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Brett Halsey Professor Paul Evans

Meg Register Liza Harris

Lino Salemme Turi DeSimone

Christina Engelhardt Susie

Pascal Druant Kevin

Grady Thomas Clarkson Sean

Ettore Comi John

Carla Cassola Lilla the Medium

CREW

Directed by Lucio Fulci

Produced by Ettore Spagnuolo

Screenplay by Pietro Regnoli & Lucio Fulci

Production Manager Alessandra Spagnuolo

Director of Photography Luigi Ciccarese

Art Director and Costume Designer Massimo Bolongaro

Film Editor Otello Colangeli

Music by Giovanni Cristiani



Lucio Fulci, “Genre Terrorist”: When the Supernatural Slasher Meets Libertine Nuns

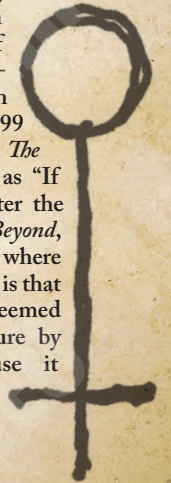
by Kat Ellinger

In a 1995 interview,¹ director Lucio Fulci described himself as a “genre terrorist”. His status as a journeyman, as with many Italian directors who worked in genres commonly perceived as ‘B’ strains, demonstrates the director’s dogged determination to keep on moving, a flexibility that ensured he was able to stay in work creating cinema for over four decades, by adapting to the demands of an ever-changing commercial market – a market that by the 1980s was shrinking in terms of size, budgets, and resources. Yet Fulci never subscribed to the basic formula for any given genre. Instead, what you often see in his work, especially that from within

the giallo or thriller mould, is a rebellious spirit, a reinventing, reshaping and – more often than not – total disregard for rules and convention. In this respect Fulci was as restless as he was inventive.

What’s interesting about the production and distribution of 1990’s *Demonia* – described by Stephen Thrower in his 1999 book *Beyond Terror: The Films of Lucio Fulci* as “If there’s a morning after the night before in *The Beyond*, that’s when and where *Demonia* was made” – is that the film has been deemed something of a failure by some critics because it never made it to its apparently planned theatrical release.

1 - Interview by Sergio Grmek Germani (interviewer/director/producer) and Robert Palazzi (camera) (2007, Box Office Spectaculars).





Of course, the theatrical releases of Fulci's films, and most importantly the support and love from horror fans who were shaped by those early experiences, gave Fulci the reputation of being something of a singular force in Italian horror, a provocateur, and therefore one of Italy's most important genre maestros. While this aspect was pivotal in the development of his somewhat infamous reputation as a maker of horror films, it's only part of the story. When the home video

market began to open up in the early 80s, Fulci's international reputation really exploded. For the first time ever, people were able to fully access the kind of horror deemed unacceptable for television without having to go to a theatre – there is *nobody* more unacceptable for television than Lucio Fulci. They were able to bring these films into their homes and indulge in the intimacy of the more private setting as they relished over every frame, fast-forwarding,

rewinding and pausing, to get to the juiciest bits, savouring every last bite. As lower budget horror was pushed out of mainstream theatres in favour of the big budget spectacles that dominated the era, the home video market was there waiting with open arms to receive the outliers. So began a new cycle, a wild frontier, where almost anything seemed possible and permissible when it came to the direct-to-video market. And it's these fans, the ones who encountered Fulci in a more personal, private way, via VHS

tape, then later DVD and Blu-ray, who have largely kept his legacy alive. On this note, as with most of Fulci's later oeuvre, *Demonia*² is a film that fully suited the overall mood of the maverick home video boom: for its general sense of anarchy, its refusal to confine itself to any one convention, its sheer ballsy absurdity.

