

*The Canadian Giallo, or how the Italian Thriller influenced the Canadian Slasher Film*

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Quite a few years ago, I wrote about the relationship between certain kinds of slasher films and their relationship to urban legends (Koven, 2003). To differentiate between urban legend-based slasher films from what I saw as *typical* slasher films, I referred to those horror films as being more like murder-mysteries: actually, I called them “Scooby-Doo movies,” because at their conclusions, the killer is revealed to be one of the group being murdered. Often these films end with the killer being unmasked with great affect of surprise. In preparing that essay for publication, a connection was suggested, by one of the article’s reviewers, that there was a link between what I was calling “Scooby Doo movies” and the Italian *giallo*. Once this article had been published, I began exploring the Italian *giallo* in more detail, and the result was *La Dolce Morte: Vernacular Cinema and the Italian Giallo* (Koven, 2006), what I have subsequently learned to be the first book-length academic study of the *giallo*. I am now picking up where I started from and looking in more detail at the relationship between the *giallo* and the slasher film, particularly those I referred to as “Scooby Doo movies.” However, the “Scooby Doo” movies I shall be discussing here were all produced in Canada between 1980-1982, and many are recognized as classics of the sub-genre: *Prom Night* (Paul Lynch, 1980), *Happy Birthday to Me* (J. Lee Thompson, 1981), *Terror Train* (Roger Spottiswood, 1981), *Visiting Hours* (Jean-Claude Lord, 1982), and *Curtains* (Jonathan Stryker [Richard Ciupka], 1983). And all these films, I argue, feature strong connections to the *giallo*.

The connection between the *giallo* and the slasher film was noted as early as 2002; Adam Rockoff, in his seminal book on the slasher film, *Going to Pieces*, noted that the slasher

film owed much to the Italian thriller; and while he does offer a brief discussion about the *giallo*, he does not make the connections beyond vague fuzzy allusions (2002, 30). But the relation between the *giallo* and the slasher film is entirely missing from Vera Dika's *Games of Terror* (1990: 29), although she does grant that there is a playful quality to the slasher film. Dika notes that in some films, like those discussed below, "the spectator is implicated by a number of conventionalized formal strategies, ones that encourage a play with the film itself, rather than ones that merely allow the events to unfold for the spectator's observation" (1990: 22). In other words, although she does not make the connection herself, the ludic challenge to the audience is to try and solve the film's central mystery; one sees this in the *giallo* too. Kim Newman, in *Nightmare Movies* (1988: 105), likewise discusses the *giallo vis a vis* Dario Argento as an auteur, but when it comes to discussing the slasher film, the author did not see, or did not comment, on the connection made here (Newman 1988: 143-157).

And yet, other critics *did* see the connection as more than vague. Jim Harper, writing about the same time I was writing *La Dolce Morte*, made the connection unambiguous: "the *giallo* films of the sixties and the seventies paved the way for the stalk and slash movies of the eighties..." (2004: 9). He continues noting that "it's possible to see the seeds of the *giallo* in almost every aspect of *Halloween* and the multitude of films that followed" (2004: 10). While I have argued elsewhere that *Halloween* is a different animal to the *giallo*-influenced slasher films I will be discussing, here, what is most significant is Harper's connection between the two film cycles/genres/*filone* (Koven 2003).

The black leather and the masks may give Argento's murders a supernatural appearance, but ultimately they are revealed to be coherent and seemingly normal people. The endless repetition of this device in slasher movies has robbed it of any

impact – no one is surprised when the killer turns out to be another ‘normal’ student, teacher, journalist, whatever – but ultimately it has been derived from the *gialli* (Harper 2004: 10).

Harper also distinguishes between those killers whose identities are hidden from the audience until the film’s final act and those who, due to physical deformity or another disfiguration, are continually killing (Jason Vorhees, Michael Myers, etc). And it is in this sense, the horror film more closely resembles a murder-mystery, and therefore, *giallo*. Martin Rubin (1999: 163-4) distinguishes between those slasher films which follow a “whodunit format” from those which feature the “cipher format”: as argued below, Rubin’s “whodunit format” have a distinct connection to the *giallo*. “There is a teasing, gamelike quality to stalker films, filled with red herrings, practical jokes, false alarms, and false alarms that turn out to be real alarms” (Rubin 1999: 167). Harper notes that these “whodunit format” slasher films’ killers “are articulate and agile, and usually engage in conversation at some point. Although obviously deranged, they tend to bear no physical disfigurement that would prevent them from mixing in civilized society” (2004: 42). And a surprising number of what we, retrospectively, call the “classic” slasher film follow this “whodunit format,” rather than the “cipher.”

In more recent years, the *giallo*-slasher connection has been more widely recognized. Wickham Clayton sees the *giallo* as explicitly a “prototype” to the slasher film (2015: 7); a point echoed by David Roche in the same volume (2015: 35n2). Ian Conrich notes the oft-cited connection between the *giallo* and slasher film in that the couple pinioned by a skewer through both of their bodies while making love appears in both *Friday the 13<sup>th</sup> Part Two* (Steve Miner, 1981) and *Bay of Blood* (Mario Bava, 1971) (2015: 111). Conrich

also see these films as “essentially whodunits that are closer to Agatha Christie or Scooby-Doo and can include an end-of-film unmasking and explanation” (2015: 113). Finally, despite not name dropping the *giallo* per se, Jessica Balanzategui notes the following in accounting for the marked change in tone between *Halloween* and *Friday the 13<sup>th</sup>*, with the more ratiocination of *Prom Night* or *Terror Train*:

This thematic shift involves a level of generic hybridity, as the slasher began drawing on plot elements from the mystery and detective genre to flesh out the narrative and amplify anxieties about the identity of the killer. As a result, viewers and protagonists became tasked with solving the mysteries of the killer’s existence by uncovering clues surrounding each of the murders (2015: 170).

