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Streaming Italian horror cinema in the United Kingdom: Lovefilm Instant¹

ABSTRACT

This article investigates the distribution of Italian horror cinema in the age of video streaming, analysing its presence and categorization on the platform Lovefilm Instant UK, in order to investigate the importance of 'niche' in what is known as the long tail of online distribution and the online availability of exploitation films. I argue that looking at the streaming presence of Italian horror and comparing it to its prior distribution on home video formats (in particular VHS and DVD) we can grasp how distribution and access have shaped the understanding of the genre. In particular, I address the question of the categorization of the films made by the S-VOD services and the limits of streaming distribution, such as lack of persistency in availability and the need for enhanced curatorship.

The recent development of streaming distribution platforms, which promises unlimited and instant access, presents a new challenge regarding the impact of the Internet on audio-visual circulation and the categorization of films and genres (Tussey 2011; Curtin et al. 2014). Online video-on-demand (VOD) generates only a small amount of revenue when compared with other home entertainment formats; yet its steady growth has led to a series of debates, including discussion regarding the possible disintermediation of film distribution and the consequent need of new business plans (Levin 2009; Iordanova

KEYWORDS

Italian horror
Lovefilm
streaming
subscription video
on-demand
distribution
genre
world cinema

1. The research for this article was carried out as part of the AHRC-funded research networking project 'World cinema on-demand: Film distribution and education in the streaming media era' (2011-13).

2. According to Ramon Lobato informal economy is distinguished by the 'economic production and exchange occurring within capitalist economies but outside the purview of the state' (Lobato 2012: 39–40).
3. For an overview on the state of distribution studies see Perren (2013).

2012), the relationship between formal and informal distribution (Lobato 2012),² the re-location of viewing practices (Casetti 2011), the risks of digitalization (Dixon 2014), and, lastly, the appearance of new forms of gatekeeping (Vonderau 2013). Moreover, if one considers Chris Anderson's theorization of the long tail of distribution (2006), online VOD allows us to reflect on the role played by 'niche' markets, to understand which content is available through the new technology, and how it finds new audiences. This is particularly relevant if we look at film genre, remembering Rick Altman's observation that 'the perceived nature and purpose of genres depend directly and heavily on the identity and purpose of those using and evaluating them' (1999: 98).

This article engages with the online life of Italian horror cinema to explore whether the remediation of horror films through streaming distribution platforms allows new understandings of the genre. I intend to join those scholars who have suggested that in order to define and understand a genre it is necessary to acknowledge the role played by distribution and the forms of media consumption.³ Ramon Lobato and Mark Ryan, for instance, argue that '[a]ttention to the circulation of texts as material commodities in cultural markets, and to the structural and economic forces shaping movie genres as textual formations, industrial categories and production templates, can produce new models for genre analysis' (2011: 190). In their work, they refer to a model that goes beyond textual analysis to define genre theoretically, and which operates on two levels. The first level is 'through its capacity to circulate or withhold individual texts and groups of texts' (Lobato and Ryan 2011: 192). The second consists in the distribution ability to regulate the degrees of access. In other words: 'Thinking genre through distribution provides a different way of addressing some of the typical concerns of genre studies, such as patterns of generic evolution, aesthetic histories of individual genres/sub-genres, and debates around categorization and canonization' (Lobato and Ryan 2011: 189). More recently, David Church's analysis of the history of exploitation cinema in the United States stresses how

the role of distributors [is] key to understanding the propagation of exploitation cinema, because distributors often suggested and assembled lurid publicity materials, strategized where and how to exhibit films, retiled or recut prints for different regions and periods and, in later years, licensed these films for home video release.

(2015: 11)

I would suggest that Italian horror cinema (from the 1950s to the 1980s) exemplifies the role played by distribution and accessibility in the understanding of the evolution of this genre. In fact, 'Italian horror' is typically defined more by consumption practices, market availability and fandom approaches than by shared 'national' features or clear generic conventions (textual and industrial). Italian horror cinema in the period under discussion encompassed several subgenres and trends (cannibal films, giallo, nazisploitation, etc.), promoted several critical arguments (from authorship to censorship) and, most importantly, was an exemplar of a peculiar mode of production characteristic of Italian popular cinema after World War II (Bayman and Rigoletto 2013).

