

DEATH WALKS TWICE

**TWO FILMS
BY LUCIANO ERCOLI**





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DEATH WALKS ON HIGH HEELS

CAST

FRANK WOLFF as Dr. Robert Matthews
NIEVES NAVARRO (as **SUSAN SCOTT**) as Nicole
SIMON ANDREU as Michel
CARLO GENTILI as Inspector Baxter
GEORGE RIGAUD as Captain Lenny
J. MANUEL MARTIN as Smith
FABRIZIO MORESCO as Bergson
LUCIANO ROSSI as Hallory
CLAUDIE LANGE as Vanessa Matthews





CREW

Directed by **LUCIANO ERCOLI**
Produced by **ALBERTO PUGLIESE** and **LUCIANO ERCOLI**
Screenplay by **ERNESTO GASTALDI** and **MAY VELASCO**
Story by **ERNESTO GASTALDI**, **MAY VELASCO** and **DINO VERDE**
Director of Photography **FERNANDO ARRIBAS**
Edited by **ANGELO CURI**
Music by **STELVIO CIPRIANI**



DEATH WALKS AT MIDNIGHT

CAST

NIEVES NAVARRO (as SUSAN SCOTT) as Valentina
SIMON ANDREU as Gio
PIETRO MARTELLANZA (as PETER MARTELL) as Stefano
CARLO GENTILI as Inspector Serino
IVANO STACCIOLI as Professor Otto Wuttenberg
CLAUDIO PELLEGRINI as Henri Velaq
FABRIZIO MORESCO as Pepito
ALESSANDRO PERRELLA as Van Driver
LUCIANO ROSSI as Hans Krutzer
CLAUDIE LANGE as Verushka Wuttenberg





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Produced by **ALBERTO PUGLIESE** and **LUCIANO ERCOLI**
Screenplay by **ERNESTO GASTALDI** and **MAY VELASCO**
Story by **SERGIO CORBUCCI**
Director of Photography **FERNANDO ARRIBAS**
Edited by **ANGELO CURI**
Music by **GIANNI FERRIO**







TEETERING ON HIGH HEELS

by Danny Shipka

Warning: The following essay contains major plot spoilers.

Murder, intrigue, illicit love affairs and striptease acts with a gold-laden disco Cleopatra – let's be honest, the Italian *giallo* genre is just plain fun. No other film genre throws as many contrived plot twists, oddball characters and muddled sexual psychology at a viewer than a *giallo* does. If done well, like Dario Argento's *Deep Red* (*Profondo rosso*, 1975) or Massimo Dallamano's *What Have You Done to Solange?* (*Cosa avete fatto a Solange?*, 1972), the viewer is strung magically along into a violent murder mystery which is as profound as it is disturbing. If done poorly, like Andrea Bianchi's *Strip Nude for your Killer* (*Nude per l'assassino*, 1975), they manage to entertain in their pursuit to offend as much of their audience as possible. The goal in any good *giallo* is to throw plot expectation out the window and keep its viewers constantly guessing.

The late Luciano Ercoli's 1971 *Death Walks on High Heels* (*La morte cammina con i tacchi alti*) isn't a *giallo* per se. It can't be compared to, say, *The Bird with the Crystal Plumage* (*L'uccello dalle piume di cristallo*, 1970) or Sergio Martino's *The Strange Vice of Mrs. Wardh* (*Lo strano vizio della Signora Wardh*, 1971); whilst it shares some elements in common with these films – the black-clad perpetrator with a scary, mechanized voice, some spotty razor blade violence, the obligatory nudity and some terrible 1970s European lounge music – it doesn't commit fully to them. More often than not, it positions itself more as a conventional, i.e. safe, crime/gangster thriller. But that's okay – because what *High Heels* is, up to a point, is tremendous fun.

Ercoli's second feature effort, *Death Walks on High Heels* is a consolidation of the success of his directorial debut, the delightful *The Forbidden Photos of a Lady Above Suspicion* (*Le foto proibite di una signora per bene*, 1970). That film, which sees German actress Dagmar Lassander (*Hatchet for the Honeymoon*, 1970) caught in a web of sexual haze and blackmail, turned out to be a self-assured first effort. It certainly didn't hurt to have Ernesto Gastaldi supplying the screenplay. Gastaldi was a veteran when it came to genre films, with his prior credits including gothic classics *The Whip and the Body* (*La frusta e il corpo*, 1963) for Mario Bava and Riccardo Freda's *The Horrible Dr. Hichcock* (*L'Orribile segreto del Dr. Hichcock*, 1962). Gastaldi had also just successfully turned his hand to writing for the *giallo* genre with *The Strange Vice of Mrs. Wardh* as well as *So Sweet... So Perverse* (*Così dolci... così perversa*, 1969) for Umberto Lenzi. Gastaldi's screenplay for *Forbidden Photos* showcased his relative ease with the tropes of the *giallo*, combining a complex plot with strong female characters under the threat of sexualized violence.





Audiences seemed to respond positively when *Forbidden Photos* was released in November of 1970, and its success prompted Ercoli to find new material for his second feature. It's no surprise that he concentrated on making his follow-up film a complex violent crime drama, because he personally loved them and so, clearly, did audiences. Ercoli was like every other Italian filmmaker of the time, beholden to the mighty lira and looking for those genres that could perform financially. It's no surprise, therefore, that he would incorporate *giallo* elements into his next film, as at that time a huge number of Italian directors (Argento, Bava, Fulci, Martino, Lenzi, Freda, to name but a few) were exporting to the wider world their own particular takes on the genre – and were seeing healthy returns.