What Balanzategui sees as a change in the narrative structure of the films, has, instead, always been part of the continuity between the *giallo* and the slasher film. Balanzategui, is correct in identifying the playful, ludic, game these films have with their audiences.

But why Canada? Why did Canada produce so many classic slasher films in the wake of the successes of *Halloween* (John Carpenter, 1978) and *Friday the 13<sup>th</sup>* (Sean S Cunningham, 1980), particularly, as Canadian film critic John Harkness (1982: 27) noted,

The crazed killer is an American phenomenon ... [and] these stories are native to the American psychology. ... When we [Canadians] try to imitate a foreign genre, we wind up with a *Visiting Hours*, a *Terror Train*, a *My Bloody Valentine*, where artistic decisions are based solely on commercial factors.

To be sure, “commercial factors” play an instrumental role in these films’ production. Andrew Dowler also noted that Canadian filmmakers were particularly poor at imitating the earlier American successes. Dowler (1985:16) notes, “... and we’ve never made them worse: ... just cold, pallid and relentlessly dull simulacra [of the American films],” and he concludes, much as Harkness did, that Canada just does not have the tradition of crime and mystery fiction which our American cousins do (1985: 17). However, as Richard Nowell (2011: 57-78) noted in detail, it was not *Halloween* which lit the fuse for the slasher film to explode, but a Canadian shocker a few years earlier, *Black Christmas* (Bob Clark, 1974) (see also Constantineau, 2010). The cultural relationship between Canada and the United States creates a permeable membrane of mutual influence, which Suzie Young (2005) also noted.

However, calling these films out as commercial prospects only, as Harkness and Dowler do, is an over-simplification. Certainly, these films were produced to make money over any artistic expression of Canadian identity, and thus why they were most often criticized. But that is only part of the picture. In 1967, the Canadian Film Development Corporation (CFDC) was founded as a government body to partially fund and offer tax incentives to Canadian filmmakers exploring topics of a national interest. While, in the first few years of the CFDC, several films were produced which today are recognized as classics of Canadian national cinema (Don Shebib’s *Going Down the Road* (1970) and Peter Carter’s *The Rowdyman* (1972) are two examples), they failed at the Canadian box office, due, partially, as Christopher Gittings notes (2002: 95), to American companies’ monopoly on distribution in Canada. By 1974, the Canadian government felt that CFDC-funded films needed an explicitly commercial orientation; that the films needed to stand, at least a chance, of competing with American films. To facilitate this, the CFDC enabled eligible

film producers to write off 100% of investment against the film's profits on their personal income tax, so long as certain key factors were maintained (see Pednekar, 2985). "The Tomkins Report of 1976 ... pushe[d] the Canadian industry towards making Hollywood-style films, films 'with a mass audience appeal beyond the boundaries of any one country'" (Gittings, 2002: 96). And it was in this context that *Black Christmas* was born: As Richard Nowell (2011: 63) notes, "*Black Christmas* was seen by CFDC executives to be capable of proving Canada with its first genuine US box-office success." Due to the amount of investment that independent producers could write off in this period, the mid-to-late-1970s and early 1980s became known as "the Tax Shelter" period, and this is the context which birthed the slasher films being examined here. Canadian horror film historian Caelum Vatnsdal noted (2004: 121): "The tax shelter period was a deeply ignoble time in Canadian history. Abuse was rampant; not just of the tax laws, but of cinema itself. Films were made the wrong way by the wrong people for the wrong reasons."

So "ignoble" was this period that the slasher films discussed here do not appear in mainstream textbooks on Canadian cinema (see Elder, 1989; Gittings, 2002; and Beard and White, 2002); the tax shelter years produced films which, it appears, Canadian film studies wishes to ignore even existed! Vatnsdal noted (2004: 122) that "[t]hese are the movies that ... undermined Canada's position in the film world simply by being so awful." And Canadian film history would rather focus on those films which articulated "a Canadian cultural identity" (Ted Magder, cited by Nowell, 2011: 62), and not those cheapened by the (perceived) stench of commercial opportunism.

