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The Corrupting Sea, Technology and Devalued Life in Sergio Leone's Spaghetti Westerns

Timothy Campbell

In one of the most important, recent statements on the cultural and philosophical meaning of the Mediterranean, Franco Cassano attempts to recuperate a middle zone for the Mediterranean as one that knows both division and connection, departure and return. His argument is eloquent and at first glance convincing. "The Mediterranean," he writes, "is the sea where, precisely because one encounters the others there, the real game begins, the one that can lead to hostility and confrontation, or to the road to peace. However, peace in the Mediterranean is not born from domination, annihilation and silencing of others, but from a balance, from mutual recognition, from respect for the dignity of others, from exchanges, from translations, from curiosity and knowledge."¹ Cassano intends in his neo-humanist perspective on the Mediterranean to mark distinctions useful for the emergence of what he will call "Southern Thought," that is, an immanent view of the human race not transcended by any notion of universal Western forms of life or universal politics. In Cassano's view, the Mediterranean holds out the hope for a space of modernity not beholden to the "fundamentalisms" of either land or sea.²

As productive as Cassano's perspective has been for the burgeoning field of Mediterranean Studies, a radically different view is offered in Horden and Purcell's recent study *The Corrupting Sea*. Here, both authors speak menacingly of the "Great Sea" as the Greeks called the Mediterranean, seeing in it the other side of exchange, difference, and cultural hybridity.³ As they go on to argue, the Greeks and Romans knew how profoundly disruptive exchange was to the social order, especially when the primary goal was acquisition. This more pessimistic perspective on the Mediterranean in which exchange is always inscribed in larger horizon of acquisition and violence is one that a number of recent philosophers and critics have taken up, sometimes in direct opposition to Cassano's bracketing of the Mediterranean from a more negative perspective. Roberto Esposito, for instance writing in *Communitas: The Origin and Destiny of Community*, makes no distinction between the Mediterranean and the sea; both are located in a "potenziale acquisitivo, violentemente appropriativo."⁴ So too Fernand Braudel, not one given to easy dismissals of the virtues of the Mediterranean, who argues that "the Mediterranean is a thousand things at once. It is not a civilization but a series of superposed civilizations . . . It means to sink into the abyss of centuries . . . It means to immerse oneself in the archaism of insular worlds and, at the same time, to be astonished by the extreme youthfulness of very ancient cities, open to all the winds of culture and profit that, since centuries, oversee and consume the sea."⁵ Braudel implicitly gestures to a less sanguine

¹ Franco Cassano, "Southern Thought," *Thesis Eleven* 67 (2001), 5.

² "[A] sea that separates and links at the same time, a sea that never becomes an abyss ... It is therefore very far from the fundamentalisms of either land or sea." *Ibid.*, 4.

³ Peregrine Horden and Nicolas Purcell, *The Corrupting Sea: A Study of Mediterranean History* (London: Blackwell, 2000), 10.

⁴ Roberto Esposito, *Communitas. L'origine e destino della comunità* (Torino: Einaudi, 1998), 107.

⁵ Fernand Braudel, *La Méditerranée. L'espace et l'histoire* (Paris: Flammarion, 1990), 7-8; quoted in *Reading and Writing the Mediterranean: Essays by Vincenzo Consolo*, eds. Norma Bouchard and Massimo Lollini (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2006), 15.

perspective on the Mediterranean when he pairs profit *and* culture, one that is captured in that figure which, more than any other, expresses the notion of acquisition associated with the sea, namely the Leviathan. It is the Leviathan who battles the landed behemoth, enfeebling not only land but by association all political order affiliated with it.

Massimo Cacciari goes even further in *Geo-filosofia dell'Europa* when, drawing upon his own earlier reflections on technology and the sea, he singles out in the Mediterranean the traveler who embodies a demonic relation to nautical technology. This stranger or foreigner is “il demone della *téchne nautiké*, del marinaio-colonizzatore, del viaggio,” the one who “‘sposta’ incessantemente in confini della propria ‘terra’ . . . , e che, dunque, non possiede vera terra, non ha vera *radice terranea*.”⁶ Interestingly, Cacciari doesn’t limit such a nautical agent merely to the ships that the demon sailor sails but rather finds in the itinerant features of the colonizer-sailor himself a form of technology able to move across borders and indeed propriety itself. Cacciari clearly is following in the footsteps of Carl Schmitt who in a more generalized context of the sea describes “heroes of a sea-bound life,” “enterprising adventurers, sea-roamers, daring whale-hunters, bold soldiers.” Schmitt too will see in these “adventurers” a relation both to acquisition as well as technology, prosthesis, and the possibility of colonization.⁷

These other perspectives that highlight commerce as well as technology and violence seem to accord in ways that Cassano’s does not with readings attentive to those first accounts we have of the Mediterranean in the Homeric poems, in particular the *Odyssey*. The *Odyssey*, as we know, is particularly rife with plundered towns, punitive raids, and kidnapped wives, so much so that it becomes difficult indeed to limit ourselves, as Cassano does, to seeing in the Mediterranean only peaceable departures and idyllic returns.⁸ What happens in between one departure and a later return is commerce and violence, a commerce made possible by violence brought on by the possibilities afforded the colonizer by his *téchne nautiké*. No moment better captures the differences afforded by nautical power than the stark contrast between Odysseus, his men, and the Cyclops (*Od.* 9, 112-115). The latter’s monstrosity and ineffectiveness are repeatedly linked to their inability to sail.⁹

