

The Yellow Fever:
Giallo in Italian National Cinema

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What is a giallo film? The sub-genre of thriller which emerged in Italian cinema in the 1960s often seems to be defined through the theoretical lens of genre, with authors highlighting recurring elements that appear across and connect the films in question. The giallo protagonist is often, but not always, a tourist who witnesses a murder and embarks upon an amateur investigation, relying on their flawed perception and memory to solve the case before they themselves end up as its victim. The giallo killer is often, but not always, depicted in a trench coat, wearing black gloves that the viewer can observe through point-of-view shots which provide an intimate perspective into the murders. Gialli often, but not always, prioritize visuals over their sometimes incoherent narratives, featuring extremely stylized sequences of violence that are often, but not always, perpetrated on conventionally beautiful, sparsely dressed women.

While there has been a solid amount of examination of the giallo through genre theory, and some through the framework of gender studies, a particularly intriguing aspect of the films, which has thus far not been as prominent in international scholarship, lies in its relationship to the concept of national cinema. As such, the focus of this thesis is to define the genre precisely through that lens, drawing upon the social and economic context in which it developed to illustrate how the giallo and its vision of urban life reflect the state of affairs in Italy during the period from the mid-1960s until the mid-1980s.

The first portion of the following text discusses the emergence of the genre through its relationship to its literary origins and cinematic precursors. Here, special attention is given to the combined interaction of foreign and national influences on giallo cinema, as well as the turbulent sociopolitical context of the period. The second part attempts to place the genre within the structure of the Italian film industry in several aspects — considering the conditions of giallo films' production, examining the genre's association with *terza visione* audiences, and establishing its relationship to the broader tradition of *filoni* in Italian culture. The third section of the thesis aims to illustrate conclusions from the first two, as well as define the genre's central motifs and evolving vision of urban life through an analysis of two films — Mario Bava's *The Girl Who Knew Too Much* (1963), as an example of an earlier giallo which articulated for the first time some of its fundamental imagery, and Dario Argento's *Tenebrae* (1982), a later feature which refers to and comments on the genre's basic grammar, as well as on the criticisms it so often received.

1. The Emergence of the Giallo

There are multiple and contradictory visions claims among scholars and fans as to when the exact 'birth of giallo' happened, and pinpointing a specific moment at which the genre came to life then seems to be somewhat futile. However, a closer look into the broader social and cultural background of the genre's inception might reveal the tensions that are reflected and exist within the giallo itself.

a) Literary Origins

The cultural origins of the giallo film can be deduced from its very name — the word *giallo*, meaning *yellow*, refers to the color of the covers that characterized a series of popular crime novels published by the Mondadori Editore firm beginning in 1929. As the books gained commercial success, the term ‘giallo’ became synonymous with the mystery genre. In *La Dolce Morte*, one of the first books devoted solely to the genre, Mikel J. Koven explains how “in a British or North American bookstore, if we wanted to find, say, an Agatha Christie novel, we would look for a section called ‘Mystery’; however, in an Italian bookstore, that section would likely be called ‘Giallo.’”¹.

In fact, while the initial publishing of giallo literature focused more on popular foreign writers like Agatha Christie or Edgar Wallace, increasing demand resulted in the emergence of a new trend — the proliferation of Italian authors writing under English pseudonyms as a response to the public’s interest in Anglo-Saxon writers on one hand, but the barriers to import that publishers faced on the other. The flourishing of home-grown gialli in the inter-war period could also be attributed to the policies of Benito Mussolini’s government regarding cultural production — in an attempt to limit (what was deemed) the “corrupting influence”² of American and British culture, significant funding was provided to national arts industries.

¹ Koven, *La Dolce Morte*, pp. 2-3.

² Needham, “Playing With Genre: An Introduction to the Italian Giallo,” online. www.kinoeye.org/02/11/needham11.php.

In 1936, the Ministry of Press and Propaganda was reformed into the Ministry of Popular Culture, whose activities included “approving published materials and examining books and other publications before they could be printed”³, and investing over 634 million lire “to finance the work of 906 intellectuals and 387 newspapers, magazines and news agencies.”⁴ One of the main cultural projects conducted during the Fascist regime also included the construction of the EUR district, which was intended to serve as the location of a World Fair to commemorate the twentieth anniversary of the Marcia su Roma, Mussolini’s coup d’état, and which would later become the main shooting location of Argento’s *Tenebrae*.

Alexia Kannas, author of *Giallo!*, points out that “the dichotomy created by this scenario came to be replicated, years later, in attitudes to the genre films that spring from these cheap paperback novels” because “on the one hand, imported and translated crime stories were dangerous, in that they opened the door to dissent and political transgression,”⁵ yet “at the same time [...] the Italian-authored gialli relied fundamentally on an association with British and American stories, as demonstrated by Italian authors’ use of the *nom de plume*”⁶ to make the argument that “from its very inception as a critical category, the giallo has occupied *a curious state of in-betweenness*.”⁷ As such, the combination of foreign origins and domestic appropriation of the giallo novel might already indicate the peculiar place it holds in relation to its social context.

³ Antonelli et al., “Accounting for Propaganda in Italy Under the Fascist Regime (1934–1945),” p. 11.