The job of establishing continuity between the *giallo* and the slasher film would be substantially easier if we could uncover an interview with one of the slasher film directors, screenwriters, or producers who fully admits that so-and-so saw *Deep Red* (Dario Argento, 1975) at the Rio Cinema (or the Biltmore, or the Coronet) in Toronto in 1978, on a double bill with *Halloween*. This continuity would be more easily established if we could put anyone who worked on these slasher films in the same room screening a *giallo*. But I have yet to find such a connection. Instead, I need to put together small pieces of discussion, much like a jigsaw puzzle, to create the picture. Of course, simply by identifying that slasher films are murder mysteries, whodunits, by their very definition makes them *gialli*; the word, in Italian, refers to the murder mystery genre. So, any whodunit is, by definition, a *giallo*. But were any of these filmmakers watching Italian exploitation cinema? Raiford Guins notes (2005: 16) that “prior to videocassette and its large-scale ‘home penetration’ in the mid-1980s, Italian horror ‘films’ (when distributed and shown on U.S. screens [and by extension, Canadian screens]) were exhibited in limited release, or found on the midnight movie circuit, or at paracinema festivals, or at drive-in cinemas after their post-War glamour period had run its course”. So, via Guins, we know that some of these Italian thrillers were screened in North America during this period at less-than-reputable venues. According to Dowler (1985: 18) again, “as far as I can gather from back issues of *Cinema Canada*, none of our *schlockmeisters* is a rabid film fan (I could be wrong about this; I don’t know these guys personally and what I’m doing here is speculating), at least not the sort of junkie who’s spent great chunks of his life sprawled in some three-for-a-dollar fleapit drinking it all in.” Despite limited release of Italian thrillers in North America, critics such as Dowler suggest that no one involved in the making of these Canadian slasher films ever watched any, despite the speculative nature of his conclusion.

Returning to Richard Nowell (2011: 59), he recognizes that the *giallo* film goes back to the early 1960s and continued right up to the late 1970s (and beyond), and therefore, audiences would be acclimatized to films wherein psychotic killers murder a bunch of beautiful people for their own, often, psycho-sexual needs. But Nowell also notes that the Motion Picture Association of America (MPAA), whose membership consists of the major (and a few minor) American studios and distribution companies, would often pick up Italian exploitation films (among others) for North American distribution. “For example, Dario Argento’s giallo film *Quattro Mosche di Velluto Grigio* (1971) was release by Paramount as *Four Flies on Grey Velvet* and MGM had issued *La Tarantola dal Ventre nero* (1971) as *The Black Belly of the Tarantula*” (Nowell 2011: 66). Never mind questioning whether the Canadian slasher filmmakers watched *gialli* at the drive-in or urban grindhouse cinemas, the major studios were distributing Italian pick-ups across the continent. Film audiences had a better chance of watching a foreign import film (whether subtitled or dubbed) in the early 1970s during a period of low production “famine” (Nowell 2011: 69); demand for films outweighed the supply due to the major studios cutting back on production. And with international hits like Argento’s *Bird with the Crystal Plumage* there was a certain demand for these horror-mystery hybrids: quoting Nowell again (2011: 130),

On the back of Dario Argento’s 1969 international hit *The Bird with the Crystal Plumage*, MPAA-members had imported Italian giallo films into the US to alleviate the production shortage of the early 1970s ... The giallo films were not hits in the US, but the production American versions [of *giallo*-like films] ... suggests that they resonated deeply with some American filmmakers.

With Canadian filmmakers too. What Nowell identifies as “American *giallo*” are mainstream studio pictures such as *Dressed to Kill* (Brian de Palma, 1980), *Cruising* (William Friedkin, 1980), and *The Eyes of Laura Mars* (Irvin Kershner, 1978), which “relocated the grisly murder-mysteries of Dario Argento and his contemporaries from urban Italian locations to the upper-middle-class neighbourhoods of New York City” (2011: 118). So, even if we cannot say with any certainty that *Prom Night* director Paul Lynch saw *The Bird with the Crystal Plumage*, or that *Terror Train*’s director, Roger Spottiswood, spent the 70s sat in the Toronto’s Biltmore cinema, we can begin to look at the complexity of influences the *giallo* had on North American genre cinema in the late 1970s and early 1980s. Of course, this is not to suggest that the *giallo* was the only influence on the slasher film, but, as I hope to demonstrate now, the influences are sufficiently pronounced to call these films Canadian *gialli*.

But first, a note on the analyses: the discussions below textually examine the six key Canadian made slasher films which hold the most resemblance to the Italian *giallo* – *Prom Night*, *Terror Train*, *My Bloody Valentine*, *Happy Birthday to Me*, *Visiting Hours*, and *Curtains*. Each of these films will be looked at considering a list of typical *giallo* attributes: *testamone oculare*, the amateur detective, ineffectual police, sexualized murders, any discourse on modernity, sexualized trauma (of the killer), the black-gloved killer, the use of the I-camera, diverse methods of killing, gory set-pieces, sequences of ratiocination, a range of suspects, and occasionally a fading Hollywood star. In much the same way that not all *gialli* feature all these aspects, some will be more relevant than others in the application to the slasher films. There will be spoilers.

## Prom Night

*Prom Night* can be easily summarized as a killer, dressed all in black, is hunting the students at Hamilton High School's senior prom. But the film opens, indeed spends ten full minutes, six years in the past. Twins Robin (Tammy Bourne) and Alex Hammond (Dean Bosacki), and their older sister Kim (Debbie Greenfield), come across a group of school mates playing an extreme form of "hide and go-seek" called "Killer" in an old, abandoned building: the person who is "it" hunts down the others who are hiding, but once found, joins the killer in tracking down those yet to be discovered. Robin wants to join in on the game and runs off to play, while Kim continues home, and Alex vacillates about whether to follow Kim or Robin. The older kids playing the game team up against Robin and frighten her so badly she steps backwards and crashes through a window to her death. The other children swear never to talk about this tragedy to anyone. Jump ahead six years later, and the anniversary of Robin's death coincides with Hamilton High's senior prom, and those kids – Jude (Joy Thompson), Kelly (Mary Beth Rubens), Nick (Casey Stevens)<sup>1</sup> and Wendy (Anne-Marie Martin), the "leader" of this group – are getting ready for the big dance. Throughout the day, the teenagers responsible for Robin's death receive threatening phone calls asking them if they "... can ... come out to play tonight" and warning that "I'll see you at the prom." Of course, the killer is true to his word, and one-by-one murders the other teens.

