





Even taking into account the Western as refracted through the Latin imaginations of Leone and co., the Italian horror film was probably the finest flower of the country's popular cinema, but of equal long-term significance is the stylish murder thriller (*giallo*; *pl gialli*). The most adroit exponents of the latter fields (apart from the groundbreaking Riccardo Freda) were Mario Bava, Dario Argento, Sergio Martino and the less talented Lucio Fulci. Once a despised genre internationally (principally because of the crass dubbing to which they were invariably subjected), *gialli* have undergone a major critical re-assessment, with their visual stylishness and bizarre plotting now celebrated. These grisly whodunnits, inspired by the yellow-jacketed thriller paperbacks of the 1930s/40s, that enjoyed immense success among Italian readers, represented something of a sleight of hand in their strategies. With their high-gloss surfaces (widescreen and colour are almost always *de rigueur* for the genre), the essential paradigms were a sumptuously photographed series of murder set pieces in upscale apartments (with the victims usually beautifully dressed, sensuous women), apparently committed by a sex-obsessed psychopath. The murder weapon is customarily a knife, brandished in a black-gloved hand. But this twisted-psychopathology motive is almost invariably a red herring; mammon is usually at the centre of the killings, with greed and financial gain being the leitmotif as the source of the bloodletting (the *reductio ad absurdum* of this schematic is Bava's *Reazione a catena/A Bay of Blood*, 1971, where the treatment of the murder motivation is almost absurdly casual).

So what sort of work populated the genre? The film that might be considered one of the first *gialli*, Mario Bava's *Sei donne per l'assassino/Blood and Black Lace* (1964), is comfortably the director's most influential film on the cinema of other countries – and a key work in the field, with narrative and visual tropes that instantly became templates for the glossy catalogues of mayhem in the films of Argento and others.

However, directors whose names have acquired very little cachet over the years produced provocative work in the genre, such as Paolo Cavara, whose *La tarantola dal ventre nero/The Black Belly of the Tarantula* (1971) has gleaned a certain reputation (which may be partly due to the fact that it was unseeable for several years). Regrettably, however, while flashes of inspiration are to be found, it is a fairly workaday effort, with occasional moments of imagination illuminating the grim proceedings. The method of the killings is notable: a similar technique to that by which certain wasps paralyse tarantulas before eviscerating them. Erotic elements are foregrounded here quite as much as any violence, with a nude Barbara Bouchet undergoing a sensuous massage before she is bloodily slaughtered.

Eccentricity (of a self-conscious variety) is a hallmark of the genre. *La casa dalle finestre che ridono/The House with the Laughing Windows* (1976), directed by Pupi Avati, sports another outlandish title and, in this case, is a suitably outlandish film to match. Avati engineers an ingenious (if absurd) narrative that functions intriguingly in its own right, rather than being a way of stitching together



a variety of bloody set pieces. In 1950s Italy, a painter accepts an invitation to repair a fresco in a local church. The artist originally responsible for the piece enjoys a poor reputation in the town, and his fresco shows Saint Sebastian undergoing torture. Right from its opening sequence (in which a bloody stabbing is repeated seemingly *ad infinitum*), this is another piece firmly aimed at the exploitation market. But that is not to say that Avati is not capable of the visual invention of more ambitious films.

There is a fascinating – and phoney – internationalism to the *giallo*. The pseudonymous credits attempting to fool Italian audiences into thinking they were not watching a low-prestige local product were one tactic; another deception extended to the use of foreign locations: some cursory pickup shots in a foreign city would be intercut with sumptuous interiors shot in a Rome studio. When *gialli* choose London as their setting, the results are often very odd indeed. In *Gli occhi freddi della paura/The Cold Eyes of Fear*, directed by Enzo G Castellari in 1971, the off-kilter London scenes add another stratum of delirium to the generally odd proceedings.

Bizarrely-poetic titles are another fingerprint of the genre, as with *Passi di danza su una lama di rasoio/Death Carries a Cane* (1972), directed by Maurizio Pradeaux. The Italian title of the film translates as 'Dance Steps on the Edge of a Razor', which is actually a better title than the one that its English and American producers chose to go with. (The movie itself, in this case, is entertainingly grotesque, with performances pitched at high-operatic levels.)

But how relevant to *giallo* credibility are auteur credentials for the director? Luciano Ercoli's *Le foto proibite di una signora per bene/The Forbidden Photos of a Lady Above Suspicion* (1970) demonstrates that second-rank directors could make substantial contributions to the *giallo* genre. A perfectly calculated genre exercise with minimal inspiration from its journeyman helmsman, it is also an exemplar of an attitude to female sexuality typical of the genre, with its fetishistic and menacing games with a knife. In the *giallo* field, of course, fetishistic imagery is the order of the day, and those looking for a more enlightened, feminist view of female sexuality should look elsewhere (in fact, it would probably be a good idea for such individuals to ignore the *giallo* genre altogether). But for those prepared to take the controversial fare on offer without being offended, the feast of violently unsettling and erotic imagery frequently has a charge that Baudelaire and Poe would have applauded.

For all their delirious visual invention, plotting is not the strong suit of the *giallo* – what mostly serves for plotting is a tortuous stitching together of disparate narrative elements to provide integument for the blood-drenched set pieces. But the same charge might be levelled at the masterpieces of Hitchcock – except that the English director was canny enough to hire the best screenwriters to provide such texture along with psychological verisimilitude, another element only fitfully present in most *gialli*. If such quality writing is in shorter supply in the Italian films, the exuberant staging, sanguinary inventiveness and constant visual flourishes provide more than sufficient frissons.

## Barry Forshaw

## A Bay of Blood

Reazione a catena  
Aka Antefatto/Twitch of  
the Death Nerve

**Production Company:**

Nuova Linea Cinematografica

**Distributors:**

Hallmark Releasing Corp  
Ambassador Film Distributors  
Alberto Bitelli Intl. Films  
Internacional Films Distribución

**Director:**

Mario Bava

**Producer:**

Giuseppe Zaccariello

**Screenwriters:**

Mario Bava  
Filippo Ottoni  
Giuseppe Zaccariello (as Joseph  
McLee)  
Dardano Sacchetti (story)  
Franco Barberi (story)

**Cinematographer:**

Mario Bava

**Editor:**

Carlo Reali

**Art Director:**

Sergio Canevari

**Duration:**

85 minutes

**Genre:**

Giallo/Horror

**Cast:**

Claudine Auger  
Luigi Pistilli  
Claudio Camaso  
Leopoldo Trieste  
Isa Miranda

**Year:**

1971

### Synopsis

An elderly countess is murdered by her husband, Filippo Donati, at her large home in a picturesque rural bay, and the death is made to look like a suicide. Soon after, her husband is himself killed by a mystery assailant, and it transpires that real-estate agent Frank Ventura has been attempting to acquire this location in order to build new and lucrative properties. Other residents of the bay, the entomologist Paolo and his wife Anna, along with the countess's illegitimate son Simon, have their own views on what has happened, and, after four teenagers are murdered, Donati's estranged daughter and her husband arrive to ascertain what has happened, leading to conflicting personal agendas that threaten further violence and death.

