Bodies of Desire and Bodies in Distress

Bodies of Desire and Bodies in Distress: The Golden Age of Italian Cult Cinema 1970-1985

By

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This book is dedicated with much love to Caroline and Zena

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FOREWORD

ENZO G. CASTELLARI

My memory of Italy during the 1970s was a strange memory, because I was out of the country between 1967 and 72, when I was shooting movies all around the world. As a result, I don't remember the famous 1968, with all of the student revolutions. I didn't live directly in those times because I was often outside of Europe filming. The only memory I have of that time was returning to Rome to pick up a copy of my graduation certificate in architecture, only to find that this university was the first to be destroyed in this kind of student revolution, so I started to hate that times!

Of course this was the time of the *Red Brigades*, with the kidnappings and so many horrible things. The Italian people were living with the pain of what was happening. They were living with the fear to go just outside of their door, in case they would be murdered. It was a terrible time as I remember. In fact I recall that all of us had permission to carry guns and to use them for our own defence. I remember when I was filming my movie *The Big Racket*, all of the crew were armed with real guns, and we would

be on shooting practice in the lunch breaks, so this tells you that Italy at this time was all a big mess!

I did all of my best movies during the period that became known as the *Anni di piombo*. In 1973 I did *High Crime,* in 1974 I did *Street Law* and so on. Although this was a very political time, throughout these years I had never been political. I am still never involved in any politics. This is a problem for my career, perhaps! But in those 1970s movies, critics considered me to have been completely fascist for showing what was happening to Italian citizens during this time. This was especially so with the press for *Street Law*. Yet in Italy during this period there were idealistic communes where the young communists lived. I was once invited to one of those very left-wing communes to screen my film *Street Law* on a big projector. In fact, the left-wing audience loved it! But everybody in the press considered this film to be fascist, and also considered me as the director to be especially fascist! But I see it like this. Imagine one morning I go to the bank to pay in my salary. Suddenly there is a hold-up. They hit me. They steal my money. They take me away and assault me. Imagine, I am the victim of this terrible violence, but the police do nothing to help me. Of course, I just want my revenge, so I start to take out my revenge personally. I want to start my vendetta, but that does not make me a fascist.

If anything, what disturbed critics was the fact that my movies were exactly the picture of that time in Italy. They reflected the fear that was there every day, for everybody, you lived with it! There was fear right at your door. Every day you would go out and never be sure you would make it home alive. There were the Red Brigades, the Black Brigades, the Crimson Brigades and so on. So you were so afraid all the time.

But while I could not resolve the situation in reality, I created the chance just for two hours, to resolve it in my movies. At least for my spectators, the fear, the problems, the terrorism could be solved. What was so perfect about those movies, was that if you look at one of them, you really got inside the mind of the leading character. This was because his fears, his anxieties matched the fears of Italian people at this time. So, it was a kind of exchange between the Italian actors and the Italian people.

This exchange also occurred in a kind of films that critics hated, which are now the kinds of movies considered as cult movies or B-movies. I was once at a press conference with Quentin Tarantino, and a critic asked me

"what is it like to work in B-movies?" The answer is that it gives you tremendous freedom and the power to create. I have done this throughout my career and hope to continue to do so in the future. So I am very proud of the labels of cult and B-movie. Whatever we mean by 'B-movies', I am proud to work in them. As Quentin Tarantino and I said at our press conference: "B is for B movie, B is for beautiful!"

—Enzo G. Castellari - Director

INTRODUCTION

BODIES OF DESIRE *AND* BODIES OF DISTRESS BEYOND THE 'ARGENTO EFFECT'

> One of the problems in dealing with film and television programmes in terms of their cult status lies in defining precisely what 'cult' means in such a context. Does it simply refer to a congregation of fans or enthusiasts around particular cultural texts, or is there a cult quality within the texts themselves, some property that encourages or facilitates an audience's cultish devotion? Or is it a mixture of the two…
> —Peter Hutchings, 'The Argento Effect'[1]

Introduction

Over the last decade, critics and theorists have begun to develop a distinct body of knowledge to consider those texts and auteurs previously dismissed as examples of cult, 'trash' or 'bad' cinema. The development of this new line of enquiry has been evidenced by the publication of key polemics and manifestos which seek to define and divide the cult image from other types of cinematic activity (such as the celluloid mainstream), whilst also exploring some of the national *and* psychic tensions that these texts come to exemplify. One of the earliest and most influential accounts in this area was Jeffrey Sconce's article 'Trashing the Academy', which not only formulated the cult-friendly-category of the 'paracinematic', but also identified certain classes of marginal texts which are frequently shunned on grounds of technical or representational 'excess', or simply because they are deemed as an affront to the boundaries of 'good taste'. Sconce's analysis focused attention on how paracinema's emphasis on "cinematic style and excess"[2] (most frequently figured through atypical and confrontational gender or racial codes), can effectively represent a challenge to prevalent ideologies and taste arbiters. However, he also recognised the crucial role that fans and academics have in rereading these often subcultural and subversive texts. He notes: "The caustic rhetoric of paracinema suggests a pitched battle between a guerrilla band of cult film viewers and an elite core of would-be cinematic taste makers."[3] Indeed, in

challenging the presumed ideological basis of this cinematic orthodoxy, Sconce makes the revision of these oft marginal texts a near-political requirement, noting that:

> Paracinematic taste involves a reading strategy that renders the bad into the sublime, the deviant into the defamiliarized, and in so doing calls attention to the aesthetic aberrance and stylistic variety evident but routinely dismissed in the many subgenres of trash cinema.[4]

In contravention of these narrow ideological prescriptions, the author argues that the cult text represents "an aesthetic of vocal confrontation",[5] whose narrative features and specific patterns of audience identification require further investigation.

It is the interrogation of these marginal texts, auteurs and audiences which has preoccupied cult film theorists since the publication of Sconce's article. In this respect, the academy has not merely been 'trashed', but that process of ransacking has undoubtedly expanded the acceptance of certain marginal texts by this critical community. However, this new agenda of trash textuality has (until recently) been dominated by attempts to reclaim Anglo-American objects of study. Indeed, following the case studies of American pulp auteurs such as Ed Wood Jnr and H.G. Lewis provided by Sconce's original analysis, other prominent examples of this agenda have included Joan Hawkins' project to redefine the American avant-garde along pulp lines (as seen in her volume *Cutting Edge*),[6] as well as Eric Schaefer's attempts to systematise Stateside sleaze in his historiographical account "*Bold! Daring! Shocking! True!": A History of Exploitation Films 1919–1959*.[7]

Italy and the Argento Effect

Although Italy was a major producer of the kinds of text that Sconce's analysis would classify under 'cult', 'trash' or 'exploitation' banners, theoretical receptions of their nationally-specific paracinema works have been limited to a narrow focus on those few individuals whose output has been fortunate enough to be valorised at an international level. Thus, when Peter Hutchings refers above to the 'Argento Effect' of Italian cult cinema, he can be seen as defining *both* the singular director, whose oeuvre has been the subject of the most sustained studies in this area, as well as a much wider (and arguably limiting) 'Effect', which has attempted to isolate Dario Argento's cinema from wider Italian cult trends in this area. Expanding on Sconce's original paracinema polemic, Hutchings notes several levels of immoderation in Argento's cinema, which firstly "exceed

any narrative function and which go beyond the scenes of licensed or permitted excess in the mainstream".[8] Noting the director's penchant for complex cinematography, elaborate lighting and sound design, Hutchings firstly argues that Argento's cinema exceeds generic definitions of the horror/thriller hybrid in which he operates, thus giving his cinema a countercultural aesthetic, which is often acknowledged by the attuned cult follower.

Arguably, this stylistic level of opulence differentiates Argento's films from 'standard' mainstream cinematic operations that cult film theorists tend to view as ideologically-laden. However, it is his well documented annexing of cinematographic brilliance with scenarios of sexual violence and mutilation that confirm a transgressive surplus as essential to the definitions of 'excess' that such cult texts contain. Thus, the Argento Effect speaks to those texts dominated not only by the "excessiveness and spectacle of the scenes of violence they contain",[9] but also the ways in which these texts often subvert heteronormative presumptions (often through the trope of gender ambiguity), thus making them "potentially transgressive of certain sexual norms".[10]

Interestingly, Hutchings makes clear the potential division between academic and fan discourses in relation to Italian cult film auteurs such as Argento, noting that while the former group have characteristically focused on the potential gender disruptions within his work, the latter have largely turned their attention to elements of stylistic and expressionistic excess, which they feel often go unrecognised in the censorship Argento's work has endured.[11] To this end, fan discourses often employ journalistic associations which valorise their cherished cult object through an equation with more acknowledged and accepted cinematic figures. Thus, leading genre critic Alan Jones has frequently defined Argento as both "The Italian Hitchcock"[12] (in recognition of his ability to subvert genre expectations in the fashion of the acknowledged 'master of mystery'), whilst also dubbing him "The Horror Fellini"[13] (for his ability to infuse elements of arthouse within the formulaic foundations of Eurotrash cinema).

While this willingness to consider Argento an unappreciated or unrecognised cult 'master' has now become a standard trope in many fan-oriented (and obsessive) paracinematic approaches, it is interesting to note the extent to which the Argento Effect has also become a mechanism through which academic discourses in this area have attempted to separate the director's output from his contemporaries in the Italian cult sphere. For instance, while similarly identifying an element of trangression in the "excess and grotesque"[14] arena of Italian horror in which he operates,

Mary P. Wood is careful to separate Argento from other directors in this field, citing the decisive degree of authorial intent he retains over these unique cinematic visions. Writing in the volume *Italian Cinema*, Wood notes:

> Argento has always had production control of his films which, from *L'uccello dalle piume di cristallo* (*The Bird with the Crystal Plumage*) … covered their costs on the Italian market alone. Since 1982 Argento has both diversified into pulp film production by the company he owns and runs with his brother … In common with other Italian *auteurs* he has moved into 'quality' genre and international distribution. His cult, international status ensures that his films maintain premium prices on the racks of video and DVD.[15]

Whilst it is important to acknowledge Argento's influence in the arena of Italian paracinema accounts (and one I would admit has certainly guided my own earlier interventions in this field), it is also crucial to recognise that the theoretical interest in his cinema has often occurred at the expense of a more thorough and sustained analysis of both textual patterns and gender configurations occurring in Italian cult film more generally. As Maitland McDonagh, author of the first published monograph on the director, has conceded:

> You can't reasonably look at Argento's work without bearing in mind the contradictory context from which he springs: on the one hand, the practical Italian film industry, with its relentless emphasis on genre and its quick and dirty production practices; on the other, the cerebral world of film criticism, with its inevitable emphasis on analysis and intellectual distance.[16]

In this respect, *Bodies of Desire and Bodies in Distress: The Golden Age of Italian Cult Cinema 1970–1985* aims to expand existing debates around Italian paracinema and wider 'cult' representations of gender and subjectivity beyond the Argento Effect. I have chosen the period from 1970 to 1985 as a framework for the volume because during this period a number of significant Italian cult film directors, formats and icons emerged that retained a high degree of internal coherence and wider social impact, while also complicating representations of subjectivity and identity as currently theorised by film studies. Because of their repeated conflation of desire with scenarios of threat, murder or humiliation, I shall refer to these texts under the heading 'Bodies of Desire and Bodies in Distress', in explicit recognition of the fact that the narratives embodied a disturbing focus on sexual excess and annihilation, with scenes often directly presented to a fictionalised and shocked viewing audience. If it is

these features that defined the unique viewing experience of Italian cult cinema between 1970 and 1985, then it is also an experience which I feel requires further theorisation.[17]

Given his historical and international importance to this field, Dario Argento's output is certainly explored herein, but my interest is in situating his work alongside those less theorised 'low budget' directors (such as Umberto Lenzi, Aristide Massaccesi, Pupi Avati, Enzo G. Castellari and others), marginal icons (including Tomas Milian, Franco Nero and Laura Gemser) and 'disreputable' genres (including rape-and-revenge, erotica, rogue cop and post-apocalypse cycles). Through these case studies, I wish to see if any textual regularities and shared representational strategies can be defined which assist in the wider understanding of these works.

However, while my explicit aim is to expand research in this area beyond the current Argento Effect, it is not my intention to analyse *every* Italian cult film director, icon or genre between 1970 and 1985 (which would be impossible, even given the relative luxury that an extended monograph format permits). As a result, some key traditions of Italian paracinema (such as the infamous cannibal, zombie and possession cycles of the late 1970s and early 1980s) have been omitted from the current study, although their thematic concerns and representational features clearly fit with the wider assertions about this area of cult activity that I wish to explore. However, I wish to use the indicative case studies contained within this book to assess their dual psychic and social particularities, so that key criteria may be derived that can then be applied to additional Italian paracinema formats. I also make explicit from the outset that I do *not* intend to cover the wider international reception of these works vis-à-vis debates on censorship policy or structures of state control. While I concur that censorship and the suppression of 'excess' is often central to "the marginal status which has been seen by some as a necessary precondition of cultdom",[18] I also feel that these debates have been well represented by both policy analysts and audience studies specialists alike.[19]

From an Italian Argento to an Italian Unconscious

As the title *Bodies of Desire and Bodies in Distress* implies, my methodological orientation involves an expansion of those psychoanalytic and gender-based approaches currently used to dissect Argento's cinema, which I will use to explore other areas of Italian paracinema. I would here concur with Peter Hutchings' observation, that these approaches are best

viewed as "symptomatic, as a window on themes and issues that do not pertain to Argento alone".[20] By extending the use of psychoanalytic methodologies to these marginal cycles, icons and auteurs of Italian cult film, I am interested in exploring the extent to which these symptomatic readings can be linked with existing cine-psychoanalytical and clinical accounts, which situate representations of female sexuality in wider systems of masculine (or what Jacques Lacan termed Symbolic) ideology. Equally, I am also interested to explore how the recurrent theme of the traumatised male viewer in all of the film formats surveyed may also indicate the extent to which the Italian cult experience evidences fissures in masculine subjectivity. Finally, by identifying 1970–1985 as the period of review, I am interested in exploring how the symptomatic readings that Hutchings identifies evidence the intersection between psychic traumas and wider social tensions occurring in Italy at this time.

Either alone (or in combination with socio-historical accounts), psychoanalysis arguably remains the most dominant methodology used to consider Italian cult cinema. Specifically, the perspective is used to address the abundant issues of unresolved infantile sexuality, which the Italian cult film frequently uses as a rationale for adult scenarios of transgression, with these illicit acts characteristically revealed via ambiguous flashbacks that conflate sexuality with threat, punishment and gender disorientation. By replicating scenarios that conflate the boundaries of desire and distress, these images evoke psychoanalytical notions of unresolved primal trauma, which impede both sexual and narrative progression. Indeed, as early as 1996, Adam Knee's article 'Gender, Genre and Argento', highlighted the centrality of the primal scene (or fantasised access to parental relations) as a core component in the director's work, with subsequent accounts building upon this interpretation. For instance, when discussing the ambiguous assault that the amateur detective Sam Dalmas witnesses in the art gallery opening to *L'uccello dalle piume di cristallo* (AKA *The Bird with the Crystal Plumage*, 1970), Knee notes:

> The extreme (and, one suspects, erotic) nature of the protagonist's fascination with and attachment to this scene becomes clearer as the film progresses: he repeatedly shows more interest in details of the investigation than in the amorous attentions of his girlfriend…[21]

It has been a willingness to expand the consideration of these unresolved primal tensions from Argento's output to the Italian thriller format of the *giallo* in which he works that has dominated more recent interventions in this field. For instance, in his brief but important overview 'Playing with Genre: An Introduction to the Italian *Giallo*', Gary

Needham situates the development of the *giallo* cycle (from late 1920s literary product and imported detective fiction novelisations) to two specific periods of cinematic activity, occurring between 1963–1964 and 1970–1975 respectively. Arguably, the second period of development evidences the Argento Effect at an industrial level (with the international success of the director's debut film spawning a significant range of domestically produced emulations and unofficial sequels). While Needham's consideration of the *giallo* calls for an analysis based on "the various associations, networks, tensions and articulations of Italian cinema's textual and industrial specificity in the post-war period",[22] he also complements this with an expansion of the psychoanalytic themes outlined above. Firstly, the author notes the term "*Testimone oculare*" as referencing Italian definitions for the label of eyewitness to a crime. However, the author notes that access to this traumatic visual 'scene' establishes a pattern of transgressive and illicit viewing that exceeds pure criminological scrutiny. Finding their basis in psychosexual trauma, these crimes characteristically conflate images of sexuality and violence, while establishing a pattern that intersects across intended narrative development. Importantly, the prominence of psychoanalysis in the *giallo* text extends to include characterisation, as evidenced by the sub-cycle of films that feature therapists having to adopt the role of detectives in order to resolve sexual wrongdoing. Equally, the symptomatic reading of such discourses extends to particular modes of excessive characterisation whereby "performances confirm that hysteria is always histrionic when it comes to Italian cinema".[23] While Needham concedes that the *giallo* is dominated by fractured female protagonists who are "either in therapy, have had therapy or are told that they *need* therapy",[24] it is noticeable that male heteronormative subjectivity is equally disturbed, with an abundance of represented feminine excess pushing the cycle into the realms of camp/queer identification.

Though psychoanalytic interpretations of cinema have a long established (and often contested) status within film studies research, these methods have proven extremely attractive to critics and analysts attempting to unpick and decode the extremes of horror and cult imagery. Implicit in these accounts is the idea that such derided trash templates facilitate the 'return of the repressed', with suppressed sexual and (anti) social childhood urges being gratified via the representational strategies of the genre (with these often being fed directly through the figure/body of the monster),[25] as well as through the subversive stylistic strategies that the medium employs to unsettle the adult and civilised status of the viewing subject. It is not within the remit of this current volume to explore the

wider applicability or use-value of psychoanalytic interpretation in relation to the cinematic image,[26] but rather to highlight the extent to which this methodology provides both an interpretive framework for understanding key themes within the texts under review, as well as a pivotal point of reference for Italian filmmakers and audiences engaged in the production and reception of these texts.

Indeed, it seems more than coincidence that Dario Argento's films have been most extensively explored as instances of psychosexual drama, than as examples of Italian cinematic culture, even by Italian critics themselves. Moreover, the filmmaker has himself acknowledged the importance of psychoanalysis to the creation of his narratives (with his comments on the use-value of this methodology being outlined in the interview I conduct with him that is reproduced in chapter five of the volume). Whilst Argento's interest in issues of sexual trauma and the complexities of masculine voyeurism have long been acknowledged, this psychoanalytic awareness extends beyond the personal interests of the director to reflect a far larger point of reference in Italy during the 1970s. In two recent contributions to the journal *International Forum of Psychoanalysis*, Marco Conci has begun to explore the long history of psychoanalysis within a specific Italian context. In his 2008 article 'Italian Themes in Psychoanalysis – International Dialogue and Psychoanalytic Identity', the author explores Freud's links to Italian psychoanalytic culture, as well as the wider national reception of this methodology. Conci concedes that while "It actually took many years for psychoanalysis to become established in Italy and for Italian psychoanalysts to gain international recognition as important intellectual players in their field",[27] the country's traditional emphasis on family structures, sibling drama and maternal dominance rendered it a natural, national home for the emergent discourse, not least by Freud himself. Here, Conci cites Freud's 1923 correspondence with Edoardo Weiss (the founding father of Italian psychoanalysis), in which he commented: "Have no doubt that there is a future for psychoanalysis in Italy too. You only have to wait for a suitable time."[28] Having already studied with Freud in Vienna, Weiss became central to the development of the discipline in Italy, publishing *Elementi di psicoanalisi* (AKA *Basic Concepts of Psychoanalysis*) in 1931. This volume was the first Italian account of the subject. It was closely followed by the formal reconstitution of the Societa Psicoanalitica Italiana (Italian Psychoanalytic Society) in 1932, along with the formation of the journal *Rivista italiana di psicoanalisi*, which lasted from 1932 until 1934, when the publication was disbanded under the fascist regime. As a result, Weiss fled from Italy to America. For Conci, it was wider political pressure

(rather than a lack of national interest) which prevented the widespread dissemination of psychoanalysis in Italy during this period. As he states:

> I should also add that it took our culture and society many years to emancipate themselves not only from the biased anti-modernity attitude of the Catholic Church and from the antiscientific brand of idealistic philosophy represented by Benedetto Croce (1866–1952), but also from Mussolini's (1922–1943) nationalistic and obscurantist regime.[29]

Importantly, it was only when this 'anti-modernity' rhetoric was revised during the later economic revolution, that the Italian public's fascination with psychoanalysis was fully revealed.[30] Equally, as Conci notes in an earlier article 'Psychoanalysis and Italy: A Reappraisal', Italy also became a major European translator of psychoanalytic texts during this period, further evidencing the dissemination of this perspective into wider domestic culture.[31] While Conci's comments make clear a nation clearly fascinated by debates around traumatic material bound by both violent and sexual excess, what remains as fascinating (from a critical perspective) is why this interest was heightened during the 1970s. Arguably, the loosening of certain censorship and moral codes certainly added to a wider public willingness to consume taboo material, but this still does not fully account for the unnerving connection between bodies of desire and bodies in distress that underpins the key genres surveyed in this volume.

A more appropriate method of interpretation would be to expand upon these accounts to align psychoanalysis with a historically attuned consideration of events occurring in Italy during the 1970s. Indeed, in his recent volume *La Dolce Morte: Vernacular Cinema and the Italian Giallo Film,* Mikel J. Koven adopts an innovative folklorist approach to the study of format, applying debates from oral culture to the series, as well as assessing how the phenomenon mirrored wider trends and tensions within Italian post-war society. Here, Koven divides distinct urban and rural (or vernacular) Italian audiences, with the latter revealing a resistance to *both* modernist modes of narration *and* the processes of modernisation which accompanied the Italian economic miracle of the post-war years. While acknowledging that the "[p]opular awareness of Freudian psychology permeates the psyches of these *giallo* killers",[32] Koven goes on to reject this line of enquiry, concluding: "I remain unconvinced that audiences would actually care about such motivations."[33] However, this dismissal of psychoanalytic interpretations of the *giallo* does contain an interesting caveat which calls for a "recognition of past trauma on the contemporary Italian psyche".[34] Here, the author concedes that the repeated focus on

childhood states that bleed over into contemporary fears can be seen as "reflecting the more cultural explanation of 1970s Italian disassociation resulting from fascism, military defeat … and post-war reconstruction".[35]

Although not fully explored in the rest of his volume, Koven's comment does suggest potential intersections surrounding psychic and social trauma in relation to not only Argento's films but the wider sphere of Italian cult cinema explored in this book. Indeed, to return to Conci's consideration of the explosion of interest in psychoanalysis in 1970s Italy, it seems significant that he cites other contemporary concerns as provoking the public interest in the split subject: "since 1968 also in Italy we benefited from the development of a social critique based on psychoanalysis."[36] Whether seen through the rapid and politicised growth of the Italian feminist movement (with its associated fears surrounding female sexual dominance), the catastrophic collapse of longstanding economic prosperity during the mid-1970s (with its concurrent traumas for male potency), or even the decade-long anxieties around terrorist outrages (which themselves evoke implicit concerns over the violent loss of subjectivity), this was clearly a period in which psychic and social terrors coalesced in the Italian mindset. Indeed, one of the most fruitful areas of research to impact on the current project remains recent accounts by Alan O' Leary, Ruth Glynn and others[37], who have begun to reassess the impact of the so-called *Anni di piombo* or years of lead, in which terrorist fears dominated the Italian political and cultural landscape of the 1970s and mid 1980s. Here, a range of authors have noted that fears of insurrection were played out in predominantly populist and fictional formats that fused contemporary imagery of social turmoil within family dramas that often evoked traumas of castration, body wounding and fears around the female body. The project of the current volume will therefore be to assess not only the applicability of psychoanalysis to a range of key Italian cult film texts, but also to survey the extent to which social turmoil and psychic disturbance between 1970 and 1985 became recurrent features in the following chapter case studies under review.

Bodies of Desire and Bodies in Distress

In order to explore the shared social and psychic tensions embodied by the Italian cult film experience of the 1970s, I have organised this book into a series of case studies of key cycles, auteurs and icons, whose disturbing emphasis on bodies of desire and distress can be interpreted using psychoanalytic, gender-based and socio-cultural accounts where appropriate.

In my opening chapter, I offer an extended assessment of both Dario

Argento and key *giallo* titles produced during the 'classic' period of 1970–1975. As the most celebrated area of Italian paracinema, it is necessary to situate these texts in light of the theoretical assumptions that I have begun to identify above. Central to this discussion will be my consideration of the extent to which the staging of a primal scene encounter remains at the traumatic core of the cycle. Drawing on Freud's celebrated case study of the patient who became known as the Wolf Man, I shall outline the key features of primal trauma, as well as discussing the extent to which the presentation of an infantile compulsion (conflating scenes of sexuality and implied threat or violence) are reproduced by both the content and structure of the *giallo*. Although psychoanalysis has often been employed as a mechanism through which to read such scenes of transgression within crime fiction, it is my intention to use these accounts (derived from not only Jacques Lacan, but also Geraldine Pederson-Krag and Slavoj Žižek), to provide a more sustained analysis of the cycle under review. In particular, I shall consider two key Argento titles where a past scene of sexual violation initiates contemporary carnage, as well as revealing the inability of male authority figures to foreclose the endless circulation of perversions they entail.

The second chapter moves from the return of the repressed to the return of the rural, by offering the first theoretical consideration of a cycle I will term as the *Mezzogiorno giallo*. The term *Mezzogiorno* (used to connote a wider set of nationally specific debates that surround the concept of the Southern problem), has a long trajectory within Italian studies, but has yet to be fully realised in discussions of cult material. As I reveal in the course of this chapter, the *Mezzogiorno giallo* is in fact a cycle that can be traced to widespread social fears about Italian unification and concurrent mythologies of the Italian Southerner as barbaric and uncivilised. By referencing a variety of historical sources, I discuss the extent to which the Italian South has become configured as a site of mythical fears, impacting on representations of the landscape and its inhabitants. In order to explore these tensions further, I identify a series of specific tropes used in Southern *giallo* depictions (which include the motif of a fictionalised journey, the fusion of dramatic and comic inserts, as well as a specific coda for depicting a rural physiology). While these representations clearly draw parity with established Italian fears surrounding concepts of geographical perversity, I also explore the extent to which '*Mezzogiornosploitation*' reproduces key features of the primal scene, by presenting bodies of desire and bodies in distress within a specifically rural context.

Chapter three moves from the rural to the railroad, considering a

significant cycle of Italian rape-and-revenge dramas that were popular between 1975 and 1980. Although briefly defined in Mikel J. Koven's book under the label of 'suspense-thriller *giallo*', these titles reveal a number of significant differences to the main variants the author outlines in his volume *La Dolce Morte*. Not only do these later entries eschew the detective element of the *giallo* by clearly identifying their transgressors at an early stage, but they also replace their constructions of air travel and mobility as signifiers of liberation, with a nihilistic concentration on road and rail journeys as routes to rape and victimisation. As a result, the suspense thriller *giallo* raises significant and controversial issues of gender representation, which are complicated by the frequent marketing of these titles in line with contemporary American rape and revenge dramas. By analysing both cinematic texts and poster/marketing campaigns affiliated to the suspense thriller *gialli* titles, I explore the extent to which the series reveals a nationally specific rendition of a female avenger, which can be linked to both socio-cultural and psychoanalytic concerns. With its emphasis on strident and vengeful women wreaking revenge on deviant and ineffectual males, the series can arguably be linked to wider patriarchal fears surrounding feminist interventions at the levels of both national politics and armed insurrection associated with the *Anni di piombo* period. However, the maternal predisposition often expressed by these characters, along with the reproduction of a primal scene encounter in these works (here figured by scenes of a female protagonist either forced or enticed to watch scenarios of sexual violence unfolding before them), once again confirms these films as operating at both social and psychic levels of Italian anxiety.

Having identified the trope of castrating, vengeful woman as central to the Italian rape-and-revenge cycle, it is the figure of the 'Demonified Mother' which is the focus of the fourth chapter of the book. This character (derived from the clinical case studies of American analyst Charles W. Socarides), connotes the all-enveloping persona of the pre-Oedipal mother, whose presence was masked behind a male patient addicted to acts of extreme voyeurism and female mutilation. However, rather than conceptualising his female victims as lacking or castrated, the subject revealed a fluid sense of self and bodily boundaries, which led to him identifying with their suffering. At the basis of his confused sexual identity were three powerful and yet feared matriarchal representatives, whose domestic dominance and marked association with body fluids effectively distorted the subject's image of maternal physiology. I employ Socarides' case study to consider Italian cult cinema's most revered matriarchal trio: 'The Three Mothers' of Dario Argento's celebrated

supernatural thrillers *Suspiria* (1977) and *Inferno* (1980). Specifically, I explore these figures using a variety of psychoanalytic approaches, to consider how widespread themes of maternal dominance are within Italian horror. In particular, I argue that these representations transcend the director's traditional placement within the *giallo* format, to evoke earlier cycles of the 1950s Italian Gothic. These prior traditions emphasise the threatening figure of the pre-Oedipal mother, by depicting ambiguous female figures who preside over impaired or infantilised males. While these representations can be legitimately considered through psychoanalytic and gender studies approaches, the chapter also links these images to more specifically Italian concerns of a nationally-specific mythology of gender and witchcraft.

Having been the subject of the most sustained number of academic studies devoted to Italian cult film, I am delighted to enclose an exclusive interview I conducted with Dario Argento as chapter five of the volume. Here, I not only profile the director's work during the period 1970–1985, but also the ways in which his reception was initially generated at the level of cult icon, rather than as a 'legitimate' Italian film auteur. As well as realigning this output with wider Italian film traditions, the chapter also considers the central cult reception of Argento over the last decade. In terms of the register of cult 'excess', I explore the extent to which Argento's films are all marked by an elaborate use of camerawork, lighting and musical score, emphasising the elements of technical distinction that critics such as Peter Hutchings have identified in his work. However, as Argento's most stylish moments are also used as backdrops to pronounced images of sexual violence, the director discusses some of the gender-based readings of his work in line with these controversies. Importantly, given the increased alignment of psychoanalytic and socio-cultural approaches to Argento and the *giallo*, it seems more than appropriate that the director analyses both of these elements in central sections of the interview. Not only does Argento discuss the importance of psychoanalysis for both the creation and reception of his cinema, but he also comments in some depth on the emergence of his cinema during the *Anni di piombo*, thus making a persuasive case for reading Italian cult imagery in line with an era of social and psychic trauma.

Beyond Dario Argento, another cult director annexing Italian social anxieties with psychic fears is the late Aristide Massaccesi, whose prolific output I explore in chapter six. In a career that spanned nearly 40 years, Massaccesi worked in a variety of paracinema genres, directing films that specialised in unnerving combinations of explicit sexuality, tortured voyeurism and bodily dismemberment. As a result, the director pioneered

some of the decade's most extreme cinematic hybrids, including hardcore zombie films, pseudo-snuff erotica and porno cycles with a Gothic horror inflection. Despite having directed over 190 films, this section of the book offers the first theorisation of Massaccesi's output, exploring both their imagery and key themes via recent revisions of Freud's work on the *unheimliche* (uncanny). By adapting this work from its traditional domain of Gothic literature, I argue that Massaccesi's 1970s output (with themes of morbid loving, fetish for dead love objects and eroticisation of maternal substitutes) contemporises the unresolved primal traumas that underpinned Freud's analysis of fictional works such as *The Sand Man*. By adapting literary and psychoanalytic revisions to Freud's source material, I propose that Massaccesi's disturbing texts also reverse the gender binaries (around themes of castrative wounding/eye loss and doubling motifs) that marked Freud's original analysis. The closing section of my analysis (entitled 'A Historical *Unheimliche*'), considers the extent to which Massaccesi's cycle of erotic dramas contain an unsettling element of historical reflection, by outlining issues of morbid sexuality within a 1940s Italian fascist context. Here, it not only the female body that provokes unease (through its associations with doubling, excessive sexual drives and decay), but also the racially distinct body (with its connotations of physiological and cultural distinction) that further introduce uncanny elements into the director's work.

Chapter seven extends considerations of Italian paracinema's representations of ethnicity, by offering one of the first academic considerations of the *Black Emanuelle* series of erotic travelogue films popular during the 1970s. These featured the Indonesian actress Laura Gemser as a racially ambivalent female photojournalist, who scours the globe to seek out violence and injustice against women. The cycle was produced between 1975 and 1983, and was initially marketed as a parasitic extension to existing European erotica that linked sensual experimentation to the wider ethos of post-1968 sexual politics. However, given the centrality of directors such as Aristide Massaccesi to the trajectory of the series, it comes as little surprise that the *Black Emanuelle* films perverted any logic of sexual liberation through outrageous combinations of desire, death and dismemberment, administered by a range of male adversaries that included male rapists, snuff film producers, prison inmates and even cannibals. Importantly, the heroine's ethnicity was perennially linked to the regimes of suffering enacted in the cycle, with her undefined racial ties functioning through the sliding scale of Otherness with which she was defined. By exploring constructions of the character's ambivalent origins, I consider the series through the specifically Italian discourse of *Faccetta*

nera (black face), which binds racial distinction to established fascist discourses around physiological differentiation, as well as ensuring the replication of these myths in a wide range of cultural products from travel literature to ethnographic cinema and beyond. Whilst clearly indicating that the contradictory images of the *Black Emanuelle* films can be read through a specifically historical Italian discourse, the troubling representations they convey were often conjoined with de-subjectified dream scenes experienced by the heroine. These fantasy inserts further point to psychic structures as underpinning the Italian paracinema text, which I also explore in relation to Laura Gemser's wider roles in the closing sections of the chapter.

In its consideration of the Italian *poliziotteschi* (or rogue cop cycle), chapter eight is significant in two respects. Firstly, it expands the recent theoretical movement (by authors such as Timothy C. Campbell and Maggie Günsberg) towards non-*giallo*-oriented accounts of Italian cult film that I identified earlier. Secondly, it shifts critical attention away from the representations of female subjectivity explored in previous chapters, towards the sphere of masculine melodrama. This cycle (which popularised the motif of an unorthodox detective fighting crime outside the system), has traditionally been dismissed for emulating contemporary American versions of the rogue cop figure. However, with their emphasis on kidnappings, car-jacking, the assassination of public officials and the sexual brutalisation of minors, I argue that the *poliziotteschi* can be irreducibly linked to the decade-long period of both fascist and leftist terrorist activity defined through the *Anni di piombo*. As well as identifying the social conditions behind these so-called 'years of lead', I also consider nascent issues of psychic trauma underpinning male subjectivity in the format. Here, I combine cinematic analysis with a consideration of so-called 1970s 'terrorist literature' alongside clinical accounts derived from the confessions of captured terrorist cell members, all of which reveal a distinctly libidinal agenda. If these various narratives (fictional and diarised) reveal a psychic state of *dissociati* (disassociation from the governing ego), then these sexual tensions are reproduced in the fractured masculinities of the rogue cops themselves. Using debates derived from Freud's work on the 'Family Romance' and male masochism, the chapter concludes with a psychoanalytic reading of the rogue cop's near paranoid attempts to distinguish his sexuality from the hysterical and feminised physiology of the villainous prey he opposes.

Chapter nine expands considerations of the masculine body within Italian paracinema to an academic consideration of the post-apocalypse and barbarian narratives popular between the early to mid-1980s. These

narratives (which focused on the trials of humanity after a nuclear apocalypse) have frequently been dismissed for being derivative of existing international science fiction productions. However, I argue that they retain a strong nationalistic perspective, using genre imagery from the economic miracle of the 1950s to negotiate some of the social and sexual contradictions inherent in later 1980s Italy. Via their emphasis on extreme displays of male virility (often 'performed' in bouts of sadistic contest, and before the gaze of an all-male group), these narratives reproduced the central imagery and themes of the earlier peplum cycle popular in 1950s Italy. For critics such as Maggie Günsberg, these mythical adventures (featuring a heroic strongman who opposes despotic rule) spoke directly to the political discourses of a post-war Italy now repelling its fascist past in the face of international pressure. Equally, by dwelling on the spectacle of the peplum hero's physical prowess, these texts also appealed directly to a marginalised regional populous, whose manual work patterns were being interrupted by the mechanised processes of the economic miracle. By drawing so heavily on peplum mythology, the Italian post-apocalypse film speaks directly to contemporary male fears accompanying the so called 'second economic miracle', which replaced male-dominated, traditional industry with more feminine-led modes of consumer-based technology. This impending phallic redundancy can be exemplified by the post-apocalypse hero's mourning of obsolete modernist machinery, which is accompanied in these works by the pointed rejection of the female body and heterosexual union. In the second part of the chapter, I expand this consideration of male post-industrial anxiety to a study of the barbarian narratives, which were also popular in Italy during the mid-1980s. Here, I once again consider how fears of reduced male prowess are figured through mechanisms of social displacement and confused family lineage, resulting in sexual traumas similar to those identified in previous chapters.

Bodies of Desire and Bodies in Distress concludes with an examination of the social and psychic determinants underpinning the varied erotic cycles which emerged in Italy between 1970 and 1985. As I argue, rather than representing a specific genre, erotic content represented the most porous of all 'excessive' tropes produced during this era, with sexual imagery seeping into all of the key cycles under review. While Italian popular culture has long been viewed as defined by fluid and hybridised boundaries (with the term *filone* once again replacing genre as a stable category of consideration), the explosion of sexual content into the cult cycles reviewed in the volume cannot be divorced from the wider toxic social and political context of the 1970s. Here, rather than signifying any element of sexual liberation, titillating material produced in Italy during

this era was frequently framed within a morbid context, often conflating eroticism with violence or coercion, displayed before a represented male viewer. In seeking to analyse these unsettling images, I argue that the 1970s *filone erotico* as they have been termed, can be directly linked to some of the social contradictions which marked the *Anni di piombo*, with feminist interventions being seen as part of a wider militant attack on established national mores. In this respect, the trope of the erotic, but enfranchised, Italian woman became a contradictory figure in a number of works produced during this era, where she often retained negative associations to the countercultural movement. As well as identifying particular representations of female sexuality in the erotic material produced during this decade, I also assess their impact on erotic depictions of the male body, identifying how tensions in subjectivity were mediated by both comedic and dramatic formats. By also identifying the primacy of incest and family desires within these works, I firmly locate these ribald images within a libidinal circuit, evidenced in both the comedic and dramatic patterns I survey in the chapter. Here, the repeated motif of implied carnality between siblings, as well as the reproduction of a depicted primal scene structure, comes to conflate both sexuality and threat in these works. Using recent psychoanalytic interpretations of primal imagery within erotica, I provide a consideration of how these 1970s patterns functioned via a pattern of masochistic male debasement, as well as exploring how heteronormative stability only began to return to these cycles during the late 1980s after the secession of terrorist activity.

Notes

[1] Peter Hutchings, 'The Argento Effect', in Mark Jancovich, Antonio Lázaro Reboll, Julian Stringer and Andy Willis (eds), *Defining Cult Movies: The Politics of Oppositional Taste* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2004), p.127.
[2] Jeffrey Sconce, 'Trashing the Academy: Taste, Excess and the Emerging Politics of Cinematic Style', *Screen* 36: 4 (1994), 380.
[3] Ibid., 372.
[4] Ibid., 386.
[5] Ibid., 374.
[6] See Joan Hawkins, *Cutting Edge: Art Horror and the Horrific Avant-Garde* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2000).
[7] See Eric Schaefer, *"Bold! Daring! Shocking! True!": A History of Exploitation Films 1919–1959* (Westmoreland: Duke University Press, 1999).
[8] Hutchings, 'The Argento Effect', p.132.
[9] Ibid., p.133.
[10] Ibid.

[11] Hutchings defines the “us/them opposition” (p.131) as a common fan practice in this area, whereby the ‘subversive’ practice of cult affiliation is opposed to the dominant ‘taste-makers’ such as governmental censorship bodies.
[12] Alan Jones, *Mondo Argento* (Cambridge: Midnight Media Press, 1996), p.5.
[13] Ibid.
[14] Mary P. Wood, *Italian Cinema* (Oxford: Berg, 2005), p.58.
[15] Ibid., p.59.
[16] Maitland McDonagh, *Broken Mirrors/Broken Minds: The Dark Dreams of Dario Argento* (London: Sun Tavenfields, 1991), p.31.
[17] Whilst I have focused on published works, I also acknowledge two recent PhD theses that have considered wider Italian cult film from reception and textual approaches, namely Russ Hunter’s ‘A Reception Study of the Films of Dario Argento in the UK and Italy’ (Aberystwyth University, 2009) and Robbie Edmonstone’s ‘Beyond “Brutality”: Understanding the Italian *Filone*’s Violent Excesses’ (Glasgow University, 2008).
[18] Hutchings, ‘Argento Effect’, p.132.
[19] In a British context, one of the earliest accounts to explore censorship in the UK home video context was Martin Barker (ed,), *The Video Nasties: Freedom and Censorship in the Media* (London: Pluto Press, 1984). Later revisions focused more fully on censorship and its links to media policy, most prominently with Martin Barker and Julian Petley (eds), *Ill Effects*: *The Media/Violence Debate* (London: Routledge, 1997 [reprinted and expanded in 2001 as *Ill Effects II*]). While both of the above titles make general reference to Italian horror/exploitation titles as part of a wider list of so-called ‘video nasties’ prosecuted by the Director of Public Prosecutions in the early 1980s, they do not explicitly deal with the issue of how the suppression of these texts generated ‘cult’ meaning for subcultural consumers. For a more recent account which does situate these works alongside fan receptions, see Kate Eagan, *Trash or Treasure: Censorship and the Changing Meaning of the Video Nasties* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2007).
[20] Hutchings, ‘Argento Effect’, p.136.
[21] Adam Knee, ‘Gender, Genre and Argento’, in Barry Keith Grant (ed.), *The Dread of Difference: Gender in the Horror Film* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1996), p.217.
[22] Gary Needham, ‘Playing with Genre: An Introduction to the *Giallo*’, in *Kinoeye: New Perspectives on European Film*, p.3.
http://www.kinoeye.org/printer.php?path=02/11/needham11.php Accessed 03/09/2012.
[23] Ibid.
[24] Ibid.
[25] The key account in this area remains Robin Wood’s chapter ‘Introduction to the American Nightmare’, which was revised and amended as ‘The American Nightmare: Horror in the 70s’ for inclusion in his volume *Hollywood: From Vietnam to Reagan* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1986), pp.70–94. Here, Wood identifies a series of key categories of the monster as Other, which evoke dual fascination and repulsion because these figures represent marginal social and sexual groups repressed by patriarchal and capitalist society. Wood

proceeds to identify some key groups that gain frequent monstrous representation in the horror film, such as women, the proletariat (whom Wood famously argues are subject to "colonisation by bourgeois ideology" [p.74]), as well as other cultures and 'queer' sexualities. The author argues in favour of fusing psychoanalysis with political methodologies (here derived from Frankfurt School theorists), to explain horror's appeal to spectators who are subject to both basic repression (via the containment of libidinal drives), as well as surplus repression (which ensures that they function as "monogamous heterosexual bourgeois capitalists" [p.71]). Key to his approach is an understanding of how society then deals with the monster: either through processes of containment and externalisation (most explicit in periods of social stability), or through prominent and unstrained resurgence (as evidenced in periods of social turmoil). Following Wood's analysis, a number of other accounts have similarly viewed horror as a return of the repressed vis-à-vis sexual and ideological processes, with many accounts considering the centrality of family processes in relation to horror imagery and monstrous construction. Key studies here have included D.N. Rodowick's chapter 'The Enemy Within: The Economy of Violence in *The Hills Have Eyes*', contained in Barry Keith Grant (ed.), *Planks of Reason: Essays on the Horror Film* (Metuchen: The Scarecrow Press, 1984), pp.321–331, as well as the book-length volume by Tony Williams, *Hearths of Darkness: The Family in the American Horror Film* (Madison: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, 1996). While Wood's formative return of the repressed hypothesis also discusses the centrality of voyeurism in relation to the contradictory emotions that the horror film (in a separate section entitled 'Horror in the 80s' [pp.189–202]), debates in relation to the cinematic 'look' and horror have also blossomed into an area of analysis in their own right, to include Steve Neale's early study '*Halloween*: Suspense, Aggression and the Look' (also contained in Grant's *Planks of Reason* volume [pp.331–346]), as well as Carol J. Clover's significant entry *Men, Women and Chainsaws: Gender in the Modern Horror Film* (London, BFI, 1992), which expanded the use of psychoanalysis and gender approaches to a wider study of (American) 'slasher', possession and rape narratives. Barbara Creed's volume *The Monstrous Feminine: Film, Feminism, Psychoanalysis* (London: Routledge, 1993) has similarly focused on the abject fear and fascination that the pre-Oedipal child exhibits for the mother's body, as well as assessing how this phobia is reproduced in horror patterns across Europe and America.

[26] See the considered critique of Wood's position in the chapter 'Dealing With Difference' in Peter Hutchings' volume, *The Horror Film* (Harlow: Pearson Education, 2004), pp.97–127. Here, Hutchings questions the extent to which 1970s American horror provides the supposedly radical template through which to read the return of the repressed, commenting that political imagery and engagement is often peripheral to these narratives, indicating that "Otherness … cannot be readily translated into a cohesive political message, progressive or reactionary" (p.120). However, while there may be a peripheral use of political discourse in the American horror film, comments by Needham and others do point to the central use-value of psychoanalysis as an interpretive tool for understanding the Italian

horror film, while the interview material contained in chapter five of this volume also underscores the centrality of psychoanalysis to the production and reception of these works.

[27] Marco Conci, 'Italian Themes in Psychoanalysis – International Dialogue and Psychoanalytic Identity', *International Forum of Psychoanalysis* 17:2 (2008), 65.

[28] Freud cited in Conci, 'Italian Themes', 65.

[29] Ibid., 66.

[30] This increasing infiltration of the discipline into wider Italian culture was evidenced by not only the 1966 publication of Michel David's volume *La psicoanalisi nella cultura italiana* (AKA *Psychoanalysis in Italian Culture*), but also the 1969 International Psychoanalytic Association Congress being held in Rome, with the first university courses in Padua and Rome opening in 1971.

[31] Marco Conci, 'Psychoanalysis in Italy: A Reappraisal', *International Forum of Psychoanalysis* 3:2 (2004). Here the author notes:

… in our bookstores – and on the shelves in many of our offices – you can find not only most of the classics of interpersonal psychoanalysis, but also most of the contemporary psychoanalytic literature. This is actually one of our records: to be one of the countries in the world in which the highest number of analytic books are being translated! … As a consequence, both M. Klein's and D. Rapaport's works, for example, were translated during the 1970s and were very influential in shaping our analytic culture. The reader may know how slow the introduction of M. Klein's work has been both in the USA and Germany. The same is true also for W. Bion's work, not to mention Lacan and Kohut. (118)

[32] Mikel J. Koven, *La Dolce Morte: Vernacular Cinema and the Italian Giallo* (Maryland: Scarecrow Press, 2006), p.105.

[33] Ibid., p.109

[34] Ibid.

[35] Ibid. For an interesting analysis of how Italian fascist fears become reordered into Nazi imagery, see Mikel J. Koven, "The Film You Are About to See is Based on Documented Fact': Italian Nazi Sexploitation Cinema', in Ernest Mathijs and Xavier Mendik (eds), *Alternative Europe: Eurotrash and Exploitation Cinema Since 1945* (London: Wallflower Press, 2004), pp.19–32.

[36] Conci, 'Psychoanalysis in Italy', 119.

[37] For further information on this theme, see Ruth Glynn, Giancarlo Lombardi and Alan O'Leary (eds) *Terrorism Italian Style: Representations of Political Violence in Contemporary Italian Cinema* (London: Igris Books, 2012).

CHAPTER ONE

"THERE IS SOMETHING WRONG WITH THAT SCENE": THE RETURN OF THE REPRESSED IN 1970S *GIALLO* CINEMA

> The voyeur is never entirely satisfied with his peeping which he has the compulsion endlessly to repeat like the detective story addict who rereads the same basic mystery tale without tedium. In the gradual revelation of clues that make up the bulk of the narrative, the reader is presented with one significant detail after another... Finally the crime is reconstructed, the mystery solved, that is, the primal scene is exposed.
> —Geraldine Pederson-Krag, 'Detective Stories and the Primal Scene'[1]

> The *giallo* literally begs for psychoanalytic inquiry and at the same time stages both the "analytical scene" and the classic symptoms. As usual, this staging occurs through the conduit of femininity but in some cases – as in (almost) every Dario Argento film – masculinity is the key focus.
> —Gary Needham, 'Playing with Genre'[2]

Introduction

As outlined in the introduction to this volume, the Italian *giallo* format has become one of the most widely discussed areas of 1970s Italian cult cinema. The series (whose name is derived from the yellow dustjackets that adorned imported crime novels) fused the machinations of detective fiction with the grisly viscera of psycho-sexual horror across two distinct periods of production activity during the 1960s and 1970s. This vibrant but unconventional Italian series (most closely associated with the iconic output of Dario Argento) was often characterised by themes of alienated or foreign amateur detectives who travel to Italy, only to become inadvertently embroiled in a series of murders often revolving around some aspect of unresolved sexual trauma. The resolution to these complex narratives frequently revealed not one, but multiple assailants, with a

common theme of gender disassociation allowing women to be unveiled as the ultimate culprits within these fictions.

Both the *giallo* and Argento's output in this field have been the subjects of a range of critical studies which have considered the cycle's themes, controversies and underlying sexual politics. Whilst all key accounts acknowledge the key period of the cycle's popularity as lasting from 1970 until 1975 (what author Mikel Koven has defined as the 'classic' *giallo* period), theoretical receptions of the format have shifted from more traditional auteur analyses of key iconographical creators (demonstrated in studies of Argento and Lucio Fulci by Maitland McDonagh and Stephen Thrower respectively)[3], to socio-historically inclined approaches emphasising how these deviant tales of detection reflect changes in Italian society (such as Gary Needham's study of the *giallo* in light of the economic miracle of the 1960s). While other recent works in this area have also adapted novel folklorist approaches to the cycle (as in Koven's *La Dolce Morte*), by far the most significant theoretical perspective on the *giallo* has been psychoanalysis. This methodology (either in isolation, or in conjunction with wider socio-historical or gender-based methodologies) features explicitly in seven out of nine key accounts published on the topic.[4] Here, authors frequently evoke psychoanalytic notions of the return of repressed urges to explain the thematic emphasis on unresolved primal trauma (which conflates violence and sexuality before an assembled viewer), underpinning many key entries in the *giallo* genre.

While these psychoanalytic perspectives remain a central (if contested) method through which to consider the horror dynamics of the *giallo*, I am more interested here in how they might also be expanded to consider the format's use of detective fiction motifs. As Needham has intimated in his opening summation, the kernel of the *giallo* precipitates psychoanalytic observation because key entries revolve around a past traumatic event (often conflating sexual excess with aggression), which mutually afflicts both the killer (who desires a mechanism to forget the trauma) and the amateur detective (who must endlessly replay the event in order to reveal its concealed aggressor). Moreover, it is noticeable that the *giallo* does not merely revolve around this half-remembered illicit act, it *fixates* on it, often impeding narrative progress so that the protagonist and spectator alike can marvel at its incessant replaying. Equally, the act is (lovingly?) recreated through the use of photographic stills and concealed film reel footage, whose documentation of transgression forms the basis for the convoluted blackmail plots that the *giallo* often details.

Indeed, it seems more than coincidence that the translated title of *Un*

posto ideale per uccidere (Umberto Lenzi's 1971 entry to the *giallo* cycle) is *Dirty Pictures,* which pretty much defines the obsession with looking at illicit and criminal acts that underpins the cycle as a whole. To this end, the existence of a salacious set of pornographic stills implicating an art professor in a ménage à trois with his (markedly younger) female students also proves the motivation behind the killer's quest in *I corpi presentano tracce di violenza carnale* (AKA *Torso*: Sergio Martino, 1973), while similar reproductions of past 'sexual' encounters that hint at violence or coercion are central to the majority of the titles produced in this initial 'classic' phase, including Luigi Bazzoni's *Giornata nera per l'ariete* (AKA *The Fifth Cord*, 1971), Sergio Pastore's *Sette scialli di seta gialla* (AKA *The Crimes of the Black Cat*, 1972), Roberto Montero's *Rivelazioni di un maniaco sessuale al capo della squadra mobile* (AKA *The Slasher ...is the Sex Maniac!,* 1972), as well as Alberto Negrin's *Enigma rosso* (*Red Rings of Fear,* 1978). Dario Argento's debut *The Bird with the Crystal Plumage* offers a variation on the above, by making its central 'illicit image' a painting (rather than photographic still) which depicts a genital mutilation central to the narrative enigma, while Antonio Bido's *Solamento nero* (AKA *The Bloodstained Shadow*, 1978) also uses a canvas image to replicate the historic mutilation of a female victim.

Whether cinematographic, photographic or pictorial, these representations of 'wrongdoing' often function to integrate familial relations into the perverse chain of desire, with siblings frequently depicted in the transgressions being surveyed. For instance, Aldo Lado's *Chi l'ha vista morire?* (AKA *Who Saw Her Die?*, 1972) features a grieving father turned amateur detective, Franco Serpieri (George Lazenby), who uncovers a perverse sex ring connected with the murder of his young daughter. His narrative quest is assisted by a disabled assistant Francois Roussel (Giovanni Forti Rosselli), whose mother has also recently been dispatched due to her knowledge about the identity of the child killer the elusive sect are shielding. As Roussel admits in the central scene of the movie, his mother also appeared in pornographic loops for the high-ranking male members of the ring, which he demonstrates by screening a silent erotic short film of her sexual exploits for Serpieri. In the sequence, Roussel's mother Ginevra (Dominique Boschero) is seen 'performing' for an unidentified male suitor (whose identity is hidden behind a high-backed chair). Although Roussel comments that "I am so ashamed that my mother let herself be degraded like that, they must have forced her to do those things, Mr Serpieri", his comment jars with the image that we see, which implies intense sexual enjoyment on the part of the female protagonist. As the pair watch the porno loop progress (to include other male members

joining the ‘scene’), Roussel comments: “I don’t know anymore. Sometimes, I don’t want to know the truth.” However, the camera here alternates between the actual footage and the increasing erotic interest of the two male spectators, indicating that Roussel does *indeed* want further visual evidence of his mother’s sexual ‘crimes’.

What the example from *Who Saw Her Die?* indicates is that the *giallo* draws heavily on past sexual trauma as the trigger for its present transgressions, often providing a replication of the illicit act via photographic or celluloid reproductions. In so doing, the cycle provides a crucial pathway between detective fiction and psychoanalytic themes, to the extent that Garry Needham has argued “the *giallo* is a paradigm case in defence of psychoanalysis. It solicits psychoanalytic interpretation and stages every Oedipal scenario literally and spectacularly”.[5] Not only do *giallo* characteristically feature psychoanalytic plot lines, but psychoanalysts feature as either figures to be deceived (*Una lucertola con la pelle di donna* [AKA *Lizard in a Woman’s Skin*: Lucio Fulci, 1971]), protagonists required to restore order and crucial insight to narrative ambiguity (as in the finale of *The Bird with the Crystal Plumage*), or figures to be killed because of their link to abusive family structures (as in Needham’s example of *L’occhio nel labirinto* [AKA *Eye in the Labyrinth*: Mario Caiano, 1972]).

It is more than just coincidence that psychoanalysts feature so heavily in this cycle of Italian pulp cinema. As early as 1949, analysts such as Geraldine Pederson-Krag argued for a connection between detective fiction and the libidinal processes of infancy, noting that both are dependent on definable patterns of repetition:

> There is little novelty in this vicarious pursuit of criminals. Each mystery drama or detective story is less interesting for specific details than because the gratification lies in certain basic elements which are always present.[6]

For Pederson-Krag, the ‘gratification’ of these repeated fictional compulsions centres on the reader’s desire to explore the concealed and the illicit precisely because of “the intense curiosity it arouses”.[7] This obsession with uncovering that which preceded the *fictional* investigation is also a desire to explore that which predated *factual* maturity: namely the child’s desire to uncover the truth behind its parent’s sexual relations. Pederson-Krag thus concludes:

> Here is the first element of the detective story – the secret crime. Carrying the parallel further, the victim is the parent for whom the reader (the child) had negative Oedipal feelings. The clues in the story, disconnected, inexplicable and trifling, represent the child’s growing awareness of

> details it had never understood, such as the family sleeping arrangements, nocturnal sounds, stains, incomprehensible adult jokes and remarks.[8]

While earlier analysts such as Pederson-Krag used a Freudian vocabulary to consider the compulsions that underpin both clinical case study and crime fiction, more recent critics such as Slavoj Žižek have expanded the connections between the fictionalisation of crime and its links to infantile observation of parental coitus, noting that both require an agent to investigate and resolve the traumas that these fictional and libidinal acts provoke. As Žižek argues, both detective and analyst are forced to piece together the truth from a series of fragments or clues which predate the investigation. As Freud's celebrated case study of the Wolf Man indicates, these primal traumas centre on the infant's discovery of its own origins and the logic of sexual difference through a witnessed scene of parental coitus. In Freud's study, this scene was subject to distortion and adaptation, with fantasised scenarios of violence and threat coming to connote the terror that the child felt upon observing the sex act. (Specifically, Freud's patient reconfigured a witnessed scene of parental sex into a nightmarish scenario involving wolves that threatened him at night.) This 'primal scene' scenario not only recast a scene of consensual intercourse into one of sexual violence, but became the basis of a pattern of compulsive repetition, which constantly re-emerged to impede the Wolf Man's future psychic and sexual development.[9] Through these processes of distortion and misrecognition, Žižek argues that such clinical case studies come to closely resemble the basis of the detective tale, which also fixates on past traumas/crimes that conflate sexual violence with an accompanying loss or concealment of identity. In this respect, both clinical case study and detective fiction operate via a principle of traumatic repetition: compulsive behaviour on the part of the patient, and narrative repetition based around the crime and activities of a criminal in detective fiction. Both (ultimately) require an agent (analyst or detective) to investigate these enigmas and thus reconstitute missing elements of identity.

Primal Crimes, Deviant Detection

In order to further explore the parallels between the role of the analyst and the detective in relation to the *giallo*, I wish to first discuss the role of repressed tensions in Dario Argento's film *The Bird with the Crystal Plumage,* as it provided the successful template upon which later sexual deviations in the cycle were based. Indeed, the title for this chapter comes from a line uttered by Sam Dalmas (Tony Mussante), the lead character in

Argento's debut, as he attempts to reconcile contradictory memories of a sexually violent 'scene' he witnesses at the beginning of the film. Dalmas (an American writer living in Rome) witnesses a chance struggle and subsequent assault of a woman, Monica Ranieri (Eva Renzi), by an unidentified assailant in a gallery late one night. This violent act shifts Dalmas from unwilling witness trapped behind a set of glass doors by Monica's assailant, to police suspect. Remaining imprisoned on the premises when the police arrive, he has his passport confiscated by Inspector Morosini (Enrico Maria Salerno), who links the incident to an ongoing series of sexual murders that have occurred in the city.

In a desperate attempt to prove his innocence, Dalmas is forced to adopt the role of amateur detective. Convinced that he can identify the killer, he tracks down a painting of a young woman being sexually assaulted by an unidentified aggressor, which he believes is connected to the murderer's quest. This image is marked by a near-erotic component to mutilation, depicting a female victim being genitally mutilated by a concealed attacker.

Dalmas's status only shifts from suspect to victim after repeated attempts on his life and that of his girlfriend Julia (Suzy Kendall) reveal the killer to be Monica Ranieri. Returning to the gallery to confront the killer, Dalmas realizes that what he saw was Monica attempting to kill the unidentified man (her husband, Alberto). As a psychoanalyst explains during the film's resolution, Ranieri was in fact the girl depicted in the painting that Dalmas uncovered. Suffering a serious sexual assault as a teenager, she suppressed all memory of the event until she saw a copy of the painting in an antiques shop. Upon seeing the painting, Ranieri identified herself not as the victim, but with the male aggressor who assaulted her, thus taking out her vengeance against women.

The startling revelation of a female killer mistaken as a victim of male violence gave *The Bird with the Crystal Plumage* an innovative dimension that was much emulated by later 1970s *gialli*. However, the pivotal sequence of Argento's film remains the ambivalent gallery encounter that Dalmas first views. What is evident in the struggle that the protagonist sees, is that it replicates key features of the primal scene. As with Freud's account of the Wolf Man, it conflates images of sexuality and violence before an assembled male spectator. Indeed, Argento's use of sound is intriguing here, filling the shots from inside the gallery space with a near orgasmic moaning that connotes more sexual pleasure than violent assault:

Figure 1.1: Primal crimes: Sam Dalmas views the ambivalent gallery space of *The Bird with the Crystal Plumage*.

While the gallery space presents Dalmas with a site that confuses sexuality with violation, the event also initiates a pattern of traumatic repetition (in the form of flashbacks) which continually interferes with the protagonist's ability for sexual engagement with his girlfriend Julia.

Via these processes, the inclusion of the central gallery scene in *The Bird with the Crystal Plumage* emulates the primal scene scenario by conflating sexuality and threat before a traumatised viewer (in this case the amateur detective Sam Dalmas). Furthermore, the impetus of this powerful encounter replicates a pattern of repetition that effectively dominates both the actions of the central character and the progression of future narration within the film. However, it is also Dalmas's failure to resolve or limit his access to the transgressions contained within the film's central primal scene that mark out a distinctive and deviant form of detection from the clinical analogy that critics such as Žižek have discussed. Specifically, the failure to resolve or limit the primal scene structure in Argento's film can be seen as subverting the reconstitution of the masculine order identified in Žižek's analysis of both patient case study and detective fiction.

Following Jacques Lacan's celebrated reading of Edgar Allen Poe's 'The Purloined Letter'[10], Žižek identifies a primal scene incident in this crime tale via the theft of a compromising letter from the Queen's personal chamber by her minister. This act is both sexual in location (the royal boudoir), while also representing a past event that has to be repeated, re-narrated and ultimately resolved by the detective Auguste Dupin. His investigation returns the lost object to its owner by repeating the pattern of theft, this time against the offending minister who has stolen the letter. In so doing, the detective manages to reintegrate order and identity into the narrative through a speech-led resolution explaining his conclusions. According to Žižek, the successes of 'classic' detectives such as Dupin and Sherlock Holmes are based both on an ability to read the fragment within a scene of transgression and to reinstate order and (masculine led) language in a closing explanatory speech. It is not only the power over discourse which distinguishes (and advantages) Dupin over the other characters in 'The Purloined Letter', but also his power of sight. This is evidenced by his ability to deduce the location of the stolen object when shown around the minister's apartment.[11] For the classical detective, this vital clue is usually figured in the form of a 'visual fragment'. Importantly, what the detective has to do is re-articulate that which draws his attention, the visual, the absent, and bring them back into the realm of discourse.

However in *The Bird with the Crystal Plumage,* Argento initiates a theme of the male detective who is plagued by doubts about his ability to correctly analyse the visual evidence of the crimes he is witness to. Sam Dalmas's belief that something is "missing" in his recollection of the assault is proven correct when he returns to the gallery at the end of the film. It is only then that he realises Monica was not the victim he imagined he saw in the scenario, but the aggressor who was only wounded after attempting to kill her husband in the gallery. In this positing of an investigator as either unable to isolate criminal identity or even implicated in transgression, Argento's film confirms that Gary Needham's 'deviant role of detection' is being played out here. As Needham has noted:

> The gallery is explicitly concerned with maximising clarity and vision: the space is minimal so there are no distractions for the gaze other than that of the crime; the doors/façade are enormous glass panels; nothing is obscured; the entire area is brightly lit. However, despite all of these supports aiding Dalmas's vision, he fails to see (or in psychoanalytic terms, he *misrecognises*) the truth of his gaze.[12]

Flashback, Fragments and Scenes: Transgressive Drives in the *Giallo*

With its emphasis on a violent and sexually suggestive event whose influence spawns further violation, Argento's debut film initiated a craze for generic and gender subversions which came to dominate the remainder of the classic *giallo* period until 1975. However, it was the transgressive and contagious nature of primal scene structures within the *giallo* that the director later returned to in his self-reflexive 1982 production, *Tenebre* (AKA *Tenebrae*). Here, crime author Peter Neal (Anthony Franciosa) finds his latest novel *Tenebrae* used to influence a murderer bent on eliminating 'human perversion'. Neal attempts to solve the case by casting allusions to the logical methods of deduction plotted by writers such as Conan Doyle. The boundaries of murder investigation and fictional detection are further eroded when Captain Giermani (Giuliano Gemma) of the Rome homicide squad abandons normal criminological tactics in order to plot a solution using Neal's fictional methods.

Much to the dismay of critics, *Tenebrae*'s constant references to writers such as Conan Doyle and Poe failed to give the film the tightly plotted mode of detection that such references imply.[13] Specifically, *Tenebrae* was marked by a paranoid inability to limit or define culpability to any one individual in the text. Although Peter Neal is guilty of writing the book that sparks the killings, he is also positioned as a potential victim for the maniac. Yet, it is his very knowledge of detective fiction that allows him to identify the killer as Christiano Berti (John Steiner), a conservative television critic. Paradoxically, Neal's motives have little connection with the reintegration of law and logic. His proximity to the murders has awakened a dormant psychosis, and after killing Berti, he assumes his identity and continues his murderous quest.

In its complex shifting of Neal between the various positions of suspect, victim and murderer, *Tenebrae* offers an example of what Franco Moretti has defined as "the nightmare of detective fiction", namely:

> ...the featureless *de-individualized* crime that anyone could have done because at this point everyone is the same.[14]

Although the film reveals Neal's psychotic status, it fails to isolate him as the only remaining killer at large. In raising this inability to resolve the central enigma of the killer's identity, the text displaces the role of the agent traditionally responsible for bringing order to such narratives. If not fully repressed, Žižek argues that the revised scenes of sexuality and violence underpinning both psychic aberration and detective fiction

continue to disturb the subject's identity and sexuality.

