

Bodies of Desire and Bodies in Distress

Bodies of Desire and Bodies in Distress:
The Golden Age of Italian Cult Cinema
1970-1985

By

Xavier Mendik

**CAMBRIDGE
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P U B L I S H I N G

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This book is dedicated with much love to Caroline and Zena

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FOREWORD

ENZO G. CASTELLARI



My memory of Italy during the 1970s was a strange memory, because I was out of the country between 1967 and 72, when I was shooting movies all around the world. As a result, I don't remember the famous 1968, with all of the student revolutions. I didn't live directly in those times because I was often outside of Europe filming. The only memory I have of that time was returning to Rome to pick up a copy of my graduation certificate in architecture, only to find that this university was the first to be destroyed in this kind of student revolution, so I started to hate that times!

Of course this was the time of the *Red Brigades*, with the kidnappings and so many horrible things. The Italian people were living with the pain of what was happening. They were living with the fear to go just outside of their door, in case they would be murdered. It was a terrible time as I remember. In fact I recall that all of us had permission to carry guns and to use them for our own defence. I remember when I was filming my movie *The Big Racket*, all of the crew were armed with real guns, and we would

be on shooting practice in the lunch breaks, so this tells you that Italy at this time was all a big mess!

I did all of my best movies during the period that became known as the *Anni di piombo*. In 1973 I did *High Crime*, in 1974 I did *Street Law* and so on. Although this was a very political time, throughout these years I had never been political. I am still never involved in any politics. This is a problem for my career, perhaps! But in those 1970s movies, critics considered me to have been completely fascist for showing what was happening to Italian citizens during this time. This was especially so with the press for *Street Law*. Yet in Italy during this period there were idealistic communes where the young communists lived. I was once invited to one of those very left-wing communes to screen my film *Street Law* on a big projector. In fact, the left-wing audience loved it! But everybody in the press considered this film to be fascist, and also considered me as the director to be especially fascist! But I see it like this. Imagine one morning I go to the bank to pay in my salary. Suddenly there is a hold-up. They hit me. They steal my money. They take me away and assault me. Imagine, I am the victim of this terrible violence, but the police do nothing to help me. Of course, I just want my revenge, so I start to take out my revenge personally. I want to start my vendetta, but that does not make me a fascist.

If anything, what disturbed critics was the fact that my movies were exactly the picture of that time in Italy. They reflected the fear that was there every day, for everybody, you lived with it! There was fear right at your door. Every day you would go out and never be sure you would make it home alive. There were the Red Brigades, the Black Brigades, the Crimson Brigades and so on. So you were so afraid all the time.

But while I could not resolve the situation in reality, I created the chance just for two hours, to resolve it in my movies. At least for my spectators, the fear, the problems, the terrorism could be solved. What was so perfect about those movies, was that if you look at one of them, you really got inside the mind of the leading character. This was because his fears, his anxieties matched the fears of Italian people at this time. So, it was a kind of exchange between the Italian actors and the Italian people.

This exchange also occurred in a kind of films that critics hated, which are now the kinds of movies considered as cult movies or B-movies. I was once at a press conference with Quentin Tarantino, and a critic asked me

“what is it like to work in B-movies?” The answer is that it gives you tremendous freedom and the power to create. I have done this throughout my career and hope to continue to do so in the future. So I am very proud of the labels of cult and B-movie. Whatever we mean by ‘B-movies’, I am proud to work in them. As Quentin Tarantino and I said at our press conference: “B is for B movie, B is for beautiful!”

—**Enzo G. Castellari - Director**

INTRODUCTION

BODIES OF DESIRE *AND* BODIES OF DISTRESS BEYOND THE ‘ARGENTO EFFECT’

One of the problems in dealing with film and television programmes in terms of their cult status lies in defining precisely what ‘cult’ means in such a context. Does it simply refer to a congregation of fans or enthusiasts around particular cultural texts, or is there a cult quality within the texts themselves, some property that encourages or facilitates an audience’s cultish devotion? Or is it a mixture of the two...

—Peter Hutchings, ‘The Argento Effect’¹

Introduction

Over the last decade, critics and theorists have begun to develop a distinct body of knowledge to consider those texts and auteurs previously dismissed as examples of cult, ‘trash’ or ‘bad’ cinema. The development of this new line of enquiry has been evidenced by the publication of key polemics and manifestos which seek to define and divide the cult image from other types of cinematic activity (such as the celluloid mainstream), whilst also exploring some of the national *and* psychic tensions that these texts come to exemplify. One of the earliest and most influential accounts in this area was Jeffrey Sconce’s article ‘Trashing the Academy’, which not only formulated the cult-friendly-category of the ‘paracinematic’, but also identified certain classes of marginal texts which are frequently shunned on grounds of technical or representational ‘excess’, or simply because they are deemed as an affront to the boundaries of ‘good taste’. Sconce’s analysis focused attention on how paracinema’s emphasis on “cinematic style and excess”² (most frequently figured through atypical and confrontational gender or racial codes), can effectively represent a challenge to prevalent ideologies and taste arbiters. However, he also recognised the crucial role that fans and academics have in rereading these often subcultural and subversive texts. He notes: “The caustic rhetoric of paracinema suggests a pitched battle between a guerrilla band of cult film viewers and an elite core of would-be cinematic taste makers.”³ Indeed, in

challenging the presumed ideological basis of this cinematic orthodoxy, Sconce makes the revision of these oft marginal texts a near-political requirement, noting that:

Paracinematic taste involves a reading strategy that renders the bad into the sublime, the deviant into the defamiliarized, and in so doing calls attention to the aesthetic aberrance and stylistic variety evident but routinely dismissed in the many subgenres of trash cinema.⁴

In contravention of these narrow ideological prescriptions, the author argues that the cult text represents “an aesthetic of vocal confrontation”,⁵ whose narrative features and specific patterns of audience identification require further investigation.

It is the interrogation of these marginal texts, auteurs and audiences which has preoccupied cult film theorists since the publication of Sconce’s article. In this respect, the academy has not merely been ‘trashed’, but that process of ransacking has undoubtedly expanded the acceptance of certain marginal texts by this critical community. However, this new agenda of trash textuality has (until recently) been dominated by attempts to reclaim Anglo-American objects of study. Indeed, following the case studies of American pulp auteurs such as Ed Wood Jnr and H.G. Lewis provided by Sconce’s original analysis, other prominent examples of this agenda have included Joan Hawkins’ project to redefine the American avant-garde along pulp lines (as seen in her volume *Cutting Edge*),⁶ as well as Eric Schaefer’s attempts to systematise Stateside sleaze in his historiographical account “*Bold! Daring! Shocking! True!*”: *A History of Exploitation Films 1919–1959*.⁷

Italy and the Argento Effect

Although Italy was a major producer of the kinds of text that Sconce’s analysis would classify under ‘cult’, ‘trash’ or ‘exploitation’ banners, theoretical receptions of their nationally-specific paracinema works have been limited to a narrow focus on those few individuals whose output has been fortunate enough to be valorised at an international level. Thus, when Peter Hutchings refers above to the ‘Argento Effect’ of Italian cult cinema, he can be seen as defining *both* the singular director, whose oeuvre has been the subject of the most sustained studies in this area, as well as a much wider (and arguably limiting) ‘Effect’, which has attempted to isolate Dario Argento’s cinema from wider Italian cult trends in this area. Expanding on Sconce’s original paracinema polemic, Hutchings notes several levels of immoderation in Argento’s cinema, which firstly “exceed

any narrative function and which go beyond the scenes of licensed or permitted excess in the mainstream".⁸ Noting the director's penchant for complex cinematography, elaborate lighting and sound design, Hutchings firstly argues that Argento's cinema exceeds generic definitions of the horror/thriller hybrid in which he operates, thus giving his cinema a countercultural aesthetic, which is often acknowledged by the attuned cult follower.

Arguably, this stylistic level of opulence differentiates Argento's films from 'standard' mainstream cinematic operations that cult film theorists tend to view as ideologically-laden. However, it is his well documented annexing of cinematographic brilliance with scenarios of sexual violence and mutilation that confirm a transgressive surplus as essential to the definitions of 'excess' that such cult texts contain. Thus, the Argento Effect speaks to those texts dominated not only by the "excessiveness and spectacle of the scenes of violence they contain",⁹ but also the ways in which these texts often subvert heteronormative presumptions (often through the trope of gender ambiguity), thus making them "potentially transgressive of certain sexual norms".¹⁰

Interestingly, Hutchings makes clear the potential division between academic and fan discourses in relation to Italian cult film auteurs such as Argento, noting that while the former group have characteristically focused on the potential gender disruptions within his work, the latter have largely turned their attention to elements of stylistic and expressionistic excess, which they feel often go unrecognised in the censorship Argento's work has endured.¹¹ To this end, fan discourses often employ journalistic associations which valorise their cherished cult object through an equation with more acknowledged and accepted cinematic figures. Thus, leading genre critic Alan Jones has frequently defined Argento as both "The Italian Hitchcock"¹² (in recognition of his ability to subvert genre expectations in the fashion of the acknowledged 'master of mystery'), whilst also dubbing him "The Horror Fellini"¹³ (for his ability to infuse elements of arthouse within the formulaic foundations of Eurotrash cinema).

