

DRUNK MONKEYS | LITERATURE + FILM (/)

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FILM / SO DEADLY, SO PERVERSE: AN INTERVIEW WITH TROY HOWARTH

Film (/2017-posts/category/Film)





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Drunk Monkeys film editor Sean Woodard had the opportunity to speak with Rondo-nominated writer, Troy Howarth, who specializes in European Cult Cinema. Since 2015, Troy Howarth has recorded dozens of audio commentaries on a wide array of films for such labels as Arrow Video, Synapse Films, 88 Films, Shout Factory, Blue Underground, Mondo Macabro, Kino Lorber, and many more. His books include *The Haunted World of Mario Bava*, first published by FAB Press in the UK in 2002, then printed in a revised, expanded edition by Midnight Marquee Press in the US in 2013; *So Deadly, So Perverse: 50 Years of Italian Giallo Films (Volumes 1-3)*; *Splintered Visions: Lucio Fulci and His Films*; *Real Depravities: The Films of Klaus Kinski*; *Human Beasts: The Films of Paul Naschy*; and the upcoming *Murder By Design: The Unsane Cinema of Dario Argento*. He has also written for such publications as *We Belong Dead* and *Scream*.

What was the first *giallo* film that made an impression on you and what elements of Italian horror filmmaking attracted you to them?

That's a tricky question, one which requires a slightly rambling answer—so bear with me! I suppose the first one I saw was *Creepers*, the radically edited U.S. version of Dario Argento's *Phenomena*. That's an offbeat entry in many respects, given the paranormal nature of the plot, but it manages to work both as a horror film and as a traditional *giallo*. Around that same time, I also saw *The Night Evelyn Came Out of the Grave* on late-night TV. It used to be in the rotation on Channel 9's weekend horror movie program.

I don't know that I can say that either film particularly "attracted" me at the time. They were both a little too weird for me to get my head around as a kid. Really, it was Mario Bava's tongue-in-cheek Gothic *Baron Blood* which really whetted my appetite for Euro horror—not that I had any clue what that was at the time. I was probably about 5 or 6 when I first saw that film. It was a gradual process over my adolescence and beyond, getting into these films. Over the next several years I saw films like *Hatchet for the Honeymoon*, *The Bird with the Crystal Plumage*, and *Opera*, but none of them really won me over to the point that I started to really delve into *giallo* cinema. I didn't really come to understand that as a concept until I was probably in high school, and at that time in the 90s, you were at the mercy of whatever they aired on TV or whatever your local video store had in stock. Every now and again, you'd luck out and find some offbeat gem in the bargain VHS bin at Kmart or whatever, but it wasn't the same then as it is now; now everything is available, pretty much.

But going back to *Baron Blood*, which I took a liking to right away, I appreciated the film's creepy atmosphere more than anything else. It felt different than the Universal or Hammer or AIP movies I was weaned on, even if I couldn't really articulate that at the time. I came to realize from reading *The Encyclopedia of Horror Movies*, which was basically my Bible as a burgeoning cineaste, that the film's

director was somebody of interest. From there, I started to read up on Bava, and that in turn led to reading about Argento, Fulci, etc. It all sort of sprang from there, but it was a very gradual process, as it took me a long time to get past the dubbing and the other “odd” elements which differentiated these films from conventional American and British filmmaking; the music, for example, was very jarring to me for a long time. When I got past that and learned to embrace it, I was hooked.

How did the idea for your *So Deadly, So Perverse* book series begin?