This other history of the Mediterranean as the interstitial space of acquisition, technology, and violence between departure and return is the context in which I want to discuss the first two films of Sergio Leone’s “Dollar Trilogy,” specifically *Fistful of Dollars* (1964) and *For a Few Dollars More* (1965). Colloquially known as the “spaghetti western,” these films became the model for a number of much maligned films that appeared soon after by such directors as Sergio Corbucci and Giulio Petroni. Implicit in the term, “spaghetti western,” is the identification of Leone’s films exclusively with Italian culture, with the result that a straitjacket of sorts has been outfitted for understanding Leone’s cinema: the focus on the films’ “Italian-ness” has trumped other powerful features that might be grouped around the Mediterranean. The films themselves were of course a profoundly Mediterranean product; the fact that they were shot in Spain and

⁶ Massimo Cacciari, *Geo-filosofia dell'Europa* (Milano: Adelphi, 1994), 53.

⁷ Carl Schmitt, *Land and Sea*, trans. Simona Draghici (Corvallis, OR: Plutarch Press, 1997), 13.

⁸ “The Mediterranean which is at the same time departure and return, guards a complex consciousness . . . its hero is Ulysses, the hero of voyage and return.” Cassano, 4.

⁹ Thus the distinction between them: “The Cyclops have no ships with crimson bows, no shipwrights who might fashion sturdy hulls that answer to the call, that sail across to other peoples’ towns that men might want to visit. And such artisans might well have built a proper place for men to settle. In fact, the land’s not poor; it could yield fruit in season; soft, well-watered meadows lie along the gray sea’s shores; unfailing vines could nourish; it has level land for plowing, and every season would provide fat harvests because the under-soil is black indeed.” In Homer, *Odyssey of Homer*, trans. Allen Mandelbaum (Westminster, MD: Bantam Dell, 1991), 173.

Italy by an Italian director with a largely Italian and Spanish cast suggests that they are the product of exchange among different cultures but also that the films themselves are subject to the Mediterranean as a “corrupting sea”; that visually and narratively, this negative understanding of the Mediterranean might function as a political unconscious for these films. Such a possibility of a “political unconscious,” to borrow Frederic Jameson’s term, would link Leone’s films to others that might appear at first glance to be quite distant; films that subject the Mediterranean idyll that Cassano sees as so decisive for southern thought to the Mediterranean as a conflict-ridden, corrupting space.¹⁰

This attention to the Mediterranean as a space of corruption and violence guides my reading of Leone across the following pages, allowing me to ask a number of questions about the nature of politics, community, technology, and life itself in his “spaghetti westerns.” I will focus especially on two elements in my reading of *Fistful of Dollars* and *For a Few Dollars More*. In the first, I ask after the effects on meaning provided by a *mise-en-scène* of the Mediterranean, which in my reading will mark a reversal of sorts from the American Westerns of Howard Hawks and John Ford, where nature dominates culture. Second, I try to think how technology, when portrayed in these films as a sort of human prosthesis, combines ultimately with “the potential for acquisition” to imperil communities. The result is a severe devaluation of the value of life.¹¹ Reading Leone’s cinema as privileging the Mediterranean as a political unconscious that subverts idyllic meanings of the Mediterranean as exchange offers the critic important advantages. Much early scholarship on the “spaghetti western” tended to highlight the derived character of the films themselves and their status as mere low-brow copies of the Ford and Hawks originals. Limiting themselves to the parodic features of Leone’s films, these scholars continued to focus almost entirely on questions of genre and national cinema. Thus, if I dwell on the Leone western as a Mediterranean one, it is to associate the films’ milieu with Hobbesian struggles for existence: of immense fear, of laws no longer respected, of interactions gone bad, of the stability and order of a landed perspective brought low by the sea.

As is well known, it was Hobbes who more any other philosopher spoke of the role of fear in man’s dealings with other men. *Homo hominis lupus* – man is a wolf or a threat to other men – is the phrase that not only describes the Hobbesian state of nature, but also signals Hobbes’s principal insight into human existence. In the absence of state power, man finds himself in a space in which struggles for domination are the order of the day; in other words he “exists” in a state of nature.¹² This, it seems to me, is also the space that Leone will construct in his films,

¹⁰ Here I see the Mediterranean’s corrupting influence functioning as an “absent cause” in the Jamesonian sense, one that operates upon all cultural and lived experience. Cfr. Frederic Jameson, *The Political Unconscious: Narrative as a Socially Symbolic Act* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1981). See too Steven Helmlings’ “Failure and the Sublime: Frederic Jameson’s Writings in the ‘80s,” in *Postmodern Culture* 10:3 (May 2000). It would certainly be productive to consider other Mediterranean coproductions as subject to a Mediterranean political unconscious. Certainly Pontecorvo’s *Battle of Algiers* comes to mind as does Manuel De Oliveira’s *Um filme Falado*. My thanks to Lucia Re and Claudio Fogu for drawing my attention to De Oliveira’s work.

¹¹ This perhaps accounts for Anthony Mann’s criticism of Leone’s films: “Of a *For a Few Dollars More*, Mann observed: ‘In that film, the true spirit of the Western is lacking. We tell the story of simple men, not of professional assassins; simple men pushed to violence by circumstances. In a good Western, the characters have a starting and a finishing line ; they follow a trajectory in the course of which they clash with life. The characters of *For a Few Dollars More* meet along their road only the ‘black’ of life” (quoted in Christopher Frayling, *Sergio Leone* (London: Faber and Faber, 2000), 181-82).

