

# UNVEILING THE CINEMATIC ARTISTRY

## Pedagogical Approaches to Teaching Spaghetti Westerns in Higher Education

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**ABSTRACT** • This article proposes interdisciplinary approaches, utilizing film theory, cultural studies, and historical perspectives to facilitate an enriched learning experience for students by examining the socio-political contexts, directorial styles, and thematic elements prevalent in Spaghetti Westerns. The Spaghetti Westerns genre can be useful in the context of teaching Italian culture, cinema, and language, due to the genre's ability to transcend traditional genre boundaries, subvert expectations, and provide a candid commentary on society. The best Spaghetti Westerns movies allow students to question longstanding myths of American heroism and reflect the disillusionment of Italian society with its own political realities. Moreover Italian curricula in North American Universities should give to Spaghetti Westerns more attention because while the study of neorealist films in a second language classroom may be beneficial in terms of exploring narration and character development, Spaghetti Westerns are better in terms of discussions regarding innovative cinematic techniques.

**KEYWORDS** • Spaghetti Westerns, Italian culture, Second-language acquisition, Cinematic pedagogy, Socio-political commentary.

Spaghetti Westerns, the subgenre of western films made in Europe, started to gain momentum a few decades after the second world war and, more appropriately, three decades after John Wayne starred as “Singin’ Sandy” in Robert N. Bradbury’s *Riders of Destiny* (1933). In Europe, and predominantly (but not solely) in Italy, Westerns were all the rage all the time. Even after “high production costs in Hollywood and the popularity of Western television shows such as *Gunsmoke* and *Rawhide* started to decrease the output of theatrical Westerns at the American box office” (Agnew 2020: 188) the fanaticism with the western genre in Europe showed no signs of letting up. As the law of supply and demand tells us, when there is a demand for a good, but the supply is low, prices of that good will increase. Similarly, the demand for Westerns in Europe was very high in the 1960s but, since the supply was low due to the high production costs in Hollywood, film directors such as Sergio Leone and Sergio Corbucci sought to monopolize from this imbalance. As a result, the homegrown genre of Western films known as Spaghetti Westerns was born<sup>1</sup>.

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<sup>1</sup> The Spaghetti Westerns – ranging from high-quality films to B-movies – produced between the years 1963 and 1978 were quite numerous (more than 600, according to most estimates), but it is believed that the films

This paper aims to delineate pedagogical strategies for teaching Italian culture while questioning longstanding myths of American heroism by means of Spaghetti Westerns within the university curriculum. By examining the socio-political contexts, directorial styles, and thematic elements prevalent in Spaghetti Westerns, educators can foster a comprehensive understanding of the genre's impact on cinema and society. This article proposes interdisciplinary approaches, utilizing film theory, cultural studies, and historical perspectives to facilitate an enriched learning experience for students. There is no doubt that the Spaghetti Westerns genre can be useful in the context of teaching Italian culture, cinema, and language, and yet, perhaps, Italian curricula in North American Universities have not given to Spaghetti Westerns the attention they should. Thus, the purpose of this article is to examine why Spaghetti Westerns are valuable for an Italian curriculum aimed at second-language learner.

This genre of film was initially referred to as *westerns all'italiana*, and actors from these movies were not thrilled when the Spanish journalist, Alfonso Sancha, coined the term Spaghetti Westerns. The Spanish actor, Aldo Sambrell, known for his portrayal of Dougy in Sergio Leone's *Un pugno di dollari* (*A Fistful of Dollars*), when asked about the term Spaghetti Westerns, revealed: "I don't like it, to tell you the truth. I got into a discussion with the guy who created that term, he was a newspaper reporter, especially in films, Alfonso Sancha, I know him very well. And I said to him, 'How can you talk about the Western this way'" (Joyner 2009: 180). Sambrell continued to explain that there should be no distinction between internationally made Westerns and the original Western genre from the United States: "[...] simply call them 'Westerns', because that's what they are. You can consider which ones are good and which are bad, but they are Westerns, period" (Joyner 2009: 180). But are they? Contrary to Sambrell's statements, the Spaghetti Westerns genre is notably different from the American Westerns. What follows is an analysis of these differences and a sort of reappropriation (if you will) of the term Spaghetti Westerns.