I think I started to toy with that idea around 2010. At that time, it seemed insurmountable—there were still so many films I didn’t have access to, and I just didn’t quite know where to begin. But I knew there was room for something more in-depth about the genre. I had read a couple of books on *giallo* cinema and they either seemed too shallow or too academic for my tastes, so I started to formulate the idea of doing something akin to a roadmap or encyclopedia of the genre. I toyed with writing with in collaboration with another writer at one point, but this individual, who shall go unnamed, soon revealed himself to be flighty and unreliable; I didn’t want to be beholden to a cowriter who wasn’t going to do what he needed to do. Right after overhauling *The Haunted World of Mario Bava* for a revised, expanded edition through Midnight Marquee, I felt inspired—I hadn’t attempted to write another book in many years, and suddenly I found myself energized and wanting to keep the momentum going. That was in 2013, and by a remarkable coincidence that marked the 50th anniversary of the real honest to goodness *giallo* on the screen—Mario Bava’s *The Girl Who Knew Too Much* had been released in 1963, so it seemed perfect timing. Then it was just a matter of figuring out what titles needed to be covered and getting hold of copies so I could review them properly. Luckily by that time, 99% of the titles were readily accessible in English-friendly editions; had I tried to do such a project even a few years earlier, it probably would have been so much more difficult. Timing is everything in these matters, so it just happened to work out well in my favor.

In planning and outlining the books, what was your research and writing process?

The key thing was to get a proper, comprehensive list of titles going. In that sense, I had a great ally in the form of Roberto Curti—the Italian writer whose books on Riccardo Freda, the *poliziottesco* genre, and Italian horror are utterly indispensable. Roberto had contributed essays to both the original and the revised editions of *The Haunted World of Mario Bava*, and I knew he would be a tremendous help in a project such as this. I put together my own list, then he countered it with films he disagreed with incorporating (some, like *Short Night of Glass Dolls*, I agreed with him on; others, I decided to go against his advice and include them anyway), and also with quite a few I had overlooked. I had Roberto review this list probably a half dozen times, and he agreed with me that it was as comprehensive a list of *giallo* films as had ever been attempted in an English language context

—he felt it was pretty much definitive as these things go, and I certainly wasn't going to argue with him; the man knows his stuff! From there, it was a matter of tracking down all the films I didn't already have copies of.

My process is generally the same: I prepare an outline, I lay the groundwork, and then I start putting meat on the bones, as it were. I gather whatever research materials I might need, especially any volumes which will provide some background or appropriate quotations, then I pretty much work my way through by watching the films, taking detailed notes, then writing up my critique as I see fit. I tend to work quickly but not, I hope, recklessly. But it is relatively quick and easy for me to get through the first draft before going back and doing the tinkering, editing, and so forth that is required. Fortunately I don't tend to suffer from writer's block, so I don't find it nearly as agonizing a process as some do; it's not always a walk in the park—especially when you have to suffer through some pretty awful films—but I don't find it to be particularly difficult in general.

Was the process different preparing this series, compared to a book focused solely on a director's filmography, such as *The Haunted World of Mario Bava* or your upcoming book on Dario Argento?

Not particularly, no. I mean, the amount of coverage you can afford individual titles is different. There simply isn't room to go into the sort of scene-by-scene analysis I have room to do in a director study; and also, because I'm focusing on mystery-style films, I don't want to go out of my way to spoil the endings. It's impossible to avoid spoilers when you're talking about a specific artist's work and breaking down their thematic obsessions and so on, but in a context like this, it's easier to get into the overall salient points (it's good, it's not; this is what works, this is what doesn't) without having to reveal the identity of the killer every single time. So, while I might spend 10 pages talking about *The Bird with the Crystal Plumage* in the context of my book about Argento, I can only afford it maybe a page or two in something like this—and that's more than I can afford every single title, seeing as how not all films carry equal weight or are as significant in the overall scheme of the genre.

The first two entries of *So Deadly, So Perverse* focused on the golden era of giallo cinema in the late 1960s and '70s to its decline in the '90s, while the third explores films around the world that were inspired by or contain elements of giallo films. Although some film fans and scholars deride modern homages or interpretations of the genre, you've dedicated a whole book to them. How do you feel these films fit into the discussion of gialli and what are some of your favorite examples?