Armed with a larger budget this time around thanks to the success of *Forbidden Photos*, Ercoli looked to Gastaldi to work up a script that would prove as lucrative as their previous collaboration. Gastaldi, for his part, delivered a marvelously convoluted story of a young dancer being terrorized by a black-clad man trying to get his hands on her late father's diamonds. Complex plot that would confound the audience's expectations? Check. Exotic locations? Check. Deviant sexual behavior and a smattering of graphic violence? Triple check! With practically the same cast and crew as *Forbidden Photos*, Ercoli set out to make his second film. First, however, he would need to find someone to play the not-so-helpless heroine. Her role would be pivotal and Ercoli knew exactly where to look – no further, in fact, than his fiancée.

Nieves Navarro (aka Susan Scott) was born in Almeria, Spain in 1938. Initially working as a fashion model and later in commercials in Spain, Navarro began appearing in Italian/Spanish co-productions in the mid-1960s. Perhaps because of her exotic looks, accentuated by her expressive, dark Spanish eyes, she was often cast in Westerns such as the popular *Ringo* films, *A Pistol for Ringo* (*Una pistola per Ringo*) and *The Return of Ringo* (*Il ritorno di Ringo*, both 1965). It was whilst working on these productions that she met Ercoli, who was producing the films, and their partnership was born. Ercoli wisely cast her in a co-starring role as the freewheeling friend and fellow blackmail victim Dominique in *Forbidden Photos*, where she very nearly stole the movie out from under star Dagmar Lassander. Now, with Gastaldi's script in hand, Ercoli had the perfect vehicle to move Navarro front and center.

Let's be honest, *Death Walks on High Heels* was filmed by a man in love. Everything in the movie, from script, to camera angles, wardrobe, musical numbers, even the wigs are all designed to showcase Navarro and her talents. Normally this could be a dangerous proposition – cinema is full of examples where a director has determined to cast their girlfriend (or boyfriend) in a leading role despite a conspicuous lack of talent. Many an audience has had to endure painfully poor performances for the sake of love. Because Navarro's role is the very anchor of *High Heels*, Ercoli's faith could not afford to be misplaced.

Luckily for Ercoli (and us), his faith was not misplaced, as Navarro is sensational in the film. She's the 'snap-crackle-pop' of *High Heels*, from the first scene in a Parisian cab (with fellow *Photos* co-star

and countryman Simón Andreu) sporting big Jackie-O sunglasses and a beguiling grin. As Nicole Rochard, daughter of a slain jewel thief, Navarro is clearly having the time of her life. The *giallo* heroines of the early '70s were, for the most part, a neurotic bunch (I'm looking at you, Florinda Bolkan in *A Lizard in a Woman's Skin* [*Una lucertola con la pelle di donna*] and Mimsy Farmer in *Four Flies on Grey Velvet* [*4 mosche di velluto grigio*], both 1971). If not completely insane, these leading ladies are often prone to outbursts of emotion, like Suzy Kendall in *The Bird with the Crystal Plumage*. Not Navarro, however. Gastaldi's script gives her all the power, which she uses by telling off the cops in one scene, or telling the killer "don't break my balls" in the next. Perhaps it's due to her age (Navarro was 32 when filming), but there's a self-assuredness, a strength in her portrayal that makes her immediately likeable. When she tells her loser boyfriend (Andreu) that she's got to work because "someone has to keep the rails on", you can't help but root for her.

But lest we think that we're getting a new, emancipated archetype, we have to remember that this is a *giallo* (or a pseudo-*giallo*, at least) so we've got to see our heroine exploited in some way. That can be found in her profession as a nightclub dancer. Not just any dancer, but an exotic one at that. One particularly standout sequence (for perhaps the wrong reasons) has Navarro performing as an "African", complete with black skin and afro wig whilst shaking her money tree all the while. This uproariously politically-incorrect moment is only eclipsed when, during the show, audience member Frank Wolff (*The Lickerish Quartet*, 1970) pulls out the world's biggest video camera and starts filming her on the spot! Navarro plays these scenes with such infectious enthusiasm and demeanor that it's hard to fault her (even if we should!).

Over the next 40 minutes, Navarro, still in black face, has sex with her loser boyfriend because he "likes it when you're all black", gets some threatening phone calls, then runs to another club, sans blackface, to dance as some gold-plated disco Cleopatra. There she encounters the guy with the big camera again (who, like all good stalkers, shows up in the oddest of places), gets attacked by a masked killer who's after her diamonds, before finally deciding that her boyfriend's a loser and that she should run away to England with the camera perv whom she just met the night before (which she subsequently does). He, who's quite married by the way, sets her up in his vacation home on the sea where she gets to wear a lot of wigs and new clothes.

Then she's killed... off-screen.

Wait, what? Damn! Ever since Alfred Hitchcock killed off Janet Leigh in the 47th minute of *Psycho* (1960), directors of suspense films have utilised this stunt of killing off a lead pre-midpoint. Mainstream filmmakers like Brian De Palma did it in his Hitchcock homage *Dressed to Kill* (1980), Tarantino had a helluva good time killing off most of his entire cast halfway through *Death Proof* (2007), and the TV series *The Walking Dead* (2010-present) seems to take delight in killing off a main character or two every season. *Gialli* filmmakers, with their mantra to confound and confuse, are more apt to pull this trick, given their propensity to wanting to keep the audience guessing (a





good example of this would be Martino's *Torso* [*I corpi presentano tracce di violenza carnale*, 1973] where he kills most of the female cast off-screen halfway through).

