



# Once Upon a Time in Italy:

## Transnational Features of Genre Production 1960s–1970s

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*In the introduction* to his and Steven Ricci's seminal collection on European cinema, Geoffrey Nowell-Smith points out that 'the area in which Europe has most seriously lost out over the past twenty or thirty years has been that of popular genre production' and goes on to state that 'until the mid-1960s the major European production countries continued to produce genre films of various types [...] mainly for domestic

consumption' (Nowell-Smith 1998: 10). However, a closer look at the 1960s popular genre production of some of the major European film industries (Italy, France, Germany) reveals that the emphasis placed by Nowell-Smith on domestic consumption can, in some cases, be misleading. In particular, it is noteworthy that many of the hundreds of genre films produced in Italy from 1959 onwards fared poorly at the domestic box office and, furthermore, that entire genres, such as the Italian horror film or the *giallo*, continued to prosper even though they were often neglected by the Italian audience.

In this essay, we will argue that it is not possible to fully understand European popular genre cinema through a nation-state perspective and, at the same time, that such a cinema is a phenomenon that somehow failed to acquire a stable transnational identity, both economically and culturally. We will focus in particular on a number of Italian/French co-productions of the 1960s, in order to show how they rely on a typically European production system to provide a culturally international – or, perhaps, non-national – product, mostly aimed at the North American market. To this extent, Jacques Deray's *The Swimming Pool/La Piscine* and Umberto Lenzi's *Paranoia/Orgasmo* provide two interesting case studies, as they were both produced in 1969 in a joint venture between a French and an Italian company, and share some generic features while being clearly aimed at very different audiences.

## European genre cinema economics

As both Nowell-Smith (1998) and Barbara Corsi (2001) observe, all the different measures of protection against Hollywood adopted by many European countries since the second decade of the twentieth century share an inner contradiction between the cultural and the economic spheres. However, the Italian system of incentives shows some interesting peculiarities. Constructed in 1949 by Giulio Andreotti, then a promising young functionary of the Italian ruling party, the Christian Democrats, it relied heavily on Fascist-era legislation and remained virtually unmodified until 1965. On the one hand, such a system dramatically boosted Italian film production, through a special loan fund

which was fed by taxes on foreign film dubbing, an automatic tax refunds system (about 10 per cent of the film's total gross) and a special norm (introduced in 1951) which forbade the export of 50 per cent of the gross made in Italy by every foreign film, thus forcing the Hollywood majors to invest part of their income in Italian productions. On the other hand, these aids were granted virtually to every single film, regardless of its artistic or cultural value. Moreover, the 'Andreotti law' was not designed to favour the birth of solid industrial assets: in fact, while during the Fascist era only middle-sized or larger companies were eligible for bonuses or loans, now these were granted to every company, even to smaller and unprofessional ventures, which were set up for the precise purpose of benefiting from the governmental aids. As Quaglietti (1980) points out, the Christian Democratic Party's media policy was in fact aimed at acquiring the maximum consensus among conflicting categories (exhibitors, distributors, producers, facility workers) in order to gain political control over Italian film production. Therefore, each group could prosper only thanks to the incentives and was eager to avoid issues which would have hurt the Catholic sensibility of the ruling party. This choice, however, had an interesting side effect on the development of low-cost, popular genre features, as it made life easier for small companies than for already established Italian studios. On the one hand, for an adventurous although inexperienced producer it became very easy to make a movie, also because Italian cinema could count on many well-trained professionals who were skilled at containing costs. Once the picture had been sold in advance to a distributor, it was relatively easy for its producer to have access to the governmental loan fund. Then, as a rule, the producer actually made the movie using about half of the original estimated budget, keeping the rest as his wages;<sup>2</sup> the distributor was left to face the uncertainties of the market. On the other hand, life was more complicated for the bigger companies, which were at the same time producers and distributors: in fact, although they made more polished products which often fared pretty well at the domestic box office, at the same time they had to face the inflation of many lowbrow pictures which, along with the US imports, were flooding the Italian screens.

Therefore even the bigger Italian production companies, which during the 1950s were trying to mirror the Hollywood producer-unit system, were later forced to turn into mere distributors (as in the case of Titanus, which was forced to shut down its production branch following a financial crash in 1964) or disappear (as happened to the medium-sized Galatea in 1965) or eventually to move to the United States.