While *Prom Night* maintains several motifs from *Halloween* – notably the teenage/high school age milieu and the casting of Jamie Lee Curtis in the lead role (as the teenaged Kim) – motifs all suggesting continuity with the emerging slasher film cycle, it also features several *giallo*-like aspects. Most obvious, and illustrated by the film's original

poster, is the costume of the killer: black balaclava, black turtle-neck top, black trousers, and most importantly, black gloves. Of course, as Martin Rubin (and others) have pointed out, the killer's disguise is entirely "for the purpose of keeping the killer's identity hidden" (1999: 164). But otherwise, the film uses its formal construction to also keep the killer's identity a secret until the end. Vera Dika notes (1990: 89), "while *Who is the killer?* is the narrative question that supposedly dominates the film, the frameline has been used to mask the killer's identity, as does the skintight black suit and the face mask he wears". It is not that the killer is wearing a disguise which is important, but that the disguise is essential to maintain the whodunit format. In *Halloween* or *Friday the 13<sup>th</sup>(s)*, and others of Rubin's "cipher format", once one encounters Michael, or Jason (or Jason's mom), there is no respite before one is killed. The game, such as it is, is more often *where* is the killer? With these *giallo*-inspired films, as already noted, we are playing a more active game of *who* is the killer?

The killer's taunting phone calls to the teenagers also evoke *giallo*-esque qualities. In these sequences we are presented with extreme close-up shots of the telephone cord, the phone, a(n ungloved) hand holding the receiver, and most threateningly, of the pencil crossing off the names of Jude, Kelly, Nick, and Wendy, violently. The killer's voice is raspy and clearly disguised to further delay the revelation of the killer's identity. Caelum Vatnsdal dismisses any anxiety this sequence might have on an audience (2004: 139): noting that these calls are "less-than-frightening [and]... from an irritated mystery man with a whispery voice and a good supply of pencils, which he taps endlessly as he sibilates vaguely threatening messages." But when seen through the lens of the *giallo* these sequences have a certain Argento quality, given the Italian penchant for extreme close-

ups in the killer's world, for the same purpose – to delay the revelation of the killer's identity.

It is the mystery-element which most aligns *Prom Night* to the *giallo*: the film's entire formal set up is to hide whodunit. We are given a variety of suspects as red herrings too: the killer might be Robin's still-grieving father (Leslie Nielsen), who also happens to be Hamilton High's principal, it could be the creepy school caretaker, Mr Sykes (Robert Silverman), or it could be the escaped paedophile, Leonard Merch, who was wrongly convicted of murdering young Robin. Significantly, the Merch plot line is more expanded on in the television cut of the film, replacing some of the film's excised gore when originally broadcast on US television. By removing this aspect from the theatrical cut of the film, the whodunit aspect is diminished in favour of increasing the closer affinity with *Halloween*, and the emergent slasher film. The differences between these two cuts of the film are suggestive: to be reinstated in the television cut of the film, those Merch-oriented sequences would have been originally written, shot, and edited, before being removed from the theatrical cut. This suggests the film's mystery components were more pronounced originally, and the film was cut back to be close to the style of the slasher before theatrical release. Interestingly, the police presence in the film is entirely focused on hunting down Leonard Merch, the red herring, and *giallo*-like, presents law-enforcement as ineffectual.

The murders are sexualized in so far as Kelly was about to lose her virginity to Drew (Jeff Wincott), but decided not to at the last minute<sup>2, 44</sup> Jude and Slick (Sheldon Rybowski) are both killed after losing *their* virginites (and smoking some weed), and Wendy, it is suggested, lost her virginity long ago; and she is chased down by the killer with an axe. Significantly, neither Kim's nor Nick's virginity is ever questioned in the film, which

may be why they survive. While the punishment-for-sex motif is rampant throughout slasher movies, and *Prom Night* makes that connection particularly clear, it is different only in degree to the *giallo*.

Despite the absence of any *testemone oculare*, or anyone occupying an amateur detective role (no one knows these murders are happening), and while the police, in hunting down the known paedophile, Merch, assume there to have been sexual trauma, *we* know Merch was not responsible for Robin's death. And except for Lou (David Mucci) getting decapitated with an axe and having his severed head roll out into the middle of the disco dance floor, the set-pieces are weak. There is still sufficient connection to the *giallo* to see *Prom Night* as an extension and reinterpretation of these Italian thrillers.

The unmaking of the killer at the film's conclusion, the revelation that the killer has always been Alex Hammond (Michael Tough), is the epitome of the "Scooby-Doo" ending: had he not been dying, it stands to reason Alex would have cursed that he might have got away with his crimes if it were not for those kids.

