

**CRITICA** **The Female Vampires and the Uncanny Childhood**  
**CINEFILIA** *A Journey across Italian Gothic Cinema*  
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Throughout the course of this essay, I prefer the use of the word “Gothic” to “Horror” in order to help to define the cinema of such directors as Riccardo Freda, Mario Bava, Lucio Fulci, and Dario Argento. This decision is not due to the negative connotations traditionally attributed to the word “Horror”, which is still in common use among those who write about cinema, often even in place of the more general category of the “Fantastic”<sup>1</sup>. But rather, the word “Gothic” seems to fit better with the work of which the aforementioned directors. Its suitability is conceivable, however, only if we can think of an enlargement of the word’s meaning. In fact, if we intend “Gothic” as a categorisation of “excess” and “transgression” (as the term was denoted by Fred Botting in his work *Gothic*, 1996), encapsulating both the return of the past over the present and the repressed over the conscious, the term “Gothic” may well become a container able to include such cinematic works as those which spread over Italy when the wave *Neorealista* had already produced its masterpieces<sup>2</sup>. The Fifties and the Sixties were in fact the chronological span when an objective and unbiased approach to reality was favoured by directors who wanted to document the Italian condition after the Second World War. At the same time as Dino Risi and Antonio Pietrangeli were directing their most important films, Bava had already directed his *La maschera del demone* (1960). This movie is set in the 1800s, and its prologue contains the execution of a witch which occurred two centuries before. As a *revenant*, in that she comes back from the other world, Asa (the name of Bava’s witch) symbolises the return of the repressed over a cinema that had consciously taken another way. In other words, she appears as the emblem of a cinema that privileged the representation of the unconscious side of the human mind rather than a self-aware ethical-political commitment (as in several films from the *Neorealismo*).



La maschera del demone (1960)

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But there is something more. If we can compare Italian cinema to films from other countries, we find that Italian gothic cinema shows peculiarities of its own. As stated in Robin Wood's essay "The American Nightmare: Horror in the 70s"<sup>3</sup>, some of the most significant American horror movies of the late 1960's mirrored the mindset of both the countercultural protests and the social liberation movements engaging blacks, women, and homosexuals in Northern America. As evidence, Worland mentions the African-American character in George Romero's *Night of the Living Dead* (1968), who is assumed to be a zombie at the end of the movie and is killed by a group of white hunters<sup>4</sup>.



Night of the Living Dead (1968)

A similar sociological perspective does not apply (or applies less) to the Italian case. Italian gothic cinema, in fact, mainly represents an artistic experience grounded in a strong literary tradition based on E.T.A. Hoffmann's and Poe's literature<sup>5</sup>. The presence of this tradition allowed several directors to give voice to what we may find in the innermost depths of the human unconscious. Beneath Bava's representation of the otherness, for example, it is possible to uncover themes studied by psychoanalysis decades earlier. One of these, as I point out in the present paper, is the Double (*Doppelgänger* in German language). The aim of the present article, then, is to provide specific examples of the different themes covered by Italian gothic cinema, which are articulated in the three sections into which my paper is divided: vampirism, ghosts, and childhood. These topics will be illuminated by means of a journey through Freda's, Bava's, and Fulci's movies.

### ***Female vampires***

The vampire figure was first imported to Italian cinema in Riccardo Freda's *I vampiri*, a movie directed in 1956 and set in Paris. While this film is also regarded as the first Italian gothic movie, such qualified sources as Gordiano Lupi's *Storia del cinema horror italiano* (2011) states that the very first Italian gothic movie was Eugenio Testa's *Il mostro di Frankenstein* (1920)—a silent, 39-minute film that has unfortunately been lost. But Freda's *I vampiri* is still available and has become a cult object through

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the years. Freda introduced, in fact, several devices that later directors would imitate, including as the subjective shot of the murderer, or details of black-gloved hands (which will be very important for Bava's *Sei donne per l'assassino*, 1964, as well as Argento's *Profondo rosso*, 1975).

The main character of *I vampiri*, Duchess Margherita Du Grand, is forced to suck young women's blood in order to remain forever young. Freda, who was helped by his friend Bava throughout the twelve days of shooting, said that the model for it derived from the un-dead figures first introduced in such expressionist works as Friedrich Wilhelm Murnau's *Nosferatu* (1922) and Carl Theodor Dreyer's *Vampyr* (1932)<sup>6</sup>. A filmic tradition, in other words, did already exist, and Freda and Bava claimed to do nothing but re-enact it, though both directors were clearly able to re-interpret and renew this tradition through the insertion of several new elements.

