
I WAS A TEENAGE SURFER ZOMBIE FROM MARS

A BEGINNER'S GUIDE TO CULT CINEMA

Andrew Graves

Week 9: Italian and Spanish Oddities

Dario Argento

- Frustration/confusion – often sexual
- Kafkaesque breakdowns in communication
- Innovative use of sound
- Style
- Use of colour
- Lighting
- Fluid '*Hitchcockian*' use of camera and camera angles
- Often referred to as the Italian Hitchcock
- He presents the audience with a mystery
- The narrative – never really the point of Argento's features – is broken into a thousand pieces and offered in small segments which often don't appear to make any sense in a traditional manner
- The conclusion is usually dealt with incredibly quickly in the form of exposition (as in *Psycho*), yet this isn't really the point – Argento's films are strange journeys – the end destination is often meaningless

'The Animal Trilogy'

- *The Bird with the Crystal Plumage*
- *The Cat o' Nine Tails*
- *Four Flies on Grey Velvet*

Suspiria (1977) And Disney

- "Disney's hidden reverse" - Linda Schulte-Sasse
- Folkloric stock characters
- Protagonist on a quest – who will lose her innocence
- Helper characters
- A malevolent maternal trio
- Madame Blanc – echoes Disney's 'black queen'
- Like Disney, Argento shows no interest in creating a reality – this is a dark fairytale
- Style over plot

A Dark Fairytale

- A maiden/princess arrives at a strange house in the rain
- The opening scene makes it clear that the young girl is on a quest/journey
- Magic is a factor

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Suspiria (1977)

“...we were trying to reproduce the color of Walt Disney's Snow White; it has been said from the beginning that Technicolor lacked subdued shades, was without nuances—like cut-out cartoons.”

Dario Argento

Caligari and Suspiria

- Twisted, deliberately distorted perspectives
- Unexpected angles
- Not a hint of nature is allowed in to distract from the spectral set design

Kafka and Suspiria

‘...in that his subjects enter a sometimes bureaucratized, anonymous world where they become easily disoriented and helper figures are decidedly unhelpful.’

Linda Schulte-Sasse

- Multiple taxis pass Suzy, stranded in the rain
- The cab driver ignores her, refuses to help her with the luggage – this foreshadows a later, more serious breakdown in communications
- Employees don't understand the language and speak in incomprehensible tongues
- Clues disappear
- Telephones don't work
- Authorities speak plainly enough but most harbour dirty secrets.

Gothic Spaces

- The Dance Academy is the main setting “the terrible place” – according to Carol Clover’s *taxonomy of horror*.
- Made to look unreal
- Red – the most semiotically-charged colour (anger/lust/love/danger/horror) appears throughout

The Dance Academy

- The house is on the attack – bats/sharp wire coils
- There is also a suggestion that the house is sick or rotting – maggots fall from the ceiling

Music

There are few moments of relaxation in this horribly effective fantasy thriller which puts the nerves to severe test. The gory ravings of Brian De Palma seem almost reserved next to these blood-spattered displays...a modern baroque style that owes much to the musical soundtrack.”



***Suspiria* and Music CONT...**

"I thought and still think that Suspiria was a great pop opera. We needn't have spoken in the film, we could have sung. It was all so closely tied up to the suggestiveness of the images and the colours...Also there was this unusual music...the whispering, the chattering, the noises. It was great opera."

Stefania Casini

Italian Horror

- The realm of seventies and eighties Italian horror cinema is a convoluted place.
- Rammed with rip-offs, sequels, unofficial spin-offs, multi-titled products, dubs, redubs, cuts, edits and ever-changing re-badged versions of the same thing.
- And yet it is also a place of genius, shock and awe and paradigm-shifting marvels.
- Directors like Dario Argento and Lucio Fulci who had established themselves making smart, murder mysteries and Giallo features, taking up the mantle where the great Mario Bava had left off, soon drifted towards a more traditional style of supernatural horror with a distinctly continental surreal twist.
- Argento especially, would place himself at the centre of this unmistakably European movement. Pictures like *Deep Red* (1975), *Inferno* (1980) and of course the masterful *Suspiria* (1977) were awash with lush technicolour gore, intricately composed cinematography and mind-boggling narratives full of shattered puzzles, red herrings and horrific death sequences.
- Fulci too would weave his magic into the horror landscape combining out and out splatter with atmospheric Lovecraftian chills, producing the Poe adaptation *The Black Cat* (1981), and his much-loved *Gates of Hell* trilogy encompassing *The City of the Living Dead* (1980), *The Beyond* (1981) and *The House by the Cemetery* (1981).