Does this ploy work? It depends. In *Psycho* it works because Hitchcock does such a good job promoting sympathy for the character of Norman Bates and his predicament is so well presented that the audience is able to transfer affection. Does it work for *Death Walks on High Heels*? The answer is more problematic. Navarro was the heart and soul of the film. Her infectious enthusiasm is hard to replace and her absence from the latter stages of the film is compounded by the fact that Ercoli fails to give us any other characters to care about. With over an hour left in the film, whom can the audience re-identify with?

It's jarring, no doubt. If one walked out of the room prior to Navarro's death and came back three minutes later they'd think they were watching a completely different movie. At this point, Gastaldi's script takes a decidedly conventional turn as we're introduced to new characters, none of which are all that interesting. The new female character Vanessa (Claudie Lange), wife to the perv, is played – you guessed it – neurotically, so she can't, and doesn't, last long, with a particularly gruesome death that is the most graphic in the film. We get the obligatory detective (Carlo Gentili) and sidekick as well as the 'quirky' characters like a fish seller who busts out our villain in the end. Mostly what we get is the standard trope of redemption for Michel (aka loser boyfriend). Andreu, being the competent actor he is, infuses him with a little more sympathy in the end but he, like us, misses Navarro.

High Heels teeters but it doesn't fall. Ercoli is too professional for that. Though certainly conservative, the second act of *High Heels* is competently handled. Andreu and Wolff (who, unfortunately, would die the following year under mysterious circumstances) give solid performances, though their climatic battle had me wondering if Navarro could take them both out. As for Ercoli and Navarro, they would marry, for life, the following year and take another walk with death, this time at midnight.

Danny Shipka is a professor at Oklahoma State University. He is the author of *Perverse Titillation: The Exploitation Cinema of Italy, Spain and France* (McFarland, 2011) and co-editor of *International Horror Film Directors: Global Fear* (Intellect, 2016).











DEATH WALKS THE '70S: LUCIANO EROCOLI AND THE GIALLO

by Troy Howarth

There's just something about the *giallo* film that fires up the imagination. Now, if you're reading these notes, you know damn good and well just what it is that I'm talking about, so I'll spare you the background lecture on what constitutes a *giallo*. However, just how far you've delved into this peculiar and offbeat genre is another matter altogether. The more dedicated (read: potentially unbalanced) among us have already sat through blurry bootleg editions of every single Italian production with a salacious title that we could get our black-gloved little hands on; others (read: potentially more sane) will have exercised a little more restraint and – dare I say it? – good judgement. I fall firmly into the former camp, but don't let that fool you: I wouldn't dream of looking down on the latter camp, many of whom have spared themselves the ordeal of seeing some of the films I've already watched, or more accurately, gaped at in disbelief. Nevertheless, as with any genre, it's the interesting films that keep us coming back for more. Note, I say interesting – not good, necessarily, but interesting. Yes, pretty much all of us who know what a *giallo* is have already sat through *Blood and Black Lace* (1964), *Deep Red* (1975) and *Torso* (1973), but films such as these only tell part of the story.

For many Eurocultists, the *giallo* is pretty much defined by the Mario Bava/Dario Argento strain of *gialli*, wherein a black-clad killer stalks sexy women and slashes them up in imaginative ways. But never let it be said that that type of thriller is the sum total of the *giallo* experience. The genre also encompasses a wide array of offbeat, off-the-wall approaches, some of which can be summed up under the umbrella banner of what I call the “sexy *giallo*” – thrillers patterned after *Les diaboliques* (1955), wherein a psychologically fragile protagonist is manipulated by amoral villains who are looking to get their hands on some money – and some of which defy categorization altogether.

The genre being what it is, it tends to inspire a great deal of interest among auteurs who focus on the work of particular filmmakers: Bava and Argento are popular examples, clearly, but let us not forget Lucio Fulci, Umberto Lenzi, Massimo Dallamano, Sergio Martino, Paolo Cavara and other talented artisans who toiled in the Italian exploitation genre. All of these directors, and many more besides, made their mark within the genre – sometimes by playing by the rules, and more often than not by willfully breaking them. Argento helped to popularize the genre on an international scale, but there was only so far he could climb before a lack of inspiration and a stagnant tendency









towards self-celebration started to take the edge off of his work. Bava, Fulci, Cavara, Dallamano and others didn't work in the genre as much as they probably should have, though they proved to be consistently creative and imaginative whenever they did, while others like Martino succumbed to the general air of blandness that permeated Italian genre cinema of the 1980s and beyond. And then there were the "one-off" directors – the ones who never quite climbed the dizzying heights attained by some of their contemporaries, but who, for a period of time, managed to churn out some entertaining and occasionally inventive product.

