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Citation: Walker, Johnny (2016) Knowing the unknown beyond: "Italianate" and "Italian" horror cinema in the twenty-first century. In: Italian Horror Cinema. Edinburgh University Press, Edinburgh, pp. 62-78. ISBN 9781474419680

Published by: Edinburgh University Press

URL:

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Knowing the unknown beyond: 'Italianate' and 'Italian' horror cinema in the twenty-first century

Johnny Walker

Since the year 2000, European horror cinema has undergone a major revival. After the 1990s, which saw very few European horror films made, the first fifteen years of the twenty-first century witnessed a groundswell in production from France, Germany, the Netherlands, Spain, Serbia and the UK. Italy was also part of this 'new wave', though its horror films typically did not reach as wide an audience, nor experience the critical recognition, of its continental neighbours. Italian horror during this period also faced a great irony. Whereas several filmmakers from America and Europe pastiched the Italian horror boom of the 1960s, 1970s and 1980s with films that were widely distributed and commercially well-received, Italian directors shooting horror films either in Italy or elsewhere, typically lacked access to 'formal' distribution (Lobato 2012), and therefore their films were not as widely seen.

It is the purpose of this chapter to explore what 'Italian horror' has meant in the twenty-first century as a historically-grounded and transnational concept on the one hand, and a contemporaneous mode of production on the other. The chapter begins by considering those films that, while lacking the involvement of Italian resources and investors, set out explicitly to recall some of the most influential moments of Italian horror cinema's history. It will consider, specifically, how such films – what I will be collectively referring to as 'Italianate' horror – can be considered as both 'art' and 'exploitation'. The chapter will then proceed to consider the shape of Italian horror production since 2000, and how it managed to stay buoyant in a marketplace crowded with high profile international production.

Italianate horror

The term 'Italianate' is often used to refer to 'Italian style' architecture dating back to the 1840s, which was popular in both America and England and drew inspiration from 'Tuscan late-Medieval farmhouses' (Hopkins, Jr. 2009: 102). The use of the term can also be found in various books dealing with early nineteenth century English fashion (Brand 2011: ix), and late nineteenth- to-early-twentieth century works of art (Jaffe 1992). However, in spite of its implied lack of currency in the twenty-first century, the presence of what C. P. Brand in 1957 dubbed 'Italo-mania' (2011: ix) has been widely felt across international film production in recent years: firstly, across the field of horror and exploitation cinema; and secondly, in the realm of art cinema.

From the former camp, one might single out the work of Quentin Tarantino, whose fannish myriad of Italian hat-tips include a 'revisioning' of Enzo G. Castellari's 1975 exploitation film *Inglorious Bastards* (as *Inglorious Basterds* in 2009) and a 2013 'sequel' to Sergio Corbucci's violent Spaghetti Western from 1966, *Django* (*Django Unchained*). The films of Tarantino's protégé, Eli Roth, can also be understood as possessing notable Italianate streaks. The ultra-violent *Hostel II* (2007), for instance, is laced with corporeal set pieces that recall the scenes of 'violence and bodily mutilation' that have come to signify the horror films of Lucio Fulci (Grant 2000: 68). *Hostel II* also features cameos by the Italian genre star Edwige Feneche (who featured in a string of Italian sex comedies and gialli in the 1970s) and Italian horror director Ruggero Deodato. Similarly, Roth's *The Green Inferno* (2014) lifts its title and its hand-held shooting style directly from Deodato's *Cannibal Holocaust* (1980).¹ A host of direct-to-video/DVD cheapies, from the retroactive 'cannibal' film

¹ 'The Green Inferno' is term used by the protagonists in *Cannibal Holocaust* to describe the Jungle that the cannibals inhabit. On film style in *Cannibal Holocaust* see Jackson 2002.

Welcome to the Jungle (Jonathan Hensleigh, 2007), to the gory British-gangster-film-meets-poliziottesco A Day of Violence (Dan Ward, 2009), and the giallo-like Kolobos (David Todd Ocvirk and Daniel Liatowitsch, 1999) and Fantom Kiler [sic.] series (Roman Nowicki, 1998-2008),² can also be thought of as being Italianate in both style and spirit. These kinds of ‘retrosploitation’ (Church 2015) films point towards the enduring appeal of Italian horror’s ‘golden age’ with filmmakers beyond Italy and their global audiences, by nostalgically relishing some of the more iconic film’s exploitative elements. Such films have emerged at a time when indigenous Italian horror production - which is similarly indebted to a past era of exploitation cinema (discussed below) - lacks visibility in most markets.