### Terror Train

Even by slasher standards, *Terror Train* is a minor film (see Harkness 1980). It opens with the past trauma sequence (as did *Prom Night*, and *Halloween* before that): Kenny Hampson (Derek McKinnon) is pledging the Sigma Phi fraternity, and as part of a prank, he is enticed into losing his virginity with Alana (Jamie Lee Curits). Instead of Alana, however, Kenny slips into bed with a purloined cadaver from the Medical School; the shock of this sexually tinged trauma drives Kenny insane. As a result of the prank,

fraternity parties have been banned on campus. Jumping ahead three years, and the soon-to-be graduating class have hired out an antique train as the venue for an elaborate New Year's fancy-dress party. Unbeknownst to the university students, Kenny Hampson has returned, and is stalking the party murdering those who partook of the prank years earlier. The device of the fancy-dress costume party means that Kenny can continually change his costume. As Vera Dika noted (1990: 97),

because of the disguise element in *Terror Train*, Who is the killer? becomes the central question toward the end of the film. Although we know the killer's identity from the opening sequence, his changing use of costume and the length of time that has elapsed from the past event makes us unsure in our recognition of him.

Our chief suspect for “who is Kenny now?”—we barely see him clearly in the past trauma sequence—is the stage magician hired to entertain the kids (played by illusionist David Copperfield). Throughout the film, he has a flirtation with Alana: we see him staring at her (established through shot-reverse-shot editing), and she enjoys the attention. All of which echoes Kenny's unresolved feelings for Alana, particularly as it was her seduction which lured him into the prank to begin with. We discover, about halfway through the film, that Kenny was heavily into magic, and at one point, the magician's assistant refers to him as “Ken.” The magician remains the film's chief suspect until he is murdered with a sword through the head in one of his magic tricks. We are led to conclude that not only is Kenny Hampson the killer (which is true), but that Kenny is the magician (which is false). The killer turns out to be the magician's assistant; as a member of the trans community, actor McKinnon can hide right under our noses because we are not looking for Kenny disguised as a woman.

While the revealed identity of Kenny Hampson and his/her ever-changing series of disguises underlines the murder-mystery elements of the narrative, murders on a train are a staple milieu for mystery novels and *giallo* films. Agatha Christie's *Murder on the Orient Express* (originally published in 1934) may be the template for this narrative, or its filmed version from 1974 (directed by Sidney Lumet); or, as I suggested in *La Dolce Morte* (2006: 17n5), there may be a connection to *Murder She Said* (George Pollock, 1961), based on Christie's *4:50 from Paddington* (1957). *Gialli* set on a train include *Night Train Murders* (Aldo Lado, 1975) and *Death Steps in the Dark* (Maurizio Pradeaux, 1977): either of which may have indirectly inspired *Terror Train*. While the setting and the game of "who is the killer?" underline this *giallo* connection, the film's diegetic timeline occurs over just one night, which makes the film more a slasher, than *giallo*.

Both Alana and the train's conductor, Carne (played by fading Hollywood veteran Ben Johnson), know something is amiss and play amateur detectives; the police absence is explained by being on a moving train. Carne comes across the bodies, but they disappear whenever he returns with others for confirmation, while Alana is the one who puts the pieces together fingering Kenny Hampson as the killer. While the murders are not particularly sexual, the trauma Kenny experienced certainly was. Both amateur detectives could have killed Kenny: Alana initially pushes him off the train, after stabbing him with a sword, but he holds on until Carne is able to smack him off the train with a shovel. Kenny plummets to his (presumed) death into an icy river, like so many *giallo* killers have done before him.

Happy Birthday to Me

The plot to *Happy Birthday to Me* is intricate, and in this sense, is one of the most *giallo*-like of the Canadian produced slasher films. Adam Rockoff (2002: 114), for example, calls it “a complicated and confusing film”. *Cinema Canada* published a brief report from the set of the film in 1981, noting: “no one from the press is permitted on set for fear a reporter will see and record something which could spoil the surprise for theatre audiences. In fact, after roughly half the shooting, neither cast nor crew are aware of the identity of the killer, not even the killer him/herself” (Goldberg 1981: 6; see also Reiter, 1981: 32). *Birthday* sees the “top ten” (a self-labelled clique of the elite of the elite) at Crawford Academy bumped off one-by-one in some highly original ways which evoke the set-pieces in *gialli*.

The film opens in classic *giallo* style: Bernadette (Lesleh Donaldson) is attacked in her car by a black gloved killer hiding in the back seat. While a chase ensues, she is killed with a straight razor across the throat. Each murder is accomplished by diverse and creative means: Etienne (Michel-René Labelle) is garrotted with his own scarf in the wheel of a motorcycle, Greg (Richard Rebiere) is crushed while weightlifting, and Steve (Matt Craven) is skewered with a shish kabob. All this mayhem appears to focus on Ginny (Melissa Sue Anderson), who is not only playing amateur detective, trying to figure out what is happening to her friends, but also to reconstruct the past event trauma which saw her in hospital undergoing serious brain surgery. In Ginny trying to remember what happened to her, we can see, if not an explicit *testemone oculare*, then at least something similar: an attempt to visually express how the mind tries to reconstruct broken memories. These memories are clearly linked to the current spate of murders, but until Ginny can fully recall what happened to her, and the incidents surrounding her mother’s death,

neither we nor our protagonist will understand the connection. And while these past events are not explicitly sexualized, there is an underlying sexual motive: Ginny's mother, who was "from the wrong side of the tracks," had an affair with a married man and Ginny was the result. This also gives Ginny a-previously-unknown half-sister. But the actual cause of Ginny's mother's death, while related, was not directly causal with the affair.