Therefore, we maintain that the development of a popular genre cinema, which was not favoured by the government in France, and which grew in spite of the absence of governmental aids in West Germany,<sup>3</sup> was made possible in Italy by the continuous money flow that the Italian government granted until the late 1960s. However, the switch to a package-unit system that we have just described, in which the bigger studio only acts as the financier and distributor of films made by smaller companies, is not exclusive to the Italian industry,<sup>4</sup> but is tied to the transnational dimension that European cinema has been acquiring since the late 1950s.

## The European co-productions and Hollywood

In 1956 Goffredo Lombardo, Titanus chief executive officer and president of the Italian Producers Association, stated that Italian cinema – then in the middle of a short-lived but deep crisis – could no longer rely just on the domestic market, but should try to conquer foreign audiences through three types of production formulas: while lowbrow pictures were to be made just for Italian spectators with Italian funds, medium-sized productions should instead be made in partnership with European investors and should be aimed at the European market; eventually, Italian cinema should also attempt large productions in partnership with some American studios, with the goal of reaching a global market (Lombardo 1956). As Lombardo's words suggest, Italian cinema cannot help seeing itself as an international cinema that is already projected into the European market and furthermore is able to speak as a peer to what Elsaesser (2005) calls Europe's 'significant other', that is Hollywood cinema.

Although Italian cinema would never walk, as Lombardo envisaged, into the international



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market from the front door, thus becoming able to actually export most of its products into the 'enemy' homeland, during the same years Italian genre cinema did manage to successfully enter American theatres through the back door. In 1958, the medium-sized production company Galatea sold the domestic box office hit *Hercules/Le fatiche di Ercole* (Pietro Francisci, 1958) to the American distributor Joe Levine and received an advance for a sequel (Venturini

2001; McGee 1984). From then on, even smaller producers knew that there existed American distributors who were willing to pay in advance for genre movies, and even for genres that Italian audiences did not like.

Moreover, the development of Italian genre cinema was also helped by the practice of European co-productions. The first European bilateral agreement was signed between Italy and France just after the end of the war, but other agreements between Italy and other countries such as West Germany and Spain would soon follow. A co-production agreement allowed two or more production companies from different countries to participate in the making of a movie, supplying various parts of the funding, and also physical resources such as national stars, locations, facilities and crew members. In return, every participating company could harvest both (or more) countries' governmental aids, keep exclusive distribution rights in its own markets and eventually enjoy a share of the profits made when the film was sold in 'neutral' markets such as the United States. Increasingly frequent, such co-productions eventually made up 60 per cent of the entire Italian output in the productive heydays of the 1960s: often dismissed in the Italian critical literature as a way of making movies purely aimed at harvesting state benefits, co-productions instead played a pivotal economic role in the development of Europe's national cinemas, while at the same time having a crucial importance for the definition of minor European genres, such as the *giallo*.

## The *giallo*'s representation of a (hedonistic) European Union

Among the different genres, subgenres and generic cycles that during the 1960s characterized the Italian companies' most significant involvement in co-production agreements, the *giallo* undoubtedly presents significant characteristics, in particular for what concerns the blurring of notions of national cinema and identity.

The *giallo* (Italian for 'yellow') was named after the main colour of the front covers of the crime novels, thrillers and murder-mystery



books printed by the Italian publishing company Mondadori since 1929. Its filmic counterpart, despite significant differences, maintained some of the literary characteristics, such as the foreign influences, the broad and touristic choice of settings and, of course, the crime theme. The filmic genre emerged in 1963, thanks to Mario Bava's *Evil Eye/La ragazza che sapeva troppo* and found its structural standard with the Italian/German co-production *Blood and Black Lace/Sei donne per l'assassino* (Bava, 1964). The latter film, in fact, contained the most distinguishable features of the genre: from the leather gloves worn by the assassin to the elaborate set pieces and the undressed female victims. Such features were promptly adopted and developed in a series of rather successful films by directors such as Freda, Lenzi, Carmineo, Lado, Fulci, Martino and, of course, Argento.

Surely, the mechanism behind the production of *gialli* did not differ from the other popular genres such as the western and the horror film, in particular concerning the use of co-production agreements, the reliance on foreign investments and distribution, and the fact that they were shot with largely Italian crews and multi-national casts.



Instead of being hybrid products of the clash of the different national identities involved in the co-production, or focusing on the construction of a recognizable national character and subjectivity (Higson 1989), the *gialli* underplayed their national identity in favour of a more neutral ‘international’ one, in a way that can perhaps be found only in the ‘James Bond’ franchise.

