

## Fulci giallo

Never an elegant stylist, Lucio Fulci is best known for his later, budget constrained and at times wildly imitative horror features, abundant in gore and giddily paced, but seemingly tacked together with duct tape and string. Fulci was a career director, however, who got his start in mainstream Italian cinema and only turned to horror because that was where he found the most profit. Before the horror movies, like a number of Italian directors, he did make several giallo features, including one that is considered a masterpiece, the 1972 **Don't Torture a Duckling**, which has been released on DVD & Blu-ray by Arrow Video (UPC#760137035480, \$40).

The rules of giallo are fast and loose, but in general parameters, they are murder thrillers with especially twisty narratives and amped up sequences of violence. Normally, rich people are involved in one way or another, and as a consequence, the décor of the settings are ultra modern or avant-garde, and the costumes are equally striking. **Duckling** is set in a rural area but, in a wonderful piece of absurdity, there is one fancy house there, which was built by a wealthy man as a show house that he never intended to live in. His daughter, played by Barbara Bouchet, is staying there for the summer. Bouchet is the heroine of the film, along with Tomas Milan, who plays an investigative reporter, but in the film's greatest absurdity of all, she is also a pedophile, getting her kicks from acting provocatively toward pubescent boys. The boys are being murdered, and the 108-minute film takes the viewer through a series of feints where you are sure one person is the killer, and then you are sure another person is the killer. At one point, you're sure that it is Bouchet's character, but instead, she saves the day.

The film's gore is grotesque to the point of satire (the demise of the villain is particularly amusing—gross, but amusing), which is a hallmark of a Fulci picture. It does not have the smooth, dynamic camera angles that one normally associates with giallo, but there was enough money in the budget so that Fulci did not have to compromise his approach. The film is competently executed, with a setting that accommodates its slightly rough and cobbled look. What makes the film so compelling is the depth and cleverness of the narrative. Florinda Bolkan co-stars as the 'village witch' (yeah, at one point, you're sure it's her), and the film, as it progresses through the mystery, is looking at how such towns, and the greater society that they represent as a microcosm, treat individuals who are different or otherwise threatening to the social self image. As the police and the clergy become involved (the boys all go to the same parochial school), the film develops a political attitude, as well. Hence, despite the gore and some appealing nudity, the movie is more than just an exploitation suspense film. It is intelligently conceived, and progresses with a constant awareness of what a viewer is thinking, so as to undermine those expectations—and the foundations they are built upon—every step of the way. Irene Pappas is also featured.

We reviewed an Anchor Bay Entertainment DVD in Jun 00. Arrow's presentation is letterboxed with an aspect ratio of about 2.35:1. There is some speckling and a bit of grain, but colors are fresh and the image looks terrific. Not only is the source material cleaner than the Anchor Bay release, but the hues are deeper and the image is better detailed. The monophonic sound is a little harsh in places, but strongly delivered. There is an Italian audio track and a serviceable English track (Anchor Bay's was in English only), with optional English subtitles.

Italian film expert Troy Howarth supplies a competent commentary track, going over the backgrounds of the cast and the crew (including quite a bit about Fulci's career), explaining how they are contributing to the film's appeal, and discussing the movie's artistic dynamics. The talk is reasonably thorough and informative. There is also a decent 20-minute analysis of the fate of women in Fulci's films and their specific archetypal roles in **Duckling**; a very nice 28-minute interview with Bolkan talking about acting strategies, socializing on a set (she prefers hanging out with the other craftspeople rather than actors, for a change in perspective), Fulci (she enjoyed his creativity) and her death scene, which she is recorded watching for the very first time; a great 46-minute interview with cinematographer Sergio D'Offizi, who speaks in detail about his reasons for shooting different scenes the way he did in **Duckling**, talks about his experiences working with the different cast members, and is willing to discuss Fulci's imperfections and shortcomings, as well as his strengths; a less interesting 26-minute interview with editor Bruno Micheli about his career, the art of editing and the challenges of **Duckling**; a passable 16-minute interview with makeup artist/prop designer Maurizio Trani about his career and the work he did on the film; and 33 minutes of audio recordings that Fulci made for a reporter in a sort of stream of consciousness, talking about his films, his ideas about moviemaking, and the film business itself. The recordings are in Italian and there is no option on the menu to activate the English subtitles, but they are there if you can activate them on the remote. There is a montage of images accompanying the recordings, mostly of a tape recorder playing a tape, but with promotional materials for various films inserted as the topics arise.