The first two volumes were intended to be pretty much definitive, much as I loathe that word; I should say, the first two volumes were conceived as a single volume—but it became apparent after a certain point that it was too much for one volume, so it needed to be split. My intention was to cover every single cinematic giallo and to work in some of the made for TV ones, especially ones with connections to the major players in the field. But defining the genre is slippery—as is so often the case, people don't agree across the board. I recently saw a Blu-ray featurette about Riccardo Freda in which the writer described his film *Tragic Ceremony* as a *giallo*; it certainly isn't a *giallo* from my point of view! *Suspiria* is sometimes called a *giallo*, and I don't agree with that. And so on. Genres tend to be a bit fluid and hard to pin down in general, so this isn't altogether surprising. Anyway, the first two volumes cover 50 years—and to my mind, collectively they encompass every single film that meets my criteria as a bona fide *giallo*.

Volume 3 was a bit of an afterthought and it arose from the feedback I got from so many readers who wanted to see more about the films from other countries which have a *giallo* flavor to them. To simplify, from my point of view (and I'm not alone in this; Roberto Curti certainly agrees with me, for example) a true giallo must be Italian in origin; even though a lot of these films were funded with money from other countries, the films in question should be primarily Italian, with an Italian director and preferably an Italian screenwriter on board. That's how I see it. So there are a lot of Spanish-Italian movies which are very much in the *giallo* mold, for example, but they didn't make the cut because, again, they're not "proper" Italian films. And it occurred to me that a volume serving as a sort of elongated post script, devoted to these films, might be a fun project. I didn't want to try and be comprehensive because that was too slippery a slope and it would have doubled or even tripled the size of the book—so this one is more of a selective cross-section of films from across the globe: America, Great Britain, Spain, Germany, Turkey, India, Japan, and so forth.

As to the *giallo* homages we've seen in recent years, that can't—or shouldn't—be answered as a generalization. It's very much a case-by-case sort of a thing. Some of these films pay lip service to the surface elements but have very different aims in mind—look at *Berberian Sound Studio*, for example. When I first saw it, I expected a *giallo*, and I was underwhelmed. Seeing it again, I appreciated it much more for what it was—which is very different from the average exploitation film the Italians were churning out in the 60s and 70s. On the other hand, there are films that are so self-conscious and arty in their approach that I find them a bit arid and off-putting. They get too wrapped up in their own self-perceived cleverness and they end up losing me. So it really depends on the film. But a film like *Berberian Sound Studio* works because it ticks off all the boxes as a *giallo* homage, but its reach doesn't exceed its grasp where its own ambitions are concerned, either.

Could you describe your experience working with boutique home entertainment labels—such as Arrow Films and Blue Underground—to create Blu-ray supplements and audio commentaries for multiple films?

I don't think I ever would have gotten a chance at doing commentary work were it not for *So Deadly*, *So Perverse*. I think that's the book that made people think I might have something of interest to say about these films. I remain indebted to Michael Mackenzie, who produces a lot of releases for Arrow; it was Michael who got me to do my first commentary, for *The Night Evelyn Came Out of the Grave*. When the offer came, I was unsure of myself, as I often am, and I didn't understand the technology... how could I record a track for a company based in England when I'm in Johnstown, Pennsylvania? Ah, but there's this wonderful thing called the internet and it allows me to record in my own home and then transmit an audio file to anywhere in the globe... science at its finest! So I learned how to do it, with Michael's assistance, and I did my best to put together a track that would be interesting but also enjoyable. As a film fan who really loves commentaries, I've learned what I like—and more importantly, what I don't like, from listening to so many different audio commentaries down through the years. I won't name the people whose work I don't enjoy, but I can say I was very inspired by people like David Kalat, Greg Mank, Sir Christopher Frayling, Kim Newman, and Jonathan Rigby . . . I just love listening to those guys talking about my favorite movies. I wanted to avoid making my tracks sound dry or stuffy, like a lecture. But there's a fine line between rambling on and winging it and scripting something to a stifling degree. So I've been mindful of that—I don't want to just babble without form or structure, but I don't want every single pause and comma to sound like I'm reading from a monitor, either. Modulating the voice is also important. I hate when people sound robotic, or like they don't really love what they're talking about. I'm sitting here listening to you—give me a reason to want to keep *listening*! Amuse me! Anyway, I continue to try and practice what I preach and make these things funny where possible, while also imparting as much information as I can that will hopefully be of interest. You can't do these things assuming that everybody in the audience knows as much as or more than you do—you have to be mindful of the newbies, as well. So I try to make things accessible without making it sound like I'm just talking at people from a podium; I prefer to make it like I'm sitting with friends, jabbering away about these films.