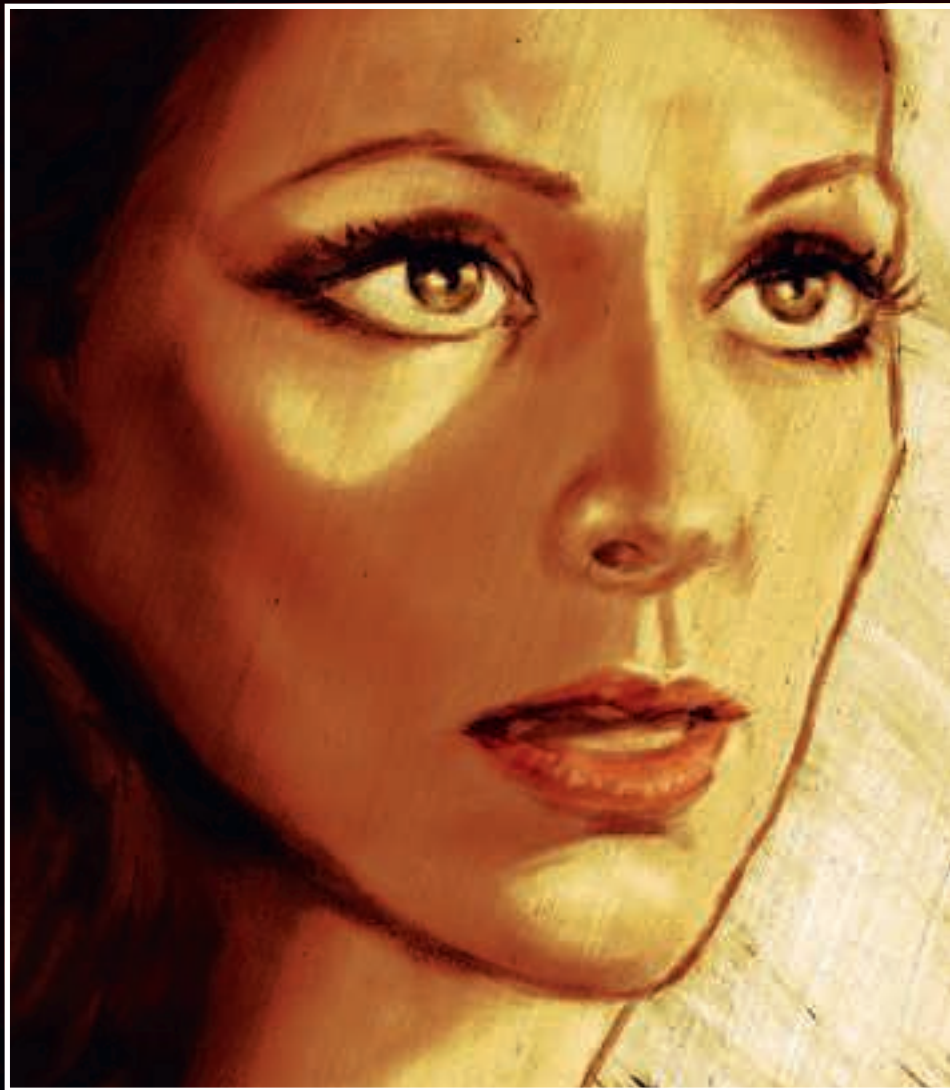
This brings us to Luciano Ercoli, who directed three interesting *gialli* in rapid succession at the start of the 1970s. Ercoli is not revered in the same way as Bava or Argento, and for good reason, but the three thrillers he directed – *The Forbidden Photos of a Lady Above Suspicion* (1970), *Death Walks on High Heels* (1971) and *Death Walks at Midnight* (1972) – are all well worth seeing, especially if you're threatening to burn out over too many revisits to *Deep Red* or *Tenebrae* (1982).

Luciano Ercoli was born in 1929 and entered films as a producer in 1961. In this capacity, he was responsible for such films as the comic *giallo* *What Ever Happened to Baby Toto?* (1964) as well as such above average Spaghetti Westerns as *A Pistol for Ringo*, *The Return of Ringo* (both 1965) and *The Ruthless Four* (1968). In 1970, he turned to directing with the aforementioned *The Forbidden Photos of a Lady Above Suspicion*. *Forbidden Photos* was firmly rooted in the "sexy *giallo*" tradition popularized by such films as Romolo Guerrieri's *The Sweet Body of Deborah* and Umberto Lenzi's *Orgasmo* (both 1969), and while it suffered from *longeurs* in its execution it also offered up some stylish and occasionally steamy imagery, set to a glorious soundtrack by maestro Ennio Morricone.

The film's success prompted Ercoli to follow up with another thriller, *Death Walks on High Heels*, which was more-or-less in a similar vein. Both films were written by the gifted and prolific Ernesto Gastaldi (born 1934), whose role in the creation and evolution of the *giallo* on film should never be underestimated. When the time came for their next collaboration, Ercoli and Gastaldi were joined by another significant Italian genre cinema icon: writer/director Sergio Corbucci (1927-1990). It was Corbucci who devised the scenario, perhaps with an eye towards directing it himself, but when the time came to make the film, it was Ercoli who took charge, with Gastaldi putting his own unique imprint on the material as well.

Ercoli and Gastaldi would reunite one last time on *The Magnificent Dare Devil* (1973), but though it is sometimes credited as being a *giallo*, in truth it is more of an action-adventure with some thriller elements. Ercoli would go on to direct a pretty good *poliziottesco*, *Killer Cop* (aka *The Police Can't Move*, 1975), but by the end of the decade he washed his hands of the film industry for good; he came into a large inheritance and elected to rest on his laurels. Luciano Ercoli died in Spain in early 2015, mostly forgotten by the world at large but still remembered by loyal Eurocultists thanks to his stylish and energetic films of the 1970s.

