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La Dolce Morte: Vernacular Cinema and the Italian Giallo Film

By Mikel J. Koven

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A Review by David Church, San Francisco State University, USA

Mikel J. Koven's *La Dolce Morte: Vernacular Cinema and the Italian Giallo Film* is the first in-depth study of a cycle hugely popular amongst cult and horror fans but largely neglected by the academy. The *giallo* is a particular tradition of Italian murder mysteries cinematically pioneered by Mario Bava in the 1960s but popularized by Dario Argento in the early 1970s, displaying recognizable narrative formulas and iconography that quickly characterized the entire cycle. *Gialli* often feature an amateur detective witnessing and investigating a series of gory murders, and their fetishization of excessive, stylized slaughter more commonly associates them with the horror genre than traditional crime or mystery films. Koven presents a detailed analysis of the *giallo's* defining traits in the context of its original audience, but while this strategy shines in certain areas, its central premises are beset by several potential contradictions.

In his first chapter, Koven provides a substantial definition and history of the *giallo*. Culturally specific terms like "genre" and "subgenre" do not translate well into the context of Italian film markets, he argues, instead suggesting the term "*filone*" (v) as more appropriate, described through the visual metaphor of streamlets (traditions or cycles) branching off from, and sometimes returning to, a larger river (genre). Thus the *giallo* should not be considered a distinct genre or subgenre, but rather a cluster of concurrent *filone* (displaying similar narrative patterns and iconography) deviating from the broader genre of crime films (5-7). He suggests that:

[T]he classic *giallo* existed as *filone* in the first half of the 1970s and emerged out of an existing demand for more traditional *poliziotto* [police procedural] films. Once the cycle had run out of steam, the *filone* returned back to the more familiar cop dramas. (8)

However, Koven neglects to add that many *giallo* directors did not return to *poliziotti* in the late-1970s, instead favouring more explicit sex and horror *filone* to counteract the approximately fifty percent decline in Italian ticket sales from 1975-1979, as moviegoers increasingly turned to an exploding pornography market and newly-liberalized independent television networks. Drawing upon studies of other popular Italian *filone*, the chapter ends with an excellent contextualization of Italian exploitation films, explained as derivative of Hollywood product, yet often profitably remarketed to the USA, Britain, and elsewhere.

Similarly compelling is a second chapter laying out the principles of "vernacular cinema," Koven's alternative to more problematic categories like "popular" or "mass/mainstream" cinema. Vernacular cinema is a type of genre product specific to a particular (often lower-class) audience, and these films, although sometimes technically sophisticated, typically lack high-art/modernist pretensions. Vernacular cinema like the *giallo* often fails when placed in a non-vernacular context -- such as when high-minded (British and American) critics deride their low budgets, flimsy scripts, and emphasis upon violence -- but the reverse is also true when non-vernacular films fail among vernacular audiences. The term encompasses localized viewing practices, a sort of "'filtration' process from high-art predecessors," and/or an "intentional opposition to a 'high style'" (29). There are different classes of Italian cinema: *prima visione* (urban, first-run cinemas with middle-to-upper-class patrons), *seconda visione* (second-run houses), and *terza visione* (rural cinemas serving lower-class workers); while popular *prima visione* films eventually trickled down to *terza visione* venues, many exploitation films (including *gialli*) only played at the latter due to daily demand for new product. According to Koven, *terza visione* viewers were far less concerned with auteurs and aesthetic contemplation than strong moments of visceral sensation (sex and violence) regularly punctuating the social activity of "going to the pictures" -- hence the *giallo*'s emphasis on excessively violent set pieces over logical, cohesive narratives (27). While vernacular cinema "is often criticized for its lack of introspection and self-reflexivity" (35), it is said to operate primarily through orality (unlike modernism's "readable texts"), displaying oral cultural traits like formulaic narratives, redundancy and repetition, agonistic tone, and conservative ideologies. Echoing Koven's background as a folklorist, this contention opens up fascinating avenues for thinking about forms of cinema marginalized by the academy's dominant, modernist-inflected optics.