Italian horror cinema is, thus, notably transnational in nature (Baschiera and Di Chiara 2010; Church 2014). In fact, it features a series of thematic and stylistic influences from international products, in addition to its dependence on foreign capitals, international markets and co-production agreements

(Wagstaff 2001; Baschiera and Di Chiara 2011). Considering also that the Italian horror film achieved 'cult' status through its home video reception beyond Italy, in particular in a 'paracinematic' niche market (Sconce 1995), we can see that the understanding or even the recognition of the genre with its peculiarities and principle characteristics emerged mainly in an extratextual manner starting from its VHS availability. For this reason, Italian horror cinema features prominently in a series of studies on fandom and varying national contexts of home video distribution (Guins 2005; Egan 2007; Olney 2013; Church 2015).

In this article I look at how the understanding of Italian horror as a genre is shaped and categorized in British streaming services. Alongside the US market, it is in the United Kingdom that the access and consumption of Italian horror cinema has been most intertwined with its shifting definition and categorization and where the genre has found a fan base and a cult following. An analysis of the presence of Italian horror cinema on streaming platforms allows consideration of the role played by the categorization of the catalogue (from 'national' parameters to textual ones) in the context of online access. In this regard, it is evident that horror cinema and its subgenres, especially non-Hollywood productions, can be seen as part of the long tail 'niche productions'. Niche is manifest on online platforms in two ways: through what we can define as specialized films, including documentaries, art cinema, film 'classics' and world cinema understood as art-house/subtitled films; and in subgenre films, such as B-films, torture-porn, retrosploitation and popular world cinema, etc. In fact, it is now clear that 'the straight to DVD' trajectory common to the majority of horror films is quickly being replaced by the 'straight-to-VOD' (Walker 2014), which in turn offers a new means of giving visibility, and therefore access, to horror cinema in the twenty-first century.

Looking at long tail distribution circuits and considering how 'feedback loops between production and distribution are especially pronounced in this corner of the horror economy' (Lobato and Ryan 2011: 193), Lobato and Ryan point out how the nontheatrical horror market is increasingly fragmented in the Internet age with the improved availability of niche subgenres and of films from different countries and languages. Accordingly, I argue that this fragmentation and the development of niche horror markets represent, on principle, a good opportunity for a renewed availability of a cinema characterized by *filoni*, subgenres and trends such as Italian horror.

STREAMING DISTRIBUTION

Before looking at Italian horror cinema, it is necessary to provide a brief overview of some of the issues surrounding streaming distribution and the role that film genre plays in the promotion and categorization of the online catalogues of VOD providers. In particular, I consider here the impact of the long tail distribution circuits of the Subscription Video on Demand model (S-VOD, the so-called 'Spotify model') employed by online content providers such as Netflix and Amazon Instant Video. While the VOD model, used for instance by iTunes, works on principles such as the traditional brick and mortar store, where the viewer's goal is to rent or buy a particular title (usually a new film), S-VOD services base their competitiveness on the impression of giving access to an endless catalogue for a monthly fee. This impression is often fuelled by the 'what to watch next' suggestions that aim to tailor the homepage and the catalogue to the tastes and viewing habits of the customer.

4. In this regard, the competition launched by Netflix in 2009 in order to improve its algorithm (Lohr 2009) is worthy of note. However, eventually such an algorithm has never been completely implemented and the system still relies to some extent on human intervention. On Netflix algorithm see Wu (2015).

This leads to the first (and main) aspect of streaming services: the need for a curatorial and gatekeeping role enabled by the visibility of the catalogue. S-VOD services have to deal with the challenge of what to show, how to organize it, what to suggest to customers to give the illusion of a continuous discovery of new films, and what to make immediately visible on the home page. To understand the centrality of this point, it is sufficient to consider how the streaming services are always on the quest for the best 'viewing suggestion' algorithm and are willing to offer good money for it.⁴ Kevin P. McDonald, in his analysis of Netflix, rightly argues that

Netflix seemed to personify the Long Tail approach. On the one hand, the company was devoted to expanding its overall catalogue, providing a wider range of choices and using various customization and recommendation tools to match customers with this material. On the other hand, the business was taking advantage of its ability to optimize undervalued content.

