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THE PYJAMA GIRL CASE

La ragazza dal pigiama giallo
1977

CAST

Ray Milland as Inspector Timpson
Dalia Di Lazzaro as Linda Blythe
Michele Placido as Antonio Attolini
Mel Ferrer as Professor Henry Douglas
Howard Ross as Roy Conner
Ramiro Oliveros as Inspector Ramsey
Rod Mullinar as Inspector Taylor
Giacomo Assandri as Quint
Eugene Walter as Dorsey

CREW

Directed by **Flavio Mogherini**
Produced by **Giorgio Salvioni**
Associate Producer **John Taylor**
Story and Screenplay by **Flavio Mogherini** and **Rafael Sanchez Campoy**
Director of Photography by **Carlo Carlini**
Film Editor **Adriano Tagliavia**
Music by **Riz Ortolani**
Production Designer **Franco Velchi**



STRANGER THAN FICTION: IMMIGRATION, ALIENATION, AND THE REAL PYJAMA GIRL

by Alexandra Heller-Nicholas

On 13 July 1944, a body said to be that of a woman called Linda Agostini was laid to rest in plot L8341 at the Preston Cemetery, an inner northern suburb in the city of Melbourne, Australia. She had no friends or relatives present, but in a gesture drenched with symbolism, four local journalists carried her coffin. No one had claimed the body and the funeral rated only a small article on page three of the local daily newspaper *The Argus*, but Agostini was still a minor celebrity so this central presence of the media made sense. One report noted that around fifty people attended the funeral: mostly women, they brought their kids, their dogs, their knitting. Like much of the public discourse leading to this moment, this was a spectacle, something to do. The Pyjama Girl meant a day out.

The body that was buried on that cold Thursday had been the subject of a mass national fascination for a decade, and still goes down as one of the most macabre and tragic moments of 20th century Australian criminal history. On 1 September 1934, a man famously walking his bull down a rough stretch of road just outside the rural Victorian/New South Wales border town of Albury discovered the body of a young woman at around 9 o'clock in the morning. She had been beaten viciously around the head, shot, and partially burned. Wearing yellow silk pyjamas, the garment inspired the popular shorthand for one of the nation's most intriguing murder investigations: the pyjama girl mystery. Put on public display in a formalin bath in a glass cabinet, investigators hoped this mass exposure would help lead to her identification, but it became something more than that. A visit to see the pyjama girl was a day's entertainment, and the entire fiasco still remains one of the country's most grotesque cultural phenomena.

After many years of national and international news coverage, the highly publicized official police investigation wound down with the identification of the body as 28-year-old Linda Agostini, ruling she was murdered by her husband Antonio. He was an Italian waiter who moved to Melbourne in 1933 – three years after they were married – to work for the fascist newspaper *Giornale Italiano*. Certainly, there remains little debate that this man





murdered his wife, but whether the body found in Albury was in fact Linda Agostini is still contested. In his 2004 book *The Pyjama Girl Mystery: A True Story of Murder, Obsession and Lies*, historian Richard Evans argued convincingly that the police were working from a list of 125 names of missing women who remained “uneliminated and untraced”, and they simply decided on Agostini because it would bring to an end an until-then highly publicised unsolved murder that after so many years was just bad PR. Found guilty of the murder of his wife, Antonio was deported back to Italy and the investigating officers could retire without the case that brought them such notoriety still hanging over them.

Although Evans has often struggled to hide his derision for Flavio Mogherini’s *The Pyjama Girl Case* (*La ragazza dal pigiama giallo*) from 1977 – dismissing it for its lack of fidelity to the actual story, made all the more tasteless to him for its framing through the less-than-refined aesthetics of the horror genre – as he noted so eloquently, “like Ned Kelly, the Pyjama Girl story has floated free from reality. It has become an Australian myth.” But this particular Australian myth – through the identification (or, possibly, misidentification) of the roles of Linda and Antonio Agostini – is significantly linked to the cultural politics of immigration, which even today is a highly volatile, even taboo, subject in Australia, currently notable for its cruel, draconian policies that govern the indefinite offshore imprisonment of asylum seekers. *The Pyjama Girl Case* may not be an accurate film about the real Pyjama Girl case, but – perhaps despite itself – it offers real, lasting insight into the migrant experience in Australia.

