

The Italian Gothic Film

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To try and synthesise all the explicit and implicit definitions of what constitutes ‘the Gothic’ would make one as insane as Ambrosio in Lewis’s *The Monk* (1796) or one of Poe’s narrator/protagonists. Gothic at once refers to a very definite set of creative choices and expectations, while it also can, seemingly, refer to anything with a graveyard or a cobweb in it. Baldick and Mighall (2012) noted how the term has become so overextended as to render it almost completely meaningless: so that anything vaguely scary or sensational is labelled as Gothic (280). Botting (2008: 12) noted, citing Levy, such a proliferation [of different kinds of Gothic] . . . threatens to gothicise the entirety of human experience. The word becomes meaningless if it can refer to anything. I have no doubt that many of the articles published in this volume proffer better definitions than I could hope to articulate, so I defer to them. In lieu of a proper definition of the Gothic, I will fall in with Gilda Williams (2014: 412) who simply identifies the Gothic as anything which depicts a lurid interest in the macabre: ‘works typically featuring skulls, gore and other “spooky” iconography’. Later on, Williams (417) focuses her definition slightly, seeing the Gothic ‘as a synonym for the aesthetic of the dark, the grotesque, the macabre and the supernatural’.

Work on Gothic *film* tends to suffer from a similar epistemological malady which attempts to keep the definition open until it becomes almost synonymous with the entire horror genre itself. Consulting Halberstam (1995), Hervey (2007), Hopkins (2005), Kay (2012), Morgan (2002), Aldana Reyes (2014) and Spooner (2006), few could give a concrete definition of what Gothic *film* actually was. Many of the scholars just noted contain their research by looking only at specific film adaptations of a priori Gothic literary texts, suggesting that Gothic film is an adaptation of a particular Gothic novel. Worland (2014) provides a useful overview and contextualisation distinguishing between Universal Pictures’ cycles of Gothic horror in the 1930s and 1940s, the

British Hammer Gothic movies from the 1950s through the 1970s, the Roger Corman-directed Edgar Allan Poe adaptations of the early 1960s and, albeit only slightly, the Italian Gothic films I will be discussing here. I am drawing much of my understanding of Gothic film, and particularly the Italian Gothic horror film, from two recent volumes: Roberto Curti's *Italian Gothic Horror Films: 1957–1969* (2015) and Jonathan Rigby's *Euro Gothic: Classics of Continental Horror Cinema* (2017).

What follows is a discussion of the Italian Gothic horror movies produced in the early 1960s but put into the context of the larger debates about the Gothic, sometimes outside of film studies. Space and time only permit me to explore a few films, and so my selection is meant to be representative, not definitive. Therefore I shall be discussing *Black Sunday/La maschera del demonio* (Mario Bava, 1960), *The Horrible Dr. Hichcock/L'Orribile segreto del Dr. Hichcock* (Robert Hampton [Riccardo Freda], 1962), *The Whip and the Body/La frusta e il corpo* (John M. Old [Mario Bava], 1963) and *Castle of Blood/Danza macabra* (Gordon Wilson Jr [Sergio Corbucci] and Anthony Dawson [Antonio Margheriti], 1964), and examining these films within the discourse of the Gothic.

There are some minor discrepancies in fully identifying the beginnings of the Italian Gothic film: while Hughes (2011: 77) gives the years 1960–5, for example, Curti (2015) casts his net wider, discussing a range of films produced between 1957 and 1969. Danny Shipka (2011) identifies key continuities between the films produced in the 1960s and film production through the 1970s, and Rigby (2017) discusses the European Gothic film (including those made in Italy) from the very beginnings of cinema history to the present day. Trying to nail down, definitively, any period of film production is notoriously difficult; however – and typical of the scholarship on Italian genre cinema – a more useful approach is to see the Gothic in terms of *filone*, an Italian word literally referring to a seam of precious metal or a tributary of a river in its larger context. Rather than seeing the Italian Gothic film as a distinctive period in Italian horror film-making, it is, perhaps, advantageous to refer to a Gothic *tradition* within the genre. Such an approach recognises a period in vogue (in the early 1960s), while also recognising that, like Dracula himself, the Gothic never truly dies.

