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Sighs from the depths: rendering trauma and national history in Italian horror cinema

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Thesis

SIGHS FROM THE DEPTHS:

RENDERING TRAUMA AND NATIONAL HISTORY

IN ITALIAN HORROR CINEMA

by

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DEDICATION

For Lilly and Oliver.

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outline that would serve as the foundation for this. I'm thrilled with how it panned out. On top of that, Dr. Jaramillo's continued advocacy and support for our cohort has demonstrated the kind of behavior I want to emulate in the future as an educator. Not only that, but she also introduced me to Dario Argento's *Pelts* (2005), which deserves an entire thesis on its own.

My initial interest in the study of Italian horror cinema in relation to Benito Mussolini's Fascist regime and its control over the national film industry was born in Dr. Lindsey Decker's International Horror course. Not only did she introduce me to some of the films and pieces of literature that I would draw on for this thesis, but she also helped me realize my interest in transnational genre cinemas at large. Every course I have taken with her since has only deepened my curiosity and motivated me to explore films from other nations and genres that I had not previously been familiar with. I doubt this project would have reached a finished state without the guidance, compassion, and encouragement that Dr. Decker has shown me throughout this process.

Finally, I would not be here without the unending love and support of my family, who have seen me through both struggles and triumphs, defeats and victories. My success is yours. Thank you for everything.

SIGHS FROM THE DEPTHS:

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ABSTRACT

This thesis examines the development of the surreal and often transgressively lurid aesthetic of Italian horror cinema of the late twentieth century and its connection to the turbulent relationship between the nation's cinema and its troubled political history. Much of the previous scholarship on Italian horror cinema tends to couch its analysis primarily through the lenses of either its transnational influences or the role of *auteurs* such as Dario Argento, Mario Bava, Lucio Fulci, Umberto Lenzi, or Riccardo Freda. While both approaches are vital to understanding the construction of Italy's horror cinema as a robust movement, I argue that they neglect important historical context that can provide insight into the thematic interests that motivate the unique stylization of these texts.

Often the focus on Italian horror cinema's reputation for being mostly composed of cheap imitations of more successful international horror movements can reinforce the narrative of the horror film's relatively low status within taste culture discourses. Exploitation films particularly fall victim to these stigmas and can have their more potent qualities ignored. Through a historical survey of the formation of Italy's horror cinema in the aftermath of the political turbulence caused by Benito Mussolini's Fascist regime and close, formal analysis of foundational Italian horror texts, this thesis argues that the

stylistic excesses and indulgences in the grotesque that characterize Italy's horror cinema upend the viewer's comfort in spectatorship through confrontational aesthetics of destabilization. The aesthetics of destabilization not only challenge viewer's passive consumption of such lurid content but also truly make them *feel* the sensorial destabilization and brutal impact of the violence onscreen. Ultimately, this thesis demonstrates how this stylistic approach is in conversation with Italy's recent trauma and the inextricability of its national cinema development from this history.

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INTRODUCTION

"Violence is Italian art!" – Lucio Fulci

Before I knew anything of the Italian cannibal subgenre, I knew of the unsimulated animal slaughter in Ruggero Deodato's *Cannibal Holocaust* (1980). Before I knew anything of Dario Argento's authorship and contributions to the *giallo* subgenre, I had seen the vivid image of the hanged corpse with neon red blood speckled around her mouth from *Suspiria* (1977). The transgressive reputations of these foundational Italian horror texts precede them to such a degree that they outweigh much of the critical discourse that actually gets to the root of why these films are so stylistically abrasive and salacious. In full honesty, the notoriety of their content drew me to these films in the first place.

I saw *Suspiria* for the first time at a repertory screening. The film's kinetic camerawork, expressionistic color palette, and ferocious sequences of violence augmented by Goblin's pervasive, pummeling musical score completely overwhelmed my senses. I had fancied myself a horror enthusiast for a long while, but this film was unlike anything I had ever seen. More than that, *Suspiria* genuinely shook me up in a way I had not experienced in a long time. My next entry points to Italian horror cinema had a similar effect even when they were not supplemented by the theatrical setting; they left me feeling rattled and off balance in a way that few horror films ever had. The films lingered upon brutal violence and prurient sexuality, often occurring in tandem, in a shocking manner. More than that, I was keenly aware of my close proximity to the

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horrors unfolding onscreen. I felt their impact more viscerally. I had a lot of questions: what is it about Italian cinema that yielded such a unique horror output? What is the purpose of their strange, dreamlike quality? What impulses led filmmakers to indulge in such shocking content?

This thesis examines the development of the surreal and often transgressively lurid aesthetic of Italian horror cinema of the late twentieth century and its connection to the turbulent relationship between the nation's cinema and its troubled political history. Much of the previous scholarship on Italian horror cinema tends to couch its analysis primarily through the lenses of either its transnational influences or the role of *auteurs* such as Dario Argento, Mario Bava, Lucio Fulci, Umberto Lenzi, or Riccardo Freda. While both approaches are vital to understanding the construction of Italy's horror cinema as a robust movement, I argue that they neglect important historical context that can provide insight into the thematic interests that motivate the unique stylization of these texts.

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upend the viewer's comfort in spectatorship through confrontational aesthetics of destabilization. The aesthetics of destabilization not only challenge viewer's passive consumption of such lurid content but also truly make them *feel* the sensorial destabilization and brutal impact of the violence onscreen. Ultimately, this thesis demonstrates how this stylistic approach is in conversation with Italy's recent trauma and the inextricability of its national cinema development from this history.

First and foremost, it is important to define the terms that are used throughout this thesis. These terms are discussed in depth with more context in the forthcoming chapters. I survey Italy's horror cinema according to two major movements that I argue to be most instructive towards understanding the political messaging that underscores these texts: the Italian Gothic and the cinematic *giallo*. The Italian Gothic film takes influence from both Gothic literature and the boom of popular Gothic horror films coming from Britain in the late 1950s. These films are characterized by period settings in non-Italian locales and overt supernatural elements. Later films within what I call the Italian Gothic Revival stray away from some of the classical Gothic elements and hybridize modern Gothic sub-cycles, such as the Southern Gothic, with traditional folklore of other cultures. Though some connections can be drawn between the threats of the early Italian Gothic films and those of the Italian Gothic Revival, such as the witch of *Black Sunday* (1960) and the coven in *Suspiria*, the later films were responding to the popularity of other horror subgenres and, thus, centered more modern monsters like zombies around their Gothic approach.

Classifying the *Giallo*

The *giallo* (or *gialli*, in plural form) is a cycle of Italian crime literature that eventually translated to the cinema in the early 1960s, during the infancy of Italy's horror cinema. The word *giallo* is Italian for yellow and became the movement's moniker because of the bright yellow covers of the first *giallo* novels published by Mondadori as *I Libri Gialli*. Originally released as Italian translations of crime literature from English speaking countries like the United Kingdom and the United States, Italian authors eventually began writing their own *gialli* and thus reinforced the movement's distinction as notably Italian in characterization. Gary Needham (2002) writes that the *giallo*, by contrast to the Italian Gothic, foregrounds its "Italian-ness" through emphasis on Italian tourist spots and basing crucial elements of its design (particularly costuming and scenic decor) on continental trends; what was considered to be fashionable at the time also became significant pieces of *giallo* iconography (Needham 2002). The *giallo* is not only responding to popular cinematic trends, but it also keeps up with the most couture fashion of the time.

Scholars contest the generic distinction of the *giallo* for several reasons. Primarily, many argue that the *giallo* cannot accurately be described as a genre unto itself, or even as a subgenre of horror. Donato Totaro (2011) instead argues that the *giallo* is a *filone*. *Filone* is an Italian word that, in a cinematic context, can best be described as a more flexible "streamlet" that forms its own unique paths and only occasionally reconnects to what Totaro refers to as the larger "genre-river" (2011). According to Totaro, the *filone* is less rigidly defined than the more "subordinated" subgenre as it

accounts for differences in "cycles, trends, currents, and traditions." The multiplicity of

approaches that different *giallo* texts take does not preclude them from classification as

such because of the *filone's* adaptability. Because of the propensity for Italian horror

cinema to act quickly and fast-track productions in order to respond to the latest popular

trends, the *filone* classification not only accounts for the conventions that the Italians may

imbue in these texts that differ from their transnational influences, but it also argues for

an understanding of how industrial trends inform the production of these films. The *filone*

wrangles the otherwise multifaceted nature of Italian horror cinema; it provides

connective strands that allows for scholars to reckon with different approaches to style or

narrative structure than is understood of the larger genre that the *filone* streams off from.

Another hinderance to the traditional understanding of the *giallo* as a subsection

of horror is its roots in crime literature and its hybridization with police procedurals and

detective fiction. Though these generic roots are fundamental to the conventions of

cinematic *gialli*, I argue that in translation between literature to film, *gialli* authors imbue

the texts with clear semantic, syntactic, and pragmatic elements of the horror genre,

according to Rick Altman's framework for generic classification and his subsequent

revision of his proposal. Altman resists a clean definition between the three approaches,

but he approximates a solution in recognizing "generic definitions which depend on a list

of common traits, attitudes, characters, shots, locations, sets, and the like" as the semantic

makeup of a genre, while its syntax is located in "definitions which play up instead

certain constitutive relationships between undesignated and variable placeholders"

(Altman 1984, 10). Essentially, the semantic elements that construct genre are aesthetic

details that can provide a common linkage between texts and, thus, an expectation for audiences looking for that genre. The syntactic elements of genre are those details then interlinked with elements of narrative and structural conventions.

Upon first glance, this approach may neglect to account for different audience desires and rapidly shifting industry practices, especially when taken in consideration with the nascency of Italy's horror industry when it was first formed. However, Altman's revision of his theory adds these nuances and, in my eyes, lends credence to the conception of genre as more flexible than proponents of the *filone* may give it credit for. In a new conclusion written for the 1999 republication of *Film/Genre,* Altman acknowledges the limitations of his earlier theory and, thus, proposes an additional pragmatic approach to genre. Altman likens his pragmatic approach to the study of linguistics and, namely, the intrinsic instability of our understanding of the development of language: "Rather than breeding stability and security, this system thrives on borrowed time and deferral. The long history and social usefulness of individual languages may give them a higher degree of apparent stability, yet even they are never as stable and secure as our dictionaries imply" (Altman 1999, 209). Genre functions similarly; our preconceived notions of its established conventions as a defining vocabulary restrict how we understand generic classification, and thus, limit our ability to comprehend the ever-changing nature of a genre's language.

In the case of the *giallo*, many of its syntactic and semantic elements primarily overlay with the crime genre. That said, when looked at through a pragmatic lens which considers the ways the makeup of a genre is constantly shifting, these shared conventions

can mean different things for different audiences. For example, the common *giallo* trope of an amateur detective investigating a string of murders can simultaneously satisfy an audience expecting a crime film as well as a horror film. The *giallo* can elicit the requisite intrigue of the crime genre as well as the dread or bloodshed of the horror genre, often with the same signifiers: anonymous killers cloaked in heavy shadow, sharp knives, elaborately staged death scenes, and so on. Though I resist the notion that the distinction of the *giallo* as a subgenre negates its multifaceted nature, I will refer to it as *filone* because of the combination of many aesthetic and generic influences that construct it while also primarily arguing for it as a stream of the horror corpus. Either way, the *giallo* is heavily instructive towards understanding the development of the larger Italian horror cinema movement.

Not only does the *filone* embrace the flexibility of the *giallo* and other forms of Italian horror, scholars note that it also carries with it some of the conventions audiences associate with horror and exploitation cinema, often to the detriment of their reputation in cinematic canons. Robert J. Edmonstone (2008) writes that the lurid signifiers of *gialli* and other horror texts also translated to other non-horror *filoni* like the spaghetti western or the *poliziotteschi* (crime film); the ubiquity of the grotesque among these Italian texts all unified by similar modes of production and transnational influences renders it, and the halting of narrative and logic that often comes with it, as distinctly Italian in style (Edmonstone 2008, 11). We can see this from the very start of Italian horror cinema's reign, as the aesthetics and content of other nations' more popular horror texts were extremified with more graphic violence and sexual content, which I discuss at greater

length in the following chapters.

Aesthetic Destabilization

Edmonstone's piece touches on the excessive violence and its subversive effects on upending the films' spatial and temporal logic in order to maximize the impact of the content to spectators. He refers to the "hyperbolic" and "inherent artificiality" of these sequences in terms of how they have resulted in their texts' designation as low culture objects (Edmonstone 2008, 14). Though Edmonstone and I have similar reads on the effect of these aesthetics and their disruption of continuity, I take an approach that argues for their political intentionality along with describing how their brutality is augmented by such stylization. For this purpose, I propose the term *aesthetics of destabilization* as a catch-all to refer to a number of stylistic devices that render the violence of Italian horror cinema more viscerally impactful to audiences while also upending conventional understandings of the cinematic language to force viewers' out of their spectatorial comfort. In doing so, viewers are then made to reckon with the pleasure they derive from the excessive nature of these films. I argue that these aesthetics truly came to the fore in the 1970s as Italian horror films, particularly *gialli*, became more singular and untethered from the cinematic influences that laid the blueprint for it.

The aesthetics of destabilization primarily encompass experimental strategies of editing, cinematography, mise-en-scène, and sound that all serve to sensorially overwhelm the viewer in a manner that parallels the extreme nature of the content on screen. These aesthetics are most notably deployed during sequences of violence. My

conception of aesthetics of destabilization is, in part, inspired by Bertolt Brecht's theory

of the *verfremdungseffekt*, or alienation effect as it is roughly translated to in English.

Brecht first coined the term in the chapter "Alienation Effects in Chinese Acting

Techniques" (1936) from *Brecht On Theatre* (1964)*,* an English translation of many of

his theoretical essays. The *verfremdungseffekt* acts as a way of forcing audiences to a

removed distance from subjects or characters that they may empathize or connect with on

an emotional level. Though his chapter mostly just speaks to a particular school of acting,

Brecht contends that the alienation effect can be woven into the form of any given text

that is consumed by a spectator. The first level through which this effect is achieved is by

a dissolution of the barrier between audience and subject:

> Above all, the Chinese artist never acts as if there were a fourth wall besides the
>
> three surrounding him. He expresses his awareness of being watched. This
>
> immediately removes one of the European stage's characteristic illusions. The
>
> audience can no longer have the illusion of being the unseen spectator at an event
>
> that is really taking place. A whole elaborate European stage technique, which
>
> helps to conceal the fact that the scenes are so arranged that the audiences can
>
> view them in the easiest way, is thereby made unnecessary. (Brecht 1964, 92)
>
> Brecht's alienation techniques translate to the cinema in a myriad of ways.

Brecht's proclivity for having his actors directly address the audience onstage in order to

make textually explicit the broken barrier between spectator and subject can be found in

cinematic techniques ranging from close-up shots of a character's face to point of view

shots that force the audience to embody the perspective of a character. As Italian cinema

grew bolder and more experimental in approach, more films used these techniques decenter the viewer and shake them into considering the film's content as though it were unfolding in the reality before them. The purpose for Brecht's conception of the *verfremdungseffekt* in the first place can simply be boiled down to the highly political nature of his works, and the fraught climate that they were produced during. Brecht believed that alienation effects in a modern German theatre could shake the viewer from considering the content on-stage in the linear, simplified ways that they had otherwise been conditioned to.

He posits that the conventions of the "bourgeoisie theatre" create a representation of human nature and response that repeats itself and, thus, becomes untruthful: "All its incidents are just one enourmous cue, and this cue is followed by the 'eternal' response: the inevitable, usual, natural, purely human response," (Brecht 1964, 96). He notes that while there is a historical pattern that may justify why dramatists rely on these repetitions, he also argues that it is "none the less unhistorical." The conditions and climates surrounding the characters inform their responses, just as those factors impact the audience reactions to what they are taking in. The *verfremdungseffekt* intentionally disrupts those patterns of convention and, in turn, audience thought and forces consideration of history and the many different possibilities and implications it presents. This theory transposed to Italian horror cinema renders the movement reflexive in its treatment of both the genre's legacy as well as the nation's history. Through audience alienation, Italian horror texts probe viewers to consider what the traditions they expect from horror cinema and, more importantly, ponder what it is about Italian identity and

perspective that causes these texts to subvert the preconceived notions they hold.

The principal addition that distinguishes Brecht's theory from my conception of the aesthetics of destabilization is the addition of a sensory interaction between the viewer and the film. The visuals are a garish feast for the eyes; the musical scores shriek and hiss alongside the victims of whatever onscreen slaughter is occurring; the subjective framing of the murder sequences renders them all the more tactile and assaultive. Each stab or blow to the body is palpably felt. In the introduction to her book *The Tactile Eye: Touch and the Cinematic Experience*, Jennifer Barker (2009) theorizes that the common cinematic devices used to derive a sensory experience and emotional response are actually behavioral gestures from a "cinematic body" that is capable of an "infinite variety of particular themes or patterns: caressing, striking, startling, pummeling, grasping, embracing, pushing, pulling, palpation, immersion, and inspiration" (2009, 2-3). According to Barker, each film is a living organism with unique behaviors that touch and directly interact with viewers, thus transcending traditional ideas of cinema as a purely visual or audial medium.

My proposition of the aesthetics of destabilization aligns with Barker's theory of the cinematic body; the vicious behaviors of the Italian horror film are such that they actively seek to disturb and assault any sense of comfort that the viewer may feel in watching it. More than that, these aesthetics function similarly to Brecht's theory of the *verfremdungseffekt,* as they seek to pull viewers away from their assumptions for how horror films should behave or how they desire the actual horrors of these films to be framed. Ultimately, these films urge viewers to consider the nature of their spectatorship:

what does it mean to watch a violent film in a climate filled with real-world violence? Why do we desire shocks from a horror film, and is there a threshold for just how abrasive they may be? Finally, what can these films tell us about the places and histories they come from?

