I.B.TAURIS

Austin Fisher

# RADICAL FRONTIERS in the SPAGHETTI WESTERN

## Politics, Violence and Popular Italian Cinema

Austin Fisher is a lecturer in Media Arts at the University of Bedfordshire. He received his PhD from Royal Holloway, University of London in 2009, and also holds degrees from the University of Birmingham and Queen Mary, University of London. Austin is the 'Spaghetti Westerns' editor for the *Directory of World Cinema: Italy*, has published articles in scholarly journals such as *The Italianist* and *Scope* and writes a blog around his research interests at www.austinfisher.me.uk.

His continuing research extends his analysis of critiques dealing with state corruption, ideology and political violence within the Spaghetti Western to incorporate an examination of the Italian police thriller (or *poliziesco*) genre of the 1970s. He is also investigating the discrepancies between intended political inscriptions in popular Italian cinema of the 1960s and 1970s and their patterns of reception in the English-speaking world.

*For Kirsty*

# RADICAL FRONTIERS IN THE SPAGHETTI WESTERN

## Politics, Violence and Popular Italian Cinema

Austin Fisher

I.B. TAURIS
LONDON · NEW YORK

Published in 2011 by Tauris Academic Studies
An imprint of I.B.Tauris & Co Ltd
6 Salem Road, London W2 4BU
175 Fifth Avenue, New York NY 10010
www.ibtauris.com

Distributed in the United States and Canada
Exclusively by Palgrave Macmillan
175 Fifth Avenue, New York NY 10010

Copyright © 2011 Austin Fisher

The right of Austin Fisher to be identified as the author of this work has been asserted by the author in accordance with the Copyright, Designs and Patent Act 1988.

All rights reserved. Except for brief quotations in a review, this book, or any part thereof, may not be reproduced, stored in or introduced into a retrieval system, or transmitted, in any form or by any means, electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording or otherwise, without the prior written permission of the publisher.

ISBN 978 1 84885 578 6

A full CIP record for this book is available from the British Library
A full CIP record for this book is available from the Library of Congress

Library of Congress catalog card: available

Printed and bound in Great Britain by CPI Antony Rowe, Chippenham
Camera-ready copy edited and supplied by the author

# Contents


*List of Illustrations* vii
*Acknowledgements* ix

Introduction 1

PART I: THE BACKDROP

1 Imagining America: US Influence and American Mythology in Post-War Italy 11

2 A Marxist's Gotta Do What a Marxist's Gotta Do: National Identity and Political Violence on the Italian Frontier 43

PART II: THE FILMS

3 Go West, Comrade! Defining the Absolute Enemy 77

4 Violent Mexico: 'Crossing the Border' into Armed Insurgency 117

PART III: THE LEGACY

5 Revolutionising Violence: Radical Translation and Postmodern Residues in US Cinema 163

6 Along the Radical Spectrum 203

APPENDICES

A Highest Grossing Italian Westerns, 1962–1980 (Domestic *Prima Visione* Box-office Returns) 219

B Italian Western Releases in Italy, 1962–1980 223

C Italian Western Releases in the USA, 1962–1980 225

D Corpus of US and UK Reviews of Fifty Italian Westerns, 1965–1977 227

*Notes* 235
*Bibliography* 259
*Index* 289

# List of Illustrations


| | | |
|---|---|---|
| 1 | George Barnes takes aim in Edwin S. Porter's *The Great Train Robbery* (1903) | 63 |
| 2 | Tigrero's adherence to the law cannot conceal his bloody toll in *Il grande Silenzio* (1968) | 81 |
| 3–4 | Corbett takes control of the camera once more in *La resa dei conti* (1967) | 101 |
| 5 | The Mexican's gaze is no longer deferential as *Quien sabe?* (1966) draws to a close | 136 |
| 6 | Cuchillo takes a break to join the audience in *Corri, uomo, corri* (1968) | 141 |
| 7–8 | 'Fight the bourgeois concept of representation.' *Vent d'Est* (1970) | 204 |

# Acknowledgements

This volume began life as a PhD thesis. Consequently, my profuse thanks are due to Barry Langford for supervising the project with ceaseless support, enthusiasm and rigour over several years. I am also indebted to Christopher Frayling for his invaluable feedback and encouragement, to the ever-helpful staff at the BFI Library for their patient retrieval of countless obscure journals and to the Humanities and Arts Research Centre at Royal Holloway, University of London for funding my studies. I am most thankful to Jenna Steventon , Liza Thompson, Pat FitzGerald and all at I.B.Tauris for indulging my interests and permitting me this opportunity to disseminate them. Furthermore, my gratitude must be extended to Mark Glancy for opening my eyes to the study of film many moons ago.

Elements of Chapters Two and Four of this book have previously been published in both *The Italianist*, 30 (2) and *Scope: An Online Journal of Film and Television Studies*, 15. I would therefore like to thank their editors for providing important forums for the germination of this volume.

Every effort has been made to contact copyright holders. Any errors or omissions brought to the attention of the publishers will be made good in future editions.

Such a brief note as this is an entirely inadequate medium through which to thank my parents, John and Joyce, for thirty-three years of unconditional love, intellectual stimulation and constructive criticism. A familial rock and moral anchor (not to mention a source of proof-reading) more reliable this eternal student cannot envisage. Finally, this book is dedicated to my partner Kirsty, without whose remarkable forbearance, loving disposition, insatiable good humour and aptitude for Italian it would not have been completed.

