

Once upon a time in Italy

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Sergio Leone's 'A Fistful of Dollars' and Damiano Damiani's 'El Crucho' explicitly connected Mexico and Italy as places of working-class revolution, and launched a genre that is still relevant.

Sergio Leone launched a stylistic revolution with *A Fistful of Dollars* in 1964 and the Italian-made western created its own genre, between political allegory and popular entertainment. The definitive Zapata western — spaghetti westerns set in the 1910 Mexican revolution — was *El Chunchu* (A Bullet for the General), released in 1966 when Italy, split between the rich north and the poor south, was celebrating a century of unification while on its way to the *anni di piombo* (leaden years) (1). In the film, directed by Damiano Damiani, the bandit El Chunchu (Gian Maria Volonté) meets American mercenary El Niño (Lou Castel) who encourages him to support the revolution but is secretly planning to kill a revolutionary general on behalf of dictator Porfirio Díaz.

Besides references to the assassinations of Emiliano Zapata and Pancho Villa, the film comments on US intervention in Latin America. A rebel *peón* says the US supports or opposes the revolution according to its current interests. The local landlord asks: "You want to kill me because I'm rich?" The *peón* replies: "No señor, because we are poor, and you've done everything to keep it that way." There is a clear parallel drawn between the north-south divisions in the Americas and in Italy; southern Italians also suffered from broken promises about the redistribution of land. The resemblance between the Mexican and Italian flags emphasises the comparison.

With its train ambushes and revolutionary cavalcades (shot in Andalucía right under General Franco's nose), *El Chunchu* set the genre pattern: a *peón* or a bandit is gradually made aware of class struggle, and eventually the struggle of the people means more to him than money. The gringo is secretive in *El Chunchu*, cynical and mercenary in Sergio Corbucci's *The Mercenary* and *Compañeros*, disillusioned in Sergio Leone's *Once Upon a Time in the West*, but he is always a manipulator. The Mexican is awed by the gringo's clever strategy until he realises that he's been conned. This uses the old narrative formula that makes antagonists complementary in action, and opposes the different worldviews and class realities of the oppressed, who have no choice but collective struggle, and of the tourist with his own agenda who "does not love Mexico", as El Niño says in *El Chunchu*.

El Chunchu's political dimension is clear even in the cast; Gian Maria Volonté was a member of the Italian Communist Party and appeared in many allegorical thrillers, including *Investigation of a Citizen Above Suspicion* (Elio Pietri, 1970) and *The Mattei Affair* (Francesco Rosi, 1972), which won the Cannes Palme d'Or. The far-left militant Lou Castel was deported from Italy in 1972, but before that acted in *Fists in the Pocket* (Marco Bellocchio, 1965), and *Requiescant* (Carlo Lizzani, 1967), another allegorical western with Pier Paolo Pasolini as a revolutionary priest.

Chasing the bosses

El Chunchu benefited from an outstanding scriptwriter, Franco Solinas, a communist militant born in Sardinia, who was first a worker, then a student, a journalist and a novelist. He wrote *The Battle of Algiers* (1966) for Gillo Pontecorvo, which was banned in France but won a Golden Lion award at the Venice Film Festival, and *Burn!* (1969), about colonialism in the Caribbean. Because Pontecorvo wanted to produce popular films, Solinas wrote a western — *The Mercenary* (also called *A Professional Gun*), directed by Corbucci in 1968, in which Franco Nero plays a Polish mercenary who sells his skills expensively to revolutionary *peóns*. As in *El Chunchu*, it is the gringo's contempt that makes mineworker Paco (Tony Musante) aware of working conditions and class values. When the Pole asks "what does the revolution mean to you?" the mineworker replies "chasing the bosses and taking their money"; arrested after a holdup attempt, he says "taking from the rich to give to the poor is never very popular among the rich."

There is an unforgettable scene in which the Pole explains the class gap to Paco, who is in bed with a naked Mexican woman: “Imagine that the rich are the top part, the head, and the poor, the lower part, the arse. A revolution is like trying to put both parts on the same level — only that’s impossible, because between the head and the arse, there’s the back.” Paco strokes his lover’s backside: “Well, if I have to choose, I’ll stick with the poor.”

