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Why Bad Things Happen to Bad People: Investigating Evil in the Italian *Giallo*

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Scholars generally find little to say about morality in the Italian *giallo* film, beyond proposing that it must be conservative and then moving on to more interesting topics. At the same time, the genre is often thought to display aspects of modernist radicalism. I explore this potential contradiction by identifying how the genre suggests the presence of evil. This suggestion offers new ways of thinking about the moral and artistic strategies of a genre which I argue represents a break in the history of Italian popular cinema. This break is as violent as it is uncertain, and its uncertainty offers a key to positioning the *giallo* in relation to its cultural background. To recognise the presence of evil in the *giallo* thereby helps in understanding the particularities of the modernity, the morality, as well as the pleasures the genre presents.

In his 2010 book *On Evil*, the literary critic Terry Eagleton reflects upon the contribution that evil has made to the development of systems of moral thought. In Eagleton's account, attempts to think about evil come up against a conundrum regarding our sense of reason – why do bad things happen? – and justice – why do they happen to good people? To leave this conundrum unsolved would threaten to undermine faith, for the existence of unjustified suffering is difficult to reconcile with belief in a creator that is both all-powerful and also good.

The various schools of thought Eagleton considers achieve this reconciliation via the role they accord evil in a particular dramatic structure. In the Gnostic and Manichean conceptions this drama is one of a universal force in eternal conflict with its opposite, good. For Aquinas, and perhaps in The Book of Job, evil is an enduring mystery which demonstrates that God's might is beyond human comprehension. Meanwhile Plotinus conceived of evil as the chaos of unactualised potential.[1] A less cautious commentator than Eagleton might venture the anthropological generality that evil has an inherent drama to it, and could perhaps also suppose that this drama lies at the basis of storytelling. The repeated fictional struggle between hero and villain provides ways of conjuring up enigma, conflict and peril, to be resolved by the ultimate triumph of good. This dramatic conflict gives a human shape to moral terms, making evil comprehensible, and therefore also potentially vanquishable.

Narrowing the perspective to a more restricted focus, this essay considers evil in one very particular type of storytelling, the thriller-horror films of the Italian *giallo* that began in the mid-1960s and flourished in the 1970s. *Giallo* means 'yellow', a name which stuck after the first series of popular crime paperbacks was published in Italy by Mondadori in the 1930s with yellow covers. Italian makes no distinction between these pulpy crime thrillers and even a highbrow murder mystery like *Blow-Up* (Michelangelo Antonioni, 1966). When used in English however, *giallo* describes a distinct type of film whose sex and violence makes it akin to the 'slasher'.

The *giallo* is just one instance of an international transformation of horror production in the 1960s. These new horrors added contemporary fears of psychos and sexual maniacs to the counts, barons, monsters and demons that gothic lore had borrowed from earlier folk legend. Horror was now as likely to be explained through reference to pathologised psyches as to supernatural forces; a pathology that can potentially be extended to diagnose the very modernity that enables genres like the *giallo* to exist in the first place.[2]

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[1] A further account of these ideas can be found in Midgley, 1984.

[2] Debate on whether the *giallo* is a genre is summarised in Kannas, 2017a. For the purposes of this essay I only seek to indicate a category of films that share broad similarities and so I use the word genre.

The *giallo* sets its tales of suffering in a world that is geared around consumption, fashion, cosmopolitanism, permissiveness and rapid social change. Most *giallo* scholarship accordingly takes this setting as its starting point. But what it tends to find less interesting is any exploration of the moral significance this setting might have. Writing about *L'uccello dalle piume di cristallo/The Bird with the Crystal Plumage* (Dario Argento, 1970), the film whose success in 1970 initiated the boom of the *giallo* formula, Maitland McDonagh complains that its 'transgressions against the law, against religion, against conventional morality…are confined to matters of plot and quickly resolved' (1994: 19). Austin Fisher finds similar confines when thinking of the genre as a whole, which he describes as depicting a 'superficial, licentious consumer society' (2019: 131) through which it 'simplistically conflates loosening moral standards, shifting mores around sexual politics, the atomisation of urban living, increasing consumerism and a marked internationalisation of Italian (and broader European) society' (2019: 136). Providing a logical conclusion to this line of thought, Seb Roberts states that the *giallo* functions to impart 'the lesson is that death is the final price of transgression' (2018: 118).

Mikel Koven (2003: np) counsels somewhat greater circumspection when he writes that it is 'just too easy to say that, in appealing to the lowest common denominator, *gialli* are conservative, regressive and reactionary (although they may be).' I want however to go further and state that the *giallo* poses moral challenges to which it provides neither simplistic lesson nor neat resolution. This offers a new perspective on what Richard Dyer calls the *giallo*'s 'fresco of corruption' (2016: 189), a fresco which is after all one of the genre's principal pleasures. The features of this fresco gain in vividness when set against the background of Vatican Catholicism, whose dominance not only in religious practice in Italy but in cultural tradition and popular life could hardly be overstated. Their vividness becomes more striking still when one considers the evidence provided by Andreas Ehrenreich that *gialli* were not niche films from the disreputable margins, but 'rooted firmly in the mainstream of 1970s film culture in Italy' (2017: 122).