This represents a 'foreclosure' or negation of subjectivity as it relates to the Symbolic and ideological structures that Lacan argued define and limit our gender identity. Its effect was seen in the Wolf Man's traumatic compulsion to repeat the fantasised and revised scenes of parental sexuality he had witnessed. In Freud's case study these revisions conflated sexuality with violence seen in nightmares where the patient was threatened by savage wolves, and had his body violently altered in acts of self-mutilation. Implicit in all the Wolf Man's fantasies remained a dual loss of discourse and established body image, two features that are central to the aberrations underpinning the primal scene.[15]

The "*unspeakable* terror"[16] which the patient explained as disrupting his established modes of speech during the hallucinations are themselves reproduced in several of Argento's works. For instance, the gallery sequence of *The Bird with the Crystal Plumage* provides a space which both positions Sam Dalmas as viewer, while cutting him off from the processes of speech. This is indicated in his inability to fully communicate with either the injured Monica or the passer-by who cannot hear his pleas from the street outside:

Figure 1.2: Impotent viewer/silent witness: Dalmas cut off from language in *The Bird with the Crystal Plumage.*

Alongside the denial of language, the gallery scene also evidences the fragmentation of distinct body image that frequently accompanies the

primal scene experience. For instance, in its visualising of Monica's penetrated body, the scene also demonstrates the "episodes of depersonalisation, bizarre body states and fear of bodily disintegration" identified by Joyce McDougall's study on 'Primal Scene and Sexual Perversion'.[17]

With its further dislocation of the speech act, the later film *Tenebrae* also renders the tools of language and communication ambiguous. The opening sequence of the film depicts the killer hurling a copy of Neal's book into an open fire, then choking a shoplifter with pages from *Tenebrae*. Both instances indicate that this is a film in which words, sentences, grammar, syntax and logic are cut up, burned, destroyed. Alongside this systematic erosion of discourse, *Tenebrae* replicates other key features of the primal scene in its privileging of a flashback that is repeated before each murder in the film. The scenario once again recalls Freud's account, by conflating images of eroticism and sexual violence as a woman strips to seduce a group of young men before being beaten by an onlooker. This potential assailant is then chased by the assembled crowd and sexually humiliated by having the heel of the woman's shoe forced into his mouth while being pinned down by her lovers.

If this sequence can be defined as the primal scene of *Tenebrae,* then it functions to disrupt not only the speech act (by reducing the soundtrack to musical score) but also established codes of gender identity. This appeal to sexual ambivalence is indicated through the casting of transsexual actor Roberto Coatti (AKA Eve Robbins) as the seductive 'girl' who dominates in the scene. Coatti appeared in a number of European exploitation productions that dwelt on his ambivalent gender. For instance, Antonio D'Agostino paired him with fellow transsexual Ajita Wilson for the sex film *Due sessi in* uno (AKA *Eva Man* AKA *Ambi-Sex*, 1980). The recurrence of androgynous representations in Argento's cinema indicates the filmmaker's interest in that which places existing and totalising gender categories under stress. It also confirms sexual ambivalence as central to the transgressions haunting both the primal scene and the *giallo.*

In *The Bird with the Crystal Plumage*, not only did Argento initiate a pattern of the mutilated female killer whose past genital violation defies the logic of sexual difference (a feature repeated in several of his works), but he also depicted the gallery as a site populated with figures marked by gender ambivalence. Prominent iconography in this space includes a statuette whose features include breasts and a phallic-shaped beak for a head, a literal fusion of the features of both male and female anatomy. This confirms the gallery as a site where "the Symbolic and Imaginary meet and resistance occurs".[18]

Figure 1.3: The primal scene and gender ambiguity: sexual 'fusion' in *The Bird with the Crystal Plumage*.

Importantly, the traumatic flashbacks from both films also function to fragment the flow of the narrative. In *Tenebrae,* the scene is both repeated and elaborated throughout the film, producing a series of disruptions which impede narrative progression. In the case of the Wolf Man, the traumatic 'recollection' of parental coitus was accompanied by the infant's feeling of passivity (both in his sexual behaviour, and ability to affect the outcome of a scenario). This lack of mastery became re-coded in fantasies and scenarios which saw the infant as the active and aggressive protagonist. An example of this is indicated in the patient's recollection of an aggressive disposition that he had adopted towards his sister during his childhood. This 'memory' was linked to the libidinal through his attempts to sexually assault his sister during a bath time activity. According to Freud, this memory was actually a re-codification of an experience that was "offensive to the patient's masculine self-esteem,"[19] namely that he was being sexually assaulted by his sister.

The re-codification of these feelings of passivity and humiliation evidenced by the primal scene is also discussed in Joyce McDougall's work on 'Primal Scene and Sexual Perversion'. She identifies the scenario of the "anonymous spectator"[20] as present in perversion and psychosis. Here, the sufferer attempts to efface former feelings of passivity by rerunning primal scene structures which maintain physical and visual domination over a partner.[21]

These structures are reproduced in *Tenebrae's* reorganisation of the flashback as a site of Neal's mastery and aggression. The initial scene of humiliation is replaced later in the film by one depicting Coatti being

murdered by her former victim in a suburban location. Here, Neal's presence is defined by aggression (in his brutal slaying of Coatti), as well as visual mastery (by remaining concealed until the point of attack). This second 'scene' not only attempts to efface the original site of his humiliation, but becomes a model of 'mastery' upon which later revisions of the flashback are based. When the film returns to this past 'scene' for a third revision, the point of focus becomes Coatti's death and the extent of mutilation afforded to this 'female' body.

However, rather than indicate an ability to surmount past traumas, it is the purpose of *Tenebrae* to position both Neal and the spectator at the site of the writer's original humiliation. This is an encounter with "the pleasurable counterpart of death"[22] that Freud identified as an integral feature of the death drive and compulsions that are left unchecked. This is indicated by a reciprocity between Neal and Coatti which provokes the writer's hysterical attack. This feature equates passivity with penetration, and is initiated when Coatti forces the heel of a shoe into Neal's mouth. Although this humiliation is reciprocated with the later wounding of Coatti with a knife, this action merely mirrors Neal's fatal penetration with a steel monument in the film's closing scene.

This troubling preoccupation with the death drive is itself a feature initiated by Sam Dalmas's return to the gallery in *Plumage*. Here, the original primal scene encounter is revised with Dalmas in the role of passive victim. Whereas the original scene was dominated by Monica's bleeding body, the end sequence of the film eschews Dalmas's notions of mastery as he awaits death trapped beneath a razor edged piece of art. Monica's comment that Dalmas will "now die like all the others" makes explicit his placement in a position of 'degraded' female violation:

Figure 1.4: The primal viewer feminised: Sam Dalmas awaits his 'wounding' in *The Bird with the Crystal Plumage*.

The Role of the Detective in the Films of Dario Argento

What both Argento's films discussed here highlight is the impossibility of locating the ratiocinative drive of the classical detective within the domain of the *giallo.* The infantile drives that underpin the transgressions in these films are left unchecked, reflecting a series of crucial differences between the investigating figure and the capacities of the classical detective. According to Stefano Tani's account of *The Doomed Detective,* the incongruity between the position of *giallo* and classical English investigator reflects the fact that the genre was a late import to Italy. Although the printing of the collection *I Libri Gialli* (1929) established an interest in the rational methods of British detection, it also produced a predilection for deviation, hybridity and parody in the Italian writers who emulated its form.

Tani has noted a duality of the classical detective's persona, reflecting both a chaotic creativity and a rational drive. However, this "vampiresque schizophrenia,"[23] as he terms it, is used by the detective to access the mind of the criminal thus assisting in the reconstitution of their concealed identity. It is through his "cerebral performances"[24] that Sherlock Holmes remains allied to the male realm of language and logic. He is able to integrate visual and verbal registers and uses his creative side only to provide the narrative with the coherency and mastery previously denied by the criminal. What is reconstituted along with the restoration of narrative order is the very idea of subjectivity that these drives have threatened.

In 'A Case of Identity'[25] for instance, Holmes reconstructs the personality and fate of the missing fiancé of client Mary Sutherland. Behind this loss lies a scheming stepfather Mr Windibank. Fearful of the loss of control over Mary's finances through marriage, Windibank transforms himself into a suitor for the girl, using her poor eyesight as a means to assist his disguise. Although no direct punishment is attributed to Windibank, the detective's task is to reconstitute the absent identity of the transgressor and thus forestall the coupling between a woman and someone who occupies a paternal role.

Although Mary's account of Windibank to Holmes stresses the difference between him and her real father, a series of close parallels are created between the two through the figure of Hosmer Angel. For instance, the location of Mary's first meeting with Angel is at the gas fitters' ball, an event attended by her late father (whose friends accompany Mary to the gathering). Equally, when explaining her relationship with Windibank to Holmes, she expresses her surprise at his decision to marry her mother, when "he is only five years and two months older than myself".[26] This

apparent sexual interest in Windibank also intimates a degree of hostility towards the maternal agent, which again can be linked to the primal scene and the infant's inability to accept the true nature of its parent's relationship.[27]

Thus, it is not only Windibank's motives the narrative seeks to expose, but also Mary's (who does not figure in the narrative again). Her fate and desire are left unresolved following the detective's decision not to inform her of the truth of his findings. In effect Holmes's actions, as with those of other classical detectives, centre around bringing these unresolved primal desires to a close. In so doing, these investigators reinstate the law of the phallus that the Lacan argued the Symbolic embodies. The resultant marginalisation of the feminine forms a repeated method of resolution to the Holmes narrative.[28]

It is this ability to terminate the drives and compulsions of the primal scene while remaining structurally separate from what Žižek terms the "curse of their endless repetitions"[29] that marks the legitimacy of the classical detective. Their stability of sexual identity and access to the law provide a marked counterpoint to the investigators of Argento's films and the wider Italian *giallo*. These detail the activities of amateur detectives, whose subjectivity is as compromised as that of the murderers they seek to expose. This style of detection centres on the figure of the "paranoid alienated seeker"[30] that Todd French has identified as the typical Argento investigator. This position marks a form of moral involvement either through a direct role in the murders (Peter Neal), or by inadvertently witnessing a crime and subsequently adopting the guise of a detective in order to satisfy certain intellectual vanities.

This latter position was initiated with Sam Dalmas in *The Bird with the Crystal Plumage*. Although Dalmas attempts to pose in the fashion of the classical detective, his failings reveal a number of distinctions between the *giallo* detective and figures such as Holmes. Most obviously, the *giallo* hero's proximity to the site of transgression profoundly alters their ability for visual and verbal mastery over the 'signs' of crime. And in this respect, his position confirms Needham's view that "the *giallo* makes a point about the failings of vision as a source of authority".[31]

As a result, the classical methods of scientific deduction that are frequently employed in the *giallo* fail precisely because they are directed at transgressions which do not fit easily with established constructions of self and sexuality. *The Bird with the Crystal Plumage* employs a wide range of forensic equipment from voice-enhancement machines and infra-red photography to microscopic analysis and identity parades. All these methods are used in a futile effort to trap the 'man' Dalmas believes to be

Monica's 'assailant' in the gallery. From this constant attempt to categorise and classify, the police believe they have pinpointed accurate details of the killer's identity. Inclusion of features such as the type of cigar the killer smokes even draws parity with Holmes's paper 'Upon the Distinction Between the Ashes of the Various Tobaccos'.[32] Such methods indicate the protagonist's misplaced belief in the ability to classify these crimes within Symbolic modes of regulation.

Although it is possible for the methods and agents of classical detection to be present in the *giallo*, they must exist on the margins, beyond the sphere of sexuality and death. In *The Bird with the Crystal Plumage* this role is fulfilled by Inspector Morosini, who confirms his status as classical detective both through an inoculating absence from the sites of violent crime, as well as a constant and criminological attempt to categorise sexual deviation:

Figure 1.5: Forensic technology and statistical data keep Inspector Morosini separate from the 'primal' crime scene.

The film plays this obsession with sexual stratification to the point of parody, when Morosini arranges an inspection parade of 'sexual perverts' for Dalmas to attend. When the transvestite 'Ursula Andress' is introduced into the line, Morosini berates his assistant for presenting him in the wrong

category of perversion.

While Morosini strategically works to keep himself separate from the primal scene basis of the murderer's transgressions, the very opening of the film indicates a troubling reciprocity between Sam Dalmas and the killer. Here, Monica Ranieri's psychosis literally places her beyond the limits of discourse via her obsession with the iconic. She not only stalks her victims but meticulously photographs them prior to an attack. This 'near medical' obsession with the visual itself mirrors Dalmas's use of forensic images of past victims. Equally, the greatest clue that Dalmas uncovers is the painting of Monica's original assault, which once more links him to her 'iconic' compulsions. While Monica erects a copy of this painting in the secret shrine where she develops the photographs of her victims, Dalmas also constructs a near identical photomontage of clues that he hopes will resolve the case.

Figure 1.6: The original painting of Monica's violation and its reproduction as iconic compulsions for killer and detective.

It is through the use of such scenes that Argento underscores the reciprocity between the pair, once again confirming the inability to contain primal scene transgressions within the *giallo*. As Gary Needham has concluded:

> The typical Argento protagonist is the victim/witness of trauma who must keep returning to the scene of the crime (the Freudian "*nachtraglichkeit*" or retranscription of memory; popularly represented via flashback sequences), often committed by a killer who just can't resist serial murder (the psychoanalytic "compulsion to repeat").[33]

We shall see in the next chapter how this troubling return of the repressed takes on a specifically regional Italian flavour in those *gialli* set in the South, where the resurgence of primal data is linked to longstanding fears of the rural inhabitant and their base sexual drives.

Notes

[1] Geraldine Pederson-Krag, 'Detective Stories and the Primal Scene', *Psychoanalytic Quarterly* 18 (1949), 211.
[2] Gary Needham, 'Playing with Genre: An Introduction to the *Giallo*', *Kinoeye: New Perspectives on European Film* 2:11 (2002), 3.
[3] For more information on the latter account, see Stephen Thrower *Beyond Terror: The Films of Lucio Fulci* (Surrey: FAB Press, 1999).
[4] One of the primary academic accounts to consider Argento and the *giallo* through psychoanalytic and gender-based approaches was Leon Hunt's article 'A (Sadistic) Night at the Opera: Notes on the Italian Horror Film', first published in 1992 and reprinted in Ken Gelder (ed.), *The Horror Film Reader* (London: Routledge, 2000), pp.324–336. Here, the author identifies the key issues of sexual ambiguity and unresolved primal desire in which "Argento's killers are generally constructed as perverse in their reluctance or inability to undergo 'correct' heterosexual Oedipal trajectories" (p.329). As a result, both fictional protagonist and viewer oscillate between a range of permeable subject positions, with shifting states of sadism and masochism, indicating a "bisexual oscillation between male and female, active and passive, victim and aggressor" (p.334). By projecting the spectator through this range of sexual standpoints, Hunt concludes that the Italian horror film "violates the spectator" (p.335), a presumption that seems confirmed by the fact that violence in the Argento films discussed is frequently directed in a self-reflexive manner towards the camera lens (and the 'unsafe' position of the viewer beyond it).

It is the extended discussion of sexual ambiguity via psychoanalytical and gender methodologies that has dominated later theoretical readings of the *giallo*. For instance, Adam Knee's 1996 contribution 'Gender, Genre and Argento' in Barry Keith Grant (ed.), *The Dread of Difference: Gender in the Horror Film* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1996) pp.213–230, echoes the central tenets of Hunt's earlier examination, by concluding Argento's cinema to be dominated by issues of gender fluidity and transgendered excess derived from unresolved primal desires. As a result, Knee argues that the Italian *giallo* problematises not only concepts of sexed identity, but also the "rigidity of certain psychoanalytic schema" that evolved from feminist-inspired critiques of the "gendered binarisms in the horror film" (p.215).

More recent accounts of Argento and the *giallo* have retained psychoanalysis as a key model of interpretation, while increasingly aligning the methodology within a wider contextualisation of Italian culture. For instance, Giorgio Bertellini's 2004 account of '*Profondo Rosso Deep Red*', contained in the author's

edited volume *The Cinema of Italy* (London: Wallflower Press, 2004), pp.213–222, confirms that the director's "gender politics … ought not be seen as straight forwardly misogynist or rigidly polarised" (p.215). As a result, the author provides a persuasive consideration linking these cinematic representations with longstanding national representations of ambiguous female sexuality, derived from both criminological study and literature. As Bertellini notes, a pseudo-scientific fascination with gendered ambiguity has passed from sociological exposé (conducted by acclaimed writers such as Cesare Lombroso and Paolo Mantegazza), to certain classes of *feuilleton* or serialised popular writing (which deal with unrestrained female passion), before being relocated in Argento's celluloid universe of abject, physiological excess. Importantly, the Italian criminological and clinical interest in the subversive aspect of female and maternal drives leads Bertellini to conclude: "Following with the tradition of the *feuilleton*, the conception and execution of the murder derives from traumatic sexual and familial relationships" (p.220), which Argento and the wider *giallo* fixates upon.

[5] Needham, 'Playing with Genre', 3.

[6] Pederson-Krag, 'Detective Stories', 207.

[7] Ibid., 208.

[8] Ibid.

[9] This was indicative of the Wolf Man's recasting of the scene he had witnessed from mutual sexual pleasure to violent anal intercourse initiated against the mother's will.

[10] See Edgar Allan Poe, *Tales of Mystery and Imagination* (Hertfordshire: Wordsworth Classics, 1995), pp.132–148. See also Jacques Lacan's analysis 'Seminar on "The Purloined Letter"' in John P. Muller and William J. Richardson (eds), *The Purloined Poe* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1988), pp.28–54.

[11] This power over vision is even emphasised by Dupin's wearing of green-tinted glasses during this exploration.

[12] Needham, 'Playing with Genre', 4.

[13] See '*Tenebrae*' [review], *Sight and Sound* 52 (Summer 1993), 220.This argued that the film was "frenetic" with little attention being paid to methods of detection. Other reviews include Philip Strick '*Tenebrae*', *Monthly Film Bulletin* 50 (May 1993), 20. Here, he commented that it was "marked by an inability to match visual flair with anything worth watching". Such criticisms added to earlier claims by Vincent Canby that Argento was "simply a director of incomparable incompetence" in his knowledge of the rules of detective fiction. Vincent Canby, '*Deep Red* is a Bucket of Ax-Murder Clichés', *The New York Times* (June 10 1976), 219.

[14] Franco Moretti, 'Clues', in Tony Bennett (ed.), *Popular Fiction: Technology, Ideology, Production, Reading* (London: Routledge, 1990), p.53.

[15] See Bice Benvinuto and Roger Kennedy, *The Works of Jacques Lacan* (London: Free Association Books, 1986), pp.142–165. This contains a more detailed exploration of the Wolf Man's fantasies through Lacan's constructions of psychosis and the Real.

[16] Ibid., p.153.
[17] Joyce McDougall, 'Primal Scene and Sexual Perversion', *International Journal of Psychology* 53 (1972), 372.
[18] Francette Pacteau, 'The Impossible Referent: Representations of the Androgynies', in Victor Burgin, James Donald and Cora Kaplan (eds), *Formations of Fantasy* (London: Routledge, 1986), pp.62–85 (p.63). Pacteau's account traces artistic representations of sexual ambivalence to the problems of gender identity that the primal scene produces. As a result, androgynous representations frequently figure in fantasies about the primal scene, thus connoting a threat to Symbolic structures and their emphasis on sexual differentiation. As with the Wolf Man's construction of his mother as a 'wounded' animal, the hermaphrodite carries with them both the signs of castration and violence that accompany the revision of the primal scene. It also indicates a desire to transcend the gender distinctions that the Symbolic upholds. It is the essential oscillation between differing readings of the body that marks Dalmas's relation to the ambivalent figures in the gallery space of *Plumage*. The fact that these displays constantly alter whenever he returns to the locale indicate it as a site which denies the subject a stable sexual identity.
[19] Freud, *Case Histories II* (London: Penguin Books, 1991), p.248. The patient's later choice of adult love objects confirmed a pattern of social domination, with suitors drawn from the servant classes.
[20] McDougall, 'Primal Scene', 374.
[21] This concept is extended by McDougall in her book *A Plea for a Measure of Abnormality* (London: Free Association Books, 1990), pp.21–55. Here, she discusses the case study of 'Professor K.' whose adult life was traumatised by a fear of a past 'crime' being discovered. This transgression was revealed as infantile access to a primal scene encounter which conflated erotic excitement with the fear of parental discovery. The trauma that this experience induced was reproduced in K.'s adult sexual experiences, evidenced by his ritualistic beating of a female partner's buttocks as a precursor to his orgasm. Rather than merely indicating K.'s mastery over this event through the punishment of another, McDougall notes the patient expressed fear that the 'anonymous spectator' was present and would turn the object upon his own body.
[22] Sigmund Freud, 'Beyond the Pleasure Principle', in *On Metapsychology* (London: Penguin, 1991), pp.269–338 (p.285). Along with his analysis of the Wolf Man, this account identifies a pattern of traumatic repetition present in both the 'fort/da' scenario of infantile play, as well as the obsessive recounting of images of destruction in traumatised soldiers.
[23] Stephano Tani, *The Doomed Detective: The Contribution of the Detective Novel to Postmodern American and Italian Fiction* (Illinois: Southern Illinois University Press, 1984), p.5.
[24] Ibid., p.18. See also Ian Ousby, *The Blood Hounds of Heaven* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1976), pp.140–175. Although Ousby notes that Holmes embodied a Victorian decadence fashionable in artistic and philosophical circles, this remained separate from his scientific and rational drives.
[25] See Arthur Conan Doyle, *The Adventures of Sherlock Holmes* (Hertfordshire:

Wordsworth Press, 1993), pp.147–159.
[26] Ibid., p.149.
[27] Ibid.
[28] See Catherine Belsey, 'Deconstructing the Text: Sherlock Holmes', in Tony Bennett (ed.), *Popular Fiction: Technology, Ideology, Production, Reading* (London: Routledge, 1990), pp.277–289. Belsey has noted a repeated pattern of gender control through a denial of discourse to female characters depicted in the Holmes narratives. An example of this trope is seen in the Holmes tale 'The Case of the Dancing Men', where a woman under investigation remains either silent or unconscious for the majority of the narrative. This leads to Holmes having to crack a cypher that will not only explain the motive behind her behaviour, but will also bring this troublesome female body back into the realm of language. Belsey's conclusions about the female's limited access to discourse in Holmes narratives are confirmed in 'A Case of Identity'. Here, Mary's relationship to modes of language is shown to be both limited and instrumental. Although she states that her work as a typist affords her a supplementary income, she also admits that her poor vision means she has to locate the letters without the usual means of sight.
[29] Žižek, *Looking Awry*: *An Introduction to Jacques Lacan through Popular Culture* (Massachusetts, MIT Press, 1991) p.61.
[30] Todd French, 'Dario Argento: Myth and Murder', in Chas Balun (ed.), *The Deep Red Horror Handbook* (Albany: Fantaco Enterprises, 1989), pp.7–29 (p.11).
[31] Needham, 'Playing with Genre', 4.
[32] Referenced in 'The Sign of Four'. See Conan Doyle, *Adventures of Sherlock Holmes*, pp.64–117.
[33] Needham, 3.

CHAPTER TWO

DON'T TORTURE THE LANDSCAPE: ITALIAN CULT CINEMA AND THE *MEZZOGIORNO GIALLO*

> The South was one of Italy's most important banks of Otherness. The barbarous, the primitive, the violent, the irrational, the feminine, the African: these and other values, negatively connoted, were repeatedly located in the *Mezzogiorno* as foils to definitions of Italy.
> —John Dickie, 'Stereotypes of the Italian South'[1]

Introduction

With its emphasis on a concealed scene of sexual violence that afflicts the male amateur sleuth via flashbacks and other temporal slippages, Dario Argento's debut film placed the psychic return of the repressed at the centre of the *giallo* narrative. However, the significance of *The Bird with the Crystal Plumage* lies not only in its foregrounding of perverse female aggression as a key narrative trope, but also for the way in which landscape and regionality became inculcated in the libidinal excesses ranged across the text. Here, the key trigger for resolving the narrative quest is predicated on Sam Dalmas's journey to rural Italy, when he visits Berto Consalvi (Mario Adorf), an itinerant artist whose pivotal painting of the unidentified woman being violated is revealed as the basis to Monica Ranieri's murderous campaign:

Figure 2.1: Country contacts: Sam Dalmas's rural encounter in *The Bird with the Crystal Plumage*.

This fictionalised journey proves central as it takes Dalmas away from the (limited but definable) security of the Italian city to an unspecified and barbaric rural landscape that is the site of repressed knowledge, but also functions as temporally and socially distinct from the urban sprawl. Here, the urban(e) investigator has to negotiate a barren 'Other' environment, whose distinction is premised on its functioning beyond the sphere of modernist/technological advances (as evidenced in the scene where Dalmas is forced to ride in an antiquated truck to Consalvi's home in order to acquire information):

Figure 2.2: Rustic and rusted: the pre-modernist rural apace of *The Bird with the Crystal Plumage*.

Moreover, it is not merely technology that is retarded in the protagonist's rural encounter, but the social compact of civility itself. Not only is the interior of the artist's home defined by abject squalor (comically noted by Dalmas's expression upon inspection of the premises), but his rationale for caging cats is ultimately revealed after he feeds his unwitting guest the stewed corpses of the creatures. Indeed, even the character's sneering dismissal of Sam Dalmas as "Capitalist!" at the end of their interaction indicates the rural inhabitant as beset by separate socio-political values, which negate their wider integration into the national *and* social body politic.

Italian Cult Cinema and the *Mezzogiorno*

In many respects the depiction of Berto Consalvi's environment and persona evokes a longer standing set of rural representations, stereotypes and mythologies which can be traced back to the integration of the South under an uneasy unification as the Kingdom of Italy in the 1860s. According to John Dickie, the *Mezzogiorno* or Southern rural zone has become an object of Northern intellectual, critical and cultural concern since the late 19th century, where perceptions of country life have conjoined with anthropological, sociological and even eugenic-based studies, largely to sustain an established belief of the region as "feudal, semi-civilized and even barbaric". [2] Indeed, citing the influence of Alfredo Niceforo's volume *L'Italia barbara contemporanea* (AKA *Contemporary Barbarian Italy*, 1898), Dickie argues that the pseudo-scientific methodology outlined in the book (employing crime, birth, mortality and even cranial data) initiated a template of regionalised (and indeed, racialised) distinction that continues to seep into popular culture *and* consciousness. As Dickie comments:

> Niceforo argues that Sicily, Sardinia and the Southern mainland are stagnating at an inferior level of social evolution to the northern and central provinces… Italy's hopes for the future rest on its becoming a federal state, since specific forms of government are necessary to deal with the distinct characteristics of each region: government must be authoritarian in the South and liberal in the North.[3]

If constructions of this "imaginary South"[4] presume a distinct rural body, regionally specific codes of (im)morality and distinct modes of extreme political affiliation, then these characteristics are clearly reproduced in a range of Italian fictions including the *giallo*. Indeed Mikel Koven's socio-historical approach to the cycle emphasises the extent to which the *giallo* functions as a contradictory index of the 1960s economic miracle, which

integrated Italy into the wider European sphere as a mass-producing consumer economy. While Koven notes the *giallo's* essentially contradictory responses to these advances (through ambivalent representations of technology, mobility and the amateur detective as a disruptive foreign influence), it is interesting to note how the South here figures as the rural return of the repressed, which displaces technological innovation via recourse to archaic and feudal modes of existence. This seems confirmed by historical data produced during the peak period of the *gialli*'s production. For instance, historian Paul Ginsborg has defined the economic miracle as being of distinctly regional and "autonomous character".[5] This highly specific period of modernisation concentrated new growth industries and the concurrent desire for consumer goods in the North-West and Central region, thus heightening "the already grave disequilibrium between North and South".[6] As a consequence, regional inequality was evidenced by marked patterns of migration between North and South between 1958 and 1963.

Arguably, the *giallo* directly responds to the geographical contradictions inherent in the economic miracle, by representing rural spaces as threatening locales on "the outskirts of the cities, marginalised and isolated from the modern urban experience".[7] As a result, the monstrous potential contained within the motif of an amateur detective's Southern journey becomes a repeated trope within the *gialli* produced between 1970 and 1975, where the rural return of the repressed is associated with the eruption of prior crimes/memory traces which subsequently infect the emancipated Northern sphere.

While it is intriguing to note that Argento has often understated the significance of these internalised Southern journeys within his own *gialli*, (see chapter five for further information), it is noticeable that the trope of the urban detective's journey to the rural regions was indeed re-staged in 1975's *Profondo rosso* (AKA *Deep Red*), where pianist-cum-amateur sleuth Marcus Daly (David Hemmings) has to travel from Rome to an abandoned country villa to unravel a (literally) repressed painting whose walled secrets reveal a murderously incestuous bond between a musical colleague and his mother. Beyond Argento's work, other key examples of this motif include Aldo Lado's *Who Saw Her Die* and Sergio Martino's *Torso*, both of which have significant rural inserts as part of their explorations of perversity.

Given the centrality of the 'Southern question' to wider debates around Italian identity, it is surprising that so little attention has been given to the role of the rural space within theoretical accounts of the *giallo* (not least because its nascent debates fit well with the vernacular angle that Koven

adapts in his folklorist approach to the genre). However, the narrative significance of a rural return of the repressed embodying both archaic sexuality and barbaric excess is prevalent in a number of key genres produced in Italy during the 1970s. For instance, the trope of the Southern '*giallo* journey' is itself reproduced in the Italian rogue cop cycle (discussed in chapter eight), which is frequently figured through the narrative device of an unorthodox cop whose 'brutal' methods lead to him being busted in rank and reduced to patrolling a remote Southern region as punishment. Here, he encounters not only a far more primitive and brutal community (whose technological reductionism is signified by the lack of closed circuit monitors and banks of communication terminals depicted as normalised within the Northern police sphere),[8] but also the criminal basis to the narrative enigma that first led to his urban expulsion. Beyond the example of the Italian rogue cop, many cycles of sexploitation cinema also locate their action in the South, characteristically using the figure of a sexually precocious sibling or female tutor who travels to the rural regions to correct their wayward behaviour, only to find a more ribald and unabashed environment than is present in the repressed Northern sphere.[9]

While the recurrence of the debased Southern journey across Italian cult traditions substantiates Gary Needham's view of the sphere as a "locale of the uncanny",[10] it is interesting to note the extent to which not only its protagonists but also its landscapes are rendered libidinal. For instance, Sergio Martino's *Torso* remains a movie of two differing environments, with distinct modes of narrative impetus and audience appeal. The opening segment of the movie, which takes place in the plush Roman interiors of a university art department, is dominated by a marked drive towards character exposition (outlining how a group of female co-eds become the prey of a sexually voracious neck-tie killer). However, the closing rural sections of the movie are very much defined by grotesque/comedic and sexploitation traits with an emphasis on the excess physiology of the locals. Here the heroine (played by *giallo* regular Suzy Kendall) and her surviving female friends seek refuge in a Southern holiday villa, only to find they are now subject to a new set of menaces. From groups of sexually coercive male villagers who constantly gaggle and gawk at the 'exoticism' the girls represent, to leering comic locals reduced to hysterical displays in their presence, *Torso* presents both the landscape and its inhabitants as infantile and yet sexually voracious. Importantly, not only was this reorientation of narrative towards grotesque character types and comic tradition commented upon in the film's international reception, but a number of reviews also noted how the regional shift in the second part of the movie foregrounded the role of

landscape in these proceedings. For instance, *Variety* defined the "small city in the mountains" as "stunning",[11] while a *Cinefantastique* review concluded that the film's "Italian locations [were] an asset".[12]

Don't Torture the Landscape: Policies of the Picturesque

Rather than functioning as an isolated example, the regionalised foregrounding of the Southern landscape also occurs as a consistent trait within the cycle I shall term the *Mezzogiorno giallo*, which can once again be linked to the historical tensions in the region. For instance, John Dickie has identified a long-standing policy of the 'picturesque' in relation to the Southern landscape, which imbibes the region into ahistorical (and ideologically containable) parameters. In his study of popular journals such as *Illustrazione Italiana,* Dickie identifies the picturesque as present in a strategy of anaesthetising the Southern landscape (via poetic literary prose and accompanying illustration), which serves up the region as a pastoral and non-threatening ideal for Northern consumption:

> The word that most often encapsulates this elementary aesthetic *italianità* is 'picturesque'. A picturesque scene, custom or figure is foreign enough to be exotic, to belong to the poetic margin beyond a humdrum reality, and yet familiar enough to be soothingly Italian.[13]

These positive proclamations of the landscape often stand in contrast to its depicted inhabitants, who Dickie notes are constructed with a "crude aesthetic quality"[14] that nullifies any serious examination of the social or economic factors underpinning their malaise. Through this attempt to "anaesthetise social problems", the equation of the picturesque with the Southern landscape also affords "a conciliatory veil over an ugly or alien reality".[15]

Moreover, it is interesting to note how the Southern landscape here becomes synonymous with not only a coda of rural typage, but also an increased aspect of polymorphous sexuality. For instance, to return to the international reception of Sergio Martino's film, it is noticeable that reviews such as *Variety*'s made a clear connection between landscape and female sexuality, commenting that the film contained "stunning scenery and even more stunning girls", ensuring that "it should do excellently within its given market".[16] These comments (echoed by other press accounts that defined the female characters "as predictably bosomy, leggy, and doe eyed")[17] also highlighted the extent to which the first part of the movie was dominated by male protagonists (usually in the form of multiple suspects) with "the emphasis on heterosexual sex (intimated more

than shown)".[18] By contrast, the rural finale of the film foregrounds not heterosexual, but female sexualities, with the emphasis on "a dollop of lesbianism between the two girls".[19]

Rather than just evidencing the predictable exploitation aesthetic that aligns female sexual desire with uninhibited behaviour, the use of the rural backdrop as a space of gendered sexual exploration has a longer set of cultural values and myths once again linkable to the *Mezzogiorno.* Here, established perceptions of the South as a zone of female dominance (sexual and matriarchal), function via the region's equation with both femininity and the irrational. This is seen in Niceforo's conclusion that "Neapolitans, dissolute and weak by nature are a *popolo donna* ('a "feminine" people'), while the Northern provinces represent a *popoli uomini* ('"masculine" peoples')".[20] It is also reproduced in publications such as *Illustrazione Italiana,* which John Dickie has noted often traded on images of idealised peasant women and their location, representing an:

> … anomalous position … between the world of civilized progress and the spheres of either rusticity or barbarism. One of its tasks is to move the South nearer to 'us' when it is pastoral and nearer to 'them' when it is uncivilized.[21]

The conflation of unabashed female sexuality with the rustic rural sphere is even more pronounced in those *Mezzogiorno gialli* which are located centrally in the South, and detail Northern intellectual and criminological investigations of prior transgressions within this archaic landscape. Key titles here include Lucio Fulci's *Non si sevizia un paperino* (AKA *Don't Torture a Duckling*, 1972), as well as Pupi Avati's *La casa dalle finestre che ridono* (AKA *The House with Laughing Windows*, 1976).

In the former, detectives and journalists from Milan are drafted into the backwoods locale of Achendura, to apprehend the culprit who has been kidnapping and dispatching young boys there. From the outset, prominence is given to a range of sexually promiscuous and 'mystical' females as potential suspects, including Maciara (Florinda Bolkan), whose alchemical beliefs and marginalisation from extended kinship structures in the village ensure, in the words of Mikel Koven, that "she holds a liminal position within community as both insider and outsider".[22] Maciara's near-Gothic construction is confirmed in the film's iconic opening scene, which juxtaposes the somewhat incongruous shot of a new motorway edged into the dirt track of the village, against close-up shots of Maciara's hands delving into the filth at the side of the viaduct in order to expose the buried foetus of a young child. From the very outset then, I would agree with Koven's observation that here the tension within the film is often

regarding the villagers' resistance or ambiguity towards modernity as a specific mode of 'alien' Northern advancement. Indeed, this potential regional disjuncture is also evident in Riz Ortolani's strident opening score, which mixes a jagged classical string composition with a traditional Italian folk ballad as if to signify an aural incompatibility between modernism and its macabre Other.

Rather than functioning in isolation, the pivotal role that Fulci's film attributes to female transgression extends beyond Bolkan's character, to include Patrizia (Barbara Bouchet), who is also a suspect for the child killings due to the sexually inappropriate relations that she has with a number of teenage boys in the film. Indeed, she is introduced into the film attempting to seduce a clearly uncomfortable young boy, who finds her nude in front of a sunray lamp. Here, Fulci's camera alternates between Bouchet's self-confident nakedness and the pre-pubescent and poorly clothed body of the peasant child, reiterating the perverse disjuncture between them. As with Maciara, Patrizia remains another liminal female character within Achendura. Her ambivalent position is underscored by the architectural disparities associated with her status in the rural space. As we discover, Patrizia is a perennial wild child who is hiding out in the region having been arrested for drug use in Milan. Although she is associated with the accoutrements of modernism (from sports car to 1970s chic lava lamps) she derives from Southern stock, but is shunned because of her sophisticated pretensions. As the local police chief comments to Milanese investigators: "She was born here, her father made a fortune in Milan. You may have noticed that funny modern-looking type building on the way into town. Her father owns it, but he only built it for show, he hates the place." Indeed, the 'funny-looking building' to which he refers once again points to the disjuncture between modernist advancement and the rural space, with the house occupying an incongruous position within a wider rural image of the picturesque.

However, while the film clearly fulfils Koven's vision of the *giallo* as split between urban advancement and rural resistance, this spatial dichotomy comes to take on distinctly gendered connotations that exceed the film's disjuncture between the rational modernistic structures of (masculine) advancement/surveillance and the feminine, fleshy, irrational landscape. The gendered associations to the landscape extend to include a psychic and libidinal dimension that includes the infantile echoes that puncture the soundtrack during Maciara's frequent excavations of the soil. As we discover, although not the killer in the narrative, she (and the rest of the town folk) are responsible for the illegal concealment of the corpse of her illegitimate child years earlier, thus further conflating illicit acts with

the Southern soil upon which modernist advancement now takes place. This landscape therefore evokes a rural return of the repressed comparable with Linda Ruth Williams's reading of John Boorman's *Deliverance* (1972). Here, she notes that a rural locale can convey "the feeling that something is in the process of being lost or buried".[23] For Williams, the central role that landscape has in Boorman's film is vividly demonstrated in the film's final shot, when a cadaverous hand emerges from an otherwise placid country lake as evidence of violent sexual conflict between barbaric locals and four urban males on a fishing vacation.

As with Boorman's film, the *Mezzogiorno giallo* uses landscape (and its association with the female body and its irrationalities) to add an important psychic dimension to the Southern picturesque. This chimes with Williams' account of the libidinal protagonists of *Deliverance,* whom she defines as "too 'natural' to be properly human … to intimate with, and isolated by, the natural … landscape… So natural are these people that they have become unnatural…"[24] It is further evidenced by the disenchanted Milanese police inspector who finds Maciara bludgeoned to death by the side of the new motorway after locals have wrongly assumed she is the child killer. As he comments: "A horrible crime … bred of ignorance and superstition. We construct gleaming highways, but we are a long way from modernising the mentality of people like this." Although the resolution of the film reveals the murderer to be the local priest Don Alberto Avallone (Marc Porel), the associations between repressed transgression and the 'feminine' remain prominent by virtue of the assailant's attire and family connections. As Mikel Koven has noted:

> The ambiguity of gender with regard to the priest's cassock also points to an ambiguity of gender with regard to priests themselves. – They are born men, but cannot live "like men," from a heteronormative context of Italian masculinity and machismo.[25]

Primal Peoples and the Primal Scene

As indicated above, although the *Mezzogiorno giallo* has yet to receive appropriate theorisation in accounts of the genre, it remains significant for representing the rural space as a site of wider sexual and social tensions within the Italian psyche. In these narratives, the conflation of unresolved psychic aberration with an 'untamed' landscape facilitates a kind of rural return of the repressed, where the environment and its inhabitants come to signify a monstrous mode of expression that must remain submerged within the civilised Northern consciousness. As Gabriella Gribaudi has noted, this paradoxical strategy of revering the rural space, whilst

condemning its protagonists, has long-standing historical foundations whereby:

> …the South appeared to be a 'paradise inhabited by devils.' The South was a marvellous and happy land, while the inhabitants were savages. The immoral behaviour and lack of civilisation were precisely the product of the climate and the pleasant and attractive countryside which made it possible to live in a state of nature, a primitive contentment allowing only for the most extreme and basic passions.[26]

This disjuncture between a rural ideal and its aberrant inhabitants becomes more pronounced in those *gialli* either set centrally in the South, as the above case study of *Don't Torture a Duckling* indicates. Another significant example of the *Mezzogiorno giallo* is Pupi Avati's *La casa dalle finestre che ridono* (AKA *The House with Laughing Windows*, 1976), which uses the Emilia-Romagna region of Northern Italy to show how rural enclaves can pervert the wider ideals of Italian economic and cultural development. In Avati's film, the rural backdrop is also used to explore startling themes of male masochism and gender ambiguity. Following the pattern of Argento's foundational debut*, The House with Laughing Windows* also employs the central image of a painting that resurrects repressed sexual urges, though here they are used to evoke scenarios of male suffering and annihilation, rather than a scene of female genital distress. As indicated in Freud's study of the Wolf Man, if primal tensions remain unchecked, they perpetuate both a fatalistic pattern of compulsive repetition, as well as perverse forms of gender orientation, which are reproduced in Avati's film through a preoccupation with masochistic male imagery.

This pattern is demonstrated in the film's startling sepia opening montage, which depicts a partly clad and bound male being brutalised in slow motion by two unidentified figures, while his suffering is simultaneously reproduced as a macabre painting. Echoing the often violent distortion of erotic content within the primal scene, it seems significant that the off-screen dialogue which accompanies this sequence is coded in explicitly sexual terms. Here, the narrator discusses the punishment enacted upon the depicted male body in near pornographic terms, noting that the colours of his canvas are "hot like fresh blood … the liquid flows down my arms…" This macabre version of ejaculation is reproduced as the camera pans down the bloodied torso of the male victim during the narration. The sexualisation of these scenes of primal violence is reiterated by the narrator's later comments: "Death, I can tell it's coming… Oh my God, Oh my God! I am dying, purify me", thus linking

jouissance to the scenes of aggression being depicted. Whilst many psychoanalytical studies have focused on the way in which visual content can reproduce unrepressed primal structures, Freud also examined the extent to which these infantile echoes can be recast as aural patterns, which are reproduced by the audio recordings that come to dominate Avati's film.[27]

The voiceover narration is revealed to be that of Buono Legnani (Tonino Corazzari), a controversial and celebrated artist from a remote rural village, whose images of extreme agony sketched from models at the point of death earned him the title 'The Painter of Agonies'. As we discover, the now dead artist's reputation still casts an obscene air of celebrity over the remote town, whose residents have decided to restore one of Legnani's church frescoes (which depicts Saint Sebastian being attacked by two unidentified aggressors)[28] in a bid to attract more Northern tourists. As a result, the post-credit sequence depicts the art historian Stefano (Lino Capolicchio) arriving in the region, which instantly connotes the distinction between the idyllic landscape and its aberrant inhabitants that Gabriella Gribaudi has defined above. Here, a gradual close-up shot of the town's pier reveals Stefano's new benefactor to be Solmi (Bob Tonelli), the dwarf turned self-styled mayor who is attempting to reverse the town's fortunes. Although Solmi proudly informs his new employee that, alongside the infamy of Legnani's paintings, the region is also famed for the "women, the water and silence", Stefano's landlady vocalises the decay evident in the town: "The last tourist I saw was a Nazi, and that was in the 1940s!" Beyond the figure of Solmi, it is noticeable that *The House with Laughing Windows* revels in a pantheon of physiological abnormality, with regional defects and local disabilities being displayed before Stefano in communal settings such as the town's (singular) restaurant, as if he were a forensic rather than art expert.

These images of the aberrant rural body very much mirror what Linda Ruth Williams finds in her study of American backwoods texts such as *Deliverance.* Here, physiological imperfection is signified by bodily and behavioural characteristics that include "bad teeth, worn dungarees … lazy demeanour appropriate to long hot afternoons lounging on the peeling veranda – as well as their willingness to go one step further as the monstrous hillbillies of horror".[29] Williams' comments about the essentially backwards nature of the backwoods dweller's evolution also reiterate the concept of "temporal discrepancy"[30] that Annalee Newitz has identified in the American 'white-trash' horror film. These narratives of physical and psychical regression reflect urbanite fears about the lack of development within the untamed rural sphere, rendering the inhabitants of the countryside

(and their bodies) as source of both fascination and repulsion.

However, the monstrous nature of the *Mezzogiorno giallo* even outstrips the abnormalities identified by Williams and Newitz, with texts such as *The House with Laughing Windows* adding an important angle of gender ambiguity to the rural return of the repressed. For instance, although the artist Legnani is revealed to have perished in an act of horrific self-mutilation prior to the actualisation of the narrative, his personality (and body) is kept alive by both the delirium of his murderous audio recordings, as well as his self-portraits, which proudly hang in local dignitaries' homes. When the restaurant owner shows one of these paintings to Stefano, to explain the artist's limited success with women, the transgendered nature of his body (replete with fulsome breasts and long feminine hair) becomes startlingly apparent, echoing themes of sexual ambivalence found in the primal scene *and* the painter's siblings.

Importantly, given the familial perversions which come to underpin such Italian variants of the *Mezzogiorno giallo*, the film seems to echo Ruth Williams' analysis of *Deliverance,* where:

> The rural family of cinema horror is disturbing for classically Freudian reasons: this is a composite monster rendered from recognizable elements of backwoods America and the awful suspicion that interbreeding and literal mother-fucking have shredded the vestiges of behavioural control… Uneasy glimpses of bodies which (we assume) wear the symptoms of incest push the film into difficult territory from the start.[31]

As Williams continues, such narratives trap horrified Northern tourists in "a sticky genetically intensified web made by too much family".[32] While eugenic and pseudo-scientific studies have attempted to define, categorise (and criminalise) these defective Southern American family genes, I am interested in how this vocabulary of Otherness has been similarly transposed into the *too much family* of the *Mezzogiorno giallo.*

For instance, the familial basis of the unexplained murders that occur after Legnani's death comes as little surprise, with the finale revealing that the artist's geriatric sisters have been mutilating male victims in a similar fashion to the Saint Sebastian pose their brother depicted. Indeed, this conflation of carnage with creativity is verbalised in the final moments when a fatally wounded Stefano realises the murderous connection between the two elderly women from the statement: "That is a lovely wound. Legnani would make a masterpiece out of that!" The actions of these ageing matriarchs (which are in effect mirrored by the mother of the killer priest in *Don't Torture a Duckling*) both confirm the ambivalent *sexual* power that these women retain within the *Mezzogiorno giallo*,

whilst also pointing to the network of *social* power they weave across their depicted communities. (This is confirmed when Stefano seeks solace from his attackers, only to have the townsfolk refuse him entry to their homes because of his ‘foreign’ status.)

These images suggest that the town effectively accepts and justifies the Legnani family’s violations, thus indicating a communal basis to the notion of *too much family*, which can also be analysed from a specifically Italian context. Indeed, noting the parallels between Italian and American accounts of the rural Other, Gabriella Gribaudi has identified the cultural significance of the American sociologist Edward Banfield’s study *The Moral Basis of a Backward Society* in relation to the on-going debates around the Southern problem. Here, Banfield used a year-long observational study of the impoverished Italian village of Basilicata to consider the extent to which the Southern regions were becoming more disenfranchised as the result of the 1960s economic miracle. To exemplify this Southern position of regression, Banfield formulated the concept of ‘amoral familialism’ to explain a regional rejection of the cultural and socio-political bonds associated with modernity and its advancement. Rather than a shared belief in a cohesive social body,

> The term ‘amoral familialism’ describes a form of behaviour directed solely towards the good of the family, understood here in the more restricted sense of parents and children. It implies therefore an endemic inability to act in the common good – what is popularly called a lack of civic consciousness. It is related to societies where the fundamental unit is the nuclear family and more complex forms of social organisation are absent.[33]

As Gribaudi notes, Banfield’s study was initially published in 1957, receiving its Italian translation as early as 1961, precisely because the amoral familialism concept fitted so well with existing constructions of the South as dominated by brigandage rather than legality, and vendetta (between families) rather than civic society. In cinematic terms, the visual vocabulary of amoral familialism ensures the rural return of the repressed in a variety of Italian cult genres from the *Mezzogiorno giallo* (with its emphasis on defective female-dominated family structures), to the rogue cop series (which charts the dissolution of legality through endless vendetta and bloodletting) and even erotic genres (where Southern social values privilege kinship/libido passions over morality issues).

Indeed, amoral familialism also functions within the *Mezzogiorno giallo* to destabilise any moral and social institutions which do operate some degree of social order, as in the case of the Catholic church. Koven’s analysis of the classic *giallo* has identified a sub-genre of the cycle as

dominated by killer priests, but fails to explore the significance of these representations within the traditionally religious heartland of the Italian South. As with the killer from *Don't Torture a Duckling,* the perverse cleric of Avati's film is shown to privilege ritualistic familial perversion over communal and moral duty. This subversion of the priest's role is given added dramatic weight in the shock ending of *The House with Laughing Windows,* when the priest that has befriended Stefano is revealed to one of Legnani's sisters, who has been living (and accepted) in the community under the guise of a male cleric. This startling gender revelation is demonstrated when the cleric removes 'his' robe to reveal a firm pair of breasts beneath, the freeze-frame ending on Stefano's shocked reaction indicating that his final fate at the hands of the rural return of the repressed remains unresolved. In many respects, this open ending to the film provides an appropriate (lack of) closure to the threat that the return of the Other evokes. Situated between the psychic disturbance of the unrepressed urge and embodiment of an over-naturalised landscape, they ensure that:

> This is an open text, not simply because of its inconclusiveness, its 'failure' to resolve meanings, but in the way it keeps anxiously returning to its own past. Repression and remembering are intimately bound to each other across the different moments that the subject inhabits (both the characters on screen and the audience, who are invited into identification with their disruptive sense of 'rewritable' reality).[34]

What the ending to Avati's film also confirms is that rural Italian horror remains a space where social phobia and psychic disturbance meet. In this respect, The film's disquieting theme can be seen as drawing on long-standing and submerged fears around the monstrous nature of the Southern Italian that can be defined under the title of the *Mezzogiorno giallo*.

Notes

[1] John Dickie, 'Stereotypes of the Italian South', in Robert Lumley and Jonathan Morris (eds), *The New History of the Italian South: The Mezzogiorno Revisited* (Exeter: Exeter University Press, 1997), p.119.
[2] Ibid., p.115.
[3] Ibid.
[4] Ibid., p.138.
[5] Paul Ginsborg, *A History of Contemporary Italy 1943–1980* (London: Penguin Books, 1990), p.216.
[6] Ibid.
[7] Koven, *La Dolce Morte: Vernacular Cinema and the Italian Giallo Film*

(Lanham MD: The Scarecrow Press, 2008), pp.52–53.

[8] Importantly, the replication of technology and its association with the Northern sphere is another aspect of the economic miracle that writers such as Koven associate with Italian post-war cult genres. It is no coincidence that Argento's debut movie *The Bird with the Crystal Plumage* begins with a close-up of a typewriter as the unidentified killer types out her perverse wish list. As Paul Ginsborg has noted in *A History of Contemporary Italy*:

> Another major area of expansion was typewriters. With Olivetti in the forefront, and its 'model' factory at Ivrea one of the great success stories of the fifties, the number of typewriters produced rose from 151,000 in 1957 to 652,000 in 1961. (p.215)

[9] The equation between the 'naturalness' of the Southern landscape and unabashed sexuality has long been a source of commentary for intellectuals ranging from Freud to Weber, often establishing contradictory assumptions surrounding the landscape and its inhabitants. For further information on this, see George R. Sanders' chapter, 'The Magic of the South: Popular Religion and Elite Catholicism in Italian Ethnology', in Jane Schneider, *Italy's Southern Question: Orientalism in One Country* (Oxford: Berg Press, 1988), pp.177–202. Sanders notes the rural space is often cited in almost eroticised terms as "emotional, sensuous, aesthetic" (p.177). Equally, Sanders notes this fleshy landscape also carries a distinctly libidinal set of connotations, where primal drives are only ever partially repressed:

> Most northerners (Including northern Italians) have felt little compunction about declaring the unchanging otherness of Southern Italy… it is an alien land, and the alien attracts and repels simultaneously. (p.178)

[10] Gary Needham 'Playing with Genre: An Introduction to the *Giallo*' in *Kinoeye: New Perspectives on European Film,* Volume 2, Issue no 11 (2002), 5.

[11] '*Torso*' (review), *Variety* (November 13 1974), 19.

[12] John Duvoli, '*Torso*' (review), *Cinefantastique* 4:4 (January 1976), 31.

[13] Dickie, 'Stereotypes', p.134.

[14] Ibid.

[15] Ibid.

[16] '*Torso*', *Variety*, 19.

[17] Duvoli, '*Torso*', 31.

[18] *Torso*', *Variety*, 19.

[19] Ibid.

[20] Alfredo Niceforo, cited in Gabriella Gribaudi, 'Images of the South: The *Mezzogiorno* as Seen by Insiders and Outsiders', in Lumley and Morris, *New History of the Italian South*, p.95.

[21] Dickie, 'Stereotypes', p.135.

[22] Koven, *La Dolce Morte: Vernacular Cinema and the Italian Giallo Film*, p.53.

[23] Linda Ruth Williams, *Critical Desire: Psychoanalysis and the Literary Subject* (London: Edward Arnold, 1995), p.138.

[24] Ibid., p.139.

[25] Koven, *La Dolce Morte: Vernacular Cinema and the Italian Giallo Film,* p.103.

[26] Gribaudi, 'Images of the South', p.88.

[27] See the chapter 'A case of Paranoia Running Counter to the Psychoanalytic Theory of Disease' in Freud's *On Metapsychology* (London: Penguin Books, 1983), pp.148–158. Here Freud reviews the case of a female patient whose adult sexual relations were plagued by aural terrors that related to having her emotional encounters recorded without her knowledge. Freud notes that these phantom noises (which resembled the beat of a clock) were particularly heightened during moments of emotional intensity:

> In the midst of this idyllic scene, she was suddenly frightened by a noise, a kind of knock or click. It came from the direction of the writing desk, which was standing across the window; the space between desk and window was partly taken up by a heavy curtain. (p.148)

For Freud, the disembodied sounds, as well as the scenario of concealment in which they occurred, indicated the fear of the ticking clock as a displaced reference to "a sensation of a knock or beat in her clitoris" (p.155). These traumatic sounds related to the sensation that the patient experienced when illicitly viewing a primal scene encounter between her parents.

Beyond Freud's example, more recent studies of the primal scene as an auditory mechanism include William G. Niederland's study 'Early Auditory Experiences, Beating Fantasies and Primal Scene', *The Psychoanalytic Study of the Child* 13 (1958), 471–504. This examines a patient who became paralysed by the 'banging' of industrial sounds (such as that of a hammer hitting metal), which the analyst reads against his exposure to a scene of parental coitus with violent overtones.

[28] The reference to Saint Sebastian is significant here, as this figure forms part of the case study of 'moral' masochism that Kaja Silverman adopts in relation to male suffering and primal scene structures. See the chapter 'Masochism and Male Subjectivity' in *Male Subjectivity at the Margins* (London: Routledge, 1992), pp.185–213.

[29] Williams, *Critical Desire*, p.139.

[30] Annalee Newitz, 'White Savagery and Humiliation Or a New Racial Consciousness in the Media', in Matt Wray and Annalee Newitz (eds), *White Trash: Race and Class in America* (London: Routledge, 1997), p.134.

[31] Williams, *Critical Desire*, pp.139–140.

[32] Ibid., p.140.

[33] Gribaudi, 'Images of the South', p.107.

[34] Williams, *Critical Desire*, p.144.

CHAPTER THREE

RAPE, REVENGE AND RAILTRACK: SPACE AND SEXUAL SPECTACLE IN THE SUSPENSE THRILLER *GIALLO*

Introduction

As indicated in chapters one and two, Dario Argento's spectacular subversion of the killer's identity in *The Bird with the Crystal Plumage* provided an influential gender formula which subsequent *gialli* also exploited. Giorgio Bertellini has correctly identified Argento's cinema as "a manifesto of gender ambivalence",[1] and it is interesting to consider how the initially transgressive figure of Monica Ranieri (who retained both a lustful disdain for sexually attractive women *and* an aberrant physiology to match) generated a plethora of vengeful Italian female attackers who instilled fear in potential victims and misguided masculine sleuths alike.

For instance, the link between aberrant female physiology and the strategised slaying of female prey also occurred in later entries to the cycle, such as Sergio Pastore's *The Crimes of the Black Cat*, which ranges the (literally) lacking female killer Françoise Ballais (Sylva Koscina) against the equally 'impaired' blind amateur detective Peter Oliver (Anthony Steffen). The finale of the film reveals that Ballais's body had been violated as the result of a car crash, which motivated her quest to mutilate the busty models employed at her chic fashion house. To add weight to this somewhat strained explanation, the female killer rips open her blouse in the final scene to reveal her disfigured breasts before Oliver's impaired gaze.[2] In an added ploy to mislead viewers about Ballais's monstrous physiology, official press campaigns for *The Crimes of the Black Cat* often cast the character in a strident semi-clad pose, with the title obscuring the offending area of scarred tissue from the screen:

Figure 3.1: Tantalising violations: advertising masks 'damaged' female physiology in *The Crimes of the Black Cat*.

Beyond the issue of personal disability, female *giallo* killers frequently transgress to avenge the violation of *other* female bodies (often resulting from botched abortions, as in the case of Andrea Bianchi's *Nude per l'assassino* [AKA *Strip Nude for Your Killer*, 1975]). Female aggression is also linked to sexual frustration, same-sex attraction or implied lesbianism in a range of titles that include Francesco Barilli's innovative *Il profumo della signora in nero* (AKA *The Perfume of the Lady in Black*, 1974), which links the frigidity of heroine Silvia Hacherman (Mimsy Farmer) to a prior sexual assault suffered at the hands of her stepfather, as well as Lucio Fulci's *Lizard in a Woman's Skin,* where uptight matriarch Carol Hammond (Florinda Bolkan) uses a vocabulary of (hetero)sexual repression to mask a torrid and destructive lesbian tryst.

What the cursory survey of above *giallo* titles indicates is the extent to which the cycle exploited myths of monstrous (and often non heterosexual) women during the 1970s. Although the *giallo* remains the most theorised of Italian cult cycles surveyed for this volume, it is surprising that the figure of the female *giallo* killer has not been more prominent in accounts of the cycle. For instance, while acknowledging the significance of Argento's atypical gender constructions in the *giallo*, Mikel Koven still concludes that:

> …although sexually ambiguous killers appear in *giallo* cinema, their overall percentage is relatively small. These killers may appear in the genre's more famous examples, or are examples that are more useful to certain types of critical analysis, but the sexually confused *giallo* killer is a frequent, but by no means typical character.[3]

While I would agree with Koven's implication that the cycle does indeed contain a level of gender 'containment' to its images of female excess, it is still the case that the *giallo* conveys a plurality of sexual perversions which frequently undercut stable concepts of sexual identity in *either* male or female subjectivity. In order to explore this further, I wish to devote the rest of the chapter to an important, but as yet untheorised series of later entries to the cycle, which Koven briefly refers to as "suspense thriller *gialli*".[4] I shall consider this sub-series of films in detail, not only because they have often been overlooked by the recent flurry of theoretical 'recuperations' of the *giallo,* but also because their stark images of sexual violence provide an interesting (if extreme) case study through which to extend questions of sexual representation *and* gender ambiguities within the format. As with the classical versions of the *giallo* format, the suspense thriller variants can also be read through the social and psychic tensions at play within 1970s Italy.

In terms of their narrative configurations, the suspense thriller format eschews the mechanics of amateur detection found in 'classic' entries to the cycle (such as the need to uncover a transgressor's identity), in favour of the exploration of violence and sadism between given and identifiable groups of rival characters. As Koven rightly notes: "In the classic *giallo* films, the amateur detective looks for the killer 'out there', somewhere in the city, the investigation is *external* to the film's protagonist."[5] However, while the criminal in the suspense thriller *giallo* is still external (often being randomly connected to his victims by chance occurrence), these crimes are deemed more extreme (indicated by the disturbing imagery of rape and violation running through the series) because his identity is instantly knowable. As a sub-cycle of Italian exploitation, the suspense thriller *giallo* occupied a broad timeframe between the years of 1975 and 1980, with titles that included Aldo Lado's *L'ultimo treno della notte* (AKA *Don't Ride on Late Night Trains*, 1975), Pasquale Festa Companile's *Autostop rosso sangue* (AKA *Hitchhike*, 1977), Franco Prosperi's *La settima donna* (AKA *Terror*, 1978), Ferdinando Baldi's *La ragazza del vagone letto* (AKA *Terror Express*, 1979), Ruggero Deodato's *La casa sperduta nel parco* (AKA *The House on the Edge of the Park* [shot in 1978, but released in 1980]) and Fernando di Leo's *Vacanze per un massacro* (AKA *Madness*, 1980).

Unlike so-called classical *giallo* entries discussed previously, many of the suspense thriller format often had their 'legitimate' Italian roots erased via a calculated conflation with existing American 'rape-and-revenge narratives' popular during the 1970s. The success of Wes Craven's sexually explicit splatter movie *The Last House on the Left* (1972) led to many key entries in the cycle being retitled to echo Craven's debut.[6] For instance, beyond its original export title of *Terror*, Franco Prosperi's *La settima donna* was also widely retitled as *The Last House on the Beach*, whilst Aldo Lado's *Don't Ride on Late Night Trains* was rebranded via a range of parasitic titles including *Last House Part II*, *Last Stop on the Night Train*, *New House on the Left, The New House on the Left* and even *Second House on the Left*. (All of these titles prove particularly inventive as the majority of Lado's film occurs on a trans-European express train, rather than in a domestic setting.)

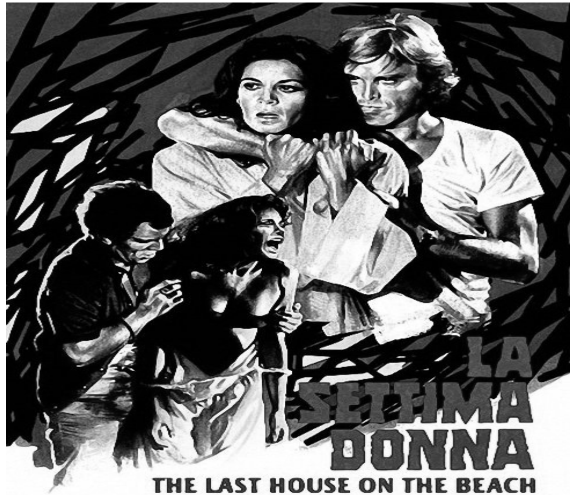

Figure 3.2: *La settima donna* rebranded as US style rape-and-revenge flick.

Beyond these parasitic marketing strategies, the Italian sub-cycle of suspense thriller *giallo* provided an additional association to Wes Craven's film in their frequent casting of *Last House* lead-thug David Hess in a later series of roles that accentuated the sexual sadism exhibited in this previous hit narrative. Later characterisations included the sociopathic loner Adam in *Hitchhike*, and the disco dancing date-rape killer Alex in *House on the Edge of the Park*.

While the submersion of potential *giallo* markers within a more transnational rape-and-revenge vocabulary appear to mark the decline of the cycle, the suspense thriller variants released between 1975 and 1980 do retain a number of the key Italian concerns identified in Mikel Koven and Gary Needham's accounts. These include an obsession with transgression, travel and transnational identity, which occurs here in a much starker sexual environment than the more mainstream *giallo* versions.[7] For instance, both Koven and Needham have noted the prominence of airline travel within the classic *giallo*, where it functions as an index for transnational mobility. However, the suspense thriller format limits any element of social and cultural emancipation by repeatedly linking the journey motif to sadistic humiliation. For instance, Pasquale Festa Campanile's *Hitchhike* is just one entry that connects car travel with violation, when bickering couple Walter and Eve Mancini (played by Franco Nero and Corinne Clery) unwittingly pick up a sexually sadistic stranger Adam Konitz (David Hess) at the side of the road. The bulk of the subsequent narrative is shot from within the vehicle, where intricate cross-cutting between aggressor and prey is used to exacerbate the sexual tensions between the trio:

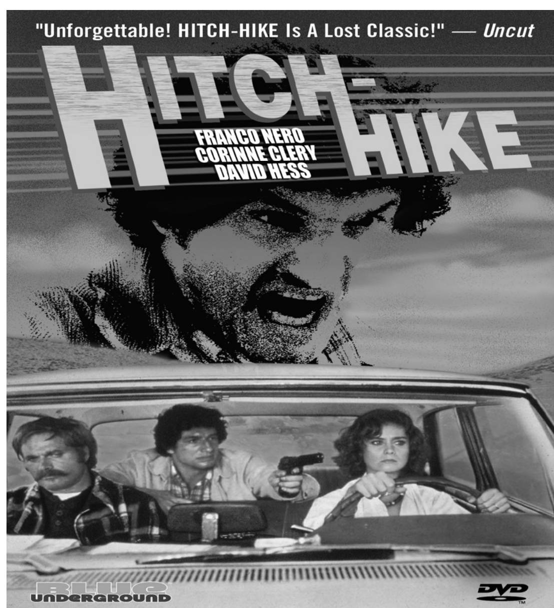

Figure 3.3: Don't ride in confined spaces: the car interior as a zone of sexual humiliation in *Hitchhike*.

It is noticeable that while the confines of the car become a repeated locale for working through a range of sexual dynamics within the suspense thriller *giallo*, trains also regularly appear as vehicles that throw random classes (and genders) together, often with fatal results. According to Koven, Aldo Lado's *Don't Ride on Late Night Trains* is one *giallo* that functions through the "liminal space of the train compartment",[8] in a narrative that details two ill-fated teenage girls being stalked and sexually molested by a pair of thugs on a deserted overnight transcontinental train. Ferdinando Baldi's later *Terror Express* takes the concept of 'train trauma' one step further by having a trio of knife-wielding, high-energy disco deviants invade a rail carriage and force the conductor to travel across national borders while they subject a cross-section of society to a string of taunts and sexual indignities. Baldi's film uses the confined spaces of the train carriage to interesting narrative effect, by enclosing a random selection of passengers within separate sleeping compartments so that the train interior allows a series of episodic encounters between the differing victims and the rapists.

As with *Late Night Trains* before it, *Terror Express* uses the motif of inter-rail travel to offer a contradictory commentary on the benefits of modernity and technological advancement. Here, the singular, foreign 'classical' *giallo* amateur sleuth is replaced by multiple representatives of differing nation states, who reveal little communal connection, and often display outward and vicious hostility towards one another. Also significant here is the role of photography and location shooting, which is heightened to provide additional local colour to the catalogue of abuse that unfolds. In his analysis of the classical *giallo*, Koven has identified the historical importance of railway travel to such detective fiction traditions, noting that:

> As "popular" literature, crime novels … often featured trains or train journeys, for example in the Sherlock Holmes stories, particularly as spaces and times for the detective to mediate on the puzzle … though in [Agatha] Christie's hands, trains were just as likely sites for murder as the contemplation of the murder.[9]

Although the author argues that "the airplane has replaced the train as the main form of mass transit" in the classical *giallo*,[10] it seems significant that the final entries to the series rely heavily on train and automobile travel as key narrative triggers. Here, such "*gialli* tend to feature 'travelling shots', that is, shots, usually taken from a car, that establish, the geographical location of the film through a sort of 'travelogue' footage, showing key points of tourist interest".[11] However, as these quasi

documentary inserts are framed by wider fictional scenarios that include enforced deflowering via a switchblade knife (*Late Night Trains*), brutal gang violations for the failed contestants of poker matches (*Terror Express*) and motor engine failure as the trigger to mutilation in a religious female retreat (*Terror*), it is clear that these films link mobility to mayhem, thus expressing a deeper cultural fear about the perils of permeable national boundaries.[12] By linking travel to terror, these films provide "one of the areas in which the genre articulates its ambivalence towards modernity: specifically through juxtaposition of luscious travelogue visual footage with diegetic horror and tragedy".[13]

While the transposition of narrative action from plane to train travel in the suspense thriller format distinguishes it from the more cosmopolitan entries that Koven discusses, the annexing of rail travel to physical violation also carries a direct social and political resonance relating to the period of 1975 to 1980. During this time, Italy witnessed an intensification of the armed political struggles which came to define the terrorist years of the *Anni di piombo*. As Ruth Glynn has recently suggested in her article 'Trauma on the Line', this wave of armed turmoil specifically targeted vulnerable metropolitan spaces, such as railways, with a series of high profile bombings creating a wave of social and physical panic around the dangers of public transportation. Glynn's work goes some way towards explaining why not only rail tracks, but also the spectres of terrorism, hang over the suspense thriller *giallo*, with bomb threats used as a narrative ploy to shift protagonists into vulnerable public spaces (*Don't Ride on Late Night Trains*), or dissidents being associated with either acts of violation or the liberation of potential female victims (*Terror Express*).

