



Studia
Filmoznawcze
38
Wrocław 2017

Monika Siebert

University of Richmond

EAST ASIAN WESTERNS AT/AS THE LIMITS OF THE WESTERN GENRE CRITICISM

DOI: 10.19195/0860-116X.38.2

In the early twenty-first century the Western, already a highly mobile filmic genre, has settled on what perhaps we can call, only partly facetiously, its final frontier, East Asia; and it appears to have become undone there, at least in the eyes of the Western critics and scholars of the genre. To be sure, film directors working within the national cinemas of the region have turned to the Western in the past,¹ but their films have not been available, or have not gained visibility, beyond the regional markets and area studies scholarship until recently, when they resurfaced as part of the effort to contextualize the twenty-first-century interest of East Asian directors in the genre. Recent Westerns from East Asia, however, such as Wisit Sasanatieng's *Tears of the Black Tiger* (2000), Miike Takashi's *Sukiyaki Western Django* (2007), Kim Jee-woon's *The Good, the Bad, the Weird* (2008), or Jiang Wen's *Let the Bullets Fly* (2010), for example, have reached broader audiences, become some of the highest grossing films in their respective national entertainment industries as well as international blockbusters, and drawn sustained though selective critical and scholarly attention.² These twenty-first century East Asian Westerns present a particularly interesting case in the history of the genre not only because they offer radical formal

¹ Nikkatsu Studios' *Wanderer* series (1959–1962) in Japan, Manchurian Westerns of the 1960s in Korea, Chinese Westerns of the 1980s, or Bollywood's best known production, 1975 Western musical *Sholay* serve as quick examples here.

² East Asian cinema scholarship is very much interested in these films, but they appear very rarely, if at all, in the Western studies scholarship. Miller and Van Riper's (2014), Paryz and Leo's (2015) and Higgins, Keresztesi and Oscherwitz's (2015) collections offer three notable exceptions.

permutations and engage in the most widely ranging, thoroughly global, intertextuality, but also because they are still largely missing from the central conversations animating the field of the Western studies, thus highlighting the discipline's very limits. This absence is noteworthy because the discipline (and I mean here both the study of the region and of the genre, as the two are typically tightly intertwined due to the governing presumption of the fundamental Americanness of the Western) has taken a transnational turn in recent decades, enlarging its customary pool of data beyond the U.S. productions as well as refashioning its main conceptual tools and methodological approaches, adjustments that taken together would make the East Asian Westerns, at least so it seems, the next obvious stop in the discipline's tracing of the genre's transnational trajectories. I'll argue below that it is precisely the extent and nature of the formal experimentation in these films and its implications for theorizing the genre that makes them an unwieldy, when not altogether ignored, case study among the scholars of the Western. Yet, when brought back to bear on the field, East Asian Westerns offer an opportunity for thinking about the genre in general and about its U.S. classic and revisionist iterations in fresh ways.

Historically, scholarship on the cinematic Western has focused on the U.S. productions, despite the fact that the genre has manifested transnational dimensions since its emergence in the early twentieth century.³ Recently however, in the wake of the transnational turn in American studies and ongoing globalization of film industry, the field has undergone a conceptual shift that has opened the way for a far broader scholarly purview. The work of Neil Campbell, particularly in *The Rhizomatic West* (2008) and *Post-Westerns* (2013), is emblematic of this new direction, representing, at the moment, the furthest conceptual reach, if not the broadest range of case studies, of the Western criticism, and as such will serve here as a shorthand example. Having already transformed the study of the region in *The Cultures of the American New West* (2000) by bringing the critical insights of feminism, multiculturalism, and environmentalism to bear on the conventional notions of the West, in *The Rhizomatic West* Campbell sets out to reconfigure altogether the theoretical toolkit of the Western studies by reaching for Deleuze and Guattari's concept of the rhizome to replace the standard tropes of the frontier and the settlement that have typically organized the disciplinary discourse. Theorizing against the influential tradition of the "narratives of cohesion," exemplified by the classics of Western history and criticism (*The Rhizomatic West* 30),⁴ Campbell begins with an assumption that "to examine the West in the twenty first century is to think of it as always already transnational... a travelling concept whose meanings move between

³ The early history of the genre, for example, included competition between the U.S. and French production companies which had studios in the U.S. and Europe and filmed in France as well as on the American East and West coasts. See Simon and Abel.

