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Between Two Worlds: Disjointed Trajectories in the Local and Global Circulation of Italian Made-for-Television Horror Series

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ABSTRACT

The article addresses the challenges faced by *filone* filmmakers to adapt to televisual language and content in the 1980s. Made-for-television horror films exemplify this failed adaptation process in a decade characterized by the rise of commercial television and the consolidation of the dominant market position of Silvio Berlusconi's broadcasting empire. They are also an example of the impact of distribution patterns on discursive practices surrounding the international circulation of Italian horror movies. Challenging ongoing scholarly debates in anglophone contexts, the article aims to shed light on the impact of transnational distribution practices peculiar to production companies like Dania Film and Medusa Distribuzione on the marketization of made-for-television horror series in anglophone countries and beyond. The combination of old and new industrial traditions may not have favoured the series' success in Italy on the verge of the 1990s, but it ensured their circulation around the globe long after.

SOMMARIO

Questo articolo analizza le difficoltà incontrate da registi e produttori del cinema horror italiano nel processo di adattamento ai linguaggi e ai contenuti televisivi degli anni Ottanta. I film horror realizzati per la televisione costituiscono un caso emblematico di tale adattamento in un decennio segnato dall'ascesa della televisione commerciale e dal consolidamento della posizione dominante dell'impero mediatico di Silvio Berlusconi. Essi offrono inoltre un esempio significativo dell'impatto esercitato dai modelli distributivi sulle pratiche discorsive che caratterizzano la circolazione internazionale del cinema horror italiano. In dialogo critico con i dibattiti accademici in ambito anglofono, l'articolo esamina l'impatto delle pratiche di distribuzione transnazionale adottate da società di produzione come Dania Film e Medusa Distribuzione, nei processi di posizionamento internazionale dei film che compongono le serie horror realizzate per la televisione. In particolare, l'articolo rileva come la combinazione dei modelli industriali cinematografici e televisivi non abbia favorito il successo di questi film in Italia alla soglia degli anni Novanta, pur assicurandone una duratura circolazione a livello globale.

KEYWORDS

filone cinema; made-for-television horror films; distribution; Dania Film; circulation; VHS; DVD

PAROLE CHIAVE

iiloni cinematografici; serie TV horror; distribuzione; Dania Film; circolazione; VHS; DVD

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Very little has been written about the transition of Italian genre films from the big to the small screen with the rise of commercial television, let alone the international circulation of made-for-television horror film series. Scholarship on the post-cinematic tail of the so-called *filone* cinema tends to focus on the circulation of films intended for a theatrical release in Italy via VHS and DVD collections in anglophone markets.[1] Fan, fanzines and fan-critics are often the primary sources to address the transformation of critically scorned cycles of films or directors into cult phenomena, considering the Italian industrial context that originated them as one of the criteria to interpret fan debates and the newfound status of Italian horror films.[2] The picture that comes out of these debates risks reducing a multilayered and inherently transnational cultural production into localized postcards of nationally specific cultural memories.

Instead of rehashing discourses on the Italian-ness of these products, even if only from an industry perspective, the focus of this article shifts the parameters of the debate to the recognition of frictions between old and new approaches to film production and distribution in the evolving Italian media environment, which was dominated by television in the late 1980s. The trajectory of the central figure in this landscape, Silvio Berlusconi's Fininvest group, illustrates this friction played out around transnational production and distribution practices that had long characterized *filone* cinema. The series of made-for-television Italian horror films produced by Fininvest's ReteItalia in collaboration with a staple of *filone* production, Luciano Martino's Dania Film, can be seen as the culmination of a transitional moment within the Italian television and film industry. Developed during an era of international expansion of Berlusconi's group, the series initially tried to replicate traditional production and distribution models, only to succumb in its own country to new trends and market reconfigurations. Despite the withdrawal to the national of Italian television production, the involvement of experienced figures like Luciano Martino provided these liminal media products with a long-lasting afterlife, facilitating their assimilation within the milieu of *filone* cinema in English-speaking contexts and the broader category of Western horror elsewhere.

Hence, this article delves into production and distribution patterns of made-for-television horror series in the 1980s, situating them within their specific industrial context. It aims to shed light on the impact of 'formal' distribution, intended as industry-led practices linked to the selling, purchasing and licensing of film rights, on the consumption of these hybrid products via Italian and international circulation, intended as the audience-oriented availability of media texts and the discursive practices it enables. Using Lobato's definition, the strategies (or lack thereof) of international 'formal' distribution impacted the circulation of made-for-television Italian horror films abroad also through 'informal' channels.[3] In this respect, Crisp explores peer-to-peer filesharing activities by 'release groups' of copyright material,[4] observing how 'under certain circumstances', filesharing can 'boost sales rather than damage' the film industry, offering a form of sampling before purchasing.[5] Accordingly, this article considers the impact of the availability of pirated copies of the films on client-server platforms like YouTube and Dailymotion on fan discursive practices and distributors' re-release strategies.

