

One-way ticket

A review of the greatest émigré German directors of Hollywood

In the 1920s only a thin line divided German cinema from its American counterpart. During Nazi rule, several artists and intellectuals left Germany in the hope of finding freedom of expression and peaceful working conditions in the United States. Famous names such as Lubitsch, Wilder, Murnau, Lang, Preminger, Siodmak, Zinnemann, Dietrich, Von Stenberg, Ophuls, and Freund come to mind as just some of the artists who sought artistic freedom in the United States. It is also important to remember that a number of other figures in the forms of intellectuals such as Adorno, Brecht, Piscator, and Reinhardt made an important contribution. The influx of such individuals played a key role in shaping the growth and identity of American cinema: defining a new aesthetic that probably only Charlie Chaplin had experimented with before. Aside from Chaplin only Hitchcock, another British director, had conquered Hollywood. Formal innovations such as linguistic changes, fantastic and realistic themes, provocative styles and scenography helped shape the so-called Golden Age of American cinema. This triggered a deep revolution within the organisation and helped change the image of Hollywood.

German copyright is in many ways linked to the legacy of Hollywood, in particular with regard to consumption and authorship. This can be seen when considering director's vast filmography. Lubitsch's "The eyes of the Mummy" (1918), and Murnau's "Nosferatu" (1922) represent, for example, the beginnings of an enduring and successful franchise of vampire movies. Lubitsch emigrated to the U.S. in 1922, and is widely regarded as having been a figurehead within the cinematographic German Diaspora at a time when Germany was still the capital of culture and cinema. He also invented light comedy, now known as American comedy. This form of comedy was strongly indebted to "boulevardier" theatre and Viennese *opérette*. Furthermore, he was very involved with the European film scene: one of his masterpieces, "Ninotchka", for example, was set in Paris. The piece describes, in a humoristic and paradoxical way, the contradictions and contrasts between the grey Soviet Union and libertine old Europe.

Murnau, however, died in 1931 in a car crash. He is famed for having directed the controversial yet brilliant “Tabu” in collaboration with the American director Flaherty.

(Insert Title)

Fritz Lang is perhaps the most representative German director of the period. He invented the *noir* genre, best epitomised in works such as *M* (1931), *Fury* (1936) and *You only live once* (1937). Prior to this he was the main exponent of European fantastic cinema. He was one of the first Germans to flee Germany just a few months prior to Hitler’s rise to power. Following Lang came several genial directors such as Ophuls, director of *Letter from an unknown woman* (1948), Siodmak, *People on Sunday* (1929), and Zinnerman, *From here to eternity* (1953). However, arguably the most important artistic contribution was made by Billy Wilder, who was the first director brave enough to address controversial topics such as the Shoah and concentration camps in *Stalag 17* (1953).

The directors of this period, inspired by Expressionist arts and drama, placed emphasis in their works on a deep analysis of hidden messages within cinematographic technique and language. As a consequence, *noir* movies made a great visual impact: scenography and photography were used to give camera shots additional meaning rather than act simply as representations of an object. These films address a very diverse thematic range of topics: historical reconstruction, social drama and remakes of literary classics. However, the most innovative ones were those that, through stories shrouded in mystery, fantasy and horror, investigated the dark side of human beings. They created a complex and contradictory universe that only Sigmund Freud had previously explored. Some titles were milestones in the history and development of cinema such as *The Cabinet of Doctor Caligari* (1919) by Robert Wiene, *Doctor Mabuse*, (1922) *The Dusseldorf Monster* (1931) by Fritz Lang, and *The Street* (1923) by Karl Grune. The scenography and wallpapers were meant to express the idea of not only an action, but also the attempt to capture a perfect and elaborate camera shot. This method emphasized the contrast between light and shadow, which were the main elements that Expressionism bequeathed to the art of motion picture. Black and white photography acted as a metaphor for the fight between Good and Evil. This was the most enduring contribution that Old Europe gave to Hollywood’s classic *noir*. However, it should also be noted that the *noir* genre would have struggled to achieve success had it not been for financial support provided by Hollywood.

Several factors gave rise to Hollywood's so-called Golden Age: the import of the old-European style; the American socio-economic reality; a production process which alternated between high budget project and a series of B-movies that provided excellent breeding grounds for new ideas (even if such ideas were not always politically correct); and finally experimentation with new technologies and artistic solutions. Arguably, however, the most important factor was the constant collaboration and dialogue that Hollywood maintained with the leading exponents of visual art (like Andy Warhol, Edward Hopper, Salvador Dalí *et al.*).

