

# **A Reception Study of the Films of Dario Argento in the UK and Italy**

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### **Abstract:**

This thesis presents the processes and outcomes of a comparative critical reception study of the films of Italian horror and *giallo* director Dario Argento in the UK and Italy. Situating itself broadly within the study of European popular genre cinema, and taking a reception studies approach, it identifies and compares the frames of reference of his films within those countries, as evidenced in materials available in the public sphere, such as film reviews, feature articles, interviews and news stories. By studying the critical reception of Argento's films in two regions this study has been able to assess how his films tap into, oppose, or stimulate, existing frames of reference within local culture; and investigate the function and effectiveness of local and cross-cultural public discussion on its consumption (or objections to it).

The material discussed in this study suggests that the cultural status of the horror and *giallo* film genres and their relation to popular cultural discourses varies between these two cultural contexts. In the UK, this thesis argues, the application of the term *cult* to his work is seen as a culturally ambiguous term that has been utilised because *as a concept* it fitted the idea of a phenomenon critics could not themselves quite make sense of, namely the continued career (and niche popularity) of a director whose work was at best tolerated and at worst critically panned. In Italy, Argento's popular appeal has increasingly run against critical opinion of his work, which has been strongly influenced by the highly political nature of the Italian cultural sphere. This work argues that this continued popular appeal has meant that critics have shifted focus from attacking his work on narrative grounds, to instead reflecting upon his national and international significance as an *Italian* filmmaker in order to maintain a culturally 'relevant' position in relation to him.

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## ~ Chapter 1 ~

### Introduction

The purpose of this doctoral study is to research the reception of the films of Dario Argento across two countries, Italy and the UK, in order to assess the varying dynamics of critical discourses in relation to his work from the release of his first feature film, *The Bird with the Crystal Plumage* (1970) to *Do You Like Hitchcock?* (2005).<sup>i</sup> Specifically it uses the case studies of critics in Italy and the UK to explore the impact that differing socio-historical circumstances, across two different cultural (and national) contexts, have upon meaning creation in relation to film reception.

This thesis makes an intervention in the area of critical Reception Studies and in so doing accepts the assumptions central to the work of both Janet Staiger and Barbara Klinger in as much as it argues that it is the interaction between historical context and the subject positions of individuals that informs the act of meaning creation.<sup>ii</sup> It diverges with their work however in several key respects. Firstly this thesis rejects the notion that texts are always and inherently devoid of any immanent meaning, arguing that, in fact, there do appear to be stable and broadly agreed upon interpretations of texts that suggest the presence of some structuring textual prompts. In addition to this, whereas Staiger and Klinger used aspects of critical reception at various points in *Interpreting Films*, *Perverse Spectators* and *Melodrama and Meaning*, their work had as its stated aim the desire to access ‘actual audiences’. This study is very explicitly a *critical* Reception Study in that it takes as its object of study acts of meaning creation amongst professional film critics, film journalists and academics (who are considered to be a specific type of audience) in order to identify and assess the circulating

critical discourses around the work of Dario Argento both across cultural contexts and across time. In line with recent development within Reception Studies, it therefore seeks to contribute to the small but growing number of studies that attempt to explore - both methodologically and historically – the dynamics of cross-cultural reception.

It does not provide a slavish film-by-film narrative of Argento's career that explores the general and developing tenor of critical opinion of his work as pure narrative. To do so would be to offer little more than a narrative account of the critical reaction to his career. Rather reception analysis is employed here in order to identify several notable reception strands (or trajectories) that both his personal reputation, and that of his work, has followed in order to stress the multifaceted nature of reception. There is an extent to which it is difficult to strictly separate the reception of the man from his work and so this thesis gives consideration both to the way his work is received and to the ways in which this has impacted upon his own critical standing and vice-versa.

Discourse can be a complex and often confusing concept, however it is used here to refer to “a system of communicative practices that are integrally related to wider social and cultural practices, and that help to construct specific frameworks of thinking.” In fact, as Myra McDonald notes, these 'specific frameworks of thinking' are “themselves provisional, open to contest and debate, making discourse more understandable as a *process* of making meaning, rather than a fixed position.”<sup>iii</sup> As this thesis demonstrates – particularly in relation to concepts such as genre and cult cinema as applied to Dario Argento – discourses operate in a way which suggests that the boundaries and definitions of concepts and ideas can often have an amorphous quality that impacts upon the nature of debates that can and do take place,

underlining that, as James Naremore has observed, discourses are more often than not a “loose, evolving system of arguments and readings.”<sup>iv</sup>

### **Popular European cinema and film reception**

Situating itself broadly within the study of European popular genre cinema, and taking a reception studies approach, it will identify and compare the frames of reference drawn upon within these countries in relation to Argento’s work, as evidenced in materials available in the public sphere.