***Dawn of the Dead* (1978)**

- Though the much more outwardly political *Dawn of the Dead* (1978), with its often talked about consumerism critique, was a colourful, richly entertaining zombie flick, inspiring another four official instalments, it would also open up the gates of hell to a whole other subset of movies quick to associate themselves with Romero's original *Night of the Living Dead* continuation.
- To get the project off the ground Romero turned to horror master Dario Argento and his Italian financiers.
- While they allowed Romero to make the film he wanted to make, in exchange, Argento requested that he be allowed to release his own cut for the European market.

***Zombi* (1978)**

- Re-christened *Zombi*, Argento unleashed his version in Italy before Romero's American edition had hit the picture houses, and the Italian director's less jokey alternate edit with a Goblin soundtrack proved to be a such a hit that an official sequel was rushed into production.

Zombi 2 AKA Zombie Flesh Eaters (1979)

- The use of the word 'official' perhaps only rings as factually accurate in Argento's home country, where copyright laws at the time allowed for any new picture to be passed off as 'official sequel'.
- The upshot was that an unrelated script written by Dardano Sacchetti was quickly repurposed and eventually given to *Don't Torture a Duckling* (1972) director, Lucio Fulci.
- Though it undoubtedly had cash-in written all over it, and it could easily have been a dodgy segue into throwaway exploitation garbage, *Zombi 2 AKA Zombie Flesh Eaters* (1979) became something special in its own right.
- Fulci, producer Fabrizio De Angelis's second choice as director after Enzo G Castellari had turned it down, was able to bring his keen eye and considerable experience to the project, giving the piece a slightly off-kilter, dreamlike quality, juxtaposed with horrific special effects.
- Mixing living dead splatter and eye-piercing horror with Giallo style unease and voodoo spookiness, *Zombie Flesh Eaters* played out more like an odd remake of *Island of Lost Souls* (1932) than Romero's urban social commentary.
- Fulci and crew took the zombie legend back to the faraway island using thirties features like *White Zombie* (1932) and Val Lewton's *I Walked with a Zombie* (1943) as obvious inspiration only with an accompanying all too modern blood-spattered veneer.
- And while it may have begun as a rushed attempt to spearhead a temporary fascination, it quickly developed a legend of its own, becoming not only a controversial video nasty but also the first outing in yet another zombie franchise.

Ian McCulloch

- Glasgow born Ian McCulloch, future star of *Alien* (1979) copycat, *Contamination* (1980), and *Zombie Holocaust* (1980) would begin his fairly short-lived Italian exploitation cinema period when he met Fulci for a supposed audition, although that experience, according to the young thesp had largely been about whether McCulloch was still blonde and good looking enough, with the director paying little regard to his actual acting chops.

Production

- As with many other Italian features of the 60s and 70s, to save on expensive production time, *Zombie Flesh Eaters* would have its voice track and sound added in post.
- This technique carried the advantage that any movie could be easily distributed to other territories, they being easily being dubbed into alternative languages.
- It also had the bonus that the actors on set who may be speaking in multiple tongues didn't necessarily need to learn their lines.
- However, being trained in the theatre and not used to this way of making cinema, McCulloch often felt out of his depth and slightly disorientated, placing him at odds with other cast members who interpreted his behaviour as being standoffish or whiney.

- There could be other clashes on set too as Fulci, rushed and bloody-minded was wont to lose his temper with certain actors, particularly topless scene-stealer Aretta Gay (Susan Barratt), who was especially prone to the director's fiery outbursts.

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***Zombie Flesh Eaters* (1979) CONT...**