However, what appears to be different is the way in which this internationalization of the production is mirrored in the narrative of these works. Instead of ‘hiding’ the international involvement in the production of the films (pretending to be ‘fully foreign’, as happened in the horror and western, or ‘fully Italian’, as in the comedies), the *giallo* completely exploited the possibility offered by co-production agreements to shoot in suggestive international locations – a possibility seldom exploited in other Italian genres.

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This representation of a neutral identity is particularly noteworthy in the context of a cinema such as the Italian one, which played a highly significant role in the construction and representation of modern national identity. Hence, during the 1960s, while the most prestigious components of the Italian film industry were engaged in an attempt at remapping the nation, drawing

new coordinates in a landscape transformed by the new world of commodities and by the deep transformations of the society, the ‘other side’ of the industry was making co-produced films that were very distant from both national history and contemporary social issues.

This aspect is even more significant considering that, in contrast to other genres, the *gialli* were set in contemporary times and in ‘real’ spaces, in an attempt to describe the ‘now’ and ‘where’ of the hard-to-define European identity. We would argue that if, as de Grazia points out, ‘In the 1960s the cinema signalled the vigour of European recovery and western Europe’s convergence around a common high standard of consumption’ (de Grazia 1998: 21), the *giallo* had its part in this process.

Almost every scholar who has engaged with this genre has signalled the constant presence of the theme of travel, pointing out how the protagonists of these films are often travelling, or living, in a foreign country; indeed, the landing of an airplane is one of the most recurring visual tropes of these films (Needham 2002; Koven 2006).

The *gialli*, in fact, extensively mapped European spaces and gave prominence to what was supposed to be the lifestyle of the

international jet set. While the *gialli* produced exclusively by Italian companies opened up Italian locations to the world, in the films of the international co-production system – by including a melting pot of nationalities, images of modern commodities and constant references to journeys to foreign destinations – the attempt of mapping contemporary Europe became more evident.

Almost every European capital city as well as many recognizable touristic destinations were framed in the *gialli*: London, Dublin, Vienna, Venice, the Balearic Islands, Barcelona – these and many more locations were visited by the *giallo* protagonists, who often were Americans, a stratagem that allowed an even stronger identification with the drive-in audience and their desire for exotic adventures and touristic experiences abroad.

A perfect example can be found in Lenzi's *Eyeball/Gatti rossi in un labirinto di vetro* (1975), which tells the story of a series of killings in Barcelona among American tourists travelling Europe by bus. This Italian/Spanish co-production not only offers a clear touristic gaze on the capital of Catalonia, but also presents an ideal lifestyle consisting of intercontinental travel and the international placement of jobs. In *gialli*, in fact, not only the tourists travel; often the journeys around Europe are justified by work-related needs or study opportunities, and it is not unusual to come across characters who moved to new places to find better jobs, or to follow a spouse who accepted a new appointment.

For instance, in *Eyeball* Mark Burton (John Richardson) joins his mistress in Barcelona, after having been in Paris with his wife for a conference. As Needham rightly underlines, in the *giallo* the characters 'don't seem fixed to a home or location; they are always [in-]between different places' (Needham 2002). This crossing of European spaces is surely linked to the new idea of Europe that was emerging during the 1960s and that slowly began to question the future role of the nation state. Of course, the *giallo* depiction of a borderless Europe inhabited by cosmopolitan characters belonging to the high bourgeoisie represents an inauthentic, predictable and clichéd transnational identity. Considering the popular cinema, we can grasp how a genre such as the *peplum* depicted common European cultural roots, while the *giallo*

aimed at a shared fantasy of the present and its modernity (Dyer and Vincendeau 1992: 6).

Moreover, it is noteworthy that these films instead of depicting, for instance, the social background of the crimes committed (and thus offering an implicit or explicit world-view on which to construct a national identity), show murderers who act solely on the basis of personal and psychological problems and damages, in a way that is completely independent of the national and social context. The same can be said about the lifestyle represented by *gialli* through a series of affluent, degenerate characters who enjoy the luxury, vices and highlife of modern times (often symbolized by a fast and expensive sports car) and young people corrupted by the sexual revolution and the new consumer-driven lifestyle, which made them the 'unifying cultural force' (de Grazia 1998: 28) of Europe. From London to Majorca, we have an indistinguishable stream of whiskies, fancy cocktails, rock music, dancing floors, design furniture, airport arrival lounges. This clichéd European jet set is for the *giallo* what saloons and horses are for the western: the easily identifiable background against which the narrative develops or, better, against which the different narrative components of the genre are put together as in a jig-saw puzzle.