The complex distribution history of *Assassino al Cimitero Etrusco* (*The Scorpion with Two Tails*, dir. Sergio Martino, 1982), a French-Italian co-production initially conceived as a

television series but released theatrically in the early 1980s, underscores the persistence of an old production and distribution model associated with *filone* cinema, which Baschiera defines as 'cinema of imitation'.[6] Two horror series produced by ReteItalia and Dania Film, *Brivido Giallo* (dir. Lamberto Bava, 1986) and *Case Maledette* (dir. Umberto Lenzi and Lucio Fulci, 1989), showcase the fusion of old and new production and distribution models and the impact of Dania Film's distribution practices on the international circulation of the films. The last case study, *Alta Tensione* (dir. Lamberto Bava, 1989), produced by ReteItalia without Dania Film, demonstrates the impact of discursive practices informed by specific distribution patterns on the categorization of made-for-television horror films. Contrary to *Brivido Giallo* and *Case Maledette*, *Alta Tensione* did not have a VHS or DVD release, but despite this gap in circulation, its intended televisual target and its ambiguity in terms of genre, it has been assimilated into the broad category of Italian *filone* production.

Therefore, the first part of the article addresses the impact of the evolving Italian television and film market on the form and content of the series. The second part explores the circulation of *Brivido Giallo* through VHS and DVD releases in international markets as an exemplary case to illustrate the impact of transnational distribution practices on the marketing, consumption and categorization of the series in different countries. By shifting the focus over these practices, it becomes apparent how the channels opened (or not) by production and distribution companies created the conditions for fans to articulate the source of their cinephile pleasures and for international distributors to rebrand liminal products and inscribe them into their marketing strategies linked to *filone* cinema.

Cinema of imitation and distribution shifts

Baschiera addresses *filone* cinema as 'cinema of imitation', a concept that is crucial to understanding the development of Italian genre films. The term refers to 'the attempts made by Italian cinema to make cheaper 'knock-offs' of foreign (often American) genre films'.[7] As will be explored below, 1980s made-for-television horror series, despite being more problematic to assimilate with this industrial tradition, continued to rely on some of its recognizable features. Similar to *filone* cinema, their derivative approach did not rely uniquely on foreign models. From its inception, Italian genre production looked abroad but also at itself through serial[8] and intermedial forms.[9] In these terms, imitation can also be understood in terms of self-awareness and self-reflexivity. With private television companies taking central stage in film production and distribution, self-reflexivity and awareness had to change references. These references could no longer come from international and local cinematic trends but had to come from the television idioms, languages, and styles that funded them.

As Baschiera analysed, national and foreign distribution played a prominent role in the development of *filone* cinema.[10] Nationally, Italian independent productions relied heavily on distributors through the 'secured minimum': independent producers pitched their projects to regional distributors to secure a starting budget for their films, also aiming at distribution in regional circuits.[11] Accordingly, regional distributors contributed significantly to shaping producers' understanding of Italian audiences' tastes and, in turn, the content they would consume. Internationally, foreign

distribution played a pivotal part in influencing the reliance of film content on international tropes, validating the financial potential of genre productions by providing a relatively steady source of revenue.

The crisis of regional circuits — with first-run cinemas reaching 77% of the theatrical audience in 1990[12] — had a determinant impact on the change of this funding mechanism. Similarly, the decline of European film co-productions[13] and traditional international exhibition venues of *filone* cinema like grindhouse cinemas and drive-ins[14] demanded a model change. In the 1980s, co-productive efforts concentrated on television, public and private.[15] The production and distribution model of *filone* cinema was first disrupted and then supplanted by the new offering of films provided by private networks. The companies involved in *filone* cinema adapted without much resistance. From 1980 to 1990, film revenues from television had grown from 15% to 50%, and foreign circulation significantly decreased its financial impact, with international sales accounting for only 5% of total Italian film revenues, dropping from 30% in 1980.[16]

