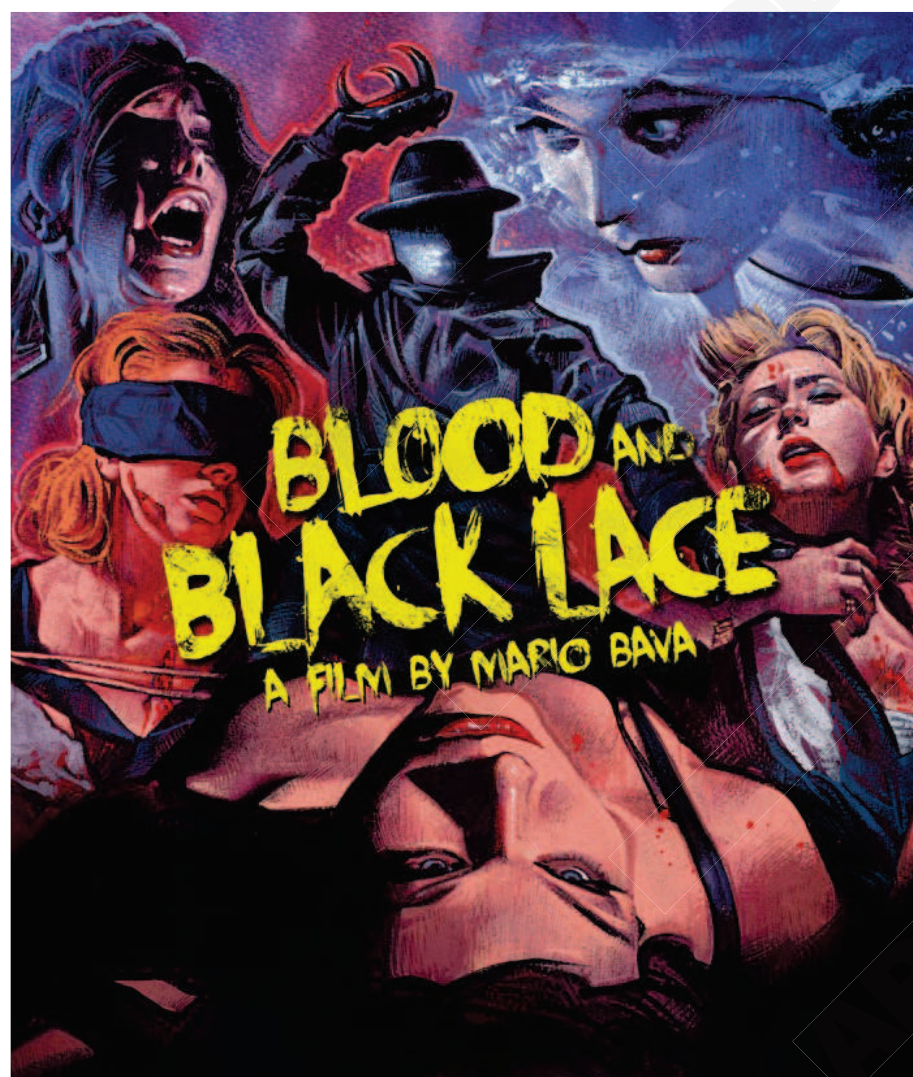


BLOOD AND BLACK GLOVES

Michael Mackenzie on the Giallo



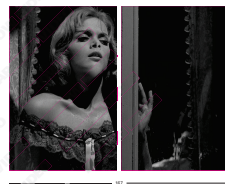
Artwork by Graham Humphreys

Film historians David Bordwell and Kristin Thompson state that “a genre is easier to recognise than to define”. Rarely has this seemed more relevant than when referring to the *giallo* – a sensual, stylish and luridly violent body of Italian murder-mystery films which, like the American *films noir* which preceded them by a few decades, responded to a unique set of sociocultural upheavals and were therefore influenced as much by the period in which they were produced as by generic conventions. The Italians have a specific term to describe this phenomenon: *filone*, meaning ‘vein’ or ‘streamlet’. These faddish, often highly derivative genres each tended to enjoy a brief spell of immense popularity and prolificacy before fading into obscurity as quickly as they first appeared, their creative potential (and their audience’s appetite for more of the same) exhausted. Throughout its long and colourful history, the Italian film industry has borne witness to the rise and fall of an almost mind-boggling number of *filoni*, ranging from Spaghetti Westerns to high-octane *poliziotteschi* crime thrillers to playful sex romps. There is something uniquely compelling about the *giallo*, however, that not only allows it to stand the test of time but also invites repeat viewings – the better to unpick their hidden meanings.

The word ‘*giallo*’ is the Italian for ‘yellow’, and derives

from the yellow jackets of the plethora of detective novels that began to saturate the Italian market in the late 1920s, among them translations of the works of authors as diverse as Arthur Conan Doyle, Raymond Chandler and Agatha Christie. The *giallo* film is something altogether different and more narrowly defined, emerging in the early 1960s and enjoying a brief spell of immense popularity in the early-to-mid 1970s. The conventions of these films have been well-established elsewhere and are iconic enough that even those without an intimate knowledge of the genre can recognise them: the black gloves, hat and trench coat that disguise the killer’s identity and gender; the modern urban locales which provide a backdrop to the carnage that unfolds; the ‘whodunit’ investigative narratives with their high body counts and multitude of suspects and red herrings; the amateur detective who is often a foreign tourist in a major European city; the lush lounge scores by composers such as Ennio Morricone, Bruno Nicolai and Stelvio Cipriani; the allusions to animals in the titles, which often have little to do with the content of the films themselves... Critic Stephen Thrower defines the mood of the *giallo* as “one of moral decay and cynicism, with ever more convoluted plots emphasising morbid details in a Janus-faced world of paranoia and betrayal” – and that cuts straight to the central conceit of these films: everyone is guilty

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