This essay, thus, explores a potential contradiction between scholarly assertions of a simplistic conservatism and another major strand of *giallo* scholarship which argues that the genre is a modernist artistic project. Writing within the context of 'Euro Horror', Ian Olney acknowledges the *giallo*'s 'potentially radical, transformative nature' that subverts norms of masculine control and allows the spectator to 'experiment with a range of subjectivities generally proscribed by mainstream cinema and the dominant social order' (2013: 141). For Alexia Kannas, the *giallo* exhibits a 'fascination with late modernity' and exhibits qualities 'such as reflexivity and abstraction, along with thematic preoccupations… including alienation and "disclosure of the idea of nothingness behind the surface of reality"' (Kannas, 2020: 82, citing András Kovacs).

I do not think that the *giallo* counterposes a simplistic conservativism of plot to an exciting radicalism of style. Weaving together the strands of moral outlook and artistic sensibility in the *giallo* demonstrates them instead to be in tune with each other. As this weaving will also show, the *giallo* provides neither lesson nor salvation, but gleefully foregrounds its own refusal to do so. In this, the *giallo* represents a historical break with the ethical responsibility that had been granted in Italy both to film and to the narrative of detection. This break is as violent as it is uncertain, for the *giallo* presents a world where faith is absent yet evil is not. This point seems to express the limits of Italian modernity reached at the time of the *giallo*'s production; and yet the *giallo* also brutally and often comically undercuts those who attempt a moral condemnation of what this modernity offers.

Though its context is international,[3] the *giallo* offers a peculiarly Italian route back to one of the fundamental aspects of horror: that its fears are also its pleasures. At equal turns indulgent and sadistic, the *giallo* treats its audience to the spectacle of luxurious lifestyles and sexual liberties that its protagonists enjoy, as well as to the graphic violence to which they inevitably fall victim. In this, it challenges suppositions, apparently inspired by the US slasher, that horror exists to teach a punitive lesson about the evils of pleasure and the salvation of chastity. As chronicled by Andrea Bini, the full flower of the *giallo* was between 1967-77 (2011: 65), making it a product not of the conservative reaction that is the context to the slasher, but the turbulent and yet incomplete social revolution that preceded it. What I seek to argue is that the *giallo* presents a world motivated by the twin forces of pleasure and evil. The good has been removed from this world, and along with it, the sense that the spectator ought to feel bad about it.

The *giallo* in its moral context

Suffering – the contemplation of bad things happening – is a central part of horror, often elaborately so. The genre's characteristic traits include malevolence and the depiction of random, drawn-out violence. While theodicy[4] tends to have little role in discussions of horror, the notion of an almost mystical badness does play a role in popular understandings of narrative cinema. Tom Gunning (2004) describes the recurrent belief that cinema has a capacity to do evil and the coincidence that the Manichean conflict of light and darkness is also the physical basis of film projection.

[3] *Giallo* films were frequently co-produced and intended for international distribution. For studies of transnationalism and the *giallo* see Baschiera and Di Chiara 2010, Di Chiara 2012, Church 2014.

[4] Arguments around the justness of God.

As Gunning notes, fears of the spellbinding power of film were often expressed in public scandals about the new medium and they replay an ancient mistrust of vision to overwhelm rational faculties.

Gunning is concerned with the early decades of cinema in the US, but debates on the moral function of cinema were of no less prominence in Italy. Pope Pius XII called the cinema the 'church of the modern man in the big cities' (1943, cited in Mosconi 2006a: 270–1), while his predecessor Pius XI had called on the industry for a cinema that was 'moral, moralizing, educative' (cited in Mosconi, 2006b: 81). Such piousness became more comprehensive as cinema took on a new ethical purpose after the war, aiming to fill the gap left by the loss of moral certainties amid the downfall of fascism. An entire genre emerged of films of female martyrdom in line with a contemporary Marian cult, and the Sacred was often present as an explicit and active force in tales of conversion, redemption, sacrifice, providence, even of apparent miracles and communion with divine realms.

Italian neorealism is the landmark moment in post-war Italian and global film history and in contrast to such devotional films, its immediate aims were for political rather than spiritual reconstruction. But neorealism also constituted a highly moral cinema that was deeply marked by the notions of piety and charity prevailing in its wider cultural context. Many of the most famous images of neorealism transpose Catholic iconography into contemporary reality: the camera lingers on the body of the Communist resistance fighter martyred by the Nazis in *Roma città aperta/Rome Open City* (Roberto Rossellini, 1945) who dies in crucifix position. As Karl Schoonover has shown, neorealism confers meaning on suffering, which is seen as guaranteeing righteousness and suggesting the possibility of rebirth (Schoonover 2012). A Catholic sensibility can even be found in as avowedly secular a director as Vittorio De Sica, who proclaimed of *Ladri di biciclette/Bicycle Thieves* (Vittorio de Sica, 1948) that 'to the suffering of the humble I dedicate my film' (De Sica 1948).[5]