Aldo Sambrell's comments outlined above derive from the stigmatization of the Spaghetti Western genre. By 1966, the Cinecittà studios in Rome was "churning out Westerns at a rate of over 50 a year" (Fisher 2011: 162). This oversaturation of the genre gave the impression that the Italians were creating oversimplified and counterfeit Western films. However, this could not be any further from the truth. While it is true that the inspiration for the Spaghetti Western genre came from Hollywood and John Wayne movies (for example), the Italian reimagining of these movies generated a completely new genre. Sergio Leone's decision to partner with award-winning classical music composer, Ennio Morricone, allowed him to create movies of epic and operatic proportions. Furthermore, often directed by renowned figures like Sergio Leone, these films challenged traditional Western conventions and garnered global acclaim for their innovation and audacity. Priscilla Layne, in her article, *Lessons in Liberation: Fassbinder's "Whity" at the Crossroads of Hollywood Melodrama and Blaxploitation*, explains that the German obsession with Spaghetti Westerns was rooted in the breaking of genre conventions of typical Westerns (Layne 2012: 264).

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most worthy of being studied in class are the following: *Per un pugno di dollari* (*A Fistful of Dollars*), Sergio Leone, 1964; *Il buono, il brutto, il cattivo* (*The Good, the Bad and the Ugly*), Sergio Leone, 1966; *C'era una volta il West* (*Once Upon a Time in the West*), Sergio Leone, 1968; *Faccia a faccia* (*Face to Face*), Sergio Sollima, 1967; *Corri uomo corri* (*Run, Man, Run*), Sergio Sollima, 1968; *Django*, Sergio Corbucci, 1966; *Il grande silenzio* (*The Great Silence*), Sergio Corbucci, 1968; *Se sei vivo spara* (*Django Kill... If You Live, Shoot!*), Giulio Questi, 1967; *Lo chiamavano Trinità* (*They Call Me Trinity*), Enzo Barboni, 1970.

Layne outlines specific features of subverting these genre norms: “filmmakers could ignore the censorship laws of the United States, they introduced morally ambiguous heroes, intensified violence and occasionally feature explicit homoeroticism and masochism” (Layne 2012: 265). By challenging the traditional Western conventions, Spaghetti Westerns garnered global acclaim for their innovation and audacity. In Universities, integrating Spaghetti Westerns into second-language courses presents an opportunity to explore diverse cultural contexts, cinematic techniques, and socio-political commentaries inherent within these films. As William B. Russell tells us: “Teaching with film is a powerful and meaningful instructional methodology” (Russell 2012: 157).

### 1. Historical and Cultural Context

Understanding the historical backdrop against which Spaghetti Westerns emerged is crucial for students to comprehend the genre’s significance. Exploring post-World War II Europe, the economic conditions in Italy, and the influence of American culture provides a foundation for dissecting the thematic elements of these films. Discussing the impact of socio-political events on the portrayal of anti-heroes, moral ambiguity, and critiques of capitalism within Spaghetti Westerns enriches students’ contextual understanding.

In post-World War II Italy, there were instances in which individuals appeared to desire the removal of past atrocities from their conscious awareness, opting instead to relegate these memories to their subconscious or to relinquish them entirely; it appeared that Italians were not interested in hearing stories nor seeing films that depicted events from the second world war. In fact, even Primo Levi could not convince Europeans to read his stories nor listen to the recounting of his nine-month journey home to Turin from Auschwitz. There was no doubt a “strong desire to forget (or not talk about) what had happened, even on the left, and even amongst intellectuals from within the Jewish community” (Foot 2019: 4). Despite this, a trip to the cinema after the second world war would provide Italians with two options: *cinema basso* (low cinema) and *cinema alto* (high cinema), as noted by journalist Goffredo Fofi in his work, *I limiti della scena: spettacolo e pubblico nell’Italia contemporanea*. Fofi elaborates:

Sono convinto che questa dicotomia funzionasse un po’ per tutto il pubblico cinematografico italiano del primo decennio del dopoguerra. I film americani erano l’evasione, il mondo levigato dei sogni, l’esotico, e magari “l’arte”. I film italiani, pur con il loro carico di convenzioni, erano la “realtà”. Gli ambienti, le facce, le passioni erano riconoscibili e nostri. Tutta la schematica e riduttiva, ripetitiva fantasia delle trame aveva una base di concretezza e partecipazione possibile. (Fofi 1992: 70).