(2013)

Clearly, the question of genre is crucial to the organization of the catalogue and to the satisfaction of the customers' tastes. While traditional genres are strongly present and categorized (like Comedy, Sci-fi etc.) a new series of cross-categories – 'micro-genres' or 'collections' such as 'dark films' or 'films with a strong female lead' – appear on services like Netflix in order to guide the viewer through the catalogue (Baschiera 2014), giving the impression that it is tailored to their tastes. For instance, according to an article published in *The Atlantic*, Netflix featured 76,987 personalized genres in 2014 (Madrigal 2014). This process of creating new personalized genres and collections stresses the need of streaming services to be able to design a series of connections between films (through tags that rely both on the text and on paratextual features) and to feature an increasingly higher number of filmic texts that can fuel the categorization process. As David Beer argues in his analysis of archives and classificatory processes, 'metadata, often in form of tagging, are now prevalent and powerful in shaping what the culture is, how visible it is, and how it is accessed and understood' (2013: 61). Looking at the online providers, the question of categorization is also closely linked to the algorithms used to measure and predict cultural consumption (see Beer 2013: 63–65) and the role played by the niche in offering additional data to the classificatory process. In fact, the metadata linking together different features of the filmic catalogue may bring to the surface niche products otherwise hidden away in subcategories.

However, the availability of a film on a streaming service does not necessarily mean that it will find a new audience. This is where the gatekeeping role emerges, since the viewing suggestions and catalogue organization on the home page can regulate the degree of access to the filmic text. I have elsewhere addressed the role played by world genre cinema in online streaming platforms, in particular looking at how it works in the organization of the vast online catalogue. I maintain that

world cinema as 'niche' finds a new place in the online catalogue: not really as world cinema per se but as a sort of 'filling up' of generic categories. Foreign genre films appear to be used to give the impression of

the depth of the catalogue and for completing the offering in subgenres and specialist subcategories.

(Baschiera 2014)

5. On the impact of online technology for the distribution of low-budget horror films see Johnny Walker (2014).

Therefore, the first thing we shall take into account when looking at the 'streaming life' of Italian horror cinema is the way the genre is categorized and made available.

Directly linked to the question of a curatorial role is the second issue encountered while engaging with streaming distribution: the persistence of the film online. With the exclusion of online archives dedicated to the 'digital preservation' of films, streaming services constantly rotate their catalogue, because of the ending of distribution agreements or because of the costs of the servers. While at the beginning of the streaming distribution era the studios were more keen to give away the online rights that they did not consider particularly profitable, in recent years the copyright holders have begun raising the costs or, acknowledging that 'content is king', have started introducing their own streaming platforms – such as, for instance, HBO Now. This, and the increasingly important role played by a new series of intermediaries like content aggregators (Vonderau 2013), alongside the need to renegotiate the rights for online distribution in certain geographical areas (Lobato 2009), has led to a fluctuation of the content availability on different platforms. As a result, the catalogue of streaming distribution services, despite the impression of being endless in terms of availability, is characterized by constant renewal and turnover. While a streaming platform like Mubi found ways to embrace the temporary nature of the catalogue by creating curated 'festivals' and retrospectives, other services (for instance, Netflix) try to divert the users' attention to the 'new arrivals' and 'recently added'.

Finally, the third element characteristic of online distribution is the complex relationship between these services and digital piracy, between what Lobato (2012) defines as 'formal' and 'informal' channels. I have used 'relationship' here instead of 'fight' because informal distribution often underlines a market demand that streaming services may try to fill. For instance, in 2013 the Netflix acquisition office kept an eye on the list of the most pirated TV shows in order to decide whether a possible investment would meet a real demand (Spangler 2013). Moreover, several developments of the business plans of the streaming platforms have been formed as a reaction to piracy issues (see for instance, Price 2105).

In the long tail market of streaming distribution the overlap between formal and informal modes is more evident. We can think, for instance, of the recent production of horror films (particularly in Europe) and the ways in which video services such as Vimeo and YouTube or even peer-to-peer networks have been used by copyright holders to share low-budget productions to a wider audience.⁵ Other symptoms of this relationship can be identified in the popularization of tools aimed at bypassing the geo-blocking of copyrighted material, allowing access of streaming services in countries where they are not legally available. Moreover, as I shall discuss later, one may consider the attempts made by some of the online services to create a space for the meeting of subculture capitals (Hills 2005: 192–94) through the institution of 'discussion areas': mimicking, to some extent, the forums that characterize torrent communities.

These are the three areas of enquiry I suggest we consider when looking at the life of Italian horror cinema (or other niche cinemas with subcultural value) on streaming service platforms.