Perhaps one of the most intriguing developments amid the flurry of non-Italian production, however, is a cycle of art films that share the intertextual revelry of the aforementioned Italianate movies, but have managed to gain a certain amount of critical credibility that most of the other horror pastiches have not.³ The first art film in question is the French/Belgian production Amer (Hélène Cattet and Bruno Forzani, 2009), which, through three chapters, traces the sexual awakening of Ana (Cassandra Forêt/Charlotte Eugène Guibeaud/Marie Bos) from young girl, to teenager, to woman. The second film in this cycle is the British production Berberian Sound Studio (Peter Strickland, 2011), in which Gilderoy (Toby Jones), a British sound-designer, applies the visceral sound effects to a supernatural Italian horror film. The third film, which is

² On the Fantom Kiler films see Carter 2013.

³ Of course, the exception to this rule is the multi-award winning Tarantino. But, by and large, the films of directors like Eli Roth have rarely been critically acclaimed. Rather, they are mostly (when they are reviewed in mainstream press at all) condemned. For Roth specifically, this is mostly due to his associations with the vilified ‘torture porn’ cycle. See Jones 2013: 27-39 and Bernard 2014.

also the second by Amer's directorial team, is the France/Belgium/Luxembourg production *The Strange Colour of Your Body's Tears* (Hélène Cattet and Bruno Forzani, 2013), which tells of a man's (Klaus Tange) mental breakdown following the disappearance of his wife. These films are arguably more comparable with the films of the 'new European extremism' (Kendall and Horeck 2011) than they are with the work of Tarantino, Roth and others, as they foreground a variety of tropes one would tend to associate with the avant-garde. Indeed they have been collectively heralded in mainstream critical discourse for their stylistic innovation and pretensions to art house sensibilities, and have thus been granted a centrality to mainstream press discourse that contemporary Italian horror production, by comparison, has not. Yet, for all that these films carry an aura of high culture, in that they celebrate more overtly the auteurist legacies of Dario Argento and Mario Bava rather than their cult legacies outside of Italy, the films are still imbued with a sense of self-reflexive appreciation of Italian horror's more unsavory associations.

Amer, Berberian Sound Studio and *The Strange Colour of Your Body's Tears* conflate the commercial prospects of exploitation cinema with the intellectualistic arena of the art film and thus contribute to a long tradition in Italian horror in spite of their non-Italian production origins. Leon Hunt, in his essay about Dario Argento's *Opera* (1987), acknowledges classic Italian horror's pretensions to 'art'. Via David Bordwell's work on the art film, Hunt argues that much of Dario Argento's work from the 1970s and 1980s can be thought of as 'art films' because they comprise 'patterned violations of the classical norm', display preferences for 'an unusual angle, a stressed bit of cutting, a prohibited camera movement' and the deliberate 'failure to motivate cinematic space and time by cause-effect logic' (Bordwell quoted in Hunt 2009: 328). Furthermore, Peter Hutchings has recognised how Argento specifically is

revered as a 'great film artist' by British fans who seek to valorize his work above lesser examples of ironically-appreciated paracinema (Hutchings 2003: 135), while Andy Willis has argued that the films of Argento, Mario Bava, Lucio Fulci and Ruggero Deodato, adopt a position 'somewhere between' art and the less-credible area of exploitation, through juxtaposing realism and other art film tropes against gory prosthetic effects (Willis 2006: 110).

Characteristic of much exploitation cinema, *Amer*, *Berberian Sound Studio* and *The Strange Colour of Your Body's Tears* are commercial properties out to capitalise on the (cult) reputation of the most decorated and widely-seen works of key Italian directors, through film form, specific textual allusions, their soundtracks, and thematic congruencies. *Amer*'s title sequence, for instance, sees the screen divided into three panels that recall specifically the 'split-screen' party sequence in Fulci's *Una lucertola con la pelle di donna / Lizard in a Woman's Skin* (1971). The emphasis placed throughout the film on close-ups of people's eyes, and the general theme of 'looking' at scenes of terror, chimes with the issues of 'visibility, spectatorship, and horror' that have been said to be at the core of films like *Opera* (Hunt 2009: 333). The blue, red, and green light filters that are used all through the film echo the psychedelic cinemasces of Bava's *Reazione a catena / A Bay of Blood* (1971) and Argento's kaleidoscopic *Suspiria* (1977), while its score comprises a mix of harsh synthesized melodies and smooth jazz - compositions which are, in fact, lifted directly from Italian *gialli* of the 1970s.⁴

⁴ Songs include, amongst others, the theme from Sergio Martino's *The Case of the Scorpion's Tail* (1971) by Bruno Nicolai and the theme from Massimo Dallamano's *What Have They Done to Your Daughters?* (1974) by Stelvio Cipriani.