Although not all of the entries to the suspense thriller *giallo* revolve around entrapment within automotive confines, the theme of sadism emanating from confined travel is still evident in these titles, further substantiating Glynn's notions surrounding the vulnerable Italian public space. Thus, Prosperi's *Terror* begins with three thugs attempting to flee a crime scene before a faulty getaway car forces them to hide out in an all-female Catholic summer retreat, with predictable and brutal consequences. Ruggero Deodato's *House on the Edge of the Park* links entrapment to engine failure with a plush couple using the pretence of a malfunctioning motor to lure two mechanics to an upstate party in order to exact revenge for a prior sexual crime. In a novel twist on the above plots, Giovanni Brusadori's *Le evase – storie di sesso e violenze* (AKA *Jailbirds*, 1978) has militant butch dyke convicts hijack a coach of attractive female tennis players, whom they abuse in predictably salacious ways, before laying siege to a male judge's house to continue their reign of transgression.

In the above cases, isolated locales (summer school/party venue/isolated country home) effectively replace the enclosed car/train interior, with victims being forced to huddle in confined spaces as unwilling observers to their peers' brutalisation. Indeed, it is not uncommon for the visual vocabulary of the suspense thriller *giallo* to focus on the wild eyed and disgusted gaze of (usually female) protagonists who adopt the mantle of avenger precisely because they have been forced to watch the violation of loved ones at the hands of a marauding individual or group. This perverse gaze at brutality, dismemberment and sexualised perversion is itself reminiscent of the concept of "traumatic hyperarousal"[14] that Ruth Glynn has identified in a range of Italian fictions and biographies from the 1970s. These stark memoirs function to annex train blasts and car-jackings to unconscious fantasies surrounding castration and genital difference, akin to a "psychological trauma or wound".[15]

Terror is one prolific entry which uses this visual index of trauma by repeatedly employing extreme close-ups of the anxious gaze of central protagonist Sister Cristina (Florinda Bolkan), whose religious convictions of passivity towards the invading criminal group are radically reassessed when they force her to watch the girls in her charge being molested:

Figure 3.4: Wild eyed and vengeful: traumatic hyperarousal as a trigger to religious revolt in *Terror*.

In one pointed scene, Cristina finds one unfortunate being violated with the stump of a tree: alterations in camerawork between the dead girl's body (with tree trunk still protruding from between her thighs) and extreme close-up reaction shots of Bolkan's eyes rotating wildly convey her impending revolt (which is actualised when she and the remaining teenagers go on the rampage with gun, knife and cudgel in the film's

frenzied finale). The film's focus on the wild eyed and horrified stare of the religious central protagonist confirms Peter Hutchings' view that:

> … the most intense, lucid and powerful representations of the states of fear and terror in Western culture are associated, more often than not, with the feminine. The visual and aural repertoire of fear – the panicked gesture, the eyes widened helplessly, the high pitched scream – somehow seems more apt or credible when expressed or articulated through the body of a woman.[16]

In his recent account of 1970s British women in peril movies, Hutchings argues in favour of re-examining a range of controversial productions that annexed the visualisation of female distress with even more unpalatable images of rape and violation, arguing that the texts often betray a plurality of gender messages in which "heterosexual gender relations are dysfunctional in a manner that is not really resolved or assuaged by the narrative process".[17]

If, as Hutchings argues, there remains a tension between differing modes of gender reception within these problematic texts, then they are often reproduced in the official marketing campaigns for the suspense thriller *giallo*, which emphasise elements of fear and female disempowerment, rather than the violent revolt which actually comes to dominate their narratives. This seems confirmed by Hutchings' close textual analysis of the official poster campaigns for 'Women in Terror' double bills, which attempted to establish a conventional gender dichotomy between petrified/mutilated female reactions and the potent gaze of a male assailant. In many respects, the Italian suspense thriller *gialli* also evidence similar sets of ideological contradictions surrounding their marketing and promotion. As previously indicated, the advertising campaign for *Terror* emphasised its lexical connection to *Last House on the Left* via the use of alternative titling. However, at the level of the indexical, the imagery for the press packs polarised the horrified gaze of the imprisoned heroine against the controlling and sadistic look of one of her attackers (played by Ray Lovelock). Other entries to the series dispense with the iconography of the petrified female gaze altogether, functioning instead via a relay of perverse/punitive and retaliating male looks. For instance, the Dutch, French and Italian press campaigns for *Don't Ride on Late Night Trains* are noticeable for the prominent gazes of the male rapist and avenging father respectively:

Figure 3.5: Marketing male myths: excluding the phallic woman in the posters for *Don't Ride on Late Night Trains*.

Interestingly, female intervention into the above only occurs in the Dutch campaign, which partly reproduces Hutchings' figure of the 1970s petrified woman in peril (albeit without a direct address to the spectator), while adding a second and much more sexualised female representation whose genital area is bisected by the emerging train. While referencing the film's standout shock scene, where a female victim is violated with a switchblade knife, by appending a train to the vagina, the image also paradoixcally connotes the idea of female phallic empowerment, which is referenced in Lado's film through a crucial and controlling female figure who orchestrates the sexual crimes of the narrative.

The suppression of this central (but unnamed) protagonist from the official press campaigns for the film is interesting as it confirms Hutchings' view that the 1970s suspense thriller *giallo* contains a number of complex and contradictory gender readings which often become distilled and normalised through the 'exploitation' marketing that accompanied the release of these pictures. However, it is precisely the presence of such a sadistic female character that provokes a reconsideration of the gender representations and visual codes within Lado's film and the suspense thriller *giallo* as a whole.

The Women Who Viewed Too Much

With its repeated depiction of sexual molestation provoking violent female retribution, the suspense thriller *giallo* remains the most explicit and problematic of entries to the cycle as a whole. Their images of sexual violation have led writers such as Mary P. Wood to argue that "one of their distinguishing characteristics … is their misogyny and noticeable elements of sadism and sadomasochism".[18] While Wood's conclusion that these narrative elements were orchestrated to appeal to "an early evening, male audience"[19] remains a fascinating (if contestable) hypothesis, it is true that the cycle's anchoring of female violation to a heightened voyeuristic gaze (often reproduced for both spectator and terrified heroine), has traditionally raised a number of problematic questions around sexual difference and the visualisation of extreme suffering in such texts. And on first appearance, the suspense thriller *giallo* would appear to fit with established ideologically bound readings of the cinematic machine advanced by gender theorists and cine psychoanalysts.[20] In particular, Laura Mulvey's now famous and much revised exploration of 'Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema'[21] identifies the potential for film to gratify the spectator's latent desires for sadistic and voyeuristic control over the depicted female body. Mulvey argues cinema reflects the wishes of the masculine by granting not only physical power, but also a potency of gaze, to the central male protagonist. This gender dichotomy is marked by the fact that traditionally the female protagonist is seen to be unable to control either the flow of narrative events, or the look. This results in a devaluation of her role for both protagonist and viewer:

> Traditionally, the woman displayed has functioned on two levels: as an erotic object for the characters within the screen story, and as erotic object for spectator within the auditorium, with a shifting tension between the looks on either side of the screen.[22]

By raising the concept of the 'male gaze', Mulvey's analysis points to the ability of cinematic fiction to reproduce the contradictory fascination and fear of the female body that marks the libidinal processes of infancy. This desire to 'look' is rooted in the child's fascination with the exploration of both the mother's body and the nature of her relations with the feared paternal figure. This voyeuristic fascination is reproduced in mainstream cinema's construction of female protagonists whose appearances are "coded for strong visual and erotic impact so that they can be said to connote *to-be-looked-at-ness*".[23] In such works, Mulvey argues that the narrative is halted to allow the viewer to contemplate the spectacle

of the female body on display. However, the pleasure that such vision offers is also linked to the traumatic discovery of the mother's genital difference that subsequently marks her body as a site of horror and castration for the infant.

According to Mulvey's analysis, this potential for the female body to act as a site of horror is also present in the voyeuristic strategies of the cinematic machine. As with the traumatised infant, the filmic image mobilises certain features in order to protect the male viewer from the threat implied by the female body. The key defence mechanisms of cinema can be defined through structures of voyeurism and fetishism, both of which offer useful characteristics through which to consider the controversies surrounding suspense thriller *giallo*. Primarily, voyeurism (as facilitated through technical devices such as shot-reverse-shot and subjective camera angles), empowers the hero or other leading male protagonists with a look that is aggressive in its aim to scrutinise the female form. The sadistic aspect of male voyeurism is indicated in the physical punishment that often accompanies the investigation of the female character.

On first appearance, Mulvey's analysis seems to offer an appropriate method of understanding the construction of sexuality and voyeurism in a title such as *Don't Ride on Late Night Trains*. This is implicit in the narrative, which details the kidnapping, sexual violation and murder of a pair of teenage girls Lisa Stradi (Laura D'Angelo) and Margaret Hoffanbach (Irene Miracle) by two thugs travelling on a trans-European train. During the protracted rape scene, the girls are sexually humiliated by gang members Blackie (Flavio Bucci), Curly (Gianfranco De Grassi) and a passing professional male (Franco Fabrizi) who the pair goad into participation.

Central to the sadistic and sexual activities that occur in the film appears to be the activation of a punishing and potent gaze directed towards the female body by the two male aggressors. This is indicated in the film's early scenes, where the pair wreak havoc in a crowded train station before initiating an unprovoked attack on an elderly bourgeois woman. The attack not only emphasises the potency of the characters' gaze towards the victim, but also the vicious slashing of her overcoat. Rather than being an unmotivated act, the ripping of her clothing confirms the female body as a site of trauma that the male has to punish.[24] This is indicated by the fact that the coat is made of animal fur, which for Freud featured frequently as a substitute for female pubic hair in sexual perversion.[25] As a reference to genital violation, the symbolism of this act is reiterated in the later penetration of one of the film's heroines with the same knife.

In this respect, the opening scene of *Late Night Trains* has importance beyond establishing the divergent character relations that will later collide

on the trans-European express. Whilst the startling assault on the woman's coat becomes linked with wider castration imagery contained within the scene, the sequence also functions to create a series of connections between male violence and the violated female body that comes to equate with other characters introduced into the text. For instance, when the film shifts away from the train station following the opening credit scene, the equation between the gendered body and castration is further reiterated in the introduction of *giallo* regular Enrico Maria Salerno as Professor Giulio Stradi, the father of one of the female victims. The scene reveals him to be a surgeon operating on an accident victim just admitted to the hospital. Here, the camera details his medical activities in extreme close-up to the extent that it prevents gender identification of the victim. It is only through a verbal cue (Giulio's reference to the patient as "her") that the connection between body wound/castration and the feminine is established. This statement, as well as Giulio's rapid movement to penetrate the victim's flesh with a scalpel ("Even if the chance is remote, you must operate", he preaches to a younger medical intern), indicates the violent exploration of the female body to be a fascination shared by *all* the male characters. The scene also confirms Phyllis Greenacre's comment that castration imagery reaches beyond anatomical distinctions to include "witnessing or experiencing bloody mutilating attacks in the form of operations (on the self or others), child-birth, abortions or accidents".[26]

Given the catalogue of violation and genital mutilation that follows, Greenacre's commentary on wounding imagery and its links to wider constructions of female lack are highly suggestive. However, what makes Lado's film so interesting is the way in which it uses the introduction of a controlling female character to complicate any neat fit between male violence and regimes of looking within the narrative. This is achieved via the casting of French actress Macha Méril as an unnamed wealthy woman who goads the pair of thugs into raping and killing the girls on the train. Her central placement as a controlling female sadist who hides behind what Joan Riviere would define as "the mask of womanliness"[27] is made more shocking by the fact that she manages to evade punishment at the end of the film by convincing the vengeful parents that, as a woman, she is as much a victim of male violence as their dead offspring.

However, Méril's placement in the text retains importance beyond the moral ambiguity she produces in the male characters that surround her. Her role as a female sadist also complicates notions of the pleasures of male voyeurism and punishment of the female body within the suspense thriller *giallo*. Importantly, her introduction into the narrative coincides with a pattern whereby the stability of both the male protagonists, as well

as the viewer's access to images of the female body, becomes increasingly fragmented. If the two fated heroines are coded as victims of violation and aggression, then their inability to master on and off screen space proves central to this suffering. From the beginning of the film a disparity between the aggressors' sadistic desire to 'look' at the female body and the two victims' inability to return this gaze is initiated. It is this inability to use the gaze to locate the specific whereabouts of the rapists that results in the abduction and murder of the two heroines in a deserted train carriage.[28]

By marked contrast, Méril's character is from the outset depicted as possessing a potency of vision that challenges the male characters depicted. Indeed, she is initially introduced into the narrative boarding a crowded train compartment dominated by men, whom she instantly constructs as objects of her own inquisitive and desiring gaze (this being indicated in her visual 'interrogation' of a male scientist whose image she identifies in a magazine). Equally, as with the two male sadists who become her companions, Méril's character is seen to equate voyeurism with sexual perversion. This visual obsession with explicit degradation is intimated in this early scene, when Méril's overnight bag spills open in the crowded carriage, revealing a series of sexually explicit photographs to her bemused male travellers. This desire to visualise sexuality is further confirmed by the character when she later insists on *seeing* the degrading acts that her two male assistants enact against their female victims during the pivotal rape scene.

Méril's desire to look is crucial to reading the role of sexuality in Lado's film. Firstly, it indicates her (violent) attempts to distance herself from the 'castrated' status that the two punished females come to attain in the text. More importantly, it complicates Mulvey's thesis that "in a world governed by sexual imbalance, pleasure in looking has been split between active/male and passive/female".[29] In her assumption of the position of sadistic voyeur, Méril transcends presumed gender boundaries in the film, adopting a position that ultimately proves traumatic to the male characters depicted. This is indicated in her constant placement of both female victims and male aggressors as objects of her gaze. This pattern is initiated with the discovery of the sexually explicit pictures in Méril's overnight bag. These 'obscene' shots depict *both* male and female bodies as a site of sexual spectacle and public contemplation. This scopophilic revelation initiates a pattern whereby the depicted male bodies are themselves subject to increased visual exposure, diminishing the onscreen power they have over the depicted space. In this respect, it seems pertinent that the narrative shifts from depicting the male body caught in the throes of a pornographic pose to shots of Blackie's partially naked body as he initiates intercourse

with Méril in a lavatory on the train.

Importantly, during the erotic encounter between Méril's character and Blackie, it is noticeable that the increased visualisation of the male body coincides with a marked loss of the camera's control by these aggressive male figures. The links between the loss of vision and castration are well discussed in Freudian theory (as I outline in chapter six), and are violently confirmed in the film's finale. Here, Curly is blinded by having surgical spirit thrown in his face by Giulio, who then uses the antagonist's disorientation to stab him in the groin with a medical stand.

This action can be seen as complicating (or even punishing) the voyeurism that Mulvey argues empowers male characters and spectators. Indeed, the fact that the violence is here directed both towards the character and at the camera directly implicates the spectator in this act of violation and the feelings of spectral insecurity it engenders.[30] Importantly, rather than functioning as an isolated example, it is noticeable that many of the suspense thriller titles also function to reproduce what Gary Needham has termed the doubly "penetrating and penetrated" gaze of the classical *giallo* eye.[31] For instance, Franco Prosperi's *Terror* contains a number of ideological correctives to its controversial rape scenes, which either function to subvert visual (and aural) pleasures associated with sexual depictions, or else implicate the spectator's vulnerability in the acts of transgression taking place. In one pointed rape encounter, Prosperi suddenly shifts from real time to slow motion sound and image reproduction, adding an aural reverb of agony to the distorted cries of the female victim. Moreover, the violated character looks directly at the camera lens as if to condemn the spectator's involvement in the violent events unfolding:

Figure 3.6: Victim as violated viewer: slo-mo suffering and the direct address to camera in *Terror*.

Significantly, the scene occurs after the victim has already injured one of the three attackers with a metallic hair comb, rendering him immobile with a stomach wound which also hampers his physical ‘performance’. Whilst the girl’s subsequent violation in front of her Catholic tutor and assembled peers would first appear to be a symbolic measure by which the remaining group members assert their phallic authority, the ritualistic manner of the assault, with the key rapist Walter (Flavio Andreini) donning the girl’s lipstick, rouge and foundation, is revealing. Having already transferred the status of castrative ‘wound’ to their male colleague, this uncharacteristic moment of feminisation prior to sexual assault indicates more a fatalistic acknowledgement of encroaching male insecurity than the confirmation of control. The resultant (and near transgendered) image of the male assailant writhing in slow motion ecstasy confirms Carol J. Clover’s influential view that “horror is not as concerned as ‘dominant’ cinema with disavowing male lack; on the contrary... it seems almost to indulge it, to the point of revelling in it”.[32]

Figure 3.7: Assaultive drag: rape and the disavowal of phallic identity in *Terror*.

Equally, in its most notorious sequence, *Terror* further subverts the processes of visual mastery associated with such scenes of sadism. Here, the wounded Nino (Stefano Cedrati) takes revenge on the strong-willed teenager who earlier injured him, brutally penetrating her with a tree stump as a replacement for his now redundant phallus:

Figure 3.8: Violation as visual displeasure: the penetration of sexual and viewing organs in *Terror*.

As indicated in the frame above, it is noticeable that the scene reproduces the strategy of camera violation evidenced in the finale of Aldo Lado's film. Here, the offending implement is forced in slow motion directly into the camera before being used as a weapon against the female victim. Unsurprisingly, *Terror's* controversial images of rape and physical violation have not lent the movie readily to academic interpretation, but one incisive horror e-fanzine review has commented that in Prosperi's film "we eye the perverse", in a narrative that "creates … a unique play on sight and perception, where the act of rape is not nearly as interesting as the reactions it elicits from its participants".[33]

Fatal Frames, Fearful Fetishism

While the links between male sadism and a controlling gaze are frequently eroded in the suspense thriller *giallo*, the cycle also complicates Mulvey's identification of fetishism as a second method of controlling the trauma induced by the female body. As with voyeurism, this strategy is based on the trauma of castration and the infant's realisation of the body as a site of bodily difference. Paradoxically, upon realisation of the sexual difference that separates his body from that of the mother, the infant refuses to relinquish the idea that the mother does not possess the phallus. According to Freud, the child still clings to the belief that the mother has a penis, but that it now exists in disguised or sublimated form. This reconstituted phallus is often evidenced by objects or garments associated with feminine modes of display: stockings, shoes, lace or leather.

These feature in male perversion and sexual obsession, indicating the

infant's continued attempts to reconstruct or repair the mother's 'mutilated' form with objects that will either obscure or compensate for the genital difference. Although the manifest reason for such garments remains decoration and eroticisation, they also work to contain an element of trauma that relates them to the discovery of castration. In this respect, they become what Freud termed:

> .... a substitute for the woman's (the mother's) penis that the little boy believed in and ... does not want to give up.[34]

Through fetishism, the subject may also attempt to defuse the trauma of castration by glamourising or elevating the female body to a site of perfection. This latter method is seen in cinema through what Mulvey defines as an obsessive concentration on the 'desirable' parts of the actress's body. This is achieved via clothing, set design or lighting. Frequently, film uses such objects or garments to obscure or disguise the actuality of the woman's form, confirming her status as incomplete. In a film like *Terror,* fetishism shifts from reconstructing the body of the mother to that of the 'Holy' mother, the rapists forcing Sister Christina to strip and then don a Nun's outfit while her exhibitionism is viewed by captors and terrified teenage co-eds alike:

Figure 3.9: Dangerous habits: the nun's outfit as fetish object in *Terror*.

If this curious 'reverse strip number' represents a fetishistic method of 'adding' to and perfecting the body of a female character, then it is certainly also reproduced in framing and masking techniques consistently

employed in Lado's entry *Don't Ride on Late Night Trains*. Here, the opening shots of femme fatale Macha Méril (juxtaposed with the aggressive actions of Curly and Blackie in the same location), centre on her purchasing a handbag from a store in the train station. Importantly, this scene establishes a pattern where parts of her body are obscured from the viewer by means of objects in the foreground. In this first shot, it is shelving for the baggage in the store window that creates a literal barrier preventing the viewer from gaining total visual access to her image.[35] This process of concealing Méril's body is further reiterated during the early stages of the train journey. Here, repeated close-ups reveal her face, obscured from the camera by a fine layer of lace attached to the brim of her hat. This repeated focus on the lace covering confirms the use of such material as fetish object as identified by Freud.

However, if this is further evidence of a traumatic need to reconstruct the damaged female body, then it is a position again relayed between *both* the male and female characters the film depicts. Indeed, it is possible to argue that Méril stops functioning as a damaged female in the sequence where her concealed pornographic stills are exposed. During this scene she not only lifts the veil covering her face, but begins to return the gaze of the (predominantly) masculine passengers whom surround her.

While this dark heroine's actions indicate her oscillation from a castrated to a more potent position, it is significant that the camera then shifts to obstruct the images of both Lisa and Margaret. An example of this is indicated in a scene where Curly's first sighting of the pair is fragmented by a window frame which separates the aggressor from his future victims. It is the transference of this lacking status to the pair that ensures they are subject to future violence. While the actions of Blackie and Curly confirm that "no human male is spared the fright of castration at the sight of a female genital",[36] they also highlight the contradictory nature of the fetish for the male subject.

As with voyeurism, which works to devalue the threatening female body through investigation and punishment, Freud notes that it is not uncommon for the fetishist to confirm a castrated status on a maternal substitute through mutilation or sadistic behaviour. Lisa's 'violated' status is literally confirmed during the rape scene through the forced penetration of her body with the knife, ensuring the film its controversial and much censured status. Paradoxically, the two men's aggression towards the ill-fated heroines is in part premised on their (uncomfortable) reactions to Méril's character dictating both the space of the train carriage and the transgressions that occur within it.[37] For instance, in one pointed scene, Curly ritualistically cuts off a clump of Lisa's hair and caresses it, having

just viewed Méril reach orgasm with Blackie on the seat next to him. Curly's sudden and unmotivated haircutting gesture conflates the implication of violence with the reverence through which the fetishist clings to the belief in the mother's body as unified.[38]

While these contradictory actions would seem to confirm Mulvey's thesis that mainstream cinema constructs the female body as a site of objectification and mutilation, this view is complicated by the final recodification of body as fetish that the film depicts. This occurs in Giulio's mansion at the point where the paternal agent learns of his daughter's fate, and enacts violent revenge against the two men who helped murder Lisa. Here, it is the *male* not female body which is subject to violence: its 'damaged' status being indicated by the visual barriers and obstructive decor that frame Curly's body as he is attacked and castrated.

With their startling and savage imagery, suspense thriller *giallo* titles such as *Don't Ride on Late Night Trains* and *Terror* have proven the most difficult to recuperate within recent theoretical accounts of Italian cult film, primarily because they appear to trade on the unabashed sensationalism of female rape and victimisation. However, rather than confirming Mikel Koven's assumption of the scarcity of female aggressors/avengers in the cycle as a whole, these later entries to the Italian suspense thriller format indicate that the role of female sexual aggression and mastery are far more widespread than his consideration of classical *giallo* entries initially implies. Moreover, their crucial interjections into rape-and-revenge narrative also have profound ramifications for the reconstruction of the male body as both 'lacking' and fetishised, as the closing scene of Curly's obscured body in *Don't Ride on Late Night Trains* confirms. By way of conclusion, it is also worth giving brief consideration to the way in which the suspense thriller *giallo* complicates notions of masculine heterosexuality.

Rapists and Other (Male) Lovers

In his reconsideration of 1970s British rape and revenge shockers, Peter Hutchings has noted an interesting disjuncture between the marketing of these movies which "emphasized female fear",[39] and the texts themselves, which often ranged independent and mobile women (the use of transportation matching my earlier comments on car and train travel in the *gialli* variants) against a range of unsuitable male characters defined by their "creepiness".[40] While the British variants that Hutchings discusses resemble the classic *giallo* variant by concealing the identity of the rapist until the closing moments of the narrative, they also share the wider

vilification of masculine sexual prowess which defines the suspense thriller *gialli*. In this environment, any male protagonist can be revealed as an abuser, and male psychology and morality are further undermined by the way in which female violation is often constructed as an act to be shared and recounted between male participants. As Hutchings notes:

> A striking feature of this apparent inability to separate out the good men from the bad … might be seen as lifting the blame from men for their behaviour, blaming it instead on a sexual drive that overpowers them. But it also suggests a model of male identity that is fraught and anxious and through which self-confidence and any kind of authority are impossible to achieve.[41]

It is precisely this lack of moral authority which haunts masculine representations of the later Italian *giallo* formats I have been discussing. A film such as Ferdinando Baldi's *Terror Express* remains one of the most extreme entries in this respect. The narrative is made particularly unpalatable for the scene in which the three male rapists gradually bond with the train carriage of male patriarchs they have imprisoned, to the extent that the same-sex pack end up playing poker to decide which unfortunate female train hostage the trio should violate next. As a result, *Terror Express* contains so many rape scenes that the presumed shock impact of the production somewhat loses its specificity, whilst any revenge motif effectively becomes impossible as *too* many protagonists have been assaulted to make a personalised vendetta in the closing scenes viable. In the end, it is left to the train's resident high-class hooker (Silvia Dionisio) and a left-wing activist to disarm the three disco-loving deviants, while the remainder of the entrapped collective appear curiously appalled to have been liberated by a duo with such marginal sexual and political affiliations. While Baldi's slightly parodic approach to the subject matter ensures that *Terror Express* is less effective than other entries to the series, its significance is evidenced in the way in which the rape scenes are constructed to maximise the genital display of *both* the male attackers and their female victims.

Indeed, by dwelling so heavily on protracted scenes of rape involving two male participants, Baldi fills the narrative with images of male buttocks grinding together in a fashion that strains both narrative plausibility and the presumed heterosexual confines of the format. Rather than being an isolated example, these sexual tensions are implicit in rape-and-revenge cinematic iconography as a whole. As Peter Lehman has commented:

> At the simplest level, the gang rape lends itself well to the narrative demands of the feature film… The gang rape structure, however, also points to male homoerotic bonding. The friends 'share' the woman in a manner which unites them.[42]

Thus, it could be argued that the homoerotic undercurrent of the rape-and-revenge narrative forms a constant feature in the suspense thriller *giallo* and functions as a form of sexual contract not only between groups of male oppressors, but also between same-sex victim and prey. For instance, Pasquale Festa Campanile's *Hitchhike* is marked by the erotically charged and morally ambivalent relationship between hostage Walter Mancini and sadistic stranger Adam Konitz, who abducts the journalist and his wife following a botched bank raid.

Although the narrative pretext for this encounter functions to give Konitz a concealed escort to the Mexican border, the film dwells on the emergent sexual compact between the two men, which is heightened when the captor suggests that he employ Mancini to write the novelisation based on their brutal encounter. Adam's invitation for this unconventional offer of employment is itself significant in confirming Lehman's comments about the role that the female rape victim plays as a bridge between same-sex male relations. As he comments to Walter: "Come with me to Mexico. All expenses paid and a hundred thousand. We'll have a ball! And we can even take Eve along to screw if you like. If not, we can send her home to daddy!"

Figure 3.10: Captive, captor and homoerotic relations: killer and prey plan the perfect 'male' novel in *Hitchhike*.

The codification of sexual intent in the dialogue between the two male characters develops to become a key component of Campinale's film. Thus, when Adam first takes the couple hostage and proceeds to requisition their booze supply, Walter flippantly comments "Go ahead, help yourself, Cunts", to which the attacker replies "It's Konitz, please try and remember." Given Peter Lehman's comment that men in the rape-and-revenge narrative "are positioned in places traditionally reserved for women",[43] this flippant and sexualised mispronunciation of the villain's name becomes established as a form of near-seductive word play between the two men. It is frequently matched by Konitz's dismissal of Mancini's failed journalistic career as a comment on his phallic virility, as seen in statements like "You've got a great way with words reporter, that's your business. Well, in my business, I don't need any words. I've got a friend here [referring to his pistol] says everything loud and clear." This confusion of discourse with phallus (which echoes the classic Lacanian rupturing of the presumed link between male anatomy and its wider signifying status),[44] moves beyond heterosexual readings of the two characters' attempts to compete with the other's prowess, to establish a fetishistic over-evaluation of the phallus that seems confirmed when the pair discuss a concealed handgun that Konitz discovers on Nero's character.

Figure 3.11: "The victim as vengeful aggressor: Eve Mancini confronts the heterosexual tensions of *Hitchhike*.

If *Hitchhike* uses the rape-and-revenge vocabulary to undercut and critique stable notions of masculine heterosexuality, then it also seems confirmed by the structure of the two sexual assaults Adam enacts upon Eve Mancini during the film. On both occasions, Walter is bound and forced to watch the sexual display, with Adam only halting his advances to ensure that the captive male can view his partly clad body, while he is raping the petrified heroine. Importantly, the first sexual assault is suddenly curtailed by the appearance of Oakes (Joshua Sinclair) and Hawk (Carlo Puri), two gay hoodlums who have been tracking Konitz after he fled with the proceeds of the bank raid they enacted together. Although Konitz later kills the two male lovers, recapturing Walter and Eve in the process, their intervention into the narrative further undercuts notions of stable heterosexuality. As Walter later comments to Konitz while being bound to watch a second sexual assault on his wife, "Have you ever noticed, Konitz? Only homosexuals know what real love is anymore. I'm not joking, they are building a new society, a homosexual one: men on one side, women on the other. Haven't you noticed?" While the kidnapper looks slightly puzzled by his captive's comments, Eve simplifies the poetics of this statement with her snappy retort "It's true, you're all a bunch of damn fags!"

Eve's statement in many respects reiterates Peter Lehman's comments about the process of 'naturalisation' that occurs within the rape-and-revenge narrative to deny male sexual violence and friction "as containing an erotic component".[45] However, it is noticeable that even when the couple finally overpower their captor after the second rape scenario, these sexual frictions are far from contained. Here, Eve emerges naked and violated to dispatch Adam with a shotgun so that he falls into Walter's arms as if enacting a lover's embrace. This pointed scene, once again intimating a quasi-romantic coupling between the two male leads, reiterates the homoerotic impetus that resides within such sexual violation narratives.[46] As Lehman's commentary on rape-and-revenge iconography has concluded:

> Given the multi-layered, disturbing nature of the psychodynamics of the genre, it is not surprising that it is first and foremost a B genre… What do heterosexual male spectators find so pleasurable about all of this? Not surprisingly, it cannot bring itself to fully and honestly address the very issue it raises.[47]

As this comment suggests, if the rape-and-revenge narrative produces complex and contradictory gender messages, then these are reproduced in the suspense thriller *gialli*'s depiction of both male and female sexuality. If

these same-sex tensions surrounding masculine heterosexuality do surface without fully being addressed as Lehman suggests, then we can also explore how they proliferate across other Italian cult film cycles such as the rogue cop series, which I discuss in chapter eight.

Notes

[1] Giorgio Bertellini, *The Cinema of Italy* (London: Wallflower Press, 2004), p.215.
[2] Beyond Pasore's film, other examples of female *giallo* killers who kill to defy physiological defects include Umberto Lenzi's aptly named *Gatti rossi in un labirinto di vetro* (AKA *Eyeball*, 1975), where demure heroine Paulette Stone (Martine Brochard) is revealed to be guilty of gouging out the eyes of pretty female tourists travelling around Barcelona because she lost one of her own as a child.
[3] Mikel J. Koven *La Dolce Morte: Vernacular Cinema and the Italian Giallo Film* (Lanham, MD: The Scarecrow Press Inc., 2006), pp.108–109.
[4] Ibid.,p.8.
[5] Ibid.
[6] As has been well documented, Craven's film was itself an Americanisation of a previous European narrative derived from Ingmar Bergman's *Jungfrukällan* (AKA *The Virgin Spring*, 1960), which uses the same motif of rapists unwittingly seeking shelter in the parental home of their victims. For more information on the dialogic transformation between European and American visions of the tale, see Michael Brashinsky, 'The Spring, Defiled: Ingmar Bergman's *Virgin Spring* and Wes Craven's *Last House on the Left*', in Andrew Horton and Stuart Y. McDougal (eds), *Play it Again, Sam: Retakes on Remakes* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1988), pp.162-172.
[7] The intimate connections between both versions of the *giallo* can be indicated by brief discussion of a title such as Luigi Cozzi's *L'assassino è costretto ad uccidere ancora* (AKA *The Killer Must Kill Again*, 1975). The movie begins with familiar characteristics and castings, by pairing Giorgio Mainardi (played by 'rogue' regular George Hilton) with a mysterious assassin (Antoine Saint-John), who agrees to murder Mainardi's wife in return for a share of the bogus kidnapping fee raised from her wealthy family. Although the elaborate murder strategy (executed in an *all-yellow* apartment to underscore the scene's classical *giallo* affiliations) goes as planned, the assassin then unwisely hides Mrs Mainardi's body in the boot of a getaway vehicle while he doctors the crime scene. It is only when he returns to dispose of the body that both he and the viewer discover the car has been stolen by a freewheeling hippie couple who need transportation for a romantic liaison in a rural location. This is the point where classic *giallo* meets suspense thriller *giallo*, with interesting narrative deviations. Firstly, despite his major billing, Hilton's character largely disappears from the plot to be replaced by an ongoing and tense narrative trade-off between the young couple, Luca (Alessio Orano) and Laura (Cristina Galbo), and the unnamed killer, who trails them to the beach to recover

the body from the boot of the car. As well as an alteration in casting (Hilton only reappearing in the narrative's closing moments as part of a police trap to implicate him), the transition from classic to suspense *giallo* is also marked by an alteration in space. As Koven notes, the suspense variants often occur in internal, enclosed and privatised spaces, and this is reproduced in Cozzi's film by an increasing focus on the stolen car and the potential threat it poses for its unwitting young inhabitants. Thus, unlike the classical incarnations of crime discussed earlier, signifiers of cosmopolitan travel (such as aircraft) are replaced by smaller vehicles which now function as modes of potential threat (this being actualised when all the antagonists converge on the beach and sexual humiliation ensues).

[8] Koven, p.8.

[9] Ibid., p.48.

[10] Ibid.

[11] Ibid., p.50.

[12] This results in the suspense thriller *giallo* often being used to comment on wider cross-cultural tensions for social and political effect. For instance, commenting on the centrality of the train journey between the twin cities of Munich and Verona in *Don't Ride on Late Night Trains*, Sylvain L. Paris has argued that the film uses themes of violation occurring between the two locales to connect Germanic transgressions of the past to the caustic Italian social scene of the seventies. As he states:

> It is a social journey between Germany and Italy, surrounded by the shadows of fascism - the German war veterans singing 3rd Reich songs in their cabin -, terrorism of the Red Brigades - the first train stops because of a bomb alert -, cynically questioning the dark side of the Church - the senile bishop glancing at a young priest, and later this obvious physical connexion made by Lado between the bishop seen in the first train and a very unappealing prostitute in the second one - and above all denouncing the overwhelming power of the upper class…

See http://killinginstyle.blogspot.co.uk/search/label/Aldo%20Lado
Accessed 30/07/2010.

[13] Koven, p.51.

[14] Ruth Glynn, 'Trauma on the Line: Terrorism and Testimony in the *Anni di piombo*', in Monica Jansen and Paula Jordão (eds), *Proceedings of the International Conference: The Value of Literature in and After the Seventies: The Case of Italy and Portugal*
http://congress70.library.uu.nl/main.html Accessed 22/01/2011.

[15] Ruth Glynn. 318.

[16] Peter Hutchings, ''I'm the Girl He Wants to Kill': The 'Women in Peril' Thriller in 1970s British Film and Television', *Visual Culture in Britain* 10:1 (2009), 53.

[17] Ibid., 59.

[18] Mary P. Wood, *Italian Cinema* (Oxford: Berg, 2005), p.83.

[19] Ibid.

[20] For a fuller discussion of the impact of psychoanalysis on British film theory see the chapter 'Screen Theory' in Joanne Hollows and Mark Jancovich (eds),

Approaches to Popular Film (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1995), pp.124–150.
[21] This article originally appeared in *Screen* 16:3 (1975). It has been reprinted in several key volumes including Constance Penley (ed.), *Feminism and Film Theory* (London: Routledge, 1988).
[22] Laura Mulvey, 'Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema', in Penley, *Feminism and Film Theory*, p.62.
[23] Ibid.
[24] Indeed, one of the thugs terms the woman a "filthy bitch" prior to the attack. This condemnation is significant as it reflects the aggression that the male infant feels towards the mother following the discovery of her genital difference. Where once her body was seen as a site of plenitude it now becomes equated with fear and disgust.
[25] See the chapter on 'Fetishism' in Freud's *On Sexuality* (London: Pelican, 1986), pp.345–359. Here, he notes that fabrics such as fur and velvet serve as obsessive points of reference to perverse and fetishistic patients who have become traumatised by the discovery of the mother's genital difference. While such materials, "as has long been suspected – are a fixation of the sight of the pubic hair" (p.354), other objects such as stockings and suspenders become equated with the infant's discovery of the mother's 'difference' because of their proximity to the genital difference. Although these objects are eroticised in later life they still contain an element of trauma that relates them to the fear and discovery of castration.
[26] Phyllis Greenacre, 'Further Considerations Regarding Fetishism', cited in Edith Buxbaum, 'Hair Pulling and Fetishism', *The Psychoanalytic Study of the Child* 15 (1960), 243.
[27] Joan Riviere, 'Womanliness as Masquerade', *International Journal of Psychoanalysis* 10 (1929), 303. In this interesting and influential case study, Riviere recounts sessions with a number of female patients who, while exhibiting a highly intellectual and ambitious drive, concealed these 'masculine' characteristics beneath a passive 'female' facade. While this need to acquiesce to male authority figures can in part be interpreted in line with the female Oedipal fantasy of paternal seduction, Riviere notes a strong tendency towards castrating male figures in these patient's fantasies, which points to latent fantasies towards harming the paternal figure and purloining the power he represents. These fantasies of male violation are thus concealed behind the veil of passivity, leading the author to conclude that:
"Womanliness therefore could be assumed and worn as a mask , both to hide the possession of masculinity and to avert the reprisals expected if she was found to possess it" (305). In an interesting aside to one of her case studies, Riviere recounts how one patient "had great anxiety about defloration, and had had the hymen … slit before the wedding by a female doctor" (306). If this marks an extreme but not necessarily atypical response to the contradictions surrounding self- and body-image that the 'masquerading woman' exhibits, it is interesting to note that Méril's character also comments that she was deflowered by a surgeon's knife, as she forces the weapon between Lisa's legs in *Don't Ride on Late Night Trains.*

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[28] In this respect, it is ironic that the only time Lisa's subjective vision is marked in the film is during the death throes that follow her genital penetration.
[29] Mulvey, 'Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema', p.62.
[30] This important point has also been raised by Carol J. Clover in her significant study of the modern horror: *Men, Women and Chainsaws: Gender in the Modern Horror Film* (London: BFI, 1992). In the final chapter in the volume, she notes that despite their often reactionary reputations, the horror film often punishes the sadistic male wish to objectify and mutilate female victims by blinding male aggressors. Although the American horror film is the primary focus of her analysis, it is significant that she uses Italian case studies such as Lamberto Bava's *Demons* to exemplify the extent to which violence towards intended or depicted viewers also acts as a warning against identification with the male gaze.
[31] Gary Needham, 'Playing with Genre: An Introduction to the Giallo', *Kinoeye: New Perspectives on European Film* 2 (2002), 4.
[32] Clover, *Men, Women and Chainsaws*, p.181.
[33] See http://horrordigital.com/printout.php?articleid=476 Accessed 03/08/2010.
[34] Freud, 'Fetishism', p.352.
[35] If this is evidence of the need to create additions to the 'incomplete' female then it is interesting to note that this strategy is repeated when the camera shifts location to Gulio's operation on the female accident victim in the hospital. Here, another literal barrier between the 'damaged' body and the viewer is provided by an obstructing ward room wall.
[36] Freud, 'Fetishism', p.354.
[37] The contradictory status of the woman as fetish object is also seen in Blackie and Curly's relations with Méril's character. Her dominant role in orchestrating the punishment of Lisa and Margaret gives her a phallic potency that matches and even disgusts her two male accomplices. However, their loathing turns to sadism when she attempts to dispose of the dead girl's vaginal blood with a rag. Importantly, Méril is depicted squatting over the blood with her legs apart when Blackie launches an unprovoked attack on her. This indicates the trauma produced in the male when the female body as fetish oscillates between 'complete' and castrated constructions.
[38] For further studies of haircutting/hair-pulling and their links to castration fears see Edith Buxbaum's article 'Hair Pulling and Fetishism'. Here, the analyst offers two fascinating case studies of pre-teen female patients, 'Beryl' and 'Ann', who use hair-pulling and scalp mutilation as disassociative measures to distance themselves from adult notions of female lack. Importantly, Buxbaum goes beyond simplistic readings of the patients' actions as gestures of self-harm, to examine the extent to which these actions are linked to the Oedipal process. In the case of Beryl, the hair-pulling and scalp mutilation was linked to a "dirt orgy" (247), whereby the young girl expressed a genital obsession and unresolved oral cravings. As with the case study of Anne, it is interesting to note that Buxbaum links the onset of both girls' disorder to the sight of their mother's body, which evoked a sense of horror in the two youngsters. This is underscored by one mother's comments: "I was washing my genitals and glanced at Ann who was looking at me

with a rather frightened expression. I said, "Honey, does this hair on my body worry you?" She said, "Yes." I said, "It's nothing to worry about, dear. When people grow up they grow some hair on their bodies. Is that the reason you pull the hair on your head?" She said, "Yes." (253). While this interaction reiterates the fear of sexual difference implicit in many infantile actions and fantasies, Baxbaum also notes that the female child's visual knowledge of her father's defective phallus (due to a tumour) further resulted in "an interest in and horror at the genital region … connected with the observation of father's genitals and his moaning and groaning behind the locked bathroom door when he was in pain" (253). This comment is significant in reiterating that *both* the male and female body can come to signify castration and lack, thus offering interesting allusions to readings of the masculine body in a film such as *Don't Ride on Late Night Trains*.

[39] Hutchings, ''I'm the Girl He Wants to Kill'', 53.

[40] Ibid., 59.

[41] Ibid., 61.

[42] Peter Lehman, 'Don't Blame This on a Girl: Female Rape and Revenge Films', in Steven Cohan and Ina Rae Hark (eds), *Screening the Male: Exploring Masculinities in Hollywood Cinema* (London/New York: Routledge, 1994), p.107.

[43] Ibid., p.106.

[44] For more information, see the chapter 'The Signification of the Phallus' in Lacan's volume *Ecrits: A Selection* (London: Routledge, 1993), pp.281–291. Here Lacan identifies the misrecognition between the penis as anatomic appendage, and the phallus, which functions as its abstract designate within the signifying system. As he notes, "the relation of the subject to the phallus … is established without regard to the anatomical difference of the sexes" (p.282), thus constituting what Lacan sees as one of the central tenets of the "fraudulent" mechanisms through which men use anatomical difference to impose Symbolic control over the female body (p.287).

[45] Lehman, 'Don't Blame This on a Girl', p.114.

[46] Alongside Lehman's analysis, see also the chapter 'Narratives of Transformation: The Rape and Revenge Cycle' in Jacinda Read, *The New Avengers: Feminism, Femininity and the Rape-Revenge Cycle* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2000), pp.22–57. Here Read acknowledges the masochistic and homoerotic dimensions to the rapist's downfall, which often get overlooked by the controversial reception of these works. As she notes, "although men are violently punished in these films, it is more often than not in a context that is overtly erotic and punishment is frequently preceded by the promise of sexual pleasure" (p.41).

[47] Lehman, 'Don't Blame This on a Girl', p.116.

CHAPTER FOUR

MATERNAL MONSTERS AND 'DEMONISED' BODIES: THE THREE MOTHERS AND BEYOND

> Sexual perversion serves the repression of a pivotal nuclear complex, the urge to regress to a pre-Oedipal fixation in which there is a desire for and dread of merging with the mother in order to reinstate the primitive mother-child unity.[1]
> —Charles W. Socarides, 'The Demonified Mother'

> More than just the leader of the pack, Helena Marcos, is the supreme image of the maternal abject: wrinkled, distorted, and ridden with open, festering wounds.[2]
> —Jacqueline Reich, 'The Mother of All Horror'

Introduction

Charles W. Socarides' analysis, while based in clinical practice rather than the study of 1970s Italian cult cinema, still offers observations appropriate to some of the controversies generated by cycles like the *giallo*. The analyst's case study of 'Martin', a patient whose habitual voyeuristic tendencies extended to the sexual violation of female victims, could easily be transposed into the fictional *gialli* milieus of the Milan fashion house or the Roman villa. As with the unidentified and ambivalent assailants generated by the feverish imaginations of Italian cult auteurs such as Dario Argento or Sergio Martino, this patient derived extreme pleasure from spying on women in his neighbourhood. Such was the intensity of Martin's compulsions, that by the age of 15 he had developed what Socarides defined as a "full scale voyeuristic perversion"[3] using darkness and disguise to further instil fear into his victims. The degree of the patient's perverse compulsions were underscored by the fact that during his teenage years, he claimed to have watched more than 1,000 women undress from a concealed vantage point, before the sadistic fantasies associated with voyeurism led him to begin mutilating his victims in a fetishistic manner. He often concealed their gaze

with intimate items of clothing because, as he informed them: "I don't want you watching me, I don't want you to see me."[4]

As discussed in chapters one to three, pivotal permutations of voyeurism in the classic, *Mezzogiorno* and rape-oriented versions of the *giallo* provide similar scenarios to Socarides' clinical observations, whereby sexual thrill is equated with the distanced and unobserved power of the (sadistic) viewing male. As with the clinical case study described above, the cycle has also developed a range of thematic and stylistic strategies that prevent its desperate female victims from confronting and returning the gaze of their attacker. From brutally being stabbed in the eyes with bottles at a crucial point of attaining information (as in the case of Sergio Martino's *La coda dello scorpione* [AKA *The Case of the Scorpion's Tail*, 1971]), to the much discussed example of Argento's *Opera* (AKA *Terror at the Opera*, 1987), where the sexually repressed heroine Betty (Cristina Marsillach) is forced to watch the brutalisation of others for fear of being blinded by rows of needles placed under her eyes by a masked killer, the *giallo* remains an Italian format that firmly equates fear with an inability to see.

While I have previously discussed the extent to which scenarios of brutal gazing (and the primal scene encounter they reference) often point to a confused pattern of subjectivity for the viewer, this chapter focuses on the crucial role of the mother within these sadistic vignettes. Using the concept of the 'Demonified Mother', Socarides underscores the key influence of the maternal within these fantasies of male assault. Rather than reading Martin's violent quests as a perverse projection of the woman's body as a site of lack, he points to the patient's original anxiety as originating in the:

> …pre-Oedipal period. As a result of the maturational (psychological) development failure, there ensues severe ego deficits, e.g. faulty identification, fluidity of ego boundaries, impairment of body ego…[5]

Here, the patient recounted the presence of his faulty paternal role model, whose perpetual illness and depression promoted his wife to a dominant position, and interestingly conflated the conjugal and maternal roles. This gender confusion was registered by the patient's recollections of "watching in dread and fascination while his mother dressed and bathed his father and tended to his evacuative functions".[6] This in turn installed a connection between the maternal body and abject bodily fluids, which is confirmed by Martin's confession that: "My mother would often burst into the bathroom while I was bathing. She would pull down her pants and use the toilet. She would also walk around the house naked."[7] The perverse and erotic connection that the maternal agent's actions instilled in the

patient are later replicated in his voyeuristic acts, which centred on "seeing women not only in the nude, but on the toilet".[8] For Socarides, the patient's adult quest to defile the female body therefore relates not to castration fears, but pre-Oedipal anxieties that surround the voracious and engulfing fear of the maternal body (and its secretions). Indeed, these phobias were reproduced in a traumatic, tripartite structure relating to the fact that Martin had to negotiate these ambivalent feelings with not only his mother, but also the aunt and sister with whom he shared the domestic space. This endlessly replicated the "basic pre-Oedipal nuclear fear found in all perversion: the fear of merging and fusing with the mother".[9]

It is the fear of being engulfed by three aggressive and demonised maternal figures which similarly hangs over Dario Argento's cinema, through his creation of the infamous and monstrous 'three mothers' series, which I intend to discuss. However, what is interesting about the director's work is the extent to which, like Socarides' patient, these monstrous mothers are subject to endless replication, appearing as a constant feature across his cinema. Indeed, by basing his *giallo* career upon the trope of violence erupting within and between siblings, Argento has repeatedly expressed an interest in the destructive and sexual underside of the family, which has lead Giovanni Bertellini to conclude that in his cinema:

> …the killing act stems from sexual disturbances … lack of affection or hate between parents or between one parent and a child, or excessive maternal … affection.[10]

Indeed, central to the director's output has been a violent and disturbing construction of the mother who threatens to smother the individuality of the offspring in her charge. While Argento's interest in the theme of the destructive maternal agent was most famously demonstrated in the figures of the 'three mothers' from *Suspiria* (1977) and *Inferno* (1980), it is also present in earlier productions such as *Deep Red*. Here, the effeminate musician Carlo (Gabriele Lavia) is revealed as part of a murderous duo, assisting in a series of killings in order to protect the identity of his psychotic mother. With the later *Phenomena* (AKA *Creepers*, 1985), Argento reframed the trope of the murderous maternal in the story of an abused school governess and her deformed son revealed as culpable for the mutilation of teenage female students in their charge.

More recently, films such as *Terror at the Opera*, 1993's *Trauma* (with its 'Head Hunter' killer revealed as the vengeful mother residing over the mummified remains of her dead foetus) and *La syndrome di Stendhal* (AKA *The Stendhal Syndrome*, 1996) have indicated Argento's growing interest in the problematic relations between powerful mothers and their daughters.

O*pera* for instance, presents the figure of Betty, whose childhood memories are scarred by the scenarios of torture and sadistic coitus that her mother organised with her masochistic lover Alan Santini (Urbano Barberini).

Although absent from the narrative of *The Stendhal Syndrome*, the mother of Anna Manni (Asia Argento) still manages to exert a transgressive influence over the central protagonist. The narrative depicts how Manni's repeated encounters with a serial killer results in her becoming psychotic and reproducing his murderous quest. However, Manni's obsession with art, which unites her with this male oppressor, is revealed as having been instilled by childhood visits to local galleries with her mother. The shadow of the monstrous female mother is even present in Argento's 2005 TV film *Ti piace Hitchcock* (AKA *Do You Like Hitchcock?*), in which a young amateur sleuth is haunted by scenes of maternal brutality he witnessed as a child.

What interests me in the theme of Argento's murderous mothers is not merely their homicidal intent, but also their physiological construction, which often provokes a type of disgust evidenced by Socarides' patient. Frequently, these are female figures whose bodies are either forcibly altered through violent interaction or open to supernatural transformation which indicates physiology as unrestrained. By postulating that Argento's films are dominated by images of the disgusting, monstrous female body I shall draw on psychoanalytical theories of gender and identity to explore these constructions in both their psychic and Italian cultural contexts.

In particular, Julia Kristeva's work around abjection and disgust will be employed to indicate how such images draw on the individual's pre-Oedipal and repressed relations to the maternal agent. I shall argue that the figure of the debased, monstrous and yet potent mother which occupies much of her analysis is also central to the themes of Argento's films. In her attempt to write back the repressed image of the mother into what she defines as male ordered language and historical structures, Kristeva is interested in those aspects which disrupt or disturb the sexuality and identity that the Symbolic or the speech act gives us.[11] These fissures or gaps in subjectivity refer back to infancy and the repressed relationship with the maternal agent that dominates these early years. According to her analysis, certain types of artistic representation draw upon the attractions and tensions of early infancy and to the period when the child's (lack of) identity was bound up with its relations with the mother. Although these primary, pleasurable encounters are often repressed when the child gains an understanding of its gender identity within the Symbolic, they are never fully restrained. These tensions threaten to re-emerge in later life either through mental trauma, nightmares or 'poetic' works of art. According to Kristeva, certain aesthetic strategies and modes of art draw upon the primary bond between mother and child. This is seen both

through an obsession with excessive, disgusting, infantile acts, as well as an attempt to dislodge and subvert the dominant structures of language which hold our adult, gendered identity in place. In so doing, these artistic works reference not merely the infant's destructive and archaic early tendencies but also the subversive power of the mother during this primary period of development.

Monstrous Female Bodies in Italian Horror and Italian Society

Upon first appearance, issues of subversive female power would not seem to sit easily with the traditional definitions of Argento's work as part of the classic phase of Italian *giallo* thrillers popularised between 1970 and 1975. As discussed in chapter one, the term became synonymous with a series of films detailing the fate of amateur detectives who find themselves compromised by their involvement in crime, and as a result are forced to go outside the law to mount an unofficial investigation in order to prove their innocence. In the course of their investigations, these (usually male) sleuths uncover scenes of extreme violence against women, which Argento pushed to the limit with his own entries to the cycle. As a result, from his debut film *The Bird with the Crystal Plumage* to the later controversial *Tenebrae*, Argento's works have been heavily criticised for focusing on the voyeuristic, sustained mutilation of the female body. As Mark Le Fanu commented on the release of *Tenebrae*:

> Argento's preoccupation after *Suspiria* seems to be with devising increasingly nasty ways of killing his characters especially when they are women. Each murder scene occasions a dazzling assemblage of cinematic effects – the camera tracks its victims who gaze back in erotic appreciation of their own vulnerability.[12]

Importantly, it is this annexing of flashy filmic affect to images of female violation which remains one of the most heated points of discussion in theoretical accounts of Argento's cinema that have appeared in recent years.[13] The idea of these narratives being symptomatic of a wider masculine quest to both survey and punish female sexuality appears initially confirmed by both the content of Argento's films, as well as his penchant for contentious statements and on-set practices (which have reportedly included him standing in as the unidentified *giallo* killer in heightened scenes of visceral mayhem).

Although Argento does dwell on the (sexual) suffering of female victims, it is also noticeable that they can occupy positions of mastery and aggression within his films (as he discusses more fully in the interview chapter which

follows). This crucial oscillation is evidenced through characters such as Monica Ranieri and Anna Manni from *The Bird with the Crystal Plumage* and *The Stendhal Syndrome* respectively. In both films their gender identity is altered as a result of violent male assault, which leads them to adopt a sadistic, murderous male quest. By disclosing the identity of killers whose behaviours eschew gender expectations, the resolutions of both films are shocking.

However, the 'female' killers they portray are also rendered 'disgusting' by virtue of having their bodies forcibly altered and made offensive because of the male violence that induced their psychosis. In *The Bird with the Crystal Plumage,* Monica's identity crisis is the result of a past genital violation by a male assailant. The repeated violation of Anna Manni at the hands of serial killer Alfredo Grossi (Thomas Kretschmann) results in her having to 'reconstruct' her damaged femininity with the aid of artificial cosmetics in order to hide the scars of her ordeal. Thus, Argento's films use a *giallo* framework to organise narratives around the desire to uncover the identity of a transgressor, while also constructing their females as victims of inferred violent castration. Paradoxically, they also depict certain female characters who, either by adopting the role of the maternal or by virtue of their status as former victims, manage to evade this position of oppression. While the existence of these protagonists depicts the construction of aberrant female physiology as a source of disgust, these potent characters are incorporated from earlier Italian popular genres such as the mythical adventure of the peplum (discussed more fully in chapter nine) and the Gothic horror, both of which were popular during the 1950s.

As indicated in the introduction to this volume, Italian popular cinema has often been seen as a *filone* or hybrid medium, whose output frequently fuses differing film genres to appeal to various audiences' modes of consumption. For writers such as Maggie Günsberg and Carol Jenks, 1950s cycles such as the peplum and Gothic horror reflected changing gender roles within the Italian economic miracle, through a contradictory configuration that equated the female body with both seduction and monstrous threat. For Günsberg, both formats use fantasy scenarios to explore mutually interchangeable fears "concerned with the body and the exploration of gender".[14] While the peplum focuses on male virility to play out a range of cultural and unconscious anxieties, Günsberg sees 1950s Italian Gothic horror as centring "on the female body and the threat femininity poses to masculinity… through the invasion of boundaries, incorporation and castration".[15] While the author offers a persuasive set of socio-cultural and psychoanalytic readings linking such female representations to changing industrial, educational and familial roles adopted by Italian women during

the 1950s and 1960s, Carol Jenks has also considered Italian Gothic gender configurations through a study of its most famous performer. Indeed, in her article 'The Other Face of Death', Jenks has linked the popularity of actress Barbara Steele in Italian horror films of the 1950s to a longer tradition depicting fatalistic and monstrous female figures. In a series of influential Gothic productions, Steele was frequently cast as a seductive vampire or witch, whose 'excessive' desires provoked retribution from assembled male characters, such as in Mario Bava's *La maschera del demonio* (AKA *The Mask of Satan*, 1960).

According to Jenks, these characteristics of the provocative but deadly female figure recall the *Divisimo* films of the silent years, when actresses such as Theda Bara drew upon historical and mythical depictions of duplicitous and evil women such as Delilah and Cleopatra. While these historical figures remained popular within the mythical 1950s peplum sagas, they were complemented by the roles undertaken by Steele (most famously in Bava's film). Here, she is cast in the role of the witch Asa, who is executed along with her lover Yavutich (Arhuro Dominici) in the film's powerful opening scene. Before being killed (by having a spiked mask forced onto her face), Asa swears vengeance on her brother and the Vidor family for her torture and execution. Two hundred years later, her rotting corpse is reanimated by the blood of a Victorian surgeon, Kruvajan (Andrea Checchi), who cuts his arm when examining her tomb. Although Asa carries out her threat to destroy the male lineage of the Vidor family, the narrative reveals her real quest to inhabit the body of her identical descendant Katia (also played by Steele). In so doing, the film establishes a pattern where subjectivity and identity between opposing female relations become ambivalent. As David J. Hogan suggests:

> It becomes clear in the course of the film that good and evil have numerous shared traits, an ambivalence that is neatly visualized by the introduction of the heroine. Princess Katia is essentially the antithesis of the witch, yet the separation is not total... Her dual role is especially significant; even at this point in her career, Steele was viewed as the ideal dream girl of paranoiacs who imagine hideous menace lurking behind every pretty face.[16]

Asa's attempted fusion with Katia is foregrounded in the finale of *The Mask of Satan*, when the hero Andre Gorobec (John Richardson) is forced to decide which of the pair must once again be burned for her transgressions. Although the two look identical, (the witch regaining her former facial beauty from close proximity with her intended victim), Richardson finally identifies Asa by tearing back her gown to reveal her decaying, insect-ridden body. The fact that her hideous physiology reveals her true status is important, as it

reiterates the construction of the feminine as monstrous and archaic in these cycles. The difficulty in locating the disease-ridden reality of Asa's body highlighted in Bava's film provided a template for later roles that Steele adopted. In Antonio Margheriti's *I lunghi capelli della morte* (AKA *The Long Hair of Death,* 1964), she is similarly cast as a rejuvenated witch who only reveals her filthy decaying body to her lover after they have engaged in sexual intercourse.

Arguably, Argento's work has translated these 1950s Italian Gothic concerns around the transformative and monstrous nature of the female body into the investigative framework of the seventies *giallo*. The shifting impact of these two film modes on his work is clearly seen in the film *Dèmoni* (AKA *Demons*), which he produced in 1985. This was directed by Lamberto Bava (son of Mario), and openly traces the importance of *The Mask of Satan* on contemporary Italian horror film culture. This set of self-reflexive references is achieved by staging the film's action in a disused cinema, where an invited audience is attacked by possessed patrons while watching an untitled horror film. Among the assembled viewers are a blind man, Werner (Alex Serra), and his female assistant Liz (Enrica Maria Scrivano). Their casting refers back to the *giallo*, and to Argento's interest in blind detectives such as Franco Arno (Karl Malden) in *Il gatto a nove code* (AKA *The Cat O' Nine Tails*, 1971). The cinema features other references to Argento's work, with posters for *4 mosche di velluto grigio* (AKA *Four Flies on Grey Velvet*, 1972) and George A. Romero's *Dawn of the Dead* displayed in the theatre foyer.

However, with its emphasis on the visible aspects of the transformative female body, *Demons* also casts clear references to the earlier Italian Gothic horror traditions of the 1950s and 1960s. For instance, the trigger for the chaos that engulfs the theatre is a cursed display mask hanging in the cinema foyer. The mask is identical to the one forced over Barbara Steele's face in *The Mask of Satan*:

Figure 4.1: Behind the mask: Gothic references to *The Mask of Satan* abound in the Argento-produced *Demons*.

Importantly, the first patron to be infected is a black prostitute, Rosemary (Geretta Giancarlo), who dons the mask before entry to the screening. Her coding as an explicit site of erotic visual display also draws equations with the paradoxes apparent in Barbara Steele’s star image. While the *Demons* character is depicted as a signifier of sexual attraction, her body is marked by a sudden degeneration into decay and death, comparable to that of Asa in Mario Bava’s film.

Demons even parodies the duality between Asa and Katia established in *The Mask of Satan* through its casting of Natasha Hovey as central female protagonist Cheryl. Although described by Rob Winning as a “symbol of all that is innocent and unblemished in the world”,[17] Cheryl ultimately unsettles the clarity of this definition. During the film’s closing sequence, her body suddenly transforms into a demon. This act is both horrific (in terms of the intensity of transformation depicted) and unsettling, revealing that the viewer’s stable source of identification throughout the narrative has been infected all the time.

While examples from both *The Mask of Satan* and *Demons* indicate a shared cinematic history, such depictions of uncontrollable female physiology also link them to the processes of disgust and abjection defined by feminist theorists such as Julia Kristeva. These bodies reveal a defiance of the male ordered Symbolic, which Kristeva has argued is dominated by attempts to regulate and discipline physiology. Thus, these unstable female forms recalls an earlier pre-Oedipal/pre-linguistic period, prior to the processes of separation between mother and infant. This primary pairing is fragmented as

a consequence of the discovery of sexual difference and the threat of castration that defines the child's absorption into the Symbolic. It is the infant's interpellation into the language system which Kristeva argues also works to fragment former ambivalences around its identity and gender.

However, what Argento's narratives do is draw attention to the artificial processes of language itself. By constructing bodies of disgust, paradox and excess, the feminine depictions of the *giallo* indicate the ease with which physiology can be dislocated from the terms, polarities and categorisations that discourse constructs. Specifically, Argento's horrific females, by virtue of their impossible construction, foreground the importance of the border in such systems of gender classification. In the book *Powers of Horror*, Kristeva defines abjection as an erosion of the borders of subjectivity which can be explored from a psychoanalytical perspective. The child's identity is formed through its absorption into a system of language which is itself dependent on the polarisation of self, sexuality and external body image into a series of discrete binaries and categories. These terms:

> ...need to be oppositionally coded in order for the child's body to be constituted as a unified whole and for its subjectivity to be defined and tied to the body's limits. They are conditions under which the child may claim the body as its own, and thus also the conditions under which it gains a place as a speaking subject.[18]

Central to the functioning of this system of subjectivity is the repression of the infant's pre-linguistic fascination with its own body and its associated waste products. Here, Kristeva (following theorists such as Mary Douglas) defines the body's waste products as a troubling type of 'dirt', marked by matter such as faeces, urine, vomit, spittle and menstrual blood. These bodily products are seen as 'taboo' because they operate and intersect at the space between the interior of the self and its external image. As a result, they deny crucial borders through which the Symbolic attempts to construct "the clean and proper body".[19]

Although Kristeva argues that the Symbolic attempts to banish these forms of primary pleasure, they recur in later life through formats such as unconventional works of art. And in this respect, it is interesting that the abject is reproduced in both the content and form of Dario Argento's cinema. Central to many of his films is the displacement of borders and the mechanisms of Symbolic clarification that they represent. For instance, bodily matter such as blood and mucus prove central to the source of infection that marks the Metropol cinema in *Demons*. Here, it is Candy's blood that initiates infection when she is scratched by the cursed display mask in the theatre. As a result, her external body image displays a lack of

integrity and control by erupting into a series of facial lesions, which eventually burst, sending a shower of blood and thick green pus cascading down her neck.

As with the construction of waste matter in Kristeva's analysis, these eruptive female bodies provoke disgust because they undercut the established boundaries of external appearance. In the case of Candy, this corporeal 'corruption' is marked by the 'shedding' of her established form: her fingernails and teeth replaced by claws and a phallic-shaped tongue. According to Barbara Creed's book *The Monstrous Feminine*, it is the corruption of established body and identity boundaries which remains at the core of the horror film's paradoxical appeal through disgust. Adapting what she identifies as key borders transgressed in horror cinema, it can be argued that Argento's work is also concerned with the elision of the boundary between the human and inhuman (as in *Demons*, *Inferno*, *Suspiria* and *Creepers*), as well as the boundary separating established gender distinctions (*The Bird with the Crystal Plumage* and *Deep Red*).

Filth, Food, Sexuality and the (Three) Mother(s)

Despite differences in the categories of abjection depicted, Argento repeatedly concentrates on the female body as a signifier of disgust and chaotic transformation. For instance, although *Demons* details a process of physical possession afflicting both sexes, it is interesting to note that the narrative does not visualise the male body undergoing the same excessive transmutations that afflict depicted female characters. As a result, these female-led transformations can be linked to the primary bonds of infancy, and in particular the young child's initial relations with its mother. Prior to the discovery of its own autonomy, the infant's dependence on the mother is indicated in her primary role in the training, coordinating and controlling of the child's body. Her role is particularly marked through the supervised expulsion and disposal of waste matter such as urine and excreta. Kristeva defines this process of maternal control over the infant's body as a process of 'primary mapping'. This includes activities such as sphincter training, which allows the child to discover the contours of his own developing body, while retaining the gratification of contact with the mother's form (through activities such as breastfeeding).