¹² See in this regard Guglielmo Ferrero’s reading of Hobbes: “He fears and is feared more than any other because he is the only creature with the idea, the obsession, and the terror of the great dark gulf of death into which the torrent of life has been pouring ever since the beginning of time.” In *The Principles of*

linking Hobbesian struggles for domination to a lawlessness that is never far removed from the Mediterranean's own corrupting influence. In other words, introducing the Mediterranean as akin to a Hobbesian state of nature in a context of Leone's films forces us to consider the myriad influences at work in a genre picture, helping draw attention to elements of the film that previously went unaccounted for.¹³ It is also an approach authorized by Leone himself, who, when reflecting on his early films, spoke broadly about the cultural elements of his own background that influenced his film-making.¹⁴

....

The first film I want to examine, *Fistful of Dollars*, distills in ways Leone's later films do not the corrupting influence of the Mediterranean. First appearing in 1964 and featuring a little-known American television actor named Clint Eastwood, Leone's *Fistful of Dollars* would go on to make more money than any other Italian film in the 1960s. The film, as is well known, is itself a remake of the earlier Japanese film *Yojimbo: A Bodyguard* in which a samurai plays off two rival clans in a frightened and traumatized Japanese village. *Fistful of Dollars* follows *Yojimbo* (in some cases frame for frame), and what's more, it contains all of the features that will come to characterize Leone's formal vision of the Western: in addition to mapping East/West dichotomies onto North/South, there are the extreme close-ups, the patient visual exposition of the story's narrative, the long takes, the decisive importance of Catholic imagery, and then of course violence and lots of it.¹⁵ The story is simple enough. A man arrives in a shuttered town emptied of its inhabitants, all shot or now enrolled in one of the two leading families, the Baxters and the Rojas. The stranger, as Leone calls him in an early script, plays one family against the other while amassing his fortune, leading in the film's conclusion to the destruction of both families. The film ends with a showdown between the stranger and the pathological killer, Ramón, who, along with his two brothers, is killed.

Much discussion of the film continues to mine the monumental work of Christopher Frayling, whose compendium of readings (discourse analysis, cultural studies, genre) did so much to answer charges of parody and the spaghetti's derived status.¹⁶ Yet Frayling and those

Power: The Great Political Crises of History, trans. Theodore R. Jaekel (New York, G.P. Putnam's Sons, 1942), 30.

¹³ This is something Leone knew well when in an interview with *Bianco e nero* in 1971 he argued both that "il western di allora, se uno volesse storicizzarlo bene, se volesse essere aderente ad una stretta realtà, era veramente il regno della violenza per la violenza." "Leone spiega se stesso," *Bianco e nero* 32:9/10 (settembre/ottobre 1971), 38.

¹⁴ Speaking of the relation between Kurosawa and his own work, especially in the similarity of puppet theater, Leone notes "What I wanted to do was to undress these puppets, and turn them into cowboys, to make them cross the ocean and to return to their place of origin. That was the provocative bit. But there was another thing. I had to find a reason *in myself* – not being a character who had ever lived in that environment. I had to find a reason within my own culture" (quoted in Frayling, *Sergio Leone*, 125).

¹⁵ So close in fact that Kurosawa received fifteen percent of all international profits." See Lee Clark Mitchell, *Westerns: Making the Man in Fiction and Film* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996), 313. See as well Mitshuhiro Yoshimoto, *Kurosawa: Film Studies and Japanese Cinema* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2000), 423-424.

¹⁶ Of the numerous studies in English of Sergio Leone, see Christopher Frayling's profoundly influential *Spaghetti Westerns: Cowboys and Europeans from Karl Marx to Sergio Leone* (London: Routledge, 1981) and his more recent *Once Upon a Time in Italy: The Westerns of Sergio Leone* (New York: Harry N. Abrams, 2005). Other seminal studies include Oreste de Fornari, *Sergio Leone: The Great Italian Dream of Legendary America* (New York: Gernese, 1997; 1984) and Laurence Staig, *Italian Western: The Opera of Violence* (New York: Lorrimer, 1975); In the last decade interest has decidedly grown on Leone and the spaghetti western. See in particular John Wesley

who follow him don't devote much space to films' Mediterranean milieu. The long and forgotten shadow of the Mediterranean with its corrupting influence is forgotten in the same way that the politics of these films is elided. The unfortunate result has been to dismiss Leone's films as somehow less than political. It's only when we retrieve the Mediterranean as the film's unconscious that we can begin to see how it constructs a political space characterized by the state of nature. This space of death and violence, of towns as cemeteries in which the only productive activity is the undertaker's, is what the Mediterranean offers Leone.¹⁷