However, despite his stated intentions, a troublingly traditional high/low cultural opposition emerges between the literacy/contemplation/modernism of the *prima visione* and the orality/sensation/vernacular cinema of the *terza visione*. While he briefly notes that it "is not necessarily *always* the case" that *prima visione* audiences want quiet aesthetic contemplation over sensation (27), this point deserves further elaboration -- perhaps through examining *seconda visione* viewership or how "high art" filters down to the *terza visione* -- but at present, Koven inadvertently advances certain overgeneralizations about class-based viewing pleasures. Well-taken is his earlier observation that Italy's high-art directors like Fellini and Antonioni could only be viable in a national film industry built upon exploitation cinema profits (11), but he provides no solid statistics concerning how many *gialli* were exclusively *terza visione* fare and how many trickled down from more "reputable" venues. For example, Argento's *gialli* exhibit all the qualities of vernacular cinema, but can also be highly self-reflexive and artistically composed, proving financially successful in all classes of Italian cinema. Vernacular cinema supposedly allows for no critical distance, but here Koven does not fully account for how the same film might elicit different viewing strategies in different venues. While the majority of Italian cinema has indeed been neglected by self-serious modernist viewers, his purely anti-auteurist perspective also leaves certain critical gaps (even if self-reflexive filmmakers like Argento are the minority).

Koven criticizes some cult film theorists for attempting to raise exploitation films into the high-art/modernist canon without concern for the films' original vernacular context. Although several well-intentioned academics do indeed bend over backwards to justify their interests, his overgeneralization that all *gialli* are exploitation films unfit for modernist analysis ignores how certain

films are polysemic enough to successfully transcend a high/modernist vs. low/vernacular cultural divide. The concept of "vernacular cinema" situates films in the lived experiences of their intended audience, but does not consider unintended reinterpretations of these films. It may be "even easier [for critics] to dismiss certain films if they are 'foreign,' or someone else's exploitation trash" (10), but should we dismiss as incorrect all recontextualizations of vernacular cinema (especially when remarketed to foreign audiences not directly paralleling *terza visione* viewers)? "Vernacular cinema" as a contextual category could be used to question the cultural colonialism present within American and British cult networks (which frequently reinvest *gialli* with meaning as "exotic" continental spectacles of sex and violence), but the non-vernacular realm of cult viewership goes largely unexplored here, perhaps owing to the modernist reading practices employed by (predominantly bourgeois) cult viewers to differentiate their object choices from "mass/mainstream" cinema.

The consumption of "Italian-ness" in *gialli* receives attention in Chapter Three, which analyzes space and place in relation to modernity. The "economic miracle" of Italy's modernization between the mid-1950s and mid-1970s opened up the country as an alluring travel destination for outsiders, also giving middle-class Italians enough capital to jet around Europe. Koven argues that *gialli* are often set against touristic backdrops because they reflect this newfound mode of leisure/transportation, becoming "the cinematic equivalent of 'vacation novels'" (47). His central thesis is that *gialli* are "shadows of jet-set European sophistication: a simplified, more vernacular commentary on the 'economic miracle' than Fellini's *La Dolce Vita* [1960]" (49), betraying a profound ambivalence about the effects of modernity. Travelogue-style footage is often juxtaposed with extreme violence, indicating the possible dangers of tourism in and out of Italy, and also a discrepancy between the violence of modern life and Italy's glamorous advertisements of itself to the world. Foreigners and foreign ideas could now enter Italy freely, and it is typically an "outsider" to hegemonic society who serves as amateur detective, victim, or killer. These suspicious outsiders are blamed with breaking down a sense of community in urban areas, and disrupting traditions and long-buried secrets in rural areas.

The analysis here is presented very convincingly, but leaves a number of unanswered questions that bleed over into subsequent chapters. Beyond the obvious lure of violent spectacle and Koven's passing references to escapism or wish fulfilment, it remains unclear why lower-class *terza visione* audiences would be so attracted to these stories of middle-class jet-setters (usually tourists or professionals) becoming *filoneur*-like amateur detectives amongst Italy's high-class, high-fashion environs. While the advances of modernity certainly affected the *terza visione* as well (as Koven observes), this cannot fully explain the *giallo*'s appeal if only a minority of viewers paid attention to the narrative itself, nor account for the films' successful remarketing into countries that did not similarly experience Italy's "economic miracle." He explains elsewhere that because vernacular narratives are intrinsically formulaic and conservative, *gialli* "suggest and recognize a variety of social problems, inherent in modernity, but the solutions to those problems, while hardly 'sophisticated' or 'sensitive,' are intended to be debated, not merely accepted" (79). However, one wonders if the *giallo*'s ambivalence toward modernity is significantly different from the tensions expressed in other *filone* (to say nothing of Italian high-art/modernist films), and it remains questionable just how much debate ensues if *terza visione* audiences are (according to Koven) only seeking visceral thrills.