⁴ Such as Henry Nash Smith's *Virgin Land*, Leo Marx's *The Machine in the Garden*, and Roderick Nash's *Wilderness and the American Mind*, among others.

cultures, crossing, bridging and intruding simultaneously” (*The Rhizomatic West* 4). Through this shift in perspective, Campbell aims to articulate a “more sophisticated ‘diagram’ of the West,” one meticulously tracing the “rhizomatic ‘leakages’ or ‘lines of flight’ that don’t tally with the official, mythic images” that have determined the scholarly and popular discourse as well as cultural production about the region (*The Rhizomatic West* 7). To apprehend “the presence of westness in its various, complex forms of mobility as it has travelled globally,” Campbell focuses on “texts that remove us from the dominant center so that we might glimpse alternative... [and]... transformative perspectives to help reshape and question persistent grids of representation” (*The Rhizomatic West* 37, 40). This indeed is an interpretive net cast as wide as possible, shifting focus from a location (the West) to a system of signification (westness) seemingly without a limit, a narrative of dispersion rather than cohesion.

In this context of the West as a travelling concept, the Western too emerges as a “travelling genre” (*The Rhizomatic West* 155) and as a “mutational and dialogic form” (*Post-Westerns* 9), a line of theorizing Campbell pursues in the next volume of his Western trilogy. The central premise of *Post-Westerns* is that, despite the numerous declarations to the contrary by the critics and historians of the Western, the genre is not dead, but persists in other than classic forms (2). Following Cawelti, Campbell argues that post-Westerns are those films that “refuse to dwell in the nineteenth century moment of the classic Western but rather explore its divergent histories by veering into and across unexpected, uncanny landscapes” and thus end up interrogating “the very ideological frameworks that had conjured [the Western] into being in the first place” (2–3). Post-Westerns examine “the limits and inaccuracies of Western generic formulas” offering “the ironic parody of the Western myth” and include films “made in other countries,” which “redefined and expanded the meaning of the West itself as a mythic terrain or territory” (*Post-Westerns* 7). Further guided by Deleuze’s de-territorializing impulse for dislocation and estrangement and borrowing from Ranciere the idea that Westerns evoke conventional generic expectations only to frustrate them, Campbell sets out to “rethink the Western as something more than a lost or dead form, something moving beyond and coming after the ‘provincial world of the Western,’” something “reconfigured and renewed within and outside Hollywood, telling different stories and reframing the audience’s critical sense of the region of the West and its place in the world” (*Post-Westerns* 44, 47). In Campbell’s vision, the Western does travel to the outer regions of the rhizomatic West, but it never forgets its departure point, through all its transnational peregrinations it remains ideologically oriented towards its presumed origin in the American West. Notable in Campbell’s elaboration is a structural tension between a conceptual commitment to westness as properly rhizomatic multiplicity without an organizing principle and a singular interpretive focus pulling back to the West as the point of departure and arrival; a narrative of dispersion harkening back to cohesion.

I'll suggest below that East Asian Westerns allow us to resist that reemerging impulse to interpretive cohesion around the West as an interpretive origin and focus.

Given the virtually global sweep of this theoretical reconfiguration, the examples of Westerns discussed in Campbell's work stay pretty close to the range. While Campbell samples liberally among the U.S. revisionist Westerns, his case studies of international Westerns, whether traditional or revisionist, are very few; in this respect his approach reflects the broader dynamic in the field. To flesh out the concept of the Western as a travelling genre, for example, in *The Rhizomatic West*, Campbell turns to Sergio Leone's 1968 *Once Upon a Time in the West*, and this choice of a case study makes perfect sense, given that the Italian productions of the 1960s, popularly known as Spaghetti Westerns, uniquely among international Westerns, have attracted sustained critical attention from the Western scholars of the genre.⁵ He highlights the film's "extreme stylization," heightened self-reflexivity conveyed through multiple gestures of "Brechtian laying-bear the device," suggesting that functioning as "a mythic theme park of repeated icons," Leone's film marks the end point of the Western genre that has always been "about spectacle, about simulation, about performance" (*The Rhizomatic West* 148). And yet this assessment is not a dismissal, but rather an endorsement, as Campbell insists that "Leone's films are never just about pastiche or nostalgia, never simply citing other films in an uncritical manner, but rather deploying these elements as tools of drama and interrogation, creating rich and playful texts that also delve into and analyze established ideologies, iconographies, and histories of the West" (*The Rhizomatic West* 119). This orientation towards ideological work aimed at refashioning our understanding of the (American) West, dictates other examples too, in another chapter on the generic variations in *The Rhizomatic West* and throughout *Post-Westerns*. Even if the film directors happen to hail from outside the United States (Michael Winterbottom and Ang Lee in *The Rhizomatic West*; Wim Wenders in *Post-Westerns*), all the films discussed are diegetically firmly located in the American West, whether past or contemporary. The directors' nationality is not relevant, the sites of filming or production can range, but what remains fundamental is the clear orientation to the West of the films' interpretive and ideological work.

