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# CAST

**Anita Ekberg** Sister Gertrude

**Paola Morra** Sister Mathieu

**Alida Valli** Mother Superior

**Massimo Serato** Dr. Poirret

**Daniele Dublino** Hospital Director

**Lou Castel** Peter

**Joe Dallesandro** Dr. Patrick Roland

**Laura Nucci** The Baroness

**Alice Gherardi** Nurse

**Sofia Lusy** Janet

**Nerina Montagnani** Josephine

# CREW

Directed by **Giulio Berruti**

Produced by **Enzo Gallo**

Based on an idea by **Enzo Gallo**

Written by **Alberto Tarallo, Giulio Berruti**

Editor **Mario Giacco**

Director of Photography **Antonio Maccoppi**

Music by **Alessandro Alessandroni**

Production Designer **Franco Vanorio**

Unit Manager **Giancarlo Funaro**



# KILLER NUN TEXT AND CONTEXT

by Andreas Ehrenreich

The film *Killer Nun* (*Suor Omicidi*, 1979), which deals with homicidal and promiscuous nuns working in a psychiatric hospital, seems like a unique and absurd cinematic spectacle. But considering the historical situation from which the movie emerged, it does not appear quite so extraordinary. After discussing the economic and generic context in which *Killer Nun* was situated, the film's peculiar narrative and aesthetics will be discussed offering a close reading of the film's opening sequence as well as a consideration of Anita Ekberg's noteworthy performance.

## An Ailing Industry

In the late 1970s, the heyday of the Italian film industry was over. While 525 million tickets had been sold in 1970, a decade later this number had reduced drastically to 242 million, i.e. more than half of the domestic ticket sales.<sup>1</sup> Within the same decade, the country lost about a quarter of its cinemas.<sup>2</sup>

Traditionally, Italy's exhibition sector was divided in three groups according to ticket price, comfort and location. First-run cinemas were usually elegant venues located in the city center high admission prices for the newest films. Having exhausted the most profitable circuit, a movie would be relegated to second-run cinemas where patrons paid lower prices. The third-run cinemas, often located in urban working-class neighborhoods and rural communities, represented the final stage of theatrical exploitation. For a small fee, cinema-goers could enjoy films which had previously run in the more prestigious circuits. Whereas the latter screened each film for continuous periods, third-run theaters changed their program on a daily basis. Distributors were keen to place their products in first-run houses as the high admission charged in these cinemas allowed them to recoup expenses rapidly.<sup>3</sup> Sometimes, when a film was not in high demand, it was directly launched in the second or third-run circuit. Although such venues charged low fees, the economic impact of the minor circuits should not be underestimated. Especially during the 1950s and 1960s, these cinemas were regularly attended by vast audiences and often provided a significant share of the domestic revenue of popular genre movies.

Whereas in 1970 only 1.6% of all movie theaters belonged to the first-run category, ten years later this applied to 92% of all cinemas in Italy.<sup>4</sup> Hence, the three-tiered system unraveled in just a decade. Television, which commanded a rapidly growing audience, absorbed much of the fare that had previously populated the minor circuits. Many venues that had belonged to the second and third-run circuits were shut down or transformed into porn cinemas.<sup>5</sup> Offering erotic content, which could not be programmed on television, constituted a strategy to lure audiences back to the movie theaters.

The decline in ticket sales and cinemas not only concerned Italy but markets all over the world. This had significant consequences for film export which represented an important source of income for many Italian filmmakers. For decades, the film industry in Italy had depended on North American cinemagoers. Since the end of the Second World War, the US market had been a steady buyer of Italian art-house and genre films, as the major studios did not supply enough product to fulfil the demand of the domestic exhibition sector. At the beginning of the 1970s, the US studios managed to consolidate their business.<sup>6</sup> The Motion Picture Production Code, a means of self-censorship established by the majors in the 1930s, was abolished in 1966. Hence, American distributors and exhibitors did not rely on the import of risqué films from foreign countries anymore.<sup>7</sup> Like the domestic audience, the demand for Italian films from distributors outside of Italy diminished.

Giulio Berruti's movie *Killer Nun* can be seen as a reaction to an aggravating economic situation in which filmmakers attempted to make money through an emphasis on screen violence and eroticism. As weird as a film about a murderous nun appears today, Berruti's work was certainly situated in a continuous thematic preoccupation with the clergy and religious institutions specific to Italian cinema during the 1960s and 1970s.

### Italian Nunsplotation Cinema

Alongside pornographic films like *Images in a Convent (Immagini di un convento, 1979)*, *The True Story of the Nun of Monza (La vera storia della monaca di Monza, 1980)* and *The Other Hell (L'altro inferno, 1981)*, *Killer Nun* represented the historical culmination of a popular film cycle about nuns, monks and convents dubbed nunsplotation. As a country with a staunch Catholic tradition, religious themes were always relevant in Italian culture, whether it was literature or, more recently, cinema.

Besides clergy-related topics in the works of Renaissance authors Giovanni Boccaccio and Pietro Aretino, a scandal that occurred in a monastery in Monza, close to Milan, in the 17<sup>th</sup> century proved to be highly influential. In 1588, a girl from an aristocratic family was forced to join a cloister. After some time, the involuntary nun developed a relationship

with a count living nearby and gave birth to two babies, one of which was stillborn. The illegitimate affair continued for years and involved the murder of several confidants who threatened to reveal it. Due to tenacious rumors about excesses in the abbey, an official investigation was launched. In 1607, a trial took place. Sister Virginia, the unchaste nun, confessed under torture and received a life sentence. After being walled in for 14 years in an institution for ex-prostitutes, the prisoner was released and lived in the asylum until her death in 1650. Through Alessandro Manzoni's *The Betrothed (I promessi sposi)* from 1827, the melodramatic fate of Sister Virginia became part of world literature. In Manzoni's novel, the nun's name is Gertrude, which Giulio Berruti would take up in *Killer Nun*.