After years of competition between emerging private networks — also played on purchasing and broadcasting films to fill out the palimpsests[17] — in the late 1980s, the market crystallized around a duopoly made of public RAI and private Fininvest networks. Fininvest changed its strategy and shifted its brand identity. The implementation of an American broadcasting model initially gave the new commercial network a 'clear brand identity, partly by breaking radically with both the public monopoly offering and the many local networks that had flourished in previous years'.[18] However, in the late 1980s, it began to compete with RAI at their own game, 'purchasing' former RAI stars throughout the decade and shifting its programming towards national popular content targeting wider audiences. The shift was also reflected in the genres used to target these audiences, driven by the need to convince advertisers of the commercial potential of the network. Balbi and Prato describe this process as an 'imitation and reconfiguration model' that peaked in the 1990s.[19] Similar to Baschiera's 'cinema of imitation', the reference point of this model of production and distribution resided both inside and outside of Fininvest. RAI provided the model for content directed at more generalist audiences, where the language and styles came from the core of Berlusconi's group, advertising. The financing of production based primarily on television distribution made generalist audiences and, more importantly, the advertisers aiming at reaching them the real holders of power related to television content.

In this context, *filone* cinema's production networks intensified their intrinsic fragmentation, transitioning between ever shorter cycles of film and ultimately joining the television market or direct-to-video. Initially, companies like Dania Film attempted to carry on with their traditional production model, independently seeking new funding streams from regional private broadcasters and international sale deals. Eventually, they integrated their model through partnerships with market leaders like Fininvest later in the decade. As Dania's example illustrates, television networks funded the production in exchange for the broadcasting rights, leaving to minority partners the rights for the international distribution of their genre production.

Concerning horror, Dania tried to adapt the serialization of *filone* cinema to the televisual format, transposing its recurrent motifs and international outlook onto weekly broadcasting appointments before settling on nationally oriented genres like

comedy. Smaller and shorter-lived companies that had made Italian horror cinema in the previous decades would turn to direct-to-video distribution or disappear. As Baschiera describes, 'new Italian productions could only live on the channels of the national broadcasters where, however, they had to face the fierce competition of American films […], leaving horror cinema at the margins of the national industry'.[20] Horror films had lost the support of regional distributors in terms of funding, and broadcasters and advertisers had a different understanding of viewers' tastes. By 1990, Fininvest and RAI financed around 75% of national production,[21] shaping the content circulating on all types of Italian screens.

Made-for-Television Horror in the Early 1980s: *Assassinio al Cimitero Etrusco*

Promoting *Assassinio al Cimitero Etrusco*, director Sergio Martino expressed enthusiasm with the idea of working with private networks, celebrating the 'lack of bureaucratic mentality' and 'an entrepreneurial approach' that, compared to RAI, allowed directors 'to work more organically'.[22] However, the film, produced by Dania Film and Medusa Distribuzione, stands for the problematic transition of *filone* production from cinema to television. Its distribution pattern contrasts with Martino's initial enthusiasm and illustrates the unsuccessful experimentation stimulated by competing private networks. The director noted more recently the lack of will of Quartarete, the Turin local network that commissioned the series, to compete with Berlusconi's televisions.[23] The product, coproduced with France, originated as a 6- to 9-episode television series, initially titled *Il Mistero degli Etruschi*, and the 50-minute episodes were delivered in 1982 but were shelved by the network.

The film still relies on tropes of Martino's *filone* films of the 1970s, including character construction and plot points (*giallo*), musical themes (*poliziottesco*) and visual effects (horror) with worms invading the screen, and characters' necks turned 360 degrees on camera. This kind of content was unusual for television in the early 1980s but easily recognizable by cinema audiences. In a transitional moment within the private television market, the uncertainties regarding the potential broadcasting convinced the producers to rely on traditional distribution channels despite funding coming from television. Dania Films and Medusa Distribuzione recut the series and released it theatrically as a 98-minute film, achieving modest box-office returns.[24]

ReteItalia bought the series for a release on Fininvest's flagship channel Canale 5 in the late 1980s, recut into a two-part telefilm with the title *Lo Scorpione a Due Code*. The decision to purchase the product can be seen as part of the network's strategy to support original productions of genre films through the newfound partnership with Dania Film, attempting to incorporate an older industrial model into the new pathways of commercial television broadcasting. Nonetheless, Canale 5 would not air *Il Mistero degli Etruschi*, also known as *Assassino al Cimitero Etrusco*, also known as *Lo Scorpione a Due Code*, and the two-part telefilm would reappear only on regional networks in the 1990s. Arguably, the same dynamics that led to the shelving of *Alta Tensione* and *Case Maledette* in the late 1980s impacted the telefilm. As will be explored below, the circulation of these products in Italy was disrupted when Fininvest stopped believing in the role of made-for-television horror films on Italian television. The scattered

circulation of *Lo Scorpione a Due Code* thus confirms the struggle of *filone* cinema to adapt its production and distribution model to the new market paradigm dominated by television networks.