# Introduction

The purpose of this book is twofold. Firstly, I aim to demonstrate how and why radicalised Italian film-makers identified in the Western genre an apt vehicle for communicating revolutionary political views in the national and international contexts of the late 1960s. Secondly – and more importantly – I seek to tell a story, charting the brief but intriguing lifespan of a group of films loved by fans but neglected by critics and scholars alike.

The category of film-making now known the world over as the 'Spaghetti Western' was produced on a truly industrial scale, with almost five hundred Western films emerging from the Italian studio system between 1962 and 1980.[1] In the milieu of popular Italian cinema of the era, where formulaic cycles (known locally as *filoni*[2]) would ebb and flow with the perceived whims of popular taste, this constitutes not only a vast collection of films, but a remarkable longevity. Various trends therefore emerged, flourished and expired within the Spaghetti Western format itself, from slapstick comedies to baroque tales of intrigue and horror film hybrids. It is the task of this book to chart the lifespan of one such trend: that which appropriated the Italian Western with the intention of disseminating Far Left political doctrine between the years 1966 and 1970. In this period Damiano Damiani, Sergio Sollima, Sergio Corbucci, Giulio Questi and Giulio Petroni each directed films whose locales – though lifted directly from Hollywood – barely concealed bravura, and at times militant, denunciations of advanced capitalism.

The Spaghetti Western as a whole has long been a favourite of cult film buffs, and increasingly enjoys a mainstream renaissance as audiences and critics reassess its influential place in film history (largely due to the internationally celebrated films of the now-canonised Roman director Sergio Leone). In the academic sphere, too, this once-scorned category of

film-making has come to inform fields from transnational popular culture to Italian studies, through the valuable works of Dimitris Eleftheriotis,[3] Christopher Wagstaff[4] and, most notably, Christopher Frayling.[5] Yet, while this *filone*'s visibility in Film Studies departments steadily increases as it becomes admitted into the pantheon of Italian cinema, there remains a scholarly void surrounding the politically-committed variations summarised above. Academic discussion of Italy's 1960s political *auteurs* abounds (Rosi, Pontecorvo, Bellocchio to name but three), yet the complex relationship of the Italian Western to the political ferments of its era has gone almost entirely unnoticed.[6] This book is the first extended analysis of these militant trends, and therefore seeks to fill this gap.

As the plural noun in my title 'Radical Frontiers' indicates, the analysis identifies a variety of borderline exchanges which together construct this account of transcultural borrowing, political re-interpretation and generic mutation. The text is structured around an organising principle that the post-war transatlantic relationship was less one of domination by American-led modernity than one of negotiation and cultural blending: what the historian James Clifford dubs 'cultural import-export'.[7] Italian re-workings of the Western genre's ideologies naturally provide the study with its foremost case in point. The films which form my primary source material are thus interpreted as neither rejections nor imitations of Hollywood's cultural reach; more, by refocusing the Western through the lens of Italy's revolutionary 'New Left' in and around the tumultuous events of 1968, they register processes of appropriation and re-inscription which characterised significant portions of Italian culture in this era. I show how, in this new political context, the Hollywood genre's obsessive focus on the legitimacy of violence took on fresh meanings and appealed to new audiences.

My first chapter sets the cultural-political scene of post-war Italy from which these films emerged, progressing through a steady arc of contextualisation from the broad to the particular: that is, from concerns spanning Italian culture to those of a specifically cinematic nature. By opening with an emblematic case-study of Steno's satirical film *Un americano a Roma* (1954), I frame the book's subject matter within the fraught debates of the era concerning Italy's intimate encounter with US popular culture. After summarising and appraising the well-trodden arguments around transatlantic influence, I demonstrate how the increased cultural borrowing in this period frequently resulted in creative re-working. Though so-called 'Americanisation' was condemned by many on the political Left, appropriation and resistance characterised this imaginary 'America' upon which contemporary Italian mores were projected, but also contested.

Turning to the Italian film industry as a key factor in this argument, I then repudiate the era's widespread perceptions of a politically-engaged native cinema set against an anodyne, imitative genre cinema. Instead, the growth of the Roman studio system is analysed as a dynamic factor in these processes of cultural blending, from which the Italian Western emerged organically. As the chapter closes by introducing this *filone*'s political offshoot, I ask why, as Americana came to symbolise and fuel aspirant post-war notions of modernity, the Western film took on a singular resonance amongst militant constituencies.

The cultural and political coordinates surrounding the emergence of the book's key films thus detailed, my second chapter focuses on the Hollywood Western itself, assessing why this genre above all others came to be requisitioned for radical leftist ends in 1960s Italy. The previous chapter's discussion of creative appropriation is now focussed specifically on this cinematic category. Through an examination of the Western's history as both a popular format and an ideological vehicle, I arrive at the cultural 'moment' of the late 1960s, where key aspects of the genre are shown to possess compelling parallels with the concerns of Italian militants.

I argue firstly that the Western's archetypes, from their origins in the late nineteenth century, display notable concordances with dominant modes of representing the Italian South. The Wild West's status as a contested terrain for American national identity was therefore equally a mythic space with resonance within the Italian popular imagination. The genre's appropriation by radical audiences, for whom issues of banditry and redemptive violence held an additional fascination and urgency, is interpreted from within this pre-existing framework. It is in the issue of violent action and its legitimisation that I identify the foremost point of contact between the Hollywood Western's established structures and the concerns of Italian militants in the second half of the 1960s. The Spaghetti Western is frequently accused of evacuating the genre's emphasis on violence of its moral imperative. The next two chapters illustrate how ideological re-inscriptions sought to replenish it.