ITALIAN HORROR CINEMA FROM VHS TO PEER-TO-PEER

Home video distribution of Italian horror cinema has been analysed by Raiford Guins in an essay that, despite being focused on the US market, is a good start to an investigation of the role played by marketing, access and distribution strategies for the definition of the subgenre. Guins investigates the life of Italian horror cinema in the home entertainment market in the US, engaging in particular with films' remediation from VHS to DVD. He argues that, in the VHS era, Italian horror films were typically thought of as 'gore objects' (Guins 2005: 17). Films such as *Profondo rosso* (*Deep Red*) (Argento, 1975) found a wide audience thanks to the development of the home cinema market and VHS. However, they were cheaply marketed, mainly through sensational box covers where any information regarding, for instance, the director was removed in favour of strong gory images designed to attract the attention of potential viewers browsing in the video store. The fact that these videos were displayed in the 'adult' section of the stores made the employment of explicit images permissible (Guins 2005: 18). According to Guins these films are indicative examples of 'paracinema': the distributors rarely considered the films' artistic value, as they were rather often heavily cut, poorly dubbed and low-quality transfers (2005: 19–21).

In the United Kingdom, the situation was similar, albeit more fragmented by the presence of bootleg copies of Italian horror films following the Video Recording Act of 1984 and the consequent banning of a number of significant titles. Kate Egan, in her analysis of the 'video nasties' moral panic, points out that some of the marketing strategies employed by the distributors of horror cinema before the VRA consisted in the spectacularization of the cover arts, promoting the extreme content of the film through gory images (2007: 59). However, at the same time, the films were generally heavily cut. This may have occurred to save money on the magnetic tape, or to avoid further trouble with the legislation (Egan 2007: 59). Egan argues that in some circumstances the same distributor marketed the same version of the film in different ways, sometimes cut and at other times uncut.

In this regard, it is important to consider the question of the films' textual integrity. In fact, not only was that heavily compromised by the cuts, but it was also exploited as a marketing device by withholding or releasing 'never seen before' footage. Looking at the presence of Italian films in the video nasties lists it is possible to grasp how some of the earliest international recognition of the genre was strongly associated with the 'nasty label' and the fandom that it generated in the United Kingdom. What is left out is the complexity of the *filoni* and subgenres as well as the transnational nature of Italian horror productions.

The association between the question of 'extreme', national cinemas, and authorship, began to emerge in the reception of the films during the VHS era, characterizing in this way the presence of the 'Italian horror genre' in the anglophone world across several formats. As Church argues:

In Italian horror's reception, we can therefore see an intrasubcultural friction between earnest ascriptions of an artworthiness transcending economics and celebrations of an economically calculated affectivity more easily (but not exclusively) aligned with 'bad taste'. Yet, these are not dually opposed poles, since the visual excesses often ascribed to these films' supposed 'Italianness' is equally capable of stimulating viewers more attuned to formal stylization and those more attuned to gore.

(Church 2014: 15)

According to Guins, this understanding of the genre changed with the advent of the DVD format. In the DVD era, these films became, to quote Guins, 'art-objects'. DVD box sets were marketed and organized according to director names such as Mario Bava, Dario Argento and Lucio Fulci, who reached an authorial status in their marketing and were invariably considered 'Masters of Horror'. Guins argues that the DVD packages relied on positioning such films as the works of an auteur, while the discs themselves often featured different cuts of the films, in addition to deleted scenes that had hitherto only been available in a given foreign market, in director commentaries, original posters and in trailers.⁶ Therefore, these DVDs, in addition to being objects desired by fans collectors, also in many cases represented the first time that such films were offered in a sort of critical edition, often remastered from the original master to offer a film as it was 'meant' to be, thus underlining its artistic status.

Nonetheless, Church warns against an oversimplification of this 'teleological path towards increased cultural value' (2014: 15–16). He argues that 'this one-way flow of value is an oversimplification of the video marketplace, especially since DVD is no longer considered a prestigious "new" technology' (Church 2014: 15), and gives some examples of DVD editions of Italian horror films that are far from being restored and marketed as art objects.

I agree that it is risky to overgeneralize the impact of DVD on the perceived cultural value of films. I suggest that the remediation of Italian horror cinema to online services represents a break with respect to the idea of a progressive reevaluation of these films. However, taking into account Church's reservations and recognizing the existence of exceptions, I believe that, for the sake of the argument, Italian horror films on the DVD format can still be considered 'art objects' because of the series of auteur-oriented marketing strategies mentioned above. Or, better, DVD (and then Blu-ray) are the formats where those strategies are most prominent.

An analysis made by Oliver Carter (2013) also reveals that in the United Kingdom the transfer to DVD has a significant cost for the small distributors specializing in cult films to the extent that they have had to face a significant downturn after the financial crisis of 2008. In fact, according to Carter a remastered DVD of a cult film needs a £15 to £20 price tag to be profitable: a cost that does not match the strength of this niche market in Britain. At this price the DVD needs to be aimed at the 'collector' who is already a fan and willing to attribute a certain cultural value to the film in question.