This allows students who view Spaghetti Westerns in a second-language classroom to understand the cultural perspective of post-war Italians. In fact, while, at times, they (the Italian cinema audience) were using cinema as escapist therapy (when watching North American films and participating in *cinema basso*), the Italian culture of the ’60s and ’70s was also focused on other societal challenges, such as violence, corruption, and the economic conditions (seen in Italian neo-realist films, Spaghetti Westerns and *cinema alto*). The significance of understanding and experiencing various aspects of the target culture in foreign-language learning has been well-documented in numerous second-language studies. In fact, William Littlewood, in his work, *The Communicative Language Teaching: An Introduction*, observed:

When we try to adopt new speech patterns, we are to some extent giving up markers of our own identity in order to adopt those of another cultural group. In some respects, too, we are accepting another culture’s ways of perceiving the world. If we are agreeable to this process, it can enrich us and liberate us. (Littlewood 1981: 55).

Randal Holme, in his article, *Carrying a Baby in the Back: Teaching with an Awareness of the Cultural Construction of Language*, outlines five views on how language teachers tend to focus on culture in the classroom. His description of the *competence view* delineates the noteworthy relationship between learning a language and understanding the culture of that language:

This view contends that knowledge of a language's culture is thought essential to a full understanding of a language's nuances of meaning. Knowledge of a culture presupposes a competence which is essential to the grasp of a language's true meaning. Thus, learning a language should be completed by a sustained and ethnographically structured encounter with the language's culture (Holme 2003: 20).

While the significance of learning culture in the acquisition of a second language is well established, the question of which cultural topics should be prioritized for focus remains a subject of ongoing debate. Italy's extensive and rich history could pose a challenge for language teachers when attempting to select the most important events for a semester-long course. As Maria Teresa Brancaccio tells us, "World War II was a shattering and complex experience in Italy" (Brancaccio 2010: 141). It is this complex experience that renders post-war Italy a noteworthy period on which language teachers should dwell. And while "the recursion to a setting in the years immediately preceding and following World War II is a part of a long trend in the Italian cinema" (Celli 2001: 105), there was also a desire to create movies that depicted a trend in society separate from the world wars:

The desolate spaghetti West depicted on the silver screen hit home with moviegoers in an era marked by a rising tide of violence, cynicism, and despair. These revisionist westerns offered new images and story lines that resonated with audiences in the years following the assassination of President John F. Kennedy. As the nation and world recoiled from assassinations, political corruption, corporate greed, the Vietnam War, campus protests, urban violence, and tumultuous social movements that rippled across American and Europe, these dark films proved a perfect fit for the dark times (Aquila 2015: 196).

Thus, students of Italian as a second language would benefit from watching Spaghetti Westerns as they could serve as useful tools in understanding the culture of Italy during the '60s and '70s. While some critics have dubbed Spaghetti Westerns as escapist cinema (escaping from the traumas of the second world-war), in fact they were depicting the cultural reality of Italy and the rest of the world at that time. Of course, the traumas of the world wars were still lingering deep somewhere inside the Italian subconscious, but there were other events plaguing the Italian experience (as Aquila outlined above), events that would eventually influence and infiltrate the cinematic culture of Sergio Leone and the likes. This could all serve as a response to Brancaccio curiosity of "why had it taken until the 1990s for the Italian public to recognize the suffering of Jewish people under fascism and during World War II" (Brancaccio 2010: 141). It is possible that Italians were not ignoring these atrocities and were not attempting to escape these horrendous memories, but instead were focused on other more current events (equally dark and cynical). Therefore, if it is true as Fumagalli states that "spaghetti westerns are far from being mere escapism" (Fumagalli 2009: 400), it would be necessary to include Spaghetti Westerns in the cultural education of language learning to assist in understanding the culture of Italy in the '60s and '70s.