Stanley Kubrick (1928-2000)

Stanley Kubrick, American by birth, was European by culture; his father was an Austrian-Jewish doctor. Not only was Kubrick a director, he was also a photographer, artist, poet, philosopher, visionary, scientist, a serious professional, a madman and a genius. When he was 13 years old, he inherited his father's passion for photography: he took photographs of everything he encountered. One of his photographs was published by *Look* magazine, the mouthpiece of an American middle class who had won the Second World War, and was concerned about the threat of communism. He worked for "Look" magazine until 1950, and he came to be regarded as one of the most realistic and socially oriented photographers of the period. In the meantime, he began to develop an interest for classic movies (some sources testify that he watched up to 5 screenings a day). His favourite directors were Max Ophuls and Elia Kazan: directors who embodied the meshing of American and European cultures. In 1949 he directed his first series of short movies and then his first self-financed movie with reduced personnel and a low budget. His first 'substantial' movie was *The Killing* (1956), in which, for the first time, his absolute mastery of the cinematographic instrument was fully utilized.

Kubrick later confessed that he was driven to direct not only because of his passion to do so, but also because he was completely aware of his own extraordinary artistic intuition and precocious talent. In the early 1960s he moved to Great Britain because he considered Hollywood's system too invading, and because they would clash with his strong and stubborn personality. He was clearly an individualist and a self-absorbed person. He wanted full creative control and responsibility for his movies, and he didn't agree to any projects without such control. He chose and planned his movies, contributed

to the screenplay, and also oversaw casting, photography, montage, soundtrack (he was also a jazz drummer) and even marketing. He was an “author” by pure definition, and he never again returned to the U.S. as he increasingly isolated himself in the English countryside. His connection with the outside world became almost non-existent. His artistic career spanned over 50 years; it can be seen as representing a long journey towards perfection. He was determined and had a maniacal care for style, scenographic details and camera focus, but also for the characterization of the actors with their ideological and moral implications. His personality dominates the history of cinema with his classic film *2001 Space Odyssey*, which can be compared in saliency to George Orwell’s “1984”. Kubrick was an enigmatic man, and a chess-player, (another passion often portrayed in his movies). He never showed his personal feelings or those of his characters. He was an unconventional human being who viewed society in a negative light, and a man who was full of doubts and uncertainty, and considered everything illusory and perceived the ferocity of social mechanisms. He was scared of modern times, inhumanity and the progress of technology, yet he was also a passionate artist who foresaw the power and charm of the silver screen over human conscience. He saw cinema as a means to wrest individuals from commonsense rationality.

Themes

Kubrick was not an “immediate author”; his films need time and detachment to be understood and assimilated. He was considered a conceptual director, strongly imbued with a philosophical spirit. Although he represented a huge variety of genres and arguments, it is possible to discern a common thread: a thematic nucleus that can be summarized as the crisis of human reasoning and intellect. The human being is imponderable, escaping from vigilant systems and attempts to avoid every kind of preconceived control. He was torn between the acceptance of rational order, a stable society, the need for unhindered freedom, and the exaltation of passions and individual energy. He was inspired by bitter and pessimistic literature, mostly British works such as Swift’s *Gulliver* and Stevenson’s *Doctor Jekyll and Mr Hyde*.

Kubrick addressed these themes not with dialogue, but rather through the use of images and sounds mixed with music, peculiar languages and silence. Kubrick mistrusted words as a means of communication, and for this reason his movies always feature characters that were failed writers. Another recurring theme is the obsession with doubles:

dualism is seen as the generating principle of imperfect symmetries, and of different replicas. This dualism is visually explained through the use of twin characters with an incessant use of mirrors and repetition of names, Humbert Humbert in "Lolita" for example. Kubrick built a gallery of characters unique in their individualism and personality and tried to create figures of contemporary heroes living in a world full of internal conflicts and social contradictions. The protagonists of his movies seem fragile and human: victims of human cruelty, and as a consequence their alienation and frustration results in madness and a loss of control.

