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Chapter 3

The 1980s Italian horror cinema of imitation: the good, the ugly and the sequel

Stefano Baschiera

Italian horror and the 1980s crisis

In the first half of the 1980s, Italian horror cinema thrived amid a significant moment of crisis and structural changes in the national film industry and infrastructure. During the decade, the crisis of Italian cinema, which began in the 1970s, worsened significantly and affected all the sectors of the industry.¹ Specifically, the exhibition sector continued to struggle and witnessed an apparently irreversible resizing of the number of cinema theatres in the country and a massive decline in the number of the increasingly expensive tickets sold (Corsi 2001: 116-23).² The second and third run theatres – in particular the provincial ones – which constituted the backbone of Italian cinema-going faced the crisis of the sector first, soon followed by more prestigious urban exhibition centres.

The national film industry was adapting to and attempting to rationalise the uncontrolled emergence of private television networks. In fact, they were not only the main competitors of theatrical exhibition but, as I shall discuss later, they became the key players in the national film production. The first consequence was a consistent withdrawal to the national signalled by the gradual departure from the international stage that Italian cinema was accustomed to, as well as the more limited ability to attract foreign investments and to participate in ambitious European co-productions (Corsi 2001: 139-141).

While art cinema struggled with the challenges of a generational renewal and a generalised lack of ambition of producers, a creative crisis also hit the last haven of Italian cinema: its genre production. The inevitable move of popular cinema from third run theatres to the small screen began to impact the quantity and quality of the films produced.

Arguably, the crisis did not impact horror cinema. In truth, the production of horror films quantitatively thrived during the years across the end of 1970s and the beginning of the 1980s. As Paolo Russo points out, between 1977 and 1985 75 films belonging to the horror genre were produced, with seventeen films made in the years 1977 and 1980, ‘for an average percentage close to the six per cent (of the entire production) a figure which is undoubtedly relevant in particular if compared with the numbers of the previous decades’ (Russo 2005: 441). During the 1980s two films by Dario Argento (*Inferno*, 1980, and *Tenebre/Tenebrae*, 1982) were among the few titles not belonging to the comedy genre that managed to enter the top ten of the national box office.³

Overall, the crisis of the exhibition sector did not affect horror production, because, with a few exceptions, since the 1950s the national market was hardly the first source of revenue for Italian horror films. A consequence of the reliance on foreign markets can be seen in the transnational dimension of the production based on co-production agreements, employment of international cast, use of English pen-names, foreign settings and locations and the involvement of American distributors for the financing of the films.⁴ As discussed later, these (and other) features that characterised

the mode of production of Italian horror cinema became increasingly prominent in the 1980s.

Moreover, during the decade, with the development of VHS distribution, Italian horror cinema developed a new form of fandom and reached a cult status, particularly in the US, UK, Germany and Japan. In the same period it encountered a problematic canonisation (see Church 2014) because, on the one hand, fans and critics promoted a new understanding of the genre through an authorship approach focused on directors such as Mario Bava, Dario Argento and Lucio Fulci. On the other hand, Italian horror became synonymous with extreme cinema and with visually graphic excesses, as can be grasped by the recurring presence of those films in the UK video nasties lists (see Egan 2007).

The neglected decade: Scholarly approaches to 1980s Italian horror

Despite its international relevance little scholarly attention has been dedicated to the production of the genre in the 1980s. In fact, that the main publications dedicated to the genre end their analysis at the end of the 1970s. This is the case, for instance, of recently published works on the Italian horror (such as Pitassio 2005, Curti 2009, Di Chiara 2009, Venturini 2014) and on the general production of Italian popular cinema (Manzoli 2012).

Overall it can be argued that the reason for this recurring timeframe when dealing with Italian popular cinema is related to the changes in the film production landscape. I am thinking of the crisis of the exhibition sector, the loss of key producers such as Dino De Laurentiis and Aurelio Grimaldi, and the unregulated emergence of private networks and their involvement in the film financing. These changes, which initially began in the

mid-1970s, affected genre production of the following decade and left a general opinion that the ‘golden age’ was inevitably behind and unrepeatable.