⁴ *ibid.* p. 10.

⁵ Kannas, *Giallo!*, p. 3.

⁶ *ibid.*

⁷ *ibid.*

b) Cinematic Precursors

However, before delving into the giallo itself, it would be useful to take a closer look at its cinematic precursors, which might indicate a similar kind of in-betweenness that characterizes the genre. In specific, perhaps the most relevant point of cultural context in which the giallo emerged lies in the lack of an established filmic tradition.

In *A History of Italian Cinema*, Peter Bondanella and Federico Pacchioni write that “one of the characteristics of modern Italian fiction in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries is its relative dearth of books written in such popular literary genres as science fiction, thrillers, or mysteries, genres that in Italy were almost always, until recently, associated with Anglo-Saxon and, to a lesser extent, French literature”⁸, further arguing that the lack of “a flourishing tradition of indigenous mystery and crime fiction was obviously an impediment to the creation of a similar tradition in the cinema, and this partially explains why Italian cinema was so late in embracing themes related to mystery and detection.”⁹

Due to the fact that Italian cinema was, as the pair claim, relatively late in adopting the mystery genre, one might observe that a significant amount of its earlier efforts to produce one referred to foreign cinema. In fact, earlier efforts in the mystery genre, aside from individual pictures like Luchino Visconti’s *Ossessione* (1943) or Michelangelo Antonioni’s *Story of a Love Affair* (1950) — both of which were themselves loose adaptations of James M. Cain’s *The Postman Always Rings Twice* (1934), — tended to be

⁸ Bondanella & Pacchioni, *A History of Italian Cinema*, p. 431.

⁹ *ibid.* pp. 431-432.

focused on gothic horror. In line with that, earlier gialli (like *The Girl Who Knew Too Much*) exhibit certain gothic horror elements: they feature a supernatural threat, depict the 'house' as a locus of danger, or use dramatic, high-contrast lighting seen in non-giallo mystery films like Robert Siodmak's *The Spiral Staircase* (1946).

Still, the obvious but nevertheless fundamental influence on the giallo were the films of Alfred Hitchcock. In fact, the title of Mario Bava's film, *The Girl Who Knew Too Much*, is an explicit reference to Hitchcock's 1934 feature (also remade in 1956) *The Man Who Knew Too Much*. In terms of narrative elements, the plots of numerous gialli are brought into motion by the protagonist witnessing a murder at first unrelated to them, but in which they gradually become more involved as an amateur investigator, similarly to the character of James Stewart in *Rear Window* (1954). Moreover, films like *Profondo Rosso* (1975), which is often considered one of the finest artistic achievements of the genre, clearly emulate the stylized, circular camera movements of Hitchcock's *Vertigo* (1958).

An illustrative example of Hitchcock's overarching influence, as well as of the director's general popularity with Italian audiences, can be found in "the actual inscription of Hitchcock's name, even if purposely misspelled for obvious legal reasons, in the title of a film [...] *L'Orribile segreto del dottor Hichcock*"¹⁰, as well as its "more giallo-inflected sequel [...] *Lo Spettro de Dr. Hichcock*."¹¹ While both the gothic horror and the Hitchcockian elements of the giallo would become less prominent with the genre's evolution and its

¹⁰ Boyd & Palmer (eds), *After Hitchcock: Influence, Imitation, and Intertextuality*, pp. 200-201.

¹¹ *ibid.*

consequent establishment of an independent genre grammar, some of their central elements can be found scattered throughout even the most mature gialli.

In a sense, the tension within the cinematic tradition from which the giallo emerged mirrors the tension visible in its literary origins — the genre was, on one hand, full of foreign (especially British and American) influence, but was, on the other hand, a clear product of the distinct national context in which it emerged, the turbulent and divided nature of which is examined in the following section.

c) Social Context

The tension between domesticity and foreignness which characterizes the cultural background of the giallo seems to be paralleled by the divisions that underlie the social context of its emergence. If neorealism can be considered the cinema of a post-war Italy undergoing reconstruction, giallo could then be viewed as the product of a reconstructed Italy facing new issues — with the common goal of rebuilding the country fulfilled and no longer uniting its inhabitants, the Italian people found themselves in a decades-long political binary.

The two main parties of the political landscape were the Catholic, centrist Democrazia Cristiana (DC) and the left-wing Partito Comunista (PC). In 1948, the alliance between the two parties ended, and, according to historian Valentina Vitali, “for the following three decades cultural debates were framed by the conflict between the ruling party, the DC”¹²,

¹² Vitali, “The Exclusion of Giallo Films From the History of Italian Cinema,” p. 44.

which was in power from 1946 until 1981, “and the opposition, the PC”¹³, which exhibited a gradual transition from rigid Leninism towards a kind of democratic socialism.

However, the ruling party faced internal tensions as well. According to historian Paul Ginsborg, the central struggle within the DC lied in the fact that “laissez-faire ideas of the development of the economy and society clashed with those of Catholic integralism, which emphasized the need for society to correspond to and reject Catholic values”¹⁴; in other words, the DC struggled to reconcile religious values with capitalism (and its culture of consumption) within their ideological doctrine.

