

### What is Spaghetti Cinema and Why Does it Work?

Devised by Dr. Austin Fisher and first held in 2013, *Spaghetti Cinema* is an academic conference and film festival that celebrates the history and contemporary reach of Italian genre cinema. The first event focused on Spaghetti Westerns and the next was a two-day event dedicated to the *giallo* and Italian horror cinema. Both these events took place in association with the University of Bedfordshire.

The balance of academic rigour and cinematic appreciation is a key element of the *Spaghetti Cinema* approach. The 2014 event featured screenings of Dario Argento's *Phenomena* (1985), Lucio Fulci's *...E tu vivrai nel terrore! L'aldilà/The Beyond* (1981) and Ruggero Deodato's *Ultimo mondo cannibale/Last Cannibal World* (1977). These screenings were set in context by the appearance of figures involved in varying degrees in the production of the films including Deodato himself alongside his *Last Cannibal World* actress Me Me Lai. The event also welcomed Luigi Cozzi who worked on the special effects for *Phenomena* and star of *The Beyond*, Catriona MacColl.

*Spaghetti Cinema* represents an evolution in both academic conference and film festival terms. Fujiwara claims that festivals have seen a 'calcification of taste' (2013: 218), while Cousins argues that 'so many of them present retrospectives of, or tributes to, filmmakers, genres, or themes that are already well established, part of the canon' (2013a: 169). Cousins also states that '[they should] look at the past of film culture in the broadest geographical terms' (2013a: 169). *Spaghetti Cinema* can't be accused of mining the same territory as other festivals and its focus on its subject is broad in terms of the approaches to the material that it encourages. It is, however, very niche and as Fujiwara states: "'niche" [...] festivals, instead of uniting viewers, isolate them in micro-experiences' (2013: 219). The 2014 *Spaghetti Cinema* suffered slightly from the fact that whilst the University of Bedfordshire supported the event, restricting it to the university campus meant that it failed to breakout and attract much of a general public.

It could be argued that Italian Horror is more of a niche attraction for general cinemagoers than the Spaghetti Western but 2013's *Spaghetti Cinema* succeeded largely due to the event being held in a public cinema space in Luton. The intent of the event is admirable in the way it directly addresses what Cousins outlines as a problem with film festivals by broadening the scope of content whilst simultaneously ensuring the event is one that encourages the participation of scholars, practitioners and fans. It strives to achieve this by creating a film festival atmosphere where the content is largely serious academic research. Cousins in his 2012 manifesto for film festivals suggests changes:

There's the whole issue of festivity itself to restore to the centre of the world of film festivals [...] film festivals should realise that, especially in the age of online, it's the offline community of film festivals, the fact that we are all getting together to do the same thing, that is part of the source of their joy (2013: 171, 172).

A collegiate atmosphere where practitioners, scholars and fans mix is key to the attraction and success of *Spaghetti Cinema*. The niche nature of the content allows for these three groups to spend time in the same space in a manageable way. By extending the reach of the

event outside the walls of academia it is also a way for institutions to engage with their local community, extend the impact and reach of the research its academics undertake and fulfill another role for film festivals desired by Cousins whereby '[they] should be more skeptical about business and industry. They should be the conscience of the film world' (2013b: 171). A public event that includes screenings, the added value of practitioners and where critical research is central ensures *Spaghetti Cinema* fulfills this obligation of both the festival and it could be argued, academia itself.

Another reason for the success of the event is the input of the scholars who are also, crucially, fans. It's inspiring to see scholars engaging with, and in slight awe of, the practitioners that created and inhabit the work they are discussing in their papers. It creates a unique tension, mainly because of the presence of fans in the event. Duffett (who also delivered a paper at the 2014 event) asks:

What does it mean to be a practicing fan? The term implies some kind of activity, rehearsal, art or craft, competency – the fan as *practitioner* (2015: 1)

The fact that the scholars are fans ensures that the event works as a festival due to their willingness to participate across the duration of the event, something common with smaller niche events but a problem for larger conferences. It also means that the event has a certain hybridity between fandom and scholarship. Duffett claims that 'in the mass broadcast era [...] fans can be active, savvy, intelligent, politicized, and subversive' (2015: 03) and *Spaghetti Cinema* showcases an emerging scholarly voice that celebrates the fan aspects of research culture whilst retaining a commitment to academic diligence. This relates to what Sheaffer describes as 'Acafandom' (2012), whereby academics become more directly involved in the product/text they are analysing. In filmic terms this is often by means of creating video essays or visual remixes of films and filmmakers but could be extended to an increased dedication to *Spaghetti Cinema* type events. Sheaffer says:

I think the university certainly does have a very active role to play in creating a cinematic frame-of-mind from which new creative content can and does emerge (2012).