ReteItalia and Dania Film Horror Series

The partnership between Dania Film and ReteItalia opened a season of failed attempts to produce horror films for commercial television. In 1986, the companies announced the intention to invest more in original productions, supplying Fininvest networks with 52 hours of content uniquely designed for the television market by 'acquiring the broadcasting rights before film production, paying them between 300 million and one billion lire'.[25] Lamberto Bava was contracted to direct a series of four films, *Brivido Giallo* (*Una Notte al Cimitero/Graveyard Disturbance*, *Per Sempre/Until Death*, *La Casa dell'Orco/The Ogre*, *A Cena col Vampiro/Dinner with the Vampire*). Bava shot the films in English with a cast composed of both Italian and international actors,[26] consistent with the production model of *filone* cinema and with ReteItalia's strategy to release 'low-budget products, made by young authors with the aim of rejuvenating the Italian film world also considering new international partners'.[27] The company wanted to tap into the theatrical success of *Demoni* (*Demons*, dir. Lamberto Bava, *1*985) and *Demoni 2 … L'Incubo Ritorna* (*Demons 2*, dir. Lamberto Bava, *1*986), both gaining more than 1 billion lire at the box office,[28] complementing the offer of horror movies of Fininvest's youth-oriented channel, Italia 1.[29] As part of its strategy of internationalization, Berlusconi's group could also count on its foreign branches to maximize the return for the broadcasting of the series. As explored below, both Bava's *Brivido Giallo* and *Alta Tensione* would be broadcast in France — *Alta Tensione* even before it was broadcast in Italy.

Nonetheless, considering production and marketing decisions surrounding *Brivido Giallo*, *Alta Tensione*, and *Case Maledette*, their trajectory suggests both a lack of confidence in the place of Italian horror in television by Fininvest's executives and the influence of international distribution networks on their return to the small screen. *D*espite being promoted as a horror series,[30] *Alta Tensione* leans more towards the thriller tropes, also suggested by a title, which literally translates as 'High Tension', recalling 'suspense' more than horror. The same had been done with the first Bava series, which, through the label 'giallo', connected the films more with the murder-thriller genre than with horror, a distinction that tends to get lost in Anglo-American criticism.[31] *T*he second series had to be coproduced with Finivest's French channel La Cinq, involving six more films with French directors,[32] *b*ut ended up comprising only four films directed by Bava (*Il Maestro del Terrore/The Prince of Terror*, *L'Uomo che non Voleva Morire/The Man Who Didn't Want to Die*, *Il Gioko/School of Fear*, *Testimone Oculare/Eyewitness*). The decision to also shelve these four films followed the modest viewership results of *Brivido Giallo*, whose positioning mid-week in mid-August suggests the scepticism of network executives around the potential of these horror projects.

Alta Tensione aired on Fininvest's networks only in 1999, except *L'Uomo che non Voleva Morire*, which aired on the satellite network *Zone Fantasy* (Sky) in 2007.[33] The other Dania and ReteItalia horror series, *Case Maledette*, had a similar fate. The series had to comprise

six episodes, four directed by veterans Lucio Fulci and Umberto Lenzi, and two directed by Lamberto Bava. Only Fulci's (*La Dolce Casa degli Orrori*/*The Sweet House of Horrors*, *La Casa nel Tempo*/*The House of Clocks*) and Lenzi's (*La Casa del Sortilegio*/*The House of Witchcraft*, *La Casa delle Anime Erranti*/*The House of Lost Souls*) films were completed but never aired on Berlusconi's channels. They were released in Italy on VHS in 2000 and, in 2006, aired on *Zone Fantasy*.[34] Noticeably, both *Alta Tensione* — as a complete series — and *Case Maledette* were first aired on a British-owned channel dedicated to fantasy and horror content. Zone Vision Networks, now AMC Networks International UK — a broadcaster and distributor of thematic television channels — produced *Zone Fantasy* and brought the series back on its original platform, illustrating the pivotal role of international distribution networks in the circulation of made-for-television horror films also in Italy.

Considered in their totality, *Assassinio al Cimitero Etrusco* and ReteItalia's films seem like failed hybridization experiments, aiming to combine two languages but resulting in products that are out of sync with their intended medium. Bava's two series in particular *b*latantly tap into cultural trends of their primary target, young television audiences, through fashion, language, and references to pop culture. At the same time, the use of specific narrative devices such as self-referentiality and intermediality connect the films to *filone* cinema. Both *Il Maestro del Terrore* and *A Cena col Vampiro* revolve around horror directors dealing with the burden of their legacy. The films seem to know perfectly how they are situated in terms of cinematic tradition and future circulation. The former opens with the protagonist complaining about the shabby visual effects and poor budget of the film he is shooting. In the latter, the director is a vampire struggling to scare a group of young actors. Noticeably, one of them counters his deadly bite with a VHS of *The Fearless Vampire Killers* (dir. Roman Polanski, 1967). *La Casa dell'Orco* and *Il Gioko* play with the languages of other media to build up the cinematic tension, with the former materializing the literary nightmares of a horror novelist and the latter presenting a group of school kids re-enacting recent crime news to torture their teacher. *A*rguably, even if it could have once been enough to convince regional distributors, the makeup provided by a youth-oriented language, and ambiguous titles and generic identity did not have the same effect on advertisers.

