



## Transnationalism and Imperialism: New Perspectives on the Western

A conference organized by EMMA (Études Montpelliéraines du Monde Anglophone), CAS (Cultures Anglo-Saxonnes) and CORPUS (Conflits, Représentations et Dialogues dans le Monde Anglo-Saxon)

Université Paul-Valéry Montpellier 3

Site Saint Charles

November 15-16, 2018

Keynote speakers: Matthew Carter (Manchester Metropolitan University) and Andrew Patrick Nelson (Montana State University)

This conference is a follow-up to a symposium entitled “Politics of the Western: a Revisionist Genre” organized by Hervé Mayer (EMMA EA741) at Université Paul Valéry Montpellier 3 on December 8, 2017. The aim of this conference is to question the film genre of the Western as being essentially American by focusing on the transnational dimension of Western narratives and images, as well as the circulation, reception, and production of Westerns outside the United States.

The genre has been widely read within the confines of a national culture and cinema in the U.S. André Bazin and Jean-Louis Rieuepeyrou (1953) famously labeled the Western “the American cinema *par excellence*,” and film genre studies since have consistently resorted to a “sociohistorical analysis” to read the genre as the cinematic expression of an American identity (Le Bris 2012). In recent film studies, the Western genre is still widely explored, understood, and constructed as an American genre despite overwhelming evidence of foreign production and global circulation since the invention of cinema. In doing so, studies of the Western strengthen the construction of an American exception that the genre—and the myth of the West it is grounded in—itself promoted. In order to emancipate studies of the Western from discourses of American exceptionalism, this conference proposes to connect film genre studies with the recent field of transnational cinema. Transnational cinema generally refers to films that cross national borders, as stories, productions, and sometimes both. But the concept of transnationalism can be interpreted more widely as a repositioning of film studies, in which the “study of *national* cinemas must then transform into *transnational* film studies” (Lu 1997, emphasis in original). This “critical transnationalism” approaches film from the viewpoint of international networks of production and reception rather than from national film traditions, exploring the complex economic, political, and cultural negotiations between transnational and national along with questions of “postcoloniality, politics and power” (Higbee and Lim 2010).

Several scholars have pointed out the blind spot of transnationalism in the study of the Western and started to explore the genre from more de-centered perspectives. In a 2001 article on Cormac McCarthy, Susan Kollin called for researchers to abandon the idea of the Western as a “quintessential American form” and invited them instead to “recognize that its sensibilities have been shaped by a larger history of imperialism”. In their respective contributions to *Zoos humains* (2011), Pascal Blanchard, Eric Deroo and Eric Ames underline the ideological familiarity between Buffalo Bill’s Wild West Show and other spectacles of imperialism at the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. In his study of French colonial cinema, Abdelkader Benali (1998) notices that “several levels of comparison can be established between the French colonial cinema and the American Western”, referencing narrative structure, themes, dramatic content, or what he calls the “ethno-anthropological dimension” of those genres. Expanding on ideas put forth by Richard Slotkin (1992) and later by Stanley Corkin (2004), James Chapman and Nicholas Cull, in the first chapter of *Projecting Empire* (2009) which focuses on the British and American co-productions of empire films in the 1930s, mention the “common ground” of Western and empire films, again citing narrative structures (expansion, taming of the frontier, clash of civilization and savagery). These various arguments seem to invite the following hypothesis: that the Western is not so much an American exception, but rather the American expression of a transnational ideology and culture of imperialism. That only a limited percentage of American Westerns feature the Indian wars and territorial conquest does not change the fact that the entire genre explores racial and gender hierarchies, as well as issues of progress and violence inherited from, and shaped by, a history of imperialism. The very category of the “Western” as a genre can therefore also be questioned as other labels (empire cinema or cinema of exploration) may better capture the common features of imperial cinemas beyond national borders.

Along with the ideological and narrative similarities between the American Western and other spectacles of imperialism, another largely unexplored field of study is that of the circulation and reception of Westerns outside the United States. Quantitative studies on the exportation of American Westerns abroad are needed to specify the vague estimates presently available, as well as studies on the marketing strategies developed by studios to sell their products outside the United States. One recent step to answer this question is Russell Meuff’s 2013 study of the target marketing of John Wayne films in 1950s France. If Hollywood’s construction of foreign markets is important to understand how producers conceived the appeal of their products beyond national borders, the reception of American Westerns abroad is as important to understand how those products interacted with, and contributed to shape, national or local cultures. Talking about *Cheyenne Autumn* in a 1967 interview with Peter Bogdanovich, John Ford mentioned the interest of European audiences for the Indian as one of the reasons for making the film. This interest needs to be verified. More specifically, it begs the question: to what extent does/did the American Western crystallize national or local issues of imperialism? One hypothesis that could be addressed is that American Westerns acted as a foil to audiences of imperial nations: it represented both a foreignness that allowed for dissociating criticism (Americans murdered the “Indian”) and a familiarity that was exhilarating (the white man’s epic), the level of historical dissociation being proportionate to the guiltless enjoyment of an imperial story. Some scholars point to more complex power