As a result of her close proximity to these sources of waste matter, the mother becomes viewed as 'abject by association' by the child when it enters the Symbolic. Although her influence in this primary period of physical development is repressed, it returns as a sight of horror and disgust in the unpalatable representations of the female body in various cycles of Italian

cult cinema. These cinematic figures display an inability to control bodily hygiene, an association with images of mucus and filth that confirms waste matter as a key form of abjection. This capacity for waste matter to invoke the primary maternal bond is indicated in Kristeva's example of 'A.' This case study detailed the actions of a four-year-old child whose recurrent nightmare focused on his attempted expulsion of faeces.[20] When the substance was emitted, it refused to be detached from 'A.'s' body, and in fact transformed into a monster, which the child defined as a cross between a frog and a crocodile. The threat that the monster poses is as a disruption to the unity of the external body image, and its links to Symbolic regulation. Whereas the established image of the self can offer the individual a guarantor of distinct identity, faecal matter is marked by "the mixtures, alterations and decay"[21] that run counter to such modes of classification. Importantly, the nightmare that plagued the child coincided with his emerging understanding of the rules that govern modes of verbal communication. The dream thus reveals a slippage between two developmental registers: the past realm of the mother (with its overwhelming focus on the body and its secretions), and the Symbolic (with its strategies to repress these former contacts and modes of gratification).

The fact that 'A.'s' nightmare evokes a period prior to his construction as a subject is intimated by the entrance of the father into the narrative, the dream ending when he "sees the animal and threatens punishment".[22] Indeed, given that the monster which attached itself to 'A.'s' anus possessed a transparent membrane, it is worth remembering that in *Demons*, during her transformation, Candy's face is transformed by a network of blood vessels rising from the interior of her body to corrupt its external appearance.

While waste matter remains one of the key types of abjection that Kristeva identifies, other variants such as food loathing and the obliteration of the signs of sexual difference are also evidenced in Argento's works. According to Kristeva, food loathing is "perhaps the most elementary and archaic form of abjection".[23] As she notes in *Powers of Horror*, such loathing is of particular importance in the renunciation of the maternal bond. Not only does it evoke the primary 'oral' period of infantile dependence, but it also undercuts the role of distinction and cultural categorisation. Kristeva exemplifies the notion of food loathing and the cultural borders it disturbs with the example of the skin that forms on fetid milk. This provokes disgust not only because of its smell, but also because it conflates the distinction of the food matter as <u>either</u> solid or liquid, eroding the border "between two distinct entities or territories".[24] Evidence of food loathing is provided in Argento's most famous abject experiment, *Suspiria.* Here, meat is rendered unfit for human consumption through an infestation by maggots. It is also

linked to a plague of rats in the film's sequel, *Inferno*.[25]

What is important about both *Suspiria* and *Inferno* is that abject waste matter is clearly equated with the maternal through the narrative concentration on a trio of witches known as the 'Three Mothers'. These destructive figures are revealed to dominate the world and spread pestilence via a series of cursed locations in Rome, New York and Freiburg. *Suspiria* explores this destructive maternal presence by concentrating on the activities of Mater Suspiriorum, who hides under the guise of Helena Marcos, the head of a dance school in Germany.

The film shows that this witch and her female assistants work to infantilise those in close proximity with them. *Suspiria* depicts the school as dominated by a series of destructive female figures, including Principal Madame Blanc (Joan Bennett), and her senior dance instructor Miss Tanner (played with authoritarian zeal by Alida Valli). Importantly, Argento makes these two characters the focus for a series of masculine figures that are dependent on them as maternal substitutes. For instance, Madame Blanc is constantly accompanied by her nephew Albert (Jacopo Mariani), an androgynous young child upon whom she lavishes all her affection.[26] This relationship is in turn mirrored by Miss Tanner's fondness for a young (and destitute) male dancer (Miguel Bosé), who she allows to stay on at the academy despite his inability to pay the fees. Even the academy pianist is rendered dependent on these female agents (as guides) by virtue of his being blind.

Importantly, it is not merely their dominance over younger and more vulnerable characters which ensure Tanner and Blanc monstrous maternal status within the fiction of *Suspiria*; it is also the extent to which Argento uses non-diegetic data surrounding the star personas of Joan Bennett and Alida Vali to add to their threatening construction. As Marcia Landy has noted in the volume *Stardom Italian Style*, "Argento's films belong to experimental conceptions of cinema in their uses of visual and sound imagery, narrative form, intertextuality, acting … use of established stars, and the appearance of new stars".[27] In the case of *Suspiria*, Joan Bennett's casting clearly draws on her established star persona as a fatalistic *noir* female lead or compromised domestic heroine in 1940s American titles such as *Woman in the Window* (Fritz Lang, 1944) and *The Reckless Moment* (Max Ophüls, 1949). However, rather than emphasise the seductive and desirable qualities of such strong female icons, Landy argues that in casting

> Alida Vali and Joan Bennett, Argento adopts the practice of using international stars …. but rendering them distorted and grotesque, emphasizing their aging and monstrous bodies.[28]

In her discussion of the experimental qualities through which Argento frames these mothers' transgressive acts, Jacqueline Reich has drawn similar conclusions to Landy, commenting on the particular significance of established Italian icon Alida Vali to *Suspiria*. Writing in the chapter 'The Mother of All Horror', Reich notes that Vali's casting as authoritarian head of an all-female ballet school has resonances given that her domestic star image was initially formed via appearances in 1930s and 1940s all-girl school comedies, where she was depicted as a source of concern to controlling patriarchal figures. Her casting in *Suspiria* clearly draws on these disruptive past roles, albeit reconstructing her body in an archaic and monstrously aged form:

Figure 4.2: Aged icon: Alida Vali's 'disruptive' star persona brought to bear on *Suspiria*.

To this extent, Reich argues that the ambivalent maternal figures of *Suspiria* construct an all-female environment that constitutes a threat to the masculine Symbolic order, both in the abject female bodies the locale harbours, as well as the expressive but non-communicative creative acts it privileges. Indeed, commenting on the vibrant colour coding that Argento

uses in the ballet school, Reich argues that such overpowering stylistics function to isolate pivotal feminine characters and female agency from the more peripheral male protagonists portrayed in the film:

> It is important that Suzy's interview with the psychiatrist is the only sequence in the entire film shot in a naturalistic way (the on-location set, use of natural lighting, the public space and the realistic mise-en-scene).[29]

Importantly, the psychiatrist Frank Mandell (Udo Kier) rejects Suzy's fears that her dance academy may be governed by a coven of witches as symptoms of potential mental illness. However, rather than signs of psychological aberration, the film reveals an all-female community which is in fact dangerous to male rationality and logic precisely because of its supernatural underpinnings. Reich provides an incisive account of how *Suspiria* draws on long-standing Italian cultural traditions linking "the witch's subversive power to mutilation of the vulnerable male physically, emotionally, or sexually".[30] The author also links the witches' power to intimate body fluids, which erode the power of potential victims like Suzy: "while she is ill, the red wine she must drink has the consistency of blood, perhaps menstrual blood".[31]

What *Suspiria* also points to is an absence of controlling male figures, allowing these monstrous maternal figures to limit the autonomy of the individuals in their charge. The film reveals that they violently dispatch those who discover their true identity, often evoking abject imagery in their assassination attempts. The inspiration for *Suspiria* can be partly traced to the experiences of Argento's former partner and long term collaborator Daria Nicolodi at a ballet school during her youth. Although Nicolodi moulded rumours that the institution was ruled by witches into a screenplay for the film, it was Argento who constructed these figures as destructive maternal agents. As he stated:

> ... in an early draft I even planned to have the action take place in a school where the witches were teachers who tortured the children.[32]

According to Leon Hunt's article 'A (Sadistic) Night at the Opera', further sources of inspiration for *Suspiria* and *Inferno* can be found in both Thomas De Quincey's essay *Levana and our Ladies of Sorrow*,[33] and the 1950s Italian Gothic narratives of Mario Bava and Antonio Margheriti I discussed earlier. As a result, they appear to differ from the *giallo* framework that characterises other Argento texts. However, despite the supernatural emphasis of both films, they retain the investigative quest that defines other Argento works. In *Suspiria*, the lead female protagonist Suzy Bannion assumes the role of investigator in order to discover the truth behind the

disappearance of her friends at the school. In the film's sequel, *Inferno,* the role of the detective is taken by Mark Elliot (Leigh McCloskey), whose sister Rose (Irene Miracle) discovers one of the witches living in a New York apartment. Rose is subsequently killed for her knowledge of the witches' existence, resulting in Mark's journey to the hotel to investigate her disappearance.

Both films (reiterating Argento's statement) construct the three mothers as cruel, duplicitous and threatening. These traits can once more be linked to Kristeva's theory of abjection. She argues that upon entry into the Symbolic, the infant renounces the mother as a figure of erotic attraction. While the functioning of the Symbolic relies on the clean, ordered and categorised body, the repressed dyad points back "to that time when the mother-child relationship was marked by an untrammelled pleasure in 'playing' with the body and its wastes".[34] However, this process of repression is frequently disturbed by those mothers who refuse to allow their children independence.

In such cases, the infant becomes trapped between two developmental registers: the initial mode of maternal dependence (which she terms the Semiotic) and the later stage of identity and language acquisition implicit in the Symbolic. As a result of this split, the mother becomes recast from a nurturing to a threatening figure, who works to limit the autonomy of her offspring. As Barbara Creed would argue, these works construct the maternal figure:

> . . . as the monstrous feminine. By refusing to relinquish her hold on her child, she prevents it from taking up its proper place in relation to the Symbolic. Partly consumed by the desire to remain locked in a blissful relationship with the mother and partly terrified of separation, the child finds it easy to succumb to the comforting pleasure of the dyadic relationship.[35]

It is this threatening construction of the maternal which frames Argento's *Inferno*. Here, the status of the three mothers as an abject and threatening presence is established in the pre-credit sequence, when a voiceover (revealed to be that of an architect named Varelli) narrates how he designed three dwelling places for the witches. His assertion that these locations have become the "repository of all their *filthy* secrets" confirms the equation between the maternal and abject waste matter.

Inferno reveals a New York hotel to be the home of another of the trio: Mater Tenebrarum. As well as being plagued by rats, the location has a sickening stench that disgusts those inhabitants in close proximity to the site. Indeed, Varelli's voiceover comments that the deathly 'reek' of the mother's dwelling place acts as a "primary key" to their foul presence. This reference locates the maternal realm at the level of physiology and corporeal mapping,

and (as the narrative reveals), beyond the limits of discourse. The film's opening sequence depicts the film's ill-fated heroine Rose Elliot exploring the caverns of the New York hotel after reading Varelli's writings. These underground locations, which remain submerged in water, instantly connote the maternal through a womb-like structure. However, the film instantly introduces a tension into the traditional equation of the maternal with the fertile by having Rose's exploration disturbed by her discovery of skeletons and abject body parts in the underground location. This recasting of the womb as a site of death rather than the source of creation confirms Varelli's initial statement about the witches as barren mothers who are "incapable of creating life".[36]

Importantly, the significance of a hidden chamber or secret room which contains a site of death and decay is central to several Argento texts. While *Inferno's* submerged cellar holds the key to Mater Tenebrarum's identity, her counterpart from *Suspiria* is concealed in a secret room whose passages are lined with the dead bodies of her female victims from the dance academy. In these locations the monstrous mother "commits dreadful acts in a location which resembles the womb. These inter-uterine settings consist of dark, narrow winding passages leading to a central room, cellar or symbolic place of birth".[37]

It is these images of blood and violent birth that Argento's films and the earlier Italian horror cycles play upon. For instance, evidence of the abject construction of the womb can be traced back to Gothic horror works such as *The Mask of Satan*. Here, the witch Asa assumes the role of 'barren' mother by resurrecting her dead lover Javutich from a deserted graveyard. This sequence appears as a parody of birth, with the male figure emerging from "the erupting earth, his hands covered with a web of mucus".[38] According to Kristeva, in such images the:

> Evocation of the maternal body and childbirth induces the image of birth as a violent act of expulsion through which the nascent body tears itself away from the maternal insides.[39]

A similar equation of the womb as site of death and decaying bodily waste is evidenced in *Demons* (once more demonstrating Argento's wish to comment on the importance of Mario Bava's earlier film). Here, one of the film's key protagonists, Kathy (Paola Cozzo), experiences a bizarre version of the birth act when a demon literally <u>tears</u> through the surface of her skin following a process of unnoticed internal incubation:

Figure 4.3: Birth trauma: the abjection of reproduction referenced in *Demons*.

While depictions of the grotesque female body and the birth act provide a clear link between *Demons* and Bava's work, a direct comparison can also be found between *The Mask of Satan* and *Inferno.* This is seen in the fact that Mario Bava worked on the latter in the capacity of special effects designer (his son Lamberto also featured as an assistant director on the production). Bava's role in *Inferno* included the creation of the underwater cavern that Rose Elliot discovers prior to her disappearance.

Importantly, the only represented reference to the mothers during this sequence is a painting of Mater Tenebrarum which hangs in the underground cavern Rose Elliot explores. However, confirming Kristeva's conclusion that the female form cannot fully be represented by a male-ordered language, it appears pertinent that only the name rather than the image of the mother is presented in the painting. This feature is itself important as it points to another type of abjection that Argento's mothers share: the ability to upset or transcend an established body image and the signs of sexual difference.

These mothers prove to be female characters whose presence undercuts external and internal categorisations of the body, once more reflecting the primary ambivalence that surrounds the infant's sense of self. For instance, Mater Suspiriorum exists in *Suspiria* as a force with neither shape nor distinction, only being locatable by her breathing (which, in sounding like a death rattle, reiterates her body as site of decay). Importantly, the film's heroine, Suzy, manages to destroy the witch by identifying the shadow of her

outline in a thunderstorm. When in death Suspiriorum does materialise (revealing herself to be an aged hag), her body is once more coded as a site of 'dead' flesh.

This ability to defy Symbolic codes of physiological representation is also present in the closing sequence of *Inferno.* Here, the hero Mark Elliot discovers the lair of one of the witches after investigating the disappearance of his sister Rose at Mater Tenebrarum's New York apartment block. His actions set in motion a blaze at the building, in which he discovers that Mater Tenebrarum is actually a nurse who tends for the (now mute and disabled) architect Varelli.

While recapitulating the reduction of the male to infantile status initiated in *Suspiria,* Tenebrarum's unholy power is also indicated in her sudden transformation from human to skeletal form as she chases Elliot through the blazing building.[40] This apparent ability to defy the stability of categorical representation fits well with the conception of the mother as a dominant and feared figure who (the infant often fantasises) is able to transcend the borders of her own form. The trauma that this imagined ability for transformation provokes in the subject's sense of self seems recapitulated in the film's ending via the fear induced in Elliot when Tenebrarum states that his body will undergo a similar series of alterations under her power.

Mater Tenebrarum's transformation in *Inferno*'s finale indicates the transience of the barrier between the ordered exterior of the body and its underlying physiology. More important, by appearing as a figure of death, attention is drawn to Barbara Creed's conclusion that "the ultimate abjection is the corpse".[41] By replicating abjection across a range of texts, Argento's cinema also evokes the primal power of the pre-Oedipal mother, whose influence can be traced in cinematic case study and clinical practice alike. The influence of this maternal agent is a presence that extends beyond the nurturing role to retain a far more powerful and threatening status, which Charles W. Socarides sees as expressed in adult male patients who exhibit a "fear of being destroyed, invaded, engulfed, inwardly (bodily) despoiled and persecuted".[42]

Notes

[1] Charles W. Socarides, 'The Demonified Mother: A Study of Voyeurism and Sexual Sadism', *International Review of Psychoanalysis* 1 (1974), 187.
[2] Jacqueline Reich, 'The Mother of All Horror: Witches, Gender and the Films of Dario Argento', in Keala Jewell (ed.), *Monsters in the Italian Literary Imagination* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 2001), p.98.
[3] Ibid., p.190.
[4] Cited in Socarides, 'Demonified Mother', 192.
[5] Ibid., 187.
[6] Ibid., 190
[7] Ibid., 191.
[8] Ibid.
[9] Ibid., 193.
[10] Giorgio Bertellini, *The Cinema of Italy* (London: Wallflower Press, 2004), p.224.
[11] Kristeva's interests in language, ideology and the representation of the feminine are split between a number of important publications which chart the formation of her ideas on the repression of the maternal in patriarchal society. Texts such as *Revolution in Poetic Language* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1984) provide an examination of the strict, rule-bound systems of language that govern the Symbolic, while contrasting them with the fluid forms of communication that exist between mother and child. Both this volume and *Powers of Horror* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1982) indicate how subversive forms of discourse used between the pair reappear in certain forms of modernist literature. Although cinema remains largely absent from her analysis, it is the examination of the mother as a sign of Symbolic disgust and loathing within these texts that resulted in critics such as Barbara Creed applying Kristeva's work to the horror film. More recently, volumes such as *Tales of Love* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1987) have shown Kristeva attempting to write accounts of the history of motherhood using unconventional and subversive written techniques. These methods are present in chapters such as 'Stabat Mater' in order to show how an 'infantile' use of discourse can be used to represent the feminine in language.
[12] Mark Le Fanu, '*Tenebrae*' (review), *Films and Filming* 348 (September 1983), 36.
[13] Here, several noted critics have argued that the levels of stylistic excess exhibited in Argento's films actually complicate the processes of sadistic affiliation that these narratives produce. For instance, writing in the article 'The Argento Effect', Peter Hutchings has noted:

> Extravagant camera movements abound – most spectacularly in the scene in *Tenebrae* where a crane mounted in one long uninterrupted take from the ground floor of a house, up on and over the roof and then down to the back part of the house. It would be easy to list a range of other tracks and pans, unusual camera angles and bizarre pieces of editing elsewhere in Argento's films.

Peter Hutchings, 'The Argento Effect', in Mark Jancovich, Antonio Lázaro Reboll, Julian Stringer and Andy Willis (eds), *Defining Cult Movies: The Politics of Oppositional Taste* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2003), p.127.
[14] Maggie Günsberg, *Italian Cinema: Gender and Genre* (London: Palgrave, 2004), p.133.
[15] Ibid.
[16] David J. Hogan, *Dark Romance* (Northampton: Equation, 1988), p.168.
[17] Rob Winning, '*Demons*' (review), *Cinefantastique* 17:2 (March 1987), 44.
[18] Elizabeth Grosz, 'The Body of Signification', in John Fletcher and Andrew Benjamin (eds), *Abjection, Melancholia and Love*: *The Work of Julia Kristeva* (London: Routledge, 1996), p.86.
[19] Barbara Creed, *The Monstrous Feminine* (London: Routledge, 1994), p.11.
[20] In her article 'Ellipses on Dread and the Specular Seduction' in *Wide Angle* 3:2 (1979).
[21] Kristeva, *Powers of Horror,* p.108.
[22] Kristeva, 'Ellipses on Dread and the Specular Seduction', 45. It seems pertinent that the narrative does not specify to whom the punishment will be directed: the monster for its sudden appearance, or the infant for creating such a figure from its own 'filth'.
[23] Kristeva, *Powers of Horror*, p.2.
[24] Ibid., p.9. The basis of food loathing is also indicated in Mary Douglas's *Purity and Danger* (London: Routledge, 1991). This book analysed the rationale behind the construction of certain animals as taboo in religious or ritual practice. In orthodox Judaism, only animals whose characteristics equate with the category of their 'appropriate environment' are seen as fit for consumption. Thus, the snake is seen as taboo because it can inhabit both land and water despite possessing neither gills nor legs, and as such defies the distinguishing categories between land animals and fish.
[25] This connection is made by Creed in *The Monstrous Feminine* (pp.76–77). Her analysis of both Argento films is tied to the cultural history of representing the female witch as a filthy, unclean presence.
[26] Importantly, the boy (aged around seven or eight years old) is clothed in mock Victorian dress more suited to a younger child. This factor, along with Albert's apparent inability (or refusal) to enter into conversation in the film, redoubles the relationship of the mother to the pre-Oedipal and pre-articulate child.
[27] Marcia Landy, *Stardom Italian Style: Screen Performance and Personality in Italian Cinema* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2008) p.178.
[28] Ibid., p.225.
[29] Reich, 'Mother of All Horror', p.97.
[30] Ibid., p.93.
[31] Ibid., p.97.
[32] Maitland McDonagh, *Broken Mirrors/Broken Minds: The Dark Dreams of Dario Argento* (London: Sun Tavenfields, 1991), p.129.
[33] His essay itself privileges uncontrollable physiology, linking the mother's presence to "functions pointing to the flesh", as cited in McDonagh, *Broken*

Mirrors, p.136.
[34] Creed, *Monstrous Feminine*, p.13.
[35] Ibid., p.12.
[36] Ibid., p.77.
[37] Ibid., p.53.
[38] Carol Jenks, 'The Other Face of Death: Barbara Steele and *La Maschera del demonio*', in Richard Dyer and Ginette Vincendeau (eds), *Popular European Cinema* (London: Routledge, 1992), p.157.
[39] Kristeva, *Powers of Horror*, p.101.
[40] Her transformation from the guise of nurse to a 'genderless' skeleton reiterates the division of the interior and exterior modes of physiology that abjection attacks.
[41] Creed, *Monstrous Feminine*, p.8.
[42] Socarides, 'Demonified Mother', 194.

CHAPTER FIVE

FEAR AT 400 DEGREES: AN INTERVIEW WITH DARIO ARGENTO

Over the years, slasher and gore film buffs around the world have elevated Argento to cult status… These admiring hagiographies gave Argento international fame and distinction, but it came at a price… Regularly excluded from scholarly publications dedicated to Italian cinema of the 1970s, Argento's films have been regarded as lacking cultural (read political) and artistic consistency…[1]
—Giorgio Bertellini, *The Cinema of Italy*

Figure 5.1: Raising the fear factor: Dario Argento discusses *Suspiria,* the *giallo* and 1970s Italian politics.

Befitting Bertellini's opening quotation, Dario Argento remains the most celebrated and cited Italian cult film director considered in the volume, hence two chapters of this study being devoted to his work. However, this

output also demonstrates the extent to which his reputation was *primarily* reclaimed through cult oriented outputs such as fanzines and popular journals, rather than theoretical accounts of national cinema traditions. Indeed, Argento is noticeably absent from the first two editions of Peter Bondanella's influential volume *Italian Cinema: From Neo-Realism to the Present*, and is only considered in an expanded version of an existing chapter on 'Italian cinema in the 1980s', which appears in the third edition of the volume published in 2001. However, even in this amended rendition, Bondanella's reading of Argento's national significance remains 'Italian-lite', with his insistence that the director's work is dominated by the "citations of American horror classics"[2], leading to the presumption that much of his celebrity status is bound up with the wider American reception of his works. Indeed, it was only the 2009 edition of the volume (published as *A History of Italian Cinema*), in which the author finally devoted a sizeable section to Argento and other Italian cult luminaries.

Possibly, it is this continued resistance to locating Argento's output as a specific product of both Italian culture *and* Italian cinema culture of the 1970s that Marcia Landy's re-titling of Argento as "A Belated Star",[3] which she uses as a structuring motif to explore the extent to which his films draw on non-genre-based Italian film influences. In many respects, Landy's label of Argento cinema as a complex index of Italian and wider European influences seems more than appropriate for a director born in 1940, whose father (Salvatore) was an influential film producer, and whose mother (Elda Luxardo) was an established Brazilian photographer. While these parental influences assured Argento's fascination with film from an early age, he also assimilated influences from a wide range of the fantastic arts. These included the films of Alfred Hitchcock, Fritz Lang, F.W. Murnau and Walt Disney, as well as surrealist painting, the macabre literary works of Edgar Allen Poe and the delirious writings of Thomas De Quincey. In later years Salvatore Argento's cinematic influence would be directly seen on the production credits of many of his son's films, along with those of Dario's brother Claudio, who acted as producer on many of his works.

It is also true that as a director, Dario Argento very quickly established the status of cult film icon (rather than an Italian film phenomenon) whose works were praised and condemned in equal measure. Since 1970 he has directed 20 films, whose convoluted plotting, excessive visual style and unconventional gender twists have repeatedly upset established definitions of cinematic taste. Argento's films are all marked by an elaborate use of camerawork, lighting and musical score. However, any artistic labels

applied to these images are complicated by his insistence on using them as backdrops to scenes of sexual violence. As Marcia Landy has noted:

> Dario Argento is a controversial director who has been regarded with distain as well as adulation. His films are identified with the international cross-over between populist and auteur cinema…[4]

His reputation as a European master of the macabre willing to push onscreen images of violence to the limit has been confirmed by his high profile roles as script consultant/producer on celebrated gore classics such as George A. Romero's *Dawn of the Dead* (1978) and Lamberto Bava's *Demons*, as well as the writer of Lucio Fulci's posthumously completed project *M.D.C. - Maschera di cera* (AKA *Wax Mask,* 1997). His influence has also extended beyond film to include helming the popular Italian TV series *La porta sul buio* (AKA *Door Into Darkness*) in the 1970s, contributing two episodes to the acclaimed *Masters of Horror* series in 2005–2006, as well as the feature-length TV special *Do You Like Hitchcock?* (also 2005).

Made in Italy: The Argento Formula

As with many of Europe's leading post-war directors, Argento began his career as a film critic for the Rome newspaper *Paesa Sera*, before becoming a screenwriter for popular 1960s Italian genres including westerns such as *Une corde un colt* (*Cemetery Without Crosses* [1969]), and war movies including *The Commandos* (1968). It was his screenwriting contribution to Sergio Leone's *Once Upon a Time in the West* (1968) that brought him to the attention of Gofredo Lombardo of the established Titanus Distribution company. Lombardo asked Argento to fashion a screenplay for what was to become his first film: *The Bird with the Crystal Plumage*. This influential movie not only started the second, and most prolific period of *giallo* production (from 1970 until 1975), but also initialised the theme of compromised amateur male forced to go outside the law to mount an unofficial investigation to resolve a violent crime they have witnessed.

In an important departure from American detective films of the period, Argento constructed his masculine sleuths as defective investigators, whose deductive errors result in the exacerbation of mayhem and transgression, rather than its resolution. This is signalled in his debut movie when Sam Dalmas mistakenly presumes that Monica Ranieri is the innocent victim of a crazed male sex attacker in the pivotal opening gallery scene. As the subsequent police investigation is premised on

Dalmas's recollections and observations of the male 'assailant' he sees fleeing the scene, it can be argued that the protagonist's deductive failings actually assist Monica's subsequent killing spree. This is only curtailed in the film's finale when the protagonist is shocked to discover that the woman he thought he saw being attacked is in fact the film's killer.

With the startling ending to *The Bird with the Crystal Plumage*, Argento clearly signalled himself as a director playing with audience and critic expectations about the role of gender in the horror film. By manipulating many of the features of psychosexual thrillers (such as the 'male' point of view used by the killer to stalk and survey future female victims),[5] the unmasking of a female assassin proves a genuinely shocking revelation. If this plot device indicated Argento's scathing views of the ineffectiveness of traditional methods of detection as applied to sexually transgressive crimes, then this seems confirmed by an interest in deconstructing the mechanics of logical detection that would dominate many of his future films.

For instance, Argento's second movie, *The Cat O' Nine Tails*, featured the unlikely pairing of a newspaper reporter and a blind amateur detective, who unwittingly uncover a blackmail plot and subsequent string of murders occurring at a gene research unit. This film is viewed by Giorgio Bertellini as the second instalment in the director's "animal trilogy",[6] so called because an animal features strongly in the title, or in the dénouement of the crime under investigation. However, while *The Bird with the Crystal Plumage* proved an 'acceptable' animal because its relatively restrained plot mechanics were well received in foreign territories such as the United States, these two follow-up films were often criticised by Anglo-American critics, who felt that Argento's brand of detective fiction abandoned rational methods of deduction in favour of a near-fantastical and stylistic led excess. For instance, the resolution of *The Cat O' Nine Tails* reveals the film's killer to be an effeminate scientist, who discovers he is afflicted with an abnormal XYY chromosome, which results in him dispatching fellow researchers involved in his experiments. The rationale behind Argento's next film, *Four Flies on Grey Velvet*, proved even more unrealistic. Here, the oppressed hero/detective Roberto (Michael Brandon) is pursued by an unidentified aggressor who blackmails him over an apparent act of murder performed in an abandoned theatre. The four flies referenced in the film's title refer to an image captured on a scientific device able to store the last object imprinted on the retina of a murder victim. In this case Roberto discovers that the camera reproduces an image of what appears to be four flies in motion.

This pseudo-scientific revelation brings to the protagonist not a release from his suffering but further victimisation and humiliation, as the killer is revealed to be his own wife, Nina (Mimsy Farmer). Although Roberto was unable to correctly read the image that the camera reproduced, the film's resolution reveals the flies to be an image on the amulet that Nina wears when she kills her victims. As with the male heroes from Argento's previous two entries, the detective here not only lacks the critical distance needed to solve the actual crime, but also faces death and mutilation as a result. As Nina reveals, her only reason for marrying the protagonist relates to the physical similarity that he bore to her father, who she wanted to punish for his ineffectual qualities.

While the meandering mechanics of investigation demonstrated in *The Cat O' Nine Tails* and *Four Flies on Grey Velvet* resulted in both films receiving a mixed reception abroad, it was also their pronounced and self-reflexive use of the cinematic medium that baffled many critics. For instance, both films displayed the complex constructions of cinematic time and space normally associated with art cinema. For Maitland McDonagh, the director's attempt to fuse genre cinema concerns with arthouse sensibilities very much reflects the culturally specific background from which Dario Argento has emerged. As she states:

> You can't reasonably look at Argento's work without bearing in mind the contradictory context from which he springs: on the one hand, the practical Italian film industry, with its relentless emphasis on genre and its quick and dirty production practices; on the other, the cerebral world of film criticism, with its inevitable emphasis on analysis and intellectual distance.[7]

As the 1970s progressed, these attempts to appeal to both intellectual and populist audiences were further complicated by Argento's fusion of the supposedly distinct world of 'rational' *giallo* fiction with macabre traditions of supernatural horror. For instance, *Deep Red* (1975) centres on a psychic who discovers a dark and incestuous secret in the mind of an unidentified audience member present at one of her seminars, which relates to the murder of a patriarchal figure. This knowledge leads to the psychic's violent murder, which is witnessed by Marcus Daly, an English musician living in Rome. As with Sam Dalmas in *The Bird with the Crystal Plumage*, Daly becomes entwined in a crime he has fundamentally misjudged and this obsession forces him to adopt the role of a detective.

Deep Red remains a transitional film in terms of Argento's development, both as director and cinematic stylist. As Maitland McDonagh has noted, the film is "relentlessly theatrical", with its onscreen splatter framed by winding

long takes, ambiguous point of view camerawork and radical splits between sound and image tracks.[8] The film's allusion to the arthouse techniques pioneered by directors such as Michelangelo Antonioni is more than coincidence. Indeed, with his casting of the actor David Hemmings as the ill-fated amateur sleuth, Argento is clearly recalling the performer's similar casting as Thomas in Antonioni's *Blow Up* (1966). While Thomas uncovers an assassination hidden in the apparently innocent contours of a photograph, Marc unravels a murder mystery that entangles and implicates his closest associates. Whereas Thomas is literally swallowed up by his investigation during the ambiguous finale of *Blow Up*, the climax of *Deep Red* finds Hemmings' character seriously wounded after failing to recognise the film's female killer as the mother of his closest Italian companion. As Marcia Landy has noted, in his consistent campaign to echo the casting, themes and stylistic ambiguities of Antonioni's cinema, Argento has ensured that his texts are both "self-reflexive and metacinematic".[9] This increasing stylistic and generic ambiguity functions to connect Argento to Antonioni across a number of differing axes, to the extent that both director's share an:

> …experimentation with colour, sound, and a visionary landscape, the exploration of mental states, and their challenge to visual and verbal clichés. Most significantly, both directors share in a concern to probe the fascinating and threatening properties of optical and sound images.[10]

While these specifically Italian attempts to combine the populist with the poetic were marked as new developments in *Deep Red*, they were even more pronounced in the groundbreaking Argento film that was to follow.

Fear at 400 Degrees: *Suspiria* and Beyond

Deep Red demonstrated Argento's ambition to incorporate the investigative drive of the *giallo* alongside elements of the supernatural, and these elements were even more central to his most famous film: *Suspiria* (1977). Here, the *giallo* drive to discover the identity of a brutal murderer was spliced with the theme of a coven of witches dominating a German dance academy. In contravention of the cosmopolitan settings that dominated contemporary European horror, Argento located *Suspiria* in a Baroque ballet academy, where the students are dispatched by a group of murderous matriarchs headed by the 'Black Queen', Helena Marcos. Although the film's supernatural setting signified a radical departure from his earlier *giallo* productions, Argento retained his favoured theme of ineffectual men dominated by aggressive women. This is seen in the film's

pattern of depicting male characters who remain dependent on the evil school governess Madame Blanc and her female assistant Miss Tanner.

Argento presents these characters as responsible for some of the most shocking murders ever depicted in the history of horror cinema. For instance, the infamous opening of the film juxtaposes the arrival of the heroine Suzy Bannion (Jessica Harper) with the gruesome and lengthy murder of a female student who has discovered the dance school's grim secret. This unfortunate protagonist is not only stabbed to death, but her mutilated body forced through a plate glass window (killing her companion in the process). Other unfortunate victims of the witches' murderous quest include the academy's blind pianist (Flavio Bucci) who is stalked and then savaged by his own guide dog, while Suzy's only friend in the school (played by Stefania Casini) becomes painfully entrapped in a room full of coiled wire before having her throat cut. It is only after Bannion has stumbled into the art deco lair of the Black Queen that the rotting horror of Helena Marcos's existence is finally revealed, and she is dispatched by the heroine as the dance academy erupts into flame.

While the uncompromising nature of these murders ensured its shock value and instant cult status, *Suspiria* is also famous for the excessive visual style that Argento created as a backdrop to these grisly murders. In *Suspiria*, the distinctive style was achieved through the use of outdated Technicolour film stock, which floods the image track with an unnatural, unrealistic sheen, confirming Argento's wish to give the film a fairy tale quality.[11] The film also highlighted his trademark features of disorientating camerawork, as well as the vivid use of both lighting and elaborate musical score (composed by his in house prog-rock group Goblin). In terms of the film's innovative use of camerawork and lighting, Argento collaborated with acclaimed cinematographer Luciano Tovoli, who had previously worked on Antonioni's 1975 classic *Professione: reporter* (AKA *The Passenger*), as well as having working relationships with other arthouse luminaries such as Barbet Schroeder. For the score, Goblin provided Italian horror with its most memorable and menacing score to date, in a soundtrack that combined alchemy with avant-garde agitation, taking in cross-cultural sounds with shocking effect. As Giorgio Bertellini has commented:

> In this poetic of the sensationally outrageous, the soundtrack is never pure accompaniment, but a plastic embodiment of terrifying scenes. Together with a personal, obsessive attention to sound effects, Argento makes very eclectic choices in terms of casting his musical collaborators.[12]

As with all art cinema, *Suspiria* is a film that requires contemplation. Its surreal compositions emulate the feel of an artist's canvas, with individual scenes being more aesthetically pleasing than the film as a whole. In characteristic Argento style, the most cinematically charged sequence is the opening murder scene, which is saturated with primary colours and a near-hysterical soundtrack. Both of these features are so overpowering as to distract the viewer from the gory activities the scene details. The unnerving force of the sequence is once again testament to the director's ability to manipulate every aspect of cinematic technology in his quest to expand the boundaries of horror cinema.

Commenting on the cult status that *Suspiria* accrued, Argento is often quoted as saying that he wanted to extend fear from a 375 degree centigrade experience to 400 degrees.[13] While the film perfectly captures the director's wish to take the genre to new heights of sensory experience, his subsequent work has been, at best, uneven. While the film's sequel, *Inferno* (1980), extended the theme of malevolent female forces at work in European locations, its style never equalled the dazzling heights of *Suspiria*. Equally, the films Argento has released after 1980 seem to evidence a director who feels further embattled by the views of critics (and censors), who have repeatedly failed to see the merits of his technical and generic innovations. For instance, the 1982's *Tenebrae* was banned on video in the UK during the 1980s 'video nasty' campaigns, due to British Board of Film Classification fears about its theme of sexual violence. One scene that provoked particular offence depicted a young semi-naked 'woman' being beaten by one of her lovers. However, as discussed in chapter one, the 'actress' in the scene was actually the transsexual actor Roberto Coatti, once again indicating Argento's ability to use images of sexual violence to manipulate the views of his most outraged critics.

Paradoxically, when the director did tone down his depiction of violence for the 1993 film *Trauma*, it was panned as uninspired by both fans and his most ardent journalistic defenders. With *The Stendhal Syndrome* and *Non ho sonno* (AKA *Sleepless*, 2001), Argento experienced an aesthetic return to form. The former title punctuates a serial killer's activities with breathtaking (and often disturbing) images of art, while the latter updates *giallo* mythologies by focusing on a primal scene encounter that engulfs a group of teenagers in a killing spree. Out of both of these titles, *The Stendhal Syndrome* was noteworthy not only for its extreme images of sexual violence, but also for the impassioned central performance by the director's daughter Asia Argento, who has become a consistent collaborator in his recent works, returning to star in the much

anticipated *La terza madre* (AKA *The Mother of Tears*), which opened to mixed reviews in 2007.

This film, along with *Giallo* (2009) and *Dracula 3D* (2012) have provoked controversy amongst Argento's cult fan base, with accusations that the director is applying a far more Americanised style to the narratives he is now creating. While these current debates provide an (unwholesome) repetition of the longer-standing debates around the national status of Argento's works, it is clear that the period under review in this volume also represents the most significant decade of the director's output. In the following interview, the director discusses the historical and social importance of the Italian *giallo*, as well as the stylistic and gender significance behind his most celebrated and controversial work, *Suspiria*. By also discussing his own involvement in the political and countercultural scene of the period, the director addresses his own disputed status within the wider theorisation of Italian national cinema.

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Xavier Mendik: *Despite the international success of your movies, it is still the case that you remain absent from many of the leading volumes on Italian cinema. Those books that do document your work repeatedly discuss themes of childhood trauma as being central to the giallo, and your work in particular.*[14] *For instance, a movie like* ***Deep Red*** *seems to indicate that childhood trauma is the blueprint for everything that happens in the contemporary Argento landscape.*

Dario Argento: Child trauma? I did a film also with this theme: *Trauma* with Asia, my daughter. [Laughs] But perhaps the true title to this film should have been *Child Trauma,* and not *Trauma*! I think you are the man you are or the woman you are because of the experiences you have had when you are a child. Life for me is Freud, pure Freud! Every director, I think, needs to undertake the study of Freud in their work. Every director needs to go to Vienna and visit the house of Freud. It's important because cinema is essentially Freudian, it occurs between the dark and dreams between reality and what we can no longer recall. For me cinema, even more than real life, is pure Freud!

One recent theoretical account of your work has defined the Argento male detective as "an imperfect and unfocused observer, a visually impotent character who overlooks a crucial detail".[15] *And from the moment that Sam Dalmas misread the scene in the gallery during your debut film* ***The***

***Bird with the Crystal Plumage**, your movies have become synonymous with manipulating male desire. Do you feel this is an important aspect to your work?*

Yes, of course. [Laughs] Manipulating men should be done in reality and not just in cinema! It is important because it is also the manipulation of male voyeurism. This is important because voyeurism is central to these characters and also to cinema, because the camera looks inside the life of the people. Hitchcock recognised this perfectly, which is why women are so good at manipulating male desire in his films. That is why I think it is wrong that many people saw him as a misogynist. I don't think he was at all. It's a misunderstanding from some critics, because these women are big and important. They are the strong centre in the Hitchcock films, as they are in my films. Manipulating male desire often comes from the childhood trauma we have discussed. I do think the themes in Hitchcock are very heavily influenced by Freud; really it is *the* big influence in his films. Every film is full of Freudian citation, such as *Vertigo* (1958). Here, the famous dream that was designed by Salvador Dali exposes the hero's flaws, and it comes directly from Freud. Me too, I also come directly from Freud. Freud is one of my heroes and I think it's something that Hitchcock and I have in common.

The giallo not only manipulated male desire, but also audience expectation, often through themes of gender ambiguity and female sexual potency. Do you see the giallo's gender codes as in any way innovative?

Yes, very much so. The *giallo* was a very important genre during those years, and in a way, I was the person who re-launched it. It was important because it brought something new, extremely new. It ended up having an influence on American and French cinema, not to mention Italian cinema. The Italian film industry began producing lots of *gialli* after I did. I feel that my background helped me craft these advances in the *giallo*. I started out in film criticism and also writing for Sergio Leone, including *Once Upon a Time in the West*. So I had a different background from other directors and I created a niche for myself with the *giallo*, which, I guess, was crucial to the films' success. It lasted a few years, then I moved on to something else.

While there have been a number of accounts which consider gender disruptions in your work, one aspect which remains unexplored is the extent to which your 1970s cinema conveys a sense of the turbulent Italian

*political scene associated with the Anni di piombo. Many of your early works contain pointed leftist and countercultural commentary, often delivered by esoteric secondary characters such as Berto Consalvi in **The Bird with the Crystal Plumage** or Godfrey (Budd Spencer) in **Four Flies on Grey Velvet.***

Well, the time when I started making films was one of great turbulence in the whole of Europe – and in the rest of the world. This was the early seventies: there was a sort of rebellion amongst the young, on a political level but also within culture, music, fashion. This movement was really big: a powerful global revolution that has never been repeated since. I think that if I hadn't got into cinema I would have ended up very badly. I would have ended up in prison, I could even have died, because I was very involved in the social movement which was taking place during those years. Instead, I basically became very famous immediately after my first films so I couldn't pursue my involvement in the movement that was everywhere – in Italy, France and Germany – so perhaps that really saved my life!

That is a very interesting point, particularly as leftist revolt in Italy remained quite sustained into the late 1970s, unlike other European territories such as France. And it seems as though Italian genre filmmakers were really interested in capturing this wave of social discontent. Would you agree?

Yes, but I feel that I have only made one slightly political film, which was called *Le cinque giornate* [AKA *The Five Days,* 1973]. It was an amusing, strange film, about the 1848 revolution in Italy. In fact, the film explained that it wasn't a revolution at all because it was organised by the bourgeoisie, who took ownership of the revolution and shaped Italy into what they wanted it to be. Other than that, my involvement in politics is not evident in an easy way; my films don't speak about politics directly, they are, rather, political acts themselves. There was no need to talk about political parties, since these were outdated constructs that I no longer related to. At the time, I did not feel represented by any political party, so I didn't have any interest in them.[16]

Figure 5.2: Political films as "political acts": the *giallo* meets social commentary in *The Five Days*.

What is also interesting to note is that your early 1970s films not only come to reflect political tensions, but also regional tensions such as the Mezzogiorno, with urban characters such as Sam Dalmas and Marcus Dailey making a journey to the South to acquire information about their investigations.

Yes, but these are not major aspects to these films. Actually, I have never made a film about Southern Italy. I think Fulci made some; I never have. It's not a problem that interested me. I was interested in more general issues. Yes, there is a distinction between the countryside and the city and that has historical roots, but my films are all metropolitan because I have always lived in the city.[17] I really don't know the country very well; actually I don't know it at all, so my films were shot in Turin, Milan, Rome – all the metropolitan cities, which are the new jungle. The new

jungle is in the city, not in the countryside. There is now peace and tranquillity in the country.

That is an interesting point and quite surprising given the journey motif contained in those early productions! Just before we leave the 1970s political scene, I wonder if you encountered any censorship problems during this period? My interviews with other giallo directors of the 1970s have indicated that there was a degree of state control over violent, sexual content, and 'moral' content.

Yes, but I encountered most interference in television not film. In the early 1970s I did a *giallo* TV series called *La porta sul buio* [AKA *Door Into Darkness*]. In those days television was very different. It was dominated by the Christian Democrats, and they were impossible! They didn't like my series and they wanted to cut, cut, cut! Today it is easier to make television programmes because there is more competition, but in the 1970s, it was very difficult.

OK, I wanted to move onto the international reception of your films, which has been, at best, uneven. Looking at a movie like ***Suspiria*** *for instance, a number of reviews argued that the film was dominated by a series of visual set pieces that lacked narrative cohesion.*[18] *Indeed, the opening murder scene seems to have been the subject of specific criticism, with one reviewer arguing that you provide "the biggest thrill near the opening of the picture ... There is nothing left to rival it".*[19] *This critique seems pretty consistent with the American reception of other Italian works such as Leone's Westerns.*[20] *Would you agree?*

Regarding the opening of the film, I remember Sergio Leone telling me about an episode in Samuel Goldwyn's autobiography that he had read when he went to America. In the thirties, when things weren't going very well for MGM, Goldwyn called all the writers that worked for him in for a meeting. So all the writers gathered at this very important meeting, and Goldwyn told them that he had an idea for a new film. So they asked what the idea was and he replied that: "The film would start with the Krakatoa volcano erupting: a huge scary explosion, cinders and lava everywhere, flames reaching the sky; a dreadful and frightening scene." And then he said that from that moment on, the intensity of the film had to increase. The writers were astonished but they understood what he meant: he wanted films that had a powerful crescendo, not another dull comedy like those that were produced in Hollywood at the time. So I remembered this

anecdote and I decided to apply Goldwyn's principle to *Suspiria*, in which the first 16–18 minutes are a seamless crescendo that escalates up until the moment when the girl is hung in the house. That is the moment of absolute intensity, after which the film becomes quieter. So I owe Sergio for that interesting and inspiring story, as well as how American critics viewed the scene!

Figure 5.2: Technical, technicolour excess: the hyperreal colour coding of *Suspiria*.

Another aspect that reviews commented upon was the role of colour codifications used in the film. How did these stylistic aspects evolve?

That's a really complex subject. In *Suspiria*, Luciano Tovoli and I wanted to recreate the Technicolour used in American films of the forties – late thirties, early forties – like those of John Ford and Walt Disney's cartoons. We wanted to reproduce that colour that was so powerful, vivid and intense. Those red, fiery sunsets and those intense blue skies that we don't have anymore. We wanted to recreate all these colours, the colour gold in particular, which hadn't been used in films for several years. We wanted to recreate the red, which is also a very difficult colour to render on screen, so we started to research it in depth. For example, we studied the Japanese Fuji colour, which gave a wonderful red, a very beautiful red, but the other

colours were not so good; for instance, the blue and the yellow were not so interesting – that is, at the time, because today it's much better.

So from Japan you switched to a Hollywood colour scheme.

Yes. In the end, Tovoli had the idea to use a very low ASA film stock. At the time, a 500 ASA film was already available, so we tried to find one that was between 30 and 40. This was because 500 ASA film is very thin. The lower the ASA, the more emulsion the film has, therefore 30 to 40 ASA film is very thick. This allows for a better rendition of depth: the tri-dimensional image. In addition, the colours are captured in a purer way; think, for example, of the Walt Disney films, which had wonderful, pure colours, or the beautiful films of John Ford. So we went over to America, to Kodak, but they had run out of 30 to 40 ASA stock. Instead, we found some 40 ASA film in a laboratory in Texas and we bought it all, but it wasn't much, it really wasn't much.

This must have had a somewhat limiting impact on the post-production processes for the film.

That was a real problem because when we came to shoot I couldn't afford many takes, otherwise I would have quickly run out of stock. The film took a long time to make, 14 weeks, but I was only doing two takes per shot. I would rehearse each scene many times so that everything was perfect and precise and then I would shoot it twice or three times maximum. When it came to editing the film it only took two weeks because I had so little footage to work with. So it only took two weeks to edit it and it's a film that I'm really attached to.

Alongside colouring, ***Suspiria*** *and your other films also revel in an aesthetic excess of architecture and depicted space. What fascinates you about such designs?*

Well, I am passionate about art in general, not just architecture. I'm not an architect myself; my passion for architecture comes from Michelangelo Antonioni, a director who gave it primary importance. Since I am a very big fan of Antonioni's work, I've come to love the use of space in his films. I especially love the early ones, such as *L'eclisse* [AKA *Eclipse,* 1962], where there is a magnificent use of architecture and light. At the time we were making *Suspiria*, my set designer, Giuseppe Bassan, and I travelled around Europe to see some art and architecture that interested us,

such as art deco and the work of the Pre-Raphaelites. In Brussels we found some little buildings and outdoor staircases, which were amazing examples of art deco. Then Brussels became the capital and they needed big spaces and big, imposing buildings, so those crazy Belgians tore almost all the old ones down. There is basically nothing left today of that wonderful Belgian art deco, which was very famous and more interesting than the French kind. In *Suspiria* we tried to recreate it, for instance in the coloured glass. The film was also almost entirely shot indoors in a studio. The interiors had been completely designed from scratch by the architect, including all the furniture, the mirrors and the interior design.

Figure 5.3: Anguish and aesthetics: Sam Dalmas suffers for his art in *The Bird with the Crystal Plumage*.

OK. While a movie like ***Suspiria*** *reveals a clear interest in architecture, I have also noted that works of art feature heavily in a number of your films, either as objects to contemplate or as murder weapons to castrate. It begins with Sam Dalmas being wounded under the art display in* ***The Bird with the Crystal Plumage*** *and reaches a sensational climax with Peter Neal being penetrated by the steel sculpture in* ***Tenebrae.***

Yes, this I true that I am fascinated by such things. It is even wider than you just describe. You will see in many of my films a piece of architecture or a sculpture, paintings or art objects, because, for me, the difference [between] reality and art is very, very subtle; for me, they are so similar

they can become one. This is as true when I am making the film as what I am trying to say in the film. This is the basic story of *The Stendhal Syndrome*, where the detective can no longer distinguish her reality from the painting that fascinates her. I remember when I was shooting *The Stendhal Syndrome*, I was shooting for a long time in the Uffizi Gallery in Florence, with one beautiful painting after another from Leonardo da Vinci and Michelangelo to every significant artist from the Italian Renaissance. I remember we had to shoot at night because in the day people were always in there. When I was preparing during these night shoots I would wander around the dark rooms of the Uffizi, with only a battery torch to light my way and the paintings really affected me, it was as if the faces in these famous pictures were stalking me! I didn't see something that was on canvas, I saw something that was true. These works of art appeared to be alive, with their eyes staring right at me. [Laughs] I was very scared, but that is what I mean about art works in my films, they occupy a very, very subtle relationship to reality.

From ***Deep Red*** *onwards, your cinema has been marked by an experimental use of camerawork, which emphasises long tracking shots, fluid use of camera movement and ambiguous point of view shots. Do you see an evolving art-cinema style in your later 1970s output?*

Yes, even though I may not have been aware of it at the time. Once when I was still working as a film critic, I was the moderator in a question and answer session with [Pier Paolo] Pasolini and I asked him a question related to an essay he had written. In this essay he stated that there were two kinds of cinema: the cinema of prose and the cinema of poetry. The cinema of prose is the one where you never notice the camerawork; the cinema of poetry is the one where you notice it a lot. So I asked him a question and, knowing that he was a poet, I thought he would give me a certain answer. I asked him, "What kind of cinema do you make? One of prose or one of poetry?" And he replied: "I make a cinema of prose because you never notice my camerawork." So when I started making cinema I realised that I was making a cinema of poetry, where the camera is ever-present.

That is interesting. I wonder how much soundtrack also contributes to this notion of a cinema of poetry? For instance, your films have frequently used composers who have foregrounded musical score in an often experimental fashion. I guess the most obvious example of this being Goblin's soundtrack to ***Suspiria****.*

Figure 5.4: Scoring a nightmare: Argento and the band Goblin recording the *Suspira* soundtrack.

As I've said before, I was very involved in the cultural scene that was around when I was growing up. Therefore, music was of fundamental importance to me. It contributed a lot to my films; it complemented them and was a source of inspiration for me. I was lucky to work with great musicians such as Ennio Morricone, who also worked with Sergio Leone, who was my mentor and, in a way, I inherited Morricone from him. Since then, I concluded that musicians are very important because they add to the atmosphere of a film. All of the musicians I have worked with have added something necessarily to the film itself, whether it was Morricone, or Pino Donaggio, Claudio Simonetti, or Goblin, his original band.

Moving from style to sexuality, I have to ask about the representations of gender, which have frequently provoked controversy.

Yes. I have often been accused – up until a couple of years ago – of misogyny, of murdering women in my films; obviously not in real life. This is very wrong; a very wrong interpretation of the films. In fact, I am very egalitarian, in that I kill as many men as women. It must be that since I am more interested in women, I have them killed in more spectacular ways.

OK! But in a way you have fed this controversy, not only in the graphic nature of your depictions but also through your oft-cited insistence on 'performing' the female murders on set with your own gloved hands.

Yes, but I completely reject the accusation that I am a misogynist. On the contrary, I love women and it is not a coincidence that almost all the protagonists of my films are women. I have a real passion for women because when they appear in cinema they are more free, more open and ready to follow you in a project. Men, on the other hand, are more prudish, more restrained, they are too controlled. Women find pleasure in throwing themselves into an adventure. I realised this in my first film, in which I had a male protagonist, after which I started devoting more attention to women. Despite these claims against my films, today my audience is mainly composed of women. 60–70% of my audience are women.

Moving from misogyny to motherhood. Your films are dominated by an interest in the notion of maternal aggression, which first appears in ***Deep Red*** *but is most significant in* ***Suspiria.***

Yes, but in *Suspiria* I wasn't primarily interested in the theme of motherhood but, rather, in women's lives. In fact, if you want to give a deeper reading of the film, it can be seen as a vaguely lesbian story; where lesbianism has a certain importance, or, more precisely, where the relationships between women are sometimes of a lesbian nature and are characterised by power struggles.

That is a genuinely fascinating comment and I don't think I have heard you discuss the film's lesbian theme in any other interview I have read. It also confirms recent feminist re-readings of ***Suspiria****, which read the ballet school as a subversive all-female community.*[21]

Well, there aren't any male characters to speak of in the film; among those that do appear, one is blind, another is mute and the other is gay. So there are practically no men. All there is are power relations between women. So my plan was to make a film about the world of women and the relationships within this entirely feminine community. But because society at the time was more prudish than today I couldn't fully express the lesbian theme and I am really sorry about that. But, on the other hand, the implication is there and evident to those who want to see it.

Just to close, I wanted to get your comments on the fact that more than 30 years after its release, ***Suspiria*** *is finally becoming an object of academic study.*

I think *Suspiria* can be a very interesting film to study. Also I made it with total passion. At the moment of making it, I set myself the challenge not to frame any two shots in the same way. This is something that does not happen very often in cinema. I think people that are into cinema will find it interesting. It took a lot of effort on my part to frame every scene in a unique way, that wouldn't look like one that I had done before and wouldn't be repeated. It was very hard work and today you wouldn't be able to make a film like that because there wouldn't be enough funding. At the time it was easier because there were more possibilities, films were less expensive. Today you just can't, it would be unimaginable to make *Suspiria* again. I know they are working on a remake of *Suspiria* but I don't think they will manage to make it as rich and imaginative as the original.

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This interview was conducted across two sittings (in Brussels and London), and some of the material was included in the documentary extras I completed for the 2010 Nouveaux Pictures-Cine-Excess release of *Suspiria*. I wish to offer my thanks to Dario Argento for agreeing to both interviews. My thanks also go to both Jon Wordie for his translation of Mr Argento's comments back into English, and to Eve Bennett for her assistance with transcribing the interview.

Notes

[1] Giorgio Bertellini, *The Cinema of Italy* (London: Wallflower Press, 2004), p.213.
[2] Peter Bondanella, *Italian Cinema From Neorealism to the Present* (New York: Continuum, 2001), p.421.
[3] Marcia Landy, *Stardom Italian Style*: *Screen Performance and Personality in Italian Cinema* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2008), p.223.
[4] Ibid.
[5] Giorgio Bertellini discusses this point further, noting that the paradoxes inherent in Argento's construction of vision result in the viewer being guided through the essentially defective gaze of the male investigator:

> At the same time … the film forces us to see what the killer sees. Our vision, in this case, is not impaired with regard to the holder of the gaze, the subject who watches (and kills). We enjoy an optical alignment with the murderers 'eyes' without seeing his/her own face. Argento's murder thrillers are about the progressive encounter of these two differently-flawed visual perspectives. (p.216)

[6] Ibid., p.213.

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[7] Maitland McDonagh, *Broken Mirrors/Broken Minds: The Dark Dreams of Dario Argento* (London: Sun Tavenfields, 1991), p.31.
[8] Ibid., p.123
[9] Landy, p.225.
[10] Ibid., 224–225.
[11] Earlier examples of his technical innovation included the use of medical cameras in *Four Flies on Grey Velvet*, which were employed to capture the decapitation of (another female) killer. In the later *Opera* (1987), Argento constructed disorientating, panoramic camera operations to emulate the attack of vengeful ravens against a theatre audience harbouring a perverted killer.
[12] Bertellini, *Cinema of Italy*, pp.221–222.
[13] Argento cited in Alan Jones, *Mondo Argento* (Cambridge: Midnight Media Publishing, 1996), p.19.
[14] Interestingly, in *Stardom Italian Style,* Marcia Landy ties the 1960s emergence of Argento as both a journalist and filmmaker to the increasing popularity of both Freudian and Lacanian psychoanalysis in European intellectual and cine-critical circles. This resulted in "popular journalistic expressions of trauma and stress and more overt concerns with sexuality and gender" (p.225). In her brief discussion of horror and the Italian popular, Mary P. Wood's volume *Italian Cinema* also discusses Argento's cinema as an expression of the infantile, noting that his films are dominated by "male anxieties and pathologies" (p.58). In his brief overview of Argento's oeuvre, Peter Bondanella also links the director's creations to infantile process of repression, stating that in the case of *Deep Red*, the "plot focuses on a conventional Freudian murder drama of a traumatic event in the past (the murder of a father by a demented mother witnessed by their own son) that produces a succession of horrific murders in the present" (Peter Bondanella, *Italian Cinema From Neorealism to the Present* [New York: Continuum, 2001], p.420.) As discussed in the first chapter, one of the earliest accounts to apply psychoanalytic readings to Argento remains Leon Hunt's article 'A (Sadistic) Night at the Opera: Notes on the Italian Horror Film' reproduced in Ken Gelder (ed.), *The Horror Film Reader* (London: Routledge, 2000), pp.324–336, which discusses infantile sexuality and its reproduction across sadistic and masochistic impulses in Argento's cinema in the fourth section of its analysis.
[15] See '*Profondo Rosso Deep Red*' in Bertellini, *Cinema of Italy*, p.216.
[16] As an interesting aside, Argento formally stated at the Rome press conference for the documentary *Fear at 400 Degress: The Cine-Excess of Suspiria* (May 2010) that he had drafted a film script on the Italian Red Brigade but found that producers and backers had continually shunned funding the project.
[17] Although Argento's response is somewhat surprising here, it does support Marcia Landy's belief that the director's "use of landscape has been attributed to his fascination with Antonioni's filming of Roman landscapes" (p.225).
[18] For instance, the *Variety* review of March 9 1977 argued that while *Suspiria* was defined by "overamplified sound, a ritualistic beat and a surcharge of dazzling, almost psychedelic colour", Argento was "unable to match the intensity of these elements with either a rational or irrational script, the basic development of

suspense or that right touch with actors" (17). Writing in *The Hollywood Reporter* (August 23 1977), Ron Pennington went much further in aligning narrative 'deficiencies' to a presumed audience by defining *Suspiria* as "entirely a matter of effects over material … In fact the movie looks like a bad trip, but the shock value achieved through the special effects should please undiscriminating audiences seeking cheap thrills" (3). Even the more conciliatory reviews of the film (such as *Films Illustrated* 7:4 [October 1 1977]) conceded that "the mechanics of fear, pure and simple, are what concerns this Italian manipulator of the shake and scream, and the story is strictly of secondary importance" (50).

[19] Mick Garris, '*Suspiria*' (review), *Cinefantastique* 6:3 (December 1 1977), 21.

[20] Christopher Wagstaff provides an interesting account of the international reception of *Per qualche dollar in più* (AKA *For a Few Dollars More,* 1965) in support of the regionally specific construction of these texts as a blind-spot to wider press readings of their narrative structure. For further details see Wagstaff, 'A Forkful of Westerns: Industry, Audiences and the Italian Western', in Richard Dyer and Ginette Vincendeau (eds) *Popular European Cinema* (London: Routledge, 1992), pp.245–246.

[21] See Jacqueline Reich 'The Mother of All Horror: Witches, Gender and the Films of Dario Argento', in Keala Jewell (ed.), *Monsters in the Italian Literary Imagination* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 2001). As Reich notes, Argento's film functions to divide male-ordered religion and scientific logic from the same-sex subversives contained in the dance academy. Thus, in the ritualistic finale of the film, Mrs Tanner and Madame Blanc perform a satanic version of communion in order to ward off male intervention in this transgressive all-female zone. As Reich states:

> The fact that *Suspiria* situates this communion in an entirely feminised space codifies the transaction as both an inversion of Christian rituals and patriarchal order and a manifestation of female solidarity and power. (p.97)

CHAPTER SIX

"BODY IN A BED, BODY GROWING DEAD": UNCANNY WOMEN IN THE GOTHIC HORROR FILMS OF ARISTIDE MASSACCESI

> ...We arrive at the concept of the female figure who embodies both sexuality and castration and death, a figure I would like to call the Uncanny Woman ...As both Goddess of death and emblem of castration, her specific manifestations may shift to emphasise one motif or the other, but her final import involves them both.[1]
> —Phillip McCaffrey, 'Freud's Uncanny Women'

Introduction

As indicated in previous chapters on the *giallo* and Dario Argento's cinema, psychoanalysis remains one of the key methods of interpreting 1970s Italian cult film themes and imagery. Here, traumas relating to social and political uncertainty are often annexed to more psychic considerations of repressed familial desires, as well as the repetition of past sexual anxieties. While the discussion of these themes has been central to the re-evaluation of directors such as Dario Argento, I wish to now extend the use of this vocabulary to the films of Italian exploitation director Aristide Massaccesi.

In a career that spanned nearly 40 years, Massaccesi worked in a variety of production roles (primarily as director, cinematographer and producer), and across the genres of horror, pornography, post-apocalypse science fiction and mythical adventure (with his output in these areas discussed in other chapters of the volume). In the course of his career, Massaccesi pioneered a series of bizarre genre-hybrid movies designed to tap into the 'sex and death' tastes of grindhouse audiences. At its most extreme, this policy of controversial cross-generic overload produced films such as *Le notti erotiche dei morti viventi* (AKA *Erotic Nights of the Living Dead*, 1980), which featured voodoo priestesses castrating their lovers at the point of orgasm, while *Porno Holocaust* (1981) depicted

Third World zombies attacking Europeans with monstrously outsized phalluses. Given this interest in the use of 'primitive' locations as backdrops for extreme acts of sex and violence, it is of little surprise that Aristide Massaccessi was one of the most prolific Italian cult directors involved in the *Black Emanuelle* films released between 1975 and 1983, which followed an ethnic female journalist as she travelled around the world exposing corruption, injustice and violence against women. His entries to the series traversed the boundaries of sexuality and the macabre, most notably in titles such as *Emanuelle in America* (1975), which combined a porno aesthetic alongside snuff-style footage of female prisoners being tortured and violated in the name of Third World entertainment.

Later releases such as *Antropofago* (AKA *Anthropophagous: The Beast*, 1980) and *Rosso sangue* (AKA *Absurd,* 1981), pushed images of violence even further. Both films featured Massaccesi's frequent lead actor and scriptwriter George Eastman (AKA Luigi Montefiori) as a murderous, cannibalistic ogre, and were banned or heavily censored in many European territories. Massaccesi's sex and death hybrids proved extremely popular during the 1970s and 1980s, to the extent that he helmed over 190 films, often hiding his real identity behind a bewildering variety of pseudonyms, most frequently Joe D'Amato (though other popular nom de plumes included Alexandre Borsky, Dario Donati, David Hills, Kevin Mancuso, Peter Newton and Michael Wotruba). In his later career, Massaccessi moved from being a successful cult director to a prolific studio head. Between 1980 and 1994 Massaccesi's own Filmirage company released 44 features at the tail end of the Italian exploitation era, including works by other Italian cult icons such as Umberto Lenzi (*La casa 3* [AKA *Ghosthouse*, 1988]) and Lucio Fulci (*Le porte del silenzio* [AKA *Door into Silence*, 1991]). The latter entries to Massaccesi's Filmirage catalogue consisted of erotic thrillers and melodramas, while he also directed a number of significant hardcore porn feature films before his death in 1999.

Despite Massaccesi's extensive and excessive filmography, a number of key concerns dominate, regardless of the genre he worked in. These revolve around themes of morbid loving, voyeuristic perversion (and its frequent punishment), as well as the return of repressed infantile material into the modernised 'adult' world. Even the director's two most controversial features *Anthropophagous: The Beast* and *Absurd*, deal with monstrous male figures erupting into 'civilized' communities as a destructive and monstrously aggressive libidinal force.

Figure 6.1: Absurd titling: Massaccesi's controversial horror films often evoke classic fairy tale fears.

If this gives the director's works an almost obscene, fairy tale-like quality, then these tensions are particularly marked in *Absurd*. Here, George Eastman plays an unstoppable Greek killer whose grisly acts resemble the classic figure of the castrating ogre identified by folklorists such as Bruno Bettelheim.[2] The infantile angle seems to be confirmed by the castrative imagery prominent in the narrative: from phallic objects piercing eyes and temples, to male bodies being violently parted by circular saws. One female victim (played by Annie Belle) is even baked in the oven, in a scene that evokes classic childhood fears of violence bleeding over into the safety of the domestic space. A further infantile element is seen in the finale of the film, where Montefiore's character is destroyed by an immobile prepubescent girl, who blinds the giant before

presenting his severed head to her shocked parents as a gift.

To add to the libidinal tensions that underpin Massaccesi's catalogue, the director's repeated focus on a past act of illicit desire provoking horror and violence within a present setting, lends itself to the notion of the 'return of the repressed' that I have previously advanced in relation to Italian cult cinema. Indeed, Freud's work on literature and aesthetics[3] indicates how art can reflect the traumatic backdrop to the individual's psychological development. In particular, his discussion of the uncanny outlines how the central concern with voyeurism in Gothic writing reflects the traces of desire and prohibition that mark the Oedipal construction of the child. While providing access to scenarios of pleasure (through witnessed scenes of sexual activity), many of these tales also detail how such acts of illicit looking result in terror and physical violation. The close connections between eroticism and death found in the literature that Freud discusses provide a basis for understanding constructions of sexuality and violence in Massaccesi's films.

Indeed, it is noticeable that Massaccesi's directorial debut *La morte ha sorriso all'assassino* (AKA *Death Smiles on a Murderer*, 1973), was a Gothic tale that mirrored many of the themes outlined in Freud's research. The film focuses on the grisly fates that befall a group of aristocrats who fall under the spell of Greta (Ewa Aulin), a mysterious woman who arrives in their village in a state of near death.