Besides many adaptations in all kinds of media, the Monza scandal constituted the perfect material for films. At the beginning, such movies turned out to be rather serious dramas with an attractive cast. After a 1947 adaptation entitled *La monaca di Monza* ('The Lady of Monza') starring later Hollywood export Rossano Brazzi, the drama about Sister Virginia became a successful cinematic property with the 1962 version featuring Giovanna Ralli, Gabriele Ferzetti and Gino Cervi, again entitled *La monaca di Monza* (see Table 1 for box-office statistics). This was the penultimate work by veteran director Carmine Gallone who had started his career in the early 1910s. In 1963, Gallone's film resulted in Sergio Corbucci's equally lucrative parody *The Monk of Monza (Il monaco di Monza, 1963)*, a Totò vehicle with a musical number featuring famed Italian musician Adriano Celentano. The same year also saw the release of Luciano Salce's star-studded comedy *The Little Nuns (Le monachine)*, however, its impressive cast that included Catherine Spaak, Amedeo Nazzari, Lando Buzzanca and Sylva Koscina was not reflected in the film's domestic revenues. Drama and comedy would remain the most important generic frameworks for narratives about the clergy throughout the 1960s and 1970s.

Except for the award-winning drama *A Nun at the Crossroads (Encrucijada para una monja, 1967)*, a co-production between Italy and Spain starring Rossana Schiaffino and John Richardson, the interest in melodramas with a religious background cooled down for several years, until Eriprando Visconti, the nephew of the famous director, landed a surprise hit with a project that his uncle had abandoned. Based on a screenplay co-written by Edward Bond, *The Lady of Monza (La monaca di Monza, 1969)* grossed £1.5 billion at the domestic box office. Only a fraction of all Italian films managed to take in more than £1 billion, so Visconti's drama, which featured Anne Heywood, Hardy Krüger and Antonio Sabato was extraordinarily successful. Still in the same year, the Lando Buzzanca vehicle *Puro siccome un angelo papà mifece monaco... di Monza* ('Purely Because my Father Made me a Monk... of Monza') was released, but the movie was not yet part of the later wave of sexy parodies in medieval settings which would often involve nuns and monks. Whereas there were several highly successful historical-themed films outperforming £1 billion in



the second half of the 1960s, it took some time until the boom of erotic comedies loosely inspired by Boccaccio and Aretino ultimately commenced. Maybe producers deemed projects like *The Lady of Monza*, the satire *Brancaleone's Army* (*L'armata Brancaleone*, 1966) and Fellini's *Satyricon* (*Fellini Satyricon*, 1969) which depended on lavish costumes and sets, as too expensive to be copied. Often, small and medium production companies attempted to cash in on extraordinarily lucrative films and churned out similar fare made with low budgets. Despite several promising textual templates, the Italian production sector was not yet willing to invest in large-scale, raunchy historical comedies. Instead, many filmmakers continued to make gialli, titillating thrillers which were extremely popular with home-grown audiences and did not require costly historical settings.

This changed with the massive revenue of Pasolini's *The Decameron* (*Il Decameron*, 1971), a sensual Boccaccio adaptation that took in £4.4 billion at the Italian box office.<sup>8</sup> Even though pictures in historical settings seemed laborious, small-time producers could not ignore the enormous potential earnings to be made with raunchy historical comedies. Dozens of *decamerotici* hit the Italian screens in 1972. This marked the beginning of the outright sleazy variation of nunsplotation. Just like Pasolini's template, many of these movies did not deal with clerics exclusively, but involved single relevant episodes or characters belonging to the clergy. *The Sinful Nights of Pietro Aretino* (*Le notti peccaminose di Pietro l'Aretino*, 1972) and *Put Your Devil into My Hell* (*Metti lo diavolo tuo ne lo mio inferno*, 1972) were pertinent examples.<sup>9</sup>

Crucially, some such films focused entirely on nuns and, to a lesser extent, monks. The massive worldwide popularity of Ken Russell's *The Devils* (1971) – in Italy, the film was sequestered a number of times<sup>10</sup> – proved that stories about sexually transgressive sisters were able to attract significant audiences. While all movies with nuns in major roles released in 1972 and 1973 fared rather well at the box office, this was a heterogeneous bunch in terms of genre and production values. The Edwige Fenech vehicle *Naughty Nun* (*La bella Antonia, prima Monica e poi Dimonia*, 1972), *Roman Scandals '73* (*Fratello homo sorella bona*, 1972) and *Secret Confessions in a Cloistered Convent* (*Confessioni segrete di un convento di clausura*, 1972), which starred Rosalba Neri and Mark Damon, were all low-budget sex comedies in medieval settings. Sergio Bergonzelli's *Our Lady of Lust* (*Cristiana monaca indemoniata*, 1972) was an exception insofar as it constituted the only contemporary-set entry in the nunsplotation cycle that tells the story of a sex-crazed woman joining a convent to thank God after her plane almost crashed. Although *Our Lady of Lust* and *Secret Confessions in a Cloistered Convent* grossed the lowest sums, it is possible that they recouped the filmmakers' investment through the combination of domestic returns, foreign sales and government subsidies.

The comparably low takings of the German-Italian action picture *Crucified Girls of San Ramon* (*Io monaca... per tre carogne e sette peccatrici*, 1972) that has a machine pistol-wielding nun helping escaped convicts from a women's prison did not pose much of a problem. As the film was presumably a minor co-production for the Italian partner, it is likely that the revenues already recouped the initial investment. *Devils in the Convent* (*Frau Wirtins tolle Töchterlein*, 1973), a co-production between Austria, Germany and Italy, was the sixth instalment of the *Sexy Susan* (*Frau Wirtin*) series and mostly consisted of clips from the previous films about a randy innkeeper held together through a framing narrative set in a convent. *The Monk* (*Le Moine*, 1972) represented the most ambitious of these films, directed by the Greek film critic Adonis Kyrou and starring Franco Nero and Nathalie Delon. An adaptation of the famous Gothic novel by Matthew Lewis, the film was developed from an unrealized project of Luis Buñuel. With its sexualized and violent atmosphere, *The Monk* paved the way for many of the more canonized entries of the nunsplotation cycle and achieved a very good box-office result.