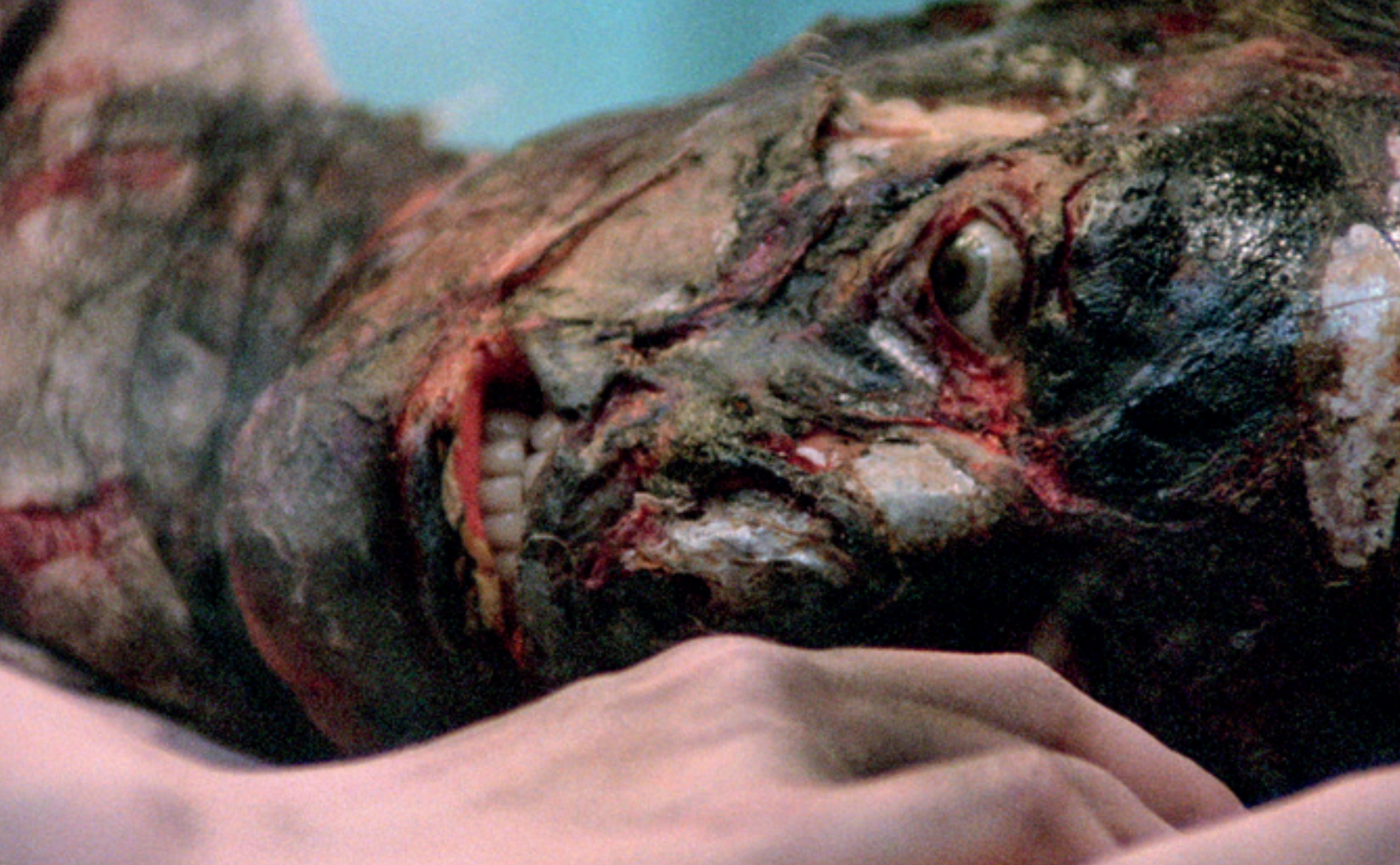
Evans lists a number of other women amongst those 125 names who were alternate possible identities for the girl in the yellow pyjamas: without diminishing the tragedy of their disappearances, one-time possible candidates for the Pyjama Girl’s identity like Anne Philomena Morgan and Beryl Cashmere even have names that sound like they’re straight from a *giallo* film. In this light, Mogherini’s fictional ‘pyjama girl’ Linda Blythe – played by Dalila Di Lazzaro, whose filmography includes *Phenomena* (Dario Argento, 1985) and *Flesh for Frankenstein* (Paul Morrissey and Antonio Margheriti, 1973) – suddenly doesn’t seem so far-fetched. From the film’s opening moments to its final scenes, Glenda and Linda’s stories diverge substantially: Glenda’s body was found in a car on a picturesque suburban Sydney beach, as far from the isolated reality of that rural Albury roadside as can be imagined. Likewise, the film’s conclusion reveals Glenda is buried at a lovely seaside cemetery on top of a hill, a far cry from Linda Agostino’s final resting place in a suburban cemetery in Melbourne that is today nestled between a McDonalds, a mini golf course, and a car wash.

