

# ***Giallo* Nostalgia: Appropriations of *Giallo* Aesthetics in Contemporary Cinema**

## **Nostalgie *giallo*. Appropriations de l'esthétique *giallo* dans le cinéma contemporain**

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# *Giallo* Nostalgia: Appropriations of *Giallo* Aesthetics in Contemporary Cinema

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## ABSTRACT

This article aims to engage with the ways in which contemporary global cinema looks back at the Italian *giallo* production of the 1970s through a series of remakes, homages and pastiches. What we define as *retrogiallo* differs from other examples of “retroexploitation,” where films such as *Grindhouse* (Rodriguez and Tarantino, 2007) and *Hobo with a Shotgun* (Eisener, 2011) address nostalgia for a specific kind of spectatorship, the grindhouse circuit, through conscious visual archaisms. *Retrogialli* present a more complex approach: instead of mimicking the imperfections of analogue indexicality, they fetishize the artisanal quality of filmmaking, displacing the stylistic features of the *giallo* in a highbrow context. Films such as *Amer* (Cattet and Forzani, 2009), *The Strange Colour of Your Body's Tears* (Cattet and Forzani, 2013) and *Berberian Sound Studio* (Strickland, 2012) ultimately present a new opportunity to address the critical understanding of the *giallo*.

As much as we are driven to the new, we are living in a time preoccupied with the past: the age of nostalgia. Fashion and design objects present in our daily lives hark back to old styles and models; political slogans, infused by populism and nationalist agenda, champion an imagined past superior to the current socioeconomic situation and falsely promise an improved future. Moreover, several films and television series, from *Downton Abbey* (Michael Engler, 2010–2015) to *Stranger Things* (The Duffer Brothers, 2016–), look back to the distant but also more recent past with a nostalgic gaze. Following Fred Davis's argument (1979) that nostalgia functions as a coping mechanism in times of change, Manuel Menke (2017)

maintains that the current wave of media nostalgia is related to how people try to confront and handle the profound social and cultural alterations occurring in contemporary societies. This interpretation stems from Katharina Niemeyer's argument (2014, 2) that nostalgia represents a reaction to accelerated times and the impact of digital technologies, namely the rampant use of social media, and a desire to overcome and cure our homesickness for the past via media themselves. Similarly, Ekaterina Kalinina (2016, 13) understands this nostalgia boom as the "prevailing paradox of modern societies, oscillating between acceleration and deceleration," a wavering which is due to the fear of the rapid development of the newest technologies, their increased uses and, at the same time, the desire to return to a slower pace of development.<sup>1</sup>

Besides its current significant position in our vibrant media environment, nostalgia is already a prominent scholarly topic investigated from different academic fields spanning from social psychology, memory studies and marketing to literary studies, communication studies and political sciences to name but a few. Within media studies, the notion that nostalgia exists not only as a feeling, which occurs when someone is emotionally stimulated, has started gaining consensus: it can also be something inhabiting objects, actions and places (see Clewell 2013, Holdsworth 2011). As Niemeyer (2014, 11) has eloquently pointed out, "media do not only produce nostalgic narratives, but . . . they can be, in themselves, the creative projection spaces for nostalgia, as well as acting as the symptoms or triggers of nostalgia."

It is interesting to note how film studies scholarship has paid particular attention to how nostalgia is embedded in heritage and period films and more generally high- and middle-brow productions (see Powrie 1997, Higson 2003, Vidal 2012). Nostalgic and postmodern reappropriation of old styles, however, did not leave untouched popular genres such as horror and exploitation films, given that the cult status of B-movies and fandom practices preserved them from oblivion. Not only they are increasingly available in different audiovisual formats (from Blu-ray reissues to high-quality digital files on streaming platforms), but they have also inspired a series of new productions which rework the storylines, look and (to some extent) technical peculiarities of these films. In

his pioneering study *Grindhouse Nostalgia: Memory, Home Video and Exploitation Film Fandom*, David Church adopts the term “retroexploitation” to describe those films characterized by a retro style which is “drawn heavily from the aesthetic sensibilities of 1960s–80s exploitation media” (2016, 121). Robert Rodriguez and Quentin Tarantino’s double-bill *Grindhouse* (2007), with its intentionally aged look, can be considered a seminal example of this cycle, whose films vary vastly in terms of budget, ambition, distribution and ironic degrees in which the nostalgic element is present.<sup>2</sup>

In this article, we would like to discuss a particular case of retro-exploitation, namely the nostalgic reappropriation of Italian *giallo* films in contemporary global cinema. By doing so, we intend to draw attention to *giallo*’s persistency within the contemporary media landscape, its enduring appeal, and the new cultural capital associated with it. *Giallo* films, murder mystery stories characterized by sensational scenes of graphic violence and titillating nudity, were produced in Italy throughout the 1960s and 70s by directors such as Dario Argento, Mario Bava, Umberto Lenzi, Lucio Fulci and Sergio Martino among others.<sup>3</sup> We define *retrogiallo* as a complex cinematic phenomenon that includes remakes, occasional references, homages and new takes on these popular Italian productions. Unlike other examples of retroexploitation cinema, *retrogialli* do not necessarily display a nostalgia for the damaged look typical of 1970s B-movies, which inevitably embodies consumption practices, but rather long for the excessive and bold look and sound of the original *gialli* and the vintage material culture they displayed.