In the 1980s the Italian horror landscape was even more fragmented and diverse than before. In many respects the decade offered some of the most iconic films associated with Italian horror as a whole, such as ...*E tu vivrai nel terrore! L'aldilà/The Beyond* (Lucio Fulci, 1981) *Cannibal Holocaust*, (Ruggero Deodato, 1980) *Lo squartatore di New York/The New York Ripper* (Lucio Fulci, 1982), *Dèmoni/Demons* (Lamberto Bava, 1985) and *La chiesa/The Church* (Michele Soavi, 1989). Equally the decade witnessed a seemingly disorderly proliferation of highly derivative, very low-budget films which further advanced the concept of “cinema of imitation”,⁵ based on (unofficial) sequels and/or remakes able to quickly exploit the popularity of a particular title and subgenre. Even if we consider only the years 1980 and 1981, it is possible to list films such as *Alien Terror/Alien 2* (Ciro Ippolito 1980), *La casa sperduta nel parco/House On The Edge Of The Park* (Ruggero Deodato, 1980), Luigi Cozzi’s *Contamination – Alien arriva sulla Terra/Contamination* (1980) and Bruno Mattei’s *Virus - l'inferno dei morti viventi/Hell Of The Living Dead* (1980) as examples of this trend.

Generally speaking, in the 1980s film production does not seem to add any successful new features to the strengths (and weaknesses) of the industrial system put in place in the previous decades, and it continued to be characterised by several short-lived and small-sized production companies. In the same way, from a textual perspective there are not significant innovations in plots, styles and themes. Instead, the Italian horror of the 1980s brings to the extremes both the fragmentation of the production and recurring motifs such as the reliance on representation of sex and gore violence. Therefore, I would

argue that the struggle to offer a holistic vision of the genre during the 1980s is the first reason why the decade has been regularly left out from scholarly works. The production, in fact, does not offer sufficient originality, innovation in its style, personnel and industrial system to be considered as an ‘age’ on its own.

The second cause can be found in the new understandings of Italian horror cinema. As previously mentioned, with the international recognition and canonisation of the genre, and the subcultural capital it generated, an authorship approach began to emerge. This originated with the fanzines and was then employed by marketing strategies as well as scholarly and critical works. Therefore, the condition of the genre during the 1980s has been primarily approached through the study of the oeuvre of specific directors, with Argento being the clear frontrunner given the number of book-length studies dedicated to him. The 1980s are thus mainly understood through the (limited) filmic production of the period by canonised ‘horror auteurs’ (mainly understood as Mario Bava, Dario Argento, Lucio Fulci) whose careers began in a previous decade.

Another way in which the 1980s Italian horror has been analysed by scholars is through its most iconic subgenres: cannibal and zombie films. Looking, for example, at the former, which started at the end of the 1970s, there is no doubt that it became seen as most representative of the genre across the two decades, attracting academic attention because of its initial originality, its development from the ‘shockumentaries’ tradition and a ‘textual consistency’ that was difficult to find in other horror series.

To sum up, the 1980s Italian horror cinema was investigated through an authorial lens or through its most recognisable (and consistent) subgenres. I suggest instead examine the 1980s as the period where some of the key features of horror production in

Italy are most evident. In order to do that, we must embrace the flourishing of highly derivative productions as an opportunity to investigate one of the most interesting characteristics of Italian low-budget popular cinema and horror genre in particular: the imitation film.

The imitation game in Italian popular cinema

In order to look at the role played by the imitation film in Italian horror cinema of the 1980s, it is necessary to understand how the concepts of imitation and intertextuality works within Italian popular cinema. First, we need to step back and consider the 1970s, the period when the emergence of private TV broadcasters and the crisis of the film industry promoted changes which would cross over into the following decade. During the second half of the 1970s imitation and intertextual exchange with popular culture contributed both to the growth of traditional genres (adventure, fantasy and sci-fi cinema) and the large pool of films which borrowed from other media, such as the music industry, TV shows, and comic books (Manzoli and Menarini 2005: 398). These exchanges with popular culture led to the fragmented division in subgenres and *filoni*, a condition able to generate series of films with repetitive narrative structure and plot developments.

One of the thematic features common to the generic proliferation of those years was the strong presence of sex and violence (Manzoli and Menarini 2005: 398). While eroticism featured in the comedies of the time, an increased representation of violence became the dominant characteristic of genres such as the adventure film, the western, poliziottesco and of course, horror. With the exception of comedy and *poliziottesco*, the imitation films, highly derivative of the American productions, continued to hide its

national traits. In fact, as Manzoli and Menarini (2005) argue, without the association with a strong director name, the genre production in Italy constantly had to pretend to be American in order to attract an audience.

