Touching the Colour and Sound of Your Body's Tears:
Affect and Homage in the *Neo-Giallo*

Produced in Italy throughout the sixties and seventies, *giallo* films were murder mysteries presenting stock characters and by-the-numbers narratives. What really drew audiences to these films were the scenes of explicit violence and titillating nudity, with the act of murder presented in lurid and graphic detail. Dismissed at the time as exemplifying the traits of low culture and 'bad' filmmaking, these films have since become subject to critical re-evaluation and interest. Along with this renewed critical attention, several contemporary filmmakers have produced new *gialli*, or what have been referred to as neo-*giallo* films. These filmmakers are not influenced by the *giallo*'s narrative structure, but the ways in which these films evoked immediate sensory responses through vivid expressionistic colour schemes, psychedelic soundtracks, and an approach to violence that is deeply visceral and tactile. In this essay I will discuss how, through the use of affect theory, a new avenue of exploration is opened up when examining the neo-*giallo*, a shift away from discussion about whether these films are "good" or "bad", instead uncovering how these contemporary works are embodied events. Through stylistic excess, repetition, and intertextual references, the neo-*giallo* is experienced corporeally, a stimulating overload arousing all five senses.

Affect and the Neo-*Giallo* Film

While much has been written about the *giallo* film, most often these analyses focus on forms of representation and their ideological influence. Many of these articles have interrogated the gender representations in these films from a feminist or psychoanalytical perspective, arguing one way or another about the possible misogyny at the heart of these films, given that they

trade so heavily on images of women being stalked and murdered (although one could argue that the *giallo* has more than its fair share of male victims, and female killers).

What is most striking about these films, however, is how they present these images of shocking violence in a way that is deeply felt by the spectator, evoking a strong bodily response. The impact of these films is experienced immediately, before we subject them to intellectual analysis and place them within a framework where images are assigned political meaning. Therefore, the aim of this essay is to explore how modern filmmakers actively utilise *giallo* techniques and style in order to evoke a visceral and corporeal response, rather than reiterating key *giallo* narratives and ideological representations. Neo-*giallo* films such as *Amer* (Hélène Cattet & Bruno Forzani, 2009) and *Berberian Sound Studio* (Peter Strickland, 2012) consciously deconstruct the fundamental elements of *giallo* cinema, moving beyond mere homage and pastiche to the formation of highly affective imagery. These new films expose how the continuing influence of this sub-genre lies in its power to create strong affects, rather than (and often at the expense of) telling a coherent story. The boldness and the vividness of the images (and sounds) of violence found in the original *giallo* cycle reverberate into and through contemporary neo-*gialli* at a sensory level, not a narrative level. There is a conscious intertextual engagement with previous *giallo* films, in a way that emphasizes their fundamental affective qualities.

The original cycle of *giallo* films were made in Italy, with Mario Bava's 1962 film *La ragazza che sapeva troppo/The Girl Who Knew Too Much* considered to be the first film made in this vein (fig. 1). These films continued to be made in high numbers throughout the 1960s and 1970s, gaining popularity within Italy while also garnering screenings and fans abroad. According to Mikel J. Koven (2006), the *giallo* crosses over with the police procedural, the suspense-thriller, and the horror film (even though there is no supernatural element). These films are a melding of Agatha Christie style murder mysteries, with victims

dispatched one by one, and Edgar Allan Poe inspired horror expressed through an air of paranoia and a tinge of the Gothic, often seen in an expressionistic and stylized set design suggesting psychological disturbance and mental fracturing. Thus, the design aesthetic of these films plays a significant role in creating a sense of fear, unease, and disorientation, as much as, perhaps even more, than the plot itself, again highlighting the emphasis on affect rather than narrative.