The vampire figure is the point of arrival of a long literary heritage, having being able to even change sex over the decades, from a dark fascinating Byronic hero, mainly attracted by young women's necks, to a female character (as in the case of Joseph Sheridan Le Fanu's *Carmilla*), increasingly identified with the *Femme fatale* or the *Belle dame sans merci*. To re-use the words of Giovanna Franci concerning vampirism, women are not inferior to men<sup>7</sup>. Though it is true that the first vampire given a literary substance was a male created by Byron's secretary John William Polidori in 1816, it is still accurate to say that Lord Ruthven (this is the name of Polidori's creation) was preceded by several *Femmes fatales*. Though not yet blood-drinkers, these fatal women were emblematic of an unbridled and cruel (at least under a male-dominated perspective) femininity – think of Samuel Taylor Coleridge's *Christabel* (1797) or the demonic character of Mathilda in Matthew Gregory Lewis's *The Monk* (1796).

As opposed to Freda's interpretation, Bava's vampires move away from the norm. Bava really only gives us one interpretation of the classical vampire figure. In one episode of his three part movie, *I tre volti della paura* (1963, also known as *Black Sabbath*), Boris Karloff plays a completely traditional vampire with the habit of drinking blood, especially of those whom he loves. Karloff is seen in the segment *I Wurdulak*, which is inspired by a tale of Aleksey Konstantinovich Tolstoy and set in a Russian steppe haunted by bloodthirsty creatures. In a location reminiscent of Caspar David Friedrich's paintings, an entire family is waiting for the old patriarch's return. As soon as he comes back after a five-day absence, he shows aberrant and aggressive behaviours that the other family members recognise as typical of a vampire. By the end of the segment, all the family is contaminated and destroyed by the vampire virus.

On closer inspection, things are different in *La maschera del demonio* (also known as *Black Sunday* or *The Mask of Satan*, 1960), a loose interpretation of a Nikolaj Vasil'evič Gogol's story. Two imprudent doctors, Thomas Kruvajan and Andre Gorobec, who are travelling across Moldavia, make the witch Asa come back from the dead. Asa was executed two centuries before after the imposition of a mask with metal spikes on the inside. After breaking the glass of the grave, Thomas accidentally cuts himself and a drop of his blood falls on the corpse of the witch, arousing her from her eternal sleep. But now that she is awake, Asa needs blood in order to keep herself alive. Therefore, with the help of her lover Javutic (dead after the torture of the "Maschera del demonio" as well), she transforms Kruvajan into her slave by means of a poison kiss. Then she attempts to take possession of the body of her descendant, who is identical to her (both characters are played by Barbara Steele). In the last sequence of the movie, we see Asa in the crypt of the castle sucking the blood of her double, Katia, until Andre and the town's peasants finally come to Katia's rescue. The story ends with Asa's final, and ultimately successful, execution.

Despite all the violence implicit in this synopsis, Bava's movie actually features very little blood. Moreover, there is no typical vampire's bite (Asa's kiss is not properly a bite, but rather the suction of victims' life energy). The only sign of a characteristic vampire attack is a couple of holes made on Katia's father's neck, but even these seem to be rather an exception. In addition, vampires are not killed with the usual wooden stake in the heart, but rather by piercing them in their eyes. The almost complete absence of blood more likely implies that Bava is not interested in the prevalent interpretation of vampirism as the

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symptom of a venereal malady (as it was, for instance, in the nineteenth century with syphilis). Rather, what Bava seems to concern himself with is the moral problem of vampirism. It is not by chance that the movie features the burying of a holy icon along with the corpse in order to complete the annihilation of a bloodthirsty creature.