It is difficult to find a Hollywood success of those years that was not imitated or parodied in Italy. *Conan the Barbarian* (John Milius, 1982), for instance, generated Italian fantasy films such as *Ator l'invincibile / Ator, the Fighting Eagle* (Joe D'Amato, 1982), *Ator 2 – l'invincibile Orion/The Blade Master* (Joe D'Amato, 1984), *Gunan il guerriero/Gunan, King of the Barbarians* (Franco Prosperi, 1982), *Thor il conquistatore/Thor the Conqueror* (Tonino Ricci, 1983) and *The Barbarians* (Ruggero Deodato, 1987). A film such as *Karate Kid* (John G. Avildsen, 1984) was followed by *Il ragazzo dal kimono d'oro/Karate Warrior* (Fabrizio De Angelis, 1987) and its long series of sequels (six in total).

The same happened with the Italian “post-apocalyptic” cinema that owed much to the success of *Mad Max* (George Miller, 1979), *The Warriors* (Walter Hill, 1979) and *Escape From New York* (John Carpenter, 1981). As Manzoli and Menarini (2005) maintain, works such as Enzo G. Castellari's series of films *1990: I guerrieri del Bronx/1990: The Bronx Warriors* (1982), *I nuovi barbari/Warriors of the Wasteland* (1983) and *Fuga dal Bronx/Escape from the Bronx* (1983) are good examples of the ability of the Italian production to ride the wave of American genre success. The most interesting case of cinema of imitation, however, can be seen with Spielberg's *Jaws* (1975) which quickly generated a long series of interesting imitations such as Enzo G. Castellari's *L'ultimo squalo/Great White/The Last Shark* (1980), Sergio Martino's *Il Fiume del grande caimano/The Great Alligator* (1979), *Shark: Rosso nell'oceano/Devil*

Fish (Lamberto Bava 1984), *Killer Crocodile* (Fabrizio De Angelis, 1989) and many more.⁶

These films are exemplars not only for their ability to hide their national belonging, but, as with other imitation films, they cope with their budgetary limitations in respect to the original through a strong accent on exoticism and graphic violence. Moreover, they showed the ability of a producer/director like Ovidio G. Assonitis, who was at the forefront in the production of imitation films, to build the film around a prominent international cast. This is the case not only of *Tentacoli/Tentacles* (1977), which features Henry Fonda, John Huston and Shelley Winters, but also of *Piranha 2/Piranha Part Two: The Spawning* (Ovidio G. Assonitis and James Cameron, 1981) which also featured the contribution of James Cameron.

It can be argued that at the start of the 1980s, Italian horror cinema re-emerged after a period of crisis mainly because of the new popularity of the genre as whole on the international market, thanks to the works of directors such as Tobe Hopper, Wes Craven, John Carpenter and in particular George A. Romero. These filmmakers presented Italian horror production the opportunity to capitalise on its ability to quickly develop imitation subgenres based on successful films. However, once again, it was the international market that offered the most significant slice of potential revenue.

Italian Horror and the 1980s international market.

In line with what happened to genres such as the spy story, the adventure, the mythological and the Western film, the emergence of horror cinema in Italy in the 1950s can be ascribed to an attempt of Italian producers of low-budget films to exploit the

relatively new popularity of the genre in the domestic second and third run distribution circuit. In particular towards the end of the 1950s films by British Hammer and by American International Pictures generated a certain amount of interest in the genre which prompted new production (Della Casa 2001: 319).

However, the production of films such as *La maschera del demonio/Black Sabbath* (Mario Bava, 1960) and *Danza Macabra/Castle of Blood* (Antonio Margheriti, 1963) were a long way from meeting the national box office success of *Dracula* (Terence Fisher, 1958), despite their fake international origin and their ‘new’ depiction of sex and violence (see Di Chiara 2009 and Pezzotta 2013). Indeed, during the 1960s the sum of the box office returns of horror, *giallo* and sci-fi was equal to the twentieth of the adventure films alone (Pitassio 2005: 36).⁷

Therefore, from its beginnings the genre relied on the international market, in particular on American distribution, in order to generate income. *La maschera del demonio* is a clear example of a film that thanks to a partnership between its production company Galatea and American International Pictures (AIP) managed to find its main source of revenue in the drive-in circuit. Italian horror producers began to rely on (or to aspire to) the advances for the distribution in foreign markets to help the financing of their films, in addition to the mechanism of the secured minimum, which was the financial backbone of independent productions.