Corbucci also directed the comic *Compañeros* (1970), with Nero as a Swedish arms dealer involved with revolutionaries headed by El Vasco — the versatile Cuban actor Tomás Milián, looking like Che Guevara. Milián, a Zapata western icon, played the ragged but resourceful working-class man more than any other actor, notably in three Sergio Sollima westerns that made him a third-world star. Besides roles in *The Big Gundown* (1966) and *Run, Man, Run* (1968), he played a rough bandit encountering a US professor — Gian Maria Volonté — in *Face to Face* (1967). The bandit’s lawlessness gives the professor a pretext for his sadistic impulses. Sollima bitterly reflects how resorting to violence may lead to a fascination with it.

Italian filmmakers often opposed that fascination, not only in film. Sollima had been in the Italian Resistance movement, as had Giulio Petroni, who directed the sombre *Tepepa* (1969), with a screenplay by Solinas. Milián played Tepepa, a guerillero supporting Francisco I Madero, later president of Mexico (1911-3) before being overthrown and assassinated by General Huerta. Madero asks the peasants to give up their weapons in exchange for land, but Tepepa understands that the slogan “land and liberty” is far from a reality and returns to fight a ruthless colonel (Orson Welles).

References to fascism

Leone, having remade the western by deconstructing Hollywood fantasies to produce films of raw realism, then went against the political optimism of his counterparts with *A Fistful of Dynamite* (also called *Duck, You Sucker*, 1971). James Coburn as an exiled member of the Irish Republican Army (IRA) tricks outlaw Rod Steiger with the promise of a lucrative bank robbery. But the bank contains only political prisoners and the outlaw becomes a revolutionary leader. In this modern parable, Leone closely followed the codes of the Zapata western, scattered with many references to fascism, including an execution alluding to the Ardeatine massacre (when Nazis shot 335 Italian prisoners in Rome in March 1944 as a reprisal) and a caricature of a German officer.

The *peón* again teaches the gringo a lesson, although in a more disillusioned and less violent way than in *El Chunchu*. “For Chrissake, it’s not for you to tell me about revolutions. I know very well how they break out... those who know how to read books go to see the poor people who don’t know how to read books, and they say ‘things have to change here’. So the poor bastards carry out the changes and then the cleverest of those who know how to read sit around a table and talk and eat.” This scene, improvised during shooting, reflects Damiani’s political disillusionment: “The men of my generation have heard too many promises. They had dreams. Now all they have is regrets” (2).

The friendship that ties Leone’s bandit to the bombmaker leads to the bandit’s emancipation and the bombmaker’s nihilism when bombing becomes his only way to vent his spleen, which may be interpreted as criticising the rush to extremism of far-left groups (the Red Brigade formed in 1970) at a time when the Italian political context was mirroring the cinema, with the emergence of neo-fascist groups, the infiltration of the government by secret services (the CIA-backed Operation Gladio), a bloody terrorist attack in the Piazza Fontana in Milan, wrongly attributed to anarchists, and strikes and riots in southern Italy.

After Leone’s *Dynamite*, the genre descended to unsubtle farce. In Duccio Tessari’s *Don’t Turn the Other Cheek* (1971), Franco Nero and Eli Wallach repeat their most famous Zapata roles; Vittorio Gassman as an actor and Paolo Villaggio as a priest are caught in turmoil in Corbucci’s *What am I Doing in the Middle of the Revolution?* (1972).

The Zapata western enabled Solinas, Sollima and Corbucci to blend entertainment with social commentary. Because they slipped political allusions into action scenes and turned ordinary people into heroes, their films reached a broad audience, which the more austere militant cinema never managed. Despite the genre’s popular success, critics condescended to it, and accused it of being too commercial

and violent, with cheap humour but over-serious subjects. Yet the Zapata western was not a black-and-white caricature, and did not paternalistically educate the masses; it was about the working classes emancipating themselves, and so remains relevant today.