Playing with tradition allows Bava to have recourse to an alternative kind of extra-terrestrial vampire that is quite rare in the history of cinema. This is the case of *Terrore nello spazio* (1965), whose title for international distribution was *Planet of the Vampires*. It is the story of two interplanetary ships on an expedition into deep space that receive a mysterious signal from a still unknown planet, Aura, which is crowded with vampires that are invisible and do not need blood, but rather another body in order to survive and reproduce. By the end of the story, we discover that both crews have been taken by storm and all the astronauts are haunted. Though their external appearances remain intact, the astronauts have changed their personalities and become aggressive and cruel. What we have observed in *La maschera del demonio*, ultimately, works here as well: the typical concept of vampirism as a noxious contamination recurs in Bava's filmography (as we can observe at the end of the movie, as the crew of one ship is going to land on Earth, thus implying that the whole of humankind is to be contaminated soon). In addition, the Italian director seems to be more concerned about vampirism as a representation of evil. Being a vampire automatically means being a bad creature and, furthermore, it does not seem to be a possible way of communication between humans and vampires. In some sense, we may say that Bava puts himself in the tradition inaugurated by the American science-fiction movies of the Fifties, such as William Cameron Menzies's *Invaders from Mars* (1953) and Don Siegel's *Invasion of the Body Snatchers* (1956), the movie that best expressed the fear for a humankind annihilation after a hypothetical nuclear world war. But, differently from these illustrious predecessors, it is difficult to see a sociological symbolism behind his movies.

It goes without saying that under a male perspective, vampirism, which already connotes an otherness, results in an increasing uncanniness if provided with a female sexuality. But Bava complicates the pattern through the insertion of a precise psychoanalytical issue: the Double, which crosses the whole of Western literature (consider, for instance, Poe's tale *William Wilson*), the early cinema (as in Stellan Rye's *The Student of Prague*, 1913), right up to the beginning of psychoanalytical theorisation (Otto Rank).

After leaving the crypt, in one of the first sequences of *La maschera del demonio*, the travellers encounter Katia, whose appearance disorients the spectator because they quite reasonably believe she is Asa. The disorientation at this point of the story confirms the thesis of Tzvetan Todorov, who sees in the *hésitation* the essence of the fantastic genre<sup>8</sup>. A similar ambiguity is found at the end, although now the spectator no longer hesitates, and rather the hesitation is located in the character's perspective. Andre breaks into the crypt and is about to kill Katia, mistaking her for Asa. At this point only a cross (which vampires cannot wear) on Katia's neck discloses to the doctor who is who.

According to psychoanalytical thought, synthesised by Otto Rank's study *Der Doppelgänger* (1914), the Double has features that are opposite if not specular to the subject. The Double is identical to the ego in the form and contents of personality, in the basic characters, in the background of knowledge, and in the quantity of energy to invest. Yet it is opposite in the orientation of the *libido* energy and in the instruments to be used in such investment. In other words, the ego and its Double are irreconcilable<sup>9</sup>. As evidence, not only are Asa and Katia complete opposites, but they are also bound in a relationship of inverse proportionality: the more the former manages to achieve her devilish goal, the more the latter becomes weak, until the extent that Katia's ability to live becomes possible only upon the complete destruction of Asa. Translated into a psychoanalytical perspective, it is necessary to remove the Double for the ego to grow and freely develop<sup>10</sup>.

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**Nordic ghosts**

In *Operazione paura* (also known as *Kill Baby Kill!*, 1966), the ghost of seven-year-old Melissa, dead a few years before in an accident and surrounded by the general indifference of her fellow citizens, haunts an imaginary Northern European village, Karmingén. Due to her desire for vengeance, Melissa pushes to suicide everyone who comes into contact with her. The movie opens in a quite conventional way, that is, according to several rules of the gothic genre. In the first sequence, a crying woman escapes from a building, as though she were persecuted by a mysterious entity. The woman goes up the stairs of an abandoned mansion and then throws herself from above against the railing of a gate. Immediately after, the opening credits overlay the shadow and a close up of Melissa's feet and she descends the stairs. As a forensic expert, Doctor Paul Eswai is called to conduct an autopsy of the corpse. As a nineteenth-century character, he embodies the rationalistic mindset of Positivism, though destined to revise his previous positions after dealing with supernatural phenomena. Also, Paul's arrival to Karmingén reflects specific rules of the gothic genre as well: the coachman that brings Paul does not want to proceed, claiming to be scared by the bad reputation of the place (something very similar was in *La maschera del demonio*); Paul's coming to the local inn is accompanied by the customers' distrust, since the inhabitants are afraid that the man may know the terrible secret of the place. As expected, it does not require much convincing for Paul to understand that people at Karmingén are the victims of a curse put by old Baroness Grab, Melissa's mother. And his goal in the second part of the movie is exactly to fight against this evil spell.