Although coded as an obvious figure of attraction, the narrative reveals that the character is in fact a corpse revived to wreak vengeance on the family that abandoned her during childbirth. A lengthy flashback in the opening part of the film reveals Greta was reanimated by her brother (Luciano Rossi), using a mixture of alchemy and weird science. The narrative points to an incestuous undercurrent to these proceedings, detailing how the surgical interventions made on Greta's body are premised on her brother's infatuation with her. Once revived, Greta directs her wrath towards the family of the former lover who impregnated her. In each of the murders she commits, a link between sexuality and death is implicit in her couplings with male and female victims alike. Although these characters are all aroused by Greta's erotic appearance, it is only during intercourse that her true and decaying status is revealed.

The fact that *Death Smiles on a Murderer* concentrates on a heroine whose desirable construction is later revealed as a signifier of death certainly warrants consideration via Freud's discussion. Equally, it is the repetition of the scene of her original demise that provides the organising principle around which the narrative is constructed. This feature is represented in a series of flashbacks, the consistent intervention of which

Figure 6.2: Gothic debut: Massaccesi's first film as the Freudian uncanny.

impedes the flow of the narrative. As reviewers such as Kevin Lyons noted:

> *La morte sorride all assassino* (1973 directed as Aristide Massaccesi) is a weird zombie/period piece hybrid that highlights one of Massaccesi's more enduring traits; a script totally devoid of logic… The split time period is particularly confusing as the multi-flashback construction makes it unclear as to which scenes are set when.[4]

Rather than rejecting the repeated use of such technical features as a cinematic failing, this chapter will argue that the peculiarities of Massaccesi's film style, as well as his consistent equation of the female with death and decay, draw similarities with Freud's work on the Gothic. I shall consider his work on the uncanny due to its identification of the gothic as a form which encompasses the repeated trope of the woman as a signifier of death. I shall argue that the same tensions around female sexuality that Freud identifies in the work of Gothic writers are present in both Massaccesi's 1970s horror films and the later erotic productions he directed in the early 1980s.

The Uncanny Effect: Freud and the Gothic

What unites Aristide Massaccesi's works with those discussed by Freud is the way in which desire, repetition and prohibition are marked along an axis traversing the categories of the familiar and the horrific. As indicated in *Death Smiles on a Murderer*, it is often the reappearance of a dead female lover that disturbs these boundaries. As Freud noted, although writers such as E.T.A. Hoffmann, Johann Wolfgang von Goethe and Oscar Wilde deal with elements of the supernatural and the unfamiliar, they also place these elements in close proximity to established definitions of normality. It is this ambiguous aspect that Freud dissects in the opening section of 'The Uncanny'. Here, he discusses the significance of the term uncanny (*unheimliche*) as a label often applied to the type of fantastical literature under review. Despite Germanic definitions of the term stressing its unfamiliar or alien qualities, Freud notes its proximity to the opposite of these traits: identified as not only familiar, but "belonging to the house".[5]

It is this erosion of the difference between these two terms, as well as the label of the uncanny as a hidden yet familiar phenomenon, that leads him to conclude these experiences also refer to the child's fear of castration.[6] The ambiguity that encompasses the label of uncanny is reproduced in the following features that more recent critics such as

Mladen Dolar[7] have identified in Gothic literature:

(1) The uncontrollable, excessive or malevolent gaze: the instrument of pleasure whose 'excess' of 'seeing' induces trauma in the individual.
(2) An ambiguity to the body, which could either be living, undead or not human at all.
(3) The appearance of the double or Döppelganger.

It is all of these features that Freud identifies in E.T.A. Hoffmann's tale *The Sand Man*, which forms the central part of his analysis. Here, the gaze is constructed as an uncontrollable locus of both desire and dread, which provokes the downfall of Nathaniel, the male protagonist in Hoffmann's tale. This character is haunted from early childhood by the nightmarish figure of the tale's title. Here, the Sand Man appears in a number of guises throughout the tale, threatening to punish the protagonist's voyeurism with physical retribution. According to Freud, the fear of blinding that the Sand Man threatens is in fact a reconstruction of the child's fear of castration at the hands of the paternal agent:

> A study of dreams, phantasies and myths has taught us that anxiety about one's eyes, the fear of going blind, is often enough a substitute for being castrated. The self-blinding of the mythical criminal Oedipus, was simply a mitigated form of the punishment of castration...[8]

In Hoffmann's tale, this fear of violation is linked to retribution for the child's visual access to a 'forbidden' scene. Here, Nathaniel discovers an act of alchemy occurring between his father and the sinister lawyer, Coppelius. By concealing himself in his father's study, Nathaniel observes a ritualistic ceremony centring on the pair's work over a brazier containing the disembodied eyes of children. (This confirms his initial fear of Coppelius as the dreaded Sand Man figure his nanny warned him would deprive naughty children of their eyes.)

The Sand Man reiterates not only its ambivalent construction of the gaze, but also the presence of the double that Dolar cites as another example of the uncanny effect of the Gothic. The repeated existence of the theme of the double in the works of Hoffmann, Poe and Wilde is the guarantor of future tragedy for the protagonist. For instance, following Otto Rank's[9] account of the phenomenon, Dolar notes that the double provokes inevitable chaos for the individual, dooming them to failure through a repetition of loss or suffering. The double can take the form of a literal duplicate of the individual, or a separate character who shares all of

the subject's attributes. The repeated theme of the double appearing to disrupt the romantic/sexual desires of the afflicted individual intimates the figure's link to repressed incest taboos.

In *The Sand Man,* the intrusion of the double onto Nathaniel's desires is seen through the repetition of traumatic characters/encounters which define his adult development. This is indicated in the latter part of *The Sand Man*, which details his period at university. Here, the protagonist's voyeuristic obsessions are now focused on the beautiful Olympia, who lives opposite his accommodation. This visual compulsion brings Nathaniel in contact with a market trader Coppola (who sells him an eye glass in order to spy on the woman), as well as drawing him closer to his physics teacher Professor Spalanzini (who is Olympia's father). The erotic attachment to this female figure (and the relationship that emerges from it) implies Nathaniel's ability to surmount both past trauma and the original source of his infantile desire. This is indicated through the narration's emphasis that the protagonist had "completely forgotten that there was a Clara in the world and his mother" as a result of his interactions with Olympia.[10]

Yet the emergence of this relationship and its sanctioning by Spalanzini is undercut by disturbing behaviour exhibited by Olympia. In particular, the narration notes her predisposition towards long periods of silence, introspection and apparent paralysis. In his quest to uncover the root of his lover's unusual qualities, Nathaniel hides in Spalanzini's office, only to discover to his horror that Olympia is in fact an automaton. The revelation of Nathaniel's desire for an inanimate object confirms Dolar's conclusion that such tales are populated by characters whose status traverses the boundaries of life and death.

Echoing the trauma of his earlier encounter, Nathaniel discovers that Olympia's eyes have been forced out of her head during a struggle between Spalanzini and the itinerant trader Coppola. The scene reiterates the equations between castration and voyeurism that marked the previous encounter, as well as Nathaniel's discovery at the forbidden scene. (This confirms that the two figures function as doubles to the paternal characters haunting Nathaniel's original trauma.)

Nathaniel's discovery also enacts a pattern of traumatic repetition enacted by his earlier encounter with the Sand Man. Once again, the narration details him collapsing at the sight of the disembodied eyes, only awakening as "if from a terrible nightmare"[11] to find that he had been transported back home to be tended by his mother, Clara. These actions, echoing his earlier recovery under his mother's care, reiterate the love object as a maternal substitute. Indeed, in the months following his second

traumatic encounter with the Sand Man it is interesting to note that the narration defines Nathaniel's recovery in terms of him being "more childlike than he had ever been before"[12] in his emotive relations with Clara. Although the protagonist believes that these relations imply a maturation of his relations with a love object, the wording of the tale's narration once again locates these impulses in the past that haunts him. Nathaniel's inescapable nature is confirmed, however, when he jumps to his death after spotting Coppelius from a tower.

As the story of *The Sand Man* indicates, failure to resolve the tensions surrounding infantile sexuality not only displaces any pleasure associated with the act of voyeurism, but establishes a pattern of repetition that works to limit the subject's future psychic and sexual development. In the films of Aristide Massaccesi, this traumatic principle of repetition is figured through a past act (equating the female body with both eroticism and death), that then becomes a model upon which subsequent desires/narrative repetitions are based. The continuation of this pattern is evidenced by the emergence of a series of female doubles whose sexuality is equated with dismemberment and castration.

This pattern is evident in early Gothic Massaccesi productions such as *Death Smiles on a Murderer*. Displaying its links to Freud's essay, the film defines the crucial features of the double and the inanimate body through the monstrous figure of Greta. The film reveals her character to be literally doubled, reappearing in various guises to torment both her former lover Walter (Sergio Doria) and his family. Equally, her incorporation into his family is premised on her corpse-like status after she appears to the group as the victim of a coach accident. This results in her undergoing various medical examinations which indicate that her inanimate body appears to be still very much alive.

The Seventies Gothic: *Beyond the Darkness*

The patterns of fatalistic voyeurism, doubling and traumatic repetition that Massaccesi established in his first film, were the basis of a pattern that itself would be replayed in many of his later works. For instance, in his 1977 horror film *Buio Omega* (AKA *Beyond the Darkness*), the director once again conflates sexuality with death via the exploration of the relationship between Frank (Kieran Canter), his terminally ill wife Anna (Cinzia Monreale) and their sinister female housekeeper Iris (Franca Stoppi).

Situating the perverse desires between this trio via patterns of compulsive repetition, *Beyond the Darkness* draws parity with *The Sand*

Man through its theme of adult desire as premised on infantile trauma and loss. Centrally, the film displays the key features of a morbid desire to gaze, processes of female doubling and an inanimate object as love object that Freud's account identified. These tensions are immediately apparent following the film's post-credit scene. Here, Massaccesi juxtaposes a scene depicting Frank's occupation as a taxidermist (figured through his reparation of a dead baboon) with shots of Anna's demise in a hospital ward. The syntagmatic positioning of the scenes of the reconstructed baboon (indicating a literal fetishisation of the past) are immediately equated with morbid desires through connection with Anna's suffering. The theme of orgasm as death is reiterated in her dying wish to be able to make love to Frank one last time.

Although Anna dies before he can initiate intercourse, Frank steals her body before its burial, disembowels and embalms the corpse and reconstructs his mansion as a shrine to his former bride. These actions provide us with a connection to characteristics of the uncanny Gothic as identified by writers such as Dolar. For instance, the film figures Anna's body as a shell that is open to violent reconstruction via Frank's surgery. As a result, her corpse has a series of ambivalent connotations, confounding the barrier between the living and the dead by becoming an inanimate love object for her husband. In this respect, Frank's relations with his dead lover mirror those of Nathaniel and the automaton in Hoffmann's tale.

Indeed, just as Nathaniel spends his time verbalising his desires to the unresponsive Olympia, Frank devotes his attention to describing his desires in front of Anna's corpse. (The fact that his housekeeper constantly refers to the corpse as his "stupid doll" even draws parity with the automaton Nathaniel mistakes for a lover in *The Sand Man*.) According to Dolar's account, the relations between Nathaniel and Olympia reference the death drive not only because of Nathaniel's expression of love for a 'dead object' but because:

> ...Nathaniel strangely reacts in a mechanical way. His love for the automaton is itself automatic; his fiery feelings are mechanically produced... The question arises as to who is the real automaton in the situation, for the appearance of the automaton calls for an automatic response; it entails an automatic subjectification.[13]

This obsession with an inanimate or dead love object reiterates the uncanny's ability to retard adult development via an obsessive preoccupation with past libidinal desires. Its impact seems replicated in Massaccesi's film via Frank's paradoxical statement that Anna's corpse is

his “only reason for living”. In both cases, desire is born out of a process of loss that produces a pattern of fatalistic repetition marking the protagonist’s relations to others in the narrative chain.

Figure 6.3: A (morbid) kind of loving: dead love objects adorned in *Beyond the Darkness*.

Indeed, one of the most controversial aspects of *Beyond the Darkness* centres on Frank’s seduction of women in the bed that contains the concealed corpse of his former wife. In the case of a female jogger who is picked up nearby his mansion, Massaccesi here makes explicit the theme of sexuality merging with death by having the victim discover the adjacent corpse as she nears her orgasm. As with the other women who discover the cadaver, the jogger is mutilated before being dismembered by Frank and Iris. Arguably, it is his relationship with this older female assistant (who becomes his accomplice and lover following Anna’s death) that confirms the pattern of traumatic repetition as central to the film. This is indicated in

Frank's revelation that Anna's death in fact mirrors the demise of his mother, which he witnessed as a child. The pattern of constructing both infantile and adult love objects through the body of a dead female is indicated in the fact that Frank then adapts his mother's living quarters as a shrine to Anna.

Thus, it can be argued that the traumatic basis of *Beyond the Darkness* centres not on the demise of Anna, but the original death of the mother that initiates the pattern of repetition underpinning the narrative. This is further evidenced by the fact that Frank's housekeeper becomes centrally located in this process of repetition as a maternal substitute. The libidinal paradoxes inherent in her positioning are immediately apparent upon her discovery of Frank in his mother's room. The housekeeper instantly adopts the role of nurturing agent: she cradles Frank in her arms and offers assurances of being able to tend for him, simultaneously offering him her breast to suckle.[14] The erotic component of their coupling is later indicated when she masturbates Frank while he gazes at Anna's corpse. Importantly, her construction as an ambivalent assistant to Frank's crimes evokes the powerful and phallic figure of the pre-Oedipal mother who retains a paradoxical status as both a nurturing and potentially threatening figure for the infant.

What the above analysis points to is the extent to which female figures within Massaccesi's film can be seen as doubles for Frank's initial love object: his dead mother. Indeed, the film is marked by a process of metaphorical doubling in the recasting of Iris as a replacement for both the maternal agent and adult love object. Equally, a further process of literal female doubling is enacted between Anna and her twin sister Eleanor (again played by Cinzia Monreale), who arrives at the mansion only to be abducted by Frank and Iris in the finale of the film.

Indeed, her arrival (as well as her indexical likeness to her dead sister) produces further ambivalence around the female body that may or may not be alive. This uncertainty is foregrounded in the finale of the film. Here, the private detective who has been investigating Frank's activities arrives at the mansion to see the (fatally wounded) protagonist incinerating what appears to be Eleanor's body. In the film's closing scene, the investigator returns what he believes is Anna's corpse to its grave, only to have it spring into life as a priest is about to lower the coffin lid. It is a freeze frame of this suddenly animated female body with which Massaccesi ends *Beyond the Darkness*. By posing an unresolved question as to which sister has been rescued, the film's finale prevents any resolution to the problems of identity that the female double presents.

Eleanor's introduction into the narrative has relevance beyond her

obvious status as a duplicate of Anna's ambivalent body. While confirming the presence of the double as a feature in both Gothic and Aristide Massaccesi's films, the fact that these are female döppelgangers has important ramifications for Freud's account. In particular, his analysis of the double as representing the Oedipal male's fear of the father marginalises the fear of the female figure in writings such as Hoffmann's. For instance, Phillip McCaffrey's analysis of 'Freud's Uncanny Women' argues that Nathaniel's encounter with Olympia (with her status as a replacement for the desired mother) is marginalised in favour of an analysis of the doubling of castrating father figures in the tale.[15]

It is true that the second part of the narrative demonstrates a doubling of paternal images relating to Nathaniel's desires for Olympia.[16] However, as McCaffrey notes, Olympia represents an example of the 'Uncanny Women' that haunt many Gothic narratives. Although he argues such figures are present in the tales Freud analysed, they remain marginal to the conclusions he consequently constructs. While noting that the double emerges as an indicator of the subject's annihilation, Freud limits this analysis to the reproduction of paternal figures, evidencing the subject's fear of the father's castrating powers. Although constructed as a figure of desire for the protagonist, McCaffrey notes that Olympia's true status as an automaton once again references death via her traits of "silence, paleness, concealment and statuesque immobility".[17] These features themselves refer back to the tensions surrounding the character's construction as a maternal substitute. This is indicated in the fact that Nathaniel is bringing Olympia his mother's wedding ring as a gift of their union when he discovers the two father figures struggling over her body.

Although not commented on by Freud's analysis, McCaffrey has argued that the connection between Olympia and Nathaniel also erodes the ability of the male subject to distinguish himself from the female body as a signifier of lack or castration. While Nathaniel's discovery of the doll's body appears to displace the trauma of the protagonist's fear of castration onto the female form, Coppola's revelation that the disembodied eyes are in fact his own ensures that:

> ...Nathaniel discovers his own castration belatedly, after it has already happened, thus re-enacting the terror of the infantile male gazer who discovers that he is already, and has always been, vulnerable to castration.[18]

As a result, McCaffrey argues that a number of distinct patterns emerge in the coding of the Uncanny Woman, which induce fear into the male protagonist. Her body may function as a sign of castration, which in

the case of Olympia reminds the male protagonist of his own ability to signify physiological lack. Alternatively, the uncanny woman can adopt an aggressive pose and threaten to castrate the male voyeur.

This pattern, although present in many of Hoffmann's other tales, is an aspect Freud fails to discuss. For instance, in his account of *The Devil's Elixirs*, McCaffrey notes that Freud limits his consideration of castrating doubles to evil monk named Medarus, whose influence appears reproduced across the text. What remains absent from this discussion is the fact that the tale is also plagued by a series of threatening female characters who appear as replacements of one another, redoubling the infant's sense of loss surrounding the mother's body. As with the characters from *Beyond the Darkness,* the female characters from Hoffmann's tales are also defined by an artificial beauty. It is only at the point of emotional or sexual union that the true nature of their decaying sexuality becomes apparent. *Beyond the Darkness* constructs a process of female doubling that connects adult desire with both the maternal body and death.

The Uncanny Woman's Gaze

If the uncanny woman remains a potent figure within Gothic fiction as McCaffrey has suggested, her existence can be seen in the repetition of dead and sexualised female doubles that populate Aristide Massaccesi's 1970s horror productions. Beyond this literal and horrific splitting of female subjectivity, what also defines the power of the uncanny woman in the Gothic is the disturbing power of her gaze. It is with this apparatus that she "threatens the young male gazer"[19] with physical punishment for his desire to scrutinise her (damaged) form. For instance, in *The Devil's Elixirs,* Hoffmann describes the female character of Euphema as the double of St. Rosalie, another female figure who although defined as 'a living image of Venus' is revealed as having a distorted disease-ridden body. Importantly, it is not only her physical appearance that disturbs male protagonists in close proximity, but also her "hideously distorted face with large protruding eyes".[20]

It is the ghastly stare of the monstrous female protagonist that further links such Gothic tales to the cinema of Massaccesi. In particular, *Beyond the Darkness* indicates a concern with destabilising identity and the individual's ability to control the gaze. As with the figure of Nathaniel from *The Sand Man*, these films detail scenarios where the male subject's desire to see or to control the depicted space is literally turned around on them, provoking a sense of horror at their resultant inability to regulate the

visual field.

The ambivalent status of the gaze is referenced in *Beyond the Darkness* via Massaccesi's equation of voyeurism with death and the inanimate female body. The most obvious example the film centres on is Frank's reconstruction of Anna's corpse, which Massaccesi emphasises as having a distorted and ghastly stare. In this respect, her gaze mirrors that of the other 'dead' artefacts that Frank gathers in his home. The construction of his mansion as a surveying, yet inanimate, environment is evidenced in the scene where he picks up an English hitchhiker after exhuming Anna's corpse.[21] Upon exploring his home, this future victim is startled firstly by the carcass of the stuffed baboon which appears to be looking at her (Massaccesi even uses a zip panning camera movement to create the impression of a visual exchange between the pair). The construction of the gaze as a site of death, rather than a source of pleasure, is confirmed when the hitchhiker flees in terror from the baboon's gaze, only to be confronted by the scene of Frank completing the process of embalming Anna's corpse in the adjoining room. She stumbles upon the scene at the point where Frank is replacing Anna's eyeless sockets with two false pupils, giving the impression of the cadaver directly addressing the female protagonist's horrified look.[22]

The terror that the eyeless sockets evoke in this female victim also draws parity with Nathaniel's fear of castration in Hoffmann's tale. As with Freud's analysis, *Beyond the Darkness* uses this theme of loss of sight/castration to link the differing female characters it depicts. Thus when disposing of the hitchhiker's corpse in an acid bath it is pertinent that her fleshless skull rises to the surface of the vat, its singular but staring eye disgusting Frank. The fear of castration that the dead, damaged or decaying female form evokes in the male is underscored by the differing responses of the two protagonists to their murderous actions during this scene. Frank's fear of close proximity to the corpse of the hitchhiker is intimated by his donning of protective clothing and breathing apparatus. By contrast, Iris reveals an apparent indifference to the grisly activities she is involved in. Frank's disgust is underscored when Iris moves from disposing of the woman's remains to aggressively devouring a pot of stew she has prepared in the kitchen.

Arguably, Iris's actions are offensive to depicted male protagonists precisely *because* she refuses the definition of the female body as primarily castrated. Following McCaffrey's conclusion that the uncanny woman is able to transcend the barrier between 'damaged' victim and potent aggressor, it is interesting that the female doubles of Massaccesi's narratives are equally able to subvert principles of male power and

punishment. Reiterating a basis in the Gothic writings that Freud analysed, Greta from *Death Smiles on a Murderer* undercuts her brother's manipulation of her body by blinding him in the film's finale. Iris goes even further in literalising the fear of emasculation that haunts Nathaniel's fear of lost vision: she simultaneously blinds and castrates Frank in the closing scene of *Beyond the Darkness*. In both cases, these female figures offer examples of what McCaffrey terms a:

> ...new development in the narrative of infantile male fantasy: the female victim may be promoted from an illustration ... of castration to its actual perpetrator. In this version of the fantasy, it is the uncanny woman who threatens the young male gazer with her own fate. She is the Medusa, once abused and punished, now vengeful.[23]

A Historical *Unheimliche*: Massaccesi's 'Period Erotic' Narratives

As the above analysis indicates, Aristide Massaccesi's 1970s horror films can clearly be analysed as 'uncanny', using both Freud's account and recent feminist revisions of these ideas. By way of conclusion, it is also worth considering the extent to which these concerns are reproduced in his later 1980s works. Although the director's work during the mid-1980s was marketed as more overtly erotic than horrific, it is interesting to note these later films retain a macabre dimension. This relates to their obsessive depiction of the desires circulating around a dead female love. As with earlier Massaccesi works, the demise of the female heroine references the maternal agent as the source of the Oedipal child's desires while projecting these erotic attachments onto a series of other female doubles. Defined by titles such as *Il piacere* (AKA *The Pleasure*, 1984), *L'alcova* (AKA *The Alcove,* 1984) and *Lussuria* (AKA *Lust*, 1986), these works created an axis of trauma across psychic and historical/ideological lines. This is achieved by linking the sudden or violent death of a mother/lover to an examination of the repressions or contradictions that surrounded sexuality under Italian fascism of the 1940s.

Once again these historical narratives draw heavily on the *unheimliche*'s traversing of the boundaries which separate the alien from the familiar. Although the disruption of specific established categories differs from narrative to narrative, in each case the resultant confusion leads to an eruption of uncontrollable sexuality and violence within the Italian family home. For instance, tensions are found in Massaccesi's 1984 Filmirage production, *The Pleasure*. As with the director's other works, this locates a series of erotic encounters around a dead lover/mother,

Leonora (Andrea Guzon). Indeed, as with *Beyond the Darkness*, this later film links the demise of a female love interest to a male protagonist's obsessive attachment to memories of an erotic past. This is figured by the central protagonist Gérard (Gabriele Tinti), who constantly replays the audio tapes recounting his erotic encounters with his mistress.

His narration (which replaces her recorded sexual fantasies in the opening scene) leads to a flashback depicting their meeting at the Venice carnival and subsequent sexual adventures in a local brothel. Here, an oriental libertine named Haunati (played by Laura Gemser) introduces the duo to the delights of opium and sexual experimentation. It is Gemser's instructions for Gérard to "take her as he would take Leonora", as well as her comments that her role is "to form a complete body" between her and his lover that heralds the theme of the female double in the film.

As with other Massaccesi films, the female doubles of *The Pleasure* are equated not only with sexuality, but also with death. This is first indicated in the ensuing orgy scene with Leonora lying motionless in response to Haunati's lesbian advances. It is a comparable image of her naked, immobile body that the camera focuses on when the scene reverts from the flashback. Upon first appearance, the protagonist's closed eyes give an equitable expression of erotic ecstasy, particularly as shots of her face are intercut with those of female hands seductively placing stockings over her thighs. However, Massaccesi startlingly subverts the vocabulary of softcore erotic imagery when the camera pulls back to reveal that Leonora is actually dead and her corpse is being prepared for burial by Gérard's assistant Fiorella (Lilli Carati).

Leonora's initial placement as a signifier of sexuality and death establishes a pattern of traumatic loss and repetition, confirmed by the arrival of her son Edmund (Marco Mattioli) and daughter Ursula (played by Andrea Guzon again) for her funeral. In particular, Ursula's identical looks and sexually precocious behaviour produce an instant tension between her and Gérard. At one level, the narrative attempts to 'legitimise' the ensuing sexual attraction between Gérard and Ursula, explaining that she and her brother are actually the children of Leonora's first marriage. However, Ursula's resolution to lose her virginity to Gérard by adopting the sexually liberated traits of her mother's identity makes clear the Oedipal tensions at play in the text.

It is not merely Ursula's identical appearance to her mother that reinforces her uncanny status as a female double. It is also the way in which she orchestrates her seduction of Gérard using her mother's taped recordings as a guide to his sexual tastes. As is revealed in one of the recordings Ursula overhears, the encounters he shared with her mother revolved around their

participation in “acts against nature”.[24] Part of the couple’s drive towards transgression centred on Leonora’s occupation as a prostitute, which granted Gérard the opportunity to see her with a variety of male and female suitors. While the heroine’s sexual status allowed the activation of a number of witnessed sexual scenarios, it initiates a pattern which then locates Ursula in the role of ambivalent love object following her mother’s death.

Thus, it is pertinent that following her demise, Leonora’s activities are described as evidence of her “double life”. It is through this very inability to define her own distinct identity that Ursula comes to reconstruct herself in the role of her dead mother in an attempt to seduce Gérard. An example of the blurred boundaries between these two female figures is evidenced in a scene where Gérard watches Ursula seduce a cinemagoer in a movie theatre. These advances (premised on a past encounter she overhears on the tape) situate her actions as a further revision of the child’s attempts to locate itself vis-à-vis the parent’s desires. Indeed, the sequence confirms the narrative’s doubling of the identities of mother and daughter through a disjuncture in the sound and image band. Here, Gérard’s voiceover narration describes his ambivalent feelings (and ultimate excitement) at watching Leonora seduce the cinema patron, while the image band depicts Ursula enacting these actions in an identical fashion to her mother. Other examples of the transgressive doubling between these two female figures are seen in Ursula’s seduction of a stable-hand who was also Leonora’s lover (this encounter is once again observed by Gérard), as well as her final assumption of the role of prostitute at the same bordello frequented by her mother. Ursula’s vocation as a whore is itself premised on Gérard’s continued rejection of her advances, resulting in his eventual initiation of intercourse with her in the bordello setting.

Thus, it can be argued that *The Pleasure* recapitulates the complex system of doubling provided by the death of a mother/lover as desired object found in previous Massaccesi works, such as *Beyond the Darkness.* This pattern implicates all key protagonists in three interrelated patterns of desire and mourning for the dead Leonora:

(1) Gérard uses his library of audio tapes to retain the memory of his desires for his dead mistress. These recollections are facilitated (for both protagonist and spectator) by Massaccesi’s trademark feature of extended flashbacks as a visual index of ‘excessive’ desires. This cinematic reference to the continued power of a dead female protagonist is itself complemented by her vocal presence on Gérard’s collection of audio tapes.
(2) This conflation of eroticism and death are subsequently projected onto

Gérard's relations with Ursula. While the role of doubling is made explicit through the protagonist's adoption of her mother's identity as a seduction technique, this results in her ambivalent equation with death and decay for the remainder of the narrative. Ursula's macabre construction is indicated not only in Gérard's constant dismissal of her sexuality as filthy and disgusting, but also the comments of other protagonists such as the Madame of the brothel where Leonora once worked. When first confronted with Ursula's identical appearance to the dead heroine, she locates the protagonist clearly within gothic connotations of the double, defining her as "a spectre". Given Ursula's close associations with her mother, it is pertinent that her final response to Gérard's rejection of her advances is to overdub his collection of audio tapes with her own messages scorning his behaviour. Paradoxically, her critique of him as obsessed with a woman "who is gone, and is cold and still in her grave" is undercut by her drive to assimilate this identity, resulting in their eventual sexual union that closes the film.

(3) The process of doubling represented by Gérard's relations with Ursula is itself reproduced by Fiorella's sexual relationship with Leonora's son Edmund. Whereas Gérard's relations are initially deflected by his adoption of a paternal role in relation to her, Fiorella's emerging erotic bond with Edmund is initiated immediately after he and his sister arrive to attend their mother's funeral. Importantly, their relations are premised on a duplication of the nurturing/erotic bond that defined Iris's bond to Frank in *Beyond the Darkness.* Fiorella's need to adopt this role in relation to her younger lover, as Kim Newman has noted, is made explicit by "the character of Edmund, whose epileptic fits can only be curbed by sucking the nearest breast".[25] These gestures follow the pattern dominating other relations in *The Pleasure*, with Edmund's obsession with the female bosom revealed as initiated in his youth when Leonora allowed him to suckle her in order to heighten his sexual excitement.

The dual dyads between Gérard/Ursula and Fiorella/Edmund indicate that the (dead) female sexual object prevents any resolution of the infantile desires expressed in *The Pleasure*. This is confirmed in the finale of the film, when Edmund arrives at the brothel where his sister now works. Despite being aroused by two prostitutes at the same time, the protagonist admits that he finds the locale and its inhabitants "creepy" (reiterating the gothic connection between sexuality and death that permeates the narrative). His unease at the duo's attempted seduction results in his body

convulsing in a series of spasms, scaring them away. It is (once again) only Fiorella who can restrain Edmund by offering him her breast and comforting him as her beloved son.

While *The Pleasure* clearly evokes an aura of displeasure through its uncanny themes of dead but eroticised heroines, Massaccesi's *The Alcove* adds a distinctly racial dynamic to the historical *unheimliche*. This is achieved by exploring the dissolution of the boundaries of the alien and the familiar through the theme of an African female servant introduced into a bourgeois Italian home. The protagonist, Zerbal (Laura Gemser), returns to Italy as the prized possession of former soldier (and widower) Enzo (who is given her as a gift for his imperialistic advances abroad). Enzo (Al Cliver) introduces Zerbal to his second wife Alessandra (Lilli Carati) as his prized possession (referring to her as "a genuine black pearl"). However, she immediately berates him for introducing a filthy savage into their home.

It is not only western perceptions surrounding Zerbal's body and hygiene which cast her in the position of feared racial Other. More importantly, it is her construction as a sign of threat and potential horror that ensure her status as *unheimliche*. Zerbal's position as a site of servitude and disgust is particularly marked vis-à-vis Alessandra and her assistant/lover Virna (Annie Belle). When Zerbal catches the pair making love, Virna complains that she feels scared to be in close proximity to the servant for fear that "her black face will jump out and scare her". This statement, along with her comment that Zerbal's "dark face gives me the creeps", confirms the protagonist's construction as a site of terror:

Figure 6.4: A racial *unheimliche*: Zerbal introduces an air of the unfamiliar in the Italian home of *The Alcove*.

However, the *unheimliche*'s connotations of dread *and* attraction are confirmed by the intense desires Zerbal arouses in the very characters who denounce her. This paradox is evident in the subsequent seduction of Zerbal by Alessandra. During their initial lovemaking scene, Zerbal is asked whether all Abyssinian women are as pretty as her. Her reply that she was in fact given as a gift to Enzo because she was considered too ugly for marriage is a jarring statement that introduces an element of ambiguity into the pleasure that the pornographic text is meant to produce. Zerbal's equation with both sexuality and death are further underscored by Enzo's warning to Alessandra that she "watch the sinning Abyssinian" for fear that "she might devour you". These contradictions surrounding the sexual and visual power of the debased black heroine are reiterated in the finale of *The Alcove.* Here, Enzo decides to go into the production and distribution of pornography in order to clear the debts amassed by his colonial adventures in Abyssinia. This segment of the narrative reiterates Massaccesi's interest in foregrounding or subverting established features of pornography, often for horrific or humorous effect. For instance, in one scene Enzo becomes so engrossed in screening silent pornography as a potential inspiration for his own future productions that he fails to notice his three female companions masturbating each other behind him.

Paradoxically, inspiration for the film comes from Zerbal, who persuades Enzo to restage the storming of her village and subsequent torture, rape and murder of women and children by invading Italian forces. This suggestion, along with Zerbal's insistence that her role be played by a white woman, translates the pornographic technology of pleasure into one of horror. The production scenes themselves cast Zerbal in the role of the castrating uncanny woman who orchestrates the sexual humiliation of Virna by Alessandra. The beginning of the scene is played for titillation, by drawing on established softcore iconography derived from both the 'Women in Prison' (with Virna being bound to the bed and whipped) and 'Erotic Nun' cycles (seen in Alessandra's clerical iconography while she assaults her lover).[26]

However, Massaccesi here once again subverts the erotic pleasure implicit in the scene, with Zerbal suddenly introducing a gardener into the coupling who then proceeds to rape the defenceless Virna. It is Zerbal's sadistic management of the pseudo-pornographic scenes in *The Alcove* that confirms the mastery of the uncanny woman over the processes of voyeurism. The contradictions surrounding the ambivalent status of the look seem confirmed in the film's finale. Here, Zerbal is killed by a vengeful Virna, who traps her in the reels of nitrate film containing the images of her former sexual humiliation before burning her to death.

The resolution introduces an element of trauma into the pleasure that the pornographic text is meant to ensure, while once again pointing to the presence of the uncanny woman who haunts Massaccesi's work from the era. Equally, the fact that it is Laura Gemser's character organising the sexual scenarios that finally engulf her former (male and female) oppressors is also pertinent. Her casting as Zerbal in *The Alcove* extends the connotations of sexuality and ethnicity from her role as Black Emanuelle, whose racial difference also ensured her status as a locus of both sexuality and dread in the Italian mind-set, as I will discuss in the next chapter.

Notes

[1] Phillip McCaffrey, 'Freud's Uncanny Women', in Sander Gilman, Jutta Birmele, Jay Geller and Valerie D. Greenberg (eds), *Reading Freud's Reading* (New York: New York University Press, 1994), p.96.
[2] For a psychoanalytic reading of the castration imagery in folktales see the section on *Jack and the Beanstalk* in Bruno Bettelheim, *The Uses of Enchantment* (London: Penguin Books, 1976), pp.183–194.
[3] Collected in Freud's volume *Art and Literature* (Harmondsworth: Pelican Books, 1988), pp.335–377.
[4] Kevin Lyons, 'Joe D'Amato: The Secret of his Excess', *Samhain* 8 (March/April 1988).
[5] Freud, *Art and Literature*, p.343.
[6] Elizabeth Bronfen elucidates on this point in her book *Over Her Dead* Body (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1992). She defines the linguistic slippage between the *heimlich* as something both familiar and visible and the *unheimliche* as that which is concealed/hidden from view. These terms mirror the child's oscillating perception of the mother's body as either complete or castrated. While acknowledging the anatomical differences that exist between the genders, the infant configures the missing penis as existing in another (interior) section of the body.
[7] Mladen Dolar, 'I Shall be With You on Your Wedding Night: Lacan and the Uncanny', *October* 58 (Fall 1991), 6.
[8] Freud, *Art and Literature*, p.352.
[9] See Otto Rank, *The Double* (London: Karnak Books, 1989).
[10] E. T. A. Hoffmann, *The Sand Man and Other Stories* (Gloucester: Dodo Press, 2008), p.209.
[11] Ibid., p.212.
[12] Ibid., p.213.
[13] Dolar, 'I Shall be With You on Your Wedding Night', 9.
[14] It is noticeable that this encounter between the pair initiates a specific mode of infantilising Frank through discourse. At various points in the text, he is referred to as "poor, little Frank" and "Frank baby", reiterating the housekeeper's role as

maternal substitute.
[15] McCaffrey notes this pattern as being present in many of the tales that Freud discusses. For instance, his analysis of Oscar Wilde's *The Canterville Ghost* emphasises the disturbing nature of the spectre's gaze as an aspect of its castrating powers. However, as McCaffrey notes, Freud's analysis is developed at the expense of analysing the construction of the female protagonist Virginia, who is coerced into assisting the ghost as a child only to return from these encounters as sexually mature. This connection once again confirms the link between desire and death that such narratives promote.
[16] Firstly, Nathanial encounters Coppola's market trader when he purchases an eye-glass in order to spy on his love object. However, it is not merely the similarity of this character's name which links him to the lawyer from Nathaniel's past. Rather, it is his status as an eye-glass salesman that draws parity with Copplelius's interest in the violent disruption of sight. If Coppola's connections with castration result in his construction as a potential threat to Nathaniel, Professor Spalanzini (his physics tutor) reproduces the conciliatory aspect of the paternal image embodied by his own father. Indeed, the familial link is confirmed by the fact that Spalanzini has not only an intellectual link to the protagonist, but is also revealed to be Olympia's father. Spalanzini's position vis-à-vis Nathaniel is thus premised on his ability to legitimise the protagonist's sexual desires, indicated in his sanctioning of the romance with Olympia.
[17] McCaffrey, 'Freud's Uncanny Women', p.102.
[18] Ibid., p.103.
[19] Ibid., p.98.
[20] Hoffmann cited in McCaffrey, 'Freud's Uncanny Women', p.98. A further example of the uncanny gaze of the decaying female body is given in his analysis of Wilhelm Hauff's story *The Severed Hand*. Here, a physician reacts in horror upon seeing the eyes of a dead girl opening as he is performing an autopsy on her corpse.
[21] During her journey to the mansion Massaccesi once again underscores the film's linked themes of desire and death by emphasising the hitchhiker's orgasmic moans while under the influence of drugs. At this point she is unaware that her head is positioned in close proximity to Anna's body.
[22] While possessing a physical similarity to her dead sister, Eleanor's status as a female double is also confirmed through her disruption of the gaze as a source of pleasure. This is indicated in her presence at Anna's funeral where her face is obscured by the dark sunglasses she is wearing. In blocking the spectator's access to her gaze, Massaccesi draws parity with the eyeless sockets of her sister/the skulls appearing in the film.
[23] McCaffrey, 'Freud's Uncanny Women', p.98.
[24] Reiterating its similarity with *Beyond the Darkness*, it is interesting that Ursula discovers Gérard's erotic audio tapes (as well as a collection of her mother's clothes) in a hidden room to which she is forbidden entry.
[25] Kim Newman, '*The Pleasure*' (review), *Monthly Film Bulletin* 53 (June 1986), 181.

[26] For a further examination of the female body in Italian Nunsploitation movies see Tamao Nakahara's chapter 'Barred Nuns: Italian Nunsploitation Films', in Ernest Mathijs and Xavier Mendik (eds), *Alternative Europe: Eurotrash and Exploitation Cinema Since 1945* (London: Wallflower Press, 2004), pp.124–134. Here, Nakahara notes that the figure of the Italian nun often conveys a contradictory set of sexual readings, evoking the threat of "sexual, hysterical and murderous" women (p.129), whose rule defies male authority.

CHAPTER SEVEN

BLACK SEX, BAD SEX: MONSTROUS ETHNICITY IN THE BLACK EMANUELLE FILMS

> For centuries, the uncertain continents – Africa, the America's, Asia – were figured in European lore as libidinously eroticised. Travellers' tales abounded with visions of the monstrous sexuality of far-off lands, where, as legend had it, men sported gigantic penises and women consorted with apes, feminised men's breasts flowed with milk and militarised women lopped off theirs.[1]
> —Anne McClintock, *Imperial Leather*

Introduction

According to Anne McClintock, the principles of oppression that underpinned European expansion and colonisation into non-western lands between the 15th and 19th century were often coded as an erotic and yet monstrous journey into the unknown. Part of the appeal of such foreign exploration was the idea that European 'adventurers' would come into contact with exotic and unusual forms of sexuality. Western impressions of these locales as sites of physical excess arguably reflected the levels of sexual repression and morality that dominated Europe at the time.

Although McClintock's account deals primarily with the social and sexual tensions that affected images of race during earlier historical periods, they can also be applied to more recent cinematic representations drawn from the European experience and imagination. For instance, in her work on 'The Pursuit of Pleasure and the Sale of Sex', Lenore Manderson has argued that contemporary media and related 'leisure' activities such as tourism reiterate long-standing colonial myths around the Orient and its inhabitants as facilitating a sexual journey into exotic territories. In this respect Manderson argues that such constructions of Asia can be seen as successors "to the Orient of nineteenth century imperialism, traveller's tales, early anthropology and their associated projects".[2] Both McClintock

and Manderson's accounts reiterate Edward Said's view that western perceptions of the non-European 'Other' are facilitated through an essentially false distinction between the Orient and the Occident. Here, the use of colonial and mythical constructions about the Orient function as a "contrasting image, idea, personality, experience"[3] which allows the stabilisation of the known (European) self from the mysterious exotic inhabitant. What Said's work on Orientalism (and more recent studies by critics such as McClintock and Manderson) have made clear is the extent to which "European culture gained in strength and identity by setting itself off against the Orient as a sort of surrogate and even underground self".[4] It is the existence of this 'underground self' which points to long-standing European fears surrounding non-western lands and non-European sexuality.

In this chapter, I wish to use such theoretical advances to consider sexual and racial tensions in the 1970s *Black Emanuelle* films, which were associated with a range of Italian cult directors, including Aristide Massaccesi (whose work was profiled in the previous chapter.) While Massaccesi was responsible for some of the most outrageous entries into the series (which lasted from 1975 until 1983), other directors associated with the series included Adalberto 'Bitto' Albertini (*Emanuelle nera* [AKA *Black Emanuelle*, 1975]), Enzio D'Ambrosio (*La spiaggia del desiderio* [AKA *Emanuelle on Taboo Island*, 1976]), Brunello Rondi (*Velluto nero* [AKA *Black Emanuelle, White Emanuelle/Smooth Velvet, Raw Silk*, 1976]), Guiseppe Vari (*Suor Emanuelle* [AKA *Sister Emanuelle*, 1977]), and Bruno Mattei (*Violenza in un carere femminile* [AKA *Emanuelle Reports From a Women's Prison*, 1982]). The success of this franchise can be measured not only by the fact that its parasitic titling was used to promote unrelated Italian cult entries that fused eroticism with ethnicity (such as Adalberto Albertini's *Il mondo dei sensi di Emy Wong* [AKA *Yellow Emanuelle 1976*]), but also by virtue of the fact that other Mediterranean cultures also adopted the Black Emanuelle anchor to peddle unrelated softcore narratives, such as the Greek entry *I mavri Emmanouella* (AKA *Emanuelle, Queen of the Sados*, 1979).

What united all of these 'erotic' productions was not only an extreme emphasis on sexual suffering, but also the casting of Indonesian actress Laura Gemser as a photojournalist who scoured the globe exposing acts of violence and injustice perpetrated against women. In true exploitation fashion, the series had been 'hijacked' by Italian filmmakers from the earlier and more polished French template of Just Jaeckin's *Emmanuelle* (1974). While liberally drawing from Jaeckin's original source material (Emmanuelle Arsan's novel of the same name), Italian producers altered the spelling of their heroine's name from two 'm's to one to avoid any

legal wrangles. While Aristide Massaccesi was not the only director who deployed the talents of Laura Gemser as a vehicle to exploit the success of Jaeckin's film (other notable directors included Adalberto Albertini and Brunello Rondi, whose work I shall also discuss), he became synonymous with the cycle for two reasons.

Firstly, the *Black Emanuelle* series initiated his long-standing working relationship with Laura Gemser, who went on to appear in more than 20 films for Massaccesi, as well as providing costume design for many of the later movies distributed through the director's Filmirage production house. Indeed, it can be argued that the only coherence provided to the cycle emerged from the repeated participation of Gemser, who played *Black Emanuelle* in 16 films (three produced in 1976 alone). Alongside the cycle, she also worked for Massaccesi in a series of related erotic dramas such as *Eva nera* (*Black Cobra* [1976]), which were subsequently re-titled as 'Emanuelle' adventures for sale in foreign territories.

Secondly, Aristide Massaccesi's entries in the *Black Emanuelle* series can be distinguished from other Italian emulations in the field because of the macabre fashion in which they situated the heroine in repeatedly ghoulish, violent and grisly situations. By pitching his heroine against rapists, cannibals and snuff movie directors, as well as slave traders and manipulating mystics, Massaccesi constructed a series of narratives more befitting a horror 'Scream Queen' than a porn diva. As Gemser's deathly status was often conflated with her blackness, Massaccesi's films provide a way into understanding the very specific Italian fears and contradictions surrounding black sexuality and savagery that underpin this cycle of cult cinema.

Travelogues of Desire

If the *Black Emanuelle* series did demonstrate a set of long-standing European concerns around the presumed monstrous nature of black sexuality, then these tensions were reproduced by the narrative structure and organisation of the films within this cycle. In particular, by depicting Laura Gemser as a photojournalist who tours the world seeking out scandal with the assistance of hidden photographic equipment, the series immediately introduced an element of 'image'-based power and concealment into its examination of aberrant, non-western sexuality. In this respect, it can be argued that the series reproduced what postcolonial theorists have referred to as the traits of 'ethnographic' cinema: narratives that existed across fiction and documentary forms and aimed to provide a near scientific exposition of non-European cultures. According to Anne

McClintock's analysis of the colonial imagination, it can be argued that this style of cinema reproduces the western drive towards exploration and travel. Implicit in these advances was the exposition of an 'exotic' environment from a (privileged) European perspective.

For film, such ethnographic fascination was not new. From the end of the 19th century, cinema had come to play a crucial place in processes of colonial domination, with the development of silent 'panorama' films that allowed the viewer access to exciting and 'unusual' areas of the world. In her book *The Third Eye,* Fatimah Tobing Rony argues that ethnographic film has continued to serve a number of functions within 20th century society including colonial propaganda, pseudo-scientific exploration of other cultures, travelogue loops and even 'jungle' adventure films. As she notes, in its documentary format ethnographic cinema frequently presents its viewer with:

> ...an array of subsistence activities, kinship, religion, myths, ceremonial ritual, music and dance, and – in what may be taken as the genre's defining trope – some form of animal sacrifice.[5]

Even when ethnographic cinema merged with fiction film, it retained a scrutinising gaze at ethnic difference as its central motif. For instance, the *Black Emanuelle* series can be classified as a variant of the 'mondo' tradition of ethnographic film popular in Italy during the 1960s and 1970s. This format (as popularised by titles such as *Mondo cane*, 1962], *Africa addio* [AKA *Africa Blood and Guts*, 1966] and *Africa segreta* [AKA *Secret Africa*, 1969]) utilised different documentary loops from across the world, and often embedded these short excerpts within a fictional or 'staged' format that was then marketed on its factual information and 'educational' content. However, the mondo film's obsession with documenting images of primitive black sexuality and its links with 'savagery' demonstrates the extent to which the cycle's pseudo-intellectual aims concealed a salacious drive consistent with 'exploitation' cinema.[6]

Central to the appeal of the mondo film was not merely an exploration of racial distinction, but also an 'aestheticisation' of ethnic difference within its 'natural' domain. Typically, this meant the reduction of the non-European landscape to a form of picturesque display, to be surveyed by western travellers. Thus, it seems appropriate that when Rony refers to 'travelogue cinema' as a branch of ethnographic film, she is in fact referring to a type of production that represents "travel as penetration and discovery".[7] The central features of the travelogue genre (as defined by their peak period of production between 1898 and 1922) included a narrative structure that was short in duration, beginning and ending with a

panoramic view of the landscape. This type of production also provided a guiding narrational device in the figure of the white tourist. Equally, Rony notes that unlike narrative fiction, the travelogue production made little effort to conceal its basis in documentary, with people openly addressing the gaze of the camera (and that of the white explorer behind it).

The format of the travelogue cinema, with its emphasis on a tightly constrained duration and its spurious fusion of factual and fictional titillation is directly reproduced in many of the projects that Laura Gemser undertook during the 1970s. These included the series of 'sexy' documentaries such as *Le notti porno nel mondo* (1977) and *Emanuelle e le porno notti nel mondo 2* (released in Britain as *Mondo Erotico* [1978]), some of which she completed for exploitation directors such as Massaccesi. These works cast Gemser as the onscreen host/narrator who oversees the 'documentary' inserts from swinger's clubs, massage parlours and racy discos dotted around the world:

Figure 7.1: Travelogue and titillation: the pseudo-global sex aesthetic of *Mondo Erotico*.

As well as disclosing (and disrobing) between the excerpts, these films also saw Gemser dispatching a rather curious brand of puritanical morality upon selections of film footage that had clearly been collated for jaded European audiences. Although these sexy documentaries were essentially light in tone, they retained travelogue cinema's obsession with replaying colonial myths surrounding the savagery associated with black sexuality (albeit in comical form). For instance, the opening excerpt from *Emanuelle e le porno notti nel mondo 2* finds Gemser narrating a nightclub scene where a white maiden prepared for tribal sacrifice 'endures' intercourse with an ape-like beast in order to secure her freedom.

Although the *Black Emanuelle* series that Gemser completed alongside these documentaries were of the duration normally associated with feature length fiction productions, this does not preclude considering them as a branch of travelogue cinema, using the criteria that authors such as Rony have outlined. Indeed, the duration of these films is dramatically reduced if one considers them as embedding two types of narratives together: extended scenes of fictional action with shorter documentary scenes of the 'exotic'. The significance of these shorter, more constrained, factual elements is underscored by the fact that they work against the progression of the text's fictional dynamics.

An example of these 'embedded' travelogue traditions can be seen in Aristide Massaccesi's 1977 film *La via della prostituzione* (*Emanuelle and the White Slave Trade*). The narrative oscillates between a fictional focus on the heroine's attempts to expose an intercontinental sex trade in women and a documentary exposition of the 'colourful' cultures she witnesses during this journey. The tension between these two cinematic modes is indicated in the credit sequence of the film. Here, fictional shots of Gemser and her white companion Susan Powell (Ely Galleani) driving around Kenya are intercut with documentary footage of tribal activity and scenes of wild antelope roaming across the African plains. These scenes, along with shots of Emanuelle buying 'traditional' jewellery and trinkets from local traders, are all photographed by the heroine, thus fixing the local landscape within a primitive (and visually decodeable) past. Via these features, the sequence performs a similar ideological procedure to both the ethnographic and travelogue traditions that Rony has explored. Namely, by diluting other cultures to a picturesque (and desirably photographic) status, it reduces its inhabitants to a "people without history, without writing, without civilisation, without technology, without archives".[8]

Rather than functioning in isolation, these initial documentary depictions of the exotic form a pattern that dominates Massaccesi's film,

and the cycle as a whole. Indeed, Rony's comment that travelogue cinema often begins and ends with trains/ships either entering or leaving an exotic location is replaced in the cycle by an overemphasis on plane travel as a European mechanism of discovery. It seems hardly a coincidence that from Gemser's first appearance in the role of Emanuelle, plane travel either features prominently in the credit scenes of these productions, or else airports are used as locations where important narrative information is divulged. For instance, in the case of *Emanuelle and the White Slave Trade*, it is while waiting at an airport that Gemser first discovers evidence of the illegal trade in white female prostitutes between European and African gangsters that motivates her subsequent quest. In the course of this investigation, the film even goes so far as to disguise the heroine as an air hostess, as seen in a sequence where Emanuelle and Susan try to entice information about local racketeers from an Eastern prince who has just arrived at Nairobi airport.

Although the film eschews plane travel in favour of a motor vehicle in its opening scenes, the use of a Land Rover (with its overtones of safari travel and colonial exploration) maintains these travelogue connotations. The trait of air travel is, however, included in a later scene in the film, when Emanuelle and Susan are treated to a ride in a hot air balloon, during which the heroine photographs both the landscape and its inhabitants below. In this respect, her role provides parity with Rony's figure of the narrator/tourist: someone allowed to survey both the environment and the body of the 'primitive' from a privileged, voyeuristic position. As such, Emanuelle's dual status as traveller and photographer underscores the fact that racial power and identity is:

> …signified by who gazes at whom. Performers do not look at the camera, but the gaze of the scientist is often acknowledged...[9]

Desire, Disgust and Double Features

While it is clear that the *Black Emanuelle* films drew upon an existing colonial vocabulary, to write off the cycle as *merely* ideologically-laden fails to recognise some of the more interesting tensions inherent in the series. This is because, as Lenore Manderson has argued, the contemporary colonial gaze (as figured through either electronic media or tourist practices), is effectively a contradictory gaze, where sexual fascination merges with long-standing fears and taboos that effectively challenge the power and potency of the European observer. For instance, in her analysis of the public performances of sex in Thailand's infamous Patpong district, Manderson has identified strategies of subversion in the erotic dance

routines performed by Oriental women for visiting tourists.

Manderson's analysis of these subcultural sex practices is pertinent for the present course of study, as it was the Patpong region that featured in not only Just Jaeckin's original *Emmanuelle*, but also in many of the Laura Gemser imitations that followed. In *Emmanuelle*, Patpong is depicted as a western playboy's haven that the heroine's husband visits following the couple's temporary estrangement. The depiction of the bar replicates the features identified by Manderson's analysis: namely, a locale heavily geared towards European values and easily identifiable pop cultural codes, while maintaining western presumptions that Oriental sexuality is premised on "a panoply of purported exotic and other 'out of the ordinary' acts".[10]

In Jaeckin's movie, the Patpong sequence is framed by two exotic dance routines that are structurally separated by the musical codes accompanying these performances. Here, a lone female dancer gyrates to a sensual seventies organ soundtrack, before inserting and maintaining a lit cigarette within her vaginal lips. At the other end of the bar, two Thai performers enact a frenzied dance to a 'sub-Beatles' number before disrobing and simulating a lesbian coupling for the assembled guests. The fact that these routines privilege visual access to the sex act (underscored in Jaeckin's movie by cut-ins of the depicted club audience) underlies the importance of the western tourist's ability to visually consume any encounter with an erotic, Oriental Other. While such displays are undoubtedly premised on a "sentimental mix of the exotic and the erotic",[11] Manderson has found a number of oppositional strategies used by the female performers to disinvest this viewing audience of their controlling gaze. These include staged displays which mock and caricature the licentious desires of the assembled male western tourists/sex consumers. These parodic practices are supplemented by the close proximity between performer and patron, which evoke a series of nationalised modes of resistance to which the western gazer remains oblivious. As Manderson notes:

> Thai notions of pollution and the profanity of the genitals, allow – with or without intentionality – a nice inversion within the bars, as women, genitals displayed, literally perform over the heads of men.[12]

Lenore Manderson's work indicates that in either performances or representations of non-European sexuality "subordination is not complete; parody, irony and satire are possible".[13] In terms of the *Black Emanuelle* films, the potentially subversive elements of the series are heightened by the format in which they appeared: that of Italian cult cinema. As Barry

Keith Grant has argued, cult and exploitation movies frequently oscillate between definitions of the conservative and the transgressive due to the way in which they give access to an otherwise marginalised sexual and ethnic Other. Importantly, Grant acknowledges the contradictory nature of this figure in the cult film, noting its frequent associations with constructions of the monstrous. As he notes in his article 'Second Thoughts on Double Features', while such works:

> ...commonly seem to offer some form of transgression, many of them also share an ability to be at once transgressive and recuperative. These are films which reclaim what they seem to violate... They tend to achieve this ideological manipulation through a particular inflection of the figure of the Other. This figure which, while of course present in and fundamental to several genres, becomes in the cult film a prominent caricature that makes what it represents far less threatening to the viewer.[14]

What complicates ideological readings of the *Black Emanuelle* films is the fact that they project a contradictory attraction to and repulsion from the black body through a heroine who is herself defined as both racially distinct and deviant. It was a shift from replicating the white European body of the original *Emmanuelle*, Sylvia Kristel, to the black body of Gemser, which goes some way to explaining the different narrative trajectories that the two cycles took. As Linda Ruth Williams has argued, Just Jaeckin's original *Emmanuelle* displayed a pseudo-philosophical edge to its depiction of desire through a quest to "unite the cerebral with the animal".[15] As Williams indicates, Jaeckin's movie sought to popularise an aestheticisation and acceptability of porn that paid as much attention to chic interiors, abstract art and cheese plants as it did to any act of fornication.

However, the *Black Emanuelle* cycle that emerged from this 'feel-good' template replaced any drive towards emancipation with a disturbing focus on death, decay and the macabre. This was achieved by adding outrageous overdoses of horror and mutilation to an already eroticised text. Through these deviations, the *Black Emanuelle* films maximised their appeal to differing grindhouse audiences. Simultaneously, they also alienated and outraged those critics searching for a radical message in 1970s 'porno chic'. It is undeniable that such economically motivated cross-generic overload reveals the series as disparate and hastily assembled. Yet I would argue that the *Black Emanuelle* films retain a cultural significance relating to their focus on a black female protagonist whose erotic and implausible investigations embroiled her in archaic and monstrous situations. If, as Grant has argued, the cult film works through a contradictory double feature, whereby the Other's position is both

elaborated and then coded as monstrous and transgressive, then it seems appropriate to consider the way in which Gemser's construction and activities isolated her from the original, white Emmanuelle. The central differences that separated the black Gemser from Sylvia Kristel's white character were mapped out in *Emanuelle nera* (*Black Emanuelle* [1975]). This film was directed by Adalberto Albertini, and featured Gemser in her first appearance as the heroine. During the narrative, she travels to Kenya to provide a photographic record of the European business and beatnik classes that reside there.

Figure 7.2: Ethnic origins: Laura Gemser's first role as *Black Emanuelle* initiates racial distinctions in the cycle.

With its emphasis on the heroine's endless and emotionless encounters, Albertini's *Black Emanuelle* clearly emulates the Arsan/Jaeckin model.

For instance, it mimics the opening section of the novel. Here, the plane-bound Emanuelle expands the concept of in-flight entertainment by indulging in a number of sexual encounters with staff and fellow passengers. However, the opening of Albertini's film also uses the musical score to signal its departure from the Jaeckin template. Sylvia Kristel was introduced as the original Emmanuelle via a perky, upbeat piece of Europop sung in both French and English by Pierre Bachelet. By comparison, the theme that accompanies *Black Emanuelle* is far heavier in tone, combining a set of screeching soul sisters and a tribal beat over a tune arranged by Nico Fidenco.

From the very opening then, the film alludes to the ethnicity of the star as a central feature separating the two cycles. It seems pertinent that Gemser's blackness is frequently commented upon by her fictional white lovers, usually in violent or aggressive terms. For instance, in Albertini's film, the heroine's lover Gianni (Angelo Infanti) informs his colleague that one could never fully love or trust a black woman like Emanuelle for fear that "she might devour you". This threat was itself literalised in the theme tune that Fidenco later constructed for Massacceti's *Emanuelle and the White Slave Trade***.** Here, the by now familiar tribal tune about the heroine is accompanied by lyrics referring to her as a cheetah whose breath her lovers feel down their backs before realising their "clothes are in rags".

From White Emmanuelle to Black Emanuelle: From Desire to Distress

The contradictory construction of black female sexuality as a source of both desire and threat is partly traceable to long-standing constructions of racial Otherness that Italian popular fiction draws upon. For instance, in her work on *Faccetta nera* (or Italian black face), Karen Pinkus has discussed the way in which the black body connotes a monstrous excess of sexual attraction and repulsion in Italian culture. Although this dual fascination and fear of the Other has its roots in the nation's colonial past, she notes that "even today ... blackness always elicits a gaze; a black body is black before it is anything else".[16] In terms of the *Black Emanuelle* series, Gemser's blackness is used as a way of anchoring the non-western regions depicted.

Unlike Sylvia Kristel, whose European status guaranteed her an inoculating distance from the landscapes under review, Gemser's blackness condemned her to being slotted into any exotic culture. Indeed, it is significant that Kristel's tropical explorations adopt the role of the classical western tourist by providing a detailed examination of usually

only one foreign landscape at a time. For instance, the title sequence for the 1977 film *Emmanuelle 3* (also known as *Goodbye Emmanuelle*) features a panoramic bird's eye view of the Seychelles. The camera gradually closes in on the location in the same way as its fictional European protagonists. Both the camera and the characters of this series confirm John Urry's view that the European tourist gaze is centred on:

> ...aspects of landscape or townscape which are distinctive, which signify an experience which contrasts with everyday experience. It is that gaze which gives a particular heightening to other elements of experience, particularly to the sexual.[17]

In contrast to this colonial 'centredness', *Black Emanuelle* literally spanned the world in the course of a 90-minute production, thus disrupting the temporally organised and contrastive experience through which writers such as Urry and Manderson have defined western tourism. Gemser's spatially unstable, transnational quest was often made explicit by the poster campaigns that accompanied the series. These frequently depicted the heroine against historic and culturally definable backdrops (as in *Emanuelle nera – orient reportage* AKA *Black Emanuelle Goes East* [1976], *Emanuelle in America* [*1976*] and *Emanuelle: perché violenza alle donne?* AKA *Emanuelle Around the World* [1977]), or else juxtaposed her against representations of the globe itself (as in the case of *Le notti porno nel mondo*). It was the heroine's ability to shift from one culture to another, seemingly without any problems of assimilation, that led Richard Combs to argue the series demonstrated 'an orgy of globe-trotting' that "quite overshadowed the sexual activity".[18]

Throughout the cycle the black heroine was depicted as a variety of nationalities from Arabic, African and Indian, to Chinese and Japanese. For Italian journalist Manlio Gomorasca, regardless of Gemser's fictional nationality, "she was made to reincarnate all the temptations of the earth, thanks to that little bit of exoticism that the colour of her skin guaranteed".[19] If the series equated the heroine's exoticism with a sense of racial ambiguity, then this seems confirmed by the frequency with which westerners mistake her for 'native'. An example of this is indicated in the credit sequence of *Black Emanuelle*. Here, a hippie missionary attempts to flirt with the heroine by talking seductively to her in Swahili. When Emanuelle replies that she does not understand his language, the missionary responds in English stating that he naturally took her for an African. This interaction sets up a pattern by which Gemser is increasingly absorbed into the landscape, much to the disgust of her white travelling companions.

The reason for their unease relates to the way in which the African landscape and its inhabitants evoke not only desire (by virtue of an exotic sexuality), but also death (via a repeated connection with contagion and decay). From the missionary's revelation that he works with natives whose minds are "clean and uncontaminated" to Gianni's definition of Africa as seductive like "an incurable disease", the fear of infection can be seen as lurking behind this film, the rest of the cycle, and indeed the Italian cultural and psychic machinery that has produced it. As Karen Pinkus has noted, since the 1930s a mythology of corporeal and hygienic deformation had been a central part of the Italian perception of the black body. As a result, non-European lands were reconfigured as sites of sexual and primitive chaos focused on acts such as "masturbation, incest, polygamy and excessive sexuality".[20]

Importantly, such Eurocentric notions concerning the unclean, non-western body are also central to Arsan's novel *Emmanuelle*. For instance, it details a near paranoid obsession with the 'unknowable' nature of the Thai landscape. Here, the locale is divided into a series of 'picturesque' scenes, sites and restaurants,[21] while the frequent nakedness of its inhabitants is referred to as "the Orient you see in films".[22] However, behind these definitions lies a far more threatening and unstable environment that the narration gradually exposes. For instance, chapter four of the novel centres on Emmanuelle's exploration of the city while waiting for her lesbian lover Bee. Here, she stumbles across the horrific sights that remain concealed from the self-styled 'palace' she refers to as her "observation post".[23] The narration remarks that she:

> ...was frozen in horrified contemplation of a leper sitting on the sidewalk. He was moving backward, supporting himself on his decomposing wrists and dragging the stumps of his thighs along the soiled ground. She was so shaken by the sight that she was unable to start the engine of her car. She sat there paralysed, having forgotten where she wanted to go and the movements she had to make, with her undecayed feet, her healthy, fragile hands...[24]

Following this traumatic encounter, it is a reluctant Emmanuelle who explores the more uncivilised regions of the city in the final chapter of the novel. The heroine completes her sexual training under the guidance of Mario, an ageing playboy who promises to show her something foreign and exotic. The narration codes this journey within a vocabulary of disgust: terms such as unclean, mouldy, stench, smell and plague dominate the narration. Equally, the heroine's disdain at the sight of a man urinating in a river reiterates the exposure of both protagonist and reader to a different set of body fluids than have been in evidence so far.

Emmanuelle's expedition includes visits to a number of sex dens where she is forced to lie on filthy bedding and masturbate with wooden dildos described as "revolting", "rough" and "dirty".[25] The heroine's ordeal culminates with Mario coercing her into intercourse with a young native. This encounter is further coded in terms of the heroine's distress. Thus, when Mario commands Emmanuelle to suck and drink from the native's penis her response is "to struggle against nausea" during the act.[26] The narration then goes on to describe the differences between the native and European body which provoke Emmanuelle's unease:

> It was not that she felt that it was degrading, in itself, to perform that act of love with an unknown boy. The same game would have pleased her greatly if Mario had imposed it on her with a blonde, elegant boy who smelled of *eau de cologne* in the bourgeois drawing room of a Parisian friend... but with this boy It was not the same. He did not excite her at all. On the contrary he frightened her. Furthermore, she had at first been repelled by the thought that he might not be clean...[27]

Arguably, the *Black Emanuelle* cycle that followed Arsan's novel shares many of the contradictions surrounding the monstrous nature of non-western sexuality. As with Arsan's novel, there is evidence of the glamorous and profoundly de-historicised exotic displays performed for white explorers: "Africa reduced to colourful ribbons or vaguely tribal jewellery ... assimilated into the vocabulary of the west",[28] as Pinkus would term it. Beyond these pleasant parameters, there is also a more dangerous environment that conceals chaos, violence and the monstrous.

However, what crucially separates the two cycles is the ease with which the black heroine becomes associated with such filth and degradation. Indeed, in Albertini's *Black Emanuelle* Gemser is asked by a young African boy "Why are we the colour we are?", to which the heroine replies: "Let's tell people that we never wash." In contrast to Arsan's Emmanuelle, physical revulsion is replaced in Gemser by physical possession as her body literally becomes invaded by the primitive forces surrounding her. This process of physiological contamination is indicated in Albertini's film through a disorientating dream occurring to the heroine. Here, Emanuelle imagines that she is involved in intercourse with a tribal chief (who manages to maintain full ceremonial headgear during the sex act). This encounter results in a delirious and de-subjectified dream scene where the heroine imagines looking in on herself and Gianni making love. (The camera alternates between the actual act of intercourse and shots of Gemser watching the scene and masturbating.)

While it could be argued that Sylvia Kristel's Emmanuelle also experienced sexually charged trances as the (white) *Emmanuelle* series progressed, these function in a very different manner to the delirium of desire experienced by Laura Gemser. For instance, *Emmanuelle: l'antivierge* (AKA *Emmanuelle 2* [1975]) finds Kristel's character undertaking a course of intimate acupuncture to heighten her erotic senses. This scene, performed in a 'women only' Chinese parlour, results in Emmanuelle's face, lips, breasts and stomach being penetrated by a collection of fine needles that send her into a heightened sensual state. This image (famously reproduced as the marketing campaign poster for the film) intimates the European exposure to an enticing form of Oriental sexuality derived from "notions of liberalism, fantasy, license, fancy and adventure".[29] However, what is interesting is the way that this sequence still splits sexual fantasy along racial lines, with Emmanuelle imagining taking a white lover, rather than one of the locals who have initiated her into this heightened state of pleasure.