And yet, the fact of "the endless recycling of Western iconography as a global production of meaning" (*The Rhizomatic West* 118) that prompts Campbell's re-theorization of the genre is evidenced perhaps most obviously by East Asian Westerns in particular, the twenty-first-century spectacular blockbusters as well as their lesser known twentieth-century predecessors. These films bring substance to Campbell's conceptualizations of the Western as a travelling genre or a mutational and dialogic form, and they do so, I propose, precisely due to a feature that appears to keep them

⁵ Despite the fact that Indianerfilme predate Spaghetti Westerns by at least a decade, and served as their inspiration, by the end of the twentieth century only the latter have achieved scholarly monograph treatment, and have become a mainstay of discussions of the genre's development.

outside of the Western critics' purview: their evident de-coupling of the genre's most recognizable tropes and props from its presumed location in the (American) West. Because East Asian Westerns indigenize the genre by transplanting it to the East and by intermingling its conventional thematic and formal characteristics with their East Asian equivalents,⁶ they constitute the farthest reaching tendril of the rhizomatic West, the longest line of flight of the Western, exemplifying, and pushing at the limits of, the genre's new re-conceptualization. As such, I suggest, they are worthy of critical attention not only in the context of East Asian cinema scholarship, where they have met with considerable interest, but also as part of the purview of the Western genre studies. Because its East Asian iterations, in Vivian Lee's apt phrase, de-Westernize the Western altogether (Lee, "Staging the 'Wild Wild East'" 148–149), a detour through these films both puts into sharper relief conceptual limits of transnational Western criticism and inspires reassessment of the American iterations of the genre, whether golden age classic or contemporary revisionist, and perhaps even, and paradoxically, a new understanding of the West, or at the least of its changing meanings in the world.

Even as they deploy the classic Western props and tropes to the extent that makes them easily recognizable as iterations of the genre, East Asian Westerns leave the West behind altogether, at least as a concrete geographical location in North America with its specific set of allegorical meanings,⁷ if not as a general referent of considerable cultural capital variously viable beyond North America and beyond Hollywood. This geographical and ideological re-location distinguishes East Asian Westerns from the majority of their international predecessors that have caught critical attention of the scholars of the genre. West German *Indianerfilme*, East German DEFA Westerns of the 1950s, and Spaghetti Westerns of the 1960s, to cite the better known examples of European practice, undertook to reimagine the specifically American West with the European shooting locations, actors,⁸ producers, and ideological investments. German Westerns countered the U.S. nationalist narratives of the frontier and its attendant political conflicts with ideological realignment of protagonists and antagonists, taking up the genre's potential as one of the many discursive tools of the cold war. Spaghetti Westerns, especially those directed by Leone and Corbucci, reimagined the heroic cowboy as an amoral agent exploiting the chaos of the border zone for personal monetary gain and downgraded the frontier town from a bustling microcosm of the American democracy extending across the continent under the auspices of Manifest Destiny to the deserted, half-ruined,

⁶ Though they are not the first or only international Westerns to indigenize the genre, as is now evident thanks to Miller and Van Riper's collection.

⁷ Westerns have been often interpreted as intervening in nationalist or imperialist narratives of civilizational progress, whether in celebration (by naturalizing such narratives) or in critique (by revising them).

⁸ The Italian Westerns of the 1960s sometimes featured American actors in the leading roles.

mud-filled, God-forgotten ghost town, perhaps by way of allegorical representation of the human capacity for brutality in the wake of WWII and Holocaust. But the North American West remained their staging ground, their central point of reference. More recent examples of better known European Westerns follow this pattern as well, each new addition offering yet another adjustment of the classic tropes and consequently a revision of the Western, and the specifically American West.⁹

By contrast, East Asian Westerns unfold their plots in locations unexpected within the conventional calculus of the genre.¹⁰ In Kim's *The Good, the Bad, the Weird* (*TGBW*) we do have the standard elements of the Western plots and the Western look, such as train robbery, horse-riding and gun-slinging pageantry, shooting sprees winding through frontier towns and pursuits unfolding in open spaces, all taking place in an unstable border zone contested by a variety of antagonists. And yet all this familiar action unfolds in Manchuria of the 1930s where the main antagonists are the Japanese colonial army, the protagonists are Korean (played by the three best known stars of South Korean cinema), local stand-ins for Indians display the sartorial look more typical of the Asian steppes, and where the classic props such as horses, rifles, revolvers and a variety of mechanized military weaponry are deployed side by side with paraphernalia familiar from martial arts films. The same strategy obtains in Miike's *Sukiyaki Western Django* (*SWD*) as revolvers spar with samurai swords in standoffs between warriors dressed in variations on traditional samurai garb and Western horse-riding chaps (with a medieval armor, baseball jacket, or a feathered headdress thrown in here and there) and lone riders in long black dusters straight out of a classic American Western on the main street of a town called Nevada but looking like a Japanese village of unspecified historical vintage. The film's clues regarding time and place, such as, for example, a title card locating Nevada in Utah or the mention of the battle of Dannoura in the opening sequences, do nothing to concretize either time or place. Kim and Miike are not original in deploying this strategy of moving the Western East: Asian Westerns of the twentieth century typically focused on local settings such as China's northwestern borderlands in a series of Westerns sponsored by the Chinese national film industry in 1980s, or the 1920s–30s Manchuria in the Westerns of the South Korea's golden age cinema in the 1960s, Karnataka in Southern India in *Sholay*, or Thailand's provinces and cities in Kim's and Miike's Westerns more recent predecessor *Tears of the Black Tiger*. In *TGBW* Kim follows this precedent closely by harkening to the Manchurian