Berberian Sound Studio makes repeated nods to Italian horror, too. The film that Gilderoy works on has a characteristically elaborate title, *The Equestrian Vortex*. Having ‘Equestrian’ in the title directly alludes to Argento’s revered ‘animal trilogy,’ *L'uccello dalle piume di cristallo / The Bird with the Crystal Plumage* (1970), *Il gatto a nove code / The Cat o’Nine Tales* (1971) and *4 mosche di velluto grigio / Four Flies on Grey Velvet* (1971), as well as to the flurry of similarly-titled films that sought to capitalise on Argento’s success, such as *La tarantola dal ventre nero / Black Belly of the Tarantula* (Paolo Cavara, 1971), *L'iguana dalla lingua di fuoco / The Iguana with the Tongue of Fire* (Riccardo Freda, 1971) and *Non si sevizia un paperino / Don’t Torture a Duckling* (Lucio Fulci, 1972). Meanwhile, the word ‘Vortex’ corresponds with the audacious, surrealist, and otherworldly sensibilities of supernatural films such as Argento’s *Suspiria* and Fulci’s *L’aldilà / The Beyond* (1981); the latter of which actually sees the protagonists pass through a ‘vortex’ into the wastelands of Hell.

In *Berberian Sound Studio* we learn that *The Equestrian Vortex* tells of the awakening of an evil witch à la *Suspiria* and *Inferno* (Dario Argento, 1980), and features the kinds of grisly attacks on young women for which Argento and his contemporaries have become so infamous (see Clover 1992: 42; and Knee 1996). Not insignificantly, the film-within-the-film’s director, one Giancarlo Santini (Antonio Macino), views film violence (namely, a scene involving a woman being sexually violated with a hot poker) as being intrinsic to his artistic vision and responsibilities as a filmmaker. As he states with gusto: ‘It is my duty to show!’ *Berberian Sound Studio* is also littered with other intertextual nods to canonical Italian genre cinema: the person who changes the film reels in the post-production suite is identified only by their black leather gloves - much like the killers in numerous gialli; and the title

sequence of *The Equestrian Vortex* (which, incidentally, is all that we see of the film) is a moody animation in black, red and white which swirls in and out of focus, a la the opening credits of *Un pugno di dollari / A Fistful of Dollars* (Sergio Leone, 1964).

Finally, *The Strange Colour of Your Body's Tears* also makes repeated nods to classic Italian horror. Its title, as with *The Equestrian Vortex*, is decidedly opaque, attesting perhaps to an awkward English translation, or, more likely, to the similarly abstract titles of other gialli such as Giuseppe Benati's *L'assassino ha riservato nove poltrone / The Killer Reserved Nine Seats* (1974) and Pupi Avati's *La casa dalle finestre che ridono / The House with Laughing Windows* (1976). The film abandons narrative, preferring long impressionist scenes instead, and replicates the blue, green and red light filters from *Amer* throughout. Moreover, the scene in which a woman has her nipple flicked and scraped by the killer's knife is a direct nod to a similar scene in Fulci's notorious *Lo squartatore di New York / The New York Ripper* (1982) where a woman's nipple is sliced off with a razor blade. As with *Amer*, the soundtrack of *The Strange Colour of Your Body's Tears* is lifted from controversial Italian exploitation films, as in the credit sequence that utilises the theme from Giulio Berutti's 'nunsplotation' movie *Suor Omicidi / Killer Nun* (1979).

For all their exploitation qualities, the films pertain to 'art' in a number of ways. Unlike most exploitation films, *Amer* and *Berberian Sound Studio* are widely celebrated works, while the more divisive *The Strange Colour of Your Body's Tears* has still managed to command mainstream champions. These films have also been cited individually in the mainstream press for their intellectual pretensions, as well as for circumventing the standard aural, visual and narrative conventions of the commercial mainstream. For example, in his review of *Amer*, Philip French

comments on how the film's 'soundtrack ... is ominously exaggerated', how the 'close-ups are extreme', how 'colours change melodramatically to fit the shifting moods' and that, come its conclusion (or lack thereof), it is left up to the audience to make any real sense of it. 'This is art-house horror,' French concludes, 'a pure cinema for connoisseurs, a return to late-19th-century decadence' (French 2011). Similarly, Wendy Ide of the Times praised *Berberian Sound Studio* as 'an impressively eccentric and genuinely original piece of cinema' (Ide 2013: 24), while *The Strange Colour of Your Body's Tears*, though not as well-received as either *Amer* or *Berberian Sound Studio*, was nevertheless dubbed 'a ludicrous head trip of a movie ... full of spirals and fractals, mystery and menace' (Brookes 2014), as well as '[h]igh-art horror' and 'architectural art nouveau' (Muir 2014). What is immediately apparent from these reviews is how the films are framed not as 'exploitation films' or as 'rip-offs', but rather as self-aware, well-schooled and, consequently, innovative (or, in the case of *Strange Colours*, perhaps a bit too indulgent).