How can we set about locating the Mediterranean in *Fistful of Dollars*? To do so, we need to work obliquely, first by noting that simply because there is no actual sea in these films doesn't lead to anything like a figurative distancing from the sea. Instead the sea's absence that is repressed on the visual level returns in the film's narrative and in the mode by which the town and political space it inhabits are figured. Leone's films may be said to reenact the consequences of an age-old struggle between the land and the sea to the degree that law and order, which are semantically associated with land here, come under assault from an itinerant traveler. A comparison with the *mise-en-scène* of many of John Ford's Westerns and Leone's will help make this clearer. In his Westerns, Ford choreographs a mythic voyage through the West as Monument Valley, where the wide-expanses of land embody a land-based perspective. Indeed, there is little else in sight except land in these films. This emphasis, indeed obsession, on land is reflected in Ford and Hawk's narratives of community-building and the repeated retelling of the mythic creation of law, order, and civilization across a land that we observe most famously in the classic church-raising sequence in *My Darling Clementine*. In films like *Fort Apache* and *The Searchers*, this land-based perspective of community centers around a racialized dichotomy: on the one side Whites, or "Texicans" as they refer to themselves in the latter film, and on the other Native Americans. As recent and more sensitive histories of the Western have repeatedly pointed out, the *mise-en-scène* of the American Western reinforces this central division in casting: a struggle between two racial groups and, despite more even-handed portrayals in later Westerns, the maintenance of that dichotomy. Racial groupings with rigid divisions cannot be thought apart from a landed perspective and a nascent community in which one group's identity is premised on another as other. It is typical of the metaphorical associations of land itself: we speak of firm ground beneath our feet, of foundations and clearly demarcated routes. This too might seem counterintuitive since, as so many have argued, the *mise-en-scène* of Ford's films is also described as a moonscape inhabited by death. But that too is part of the land-bound perspective of the Ford Western: nature, the Native-American, death, joined together in a semantic chain while whites embody a vital spirit of lives separate and protected from death. Furthermore, there is the sense watching Ford's Westerns that at any moment nature itself, in the form of Native Americans, threatens. Hence the need for clear lines between nature and culture. To say it somewhat differently: Ford's Westerns and American Westerns more generally are political Westerns in the sense that their land-based perspective keeps the figurative threat of the sea at bay, with its mixing of borders and corruption. Order appears as the never-ending attempt to keep the outside apart, even as it continually appears that the outside can at any minute break

Fawell, *The Art of Sergio Leone's Once upon a Time in the West* (Jefferson, N.C.: McFarland, 2005); Robert Cumbow, *The Films of Sergio Leone* (Lanham, Md: Scarecrow Press, 2008); and Michael R. Lang, *Sergio Leone* (Harpending, GBR: Pocket Essentials, 2001)

¹⁷ The Mediterranean as a mass grave for those attempting to migrate to the Northern rim of the Mediterranean is one the article "Un'immensa tomba chiamata Mediterraneo" takes up. The essay may be found at http://www.guernica.imperia.it/spip/article.php3?id_article43.

through and threaten law and order.¹⁸ In this sense the American Western offers its perspective on the events from the point of view of land.

No such interval is to be found in Leone's Westerns. Instead, we have porous borders and with it a violence that touches everyone. Consider again the dramatic change in landscape from films like *Stage Coach* and *The Searchers* to *Fistful of Dollars*. What stands out most is the ordinariness of the establishing shots that open the latter film. Where Ford's Westerns starkly contrast landscape and town, in *Fistful of Dollars* the camera tracks the entrance into town of the stranger with very few if any establishing shots of the surrounding area. The effect on a viewer coming from a Ford or Hawks Western is startling. Rather than focusing on the difference between nature and town and what the difference might consist of, here no visual distinction is made between town and what lies outside. Instead, we focus on the town itself. In *Fistful of Dollars*, we quickly note that there is no threat to the town from the outside, but rather that the danger resides in the town itself; given the absence of any establishing shots, the spectator's attention in fact turns to the town. It is only after these visual cues that we begin to notice that the town is divided between two families: literally on one end we have the Baxters and on the other the Rojas. What's more, this spacing is matched by a division along racial lines *within* the town that is missing in the American Western: there the distance is always maintained between towns and what lies beyond, be it Native Americans or Hispanics in some instances. The impression that both families are almost on top of each other in the town is unavoidable given the limited space that is involved. This too suggests a different association from the one that follows in the films of Ford and Hawks where distance is always maintained between racial groups. In Leone's film the lack of distance between the town and what lies outside coincides with the lack of borders across the film be they political or ethical. It is this lack of borders, between North and South, as well as East and West, that the stranger will exploit, as well as the borders between lawful and unlawful. It is in these easily crossed borders that we will find one of the chief ways in which the Mediterranean as visual and narrative unconscious in Leone's perspective on the American Western emerges. In Leone's films, the town becomes the site in which clear-cut divisions between nature and culture and between friend and foe are lessened. In other words, the town is transformed into the space in which the Mediterranean as political unconscious is registered most directly.

Leone's decision to limit the monumentality of nature by filming in the arid Spanish South dramatically alters not only the meaning of *Fistful of Dollars* but that of an entire genre by demoting (when not eliminating) the *mise-en-scène* of the original American Western. As I noted above, the repeated long shots of Monument Valley make it the classic American landscape for Ford's and Hawks' Westerns. In the clear-cut demarcation between nature and civilization, these films visually link Monument Valley with political stability and order, which reappears in the divisions between friend/foe, lawful/unlawful, normal/abnormal that we register across these films. In lieu of the landed perspective, the political space of Leone's film will be characterized not simply by the absence of law and with it a state or local power – a situation that might be said to characterize other American Westerns as well – but rather the domination of that space by technology. This is what so many readings of the Leone Westerns miss, namely that the

¹⁸ Fundamentally, this is a question of security. See Michel Foucault's lecture of January 11, 1978, collected in *Security, Territory, Population: Lectures at the Collège de France 1977-1978*, trans. Graham Burchell (New York: Palgrave, 2007), 1-23.

