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## Film Auteur Sergio Leone

by Jake Kola

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### Biography

**S**ergio Leone was an Italian filmmaker and director who was a pioneer of his craft during his lifetime. Born the son of a director and actress, Sergio was thrust into the life of cinema at a young age during the early days of the Italian Neo-realism film movement and the Peplum style films. It is noted that, “Leone's first directorial efforts, beyond assistant director, came in the sword and sandal films. But he was unheard of until he unleashed *A Fistful of Dollars* upon the world”.<sup>1</sup> Sergio Leone had his directorial debut in 1961 with *The Colossus of Rhodes*, but first struck gold in his early 30's with the film, *A Fistful of Dollars*; an Italian's version of the American “Old West”. Leone would go on to create two more films in the “Man with No Name” trilogy as well as more Western films, crime dramas, and even comedies before his death in 1989. He is a man with not the most film credits to his name, but for the fistful he does, they are undeniably his own.

### Sergio Leone's Importance to film history

Sergio is important to film history by creating the film movement that has become known as the “Spaghetti Western”. Although a strict definition isn't easily found, there are common pieces that different critics as well as websites point out as being critical to meeting this definition. The first is that the film must be produced by an Italian studio: spaghetti, check. The second is that it must be set in the Old West: Western, check. Third, the film should have a small budget. Fourth, the film is highly likely to be shot in Spain. Fifth, there is a higher level of stylized violence present as compared to American Westerns of the time. Sixth, morally ambiguous characters as well as costumes and people that are grittier and less clean-cut compared to their American cinema counterparts. Sergio Leone laid down these rules, and with his own small stylistic cues, created some of the most successful Italian films for an American audience of the 1960's and 1970's. To this day Sergio Leone and “Spaghetti Western” are permanently tied to one another, and that won't be changing anytime soon.

### Why Sergio Leone is an Auteur

A film Auteur is “A filmmaker whose individual style and complete control over all elements of production give a film its personal and unique stamp”.<sup>2</sup> As noted in the previous section, Sergio Leone could be considered the father of Spaghetti Westerns. Some Western Film websites even credit him as “the master of the Spaghetti western era” and creator of “some of the best Western films”.<sup>3</sup>

<sup>1</sup> “The Spaghetti Westerns of Sergio Leone.” The Spaghetti Western Database. Accessed May 3, 2019. [https://www.spaghetti-western.net/index.php/The\\_Spaghetti\\_Westerns\\_of\\_Sergio\\_Leone](https://www.spaghetti-western.net/index.php/The_Spaghetti_Westerns_of_Sergio_Leone)

<sup>2</sup> “Auteur.” In *Dictionary.com*.

<sup>3</sup> “Top 20 Spaghetti Westerns.” Most Wanted Western Movies. Accessed May 3, 2019. <http://most-wanted-western-movies.com/spaghetti-western-movies/>.

The signature style of Leone's films include "juxtaposing extreme close-up shots with lengthy long shots".<sup>4</sup> Throughout every one of his films, these shots can be seen. The Western films have repeated usage of this idea, one of the most famous being the final standoff at the end of *The Good, The Bad, and The Ugly* with its quick cuts between each of the characters faces as well as zoomed out overviews of the graveyard. Beyond this, Leone redefined what a Western movie was composed of, especially how it sounds. In *A Fistful of Dollars*, "The title sequence resounds to the sound of gunshots and Ennio Morricone's distinctive music, strikingly different to the orchestral scores and hokey renditions of folk songs that had characterized the soundtracks of American Westerns up to that time".<sup>5</sup> Leone's partnership with Morricone and the distinct style of music is carried over into every film that Leone directed after *A Fistful of Dollars* and the rest of the Man with No Name trilogy. To this day, the "cheesy" sound effects and music that originated in Leone's Spaghetti Westerns have become synonymous with the West and have reached the point of becoming "cliché". This point holds especially true at a personal level as Leone's Westerns are what come to mind when I think of the Old West, compared to TV shows like *Gunsmoke* or movies such as *Rio Bravo*. Even when a modern TV commercial is looking to capitalize on an Old West theme, they sample the music or sound effects of Morricone from one of Leone's movies. Common themes that Leone films used include the use of morally ambiguous characters such as Blondie aka the Man with no Name from the eponymous trilogy. In the final movie of the series, *The Good, The Bad, and the Ugly* he is the "good" in the title, but far from it in action. He scams, crosses, and kills for selfish ambition and in pursuit of the almighty dollar. That being said, he spares Tuco at the end of the film and rides off into the sunset only with his share of the gold, leaving Tuco roped but with his share. Another theme common in Sergio Leone films is how American cinema contrasts with what he, or other Europeans view and believe America to be. Leone was an Italian man who worked on films that would be released in America using American actors at times, but he himself identified as Italian by birth and European in his views. His films, especially the early Westerns, all have an almost mythological feeling about them and how they are filmed and directed. They are what Europeans expect Americans of the Old West to really look like; not necessarily the truth but what people expect the truth to look like. This builds into the third theme of deconstructing American cinema. From *A Fistful of Dollars* all the way to *Once Upon a Time in America*, Leone has a way of boiling down a story to its "violence and greed", in the words of Roger Ebert. Another write up states, "Leone's camera celebrates the visceral energy of America's mythology of violent individualism while remaining coolly ambivalent about its morality. His West is the savagery of the frontier without the posthumous, self-justifying liberal veneer with which American films of the classic era liked to coat it".<sup>6</sup> This review is based around the Old West films, but I think helps to describe Leone's view of The West, aka the United States, in general. High violence and moral ambiguity, as previously noted, are critical themes for many of Leone's films.

