

Introduction

FRENCH WRITER/DIRECTOR DUO Hélène Cattet and Bruno Forzani's 2009 debut feature, *Amer*, imagines three key moments in its protagonist's life. The first part of the film introduces us to a child named Ana (Cassandra Foret) as she wanders the dark halls of her family's hilltop mansion on the Côte d'Azur. In one room, she encounters the corpse of an elderly man, from which she takes a gold pocket watch; afterwards, she imagines him awakening and regarding her with a horrific stare. Peering into another room further down the hall, she glimpses her parents having passionate sex. The film then leaps forward in time and we find that Ana (Charlotte Eugene-Guibbaud) is now a teenager, shopping with her mother in their village. The psychosexual tone established through Ana's witnessing of the primal scene in the first section of the film takes on a heightened potency now; as she saunters through the streets, her dress moving in the breeze, her nubile sexuality is put on display for the men of the village and Ana plays with this new dynamic system of looks she finds herself at the center of. In the third section of the film, the threat of *Amer*'s dark undercurrent materializes as a masked killer when Ana (Marie Bos) returns to her childhood home. The distinct three-part structure aside, *Amer* (which is French for "bitter") plays like a voyeuristic fever-dream, with almost no dialogue, sweeping lapses in time and close-ups that fetishistically fragment space and the body.

Most English-language reviews of *Amer* mention that Cattet and Forzani envisioned their film as an homage to the Italian popular film genre known as *giallo*. Stephen Holden's unfavorable review in the *New York Times*, for instance, calls the film "a surreal cinematic tone poem that pays slavering homage to Italian giallo horror films of the 1970s" (10).

Nigel Andrews at the *Financial Times* elaborates on the *giallo* influence, writing that *Amer* “is intended as a homage to the Italian, mostly city-set *giallo* films of the 1960s and 1970s—tales of murder and detection influenced by opera and grand guignol” (11). Jamie Dunn at *The Skinny* also foregrounds the stylization of the film in his review, calling it “a banquet of baroque imagery and kaleidoscopic colour.” In his more nuanced reading of the film’s multivalent relationship to its Italian genre lineage, Anton Bitel, in *Sight and Sound*, explains that

Amer is a surrealist homage to the thematic preoccupations, visual stylings and musical cues of Italian genre cinema. Here all the primal scenes, sinister bewitchings, gloved killers and colour codings are borrowed from *gialli*, while the eclectic score has been appropriated directly from various 1970s *poliziotteschi*, and the beautifully styled erotica of the middle section recalls the fetishistic softcore of Tinto Brass. (46)

Although each of these reviews cites the fundamental importance of the *giallo* tradition to *Amer*, the writers’ descriptions of this body of films are significantly diverse. The amorphous, polychromatic image that emerges from these divergent definitions is the subject of this book.

Giallo means “yellow” in Italian. To appreciate how a word that describes the color of sunflowers came to refer to a genre of violent, highly stylized crime films, we must begin in 1929, when Italian publishing house Mondadori released the first of a series of pulp crime and mystery novels they called *Il Giallo Mondadori*. Like the cheap “yellow-backs” published in Britain in the second half of the nineteenth century, the covers of the books in Mondadori’s mass-marketed series were predominantly yellow. They proved to be so popular that in Italian the word *giallo* came to describe the crime and mystery genre as a whole. The first instalments of *Il Giallo Mondadori* were mostly translations of pulp crime novels by writers like Agatha Christie and Edgar Wallace. Film scholar Gary Needham tells us that the types of stories published as part of this original series were typically derived from two subgenres of mystery fiction: British Sherlock Holmes-style “rational-deduction” stories and “quasi-fantastic murder mysteries” (“Defining” 135), modelled on the work of Edgar Allan Poe. The great success of these cheap and highly portable volumes of pulp fiction soon instigated a wave of similar series being released in Italy by Mondadori’s competitors and many of these sought to capitalize on the recognizability of Mondadori’s yellow cover

design. It was not long before the commercial viability of this new genre began to attract Italian writers who, for generic consistency, were often published using English-language noms de plume.