But despite the critical tendency to dismiss the film for its relaxed approach to factuality, in terms of the Australian immigrant experience at least *The Pyjama Girl Case* arguably speaks its own truth in a way that warrants far more attention. Even before the title card

appears, the film presents a postcard-like vision of an Australia seeped in sunshine and surf; a young girl embodies a vision of innocent childhood – resplendent in a floral and lace frock, no less – happily wandering on a beach, weaving between trail-bike riding youths underneath a symbolically soaring eagle kite, all set to the Riz Ortolani’s carefree, joyful soundtrack. And while iconic landmarks like the Sydney Opera House remain striking precisely because of how little it has changed since the late 1970s, from an Australian perspective at least the film at times functions like a veritable time-capsule in other ways: in a sequence where Glenda and Antonio (Michele Placido) walk through Sydney’s inner-city Kings Cross, old signs recall an Australia long forgotten. They walk past old shops like Oliver Men’s Boutique and the defunct Commercial Bank of Australia, and there’s even a blink-and-you’ll-miss it glimpse of a sign for “B. Schwartz: Dental Surgeon”, the clinic of long-time Kings Cross dentist Bella Schwartz whose son Jerry still continues the family business and their highly-regarded Schwartz Foundation charity. When Ray Milland’s Inspector Thompson walks down a street to talk to the bird-cage hoarding Dorsey (played to perfection by Eugene Walter, only slightly less queer here than in his legendary priest in Pupi Avati’s *giallo* *The House with Laughing Windows* the year before), a less Australian-looking row of terrace houses you are unlikely to find. And there’s other relics of this Australia of yore in abundance: neon lights indicating a Westfield shopping centre can be seen from the window of Glenda and Antonio’s apartment, the couple meet at the base of a lovingly shot Qantas building in Sydney’s CBD, and an iconic blue can of Foster’s lager is deployed in what may be the worst poured beer in film history.

In its glossier moments, the Australia of *The Pyjama Girl Case* could on its own function effectively as a pro-immigration ad to the film’s Italian audience, luring them to a land of fun, sun, and sand. But fascinatingly, the film never lets that happen: if this was ever an invitation, it is almost immediately subverted with the discovery of Glenda’s blackened corpse only minutes into the film. As an immigrant, the liminal space of the Outsider is here configured as somehow tragically lost in space and time: as Antonio heartbreakingly tells Glenda at one point looking at a typical Australian ocean: “I like looking at the sea – it reminds me of Italy.” This sense of dislocation is later made explicit when Antonio’s partner in Glenda’s death Roy Conner (Howard Ross) informs the latter as they track her down after she attempts to flee Sydney, they may live in Australia, but they will never belong: “We’re second class citizens. We’re immigrants, remember?”

What remains so fascinating about the film is that – despite being an Italian film and focusing so explicitly on the sense of isolation and alienation of immigrants in Australia – it also silently flags other migrant flows into Australia beyond Italy. Glenda, for example, is Dutch, and as Inspector Thompson tracks down one of his few clues – some grains of rice – he wanders into Sydney’s Chinatown area, a sign clearly showing the famous New Tai Yuen





Restaurant in the Golden Harbour Building on Dixon Street (one of the very few Chinese restaurants from that period still there today). Likewise, in the still-shocking scenes of spectators lining up to see the Pyjama Girl's body on display in her glass coffin that closely mimic the display of the real corpse, from a contemporary perspective what remains so striking about this moment – beyond the degrading spectacle made of the dead woman herself – is how so many African Australians are shown to be part of the community. Watching the film in 2018, it's hard to ignore the current anti-African rhetoric that dominates that Australian tabloid press in their endless unsubstantiated scaremongering campaigns about 'African gangs'. There's something almost depressingly eerie about this 1977 Italian film's vision of a racially diverse Australia that the country still struggles to live up to over forty years later.