While there is much to enjoy in *Forbidden Photos* and *High Heels*, I would argue that *Death Walks*





at *Midnight* is Ercoli's masterpiece. The film sees the director and his collaborators going for broke, building upon earlier ideas and expanding them into something altogether more unusual. The style is more aggressive, the music is louder and more outré, and the violence is ratcheted up considerably compared to his earlier films. There are some quotations from earlier *gialli*, but ultimately the film is very much its own entity. The tone is light and even a bit flippant, but the director does not shy away from embracing the seedier and more vicious aspects of the genre either. The story borrows the gimmick of a murder witnessed by somebody under the influence of drugs from Mario Bava's *The Girl Who Knew Too Much* (1963), which is hardly surprising when one considers that Corbucci had a hand in writing that seminal *giallo*. It is all updated to a more "swinging '70s" sensibility, however, with plenty of groovy discotheque sequences and gloriously artificial settings and costumes. Beyond that, it also retains the idea of the spunky and resourceful heroine who is not about to take being made a fool of lightly. Our heroine, Valentina, is one of the strongest female leads in a *giallo* of this vintage. She is resilient, tough, can throw a mean punch and plays an active rather than a passive or merely decorative role in the proceedings.

Aficionados with a streak of bloodlust will be relieved to hear that this one doesn't skimp on the red sauce. Updating an idea found in Bava's earlier *Blood and Black Lace*, the killer uses a blade-lined metal glove to mutilate his victims. The image of the glove being rammed repeatedly into the faces of the victims, as chunks of flesh are seen being ripped out and blood spurts most convincingly, is not one for the squeamish and helps to give the film a more brutal edge compared to Ercoli's earlier thrillers.

A good *giallo* is also distinguished by its visual sensibility, and *Death Walks at Midnight* is a firm winner in this department as well. The cinematography by Fernando Arribas is loaded with memorable images, whether it be a flashy set-up like the image of one victim's reflection being shown in the killer's dark glasses or in the skillfully composed wide-angle shots. Ercoli and Arribas work to ensure that the dialogue scenes have ample visual interest in them, thus ensuring that the film does not fall into the trap of only coming to life during its murder set-pieces. The J&B flows with regularity, too, so much so that Simón Andreu is heard explicitly ordering it at the bar in one scene. The music score by Gianni Ferrio is also quite infectious, and helps to set the right tone.

Born in 1924, Ferrio entered films as a composer in 1959 and would go on to have a prolific career. His other *giallo* soundtracks include *Death Occurred Last Night* (1970), *The Bloodstained Butterfly* (1971) and *Crime of Passion* (1994), but his output encompassed such diverse popular genres as Spaghetti Westerns (*Don't Turn the Other Cheek!*, 1971), spy thrillers (*Danger!! Death Ray*, 1967), *polizotteschi* (*Tony Arzenta*, 1973) and even softcore (*Sexy Susan Knows How...!*, 1970). Ferrio remained active into the mid-'90s, but his output slowed down considerably after that point; he died in 2013. His name is not referenced as much as that of Morricone or Riz Ortolani among genre fans, but his work on this film in particular ensures him a place in the pantheon of great *giallo* soundtrack composers. I guarantee you, once you hear the seductive central theme, *Valentina*, you'll be humming it for days, if not weeks.

Speaking of Valentina, she is played by one of the genre's most beautiful and perpetually underappreciated actresses: Nieves Navarro, billed here, as usual, under her *nom de plume* of Susan Scott. Her portrayal of Valentina is sympathetic without becoming cloying. She is tough and does not suffer fools gladly, and her interaction with the men in her life leaves one in no doubt that she is a very modern and emancipated character indeed. Ercoli ensures that she looks her best throughout, with the arguable exception of a, let's say, peculiar hairstyle she sports in one of the nightclub scenes; that Ercoli seems so smitten with her here and in his earlier *gialli* is hardly surprising when one realizes that she would marry the director in 1972 and remain by his side until his death in 2015. Navarro makes the best of some witty dialogue and seems to really be enjoying a rare opportunity to take center-stage for the duration of the picture. It's a pity that so few filmmakers seemed to really appreciate what a compelling presence she had on screen, but *Death Walks at Midnight* certainly provides her with her best showcase.

Navarro was born in Spain in 1938 and made her film debut in 1965, in the Spaghetti Westerns *A Pistol for Ringo* and *The Return of Ringo*, starring the late Giuliano Gemma. Navarro's striking looks and willingness to dispense with her wardrobe made her a popular fixture in various genre films, ranging from Spaghetti Westerns to horror films to sexy comedies; she even appeared in the borderline hardcore *Emanuelle and Lolita* (1976), in the role of Emanuelle. While Ercoli was content to enjoy the pleasures of an early retirement, Navarro would continue to make sporadic film appearances as late as 1991. In addition to her appearances in Ercoli's *gialli*, she also appeared in such sordid gems as *All the Colors of the Dark* and *So Sweet, So Dead*, both released in 1972.

Navarro's would-be knight in shining armor in *Midnight* is played by another *giallo* veteran: Simón Andreu. Andreu has good chemistry with Navarro (they had already appeared together in *Forbidden Photos* and *High Heels*) and he manages to make the potentially sleazy character of Gio into a rather endearing figure. Andreu was born in Spain in 1941, and his genre credits include *gialli* like *Death Carries a Cane* (1973) and the well-remembered Spanish horror item *The Blood Spattered Bride* (1972). He remains active in the European film scene. The supporting cast includes an appearance by the ultra-creepy Luciano Rossi (1934-2005), who appears as a maniacally giggling drug pusher with a sadistic streak. Rossi excelled in the type of perverse characterizations one normally associates with Klaus Kinski, and indeed the two actors would be united a short time later in Aristide Massaccesi's morbid Gothic chiller *Death Smiles on a Murderer* (1973), a film which is inaccurately bracketed with the *giallo* genre in some sources.