Crucially, it is not merely the attitude to non-western physiology and sexuality that separates white from black Emanuelle. Rather, it is the fact that as the *Black Emanuelle* cycle progressed under Aristide Massaccesi's direction, he literally rendered his heroine as 'monstrous' via Gemser's increased exposure to horror, savagery and death. This direction of the cycle can be inferred by a brief consideration of other key titles in the series, such as *Emanuelle e gli ultimi cannibali* (AKA *Emanuelle and the Last Cannibals*, 1977). In this episode, the heroine investigates the existence of cannibals in the Amazon rainforest, after discovering ancient tribal markings on the vaginal lips of a white female mental patient. (This intercontinental theme of savagery once again links the emergence of a European 'symptom' to an underlying ethnic problem.) In many respects, *Emanuelle and the Last Cannibals* takes its travelogue roots to an extreme in the scene where Gemser and her anthropologist lover Mark Lester (Gabriele Tinti) watch mondo-style footage of a ritualistic execution.

The sequence conflates colonial fears around sexuality and death (via the punishment of a couple's illicit relationship), and also features the graphic castration and consumption of a man's penis, which jars with the image of Emanuelle and Lester's copulation. These acts, as well as the savage butchering of a European couple that Emanuelle photographs during the climax of the film once more confirm Rony's claim that anthropological cinema represented "a science strewn with corpses, one obsessed with origins, death and degeneration".[30] However, as with the other films in the cycle Gemser's own blackness provides a position from which to not merely judge and survey, but also to be assimilated to the

Other. This is seen in the finale of the film where Emanuelle dons ritualistic symbols and disguises herself as a water goddess in order to rescue her white lover Isabel from the cannibal lair. As she explains to Lester: "As I look very much like them, they will believe their water god has come to receive their sacrifice."

Under Massaccesi's direction, even the more innocently titled films from the series continued the tradition of immersing the heroine in death and decay. For instance, *Emanuelle in America* finds the reporter investigating a transcontinental snuff movie ring, where woman are raped and tortured onscreen. This film, with its frequent and unmotivated oscillation between sexual pleasure and death not only reiterates the heroine's connection to the monstrous, but also provides an interesting overview of the way in which the series manipulated the motifs of eroticism. Although one of the more extreme examples from the series, a witnessed act of intercourse combining eroticism with either humiliation, violence or implied threat, remains central to the series as a whole.

Equally, even those titles not directed by Massaccesi still function to immerse the dark heroine in primitive and violent environments, revealing a number of contradictory colonial tensions surrounding both the protagonist and the depicted environment. For instance, *Black Emmanuelle, White Emmanuelle* doubles its degree of female sexualisation by having not one but two liberated heroines who occupy the 'Emmanuelle' title. Here, Gemser is joined by seventies sex starlet Annie Belle as Pia, part of the disenfranchised class of expats craving sexual solace in the arid Egyptian landscape the film depicts. While both Gemser and Belle were established erotic performers by the time of the film's release (the latter having appeared in a variety of roles which cast her as a liberated sex kitten with pseudo-feminist pretensions), what is significant here is the way in which the racial distinctions between the two female stars is used to convey a wider range of distinctions that function to separate white/European (civilised) from black (savage) sex drives. For instance, the normally raven-haired Belle is here depicted with a bleached, blonde buzz-cut, while lighting is used in the film to accentuate her 'whiteness'[31] in relation to the darker skinned Gemser. The use of both physiognomic and lighting distinctions to convey wider racial differences between the two protagonists was also further accentuated in the ad campaigns which promoted the film's release:

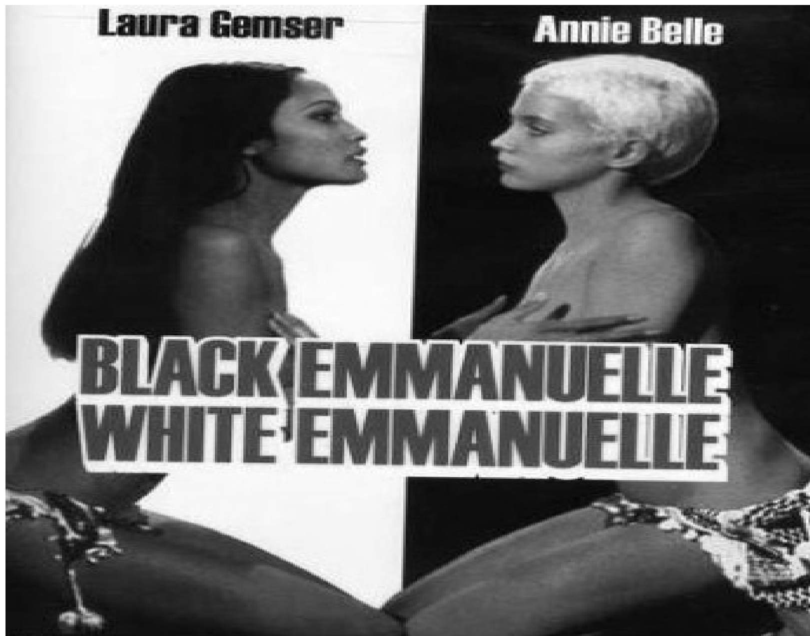

Figure 7.3: Lust in light and shade: racial distinctions dominate the ad campaigns for *Black Emanuelle, White Emanuelle.*

However, it is not merely lighting codes that separate the two heroines, but how they react to the Arabic landscape in which they are depicted. For instance, unlike other entries into the series, Gemser is here depicted not in the role of photographer, but a model under the control of her sadistic boyfriend Carlo (Gabriele Tinti). In a number of key scenes in the film, Carlo forces Gemser's character to initiate intercourse or else exhibit herself in a sexually degraded position against the 'extreme' Egyptian landscape he is photographing. In the first of these encounters (which is also Gemser's introduction into the text), she is forced to pose seductively next to the carcass of a rotting goat, while she is later cajoled into being photographed in an erotic stance against the charred remains of a Bedouin corpse that the pair discover during a local excursion:

Figure 7.4: Abject art: the animal carcass photo-shoot from *Black Emanuelle, White Emanuelle.*

Through these couplings Gemser's character becomes clearly equated with the death and decay implicit in the landscape, with her abject status confirmed by Carlo's dismissal of her as a "lousy shit" when she refuses to adopt more enthusiastically seductive poses next to a rotting animal carcass and human remains.[32] By eroticising such disturbing aspects of Arabic locales, *Black Emmanuelle, White Emmanuelle* reproduces what Anne McClintock has defined as the 'Porno-tropics', a wholly western conception of Africa, Asia and the East as locales dominated by uncontrollable sexual urges, as well as virulent disease and violent death. It is a feature later reproduced in the film's central party scene, hosted by the effeminate Hal (Feodor Chaliapin Jr), whose quest to "discover himself in Moslem Africa" conceals the intent to exert his will over the pubescent native boys he courts. These actions one again reveal the extent to which the European protagonists view the environment and its inhabitants as vehicles for sexual and ideological domination. This social gathering (which includes 'local' dance and ritual displays expected of such mondo-oriented productions) climaxes when wandering white mystic Horatio (Al Cliver) offers to put the jaded guests under a trance in order that they might be able to further align themselves with the unconscious exoticism inherent in the Egyptian landscape. Interestingly, when he attempts to hypnotise Annie Belle's character, she feigns compliance, only to ridicule Horatio's mystical skills. However, Gemser's character is the

first of the guests to be hypnotised, with startling and disturbing results. Not only does the heroine shudder and scream in contorted gestures, but her sudden shift to speaking in Arabic indicates a further hysterical absorption into the landscape:

Figure 7.5: Dark diva: horrific incorporations into the primitive landscape of *Black Emanuelle, White Emanuelle*

The macabre connotations of these incorporations are confirmed when Gemser then grabs a tethered goat and slits its throat before the horrified group, intermittently feasting on its blood while speaking in Arabic.[33] The scene only ends when Gemser staggers out of the party covered in animal blood and in a state of continued delirium, with Horatio unable to rouse her from her state of libidinal excess. "You wanted the truth, well this is it," he tells the partygoers shocked by her sudden shift in behaviour. Interestingly, this violent vignette also marks the character's abrupt exit from the narrative, the remainder of which deals with Pia's seduction of both European and native characters amongst the pyramids. Only a long shot of Gemser disrobing as she wanders into the Egyptian mountains (which is repeatedly replayed in the movie's finale) functions as a reminder of Black Emanuelle's intervention into the narrative, and with her disturbing (and figurative) incorporation into the diseased and archaic excess of the landscape, the logic of the film seems complete.

Deadlier Than the Male: Black Magic, Black Bodies, *Black Cobra*

If the *Black Emanuelle* series does display a series of tensions around monstrous (and ethnic) sex, then these contradictions are also present in *Black Cobra*, which Laura Gemser made for Aristide Massaccesi in 1976. Although not strictly an example of the *Black Emanuelle* series, the film clearly draws on Gemser's established (and increasingly monstrous) 'black' persona. She is cast as Eva, a woman who performs an erotic routine with snakes at a Hong Kong nightclub. The film details Gemser's ill-fated relationship with the wealthy Judas (Jack Palance) and his treacherous brother Julius (Gabriele Tinti). This bizarre love triangle ends with the heroine plotting a deadly revenge against the latter after he murders her white lesbian lover Gerri (Michele Starck).

While this plot overview indicates that Gemser becomes once again associated with death and the macabre, *Black Cobra* also demonstrates the elements of ambiguity surrounding racial and sexual identity that the heroine experienced in the *Black Emanuelle* cycle. Indeed, marketing campaigns for the film accentuated the racial contradictions surrounding 'sliding' ethnic status, even recasting her as European in some territories. This ambivalent marketing seems appropriate, as from the outset of the film Eva is depicted as a character whose origins and relationship with the East remain unstable. The opening sequence (staged once again at an airport) finds a surprised Julius discovering that Eva is not a native as he had presumed, rather a tourist determined to discover the Hong Kong "we don't know about".

As with the *Black Emanuelle* films upon which the narrative draws heavily, this initial uncertainty over the heroine's racial origins allows the narrative to gradually incorporate her into the exotic regions under review. (These locations are depicted in a series of mondo-style documentary sequences in temples, exotic restaurants, massage parlours and lesbian discotheques.) Indeed, after discovering that Julius is responsible for releasing the snake that kills Gerry, Eva plans her revenge by taking Julius to the island where she was born. However, other than describing her village as a region "not yet discovered by tourists", the film does not reveal the specific name of the location or indeed its geographical relationship with the other Eastern regions depicted.

Not only does *Black Cobra* continue the ambivalent construction of its heroine's ethnicity (seen in previous Laura Gemser roles), it also ties Eva's ambiguity to the exotic, and the primitive/ deadly (via her affiliation with snakes). This archaic set of associations is first intimated

in an erotically charged dream that occurs to the heroine soon after her first nightclub routine. Here, Eva lies on her bed and looks off screen at images of herself performing with the snake. This fantasy provokes an act of autoeroticism, to which the heroine responds by initiating masturbation. The imaginary act is then accompanied by another separate vision in which Gemser begins to make love to a Chinese girl. In both cases, the illusory flashes of the female self-examination look back to the bed-bound Eva, indicating a literal split in her identity.

Thus, while the *Black Emanuelle* films frequently used dream scenes to double images of the heroine (as if to underscore her identity as fissured), with *Black Cobra* Massaccesi triples this sense of self in a truly disorientating manner. This loss of subjectivity also comes to the fore in the climax of the film when Gemser leads an unwitting Julius to his death on the unidentified tropical island. Here, the heroine becomes fully incorporated within the sexually aggressive notions of the primitive that haunt the narrative. As a western observer to this transformation, Julius responds with an appropriate degree of disgust. For instance, he makes clear his unease at Eva's insistence that she be allowed to sleep on the filthy floor of a fisherman's hut just as "she had to do as a child". This alteration in behaviour locates Eva as a site of excessive sexual desire (taunting Julius by indulging in group sex with the local natives), primitive and magical acts (performing a black magic ceremony before killing Julius), and savage brutality (killing Julius with a snake that burrows its way out of the victim's body).

In her transformation from an object of western desire and fascination to a source of terror, Eva exhibits the subversive sex element that Lenore Manderson has identified in the Oriental performance of pleasure encountered by the European voyeur/traveller. While such figures of obvious display appear to offer a source of unproblematic gratification, their routines and practices often draw on well established, non-western traditions that equate female sexuality with death and infection. For instance, Manderson notes the frequent use of snakes in Oriental nightclub routines connotes not only female power, but also male castration/ wounding fears. This effect is particularly marked in Thai performances which involve female dancers hiding razor blades and coiled snakes in their vaginas, only to produce these objects to the stunned western observer at a point of heightened erotic charge. The sudden introduction of these threatening objects not only subverts the viewing pleasure associated with such erotic spectacles, it also "explores the theme of the dangerous vagina, as well as the instability of women's desire and of the anomaly of her sexuality".[34]

While *Black Cobra* reveals that Eva's association with snakes is mirrored by Judas's obsession with reptiles, the film is careful to split this dual interest along racial lines. For instance, during their first meeting, Jules informs Eva that the routine she enacts has "ancient origins", which "most people cannot perform". This statement (along with Eva's own admission that the male character caresses her as if she were a snake), strategically distances Judas's own reptilian obsessions, which take the form of the classical colonial collector. (He informs the heroine that his "prized" specimens include examples from Africa, the Sahara and South America.) Once more, these processes indicate the way in which Gemser's casting in the film extends the connotations of sexuality and ethnicity established in her prior role as Black Emanuelle. Equally, it also confirms the status of this character and Eva as sites of sexuality *and* death. This is confirmed in the finale of *Black Cobra*. Here, Eva is killed by Judas's prized snake after she returns to tell him how she engineered Julius's demise.

Eva's death in many respects represents the logical conclusion to the monstrous status Gemser achieved as Emanuelle. In terms of Barry Keith Grant's analysis of the tensions contained within the cult and exploitation text, the film recuperates that "which has initially posed a threat to dominant ideology".[35] This is a figure that by virtue of her sexual and racial difference both attracts and repels, a figure whose contradictory status is first elaborated and then expelled. In this respect the fate of Eva and the many other Emanuelle's before her highlight the monstrous constructions of female sexuality and ethnicity haunting this cycle of Italian cult cinema.

Notes

[1] Anne McClintock, *Imperial Leather: Race, Gender and Sexuality in the Colonial Contest* (London: Routledge, 1996), p.22.

[2] http://www.hsph.harvard.edu/Organizations/healthnet/SAsia/repro2/pursuit_of_pleasure.html Accessed 20/03/2006, 3.

[3] Edward Said, *Orientalism* (London: Penguin, 2003), p.2.

[4] Ibid., p.3.

[5] Fatima Tobing Rony, *The Third Eye: Race, Cinema and Ethnographic Spectacle* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1996), p.7.

[6] For another perspective on the cinematic conflation of exploitation and 'educational' strategies, see the chapter 'Hollywood, Science and Cinema', in E. Ann Kaplan, *Looking for the Other: Feminism, Film and the Imperial Gaze* (London: Routledge 1997), pp.27–56. Here, Kaplan identifies an 'imperial gaze', which "reflects the assumption that the white western subject is central, much as

the male gaze assumes the centrality of the male subject" (p.78). According to Kaplan's analysis, this imperial gaze is seen in the emergence of cinema at the height of colonial travel, noting that both attempted to regulate foreign, non-western landscapes before a look that conflated a (near-erotic) fascination for the exotic with a scientific quest to distinguish and dislocate racial distinction as Other.

[7]Ibid., pp.81–82.

[8] Ibid., p.7.

[9] Ibid., p.55.

[10] http://www.hsph.harvard.edu/Organizations/healthnet/SAsia/repro2/pursuit_of_pleasure.html,7.

[11] Ibid, 8.

[12] Ibid, 5.

[13] Ibid

[14] Barry Keith Grant, 'Second Thoughts on Double Features: Revisiting the Cult Film', in Xavier Mendik and Graeme Harper (eds.), *Unruly Pleasures: The Cult Film and its Critics* (Surrey: Fab Press, 2000), p.19.

[15] Linda Ruth Williams, 'The Oldest Swinger in Town', *Sight and Sound* 10:8 (2000), 24.

[16] Karen Pinkus, 'Shades of Black in Advertising and Popular Culture', in Beverly Allen and Mary Russo (eds), *Revisioning Italy: National Identity and Global Culture* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1997), p.134.

[17] John Urry, *Consuming Places* (London: Routledge. 1995), p.132.

[18] Richard Combs, '*Emanuelle V. Violence to Women*' (review), *Monthly Film Bulletin* 45 (1978), 88.

[19] Manilo Gomarasca, *To Emanuelle* (Milan: Media Word Publications, 1997), pp.4-5.

[20] Pinkus, 'Shades of Black', p.144.

[21] Emanuelle Arsan, *Emmanuelle* (New York: Grove Press, 1971), p.89.

[22] Ibid., p.95.

[23] Ibid., p.104.

[24] Ibid., p.88.

[25] Ibid., p.207.

[26] Ibid., p.208.

[27] Ibid., p.209.

[28] Pinkus, 'Shades of Black', p.149.

[29] http://www.hsph.harvard.edu/Organizations/healthnet/SAsia/repro2/pursuit_of_pleasure.html, 3.

[30] Rony, *The Third Eye*, p.46.

[31] For an analysis of how the technology of film lighting procedures feeds into the ideological construction of racial difference, see the chapter 'The Light of the World' in Richard Dyer's *White* (London: Routledge, 1997), pp.82–145.

[32] Interestingly, the sadistic nature of these 'glamour' shoots forms part of a wider pattern, which also conveys the use of cinematic and photographic technology as mechanisms of white oppression. For instance, the film's pre-credit sequence

depicts stock documentary footage of the pyramids and Bedouins praying before holy temples characteristic of the mondo characteristics of the series. Towards the end of the scene, the camera shifts to the interior, following an Arab worshipper as he walks down the hall of the temple. Importantly, the camera is positioned at the end of the passage and depicts the temple dweller bowing directly to the camera lens as Brunello Rondi's credit as director appears on screen. This initiates a theme of ethnic servitude to white technology and ideology that marks the fate of many of the Arabic characters depicted.
[33] Interestingly, while the animal is being sacrificed, the accompanying soundtrack registers the sounds of a child crying, thus adding a racial dynamic to the maternal/abject connotations of Italian cult cinema discussed in chapter four.
[34] http://www.hsph.harvard.edu/Organizations/healthnet/SAsia/repro2/pursuit_of_pleasure.html, 5.
[35] Grant, 'Second Thoughts on Double Features: Revisiting the Cult Film', p.25.

CHAPTER EIGHT

HIGH CRIMES AND FATALISTIC COPS: THE ITALIAN *POLIZIOTTESCHI* FILMS OF THE 1970S

It is easy to misinterpret Italian crime/cop thrillers of the 1970s as brazen *Dirty Harry* knock-offs because, more often than not, these films incorporated a lone cop fighting the 'system' – using brute force to bring the 'bad guys' down, much in the same way Callahan did in his work. However, Italian crime/cop films were a reflex reaction to the explosive political environment found in cities like Rome, Naples, and Milan during the 1970s.
—Christopher Barry, 'Violent Justice: Italian Crime/Cop Films of the 1970s'[1]

More recent studies of Italian paracinema have noted the generic schizophrenia of Italian trash, the blurred boundaries among all the favoured genres of Bruno Mattei, Umberto Lenzi, Sergio Martino and Ruggero Deodato. Yet for all the current interest awarded to the practitioners of paracinema, little attention is paid to the cultural and critical worries that the polizieschi films embody, or to their relation with the theoretical and historical elaborations of gender that occurred in the same period in Italy.
—Timothy C. Campbell, 'Violent Cities: Umberto Lenzi's Polizieschi and B Movie Fascism'[2]

Introduction

With vivid and vengeful titles such as *Il grande racket* (AKA *The Big Racket*, 1976), *Milano trema – la polizia vuole giustizia* (AKA *The Violent Professionals*, 1973), *Il cittadino si ribella* (AKA *Street Law*, 1974), *Uomini si nasce poliziotti si muore* (AKA *Live Like a Cop, Die Like a Man*, 1976), *Un poliziotto scomodo* (AKA *Convoy Busters*, 1978) and *Luca il contrabbandiere* (AKA, *Contraband*, 1980), the Italian *poliziotteschi* or rogue cop film was another paracinematic format that flourished during the turbulent period of 1970s Italy. The cycle employed the two repeated

tropes of the renegade detective forced to step outside the law to 'correct' criminal activity, or the private citizen who has to adopt the mantle of vigilante as a consequence of police incompetence or inactivity. The series also frequently reproduced elements of '*Mezzogiorno-sploitation*' as discussed in chapter two, through the trope of the busted Northern cop posted to a corrupt rural outpost as a form of punishment. Although the term *poliziotteschi* implies a straight police procedural narrative, the cycle emphasised its cult credentials via explicit scenes of torture and sexual violence (from visceral eye-gouging agony for informant ex-cons, to the gang rape and petrol-scorching of would-be vigilante wives, to gratuitous face melting via Bunsen burners for fraudulent female drug mules), extended chase scenes (featuring an ever expanding repertoire of commuter carnage), and histrionic modes of acting performed by some of the cycle's most iconic male leads (such as Franco Nero, Tomas Milian and Fabio Testi):

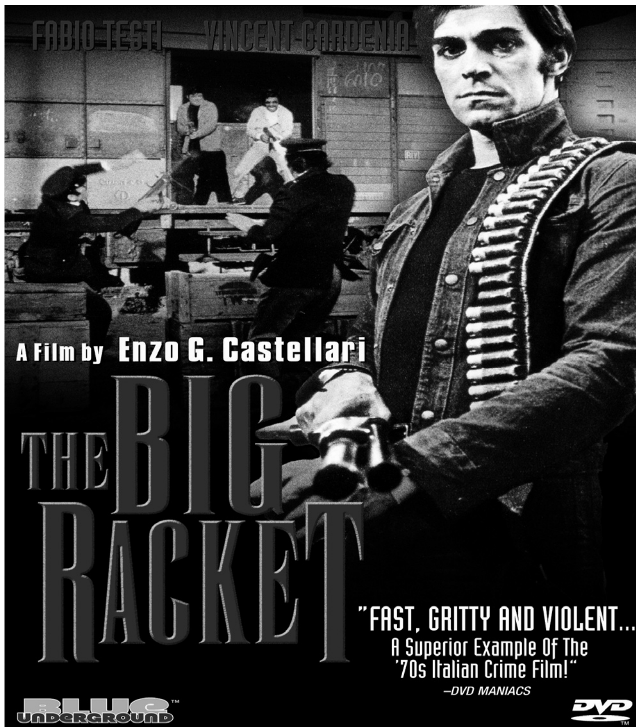

Figure 8.1: Blast fighter: Fabio Testi goes on the vengeance trail in *The Big Racket*.

In terms of their popularity, Italian bibliographic sources suggest that the *poliziotteschi* remains one of the most significant cycles produced during the era. Between 1966 and 1980, 274 *poliziotteschi* narratives were released as either Italian or wider European co-productions (meaning that the cycle far exceeded the *giallo* in terms of feature output) – the majority of which were made between the years of 1970 and 1980.[3] These productions reveal a high degree of coherence, with key periods of production occurring in 1973 (when 36 related productions were produced), 1974 (32 releases) and 1976 (with 37 films being made after a slight dip in the previous year).

As Timothy C. Campbell has noted above, the paradox of the *poliziotteschi* film remains the fact that, despite a rapid and consistent period of production, the theorisation of these Italian cop films has been diminished by the recent critical interest in other Italian cult cycles such as the (classic) *giallo.* However, as Campbell notes, despite functioning as a potential blind-spot within current trash historiography, there remain a number of key connections between the two cycles, with key cast and crew from the *giallo* often playing prominent roles in the formation of the Italian tough cop cycle. For instance, although strongly associated with the *giallo* format, Sergio Martino also contributed five key entries to the tough cop cycle as director between 1973 and 1975, while his production company Dania Film financed and produced many of the key feature films of the cycle for other directors of the *poliziotteschi* series, thus ensuring a further degree of coherence for the cycle as a whole. Equally, director Umberto Lenzi, who is also strongly associated with the *giallo*, completed some of his most iconic 1970s output in the *poliziotteschi*, often for Dania Films. Here, bibliographic data reveals that the director completed 10 prolific entries to the rogue cop cycle between the period of 1973 and 1979, with three films produced in 1976 alone. The popularity of Lenzi's cop thrillers is further confirmed by box office takings which indicate that while other *poliziotteschi* titles such as Sergio Martino's *The Violent Professionals* and Mario Caiano's *Milano violenta* (AKA *Violent Milan*, 1976) averaged a domestic box office gross of 143.000.000[4] and 97.000.000[5] lire respectively, Lenzi's *Milano odia: la polizia non può sparare* (AKA *Almost Human*, 1974) achieved 207.000.000 lire.[6] Beyond this obvious audience appeal, Campbell has argued that by emphasising the unstable social and sexual dynamics of the urban Italian space, as well as foregrounding an unhealthy veneration of the "transgressive, often disfigured body",[7] Lenzi's 1970s crime narratives also provide a crucial bridge between his earlier *giallo* and later zombie and cannibal productions for which he was to become infamous:

> …for all their lack of aesthetic flair, the films under examination here Milano odia: la polizia non può sparare/Almost Human (1974), Roma a mano armata/Rome Armed to the Teeth (1976), Napoli violenta/Violent Protection (1976), and Da Corleone a Brooklyn/From Corleone to Brooklyn (1978) – stand out for their imaginative elaboration of the category of virility in modern Italy, in a moment of crises for masculinity brought on by greater differentiation of gender roles of the 1970s.[8]

Whilst it could be argued that the rogue cop cycle has suffered because of the recent theoretical focus on the *giallo* outlined in the introduction to this volume, the social significance of the *poliziotteschi* series has been further diminished by the themes it shared with existing American vigilante films of the 1970s. Indeed, the Anglo-American reception of the *poliziotteschi*'s key titles repeatedly diminish the importance of these texts by referring to them as emulations of international successes such as *The French Connection* (1971) *Dirty Harry* (1971), *Death Wish* (1974) and *Magnum Force* (1973).[9] While it is true that both the American and Italian rogue cop cycles share what Christopher Barry has defined as a fantasised desire for the "individualist cop, the macho law enforcer, silent while withstanding pain",[10] these masculine representations also serve a markedly different set of social and political contexts which require further elaboration. This chapter therefore considers both comparisons and differences between the *poliziotteschi* hero and American fictionalised versions of the lone cop, as well as analysing the possible social, historical and sexual configurations underpinning this cult cycle (and its key male stars). In so doing, it will also explore why the 1970s witnessed such an explosion in Italian crime narratives, and how these violent representations can be linked to other psychosexual tensions explored in the volume.

American Enforcers and Italian Emulators

As with the American avengers who initiated these templates, the *poliziotteschi* hero is either an embattled and weary cop forced to step outside the law to confront violent oppression and formal corruption, or a private citizen cajoled into crime-fighting to avenge a family violation or personal vendetta. As Christopher Barry concedes, with "titles like *Una magnum Special per Tony Saitta* (AKA *Blazing Magnums*, 1976) and *Napoli si ribella* (AKA *A Man Called Magnum*, 1977), it is easy to see why viewers regard these Italian films as forgettable rip-offs".[11] Indeed, the 'exploitation' element of these movies extends beyond the re-titling of continental cop thrillers based on the popularity of *Magnum Force*, to include the casting of actors such as Vincent *Death Wish* Gardenia in *The*

Big Racket, as well as established European stars such as Fernando Rey and Marcel Bozzuffi in roles that clearly drew upon their past personas from *The French Connection*. For instance, Enzo G. Castellari's *La polizia incrimina la legge assolve* (AKA *The Marseilles Connection* [1973]) casts Rey as an ageing gangland boss in a role that clearly draws parity on his previous billing, while the similarity of titling was used by later productions to convey the international nature of crime these narratives detail.[12]

However, while the *poliziotteschi* appears a carbon copy of the American lone cop narrative, closer analysis reveals that the two cycles address very differing sets of social (and sexual) anxieties. For instance, Mia Mask has linked the emergence of the Stateside rogue cop to the tumultuous political and cultural changes enacted in the post 1968 era, where race politics, countercultural militancy and adversarial advances by the feminist movement created a fantasised desire for a potent form of 'phallic policing'. In the case of *Dirty Harry*, Mask links the release of the film to the increased visibility of the anti-war movement (which witnessed more than 200,000 protesters marching on Washington on April 24 1971), whilst militant feminist and African American political groups also helped create a series of fictional detectives that gratified "mainstream America's thirst for crime films featuring tough white cops who confronted and controlled inner-city crime".[13] In the course of her discussion, Mask offers a convincing analysis that positions 'Dirty Harry' Callahan (Clint Eastwood) and lone psychotic gunman Scorpio (Andy Robinson), as representatives of the authoritarian American mainstream and the countercultural movement respectively. (Scorpio's indexical connections to subcultural politics include his prominent CND belt buckle, long hair and hippie attire.)[14] Moreover, as Mask points out, Scorpio's persona carries a series of distinctly feminine characteristics which confirm his status as a sexually ambivalent alternative to Eastwood's stoic but 'stable' investigator.[15] As a result, Scorpio's character throws up a number of challenges to heteronormativity from which Eastwood's character must remain structurally separate. As Mask notes:

> Actor Robinson's higher-pitched voice, his long, curly hair, his limp leg (wounded by Harry), the brutal cosmetic manipulation of his face (self-inflicted to frame Harry for police brutality) and his hippie costumes are semiotic codes for his dubious masculinity or relative femininity.[16]

As the above quotation indicates, Mask sees the wider project of the film as extending beyond a critique of the troubling elements of the counterculture to include a strategy of controlling female (and feminised)

sexuality in line with advances that were occurring in gender based politics during this period. As Peter Lev has similarly noted:

> *Dirty Harry* presents a San Francisco overrun with crime and sexuality, as represented by the red-light district, a woman known as "Hot Mary", a homosexual in the park, a sexual threesome involving two women and a man … and of course Scorpio himself.[17]

In this respect, it is interesting to note that while *Dirty Harry* makes explicit the distinction between a feminised ambivalent loner and the lone but potent phallic cop as avenger, an uncomfortable series of comparisons between the pair circulate around their shared interest in their surveillance of women's bodies. For instance, the film's opening scene, in which one roof-top victim "is situated below the assassin's voyeuristic position",[18] establishes a pattern whereby both the feminine and the San Francisco landscape circulate in a relay of looks between both killer and avenging cop. This is indicated in scenes where Eastwood is mistaken for a prowler and beaten by locals for peering in on a downtown sexual coupling, as well as later illicit glances at a chic countercultural orgy accidentally spotted while patrolling for Scorpio. It is these instances, as well as the shocking sequence of Callahan scrutinising the killer's latest naked and violated corpse, which confirms that "*Dirty Harry* may centre on crime, but women, their sexual vulnerability, and the containment of an androgynous murderer are at the film's foundation".[19]

While reproducing many of the sexual contradictions from the American lone cop template, the *poliziotteschi* noticeably reorients bodily trauma towards the masculine, ensuring that problematic issues of criminality and gender address a far more specifically Italian set of concerns, which relate to the decade-long wave of political and terrorist activity often referred to as *Anni di piombo* or 'years of lead'. Historians such as Martin Clark have pinpointed key events of this phenomenon, including the 1969 Piazza Fontana (Milan) and 1980 (Bologna) bombings by clandestine fascist groups, as well as sustained violent activity by leftist collectives such as The Red Brigades (*Brigate rosse*), which included the spectacularly tragic kidnapping and murder of Christian Democrat Premier Aldo Moro in 1978. Unlike America's relatively brief period of social insurgency, Italy's so-called 'Hot Autumn' spiralled into a bloody state of sustained civil conflict that continued to run into the mid-1980s. If this indicates a far more complex and toxic set of social and economic factors than identified by Mia Mask's analysis of *Dirty Harry*, then it is confirmed by Clark's conclusion that unlike other European and North American territories, in Italy:

> … the struggle continued for years. Student riots became an everyday occurrence scarcely noted by the media. Industrial militancy also became routine. The economy staggered from recession to stagflation. Protest spread to the schools, to the welfare services, to the police and army, to the political parties, to the Church, even to the family.[20]

Clark's closing comments here prove interesting, integrating familial tension into the wider political and social tensions occurring in Italy during this time. While it would be reductive to distil these complex social and political tensions into a purely gender-based or psychoanalytic dynamic, it is significant that the years of lead are often recounted in distinctly libidinal/familial terms, most frequently by the terrorist perpetrators themselves. For instance, the Italian sociologist Raimondo Catanzaro has discussed notions of ego loss and depersonalisation that accompanied the actions of many *Brigate rosse* activists during the 1970s. By analysing interview transcriptions from imprisoned representatives of the organisation, as well as via direct participant observation with lower ranking affiliates, Catanzaro identifies a process of *dissociati*, or dislocation, from existing social and emotional bonds as a precursor to involvement in violent terrorist acts. This signals a potential loss of ego, exposing junctures between unrestrained somatic 'urges' and the wider social body, producing what the author terms "a marked break in biographical history".[21] Importantly, this eruption of violence (figured through the favoured *Brigate rosse* tactics of kidnappings, beatings, assassinations and kneecapping) function as a type of politicised return of the repressed, with transgressive and murderous displays preventing the activist from "reconstructing a coherent identity of his or her own past".[22] Interestingly, the rationale for these violent outrages is often coded in clearly libidinalised terms by respondents:

> [The armed struggle was] … attractive because it was … a break … a break with a castrated and obsolete world of politics, the old and unresponsive world. [23]

From the above comments, it becomes clear that the world of established political discourse is here constructed as both generationally and genitally 'impaired', while the *Brigate rosse* is clearly distinguished from lost potency by its ability to engage in violent insurrection. Thus, when Catanzaro quizzes respondents about handling weapons prior to an assault or assassination, one interviewee conveys not guilt or remorse for their actions, but an unabashed and almost infantile fascination with the power that such weaponised assault can convey:

> …arms have a fascination of their own, it is a fascination that makes you feel in some way more … more virile … this sensation of feeling stronger, more manly … I found myself … showing them to women, to try and impress them … and then it seemed somehow more noble…[24]

Catanzaro concludes that the fascination with phallic armoury is associated with returning to a less 'civilised' and corrupted state: "The relationship … with arms was not justified solely from the point of view of fascination, but also from the point of view of its being 'natural.'"[25] This desire to use political violence to regress to a more natural (and ultimately infantile) state marks not only Catanzaro's account, but contemporary readings of the years of lead, which further connect social and political paranoia with unresolved sexual traumas.[26] Equally, while this curious conjoining of the seditious with the psychic has yet to be fully theorised in relation to marginal Italian cult cycles such as the *poliziotteschi,* research from other Italian fictional formats produced during the 1970s does point to the pertinence of reading Italian terrorism through gender-based and psychoanalytic methodologies.

For instance, while the *poliziotteschi* does not figure directly in her analysis, Beverly Allen has highlighted the re-narrativisation of *Anni di piombo* across a range of creative and literary works, which significantly altered their content to include themes of politically-motivated conflict during this period. For instance, by considering alterations in the Italian novel during a period of prolific Italian terrorism, Allen has identified a crucial conflation between the "membranous body politic"[27] and the body of literature that replicated terrorist acts. Interestingly, the author situates these dramatic social and political changes within a distinctly physiological and polymorphous terminology:

> Situating fixed bodies became ever more difficult, therefore, except for the literal ones left dead, maimed or imprisoned. The figurative body politic, subject to constant reconstructions and undoings, determined by violent acts and discursive practices, shows up as a membranous entity, adjusting here and there, feeling uncomfortable in its (libidinous?) osmosis…[28]

Allen's reference to this infantile base of violent revolt proves significant, as she proceeds to read a perverse familial element across the two distinct patterns of Italian novel produced during the decade. For instance, via an analysis of fiction produced in the early 1970s (such as Natalia Ginsberg's 1973 novel *Caro Michele*), she identifies a repeated pattern of infantalising problematic and politicised (males) as a mechanism of absorbing their transgressions back into the existing social and sexual structures implicit in Italian nationhood. In this respect, Allen

suggests a 'romanticisation' of left-leaning protagonists (interestingly, depictions of fascist paramilitaries remain largely absent from literary works produced in this first wave of terrorist texts). In part, this softening of the terrorist's image reflects the fact that "the perpetrators of the violence … belonged to the same group as the readers of the novels",[29] a factor reiterated by Paul Ginsborg, who has similarly identified middle-class, intellectual backgrounds to *Brigate rosse* founders such as Renato Curcio and Mara Cagol.[30]

Ginsborg's assumption of a strong Catholic affiliation in these middle-class antagonists, ensuring that "the transition from adolescent religious idealism to the revolutionary groups … and then to the terrorist bands was a common one",[31] is also relevant here, with the Catholic veneration of both the family and the sanctified innocence of the young central to the idealised image of terrorism that these early 1970s novels present. As a result, these formative years of lead fictions often distil issues of ideological struggle into familial and Oedipal frameworks, which emphasise resolving the "insistent theme of paternity – traditional, threatened, assumed, ambivalent or otherwise",[32] whilst also foregrounding maternal influence as a corrective to any misdirected teenage aggression. Through this reduction of terrorist acts to an infantile and familial nexus, Allen notes that:

> Initially, the novel as a genre casts the perpetrators as prodigal children, offspring of the ruling class, certainly part of the body politic, certainly Italian, and thus reassuringly recuperable.[33]

In marked contrast to these early depictions of political terror, later representations of the ideological fugitive are marked by not only the stark descriptions of their acts, but also their marginalisation from the Italian "normative social body".[34] For Allen, a novel such as Carlo Castellaneta's *Ombre* (published in 1982) replaces the comforting image of the maternal with the more troubling figure of "the *madre snaturata* (denatured mother)"[35] via the female protagonist Marina, who abandons her illegitimate child in favour of radical and violent insurrection. As well as annexing taboo subjects of shunned motherhood and unabashed sexual activity (indicated by her status as 'sex prize' for the differing male members of her leftist political cell), this shift from male to female agitation in part reflects Ginsborg's definition of Italian feminism as the "last of the collective movements to develop in the early 1970s … that destined to have the greatest influence in the long run".[36] This annexing of political orientation and libido (underscored by the protagonist's fantasised scenarios of revolt during her progression to sexual climax) underscores

what Allen also sees as the shift from depicting terrorists as children to "associating the "terrorist" protagonists with sexual behaviour cast as abnormal".[37]

This transition towards the perversion of sex drive as modus operandi for extreme insurrection is matched by the inclusion of an unnamed fascist activist in Castellaneta's novel, whose political and sexual activities function as a mirror to Marina's feminist transgressions. Whilst the fascist protagonist's links to adult perversion are ensured by his involvement in a series of sexual murders, he (along with his promiscuous female mirror image) functions as a fictional delegate who references the categories of real life political atrocities prevalent during this decade. Thus, whereas the female lead is described as receiving stimulation from planning "high-risk kidnappings"[38] (mirroring the favoured *Brigate rosse* tactic), the shadowy fascist male registers sexual arousal from planning bomb outrages (similar to the extreme right-wing explosions at both Milan and Bologna). Equally, while the female protagonist denies her family connection via abandonment, the transgressive male character's links to the social compact are even more opaque, with any family connection being "vague almost to the point of nonexistence".[39] By emphasising the link between extreme ideological conviction and "unbridled libido",[40] Allen also argues that the terrorist fictions of the later 1970s and early 1980s function to protect the Italian state from the horrors of home-grown, violent descent. This increasing externalisation (as indicated in *Ombre* by the fascist character's international connections and eventual flight from Italy to South America) reiterates the author's view that nationhood is thus confirmed by the implication that "it does not include the deviance of "liberated" women, voyeuristic male murderers, and, secondly, the clandestine political violence called 'terrorism'".[41]

Infantilisation and Ideology: Re-Reading 'Right-Wing' Rhetoric

Although neither fascist groups nor left-wing collectives are explicitly named in the *poliziotteschi*, the representation of terrorism in the cycle shares a broad chronology with the novels discussed in Allen's analysis, as well as annexing political confrontation with the physical and libidinal affects that she identifies. In many respects, the reason why these political groupings remain so amorphous to the *poliziotteschi* partly reflects the extensive (and often highly regionalised) proliferation of terrorist cells during this era, to the extent that "by 1976 … there were 140 separate left-wing terrorist groups active in the country".[42] However, reflecting Martin

Clark's observation that "Terrorism was partly self-financed through bank robberies, kidnappings etc"[43] it is noticeable that botched bank raids and the resulting abduction of (usually female) hostages form a visual vocabulary in all of the *poliziotteschi* titles surveyed for this volume.

While these acts implicitly reference left-wing radical tactics popular during the *Anni di piombo*, they are never explicitly linked to any political cause. Indeed, the *poliziotteschi* actively seek to shift attention away from left-wing suspects, either revealing a neo-fascist conspiracy to falsely implicate countercultural groups in theft and kidnappings (as in Martino's *Violent Professionals*), or uncovering female 'hostages' as duplicitous co-conspirators in bank raids (as in Marino Girolami's *Italia a mano armata* [AKA *A Special Cop in Action*, 1976]).

Whilst this somewhat ambivalent political stance reflects the fact that (until the Moro kidnapping and murder at least) left-wing activists could rely on "plenty of money and some public sympathy",[44] it also reproduces a potential *poliziotteschi* affinity between terrorist and presumed viewer that Allen identifies in the first wave of early 1970s Italian terrorist novels. Indeed, this connection appears confirmed by the fact that the rogue cop's views of the counterculture are often moderated after an undercover stint at a commune (*The Violent Professionals*), while students and other categories of the disaffected prove crucial allies to the avenging Italian citizen's quest to bring down an organised crime or racketeering syndicate (*Street Law*).

Equally, while Martin Clark has identified the "vast-wave series of unofficial 'wildcat' stoppages, street demonstrations, protest marches and factory occupations, spreading throughout Northern Italy"[45] as evidencing the volatile fusion of left-wing activism and industrial militancy from 1967 to 1976, these events are presented in an ambivalent manner by the *poliziotteschi.* For instance, one of the most iconic and symbolically charged scenes of the whole series occurs in Enzo G. Castellari's *The Marseilles Connection*, when Franco Nero's embittered Inspector Belli has to intervene on an industrial protest to try to arrest his superior's killer, who is hiding in the striking ranks. The scene begins with a montage mixture of overhead and low angle verité-style shots of Nero's character first challenging the strike leaders before being enveloped in the militant throng. However, as soon as Belli informs the union leader that he has arrived to arrest his police commissioner's assassin, the crowd instantaneously and silently parts as if in tacit recognition of the validity of his quest, thus facilitating the easy capture of the gunman.

Before being arrested, Belli's prey pleads with the strikers, "Comrades, stop him, stop him! He's a fascist!", a statement that is often seen as

embodying the sentiments of both the *poliziotteschi* and their fictionalised rogue avengers. The idea is widely held that the cycle's extreme right-wing sentiments follow the American rogue cop films, to which the *poliziotteschi* are too frequently compared.

For instance, the original reception of *Dirty Harry* stressed both Scorpio's connection to a political counterculture defined by perverse murderous excess, as well as Harry's extreme methods of policing, leading to the film being labelled as moral fascism and "fascist medievalism"[46] by reviewers Roger Ebert and Pauline Kael respectively. Eastwood's character was subsequently critiqued as a "reactionary, white cop. Politically aligned with the establishment", who "makes no secret of his distaste for ethnic minorities or the plight of the inner city ghettos".[47] Equally, it is interesting to note that similar sentiments seem to apply to the reception of the *poliziotteschi.* For instance, even Italian cult historiographers such as Stephen Thrower have rejected the ethos of the Italian rogue cop movie, arguing that "Italy's exploitation directors had, during the seventies, turned from the labyrinthine narrative excesses of the *giallo* to the right-wing enforcement wet dreams of the *poliziesco*",[48] while Timothy C. Campbell (author of one of the few academic articles written on the cycle) also struggles to situate the Italian cop beyond fascist ideologies surrounding the impregnable male body. However, as noted above, the Italian rogue cop cycle details a very different set of social and political dynamics to Harry Callaghan's North American model, and one in which any clear alignment between the lone cop and the political establishment becomes problematic.

Indeed, the *poliziotteschi* cycle actually exceeds attempts to recuperate the 'youthful' political extremism that Allen identifies in early 1970s Italian terrorist novels, by not only infantilising teenage activists, but also foregrounding actual infants as perpetual victims of adult sexuality and crime. Thus, when Luc Merenda's undercover cop falls for Maria, the foxy feminist activist depicted in *The Violent Professionals*, he jokingly gives her the nickname "Maria X",[49] as a way of diminishing her strident actions within a more informal and restrained set of emotional relations. As we discover, Maria's road to radicalism is itself a revolt against an infantilised position of exploitation that previous older male figures have enacted against her: from the philosophy tutor that tried to sexually assault her at university, to the male 'photographers' and agents who exploited nude shots of her in a prior modelling career. Her later assassination by a wider conspiracy of government-backed fascist operatives indicates how this strategy of infantilism often has a lethal trajectory, with young radicals often dying in the arms of the rogue Italian cop (with a decidedly

homoerotic version of this formula being reproduced in Castellari's *Street Law*). It also points to the *poliziotteschi* as possessing a more conciliatory, and left-leaning, set of political affiliations than recognised by contemporary reviewers. As Christopher Barry has commented:

> The majority of these films were produced with a blatant anti-government agenda. Italian crime/cop films not only stood against the police force, but they blazed away at the government as a whole, which was represented as crumbling into despair and fully corrupt. The best films of the cycle … portray a weakened police force liberally accepting a bloody terrorist reign and fascist syndicates spearheaded by government officials.[50]

If the teen terrorist represents one category that requires the *poliziotteschi* cop's protection, then their vulnerable status is both replicated and supplemented by the pivotal role that children play within the Italian rogue cop cycle. Rather than being infantilised as a mechanism to recuperate their radical impetus, these literal children proliferate in the narratives reviewed, functioning as victims of both political violence and adult perversion. In terms of the image of the vulnerable infant, it is noticeable that the abduction and murder of a child is central to the extreme cop's revenge motifs in all titles reviewed for this volume. Some overload the theme of violated innocence, by rendering multiple children as subject to abduction and assault. For instance, *A Special Cop in Action* features a school bus of children who are kidnapped in Milan, before being executed, with the police forced to watch their plight from the distance. Other narratives use the image of the butchered child as a haunting malady that underpins the rogue cop's extreme quest (as in the case of *The Marseilles Connection*, where Franco Nero's daughter is run over as punishment for her father exposing an international drugs ring).[51]

Often this corruption of innocence includes an obscene sexualisation of the child, as in the case of titles such as *The Big Racket*, where a wilful shop owner's pre-teen daughter Stefania (Stefania Girolami) is abducted, gang raped and murdered as punishment for his refusal to meet their protection racket payment plan.[52] This unpalatable scene is made all the more disturbing by virtue of the participation of a female gang member in the sexual violations. Interestingly, her pivotal role in kidnapping the young girl is predicated on the assailant disguising herself as a nun in order to gain Stefania's trust (thus reproducing the distorted image of motherhood identified by Allen in later Italian terrorist novels of the 1970s).

High (Camp) Crime and Histrionics

As indicated above, the years of lead produced a startling range of *poliziotteschi* movies, which at first appear deeply indebted to the American rogue cop cycle. While sharing a common iconography and appeal to the theme of the American enforcer, what is also noticeable about the *poliziotteschi* series is the marked distinction in terms of a masculine and social body politic that these films display. While a rogue cop such as Dirty Harry Callahan "re-establishes masculine control over a feminised, urban landscape",[53] it is the *poliziotteschi* hero who is subject to an enforced feminisation and violation from which he struggles to recover. Unlike the laconic and long-lasting ego-ideal of Eastwood's *Dirty Harry*, it is not uncommon for the Italian rogue cop hero to die in the closing reels of the film, as is the case in both *The Marseilles Connection* and *A Special Cop in Action*. In the latter example, the image track suddenly shifts from colour to monochrome coding at the point where Inspector Berti (Maurizio Merli) is shot by unidentified assassins, to convey the very realist manner in which "bombings and assassinations became a normal part of the Italian drama"[54] during this decade.

Equally, given the Oedipal process that writers such as Beverly Allen have identified as central to Italian images of crime and political violence in the 1970s, it seems significant that the paternal structures she identifies in the domestic literature of the period are actually ruptured rather than reproduced in the celluloid rogue cop cycle. Here, it is noticeable that the assassination of a respected older male (usually the central protagonist's superior) is frequently the motivation for their subsequent rampage. Rather than having paternity as tested only to be resolved, the *poliziotteschi* configures vendetta as a rupture across the generational chain of masculinities, from which the Italian rogue cop struggles to recover. Significantly, while the *poliziotteschi* often depicts a retarded familial lineage in relation to its villains (thus reproducing an attempt to externalise their criminality that Allen finds in later Italian terrorist novels), the rogue cop's only link to a wider emotional sphere often comes through a heightened insertion into his superior's domestic/familial relations, with the informal familiarity between the two men intimating that the younger detective will one day take on the elder male's phallic mantle. If this familial 'restructuring' (which often generates the only domestic scenes within the Italian cop cycle) draws comparison to the wider Oedipal pattern "of being a step-child or an adopted child"[55] that Freud identified in his study of 'The Family Romance', then it explains why the sudden loss of this fantasised father figure "of higher social standing"[56] is met

with such rage and trauma on the part of the central *poliziotteschi* hero. Indeed, as demonstrated in a film such as Enzo G. Castellari's *The Marseilles Connection*, it is significant that the death scenes of these elder police figures are themselves highly spectacular and emotive moments, often combining slow motion montages and melancholic theme tunes to underscore the traumatic loss of these paternal figures.

In many respects, the close bonds that occur between these differing generations of male cops reproduces what Maggie Günsberg has identified as the "oldman/boy pairings"[57] in other Italian cult genres such as the spaghetti western. Günsberg (here drawing on Steve Neale's work on masculine patterns of spectacle and identification within male-oriented action cinema), argues that these Italian cycles are haunted by the fear of both sexual difference and femininity and, as a result, erotic charge is distilled not across heterosexual couplings, but via differing generations of male characters. In such cases, these fictions subvert the 'normalised' developmental sex structure that dominates heteronormative development, so that:

> Rather than resolve the Oedipal complex via heterosexuality and marriage … the complex is on occasion sidestepped or drastically scaled… In some films the traditional family trio (father, mother, son) is completely replaced by an all-male family…Alternatively, the family is reduced to the father-son dyad, thereby excluding femininity altogether and preserving homosexual exclusivity.[58]

The sexual dynamic of the old man/boy pairing of the *poliziotteschi* is underscored by a related trope, whereby the superior survives an assassination attempt, but has his potency reduced because of these injuries. As in the case of avenging the dead father/superior figure, the Italian rogue cop's response to the emasculation of this older role model is an unrestrained display of phallic rage and carnage that far outstrips the violence of his opponents. Although these narratives rarely address the impairment of the superior officer in directly sexualised terms, the visual vocabulary relating to these disorders is highly charged and easily equated with genital mutilation and castration. One notable example occurs at the end of *A Special Cop in Action,* when Commissioner Berti visits his superior officer and surrogate father in hospital, after the latter has been subject to a hit-and-run by a group of French drug dealers. Although the medical prognosis for this injury is revealed as irreversible paralysis, the visual vocabulary of the scene (which employs a highly evocative surgical dressing draped over the groin area to emphasise wounding to the genital area) underscores the sexual undercurrent of the illness.

As well as mourning the loss of the phallic father figure, it is also noticeable that the *poliziotteschi* hero suffers an extreme of mutilation and humiliation which clearly demarcates him from the near-indestructible image of the American rogue cop with which he is often compared. Indeed, the systematic differences between these two rogue cop formats point to a very different set of generic influences and gender codes as underpinning the *poliziotteschi* cycle *and* the actors who performed these iconic roles. For Campbell, the social and political turmoil of the years of lead are often directly distilled through the body of the Italian rogue cop; the way in which these films "part ways with the Hollywood action cinema of the same period is primarily in the point of view they adopt vis-à-vis masculine bodies that no longer have the usual means at their disposal for demonstrating virility".[59] Indeed, the closest Italian model of demonstrable machismo to mirror Eastwood's persona has to be Italy's actor-of-lead Maurizio Merli (who Christopher Barry notes acted in 12 *poliziotteschi* movies between 1975 and 1979).

Merli's stature in the genre is confirmed by the fact that he is one of the few actors from the cycle to be attributed with his own axes of seriality (playing the embittered Commissioners Betti, Berni and Tanzi in multiple crime outings). Within these renditions, the actor created a high octane cult persona which traded on the heightened signifiers of his onscreen virility where "the beatings he doles out to criminals from beginning to end would make even Dirty Harry or Popeye Doyle blush".[60] Even off-screen, Merli's unstoppable phallic gusto attained cult credibility, where frequently "the actor may have enjoyed his role a little too much – actually smacking down stuntmen during the fight sequences".[61] Indeed, Merli's superhuman performances (traditionally demonstrated by an obligatory extended chase and gun-them-down sequence at the start of each of his movies) were even commented upon by the often self-reflexive dialogue that accompanied his fictional roles (usually by surgeons who remark on his incredible ability to withstand pain and torment). While it is true that Maurizio Merli retained all the key characteristics to play Italy's cop of lead – a "dirty crop of blond hair, thick bushy moustache, unruly mutton-chop sideburns, rose lensed avatar shades, chipped teeth, clenched fists"[62] – what is interesting is how his image of potency was only ever *relational*, rather than resolute.

Here, potent star image only gained value by being opposed to the feminised and deformed opponents ranged against him, which were usually played with histrionic flare by Cuban-born actor Tomas Milian. Interestingly, Milian studied at the Lee Strasberg Actor's Studio in New York during the 1950s, only relocating to Italy after a successful career in

North America failed to materialise. Although he went on to work in a number of acclaimed roles for European art directors such as Bernardo Bertolucci and Luchino Visconti, his reputation flourished through a series of genre productions that traded on his unnatural ability to contort his body in grotesque and unnatural ways.

The centrality of Milian's performances may have escaped critical review, but are cemented within the cult community which makes up his core audience. For instance, writing in the recently published genre biography *Tomas Milian: The Tough Bandit, The Rough Cop and the Filthy Rat in Italian Cinema*, Pierpaolo Duranti has defined Milian as a "cornerstone … cult icon" of Italian trash cinema, whose prolonged popularity with genre audiences led to him being dubbed the "Cuban of Cinecittà".[63] As with many of the icons of *poliziotteschi,* Milian gained widespread exposure during the late 1960s spaghetti western craze in a series of hysterically-charged bandit roles in titles that included *Se sei vivo spara* (AKA *Django Kill*, 1967) and *Faccia a faccia* (AKA *Face to Face*, 1967).

Although he only occupied a 15 minute slot in Mario Lanfranchi's portmanteau 'Django' entry *Sentenza di morte* (AKA *Death Sentence*, 1968), his role as an epileptic albino henchman beset by body spasms and gurgling cries is indicative of the "inherently campy qualities"[64] he cultivate across other key performances from the era. It comes as little surprise that Milian's most outrageous and yet memorable roles occurred within the Italian rogue cop cycle of the 1970s, with sustained outings as both villain (most infamously as the twitchy, bisexual kidnapper Giulio in Lenzi's *Almost Human*),[65] outraged citizen (the vengeful biker Rambo in Lenzi's later *Il giustiziere sfida la città* [AKA *Rambo's Revenge*, 1975]) and maverick cop (seen in multiple productions including *Squadra volante* [AKA *Emergency Squad*, 1974]).

Indeed, while Maurizio Merli's star billing afforded him multiple performances as definable cop characters, this cult seriality was not only matched, but surpassed, by Milian (possibly explaining the caustic relations between the two stars in their frequent movie pairings).[66] For instance, having proven adept at shuddering and shaking through a series of onscreen personas, Milian developed the "new identity of 'Monnezza', a lower class white trash hick",[67] which fed across a number of screen titles, as well as the memorable 'Il Gobbo', a sadistic hunchbacked gangland boss, whom the actor most famously 'performed' opposite Merli in Umberto Lenzi's *Rome Armed to the Teeth.*

According to Campbell, the physiological deformity in Milian's role here renders his body and sexuality "inorganic" and non-differentiated,[68]

while the hysterical demonstrations he 'performs' when under police investigation also points to an excess of *non-characterisation*, which contrasts sharply with the cool, calculated phallic control of Merli's Commissioner Tanzi character. Interestingly, Milian is introduced into the narrative in an abattoir, dissecting the bloodied carcass of cattle (in an unscripted scene which the actor apparently requested be added to the shooting schedule). Thus, he is both "literally a butcher (we see him in the first scene cleaning the entrails of a recently butchered cow) and head of the most important band of criminals operating in the city",[69] whilst being instantly equated with the non-defined 'flesh' against which Tanzi's masculine identity must be compared. In one pointed scene, Il Gobbo attempts to crush Tanzi's wife (Maria Rosaria Ommagio) in an industrial press as a warning against the impending police investigation. As a reprisal for this act of aggression, Tanzi forces Milian's character to eat one of the bullets with which the commissioner will later kill the deviant. Read as a literal incorporation (rather than possession of) the phallus, it is noticeable than Milian readily accepts this feminised status with characteristic physiological excess: gagging on the bullet and shuddering uncontrollably before swallowing, he then apologises to Tanzi after ingestion of the metal object brings on an uncontrolled belching attack.[70]

While it is clear that the polarisation of Milian's and Merli's physiological and performative styles have wider ramifications for the range of masculine positions they convey, it is noticeable that even as a solo entertainer, Milian's later repertoire became increasingly feminised and hysterical, with the actor often adopting multiple roles in each film, again with an emphasis on grotesque and histrionic excess. For instance, Lenzi's 1978 *La banda del gobbo* (AKA *Brothers Till We Die*), fuses the actor's previously distinct characters of the illiterate street thug Monnezza (whose afro hair here figures him as more 'brown' than 'white trash'),[71] and the resurrected Il Gobbo as siblings seeking revenge on underworld colleagues who left them for dead at the scene of a bank raid.

Here, the use of innovative split screen effects produces a virtual multiplication of Milian's onscreen image, rendering him a literally split subject (with his dual characterisations defying the phallic mandate with comic and horrific effect). The film also contains a singularly startling scene of self-reflexive body excess, when Il Gobbo performs a hunchbacked disco routine in a venue of cruel and cackling clubbers who are unaware of his true criminal identity. When Il Gobbo suddenly has the nightclub spotlight turned on his grotesquely malformed body for the entertainment of the jaded guests, he begins to mimic monstrous gestures to the disco beat, before gathering the audience around him as he launches

into a tirade of self-debased commentary about his own deformity. The self-referentiality of the scene (which is figured through a direct to camera address) functions as a marked moment of masculine 'mocking' between Milian and the non-diegetic audience, which only ends when Il Gobbo reveals his true identity before going on a terrifying rampage through the disco with a submachine gun.

Figure 8.2: Deadly when deformed: Tomas Milian as the lethal hunchback of *Rome Armed to the Teeth.*

This intertextuality of physical and psychical instability demonstrated by the actor's villainous *poliziotteschi* roles was also relayed across another 1970s sub-cycle of Italian rogue cop films in which Milian starred as flamboyant undercover cop Nico Giraldi. This paired the actor with

former spaghetti western director Bruno Corbucci, and included titles such as *Squadra antiscippo* (AKA *The Cop in Blue Jeans*, 1976), *Squadra antigangsters* (AKA *The Gang That Sold America*, 1979) and *Delitto al ristorante cinese* (AKA *Crime at the Chinese Restaurant,* 1981). These entries accentuated the actor's chaotic bodily performance and multiple personas (particularly in the latter title, where he plays both the hero and the Chinese villain Chin Chun Chao). Equally, the title of Giraldi's last assignment, *Delitto al Blue Gay* (AKA *Cop in Drag*, 1984), in which the protagonist infiltrates a gay nightclub to solve the murder of a transsexual singer, also indicates the extent to which stable notions of masculinity *and* heterosexual characterisation are undercut by the actor's work.[72]

As indicated above, the *poliziotteschi* work through a number of contradictions surrounding a crisis "in patriarchy and body image",[73] where masculinity can only be assured by the projection of femininity or gender ambiguity onto the non-differentiated and distinct criminal body. Whilst Maurizio Merli managed to retain some degree of potency via his relational distinction from the gendered excesses of Tomas Milian, it is noticeable that many of the remaining *poliziotteschi* cops are exposed to either domestication or injury, and are subsequently "shown as somehow feminized by the experience".[74] Indeed, it is significant that the Italian rogue cop film developed its own distinct visual coda to deal with themes of masculine impairment, which are particularly marked in director Enzo G. Castellari's work with former spaghetti western icons such as Franco Nero and Fabio Testi. As Christopher Barry has noted, the director made a seamless transition from the Italian Westerns of the late 1960s to cop films, trailing male trauma across the genres in that transition. As he notes: "Castellari was able to assimilate the cinematic aesthetics (and excesses) of Sam Peckinpah into the cop genre with a balletic blaze of gunfire and car chases."[75] As with Peckinpah, the films of Castellari use extended scenes of slow motion to outline the degree of intimidation and violence directed towards the *poliziotteschi* hero's body, which often locates him in a far more degraded position than their American counterpart.

For instance, his 1974 film *Street Law* was marketed in foreign territories as an Italian version of *Death Wish,* and suffered in terms of its foreign reception for this reason. The *Variety* review argued that the film (initially released in the US as *The Citizen Rebels*) only retained one positive feature: its "uninhibited modelling of violent action on similarly themed Hollywood films".[76] However, despite critical presumptions surrounding the overlap between these films, Castellari's *Street Law* departs dramatically from Michael Winner's original source material in a number of ways. While the motivation for this (and the prior Brian Garfield

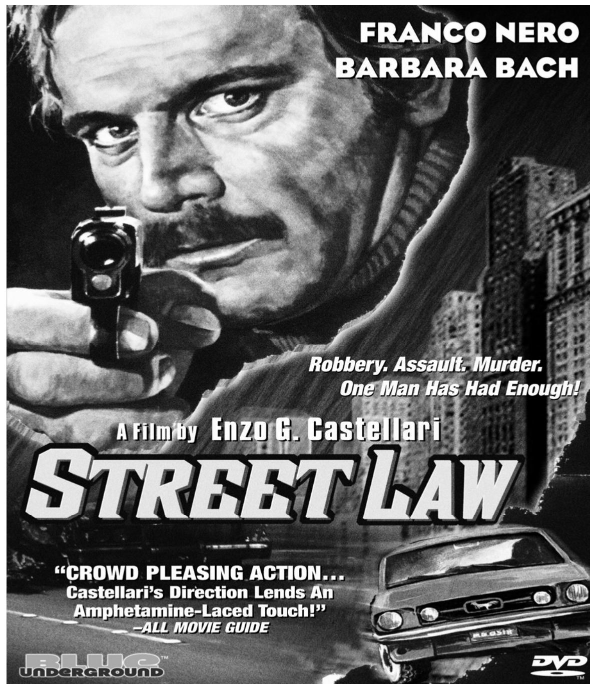

Figure 8.3: Italian Enforcers: The international reception of *Street Law* often overlooked its domestic concerns.

novel) involves Paul Kersey (Charles Bronson) taking on the mantle of vigilante to avenge the rape and humiliation of his wife and daughter, *Street Law* uses the trope of male violation as the trigger to its violent revolt. Here, Franco Nero is cast as Carlo Antonelli, a mild-mannered engineer who is taken hostage by a group of kidnappers during a foiled bank raid. In the opening scene that follows, Nero is savagely beaten and his face disfigured by the group, who also taunt his feminised responses to the beatings he receives. This initial assault (which the character repeatedly terms a form of masculine "humiliation") initiates a pattern of phallic trauma for Antonelli, who finds himself increasingly isolated from his wife Barbara (Barbara Bach). In an attempt to track down the kidnappers, Nero's character attempts to infiltrate the Roman underworld, only to face further exploitation and humiliation. Having faced a second pummelling for his efforts to track down his former antagonists, he is finally reunited with the criminal gang, leading to an extended slow motion sequence of Antonelli being savagely beaten:

Figure 8.4: Fright and feminisation: Franco Nero's changing 1970s star persona evoked in *Street Law*.

Rather than being an isolated example, Castellari's overt feminisation of Franco Nero's action persona functions as a regular feature in his *poliziotteschi* performances, explaining why Nigel Gearing noted that the actor's overt rendition in *The Marseilles Connection* (under its American title of *High Crime*) replaced the laconic machismo of *Dirty Harry* with camp and "energetic arm waving".[77]

Arguably, the recodification of Nero's star image from potent western avenger to embattled and brutalised rogue cop/private citizen is pointed when compared with former Western icons such as Eastwood, and is supplemented by patterns of violation suffered by other former spaghetti leads such as Fabio Testi. For instance, the actor's masculine prowess was most violently assaulted in Castellari's *The Big Racket*. Here, he is cast as Inspector Nico Palmieri, who is spearheading an investigation into the international roots of a protection racket plaguing Roman stores. In an early scene in the film, Palmieri is ambushed and carjacked by the violent group responsible for the crime wave:

Figure 8.5: Euro cops in crisis: Nico Palmieri endures a brutal beating at the hands of a female gang member from *The Big Racket*.

In the attack that follows, Palmieri's arm is smashed by the prominent female member of the group, before his vehicle is pushed off a cliff in a sequence that employs a sophisticated mobile 360 degree camera positioned inside the vehicle to emphasise how the hero is being disfigured as the car falls down the mountainside. Following this dramatic attack, it is significant that Testi's character's phallic prowess is redefined as damaged.

Figure 8.6: A paranoid 'grammar of virility' underpins scenarios of male punishment in *The Big Racket.*

Not only does his partner Salvatore complain that he will “end up a cripple” for trying to stand upon his smashed limbs, but Palmieri’s frustration at the limitations to this legal and phallic mobility is further expressed by his attempts to smash off the cast in order to retrain the damaged limb for further combat. Palmieri’s actions confirm the paranoid extent to which the *poliziotteschi* “deploy a grammar of virility in their portrayals of cops and criminals”.[78] Indeed, what is interesting is the way in which this index of masculinity frequently incorporates the figure of the damaged male avenger into a number of key titles in the series. In the case of *The Big Racket,* Castellari counter poses Palmieri’s attempts to renew his masculine agency by exposing the racketeers with other subplots involving male characters whose phallic power has been similarly threatened by the gang. These include Piero Mazzarelli (Glauco Onorato), a nightclub owner whose back is broken in an assault by the group and who is forced to wear a neck and body brace as a result, and Gianni Rossetti (Orso Maria Guerrini), a champion marksman forced to watch his wife being gang raped and set on fire in a revenge attack by the organisation.