Before looking at an overview of the Italian Gothic horror films produced in the early 1960s, further context is needed. As the domestic box-office underperformance of *Black Sunday* suggested, Italian audiences had little interest in Italian horror films. *Black Sunday* gained its audience largely through American International Pictures (AIP) buying the rights and putting the film out on the grindhouse and drive-

in circuits in the US (Rigby, 2017: 123): so, given the apparent lack of domestic interest, most of these films were produced for international *export*. The international casts many of these films (featuring American, British, German, Spanish as well as Italian actors) not only reflect this international distribution, but also the international co-production of many, often being Italian-Spanish or Italian-German co-productions. As Francesco Di Chiara noted, ‘this formula allowed companies located in different countries to pool resources and production experience in order to make bigger, more competitive films, which were able to attract a European audience typically keen on consuming American films’ (2016: 34). Furthermore, because of European (Italian, in particular) audiences’ desire to watch American films, many of the Italian film-makers (and writers and actors) worked under English-sounding pseudonyms. So, for example, Mario Bava (after the financial failure of *Black Sunday* under his own name) directed *The Whip and the Body* (1963) as John M. Old. Other relevant pseudonyms (for this chapter) include directors Robert Hampton (Riccardo Freda), Anthony Dawson (Antonio Margheriti) and screenwriter Julian Berry (or Julyan Perry).¹

Rigby (2017) saw Italian Gothic horror films as having, at least in the historical context I am working here, two distinct waves of production: one following on the heels of the Hammer horror films beginning with *The Curse of Frankenstein* (Terence Fisher, 1957) and *Dracula* (Terence Fisher, 1958) (see Di Chiara, 2016: 35), and the second in response to the AIP adaptations of Edgar Allan Poe stories directed by Roger Corman, starting with *House of Usher* (1960). As Rigby noted:

For, just as the first wave had been set in motion by Hammer Films, the second took its cue from Roger Corman’s sequence of Poe adaptations for AIP, specifically his 1961 smash *Pit and the Pendulum*, which made as big an impact on Italian audiences as Fisher’s *Dracula* had a few years earlier. Henceforth no Italian Gothic seemed complete without a diseased family at its centre, garnished if possible by torture devices in the basement and prolonged, candlelit corridor-wanderings for the beleaguered heroine. (2017: 125)

This patterning reflects the initial wave of Gothic production in 1960, including Bava’s *Black Sunday*, and then another apparent wave around 1962–3, including Freda’s *Dr. Hichcock*. The following analysis is intended simply as a representative sampling of this period of Italian genre cinema.

While critics like Curti and Rigby trace the Italian Gothic films back to, at least, 1957 and *I Vampiri* (Riccardo Freda [and Mario Bava], 1957),² most histories put the start of this *filone* with Mario Bava’s

‘official’ directorial debut, *Black Sunday*. Bava’s film opens with an Inquisition-like auto-de-fé condemning Satanists Asa Vajda (Barbara Steele) and her lover Javutich (Arturo Dominici) to be burned at the stake after the ‘Mask of Satan’ (the title of the film in Italian, *La maschera del demonio*) has been nailed to their faces. A sudden rainstorm puts out the fires and Javutich is buried in unconsecrated ground, while Asa is taken to the Vajda family crypt. Jumping ahead two hundred years, Dr Kruvajan (Andrea Checchi) and his young assistant, Dr Gorobec (John Richardson), are on their way to a conference when their carriage breaks down near Castle Vajda. The two doctors explore a nearby crypt and discover Asa’s tomb. Dr Kruvajan removes the ‘mask’, and accidentally cutting his hand on the broken glass of the coffin, drips a tiny amount of blood on the corpse. This is enough to begin Asa’s resurrection. The two doctors decide to stay at a nearby inn for the night, but as they are leaving the crypt, they encounter Asa’s descendent, Katia Vajda (also played by Steele), who mentions that she lives at Castle Vajda with her father, Prince Vajda (Ivo Garrani), and her brother, Constantine (Enrico Olivieri). Later that night, Prince Vajda is taken seriously ill and Dr Kruvajan is sent for. The partially resurrected Asa calls forth Javutich, who emerges from his unconsecrated grave to do her bidding. Javutich is sent to intercept Kruvajan and bring him to the vampire-witch. Asa seduces and kills Kruvajan, turning him into a vampire like herself. Kruvajan, in turn, kills Prince Vajda. All of this is part of Asa’s grand plot to destroy the Vajda family who condemned her to die two hundred years earlier, as well as her desire to possess the body of Katia so she can be fully alive.