In this sense, the reappropriation of Italian *gialli* in contemporary global cinema ought to be understood as a nostalgic style, but a rather selective one, given the fact that very often these recent productions appear even beautified, enhanced in their aesthetic qualities. The phenomenon of *retrogialli* represents a peculiar fetishism of certain aspects characteristic of 1960s or 70s *gialli*: their soundscape, the craftsmanship involved in their production, the elaborated murder scenes and more generally the stylized iconic view of the popular culture of that time. However, *retrogialli* are different from other examples of the commodification of past styles like retro-typing, the collective form of regressive nostalgia described by Michael Pickering and Emily Keightley (2012, 2014). *Retrogialli*,

in fact, do not necessarily rely on stock images and cliché motifs and narratives: they go beyond mimic reproduction and channel new life to the *giallo*. While some critics and scholars (such as Lindsay Hallam) refer to this recent production of *giallo*-inspired films as “neo-*giallo*,” we suggest that the “retro” prefix helps to locate these productions within the broader phenomenon of retroexploitation, thus underlining the nostalgic reappropriation of the genre. We argue, in fact, that the forms of genrefication present in the reappropriation of *giallo* themes and style are strongly characterized by the same mix of playful referencing and nostalgic reinterpretation present in the retroexploitation products.

As argued by Richard Dyer (2007), looking at generic pastiche contributes not only to fixing the perception of the genre that it pastiches but also to identifying its very existence. In light of this and referring to our previous work aimed at the definition of three declinations of vintage cinema (2015), we engage with the recent generic pastiche of films such as *Amer* (Hélène Cattet and Bruno Forzani, 2009) and *Berberian Sound Studio* (Peter Strickland, 2012) among others, in order to gain a better understanding of the original *filone*, the successful vein of stock characters and rigid narratives exploited by Italian producers.<sup>4</sup> Moreover, we provide an overview of the different forms in which *giallo* is present in the contemporary mediascape, suggesting that the nostalgia for these films becomes a creative force that innovates, subverts and reinvents generic features and traits.

### **From *Giallo* to *Retrogiallo***

Before considering the contemporary reincarnations of *giallo* films, it is important to trace the genre’s origins and clarify some of its features through a short historical overview. Two films by Mario Bava in the early 1960s contributed to the definition of *giallo* and its familiar traits: *The Girl Who Knew Too Much/Evil Eye* (*La ragazza che sapeva troppo*, 1963) and, more significantly, *Blood and Black Lace* (*Sei donne per l’assassino*, 1964).<sup>5</sup> As described by Gary Needham (2002), the opening scene of *The Girl Who Knew Too Much*, where we see the protagonist Nora Davis (Letícia Román) reading a *giallo* novel on an airplane, “is essentially a foundational gesture that brings together several elements all at once,” specifically the *mise en abyme* of the

*giallo*'s literary origins, the focus on travel and tourism, and fashion and style. Bava's subsequent film, *Blood and Black Lace*, with its stylized set design and sense of uneasiness, represents a titillating spectacle of gory murders, often imitated by subsequent works.

After a slow start, *giallo* reached its production peak in the first half of the 1970s, in particular thanks to the international success of Dario Argento's *The Bird with the Crystal Plumage* (*L'Uccello dalle piume di cristallo*, 1970). By then *giallo* films presented a series of recognizable characteristics: the masked killer wrapped in a Mackintosh wearing black leather gloves; the baroque set design, colours and lighting; the elaborate and choreographic murder set-pieces; the focus on the question of travel and dislocation; the representation of the morbid vices of a decadent high bourgeoisie and a hedonistic youth culture, corrupted by the sexual revolution and a consumer-driven lifestyle. As was the case for Italian horror cinema, *giallo* films relied on low budgets, advances on distribution, co-production agreements and an international market (Baschiera and Di Chiara 2010). Consequently, *giallo* found its canonization and cult status thanks to international fandom, in particular during the VHS period of the 1980s; its constant availability in DVD and Blu-ray special editions, as well as online communities and streaming distribution, have undoubtedly contributed to its "retro-renaissance" in the present.

