

## Ultraviolet Gothic Visions: Lucio Fulci's 'Gates of Hell' Trilogy as Derridean Cinematic Haunted Spaces

So no one can live there. Whether dead or alive. It is neither a house nor a burial place (Jacques Derrida, *Glas*, 1986, p. 3).

In his analysis of the films of the Italian director Lucio Fulci, Troy Howarth states that 'Fulci's place in the canon of great horror filmmakers is nowhere near so assured as that of Bava or Argento, but there is every reason to argue that he is among the least properly appreciated directors of his era' (2015, p. 11). Yet, such a reappraisal is evident. For example, within popular culture his work has been referenced in Dave Parker's horror film, *The Dead Hate the Living!* and in the art work and lyrical content of the extreme metal band, Necrophagia, while the independent publishing company, Eibon Press has produced a number of contemporary comic-book adaptations of his key films (such as *Zombie Flesh Eaters*, *The City of the Living Dead*, *The New York Ripper*, and *The House By The Cemetery*). Furthermore, from an academic perspective, the number of established examinations of Fulci's films (Thrower, 1999; Totaro, 2003; Russell, 2005; Bondanella, 2009) have been buttressed by a range of academic explorations of his cinematic work (Zani and Meaux, 2011; Hubner, 2015; Church, 2015; Howarth, 2015; Baschiera, 2016; Curti, 2019), and it is such a retrospective reappraisal of Fulci's horror work between 1980-1981 that is the basis of this article.

As David Church argues, Italian horror cinema traditionally is compartmentalized into three distinctive periods, beginning with Mario Bava's gothic-influenced films in the late 1950s and the 1960s; Dario Argento's popularization and re-invention of the Giallo murder-mystery in the 1970s, and 'Lucio Fulci's 1980s turn

toward explicit gore' (2015, p. 2). In Roberto Curti's (2019) view, following the success of *Zombi 2* (marketed beyond Italy as *Zombie Flesh Eaters*), Fulci became Italy's most conspicuous horror film director, directing a number of films in the early 1980s, that, amidst the violent and gore-filled sequences, contained distinctive and original representations of gothic themes. The gothic quality of Fulci's work principally surrounds the films he directed between 1980 and 1981: *City of the Living Dead/Paura nella città dei morti viventi* (1980), *The Beyond/L'aldilà* (1981), and *The House by the Cemetery/Quella villa accanto al cimitero* (1981). The latter three films have been routinely perceived to represent Fulci's best work (Church, 2015), to the extent that these films acquired an unofficially interconnected status as his 'Gates of Hell' trilogy (Bondanella, 2009), and which stress a distinctive gothic sensibility, imbued as they are with 'images of madness, death and decay' (Rigby, 2002, p. 11). While these may be seemingly generic gothic horror film motifs (Kaye, 2001), in Fulci's work they are especially vivid and extreme, with the subjects of decay and unflinching depictions of ultraviolent death and bodily destruction serving as signature points. Yet, as David Punter states of the nature of the gothic, 'it speaks of phantoms ...Gothic takes place - very frequently – in crypts ... And Gothic speaks, incessantly, of bodily harm and the wound: the wound signifies trauma' (2015, p. 2) – themes central to Fulci's oeuvre.

While Keith H. Brown (2012) dates the phase of 1956-1966 in Italian horror cinema as its key Gothic period, Fulci's work in the early 1980s welds extreme gore with a sustained and highly stylized gothic ethos, but this article will critically explore this from the perspective of the work of Jacques Derrida. With an especial focus in relation to the representation of wounds as a key leitmotif, haunting, and haunted spaces, the article will analyse Fulci's films using Derrida's related concepts of spectrality and hauntology (as articulated in *Spectres of Marx*), and with additional