⁹ Jon Kounen's *Blueberry* (2004), for example, reimagines the U.S. frontier town as a multi-national and multiracial microcosm of the larger nation.

¹⁰ In the discussion to follow, Miike's *Sukiyaki Western Django* and Kim's *The Good, the Bad, the Weird* will serve as my primary examples, since they represent two different kinds of the Western's trajectories in East Asian cinemas: the art film often associated with the auteurist tradition in the case of *SWD* and the transnational blockbuster intended as spectacular entertainment for both local and global audiences in the case of *TGBW*.

Westerns and thus placing his film firmly within the South Korean cinematic tradition of indigenizing Hollywood genres.¹¹ In *SWD* Miike takes this strategy a step further, by creating a fully allegorical location anchored neither geographically nor temporally, while intermingling the props of classic Westerns and classic samurai films. In both films, we surely are no longer out West, at least not the West as we have so far known it.

What does distinguish Miike's and Kim's films from their East Asian precursors is that their primary Western source of borrowing is not the classic Hollywood Western, as was the case with the latter, but the Italian Westerns of the 1960s. Both directors acknowledge this genealogy well beyond the explicit, and ironic, titles. In terms of plot and cinematic language, *TGBW* offers a retelling of Leone's 1966 film, often just reshooting specific episodes from *The Good, the Bad and the Ugly* in locations that are regional but evocative of the Spanish Almeria and with indigenized scenography and casting, all the way to a nearly take by take recreation of the final Mexican shootout, citing abundantly Leone's characteristic camera work throughout. Miike, in turn, conceives *SWD* as a prequel to Corbucci's 1966 Western by offering a childhood biography of its protagonist cowboy, Django, a childhood spent under the tutelage of Gunman, a black clad rider figure who, in defiance of the logic of classic Westerns, turns out to be a good guy. Miike too lifts episodes, props, and settings directly from *Django*, from scenes of torture, to a machine gun in a coffin, to a dilapidated cemetery and a frontier town drowning in mud. Both directors cite so relentlessly, and so engagingly, that the early reception and critical assessment of their films by Western critics had often been limited to outlining the resulting thick webs of intertextuality in a kind of citational erudition Olympics among the commentators.

As Vivian Lee has noted, by so emphatically evoking Leone's and Corbucci's most famous films rather than the classic U.S. Westerns, Miike and Kim automatically inscribe themselves into this particular Western tradition of self-reflexive genre practice (Lee, "J-Horror and Kimchi Western" 136), which as a consequence shifts the interpretive import of their films: Miike and Kim are far more interested in exploring the limits in the practice of the Western as a genre than in exploring the meanings of the West as a region or a myth. Further, by extending their citational purview beyond Spaghetti Westerns to a variety of other sources — South Korean Manchurian Westerns (Kim), other regional genres, such as martial arts, wuxia and war films (Kim and Miike), and beyond cinema to other forms of cultural production (Miike)¹² — they not only reinforce the genre's focus on spectacle and performance and enrich its "mythic theme park of repeated icons" by adding East Asian elements, but also further intensify the effect of de-westernizing the Western

¹¹ On South Korean cinema's relationship to Hollywood see Lee's "J-Horror and Kimchi Western," Klein, as well as Chung and Diffrient.

¹² See Van Riper and Lee on Miike's citations, Lee and Chung and Diffrient on Kim's.

first achieved via the indigenizing of the location and the look of their films. Together these strategies dispense altogether with the generic pretense of representing the West that is of central import to Campbell and other scholars of the West and the Western. Instead, Miike's and Kim's Westerns are films about the cinematic genre itself, where the main point is to travel far enough from the Western's presumed source of origin and inspiration, even leaving it out of the picture altogether, both diegetically and metaphorically, while continuing to showcase dexterity with the Western's formal conventions in order to harness its globally recognizable cultural capital for altogether different localized ideological ends.

