

One on Top of the Other: Lucio Fulci, Transnational Film Industries, and the Retrospective Construction of the Italian Horror Canon

DAVID CHURCH

Any instance of canonization is a mnemonic process asserting the worth of certain cultural objects over others, retrospectively ascribing ahistorical and transcendent values to selected texts as a means of defensively disavowing the historically constructed nature of both these valuations and the canonizer's assumed authority. In many ways, this dynamic is as true of culturally hegemonic taste cultures as self-selected groups of niche consumers. The alternative film canons created by fan cultures, for example, regularly posit their supposed subcultural difference from so-called "mainstream" tastes—and yet, instead of altogether challenging the basis of "proper" aesthetic canons, fan-cultural canonization often draws upon rather traditional criteria, such as appeals to auteurism, technical skill, thematic significance, and national/historical influence. This latter criterion is of particular note because, as a growing body of research on transnational cinema has demonstrated, the question of national-cultural belonging frequently informs assessments of the other criteria, despite the many contingencies affecting a given film's circulation and reception.

These criteria have been deployed—albeit inconsistently—in the Anglo-American discourses elevating Italian horror cinema as one of the most prominent nodes of cult film fandom. During its heyday from the 1960s to 1970s, the Italian exploitation film market often exceeded Hollywood's output in annual film production by relying heavily on cycles (or, in the Italian context, *filoni*) imitating earlier successes, a trend supported by not only Italy's standing as the most voluminous consumers of popular cinema in continental Europe during those years, but also the box-office success of these films abroad.¹ Although the Italian horror films emerging from this exploitation market were neither wholly derivative nor uniquely national products, their present-day cult status among Anglo-American fans largely derives from their prolific remediation on home video in the early 1980s and an attendant explosion of evaluative discourse. As Peter Hutchings posits, "'European horror' as a meaningful cinematic category does not really exist before" the 1980s home video era, but remains a category defined as much by the fragmentation endemic to international production and distribution contexts than by a coherent national-cultural style.²

Building upon Hutchings's suggestion, but in reference to the narrower subcategory of "Italian horror," I will argue that despite fans' gradual efforts to pin down a canon, this very discursive explosion paradoxically increased the difficulty of unambiguously applying traditional standards of auteurism, artworthiness, and national tradition to a transnational

David Church is a doctoral candidate in Communication and Culture at Indiana University. He is the editor of *Playing with Memories: Essays on Guy Maddin* (University of Manitoba Press, 2009), and has been published in *Cinema Journal*, the *Journal of Film and Video*, *Participations*, *Disability Studies Quarterly*, and several collections on cinema culture.

object like Italian exploitation cinema, leading to intrasubcultural divisions over how to privilege the texts' supposed "Italianness" as a mark of the films' and fans' assumed sense of cultural distinction. In questioning these evaluative claims by measuring them against their objects' industrial impetus, we can find that the term "Italian horror" reveals its constructedness as a mnemonic category used by a range of critics (professional reviewers, fans, etc.) in making sense of a historical film market marked by so many border-crossing generic and cyclical tangents.

Fans and scholars alike have roughly periodized the three major decades of Italian horror production through the figures of three auteurs: Mario Bava's pioneering gothic influence dominated the late 1950s and 1960s; Dario Argento's popularization of the *giallo* (a cycle of murder-mysteries only later generically recoded as "horror") led to the 1970s as a period of cyclical cross-pollination; and Lucio Fulci's 1980s turn toward explicit gore marked the beginning of the genre's creative exhaustion and demise by the 1990s.³ Although fans and scholars have claimed that Bava and Argento are important but unsung auteurs within Italian film history, Fulci—despite his lengthy career working in many genres and his place within this triumvirate of Italian horror directors—has often been pigeonholed as a substandard gorehound fixed more strongly in the sensational exploitation tradition than an interest in higher aesthetic aspirations. While the economics of the Italian exploitation industry generally privileged transnational influences and subverted strong authorial stamps, Fulci has thus become backhandedly canonized by fans as an unlikely auteur within a national-generic context that cultists seeking to bolster their niche connoisseurship often assert as specific to Italy and more inaccessible to wider overseas audiences—despite notable evidence to the contrary.

Although I would certainly not deny that Fulci's 1980s films witness a declining career and a declining industry, it is precisely this tension between an earnest appreciation of his exploitation films and a tongue-in-cheek celebration of their "trashiness" that embodies many of the ongoing ambiguities in Italian horror's international reputation. In this sense, unlike the easier critical reclamation of Bava and Argento, I will argue that the spread of Fulci's reputation (for better or worse) during the video-era years of Italian horror's conceptual concretion makes him *the* emblematically central figure in the history of Italian horror cinema for Anglo-American viewers. In using his films as a particular case study for Italian horror's transnational history, I do not intend to uncritically reinforce the discursively constructed figure of the auteur, but rather to question how that figure produces multivalent conceptions of national-cultural specificity in relation to conflicting critical criteria for canonization.

I will begin with a brief overview of the Italian exploitation industry and its popular cycles, before considering how Italian horror's Anglo-American reception has changed in tandem with intertwined shifts in fan activity and home video formats. For representative examples of this critical discourse, I draw upon contemporaneous reviews from trade publications like *Variety* and fan magazines like *Cinefantastique*, along with more recent examples of academic and fan criticism. With the recent scholarly turn toward examining those European popular genres that have long evaded consideration as "serious" forms of national cinema, Fulci's reputation illustrates how claims about the national-cultural specificity of such genres can obscure as much as they reveal.

Andrew Higson argues that discourses about "the national" tend to neglect the full range of films and audiences that constitute a national film-culture, including films both imported from other countries and destined for export elsewhere. While state policies intended to generate and protect national film industries from outside influence "can rarely have more than a cosmetic effect on what is really a problem of the international capitalist

economy,” the process of promoting “national” cinema on the world stage (e.g., international film festivals) by ostensibly establishing its cultural difference from Hollywood product can often result in opening a nation’s cinema to a broader range of foreign influences. In this regard, “cultural diversity within a national film-culture may just as easily be achieved through encouraging a range of imports as by ensuring that home-grown films are produced.”⁴ So-called “popular” cinema plays a particularly thorny role here, since nationally popular films may be either imports from another country (particularly the United States) or homegrown films emulating the internationally dominant Hollywood style—unlike the art films long championed by critics and national cinema scholars but seldom achieving domestic popularity.⁵

Of special note is the exploitation film market that developed in most West European nations during the postwar era, producing and circulating a multitude of low-budget genre films commonly associated with imitation, excess, and crass commercialism. These films, comprising much of Italy’s domestically produced genre product, are not easily reclaimed by national cinema discourses, largely due to the disreputably “low” tastes such texts supposedly targeted. Raiford Guins observes, for example, that the academy has tended to reinforce the sense that Italian horror is not to be associated with a particular culture in its own right, because “horror as part of a national cinema other than the United States tends to be subsumed into a larger consideration of the genre as not nationally specific, that is unless the ‘American Horror Film’ is singled out.”⁶ If, according to Higson, “[p]roclamations of national cinema are thus in part one form of ‘internal cultural colonialism,’” authenticating certain texts and textual concerns as part of the imagined national community while marginalizing others,⁷ then exploitation films stand as a prime example of an Italian popular cinema which highlights “cultural cross-breeding and interpenetration, not only across borders but also within them,” rendering them “invariably hybrid and impure” effects of transnational media exchange.⁸

One of the most successful and long-lived genres in this marketplace, the Italian horror film has been a transnational media product virtually since its inception in the late 1950s, and particularly as export markets grew with the increase of international co-productions. Consequently, its past and present reception exhibits multivalent tensions between elements of cultural similarity and cultural difference that are situationally privileged as these films take their place within longer cultural histories. For instance, even upon the release of the first modern Italian horror film, Riccardo Freda’s *I vampiri* (1957), the homegrown horror genre developed under an industrial impetus for cultural similarity between Italy and those countries whose horror films it imported.

As Freda himself noted, Italian audiences did not initially perceive horror as a genre capable of being produced by their fellow countrymen, so Italian horror filmmakers often used Anglicized pseudonyms to pass off their films as British or American productions.⁹ While prolific Italian genre screenwriter Dardano Sacchetti notes that, “in Italy, the horror genre has never really taken hold, with the exception of Bava’s later films. . . in the late sixties, early seventies,”¹⁰ gothic horror films did briefly catch on with domestic audiences in the early 1960s, particularly following Bava’s *La maschera del demonio* (*Black Sunday*, 1960). Although other genre variants emerged during this period, fans and scholars often cite Bava’s seminal influence upon the gothic style that dominated Italian horror’s “Golden Age” (ca. 1957–1968).¹¹

Laura Parigi advances the argument that even if Anglicized pseudonyms (e.g., Mario Bava / “John Old,” Riccardo Freda / “Robert Hampton,” Antonio Margheriti / “Anthony Dawson”) may have initially disguised Italian genre films as Anglo-American imports, this practice was too long-lived and inconsistently used to have survived into later decades as

merely a ruse for tricking unknowing audiences. Rather, it is more likely that these “fake Americans” represented a knowing complicity between Italian filmmakers and Italian audiences with a shared recognition that these genres and cycles were “the cinematic representation of an imaginary. It was the image of Hollywood cinema and its profound influence on Italian popular culture, reconstructed by the cinema itself.”

