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## **A Blade in the Dark: Translating the Giallo Killer into the Slasher**

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“A Blade in the Dark: Translating the Giallo Killer into the Slasher”

The field of translation studies is diverse and far reaching. There is the most common field of study, which is the literal translation of one language to another. There is quite a bit there to study as much can get lost in translation, both spoken and via text. In film and media, this field largely surrounds dubbing and subtitles. However, by no means is this the only field of translation studies. There is also the field of studying remakes, such as Japan's *Ringu* (Hideo Nakata, 1998) to the American *The Ring* (Gore Verbinski, 2002). Beyond that, there is the study of translating genre. In her article, “Genre, Translation, and Transnational Cinema: Kim Jee-woon's *The Good, the Bad, the Weird*,” author Michelle Cho writes on translating the Spaghetti Western to the Korean “Kimchi” Western argues this is translation of a culture (Cho, 44-68). Overall, this paper needs to answer the question of the Americanization of translation, in other words, how something is translated when coming from overseas to the United States. This paper will not look at genre translation, but will be more specific and look at the translation of a specific genre convention, or trope, which is a recurring theme or idea in a specific genre film.

This paper will look at the translation of the Italian Giallo film to the American Slasher movies of the late-70s through early-90s. Specifically, the genre convention that will be addressed is the similarities and differences between the killers in those films, the Giallo killer and the slasher. There are many aspects to look at from broad depictions of the killers in those films, victimology, and location of the killings in the films. This paper will take a very broad look at the killers in both these genres to compare overall patterns, as individual killers and slashers as very diverse and unique. The purpose of this essay is to view the translation of a genre convention to see how the trope changes when it is Americanized.

The Italian term Giallo, or Gialli in the plural, literally translates to the word “yellow” in English. This is because many Italian pulp mystery novels tend to be printed with yellow covers and the term carried over into film. The Giallo film is often a crime mystery centered around an unknown, often masked and unidentified killer. Whereas Slasher films tend to view body count over almost anything else, the Giallo film is usually about the hunt for the killer. Whereas the focus of Slasher films is usually the slasher themselves, or possibly the “final girl,” the focus of Gialli tend to be on the people investigating the crimes, though only occasionally are these people actual law enforcement officers<sup>i</sup> (Koven 159-162).

The Gialli owe a debt to both the film noirs in terms of storylines and early explicit horror films like *Peeping Tom* (Michael Powell, 1960) or *Psycho* (Alfred Hitchcock, 1960). The first “true” Giallo film was Mario Bava’s *La ragazza che sapeva troppo*, otherwise known as *The Girl Who Knew Too Much* (1963). The film itself, as the title indicates, owes a great deal to the work of Alfred Hitchcock in terms of style and form. However, Bava himself was a master director, and put his own unique, Italian twist onto the film. From there, Bava would continue with the Gialli, doing films like *Blood and Black Lace* (1964) and *Bay of Blood*, otherwise known as *Twitch of the Death Nerve* (1971). This latter would be extremely influential to the slasher genre, as it is the first Giallo film to rely on a body count in terms of its narrative structure. Many other Italian directors of note would contribute to the genre including Bava’s son Lamberto, Enzo G. Castellari, Umberto Lenzi, Lucio Fulci, and Dario Argento. Besides Mario Bava, Argento may be the best known and, arguably best regarded, director of the genre. His first Giallo was called *The Bird with the Crystal Plumage* (1970) and is one of the more highly regarded films of the genre. Much like Bava, Argento was noted for his unique cinematography and use of bright, vibrant colors. Argento would continue with the genre for arguably one of its

best films in *Suspiria* (1977). *Suspiria* is somewhat unique to the Giallo genre in that, while most Giallo killers are mortal human figures, the killers in the film are witches, thereby entering the realm of the supernatural.<sup>ii</sup> This would also carry over when the Slashers began (Olney, 103-141).