These divisions, however, were not just theoretical, but translated into real-life violence that would mark the period from 1968 to 1988, more often known as *anni di piombo*, or the Years of Lead. The era saw numerous instances of terrorism, both from far-right and far-left radical organisations, which included bombings, random killings, and targeted assassinations, the most prominent of which was the kidnapping and murder of former prime minister Aldo Moro. In relation to the giallo, the significance of these events lies in the kind of social context they created — people in larger cities lived in a constant state of fear, witnessing premeditated, but often arbitrary violence; an atmosphere not dissimilar to that of the giallo film.

While connections have been made in scholarship between the poliziottesco — another genre from the same period, similar to the ‘police procedural’ — and the violent era,

¹³ *ibid.*

¹⁴ Ginsborg, *A History of Contemporary Italy: 1943-80*, p. 154.

it is in that context that the giallo should be examined as well. In *That's La Morte*, a documentary about Italian cult cinema and the Years of Lead, Dario Argento, perhaps the most acclaimed of the giallo directors, recounted how each night, he had to face “the thought of going out in the evening with the fear of being caught out in the shootouts [and] the bombings,”¹⁵ and fellow directors that dabbled in giallo, like Umberto Lenzi (*Orgasmo; So Sweet... So Perverse*) and Ruggero Deodato (*Phantom of Death*), expressed similar sentiments in their respective interviews. Overall, the giallo, albeit a commercial genre based on foreign influences, cannot be extrapolated from the distinct national socio-political context of which it is a direct product, as evidenced from the testimonies of the filmmakers who created it.

2. Within the Structure of Italian Cinema

While the previous section concentrated on the social context and artistic tradition of the genre in question, the following, in turn, examines the giallo as an economic and cultural product. In specific, the goal here is to define the giallo through the place it occupied in the Italian film industry of the period, through examining the conditions of its production, its reception among critics and audiences, as well as its relationship to the culture of filoni.

a) Economics of Production

The giallo period began in the early 1960s, which were a turbulent era for Italian cinema, then continued throughout the industry's revitalisation in the late sixties and

¹⁵ Mendik, *That's La Morte: Italian Cult Cinema and the Years of Lead*. [00:28:51-00:29:03]

seventies, and effectively ended during its crisis in the 1980s. It is important to note that the state of the industry during the inception of the giallo was marked by a mix of foreign and national capital investment. According to film historian Michael Silverman, “American money intervened significantly in Italy starting in 1948, the first year of funding under the Marshall Plan”, where “almost immediately the influx of this new money began to be felt within Italian film production”¹⁶

However, in order to protect the Italian film industry from US dominance in the midst of increased foreign investment, state undersecretary Giulio Andreotti introduced legislation which established import limits, introduced screen quotas, and ensured profit retention for Italian businesses. As a result, American companies began establishing business entities in Italy, but which were financed partly or wholly by US capital, in order to optimize their own earnings in response to the law. One example of such maneuvering can be found in the production background of *The Girl Who Knew Too Much*, which was made by Galatea – an Italian company financed partly by American International Pictures (AIP).

The consequence of the mixed sources of investment can be seen on multiple levels. For one, gialli would, as a result, often use a mix of foreign and Italian cast and crew, thus adding to the previously discussed co-existence of foreign and national influences, but on a more procedural level. Moreover, since it was often difficult for exhibitors to adhere to the conditions of American distributors, such as block-booking, Vitali describes how “Italian productions by Italian directors under English- or American-sounding aliases is likely to have been introduced to solve the tension between the public’s tendency to prefer US films and

¹⁶ Mellencamp & Rosen (eds), *Cinema Histories, Cinema Practices*, p. 41.

exhibitors' preference for Italian ones,"¹⁷ mirroring the same practice which, albeit common in other countries as well, marked giallo literature decades prior.

The 1970s, in turn, saw the most prolific period of giallo production; in fact, between 1971 and 1975, over one hundred films were made in the genre (although some were co-productions filmed in Spain, where it had become quite popular). The increase in production, however, seems to have been followed by a decline in demand, with author J. A. Kerswell describing how "the giallo had all but fallen out of fashion,"¹⁸ with "budgets and production values [plummeting], and some even [trying] to spice things up by employing hard-core pornographic elements [...] or over-emphasizing the horror and sleaze to win back their once loyal audiences"¹⁹.

Kerswell further identifies "the sure death knell for the genre"²⁰ in the late-seventies moment at which giallo spoofs, like Pupi Avati's *All Deceased... Except the Dead* (1977), started appearing. The final nail in the metaphorical coffin, however, might lie in the crisis that affected Italian film production throughout the eighties — in 1985, only 80 films were produced in the country, just four of which were gialli (which becomes even more striking when compared to the thirty-one gialli that were produced in 1971)²¹. The steep decline of the giallo in particular could perhaps be attributed to the rise of television, which adapted popular

¹⁷ Vitali, "The Exclusion of Giallo Films From the History of Italian Cinema," p. 55.

¹⁸ Kerswell, *The Teenage Slasher Movie Book: Expanded Edition*, p. 122.

¹⁹ *ibid.* pp. 122-123.

²⁰ *ibid.* 123.