Of course, over the past decade, DVD was not the only format offering audiences Italian horror cinema. As in the 1980s and 1990s, Italian horror films remain widely accessible through other informal channels and, in particular, on torrent websites. Therefore, following the remediation itinerary of the genre and before engaging with the formal streaming distribution, we must consider the online 'pirate' life of Italian horror cinema.⁷

Carter engages with this very aspect, analysing the invitation-only file-sharing community 'CineTorrent', which was founded in 2007 and specialized in the sharing of niche products such as cult films. As with other online sharing communities, it has its own 'strict laws, policies and regulations' (Carter 2013) as well as a mission of intent that mainly consisted of making available the previously unavailable. Carter strongly stresses the idea of amateur archive to describe 'CineTorrent', and in particular the collector attitude of the cult fan who is willing to make available the unavailable in order to respond 'to the current limitations of commercially releasing *gialli* on DVD' (Carter 2013).

6. For a detailed analysis of the impact of DVD on horror cinema distribution see Bernard (2014). Instead for an overview of the horror home video distribution from VHS to P2P networks see Caetlin Benson-allott (2013).
7. At the borderline between formal and informal distribution, Italian horror cinema is also widely present on services like YouTube. Also on this platform, versions are shared with different degrees of video quality, with little information regarding the version being accessed.

8. This differentiation, I would argue, is present only in scholarly works and in fan communities and publications. It is very rare that the *giallo* is promoted as part of a distribution strategy.
9. The service was active in United Kingdom, Denmark, Germany, Norway and Sweden, providing both DVD-by-mail and streaming service to almost two million of subscribers.

A section of 'CineTorrent' is dedicated to projects of at least ten films that members are invited to complete by uploading missing works in exchange for 'seeding bonuses'. Several projects involve European cult cinema, and one of these projects was dedicated to *giallo* films and reached the status of 'complete' with 217 films in the catalogue. Interestingly, according to Carter, 53 per cent of these media files were captured from VHS, as they were not available on any other format. Considering the time dedicated to find the films, to create the media files and to discuss and organize them in an archive and the ambition of presenting them in never-seen-before versions, I propose to define the idea of Italian film horror in the piracy world as an archive of 'collectable digital objects'.

It is noteworthy that this informal mode of distribution is one of the rare occasions I have encountered where the categorization of Italian horror cinema follows a canonization based on the idea of *filoni* and subgenres. A clear example is the fact that *giallo* as a (sub)genre is recognized, defined and, one may argue, canonized through the parameters of its own collection, being therefore a very rare occasion when a differentiation between Italian horror and *giallo* is made.⁸

After having considered VHS gore objects, DVD art objects and torrent collectable digital objects, we shall now move on to the ways in which these films existed at the beginning of the formal channels of online streaming distribution.

LOVEFILM INSTANT IN UNITED KINGDOM

My analysis focuses on the now-deceased UK-based streaming platform Lovefilm Instant.⁹ Despite the fact that on the 26 of February 2014, three years after its acquisition by Amazon, Lovefilm had been completely absorbed by Amazon Instant Video, I believe that an analysis of this service is still particularly helpful for, at least, three reasons.

First, Lovefilm can be seen as one of the most successful European attempts to go beyond a brick-and-mortar store by employing online technology. Starting in 2002 as a DVD-by-mail service, after a series of mergers with other companies it became one of the leading rental and streaming outlets in the United Kingdom. During its existence Lovefilm experimented with a download service (which ceased in 2009) and then S-VOD. The streaming service named Lovefilm Instant was also available through a Playstation 3 application launched in 2010 while only in 2012 it started to offer films in HD. Most importantly, Lovefilm Instant had one of the most comprehensive catalogues of Italian horror films available through formal streaming distribution.

Second, the Lovefilm website allowed the viewer to post reviews and rate the film chosen. This began with the DVD-by-mail service and developed when the 'watch online' option was added to their offering. The customer reviews are still present in the new service, Amazon Instant Video, alongside information taken from amazon.co.uk reviewers, and Imdb comments and ratings, creating a sometime confusing critical apparatus to the film bought/rented. Moreover, looking at Lovefilm, the introduction of a streaming option in a website originally designed for renting DVDs generated a series of overlapping and stratification of data and viewer expectations, in particular with regard to instant availability versus 'quality' (when the streaming was mainly in standard definition [SD] and hard to access beyond the computer screen).

