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**Title:** 'The Cultural Capital of the Gothic Horror Adaptation: The Case of Dario Argento's *The Phantom of the Opera* and *Dracula 3D*'

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**Abstract:** Dario Argento is the best-known living Italian horror director, but despite this his career is perceived to be at an all-time low. I propose that the nadir of Argento's filmography coincides, in part, with his embrace of the gothic adaptation and that at least two of his late films, *The Phantom of the Opera* (1998) and *Dracula 3D* (2012), are born out of the tensions between his desire to achieve auteur status by choosing respectable and literary sources as his primary material and the bloody and excessive nature of the product that he has come to be known for. My contention is that to understand the role that these films play within the director's oeuvre, as well as their negative reception among critics, it is crucial to consider how they negotiate the dichotomy between the positive critical discourse currently surrounding gothic cinema and the negative one applied to visceral horror.

**Keywords:** Dario Argento, Gothic, adaptation, horror, cultural capital, auteurism, *Dracula*, *Phantom of the Opera*

Dario Argento is, arguably, the best-known living Italian horror director. His international credentials are such that he was asked to direct not one but two episodes ('Jenifer' and 'Pelts' [2006]) of the landmark American TV series *Masters of Horror* (2005–07). His inclusion in this anthology series is particularly significant, as only a very select number of directors from outside America were asked to be a part of the project – most notably, the Japanese Takashi Miike and the Canadian David Cronenberg, generally accepted to be horror 'masters' of a similar calibre. Argento's style, which blends a cinematic eye for colour and composition – for some, to the detriment of the narrative in his films – with significant doses of stylized and explicit violence, has become his trademark. His style is so recognizable that new directors such as Hélène Cattet and Bruno Forzani, the duo behind the *giallo* horrors *L'étrange couleur des larmes de ton corps* (*The Strange Colour of Your Body's Tears*) (2013) and *Amer* (2009), have cited Argento's work on several occasions as the inspiration for their own aesthetics (see, e.g., Bitel 2014). Argento's work now appears in most respectable guides to the genre, and yet the quality of his films is generally acknowledged to have plummeted since *La sindrome di Stendhal* (*The Stendhal Syndrome*) (1996).

In this article, I want to argue that this nadir of Argento's filmography coincides, in part, with his embrace of the gothic adaptation and that at least two of his late films are born out of the tensions between his desire to achieve auteur status by choosing respectable and literary sources and the bloody and excessive nature of the product that he has come to be known for. As I will move on to show, it is possible to track this directorial decision, and its consequences, to the wider appeal of the gothic as a more serious and mainstream version of horror. This recuperation of the gothic may be serving to legitimize work in horror, but it may also be, all too readily, neutralising its transgressive and excessive qualities. At the same time, Argento appears to be romanticizing the original gothic texts he draws from so that, when the gory spectacles finally show their visceral heads, they seem all the more out of place.

### **Argento and Italian Gothic Horror**

The gothic is a literary artistic mode, often confused with a genre, that gradually coalesced in Britain in the mid-to-late eighteenth century and which has been read as a reaction to the Enlightenment's preoccupations with scientific reason, as well as to the incipient development of middle-class taste (Punter 1996: 20–53; Chaplin 2011: 31–46). The gothic often harks back to a medieval past – the preferred settings are ruined abbeys, castles and other grandiose buildings, cemeteries and underground or secret passages – and, thematically speaking, relies on recognizable motifs such as the dangerous monster (and his or her upbringing), the family curse, the heir returning to the throne (and dethroning the villainous aristocrat), the spectral visitation, twisted psychologies, sinister transformations or doppelgängers. As the term 'gothic' has gradually come to be used beyond its purely historical remit – that is, as strictly defining the period covering the rise and fall of the first wave of gothic fiction (roughly 1764 to 1820) – later Victorian and *fin de siècle* texts have become an intrinsic part of a longer tradition spanning around 400 years (Davenport-Hines 1998). This means that novels such as Robert Louis Stevenson's *Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde* (1886), Bram Stoker's *Dracula* ([1897] 2011) or Gaston Leroux's *Le Fantôme de l'Opéra* (*The Phantom of the Opera*) (1909–10), and more recent work by the likes of Angela Carter, are now retrospectively studied as gothic landmarks. Applied to cinema, 'gothic' describes a certain type of horror film, or sometimes melodrama, that either resorts to the formula and aesthetics of gothic fiction, or else adapts the novels associated with it (Aldana Reyes 2015). Although reviled for a long time due to its perceived escapist, formulaic and trashy nature, especially after the excesses of Mathew Lewis' banned *The Monk* (1796), the gothic has undergone a process of sanitization and critical re-appreciation in the 1990s, when the International Gothic Association and the journal *Gothic Studies* were founded, and has, more recently, been embraced by the wider public. Examples of this more general interest include the British Film Institute's vast and very successful running of a *Gothic* season in 2013–14 and the British Library's *Terror and Wonder: The Gothic Imagination* exhibition in 2014–15.