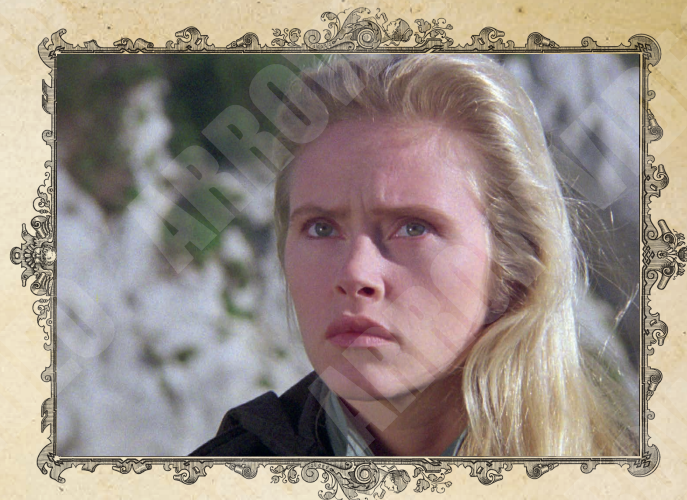
2 – While the film didn't receive an American video release until 2001, the Japanese (English-friendly) import tape made the rounds amongst cult horror fans during the interim.



If there was one genre that overshadowed the VHS rental market in the 80s, it was the American slasher. By the end of the decade things were running riot in the indies.³ It would be easy to write off many of the films involved in this arena as the product of undiscerning filmmakers, made for undiscerning fans, but to take this position is to ignore the fact

3 - Especially in the US, with the rise of the anarchic SOV horror, as well as other low budget rabble rousers like Fred Olen Ray, David DeCoteau, Charles Band and Frank Henenlotter.

that this type of horror – often branded by its microbudget status, its provocative nature, its emphasis on all out gratuity, or more fantastical elements – broke the conventions of ‘good’ taste in order to serve a fringe audience of misfits, who were sick of vanilla offerings in mainstream cinema. It was a deliberate kick back at an establishment purely obsessed with the curation of multi-million-dollar blockbusters. It was, in essence, an act of punk rock.



Fulci, being a lot older than many of the filmmakers who arrived kicking and screaming in the latter part of the 80s, could hardly be considered a punk in a traditional sense. And yet, his work in horror in his position as a self-proclaimed “genre terrorist” does seem to exhibit some of the same philosophical defiance. It’s no accident that of all the Italian directors who were cherished throughout the rise of home video, the punks, the metalheads – essentially the anti-establishment outsiders – gravitated towards Fulci more than any other

filmmaker. There was something about the director’s nihilism, his stance as a rule breaker, the outrageous graphic violence he put on screen, that resonated with subculture film fans in particular.

The director’s genre terrorism in horror and thrillers is evident from the get-go. For instance, none of the gialli he made in the classic period subscribed to the established convention: the ambiguous *Perversion Story* (*Una sull'altra*, aka *One on Top of the Other*, 1969) is very much a mood piece that combines contrary

thematic elements such as the Gothic double with post-*Blow-Up* (Michelangelo Antonioni, 1966) sixties glamour. *A Lizard in a Woman's Skin* (*Una lucertola con la pelle di donna*, 1971) opts for a descent into the psychedelic sapphic nightmares of a woman with a severely fractured psyche. *Don't Torture a Duckling* (*Non si sevizia un paperino*, 1972), with its riff on Calvinist Gothic, shoots two barrels into the bleeding heart of Catholic patriarchy. While *The Psychic* (*Sette note in nero*, aka *Seven Notes in Black*, 1977), like *A Lizard in a Woman's Skin*, adopted rich elements of the Female Gothic, this time with supernatural notes.

If Fulci was going to make a zombie film, he wasn't going to follow the commercial success of George A. Romero's *Dawn of the Dead* (1978). He was going his own way – regardless of what producers were expecting. He was going into Haitian myth, and he was also pitting a shark against a zombie in an

underwater fist fight for *Zombie Flesh Eaters* (*Zombi 2*, 1979). What's more, he would become an idol amongst the aforementioned subset of film fans for doing this. And then, he was going to top that by bringing zombies to a haunted hotel in New Orleans, as seen in *The Beyond* (*L'aldilà*, 1981), or a Lovecraftian landscape, for *City of the Living Dead* (*Paura nella città dei morti viventi*, 1980). If Fulci was going to make a slasher it was either going to revel in the debauched sweat-stained sleaze of a crime-ridden New York – for *The New York Ripper* (*Lo squartatore di New York*, 1982) – or he was going the fantastical route, making his killer a fully-fledged Gothic mad scientist – part vampire, part Frankenstein's monster – as seen in *The House by the Cemetery* (*Quella villa accanto al cimitero*, 1981). The closest he got to a deliberate 80s 'pop' aesthetic was his late-in-the-day giallo *Murder Rock* (1984), which is decidedly bonkers, including copious *Flashdance*-inspired choreography, complete with pulsing crotch-shots.