As previously mentioned, the *giallo* needs to be understood within the framework of the *filone*, defined by Mary Wood (2005, 11–12) as "a strand of similar films, rather than a genre. Trendspotting successful subjects, names, themes and stars resulted in quickly-made similar films, until public interest was seen to wane." What is missing from Wood's definition is the fact that each *filone* begins as a phenomenon of imitation of foreign models, following in the footsteps of a particularly successful genre film, in this case, the German *krimi* and more traditional murder mystery films. Unlike the industrial connotation of the genre as understood in the Hollywood context, the *filone* implies an artisanal ability to improvise in order to quickly meet the demands of the market and the limitations of low-budget productions (Kannas 2017). The spaghetti western represents a well-known example of Italian genre production imitating and then developing a foreign model through key recognizable

actors and directors while generating a longstanding influence on global cinema.<sup>6</sup> Despite arguably paving the road to the development of American slasher films in the 1980s, *giallo* itself quickly disappeared from the cinematic landscape, if one excludes in particular the productions not associated with the authorial labels of Bava and Argento.

The recent wave of mystery thriller films, which evoke tropes and atmospheres of 1970s *gialli*, represents only one way in which the *filone* reverberates in contemporary productions. Four different but sometimes overlapping modes can be observed: remakes; homages and episodic visual inspirations; recent engagements by old masters of the *filone*; and *retrogialli*.

First, the *retrogiallo* phenomenon is present in our contemporary media landscape through the release of remakes of old *giallo* films.<sup>7</sup> *Suspiria* (Luca Guadagnino, 2018) is a prime example of this trend, although one could argue that Dario Argento's original film leans more on the horror and paranormal elements than the *giallo* (Heller-Nicholas 2015). While Argento's film was set in Freiburg and came out in 1977, the remake is set in that year and transplanted to West Berlin, specifically at the Markos Dance Company in Kreuzberg, a counter-culture neighbourhood enclosed by the Wall on three sides. Guadagnino's film maintains the same premises: the arrival of a promising ballerina, the death/dance tension, the eerie atmosphere of the dance school, but this time transposes the horror of the witches' coven to Cold War Germany, enveloped in the political turmoil of the Red Army Faction's terrorist attacks and the lingering legacy of the Holocaust. Rather than the strikingly brilliant colours of Argento's *Suspiria*, this post-millennial rendition imbues the story in desaturated colours, the perfect naturalistic setting for dealing with the journey of self-discovery of a talented young woman.

Second, recent screen productions such as *Hostel: Part II* (Eli Roth, 2007) but also the TV series *Castle* (Andrew W. Marlowe, 2009-2016) and *Hannibal* (Bryan Fuller, 2013-2015) have paid homage to the *giallo* tradition, despite not being closely associated with the features of the *filone*. Among others, *Hostel: Part II* features cameos by iconic *giallo* star Edwige Fenech as well as the director Ruggero Deodato, and the third series of *Hannibal* draws on the *giallo* aesthetic by showcasing elaborate murder set-pieces and the use of

Italian settings. Artfully staged deaths, sumptuous locations, specifically Florence, and discordant music associate the show with the operatic *gialli* of Bava, as confirmed by its creator Bryan Fuller in an interview for *ScreenRant*.<sup>8</sup> In addition, the direct-to-video low-budget fantasy horror *Another* (also known as *Mark of the Witch*, Jason Bognacki, 2014) has been analyzed by reviewers for its *giallo* influences, specifically for its erotic imagery and stylized cinematography. Jacqui Blue praises the delicately eerie score and the beautifully shot slow-motion footage, which however do not support a convincing plot and characters.<sup>9</sup> Similarly, Mike Wilson notes in his review the homages to the *gialli* of Bava and Argento through techniques such as intense close-ups, first-person shots and a rich colour palette.<sup>10</sup> Nonetheless, these remain episodic references or reuses of the semantics of *giallo*, rather than a more consistent reworking of *giallo* syntax.

Beside remakes, homages and occasional references to *giallo*'s traditional features, a contemporary presence of the *filone* emerges in recent films directed by some iconic directors of the *giallo* period, first and foremost Dario Argento. He has been at the forefront of this renaissance in the new millennium given that Mario Bava died in 1980, Lucio Fulci died in 1996 and Sergio Martino has not released a *giallo* since *Mozart is a Murderer* (*Mozart è un assassino*, 1999). Argento's post-millennial *gialli*—*Sleepless* (*Non ho sonno*, 2001), *The Card Player* (*Il cartaio*, 2004), *Do You Like Hitchcock?* (*Ti piace Hitchcock?*, 2005), *Mother of Tears* (*La terza madre*, 2007)—struggle to match the quality and acclaim of his earlier works. Nonetheless, they fix themselves firmly in the *giallo* tradition with the reworking of staple features: black-gloved killers, kinky eroticism, a baroque *mise en scène* and an incoherent narrative. Curiously, Argento's latest foray into this generic revival is entitled *Giallo* (2009). This time, however, the film features a parodic approach, probably not intentional, as it presents absurd dialogues and Adrien Brody's exaggerated performance as detective and jaundiced serial killer at the same time.