The secured minimum, in fact, was mainly used by ‘independent producers who relied on national or regional distributors to take their films, receiving from them initially a secured minimum of the proceeds of distribution on account’ (Ventavoli 2003: 218). Therefore, the secured minimum ‘was paid by the independent regional agents to the

producers directly or through a “central” distributor. In essence it was a sum that was supposed to match the probable minimum return of the film in their particular area’ (Ventavoli 2003: 218).

The importance of foreign markets for the development of Italian horror cinema and the mechanism of the secured minimum demonstrate, once again, the key role played by distribution. Recent scholarly works have stressed the need to look at distribution in order to understand film genre.⁸ For instance, Lobato and Ryan argue that thinking about genre ‘through distribution provides a different way of addressing some of the typical concerns of genre studies, such as patterns of generic evolution, aesthetic histories of individual genres/sub-genres, and debates around categorization and canonization’ (Lobato and Ryan 2011: 190). In particular, their research stresses the role of the distribution as gatekeeper for their ability withhold or circulate texts and to indirectly regulate the degrees of access to them.

Pitassio perfectly explains the key role distribution played in Italian horror cinema when he claims that:

The founding characteristics of popular cinema do not stem from the formative objective of the production system but, more specifically, from its distributional apparatus. This allows a widespread flow of products and clichés, tangible objects and subdued technologies. The “secured minimum”, in this sense, provides a distributor with an extraordinary contractual power over any operational choices, thus facilitating the metamorphosis of the genre into a more flexible trend. This also determines an order of priorities, privileging the effect over its predisposition, the result over its building. In other words, it dictates a spectacular

attraction over the textual organisation that validates it, including a technological attraction towards experimenting with original tools (Pitassio 2005: 36).⁹

I would argue that this is a key characteristic of Italian popular cinema in general and of horror cinema in particular. The crucial role played by the distribution apparatus can be seen as part of a production system characterised by fragmentation in small companies and dictated by the financial need to rely on practices of imitation and recycle of American models.

A clear example of this has been offered by Kevin Heffernan's analysis of the distribution account of Mario Bava's ambitious 'art-horror' *La casa dell'esorcismo/ Lisa e il diavolo/Lisa and the Devil* (1972), his largest budget film (see Heffernan 2007: 144-163). The film, produced by Alfredo Leone, was meant as the follow-up to the box-office success *Gli orrori del castello di Norimberga/Baron Blood* (Mario Bava, 1971) which was distributed by AIP. Both Allied Artist and AIP were interested in the distribution rights and ready to offer upfront a significant amount of money (approximately a quarter of the production budget) to secure them. However, after its premier at the 1972 Cannes film festival, *La casa dell'esorcismo* was without a distributor because for AIP it was too 'arty, obscure and campy' (Heffernan 2007: 156). After one year without American distribution, Leone asked Bava and the actress Elke Sommer to reshoot a new subplot involving a demonic possession. The new cut, called *The House of Exorcism*, was then screened in 1974 to potential distributors looking to exploit the international success of *The Exorcist* (William Friedkin, 1973). The fascinating story of the distribution of this film does not end here and it is more complicated than this brief summary. However, it is

important to note, once again, the role that imitation and falsification played in the production of popular genre and the fundamental importance of the international markets.

Since the introduction of the 'Industry Code of Self-Regulation (CARA) in 1968 by the Motion Picture Association, which allowed the representation of graphic violence in its rating categories, R-rated horror films 'have explicitly visualised graphic violence and taboo subject matter to a degree unprecedented in the commercial American cinema' (Gregory A. Waller, 2000: 148).¹⁰ The production of films that challenged the censorship boundaries had undoubtedly taken its peak during the 'gore/slasher' period of the 1980s thanks to films like *Friday the 13th* (Sean S. Cunningham, 1980) and *Slumber Party Massacre* (Amy Holden Jones, 1982).

This slasher production ran in sequels, cycles, subgenres and repetitive formulae (Waller: 262) and created a new demand for horror films made quickly, independently and with low-budget. In fact, the majors did not get involved in the production of cheaply-made genre films, but preferred to act as a distributor (as happened for instance for Paramount and *Friday the 13th*), compromising in some ways the development of the genre but leaving a more fierce competition among independent producers.