The aforementioned theme is best exemplified in what is probably his most famous film, *A Clockwork Orange*: based on Anthony Burgess' 1962 original novel. This movie played a pivotal role in the history of cinematography as it disconcerted and shocked audiences and critics alike because of its rawness, violence, and innovative language, which Kubrick called "Nadsat". The movie was strongly influenced by cultural movements during this period and by English pulp writers J.Schlesinger and W. Anderson. At the end of the 1960s, the cultural environment was steeped in an atmosphere of uncertainty; the press, for example, spoke in terms of the decline of values. Capitalism and consumerism transformed society into a huge market; beauty became the new religion; and superficiality and appearance dominated world business and the fashion market. Artists were aware of this dramatic situation and protested in different ways: figurative artists created "Pop Art" and "Kitsch" while musicians began the experimental "Electro" period. "Clockwork Orange" can be considered the cinematographic answer to this period. And worldwide artistic began the "riot act", a provocative work against the subliminal brainwashing of human conscience by the media and politics. *A Clockwork Orange* is widely seen as a masterpiece that elevated Stanley Kubrick to legendary status. He will always be seen as pivotal figure who linked American and European cultures.

The Italian Western

"Without Spaghetti Western a consistent part of the Italian cinema wouldn't exist and Hollywood wouldn't be the same"

-Quentin Tarantino

The Italian Western, better known as the Spaghetti Western, was a cinematographic genre produced in Italy during the 60's and 70's. They often featured actors, still at the beginning of their careers, who later became prize-winning international stars. These movies were predominantly filmed in Italy and Spain; it was rare for them to be filmed in other European countries. From 1964 to 1978, this prolific franchise allowed the Western to experience a renaissance in popularity within Europe and also in the U.S. Prior to this, the genre had witnessed a dip in popularity due to the absence of well-known figures such as John Wayne and John Ford: the protagonists of the Western's golden age. In 2007 the International Film Festival of Venice made a tribute to the Spaghetti Western with a review of 32 titles, and the initiative garnered positive feedback.

The Poncho: one of the symbols of the Spaghetti Western

The term "Spaghetti Western" was coined in the U.S., and only a few feature films, intentionally made in Italy with low budgets and cheap props, were screened in America. The term "Spaghetti Western" referred to the huge quantity of blood spilt during the movies: reminiscent of tomato sauce on plate of spaghetti. Despite an initial diffidence, the genre gradually connected with a larger audience. Critics however remained cold towards these films and only conceded artistic value to the highest exponents of the genre: Italian director Sergio Leone and several of the actors involved with his productions. He was the only director who earned esteem and respect from his American colleagues, and in doing so he achieved remarkable popularity in international theatres.

Sergio Leone moved the Spaghetti Western in a new direction: introducing innovative details and solutions, while giving more attention to particulars. He changed settings and costumes; filmed his movies in different landscapes rather than the traditional ones; and dressed his actors with more colourful and folkloric clothes such as the typical Mexican poncho and sombrero. He also revolutionized classic dialogues by creating an essence of pathos and thrill during many of his scenes. His talent and his intuition revitalised Westerns, and critics approached his films with a feeling of revisionism. During the early 1980's many Spaghetti Westerns, produced prior to Sergio Leone, were re-released. The first Italian western was *Terror of Oklahoma* (1959). It was directed by Mario Amendola and filmed in Mediterranean Africa, and proved to be an inspiration to many of his successors.

Arguably the most popular and appreciated piece of work was *The Dollar Trilogy* made by Leone. The film featured Clint Eastwood, who is widely credited as having begun the legend of the unnamed man. It also featured a soundtrack by Ennio Morricone: *A fistful of dollars* (1964), *For a few dollars more* (1965) and *The good, the bad and the ugly* (1966). The latter is probably the most famous piece and was produced on a budget of almost a million dollars. After this trilogy, Leone added to this existing series with “*Once upon a time in the west*” (1968): arguably his greatest masterpiece, a monumental and nostalgic fresco of the West epopee.