## 2. Analyzing Cinematic Techniques

Visual storytelling, innovative cinematography, iconic soundtracks, and the use of close-ups to evoke emotions are pivotal aspects worth exploring when delving into the genre of Spaghetti Westerns. Engaging students in shot-by-shot analysis, scene deconstruction, and comparative studies between Spaghetti Westerns and classical Western films can illuminate the distinctive stylistic choices and their impact on the genre's evolution. Film in second-language classrooms has been commonly used to expose students to the target language directly while consuming the media in its original language format. The indispensableness of film and other multimedia in second language classroom has been well-documented. As Jane Sherman tells us in her book, *Using Authentic Video in the Language Classroom*, language teachers can “use clips as models of language, as moving picture books, as samples of human behaviour and as stimuli for spoken or written production” (Sherman 2010: 47). It is important to note that the analyzing of cinematic techniques in the classroom would be conducted in the target language. Obliging the students to discuss cinematic techniques in Italian after watching a Spaghetti Western would enhance their vocabulary and allow them to explore diverse grammatical structures of the language. In fact, the students may not even feel the burden of obligation, but instead would be individually compelled to partake in classroom discussions due to the innovative, elaborate, and entertaining cinematic techniques found within Spaghetti Westerns. As Michael Graves mentions in his book, *Teaching Vocabulary to English Language Learners*, “considering studies of the vocabulary instruction observed in actual classrooms, it appears that there remains a great deal of room for improvement, both in terms of time spent on instruction and in methods” (Graves 2013: 17). The same can be said for teaching vocabulary to language learners of Italian. Improvement can begin with employing strategies of effective vocabulary instruction, which Graves outlines as the necessity to utilize vocabulary instructions in other “academic areas such as science and social studies” (Graves 2013: 17).

Concurrently with the emergence of Spaghetti Westerns, Italian neorealist films were also debuting. However, neorealism prioritized narrative and character development over the use of innovative cinematic techniques. The esteemed French critic André Bazin elucidates in his work, *What is Cinema* (1967): “In Roberto Rossellini’s *Paisà* and *Germania Anno Zero* and Vittorio de Sica’s *Ladri di Biciclette* (*Bicycle Thieves*), Italian neorealism contrasts with previous forms of film realism in stripping away of all expressionism and in particular in the total absence of the effects of montage” (Bazin 1967: 37). Undoubtedly, the study of neorealist films in a second language classroom would be beneficial in terms of exploring narration and character development; however, it would fall short in terms of discussions regarding innovative cinematic techniques.

## 3. Socio-political commentary

Spaghetti Westerns are undoubtedly rich with socio-political commentary, which is often a reflection of the complexities of the historical context mentioned above. These films not only aimed to entertain, but they also reflected and critiqued contemporary issues, particularly in post-World War II Europe, during the Cold War, and in the context of shifting attitudes toward the American frontier myth. In fact, Spaghetti Westerns often deconstruct the myth of the American frontier that was so central to Hollywood Westerns. The traditional Hollywood Western often portrayed the American West as a place of heroic individualism, rugged masculinity, and moral clarity. Jeremy Agnew in his book, *The Old West in Fact and Film* tells us:

Most Hollywood Westerns are traditionally set in the time period that starts after the end of the American Civil War and ends before the turn of the twentieth century. These years were a time of rapid population expansion into the western United States that turned it into a place of social upheaval, which made a setting for stories of the Old West that was ideal for tales of rugged individuals, and the trials and tribulations they faced in taming the land (Agnew 2012: 9).