In thus reducing the West to the Western, so to say, a weighty myth to a mere mobile genre, East Asian Westerns have perplexed the Western film critics, and have yet to catch sustained interest of the Western studies scholars. The former have typically focused on the exuberant citations from Spaghetti Westerns these films engage in, and consequently dismissed them as nothing more than self-indulgent genre play without any discernible aspirations to articulate politically relevant meanings, in other words mere postmodern cinematic fireworks, with nothing to say to the broader themes conventionally attached to the genre.¹³ Scholars of East Asian cinema, however, have argued that the kind of generic experimentation evidenced by these films not only allows for a new concept of the Western as a genre, one more pertinent to the current globalized film industry, but also that it evidences an emergence of a new transnationalism specific to the region, one that marginalizes Hollywood, and the West, in favor of intra-Asian cinematic and broader cultural intertextuality (Lim 22–26).

Thus, to make sense of the full citational extent of Miike's and Kim's films, scholars have abandoned the more conventional language of the appropriation of the U.S. centric canon of Western's props, tropes, and preoccupations in favor of the notion of a "global Western vernacular" (Lee, *East Asian Cinemas* 7), a kind of open access international repertoire of themes, locations, protagonists, props, and filmic language (camera takes, editing strategies, and such), the cinema's version of "great quotes" compendium, from which the film directors draw and which they expand with their own contributions. In that context, rather than representing an effort to hybridize a Hollywood genre, as the Manchurian Westerns of the 1960s did, *The Good, the Bad, the Weird's* "propensity for transnational articulations in style and content... encapsulates the transnational aspirations of South Korea's film industry" (Lee, "Staging the 'Wild Wild East'" 155) in the early twenty-first century. Ironically, by dipping into the global Western vernacular, Kim's film participates in an effort to consolidate a national (South Korean) film industry both on

¹³ Edward Buscombe has notably called the first East Asian Western of the twenty-first century, *Tears of the Black Tiger*, a film about nothing (Sutton 38), a sentiment that has been echoed in the reviews of *SWD* and *TGBW*.

the international market and regionally.¹⁴ *TGBW* debuted at Cannes in 2008 and it became the tenth highest grossing South Korean film as of 2008. Its subsequent domestic release was a whole industry event, including a retrospective of fifteen Manchurian Westerns. In the film's promotional materials, Kim confessed that he "always wanted to take on the Western," the attempt constituting a kind of liminal rite of directorial passage, especially for a director already known for making genre films. He further claimed that he intended *TGBW* as "a truly entertaining genre film" and a "unique Korean Western" (Chung and Diffrient 117 and the dvd featurette). Kim's words and the context of his film's domestic and international releases are telling here. By placing his film amongst Manchurian Westerns, Kim inscribes it in the longer tradition of South Korean cinema's engagement with the Western, emphasizing that history as the primary context and strengthening the narrative of national cinematic continuity. But by emphasizing the entertainment aspect of *TGBW*, he depoliticizes the South Korean Western tradition (an intention echoed in his decision to highlight genre play by sourcing Western motifs from Spaghetti Westerns rather than classic Hollywood Westerns as the Manchurian Westerns did), to appeal to a regional and global (rather than only domestic) audience, brought into existence by the success of the Korean wave in the late twentieth century and greater visibility of South Korean cinema on international film markets in the twenty first century.¹⁵ Kim's earnest pairing of "Korean" and "Western" too serves the purpose of making *TGBW* visible internationally as a specifically South Korean film. The apparent irony of reaching for a genre so emphatically associated with another national film industry to consolidate one's own disappears once we realize that the Western has come to function in the same way that the epic, and later the novel, have functioned, as Stephen Owen put it, "to bring cache to the history of a national literature" (1389). Once it has been freed from its diegetic connection to the (American) West, the travelling Western's primary cultural capital in the age of globalization, then, inheres in its ability to consolidate national cinematic traditions and film industries and make them visible as such on the international and regional film markets.

Sukiyaki Western Django participates in this regional/global cultural dynamic too, but with a difference. The film's promotional materials refer to it variously as a "Japanese Western" and an "Oriental Western" and describe Miike's engagement with the genre in terms of competition with Hollywood (*SWD* featurette). Yet, as Vivian Lee has pointed out, *SWD* becomes a far more interesting film in its regional context, putting questions to the specifically Asian Western as an example of Asian cinema (Lee, "Staging the 'Wild Wild East'" 153). Like Kim, Miike dips into global Western vernacular with abandon. However, in *SWD* this particular highly self-re-

¹⁴ For a longer discussion on South Korean film industry efforts at consolidation via appropriation of Hollywood genres, see Klein and Chung and Diffrient.