reference to Mark Wigley's 'postmortem architecture' (1987 and 1993), that draws upon Derrida's deconstructive philosophical approach. From these perspectives, the article will articulate the ways in which Fulci establishes a unique and highly stylized neo-gothic vision in his 'trilogy' that reflects a hauntological ethos, and effectively a distinctively Derridean evocation of the gothic. In fact, as Jeff Collins and Bill Mayblin stress, the undead and Derrida make for a natural connection in relation to his deconstructive concept of 'Undecidability,' an idea that Derrida finds expression in the figure of the zombie. This is because 'the zombie poisons systems of order, and like all undecidables ought to be returned to order' (2000, p. 22). Yet, in the context of the *Gates of Hell* trilogy, the idea of undecidability is a persistent and compelling subject that is actively woven into the narratives through the gothic elements that infuse the supernatural, unpredictable, and frequently surreal cinematic visions that Fulci conjures (with the deliberate disregard for time, space or narrative causality a leitmotif in all of the films) to constitute, as I will argue, a distinctive hauntological gothic cinematic aesthetic. This is so because Fulci's films effectively stress a gothic sensibility that reflects approaches to the gothic that are predicated upon a conventional world meeting a supernaturally-themed 'different sphere', but with a distinctive Derridean hauntological quality that is characterised by a conception of time and space that is 'disarticulated, dislocated, dislodged' (Derrida, 1994, p. 18) – the essence of Fulci's stylistic approach in the *Gates of Hell* series.

### **The City of the Gothic Spectres**

As David Flint (2009) argues, Lucio Fulci's career as a director since the 1960s saw him move between various genres (from sex comedies and westerns to giallo thrillers), but it was the international success of the 1979 film, *Zombie Flesh Eaters* (AKA *Zombi 2* – to

imply that it was a sequel to George A. Romero's *Dawn of the Dead*), that saw him establish a reputation as a major horror film director. In the context of theme, *Zombie Flesh Eaters* draws upon the classic colonial Caribbean myths of the undead as popularized by travel writers such as Moreau de Saint-Mery and William B. Seabrook and also classic films such as *White Zombie* and *I Walked with a Zombie* (Bishop, 2008). While the classic Haitian zombie represented 'a slave raised from the dead to labor' (Lauro, 2015, p. 4), Fulci's zombies instead ranged from the recently dead to the long-interred reanimated corpses of Spanish Conquistadors, whose sole function is to attack and (graphically) consume the flesh of the living. Still, amidst the gore-filled tableaux that are interspersed throughout the film are, argues Laura Hubner (2015), distinctive traces of the gothic tradition, from the echoes of the deserted ship that opens the film to that of the *Demeter* in F.W. Murnau's 1922 film classic, *Nosferatu*, to the setting of a hospital located inside the confines of a ruined church. Moreover, Hubner contends that the collision of the natural with the seemingly supernatural conjures Charlene Bunnell's summation of the nature of the gothic:

The Gothic, acutely aware of the universal dichotomies in life, is concerned with two worlds co-existing in the genre's portrayal of reality: a diurnal world and a nocturnal one ... One world is the external one – cultural and institutional; it is 'light' because it is familiar and common. The other world is the internal one – primitive and intuitive; it is dark, not because it necessarily signifies evil (although it may), but because it is unfamiliar and unknown (in Hubner, 2015, p. 43).

In Bunnell's view of this Manichean gothic nature, characters are typically transported from one world into the other, or face situations in which they comprehend the 'nocturnal

world', whereby the gothic involves 'representations of the conventional world meeting a 'different sphere'' (1984, p. 81). In *Zombie Flesh Eaters*, this confrontation is that of the characters entering the island of Matul (a fictional atoll in the Antilles) to discover an 'impossible' zombie-infested environment, a world in which the forces of Voodoo and medical science collide to explain the phenomenon. However, Fulci's subsequent 'Gates of Hell' collection of films foregrounds this gothic concept of differing worlds merging in its consistent depiction of characters drawn towards, or totally transported into 'nocturnal' worlds, a concept that is central to *City of the Living Dead*, and its distinctive and visceral evocation of a Derridean hauntological domain.

The theme of interweaving worlds is established in *City of the Living Dead* from the outset as it juxtaposes two locations: a cemetery in Dunwich and a séance in New York, which are linked by the medium, Mary Woodhouse (Catriona MacColl), whose trance-like state gives her the ability to psychically 'see' Dunwich's Catholic priest, Father Thomas (Fabrizo Jovine), hang himself – an action that causes her 'symbiotic death' in turn (Totaro, 2002a, p. 128). What is more, the death of Father Thomas is an act that opens the 'Gate of Hell', an action which will enable the dead to invade and destroy the human world, and a cataclysm that can only be avoided if the gate is closed by All Soul's Day. As the narrative progresses, it is revealed that Mary is merely in a catatonic state, and later teams up with a journalist, Peter Bell (Christopher George), to venture to Dunwich and stop the evil machinations of Father Thomas and his apparent legion of the undead from attacking the living and ruling the earth. At the most discernible level, the gothic elements of the film lie in the overt influence of H.P. Lovecraft, whose stories invariably were concerned with 'the dissolving of the boundary between the natural and the supernatural' (Thacker, 2011, p. 9), and with his depiction of 'malign forces' from a parallel universe pushing through into the 'rational' world (Punter and Byron, 2009, p.