National Cinemas

Throughout this thesis, I will refer to Italian films as part of a larger national cinema. For the sake of clarity, it is worth defining what I mean by a national cinema, and how I consider Italy's horror cinema to be a subsection of it. A proper definition of the term has been debated by film scholars and historians alike. While some tend to think of national cinema as simply the country of origin for a given body of texts, others consider on a more complicated level. Valentina Vitali and Paul Willemen (2006) write that most national cinema theorists couch their analysis in either the industrial contexts that emphasize the texts as products within a capitalist system or the cultural contexts that examine the sociological forces that led to the conception of different films (2006, 2). I seek to blend the two approaches by considering both the industrial and historical circumstances that create Italy's national cinema, particularly as it developed in the years following World War II and the fall of Benito Mussolini's Fascist regime.

More than that, I borrow from the textual approach that Phillip Rosen poses later in Vitali and Willemen's collection. Rosen takes a three-pronged approach to defining a national cinema as a body of many texts. First, he argues that these texts, no matter how many there may be, must be able to be intertextually linked together to form a "coherence" of thematic and/or aesthetic makeup; second, he urges that theorists consider

the nation in question with a similar logical coherence to the body of texts they classify; third, he emphasizes a common conceptualization of "what is traditionally called 'history' or 'historiography'" (Rosen 2006, 18). Through tracing the history of the post-Fascist Italian landscape in relation to the emerging cinematic trends responding to the political turbulence of the era, I locate Rosen's idea of coherence in the links between the films I outline even before I reach the first Italian horror films. However, it is also worth noting that these films also belong to smaller movements under both the national cinema and genre umbrellas. In order to properly ascertain the commonalities that connect these texts, it is important to acknowledge these movements.

Geoffrey Nowell-Smith (2013) writes that the cinematic new waves that spanned across several different European nations can be linked to the prevalence of the Hollywood studio system in the twentieth century and the financial infrastructure it provided to build a robust industry: "European industries at first found it hard to compete without the benefit of protectionist legislation, reluctantly conceded by the Americans" (Nowell-Smith 2013, 21). Nowell-Smith then argues most popular and influential of these movements were Italian Neorealism and the French New Wave, which both provided successful domestic counterprogramming to the Hollywood films that otherwise flooded both nations' markets (2013, 21). The Italian Neorealist movement is especially important in the evolution of post-Fascist Italian cinema, given its explicit political messaging, which can be seen as something of a through line connecting the movements that would arrive in its wake. Though the films that precede the Italian horror film are considerably "artier" and appeal more to the highbrow in discussions of taste, they

establish the interests of the Italian film that eventually are filtered through the grimy, abrasive, and undeniably singular horror lens.

The role of violence in Italian horror cinema is of particular interest to me. These films place viewers in the subjectivity of both assailants and victims. Connecting this to Italy's recent traumatic history only illuminates its resonance. Italy perpetuated great violence in its alignment with Axis forces and embrace of Fascism and the ideologies that come with it. In doing so, those that held political power created massive rifts and inequities that subjugated a major population of Italian citizens. Italian horror cinema embodies this duality.

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Chapter Breakdown

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In the first chapter of this project, I discuss the historical events leading up to the beginnings of the Italian horror movement. The chapter analyzes Benito Mussolini's Fascist regime in broad strokes but places particular emphasis on the origins of *giallo* literature and its fraught relationship with Fascist censors, as well as Mussolini's control over Italian cinema. I draw comparison between the nationalistic propaganda and spectacle of Fascist-era cinema and the stripped down and deeply anti-Fascist cinema that emerged after the execution of Mussolini and the fall of Fascism. I then trace the lineage of the post-Fascist cinema era by first focusing on Italian Neorealism and its influence on film noir and then discussing the rise of modernist cinema after filmmakers began to pivot away from the Neorealist template. I connect the formal experimentation of the modernist era and the rise of popular transnational genre cinemas to the development of Italian genre cinemas, most notably the horror film. Through a brief discussion of early

Italian Gothic films, I discuss how heavily these early texts borrowed from their international counterparts. Finally, I discuss Mario Bava's *La ragaza che sapeva troppo/The Girl Who Knew Too Much* (1962) as the synthesis of these many cinematic developments and the blueprint of the *giallo*, which in its infancy foresaw the potential for Italian horror to be truly original and confront political issues of agency in the face of violence and responses to trauma.

In my second chapter, I discuss the sudden booming popularity of the *giallo* as a result of Dario Argento's highly successful *L'uccello dalle piume di cristallo/The Bird With the Crystal Plumage* (1970). I argue that though that film triggered the rise of distinct auteurs who imbued their *gialli* with more individualized and extreme stylization, it is Mario Bava's *Blood and Black Lace* (1964) that establishes a lot of the vocabulary that Argento's film and later *gialli* would then build upon, specifically Lucio Fulci's *Non si sevizia un paperino/Don't Torture a Duckling* (1972) and Argento's *Profondo rosso/Deep Red* (1975). Those films wield greater extremes of content and more experimental style in order to present a far more confrontational and visceral experience of horror. In my analysis of these films, I apply my conception of the aesthetics of destabilization to locate the films' political consciousness and distinctly Italian identity. Even when the films are not making explicit political statements, I pose that they both use the aesthetics of destabilization to directly probe the audience into considering their passive spectatorship to grotesque, extreme assaults against marginalized bodies while also using cinematic techniques to render these violent attacks with as much tactility as possible.

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Finally, my third chapter connects the waning popularity of the *giallo* in the late 1970s with the revival of Italian Gothic horror. I begin by returning to and expanding upon my initial discussion of the Gothic films that inspired the earliest Italian horror texts. The Hammer horror films coming from Britain in the mid-to-late 1950s were heavily influential to these early films and provided the aesthetic groundwork for them to build upon. I note that Italian Gothic filmmakers like Mario Bava and Riccardo Freda added more eroticism and violence to these texts, which gave them more Italian flavor. I then jump to the late *giallo* period of the 1970s and discuss the Gothic and supernatural elements of these later period films, in addition to their deployment of aesthetic destabilization, in order to connect them to the eventual Italian Gothic revival. Unlike early films which drew their horrors from classic movie monsters, I contend that the Gothic revival frequently featured the undead and the threat of zombie transformation. Through analysis of the Italian-American co-production of George A. Romero's *Dawn of the Dead* (1978) and close reading of Lucio Fulci's unofficial sequel *Zombi 2/Zombie* (1979), I maintain that the Italian zombie film envisions apocalyptic futures and undead takeovers as grotesque punishments for the sins of Italy's Fascist history through the aesthetics of destabilization as well as the juxtaposition of explicit violence with political and religious iconography.

Ultimately, this project strives to provide a comprehensive analysis of the Italian horror corpus as an important section of Italy's national cinema. The bulk of my formal analysis revolves around films by three of the most influential Italian horror auteurs: Bava, Argento, and Fulci. I selected these three because their contributions are exemplars

of what I argue Italian horror cinema is doing. The unique approaches that can be located

in Italian horror movements, particularly the *giallo* and the Gothic Revival, demonstrate

that the serious-minded meditations of Italy's traumatic history are not just reserved for

the more revered, high-culture art films that they are typically associated with.

CHAPTER ONE:

Fascism, Postwar Cinema, and the Genesis of the Italian Horror Film

Despite the newfound vitality of Italian cinema after World War II, it took some time before any robust genre movements took hold. This is due in part to an economic boom that afforded the film industry the resources to rebuild a sustained and multifaceted cinematic output. In the time between the end of World War II and the birth of Italy's multiple genre cinemas, filmmakers began to transition away from the aesthetics of Neorealism in order to pursue other styles, particularly modernism. This was an older generation of directors suddenly looking at a new Italy; the tumult of the previous decade changed the landscape dramatically. Cinema had to respond in kind.

Italy's horror cinema did not emerge until well into the 1950s. Prior to this moment, Italian filmmakers and studio financiers were not interested in the genre, given that "Italian filmmakers favored fantasy films and big screen spectacles" and also because their "lurid, violent content still caused censors some sense of nervousness well into the '50s" (Shipka 2007, 41). However, the Italian film industry had a vested interest in responding to Hollywood's industrial successes and immense growth, especially given that American films distributed in Italy were largely dominating the box office. Riccardo Freda made *I Vampiri/The Vampires* (1957), widely acknowledged as the first proper Italian horror film, on a stipulation with his producers that he could beat censors and that he could shoot the entire film in twelve days (Shipka 2007, 42). Though the film underwent a difficult production, including Freda storming off set and being replaced by

Mario Bava, and was not a success in Italy, the film's failure motivated Freda to continue making horror films and tweaking them in order to make them more successful.

This chapter examines the synthesis of cultural trends that culminated in the birth of Italy's horror cinema and, particularly, the popularity of the giallo horror film. In order to effectively understand the popularity of Italian horror, its steady output, and its unique aesthetics, it is important to dive into the complicated history of Italian cinema. I first outline the storied history of the impact of Benito Mussolini's Fascist party on Italian media, with particular emphasis on its contentious relationship with *giallo* literature and Italy's national cinema. I then discuss the cinematic trends emerging in the wake of the fall of Fascism and the end of World War II. Once I have delineated this history, I synthesize these tracks to discuss how they intersect and construct the foundations of Italy's horror movement, with particular emphasis on the birth of the cinematic *giallo*. Ultimately, through a close reading of sequences from Mario Bava's *La ragazza che sapeva troppo/The Girl Who Knew Too Much* (1962), I analyze the early aesthetics of the burgeoning *filone* and argue that though *giallo* cinema begins as an amalgamation of multiple transnational and generic influences, these early films demonstrate the subgenre's unique potential to comment on Italy's troubled history and broadly examine the effects of national trauma and social unrest.

The Literary *Giallo*

The key to the success of the early Italian horror industry was international distribution. Given the nascency of the movement and the tight resources, these films had to appeal to audiences in more dominant markets in order to ensure profits. The effort to

make these films palatable in these foreign markets entailed editing these films in order to not alienate their audiences. This included "Anglicizing" Italian names and pronouns, significantly cutting down sequences of violence despite the "disastrous effect on the story," and also shooting additional footage that lightened the tone to "soften up the material" (Shipka 2007, 44 – 5). Similarly, these films were rushed into production so as to quickly respond to current trends in the popular cinema of the United States and Europe, in particular.

However, these transnational influences did not stop with cinema. One of the most influential cycles of Italian horror cinema — the *giallo* — was born from the tradition of crime fiction. More than that, the prevalence of crime literature in Italy was inherently political when taken against the backdrop of Fascism. The first crime novels arrived in Italy in 1929 as translations of American pulp fiction entitled *Il Libri Gialli* (1929). Before going on to publish original stories by Italian authors, these *gialli* translated the works of authors like Agatha Christie and Edgar Allen Poe (Needham 2002). These influences established the typical narrative structure and stylistic conventions that *gialli* literature would come to follow. Known for their famous yellow covers (a feature that eventually contributed to the genre's namesake) and published by Mondadori, one of the most influential publication houses in Italy, these crime narratives took immediate hold over popular culture while also flagging the attention of censors and bureaucrats from the Fascist party concerned about their content.

Interestingly enough, the Fascist government was initially responsible for *giallo* works being written by Italian authors due to the "Fascist legislation that imposed a

minimum quota of national authors on all publishers' lists" (Cicioni and Di Ciolla 2008,

2). This advocacy quickly gave way to condemnation, however, as the regime grew

increasingly anxious about how the lurid nature of *giallo* literature reflected Italy's

national identity. *Gialli*, like the American crime novels by figures like Raymond

Chandler that they were modeled after, focused on a cynical, hardboiled detective

character who finds themselves ensnared in a tangled web of criminal intrigue after

bearing witness to an inciting incident, usually a murder. In order to curtail the growth of

the genre so as to protect Italy's image from what they perceived to be further

degradation; the Fascist government imposed many strictures onto *giallo* authors.

These mandates included enforcing that any behaviors or characterizations that

could be perceived as negative were coded as foreign, or more explicitly non-Italian. This

specifically meant that the criminal antagonist in these stories could not be Italian

individuals and that the detective protagonist had to effectively solve their case and enact

justice (Cicioni and Di Ciolla 2008, 2). Eventually, these sanctions gave way to outright

banning, as publication houses were forbidden from publishing *giallo* literature anymore.

In stifling the genre and its authors, however, the Fascist government inadvertently

stoked greater interest in *giallo* and lent the movement a new political power: "Fascist

fear of the genre, revealed in the administration's ultimate decision to prevent publication

of detective novels, further indicates its intellectual potential to subvert dominant

structures of power: *gialli* might teach citizens how to challenge the status quo" (Past

2012, 6). The struggle between *giallo* texts and the bureaucrats in control of their

publication and distribution continued throughout the 1930s and into World War II.

Mussolini prohibited the importation of crime fictions from the United States "on the grounds that their corrupting influence and glamorization of crime would negatively influence 'weak-minded' Italians" (Needham 2002). This stifling of artistic expression went beyond literature, permeating other media forms as the Fascist government worked to exert dominance over the production and dissemination of all streams of content.

Fascism and the Cinema

In the case of cinema, Benito Mussolini held significant control over the kinds of films that were produced and distributed in Italy. In an attempt to revitalize Italy's national cinema after it experienced financial hardships in the early 1930s, Mussolini founded the Cinecittà Studios. He appointed both Luigi Fredda, an editor for Mussolini's newspaper *Il Popolo de Italia* and a "strong supporter of the Fascist movement," as the head of the *Direzione Generale per la Cinematografia,* and his son Vittorio as the editor-in-chief of *Cinema*, the nation's most popular film publication (Bondanella 1990, 13). By taking these steps, Mussolini positioned himself and his regime as a benefactor to Italian cinema and, as a result, afforded himself the power to oversee and dictate the makeup of Italy's cinematic output. Bondanella writes that though it would not be accurate to say that every film made in the Fascist period explicitly expressed support for Mussolini's party, there were a number of films "with a nationalistic flavor" that the party could take credit for and use to argue for "Italy's cultural permanence" (Bondanella 1990, 18). In other cases, the films produced under Mussolini's watch at Cinecittà Studios were large-scale epics that demonstrated Italian cinema's technical proficiency while also perpetuating propagandist celebration of Fascist policies.

One such film was the historical drama *Scipione l'africano*/*Scipio Africanus: The Defeat of Hannibal* (1937). Funded entirely by Mussolini, the ambitiously scaled film used nearly seven thousand extras, a mix of location and studio shooting, and even live elephants to recreate the defeat of Hannibal at the historic battle of Zama by the dictator Publius Cornelius Scipio (Bondanella 1990, 19). Films such as *Scipio Africanus* filtered pro-Fascist rhetoric through grand spectacle that sought to compete with that of Hollywood filmmaking. American films that sought Italian distribution were met with intense scrutiny by Fascist censorship boards that sought to protect the national cinema from any films that might harm its reputation. Any foreign films that seemed to oppose Fascism or support any anti-Fascist politics were prohibited, along with crime films that seemed to align Italian characters with criminal behavior: "Because both *Scarface* (1932) and *Little Caesar* represented American gangsters as Italian in origin, neither was permitted entry" (Ricci 2008, 75). Because of the power that the Fascist party held over Italy's film industry, it could easily filter out whatever content did not align with the ideologies it wanted to promote. Though not all films made under Mussolini's reign were explicitly pro-Fascist, all filmmakers had to at least adhere to the content standards that had been set by the powers that be.

Between the years of 1943 and 1945, Italy's national cinema was shaken to its core by a number of factors. For one, Benito Mussolini was arrested and deposed from his position as Prime Minister. With his removal came the downfall of his Fascist party in order to usher in Pietro Badoglio and his new government. Badoglio then signed an armistice agreement with the Allied forces, who assumed full authority on decision-

making regarding the Italian film industry:

> During the remaining war years, many of the figures who had regulated cinema
> during the regime remained in place. But final authority for institutional decisions
> was squarely in the hands of the Allies. From the outset, an interim Film Board
> took up two basic policy positions. It sought to dismantle fascist cinema
> legislation and simultaneously pave the way for renewed importation of films
> from Hollywood. (Ricci 2008, 167)

During World War II, the Italian film industry took another major hit when Cinecittà Studios was nearly destroyed entirely by the Allied forces' bombings of Rome. Not only had the industry lost its resources and financial backing but the significant political shift revealed the immense socio-economic rift that had deepened under Mussolini. The Fascist perspective on cinema was contradictory as is. Mussolini wanted the Italian film industry to thrive, but only if it reflected his and his party's ideologies. When Mussolini was removed from office and Fascism fell, the Italian film industry was left in a state of flux. It was impossible to move forward with same kind of cinema that had proliferated under Mussolini, as the Allied forces sought to dissolve every aspect of the Fascist era of Italian cinema. Coupled with the destruction of Cinecittà Studios, a new type of cinema needed to emerge.

One change that stemmed from the fall of Fascism was a new freedom to address – and criticize – the political landscape. In the wake of World War II, the scars of a traumatized and deeply divided nation truly revealed themselves. Between the immense economic disparities that left working class citizens in abject poverty and the remnants of

the sites obliterated by bombings, the Italian people were reckoning with the

ramifications of Fascism and the war. Any cinema that would rise from the ashes had to

address these societal ills. The grandeur and decadence of the previous decade of Italian

cinema was too closely associated to Fascistic nationalism to return to anytime soon. This

truth, and the reality that the infrastructure to produce such large-scale cinema had

crumbled in the war, forced filmmakers to consider a more grounded, documentarian

approach to cinema.