More concretely I focus here upon the collection and analysis of the work of professional film journalists for print-based media. In so doing I have made a careful decision not to limit this to film reviews, as writing on film is clearly not restricted specifically to the bounds of review pages. Rather I take reviews as a starting point and utilise both film features, previews, interviews and other film-related journalism in order to perform such an analysis – a collection of materials that I am collectively calling ‘review materials’.

This recognition of the breadth of film-related writing is indicative of the fact that different types of materials can act as forms of review and critical appraisal and offer access to the varying kind of discourses that circulate around particular cultural artefacts. Importantly recent interventions within reception studies, such as the international *The Lord of the Rings* audience and reception project, have attempted to broaden the basis of reception materials employed within their analyses, choosing to code a variety of items that related to their chosen film and not rigidly adhering to one kind of material. There is also a practical reason for drawing such boundaries around my work here. Although the analyses presented here do

employ some articles and features from news (i.e. non-film or culture-specific) sections of newspapers and magazines where salient, it does not examine each and every such mention of Argento in the British and Italian press. To do so would have produced a quantity of materials that it would have been impractical for me to utilise effectively.

It is possible to question the extent to which reviews in particular, and film journalism in general, serve an agenda-setting function, but that is not the reason for their inclusion here.<sup>v</sup> Importantly review materials are not just acts of criticism that indicate whether a film is ‘good’ or ‘bad’ but, as Barbara Klinger has identified, a much broader type of social discourse.<sup>vi</sup> As such they not only act as sources through which one can explore the material relations between a film (or a filmmaker) and prevailing critical norms, but also as a means to access wider socio-historical debates. That is to say, and following the work of Mathijs, this thesis supports the notion that reviewers make their reviews relevant by referencing issues that circulate not just in critical channels of communication but that touch upon the historically topical.<sup>vii</sup> In this way they then allow access to the changing dynamics of a range of socio-historical debates.

In fact, a reception studies approach is one that can best utilise this quality in review materials in that, following the work of both Janet Staiger and Barbara Klinger, it attempts to trace the ways in which changing socio-historical circumstances can affect the reception trajectory of any given individual or cultural artefact. Although the field of reception studies has gradually developed a tradition of researching popular genre cinema, many of these studies have limited themselves to researching genre-specificity on a textual level, or to analyses of particular circumstances of reception.<sup>viii</sup> A systematic interest in genre reception has only recently gained academic momentum. As such, there is therefore a clear gap in our



knowledge of the reception of popular genres in the public sphere, and in a cross-cultural context. In the case of European popular genre cinema a focus on cross-cultural reception contexts has become a necessity. European genre cinema has a longstanding popular appeal and, as Pierre Sorlin indicates, this suggests a close connection between the films themselves and the cultural debates operating in the countries in which these films circulate.<sup>ix</sup> Although traditionally, European cinema has been studied through what Dyer and Vincendeau have called a 'high white tradition', which favours auteurist, modernist cinema rather than genre cinema, and a preference for studies in discrete national cultural contexts, recent moves within reception studies have challenged such a position.<sup>x</sup>

So whilst such an emphasis had until relatively recently prevented a thorough exploration of popular culture within film studies, reception studies has made a significant impact in this respect. However, reception work to date has done little to focus upon European genre cinema which, I believe, has a particular cross-national appeal and impact (something David Sanjek and Carol Jenks note, for example, in their discussions of fanzines and the reception of Mario Bava's horror films respectively).<sup>xi</sup> Although, as Mary Wood has noted, some genre films have a very locally specific market, Italian genre films, in particular, have often been produced with foreign markets and audiences in mind, and with the advance of DVD, the Internet, and international film festivals (especially genre festivals), the informal communities of reception so typical of popular cinema frequently cross national and cultural boundaries.<sup>xii</sup> In the same ways as Sorlin suggests for national cinemas, this thesis is based upon the premise that it is important to study popular European genre cinema in an international context because of the increasing importance of global circuits of communication and reception in today's film culture.<sup>xiii</sup>