On the basis of a symbolic reading, in *Operazione paura*, the otherness, embodied by the ghost figure, is the personification of the ungovernable forces coming from the unconscious. Moved by hate (to paraphrase the words of the inn's owner), Melissa only drives other people to fulfil *Thanatos* (which is the death-drive according to Freud's *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*), while their conscious puts out resistance. Bava's movie may be then approached as the account of a progressive acquaintance with a remote dimension of the human psyche, as well as the discovery of a truth hard to recognise. Consequently, repeated elements of self-moving doors and windows, which suddenly open and close without any human intervention, symbolise the difficulty in catching a troublesome truth. To paraphrase an idea of Jean-Louis Leutrat from his *La vie des fantômes*, the secret hidden behind a door is a theme well known by everyone from childhood<sup>11</sup>. It recalls, in fact, several popular fables, among which that of Bluebeard is perhaps the most significant. Similarly, in the history of gothic cinema, a closed door (that is, a door that a character must not open) always hides a terrible secret. In Riccardo Freda's *L'orribile segreto del Dottor Hichcock* (1962), for example, the close framing of a door knob, which turns as soon as an invisible actor handles it from behind, represents an undeniable element of suspense.

The sudden opening of a door corresponds to the disclosure of a truth in the unconscious, while the closing precludes the discovering, and provokes frustration. Bava himself provides spectators with an interesting key to this reading as soon as Paul is the victim of hallucinations after his second visit to Villa Grab. The famous sequence of the character called by Monica, who runs through a series of identical rooms, sees and reaches himself is still a variation in the psychoanalytical theme of the Double. And it is significant that such theme is here linked exactly with a long series of doors in a consecutive series of entirely identical rooms.

At this point, not only is the focus on the Double important, but also on what is its manifestation in terms of reaction—the Uncanny (*Das Unheimliche* in German language), which is one of the key concepts of Freud, who believed it represented one of the privileged expressions of the unconscious. The Freudian concept of the Uncanny indicates something that can be uncomfortably familiar, yet comfortably weird at the same time. To quote Nicholas Royle, who provided an enlargement of its meaning, the Uncanny 'has to do with a sense of ourselves as double, split, at odds with ourselves'<sup>12</sup>. Therefore, the Uncanny feeling suits whatever comes back after a repression (in psychoanalytical terms) and is given the consistency

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of specific figures. These are perhaps the best definitions we could provide in order to interpret the aforementioned sequence. Paul is to catch his double, and his reaction as soon as he grasps himself is exactly a deep perturbation. The chance to reach the other that is within us has definitely vanished; in the following sequence, in fact, the doctor is enveloped in an enormous web (a recurrent element in the movie, mainly meant to denote neglect and desertion, and symbolically alluding to the tangle of the plot). Deeply connected to the web symbol is that of spiral. The spiral adumbrates the circularity of the story, from which it is very difficult to escape, as well as the repetitiveness of the spell that captivates people in the movie. The spiral is symbolised by the winding stairs that Monica walks while going down, in an ideal *descensus ad inferos* which is, again, a descent into the most obscure side of everyone's psychic apparatus. As a proof of this reading, it is noticeable that after the death of the baroness and that the spell has been broken, Paul and Monica finally find the door open and their way out of the bewitched mansion.

### **Uncanny childhood**

Lucio Fulci ends one of his well-known movies, *Quella villa accanto al cimitero* (also known as *The House by the Cemetery*, 1981), with a sentence that he assumes to have taken from Henry James: "No one will ever know whether children are monsters or monsters are children". In actual fact in the movie, part of an ideal *Gates of Hell* trilogy, the real monster is played by Doctor Jacob Freudstein (at least what remains of his body), and children simply represent a stage of innocence. When he was still alive, Freudstein was the surgeon who conducted experiments on human flesh. With his research he went so far as to discover that flesh could be regenerated, through the assimilation of that of other humans. His scientific activities were mainly illegal, though; consequently he was disbarred. The reason of Fulci's sentence, thus, relies on the character of little Bob, who moves with his parents to a new house near Boston. The house is located near a cemetery, which is what justifies the unusual title of Fulci's movie. It is in the new location that Bob's supernatural powers are confirmed, allowing him to receive Freudstein's little daughter's telepathic advice, and warning him not to move to the new house. With his blond page-boy haircut, the air of innocence, as well as his extra-sensorial power gift, Bob considerably reminds us little Danny from Kubrick's *The Shining* (1980), a movie that was released just one year before Fulci's. But Bob is only one of a long line of children in possession of extra-human abilities and more likely able to get in touch with ghosts and other supernatural creatures. One of the most famous is undoubtedly little Cole in M. Night Shyamalan's *The Sixth Sense* (1999).