Chapter Three defines and analyses the first of two strands of politically-engaged Italian Westerns addressed by this book: what I dub the RSA, or 'Repressive State Apparatus', variant. The key films analysed in this chapter are *Se sei vivo, spara!/Django Kill!* (Giulio Questi, 1967), *La resa dei conti/The Big Gundown* (Sergio Sollima, 1967), *Faccia a faccia/Face to Face* (Sollima, 1967) and *Il grande Silenzio/The Great Silence* (Sergio Corbucci, 1968). The primary political function I identify in this group of films is an attempt to expose brutal mechanisms lying behind modern-day Western society. I demonstrate

these films' close engagement with preoccupations characteristic of Italy's radical New Left, particularly concerning latent domestic fascism and the oppressive 'system'. The first half of the chapter is a wide-ranging analytical survey of antecedents and offshoots of this trend within the wider Spaghetti Western, revisiting famed and obscure films alike to demonstrate the gradual and organic emergence of this radicalised inclination. My appraisal considers the extent to which the trend emerged from film-makers with traumatic experiences of the Second World War and the Resistance against Nazism, positing that their films' ideological function is twofold: they seek simultaneously to evoke the horrors of the nation's past and to expose continuing threats in its present.

The chapter's focus then shifts to a close analysis of narrative and cinematography in two films which offer emblematic expressions of this trend's outlook: *La resa dei conti* and *Faccia a faccia*. I show how, with a meticulous manipulation of dramatic irony, revelation and point-of-view, Sergio Sollima attempts to position his audience to communicate his political agenda. *Faccia a faccia* in particular, through a philosophical subtext pertaining to the historical theses of Friedrich Nietzsche and Walter Benjamin, displays a level of sophistication rarely associated with the Italian Western. Ultimately, however, I argue that this film's political incoherence renders Sollima's intended messages problematic. In its ambivalence to the ethics of violence, it inadvertently reflects ideological contradictions within late 1960s protest movements, which would lead some factions towards armed struggle as the 1970s dawned.

Chapter Four defines and analyses the second trend of politically-engaged Italian Westerns, which I dub the 'insurgency' variant. The key films analysed here are *Quien sabe?/A Bullet for the General* (Damiano Damiani, 1966), *Corri, uomo, corri/Run, Man, Run* (Sergio Sollima, 1968), *Il mercenario/The Mercenary* (Sergio Corbucci, 1968), *Tepepa* (Giulio Petroni, 1969) and *Vamos a matar, compañeros* (Corbucci, 1970; henceforth *Compañeros*). Set in the revolutionary 'Mexico' of the popular imagination, these films' endorsements of violent peasant insurrection against the Western world are as bravura as they are obvious. My analysis, however, additionally identifies how they seek to wage a cinematic campaign against the representational practices of Hollywood. I begin by surveying the allegorical motif of the border crossing as repeatedly depicted in US cinema during the Cold War. Here, the presence of white adventurers in Mexico is met with gratitude and cordiality by oppressed peasants.

I then argue that it is precisely this mode of representation which is engaged by the key films examined in the chapter, through close examination

of camerawork, narrative and performance. On the surface these radicalised films reformulate the Hollywood Western into an oppositional format in remarkably explicit terms. They appropriate the commonplace depiction of aspirant Third World peasants and benevolent American interlopers, seeking quite literally to turn the film camera around and applying the Western's emphasis on regenerative violence to the postcolonial theses of Frantz Fanon. Far from rejecting the ideological functions of the Hollywood Western, however, these films in fact work with the genre's traditions, inadvertently giving the reader a glimpse into the transatlantic dynamics of popular Italian film-making of the era. Not only do their methodologies betray an ambiguous outlook on Italy's post-war encounter with US popular culture; their failure to put forward consistent ideological positions frequently tends towards banality and over-simplification (a charge most pertinently levelled at Corbucci's *Il mercenario* (1968) and *Compañeros* (1970)).

These intentions and ambiguities outlined and discussed, Chapter Five assesses the films' legacies in global popular culture, which have diverged markedly from that which their makers intended. My focus here shifts to the US film industry – where the Spaghetti Western's legacy is at its most globally visible – and the timescale of the book now widens considerably, to chart the myriad strands of influence these eccentrically radicalised films can be seen to have exerted. While the previous two chapters have shown film-makers seeking to steer the viewer towards specific political viewpoints, I now show audiences once again engaged in processes of cultural borrowing to construct their own meanings from these imports. This transatlantic relationship, however, is the reverse of that depicted in Chapter One – this time US audiences appropriating Italian popular culture – and the book's central concern turns to gauging the political and cinematic impact of the films previously assessed.

My analysis focuses, firstly, on one decisive factor in their artistic failure. These films' international releases came at a time when violence of a stylistic kind was the hot topic of debate, as Hollywood's Production Code was giving way to a new wave of brutal cinema. I assess the implications of the violence depicted in these Italian Westerns, both through analysing patterns in contemporary critical reception, and through a contrast with the stylistics being simultaneously pioneered within Hollywood's own emergent counterculture. Arthur Penn's *Bonnie and Clyde* (1967), Sam Peckinpah's *The Wild Bunch* (1969) and Don Medford's *The Hunting Party* (1971) in particular provide this segment with gory, graphic counterpoints to the surprisingly sanitised and bloodless depictions of death to be found throughout the Spaghetti Western. I argue that this stylistic divergence holds

a key to understanding why, though the Hollywood Western itself became increasingly appropriated for radical ends in the 1970s, the belligerent militancy evident within the Italian films mostly failed to translate into global popular culture.