In this sense, Italian filmmakers were less likely hiding behind a pseudonym as a deceptive ploy than as a means of effectively “playing the character” of an American filmmaker through their creative reworking of genres and films that Italian filmmakers and audiences alike already recognized as non-Italian in origin.¹² Filmmakers and audiences thus adapted their cultural memories of American hits in the production and reception of Italian genre *filoni*, implicitly acknowledging that Italian *filoni* were localized rewritings of cultural memories propelled outside specific national borders through transnational exchange. Italian genre cinema’s marketable sense of cultural similarity was thus highlighted by its oft-cited penchant for “making cheap imitations of successes in America and Britain,”¹³ resulting in the industry’s tendency to produce a number of *filoni*, or cycles spinning off from a profitable earlier film.

As Kevin Heffernan notes, associations with the internationally profitable horror films emerging from Hammer Films and American International Pictures (AIP) during the late 1950s were key cultural touchstones in Italy. AIP was also responsible for importing some of the Italian gothics back to the U.S., where they not only shared the exploitation market with Roger Corman’s Edgar Allan Poe cycle, but also garnered box-office returns offsetting AIP’s above-average expenditure on the Poe productions. The syndication of Italian imports to American TV affiliates during these years also meant that the cult reputation eventually earned by Bava and other early Italian horror directors depended as much on their films’ televisuals as late-night monster movies than as films popularized at drive-ins and grind houses.¹⁴ Home viewing contexts have therefore long proven a lucrative market for Italian horror in the U.S., but the fan canonization of Bava and Italian horror’s “first wave” owes more to television than Argento’s and especially Fulci’s reputations owe to home video.

Italian horror producers aimed to market what Koichi Iwabuchi terms “culturally odorless” products, or products concealing their cultural origins—here, by taking up the guise of Americanness or Britishness.¹⁵ Italian horror’s transnational travel was made easier by the Italian film industry’s common practice of redubbing all actors’ dialogue into an importing country’s native language, particularly when using international casts (a common precondition for co-production funding) who performed in their native tongues during filming and were often unavailable to redub their own lines later.¹⁶ As Mark Betz explains, art film aficionados tend to believe that “the inscription of national language at the level of the sound track and of national character in the person of the director combine to form an almost inviolable bond—a bond that is only broken by the travesty of the dubbed print. And this is why dubbed prints are perfectly acceptable for coproduced low genre films rather than high ones—in the former, there is no director’s vision or national tradition to be thrown into question by a signifier of another language and another culture.”¹⁷

Yet, dubbing is no less “authentic” than subtitling if the vast majority of Italian films, including both popular and art films, were recorded with postsynchronized sound and dubbed dialogue even in their original Italian versions.¹⁸ Likewise, despite the auteurist emphasis that genre film fans often place upon the Italian horror director’s role in crafting the initial version of these texts, it was not uncommon for the genre directors to personally re-cut different versions for various export markets, as Bava did for the American release of *I tre volti della paura* (*Black Sabbath*, 1964), co-produced by AIP.¹⁹ Such industrial practices call into question the sacralized “authenticity” of the domestic Italian version—a purported

“Italianness” that the film’s producers may have wished to hide, but was reclaimed as Italian horror directors gradually became familiar names within fan cultures beyond Europe.

From the 1960s onward, the use of pseudonyms and dubbing helped these films achieve transnational visibility precisely by allowing them to blend in with the Anglo-American products made by their co-production or distribution partners. Meanwhile, despite their low cultural standing, revenues from these same exploitation products provided the Italian film industry with the capital necessary for its nationally self-promotional art pictures. Whereas newly imported Hollywood productions would be released in *prima visione* (first-run) theaters in major Italian cities, nearly three-quarters of the Italian film industry’s total box-office receipts from the late 1950s to late 1970s were generated in *seconda visione* (second-run) and *terza visione* (third-run) theaters located in small cities and towns of outlying provinces.²⁰ As Christopher Wagstaff notes, most genre films were cheaply made exploitation movies, critically deemed “*sottoprodotto* (a debased, ersatz product),” which flooded the marketplace during the postwar period—particularly in *terza visione* theaters located in rural and southern areas, where daily programming changes were common due to the shortage of television sets in working-class households. Since exhibitors did not need to aggressively promote this overabundance of low-grade films, “Italian producers had never been able to persuade the government to give them adequate protection against imports.”²¹

Consequently, the transnational interface through which Italian exploitation cinema first encountered and emulated Anglo-American horror in the late 1950s and early 1960s may have intentionally collapsed apparent cultural differences as these ostensibly (though not wholly) “odorless” products traveled overseas. And yet, I would argue that this exchange simultaneously accelerated the very need to produce more and more of these homegrown (or at least co-produced) films in order to maintain saturation of the domestic marketplace during a period when the major Hollywood studios were withdrawing from Italy, leaving the Italian market open to smaller companies like AIP. Meanwhile, with a film industry primarily consisting of many independent producers (instead of a concentrated studio system able to absorb financial losses), Italy’s imitation of successful films “offered a good chance of a reasonable return on investment and an outside chance of large profits, and a lessened risk of losses, for these might partly be covered by the tax-payer” via government subsidized co-productions and international distribution deals during the 1960s.²²

The hit films that triggered various Italian exploitation cycles thus need not have originated on one side of the Atlantic over another, but rather emerged from a transnationally distributed network of cinematic influences. Some *filoni* capitalized on popular Anglo-American imports, some emerged after an Italian-made hit reinforced an Anglo-American one, and others were primarily imitative of homegrown Italian hits. The latter was the case, for example, with the *giallo*, a filmic cycle of highly violent and stylized murder mysteries inspired by Anglo-American novels but which did not become a full-blown cycle until the success of Argento’s *L’uccello dalle piume di cristallo* (*The Bird with the Crystal Plumage*, 1970) launched many imitators through the late 1970s. Significantly, *gialli* marked a turn away from the supernatural period pieces popularized by Bava, moving instead toward the portrayal of horrific serial killings set in modern-day Italy. The generic negotiations motivated by this turn meant that what later became known as the “Golden Age” was already increasingly perceived as a thing of the past when the very concept of “Italian horror” began emerging as a retrospectively constructed entity in Anglo-American discourse.

Despite Italian industrial demands for successful imitations, more recent critics have also retrospectively reasserted a degree of cultural difference for Italian horror, as if reevaluating these films as worthy objects of inquiry requires situating them in a national-cultural context distinct from the Anglo-American genres and cycles they may have been aping.

Although passing references to these films as specifically “Italian” products are sometimes used in reviews and other press materials from the time of their initial release, it is important to note that the following connotations of cultural difference accreted earlier within fan cultures and later spread to other critics and scholars.

Specifically, Italian horror is often associated with depicting more sadism, perversion, and stylistic excess than Anglo-American horror. Heffernan, for example, says the 1960s Italian gothics are “substantially more violent, sexual, and downbeat than the carefully constructed Poe films that were forming the centerpiece of AIP’s release schedule,” requiring Italian directors to satisfy their co-production arrangements by making alternate versions for the American market.²³ These early gothic films are also credited with “integrating modern horror with more traditional ‘Mediterranean’ themes, treating sexuality more openly than in more puritanical countries and creating mesmerizing female characters.”²⁴ “Italianness” may thus be problematically exoticized through stereotypes about “the Italian taste for classy sex and violence,”²⁵ and such speculations about culturally symptomatic (as opposed to industrial) reasons for a *filone*’s emergence regularly spring up in more scholarly works as well. Brad O’Brien, for example, contemplates whether zombie films were particularly successful in Italy as a reaction to Italy’s political turmoil during the 1970s, or even as a “reverse affirmation” (the living dead as a perverse resurrection) of the nation’s predominately Catholic faith.²⁶

Meanwhile, Donato Totaro notes that Italian horror is built around more spectacular set-pieces than the “character-based, plot-driven” construction of American horror,²⁷ echoing Wagstaff’s assertion that “Hollywood marketed genres. . . were constituted by the meaning of whole films; Italy marketed *filoni* made up of items” (i.e., units of thrilling attraction strung across a loose narrative). Unruly and distracted *terza visione* audiences, only intermittently paying attention to a film’s most sensationalistic moments, are said to account for this filmmaking style.²⁸ Yet, without greater empirical justification, such speculation overdetermines the relative attention or indifference to specific films held by rural or working-class audiences. Likewise, we might argue that there is perhaps nothing nationally or culturally distinctive about films made for *terza visione* theaters, since exploitation cinema, regardless of country of origin, often follows the “electrocardiogram model” of sensational moments that has been ascribed to Italian popular genres. As Susan Hayward warns, “it is hard to make a distinction between what nations really are and what they are masquerading as. And so one must beware of invoking an ‘alternate’ form of essentialism as a solution since, in the final analysis, it merely mirrors the practice of dominant ideology.”²⁹

The fact that Anglo-American critics regularly describe signifiers of “Italianness” as moments that seem more sensuous or affectively stimulating than found in their Anglo-American contemporaries points toward not only the structuring force of intercultural comparisons in the critical construction of Italian horror, but also how spectatorship itself is “an act of sensory translation of cultural knowledge.”³⁰ If Italian exploitation filmmakers allegedly reworked their own cultural memories of American and British films by *italicizing* the more sensational aspects for domestic audiences and overseas export, then it is little surprise that Anglo-American critics focus on the purported “Italianness” of transnationally exploitable elements which filter the mnemonic familiarity of popular genre conventions through the seemingly “foreign” sensorium of Italian filmmakers. One chronicler of zombie films, for example, notes that “[e]xtreme violence was a way to stand out, and Italian horror filmmakers did their very best to one-up their American counterparts.”³¹ Today, this tendency is highlighted when DVDs remedially reconstruct a “complete” film by inserting brief scenes of Italian-language footage missing from the dubbed English-language version; as Italian voices and subtitles jarringly interrupt the English dubbed audio track, these

differences between domestic and exported iterations literalize the perceived “Italianness” of moments not originally allowed to translate abroad (e.g., graphic violence, local humor).