It is a rare and noteworthy coincidence that two films belonging to the same genre excelled the magical limit of £1 billion within two consecutive years. Domenico Paolella's *The Nun and the Devil* (*Le monache di Sant'Arcangelo*, 1973) that featured Anne Heywood, Luc Merenda and Ornella Muti did excellent business, and the same director's *Story of a Cloistered Nun* (*Storia di una monaca di clausura*, 1973) with Catherine Spaak and giallo regular Suzy Kendall, which was quickly released after its predecessor had made so much money, also performed well. In 1974, Gianfranco Mingozzi's *Flavia the Heretic* (*Flavia, la monaca musulmana*), an ultra-brutal vehicle for Florinda Bolkan, earned about £1.2 billion. The most successful entries to the nunsplotation genre released in 1973 and 1974 showcased high-profile actors (some of whom already had experience in the cycle), beautiful sets, lavish costumes and ambitious stories. There were two further nun-related movies from 1974, but they could not compete with the income yielded by Paolella and Mingozzi's works – despite the alluring star power of Barbara Bouchet who starred in *La badessa di Castro*.

After the record intakes in 1973 and 1974, nunsplotation films failed to draw as much money, even though producers tried to vary the formula. *The Novice* (*La novizia*, 1975) with Gloria Guida in the lead role; *Sister Emanuelle* (*Suor Emanuelle*, 1977), an instalment of the *Black Emanuelle* series with Laura Gemser, and the rape-and-revenge movie *The Last House on the Beach* (*La settima donna*, 1978) in which Florinda Bolkan reprised her role as a nun, were all set in the present-day. Interestingly, *The Last House on the Beach* was the least successful of all nunsplotation movies, earning only £25 million. A year before *Killer Nun*, the Polish surrealist Walerian Borowczyk presented his beautifully crafted Italian production *Behind Convent Walls* (*Interno di un convento*) which resorted to a historical setting again. The film, which constituted *Killer Nun* star Paola Morra's debut, was photographed





by Luciano Tovoli whose impressive work for Michelangelo Antonioni, Dario Argento and Valerio Zurlini made him one of the country's most acclaimed cinematographers.

In a nutshell, during the 1960s and 1970s Italian cinema mainly portrayed clergywomen in sensationalistic melodramas, bawdy comedies and horrific dramas about torture and abuse. Out of 22 films centering on nun and, rarely, monk characters from 1962 until 1978, three made more than £1 billion and seven earned more than £500 million. Only three movies yielded less than £200 million. Hence, with average profits of £527 million per film, the economic viability of the cycle was excellent throughout a period of 16 years. After a long and convoluted cinematic history involving illegitimate affairs in convents, horny sisters and pitiful martyrs, in 1979 Giulio Berruti offered a contemporary interpretation of nunsplotation, rendering the nuns not as victims, but as perpetrators within a repressive ecclesiastical system.

### The Film

*Killer Nun* tells the story of Sister Getrude (Anita Ekberg), a nun in her late 40s, who works as a nurse in a psychiatric ward of a Catholic hospital. After the removal of a brain tumor, Gertrude is afraid that she might still suffer from cancer, even though the attending physician, her colleague Dr. Poirret (Massimo Serato), affirms that she has completely recovered. Her fear of illness makes Gertrude mentally unstable. With the help of Sister Mathieu (Paola Morra), her only confidant, the angst-ridden nun medicates herself with high doses of morphine without telling a doctor. At the same time, Gertrude has to repel Mathieu's lesbian advances and enjoys an anonymous sexual encounter with a man she meets by chance during a trip to the city. While the nun loses control over her private and professional life and she becomes more and more unhinged by her addiction, a number of patients fall prey to a mysterious killer, yet the clinic is not interested in finding the perpetrator. While the institution attempts everything to avoid a scandal, a new employee, Dr. Roland (Joe Dallesandro), suspects that Gertrude is responsible for the murders. As a fourth corpse appears, the head of the order (Alida Valli) decides to confine the supposedly guilty nurse. Meanwhile, Mathieu appeases Dr. Roland's investigation by revealing her colleague's morphine addiction and offering him sexual favors. In her solitary cell, Gertrude has a moment of clarity and remembers witnessing her lesbian sister being responsible for the homicides. After having killed her abusive grandfather, Mathieu developed a taste for murder that has led to the incidents in the hospital.

*Killer Nun* stages the drama of the human body as it is controlled and subjugated through the Roman Catholic Church. The beginning of the film makes this clear. The movie opens with a black screen rapidly giving way to an extreme low angle shot of a priest raising a goblet. It turns out that the chalice covered the camera lens, hence causing the absolute darkness at the beginning of the shot. As the cup is being raised, the priest's face – he is a middle-aged man with a parting and a black beard – briefly comes into focus, before it exits the frame and we only see his outstretched arms holding the goblet from below for a couple of moments. The next shot presents a bird eye's view of the central space of an otherwise unidentifiable church. We behold the first few benches and an elevated platform with a yellow carpet. (The altar, which is supposed to be located on the platform, is out of sight, however.) The large empty area between the benches and the elevated space is slowly filled by nuns in white habits who enter the frame in rows of two and kneel down on the steps that lead to the altar, forming a line. Due to the high-angle framing and the nuns' position – they face the altar, turning their backs towards the camera – we recognize nothing but their long, bright dresses and veils as well as their dark shoes. After a parenthesis in which one of the sisters, at the side of her fellow believers' procession, confesses her profound hatred for a man who has long been dead to a horrified priest in a confessional, a long traveling shot traces one nun after another ingesting the host put in their mouth by another cleric. Presumably, although we only see his hands and sleeves, it is the priest from the very first shot, as he takes the hosts out of the metal chalice we have seen before. The tracking shot reveals the nuns' previously concealed faces: their features, hair, beauty, their age. This is the audiovisual preamble on which the opening credits are superimposed.