On one hand, I demonstrate that these films' postmodern re-workings of Hollywood did connect with certain disenfranchised groupings in the USA, identifying in 'blaxploitation' a strand of influence which retains the postcolonial meanings intended by the Italians. I show, however, that this 'grindhouse' association has itself contributed to a politically anodyne reception in contemporary US cinema. Appropriated and admired by Quentin Tarantino, Robert Rodriguez and Sam Raimi, these supposedly radical works have become assimilated into 'cool' pop culture and transformed into violent, but not political, films.

To conclude, Chapter Six situates these films' approaches to genre cinema within the varied cultural outlooks of the European New Left. I argue that they belong firmly within a spectrum of late 1960s political cinema and attest to the diversity of attitudes towards political dissemination amongst radical groups. Through a comparison of cinematic technique with the work of Jean-Luc Godard, I repudiate assertions that such popular political films as those addressed by this book were diametrically opposed to more experimental forms in this era. Ultimately, however, I show that their entwinement with (and reliance upon) genre convention was their undoing. Their simultaneous attempts to destroy the authority of a Hollywood format and to inscribe new authoritative structures into that same paradigm prove contradictory. As Chapter Five demonstrates, they themselves have become reformulated by disparate audiences, and emptied of their intended political imperatives. I leave these films as illuminating yet ambiguous case studies of transatlantic borrowing, which underline to the reader the key role of an audience in the negotiation of cultural meaning.

It is my intention that this volume should offer the reader a fresh, compelling and nuanced perspective on the political coordinates of European cinema and the Hollywood Western alike. Its scholarly focus incorporates discourses and arguments pertaining to *auteur* theory, trash cinema, transculturation, structuralism and postmodernism. Yet these are mere academic adornments to the book's true purpose: that of looking again at a group of stylistically eccentric and riotously entertaining films whose very flaws render them fascinating objects of study for student and film buff alike. While this is no work of enthralled hagiography (the fundamental incoherence of the films' agendas is a central concern throughout), it is born of a profound fondness for the lesser-known contributions to a filmic

category so often dominated by the aegis of Sergio Leone. I hope that this enthusiasm is discernible in my writing.

I must make a couple of points for the sake of consistency, brevity and clarity. Western movies produced or co-produced by Italian studios in the 1960s and 1970s have been variously referred to as 'Spaghetti Westerns', 'Euro Westerns', *Westerns all'italiana* and even 'Macaroni Westerns'. Though Christopher Frayling quite reasonably justifies his own use of the originally pejorative 'spaghetti' moniker by identifying in it a symbolic cultural hybridity,[8] in the majority of cases I opt instead for the neutral and descriptive 'Italian Western'. I frequently add an extra prefix to categorise 'political' or 'militant' Italian Westerns, distinguishing my key group of films from the bulk of this larger *filone*. Additionally, since Chapters Three and Four analyse two distinct trends within this group, I require a further division between the 'RSA' ('Repressive State Apparatus') narrative and the 'insurgency' narrative.

Lastly, I wish to make clear my partial use of the Italian language. Throughout the book I translate films' Italian dialogue into English as faithfully as possible, only mentioning the Italian where I feel clarification of meaning is required. Likewise, I translate Italian interviews and Italian critics' analyses into English. Conversely, however, I refer to Italian films by their Italian titles. This too is primarily for clarity's sake, since most Italian Westerns have been subsequently released in cinemas, as well as on television, VHS and DVD, under numerous English language titles. To cite just one example, Giuliano Carnimeo's *Una nuvola di polvere … un grido di morte … arriva Sartana* (1970) was released internationally under the titles *Cloud of Dust … Cry of Death … Sartana is Coming*, *Gunman in Town* and *Light the Fuse … Sartana is Coming*. For the sake of consistency, this policy applies equally to films whose English titles are the better known: *The Good, the Bad and the Ugly* remains *Il buono, il brutto, il cattivo*.

# PART I

# THE BACKDROP

# 1

# Imagining America: US Influence and American Mythology in Post-War Italy

Late at night, a lone figure darts between pillars and doorways to a portentous backing track. Approaching footsteps from the shadows augur a meeting in the deserted street. The 'gun' drawn in anticipation, however, is make-believe, for I describe a scene not from Hollywood film noir, but from *Un americano a Roma*: an Italian comedy directed by Steno in 1954. Nando Moriconi (Alberto Sordi) is returning home from his local cinema where, jostling for position with equally wide-eyed children, he has just seen the latest Hopalong Cassidy Western. The thrill of Wild West shoot-outs and vast desert landscapes contrasts markedly with the tenements and narrow cobbled streets of the Roman district of Trastevere; yet Nando is immersed in his private world of Hollywood mythology, and projects his fantasies onto this familiar locale. The spell is abruptly broken when a policeman approaches and the music cuts out, since Nando's 'America' is no more than a phantasm of the movie screen.

I open with this arresting and memorable vignette because it foregrounds cultural factors which would play key roles in the emergence and development of my central subject matter, and which form the basis of this chapter. Steno's film – dubbed by David Ellwood 'a milestone in the history of Italian identity'[1] – parodies and anticipates significant transformations brought about by Italy's post-war alignment with the American sphere of influence. Simultaneously, however, it depicts this flow of transatlantic borrowing as a process of negotiation and reinterpretation, instead of mere imitation.