It is almost impossible to tell the difference between the represented experience of drinking Campari on a terrace over the Ramblas or a J&B in a Roman café. Europe – as an imagined community in the *giallo* – appears as a hedonistic promised land (although with killers) and, most importantly, emerges as borderless and united. For instance, the investigation of a crime in Austria can smoothly continue in Spain as happens in *Blade of the Ripper/Lo Strano vizio della Signora Wardh* (Sergio Martino, 1971).

Accordingly, it was not the image of Italy, France or Spain that *giallo* films sold to the American audience, but the image of an exotic and vicious Europe also familiar to the American market through the 'licentious' and 'subversive' European art films. This relationship between art film and popular cinema, with the involvement of co-production agreements and an international market, find perfect exemplification in the collaboration between the French Société Nouvelle de Cinématographie and the Italian Tritone cinematografica.

## So different, so similar: Deray's *The Swimming Pool* and Lenzi's *Paranoia*

The same features commonly shared by *giallo* films can be traced in two very different movies, both made in 1969 by the same two companies, and yet aimed at very different audiences. *The Swimming Pool*, directed by French thriller expert Jacques Deray, was produced and distributed by the French company SNC (Société Nouvelle de Cinématographie) with a minor financial



participation by the Italian company Tritone Cinematografica, and features an international-level French film star (Alain Delon) along with two European actresses who were then becoming identified with French cinema, Austrian-born Romy Schneider and British actress/singer Jane Birkin.

The film was clearly designed to appeal both to a French and to a European audience, and was also sold to the former exploitation-cinema expert Joseph E. Levine, who had just become a European art-films distributor through his new company, AVCO Embassy. *Paranoia*, helmed by the journeyman director Umberto Lenzi, was a very different proposition: it was a package-unit system production, financed by Titanus with a minor participation by SNC and organized directly by Tritone Cinematografica, which specialized exclusively in popular genre films and co-productions. The movie was pre-sold by Titanus to the North American distributor Commonwealth United, and instead of being designed for the domestic market, was clearly aimed at an overseas audience. *Paranoia* also features an international cast, albeit less shiny than that of its French counterpart. The main star is the American actress Carroll Baker, whose career was at the time in a descending phase, while the male lead is the Colombian Lou Castel, who had previously been cast in some key Italian New Wave films, such as *Fists in the Pocket/I pugni in tasca* (Marco Bellocchio, 1965) and *Grazie zia* (Salvatore Samperi, 1968).

At the level of production values, *The Swimming Pool* and *Paranoia* are clearly different, as the former is rather glossy compared to the latter. Moreover, it is difficult to understand why SNC should have had any interest in participating in *Paranoia*, especially given that Lenzi's picture was not released in France until 1972 (as *Une folle envie d'aimer*) through a third-party company. Therefore, SNC's participation might be explained simply by the company's will to harvest part of the Italian governmental aids, and to share the income from the selling of the movie to the European and North American markets.

On the other hand, taking part in *The Swimming Pool* allowed Tritone to absorb a model which the company would use for two other movies starring Carroll Baker, *So Sweet...*

So *Perverse/Così dolce... così perversa* (1969) and *A Quiet Place to Kill/Paranoia* (1970). Actually, Italian *gialli* at that time were attempting to rid themselves of the formulas that were established in the early 1960s, and to replace them with others drawn from a number of contemporary French thrillers with a marked erotic component, such as *Blazing Sun/Plein soleil* (René Clément, 1960). A similar attempt had already been made in 1968 by an Italian/French co-production, also starring Carroll Baker, *The Sweet Body of Deborah/Il dolce corpo di Deborah* (Romolo Guerrieri). In fact, speaking of his late 1960s *giallo* trilogy, Lenzi stated that his inspiration came from 'La piscine, an Alain Delon feature'<sup>5</sup> a film whose innate features were turned by Tritone into exploitation-movie material.

## Under the Mediterranean Sun

With *Paranoia*, Lenzi brings to the foreground the European exotic milieu typical of the *giallo*, focusing on the representation of the dissolute lifestyle of the high bourgeoisie. However, sex, nudity, abuse of drugs and alcohol take precedence over the choreographic and gory murders typical of the genre; the body count, in fact, is extremely low in this film.

The criminals of this *giallo* are not mysterious assassins with a serious psychological condition, a terrible past and leather gloves moved by irrepressible impulses. Instead, they are two representatives of the young, transnational 'sex, drugs and rock & roll' generation, instructed by an old, cynical lawyer; all three are exclusively motivated by greed.