So where does *Demonia* fit into all of this?





As mentioned, the American slashers dominated the first part of the eighties. Meanwhile in Italy, makers of horror seemed more interested in their burgeoning cannibal and zombie cycles, when it came to the slasher's 'golden' years – roughly spanning 1978–1983 – to bother much with what Americans were doing. Fulci grew his reputation in the latter, using the theme to explore the more fantastical elements the genre had to offer.

Italian horror embraced an increasing amount of fantasy-themed fare, especially through the work of not just forerunner Fulci himself but also Lamberto Bava (*Demons* [*Dèmoni*, 1985]), Umberto Lenzi (*Ghosthouse* [*La casa 3*, 1988]) and newcomer Michele Soavi (*The Church* [*La chiesa*, 1989]; *The Sect* [*La setta*, 1991]). Likewise, Dario Argento altered his mainstay giallo formula, mixing it with fairytale aspects for *Phenomena* (1985); while Sergio Martino

incorporated Etruscan myth into the giallo for *The Scorpion with Two Tails* (*Assassinio al cimitero etrusco*, 1982). There were some American slashers that started to move into more fantastical territory; take, for example, *Superstition* (James W. Roberson, 1982), or *Eyes of Fire* (Avery Crounse, 1983) – both supernatural body-count-by-numbers films – yet, as with most outlandish concepts in genre, it was the Italians who dominated this field.

In light of this, it could be argued that *Demonia* constitutes a continuation of Fulci's focus on dealing specifically in the fantastic, as an ongoing passion that began long before many others started doing it. It's a film that plays with several genres, both borrowing⁴ from its earlier predecessor

4 - Especially in the main protagonist's name, Liza, but also the film's central conceit of an innocent opening a forbidden portal; the notion of a curse (with nuns this time, not a painter, coming back after being crucified, nails hammered into their hands); and a 'helping' figure – a mysterious woman who is later savagely killed by domestic pets.





*The Beyond*⁵ and mixing in aspects of both the supernatural slasher and nunsplotation for good measure. The nun theme becomes especially tasty when you consider Fulci's position on Catholicism. The director explained, "This may seem strange, but I am happier than somebody like Buñuel who says he is looking for God. I have found Him in the others' misery, and my torment is greater than Buñuel's. For I have realized

5 - Catriona MacColl, star of *The Beyond*, was offered the role of Liza but apparently turned it down.

that God is a God of suffering. I envy atheists; they don't have all these difficulties."⁶

Fulci never indulged in nunsplotation at the height of its cycle, which was at its peak during the seventies. Instead, he put his somewhat misanthropic view of the church into giallo *Don't Torture a Duckling* during this period – a picture that exposed some of the cruelties inherent in Catholic patriarchy.

6 - Shockloff, Robert (1982) *Lucio Fulci*. Starburst Magazine, Vol 4, Number 12 (August 1982).

Don't Torture a Duckling is in many respects an angry film made by a filmmaker who was raging at a God he still believed in but didn't like very much because he felt his religion had failed him. By the eighties, Italian nunsplotation, which had once been a reasonably prolific and profitable cycle – one in which Italian filmmakers could be particularly critical of Catholicism – had pretty much burnt itself out beyond the odd anomaly such as Joe D'Amato's *Convent of Sinners* (*La monaca nel peccato*, 1986). Fulci resurrects the

concept of the naughty nun but infuses it with aspects of Sadean libertines. These nuns, when alive at least, enjoyed cavorting in orgies before killing their prey like black widows. But this wasn't quite enough for them. When they ended up pregnant, they would give birth to the children then burn their screaming bodies alive on the fire, in scenes which wouldn't look out of place in de Sade's *The 120 Days of Sodom*. Then Fulci resurrects the crucified nuns, in a bizarre twist that appears somewhat inspired by