### Critique

By the time he made *Reazione a catena* in 1971, Mario Bava had already secured his name and international reputation as a significant horror Director: the first, trailblazing figure in what would soon become a disreputably venerable, distinctly Italian genre and the key artistic progenitor of such film-makers as Dario Argento, Lucio Fulci and Ruggero Deodato among numerous others. He had played a significant role in the return of Italian horror after a long-standing fascist ban when he photographed, designed and finished directing both *I vampiri/Lust of the Vampire* (Riccardo Freda, 1956) and *Caltiki the Undying Monster/Caltiki – il mostro immortale* (Riccardo Freda, 1958) (Freda had stepped aside to allow his younger protégé a chance to show his ability). Bava directed what is generally considered the first real *giallo* film, *La ragazza che sapeva troppo/The Girl Who Knew Too Much* (1963), in addition to making science-fiction, delirious, Universal/Hammer-inspired gothic horror, and ghost stories.

In so doing, Bava developed a signature style predicated on baroque, primary colour-saturated *mise-en-scène*, stylized cinematography and convoluted plots. These narratives frequently develop in a centrifugal manner, tracing a heritage of violence that seems to spread between characters like a disease. His films also feature graphic bloodletting and sexuality (frequently interrelated, with murder and intercourse figured as mirror images), conflate a number of different horror tropes (as noted, from Universal to Hammer), and centre on a thematic emphasis on good and evil as coterminous rather than mutually-exclusive states.

*Reazione* takes its place among its director's plethora of diverse horror texts by virtue of its status as a proto-typical slasher film. Bava had earlier helped develop the form with *Sei donne per l'assassino/Blood and Black Lace* (1964), but the director here ups the ante by introducing several motifs that would soon dominate the sub-genre. In particular, the emphasis on voyeurism and the narrative hook of having young characters in a remote location finding themselves the targets of horror and violence anticipated



the groundbreaking American horror *Black Christmas* (Bob Clark, 1974), as well as *The Texas Chainsaw Massacre* (Tobe Hooper, 1974), and other such films which came in its wake.

What distinguishes Bava's film from its progeny in both Europe and America is its heightened style. In particular, the director's frantic use of the zoom lens perpetually serves to destabilize space and point of view, as though the whole narrative was being refracted through an imbalanced psyche and told by a distinctly unreliable narrator. Bava also makes particularly connotative use of scene transitions early in *Reazione a catena* in order to suggest connections between otherwise disparate characters and underline their nature as potential victims or killers, predator or prey. This strategy, coupled with an explicit discourse on killing and the human beast that arises when two characters discuss their respective pastimes of fishing and entomology, alludes to Bava's perennial obsession with the innate violence that potentially lies within all of us, requiring only facilitation and release.

Indeed, with this latter point in mind, the entomologist figures as something of a diegetic personification of the director. He studies his precious insects with care and affection much as Bava at times seems to visually probe, penetrate and study his characters, and indeed invite the viewer to do likewise – to stand back and observe rather than identify with them, and examine their behaviour and avowed motivations and decide for themselves the 'truth' of the scenario. In actual fact, as a corollary of the above, numerous other potential Bava substitutes abound in the film's plethora of figurative film-makers, characters engaged in nefarious plots to manipulate and control events to their own ends. It is a subtly self-reflexive, at times almost playful, ploy, and offsets the grimly relentless violence elsewhere and even anticipates the Wes Craven-led slasher film makeover in the 1990s with *Scream* (Wes Craven, 1995), making *Reazione* a truly seminal work by a seminal director.

### Adam Bingham

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## The Bird with the Crystal Plumage

L'uccello dalle piume di cristallo

**Studio:**

Seda Spettacoli/CCC Filmkunst

**Director:**

Dario Argento

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### Synopsis

Sam Dalmas, an American writer living in Rome, is walking home one night when he witnesses a violent altercation through the window of an art gallery: a young woman is struggling with a sinister figure wearing a black coat. Dalmas rushes to help the young woman, but finds himself trapped between the art gallery's glass doors, which are electronically operated. The attacker disappears, and the young woman is left lying on the floor, bleeding copiously from a vicious knife attack. The Italian police subject Dalmas to a rigorous cross-examination about the event, and his author's eye is able to supply a host of details. It transpires that the assault is only one of a series – mostly fatal – on young women. But Dalmas is not satisfied with the full extent of his own recollection, and strains

**Producers:**

Goffredo Lombardo  
Salvatore Argento

**Screenwriter:**

Dario Argento

**Cinematographer:**

Vittorio Storaro

**Art Director:**

Dario Micheli

**Editor:**

Franco Fraticelli

**Duration:**

96 minutes

**Genre:**

Giallo

**Cast:**

Tony Musante  
Suzy Kendall  
Eva Renzi  
Enrico Maria Salerno  
Umberto Raho

**Year:**

1970

his memory to come up with one missing detail which will make the scene clear for him. He knows that there is a false note in his picture of the incident, but his attempts to clarify his memory (hampered by the intrusive attention of the unsympathetic police) serve to make the writer a target for a particularly implacable killer.

**Critique**

Despite comprehensively squandering the good will of his admirers with a recent series of truly woeful efforts, the key director of the modern *giallo* is the brilliantly talented Dario Argento – the ultimate craftsman in the field. In his earlier films, Argento's astonishing visual and aural assaults on the sensibilities of the viewer put the emphasis on the total experience of film rather than intellectual appreciation of a well-crafted script (Argento's horror films are definitely not for those who demand carefully-constructed, literate screenplays!). Usually to the throbbing, high-decibel accompaniment of the music of Claudio Simonetti's *Goblin* (his long-time collaborator), Argento's films are a rollercoaster ride of painterly visuals and graphic horror. Argento's 1970 feature film debut, the poetically titled *L'uccello dalle piume di cristallo/The Bird with the Crystal Plumage*, augured well for his career – a commercial success in its day, it now comes across as a fascinating dry run for many ideas to be more fully developed in later films. Tony Musante plays an American writer in Italy who witnesses a murderous assault through glass (prefiguring David Hemmings in the later *Profondo rosso/Deep Red*, 1976); he is trapped between sliding glass doors while attempting to aid the bleeding victim (Eva Renzi). This sequence seems to be the one people remember over the years – probably because Musante's subsequent tracking down of the black-leather-clad murderer is handled with rather less panache than Argento was to develop in his later films. There are of course visual delights galore – a marvellously Hitchcockian chase of a yellow-jacketed hired killer (one of several loose ends not really tied up) that ends with a joke worthy of *North by Northwest* (1959): a murder by razor that utilizes sound as chillingly as Polanski did in *Repulsion* (1965). And a word would be in order here about the score (*Goblin* not yet in place as house musicians): Ennio Morricone's mesmeric music is cleverly used throughout. The suspenseful siege of Dalmas's girlfriend (Suzy Kendall) in her flat is text-book stuff – the murderer's knife cutting through the door invites another comparison: the demolition job done on a similar door in Hitchcock's *The Birds* (1963) – but this does not prevent the sequence from being claustrophobically pulse-racing. Quibbles apart, the film is essential viewing for admirers of the director – though it remains a tyro effort, however dazzling.