While this willingness to consider Argento an unappreciated or unrecognised cult 'master' has now become a standard trope in many fan-oriented (and obsessive) paracinematic approaches, it is interesting to note the extent to which the Argento Effect has also become a mechanism through which academic discourses in this area have attempted to separate the director's output from his contemporaries in the Italian cult sphere. For instance, while similarly identifying an element of transgression in the "excess and grotesque"¹⁴ arena of Italian horror in which he operates,

Mary P. Wood is careful to separate Argento from other directors in this field, citing the decisive degree of authorial intent he retains over these unique cinematic visions. Writing in the volume *Italian Cinema*, Wood notes:

Argento has always had production control of his films which, from *L'uccello dalle piume di cristallo* (*The Bird with the Crystal Plumage*) ... covered their costs on the Italian market alone. Since 1982 Argento has both diversified into pulp film production by the company he owns and runs with his brother ... In common with other Italian *auteurs* he has moved into 'quality' genre and international distribution. His cult, international status ensures that his films maintain premium prices on the racks of video and DVD.¹⁵

Whilst it is important to acknowledge Argento's influence in the arena of Italian paracinema accounts (and one I would admit has certainly guided my own earlier interventions in this field), it is also crucial to recognise that the theoretical interest in his cinema has often occurred at the expense of a more thorough and sustained analysis of both textual patterns and gender configurations occurring in Italian cult film more generally. As Maitland McDonagh, author of the first published monograph on the director, has conceded:

You can't reasonably look at Argento's work without bearing in mind the contradictory context from which he springs: on the one hand, the practical Italian film industry, with its relentless emphasis on genre and its quick and dirty production practices; on the other, the cerebral world of film criticism, with its inevitable emphasis on analysis and intellectual distance.¹⁶

In this respect, *Bodies of Desire and Bodies in Distress: The Golden Age of Italian Cult Cinema 1970–1985* aims to expand existing debates around Italian paracinema and wider 'cult' representations of gender and subjectivity beyond the Argento Effect. I have chosen the period from 1970 to 1985 as a framework for the volume because during this period a number of significant Italian cult film directors, formats and icons emerged that retained a high degree of internal coherence and wider social impact, while also complicating representations of subjectivity and identity as currently theorised by film studies. Because of their repeated conflation of desire with scenarios of threat, murder or humiliation, I shall refer to these texts under the heading 'Bodies of Desire and Bodies in Distress', in explicit recognition of the fact that the narratives embodied a disturbing focus on sexual excess and annihilation, with scenes often directly presented to a fictionalised and shocked viewing audience. If it is

these features that defined the unique viewing experience of Italian cult cinema between 1970 and 1985, then it is also an experience which I feel requires further theorisation.¹⁷

Given his historical and international importance to this field, Dario Argento's output is certainly explored herein, but my interest is in situating his work alongside those less theorised 'low budget' directors (such as Umberto Lenzi, Aristide Massaccesi, Pupi Avati, Enzo G. Castellari and others), marginal icons (including Tomas Milian, Franco Nero and Laura Gemser) and 'disreputable' genres (including rape-and-revenge, erotica, rogue cop and post-apocalypse cycles). Through these case studies, I wish to see if any textual regularities and shared representational strategies can be defined which assist in the wider understanding of these works.

However, while my explicit aim is to expand research in this area beyond the current Argento Effect, it is not my intention to analyse *every* Italian cult film director, icon or genre between 1970 and 1985 (which would be impossible, even given the relative luxury that an extended monograph format permits). As a result, some key traditions of Italian paracinema (such as the infamous cannibal, zombie and possession cycles of the late 1970s and early 1980s) have been omitted from the current study, although their thematic concerns and representational features clearly fit with the wider assertions about this area of cult activity that I wish to explore. However, I wish to use the indicative case studies contained within this book to assess their dual psychic and social particularities, so that key criteria may be derived that can then be applied to additional Italian paracinema formats. I also make explicit from the outset that I do *not* intend to cover the wider international reception of these works vis-à-vis debates on censorship policy or structures of state control. While I concur that censorship and the suppression of 'excess' is often central to "the marginal status which has been seen by some as a necessary precondition of cultdom",¹⁸ I also feel that these debates have been well represented by both policy analysts and audience studies specialists alike.¹⁹

From an Italian Argento to an Italian Unconscious

As the title *Bodies of Desire and Bodies in Distress* implies, my methodological orientation involves an expansion of those psychoanalytic and gender-based approaches currently used to dissect Argento's cinema, which I will use to explore other areas of Italian paracinema. I would here concur with Peter Hutchings' observation, that these approaches are best

viewed as “symptomatic, as a window on themes and issues that do not pertain to Argento alone”.²⁰ By extending the use of psychoanalytic methodologies to these marginal cycles, icons and auteurs of Italian cult film, I am interested in exploring the extent to which these symptomatic readings can be linked with existing cine-psychoanalytical and clinical accounts, which situate representations of female sexuality in wider systems of masculine (or what Jacques Lacan termed Symbolic) ideology. Equally, I am also interested to explore how the recurrent theme of the traumatised male viewer in all of the film formats surveyed may also indicate the extent to which the Italian cult experience evidences fissures in masculine subjectivity. Finally, by identifying 1970–1985 as the period of review, I am interested in exploring how the symptomatic readings that Hutchings identifies evidence the intersection between psychic traumas and wider social tensions occurring in Italy at this time.

