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Proposal Introduction

The following dissertation proposal will explore themes and formula within the Spaghetti Western subgenre, and the audience's response to this seemingly timeless, highly stylized filmmaking movement.

Although being established in 1960's American and Italian cinema, the similarities of common SW (Spaghetti Western) visual and narrative traits can be seen in many examples of modern mainstream cinema. This proposal will observe and evaluate existing analysis work of SWs (such as Bert Fridlund's '*The Spaghetti Western: A Thematic Analysis*', 2014) to understand the effectiveness of the subgenre's qualities, for a more developed comprehension of the prevalence of the SW and its long-standing influence on contemporary cinema.

This will involve research into what/who instigated the Spaghetti Western into becoming a well-established subgenre, what were its existing predecessors and the inspiration for this type of film. What can be derived from the 'golden age' of the SW, how creatives (directors, SW documenters) engage with this specific style of filming and the effect of its legacy.

Composition

When taking into consideration the archived films which epitomize the SW subgenre (an example being Sergio Leone's *Dollar Trilogy*), the composition never really breaks continuity or diverges throughout the subgenre's filmic catalogue. To take into consideration the points of *Fisher, A.* (2016), Spaghetti Westerns have their "antecedents and legacies in Italian neorealism, French comic books, Japanese Chanbara [Samurai] films", both Italian neorealism and Japanese Chanabara films (often) depict bleak period drama with values which question the human condition.



Above, Left- 'A Fistful of Dollars' Release Poster (Unidis, 1964), Right- 'Yojimbo' Release Poster (Toho, 1961)

Austere styles of film making from Post War Japan paved way for the Chanabara and Jidaegek (period dramas), which allowed filmmakers to propose questions of mistrust in the human condition (example. Kurosawa's *Rashomon* (1950); a film which challenges the human depiction of truth, and how stories become misconstrued) and at the time these films were scarcely seen

in the Western world. However, similar messages and values were developed for Western cinema and delivered by the Spaghetti Western subgenre.

This profound theme of Western filmmaking was spawned by Italian director, Sergio Leone. Leone was directly inspired by the Japanese Chanabara subgenre film, '*Yojimbo*' (Kurosawa, 1961), he adapted the core themes and narrative of this film into '*A Fistful of Dollars*'. In Cumbow's analysis of Leone's filmic library (Cumbow, 2008), Cumbow draws multiple comparisons between '*Yojimbo*' and '*A Fistful of Dollars*', however, with each comparison made Cumbow will divulge what he believes is a pertinent difference in Leone's work and the ways in which the film sets itself apart from its preceding source material.

"The coffin-maker, too, is somewhat changed in Leone's film. In Yojimbo, he complains there is too little killing; he says he doesn't have enough business. Then later he complains there is so much killing nobody bothers with coffins. In A Fistful of Dollars, the coffin-maker never lacks business... running from body to body, measuring the corpses with a length of rope."

- Cumbow, R.C., 2008

The quote above is an example of Cumbow's comparisons, he states the similarity of the coffin-maker character and proceeds to use a contrasting point which he deems is applicable to the compositions of the films. Cumbow's argument within this seems to focus on the fact that the two films are thematically different, though this is true (*Yojimbo* set in feudal Japan and *AFOD* as a Western), objectively seen, both films still conform to similar narrative and message/value structures.

Cumbow's analysis on the history of Leone is outlined in his introduction's aim to make a biography on Leone and to "assay nothing more than an appreciative critical response... as a tribute to this important film stylist" (Cumbow, 2008). From his proposition it is deducible that there is possibility for a slight bias towards Leone in Cumbow's writing, therefore, his points on contrasts between *Yojimbo* and *AFOD*, **may be in a way subjectively contrived** and acts as a way of averting the conflicting topic, that *AFOD* is dubiously an unofficial remake. Bringing up reason to question why a remake would be necessary for a Western audience, when the original already covers the same message/value composition and how had it never gathered popularity against the established American 'Western' film genre.