Spaghetti Westerns, however, presented a more cynical and morally ambiguous view of the frontier. This perspective was further developed through the portrayal of characters who were frequently depicted as antiheroes, individuals who defied conventional notions of heroism and moral clarity. In demonstrating this departure from traditional westerns, Lee Broughton in his book, *The Euro-Western*, explains that “cynical white anti-heroes were the norm in Spaghetti Westerns” (Broughton 2016: 153). Broughton continues: “By contrast, Sergio Leone’s *For a Few Dollars More* presented vengeance-seeking as an honourable endeavour and it subsequently became one of the predominant themes that served to distinguish Italian Westerns from American Westerns” (Broughton 2016: 153). This served to challenge and question the idealized narrative of American expansionism. By doing so within an Italian language classroom offers a richer insight into Italian culture, while discussing it in the target language allows for a more nuanced understanding of meanings and subtleties that could be overlooked in translation. As students deepen their understanding of Italian culture, they begin to recognize the similarities between it and their own cultural backgrounds. As a result, they are able to form a deeper connection with the target culture, which in turn facilitates the acquisition of the language and its complexities because, as is often said, “the person who learns language without learning culture risks becoming a fluent fool” (Bennett, Janet M., et al. 2003: 237). Teaching culture through the use of Spaghetti Westerns enables students to better understand the social and political conditions in Italy following World War II. For example, in *Il mercenario* (1968) (*The Mercenary*), directed by Sergio Corbucci, the film critiques the exploitation of Mexican laborers and the greed of foreign capitalists. The workers are portrayed as oppressed, while the ruling class is shown to exploit them for profit which mirrors the real-world economic inequalities and class struggles in Italy following the second world war. In fact, “by 1946 industrial capacity was 37 percent higher than in 1938, but industrial production was 43 percent lower” (De Cecco and Giavazzi 1993: 61). As a result, following Mussolini’s downfall, Italy became even more plagued by corruption. Martin Rhodes, in his article *Financing Party Politics in Italy: A Case of System Corruption*, explains: “Corruption offences were to increase significantly in Italy from the mid-1970s, but corruption was a constant of the Italian system in the 1950s and 1960s and led to calls for a reform of party finance in Italy from the early 1960s onwards” (Rhodes 2013: 56). We see this over and over again in Spaghetti Westerns where the role of lawmen and government authority is frequently subverted. The “law” is often corrupt, and those who claim to uphold it are shown as opportunistic and self-serving. Spaghetti Western films, such as *Per qualche dollaro in più* (1965) (*For a Few Dollars More*), explore the complexities of law enforcement in a lawless land, with bounty hunters and mercenaries filling the void left by official authorities. This often serves as an indictment of governmental failure or corruption.

#### **4. Why Spaghetti Westerns Matter in Second-Language Education: Bridging Cinema, Culture, and History**

So why would an Italian language student have to watch Spaghetti Westerns to connect with this cultural phenomenon? After the era of Italian Neorealism, which dominated the post-World War II cinematic landscape, Italian cinema underwent significant transformations that broadened



its stylistic and thematic diversity. Neorealist films such as *Roma città aperta* (1945) and *Ladri di biciclette* (1948) are often hailed for their authentic, gritty depictions of the hardships faced by ordinary Italians in the aftermath of the war. These films were committed to portraying reality with unflinching honesty, grounded in a socio-political commitment to represent the struggles of the working class. However, as Italy entered the 1960s, filmmakers began to seek new forms of expression, often in response to the disillusionment with both the political establishment and the ideals of post-war reconstruction. It was within this shifting cultural and historical context that the Spaghetti Western genre emerged—an innovative, albeit controversial, subversion of both the Western genre and the prevailing cinematic modes of the time.

Unlike Neorealist cinema, which focused on portraying the stark realities of Italian life through the lens of everyday people caught in the grip of poverty and war, Spaghetti Westerns often embraced a more stylized, exaggerated, and confrontational approach. While Neorealism was rooted in the lived experiences of individuals, Spaghetti Westerns used violence, spectacle, and exaggerated archetypes to critique the larger societal forces at play. They distanced themselves from the realism of earlier Italian cinema, employing heightened symbolism and subverting genre conventions to explore the complex social and political issues of post-war Italy and the broader Western world. This shift in focus is central to understanding why Spaghetti Westerns are crucial to studying Italian culture and language.

While Neorealist films grappled with themes of social struggle, poverty, and moral clarity, they largely avoided the kinds of political and ideological critiques that would come to define the Spaghetti Westerns. By contrast, Spaghetti Westerns were intensely engaged with the world of politics, power, and identity, but through the lens of cynicism, violence, and ambiguity. As Lee Broughton argues in *The Euro-Western* (2005), “Spaghetti Westerns subvert the mythic dimensions of the American West, replacing them with a brutal reality where morality is fluid, and power is more often exercised through manipulation than through valorous deeds” (Broughton 2016: 153). The genre’s focus on morally ambiguous antiheroes, corrupt authorities, and the failure of traditional justice systems reflects the disillusionment of Italian society with its own political realities. As Italy struggled with the aftermath of fascism and the economic and social dislocations of the post-war period, the Spaghetti Westerns offered an alternative mode of expression that tackled themes of capitalist exploitation, the disintegration of the American frontier myth, and the failure of government institutions.

