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Conference Report: Transnationalism and Imperialism: New Perspectives on the Western
Université Paul-Valéry Montpellier 3, November 15-16, 2018 / Conference organized by Hervé Mayer, David Roche and Marianne Kac-Vergne.

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Personnes citées : Lisandro Alonso, Nassim Amaouche, Michelangelo Antonioni, Claude-Bernard Aubert, Thomas Bidegain, Delmer Daves, Clint Eastwood, John Ford, Kim Jee-woon, Tommy Lee Jones, David Lean, Anthony Mann, Amit Masurkar, Andreas Prochaska, John Sayles, William Shakespeare, Wim Wenders, Chloé Zhao.

This two-day conference, whose topic expands on the Agrégation externe d'anglais curriculum, was organized by Hervé Mayer (EMMA, EA741, Université Paul-Valéry Montpellier 3), David Roche (CAS, EA801, Université Toulouse II Jean Jaurès) and Marianne Kac-Vergne (CORPUS, EA4295, Université de Picardie Jules Verne) in November 2018, and is a follow-up to a symposium organized by Hervé Mayer at Université Paul Valéry Montpellier 3, on December 8, 2017, entitled "Politics of the Western: a Revisionist Genre." It was recorded and videos of the participants will soon be available at https://www.canal-u.tv/producteurs/um3/themes#element_2.

The aim of this conference was not only to explore the impact and reception of American Western movies beyond the borders of the United States, but also to highlight the immense diversity of the genre by looking at Westerns produced throughout the world. Through this transnational prism, the conference organizers sought to underscore the complexity of the Western, a genre that is too often reduced to the expression of American exceptionalism. Studying the Western's ideology and values from this perspective thus makes a comparatist approach possible: the defining features of the genre can be seen as yet another expression of the imperialist ideology, at work in French or British colonial movies for instance. When looking at contemporary productions, it seems that the Western, or at least the appropriation of its more salient aspects, has become a genre particularly suited to the examination and criticism of racial issues related either to colonialism and postcolonialism or to questions of immigration and integration.

These were some of the points that were discussed, among others, over the course of this conference by fifteen speakers. Each panel was devoted to Westerns produced in certain geographic areas, while analyzing their relation to American Westerns. The first day included a roundtable in which participants discussed contemporary Western film studies, a topic which was also addressed by two keynote speakers, Matthew Carter on the first day, and Andrew Patrick Nelson on the second day.

The first panel focused on American Westerns as export products. Patrick Adamson (University of Saint Andrews) studied silent epic Westerns produced by Paramount and Fox during the 1920s, that is when Westerns truly started turning towards historical aspects. Adamson argued that these films were aimed at regaining some level of global harmony. He highlighted the fact that the First World War had left some scars which cinema, as a mass media, was designed to heal. He insisted on how successful they were all over the world, but also on how they were adapted to a variety of audiences. Adamson specifically showed how references to the Old World were added during screenings in London, how Maoris were presented as similar to Native Americans in New Zealand so as to create a broader sense of "the other," or how intertitles were changed to erase the word "American." The overall plots remained the same but those tiny details helped the public

identify with the diegetic world, enabling American history to remain relevant beyond its national boundaries.

Costanza Salvi (Bologna University) attempted to assess the American and Irish influences in John Ford's *Cavalry* trilogy (1948-1950). The American director actually added Irish references that were not in the original stories that he adapted. She explained that he increasingly portrayed Native Americans as degenerates and drunkards, which provided his films with moments of slapstick comedy. She pinpointed the Shakespearean heritage at work there, creating a parallel between Native Americans and Irishmen under British rule. Ford's Westerns also took after Shakespeare's plays in other respects, such as the dilemma between violence and duty. According to Salvi, the Irish undertones in the portrayal of Native Americans fulfill comic purposes while providing the audience with racial stereotypes. She also showed that the celebration of the cavalry was actually intended as a praise of American democracy. As an American of Irish descent, Ford said he found himself on both sides of his Westerns, just like his ancestors, who could identify both with Natives, because of their experience in the Old World, and with settlers.

Céline Murillo (Université Sorbonne Paris Cité) addressed the question of transnational Hollywood through a discussion of the figure of the "Mimic Indian," based on Homi Bhabha's definition of mimicry in "Of Mimicry and Man" (1984), as a practice reserved to a class of interpreters in colonial contexts and "in which to be Anglicized is *emphatically* not to be English." Her analysis explored three main functions of mimicry through various figures of "Mimic Indians" in Hollywood Westerns, focusing first on the "mimic as a tool" as exemplified by Juan in *Broken Arrow* (Delmer Daves, 1950), whose subaltern status is emphasized by his disposability once he has fulfilled his mission of teaching Apache to the white man Jeffords. *Devil's Doorway* (Anthony Mann, 1950) was presented as illustrating a second aspect of mimicry, namely its lethal function, as Lance Poole's death might be seen as the result of his unsuccessful attempts to mimic the whites and reject his Indian origins. Finally, the character of Lone Watie in *The Outlaw Josey Wales* (Clint Eastwood, 1974) was analysed as a revisionist counterpoint to Juan, who, through a conscious practice of mimicry, navigates an interstitial space and is not relegated to a subaltern position.