²¹ Zagarrío, *Storia del cinema italiano 1977/1985*, p. 329.

genres like the mystery and the police procedural into arguably more suitable serial formats, potentially stripping genre cinema, including giallo, from its original audiences.

b) Reception as Popular Cinema

The question then follows: who exactly was the audience of giallo? Most earlier scholarship on the genre frames the genre in relation to a specific reception context — the so-called *terza visione* (or third-run) cinemas located in rural and industrial residential areas and characterized by their audiences' casual mode of spectatorship. Here, Koven applies Christopher Wagstaff's general writing on Italian genre cinema to the giallo in order to argue that “within the *terza visione* cinema culture, the film text was of less importance than generally 'going to the pictures,' a context for social interaction rather than textual contemplation”²², claiming that the films themselves were, in turn, consciously designed for that kind of viewing.

The example he uses is Mario Bava's *Bay of Blood* (1971; also known as *Chain Reaction* or *Twitch of the Death Nerve*), which features attention-grabbing murder scenes in the first and final twenty minutes of the film, while keeping the middle less eventful and focused on narrative exposition; for Koven, the film's structure reflects how, “in anticipating the *terza visione* audience's reaction”²³ and waning attention, Bava “gives them the space

²² Koven, *La Dolce Morte*, p. 27.

²³ *ibid.* p. 28.

they require to move around and socialize within the cinema,”²⁴ then bringing their attention back to the screen for the grisly finale.

However, an overview of recent scholarship might suggest a more nuanced vision of the giallo audiences. For one, Andreas Ehrenreich’s research of marketing materials showed that gialli were, especially in the early 1970s, often featured in programs of first-run cinemas, with the author arguing that scholars like Wagstaff and Koven “exaggerate the giallo’s marginality.”²⁵ In fact, both *The Girl Who Knew Too Much* and *Tenebrae* had traditional theatrical runs (which is perhaps less surprising in the case of the latter, with it being the then-quite-popular Argento’s return to giallo after his ‘supernatural’ period, than the former, an early feature of a relatively unknown Bava which nevertheless had two separate runs in “first vision, city-centre cinemas Paris and Radio City,”²⁶ as well as the Ritz Theatre.)

In addition, Kannas brings up giallo director Sergio Martino’s statement on the intended audience of his films, in which he claimed that he “never [relied] on a specific target”²⁷ but rather “imagined an audience that was going to the cinema not to get bored”²⁸, recalling how he “often saw upper-class people that were there to enjoy themselves”²⁹, and highlighting how “[his] films were also shown in the first run cinemas”³⁰, as well as how his

²⁴ *ibid.*

²⁵ Ehrenreich, “Not Niche at All: The Distribution and Marketing of the ‘Giallo’ Genre,” p. 116.

²⁶ Vitali, “The Exclusion of Giallo Films From the History of Italian Cinema,” p. 36.

²⁷ Kannas, *Giallo!*, p. 42.

²⁸ *ibid.*

²⁹ *ibid.*

³⁰ *ibid.*

first giallo “targeted the same audience of first run cinemas”³¹ as the already well-established films of Dario Argento. This, again, seems to contradict the established account of giallo films as ones intended to be seen in the *terza visione* mode of spectatorship.

However, out of the approximately thirty gialli exhibited during the genre’s prolific 1970/71 season (i.e. the period from 23rd August 1970 to 31st July 1971), only ten had been shown in first-run cinemas, most of them directed by established giallo filmmakers like Argento, Martino or Lucio Fulci.³² As such, rather than limiting the genre to a single reception context, one could suggest a spectrum within the giallo, with auteurs like Bava, Argento, Fulci or Martino who aimed at first-run audiences on one side, and cheaper productions which went straight to third-run theatres on the other. In light of that, the peculiar state of in-betweenness of the giallo, which operates on the aforementioned paradigm between foreign and national, can be seen in its liminal position between commercial and art cinema as well.

An illustration of the thin line between the giallo’s commercial origins and arthouse strivings can be found in a comparison of two Italian mystery films — Argento’s *Profondo Rosso*, a critically-acclaimed example of giallo cinema, and Antonioni’s *Blow-Up* (1966), a classic of art cinema. Both films star David Hemmings in the role of a young artist who witnesses a crime and assumes the role of amateur detective, both deal with the notion of vision and its uncertainty, and both reflect certain social tendencies — be it the mid-sixties fashion culture of London, or the urban atmosphere of 1970s Rome. However, the two

³¹ *ibid.*

³² Ehrenreich, “Not Niche at All: The Distribution and Marketing of the ‘Giallo’ Genre,” pp. 116-117.

occupy vastly different positions in traditional accounts of Italian film, with one deemed a classic of art cinema, winning the Palme d'Or at the Cannes Film Festival, and the other often cited as 'the most artistic giallo', but still somewhat marginalized as a violent genre film.

c) The Tradition of Filone

As much as it is defined through its reception, the nature of the giallo is also further illuminated when observed through the particular culture of artistic production within which it thrived. Bondanella and Pachionni point out that "Italian film historians and scholars are more likely to call a collection of films, such as the spaghetti western or the giallo, a filone [...] literally meaning a large thread, but used by Italians to indicate a collection of similar themes or styles, a genre or subgenre, perhaps also a formula or pattern."³³

In cinema, as the pair write, popular filoni of the period included the giallo and the spaghetti western, as well as the aforementioned poliziottesco, the commedia all'Italiana, or the peplum ('sword-and-sandal') film. However, the flexible nature of the term itself suits the nature of the films it aims to describe, as filoni were often interwoven — for example, numerous gialli feature elements of the police procedural, while the spaghetti western and commedia all'Italiana were successfully merged in the early-seventies work of Bud Spencer and Terence Hill.