## The case of Dario Argento

I will apply this method to the reception, in the UK and in Italy, of a specifically challenging body of work in popular European genre cinema: the films of Dario Argento. There are good reasons for selecting Argento as a case study. As a figure closely identified with genre cinema but also one who has also exhibited strong auteurist tendencies, he offers an interesting example of a director whose cultural status has often been contested as lying between the generic and the highly individual. In fact, his work, from the early 1970s to date, is said to resonate across a number of cultural debates. His films are not only widely popular, but are also often described as misogynist, because they observe patriarchy and present regular scenes of violence towards women.<sup>xiv</sup> Argento's work is also seen as pivotal in discussions of highbrow/lowbrow European culture, and in considerations of the possible dangers of film consumption.<sup>xv</sup> Furthermore, Donald Campbell and Xavier Mendik describe Argento's work as challenging spectator expectations, thus questioning processes of interpretation and pleasure.<sup>xvi</sup> Yet, as Mikel Koven argues, his affiliation with a recognized, and continuously popular, tradition of 'giallo film' (a combination of detective, thriller and horror) also puts him at the centre of debates on how vernacular categories of film operate in contemporary reception networks (both in local and international contexts).<sup>xvii</sup>

It is perhaps no accident that one of Dario Argento's most notorious films, *Tenebre* (1982), features an outspoken critic of 'perverse' stories having his head split open by an author furiously wielding an axe-blade. In fact, the Roman director has long had a fractious relationship with critics, both in his native Italy and in the UK, where his work has, at various times, been praised and lambasted in equal measure. Argento offers an interesting case study for such an investigation. In general terms, however, Dario Argento has long occupied a very

different place in both Italian and British imaginations. In Italy, where his films are regularly shown on public television and in the 1970s and 1980s did tidy box office, he is a well known and uncontroversial filmmaker of both giallo and horror films with a rock-star like persona.<sup>xviii</sup> In the UK he has often occupied a marginal position in national film culture and, as Peter Hutchings has pointed out, his films have always created controversy and attracted ambiguous reactions.<sup>xix</sup> Indeed, there is a sharp contrast between the Italian context, where Argento's public recognition means he is likely to be mobbed if he walks down the street, to the UK where he likely to be recognised by only a few horror cognoscenti. But regardless of his fame or notoriety in each country, as long-time Argento critic Maitland McDonagh has noted, an engagement with Argento's work rarely draws ambivalent reactions, stating that this related to a certain 'weirdness' that is "compelling, enticing and purely cinematic; it makes Argento's work stand out in sharp relief from the ranks of hundreds of films whose subject matter is the same, and even from those whose cinematic technique is superficially similar"<sup>xx</sup>

As an Italian director he offers the opportunity to study critical reactions and engagement to his work in two different cultural contexts, one where he represents a 'foreign' filmmaker (the UK) and one where he is the product of that culture (Italy). By studying the reception of Argento's films in two regions I will therefore be able to assess how his films tap into, oppose, or stimulate, existing frames of reference within local culture; and investigate the function and effectiveness of local and cross-cultural public discussion on its consumption (or objections to it). More generally, this will enable a view on the role of local discourses of reception in international flows of communication, and film culture.

Crucially there is an important methodological issue here. Cross-cultural research is sometimes associated with dangers of access and comparability.<sup>xxi</sup> For popular European genre cinema, linguistic issues and the lack of a frame of analysis applicable across more than one region are additional obstructions. But increasingly methodologies for film reception research have managed to offer bit-by-bit comparisons, across time frames, and between critical reception and audience reception.<sup>xxii</sup> Following a close critical examination of recent proposals for an integrated study of reception materials, I aim to draw on these sources and use their methodology of the analysis for ancillary and reception materials across two nations.<sup>xxiii</sup> In the process, this thesis seeks to develop a refinement of this methodology.

## **Methodology**

In attempting a study such as this methodological considerations are clearly important. I note in Chapter Two that one of the criticisms of current reception work has been a tendency to either be vague or unclear as to the number, rationale and implications of chosen source materials. But equally such studies should in some sense be methodologically repeatable. That is to say that other scholars seeking to either check, clarify or expand upon one's research should be clear as to how one's own study has been carried out. This is not the same as saying that the *results* should be the same. Critical reception studies as I understand and implement it here is both a qualitative and (in part) quantitative research method. In this sense I have aimed to make my research open to scrutiny and analysis (and disagreement) by being as open as possible about my methodological workings. The nature of reception material collection and its subsequent coding tends to mean that 'numbers' do in some sense matter. Studies that use two or three such materials and then lay claim to a wider significance

(sometimes implicitly, sometimes explicitly) are clearly very different in nature from those that collect a larger number.