[Fig 1: Nora (Letícia Román) reads a *giallo* novel on her plane ride to Rome in what is considered to be the first *giallo*, Mario Bava's *La ragazza che sapeva troppo/The Girl Who Knew Too Much* (1963)]

What is most interesting about the enduring style of the *giallo*, though, is what happens when filmmakers take certain stylistic elements and put them in another context outside of a straightforward murder mystery. The two feature films made by husband and wife team Hélène Cattet and Bruno Forzani – *Amer* and *L'etrange couleur des larmes de ton corps/The Strange Colour of Your Body's Tears* (2013) (fig. 3) - and Peter Strickland's *Berberian Sound Studio* express a *giallo* influence, but obliquely. The narrative of the *giallo*, which was never a strong element, is thrown aside in order to emphasise the *giallo*'s power to provide a sensory experience. Things never really made sense in a *giallo*, events were often implausible, psychological motivations were sketchy and trite, and resolutions usually arbitrary and unsatisfying. Instead, these films were evocative in the ways they presented sex and violence not as events to progress the narrative but as visceral experiences which attracted audience attention precisely because they were cinematic events that audiences could feel, without having to follow the story.

[Fig 2: The ubiquitous black gloves, always worn by the *giallo* killer. From Dario Argento's 1971 film *L'uccello dalle di cristallo/The Bird with the Crystal Plumage*]

In traditional psychoanalytical models the frequent scenes of murder commonly found in *gialli* conform to the idea that the cinematic gaze is one that is male and inherently sadistic, which dominates and victimises the female on screen. Using an Affect Theory approach, Steven Shaviro presents a counter-argument to this interpretation, stating that scenes of murder, such as those in the films of Argento, are so excessive and spectacular in their presentation of violence that the conventional binaries of "male and female, active and passive, aggressor and victim, and subject and object" are shattered (1993: 50). Shaviro actually argues that, contrary to the psychoanalytical view:

> "our primary excitement and involvement is with the victims, not with the monsters or murderers. Our 'identification' or investment is with the very bodies being dismembered, rather than with the agents of their destruction… Argento's hyperbolic aestheticization of murder and bodily torment exceeds any hope of comprehension or utility, even as it ultimately destabilizes any fixed relations of power. The spectatorial affect of terror is an irrecuperable excess, produced when violated bodies are pushed to their limits. (1993: 60-61)

Thus, the notion presented from a psychoanalytical perspective that we identify with the perpetrator is questioned. We are not reaching out into those black gloves through the screen and squeezing, if anything we are more likely to be feeling the squeeze. The overwhelming terror and resulting visceral response evoked by such extreme displays of violence and bodily punishment is felt in multiple ways and directions as a masochistic excess. In these moments of violence we are feeling and responding physically (and masochistically) to the images, not consciously analysing them, and it is this immediate bodily reaction that contemporary filmmakers seek when utilising the *giallo* form.

On this point, Bruno Forzani has said that the neo-*giallo* films he co-directs with Hélène Cattet are "definitely not homage. It's more that we reinterpret and re-use the *giallo* language to tell our story." (Selavy 2014) Yet, the stories that Cattet and Forzani tell are not ones where the viewer must search for the meanings behind representations. Rather, these films are firstly physical bodily experiences, as Cattet explains: "We construct the film in two ways. The first is the sensorial way, which corresponds to the first viewing of the film: you experience the film physically, then it sinks in." (Selavy 2014) Forzani even goes so far as to declare that "We try to give our viewers a filmic orgasm." (Selavy 2014) As this statement suggests, there is a strong tactile element to the images, creating a physical impact that is tinged with both pleasure and pain. The filmmakers attempt to 'touch' their audiences in a sexual and pleasurable way, achieving this by arousing them through the combination of sound and image.

[Fig 3: In Hélène Cattet and Bruno Forzani's *L'etrange couleur des larmes de ton corps/The Strange Colour of Your Body's Tears* (2013) the elements of the giallo are deconstructed.]

Becoming Woman: *Amer*

Cattet and Forzani's debut feature *Amer* – which is French for 'bitter', evoking the sense of taste – is replete with images that touch the viewer, creating sensations which transgress the border between screen and spectator. The film presents three incidents from the life of Ana, from her childhood, adolescence, and adulthood. In Forzani's words, it is "the story of a girl at three moments in her life where she discovers 'Body' and 'Desire'." (Gracey 2010) The film opens with a series of splitscreen images, including a shot of three pairs of eyes – one eye each belongs to three different bodies: Ana, her mother, and her father. Ana is not only the combination of her mother and father, but is herself three different bodies

presented at three different points in time, played by three different actors (fig. 4). Her plural subjectivity envelops us into her experience, as through the course of the film we not only see what she sees, but feel the same sensations.