Slasher films are noted for three big tropes, the idea of the slasher as a central figure, the “final girl,” and the body count. Going by these genre conventions, the Slasher film can be traced all the way back to the 1932 film *Thirteen Women* (George Archainbaud). Other early American proto-slashers included *The Leopard Man* (Jacques Tourneur, 1943), *Psycho*, and *Silent Night, Bloody Night* (Theodore Gershuny, 1972). However, when it is generally thought that the “Golden Age” cycle of Slasher films began with two films, *The Texas Chain Saw Massacre* (Tobe Hooper, 1974) and *Black Christmas* (Bob Clark, 1974). *The Texas Chain Saw Massacre* did follow the three major tropes, yet because of its level of violence, it tends to be more regarded as a splatter film.<sup>iii</sup> *Black Christmas* on the other hand, hits all the major tropes and is widely seen as a Slasher film, many people incorrectly regarding it as the first slasher. Others often cite *Halloween* (John Carpenter, 1978) as the first slasher, which is also a mistake, though it was the film that brought the Slasher film to the forefront of public consciousness (Rockoff, “Going to Pieces” 23-50). Once the 1980s rolled around the Slasher film became one of the most well-known types of film, almost seeming to encapsulate films of the decade along with the teen comedies of John Hughes. Additionally, slasher killers became major popular cultural figures at that time, rivaling the classic Universal horror monsters like Dracula, The Wolf Man, and the Frankenstein Monster. In the 80s, these new, human, albeit superhuman, slashers included *Halloween*’s Michael Myers, Jason Voorhees of the *Friday the 13<sup>th</sup>* series, and Freddy Kruger of the *A Nightmare on Elm Street* series.

The Giallo killer is noted for several tropes surrounding its character. Perhaps the most notable genre convention surround the killer is the notion of the “black gloved killer.” This trope was introduced in Bava’s follow-up Giallo film to *La ragazza che sapeva troppo*, *Sei donne per l’assassino*, better known by its American title, *Blood and Black Lace*, the film’s plot details a storyline that would be used in several Slasher films later, a mysterious killer stalks and kills models. Where this becomes archetypal is the introduction of the black gloved killer. This is a Giallo villain that all the audience only ever sees the hands of through most of the film. Clad in heavy black gloves it was meant to add an air of mystery to the killer, which made sense as these films were mysteries. *Sei donne per l’assassino* adds to this trope by adding a trench coat to the killer’s wardrobe. This would also become a running fixture of the Giallo villain. Finally, it depicts the killer in an entirely white mask, giving him the appearance of a monster. One final trope is necessary to discuss when mentioning the tropes surrounding the Giallo killer; the camera often takes the killer’s first person perspective, putting the audience directly in the place of the killer as he is doing the murders. Finally, by in large, the killer in a Giallo film was usually male, though this was not always the case as seen in *La casa dalle finestre che ridono*, *The House with the Laughing Windows* (Pupi Avati, 1976). While not all these conventions appeared in every Giallo film, there was usually some combination of these major tropes, most often the black gloves (Koven, 100-104).

In the American Slasher film, many of these tropes carried over to their villains. While Brian De Palma’s *Dressed to Kill* (1982) could more accurately be called an American Giallo than a Slasher, it followed several Giallo depictions of killers, including fact the killer is male, wears a trench coat, and his most notable feature is his black gloves. In the classic slashers, however black gloves were only semi-regularly seen, as in the film *Prom Night* (Paul Lynch,

1980). *Prom Night* itself functions quite like a Giallo film, as there is a mystery over who is the killer that is not revealed until the final reel. Several Slasher films themselves use the first-person perspective for the killer as well, such as the opening of *Halloween*. However, the two biggest tropes in the depiction of the slashers are the fact that they are often males, and most often wear masks. Now, the male slasher is not always a sure bet, there were female slashers in Angela in the *Sleepaway Camp* (Robert Hiltzak, 1983)<sup>iv</sup> films and, most notably, Pamela Voorhees in the first *Friday the 13<sup>th</sup>* (Sean S. Cunningham, 1980). However, most of the major well-known slashers are male. Additionally, while many slashers do not wear masks, most do, often to separate them from humanity and “other” them as monsters. Jason Voorhees and Michael Myers are probably the two most famous masked slashers, but many others exist in films like *My Bloody Valentine* (George Mihalka, 1981), *Terror Train* (Roger Spottiswoode, 1980), *The Town That Dreaded Sundown* (Charles B. Pierce, 1976), and *The Prowler* (Joseph Zito, 1981)<sup>v</sup> (Rockoff, “Going to Pieces” 5-23). This trend continues past the classic era of Slasher films to postmodern slashers like *Scream* (Wes Craven, 1996) and *Behind the Mask: The Rise of Leslie Vernon* (Scott Glosserman, 2006).