Although the downfall of the Fascist state and subsequent Liberation gave rise to a more politically critical Italian cinema than before, it was thus with a renewed sense of the moral purpose of the medium. This purpose would only be rejected much later, after the economic miracle, the emblem of whose liberalisation is *La dolce vita* (Federico Fellini, 1960) (even if this film retains an air of moral disapproval over the ultimate insubstantiality of the pleasures its characters indulge in). The *giallo* thus represents the culmination of a longer move away from moral purpose in Italian cinema. The *giallo*

[5] 'Alla sofferenza degli umili il mio film è dedicato'.

was enabled by changes to state funding and censorship laws that had been put in place by the post-war Christian Democrat government (see Baschiera and Di Chiara, 2010). It enjoyed a loosening of restrictions especially centred on increased erotic content (Ehrenreich 2021) but also regarding violence and 'immorality' more generally. It played a central role in the abolition in the 1973-4 season of *censura preventiva*, the preventative censorship of scripts prior to shooting (Guarnieri 2021).

Popular culture tends towards the provision of pleasure before it does towards moral lessons. Even the fascist government understood that the primary goal of popular cinema was not to teach but to entertain (see Bayman and Rigoletto 2013: 7), and popular films were historically the lifeblood of the Italian industry. Yet the comedies, adventures and romances that were the basis of popular cinema tended to showcase nice people doing nice things, and where there was villainy, they made sure it was clearly identified and usually beaten. The social satires of the *commedia all'italiana* and the brutality of the spaghetti westerns moved Italian cinema towards a deeper cynicism in the 1960s, but it was still with an implicit moral opposition, respectively, to the blaggarts and *mostri* that populate the comedies and the greed and violence of the American West. Even the exploitative *mondo* documentary films contain an outer pretence to educational value. The *giallo* is instead the genre most invested of all in pleasure, its libidinal energies unrestrained by moral pretence or social responsibility. Nowhere else in the Italian genre system, not even in the pornography that was its contemporary, can we find a pleasure principle as aggressively pursued as in the *giallo*, which adds to the joys of sex and glamour those of murderous rage.

Yet to claim that the *giallo* is interested in evil is to address something that apparently does not exist. Richard Dyer points out that 'while the word "evil" is prevalent in newspaper and true crime writing, it is seldom used, at any rate with any explanatory force, in European serial killer films' (2016: 82). In his wide-ranging article on the genre Seb Roberts agrees that 'the *giallo* killer is never an already-existing embodiment of inhuman evil', because the killer is not inherently, but instead becomes, a killer (2018: 121). Both claims are indeed correct at the level of open articulation: evil is neither seen nor heard in the *giallo*. Yet it is frequently spoken of in wider popular discussion of the *giallo* as a broader form in Italy, where, as mentioned earlier, '*giallo*' can mean not only the films under discussion here, but any kind of murder mystery. A 2003 article 'Mystery and morality: how the *giallo* narrates our disquiet' in the newspaper *La Repubblica* reflects upon the legacy of the classic 20th century novelists Leonardo Sciascia and Friedrich Dürrenmatt, concluding that they wrote *gialli* because they considered them to be 'the only way now possible to speak about justice, truth, guilt

and innocence, that is, to be moral writers' (Manetti: 2003).[6] The 14th edition of the literary festival 'Tutti i colori del *giallo*' was held in 2018 on the theme of 'The giallo and evil', with the organiser Fabrizio Quadranti describing the genre's basis in 'a fascination in evil [and] the negation of good' (Pianezzola 2018).[7] In a recent magazine article 'Cinema and evil', veteran left-wing critic Goffredo Fofi describes Hollywood 'gialli' as fundamentally about original sin, and proposes the confrontation with evil as central to the works of Lang and Hitchcock (Fofi: 2020).

Such discussion pre-dates the particular turn that the *giallo* took in 1960s cinema, marking public debate ever since the first emergence of the *giallo* novel in popular paperback editions in Italy in the 1930s, which were perceived to signal a shift in moral parameters. The Fascist government was opposed outright to the image of vice the genre conveyed (see Somigli 2005). Italian *giallo* novelist Augusto de Angelis was concerned enough about this debate to write in his 1940 novel *Le sette picche doppiate* that

> Man today has become accustomed to the terrible, nagging, spasmodic fear of crime in everyday life and has immediately created a God to protect him: the God detective, celebrated in the cult of the crime novel (cited in Somigli, 2005: 74).[8]

The great post-war work of Italian literary modernism, *That Awful Mess on the Via Merulana*, amounts to an extended reflection on moral justice in the wake of fascist decadence. The narrator of the book expresses a moral conception which is relevant to the *giallo* as a whole, in which 'Evil crops up unexpectedly in sudden, horrible shards… From beneath the covering of decent appearances, like a stone, it breaks the ground, and you can't even see it: like the dark hardness of the mountain, in a green field' (Gadda [1957] 2000).

Collectively then, journalists, fans and authors alike share a historical perception of evil as a motive force in the classical *giallo* canon. This perception, as expressed in the above quotation by Gadda, is of something neither identified nor articulated yet which provides the unseen enigma on which the genre rests. 1960s Italian cinema represents a change in the representation of violence in popular fiction, but was met with similar concerns over its moral effects to the crime paperbacks of the 1930s. Paolo

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[6] 'Mistero e morale, così i gialli raccontano le nostre inquietudini'… 'l'unico modo ormai praticabile per parlare di giustizia, verità, colpa e innocenza, insomma, per essere scrittori morali.'