From this perspective, if there is a great villain in the film, it is a symbolic power far beyond the lonely, violent misogyny of Roy and Antonio: it is the alienation fostered in them by the dominant colonial paradigm personified by British actor Milland himself. Ray Milland was not exactly at his peak by the time he appeared in this film, both physically or in terms of his career: the suave gent of *The Uninvited* (Lewis Allen, 1944) and *Dial M for Murder* (Alfred Hitchcock, 1954) has been usurped here by a figure who effectively plays out on-screen as a bloated, anachronistic has-been, the perfect (although perhaps unintended) personification of colonial power. Milland's Inspector Thompson might be part of the institutional body that solves the crime but there's something unspoken in the film that implies it is the very alienation of immigrants like Antonio from the world that Milland represents that drives him over the edge in the first place.

From this perspective, despite being so flagrantly disinterested in maintaining any sustained spirit of fidelity to the story of the 'real' Pyjama Girl (whoever she may be), *The Pyjama Girl Case* perhaps surprisingly speaks in various ways to both the past and future of Australia's migrant history. This movie is so much more than a curious relic or a thoughtless, exploitative retelling of a true crime phenomenon: rather, it is a dark – and at times almost chillingly prescient – reimagining of the experience of being an Outsider in a country still riddled with colonial guilt about its own white history, desperate even today to deflect blame onto more recent new arrivals, be they Italian, Chinese, or African.

Alexandra Heller-Nicholas is a film critic from Melbourne, Australia. She is the author of five books on cult, horror, and exploitation cinema, including *Suspiria* (Auteur, 2016) and *Ms. 45* (Columbia University Press, 2017). She is currently writing a book on art and intertextuality in Italian *giallo* cinema and finalizing the forthcoming book *1000 Women in Horror*.







ABOUT THE TRANSFER

The Pyjama Girl Case/La ragazza dal pigiama giallo is presented in its original aspect ratio of 1.85:1 with Italian and English mono audio. Scanning and restoration work was completed at L'Immagine Ritrovata, Bologna. The original 35mm camera negative was scanned in 2K resolution on a pin-registered Arriscan. Thousands of instances of dirt, debris, scratches, picture instability and other instances of film wear were repaired or removed through a combination of digital restoration tools and techniques. The mono Italian and English language tracks were remastered from the optical sound negatives. The audio synch will appear slightly loose against the picture, due to the fact that the dialogue was recorded entirely in post-production, as per the production standards of the period.

The film was graded on Digital Vision's Nucoda Film Master at R3Store Studios, London.

All original materials used in this restoration were accessed from Surf Film.

Restoration supervised by James White, Arrow Films

L'Immagine Ritrovata:

Simone Arminio, Gilles Barberis, Valeria Bigongiali, Julia Mettenleiter, Alessia Navantieri, Charlotte Oddo, Caterina Palpacelli, Davide Pozzi, Elena Tammaccaro, Giandomenico Zeppa

R3Store Studios:

Gerry Gedge, Jo Griffin, Andrew O'Hagan, Rich Watson, Jenny Collins

Surf Film:

Stefania Carnevale

PRODUCTION CREDITS

Disc and Booklet Produced by **Michael Mackenzie**

Executive Producers **Kevin Lambert, Francesco Simeoni**

Technical Producer **James White**

QC Manager **Nora Mehenni**

Blu-ray Mastering **Fidelity in Motion / David Mackenzie**

Subtitling **The Engine House**

Artist **Chris Malbon**

Design **Obviously Creative**

SPECIAL THANKS

Alex Agran, Manlio Gomasasca, Alexandra Heller-Nicholas, Troy Howarth, Peter Jilmstad,
David Mackenzie, Howard Ross, Alberto Tagliavia



AV164 / FCD1790