Either alone (or in combination with socio-historical accounts), psychoanalysis arguably remains the most dominant methodology used to consider Italian cult cinema. Specifically, the perspective is used to address the abundant issues of unresolved infantile sexuality, which the Italian cult film frequently uses as a rationale for adult scenarios of transgression, with these illicit acts characteristically revealed via ambiguous flashbacks that conflate sexuality with threat, punishment and gender disorientation. By replicating scenarios that conflate the boundaries of desire and distress, these images evoke psychoanalytical notions of unresolved primal trauma, which impede both sexual and narrative progression. Indeed, as early as 1996, Adam Knee’s article ‘Gender, Genre and Argento’, highlighted the centrality of the primal scene (or fantasised access to parental relations) as a core component in the director’s work, with subsequent accounts building upon this interpretation. For instance, when discussing the ambiguous assault that the amateur detective Sam Dalmas witnesses in the art gallery opening to *L’uccello dalle piume di cristallo* (AKA *The Bird with the Crystal Plumage*, 1970), Knee notes:

The extreme (and, one suspects, erotic) nature of the protagonist’s fascination with and attachment to this scene becomes clearer as the film progresses: he repeatedly shows more interest in details of the investigation than in the amorous attentions of his girlfriend...²¹

It has been a willingness to expand the consideration of these unresolved primal tensions from Argento’s output to the Italian thriller format of the *giallo* in which he works that has dominated more recent interventions in this field. For instance, in his brief but important overview ‘Playing with Genre: An Introduction to the Italian *Giallo*’, Gary

Needham situates the development of the *giallo* cycle (from late 1920s literary product and imported detective fiction novelisations) to two specific periods of cinematic activity, occurring between 1963–1964 and 1970–1975 respectively. Arguably, the second period of development evidences the Argento Effect at an industrial level (with the international success of the director's debut film spawning a significant range of domestically produced emulations and unofficial sequels). While Needham's consideration of the *giallo* calls for an analysis based on "the various associations, networks, tensions and articulations of Italian cinema's textual and industrial specificity in the post-war period",²² he also complements this with an expansion of the psychoanalytic themes outlined above. Firstly, the author notes the term "*Testimone oculare*" as referencing Italian definitions for the label of eyewitness to a crime. However, the author notes that access to this traumatic visual 'scene' establishes a pattern of transgressive and illicit viewing that exceeds pure criminological scrutiny. Finding their basis in psychosexual trauma, these crimes characteristically conflate images of sexuality and violence, while establishing a pattern that intersects across intended narrative development. Importantly, the prominence of psychoanalysis in the *giallo* text extends to include characterisation, as evidenced by the sub-cycle of films that feature therapists having to adopt the role of detectives in order to resolve sexual wrongdoing. Equally, the symptomatic reading of such discourses extends to particular modes of excessive characterisation whereby "performances confirm that hysteria is always histrionic when it comes to Italian cinema".²³ While Needham concedes that the *giallo* is dominated by fractured female protagonists who are "either in therapy, have had therapy or are told that they *need* therapy",²⁴ it is noticeable that male heteronormative subjectivity is equally disturbed, with an abundance of represented feminine excess pushing the cycle into the realms of camp/queer identification.

Though psychoanalytic interpretations of cinema have a long established (and often contested) status within film studies research, these methods have proven extremely attractive to critics and analysts attempting to unpick and decode the extremes of horror and cult imagery. Implicit in these accounts is the idea that such derided trash templates facilitate the 'return of the repressed', with suppressed sexual and (anti) social childhood urges being gratified via the representational strategies of the genre (with these often being fed directly through the figure/body of the monster),²⁵ as well as through the subversive stylistic strategies that the medium employs to unsettle the adult and civilised status of the viewing subject. It is not within the remit of this current volume to explore the

wider applicability or use-value of psychoanalytic interpretation in relation to the cinematic image,²⁶ but rather to highlight the extent to which this methodology provides both an interpretive framework for understanding key themes within the texts under review, as well as a pivotal point of reference for Italian filmmakers and audiences engaged in the production and reception of these texts.