*Gialli* based in elite private schools suggest films like *Suspiria* (Dario Argento, 1977), *What Have you Done to Solange?* (Cosa avete fatto a Solange?, Massimo Dallamano, 1972) or *The Young, the Evil and the Savage* (Nude...si muore, Antonio Margheriti, 1968). And, in focusing on such a privileged milieu, *Birthday* resonates with the jet-set and wealthy characters one often finds in the Italian thrillers. Ginny's mother (Sharon Acker) is characterized as a social climber, as someone who did not belong in the world which houses Crawford Academy, and by extension, that taint spread to Ginny herself, making her suspect in these murders. While we "see" Ginny murder both Alfred (Jack Blum) and Steve, our own vision as audience is compromised by misdirection: Anne (Tracey Bregman), the film's actual killer and Ginny's half-sister, is wearing an elaborate rubber mask to look like Ginny. But there is a plethora of other suspects throughout the film including Ginny's father (Lawrence Dane), her psychiatrist (played by Hollywood veteran Glenn Ford), another of the "top ten"—Rudi (David Eisner), and creepy Alfred who is into such macabre hobbies as taxidermy (shades of Norman Bates) and special horror effects; we even see Alfred wearing the tell-tale black gloves of a *giallo* killer. And, while very few of these films include set-pieces on the scale of an Argento or Fulci film, the final tableau in *Birthday*, of a grisly birthday party where all the accumulated corpses from the film are set up around a table, including a recently dug up Ginny's mom, play with the kind of spectacle we often find in Italian genre cinema.

What these three films — *Prom Night*, *Terror Train*, and *Happy Birthday to Me* — have in common, among other things, is that they feature “young” people: either high school or university level students. And while some *gialli* obviously do centre on young student-types, many of them have more adult protagonists: professionals and other working-folk, long past their carefree student days. Slasher films, on the other hand, tend to feature (and are marketed to) the late teen/early 20s audience. So, despite narrative and stylistic similarities with the *giallo*, one of the critical differences between these two types of horror films is the group of protagonists: slasher films are about the young, *gialli* tend to be about adults. However, the Canadian slasher films I am discussing here tend to focus on more adult protagonists rather than teenagers, and in the discussions which now follow, this focus on adult characters strengthens this claim that such films are indebted to the *giallo*.

### My Bloody Valentine

To be sure, *My Bloody Valentine* is not the strongest *giallo*-inspired slasher movie under consideration here; however, as a murder-mystery investigating who the actual killer might be, it nicely illustrates some of the differences and continuities between these two forms. Nowell identifies that *Valentine*, along with *Terror Train*, were marketed specifically *as* murder-mysteries in trying to capture a broader market share than a straight up horror movie might (2011: 231; see also Dowler, 1981: 67).

Twenty years earlier, in the town of Valentine Bluffs (filmed in Sydney Mines, Nova Scotia), a mine accident caused five miners to be trapped while the rest of the town

celebrated Valentine's Day with a community dance. One miner, Harry Warden (Peter Cowper), survived for several weeks before being rescued by eating the other four. Warden, now clearly insane, was committed to the local asylum but escaped the following year, returned to Valentine Bluffs, and murdered anyone celebrating Valentine's Day in retribution for the mine accident. Legend has it that Harry Warden returns every year to ensure the town never celebrates another Valentine's Day. Jumping ahead twenty years, and Valentine Bluffs is about to celebrate its first Valentine's Day dance in two decades when it appears that Warden has returned and begins killing off the residents. As far as the police are concerned, Warden is the logical suspect, but eventually they discover that he has been dead for the past five years. Another suspect is T.J. (Paul Kelman), a local miner who tried his luck "out west" but has returned in disgrace trying to pick up his old life and his old girlfriend, Sarah (Lori Hallier), who is now seeing someone else. This new "Harry Warden" turns out to be fellow miner, Axel (Neil Affleck), Sarah's new beau: as a child, he saw Warden murder his father, which scarred him for life. The significant aspect is that, when not disguised in his full mining gear as "Harry Warden," Axel is the likeable work colleague, controlling boyfriend to Sarah, and love rival for T. J.; unlike the real Warden, Axel is never the crazed lunatic miner all the time.

While the past trauma is not a sexual one,<sup>3</sup> the film opens with two miners deep underground. One miner strips down and is revealed to be a beautiful woman in her underwear under the protective boiler suit (Pat Hemingway), and has a heart shaped tattoo over her heart. She suggestively fondles her lover's protective gear, including the air hose on his face mask. The still disguised miner (who is presumably male) impales her on a pickaxe right through the heart (both literally and through her tattoo). It is never explained whether this sequence is in the past during Warden's initial rampage or is somehow and

someway part of the current rampage; although I would be hard pressed to find a young woman in a rural mining town with a heart tattoo on her chest in 1961. So, while the original trauma is not a sexual one, sexualized murder is part of the story. Axel, as the new “Warden,” can stalk and kill those others who go off on their own to make love away from the pack of the others partying in the mine.

