

Cannibals and Other Impossible Bodies: *Il Profumo Della Signora In Nero* and the *Giallo* film

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For cult film audiences and academics alike, the Italian *giallo* film is considered predominantly an auteurist domain, where films by the subgenre's big names—Mario and Lamberto Bava, Lucio Fulci, Aldo Lado, Sergio Martino, Umberto Lenzi, Luciano Ercoli, and of course Dario Argento—have generally garnered the most attention. Translating literally to “yellow,” the word *giallo* refers to the yellow covers of the pulp crime novels released by publisher Mondadori during the 1920s, locating the origins of the *giallo* in the work of authors such as Edgar Wallace. As one of the first *giallo* films, Mario Bava's *The Girl Who Knew Too Much* (*La ragazza che sapeva troppo*, 1962) contains many of the *giallo* film's signature elements: sex, crime, and most famously a psychotic killer in black leather gloves. But as Mikel J. Koven notes in his book *La Dolce Morte: Vernacular Cinema and the Italian Giallo Film* (2006), these generic traits are far from uniform, and a privileging of the most well-known *giallo* auteurs risks missing the subgenre's thematic foundations.

Inherent to Koven's analysis of *giallo* is its status as a fundamentally Italian cultural phenomenon. However, the reality of their production contexts speaks of a category that expanded far beyond national borders. While the *giallo* film is commonly discussed in terms of its fundamental “Italianness,” it is worthy of note that 68 of the 134 films listed in Adrian Luther Smith's book *Blood and Black Lace: The Definitive Guide to Italian Sex and Horror Movies* (1999) are international co-productions. In fact, some of the subgenre's most iconic titles—including *Una lucertola con la pelle di donna* (*Lizard in a Woman's Skin*, Lucio Fulci, 1971), *Paranoia* (*Orgasmo*, Umberto Lenzi, 1969), *La Corte Notte Delle Bambole Di Vetro* (*Short Night of Glass Dolls*, Aldo Lado, 1971), *Così Dolce, Così Perversa* (*So Sweet, So Perverse*, Umberto Lenzi, 1969), and *C'ha vista morire?* (*Who Saw Her Die?* 1972, Aldo Lado), were all international co-productions. Even some of the major works by Dario Argento himself—the darling of Italian cult film both in Italy and internationally—were international co-productions, such as his early “animal trilogy” (*L'uccello dalle piume di cristallo* (*The Bird With Crystal Plumage*, 1970), *Il Gatto a Nove Code* (*Cat O' Nine Tails*, 1971) and *Quattro Mosche di Velluto Grigio* (*Four Flies on Grey Velvet*, 1971).

Heller-Nicholas

Rather than suggesting the “Italianness” of the *giallo* be jettisoned altogether, this article seeks to explore additional ways that the category may be understood beyond the privileging of a select number of auteurs or national cinema frameworks. At first glance, the relatively unknown cannibal/*giallo* hybrid *Il profumo della signora in nero* (*The Perfume of the Lady in Black*, Francesco Barilli, 1974) stretches its overblown enigmas so far that it collapses under its own pretentiousness, and it may be this (along with the fact that it is less accessible than the films of directors like Argento and Bava) that has rendered it almost invisible to critical and fan insight. Lead actress Mimsy Farmer’s claim that both the public and critics rejected it at the time of its release supports her opinion of the film as “grotesque,” a “cinematographic ‘mongrel,’” and that “the problem with these films is that the directors are not very ironic, they take themselves too seriously” (Palamerini and Gaetano, 1996: 47). But not all critics since have shared Farmer’s view. Adrian Luther Smith praises the film’s craft, its radical incoherence, and even Farmer herself, who “gives the performance of her career” (Smith, 1999: 89). Beyond such rare qualitative evaluations, *Il profumo della signora in nero* is a film whose rich intertextuality allows insight into alternate approaches to the *giallo* film. This is not to dismiss auteurist readings or to diminish the significance of Italian culture more broadly, but rather to expand the critical spectrum and to acknowledge that these films may be engaged in a type of cultural work that has not been fully identified previously. Barilli’s art-house background encourages more highbrow readings of the film than those expended upon his less well-connected peers. His relationship with the renowned Bertolucci brothers was well known, and not only did Giuseppe Bertolucci produce *Il profumo della signora in nero*, but Barilli also had close professional ties to his brother Bernardo. For Benjamin Halligan (2002), the stylistic and thematic similarities between Bernardo and Barilli are clear, both in terms of *mise en scene*, music and cinematography, and that *Il profumo della signora in nero* shares its “reading [...] of a secret or hidden personal history through the metaphor of the search for a deceased parent” with Bernardo’s *La strategia del ragno* (*The Spider’s Stratagem*, 1970).