The Sixth Sense (1999)

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Like his predecessors, Fulci's young character shows that childhood may well be a world apart, made up with rules of its own, if not a form of otherness provided with terrifying facets. Children are unknown beings: they are a virtual repository of terrible truths, and able of appalling behaviours too. In the above mentioned Bava's episode *I Wurdulak*, the vampirisation of an entire family involves the child as well, who is kidnapped and infected by his grandfather. As soon as the child comes back home, his mother refuses to see him as a monster in spite of her husband's advice. But in actual fact, the scene in which the woman lets her son come in is the equivalent of an opening of the door to evil.

In *Reazione a catena (Ecologia del delitto)* (also known as *The Bay of Blood*, 1971) children are not central figures, yet their appearance at the end of the movie provides further evidence to the present argument. The plot follows the action of several characters willing to take possession of a mansion and a bay in which it is located. At the end of the movie, two of the characters congratulate each other on the success of their plot, but they are shot down by their respectively four-year and five-year-old sons. After the killing, the children look at each other with satisfaction and exclaim how good their parents are at playing dead.

Little Marco from Bava's *Shock (Transfert Suspense Hypnos, 1977)* shows strange and unsettling behaviours, and reminds us a bit of Regan, the possessed girl from William Friedkin's *The Exorcist* (1973). After having been told that his father has died in a sea accident several months earlier, Marco moves to his mother, Dora's, former house with the woman and her second husband, Bruno. Marco's uncanny behaviours mainly consist in the physical attraction that the child seems to feel for his mother, who, on the other hand, begins to be disturbed by several hallucinations. One night that Dora and Bruno are in bed, a porcelain hand moves by itself on a shelf, and Marco raises himself to a sitting position on the bed, calling the other two 'Porci'. The day after, Marco plays in the garden with his mother. After a long run, they both throw themselves on the grass, and Marco lies on his mother's body, as though he wanted to reproduce Bruno's position the night before. And that night the child insists on sleeping with his mother. While she is sleeping, he wakes up and touches her face, although his hand appears to be decomposed, as if he were dead. Finally, during a party, Marco vengefully gazes at his mother from a distance; then he suddenly approaches and declares that he needs to kill her. Exactly when Dora starts believing that her hallucinations have a psycho-pathological source, Marco peeps at her while she is in the bathroom, steals her underwear, and even worries her by faking to be sick.

At this point, leaving behind the possibility that Marco may give expression to a violent Oedipus complex, the spectator is more and more convinced that the child is the vehicle of his dead father's revenge. The doubt that everything is the product of Dora's hallucinations, since the woman has been addicted to drugs for years, is almost immediately extinguished. The episode of the self-moving porcelain hand, in fact, is based on an external focalisation: it is seen by the spectator, but yet remains unknown to Dora and Bruno. Espousing again Todorov's point of view, we may say that we are now in the area of the *merveilleux*: after the initial hesitation, the story turns to a supernatural one, based on rules of its own.

In Bava's *Shock*, it is necessary for the spectator to wait until the end of the movie in order to discover the truth. The solution is linear: Dora has killed her previous husband and the memory of this killing finally emerges from her unconscious. After all, the fact that Marco had already been in touch with his father is confirmed by the end of the movie, characterised by a macabre irony: while Dora, obsessed with her sense of guilt, punishes herself in the cellar by slitting her own throat, Marco serves tea to an invisible guest outside in the garden, asking what game they would play next. Then a seat in front of him moves, and Marco goes and gives an invisible person a push on a swing.