supposed hyper-violence of the films isn't gratuitous at all. Rather, it is profoundly linked to the space of the town that has become unmoored from a landed perspective.¹⁹

What are the features, then, of this Mediterranean space of technology and violence as they emerge in Leone's Westerns? First, there is the stranger himself, who moves across borders, always at the limit of his own proper land and who becomes a form of technology himself. In this sense, he embodies *téchne nautiké*, which I noted earlier when speaking of philosopher Massimo Cacciari, the maritime colonizer who moves incessantly just beyond his own property and a sense of propriety. *Fistful of Dollars* captures visually and narratively the destabilizing consequences of this traveler who carries danger to land precisely because he doesn't belong to land. In fact, it is the lack of any rootedness that associates the "Dollar Trilogy" with the perspective of the sea. The combination of up-rootedness and impropriety that sets out the figure of the stranger as emblematic of the corrupting presence of the Mediterranean in which maritime technology – in his errant status he embodies a form of technology – profoundly shakes up the certainties of a terrestrial one. The traveler/colonizer, the stranger/traveler represent in other words a kind of technological power well beyond uprootedness. We see this clearly in the inhuman speed with which he kills numerous men (and not just one as in most American Western that preceded *Fistful of Dollars*), all in the service principally of his own private gain. It's impossible to recall an American Western before Leone's *Fistful of Dollars* in which a stranger arrives whose effect on the town is so destructive.

The second feature of this deeply violent political space of the Mediterranean in the film concerns the effects of technology on life. The overall result not only is to introduce technology into a town, but then to show the effects on life itself, demonstrating the vulnerability of all life to technology when *homo hominis lupus* is the only order of the day. First, of course, there is the stranger's ability with the gun, though even more significant is the way in which Leone films these gunfights, often awarding a point of view to the gun itself, as we see in the first shootout with Baxter's men. This visual amplification of the role of technology coincides with a startling increase in the numbers of men who are killed, which Leone takes up again in more obvious fashion when the Gatling gun is introduced and with it the scores of dead killed at the hands of Ramón. Here, critics of the film, who were shocked at these never-before-seen levels of violence (as well as others today who find in these same scenes parody and cartoonish violence), clearly miss the point. *Fistful of Dollars* doesn't traffic in violence for violence's sake, nor is it a simple ironic commentary on the American Western, but rather the film reflects the effects of heightened violence that results from the extension of technology. It is technology, both as prosthesis (the inhuman velocity with which the man with no name kills, with the pistol an extension of his arm) and the sheer size of killing machinery in the Gatling gun, that accounts for placing life and death at the center of the film. In other words, the Mediterranean as it appears in Leone's films marks a zone in which technology and violence know few bounds, putting the very existence of the town in jeopardy. A comparison once again with Kurosawa's *Yojimbo: The Bodyguard* will make this clearer. There, Yojimbo, a samurai warrior, travels the countryside, living on his "wits and sword" as the middle-class's power grows and the dynasty's wanes. Yet, there is nothing like the absence of authority or law that there is Leone's films – indeed

¹⁹ It is also where we will want to disagree with Lee Mitchell's brilliant analysis of the film. For Mitchell, Leone, by refusing to imagine his hero in a wilderness milieu, "transformed the landscape (the "West") into a vague topography that might be almost anywhere, and the western code into mere capitalist excess at its most ruthless" (Mitchell, 228). My own reading rather is that such a topography instead is to be thought through a Mediterranean milieu in which the role of technology is key.

Kurosawa finds time to show an inspection taking place – nor do we see the tremendously devastating effects of technology on the town’s populace. It is the introduction of a state of nature along with heightened technology that has the capacity to take lives easily which characterizes the Mediterranean milieu of Leone’s early Westerns.

This difference between *Yojimbo* and Leone’s Westerns holds as well in comparisons with the American Western. Technology in the form of the Gatling gun or the speed and accuracy with which Ramón and the stranger shoot threatens the very life of the town, turning it into a veritable cemetery. Now, I certainly do not want to deny that many American Westerns also revolve principally around questions of life and death, nor that one of the principal political questions that the American Western poses is how best to protect a town or a community from threats, principally arising from Native Americans or outlaws. But before Leone’s films, the town’s existence was rarely if ever so utterly put at risk. Yes, wagon trains are attacked in numerous Westerns, *Red River* comes to mind, and yes, *Fort Apache* ends with the destruction of cavalry regiment, but in both cases others always remained to carry on. Here instead, Leone in a sense allows us to pose a thought experiment. What happens to politics when an inhuman technology is introduced in a political space characterized by a state of nature? The American Western never posits the question so radically since the state of nature in the American Western is always softened by a profoundly interiorized sense of what is lawful. Here, Leone is drawing upon that deep connection that Hobbes makes between the sea, the role of demonic technology characterized by it, and the deep associations with the state of nature. Said differently, what *Fistful of Dollars* shows is an implicit state of nature linked to a Mediterranean milieu – with the introduction of the itinerant traveler who pushes the political effects of technology to their furthest point of political no return.