Unlike other horror films produced in Italy around this time, like *I vampiri* (Freda and Bava, 1957), all of which took place in the present, Bava’s film takes place in a nineteenth-century past; this is a significant Gothic setting, especially given the publication history of Gothic novels, at least in English. Bava’s *mise-en-scène* is filled with the images one stereotypically associates with the Gothic. Howard Hughes noted: ‘The ruined chapel has crumbling arches, cobwebs, tombs and a crypt, and the castle interior, with its great hall dominated by an ornate fireplace and portraits of Asa and Javutich, conceals a network of secret passages and trapdoors’ (2011: 79). But we can identify other elements of the literary Gothic throughout the film too: despite the film’s setting in Moldavia, and the designation of the Church as Eastern Orthodox rather than Roman Catholic, the film’s opening with hooded monks torturing and then burning alive the two Satanic witches echoes the (British) Gothic’s anti-papal litany of Roman Catholic excesses in previous centuries. If the British Gothic was anti-papal, as suggested by Botting (1996: 3),

then Bava, coming from a Catholic country himself, displaces these abuses of the past to an alternative European Other, namely the Eastern European, with its echoes of Dracula's Transylvania.

The key Gothic theme of a long hidden past erupting into an unstable present, regardless of whether that 'present' is the mid-twentieth century or within the story-world itself, is explored by Bava in Asa's persistent disruption of the Vajda family's existence. The events of *Black Sunday* coalesce around the anniversary of Asa's and Javutich's executions. As Curti commented, 'the present is continually menaced by a past that hangs and waits, ready to take back what belongs to it' (2015: 45). As Botting elsewhere has noted:

The projection of the present onto a Gothic past occurred, however, as part of the wider processes of political, economic, and social upheaval: emerging at a time in bourgeois and industrial revolution, a time of Enlightenment philosophy and increasingly secular views, the eighteenth-century Gothic fascination with a past of chivalry, violence, magical beings, and malevolent aristocrats is bound up with the shifts from feudal to commercial practices in which notions of property, government, and society were undergoing massive transformations. (2012: 13–14)

Kruvajan and Gorobec embody a contemporary bourgeoisie: while the Vajda's aristocratic family persists, they fulfil no apparent purpose than to suggest the tenacity of the aristocracy itself. The two doctors, however, are men with trades, men who work for their living, even if such educational privilege was open only to the lucky few who had the economic resources to take advantage of it. Asa and Javutich, as Botting's 'malevolent aristocrats', return from the dead to feed off the living. As vampires, they literally live on the blood of the living; as vampires, they are, what Punter (1996: 183) identified as, 'barbaric' – symbols of the chaos of the past attempting to disrupt the equilibrium of the present, much like the barbaric hordes did to Rome. As Curti noted in detail:

Black Sunday evokes a fear of past times which is typical of Gothic literature, by reworking the awe of the aristocracy which was the basis of the legends on vampires. Through Asa, Bava synthesizes one of the Gothic's fundamental themes: the fear of a 'return to the past.' Time becomes an obsessive presence, and produces a sense of vertigo and inevitability: just as the barriers between life and death become blurred, the same happens between the past and the present. The returning past takes the form of a curse launched centuries earlier, whose oppressive legacy has an impact on the present. (2015: 45)

Italian Gothic horror cinema is filled with idle aristocracy juxtaposed to 'contemporary' men of education and employment. The Gothic, itself,

can be seen as an anxiety regarding the epochal shift between these two organising principles from aristocracy to bourgeoisie.

In many respects, aristocracy and bourgeoisie can be seen as each other's double, reflecting the opposition between the two. This doubling is also a standard motif within Gothic literature, which Bava could not be unaware of. In casting Barbara Steele as both Asa and Katia, *Black Sunday* visually connects the two. Like Stevenson's Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde, the *sine qua non* of doppelgänger motifs in Gothic literature, Asa is the wicked witch to Katia's 'virginal heroine' (Curti, 2015: 45). Across the corpus of Italian Gothic horror cinema, this doubling becomes a standard feature in many films, as noted below.