Finally, and what this article focuses on, *giallo* returned in the new millennium with a wave of mystery thrillers which renovate the *filone* through disorienting narratives, stylish settings and images of visceral violence. Contemporary filmmakers go beyond the murder mystery narrative in favour of indulging in a sensory



journey through the look and sound of *gialli*. According to Lindsay Hallam,<sup>11</sup>

neo-*giallo* films [...] consciously deconstruct the fundamental elements of *giallo* cinema, moving beyond mere homage and pastiche to the formation of highly affective imagery. These new films expose how the continuing influence of this subgenre lies in its power to create strong affects, rather than (and often at the expense of) telling a coherent story. The boldness and the vividness of the images (and sounds) of violence found in the original *giallo* cycle reverberate into and through contemporary neo-*gialli* at a sensory level, not a narrative level.

The following list, although not exhaustive, catalogues films which develop, readapt and fetishize some recognizable features of classic *gialli*:

- *Amer* (Hélène Cattet and Bruno Forzani, France/Belgium, 2009)
- *Julia's Eyes* (*Los ojos de Julia*, Guillem Morales, Spain/Mexico, 2010)
- *Red Nights* (*Les nuits rouges du Bourreau de Jade*, Julien Carbon and Laurent Courtaud, Hong Kong/France/Belgium, 2010)
- *Symphony in Blood Red* (*Come una crisalide*, Luigi Pastore, Italy, 2010)
- *Ubaldo Terzani Horror Show* (Gabriele Albanesi, Italy, 2010)
- *Masks* (Andreas Marschall, Germany, 2011)
- *Tulpa: Demon of Desire* (*Tulpa, perdizioni mortali*, Federico Zampaglione, Italy, 2012)
- *Berberian Sound Studio* (Peter Strickland, U.K./Germany/Australia, 2012)
- *Yellow* (*Giallo*, Ryan Haysom, U.K./Germany, 2012)
- *Deep Sleep* (*Sonno profondo*, Luciano Onetti, Argentina, 2013)
- *The Strange Colour of Your Body's Tears* (*L'étrange couleur des larmes de ton corps*, Hélène Cattet and Bruno Forzani, Belgium/France/Luxembourg, 2013)
- *The Editor* (Adam Brooks and Matthew Kennedy, Canada, 2014)
- *Francesca* (Luciano Onetti, Italy/Argentina, 2015)
- *The Neon Demon* (Nicolas Winding Refn, USA/Belgium/Denmark/France, 2016)

Among these films we have clear spoofs and parodies (*The Editor*), short films (*Yellow*) and homages (*Masks*). The list also shows how *giallo* is having a widespread influence on global cinema, similar to the spaghetti western in other cinematic traditions.

### **Phenomenology of *Retrogiallo***

Despite clear and significant differences in the production and distribution of *retrogialli*, all these films strongly focus on retro, the analogue aesthetics of the 1970s and the material culture of the period. In order to better comprehend the resurgence of *giallo* in the new millennium it is important to consider some of the stylistic and thematic features which constitute the very essence of *retrogiallo*.

#### **1. Art Cinema**

As noted by several scholars, most recently Johnny Walker (2016), European films such as *Amer*, *Berberian Sound Studio* and *The Strange Colour of Your Body's Tears* almost displace the *giallo* features, redirecting them from the exploitation commercial arena to an art-house context. As *giallo* films, they feature a fragmented narrative, but instead of being organized around the murder set-pieces for the distracted viewers of third-run cinemas, they are characterized by experimental and art-film qualities. As Walker points out,

For all their exploitation qualities, the films pertain to “art” in a number of ways. Unlike most exploitation films, *Amer* and *Berberian Sound Studio* are widely celebrated works, while the more divisive *The Strange Color of Your Body's Tears* has still managed to command mainstream champions. These films have also been cited individually in the mainstream press for their intellectual pretensions, as well as for circumventing the standard aural, visual and narrative conventions of the commercial mainstream. (Walker 2016, 66)

This cultural shift is not completely uncalled for. In fact, it mirrors the complex canonization of *giallo* and more broadly Italian horror in the 1980s, which occurred because of two conflicting approaches. The first one was based on an authorial understanding of the genre through its more recognizable directors, Argento and

Bava first and foremost. The second approach focused instead on a filmic representation characterized by an excess of sex and graphic, extreme violence. From this approach, *giallo* and Italian horror were indissolubly associated with the “extreme” label, enduring censorship cuts, bad video transfers and poor dubbing, to the extent that, according to Raiford Guins (2005), they were examples of “paracinema.”