Indeed, it seems more than coincidence that Dario Argento's films have been most extensively explored as instances of psychosexual drama, than as examples of Italian cinematic culture, even by Italian critics themselves. Moreover, the filmmaker has himself acknowledged the importance of psychoanalysis to the creation of his narratives (with his comments on the use-value of this methodology being outlined in the interview I conduct with him that is reproduced in chapter five of the volume). Whilst Argento's interest in issues of sexual trauma and the complexities of masculine voyeurism have long been acknowledged, this psychoanalytic awareness extends beyond the personal interests of the director to reflect a far larger point of reference in Italy during the 1970s. In two recent contributions to the journal *International Forum of Psychoanalysis*, Marco Conci has begun to explore the long history of psychoanalysis within a specific Italian context. In his 2008 article 'Italian Themes in Psychoanalysis – International Dialogue and Psychoanalytic Identity', the author explores Freud's links to Italian psychoanalytic culture, as well as the wider national reception of this methodology. Conci concedes that while "It actually took many years for psychoanalysis to become established in Italy and for Italian psychoanalysts to gain international recognition as important intellectual players in their field",²⁷ the country's traditional emphasis on family structures, sibling drama and maternal dominance rendered it a natural, national home for the emergent discourse, not least by Freud himself. Here, Conci cites Freud's 1923 correspondence with Edoardo Weiss (the founding father of Italian psychoanalysis), in which he commented: "Have no doubt that there is a future for psychoanalysis in Italy too. You only have to wait for a suitable time."²⁸ Having already studied with Freud in Vienna, Weiss became central to the development of the discipline in Italy, publishing *Elementi di psicoanalisi* (AKA *Basic Concepts of Psychoanalysis*) in 1931. This volume was the first Italian account of the subject. It was closely followed by the formal reconstitution of the Società Psicoanalitica Italiana (Italian Psychoanalytic Society) in 1932, along with the formation of the journal *Rivista italiana di psicoanalisi*, which lasted from 1932 until 1934, when the publication was disbanded under the fascist regime. As a result, Weiss fled from Italy to America. For Conci, it was wider political pressure

(rather than a lack of national interest) which prevented the widespread dissemination of psychoanalysis in Italy during this period. As he states:

I should also add that it took our culture and society many years to emancipate themselves not only from the biased anti-modernity attitude of the Catholic Church and from the antiscientific brand of idealistic philosophy represented by Benedetto Croce (1866–1952), but also from Mussolini's (1922–1943) nationalistic and obscurantist regime.²⁹

Importantly, it was only when this 'anti-modernity' rhetoric was revised during the later economic revolution, that the Italian public's fascination with psychoanalysis was fully revealed.³⁰ Equally, as Conci notes in an earlier article 'Psychoanalysis and Italy: A Reappraisal', Italy also became a major European translator of psychoanalytic texts during this period, further evidencing the dissemination of this perspective into wider domestic culture.³¹ While Conci's comments make clear a nation clearly fascinated by debates around traumatic material bound by both violent and sexual excess, what remains as fascinating (from a critical perspective) is why this interest was heightened during the 1970s. Arguably, the loosening of certain censorship and moral codes certainly added to a wider public willingness to consume taboo material, but this still does not fully account for the unnerving connection between bodies of desire and bodies in distress that underpins the key genres surveyed in this volume.

A more appropriate method of interpretation would be to expand upon these accounts to align psychoanalysis with a historically attuned consideration of events occurring in Italy during the 1970s. Indeed, in his recent volume *La Dolce Morte: Vernacular Cinema and the Italian Giallo Film*, Mikel J. Koven adopts an innovative folklorist approach to the study of format, applying debates from oral culture to the series, as well as assessing how the phenomenon mirrored wider trends and tensions within Italian post-war society. Here, Koven divides distinct urban and rural (or vernacular) Italian audiences, with the latter revealing a resistance to *both* modernist modes of narration *and* the processes of modernisation which accompanied the Italian economic miracle of the post-war years. While acknowledging that the "[p]opular awareness of Freudian psychology permeates the psyches of these *giallo* killers",³² Koven goes on to reject this line of enquiry, concluding: "I remain unconvinced that audiences would actually care about such motivations."³³ However, this dismissal of psychoanalytic interpretations of the *giallo* does contain an interesting caveat which calls for a "recognition of past trauma on the contemporary Italian psyche".³⁴ Here, the author concedes that the repeated focus on

childhood states that bleed over into contemporary fears can be seen as “reflecting the more cultural explanation of 1970s Italian disassociation resulting from fascism, military defeat ... and post-war reconstruction”.³⁵

Although not fully explored in the rest of his volume, Koven’s comment does suggest potential intersections surrounding psychic and social trauma in relation to not only Argento’s films but the wider sphere of Italian cult cinema explored in this book. Indeed, to return to Conci’s consideration of the explosion of interest in psychoanalysis in 1970s Italy, it seems significant that he cites other contemporary concerns as provoking the public interest in the split subject: “since 1968 also in Italy we benefited from the development of a social critique based on psychoanalysis.”³⁶ Whether seen through the rapid and politicised growth of the Italian feminist movement (with its associated fears surrounding female sexual dominance), the catastrophic collapse of longstanding economic prosperity during the mid-1970s (with its concurrent traumas for male potency), or even the decade-long anxieties around terrorist outrages (which themselves evoke implicit concerns over the violent loss of subjectivity), this was clearly a period in which psychic and social terrors coalesced in the Italian mindset. Indeed, one of the most fruitful areas of research to impact on the current project remains recent accounts by Alan O’ Leary, Ruth Glynn and others³⁷, who have begun to reassess the impact of the so-called *Anni di piombo* or years of lead, in which terrorist fears dominated the Italian political and cultural landscape of the 1970s and mid 1980s. Here, a range of authors have noted that fears of insurrection were played out in predominantly populist and fictional formats that fused contemporary imagery of social turmoil within family dramas that often evoked traumas of castration, body wounding and fears around the female body. The project of the current volume will therefore be to assess not only the applicability of psychoanalysis to a range of key Italian cult film texts, but also to survey the extent to which social turmoil and psychic disturbance between 1970 and 1985 became recurrent features in the following chapter case studies under review.