Overall, then, one of the central inconsistencies in the reception of Italian horror is differing critical claims over their cultural similarity and cultural difference, based upon a potential contradiction between imitation for transnational trade purposes and exaggeration for domestic marketability. If these films translated cultural memories of Anglo-American genre conventions for Italian audiences, these translations often needed to maintain enough fidelity to be re-marketable back to Anglo-American audiences. Yet, no translation can maintain complete fidelity to its source material, and each should therefore be considered on its own terms as a distinct iteration of a text, rather than a failure to impossibly replicate an ideal original. Claiming the “Italianness” of these genre films thereby rests upon the perceived degree of creative liberty taken in the process of cultural translation and whether, as with any translation, these liberties are seen as deformations or improvements.

Of course, since national-cultural and authorial discourses commonly have a shared stake in originality and authenticity, translations are often seen as inferior products, not as potential improvements over an original text. In this context, appreciative fans of Italian horror are frequently placed in the convoluted position of arguing that the imitative cultural translations undertaken by Italian filmmakers qualitatively exceed the “original” Anglo-American source material in creatively distinct ways. As I will now describe, the difficulty of unambiguously making such evaluations can be seen in the conflicted reception of Lucio Fulci, an exemplar of the fundamental incoherence born of reading a transnational phenomenon like Italian horror in national-culturally specific terms.

Like many Italian horror directors, Fulci’s career spanned a number of different *filoni*, particularly during the cycle proliferation of the 1970s. Yet, he became pigeonholed (much to his dismay) as a horror specialist following the success of 1979’s *Zombi 2*. He would continue to work primarily within the horror genre from the early 1980s until his death in 1996, the same period when home video penetrated the international marketplace and the Italian horror industry saw “a radical decline in general quality. . . with films like Fulci’s *Zombi 3* (1987) being an embarrassing ghost of the rich, historically evocative types of film that Italian exploitation filmmakers had produced in the previous decades.”³² Nevertheless, I would argue that his dominant association with this genre is an inadvertent byproduct of a classificatory ambiguity within the general Anglo-American construction of “Italian horror,” an ambiguity perhaps more reductively coloring Fulci’s reputation than any other major Italian horror director.

Fulci’s horror résumé arguably extends back to 1969’s *Una sull’altra* (*One on Top of the Other*), a *giallo* thriller predating Argento’s *Bird with the Crystal Plumage*—yet, it would not be wholly accurate to claim this film as “horror.” In Italy, the term *giallo* had been synonymous with the mystery-thriller genre of literature since the 1950s (e.g., translations of Agatha Christie, Cornel Woolrich, et al.), but lacked a cinematic analogue until the mid-1960s. As Russ Hunter notes, when the *giallo* emerged as a full-fledged cinematic cycle, it centered on the particularly violent strain of mystery-thrillers pioneered by Bava between his more gothic projects and later popularized by Argento. This configuration of cyclical elements may have been assembled and replicated in Italy, but the *giallo* had roots in a variety of transnationally circulating texts, from Anglo-American novels to the West German *krimi* films of the 1960s—a cross-cultural translation of influences which helps account for the conflation of horror and *giallo* films in Anglo-American criticism since the 1970s.³³ Typically featuring an amateur detective and a serial killer, the cinematic *giallo* was uneasily positioned between the *poliziesco filone* (due to its crime/mystery elements) and the horror genre (due to its intense violence).

Yet, the 1970s *giallo filone* is often critically subsumed within the supposed cultural difference of the Italian horror genre, despite also earning comparisons to Hitchcock's thrillers. This is partly attributable to the oft-repeated critical complaint that convoluted *giallo* narratives, while eschewing altogether supernatural explanations, tend toward an incoherence that might as well border on the fantastical. Meanwhile, the excessive and stylish violence found in both *gialli* and horror texts help collapse these cinematic categories through their similarly affective impact on Anglo-American critics unaware that the *giallo* did not wholly originate within Italy as the distinctly "Italian" *filone* that it has often been deemed. In this respect, it is notable that *Bird with the Crystal Plumage* was a commercial failure in Italy upon its initial release, but its unexpected success in the U.S. garnered a profitable Italian re-release and funding for Argento's second film—suggesting that even the 1970s *giallo* boom is attributable as much to transnational marketability as supposed national-cultural resonance.³⁴

Although the dividing line is not always clean (since some *gialli* feature supernatural elements and some horror films include *giallo*-style mystery components), a rough division between fantasy-horror films and mystery-thriller films is more readily apparent in the Italian critical context. In their guide to "spaghetti nightmare" films, for example, Luca M. Palmerini and Gaetano Mistretta divide their capsule reviews into two broad sections: "Italian horror films" and "Italian thrillers and mysteries."³⁵ Likewise, Hunter claims that Argento's reputation within Italy "is not linked mainly to his work within the horror genre (although that is certainly part of it), but largely for his links to the *giallo*. . .for which wider renown sets him apart from shock-masters such as Lucio Fulci."³⁶

By comparison, an early British overview of Italian horror by horror expert Kim Newman uncharacteristically confuses the term "*giallo*" with cannibal and zombie films like *Cannibal Ferox* (1981), *L'aldilà* (*The Beyond*, 1981), and *Quella villa accanto al cimitero* (*The House by the Cemetery*, 1981), while describing an actual *giallo* like *I corpi presentano tracce di violenza carnale* (*Torso*, 1973) as a "hooded killer thriller." Despite praising Argento's "thrillers," he subsequently describes Fulci as the "current master of the *giallo*," a cycle which he claims "proliferated from 1979 to 1982" in imitation of *Dawn of the Dead* (1978) and *Alien* (1979).³⁷ Similarly, in a 1981 *Cinefantastique* article, Mike Childs and Alan Jones describe *gialli* as Italian horror films "following in the cannibalistic footsteps of George Romero."³⁸ This confusion of thrillers and zombie/cannibal films by normally astute genre critics illustrates just how indeterminate the term "*giallo*" was when still a relatively new term in Anglo-American genre criticism, before fans gradually refined Italian horror canon's parameters as the home video era progressed.

Indeed, in a *Cinefantastique* primer on Argento published later in the decade, Jones correctly identifies Argento's early films as *gialli*, in distinction from later, more supernatural films like *Suspiria* (1977) and *Inferno* (1980).³⁹ Fulci himself complained that younger critics lost sight of the distinction between the horror genre's fantastic nature and the thriller's greater emphasis on complex narrative logic, with his late-period *giallo* *Sette notte in nero* (*The Psychic*, 1977) misidentified by TV broadcasters in the mid-1990s as a "horror" film.⁴⁰ With Italian horror and *giallo* films commingling on video store shelves in the early 1980s, it is no surprise that the historical distinctions between these cinematic categories initially blurred, even if the taste valuations attached to some films remained stratified over others.

According to Hunter, critical work on Italian horror tends to privilege older films as better ones, particularly as gore levels increased over the decades following the gothic period. Argento's cultural standing between these higher and lower cultural connotations—highlighted by the generic difference between earlier horror films and the subsequent *giallo*

boom—speaks to his role as a transitional figure between the so-called first (Bava) and third (Fulci) waves of an “Italian horror” corpus that Anglo-American critics have conflated with the *giallo*, so “when the post-gothic period is explored in any meaningful sense it is done so with reference to Argento.”

Unlike virtually every other Italian horror director of note, he quickly rose to fame because of family connections within the film world, above-average production budgets, large advertising campaigns in national newspapers, and premieres in prestigious *prima visione* theaters (with subsequent runs in culturally “lesser” theaters).⁴¹ Much like Sergio Leone and the Italian western,⁴² Argento may have become the foremost figure in his respective genre, but even from the beginning of his directorial career, he was positioned well above the market that served low-budget films to *seconda* and *terza visione* theaters. His emblematic status as the key director of Italian horror’s “second wave” is ultimately due to the vastly unequal position of industrial power, cyclical influence, and critical acclaim that he held within the Italian film industry, in contradistinction to Italian genre directors working in the exploitation end of the market.