Halligan and Smith offer rare fan treatments of the film, and seek to elevate it to a level well beyond Italian genre-cinema standards. This renders their decision to ignore *Il profumo della signora in nero*’s intensive engagement with two literary classics somewhat surprising. These connections are hardly oblique: the very title *The Perfume of the Lady in Black* is a direct reference to Gaston Leroux’s novel *La parfum de la dame en noir* (1908). Just as ubiquitous in *Il profumo della signora in nero* are the many references to Lewis Carroll’s *Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland* (1865) and *Through the Looking-Glass, and What Alice Found There* (1871), ranging from iconography to direct quotations. This article examines the relationship between *Il profumo della signora in nero* and these external texts. These literary allusions structure the film’s

subversion of what appears at first to be its narrative and ethical core—the punishment of a murderer for her crime. But through the deployment of its cannibalism motifs, the film actively seeks to destroy (“eat”) such comfortable interpretations. The following close reading of *Il profumo della signora in nero* identifies the relationship between these two elements—its literary intertextuality and its weaving of cannibal film elements into a *giallo*—as fundamental not only to Barilli’s broader thematic agenda, but also one that demonstrates just how supple the subgeneric boundaries of the *giallo* film can be.

Il profumo della signora in nero pitches two separate horror tropes against each other that—while rarely intersecting as such—could on first viewing be fairly assessed as less enigmatic than simply underdeveloped. [1] On one hand, the bulk of its screen time is dedicated to the downward spiral into insanity of its female protagonist Silvia Hacherman (Farmer), a workaholic industrial scientist. *Profondo Rosso* (Deep Red, Dario Argento, 1975), *Schock* (Shock, Mario Bava, 1977), and particularly *gialli* starring Florinda Balkan such as *Le Orme* (Footsteps on the Moon, Luigi Bazzoni, 1975), *Una lucertola con la pelle di donna*, and *Non si sevizia un paperino* (Don't Torture a Ducking, Lucio Fulci, 1972) demonstrate that the monstrous-feminine is far from rare in this Italian horror subgenre. The second parallel plot involving a mysterious and undefined conspiracy of a cannibalistic cult has drawn unavoidable comparisons to Roman Polanski’s 1968 film *Rosemary’s Baby*, while also uniting it with a spate of cannibal films produced in Italy during this period. [2] Critically approached less as an adaptation and more as a tightly woven and often precariously balanced system of allusions, Barilli’s film carefully structures its references to *La parfum de la dame en noir* and *Journeys in Wonderland*, and accordingly any dedicated reading of *Il profumo della signora in nero* demands an exploration of its relationship with these texts. These allusions support the claim that Barilli’s film is a far more sophisticated and carefully constructed text than even its few supporters have previously acknowledged, demonstrating the conceptual elasticity of the subgenre as a whole.

Leroux’s Impossible Bodies

Le parfum de la dame en noir and *Through the Looking-Glass, and What Alice Found There* share a fascination with physicality, logic and identity, concepts central to Barilli’s film. The appearance in *Il profumo della signora in nero* of Silvia’s unnamed mother (Renata Zamengo) dressed in black and putting on perfume appears to be the film’s only direct connection to its title, but the thematic connections to Leroux’s novel run deeper. Famed for his novel *The Phantom of the Opera* (1909), Leroux’s *La parfum de la dame en noir*—the second book of his Joseph Rouletabille mysteries—followed the phenomenal success of the first in the series, *Le mystère de la chambre jaune* (*The Mystery of the Yellow Room*, 1908). Set at the Château d’Hercule on the French Riviera, the story follows

Heller-Nicholas

newlyweds Mathilde and Robert as they seek to escape the menacing threat of the series' villain, Frederic Larson (Mathilde's ex-husband). Journalist and investigator Joseph Rouletabille and his colleague Sinclair join the group at the Château d'Hercule to investigate both Larson's death and Rouletabille's own dark family history: like Silvia, he too has unresolved issues concerning his mother.