While much of the cast are “young,” none of them are “kids;” these are twenty-somethings in the working world, not at school or university. *Valentine* is also noteworthy in this respect in featuring an entirely working-class setting and characters. Modernity is addressed not only in the lax sexual mores of the young people, but also in T. J. looking for work outside of the community he was born into. And, at least while T. J. is a suspect for the murders (for us playing the game of “whodunit,” not necessarily diegetically), we never find out what happened to him “out west;” the world outside of Valentine Bluffs may have corrupted him into becoming a killer. And in this regard, modernity – here recognized as young people moving away from the community for better work opportunities – is deeply suspicious.

Richard Nowell’s *Blood Money* paints a vivid picture of the business concerns effecting the release of these slasher movies. In particular, he outlines how mainstream Hollywood films like *Cruising* or *Dressed to Kill* were heavily criticized for their misogyny and violence, and that such criticism caused a backlash against the violence in the slasher film. “Misogynistic films were highly susceptible to the X-rating, the receipt of which would have made the negotiation of an MPAA-member distribution deal all but impossible and left the filmmakers facing the distinct prospect of incurring substantial financial losses” (Nowell, 2011 221). The upshot of which is that Paramount, who picked

up the distribution deal on *Valentine*, heavily cut back some of the gorier moments in the film. More recently, some of the previously cut footage has been restored to the print of the film, and the two versions are worth comparing. While the almost blood-less theatrical release of the film forgoes the horror spectacles in favour of telling its story as quickly as it can, the “director’s cut” of the film reinstates the spectacle of the murders. Because the overall flow of the film is interrupted for gory spectacle in this new cut of the film, these moments work like set-pieces in the Italian films: moments where the camera lingers on the destruction of the human body longer than is necessary for its narrative purpose.

## Curtains

The only explicit production connection to the Italian thrillers is regarding a movie Andrew Dowler calls (1985:17) “a film so bad that they gave the director’s credit to one of the characters (an inept and repulsive director played by John Vernon),” *Curtains* (Jonathan Stryker [Richard Ciupka], 1983) (see also Dowler, 1984: 33). Due to interference by the producer, the film’s original director took his name off the film, and rather than use the industry standard “Alan Smithee,” chose to give directing credit to the fictional Stryker. As for the connection to the *giallo*, actress Lesleh Donaldson, who plays the figure skater Christie in the film, noted in an interview with James Burrell for the Canadian horror magazine *Rue Morgue*, “Richard wanted it [*Curtains*] to be very artistic, giallo-like and European” in opposition to what producer Peter Simpson (who produced *Prom Night*) wanted, another slasher film (Burrell, 2015: 73). This *giallo* connection was also noted by Jim Harper, who commented that “the murders themselves are a nod to the *gialli* rather than *Friday the 13<sup>th</sup>*” (2004: 77).

*Curtains* opens with actress Samantha Sherwood (Samantha Eggar) committed to an asylum by her lover and director, Jonathan Stryker (Vernon). While ostensibly this committal is research for a role, Stryker abandons Sherwood in the asylum while he tries to recast the role with a younger actress. As an audition process, Stryker and his six ingenues relocate to a country house as the actresses vie for the role. Sherwood escapes from the asylum bent on revenge. A killer begins knocking off the competition, dressed in a hag-mask and black (*giallo*) gloves. While most of the evidence points towards Sherwood as the film's obvious killer, including a cut from Sherwood to the hag-mask in a suitcase, and then to a black gloved hand taking down a sickle and sharpening it, this immediately precedes Christie being killed with the sickle while skating. All such editing points towards the conclusion that Sherwood is the killer, until she is murdered by the film's actual killer, Patti (Lynne Griffin).

Ironically, in the sequence which most evokes the *giallo*, the killer chases Tara (Santee Currie) through a props store, the lighting casts pools of distinct colour, thereby suggesting some of Mario Bava's work, but this was *not* directed by Ciupka, despite Donaldson's comment that he wanted it to be *giallo*-like: "that whole prop house chase scene, isn't mine, either" (quoted in Burrell, 2015: 73). In an "in progress" report from the set of *Curtains*, Thérèse Beaupré (1981: 43) notes that "with a background in cinematography, Ciupka is obviously sensitive to the visual aspects of the film." So who knows? Perhaps the lighting in the sequence *was* Ciupka's, but as the sequence continues into a more traditional slasher film set up, *that* is what Ciupka denies is his; but this is pure speculation on my part.

Visiting Hours

*Visiting Hours* is the only film under consideration here to appear on the British Department of Public Prosecution's notorious "video nasty" list, and therefore, has always had something of an unsavoury reputation. And it is this reputation which underlines my claim that *Visiting Hours* is the most *giallo*-like of the slasher films produced in Canada. Rarely is *Visiting Hours* even considered a "slasher" film, despite Kate Egan quoting Alexander Walker in the British *Evening Standard* newspaper identifying the film as the epitome of the label (Egan, 2007: 31). Richard Nowell, for example, calls it a "violent adult-centred thriller" (2011: 241), and Anna Fudakowska calls it "a fresh variation on the psychodrama theme" (1980: 6). Both of which suggest a more *giallo*-inflected narrative than a slasher horror movie.