¹⁵ For a fuller discussion of the film's ideological functions see Chung and Diffrient.

flexive citational strategy is ramped up further by the film's deployment of Japanese accented English and an acting style better suited to a theatrical stage, a choice that distinguishes *SWD* from Kim's, Sasanatieng's, and Jiang's productions, all shot in respective national languages and showcasing facility rather than awkwardness with the genre, and one that appears to undermine their shared effort of indigenizing the Western. If Miike's Japanese actors, locations, and elements of scenography serve to transplant the Western East, his treatment of language and acting, trips that effort up, because it suggests that the graft does not take easily, or at all. The point of Kim's dexterity with the globalized Western formulas is to showcase how adaptable the Western is to East Asian locations and thus how useful to South Korean film industry's struggle for visibility and relevance in a global market. It is all about a pretty much seamless fit, however *weird* at first. By contrast, Miike's Western begins and stays *weird* by constantly highlighting its own artificiality: English strained by Japanese pronunciation works here in concert with Miike's other many gestures of defamiliarization, camp, or the film's insistence on theatricality, chief among them.¹⁶ Thus Miike "denaturalizes the 'Asian Western' as a transplanted cinematic mode, which amounts to a mockery of its own intent" (Lee, "Staging the 'Wild Wild East'" 153). This self-parodying intent is announced in the title, which courts the nonsensical as it also echoes the Western critics' customary attempts to package the various international iterations of the genre in one handy phrase,¹⁷ and is sustained via the film's obsessively self-conscious performativity through to the final credits. "Sukiyaki Western Django" does not roll off the tongue as easily as "unique Korean Western" because rather than a viable aspiration that it is for Kim, for Miike an East Asian Western is a subgenre too easily delivering naturalized regional identities, one better subject to meticulous examination and critique than to earnest adaptation (Lee, "Staging the 'Wild Wild East'" 153). Kim's and Miike's specific deployments of the global Western vernacular to shape an East Asian Western differ in tenor, one in earnest, the other parodic. But in concert with other regional productions, which turn to intra-Asian intertextuality side by side with dexterous citation of the U.S. and European Western thematic and formal conventions, their films, as East Asian cinema scholars argue, "herald a new era that moves away from the East-West binary that has dominated intellectual discourses throughout the twentieth century"

¹⁶ For example, the scenography of *SWD* opening sequence evokes unmistakably Sasanatieng's *Tears of the Black Tiger*, which featured several prolonged scenes on the theatrical stage; it works in concert with Miike's frequent jokes about Kiyomori's efforts at impersonating Shakespeare's Henry VI to get across the idea that the protagonists of *SWD* are aware that they are playing at genre, that so to say, they are playing (bad) actors. In Kim's film, the protagonists are in earnest, only the viewers perceive the play. Or to put it differently, in Kim's film, only its viewers note the blood splotching the camera lens; in Miike's the protagonists know that it does.

¹⁷ Spaghetti, sauerkraut, baguette, kimchi and so on.

(Lim 22), hinting at “globalism more complex and unstable than ‘Hollywoodization’ or ‘Americanization’” (Lee, *East Asian Cinemas* 1).

In transforming the genre into a fluid, adaptable, and expandable global vernacular with considerable cultural capital, East Asian Westerns have served to consolidate national cinemas in the context of regional transnationalism in East Asia as well as refashioned our understanding of globalization by highlighting regional trajectories of influence. Despite their hasty dismissal as films about nothing by some Western film critics, they may still reinvigorate the theoretical conversations about the genre at the heart of Western studies as well as invite questions about their influence on the practice and reception of the U.S. iterations of the genre. For example, in Kim’s and Miike’s hands the East Asian Western most radically bears out the promise of Campbell’s rhizomatic West in Deleuze and Guattari’s proper conception of the rhizome as a model for multiplicity and mutualism without an originating center altogether. If we take the concept of the rhizomatic West to its logical extreme, East Asian Westerns constitute an obvious extension of the system of westness; but in their deft citations drawing on the global Western vernacular they also expose the centrality of the (American) West as the unsurpassable limit of the Western studies. When examined side by side with the Western as a “global Western vernacular,” the concept of the Western as a “travelling genre” presumes considerable internal coherence and solitary focus: the travelling genre as a metaphor addresses itself to the American West, it originates there as a narrative form focused on specific geo-political conditions, and is then refashioned via its international trajectories, but ultimately, with a view to a new vision, or diagram, of the West, in Campbell’s words. A shift to a “global vernacular” as a controlling metaphor for the genre severs that link to an originating source altogether and with it the presumption of the West-East axis of influence at the center of so many Western discussions of the genre that take international Westerns into consideration. In the global Western vernacular, the presumed originating source, the American West, is no longer so; it has been reduced to the Western, a trope of eminent adaptability rather than a weighty system of significance. For example, Van Riper has argued that Miike’s *SWD* “has all the hallmarks of a Western, but each of them got there by way of somewhere other than the late nineteenth-century American West,” a strategic choice that strips the classic Western of its status as a “uniquely American genre, rooted in the specifics of a uniquely American experience” to reveal it as “simply a costume in which Americans have happened to dress a set of stories and characters held in common” (409). We can take this point further to argue that Miike performs the ultimate hijacking of the genre from the U.S., and Hollywood, by claiming its archetypal narrative arch as a property of all, and, perhaps most tantalizingly, suggesting, that in fact, the U.S.-centric Western is one of the more recent belated iterations of the archetype rather than its originator.