144). The most obvious nod to Lovecraft comes in the allusion to his story, 'The Dunwich Horror', but the central theme of 'subterranean openings to another world' (Totaro, 2002a, p. 128) is central to the film, but the literary gothic quality of the film extends beyond the Lovecraft-derived motifs as the narrative intimates what Stan Douglas refers to as a central motif of classic gothic romances is frequently that of the return of the repressed, whereby 'some past transgression haunts, then destroys the culpable person, family of social order' (2007, p. 193). And so it is in *The City of the Living Dead*, as it is revealed that Dunwich is built upon the remains of Salem, a place of witchcraft and evil, and is thus a 'cursed' city. In this regard, the choice of location for Father Thomas' suicide is no accident, given the city's past transgressions and notoriety.

Furthermore, while the film features a number of living dead, they are presented in a distinctively 'undecidable' fashion with regards to their nature. As Elizabeth McAlister states, zombies 'are human-sized, human-shaped, and have no supernatural attributes' (2012, p. 474), yet, as Thrower describes the undead that populate *The City of the Living Dead*:

The zombies, when they appear, are psychedelic and dishevelled, messy Jackson Pollock-faced entities possessed of both ghostly and ghoulish skills. Fulci has them brazenly appear and disappear in the wink of a frame-edit, only to grab fistfuls of hair, skull and bloody brains in defiantly physical style (1999, 165).

In this sense, Fulci's representation of the undead reflect a dimension of Derrida's notion of undecidability that captures the nature of the walking corpse, but simultaneously that of Derrida's 'specter without a body' (1994, p. 39). As Jeffrey Weinstock explains of the condition of the ghost:

To be spectral is to be ghostlike, which, in turn, is to be out of place and time. Ghosts ... violate conceptual thinking based on dichotomous oppositions. They are neither fully present nor absent, neither living nor dead. The ghost is the mark or trace of an absence (2004, pp. 6-7).

This interpretation of the spectral acutely reflects Derrida's evocation of undecidability in relation to the figure of the spectre, the logic of which 'is that it regularly exceeds all the oppositions between visible and invisible, sensible and insensible. A spectre is both visible and invisible, both phenomenal and nonphenomenal' (Derrida and Stiegler, 2013, p. 39). Moreover, as Colin Davis states of Derrida's concept of 'hauntology', his 'spectre is a deconstructive figure hovering between life and death, presence and absence, and making established certainties vacillate' (2013, p. 56). In relation to Fulci's film, his 'zombies' reflect Derrida's spectral concept, a factor that is central to the representation of Father Thomas, who returns post-suicide to kill a number of Dunwich residents. As such, Father Thomas frequently 'haunts' his victims by appearing to them in the guise of a hanged corpse that materializes and dematerializes.

Hence, *City of the Living Dead* is, with regard to the centrality of the spectral and the process of haunting, strongly evokes Derrida's idea of hauntology, a concept that, as Mark Fisher argues, 'uncovers the space between Being and Nothingness' (2014, p. 120). Moreover, the recurrent motif in *Spectres of Marx* is that of Hamlet and the returning ghost of his father, a meeting that serves to fundamentally put 'time out of joint' in a hauntological space that 'is neither living nor dead, present nor absent' (Derrida, 1994, p. 51), a state of being that is keenly reflected in Fulci's ontologically indeterminate zombie/ghost figures that haunt the *City of the Living Dead*. Moreover, while Derrida was not referring to the supernatural, but rather the spectre of communism, hauntology,

centrally concerned with dis-located time, is the overarching motif in Fulci's next film, *The Beyond*.