While *giallo* films were initially dismissed as vulgar and formulaic, the discourse on the merits of *giallo* has now shifted, leading to a re-evaluation of its excessive look and the important role of its soundtracks. In fact, the free jazz and *musique concrète* influences of Ennio Morricone’s scores, as well as the avant-garde-like qualities of Foley sound, reappear in contemporary films, enhancing their artistic qualities (Strickland 2013, 7).

Furthermore, we could consider how in their representations of the European cultural jet-set *giallo* films tended to feature artists, models, writers, dancers and journalists who are of course butchered at one stage or the other, and references to artistic context and a variety of (sub-)cultural groups. This aspect returns in some *retrogialli*, for example in Winding Refn’s *The Neon Demon*, where the story follows a wannabe teenaged model, Jesse (Elle Fanning), arriving in Los Angeles and shaking up the fashion and modelling industry. Moreover, the “arty” *retrogialli* made by Cattet and Forzani stress the stylistic features of the *filone*, a fetishization of 1970s material culture and a direct “recycling” of *giallo* elements, such as the soundtrack. In *The Strange Colour of Your Body’s Tears*, for example, a Danish man returns to his Brussels apartment, nestled in an Art Nouveau building reminiscent of the style of architect Victor Horta, to find that the door is locked from the inside and his wife has disappeared. With pre-existing tunes by composers Stelvio Cipriano and Bruno Nicolai, often featured in original *gialli*, the film by Cattet and Forzani is a highly abstract and sensory journey into transgression and the subconscious and differs from the more commercial Italian *gialli*. The directors employ tropes and visuals present in classic *gialli*, but reinterpret and reuse them in a different, more experimental context. In short, *retrogialli* employ a retro sensibility dedicated to the prettiness of the image and of the settings, deliberately ignoring the narrative and stylistic shortcomings of the majority of

1960s and 1970s *gialli*. This leads to the second aspect of the *retro-gialli*, namely the avoidance of deliberate archaism and their retro aesthetics.

## **2. Retro and Faux-Vintage**

With the partial exception of the Canadian film *The Editor*, *retro-gialli* do not feature signs of decay, cigarette burns, discoloration, and tears in the film. Unlike the retroexploitation films analyzed by David Church in *Grindhouse Nostalgia*, *retro-gialli* seldom make reference to the grain and ageing of the film, the clear shortcomings with editing and dubbing, in an attempt to imitate the look and limitations of the original texts. Instead, the filmic qualities, starting from the cinematography, are generally enhanced. The lack of glitches and decay challenges the historical neglect of the majority of *giallo* films, recalling instead the wide availability of the “remastered and restored” productions of the most iconic directors, suggesting in this way a very selective remembrance. In terms of understanding the *filone* this emphasizes once again how the “artistic” qualities of these contemporary productions are considered dominant in respect to the narrative shortcomings of the originals.

As such, these contemporary films align more with the retro category rather than with the faux-vintage one we have illustrated in our categorization of “vintage cinema” (2015). In this taxonomy we identified three modes of recycling the past in contemporary cinema: anachronistic, faux-vintage and retro. In the first category temporal lines are misplaced and old objects, or better yet obsolete technology, reappear and feature in the present environment. Films belonging to the anachronistic category not only showcase outdated technology with respect to the period represented on screen, but such technology is an integral part of the profilmic.

Faux-vintage, instead, refers to a deliberate employment of archaism, which is either digitally recreated in post-production or is the result of using analogue technologies (films shot on videotape, 8mm, etc.). Films belonging to this category pretend to be as authentic as the period they represent, hence mimicking the imperfection of analogue indexicality (Baschiera and Caoduro 2015, 149). Contemporary retroexploitation films released in the new millennium fit this category perfectly with their signs of ageing, scratches,

jump cuts and fake old trailers. Church (2016, 126) argues that the deliberate archaism present in the simulation of the material degradation of these films transcends the imitative aesthetic categories of pastiche, homage and parody, as it represents an imagined mix of *historical use* (as a sign of affection through repeated screenings or handling) and *historical neglect* (as artefacts treated as undeserving of cultural longevity). The already mentioned *The Editor* is an excellent example of this point and represents a rare exception in faux-vintage *retrogiiallo*. On the one hand, it parodies the genre, pointing its finger at the absurdity of its artisanal tricks, plot lines, sexism, actors' abilities, special effects, cheap mise en scène and, of course, dubbing. On the other hand, there is a constant attempt to recreate the baroque and stylistic qualities of the *filone*, through creative point-of-view shots and the use of colours and lights. In this sense, the deliberate archaism of *The Editor* represents a self-conscious form of pastiche and a way to reflect and reinterpret the visual and narrative shortcomings of past examples.