Chapter 12 of *Le parfum de la dame en noir* is called "The Impossible Body," and "impossible bodies" are crucial in much of Leroux's work. [3] Along with *Le mystère de la chambre jaune*, *Le de la dame en noir* is a classic "locked room mystery," a story where a crime is "perpetrated in apparently sealed rooms or under other impossible conditions" (Hale, 1998: 245). These mysteries are typified by Edgar Allan Poe's *The Murder in the Rue Morgue* (1841) and Arthur Conan Doyle's *The Adventure of the Speckled Band* (1892) and *The Adventure of the Crooked Man* (1893). In *Le parfum la dame en noir*, the central mystery asks how Larson could have appeared in Mathilde and Robert's locked bedroom, a scenario described by Sinclair as "mysterious and beyond human comprehension" (Leroux, 1998: 103). For Rouletabille, Larson's "impossible body" and its seemingly inexplicable appearance in this locked room means "the dead Larson who leaves the room dead, without having entered it either dead or alive, terrifies me more than the live Larson!" (*Ibid.*, 150). A clear resolution is provided in the novel's *dénouement* when Rouletabille announces that Robert was in fact Larson in a disguise at the wedding. [4] Just like Silvia in *Il profumo della signora in nero*, people appear and disappear illogically, and both her and Rouletabille's stories are plagued by "impossible bodies."

In Silvia's universe, neither people nor things are what they appear, and the unreliability of Silvia's perspective as the film's central protagonist is ultimately exposed when it is made clear that she murdered her mother when she was a young child. In *Le parfum la dame en noir*, Leroux encourages a similar ethical separation from its narrator. Ann C. Hall claims that in his work, "the role of the narrator is [...] suspect" (2009: 15), and she recalls the scene in this novel where Leroux himself appears and buys a newspaper from a young Rouletabille. Leroux's generous tip allows the boy to establish his own business, and escape the poverty resultant of the desertion by his parents. This has a greater function than mere authorial egocentrism: [5]

In some ways, readers who equate Leroux with his novel are doing exactly what the novel teaches its readers to avoid, to assume that what we are being told is true, that the speaker and the author are one and the same, that they have our best interests at heart by presenting factual information. In this way, the 'facts,' though clearly fabricated, seduce us to 'suspend disbelief' and judgement. But the novel's entire purpose is to encourage its readers to analyse,

question, and become our own literary and life detectives. (Hall, 2009: 15)

Through its association with Leroux's novel of the same name, Barilli's film also "seduces" its viewer to "suspend disbelief": there is little choice, because the "impossible bodies" around whom *Il profumo della signora in nero* centers (including the growing and shrinking body of Silvia herself) allow little room for logic until the film reveals the full degree of her unbalanced mental state. If the purpose of Leroux's novel is "to encourage its readers to analyse, question, and become our own literary and life detectives," Barilli suggests that some mysteries (and bodies) must remain forever "impossible."

Like *Il profumo della signora in nero*, *Journeys In Wonderland* shares Leroux's fascination with impossible and illogical bodies. Much of the film's narrative, formal and conceptual interest hinges upon the tension and contrast between Big Silvia and Little Silvia (Daniela Barnes): Silvia's own "impossible body" shrinks and grows in much the same way that Alice's did in *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* down the rabbit hole. Just as Alice's is "a story where sense and non-sense of the body send her continuously back to the definition of her identity" (Terci, 1994: 70), so too Silvia is forced to assess and reassess the truth about herself. Driven by the sensation of bodily confusion, the film evokes a deliberate experiential parallel to the physical trauma of Carroll's famous heroine. But instead of Alice's childhood fantasy, the adult Silvia is flung over the thin line—both physically and conceptually—that separates the fantastic world of rabbits with watches, smiling cats and tea parties, and a darker variation governed instead by murder, rape, and cannibalism.

Both Silvia and Alice's trauma result from the homonymic trap active within the word "sense" itself. As "Carroll plays on the distinctions between sense as semantic meaning and sense as in sensory perception, placing them in conflict with each other" (Elliot, 2003: 187), so to does Barilli: both protagonists struggle to grasp the logic of their illogical environments, and this manifests through physical changes. Barilli's *Alice in Wonderland* motif extends beyond the construction of Silvia's character and, as the remainder of this article will demonstrate, it shares Carroll's interest in collapsing meaning. *Il profumo della signora in nero* shares Kamilla Elliot's description of Carroll's *Alice* books, which she considers "self-consciously concerned with the representational capacities of verbal and pictorial signs, with dynamics between the aural and visual aspects inside individual signs, and with splits between form and content" (*Ibid.*, 186). It is not merely that Alice and Silvia's worlds are not what they appear to be: the relationship between sign and signifier has been rendered unstable, and what remains for Alice at least is that "the 'promise' of language proves empty" (*Ibid.*). Perhaps the greatest distinction between Carroll and Lewis's outlook is that, while Alice is

Heller-Nicholas

ultimately capable of returning home, *Il profumo della signora in nero* ends with Silvia's corpse. In Barilli's film, the repercussions of the tension between sense (logic) and sense (sensory perception) are far bleaker than those in Carroll's books.