In addition, although there was a certain degree of specialisation in filoni, many figures of the giallo worked across genre cinema in general — *The Girl Who Knew Too Much*

³³ Bondanella & Pacchioni, *A History of Italian Cinema*, p. 433.

was, for example, co-written by Sergio Corbucci, director of popular spaghetti westerns like *Django* (1966) or *The Great Silence* (1968); Dario Argento wrote Sergio Leone's *Once Upon a Time in the West* (1969) alongside Bernardo Bertolucci; and some giallo directors, like Fulci, continued their career in the zombie sub-genre after the giallo fell out of fashion.

Moreover, the filone phenomenon was present in other media as well — the production of comic books in Italy consisted of multiple filoni, including the villain-focused fumetti neri (such as *Diabolik*, which Mario Bava even adapted into his 1968 feature), or the bonelliani, a series of adventure comic books starring various eponymous characters (like *Zagor*, *Dylan Dog*, or *Tex Willer*) and always published as complete stories in a black-and-white 98-page format.

The leitmotif that can be observed in both the films and the comic books in question lies in the specific model of mass production achieved thanks to their formulaic nature. While it does not diminish its artistic value, one could argue that every episode of *Zagor* unfolds in a similar manner, and that drawing templates could then be re-used from episode to episode, thus making it easier for the main artist's assistants to produce more content in less time. In a similar manner, Italian genre cinema was able to amortise costs by re-using sets and costumes across films — furniture from the set of *The Girl Who Knew Too Much* was, for example, borrowed from the set of 1961 commedia all'italiana *Divorce Italian Style*³⁴ — a phenomenon which could also be observed in the Hollywood producer-unit system during the 1930s.

³⁴ Lucas, *DVD Audio Commentary*. [00:08:00-00:08:23]

In terms of the giallo, the somewhat formulaic narrative of the genre — where an amateur detective simultaneously searches for and is hiding from a killer, only for a twist to be revealed in the end — could also be seen as a factor in its stylistic evolution. In other words, as much as gialli tend to be criticized for their lack of narrative coherence or effort, their subsequent prioritisation of more ‘cinematic’ features, such as stark visuals or tense pacing and editing, seems to garner praise among fans and critics.

However, a crucial point of context for defining the giallo within the history of Italian cinema lies in the economic reasoning behind the filone tradition. According to Vitali, the late sixties saw a shift within national filmmaking in which genre films began to carry the growth of the industry, because they were “products that guaranteed commercial gain through the capillary exploitation of the domestic market and through assured foreign distribution.”³⁵ In light of that, as well as the fact that the inception of the giallo was immediately preceded by a crisis in the film industry, this broader culture within which the giallo was produced perhaps also signifies a larger project at stake: the attempt to create popular, commercial, and above all profitable forms of national cinema, in opposition to the prominent tradition of art cinema, and the likes of Fellini, Antonioni, or Bertolucci.

3. Case Studies

While the historical, cultural, and economic context of the giallo period is crucial to its understanding, it is in the films themselves that the theoretical conclusions of the first two sections begin to reveal themselves in practice. The two case studies of the following section

³⁵ Vitali, “The Exclusion of Giallo Films From the History of Italian Cinema,” p. 59.

focus on one earlier example of the giallo — Mario Bava's *The Girl Who Knew Too Much* (1963) — and one film from its more mature period — Dario Argento's *Tenebrae* (1982) — in order to illustrate the evolution of the giallo in response to its evolving sociopolitical environment.

a) *The Girl Who Knew Too Much*

Although the bold colors and graphic murders characteristic of the giallo's distinct visual style were first seen in his later film *Blood and Black Lace* (1964), Mario Bava's 1963 film *The Girl Who Knew Too Much* is often cited as the one which established the genre's narrative grammar. The film follows Nora, an American tourist, who witnesses a murder from the past in a supernatural vision during her visit to Rome, thus becoming the next target of the so-called Alphabet Killer, and assuming the role of amateur detective.

The film was, as mentioned previously, produced by Galatea and financed with its mix of Italian and US capital, as well as featured a combination of Italian and foreign cast and crew. In addition, there were certain variations between the domestic and the international marketing of the film, with the distributors highlighting the mystery components for the former, and supernatural ones for the later (leading to the film's alternative international title: *The Evil Eye*). Moreover, the cuts of the film itself differed, with the English one including more sequences, an alternate, more comical ending, and a different score, in addition to deleting references to drug use that were present in the Italian version.