Italian Neorealism

The Italian Neorealist movement was born out of this period of unrest. Italian

Neorealism was initially conceptualized by writers for the *Cinema* journal who had, up

until this point, been prohibited from speaking out against the political landscape under

Fascism, as Vittorio Mussolini was in charge of the publication. Once they could speak

out, they advocated for a turn towards a "cinema that resembled the *verismo* (realism) of

literature" in the 19th century and aimed "not to record the social problems but express

them in an entirely new way" (Ratner 2007). Cesare Zavattini, one of the major voices in

developing the thematic and aesthetic interests of Italian Neorealism, criticized American

cinema's reliance on plot-heavy narrative and spectacle as "simply a technique of

superimposing dead formulas over living social facts" and argued for an emphasis on

observing the realities of "Any hour of the day, any place, any person" (Zavattini 2000,

51–2). Thus, the thematic emphasis on the everyday experiences of working-class

individuals was born from this philosophy. Italian Neorealism takes an observational

approach to the daily realities of these people and, in doing so, paints a picture of the

many ramifications of broader social issues on an individual scale. Through this lens, Neorealist cinema reaffirms the identity of the real Italian people as a hard-working population that was forced to passively witness and endure the effects of Mussolini's totalitarian regime when the cinema under Fascism worked to push a nationalistic agenda that did not address any of the ills plaguing the country's people.

Along with the practical necessity of filming on-location because of the lack of viable studio space, Neorealist filmmakers worked to render a vivid sense of authenticity by filming in urban spaces and casting non-professional actors in major roles. These casting practices, along with the "shambolic remains of World War II" gave filmmakers an authentic sense of realism and an inherently dramatic backdrop to imbue their films with a potent sense of the anxieties and trauma permeating the atmosphere (Ratner 2007). Most Neorealist films are set in small working-class neighborhoods in larger urban environments, with occasional glimpses at recognizable Italian locales. In only presenting glances at major Italian cities, Neorealist films cement their focus on the "real" Italian spaces and populations that have been completely marginalized by Fascist policy and underrepresented by cinema during Mussolini's reign. For the first time in decades, the cinema could render a truthful image of Italian identity that was not filtered through a Fascist lens.

Though scholars have debated whether it is the first true Neorealist film, Roberto Rosselini's *Roma città aperta/Rome, Open City* (1945) launched the movement into international recognition. The film follows an ensemble of characters involved in resistance efforts combatting the Nazi occupation of Rome. Though its narrative is more

action driven than other Neorealist films which take on a more observational tone, the approach on display in *Rome, Open City* garnered accolades from the Cannes Film Festival and acclaim from critics around the world who were drawn to the radical authenticity of the performances and aesthetics. Bosley Crowther of *The New York Times* impressed that "the fact that it was hurriedly put together after the liberation of Rome is significant of its fervor and doubtless integrity" while highlighting the "wind-blown look of a film shot from actualities, with the camera providentially on the scene" (Crowther 1946, 32). While exposing new audiences to the Neorealist movement and spreading awareness of Italy's national issues at the time, the film received more polarized feedback upon its domestic release as "audiences wanted to forget the miseries and divisions of the recent past" (Wakeman 1987, 967). The disparity between the international and domestic responses to the film and the Neorealist movement reveals an ongoing paradox that continued as Italian cinema increasingly redefined itself in the decades following the war.

The most trenchant movements in Italian cinema were not necessarily embraced immediately by Italian audiences but were instead bolstered by their international reception. The domestic embrace of *Rome, Open City* only occurred after the film's merits were validated by international film industries and awards bodies (Wakeman 1987, 967). *Rome, Open City*, along with the other films in what would form Rosselini's "War Trilogy," explicitly convey the presence of Fascist forces looming over Italian civilians and examine citizen resistance movements against the Fascist threat. Later Neorealist films, like Vittorio De Sica's famous *Ladri di biciclette/Bicycle Thieves* (1948), foreground the economic struggles of their disenfranchised characters as they are forced

to powerlessly navigate their landscape. The presence of Fascism remains in the margins, like a specter hanging over the characters, as its effects are felt by the people forced to reckon with them.

Unlike the ensemble focus of *Rome, Open City*, *Bicycle Thieves* zeroes in on Antonio Ricci, an unemployed man desperate to find work and provide for his family. When he is offered a job distributing advertisement flyers, he pawns his wife's bedsheets for a bicycle that he needs to take the job. On his first day of work, Antonio's bike is stolen. He and his young son Bruno embark on a quest to find the thief and recover the bicycle. Through their traversal of the city, the film renders a vivid picture of working-class citizens struggling to maintain a living in the wake of severe socioeconomic instability. Despite Antonio and Bruno's best efforts, they are ultimately powerless to resolve their situation. The film ends with the two disappearing into a large crowd of other people like him after he was nearly arrested for stealing another bicycle.

This theme of enforced passivity rippled through the Neorealist movement. However, many of the filmmakers who popularized Neorealism began to move away from its aesthetic constraints in order to explore new territory by the early 1950s. After having "experimented with the Neorealist template to exhaust its potential," filmmakers such as Michelangelo Antolioni, Pier Paolo Pasolini, Vittorio de Sica, and others began developing bolder, more intense aesthetics that departed from the stylistic conventions of Neorealism and instead grappled with issues of Italian identity through deployment of deeper subjectivity and more abrasive content (Barattoni 2012, 114). This modernization of aesthetics paralleled the reconstruction of Italy's landscape as the economy mended.

Post-Neorealist Cinema and Emerging Genre Film

However these films' style may have shifted, their continued thematic interest in marginalized peoples and economic anxieties kept them connected to their Neorealist roots. While Neorealist films frame their observations on economic disparity and the struggles of the working class around protagonists who directly experience their effects, Italian modernist films engaged with these issues through genre tropes and experimentation in stylization to express and comment upon the "general distrust of the forces supposedly driving the 'renaissance' of the country" (Barattoni 2012, 122). Comedic impulses especially flourished, as their generic tropes provided appropriate leeway for filmmakers to satirize the absurd grotesqueries of massive wealth and the surreal experience of watching one's country being revitalized after a period of such instability. Though Italian filmmakers were generally moving away from the aesthetics of Neorealism, they managed to adapt some of its themes to fit the directions they were going in.

Along with the rise of modernist films came budding new genre cycles that would eventually contribute significantly to the foundation of Italy's horror industry and, specifically, the birth of the cinematic *giallo*. One particularly important movement that emerged from the post-Neorealist era that built upon the aesthetics of what came before while articulating the same thematic ideas in a new way was film noir. Though there have long been problems surrounding the classification of film noir's history, many directors of the famous American noir texts have cited Italian Neorealism as an influence on their style: Jules Dassin, for example, was heavily inspired by Neorealist location shooting

techniques and casting of non-professional actors in constructing the "documentary feel" of his seminal 1948 noir *The Naked City* (Sante 2007). The aesthetic similarities of both movements are bolstered by a common interest in the plights of working-class individuals. Noir narratives typically follow an amateur protagonist, sometimes a private investigator, who operates outside of the jurisdiction of law enforcement in order to solve a mystery. Often, these mysteries revolve around lower-class civilians and are usually more sordid in nature.

In the late 1940s and early 1950s, after the American noir movement had grown popular, Italy began developing its own film noir movement. It is in these Italian noir films that the early seeds of the cinematic *giallo's* penchant for stylistic displacement can be identified. Given that some scholars have argued that one can trace generic elements of noir back to the early Neorealist films, the development of a purely Italian wave of noir is a logical next step. In some ways, identifying the presence of noir in Neorealism highlights the aesthetic similarities between both movements but, more importantly, reaffirms how their influence can be felt in later genre films. Lorenzo Marmo cites "the noir strand of postwar imaginary" in the imagery of several films of the Neorealist era, such as the "atmospheric night" of *Rome, Open City* as a signifier of the dark moods conjured by noir's common use of darkness and shadow (Marmo 2020, 220). Italian noir films like Carlo Lizzani's *Ai margini della metropoli/At the Edge of the City* (1953) further prove the inextricability of the two movements. That film, which follows a young man falsely accused of murdering his girlfriend and the defense attorney who takes on his case, strays away from the traditional narrative of hard-boiled detective work common in

the most popular noir films of the period, but still employs many of the aesthetic devices found in both noir and Neorealism: "Lizzani's depiction emphasizes the horrible living conditions of the sub-proletarian inhabitants of the *borgate*, adopting a distinctively noirish style in terms of cinematography, camera angles, and editing" (Marmo 2020, 226).

In some ways, the areas where noir and Neorealism differ thematically and aesthetically could be read as more than just different conventions but instead intentional revisions that still illuminated these themes through new generic lenses, while also affording the people at the center of these films more agency than they had previously been given. While some have identified a despairing tone in Neorealism, noir has been similarly characterized by an attitude of cynicism that was considered somewhat transgressive for the period of its emergence. Yet within this genre and the disillusionment of its imagined worlds, there exists the slight possibility of redemption. J. Madison Davis writes that renowned crime fiction author Raymond Chandler believed that "Despite all the corruption in the world, the story...requires a hero to go down the mean streets, to exact a small amount of justice. In a way, this is the last redoubt of optimism and justice" (Davis 2011, 9 - 10). These small pockets of justice and the small amount of agency granted to lower-class individuals within a society structured by corrupt systems.

The thematic and aesthetic intersection between modernist film, noir, and Neorealism proves particularly instructive when considering the budding market of Italian genre films. As many of these films were taking their cues from popular cinematic

trends in America, those that retained the noir-Neorealist sensibility felt most like they were actually touching on the nation's history. Either way, the Italian genre film industry enjoyed a financial and creative boom during the mid-to-late 1950s, as mainstream audiences embraced the higher production values and more conventional (or perhaps less outwardly despairing) stories that were emerging from post-Neorealist cinema (Shipka 2007, 38). More than that, the post-Fascist legislature provided new state support to the cinema. Giulo Anderotti was appointed Under-Secretary for Cinematography and set forth laws that "reinstituted past protectionist measures, such as taxes on the dubbing of foreign films" in order to prevent Hollywood films from dominating the market (Di Chiara 2016, 32). Anderotti also instituted "soft loans for film financing" and, most of all, a tax relief program that ensured "every domestic production was eligible to receive a government tax refund of 10 per cent of its total gross, plus another 8 per cent reserved for works considered of particular artistic value (which was usually granted regardless of the actual quality of the film" (Di Chiara 2016, 32).

The Birth of Italian Horror

Given the state-sanctioned financial protections and the prospect of international distribution buoying box office results even if a film was unsuccessful domestically, filmmakers had a newfound freedom to explore genres that they had previously been unable to. However, even with those protections in place, the horror genre was still seen as a big risk. As stated before, Riccardo Freda had to make a bet with studios in order to secure the funding to make *I Vampiri*, which was something of a false start for the genre anyway, at least in terms of long-term influence. Though there were several Gothic

horror films made between 1958 and 1962, they were mostly imitations of or even comedic riffs on the more popular Hammer Films coming out of Britain, such as *Tempi Duri per I Vampiri/Uncle Was a Vampire* (1959) which starred Christopher Lee, who famously portrayed the titular role in Hammer's *Horror of Dracula* (1957) (Shipka 2007, 47). These early Gothic films did, however, signal the larger quantities of sexual content and more graphic violence that would later become a staple of Italian horror cinema. Shipka points out that Italian filmmakers were able to compensate for the low budgets of their films by taking the Gothic style and "infusing it with more gore and sex," which ultimately worked to the "financial benefit of these lurid subject matters" (Shipka 2007, 49).

The early years of Italy's horror industry have been characterized by scholars as an exclusively Gothic period (Brown 2012, 174). Though it cannot be argued that the vast majority of horror films released at the time fall under the Gothic categorization, I contend that this period should instead be referred to as the foundational period, given that Italian horror filmmakers were largely pulling from transnational influences rather than developing their own unique aesthetic. Regardless, it is necessary to examine the figure responsible for both the aesthetic development of the Gothic and the introduction of the cinematic *giallo*: Mario Bava.

Initially influenced by *Horror of Dracula* and Hammer's other films, Bava made waves in Italy's nascent horror movement when he completed production on *I Vampiri* after assuming the role of director when Freda quit the film (Shipka 2007, 49). Prior to this point, Bava had worked in many positions on various different productions between

the late 1930s to 1950s, eventually becoming a cinematographer and visual effects supervisor. Bava made his directorial debut in 1960 with the Gothic horror *La maschera del demonio/The Mask of the Demon*, or *Black Sunday* as it is commonly known now. The film, which featured new levels of graphic violence for the period but still harkened back to the "mystic, faraway castles, fog shrouded forests, and ghosts" made iconic by the "American Universal horror films of the early 1930s," was both immensely popular and notorious at the time, as the film's American distributor, American International Pictures, had to prohibit audiences twelve and under from seeing the film and British censors banned the film (Shipka 2007, 50). Despite the film's success, Bava took a few years away from the horror genre and instead directed films in other genres, such as the sword-and-sandal and swashbuckler. In 1962, Bava returned to horror and, in doing so, birthed a new cinematic movement by synthesizing many different influences from Italy's literary and cinematic history.

The Girl Who Knew Too Much

Though many have argued that the true catalyst of the cinematic *giallo* boom was the release of Dario Argento's *L'Uccello dalle piume di cristallo/The Bird with the Crystal Plumage,* Bava's *The Girl Who Knew Too Much* is unquestionably the forebear for the movement and laid the groundwork for Argento's film to build upon. From a retrospective lens, the film is extremely tame and has even been recognized by scholars as not being nearly as frightening as later *gialli* (Brown 2012, 182). That said, *The Girl Who Knew Too Much* is profound in its construction of a new genre through the amalgamation of aesthetics of previous Italian forms. Keith Brown writes that, though the

early 1960s would still be categorized as the Gothic period of Italian horror, the early films of the budding *giallo filone* already exhibited more distinctly Italian identity, as Gothic films were typically set in non-Italian locations and "saw that cast and crew hide their Italian identities behind English sounding pseudonyms" (Brown 2012, 174). Though the cinematic *giallo* would eventually explore other locales in later decades, *The Girl Who Knew Too Much* clearly grounded the movement in Italy in order to remain true to its origins in Italian crime literature, while also setting a precedent for the genre to specifically render an Italian perspective on violence and trauma.

The film follows Nora Davis (Leticia Roman), an American tourist in Rome, who witnesses a murder and begins to conduct her own investigation into what she believes is one in an ongoing pattern of serial killings, of which she may be the next target. In her investigation, she discovers that the killer is targeting victims in alphabetical order based on their surnames, having killed people with surnames beginning with A, B, and C. The film generously borrows from other mystery narratives, particularly Agatha Christie's *The A.B.C. Murders* (1936) (Brown 2012, 183). Along with the film's clear thematic influences, Colette Balmain points out that the film "employs black and white cinematography both to highlight its noir origins and to indicate an engagement with the aesthetics of realism" (Balmain 2002, 3). By filming in black and white, Bava also demonstrates his alignment with Italian neorealist, noir, and Gothic horror filmmakers; he is not playing coy with his influences. In hybridizing these aesthetics and their loaded history to bring a new cinematic genre to life, his film's form embeds their perspectives on Italy's cinematic and political history.

From its opening scene, *The Girl Who Knew Too Much* takes a self-reflexive approach to the *giallo*, knowingly gesturing towards the tropes of *giallo* literature that inform the film. The film opens on Nora seated on a plane on her way to visit her dying Aunt Ethel in Rome. Bava's camera pans through the plane's aisle and eventually lands on a close-up shot of Nora, before panning down to reveal her reading a *giallo* novel entitled *The Knife*. Between the actual image of a plane landing in Italy and the on-screen presence of a *giallo* text, Keith Brown argues that the film explicitly signals the *filone*'s arrival to the Italian cinema through "highly self-reflexive citations of *giallo* literature, whether the specifics of 'The Alphabet Murders' alluding to Agatha Christie's *The A.B.C. Murders* (1936) or the *giallo* more generally...within the introduction of a number of key themes" (Brown 2012, 183). The most prominent of these themes is the common trope of a civilian witnessing a violent crime and taking on their own amateur investigation because they are not believed by authorities. The film foregrounds the literary *giallo* and its tropes in order to make clear its connection to the genre while also synthesizing aesthetic elements of other cinematic movements to bring the movement to life with a unique, hybridized style. The resulting film speaks to the experience of Italian citizens who were made to feel powerless by a violent, nationalistic regime and the cinematic styles that became their own form of resistance.

The confluence of these influences comes to a head in the film's inciting incident, as Nora witnesses a murder on the steps of the *Piaza di Spagna*. Before the murder even takes place, Nora is in a state of heightened dread as she witnesses her aunt's death. As Nora readies herself for bed, the heavy shadows obscure the rest of her bedroom and coat

her entirely in darkness. The blowing winds and pounding thunder rumble loudly outside her window, creating a distinct pathetic fallacy signaling the horror that will soon ensue. When Nora's aunt calls out for her, the camera whip-pans around to show the old woman writhing and suffocating in bed. Bava's use of light and shadow heighten the reality of the sequence, yielding a demonic, possessed quality. Aunt Ethel's body is almost entirely shrouded in shadow, with only small bursts of light making visible her gasping mouth and her hand clutching her throat.

For a film that is so rooted in the reality of human-enacted horrors, the sequence feels distinctly Gothic and supernatural. Brown discusses the Gothic in association with fears that are perceived as irrational even when there is nothing necessarily unnatural occurring onscreen, arguing that Bava employed Gothic aesthetics to make the reality of darkened rooms, empty city streets, and so on, seem irrationally frightening to the viewer (Brown 2012, 176–7). Similarly, Brown harkens back to traditional notions of Gothic literature being focused on characters who know little to nothing about the world they are entering, which is initially reflected in Nora's arrival to Italy but then rendered far more vividly by the rabbit hole she finds herself going down (Brown 2012, 184). As Nora flees Aunt Ethel's apartment, Bava utilizes long shots that convey her diminutive stature compared to the wide open, empty stairs of the *Piazza di Spagna*. Set late at night, the sequence unfolds in almost total darkness aside from the lamps illuminating parts of the staircase and casting massive shadows over the rest. At this point, Nora is not even aware of the threat she faces and, yet it is clear how unsafe she is. Her surroundings are completely unknown to her.