**Barry Forshaw**



## Blood and Black Lace

Sei donne per l'assassino

### Studio:

Emmepi Cinematografica  
Georges de Beauregard  
Monachia Film

### Director:

Mario Bava

### Producers:

Massimo Patrizi  
Alfredo Mirabile

### Screenwriters:

Marcello Fondato  
Giuseppe Barillà  
Mario Bava

### Cinematographer:

Ubaldo Terzano

### Art Director:

Arrigo Breschi

### Editor:

Mario Serandrei

### Duration:

86 minutes

### Genre:

Giallo

### Cast:

Eva Bartok  
Cameron Mitchell  
Thomas Reiner  
Arianna Gorini

### Year:

1964

### Synopsis

The camera prowls around the gaudy exterior of a fashion house lashed by rain and wind, its sign broken loose and swinging. One of the models, Isabella, is stalked through the stormy night by a masked assailant, who brutally batters and murders her. Another model from the fashion house, Nicole, comes across the dead girl's diary, which is a truly incendiary document. It details the sexual (and other) secrets of many of those associated with or working at the company. Inevitably, Nicole also bloodily falls victim to the murderous, disguised figure, her death even more brutal than that of the first woman. As the body count continues to rise, the dour Inspector Silvestri rounds up a shifty selection of male suspects – each looking more guilty than the last. Obviously, the dead girl's blackmail-friendly diary is the key to the continuing murders and mutilations, even after it appears to have been burned. And what connection is there between the bloody events and a soignée countess and her smooth lover?

### Critique

*Sei donne per l'assassino* was Bava's delirious tale of a masked killer prowling a fashion house, and remains the most influential *giallo* ever made. In the UK, the film was sometimes hooted off the screen for the achingly crass dubbing, the besetting sin of virtually every *giallo* to gain a nationwide circuit release in both this country and the US. But the availability of Italian-language prints have made it possible for viewers to feast on the visual delights afforded by chiffon, marble, and the director's catlike camera prowling through the exquisitely decadent production design (the latter clearly as much the loving creation of the director as that of credited production designer Arrigo Breschi). British censor John Trevelyan took his scissors to the exuberant mayhem at the time of the film's release, creating a cinematic *coitus interruptus* in which elaborate orchestration of suspense becomes a prelude to frustrating, barely-glimpsed pay-offs. However, the crippling censorship cuts that truncated every murder in the UK have been restored in new prints, and the elegantly rendered tension is now unspoilt.

Bava's calling card movie looks ever more decadently gorgeous as the years pass, and continues to be his most influential film (apart from *Reazione a catena*, 1971, whose catalogue of grisly murders was the blueprint for the *Friday the 13th* movies and their many imitations). Needless to say, characterization is pitched at the most generous level (no nuanced playing here), with the saturated colour, wonderfully excessive production design (redolent of 1950s recreations of Italian *verismo* opera productions) and exuberantly staged scenes of murder maintaining the viewer's interest rather than any narrative rigour. If the film (and its many successors) possesses a vision beyond the desire to thrill and alarm the viewer, it is a notably dyspeptic view of human nature in which venal instincts comprehensively outpace the demands of the libido; the



*Blood and Black Lace/Sei donne per l'assassino, Monarchia.*

beautifully-photographed sensuousness of the female victims is a smokescreen (as so often in the *giallo* genre) for a single-minded pursuit of filthy lucre.

Perhaps the most immediate effect of Bava's groundbreaking film is on the work of Dario Argento, which simply would not exist in the form that it does without this glossy template. The carefully-calculated multinational casting ensured the film's saleability to a variety of markets (American Cameron Mitchell, Hungarian Eva Bartok, a cluster of much-employed Italian character actors, such as the wonderfully oleaginous Dante di Paolo as a drug-addicted red herring).

**Barry Forshaw**



## The Case of the Scorpion's Tail

La coda dello scorpione

**Studio:**

Devon  
Copercines

**Director:**

Sergio Martino

**Producer:**

Luciano Martino

**Screenwriters:**

Eduardo Maria Brochero  
Ernesto Gastaldi  
Sauro Scavolini

**Cinematographer:**

Emilio Foriscot

**Editor:**

Eugenio Alabiso

**Duration:**

93 minutes

**Genre:**

Giallo

**Cast:**

George Hilton  
Anita Strindberg  
Evelyn Stewart  
Luigi Pistilli

**Year:**

1970

### Synopsis

London. Lisa Baumer is enjoying the attention of her lover when her life is changed inexorably. A plane explodes in midair – and one of the passengers is her husband Kurt. The result of his death is that Lisa is \$1 million richer, but she has to pay a high price for her new financial status. An old boyfriend attempts to blackmail her, but dies under mysterious circumstances. Lisa makes a trip to Athens in order to collect her legacy, but insurance investigator Peter Lynch has been assigned to the case and is on her tail. A series of menacing encounters begins for her: she is terrified in a derelict theatre by her dead husband's mistress, Lara Florakis, and the latter's lawyer, Sharif, and is only able to escape the encounter when she is helped by the insurance investigator Lynch. Lisa collects the insurance and begins to pack for a trip to Tokyo. But a razor-wielding assailant in black gloves has other ideas...