While the following text concentrates on the Italian version, with it being the one seen by national audiences at the time, the international critical response to the film also seems to have been aware of its social context. In an interview for *Cahiers du Cinema*, Luc Moullet claimed that the film presented a "proof of the state of confusion presently being experienced by Italian filmmakers: rejecting conformist pronouncements while nevertheless borrowing from them under the pretences of a conventional parody that never rises to the level of critique."³⁶ Regardless of Moullet's evaluation, his remarks reveal an issue which marks *The Girl Who Knew Too Much* — the attempt to create a new mode of cinematic expression to depict Italian society at the time.

The aforementioned combination of foreign and national influences can be seen in the film itself. The opening shot sees an airplane flying through the sky, as a song by Adriano Celentano is playing. Aside from the image of a quite literal vehicle of globalisation, the figure of Celentano is also indicative of Italian popular tastes at the time — the singer performed in Italian, but was heavily influenced by British and American music, even performing Little Richard's song *Ready Teddy* in Federico Fellini's *La Dolce Vita* (1960), and releasing singles like *Prisencolinensinainciusol*, a song Celentano wrote in a made-up English-sounding language in order to prove that Italian audiences would listen to anything that sounded Anglophone. Furthermore, the British character of Nora serves as a bridge between Italian and international audiences — the latter are able to identify with the position of foreignness, whereas the former are given an outsider's perspective into their own society (or the 'tourist gaze').

³⁶ Moullet, *Cahiers du Cinéma*, p. 74.



The film's opening introduces both its international scope and highlights its literary origins.

The opening of the film also features another important element of the giallo — an awareness of its literary origins. As the film moves into interior shots of the airplane, the main character is first seen reading a giallo novel entitled *The Knife*, which the narrator points out, and which is, throughout the film, used to discredit her apparent testimonies, with characters like the older doctor (Walter Williams) questioning whether reading too many gialli fuelled the girl's imagination to the extent that she began hallucinating. At given points, one might argue that it seems as if the film, in particular through narration, spoofs the giallo novel and pokes fun at its popularity among Italian audiences.

In addition, this awareness of tradition extends to its cinematic precursors as well, where, as mentioned previously, the Italian version of the title refers to Hitchcock's film(s) *The Man Who Knew Too Much*. Although the director's two features of the same name differ in specific plot points, they share a main premise (which is somewhat mirrored in Bava's film) — there is a couple on vacation. While Nora did arrive to Rome alone, she is soon aided in her investigation by Marcello (John Saxon), a young doctor who serves as the protagonist's main love interest, and who is, at first, reluctant to believe her testimonies. During the daytime, everything seems to be in order, as Nora and Marcello frequent tourist spots, enjoy the sights, and fall in love.

When night falls, however, Nora is left alone to deal with supernatural visions, thieves, and murderers. As such, Bava presents a somewhat binary vision of Rome — the fairytale city on one hand, and its dark underbelly on the other, with the shift from one to another almost always marked by sunrise or sundown. One might also note the traditional gender politics present in the narrative — when the man and woman are together, she is safe; when she is left alone, she is in danger, and the disorder of nocturnal urban life in part attributed to her unreliable female perception.

Perhaps the most striking sequence of the film, which forebodes the extreme stylisation that will characterize future gialli, occurs about halfway through the film, when Nora enters an empty building in an attempt to find out more about the Alphabet Killer. The space of the building itself is vastly different from the traditional Italian architecture of the Colosseum or Spanish Steps prominent in the rest of the film, and is rather more modern and industrial. The camerawork is also perhaps the most unusual in the film, with extreme close-ups, Dutch angles, and high-contrast lighting contributing to an overall sense of disorder and danger. The scene ends with the lights turning off, as someone grabs Nora, only for it to be revealed that the person in question is Marcello; the sense of danger thus once again disappears with the reunion of the couple. Overall, both in terms of mise-en-scene and cinematography, there is a clear dichotomy between the safety of daylight, traditional architecture, conventional camera positions, and the union of the couple, as opposed to the danger of nighttime, modernist spaces, unconventional shots, and the lone female figure.



The clear difference between day and night can be seen in Bava's vision of Rome.

However, as the film develops, the line between that binary becomes increasingly blurred, with two sequences of heightened tension occurring during daytime in the last third of the film. The first, taking place at Foro Italico (an example of Fascist architecture inspired by ancient Roman forums), sees Nora with journalist Andrea Landini (Dante DiPaolo) interrogating a woman in relation to the case, until she is left alone and begins to doubt Landini's intentions, with a series of quick zooms illustrating the suspense of the moment. The second, in turn, sees Nora alone in a more modern office building, searching for Landini and finding his corpse instead. In both of the sequences, however, as the final showdown nears, the danger and disorder usually present during the night begin to protrude into the daytime. The final showdown itself, in which it is revealed that Nora's vision was flawed — she saw a man hiding a body and assumed he was the murderer, while all along the real killer was his wife, Nora's acquaintance — occurs at night, but the film (in both the ending to the Italian and the international version) ends the next morning, with Marcello and Nora reunited, and the danger defeated.