The heavy shadowing and darkness of the scene also calls to mind the aesthetic of film noir, as so much of those films take place in urban environments portrayed as potentially dangerous through the employment of dark shadows that blur their features. Bava uses film noir aesthetics in conversation with the Gothic style to accentuate the foreboding potentiality of violence as a demonic force haunting the liminal space between the before and after of the murder. Even once the mugger who initially attacks Nora is revealed, Bava photographs his stalking of her in front of the steps with the same grandeur that he shot her walking down the steps. His malicious nature does not render him any more in control of the darkness of the setting than Nora, perhaps because he is only a minor threat compared to what is to come.

The influence of the Gothic and film noir is visually explicit in the cinematography and mise-en-scène of the sequence, but the influence of Neorealism is a bit more abstract and rooted in Nora's fractured perspective and the sequence's temporality. Nora's perception of time is shattered when she is attacked by the mugger and knocked unconscious. It is unclear how much time elapses between Nora's attack and her regaining consciousness, but Bava blends the two temporalities together through a dissolve into a shot of Nora picking herself off the ground. A blurring effect emphasizes Nora's disorientation and inability to properly perceive the events occurring. She looks up at the *Trinità dei Monti* at the top of the staircase before a shriek forces her gaze, and that of the camera, down to the sight of an injured woman stumbling up the stairs. The blurring effect still remains, reiterating Nora's immobility and woozy perception. The image only becomes entirely clear when Nora begins to snap back into reality as the

camera quickly pans into a close-up on her profile. Only it is too late; the camera zooms

into the stumbling woman as she leans forward and reveals a massive knife sticking out

of her back. As the woman slumps over, the image blurs again and quickly cuts back to

Nora's shocked expression. There is nothing she can do in the moment. She is a witness

to a traumatic event and has been forced into passivity.

Bava's emphasis on Nora's powerlessness in this scene invokes a more extreme

example of the passivity that many of the protagonists of Italian Neorealist cinema are

forced into. They are given very little agency over their circumstances. In *Bicycle*

Thieves, Antonio Ricci's ultimately futile quest to recover his stolen bicycle is the most

he can do to exert control over his financial hardships. Otherwise, he is simply a witness.

Through his eyes, the viewer looks directly upon the desperation of other people in his

position. His subjectivity magnifies the economic inequities dividing lines between

working-class citizens like him and those that enjoy wealth and luxury on the backs of

these populations. In the end, Ricci has no recourse against his circumstances and

disappears into a large crowd of people stuck in a similar position. The *giallo* follows in

the footsteps of the film noir by responding to this passivity and giving their protagonists,

even those displaced by traumatic experiences, a fighting chance to exact justice.

In Bava's film, Nora regains agency from the initial attack by assuming the role

of detective and taking it upon herself to solve the mystery. The authorities do not believe

Nora when she reports the murder. Instead, they assume she was hallucinating. This trope

can be found throughout the horror genre, but it will be particularly prevalent throughout

giallo films. The women who experience these inciting traumas are often dismissed as

hysterical, which thus leads them to begin their own investigation of what they have seen. Though the *giallo* would later become known for its exploitative violence against women and lurid sexuality, it also allows women to largely take control of their narratives, even if it leads them down a path towards depravity. Nora, for example, is assisted in her investigation by Dr. Marcello Bassi (played by American star John Saxon), but she notably takes the lead. It is through her deductions and skilled reasoning that the developments that lead her to the killer are made.

Nora's knowledge of *giallo* literature seems to aid her search, as she develops elaborate means of entrapping the killer. One sequence sees Nora going to an empty mansion that a mysterious caller had instructed her to investigate. She enters the mysterious home and discerningly paces around, looking for clues. Throughout the sequence, Nora makes active decisions that provide some semblance of empowerment after the initial trauma she endured: when a telephone suddenly rings, she simply disconnects the line. At one point, she notices a door to a room she has yet to explore. The camera zooms in on the doorknob as the foreboding musical score swells. It all portends danger for her. Even so, she decides to open the door. The door ultimately proves to just be a red herring, for the moment at least, as suddenly Nora's attention is diverted. She finds a container of white powder and begins pouring out on the floor of the hallway leading from the front door. She then uses a spool of yarn to construct an elaborate web trap. The film cuts from Nora beginning the process of building this snare to the finished product: an intricate web that spans throughout multiple rooms of the mansion. Once done, Nora simply lays down on the bed and waits for an intruder.

Nora tosses and turns until she sits up and sees a large, silhouetted figure outside the window. The figure casts a large shadow over Nora, diminishing her stature and reinforcing its power over her. Despite this, she stays in place and braces herself for their entry. The dark cinematography and thundering score signal the incoming threat. At the moment of maximum dread, Bava pulls the rug out from under Nora and the viewer alike. The door opens to reveal a police officer sheepishly calling out to see if anyone is there, followed by Dr. Bassi, who pushes past the officer before accidentally tripping the trap that Nora prepared. This moment complicates Nora's sense of agency: she is far more capable and active than she was previously, yet her plans are still foiled by forces outside her control. The presence of a police officer, who could be considered an "official" authority compared to Nora's amateur status, lends the moment a sense of genre reflexivity by openly addressing the incompetence of authority figures in these stories. Not only do the police not believe her when she goes through the official channels to report the crime, but they also impede her ability to conduct her own investigation through their own incompetence. By playing with this common trope, Bava simultaneously portrays Nora's growing agency while also reinforcing that passivity can still be forced upon her by institutional powers.

The climax and resolution of *The Girl Who Knew Too Much* continues exploring this complicated relationship between passivity and agency, however, as Nora draws closer to uncovering the identity of the murderer. When she returns to the mansion, she nervously paces around before calling the operator to see if Dr. Bassi can come assist her. When he does not answer her call, she is left to her own devices. She decides to open the

door that she would not open earlier and finds a darkened hallway leading to another door, with the movement of a mysterious figure clearly visible from the shadows under the doorframe. As Nora steps up to this second door, the camera pushes in on her as she looks back. The opportunity for her to turn back to relative safety is still there, but she decides to go through the next door anyway.

Nora forcibly pulls the door open to find a man sitting forward in an armchair. The camera crash zooms in on his shadowed, sweating face to reveal that he is the same man that Nora believes she saw commit the initial murder. He suddenly jolts up from the chair, calls for help, and falls to the ground, revealing a knife sticking from his back. Nora screams frantically and desperately tries to flee. A woman's hand suddenly clasps Nora's as the camera pans up to reveal that it is Laura, a friend of Nora's aunt and the purveyor of the newspapers that Nora used to track down the Alphabet Killer. Laura explains that she was trying to move Nora's suspicion away from her and that the newspapers never even came close to uncovering her identity as the killer. The revelation reasserts the ineffectuality of institutions expected to be the deliverers of justice: journalistic reporters fail to parse out the identity of the killer despite the clues they have, and the police continuously discount victims and impede their ability to exact justice. Laura reveals that her husband was not the actual murderer but that he was disposing of the body of a woman that she had in fact killed. She then threatens to shoot Nora after realizing that her plans have been foiled through Nora's own independent investigation. Just as she seems ready to pull the trigger, Laura is shot by her husband in his dying moments. Once again, Bava presents a constantly shifting dichotomy between enforced

passivity and Nora's sense of agency. Nora's ability and ingenuity brought her to this point of attack in the first place, but still she is denied the opportunity to fight for her life. Before she can even make an attempt to charge at Laura or flee the scene, Laura's husband regains consciousness and shoots his wife. The chance for her to exert any power she may have is thus denied.

Despite the film laying the groundwork for later *gialli* to build upon and innovate the form, Mario Bava did not look back fondly upon it: "I thought it was far too preposterous. Perhaps it could have worked with James Stewart and Kim Novak, whereas I had…oh, well, I don't even remember their names" (Met 2006, 201). This retrospective analysis from Bava lends some insight into the intentions he had with the film, as he unfavorably compares his work with Alfred Hitchcock's *Vertigo* (1958). The cultural import of Hitchcock's work with the thriller genre clearly influenced Bava's approach to hybridizing elements of the noir thriller with the conventions of the literary *giallo*. While it would be easy to prescribe unto Bava a dissatisfaction with the low cultural standing of the *giallo* when compared to the genre works of someone with more critical prestige like Hitchcock, or even the more serious-minded nature of its many influences, the fact that Bava would later go on to make more *gialli* proves that he still saw vitality in the *filone* despite how he felt about *The Girl Who Knew Too Much*.

Conclusion

Bava's next film, *6 donne per l'assassino/Six Women for the Murderer* (1964), or *Blood and Black Lace* as it is more commonly known, takes the form established by *The Girl Who Knew Too Much* and builds upon it significantly. The aesthetic influences that

informed the style of the previous film are less obvious here, as Bava begins to introduce

signifiers that would later become hallmarks of the *giallo filone* and the Italian horror

movement at large. Bava shot the film in color to highlight the couture style of the

fashion house where the film takes place, as well as to render the film's famously violent

murder scenes more visceral. The film also introduces more elaborate methods of

obscuring the identity of the killer and forcing viewers into the frantic subjectivity of

their victims, including disjunctive editing rhythms and point of view shots from both

parties' perspectives. The following chapter will discuss *Blood and Black Lace* as a

transition point from this early, foundational period of the *giallo* to the bolder, more

confident aesthetics that would codify the *filone* and inform the approach of the larger

Italian horror movement.

CHAPTER TWO:

Candy Colored Carnage! *Giallo* **Auteurs and the Aesthetics of Destabilization**

     The *giallo* form proved quite popular throughout the 1960s, as nearly thirty films were produced, despite the commercial disappointment of *Blood and Black Lace* in Italy. Because of their small budgets and relatively short productions, *gialli* could be made and distributed in a quick turnaround. International distribution also helped bolster profits, thus providing a financial safety net even when the films were unsuccessful domestically. Though *The Girl Who Knew Too Much* and *Blood and Black Lace* are now both considered blueprints of the *giallo* movement, at the time they were met with lukewarm critical reception. This trend continued into the mid-to-late 1960s as the many *gialli* released were relegated to low cultural status. Even so, the films found their way into wide theatrical releases both domestically and internationally (Shipka 2007, 78). However, despite their largely forgotten status, these early films signaled the emergence of distinct horror auteurs who would imbue the movement's tropes with their own unique visions and ultimately contribute to the evolution of the giallo aesthetic. Filmmakers such as Umberto Lenzi and Lucio Fulci, who had until this point worked in other genre films before transitioning to *gialli* and would eventually become pioneers of Italian splatter films, directed early *gialli* such as *Orgasmo/Paranoia* (1969) and *Una sull'atra/Perversion Story*, otherwise known as *One on Top of the Other* (1969).

     The preeminent *giallo* and, more broadly, Italian horror *auteur* of the 1960s was Mario Bava. Though his two foundational *gialli* were not credited as such until later, it

was his synthesis of the content of *giallo* literature with Noir, Gothic, and horror aesthetics that paved the way for auteurs like Argento and Fulci to come into the fray and innovate the form. To his credit, Bava was never pigeonholed to just *gialli*, or even the horror genre at large. Though he is known for his pioneering contributions to Italian horror and its *filoni*, Bava spent the better part of his career working in other genres. As previously mentioned, the canonization of Bava's work occurred retrospectively. Peter Hutchings writes that Bava came up in a time when "the national and generic contexts within which Bava operated were also not especially amenable to the promotion of the director as a key creative figure or as being in any other way of importance" (Hutchings 2016, 79). Given the low status of Italian *filoni* at the time, coupled with Bava's own lack of interest in becoming a "star" director, contemporary analysis of Bava's work did not take into account the considerable impact he had on the genre going forward and how his influence would inspire the new guard following in his footsteps. He provided the foundation for the cinematic *giallo*, but the incoming new voices built an extreme new aesthetic that would come to define the movement.

The *giallo* truly began to hit its stride in the 1970s with the release of Dario Argento's *The Bird with the Crystal Plumage* (1970). The film received positive reviews from critics, especially given the rather low cultural perception of the *filone*. Regardless, the film was praised for its unique style and visual innovation. Roger Greenspun of *The New York Times* conceded that although the film does not bring many new ideas to the genre, "it is pleasant to rediscover old horrors with such handsome new decor" and likened Argento's subjective camerawork to the works of Michelangelo Antonioni

(Greenspun 1970, 25). From a retrospective viewpoint, the visuals of *The Bird with the Crystal Plumage* feel relatively quaint compared to the feverish heights Argento would reach later in his career. However, at the time, his debut film brought a level of visual sophistication to the *giallo filone,* which had been, up until this point, seen as composed of mostly cheap imitations of American crime films. With comparisons to acclaimed filmmakers of the post-Neorealist Italian landscape, Argento's flourishes and unique style lent the otherwise low status *filone* a new sense of legitimacy.

Dario Argento's arrival signaled the shift that the subgenre would take in the 1970s towards distinct auteurs who would all contribute to the evolution of the giallo aesthetic. Prior to that point, Argento and the other directors who would later emerge mostly worked in other positions on earlier *gialli* or dabbled in other *filoni*. Sergio Martino, a director responsible for the further eroticization of *giallo*, made both spaghetti westerns and Mondo "documentaries." Lucio Fulci, who would eventually make waves with his apocalyptic splatter films, brought new levels of brutality and incisive social commentary to the genre with his rural *giallo Don't Torture a Duckling* (1972). Though *The Bird With the Crystal Plumage* spearheaded a more immediate boom of *gialli,* Mario Bava's contributions to the *filone* and influences on the *auteurs* who followed in his footsteps are important to consider.

This chapter primarily draws upon close analysis of three distinct *giallo* texts from different auteurs to synthesize how each sensibility contributed to the aesthetic evolution of the *filone*. First, I analyze Mario Bava's *Blood and Black Lace* for its introduction of important *giallo* signifiers that become relevant to later texts. Then

through a study of *Don't Torture a Duckling,* I examine how Lucio Fulci's film subverts the established visual language and generic tropes of the *giallo* in order to raise audience suspicions against marginalized characters only to reveal the threatening nature of those who wield institutional power. I argue that, through this bait-and-switch, Fulci confronts audience biases and implicates them in the persecution of the innocent. Finally, I analyze Dario Argento's use of voyeuristic point-of-view shots and jarring disruptions in temporal and spatial logic in *Deep Red* (1975) to challenge the viewer's perception of the events unfolding on screen. Through the synthesis of these elements of these three texts, it becomes clears that these auteurs take a similar approach to genre as the modernist filmmakers emerging after the Neorealist era. These auteurs have constructed what I call an aesthetics of destabilization that reflect Italy's traumatic history through disjunctive, surreal, and confrontational stylization that seeks to shake viewers out of comfortable spectatorship to experience these films' excesses on a tactile level and be forced to consider the thematic implications of what they sub-textually communicate.

Blood and Black Lace: Paving the Way for New Voices

Before discussing Fulci and Argento's specific contributions to the *giallo* and the impacts they have on Italian horror at large, it is worth examining in more detail the ways in which Mario Bava's *Blood and Black Lace* introduced some of the cinematic grammar that they would later complicate. While Bava's *The Girl Who Knew Too Much* was heavily stylistically indebted to the film noir and Gothic horror films of the time, *Blood and Black Lace* opened the door for the *giallo* to be an entirely unique horror movement unto itself. Like Bava's previous film, *Blood and Black Lace* is tame when compared to

the *gialli* of the late 1960s into the 1970s. That said, the film introduced a higher degree of bloodshed and eroticism that would become some of the *giallo*'s most important calling cards.

The intrinsic link between sexuality and violence that is so important to the *giallo* is worked into the narrative of *Blood and Black Lace*. Set in a lavish fashion house, the film focuses on the many beautiful models employed there who eventually become targets of an unknown assailant. The scandalous nature of each of the models' private lives is fundamental to the investigation, as Isabella, the first victim of the slayings, is revealed to have a diary containing damning accounts of her colleagues' personal affairs. While police initially chalk her murder up to a "'homicidal sex maniac' driven to kill by 'the female beauty,'" the body count begins to grow as Isabella's diary makes its way into the possession of the other models (Olney 2013, 107). The film's presentation of its murderer would become one of the later defining features of the *giallo* syntax; the killer wears a large black trench coat, a fedora, a white mask with no clear face, and, most notably, a shiny pair of black leather gloves. As a result, the killer is almost entirely obfuscated, hardly bearing any recognizable human features and completely androgynous.

Though the film does not yet experiment with the aesthetics of destabilization to the degree that later *gialli* would, the film implements some stylistic techniques to disrupt sympathetic association with the characters. In the opening scene, Bava coats Isabella in almost complete shadow as she flees the killer, while filming her in a series of close-up and profile shots. As a result, there are only very fleeting moments where her identifiable

features are visible, and even when they are, they are disembodied from the rest of her. This is most notable in a direct close-up shot on her face while she runs; while her face is entirely shrouded, her neck is inexplicably illuminated, foreshadowing how she is ultimately killed. Because Isabella's face is obscured, so too are her emotional expressions, thus limiting spectatorial identification with her panic. Instead, Bava frames her as simply a body to be slayed. Her murder is swift and brutal, as the killer strangles her and smashes her against a tree; Bava shoots the scene in a handheld long shot so that the camera moves as frantically as its subjects do. When Isabella's corpse is dragged offscreen across the dirty ground, its portrayal is as cold and unceremonious as the murder itself, because Bava denies viewers the ability to emotionally associate with her. Prior to her death, all we see of her is her pristine appearance and couture fashion sense. When those are stripped of her, it is as though all vestiges of her humanity have been too.