Italy's political landscape in the interwar period provided another reason for the surge in homegrown literary *gialli*: in its bid to protect the nation from the corrupting influence of the United States, the fascist government led by Benito Mussolini had, as Needham notes, banned outright the importation and translation of American hard-boiled crime novels, "on the grounds that their corrupting influence and glamorisation of crime would negatively influence 'weak-minded' Italians" ("Defining" 135). The dictatorship's stance on the importation of American culture meant that many Italian arts industries received substantial funding and flourished under its rule; it was in this period that Mussolini built Cinecittà—the largest and, at the time of opening in 1937, most technologically advanced film studios in Europe. Such initiatives helped the government to maintain rigid standards for content and censorship, but they also sought to actively encourage and nurture nationalist pride through the production of Italian versions of cultural products that would otherwise have been imported. 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: on the one hand, imported and translated crime stories were dangerous, in that they opened the door to dissent and political transgression. At the same time, however, 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. From its very inception as a critical category, the *giallo* has occupied a curious state of in-betweenness.

As Mikel Koven has pointed out, in Italian "the term *giallo* acts as a metonym for the entire mystery genre" (2), so when, in 1962, director Mario Bava's Hitchcockian black and white murder mystery *The Girl Who Knew Too Much* was released, it was described as a *giallo*. This instantly apparent link to the literary genre also meant that Bava's film came to be known to many as the first "true" *giallo* film—or the place in which particular narrative and formal structures first coalesce to produce the cinematic genre. This basic narrative structure involves a protagonist who, after becoming an eyewitness to a violent murder, takes on the role of amateur detective. The murder witnessed is invariably one of a series of killings by a perpetrator whose identity the amateur detective works to uncover. Much of what comes to be known as the *giallo* genre's iconography is not developed until two years later, through Bava's 1964 *giallo*, *Blood*

and *Black Lace*. It is in this second film that the level of violence escalates and we are introduced to what will become an archetypal characterization of the *giallo* killer: a mysterious, faceless figure who wears a black coat, a wide-brimmed hat, and, most famously, a pair of black leather gloves.

If Bava is responsible for establishing the codes of the cinematic *giallo*, director Dario Argento is most often credited with their refinement and popularization. His 1970 directorial debut, *The Bird with the Crystal Plumage* took Bava's blend of detection and stylized violence, twisted it in the direction of its contemporary art cinema, and became an international success. This confirmation of the financial viability of the genre set off a wave of *giallo* film production in Italy, with dozens of films being made relatively quickly and with fairly limited budgets. These were the conditions of production from which the corpus of the cinematic *giallo* genre emerged.

The approach I bring to this body of understudied films mirrors the unfolding significance they've had in my life, and, just like the narrative of *Amer*, this story pivots on three significant moments, or contexts. In the first, I'm a young teenager, asleep in my bed in Melbourne, Australia, late on a Friday night, when my father wakes me by whispering, "It's already started!" We sit on the couch wrapped in blankets in the dark, transfixed by the television screen, where the wind blows through the cemetery of the bucolic Italian town Buffalora, in the opening scene of *Dellamorte Dellamore* (Michele Soavi, 1994). This wasn't the first Italian horror film I'd ever seen, but it was probably the second. So, it was the moment when Italian horror, as a distinct category, crystallized in my mind, as well as the moment I decided I wanted to see as many Italian horror movies as I could. This obsession was nurtured by the late-night television programming of the Australian Special Broadcasting Service (SBS), whose emphasis on cultural diversity more broadly defined not only my introduction to Italian horror, but to Italian cinema itself.

Next, I'm nineteen, sitting on the floor in the summertime, flipping through a housemate's collection of stolen rental videos. They're mostly American slasher-cycle films made in the 1980s—video nasties like *The Burning* (Tony Maylam, 1981). But there is also a copy of *Deep Red* (1975), by Italian director Dario Argento. This part of the story I've told already elsewhere (see Kannas), but Argento's film played a significant role in my decision to take Italian Cinema as part of my arts degree at Monash University. For one glorious semester I spend my days watching Roberto Rossellini's *Rome, Open City* (1945) and Federico's Fellini's *La Dolce Vita* (1960), and my nights watching Argento's *Suspiria* (1977) and

Lucio Fulci's *The Beyond* (1981). I love it all, but this double life begins to generate some complex questions about the relationship between national cinemas and genre film.