From an objective view, the similarities of the two films are evident. Though Leone heavily used *Yojimbo* as inspiration, his choice to make *AFOD* (deemed as an adaptation) could show that the seemingly philosophical themes in post war Japanese cinema are applicable universally and via the medium of the already established Western film genre, the ingrained (human condition) themes can be shared by a larger audience and enjoyed through the status quo of Hollywood film composition (at the time of Post WW2 cinema).

A conclusion from this may be that filmgoers simply enjoy exploring philosophy through the medium of film, or just simply be, filmgoers find that films based on the human condition seem to subconsciously create more relatable characters and are therefore more immersed in the established, fictional Western film-world. Although, the importance of using this philosophy and the lengths at which it can be used (if it becomes too overt), could be questioned as to whether they are necessary to enhance the audience's empathetic experience.

Growing from the popularity of the traditional stylings of the American 'Western', *A Fistful of Dollars* maintained this acclaim and commenced the start of the Spaghetti Western subgenre. With the word 'Spaghetti' used as a concept to signify that Italians make these films through; production financing, participation (director, writer, etc.) and lead acting roles (Fridlund, 2014).

Whereas the Chanbara predecessor was set in Japan's Edo period, a time of social development which was focused on conflicting, bureaucratic territories and authoritarian rule (Tada, 1986). The SW, almost always, takes place just after the Civil War, a turning point in American history, and the aftermath of both these brutal struggles for societal evolution could effectively delineate a tone (and tackle questions of morality) familiar for the Post-WW2 film audiences.

By creating an environment derivative of the audience's experience, yet are still distanced by the period setting, it may be that viewers enjoy the kindred feeling of the protagonist and similarities in his behavior or attitudes to a war-torn world. The fact that the audience is partly detached from the any comparison to their current societal values, through the filmmakers' stylistic version of the West (along with fictional events), seems important to divulge a more enjoyable film and with no consequences of visualizing obvious imagery of current times (therefore; developing escapism, yet allowing this 'aftermath' theme to endure).

Presence

The basis of SW narrative follows the existence of the (most often lone) protagonist and their personal journey. In order to be engaged with any protagonist, the audience needs to relate, and this relationship primarily lies with the SW portrayal of the human condition (exemplified previously, in reference to post war cinema).

The central character to the majority of SWs, is solitary and highly passive. Akin to the beginnings of most other narratives, the hero begins as a 'passive protagonist' and in most every average film, ends with the hero transformed by the events of the narrative, this can be seen in *The Hero's Journey* formula (Campbell, 2008).

To counter traditional formula, Fridlund (2014) explains that the "typical [Spaghetti Western] character constellation is a cunning hero harboring two conflicting motives, one monetary, and the other non-monetary", this embodies the passiveness of the hero's motives and the possible ambiguity of the character's philosophy with existence (choosing greed or selflessness, equating to moral dilemmas), through ontology and techniques (requiring further groundwork) which seemingly develop compassion in the viewer. No matter the hero's choice, it is almost certain that it will result in an obligatory, violent shootout and is a central, stylistic trope to the formula of a SW and its aesthetic constitution (concerning sound and image reviewal).

It seems that Fridlund is remiss to give an alternate viewpoint to the hero's choices, as there exists a natural bias for the audience to believe that the protagonist chooses the morally correct path only because it is the right thing to do and neglects any reason that the protagonist is driven by more selfish, circumstantial motives.

The reason for such selfish motives lies with the comprehension of the previously stated, human condition (underlying sub story), a factor which influences the character narrative of most Spaghetti Westerns (adopted from Japanese post war cinema), the hero does the right thing because they want to redeem themselves (of a turbulent past, often associated with their experience from the Civil War or another trigger event) and move on (both figuratively and practically, culminating to the film's end) in most cases returning to a passive protagonist (going against the grain of 'The Hero's Journey').

