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## CAST

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**Valentina Cortese** Irma

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**Pier Giovanni Anchisi** Photographer

**Ennio Balbo** Coroner

**Anna Maria Gherardi** Servant Girl

**Bruno Scipioni** Tilde's Father

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## CREW

Directed by **Luigi Bazzoni & Franco Rossellini**

Screenplay by **Giulio Questi, Luigi Bazzoni & Franco Rossellini**

Novel by **Giovanni Comisso**

Produced by **Manolo Bolognini**

Cinematographer **Leonida Barboni**

Editor **Nino Baragli**

Art Director **Luigi Scaccianoce**

Costume Designer **Danda Ortona**

Music by **Renzo Rossellini**



# THE PRODUCTION OF THE POSSESSED

by Andreas Ehrenreich

The 1960s were a period of great productivity for the Italian film industry. In 1964, 290 films were produced in the country, 155 of these movies were co-productions. In 1965 there were 10,517 cinemas in Italy, 6,438 of which were 'industrial', i.e. they screened films commercially and on a regular basis.<sup>1</sup> While internationally the country was recognised for masterpieces like *Rocco and His Brothers* (*Rocco e i suoi fratelli*, 1960) and *8 ½* (1963), the landscape of Italian film culture was much richer and more diverse than the canon of celebrated auteurs and works suggests. Besides the cinematic highbrow, there existed a wide array of middle and lowbrow films. Usually, an extraordinarily successful movie would initiate a wave of similar projects, creating a number of popular genres. The early 1960s represented the zenith of sword-and-sandal epics, mondo documentaries and Gothic horrors,<sup>2</sup> before westerns and spy movies dominated the Italian exploitation cinema of the mid-1960s.<sup>3</sup> After the huge public attention for the sexy art-house thriller *Blow Up* (1966), many filmmakers jumped on the bandwagon, which led to the rise of the giallo genre.<sup>4</sup>

Of course, there were sporadic thrillers before *Blow Up*, but erotic suspense movies in contemporary settings only became a significant phenomenon after the success of Michelangelo Antonioni's film for MGM. Many accounts of the giallo genre cite two films by Mario Bava as the earliest instances of the Italian thriller. Despite performing poorly at the domestic box office, the flamboyant style and gore of *The Girl Who Knew Too Much* (*La ragazza che sapeva troppo*, 1963) and *Blood and Black Lace* (*Sei donne per l'assassino*, 1964) have made them essential entries in every giallo filmography. Their high status in the perception of fans and scholars alike might have attributed them an industrial, narrative and stylistic influence on later films that, perhaps, is overrated. Two other early but less

1 - Barbara Corsi, *Con qualche dollaro in meno: storia economica del cinema italiano* (Rome: Editori Riuniti, 2001), 99, 125.

2 - For studies of these genres, see Mark Goodall, *Sweet & Savage: The World Through the Shockumentary Film Lens* (London: Headpress, 2006); Daniel O'Brien, *Classical Masculinity and the Spectacular Body on Film: The Mighty Sons of Hercules* (Basingstoke/New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014); Stefano Baschiera and Russ Hunter (eds.), 2016), *Italian Horror Cinema* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2016).

3 - See Austin Fisher, *Radical Frontiers in the Spaghetti Western: Politics, Violence and Popular Italian Cinema* (London/New York: I. B. Tauris, 2011); Richard Rhys Davies, *The International Spy Film Guide 1945-1983* (Narberth: Picture and Sound, 2016).

4 - See Mikel J. Koven, *La dolce morte: Vernacular Cinema and the Italian Giallo Film* (Lanham, MD/Toronto/Oxford: The Scarecrow Press, 2006); Xavier Mendik, *Bodies of Desire and Bodies in Distress: The Golden Age of Italian Cult Cinema 1970-1985* (Newcastle upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2015).

visible gialli were released in 1965: *The Possessed (La donna del lago)* and *Libido*. By chance, both films were made by a directorial duo. While Ernesto Gastaldi would go on to become the most important screenwriter for Italian thrillers, the career of Luigi Bazzoni did not continue as unequivocally.

### A Debut Feature

Born in the Northern Italian town of Salsomaggiore Terme in 1929, Luigi Bazzoni graduated in architecture before dedicating his career to the cinema.<sup>5</sup> In 1951 Bazzoni finished his diploma in directing at the Centro Sperimentale di Cinematografia, the state film school in Rome.<sup>6</sup> From 1950, he directed many short films. One of these shorts, *On Sunday (Di domenica)*, 1963), was in competition at the Cannes Film Festival and received a special distinction by the jury.<sup>7</sup> From the late 1950s, Bazzoni entered the commercial film industry as an assistant director. Except for two jobs for directors Sergio Grieco and Claudio Gora, all of his experiences as an assistant were tied to the Bolognini brothers. Mauro, the older brother, was a prolific director and screenwriter, while the younger Manolo worked as a production manager. Through his association with the Bologninis, Luigi Bazzoni participated in star-studded literary adaptations such as *Bell'Antonio (Il bell'Antonio)*, 1960), *A Crazy Day (Una giornata balorda)*, 1960) and *The Lovemakers (La viaccia)*, 1961). Towards the end of 1964, the accomplished assistant director and the younger of the Bolognini brothers joined forces to get their first major project going.

In 1962 the Milan-based publisher Longanesi released *La donna del lago*, a novel by Giovanni Comisso. The writer from Treviso was a participant in Gabriele D'Annunzio's occupation of Fiume subsequent to World War I, and took his inspiration from a series of murders in Alleghe. Between 1933 and 1946, the quiet mountain village and its idyllic lake was haunted by a string of alleged suicides and killings, involving a family of wealthy hotel owners. The filmmakers deemed Comisso's atmospheric work the perfect template for the thriller they had in mind.

In order to proceed with the project, Luigi Bazzoni and Manolo Bolognini decided to bring in other collaborators. Franco Rossellini belonged to the famous family of Roman filmmakers. His father was the composer Renzo and his uncle Roberto Rossellini, one of the founders of cinematic neorealism and a highly influential screenwriter and director in the post-war period. After a few small roles as an actor, for example in *La dolce vita* (1960) and the parody *Totò, Peppino and [...] the Sweet Life (Totò, Peppino e [...] la dolce vita)*, 1961), Franco worked as an assistant director for some of his uncle's dramas and, again, for Sergio

5 - Roberto Poppi, *Dizionario del cinema italiano: i registi dal 1930 ai giorni nostri*, in collaboration with Enrico Lancia. (Rome: Gremese, 1993), 29–30.  
6 - Alfredo Baldi, "Il Centro Sperimentale di Cinematografia: dalla storia alla cronaca" in Alfredo Baldi, *Tre quarti di secolo: 75 anni di vita, storia e cinema al Centro Sperimentale di Cinematografia*. (Rome: Centro Sperimentale di Cinematografia, 2010), 21–41, 27.  
7 - Web: <https://www.festival-cannes.com/en/films/di-domenica>.

Corbucci's genre movies in the early 1960s. For the coming-of-age film *Agostino* (1962), Franco Rossellini and Luigi Bazzoni were both hired – the latter, being more experienced, as the first, the former as the second assistant director. It was probably then when the plan for *The Possessed* emerged. Bazzoni and Rossellini agreed to co-write and direct their first movie, while it would be Manolo Bolognini's debut as a producer.

On 5 February 1964, Bolognini acquired the rights of Giovanni Comisso's novel for £3 million.<sup>8</sup> The filmmakers decided to hire a writer to adapt the text for the screen. That's how Giulio Questi became involved in the project. Even though Questi directed only three fiction films for the cinema, his reputation is legendary. The former partisan's daring genre movies were highly political and inventive. While his western *Django Kill! (Se sei vivo spara)*, 1967) with Tomas Milian represented a lucid analysis of fascism, his zeitgeisty giallo *Death Has Laid an Egg (La morte ha fatto l'uovo)*, 1968) could be read as a scathing critique of the burgeoning consumer society. In his recollections, Questi remembered having written the script already a few years earlier, perhaps already in 1959.<sup>9</sup> The original novel, however, was only published in 1962. Despite delivering excellent work, personally Questi was not too convinced of a film that he felt not to be his own: "I wanted a certain kind of cinema, the one I was dreaming of. Hence, every time I was commissioned to work on something else that helped me to survive economically, I was upset because it distracted me from my projects. That's how I became involved with the screenplay of [*The Possessed*]. I worked on it to earn a bit of money, but in my mind I roamed around elsewhere."<sup>10</sup> Questi remembered that he had written the screenplay alone, only afterwards, other authors stepped in. In the opening titles Questi is the first writer to be credited before Bazzoni and Rossellini.