Italian horror cinema screenwriter Ernesto Gastaldi, who would go on to write some of the seminal Gothic and *giallo*³ scripts of the 1960s and 1970s, noted in the Forward to Curti's book that as beginning screenwriters, they were 'called on to make up stories set in gloomy crumbling castles, isolated villas, dark crypts and foggy cemeteries packed full with crooked crosses, in the shade of cypress tress just like in an [Italian Gothic nineteenth-century poet] Ugo Foscolo poem – even better if those cypresses were shaken by a howling wind that recalled the echo of wolf packs or the gnashing teeth of damned souls' (in Curti, 2015: 1). While Gastaldi does not use the word 'Gothic' to describe these films – in fact, the vernacular term used at first by (at least) the screenwriters themselves was 'cinema di paura' (cinema of fear, or 'scary cinema') (Curti, 2015: 1) – he does evoke the Gothic poet Foscolo as an allusion for these films. Gastaldi continued, noting that he first encountered these films referenced as 'Gothic' by director Riccardo Freda, who described his *The Horrible Dr Hichcock* (written by Gastaldi) as 'a Gothic film, due to its mixture of romance and horror' (Curti, 2015: 2).

Having learned from *Black Sunday* the coldness Italian movie-goers had towards Italian horror films, *The Horrible Dr Hichcock*, a film which Danny Shipka noted 'stands out as one of the seminal Italian Gothics' (2011: 56), hid its Italianate elements behind a facade of English-sounding pseudonyms. I've already mentioned that Riccardo Freda is credited as 'Robert Hampton' and Gastaldi as 'Julyan Perry'; I will note in square parentheses a listed actor's real name when relevant. The Italian title of *Dr Hichcock* alludes to a 'horrible secret' (a 'L'orribile segreto') of the titular character, Dr Bernard Hichcock (Robert Flemyng): necrophilia. All credit to a film made in 1962 which not only references necrophilia, but opens with a newly interred coffin dug up, opened and the body of a young (dead) woman fondled. Dr Hichcock has a regular ritual with his wife, Margaretha (Teresa Fitzgerald [Maria Teresa Vianello]): he injects her with an anaesthetic he has developed, thereby rendering her

body absolutely prone, in order to satisfy his urges. However, by administering too large a dose, he accidentally kills her. He leaves his stately home and university hospital position to get over his widowhood, but returns twelve years later with a new wife, Cynthia (Barbara Steele). Upon his return he also re-employs his housekeeper, Martha (Harriet White), whose mentally ill sister she is responsible for. Margaretha seems to haunt the Hichcock household; her portraits remain in what appears to be every room, always watching Cynthia. The new bride is even convinced she has seen the first Mrs Hichcock's ghost walking in the garden. A recovering mental patient herself, Cynthia's hold on her sanity becomes increasingly more difficult.

There are two key literary texts that Gastaldi (and Freda) appear to allude to in *Dr Hichcock*: Daphne du Maurier's *Rebecca* (1938) is evoked in the roles of the three central characters. Hichcock fills Maxim's position within the narrative, Martha is the film's Mrs Danvers and Cynthia is clearly 'the second Mrs' Hichcock. The second allusion is to Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre* (1847), specifically Martha's mentally ill sister, who, like Brontë's Bertha, is another Gothic 'mad woman in the attic'. In a move evocative of Brontë's Bertha, it is revealed that Martha's 'sister' is in fact Margaretha, and that Cynthia is to be sacrificed so her blood will rejuvenate Hichcock's first wife. But these Gothic novels (from different periods of Gothic literature) are not the only allusions: clearly the titular doctor is a reference to film-maker Alfred Hitchcock and his films are referenced. The plot recalls his film adaptation of du Maurier's *Rebecca* (film, 1940), and the spiked milk drink that Hichcock brings to Cynthia is reminiscent of *Suspicion* (1941). There may even be an echo of the story of the Hungarian Countess Elizabeth Báthory (1560–1615), who murdered hundreds of women in whose blood she bathed to keep herself young, by way of the film's allusion to *I vampiri*, one of director Freda's first films, which featured a vampiric version of Báthory.