Bodies of Desire and Bodies in Distress

In order to explore the shared social and psychic tensions embodied by the Italian cult film experience of the 1970s, I have organised this book into a series of case studies of key cycles, auteurs and icons, whose disturbing emphasis on bodies of desire and distress can be interpreted using psychoanalytic, gender-based and socio-cultural accounts where appropriate.

In my opening chapter, I offer an extended assessment of both Dario

Argento and key *giallo* titles produced during the 'classic' period of 1970–1975. As the most celebrated area of Italian paracinema, it is necessary to situate these texts in light of the theoretical assumptions that I have begun to identify above. Central to this discussion will be my consideration of the extent to which the staging of a primal scene encounter remains at the traumatic core of the cycle. Drawing on Freud's celebrated case study of the patient who became known as the Wolf Man, I shall outline the key features of primal trauma, as well as discussing the extent to which the presentation of an infantile compulsion (conflating scenes of sexuality and implied threat or violence) are reproduced by both the content and structure of the *giallo*. Although psychoanalysis has often been employed as a mechanism through which to read such scenes of transgression within crime fiction, it is my intention to use these accounts (derived from not only Jacques Lacan, but also Geraldine Pederson-Krag and Slavoj Žižek), to provide a more sustained analysis of the cycle under review. In particular, I shall consider two key Argento titles where a past scene of sexual violation initiates contemporary carnage, as well as revealing the inability of male authority figures to foreclose the endless circulation of perversions they entail.

The second chapter moves from the return of the repressed to the return of the rural, by offering the first theoretical consideration of a cycle I will term as the *Mezzogiorno giallo*. The term *Mezzogiorno* (used to connote a wider set of nationally specific debates that surround the concept of the Southern problem), has a long trajectory within Italian studies, but has yet to be fully realised in discussions of cult material. As I reveal in the course of this chapter, the *Mezzogiorno giallo* is in fact a cycle that can be traced to widespread social fears about Italian unification and concurrent mythologies of the Italian Southerner as barbaric and uncivilised. By referencing a variety of historical sources, I discuss the extent to which the Italian South has become configured as a site of mythical fears, impacting on representations of the landscape and its inhabitants. In order to explore these tensions further, I identify a series of specific tropes used in Southern *giallo* depictions (which include the motif of a fictionalised journey, the fusion of dramatic and comic inserts, as well as a specific coda for depicting a rural physiology). While these representations clearly draw parity with established Italian fears surrounding concepts of geographical perversity, I also explore the extent to which '*Mezzogiornosploitation*' reproduces key features of the primal scene, by presenting bodies of desire and bodies in distress within a specifically rural context.

Chapter three moves from the rural to the railroad, considering a

significant cycle of Italian rape-and-revenge dramas that were popular between 1975 and 1980. Although briefly defined in Mikel J. Koven's book under the label of 'suspense-thriller *giallo*', these titles reveal a number of significant differences to the main variants the author outlines in his volume *La Dolce Morte*. Not only do these later entries eschew the detective element of the *giallo* by clearly identifying their transgressors at an early stage, but they also replace their constructions of air travel and mobility as signifiers of liberation, with a nihilistic concentration on road and rail journeys as routes to rape and victimisation. As a result, the suspense thriller *giallo* raises significant and controversial issues of gender representation, which are complicated by the frequent marketing of these titles in line with contemporary American rape and revenge dramas. By analysing both cinematic texts and poster/marketing campaigns affiliated to the suspense thriller *gialli* titles, I explore the extent to which the series reveals a nationally specific rendition of a female avenger, which can be linked to both socio-cultural and psychoanalytic concerns. With its emphasis on strident and vengeful women wreaking revenge on deviant and ineffectual males, the series can arguably be linked to wider patriarchal fears surrounding feminist interventions at the levels of both national politics and armed insurrection associated with the *Anni di piombo* period. However, the maternal predisposition often expressed by these characters, along with the reproduction of a primal scene encounter in these works (here figured by scenes of a female protagonist either forced or enticed to watch scenarios of sexual violence unfolding before them), once again confirms these films as operating at both social and psychic levels of Italian anxiety.