<sup>4</sup> "Sergio Leone." In *Internet Movie Database*. Accessed May 4, 2019.

[https://www.imdb.com/name/nm0001466/?ref\\_=nv\\_sr\\_1?ref\\_=nv\\_sr\\_1](https://www.imdb.com/name/nm0001466/?ref_=nv_sr_1?ref_=nv_sr_1).

<sup>5</sup> Edwards, Dan. "Great Directors: Sergio Leone." *Senses of Cinema*. Last modified October 2002. Accessed May 4, 2019. <http://sensesofcinema.com/2002/great-directors/leone/>

<sup>6</sup> Edwards, Dan. "Great Directors: Sergio Leone." *Senses of Cinema*. Last modified October 2002. Accessed May 4, 2019. <http://sensesofcinema.com/2002/great-directors/leone/>.

## Films by Sergio Leone

During the course of his career, Leone had a late start as the Director of films, as he spent the majority of his film career crediting as a Second Unit or Assistant Director.<sup>7</sup> In total, Sergio Leone is credited with 8 movies as the Director on the IMDB website, with 1 of those being a documentary, so 7 films where he left his mark on history. The first film of his career, 1961's *The Colossus of Rhodes*, was more of a starting point for Leone to gather his footing as a director, and establish himself as being capable as well as able to function on a small budget. From here, Leone took a huge jump from the sword and sandal epic to the Spaghetti Western as they would become known.

1964's, *A Fistful of Dollars*, opens with Ennio Morricone's music and gunshots ringing out to announce the opening credits. From here, we reach the wide vista overlooking some Spanish style homes and the tight focus on actors faces. Clint Eastwood comes into frame as a small child is beat up and shot at by some bandits, and he minds his own and simply fills his canteen. As becomes the theme, he plays both sides in order to make profit. Throughout the movie the violence and lack of morality is clearly present, as is the contrast to Hollywood Western films of the era. The finale of the film contains all the elements that make a good Spaghetti Western as well as mark it as Leone's: A violent gunfight, good wide shot and close-up juxtaposition, the Man with No Name saving Silvanito, and Ennio Morricone's thematic music playing to enhance it.

1965's *For a Few Dollars More*, opens with wide vista and only whistling at first that leads to an immediate murder and an Ennio Morricone soundtrack opening. Clint Eastwood is referred to as "Manco" in this film and partners up with another ambiguous character that appears in all black as if a villain, Douglas Mortimer. These two characters spend the film going from working for the sheriff to working for an outlaw bandit, once again in the name of profit. The two characters end up crossing each other at different times, as well as pairing up due to convenience and necessity. Manco is in it for the profit and does good or bad based on convenience, much like Mortimer. Mortimer is almost exactly the same, except his motivation is based upon revenge. The final gun battle of this film is similarly set up as it is in the first movie of the series. Close up of faces, guns, pocket watches, mixed with long shots of the "battle field", Ennio Morricone music, high violence, and Leone's own vision of the American West. The film concludes with both characters riding off separately into the sunset.

The last film that is going to be noted for Leone's distinct style is what to me is his "Magnum Opus": 1966's *The Good, The Bad, and The Ugly*. Before the action even starts, Morricone's soundtrack starts and we have the famous "wah wah wah" sounds to kick off the movie. Once again a wide open vista shot is how the movie opens, this time with a face sliding into the screen and moving between two other bounty hunters. Gun shots announce the entrance of "The Ugly", "The Bad", and "The Good". A funny note is that the actor Lee Van Cleef who played Mortimer, the man seeking vengeance in the previous films, is now just a cold blooded killer in this one playing an entirely different character. This re-casting/re-use of an actor fits the Spaghetti Western bill very well, as Hollywood would only go this route if the actor was playing the same type or same character and not the opposite. Profit and "always finishing the job" is what "The Bad" lives for in this film. For all 3 of the actors, profit is the motivating factor. The finale of this film is what defines a perfect Western. Tuco searches through the graveyard for the correct burial site as "The Ecstasy of Gold" plays, leading to the inevitable Mexican standoff as all three of the characters fight for who shall claim the gold, Leone's camerawork provides many tight close ups as well as vista shots, violence, and moral

<sup>7</sup> "Sergio Leone." In *Internet Movie Database*. Accessed May 4, 2019.  
[https://www.imdb.com/name/nm0001466/?ref\\_=nv\\_sr\\_1?ref\\_=nv\\_sr\\_1](https://www.imdb.com/name/nm0001466/?ref_=nv_sr_1?ref_=nv_sr_1).

ambiguity as to right and wrong. “The Bad” is killed, and Tuco faces the gallows as Eastwood gallops off, pausing to sever the rope with a gun shot. For one last time and as a good marker for the Spaghetti Western, the Man with No Name rides off into the sunset with his share of the loot. “Wah Wah Wah”

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