I argue in this thesis that reception studies has tended either to not fully outline the number (and type) of sources analysed or has employed a sample of materials so small as to make any claims as to reception ‘trends’ utterly moot. I don’t want to argue that it isn’t possible to carry out a reception study with a small number of materials, rather that it depends upon the claims one wishes to make once one has done so.

Although some do attempt to outline and elucidate their methodological workings, crucially, the canon of reception literature to date has been characterised by a lack of clarity in relation to the ‘nuts and bolts’ of the processes and procedures that need to be worked through in seeking to identify reception discourses.<sup>xxiv</sup> In short, it is rare that researchers tell us quite *how* it is done, which makes a study such as this that much harder.<sup>xxv</sup>

The work of Staiger, in particular, has exemplified the practical difficulty in repeating much reception analysis due to this methodological ‘murkiness’. I would argue that the basis of a good methodology is one in which the process can be repeated, in some form, by those seeking to test or validate any claims made by the researcher. I want to stress, however, that this does not mean that given the same materials differing researchers should come up with the same readings rather that it is *possible* to see how any given interpretation has been reached. With this in mind, the following is an attempt to provide as much clarity as possible as to my methodological workings.

Above I highlighted the public presence of the work of Dario Argento in both the UK and Italy, stressing the very different ways in which his public persona has tended to operate. Methodologically his films, with a directorial career spanning from 1970 to present, also offer the opportunity to examine temporally diverse subjects, allowing for the observation of potentially changing socio-historical reception contexts that a ‘one off’ reception approach would not allow for. What interested me here was the reception of the films within the public sphere. I have restricted my field of research to a particular section within it, that being the role of professional critics, which includes both academics and journalists.<sup>xxvi</sup> This meant that the national UK and Italian and local (where available) newspapers, listing periodicals (such as *Timeout*, for example), monthly film magazines and journals were all considered for collection. From these publications news items, previews, reviews, interviews and other such materials from UK publications were collected. The criterion for selection was that they must be review materials that related to Dario Argento and/or his films, published in a UK or Italian national newspaper or popular film publication. Further to this the specific criteria for selection were those materials where Dario Argento was the major focus in that the article, review or feature had to relate to him substantially in some way. Therefore I excluded materials where Argento was present as a one-line mention or passing reference.<sup>xxvii</sup>

The English language materials used within this study were collected in two separate visits to both the British Film Institute (BFI) and The British Newspaper Library in London between October and December 2005. From the former I used their press clippings collection on Dario Argento to collect a small amount of UK press materials. The rest of the materials were derived through my own archival research therein. The Italian language materials used here were collected on two separate research trips to both *La Biblioteca Nazionale Centrale di Roma* and the library facility at the *Centro Sperimentale di Cinema* (CSC) in February 2006

and June 2007. The Pico CD collection at the *La Biblioteca Nazionale Centrale di Roma* provided a clippings service for a nine year period from 1989 to 1998, although this was privately funded and the only one of its type available to me. All other information was derived directly from print-based sources or from the online e-archives of those newspapers that provide such a service.

However, collecting reception materials for a director whose career began in the very late 1960s is not without issues. The dynamics and coverage levels of film and film-based journalism have changed since the late 1960s and early 1970s in both Italy and the UK. Equally archival practices in relation to precisely what is deemed worthy of preservation have varied over this period meaning that the number of materials available for each film tended to vary greatly. Developments in electronic archiving procedures meant that it was theoretically possible to conduct much of this research ‘off site’ by using a resource such as Lexis/Nexis, or individual online newspaper archives and hence minimise travel and time costs. However, it quickly became clear that I could not collect everything necessary in this way given that not all online resources are free-to-access (or have coverage for the entire period of my study). An equally practical consideration was the *type* of material available. The Lexis/Nexis archive, for instance, contains all mentions of the films in question, regardless of context. This would have been useful were I attempting to look at ways in which the films may have penetrated a wider set of social discourses, but that represented too large a sample for my own purposes here.<sup>xxviii</sup> In contrast, the BFI press clippings archive tends towards collecting review, preview and feature article materials rather than any *mention* of the specific films. Again, practicality played a large part in this decision making process.