Case Maledette was the series more invested in the horror genre but, nationally, targeted an audience related to a distribution model that had, at that time, irremediably changed. Aligning with Baschiera's idea of 'cinema of imitation', these made-for-television products tap into the success of an international cinematic franchise, *The Evil Dead* (released in Italy as *La Casa* — 'The House'), with plot points and visual reference inspired by Italian and international horror films like *The Shining* (dir. Stanley Kubrick, 1980), *Paura nella Città dei Morti Viventi* (*City of the Living Dead*, dir. Lucio Fulci, 1980), and *Poltergeist* (dir. Tobe Hooper, 1982). The violence and gore also show that cinema — not television — was the reference point of the films. In the opening of Fulci's *La Dolce Casa degli Orrori*, for instance, a man and a woman are violently killed by a burglar, with their heads smashed on camera. Lenzi commented on the projects:

> [The producers] didn't consider that the horror genre couldn't be accepted by TV sponsors […]. I wasn't an expert, and I made those films as I would have made them for a theatrical release. I didn't realize that, in this way, I was precluding myself from a career in television'.[35]

Fulci also expressed frustration towards ReteItalia over the uncertainties around the series' broadcasting.[36] This seems to illustrate the struggle to adapt to the new medium in terms of content. Neither directors nor producers seemed to fully understand the paradigm change brought by private networks and the audiences they had in mind.

If attached to an old production and distribution model, horror could not thrive on the small screen as the reference points of television were dramatically different from cinema in terms of language and intended audiences. Apart from a few well-known directors, such as Dario Argento, 'who still had a monetisable name',[37] Italian horror films with their recurring themes of sex and gory violence were not in line with what advertisers wanted to associate their products with, even when these elements were toned down for television. Consequently, new productions were confined to the home video market, which still represented between 20 and 30% of total Italian film revenues.[38] *Filone* cinema had lost its theatrical audiences, and made-for-television horror films misdirected their target, perhaps thinking the same audiences, at least in Italy, had migrated to the small screen. It was a narrower and more dispersed audience that did not prove attractive enough for the advertisers to justify future investments in the genre. Hollywood horror films were trendier, cheaper and high enough in numbers to satisfy the programming requirements of a television market dominated by RAI and Berlusconi's group.

The transformation of Fininvest's networks into hubs of national-popular programming closed the space for experimentation between old and new production and distribution models. Directors like Sergio Martino and Lamberto Bava exploited their adaptability to work on fantasy series, dramas and comedies made for television in the 1990s. Directors like Lenzi and Fulci would not find much space on the small screen after the 1980s. If, nationally, their products did not find an opportunity to circulate, the internationally oriented production and distribution model of *filone* cinema allowed them to circulate abroad, finding new life through international niche fandom facilitated by VHS and DVD releases.

Brivido Giallo: International Marketing Strategies, Serialization and Discursive Practices

Scholarship on the post-cinematic tail of Italian horror films tends to be primarily concerned with fans' relationship with the texts and their practices of categorization involving a tension between a tongue-in-cheek celebration of gore fests and authorial masterpieces. Regarding the canonization of Fulci's work following the video era, Church recognizes the struggle of separating these two forms of fan reception 'when fans account for the industrial context spawning the genre'.[39] However, when addressing the films and their distribution in English-speaking countries, the focus remains firmly on 'how Italian horror films have been seen and understood'[40] rather than the processes enabling their circulation. The primary concern seems to be the tracing of discursive practices that subtend fans' and fan critics' reception of the films through VHS first,[41] DVD later,[42] and streaming platforms nowadays,[43] particularly around the perceived distinctiveness of Italian horrors.

Fans — the primary target of new curated releases — and their practices are indeed important to understanding the reception of *filone* cinema outside of Italy. However,

made-for-television horror series suggest how production practices related to Italian commercial television and distribution practices of *filone* cinema — reaching national and international markets — need to be addressed to interpret VHS and DVD marketing strategies and the discursive practices they fed from and fed into. The companies involved in their production in the late 1980s created the conditions for reorienting public perception of Italian horror releases according to different distributors' interests and markets' configurations in different national contexts. In line with Nowell's idea of 'genre persona',[44] international distributors of made-for-television horror series strategically repositioned these products in the transition from VHS to DVD, exploiting circulation gaps and the various versions of the texts favoured by the multiple distribution channels inscribed in their production.