Nevertheless, in line with the tenets of the genre are the locations, and the theme of travel. The opening sequence is a perfect example: a plane lands at Rome airport, welcomed by dozens of paparazzi who quickly surround Kathryn West (Baker), recent widow of an important and influential man. Then she travels by Rolls Royce through suggestive, ancient (and clearly Mediterranean) environments, finally reaching an old and isolated villa by the seaside. Here the rich widow plans to mourn the tragic death of her husband, but instead ends up being imprisoned and abused.

From the beginning, the film presents the merging of past and modernity, which is characteristic of European culture: intercontinental flights, ancient Roman roads, luxury cars and seventeenth-century architecture. This setting is soon invaded by a series of foreign characters (mainly Americans, or of American ancestry) or locals with 'international' work experiences (the maid demands to be called 'Terry' and not Teresa, having worked for a long time in London). Moreover, the film constantly refers to international travel and locations, also showing



an interesting journey to London with detailed establishing shots of the English capital.

It is impossible not to notice the similarities between *Paranoia* and *The Swimming Pool* in the very creation of a particular lifestyle. In Deray's film, the main setting is also an isolated villa in the Mediterranean landscape, this time near St Tropez. The main characters, rich members of a transnational and European jet set, enjoy their holiday time, exhibit a cosmopolitan background (from the knowledge of foreign languages to intercontinental travels to Canada, the United States and India) and foreign 'tastes' in food and arts.

Furthermore, there is a focus on 'wild' parties and eroticism. The only killing in the film is the result of feelings such as greed, envy and jealousy, experienced by characters that have lost their moral compass because of the vain lifestyle they are leading. However, despite these and many other similarities at the iconographic level, the two films clearly differ in terms of production values and, mostly, narration. *The Swimming Pool* is slow paced which mimics the European auteur-cinema style (in particular Antonioni's *Blow-Up* (1966)), an impression reinforced by the fact that characters are presented as victims of their own inner void. *Paranoia*, on the other hand, takes over its morbid sensual atmosphere in order to blend it with the suspense gimmicks of the genre and with more explicit and sensational situations. Additionally, the transnational dimension of *The Swimming Pool* is always paired with its inner Frenchness (its main characters are French), whereas the different conflicting nationalities depicted in *Paranoia* tend to cancel out one another, destroying any trace of Italianness and substituting it with a hazy cosmopolitanism.

In conclusion, we can observe how these two case studies exemplify similar yet diverging strategies deployed by the 1960s European high-concept thriller and popular genre film. *The Swimming Pool* takes some iconographic elements from the latter, but merges them with high production values and a contemporary and sophisticated style, and was thus able to gross well in the main western European theatre circuits and in some selected art-cinema circuits in the United States. On the other hand, popular genre products such as *Paranoia* were able to prosper via significant repetition, by borrowing

narrative schemes from the European thriller in order to use them in the production of a series of films similar to each other. This practice was sustained by Italian cinema laws and by American distributors that bought these types of film for peripheral US markets. Perhaps *The Swimming Pool* and *Paranoia* show how different sectors of the European film industry failed to acquire a truly transnational identity, both economically and culturally. *The Swimming Pool* includes transnational elements in a film which is mainly a product of French culture, and which consequently was unable to successfully reach a truly global market. On the other hand, *Paranoia* – lacking in national features but too bound to its lowbrow and quick production formulas – was quickly relegated to the exploitation circuit which made of it a not especially successful generic product, although with worldwide distribution. •

### Contributor's details

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### Endnotes

1 This work is the fruit of genuine and intensive collaboration on all parts and aspects of the essay. Each of us was principally responsible for writing almost exactly half of the essay, as follows: Stefano Baschiera wrote 'The giallo's representation of a (hedonistic) European Union', 'Under the Mediterranean sun' and the Conclusion; Francesco Di Chiara wrote 'European genre cinema economics', 'The European co-productions and Hollywood' 'So different, so similar: Deray's *La Piscine* and Lenzi's *Orgasmo*' and the Introduction.

2 This process is described in detail in Ventavoli (1992). For the smaller Italian companies production policy see also Di Chiara (2009).

3 See Bergfelder (2005). For the Italian genre films penetration into the American market see also the seminal Wagstaff (1998).

4 Janet Staiger points out how the Hollywood studio policy was converting to a package-unit system inspired mode of production already in the 1950s; moreover, Bergfelder (2005) highlights the pivotal role of distribution companies in the development of a German popular cinema in the 1960s.

5 Lenzi in Bruschini and Tentori (1992: 18).

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