Death Walks at Midnight remains one of the genre's most purely enjoyable diversions. It may not be in quite the same class as the best of the best, but it certainly stands out as an agreeably quirky and off-kilter entry. Thanks in no small measure to the extraordinary music of Gianni Ferrio and the fetching looks and fine acting by Nieves Navarro, it is a film with a loyal cult following – and now that it is finally preserved in its best condition in High Definition, I suspect the cult will continue to grow and grow.

Troy Howarth is the author of So Deadly, So Perverse, a three-volume study of the giallo on film published by Midnight Marquee Press (<http://www.midmar.com>).







THE COMEDY STYLINGS OF THE "YELLOW" GENRE

by Leonard Jacobs

Kevin Grant, writing about how humor grew increasingly pronounced in late-stage Spaghetti Westerns, singles out two major reasons for the trend: First, market forces. Some filmmakers tried to fight the oversaturation of the market – and the declining box office that resulted – by aggressively mixing the conventions of other genres with their Westerns. They did this even when it pushed the genre to a point of self-parody. Says Grant, “Italy’s popular filmmakers have a longstanding tradition of rapidly following a commercial or critical success with a scabrous spoof of their own.” Secondly, Grant argues that the “Euro-Western,” from its start, already contained a latent form of comedy, with “Euro-Western ... protagonists exhibiting a dry, devilish wit as they went about their brutal business”. As market saturation grew, filmmakers began exaggerating this wit, taking what was implied and making it, at times, ridiculously explicit.¹

Likewise, we can find these same comedic trends at work in another popular Italian genre, the *giallo*. In the *giallo*, there is both an inherent “tendency to comedy” (which exists in even the most seminal of *gialli*) and a deliberate attempt to reignite the genre’s popularity by dowsing it in *commedia all’italiana*. Viewing Luciano Ercoli’s two *Death Walks* films in this context – as part of a larger tradition of comedy/*giallo* hybrids – is one way to appreciate their peculiar charms.

TWO KINDS OF COMEDY

Dario Argento’s *gialli* are nothing if not seminal (and, of course, endlessly influential) in the genre. And part of the mold his films helped mint includes regular comic relief. Consider, for instance, the character of the stuttering pimp in *The Bird with the Crystal Plumage* (1970) and how his remedy for stuttering – ending every sentence with “so long” – becomes a running joke in the film. Or how, in the same film, we get a police lineup of “perverts” that includes a cross-dresser who goes by the name of “Ursula Andress”. When the police inspector berates his colleague for mistakenly including Andress in this deviant group – “How many times do I have to tell you, Ursula Andress belongs with

1 - For more on this topic, see the chapter “Hybrid Westerns: The Influence of Horror, Humour and the Martial Arts,” found in Grant’s 2011 FAB Press book, *Any Gun Can Play: The Essential Guide to Euro-Westerns*.





the transvestites, not the perverts!” – Address shows comic indignation: “Well, I should hope so!” Or take the funeral expo in *Four Flies on Grey Velvet* (1971), where two of the film’s heroes – played by Michael Brandon and Bud Spencer² – discuss the best way to combat the killer while strolling through increasingly absurd examples of the latest in coffin chic. Or the “battle of the sexes” arm-wrestling match between Daria Nicolodi and David Hemmings in perhaps the most famous *giallo* of all, 1975’s *Deep Red*. In all of these examples, we see Argento using bits of comedy as relief from the otherwise gruesome, tense, even horrific elements of his mystery-thrillers. Though noticeable, they are never so pronounced as to overwhelm the thriller aesthetic and, at times, even succeed in being the most organic parts of the script.³

The market-driven version of comedy, on the other hand, is anything but organic. It’s injected in doses so high that it threatens to overwhelm the very *giallo*-ness of the film. This includes a tradition of Italian comedians being cast as the *giallo*’s stock “amateur detective” character. Examples include 1972’s *I due gattoni a nove code... e mezza ad Amsterdam*, starring none other than Italian comedy duo Franco Franchi and Ciccio Ingrassia (who would also star in many comedy-Westerns), and 1977’s *Il mostro* (aka *The Fiend*), starring Italian showman Johnny Dorelli. That movie opens with Dorelli at a theater, watching none other than Ercoli’s *Death Walks on High Heels*. Outside, in the lobby, he complains at length about what he sees as the *giallo*’s major flaws (according to him, the whole genre is “bullshit”).

The market also gave us those comedy/*giallo* hybrids that tried to have it both ways, splitting their running time almost equally between thriller set-pieces and pratfall routines. These films often feel at odds with themselves, even schizophrenic.⁴ Two examples from this tradition – linked, particularly, to Ercoli’s films – are two other *Death* films made by a single director: *Death Carries a Cane* (1973) and *Death Steps in the Dark* (1977), both directed by Maurizio Pradeaux.