Chapters Four through Seven examine different aspects of *gialli*, including methods and motives for

murder, the roles of amateur detectives and killers, and the place of superstition in an otherwise "realist" horror cycle. Koven paints a very full picture of the *filone* and provides some very fine observations in these chapters, but they are sometimes dominated by long surveys of diverse examples that can feel somewhat unfocused. His central thesis is less compelling in these chapters, given that such disparate depictions of modernity may not be part of a general ambivalence, but rather the filmmakers' lack of concern for modernity altogether. In Chapter Ten, he explores the influence of *gialli* upon slasher films, explaining how certain slashers could be better termed "North American *gialli*." While this concluding chapter is quite adequate, Koven nevertheless seems reluctant to consider the *giallo* outside of its original vernacular context, devoting relatively little space to the ways that slashers have re-influenced Italian horror.

Chapters Eight and Nine are more problematic, as Koven examines the different kinds of set pieces so endemic to *gialli*. These "sublime" moments of excessive and technically virtuosic spectacle must be approached without the larger context of narrative, he claims, quite reasonably comparing them to musical numbers. However, he invokes Pasolini's theory of a "cinema of poetry" to explain the appeal of these dreamlike, quasi-oral moments when classical continuity and narrative verisimilitude break down to reveal truly "filmic" images. Modifying Pasolini, he argues that the connotative power of these poetic images "is not purely intellectual and distanced, but also visceral and empathetic" (155). The "double nature" of cinema supposedly allows these films to stimulate visceral affect, yet also call attention to their own constructedness through stylistic excess, Brechtian distanciation, and continuity violations similar to cinematic modernism. While *gialli* can surely stimulate multiple viewing pleasures, Koven's emphasis upon such moments encouraging personal self-reflection in the *terza visione* viewer largely contradicts his earlier argument that vernacular cinema allows for no critical distance and demands audiences seeking sensation over contemplation. By privileging set pieces as "poetic" instead of "modernist," Koven differentiates vernacular audiences from more high-minded viewers, but potentially depoliticizes lower-class viewers' stirrings of critical self-reflection. He even claims that "[I]f sloppy editing and cheap special effects are indicative of a 'cinema of poetry,' then any 'bad movie' could be seen as poetic," no matter if continuity violations are intentional or accidental (151). Various cult film theorists have argued along similar lines, comparing continuity errors to a counter-cinematic aesthetic, so Koven's suggestion validates the same kind of "ridiculous" (22) modernist readings of vernacular cinema that he earlier scorns. He finally falls back upon the bourgeois standards of 'artworthiness' that he elsewhere rejects in relation to the *giallo*, concluding that some *gialli* are clearly better than others, because "identifying something as poetry is no guarantee of *quality*. [É] As *vernacular* poetry, these films may be poetic, but that is not to say they are necessarily very good poetry" (157).

Despite these caveats, the first two chapters of *La Dolce Morte* are essential reading for devotees of Italian popular cinema, plus a solid third chapter nicely exemplifying Koven's argument about the *giallo*'s ambivalence towards modernity. His concept of "vernacular cinema" remains a significant addition to the current academic debates over exploitation films, provocatively advancing primary orality as a key to understanding these much-maligned pictures. The subsequent chapters prove somewhat more disposable, but will be eagerly consumed by anyone with more than a passing interest in Italian horror. As Koven admits in his preface, this book is not intended as a definitive study of the *giallo*, and it will hopefully entice further research into this and other *filone*. The types of European cinema best described as vernacular have only recently begun receiving scholarly

attention, and one hopes that this commendable task continues, helping to redress the academy's still-incomplete view of international film culture.

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