The definition of these products, including their Italian-ness, horror-ness, and paracinematic-ness in the UK, Germany, or Japan, was shaped by these distribution patterns, impacting specific marketing strategies and the discursive practices underlying them. Guins notes how social discourses originated from fanzines and fan-authored books 'created' the Italian horror film as a 'gore-object' while DVD repackaging 'metamorphosed' it into an 'art-object'.[45] If this rings true for the anglophone market, the boundaries between the two forms of object seem to be more blurred in France, where these films were broadcast on television alongside Hollywood horrors as part of programmes dedicated to celebrating horror subcultures and fandoms. As illustrated above, ReteItalia and Dania Film produced horror content for television envisioning transnational partnerships, and the retainment of the films' broadcasting rights by the Fininvest group led to the airing of both *Brivido Giallo* and *Alta Tensione* on French television. The Fininvest-owned channel LaCinq broadcast the former in 1988, and one of the channels that shared the spoils of LaCinq's demise, M6, broadcast the latter in 1993. The two programmes that hosted the films, *Les Accords du Diable* and *Les Jeudis de l'Angoisse*, added value to the films through their curatorial approach inspired by the US format of *Elvira's Movie Macabre*. The films were introduced by short segments promoting the latest VHS horror and fantasy releases, elevating B-movie culture through fandom discourses and cult film promotional practices. *Brivido Giallo* and *Alta Tensione* films were broadcast one after the other, retaining their original serialization, and their inclusion in the frame of the two programmes raised these made-for-television products and their subsequent VHS release as legitimate cinephilic cult horror objects.

Serialization practices express the tension between generic and authorial canonization and paracinematic paraphernalia in the VHS distribution of *Brivido Giallo* films in Germany and the UK as well. The steering towards a marketing strategy based on the auteur paradigm with the DVD release is clear from Platinum's DVD release of *Una Notte al Cimitero*'s 'Director Cut'. Nonetheless, Bava's previous works were also a primary selling point in Caleco Direct Video's VHS distribution, advertising it to its potential buyers as 'the next chilling experience' by the director of *Demons*. Despite the authorial approach, the issue of texts' integrity remained tangential, as the films were retitled and attached to a fake serialization that celebrated their continuity with the work of Lamberto Bava. Trans Global Pictures's retitling of *La Casa dell'Orco* into *Demons 3: The Ogre* targeted audiences fond of the director of *Demons 1* and *Demons 2*. The director of *Demons* is also the selling point of *Changeling 2 – The Revenge*, the UK VHS title of

Bava's *Per Sempre*. *Per Sempre* became *Back from Hell* in Starlight Video's VHS German release, signalled as 'Cult Director Lamberto Bava's apocalyptic psychotrip'. On the other hand, in Germany, the VHS release of *La Casa dell'Orco* was also retitled and re-serialized as *Ghosthouse 2* by Splendid Video, this time without any mention of the previous works of its director. *Ghosthouse* was the title of Umberto Lenzi's 1988 film, which, in Italy, had been titled *La Casa 3 – Ghosthouse* to tap into the success of Sam Raimi's *The Evil Dead* (1981) and *The Evil Dead 2* (1987) and artificially assert a continuity between the films. Thus, once in the hands of foreign distributors, the films were marketed according to the companies' understanding of audiences' relationship with the texts, highlighting its authorial background, its sensationalistic content or a mixture of the two.

More than a peculiarity of individual national industries, practices of retitling and re-serialization of horror films trespassed national borders. They highlight the lack of care or interest of the primary owners of the distribution rights in retaining the artistic integrity of the films when it concerned both national and international sales. Dania Film, often in collaboration with Medusa Distribuzione, championed this approach that favoured adaptive transnational distribution strategies via VHS and then DVD. Dania produced at least 22 films and series for television since 1982.[46] The new corporate asset of Medusa consolidated the partnership between ReteItalia and Dania, with Fininvest buying 49% of the company and Luciano Martino holding the balance with a 2% ownership.[47] As Sergio Martino recalls, most of the television films produced by ReteItalia and Dania were funded by Fininvest. The Milanese group retained the broadcasting rights, and the revenues from international sales were split among Medusa's stakeholders, with Dania taking a prominent role.[48] As the example below illustrates, it is safe to assume that the strategy oriented towards international sales of the made-for-television horror films was in continuity with the pattern established by Dania and Medusa in their long-lived partnership before the entrance of Fininvest in the company. It is also safe to assume that Dania's control over the films stopped once it had secured a profitable deal with foreign distributors.