### **Into the (Haunted) Sea of Darkness**

Encapsulating the incongruous and narratively unstable essence of *The Beyond*, Thrower opines that it is 'gorgeous and vile like a dream about a nightmare' (1999, p. 169), while Totaro provides a more succinct overview of the plot, whereby the film tells the tale in which, 'when a plumber unwittingly opens a gateway to hell in the basement of a Louisiana hotel, spatiotemporal narrative order begins to go out of whack' (2003, p. 165). While there are eventually zombies in the film, as with *City of the Living Dead*, the phenomenon of haunting is the dominant narrative dynamic, and on a number of levels. At its heart, *The Beyond* persistently conveys Bunnell's gothic idea of the interweaving of diurnal and nocturnal worlds, but in a manner that simultaneously displays Derrida's conception of hauntology. As Fisher argues, hauntology denotes 'that which is (in actuality is) *no longer*, but which is still effective as a virtuality' (2012, p. 19). In *The Beyond*, it is the figure of the artist, Schweick (Antoine Saint-John) who represents the undead 'virtuality' in the film and who is the locus for setting time terminally, 'out of joint'.

*The Beyond* opens in Louisiana, 1927, and shows a number of townsfolk converging on a hotel, torches in hand. Cutting to hotel room number 36, the character of Schweick is seen painting an eerie, corpse-ridden landscape entitled 'The Sea of Darkness.' However, Schweick is disturbed from his work when the 'mob' breaks into his room, driven by the rationale that he is a 'warlock', and proceeds to torture him in the hotel's basement with a chain, crucify him to the wall, and then douse his head and face with a corrosive liquid. Before his death, Schweick warns his attackers that

their actions will curse both the hotel and the town, because the hotel lies on one of the seven gateways to Hell, which will now open and allow evil to invade the world. From here, the film jumps forward to 1981, where Liza Merrill (Catriona MacColl) has inherited the hotel and is planning to renovate the now-dilapidated building and reopen it to the public, but right from the beginning, signs of haunting inside the hotel begin to occur. For Derrida, haunting 'can be seen as intrinsically resistant to the contraction and homogenization of time and space. It happens when a place is stained by time, or when a particular place becomes the site for an encounter with broken time' (Fisher, 2012, p. 19). The issue of 'broken time' in *The Beyond* is immediately conveyed when a painter on a scaffold sees a blind woman, Emily (Cinzia Monreale) in one of the rooms and falls (Emily was present in the hotel in 1927 on the night of Schweick's death), and as Liza tends to the stricken tradesman, joined by Dr John McCabe (David Warbeck), the bell rings for room 36, even though it has been unoccupied for decades.

While Schweick progressively becomes the central supernatural figure in the narrative, it is the character of Emily who represents a recurrent spectral presence throughout the film, from mysteriously appearing on an empty highway, to manifesting in the hotel bearing messages of warning to Liza, urging her to leave the hotel. As such, Emily consistently conveys a hauntological nature, with respect to the concept representing a deconstruction of 'ontology and its assured oppositions of appearance and reality, presence and absence, the living and the dead' (Sherbert, 2015, p. 107). Emily's own ontologically uncertain status is represented in the scenes depicted inside her house, which is ornate and pristine when Liza visits her, but is revealed to be derelict and long-abandoned when John's investigations take him there. The revelation of Emily's paranormal nature comes when Emily, sensing Schweick's malignant presence, flees from the hotel and Liza mentally replays the scene, to reveal

that her departure created no audible footsteps, confirming her incorporeal state, as both a ghost and as an escapee from 'the Beyond.' Yet, having revealed Emily to be a ghost, Fulci then reintroduces the undecidable in relation to the uncertain nature of her status when she is attacked and violently killed by her zombified guide dog.

Similarly, in terms of Schweick's representation, he ostensibly tends towards the animated corpse, but behaves in a distinctly ghost-like fashion. His return to the narrative is inaugurated when Joe (Giovanni De Nava), a plumber employed to deal with an inexplicable and unexplainable flood in the hotel basement, breaks through a wall to discover the place of Schweick's murder, only to be then brutally murdered by the seemingly undead warlock. Though, when Liza discovers Joe's mutilated corpse, she also witnesses Schweick's now seemingly dead body float to the surface in the flooded basement, resulting in both corpses being transported to the morgue. From this instance, the film consistently displays its hauntological take on ontological representation. At one level, this manifests itself in an inconsistent representation of Schweick and his victims. For example, when Schweick's body is being examined in the morgue, Dr Harris (Al Cliver) inexplicably wires up the body to his 'brainwave' machine, which (unnoticed by him) begins to register brain activity, suggesting that Schweick is living dead in nature. Yet, later in the film Schweick displays the ability to appear and disappear at will, and has distinctly supernatural powers. Likewise, at one stage he appears to Liza in the form of his crucified body, before vanishing in a spectre-like manner, reflecting Tom Ruffles' depiction of the ghost as a supernatural entity that acts to 'contradict our expectations of the reliability of the world' (2004, p. 61), and also serving to further bring to mind Derrida's conception of the hauntological state whereby the spectre manifests 'the visibility of the invisible' (1994, p. 100), a factor that is central to the representation of Schweick.