While David Punter (1996: 183–4) recognised 'taboo' as one of the 'aspects of the terrifying to which Gothic constantly, and hauntedly, returns' – and necrophilia is, in most polite circles, a taboo subject – it is rare to find the practice quite so explicitly depicted in *Dr. Hichcock*. Punter identified these key literary Gothic sensibilities as 'constantly approach[ing] areas of social-psychological life which offend, which are suppressed, which are generally swept under the carpet in the interests of social and psychological equilibrium' (184). Taboo in the Gothic tradition, then, manifests itself as the return of the repressed. The pleasures inherent in breaking these taboos within the safe and contained contexts of a novel or a film feeds what Botting identifies as our 'fascination with transgression and the anxiety over cultural limits and boundaries, [and

which] continue to produce ambivalent emotions and meanings in their tales of darkness, desire and power' (1996: 1). Despite this fascination, a lurid interest in the macabre is, as Botting noted, 'less an unrestricted celebration of unsanctioned excesses and more an examination of the limits produced [in these texts] . . . to distinguish good from evil, reason from passion, virtue from vice and self from other' (1996: 5). The theme of necrophilia in *Dr Hichcock* is disarmed by an almost ludic self-reflexivity (cf. Hurley, 2007: 142–3) and a sense of the comic (cf. Horner and Zlosnik, 2012): as Rigby (2017: 110) noted, Hichcock's perversions require the epitome of the docile sexual object – taking 'lie back and think of England' to its furthest conclusion. The 'Englishness' of the Gothic novel is also played with in these films by frequently having Britain as a setting; *Dr. Hichcock*, for example, takes place in 'London, 1885', as we are told at the beginning of the film.⁴ However, as these films were produced mainly for export, what we see is less a presentation of Britain than a depiction of how Italy *sees* Britain; it is a distorted Britain, filled with sexual repression and Gothic angst. English women are cold to the point of being cadaverous and the men are so sexually repressed they look like they're going to explode in a miasma of jism and blood. Necrophilia then, from an Italian perspective, is the quintessential *perversione inglese*.

To be sure, the necrophilia in *Dr Hichcock* produces a visceral reaction to this day; the physicality of Asa's seduction of Kruvaján suggests necrophilia, but *Dr Hichcock*'s perversion is not only onscreen; Margarethe is aware of and complicit in his necrophiliac indulgences. Such explicitness further suggests a Gothic in the Lewisonian tradition, as, in the words of Andrew Smith, an 'explicit physicality of horror' (2007: 147). This physicality, what Jack Morgan (2002: 7) called the 'bio-psychological', is a key device in the Gothic, and with a loosening up on censorious limits of what could be shown in a film (Curti, 2015: 15; also Shipka, 2011: 39), these Gothic film-makers were able to exploit the limits of Gothic cinema, specifically with regard to the perverse play with sex and death. Although discussing *Black Sunday*, Peter Bondanella noted how Barbara Steele embodied this sex/death connection: 'Steele's high cheekbones suggest that there is a skull barely concealed under her beautiful face . . . combining the suggestion of death behind the face of a woman embodying the traits of both virgin and temptress – and thus associating the themes of sex and death – certainly serves the many related themes found in the horror film quite well' (2009: 313). In *Dr Hichcock*, Steele still embodies those qualities Bondanella saw in *Black Sunday*, and, while not stated directly, certainly suggests how Cynthia functions as a sex-death fetish for Hichcock. But it is not simply connecting sex and

death that these Italian film-makers achieve so well, but that, as Judith Halberstam (1995) noted with regard to the Gothic, these abstractions were viscerally felt by the audience. As Roberto Curti pointed out, 'Excess, in these films, meant not only a more direct approach to horror but also the presence of a strong emotional element which was a direct result of the Italian tradition of melodrama' (2015: 15). The excess and perversion in the Italian Gothic horror film plays upon the physical, visceral reaction to the horror, while also leading viewers to connect emotionally with it: a bio-psychological experience.