Dania's lack of care for the artistic integrity of their productions set up a pattern that is difficult to ignore. Re-cuts and re-edits of foreign films were not uncommon in the anglophone markets, with the same distributors sometimes changing the marketing of the same films' re-release, sometimes releasing a cut version and others uncut.[49] New World Pictures and United Pictures Organization took the following step by re-shooting the opening sequence of Dania and Medusa's *L'Isola degli Uomini Pesce* (dir. Sergio Martino, 1979) for US distribution, with the addition of further gory violence and bodily horror, releasing it with the title *Something Waits in the Dark* and *Screamers* for a subsequent re-release. Sergio Martino's apparent unawareness of the changes signals once more the lack of interest in following up — not to mention protecting — the integrity of their films once they left the national soil. Even if Martino claims that 'Foreign distributors often made changes without our consent, but we were a minor film industry and we accepted many compromises',[50] consent did not seem to be particularly sought after by Dania and compromise seems to be inscribed in the foundation of these cinematic projects in the first instance.

Compromise became even more significant for made-for-television films produced by the companies involved in Medusa, whose configuration implied multiple distribution

channels following diverse distribution practices both in Italy and abroad. Dania Film was far from being a dominant agent in the international film market, but it had established itself as a stable and consistent contributor to the Italian cinematic output and a knowledgeable actor in the network of transnational distribution practices, especially across Europe and in the USA. Claims of naivety are less plausible than the instrumental need for quick returns ensured by loose licensing deals. The involvement of television networks and their broadcasting interests with experienced *filone* directors and producers like Martino, Lenzi, Fulci and Bava — already possessing a long list of credits through his collaboration with his father Mario, despite his young age — created the ground for the existence of different versions of the same films that served the interests of both Italian and international distributors in the following years.

Their foreign marketization involved localized discursive practices facilitated by *filone* films' permeation into different international markets at different levels. The positioning of these films in these markets depended on the channels already opened by Dania and Medusa and their licensing deals, which, with international distributors, created the conditions for the recognizability or affiliation — or lack thereof — of their products with local trends. The affiliation of the VHS releases of made-for-television horror films to Bava and his previous works in Germany and the UK and not in other markets exemplifies this dynamic. It meant that these products could be taken over by established distribution practices that facilitated their repositioning in these contexts. Outside of the Anglophone or Western European sphere, exposure to different distribution strategies or the prominence of 'informal' channels of distribution, including pirate networks, may have limited the development of the aforementioned discursive practices and favoured different types of affiliations influencing the marketing of the products.

The lack of any mention or highlight of Bava and his *Demons* series in the VHS packaging in Japan, Korea, Greece, and Turkey suggests, in fact, how cultural proximity and affordances may have played a role in not making them marketable features. The further marginality in these contexts of defining fan and critical debates on the Italian- and other '-nesses' facilitated the translation of the 'culturally odourless' nature associated with these products[51] into their VHS release strategies. Their primary selling point was not the gore of their content, nor their positioning within cultural hierarchies, nor the peculiarities dictated by their Italian background. Instead, it appears to be their loose association with broader cinematic traditions like American and European horror — a defining category that, as Hutchins suggests, arose from the sudden availability during the early 1980s of European horror video 'either because of the vagaries of film distribution or because of censorship constraints'.[52] The presence of the English title above the translated one in the Turkish, Greek, Korean, and Japanese VHS releases seems to corroborate this intended association.

The varying features of reception environments around the globe seem to be the prerequisite and not the product of what Church defines as the 'intrasubcultural friction between earnest ascriptions of an artworthiness transcending economics and celebrations of an economically calculated affectivity more easily (but not exclusively) aligned with "bad taste"'[53] that defines fan discourses around Italian horror films in anglophone countries. Made-for-television horror series of the late 1980s are once more exemplary of this friction because of their different codification and availability in various national contexts. New channels of formal and informal distribution created the

conditions for the co-existence of 4 K restored copies of *A Cena col Vampiro* circulating on US YouTube fan channels alongside low-definition versions of cable TV recordings and nobilitated Blu-Ray releases.