Third, during its online life, Lovefilm presented a system of categorization that featured 'tags' including genres, nationality, directors, dates and stars. However, this was just one of several ways in which the company tried to organize its catalogue, alongside a popularity rating, a system of 'collections', and the presence of different editors (among their staff) providing a selection of suggested titles to watch. The latter was an attempt to fuel a feeling of community and to affirm a curatorial role in the offering, creating in this way a 'hybrid' between the often 'anonymous' recommendations of Netflix (generated by the user's tastes) and the 'hand-picked' selection of films promoted by Mubi. Also in this case, the new streaming offer of Lovefilm was added as a new 'layer' over a pre-existing organization of the DVD catalogue.

Therefore, looking at the life of Italian horror cinema on Lovefilm Instant UK we can better understand how the genre was codified and canonized at the dawn of the streaming era, engaging with the issues of availability, categorization and the discussions that it promoted in the review sections. Most importantly, it is possible to grasp its relationship with the categories of nationality and authorship. In fact, Lovefilm Instant is an interesting case study also because both of its categories, 'World cinema' and 'Italian films', were significantly characterized by Italian generic production of the 1970s and 1980s.

For instance, in October 2013 the category 'Italian' nested inside 'World Cinema' had the following top fifteen titles available and arranged from the 'most popular': *Le monache di St'Arcangelo (Nun and The Devil)* (Paolella, 1973), *Dèmoni (Demons)* (Bava, 1985), *I nuovi barbari (The New Barbarians)* (Castellari, 1983), *Ultrà* (Tognazzi, 1991), *L'ultimo treno della notte (Night Train Murders)* (Lado, 1975), *Paura nella città dei morti viventi (City of the Living Dead)* (Fulci, 1980), *Storia di una monaca di clausura (Story of a Cloistered Nun)* (Paolella, 1973), *Salon Kitty* (Brass, 1976), *Gladiator Games* (Milla, 2011), *Barbarossa Siege Lord* (Martinelli, 2009), *Zombie 2 (Zombie Flesh Eaters)* (Fulci, 1979), *Deep Red, Zombie Holocaust* (Girolami, 1980), *Femina ridens (The Frightened Woman)* (Schivazappa, 1969)¹⁰ and *Papaya – Love Goddess of the Cannibals* (D'Amato, 1978). Other titles featuring in the top 30 of the most popular list included *Dèmoni 2 ... l'incubo ritorna (Demons 2)* (Bava, 1986), *L'uccello dalle piume di cristallo (The Bird with the Crystal Plumage)* (Argento, 1970), *Phenomena* (Argento, 1985), *Venus in Furs* (Franco, 1969), *Nude per l'assassino (Strip Nude for your Killer)* (Bianchi, 1975), *1990 I guerrieri del Bronx (1990 the Bronx Warriors)* (Castellari, 1983). From this list, and the way the films were presented on the website, we can make a series of interlinked considerations.

First of all, the offering of Italian cinema on this streaming platform was clearly dominated by generic productions. In fact, with the exception of middle-brow films such as *Caos calmo (Quiet Chaos)* (Grimaldi, 2008) *Anche libero va bene (Libero)* (Stuart, 2006) *Ultrà (Ultra)* (Tognazzi, 1991) and *Mio fratello è figlio unico (My Brother Is an Only Child)* (Lucchetti, 2007), the 30 most popular titles categorized under the 'Italian' label were of generic nature, with a predominance of extreme niche markets like nunsploitation and cannibal films.

On the one hand, it is evident that the role that genre films play in the streaming catalogues as filler for other categories is crucial. The popularity and presence of these films emerge also from the 'search tools'. It was, in fact, sufficient to type 'new' in the search tool to find as first suggestion *Lo squartatore di New York (The New York Ripper)* (Fulci, 1982). In particular, the presence is noteworthy of 'old' generic products whose rights may be acquired from

10. This was presented with the Shameless Screen Entertainment DVD cover featuring the director's statement: 'this IS the version of my film to watch'.

specialized distributors and that were still enjoyable in Standard Definition. Moreover, these titles still had attractiveness because of their controversial history in the UK market. On the other hand, the list offers a further understanding of the notion of Italian-ness for the new streaming platform, perpetuating the association between national belonging and the question of 'extreme' that in the United Kingdom was formed with the advent of VHS technology. It is noteworthy that this does not happen in a platform like Netflix, where, as of Autumn 2015, the kind of 'prestige' authorial production that travels to international markets with films such as *La grande bellezza* (*The Great Beauty*) (Sorrentino, 2013) and *Nuovo Cinema Paradiso* (*Cinema Paradiso*) (Tornatore, 1988) features under the subcategory 'International Movies – Italian films'.