Like his American contemporary Brian De Palma, positive and negative comparisons between Hitchcock and Argento have been a staple of the latter’s career. From American critics, for example, he earned early (if backhanded) praise in *Variety* as a “garlic-flavored Hitchcock” who “knows exactly how to create and build suspense, and the film becomes a primer on techniques. They may be cribbed but more importantly they work.”⁴³ The *New York Times* generally agreed with this assessment, arguing that Argento may have copied from Hitchcock, Lang, Antonioni, and Petri, but “[s]omething from each of its better models has stuck, and it is pleasant to rediscover old horrors in such handsome new décor.”⁴⁴

Yet, whereas Hitchcock’s critical renown might help legitimize Argento by linking his work to a longer and more respected thriller tradition, his domestic popularity as a *giallo* director (a term not introduced to Anglo-American genre criticism until decade’s end) gradually became suspect among high-minded Italian critics, suspicious that the more violent and horrific elements of Argento’s films were appeals to a populism unbecoming of a director whose work also displayed an artistic sophistication ostensibly lacking in imitators like Fulci.⁴⁵ Following the success of *Bird with the Crystal Plumage*, Fulci had made several more *gialli*, including *Una lucertola con la pelle di donna* (*Lizard in a Woman’s Skin*, 1971), *Non si sevizia un paperino* (*Don’t Torture a Duckling*, 1972), and *The Psychic*. Often seen at home and abroad as cheaper and sleazier imitators of the already imitative Argento, they tended not to win the major Hollywood distribution arrangements that benefited several of Argento’s *gialli*, instead becoming relegated to independent exploitation film distributors.

Lower critical expectations for these more exploitative imports meant that U.S. reviewers were sometimes pleasantly surprised by the thrilling excesses of Fulci’s *gialli*, whereas critical comparisons to Hitchcock or Antonioni meant that Argento’s films gradually drew more stringent scrutiny, especially in trade publications evaluating a film’s potential profitability with its assumed audience. AIP, for example, released *Lizard in a Woman’s Skin* under the U.S. title *Schizoid*, which was well-reviewed in *Variety* as “an unusually well-mounted suspense thriller that should draw an audience from among filmgoers on the prowl for sensational stimulation. ‘Lizard in a Woman’s Skin’ has this in abundance in a mélange of deviate sex, gratuitous sadistic terror, and hippy-drug orgiastics well worth the tab for anyone bugged on these recurrent screen abnormalities.”

In addition, the film earned nods to artworthiness for its surrealistic dream sequences and “an elegance of background suggestive every now and again of Francis Bacon touches.”⁴⁶ Likewise, reviewed alongside each other in a January 1972 issue of *Variety*, Fulci’s *One on Top of the Other* (distributed in the U.S. by Gadabout Gaddis Productions)

was declared a “mildly diverting” melodrama with an implausible script and “some sexy scenes for the benefit of voyeurs”; whereas Argento’s Paramount-released *Quattro mosche di velluto grigio* (*Four Flies on Grey Velvet*, 1971) was called visually stylish, but hurt by “strangely inept direction” and “a script bogged down with farce comedy, unneeded sex, coarse language, and trite dialogue.”⁴⁷ These examples indicate that, because operating in differently appraised sectors of the transnational film market, the *gialli* of neither Argento nor Fulci were uniformly associated with artistry or imitation (respectively) during the early 1970s.

However, these associations would increasingly sediment by the early 1980s, as Argento’s films became known as irrationally motivated but technically accomplished style-fests, whereas critics found Fulci’s increased reliance on gore outweighing his technical accomplishments.⁴⁸ At a time when even Argento had shifted from *gialli* to supernatural horror film, but Anglo-American fans had not yet disambiguated the belatedly imported term “*giallo*,” it is no surprise that Fulci’s biggest career success would paint him as a horror maestro—a reputation whose questionable cultural standing echoes Italian horror’s own contested connotations of undistinguished derivation and distinctive innovation.

The turning point in Fulci’s career, less in terms of critical acclaim than subsequent fan canonization, came with 1979’s *Zombi 2*. Appearing quickly in the wake of George A. Romero’s *Dawn of the Dead* (1978), the film is today described as having “forever changed the face of Italian horror movies”⁴⁹ and “instigated the last great wave of Italian horror.”⁵⁰ *Zombi 2* depicts a group of Americans who travel to a tiny Caribbean island, seeking a woman’s vanished father. They find a doctor treating a mysterious outbreak, perhaps caused by local voodoo, which is causing the dead to rise, including long-dead Spanish conquistadors. Upon escaping to New York, they discover the city already falling to zombies marching into Manhattan.

This image of the nation under threat from unstoppable invaders echoes how some critics have discussed Fulci’s film in relation to the powerful influence of American cinema—but I want to instead suggest that the film’s hybridity as product of transnational market demands undercuts the national-cultural connotations of “Italian horror” in productive ways for understanding Fulci’s centrality to this retrospectively constructed canon. Exemplifying the tension between cultural similarity and cultural difference in the interface between American and Italian horror films is the temporal and generic proximity between *Dawn of the Dead* and *Zombi 2*, the latter often claimed as Italian horror’s definitive step toward increased gore to defensively differentiate Italian product from American imports. A *Cinefantastique* reviewer, for example, said that Fulci “makes Romero’s use of gore effects look restrained,” rhetorically asking whether this film is the “*ne plus ultra* of gore.”⁵¹ More accurately, however, Fulci’s film both *localizes* and *globalizes* Romero’s zombie tropes in response to Italian horror cinema’s unequal position of power in domestic and international markets—a disparity still reflected in fans’ conflicting evaluative criteria for the genre.

A reorganized Hollywood made fresh inroads into the Italian marketplace during the 1970s, a period of sharp decline in the number of *terza visione* theaters, inflation rates that doubled ticket prices between 1975 and 1979, and overall ticket sales decreasing by over fifty percent (largely following national deregulation of television content in 1976).⁵² Andrew Syder suggests that the 1970s cannibal and zombie *filoni*, themselves “cannibalizing” American movies for economic survival, emerged “as responses to the tightening grip of American cultural imperialism, to the crises of the 1970s Italian film industry, and to the national culture’s challenges in coming to terms with its own history of colonialism.”⁵³ Yet, we should recall that, regardless of purported national-cultural symptoms, the very

existence of these texts often relied on the influence of foreign investors engaged in advance distribution deals preceding a film's production.

Zombi 2 producer Fabrizio De Angelis typically attended Il Mercato Internazionale del Film e del Documentario (MIFED) with publicity materials for nonexistent films already said to be in production. Upon signing contracts with prospective distributors, De Angelis would secure financing from Italian banks and commission a script. According to Dardano Sacchetti, these films (including *Zombi 2*) were often written in less than a week, with directors attached shortly before shooting—a fact which complicates the later auteurist recuperation of such films. “There was no poetry at work, no writer’s inspiration,” he observes. “No one produced a Lucio Fulci film simply because it was Fulci.”⁵⁴ This practice suggests a level of complicity with transnational capital not only supporting the Italian film industry’s imitative nature, but also enhancing its need to accelerate production to match the speed of international distribution networks.

Wagstaff argues that the slower investment return from *terza visione* films (playing in provincial areas over four or five years) meant they were slower in responding to the more fashionable production trends of *prima visione* films—hence a successful genre’s languorous duration in *terza visione* theaters.⁵⁵ Yet, I would argue that the shorter-lived *filoni* helping comprise a larger genre (e.g., the zombie *filone* emerging within the broader Italian horror genre between 1979–1982) actually had to respond quite rapidly to changing market conditions for survival, particularly if the future of independent producers like De Angelis depended upon recouping enough immediate returns to fund their next project. As director Luigi Cozzi remarked in an oft-cited comment, “In Italy . . . when you bring a script to a producer, the first question he asks is not ‘what is your film like?’ but ‘what *film* is your film like?’ That’s the way it is, we can only make *Zombie 2*, never *Zombie 1*.”⁵⁶ If riding the coattails of an internationally successful film was often necessary for Italian exploitation producers, this required rapidly localizing winning formulas for not only *terza visione* audiences, but also to satisfy the foreign investors who helped initiate production.

In the case of *Zombi 2*, there had, however, been Italian hands behind its predecessor. *Dawn of the Dead* was a U.S.-Italian co-production, with Claudio Argento investing half of the shooting budget in return for distribution rights to the non-English-speaking world. Dario Argento—who had supervised the screenplay, production, and score—was allowed to re-cut the film for its European release.⁵⁷ The film premiered in Italy in September 1978 under the title *Zombi*, but conflicts with the Motion Picture Association of America (MPAA) prevented the U.S. release of Romero’s cut for another six months. Meanwhile, its Italian box-office success spurred production of *Zombi 2* during the summer of 1979, premiering in Italy that August.