The binary division and final resolution of the film are quite indicative of its social context — the Italy of the early sixties was undergoing a process of modernisation in which traditional and progressive culture were clashing, but with the scale still tipped in favor of the

former, thanks in part to the conservative government of Democrazia Cristiana. In fact, there is little discussion of ‘subversive’ trends of the period in the film (aside from two joking allusions to marijuana), the violence is not graphic (with most of the actual murders occurring off-screen), and the film reaffirms the basic premise of the couple reuniting, the murderer defeated, and daylight restored.

b) *Tenebrae*

While Bava’s film reflects the early sixties period, prior to the Years of Lead, Argento’s *Tenebrae* from 1982 could be said to deal with their legacy. Argento himself had, at that point, established himself as the prime giallo filmmaker, before turning his attention to supernatural tales — in specific, the box-office hit (and later cult classic) *Suspiria* (1977), followed by its thematic sequel *Inferno* (1980). After the latter’s commercial failure, *Tenebrae* saw the director’s return to his signature genre, albeit at a point during which the giallo was already in its decline. The film was, again, made with a mix of Italian and American cast and crew, and the filming itself took place in New York and Rome.

In terms of narrative, *Tenebrae* follows Peter Neal, a writer of giallo novels who travels to Rome as part of his book tour, only to become involved in a series of ongoing murders inspired by his new novel. As opposed to Nora’s mere enthusiasm for giallo literature, the protagonist is, in this case, directly involved in its production, leading fans and critics to argue that the character serves as a kind of avatar for Argento himself. Additional support for this reading could be found in the interview scenes, in which Neal is being criticized for his depictions of violence over women, and the corrupting influence of his art

on its audience, mirroring the criticisms that Argento had faced throughout his career. These speculations then render the final twist of the film quite ironic — Peter Neal is revealed to have killed the original murderer and assumed his place.



The opening shot of the film features Neal's work; the interview sees its 'corrupting' influence critiqued by Berti, the original killer.

The film, as is the case with Bava's, begins in an airport and features a foreign protagonist, but the tourist gaze, in this case, does not include the popular attractions of Rome that were prominent in the 1963 feature. In fact, most of the film was shot in the EUR district of Rome which was, as outlined in an earlier section, part of Mussolini's attempt to construct an architectural vision of the future of fascism. In that sense, one can already observe the evolution in the depiction of the Italian capital between the two films — moving from Bava's focus on historical landmarks towards the sterile modernism of Argento.

The first murder of the film already signals Argento's distancing from the binary division that characterized the Rome of *The Girl Who Knew Too Much*. After talking her way out of shoplifting charges, a woman (Ania Pieroni) is seen walking along a well-lit residential area, before being grabbed by a homeless man whom she successfully fights off. Having narrowly escaped into the apparent safety of her home, the woman then walks through the

apartment, and even converses with a neighbor through her window, until she is grabbed from behind by a black-gloved hand, her throat slit, and her mouth stuffed with pages from Neal's book. In sum, the sequence sees the female victim in danger both when she is walking down the street in broad daylight, and inside her own home, with the neighbor and onlooker unable to help her due to the walls and screens that divide them.

The most telling death scene, however, happens near the end of the film, and sees Neal's agent Bullmer (John Saxon) murdered in the middle of a town square. As the soon-to-be victim sits on a bench, the film cuts between shots of him observing his surroundings, and static point-of-view shots of the people observed — a woman breaking up with her boyfriend, two punk youths looking at a store front, and a child playing. Taking place in the middle of the day and featuring a square full of people, the atmosphere of the scene seems safe at first; the music, which usually announces the killings, does not even appear until moments before the murder, nor does it ever reach the rhythmic intensity of the soundtrack from the first death, but rather remains a string of scattered synth chords.

As Bullmer is suddenly stabbed by an unknown assailant, the film continues to cut between him bleeding on the ground, and a shot of the woman he had been observing walking towards him — she is, however, in tears, so engulfed in her own life that she does not notice the dying man until he grabs her. It is only then that the dozens of onlookers notice Bullmer and rush not to help, but to observe. The scene in question is thus perhaps most reflective of Argento's vision of the modern city as a shared space whose inhabitants are nevertheless almost completely alienated from one another, even when encountered with violence in public.



Bullmer bleeds out in the middle of the square without anyone noticing.

The film's very title, meaning 'darkness' in Latin, could be contrasted to the film's lighting, in which most of the murders occur in well-lit spaces with witnesses around. In other words, if Bava's city seems like a bad dream from which Nora wakes up in the morning, then Argento's city could best be described as a waking nightmare. The evolving vision of urban life should also be observed within the respective sociopolitical context of both films — while *The Girl Who Knew Too Much* was made prior to the Years of Lead, Argento had lived through the period of broad-daylight violence and terrorism, which could account for his depiction of the city as perpetually unsafe. In fact, the director explained his specific motivation for making the film, claiming that "to kill for nothing [...] is the true horror of today [...] and that's the sort of atmosphere [he] wanted to put across in *Tenebrae*."³⁷

A further example of the giallo's maturation, albeit on a more stylistic level, can be found in the three-minute long crane shot from the film, in which the camera moves around the exterior of a building as a sort of introduction to the murder of the two women inside it. For one, the shot is a clear example of the giallo's extreme stylisation — it is not necessary to

³⁷ Jones, *Tenebrae DVD Booklet*.

the narrative, not motivated by a character's action, nor is it a point-of-view shot. However, in grazing by each of the windows and doors, the shot does gradually reveal the vulnerabilities of the home, as well as the fragmentation of modern life, in which two lovers occupy different spaces in the house and do not even share the same room (which will, consequently, make the murderer's job much easier, being able to pick the pair off one-by-one). Another component of the scene which reflects the stylistic evolution of the giallo lies in the score — whereas Bava's film presented the viewer with a mix of jazz music and classic orchestral scoring, the crane shot from *Tenebrae* is accompanied by the prog-rock soundtrack of Goblin, Argento's frequent musical collaborators.