The sequence introduces the dynamics of concealment and revelation on which the entire narrative is based. Having dedicated her life to God, the nun must wear a religious habit that erases her identity almost entirely. Or, as the dress only spares the face, does it instead emphasize one's individuality? After all, the habit that hides away so much of its wearer steers the spectator's gaze to focus entirely on the part of the body considered the center of human identity. The opening of *Killer Nun* engages in this game. When the sisters pace towards the altar platform, the film completely denies their uniqueness. The spectator only discerns the religious uniform the women share, identifying them as belonging together, as belonging to an institution. The scene in the confessional takes this idea, the invisibility of the individual, a step further. Although the camera is close to the woman who recounts her traumatic experience with a sexually aggressive man, the movie omits the face of the nun struggling with her past. Instead of giving away the sister's identity, the camera moves towards her hands that violently knead a rosary. Subsequently, it is directed toward the head of the hate-filled woman from inside the box, but the close-mesh grid of the confessional does not allow to make out her facial features. Although the film spares the



nun's face, the agitated, sibilant voice of the confessor in combination with a camera in extreme proximity to the characters' bodies create an uncomfortable sense of intimacy and immediacy. The tension is somewhat relieved through the following dolly shot depicting the nuns receiving their host from the hands of another priest. For the first time, and even though it is just a brief glimpse, we are able to see that there are actual human beings under the impersonal white dresses.

The dispute between communality and individuality that becomes tangible through the nun's clothes and bodies is determined through a highly hierarchical distribution of power. This gendered hierarchy is visualized strikingly when the sisters are given the host. Literally 13 women on their knees are fed by one mighty man. Not only do the devoted nuns obey the priest, but also, in a way, the film itself. After all, it is the bearded priest who lifts the goblet from the camera objective, enabling the spectator to see and follow Gertrude's strange deeds. It is director Giulio Berruti himself who delivers a cunning cameo appearance as a man of God raising the chalice to praise the lord. The priest/director allows us to take part in the nun's futile struggle for autonomy within a repressive environment.

The pleasure of witnessing this struggle is strongly related to the impressive performance of Anita Ekberg. The Swedish actress became a household name due to the international success of *La dolce vita* (1960), an epic portrait of propriety within Roman high society in which Ekberg portrayed the lively movie star Sylvia. Certainly, Fellini's masterpiece was also fascinating because of Ekberg's bodily presence, a young, voluptuous woman desired by a plethora of admirers. Paradoxically, *Killer Nun* makes a point of concealing this mythical body. The 1979 exploitation film takes great joy in staging the hide and seek of an aging character, veiling her forms for almost the entire running time. Observing actors in different stages of life and career is one of the unrivalled spectacles film history offers, and Berruti's nunsploitation entry plays inimitably with this allure. While keeping female shapes out of the spectator's sight in large part, the film finds several opportunities to disrupt this pattern, disrobing Gertrude and Mathieu in the setting of their shared room. Still, the narrative never follows up on the promise of a steamy lesbian encounter that the intimate configuration implies. Alongside the outrageous idea of a murderous nun slaughtering helpless mental patients, the confrontation of seductive women of different age groups represents the prime guilty pleasure of this elegantly crafted exploitation movie. The titillating juxtaposition is but one act in the drama of the human body under the regime of a suppressive institution. While the youthful Mathieu asperses her sister and distracts Dr. Roland's suspicion through offering sexual services, Gertrude, with her torso marked by the abuse of morphine, is denounced as an insane assassin and locked away in a solitary cell. Although the narrative's solution remains open, it does not seem as if Sister Gertrude and her exhausted body will be rehabilitated.

Table 1: the box-office performance of Italian nunsploitation films from 1962 until 1978.

YEAR	TITLE	DIRECTOR	ITALIAN REVENUE
1962	<i>La monaca di Monza</i>	Carmino Gallone	£676,633,000 (ANICAGIS 1974, p. 32)
1963	<i>The Monk of Monza (Il monaco di Monza)</i>	Sergio Corbucci	£539,482,000 (ANICAGIS 1974, p. 39)
1963	<i>The Little Nuns (Le monachine)</i>	Luciano Salce	£270,501,000 (ANICAGIS 1974, p. 39)
1967	<i>A Nun at the Crossroads (Violenza per una monaca)</i>	Julio Buchs	£555,745,000 (AGIS 1978, p. 101)
1969	<i>The Lady of Monza (La monaca di Monza)</i>	Eriprando Visconti	£1,509,912,000 (AGIS 1978, p. 116)
1969	<i>Puro siccome un angelo papà mi fece monaco... di Monza</i>	Giovanni Grimaldi	£335,335,000 (AGIS 1978, p. 119)
1972	<i>Naughty Nun (La bella Antonia, prima monica e poi dimonia)</i>	Mariano Laurenti	£453,807,000 (AGIS 1978, p. 182)
1972	<i>Roman Scandals '73 (Fratello homo, sorella bona)</i>	Mario Sequi	£602,216,000 (AGIS 1978, p. 190)
1972	<i>Our Lady of Lust (Cristiana monaca indemoniata)</i>	Sergio Bergonzelli	£238,872,000 (AGIS 1978, p. 186)
1972	<i>Secret Confessions in a Cloistered Convent (Confessioni segrete di un convento di clausura)</i>	Luigi Batzella	£259,579,000 (AGIS 1978, p. 212)
1972	<i>The Monk (Il monaco)</i>	Adonis Kyrrou	£706,306,000 (AGIS 1978, p. 195)
1972	<i>Crucified Girls of San Ramon (Io monaca ... per tre carogne e sette peccatrici)</i>	Ernst Ritter von Theumer	£157,591,000 (AGIS 1978, p. 192)