The Jerry Gross Organization imported it to the U.S. in July 1980 under the title *Zombie*, earning a spot in the top ten weekly grosses by month’s end.⁵⁸ While De Angelis would later admit that “[w]e made an improved copy [of Romero’s film], with different ideas,”⁵⁹ Fulci often deflected claims of copyright infringement by claiming that *Zombi 2*’s Caribbean setting recalled more gothic, pre-Romero cinematic representations of zombies, such as *White Zombie* (1932) and *I Walked with a Zombie* (1943). “Zombies belong to Haiti and Cuba, not to Dario Argento,” he explained, proud that his film allegedly exceeded Romero’s film in worldwide box-office receipts.⁶⁰

With its reputation as the “seminal modern Italian zombie film,”⁶¹ numerous critics have remarked upon Fulci’s supposed innovations over Romero (more gore, less humor, less “human” zombies). Implicitly advancing familiar arguments about what supposedly differentiates Italian horror from American horror, the privileging of style and violence over narrative coherence allegedly allows Fulci to eschew Romero’s heavy-handed allegories

about consumerism. Of particular debate is whether Fulci intended the Afro-Caribbean and conquistador zombies to suggest a critique of colonialism, an exploitation of Eurocentric fears about the rise of a politically “liberated” Latin America, or just a throwaway detail providing the film with local color.⁶² While most commentators acknowledge that Fulci’s own use of allegory is confused at best, Syder suggests that the film’s absence of explicitly Italian characters (and thus references to Italy’s own colonial history) displaces the root of colonialism onto the U.S., bespeaking Italy’s “vacillating position as both colonizer and colonized.”⁶³

I would argue, however, that the transnational success of Fulci’s film does not reflect a clear case of American cultural colonialism in Italy—particularly since *Dawn of the Dead* was an independently produced film operating within the exploitation market, and thus occupied a more equal playing field with Fulci than a market-saturating Hollywood horror release. Nor did Argento’s cut of Romero’s film have a wholly “liberating or democratizing effect on the local culture, expanding the cultural repertoire,”⁶⁴ since its lasting influence in the locally profitable (but not nationally heralded) zombie *filone* depended on foreign investment. After all, although critically berated in Italy, *Zombi 2* still proved a substantial success for the domestic film industry; and while Fulci influentially localized several generations of the zombie film, his film originated through links to global distribution networks. Overall, then, even as critics and fans may continue locating *Zombi 2* within a specific national-cultural framework, its transnational origins and circulation unmoor it from a single point of cultural fixity, pointing toward the cultural mobility of Italian horror texts since the genre’s inception.

Fulci followed *Zombi 2* with the zombie films *Paura nella città dei morti viventi* (*City of the Living Dead*, 1980), *The Beyond*, and *The House by the Cemetery*—firmly establishing his horror credentials, while providing more fodder for cyclical imitation. Although Peter Bondanella credits Fulci with creating “a mythical world closer to that of the Gothic horror film than the modern splatter film,” Mario Bava’s death in 1980 had marked the symbolic end of Italian cinema’s gothic horror tradition. Following Fulci’s lead, “the horror genre both developed and degenerated into something quite different from the far more elegant products of a Bava or an Argento.”⁶⁵ While Fulci would return to *gialli* with *Lo squartatore di New York* (*The New York Ripper*, 1982) and *Murderock—Uccide a passo di danza* (*Murder-Rock Dancing Death*, 1984), most of his late career was devoted to gory horror films, since the *giallo filone* had been largely exhausted by the late 1970s and other horror *filoni* (zombies, cannibals, etc.) were relatively short-lived. With the Italian exploitation industry imperiled by the destruction of exhibition venues and the expanding markets for television and home video, it became difficult for independent producers to sustain enough capital to finance future productions and some directors turned to made-for-TV movies.

As one of Italian horror’s most prolific directors during these years, Fulci’s reputation became associated with the genre’s decline, negatively painting him as a paragon of gory excess, cyclical degradation, and eventual failure. As Stephen Thrower remarks, “It’s only after he scored a higher profile making a clutch of magnificent horror films between 1979–1983 that [Fulci] started to choose a slightly different route—that of horror-auteur. It’s unfortunate then that his work during the latter period dropped so drastically in quality.”⁶⁶ This is even thematized in his film *Un gatto nel cervello* (*A Cat in the Brain*, 1990), in which Fulci plays himself, a director tired of making horror films but trapped by his gory reputation when a deranged psychiatrist begins butchering people and framing him.

Having hypnotized Fulci into believing himself responsible for the murders, the psychiatrist presumes the director’s own films will implicate Fulci through the media-effects hypothesis that watching violence causes real violence. His real-life willingness to

capitalize on the notoriety of his name can be seen in both this self-reflexive starring role and the selling of his name to a 1988–89 series of horror films billed as “presented” or “supervised” by Fulci. As if cementing Fulci’s association with generic decline and collapse, the “last great Italian horror film,”⁶⁷ *Dellamorte dell'amore* (*Cemetery Man*, 1994), coincidentally appeared only two years before his death, much as Bava’s death signaled what was retrospectively deemed the beginning of the end.⁶⁸

Although fan publications began embracing Fulci and Italian horror by the late 1970s, the availability of decades’ worth of Italian horror on home video during the 1980s encouraged fans to evaluate a wide range of titles. In Britain, the sudden appearance of numerous titles created the impression of an onslaught of violent films, with unregulated texts violating the sanctity of nation and home.⁶⁹ Paranoia over the media effects which *A Cat in the Brain* ironically dramatizes spurred moral panic over so-called “video nasties,” leading to the 1984 Video Recordings Act; indeed, Italian films disproportionately comprise the titles on the banned videos list. If Thatcherite conservatives evinced a “fortress mentality” against this “foreign” threat, fans would increasingly celebrate the “Italianness” of these titles in order to place them in a historical and cultural context lost on the general public. As one fan critic recalls, “Seeing a clever and provocative film like Dario Argento’s *Tenebrae* attacked for misogyny gave me further drive for a counter-attack.”⁷⁰ Meanwhile, controversy in the U.S. over violence in the slasher cycle of 1980–1982 led the MPAA to crack down on horror film violence, spurring fans to champion independently produced films like *Dawn of the Dead* and *Zombi 2* in the pages of magazines like *Fangoria*.⁷¹

As a semi-defensive phenomenon, most Anglo-American fanzines and prozines exploring European exploitation cinema premiered in the mid-to-late 1980s. Yet, early fan appraisals of Fulci’s most renowned filmmaking period were not unreservedly positive. More representative of an artisan turned unlikely auteur, Fulci’s films allegedly showed a promising talent working with scant resources, yet still falling short of Bava and Argento in critical esteem.⁷² “In his native Italy, he is known as the Master of Terror,” claims one early article, “but in the United States, if you haven’t been to a drive-in recently, you’ve probably never heard of him.” Beyond praising the “grueling violence” that “tends to overpower some well-crafted suspense,”⁷³ his films were sometimes dismissed as “laughably inept” in their direction, editing, and dubbing,⁷⁴ creating derivative, “time-wasting non-films you feel like you should have gotten some sort of prize for sitting through.”⁷⁵ He is damned with faint praise as “Italy’s best post-Bava gore auteur (by default—the others are so much worse).”⁷⁶ Likewise, letters to the editor often dismiss his heavy turn toward gore as a mark of unsophistication, so his growing renown within fan cultures was far from uniform and uncontroversial.⁷⁷

Of course, as was true of trade reviews, initial reactions to Bava and Argento films were not always positive in the fan press, either. *Deep Red*, for example, earned middling reviews in *Cinefantastique*, while *Suspiria* was described as a pretentious failure, “hackneyed in concept, but experimental in form.” According to one review, “Dario Argento could spin a masterful tale if only he’d knock off the bullshit.”⁷⁸ Almost a decade later, *Cinefantastique* would praise these same films as amongst the strongest of his oeuvre, citing *Deep Red* as “the quantum leap from Argento’s early, Mario Bava-influenced giallo thrillers into a brand of horror all his own.”⁷⁹ Yet, Fulci’s obituary in the same magazine later that year remarked that “[e]ach piece of ‘accidental art,’ as critics often dubbed his work, pushed nausea-inducing, gore-drenched mayhem to show-stopping extremes, earning him a rabid gore-hound following.”⁸⁰ As one self-described “gorehound” said, “it is probably a given that the more jaded fans have *become* jaded by having already endured the bulk of Fulci’s work.”⁸¹ More often described as a viscerally impactful plagiarist than a wayward genius

like Argento, Fulci's reputation as an exploitation filmmaker with an aesthetic eye for gore condensed around the wider tensions in Italian horror's own reputation as both a stylish-but-sleazy impostor and an excessive-but-superior enhancement over the Anglo-American model.

Fanzines may have performed the research needed to construct an Italian horror canon, from chronicling influential "horror stylists" like Freda, Bava, and Argento to wallowing in "the base level of unredeemable splatter and gore" from "directors like Lucio Fulci and Ruggero Deodato."⁸² Yet, flipping through the pages of different publications reveals that "stylists" like Bava and Argento and "unredeemable" directors like Fulci and Deodato all share a reputation for gore which need not cancel out the auteurist attention that has been lavished (albeit unevenly) upon all four directors. As a product of competing at home and abroad with Anglo-American horror, Italian filmmakers' attempts to up the ante on exploitable elements without abandoning generically recognizable tropes has created divisions within fan cultures over how to qualitatively canonize certain texts and directors over others.⁸³ Bava and Argento may be upheld by one fanzine as auteurs whose dense visual style deserves serious attention, whereas another publication might focus on the more violent or gory aspects of their films as qualities that allegedly make them great directors.