The movie portrayed a decaying Western Frontier, in which the characters acquired a bigger human density. The masterful technical ability and storytelling of the director is mixed with a rich and powerful subject ideally combining the crepuscular themes of the new American western. Beyond Leone, other Italian directors working in this genre such as Florestano Vancini, Duccio Tessari, Sergio Corbucci, Lucio Fulcie and Sergio Sollima, enjoyed success. They conceptualised variations of classic works, such as gothic westerns (titles like *Joko*, or *Colts sang the dead*), in which serene environments were substituted with dark and gloomy locations: cemeteries and ghost towns. M. Lanfranchi’s *Dead Sentence* (1968), featuring “cowboy zombies”, inspired the graphic novel “*Dead in the West*” by Joe Lansdale. Also the “peplum” western and the “thriller” western experienced a Golden Age during this period. Despite the serious and violent themes, it must also be noted that Bud Spencer and Terence Hill created a parody of Spaghetti Westerns that were full of rumbles and funny moments. With such movies they achieved unexpected success within Italy and several other European countries.

By the end of the 1980s the Spaghetti western, much like the American western, lost its appeal with audiences and abruptly disappeared from theatres. It can be argued that the last epic movie of this genre was Clint Eastwood’s first directed movie *Unforgiven* (1992), which he dedicated to Sergio Leone’s memory in the final credits (Quentin Tarantino did the same ten years later with *Kill Bill* volumes I and II). Mexican director Robert Rodriguez however continues the Spaghetti western tradition with his evocative “burrito westerns.”

In 1971 film critic Franco Ferrini published an article in which he identified nine factors that distinguished Italian and American Westerns. These refer to the diverse use of several themes in the Spaghetti westerns such as alcohol, names, weapons, Law, duels and cemeteries. The protagonists in spaghetti westerns were almost never heroes. Instead they were more often anti-heroes without idealistic intents. Instead they were determined

to reach their goals in every possible way. There were no optimistic situations; the characters only sought money and power, and as a consequence the distinction between good and evil is blurry. In Italian Westerns, the characters are more cynical and gritty. Thus they are more realistic. The films also featured inhospitable locations such as villages that looked dusty and desolate. Spaghetti Westerns from the 20th Century were seen as less epic and generally tougher and cruel.

Most Spaghetti Western movies were filmed in Central Italian regions and in the La Mancha desert in Spain: both of which had landscapes reminiscent of the American West countryside. Recurrent themes in Spanish movies were the Mexican Revolution, the border issue in the U.S. and the figures of “bandidos”. However there is a complete lack of Indian natives or Redskins. Often scenes were shot at a high altitude where clouds were scant, and this fact explains why in a lot of movies the sun was quite visible; subsequently, there was a noticeable feeling of desolation. Furthermore, typical of this genre was the peculiar and sometimes weird titles of the movies which reflected the stereotypes of the stories and also the picturesque names of protagonists such as Trinity, Alleluia, and the Magnificent. Equally interesting were the sagas, often 10 episodes long, with the same characters, such as Django, Santana, Colt and several Joes. Even if Spaghetti Westerns are now considered just a relic of cinema’s past, this legacy is still however very much alive. In Quentin Tarantino’s latest film *Inglourious Basterds*, Tarantino claimed that the first scene of the film is a tribute to Sergio Leone’s *Once upon a time in the west*. This demonstrates that the Italian influence is still very much alive.

New American Cinema - Independent cinema of the 1960s

New American cinema is a heterogeneous movement of independent directors born in the U.S. following the release of an artistic manifesto promoted by Jonas Mekas and Lewis Allen on the 28th of September 1960. Thanks to the generous effort of Mekas, who was the principle animator, the movement tried to establish an alternative organization and distribution settling in New York City: the first big Film Makers’ Cooperative. Under the trademark “New American Cinema” it brought together people who wanted to act and direct with different kinds of artistic solutions against sufferable marketing laws.

“Experimenters”-directors perceived filmmaking in a more personal and poetic way. The initial works, primarily “*Pull My Daisy*” (1960) by R. Frank and A. Leslie, *Shadows* (1960)

by J. Cassavetes, *"The Connection"* (1962) by S. Clarke and *"Guns of the Trees"* (1962) by Meksas, all feature a realistic matrix which recalls the New York old school, but also reveals powerful themes of incongruence and improvisation similar to the European dogma. In any case it undoubtedly forms part of the most relevant phenomena of American contemporary art.