From the end of the 1970s, Italian imitations needed to quickly adapt to a fast paced emergence of subgenres (like the rape revenge, post-apocalyptic etc.) which characterised the American productions of the time. The low-budget and graphic violence of the slasher films, for instance, presented a new opportunity as well as a challenge for Italian production companies such as Fulvia and Dania film to quickly develop their diverse catalogues.

Low budget imitations in the 1980s

The production of Italian horror films in the 1980s shows the features (and the limits) of the overall production of low budget popular cinema. In this regard, Pescatore and Manzoli have addressed a new theoretical approach to the question of low budget in Italian popular cinema in a series of contributions (Manzoli and Pescatore, 2004 and 2005).¹¹ Looking at the genre cinema of the 1960s they engage with these low budget productions by distinguishing three levels.

The first comprises the development of the local technologies that are a ‘low cost alternative in respect to the foreign technological innovations, in relation in particular to the American film industry’ (Manzoli and Pescatore 2004: 100). The second level refers to aesthetics understood as ‘a label of recognisable phenomena: auteurs, styles, conventions, linguistic modes, intertextual or intermedial contributions’ (ibid.). The system looks at the practices of falsifying these phenomena by ‘the plagiarism of linguistic forms (...), the recycling of external aesthetics borrowed from other media (...) or internal aesthetics (parodies of high-brow cinema)’ (ibid.). The third level is a mediation and negotiation between the other two levels. Italian genre cinema is understood as being in continuous negotiation between technical and aesthetic competences.

Looking at these levels Manzoli and Pescatore argue that they correspond to the main shortcomings of Italian popular cinema, namely ‘the lack of a laboratory, understood as a place for the technological development for the production; the lack of strong authorial, productive and stylistic labels able to attract a popular audience; the lack

of an internal dynamics within the national genres able to stimulate further “genreification” processes’ (Manzoli and Pescatore 2004:101).

However, within these limitations, popular cinema was still able to innovate, as it is evident from the production of horror cinema. Cannibal films, for instance, with their reliance on documentary aesthetic and outdoor shooting in exotic locations, present a constant level of negotiation between recycling the documentary aesthetic (typical of the *mondo* movies) and elements taken from several subgenres of the period (from zombie to soft-core). They continue with the practice of plagiarising forms belonging to other genres, such as the adventure film. Overall, one could argue that the “found footage” plot device used in *Cannibal Holocaust* (Ruggero Deodato, 1979) is one of the most effective and original manifestations of the negotiation between technical availability (the use of a 16mm camera) and aesthetic features.

Although Manzoli and Pescatore do not engage with the question of distribution, this aspect plays a crucial role in the three conceptualised levels. The same negotiation occurring at the third level is due to a production system which strongly relies on secured minimum and advances. Plagiarism, faking and recycling are by-products of this system and it can be argued that Italian horror cinema, with its reliance on foreign distribution, existed as long as it managed to sustain this negotiation between cheap technology and recognisable/imitative aesthetics.

This is evident not only by looking at the long series of “zombie” films, with titles evoking to different degrees Romero’s – such as Fulci’s *Paura nella città dei morti viventi/The City Of The Living Dead* (1980) and Mario Girolami’s *Zombie Holocaust*

(1982) – but also the borrowing of subgenre tropes and iconography in films such as Fulci's *L'aldilà* or Lamberto Bava's *Dèmoni*.

In particular, there is one feature belonging to the “level of aesthetic” and involving the mode of imitation that I would like to draw attention to: the use of international locations and settings. Early Italian horror films recreated in studios their Gothic settings whereas *giallo* productions were characterised by the figure of the traveller and the representation of European capitals and “exotic” locations, revealing in this way a showcase of touristic attractions and a hedonistic international “jet-sets” (see Baschiera and Di Chiara 2009). Cannibal and shockumentaries, instead, bring the idea of “exoticism” to a complete different level, with films shot in Malaysia, Sri Lanka, Thailand etc. Shooting in New York was almost an exceptional occurrence for a film like Fulci's *Zombi 2*; on several occasions the American landscape was “recreated” in Italy in films such as *Autostop rosso sangue/Hitch Hike* (Pasquale Festa Campanile, 1977). In contrast, the 1980s were characterised by Italian horror productions set and shot in the US. I am thinking of films such as *L'aldilà*, *La casa sperduta nel parco*, *Miami Golem* (Alberto De Martino, 1985) and *Uccelli assassini/Zombie 5: Killing Birds* (Claudio Lattanzi and Joe D'Amato, 1987). After *Texas Chain Saw Massacre*, *Halloween* and *The Last House on the Left*, horror tales moved to different spaces in America: from the countryside to (sub)urban areas, and Italian productions followed accordingly, also thanks to new partnerships and collaborations with American companies and distributors.