My experience has been very favorable on the whole. I've encountered some negativity from some quarters, but that is to be expected. The companies themselves are pleased with my efforts, which is why they keep asking me to do more for them. It's like anything else: when push comes to shove, you either deliver, or you don't. If you get a commission and you flake out or deliver something

shoddy, that company may well give you the cold shoulder after that. But if you deliver and don't disappoint them, the work continues to flow pretty steadily. Overall, my experience has been very, very positive.

Of course, I'm also intensely self-critical. If I make a mistake—and truly, everybody does; the most meticulous people who script every single pause have still managed to make errors in their tracks—I tend to beat myself up over it. But so long as the mistakes aren't copious or really, really huge, I think we can overlook them and be at least a little forgiving. But that said, there are some churlish reviewers out there—but often I think they just want to show off a bit when they get hung up on minutiae.

What's your fondest memory engaging with the film community and Italian horror fans?

Well, I live in a small town so interacting with people who share my interests is not exactly a daily thing! I've been going to a convention called The Monster Bash, in Mars, PA (how appropriate!) since 2011... and then in 2014, I started going as a vendor, selling copies of my books. Meeting people who enjoy what I do is always fun—a bit surreal, too. I don't think of myself as anything special or as any kind of a “celebrity,” so to be sitting behind a table and signing copies of my books is always so weird. But the people are incredibly kind and generous, and I always enjoy hearing their feedback. Sometimes they'll suggest topics for books, too, which is always appreciated; you never know, I might actually tackle some of those ideas one of these days. Beyond that sort of face-to-face interaction, I also enjoy hearing from people through Facebook and Instagram—the people who really appreciate what I do and want to chat with me about these films are just a lot of fun to interact with. Sometimes my time is limited, owing to having so many irons in the fire, but I always make a point of replying as best I can.

Any upcoming projects you're excited about working on?

I'm currently at work on a book called *Assault on the System: The Nonconformist Cinema of John Carpenter*, for WK Books. I've also wrapped up *Murder By Design: The Unsane Cinema of Dario Argento*, which will be published in the first half of 2020 by Midnight Marquee. Lee Gambin has been very helpful in getting me some major interviews for the former, notably Carpenter himself, while Rob Ruston's contacts in Rome enabled me to get some fantastic interviews with the latter, including Argento. I also have signed a contract for another book, but I haven't spilled the news on that one just yet.

Commentary-wise, I've just recorded several more—and I have a bunch more in the pipeline. I can say that there are some more Lucio Fulci tracks coming, for example, but until I get permission to share the news, I can't really reveal any titles—at least not just yet!

Off the top of your head, can you name your top five *gialli*?

My top five are: *Deep Red* (Dario Argento), *Don't Torture a Duckling* (Lucio Fulci), *Blood and Black Lace* (Mario Bava), *The House with the Laughing Windows* (Pupi Avati), and *The Strange Vice of Mrs. Wardh* (Sergio Martino).

Is there anything you'd like to add?

I guess just that I truly appreciate the kindness and support and enthusiasm of so many people in the fan community who continue to purchase my books and check out my commentaries; getting their feedback makes all the hard work worthwhile. And make no mistake—it truly is hard work... not like digging ditches work, no, but mentally and emotionally it can be very draining. All this on top of a regular 8AM to 4PM job and maintaining some semblance of a social life can be tricky—but knowing that there are so many people who really enjoy what I do makes it worth the fuss. And so long as there's an interest, I plan to continue writing and talking!

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