Technology is also featured in *Fistful of Dollars* as bound to capital in their joint devaluing effects on life. In the first instance, I have in mind the effects that the stranger has on the old-fashioned familial “capitalism” that characterizes the town before his arrival. When he does arrive, he begins to circulate as a kind of object that is repeatedly bought and sold. He moves between the two blocks without regard to previous borders, be they familial or even what is considered proper (he guns down four of the Baxter’s men in the height of impropriety). In this, the stranger comes to stand in for a technological form linked to that mode of postmodern capitalism in which circulation of bodies, objects, and labor power is key. If we were to follow this idea out further, we would see that in the affiliation of the stranger to demonic *téchne nautiké* and circulation, we have the old capitalist forms of exploitation and violence now challenged by a new form of capital. In the second instance, the film implicitly suggests that the stranger brings in his wake a new form of violence linked precisely to this ability to circulate. That perspective on technology and new forms of capital is one that is closely linked to the Mediterranean as the ancient site of exchange and is at odds with traditional accounts of capitalism and technology and their role for the American Western, where technology is seen primarily in terms of a threat to nature.²⁰ In Leone’s films, technology enjoys a different weight, since we find him repeatedly privileging the circulation of men, guns, and labor in them. It is this circulation of bodies and objects without regard for borders, what many refer to as one of the principal features of postmodern capital, that harkens back to the Mediterranean as an earlier space of greater circulation and exchange but also conflict as I have repeatedly pointed out here.

²⁰ See in particular Leo Marx’s seminal work on technology and nature in American literature: *The Machine in the Garden: Technology and the Pastoral Ideal in America* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000).

Indeed, it is precisely the ease with which the stranger moves back and forth between families that might well be said to be at the bottom of the heightened violence of the film and its devaluation of life.²¹

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Even in those films that are most compared with Leone's early Western, *Vera Cruz* in particular, where almost all of the action occurs in Mexico (and in fact was shot mainly there), there is nothing even remotely comparable to the violence we witness in *Fistful of Dollars*. Nor is there anything approaching the levels of violence that result from technology and the threat it poses to the life of the town. No scene comes close to the inferno of killing that Ramón sets in motion in the heart of the town at the film's conclusion. In other words, *Fistful of Dollars* discounts lives that in the American Western were protected. It does so by amplifying the threat that technology poses to the town itself in a context in which man is the principal threat to man. Leone's crosses the New World with the Mediterranean, and the result is a space in which violence dramatically increases. Needless to say, in the devastation set in motion by technology, there is no ultimate defense of the order provided by officially sanctioned law, which is to say there is no ultimate defense of culture (or law or order) against (human) nature. The stranger isn't magically transformed by film's end into a sovereign, nor is there anything like a pact between the families to cease their battles since by film's end they are all dead. Said somewhat differently, the Gatling gun and the supreme speed with which men can be killed uncovers features of power negatively as power *not* to do good or to protect or enhance the security of a town and its inhabitants through the repression of the threat that comes from outside. Rather, we have a power over life and struggles for power that take place among competing technologies (the armored plate, the rifle, the pistol, the Gatling gun). The good, therefore, in *Fistful of Dollars* is separated from power, which Leone will make explicit in his *The Good, the Bad, and the Ugly*. It is this conjunction of the power of technology, the amplification of that power by the arrival of the stranger, and the failure of a landed perspective to withstand the domination of technology that marks the film as a Mediterranean Western. Echoing Simone Weil who said, "There is not on earth any other force except force," Silvanito reminds us and Joe: "C'e' solo odio e violenza per chi non sa sparare."²² Leone's films do nothing other than repeat this mantra.

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The Mediterranean milieu that Leone depicts in *Fistful of Dollars* in which technology dominates life both collective and individual is extended to entire regions in the second installment entitled *For a Few Dollars More*. Rather than focusing on one town, Leone instead centers his film on two killers and their partnership in tracking down a psychopathic killer, El Indio. The film once again both associates the domination of technology over the political with a Mediterranean perspective but also highlights those areas on both sides of the border as political spaces in which life is dramatically discounted. The opening moments of the film confirm both vectors of Leone's critique of power. The chilling opening shot in which we follow the movements of a man on horseback seen from the hills above picks up once again the point of view of technology that Leone first offered in *Fistful of Dollars*. In what will later become a

²¹ See in this regard Kriss Ravetto's reading of Pasolini's *Saló* and neo-capitalism in *The Unmaking of Fascist Aesthetics* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2001), 102-04.

²² Simone Weil, *The Need for Roots: Prelude to a Declaration of Duties Towards Mankind* (London: Routledge, 1952), 211.

classic visual cue in a host of first-person shooting video games, the camera tracks at a distance the man on horseback and then again from the point of view of the gun (and killer), shoots him. Here we have a neat shorthand for my earlier argument about the perspective afforded technology in Leone's Westerns and the role that the *mise-en-scène* plays. Rather than providing us with the sheer beauty or monumentality of the American Western in an opening establishing shot, Leone brings together the *mise-en-scène* of a certain kind of landscape that recalls nothing other than a nondescript barren wasteland with long-distance shooting. In this setting, however, no special meaning is attached to the importance of one life, except that it can be taken literally from above by technology and at a distance (the essential idea is that the film substitutes a technologized perspective of the gun for that of God). By moving the "action" outside of town, however, and literally tracking and opening fire on the man below, Leone extends the effects of technology on politics to an entire region.