[7] 'il fascino del male [e] la negazione del bene'.

[8] 'Oggi, l'uomo ha avuto terribilmente assillante spasmodico il terrore del crimine elevato a consuetudine della vita quotidiana e subito ha creato un Dio per proteggerlo: il Dio *detective*, di cui si celebra il culto nei romanzi polizieschi'.

Noto describes the contemporary critical consensus that Italian horror of the 1960s and 70s presented evil as 'a ubiquitous and pervasive – to some extent invincible – force' (Noto 2016: 216). The *giallo* film of this period increases the amount of sex and violence compared to previous thrillers, but what seemed to disturb its critics even more was its refusal to provide a clear response to the moral problems it posed. Writing in the cultural page of the Communist Party daily *L'Unità* in 1971, Mino Argentieri condemned 'Il "giallo" all'italiana' because 'its characters resemble phantasms playing out the eternal struggle between good and evil, understood more as psychic than moral categories'; lamenting that in the classic days of the genre 'the queen of the *giallo* used to be Reason, who aimed at clearing away the mists of the unconscious and at providing a concrete motive for the crime.'[9]

This essay largely agrees with Argntieri's position, although not with his criticism that the *giallo*'s rejection of reason is a bad thing. To show why however, I should now identify the artistic contours of this dynamic force, whose ubiquitous, unarticulated presence motivates the genre.

Evil and the dramatic structure of the *giallo*

The classical exemplars of the murder mystery such as Edgar Allan Poe, Arthur Conan Doyle, Edgar Wallace and Agatha Christie, tended to combine a cynicism about human motives with a faith in reason (Cawelti, 1977). A sleuth collects evidence that leads to the deduction of a logical motive. While the prevalence of murderous lust or greed could have troubling implications, the detective provides reassurance that the social fabric will remain intact, for self-interest is moderated by the rationality of the process of detection.

The *giallo* cinema of the 1960s and 70s marks a departure however, as a generic hybrid of the detective narratives inherited from its literary predecessors, and horror. Horror is a more unstable genre than detection because it presents its audience with intractable problems like mortality and vulnerability, along with extended scenes of suffering. This remains the case as horror developed in the 1960s in the wake of *Psycho* (Alfred Hitchcock, 1960), *Les Yeux sans visage/Eyes without a Face* (Georges Franju, 1960) and *Peeping Tom* (Michael Powell, 1960). Cynthia A. Freeland (1995) terms this shift 'realist horror', that is, the horror of that which actually does exist in real life, or which is at least scientifically plausible. Alongside the spectres, vampires, werewolves,

[9] 'I personaggi assomigliano a fantasmi che recitano l'eterna lotta fra il male e il bene, sentendo queste categorie in un'accezione più psichica che morale. Un tempo, la regina del *giallo* era la Ragione, tesa a diradare le brume dell'inconosciuto e a una motivazione concreta del delitto.'

zombies and other inhuman monsters already common to the genre, horror could now be found in a timid, even attractive young man kind enough to help his crotchety mother run the family motel. The danger is no longer a monstrous threat to normality but part of normality itself.

A study has yet to be written of how the serial killer functions to transpose the traditional concerns of evil into more secular times; one might think of the Satanic overtones of the wealth and taste ascribed to Hannibal Lecter in *The Silence of the Lambs* (Jonathan Demme, 1991) or the Plotinian void at the heart of *Henry, Portrait of a Serial Killer* (John McNaughton, 1986). Like evil, the serial killer confounds reason, for they combine methodical behaviour with the extremity of a destructive impulse.

But the Italian *giallo* is different, and it is different because of its hybridity. Like the whodunnit, the *giallo* waits until the closing moments of the film to identify the killer. But to employ the extended vulnerability of horror, this revelation comes as great a surprise as possible. Ingenious and multiple twists are required to maintain the suspense. In *The Bird with the Crystal Plumage*, the apparent victim is revealed to be the murderer (Eva Renzi), while in *Tenebre* (Dario Argento, 1982), the main protagonist (Anthony Franciosa) opportunistically decides to become a multiple murderer after murdering the film's initial murderer. An old woman is murdered by an unseen hand in the opening scene of *Ecologia del delitto/A Bay of Blood* (Mario Bava, 1971) but within seconds her murderer is suddenly himself dispatched by another unseen hand. The film ends on the revelation that the murderers are the parents of a family who get away with it, only then to be unexpectedly killed in the last seconds of the film by their own children. Unlike the often ingenious twists of an Agatha Christie, the solution to the puzzle comes without a corresponding faith in the sleuth – and consequently, in human reason or legal authority – to work it out.

