173-94.

²² For an introductory review of the political trend inspired by *Quien sabe?* within this *filone*, see Frayling, *Spaghetti*

Westerns, pp. 217-244, and Austin Fisher, 'A Marxist's Gotta Do What a Marxist's Gotta Do: Political Violence on the Italian Frontier', *Scope: an Online Journal of Film and Television Studies*, 15 (2009) <<http://www.scope.nottingham.ac.uk/cultborr/chapter.php?id=14>> [accessed 29 March 2010].

²³ John J. Michalczyk, *The Italian Political Filmmakers* (London: Associated University Press, 1986).

²⁴ Slotkin, p. 232.

²⁵ See Nelson Moe, *The View from Vesuvius: Italian Culture and the Southern Question* (London: University of California Press, 2002), pp. 23-26, and John Dickie, *Darkest Italy: The Nation and Stereotypes of the Mezzogiorno, 1860-1900* (London: MacMillan, 1999), p. 37.

²⁶ Eleftheriotis, *Popular Cinemas of Europe*, pp. 101-102.

²⁷ Michel de Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life*, 2nd edn (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1988), pp. xiii-xiv.

²⁸ See, for example, Richard Dyer, *Only Entertainment*, 2nd edn (London: Routledge, 2002), and Alan Lovell and Gianluca Sergi, *Cinema Entertainment: Essays on Audiences, Films and Film Makers* (Maidenhead: Open University Press, 2009).

²⁹ Anna Maria Torriglia, *Broken Time, Fragmented Space: A Cultural Map for Postwar Italy* (London: University of Toronto Press, 2002), p. 79.

³⁰ Faldini and Fofi, p. 300.

³¹ This particular Hollywood Western possesses a singular symbolic currency as a romanticized depiction of both American society and cinema, replicated in a nostalgic tenor in *The Last Picture Show* (Peter Bogdanovich, 1971), which is also set in the early 1950s.

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