At this moment, the *Alta Tensione* films can be found on YouTube and Dailymotion in Italian with English titles despite never being distributed abroad. Some are recordings of the films aired by satellite networks, others of their subsequent broadcastings. A version in English of *Il Maestro del Terrore*, re-titled *The Prince of Terror TV Movie Horror "Rare"*, presumably a digital copy of a non-commercial promotional VHS, can be found on YouTube. Arguably, the absence of Dania Film's ties with international distributors prevented its VHS and DVD releases. ReteItalia produced the series with ANFRI Srl. This new partnership, however, invested in more family-friendly made-for-television fantasy series in the 1990s that broadcast across Europe. The lack of video release of the *Alta Tensione* series left a gap in the market that, through discursive practices on Italian horror 'maestros' propelled by DVD and Blu-Ray releases of other Bava films, led to its assimilation into the ranks of obscure and rare sub-products composing Italian horror cinema. A personal conversation with scriptwriter Dardano Sacchetti suggests an incoming DVD box set for the anglophone market, showing how, indeed, the proliferation of pirated copies on client-server platforms may have propelled a demand for adding this product also into the collections of Italian horror fans.

Conclusion

The analysis of the Italian production and distribution pattern of *Brivido Giallo*, *Alta Tensione* and *Case Maledette* in the first part of this article framed them as failed hybridization experiments out of sync with a medium dominated by the power of advertisers. *Filone* directors and producers did not fully understand the paradigm shift brought about by commercial television, and the films, especially Lamberto Bava's *Brivido Giallo* series, seem to confirm the reading of television co-productions functioning as the 'key determinants that motivated the return to a blander, more universally acceptable fare'[54] in terms of content. *Brivido Giallo* reduced to the minimum the elements of gore and relied heavily on comedic elements for its television-friendly 'chills'. It is problematic, though, to use the content as an indicator for the broadcasting obstacles to *Alta Tensione* and *Case Maledette*. The excessive violent and gory content of these two series of films has become a widespread interpretation in fan discourses and reference books,[55] but evidence supporting this theory is hard to find. Broader shifts in the Italian film and television industry thus provide a more solid ground to interpret the trajectory of these products.

Scholarship on Italian television and cinema, focusing on the ideas of 'cinema of imitation'[56] and an 'imitation and reconfiguration model',[57] highlighted distribution's impact on the content and circulation of both theatrical and made-for-television horror films. The power over content that was once held by regional distributors shifted towards private networks and the advertisers behind them. Accordingly, the reference point of made-for-television productions went from international box offices to television programming. The troublesome distribution path of works produced in the early 1980s, like the tv-series-turned-into-film *Assassino al Cimitero Etrusco*, shows the struggle to adapt to systemic changes in the Italian audio-visual market, comprised at

first by a competing local private network and later dominated by Fininvest. Across the 1980s, the international branding of Berlusconi's group supported producers' belief in the profitability of made-for-television horror films. By the end of the decade, however, Fininvest's transformation into a hub of national-popular programming brought to an end the experimentation between old and new production and distribution practices that had characterized made-for-television horror films. Nonetheless, it is the international outlook of *filone* production and distribution networks that enabled its circulation abroad, contributing to keep these products alive and opening a path for them to come back to Italian screens as well.

Analyses of fan discourses are therefore useful to explore their impact on shaping our understanding of Italian horror films' reception and interpretation by international audiences, but less so concerning production and distribution practices. Nonetheless, they can shed light on processes of categorization and canonization that DVD labels have successfully tapped into for the marketization of new curated re-releases of Italian made-for-television horror films lacking, in some instances, so many of the excesses that seem to nurture the love of anglophone fans for *filone* cinema. Similarly, addressing broader discourses affecting fan practices in specific contexts — such as the heated 'nasties' debates and subsequent regulatory measures on the home video market in the UK[58] — is certainly pivotal to understanding the strategies adopted by VHS labels to intercept their target audience in localized contexts. As Baschiera writes, however, 'what is left out is the complexity of the *filoni* and subgenres as well as the transnational nature of Italian horror productions'.[59] This transnational nature should not be taken as a natural force, though, but framed within conscious industrial choices in Italy that, especially in the 1980s and regarding companies like Dania Film, had long abandoned improvised or amatorial entrepreneurial endeavours.

Made-for-television horror films can well be interpreted as experimentations in terms of language, but their production and distribution followed patterns well established in the industrial milieu of *filone* cinema. Part of the reason for their failure in Italy depended on the primary distribution channel dictated by the source of their funding. *Assassinio al Cimitero Etrusco*, *Brivido Giallo* and *Case Maledette* found a new life abroad by exploiting more traditional distribution channels championed by companies like Dania Film. The mixture of old and new industrial traditions may not have brought good fortunes to the series in Italy on the verge of the 1990s, but it ensured the circulation of these products in international markets long after. Their assimilation into the broader category of Italian horror films facilitated by VHS and DVD releases paved the way to welcome even more ambiguous products like *Alta Tensione* into the catalogues of Italian 'chills' collections.

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The author reports there are no competing interests to declare.

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