     Blood and Black Lace is a significantly more aggressive film than *The Girl Who Knew Too Much*. Through alienation techniques that distance viewers from both assailant and victim, Bava emphasizes a purely visceral approach to violence that eschews the comparatively empathetic tone he takes in the previous film. Where that film centered Nora's horrified perception of the murder and her gradual regaining agency in order to exact justice, *Blood and Black Lace* centralizes the audience as the passive figure. That is not to say that the film abandons his exploration of the effects of witnessing violence and the difficult road to redeeming trauma, as these themes do carry over between texts. Instead, Bava complicates the approach; rather than giving the audience a sympathetic

figure to associate their perspective with, he implicates the audience as passive spectators.

Ian Olney writes that *Blood and Black Lace* is the first film to properly embody the ways that the later *giallo* "amplifies, in a postmodern manner, the bias toward disruption, transgression, undecidability, and uncertainty inherent in horror cinema" and through this distinct focus, yields a "uniquely performative kind of spectatorship" (Olney 2013, 107). *Blood and Black Lace*, along with the 1970s *gialli* that arrive in its stead take the dichotomy between passivity and agency established in *The Girl Who Knew Too Much* and more directly addresses the role of the audience within this relationship. Though neither of Bava's early *gialli* are explicitly political in their text, their unique aesthetics expand upon the more overt political dimensions of their influences. As stated in the previous chapter, *The Girl Who Knew Too Much* is heavily indebted to the film noir and Gothic horror on a stylistic level and Italian Neorealism on a thematic level. By synthesizing elements of these movements into creating the foundational text of the cinematic *giallo*, whose literary legacy is also entrenched in political conflict with Fascist censors, these aesthetics and all of their later permutations are loaded with this history even when the text seems otherwise apolitical.

Perhaps it is the fact that much of this commentary remains subtextual that these texts are often denigrated as being empty exploitation. Despite this, the way that these films transgress traditional ideas of film spectatorship even among other horror texts has piqued the interest of scholars over time, which can thus explain the revisionist canonization of Italian horror texts. Of course, this probably would not be so without the

radical development of *gialli* in the 1970s. *The Bird with The Crystal Plumage* and subsequent *gialli* took the models established in Bava's foundational films, proved that they could be successful, and expanded them into new, deranged directions. One of the most prolific authors of the 1970s *giallo* was Lucio Fulci, whose penchant for grisly violence pushed the *filone* to significant new extremes. More than that, Fulci pushed the political undertones of previous *gialli* to the forefront and used the iconography and assumptions associated with the *filone* to subvert expectations and deliver something truly shocking. I argue that he reaches the pinnacle of this experimentation in his 1972 film, *Don't Torture a Duckling.*

Don't Torture a Duckling: Political Memory and Audience Implication

Born in Rome to a single mother with family connections to anti-Fascist movements, Lucio Fulci had always immersed himself in political efforts (Howarth 2015, 18). Having been raised to be politically conscious by his family as well as coming of age during the reign of Benito Mussolini's National Fascist Party, Fulci was active in resistance movements. During his high school years at the *Liceo Classico Giulio Cesare* and his film studies at the *Centro Sperimentale*, Fulci aligned himself with the Italian Communist Party while working as an apprentice to Stefano Vanzina, or Steno, and taking jobs in various positions on genre film productions (Howarth 2015, 18). Eventually, Fulci worked his way up to becoming a director himself. Throughout the 1960s, Fulci directed several films and worked in various genres, most notably Italian comedies and spaghetti westerns.

Fulci's first two *gialli*, *One on Top of the Other* (1969) and *A Lizard in a*

Woman's Skin (1971), are both credited for pushing the genre's budding eroticization and exploitative qualities to new heights. But it was his following film, *Don't Torture a Duckling,* that proved to be one of the most subversive entries into the now densely populated *filone*. The film differs from typical *gialli* in many respects. The most immediately noticeable difference is the film's setting. While most *giallo* films are set in urban landscapes, with recognizably Italian locales serving as the backdrop for the films' crime narratives, Fulci's film instead opts for a rural setting. The effect on the narrative is profound, as the invasion of the rural space by urban forces only intensifies the townspeople's mounting bloodlust for vengeance and mob mentality. Set in the small Italian village of Accendura, the film charts the growing paranoia among the townspeople as three young boys, Bruno, Michele, and Tonino, are found slain. As media and state police investigators descend upon Accendura, the townspeople grow hysterical in their desperation to find the killer and bring them to justice. Rather than following a single protagonist who witnesses one of the murders as most *gialli* do, *Don't Torture a Duckling* instead follows an ensemble cast of townspeople, detectives, and reporters all trying to get to the bottom of the case. One of the prime suspects at the center of the case is La Magiara, a witch who is known for practicing black magic rituals in the countryside.

Austin Fisher (2016) argues that rural set *gialli* are particularly instructive towards illuminating the nation's history through the genre's aesthetics and, in particular, its portrayal of the relationship between modernized urban spaces and the aged, rustic qualities of the Italian countryside and its people. To put it simply, the urban setting

represents modern Italy, and the rural setting represents the nation's past. Fisher also highlights a "common tension" in *gialli* between "cosmopolitanism and parochialism" that "provides a figurative form of 'time travel' in which a representative of modernity discovers a point of contact with this past, which inescapably haunts or shapes the 1970s present" (Fisher 2016, 165). The role that Fisher refers to is often fulfilled by the character who stumbles into the central crime narrative. As the labyrinthian crime plot unfolds and the protagonist assumes the role of amateur detective, the effects of history that now haunt the present (in this case, through the violence of serial murders) are brought to light by modern forces. As a result, the most painful elements of this history manifest themselves in the violence of these murders. The way that the films then frame such violence indicates their perspectives on the traumatic nature of this history.

In the case of *Don't Torture a Duckling*, a large group of all kinds of investigators descend upon Accendura and brutally drag its darkness out into the light. Viewing *Don't Torture a Duckling* through this lens reveals the reflexivity with which Fulci approaches the film's place within the *filone*. It is common in *gialli* for the body counts to increase as the protagonist draws closer to identifying the killer. No matter how convoluted the mystery may grow, it is common that the victims in *gialli* are all directly tied to the same assailant. Fulci subverts this expectation, arguing that the suspicion against one individual can manifest into community-wide violence. In this film, the body count extends beyond the killer's targets as the ramifications of the investigation result in the persecution and even murder of other suspects.

Along with its subversions of *giallo* conventions, *Don't Torture a Duckling* was

immediately notorious upon release due to its transgressive content and political commentary. Though it features less on-screen sexual content and less frequent violence than other *gialli*, the film portrays violence against children as well as criticizing the abuses of power perpetuated by the Catholic church and the police state. More than that, the sequences of violence against suspects are incredibly tactile and prolonged. When La Magiara is flogged to death by a mob of enraged townspeople, every whip is brutally felt. Her innocence only compounds the savagery. It is no coincidence that the arrival and suspicions of state police immediately target the most marginalized townspeople of Accendura such as La Magiara, a "lonely woman subjugated by ancient ancestral and shamanic rites," and Giuseppe, a person who has an intellectual disability (Locatelli 2020, 237). Eventually, the killer is revealed to be Don Alberto, the young and handsome village priest. Don Alberto has justified killing the three boys to himself because he believes that he is preventing the boys from growing up into a life of sin. Thus, by killing them, he believes he is maintaining their purity in the eyes of God. However, he is not served justice until well after several of those marginalized individuals have already been prematurely punished for actions they did not commit.

Fulci withholds Don Alberto's identity for the better part of the film and focuses his attention on the other, more seemingly obvious, suspects instead. He uses the previously established *giallo* signifiers of obfuscation and disembodiment of human features to mislead audience assumptions towards suspecting characters who are actually innocent. Rather than costuming his suspects in the trademark black leather gloves or trench coats, Fulci trades in those outfits, which project a sleekness that could be more

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appropriately associated with the modern, urban settings of other *gialli*, for substitutions that align with what Fisher identifies as the cruder rural setting.

The prime figure that Fulci seeks to raise audience suspicions of through subverted generic conventions and aesthetic destabilization is La Magiara. From the film's opening scene, sequences involving La Magiara's ritualistic behaviors are filmed in discomfiting extreme close-ups that zoom in invasively on what she is doing. Because the film withholds much explanation for the reasons behind her practices, the visual language generates unease by putting the viewer in tight proximity with these unfamiliar rituals. Given her standing in the village and her reputation, La Magiara is a marginalized, othered figure and her behaviors are presented as such. The film opens on a panning long shot of the idyllic Accendura countryside. As the camera continues panning to the side, the frame reveals a long freeway that passes through the otherwise untouched landscape. Underscored by the soothing tones of a woman's singing voice and environmental ambiance, the sequence conjures a surprisingly relaxed atmosphere. The camera zooms in while still panning across the freeway before abruptly revealing La Magiara's hands as they wildly dig through the hillside dirt.

The languid tone is violently disrupted as the calming music sharply cuts to the sound of screeching violins matching La Magiara's movement. Though La Magiara's digging is the more startling visual, the juxtaposition of the large freeway with the natural landscape foreshadows the ways that modernity and urbanity violently converge upon the village. The intensity of La Magiara's reveal then makes the implications of the image explicit, pairing it with an actually violent action. Blood seeps from her fingernails as she

picks at the dirt. Her motion is so frantic that her hands and forearms become covered in viscera. Fulci initially shoots the scene in a series of extreme close-ups on La Magiara's hands, often zooming in to the point of blurring the image. The scene cuts to a canted, somewhat wider shot of La Magiara digging in the foreground with the image of the freeway appearing in the background. The camera pans up to the woman's face before suddenly jump cutting to a more direct close-up of her looking at what she has dug up.

From this moment on, Fulci frames La Magiara's presence as a destabilizing force to both the diegetic environment and the spectator's engagement with the film. The shift from smoothly panning cinematography and relaxing music to sudden frantic handheld camerawork and piercing music immediately forces the viewer into a state of heightened anxiety associated with her presence. Fulci zeroes in on the gnarly particulars of La Magiara's actions: the dirt encrusting under her bleeding fingernails, the growing mixture of mud and blood surrounding her, and the sweat dripping down her face. Though the murder plot has yet to even be introduced, Fulci uses this moment to cast suspicion and fear around La Magiara.

In a later scene, a figure we are meant to take as La Magiara makes three wax figures and proceeds to stab them each with pins in some sort of black magic ritual. It is in this sequence that Fulci drums up further suspicion by referencing common *giallo* visual language and subverting it for his own purposes. First and foremost, acknowledging the scene's place in the narrative is important to understanding Fulci's intentions. The scene immediately follows a moment in which the three boys taunt Giuseppe, a villager with a mental disability who later becomes a prime suspect in their

murder, for spying on other townspeople having sex with prostitutes. When Giuseppe

catches the boys taunting him, he chases them away down the hillside. The scene

suddenly cuts to a shot of a bubbling cauldron of boiling black liquid as a wax effigy

floats to the surface. A series of close-up shots follow a pair of mud-covered hands

picking up the figurine, plucking a pin from a cushion, and then slowly stabbing the pin

through the figurine's neck. As this character stabs the pin, the grotesque sounds of a

screaming and retching young boy matches an abrupt cut to a close-up of Bruno's face.

This sequence continues as two more effigies are made and subsequently stabbed,

representing the other two boys who are later slain.

Though we understand that this is part of the rituals that La Magiara is known to

partake in, Fulci does not reveal the exact identity of the person stabbing these dolls.

Instead, the sequence plays out similarly to scenes from other *gialli* in which the killer

prepares for the assault they are about to commit. There is a focus on process over

identity. In other *gialli*, filmmakers tend to focus on the killer's hands as they put on the

requisite black leather gloves and choose their weapons. Fulci plays with this grammar to

heighten our suspicions. Rather than donning black leather gloves, this character's hands

are covered in mud, dirt, and callouses, presumably from the process of making these

figures, also calling back to the opening sequence. Taken against the sleek, ultramodern

fashion that traditional *gialli* killers don as part of the process of concealing their identity

and preparing to attack, this sequence paints the process of its subject as primitive and

sloppy.

That the sequence takes place before any of the actual murders take place only

casts further suspicions on La Magiara. It also renders the framing of her actions all the more surreal. For one, it is unclear whether the sounds of the three boys screaming as this figure stabs their representative effigies are real or imagined, given that none of their murders are actually shown onscreen. The uncertainty is intentional, given Fulci's willful misdirection of audience perception of La Magiara. The full effect of this aesthetic destabilization does not actually come to fruition until much later in the film when La Magiara's innocence and the true identity of the killer is revealed. Ultimately, Fulci frames this scene in this specific way both narratively and stylistically in order to probe audience discomfort and associate La Magiara with abjection in the abstract sense as well as the specific murders that the film centers around. When the truth is revealed, the rug is pulled out from the viewer. The degree to which they bought into the discomfort that Fulci projects is the degree to which they are complicit in La Magiara's wrongful persecution.

In contrast to La Magiara, Don Alberto does not even appear until well into the runtime, when journalists coming to the village to investigate the murders meet with him and visit the church where he runs a boys' group. The difference in framing the first impressions of both characters could not be more distinct. Compared to the repellent frenzy of La Magiara's introduction, Don Alberto is portrayed as a gentle, charismatic figure that the authorities can trust to guide them. He wears a clerical robe and is framed in steady, medium long shots that convey his reliability. Though Don Alberto seems harmless on the surface in his early scenes, Fulci uses the affable front that he puts on for reporters to comment on the insidious history between Roman Catholicism and its

enablement of Italian Fascism. During his conversation with one of the reporters, Don Alberto says "Things like this happen and the world is shocked...You look for a culprit, but no one ever asks if the culprit is nor would be liberalism," before revealing that he has connections with the local news vendor and ensures that newspapers and magazines that traffic in more scandalous content are not sold in Accendura.

"It's a sort of censorship, right?" asks the reporter.

"Do you think I'm wrong?" replies Don Alberto.

The moment is not lingered upon, but this dialogue exchange speaks volumes, especially once the truth of Don Alberto's transgressions is revealed. The Roman Catholic Church was a chief accomplice in the rise of Benito Mussolini's Fascist regime in the 1920s. Roger Eastwell (2003) explains that Mussolini made an effort to bridge his budding party with the Church by promoting mutually advantageous doctrines that would empower both institutions while subjugating their mutual opponents: "Arguably more important points of contact between Catholicism and Fascism were shared enemies - in particular, the weak liberal state and the anti-nationalist left, which in Italy had a violent tradition even before the Bolshevik Revolution" (Eastwell 2003). Fascist legislation also allowed for a higher Roman Catholic presence in schools, leading to the indoctrination of children and young adults into the ideologies perpetuated by both institutions. Christopher Duggan (2013) expands on this, writing that the Fascist Party believed that education was an integral tool for moulding the "hard-working, obedient, truthful, and patriotic" sense of moral character that it sought to promote in the media (Duggan 2013, 180). The murders that Don Alberto commits are an extreme version of this, but his

rigorous dedication to ensuring the boys' moral purity is in line with the Fascist doctrines that bolstered the Roman Catholic presence in classrooms.

Despite the loaded historical context behind this sequence, Fulci does not show his cards too early. Instead, Don Alberto hides in plain sight as the rest of the people of Accendura grow more suspicious of La Magiara. During Michele's funeral, his mother cries out that she senses the presence of his killer. The camera pans around the church hall, with Don Alberto leading the service, until it zooms in on La Magiara hiding in the shadowy corner. As Michele's mother sobs and the organ music swells, Fulci holds on La Magiara's face as she nervously peers around and begins to sneak out of the mass. She is eventually brought in for police questioning, where she reveals that she "put them to death" and begs to be imprisoned, realizing it is more dangerous for her to be out in town as a suspect than in jail. When pressed further, she speaks unclearly, crying out that she warned the boys and that she threatened to "break" them. Her body then erupts into spasms, as she writhes on the ground and foams at the mouth. As the officers drag her out of the station and sedate her, Fulci's camera adopts her perspective in a frenzied point of view shot that blurs out once she loses consciousness.

When she wakes up, she confesses to the officers that she made three dolls resembling the boys and stuck pins through them to cast a death spell over them. "Who does the killing?" asks one of the officers. La Magiara explains that it could be anyone, before the image abruptly cuts to the statue of The Crucifixion as the violins from the opening scene loudly screech. The scene cuts back to the officers deliberating whether or not to release her; despite her innocence, they know that she is in grave danger as the

prime suspect. They ultimately decide to release her the next morning. Though the officers acknowledge the trouble that her release could stir among the townsfolk and the precarious position it puts her in, they release her. Fulci quickly confirms this danger when she is immediately tracked down by an angry mob armed with chains, whips, and even blocks of wood.

The soundscape abruptly shifts from environmental sounds to the music playing on the local radio station as the men trap La Magiara in a graveyard. The visceral, gory violence that would become Fulci's trademark in his later zombie films is on full, cringe-inducingly tangible display here. For nearly four full minutes, Fulci lingers as the men slam the woman's hands to the point of bleeding in the graveyard's gates and flagellate her with such intensity that her flesh is torn off with each blow. Jovial rock-and-roll music from the radio underscores the better part of the sequence, before transitioning to a soaring ballad as the men stop and leave La Magiara for dead. Throughout the scene, Fulci's camera switches rapidly between adopting her first-person perspective of the attack and showing the men each scourging her. Each time the whips hit her body, the camera jerks in response, forcing the viewer to experience some approximation of the strike against her body.

Fulci ensures that there is no perverse pleasure to be had in watching La Magiara's torture and death, no matter how scandalizing the gore effects. Rather, the scene acts as a punishment. By using common *giallo* signifiers and deploying aesthetic destabilization to drum up suspicions and conjure fear around La Magiara, Fulci entraps the audience and exposes their willingness to participate in the subjugation of an

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innocent, no matter how peculiar their practices may be. In turn, they are forced to truly live in the consequence this bias has wrought. If the beating were not enough, Fulci stays with La Magiara as she desperately attempts to crawl to safety. She eventually makes it up to the side of a road as cars filled with happy families, presumably listening to the radio the formed the scene's soundscape, drive by. They are blissfully oblivious to the carnage only a few feet away from them. She dies moments later.