However, the film's budget reveals that a fourth uncredited artist was involved, Ernesto Gastaldi.<sup>11</sup> It is likely that the filmmakers asked him to contribute for two reasons. Firstly, Gastaldi was already known as a specialist for thrillers. In 1964 he had more than 30 realised scripts – and probably a great many unrealised ones – under his belt, and was a much more experienced screenwriter than any of the others involved. Secondly, Gastaldi stemmed from Graglia, a mountain village in the Piedmont region. Perhaps, Bazzoni, Bolognini and Rossellini thought that due to Gastaldi's growing up in a place similar to Alleghe, the location of the actual murders, he could flesh out the screenplay and add worthwhile narrative material. For their contributions to the script, Gastaldi, Bazzoni and Rossellini received £700,000, £500,000 and £250,000 respectively. Giulio Questi,

8 - Manolo Bolognini, "Dichiarazione analitica del costo effettivamente sostenuto", 8 October 1966, in *Archivio Centrale dello Stato* (Rome: Ministero del Turismo e dello Spettacolo, Direzione Generale dello Spettacolo, Divisione Cinema, CF 4783).

9 - Giulio Questi, *Se non ricordo male: frammenti autobiografici*, ed. Domenico Monetti and Luca Paliach. (Rome: Centro Sperimentale di Cinematografia/Soveria Mannelli, Rubbettino, 2014), 78.

10 - "Volevo un certo cinema, che era quello che sognavo io. Per cui ogni volta che mi arrivava un lavoro utile alla mia sopravvivenza economica, mi arrabbiavo perché mi distraeva dai miei progetti. Così mi è arrivata addosso la sceneggiatura di *La donna del lago*. Ci ho lavorato per prendere un po' di soldi, però la testa vagava altrove." Op. cit., Questi 2014, 79.

11 - Op. cit. Bolognini, "Dichiarazione analitica del costo effettivamente sostenuto".

though, was awarded the lion's share with a sum of £3 million.<sup>12</sup> Despite appreciating his co-author Bazzoni's achievements in the cinema, Questi claimed not have seen *The Possessed* at all.<sup>13</sup>

### The Synopsis and the Script

During the 1960s a synopsis for a feature-length fiction film would usually consist of a few pages delineating the plot. Bolognini's first production, however, originated as a detailed 20-page synopsis credited to Questi, Bazzoni and Rossellini. It seems that Gastaldi contributed to the elaboration of the screenplay itself, but not at this early stage. The cover of the typewritten text specifies "loosely based on the eponymous novel by Giovanni Comisso"<sup>14</sup> to make clear that the film adaptation is not completely faithful to the novel. Instead of the rather dry and succinct style of most screenplays, this synopsis is written in a very literary fashion. It meticulously describes the inner state of protagonist Giovanni Bernard who constantly doubts his own memory and perception. While the first textual and the final film version conform in large part, there are some differences worth noting.

Giovanni Bernard is described as an "already famous writer".<sup>15</sup> In the synopsis Bernard receives more of a past. He goes back to the old hotel by the lake because he already went there as a child "with his mother, an aunt and the cousin (the first woman he loved and possessed in his life)".<sup>16</sup> In the film, his nostalgic reasons to return to the lake are mentioned in dialogue, but it is not emphasised that even before his interest in the hotel maid Tilde, he had an unforgettable and transgressive erotic experience still tying him to the tranquil mountain resort. In his mind the author compares the maid with his unnamed cousin: "The body of that woman [Tilde] seemed to reincarnate [...] the mythical body of that cousin from his adolescence, a body he was unconsciously searching since and that he never found the same."<sup>17</sup>

Moreover, the reasons why Francesco, the local optician and old friend of Giovanni's, supposes that Tilde's suicide in fact was a murder are expanded a bit. Besides the photo showing her with a pregnant belly, Francesco remembers having heard the maid singing as usual while she was working, which a person pondering suicide would not do for sure.<sup>18</sup> In the synopsis the optician also dwells more on the circumstances of the woman's death. Whereas, in the film, he says that Tilde did not die because of the iodine she swallowed but

<sup>12</sup> - Ibid.

<sup>13</sup> - Op. cit. Questi 2014, 79.

<sup>14</sup> - Giulio Questi, Luigi Bazzoni and Franco Rossellini, "La donna del lago: soggetto", in: *Archivio Centrale dello Stato* (Rome), CF 4783.

<sup>15</sup> - Op. cit. Questi, Bazzoni and Rossellini, "scrittore già celebre", 2.

<sup>16</sup> - Op. cit. Questi, Bazzoni and Rossellini, "Con la madre, una zia e la cugina (la prima donna che ha amato e posseduto nella sua vita)" 2.

<sup>17</sup> - Op. cit. Questi, Bazzoni and Rossellini, "Il corpo di quella donna gli sembrò reincarnare [...] il corpo mitico di quella cugina della sua adolescenza, un corpo che aveva poi sempre inconsciamente ricercato e mai trovato uguale." 3. -

<sup>18</sup> - Op. cit. Questi, Bazzoni and Rossellini, 4.

because a razor cut her throat, in the synopsis Francesco adds that the razor "was found, strangely enough, on her bedside table".<sup>19</sup> The location of the weapon beside the body of the dead maid is mentioned to reinforce the idea that the theory she committed suicide is highly questionable.

Also, the treatment reveals a significant detail about the relationship between Tilde and the hotel owners that is omitted in the film. Tilde was still underage when she had sex with both Mario and his father Enrico, and used this compromising fact in order to blackmail the men. The synopsis presents the background of the murder as an imagination of Giovanni who puzzles over the course of events.<sup>20</sup> Engaging in a sexual relationship with a minor represents the criminal undercurrent of a morally dubious love triangle which endangers the reputation of Enrico's family. After all, it is not only Enrico, Mario and Irma's standing in the gossip-ridden provincial town that is at stake, but they might also face a penalty for child molestation.

Another minor difference concerns the shack in which Tilde's father lives. In the film it is in the woods surrounding the village, the synopsis states that his makeshift dwelling is situated in the reed by the lake.<sup>21</sup> Evidently, the writers attempt to anchor the lake as a central visual motif in their work and also emphasise its wild and uncivilised side in correspondence to the character of the vagabond. Notably, the film represents the lake as bordering on a park – i.e. a form of man-made landscape – and frequently displays its well-defined shore as free of water reeds. Moving the father's hut into the forest enables the movie to re-use the eerie natural setting, which is also where the cemetery with Tilde's grave is located, as an impressive visual contrast to the majority of the exteriors shot on the waterfront.

Except for Giovanni's cousin, the film omits another female character described in the synopsis. The author enjoys "the gentle grace of a suggestive hotel guest with whom, one night, he tries to make love in vain".<sup>22</sup> The failed attempt to have sex with a fellow traveller underlines the notion of the protagonist being dragged into a whirlpool of haunting memories and suspicion to a degree that he cannot lead a life apart from his investigation of Tilde's assumed assassination. In the final film this inability is mostly conveyed through the neglect of Giovanni's work as a writer which is repeatedly hinted at. While further hotel guests are sometimes visible, for example in the dinner scene, the author does not interact with them. Eliminating the female characters as in the synopsis serves to focus the narrative completely on the mystery of Tilde and the family of Mr. Enrico.

<sup>19</sup> - Ibid. "venne trovato assurdammente appoggiato sul suo comodino"

<sup>20</sup> - Op. cit. Questi, Bazzoni and Rossellini, 8.

<sup>21</sup> - Op. cit. Questi, Bazzoni and Rossellini, 7.

<sup>22</sup> - Op. cit. Questi, Bazzoni and Rossellini, "La molle avvenenza di un'equivoca ospite dell'albergo con la quale una notte tenta inutilmente di fare all'amore." 7.

The synopsis makes an explicit reference to the genre(s) to which the story unfolding belongs. Irma's pain, Mario's toughness, the failed adventure with the other guest, the outcast father and the hunchbacked Francesco "aren't but the external stimulants of construing his [Giovanni's] internal 'whodunit', a mysterious psychological drama, dark and violent".<sup>23</sup> I have translated the original word choice "giallo" not as such, because in Italian the term "giallo" is (still) used in a very unspecific way, evoking a general notion of crime narrative in any kind of medium. With this passage, Questi, Bazzoni and Rossellini undertake a generic self-definition offering a variety of terms to describe Giovanni's investigation in the remote lake resort.