[Fig 4: Eyes of mother, father, and daughter in the opening scene of *Amer*]

The image of the eye is a common *giallo* trope. Many *gialli* revolve around the figure of the eyewitness, and there are many scenes of violence toward the eyes (which never fail to provoke strong feelings of squeamishness and revulsion). Gary Needham notes that "many *giallo* titles have "*gli occhi*" in them, whether this refers to the eyes of detectives, victims, killers or cats… The *giallo* eye is both penetrating and penetrated." (Needham 2002) While the image of the eye and the figure of the eyewitness in *giallo* have often been interpreted from the angle of Freudian psychoanalysis, from an affective perspective, to quote Barbara Kennedy: "The look is never purely visual, but also tactile, sensory, material and embodied." (Kennedy 2000: 3). This statement is reminiscent of Gilles Deleuze's assertion that painting (and, by extension, film) "give us eyes all over: in the ear, in the stomach, in the lungs" (Deleuze 2003: 37). The act of looking is not just a physiological process, it produces sensations and affects felt throughout our bodies. The act of looking goes beyond the sense of sight evoking other senses, particularly that of touch. Thus, there is an immediate moment of engaging with the image in a physical sense that envelopes us, as Shaviro described earlier, in a masochistic sensation, as our eyes are inflicted with images of violence in a way that is felt as both pleasure and pain, an intensity of sensation that reaches beyond the screen. We are touched by these images in a provocative interplay of seduction and violence.

This interplay is explicitly addressed in the final part of *Amer*, as the adult Ana is seemingly assailed by an anonymous, black-gloved person armed with a razor. Nearby, the taxi driver who delivered Ana back to her childhood home prowls the property and watches

the attack. The gloved hand reaches over her mouth and a razor is held to her throat, then it is glided over her body as the other gloved hand reaches down into her pants. The razor finds its way back up to her mouth, and as Ana's teeth clack down on the metal it squeaks as it slides across her clenched teeth (fig. 5). The shot is clearly reminiscent of the infamous close-up in *Un chien andalou* (Luis Buñuel and Salvador Dali, 1930) where a razor cuts across an eyeball, evoking Deleuze's assertion that film can give us "eyes all over". The multiplicity of the image, its connections to various body parts and sensations moves away from the purely visual, across all senses. The sound as the razor scrapes across Ana's teeth is particularly piercing, recalling the sound of fingernails on a blackboard. All at once the image and sound of the mouth and razor instantly stimulates impressions of eyes, genitals, and fingers, while simultaneously conjuring memories of our own past experiences, dreams, and of course, other films.

[Fig. 5: The razor trapped in Ana's teeth.]

Also noticeable in this scene is the prevalence of close-ups, fragmenting the scene so it is difficult to discern who is where, or even who is who (is there really a third person, a killer? Is this all a projection of Ana's fantasies and fears?). These questions though are of little importance, secondary to the sensual evocations and affects that the sequence produces through image and sound. The close-ups also serve to heighten the emphasis on textures, which is further enhanced by the accompanying sound – the squeaking of the leather gloves, the razor scraping against skin, and most effectively and affectively, that sound of the razor grating along Ana's teeth. From a psychoanalytical perspective, close-ups of the female body are akin to a form of violence, cutting up the body and subjugating it to the male gaze, but yet in this sequence, as I have argued, the close-ups serve to remind us of the expanse and possibilities of the body. Desire becomes productive and creative, rather than an expression of a pathologised lack as articulated in psychoanalysis.

Harking back to the accusations that the *giallo* film is inherently misogynistic, with its many scenes of female victimization and murder, Cattet agrees that "Some of them are misogynistic, but in general it's true that only men have directed *gialli*. I thought it was time to have a female point of view on it! In *gialli*, I like the feminine characters such as Miss Wardh or Florinda Bolkan in *Lizard in a Woman's Skin*, who have a tortured intimate-erotic universe and we have reused that kind of character. But this time imagined by a woman!" (Gracey 2010) Cattet is unique in her status as a woman filmmaker, as most *giallo* and neo-*giallo* films have been directed by men. Thus, as Cattet suggests, her involvement brings a "female point-of-view" which is lacking in other films. The focus on the experience and desires of a female protagonist are more central to *Amer* than developing an intricate narrative – the film itself is nothing but "a female point-of-view". There is no mystery that Ana needs to solve, no killer she needs to catch, there is only her own relationship with her changing body and the exploration of her desires that navigate the darker areas of sex, death, and violence.