YEAR	TITLE	DIRECTOR	ITALIAN REVENUE
1973	<i>Devils in the Convent (Leva lo diavolo tuo da lo mio convento)</i>	Franz Antel	£318,508,000 (AGIS 1978, p. 218)
1973	<i>The Nun and the Devil (Le monache di Sant'Arcangelo)</i>	Domenico Paoletta	£1,013,616,000 (AGIS 1978, p. 221)
1973	<i>Story of a Cloistered Nun (Storia di una monaca di clausura)</i>	Domenico Paoletta	£788,234,000 (AGIS 1978, p. 230)
1974	<i>Flavia the Heretic (Flavia, la monaca musulmana)</i>	Gianfranco Mingozzi	£1,184,518,000 (AGIS 1978, p. 246)
1974	<i>The Sinful Nuns of Saint Valentine (Le scomunicate di San Valentino)</i>	Sergio Grieco	£184,109,000 (AGIS 1978, p. 256)
1974	<i>La badessa di Castro</i>	Armando Crispino	£277,029,000 (AGIS 1978, p. 238)
1975	<i>The Novice (La novizia)</i>	Giuliano Biagetti	£594,144,000 (AGIS 1978, p. 274)
1976	<i>Sister Emanuelle (Suor Emanuelle)</i>	Giuseppe Vari	£424,295,000 (AGIS 1978, p. 325)
1978	<i>The Last House on the Beach (La settima donna)</i>	Franco Prosperi	£25,400,000 (AGIS 1978, p. 333)
1978	<i>Within the Convent (Interno di un convento)</i>	Walerian Borowczyk	£485,240,000 (AGIS 1978, p. 330)

ANICAGIS. (1974) *Catalogo generale dei film italiani dal 1956 al 1973*, Roma: Associazione Nazionale Industrie Cinematografiche ed Affini/Associazione Generale Italiana dello Spettacolo.

£ = lire

Andreas Ehrenreich is a film scholar specializing in European exploitation cinema. He has organized conferences on *Mark of the Devil*, the *giallo* genre and archival research on popular Italian cinema. His work is published in *Bianco & Nero, Cine-Excess* and *Maske und Kothurn*.

## Endnotes

- 1 - Barbara Corsi, *Con qualche dollaro in meno: storia economica del cinema italiano*, Roma: Editori Riuniti, 2001, p.124
- 2 - Corsi 2001, p.125
- 3 - For an influential study of the Italian cinema market see Christopher Wagstaff, "A Forkful of Westerns: Industry, Audiences and the Italian Western" in Richard Dyer and Ginette Vincendeau (eds.), *Popular European Cinema*, London/ New York: Routledge, 1992, pp. 245-261
- 4 - Corsi 2001, p.128
- 5 - See Edward Bowen, "'Take Notice of the Red Light!': A History of Adult Cinemas in Rome" in *Journal of Italian Cinema and Media Studies*, Volume 5, Number 1, July 2017, pp.3-21, p.4
- 6 - See Michael Conant, "The Paramount Decrees Reconsidered" in Tino Balio (ed.), *The American Film Industry*, rev. ed., Madison, WI/London: The University of Wisconsin Press, 1985, pp. 537-573
- 7 - Tino Balio, *The Foreign Film Renaissance on American Screens: 1946-1973*, Madison, WI/London: The University of Wisconsin Press, 2010, p.14
- 8 - AGIS, *Catalogo generale dei film italiani dal 1965 al 1978*, 5<sup>a</sup> ed., Roma: Associazione Generale Italiana dello Spettacolo, 1978, p.158
- 9 - Of course, there were many films with clergymen as supporting characters in a contemporary setting such as Lucio Fulci's *The Eroticist (All'onorevole piacciono le donne, 1972)*
- 10 - Although being a minor production, the latter movie made an astonishing £908,406,000 and spawned a sequel the following year (AGIS 1978, p.194)
- 11 - AGIS 1978, s.p.
- 12 - See Tim Bergfelder, *International Adventures: German Popular Cinema and European Co-Productions in the 1960s*, New York/Oxford: Berghahn, 2005, pp.226-227.



# SISTER MORPHINE

## THE MAKING OF KILLER NUN

by Roberto Curti

In mid-February 1978, Italian news agencies reported that a Josephite nun had been arrested for having falsified prescriptions and stolen money from the patients of a geriatric ward at the public hospital of Wetteren, in Belgium, in order to buy morphine, to which she had become addicted after undergoing surgery to remove a brain tumor. Most newspapers confined it to a short article in the internal pages: a Belgian drug-addicted nun was slightly more than a curio at a time in which Italy was in a state of turmoil, from the impending agreement between the country's major parties, DC and PCI (the so-called "compromesso storico") to the frequent bloody terrorist attacks that plagued 'The Boot'.

Very soon, though, more grisly details came out, and the case of the 44-year-old Cécile Bombeek, or Sister Godfrida arose to the top pages. She confessed to three murders, but was suspected of killing over 30 elderly patients, with insulin overdoses. The articles also underlined the weird sexual behavior of Sister Godfrida, who had made obscene advances to other nuns, her expensive tastes in food, dresses and shoes, and the code of silence surrounding the hospice, where many seemed to know about the nun's murderous deeds. By then, Sister Godfrida had been rebaptized "Sorella morte" (Sister Death) or "Suor omicidi."<sup>1</sup>

Cécile Bombeek was later found not fit to stand trial, and subsequently interned in a psychiatric facility. Her chilling story was soon forgotten, and replaced by other, much more alarming news, such as the kidnapping of prime minister Aldo Moro. Still, it stuck in the mind of a young producer named Enzo Gallo. Born in Aciri, in Calabria, in 1947, Gallo – a former real estate agent – was one of the many who tried their luck in the movie business, a world he had been close to since his marriage with Yugoslavian actress Olga Bisera in 1971. His debut as a producer came with the 1976 supernatural yarn *A Whisper in the Dark* (*Un sussuro nel buio*), directed by Marcello Aliprandi and starring John Phillip Law, Nathalie Delon and Bisera, among others. However, Gallo's name had made the news in 1974: after Bisera left the conjugal home to attend the funeral of French president Georges Pompidou with the prime minister of the Seychelles islands (labelled as her "suitor" in a press article), Gallo tried to hang himself with an electric wire.<sup>2</sup> The news, which monopolized the gossip columns for a few days and was accompanied by photos of Bisera in various stages of undress, was most likely an elaborate publicity trick to give visibility to the actress, who

had just finished shooting Pier Ludovico Pavoni's *Amore libero - Free Love* (1974) in the Seychelles islands.