Although essentially an Anglo-American mode, the gothic made it to other European countries like Italy and Spain, where it blossomed cinematically, especially in the 1960s and 1970s, as part of home-grown exploitation cycles like Spanish 'fantaterror'. The golden age of Italian gothic horror was roughly 1960 to 1965. If *Il mostro di Frankenstein* (*Frankenstein's Monster*) (Testa, 1921), *Malombra* (Soldati, 1942) and *I vampiri* (*Lust of the Vampire*) (Freda, 1956) were clear forerunners, it was the success of Mario Bava's *La maschera del demonio* (*Black Sunday*) (1960), a film heavily influenced by the global success of Hammer's horror films, and *Dracula* (Fisher, 1958) in particular,

that kick-started a surge of interest in the gothic. Almost immediately, there was a flood of films that took place in old dark houses full of nasty secrets (*Il mulino delle donne di pietra* (*Mill of the Stone Women*) [Ferroni, 1960] and *L'orribile segreto del Dr. Hichcock* (*The Horrible Dr. Hichcock*) [Freda, 1962]), contained sadistic violence (*La frusta e il corpo* (*The Whip and the Body*) [Bava, 1963]) and featured vengeful spectres (real in the case of *I lunghi capelli della morte* (*The Long Hair of Death*) [Margheriti, 1964] and fake in that of *Lo spettro* (*The Ghost*) [Freda, 1963]). *Black Sunday*, which centres on the return, 200 years later, of a witch and her lover after they are executed gruesomely by the Inquisition, also doubled as a vampire film – although no fangs are ever shown. Bava's own portmanteau film *I tre volti della paura* (*Black Sabbath*) (Bava, 1963) would make a much clearer vampiric investment by adapting Aleksey Konstantinovich Tolstoy's novella *La famille du Vourdalak* (*The Family of the Vourdalak*) (1884).<sup>1</sup> Boris Karloff's collaboration as Gorcha, the patriarch, and the film's histrionic use of colour, did much to connect this piece to the products of well-established production companies such as Universal and Hammer Horror and to the more recent success of Roger Corman's Poe cycle in America.

Dario Argento, who came to fame in the early 1970s with his *giallo* 'animal trilogy', was deeply influenced by this upsurge of gothic horror, especially the work of Bava.<sup>2</sup> Although his commitment to deconstructing the *giallo* was strong, the gothic already crept into the ambience of *Profondo rosso* (*Deep Red*) (1975), and by 1977 Argento had already co-penned and directed what many consider to be his gothic masterpiece: *Suspiria* (Argento, 1977). One of the most well-known horror films to come from continental Europe, and still a favourite of horror fans (Cherry 2012: 26), *Suspiria* blended the hyperstylized look and lavish *mise-en-scène* of Bava's *Sei donne per l'assassino* (*Blood and Black Lace*) (1964) with gruesome violence. The result was a piece drenched in colour, 'a garish tale of the occult, the supernatural and its macabre intrusions on a seemingly normal situation' that feels like 'a morbid and fascinating fairytale' (Gracey 2010: 68). Taking inspiration from Thomas De Quincey's essay 'Levana and our ladies of sorrow' (1845), which tells the story of the ancient Roman goddess of childbirth and three imagined companions – Mater Lachrymarum, or Our Lady of Tears, Mater Suspiriorum, or Our Lady of Sighs, and Mater Tenebrarum, or Our Lady of Darkness – Argento would go on to mine this gothic vein in *Inferno* (1980) and *La terza madre* (*Mother of Tears*) (2007). The three sisters, responsible for developing the art of witchcraft on the coast of the Black Sea in the eleventh century, move on to inhabit three locations around the world, from which they rule. As can be glimpsed from this most cursory overview, Argento was no stranger to the gothic even during his formative years.