Additionally, a sense of worldly reliability lies at the core of *The Beyond*, and echoes what Fred Botting refers to as the gothic's fascination with the past, but principally in the form of violence, magic and malevolence. Further, this conception of the gothic focuses upon a representation of time that reflects 'the doubleness of the relationship between present and past' (2001, p. 12), a factor central to *The Beyond* as the narrative progresses and Schweick's return opens the gate of Hell beneath the hotel. This action unleashes the 'Sea of Darkness' that spreads from the basement and out into the outer world, one effect of which is to bring the dead back to life, who proceed to menace the living while Schweick, the figure who haunts the film, continues to dissolve the spaces between past and present, the physical and the disembodied, and bring *The Beyond* into reality. Thus, at the climax of *The Beyond*, as Liza and John's battle for survival in the hospital against Schweick leads them, impossibly, back into the basement of the hotel and into the 'Sea of Darkness', their opaque eyes (reflecting those of Emily) signify that they are to face an eternal existence in the void-like eternal nature of *The Beyond*.

In his analysis of *The Beyond*, while Michael Grant likens it to the central literary premises of modernism, his analysis also serves to flag the Derridean quality of the film, as he states, it is a text in which 'totality is not to be trusted [and the] status of what we are seeing has become undecidable' (2000, p. 64). *The Beyond*, therefore, is a film that deconstructs narrative to foreground undecidability, that strives to consciously offer no answers to a succession of questions, an approach that, in Derrida's approach, equals 'a continuous displacement of structure that cannot be evaluated in traditional terms because it is the very frustration of those terms' (Wigley, 1993, p. 29). As such, this is a dynamic that is similarly evident in the final segment of the *Gates of Hell* series, *The House by the Cemetery*.

## **The Gothic Parasite Who Haunts the Basement**

If *City of the Living Dead* and *The Beyond* present the fusion of worlds at an apocalyptic scale, *The House by the Cemetery* reduces this theme to the level of a single domestic location to present an alternative take on the gothic haunted house scenario. As Clive Bloom argues, as the gothic developed as a literary genre, it shifted, by the middle of the nineteenth century, from medieval locations (castles, abbeys, etc.) to middle-class homes or hotels' (2007, p, 12) with a focus upon 'the secret or hidden' (Luckhurst, 2002, p. 541) within these spaces. The mystery at the heart of *The House by the Cemetery* comes as the result of a family, Professor Norman Boyle (Paolo Malco), his wife Lucy (Catriona MacColl), and their young son, Bob (Giovanni Frezza), moving into the eponymous house in New Whitby. They arrive there in order for Norman to continue the New England architectural research initially conducted by Dr Petersen, who seemingly murdered his family before committing suicide. While the film, with its Giallo-style approach of showing the murders from the POV of the unseen killer (even suggesting that Norman may be the murderer), the film decisively shifts into the supernatural with the revelation that the true slayer is the Victorian surgeon, Dr. Jacob Freudstein.

While the character of Dr. Freudstein (Giovanni De Nava) seemingly takes the form of a zombie, his true nature is much more interesting, with respect to what he actually is, but also the location of his hideaway, located in the basement of the house. Given the name of the character, it is no surprise that Freudstein's activities take on key aspects of Freud's concept of the uncanny, typically represented 'by anything to do with death, dead bodies, revenants, spirits and ghosts' (Freud, 2007, p. 171). Significantly, as Wigley observes, the uncanny links directly with Derrida's concept of undecidability in its emphasis upon 'the uneasy sense of the unfamiliar in the familiar, the unhomely in the home' (1993, p. 108). For Derrida, the homely paradoxically involves the familiar, the