Silvia Through the Looking Glass

Il profumo della signora in nero's allusions to *Journeys In Wonderland* suggest that—like Alice's—Silvia's world is divided between the real and the fantastic. It is thus crucial to establish the point where the film shifts from its diegetic reality into the less stable realm of fantasy as the former provides a point of comparison for the later horrors: everything before that moment sets the parameters of what normative so-called reality the following events disrupt. This point is a conceptual wormhole for each story's protagonist to transcend one space into an opposing one, where binaries such as sanity/insanity, logic/illogic, child/adult and innocence/guilt are questioned.

Silvia's exact point of transformation—from sane to insane and victim to villain—is not explicitly identified within the narrative, but rather there are a series of increasingly unavoidable moments where it appears things are not as they should be, such as the unexplained destruction in her bedroom, the appearance of Little Silvia as she plays tennis, and the appearance of her mother, the eponymous lady in black. Although the narrative does not flag the precise moment when Silvia enters this alternate realm, a single, static shot of 80 seconds render this a privileged moment that Barilli camouflages in the film's opening credits. The image, showing a vintage-themed family portrait that includes the Alice-like Little Silvia, not only marks the influence of Carroll's books from the outset, but also denies the audience any point of comparative normalcy within the film's cross-realm diegesis. This image is clearly manipulated—it is a hand-tinted photograph, a technique that adds to its vintage quality. Thus, the supplementary or secondary fantasy space within *Il profumo della signora in nero* forbids comparative analysis by actively denying any kind of original normative reference point.

Evidence that the entire film from this point occurs in the realm of the fantastic is abundant, demonstrated by the emphasis on the synthetic environments in the film's *mise en scène*. In the tradition of Alice's Wonderland and Leroux's seemingly impossible spatial enigmas and disguised characters, things are rarely what they seem in Silvia's world. It is constructed of persistently artificial environments, and the film is rich with decor that demands comparison to a natural (normative) Other. The film's striking visual style relies upon establishing these artificial environments, and they are arguably the film's most dominant formal motif. Early in the film, Silvia and her boyfriend Roberto (Maurizio Bonuglia) attend a dinner party hosted by Andy (Jho Jenkins) in his garden-styled house, where plants fill a faux-jungle living area. Roberto's

bedroom replicates the sky: with its blue painted walls, framed butterflies and large flock of stuffed birds, the skyline is completed with a white cloud-like lamp. Near-psychedelic floral wallpapers and murals appear regularly throughout the film as self-consciously theatrical backdrops that both mimic natural environments while simultaneously flaunting their status as staged constructions.

Some environments in the film are even more overtly contrived. The zoo becomes an important space for Silvia, as it is here where she reflects on her dead father, and also where she establishes her friendship with her lecherous elderly neighbour, Signor Rossetti (Mario Scaccia) who she murders later in the film. With its attention to the animals' contrived habitat, there is a similar tension to the heavily aestheticised floral and natural environments previously identified: the animals are clearly not in their natural habitat, but in this backwards-Wonderland, a banal replication of their real environments is provided instead.