Another important thing should be discussed in the depictions of both the killers in Gialli and the Slashers; while most are human monsters, in that they do not usually have superpowers, this is not always the case and the supernatural has been known to play a key role in both genres. As previously mentioned, *Suspiria* is one of the more highly regarded Gialli and it features supernatural killers in witches. An interesting thing to note on the Slashers is, while it is true most are human monsters without any supernatural force surrounding them, most of the famous ones do have power. Freddy Kruger is a dream hopping ghost/demon. Jason Voorhees is technically a revitalized zombie, at least after *Friday the 13<sup>th</sup> Part VI: Jason Lives* (Tom

McLoughlin, 1986). Michael Myers is initially human, but is also somehow the personification of pure evil and, per at least one film, is controlled by an evil cabal of druids who have him under an ancient curse.

One final bit to cover is the fetishizing of the slasher. While Italy was no stranger to recycling characters in films, it was so rare that Giallo killers made a reappearance that it almost negligible. However, slashers became franchises. Arguably, Freddy Kruger and Jason Voorhees were two of the biggest stars of the 1980s. Audiences flocked to see them in film after film. So, in translating the identity of the killer, it should be noted many of the characteristics of the Giallo killer did make their way over to the Slasher. But why were certain things changed? Part of this likely owes to the history of serial killers in both countries. While Italy has had its share of serial killers, only one ever became internationally widely known, the still unknown killer known as “Il Mostro,” the Monster of Florence. This story made headlines around the world. However, Italy never glorified that killer. To date, only one Italian movie was made specifically referencing the killer, a comedy called *Il mostro* (Roberto Benigni, 1994).<sup>vi</sup> On the other hand, America makes celebrities out of its serial killers. People like Ted Bundy, David Berkowitz, the Zodiac, Jeffrey Dahmer, and Henry Lee Lucas are all big, iconic American names. Every one of them have had movies based on their lives. People often kill just for the glory and fame. Even though his name is lesser known, killer Ed Gein has had at least five separate movie characters based on him and his killings. Because of this proliferation of famous serial killers in the media, it is no wonder America fetishizes its slashers, the cinema is safest thing its way for society to observe these real monsters. So, why make so many of the famous ones supernatural? Perhaps a reason for this might be that because there is pleasure in voyeuristic viewing, people liked the fetishistic scopophilia of watching Slasher films. However, to remove themselves one more step from

feeling like they were participating in these crimes as a complicit witness, the supernatural takes them one additional step outside of reality, into a mythical world where these slashers dwell. It has been theorized that the Slasher films of the 80s were a response to Reagan's America and the ultra-violent "torture porn" films of today are society's response in film post 9-11. Whatever the reason, Slashers became the inheritor of the Giallo killer (Rockoff, "Horror of it All" 219-229).

Beyond just the physical description and costuming of the killers, there are several other similarities between the Giallos and the slashers. Victimology and motivation is one of the bigger commonalities between the two genres. While motivation differs wildly from killer to killer, film to film, and genre to genre, much of the impetus for killings in both Giallos and Slasher often lie in voyeurism. The killer, often male, tends to be fixated on women, often one woman specifically; and enjoys the habit of watching her religiously. Eventually, this fetishistic scopophilia takes a dark turn and the killer turns violent, going after the woman or women and anyone else in his way. This goes back to Gialli like *Blood and Black Lace*, *Bay of Blood*, and Dario Argento's *The Bird with the Crystal Plumage* (Koven, 104-107). Argento's work especially features many instances of voyeurism, often directly from the perspective of the killer. One of his late Giallos, which is also highly influenced by the Slasher genre, is *Opera* (1987). In the film, the killer himself is not only voyeuristic of the lead female Betty, but he forces her to become a voyeur by making her watch him commit his killings (Cooper, 63-72).

Voyeurism and the targeting of women would become prevalent throughout the slasher genre. The theme of violence against women would become associated with the slasher genre. While it is true violence against women is a recurring theme in the genre, men account for more victims on average in slashers. One account gives the number at around sixty percent of the deaths in slashers are males. However, one thing the Slasher film did do in relation to sex was

create the idea of the “final girl.” The final girl refers to the girl who survives until the very end and who often is the one to undo the killer, either by incapacitating him long enough for the police to arrive, or by killing the slasher. This is apparent from the first in the film *Halloween*, in which Laurie Strode (Jamie Lee Curtis) acts as the original final girl. Curtis would go on to be the final girl several more times in *Prom Night*, *Terror Train*, and two of the three *Halloween* sequels in which she appeared. While the idea of the final girl in no way eliminates claims of misogyny present in either the slasher genre, it does add a bit of progression. One of the big theories as to why the final girl became a regular trope is that these films came about after the sexual revolution, where women, though still largely sexualized, began to take stronger and stronger roles in the world and that this translated to film (Modleski, 625).