Nando Moriconi, though infatuated with the United States as a vibrant and modern alternative to a dreary post-war Europe, is not a passive member of the cinema audience, gazing longingly at America and its mythologies. Once he leaves the picture house he attempts to re-mould the semantic structures of Americana to formulate his own identity, with comic consequences. His incomprehension of US culture, for example, is ably symbolised by his meal of bread, milk, yoghurt and mustard, which he imagines is an American dish and which proves so inedible he is forced to turn back to the familiar spaghetti and wine. With such vivid symbolism, *Un americano a Roma* captures the disorientation discernible through much of Italy's cultural output of the 1950s and 1960s, and I shall refer back to the emblematic scene on which this chapter begins at various points through the course of the book.

The films which will form the primary focus of this volume are ineluctably tied to these pre-existing processes of creative participation in the meanings of transatlantic formats. Though the notion of militant left-wing Italian Westerns may at first seem offbeat, eccentric or even downright ludicrous, this was an entirely logical, obvious and perhaps necessary conceit given the cultural-political conditions of the films' time and place. Their anti-imperialist stances and intended rejection of Occidental capitalism ostensibly place them at odds with the very concept of the 'West'. It is my contention, however, that they are in fact entwined in a dialogue with the traditions and ideologies of the Hollywood Western.

In order to analyse the complexities of this argument beyond reductive notions of imitation or rejection, it is essential that I chart both the cinematic and the wider cultural milieus which fostered these films. It is for this reason that the following two chapters assess their historical, political and cultural antecedents before I embark on the more textual and cinematic analysis at the book's core. My intention is that, through this methodology, these two chapters will allow the reader to arrive at the cultural 'moment' of the films' production and release, firstly through assessing the fraught debates surrounding 'Americanisation' in post-war Italy. I shall then refine this issue to focus on the cinema industry and then, in Chapter Two, specifically on the Western genre, to chart the myriad processes of transcultural borrowing which meet in the films of Damiani, Sollima et al.

## 'Americanisation' in Post-War Italy

By the 1950s, Gertrude Stein's 1935 declaration that 'the twentieth century has become the American century'[2] had a prescience which was all too apparent to many cultural critics in Europe. The growing hegemony of

the United States had been preoccupying intellectuals for decades (William Stead, for example, published *The Americanization of the World* as early as 1902). In the post-war years, however, concerns over the degradation of traditional culture brought about by US-led modernity intensified considerably. The influx of Hollywood films, the perceived pell-mell adoption by youth culture of transatlantic fashions and the continued presence of US troops on European soil led many to express a sense that indigenous culture was being overwhelmed. Intellectuals from across the political spectrum – notably Orwell, Leavis, Marcuse and Sartre – engaged in earnest condemnations of American cultural imperialism, as US hegemony in the West became ever more apparent in the 1950s. A dystopian vision of a conformist mass culture sweeping away European traditions, foretold by Orwell renaming Britain 'Airstrip One' in *Nineteen Eighty-Four*,[3] was dubbed 'admass' by JB Priestley. Palpable in both terms is a sense of horror at the standardisation awaiting the world in the second half of 'the American century'.

Seminal theorists of early British cultural studies such as Richard Hoggart, Raymond Williams and EP Thompson were among the most vociferous of these critics. Hoggart's *The Uses of Literacy*, in studying the 'candy-floss world'[4] of mass consumerism, laments the debasement of working-class culture caused by the 'spiritual dry-rot' of homogeneous Americanisation. His despair at British youth, whose 'clothes […] hair-styles […] facial expressions all indicate [they] are living […] in a myth-world compounded of a few simple elements which they take to be those of American life',[5] demonstrates Nando Moriconi's affectations to be signs of the times well beyond the borders of Italy.

These most rigorous of British critiques came chiefly from within the broad church of socialist thinking that formed the nascent New Left (Thompson, for example, was a member of the Communist Party of Great Britain until 1956, while Hoggart was a member of the Labour Party). In Italy, however, the foremost contemporaneous and analogous stance came specifically from the Italian Communist Party (PCI). This, indeed, reflected the PCI's considerably more influential status amongst national Communist parties as a mass movement, which broadly spoke for the political Left in national discourse prior to the mid 1960s.[6] The PCI's post-war ethos drew largely from the writings of the party's founder Antonio Gramsci and from the legacy of the wartime Resistance to Nazism, but was also built on a vehement opposition to American influence. In 1948, a hard-line attitude towards American culture was announced by deputy leader Pietro Secchia:

> The great American trusts send us not only their riflemen, their spies, their agents, and organizers of sabotage and betrayal, but inundate our country with their books, their films, and their lowbrow ideological rubbish that should serve to weaken, disorient, and corrupt our people.[7]

'Americanisation' (that is, the emulation and adoption of habits and values associated with the USA) thus became a distinctly pejorative term in post-war Europe, implying pollution and corruption. Rob Kroes defines it as a word which 'normally serves in a discourse of rejection to point to the variety of processes through which America exerts its dismal influence on European cultures. [This view] reduces the complex processes of cultural influence […] to the stark binary form'.[8] The issue, indeed, was not as clear-cut as Hoggart or Secchia supposed. Even within the PCI itself, the wider membership engaged in debates surrounding the political implications of US-led consumerism and mass culture for much of the 1950s. As we shall see, they did not universally accord with the leadership's hostility.