Mario Bava's *The Whip and the Body* may very well be the most beautifully filmed Italian Gothic horror film. Instead of necrophilia, this time screenwriter Gastaldi explicitly uses the Gothic as a means to explore sadomasochism.⁵ Prodigal son, Kurt Menliff (Christopher Lee), returns to his costal castle after leaving in disgrace many years before. His departure had something to do with his seduction of housekeeper Giorgia's (Harriet White) daughter, Tanya, and Tanya's suicide. Giorgia blames Kurt explicitly for her daughter's death, and she keeps the still bloody dagger Tanya used as a memento, under glass. Kurt is into the sadomasochistic scene rather heavily, wherein he enjoys savagely whipping his lovers into ecstasy. He finds a more than willing partner in his brother Christian's (Tony Kendall [Luciano Stella]) wife, Nevenka (Daliah Lavi), and they begin an affair. Kurt is mysteriously killed one night with the bloody dagger, although the murderer is unseen. Thereafter Nevenka claims to see Kurt through her window or his muddy footprints in the crypt. Kurt appears to Nevenka sufficiently to continue their sadomasochistic affair. At first, only Nevenka can detect Kurt's ghost (assuming Kurt is really dead), but soon after, Christian also claims to hear his brother's laughter in the echoing halls.

Castle Menliff is filled with secret passages down to the crypt, and a wind storm ravages the coastline; this setting is right out of a classic Gothic novel, a point also noted by Rigby (2017: 131) and Punter and Byron (2004: 259). Curti noted how this setting all too frequently reflects the emotional state of the characters, most notably Nevenka's 'tormented soul and psyche' (2015: 105). If *Dr Hichcock* was Lewisonian in its physicality, *The Whip and the Body* (while also quite physical in its own right), is more Radcliffian in how 'an overwrought (and therefore Gothic) imagination can become overly stimulated by fantastical ideas' (Smith, 2007: 147). There are questions throughout the film about the extent to which this haunting is entirely in Nevenka's head, a key theme and preoccupation in the Gothic (Curti, 2015: 5). Scott Brewster, discussing the theme of madness in the Gothic, noted:

We compulsively interpret random signs, haunted by the possibility that we may be deluded, that we have not seen enough or have seen too much. To pursue delusion leads nowhere but, as these Gothic texts have suggested, we cannot help but undertake this pursuit. The madness we find resides in us: madness in the Gothic lies in the reading. (2012: 493)

The Gothic text is, as these critics have suggested, a hysterical text; we are sutured into a narrative told by a madman (or woman). The world, as we see it, is told from their subjective experience. At least, these narratives challenge our assumed omniscient perspective, either as a reader or a film viewer. Perhaps, most particularly, the Gothic film challenges this assumption of omniscience as we are too quick to assume what we *see* is some form of objective (narrative) reality. In this way, Bava's breathtakingly beautiful cinematography shapes the subjectivity of the film experience. Without going so far as to say *all* films that present their narrative from such a distorted subjective perspective are, *ipso facto*, Gothic, the films discussed frequently play with that visualised subjectivity. This perspective is what Punter called, in his three key aspects of the Gothic, 'paranoiac fiction': 'fiction in which the "implicated" reader is placed in a situation of ambiguity with regards to fears within the text, and in which the attribution of persecution remains uncertain and the reader is invited to share in the doubts and uncertainties which pervade the apparent story' (1996: 183). Until the film's conclusion, Kurt's haunting of Nevenka remains ambiguous; it is the final revelation that not only was she responsible for Kurt's murder, but that the entire 'haunting' has been in her mind, which confirms that we've experienced the film text as free indirect discourse, a subjective position presented to us as objective.

The elite French film journal, *Cahiers du Cinéma*, referred to Antonio Margheriti's *Castle of Blood* as a '*poème nécrophilique*' (cited in Rigby, 2017: 129), which is a lovely way of framing a film which is so typical of the Italian Gothic cinema that its charms can be overlooked. The film begins with a bizarre wager: Lord Thomas Blackwood (Raul H. Newman [Umberto Raho]) wagers £10⁶ to journalist Alan Foster (Georges Rivière) that he cannot spend one night (that night) in the Blackwood stately home. As witness to this bet is the American writer Edgar Allan Poe (Montgomery Glenn [Silvano Tranquilli]) who Foster is supposed to interview. Not long after arriving at the Blackwood estate, Foster meets Elisabeth Blackwood (Barbara Steele), Blackwood's sister, and the two fall madly in love with each other almost instantly. However, Foster finds himself in a complex melodrama of adulteries, passions and murders: while Elisabeth (seems to) love Foster, she is married to William (Ben Steffen [Benito Stefanelli]) and is having an