In addition, it is worth noting that the lovers in question are a lesbian couple practicing an open relationship because one of them is a prostitute, which, when compared to the conventional heterosexual dynamic of Bava's film, reflects the evolving social context characterized by the dissolution of traditional familial structures. In fact, perceived social deviancy is a central theme of the film, and the main motive for the murders — the original killer, conservative journalist Cristiano Berti, targets those whose behavior he considers deviant, such as shoplifters and lesbians. However, after Neal murders him and decides to take over his role, the motivation behind the subsequent killings becomes more personal, with Neal targeting his ex-fiancée Jane (Veronica Lario), and Bullmer, with whom she is having an affair. Still, even though the final murders are less ideological in their motivation, the notion at their centre is still that of the dissolution of the traditional couple, with Neal wanting to enact his revenge on his former lover and the friend whom he felt betrayed him.

Furthermore, Neal's childhood visions reveal a deeper-rooted issue at the core of his murderous tendencies — as a boy, he was sexually humiliated by a woman (Eva Robin's; a transgender actress in her debut role) whom he later murdered, having repressed the memory which then re-emerged during the course of the film and unleashed his bloodlust. The casting of a transgender actress as a figure who wields threatening sexual power over the protagonist (to the point at which he had to murder her to free himself) in itself brings to light issues of gender and 'alternative' lifestyles which were, during that time, central to Italian cultural discourse.

While the period in which Bava's film was made suffered from a degree of censorship which perhaps rendered the director unable to tackle these notions in a manner more meaningful than marijuana jokes, the sole obstacle that Argento faced was one of the censors' last remaining tools — the age limit, which was, for *Tenebrae*, set to 18 years old (or VM18). The director later complained that the high rating (as opposed to the VM14 which he had hoped for) was a direct result of his open depiction of homosexual relationships and transgender characters, claiming that, because "in Italy [...] many things were frowned upon, especially homosexuality"³⁸, his goal was to "recount this subject freely and in an open manner, without interference or being ashamed"³⁹, and that the rating was "all because of this sexual diversity."⁴⁰

³⁸ Waddell, *The Unsane World of Tenebrae*. [08:15-08:22]

³⁹ *ibid.* [08:23-08:35]

⁴⁰ *ibid.* [08:45-08:49]

If the ending of Bava's film sees the cultural clash happily resolved in favour of the more traditional side, then Argento's film, informed by almost two decades of violence that followed, presents a much bleaker vision of Italian future. In *The Girl Who Knew Too Much*, Nora and Marcello are last seen in a joyful reunion, looking forward to the life they will spend together. *Tenebrae*'s Peter Neal is, in contrast, last seen manically gasping for air as he is impaled on a piece of modern art, with the piercing scream of his lover persisting, even as the screen fades to black and the credits begin to roll.

Conclusion

Even though the giallo is now perhaps most often associated with its role as a predecessor to the slasher, and observed through its part in the historical development of the horror genre, this thesis focused on defining the genre through the lens of national cinema. The giallo, from its inception, draws to surface numerous tensions that existed within Italian society during the period of its existence. For one, the genre, in its origins, as well as in its process of production, reflects the combination of foreign and domestic cultural influences that were present in the country during the second half of the twentieth century; its violent content, in turn, reflects the turbulent national political context of the Years of Lead.

Furthermore, the liminal place the giallo occupies between high-brow and low-brow culture (exhibiting arthouse tendencies despite its commercial origins, and targeting both first-run and *terza visione* audiences), indicates its role as part of a larger cultural project — alongside other artwork made in the *filone* tradition, and perhaps motivated by the industry crisis of the early sixties, the giallo could be seen as an attempt to counter the art film culture

of the previous years and develop a popular and commercial form of national cinema, which nevertheless holds some degree of aesthetic value. On a final note, the giallo was, due to its typically violent and sexual elements, often able to tackle certain topics which concerned the then-contemporary clash between traditional and progressive values — as the cultural and political capital of Democrazia Cristiana waned, the extent of their censorship over media diminished, and the films were gradually able to feature themes like drug use or homosexual relationships in a more direct manner.

In sum, the giallo genre (or filone) and its development reflect the social, political, and economic shifts that occurred in Italy throughout the period from the mid-sixties to the mid-eighties. Even if it did not offer a solution or resolution to social tensions, nor did it provide an optimistic vision of the future, the giallo film did perhaps give its original audiences the chance to see their frustration released on the screen, and bestowed upon them a scopophilic, self-indulgent, blood-filled catharsis.

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