He continued to work on gothic film, increasingly, through adaptations of well-known texts that are part of the gothic horror literary canon. In the 1970s, he co-wrote a script for an adaptation of Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* (1818), but the project fell through due to intentional links between the monster and Nazi Germany that allegedly made the project 'too political for American producers' (McDonagh 1999: 54). After finishing *Deep Red*, Argento also considered adapting the cosmic horror of H. P. Lovecraft, as he was keen to work with an author who had created a mythology. Although he eventually decided against this project, perhaps, as has been suggested, because 'it required too great a devotion to another artist's inventions' (Thrower 2001: 127), this interest would re-appear in unexpected places, such as the impregnation scene in his co-written *La setta* (*The Sect*) (Soavi, 1991). In 1990, he adapted 'The Black Cat' (1843) by Edgar Allan Poe, a writer he had read and enjoyed as a child. The resulting short film, presented alongside George A.

Romero's own take on 'The Facts in the Case of M. Valdemar' (1845) as *Due occhi diabolici* (*Two Evil Eyes*) (1990), offers a more visceral rewrite of the story, which includes Annabel (Madeleine Potter) being killed with a cleaver, meat-feasting feral cats and a corpse mutilated by the blade of a pendulum in a direct homage to another of Poe's most famous short stories, 'The Pit and the Pendulum' (1842). But it would not be until 1998 that Argento would commit wholesale to adapting an entire novel into a feature film, and his choice would be a well-known gothic story, Gaston Leroux's *The Phantom of the Opera*. Later, in 2012, he would attempt to recast the most famous vampire of all time in his *Dracula 3D*. The films are the only sustained adaptations of a long text in his career – they are popular and studied novels in both cases – and explicitly aimed to look and feel gothic.

In the rest of this article, I turn to Argento's motivations for adapting *Phantom* and *Dracula* within the context of his horror career, as well as the most notable differences between them and the original texts. My contention is that, in order to understand the role that these films play within the director's *oeuvre* and their negative reception among critics, it is crucial to consider gothic adaptation more generally. The positive critical discourse that surrounds gothic cinema is frequently set in contradistinction to the visceral qualities of horror, itself perceived to be too explicit and of little intellectual interest. Argento's gothic horror adaptations challenge this dichotomy and, unsuccessfully, if we are to follow their critical reception, attempt to humanize and romanticize its monsters without compromising the director's more general bloody, histrionic style. The result is, inevitably, a confused product that reveals wider shifts in the critical appreciation of the gothic as a reputable horror subgenre.

### **Argento's Gothic Adaptations: *The Phantom of the Opera* and *Dracula 3D***

Argento's *The Phantom of the Opera* shows a clear investment in its antihero from its credits sequence, which follows his arrival, via floating basket, into the depths of a stalagmite-heavy cave populated by rats with glowing red eyes. The scene features a title card with the caption '[t]hus, by chance, a mysterious bond is forged between the abandoned child and the inhabitants of darkness', an invitation to read this film as bildungsroman and not as a horror monster feature. Unlike the original deformed phantom, whose ugly face generates disgust and abject horror on those unfortunate enough to see it, Erik (Julian Sands) is introduced as a handsome, if ragged, man who tells young and beautiful opera singer Christine (Asia Argento) that her 'voice fills [his] heart with divine light'. The casting of a troubled and gentle-spoken Sands as a distracted phantom with a 'rock star look' (Jones 1998: 35) is noteworthy: it instantly positions him as foreign (his is the only real English accent in the film) and as non-threatening, and therefore prompts the viewer less to fear than to empathy. His kind words to Christine, as well as his unexplained encounter with her, are likely to generate curiosity. The foregrounding of the phantom as romantic hero here is antithetical to Leroux's Erik, a 'stupendously repulsive' monster that, in the novel, Christine describes as 'the personification of all that is foul' (Leroux [1910] 2012: 218, 140).<sup>3</sup> As Argento has noted, this decision was a conscious one; he had sought to create a hero that was both Leroux's at heart, encompassing cruelty and madness, yet was 'different from all the previous phantoms that made it to the screen' (Curci 1998: 41). Subsequent encounters between Christine and Erik see the phantom promising love and happiness to the sound of the delicate violin music that underscores their romantic attachment.

The film includes a number of scenes that emphasize the grandiosity and relevance of the setting, as well as its connection with the figure of the phantom. Christine is shown practising her singing, projecting her voice at the empty opera house, which is gradually unveiled through very wide shots. That the phantom appears in the background, apparently unseen by Christine, but not quite lurking, is relevant. Apart from being a clear testament to the strong connection between the building and the monster haunting it, the scene does not portray Erik as a voyeur, but as a secret, suffering lover. The opulent and elegant rooms where ballerinas exercise, and which very specifically attract the attention of painter Edgar Degas (Ferenc Deák B.), resonate with a phantom that, as Paulette (Kitty Kéri) remarks, would appear to be more of a cape-wearing 'gentleman'. His spectacular killings are also softened by imbuing them with a sense of retribution: Paulette and Alex (David D'Ingeo) are shown to be after his treasure, and the Pourdieu (Aldo Massasso) is punished for attempted child abuse. It is obvious that Argento invites us to read Erik not as a monstrous phantom, but as a feral child.<sup>4</sup>