They are not simply horror, but art house horror: a designation that implies their superiority over run-of-the-mill genre fare. According to French (2011), *Amer* is 'a pure cinema': an expression which infers a cinema that is untarnished by the generic falsities of the commercial mainstream. French also prefers to use the term 'connoisseurs' to describe *Amer*'s audience - an elite group he seems to include himself in—rather than terms such as 'geeks', 'nerds' or 'fans', which have traditionally carried negative connotations (Duffett 2013: 37-8). Importantly here--and unlike 'fans'—the word 'connoisseurs' points toward knowledge or intellect, not 'obsession'. Moreover, the film is presented to French's readership as 'decadent' rather than off-puttingly excessive - an adjective often used to invoke cult 'paracinema' and its audience's taste practices (Sconce 1995). Ide similarly celebrates

incongruity in her review of Berberian Sound Studio. While one could argue that a generic trait of Italian horror is its lack of coherence and abandoning of narrative, Ide finds this ‘eccentric’ and ‘original’ rather than reductive or simply generic. In other words, these films pertain to art cinema because of their sublime imagery, and the supposed challenges they present their audience through narrative.

For all their art-house associations, the context from which these films have emerged is the same context as those populist Italianate films discussed earlier. Recent High Definition Blu-Ray versions of *Inferno*, *L'aldilà* and *Cannibal Holocaust* continue to afford films that were at one time deemed controversial, immoral and ephemeral, a new cultural status. Digital re-mastering has permitted them cultural reassessment and newfound recognition of their once unacknowledged artistry (see, for example, Guins 2005: 27). In the UK, these kinds of releases, from art house companies such as Arrow Films (through its ‘Arrow Video’ brand), have given Italian horror films once banned in Britain,⁵ such as *Zombi 2 / Zombie Flesh-Eaters* (1979) and *L'aldilà*, new cultural cachet, that belies their grindhouse distribution origins – which Tarantino openly invokes in his films (Church 2015) – and their Betamax legacies – as invoked in low-fi, shot-on-video DVD movies such as *A Day of Violence*. What is particularly interesting about *Amer*, *Berberian Sound Studio* and *The Strange Colour of Your Body's Tears*, then, is their assumed status in comparison to other kinds of horror films being produced today—not least, in Italy.

⁵ These films, when released on video in 1980s Britain, were among a final 39 titles that were banned under the Obscene Publications Act (OPA). The term historically attributed to these controversial films is ‘video nasty’. For insight into the legal and journalistic history of the video nasties, see Petley 2011; and for a discussion of the legacy of the video nasties in horror and film collectors circles see Egan 2007.

Contemporary Italian horror cinema is typically regarded as being far less innovative than critics and audiences have heralded its artful Italianate counterparts. In fact, with the exception of a mere handful of films, most recent Italian horror productions have not been theatrically released, nor have they been featured in mainstream press discourse. Having examined the value of Italianness in horror cinema to non-Italian horror filmmakers and critics, it is to Italy, and the apparent disinterest of audiences in native horror film production, that we must now turn.

Italian horror

In the early 2000s, the film industry trade press optimistically reported that '[a]uteur-driven, art house films' which had 'dominated the headlines in Italy for as long as anyone can remember' were to give way to a host of 'producer-led' genre pictures (Rodier 2003a: 20) that were 'easier for a distribution company' to place with an audience, notably thrillers (Gosetti quoted in *ibid.*). The 'thriller' has an interesting historical relationship with the horror film. It has often been the case that many films which may have been otherwise marketed as 'horror' have, instead, been marketed as 'thrillers' due to the negative associations that 'horror film' carries with contemporaneous mainstream audiences. Perhaps the best example of this practice is the Oscar-winning 'up-market' psychological thriller *The Silence of the Lambs* (1991) which was released at a time when most 'horror' films were made in the critically-reviled 'teen slasher' mold (Hutchings 2004: 2). Indeed, the slasher cycle, which saturated the horror theatrical market throughout the 1980s, has repeatedly been blamed by some for having killed the genre off during this period, leading to a slump in production in the 1990s (see, for example, Pirie 2008: 213).