affair with the gardener, a shirtless hunk of a man (Johnny Walters [Giovanni Cianfriglia]) and the object of desire for Julia (Margaret Robsham [Margrete Robsahm]). Not long after Foster and Elisabeth consummate their mutual passion for each other, she admits to being dead (necrophilia again), and Foster then witnesses the other ghostly residents in the house reliving their deaths. Also present in the house is Dr Carmus (Henry Kruger [Arturo Dominici]), a scientist studying the supernatural, who also repeatedly experiences his own murder. These ghostly inhabitants of the Blackwood estate feed on the blood of the living, which gives them this one day of life every year. It was Blackwood's plan to find someone each year to stay in the house overnight to feed these hungry ghosts.

Castle of Blood is a veritable checklist of Gothic motifs: old mansion filled with dusty furniture and cobwebs, ghosts, crypts, adultery, passion, murder, necrophilia . . . one could go on. While the film is easily dismissed as simply ticking off the motifs as it goes through the motions, Gothic scholars, like Catherine Spooner, saw these similarly transparent Gothic mechanisms as part of the genre's self-reflexivity. In other words, the 'checklist-like' litany of motifs in the film is a Gothic device itself, letting the reader/viewer in on the joke from the very beginning. Spooner likewise noted how the Gothic

is also . . . profoundly concerned with its own past, self-referentially dependent on traces of other stories, familiar images and narrative structures, intertextual allusions. If this could be said to be true of a great many kinds of literature or film, then Gothic has a greater degree of self-consciousness about its nature, cannibalistically consuming the dead body of its own tradition. (2006: 10)

Consider the function of Edgar Allan Poe in the film. *Castle of Blood's* Poe is simply a referent to the Gothic; Poe is a writer so associated with the nineteenth-century macabre that the simple evocation of his name is sufficient to make the connection. Certainly, Poe's inclusion in the film is a further reference to the Roger Corman-directed adaptations which were popular at the time. The film-makers even claim that their movie is based on a short story by Poe (it's not). As Curti (2015: 110) noted, Poe's inclusion was 'mostly as a commercial gimmick and sometimes just as a vague reference'. Be that as it may, while in the coach on route to the Blackwood estate, Foster is able to interview Poe who comes along for the ride although he's not spending the night. During this interview, or as much of it as we see, Poe relates the famous dictum from his essay 'The Philosophy of Composition' (1846), namely that 'the death of a beautiful woman is the most poetical topic in the world', a statement

that clearly foreshadows Foster's encounter with the striking Elisabeth. But in this self-reflexive sense, the aggregate of Gothic horror motifs, or the film's apparent clichés, are part and parcel of the Gothic itself.

Furthermore, *Castle of Blood* plays less with the horror motifs than with the erotic. While the passion Foster and Elisabeth have for each other is clearly physical and fully unrepressed, it is still necrophiliac – while Elisabeth may be ghost, she is still dead. But, Elisabeth is not decomposing like Asa or in a drugged catatonia like Margaretha Hichcock; she is the beautiful, and physical, body of Barbara Steele. But we can add to the film's list of erotic excesses, like Julia's explicit desire for Elisabeth. While the word 'lesbian' is never used, the relationship between the two women was clearly sexual, at least at one time, although Julia is rejected for Foster and the heteronormative. Elisabeth is constructed as the bisexual subject of the film; in addition to the strong suggestion of a previous sexual relationship with Julia and her current focus on Foster, we see Elisabeth having a quick fumble with the shirtless gardener and, from the construction of the shots in this sequence, particularly its focus on the ecstasy on Elisabeth's face, it is strongly suggested that he has gone down on her. As the bisexual subject, Elisabeth can be read within the context of queer theory, namely in how her character can be seen as a 'radical deconstruction of sexual rhetoric as a form of resistance to sexual normalization' (Hanson, 2007: 175). Elisabeth rejects the traditional role of heteronormative sexuality of an aristocratic married woman through her bisexuality, adultery and her continued sexuality after her death.