### Critique

Despite the inconsistency of Sergio Martino's career as a director, the Spanish-Italian co-production *La coda dello scorpione* is unquestionably one of his most assured and confident pieces, with the clichés of the genre playfully inverted or given a novel twist by a director enjoying the fact that he is so completely in charge of his material (Martino has admitted that Henri-Georges Clouzot's film of the Pierre Boileau/Thomas Narcejac novel *Les Diaboliques* (1955) was a template for his work – as it was for Hammer Studio's earlier series of black-and-white psycho thrillers). Beneath the seductive surface of the movie (with its kinetic, blood-boltered set pieces, Hitchcockian flourishes and perfectly judged widescreen *mise-en-scène*), the plot, as so often with such movies, is absurd – and bears little scrutiny. But aficionados customarily grit their teeth and take such shortcomings on the chin, and *La coda* is actually a more satisfyingly labyrinthine entry than many in the field. Martino (who enjoyed the cosmopolitan, Babel-like atmosphere of a multi-national project such as this) is particularly good at his offkilter rendering of locations, and peoples his film with a *dramatis personae* of sharply-drawn murderous/vulnerable protagonists, with particular attention paid to the various red herrings (a *sine qua non* of the genre).

Another piquant element of the movie is its impressive cast of charismatic European actresses, notably Evelyn Stewart and Anita Strindberg (who between them serve the function of female lead – though one of the actresses serves a function similar to that of Janet Leigh in *Psycho* (Alfred Hitchcock, 1960). Male lead George Hilton delivers his customary efficient ambiguous performance (albeit one cast in the same mould as those he served up for a variety of other directors). The continuing influence of Antonioni's *Blow Up* (1966) is evident in the use of a significant photographic clue to the killer's identity, and such are Martino's creative stagings that one can forgive such infelicities as the maladroit model work of the

plane explosion at the beginning of the movie that sets the plot in motion. As so often in the genre, human venality is the plot engine here, but there are piquantly novel touches, such as the double helping of vicious murderers to match the duo of toothsome heroines. As so often, the director's wryly expressed self-deprecation of his own work in a variety of interviews undervalues his sheer craftsmanship, which is seen at full stretch in *La coda dello scorpione*.

## Barry Forshaw

### Deep Red

Profondo rosso

**Studio:**

Seda Spettacoli

**Director:**

Dario Argento

**Producer:**

Claudio Argento

**Screenwriters:**

Dario Argento  
Bernardino Zapponi

**Cinematographer:**

Luigi Kuveiller

**Art Director:**

Giuseppe Bassan

**Editor:**

Franco Fraticelli

**Duration:**

130 minutes

**Genre:**

Giallo

**Cast:**

David Hemmings  
Daria Nicolodi  
Gabriele Lavia  
Carla Calamai

**Year:**

1975

### Synopsis

At a conference discussing the subject of parapsychology, celebrated psychic Helga Ulmann is deeply disturbed when she realizes that the audience she is addressing contains a murderer. Deeply frightened, she informs a fellow guest, Professor Giordani, that she will communicate to him the identity of the killer the next day. That night, Marc Daley, an English pianist living in Rome, is spending time with his inebriated friend Carlo in the square outside his house when he witnesses a horrific sight: Helga Ulmann being bloodily dispatched at her window. Marc rushes to her aid, but by the time he reaches her apartment, her life has ebbed away. Marc is subsequently obliged to fend off the attentions of the police and an aggressive reporter, Gianna Brezzi. But later, he realizes that there is a detail fixed in his mind – something he saw in the dead psychic's hallway. Unwisely, he initiates his own investigation into the killing, and begins to get closer and closer to an utterly ruthless psychopath. At the same time, the killer is implacably (and imaginatively) murdering anyone who might possibly reveal their well-concealed identity.

### Critique

While a case might be made for *Suspiria* (1977) as the Argento film that offers a total sensory immersion via its thoroughgoing utilization of poster-colour visuals and high-decibel aural effects, in terms of structure, *Profondo rosso* is unquestionably his most fully-realized work, rigorously detailed and showing an attention to narrative that is largely absent from most of the director's haphazard scenarios. Of course, the presence of the understated English actor David Hemmings in the cast is salutary: he comes carrying (as the film-savvy Argento is fully aware) the baggage of his appearance in Michelangelo Antonioni's *Blow Up* (1966), and in many ways his character here cannily reprises elements of the earlier film, with its existential whodunnit structure. Hemmings' character in the Argento film is much more motivated (and single-minded) than the aimless, alienated photographer of the earlier movie; Argento is far less interested in fashioning a vision of an alienated, hedonistic society than in demonstrating his virtuoso mastery of the language of cinema, and uses Hemmings as a shorthand image of the



accidentally involved onlooker. But (despite not having a great deal of material to work with) Hemmings grants the character a genuine verisimilitude, using the most economical means.

*Profondo rosso* is, however, every inch an Argento movie, and in no other film in the director's oeuvre are his visual pyrotechnics used to such exhilarating effect. It is obvious that the director's real interests lie in the heady, sensuous exploration of baroque architecture in front of which his characters are gorily dispatched. Hemmings, with the ambiguous aid of a young newswoman (played by the director's then-partner, Daria Nicolodi), threads his hesitant way through several menacing expressionist settings before, inevitably, confronting the deranged killer (a logically-motivated character rather than the arbitrary figures thrown up in so many gialli). The gruesome murders along the way are imaginatively mounted – the

*Deep Red/Profondo rosso*, Rizzoli Film/Seda Spettaloli.



death-by-boiling-water sequence is particularly unsettling, even when viewed in the twenty-first century, when ultra-violent death in film is commonplace. Several frissons are provided by the effects created by a pre-*ET* (Steven Spielberg, 1982) Carlo Rambaldi – the most shocking being decapitation by a combination of necklace and moving lift. From the credits onwards, the surface of the movie glitters with a sinister iridescence. As so often in Argento's work (and in that of most of his contemporaries), the underlying sexual politics of the film are not notably enlightened, but viewers who can put any notions of political correctness in abeyance for 100 minutes or so will find themselves transported by this most fully achieved work from a deeply inconsistent director.

### Barry Forshaw

## The House with the Laughing Windows

La casa dalle finestre che ridono

#### Studio/Distributor:

AMA Film

#### Director:

Pupi Avati

#### Producers:

Gianni Minervini  
Pupi Avati

#### Screenwriters:

Antonio Avati  
Pupi Avati  
Gianni Cavina  
Maurizio Costanzo

#### Cinematographer:

Pasquale Rachini

#### Art Director:

Luciana Morosetti

#### Editor:

Giuseppe Baghdighian

#### Duration:

110 minutes

### Synopsis

Stefano is hired by the residents of a small sleepy town near Ferrara to restore an early twentieth-century church fresco depicting the martyrdom of St Sebastian, painted by deceased local artist Buono Legnani, known as 'the painter of agony'. Threatening phone calls warn Stefano off; people who say they have information for him die in mysterious circumstances before they can tell him. He begins a relationship with the schoolteacher, Francesca, and they move into a big old house inhabited only by a bedridden old woman. Francesca is raped and both she and Lidio, her assailant, are killed. Stefano witnesses Lidio's murder and is himself attacked, but he manages to escape. However he finds that no one in the town will take him in and even the local priest, who does, turns out not to be all he seems.