To make this even clearer, the frequent use of mirrors references Alice's adventures through the looking glass and affirms the film's driving fascination with alternate spheres of reality. Inherent to this mirror motif is the idea of "impossible bodies," where Silvia herself can be replicated in numerous configurations: there is Big Silvia, Little Silvia, and mother. [\[6\]](#) Even early on in the film, long before tangible symptoms of Silvia's unstable condition manifest, mirrors appear with significant regularity. Silvia's bedroom not only contains many mirrors, but above the bed there is also a large painting that reflects her bedroom scene—a green bed showing the back of a figure wearing the same shade that Silvia herself often wears. Silvia is not the only character who is surrounded by mirrors, and their appearance seems to function as gateways for her dead mother's "impossible body" to appear. The first time Silvia sees her mother's apparition is in a mirror, and locking even more directly into the film's surface Oedipal drama, the film's two sex scenes are shown in mirrors (firstly when Silvia and Roberto have sex, and secondly when Silvia recalls discovering her mother and Nicola [Orazio Orland] in bed together). When Little Silvia first invades Big Silvia's apartment, their conversation is carefully positioned in front of a large mirror in Big Silvia's living room. Even more significantly, as her mother's boyfriend Nicola chases Silvia around her deserted childhood home before raping her in one of the film's most brutal and shocking moments, his reflection is also shown in a mirror. This unrelenting placement of mirrors in the film and the implied suggestion of other realms make it difficult to determine which of these events have happened, and which Silvia herself has imagined. In the case of the appearance of her mother, this may be deemed merely a poetic technicality. In terms of the rape scene, however, there are clearly some instances when the designation of reality and fantasy are not only pertinent to Silvia's mental state, but also more

Heller-Nicholas

broadly impact the film ideologically, as it potentially ventures into the deeply problematic terrain of so-called female rape fantasy.

Unlike Leroux and Carroll's clear establishment of initial norms to be subverted, Barilli's mirrors do not suggest a binary between fantasy/reality or visible/invisible. There are many mirrors in the film, and each heralds the arrival of yet another potential threat. Because their function shifts from scene to scene, these reflections do not necessarily open out to the same, shared alternate universe. It does not limit the mirrors directional gaze to only two realms like Looking Glass Land ("here" and "there"), but rather places Silvia's body in a more chaotic, less structured and infinitely "impossible" *mise en abyme*. Silvia has no Humpty Dumpty or White Rabbit to explain the rules to her (as illogical as they may be), and there is no Joseph Rouletabille to bring forth a satisfying *dénouement*. The bulk of the film functions in an undefined Beyond, complicated further as this fantasy realm is itself neither singular or cohesive, but riddled with fractured imagery, shattering Alice's polarized (reality/fantasy) experience and replacing it with what is both diegetically and non-diegetically an untenable scenario for both Silvia and the spectator.

Conceptually and literally, *mise en abyme* forms the basis for some of the film's most striking moments. One of the most memorable sequences is a séance held at Sylvia's neighbour Francesca's (Donna Jordan) apartment. Clearly upset at the suggestion that she may be forced to recall her parent's deaths, the suffocating trap of Silvia's spiralling mental condition is effectively communicated through the intense and visually confusing environment, creating a sense of claustrophobia for both Sylvia and the spectator. Again, the overpowering floral wallpaper in the sequence creates an overbearing not-garden that is reflected into infinity between strategically positioned wall mirrors. *Mise en abyme* is presented throughout the film in a variety of other ways. The first shot of Silvia in the film shows her bedroom window: a three-way mirror reflects not only the room itself, but the painting on the wall that reflects her bedroom. This same mirror allows an even more complex configuration of images near the end of the film before Silvia's death: it shows both Little Silvia and Big Silvia, the latter of whom is dressed as her mother. Literally and figuratively, Silvia is the only person in this shot. But, replicating the fracturing of her own crumbling mental state, it also depicts three separate characters: Big Silvia, Little Silvia, and Silvia's mother, whose presence is denoted by Farmer wearing her dress and applying scent. Materially, there are actually four bodies shown in this image: one of Little Silvia, two reflections of Big Silvia and the "real" Silvia shown from the back.

Why are these multiple proliferations of Silvia necessary? If understood as a binary division between the real and the imagined, the power of the

mirror in this moment can only be understood as pertaining to Silvia and Little Silvia, but clearly this is not the case. Instead, caught in the cross-reflecting, infinite chaos of *mise en abyme*, Silvia is not one half of a real/reflection equation, but something much more desperate, complex and sinister. As she spirals into murderous collapse, the shared confusion facing both Silvia and the spectator forces a rejection of the binary symmetry of a fantastic looking-glass world, replacing it instead with the chaos of an unforgiving and horrific kaleidoscope.