What is most interesting, however, is an excellent 28-minute deconstruction of the movie (it also contains a number of clips from **The Suspicious Death of a Minor**) by Italian film expert Mikel J. Koven, who explains that giallo movies were designed for theaters where audiences gathered on a weekly basis to socialize and chatter. "The cinema was a center of social activity, even during the film. So people are talking to one another throughout most of the film, they're sharing stories, they're intermingling. Every once in a while, the film would do something to draw the audience's attention back to the screen for a couple of minutes while they watch that sequence, and then they would go back to their conversations and what not. This is significant for any of the giallo, because these films are being constructed for a distracted audience. Because the audience's primary focus isn't on the screen, the filmmaking needs to do things every once in a while on the film to draw attention back to the screen."

He also talks about other trends in Italian genre films and how they all relate to one another, and how the films look upon modernity as something exciting, but something dark and dangerous, as well. "One of the problems I have always had with Spaghetti Westerns, trying to get my head around, was why so many of these films seemed to be valorizing the Confederacy, the American South. What's going on with that? It was making me sort of really uncomfortable. [As another critic has explained, however], actually when they are talking about the 'North' and 'South,' in a Spaghetti Western, they're actually not talking about the 'North' and 'South' in the Civil War, they're talking about the 'North' and 'South' in Italy. So that the valorizing of the South in these films is actually a valorizing of these poor, migrant workers who are coming north and are getting completely screwed by capitalism. And **Duckling** is, I think, a really interesting film in that regard, partially due to the rural setting of the film, but, as it takes place in the south, we see this culture clash between the 'North' and 'South' happening in the village that the murders are taking place."

## Italian action

Making the suitable plot turns but never slowing down, a 1975 Italian police action film shot on the streets of Milan, **Suspicious Death of a Minor**, released on a DVD & Blu-ray by Arrow Video (UPC#76013-7043980, \$40), has a number of elaborate and enjoyable chases and stunt sequences, particularly a well executed shoot-out on a rollercoaster. Directed by Sergio Martino, you don't know who the hero is at first, and the less said about any particular plot revelations, the better, but basically, amid a high-profile kidnapping and ransom case, witnesses to the circumstances surrounding the unrelated murder of a young woman are themselves being targeted by a hit man. There is a comical element to the plot, involving a young, gangly hustler who ends up assisting the hero, and thus, amid all of the violence and suspense, the tone becomes somewhat lighthearted at times, which some viewers will regard as uneven. Despite a viable moral resolution, however, the spirit of the movie is in its frantic and engaging action, and the comedy spins off of that as easily as the violence.

Claudio Cassinelli stars, with Mel Ferrer in a minor supporting role that nevertheless nabs him second billing. The picture is letterboxed with an aspect ratio of about 2.35:1. The opening moments of the film, perhaps because of its application of multiple titles, is a bit off color, but the remainder of the movie looks fine, with fresh hues and accurate flesh tones. The monophonic sound has a harshness associated with recordings of the time but is otherwise reasonably strong and clear. Along with the Italian track and optional English subtitles, there is an English track that is passable, although the Italian seems to smooth out the film's edges a little better. In Italian, the film's title is *Morte Sospetta di una Minorenne*, but the credits that appear when the English track is selected call the film *Too Young to Die*. A commentary featuring Italian film expert Troy Howarth is included, who covers the backgrounds of the cast and crew in great detail, and talks about the film's history and its interesting tonal dynamics. More rewarding, however, is a 43-minute interview with Martino, who talks about his career, about the different cast members he worked with, and about the film's stunt sequences and other key scenes. He also has some interesting things to say about dubbing—not in foreign languages so much as in Italian itself. It wasn't just that most of the films were shot without sound and dubbed later. The Italian actors did not necessarily provide their own voices for the Italian tracks, and he only realized later that the phony 'purity' of the voices detracted from the texture of the characters.

## Transporting mysteries

Murder mysteries taking place in remote locations are not just transporting for the depiction of the locale, but for the concentration required by the viewer to follow the hero's mind as the clues are pieced together to solve the crime. It is this specific, almost interactive mental activity that pulls the viewer into the setting in a manner that some other sort of drama would not. When the stories are well constructed and the setting is attractive, there are few viewing experiences that are more pleasurable.