While the characters in *Don't Torture a Duckling* are ambivalent towards La Magiara's unjust death, Fulci clearly is not. He delivers some semblance of justice when Don Alberto is exposed by two journalists and pushed off a cliff. Fulci revels in images of Don Alberto's face being mangled by the rocks below. However, the moment pales in comparison to the brutality and lasting implications of La Magiara's death. *Don't Torture a Duckling* is a politically and formally radical *giallo* text. Though it features comparatively less violence than other *gialli*, the carnage it does display is some of the highest impact the *filone* has to offer. Its subversions of generic tropes and pieces of iconography pave the way for Fulci to deliver a searing indictment of the systems of power that encourage groupthink and violence that always most directly impacts the marginalized.

In some ways, *Don't Torture a Duckling* represents Italian horror cinema at its most incendiary. It is easily the most explicitly political of these texts and best augurs the reappraisal of the corpus that would unfold in later decades. However, *Don't Torture a Duckling* still comes from the *filone's* relative infancy, as the rest of the 1970s decade was filled with profoundly innovative *gialli*. Dario Argento had already made his stamp

with *The Bird with The Crystal Plumage* and the other entries in his unofficial "Animal Trilogy." His next work, *Deep Red*, would become one of the most significant entries into the *filone* and even standout amongst the most legendary of the larger horror genre.

Deep Red: Shattered Glass, Shattered Logic

As I said before, the violence in *The Bird with the Crystal Plumage* is tame when compared to the extreme, creative slayings that would later become a major calling card of Dario Argento's style. However, the film does call to mind his interest in the destabilizing nature of violence and, in particular, its effects on those who bear witness to it. Only five years after the release of his debut, Dario Argento's *Deep Red* would assault audiences with an approach to the *giallo* horror film so abrasive and overwhelming that its characteristics would color the wide perception of the subgenre for decades to come. For one thing, the violence in *Deep Red* is significantly more protracted and graphic than anything he had done before. There is a far greater emphasis on pain in these murder sequences than in previous *gialli*. Not dissimilar to the most grotesque of Fulci's work, Argento films force the viewer to experience firsthand the victim's agony and helplessness.

Marcia Landy (2016) discusses Argento's interest in showing violent acts for what they are: extremely cruel, barbaric, and nonsensical. To achieve this effect, Argento imbues his most violent sequences with jarring visuals, extremely quick cuts, and abrasive sounds that shake the viewer's perception of the film's reality, all while delivering grotesque images of trauma inflicted upon human bodies. She argues that in Argento's films' "blurring of fact and fantasy, challenges to representation, hallucinatory

quality and particular strategies to incorporate the viewer into their images, they address a world where the real and illusory have lost their clarity and where art is as dangerous as life" (Landy 2016, 93). The approach thus reflects on the nature of film violence in multiple ways. First, the sheer intensity of the violence forces the viewer to contend with explicit portrayals of human destruction. Second, the sequences' abrasive stylization forces the viewer to reflect on how the film industry documents and filters violence to an audience that will consume it. Finally, the viewer then must contend with themselves as spectators and willful participants in what has become a perpetuation of violence.

Deep Red boasts a labyrinthian narrative that is convoluted even by *giallo* standards. The film opens with German psychic medium Helga Ulmann presenting as part of a conference on parapsychology. All of a sudden, she is overwhelmed by intrusive sensations; she claims that she detects the presence of depraved, murderous thoughts from one of the audience members. She is violently slaughtered in her apartment later that evening. The attack is randomly witnessed from the street by pianist Marcus Daly, her upstairs neighbor. When Marcus begins to sense that he is one of the next targets, he conducts his own investigation to uncover the identity of the killer. His inquiry leads him down a rabbit hole full of red herrings and intrigue.

Argento's challenges to viewers' perceptions extend beyond the elaborate murder set pieces that his films are famous for, however. His *gialli* are set in recognizably urban locales and hit many of the same narrative beats, but through experimenting with cinematography, sound, and mise-en-scène, Argento destabilizes the viewer's expectations of the *filone*, or even the logical vocabulary they have come to understand of

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cinema in general. One of the most fundamental components of Argento's style is the way in which he uses "wildly inappropriate funk jam music, often from the group Goblin," in conjunction with clanging sound effects to shatter the binary between diegetic and non-diegetic sounds (Smuts 2002). In *Deep Red*, Goblin's score straddles the line of being a non-diegetic supplement to the film and a narrative cue of an incoming threat that seems to have permeated the diegetic space. When Helga detects the presence of her assailant in her apartment, Goblin's pounding score kicks in at full volume; when the presence briefly disappears, so too does the music. Though the music could simply be a piece of shorthand to indicate Helga's supernatural abilities to viewers, that the score is matched so closely to action within the diegesis already expands its use beyond the non-diegetic. The score cuts out as Helga approaches her door, with almost complete silence acting in its own way as an indicator for the looming threat. Once she senses that the killer is not only outside her door but ready to attack, Helga lets out an ear-piercing scream made all the more jarring for its quick succession to the silence. Argento matches the blaring musical cue with the action of the killer's break-in to Helga's apartment.

The maximalism of both the visual and aural cues heighten the scene's tactility, as each blow to Helga's body or shattered piece of glass registers as an attack on the viewer as well. The sequence functions on multiple sensory levels. The first of which is the aforementioned sudden mixing in-and-out of Goblin's abrasive score, both adhering to and subverting what Craig Hatch describes as "strict synchronicity with the events unfolding on screen" between image and sound in horror films (Hatch 2016, 176). The second level lies in the overload of visual information supplied by Argento's style.

Within split seconds after the killer kicks in the door, Argento's camera cuts multiple times in rapid succession to angles of the killer's hatchet in the air and suddenly plunging into Helga's chest in extreme close up, with requisite bright red blood-splatter. Argento repeats this trick as he alternates between frenzied, nearly out of focus, close ups of Helga's anguished face, the killer taking steps towards their prey, and their hatchet chopping in and out of Helga's body.

Along with breaking traditional notions of diegetic sound, Argento rapidly fluctuates between subjective camerawork, assuming the perspectives of both attacker and victim while also constantly disrupting the spatial and temporal logic of the sequence. The screeching music, thrashing camerawork, disjunctive editing rhythms, and graphic violence all work together to construct a cinematic world in constant, jarring motion. Karl Schoonover writes that *gialli* "nevertheless provoke a political thinking by way of confronting their viewer, through a re-formation of that viewer's perspective on the physicality of that world via a kind of aesthetic agitation" (Schoonover 2016, 112). *Deep Red* takes the aesthetic destabilization of previous *gialli* to a new level, constructing a fractured subjectivity that permeates throughout the entire world of the film.

Argento suddenly interrupts the timeline of the assault, cutting to Marcus and his friend Carlo walking down the empty city streets and having a casual conversation. It is a jarring sensory contrast from the previous scene. Compared to the baroque, colorful design of Helga's apartment, the streets are a dull grayscale. The only sounds are ambient environmental noises that underscore Marcus and Carlo's conversation. The moment feels out of an entirely different film. Argento actually allows the moment to breathe,

lulling the viewer into something of a false sense of security. This moment of relief is abruptly shattered when Marcus looks up from the alleyway and sees Helga pressed up against her window, revealing that throughout Marcus' entire conversation with Carlo, Helga's assault was ongoing. Thus, it becomes clear that Argento has broken the temporality to move backwards in order to properly bridge Marcus and Helga's realities once the two encounter each other. Argento merges their timelines when Marcus sees the killer come up from behind Helga and smash her head through the glass, killing her. Until the glass breaks, the viewer experiences the interaction through Marcus' perspective. Argento cuts between an extreme long shot that emphasizes Marcus' distance from Helga's window to a more direct medium long shot that shows what he is seeing more clearly. Neither Marcus nor the viewer can hear Helga's screams. As soon as the killer shoves Helga through the window, however, both her screams and Goblin's score that played during the initial assault cue in at full volume, thus finally making explicit the temporal bridge between both Marcus and Helga's perspectives.

Even without the brutal violence against Helga, the scene of her death is an overwhelming sensory overload full of jarring stylistic decisions. Once coupled with the visceral cleaver strikes against her body and the elaborate final staging of her corpse, the sequence becomes a far more challenging treatise on the nature of cinematic spectatorship and the act of consuming violence. Colette Balmain refers to Argento as a "philosopher practitioner whose films map out new types of mental images" through heavy stylization and transgressive positions of violence and the spectators rendered passive to it (Balmain 2004, 8). Through emphasizing both Helga's experience of the

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assault and Marcus' distant vantage point, Argento forces the audience into the roles of both passive spectator unable to act in time *and* the brutalized victim. Unlike *Blood and Black Lace*, which creates a chilly remove between both subjects, Argento instead forces us closer to them. His abrasive sensory approach thus confronts the viewer with the traumatic consequences of the passivity that he already forced upon them.

To Schoonover's point, the "agitation" inherent to watching an Argento film only becomes more loaded when the film is taken in context with Italy's turbulent political history and the role of the *giallo* (Schoonover 2016, 112). The destabilization that Argento foregrounds reflects the instability that Italian citizens were forced to endure as a result of Fascism: the economic turmoil, nationalistic ideologies through propaganda, widening political rifts, and so on. Argento's films recognize the violence of this history, so they bring it to the present and make it more literal, forcing the audience to feel some small semblance of what living in that fragile, violent climate was like.

Conclusion

The heyday of the *giallo* lasted for a relatively short period of time, as the most notable *auteurs* began exploring other Italian horror *filoni*. That said, the aesthetics of destabilization that they promulgated carried over into other films within the larger Italian horror corpus. The next chapter will explore the transition between the *giallo* period and the beginnings of what I call the Italian Gothic Revival in the late 1970s. Connections between the cycles can be located in the supernatural elements already coursing through some of the most notable *gialli* of the period, including films like *Deep Red*. Though the approaches change, I argue that these texts still maintain the thematic ethos underlying

their aesthetic development and thus still cohere along the timeline that I have

established.

CHAPTER THREE:

**The Gates of Hell: Reviving the Italian Gothic, Zombie Cinema,
and Apocalyptic Horror**

Though the Gothic horror film eventually took a backseat to the booming *giallo* cycle of the 1970s, it can be credited with providing the initial jolt of life that the Italian horror industry needed in order to sustain itself. More than that, once the *giallo* cycle began to wind down, the broader horror movement pivoted towards supernatural narratives and Gothic aesthetics. This can be credited to a number of phenomena; for one, the *giallo* film was no longer as fresh in content and structure as it had been before and, thus, its popularity began to wane in the late 1970s to the early 1980s. The preeminent auteurs responsible for imbuing the *giallo* with a disarming and subversive aesthetic sensibility were pivoting away from the *filone* to explore other ventures. This shift occurred for other reasons as well, such as the rising international popularity of supernatural horror films that trafficked in demonic possessions or hoards of the rising undead. The *giallo filone* proved fertile ground for horror auteurs to employ their unique aesthetics in new ways, while also adding new dimensions to the established Italian Gothic movement.

Dario Argento and Lucio Fulci, both quite influential in the aesthetic development of the 1970s *giallo* cycle, were key figures in the pivot back towards the supernatural and Gothic roots of Italy's horror output. Despite their most prominent films from the decade being *gialli*, both had experience detouring into other genres. Argento, who had already accrued several screenwriting credits in the 1960s on spaghetti westerns and war films

before making his directorial debut, directed the period comedy *Le cinque giornate/The Five Days of Milan* (1973) between the release of *4 mosche di velluto grigio/Four Flies on Grey Velvet* (1972) and his renowned *giallo Profondo rosso/Deep Red* (1975). Fulci had directed numerous other genre films, including spaghetti westerns, war films, and comedies, spanning from the late 1950s until well into the 60s, before he made his foray into *gialli*. He even followed up his infamous *Non si seviza un paperino/Don't Torture a Duckling* (1972) with an adaptation of Jack London's 1906 survival adventure novel *White Fang* (1973). Neither were entirely beholden to the *giallo*; they were simply following the popular trends. That said, both filmmakers were able to develop the sensibilities they would come to be known for through their *gialli* and, in doing so, contributed to the radical evolution of the subgenre's style that would eventually transcend the *giallo* and permeate other forms of Italian horror. Both *Don't Torture a Duckling* and *Deep Red* contain traces of the supernatural tropes that the directors would eventually lean into full tilt, such as La Magiara's black magic rituals or Helga's psychic abilities. These indicators, along with the previously outlined aesthetics of destabilization that their films exhibited, were carried over as both filmmakers transitioned into fully supernatural horror.

Between the transnational influence of other horror movements and the hybridization of *giallo* conventions with Gothic aesthetics, interest in the supernatural rose to prominence once again. Only now these films were fueled with a new, full-blooded intensity responding to the turbulent times. The Italian Gothic films of the late 50s to early 60s took their cues from Hammer Film Productions' classic creature features

like *The Curse of Frankenstein* (1957), *Horror of Dracula* (1958), and *The Mummy* (1959). While Mario Bava's directorial debut *Black Sunday* (1970) was loosely based on Nikoali Gogol's short story *Viy* (1835), the film was made to capitalize on the popular trends set by Hammer's films (Lucas 2013, 286). From the shadowy cinematography and the classical Gothic architecture of the castle settings, the film's aesthetics reflect these ambitions.

But what of the Gothic films that emerged later? What trends did they respond to? And most importantly, what do they reveal about Italy's past that the *giallo* did not? This chapter begins with the history of the Gothic film and its transnational influences as a genesis point for Italy's early horror movement that was eventually taken over by *gialli*. I then discuss the transitional period between the dominant *giallo* cycle of the mid-to-late 1970s and the revival of the Italian Gothic with the new aesthetics developed by the foremost *giallo auteurs* during that period, as well as the supernatural and Gothic elements that are hybridized with these *gialli*. In this section, I discuss how the popularity of the zombie film translated to Italy and culminated in the US-Italy international co-production of George A. Romero's *Dawn of the Dead* (1978), which helped birth Italy's own unique zombie subgenre, shepherded by Argento and, to an even larger extent, Lucio Fulci.

Through this industrial context, along with discussion of Fulci's role in reviving the Gothic through his undead horror films, with particular emphasis on *Zombi 2* (1979), I argue that unlike the previous Italian Gothic films that couched their horrors in the past, these films of the Gothic Revival envision apocalyptic futures ravaged by the sins of

mankind through aesthetics of destabilization and an embrace of the Gothic's irrational nature. Though they are set in foreign locales and are of transnational influence, I conclude that these films retain their Italian cinematic identity through their bleak worldview and extensive, borderline absurdly protracted, allegorical sequences of violence and bodily destruction that represent the oppression wrought by the nationalist ideologies perpetuated by the Italian Fascists.

The Early Italian Gothic

Unlike the *giallo*, which was more distinctly Italian in locale and flavor, early Italian Gothic films were more amorphous in their presentation of nationality. Keith H. Brown writes that these films, which took significant inspiration from the popular Hammer films coming from Britain in the late 1950s, were set in the past in non-Italian locations with anglicized names and credits in order to hide their clear Italian roots (Brown 2012, 174). He notes that this phenomenon is in contrast to the Gothic literature that inspired these films, as Italy served as an important location in Gothic texts such as Horace Walpole's *The Castle of Ontranto* (1764) and Ann Radcliffe's *A Sicilian Romance* (1790) (Brown 2012, 177). Though the lack of Italian locales in the early Gothic films made in Italy is notable, it can be explained by a few different phenomena. For one, the popularity of the British horror films at the time led filmmakers to believe that their films would attract more success if they seemed to be of a piece with those films. But Brown also posits the notion that filmmakers also consciously shifted the narrative focus away from Italy as a direct response to the original Gothic texts. With Italy serving as the primary location in many classical Gothic texts coming from England,

Brown argues that its positioning reinforced the nation and others like it as "conceptual Others" whose political and social contrasts were represented as macabre and negatively coded (Brown 2012, 177).

As seen in the Fascist era of Italian literature and cinema, any media that associated Italy with criminality, depravity, or really any characteristic that bristled against the desired projection of Italian moral character was subjected to censorship and forced revisions. Not entirely dissimilarly to how media during the Fascist era sought to protect a national image of Italy's unity and positive virtue by coding criminal characters as foreign, "Italians increasingly understood themselves as modern. If irrational fears were to be found, they were better located elsewhere in place and/or time" (Brown 2012, 178). The main difference being, of course, that the creatives behind these decisions had agency in the matter as opposed to during the Fascist period when those decisions were made under significant external pressure. Brown's theory also explains the role of *giallo* films in all of this, as they were clearly set in modern-day Italy and foregrounded human threats in lieu of supernatural ones. This could be associated with a shift in Italian cinema that focused on everyday Italian citizens either experiencing the harmful effects of Fascism and, in some cases, joining resistance movements in response. Because of the very real threat that Italians had lived under for so long, the desire to eventually couch horror in reality makes sense. That said, the *giallo* was built upon the foundation laid by early Italian Gothic cinema.