intimate, or the friendly, but also the concealed, that which can cause violence inside the homestead, thus, the uncanny becomes the “Not-being-at-home”, a sense of alienation whereby, once acknowledged, means that ‘everyday familiarity collapses’ (Wigley, 1993, p. 110). This condition is caused by what Derrida refers to as the uncanny ‘subversive role of parasites in the house’, the ‘foreigner occupying the domestic interior and unable to be expelled from it’ (1993, p. 179). Here, then, Derrida’s notoriously abstruse concepts are thematically and visually actualized in *The House by the Cemetery* in relation to the actions of Dr. Freudstein, and the clandestine space in the house in which he scientifically sustains his life through regenerating his cells harvested from the body parts of those he kills, a process he has been undertaking since the turn of the twentieth century, thus fusing Mary Shelley’s literary creations as he represents both the doctor *and* the monster. Tellingly, the Derridean notion of the ‘unhomely home’ is also present within the first two films in the series. For example, while the supernatural threat is macrocosmic in scale within *City of the Living Dead*, its effects are manifest within the domestic setting of the young boy, John-John Robbin’s (Luca Venantini) home as his nuclear family is disrupted by the death of his sister, Emily (Antonella Interlenghi), and then utterly destroyed when the now-spectral Emily returns to murder her parents and attempt to kill John-John, forcing him to flee from his previously secure household. Similarly, Liza’s ambition within *The Beyond* to make renovate the hotel and to make it into her home (and open it up to the wider community) is undone when the evil lurking in its basement manifests and ultimately overwhelms the domestic space to render it a haunted and threatening non-place.

In terms of the further linking threads of Fulci’s ‘trilogy’, and their gothic underpinnings, Thrower argues that:

Factors such as the obsession with physical decay, the emphasis on worms and maggots, the alarming plasticity of flesh and bone, and Fulci's sheer doggedness in presenting drawn-out mutilation all help to connect the Gothic films: as does the repeated portrayal of a demonic dream-world beneath our own (the Dunwich cemetery catacombs, the haunted hotel basement leading to another dimension and ... the labyrinthine charnel house of Dr. Freudstein) (1999, p. 182).

Yet, the issue of haunting and the spectral is a further gothic leitmotif that runs through each film, and a key one that ultimately transcends the gore and the zombies that punctuate the texts in differing degrees. In *The House by the Cemetery*, the issue of haunting presents itself in two distinctive ways: Dr. Freudstein's putrescent presence, and the phantom manifestations of his daughter, Mae (Silvia Collatina) and wife Mary (Teresa Rossi Passante). With reference to Freudstein, he represents Derrida's domestic parasite, who is, on one level, a malodourous 'reeking cadaverous ghoul' (Thrower, 1999, p. 186), yet, for all of the brackish blood intermingled with worms that pours from the wounds inflicted on him by Norman, Dr. Freudstein is *not* a zombie, but is actually alive, and his continued existence is the result of a revolutionary (albeit unexplained) scientific process based upon the utilization of the bodies of those he has slain. Nonetheless, Freudstein's unnatural longevity and presence, while the result of scientific discovery, is what serves to give the house a 'haunted' atmosphere. Indeed, his rootedness in the confines of the house serve to suggest the interconnected themes of haunting and imprisonment that Ana Finel Honigman (2012) argues is a persistent trope in the classic gothic novel. Furthermore, as Barry Curtis states of the haunted house in film, such gothic spaces enact the disruption of the present by forces of the past as they are locations in which space and time are disoriented. As such:

The haunted house requires an investigation of labyrinthine spaces that is closely akin to a pilgrimage or rite of passage. The search for an explanation is complemented by a more conventional forensic schema of research that takes new owners into archives, libraries and the homes of eccentric witnesses in order to discover occluded past circumstances (2008, pp.56-57).

Still, while Dr. Freudstein haunts the house as an embodied phantom, Mae and Mary Freudstein *are* ghosts (with the clear implication that they both fell victim to Freudstein's experiments). This supernatural dimension to the film is established in the scenes in which Bob gazes at a sepia photograph of the Freudstein house and sees the image of Mae calling out to him, warning him not to come to the house. Mae then manifests outside the house in 1981, and is seen by Bob (and only Bob) when he first arrives in New Whitby, again, underscoring a common theme in relation to ghost cinema, whereby children frequently 'play a significant role in mediating between the worlds of the dead and the living' (Curtis, 2008, p. 15). Mae's role as Bob's supernatural guardian becomes manifest in the film's conclusion, in which Bunnell's theme of the gothic fusion of the diurnal and nocturnal worlds becomes doubly presented. As Totaro states, the 'passageway to Freudstein's corpse-ridden, fetid lair is through a crack in his own gravestone that is positioned within the house' (2002b, p. 175) that acts as a supernatural threshold to a world that is seemingly suspended between life and death. As illustrated in the film's climax, this notion of the interweaving of discrete worlds is pushed even further as Bob is pulled from the basement by Mae through this passageway just as Freudstein is about to seize him (having killed his parents). But, once through the gap, Bob seems to have been transported back in time to Mae's Victorian world (or is it her spectral world?), in a conclusion that, as Russell concludes, 'simultaneously makes perfect sense and