Nonetheless, the majority of *retrogialli*, as our definition implies, better fit the category of retro, defined as films set in a past whose "style does not try to be contemporary to the narrated story" (Baschiera and Caoduro 2015, 151). The highly contentious notion of retro has been examined by several scholars. Its critic Fredric



**Figure 1.** *The Editor* (Brooks and Kennedy, Canada, 2014).  
A shot alluding to the vibrant red of Argento's *Suspiria* (1977).

Jameson (1991) found the culture of recycling old fashions historicist and an empty stylistic gesture; similarly, in his analysis of historical films, Baudrillard (2004) laments the retreat of history and the loss of references; and art and design historian Elizabeth Guffey (2006, 20) considers retro as a non-historical way of coming to terms with and knowing the past. Countering these interpretations, Louis Bayman (2016, 79) puts the emphasis on retro's "interest in the discarded packaging of modern life." This is particularly relevant for this post-millennial wave of films because of their focus on 1970s popular culture and lifestyle and their intertwining of sound and visuals.

*Retrogialli* often present a very glossy and striking perfection in the image without any sign of decay. Films such as *The Neon Demon* and *Red Nights* feature an obsession with strong colour, specifically blue, green and red, in order to provide a bold and dazzling aesthetic. In this regard, all *retrogialli* play strongly with the use of colour so typical of the visuals of the original *filone*. Interestingly, as Francesco Pitassio (2005, 37) remarks, this is a quality which derives from the budget restrictions of Italian genre production and the use of Eastmancolor film, which is more prone to the excesses in colour than Technicolor. Therefore, even the patina of the cinematography of *Amer* and its lighting indirectly recall the artisanal qualities and technical limitations of the *giallo*.

The cinematography and mise en scène are not the only features of *giallo* that have been fetishized in recent productions. Clothing, design elements, furniture, media and more generally props belonging to the 1970s have received attention not dissimilar to that offered by recent mainstream media. In particular, this fetishization has led to an archaeological investigation of audiovisual tools which nostalgically celebrate the sensory power of analogue media. Film cameras, Betamax cassettes, mixers, editing platforms, TV sets, VHS cameras, 16mm film and projectors are often framed in close-up to the point that in *Berberian Sound Studio* the machines even become sensual tools. In this film, sound artist Gilderoy (Toby Jones) immerses himself in his work of recorded screams and Foley sound, softly sliding his fingers on the mixing board. The director Peter Strickland commented in this respect: "There's a ritualistic and mysterious quality to it all and the film is meant to celebrate



**Figure 2.** *Berberian Sound Studio* (Strickland, 2012). Gilderoy (Toby Jones) recording Foley sound effects.



**Figure 3.** *Berberian Sound Studio* (Strickland, 2012). Gilderoy's fetishistic relationship with sound recording technologies.

that. With digital, there's nothing mysterious about watching someone clicking on their plug-ins" (Wood 2014, 134).

The consistent presence of audiovisual machinery for recording and screening films goes beyond the mere representation of the cinematic *dispositif* and functions as a diegetic "technostalgia" (see

Van der Heijden 2015), which shifts attention from audiences and the historical use of these films to their production.

### 3. Production

Besides style, *retrogialli* appear to be particularly fascinated by the production process. In other words, they often feature meta-references and draw attention to media-related issues and the mechanics of filmmaking. *Berberian Sound Studio* is set in a 1970s Italian horror studio and deals with sound editing and the tricks of Foley work; *The Editor* follows the difficult post-production of a *giallo/poliziottesco* film;<sup>12</sup> *Ubaldo Terzani Horror Show* captures the relationship between scriptwriter and director in the making of a feature film; while *Masks* engages with an acting school. Cynical directors, peculiar actors and artisanal creations: this intense reflexivity represents the *retrogiallo's* homages to its own tradition. The nostalgia for analogue and indexicality is therefore manifested in such attention towards the making of *gialli* and the idealizing of the artisanal quality of the *filone*.

If, as we suggest, *retrogiallo* tells us something about the understanding of the *filone*, it is particularly noteworthy that there is a lot of attention paid directly to the act of filmmaking, featuring the industrial history and difficulty of low-budget productions. This is not an isolated peculiarity of this renaissance. Writing about Hollywood's obsession with its own past, Jason Sperb (2016, 7) has noted how self-referencing studio histories is in fact an aesthetic and economic matter.