The treatment envisages the funeral of Adriana, Mario's wife, a bit differently, as Tilde's father shouts something at Enrico which Giovanni, who observes the sad procession from the hotel, cannot hear.<sup>24</sup> In the film the hotel owner suffers from a dizzy spell without an apparent reason. The yelling of Tilde's father happens rather within the first 20 minutes of the running time, with the old outcast shouting obscenities in the direction of the hotel. During the funeral the author takes advantage of the hotel owners' absence and searches through Mario's bedroom. On the desk he finds two photos of the deceased Adriana. The synopsis provides a variation of this scene. Here, Giovanni looks at two photos of Mario and Adriana sightseeing in Rome and Venice during their honeymoon. The intruder cannot tell the difference, but he realises that Adriana and Mario appear to have changed in Venice: "Bernard seems to 'feel' that between Rome and Venice something must have occurred between the two of them, 'something' that had really transformed their relationship."<sup>25</sup> It seems that the scene is altered in the final film, as the process of recognition, easily put across through the literary form, turns out to be too ambiguous to be used effectively on screen.

While in the movie, the writer imagines an emotional outburst from Irma bemoaning the loss of face her family has to endure – a sequence photographed with accentuated contrast – it omits a similar scene in which Giovanni imagines Enrico's confession. In the treatment, the 50-something Enrico accuses his son of the murder as he did not want to marry and, subsequently, share Tilde any longer with the father.<sup>26</sup> The film also features quite a different take on the conversation between Giovanni and Irma when the latter asks the former to leave the hotel. While in the final version the woman speaks calmly, explaining the reasons for the sudden closing, the synopsis describes the dialogue as more intense

23 - Op. cit. Questi, Bazzoni and Rossellini. "Non sono che stimoli esteriori per costruire il suo 'giallo' interiore, un dramma misterioso psicologico, oscuro e violento". 7.

24 - Op. cit. Questi, Bazzoni and Rossellini, 12.

25 - Op. cit. Questi, Bazzoni and Rossellini. "Pare a Bernard di 'sentire' che fra Roma e Venezia fra i due doveva essere avvenuto qualcosa, 'qualcosa' che veramente aveva mutato i loro rapporti." 13.

26 - Op. cit. Questi, Bazzoni and Rossellini, 14.

and painful.<sup>27</sup> Apparently, the writers ultimately toned down the impulsiveness of Irma's character in order not to give away prematurely her maniacal side that is revealed in the finale at the lake.

Subsequently, the feverish search for Francesco differs from the film version. Instead of going to the station and observing the departing train, in the synopsis Giovanni looks for his friend in a bar at the lakeside. There, he encounters the district judge who tries to engage the writer in a debate about tourism. Moreover, the judge attempts to convince him of participating in a local committee as a guest of honour. The subject the committee is supposed to discuss remains open. Finally, the talkative bar guest tells the author that he has recently seen Francesco passing by with a suitcase, walking in the direction of the bus station. When Giovanni finally arrives there, he is forced to see Francesco in a bus speeding towards the motorway.<sup>28</sup> The filmmakers opt for the version without the judge, which would have delayed the rapid progression toward the climax of the narrative.

As in the film, the synopsis contains a scene in which the author imagines Mario's confession to murdering Tilde and Adriana. However, the outline varies slightly. The butcher, after having killed a calf, goes to the maid's room to find her "naked in all her beauty, standing out against the window glass, illuminated by the first light of dawn. But it wasn't him killing her [...] it was 'his hand', his very own hand which he couldn't command anymore, which became an alien being that didn't belong to him and that obeyed to extraneous orders."<sup>29</sup> Distractedly, he puts the razor on the bedside table. His father and sister then support him in presenting the murder as a suicide. He also admits to having suffocated Adriana and thrown her body in the lake.<sup>30</sup> Visually realising the description in the synopsis, the film carefully stages Mario's hand while walking up the stairs to his victim's room in high-contrast images. But of course, Tilde is dressed when meeting her end. Furthermore, the movie only hints at Adriana's murder and omits the disposal of the corpse, while there is no apparent assistance in covering up the killings by Irma or Enrico. Right after imagining the confession of the butcher, Questi, Bazzoni and Rossellini add another brief sequence in which Giovanni, dozing on the bed, sees a razor glistening in the moonlight as it repeatedly strikes something he cannot discern.<sup>31</sup> This scene does not feature in the film, in which the transition from the dream with Mario to seeing Irma at the strand is linked without parenthesis.

27 - Op. cit. Questi, Bazzoni and Rossellini, 15.

28 - Op. cit. Questi, Bazzoni and Rossellini, 15-16.

29 - Op. cit. Questi, Bazzoni and Rossellini. "Nuda in tutta la sua bellezza stagliata davanti ai vetri della finestra illuminata dalle prime luci dell'alba. Ma non fu lui ad ucciderla [...] fu la 'sua mano', questa sua stessa mano che lui non può più comandare, e che gli era diventata come un essere estraneo che non gli apparteneva e che ubbidiva a dei comandi estranei a lui." 16a.

30 - Op. cit. Questi, Bazzoni and Rossellini, 16a-18. The synopsis does not include 17, 18 seamlessly follows 16a.

31 - Op. cit. Questi, Bazzoni and Rossellini, 18.

A crucial difference can be noted at the climax of the narrative. In the synopsis Irma does not confess anything but runs away from Giovanni into the dark. The writer then finds Mario and Enrico in “a lake of blood”<sup>32</sup> in the butchery. At the police station the young man and an investigator puzzle over what happened in the hotel by the lake. This is their theory: most likely, it was Irma who killed Tilde in an attempt to save the honour of the family. Then, she persuaded Mario to murder his wife Adriana because she feared Adriana could confide her knowledge about the initial murder. In a final fit of madness Irma slaughtered her father and her brother, “feeling betrayed by these men who didn’t know how to endure the burden of those ‘doings’ that had emerged due to ‘her love for them’.”<sup>33</sup> The police are assumed to find Irma’s body in the lake.<sup>34</sup> Ultimately, the filmmakers shy away from using the open ending devised in the treatment, as if to give a narrative already full of subjective sequences and delirious dreams a conclusion which many spectators perceive as more satisfying than the speculations of the investigators.

Overall, the final cut of the film evidences that the directors strived to eliminate characters and events diverting from the principal strand of the narrative. In an isolated case, the scene with the honeymoon pictures, an idea was abandoned due to its literary nature that could not be realised convincingly in a visual way. On several occasions the film mitigates the more disturbing traits of the tale by omitting sexual and violent details still envisaged in the storyline. The strict focus on Tilde, her abuse, and demise, seem to have led to the brief running time of *The Possessed*.

### The Team

With his directors Luigi Bazzoni and Franco Rossellini, producer Manolo Bolognini put together a team of outstanding professionals. This was not the kind of quickly manufactured thriller as would be the trend after the financial successes of *Blow Up* and *The Bird with the Crystal Plumage* (*L’uccello dalle piume di cristallo*, 1970) when the genre boomed in Italy. The key creatives behind *The Possessed* only hired crew members who excelled in their field of expertise.

Leonida Barboni was an experienced director of photography who had been active since the 1940s. He had previously collaborated with the Bolognini brothers and, after *The Possessed*, worked on a second giallo, *The Sex of Angels* (*Il sesso degli angeli*, 1968), before suffering a premature death in 1970. Franco’s father, Renzo Rossellini, contributed one of his last film scores. Nino Baragli was one of the country’s high-profile editors who

32 - Op. cit. Questi, Bazzoni and Rossellini “un lago di sangue”. 19.

33 - Op. cit. Questi, Bazzoni and Rossellini. “Sentendosi tradita da quei due uomini che non sapevano reggere il peso di quei ‘fatti’ determinati dal ‘suo amore per loro’.” 20.

34 - Ibid.

amassed more than 200 credits in his filmography. He frequently worked for auteurs such as Damiano Damiani, Sergio Leone and Pier Paolo Pasolini, but did not feel too good about supporting aspiring talents like the directorial team behind the 1965 thriller. The same is true for art director Luigi Scaccianoce who was nominated for an Academy Award for *The Gospel According to Matthew* (*Il vangelo secondo Matteo*, 1964) and would go on to design *Fellini Satyricon* (1969). Moreover, Bazzoni hired his younger brother Camillo as a camera operator.<sup>35</sup> A year later, Camillo’s short *The Scream* (*L’urlo*, 1966), which starred future giallo director Francesco Barilli and was photographed by Vittorio Storaro, competed in the Cannes Film Festival.