A recent Italian example of a horror film that was marketed as a 'thriller' is Alex Infascelli's serial killer movie, *Almost Blue* (2000). One journalist did pick up on its horror elements, heralding it as 'scary as anything seen in Italy since early Dario Argento' (Marshall 2000); however, it was mostly reported as being a 'thriller', with the press drawing comparisons with US psychological thrillers *Seven* (David Fincher, 1995) and *Fargo* (Joel and Ethan Cohen, 1996) (see *ibid.*). Dario Argento's output since the 2000s also falls into this category. For example, *Il cartaio* / *The Card Player* (2004) was marketed, and referred to in the press, as a 'thriller' (Rodier 2003b; Anon 2003; Rodier 2004b). Additionally, the film, along with Argento's previous film *Non ho sonno* / *Sleepless* (2000), was received much more poorly than his more violent and subversive canonical works (see Hunter 2010: 68, 73 and n14). The main reason for this is that while Argento had (and continues to have) a stable presence in home video markets all over the world, the horror genre remained unpopular with Italian cinema-going audiences during this period. Screen International conducted a survey of Italian cinema in 2005, which revealed that 'comedies' and 'romantic comedies' collectively generated an average of \$11.3 in ticket sales in Italy in the 2000s; 'action films' generated an average of \$3.5; and dramas and thrillers generated an average of \$2.3 each (Rodier 2005: 20). 'Horror', however, was rendered 'not applicable' (*ibid.*). To this end, Argento was pressured in the early 2000s 'not to show blood' in his films (Argento quoted in Rodier 2003b), and to tone them down for a general theatrical audience and television syndication (Cozzi 2014). As *Screen Daily* reported upon the release of *The Card Player*, the Production Company and distributor, Medusa Films, was 'more interested in today's cinema going masses than the ultra-niche market of diehard Argento fans' (Marshall 2004); the result being that both *Sleepless* and *The Card Player* performed

well domestically (generating \$2.6m and \$3.6m in box office receipts respectively),⁶ but were since relegated to the direct to DVD market of cult horror fans on the strength of Argento's past reputation.⁷

In light of these industry pressures - and the simple fact that no other Italian horror filmmakers have been able to secure wide theatrical distribution for their films - contemporary Italian horror has mostly been made, as in the 1970s and 1980s, for international export. This has meant that, of the Italian horror films that have managed to find a way out of Italy, whether at festivals, on DVD or Video On Demand, the vast majority of films have been recorded in, or have since been dubbed into, English, and have been designed to capitalise on sub-generic strands of horror popular with cinema-going audiences worldwide. Examples of this practice include Bruno Mattei's Snuff killer - *La morte in diretta* / *Snuff Trap* from 2003, which lifts its plot directly from the late-90s Nicolas Cage star vehicle, *8mm* (Joel Schumacher, 1999). Another example is Federico Zampaglione's *Shadow* (2009). Its plot, which sees a former American soldier abducted by a deformed Nazi doctor in the European wilderness, resonates with a number of popular rural horrors of recent years that place city types in hostile environments, such as the French/Romanian *Calvaire* (Fabrice Du Welz, 2004), the British *Eden Lake* (James Watkins, 2008) and the North American *The Last House on the Left* (Dennis Iliadis, 2009).

⁶ On *Sleepless* see Rodier 2003b. On *The Card Player* see Rodier 2004a.

⁷ In the UK, Arrow Video remarketed Argento's contemporary thrillers *The Stendhal Syndrome* (1996), *Sleepless* and *The Card Player* with *Terror at the Opera* as 'The Neo-Giallo Collection', in-keeping with the company's lavish releases of Argento's critically revered films. For a discussion of how Argento's decreasing popularity with critics has paralleled the critical reappraisal of his past work and the consolidation of his reputation as a cult auteur, see Hunter 2010.

Similar to the subterranean monster that inhabits the London Underground in the widely-distributed British/German horror film *Creep* (2004), the monstrous Nazi in *Shadow* is also slim, bald, and uses a medical table to perform grueling experiments on his victims. The film's Nazi theme also parallels popular European horror such as *Frontiere(s)* (Xavier Gens, 2009), in which a young girl and her friends are captured by a neo-Nazi family and subjected to a host of experiments, as well as contemporary 'Nazisploitation' movies, such as *Outpost* (Steve Barker, 2009) and *Dead Snow* (Tommy Wirkola, 2009) which were produced primarily for consumption on home-viewing media. Dario Argento's *Giallo* (2010) also tuned in to contemporary trends. In the film, a detective (Adrian Brody) hunts for a serial killer who kidnaps and tortures attractive young female models. The theme of entrapment, and the scenes in which young female protagonists are tied up and tortured, resonate with a host of 'torture porn' movies such as *Hostel* (Eli Roth, 2005) and *Martyrs* (Pascal Laugier, 2008).⁸ Moreover, while the 'cat and mouse' relationship between the detective and the killer in *Giallo* is a trope found in most gialli, in the context of contemporary horror production this factor also chimed nicely with the high-octane investigative element of the *Saw* franchise (Various, 2004-2010). Significantly, *Giallo* is a much gorier film than Argento's other work of the period and was therefore a telling example of the state of contemporary Italian cinema at the time of its release. The gore factor which was seen to limit Argento's demographic in the early 2000s was deemed workable because of the returns being made on 'extreme' films in theatres and on DVD in the US and beyond.