### Critique

[Warning: this review gives away major plot twists in the film] The denouements of most gialli, when we find out who did the murders and why, are generally perfunctory and unconvincing, but occasionally they give a crazed coherence to all that has gone before. This is especially true of *La casa dalle finestre che ridono*, but to explain which involves revealing its – double – denouement.

Stefano, having already found Francesca dead in the attic of the old house, later hears cries emanating from it. He ventures up and discovers the supposedly bedridden old woman and her equally elderly sister killing Lidio. They reveal that they kill to provide models for their brother, the painter of agony. They have preserved his body, now a skeleton, in formalin and play tape-recordings of his voice: they keep him alive and bring him models, even claiming that he painted Francesca as she was dying.

The sense of the uncanny quality of modern technology runs through many *gialli* – tape recorders and phones make dead or absent voices present, chemicals render bodies undead. This gives

**Genre:**

Giallo

**Cast:**

Lino Capolicchio  
Francesca Marciano  
Gianni Cavina

**Year:**

1976

a mad sense to the sisters' claims. Moreover, what the sisters are facilitating is the production of images of agony by their brother – but what Buono paints, what his sisters stage manage, is the spectacle of pain and death that is the core of the film – and the giallo – itself. Just as the sisters use modern technology to produce images of suffering, so too does *La casa* use film to the same end.

The fact that the killers are women also builds on *giallo* tropes. In *gialli*, women are commonly multiple murderers (at massive variance to their incidence in actual crimes), and, even more commonly, killers, as here, do what they do for the sake of the family. The sense of perversity is screwed up a notch or two by the second denouement. Stefano is given shelter by the local priest, only to discover he is in reality one of the sisters in disguise. This may seem like a twist too far, but it reverberates back through what has gone before. Buono's sisters look like nuns, no more so than when they are slaughtering Lidio. More significant still is Buono's gender identification. Stefano is told that Buono considered himself ugly and as a result could not find women willing to model nude for him; so he decided to use himself as model. This information is prompted by one of Buono's paintings showing a shapely, naked female body with an ugly male head: he painted himself as a woman. Moreover, in the brief flashback showing this act, he literally paints his own body. There is, then, gender confusion aplenty in the film before the final twist, which itself plays upon the curious position of priests in Italy, fathers who by definition are not fathers.

*La casa dalle finestre che ridono* is for the most part shot in bright sunlight, bringing out glowing greens and bleached white buildings. Yet the town is a decaying backwater. It has to be reached by ferry and its main source of income, eels, is dying out. It hides literal, economic death as well as the perverse, death-loving culture of inbred family and religion. The film ends with the hysterical laughter of the sisters before Stefano's horror at the ultimate revelation. Maybe the police are arriving from the mainland – we see the local mayor making a telephone call, we hear sirens – but will Stefano be believed? And even if he is, will anyone wish to dislodge the archaic hold of family and church? A very Italian dilemma.

## Richard Dyer



## A Lizard in a Woman's Skin

Una lucertola nella pelle di una donna

### Studio:

Fida Cinematografica  
International Apollo Film  
Les Films Corona  
Atlantida Film

### Director:

Lucio Fulci

### Producer:

Edmondo Amati

### Screenwriters:

Lucio Fulci  
Roberto Gianviti  
José Luis Martínez Molla  
André Tranché

### Cinematographer:

Luigi Kuveiller

### Art Director:

Maurizio Chiari

### Editor:

Giorgio Serralonga

### Duration:

105 minutes

### Genre:

Giallo

### Cast:

Florinda Bolkan  
Jean Sorel  
Stanley Baker  
Leo Genn

### Year:

1971

### Synopsis

Socialite Carol Hammond, during a session with her psychiatrist, talks about a persistent nightmare she is experiencing in which she attacks her boisterous neighbour Julia Durer with a knife. The day after the session, Julia is discovered, stabbed to death exactly as in Carol's nightmare. When several of Carol's belongings are discovered near the body, her involvement seems clear, and she is arrested. But her lawyer father decides to build her defence around the testimony of the psychiatrist and he secures Carol's release. However, shortly after this she finds herself persecuted by a hippie figure who has appeared in the recurring nightmare. Carol's step-daughter, Joan, is working to discover a witness – her reward is to be bloodily murdered, her throat cut. The hippie is arrested and admits to Joan's killing, but maintains that he had nothing to do with the death of Carol's neighbour, being incapacitated by an acid trip. Carol's lawyer father reveals that a woman has been blackmailing him – and, surprisingly, he claims that he was the killer of Julia. But the short-tempered Inspector Corvin is not persuaded, and is convinced that the real murderer is still at liberty.

### Critique

A fascinating misfire, *Una lucertola nella pelle di una donna*, while compromised, is an intriguing pointer to later ideas in Fulci's more sanguinary 'living dead' movies. Basically a Hitchcock-style crime thriller set in a jaded 'Swinging London' milieu, it has several virtuoso set pieces, such as a brilliantly shot chase in a deserted church which is almost a text-book example of how to utilize location shooting (as well as demonstrating a lesson Fulci has now apparently forgotten – that one flesh-rending knife thrust can be infinitely more shocking than a full-scale evisceration: the heroine's one ghastly wound in this scene reminds viewers of the throat-catching jump of Donald Sutherland's death in *Don't Look Now*, Nicolas Roeg, 1973). Carol Rambaldi's pre-*ET* (Steven Spielberg, 1982) contribution consists of disembowelled dogs (for which Rambaldi had to produce synthetic models to save Fulci from outraged legal proceedings), but this is not a Fulci 'splatter' movie.

For many years, Fulci's seminal *giallo* was unavailable; it is now possible to see it in a print that does more justice to his vision, but things are complicated: only a panned-and-scanned Italian-language print contains the uncensored cut (the language, with subtitles, is not a problem, but the panning and scanning is), while the restored, surround-sound English-language print looks and sounds wonderful. The attraction of the latter, of course, is that so many of the actors in the cast are performing in English, with their own voices, notably Stanley Baker. This was one of the underrated British actor's last films, and his performance shows just what a major presence he was in British cinema. In fact, his part (a police inspector suspicious of a society woman's involvement in the murder of her decadent neighbour) is nothing to write home about,

being somewhat underwritten (Fulci and co-writer Roberto Gianviti characterized the detective only in terms of the tuneless whistle he is prone to). Baker's mere presence fills out the role admirably; similarly effective is another reliable British actor, Leo Genn, as the father of Florinda Bolkan, the woman under suspicion. Bolkan is, of course, an iconic figure in the genre, and delivers one of her most impressive performances as a woman suffering from strange, surreal dreams in which she appears to bloodily murder her neighbour after lesbian advances (to which she initially does not seem averse).