The *giallo* is thus a potent mixture of the whodunnit's suspicion of the entire fictional world with horror's extended elaborations of threat. The motives are usually unguessable, even pleasingly ridiculous. In *La casa dalle finestre che ridono/The House with the Laughing Windows* (Pupi Avati, 1976) the murderers are two elderly sisters who have decided that murdering people will help them achieve greater realism as painters; one of the sisters is also revealed to have been working in drag as the town priest. But the effect this illogicality has is to make the drive to kill a basic element present in everyday life, rather than the result of unique, explicable and so solvable motives. *Giallo* killers are not memorable characters like Hannibal Lecter but are, rather, de-invididualised, their identity concealed by the genre's trademark black gloves and mask till the films' final moments. The impossibility of guessing the killer and the frequency of multiple

murderers, makes a generalised malevolence permeate the *giallo*. Murder is less the action of an identifiable person than an inexplicable, uncontainable, force in the world.

One could be forgiven for equating this general pervasiveness of evil with a moral condemnation of the society that produces it. Indeed, the films often feature such complaints about modernity. In *4 mosche di velluto grigio/Four Flies on Grey Velvet* (Dario Argento, 1971) a rock musician (Roberto Tobias) takes refuge in the countryside where he refuses to eat a raw sprat and is told that he is 'a typical victim of the consumer society'. In *Non si sevizia un paperino/Don't Torture a Duckling* (Lucio Fulci, 1972) a rural priest (Marc Porel) muses to a journalist (Tomas Milian) visiting from Milan if it is not 'liberalism that is the culprit?' But it is the priest that is the culprit in this film, on a crazed mission against impurity. Further, in *Duckling* the most brutal murder of all is committed by a vigilante group of locals who beat a woman to death because she practices pagan worship, equating non-conformity with guilt. The threat comes not from modernity but violent prejudice and outmoded tradition.

The *giallo* does suggest a duality between modern and traditional life but this is not a duality of good and evil, for good is removed and evil is present in both. Nor do other forms of official authority prove any better. Police and legal authorities are at best incompetent and usually corrupt. Their corruption is often emphasised for the Italian release versions of said films, as the original title of *So Sweet, So Dead* (Roberto Bianchi Montero, 1972)—one unrelated to the plot of the film—might suggest: *Rivelazioni di un manicao sessuale al capo della squadra mobile* ('Revelations of a sexual maniac at the head of the flying squad'). Against this film's backdrop of the conflict of bourgeois morality with rebellious youth, the press reports that a 'mad moralist' is acting on a vendetta against unfaithful women. A criminal pathologist, Professor Casali (Chris Avram), explains that the killer must either be homosexual or a cuckolded or impotent man; yet the killer turns out to be the calmly institutional voice of normative authority himself, Professor Casali, not the deviants of his pseudoscientific imagination. Traditional morality is inadequate to understanding the changes that surround it, and it is this very inadequacy that frequently turns to madness. In *The Case of the Bloody Iris/Perché quelle strane gocce sul corpo di Jennifer?* (Giuliano Carnimeo, 1972) the aging patriarch Professor Isaacs (George Rigaud) murders models and sex workers who he holds responsible for his daughter, Jennifer (Edwige Fenech), 'becoming' a lesbian. Arbiters of propriety appear in the *giallo* only to be discredited, and figures of authority to be undermined. For example, near the beginning of *The Bloodstained Shadow/Solamente nero* (Antonio Bido, 1978), a priest (Craig Hill) casts suspicions that a medium (Alina de Simone), who he notes disapprovingly also performs abortions, and her associate, an

accused pederast (Massimo Serato), might be guilty of murder; yet only ultimately to hide the fact that the priest himself is the killer, and they his next victims.

Moral conservatism is shown in the *giallo* to be a psychopathic cocktail of repression, intolerance and hypocrisy. In the London-set *Una lucertola con la pelle di donna/A Lizard in a Woman's Skin* (Lucio Fulci, 1971) a debauched commune seems to threaten the safety of their aristocratic neighbour (Florinda Bolkan). But it is, in fact, the same neighbour who is the killer, driven mad by the demands of maintaining a respectable appearance. Set in a Catholic girls' school in England, *Cosa avete fatto a Solange?/What Have you Done to Solange?* (Massimo Dallamano, 1972) reveals the killer to be Solange's father (Günther Stoll), who sexually mutilates and kills the members of a gang of teenage girls while dressed as a priest; he holds their disobedience responsible for his daughter's pregnancy and subsequent abortion.

This all provides evidence against the claim that the *giallo* functions to uphold traditional morality. Expressions of traditional morality are made in the *giallo* only to be discarded as ridiculous or worse. Normative voices articulate the lies or delusions that cover aberrance. Family and Church are more likely to offer perversity than shelter, and as the various fathers, priests, professionals and professors in the above synopses show, the authority conferred by age and status serves to facilitate murder. This contributes to the narrative requirement to increase the surprise reveal that the killer is a figure in whom trust is habitually placed: it would simply be disappointing if the freaky non-conformists the audience is led to suspect all along actually did turn out to be the killers. But a consequence of this narrative requirement is to undermine deference to authority, perhaps even the ideological bases on which our trust in it depends. Curiouser still, this rejection of traditional moral authority comes within an artistic framework that nevertheless depends for its power upon traditional visions of immorality.