*Spaghetti Cinema* is a credit to Austin Fisher's dedication to ensuring that the notion of 'content' created by and in the university extends beyond the traditional and the digital to something truly interactive, public and full of insight and fun.

### **An Overview of the 2014 Spaghetti Cinema Event**

What follows is a selection of conference and festival highlights with the aim of conveying a sense of the breadth of content and contexts to be found at the event. The keynote was delivered by Professor Peter Hutchings and discussed the early work of Dario Argento and Mario Bava. By looking at the contemporary Italian film industry and culture when these filmmakers emerged Hutchings refigured the directors as being closer to the mainstream of Italian filmmaking than may have been argued through revisionist study. The presence of a keynote speaker who is responsible for some of the original and pre-eminent research in a specialist field was akin to the presence of Sir Christopher Frayling and his work on *Spaghetti Westerns* at the 2013 event. Having the keynote speaker present throughout, particularly one whose work forms the core basis of the scholarship being undertaken, again resulted in the odd but welcome phenomenon of interaction with a key academic who is both

referenced at length across the event and who also imparts immediate insight and analysis on the subjects being covered.

Panels on day one were titled *Re-appraising Genre Histories, Transnational Routes of Influence* and *Italian Horror Cinema's Distribution Tails*. The content and discussion was diverse and included Dr. Russ Hunter from Northumbria University starting at the beginning not only of horror cinema, but also of the form itself, in a paper titled *Mostruoso! Italy's Silent Horror Cinema*.

A paper titled *Remakesploitation: Transnational Borrowings between Turkish and Italian Exploitation Cinema*, which was delivered by Dr. Iain Robert Smith from the University of Roehampton, followed. Smith brought his trademark insight and almost archaeological zeal to uncovering links between Italian genre exports and little-seen Turkish exploitation content, including some adaptations of Italian comic book films. The paper brought the adaptation/remake elements of the Italian form into new light by focusing on the Turkish versions of what are ostensibly generic re-workings of Anglo-American fiction forms.

Michela Paoletti from the University of Bologna delivered the paper *What Ever Happened to Them? Brivido Giallo, Alta Tensione and Houses of Doom: The Horror Cable Series of Reteitalia*. Paoletti discussed the attempts of Italian company Reteitalia to bring *giallo* and *giallo*-inspired content and filmmakers to television with varying degrees of success.

Dr. Stefano Baschiera from Queen's University, Belfast brought the panel and the strictly academic business of the day to a close. His paper titled *Italian Horror Cinema On Demand* explored how recent moves in VOD and streaming services had provided an outlet for Italian horror to move beyond the realms of cult appreciation and gain a wider audience. The paper was nuanced in its discussion and looked at the categorization and 'cuts' of the films in question, delivering a detailed comparison of the distribution opportunities to the films presently and at the time of their production and release. The after-panel conversation took a fascinating turn with guests Ruggero Deodato and Luigi Cozzi providing extra insight into some of the industrial contexts being discussed on the panel resulting in a discussion between academics and practitioners, translated and moderated by Dr. Baschiera.

Day two began fiercely, opening with a panel chaired by conference director Dr. Austin Fisher. Titled *The Politics of Perverse Desire in Italian Cinema*, the panel ensured that the momentum of the event was continued with some no-holds-barred papers. The last paper was an entertaining and rigorous examination of necrophilia in three films, delivered by Professor Patricia MacCormack from Anglia Ruskin University. MacCormack discussed with incredible insight and thorough examination the 'liberatory potentialisations of unraveling perverse desire' in Massaccesi's *Buio Omega/Beyond The Darkness* (1979), Bava's *Macabro/Macabre* (1980) and Margheriti's *Flesh For Frankenstein* (1973).

The day's panel proceedings were brought to a close with the *Stylising Violence* panel. Dr. Calum Waddell from the University of Aberdeen delivered the paper 'Tropical Thunder: The Italian Cannibal Film and The Art of Misinformation'. Waddell looked at how Italian cannibal films deployed deliberate mistruths, verging on Orientalism, to present a cultural distinction that became symptomatic of the short lived genre.

Following the academic proceedings there were two screenings and industry panels. First, a screening of Fulci's *The Beyond* was bookended by conversations with Luigi Cozzi and Catriona MacColl and then to close the event Ruggero Deodato and Me Me Lai were in

conversation with Dr. Calum Waddell following a screening of Deodato's *Last Cannibal World*. This is merely a small selection of the papers delivered. The content of the conference was broad and included classic textual analysis and a focus on industrial contexts. There were papers that discussed the political implications and relationships of the films and filmmakers as well as readings of the fan, gender and sexual politics of Italian Horror. There were also discussions around the production processes of this unique area of Italian cinema in what was a truly vibrant two-day event that blurred the boundaries between maker, admirer and academic and hopefully set a blueprint for engaged and multi-faceted scholarship events moving forward.

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