Except for sound mixer Oscar De Arcangelis, makeup artist Franco Corridoni, hair stylist Maria Teresa Corridoni and assistant art director Francesco Bronzi, the crew stayed the same as planned initially.<sup>36</sup> Instead of Bronzi, Bolognini brought Dante Ferretti in. Ferretti would later trump his superior, Luigi Scaccianoce, and win three Academy Awards, mostly for his collaborations with Martin Scorsese. *The Possessed* was one of Ferretti’s earliest films. It seems to be an extremely rare case that a film team remained almost without change from the first conception until post-production. However, it was co-production which frequently necessitated the replacement of personnel. As an entirely national film, Manolo Bolognini did not have to consider the requirements of a foreign co-producer or the state. This may explain why the cast and crew involved in this film remained quite stable until the shooting wrapped.

Just as with the technical team, Bolognini hired excellent actors. Although Peter Baldwin was an able performer, his acting career had not really gained momentum when assuming the leading role in the 1965 thriller. However, the American had already started a prolific career as a TV director in 1964 which lasted until the early 2000s. Memorable are his performances in the Gothic horror movie *The Ghost* (*Lo spettro*, 1963) alongside Barbara Steele, in the giallo *The Weekend Murders* (*Concerto per pistola solista*, 1970) and the political thriller *The Mattei Affair* (*Il caso Mattei*). After an extensive period in which he played mostly on stage, Salvo Randone easily navigated between the low and the highbrow and is best remembered for his enduring collaboration with leftist intellectual Elio Petri. In 1972 he performed in *My Dear Killer* (*Mio caro assassino*), another giallo by producer Bolognini. Valentina Cortese was a highly admired actress who had recently returned to Italy from Hollywood. Like Randone, she did not shy away from genre films. Besides the movie for Bazzoni and Rossellini, in 1965 she participated in *Juliet of the Spirits* (*Giulietta degli spiriti*). Despite not being a giallo regular, her other noteworthy contributions to the

35 - Bolognini, “Elenco personale tecnico”. Op. cit. *Archivio Centrale dello Stato*.

36 - Ibid.



genre included *The Girl Who Knew Too Much* and *The Iguana with the Tongue of Fire* (*L'iguana dalla lingua di fuoco*, 1971).<sup>37</sup>

The directors also found convincing actors for the smaller roles. *The Possessed* was one of the few acting jobs of Pia Lindström (daughter of Ingrid Bergman), who would go on to work as a TV and radio journalist in the US. In 1965, butch Frenchman Philippe Leroy was rather at the beginning of an extremely prolific film career that continues to this day. He starred in thrillers such as *The Laughing Woman* (*Femina ridens*, 1969) and *Without Knowing Anything About Her* (*Senza sapere niente di lei*, 1969).<sup>38</sup> A limited but significant role was given to Virna Lisi who only worked on Bolognini's set for four days.<sup>39</sup> Around the time when this film was made, Lisi was given a seven-year contract by Paramount, but returned to Italy by the end of the 1960s. With her talent and beauty, she went on to become one of the female icons of the Italian cinema. In total, she performed in more than 110 films.

### The Shooting and Release

On 10 December 1964 the producer announced the new film to the cinema division of the Italian Ministry of Tourism and Entertainment,<sup>40</sup> as he applied for a certificate of nationality and, thus, state subsidies. For this project, Bolognini and some partners, among them Franco Rossellini, had founded the production company B.R.C., which had the extremely low sum of £900,000 at its disposal.<sup>41</sup> Hence, *The Possessed* was planned as an ultra-low-budget effort. The entire film including post-production was supposed to cost merely £136.5 million. Whereas B.R.C. raised £37,352,000 itself, Istituto Luce contributed material and services in the amount of £34,147,500. Istituto Luce was a production facility and film laboratory established during the Fascist regime which continued to operate after World War II and has recently merged with the Cinecittà studios. The largest investment, £65 million, stemmed from "Rosima Astald di Vaduz".<sup>42</sup> This seems to be a spelling mistake and is supposed to mean "Rosina Anstalt di Vaduz", a company based in the Principality of Liechtenstein which had also invested in the production company B.R.C. itself.<sup>43</sup> Therefore, Rosina paid for the better part of the project. Luce, on the other hand, did not provide cash but facilities, equipment and staff.

At the end of the year, the ministry finished its assessment of the submitted script. The anonymous official praised the screenplay's psychological depth and artistic value: "An

37 - Bolognini, "Elenco personale artistico". Op. cit. *Archivio Centrale dello Stato*.

38 - Ibid.

39 - Bolognini, "Piano di lavorazione". Op. cit. *Archivio Centrale dello Stato*.

40 - Ministero del Turismo e dello Spettacolo, Direzione Generale dello Spettacolo, Divisione Cinema.

41 - Aldo Bernardini (ed., 2000) *Cinema italiano 1930-1995: le imprese di produzione*. (Roma: ANICA, 53); Bolognini, "Denuncia inizio lavorazione".

Op. cit. *Archivio Centrale dello Stato*.

42 - Bolognini, "Piano finanziario". Op. cit. *Archivio Centrale dello Stato*.

43 - Op. cit. Bernardini, 53. I would like to thank Carlotta Bolognini, the daughter of the producer, for her invaluable advice, and Luca Pallanch from Cineteca Nazionale for establishing the contact with Mrs. Bolognini.

indisputably committed work, definitely endowed with a noteworthy dramatic 'pathos'.<sup>44</sup> As the ministry often had to deal with more exploitative thrillers, this was one of the few exclusively positive reviews for films belonging to the giallo genre.

The shooting commenced on 21 December 1964 and took about eight weeks.<sup>45</sup> For such a scarcely budgeted movie, this was a rather long period. A great deal of more expensive films made do with five weeks or less. From 21 December 1964 until 6 February 1965, the crew mostly did interiors at the Roman Istituto Luce, but ventured out to the countryside for short exterior shoots not far from the capital.<sup>46</sup> Requiring seaside locations, the team filmed in Anguillara Sabazia, Bolsena, Castel Gandolfo and Rocca di Papa. Hence, the lake in the film was composed of images taken at the Lakes Albano, Bolsena, Bracciano and Turano. The dispute between Giovanni and Francesco on the boat was shot at Lake Albano. The production wrapped with a five-day stay in the South Tyrolean ski resort Brunico/Bruneck which was also where the directors staged the cemetery scene.<sup>47</sup> With an actual expenditure of £126,662,766 the film went below the stipulated budget. The final budget also suggests that Luigi Bazzoni assumed greater responsibilities when staging the film, as he was paid £2.5 million, while Franco Rossellini received £750,000.<sup>48</sup>

*The Possessed* premiered at the Locarno Festival on 24 July 1965 to mixed to negative reviews. On 14 August, in the middle of the summer break which was reserved for cheap genre movies, the film was released in Italy. Brought into circulation by a regional independent, i.e. a minor distribution company only active in a limited area, the 18-rated film earned £100,116,000 on the domestic market.<sup>49</sup> It is possible that through the combination of the Italian revenues, foreign sales and state subsidies, the movie only generated a small loss. In the UK the film was released in September 1966, with the distributor opting for the more titillating title, *The Possessed*, rather than the direct translation, *The Lady in the Lake*. A Spanish release followed on 20 September 1971.

For Manolo Bolognini, the thriller opened up a long career as an independent producer. Although B.R.C. finished its last film in 1974, he continued to make movies via a range of different companies. Just a year after *The Possessed*, Bolognini was responsible for the billion-lire grossing movie *Django* (1966) and went on to produce Luigi Bazzoni's *The Fifth Cord* (*Giornata nera per l'ariete*, 1971), the Italian-Spanish giallo *The Two Faces of Fear* (I

44 - Ministry of Tourism and Entertainment, "[Review]", 30 December 1964, Op. cit. *Archivio Centrale dello Stato*.

45 - Bolognini, "Inizio lavorazione", 10 December 1964, Op. cit. *Archivio Centrale dello Stato*.

46 - Istituto Luce, "[Letter to B.R.C.]", 6 January 1965, Op. cit. *Archivio Centrale dello Stato*.

47 - Bolognini, "Piano di lavorazione". For an illustrated report on the exact locations in Bolsena and Brunico/Bruneck, see <https://www.davinotti.com/index.php?forum=50000579>.