### *US Influence and Italy's 'Economic Miracle'*

David Forgacs suggests that 'Americanisation is, in part at least, a symptom of anxieties about one's own national identity'.[9] It follows that countries lacking a strong national culture are among the most susceptible to the superimposition of American imports, and post-war Italy was a case in point. Shortly after the War, former Prime Minister Francesco Saverio Nitti described the unified state of Italy as 'the eggshell holding the national Humpty Dumpty together, a make-believe country that never obtained the complete […] support of all its incredulous citizens'.[10] Despite the concerted efforts of the Fascist regime to shift loyalties from the family to the state, regional identity remained the dominant pole of attraction for many, especially in the South, and a unified national culture was largely absent outside the Catholic Church and the national football team. In 1956, local dialects were the prevalent form of everyday communication for 82 per cent of the population[11] and Italy did not possess a genuinely 'national' press.[12]

Added to this, the rapid modernisation of the economy in the 1950s arrived late when compared to northern European nations such as Britain or Germany so that Italy became simultaneously an underdeveloped and an industrialised nation.[13] Stephen Gundle argues that Italy was the most receptive European country to American imports precisely because uneven economic development, combined with rapid industrialisation in the 1950s,

coincided with this absence of a genuine secular culture common to all.[14] This left a considerable void in the field of mass communications media, and weakened the nation's ability to filter foreign imports. Moreover, post-war Christian Democrat (DC) governments were content to see this void filled by American models, not least because of the covert role these played in discrediting their rivals, the PCI.

American cinema in particular had been a source of fascination for Italian audiences since the 1920s, but in the immediate post-war period this intensified considerably. The Americans – an occupying force in a devastated country – monopolised the market and implemented the Motion Picture Export Association of America's 'dumping' policy, releasing a six year backlog of Hollywood films. In the first year after the Fascist embargo on Hollywood output was lifted (1946), foreign (mostly American) imports received 87 per cent of box-office receipts.[15] US films, actors and lifestyles thus became increasingly integrated into the popular Italian psyche, and this influx was purposefully tailored. Of all the Western European nations Italy, as a liminal economy with a strong left-wing sub-culture, was both a potential bridgehead and a key focus for US anxiety over encroaching communist influence. This, as well the lure of a lucrative export market, motivated the USA to play an active role in the nation's processes of modernisation since, conversely, the potentialities of renewed European prosperity as a Cold War weapon were tangible. The domestic market thus became replete with films expounding the virtues of the American lifestyle in time for the DC's 1948 election victory over the PCI.[16] In 1949, the government opted to join NATO, committing Italy to play a central role in supporting US foreign policy. The country's subsequent modernisation along American lines, in part facilitated by the European Recovery Programme (ERP), provided the USA with the propaganda victory it had sought in its efforts to create a free market economy in Western Europe.

The arrival of television in Italy in 1954 was a watershed in the fostering of consumer aspiration, fundamentally advancing the nation's linguistic unification and heralding the start, in the domestic sphere, of what would become known as the 'Economic Miracle'. The state broadcaster RAI followed a strict Catholic moral code and a DC party line, while enticing glimpses of the outside world presented Italians with a life of consumerism based broadly around the 'American Dream'. This was at its most pronounced in such programmes as the hugely popular quiz show *Lascia o raddoppia?*, and the daily half hour advertisement slot *Carosello*. Paolo Scrivano records that the first TV sets to appear were labelled 'American',

thus linking post-war symbols of modernity with the transatlantic brand and its aspirational subtext.[17]

As had previously been the case elsewhere, television was at first, like cinema, a collective form of entertainment. Bars, clubs and even the PCI's *Case del popolo* ('houses of the people') purchased sets. In the five years between 1956 and 1961, however, the number of television licences in Italy increased more than sevenfold.[18] Though still far behind the UK,[19] let alone the USA, this statistic demonstrates the rate at which American models of consumption were becoming steadily more domesticated during the Economic Miracle. On the face of it these processes saw Italians become healthier, more prosperous and more cosmopolitan.[20] Car ownership helped to break down regional barriers, as the nation's post-war development broadly signalled a transition from an agrarian economy to an urbanised, mobile and industrial one with a global outlook.

The economic, political and cultural influences of the USA have therefore long been recognised as the most important factors in the transformation of post-war Italy, and the nation's rapid development of the 1950s indeed owed much to American models of modernity. Recent analysis, however, has highlighted the extent to which neither the reach nor the exact nature of this phenomenon are easily defined. In analysing the trends characteristic of Italian domestic life during the Economic Miracle, Scrivano writes:

> A multifaceted process characterized by contradictory meanings, Americanization took various forms and developed in highly differentiated ways. Indeed, it is difficult to gauge the extent to which American models were ever simply adopted: closer analysis reveals that such influences were subject to repeated misinterpretation, negotiation and even resistance.[21]

That this was a relationship of ambiguity more than one of linear displacement is illustrated by the limitations of the economic transformation fostered by the so-called 'Miracle'. To be sure, American imports had a significant impact on every stratum of Italian society but, as Scrivano concludes, 'modernization and Americanization did not necessarily coincide'.[22]

The economic realities of the era indeed depict a considerably less inexorable process. Though this intimate encounter with transatlantic culture had a profound effect on the lives of those in the South of Italy, this was more an Americanisation of consciousness and of aspiration than it was one of lifestyle. For many southerners, indeed, consumption was less a reality than a spectacle. Disparities between the industrial North-West and

the rural South grew more pronounced during these years, and by the late 1950s the mass media had developed faster than had the economy. Paul Ginsborg depicts an emblematic scene of the era, as southerners could only sit and literally watch the transformations unfolding in mobility, consumerism and fashion:

> In the evenings, in the piazzas of the southern cities […] the television of the local bar transmitted images from the North, images of a consumer world, of Vespas, portable radios, football heroes, new fashions, nylon stockings, mass-produced dresses, houses full of electrical appliances, Sunday excursions in the family FIAT.[23]

Chronic rural unemployment and the pull of northern prosperity on display so graphically saw a considerable exodus ensue, both from the countryside into the cities, and from the South into the North-West.[24] This influx of southern labour caught northern cities unawares. By the late 1960s, Turin alone had received nearly a million migrants in 15 years, and the newcomers were often deprived of basic sanitation and services. Southern cities, too, experienced considerable growth. The government provided subsidies to industrialise Naples, Bari, Catania and Palermo, but the rapidity of change led to overpopulation, with urban centres growing outwards in uncontrolled sprawls. Enduring poverty, state corruption and forced migration were the experiences many southerners had of the Economic Miracle. That Italy's economy 'Americanised' in these years is evident but, as Martin Clark argues, the ambiguity of this process is equally plain to see: 'The Northern [cities] became North American: commercial complexes surrounded by industrial estates. The Southern ones became South American: administrative centres surrounded by shanty towns.'[25] Beneath the veneer of modernisation lay persistent, and exacerbated, uneven development: a far cry from the homogeneous 'admass' feared by many European intellectuals.

By 1960, with this 'Miracle' in full swing, ambivalence towards the transformations in Italian society was becoming prominent on the cinema screen. In that year, Federico Fellini's *La dolce vita* depicted a vacuous, media-driven culture overwhelming traditional ways of life, registering the contemporary trauma beneath the affluent façade. A young Umbrian waitress with whom Marcello (Marcello Mastroianni) converses has been forced to move to the city so her father can earn money. She confesses to crying with homesickness every time she sees a car with an Umbrian registration, indicating both the breakdown of regional identity and the ubiquity, by the early 1960s, of automotive transport. Pierre Sorlin contrasts

*La dolce vita* with Luchino Visconti's *Rocco e i suoi fratelli* – released within a few months of each other in 1960 – as social documents of this dualism lurking beneath the Economic Miracle.[26] Fellini's film shows the decadence of the modern city into which Visconti simultaneously places an impoverished Sicilian family, torn apart by desperation.

The South of Italy in particular thus found itself being shoehorned into the ethos of an affluent consumer society, and socio-economic inequalities intensified as a foreign model of modernity took root. It is therefore unsurprising that metaphors of imperialism, repression and invasion were so commonly used amongst those for whom American ideologies were anathema (the PCI, for example, launched its defence of traditional Italian popular culture with a resolution entitled 'Against Imperialist and Clerical Obscurantism'[27]). Indeed, there is some credence to the argument that Italy's alignment with America in the post-war years was imposed as much as it was invited. US troops arriving on southern Italian soil in 1943 symbolised a world of prosperity in marked contrast to many of their hosts' poverty-stricken lives. Italy experienced a more conspicuous and extended presence of American troops than any other European nation during and after the War, and a culture of occupation grew as Allied forces moved northwards. GIs distributed cigarettes and food to the people, took advantage of local prostitutes, erected American road signs and established a *lingua franca* merging English and Italian. In short, as Anna Maria Torriglia puts it, 'Americans provisionally transformed Italy into their own land'.[28]

One scene from Roberto Rossellini's *Roma città aperta* (1945) anticipates the innate ambivalence towards Italy's liberators, even while the War still raged. On the one hand, America and Americans were mythologised as representatives of a distant utopia, soon to bring the bounties of modernity to a nation on its knees. On the other, their overwhelming power was a tangible and daunting reality, and in 1945 Italy's uncertain future was to be decided by foreign forces. Returning from a scene of mass looting in war-torn Rome, the neighbourhood police sergeant (Eduardo Passarelli) asks, hopefully: 'Pina, do you think Americans really exist?' Pina (Anna Magnani) looks up, as a point-of-view shot focuses on a bombed-out building. With a look of resignation on her face, she replies: 'It seems so.'

From 1948, the Marshall Plan's media campaign actively set out to construct a culture of consent, including mobile puppet shows to persuade Italian families of the virtues of American ways of life. Ginsborg describes this political intervention as 'breath-taking in its size, its ingenuity and its flagrant contempt for any principle of non-interference in the internal affairs of another country'.[29] Intense political pressure was exerted by the

American ambassador in Rome, James Dunn, and by Secretary of State George Marshall, threatening to suspend aid if the PCI won the 1948 elections. The 1953 elections saw a repeat performance, with ambassador Clare Boothe Luce issuing dire warnings of the consequences for Italy's future if the DC were to lose.

From a military and political perspective (as well as an economic one in the case of the South), it can therefore be said that Italy had been colonised by the American sphere of influence. This was also the case in much of Western Europe, where dissenting voices similarly used the language of imperial domination. Raymond Williams, for one, declared Britain to be 'at certain levels […] culturally an American colony'.[30] Both this comment and the PCI's proclamation of resistance against 'imperialism' express a sense of unilateral coercion, and of domination and displacement of the native culture. The relevance of such a lexicon when referring to the cultural relationship between America and Europe is, however, ambiguous. Michel de Certeau also uses colonial relations as a paradigm for assessing Americanisation, but arrives at a different conclusion: '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.'[31] Even if Italy was an American colony, the natives appropriated, subverted and adapted 'America' as much as 'America' foisted itself upon them. This notion of exchange, dubbed 'cultural import-export' by James Clifford,[32] offers a firm riposte to assertions of linear subordination such as those expressed by Hoggart and Williams in Britain, and influential PCI members in Italy.