But not all recent Italian horror films have emulated mainstream trends. In fact, the producers of many low-fi Italian horror productions have striven to

⁸ On 'torture porn' as a category, and its broad associations, see Jones 2013.

differentiate their films completely from the mainstream, with films that are produced very cheaply, shot very quickly and lack even the remotest chance of developing an audience beyond the most peripheral of cults. This is certainly the ethos that has underwritten most of the post-2000 films directed by Bruno Mattei: a director best known in cult circles for the Dawn of the Dead rip-off and video nasty, *Virus / Zombie Creeping Flesh/Hell of the Living Dead* (1981), and a string of other zombie, cannibal, and action films in the 1980s. Throughout the 2000s, Mattei was the only Italian horror filmmaker from the 1970s and 80s continuing to make exploitation films with any regularity and consistency, with shot-on-video films that were mostly made in direct homage to his own (and his contemporaries) cult output, such as the mondo film *Mondo Cannibale* (2003), the ‘women in prison’ film *Anime perse / The Jail: The Women’s Hell* (2006) and the zombie film *L’isola dei morti viventi / Island of the Living Dead* (2007).

Adopting a similar anti-mainstream ethos is director Ivan Zuccon and his independent company, Studio Interzona, which has specialized in micro-budget gothic horror films based on the work of H. P. Lovecraft since the early 2000s. If one considers the budgets of Dario Argento’s films after 2000, which ranged from \$3m to \$12m, or the \$1.4m shooting budget for Zampaglione’s *Shadow*,⁹ Studio Interzona’s budgets are minute in comparison. Indeed, the company’s shooting budgets have ranged from only a few thousand dollars (*Darkness Beyond*, Ivan Zuccon, 2001) to \$35k (*The Shunned House*, Ivan Zuccon, 2003) to, for its most recent film, \$150k (*Wrath of the Crows*, Ivan Zuccon, 2013) (Zuccon 2014).

The lack of capital available for horror cinema from the Italian film industry has also meant that directors have in some instances had to self-fund their movies or

⁹ Budgets acquired from Internet Movie Database Professional and Screen Daily.

explore alternative modes of distribution. For instance *Il bosco fuori* / *The Last House in the Woods* (2006) was entirely self-funded by its director Gabriele Albanesi,¹⁰ while Alex Infascelli's *H2Odio* / *Hate 2.0* was sold through Italian newsstands with a national daily newspaper because, according to its director, 'the picture would typically struggle in the cut-throat world of local theatrical distribution' (Infascelli quoted in Rodier 2006).¹¹ The lack of financial resources available have also meant that production companies and distributors specializing in micro-budget films have been under immense pressure to stress the distinctiveness of their products in a vain attempt to ascertain visibility in a highly crowded marketplace. Two approaches have typically been adopted.

The first approach has been the promotion of films as the wares of emerging new talent: new auteurs who are set to add to the grand tradition of cult Italian horror. This has been apparent in the UK, where the distributor Redemption Films - which was responsible for distributing Argento's *Profondo rosso* on VHS for the first time in Britain in the mid-1990s - also handled the distribution of Studio Interzona's *Maelstrom - Il figlio dell'altrove* / *Unknown Beyond* (Ivan Zuccon, 2001) and *La casa sfuggita* / *The Shunned House*. Both films were marketed on DVD in uniform packaging, with each cover featuring a still from the respective film rendered in blue. Across of the top of each sleeve, a red band displayed the legend, 'New Generation Italian Horror' (Figure 1). This marketing tactic was similar to the ways that the films

¹⁰ Albanesi is interviewed in the 'Backstage on *The Last House in the Woods*' documentary included on the Region 1 DVD release of *The Last House in the Woods* (Ghosthouse Pictures, 2006).

¹¹ It is worth noting that this method of distribution is a common practice in Italy, especially for locally-inflected independent films, such as the Sardinian parody of *My Big Fat Greek Wedding* (Joel Zwick, 2002), *Padre, figlio e spirito sardo* (Alessandro Sanna, 2004).

of Argento and Fulci were being marketed in America through Anchor Bay's 'Argento Collection' and Shout Factory's 'Deodato Collection', and in the UK through and Screen Entertainment's 'Fulci Collection' and 'Deodato Collection'. In spite of Zucon's output being virtually unknown to audiences, Redemption's strategy sought to mirror the uniformity of the other companies' auteur-led series', 'in order to invoke value statements that valorize the director's work as an art object' (Guins 2005: 29). This figuratively elevated Zucon from being an obscure director to being positioned as a leader in 'New Generation Italian Horror', stressing a bloodline to his cult forefathers as he carried Italian horror's torch into the new millennium.