Peter Hutchings, for example, argues that Argento's films can be ironically celebrated for the "badness" of their stylistic excesses and apparent flaws, but many fans have instead tended to promote a non-ironic appreciation of his films as the work of a Hitchcockian auteur.⁸⁴ With Fulci, however, "Even his admirers will acknowledge that some of his later films are disappointing, and some of his most accomplished projects, for all their brilliant moments, will occasionally lapse into crudity and crassness."⁸⁵ In other words, some fans may celebrate the more middlebrow Argento for adapting and innovating the work of conventionally canonized directors, whereas Fulci and others in the exploitation end of the industry are accused of "draw[ing] their main inspiration from more conventional American influences (though usually improving upon those, particularly in Fulci's case)."⁸⁶ Legitimate film canons are reductively associated with the more "authentic" artistry to which Argento exceptionally aspires, whereas the transnationally competitive influences ascribed to Fulci and his ilk are linked to the crude industrial impetus of American popular cinema.

On the other hand, Chas. Balun, author of the fanzine *Deep Red*, celebrates Fulci for his gorier, "trashier" qualities, his reviews scoring films according to two scales: their generic success as a horror film and their level of gore. An unrepentant champion of visceral excess, he "shamelessly equate[s]" a notorious ocular impalement scene from *Zombi 2* "with the famed Star Gate sequence seen in Stanley Kubrick's monumental 2001: *A Space Odyssey* as a moment of incandescent cinema." Appropriately enough, he describes Fulci as "a True Believer. A genuine artiste in a world bursting with poseurs, sycophants, liars, and passionless hacks," a director whose legacy is likely to be preserved "at home on the VCR, or in the mind's eye."⁸⁷ Similarly, drive-in movie critic Joe Bob Briggs describes Fulci as "the director best remembered for *Zombie II* [sic], who turns out the best American drive-in flicks Italy has to offer." He continues, "It's about time we recognize these foreign directors for the contribution they're making to the drive-in experience worldwide."⁸⁸

Yet, these two critics are dismissed in the pages of *Eyeball* as "Chas Blockhead" and "Dog Bob' Briggs," alleged purveyors of reviews "uttered in a slightly retarded Southern twang."⁸⁹ Balun and Briggs may (with tongue firmly in cheek) celebrate Fulci's films, but they are also disparaged by other fans for a perceived shortage of sober or sophisticated analysis focusing on more than gore or excess. Similarly, *Cinema Sewer* praises *City of the Living Dead* as "a vomit puddle of a cinematic experience" filled with viscerally gory scenes—yet, "[d]espite what many horror fans and critics may tell you, it's not just the

blood and guts, but the haunting, dreamlike ambience that sees this movie through its more ridiculous moments—of which it has its fair share.”⁹⁰ These comments seem not so distant from Phil Hardy’s more high-minded comments that *The Beyond*’s “indeterminate plotting is even more random than” *House by the Cemetery*, “but the setpieces. . . are handled with undeniable gusto.” Likewise, *Zombi 2*’s “script and direction are rather peremptory, [but] the film is given emotional punch by the sheer realism of its revolting imagery.” And speaking of *House by the Cemetery*, “As is the case with so many Italian horror movies of this type, the film’s qualities lie in its incidentals,” such as its gore scenes and poetically gothic scenes involving children.⁹¹

In Italian horror’s reception, we can therefore see an intrasubcultural friction between earnest ascriptions of an artworthiness transcending economics and celebrations of an economically calculated affectivity more easily (but not exclusively) aligned with “bad taste.” Yet, these are not dually opposed poles, since the visual excesses often ascribed to these films’ supposed “Italianness” is equally capable of stimulating viewers more attuned to formal stylization and those more attuned to gore. Here again, Fulci is more representative than Argento or Bava, since his unexpected canonization during the home video era occurred through an uneasy blend of serious appreciation as a technically proficient artisan and tongue-in-cheek celebration as a goremeister—neither of which can be clearly separated from the other when fans account for the industrial context spawning the genre. However, the complexities of this industrial context remain obscured when fans assert Italian horror’s alleged national-cultural specificity as justification for their own niche tastes. Upholding Italian filmmakers as “rebelliously” exceeding the limitations of more widely accessible Anglo-American horror effectively flatters fans’ own self-perception as anti-mainstream connoisseurs—but this stance is complicated when Italian horror’s reliance on transnational film industries reveals they are perhaps not so fundamentally “Italian” after all.

These ambiguities in the retrospective valuation of Italian horror texts even extend to their travel across different home video formats. Raiford Guins argues that Italian horror films have experienced an upward cultural trajectory, moving from seemingly unauthored, heavily cut, poorly transferred “gore-objects” on VHS to a new presentation as “art-objects” on DVD: uncut, restored, “authored originals” accompanied by curatorial paratexts.⁹² Yet, I would argue that this one-way flow of value is an oversimplification of the video marketplace, especially since DVD is no longer considered a prestigious “new” technology. It may be true that the name of the auteur is trumpeted on box covers, as with “Dario Argento Collection” and “Lucio Fulci Collection” banners on Anchor Bay Entertainment’s DVDs, but fans have long sought out the work of specific Italian genre directors. Auteurism may not have been a prominent selling point on VHS covers, but the names of specific directors have served as subcultural code for VHS collectors since the early 1980s.⁹³

Echoing Guins, Russ Hunter argues that Argento’s critical reputation in the UK rose in conjunction with the critical disappointment attending his most recent films. In the late 1990s and 2000s, the increased distribution of uncut and restored DVDs—including all the graphic violence that had triggered bans when first released on VHS—allowed critics to retrospectively build a privileged Argento canon in contradistinction from the declining quality of his work during those same years. His 1970s films that had once been critically dismissed as nonsensical, excessive, or overly gory were now positively reevaluated as the work of a rediscovered cult auteur whose earlier work was unjustly mutilated by moralizing censors.⁹⁴

Although I generally agree with Hunter that remediation on newer video formats has allowed Argento’s critical renown to revive in inverse proportion to the increasing mediocrity of his DVD-era films, this argument still implies a teleological path toward

increased cultural value. As counterexamples, however, we can observe that DVD has not unequivocally restored his films to the status of art objects, as seen by the cut and misframed version of *Deep Red*, included under its alternate American title *The Hatchet Murders*, in St. Clair Vision's 2004 "Fright Night Classics" DVD box set of eight titles (also including Fulci's *House by the Cemetery*) with indeterminate copyright statuses—a long-term result of the complex transnational distribution deals that spawned multiple titles and versions of a given film. These budget-priced box sets may not be the DVD editions favored by reclamatory critics, but they remain one of the most accessible means through which these directors' well-known films continue to circulate. Indeed, these déclassé editions not only level the respective cultural standing of Argento and Fulci, but are also arguably more widespread in the marketplace than premium-priced, restored DVDs or Blu-rays of the same films.

It is also an overgeneralization that DVD releases have downplayed references to gore and other low-cultural appeals on their box covers. Grindhouse Releasing's 2008 *Cat in the Brain* DVD, for example, trumpets the film as "The most VIOLENT movie ever made!" while also describing it as "a psychological masterpiece in the tradition of such cinematic classics as *Psycho*, *Strait-Jacket*, *Eraserhead*, and Fellini's *8 1/2*." Beyond the descriptive focus on violence, this redemptory language downplays critical dismissals of the film as "[c]heap, unpleasant, tasteless, repetitive, and dull," full of "appalling misogyny," and "lacking even the widescreen style and gothic fervor of his best-known films."⁹⁵ Likewise, Anchor Bay's 2001 release of *House by the Cemetery* sports a tasteful "Lucio Fulci Collection" banner on the front cover, but the back cover features images of mutilated victims, the tagline "The Ultimate Gorehound House Party," and the following description: "*The House by the Cemetery* features a mind-blowing onslaught of throat-ripping, skull-knifing, maggot-spewing and more from Lucio Fulci, 'The Godfather of Gore.' Considered to be one of the master's last great films, this outrageous Italian shocker is now presented uncut, uncensored and—for the first time ever—digitally transferred from the original camera negative!"

Reverential nods to Fulci as a "master" and a "godfather" commingle with promises of excessively gory details digitally restored to an audiovisual state befitting a "great film," while the film's "Italianness" is fleetingly mentioned as a nod to national-cultural specificity. Beyond Fulci alone, closer inspection finds such overlapping high- and low-cultural cues mixing uneasily on DVD covers of Italian horror titles, bespeaking their inseparability from a cultural reputé tied to the appreciation of visually excessive violence. Fans may privilege appeals to not only visceral affectivity and stylistic excess, but also the discourses of artworthiness traditionally associated with auteurism and national cinemas, despite the different and sometimes conflicting (sub)cultural capitals marshaled behind such discursive appeals.⁹⁶

Like Argento, then, Fulci's renown as a cult auteur was retrospectively revived by reevaluating his earlier films in distinction from the films produced during the years of Italy's rapidly declining output. But unlike Argento, Fulci's reputation is largely bookended by the VHS era itself. His 1979–1983 zombie and gore films cemented his status as the key figure in Italian horror's last wave at precisely the time that so many Italian horror texts flooded the Anglo-American video marketplace. These years associated with his primary influence upon the genre were also the major period when a canon of earlier films was reclaimed by fans as superior to the more contemporary works emerging from the vanishing Italian horror industry. Likewise, his 1996 death fell one year before the introduction of the DVD format that would help commingle the divergent qualitative criteria that fans had already attached to his films.