Connected to this point is the second consideration that emerges from Lovefilm categorization, namely the problematic attribution of a 'national label' to the films in question. It is difficult, in fact, to immediately grasp the national features that dictated such categorization. Some of the films are in Italian language with subtitles, and some are in English; they have different production histories, and settings and themes are seldom 'Italian'. Interestingly, the attribution of nationality seems to be primarily based on the director's appurtenance, proving once again the problematic ways in which two of the categorizations of 'art cinema' (nation and auteur) emerge again in a catalogue dominated by exploitation products. In the same way, the 'more like this' suggestions that Lovefilm proposed for a film like *Torso* (*I corpi presentano tracce di violenza carnale*) (Martino, 1973) feature films that are distant from the giallo and from the textual features of Martino's film. Instead, the suggestions included films associated in different ways with the idea of Italian extreme developed during the 'VHS' era: *La maschera del demonio* (*Black Sunday*) (Bava, 1960), *Un posto ideale per uccidere* (*Oasis of Fear*) (Lenzi, 1971), and *Baba Yaga* (Farina, 1973).

Interestingly, there were no references to European horror as a category and, for a system keen on adopting new 'micro genres', there is a surprising lack of a more careful approach towards the subgenres characteristic of this long tail market.

Finally, as happens in the majority of online streaming services, the cover is once again central in the presentation of the product in a way not dissimilar to the brick-and-mortar video store. While a platform like Netflix is more likely to show the film poster or other frames from the film in question, in Lovefilm Instant the actual DVD cover was the main visual reference to the streaming version, generating a further remediation between the two formats. The 'play sign' on top of the covers, while stressing the idea of immediate accessibility of the film, also invites the viewer to bypass any further information about it (director, length, year, plot) in an effort to attract the casual viewer.

Overall, it is impossible to ignore that Lovefilm Instant offered one of the most comprehensive formal ways to access Italian horror cinema. Its extensive catalogue was built thanks to the availability of films distributed by companies like Lace Group, Arrow Film and Video and Shameless Screen Entertainment. The belonging of a film to the catalogue of a distributor was also stressed by the entry 'studio' featured in the 'film card' alongside 'film format', 'starring', 'director', 'genres' and 'collections'. Albeit the 'studio' entry was not a searchable term (as it was not hyperlinked), it further proved a new layer of possible categorization based on the identification of the copyright holder, which

is something particularly relevant for the fan base of Italian horror because of the proliferation of different cuts of the films. For instance, one of the most recurring home video distributors for the genre was Shameless Screen Entertainment, a company launched in 2007, specializing in the transfer and repackaging of Italian horror films to DVDs and Blu-ray format. This is the label with the strongest identity thanks to the easily recognizable cover-art design – an illustration rendered with a striking yellow (i.e. ‘giallo’) border – which features on all their releases including, of course, films available on Lovefilm Instant.

As of October 2013 there were approximately 100 Italian horror titles from different distributors available for instant viewing on Lovefilm with a basic subscription fee of £4.99. Many of them belonged to the video nasty list and offered a level of online visibility to the subgenre unmatched by other formal distributions. It was challenging to come up with the exact number of Italian horror films that were available immediately on Lovefilm because of some of the issues I have discussed at the beginning of this article.

The first is the problem of categorization. In fact, the ‘World Cinema – Italian’ category I previously mentioned did not comprise all the titles. Instead, Italian horror films played a filler role in different genres and ‘collections’ listed on the Lovefilm website: from ‘bad taste’ to ‘the undead’ or ‘cockney and zombies’. As previously mentioned, streaming services not only add niche ‘low-quality’ titles to give the impression of having an infinite catalogue, but they also work as ‘fillers’ for categories featuring few recognizable successes. I am thinking of films such as *Zombieland* (Fleischer, 2009) or *The Evil Dead* (Raimi, 1984) that have Italian horror films listed in the ‘what to watch next’ suggestions. For instance, the version of *La casa sperduta nel parco* (*The House on the Edge of the Park*) (Deodato, 1980) available on Lovefilm Instant was distributed by Cornerstone media and was featured under the following collections: ‘bad taste’, ‘psycho killers’, ‘serial killers’, ‘slash and burn’, ‘slasher films’. At the same time, it is interesting to see how the question of ‘Italian-ness’ was strongly built around the core of texts protagonists of the video nasties era, and this is another recurring characteristic that emerged with VHS and was carried to the new forms of distribution.