Figure 1—'New Generation Italian Horror': the UK DVD box art for the release of Unknown Beyond and The Shunned House (© Studio Interzona/Redemption Films/Film 2000)

The second approach to marketing new Italian horror as distinctive has been through promoting films as 'pioneering' in regards to their production and distribution methods. The most visible examples of this practice have come from the production company Necrostorm. Based in Rome and headed by Giulio De Santi, Necrostorm's self-funded films, which so far include the revenge film Adam Chaplin (Emanuele De Santi, 2011), the futuristic horror/sci-fi Taeter City (Giulio De Santi, 2012) and the POV slasher film Hotel Inferno (Giulio De Santi, 2013), all share a penchant for ultra-violence, political incorrectness, and high body counts. In other words, Necrostorm produces films that are deliberately anti-mainstream, and strive to offend the

mainstream sensibilities that are said to characterise contemporary Italian cinema.¹² According to its website, Necrostorm is ‘the first company that takes care of every production steps [sic]: from design, to direct distribution’, and who, ‘using the latest technologies and production techniques’ aims to ‘create Horror, Sci-Fi and Fantasy products ... with a style forgotten by the big companies, but still loved and needed by the fans’. Necrostorm’s distinctiveness thus, is threefold, and relates to its company branding as an innovator.

Firstly it is positioned as a producer of innovative films. Its marketing is keen to emphasise there is no other company operating under the same premise, nor are there films currently in production which are comparable. This relates mostly to the company’s film style, which fuses the aesthetic of 1980s horror cinema, computer games and Japanese animation. For example, the futuristic police story *Taeter City*, in which violent criminals are not sent to jail but minced into fast food and sold back to society, was advertised on Necrostorm.com as giving rise to ‘A NEW SPLATTER SCI-FI SUBGENRE’, and of guaranteeing the audience ‘AN 80’s [sic] MOVIE VIBE, INSANE TECHNOLOGY, MANGA STYLE, CRAZY ACTION, BLOOD, BLOOD AND AGAIN BLOOD’ (accessed 20 May 2014). Another example is *Hotel Inferno*, a film told (and seen) entirely from the perspective of a hit man, which was marketed through Necrostorm.com as ‘the first POV splatter movie,’ and which, in true spirit of Italian exploitation business strategies, preceded the release of the glossy ‘POV’ remake of Bill Lustig’s *Maniac* (1980) by some months in 2013.

Secondly, Necrostorm boasts an innovative approach to production. It is its trademark gory special effects which have gained it most recognition, and which

¹² Often, ‘mainstream’ Italian cinema is read in relation to the influence of contemporary Hollywood.

broadly account for its modest cult reputation. These effects are shown clearly in the company's first feature, *Adam Chaplin*, in which the hulking titular character (Emanuele De Santi) kills his way through his city's underworld to find, and brutally massacre, the criminal organization that murdered his wife. While the plot may well be familiar - it has been likened to *The Crow* (Alex Proyas, 1994) and the anime classic *Fist of the North Star* (Toyoo Ashida, 1986)¹³ - the film boasts a new artificial blood effect that was integral to its marketing and subsequent reception among genre sites as 'an ass-kicking gorefest of astounding magnitude' (Jones 2012). The effect in question is the so-called Hyperrealistic Anime Blood Symulation or 'H.A.B.S'—a polymer designed to react under intense pressure. As *Necrostorm.com* explains:

Thanks to HABS, it's possible to spread out a huge amount of blood avoiding the vaporization of Fake Blood that normally occurs using the traditional techniques (accessed 19 May 2014).

The result is an in-camera (i.e. non-digital) fake blood effect that, according to the website, 'you can normally admire only in anime cartoons'. Indeed, the final scene in *Adam Chaplin*, which is a showdown between Adam, the corrupt police and the head of the mafia, Denny (Chiara Marfella/Christian R.), shows H.A.B.S. to great effect. The scene shows: Adam repeatedly punching a police officer in the face so that the front part of their skull smashes into a bloody pulp; Adam punching police officers' heads off so that they spin in the air and splatter on the ground; Adam snapping police officer's arms and legs off and smashing their heads against a white-washed wall (Figure 2); Adam shooting Derek's (Giulio De Santi) arm off at point-blank range with a rifle (so that it breaks off and lands in a bloody mess behind him); and Adam ripping out Denny's lower ribs, so that blood pours like a waterfall from his insides.

¹³ See Zedword 2013 and Kenny 2012.

Figure 2—Hyperrealistic Anime Blood Symulation (H.A.B.S) in action (Adam Chaplin © Necrostorm 2011)

The third way that Necrostorm presents itself as an innovator is through its relationship with its fans. The company sees this relationship as being integral to its success. Through its online forum it '[collects] all the fans requests and suggestions: and we try to insert/apply them to our products. We give the fans what they really want to see' (accessed 17 May 2014). On the forum the fans ask questions about the films (in the thread 'YOUR QUESTIONS') to which the company offers speedy replies (in the thread 'OUR ANSWERS'). This positive relationship is evidently maintained through mutual self-respect and self-identification. The business rhetoric, like that quoted above, points to the company's similarities with its audience, and its drive to make films that those working for the company will enjoy as much as its consumers. Necrostorm is a company different from 'the big companies' - those organisations that have 'forgotten' the audience that truly matters (ibid). And amongst the 'forgotten', it is implied, are the workers at Necrostorm itself, who have branched off from - or, rather, have rejected - the mainstream, to produce films for the fans and for themselves.¹⁴ Indeed, one can ascertain from the excited and hyperbolic language used on its various ads and products, that those working at Necrostorm are fans as well. This goes for the aforementioned ad for Taeter City, but also for the company website which features such legends as '80's/90's ARE BACK!', and the end credits