Figure 8.7: Beyond the virile vendetta: Nico Palmieri on the vengeance trail with a band of ‘disabled’ male avengers in the finale of *The Big Racket*.

The finale of *The Big Racket* details the violent trade-off between these wounded male avengers and the criminal gang. Although Palmieri emerges as the victorious sole survivor of the ensuing blood bath, the film fails to provide a level of masculine closure found in the American rogue cop cycle. Having discovered that his superiors are part of the gang he seeks to expose, the closing image of the movie ends with a close up of the impotent and injured police captain smashing the butt of his shotgun in slow motion exasperation before the image abruptly fades to black. The film's obsessive equation of phallic power with weaponry confirms the multiple and contradictory readings of masculine prowess that Maggie Günsberg defines as:

> The fetishistic over-evaluation of the gun beyond utility as signifier of the phallus in the western and urban crime thriller is by now common place … this association is taken to such lengths as to suggest not only parody, but also a masculine masquerade signalling lack in its anxiety to convince otherwise.[79]

Despite the controversies that dominated the legitimacy of the *poliziotteschi's* generic roots, its depictions of crime and sexual difference indicate the cycle's direct appeal to instances of metropolitan violence that were prolific in Italy during the decade. However, rather than deal with these issues in ideological or political terms, the Italian rogue cop cycle distils these tensions through the interplay of bodies and psychic processes, which it largely fails to resolve. We shall see in the next chapter how this uneasy fusion of social and psychic tensions further afflicts masculine representations in the series of post-apocalypse and barbarian narratives popularised in Italy during the early 1980s.

Notes

[1] Christopher Barry, 'Violent Justice: Italian Crime/Cop Films of the 1970s', in Ernest Mathijs and Xavier Mendik (eds), *Alternative Europe: Eurotrash and Exploitation Cinema Since 1945* (London: Wallflower Press, 2004), p.80.

[2] Timothy C. Campbell, 'Violent Cities: Umberto Lenzi's Polizieschi and B-Movie Fascism', in *Paradoxa* 20 (2006), online version http://ecommons.library.cornell.edu/handle/1813/2643 Accessed 10/05/2010.

[3] Data compiled from Italian bibliographic website http://www.pollanetsquad.it Accessed 11/07/2010.

[4] R. Poppi and M. Pecorari (eds), *Del Cinema Italiano I Film Volume 4 1970–1979* (Rome: Gremese Editore, 1996), p.45.

[4] Campbell, 'Violent Cities', 21.

[5] R. Poppi and M. Pecorari, p.46.

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[6] Ibid., 45.
[7] Campbell,'Violent Cities', 21.
[8] Ibid.
[9] For instance, the *Monthly Film Bulletin* review of Martino's *The Violent Professionals* is typical when it links the film to:

> …a recent burst of overtly rightist film-making in Italy. An obvious derivation of Don Siegel's *Dirty Harry*, it lacks both the stylistic coherence and obsessiveness of its model. Poaching mindlessly on some of the more sensational political events of 1972/3, it comes through-between the regular injections of not entirely ineffective sequences – with a polemic on behalf of law and order which does not stop short of using some of the more obvious smear techniques of political propaganda to make its point. (36)

See '*Milano trema: la polizia vuole guistizia* (*The Violent Professionals*)' (review), *Monthly Film Bulletin* 42 (Feb 1 1975), 36.
[10] Barry, 'Violent Justice', p.77.
[11] Ibid., p.80.
[12] For instance, Castellari's later *The Big Racket* and Lucio Fulci's *Contraband* also contain revelatory sequences where French criminals are defined as 'the Marseilles connection', responsible for both urban racketeering and rural seaport drug smuggling respectively, while unnamed French villains also regularly feature in these titles as 'international corruptors' of the depicted Italian landscape.
[13] Mia Mask, '1971: Movies and the Exploitation of Excess', in Lester D. Friedman (ed.), *American Cinema of the 1970s* (Oxford: Berg, 2007), pp.57–68.
[14] For a further elaboration of this see Peter Lev, *American Films of the 70s: Conflicting Visions* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2000). Lev's analysis of the differing readings of Scorpio from *Dirty Harry* indicate that while "an identification of Scorpio with the hippies and the anti-war movement" (p.36) may have become a standard mechanism of interpretation, director Don Siegel actually intended the killer's construction to be far more psychologically and politically ambiguous. Citing interview material with the director at the time of the film's release, Lev argues that "Siegel describes creating visual cues to suggest that Scorpio is a mentally ill Vietnam vet. Siegel thinks that the peace belt buckle symbol is a symbol of self-delusion" (p.36).
[15] In his influential article 'Masculinity as Spectacle: Reflections on Men and Mainstream Cinema', Steve Neale re-reads dominant patterns of cinematic identification, citing Clint Eastwood as one male hero "who is powerful and omnipotent to an extraordinary degree" (5).
[16] Mask, '1971', p.68.
[17] Lev, *American Films of the 70s*, p.31.
[18] Mask, p.67.
[19] Ibid., p.69.
[20] Martin Clark, *Modern Italy: 1871 to the Present* (Harlow: Pearson Education, 2008), p.448.
[21] Raimondo Catanzaro, 'Subjective Experience and Objective Reality: An

Account of Violence in the Words of its Protagonists', in Raimondo Catanzaro (ed.), *The Red Brigades and Left-Wing Terrorism* (London: Pinter Publishers, 1991), p.175.
[22] Ibid.
[23] Cited in Catanzaro, 'Subjective Experience', pp.183–184.
[24] Ibid., p.184.
[25] Ibid.
[26] For instance, see Carlo Beebe Tarantelle's study 'The Italian Red Brigades and the Structure and Dynamics of Terrorist Groups', *International Journal of Psychoanalysis* 91 (2010), 541–560. Here, Tarantelle adopts an innovative mixture of Lacanian and Kleinian analysis to account for the loss of established identity that membership of the *Brigate rosse* entailed. As the author notes, while an objective reading of the group's actions clearly indicates that their campaign to dismantle repressive state structures via violent confrontation largely failed, at a psychic level gratification occurred through the successful destruction of established forms of symbolic identity, which were read by the group as "the dialectical movement between being annihilated and annihilating, between being dead or deadly" (548). As the author proposes, by constructing the state as "bad object", the struggle by "the action of the omnipotent group" (551) would ensure the constitution of new modes of identity beyond the repressive gaze of established authority.
[27] Beverly Allen, 'They Are Not Children Anymore: The Novelisation of "Italians" and "Terrorism"', in Beverly Allen and Mary Russo (eds), *Revisioning Italy: National Identity and Global Culture* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1997), p.60.
[28] Ibid., p.61
[29] Ibid., pp.72–73.
[30] See Paul Ginsborg, *A History of Contemporary Italy: Society and Politics: 1943–1980* (London: Penguin History, 1990), pp.361–365.
[31] Ibid., p.361.
[32] Beverly Allen p.65.
[33] Ibid., 64.
[34] Ibid., 70.
[35] Ibid., 86.
[36] Ginsborg, *History of Contemporary Italy*, p.366.
[37] Allen, 'They Are Not Children Anymore', p.71.
[38] Ibid., p.69.
[39] Ibid., p.70.
[40] Ibid.
[41] Ibid, p.71.
[42] Clark, *Modern Italy*, p.462.
[43] Ibid.
[44] Ibid.
[45] Ibid., p.450.
[46] Ebert and Kael cited in Lev, *American Films of the 70s*, p.35.

[47] Mask, '1971', p.63.
[48] Thrower cited in Mikel Koven, *La Dolce Morte: Vernacular Cinema and the Italian Giallo Film* (Lanham, MD: The Scarecrow Press, 2006) p.7.
[49] For a further discussion of their relationship see Barry, 'Violent Justice', pp.82–85.
[50] Ibid., p.82.
[51] The repeated use of automobiles as weapons against the suffering child is also evident in the *poliziotteschi.* Here, the car becomes a potent vessel via which the child can be mown down in the middle of the road, or thrown out of at high speeds (as frequently occurs in the series). While this reconfiguration of the vehicle as a killing machine can in part be explained by the ambivalent responses to modernist and technological advancement identified in relation to the *giallo*, it also evidences what Campbell has defined as the "metropolitan traumas" (11) of Italian urban life during this period, when increased migration from the country to the 'economic epicentres' of the city led to a dangerous and "dizzying expansion of the automobiles into city life" (11), which is obliquely referenced in the scenes of road rage and high-speed car trashing with which the *poliziotteschi* are associated.
[52] While noticeable for the extremes of suffering endured by Stefania, *The Big Racket* provides an *exaggerated*, rather than isolated, example of the corruption of the infantile within the *poliziotteschi.* Even more perverse is an instance from Umberto Lenzi's *Almost Human*, where twitchy sexual deviant and low level criminal Giulio Saachi (Tomas Milian), snatches a young boy from the sidewalk after fouling up an armed bank raid in the film's opening moments. When police subsequently find the child's limp body on the side of the road, leading to fears he has been murdered, a temporary moment of relief (for both investigators and viewers) is assured when the young boy is discovered only to be in shock. However, this scene effectively manipulates the viewer's expectations surrounding the limits of Giulio's moral codes, so that when he later riddles a sleeping infant with machine gunfire, and kidnaps and sexually molests a rich teenage heiress, his actions seem to embody the most extreme instance of what Allen would define as adult perversion in the genre, precisely because they exceed character expectations.
[53] Mask, p.67.
[54] Clark, *Modern Italy*, p.448.
[55] See Sigmund Freud, 'Family Romances', in *On Sexuality* (London: Penguin Books, 1977), p.222.
[56] Ibid., p.223.
[57] Maggie Günsberg, *Italian Cinema: Gender and Genre* (London: Palgrave, 2004), p.205.
[58] Ibid.
[59] Campbell, 'Violent Cities', 16.
[60] Ibid, 16
[61] Barry, 'Violent Justice', p.86.
[62] Ibid.
[63] Pierpaolo Duranti, *Tomas Milian: The Tough Bandit, The Rough Cop and the Filthy Rat in Italian Cinema* (Rome: Mediane libri, 2007), p.xix.
[64] Imdb.com review of *Sentenza di morte* (AKA *Death Sentence*): see

http://imdb.com/title/tt0063580/ Accessed 07/09/2010.

[65] In one of the few academic references to Milian's acting style currently published, it is interesting to note that Campbell picks up on the high degree of feminisation that the actor imbibes into his most villainous roles. Commenting on his casting as the psychopathic killer from *Almost Human*, Campbell notes that he is initially "demasculinized" (17) from his criminal peers when he foils a bank raid through panic, killing a policeman in the process. Thus:

> …the film portrays Giulio initially as feminised; his histrionics and tears save him from certain death at the hands of the gang, but only at the cost of marking him as initially feminine: thus the close-ups of his trembling face and the high angled shots that frame his successive beating. (17)

[66] For more information on the alleged rivalry between the two stars, see Duranti, *Tomas Milian*, p.xix.

[67] Ibid.

[68] Campbell, 'Violent Cities', 19.

[69] Ibid., 20.

[70] The repeated division of Maurizio Merli and Tomas Milian's performative styles, as well as the hysterical displays emphasised by the latter, underscores the ways in which such dramatic and/or comic pairings can highlight contradictions in the Oedipal subject. For a more detailed examination of this, see Scott Bukatman, 'Paralysis in Motion: Jerry Lewis's Life as a Man', in Andrew Horton (ed.), *Cinema, Comedy, Theory* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1991), pp.188–205. Here, Bukatman convincingly argues that Lewis's comic partnership with Dean Martin exposes a division between pre/post-Oedipal renditions of male sexuality. Therefore the project of each Martin production is to try and shift him from a position of pre-phallic, pre-linguistic undifferentiation into a position of mature heterosexual adult identity. Beyond Bukatman's study, further evidence of the performer's ability to evoke infantile urges through a hysterical and uncoordinated acting style is discussed by Elizabeth Wright in her study 'Psychoanalysis and the Theatrical', in Patrick Campbell (ed.), *Analysing Performance* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1996), pp.175–190. By considering those actors whose performance styles strain the concept of unified identity, Wright argues that the audience experiences a gratification from suspending subjectivity by these theatricalised displays:

> The dramatist thereby creates a neurotic space where the spectators may live out their conflicts and even gain a masochistic satisfaction in identifying with the hero's defeat. (p.176)

[71] I use this term pointedly, as many of Milian's most significant performances accentuate his skin colouring as a signifier of racial difference (as indicated by the fact that he was frequently cast as either Mexican or Native American during the 1960s spaghetti Western craze). This aspect of racial Otherness may well appeal to Southern audiences, who according to Gabriella Gribaudi's chapter 'Images of the South: The *Mezzogiorno* As Seen By Insiders and Outsiders', have always been considered "a frontier dividing civilized Europe from countries populated by savages from Africa" (p.87). Moreover, Milian's appeal extends beyond the porous

racial boundaries of the Italian South to include a non-European audience, as Christopher Frayling has noted in the volume *Spaghetti Westerns*: “Tomas Milian … reckons that he became a ‘symbol of poverty and revolution’ to Third World viewers – and this may have helped to expand the Cinecittà sphere of operations considerably” (p.57).
[72] For more information on elements of excess across all entries of the Nico Giraldi series, see Alex Tsiknias, ‘Nico Giraldi: A Policeman’s Story in Eleven Chapters’, *European Trash Cinema* 11 (1995), 5–11.
[73] Campbell, ‘Violent Cities’, 9.
[74] Ibid., 13.
[75] Barry, ‘Violent Justice’, p.80.
[76] ‘*Street Law*’ (review), *Variety* (Wednesday September 18 1974), 22.
[77] Nigel Gearing, ‘*High Crime*’ (review), *Monthly Film Bulletin* 41 (July 1974), 154.
[78] Campbell, ‘Violent Cities’, 2.
[79] Günsberg, *Italian Cinema*, p.193.

CHAPTER NINE

NEW BARBARIANS ON THE BLOCK: THE ITALIAN POST-APOCALYPTIC PEPLUMS OF THE EARLY 1980S

> By far the most significant and dominant generic movement of this subgenre has been the emergence of post-apocalyptic hero mythology of the 1980s… Set long after the nuclear war, what little fabric of community exists is constantly threatened by rampaging bands of marauders, challenged only by (self)righteous individuals and occasionally by smaller organised groups. They are the Warriors, Terminators, Exterminators, Equalizers, Hunters and Gladiators of the post-apocalyptic future.[1]
> —Mick Broderick, 'Surviving Armageddon: Beyond the Imagination of Disaster'

> Of all the notoriously promiscuous Italian genres, the late period sword and sorcery tale, along with its mutant brother the 'post-apocalypse adventure, is the most destitute'.[2]
> —Stephen Thrower, review of *Gunan re barbaro* (AKA *Gunan King of the Barbarians*)

Introduction

Along with the *poliziotteschi,* the Italian post-apocalypse film is another key cycle from the period 1970-1985 that has yet to receive thorough theorisation within the academy. The series (which emphasised the trials of a mythical male figure within a timeless and undefined post-nuclear environment), has been derided for its apparent emulation of existing American templates, dismissed for its technically flawed vision of the future,[3] and even rejected by those trash historiographers sympathetic to the 1970s traditions of European exploitation cinema (as Stephen Thrower's above quotation indicates). Although the post-apocalypse series often employed the talents of established Italian cult auteurs such as Lucio Fulci, Enzo G. Castellari, Aristide Massaccesi and Sergio Martino (as well as a new generation of performers who populated these narratives), positive re-evaluations of these entries

were often hampered by the perception that the cycle leaned too far towards pre-existing Anglo-American productions for them to constitute 'legitimate' examples of Italian popular culture.

The Italian sub-cycle of post-apocalypse cinema was initiated in 1982, with two titles, *I Guerrieri del bronx* (AKA *1990: The Bronx Warriors*) and *I nuovi barbari* (AKA *The New Barbarians*), both directed by Enzo G. Castellari. While this director (normally associated with the 1970s spaghetti Westerns and rogue cop dramas previously discussed) also submitted the later *Fuga del bronx* (AKA *Bronx Warriors II*, 1983) to the cycle, entries from other notable Italian exploitation directors included Aristide Massaccesi (who contributed *Anno 2020: I gladiatori del futuro* AKA *Texas 2000* [1983] and *Bronx Lotta Finale* AKA *End Game* [1983]), while *2019: Dopo la caduta di New York* (AKA *2019: After the Fall of New York* [1983]) and *I guerrieri dell'anno 2072* (AKA *Rome 2033: Fighter Centurions* [1983]) were helmed by Sergio Martino and Lucio Fulci respectively.

While these post-holocaust narratives transposed established Italian cult icons such as 'Al Cliver' (Pierluigi Conti) and George Eastman (Luigi Montefiore) into undefined, future world milieus, the series also promoted a new generation of Eurotrash starlets, often chosen because their more toned physical appearances contrasted to the previous generation of stocky stalwarts. Given the cycle's emphasis on physical virility, it is little surprise that there was a distinctly male bias to the casting strategies of the post-apocalypse film, with bodybuilders such as 'Mark Gregory' (Marco de Gregorio) and Miles O'Keefe being heavily promoted for their muscular and yet glamourised appearances. That said, the cycle also spawned a new generation of female performers, most notably Sabrina Siani, who was characteristically depicted as a platinum blonde barbarian pin-up with lethal sword and fighting skills. In similar fashion, key post-apocalypse entries even attracted the talents of emergent female pornographic performers such as Moana Pozzi, eager to expand into non-erotic roles.

However, while a key chronology and coherence of production methods can be traced across the post-apocalypse cycle as a whole, these Italian texts do appear to be heavily indebted to a pre-existing strand of science fiction cinema that Mick Broderick has defined as 'Survival Long After the Nuclear War'. These films reaffirmed long held (post-1945) fears that the creation of the atomic bomb represented "the opening salvos of an anticipated Third World War, one which would spare few cities (particularly continental USA, previously untouched by modern warfare) from a Hiroshima-like fate".[4] This cycle tended not to emphasise the preparation/ immediate effects of nuclear war (as Broderick identifies as most popular during the 1960s), or even the depictions of the immediate effects of nuclear

conflict (prominent during the 1950s and 1960s). Rather, in this variant of narrative, the effects of atomic conflict were either assumed (via depictions of social decay) or else visually indicated by a brief opening event. Indeed, the two most successful examples of 1980s apocalypse cinema, George Miller's *Mad Max* (1979) and its sequel *Mad Max II* (1982) are not "expressly post-nuclear but have frequently been read as metaphors of such"[5] by emphasising the trials of a lone hero who has to deliver an endangered, desert-bound community from lawless futuristic oppressors.

Interestingly, Broderick highlights the significance of international emulations around Miller's series to the proliferation of post-apocalypse cinema as a whole during the 1980s. As he comments, even before the final instalment of Miller's trilogy (*Mad Max III: Beyond Thunderdome* [1985]) had been completed: "a wave of exploitation clones (principally from Italy, Spain, Israel and the Philippines) were released around the world".[6] Given its long history of exploiting pre-existing cinema patterns for domestic consumption, it comes as little surprise that Italian versions of the *Mad Max* saga provided the most significant number of foreign emulations of the post-apocalypse template. Out of the 49 titles that Broderick identifies as produced under the category of 'Survival Long After the Nuclear War' between 1980–1989, no less than 12 were either Italian or Italian+French/Spanish/Israeli/Turkish co-productions.

Apocalypse, Italian Style

Broderick's comments on Italian post-apocalypse film as a parasitic addition to more legitimate formats of science fiction cinema seems confirmed by the trajectory of the cycle between the period of 1983 and 1989. Here, the 1982 success of *The Bronx Warriors* and *New Barbarians* precipitated a period of rapid expansion in the cycle that saw 10 films produced in 1983, with a further four released in 1984.[7] Although a further two post-apocalypse productions gained theatrical and video release as late as 1989, the cycle was effectively over by this time.

Beyond the perception that the cycle represented a short-lived and insignificant phenomenon, the critical reception of the Italian post-apocalypse film was further impeded by the fact that its features were complicated and conflated by an intentional fusion with other disparate generic tropes. For instance, Aristide Massaccesi's *Texas 2000* seems to sit uneasily between a western adventure and a World War II concentration camp exposé, with only a few technological touches to distinguish it as 'future tense'. As Kim Newman noted, the film:

> ...even makes its future heroes Texas Rangers and tries to pass off bewigged Italian extras as Apaches, while the super-scientific villains wear only slightly modified Nazi uniforms and are led by a bald, goose-stepping Prussian.[8]

Thus, the siege scenario typically found in the classic western is subverted so that a religious group now have to band together to defend a fuel dump (rather than the traditional rural homestead) against marauding bikers. Indeed, the western orientation of *Texas 2000* is confirmed in the unlikely finale of the film, which finds a group of horse-mounted Apaches riding the liberation of the embattled group. Here, spears and shields overwhelm laser cannons and customised bikes, while the pairing of distinct brown and (predominantly) white communities indicates the possibility of a post-nuclear utopia forged along new boundaries of racial understanding.

In many respects, *Texas 2000* remains an extreme fusion of futuristic and 'frontier' narrative (even staging a gun-slinging saloon shoot-out with laser guns). However, its representations are by no means atypical of the cross fertilisation that marked the Italian post-apocalypse film. Indeed, it is interesting to note the extent to which western iconography became a prominent motif across other examples in the cycle. For instance, Sergio Martino's *2019: After the Fall of New York* introduces its hero Parsifal (Michael Sopkiw), in the unspoilt plains of Nevada, where he is seen racing an opponent in a shanty saloon town straight out of *Bonanza* (1959–1973). The only onscreen aspect that jars the temporal continuity of this otherwise traditional American 'western' milieu remains the fact that the assembled audience are not 19th-century townsfolk, but a ramshackle collection of heavy metal and Goth outcasts, while the sequence itself is at odds with the film's opening futuristic sequence of urban destruction and 'de-infestation'.

However, despite its brief timespan, and the controversy that surrounds the legitimacy of its roots, the post-apocalypse cycle contains a number of features that merit its critical re-evaluation. In particular I intend to use this chapter to explore two central features that mark the format out as being of critical interest to the current volume. Firstly, the parodic and conflated use of disparate genre motifs displayed by the cycle should not necessarily be viewed as being at odds with the commercial imperative of Italian cinema, which as Marcia Landy has noted, is often characterised by "eclecticism, drawing on different genres, national film traditions, international casts … and an innovative approach to the cinematic medium".[9] What remains of interest here is the way in which these generic deviations often reveal the manipulation of an external template to meet the expectations of Italian audiences.

Secondly, by focusing on the trials of a lone wandering hero whose physical prowess is tested in the battle to save an embattled and vulnerable

group, the Italian post-apocalypse film extends the *poliziotteschi*'s extreme focus on the male body as a source of erotic spectacle and mutilation that far exceeds its comparable treatment by American productions from the same period. Therefore, the post-apocalypse film provides another interesting and atypical case study of the trials and punishments endured by the masculine form. To give one example here, Massaccesi's *Texas 2000* foregrounds an emphasis on the dual glorification/degradation of the male body (as displayed through combat, sport and prolonged suffering). This tactic is seen in sequences where the group of rangers endure extended torture and sadomasochistic chain beatings, as well as engage in acts of extended physical competition which emphasise their masculine prowess. These features go beyond strictly western motifs to evoke much earlier Italian film genres, specifically the "mythico-historical spectaculars"[10] or peplums that writers such as Michele Lagny and Maggie Günsberg have identified as one of the first post-war cycles to dominate the Italian pulp cinema of the 1950s and 1960s.[11] As Lagny comments, "one of the dominant themes of the genre is that of virile strength",[12] which is often put to the test by a hero (or noble group), who use their physical skills to defeat a despotic ruler. In her analysis *Italian Cinema: Gender and Genre*, Günsberg extends the centrality of masculine virility to the peplum, defining it as a "fantasy genre celebrating muscle-bound masculinity in the distant, pre-historical … past, often in unidentifiable countries".[13] Seen in this context, *Texas 2000* can be read as a parodic, post-nuclear peplum, where the central characters have to use their physical prowess and fighting skills to defeat the macho gang of bikers and car wreckers linked to a sinister, authoritarian organisation. The fact that Günsberg also identifies the confused spatio-temporal parameters of the peplum is significant for not only *Texas 2000* (with its uneasy fusion of the frontier with the futuristic), but other examples of the cycle that frequently depict the post-nuclear environment as a return to prehistoric times.

Indeed, it can be argued that not only can the thematic and visual tropes of the post-apocalypse film be traced back to peplum, but also the industrial and marketing strategies used to orientate domestic audiences towards these pre-existing patterns. For instance, even advertising campaigns for post-apocalypse titles such as *End Game* and *The New Barbarians* make clear the text's association with mythical constructions of combat by foregrounding its gladiatorial rather than science fiction iconography:

Figure 9.1: Gladiatorial imagery: the post-apocalypse film marketed as contemporary peplum.

This strategy, which is repeated in related works such as *Rome 2033: Fighter Centurions*, confirms Günsberg's view that the peplum deals with "hard musculature",[14] as a means of distinguishing heroic masculinity from "other types of masculinity".[15]

Domination or Appropriation: The Post-Apocalypse Film as Italian Film

By drawing inspiration from one of the earliest formats of Italian cinema, the post-apocalypse cycle charts some of the social and cross-cultural contradictions between Italian and American culture. While works such as *Texas 2000* and *2019: After the Fall of New York* undoubtedly appear as cinematic aberrations to those viewers and reviewers used to the relatively 'pure' generic confines of science fiction cinema, its penchant for genre and temporal mixing can be seen as deriving from the commercial constraints under which the Italian post-apocalypse film was produced. In her analysis of the reception of Italian popular cycles such as the peplum, Landy has identified the transitions within Italian cinema that resulted from an increasing post-1945 American influence over domestic culture and leisure.

This can be indicated by commercial cinema's overreliance on (fading) American stars, dubbing, and anglicised pseudonyms for many of its leading genre filmmakers.

Upon first appearance, it would certainly seem that the Italian post-apocalypse film fits with these Americanised concerns. Not only do former Stateside icons such as Vic Morrow (*The Bronx Warriors*), Henry Silva (*Bronx Warriors II*) and Woody Strode (*L'Ultimo guerriero,* AKA *The Final Executioner*, 1983) occupy central billing within specific films, but the series also promotes a new set of home-grown heroes given Americanised titles to assist with their possible export status.[16] Equally, it is also interesting to note that with the exception of Lucio Fulci's *I guerrieri dell 'anno 2072* (AKA *Rome 2033: Fighter Centurions* [1983]), Italian geo-cultural references remain largely absent from the post-apocalypse series. All the other key entries to the cycle are either explicitly set in named American cities (as is often underscored in their US release titles), or else contain prologues that connect their depicted wastelands to specific Stateside regions. Indeed, even *Rome 2033: Fighter Centurions* begins in a post-nuclear, neon-lit New Jersey to reveal its key protagonist Drake (Jared Martin) dispatching a group of opponents in a televised death match, before switching to Rome's Coliseum for the film's blood-soaked finale.

Despite the pseudo-American feel that permeates all aspects of the Italian post-apocalypse series, Landy rejects the presumption that such popular film patterns merely reproduce an American dominance over European tastes. Rather, she argues in favour of a dialogic relationship between these differing cinematic traditions, highlighting "a selective appropriation of the host culture on the part of the foreign culture for its own uses".[17] As a result, such cycles can be seen as both drawing upon a very Italian perception of the United States (that takes in not only the long-held fascination with Northern America that emerged from patterns of emigration established from the late 19th century onwards), but also as adapting these transnational genre themes to fit with domestic fashions and fears.

To this extent, although they often occur in other worldly environments, the Italian post-apocalypse film also directly addresses changing social and cultural patterns emergent in the early 1980s. As historians have noted, while the early part of the 1980s saw a gradual decline in the extremes of the politically-inspired atrocities of the *Anni di piombo*, new economic and social practices brought their own tensions which became imprinted on the national psyche. Thus, when Paul Ginsborg refers to the "second economic miracle"[18] that occurred in Italy during the 1980s, this references an era in which the nation finally shed some of the more severe economic and industrial tensions of the previous decade in favour of new

technological interventions. For instance, new working methods in the urbanised Northern sphere disrupted traditional methods of political affiliation, most spectacularly when the 1980 strike at the Fiat plant (over plans to dismiss 23,000 workers) collapsed, with more than 40,000 workers defying union bosses to cross the picket line in Turin.[19] With left-wing influence shrinking on a political as well as industrial level, Ginsborg argues that the nation entered a period where after "nearly twenty years of intense social crisis, Italy seemed at last to have been pacified, and on capitalist terms".[20] While this policy of political nullification reflected a sharp decline in agricultural and traditional mechanised areas of industry (characteristically the problematic [read: male] zones of collective discontent), emergent areas of the economy, such as a boom in the tertiary sector, ushered in a new era of commodity oriented prosperity. While Ginsborg identifies how these new social and technological shifts could be registered in purely economic terms (for instance, with a decline in inflation from a high of 21.1% in 1980, to 4.6% in 1987),[21] also significant were the cultural shifts accompanying Italy's new era of industrial consensus:

> However, there is a further surprise: the level of women's employment has risen sharply since 1982, whereas that of men remained stagnant. The number of women employees rose by nearly 50 per cent in the period 1970–1985… The era of the Italian woman as permanent housewife, so typical of the years of the 'economic miracle' is giving way to one in which women are more active in the labour market.[22]

While it would be simplistic to align the emergence of the Italian post-apocalypse film *solely* with alterations occurring in the socio-economic sphere, it is significant that the cycle's key trope – of wandering males banding together when their skills have become redundant due to cataclysmic industrial change – does invite a more nationally nuanced reading. Indeed, Landy has suggested that the popularity of the muscular peplum hero to 1950s rural male audiences "speaks to the perceived powerlessness of the human body in an era of economic boom, and technological and industrial advancement".[23] While this persuasive analysis gains credence from the primarily rural setting of these former mythological tales, they are recapitulated in the post-apocalypse film's mourning of these redundant male figures and their obsolete methods of technology (particularly modernist, mass-produced goods such as automobiles), which are here hastily reconstructed as ramshackle reminders of former social and sexual stability.

Equally, it seems significant that Ginsborg has noted that while a new social and economic model of Italy emerged in the Northern and central

regions of the country, in this era it was noticeable that "the Southern problem remains unresolved. The old story has to be told once again… Unemployment north of Rome is static or falling; in the South it has increased to over 20 per cent".[24] If this data in part explains the recourse to rural wastelands as backdrops to so many the post-apocalypse titles, it also offers a rationale for why both female sexuality and fecundity are also so shunned by the series. As Martin Clarke has noted, the new Italian post-industrial era of the 1980s was very much constructed as female space. This became dominated by both "material gratifications of every kind",[25] as well as increased female presence in the industrial sphere (which the author cites as increasing by 50% between 1970 and 1985).[26] These changes also marked transitions from traditional maternal and familial expectations:

> In the 1980s the Italians, long renowned for their love of children and their family-centredness, had probably the lowest birth rate in the world (with the possible exception of China)… Between 1990 and 1999 there were 588,712 births p.a., down 288,202 on the previous decade… It also became more 'Southern' – the birth rate in the South was twice that of the North…[27]

This shift away from the primacy of motherhood (and the insipid fears of declining births it raises) is reproduced by many post-apocalypse narratives. These frequently feature men having to adopt the maternal role in the absence of women (as in *The New Barbarians* and *Bronx Warriors II*),[28] or else figure the female body as an infected or obsolete object for insemination (as seen in *2019, After the Fall of New York*). This latter film is particularly interesting, as it ranges the renegade warrior Parsifal on a mission to rescue a "Sleeping Beauty" whose fertile body can repopulate the next generation from the clutches of invading European fascists, who have turned New York into a zone of fertility experimentation.

Heroic Masculinity After the Bomb

In the absence of any central love object or maternal anchors, the Italian post-apocalypse film draws heavily on Italian peplum traditions to devise a series of strategies by which masculine characters come to define their status in the archaic and predominantly same-sex environments depicted. Here, it is characteristic for the hero to be working through some degree of past trauma within a post-nuclear lansdcape. These personal vendettas are facilitated by a number of plot devices, which are either premised on the sexual assault/humiliation of the central male (*New Barbarians*), the disruption of existing masculine codes of behaviour by a disloyal or untrustworthy group

member (*Bronx Warriors*, *Texas 2000*), or an unrestrained release of phallic energy following the murder of a loved one or family member (*Bronx Warriors II, Rome 2033: Fighter Centurions, The Final Executioner*).

What is marked in all of these examples is the way in which the cycle transcends the confines of the American/international template upon which it is based to reveal nationally specific tensions around Italian masculinity. As Michele Lagny has noted, while Hollywood film functions through the primacy of mise-en-scene, Italian popular film genres are dominated by the notion of "mise en spectacle",[29] where masculine modes of display exceed their narrative function to become a site of erotic interest in their own right. Although Lagny's analysis focuses on the peplum, it is clear that later cycles such as the post-apocalypse film use similar iconographical and formal features to capture and glorify the male body as a site of dual erotic/mutilated spectacle.

Extending Lagny's analysis, Maggie Günsberg has identified a number of features surrounding the peplum's contradictory construction of masculine virility for a domestic audience. Firstly, she distinguishes the first wave of 'mythico-historical spectacular' movies (1913–1926) from post-war versions of the peplum via their increased glamorisation of the hero's body. Whereas early versions emphasised the brutish aspects of mythical figures such as Machiste (as portrayed by the former dockworker Bartolomeo Pagano in 18 silent films), 1950s peplums pioneered a near erotic fascination with the hero's physique, especially when embodied by American bodybuilders in the title roles. In particular, Günsberg notes that the casting of former Mr Universe Steve Reeves as Hercules in many of the most prominent titles in the cycle introduced "an androgynous combination of "muscle and beauty""[30] into the mythical hero's portrayal.[31]

These processes of glamorisation (also afforded to other 1950s bodybuilding icons such as Reg Parks and Gordon Scott) indicate just one method of distinguishing the heroic male body from that of other masculine representations. This is a process that Günsberg argues is underscored by the thematic, visual and soundtrack mechanisms at play within the peplum. For instance, the author notes that the narrative:

> …in the form of action scenes contributing to the plot, contrasts heroic feats with the lesser deeds of other male characters, or the ineffectual actions or inaction of other characters … in other words, heroic action that is effective enough to contribute to narrative progression and closure.[32]

An example of such heroic contrast can be seen in *Ercole al centro della terra* (AKA *Hercules at the Centre of the Earth*, 1961). The opening of the film contrasts the lone, physically active figure of Hercules (Reg Parks),

with that of his sex-obsessed companion Thesus (George Ardisson), who fails to heed the hero's warning of a potential attack because of his preoccupation with seducing a lone female. This sequence establishes a pattern whereby Hercules has to protect his associate from the dangers associated with heterosexual desire by using his own physical skill and prowess. Such scenes confirm the narrative distinction between the hero and other males represented in the peplum, while also pointing to what Günsberg has defined as the fears surrounding 'illicit sexuality' that the format draws upon.

While narrative distinctions confirm the structural separation between the differing visions of masculinity constructed by the peplum, the hero's supreme physical qualities are further underscored by visual mechanisms that Günsberg has also identified. For instance, she notes that the hero is often introduced into the narrative in a solitary pose, characteristically being "shot from below to accentuate his height and importance".[33] In the case of a film like *Hercules at the Centre of the Earth*, this diegetic introduction retains a further phallic quality by locating Hercules above a waterfall, while the camera pans along the actor's body at penis level. This framing, as well as the camera's movement, appears to connote "ejaculation on a massive scale and hence super-phallic masculinity".[34] Added to these mechanisms is the use of score and soundtrack, which add further impact to the hero's role within the narrative. Here, the hero's exceptional status is underscored either at the level of the audio track via musical score (such as brass fanfares accompanying his exploits) or in authoritative voiceovers that give his actions a God-like status.

In many respects, Günsberg's analysis of the masculine representations within the peplum contains a number of key features which lend themselves to a wider consideration of the post-apocalypse cycle. Firstly, the cycle offers similar processes of narrative distinction between the post-apocalypse hero and other depicted male figures. Frequently, this dichotomy is achieved by pairing the hero with male assistants whose bodies are imperfect, 'damaged' or else connote castration in a manner that accentuates the physical ideals of the central protagonist. For instance, in *2019, After the Fall of New York,* Parsifal is joined by two male assistants for his rescue journey into the heart of the city. Both of these aides are marked as physically incomplete: 'Bronx' (Vincent Scalondro), a former scientist, has been equipped with a metallic hand to replace the limb severed in a torture session, while 'Ratchet' (Roman Geer) is missing an eye. In this respect, the incomplete construction of these secondary characters confirms a similar pattern of phallic distinction to that Günsberg identifies in the peplum. Here, "hard musculature is key in differentiating the hero from other men, who

either have less or no muscle, or whose bodies are not exposed to the camera's eye".[35]

Figure 9.2: Marked as macho: French poster campaigns promote heightened masculinity in Sergio Martino's film.

It is not merely that these characters occupy a differing plane of physical construction in relation to the well-tanned and toned hero (whose fetishistic construction before the camera lens indicates the visual processes of glorification identified by Günsberg).[36] Rather it is the fact that the presumed hierarchy of power that this 'incompleteness' entails engenders different sexual responses from other characters in the film. Thus, when Bronx and Parsifal are captured by the sadistic fascist group that dominate the film, the former is sent off to be tortured by a male guard (who attempts to pull the protagonist's arms and legs from their sockets), while the latter is offered up as a sexual gift to a female commander looking for the perfect specimen of male potency.

While the near-lovemaking scene that follows offers an example of the ways in which the cycle equates sexual desire with physical power, it represents a rare interruption of heterosexual union into both this film and the

cycle as a whole. As with the peplum, "heterosexual romance is not a central motif of these films, and heterosexual relations are subordinated to the motif of homosexual bonding".[37] As Günsberg has argued, heterosexual desire within the peplum is split along an axis of licit and illicit activity, both of which present potential dangers to the potency of the central protagonist and his place within the all-male group. As she notes, entries to the cycle such as *Ercole e la regina di Lidia* (AKA *Hercules Unchained*, 1959) depict Hercules as married. However, this union constantly represents an obstacle to his role as potent protector. For instance, the film portrays several examples of the "dangerously debilitating effects of domesticity on masculinity",[38] such as the scene where Hercules is lulled to sleep by his bride at the point at which a giant ogre is about to attack him. If domestication offers one source of threat to the hero, its destructive potential is overshadowed by the theme of illicit sexuality, represented by the sexually aggressive and dangerous sirens, witches and Amazons that frequently threaten the hero.

Given his control over the thematic, visual and audio levels of the text, it is not surprising that this mythical figure uses these mechanisms as a method of defence against possible heterosexual intercourse. For instance, in her analysis of *Le fatiche di Ercole* (AKA *Hercules*, 1958), Günsberg notes a scene where the hero has to rescue his shipmates from a potentially fatal seduction by murderous Amazons, who attempt to lure the men back to their fate using a "siren-like"[39] song. In response to this threat, Hercules drowns out their sounds by banging his drum violently in tune with the movements of this ship's oars in an attempt to retain control over the audio track. This gesture represents a "violent forbidding of heterosexual desire",[40] which is itself mirrored in the Italian post-apocalypse film's apparent disdain for such acts of sexual union. Indeed, it seems significant that despite his manifest physical skills, the central protagonist of *2019: After the Fall of New York* fails to rescue the only fertile woman left on earth before she has been impregnated by a radiation-ravaged ape, thus ensuring the further degeneration of the species. This nihilistic outcome indicates the extent to which the female body and heterosexual intercourse are both marginalised by the cycle's focus on the masculine body as a site of contemplation and violation between men, a key factor which requires further examination.

One's One-Shot: The Male Body in the Post-Apocalypse Peplum

If it can be argued that the peplum and the post-apocalypse film retard heterosexuality by "punctuating a homoerotic baseline"[41] into genre imagery, then these same-sex tensions are particularly pronounced in the films that Enzo G. Castellari contributed to the cycle. Once again these productions retain a narrative, visual and audio focus on the male body that connects them to Günsberg's analysis of the homoerotic discourse of the peplum. In particular, Castellari's films foreground various visual mechanisms to fetishise the male body, from extreme close-ups of the torso captured in near medical detail, to elaborate formal techniques (such as slow motion photography) to convey the minutiae of masculine conquest and suffering.[42]

These two strategies are evident in *The Bronx Warriors,* which Kim Newman aptly notes is governed by a "fetishistic display of bludgeoning, gouging slashing, strangling and mutilating".[43] This emphasis on capturing aspects of male combat and revenge is initiated in the film's opening sequence, where extreme close-ups of hands, weapons and tattooed biceps make explicit the connection between the male body and physical prowess. This pre-credit montage establishes a totalised and mythical image of the hero Trash (Mark Gregory), which is confirmed in the opening action sequence that follows. Here, Trash and his gang, The Riders, rescue the heroine Ann (Stefania Girolami), who has stumbled into the lair of a sadistic all-male roller-skating troupe referred to as The Zombies.

The combat scene that ensues introduces Trash into the narrative as the focus of two distinct sets of gazes: those of the marauding skaters (behind whom the camera is positioned), as well as the look of the entrapped heroine (who observes Trash with a mixture of dread and erotic fascination). In this scene, Castellari makes extended use of slow motion photography to capture the hero's actions, which further functions to glorify the male body in movement. Indeed, it is noticeable that Castellari's films distinguish their use of slow motion photography between the hero and other characters depicted in the film (once again confirming the narrative distinction offered to differing representations of masculinity that the cycle portrays). Thus, while the hero's body is captured in slow graceful movements, this formal function is also used to show extremes of pain, suffering and violation in other male characters. The use of such features (which again recall previous Italian genre patterns such as the peplum) indicate, in the words of Michele Lagny, that "antagonism between the good guys and bad guys is indicated not only by their discourse … but also by their relationship to space".[44]

With their emphasis on the physicality of combat, the reduction of

dialogue to brutish forms of physical display and the general glorification of the male body, the Italian post-apocalypse cycle provides an example of the kind of genre that Marcia Landy has argued "calls attention to the body politics of the films – more to the sexuality of the masculine than to the feminine – since femininity seems confined to the few instances where women are fantasised or dreamt about, or when the homosocial relations suggest traces of tenderness in the brutal and violent environment".[45]

It is these very same-sex tensions that dominate the cycle in general, and Castellari's films in particular. Indeed, while Italy's version of the post-nuclear dystopia reveals a general primitivism of gender relations (what Mick Broderick has defined as "the maintenance of conservative social regimes of patriarchal law"),[46] it is noticeable that women are rarely offered up as either sexual prizes or rape victims in the key titles. Indeed, although one duplicitous member of Trash's gang critiques Ann's incorporation into the gang, arguing that that since their leader has "hooked up with that Manhattan pussy, all the blood has rushed to his cock!", the film is careful to portray no overtly sexual relationship between the pair. Rather, it is interesting to note that the most intense emotional scene played out in the film occurs not between the heterosexual couple, but between Trash and a fatally wounded male comrade who the hero comforts and cradles in his arms. The sexual significance of these actions, along with lead actor Mark Gregory's highly feminised appearance, was not lost upon several critics. Kim Newman noted that the actor's feminised pouting "proves grotesquely reminiscent of Emmanuelle in narcissistic mood",[47] while Castellari's *over*-glamorisation of his lead's shoulder-length hair and tanned hairless chest, led critic John Martin to rather ungraciously comment that Gregory resembled "a guy whose pectorals eclipse Dolly Parton's tits!"[48]

While the homoerotic potential of *The Bronx Warriors* remains confined to the film's defining action moments, it becomes the rationale to the central vendetta motif underpinning Castellari's companion piece *The New Barbarians*. This film focuses on a group of holocaust survivors attempting to flee from the sadistic rule of One (George Eastman), "a nihilistic Templar dedicated to the extermination of what is left of the rest of humanity in the aftermath of a nuclear war".[49] Here, the recognisably phallic features of the peplum format are fused with the future, weaponry and old automotive machinery, thus creating a temporal cacophony that Castellari's film trades upon. Thus, rather than being defined by his fighting skills or superhuman strength, the central protagonist Scorpion (Timothy Brent) becomes associated with a kind of retroactive mobility via the reassembled vehicles that speed him through the post-nuclear wasteland. Indeed, Scorpion is introduced into the narrative via extreme (and near fetishistic close-ups) of

the skull that adorns his car's engine, while the film makes clear that the motor vehicle has replaced more mythical forms of combat as a symbol of male aggression.[50] For instance, in one scene, Scorpion rescues a defenceless woman from slaughter at the hands of an all-male group of Templars. As a result, the hero has to undergo a duel with the aptly named Macho, which Castellari frames through alternating shots of the two opponent's car bonnets as they size up to one another. Here, the penile references that Günsberg identifies as part of the visualisation of Hercules are replaced by a notion of automotive potency which dominates the cycle as a whole. (Indeed, it is only when he loses control of his car that Scorpion is open to brutalisation from the Templars in the film's later scenes.)

While the peplum retains homoerotic drives as an undercurrent to all-male relations, *The New Barbarians* makes explicit the sexual focus on the masculine body as a site of erotic desire and violation for the Templars. In a highly uncharacteristic scene, the hero Scorpion is captured by the group and subjected to an 'initiation' ceremony by One. This involves the protagonist being trussed up with rope, before the camera captures his trousers being sliced open to reveal his naked buttocks beneath. Scorpion is then raped by the leader of the gang, while the camera juxtaposes close-up shots of the protagonist's agonised face with wider shots of the rest of the group watching this semi-erotic spectacle. It is only after this bout of humiliation that the central protagonist is rescued by his assistant Nadir (played by blaxploitation star Fred Williamson), who then has to 'retrain' Scorpion's damaged body and masculinity for the climactic battle scene of the movie. These training scenes, which emphasise the power and phallic harmony of black and white masculine bodies in motion, recall the sport and 'training' sequences that Michele Lagny has identified as central to the peplum cycle.[51] While the explicit function of such scenes is to underscore notions of "fair play" and "distributive justice"[52] associated with physical endeavour, Lagny notes that:

> …physical strength has a powerful erotic function, which is exploited in … scenes of (very) close combat, where the sexual component of two clinching men is clearly emphasised. Is this done to appeal to women spectators? Or … is it a way of alluding to the delights of censured homosexuality?[53]

Seen as an example of the contradictory constructions that the male body in the post-apocalypse film evokes, the rape scene from *The New Barbarians* goes some way to explaining the extremes of genre confusion that dominate the narrative. In a manner characteristic of the cycle's parodic manipulation of genre motifs, Castellari frames the hero's revenge in the form of a climactic gun battle where Scorpion returns to face One for the final shoot-

out. His costume (complete with black poncho) clearly trades off the iconography of previous spaghetti westerns, until the protagonist rips back the clothing to reveal a cyborg-like translucent body shell which allows him to repel his enemy's attacks. Thus, having laid out the motivation for a western-influenced climactic shoot-out between Scorpion and One, the film eschews the promised gun battle in favour of a brutal buggy chase. This ends when a phallic drill attached to the hero's car pierces One's vehicle and body from the rear, providing a symbolically similar punishment to the previous act of anal violation suffered by the central character.

Although the overblown images of hypermasculine and homosocial display contained within texts such as *The New Barbarians* may also be present in other examples of Italian popular cinema, the post-apocalypse film represents an important deviation from the patterns of gender and sexuality contained within earlier traditions of the male adventure narrative. Even Maggie Günsberg concludes that the peplum offers a "tokenistic and sketchy"[54] resolution that favours the heterosexual endorsement of the heroic male in its final scenes. However, the post-apocalypse film is dominated by a display of unrestrained phallic energy that defies either domestication or heterosexual sublimation. For instance, the final scene of *The New Barbarians* appears to resolve the established erotic tensions between Scorpion and One by reuniting the hero with potential female love interest Alma (Anna Kanakis). However, it is interesting that Castellari chooses to visually exclude her in the closing scene of the film, ending on a freeze frame between Scorpion and a young orphaned boy who has previously assisted the hero as a mechanic and explosives expert. This symbolic exclusion of a potential heroine (and the heterosexual resolution that such an influence implies) is also reproduced in other key titles from the series including *Bronx Warriors II, Texas 2000*, *End Game* and *The Final Executioner.* Through these strategies it can be argued that 1980s Italian post-apocalypse film is a format which used existing international genre imagery as a template to explore specifically Italian cultural and sexual tensions. In the absence of these heteronormative anchors of stability, it is also worth briefly considering how the Italian post-nuclear series also resituated the Oedipal scenario found in the other Italian cult film cycles discussed in the volume.

The Peplum and the Primal Father

As indicated above, the Italian post-apocalypse film has been deemed as an unwarranted appendage to the international post-nuclear films of the early 1980s. Even those genre experts receptive to other areas of Italian

paracinema activity have critiqued the series as a short-lived phenomenon, which cannot be explicitly anchored in traditional nationalistic concerns (unlike, say, the *giallo* or the *poliziotteschi*). However, presumptions about the opportunistic underpinnings of the Italian post-apocalypse film are problematised when the cycle is contextualised within some of the other film formats being produced in Italy at the time. These included a series of erotic Roman historical dramas (with titles that included *Nerone e poppea* [AKA *Nero an Orgy of Power*, 1981], *Caligula e messalina* [AKA *Caligula and Messalina*, 1982], *Caligula ... la storia mai raccontata* [AKA *Caligula the Untold Story*, 1982] and *Messalina orgasmo Imperiale*, 1983). This series (in part motivated by the high-end, chic success of Tinto Brass's 1979 film *Caligula*) not only drew on similar Italian myths as the peplum, but even incorporated fight and contest scenes from these 1950s productions into their narrative fictions (albeit for budgetary rather than socio-historical reasons). Whilst the shared use of peplum mythology and imagery provide a link to the post-apocalypse films under review, the cycle shares similar themes of faulty sexual maturation dynamics, with female characters often marginalised by more central conflicts between a despotic ruler and a younger male charge.

Given the brief reference to some of the titles above, it is unsurprising that the elements of sexual sadism and titillation referenced in the post-apocalypse landscape are here extended (and supplemented by the frequent inclusion of hardcore orgy inserts), thus reflecting the loosening censorship regulations of the era. What is also interesting is the extent to which this shared lineage to the peplum genre is itself reproduced by a further series of productions which extrapolated the pivotal figure of the mythical strongman and supplanted him into the related cycle of 'Barbarian Male' fictions. As with the post-apocalypse film, these entries (often completed back to back by directors working in both cycles) also drew heavily on classical peplum themes and iconography, in a series of titles that included *Ator l'invincible* (AKA *Ator the Fighting Eagle*, 1982), *La guerra del ferro* (AKA *Iron Master*, 1982), *Gunan* il guerriero (AKA *The Invincible Barbarian*, 1982), S*angraal la spade di fuoco* (AKA *Barbarian Master*, 1982), *Thor il conquestatore* (AKA *Thor the Conqueror*, 1982) and *Conquest*, 1983.

Within the titles listed above, we once again find male characters circulating in a pre-industrial environment, with the themes of confused Oedipal lineage being negotiated via contradictory images of cruel and conciliatory paternal figures. With three sequels and a number of loosely defined exploitation tie-ins associated with it, Aristide Massaccesi's *Ator the Fighting Eagle* remains one of the most significant *and* typical of

entries to the series. Employing a fusion of established Italian genre actors alongside new muscular pin-ups (such as Miles O'Keefe), the Ator series shares a number of thematic parallels with the post-apocalyptic cycle and freely wanders into the chronologically-challenged landscape that the post-nuclear narrative inhabited. Thus, while the prologue of the original *Ator* film initiates the pre-biblical myth of a legendary warrior who rises up to defeat the despotic Kingdom of the Spider, the 1984 sequel *Ator I'invincible 2* (AKA *The Blademaster*) has the hero defuse a nuclear bomb in the finale, thus rending the temporality (and logic) of the franchise ambiguous. However, while the barbarian narrative both shares and accentuates the male Oedipal bias of the post-apocalyptic text, its fantastical genre tropes allow it to foreground its ambivalences around female sexuality in a more extreme manner.

Thus, while it is characteristic for Ator to be captured by aggressive Amazon groups throughout the series (their construction clearly referencing the prior depiction of dangerous female hordes that Maggie Günsberg identifies in her analysis of the 1950s peplum), the barbarian narrative also evokes fears surrounding the abject nature of female sexuality by presenting the hero with a series of markedly older and more monstrous female love objects. For instance, the original *Ator* initiates O'Keefe's character as the displaced son of Torren, whose destiny dictates he be adopted into a 'humble' family until it is time to defeat the High Priest of the Spider Kingdom (Dakar), whose repressive influence hampers enlightened progress and the advance of civilisation. During Ator's journey towards this epic battle, he encounters the sexualised but sexually ambivalent figure of Indun (played by Laura *Black Emanuelle* Gemser), who attempts to seduce the hero in her underground boudoir. Having partially stripped to entice the hero, Indun readies herself for intercourse. However, at the key moment of coital contact, the cloaked mirror opposite the bed falls away, revealing Gemser's character as an aged, monstrous hag (the oversized teeth and fleshly facial exterior replicating imagery of the *vagina dentata* that Günsberg finds in 1950s peplum symbolism).[55] If this encounter is indicative of the Oedipal child's veiled fear of and fascination with the maternal body, then it is part of a pattern of sexual trauma that stretches across the entire *Ator s*eries. Thus, by the time of the fourth *Ator* film (AKA *Quest for the Mighty Sword*, 1990), the mythical hero has spawned a son who has to 'save his mother' from a 'curse' which consumes her with uncontrollable incestuous urges for her offspring.

Even from its outset, the *Ator* series uses themes of ambivalent Oedipal lineage to disseminate polymorphous desires across the barbarian narrative. Although unaware that he has been adopted, Ator falls for his

'sister' Sunya (Ritza Brown), leading to fears of his expulsion from the family unit. Here, the adoptive father figure functions as the paternal imago that Freud identified in the study of The Family Romance.[56] This older male character is both non-castrating (being first depicted as a bedridden character who adopts the infant for a dowry), and willing for the younger man to inherit a more virile Symbolic mantle ("You are already a better hunter than I am" he assures the young protagonist, before giving him permission to marry Sunya). Although Ator's conciliatory pre-wedding speech expressing happiness that his adopters "now get to be my parents for a second time", it seems significant that any resolution of infantile trauma is displaced with the sudden kidnapping of Sunya by the High Priest's troops, who also kill the kindly paternal figure in the process.

What replaces this conciliatory figure are multiple images of what analyst Jurgen Reeder has termed as the threatening and psychotic father of cult film. Writing in the article 'The Uncastrated Man: The Irrationality of Masculinity Portrayed in Cinema', Reeder offers a psychoanalytic distinction between Oedipal formations in cult and mainstream cinema, noting the former's preoccupation with a particularly perverse and violent set of paternal tropes. Citing the disreputable nature of such extreme imagery, Reeder opens his consideration by noting that cult exists on the "margins of the cinematic and video film cultures … genres which the serious and more intellectual moviegoer will usually regard with scorn".[57] These deviations reside not only in the "unrestrained violence, dismemberments [and] gushes of blood"[58] associated with such texts, but also in a pattern of repetition, equitable with the compulsive urges I have previously identified in other key Italian cult cycles in the volume. Here:

> "Cultishness" goes much further than that, however, for in themselves these films seem to be a kind of ritual where a seemingly identical dramatic structure is reiterated many times over, but of course within the thematic boundaries set up by each genre.[59]

Although Reeder bases his analysis on a range of American cult genres, he finds a repetition of 'psychotic' paternal figures in these case studies, whereby the traits of a threatening father figure are split either between differing representations in the text, or (given the dominance of cult horror imagery he discusses) distilled into a singular unhinged paternal image who monstrously refuses to die. In each variant, the psychotic father figure appears (and reappears) not as an agent of post-Oedipal integration, but rather to ensure the fatalistic entrapment of a younger male in a web of murder and sexual violation. In this respect, these psychotic paternal representations deviate from mainstream cinema's

preoccupation with "the classical Oedipal drama … which portrayed a son more or less successfully struggling with his father to win a place in life and a measure of masculine dignity".[60] Instead, the psychotic father unleashes power and phallic violence without ego or responsibility. This figure is initially referenced in Ator through the omniscient (and racially Othered) figure of the High Priest of the Spider Kingdom, who is linked to unrivalled fighting skills (having previously slain Ator's real father), as well as uninhibited corporeality (frequently depicted with live tarantulas adorning his torso and head). However, this psychotic paternal imago is also reproduced in the potent but duplicitous figure of Griba (Edmund Purdom), who appears immediately after the death of Ator's adoptive father to train his body for manhood.

As the narrative reveals, Griba is a locus of usurped phallic power (possessing a hidden lair containing the weapons of his fallen male prey), as well as the possessor of what Reeder terms the uncastrated body, with a range of metallic, wooden and reed armour suits, which shield his corporeality from penetration. The initial plenitude and near erotic bond between the older Griba and Ator is revealed in an extended montage training scene, which increasingly frames the central protagonist from low angle positions to underscore his increased potency in the presence of this older male. However, while this sequence in many respects represents fantasy interlude (which interestingly is not matched by any other element of depicted heterosexual desire), the relations between the two men effectively block rather than facilitate Ator's incorporation into heteronormative relations. As Reeder comments:

> The elder man in the psychopath film is no benevolent father, setting limits for his child with the good intention of ushering him along the path to becoming a grownup. Instead, he will typically draw the young men into his warped orbit, attracting and fascinating him with his brutality, his strength, his attempts to corrupt him and not seldom with perverse and homosexual temptations.[61]

Given Reeder's statement, it is significant that Griba's duplicity in relation to Ator is frequently revealed via the disruptive intervention of sexual difference and female desire into this same-sex dyad. For instance, the introduction of Roon (Sabrina Siani), who comes across the pair training in the forest, not only disturbs the all-male routine, but also provides a rival love object in Ator's quest to retrieve his kidnapped bride. Interestingly, after Roon's introduction Griba disappears, telling Ator: "You have no need of me now." This indicates his status not as guarantor of male Oedipal stability, but rather as a threatening figure of unrestrained

phallic power and licentious same-sex desire. Indeed, it is only at the end of the narrative that the elder psychotic male's true motives are revealed, when Ator finds him attempting to sacrifice Sunya to the monstrous spider demon in order to further deflect the Oedipal resolution.

Although the finale of *Ator* (with its expulsion of Griba from the narrative) indicates a resolution of the same-sex tensions that the uncastrated man evokes, it is significant that the prologue to sequel *The Blademaster* reveals that, after Sunya's death, Ator goes into hiding, preferring to live with the male Eastern sage and combat instructor Thong (Chen Wong). If this curious and unexplained elision of Ator's key love interest indicates that heterosexual desire is endlessly deferred, rather than definitively resolved, then it is a central problematic that is replicated in other key entries to the barbarian male cycle:

Figure 9.3: "The signs of becoming a man": the magical bow and maturation process of *Conquest*.

For instance, Lucio Fulci's *Conquest* replaces Ator's mystical sword with a magical bow, but retains the weapon's connection to the thrill of unrestrained phallic energy. The pre-credit scene depicts an elderly male sage narrating a prologue about the bow's mystical fighting qualities to

clearly captivated young hero Ilias (Andrea Occhipinto), who questions the bow's magical potential for its owner. Interestingly, the sage replies that the magical thing is the weapon's role in helping its bearer become a man. As with *Ator* before him, Ilias's subsequent journey reproduces both the threat of sexual difference (here the key villain is the sexually voracious and masked female Ocran), while the female body is frequently replicated as a site of abject wounding (with one unfortunate victim of a savage horde attack subjected to a grisly genital violation). Equally, as with *Ator*, there is also a repeated policy of deferring heterosexual desire through an equation with disgust and and physiological corruption. Thus in one scene, Ilias falls for a female cave dweller, who connotes both unabashed sexual desire and abject bodily fluids (here signified by the excremental mud she smears over her body to entice the young male). Unsurprisingly this dual female status of attraction and repulsion is confirmed in the couple's subsequent coital encounter. Here, Ilias closes his eyes in anticipation of the imminent sex act with both he (and the film's viewer) mistaking a fatal blow to his lover's head by an enemy tribe as an orgasmic utterance. It is only when he opens his eyes that he realises the reality of the female's dead and abject body:

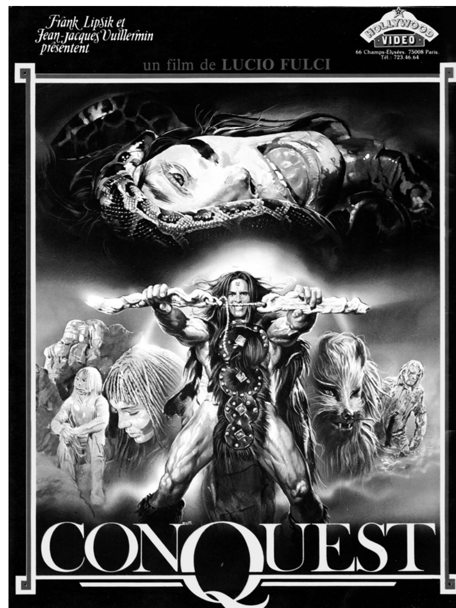

Figure 9.4: Erotic and excremental: female love objects are often coded as abject in *Conquest*.

While Fulci's film clearly echoes the contradictions and phobias surrounding female sexuality reproduced in both the barbarian male and post-apocalypse cycles, the film also remains of interest for the ways in which it distils conciliatory and psychotic paternal figures through the central protagonist Mace (Jorge Rivero). Initially appearing as an antagonistic figure who threatens to purloin Ilias's magical bow, the older, more virile male then takes on a comparable role to that of Griba in *Ator*, becoming a phallic 'tutor' to the younger male charge.[62] While this suggests an element of nurturing (as indicated in the scene where the older protagonist treats the contagious lesions on Ilias's infected body), the character's potential as lethal uncastrated man is also evoked, with the delirious youngster imagining the paternal figure fighting with a phantasmagorical double who wants to castrate, rather than cure, him. As Reeder has concluded, although the figure of the uncastrated man affords the promise of unrestrained phallic union, he actually represents the threatening figure of the 'primitive father' first identified by Freud:

> He appears in the shape of a male figure standing outside every order, and to whom all is allowed, since his only law is his own desire. Like the primal father … his pleasure is limitless. Undoubtedly a father imago, but a father who brings dread and chaos to all and everyone he comes near, for he is not touched by the requirement that we show care towards our fellow beings and the world we have created.[63]

Arguably, the duality of paternal function to which Reeder refers is reproduced by Mace, who both defies incest taboos surrounding the maternal body (proudly informing Ilias that he can share his woman's body, and that of her sister), whilst rejecting any element of post-Oedipal integration (by spurning the younger male's planned integration with the statement: "Your world may be better than mine, but I would always be a stranger there"). Drawing on Reeder's conclusion that cult imagery acts as a subversive corrective to the model of Oedipal resolution offered by mainstream cinema, it is noticeable that barbarian male and post-apocalyptic narratives remain unrepentant about the uncastrated and threatening male figures they create. Often these characterisations eschew narrative expectation, as in the finale of *Conquest*. Here, Ilias is suddenly killed, leaving Mace to destroy the evil female matriarch in the film's closing scene. The final image of the older male disappearing into the wasteland (having finally purloined his late assistant's magical bow) speaks more about Italian cult film's unwillingness to resolve the sexual contradictions of its post-apocalyptic/barbarian males than any strategy to fully integrate them.

Notes

[1] Mick Broderick, 'Surviving Armageddon: Beyond the Imagination of Disaster', http://wwwwmcc.murdoch.edu.au/~mickbrod/postmodm/m/text/armaged4.html,10 . Accessed 10/9/2010.
[2] Steven Thrower, '*Gunan il guerriero*' (review), *Delirium: The Essential Guide to Bizarre Italian Exploitation* 5 (1997), 41.
[3] For instance, Iain McLachlan's review of entries like *Texas 2000* bemoan the film's "futuristic vehicles" as nothing more than thinly disguised "conventional 1980s motor cars with additional panelling", (http://www.sffworld.com/movie/455.html 05/04/ 2005). Accessed 10/9/2010.
Similarly, Matthew Blake's comments about *The New Barbarians* typify the scorn associated with Italian cut-price versions of the apocalypse. For him, the film's "sets are laughable and (the) costumes preposterous, not unlike a cheaper episode of *Blake's 7*". http://www.erratica.co.uk/euromiscellanea/new_barbarians.htm Accessed 31/3/2010.
[4] Broderick, 'Surviving Armageddon', 4.
[5] Ibid.,10.
[6] Ibid.,11.
[7] See 'Apocalypse Vultures: The End of the World in the Eternal City', in John Martin (ed.), *Giallo Pages* 4 (1994), 14–20.
[8] Kim Newman, 'Thirty Years in Another Town: The History of Italian Exploitation', *Monthly Film Bulletin* Volume 53, no 264 (March 1986), 91.
[9] Marcia Landy, *Italian Film* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), p.182.
[10] Michele Lagny, 'Popular Taste: The Peplum', in Richard Dyer and Ginette Vincendeau (eds), *Popular European Cinema* (London: Routledge, 1992), p.163.
[11] For an overview of Italy's contribution to the wider field of mythological cinema, see Derek Elley, *The Epic Film* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1984). Whilst Elley does not distinguish 'epic' entries strictly along nationalistic lines, certain chapters of his study do point to the prominence of Italian productions in this area. For instance, see chapter 'Rome: From Myth to Republic', pp.76–86. As with other authors cited here, Elley's account is also valuable for anchoring the resurgence of the Italian peplum to the 1950s economic miracle, as well as accounting for the later social turbulence that spelled the end for a genre linked to the period of "new post-war prosperity and social re-adjustment" (p.24). As Elley has noted:

> The prosperity and optimism of the mid-sixties soon petered out… As society turned in on itself, in an orgy of doubt and self-questioning, the cinema turned to subjects which reflected this new uncertainty of direction. Horror, became the new fashion, expressing the fears of a technological society… (p.24)

[12] Lagny, p.171.
[13] Maggie Günsberg, *Italian Cinema: Gender and Genre* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004), p.97.