"There is realism in [Leone's] presentation of the Civil War in 'The Good, the Bad and the Ugly' that was missing from all the Civil War movies that happened before him. Wild and grandiose as it was, there was never a sentimental streak. Every once in a while he would do a sentimental thing like when the 'Man with No Name' would hand a smoke to a dying soldier in 'The Good, the Bad and the Ugly', but that's just about as close to sentimentality as he got."

- Tarantino, Q., 2019

Rather than the protagonist changing, the journey of a SW hero can be summed up as a 'passive existence in an active environment' and they only serve to vindicate themselves by remaining morally just (All the while lacking this 'sentimentality' for others, as they too are similarly displaced). For some reason the audience takes vicarious pleasure through this personal pilgrimage of redemption and revenge, but why would an audience remain enthralled by such an unchanging, self-effacing character?



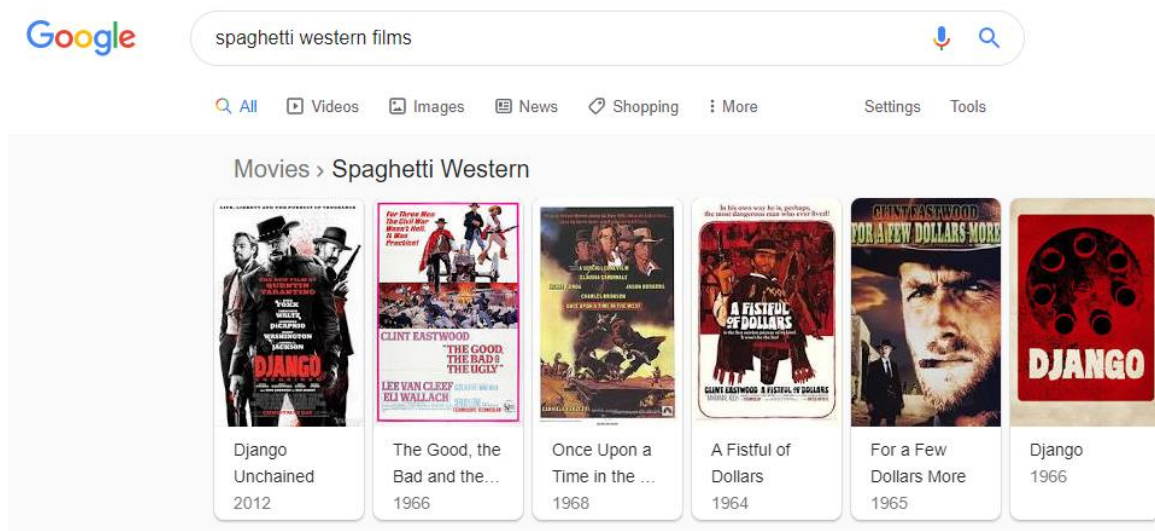
Above, Screenshot from 'A Fistful of Dollars' (Leone, 1964)

Just as crucial to composition as narrative is, the renowned and highly stylistic aesthetic of SW films is crucial to creating imagery which beneficially compliments the ontology of the hero and their actions within the environment. The hero's ontology is in harmony with the semiotic environment (as seen in image prior); empty landscapes representing a desolate bleakness (in keeping with the character's isolation), corpses and gibbets reflecting a moral split (amplifying the hero's lawless path to self-redemption). Overall, does this really reinforce the sympathy held for the character and are they a product of their environment or a result of their neglect to make a change, remaining passive.

Fridlund accounts that "The barren nature in *Fistful of Dollars* is still more barren in *Django* with dangerous quicksand and wet mud that leave more manifest and degrading marks on the characters." (2014). This constant bombardment of environmental semiotics coerces audiences into developing their subjective viewpoints in concerns to the defined structures of society and morals in this fictional world. Whether the audience derives any sympathy towards the protagonist is up to the filmmaker and how much the audience learns of the character. This may be to allow the audience to their opinion, if the protagonist is morally good or bad, and do they find redemption.