absolutely no sense at all' (2005, p. 139), a summation that serves to reflect both Fulci's trilogy, and the ideas of Derrida and the gothic that have been applied to them. For Derrida, the figure of the 'ghost is always an uncanny guest ... [the] elusive sense of the house haunted by the spacing buried within it' (Wigley, 1993, p. 189) – the quintessence of Freudstein's hidden space, his secret 'charnel house' in the basement of the house by the cemetery.

### **Beyond the Violence: Lucio Fulci's Hauntological Gothic**

In the view of Bondanella (2009), 'Mario Bava's death in 1980 had marked the symbolic end of Italian cinema's gothic horror tradition [and] the horror genre both developed and degenerated into something quite different from the far more elegant products of a Bava or an Argento' (Church, 2015, p. 12). Nevertheless, for all of their often outrageous gore, *City of the Living Dead*, *The Beyond*, and *The House by the Cemetery* constitute a potent set of distinctively gothic films that are linked by the theme of parallel worlds colliding, but, more centrally, haunting and the malign influence of the spectral and the undecidable spectre, the figure that Derrida stressed was 'neither living nor dead' (de Baecque, Jousse, Derrida and Kamuf, 2015, p. 26). In some instances, the 'undecidable' nature of Fulci's work has been argued to be due not so much to any overt intent on his part, but rather a reflection of his status as a purveyor of 'accidental art' and 'reputation as an exploitation filmmaker with an aesthetic eye for gore' (Church, 2015, pp. 13-14). While Flint dismissively describes Fulci as a 'journeyman director', he acknowledges that *The Beyond* is 'an exercise in blood-drenched surrealism' (2009, p. 112), a narrative element that also extends to *City of the Living Dead* and *The House by the Cemetery*. Certainly, Fulci's three films consistently express key aspects of cinematic surrealism, with its penchant for

displacement, the disregard for time, space or causality, the creation of dream-like spectacles (Hammond, 1978), and the 'irrational juxtaposition of objects' and the 'co-existence of an extremely exaggerated element with some element of reality' (Gould, 1976, p. 38). Similarly, the Fulci films discussed in this article present narratives that constantly play with time and space, and present dream-like spectacles and unexplained endings that resonate with Man Ray's conception of the principles of cinematic surrealism, which consist of 'psychological and dreamlike sequences without apparent logic, and [the] complete disregard of conventional storytelling' (2012, p. 274). This appraisal of the essence of surrealism is keenly captured by Fulci's own rationale for the narrative and thematic structure of *The Beyond*, whereby he states:

My idea was to make an *absolute* film, with all the horrors of our world. It's a plotless film: a house, people, and dead men coming from *The Beyond*. There's no logic to it, just a succession of images (in Russell, 2005, p. 137).

Russell points to exactly the same aesthetic of multiple and conflicting narratives pervading *City of the Living Dead* and *The House by the Cemetery*, however, it is noteworthy that, while containing some surreal moments (most notably the zombie vs. shark sequence), *Zombie Flesh Eaters* is essentially a linear narrative. Furthermore, in addition to making *The Beyond* and *The House by the Cemetery* in 1981, Fulci also directed a version of Edgar Allen Poe's short story, *The Black Cat* (*Gatto nero*) in the same year. Significantly, the tone of *The Black Cat* differs markedly from both *The Beyond* and *The House by the Cemetery* in that, while there are some gore set-pieces, they are markedly restrained with regard to depictions of violence, and also unlike the