Campbell has turned to post-Westerns in search of this kind of interpretive vantage point, expressing hope that they radically disrupt the conventions of the

classic Hollywood Westerns and thus force us to reexamine “what we had taken for granted, and in so doing move closer, through ‘connectedness with others,’ to a different configuration of a region” (*Post-Westerns* 357). East Asian Westerns offer this opportunity, perhaps even more radically, precisely by dislodging the region as a geographical and mythical reference point for the genre, and thus de-familiarizing the Western so thoroughly that when the viewers, American and international, return to the U.S. films, our second look at them may be substantially transformed. For example, having observed how the Western narrative functions ideologically in a variety of geopolitical locations, we might become less susceptible to the potential of the mimetic cinematographic representation to naturalize, and thus legitimize, historical processes, to disguise ideological imperatives as indifferent and necessary historical progress, or to obscure the collateral damage of the national/imperial projects, all ideological functions that U.S. classic Westerns have served. Having experienced the Western as a relentlessly, irreverently, and joyously citational genre game plying the global territory, we might look at the contemporary U.S. revisionist Westerns differently as well. For instance, rather than see them only as looking back to the classic Westerns to expose their ideological investments and inward to the U.S. revisionist tradition to help articulate the current ones, we could appreciate their sideways look, their rhizomatic orientation towards the many international iterations of the genre, their equally playful dipping into the global Western vernacular. With a look so adjusted, we might just see past Corbucci, to Miike, and all the way to Sasanatieng, as we follow that improbably ricocheting bullet before it reaches Samuel Jackson’s knee in the final scenes of Tarantino’s *Django Unchained* (2012) and understand that Tarantino’s Southern Western speaks back to classic Westerns, and to Mario Van Peebles’ *Posse* (1993), and to East Asian Westerns, all at the same time, but perhaps talking about something else than the West. Or, we might just realize that we take the character of Billy Rocks (played by Byung-hun Lee) in Antoine Fuqua’s 2016 remake of *The Magnificent Seven* in such easy stride, so to say, because we have already seen him riding spectacularly as the Bad in Kim’s 2008 Western; in other words, not so much because we have fully assimilated the U.S. multiculturalist imperatives of the late twentieth century, but because of the East Asian directors’ successful efforts to bring the Western East; thus with an appreciatively transnational tenor rather than a self-congratulatory domestic one.

WORKS CITED

- Abel, Richard. *The Red Rooster Scare: Making Cinema American 1900–1910*. Berkley and Los Angeles, CA: University of California Press, 1999. Print.
- Campbell, Neil. *Post-Westerns: Cinema, Region, West*. Lincoln and London: University of Nebraska Press, 2013. Print.