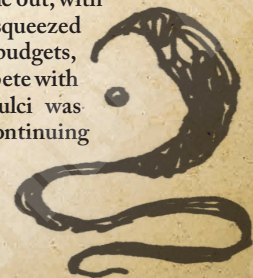


Amando de Ossorio's *Tombs of the Blind Dead* (*La noche del terror ciego*, 1972) – in that case Satanic Knights Templar. But instead of riding horses in zombified form, *Demonia* opts for a ghostly-infused slasher framework, while taking out the local villagers who have condemned them one by one in a series of gruesome murders that include harpooning, tongue-nailing and, the *pièce de résistance*, a man ripped apart into two halves.

It was around the time Fulci made *Demonia* that he became somewhat interested in supernatural slashers, revenge stories involving murderous or dangerous ghosts, as he set about reconfiguring the framework of the Gothic haunted house. *Demonia* belongs to this odd brew, a little subset of offbeat horror films made in the late stage of his career. It can be taken alongside *Ghosts of Sodom* (*Il fantasma di Sodoma*, 1988), for example, where sex-obsessed Nazis return from the grave to rape and terrorise a bunch of young students, or *The Sweet House of Horrors* (*La dolce casa degli orrori*, 1989), or *The House of Clocks* (*La casa nel tempo*,

1989). Gothic was quite often at the heart of everything he did in the genre. It is certainly evident in his tribute to Edgar Allen Poe, *The Black Cat* (*Gatto nero*, 1981) – a very early flip on the supernatural slasher of sorts – as well as his work in zombie films, and many of his later features, which don't quite subscribe to any one genre. It's just here, in later films like *Demonia*, that he turns up the weirder aspects to eleven – a mode which was very much in keeping with the balls-out direct-to-video approach that dominated the period, spurred on by horror fans who were completely open to the notion of the weirder the better.

While it's true that the director wasn't in the best of health while filming *Demonia*, that his health suffered greatly over the preceding years, and while it is also a fact that Italian horror was beginning to die out, with the industry squeezed to death over budgets, unable to compete with Hollywood, Fulci was intent on continuing his quest. *Demonia* has





not been widely celebrated. It is often pulled apart for what it should have been and not what it was. But given the state of affairs in the Italian film industry, the fact that many filmmakers who had previously worked in horror films were bailing out, moving on to other genres, or to television work, one must at least give the director credit for remaining defiant and tenacious in the face of so much adversity. Like much of his later work, Fulci's particular brand of genre terrorism prevails in *Demonia*. It's a strange mood piece, a film that indulges itself

in many elements from different genres, a hotchpotch of madness, violence and carnal sin. It is 100% Fulci. While the budget might not have been there, the heart still was. As such, *Demonia* offers up many of the director's particular delicacies for those willing to keep an open mind, those willing to enjoy the film on its own terms... burning babies, naked harpooning nuns and all.

Kat Ellinger is an author, producer, film critic and currently the serving editor-in-chief for Diabolique Magazine. She has written for Fangoria, Senses of Cinema, BFI, and Sight & Sound, amongst others, both online and in print.





ABOUT THE RESTORATION

Demonia is presented in its original aspect ratio of 1.66:1 with Italian and English mono audio. The restored High Definition master was provided by Coccinelle Film.

Fulci Talks is presented in its original aspect ratio of 1.33:1 with Italian mono audio. The High Definition master was provided by Marechiaro Film.



PRODUCTION CREDITS

Discs and Booklet Produced by Michael Mackenzie
Executive Producers Kevin Lambert, Francesco Simeoni
Technical Producer James White
QC Aidan Doyle

Production Assistant Samuel Thiery
Disc Mastering / Subtitling The Engine House Media Services
Artwork Graham Humphreys
Design Obviously Creative



SPECIAL THANKS

Alex Agran, Francesca Breccia, Carl Daft,
Kat Ellinger, David Gregory, Giovanna Stornaiuolo



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