Given the national anonymity of early Italian Gothic films, there is some dispute about how to locate these texts as the genesis of Italy's horror cinema. While many have

designated Riccardo Freda's *I Vampiri* (1959) as the true origin of the Italian horror film,

scholars have complicated this notion given the influence of Hammer's films. Michael

Guarneri contends that though *I Vampiri* is important to the establishment of Italian

horror cinema as a popular movement, the narrative surrounding its history as, what he

calls, the "epically brave, if commercially unsuccessful, challenge to the dominant taste"

that spearheaded Italy's horror cinema is misguided given the shifts in the Italian film

industry that favored the production of genre films (Guarneri 2017, 2). He instead points

to Hammer's production of Terrence Fisher's *Horror of Dracula* (1958) as most

instructive to pinpointing the inception of the Italian Gothic, despite that film coming

from Britain. Guarneri claims that the international success of Fisher's film

contextualizes Freda's film as the precursor to the "1960s Italian horrors' parasitic,

hybrid, transnational nature (meaning anything from blatant plagiarisms of Hammer's

templates to more creative 'variations on the theme' mixing foreign models with

distinctively national traits)" along with confirming Italy's "long-standing bias against

home-grown horror narratives" (Guarneri 2017, 7).

    Horror of Dracula set a precedent for the content of Gothic horror films at the

time, as it eroticized the monster at its center and established a clear connection between

sexuality and violence. Italian filmmakers responded to this trend in particular, imbuing

their subsequent films with more graphic violence and sexuality than before. This was

partially also to draw audience attention, but Roberto Curti (2015) cites scholarship that

argues that the possibility of pushing boundaries of what was deemed acceptable content

was a liberating possibility for these filmmakers: "As renowned Italian film scholar

Goffredo Fofi put it, 'ghosts, monsters, and the taste for the horrible appear when a society becomes wealthy and evolves by industrializing, and are accompanied by a state of well-being which began to exist and expand in Italy'" (qtd. in Curti 2015, 15). Curti notes that the "Italian Gothic did not germinate from the greyness, but from the light at the end of the tunnel. It was born from the thrill of transgression, which was finally possible and had to be celebrated on the big screen as well (Curti 2015, 15)." Essentially, there was something liberatory about the lurid potential of the Gothic horror film. After decades of Fascist-mandated censorship of any content deemed unbecoming of Italy, horror opened up new possibilities for filmmakers to actually have some flexibility.

Mario Bava was one such filmmaker. His debut *Black Sunday* was controversial upon release for its extreme, abrasive violence and its dark eroticism. The film's marketing campaign in Italy played into this by highlighting the sex appeal of its star, Barbara Steele, in publicity shots that showed her in sexualized poses "both in and out of character" while also showing off the film's high level of gory violence (Conterio 2015, 35 - 6). Interestingly enough, Conterio also notes that while the trailers cut for American audiences by American International Pictures highlighted the film's gore, the Italian trailers, while also showcasing violence and sexuality, emphasized the film's striking cinematography and appealed to the emotional responses of "'*L'orrore'* (horror), '*L'angoscia'* (anxiety), and '*Il terrore'* (terror)," as though to legitimize the film beyond its visceral thrills (Conterio 2015, 35 - 6). Though the exact intent of this campaign is unclear, it seems as though the appeals to emotional response seek to legitimate the horror genre to Italian audiences when there had been very little precedent set for pure

horror media in general. The literary *giallo* comes somewhat close, but those texts were primarily crime pieces and generally were not viewed as horror-adjacent until the cinematic *giallo* hybridized their conventions with the aesthetics of horror and film noir.

The early Italian Gothic horror film continued through the mid-1960s with more influential films. Bava alone contributed to the Gothic canon with several more films that would develop legacies as cult objects, such as the anthology feature *I tre volti della paura/The Three Faces of Fear* or *Black Sabbath* (1963) and *Operazione paura/Operation Fear* or *Kill, Baby, Kill!* (1966). However, Gothic horror films eventually started to decline in popularity as the *giallo* and other *filoni* grew more prevalent. Curti writes that this was in part due to decreasing audience viewership, but he also points out that genre filmmakers were eschewing pure Gothic aesthetics and narratives and instead hybridizing their elements with other genres such as the spaghetti western (Curti 2015, 17). Eventually, the movement dissipated into merely stray elements of Gothic iconography, especially as the *giallo* become the dominant mode of Italian horror in the 1970s.

Supernatural Elements in *Giallo* Films and Transitioning into the Gothic Revival

As mentioned in previous chapters, the *giallo* boom of the 1970s was heavily responsible for crystalizing the abrasive, and distinctly Italian, approach that future horror movements would adopt and then fit to their own generic conventions. Though they largely replaced the purely Gothic films of previous decades, many *gialli* from this period contained traces of Gothic imagery and common tropes. I argue that the prevalence of supernatural and Gothic elements in these films teases the reemergence of purely Gothic

films later in the decade and, thus, marks the transition between the *giallo* and the Gothic revival.

Sergio Martino's *Tutti i colori del buio/All the Colors of the Dark* (1972) takes the framework of a *giallo* and inverts it with a Gothic twist that blurs the lines between the *giallo's* commitment to real-life horrors and the supernatural "irrational" that early Italian Gothic filmmakers sought to separate themselves from. The inciting murder that kickstarts the narrative of traditional *gialli* takes place in the protagonist Jane's distant past, as she witnessed her mother's murder when she was a child. Her trauma surrounding that event, compounded by the recent loss of her unborn child, prompts her to have surreal, sexually charged nightmares that a knife-wielding killer with distinctive blue eyes is coming after her. Curti notes that Jane is a traditional Gothic heroine in that she is "simultaneously a victim and an investigator of a haunting that is caused by anxieties of transgressive sexuality" and, as a result of her investigation, she finds herself ensnared in a Satan worshipping cult who introduce her to rituals that manifest her nightmares into reality (Curti 2017, 78). Through Jane's direct confrontation of the supernatural, the film's kaleidoscopic nightmare imagery takes on a Gothic bent even though the killer she investigates is entirely human and ends up having no relation to the Satanic cult. Her encounter with their practices brought her nightmares into real life, thus blurring the lines between rational and irrational.

All the Colors of the Dark's complication of this binary between rational and irrational paved the way for Dario Argento to lean further into Gothic and supernatural elements in *Profondo rosso/Deep Red,* his follow-up to his unofficial "Animal Trilogy"

of early *gialli*. Immediately, the film sets up the expectation that Helga, the German woman who appears to have telepathic abilities, will fit the role of a similar Gothic female protagonist as Jane does in Martino's film. Helga's psychic ability to sense the presence of the killer at first seems to act in the way of the sexually charged anxieties that motivate Jane to investigate the nightmares haunting her. However, Helga and her abilities prove to be a red herring as she is violently killed early in the film. Her murder is witnessed by the film's true protagonist, Marcus Daly, who takes it upon himself to investigate the identity of Helga's murderer. Unlike Argento's previous *gialli*, which eschew the possibility of the supernatural, Gothic folktales and the presence of irrational forces seem to inform Marcus' investigation of the killer even after Helga is killed.

As part of his investigation, Marcus is directed towards a book entitled *The Modern Ghost and Black Legends of Today* that points him to a supposedly haunted mansion that may have answers as to the source of the telepathic senses Helga experienced before her murder. In sharp contrast to the baroquely expressionistic production design of much of the rest of the film, the abandoned mansion closely resembles the classical architecture of the Gothic period. However, Lucy Fischer points out that this classical look is embellished with the more modern Art Nouveau style that emphasizes extreme "curvilinear dynamics" and fluid lines in lieu of the sharper angles of the classical Gothic; she highlights the "curvilinear intricate concrete moldings and windows with whiplash mullions" forming the exterior of the mansion in contrast with the more Gothic interiors and horror signifiers of cobweb, dust, and shadows (Fischer 2017). Marcus discovers notable clues in the mansion that point him towards the killer,

including a crude drawing of a young boy with an injured adult man and a rotten corpse. Eventually, the young boy in the picture is revealed to be Marcus' friend, Carlo. The injured man in the drawing (and presumably the corpse in the mansion) is later revealed to be Carlo's father, who was killed by Carlo's mother. Though the killings themselves ultimately have nothing to do with the supernatural, the film flirts with irrational phenomena and weaves them into both the narrative and aesthetic.

Dario Argento followed up the critically acclaimed and commercially successful *Deep Red* with the phantasmagoric supernatural horror *Suspiria* (1977). While the film retains some hallmarks of previous *gialli* — an anonymous knife-wielding killer stalks the halls of the Tanz Dance Academy while American student Susie Bannion begins to investigate the strange events unfolding around her — the film couches these conventions in a Gothic narrative, with a witch coven being revealed to be responsible for the murders and the unusual atmosphere at the academy. The murder set pieces take on a similar shape to those of Argento's previous *gialli*, but the experimentations with reality and logic present in those films are more clearly thematically linked to the irrational presence of the supernatural. While earlier films treated the supernatural as an irrational disruption to an otherwise rational world, these later *gialli* emphasize the whole world as irrational.

Argento and Daria Nicolodi, his frequent screenwriting collaborator, loosely adapted the film from Thomas de Quincey's *Suspiria de Profundis*, a collection of essays published in 1845. They particularly zeroed in on the essay "Levana and Our Ladies of Sorrow" and its three central figures: *Mater Lachrymarum* (Mother of Tears), *Mater Tenebrarum* (Mother of Darkness), and *Mater Suspirorum* (Mother of Sighs). Argento

and Nicolodi took de Quncey's concept of The Three Mothers and built the film's mythology around them, envisioning them as grand witches of the central coven operating in the shadows of the Tanz Dance Academy. The comparisons between Argento's film and de Quincey's essay largely stop there; however, *Suspiria's* feverish stylization feels of a piece with de Quincey's dreamlike prose.

    Suspiria doubles down on the aesthetic destabilization of previous 1970s *gialli* and the specific disruptions of spatial and temporal logic that Argento heavily deployed in *Deep Red*, as discussed in the previous chapter. Even though lapses in reality are obviously quite common in supernatural films, their disjunctive effect remains, as does the confrontational nature of how the film frames its murder-set-pieces. The film's elaborate opening murder sequence, in which the young Patricia Hingle is slaughtered for fleeing the Tanz, vacillates rapidly between what appears to be a human attack and an unknown supernatural force brutalizing Hingle. The sequence is unclear in its geography, switching erratically between locations with little reason as to how the characters got there. The wind hisses as Pat looks out the window of her friend's apartment where she seeks asylum. A pair of bright green eyes suddenly appear in the night before the arm of a demonic beast crashes through the window and smashes Pat's face against the glass. The film cuts rapidly between Pat's assault and her friend frantically banging on the door to rescue her. Argento disrupts the spatial and temporal logic of the sequence between these shifts, as the film abruptly cuts at one point from the friend banging on the door to Pat somehow now on the roof of the apartment complex, flailing desperately to evade her attacker. It is unclear how she could have gotten herself there or how her attacker

managed to pull her from her window up onto the roof. Argento cuts to extreme close ups as Patricia is brutally stabbed in the chest, stomach, and, at one point, directly in her beating heart. The sequence reaches the apex of its surrealism (or nonsense, depending on how you look at it) when Patricia's assailant somehow rigs her into a noose that is triggered when her body is sent crashing through the glass ceiling, with one of the glass shards impaling her friend in the process.

At this point in the film, the supernatural forces driving the action are unclear on a narrative level. Argento leans into this obfuscation through the rapid shifts in space and the ambiguous identity of Patricia's assailant. Initially, the arm that smashes through the window and grabs her appears to be that of some demonic creature, with inhuman musculature, massive patches of dark hair, and what seem to be clawed hands. True to the traditional *giallo* form, Argento withholds almost every identifying feature of Patricia's attacker, only revealing their hands and the weapon they wield. However, the monstrous quality of the appendage, combined with the nightmarish unreality of the sequence's use of time and space, demonstrates a clear hybridization between the hallmarks of the *giallo* with the supernatural elements and irrationality of the Gothic horror film.

Another murder scene later in the film betrays logic in a similar way that can be narratively justified by the film's supernatural trappings. Suzy's friend Sarah is brutally dispatched after investigating the strange phenomena haunting the Tanz. After a long chase sequence, Sarah is ultimately caught by her attacker when she climbs through a window into a room inexplicably filled to the brim with razor wire. Argento's camera lingers on Sarah as she helplessly writhes around in the wire before she spots the killer

and screams at the top of her lungs. The film then cuts to an extreme close-up of the

killer's razor slicing her throat. These sequences cement Argento's confrontational

approach; not only is the violence literally senseless in that it subverts the logic of reality,

but Argento relishes in its inexplicability to heighten the victims' helplessness and

reassert the viewer's passivity to the brutalization before them. Beyond the viewer's

obvious inability to step in and intervene in a character's onscreen demise, Argento

ensures that spectators can barely even make sense of the film's violence and are equally

helpless in the sequence's assaultive nature.

Production of pure *giallo* films began to steadily decrease between the late 70s

into the early 80s in lieu of other horror subgenres that were experiencing boosts in

popularity and, more importantly, notoriety. The Italian cannibal film, for example, had

been developing throughout the 1970s with films such as Umberto Lenzi's *Il paese del*

sesso selvaggio/The Country of Savage Sex (1972), or *Man from Deep River* as it is more

commonly known. Other rising Italian horror movements took their cues from the

international successes of different horror subgenres. The most influential and the most

instructive towards understanding the development of Italian horror's extreme aesthetics,

however, was the modern zombie film as popularized internationally by George A.

Romero's *Night of the Living Dead* (1968) and *Dawn of the Dead* (1978).

The Modern Zombie Film

The US/Italian coproduction of *Dawn of the Dead* occurred at a critical inflection

point in Italian horror cinema. As filmmakers were pivoting away from the *giallo* towards

a new Gothic aesthetic informed by the developments of the previous decade, the modern

zombie film was significant in cementing the revival of supernatural horrors. More than that, zombie films were truly startling to audiences and generated discussion about their sociopolitical import. The zombie film had the potential to break new ground for Italian horror cinema and bring back the Gothic in a fresh, urgent new way.

Before the Italians got ahold of the undead, George A. Romero's films introduced a new kind of cinematic zombie to the horror genre. Before he unleashed hoards of the undead, the lineage of the otherwise nascent zombie film could be traced all the way back to Victor Halperin's *White Zombie* (1932), a Pre-Code film that starred Bela Lugosi as an evil voodoo practitioner in Haiti who transforms a young woman into a zombie slave. Chera Kee writes that American zombie narratives stem from the narrative perpetuated by US media that Haitian folklore and religious practices were linked to cannibalism in an effort to "underscore Haitian primitivism" in response to mounting anxieties of Haiti "as an independent Black republic" (Kee 2011, 9). Even though Romero's films broke from the tradition of zombies as the result of magic or religious practices, Kee argues that the DNA of the modern zombie, even when separated from its cultural origin, is still rooted in the larger notion of otherness and the anxious binary between "us" and "them" (Kee 2011, 9). Those who transform into zombies lose their sense of self and occupy a liminal space between life and true death.

The other, in this case, is the individual whose humanity and agency have been stripped from them from by forces greater than themselves. While the modern zombie film is typified by the body horror associated with the undead's cannibalistic craving for human flesh, its true horror lies in the abstract fear that one's free will could be taken

from them in an instant. As Kee states, "in this light, zombies become an allegory for the larger societal self" (Kee 2011, 23). The revitalization of the zombie film in the mid-twentieth century was thus in large part due to the genre's allegorical power; the horrific prospect of a zombie takeover reflects the same fears that catastrophes like World War II and the economic changes it led to, the rise of Fascism overseas, and the recent trauma of the Vietnam War cast over the people.

The zombies of *Night of the Living Dead* are not entranced victims of a weaponized voodoo ritual. They are ghoulish hordes of inexplicably reanimated corpses. Much has been made of that film's subversive place in 1960s cinema and the many possible interpretations of its allegorical meanings. Critics have particularly discussed the film's commentary on America's unethical involvement in the Vietnam War and trenchant acknowledgement of racial tensions. The film's graphic violence and nihilistic worldview took audiences and critics by surprise, resulting in a maelstrom of controversy upon its release. Roger Ebert of *The Chicago Sun Times* described the audience at the film's premiere at the Fulton Theatre in Pittsburgh as mostly comprised of teenagers and young children who were accustomed to the campier horror films of the 1950s and "had no resources they could draw upon to protect themselves from the dread and fear they felt" (Ebert 1969). Despite the uproar, *Night of the Living Dead* turned out to be one of the most profitable films ever made at the time and spawned a new horror subgenre.

Romero did not make a proper follow-up to *Night of the Living Dead* until nearly a decade later. Even though the original film was a box office success, Romero could not secure the necessary funding from American studios to finance *Dawn of the Dead,* as its

larger scale would require a significantly higher budget. Dario Argento, however, was an early proponent of *Night of the Living Dead* and offered to co-finance *Dawn* in exchange for international distribution rights and final cut privileges over the version of the film presented to non-English speaking countries. As a result, *Dawn of the Dead* was released in Italy under the name *Zombi*. The film's Italian marketing campaign boasted Argento's creative presence alongside Romero's (see fig. 1). Argento's cut of the film moves at a faster pace, trimming some of the slower dialogue scenes and adding in some additional gore sequences. The most significant addition to the international cut is a full score by the progressive rock group Goblin, who provided scores for Argento's previous films.

Figure 1: Dawn of the Dead's poster for US release (left) refers to Argento as only contributing music with Goblin, or The Goblins as they are incorrectly credited. The poster for the Italian release (right) positions Argento's presence as equal to Romero's.

Dawn of the Dead was an international success at the box office, with Argento's presence in the marketing clearly contributing to its international popularity, particularly in Italy. The film made such a splash that an unofficial Italian "sequel" was greenlit, in accordance with Italian copyright laws that permitted the film to be marketed as a sequel despite having no other connection to the original film (Thrower et al. 2012). Lucio Fulci was soon brought on to direct the film, released in Italy as *Zombi 2* (1979)*,* due to his experience with extreme violent content as demonstrated in his *gialli* (Thrower et al. 2012). Similarly to Fulci's *Don't Torture a Duckling*, the film's sequences of violence are rendered in prolonged sequences that relish in the excessive, gory details of bodily destruction. The film foretells Fulci's integration of the undead into the Italian Gothic with his later unofficial "Gates of Hell" trilogy and his leering emphasis on violence as a means of aesthetic destabilization.