Consequentially, the period witnessed a mobility of crew, with fewer films actually shot in Italian studios and locations and Italian directors being directly employed by American productions. This was the case, for instance, for the controversial Romano

Nightmare/Nightmare in a Damaged Brain (1981). Produced by the independent company Goldmine Productions, which made only this film, and widely distributed by 21st Century Film Corporation, it was shot in Florida and New York with an American cast.

VHS and a new understanding of Italian Horror cinema

As previously mentioned, the 1980s saw an increased availability of Italian horror cinema thanks to the quick adoption of VHS players (see McDonald 2007). In fact, the rapid development of new ancillary markets in the US during the 1980s with the emergence of rental stores marked a further growth of the niche demand for extreme content.

In his thorough study of the home video distribution of ‘splat’ cinema, Mark Bernard reminds us how the distribution of films on video did not have to abide to the MPAA ratings. Therefore films on VHS ‘were routinely released as “Unrated”, a label that was able to escape the pornographic stigma of the X rating’ (Bernard 2014: 75). In this way, video distribution represented an easier alternative for those “unrated” films which would have struggled to get a theatrical run. Most importantly, Bernard argues that ‘[a]side from more lenient regulatory policies, home video was a viable avenue for the release of “Unrated” films for several other reasons. With home video, greater responsibility is shifted to the consumer and away from the producer, distributor or retailer’ (Bernard 2014: 75).

This, of course, is just one of the reasons why the VHS distribution circuit was a promising venue for the producers of low-budget horror films. We have also to consider how the Hollywood majors did not show an immediate interest in the home video and

were at least sceptical towards this new format of home entertainment, which was promoted for its 'timeshifting' and was seen as a risk for the owners of copyrighted material (see Frederick Wasser 2008: 121; Janet Wasko 2003: 126). The renting of tapes, which emerged in 1978, was also not an immediately viable business model for the studios as it was 'covered by First Sale Doctrine, a provision of the Copyright Act of 1976 that allows the legitimate buyer of copyrighted work to dispose of the copy as he or she wishes' (Wasko 2003: 127). The growing demand for new films to fill VHS catalogues, in particular for rental outlets, seemed to favour unrated, low-budget production. On the one hand this was because of the opportunity to rely on graphic covers for the videotape cases displayed in the 'adult only' area of the store (see Guins 2005); on the other hand this was due to the demands of the market for new catalogues.

As Wasser argues:

independent producers and mini-major studios such as Orion, Vestry, De Laurentiis, Carolco (allied with LIVE), and Cannon did not have big libraries and therefore expanded their production through the mid-1980s in anticipation that the global market would pay for more new movies. In contrast the Hollywood majors did not substantially increase the number of productions (they already had libraries of popular titles) but instead increased the money spent on making and marketing their films (Wasser 2008: 124-125).

There was another incentive for independent producers to make new films that could also appeal to the videotape market: the high price-tag of unrated VHS. In truth, these were generally 'marked up to defray financial risks for producers and distributors' (Bernard 2014: 82).¹² As a result the films attracted mainly 'fans', promoting a series of collection

practices that would result in an important factor in the understanding of the subcultural capital of the genre (ibid.).

The unrated VHS proved once more the role of distribution ‘in the understanding of the propagation of exploitation cinema’ (Church 2015: 11) with the availability of different cuts of the same film and the choice of evocative covers and ever changing titles (see Guins 2005: 19-21; Egan 2007: 59).

Overall, during the 1980s, cable TV and the VHS offered a new international market to Italian horror that received a new scrutiny, exposure and, as already mentioned, canonisation. Even the fact that the American majors, instead of engaging directly with the production of the films, preferred to distribute independent productions created possible new visibility for Italian horror cinema, which was also becoming an “extreme” label for a niche fandom community.