### *Transatlantic Borrowing and the Italian Communist Party*

In truth, the PCI was divided in its response to the increasing influence of US popular culture in Italy, and trends of appropriation and adaptation within the party itself were testament to the inherent attractiveness of these novel imports.[33] On the one hand, Hollywood and other forms of commercial mass culture which were proliferating in this period were seen to be exerting an irredeemably corrupting influence on the working classes. Writing in the party's weekly magazine *Vie Nuove* in 1946, Lucio Lombardo Radice wrote:

> Poor quality, insignificant, and unintelligent literature is unfortunately very widespread among workers: American-style children's comics, with 'strip cartoons' and the most hideous, idiotic, and monstrous adventures, the sports press of whatever standard and shoddy, cheap

> films. […] In this way their resistance is at least partially side-tracked and their capacity for struggle worn down.[34]

The PCI's leader Palmiro Togliatti remained committed to the notion that genuine 'popular culture' comprised provincial traditions, community activities and educational enlightenment (in much the same way as Hoggart viewed the British working classes' communal customs). This outlook owed much to the leadership's adherence to the memory and writings of Antonio Gramsci. Posthumously published on Togliatti's initiative between 1948 and 1951, Gramsci's *Prison Notebooks* show an awareness of the problems facing the PCI's cultural outlook, addressing the historic failure of Italian intellectuals to bridge the gap between themselves and 'the people'. Forgacs, however, writes that Gramsci's work was 'barely touched by an awareness of the new communications media [and] acted in the main as a conservative, retarding influence on the party's cultural work in the 50s and early 60s'.[35] While Italy looked to the future, the PCI followed a policy of demonising popular media of cultural expression such as television and genre cinema.[36]

In this drive for a progressive popular culture book clubs, reading groups and mass theatre societies were founded. *Case del popolo* arranged debates, meetings and film clubs, and the *festa dell'Unità* became a central event in local party efforts to promote community life and solidarity. As we have seen, the PCI was the parliamentary spearhead of a large and influential communist sub-culture. From 1948 its leadership attempted to mobilise this significant support base to champion politically-committed 'neorealist' Italian film-making over Hollywood imports. Writer and director Carlo Lizzani wrote that the aim of this movement was one of 'reawakening the critical spirit of the popular masses, directing their tastes and preferences […] in order to subtract as much as possible the masses from the noxious influence of a cinema shot through with vulgarity, banality, and gangsterism'.[37]

On the other hand, there was simultaneously a growing awareness within sections of the PCI that such a prescriptive outlook would jeopardise the party's impact upon civil society. Defending sympathetic presentations of American films in *Vie Nuove*, deputy editor Michele Pellicani argued in 1949: 'As Marxists we combat capitalist society but – as long as this is the society in which we live – we cannot ignore its laws. […] We cannot put ourselves outside reality.'[38] As Forgacs states, opposing attitudes viewing mass media as bourgeois propagators of false consciousness indoctrinating the people 'contained very little notion that "the people" might already be "within" culture, still less that they themselves produce valid forms of cultural expression'.[39] Hoggart portrayed a working class who 'take up

[Americanisms] just as they appear and use them in the manner of the child in the fairy-tale, who found toys hanging from the trees and lollipops by the roadside'.[40] So too the comments already cited from Secchia, Radice and Lizzani disregarded consumers' tendencies to negotiate with cultural imports, creating a hybrid modern identity. Though the PCI leadership's ideological revulsion for Americana largely precluded their appreciating the fact, 'Americanisation' offered vitality, novelty and escape. The party membership was no different from the rest of the populace in this respect.

Nor was such appropriation by any means restricted to the PCI's rank and file, since intellectuals within the party – notably Elio Vittorini and Cesare Pavese – also openly emulated US culture. Vittorini began his career as a translator, diffuser and advocate of American literature. During the Fascist era he was a leading propagator of the literary 'American myth' of an unreconstructed land of freedom. His translations frequently contained editorial cuts, 'improving' the source material or, as Torriglia puts it, 'appropriating America and adapting it to an Italian sociocultural code, thereby stressing his own "fictional" contribution to the shaping of the myth'.[41] In the aftermath of the War, Vittorini rode a wave of cultural renewal amongst intellectuals, condemning European culture from Ancient Greece onwards and advocating a rebuilding along American lines. In 1948, Togliatti closed down Vittorini's journal *Il politecnico* over this very issue, but the appeal of America could not be suppressed so easily.

Observing the PCI's activities in the 1950s, indeed, one can see that the communist sub-culture was widely engaged in appropriating aspects of American popular culture. Though Radice had expressed abhorrence for 'American-style comics', in 1950 the party commissioned *L'Unità* journalist Gianni Rodari to oversee the publication of a weekly children's comic book of fantasy and adventure stories. *Il pioniere* maintained a socially conscientious party line and was distributed in *Case del popolo* to children enrolled in the PCI's after-school program. Throughout the 1950s, in an attempt to cultivate an alternative popular culture to one of American derivation, the party held annual 'Miss *Vie Nuove*' beauty contests and dance evenings with transatlantic rhythms. Towards the end of that decade the leadership was forced to concede more ground to popular tastes, inviting television personalities to party festivals and utilising the format of the photo-romance magazine for electoral material. Gundle describes these as 'a striking example of how the rituals and aspirations engendered by Hollywood were absorbed by the Communist subculture'.[42]

That the PCI – the most disciplined and widespread organisation expounding anti-American messages in Italy – could not persuade much