Attesting the instant nature of the project, the story for *Killer Nun* was deposited as early as April 10, 1978. Gallo's idea was astute: to combine the so-called nunsploitation genre, still very popular after the *success de scandale* of Borowczyk's *Behind Convent Walls* (*Interno di un convento*, released in late January 1978 and seized no less than three times in a couple of months for alleged obscenity<sup>3</sup>) with a touch of giallo, Argento-style. The task of writing the script (in collaboration with Alberto Tarallo) and directing the movie fell to Giulio Berruti, a 41-year-old Piedmontese editor and scriptwriter, who had collaborated with director Corrado Farina on the political vampire allegory *They Have Changed Their Face* (*Hanno cambiato faccia*, 1971) and the comic book adaptation *Baba Yaga AKA The Devil Witch*, (1973). Although he had previously directed only one feature film, *Noi siamo come le lucciole* (1976), starring Robert Hoffmann and Silvia Dionisio and inspired by the Profumo affair,<sup>4</sup> Berruti had a reputation as a film doctor, thanks to his work on such movies as Lucio Marcaccini's counterculture/crime oddity *The Hallucinating Trip* (*Roma drogata*, 1975), starring Bud Cort. In addition to that, he had helmed a series of didactic sport documentaries, including *Klaus Dibiasi* (1974), on the eponymous Olympic champion in platform diving.

As he had done with his previous films as producer, Gallo managed to put under contract an illustrious has-been in order to ensure the project visibility. In this respect, the casting choice of Anita Ekberg as the "killer nun" (rebaptized Sister Gertrude) was nothing short of genius, even though – judging from the pics of the red-haired, short, pudgy and decidedly unattractive Cécile Bombeek that appeared in newspapers – she didn't look at all like her real-life model. Having become a true icon of Italian cinema after Fellini's *La dolce vita* (1960) and *Boccaccio '70* (1962), Ekberg's name was still capable of polarizing the interest of the press, even though the Swedish actress had sunk into obscurity, losing popularity in parallel with her weight gain: her last appearances in Italy were in the cut-rate western *Deadly Trackers* (*La lunga cavalcata della vendetta*, 1972) and in the Dick Randall-produced giallo oddity *The French Sex Murders* (*Casa d'appuntamento*, 1972), while David Lowell Rich's *Northeast of Seoul* (also 1972) hadn't even been distributed in Italy. The last time her name had showed up in the news was a definitely unglamorous occurrence: in December 1977 she was assaulted and robbed in her villa near Rome by a quintet of thieves, who "almost kissed her"<sup>5</sup> as the *Corriere della Sera* reported. "Her 'sweet life' has become bitter,"<sup>6</sup> another article commented with yet another pun on *La dolce vita*.

For Anita, it looked like a return in style. News reports of *Killer Nun* being in production had ample coverage in newspaper chronicles, which saluted Ekberg's return to the scenes



and reported that she had undergone a drastic slimming cure in a German clinic where she was allowed only 105 calories a day, to play the leading role.<sup>7</sup> “Suor Anitona” (Sister Anitona, as newspapers nicknamed her) celebrated her 47<sup>th</sup> birthday on the set and talked about her role enthusiastically: “I was offered only erotic films in which I wasn’t the least bit interested... My role is dramatic, very difficult. One of those roles I always wanted to play, instead of the decorative woman, the hot chick. Now that I’m a mature actress, I only want to play serious, dramatic roles.”<sup>8</sup> Still, facts (or rather pics) contradicted her words: around the same time, Ekberg appeared on the cover of the October 1978 issue of *Playboy* (Italian edition) with only a rose barely covering her chest, and looking more glamorous than ever, for what the magazine mischievously called “Il primo nudo della mia dolce vita” (“The First Nude of my Sweet Life”). A couple of months earlier she had appeared in the Italian *Playmen* (8/1978) whose cover promised “L’estate nuda di Anita Ekberg” (“The Naked Summer of Anita Ekberg”). At 47, it looked like the Swedish actress could become the forbidden dream for a new generation of Italians.

Ekberg was accompanied by a couple of other actors who were past their box-office prime, namely Joe Dallesandro and Lou Castel, as well as some veterans of Italian cinema, such as Massimo Serato, Alida Valli, and Laura Nucci. News reports of the shooting mentioned two more old glories who eventually didn’t participate in the film: Paola Borboni and Clara Calamai. As Berruti explains, “In the original draft, the story was set in a home for elderly movie actors, who would remain unnamed except for some revealing dialogue, leaving the viewers to identify them. We thought of Calamai and Borboni. Tarallo knew Paola very well, and she had sympathy for me. But the idea was dropped because of the budget...”<sup>9</sup> The director himself appeared in a brief cameo, as the priest who elevates the chalice during the Mass in the opening scene. Dallesandro, fresh from playing the lead in another Gallo production, Bitto Albertini’s *Safari Rally (6000 km di paura, 1978)*, was by then near the end of his Italian stint (his last starring role in Italy would be in Fernando di Leo’s underrated *Madness (Vacanze per un massacro, 1980)*; he later claimed he had almost no memory of making *Suor omicidi*: “Part of my job description on a couple of these European films was to be paired with these older actresses whose careers were basically over. And I would lend support, for what it was worth.”<sup>10</sup> On top of that, his voice is dubbed by another actor in the English language version.