48 - Bolognini, "Dichiarazione analitica del costo effettivamente sostenuto". However, the final budget indicates a previously estimated sum of £140,953,800 which is slightly higher than the total sum in the financing plan cited above. It is unclear how these different figures materialised.

49 - ANICAGIS (1974) *Catalogo generale dei film italiani dal 1956 al 1973*. (Roma: Associazione Nazionale Industrie Cinematografiche ed Affini/Associazione Generale Italiana dello Spettacolo), 55; AGIS (1978) *Catalogo generale dei film italiani dal 1965 al 1978*, 5th ed. (Roma: Associazione Generale Italiana dello Spettacolo), 7.

*due volti della paura*, 1972) and *My Dear Killer*. He died in 2017. Franco Rossellini decided to focus on producing and kept close ties with Bolognini. He collaborated with Fellini and Pasolini and financed another film by Bazzoni, the western *The Short and Happy Life of Brothers Blue* (*Blu Gang e vissero per sempre felici e ammazzati*, 1973). At the end of the 1960s Rossellini moved to New York where he died from AIDS in 1992.<sup>50</sup> Luigi Bazzoni wrote and directed two further unusual gialli, *The Fifth Cord* and *Footprints on the Moon* (*Le orme*, 1975). From the late 1980s until the early 1990s he was busy with a direct-to-VHS 15-part documentary about the history of Rome. His final work, another collaboration with his debut's producer, was a screenplay for the thriller *Raul: Straight to Kill* (*Raul – Diritto di uccidere*, 2005). Bazzoni died in 2012.

£ = Italian lira

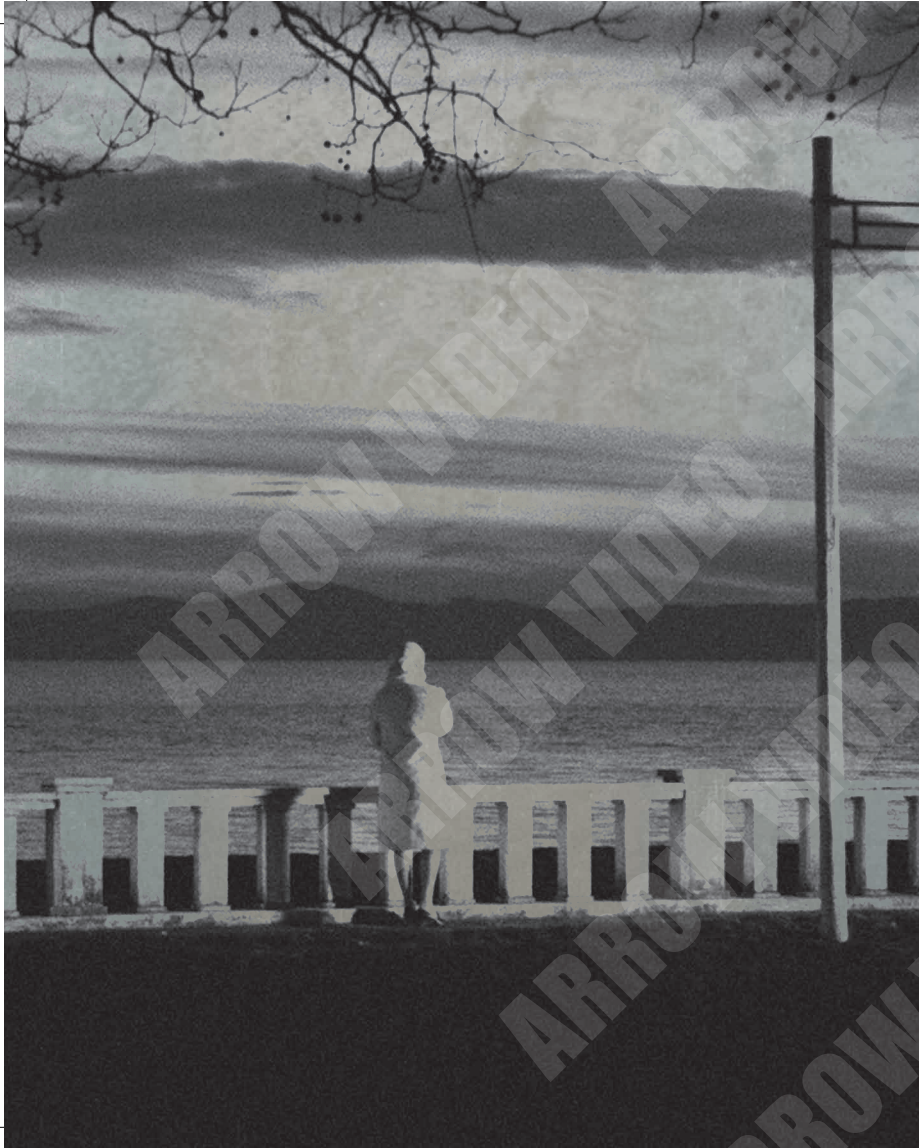
**Andreas Ehrenreich is a film scholar specialising in European exploitation cinema. He has organised conferences on Mark of the Devil, the giallo genre and archival research on popular Italian cinema. His work is published in Bianco & Nero, Cine-Excess and Maske und Kothurn.**

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50 - Op. cit. Poppi 1993, 224.







# THE SECRETS OF THE LAKE

by Roberto Curti

Alleghe is a tiny hamlet in the Dolomites mountain range, in northeastern Italy. With less than 2,000 inhabitants, it is an oasis of peacefulness: the diminutive Alleghe lake, on whose edge the village is built, is its main tourist attraction, its crystal clean waters reflecting the peak of the nearby Mount Civetta. At the bottom of the lake there is an old bell tower, submerged by the landslide which in 1771 caused it to form. According to a local legend, the toll of the underwater bells is an announcement of imminent death. For years, the villagers used to tell stories about those death tolls and the mysterious deaths that had taken place in Alleghe.

These were not ghost stories, though, and the hamlet's idyllic image was stained by one of the most infamous series of killings in 20<sup>th</sup> century Italy. It all started on May 9, 1933, when a beautiful 19-year-old girl named Emma De Ventura was found dead in room #6 of Alleghe's Hotel Centrale. Her throat had been cut with a razor, and beside her there was an empty bottle of iodine tincture, the contents of which were found in her stomach during the autopsy. Emma was a maid in the hotel run by Pietro De Blasio, his wife Adelina and the latter's brother Aldo Da Tos; the investigations dismissed the case as suicide. Six months later, on November 25, Da Tos married the 28-year-old Carolina Finazzo. The couple went on a brief honeymoon, but upon their return the bride looked singularly unhappy and was seen crying. In the early hours of December 4, a kid skating on the frozen lake noticed a hole in the crust. He approached it and found a body in it: Carolina Finazzo. Her death was deemed accidental, caused by sleepwalking.

Years passed, a terrible war ensued, and the daily life went by in Alleghe as if nothing had happened. Then, on the night of November 18, 1946, a double murder took place: a local couple, Luigi and Luigia Del Monego, were shot dead in an alley near the Hotel Centrale. The case was labeled as killing for the purpose of robbery, but the only suspect was acquitted: it was finally archived as unsolved.

The murders would have sunk in the collective memory were it not for Sergio Saviane, a special correspondent for the weekly magazine *Il Lavoro Illustrato*. As an adolescent, Saviane had resided in Alleghe, knew well the story of the local murder mysteries and had been a friend of the Del Monegos. Urged by his editor-in-chief Pasquale Festa Campanile, in 1952 he returned to Alleghe and started a journalistic inquiry, slowly penetrating the curtain of silence and dread about those deaths. This time the bell tolls gave way to a series of articles which brought to the surface again those cold cases, which Saviane hypothesized were linked together, and led to unexpected consequences. De Blasio, his wife and Da Tos sued him and demanded two million lire for libel; Saviane was condemned, but a local *carabiniere* prompted by his articles, Ezio Cesca, started an undercover investigation which led to surprising results. On July 8, 1958, a man named Giuseppe Gasperin was arrested. He confessed that he, Del Biagio and Da Tos had shot the De Monegos because they knew too much: on that night of December 1933 they had seen Aldo Da Tos carrying his wife's body on his back, toward the lake.

The ensuing trial caused a sensation and became one of the most notorious in post-war Italy, amid confessions, retractions and assorted twists. It turned out that Da Tos had killed Emma De Ventura (his lover) and revealed his secret to his wife during their honeymoon; Adelina Da Tos strangled Carolina when she claimed she would talk to the police, and Aldo disposed of the body. Many in Alleghe knew or suspected something but were too scared to talk. Eventually the four defendants were condemned to life sentences, except for Gasperin, who received a 30-year sentence.