- Campbell, Neil. *The Rhizomatic West: Representing the American West in a Transnational, Global, Media Age*. Lincoln and London: University of Nebraska Press, 2008. Print.
- Chung, Hye Seung, and David Scott Diffrient. *Movie Migrations: Transnational Genre Flows and South Korean Cinema*. New Brunswick, NJ and London: Rutgers University Press, 2015. Print.
- Fried, Daniel. "Riding Off into the Sunrise: Genre Contingency and the Origin of the Chinese Western." *PMLA* 122.5 (October 2007): 1482–1498. Print.
- Higgins, MaryEllen, Rita Keresztesi, and Dayna Oscherwitz, eds. *The Western in the Global South*. New York and London: Routledge, 2015. Print.
- Klein, Christina. "Why American Studies Needs to Think about Korean Cinema, or, Transnational Genres in the Films of Bong Joon-ho." *American Quarterly* 60.4 (December 2008): 871–898. Print.
- Lee, Vivian P.Y. "J-Horror and Kimchi Western: Mobile Genres in East Asian Cinemas." *East Asian Cinemas: Regional Flows and Global Transformations*. Ed. Vivian P.Y. Lee. New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2011. 118–141. Print.
- Lee, Vivian P.Y. "Staging the "Wild Wild East": Decoding the Western in East Asian Films." *The Post-2000 Film Western. Contexts, Transnationality, Hybridity*. Ed. Marek Paryz and John R. Leo. 147–164. Print.
- Lee, Vivian P.Y., ed. *East Asian Cinemas: Regional Flows and Global Transformations*. New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2011. Print.
- Lim, Song Hwee. "Transnational Trajectories in Contemporary East Asian Cinemas." *East Asian Cinemas*. Ed. Vivian P.Y. Lee. 15–32. Print.
- Miller, Cynthia J., and A. Bowdoin Van Riper, eds. *International Westerns: Re-Locating the Frontier*. Lanham, Boulder, New York, Toronto, Plymouth, UK: Scarecrow Press, 2014. Print.
- Owen, Stephen. "Genres in Motion." *PMLA* 122.5 (October 2007): 1389–1393. Print.
- Paryz, Marek, and John R. Leo, eds. *The Post-2000 Film Western: Contexts, Transnationality, Hybridity*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015. Print.
- Simon, Scott. *The Invention of the Western: A Cultural History of the Genre's First Half Century*. Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 2003. Print.
- Sutton, Damian. "Philosophy, Politics and Homage in *Tears of the Black Tiger*." *Deleuze and Film*. Ed. David Martin-Jones and William Brown. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012. 37–53. Print.
- Van Riper, A. Bowdoin. "The Sword and the Six-Shooter: *Sukiyaki Western Django* and the Universality of the Western." *International Westerns: Re-Locating the Frontier*. Ed. Cynthia J. Miller and A. Bowdoin Van Riper. 394–415.

EAST ASIAN WESTERNS AT/AS THE LIMITS OF THE WESTERN GENRE CRITICISM

Summary

The East Asian Westerns of the twenty-first century have been studied extensively by scholars of East Asian cinema, yet have been largely missing from the conversations animating the Western genre studies, despite the field's recent transnational turn. This absence might be linked to their unique formal feature: their de-coupling of the genre's most recognizable tropes and props from their presumed location in the American West. By indigenizing the Western, films such as Miike Takashi's *Sukiyaki Western Django* (2007) or Kim Jee-woon's *The Good, the Bad, the Weird* (2008) have served to con-

solidate national cinemas in East Asia and refashioned our understanding of globalization by highlighting regional, intra-Asian trajectories of influence. Despite their hasty dismissal by some Western film critics, they may still reinvigorate the theoretical conversations at the heart of Western studies as well as pose productive questions about their influence on the practice and reception of the U.S. iterations of the genre. In their deft citations drawing on the global Western vernacular, East Asian Westerns expose the centrality of the American West as the unsurpassable limit of the Western genre studies, while simultaneously revealing the appreciatively transnational tenor of the contemporary practice of the genre in the United States.

WSCHODNIOAZJATYCKIE WESTERNY NA GRANICY/JAKO GRANICE KRYTYKI GATUNKU WESTERNU

Streszczenie

Wschodnioazjatyckie westerny są szczegółowo badane przez badaczy azjatyckiego kina, jednak wyraźnie pomijane w dyskusjach ożywiających studia nad gatunkiem westernu mimo niedawnego pojawienia się transnarodowej perspektywy badawczej. Ta nieobecność może mieć związek z ich wyjątkową formalną cechą: odłączenie najbardziej rozpoznawalnych tropów i rekwizytów gatunkowych od ich macierzystej lokalizacji na amerykańskim Zachodzie. Przez akulturację westernu filmy takie, jak *Sukiyaki Western Django* (2007) Miike Takashiego czy *Dobry, zły i zakrecony* (2008) Kima Jee-woona, służą konsolidacji kina narodowego we wschodniej Azji oraz przeformułują nasze rozumienie globalizacji, podkreślając regionalne wewnątrzazjatyckie trajektorie wpływu. Mimo pochopnego lekceważenia przez niektórych zachodnich krytyków filmy te wciąż mają szansę ożywić teoretyczne dyskusje w sercu westernowych badań, jak również stawiać pożyteczne pytania o ich wpływ na praktykę i odbiór amerykańskich reprodukcji gatunku. W swoich wprawnych cytowaniach obrazowania opartych na globalnym westernowym żargonie wschodnioazjatyckie westerny odsłaniają główne znaczenie amerykańskiego Zachodu jako nieprzekraczalną granicę badań gatunkowych westernu, jednocześnie ujawniając akceptującą ponadnarodową tonację współczesnej praktyki w obszarze tego gatunku w USA.

Przeł. Kordian Bobowski