Evil as an artistic presence in the *giallo*

The *giallo* unfolds within an everyday, contemporary world that, nevertheless, seems to have diabolic forces present within it. A scene in a glass-blowing forge in *Chi l'ha vista morire?/Who Saw Her Die?* (Aldo Lado, 1972) works principally for the purpose of providing close-ups on infernal red fires and distorted views. *Tenebre* opens on the black-gloved killer tearing pages from a *giallo* novel and throwing it into a fireplace, the camera moving to close-up of the enveloping flames (see **Figure 1**). Cigarette smoke envelops the killer in *L'assassino* è *al telefono/The Killer Is on the Phone* (Alberto de Martino, 1972), played by Telly Savalas, whose shiny skin adds to his demonic

appearance. Fellini's semi-comic horror *Toby Dammit* (1968) presents an onscreen international film production of the first 'Catholic Western' as the sinful confusion of a modern Babel. One of the characters in *Il 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* (Sergio Martino, 1972) is a black cat called Satan.

Figures 1–2: The presence of evil as a force in the world: *Tenebre* and *The Bloodstained Shadow*.

Figure 3: The unreality of good: *Don't Torture a Duckling*.

The *giallo* establishes its protagonists as embodiments of metaphysical qualities associated with evil. This embodiment is often announced in its titles: *La morte cammina con i tacchi alti/Death Walks on High Heels* (Luciano Ercoli, 1971) or *Il vizio ha le calze nere*, 'Vice wears black tights', released in English as *Reflections in Black* (Tano Cimarosa, 1975). This latter also indicates the prevalence of blackness, found in titles like *Giornata nera per l'ariete* ('Black day for Aries', released in English-speaking territories as *The*

Fifth Chord, Luigi Bazzoni, 1971), *La tarantola dal ventre nero/The Black Belly of the Tarantula* (Paolo Cavara, 1971), *Tutti i colori del buio/All the Colors of the Dark* (Sergio Martino, 1972), *Sette note in nero* ('Seven notes in black', English title: *The Psychic*, Lucio Fulci, 1977), *Solamente nero* ('Only darkness', English title: *The Bloodstained Shadow*), *Tenebre*. One might read this trait according to the racial anxieties that often recur in the *giallo*, it would in all likelihood have been understood by contemporary audiences as, chiefly, a Manichean equation of evil with darkness. From this perspective, the black gloves, mask and raincoat that hide the *giallo* killer are not merely a disguise but a chromatic allusion to evil. Red is another recurrent colour, depicting blood and sensuality but also immorality and hell: *Il rosso segno della follia* ('The red sign of madness', English title: *Hatchet for the Honeymoon*, Mario Bava, 1970), *La dama rossa uccide 7 volte/The Red Queen Kills Seven Times* (Emilio Miraglia, 1972), *Profondo rosso/ Deep Red* (Dario Argento, 1975), *Gatti rossi in un labirinto di vetro* ('Red cats in a glass labyrinth', English title: *Eyeball*, Umberto Lenzi, 1975), *Enigma rosso/Red Rings of Fear* (Alberto Negrin, 1978). Three titles that speak for themselves in this regard are *Il diavolo a sette facce/The Devil with Seven Faces* (Osvaldo Civirani, 1971), *Il sesso del diavolo – trittico/Sex of the Devil* (Oscar Brazzi, 1971) and *Il diavolo nel cervello/Devil in the Brain* (Sergio Sollima, 1972).

As Alexandra Heller-Nicholas acknowledges, the *giallo* elicits a heightened awareness of its relation to art historical tradition (2021), and *giallo* iconography recurrently draws on this tradition to allude to evil and hell. Giulio Giusti notes Dario Argento's references to the paintings of Hieronymous Bosch (2012). The final chase in *A Lizard in a Woman's Skin* occurs in an industrial facility whose confusing circular construction brings Dante to mind. *The Bloodstained Shadow* features a painting of the devil attacking a woman (see **Figure 2**). It first appears after a woman is stalked, illustrating the *giallo*'s association of its secular violence with metaphysical forces. The artistic flourishes of the *giallo* further suggest the presence of an unseen power controlling the *giallo* world, its frequent recourse to knowing irony and characteristic stylistic embellishments indicating an invisible force driving events.

The *giallo* continually depicts moral transgression by alluding to artistic tradition, but avoids any corresponding indication of salvation. This adds another facet to claims of the *giallo*'s artistic radicalism, which Alexia Kannas makes by describing the *giallo* setting as a desacralized void. Following Siegfried Kracauer, she explains how the *giallo* environment is one of anonymity, how its continual 'coming and going' is definitive of modernity by creating 'sensations of profound disruption and instability …[and a] sense of disorientation and chaos (Kannas 2020: 73). Yet such space is typical also of the restless, writhing torment and unending confusion that traditionally characterise hell. Kannas describes the *giallo* as producing a 'centrifugal space' that 'seems to

spiral outwards' (Kannas 2020: 71), producing the protagonists' 'dispersal' within a 'fragmented and decentred' cityscape (2020: 68-9). Kannas borrows the notion of centrifugal space from Ed Dimendberg's description of post-war urban planning in LA, but in the Italian context it cannot but recall the tormenting outwards spiral that is the traditional organising motif of the circles of hell.