The first keynote speaker of the conference, Matthew Carter (Manchester Metropolitan University), explored the hybridity of the Western through its increasingly transnational dimension. Starting with an overview of the academic productions on the subject, in which he analyzed the shift from a perception of the Western as a paradigmatic example of American exceptionalism to a more global approach, Carter went on to discuss the transgeneric and transnational nature of the contemporary Western, while highlighting that these features were also present in earlier productions (as emblematically illustrated by European film directors such as Sergio Leone or Sergio Corbucci). Focusing on the way in which certain European "Post-Westerns" such as Michelangelo Antonioni's *Zabriskie Point* (1970) or Wim Wenders's *Paris, Texas* (1984) offered a comment on the Frontier myth, Carter then emphasized the increasingly transnational dimension of contemporary Westerns. Through the example of two Westerns set along the US-Mexico border in a contemporary setting, *Lone Star* (John Sayles, 1996) and *Three Burials* (Tommy Lee Jones, 2005), he showed how the influence of global politics led directors to question the ideology of Empire building, concluding that by substituting the ongoing realities of tensions along a North/South border to the myth of the Frontier, these films offered a more complex outlook on the fundamentally hybrid nature of American identities.

Jenny Barrett (Edge Hill University, Ormskirk) opened the second panel, devoted to South American and Pacific Westerns, with a discussion of Lisandro Alonso's *Jauja* (2014), a Western set in Argentina. Her analysis addressed the tension between the film's excess of references to classical Westerns, especially to *The Searchers* (John Ford, 1956), and its simultaneous distancing from the conventions of the genre, resulting in a self-conscious narration requiring the viewer's active

participation. According to Barrett, the cinematic excess of the film could therefore be understood as constituting a whole other film running alongside the main series of actions, whose plot would be one of negation, highlighting the male protagonist's failure as a hero and resisting the conventions of the classical Western.

Seung-Hwan Shin (University of Pittsburgh) presented a paper on the Manchurian Western, focusing first on the historical and theoretical context in which this genre developed. Commenting on the mythic quality of the Western, he explained that the West, as both a real place and a site of epic romance, had to be invented as a fantasy in the case of the Manchurian Western, the impossibility of a West thus being a precondition for the development of the genre. He then showed how, in *The Good, the Bad, the Weird* (Kim Jee-woon, 2008), the Western served the purpose of commenting on national history and nation-building while also allowing for the emergence of a minoritarian discourse through a "weirding of national history."

Matthew Carter, Andrew Patrick Nelson, Marek Paryz, Jesús Ángel González Lopez and Fareed Ben-Youssef gathered with Hervé Mayer for a roundtable which closed the first day of discussions. They first wondered how transnationalism, which derives from postcolonialist studies, can shed light on the genre of the Western. Paryz reminded the audience of the Western's archetypal structure, rejoining Ben-Youssef who talked about the inherent tension between victim and victimizer. Nelson and Carter, on the other hand, wanted to underline the sense of community which emerges from Westerns. Mayer then steered the debate towards what differentiates the Western from other instances of colonial cinema, which González Lopez sees mostly as a question of quality of the product. Carter emphasized the role of Hollywood's hegemony in the setting apart of the Western, and Ben-Youssef reflected on the responsibilities of the transnational scholar. They then took turns in exposing the specifics of the Western and its perception as an academic object in their countries of origin, which led González to declare that the more a film distances itself from the time of the Conquest and from the West, the more it becomes a Post-Western.

The second day of the conference was actually mostly devoted to those Westerns which are removed from the traditional definition of the Western, films produced in Europe during the 1960s and even as recently as the beginning of the 21st century. Marek Paryz (University of Warsaw) opened the first panel with a study of Austrian director Andreas Prochaska's film *The Dark Valley* (2014). Paryz, whose field of research is mostly concerned with postcolonialism and imperialism in American literature and cinema, argued that the film is representative of the savior trope, a typically American formula, which is often used in transnational Post-Westerns and generally focuses on specific ethnic communities. In this type of Western, a powerful, white, male protagonist rescues a community from repression and injustice. Paryz stated that there was, however, no racial context in *The Dark Valley*, so that it doesn't have to concern itself with political correctness.

Jesús Ángel González Lopez (Universidad de Cantabria, Santander) referred to Neil Campbell's definition of the Post-Western in order to show how two French movies, *Adieu Gary* (Nassim Amaouche, 2009) and *Les Cowboys* (Thomas Bidegain, 2015), could qualify as Post-Westerns, insofar as they contained many intertextual references to classical Westerns and sought to create a dialogue with them. Noting that both films addressed the issue of minorities and Islam in France, he concluded on the malleability of the Western, quoting the directors of these movies, according to whom the Western's traditionally intolerant and racially prejudiced opposition between cowboys and Indians can be easily appropriated in order to comment on contemporary realities such as the French model of integration.