Because the ultimate goal is to create a complex yet sympathetic villain, the film relies on a disjunction between the main narrative and ancillary horror scenes that do not help advance the plot. These gory vignettes intercalate with the evolving romance between Erik and Christine and are of an essentially different nature. The scenes are coded as horrific through the use of specific shooting techniques – the intercutting of images of animals normally associated with danger or death, such as spiders or worms, is perhaps the most obvious – and disturbing scores, so that they stand out as demarcated instances of horror. Concessions to gore include a scene where a rat exterminator is prompted by 'an invisible force' to place his own hand on a spiked trap, the stalking of Paulette and particularly graphic impalement of Alex (David D'Ingeo) in the catacombs under the theatre, and the death of Carlotta (Nadia Rinaldi).

It is only in the third part of *Phantom* that the deviant side of Erik surfaces. Once he has killed innocent people in order to get Christine the role of Juliet, it is clear that the obsession to lead what he sees as a happy, fulfilled existence has warped his mind. This is also the point at which the film's inherent 'gothicness' becomes more apparent at an aesthetic and cinematographic level: the lighted candelabra, intricately carved chairs, heavy curtains and even a full church organ that decorate the phantom's underground grotto end up becoming a form of fortress or castle where Christine is kept captive. Erik himself is then shown to engage in an erotic encounter with rats that, although cut short, signals that the 'ugliness' of the original phantom has been internalized. As Christine abandons the oppressive world that has come to symbolize the 'darkness' in her, she turns to a reassuring Raoul (Andrea Di Stefano), who tells that her feelings of impurity are a natural part of being human. Upon being questioned about the existence of the phantom, she claims that he is both 'real' and a figment of her imagination, that Erik has become a sort of double for her so that 'his will is [her] will and his thoughts are [her] actions'. When Erik is eventually killed by guards, he has already made the point of explaining that once his world of darkness is destroyed, so is he. The symbolic effacement of this human side of Christine, only possible through the death of what Erik represents, is underscored when the boat in which she and Raoul escape leaves the cave. The sun shines upon her crying figure, and chorus music announces a form of rebirth. Somewhat confusingly, the last part of the film plays Erik like an externalization of Christine's Mr Hyde, a hint that the love he had to offer was not of the purest kind.

Similarly Byronic is Argento's Count in *Dracula 3D*. In a homage to Dracula's transformations into a wolf or a bat in the novel (Stoker [1987] 2011: 326) and Stoker's acknowledgment of the historical and folkloric indistinction between vampires and werewolves (Stoker [1987] 2011: 9), Argento's Count can take on the form of an owl, a swarm of flies or a gigantic praying mantis, and can morph into a wolfman at will. Crucially, however, Argento's Dracula is eminently modern: he is smart, played by an elegant and masculine Thomas Kretschmann, and most definitely does not look like the old gentleman that appears to Harker in Stoker's novel. In fact, as Harker remarks, he is 'younger than ... expected'. He has retractable fangs, in the style of the popular HBO TV series *True Blood* (2008–14), will bite the back of Lucy's knee to disguise the mark, and is as agile as the vampire superhero in *Blade* (Norrington, 1998). Most significantly, he loses his iconic cape, introduced by the 1924 Hamilton Deane stage adaptation and cemented in Tod Browning's *Dracula* (1931), and wins a long overcoat reminiscent of Count Orlock (Max Schreck) in *Nosferatu, eine Symphonie des Grauens (Nosferatu)* (Murnau, 1922). This new Count, like the one in Francis Ford Coppola's *Bram Stoker's Dracula* (1992), is strong and dangerous, but also, more importantly, capable of romance.<sup>5</sup>

In interviews, Argento has explained that, although his inspiration was obviously Bram Stoker's novel, he was not aiming to adapt the text faithfully. Instead, his *Dracula* was an 'interpretation of the story' that uses a 'strong' and 'much more romantic' character (Anon. 2013) and which was as influenced by the Hammer adaptation and sequels (Wax 2013). The result is, in his view, a version of the myth that is unique: 'a very adult film' that may, simultaneously, have a 'fairy tale' feeling (Hanley 2013). Although it would appear that Argento attempted to distance himself from Stoker's text, he has also shielded some of his decisions behind what he sees as the apparently canonical, and therefore definitive, aspects of the story. Most notably, he has defended the 'praying mantis' transformation, which is reported to have caused laughter in some audience members, on the basis that it is '[true to] the story', since 'Dracula traditionally becomes a bat or a wolf', and it is thus 'possible for him to become any creature – a cockroach or a spider or a bug' (Malooley 2013). The intentions behind *Dracula 3D* betray a desire to be 'quite faithful to the book' while 'adding the elements that characterize [Argento's] movies', ensuring that the film has a style that 'the fans will recognize' (D'Onofrio 2011: 52).