Like Ercoli’s films, *Death Carries a Cane* has Nieves Navarro in a lead role. And it sets up her character promisingly enough: While using a sightseeing telescope, she accidentally witnesses a black-gloved killer murdering an unknown woman. Navarro springs into action, and Pradeaux’s film, for a bit, seems like it’s going to give us something akin to *Death Walks at Midnight* – a female amateur sleuth who will spend the film as the audience’s proxy while she tries to solve the murder

2 - Spencer, of course, was an icon of Italian comedy Westerns, forming one of the most famous duos in the genre with his onscreen partner Terence Hill (in, among other things, the *Trinity* films). Spencer also brought his comedy aesthetic to the Eurocrime genre in the *Flatfoot* series. His presence in both is case-in-point for the way that popular Italian genres, after reaching a certain point in their “shelf life,” tried to recapture public interest by changing up their perceived formulas.

3 - I’m thinking especially of the subtle comedy delivered by John Saxon’s character in 1982’s *Tenebrae*. Things like Saxon’s head-swivelling routine with his “beloved Borsalino hat” or his exasperated phone exchange with a sloshed client.

4 - The closest contemporary analogue of this hybrid form is Astron-6’s *The Editor* (2014), which also adds a level of genre nostalgia and deliberate self-reflexivity that probably wasn’t possible in Italy in the 1970s.







she's seen. Instead, Pradeaux quickly abandons the narrative importance of her character, and is content to place her in ridiculous and humiliating situations as some form of comic relief. Most egregious is her use in the film's climax. Navarro has accompanied two other characters who, under cover of darkness, break into a local dance academy in search of documents that will prove the killer's identity. Not once, but *twice* during this break-in, Navarro's character interrupts the action to declare (at least according to the English dub) "I gotta go pee-pee!"

Though *Cane* is the least comedic of Pradeaux's two, the comedy that's there is fatal. It forces a logic on the narrative that isn't believable in anything but the broadest of comedies. And it reveals a pacing and "put together" that suggests Pradeaux really doesn't have a clue when it comes to fashioning a successful *giallo*. Also, unlike in Ercoli's films, Pradeaux's attempts at adding humor to Navarro's character only succeed in canceling out her natural charisma. Gone is that irrepressible, bubbling-over smile that dominates both of her dance routines in *High Heels* – dance routines that should be about sex, but that also feel, because she is at the center of them, irrepressible and joyful. Gone is her patented version of the genre's damsel-in-distress, one who actually has agency, and ability, and a slightly off-kilter energy to boot. In *Cane*, in its place, is cartoon characterization and cringe-inducing "humor". It's an example of the worst comedic tendencies in the genre, tendencies that only get amplified in Pradeaux's next *Death* film.

In *Death Steps in the Dark*, Pradeaux fully embraces the comedic angle, creating a film that is one half Argento-aping thriller (complete with repeated shots of the oft-imitated "Argento eye") and one-half *Three Stooges* routine. The movie opens in almost perfect *giallo* fashion: We're introduced to a motley crew of genre types, all traveling together on the Istanbul-Athens train. There's a suspicious priest, a prickish fashion photographer, a bearded lothario and a nervous woman who keeps playing with a string of pearls. We are given a series of disorienting POV shots inside the train that lack any context (other than the context that all *giallo* fans have – that when we get these shots, we are getting the killer's POV). We watch the killer enter one of the bathrooms on the train and sabotage an electrical box on the wall. This sabotage proves key to the murder of the woman with the pearls – as the train enters a tunnel, all the lights in the compartment fail, and the woman is knifed in the titular dark.

After we witness the murder, we realize that the opening was at least partially a flashback, elicited by a police detective interviewing each of the passengers. The fashion photographer (played by Leonard Mann) appears to be the prime suspect, even though he claims he has been framed (it was his knife used to stab the woman in the dark). And it is after he's named the most likely suspect that the movie goes into live-action cartoon mode. While on the run from police, he poses as a female prostitute down by the docks – even though his cross-dressed disguise is outwardly ridiculous, played for stupid laughs, and wouldn't manage to disguise him for a second. Later on, Mann's character rents a hideout from an old black-market buddy, a shack that's built dangerously close to a busy set of train tracks. Every time a train passes, the shack and everything in it shakes like a prop from a Wile E. Coyote cartoon. Mann rushes around the vibrating shack in a panic,

trying to keep pots and pans from hitting the floor. Toward the end of the movie, Mann and a few accomplices (friends who believe him innocent) break into a house in order to burgle the contents of a safe – contents that supposedly prove his innocence... except, none of them know how to crack a safe. So, after breaking in, they sit in the dark and read a manual on safe-cracking (!). What makes the scene even more jarring is that it cross-cuts with a gory throat-slashing taking place (unbeknownst to the safe-crackers) in a room next door. We get stomach-churning gore alongside slapstick. It is, in microcosm, everything that fails to work in the worst comedy/*giallo* hybrids.

THE GENRE BRILLIANCE OF NIEVES NAVARRO

Whereas Pradeaux's *Death Steps in the Dark* plays a kind of double game – splitting the film into competing halves, comedy vs. *giallo* – Ercoli's two films take elements of comedy and successfully fold them into the larger whole.