The crisis towards the 1990s: TV killed the horror stars

The first signs of the crisis of Italian horror production occurred towards the end of the decade, in a period when the genre seemed to meet a wider audience in the national market. In fact, even after 1985 it was possible to find Italian horror productions among the “top-50” films at the box office, for instance *Dèmoni*, *Dèmoni 2...l'incubo ritorna*/*Demons 2* (Lamberto Bava, 1982), *La chiesa* / *The church* (Michele Soavi, 1989) and of course the constantly present Argento with *Opera* (1987)

The popularity of American horror films – *The Evil Dead* (Sam Raimi, 1983), *Poltergeist* (Tobe Hopper, 1982), *The Thing* (John Carpenter, 1982), *Friday the 13th*, Wes Craven’s *A Nightmare on Elm Street* (1984), for instance – contributed to the creation of

a general interest for the genre, pushing it to the mainstream. This can also be proven by looking at the astonishing popularity of an Italian horror comic book like *Dylan Dog* (1986-).¹³

Despite the possibility of Italian horror to meet, arguably for the first time, the interest of the domestic market, by the end of the 1980s and the beginning of the 1990s, the production of horror cinema dropped significantly. Koven lists in his overview of the “spaghetti nightmare” some of the causes of the crisis: the competition in the home video market of low-budget American films (which did not need the extra cost of English dubbing), the difficult generational change (which implies an authorship approach to the genre), and, finally, the fact that ‘by early 1980s spaghetti nightmare films had gone just about far as they could’ (Koven, 2014: 209).

However, a number of other production-related issues slowly brought the genre to an end. First of all, by the close of the 1980s American horror seemed to be locked in a tiresome cycle of repetitive plots and endless sequels. While the emergence of the slasher contributed to burst the Italian production of horror films, the international crisis of the genre was almost an end to it. Considering the low-cost productions emanating from Italy, we can understand how the negotiation of the technological and aesthetic levels was not able any longer to produce innovation. On the one hand, in fact, the technological gap was increasingly wide because of the new development of special effects made in Hollywood for blockbuster productions. On the other hand, from an aesthetic perspective, there was a shortage of new horror subgenres which deserved to be “falsified” and recycled.

Nonetheless, while these were ‘external’ causes for the crisis of Italian horror cinema, the main reason needs to be found in the changes taking place in the national film production with TV networks emerging as main financiers of national cinema. Starting from the decision by the Constitutional Court in 1976 that the Italian public broadcaster (RAI) did not have the monopoly at the regional level a long period of unregulated development of private TV networks in Italy completely changed the production landscapes.¹⁴

The end of the 1970s witnessed the birth of hundreds of regional TV stations, which based their activities on the often unregulated selling of advertising space and on the broadcasting of free films, usually American imports. Their offering strongly jeopardised the existence of second and third run cinema and accentuated the crisis of theatrical releases, creating in this way a disparity between the financial capabilities of cinema and TV networks (Corsi 2012: 43). As a consequence, the crisis of cinema-going led to the reduction of the funds going back to the production, compromising in this way the system of the secured minimum. As Ventavoli argues:

since the Eighties the important role played by releasing films at the cinema and relative connection with the S.M.[Secured Minimum] Italy has been gradually replaced by television sales. The old segment of the proceeds (Italian market - foreign market - government subsidies) no longer covers the whole of the costs but only a tiny or at least a very minor part, while the advance sale or the television coproduction has to cover the greater part. Thus the entire old system has been shattered and the popularity rating that was once based on the number of

actual tickets sold is measured today in terms of audience and related advertising potential (Ventavoli 2003: 221).

In the period between 1984 and 1990 a duopoly was created with two multimedia empires: RAI and Silvio Berlusconi's Fininvest, which were able to control the entire cycle of life of a film from its production to its TV run. In 1984 Fininvest formed Reteitalia, its film-producing branch which applied the same 'TV approach' to cinema, making film that could first of all generate revenue during the TV run (Corsi 2012: 44). As Barbara Corsi points out, 'from 1984 to 1995, the year when the label is substituted with that of Mediaset and then Medusa, Reteitalia produced 155 films, more than any other Italian production company in the history of Italian cinema' (Corsi 2012: 44).

However, these films were clearly aimed to the generic public in order to exploit the final TV broadcasting destination. Corsi (2012) defines this as 'nice cinema' in the sense that it is a cinema that aims to be average and to avoid controversy and complications. The dominant role played by TV broadcasters in financing films significantly limited the flexibility and variety of small productions in the country, compromising the low-cost genre production by bending it to the needs of TV broadcasting. It is noteworthy that horror was among the genres initially produced by Reteitalia. I am thinking in particular of the production of eight feature films for TV broadcasting, all directed by Lamberto Bava, which were grouped in two series. The first series, *Brivido Giallo* (1987/1988) comprises of four films: *Una notte al cimitero/Graveyard Disturbance*, *Per Sempre/Until Death*, *La casa dell'orco/The Ogre*, and *A cena col vampire/Dinner With a Vampire*. The second series called *Alta tensione* (1988-1989) featured instead: *Il gioko/School of Fear*, *Testimone oculare/Eyewitness*,

L'uomo che non voleva morire/The Man Who Didn't Want to Die, and *Il maestro del terrore/The Prince of Terror*.