The decision to provide a product that is eminently inscribed within the Euro-Horror and exploitation context from which the *giallo* and Argento's horror films developed is evident from the very beginning. Tania's (Miriam Giovanelli) early visit to his lover in the middle of the night inevitably leads to a quick haystack romp that features partial nudity. The visit of the three young vampire women in Stoker's novel becomes another excuse to parade a nude Tania, and a bath scene that sees Mina (Marta Gastini) discovering that Lucy has been bitten makes the most of a topless Asia Argento. As in *Phantom*, Argento also uses European actors that either speak English with a clearly foreign accent (an accent that sometimes contradicts their supposed intradiegetic nationality) or who are dubbed. Bloody violence is also emphasized: a shovel becomes a sharp object that can slice through someone's skull, the Count's razor-sharp nails inevitably turn his victims' necks into gushing fountains of blood, the killing of a female whistle-blower is depicted in detail through close-ups of a pick-axe bashing her body and a bullet is shown entering a man's mouth in slow motion. However, because these instances are few, relatively brief and far between, they are noticeable and seem out of character with the rest of the film. Like the occasional resorting to explicit nudity, gore seems at odds

with the highly ornate gothic trappings (crypts, castles, dark woods) and the foregrounding of romance.

Like *Phantom*, *Dracula 3D* is thus a highly stylized, colour-heavy film, more interested in camera angles, depth of image or use of shadows than in narrative coherence, pace or suspense. Both films have cinematographies that are incongruously sober – Gallant sees in *Phantom* ‘the sensibilities of French art-house’ (Gallant 2001: 239) – and make experimental concessions that contradict their otherwise hard-won classic feel. This is, arguably, one of the reasons why, despite the promise of romance and the period setting that had been effective in other recent revisions of the same texts, neither *Phantom* nor *Dracula 3D* met with particular enthusiasm from journalists or reviewers. Poor, stilted acting and a seeming lack of direction, interest and purpose were highlighted as signs that Argento’s career may have reached its nadir. For example, John Townsend complained that ‘[t]he biggest problem with *Dracula 3D* is that it just doesn’t know what it wants to be’ (2013), and other critics saw it as unintentionally comic (Nelson 2012) and parodic (Genzlinger 2013). Similarly, *Fangoria* felt let down by ‘a title with so much promise, suggesting a fresh take on a horror mainstay from a filmmaker who has brought so much visual and aural distinction to his work in prior decades’ (Gingold 2013).

My contention is that the most distinctive aspects of these adaptations, and which set them apart from previous revisions of *Phantom of the Opera* and *Dracula*, are also what brings them into the director’s territory. While *Dracula 3D*, for example, departs from previous adaptations by not relocating the story to England after Harker’s vampirization, this is not what makes the film unmistakably Argento. Instead, it is the turn to gratuitous (yet artistic) and measured gore, the occasional appearance of nudity and the elaborate and aesthetic intent behind certain sequences that will bring to mind many of his earlier films. In the case of *Phantom*, even though the adaptation was made with the intention to be ‘very faithful to the book’, it is also, in the director’s words, typically his in its ‘cruel[ty] and merciless[ness]’ (Curci 1998: 42). In other words, since Argento’s mark is one that works primarily at surface and tonal levels, his recasting of well-known gothic literary texts, alongside the romanticization of their titular monsters, might appear to be doing nothing different or new.

The tension between what, in the case of *Dracula 3D*, may be called ‘a more or less classical take on Stoker’ (Nelson 2012) and the abstracted ‘sexy, decadent European glamour’ (Olsen 2013) of Argento’s adaptations also leads to a visually and thematically contradictory cinematic experience. The choice of source materials, firmly grounded in the high gothic literary tradition, does not necessarily blend well with Argento’s *giallo* and Euro-Horror sensibility. In the case of *Phantom*, its potential is not even tapped, ignoring, as the film does, great gothic scenes such as the Poe-inspired ‘Red Death’ masked ball or the horrors of Erik’s torture chamber in Leroux’s novel. On the one hand, as I have noted, these gothic stories emphasize their romance and likable monsters. It is important, for example, that Argento’s phantom is not scarred or physically deformed, as this makes him more of a lovable antihero and source of sexual desire. But Argento’s Gothic films do so without compromising the murder-set-pieces style of the *giallo* (*Phantom*) or gratuitous displays of blood (*Dracula 3D*). The resulting clash of registers means, for some reviewers, that the films play ‘like a choppy condensation based on hazy memories of the book[s] ... augment[ed] ... with nudity and gore’, and which offer little indication of ‘why [Argento] would want to yoke himself to such a familiar property in the first place’ (Sobczynski 2013).