Shooting went on for four weeks and was plagued by budget issues. The delays in payments resulted in actors or crew members protesting during the filming of some scenes, such as the garden party sequence. “This is why there are so many close-ups,” the director points out. “I was determined to finish the movie on schedule, and I managed to by cutting bits of scenes here and there. Moreover, there was a shortage of film negative. Almost all the

scenes are first takes: honestly, with the actors we used to do a couple of rehearsals and then we shot.”<sup>11</sup>

Around the same time, Berruti made a documentary about the Volleyball World Cup which took place in Italy in September 1978, with the national team ranking at second place and earning the Silver Medal. Photographed by Aiace Parolin and Blasco Giurato, and with Berruti’s great friend Claudio Undari (AKA Robert Hundar) as second unit, *The Silver Seagull (Il gabbiano d’argento)* was a remarkable effort, and displayed Berruti’s love for sport (both in its athletic and educational aspects) as well as his skills as an editor, with a fascinating use of slow-motion. The 57-minute film was screened at schools throughout the country over the following years and made the sport familiar to many young Italians: from then on, the term “gabbiano d’argento” would become synonymous with the Italian volleyball team.

*Killer Nun* was definitely less successful. According to the ministerial papers, it was passed uncut by the rating board with an 18 rating, although Berruti claims that censors intervened on the scene in which the nun injects morphine, and had the soundtrack (which originally featured bits of the Consecration during the Mass) changed. Released in Italy in May 1979, it wasn’t the hit the producer had hoped for: by then, Sister Godfrida had long been forgotten, and the names involved failed to make the film marketable. Predictably, it was ignored by critics, and briefly gained some visibility when Berruti accused Gallo of having liberally tampered with it, without his consent.<sup>12</sup> As the director recalls: “A scene was cut because it was ‘too long’. Gertrude is hit in the head with a cane, and an in-patient played by Aldo De Franchi comes to her aid. She wakes up and tries to kill the old man.”<sup>13</sup> It got even worse. On February 29, 1980, the film was seized by the magistrate in the city of L’Aquila: the unfortunate tagline chosen by the distributor, “Dagli archivi segreti del Vaticano” (“From the secret files of the Vatican”) didn’t help. Total grosses amounted to a scant £18 million.

*Suor omicidi* was to be Giulio Berruti’s last feature film as a director. After its productive misadventures, he lost the will to make that kind of cinema, and decided to devote himself only to non-fiction, in which he was free to express himself.<sup>14</sup> Berruti returned to his beloved volleyball, with such titles as *La pallaverde* (1979) and *La pallagioco* (1982), the latter screened at the Kranj Festival,<sup>15</sup> and started collaborating with RAI, helming educational and sport documentaries.

As for Gallo, his subsequent career as producer included such diverse works as Marcello Aliprandi’s *Vatican Conspiracy (Morte in Vaticano, 1982)*, Tonino Valerii’s *Senza scrupoli* (1986) and *Una vacanza all’inferno* (1997), and the giallo *Bad Inclination (Cattive inclinazioni, 2003)*. Anita Ekberg’s career in the 1980s met a new low with Andrea Bianchi’s *The Seduction*



of *Angela* (*Dolce pelle di Angela*, 1986) before her reunion with Fellini for *Intervista* (1987), which featured a melancholy re-enactment of her most famous cinematic moment. As for Cécile Bombeek, no one ever heard about her again, and the bulk of her story is relegated to the news reports of the period: for all its oddity, *Killer Nun* is first and foremost a bizarre footnote to one of the most obscure serial killer cases of the decade.

*Roberto Curti is the author of Italian Gothic Horror Films, 1970-1979 as well as other books and essays on Italian cinema. He lives in Cortona, Italy*

## Endnotes

- 1 - Renato Proni, "Sorella morte' confessa" in *La Stampa*, February 18, 1978; Arturo Guatelli, "Ne ha uccisi 21 la 'suora-omicidi'?" in *Corriere della Sera*, February 18, 1978; [not signed], "Godfrida, sorella morte" in *Stampa Sera*, February 24, 1978; Arturo Guatelli, "Sarebbero 30 le vittime della 'suora omicidi'" in *Corriere della Sera*, February 22, 1978
- 2 - [not signed], "Tenta il suicidio il giovane marito di Olga Bisera" in *Corriere d'informazione*, April 8, 1974; [not signed] "Olga non mi abbandonerà mai. Il marito (che voleva uccidersi) ora le crede" in *Corriere d'informazione*, April 9, 1974
- 3 - [not signed], "Sequestrato tre volte" in *Corriere della Sera*, March 1, 1978
- 4 - [not signed], "Scandalo Profumo per Silvia Dionisio" in *Stampa Sera*, January 16, 1976
- 5 - Andrea Purgatori, "Rapinata Anita Ekberg da banditi che la legano e 'quasi la baciano'" in *Corriere della Sera*, December 22, 1977
- 6 - L.V., "La sua 'Dolce vita' è diventata amara" in *Corriere della Sera*, December 22, 1977
- 7 - [not signed] "Con Suor omicidi torna al cinema Anita Ekberg" in *Corriere della Sera*, August 26, 1978
- 8 - Lamberto Antonelli, "Compleanno sul set per 'suor' Anita" in *Stampa Sera*, October 3, 1978
- 9 - Giulio Berruti, email interview, December 2018.
- 10 - Michael Ferguson, *Joe Dallesandro: Warhol Superstar, Underground Film Icon, Actor*, New York: Open Road Media, 2015
- 11 - Giulio Berruti, email interview, December 2018
- 12 - [not signed], "La protesta del regista" in *Corriere della Sera*, September 21, 1979
- 13 - Giulio Berruti, email interview, December 2018. It must be noted, however, that in the 1979 short article mentioned in the previous note Berruti had claimed that "a reel and a half" had been cut, which seems unlikely given his description of the trimmed scene
- 14 - [not signed], "La protesta del regista" in *Corriere della Sera*, September 21, 1979
- 15 - Fulvio Campiotti, "Surf!" in *Corriere della Sera*, November 16, 1982