In fact, these films provided a critique of both Italian society and the larger global political system. The Italian filmmakers and writers involved in creating Spaghetti Westerns were not simply reinterpreting the American Western genre for Italian audiences; they were using the Western as a canvas to deconstruct American myths and reflect on the turbulent political climate of their time. As John Mercer and Martin Shingler note in their study of the genre, “the Spaghetti Western is an Italian response to the American frontier myth, but it also serves as a critique of contemporary American power structures, including capitalist exploitation, racism, and imperialism” (Mercer & Shingler 1999: 304). Through exaggerated portrayals of the American West, these films exposed the contradictions inherent in the myth of American exceptionalism and rugged individualism, revealing the brutality and exploitation that underpinned the seemingly heroic narrative of the American frontier.

The difference in thematic engagement between Spaghetti Westerns and Neorealist films lies not only in their narrative content but also in their approach to style and form. While Neorealist filmmakers sought to avoid artistic embellishments in favor of an “unvarnished” realism, Spaghetti Westerns employed highly stylized cinematography, dramatic music scores, and exaggerated violence. This break from Neorealism’s search for a social truth revealed a profound shift in Italian cinema, one that embraced artifice and spectacle in order to confront more complex societal and

political issues. The collaboration between director Sergio Leone and composer Ennio Morricone in films like *A Fistful of Dollars* (1964) and *Il Buono, il Brutto e il Cattivo* (1966) (*The Good, the Bad and the Ugly*) exemplifies this shift. Morricone's iconic scores, with their haunting, operatic quality, underscored the violence and moral ambiguity at the heart of the Spaghetti Westerns, transforming the films into spectacles that were as much about emotional and psychological experience as they were about narrative.

Spaghetti Westerns were inherently political in nature. They often subverted the narrative of the American frontier myth, which was commonly used in Hollywood Westerns to depict a heroically expanding civilization. Hollywood Westerns like *Stagecoach* (1939) or *The Searchers* (1956) were built upon themes of manifest destiny and the righteousness of American expansion, portraying the frontier as a place of noble struggle and rugged individualism. In these films, lawmen, settlers, and soldiers were usually depicted as morally upright characters fighting to tame the Wild West. However, Spaghetti Westerns, with their morally complex characters, challenged this idealized portrayal of American history.

As Jeremy Agnew points out in *The Old West in Fact and Film* (2012), American Westerns often glorified individualism, heroism, and clear moral distinctions between good and evil (Agnew 2012: 9). Spaghetti Westerns, on the other hand, were "cynical and subversive," reflecting the disillusionment of the postwar era and offering a darker, more complex view of the frontier. These films did not shy away from portraying the brutality and lawlessness of the American West, where characters frequently blurred the lines between heroism and villainy. The antiheroes of Spaghetti Westerns, such as Clint Eastwood's Man with No Name in *A Fistful of Dollars*, are often portrayed as morally ambiguous figures who operate outside the constraints of traditional justice systems. As Lee Broughton explains, "The protagonists in these films are not typical Western heroes; rather, they are solitary figures motivated by personal gain and a sense of vengeance, rather than ideals of law and order" (Broughton 2016: 153).

In these films, justice is often arbitrary, and the pursuit of power is shown as a corrupting force. Films like *For a Few Dollars More* (1965) and *The Mercenary* (1968) depict characters who are more concerned with personal vendettas and economic gain than with upholding moral or social values. The role of government authority is frequently called into question, as Spaghetti Westerns often depict corrupt lawmen and exploitative capitalists, highlighting the disillusionment with state power and its failure to protect the vulnerable. These themes resonate deeply with the political and economic realities of postwar Italy, where corruption, class struggles, and economic inequality were rampant.

For students of Italian, particularly in second-language classrooms, Spaghetti Westerns undoubtedly offer a unique opportunity to engage with Italian culture and language in a way that is not only intellectually stimulating but also emotionally compelling. Unlike Neorealist films, which, despite their importance in Italian cinema history, are often slower-paced and more focused on social realism, Spaghetti Westerns are action-packed and visually dynamic, offering a more accessible and engaging entry point into Italian cinema. The genre's use of iconic visual styles, compelling narratives, and powerful music makes it an ideal medium for linguistic immersion.