While Fulci may not have eventually enjoyed the same amount of critical respectability that Bava and Argento have garnered since the rise of DVD, his closer reputational proximity to the exploitation end of the Italian film industry—and the attendant market demands reflected in the sometimes derivative and excessive qualities of his transnationally traveling films—highlights the diverse strategies for refiguring past texts that have been variously drawn upon by producers, distributors, and audiences of Italian horror. Despite the web of transnational stimuli that should logically disrupt the formation of a specifically *Italian* horror canon, Fulci's example illustrates that the very discursive incoherence produced by these industrial and receptional determinants has paradoxically made "Italian horror" such a fertile object of cult fandom. The names of the auteur and nation alike may remain traditionally privileged in the canonization process, but can only disingenuously signify the far less ordered vectors of taste and influence at work in popular-cum-niche cinemas.

Notes

1. Howard Hughes, *Cinema Italiano: The Complete Guide from Classics to Cult* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2011), xi.; Stephen Thrower, *Beyond Terror: The Films of Lucio Fulci* (Godalming, UK: FAB Press, 2002), 66; Christopher Frayling, *Spaghetti Westerns: Cowboys and Europeans from Karl May to Sergio Leone* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2006), xiii.
2. Peter Hutchings, "Resident Evil? The Limits of European Horror: *Resident Evil* vs. *Suspiria*," in *European Nightmares: Horror Cinema in Europe Since 1945*, eds. Patricia Allmer, Emily Brick, and David Huxley (New York: Wallflower Press, 2012), 15–16, 22. Quote at 15.
3. Peter Bondanella, *A History of Italian Cinema* (New York: Continuum, 2009), 307, 334; Jim Harper, *Italian Horror* (Baltimore: Luminary Press, 2005), 12–13, 16, 25–26; Louis Paul, *Italian Horror Film Directors* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland, 2005), 14, 25, 125; and Andrea Bini, "Horror Cinema: The Emancipation of Women and Urban Anxiety," in *Popular Italian Cinema: Culture and Politics in a Postwar Society*, ed. Flavia Brizio-Skov (London: I.B. Tauris, 2011), 53–54.
4. Andrew Higson, "The Limiting Imagination of National Cinema," in *Transnational Cinema: The Film Reader*, eds. Elizabeth Ezra and Terry Rowden (London: Routledge, 2006), 20–21.
5. Andrew Higson, "The Concept of National Cinema," *Screen* 30.4 (1989): 40, 41.
6. Raiford Guins, "Blood and Black Gloves on Shiny Discs: New Media, Old Tastes, and the Remediation of Italian Horror Films in the United States," in *Horror International*, eds. Steven Jay Schneider and Tony Williams (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 2005), 22.
7. Higson, "The Concept," 44.
8. Higson, "The Limiting Imagination," 19.
9. Quoted in Antonio Bruschini, *Bizarre Sinema! Horror all'italiana, 1957-1979*, eds. Stefano Piselli and Riccardo Morrocchi (Florence: Glittering Images, 1996), 21. Also see Kevin Heffernan, *Ghouls, Gimmicks, and Gold: Horror Films and the American Movie Business, 1953-1968* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2004), 141; and Karola, "Italian Horror Goes to the Drive-In: The Intercultural Horrors of Mario Bava," in *Horror at the Drive-In: Essays in Popular Americana*, ed. Gary D. Rhodes (Jefferson, NC: McFarland, 2003), 230.
10. Dardano Sacchetti, interviewed in "Building a Better Zombie" featurette, *Zombi 2* DVD, Shriek Show, 2004.
11. For example, see the affectionate treatment of Bava in Lawrence McCallum, *Italian Horror Films of the 1960s: A Critical Catalog of 62 Chillers* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland, 1998).
12. Laura Parigi, "The Fake Americans of the Italian Cinema: A Marketing Strategy or a Strategy for Interpretive Cooperation?," trans. Thomas Kelso, in *Directed by Allen Smith*, eds. Jeremy Braddock and Stephen Hock (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2001), 221–22, 226–27.
13. Leon Hunt, "A (Sadistic) Night at the *Opera*: Notes on the Italian Horror Film," *The Velvet Light Trap* 30 (1992): 66. See also Donato Totaro, "The Italian Zombie Film: From Derivation to Innovation," in *Fear Without Frontiers: Horror Cinema Across the Globe*, ed. Steven Jay Schneider (Godalming, UK: FAB Press, 2003), 161; and Brad O'Brien, "Vita, Amore, e Morte—and Lots of Gore: The Italian Zombie Film," in *Zombie Culture: Autopsies of the Living Dead*, eds. Shawn McIntosh and Marc Leverette (Lanham, MD: Scarecrow Press, 2008), 59.

14. Heffernan, *Ghoul*s, 141, 154–79, 229–61.
15. Koichi Iwabuchi, *Recentering Globalization: Popular Culture and Japanese Transnationalism* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2002), 27.
16. Whether originating in Italy or the U.S., the importance of a high-quality sound effects and music track, separate from the dialogue track to be redubbed in export markets, can make or break a film's chances at finding international distribution, according to Fred Olen Ray, *The New Poverty Row: Independent Filmmakers as Distributors* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland, 1991), 200.
17. Mark Betz, "The Name Above the (Sub)Title: Internationalism, Coproduction, and Polyglot European Art Cinema," *Camera Obscura* 16.1 (2001): 17, 28, 30.
18. Bondanella, *A History of Italian Cinema*, 162.
19. Heffernan, *Ghoul*s, 142, 146–47.
20. Bondanella, *A History of Italian Cinema*, 177–78; and Mikel J. Koven, *La Dolce Morte: Vernacular Cinema and the Italian Giallo Film* (Lanham, MD: Scarecrow Press, 2006), 12.
21. Christopher Wagstaff, "A Forkful of Westerns: Industry, Audiences, and the Italian Western," in *Popular European Cinema*, eds. Richard Dyer and Ginette Vincendeau (London: Routledge, 1992), 248–249.
22. *Ibid.*, 250–251.
23. Heffernan, *Ghoul*s, 142. The oft-noted assertion that Italian versions are more violent than American export versions is not always true, however. For example, explicitly gory deaths were filmed for the U.S. version of Massimo Pupillo's *Cinque tombe per un medium* (*Terror Creatures from the Grave*, 1965), but Pupillo intended the Italian version to be tamer, "as he did not like to linger on gory details" (Bruschini, *Bizarre Sinema!*, 98).
24. Gianni Volpi, "Italian Horror Film," in *Encyclopedia of European Cinema*, ed. Ginette Vincendeau (London: Cassell and British Film Institute, 1995), 220.
25. Cathal Tohill and Pete Tombs, *Immoral Tales: European Sex and Horror Movies 1956–1984* (New York: St. Martin's Griffin, 1995), 31.
26. O'Brien, "Vita, Amore, e Morte," 61–62. See also Thrower, *Beyond Terror*, 22–23.
27. Totaro, "The Italian Zombie Film," 163.
28. Wagstaff, "A Forkful of Westerns," 253–54.
29. Susan Hayward, "Framing National Cinemas," in *Cinema and Nation*, eds. Mette Hjort and Scott MacKenzie (London: Routledge, 2000), 95.
30. Laura U. Marks, *The Skin of the Film: Intercultural Cinema, Embodiment, and the Senses* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2000), 153.
31. Glenn Kay, *Zombie Movies: The Ultimate Guide* (Chicago: Chicago Review Press, 2008), 95.
32. Danny Shipka, *Perverse Titillation: The Exploitation Cinema of Italy, Spain, and France, 1960–1980* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland, 2011), 169.
33. Russ Hunter, "A Reception Study of the Films of Dario Argento in the UK and Italy" (Ph.D. diss., Aberystwyth University, 2009); and Koven, *La Dolce Morte*, 2–4. Also see Ken Hanke, "The 'Lost' Horror Film Series: The Edgar Wallace Krimis," in *Fear Without Frontiers*, 122–23; and Gary Needham, "Playing with Genre: Defining the Italian Giallo," in *Fear Without Frontiers*, 143.
34. Bini, "Horror Cinema," 79.
35. Luca M. Palmerini and Gaetano Mistretta, *Spaghetti Nightmares: Italian Fantasy-Horrors as Seen Through the Eyes of Their Protagonists* (Key West, FL: Fantasma Books, 1996). Likewise, separate chapters divide horror films from *gialli* in Bondanella, *A History of Italian Cinema*, and Hughes, *Cinema Italiano*, but the majority of Anglo-American books on "Italian horror" subsume *gialli* into the horror genre.
36. Hunter, "A Reception Study."
37. Kim Newman, *Nightmare Movies* (New York: Proteus Books, 1984), 124, 126.
38. Mike Childs and Alan Jones, "City of the Living Dead," *Cinefantastique* 11.1 (1981): 11.
39. Alan Jones, "Dario Argento's World of Horror," *Cinefantastique* 18.2/3 (1988): 29–30.
40. Fulci, interviewed in "Lucio Fulci–Rome, July 27, 1995: Genre Terrorist" featurette, *Cat in the Brain* DVD, Grindhouse Releasing, 2008.
41. Hunter, "A Reception Study." Parigi argues that critical and box-office success within Italy made it less likely for directors to use Anglicized pseudonyms, since their work had already been vetted by the public, which may explain why Argento never used a pseudonym but less industrially privileged horror directors still intermittently did ("The Fake Americans of the Italian Cinema," 214).