Second, there is the problem of persistence: titles in streaming catalogues are available only for a limited time. For instance, a film such as *Deep Red* was available for only ninety days in October 2013. The inconsistent availability of a given film means also a challenging canonization of the genre through streaming services. In fact, despite the attempts to present the films in a curatorial manner, the constantly changing catalogue jeopardized the creation of subcategories and collections.

The lack of persistency and the problematic categorization are two clear signs that in its streaming existence Italian horror cinema is not deemed a collectable digital item as it is on torrent forums. In fact, the presence of the comment area and the ‘rating system’ did not attract discussions from fans of the genre, as happened in closed online communities like filesharing or on the ‘video nasty websites’.¹¹ Moreover, and most importantly, on Lovefilm Instant (and in other streaming services) there was seldom information about the version of the film (or, better, which ‘cut’ of the film was) available on streaming.¹² In fact, the running time of the film significantly differed from the DVD (or Blu-ray) by the same distributor, creating confusion and indeterminacy not dissimilar to that characterized the VHS era. In some occurrences

11. For an analysis of the video nasties websites see Egan (2007: 128).
12. In the same way there are several versions of the film available on YouTube for streaming, with significant differences in length.

13. If we consider the running time of the film, the version available on streaming was the one classified in 2007 for the Argent Film Ltd Distributor and on the 14 February 2007 featuring 34 seconds of cuts. See <http://www.bbfc.co.uk/releases/new-york-ripper-1970-0>, accessed 13 September 2015.
14. However, this may change soon. With home video distributors considering offering its catalogue streaming on its website, we may soon witness a new specialization of streaming services, generating a new offer for the fan base and a consequent remediation.
15. Curiously the only film 'tagged' as *giallo* on Lovefilm Instant and now on Amazon Instant is *Amer* (Cattet and Forzani, 2009) proving once again how this *filone* does not live within distribution strategies.

the 'instantly' available version was the one featuring cuts, whereas the DVD had an extended running time. This was true in the case, for instance, of Lucio Fulci's *The New York Ripper*¹³ and Umberto Lenzi's *Oasis of Fear*. On other occasions, instead, it was the other way around: the streaming version of *The House on the Edge of the Park*, for instance, was presented with no censor's cuts (a full fifteen-minute difference to the DVD version).

Interestingly, this is the aspect that most engages the fans in the film reviews and comment section on the Lovefilm website. Because the reviews were organized by title and did not differentiate between the formats, the question of 'authenticity' was not an uncommon source of debate. For instance, a review about *The House on the Edge of the Park* published on 4 August 2013 recommended watching the streaming version of the film instead of renting the DVD (the rental option was available from the same webpage) because of the heavy cuts to the latter. Overall, the reviews revealed knowledge of different cuts of the film (according to the different distributors), working in this way as a message board and recalling the pedagogical manners of video nasty collector sites (see Egan 2007: 129). From the perspective of Lovefilm, the lack of clarity regarding the version of the film available, alongside the obvious limitations of the platform in terms of extra content and choices of soundtracks, further limits the understanding of the film as an art object as happened on the DVD format. This is even truer if we think about the marginal role that the director's name plays in the categorization of genre films on Lovefilm.

CONCLUSIONS

By considering streaming services we can grasp once more the role played by distribution in shaping the borders and understanding of the horror genre. Streaming platforms offer a new long tail market that fuels a renewed European production of low-budget horror films by companies such as The Asylum or by small one-film independent productions such as Hollow Pictures. S-VOD plans and a 'micro genre'-based categorization system potentially allow niche films to find a new audience through the 'what to watch next' suggestions. At the same time, streaming distribution offers new life in the United Kingdom to B-movies made during the 1970s and 1980s, in particular to those films still associated with the video nasties list. By new life, I mean reaching audiences beyond their already existing fan base, willing to buy the exclusive DVD edition or to actually look for the film in torrent archives, going, in many cases, through the loops of invitation and regulation.¹⁴

Italian horror cinema on streaming platforms is a transactional object, as the death of Lovefilm Instant and its transformation into Amazon Instant proves. It belongs to unstable categorizations (which bend questions of nationality, auteur and subgenres), its textual integrity is not well determined, and its persistency is doubtful. Subgenres such as the *giallo*¹⁵ are not present, and signs of historicities and attempts of an authorial approach failed to be applied to the presentation and organization of the genre. Mirroring to some extent what happened during the infancy of VHS, the genre on Lovefilm Instant existed in a context of conflict between different subcultural capitals through the attempts to establish a forced association with the art-worthy category of national cinema, and a general characterization based on 'extreme' and 'disturbing' qualities that recalled the video nasties era.

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