The Cannibal's Tea Party

The analysis above enables a reconsideration of the never wholly satisfactory union of Silvia's mental decline plotline with the comparatively underdeveloped cannibal conspiracy that dominates the film's conclusion. When interviewed in the documentary *Ritratto in nero* (2004), Barilli stated that the final script was the union of two separate projects: one followed a woman's downward spiral into insanity, while the other concerned a rich, urban cannibal cult. This latter script may be assumed to continue an interest in the cannibal genre that began with his writing the script for Umberto Lenzi's *Il paese del sesso selvaggio* (*Deep River Savages*, 1972). For Barilli, the connection between the two plotlines was self-evident: "I thought it would be a winning idea because [...] the idea that they (the cannibal cult) choose you, stalk you, abuse you, drive you mad and eat you was such a modern idea" (*Ritratto in Nero*: 2004). But the linkage of these two plotlines is more ambiguous in the film itself, perhaps because of the haste with which these two projects were merged, or from a desire to make the connection deliberately ambiguous. There is evidence of some kind of conspiracy directed at Silvia from early on in the film when a strange man in a duck print shirt begins following her, and it is made explicit that Andy, Robert and her building's doorman are involved in some foreboding activity long before the cannibalism plot is made explicit. [7]

The cannibalistic elements only become explicit over an hour into the film, however. After Silvia returns to her apartment after an intense session with the blind psychic Orchidea (Nike Arrighi) in Francesca's apartment with Andy and Signor Rosetti, the remaining three drive in a silver Rolls Royce to a seemingly deserted building where they are welcomed by the man in the duck shirt. They are given grey lab coats and are taken by another of Silvia's neighbours, Signorina Cardini (Alexandra Paizi) down a long dark tunnel. Andy and Orchidea are confirmed participants in this mysterious conspiracy in their strange behaviour at Francesca's funeral (Orchidea is even given a mysterious box by one of the undertakers before she drives away). The final revelation of Silvia's own body as foodstuff is alluded to when she seats the bodies of the three men she has murdered around her dining table (which, as she merrily quotes Alice, she clearly executes as a child's impromptu tea party), and even uses a

Heller-Nicholas

meat cleaver that she had used earlier in the film to cut steak to kill Robert.

After Little Silvia murders Big Silvia by replicating the way Big Silvia murdered her own mother, the climax of the film and the specifics of its cannibalism plot are revealed. Once again, it repeats the same earlier scene where the silver Rolls Royce driving up to what looks like a deserted building. While there is no Francesca this time, Andy, Robert and Orchidea are still present. Having witnessed Robert's murder, his now-alive status renders him too another Leroux-like "impossible body," and he joins the resurrected "impossible bodies" of Nicola and Signor Rosetti inside. Their presence raises key issues surrounding fantasy and reality and presents an unresolvable contradiction: they could not be killed and now be alive, which means they were either not killed earlier, or they are not alive now. They are joined in the building by a large group of lab-coated others, many of whom have appeared throughout the film, suggesting the community nature of the conspiracy. Silvia's body is cut open, and her insides are devoured. As the final scraps of her corpse are picked over, the crowd disperses as they frantically eat while the end credits roll.

Conceptually, cannibalism offers a range of interpretive possibilities whose thematic significance is essential to the film as a whole. While the exploitative elements of what was a popular generic motif in Italy at the time must certainly account in part for its privileged placement at the conclusion, the film's relationship to Leroux and Carroll indicate that to dismiss it purely as generic box-ticking ignores significant aspects of the text as a whole. There is a horrific simplicity that the act of one human being eating another evokes, and as Cătălin Avramescu puts it, "in his strangeness, the cannibal is sovereign over a species of freedom. His story is one that casts light on the origins of the modern state and the boundaries of modern civilization, and weighs up their right to existence" (Avramescu, 2009: 3). But from some conceptual perspectives, the cannibal's mindset may not be as strange as initially thought. Keith Allan and Kate Burridge indicate how common micro acts of cannibalism are, in terms of organ transplants, the use of human tissue (such as placenta) in pharmaceuticals, and even fingernail biting (Allan and Burridge, 2006: 188). Hinging as it does on transubstantiation (where bread and wine are said to become the blood and body of Jesus Christ), the Roman Catholic Eucharist has a long critical history of being compared to cannibalism, a position shared by "Enlightenment radicals" (Avramescu, 2009: 152) and anti-Catholic rhetoric in the United States in the 20th century alike (O'Toole, 2004: 191).