This apparent incapacity to marry the gothic with horror is not necessarily due to the seeming impossibility of a hybrid aesthetics per se, but rather a consequence of contemporary perceptions that very clearly separate gothic subtlety from horror explicitness. This rhetoric, which gives cultural prevalence to the restrained scares and romance subplots of the gothic, has been internalized by Argento and may be one of the reasons his *Phantom* and *Dracula* have been received poorly.

## THE CULTURAL CAPITAL OF THE GOTHIC HORROR ADAPTATION

When asked about the origins of *Phantom*, Argento formulated his interest in remaking Claude Rains' 1943 version to show how much that film had interested and influenced him. More importantly, however, working on a canonical gothic text allowed for a consummation of his desire to show he had evolved as a horror director. Comparing the finished product to his *Opera*, he explained:

I suppose *Opera* could be seen as dealing with the same themes. But that film was colder, desperate and crueller than the Leroux story. [...] The years have passed, so has my dark mood, and *The Phantom of the Opera* is totally different. This time it's belle époque, sparkling champagne, boisterous Offenbach and the Can-Can. It's my first costume film [...] and the first I've made to contain romance, irony and humour. Perhaps indulging in those qualities is the only way I have left to shock. This signals a new direction for my career and is much more than a movie to me. It's a personal statement as I'm changing and getting older and wiser. (Jones 1998: 35)

Argento's perception of his *Phantom* as a piece exemplifying his more mature directorial persona evinces his eagerness to be perceived as an auteur, as well as a respected genre director. After all, despite the fact that critical reception of his work changed gradually throughout the 1990s and 2000s, as his older films began to be perceived as classics and Argento himself as a cult figure (see Hunter 2010: 68–70), he continues to be well known for his work in the *giallo* and horror genres. While it is important to note that he has never rebuked horror or sought to distance his products from their connection to Euro-Horror, Argento's return to the gothic as a mode that may provide for a degree of sobriety is inextricable from his own perception that he is past his dark horror years. Thus, it is not surprising that, fourteen years after *Phantom*, film reviewer David Rooney would wonder whether the inclusion of Argento's *Dracula 3D* in that year's Cannes film festival, which he described as a 'dismally kitsch spectacle', might be an indication that the Italian director was finally on his way to achieving his long-coveted 'auteur' status (2012).<sup>6</sup> The poor critical response to the film would seem to suggest otherwise.

Argento's embrace of what he sees as sophistication belies a more general trend towards and appreciation of the gothic in the study of horror. It replicates a rhetoric that has seen the gothic, once a sensationalist and excessive mode, become acceptable, worthy of recuperation and of critical praise. The gothic's perceived interest in subtle terror, as opposed to graphic horror, means that it is more palatable to critics and viewers with delicate sensibilities. As an artistic mode, the gothic has gained acceptability through an academic discourse that has privileged forms of horror that are not explicit and either prioritize highly stylized and even philosophical preoccupations – such as the nature of monstrosity or evil, isolation and psychological turmoil – or else challenge the status quo through



metaphorical explorations of transgressive bodies and sexualities. Gothic cinema has, for example, assimilated German expressionism, particularly the atmospheric *Nosferatu*, but has been more reluctant to acknowledge Stuart Gordon's bloody adaptations of H. P. Lovecraft, a writer who has been firmly established as part of the gothic canon.<sup>7</sup> For example, Misha Kavka proposes that '[g]othic film ... reveals and reconstitutes an underlying link between fear and the manipulation of the body' (2002: 210), but feels the need to distinguish it from 'that catch-all category of terror and spookiness, the horror genre' (2002: 209). Kavka, like other critics, understands the gothic to be preoccupied with the return of the repressed, the uncanny and the dark influence of the past on the present, as interested in the effect of external historico-political anxieties on subjectivity (2002: 209–14). Similarly, Stephen Carter proposes a distinction between the 'historical Gothic' of Hammer Horror productions and the more modern one of films such as *Night of the Living Dead* (Romero, 1968) and *The Texas Chain Saw Massacre* (Hooper, 1974), only to conclude that 'Gothic films continue to exist, but always in the shadows cast by expressionism, Universal and Hammer' (2013: 243). In this light, while films such as *Silence of the Lambs* (Demme, 1991) or *Hostel* (Roth, 2005) may be seen to be gothic by association, that is, through intertextuality or use of an iconography that turns them into hybrids, the gothic genre per se is limited to 'either period [films] and/or [those which] involve classic monsters' (Carter 2013: 243).