This reading is soon confirmed in the opening lines of the film. "WHERE LIFE HAD NO VALUE, DEATH, SOMETIMES, HAD ITS PRICE. THAT IS WHY THE BOUNTY KILLERS APPEARED." The meaning of the phrase echoes Silvanito's words to the stranger in *Fistful of Dollars*. "This," he says, "is a town of cadavers" and cribs what was implicit in *Fistful of Dollars*, namely that the stranger was nothing more than a hired killer working both sides of the street as a sort of allegory of Mediterranean circularity. It is this association between the lack of any state and the protections it might afford life and the state of nature that truly characterizes all of Leone's films, but especially *Fistful of Dollars* and *For a Few Dollars More*. Or better: it is the combination of a political space in which no state enjoys spatial sovereignty over the territory, along with the extension of technology in that space that truly marks Leone's political perspective. In *For a Few Dollars More*, Leone has done away with the last vestiges of political forms and state power, which shouldn't surprise us given his upending of other institutions in general throughout the film: the desacralization of a church in particular stands out in those scenes featuring El Indio "preaching" to his henchmen. They are part of those smaller, though by no means less important, moments in the film in which Manco receives his reward money and then proceeds to remove the sheriff's badge. The most important consequence of this superimposition of weakened spatial sovereignty, one that begins and ends with the sea according to Schmitt, is precisely the fire sale on life. We see this across the film in some harrowing scenes of violence – El Indio, who kills a father after having murdered his family in a ruined church, stands out particularly. The film doesn't simply show us the story of the "bounty killers" (and we note that the usual term, hunter, is not employed) but also gives us a perspective on those lives that have little or no value. What might give value to life – interactions between people, secure and thriving towns, a functioning civil authority – has gone missing. Leone appears to be responding to the landed perspective of the American Western with another, one based upon what Hegel knew deeply, namely that "the sea invites man to conquest, and to piratical plunder."²³ And, indeed, nothing is conjured up so much by the safe that Indio and his band steal than in fact a treasure chest and a band of pirates who take it. In the absence of Schmitt's landed spatial sovereignty, what characterizes the sea, namely the potential for acquisition by violence, is often turned against life itself in the film.

This is exactly where we need to inscribe what Frayling and others have noted about *For a Few Dollars More*'s profanation of the church. What they fail to do, and what is required, is to extend the desacralization from the religious to the political sphere. This is the radical meaning of "where life has no value" offered in the opening captions and which the film captures visually.

²³ G.W.F. Hegel, *The Philosophy of History* (Kitchener, Ontario: Batoche Books, 2001), 108.

The barren, nondescript landscape in which life can be taken easily, indeed more easily at a distance than closer up, or better, the emptying out of the landscape of anything mythic or monumental, profanes what was primarily sacred in Ford's films, namely landscape itself.²⁴ We have in other words a *mise-en-scène* that mirrors the principal narrative of the film: life has no value and death does. This desacralization of life, however, isn't portrayed as coming into being by itself, but rather is joined to the Mediterranean's sea-bound perspective of the violent appropriation, the forcible taking of what is proper to another (in this case not simply property but one's life) that is an integral part of the sea's workings.

This desacralization of life is undeniably *not* the case in most American Westerns that appeared before these two Leone films. There, the mythic construction of the American community is repeated like some sort of ritual and with it the sacralization of life that films like *The Searchers* and *My Darling Clementine* visualize again and again. These films reveal the struggle to make what was held in common by all now sacred, now literally and figuratively part of a larger sacred history and future. The American Western enacts the sacralization of a territory and a nation but also those lives that inhabit it as well. Said differently, to the degree the American Western makes sacred a territory by repeatedly featuring the *mise-en-scène* of Monument Valley, it also marks off as sacred those lives that inhabit the territory.

For a Few Dollars More foregoes this monumental relation between subject and landscape, between sacred narrative and the construction of an American identity, by substituting profanation for sacralization. In Hawks' and Ford's Westerns, no part of political life is subject to a potential for acquisition that does not in some way go unpunished. From a landscape made profane to the monumental gunfight that now becomes killing at a distance, there is nothing sacred about the actions of Leone's film: no institution or life that hasn't been profaned. Life itself in Leone's films has little or no value precisely because life is subject to the value of its own death. On the one hand, the American Western racialized the lives that count, a life made sacred because of its racial heritage; saving a young girl who has been kidnapped, while at the same time unleashing death on scores of Native Americans.²⁵ Death always has meaning in the American Western: it is always consecrated as the death of white men and women even when the so-called turn to more tolerant perspectives on the Native American become stylish. On the other hand, in Leone's Westerns, death no longer respects one race, which is to say that death is made meaningless because life is no longer sacred. Accordingly, there is no separate sphere for the sacred in Leone's films: no life is separated as more or less meaningful than others since all lives appear to have a price. It is life priced in terms of death that marks Leone's films. What before

²⁴ On the important role of landscape in the Western, see Mitchell, chapter six as well as 230-35.

²⁵ The number of studies that treat of racism and the American Western are numerous indeed. Of particular interest especially with regard to John Ford, see Jacquelyn Kilpatrick, *Celluloid Indians: Native Americans and Film* (Lincoln, Neb.: University of Nebraska Press, 1999); Richard Maltby, "A Better Sense of History: John Ford and the Indians," in *The Book of Westerns*, eds. Ian Cameron and Douglas Pye (New York: Continuum, 1996), 34-49; Mary-Alice Money, "Broken Arrows: Images of Native Americans in the Popular Western," in *American Indian Studies: An Interdisciplinary Approach to Contemporary Issues*, ed. Dane Morrison (New York: P. Lang, 1997), 363-88; Roberta E. Pearson, "Indianism? Classical Hollywood's Representation of Native Americans," in *Classic Hollywood, Classic Whiteness*, ed. Daniel Bernardi (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2001); A. J. Prats, *Invisible Natives: Myth and Identity in the American Western* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2002); Scott Simmon, *The Invention of the Western Film: A Cultural History of the Genre's First Half-Century* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2003); *Living Color: Race and Television in the United States*, ed. Sasha Torres (Durham: Duke University Press, 1998); Terry Wilson, "Celluloid Sovereignty: Hollywood's 'History' of Native Americans," in *Legal Reelism: Movies As Legal Texts*, ed. John Denvir (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1996), 199-224.

was separate and set apart, namely a life, no longer is. Death and life inhabit literally the same space, which is precisely what the opening lines of *For a Few Dollars More* signal.