As discussed by Howard L. Malchow in *Gothic Images of Race in Nineteenth-Century Britain*, depictions of cannibalism in the colonial imagination were heavily embedded in the racist demonization of the

colonized Other (Malchow, 1996: 41). These racist depictions of the savage (usually black) cannibal are still seen to manifest in these films from the 1960s to today, not only in the Italian cannibal films, but also notably in the recent cannibal film *Welcome to the Jungle* (Jonathan Hensleigh, 2007). It was his discomfort at the close proximity of the cannibal plot in *Il profumo della signora in nero* and the "savage" African Andy that Benjamin Halligan rightly deemed as the film's most unacceptable stereotypes. For Jay Slater, Italian cannibal productions of this period relied upon this depiction of "jungle savages, with non-specific tribal backgrounds [...] [as] a plot device that allows a group of actors to devour the cast in an orgy of special effects." He also criticises many of the Italian productions for ignoring the "reality of tribal cannibalism" as part of "religious and battle rites" (Slater, 2002: 12).

But in *Il profumo della signora in nero*, cannibalism is initially shown as a heavily ritualized phenomenon. This does not vindicate the film's problematic racial stereotypes, but unlike many other Italian cannibal films at the time, the community's greatest justification for cannibalizing Silvia is one of punishment and revenge: she murdered her mother, and her suicide is clearly not deemed punishment enough. This notion of cannibalism as an act of revenge can be traced back to French Renaissance essayist Michel de Montaigne's "Of Cannibals" (1580). In this piece, he argues that Native American civilization is in some ways superior to that in Europe, a controversial notion at the time of its writing. For Native Americans, there is a specific logic behind cannibalism that is absent from European traditions as "they do not do this, as some think, for nourishment, as the Scythians anciently did, but as a representation of an extreme revenge" (de Montaigne, 1580: np). Additionally, as Scott Manning Stevens notes, "the eating of one's enemies constitutes a radical incorporation of the other" (Stevens, 2003: 137), so as a gesture of power over another's body the literal consumption of a human body "acts as a revenge beyond blinding or depriving the enemy of their other senses. Murder is not revenge enough in this case, but rather literal incorporation" (*Ibid.*). From this perspective, Silvia is not simply punished for her crime this way, the community as a whole literally seeks to re-assimilate her.

The centrality of Silvia's naked body in the cannibalistic climax of *Il profumo della signora in nero* also flags gender as a significant critical feature. Cannibalism can be broadly understood as a metaphor for sexual desire, and the cultural consumption of female bodies, as Jon Stratton puts it, "has produced a dominant cultural structure in the West which is played out in everyday life through men's consumption of women's bodies by sight or by cannibalism and through women's consumption of commodities by sight or purchase" (Stratton, 2001: 174). The historical significance of gender to cannibalism extends far beyond contemporary consumer culture. In her treatment of anthropophagy in fairy tales,

Heller-Nicholas

Marina Warner notes how it was employed to warn women and children not to deviate from social norms (Warner, 1998: 168). While Carroll's *Journeys in Wonderland* may not technically fulfil all the criteria of the fairytale, [8] it is close enough to render Warner's observations on cannibalism pertinent. If fairytales use the threat of cannibalism to protect the sanctity of the family unit, then the punishment for matricide in Barilli's film has a clear folkloric precedent. Warner's emphasis upon this mother/father/daughter configuration underscores (again) the formal emphasis on reproduction and reflection in the film, and cannibalism may be seen to function as yet another sophisticated inversion that follows this thematic trajectory. Just as Silvia fractured into Big Silvia, Little Silvia and her mother, the act of reproduction dominates all of these aforementioned motifs (the division of the image, the synthetic replication of natural environments, the fracturing of the individual into separate entities). Cannibalism reverses these processes of reproduction (a birthing of sorts), reducing the film's infinite splinters into one privileged moment of perverse amalgamation.

While these arguments appear solid, the final moments of the film actively undermine unified readings such as these as they deliberately collapse the meaning it has sought to establish. Leading up to and including the moment of Silvia being cut open, the sequence is dominated by a strong sense of ritual. The gurney upon which Silvia's body lies forms an altar of sorts, and there is a clear and carefully constructed sense of order to the placement of the participants. As they move toward her naked body in a symmetrical and choreographed manner, the cannibal community appears to work as a single whole, and form one unified shape around her. Up to this point, the aforementioned claims that the community acts to literally ingest and reassimilate the insane, murderous Silvia hold true. If the film were to end at this point, there would be strong evidence to support this claim for the attainment of a symbolic judicial equilibrium and reassimilation. But the film does not end here: after Robert cuts Silvia's dead body open to allow the group to devour her insides, there is a dramatic shift in the scene's pacing and compositional structure. What initially functioned as a unified and ordered whole now disintegrates into greedy, violent chaos, and the once-sacred altar only moments later become cold and deserted. The ritual *surrounding* cannibalism may have been ordered and communal, but the act of consumption is a lonely, isolated affair. When considering the privileged placement of these final images of people scurrying off to eat like rats, the film appears less concerned with its superficial Oedipal drama than with its treatment of capitalist consumption.