The second keynote speaker of the conference was Andrew Patrick Nelson (Montana State University). While acknowledging that, as a scholar whose research centers almost exclusively on the most American of American Westerns, his participation in a conference on the topic of transnational Western might seem paradoxical, he proposed to question the apparently surprising success abroad

of a genre that is supposed to embody the quintessence of the United States' identity. His paper analysed the evolution of the Western and of the various studies devoted to this genre. After defining these studies as falling into three main categories, namely structuralist, evolutionist and auteur approaches, he contended that most studies of the Western have tended to focus more on larger theoretical concepts pertaining to the genre than on the movies themselves. As an example, he showed how the cinematic quality of *The Searchers* was only acknowledged belatedly, even though critics had noted the extent of its influence on a variety of films. Addressing the characteristics of the "Classical Western," Nelson argued not only that the most influential Westerns had paradoxically been produced outside the U.S., but also that this category had been invented by critics, thus leading to a binary conception of Westerns as being either "Classical Westerns" or "Post-Westerns." Although he acknowledged the lasting cinematic and cultural influence of the Western, Nelson finally noted that the Western no longer belongs to popular culture but has become a specialty genre.

The last panel of the conference focused on postcolonial (Post)-Westerns, produced between the 1950s and 2017. Fareed Ben-Youssef (NYU Shanghai) studies how post-9/11 international genre films disrupt the official discourse of the American War on Terror. He gave a paper on Chloé Zhao's two feature films, *Songs My Brothers Taught Me* (2015) and *The Rider* (2017), which both revolve around the lives of contemporary Native American youths. Ben-Youssef particularly insisted on the danger of representations because they shape the way people see themselves. Zhao's characters have "a full sense of the West," meaning that their dreams are infused with its glorious past. The Sino-American director portrays her heroes' difficulty to cope, be it with accidents or even death. According to Ben-Youssef, what matters is that, in the end, these characters find themselves. He concluded on a quotation from the director, stating that her movies are a way of understanding her identity, which is why they convey a sense of in-betweenness (Zhao herself has declared that she has a "liquid sense of identity").

Delphine Robic-Diaz (Université Paul-Valéry Montpellier 3) then presented the film *Les tripes au soleil*, directed by Claude-Bernard Aubert in 1957. A specialist of postcolonial representations in French cinema, Robic-Diaz actually had the opportunity to discuss the film with the director himself, who told her his aim was to create a movie about the absurdity of war. She explained how his films were designed to end the taboo of racism, which was still taboo during 1950s France. In the context of the Algerian War, *Les tripes au soleil* was first censored and then banned for export, sanctions that the film crew were able to overturn into a marketing plan. The film portrays two ethnic communities unable to live together. Robic-Diaz emphasized the paradoxical nature of the classification of the film as a Western, since, for once, white protagonists do not win, leading her to declare that it both questions and alters its genre.

Hadrien Fontanaud (Université Paul-Valéry Montpellier 3), who is writing a PhD on David Lean, took the floor with a talk about *Lawrence of Arabia* (1962). He shed light on the connection between American Westerns and British Empire films, which usually portray a white protagonist in a contested space, pinpointing how the desert in *Lawrence of Arabia* may remind viewers of Monument Valley. Fontanaud argued that the hostile wilderness was mirrored in the Arabs' way of life, insisting on the way they play the part that Native Americans normally get in traditional Westerns, but also in the portrayal of Lawrence himself, who has to confront his own savagery in the desert. He specifically linked the failure of the white hero, portrayed as arrogant and delusional, to the failure of the British Empire.

In the last presentation of the conference, Samira Nadkarni (independent scholar) offered a reading of Amit Masurkar's *Newton* (2017) as a postcolonial Western in which the region of Chhattisgarh, ridden by the conflict between the government and the Naxal guerrilla factions, becomes India's new Frontier. *Newton* appropriates the conventions of the Western to comment on western colonialism by introducing echoes between the Adivasi community, portrayed as voiceless

dominated characters, and the Native in Classical Westerns, and insisting on the protagonist's attempts to establish himself as an enlightened hero.

The speakers in this very interesting two-day conference pondered on the diversity of movies which can be labeled Westerns, even when they are quite removed from the time and place of the Conquest of the West. They analyzed a wide variety of films, from John Ford's more classical Westerns to other films whose belonging to the genre is more disputed, even though Western influences cannot be denied. The speakers also tackled the imperialistic aspects at work in Westerns and Post-Westerns, and showed how the figure of the Other, usually Native Americans in classical Westerns, could be transposed to other native people when the setting of the film moved away from the U.S. They showed that this transposition sometimes served commercial purposes at the same time as it displayed a power struggle between two communities, which is typical of the genre of the Western. Speakers, however, also shed light on the fact that the Western was not only defined by those conflicts, but also by an atmosphere linked to the wilderness, which could be recreated in arid landscapes reminiscent of the American West. The conference included a discussion on Western film studies throughout the world, underscoring the many venues of research which remain to be explored in this field.