Kannas also notes that the *giallo* 'casts an aesthetic spell' (Kannas 2020: 78) which confronts us 'with the ghost town of modernity's utopian dream' (Kannas 2020: 76). This is not then the modernity described by Max Weber, who defined modernity by disenchantment, the waning of belief that magical spirits animated the everyday environment ([1917] 2004). Disenchantment is incomplete in the *giallo*, which often features seances, magic, paganism, bacchanalia and aspects of the occult; *Deep Red* was inspired by Argento's visit to a psychic who sensed an 'evil presence' (Kannas 2017b: 11). But where the *giallo* re-enchants modernity with the presence of the diabolical, it does so without any corresponding sacred spirit.

The *giallo* has the potential, then, to look in two directions, both towards late modernity and towards a pre-modern heritage of artistic representation. Its settings feature tourist destinations and cosmopolitan locales that host the unbridled hedonism of a newly permissive society. In *Demonic Texts and Textual Demons* Ilkka Mäyrä (2005) describes demonic spaces as liminal, for they are placed between salvation and damnation, earth and spirit, terror and delight. The modernity of the *giallo* setting is realised as just such a demonic liminal space. The first scene of *Lo squartatore di New York/The New York Ripper* (Lucio Fulci, 1982) begins with a murder on the passenger boat to Staten Island – the flowing water, amidst the industrial noise of the boat's creaking mechanics and its foghorn blowing all part of the inhuman estrangement of the dock setting and the industrial transit of both goods and people. These innovations of modernity look and sound a lot like traditional representations of hell.

Both parts of Karl Marx's axiomatic characterisation of modernity, that 'All that is solid melts into air, all that is holy is profaned', apply in the *giallo*, with its images of construction, tourism, mass transit and foreign travel overtaking a decaying rural life and/or traditional community. *Giallo* films can be set on islands, by canals, or in *The House with the Laughing Windows* on a diseased eel farm. This fluidity is a common *giallo* motif: killings occurring in baths, showers, lakes, water tanks. And yet despite change and fluidity, the *giallo* environment shows society to be unable really to progress. Outbursts of violence punctuate a general state of loss. Generic imagery of graveyards and long sunsets, funereal motifs of crosses and bells abound while child protagonists (sometimes victims, occasionally perpetrators) watch malevolence unfold in a traumatising passing of innocence. *Giallo* protagonists display a fanatical need to replay events, whether of childhood trauma, dreams or fantasies, as well of

course as the impulse to murder. In *Don't Torture a Duckling*, the town priest reveals he has been killing boys when they begin confessing impure activities, so as to halt their lives just prior to the earthly corruption of their juvenile innocence (see **Figure 3**). When he finally recounts this motive the song 'Quei giorni insieme a te' (Those Days together with You) plays for the second time in the film, culminating in the refrain 'who knows why/I still think of those days together with you.' It is an example of how *giallo* protagonists are caught up in a multiplicity of fantastical regressions and pathological fixations. It is also evidence of how the *giallo* critiques a collective inability to progress, let alone transcend, from an imprisoning past, an inability that is relevant to the sudden but incomplete modernisation Italy experienced in the 1960s and 1970s.

The *giallo* features change, then, but not progress. The films' very particular representation of its social environment is accompanied by a high degree of subjectivity and generalised irrationality. States of delirium, delusion and drug-induced psychosis accompany dreams, fantasies, projections and imaginary scenarios that elicit the deliberate bewilderment of the spectator's distinction of truth from fiction. Distorted reflections abound; off dinner tables, metallic artworks, mirrors, the rippling surface of water, even in one instance in extreme close-up on the surface of another's eyeball, rendering vision consistently unclear. The protagonist of *Deep Red* (David Hemmings) remarks on a painting he saw in a murder scene that it was 'so strange I don't even know if it was true' to which his companion responds: it was 'your version of the truth'. Continual uses of reflections bring our mind to the unreality of the image, and stylisation increases the unreality of states of arousal that the genre simultaneously heightens.

It is suggested that 'horror of meaninglessness, of the unformed, is a more profound threat than that even of suffering and death' (Mäyrä, 2005: 32, citing Robert Detweiler). Scholars tend to discuss such traits of unstable subjectivity in the *giallo* in relation to trauma and psychology, or even as an attack on the Enlightenment (Bertellini 2004:216). Yet here the genre again recalls traditional conceptions of evil. To the medieval mindset, insanity was explained by possession by evil spirits. Evil was defined as an overwhelming confusion and as evidence of an inability to determine the reality of God's love, or to know that renunciation of material gratification was part of sacred devotion.