42. Flavia Brizio-Skov, "Dollars, Bullets, and Success: The Spaghetti Western Phenomenon," in *Popular Italian Cinema*, 83–85.
43. Rick, "Bird With the Crystal Plumage," *Variety*, July 29, 1970.
44. Roger Greenspun, "Bird With Crystal Plumage," *New York Times*, July 23, 1970.
45. Hunter, "A Reception Study"; Philippe Met, "'Knowing Too Much' About Hitchcock: The Genesis of the Italian Giallo," in *After Hitchcock: Influence, Imitation, and Intertextuality*, eds. David Boyd and R. Barton Palmer (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2006), 195–214; and Maitland McDonagh, *Broken Mirrors/Broken Minds: The Dark Dreams of Dario Argento* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2010), 51.
46. Werb., "Una Lucertola Con La Pelle Di Donna," *Variety*, April 21, 1971.
47. Gilb., "One on Top of the Other," *Variety*, January 19, 1972; and Werb., "Quattro Mosche Di Velluto Grigio," *Variety*, January 19, 1972.
48. E.g., Werb., "Suspiria," *Variety*, March 9, 1977; Yung., "Inferno," *Variety*, April 2, 1980; and Lor., "The Gates of Hell," *Variety*, May 25, 1983.
49. Paul, *Italian Horror Film Directors*, 125.
50. Harper, *Italian Horror*, 9.
51. Frederic Albert Levy, "Zombie," *Cinefantastique* 10.2 (1980): 43.
52. Wagstaff, "A Forkful of Westerns," 251; Bondanella, *A History of Italian Cinema*, 479; and Peter Bondanella, *Italian Cinema: From Neorealism to the Present* (3rd ed.) (New York: Continuum, 2001), 319.
53. Andrew Syder, "'I Wonder Who the Real Cannibals Are': Latin America and Colonialism in European Exploitation Cinema," in *Latsploitation, Exploitation Cinemas, and Latin America*, eds. Victoria Ruétalo and Dolores Tierney (London: Routledge, 2009), 83.
54. See Sacchetti interview in "Building a Better Zombie" featurette; and Thrower, *Beyond Terror*, 150.
55. Wagstaff, "A Forkful of Westerns," 247, 251.
56. Cozzi, quoted in Frederic Albert Levy, "Contamination," *Cinefantastique* 11.3 (1981): 8.
57. See Paul R. Gagne, *The Zombies That Ate Pittsburgh: The Films of George A. Romero* (New York: Dodd, Mead & Company, 1987), 84–86; Claudio Argento, interviewed in *Spaghetti Nightmares*, 12; and Kim Newman, "Dawn of the Dead/Zombi," in *Eaten Alive! Italian Cannibal and Zombie Movies*, ed. Jay Slater (London: Plexus, 2006), 89.
58. See Thrower, *Beyond Terror*, 16; Suzanne Mary Donahue, *American Film Distribution: The Changing Marketplace* (Ann Arbor, MI: UMI Research Press, 1987), 239; and Vincent Canby, "The Golden Age of Junk," *New York Times*, August 17, 1980.
59. Fabrizio De Angelis, interviewed in "Building a Better Zombie" featurette.
60. Lucio Fulci, interviewed in *Spaghetti Nightmares*, 59.
61. Totaro, "The Italian Zombie Film," 162.
62. Harper, *Italian Horror*, 205, 207; Syder, "'I Wonder Who the Real Cannibals Are,'" 74; O'Brien, "Vita, Amore, e Morte," 57–58; Totaro, "The Italian Zombie Film," 162; Thrower, *Beyond Terror*, 32; Jamie Russell, *Book of the Dead: The Complete History of Zombie Cinema* (Godalming, UK: FAB Press, 2006), 143; and Stefano Baschiera and Francesco Di Chiara, "A Postcard from the Grindhouse: Exotic Landscapes and Italian Holidays in Lucio Fulci's *Zombie* and Sergio Martino's *Torso*," in *Cinema Inferno: Celluloid Explosions from the Cultural Margins*, eds. Robert G. Weiner and John Cline (Lanham, MD: Scarecrow Press, 2010), 109–11.
63. Syder, "'I Wonder Who the Real Cannibals Are,'" 79, 83.
64. Higson, "The Limiting Imagination," 19.
65. Bondanella, *A History of Italian Cinema*, 328, 331.
66. Thrower, *Beyond Terror*, 267.
67. Harper, *Italian Horror*, 9.
68. As Tim Lucas says, "When B cinema became A cinema, the special circumstances that allowed a talent such as Bava to exist faded away. Bava's own mortality coincided with this sea change in the world of movies." Lucas, *Mario Bava: All the Colors of the Dark* (Cincinnati: Video Watchdog, 2007), 30.
69. Kate Egan, *Trash or Treasure? Censorship and the Changing Meanings of the Video Nasties* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2007), 50–51.
70. Stephen Thrower, "Introduction," in *Eyeball Compendium: Sex & Horror, Art & Exploitation*, ed. Stephen Thrower (Godalming, UK: FAB Press, 2003), 8.

71. Richard Nowell, *Blood Money: A History of the First Teen Slasher Film Cycle* (New York: Continuum, 2011), 225–29, 240.
72. As Lucas observes, Bava was critically dismissed in the U.S. and UK during most of his horror career, but his cult reputation grew in French, British, and American fan publications like *Midi-Minuit Fantastique*, *Castle of Frankenstein*, *L'Ecran Fantastique*, and *Cinefantastique* during the late 1960s and early 1970s. In 1984, the first book on Bava's films appeared, coinciding with the rediscovery of his films on VHS (*All the Colors of the Dark*, 23–29).
73. Childs and Jones, “*City of the Living Dead*,” 11. In this same review, Fulci claims that “Italian horror directors are the negroes of the Italian film industry... You have to die before the mainstream critics take any notice of you, which is what has happened recently with Mario Bava. It is for this reason that we have to go outside of Italy to be successful” (11).
74. Judith P. Harris, “*The Gates of Hell*,” *Cinefantastique* 13/14.6/1 (1984): 108.
75. Jordan R. Fox, “*The Psychic*,” *Cinefantastique* 8.4 (1979): 23.
76. Bill Kelley, “*The House by the Cemetery*,” *Cinefantastique* 15.3 (1985): 53.
77. Thrower, *Beyond Terror*, 156–57.
78. Mick Garris, “*Suspria*,” *Cinefantastique* 6.3 (1977): 21.
79. Steve Biodrowski, “Filmography: Argento's Giallo Exploits to Date,” *Cinefantastique* 27.8 (April 1996): 21.
80. Alan Jones, “Obituaries,” *Cinefantastique* 28.4/5 (November 1996): 5.
81. Scott Aaron Stine, *The Gorehound's Guide to Splatter Films of the 1980s* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland, 2003), 224. Original italics.
82. David Sanjek, “Fans' Notes: The Horror Film Fanzine,” *Literature/Film Quarterly* 18.3 (1990): 155–56.
83. On intrasubcultural divisions around how to evaluate low-budget auteurs within cult film fandoms, see Mark Jancovich, “Cult Fictions: Cult Movies, Subcultural Capital, and the Production of Cultural Distinctions,” *Cultural Studies* 16.2 (2002): 306–22.
84. Peter Hutchings, “The Argento Effect,” in *Defining Cult Movies: The Cultural Politics of Oppositional Taste*, eds. Mark Jancovich, Antonio Lázaro Reboll, Julian Stringer, and Andy Willis (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2003), 135.
85. Peter Hutchings, *Historical Dictionary of Horror Cinema* (Lanham, MD: Scarecrow Press, 2008), 134.
86. Chris Barber, “Discovering the Esoteric Argento,” in *Eyeball Compendium*, 85.
87. Chas. Balun, *Lucio Fulci: Beyond the Gates* (Key West, FL: Fantasma Books, 1997), 30, 64.
88. Joe Bob Briggs, *Joe Bob Goes to the Drive-In* (New York: Delacorte Press, 1987), 261, 315.
89. Stefan Jaworzyn, “*Storia di una monaca clausura* aka *Diary of a Cloistered Nun*,” in *Eyeball Compendium*, 338–39.
90. Robin Bougie, “*City of the Living Dead*,” *Cinema Sewer, Volume Two* (Godalming, UK: FAB Press, 2009), 118.
91. Phil Hardy, ed., *The Overlook Film Encyclopedia: Horror*, 2nd ed. (Woodstock, NY: Overlook Press, 1994), 341, 362, 370.
92. Guins, “Blood and Black Gloves,” 21, 26–29. Also see Hutchings, “Resident Evil?,” 19.
93. Egan, *Trash or Treasure?*, 114.
94. Russ Hunter, ““Didn't You Used to be Dario Argento?": The Cult Reception of Dario Argento,” in *Italian Film Directors in the New Millennium*, ed. William Hope (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge Scholars Press, 2010), 67–71.
95. Hardy, *The Overlook Film Encyclopedia*, 439, 472.
96. For more on these types of evaluative overlaps in the reception of European exploitation cinema, see Joan Hawkins, *Cutting Edge: Art-Horror and the Horrific Avant-Garde* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2000).