### 4. International

As previously mentioned, the question of travel is deeply embedded in *giallo* films both thematically and in terms of production. In fact, the protagonists were often tourists or foreign visitors travelling for business; settings included different European capitals (from Vienna to Dublin) and art cities, and the films relied on co-production agreements and international markets for distribution (see Baschiera and Di Chiara 2010). Interestingly, while *giallo* films—like other Italian popular genres—tried to hide their national context, often through foreign actors, locations and English character names, in order to be more attractive to the national market, which was keener on foreign genre productions, *retrogialli* add elements of



Italianness to link the *filone* to its country of origin. While *Berberian Sound Studio* is the clearest example of this, with the protagonist travelling to Italy to work on the post-production of a *giallo* film, the reference to Italy is constantly addressed by the presence of Italian characters (often played by a foreign actor) or by settings, designs and architecture.

It is noteworthy also that Italian production of *retrogialli* tends to look inwards, foregrounding clear Italian connotations in a sort of a late national appropriation of the genre. For instance, Zampaglione's *Tulpa* investigates the secret nightlife of a successful businesswoman in Rome's underbelly, whereas Argento's *Giallo* is set in Turin, in each case showcasing well-identifiable landmarks.

The fact that *retrogialli* are being produced in different regions of the world, from Belgium to Argentina, is also testimony to the legacy and impact of the *giallo* well beyond Italy's borders, proving the great reach of the genre. For instance, *Red Night*, the debut film of Julien Carbon and Laurent Coirtiaud, is a Hong Kong, France and Belgium co-production and sets its story of sadomasochism and gory violence in a Hong Kong imbued with dazzling crimson lights.

## Conclusion

In a period of wide availability of Italian horror production in different formats, thanks to a global fan following, streaming platforms and retrospective exhibitions, *retrogiallo* productions further contribute to reanimate this popular *filone*. They also offer a new understanding of the *filone* in the critical reception of the films and in online fanzines, an important aspect given that the definition of *giallo* seems to exist mainly in scholarly works. While all the features pertaining to the *filone* are clearly repurposed in their pastiche (creepy dolls, black gloves, masked killers, razor blades, gory violence and sexual innuendo), what is more interesting, and what makes these productions different from other forms of retro-exploitation, is the fact that the artistic qualities of the *giallo* become the predominant part of the pastiche and that the focus moves from nostalgia for cinema-going to nostalgia for modes of production. *Retrogialli* borrow and fetishize props, costumes, lighting and atmospheres from the original films, along with the very act of filmmaking and its artisanal quality.

This renaissance is not automatically retrograde or reactionary. If one adopts Svetlana Boym's interpretation of restorative nostalgia (2001), the recent turn to the *giallo* of the 1960s and 70s is not a desire to re-establish the *filone* or a simple restorative reconstruction of that period. Several *retrogialli* tend to challenge a reactionary politics of representation, shifting the focus away from the genre's exploitation qualities by means of ironic detachment (*The Editor*); by developing some distinctive stylistic features (*Amer, The Strange Colour of Your Body's Tears*); or by showcasing female protagonists, granting them new agency.<sup>13</sup>

The cultural capital of the films, in fact, changes as well. While traditional *gialli* were part of the popular genre factory of Italian cinema and were often made with an international audience in mind, contemporary references to that tradition become a sophisticated and intellectual allusion, hence the polished, enhanced look.

Overall, *retrogialli* represent a reconstruction of an idealized (and arguably anecdotal) period of Italian film production and manage to embody the *filone's* international comprehension and lasting cult status.

The presence of references to *giallo* in many films coming out of different regions of the world reminds us that this *filone*, similar to the spaghetti western, had a broad circulation and following. This time, however, *retrogialli* are offered to different audiences: films with a medium budget end up being distributed through art cinema circuits, whereas those closer to the cheaply made originals, in terms of both narrative and production, remain niche products often distributed online. In short, *retrogialli* cannot be seen as a desire to return to an ideal past as a reaction to the troubled present; they sometimes offer an ironic and affectionate look back at that brief season of popular films, but mostly revise and rewrite a new account of that time, negotiating the cinematic past through an understanding of the present through genre.

#### NOTES

1. The research into old and new media, and their definitions, has been growing exponentially over the past few years, focusing in particular on the question of change, continuity and transformation of technologies. Current scholarship (see Natale 2016, Menke and Schwarzenegger 2019) has stressed the role of emotion

and ideology in establishing the relationship of individual users towards the perceived newness of media.