Conversely the films from the more experimental current (released by directors like M. Deren, S. Brakhage, S. Vanderbeek, J. Broughton, C. Hurrington and R. Rice) were inspired by content, themes and styles historically linked to 1920s American cinematography and artistic vanguards in addition to the European post-war new-realists. This kind of cinema was termed "Underground", and it quickly grew into an anti-genre with new aesthetic and cultural solutions. One of its most regarded directors was Maya Deren; her first two movies *"Meshes of the afternoon"* and *"At Land"* featured an innovative use of image, not linked by logics or chronology, but by surrealistic symbols that recall the imagination and influence of authors like Luis Bunuel and Jean Cocteau. In 1954, in order to guarantee the potential to produce independent movies in the future, Maya Deren established the Creative Film Foundation, which financed several underground movies (Brakhage and Clarke received funds and ideas from this institution). She organized the first experimental projections open to the audience in the Provincetown Playhouse of New York. New American Cinema found important themes in working class protests and in youth unrest within schools. Works like the Meyers's *The Quiet One* (1952), Rogosin's *On The Bowery* (1956) or Cassavetes' previously mentioned *Shadows* became mirrors of the social situation of both students and workers.

These acclaimed titles gave New American Cinema a huge international reach and fame, and as a consequence influenced a new generation of filmmakers. It must be noted that the success of the New American Cinema was due in large part to parallel initiatives of the period. Such initiatives included exhibitions such as "Art in Cinema", promoted by Frank Stauffacher in the Art Museum of San Francisco from 1947 to 1955, and the "Cinema 16" organization founded by Amos Vogel in 1950 which strongly contributed to the revelation of American and European vanguards. In 1960 Meksas abandoned New American Cinema's extensive formula and most of the new generation followed him. These "New independents" shared common values such as the definition of the filmmaker as a fully rounded artist who took on different roles such director, sound artist and producer. In addition, the new independents started to use only 8 mm and 16 mm cameras and told unconventional stories using anti-narration to find new meanings. Meksas

and his colleagues, under the influence of the French “Nouvelle Vague” and “English Free Cinema”, tried to create a bona fide American author’s cinema. In New York City they found a favourable environment. There Mekas founded the “Film Culture” magazine: preaching to its readers the precepts of a new kind of cinema, in which randomness, spontaneity, fragmentation and impurity would become real instruments of expression and would substitute the strict laws of the common sense and conceptions of beauty. Mekas thought that cinema needed to break free from the hyper–professionalism and hyper-technicality. It should instead let itself be led by improvisation and intuition, and try to represent life from inside and not from outside.

This led to a spontaneous and illogical cinema, produced exactly as it was shot, without a pre-determined plot, in which characters defined themselves during the production. This was a cinema of rage and poetry that refused middle class morality as formal artistic doctrine. It was an original and witty expressive pursuit born and fed by the beat generation. The new independents preferred exception to normality, behaviour over style, action over art, and appearance over concreteness. Furthermore, a recurrent feature was the figure of “*The Wanderer Without Destination*“, which were inspired by some of Jack Kerouac’s characters. Henceforth, a consistent part of the independent production of New American cinema incorporated a new cinematographic form known as “Expanded Cinema”. Essentially, the innovation referred to the dimension of the screen where the movies were projected; rather than the common frontal screen, this new idea proposed a larger screen with a panoramic perspective. In addition, new screens were used, projecting films on different surfaces and altering the normal technical process of cutting and assembling. The first experimental attempts took place in 1958 when Kenneth Anger projected, simultaneously over three different screens, his “*Inauguration of Pleasure*“ in a Brussels theatre. But the cathedral of the Expanded Cinema would become the Movie Dome Theatre (realised in 1966 by Stan Van Der Beek in New York): a spherical hall where spectators could watch the movie completely lying and immersed in a magic atmosphere created by a fisheye lens. In the same year, Andy Warhol presented his seven-hour first movie *Chelsea girl* in two parts, projected simultaneously over two adjacent screens.

Over the last 30 years, the influence of “Expanded Cinema” in video art has been remarkable. It was the first movement that clearly promoted contamination by other arts: organising huge exhibitions with stroboscopic lights and multi medial happenings like

Robert Whitman's in which films were projected directly on the bodies of the performers. Finally, we can find echoes of attempts for independent art and production in the form of "American Zoetrope", a cinematographic cartel composed by George Lucas, John Milius and Francis Ford Coppola and even more in the New Wave American Cinema with punk derivation (Amos Poe, Erich Mitchell, Vivienne Dick, Beth e Scott B., Becky Johnson), which feature self-quoting and incorporated poetry, fashion, visual arts and readings (on the path of the previous New American Cinema). This has found many supporters and followers in the European d'Essay theatres.