Typical of the *giallo*, the film's plot is labyrinthian: Deborah Ballin (Lee Grant) is a crusading television journalist who is publicly defending a case of self-defence against an abusive spouse. Her position provokes a dangerous misogynist, Cole Hawker (Michael Ironside), to attack her in her home. Ballin survives the attack, and while recovering in hospital, Hawker tries to finish the job as she can identify him to the police. Hawker is a vicious sociopath and killer of (predominantly) older women; he photographs his victims in the act of raping and murdering them and has built himself a small shrine in the closet at his apartment. He has some kind of strange relationship with his older landlady and sends racist and abusive letters to the press and judiciary. His mother abandoned him, and he grew up with his abusive father. All of this points to a portrait of a deeply disturbed individual. In his attempt to finish Ballin off, he accidentally murders the wrong patient (Ballin had changed rooms); as he sneaks out of the hospital, he has an exchange of looks with a protective young nurse, Sheila Munroe (Linda Purl). It does not take much for

Munroe make the connection between the woman murdered in Ballin's old room and the man she saw slipping out: both she and Ballin try to recall enough information about Hawker to aid the police (*testemone oculare*, by any definition). Hawker take his frustrations out on a young woman he picks up in a coffee shop, Lisa (Lenore Zann); but she too gets away from him, but not before she has been savagely beaten. Three women can now identify Hawker, and they effectively join forces to stop this maniac.

While Hawker does rack up a significant body count, without any disguise, there is no ambiguity as to the killer's identity. By 1982, Michael Ironside was a sufficiently known screen presence, at least since David Cronenberg's *Scanners* (1980), so there is sufficient facial recognition for the film's audience. While Ballin is incapacitated in hospital, it is up to Munroe to be the film's amateur detective, assisted by Lisa. Lisa discovers Hawker's sick shrine when she returns to his apartment to trash it. The police are useless and dismiss Ballin's and Munroe's accounts as hysterical and paranoid; further challenging the legitimacy of what they saw. The police's attitude towards the women eyewitnesses underlines the film's reflection of societal misogyny; Hawker's violence against women is merely an extreme form of how society continually undermines women's voices and experiences. In the Janet Macklin case Ballin is so outspoken about, the evidence is clear that had anyone paid attention to the evidence of domestic abuse, she would not be on trial for her husband's murder.

*Visiting Hours* is a veritable checklist of *giallo* attributes: we have the *testemone oculare* of Ballin, Munroe and Lisa; Munroe and Lisa acting in the roles of amateur detectives; ineffectual police; a series of sexualized murders; reflections on modern society (particularly as it effects women); moments of subjective camera positions while Hawker

stalks his victims – the so-called “killer-cam” shots; the processes of ratiocination as Ballin and Munroe, and Munroe and Lisa, try to figure out how to track down Hawker; and while I have mentioned Lee Grant playing Deborah Ballin, her former partner and TV producer, Gary Baylor, is played by “fading Hollywood legend” William Shatner<sup>4</sup>. Missing from seeing *Visiting Hours* as a classic *giallo* are the black-gloves and disguise of the killer, a range of suspects, or diverse methods of killing. But thematically, and stylistically, the similarities are sufficient to see the connection.

### *Conclusions*

Kate Egan, in her book *Trash or Treasure?*, visits a concept which lies at the heart of this current project and my approach in the comparison between the *giallo* and the slasher film. In her book, she notes (2007: 31),

Such an approach, in Dick Hebdige’s terms, can be conceived as a ‘fixing of a chain of associations,’ where a new strain of horror is identified fashionable and commercial and thus, regardless of its actual national origins, is perceived by critics as emerging from America (the ‘paradigm’ of consumerism and the traditionless).

In this regard, while the slasher films discussed herein may disguise their Canadian national origins as a generic “America,” so too did the Italian *giallo*, particularly as they circulated in internationally dubbed versions. To a grindhouse or drive-in audience, watching a horror film from anywhere fixes that “chain of associations” in such a way as it all becomes “American,” and therefore indistinguishable from one another. The *giallo*

films circulated throughout North America through the 1970s in forms from which only a discerning cineaste might distinguish its national origins.

While Lesleh Donaldson is the only industry person to even name-drop the *giallo*, there are sufficient connections between the Italian thrillers and the Canadian-made slasher films. From black-gloved killers through to the controversial sexualized murders; from incompetent police officers to the emergence of amateur detectives; and subjective “killer-cam” cinematography and fading Hollywood stars and directors. All these films also function as discourse on contemporary social issues: from feminism to unemployment, from childish pranks to childish behaviour. And of course, simply by being murder-mysteries, these films are *gialli* by definition.

#### Notes

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<sup>1</sup> He is Kim’s date for the Prom.

<sup>2</sup> I think, in this light, it is significant that Drew is not killed, only Kelly is.

<sup>3</sup> One might be able to make the psychoanalytic case that, in *seeing* Warden murder his father, Axel is somehow channelling the Oedipal guilt that Warden did what Axel could only desire and therefore subconsciously represses his own identification with the killer.

<sup>4</sup> Although Shatner is, in fact, Canadian.

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