The deliberate hollowness of the cannibalism motif in *Il profumo della signora in nero* and Barilli's refusal to allow it to merge in a wholly satisfying manner with the more traditional *giallo* elements suggest that its most "impossible body" may in fact be the film itself. By carefully

referencing two literary texts from the 19th and early 20th century that address the narrative and thematic potential of “impossible bodies,” *Il profumo della signora in nero* deliberately seeks to emphasize the ways in which it deviates from them, while still remaining a sophisticated homage. The apparent randomness of the cannibalism plot is precisely its strength: the binary logic of what is possible or impossible—or what makes sense or non-sense—is replaced instead with a frenzied chaos. While *Il profumo della signora in nero* offers very little if only viewed through the dominant critical lenses of auteurism or national identity, this close reading of the film has sought to expand the ways that otherwise neglected *gialli* such as this can expand the parameters of how the subgenre can be understood.

Notes

[1] Michael MacKenzie (2005) provides the following brief synopsis of the film: “Silvia Hacherman (Mimsy Farmer) is an industrial scientist who is completely devoted to her job. She has been going out with the handsome Roberto (Maurizio Bonuglia) for a little over four months, but he is understandably perturbed by the fact that she seems to value her work more than him. One night, while attending, with Roberto, a party at the home of a renowned African professor (Jho Jenkins), his discussion of voodoo rituals and human sacrifices seems to unroot a memory deeply buried within her psyche. She begins to hallucinate, seeing disturbingly vivid images of her mother, who died under uncertain circumstances. As the hallucinations become more frequent and more lifelike, Silvia begins to lose her grip on reality as her sanity slips away [...]. Throw into the mix phantom girls, grisly murders, mysterious gift shops and a possible conspiracy involving her boyfriend, and you have the makings of an incredibly baffling psycho-shocker.”

[2] The roots of the Italian cannibal subgenre can be found in the “Mondo” shockumentaries of the early 1960s, and it includes films such as *Cannibal Holocaust* (Ruggero Deodato, 1980), *Cannibal Ferox* (Umberto Lenzi, 1981), *La montagna del dio cannibale* (*Slave of the Cannibal God*, Sergio Martino, 1978), *Ultimo mondo cannibale* (*Last Cannibal World*, Ruggero Deodato, 1977), and of course *Il paese del sesso selvaggio* (*Deep River Savages*, Umberto Lenzi, 1972).

[3] Erik in *Le fantôme de l'Opéra* (*The Phantom of the Opera*, 1909) may be Leroux’s most famous “impossible body”: as the supposed “ghost” of the Paris Opera, he first appears to Christine as the Angel of Music, but his presence becomes increasingly more tangible. At the same time, Erik’s disfigurement (the feature that keeps him hidden in the cellar of the building) and his struggles to experience romantic love may also be another read on a societal level as continuing Leroux’s fascination with “impossible bodies.”

[4] While the solution is clear, one of the novel's more intriguing and unresolved ambiguities regards whether Mathilde was aware of this substitution, and if so, what her ethical involvement is with Larson's villainous behavior.

[5] Self-insertion of this kind is a literary device with its own long history, and is by no means specific to Leroux only. Instances of this range across work from writers as diverse as Martin Amis, Kurt Vonnegut, Djuna Barnes. Ann C. Hall draws direct parallels with Alfred Hitchcock's famous cameos in his own films (2009: 15), and filmic parallels could be seen to extend to "fictional" cameos such as the appearance of screenwriter Charlie Kaufman (played by Nicolas Cage) in Spike Jonze's film of his script, *Adaptation* (2002).

[6] Leroux's book may appear at first to not share this striking motif, but its emphasis upon doubling and disguises—particularly Larson's convincing replacement of Robert upon which the film's central enigma depends—can be seen less explicitly in the "double" life lead by Mathilde as Rouletabille's estranged mother and her complex adulterous life with Robert and Larson.

[7] This shirt is yet another aspect of *mise en scene* that deliberately addresses the natural/synthetic binary.

[8] In his letters, Carroll referred to it as a "fairy-tale," although he emphasised that it had "no fairies" (Carroll, 1979: 65).

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