Becoming Sound and Celluloid: *Berberian Sound Studio*

The prevalence of violence against women in Italian horror is also commented on in Peter Strickland's *Berberian Sound Studio*, but what is most noticeable is that none of this violence is seen, it is only heard. Set in the 1970s, Toby Jones plays Gilderoy, an English sound man who travels to Italy after he is hired to do post-production sound on an Italian horror film. Once there he starts to psychologically unravel as the strain of having to create and listen to the repeated sounds of violence and death causes his psyche to splinter and loop.

The links between *Berberian Sound Studio* and the *giallo* film are somewhat tenuous, as the film itself is not in any way a *giallo* film – Strickland has even said that he does not think the film is a horror film at all (Lucca 2013) – and the film being made within the film is

not a *giallo* as some of the reviews and publicity has stated. The film being made – *The Equestrian Vortex* – is a supernatural film about witchcraft, more in the vein of Argento's *Suspiria* (which is also often mislabelled as a *giallo* film) (fig. 6). The *giallo* influence on the film actually comes from the soundtracks, as Strickland states:

> I thought about the stories behind some of the *giallo* soundtracks; they were very advanced for the time with their use of drone, *musique concrète*, free jazz and dissonance. The music of Bruno Maderna, Ennio Morricone and Gruppo di Improvisazione Nuova Consonanza existed in the same high art camp as Stockhausen, Cage or AMM, but then these guys were making money on the side composing soundtracks for B-grade horror films. *Berberian Sound Studio* came out of that strange, sonic no-man's-land between academia and exploitation. (Wood 2014: 133)

As Strickland points out, these musicians shifted between high and low cultural forms, yet in their low cultural work there are still elements of the avant-garde.

[Fig 6: The opening credits of *The Equestrian Vortex* – the only part of the film we ever see.]

The lines between high and low culture are further blurred in the film through casting, as several of the performers who portray actors and sound crew on the low culture horror film are actually from a performance art background: Jean-Michel Van Schouwburg, a vocal performance artist with "almost three octaves, falsettos, harmonics, deep throat singing, yodels, fast articulation, mouth noises, invented languages and bodily expression" (Amirani Records), makes an appearance to voice a character known as "The Goblin"; Jozef Cseres, a professor of the aesthetics and philosophy of music and visual arts, plays one of the foley artists; and Katalin Ladik, a Hungarian poet, actress and experimental performance artist, voices a resurrected witch (fig. 7). In the scenes involving Van Schouwburg and Ladik we

witness them use their voice to create the terrifying and otherworldly sounds of nonhuman beings. Both progress to a point where they start speaking in tongues, a form of gibberish which suggests they are being possessed by the spirit of their characters. Yet, we never see the characters that they portray; their images are conjured only in our minds through what we hear. Through vocal invocations their bodies unleash new beings, different in the mind of each spectator.

[Fig 7: Katalin Ladik performs as a witch back from the dead, seeking revenge.]

Violent affects created through sound are produced as we see the foley work for scenes that depict acts of torture perpetrated against women accused of witchcraft, such as hair being pulled out, being drowned in a barrel of boiling water, and vaginal penetration with a red-hot poker. The disconnection between body and voice that is created in original *gialli*, when voices are dubbed in post-production, is exacerbated as we see these sounds being generated through the manipulation not of human body parts but of inanimate objects, primarily vegetables. Common garden vegetables become violated bodies, split open, drowned, chopped, boiled. Vegetables were used as Strickland is a vegetarian and didn't want to use meat (Leigh 2012), but using meat would have been too literal – by having this dislocation between what is heard and what is seen (and the images conjured in our mind) creates further lines of flight, an escape from focusing on the meaning of the image to what is felt viscerally (fig. 8).

[Fig 8: Gilderoy (Toby Jones) transforms garden vegetables into violated bodies.]