The Alleghe killings struck the imagination of novelist Giovanni Comisso, who took inspiration from them for the short story *Un paese di buona gente (A Village of Good People)*, published in 1954. He then developed his ideas in a novel, *La donna del lago*, first published in 1962 (Comisso revised it for a definitive edition in 1968). Told as a first-person narrative, from the point of view of the writer himself, it followed very loosely the true story of the Alleghe killings (the mountain village is unnamed in the book). The author used the mystery plot as a pretext to explore existential themes and meditate on human nature, using the idyllic environment in a symbolic way, as a surface that conceals unspeakable passions and horrors. "Here, it's the mountains that kill," Comisso has a character say. Moreover, the novel slightly changes the solution of the mystery, with a twist ending that elects a different main guilty party among the ones established in court.

The book rights were immediately acquired for a film adaptation by producer Manolo Bolognini (the brother of renowned director Mauro Bolognini), an independent tycoon who had financed such important films as Fellini's *The Swindle (Il bidone)*, 1955) and *Nights of Cabiria (Le notti di Cabiria)*, 1957) and Pasolini's *The Gospel According to St. Matthew (Il*

*vangelo secondo Matteo*, 1964). Bolognini's associates in the company BRC were Franco Rossellini, the nephew of Roberto Rossellini (and his former assistant on *General Della Rovere [Il generale Della Rovere]*, 1959) and the son of composer Renzo Rossellini, and Toto Colaiacino, Italy's biggest supplier of technical equipment.

The first draft of the script was penned by Giulio Questi, a documentarist struggling to make his feature film debut while making a living in the movie industry as a jack of all trades, amid occasional acting stints (in *La dolce vita*, no less!) and hit-and-run jobs such as *Nudi per vivere* (1963) - a collection of night club numbers and stripteases co-directed with Elio Petri and Giuliano Montaldo, and signed 'Elio Montesti'. As Questi recalled, "I was pursuing my projects, I was striving, I was suffering, I wanted to make a certain type of cinema, and didn't give a damn about the rest. [...] And so, whenever a useful job for my economic survival came, I got angry because it distracted me from my projects. This is how the script for [*The Possessed*] came upon me. I did it to get some money, but my head was elsewhere. I remember writing it by myself, then others put their hands on it."<sup>1</sup>

By the time he got to direct *The Possessed*, Luigi Bazzoni was a promising newcomer. Born in Salsomaggiore Terme, near Parma, in 1929, he had made a name for himself first as assistant to Mauro Bolognini, on such groundbreaking films as *Il bell'Antonio* (1960), *La viaccia* (1961) and *Agostino* (1962), and then as the director of several interesting shorts, such as the critically acclaimed *Di domenica* (1963). Bazzoni was sided by Rossellini, himself a debutant. In more ways than one, then, and just as the story it was based upon, *The Possessed* was a family affair: the camera operator was Luigi's younger brother Camillo (born in 1934), also a director on his own, while Renzo Rossellini wrote the score.<sup>2</sup>

News that the film was in preproduction appeared in newspapers in Spring 1964, immediately after the decision of the Supreme Court that confirmed the convictions for all the defendants. Meanwhile, another book based on the Alleghe killings was published, Sergio Saviane's *I misteri di Alleghe*, a true crime novel, halfway between journalistic report and fiction partly inspired by Saviane's own articles.<sup>3</sup> Shooting was announced to start in June but was postponed to winter. "We were having difficulties with the financing," Bolognini recalled.<sup>4</sup>

1 - Giulio Questi, *Se non ricordo male. Frammenti autobiografici*, (Bari: Rubbettino Editore, 2014), 78-79.

2 - An amateur photographer, and a former assistant to such renowned DoPs as Vincenzo Seratrice and Aldo Scavarda, Camillo Bazzoni directed several shorts (including *L'urlo*, 1966, starring Francesco Barilli) and a quartet of feature films from 1968 to 1972, including the Steve Reeves vehicle *Vivo per la tua morte* (a.k.a. *A Long Ride from Hell*, 1968) and the grim conspiracy/mafia movie *Shadows Unseen (Abuso di potere)*, 1972) starring Frederick Stafford.

3 - Over the years other works have been inspired by the Alleghe story, namely the TV mini-series *Buio nella valle* (1984), starring Luca Barbareschi, and Toni Sirena's 2014 book *I delitti di Alleghe. Le verità oscure*.

4 - Not signed, "Sullo schermo. *La donna del lago*" in *Corriere d'Informazione*, 3-4 April, 1964.

“But then Rossellini met a woman who stayed at the Grand Hotel and who was enthusiastic about the story. She offered the necessary money to start the production.”<sup>5</sup>

In interviews, the makers underlined the psychological dimension of the film, calling it “a mental *giallo* [...] in which suspense starts from the mind of the protagonist, who is trying to read the mystery through his imagination. Even the narrative follows a peculiar technique, because the protagonist’s interpretation of facts develops on three different levels: an opening dream, observation of reality, his own mind.”<sup>6</sup> Although newspapers emphasized Rossellini’s presence, it was reportedly Bazzoni who held the reins.<sup>7</sup> Giannetto De Rossi, who worked on the film as make-up artist, recalls only Bazzoni directing, with Rossellini showing up every now and then as supervisor. The cast was first-rate, with special participations by Virna Lisi and Philippe Leroy, and key roles played by renowned stage actors Valentina Cortese and Salvo Randone. The lead was Peter Baldwin, an American actor based in Italy who had acted in Rossellini’s *Wait for The Dawn* (*Era notte a Roma*, 1960) and in Riccardo Freda’s *The Ghost* (*Lo spettra*, 1963), the latter alongside Barbara Steele. In June 1965, immediately prior to the film’s release, Baldwin married Vittorio De Sica’s daughter Emi.<sup>8</sup>

*The Possessed* debuted in July 1965, in competition at the Swiss Locarno Film Festival. It was highly anticipated, both because of its grisly real-life inspiration and for the number of talents involved, and Bolognini thought he had a winner on his hands. However, the film was allegedly met coldly by the audience and the critics alike.<sup>9</sup> “An amateurish and overambitious work, it is a third-rate giallo, cloaked in photographic preciousness which cannot hide the story’s insipid substance,” wrote the eminent Giovanni Grazzini in his review in the *Corriere della Sera*, where he even gave away the murderer’s identity.<sup>10</sup>

Still, despite the tepid critical reactions, *The Possessed* turned out as an original achievement. Bazzoni’s film retains Comisso’s first-person approach (by way of the protagonist’s voice-over) as well as the book’s reliance on the oneiric dimension but manipulates them in an imaginative way. In the novel, the narrator is “visited” by the other characters who tell him about their desires and secrets in vivid hallucinations which retain a magical, unexplained quality. In the film, it is through dreams that the narrator, a writer going through a creative crisis named Bernard, penetrates the mystery and discovers the characters’ motivations, as if he was creating a novel.

5 - Carlotta Bolognini, Manolo Bolognini. *La mia vita nel cinema*. (Milan: Aracne Editrice, 2018), 50.

6 - Alberto Cretto, “I delitti di Alleghe diventano un giallo,” *Corriere d’informazione*, 17-18 December 1964.

7 - Roberto Alemanno, “La donna del lago,” *Cinema* 60 #56, February 1966.

8 - [Not signed] “Oggi la figlia di De Sica sposa l’attore Baldwin [sic],” *Corriere della Sera*, 8 June 1965.

9 - Tino Ranieri, “Il film tradisce romanzo e cronaca,” *L’Unità*, 27 July 1965.

10 - Giovanni Grazzini, “La donna del lago a Locarno: il film sui delitti di Alleghe,” *Corriere della Sera*, 25 July 1965.

On the other hand, the link with the Alleghe murders is feebler than contemporary audiences would expect. The exteriors were partly shot in the village of Brunico, near Bolzano, in the Northern Trentino Alto Adige region, but the lake featured prominently in the film is the Bolsena lake, in the Lazio region, less than two hours from Rome, definitely not an Alpine scenery. This visual puzzle results in an undetermined, almost abstract setting. (Interestingly, a few years earlier, director Gianfranco De Bosio had penned an unfilmed treatment inspired by the Alleghe murders, characterized by a more explicitly political approach and a faithful depiction of the real-life provincial backdrop).<sup>11</sup>

Even though it centers around a murder mystery, *The Possessed* is less a giallo than an idiosyncratic work that uses genre material as keys to a more complex, auteur-tinged discourse. The film is more preoccupied with the delusional romantic obsession of its protagonist, who believes that he can redeem himself (and find new inspiration) through the love for a young maid named Tilde (Virna Lisi) whom he fleetingly met and fell for. Even the mystery elements that the makers added to the story serve a similar purpose. The hunchbacked Francesco (Piero Anichisi) shows Bernard a photograph revealing a key detail: Tilde’s pregnancy. The scene pre-dates by a few months Antonioni’s (admittedly more philosophical and theoretical) meditation on the ambiguous power of images in *Blow-up* (1966), and is more significant for the effect it plays on the hero, destroying the idealized image of Tilde in his mind.