In the final sequence, I'm twenty-three. Having just submitted my honors thesis exploring the notion of "operatic violence" as it relates to Argento's work, I sit down to review the year I have just spent focusing on the stylization of violence and trying to articulate what marked Italian horror as distinct from the other (mostly American) horror movies I had seen. I had watched wonderful movies about witches, zombies, and vampires, but what had become most interesting was the formal experimentation and reflexive tendencies that recurred through a particular subset of films revolving around crime and detection. I read photocopied cult film fanzines, trawled through online forums, and ordered bad quality DVD dupes and old VHS tapes via the internet—all of which pointed towards the existence of an Italian horror-crime-detection hybrid that could also be understood as a distinct genre. Where had it been hiding all of this time?

Because I had understood Italian horror first as Italian cinema, rather than "horror," the *giallo's* near or total absence from key critical texts on Italian national cinema had surprised me as a university student. I soon came to realize that the "Italianness" of these films was marked by a sense of cultural illegitimacy. Unlike the canonized art cinema of directors like Fellini and Antonioni, *giallo* genre films were not seen as texts that make valuable contribution to discourses of Italian national cinema or identity. But the case of the *giallo* prompts us to question how the legitimacy of canonized Italian cinema has also determined the genre film's cultural value. Despite discourses of nation having had the power to marginalize the *giallo* genre from canonized histories of Italian cinema, a recent and traceable surge in critical and popular interest in *giallo* films—particularly in English-speaking contexts—demonstrates how a genre's status is never fixed. Retrospective festivals and *giallo* film seasons have propelled these once marginalized films into the critical spotlight. As a case study, the *giallo* thus also demonstrates how shifting audience and reception contexts have the power to reshape the reputation, status, and cultural value of popular cinema.

If my childhood fascination with Italian horror has helped to structure the questions I've asked of these films, so too has it affected my methodology. My encounters with these films did not occur in their country of production or in their native language; I discovered *giallo* films on the other side of the world, via sometimes censored versions on

late-night Australian television, illegally recorded videotapes and cheaply purchased duped discs, up to forty years after the films were made. My reading of the Italian *giallo* has been structured by English-language cult film canons and discourses, and this has fundamentally affected the definition(s) of *giallo* I work with, as well as the selection of films discussed. If the descriptor “*giallo*” in Italian is a broadly applied generic term for crime fiction and detection narratives, used to refer both to films and literature, the use of this Italian word in English-language cult cinema discourse connotes a much more specific, if permeable, corpus of film texts. This critical category is delineated not only through the presence of crime or detection narratives, but also via a particular periodization. The high-volume Italian genre film production context that delivered Mario Bava’s early *gialli* in the 1960s facilitated what is sometimes read as genre cross contamination, so that the *giallo* film as it is understood in English-language discourses contains not only elements of crime or detection, but of the horror film, too. This periodization, along with the influence of this critical category’s most revered directors, Bava, Argento, and, increasingly, Lucio Fulci, also contributes significantly to the aesthetic and film style that comes to be associated with the Italian *giallo* film as it is understood by cult cinema discourses. The films I use for close textual analysis all speak to this particular definition of the *giallo* genre, as opposed to the broader Italian definition.

The shape of this book is asymmetric. The first part emphasizes the complex and ever-shifting nature of genre as it applies to the *giallo*, and the second explores some of the patterns of meaning that the generic structure opens up. The movement of this body of films through the critical shifts in each chapter is designed to recall the archetypal *giallo* formal motif: the zoom. Traversing space and time, this diachronic approach reviews the contestation around definition of this slippery group of films, but aims to move closer and closer to what constitutes its particular internal logic.

Chapter 1 uses the *giallo* as a case study to investigate the characteristics of genre as a system, by working through a number of models that scholars and theorists have applied to film genres in order to understand how they work. Building on theoretical frameworks developed by Rick Altman and Steve Neale, I aim to show that the *giallo* is uniquely positioned to highlight the limitations of evolutionary models of genre and, in fact, calls for a new conceptualization of the system that can account for the complexity of genre behavior. I argue that this is possible, and I draw on the mechanics of the kaleidoscope to help us understand how the

system of genre produces ever-shifting, potentially infinite constellations of meaning, while simultaneously generating and maintaining patterns of recognizable family resemblances.