The majority of the film takes place in the eponymous studio (the name is a nod to avant-garde musician and composer Cathy Berberian), with Gilderoy surrounded by the analogue sound equipment used during this time period when the first *gialli* were made. The way the camera lovingly glides over the surfaces of the equipment, lingers as Gilderoy and

his crew loop tapes, sliding fingers up and down the numerous dials on the mixing desk, suggests a kind of analogue fetishism, a longing for its tangibility and synthesis with the body (fig. 9). Strickland remarks that:

> You look at those old control rooms and they do have a very powerful, otherworldly feel: the racks full of oscillators, filters and oscilloscopes; the tape boxes and dubbing charts. There's a ritualistic and mysterious quality to it all and the film is meant to celebrate that. With digital, there's nothing mysterious about watching someone clicking on their plug-ins. (Wood 2014: 134)

Just as vegetables become desecrated bodies the machines also take on an embodied aspect, but one that is more sensual and loving. Gilderoy is able to connect more with these machines than with the people around him. He is isolated from others as he immerses himself in his work with the machines.

[Fig 9: Communion between flesh and machine, both fetish and ritual.]

The communion with the machines begins to take a ritualistic form, which is in keeping with the film within the film and its elements of witchcraft. The act of dubbing these alien and frightening sounds using the human voice creates a spell that produces physical responses and affects. In several interviews Strickland refers to how sound artists and musicians such as Joe Meek and Graham Bond turned to the occult, and speaks of sound engineering work as "an alchemical process… talismanic" (Ward: 2012). These sounds not only produce corporeal sensations but tap into inner vibrations and previously untouched potentialities (just think of how central music is to the 'opening up' of psychedelic experience). Repetition is a fundamental aspect of ritual, and Gilderoy's work involves creating and listening to the same sounds again and again, alongside the constant consultation of charts and notes that contain sigil-like symbols, repeated phrases, and magical words. Such

intensive repetition begins to release previously hidden forces and powers; as the narrative progresses it even releases other selves, other Gilderoys.

The repetitive screaming heard throughout, often in the background of a scene as Gilderoy converses with colleagues, is central to these dark conjurations (fig. 10). It is interesting to note that Suzy Kendall, star of *giallo* classics *The Bird with the Crystal Plumage, Torso* (Sergio Martino, 1973) and *Spasmo* (Umberto Lenzi, 1974), was brought in to provide many of the screams, thus creating a direct sound link and sense memory between *Berberian Sound Studio* and these early *gialli*. In pre-production Strickland was given two CDs of screams and testifies that "after a while it started to mess with my head. I started to see how someone could go bananas listening to this stuff everyday" (Wood 2014: 136). Each piercing screech further pierces Gilderoy's notions of self, fracturing his mind, but these fractures release other selves and subjectivities, shifting planes of reality and experience.

[Fig 10: Endless screams piercing the psyche.]

Within the final act the film itself begins to come loose, to derail and split apart. After a scene in which Gilderoy awakens in his bedroom to the sound of someone trying to break in (the film itself has begun to impinge upon Gilderoy's reality, for as the producer tells him, "You're a part of it"), he opens the door from his room and enters into the studio and we finally see an image on the screen – it is Gilderoy, from the previous scene in his room. The film begins to jump and shake (fig. 11), and burns out, revealing another film – the nature documentary that Gilderoy was working on prior to *The Equestrian Vortex*. These films are all a part of Gilderoy just as he is a part of them, his body a part of the machinic assemblage of sound equipment, film stock, projector, and image. The film narrative starts to loop, like one of Gilderoy's tapes, and scenes are played out again, although now Gilderoy speaks in Italian, having become 'tuned' into his surroundings. Yet, while others come and go from the

studio, Gilderoy is now a part of it, never to leave, only to loop and repeat, only to further fracture and dissipate into the machines, into the studio.

[Fig 11: The image becomes increasingly layered and unstable as Gildeoy's identity is subsumed by the studio, becoming cinema itself.]

In conclusion, with the films of Strickland, Cattet and Forzani the *giallo*'s power to evoke the senses is channelled in a way that even more explicitly provokes intensities and sensations that transgress the boundaries between screen and spectator. Through conscious deconstruction of the fundamental elements of *giallo* cinema these filmmakers move beyond mere homage and pastiche. The direct connection and interplay that exists between film and body is exposed, and then enacted in a way that heightens the cinematic experience into one that is ritualistic and transformative. The bodies on and off screen form an assemblage of images and affects, melding into a process of becoming cinema, becoming *giallo*.

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