relations at work in the circulation and reception of American Westerns. One example is Peter Bloom's contribution to *Westerns: Films Through History* (2001), in which the author explores how the reception of populist American Westerns in 1930s Algeria affected French rule in the colony. Such reception studies can shed new light on the issue of American cultural imperialism.

In addition to the circulation and reception of American Westerns abroad, one last area of transnational discussion of the Western is that of foreign productions. Of the three areas of study mapped out for this conference, this is the most well-known and explored. Studies of non-American westerns have developed since the 1980s (Frayling 1981), focusing predominantly on Italian Westerns that were successful in the U.S. and worldwide (those of Sergio Leone and, to a lesser extent, Sergio Corbucci), but there remains much work to consider the diversity and complexity of Western productions outside the U.S., notably by considering how the genre's imperialist thrust—the economic conquest of space and celebration of hard masculinity at the expense of a racial other—has been used to reflect on national and international concerns. Attention to the transfer of Western motifs and figures (costumes, color schemes, songs and music, the use of low-angle shots and narrative montage to emphasize heroic feats, the advance of civilization, etc.) to address national concerns and sometimes critique imperialist ideologies would be welcome. A first step in that direction was taken with the recent publications of *International Westerns* (Miller 2013) and *Critical Perspectives on the Western* (Broughton 2016), which break new grounds in focusing on reinterpretations of the Western by foreign industries such as Hungary, Brazil, Bangladesh, and South Africa. *International Westerns* is especially noteworthy for its attempt to fill in the gap of a “book-length survey of the breadth of the international Westerns” [xvi], but, while the book crosses the borders of the American Western, it reestablishes those borders in its treatment of foreign Westerns as local rewritings of the genre within national cinematic traditions. The extent to which non-American Westerns reinstate the idea of an exceptionally American genre even as they appropriate the genre remains to be assessed.

The following venues of investigation can be addressed:

- ⇒ The American Western as the expression of a transnational culture of imperialism:
  - + comparative studies of the Frontier/Western myth and other colonial or imperial narratives;
  - + transnational origins of Frontier/Western mythology;
  - + comparative studies of the American Western and other colonial or imperial cinemas;
  - + interactions of the American Western with other national cultures (appropriation, acculturation, redefinitions);
  - + discussion of the national label "Western" as opposed to transnational genre categories such as empire cinema or cinema of exploration.

- ⇒ The American Western abroad: circulation and reception:
  - + economic, cultural, political implications; American marketing strategies abroad;
  - + the reception of American Westerns in foreign countries and the degree to which they resonate with national cultures of imperialism.
- ⇒ The non-American Western: the production of Westerns abroad:
  - + case studies of non-American English-language productions (Australia, Canada, Italy, etc.);
  - + comparative studies of American Westerns and non-English-language productions (Argentina, Brazil, German, French, Manchuria, etc.).
- ⇒ Transnational studies of the Western: definitions, theory, practices:
  - + Surveys of national academic corpuses on the Western;
  - + Comparative studies of national academic corpuses.

Proposals in English (350 words including a short bio and bibliography) must be sent to Marianne Kac-Vergne ([mariannekac@yahoo.fr](mailto:mariannekac@yahoo.fr)), Hervé Mayer ([hervmayer@gmail.com](mailto:hervmayer@gmail.com)) and David Roche ([mudrockca@gmail.com](mailto:mudrockca@gmail.com)) by March 31, 2018. They will be reviewed by the scientific committee. Notification of acceptance will be sent to participants by May 1, 2018.

Organizing Committee: Marianne Kac-Vergne (CORPUS EA4295), Hervé Mayer (EMMA EA741) and David Roche (CAS EA801)

Scientific Committee: Mathilde Arrivé, Jean-François Baillon, Zachary Baqué, Lee Broughton, Matthew Carter, Christophe Chambost, Claude Chastagner, Florent Christol, Claire Dutriaux, Sarah Hatchuel, Gilles Menegaldo, Monica Michlin, Andrew Patrick Nelson, Anne-Marie Paquet-Deyris, Peter Stanfield, Vincent Souladié, Clémentine Tholas-Disset

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