Useful as these conceptualizations undoubtedly are in signalling the complex and fragmented nature of the gothic, they are still premised on a schism that is inherently problematic. Since, partly, said contributions seek to reify the cultural value of the gothic as a visual medium, there is a risk that the horror genre is, via contraposition, being divested of scholarly interest and rendered 'a vulgar, exploitative version of Gothic' (Hutchings 1996: 89). In other words, if 'proper' gothic is only an intertextual, highly referential mode that articulates psychological and socio-historical concerns, horror becomes simply a generic indulgence in explicit and confrontational images and scenarios. Whether consciously or unconsciously, there is a scholarly bias that either establishes gothic cinema and horror film as mutually exclusive, or else posits gothic cinema as a subtle or intellectual branch of horror marked by its reliance on aesthetics and a higher intellectual pursuit, sometimes connected to the very literary aims of the novels it adapts. Among other things, as Ian Conrich notes, this approach results in a failure to understand the gothic as a 'generically mobile, repeatedly hybridising and mutating' (2009: 136) artistic form and horror as anything other than that which is not sophisticated enough to be gothic. Such a move is symptomatic of a tradition that has, since Ann Radcliffe and her own posthumous article 'On the Supernatural in Poetry' (1826), equated 'horror' with excess, and 'terror' with atmospheric, sublime scares. Needless to say, this recuperation of the gothic is desirable in many respects, as it enables the critical and public revaluing of horror cinema as a genre worthy of study and scholarly attention. At the same time, it is grounded on the principle that affective horror, horror defined by the emotional effects it seeks to elicit, should be less respectable: the latter becomes that which is not elevated enough to make it into the 'gothic' canon.

Argento's allegiance to the gothic adaptation through *Phantom* and *Dracula 3D* thus needs to be read within this critical context. Aligning himself with the canonicity of myths that have their basis in well-studied literary works and have enjoyed an enduring popularity, Argento looks to invest his cinema with a specific form of cultural capital. As I mentioned at the start of this article, his inclusion in the *Masters of Horror* TV series, as well as in guides to, and histories of, the horror genre, is perhaps an indicator that Argento is now a solid genre director, something that conflicts with his aspirations

to become a well-rounded and versatile auteur. For this reason, his adaptations profit from the critical kudos associated with the gothic as a visually arresting, literary and character-driven product, but include bursts of visceral violence that make the films inherently Argento. If anything, these adaptations evince the tensions that Argento experiences as a horror director who must deliver to a fan and critical base that still associates him with the colourful and visceral content of his 1970s and 1980s work, and who, despite this, wishes to transcend the genre niche.<sup>8</sup>

As a result, his gothic adaptations, structural shortcomings aside, are riddled with contradictions that make them less cogent than some of Argento's original gothic material. On the one hand, even though they hint at the original texts in places, *Phantom* and *Dracula 3D* are too palimpsestic (they incorporate nods to many other cinematic renditions). This means that they are, perhaps inevitably, pitted against those other versions of their respective myths. One of the main objections to *Dracula 3D* and *Phantom* is that they do not appear to bring anything new to the table. Since their register is solidly gothic, with a marked preference for setting and romance, Argento's films become gothic horror hybrids. In fact, it is possible to see two different films competing for the viewer's attention: a romance-led soap opera and a gory slasher/thriller. Whether or not one appreciates the violence in the films, it is displayed in a manner almost antithetical to storylines otherwise primarily concerned with the nature and motivations of their titular monsters and romantic affairs.