It is clear from this list the way in which TV broadcasters tried to replace the production of popular cinema, attracting its personnel. Eight feature films in the span of two years can be viewed as an impressive feat and commitment to the possible life of the genre. Several of these films found a distributor and were released on the American market under several evocative titles, in the attempt to perpetuate the “imitating, plagiarising, recycling” characteristic of Italian popular cinema. However, these films did not have any particular filmic source of “sequel” ambition. The technical limitations dictated by the medium were evident starting with the 1:33 format. Moreover, if the spectacle of the gore was the main attraction and recognisable feature of the Italian productions, here the films had to meet the requirements of TV’s generic audience. Not only was the violence tamed, but films such as *Una notte al cimitero* and *Cena col vampiro* tried to appeal the TV spectatorship by adding comedy elements and self-reflexivity to the storyline. Moreover, it can be noted that the series titles *Brivido Giallo* and *Alta tensione* evoke the Italian passion for mystery TV more than horror genre.

Reteitalia did not stop there, and it was also involved in the production of Lamberto Bava’s *La maschera del demonio* (1989). As a co-production involving five countries, this remake can be seen as one of the last attempts to keep alive the horror genre and, again, was mainly designed for TV distribution. Despite this project and what can clearly be seen is an attempt to attract the VHS audience of the original film, it was not widely distributed.

As Olney points out, ‘by the end of the 1980s, Euro horror was no longer shown on network television in the United States, and the grindhouses and drive-ins that once were the reliable venues for its exhibition had been mostly driven out of business by the explosive growth of multiplex theatre chains’ (Olney 2013: 218). New Italian productions could only live on the channels of the national broadcasters where, however, had to face the fierce competition of the American films.

This ideally closed a circle. As the original *La maschera del demonio* managed to generate an international understanding of Italian horror cinema, thanks to the AIP distribution and those features that made the genre recognisable and profitable, its remake created for the small screen did not meet an international audience. Italian horror cinema at the dawn of the 1990s was mainly represented by the works of few recognisable directors: Argento in primis who still had a monetizable name. However, the system of production of popular genres based on distribution demands was completely upset, leaving horror cinema at the margins of the national industry.

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¹ For a critical overview on 1980s Italian cinema see Micciché (1998) and Zagarrio (1998) among others.

² On the crisis of Italian cinema-going see Corsi (2001: 116-23) as well as Jaykar and Waterman (2008).

³ Box office data from *Il giornale dello spettacolo*. For an analysis of the Italian 1980s box office see Fiorentini (2011).

⁴ On the role played by international markets on the production of Italian popular cinema see Wagstaff (1995)

⁵ With cinema of imitation, I am referring to all the attempts made by Italian cinema to make cheaper “knock-offs” of foreign (often American) genre films. Italian producers often “disguised” these works as American films, by hiding the Italian nationality of the actors and filmmakers involved.

⁶ For an analysis of the Italian Jaws-imitation films, see Denis Lotti (2015).

⁷ On the role played by international collaboration in the development of Italian horror cinema see Di Chiara’s chapter in this book.

⁸ For an overview of the scholarly works on distribution see Alisa Perren (2013).

⁹ This and other translations from Italian are made by the author.

¹⁰ (on CARA see Bernard 40-47 and Lewis 2000 “Hollywood vs Hardcore”, Gregory Wallen, intro in horror reader, p256)

¹¹ All the translations from Italian in this text are by the author.

¹² See Tim Lucas’ 1986 overview of the available versions of Argento’s films in the American home video market (Lucas, 1986).

¹³ The comic book is published by Sergio Bonelli Editore which since the 1940s focused its production on the development of genres (Western, Sci-Fi etc.). Interesting, Dylan Dog shares some features with horror film production: from foreign locations (it is set in London) to the ability to imitate American films.

¹⁴ For a comprehensive overview on this topic see Schlesinger (1990); Monteleone (2005); Barra and Scaglioni (2013); D’Aiola (2013).