Having identified the trope of castrating, vengeful woman as central to the Italian rape-and-revenge cycle, it is the figure of the 'Demonified Mother' which is the focus of the fourth chapter of the book. This character (derived from the clinical case studies of American analyst Charles W. Socarides), connotes the all-enveloping persona of the pre-Oedipal mother, whose presence was masked behind a male patient addicted to acts of extreme voyeurism and female mutilation. However, rather than conceptualising his female victims as lacking or castrated, the subject revealed a fluid sense of self and bodily boundaries, which led to him identifying with their suffering. At the basis of his confused sexual identity were three powerful and yet feared matriarchal representatives, whose domestic dominance and marked association with body fluids effectively distorted the subject's image of maternal physiology. I employ Socarides' case study to consider Italian cult cinema's most revered matriarchal trio: 'The Three Mothers' of Dario Argento's celebrated

supernatural thrillers *Suspiria* (1977) and *Inferno* (1980). Specifically, I explore these figures using a variety of psychoanalytic approaches, to consider how widespread themes of maternal dominance are within Italian horror. In particular, I argue that these representations transcend the director's traditional placement within the *giallo* format, to evoke earlier cycles of the 1950s Italian Gothic. These prior traditions emphasise the threatening figure of the pre-Oedipal mother, by depicting ambiguous female figures who preside over impaired or infantilised males. While these representations can be legitimately considered through psychoanalytic and gender studies approaches, the chapter also links these images to more specifically Italian concerns of a nationally-specific mythology of gender and witchcraft.

Having been the subject of the most sustained number of academic studies devoted to Italian cult film, I am delighted to enclose an exclusive interview I conducted with Dario Argento as chapter five of the volume. Here, I not only profile the director's work during the period 1970–1985, but also the ways in which his reception was initially generated at the level of cult icon, rather than as a 'legitimate' Italian film auteur. As well as realigning this output with wider Italian film traditions, the chapter also considers the central cult reception of Argento over the last decade. In terms of the register of cult 'excess', I explore the extent to which Argento's films are all marked by an elaborate use of camerawork, lighting and musical score, emphasising the elements of technical distinction that critics such as Peter Hutchings have identified in his work. However, as Argento's most stylish moments are also used as backdrops to pronounced images of sexual violence, the director discusses some of the gender-based readings of his work in line with these controversies. Importantly, given the increased alignment of psychoanalytic and socio-cultural approaches to Argento and the *giallo*, it seems more than appropriate that the director analyses both of these elements in central sections of the interview. Not only does Argento discuss the importance of psychoanalysis for both the creation and reception of his cinema, but he also comments in some depth on the emergence of his cinema during the *Anni di piombo*, thus making a persuasive case for reading Italian cult imagery in line with an era of social and psychic trauma.

Beyond Dario Argento, another cult director annexing Italian social anxieties with psychic fears is the late Aristide Massaccesi, whose prolific output I explore in chapter six. In a career that spanned nearly 40 years, Massaccesi worked in a variety of paracinema genres, directing films that specialised in unnerving combinations of explicit sexuality, tortured voyeurism and bodily dismemberment. As a result, the director pioneered

some of the decade's most extreme cinematic hybrids, including hardcore zombie films, pseudo-snuff erotica and porno cycles with a Gothic horror inflection. Despite having directed over 190 films, this section of the book offers the first theorisation of Massaccesi's output, exploring both their imagery and key themes via recent revisions of Freud's work on the *unheimliche* (uncanny). By adapting this work from its traditional domain of Gothic literature, I argue that Massaccesi's 1970s output (with themes of morbid loving, fetish for dead love objects and eroticisation of maternal substitutes) contemporises the unresolved primal traumas that underpinned Freud's analysis of fictional works such as *The Sand Man*. By adapting literary and psychoanalytic revisions to Freud's source material, I propose that Massaccesi's disturbing texts also reverse the gender binaries (around themes of castrative wounding/eye loss and doubling motifs) that marked Freud's original analysis. The closing section of my analysis (entitled 'A Historical *Unheimliche*'), considers the extent to which Massaccesi's cycle of erotic dramas contain an unsettling element of historical reflection, by outlining issues of morbid sexuality within a 1940s Italian fascist context. Here, it not only the female body that provokes unease (through its associations with doubling, excessive sexual drives and decay), but also the racially distinct body (with its connotations of physiological and cultural distinction) that further introduce uncanny elements into the director's work.

Chapter seven extends considerations of Italian paracinema's representations of ethnicity, by offering one of the first academic considerations of the *Black Emanuelle* series of erotic travelogue films popular during the 1970s. These featured the Indonesian actress Laura Gemser as a racially ambivalent female photojournalist, who scours the globe to seek out violence and injustice against women. The cycle was produced between 1975 and 1983, and was initially marketed as a parasitic extension to existing European erotica that linked sensual experimentation to the wider ethos of post-1968 sexual politics. However, given the centrality of directors such as Aristide Massaccesi to the trajectory of the series, it comes as little surprise that the *Black Emanuelle* films perverted any logic of sexual liberation through outrageous combinations of desire, death and dismemberment, administered by a range of male adversaries that included male rapists, snuff film producers, prison inmates and even cannibals. Importantly, the heroine's ethnicity was perennially linked to the regimes of suffering enacted in the cycle, with her undefined racial ties functioning through the sliding scale of Otherness with which she was defined. By exploring constructions of the character's ambivalent origins, I consider the series through the specifically Italian discourse of *Faccetta*