Part of this success, no doubt, comes because so many of those elements are found in Navarro's performance. It's in that ballsy, indignant moment when she wings the rock at smug Simón Andreu's head, breaking a window just to prove a point – that she'll no longer allow him to mess her about. It's in the way her dialogue goes from pleasant and professional to annoyed and impatient while ascending the floors of her office and being repeatedly told that her boss wants to see her. A scene that is nothing more than an exterior shot of a building, which the camera climbs, and audio of Navarro's dialogue coming from "inside". The scene – its comedic success – is solely down to Navarro's handling of the voiceover, her delivery and timing of the lines. It's in the way she playfully crosses her eyes and sticks out her tongue at the pub locals who are, she knows very well, spending all their time gossiping about her salacious presence in their village. It's scene after scene of a natural chemistry – charisma – all residing behind that indefatigable grin.⁵

All this adds up to an energetic, entertaining balance – a gore-tinged thriller *and* an incorrigible comedy, a film that is both unabashedly sexual *and* unabashedly fun. It's what makes Ercoli's *Death Walks* films two of the finest examples of comedy *gialli* – examples that prove *gialli* don't have to be humorless just to be taken seriously.

Leonard Jacobs maintains the blog *Krimi in the Pocket, Giallo on the Brain* (<http://krimi-giallo-casebook.blogspot.com>).

5 - There are of course other examples of comedy in both of Ercoli's films. In *Midnight* we get the running gag about Simón Andreu's character always looking for a light (mirrored by the inspector being repeatedly interrupted while trying to take a sip of coffee in *High Heels*). Or the way that the musical cue for George Rigaud's sea captain character is a ponderous, humorous "nautical" tune. In all these cases, the relative restraint shown in their execution – never lapsing into full-on parody, never played too broadly – is what allows them to still feel of a piece with the thriller mode.

















DEATH WALKS

ON HIGH HEELS

Death Walks on High Heels (*La morte cammina con i tacchi alti*) has been exclusively restored in 2K resolution for this release by Arrow Films and is presented in its original aspect ratio of 2.35:1 with mono 1.0 sound.

All work on this new restoration was carried out at L'Immagine Ritrovata, Bologna. The original 35mm 2-perf Techniscope camera negative was scanned in 2K resolution on a pin-registered Arriscan and was graded on Digital Vision's Nucoda Film Master.

Thousands of instances of dirt, debris and light scratches were removed through a combination of digital restoration tools. Overall image stability and instances of density fluctuation were also improved.

The film's original Italian and English mono soundtracks were transferred from the original 35mm optical sound negatives using the Sondor OMA/E with COSP Xi2K technology to minimise optical noise and produce the best quality results possible.

There are times in which the film's audio synch will appear slightly loose against the picture, due to the fact that the soundtrack was recorded entirely in post-production. This is correct and as per the original theatrical release of *Death Walks on High Heels*.

Restoration Supervised by James White, Arrow Films

Restoration Services: L'Immagine Ritrovata, Bologna

Original film and audio elements and reference materials were made available for this restoration by Intramovies.

Special Thanks: Simone Arminio, Gilles Barberis, Valeria Bigongiali, Paola Mantovani/
Intramovies, Julia Mettenleiter, Alessia Navantieri, Caterina Palpaceli, Davide Pozzi,
Elena Tammaccaro/L'Immagine Ritrovata

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Arrow Films
film restoration
& conservation
ir

DEATH WALKS

AT MIDNIGHT

Death Walks at Midnight (La morte accarezza a mezzanotte) has been exclusively restored in 2K resolution for this release by Arrow Films and is presented in its original aspect ratio of 2.35:1 with mono 1.0 sound.

All work on this new restoration was carried out at L'Immagine Ritrovata, Bologna. The original 35mm 2-perf Techniscope camera negative has been lost, so an original 4-perf 35mm Internegative was scanned in 2K resolution on a pin-registered Arriscan and was graded on Digital Vision's Nucoda Film Master.

Thousands of instances of dirt, debris and light scratches were removed through a combination of digital restoration tools. Overall image stability and instances of density fluctuation were also improved.

The film's original Italian and English mono soundtracks were transferred from the original 35mm optical sound negatives using the Sondor OMA/E with COSP Xi2K technology to minimise optical noise and produce the best quality results possible.

There are times in which the film's audio synch will appear slightly loose against the picture, due to the fact that the soundtrack was recorded entirely in post-production. This is correct and as per the original theatrical release of *Death Walks at Midnight*.

At approximately the halfway point of the film, the English audio briefly replaces the Italian audio, as this section of the Italian soundtrack has been lost.

Restoration Supervised by James White, Arrow Films

Restoration Services: L'Immagine Ritrovata, Bologna

Original film and audio elements and reference materials were made available for this restoration by Intramovies.

Special Thanks: Simone Arminio, Gilles Barberis, Valeria Bigongiali, Paola Mantovani/
Intramovies, Julia Mettenleiter, Alessia Navantieri, Caterina Palpaceli, Davide Pozzi,
Elena Tammaccaro/L'Immagine Ritrovata

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Services
by
L'Immagine
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PRODUCTION CREDITS

Disc and Booklet Produced by **Ewan Cant**
Executive Producer: **Francesco Simeoni**
Production Assistant: **Liane Cunje**
Technical Producer: **James White**
QC and Proofing: **Ewan Cant, Nora Mehenni, Michael Mackenzie**
Subtitling: **IBF**
Blu-ray / DVD Mastering: **David Mackenzie**
Artist: **Gilles Vranckx**
Design: **Jack Pemberton**

SPECIAL THANKS

Alex Agran, Federico Caddeo, Stelvio Cipriani, Michele De Angelis, Roberto D'Onofrio,
Andreas Ehrenreich, Ernesto Gastaldi, Bruce Holeccheck, Tim Lucas, Michael Mackenzie,
Nieves Navarro, Luigi Pastore and Gianni Vittori.

The release is dedicated to the memory of Luciano Ercoli.