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[14] Ibid., p.116.
[15] Ibid., p.115.
[16] The most notable new personality to emerge from this process was the former Italian waiter Marco de Gregorio, who was renamed 'Mark Gregory' for his acting debut in Castellari's *Bronx Warriors*. Here, the actor's dark, Native American-style looks made him perfect for the part of Trash: the leader of a marginal biker gang being hunted down by the sinister Manhattan Corporation and their fascistic, horse-mounted storm-troopers. (The intertextual nature of de Gregorio's racial connotations seem confirmed by his later casting as a vengeful Apache in the Fabrizio De Angelis action movie *Thunder* [1983]). Other key examples include Giancarlo Prete, who was recast as 'Timothy Brent' for both the lead role of Scorpion in *The New Barbarians* as well as that of Striker, a lethal single parent featured in *Bronx Warriors II*.
[17] Landy, *Italian Film*, p.182.
[18] Paul Ginsborg, *A History of Contemporary Italy: Society and Politics: 1943–1980* (London: Penguin History, 1990), p.407.
[19] For additional information on this, see the chapter 'The Economy and Society. 1980–2006' in Martin Clark, *Modern Italy*. Noting the social and political significance of the Fiat strike, Clark sees the event as a bulwark against the left-leaning decade that preceded it. As he notes:

> Tough management had reasserted its authority at Fiat for the first time since 1968, and the precedent was noted all over Italy… The trade unions never fully recovered from this defeat. (p.473)

[20] Ginsborg, p.407.
[21] Ibid., pp.406–407.
[22] Ibid., 410.
[23] Marcia Landy, *Stardom Italian Style: Screen Performance and Personality in Italian Cinema* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2008) p.166.
[24] Ginsborg, p.409.
[25] Clark, *Modern Italy*, p.483.
[26] Ibid.
[27] Ibid., p.486.
[28] The opening sequence of Castellari's *The New Barbarians* is significant in this respect, juxtaposing a montage scene conveying the catastrophe of a nuclear bomb, with the close-up of a corpse encased in a female decontamination suit to signify the nihilistic effects on sexuality and procreation.
[29] Lagny, 'Popular Taste', p.170.
[30] Farrasino and Sanguineti cited in Günsberg, *Italian Cinema*, p.102.
[31] For a further reading of the American actor in the 1950s peplum, see the section 'Recycled Genres, New Stars: Mythologicals and Historical Films' in Landy's *Stardom Italian Style*, pp.163–168. Here, Landy uses the example of the American bodybuilder relocating to Italy for a subsidiary career to further explore the dialogic nature of American and Italian cinematic relations discussed above. Drawing similar conclusions to Günsberg, Landy argues that the shift towards using American stars in the 1950s peplum foregrounded new methods of depicting

these ‘foreign’ physiques, whereby the “spectacle of the male and female body addressed heterosexual and homosexual audiences” (p.168). These techniques included the use of low camera angles to emphasise the statuesque nature of the performer’s torso, as well as a specific coda of “scant costume”, which ensured attention was directed towards the peplum hero’s “muscular, sculptured, well-oiled athletic bodies” (p.166).

[32] Günsberg, p.110.

[33] Ibid., p.111.

[34] Ibid.

[35] Ibid., p.116.

[36] Importantly, Günsberg’s affirmation of the hero’s unique status via the role of aural mechanisms and soundtrack is also confirmed in *2019: After the Fall of New York*. Here, Parsifal is introduced into the narrative via the voiceover of an onlooker describing his skill and courage in a brutal motorcycle competition. Aristide Massaccesi’s *End Game* goes even further, by isolating its central male protagonist along narrative, visual and audio track lines. The narrative juxtaposes the flight of an oppressed group with psychic powers, with a televised gladiatorial contest between two fearless fighters, Ron Shannon and Karnack. In narrative terms, their deadly fighting skills and courage are underscored by the fact that their opponents are easily dispatched during the contest. Equally, the reflexive film within a film motif of the actual contest provides multiple images that convey the visualisation of their potency. These include the introduction of Shannon into the narrative via a close-up of the crotch of his leather biker’s trousers, to voiceover narration from the camera operators filming the End Game match discussing his potency and fighting prowess.

[37] Landy, *Stardom Italian Style*, p.190.

[38] Günsberg, *Italian Cinema*, p.115.

[39] Ibid., p.126.

[40] Ibid.

[41] Ibid., p.108.

[42] Importantly, Castellari’s post-apocalypse films (as well as his earlier rogue cop movies) make sustained use of cinematic effects such as slow motion to offer a panorama of male suffering. Specifically, they draw parity with the homoerotic potential of the action genre identified in Steve Neale’s influential article ‘Masculinity as Spectacle: Reflections on Men and Mainstream Cinema’ in *Screen* 24 (1983), 2–17: 6. In his revision of Mulvey’s ‘Visual Pleasure’ thesis, Neale notes how same-sex cinematic identification becomes strained by certain action genres where repeated close-ups of the male body (as well as a general absence of female characterisation), results in the masculine frame becoming framed as a site of erotic spectacle for both the male and female spectator. Noting the prevalence of cinematic techniques such as slow motion to action, contest and torture sequences, Neale argues that such devices help these “remain bodies unmarked as objects of erotic display” (14). Here, slow motion is used to convey the masculine body in a state of disruption or torment, with elements of violence thus sublimating the erotic charge involved in these scenes. As a result:

> We see male bodies stylised and fragmented by close-ups, but our look is not direct, it is heavily mediated by the looks of the characters involved. And those looks are marked not by desire, but rather by fear, or hatred, or aggression. (14)

[43] Kim Newman, '*Bronx Warriors*' (review), *Monthly Film Bulletin* 50 (July 1983), 192.
[44] Lagny, 'Popular Taste', p.168.
[45] Ibid., p.190.
[46] Broderick, 'Surviving Armageddon', 11.
[47] Newman, '*Bronx Warriors*', 192.
[48] Martin, *Giallo Pages*, 20.
[49] Kim Newman, 'Thirty Years in Another Town: The History of Italian Exploitation', *Monthly Film Bulletin* Volume 53, no 264 (March 1986), 91.
[50] In its potent connection between man and machine, the post-apocalypse film here recalls not only the Italian western, but earlier peplum cycles. For instance, Lagny has identified a similar tendency in sword and sandal movies such as *La battaglia di aratona* (AKA *The Giant of Marathon*, 1959), with the hero's horse as "an extension of his own body when he is riding fast: it is even prepared to risk its own life if necessary" (p.167).
[51] The use of Fred Williams' potent body and gaze is significant here, as it subverts the colonial emphasis on 'The White Man's Muscles' that Richard Dyer identifies in *White* (London: Routledge, 1997). In his analysis of 1950s peplum, Dyer charts the cycle's historically problematic relationship to fascism, noting that ethnicity is often figured via a process of mimicry, whereby "ethnically different peoples in pepla are generally played by white actors, but the differences signalled by *mise en scéne* are those of racial difference in Eurocentric discourse" (p.176). However, when actors from ethnic groups are cast, Dyer concedes:

> Pepla do occasionally cast black bodybuilders, usually as a special case of primitivism. They are presented as possessed of a slave mentality, realising their best and true place is in subservience to the white man. (pp.178–179)

However, in both the nature of the roles that Williamson undertook for Castellari, and the narrative and physical significance the actor is given in these performances, racial orthodoxy is here reversed so that he is characteristically depicted as a physical tutor or guide in the white post-apocalyptic hero's masculine development.
[52] Lagny, 'Popular Taste', p.164.
[53] Ibid., p.171.
[54] Günsberg, *Italian Cinema*, p.108.
[55] See also the chapter 'Medusa's Head: The Vagina Dentata and Freudian Theory' in Barbara Creed's *The Monstrous Feminine: Film, Feminism, Psychoanalysis*, pp.105–121. Here, Creed discusses the distorted imagery of the female sex organ across cinema, art and religion, noting its power to evoke fear in the viewing male subject due to the overpowering image of the pre-Oedipal mother that it references. As she notes:

> The *vagina dentata* is a mouth… Fear of the *vagina dentata* and of the oral

> sadistic mother could be interrelated, particularly in view of the complex mythological and linguistic associations between mouth and the female genitals. (p.109)

[56] Given the mythological nature of the *Ator* narrative, it is interesting that Freud, in 'The Family Romance', attributes the syndrome to folktale myths of unique children placed in error with humble parents. As he notes, such daydreams evidence the child's desire to replace:

> …the real father with a superior one … an expression of the child's longing for the happy vanquished days when his father seemed to him the noblest and strongest of men and his mother the dearest and loveliest of women. (pp.224–225)

[57] Jurgen Reeder, 'The Uncastrated Man: The Irrationality of Masculinity Portrayed in Cinema', *American Imago* 52:2 (1995), 131.

[58] Ibid.

[59] Ibid.

[60] Ibid., 135.

[61] Ibid., 132.

[62] In an interesting aside to his article, Reeder also finds that the "primitive father personified in hard rock groups and horror films is a tempting lure for boys still on the threshold to adolescence" (147). This observation is well situated in relation to many of the paternal figures of the barbarian male narratives such as Mace, whose long flowing hair and toned, hairless torso approximate the 'look' of many rock stars during the era when these cycles were popular.

[63] Ibid, 143.

CHAPTER TEN

THE YEARS WITH(OUT) LEAD: TERRORISM, TRAUMA AND TITILLATION: 1970–1985

> ...in the decade of the 1970s, as the visually erotic element pervaded all genres of cinema without exception …One of the early characteristics of erotic cinema was its element of the so-called "schoolboy point of view", evolving quickly towards a provocative voyeurism.[1]
> —Rémi Fournier Lanzoni, *Comedy Italian Style*

Introduction

To paraphrase Rémi Fournier Lanzoni's opening quotation, it is more than appropriate to state that a 'visually erotic element pervaded' not only all key genres of Italian cinema during the 1970s, but also the key cult cycles that I have discussed in this volume. However, as indicated in previous chapters, this sexual impetus cannot be divorced from wider strategies of mutilation and violence that became central to Italian paracinema cycles created during this decade. These images testify to the explosion of what Lanzoni has termed "*filone erotico*",[2] an essentially generically impure set of representations with their own specific industrial, cultural and historical considerations.

Although Italian cinema has long traded on images of female sensuality, these representations were often conveyed by coded mechanisms (such as dialogue, costume and bodily gesture), in a variety of flamboyant post-war populist formats. For Mary P. Wood, the post-war economic miracle further accentuated an interest in the "*maggiorate fisiche* (the physically well endowed)",[3] with female abundance conveying the nation's emergent interest in consumption (both of products and sexed bodies). During the 1960s, Wood argues more explicit representations of female sexuality remained the preserve of auteur-based cinema, with arthouse directors such as Luciano Visconti and Michelangelo Antonioni employing images of estranged female sexuality to "shock and sometimes provoke statements

about contemporary society”.[4] Arguably, it was the political turmoil of post-1968 Europe that extended explicit imagery into populist cinema, ensuring that the resultant outrageous iconography could be read through a darkly pessimistic social and nationalistic lens.

Indeed, although Lanzoni’s insightful analysis focuses on the so-called comic considerations of the era, he does note how the established traditions of *commedia all’italiana* (or the nationally defined comedy of manners) markedly shifted during the 1970s to accommodate an unnerving emphasis on death and the grotesque, which he links to wider social discontents of the era. These fears related to the ever present threat of terrorist intervention (from both neo-fascist and leftist collectives) discussed in chapter eight, as well as wider socio-economic fears that saw rapid increases in unemployment, spiralling fuel prices and the “chronic rise of a galloping inflation”[5] overshadow the wider industrial progress of the economic miracle.

This chapter will therefore explore the extent to which two key cycles of comic and dramatic *filone erotico* can similarly be viewed as reflecting social and sexual anxieties from the 1970s, which relate not only to terrorist fears, but also gender-based phobias reflecting the changing status of Italian women during the period. However, I am also interested in the extent to which these female bodies of desire and distress impinged on both the social consciousness *and* psychic unconsciousness, specifically through the remediation of primal scene structures and imagery that I have previously identified as central to the Italian cult film experience as a whole. Indeed, returning to Lanzoni’s opening quotation, it seems intriguing that the author notes a connection between a male teen orientation of 1970s erotic material, and the guilty forms of voyeurism they convey. Although many Italian erotic titles produced during these years focused on young schoolboys erotically obsessed with the private activities of mature female authority figures as a manifest plot device, it is also interesting to note how these culturally defined imperatives were frequently annexed to psychic considerations that sought to eroticise familial relations. By fusing contemporary Italian fears and libidinal tensions, the *filone erotico* therefore provides crucial index of how fantasies and fears of female domination function at both the social and psychic levels of disturbance.

The Years Without Lead: Women, Sexuality and the *Anni di piombo*

Whether defined by the sexually liberated (and frequently bisexual) women of the *giallo*, the erotically rapacious heroines from the *Black Emanuelle* film, or even the vivacious but vengeful heroines from the suspense thriller format, Italian cult cinema of the 1970s created an extensive index of modern and eroticised Italian female. For Mary P. Wood, these images cannot be divorced from wider social and political tensions of the era, as they evoke "a range of female stereotypes available to correspond to particular male desires, from the childish to the more mature, from innocence to the degraded".[6] Although these female protagonists appear compliant to male heterosexual desire, they come to convey both desire and distress precisely because they possess an erotic will and political agenda that exceeds the limits of masculine control.

Although defined by a decade of militant terrorist activity and the all-pervasive influence of the *Brigate rosse*,[7] the rise of Italian feminism was seen as an equally disruptive political discourse, even to those male figures advocating radical countercultural change.[8] Indeed, as Lanzoni has argued, although feminism was one of the later radical movements to develop during the *Anni di piombo*, it remained one of the most significant. Here, female interventions in the economic and political sphere represented one of the significant revolutions of this decade, both in the workplace and the private sphere. As Lanzoni commented:

> These initiatives included a wide range of requests such as legalizing divorce and abortion, establishing equal rights between both partners within marriage contracts, promoting awareness for sexual freedom, contraception and finally the creation of women's commissions in factory councils.[9]

Key advances (such as the repeal of the divorce laws and legalisation of abortion) were testament to increasing feminist engagement and militation at the national political level. In particular, the struggle over the abortion act (feminist activists collected over 700,000 signatures requesting a referendum on the subject in 1975 before a bitter and protracted battle led to legalised terminations in May 1978) was part of a wider ideological battle to recognise the still taboo subject of female sexuality.

While these struggles confirmed that in Italy "a true "women's liberation" phenomenon stood against a fossilised patriarchal-dominated society",[10] this contradiction extended to splits between many feminist groups and the (male-dominated) countercultural movements of the

period.[11] As Lanzoni has noted, a number of key organisations advocating the advancement of the female position emerged during the period. These included *Movemento Liberazione delle Donne,* created in 1969 by Adele Faccio and Maria Adele Teodori, and *Movemento Liberazione Femminile*, created in 1970 as a more radical separatist group that argued for women occupying a separate zone to men. These more radical elements were also complemented by break-away factions such as *Rivolta Femminile*, whose politics of phallic exclusion extended to the denial of marriage as a patriarchal institution.

While advances were made during this era (such as the 1968 repeal of female adultery, which had been punishable by law since 1930), Lanzoni has noted the potentially contradictory 'consumption' of female sexuality that accompanied these legal changes. Here, sexual imagery was often co-opted to connote unabashed feminist emancipation, whilst retaining the vicarious thrills so popular with heterosexual audiences:

> It was during these years of sudden sexual freedom that one of the most visible manifestations of the decade began to surface with the advent of graphic eroticism and ultimately pornography (1966 saw the first erotic publication for men in Italy). However, the phenomenon did not explode until the seventies with the first *luci rosse cinema* (red light district theatres began to screen pornographic films in 1977), which eventually deeply divided the feminist movement.[12]

If the explosion of sexually explicit material during the 1970s revealed a contradictory construction of the liberated and libidinous female, then it also rendered male representations equally ambiguous. Faced with a new set of male-defined but overtly desiring female types, Lanzoni identifies the importance of new strategies of grotesque and comedic representation, which often used humorous tropes to short-circuit masculine fears of an enlivened female sensuality. These tropes feature in one of two erotic Italian traditions which came to dominate during this turbulent period: the erotic comedy and the morbid sexual drama.

Filone Erotico I: Family Dramas, Comic Drives

In its comic variant, Italian erotic cinema of the seventies often annexed social fears of female liberation to familial tensions, by detailing faulty patriarchal role models whose desires undercut the moral value system of the nuclear unit. As Rémi Fournier Lanzoni has noted, despite their appeal to comedic strategies, this erotic variant relied heavily on a troubling preoccupation with "graphic incest related scenes",[13] by depicting the

illicit relations between a sexually-charged teenager and an older parental figure. As the author notes, the moral tensions implicit in these couplings were often diffused by the introduction of a comic element (the so-called *commedia sexy all'italiana* that remains the focus of Lanzoni's study).

The dystopic family dynamic that the author identifies in the Italian erotic comedy seems replicated in some of the key erotic films produced in 1975. Here, production output reveals titles such as: *Giochi erotica di una famiglia perbene* (AKA *Erotic Games in a Respectable Family*, 1975), *L'infermiera di mio padre* (AKA *My Father's Nurse*, 1975), *La nuora giovane* (AKA *The Young Daughter in Law*, 1975), *Una vergine in famiglia* (AKA *A Virgin in the Family*, 1975) and *Il vizio di famiglia* (AKA *Vice in the Family*, 1975), all of which demonstrate a fixation with eroticising clandestine relations within the family unit.

These narratives (which usually dealt with illegitimate desires between teenage and mature siblings) extended beyond a single year of production, to become a key erotic marker between 1975 and 1980,[14] coinciding with the emergence of the *luci rosse cinema* circuit discussed by Lanzoni. Equally, the films produced in this period range beyond nuclear relations, to detail an expanded network of couplings between family members. For instance, while 1976's key releases linked the unhealthy exposition of carnal interactions between stepparents and the teenagers in their charge (*La figliastra* [AKA *The Stepdaughter*], *Oh mia bella matrigna!* [AKA *Oh, My beautiful Stepmother!*]), other titles widened the net of illicitness to include *Cugine mie* (AKA *My Cousins*), and *Cuginetta ... amore mio!* (AKA *Cousins… My Love!*).

Drawing on the gender paradoxes identified in Lanzoni's analysis of the *commedia sexy all'italiana*, it is unsurprising that issues of male debasement (either comedic or dramatic) are central to *filone erotica* produced during this era. Here, punishment is meted out to male protagonists for their attempts to survey concealed scenes of sexual activity between family members. In its comic variant, the *filone erotico* uses an extensive vocabulary of facial distortion and physiological discomfort to convey how ill-fated attempts by male family members to exploit the sexuality of their siblings ultimately leads to their own discomfort. An example of this can be seen in Alfonso Brescia's 1976 film *L'adolescente* (AKA *Sweet Teen*), which features the Sicilian comic Tuccio Musumeci as Vito Gnaula, a sexually repressed husband whose markedly younger spouse Grazia (Daniela Giordano) refuses to consummate their marriage.

Figure 10.1: Comic carnalities: unattainable women as a trigger to male sexual frustration in *L'adolescente*.

Gnaula's resultant libidinal frustrations are expressed in a range of distorted facial displays, which follow a repeated pattern of the protagonist experiencing humiliation when his advances are comically rejected.

Echoing the troubled period of its production, *L'adolescente* combines comedy with social commentary in the central scene where Vito discovers that the physician who has been supervising his wife's campaign of sexual abstinence is in fact a radical, separatist feminist, who initiates a same-sex tryst at the same time as lecturing the ailing patriarch on his failings as a heterosexual male. This scene (along with a later segment in which Vito is wrongfully interrogated by the police for diarising references to the female anatomy under encrypted names such as *Brigande rosso*, anarchists and fascists) indicates the extent to which the film's examination of sexuality

is clearly wedded to political concerns of the day. However, the introduction of Sonia Viviani as Serenella, Vito's alluring teenage niece, also shifts the narrative clearly into the realms of incest fantasy, reproducing the boundaries of confused lineage that Freud identified in his accounts of primal sexuality. Although introduced as a distant sibling who has relocated to the couple's home following the death of her natural parents, the couple refer to the youngster in much vaguer familial terms, with comments such as "Don't you think that our daughter is acting strange lately?"

These statements (and the conflation of sibling roles that they imply) add an additional level of perversion to Vito's frustrated libido, which is instantly redirected towards his new teenage guest. As he later comments during one of his many failed attempts to seduce the youngster: "Who cares about kinship in front of those boobs!" This playful displacement of the incest drive also facilitates a number of primal scene encounters in the film, which interestingly involve several family members surveying other relatives engaged in sexual activity. This strategy (which begins with both Grazia and Serenella peering into a room to watch Vito attempting intercourse with his secretary) gains an additional libidinal impetus when his niece finally agrees to have intercourse with him on the proviso that she can first watch her aunt being unfaithful with another suitor. Although Vito subsequently pays another man to seduce his wife in order to secure his own niece's virginity, the plan only facilitates further humiliation when the ill-fated male unwittingly ends up initiating intercourse with Grazia's new lover in a darkened room. This surprising same-sex interlude (along with Vito's highly feminised preparations of self-adornment in preparation for lovemaking) reiterates the policy of phallic debasement underpinning the comic *filone erotico*.

Although the use of comic modalities in *L'adolescente* softens its more transgressive exposition of eroticised familial relations, recent psychoanalytic analyses of the potential feminisation of male erotic consumers has further revealed how these narratives function to destabilise secure concepts of heterosexuality. For instance, in his article 'Pornography and the Primal Scene – A Report on the Voyage to Brobdingnag', Charles A. Peterson has linked a habitual 'heterosexual' obsession with the pornographic image to exposure to primal trauma, which he sees as resulting in a confused set of masculine gender identifications in adult life. Peterson exemplifies this hypothesis via the case study of 'Mr E.', a patient who "entered treatment with a spectrum of gender dysphoria concerns: He was uncertain of his sexual identity, troubled by dreams in which he metamorphosed into a woman; he was fearful that he might be a homosexual; and he was a

virgin”.[15]

Linking these adult insecurities with consuming explicit pornography in public venues such as adult movie houses, Peterson notes an intriguing pattern of familial relations that dominated the subject’s childhood. Noting that Mr E.’s father had committed suicide as a result of his experiences in World War Two, the patient’s early childhood life became dominated by controlling female figures, who initiated a pattern of faulty gender identification in the subject (as reiterated in the troubling fantasies of physical transformation he later recounted). Not only was the patient forced to adopt an increasingly feminised role in relation to his mother (a chronic alcoholic), but his Catholic schooling once again conveyed a sense of female dominance that threatened the male role. For instance, the male authority figures at his religious school “were called “Father”, but wore skirts”,[16] ensuring that “male, female, masculine, feminine, these were fuzzy concepts, not reliably applied to his own sense of self”.[17]

More importantly, Mr E.’s faulty conceptions of sexual identity were exacerbated by a long-term period of exposure to primal scene data, in which he observed his mother’s sexual dalliances with unnamed suitors in the central lounge of the family home. Importantly, although E. recounted a heightened sense of arousal at the sight of his mother’s sex organ during these dimly lit encounters, what remained interesting was his eroticised compartmentalisation of one male suitor’s anatomy, which he observed by:

> …feigning sleep to wait until the bodies began to blur into the darkness. He recalled a composite of part objects that would continue to haunt his consciousness … he was gripped by the sight of the man’s large penis erect and eagerly incorporated by his mother; he saw black thickly matted chest hair; in addition to his mother’s drunken giggles, he could hear indistinct sounds which might be pleasure or might be pain.[18]

As I previously discussed with reference to Freud’s case study of the Wolf Man, confusion between witnessed states of anxiety and arousal remain a concurrent part of the primal scene drama and are here reproduced by the patient’s ambivalence surrounding his mother’s role (and will) in these couplings. What is more interesting here is that Mr E.’s access to these scenes inferred not identification with, but an eroticisation of, the male bodies surveyed, which were reproduced in the ways in which filmed material was later consumed. Here, Peterson argues that the patient’s obsession with visual erotica served a masochistic strategy of “stimulus enslavement”,[19] with habitual viewings of pornography a means of making sense of previously surveyed traumatic material. However,

rather than instilling any sense of mastery, the patient's feelings of "passivity are complex and not easily resolved".[20]

It is these strategies of male heterosexual humiliation that go beyond the example of *Sweet Teen* to become a repeated trope in all of the key Italian erotic comedies produced during the 1970s. These strategies of male debasement were confirmed in a related comic cycle of Italian erotica whereby an emancipated external female figure (such as a tutor or work assistant) disrupts familial and heterosexual boundaries by initiating sexual contact with both father and son, often with comic and chaotic results. As exemplified by the 'Female Schoolteacher' films featuring the iconic seventies starlet Edwige Fenech, this sub-cycle exploited what Lanzoni sees as "the growing fascination of Italian popular audiences for erotic female teachers, female doctors or nurses, even nuns at times".[21] While annexing tropes of terrorism to titillation as identified above, the cycle also uses interesting points of same-sex desire and transsexual masquerade in a policy of male humiliation, which stresses inadvertent or enforced feminisation as the result of perverse familial bonds.

For instance, in the 1975 film *L'insegnante* (AKA *The School Teacher*), Fenech plays Giovanna, the young tutor pressured by an older lover into giving private lessons (and sex sessions) to an industrialist's wayward son, Franco (Alfredo Pea). Her spouse's directives are premised on an unwholesome quest to achieve both financial gain and civic influence, which he hopes will enliven his chances of short-circuiting the chronic social housing applications in the province. These demands reflect the petty perversions and municipal corruptions that come to define the other male protagonist's treatment of Giovanna in the film. Thus, when the industrialist expresses doubts surrounding his son's sexual prowess, he implores Fenech to seduce the minor, commenting: "But you're modern, liberal, think of all the peace of mind you can give to our son."

While phrases such as "modern", "liberated" and "teases" are used interchangeably to describe the apparent complexities of modern Italian womanhood, shrieks of "mother, mother" or desperate cries to "mama!" are frequently emitted by male tutors and the lacklustre school studs in Giovanna's charge. These curious maternal pleas (often uttered by the rubber-faced, and incongruously cast, middle-aged comic Alvaro Vitali) once again locates 1970s Italian sex comedy within the realm of the familial, echoing the perverse chains of illicit desire and confused lineage that I have already identified. So, in attempting to secure Giovanna's sexual services for their son, the industrialist confirms that his sibling needs "a gentle hand, like a sister, a big sister", while his wife describes her son "Little Franco", as a shy boy "who has to be handled very gently".

Figure 10.2: Marketing the modern Italian woman: Edwige Fenech as the unattainable school teacher.

These circuits of confused desire are confounded by Franco's own perverse attempts to manipulate his tutor/sister surrogate, and having taken advice on "how do you fake being a fag" from Vitali's character and other implausible male 'teens' in the school, Franco proceeds to enhance his already feminised appearance via bouts of crossdressing and enthusiastic nylon play. Although these extended scenes of comic sexual disguise are coded and contained as moments of 'queer passing', they cannot be

divorced from wider strategies of grotesque feminisation and the obsessions with anality and genital punishment that mark both the film and the *School Teacher* series as a whole. Indeed, the 1978 sequel *L'insegnante va in collegio* (AKA *The School Teacher Goes to Boys High*) expands some of these same-sex tensions in a narrative that pairs Fenech's habitual desirable mentor role with an industrialist's attempts to evade threats from Unionists and militants alike. Having declared himself bankrupt, this so-called "Captain of Industry" (played by genre regular Renzo Montagnani) relocates to a provincial town, where both he and his teenage son fall for Fenech, who plays the lone female language tutor at an all-male Catholic college.

In line with the usual confusions and thwarted couplings upon which Italian erotic comedies rely, repeated attempts by the students to survey Fenech naked result in aroused pupils surveying a range of partly clad male bodies by 'mistake', before their misinterpretation of the heroine's stage direction renders the school's version of *Othello* a same-sex romance sealed with an extended kiss between two confused and semi-literate male pupils. At this point, the thwarted industrialist reveals both his objections to the stage show and his true identity, just in time for the local *Brigate rosse* faction showing up to ship him off for an extended period of incarceration. The final image of the film depicts Fenech chastising the industrialist's son for besmirching her feminist inclinations, before seducing the visibly younger suitor as his father is led away for punishment.

This point of sexual and social incongruity adds an additional air of perversity which cannot be divorced from the wider tensions at play within this comic rendition of the *Anni di piombo*. In his recent work on genre cinema and terrorist tensions, Alan O'Leary has noted the frequent displacement/punishment of the father figure in 1970s Italian comedies, which used clichés to provide more strident political and psychosexual commentaries. Although "reviewers tended to dismiss the films as being excessively in thrall to genre models",[22] O'Leary argues that Italian pulp genres such as the *filone erotico* responded more readily than either auteurist or politically-inspired cinema to the tensions of the terrorist years:

> This was because the *commedia all'italiana* had the capacity to apprehend early the phenomenon of terrorism and the conditions of the *anni di piombo* because it could embed its stock types in the evolving array of the Italian comedy of manners."[23]

Although popular from the 1950s onwards, O'Leary argues that during the

period of the *Anni di piombo*, the format developed a 'satirical proximity' to both the celebrated values of the format and the role of leading male stars populating the cycle. Although these icons of heterosexual mobility were celebrated during the period of the economic miracle, their casting in the later 1970s produced an ironic and nihilistic response to the values of consumption, artifice and heterosexual conquest that these players embodied. To this extent:

> The representation of the young in the films of the 1970s was the representation of a generation alien to the actors and producers of the *commedia all'italiana*; as a consequence, in many of the films the young are shown as strange, uncommunicative, even ugly and dangerous.[24]

Arguably, this alienation is reproduced in the finales of films such as *The School Teacher Goes to Boys High,* which predicates eventual erotic union on the male student's ability to situate himself in opposition to his older patriarch's sexual failings. As a result, O'Leary links this generational conflict to the problematic father/son relationships that underpin Italian genre imagery, with the more potent and volatile generation displacing the "aging 'father'".[25] Given the confused and often melancholic conflicts between fathers and sons that dominate many of the cult Italian cycles I have surveyed, the comic-violent ejection of the father at the climax of *The School Teacher Goes to Boys High* bears comparison with the examples O'Leary has surveyed, suggesting:

> …a reading of Italian terrorism as another means of 'killing the father'. What is clear is that the use of the Oedipal mode, whether understood in purely mythical or in Freudian terms was a means of figuring conflict rather than concord at the centre of the nation, and an index of a society decidedly out of joint.[26]

This process of generational/paternal displacement continues into *L'insegnante viene a casa* (AKA *Teacher in the House*, 1978), one of Fenech's final outings in the popular cycle. Here, she is cast as Luisa, a naive piano tutor who relocates from Milan to Lucca to be with her older lover Marinotti, played once again by Renzo Montagnani. Although he is running for local office on a family and morality ticket, the character's conceit is soon revealed, as he is discovered to have concealed his marriage to an overbearing wife from the heroine. These actions mirror the immoralities of a trio of faulty patriarchs who dominate the narrative via various failed attempts to win Fenech's attentions. They include the surgeon Doctor Busatti (Gianfranco Barra), the quasi-fascist army veteran Colonel Marullo (Carlo Sposito), and the lascivious hotel superintendent

Amedeo (played by veteran comic Lino Banfi). It is pertinent that the inclusion of these three protagonists once again allows the erotic comedy format to offer an ironic commentary on the corrupt failings of the three masculine domains of medicine, the military and Italian municipality. These characters are themselves mirrored by the antagonistic relations they have with their three teenage male sons, confirming the conflict between adolescence and obsolescence that writers such as O'Leary have identified at the heart of 1970s *commedia all'italiana*, which once again can be read via a perverse and confused set of familial desires. From the opening scene in which Doctor Bussati is sexually assaulted by a confused male patient uttering "your son adores you, give me a kiss!", and Marinotti's attempts to disguise his lovemaking from Fenech with claims he is feeding his ailing mother, to later scenes in which the politician's gifts for Fenech are wrongly badged as wedding gifts for Colonel Marullo's daughter, the film repeatedly defers desire across confusing family networks with predictable consequences for the male protagonists. As with previous examples of the *filone erotico*, these comic and grotesque patriarchs unwittingly facilitate the final sexual union between Fenech and a markedly younger spouse, in this case Marcello (Marco Gelardini), the disaffected surgeon's son. The final image of the film shows the pair fornicating directly opposite Marinotti's political campaign poster proclaiming the family as "a nucleus of morality", which once again confirms the ironic and perverse underpinnings of this comic format.

Filone Erotico II: Male Immobility and Primal Punishment

While the comic variant of Italian sexploitation cinema uses themes of perverse desire and heterosexual performativity to humorous effect, the cycle of morbid erotic dramas that also proliferated during the terrorist years replaced sexual incompatibility with themes of physical immobility. Here, the trope of the politically attuned but sexually voracious Italian woman is recast as a potential vengeful and threatening figure, whose potency is sharply contrasted with images of male disability or incarceration. Appropriately, one of the earliest examples of this cycle was released in 1968 at the height of political unrest in Europe and released under various titles that included *Come Play With Me* (AKA *Grazie zia*, AKA *Thank you Auntie*). Directed by noted erotic auteur Salvatore Samperi, the film locates an incestuous relationship between the physically and mentally unstable teenager Alvise (Lou Castell) and his sexually unfulfilled older aunt (Lisa Gastone) against a backdrop of student

rebellion and the Vietnam war. Here, news reportage and atrocity re-enactment frequently interrupt the erotic games between the two, establishing morbid overtones that result in sexual regression and ultimately death. Alvise's prepubescent angst is itself mirrored by his aunt's alienation from the male-centred political discourses that surround her, including an older lover who prefers to discuss the latest Umberto Eco article than initiate intercourse with her. Although clearly attuned to the political and sexual discontents of the era, the film is as interesting for its themes of morbid loving, which are played out against the imperfect and immobile male form. The film begins with a prolonged image of male suffering, with Alvise's body contorting from the force of electric shock therapy attempting to cure his paralysis, and ends with his aunt administering a lethal injection to him once all other taboos have been broken.

Rather than representing an isolated instance, the themes of punitative sexual suffering expressed in *Come Play With Me* were reproduced in a range of carnal dramas which linked female erotic and political awareness to male fatalism and regression. These texts translate heterosexual erotica into male 'neurotica', by fusing dark family dramas with darker reflections on the increased empowerment of the Italian woman. One of the most nihilistic examples of this trend remains Aristide Massaccesi's *Emanuelle e Françoise le sorelline* (AKA *Blood Vengeance,* 1976). Although not strictly an entry in the *Black Emanuelle* series for which the director became infamous, the film retains a similar focus on sexuality, structuring an axis between desire and distress. This production recounts the fatal coupling between a manipulative womaniser named Carlo (played by Massaccesi's scriptwriter/ acting regular George Eastman), and two sisters, Francoise (Patrizia Gori) and Emanuelle (Rosemarie Lindt). The narrative is organised around a disorientating number of flashbacks that detail a catalogue of sexual humiliations forced upon the virginal Francoise by Carlo, resulting in her eventual suicide. Carlo's fatal campaign is later revealed to the more sexually liberated Emanuelle, in the form of a suicide note penned by Francoise before she jumps to her death under a speeding train. The document, revealing that Carlo forced his lover to appear in pornographic movies against her will (as well as coercing her into sexual encounters with a number of his business associates) becomes the trigger for Emanuelle to plot a violent revenge against the male protagonist.

After orchestrating a meeting with Carlo at her home, the heroine manipulates his sexual interest in her by promising seduction before drugging him. When the protagonist awakes, he finds that he has been imprisoned behind a two-way mirror. From this position of incarceration,

Carlo is forced to watch Emanuelle engage in a number of sexual liaisons with male and female partners (including his current girlfriend, Mira).

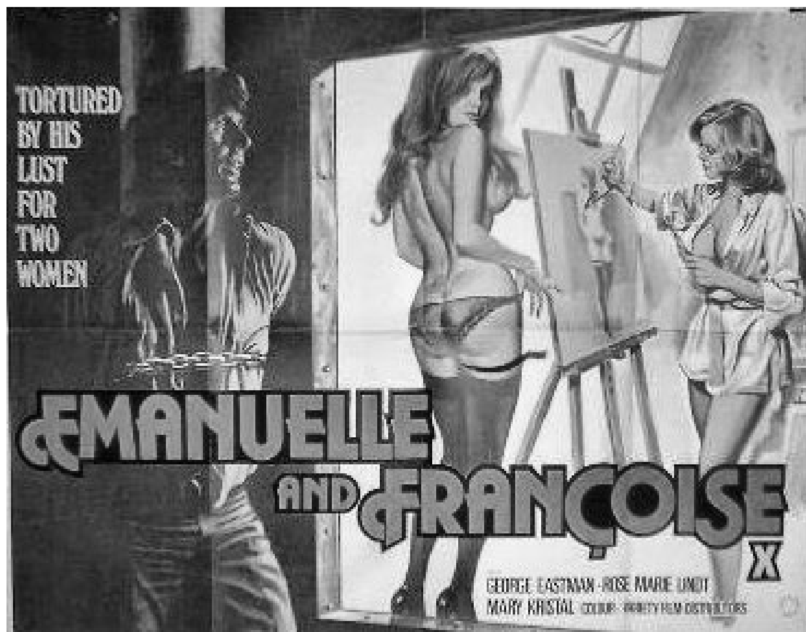

Figure 10.3: Chained desires: male voyeurism violently subverted by the emancipated women of *Blood Vengeance* (AKA *Emanuelle and Françoise*)

Via the motif of the concealed but traumatised male voyeur, *Blood Vengeance* reproduces the structure of the primal scene, rendering the thrill of sexual excess and titillation a source of male humiliation and punishment. Not only does Emanuelle proceed to starve, torture, threaten to kill and mutilate her male captive, but she also uses drugs to further disorientate and traumatise him. In the hallucinations that follow his capture, Carlo imagines his own body being violated as a punishment for this illicit gaze. One pointed example of this occurs when he imagines surveying an orgiastic dinner party, where aroused revellers feed off his flesh. This disturbing scene, with its visceral reduction of male anatomy to a series of de-subjectified body parts, reiterates Peterson's findings on the depersonalised persona of the male psyche within filmed erotic material that I discussed earlier. This process (which I would term the 'penis part object') functions to cement masculine fears around bodily wounding, thus

confirming a position of trauma for the viewing male.

While these grisly inserts indicate that Massaccesi's film constructs a clear axis between erotic desire and subsequent distress, the convoluted narrative structure proves equally ambivalent, with all seemingly pleasurable encounters later revealed as acts of coercion and violent manipulation. For instance, the opening credit scene of the film reveals Francoise confidently stripping before a cameraman in what appears to be a consensual 'glamour' photography shoot. It is only the later discovery of the heroine's suicide note that reveals Carlo's coercion of the protagonist into these pornographic scenarios against her will.[27] It is this repeated rendering of sexual activity as a site of debased public spectacle that provides the motivating principle to *Blood Vengeance*; it also constructs a point of traumatic repetition around which the narrative revolves. Although the heroine dies within the first five minutes of the film, her suicide note effectively keeps her alive, as well as prolonging her past suffering via a series of extended flashbacks. These shifts in filmic time add to the narrative's already convoluted structure, confirming a disturbing pattern of compulsion repetition. As with other examples of the *filone erotico*, the fusion of sexuality with morbid suffering did little to aid the film's international reception, with David Badder being just one critic who derided *Blood Vengeance* as "deadly dull", concluding that it was guaranteed to send the bulk of its "frustrated audience into a deep sleep long before its predictable denouement".[28]

Rather than being specific to *Blood Vengeance,* the immobilisation and then punishment of the male voyeur is repeated in a range of erotic dramas, whose contradictory elements of desire and distress remained popular in Italy until the mid-1980s (coinciding with the wider cessation of terrorist activities). Some of these other titles included Salvatore Samperi's *Fotografando Patrizia* (AKA *The Dark Side of Love*, 1985), Gabriele Lavia's *Scandalosa Gilda* (AKA *Scandalous Gilda,* 1985) and *Sensi* (AKA *Evil Senses,* 1986), Lucio Fulci's *Il miele del diavolo* (AKA *The Devil's Honey,* 1986), Piero Shivazappa's *La signora della notte* (AKA *Lady of the Night,* 1985) and Andrea Barzini's *Desiderando Giulia* (AKA, *Desiring Julia*, 1985). Across this series, a number of shared themes emerge that warrant a brief concluding examination:

(1) The motif of a violated male voyeur whose illicit gaze is punished by a female or females within the text.
(2) A related trope of enforced male infantilism and dependency on a more powerful and punishing female figure.
(3) A past sexual transgression functions as present trigger for

gendered punishment.

(4) A complex carnal cinematic style whereby flashbacks outlining prior sexual 'crimes' impede narrative progression.

At one level, these four features reproduce the key elements of primal content that we have witnessed in 1970s variants of the *filone erotico* outlined above. This is particularly marked in relation to the second point, with the theme of enforced male infantilism seen in *Blood Vengeance* becoming a disconcerting trope in a number of films. For instance, Lucio Fulci's *The Devil's Honey* dwelt on images of a potent and punishing heroine force-feeding dog food to the bound and defenceless surgeon who had killed her lover in a medical blunder. Giuseppe Patroni Griffi's *La gabbia* or *The Trap* (1985) replaced chastisement by canine chow, with cruelty through chic cuisine. Here a middle-aged lothario (played by Tony Mussante) has his chest sliced open by the mistress he spurned years earlier, who then pours fine red wine and caviar into the open wounds. Importantly, Patroni's film confirms the morbid circuit of familial desire that runs through the films under examination, by revealing the male protagonist's seducers/oppressors to be both his estranged lover and her sexually aggressive daughter, which the film strongly suggests is his own wayward female offspring.

In many respects, these films also reproduce the "challenges to gender and genre"[29] that Linda Ruth Williams has identified in her recent work on 1980s American direct-to-video erotica. Denied the direct, uninhibited and fleshy examination of the human body that hardcore affords, these milder forms of titillation often code their moments of copulation via motifs of extra textual excess. By terming these softcore thrillers "exercises in cinematic foreplay",[30] Williams draws on Freudian notions of regression to indicate how such narrative deviations represent deferred desires, with a basis in infantile displeasure. As with the concept of the primal scene that Freud identified in 'From the History of an Infantile Neurosis', Williams argues that the direct-to-video porn format reproduces the impotent gaze of the child upon a scene of parental intercourse via its repeated trope of male voyeurs reduced to watching, rather than enacting, sexual activity. As in the case of Freud's celebrated patient the Wolf Man I have previously discussed, the witnessed event proves traumatic not only because it provided 'visual' evidence barring the mother as a love object, but because it positioned the child as a *passive* observer unable to either change or affect the outcome of the scenario he had witnessed.

As a result, Freud's patient distorted the elements of the encounter to re-mould it from a scene of consensual coitus to one of violent anal rape

initiated against the mother's will, and then to a fantasy scenario involving savage and castrating wild beasts. As Freud's original account noted:

> He assumed ... that the event to which he was a witness, was an act of violence, but the expression of enjoyment which he saw on his mother's face did not fit with this; he was obliged to recognize that the experience was one of satisfaction. What was essentially new for him in his observation of his parents' intercourse was the conviction of the reality of castration...[31]

Importantly, Freud makes clear the role that voyeurism has in the primal scene encounter, noting that the scene the Wolf Man witnessed was "copulation in circumstances which were not entirely normal and were favourable for observation".[32] The residual memories of the event (although they underwent revision and distortion) formed the basis of a compulsion repetition which prevented the patient achieving satisfactory sexual relations in later life.

Along with Williams' example of the American direct-to-video thriller, Italy's *filone erotico* formats appear to reproduce this primal scene structure, not only replicating the role of the onscreen looker via a central male voyeur, but also allowing the film's viewer access to hidden and concealed scenes of sexuality. Indeed, these titles frequently frame their sexual encounters via concealed cameras hidden behind bed posts, outside doors and window frames, as if to underscore that the viewer is accessing something 'forbidden'. Moreover, these Italian works confirm Williams' conclusion that "although it is sexually exploited, voyeurism is also made to underpin the genre's punishment scenarios".[33]

As one of the final titles produced during the *Anni di piombo*, Salvatore Samperi's *The Dark Side of Love* remains one the most nihilistic in the exploration of these themes. Expanding on thematic interests from his earlier *Come Play With Me*, Samperi revisits themes of punitive voyeurism in the near incestuous relationship between a young male protagonist and a female parental substitute. Here, the transgressive coupling is played out between the 16-year-old Emilio (Lorenzo Lena) and his older sexually precocious sister Patrizia (Monica Guerritore). Indicating its basis in trauma rather than titillation, it is noticeable that *The Dark Side of Love* begins and ends with images of death and regression. The opening scene depicts the funeral of Emilio's mother and is intercut with his obsessive reviewing of home video tapes revealing the infantalising degree of control the deceased matriarch exercised. As we discover, Emilio suffers from a severe bone deformity which has "trapped his body between childhood and manhood" (enforced male infantilism

again), a permanent state of physiological regression that results in Patrizia returning from Venice to tend him. Sexual tensions soon come to the surface however, when she organises a series of sexual encounters for her brother to watch, thus exploiting his desire and unease at viewing these taboo acts. It is only when the couple have re-enacted the heroine's first sexual encounter with an 'older' stranger in a movie theatre that the regressive circuit is complete and the film ends with an unsettling image of the pair wrapped in a foetal death pose.

The ending of the *The Dark Side of Love*, with its emphasis on an emancipated but destructive female who also acts as an agent of sexual regression, confirms the *filone erotico* as a sexual landscape in which the pleasures associated with the male pornographic imagination are either comically humiliated or rendered displeasurable via their connection with threat, violence or familial transgression. As such, the the films I have outlined indicate the extent to which erotic material produced during the *Anni di piombo* evokes not only sensuality, but potential trauma and suffering for the Italian sexual citizen of the 1970s.

Notes

[1] Rémi Fournier Lanzoni, *Comedy Italian Style: The Age of Italian Film Comedies* (New York: Continuum, 2008), p.157.
[2] Ibid., p.182.
[3] Mary P. Wood, *Italian Cinema* (Oxford: Berg, 2005), p.166.
[4] Ibid., p.61.
[5] Lanzoni, *Comedy Italian Style*, p.146.
[6] Ibid., p.170.
[7] Interestingly, Lanzoni's analysis here reiterates the comments by Beverly Allen, whose work on terrorist fictions I have discussed in my analysis of the *poliziotteschi* cycle. Both authors concur that the *Brigate rosse* became synonymous with a whole decade of outrages committed by organisations with very distinct ideological agendas:

> Interestingly enough, the *Brigate rosse* (Red Brigades) often accused for the totality of the chaos, were responsible for only seventy-five of the fatalities throughout the decade, leaving the large majority of murders to other terrorist organizations from both ends of the terror spectrum (extreme-left and Neo-Fascist organisations) (Lanzoni, *Comedy Italian Style*, p.139).

[8] For further information on this aspect, see the chapter 'Crisis, Compromise and the '*Anni di piombo*' in Paul Ginsborg's *History of Contemporary Italy*. Here, Ginsborg notes that although the 1968 period saw more Italian women engaging in political activity than any other period since 1945, their participation was still hampered by male-dominated organisations and trade union movements. As the

author notes:

> It was symptomatic of their attitudes and those of the left-wing parties that in the Workers Charter of 1973 the article banning unfair discrimination at work did not even mention discrimination based on sex. (p.367)

[9] Opcit., p.148.
[10] Ibid.
[11] Indeed, to return to Ginsborg's analysis, there is even evidence to suggest that 'mixed' leftist groups actively attempted to sabotage feminist/separatist organisations. As the author notes:

> The first major organisation of the women's movement, some 20,000 strong, took place in Rome on 6 December 1975. It was disturbed by a group of men from a Roman section of Lotta Continua who, unable to accept the idea of a 'women's only' demonstration, tried to join it by force. (p.369)

[12] Lanzoni, p.151.
[13] Ibid., p.159.
[14] This information is compiled from data contained in Adrian Luther-Smith (ed.), *Delirium: A Guide to Italian Exploitation Cinema 1975–1979* (London: Media Publications, 1997).
[15] Charles A. Peterson, 'Pornography and the Primal Scene – A Report on the Voyage to Brobdingnag', *Psychoanalytic Review* 78 (1991), 411-422: 412.
[16] Ibid., 413.
[17] Ibid.
[18] Ibid., 414.
[19] Ibid., 417.
[20] Ibid.
[21] Lanzoni, *Comedy Italian Style*, p.159.
[22] Alan O'Leary, ''In pieno fumetto': Bertolucci, Terrorism and the *commedia all' italiana*'' in Ruth Glynn, Giancarlo Lombardi and Alan O'Leary (eds), *Terrorism Italian Style: Representations of Political Violence in Contemporary Italian Cinema* (London: Igrs Books, 2012), p.47.
[23] Ibid., p.62.
[24] Ibid., p.59.
[25] Ibid., p.60.
[26] Ibid., p.54.
[27] This reordering of erotic interest into public humiliation is further reiterated in the film's post-credit sequence. Here, a montage segment reveals Francoise shopping for a variety of gifts for Carlo on her way home from the glamour photography shoot. Although these scenes establish an upbeat theme to the proceedings, they are suddenly disrupted when she arrives home to discover Carlo making love to another woman. Watching the erotic encounter through an open door, Francoise adopts the position of primal scene viewer, whose obsession with looking overrides the traumatic potential of what is actually surveyed. During the scene, the camera pans between the heroine's horrified gaze, Carlo's erotic coupling and a small statue that adorns a bedside cabinet. The figure, with

distorted features and oversized, leering eyes in many respects echoes the near-monstrous status that Massaccesi gives to his voyeurs in the film.
[28] David Badder, '*Emanuelle and Francoise*' (review), *Monthly Film Bulletin* 44 (November 1977), 232.
[29] Linda Ruth Williams, *The Erotic Thriller in Contemporary Cinema* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2005), p.331.
[30] Ibid.
[31] Sigmund Freud, *Case Histories II* (London: Penguin Books, 1991), pp.277–278.
[32] Ibid., p.267.
[33] Williams, *The Erotic Thriller*, p.338.

CONCLUSION

NO SO EROTIC ENCORES

> …It then follows that there might be other places where Argento is not so marginal – notably Italy where he appears to be a more mainstream figure whose films attract relatively high budgets and boast the sort of production values associated with 'quality' cinema.[1]
> —Peter Hutchings, 'The Argento Effect'

As I have indicated during the course of this book, the features of paracinematic excess that have previously been discussed in relation to the 'Argento Effect' can also be considered in a far wider range of Italian cult texts produced between 1970 and 1985. Whilst frequently evidencing the social and psychic particularities that have led to Argento's work being both condemned and valorised at an international level, the directors, icons and cycles discussed in *Bodies of Desire and Bodies in Distress* offer comparable (and often more extreme) sets of representations around the desiring/suffering body than even Argento's most controversial works would dare permit. As a result, these texts feature a number of markedly unnerving determinants that profoundly affect both male and female sexuality in ways that are of interest to researchers working in this area.

For instance, whether it is through the 'other worldly' lens of seventies Gothic, the kinetic brutality of the train-bound rape-and-revenge saga, or even the monstrously 'feel bad' connotations of the *Black Emanuelle* films, Italian cult genres of the 1970s offer a subversive vision of female sexuality, which clearly complicates the types of gender codes and expectations associated with the Italian cult film experience. Indeed, by repeatedly equating unabashed female sexuality with death, coercion and the macabre, these cycles demonstrate a contradictory ability to both appeal and appal, with their representations of sexuality taking on a far more powerful, nihilistic and threatening composition than comparable mainstream cinema images.

I do concede that the 'exploitation' ethics that undoubtedly underpin the economic determinants of these cycles often conflated the female body with scenarios of desire and death to maximise their appeal to multiple audiences (in this case, separate sex and death grindhouse crowds).

Indeed, as Pam Cook has noted in her influential article on exploitation cinema:

> The 'exploitation' film is essentially a commercial category, a market term for those films produced at minimum cost for maximum market return, which take up, 'exploit' the success of other films – replaying the themes, star stereotypes and genres of more lavish, upmarket productions.[2]

However, I would also argue that a purely economic interpretation does not necessarily account for why the merging of these extreme elements proved so popular in Italy during the 1970s. Equally, as Cook's comments infer, despite their manifest commerciality it is through the endless 'replaying' of themes and stereotypes that certain ideological determinants are revealed (for both exploitation cinema and the wider social and psychic cultures which produced them). As the author herself acknowledges, "exploitation films present serious problems for feminists",[3] precisely because their often distorted sexual imagery must be countered "by the women's movement in its desire to destroy old patriarchal myths".[4]

Importantly, she locates a resistance to such mechanisms of patriarchal control via the use of theoretical tools such as psychoanalysis, "manifested in a growing interest in re-reading Freud by Lacan",[5] as well as through the search for oppositional modes of representation that could constitute "an alternative feminist language of film".[6] Whilst the process of establishing such distinct systems of distribution and exhibition is viewed as central to the expansion of a feminist media, Cook also turns her attention to the politics of re-reading existing patriarchal images, which often attempt to efface the ideological nature of their construction via dominant codes of realism.

However, with their explicit and even parodic renditions of heteronormative sexual relations, the cult and 'exploitation' narratives often expose the seams of their own contradictions, thus prompting significant discussions about the politics of representation:

> In fact, exploitation films are potentially less offensive than mainstream Hollywood precisely because of their resistance to the 'natural', and the way they offer the possibility of taking a critical distance on the metalanguage of mainstream cinema.[7]

It is this resistance to the natural that informs Cook's subsequent analysis of the pseudo-feminist credentials of Roger Corman's New World Cinema unit. Here, she argues that the company displays a distinctly anarchic edge in their depiction of sexually voracious females who violently rebel against male brutality whilst retaining their heavily coded erotic allure. By

trading so heavily in "bad acting, crude stereotypes, and schematic narrative",[8] it is arguable that Italian paracinema retains an equally disruptive and self-referential mode, with often disturbing images of the female subject manifesting "precisely these elements which give the exploitation film its subversive potential".[9] Equally, Cook's identification of the New World motif of the 'aggressive-heroine stereotype' fits well with the key cycles of *giallo*, rape-and-revenge, 1970s Gothic horror and *erotico filone* that I have been discussing. This is because these narratives also employ a female icon "who turns her aggression against the male world … often raping, sometimes devouring her male victims".[10] While such voracious imagery may not be uncommon within the cult canon, Cook confirms that:

> Nevertheless, the aggressive-heroine stereotype contains within it the idea of revenge, of turning the weapons of the enemy against him, an idea which is basic to the polemic of feminist cinema.[11]

Whilst extending Cook's approach of 'the pulp as political' to previously marginal areas of Italian cult cinema, *Bodies of Desire and Bodies in Distress* has also considered the social and psychic contradictions that are manifest in the so-called 'masculine' genres I have covered in the latter sections of the book. Once again, by adapting a pertinent set of psychoanalytic approaches, I have argued that Italian paracinema texts are predicated on the return of repressed material (presented via a primal scene staging), which then evokes displeasure in the viewing subject. If Cook's polemic argues in favour of a cult and exploitation domain which functions by "parodying male violence",[12] then Italian paracinema responds via a masochistic necessity to return to traumatic material, whether through the mournful requirement to replay the death of a superior/father figure (in the case of the Italian rogue cop films), the necessity to replicate the ritualistic punishment of the post-apocalyptic hero's body, or even the visual obligation to reprise the contorted, physical body spasms of characters such as Tomas Milian's villainous and grotesque creation 'Il Gobbo'.

As well as expanding the use of psychoanalytic methodologies into previously untheorised areas of Italian cult film, I have also acknowledged the need for a more nuanced approach which seeks to account for the historical reasons behind these unsettling and specifically Italian modes of entertainment that flourished so dramatically during the 1970s, only to recede from the mid-1980s onwards. As I have argued throughout the course of this volume, it is only through a critical understanding of both the social and psychic dynamics underpinning the creation of these bizarre

Italian cult hybrids, that we can understand the extent of their libidinal, as well as historical, importance.

Indeed, the fact that these Italian paracinematic texts circulated in the period of the *Anni di piombo*, with the concurrent political, social and sexual turmoil that this entailed, clearly added an additional layer of significance and meaning to both their content and national receptions. For instance, as I indicated in chapter 10, even the most seemingly debased cycle of cult representations (1970s *filone erotico*) is able to incorporate contemporary discourses around leftist terrorism and voracious feminist separatism in order to further humiliate their ineffectual male representatives. As Mary P. Wood's brief consideration of Italian erotica suggests, the proliferation of explicit material during the 1970s can only be partly attributed to a relaxation of censorship, with cult and exploitation fare filling vacant cinema schedules and seats that resulted from "terrorist activity" making "the second circuit of suburban cinemas increasingly unattractive".[13] As the author suggests, the wider pessimistic tone of the decade also affected the kinds of erotica produced during this era, which arguably display the kind of morbidity I have uncovered in the volume as a whole.

In turn, it was the transition towards a more stable social, cultural and economic landscape in Italy at the end of the 1980s which partly explains how bodies of desire and bodies in distress became recoded in far more consensual kinds of imagery. Indeed, as one of the few genres to survive the post-1985 slump in the production and consumption of nationally produced cult cinema, Italian erotica continued to flourish during the tail-end of the decade, with a number of releases marketed to Europe and North America. As with other cycles that continued after 1985 (such as Vietnam and action series), these texts occupy a relatively short timeframe (1985–1989), indicative of the decline of Italian cult and exploitation traditions during this period. This seems confirmed by the fact that many of these titles were primarily aimed at the export market (with many of Aristide Massaccesi's films shot on location in the US, and created in an English language version). Whilst it is true that late 1980s Italian erotica still placed an unsettling emphasis on sexuality and decay, as in the *filone erotico* traditions outlined in chapter 10, these gestures were more akin to cinematic nostalgia than a genuine desire to mine the forbidden. As a result, the erotic entries 'handle' or negotiate problematic issues of sexuality and subjectivity in a far more consensual and containable manner than their 1970s predecessors.

In terms of thematic content, all of these later productions remain largely free from the social commentary and political turmoil that

dominated 1970s *filone erotico* narratives. Interestingly, fears of female advancement within the industrial sphere (which I previously discussed in relation to the post-apocalypse and barbarian narratives in chapter nine), are replaced in late 1980s erotica by a mutual competiveness between the genders, as both sexes contend for status and resources within the new technocratic Italy. Given that the late Aristide Massaccesi was a director infamous for combining horror with erotic excess during the 1970s, it is particularly surprising that his late 1980s productions are marked by a policy of raising and then containing otherwise transgressive themes of excess voyeurism, macabre loving and sexual violence. For instance, his *11 Days 11 Nights* series (four films completed between 1986 and 1989) appeared to push the ambivalent anti-porno dynamic of the cycle to an extreme with extended scenes of male degradation and punishment as a primer for arousal, as well as bouts of copulation amid voodoo subplots, animal sacrifices and even paternally sanctioned rape scenes as role play for rites of passage.

11 Days 11 Nights (1986) initiates a number of scenarios in which an undercover female writer named Sarah (Jessica Moore) exploits the voyeuristic desires of the film's hero Michael (Joshua McDonald), destroying his marriage and career over eleven days and nights to which the film's title refers. At first appearing as an unproblematic object of male spectacle for Michael's gaze, Sarah is frequently and fetishistically lit in soft focus to assist the fantasy element of male pleasure that the text appears to induce. At this stage, the film even demonstrates an obsession with technologies of male voyeurism popular with softcore versions of the format during the decade. In one scene, Sarah films herself masturbating for Michael to later contemplate on video tape, an extract which he views and reviews in order to achieve orgasm. In this respect the theme tune 'I Watch You, Watching Me', which frequently accompanies the male protagonist's predilections, clearly carries connotations of a wider, self-reflexive nod to the character's obsession with voyeurism.

However, rather than merely gratify these male drives, the film draws on primal scene imagery to provoke a degree of trauma and punishment in the viewing male. An example of this can be seen during the scene in which Michael has to endure watching Sarah being aroused by a beefcake black masseur. The threat of violence implicit in the scenario is actualised when the protagonist is savagely beaten by the powerful stranger for attempting to interrupt the coupling. Beyond this example, the film provides a number of instances where Michael's desires are repeatedly humiliated and punished. This is seen in a number of sexual encounters that Sarah has arranged, which ultimately traverse the boundaries of

pleasure and trauma for the hero. For instance, in one scene she suggests that Michael fondle her in the middle of a crowded New Orleans street. As soon as the protagonist indicates a heightened state of arousal Sarah has him arrested by a passing cop, claiming that she is being sexually assaulted by a stranger. In a later scene, the protagonist is forced to wear lacy female underwear to a dinner date with Sarah in a chic hotel. Although she appears to console Michael's obvious discomfort with the promise of a hot sex session in the female toilet, the encounter provides only further male degradation. After asking Michael to undress them both, she steals his clothes, leaving him in the embarrassing position of having to return to the restaurant dressed as a woman.

Such a scene of male debasement remains relatively rare within the confines of heterosexual titillation, indicating how, in the words of Laura Mulvey, "the male figure cannot bear the burden of sexual objectification. Man is reluctant to gaze at his exhibitionist like".[14] This unsettling effect (for both protagonist *and* spectator) is confirmed in a later scene when Michael (unwisely) agrees to be tied to a marble pillar as part of a kinky sex act. After stripping him naked and smothering his body with honey, she leaves him bound, defenceless and reliant on his (disgusted) cleaner to release him the following morning. While my research in this area indicates that a past primal scene scenario functions to fragment the flow of such erotic narrative, it is also interesting to note the extent to which the traumas and humiliations that the cycle enacts against its male protagonists are themselves repetitions of previous primal scene patterns depicted in 1970s *filone erotica*. For instance, the scene of Michael left bound, naked and humiliated in *11 Days 11 Nights* is in fact a reproduction of a scene in Massaccesi's earlier macabre entry, *Blood Vengeance* (discussed in chapter 10).

With its endless recodification of sexual desire into a site of potential threat, it is clear that 1980s Italian erotica takes its lead from the previous dangerous and castrating heroines that were produced in the previous decade. However, while these late 1980s releases draw heavily upon earlier *filone erotico* texts for the regimes of male punishment they depict, it is noticeable that they also frequently contain a conciliatory epilogue that functions to 'soften' or resolve the hero's debasement at the hands of these controlling, but irrational, women. For instance, the finale of *11 Days 11 Nights* depicts a near hysterical Michael discovering the heroine's motivations behind their affair as based on a desire to further her publishing project. When questioned as to why her she chose to ruin his career and marital plans, Sarah simply replies: "You're so defenceless, the perfect victim, the part usually played by women."

However, the transgressive potential of this finale is dissipated by a number of interrelated scenes, with Michael returning to his fiancée in time for their wedding juxtaposed with shots of a lone and hysterical Sarah, indicating that genuine affection and warmth had been concealed behind her sado-sexual campaign. While the finale of the film somewhat stretches the boundaries of narrative plausibility, it is noticeable that several of these later 1980s narratives attempt to recuperate the sadistic motivations of their punishing female leads.

If, as Rémi Fournier Lanzoni has noted, "the 1970s were marked by disillusionment with social reform and economic change, leading to the rise of individualism in the 1980s",[15] then these later Italian cult productions were mutually marked by a reorientation of interest towards consumption and the containment of excess. As with many other critics working in this area, Lanzoni has attributed an industrial layer of importance to the types of cinema pattern I have been discussing, which included the film industry's requirement to respond to a proliferation of deregulated television channels and content.[16] As he argues:

> …deregulation of broadcasting policies in Italy indirectly became the death warrant of the Italian film industry (in 1976, private television companies totalled sixty eight and in 1981 they proliferated to six hundred).[17]

Significantly, the author concludes that television's increased domestic influence during this period cannot only be attributed to technological advances (such as colour TV broadcasts from 1977) or economic pressures (with spiralling living costs linked to a marked increase in cinema admission prices), but rather to a combination of these factors, with growth ensured as an "indirect consequence of the effects of terrorism and random bombings in public areas, provoking a sense of self-imposed curfew as well as a sense of security with home-based entertainment".[18] Within this safe domestic space, television was able to enact "a certain "spectacularization" of society through vulgarity and mediocrity".[19] While the medium offered comparable images of sexuality, death and forms of the grotesque that I have been discussing in this volume, these were achieved by nullifying the more unsettling images of sexual trauma produced by cinema during the seventies, as well as attempting to defuse the more excessive and transgressive elements as the 1980s progressed.

Whilst it is undoubtedly the case that the period after 1985 witnessed a rapid decline in Italian paracinematic activity, there has been an inverse proliferation of activity and debate around these movies in the fields of fandom, cult film analysis and international cinephile appreciation. As

Jeffrey Sconce notes: "in the wake of film scholars who are increasingly willing to address traditionally untouchable cinematic genres such as horror and pornography, many students in media studies wish to continue pushing the limits of the traditional cinematic canon and the constraints of conventional academic enterprise."[20] This rallying cry to expand an awareness of Italy's decade of celluloid excess has also been adopted by not only the key theorists outlined in this volume, but also by the new generation of high profile filmmakers openly drawing on the traditions (and even icons) associated with this very European strand of cult activity. This influence has extended from American remakes of Italian action classics such as Quentin Tarantino's *Inglorious Basterds* (2009), to cameos by the likes of director Ruggero Deodato and performers Edwige Fenech and Luc Merenda in Eli Roth's controversial torture porn epic *Hostel Part II* (2007). At the time of writing, Tarantino's most recent film *Django Unchained* (2012) introduced the visceral vitality of 1960s style Italian westerns to a new generation of film fans, while the director's frequent companion Eli Roth has recently completed his own rendition of the 1970s Italian cannibal film with *The Green Inferno* scheduled for release in late 2014.

It is in this spirit of critical and industrial activity that I wish *Bodies of Desire and Bodies in Distress* to be viewed. By expanding analysis of the Italian paracinematic beyond the Argento Effect, I wish to open up a debate around the wider traditions that existed in Italy during the period of 1970 to 1985, but which have yet to receive sustained academic analysis. It is in this same spirit that I have also sought to expand upon existing psychoanalytic and socio-cultural methodologies for those academics still intent on trashing the (Italian) academy. Finally, I hope that like the primal patterns I have been discussing, the current intellectual and filmmaking interest in Italian cult cinema of the 1970s refuses to be fully repressed, and continues to inspire further generation of cult thinkers to be both enthralled and appalled by Italy's bodies of desire and bodies in distress.

Notes

[1] Peter Hutchings, 'The Argento Effect', in Mark Jancovich, Antonio Lázaro Reboll, Julian Stringer and Andy Willis (eds), *Defining Cult Movies: The Politics of Oppositional Taste* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2004), p.132.
[2] Pam Cook ''Exploitation' Films and Feminism' in *Screen* 17:2 (1976), 123.
[3] Ibid.
[4] Ibid.
[5] Ibid.

[6] Ibid.
[7] Ibid., 125.
[8] Ibid.
[9] Ibid.
[10] Ibid. 126.
[11] Ibid.
[12] Ibid.
[13] Mary P. Wood, *Italian Film* (Oxford: Berg, 2005), p.61.
[14] Laura Mulvey, 'Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema', in Penley, Constance (ed.). *Feminism and Film Theory* (London: Routledge, 1988), p.63.
[15] Rémi Fournier Lanzoni, *Comedy Italian Style: The Age of Italian Film Comedies* (New York: Continuum, 2008, p.152.
[16] For further information on this, see the section on 'Press and the Media' in the chapter 'Economy and Society' in Martin Clark, *Modern Italy: 1871– the Present* (London: Longman, 2008), pp.472–493.
[17] Lanzoni, p.155.
[18] Ibid.
[19] Ibid., p.156.
[20] Jeffrey Sconce 'Trashing the Academy: Taste, Excess and an Emerging Politics of Cinematic Style', in *Screen* 36:4 (Winter 1995), 377.

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