In a sense, *The Possessed* is closer to a Gothic tale, both for its setting (the lake brings memories of one of the founding stones of Italian Gothic, *Malombra*) and its characters. Tilde, the impossible love object of all the men in the film, is yet another “ghost of love” like so many female presences in the genre, doomed to haunt the living: even though Bernard (and us) don’t know it, she is already dead when the film begins. In turn, Bernard is a weak, feverish and confused hero, a stranger whose physical dislocation hides a deeper malaise, while the other male characters turn out to be manipulated, dominated or victimized by another “woman of the lake” who is in many ways Tilde’s opposite.

The film’s stunning aesthetics stand out. Leonida Barboni’s extraordinary black-and-white cinematography, which at times recalls the works of the great photographer Mario Giacomelli, places the story in a stylized, dreamlike, haunting microcosm, whose inhabitants are like ghosts trapped in an otherworldly dimension. Note, for instance, the scenes of Bernard and Francesco on a boat in the lake, filmed under an unnatural light, making one unsure whether it is day or a full moon night. Such a mood is emphasized by the film’s reprisal and expansion of one of the book’s visual clues, the presence of mirrors that reflect and multiply the characters, hinting at a secret world behind the surface of

11 - Op. cit. Ranieri.

what Comisso ironically dubbed “a village of good people.” The dream sequences, highly contrasted, overexposed and almost experimentally edited by Nino Baragli, are surprisingly akin to the almost abstract one that opens Questi’s Gothic-tinged *Il passo*, in the anthology *Amori pericolosi* (1964), hinting at a common stylistic sensibility. Moreover, Bazzoni makes an exquisite use of subjective shots, and breaks up Comisso’s linear chronological narrative into a nervous flashback structure, which owes to the French Nouvelle Vague, namely the works of Alain Resnais.

The film’s commercial run was not felicitous. Bolognini recalled that the distributor went bankrupt on release day, and grosses amounted to a meagre 100 million *lire* at the box-office.<sup>12</sup> Still, *The Possessed* marked a turning point for all those involved, starting with Bolognini: the lady who helped him finance the start of production offered to give him a hand again on his next effort, *Django* (1966). In the winter of 1965 Giulio Questi finally got the chance to make his feature film debut, when producer Alessandro Jacovoni asked him and his friend Franco “Kim” Arcalli” to write a Western: the result, shot in mid-1966 near Madrid, was the surrealistic, ultra-violent *Django Kill (Se sei vivo spara)*, 1967). Franco Rossellini never directed another picture. Instead, he stuck to producing, with such important films as Pasolini’s *Teorema* (1968), *Medea* (1969) and *Il Decameron* (1971), Fellini’s *La città delle donne* (1980) and Tinto Brass’ *Caligula* (1979).

With only five feature films between 1965 and 1975, Luigi Bazzoni stands out as one of the most underrated filmmakers of the period, maneuvering between genre and auteur cinema with a keen visual elegance. He tried his hand at the Western, with a version of Prosper Mérimée’s *Carmen (L’uomo, l’orgoglio, la vendetta)*, 1967) and the idiosyncratic *Blugang* (1972, credited under the pseudonym Marc Meyer); he helmed one of the very few gialli based on literary works (*The Fifth Cord, [Giornata nera per l’ariete]*, 1971] based on D.M. Devine’s novel), and filmed the extraordinary *Footprints (Le Orme)*, 1975), a study on female paranoia starring Florinda Bolkan, whose tepid result at the box-office harmed his career as a director.

Bazzoni’s final work was the ambitious multimedia visual-audio event *Roma Imago Urbis*. Co-produced by Rai and shot in 24 different countries between 1987 and 1992, it was conceived as a series of fifteen films (one hour each) about Rome as the cradle of modern civilization, with music by Ennio Morricone and photography by Vittorio Storaro (who, as Franco Nero revealed, “said he’d do the film on one condition: if they hire Luigi Bazzoni for the entire program.”)<sup>13</sup> *Roma Imago Urbis* was officially premiered in Italy at Rome’s Pantheon, in 1994, in a worldwide broadcast, only to disappear without a trace for years. It resurfaced at the Metropolitan Museum in New York but was not broadcast on Italian

television until April 2012. By then, Luigi Bazzoni was no longer among the living: he had died one month earlier, at the age of 82, in his home village of Salsomaggiore Terme. He is survived by his brother Camillo, who sadly refuses to talk about their days in the movie industry, as if it was all a bad dream, full of too many ghosts, and best forgotten.

*Roberto Curti is the author of Italian Gothic Horror Films, 1957-1969 as well as other books and essays on Italian cinema. He lives in Cortona, Italy.*

<sup>12</sup> - Op. cit. Bolognini, 50.

<sup>13</sup> - Tom Lisanti, Pamela Tiffin, *Hollywood to Rome, 1961-1974*. (Jefferson, NC: McFarland, 2015), 209.







## THE POSSESSED CONTEMPORARY REVIEWS

Refractory to fame, the Locarno Festival raises its periscope in search of young talents that will bring new blood to the anemic contemporary cinema. It is a patient and laborious effort, which already gave good results; but its lenses must have been fogged when they pointed at the Italian film *La donna del lago*. [...] The film doesn't have the appropriate distinction for an international festival. An amateurish and overambitious work, it is a third-rate giallo, cloaked in photographic preciousness which cannot hide the story's insipid substance. [...] Whereas the Alleghe killings, among the most gruesome in post-War years, were raised to literary status in Comisso's novel, Bazzoni and Rossellini have diminished them again within the squalid boundaries of true crime. It wouldn't matter, if only the film managed to be spectacular and thrilling, even without being poetic. Unfortunately, those suspenseful bits slip away over the course of a messed-up yarn. [...] In the end, the story turns out to be an unmotivated tangle, simplistically solved by a brief hysterical scene: distracted viewers won't understand a thing.

**Giovanni Grazzini, "La donna del lago a Locarno: il film sui delitti di Alleghe", *Corriere della Sera*, 25 July 1965**

*La donna del lago* must be judged for what it is, a movie made by debutants. Its young authors [...] started as documentarists, and even in their first feature film one can see the good results of such an apprenticeship, for instance the terrific effectiveness with which they portray the recurring motif of the human eye watching from a keyhole. [...] The perfect mechanism of a thriller, both on the page and on screen, depends often on imponderable factors. Let's say Bazzoni and Rossellini didn't have luck on their side. *La donna del lago* wants to be an English-style *giallo*, but it needed more mystery, more horror, a gloomier setting and, most of all, less artificial, less conventional psychologies. However, the technical proficiency is commendable, as are the formal care and the good acting...

**Leo Pestelli, "Un 'giallo' sui delitti di Alleghe presentato dall'Italia a Locarno", *La Stampa*, 27 July 1965.**

This adaptation, on which Bazzoni and Rossellini were aided in the scriptwriting phase by Giulio Questi, has the only merit of not having turned *La donna del lago* into a cheap *giallo* or a horror flick. That said, however, there are many flaws to complain about, both in relation to the book that inspired it and on a strictly filmic perspective. Some key moments in Comisso's book, which looked already cinematic on page, have been neglected. [...] The character of the novelist (who in the book is some sort of "choir", fascinated by horror and fear) is among the film's unexplained elements, starting with his unmotivated and disproportionate neurosis.

The story of the Alleghe murders is basically one of money and sex [...] which the directors refused to understand, rejecting any precise localization. [...] Here, the story is always undetermined, populated by obscure characters: it's the story of a neurosis, as the directors stated. But then, why use Comisso and Alleghe, as if the novel hadn't been written and the real-life events had never happened? In conclusion, those who read the novel will find traces of it here and there, but not the spirit; those who haven't, will find themselves lost in the film as if in a small mountain Marienbad.