other films made in this period, the narrative comes to a clear conclusion when the nature and activities of the murderous Professor Robert Miles (Patrick McGee). Furthermore Fulci's next film, *The New York Ripper/Lo squartatore di New York* (1982), while presenting a series of extremely graphic and violent set-pieces (arguably Fulci's most controversial), nevertheless frames them within a 'nihilistic giallo' (Howarth, 2015) or police procedural structure that is based upon a reality-based depiction of an 'urban Hell,' but where the killer's identity is ultimately revealed and the crimes solved. Thus, the films that immediately predated and followed the *Gates of Hell* trilogy display no real traces of surrealism, and nor do they present disjointed time lines or ontological uncertainty. Hence, they point to a knowing narrative approach within these films, which are united in their foregrounding of the undecidable. Additionally, there are grounds to argue that Fulci takes a knowing and parodic approach to the genre of the gothic. For instance, within *The Black Cat*, the gothic elements of the film are so abundant that they do suggest deliberate parody by Fulci, including as it does a ruined abbey, an open crypt that contains chained skeletons and a torture chamber, a mist enshrouded nighttime cemetery, constantly fog covered nocturnal streets, ghostly voices, rat and bat attacks, a villain possessing hypnotic powers to murderous effect, a heroine in mortal jeopardy, and an ultimate supernatural intervention that foils the villain. In the sense that parody can be understood as a 'commentary about the way a text or genre operates' (Boxman-Shabtai, 2018, p. 2), it is also arguably evident within the *Gates of Hell* trilogy. For instance, the films consistently stress Lovecraftian themes and supernaturally-linked locations (Salem, Louisiana and New Whitby) and reference to various gothic motifs, to the point of genre cliché (such as graveyards, séances, ghosts, spider and bat assaults, cobweb-enveloped abandoned houses, or various instances of thunder and lightning (even

sometimes occurring within buildings!). Furthermore, the films includes absurdist elements, such as the nocturnal jungle animal cries that are heard at night within the US-set *City of the Living Dead*; when, in the same film Peter 'rescues' Mary from her premature entombment by repeatedly (and illogically) striking the sealed coffin with a pickaxe – each blow threatening to piece her skull; or the scene in which Lucy (in *The House by the Cemetery*) matter-of-factly mops up the blood of one of Freudstein's victims and asks no questions as to its origins, nor shows any emotional reaction to its presence. As such, Fulci's films seem to play with classic gothic tropes, while developing (and often deconstructing them) in original directions and representational approaches.

In Botting's view, the gothic is replete with physical spaces that 'are often tempered with decay, deserted, haunted and in ruins' (2014, p. 2), and in aligning Derrida with the architectural, Wigley points to the recurrent theme of haunting in his work, from the suggestion of the house as a tomb and crypt, and media forms such as television, film, and the telephone representing 'the realm of phantoms' (1993, p. 163). This perception, in addition to Derrida's own references to Freud's uncanny (and zombies), gives Derrida a gothic veneer, a factor enhanced with the publication of *Specters of Marx*, with its 'populations of ghosts' and a world in which the 'dead can often be more powerful than the living' (1994, p. 48) – the condition of hauntology. Moreover, while the concept of hauntology has been applied to horror films (*The Shining*, for example) and to the post-colonial figure of the zombie (Fisher, 2014; Lauro, 2015), this article has argued that it is threaded throughout Fulci's *Gates of Hell* films, as it is the spectral that dominates them - it is the ghostly that haunts the town, the hotel, and the house, as it is in Derrida's oeuvre. As Wigley states, the 'irrepressible haunting of space, the spectral economy of the haunted house that underpins

Derrida's work without ever being its apparent subject, is first and foremost the enigmatic movements of displacement or dislocation' (1993, p. 177), factors that are central to the haunted worlds represented in *City of the Living Dead*, *The Beyond*, and *The House By The Cemetery*.

Therefore, in relation to the gothic themes that the films present, the idea of haunted spaces is a motif that is present in the geographical settings that textually resonate with established gothic narratives (*The House by the Cemetery's* *Dracula* allusion with regard to New Whitby), the witch trial history of Salem in relation to *The City of the Living Dead*, and the historic traditions of Voodoo in the American South within Louisiana (the setting of *The Beyond*), and its proximity to New Orleans, a locality once 'declared America's most haunted city' (Nickell, 2002, p. 15). Therefore, Lucio Fulci's now-classic horror film series fuses ultraviolent visual spectacle with Bunnell's gothic 'representations of the conventional world meeting a 'different sphere'' (1984, p. 81), but with a distinctive (and frequently graphic) Derridean hauntological verve.

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