- The look can largely be attributed to special effects make-up man Giannetto De Rossi.
- While Tom Savini's zombies in *Dawn of the Dead* may in retrospect look a little hokey, acting more as green/blue plastered metaphors than actual members of the living dead, the creatures in *Zombie Flesh Eaters*, really do resemble corpses.
- Though much of Fulci's film is harking back to a black and white past in terms of story, the monsters of the piece belong to the future.
- This movie and its maggoty, rotting horde of killer geeks, alongside often-overlooked Spanish production *The Living Dead at the Manchester Morgue* (1971), unquestionably helped provide the blueprint for a host of features to come.
- Not only that, De Rossi's ghouls were perhaps the first to explore the idea that these inexplicable anomalies would present themselves in different stages of decay.
- It wonderfully captures both the fresh kill types as well as the more ancient relics on offer on Matul.
- Whereas many older depictions of the zombie present us with a fairly unchanging supernatural force, here De Rossi, through his excellent design work, forces us to watch these walking bodies as they go through the natural stages of decomposition while still being unsettlingly reanimated.
- Buried for generations, going back to the conquistador era, they more resemble crumbling mummies than anything on offer in other exemplars, these disquieting dry husks seem to have only the echo of humanity left.
- Where Romero's zombies held up a mirror to the living, here the empty eye sockets stare deep into our souls, affording us, in turn, a glimpse into hell. We can almost taste the rancid mouldiness as these things stumble closer to the camera in a genuinely threatening moment of blind, awful terror.
- Yet as magnificent as it looks, the horror may not have had quite the desired visual effect had it not been coupled with the bizarre soundscape which accompanies throughout. This is largely due to Fabio Frizzi's oddly schizophrenic music score.
- From the iconic opening theme with its thumping but weirdly eccentric electronica, through to the exotic drum work and oddly Beatles-esque flourishes, the music acts as a hypnotically charged invite, as we walk dazedly into the mad world which Fulci and team have created, skilfully combining echoes of horror, science fiction and lost worlds.
- As with many other Italian productions of the era, the use of post-production Foley, give the piece a heightened, largely unreal feel but more than that, it is the specific choice of certain SFX which give it a unique quality.
- Whereas many American slashers of the same era, concentrated on the 'wetter' elements of horror, highlighting the splatter and squelches of bloodletting, with *Zombie Flesh Eaters*, often the opposite is true.
- The decision to ponder the 'dryness' of age and death, creating a creeping, bone-crunching resonance of ancient evil, is both fascinating and deeply effective.
- But though *Zombie Flesh Eaters* is, a collaborative production, its strength lies largely in how it makes us feel, and while this has much to do with what we hear and see, it is unquestionably also down to the almost indescribable atmosphere which grows as the film staggers toward its grisly climax.

- Fulci, an experienced practitioner with almost thirty years of industry work behind him, brings all of his considerable talents into play, elevating this from throwaway cash-in to lasting classic.

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- And while it may be mocked for its lack of subtlety in parts, its slightly leery feel and ludicrous *Jaws* (1975) nods with its shark vs zombie sequence, the director undoubtedly also brings us something special.
- From its stomach-churning sequences, as with the infamous eye-gouging moment, which is as hard to watch now as it was then, through to the use of Giallo style camera work helping to suggest unpleasant claustrophobia in times of extreme terror, it never lets up.
- It is also not afraid to revel in many influences happily tripping from splatter to Frankenstein, to H.G. Wells without skipping a beat.
- And while it can now be enjoyed and celebrated over and over again due to its constant re-releases and updated versions on different new and improved formats, for those of us who experienced it the first time around, it will unquestionably be linked to its video nasty representation with many being unable to separate the finished piece from the poor-quality pirate versions they were only able to access for several years
- And yet its legacy is clear. Savini's effects on *Day of the Dead* were graphically much better than what was offered previously and it's hard not to surmise that his upped game was partly inspired by the kind of spectacles he witnessed in *Zombie Flesh Eaters*. Indeed, even Zach Snyder's *Dawn of the Dead* remake seems to reference Fulci as much as it does Romero, particularly with its chilling post-credits boat sequence.
- Though *Zombie Flesh Eaters* inspired at least two 'unofficial', official sequels with Andrea Binanche's *Burial Ground AKA Zombi III: Nights of Terror* (1981) and *Return of the Zombies AKA Zombi 3* (1988) as well as one obvious but highly enjoyable rip-off *Zombie Holocaust* (1980), the 'official', official instalment wouldn't burst out of the grave till nineteen eighty-eight, almost a decade after Fulci had helmed the first outing.

Tombs of the Blind Dead (1972)

- Directed by Amanda de Ossorio
 - Written by Amanda de Ossorio
 - Produced by José Antonio, Pérez Giner and Salvadore Romero
 - Cinematography by Pablo Ripoll
 - Edited by Jose Antonio Rojo
 - Music by Anton Garcon Brill
-
- Spanish horror efforts from *Who Can Kill a Child* to more recent work like *Rec*, often carry a subtle of not so subtle social commentary which is not surprising given the country's turbulent political past.

- Amando de Ossorio's *Tombs of the Blind Dead* featuring a zombie religious order murderously running amok, might be seen as an attack on Catholic Franco and his dying regime