¹⁴ Linda Badley (2009: 52-3) has written about how American DTV producers strive for the same political ideal.

of its films which acknowledge a host of cult film directors - such as Peter Jackson and John Carpenter - as having provided *Necrostorm* with inspiration.¹⁵

This is where the paradox of *Necrostorm* lies. On the one hand, the company looks to the future, boasting of its innovation and progressiveness through its use of cutting edge technology and special effects. On the other hand it is retroactive, seeking to recreate a 'vibe' associated with a specific era of cult cinema (an era that is 'forgotten' and thus, it is suggested, no more). At a time when Italianate art horror continues to ascertain visibility and critical respect, *Necrostorm* positions itself as a producer of exploitation films that relate to the ways Italian horror was seen the first time round by an international audience: not as avant-garde masterpieces, but rather as exploitation curiosities that hark back to the video era. This would partly explain the dual DVD and VHS release of *Taeter City* that was available from the *Necrostorm* store for a limited time only, which effectively allowed the viewer to genuinely experience the film's '80's vibe' through 80s technology.¹⁶ It would also explain why *Necrostorm* strives to produce deluxe fan packages, which, through DVD-R technology, are burned-to-order, and include signed posters as well as a variety of merchandise which relate directly to the film (such as the 'All You Can Eat' burger vouchers and 'Biker Officer' identification cards which come included with the DVD of *Taeter City*). This offers the fans what 'the bigger companies' do not: a respect for these films, their histories, and their 'ultra-niche' audiences, as well as a realistic future for Italian horror production.

¹⁵ It is likely that Peter Jackson is mentioned for the films he made pre-*Lord of the Rings*, such as the low-budget exploitation films *Bad Taste* (1987) and *Braindead* (1992).

¹⁶ At the time of writing, the US distributor *BrinkVision* are planning a simultaneous DVD/VoD/VHS release of the microbudget Argentinian 'neo-giallo' *Sonno Profondo* (Luciano Onetti, 2013).

Conclusion

In a book chapter published in 2005, Andy Willis discussed the state of Italian horror cinema at that time and looked despairingly to its future:

The lack of opportunities for [young Italian horror filmmakers] means that they will very likely be forced to participate in projects that are much more conservative [than the canonical works of revered Italian horror directors] in their conception ... It is unfortunate that younger directors ... are unlikely to have the chance to develop and experiment with the limits of the horror genre as they may have done in an earlier era. (Willis 2006: 129)

In a sense, Willis was right. As this chapter has shown, if we were to judge using the criteria of mainstream ‘opportunities’ and international visibility, Italianate horror cinema has certainly made more of an impression on the film world than recent Italian horror cinema has. Moreover, Italianate art horrors *Amer*, *Berberian Sound Studio* and *The Strange Colour of Your Body’s Tears* have mirrored a critical reassessment of the Italian horror film that contemporary Italian horror has not really been a part of. The flipside of this, as this chapter has also revealed, is that several young filmmakers have, in a sense, benefitted from the ‘lack’ of support from the Italian film industry and mainstream press discourse, and they have not been constrained by their low budgets as Willis anticipated. On the contrary, existing outside the mainstream has afforded filmmakers a sense of freedom that they might not otherwise have been able to experience if working within the constraints of mainstream Italian film production.

Of course, not all low budget Italian horror films find an audience, and many never get made. A case in point is the recent project *The Book*, which promised to bring together ‘Italian masters’ such as Ruggero Deodato, Lamberto Bava and Sergio Martino to make a horror anthology film. However, to the disappointment of those involved in the project, the film ultimately failed to hit its budget target on the crowd-funding website, Indiegogo.¹⁷

But companies like Studio Interzona and Necrostorm have indeed managed to find an audience (however small), and have used their outsider status to produce innovative films of varying types in spite of their ‘conservative’ production contexts and lack of mainstream support. To this end, contemporary Italian horror perhaps shares an unanticipated similarity with its Italianate art horror counterpart. While Italianate art horror has been afforded credibility within the commercial mainstream and thus can lay claim to more visibility than contemporary Italian horror, *Amer*, *Berberian Sound Studio*, and *The Strange Colour of Your Body’s Tears* remain interesting in critical circles for the same reason why Necrostorm and Studio Interzona’s output remain popular with their niche audiences: because of their experimentation, their indulgences, but above all, their cult connoisseurship.

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¹⁷ See www.indiegogo.com/projects/the-book-the-italian-masters-return (accessed 20 May 2014).

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