This is the film that caused something of a sensation in Italy, involving a court case (as mentioned earlier) in which Fulci was accused of cruelty to animals. At one point (in one of her nightmares), Bolkan stumbles into a hospital laboratory where eviscerated dogs are stretched out on racks, their pulsing hearts and other organs clearly visible while receptacles catch their dripping blood. Amazingly, it was felt that these (to modern eyes) fairly obvious Rambaldi models were the real thing, and the special effects technician had to produce them in an Italian court to prove that real dogs had not been subjected to cruel treatment! The otherwise splendid-looking English-language print does not have this most famous sequence, and all the violence and nudity is trimmed (in the English-language print, Bolkan appears to be dressed when she commits the murders; the Italian print makes it clear that she, like her victim, is nude).

### Barry Forshaw

## The Killer Must Kill Again

*L'assassino è costretto a uccidere ancora*

**Director:**

Luigi Cozzi

**Producers:**

Umberto Lenzi (as Umberto Linzi)

Giuseppe Tortorella

**Screenwriters:**

Luigi Cozzi

Daniele Del Giudice

**Dialogue:**

Adriano Bolzoni

### Synopsis

Giorgio Mainardi, an unfaithful husband with financial problems, is threatened with divorce by his wealthy wife Norma. After witnessing a man disposing of a corpse, he decides to have Norma murdered, enlisting the killer with a combination of financial incentives and blackmail. While the plan goes smoothly at first, the car containing Norma's body is stolen by Luca and Laura, two young joy riders, obliging the killer to go in pursuit.

### Critique

*L'assassino è costretto a uccidere ancora* has been promoted – not least by its writer-director – as a deliberate subversion of *giallo* conventions, centred on genre stalwart George Hilton. From the start, however, Luigi Cozzi's invocation of the *giallo* clichés is not matched by a consistent or even coherent form of critical distancing or comment. While the killer's face is revealed early on – the most obvious twist on the *giallo* formula – his identity, background and motivations remain unknown. The film opens with a genre staple, the corpse of a young woman, and the killer's prolonged caressing of her hair, face and body accentuates the necrophiliac aspect implicit in the conception, production, promotion and

**Directors of photography:**

Riccardo Pallottini  
Franco Di Giacomo (uncredited)

**Art Director:**

Luciana Schiratti

**Editing:**

Alberto Moro

**Music:**

Nando De Luca

**Duration:**

90 minutes

**Genre:**

Giallo

**Cast:**

George Hilton  
Michel Antoine  
Femi Benussi

**Year:**

1975

consumption of the genre. The mutually-loathing, bourgeois couple are held together by interdependence both financial, for Giorgio, and sexual, for Norma. This gender divide is marked further by accusations of male infidelity and female insanity, recurring elements in numerous production line *gialli*.

The film does offer an implicit critique of amoral, often brutish masculine hedonism, lust and greed. Giorgio will murder his wife to ensure financial security and freedom to pursue his sexual adventures. Luca orders Laura to expose her breasts to distract a petrol station attendant, enabling them to rob the latter. When Laura compares herself and Luca to Bonnie and Clyde, her boyfriend immediately focuses on the latter's alleged impotence, suggesting a sexual anxiety confirmed when he reasserts his masculinity in a backseat fumble with an obliging blonde pick-up. The soothing of ego and exercise of power through sexual conquest finds its most extreme manifestation in the killer. The latter beats and rapes the naive, virginal Laura as 'punishment' for stealing the car and compromising his potency, as represented by the successful completion of the murder plot and associated financial gain.

Cozzi is unable to develop this theme, allowing *giallo* conventions to dominate his material and highlight its fragile construction. The emphasis on the female form, clothed and unclothed, places the spectator in a familiar position of identification with the male predators. The belated transformation of Laura from passive woman-in-peril to resourceful heroine is undercut by the swift narrative switch to the police pursuit of Giorgio. The inspector's paternal reassurance that order is restored seems blatantly inadequate, yet the violated, traumatized Laura and cheating, battered Luca are marked as a mutually-supportive and healing couple and promptly removed from the diegesis. In any case, the tentative critique of the *giallo's* sexual politics unravels entirely during the sequence where Luca's liaison with the blonde is cross-cut with the killer's rape of Laura. This 'ironic' juxtaposition achieves nothing more than an eroticization of sexual violence long associated with the genre. Cozzi may aim to subvert the *giallo* formula but proves unable to transcend, let alone transform its inherent limitations and restrictions, ultimately endorsing the clichés with a dogged lack of imagination.

**Daniel O'Brien**



## The Scorpion With Two Tails

Assassinio al cimitero  
etrusco  
Aka Murder in An Etruscan  
Cemetery

**Studio:**

Dania Film

**Director:**

'Christian Plummer' (Sergio  
Martino)

**Producer:**

Luciano Martino

**Screenwriter:**

Ernesto Gastaldi

**Cinematographer:**

Giancarlo Ferrando

**Art Director:**

Massimo Antonello Geleng

**Editor:**

Daniele Alabiso  
Eugenio Alabiso

**Duration:**

98 minutes

**Genre:**

Giallo/Horror

**Cast:**

Elvire Audray  
John Saxon  
Marliù Tolo  
Van Johnson

**Year:**

1982

### Synopsis

Joan is the New York-based young wife of an archaeologist who is away working on an exploratory dig in Italy on behalf of her father's company. She begins having strange premonitions which appear to involve sacrificial rites carried out by Etruscans where the sacrificial victims have their heads twisted one hundred and eighty degrees. Soon she foresees the brutal death of her husband in the same manner. After her premonitions are realized in grim fashion, Joan heads to Italy to investigate his death. She is met with stern resistance from the Contessa Maria Volumna, on whose behalf her husband had also been working. She also receives a cold shoulder from the local detectives, who are keen to sweep the matter under the carpet. However, the murders continue apace and Joan sees the connecting feature between the victims to be their involvement with the archaeological dig and consequent raiding of the Etruscan tombs. As the excavations and killings continue, a disturbing likeness is found between Joan and a wall painting depicting a beautiful Etruscan noblewoman. This is the same lady who features in Joan's premonitions and who leads the sacrifices. The locals and the archaeological experts cite the Etruscan belief in the cyclical nature of life and immortality which Joan can scarcely believe.