Chapter 2 maps a reception history of the *giallo* to consider how subsequent audiences and reception contexts have participated in what Rick Altman calls “regeneration” (*Film/Genre*). Evoking the dawn of the age of home video, this chapter is interested in how English-language audiences of the *giallo* helped to build and maintain the genre canon both as a concept and as an archive. Here I draw on newspaper reviews, fanzines, promotional material, cover artwork, and online forum discussion of *giallo* films in order to demonstrate how the process of regeneration renders *giallo* as a cult film genre. I also consider Jeffrey Sconce’s work on paracinema in order to conceptualize the oppositional taste cultures in which Italian *giallo* films often find themselves participating. While such oppositional cultures have since been characterized as those that limit the texts they celebrate, here I position them as communities with fundamental agency in the process of generating and maintaining interest in such marginalized material.

Chapter 3 begins the second part of the book, which is interested in patterns of meaning generated through the genre system that relate to the critique of modernity. First I consider the cinematic city as it is imagined in the *giallo* films *The Case of the Bloody Iris* (Giuliano Carnimeo, 1972), *The Fifth Cord* (Luigi Bazzoni, 1971), *The Black Belly of the Tarantula* (Paolo Cavara, 1971), and *Tenebrae* (Argento, 1982), taking inspiration from Guiliana Bruno’s idea of the city as a space that, much like genre, is constantly shape-shifting. I begin by considering how the *giallo* city is related to the city of *film noir*, using the concept of centrifugal space as defined by Edward Dimendberg to describe an increasingly decentralized city. I argue that *giallo* films, through their particular use of centrifugal space, both establish continuity between and distinguish themselves from earlier cinemas of crime and detection. Using Walter Benjamin’s work on modernity and interiors, as well as Siegfried Kracauer’s essay “The Hotel Lobby,” this chapter reflects upon the architecture and living spaces of the *giallo* world, and suggests that their participation in the modernist aesthetic is characterized by their “lateness.” The lack of warm domestic or personal spaces in *gialli* fuels a tone of ambivalence in these films, which I suggest reflects the tension at the heart of modernity itself.

Chapter 4 follows Nora, the protagonist of Bava’s *The Girl Who Knew Too Much*, as well as Sam Dalmas, Argento’s amateur detective in *The Bird with the Crystal Plumage* (1971), to consider how these characters

function as avatars of urban experience in the late-modern *giallo* city. In both films, the role of amateur detective is fulfilled by an outsider, or tourist figure, who is ideally positioned to experience the city as a multifaceted construct. Drawing on Tom Gunning's work on cinema and modernity, this chapter argues that the *giallo* protagonist moves through three scopic regimes associated with modernity and urban experience: those of the *flâneur*, the *baudad*, and, finally, the detective.

Chapters 3 and 4 consider the *giallo* film's engagement with the conditions of modernity, but chapter 5 moves further in to explore the expression of this at the level of film style. It suggests that, despite the history of theoretical opposition between genre film and cinematic modernism, the *giallo* film's artistic critique of modernity is characteristically modernist. The complex history of defining cinematic modernism is explored through the prism of Susan Stanford Friedman's notion of "definitional excursions," where the project of fixing definitions is regarded with caution. This chapter foregrounds the formal strategies, such as reflexivity and abstraction, used in *gialli* to illustrate how these popular genre films use the same mechanics of cinematic modernism found in their contemporary art cinema. Here I seek to emphasize how cinematic modernism has so often been equated with the "masterpiece" that the genre film's valuable contribution to its discourses have been obscured. The final section of this chapter attempts to come to terms with the *giallo*'s particular engagement with cinematic modernism, and suggests that the *giallo* genre's baroque stylization and sense of decay articulate modernity's own *fin de siècle* moment.

Finally, a note on titles. Fans of the genre will be familiar with the typically evocative and often baroque film titles characteristic of *giallo* cinema; these are sometimes, but not always, translations from the Italian. *Giallo* films were also commonly given alternative titles for various international markets. For clarity, titles in this book reflect the film titles used most commonly in English-language cult cinema discourses, with Italian and alternative titles given in the filmography where relevant.