**Tino Ranieri, "Il film tradisce romanzo e cronaca", *L'Unità*, 27 July 1965.**

It wasn't easy to reproduce the mood that Comisso conveys in his novel. Bazzoni and Rossellini have chosen the most difficult way: not the one based on the facts, but on the psychological investigation, the exploration of the places where the events took place – the gossipy village, the mysterious lake, the gloomy hotel. The suggestions offered by the setting inspired the directors' expert technique and their aesthetic sensibility. The photography is excellent, the art direction is accurate, Bazzoni and Rossellini prove they handle the technique. They have tried to elevate the story – that could have been reduced to mere suspense – on a formal level, even though at times they slip into preciousness.

**Alberico Sala, "La donna del lago", *Corriere d'informazione*, 10-11 September 1965.**

A film's qualities can sometimes be traced in elements which go beyond the director and scriptwriters' intentions. Then, we'll say that the protagonist of Franco Rossellini and Luigi Bazzoni's film is the photography and its plot is the lake. Watching the movie from this perspective, we'll see how fascinating, although abstract, the story is, and how the lake seems to speak, or to burst into allusive soliloquies.

The script's greatest mistake is to have crammed the protagonist with inner issues (which moreover are never cleared) in addition to the story's facts, thus creating two guidelines: on the one hand we have the story and its events, on the other the protagonist's inner turmoil. These never interlock but end up damaging one another. Such an issue is further aggravated by Italian scriptwriters' bad habit of bringing to the screen the umpteenth intellectual in crisis.

The lake is the film's main fascination and its most original element, which allows for very beautiful parts. But the result is like a detail that overwhelms the whole canvas, escaping the author's intentions, thus raising or limiting (depending on the judgment) the film's merits."

**Claudio Rispoli, "La donna del lago", *Filmcritica* n.162, November 1965.**

*La donna del lago*, the directorial debut of Luigi Bazzoni and Franco Rossellini, based on Giovanni Comisso's novel of the same name, didn't have much luck, this summer, at the Locarno film festival. The critics and the audience panned first-time director Luigi Bazzoni (Franco Rossellini's contribution was reportedly very marginal), and ultimately in our opinion they were not wrong.

But it would be unfair not to point out that with *La donna del lago*, certainly not a very felicitous effort, a young director comes to the surface. [...] Luigi Bazzoni has cinema in his blood, and each and every effort he makes is a precise attempt at expressing a cinematic story exclusively through images, without indulging in simplistic explicatory dialogue.

Throughout the film one has the feeling that Bazzoni [...] used the novel as a pretext for a mere personal exercise, even though the choice of such a source might lead to think that he had ambitions.

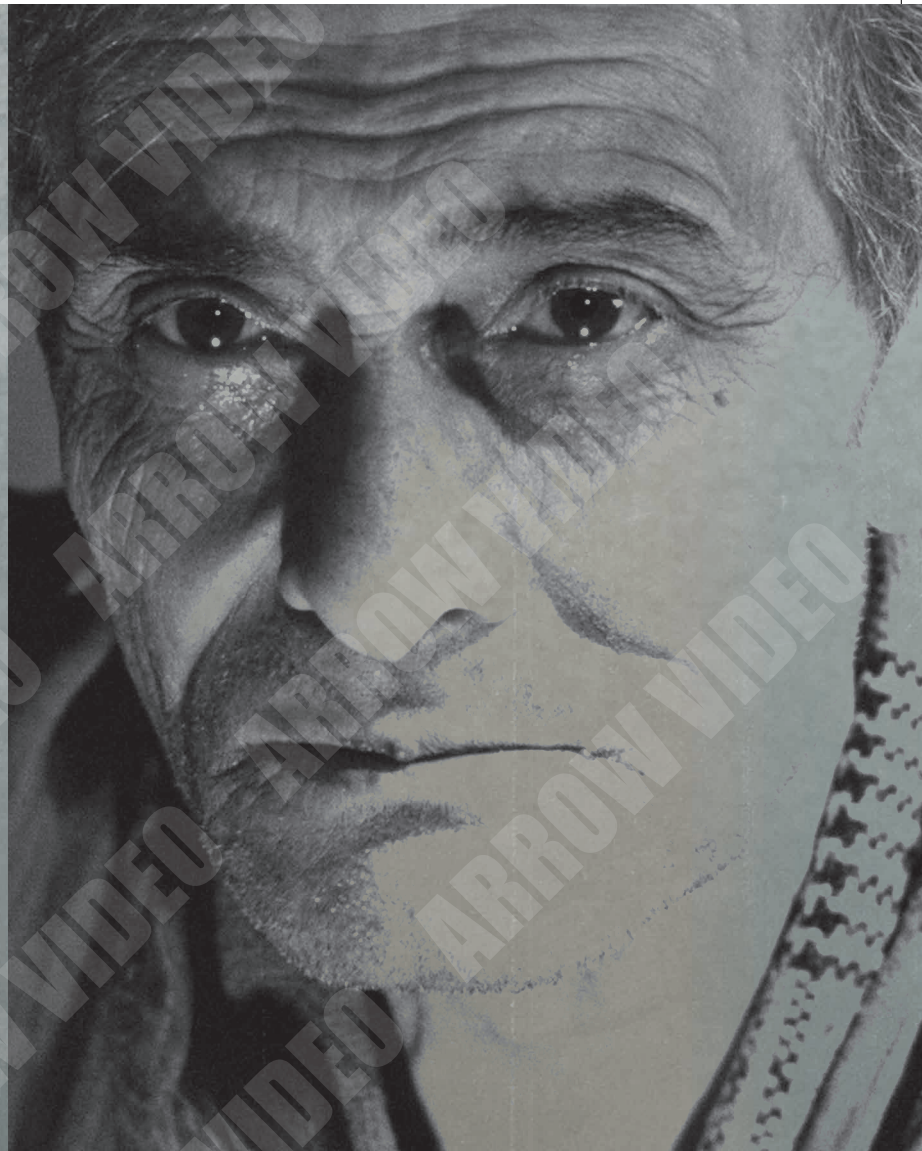
The first negative consideration is that the film is let down not only by a confused and exasperated formalism [...] but also by a severe stylistic friction which goes to the detriment of the overall aesthetics. Realistic sequences are followed by oneiric and translucent visions, which look as if they have been culled from the museum of Surrealism and avant-garde. [...] But even though almost every shot is chiseled with an unripe, exhausting and oppressive formal care, each image contains the vital spark to build a valid and stimulating starting point for the young director's future path.

**Roberto Alemanno, "La donna del lago", *Cinema 60* n56, February 1966.**

If *La Donna del Lago* is what the Italian's mean by 'new cinema', one might be tempted to give up hope not only for the Italian new cinema but for any new cinema. Flash editing, bleached out photography, slow tracking shots along gloomy hotel corridors, static figures gazing expressionless into the distance, and here all welded together into a tortuously significant film. Luigi Bazzoni and Franco Rossellini have picked up all the tricks of the trade: what they haven't done is learned how to use them. The lugubrious pace of the story is matched by some heavily self-conscious direction; and when, by the end, all but one of the leading characters have been done to death (two of them meat-axed, for good measure), significance has given way to sheer nonsense – and ineptly dubbed nonsense at that.

Uncredited, *Monthly Film Bulletin*, v.33 n.394, November 1966

Translations by Roberto Curti



## ABOUT THE RESTORATION

*The Possessed (La donna del lago)* 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, as the film's dialogue was recorded entirely in post-production, as per the production standards of the period. During a dream sequence scene appearing at approximately 34 minutes during the English version, the synch is noticeably loose, but this is as per the original release prints.

The film was graded on Digital Vision's Nucoda Film Master at R3Store Studios, London. A separate English language 35mm print was sourced from the BFI Archive for the English title sections.

All materials used in this restoration were accessed from Surf Film and the BFI.

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

### **BFI**

Katrina Stokes, John Carino

## PRODUCTION CREDITS

**Disc and Booklet Produced by** James Blackford  
**Executive Producers** Kevin Lambert, Francesco Simeoni  
**Technical Producer** James White  
**Production Assistant** Nick Mastrini  
**QC Manager** Nora Mehenni  
**Blu-ray Mastering** The Engine House Media Services  
**Artist** Sean Phillips  
**Design** Obviously Creative

## SPECIAL THANKS

Alex Agran, Francesco Barilli, Stefania Carnevale, Roberto Curti, Giannetto De Rossi, Richard Dyer, Andreas Ehrenreich, Dante Ferretti, Manlio Gomasasca, Tim Lucas, Davide Pulici



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