### Critique

A bizarre concatenation of B-movie genres and ciphers, the muddled naming and re-naming of this film relays something of its confused identity. It is ostensibly an attempt by renowned Giallo director Sergio Martino (here operating under the Americanized pseudonym of 'Christian Plummer') to draw on Italian history in order to re-energize (and legitimize?) the *giallo* genre. It also perhaps draws on the earlier 1972 picture by Armando Crispino *L'etrusco uccide ancora/The Etruscan Kills Again* for inspiration but the film ends up in a woolly mess of tangled plot knots and ugly exposition.

Stylistically, the film resembles an inexpensive television drama (indeed, it was originally conceived as such), all rapid close-ups and pull-aways, and slightly off-kilter framing. The performances are comically broad, the dialogue clay-footed and cumbersome and is delivered in a glazed monotone for the most part.

As the lead protagonist Joan (Elvire Audray) uncovers the dark plotting and skulduggery behind her husband's nasty end (linking the immorality of tomb raiding with the illegality of drug smuggling), the story melds historical adventure with contemporary thriller elements without ever resorting to the gore that genre fans prefer.

The *giallo* often incorporates a ludic approach to sight within its narratives and here the director appears to make reference to that generic convention with recurring images of maggots outpouring from eye sockets of the dead, statues and the living, which, when combined with the heroine's apparent 'gift' of second sight, creates

a playful approach to sight on the part of the film (which is also a generic trait of the giallo). The method of sacrificial murder by twisting the neck to make the human head face the other direction could also be taken as another (slightly obfuscatory) reference to that convention, or it could equally relate more simply to the protagonist's mortal dilemma of the need to watch her back or, indeed, to look back into history to find the solution to her mystery.

The twelve cases of archaeological relics (one of which is being used for drug-smuggling) are referred to in the film as being representative of the twelve major cities of Etruria. The number twelve, as well as being attributable to the dodecopoli of major Etruscan cities, did indeed appear to have ritual significance in Etruscan culture.

However, the film is essentially a clumsy medley of tropes, plot elements and constituent parts pawned from other genre staples, its closest cinematic relative being the superior Crispino film mentioned above and also trading a little on Sergio Martino's other, more successful work *La coda dello scorpione/The Case of the Scorpion's Tail* from 1971. Even the soundtrack appears to be directly pilfered from other films in the genre.

### Matthew Pink

## The Strange Vice of Mrs Wardh

Lo strano vizio della Signora Wardh  
Aka Blade of the Killer  
Aka The Next Victim!

#### Studio:

Copercines

#### Directors:

Sergio Martino  
Antonio Crescenzi

#### Producer:

Luciano Martino

#### Screenwriter:

Ernesto Gastaldi

#### Cinematographers:

Emilio Foriscot  
Floriano Trenker

### Synopsis

Arriving in Vienna, Julie Wardh, glamorous and attractive, is married to the diplomat Neil, but is increasingly dissatisfied sexually. She is haunted by a dark, disturbing affair in her past with the violent (and potentially homicidal) Jean. Their relationship consisted of destructive sexual encounters where Jean would all but rape Julie, often tearing at her clothes with the jagged edges of a broken bottle. Meanwhile a razor-wielding serial killer is on the loose in Vienna.

One night at a dissolute party, Julie notices Jean, who has been sending Julie flowers with ominous messages relating to his knowledge of Julie's hidden vices. At the party Julie flirts with the caddish George, who is apparently the cousin of her newly wealthy best friend Carol. George and Julie begin a passionate affair, but this results in blackmail, murder and threats to Julie's life. Carol becomes involved, but is brutally slain in the same manner as the victims of the serial killer. The murders continue...

### Critique

One of the better-known films of the prolific *giallo* director Sergio Martino, who was a mere 29 years old when he completed this film, part of a 'new wave' of *gialli* which arrived in the same flurry of attention as the films of Dario Argento in the early 1970s.

Given that this is only Martino's second film (his first was within another pulpish genre, the exploitation film) it is impressively shot, paced at a zippy tempo and operates around a plot predicating

**Art Director:**

None given

**Editor:**

Eugenio  
Alabiso

**Duration:**

98 minutes

**Genre:**

Giallo/Horror

**Cast:**

George Hilton  
Edwige Fenech  
Ivan Rassimov

**Year:**

1971

many tropes of the genre to come, all psycho-sexual peccadilloes and fetishistic murder. It also carries – relatively lightly – a series of plot pretzel twists. The film is generally considered to be one of the more superior pieces within not only this director's career but also the genre as a whole.

Martino demonstrates here his keen eye for aesthetically-pleasing uses of colour and light with some élan. He operates largely and successfully from a wide frame, knowing when to compose an image with jagged edges and clashing shapes, and also when to pull back – emptying the frame and exposing the dilemma (often mortal danger) of his characters.

This film cemented Martino's regular team of collaborators who would work with him on many of his future films, including the Edgar Allan Poe fan and screenwriter Ernesto Gastaldi, Martino's producing brother Luciano and actors including the feline Edwige Fenech (so often his terrorized leading lady), the sinister-eyed Ivan Rassimov and the swarthy George Hilton.

Martino paints Vienna and its hoi-polloi international society as something of a den of iniquity, where hidden sexual desires are played out at druggy parties. This closed society, of which Fenech's character and that of Rassimov are a part, takes on an additional menacing edge given the context of the city at the time the film is set – a serial killer is on the loose and slicing up beautiful young girls. At first, like Spike Lee's *Summer of Sam* (1999) or Jane Campion's *In The Cut* (2003), the serial killer operates only at the periphery of the central story but the film's tension and drive are largely derived from the manner in which both strands (Julie and Jean's violently tempestuous past, and the serial killer aspect) are assimilated.

In fact it is the rather gonzo sexual predilections of Fenech's Julie that gives this film its off-the-wall feel – that 'Strange Vice' of the title. Quite why she and Jean began their relationship, involving broken bottles, pseudo-rape and rolling around in shattered glass, is never really explained, giving the film a dark undertow.

**Matthew Pink**

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**Tenebrae**

Tenebre

**Studio/Distributor:**

Titanus

**Director:**

Dario Argento

**Producers:**

Salvatore Argento  
Claudio Argento

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Synopsis

An American crime writer, Peter Neal, travels to Rome to promote his new book, *Tenebre*. There a series of murders are committed; in one case, pages of *Tenebre* are stuffed in the victim's mouth and Peter receives menacing phone calls and messages. The killer is unmasked – but the killings do not stop, getting closer to Peter (his ex-wife and her lover, Peter's agent; his assistant) until at the end the fatalities reach epic proportions.

