

From Puccini to the Pampas: American Frontier Myths, Italian Nationhood & Migration

Introduction: The myth of American frontiers in Italy is understood internationally to begin and end with the *Western all'italiana*, widely called the Spaghetti Western. Yet, the film genre was born out of a long and complex history of frontier tales told across so-called high- and low-brow media. Some scholarship exists on the cultured origins of the North American frontier in Italian opera, musicologist Pierpaolo Polzonetti's "Quakers and Cowboys: Italian Mythologies and Stereotypes of Americans from Piccinni to Puccini," for example. Investigations into the 'low-brow' have been constricted to film studies and largely left to UK scholars—such as Christopher Frayling, Howard Hughes, and Austin Fisher—who focus on the mutually-referential transatlantic evolution of U.S., Italian, and sometimes German, Western films. Meanwhile, entire forms have gone nearly unnoticed by scholarship, and though pop studies appeared at the horizon in the 1960s with essays like Umberto Eco's "The Myth of Superman," only recently are studies of Italian culture beginning in earnest to deal with mass-media pop culture. The current moment, thus, marks a significant opportunity to explore the very forms—the dime adventure-novel, the comic, and LPs of countercultural singer-songwriters—which have for over 100 years been vehicles for the myth of the North American frontier, known as the *Far-West*, in Italy, as well as of the frontier of the Pampas in Uruguay and Argentina.

A study of this myth in popular culture in 20th-century Italy could crucially shed light on some of the barriers to nationhood that have affected the peninsula since Unification and through the years of social turmoil following WWII. The second postwar period saw, according to scholars like Pier Luigi Sacco and Giuliana Minghelli among others, the start of a collective forgetting that continues to strain the maturation of the Italian republic. The foreign myth's cultural centrality hints at this desire to forget. Additionally, through these popular cultural productions, we can see not only the hopes and fears of a nation in its epic heroes and victims, but we can begin to understand how the productions may have acted, not only as representations of the national mood, but as intentional or unintentional myth-building for the ideological components that underly the American frontier myths.

When one thinks of myth, one may think of ancient Greek gods and epic heroes. But I refer here to modern myth as theorized by Roland Barthes, who argues that in today's day and age, mass media act as the perfect vehicles for circulating mythology. Modern myth, as he characterizes it, is the collusion of form and content that seeks to hide ideology in its message, while embedding it in our minds, from

whence it can emanate seemingly naturally as our own dreams and ideals.

Research question: My research considers how popular Italian myths of New-World frontiers not only reflected, but worked to fracture, Italian national identity and to inspire emigrants while redirecting the dreams of the families left behind. The research and following book-draft will be organized across three historical moments and two frontiers. Firstly, I will look at the reception history of Buffalo Bill's European tours—1887-1892 and 1902-1906—just one generation after Italian Unification, and during Italy's first big wave of immigration to the Americas. I will then consider the cultural productions that appeared in the wake of Buffalo Bill's final tour, for example Emilio Salgari's adventure-novel trilogy, *The Far-West Cycle* (1908-1910) and Giacomo Puccini's 1910 opera *The Golden Girl of the West*. Who were the audiences for these very different Western productions? How did they and other popular instances of the myth portray the North American frontier? How may they have influenced Italians' responses to sociopolitical changes after the First World War, as a second wave of emigrants left Italy and headed towards the mythical *Far-West* lands? Secondly, I am interested in censorship of *Far-West* tales during Fascism, as Mussolini sought to mold an Italian identity by any means necessary. *Far-West* tales certainly decreased during Fascism, but some were told, in comic strips particularly. How did heroism and valor shift under the thumbs of Fascist censorship? Thirdly, and perhaps most crucially, I will look at the *Far-West* as it was endlessly reproduced between 1945 and 1985. As the new Italian Republic became a Cold War battleground, between socialist and American-brand democratic ideals, the myth of *Far-West* was continually the most prevalent epic tale told. How might the myth have impacted the turmoil of post-WWII Italy and post-Fascist Italians struggling, once again, to conceive of themselves as a nation after two decades disrupted?

Finally, I will consider a very different frontier that was, if less prevalent, a fascinating mythical space in Italy, and across Europe, during the 20th century: the South American Pampas. In 1901 Gabriele D'Annunzio wrote of the Pampas in his epic poem, *Song of Garibaldi*, with a chapter titled "The Ocean and the Pampas." Between 1923 and 1940, European and North American writers such as Jules Supervielle, José Ortega y Gasset, and Archibald MacLeish, imagined the Argentinian and Uruguayan frontiers with a sterile and mathematical quality that purified it and abstracted it to a sort of divine realm. Mostly interesting, however, is the magical-realist Massimo Bontempelli's account in his 1939 talk "The Pampas and the Squares," especially as it related to his political views and his magical-realist works from the 1920s. Argentina was another important emigrant destination and frontier myths seem

to have represented a different set of promises, which added up, nonetheless, to a thorny sort of utopia. As the U.S. frontier slowly slipped from its centrality in the Italian postmodern imaginary, gauchos and the pampas took the place of cowboys and the prairie, for example, in the late 1980s and 1990s songs of Italian singer-songwriters and in comic book series like Milo Manara's and Hugo Pratt's *El Gaucho*.

Background: This research was born out of a body of cultural productions I discovered while researching the first chapter of my dissertation. My dissertation project, *The Mythologist in Microgroove: Fabrizio De André's Italy (1961-1981)*, began with a consideration of modern mythology, and narrowed its scope to speak specifically of the role of singer-songwriters as myth producers in Italy during the counterculture years. One dissertation chapter dealt with Italian cowboys songs (jvanwagenen.github.io/writing.html) and as I gathered source material for the preliminary research, I soon realized that (a) there was no comprehensive source to which I could turn for a clearer understanding of the long Italian relationship with the US frontier myth and (b) that the cultural productions that dealt with the myth are still largely untouched by scholarship.

The initial question expanded to include the Pampas and especially its frontier with Buenos Aires when I stumbled across an unknown talk given by Massimo Bontempelli. The talk plays a small but crucial part in an article I was writing (now forthcoming) on the chess set and fractal infinities in the works of Bontempelli and Jorge Luis Borges. As I searched for other descriptions of the Pampas frontier that might help explain Bontempelli's curious mythologizing, I discovered a group of writers who treat the pampas, gauchos, and Buenos Aires in a similar way, and I began to see the initial project pluralized to include both the prairie and the pampas.