2. The retroexploitation cycle includes titles such as *Hobo with a Shotgun* (Jason Eisener, 2011), *Black Dynamite* (Scott Sanders, 2009), *Bitch Slap* (Rick Jacobson, 2009), *Run! Bitch Run!* (Joseph Guzman, 2009) and *Black Devil Doll* (Jonathan Lewis, 2007) among many others.
3. Around one hundred films can be associated with this critical label; among them it is worth citing a few: *The Strange Vice of Mrs. Wardh* (*Lo strano caso della signora Wardh*, Sergio Martino, 1971), *A Lizard in a Woman's Skin* (*Una lucertola con la pelle di donna*, Lucio Fulci, 1971), *Eyeball* (*Gatti rossi in un labirinto di vetro*, Umberto Lenzi, 1975) and *Giallo in Venice* (*Giallo a Venezia*, Mario Landi, 1979).
4. Within the cinematic context, the Italian word *filone* can be translated as “strand” or “vein,” as it better captures the industrial and thematic peculiarities of popular Italian cinema rather than the more flexible terms genre or subgenre. We dwell on this notion later in the article, but for more details see Mikel J. Koven’s discussion of *giallo* as a *filone* in his book *La Dolce Morte* (2006, 4–9).
5. The word *giallo* literally means yellow and refers to the series of books with yellow covers which the Milan publishing house Mondadori began issuing in 1929. Initially, these novels consisted of translated British and American mystery and detective stories on the Sherlock Holmes and Edgar Allan Poe model, but later the series included Italian authors as well.
6. On the production of spaghetti westerns see Gianni Volpi (1986) and Christopher Wagstaff (1992); on their global influence, see Austin Fisher (2016).
7. It has been reported that Nicolas Winding Refn’s Danish production company Space Rocket Nation will produce a remake of *What Have You Done to Solange?* (*Cosa avete fatto a Solange?*), a 1972 *giallo* directed by Massimo Dallamano. See Vikram Murthi, “Nicolas Winding Refn to Produce Remake of Giallo Film ‘What Have You Done to Solange?’,” *IndieWire*, 23 May 2016, <https://www.indiewire.com/2016/05/nicolas-winding-refn-to-produce-remake-of-giallo-film-what-have-you-done-to-solange-288971/>.
8. Bryan Fuller, “*Hannibal* Showrunner Bryan Fuller Talks Season 3 and Dream Casting,” interview by Hannah Shaw-Williams, *ScreenRant*, 30 June 2014, <https://screenrant.com/hannibal-season-3-david-bowie-fuller-interview/>.
9. Jacqui Blue, “*Mark of the Witch*: Eerie Imagery That Lacks Substance,” *Film Inquiry*, 2 June 2016, <https://www.filminquiry.com/mark-of-the-witch-2014-review/>.
10. Mike Wilson, “*Mark of the Witch* Strikes with Strong Visuals, Misses with Weak Story,” *BloodyDisgusting*, 6 June 2016, <https://bloody-disgusting.com/reviews/3393440/review-mark-witch-strikes-strong-visuals-misses-weak-story/>.
11. Lindsay Hallam, “Touching the Colour and Sound of Your Body’s Tears: Affect and Homage in the Neo-Giallo,” *16:9 Filmtisdskrift*, 22 October 2017, <http://www.16-9.dk/2017/10/touching-the-colour/>.
12. *Poliziotteschi* are Italian crime action films or police thrillers, popular in the 1970s, a time characterized by political violence from left-wing and right-wing terrorist organizations (see Fisher 2014).
13. It goes beyond the scope of this article to discuss gender representations in *giallo* films. Suffice it to remark, however, that albeit most films remain formulaic in their depiction of women as victims and objects of the male gaze, there are several occasions where female characters have indeed great agency in the narrative, beyond their roles as victims or psychopathic killers.

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## RÉSUMÉ

### **Nostalgie giallo. Appropriations de l'esthétique giallo dans le cinéma contemporain** Stefano Baschiera et Elena Caoduro

Cet article s'intéresse à la manière dont le cinéma mondial contemporain revient sur la production italienne de *gialli* des années 1970 à travers une série de remakes, d'hommages

et de pastiches. Ce que nous définissons comme *retrogiallo* diffère d'autres exemples de «rétroexploitation», où des films comme *Grindhouse* (Rodriguez et Tarantino, 2007) et *Hobo with a Shotgun* (Eisener, 2011) abordent la nostalgie d'un type spécifique de public, le circuit *grindhouse*, à travers des archaïsmes visuels conscients. Les *retrogialli* présentent une approche plus complexe: au lieu d'imiter les imperfections de l'indexicalité analogique, ils fétichisent la qualité artisanale du cinéma, déplaçant les traits stylistiques du *giallo* dans un contexte de haut niveau. Des films tels que *Amer* (Cattet et Forzani, 2009), *The Strange Colour of Your Body's Tears* (Cattet et Forzani, 2013) et *Berberian Sound Studio* (Strickland, 2012) présentent finalement une nouvelle opportunité d'aborder la compréhension critique du *giallo*.