Critique

*Tenebre* is a tease, perhaps the apotheosis of one of the core pleasures of detective fiction: being outwitted, wrong-footed, led up the



**Screenwriter:**

Dario Argento

**Cinematographer:**

Luciano Tovoli

**Art Director:**

Giuseppe Bassan

**Editor:**

Franco Fraticelli

**Duration:**

110 minutes

**Genre:**

Giallo

**Cast:**

Anthony Franciosa

Daria Nicolodi

Giuliano Gemma

Veronica Lario

Eva Robbins

**Year:**

1982

garden path. The playfulness is evident in the film's central conceit (**to reveal which is also a spoiler**): a crime writer whose books provide an inspiration for actual murders, who then kills the murderer and himself becomes – as perhaps he always has been – a murderer. The teasing is also present in the very organization of the film.

Take the title. Seldom can a tenebrous thriller have been so full of light. Even sequences shot at night have strong, unnatural light sources falling across them. The murder of Peter's agent takes place in a crowded, open-air shopping centre in broad daylight. Interpolated sequences of a young woman humiliating a man and then being stabbed to death are shot overexposed. At one point the camera pans around an empty room, coming to rest on a huge metal sculpture, whose tip gleams with light; though the sculpture may point forward to the sculpture in another location that at the end of the film pierces and kills Peter, there is really no point to the image here except to suggest the sinister, threatening quality of its gleaming tip: fear of light in a film called dark.

Then there is the use of editing. The interpolated sequences are sometimes introduced by shots of pills and the sound of running water, but only at the end of the film do we learn that Peter may have killed a young woman in his youth, suggesting that these sequences may show this woman and may be Peter's nightmares. Peter's ex-wife Jane receives a pair of red shoes, just like those of the woman in the sequences; after the murder of the agent, there is a close-up on a pair of red shoes walking and then hesitating: the killer? Or just a passer-by who happens to have the same pair of shoes? We expect details in a film to contribute to the story and have difficulty accepting they may just be evidence of the world passing by. This notion is most strongly played on in a shot of a plane taking off, after Peter has packed his bags and set off to go home; we learn (**another spoiler coming**) that he never went home, the plane is just any plane; but the way films organize narrative tricks us into thinking that the plane must be Peter's plane.

*Tenebre* also teases sexually, suggesting a web of anxiety around female and perverse sexuality. The killer kills sexually-active women. The murder of two lesbians involves a long, spectacular crane shot over their dwelling to a throbbing rock score, a shot impossible to treat as a point-of-view shot and yet which, in its seeming to search for an open window through which to see the women and in a hand finally entering the frame at the end of the take, evokes the voyeurism of soft-porn lesbianism. The woman killed in the interpolated sequences is played by Eva Robbins, well known in the period as a pre-operative transsexual.

All of this suggests unresolved psychic anxieties and moral ambiguities – and this is where the film leaves us. The ironies, absurdities and irrelevances of the film are in tandem with graphically-represented murders that provoke gasps and giggles in equal measure. And the film ends with the one survivor, screaming in the torrential rain at the sight of several grotesquely mutilated corpses, as if beneath all the cleverness and wit there is only the inchoate turmoil of terror.

**Richard Dyer**

## Torso

I corpi presentano tracce di violenza carnale  
Aka The Bodies Present  
Traces of Carnal Violence

**Studio:**

Compagnia Cinematografica  
Champion

**Director:**

Sergio Martino

**Producer:**

Carlo Ponti

**Screenwriters:**

Sergio Martino  
Ernesto Gastaldi

**Cinematographer:**

Giancarlo Ferrando

**Art Director:**

Giantito Burchiellaro

**Editor:**

Eugenio Alabiso

**Duration:**

93 minutes

**Genre:**

Giallo

**Cast:**

Suzy Kendall  
Tina Aumont  
Luc Merenda  
John Richardson

**Year:**

1973

### Synopsis

Carol and Florence, two students taking a course in fine art, fall victim to a masked murderer wielding a hacksaw. There is a clue to the identity of the killer: an embroidered red scarf is discovered on the body of one of the victims. Art student Daniela believes that she has seen the scarf before, but before she can ascertain where, she begins to receive threatening phone calls. The scarf was sold by a street trader who tries (extremely unwisely) to blackmail the murderer – with the inevitable lethal results. Meanwhile, Daniela and her friends, Ursula, Jane and Katia, decide to live together in an out-of-the-way country villa. This, unsurprisingly, is an extremely bad move, as they have been followed by the murderer, who begins to ruthlessly pick them off one by one. Soon the villa is a charnel house littered with body parts, and the identity of the murderer looks set to remain undisclosed...

### Critique

Julian Barry? Christian Plummer? Martin Dolman? In fact, the filmmaker Sergio Martino (like so many of his peers) was obliged to work under a variety of pseudonyms. His real break as a director came in the wave of *Mondo Cane*-style documentaries, with their crowd-pleasing mix of authentic grisly footage and reconstructions of the same. He then took the route that had tempted so many Italian Directors: anodyne comedies (often with soft-core sexual situations). But the director's true talent was to appear only when he moved into the genre that became his metier: the *giallo*. *Gialli* are, of course, notorious for their unwieldy, slightly ungrammatical titles (both in Italian and when translated into English), and Martino came up with one of the most memorable in *I corpi presentano tracce di violenza carnale/The Bodies Present Traces of Carnal Violence* (1974). This, however, was shortened to *Torso*, and is his best known film as well as being one of the most assured and atmospheric entries in the genre (and, in fact, less graphic than its title might suggest, although recently more complete prints have become available).

Using English actors such as John Richardson, Martino creates here an admirably disturbing piece, even if the identity of the killer is not that difficult to discern. The casting of Suzy Kendall as the menaced victim in this one – a function she also performed for Argento – is another reason for the film's success. And it is certainly a more impressive entry in the genre than *Lo strano vizio della Signora Wardh/The Strange Vice of Mrs Wardh* (1970). Although *Lo strano vizio* builds a fair measure of tension, it remains no more than a merely craftsmanlike piece, without the more comprehensive grip of *Torso*. Two years later, in *Tutti i colori del buio/All the Colours of Darkness* (1972), Martino utilized a strange, almost somnambulant narrative as a vehicle for a similarly intelligent use of both camera and *mise-en-scène*. The

other main influence on Martino (apart from Bava's and Argento's *gialli*) was, of course, the subgenre of thriller forged in the wake of Boileau and Narcejac's *Les Diaboliques*, with elaborate double-crosses and plots behind otherwise inexplicable actions. If, in retrospect, Martino's career is notable for more duds than successes, those successes show that, while as a director he was not in the same league as Argento and Bava, Martino (as *Torso* demonstrated) was in fact one of the most idiosyncratic and imaginative makers of Italian popular cinema.

### **Barry Forshaw**