# KILLER NUN

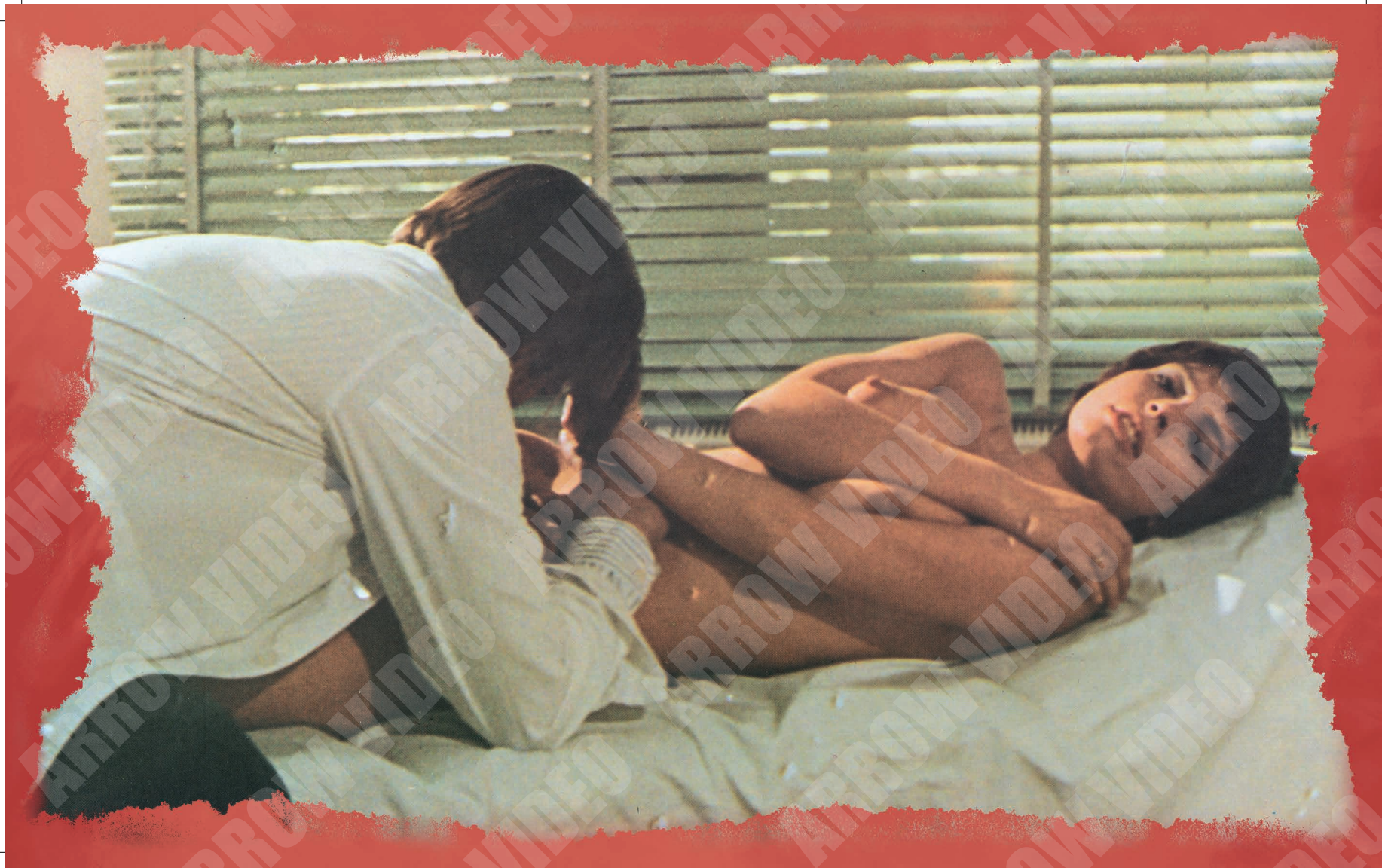
## ORIGINAL REVIEW

by Leonardo Autera

This review was originally published in *Corriere della Sera*, September 21<sup>st</sup>, 1979.

The story for *Suor omicidi* has been inspired by the case of a Belgian nun – a lustful and murderous drug addict (allegedly) – in the news a couple of years ago. In the movie, Sister Gertrude is the department head of a home for the elderly and the disabled, located in a Belgian province. Once pious and charitable, after undergoing surgery for a brain tumor she is struck by frequent crises which prevent her from controlling her actions. She has also become addicted to morphine, which she procures in Brussels with the money from thieving jewelry from patients in the hospice. Her trips also provide her the opportunity to vent with sexual rampages. The plot thickens when a series of mysterious and very savage murders (worthy of Dario Argento's bloodiest thrillers) take place in the hospice. Are they the work of the demoniac Sister Gertrude? This is what everyone suspects, except the police, who don't show up throughout the whole story. We'll leave the solution to the curious spectators; but let us add that it comes in the most abrupt manner in this coarse and absent-minded little flick from first-time director Giulio Berruti, who perhaps thought he could take advantage of the presence of *La dolce vita's* Anita Ekberg in the lead role. But 20 years later, the actress has nothing left but her name, and she carefully avoids displaying any nudity, even during a scene of frantic intercourse.

Other respected actors show up in the cast as if by chance, looking quite surprised at being involved in such a mess. They are Joe Dallesandro, Lou Castel, and three "old glories" of Italian cinema (Alida Valli, Massimo Serato, Laura Nucci) who couldn't look more humiliated.



# ABOUT THE RESTORATION

*Killer Nun (Suor Omicidi)* 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. In addition, the English version incorporates a few short sections in which only Italian is spoken.

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, Rich Watson, Nathan Leaman-Hill, Stephanie Mourey, Emily Kemp

Surf Film:

Stefania Carnevale





## PRODUCTION CREDITS

Disc and Booklet Produced by **James Blackford**  
Executive Producers **Kevin Lambert, Francesco Simeoni**  
Technical Producer **James White**  
QC **Nora Mehenni, Alan Simmons**  
Production Assistant **Samuel Thiery**  
Blu-ray Mastering and Subtitling **The Engine House Media Services**  
Artwork by **Daryl Joyce**  
Design **Obviously Creative**

## SPECIAL THANKS

**Alex Agran, Giulio Berruti, Roberto Curti, Andreas Ehrenreich, Kat Ellinger, David Flint, Ilena Fraja, Mario Giacco, Manlio Gomasca, Marc Morris, Christian Ostermeier, Adrian J. Smith**



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