By analyzing Spaghetti Westerns in an Italian language classroom, students can immerse themselves in the socio-political context of post-war Italy while simultaneously improving their language skills. As Jane Sherman observes in *Using Authentic Video in the Language Classroom* (2003), "authentic video materials in the target language provide students with a rich cultural experience while exposing them to natural language use" (Sherman 2010: 47). For students studying Italian, watching Spaghetti Westerns offers a unique opportunity to explore the language in context, while also allowing them to engage with the culture's history, politics, and cinematic traditions.



Moreover, by discussing the films' themes of capitalist exploitation, social inequality, and political corruption in Italian, students not only improve their language proficiency but also gain a deeper understanding of Italy's historical and cultural landscape. As they explore the complexities of the genre and its critique of both American myths and Italian society, students develop a more nuanced understanding of Italian identity and its place within the broader context of European and global history.

## 5. Conclusion

Spaghetti Westerns are much more than their often-dismissed reputation as escapist cinema; they are a powerful lens through which we can examine Italian history, culture, and language in the context of post-World War II Europe. By integrating these films into second-language curricula, educators have the opportunity to engage students not only in linguistic acquisition but also in an enriched exploration of Italy's socio-political realities during the 1960s and 1970s. These films are steeped in the cultural trauma and tensions of post-war Italy, offering a unique commentary on issues of corruption, class struggles, and moral ambiguity—issues that resonate deeply with contemporary societal concerns.

In language education, film has proven to be an invaluable tool for exposing students to authentic language use and cultural context. While films like *La dolce vita* or *Ladri di biciclette* have their own pedagogical benefits, Spaghetti Westerns offer an especially compelling way to investigate the subtleties of Italian cinematic techniques, narrative structures, and character development in the original language. The genre's innovative use of sound, visual storytelling, and symbolic imagery provides students with a rich tapestry of content that can serve both as a linguistic and cultural exercise.

Moreover, Spaghetti Westerns challenge traditional views of the Western genre, allowing students to question longstanding myths of American heroism and expand their understanding of cinematic storytelling. The films' critique of American expansionism, capitalist exploitation, and law enforcement offers a layered, nuanced view of history that is essential for any student studying Italian culture in its post-war context. In the classroom, discussing these themes in Italian—whether through shot-by-shot analysis or thematic deconstruction—creates a space where students can connect the dots between historical realities and cinematic representations. This, in turn, leads to a deeper and more meaningful engagement with the language and culture they are studying.

For educators, the pedagogical potential of Spaghetti Westerns goes beyond merely exposing students to language; it provides an opportunity to foster critical thinking, cultural empathy, and historical insight. These films push students to confront difficult questions about identity, morality, and power—questions that remain relevant today. By analyzing Spaghetti Westerns through an interdisciplinary lens that combines film studies, cultural history, and socio-political theory, educators can help students develop a more holistic understanding of Italy's complex cultural landscape.

While the term *Spaghetti Westerns* may have once been a term of derision, its place in Italian and global cinema is undeniable. The genre's ability to transcend traditional genre boundaries, subvert expectations, and provide a candid commentary on society makes it an essential tool for higher education. For second-language learners, particularly those studying Italian, these films offer a unique and dynamic pathway to mastering the language while also understanding the broader socio-political forces that shaped Italy in the post-war period. The incorporation of Spaghetti Westerns into university curricula, especially in the context of Italian language instruction, not only makes learning more engaging but also helps students appreciate the richness of Italian cinema, its history, and its ongoing cultural significance. Through a carefully crafted

curriculum<sup>2</sup>, Spaghetti Westerns can become a cornerstone of the Italian language classroom, enriching students' linguistic skills, deepening their understanding of Italian culture, and ultimately enhancing their ability to think critically about the world around them.

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<sup>2</sup> For further information on practical issues of teaching in the classroom, please see: Lettieri, Marco. "A Note on the Transition from Face-to-Face to Online Learning during the Covid-19 Pandemic." *Cultura e Comunicazione*, vol. 18, 2021, pp. 39-42; Lettieri, Marco. "The Pedagogy of Kindness in Online Teaching and Learning during Covid-19." *Mosaic: The Journal for Language Teachers*, vol. 13, no. 2, 2022, pp. 105-18.

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