These intimations of a heavy or medieval moral framework fail however to capture the predominant tone of the *giallo*, whose shock and estrangement produce a wicked smirk and a sense that the genre is sending up the moral seriousness that it continually alludes to. In Christian belief the world was created *ex-nihilo*—for no greater reason than purely for the sake of it—but in the *giallo* life is destroyed for no greater reason than the pleasure of gratuitous pain. And so for all its heavy moral tonalities, the *giallo* seems to offer killing as play, staged for the pleasure of the spectacle itself. *Cinque bambole per la*

luna d'agosto/Five Dolls for an August Moon (Mario Bava, 1970) begins on a group of rich tourists playing at sacrificing a virgin to the god Kral, after which the sacrificed woman plays at being really dead, much to her audience's initial fear and then delight. The killer (Stephen Forsyth) in *Hatchet for the Honeymoon* covers for the sound of screaming by pretending he was watching *The Wurdalak*, a gothic horror by the same director, Mario Bava (1963), which prompts a discussion over violence on film. The protagonist (Anne Heywood) of *The Killer Is on the Phone* is an actress who appears in a long scene of murder and suicide (the actress ends up killing the killer with the backstage theatre equipment). The recurrent *giallo* milieu of the bohemian, modern-art set indicates not only a world of surface and high class, but a removal of any sense of the reality of death, let alone of the traditional Christian sanctity of life, in favour instead of its potential as meaningless play.

Conclusion

Evil only comes alive in the *giallo* when placed against its historical and artistic contexts. These contexts reveal something not directly articulated but, as its Italian reception and its art-historical allusions show, prevalent enough within the culture not to need it. These contexts also allow us to revisit the question of the *giallo*'s conservatism or otherwise. The *giallo* combines a modernist artistic sensibility with a debt to Judaeo-Christian representational traditions – a duality that is suggestive given the stalled social revolution that was the context to the genre's appearance.

But to really complete this recontextualisation we should return to the first question underlying the investigation of evil, and ask again why, then, do people suffer? They suffer, in the *giallo* at least, because we enjoy it. The *giallo* exemplifies what traditional morality would abjure: an invitation to the excitations of immorality and fleshly gratification for the purpose of profit. Whether this is radical or conservative ultimately depends on our points of reference. While maintaining the symbolic reference points of a Catholic sensibility, *gialli* are not morality tales. Nor do they contain the political radicalism of contemporaneous socially engaged crime stories like *Rocco e i suoi fratelli/Rocco and his Brothers* (Luchino Visconti, 1960), *Il conformista/The Conformist* (Bernardo Bertolucci, 1970), *Sbatti il mostro in prima pagina/Put the Monster on Page One* (Marco Bellocchio, 1972), *Indagine su un cittadino al di sopra di ogni sospetto/Investigation into a Citizen above Suspicion* (Elio Petri, 1970). The *giallo* refuses their political engagement because it rejects *all* interest in moral improvement to indulge instead in one primary purpose, enjoyment. While it may contain a critique of materialism in the punishments meted out to rich, selfish hedonists having fun, it is a punishment whose purpose is its audience's viewing pleasure. Granted, it presumes that viewing pleasure lies in the

torture of sexually displayed women and not in envisioning social progress. The *giallo*'s refusal of moral or social responsibility thus disconnects suffering from the question of justice and attaches it exclusively to the pursuit of pleasure.

To consider this in its larger historical context, the ancient Manichean and Gnostic philosophies considered good and evil to be in universal conflict. These schools of thought influenced the outlooks (and parables) of early Christianity because, as Weber pointed out (1958), they aimed to show that suffering had value. Prior belief systems tended to explain suffering as a justified punishment, but Christianity exalted suffering with the moral significance of martyrdom. The *giallo* replays the Catholic desire to dwell on the suffering body, but returns also to the pre-Christian idea that suffering is deserved, in this case, by the entire world, for it worships the material pleasures of the body and the self. But if *everyone* is equally greedy, lustful or perverse, the world is now bereft of reason, and the good is fully removed. These films thus do not make supernatural monsters real, so much as they make reality monstrous. The *giallo* killer is not an interiorised subject in anguished conflict with temptation, and no battle is staged for this sinner's soul, since a soul is not an attribute that the *giallo* protagonist possesses. The shift of explanatory frameworks from demonic possession to the pathologised drives of the serial killer is itself a historical shift in what society considers as the forces that control our lives; in sacral times, the devil, and in the post-sacred, a mechanical individualism whose voracious appetites could, depending on one's disposition, best be explained either by Marx, Freud, Durkheim or Weber. The *giallo* points further however, towards a worldview which doesn't ultimately need to care about this, because with the removal of the good, the conflict is over, the Manichean dialectic evaporates, and we have reached the end of moral history.

The conflict motivating the *giallo* is then not that between good and evil nor between progress and conservatism but pleasure and torment. Its artistic intimations of evil highlight an absence of positive ideals, but its focus on pleasure removes any moral concern about it. The absence of any belief to replace the traditional sacred leaves sensation as the ultimate remaining value, detached even from reason. The uncertainty which provides an existential constant for the *giallo* turns out to be the cultural product of a society that can afford it – of a society that is sure enough of its ability to provide for its own pleasures to be able to indulge in fantasies of the ultimate pain. Yet it is also the product of a society, namely Italy in the 1970s, that, having destroyed tradition as a source of meaning, lacks any compensating idea of how to move forward. Here then lies its final, and only real moral lesson: that in a world without meaning or limit, you may as well do what you like, for it won't make any difference.

Competing Interests

The author has no competing interests to declare.

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