Lucio Fulci and the Gothic Italian Zombie

Zombi 2 opens on an extremely abrupt note, with an unknown figure pointing a magnum revolver directly at the camera. The shot then cuts to a cloaked figure rising slowly from a bed, before the armed character shoots the creature in the head. Fulci's camera crash zooms in on the gory wound before cutting back to the revolver. The image pulls out to reveal the figure, silhouetted in shadows, instructing someone to tell the crew that "The boat can leave now." After suddenly cutting to an opening credits sequence underscored by a propulsive progressive rock theme by frequent Fulci collaborator Fabio Frizzi, the film cuts to a seemingly abandoned boat drifting into New York Harbor. When two harbor patrol officers investigate it, however, they are attacked by a zombie onboard

the ship. A young woman, Anne Bowles, is then called into police questioning as the boat belonged to her father, a scientist who she claims is conducting research on the fictional Caribbean island of Matul. Bowles then travels to Matul to locate her father and rescue him from the mysterious illness plaguing the island.

Aside from sharing a title and a common threat, *Zombi 2* has little to nothing to do with Romero's films. Unlike both *Night* and *Dawn,* which withheld explanation as to the cause of the zombie uprising, Fulci's film harkened back to the traditional zombie origin in Haitian folklore and voodoo rituals. The phenomenon of corpses rising from the dead and attacking is revealed to be the result of an old voodoo curse over Matul that nobody has been able to put a stop to. Though it does not delve into the specifics of how such a curse was conjured, the film gestures towards an acknowledgement of the post-colonial, racialized history of the traditional zombie narrative. The human protagonists are, for the most part, white foreigners to Matul who have inhabited the island after traveling there for their own purposes, such as researching the zombification of the indigenous population, who the white characters must fend off. Simone Brioni argues that *Zombi 2* wields grotesque horror imagery to racially code the zombies, writing "The camera often indulges on disgusting physical attributes, such as real worms coming out of the black corpses," thus associating their monstrous features with racial otherness (Brioni 2013, 169). Fulci repeatedly frames the zombies in extreme close-ups with a handled camera that moves to the zombie's unsteady rhythms, forcing the viewer into tight proximity with their grotesque nature.

Similar to the *gialli* of the 1970s, Fulci uses jarring shifts between human and

zombie perspectives to destabilize the viewer's spectatorial sympathies. When Susan notices a zombie rising from the ground, Fulci switches rapidly between close-up shots of her horrified face and even more extreme close-ups on the zombie's emergence from the dirt. The back-and-forth establishes a tension for audiences as it presents two options of association; the viewer would presumably most relate to the human character. However, the shaky handheld camerawork in the close-ups on the zombie approximate its movement, as though forcing the audience to embody the creature. In placing the viewer in such tight proximity with the zombie, Fulci does run the risk of pulling the curtain back too far and bringing to attention the reality that this creature is really just a human actor in makeup. I offer that Fulci tows this line intentionally, presenting viewers the temptation to take the opportunity to distance themselves from confronting the zombie head-on by any means possible, especially when this historical and racial context come into the picture. To look so closely upon the zombie is to begin to identify with it.

The effect accentuates the individualized degradation of their Black-coded bodies; some zombies are more generally rendered, with blotchy skin and bloody mouths, while others are more vividly decaying, such as the zombie in the conquistador graveyard with rotting flesh and worms bursting from its empty eye socket. Ultimately, Fulci switches to a point-of-view shot from the zombie's perspective as it launches to attack Susan. Brioni connects their racialized characterization and attacks on the predominantly white cast of human characters, especially the attacks on female characters, which she argues are often of a violently sexual nature, to Italian Fascist laws that prohibited miscegenation and propaganda that sought to spread fear about the "'black peril'" that characterized people

of other races and ethnicities as dangerous (Brioni 2013, 170). Though the film certainly reflects these racist anxieties, I argue that the film envisions its zombie apocalypse as the consequence of colonialist sins and, specifically to Italy, the Fascist legislation and propaganda that perpetuated these fears well into recent history. Fulci's gleeful lingering on zombie attacks against humans represent a sort of revenge against these ideologies. Unlike the flogging scene in *Don't Torture a Duckling*, which takes on a more mournful tone, the energy of the zombie attack sequences is adrenalized and almost made ecstatic by the mutilation of the human characters. The few moments in which the humans do triumph over the zombies are loaded with imagery that calls to mind the history of colonialism and its intrinsic link to Italian Fascism, such as a scene in which a man kills a zombie with a crucifix.

In order to best discuss *Zombi 2's* political messaging about Italy's history, it is important to examine its status as a revisionist Italian Gothic text, as the early Italian Gothic films tend to stray away from this sort of investigation. Upon first glance, it may be difficult to pinpoint clear signs of Gothic influence on this film or the other zombie films that inspire it. Keith Brown even notes that *Dawn of the Dead* has "few, if any Gothic elements" (Brown 2012, 175). However, he notes that the presence of a mystical creature like a zombie falls in line with the Gothic tradition of "irrational fear" (2012, 175). The Gothic elements of *Zombi 2* also manifest in its rendering of historical memory through the macabre creatures and settings that have become archetypes of the Gothic. It revises the approach of early Italian Gothic with the aesthetic development of Italian horror cinema over the course of the decades since in mind. The film does follow some of

the early Italian Gothic horror model, such as couching its horrors in a non-Italian setting. However, the film is far more direct in its political allegory than those previous films and, thus, its reflection of distinctly Italian issues is far more apparent. When the zombie in the conquistador graveyard kills Susan, notably the film's only human character of color, and then sets its sights on the other (all white) characters, it is quickly disposed of when one of the men pulls a wooden crucifix from the ground and uses it as a melee weapon. The zombie is bludgeoned with the crucifix until its head explodes into a bloody puddle of viscera. Fulci is not subtle with his metaphor, but it works twofold.

On a general level, the presence of the graveyard itself and its importance to the narrative suggests itself as a stand-in for "haunted ruins" that are common of the Gothic (Brown 2012, 181). Even the island of Matul as the epicenter for the zombie outbreak could fall under such classification. But also, the image of the crucifix as a weapon calls to mind the close relationship between religion and colonialism in violently enforcing dominant ideologies over its subjects and the more subtle, insidious relationship between Roman Catholicism and Fascism, as was discussed alongside *Don't Torture a Duckling* in the previous chapter. These associations are directly tied to one another, as Brioni writes that Italy's history of Fascism recalls its history of colonialism in African territories since the nineteenth century: "*Zombi 2* represents zombies as immigrants that contaminate the West with the memory of colonialism" (Brioni 2013, 174). Italy's legacy of colonialism is thus an antecedent of the Fascist-era xenophobic rhetoric and previously mentioned anti-miscegenation laws that Brioni makes note of. The crucifix is a symbol of only a small branch of both colonialist and Fascist powers and the use of religion as a

means dissemination of their ideologies. However, the arguably outsized impact of the crucifix as a weapon on the zombie's body compared to its actual physical power is a striking metaphor for the dangerous effectiveness of religion in the context of both legacies. When the zombie is struck with the crucifix, it is immediately knocked to the ground. A single blow to the zombie's head then smashes its skull with ease.

Fulci's imagery also self-reflexively recalls the origin of the zombie narrative as a manifestation of American anxieties over Haitian independence and religious practices. Through this lens, the zombie, violent and monstrous though it may be, is the victim of the colonizer's oppressive tendencies to project their fears onto their subjects to justify the violence they use against them. Though the particulars of the voodoo curse that caused the rise of the undead in this film are unclear, the film implicitly acknowledges the role of the colonizer and their racialized anxieties in creating the larger zombie mythology, which is then reflected in the zombies in this film. Other than the crucifix sequence, the film is notably light on moments of human characters triumphing against the zombies. Instead, *Zombi 2* relishes in the destruction of the human body and, eventually, the zombie takeover of human civilization as the film ends on hoards of the undead swarming New York City, which was a massive settling place for Italian immigrants in the twentieth century.

By forcing identification with the zombies and ending the film with their victory over humankind, Fulci poses the rise of the undead as retribution for the sins of humankind. Though the character development in Italian horror films has never been the center of critical praise, it is striking just how blank the characterizations of the human

characters are in this film. Outside of arguably Anne, who at most gives a reason for the film to actually go to the island, and Dr. Menard, who primarily delivers exposition, the other human characters are largely just vessels to be gruesomely killed by zombies and maybe land one successful blow against them occasionally. Fulci seems keenly aware of the troubling political history of the zombie narrative and wields that knowledge to force a complicated reckoning upon the audience that is ensconced in the safety of removed spectatorship, presumably looking to take pleasure in the destruction of zombie bodies. Fulci denies the audience that satisfaction. Rather, he argues that apocalypse is the only logical, perhaps even the only just, resolution.

Conclusion

The films of the Italian Gothic Revival maintained popularity throughout the 1980s. Dario Argento followed up *Suspiria* with *Inferno* (1980), the second entry in his unofficial "Mother of Tears" trilogy. Though Argento would bounce between outright supernatural films and *gialli* throughout the 1980s, the influence of the Gothic can be found in each text. Lucio Fulci also began his own unofficial trilogy of undead horror films. The "Gates of Hell" trilogy continues Fulci's exploration of apocalyptic horror as a consequence of the sins of mankind. In both *Paura nella città dei morti viventi/City of the Living Dead* (1980) and *L'aldilà/The Beyond* (1981), Fulci criticizes the Catholic Church and uses the undead and extreme bodily trauma as an allegory for the church's corruption and the excesses of its power, especially when related to Fascism. Ultimately, Fulci's films demonstrate the ability of the Italian Gothic Revival to look towards a future informed by Italy's history instead of transposing its horrors to some other locale hidden

away in the past. In some ways, it represents the power of Italian horror at its apex, as it builds upon the foundation laid by previous films within the corpus, no matter which *filone* they might belong to.

CONCLUSION

Aside from a few exceptions, the Italian horror movement saw a steady decline in influence and popularity by the mid-to-late 1980s. There are a few notable entries that experimented with the tropes that came before and, in their own way, work to destabilize audiences. Dario Argento's *Opera* (1987) is a particularly nasty *giallo* that very directly comments on passive spectatorship to violence and the harms that can come from it. Lamberto Bava continued in his father Mario's footsteps by contributing to the movement with *Demoni/Demons* (1985). That film even more directly addresses cinema spectatorship and the proliferation of violence in popular media. It follows an audience of horror film enthusiasts trapped in a cinema when the demonic possessions in the horror film they are watching begin afflicting them in real life. True to Italian horror tradition, both films savor in the grisly, creative mutilations of their characters, while also taking a deeply confrontational approach to presenting such violence to their audiences.

However, as advocates for the classification of Italian *filone* say, the industry is "ever-changing" (Totaro 2011). Cycles move on and eventually wane. That said, the Italian horror film has reemerged in the public consciousness in numerous ways. Peter Hutchings notes that the recognition of *auteurs* like Mario Bava and the canonization of their texts occurred retrospectively due to the more accessible distributions of these films on home video (Hutchings 2016, 80). There are limits, however, to this phenomenon, as the filmmakers are limited to reputations that are developed by a largely reflexive discursive process that does not always account for the totality of a filmmaker's body of work. David Church expands on this with discussion of Lucio Fulci in particular, noting

that, despite Fulci's long and multifaceted career of shifting between different *filoni,* the filmmaker has been characterized as a "substandard gorehound fixed more strongly in the sensational exploitation tradition than an interest in higher aesthetic aspirations" (Church 2014, 2). While other works of Italian horror cinema have been reappraised and more openly embraced by mainstream critics, Fulci's works have still been denigrated for their content, only focusing on their gory nature rather than the thematic heft under the surface.

In full honesty, this calls to mind what drew me to Italian horror cinema in the first place: the notorious, so-called "trashy" content that has dominated the conversation surrounding their reputation. As I delved deeper into the different texts the movement had to offer, I found that there was so much more to unpack under the surface. Through analyzing the national and industrial contexts from which these films came, and their aesthetics developed, this project redresses some of the problematic discourses surrounding the Italian horror canon, such as the very issue with Fulci's reputation that Church mentions. By taking a two-pronged approach to analyzing these texts through both historical and formal analysis, my goal is to illuminate their resonance as unique documents of perspectives on Italy's troubled history.

One of the most revelatory discoveries in my research and analysis of these films was the use of aesthetic destabilization to complicate the sympathetic associations of the spectator. These films often place the viewer in the position of the "monster" or human assailant, in the case of *gialli*, through point-of-view shots or sequences that closely examine their preparation for their attack. Even when their identities or human features are hidden, by identifying their processes and adopting their perspectives, the viewer

becomes complicit in whatever violence they enact. This is only further complicated once the actual assault begins, and the films directly switch to the subjective experience of the victim. Beyond just graphic violence, these sequences are extremely tactile and use as many cinematic faculties as possible to render to a sensory experience that forces the spectator to imagine the pain of each strike.

These sequences do satisfy expectations of the intensity of horror cinema at large, and they do deliver on gore in spades for those looking for bloodshed. They also act as potent allegories for the political turmoil of Italy's past, and the dimensions of commentary that their stylization lends to the texts should not be overlooked. To put it simply, the violence enacted by the killer can act as a stand-in for the many harmful policies and rhetoric brought on by Fascist legislation, which can be traced back to Italy's legacy of colonialism. Being forced to experience both perspectives confronts audiences with the potential of their own victimization as well as their own capacity to enact violence. Italy is a particularly appropriate vector for this commentary, as it was an epicenter of violent conflict between Axis and Allied forces. Not only did Italy perpetuate some of this violence, but its ramifications were felt by the Italian people as well. This lens shows that violence, in this context, does not just mean the literal attacks on-screen. It can stand for physical and/or emotional violence. Though these attacks are interpersonal and occur between individuals, they represent mass violence perpetuated by oppressive ideologies.

To call these films just exploitative is to deny the true power of their transgressive content. Marcia Landy discusses the challenging nature of these films, with particular

focus on Dario Argento's work, and how they convey "The threat not only of being

forced to gaze but to gaze helplessly at the brutal destruction of another" and thus place

the onus on "external viewer who is situated in a related position" to decide whether they

are willing to continue looking or recoil from the screen (Landy 2016, 98). I contend that

the temptation to recoil goes beyond fear of seeing carnage but rather includes the fear of

being implicated in it. I understand the tendency to pay most attention to the gory details

but considering the heavily political nature of the post-Fascist Italian cinema that led to

the birth of the nation's prolific horror movement, to ignore the perspectives on Italy's

history woven into these texts because their lurid content initially seems to dominate the

films demonstrates only a surface level of evaluation.

All of that said, I am glad to see all of these films in even wider circulation as a

result of the advent of streaming. My goal for future scholarship is to analyze how the

ready availability of these films on streaming platforms will inform further retrospective

analysis. I am particularly drawn to studying the horror-dedicated streaming service

Shudder, as it has built much of its brand identity on the acquisition and curation of the

best that cult cinema has to offer. In a recent interview for *Inverse*, Colin Geddes and

Sam Zimmerman, two of the lead curators at *Shudder*, stated that they want to help

subscribers navigate the horror genre's "ebbs and flows" and provide an education on

"what else is out there" outside of the channels that most mainstream audiences source

their horror (Hutchinson 2016). With *Shudder*'s branding hinging on its personal,

curative touch and the desire to educate viewers on horror's many different strands

throughout history, I intend to examine how the streamer delivers on those fronts, and

how that may influence and lend nuance to discourse surrounding not just Italian horror but exploitation and cult cinema as a whole.

In choosing the films that best exemplified the characteristics of my argument and the aesthetics of destabilization in particular, I opted to focus primarily on the films of Mario Bava, Dario Argento, and Lucio Fulci. While their works have been the most instructive towards my understanding of how this concept translates to Italian horror cinema, I believe that future study on this topic would benefit from focus on some of the other notable Italian horror filmmakers. In the future, I plan to conduct closer study of Sergio Martino's *gialli,* particularly *Lo stranzo vizio della Signora Wardh/The Strange Vice of Mrs. Wardh* (1971) and *l tuo vizio è una stanza chiusa e solo io ne ho la chiave/Your Vice Is a Locked Room and Only I Have the Key* (1972), to examine his contributions to the eroticization of the *filone* in the 1970s and more directly tie it to the aesthetics of destabilization. While I briefly touched on *All the Colors of the Dark* to discuss the presence of Gothic elements in some 1970s *gialli*, I also think that film is worth further study.

Furthermore, given that the films I discuss throughout this project are heavily indebted to various transnational cinematic movements, I also intend to focus my research on the later horror texts from other nations that pay homage to Italian horror cinema, and, most notably, the *giallo*. In recent years, there has been a rise in films from all over the world that either pay tribute to or subvert the aesthetic and thematic conventions of *gialli*, including, but not limited to, the British film *Berberian Sound Studio* (2012) and the French film *Un couteau dans le cœur/Knife + Heart* (2018).

Through my research, I aim to discern how these films maintain the Italian identity that is so central to *gialli* through their aesthetics or if it is lost in translation for something else entirely. I also intend to examine what these films actually have to say about the *giallo* beyond their aesthetics. How do they revise the *giallo?* Do they locate problems within it and subvert them?

Ultimately, Italian horror cinema is still very fertile ground for study. Between its different *filoni,* stylistic approaches, and cinematic and historical influences, there are still a myriad of ways to unpack the complex nature of this movement and the reputation it has developed over time. Though I have endeavored to be as comprehensive as possible in this project, there are still plenty of areas where I have barely scratched the surface. I look forward to seeing the contributions of future scholars to this topic and how they lend dimension to this deeply idiosyncratic, bizarre, and undeniably Italian corner of cinema.

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