nera (black face), which binds racial distinction to established fascist discourses around physiological differentiation, as well as ensuring the replication of these myths in a wide range of cultural products from travel literature to ethnographic cinema and beyond. Whilst clearly indicating that the contradictory images of the *Black Emanuelle* films can be read through a specifically historical Italian discourse, the troubling representations they convey were often conjoined with de-subjectified dream scenes experienced by the heroine. These fantasy inserts further point to psychic structures as underpinning the Italian paracinema text, which I also explore in relation to Laura Gemser's wider roles in the closing sections of the chapter.

In its consideration of the Italian *poliziotteschi* (or rogue cop cycle), chapter eight is significant in two respects. Firstly, it expands the recent theoretical movement (by authors such as Timothy C. Campbell and Maggie Günsberg) towards non-*giallo*-oriented accounts of Italian cult film that I identified earlier. Secondly, it shifts critical attention away from the representations of female subjectivity explored in previous chapters, towards the sphere of masculine melodrama. This cycle (which popularised the motif of an unorthodox detective fighting crime outside the system), has traditionally been dismissed for emulating contemporary American versions of the rogue cop figure. However, with their emphasis on kidnappings, car-jacking, the assassination of public officials and the sexual brutalisation of minors, I argue that the *poliziotteschi* can be irreducibly linked to the decade-long period of both fascist and leftist terrorist activity defined through the *Anni di piombo*. As well as identifying the social conditions behind these so-called 'years of lead', I also consider nascent issues of psychic trauma underpinning male subjectivity in the format. Here, I combine cinematic analysis with a consideration of so-called 1970s 'terrorist literature' alongside clinical accounts derived from the confessions of captured terrorist cell members, all of which reveal a distinctly libidinal agenda. If these various narratives (fictional and diarised) reveal a psychic state of *dissociati* (disassociation from the governing ego), then these sexual tensions are reproduced in the fractured masculinities of the rogue cops themselves. Using debates derived from Freud's work on the 'Family Romance' and male masochism, the chapter concludes with a psychoanalytic reading of the rogue cop's near paranoid attempts to distinguish his sexuality from the hysterical and feminised physiology of the villainous prey he opposes.

Chapter nine expands considerations of the masculine body within Italian paracinema to an academic consideration of the post-apocalypse and barbarian narratives popular between the early to mid-1980s. These

narratives (which focused on the trials of humanity after a nuclear apocalypse) have frequently been dismissed for being derivative of existing international science fiction productions. However, I argue that they retain a strong nationalistic perspective, using genre imagery from the economic miracle of the 1950s to negotiate some of the social and sexual contradictions inherent in later 1980s Italy. Via their emphasis on extreme displays of male virility (often 'performed' in bouts of sadistic contest, and before the gaze of an all-male group), these narratives reproduced the central imagery and themes of the earlier peplum cycle popular in 1950s Italy. For critics such as Maggie Günsberg, these mythical adventures (featuring a heroic strongman who opposes despotic rule) spoke directly to the political discourses of a post-war Italy now repelling its fascist past in the face of international pressure. Equally, by dwelling on the spectacle of the peplum hero's physical prowess, these texts also appealed directly to a marginalised regional populous, whose manual work patterns were being interrupted by the mechanised processes of the economic miracle. By drawing so heavily on peplum mythology, the Italian post-apocalypse film speaks directly to contemporary male fears accompanying the so called 'second economic miracle', which replaced male-dominated, traditional industry with more feminine-led modes of consumer-based technology. This impending phallic redundancy can be exemplified by the post-apocalypse hero's mourning of obsolete modernist machinery, which is accompanied in these works by the pointed rejection of the female body and heterosexual union. In the second part of the chapter, I expand this consideration of male post-industrial anxiety to a study of the barbarian narratives, which were also popular in Italy during the mid-1980s. Here, I once again consider how fears of reduced male prowess are figured through mechanisms of social displacement and confused family lineage, resulting in sexual traumas similar to those identified in previous chapters.

Bodies of Desire and Bodies in Distress concludes with an examination of the social and psychic determinants underpinning the varied erotic cycles which emerged in Italy between 1970 and 1985. As I argue, rather than representing a specific genre, erotic content represented the most porous of all 'excessive' tropes produced during this era, with sexual imagery seeping into all of the key cycles under review. While Italian popular culture has long been viewed as defined by fluid and hybridised boundaries (with the term *filone* once again replacing genre as a stable category of consideration), the explosion of sexual content into the cult cycles reviewed in the volume cannot be divorced from the wider toxic social and political context of the 1970s. Here, rather than signifying any element of sexual liberation, titillating material produced in Italy during