The ghosts in *Castle of Blood* are different from many of the spectres that haunt supernatural fiction and film: in order for their single night of physical revels, they need the blood of the living to sustain them. Dr Carmus was one such victim, who, having succumbed to the Blackwood ghosts, is cursed to forever join them. The same fate awaited the Perkinses, a newlywed couple who were the previous year's victims, although we are 'treated' to the surprising (for 1964) image of Elsie Perkins (Sylvia Sorrent [Sylvia Sorrente]) topless as she undresses before the fireplace – an image which evokes the physical eroticism Margheriti is trying to covet. In this regard, the Blackwood ghosts are, in Kelly Hurley's phrase, 'abhuman': according to Punter and Byron, 'a body that retains traces of human identity but has become, or is in the process of becoming, something quite different' (2004: 41). The traces of their former lives are indelibly trapped in the estate, but their physicality, their bodies, are at once physical and ephemeral; they can interact with the material world around them, but only for the one night. As Foster, ignoring Elisabeth's pleading that she cannot go with him, drags her from the house at the film's denouement, she dissolves into dust before his (and our) eyes.

By no means has this current chapter exhausted either the aspects of the Gothic that could be discussed in reference to these films, or the number of Italian Gothic horror films which could be discussed. The topic is much larger than a single chapter could hope to cover. The Gothic never dies, and despite these films falling out of favour in the mid-1960s, there were frequent attempts to, if not resurrect the *filone* in its entirety, then to draw from it, cross-pollinating other *filone*. Mario Bava returned to the Gothic with *Kill, Baby . . . Kill/Operazione paura* (1966), *Baron Blood/Gli orrori del castello di Norimberga* (1972) and *Lisa and the Devil/Lisa e il diavolo* (1972) while Antonio Margheriti remade his own *Castle of Blood* in colour as *Web of the Spider/Nella stretta morsa del ragno* (1971). We can see evidence of the Gothic in *gialli* like *All the Colors of the Dark/Tutti I colori del buio* (Sergio Martino, 1972) and in director Dario Argento's 'Three Mothers Trilogy' – *Suspiria* (1977), *Inferno* (1980) and *The Mother of Tears/La Terza madre* (2007). As a literary genre, the Gothic has been going for more than 250 years; I would anticipate we have not seen the end of the Italian Gothic horror movie either.

Notes

1. While the Anglicisation of the Italian names was to disguise the films' national identity, I could extend this argument to say that such duplicity is further part of the Gothic traditions. Citing Jerrold Hogle, Botting notes that with regard to *The Castle of Otranto* specifically, is 'a fake translation by a fake translator of a fake medieval story by a fake author, the novel turns on a false nobleman unlawfully inheriting both title and property through a false will and attempting to secure a false lineage through nefarious schemes' (2012: 14). While I am not suggesting that such was intentional for these film-makers, it does, however, suggest a nice parallel. That being said, despite such a lack of intention, Mario Bava's son, film-maker Lamberto Bava, has occasioned to use a pseudonym as well, and when he does, he goes by John M. Old, Jr, effectively creating a 'false lineage' started by his father, 'John M. Old'.
2. Bava was cinematographer on *I Vampiri* and completed the film when Freda walked off set.
3. *Giallo* (*gialli*, pl.) as a film genre refers to Italian murder mystery-horror movies popular in the 1970s. These movies are frequently gory, sexy and the best of them are deeply sleazy too.
4. The most ludicrous setting of any of the Italian Gothic horror films is in *The Hyena of London (La jena di Londra*, Gino Mangini, 1964), in which we are told the film takes place in Bradford, which apparently (according to the title card) is a 'village' just outside of London.
5. Rigby noted: 'As Gastaldi admitted 30-odd years later, "The producers . . .

showed me an Italian print of *Pit and the Pendulum* before I started writing it. “Give us something like this” they said . . .’ (2017: 130).

6. The wager was originally for £100. However, Foster says he cannot afford that, so the wager was reduced to £10. This is only worth mentioning as some critics confuse the original wager with the accepted bet.

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