The protagonists in Argento's adaptations are also imbricated within a very modern revision of the gothic villain, following the re-introduction of romance into the gothic, which may have affected the way his films are introduced and presented. The late twentieth century has seen a gradual and steady shift towards a model of monstrosity that allows for sympathy and even love. These modern monsters are either attractive or interesting, and possess qualities that are appealing or enviable. Even when the monster still embodies the abject, as in *Mary Shelley's Frankenstein* (Branagh, 1994), he or she is also likely to evoke pathos and pity rather than fear or disgust. Crystallizing perhaps with the decadent, yet passionate, vampires of the Anne Rice-adapted *Interview with the Vampire* (Jordan, 1994) and, particularly, *Queen of the Damned* (Rymer, 2002), which saw the eponymous bloodsucker achieving the status of rock idol, and culminating in *Twilight's* (Hardwicke, 2008) romance hero Edward Cullen, Argento's monsters partake of these monstrous re-articulations. His phantom is a handsome young man that does away with Lon Chaney's heavily burnt face and is given supernatural powers (telepathy); his Dracula is a strong, romantic hero that evokes *Bram Stoker's Dracula* and its popular tagline 'Love Never Dies'. By focusing on anti-heroes who are more interesting than the other characters in the narrative, the focus necessarily changes: the films are invested in the psychologies and stories of their monsters. This is another reason why the visceral horror of both films, which would be highly desirable in other contexts, has been perceived as gratuitous or out of character.

Argento's passion for the gothic adaptation shows signs of fading despite the lukewarm critical reception of *Phantom* and *Dracula 3D*. His involvement in the staging of Verdi's *Macbeth* (1847) for his directorial operatic debut in 2013 exemplifies and summarizes all of the ideas I have put forward in this article. While the association with Shakespeare and Verdi, both canonical figures in literature and classical music, legitimizes the cultural level of the material, Argento is self-professedly interested in 'put[ting] blood on the stage' (Malooley 2013). The play is aesthetically and thematically connected to the horror film (Hutchings 2008: 156), and was already given a gothic treatment in *Opera*, where

Betty (Christina Marsillach) played a Lady Macbeth surrounded by flocks of cawing crows. The reliance on opera, traditionally a high-brow or intellectual form of entertainment, and Shakespeare's *oeuvre*, also widely reputed, are, as in Argento's other adaptations, paired with the 'sex', 'gore', 'nudity' and 'special effects' (Arbeia 2013, my translation) that his horror is known and celebrated for. This gothic operatic adaptation stems from the same need to invest his work with a high culture value that has, thus far, eluded his work. Argento's conscious mingling of literary gothic with visceral horror produces interesting pieces that pay homage to his Euro-Horror past and, simultaneously, point towards his late-career desire to become recognized beyond the horror genre. His failure with *Phantom* and *Dracula 3D* may simply be a result of the slump his *oeuvre* has experienced in the 2000s and 2010s – that is to say, it could be argued the films fail at the most basic level, as *films* – but this, I would argue, is only half the story. The recuperation of a subtle, aestheticized form of the gothic in academic and public circles has further pushed visceral and exploitative horror to a side because of the latter's perceived corporeal and, therefore, less intellectual concerns. An inevitable consequence of this shift is that the viscosity of the gothic is gradually being funnelled out and lumped into non-gothic horror, which, in turn, is being rendered unable to operate beyond the histrionic and gratuitous. The most significant danger of this move, as I see it, is that, in the process, we might be forgetting the highly exploitative nature of first-wave gothic. Despite being structurally flawed, Argento's late gothic films are actually true to this artistic mode: they constitute a true melange of sublime aesthetics and transgression that foregrounds the erotics and violent spectacles of key early gothic novels like *The Monk*.

## Notes

1. The novella was published in a Russian translation in 1884, but was written in French in 1839.
2. The 'animal trilogy' is composed of *L'uccello dalle piume di cristallo* (*The Bird with the Crystal Plumage*) (1970), *Il gatto a nove code* (*Cat o'Nine Tails*) (1971) and *4 Mosche di velluto grigio* (*Four Flies on Grey Velvet*) (1971).
3. It is important to note that Argento's original idea was to develop a mutant rat man, an idea opposed by his daughter and Sands (see Jones 2012: 251).
4. Incidentally, Erik denies that he is a 'phantom' and calls himself a 'rat' instead.
5. This may be the reason the film introduces Dolingen de Gratz, Dracula's lost love. The reincarnation theme necessarily evokes *Bram Stoker's Dracula* (Coppola, 1992).
6. It is also worth mentioning that an initial tag that indicates the film has received governmental funding identifies the film as being of 'national cultural significance'.
7. It is interesting that, in the case of *Re-Animator* (Gordon, 1985), a conscious effort was actually made to inscribe the product as gothic by hiring writer and gothic critic Dennis Paoli. He describes his task as that of 'gothic up[ping]' the original (see Paoli 2007).

8. The legacy of this perception is apparent in a recent magazine article that sought to evaluate the role of gore in the last 50 years. One of the interviewees was Argento who, in this case, was paired with directors such as Herschell Gordon Lewis and Jörg Buttgerreit (see *The Gore-Met* 2013).

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