The final major trope similarity between the Giallo and slasher genres is the idea of the body count, and this is simple to relate. After *Blood and Black Lace* and *Bay of Blood*, many Gialli began to add the body count to their running story. The death count in these films reached higher and higher in films like *Profondo Rosso (Deep Red)* (Dario Argento, 1975), *La tarantola dal ventre nero (The Black Belly of the Tarantula)* (Paolo Cavara, 1971), and *La casa con la scala nel buio (A Blade in the Dark)* (Lamberto Bava, 1983). When the Slasher film debuted, the body count was naturally a big part of it. However, in translating these tropes for an American audience, many films of the genre added a new twist to these films by making the deaths as creative as possible. This often occurs in supernatural slashers, like the *A Nightmare on Elm Street* series, though some of the more “real” Slasher films include these creative deaths, as well. Occasionally though, slashers would borrow deaths directly from Gialli. *Friday the 13<sup>th</sup> Part 2* (Steve Miner, 1981) directly takes two deaths from *Bay of Blood*, notably the machete to the face death and the spearing of two people in the act of coitus (Rockoff, “Going to Pieces” 38-39).

There is one last thing to discuss as far as translation and the Gialli and slashers go, and that is the location of the killings. While this is a diverse topic, like the identity of the killers, it does have a bearing on the killers and shows a sharp contrast between the two genres. The difference is this; Gialli tend to take place in cities, while Slasher films tend to take place in the countryside or, at least, in the suburbs. This says something about the identities of the killers. In Gialli, killers can be anybody, as the city is a diverse place. However, by changing the local to the countryside or suburbs in slashers, that makes the killer a very specific kind of person (Koven, 46-54). The prevailing theory surrounding this contrast involves collective memory surrounding horror for different cultures. Italy, and most all of Europe, has had large cities for hundreds of years, so most of the seedy horrors to happen happened out in the open. However, the United States has a very different and much shorter history. The horrors that occurred in the history of the United States happened in the frontier, hence the reason for so many horror films being set there. The suburbs also serve as occasional locations for Slasher films because they present the illusion of safety, which is why it is even more horrifying when something unexpected happens there (Epperson, 2012).<sup>vii</sup> Rarely will there be a Slasher film that travels outside the countryside or suburbs and, when it does, these films usually do not do well at the box office, such as *Friday the 13<sup>th</sup> Part VIII: Jason Takes Manhattan* (Rob Hedden, 1989) or *Jason X* (James Isaac, 2001).

The connections between Gialli and Slasher films is a very broad topic and can and should be written about further. In such a short space, it is difficult to gauge or make the connections that should be made between these two types of film. Full articles and even books can, have, and should continue to be written about these connections, as there is still so much research to do. Translation as well is a hard subject to cover in a short space, especially when

writing on the translation of something as underwritten about like genre conventions. This paper has attempted to make these connections in hope that this could eventually, given time enough and length enough, the subject of translating tropes from Gialli to Slashers can be investigated more.

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<sup>i</sup> A similar Italian genre are the Poliziotteschi films, which center around the police specifically and focus more like a crime film than a mystery.

<sup>ii</sup> There are several more supernatural Gialli, but they are the exception, rather than the rule.

<sup>iii</sup> Splatter films are a subgenre of exploitation films. In his article, “Science Fiction Double Feature: Ideology in the Cult Film,” author Barry K. Grant quotes John McCarty, saying such films, “aim not to scare their audiences, necessarily, nor to drive them to the edges of their seats, but to *mortify* them with scenes of explicit gore. In splatter movies, mutilation is indeed the message – many times the only one (Grant 81).”

<sup>iv</sup> The *Sleepaway Camp* films are notable in that the killer, Angela, is a transgender woman. However, she is only referred to as such at the end of the first and beginning of the second films, and is otherwise treated as a cisgender woman by the series.

<sup>v</sup> The Prowler also abides by the rule of the black-gloved killer.

<sup>vi</sup> An American film of version of the non-fiction book *The Monster of Florence* by Douglas Preston and Mario Spezi is supposedly currently in development, though it has been a couple years since this was updated.

<sup>vii</sup> Though this theory was presented in a popular source, *Cracked.com*, and I was unable to find an any academic sourcing of this theory, it is still a thought provoking theory I felt should be presented.