It may be useful to think this deep-seated profanation of life in terms of territory. In a recent essay on the modern and postmodern city, Massimo Cacciari posits that “non abitiamo piu’ città ma territori (territori da terreo, aver paura, provare terrore?!).”²⁶ In some sense, the process whereby cities give way to territories is one that deeply interests Leone in *For a Few Dollars More*. Here territory too is posited as a site of fear superimposed over a state of nature. To the degree territory names the space in which the state of nature is dominant, all forms of human life enjoy less protections than they might if they resided within the confines of a state. What Leone allows us to see, therefore, is precisely how towns devolve into territories thanks to the domination of a Mediterranean perspective of acquisition. In that sense, the bounty killers in Leone’s re-territorialized world are both the cause and the effect of the descent to territory, which we see across a wide-ranging profanation of institutions.²⁷

This is the final horizon in which we need to inscribe Leone’s Westerns, in that other history of the Mediterranean and the potential for acquisition. It is ultimately one that has troubled so many about Mortimer and Manco and their “bounty killing.” This potential for acquisition doesn’t concern merely the property of others, but extends to the lives of others, indeed of acquiring the experience of having killed another. Elias Canetti tells us in startling fashion what such a power is based upon: “ma che sotto, nascosti, ci siano determinati sentimenti di soddisfazione e che da questi sentimenti di soddisfazione . . . possa derivare qualcosa di molto pericolosa, se essi si verificano spesso e si sommano. E questa esperienza della morte altrui, pericolsamente accumulata, io credo sia un germe assolutamente essenziale del potere.”²⁸ There is something in Leone’s depiction of the bounty killers, Mortimer and Manco, that captures this fundamental facet of power, the sense that not simply do they kill for the bounty, but that something else is at stake, which is far more troubling and which cannot be masked by the witty repartee between the two. Canetti elaborates this idea further in *Crowds and Power*, where he notes in particular that the “moment of confronting the man he has killed fills the survivor with a special kind of strength. There is nothing that can be compared with it, and there is no moment which demands more repetition.”²⁹ That is the dark heart of the bounty killers, not making a living, but rather making a killing in both senses of the phrase for they make a living by making a killing. The desire for acquisition that I’ve associated with the Mediterranean milieu in *For a Few Dollars More* becomes the dark heart of Leone’s politics – one ultimately kills for the express purpose of surviving another.

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By way of conclusion, I would like to insist on the political stakes of what are generally thought to be Leone’s attempts at demystifying the conventions of the American Western. In this regard, consider Iain Chambers recent musings on the Mediterranean:

²⁶ The OED confirms the unsettled etymology: “*terre* to frighten, whence *terror* frightener, *territrium* ‘? a place from which people are warned off.’ “Territory,” *Oxford English Dictionary*.

²⁷ Here it may be helpful to note as well Leone’s abiding appreciation of the late 19th century Italian writer, Emilio Salgari.

²⁸ *Oltre la politica. Antologia del pensiero ‘impolitico,’* a cura di Roberto Esposito (Milano: Bruno Mondadori, 1996), 149.

²⁹ Elias Canetti, *Crowds and Power* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1960), 228.

The shores of vertical rigidities – both recalled and forgotten – of locale and their sedimented memories are also washed by horizontal waves that render the distant proximate, the foreign familiar. This is to complicate and contaminate not only the frames of time and space as the elsewhere of another time leaks into one's own appropriation of the world, but it is also to erode, disperse, and set adrift inherited bodies of analysis.³⁰

Chambers, like Cassano in not so different fashion, will go on to insist on the “different communality” of the Mediterranean that upsets enclosures like “law, land, and lineage.” Yet, as my reading of Leone's early Westerns demonstrates, this upsetting is much more than a simple shaking up of enclosures but concerns rather a radical overturning of these stabilities and institutions referred to by Chambers and others. What Chambers fails to mark about the Mediterranean is precisely what emerges from Leone's Westerns: the Mediterranean as the site in which life is devalued for the sake of acquisition masked by encounter and exploration. Leone's reversal leads him nearer the shore of vertical rigidity, certainly to a memory of another space, but one that is much more destructive and nihilistic than the one that Chambers imagines to be at the center of the Mediterranean milieu. This is a space that has devolved into a state of nature in which thinking any form of solidarity or commonality is problematic indeed. Not only are law and land reversed in the perspective of the sea to that of territory thanks to the proliferation of technology and speed, but there is also a concomitant devaluation of life itself. Ultimately, what Leone's Westerns allow us to see are the effects of setting adrift those inherited bodies of analysis: community, its defense, and law now give way to a space in which unbridled acquisition has devalued life.

³⁰ Iain Chambers, *Mediterranean Crossings: The Politics of an Interrupted Modernity* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2008), 141.

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