For Bava's *Shock*, such predecessors have been recalled as Henry James's *The Turn of the Screw*. Also, Alberto Pezzotta has noticed that some of the most surrealist ideas (e.g. the laughing keyboard of the piano) presage some sequences of Sam Raimi's visionary *Evil Dead 2* (1987)<sup>13</sup>. A part from this, Bava's movie features one of the most successful representations of the uncanny childhood. Even here, the

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children's idyllic world that we claim to fully know is but the façade of an unsettling dimension—exactly how childhood was described by psychoanalysis. A child is able to suddenly turn into an unknown being in front of his/her mother's eyes. Just as an aside, Dario Argento, who started his career by directing gory movies dealing with psychopaths, has taken this as one of the main *tòpoi* of his poetics. Children in his movies are never ingenuous. For example, the one featured by a flashback that opens *Profondo rosso* (1975) is subjected to a trauma when he watches his mother brutally killing his father.

### **Closing observations**

In conclusion, by looking at gothic literature and at psychoanalysis, Bava and other directors have given expression on the screen to the innermost side of every human psyche. To them, otherness is but the result of a courageous attempt to represent through symbols and metaphors what is un-representable by nature. As stated by psychoanalyst and Freud's Italian translator Cesare Musatti, an asexual movie is a movie that is not likely to be of interest, neither to the public attending the *sale parrocchiali*, given that such public is made of real live people as well<sup>14</sup>. By re-stating this concept, we may say that a movie that does not strive to represent the other that is within us not only does not arouse a great interest, but neither fulfil the unconscious needs of the spectator. It is for this reason, then, that horror movies, which engage with humankind's primal emotions, have been so compelling and successful over the years. And it is for this reason, too, that Freda, Bava, and Fulci drew inspiration from the nineteenth-century gothic narrative, which first articulated issues later discovered by psychoanalysis.

Gabriele Scalessa

### **Endnotes**

1. a recent example is rick worland, *the horror film: an introduction*, malden-oxford, blackwell, 2007.
2. it is renowned that the word "gothic" was originally applied in literary studies to a specific body of narrative released in england starting from horace walpole's *the castle of otranto* (1764). such literature was distinguished by such recognisable constituents as a preferably medieval setting, haunted castles, labyrinths, byronic characters, persecuted heroines, and mysterious apparitions. for the enlargement of the word "gothic" cf. fred botting, *gothic*, london-new york, routledge, 1996, pp. 1-20.
3. cf. robin wood, *hollywood from vietnam to reagan... and beyond*, new york, columbia university press, 2003, pp. 63-84.
4. the example is taken from rick worland, *op. cit.*, p. 21.
5. this interest in european gothic literature led bava to direct a cinematic version of prosper merimée's tale *la vénus d'ille*.
6. cf. gabriele acerbo, roberto pisoni (eds.), *kill baby kill! il cinema di mario bava*, rome, un mondo a parte, 2007, p. 43.
7. cf. giovanna franci, "la spirale del sangue: storie di vampiri", in emy beseghi, antonio faeti (eds.), *la scala a chiocciola. paura, horror, finzioni. dal romanzo gotico a dylan dog*, florence, la nuova italia, 1993, p. 119.
8. first appeared in the seventies and translated into several languages, todorov's work does not need any presentation, and it is still considered a milestone within the rich criticism on fantastic literature; cf. tzvetan todorov, *introduction à la littérature fantastique*, paris, editions du seuil, 1970.
9. cf. marina valcarengi, "il doppio e l'ombra", in ead. *et al.*, *il doppio. psicanalisi del compagno segreto*, como, red, 1990, pp. 13 following. on this topic, see also enzo funari, *la chimera e il buon compagno: storie e rappresentazioni del doppio*, milan, cortina, 1998; marco alessandrini, *vedere il sosia: le emozioni*



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*come doppio impensabile*, rome, magi, 2003.

10. several examples of the double may be found in the classic otto rank, *the double: a psychoanalytic study*, chapel hill, university of north carolina press, 1971.

11. for this study, cf. jean-louis leutat, *vita dei fantasmi. il fantastico al cinema*, recco-genoa, le mani, 2008.

12. nicholas royle, *the uncanny*, manchester, manchester university press, 2003, p. 6.

13. cf. alberto pezzotta, *mario bava*, milan, il castoro, 1995, one of the first and most complete monographs on the director.

14. cf. piero gadda conti (ed.), *cinema e sesso*, florence, sansoni, 1962, p. 33.