Seminal

When one searches Google for 'Spaghetti Western films', the first result is *Django Unchained* (Tarantino, 2012) from contemporary auteur director, Quentin Tarantino. This clearly demonstrates the long-lasting impact from the predecessors of the subgenre, along with the current day popularity of a contemporary SW, and yet how does a modern film gain more notoriety than such a seminal catalogue of films?



Above: A screenshot of the top 'Spaghetti Western film' search results (Google, 2020)

Tarantino's 'Django Unchained' is a film distinctly inspired by two niche and significant film subgenres: Spaghetti Westerns and the Blaxploitation films of the 1970's.

Due to Tarantino's integration of blaxploitation themes, Django Unchained was not interpreted without controversy and many viewpoints found the film to be too jaunty alongside the depictions of slavery in 17th century America. The director Spike Lee has voiced his opinion that "American slavery was not a Sergio Leone Spaghetti Western. It was a Holocaust" (Independent, 2012), this emphasizes the problem with dubious depictions (Such as stereotyping) seen in blaxploitation films and how critical it is to represent past themes in an inoffensive style.

The themes within Spaghetti Westerns are not as important or more contemporary than the context of blaxploitation cinema, so instead, in *Django Unchained* the SW subgenre serves to compliment the core values of the blaxploitation styled narrative and creates the **composition** of this film in regards to visuals (alongside legitimate aspects of the film's time period; depictions of the Antebellum South), so therefore, do new artefacts (filmmaking styles/tropes) need to be implemented to uphold/rejuvenate the subgenre itself?

This Spaghetti Western composition possibly serves a way to distance the audience from reality (a portrayal of a contentious history), although this is true for original Spaghetti Westerns, Tarantino chose to highlight depictions of America's historic slave trade and subjectively, this serves to only punctuate (possibly even revive) an otherwise preexisting story of revenge in the West. The SW style focuses attention on a more linear narrative of the protagonist's undertaking (the character's philosophy, e.g. Django is obsessive with revenge and enacts this revenge alongside a mentor character, who follows his own reasoning) and the kinetic, gritty aesthetic of the SW environment (including the visual satisfaction of the protagonist's bold expertise as a gunslinger, example. the energy of cinematography within *Django Unchained's* gunfight sequences).

This popularity of 'loner' characters within movies has grown throughout cinema history (from Scorsese's *Taxi Driver* (1976) to mainstream blockbuster, superhero film archetypes) and remains prevalent in films which contain contentious issues. The solitary character style, established in the West by SWs, is now enjoyed by a current day cinema audience. The subgenre's aspects of *schadenfreude* (enjoyment in viewing of other's suffering), the audience enjoys knowing that the protagonist will pull through as the ultimate victor, and yet the protagonist is never a 'true victor' in most SWs. Most loner films seemingly exemplify Nietzsche's text; "That which does not kill me, makes me stronger" (Nietzsche, F., 2018), the audience self-reflects this (easily identifiable) philosophy and is vicariously immersed in the protagonist's progression through the satisfaction of the aesthetic style compositions.

Concluding Question

The reason as to why the legacy of the Spaghetti Western continues is multifaceted (through both its aesthetic and narratively formulaic composition), yet the core value of the subgenre is its capability to create a story which is relatable and self-reflective for the viewer (via philosophical themes and judging human/societal values) and is therefore the groundwork for enjoyable film.

After deliberating and analysing existing work surrounding the subgenre, the consideration as to why the seminal work of the Spaghetti Western continues to inspire modern media is never evidently defined in the established works previously reviewed. An understanding of past SW composition only leads to lack of knowledge as to why it sustains to compete with (new) current day filmmaking styles, the subgenre has extended its legacy long past the initial period of relevancy, when its composition was being utilized as a vessel to question human condition in relation to morality/societal events and so;

How do the compositional traits of the Spaghetti Western subgenre continue to resonate and maintain relevancy with a contemporary audience?

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