To catalogue and code my data collection and assist in the organisation of my analysis, Microsoft Access was used to develop a database prior to the commencement of my archival research. Here I consciously left enough flexibility to see what worked so that I could redesign, as appropriate, during the data collection period. To further ensure that it suited my needs as far as possible before the research trip took place, a test database was created and subsequent changes made.

After the collection of the material it was necessary to begin to code each article. The articles were sectioned into film release order and I then began to record each specific *mention* and *reference* on a sentence by sentence basis, looking to see what was cited that may have cued these instances. These were recorded in the database outlined above. The smallest units of analysis therefore used in my research were the mention and the cue. The latter is taken in the Bordwellian sense to imply a textual element that ‘nudges’ a reviewer to adopt a particular frame of reference or line of argumentation.<sup>xxix</sup> In common with Karl Rosengren, I define a mention as:

...an expression of an association made by the reviewer, and...the mentions of one specific writer can be used an indicator of the topicality of that writer [therefore] all the mentions made in all the reviews of the press in a region during a given time period (or in a representative sample thereof) may be regarded as an expression of the lexicon of authors and writers available to the reviewers and constituting a central element of the literary frame of reference.<sup>xxx</sup>

The real difficulty came in relation to this coding process and subsequently knowing how best to analyse the set of qualitative ‘data’ it produced. In total I collected 131 UK review



materials, for which the coding took approximately six weeks, and 91 Italian articles. In the latter case the coding process took much longer in that it was further complicated by issues of translation. All translations presented here, where not stated otherwise, are my own.

The coding process was far more difficult and time-consuming than I had anticipated. To begin with, identifying mentions is not as straightforward as it may seem. Even with Karl Rosengren's conception as my working definition, it became apparent that a great deal of subjective judgement on my part was required to record what constituted an individual mention.<sup>xxx1</sup> In practical terms it is also a *long* procedure that required discipline to sit and slowly work through each article. Although locating textual cues was to some extent easier, as it was usually accompanied by reference to the narrative cue, a sound knowledge of the films was required to be able to point to exactly *what* their textual referents were.

Each reception material collected was recorded in my database, with the date, name of publication, name of author (where available), the coded reception, review tenor and any additional notes all entered. In line with review-based work carried out by Wesley Shrum Jr, materials, where appropriate, were given a tenor assignation from a five point scale that ran from ++ (wholly positive tone) to - - (wholly negative in tone).<sup>xxxii</sup> This meant that materials could later be cross-tabulated so as to cross-reference those factors that appeared to give a positive critical response (gauged as a ++ or +) and those that drew a negative critical judgement (gauged as being those that had a - - or -). This proved a useful tool in being able to associate factors that appeared to inform reviews in a either a positive or negative sense.

When it came to organising my materials for analysis, several techniques were utilised to assist in recognising any reception trends or patterns. Firstly, after the completion of the

initial coding exercise I began to assess what themes ran through the reviews. This was done for both individual films and the series taken as a whole. Initially this took the form of a ‘skimming’ exercise, whereby I read through my codings for each newspaper article and attempted to observe any emerging discourses. This was instructive in that it allowed for a free range of thinking, unbounded by any pre-set agenda. One thing that I was clear on was that I absolutely did not want any pre-imposed categories. That is to say I did not come to the research with *a priori* assumptions about either what I would find or wanted to find. The danger here is that the reception study merely serves to back up a pet hypothesis, with evidence being found to support it included and that which does not, discarded. I wanted to see what the material showed me, and not the other way around.

Having identified these emerging themes, I then ran various Access queries in order to group materials together that evidenced these ideas using various keyword searches. This allowed me to organise my materials with specific relation to those articles that alluded to each particular theme, giving a clearer indication of the kinds of ways these discourses operated. There was initially a problem with double counting, that is to say my form of computer assisted analysis meant that, without due care, it was possible to include mentions that were not strictly relevant to the discussion at hand. This was exemplified by an issue I faced in categorising the word ‘psycho’, which was used throughout my materials to refer to (i) a psychological state of mind/condition; (ii) the film *Psycho* (Hitchcock, 1960) ; and (iii) compound references and phrasing, as citations of the film *American Psycho* (Mary Harron, 2000). Clearly each of these mentions was framed in a particular context to achieve a particular effect, or to make a precise point, meaning that the context of each individual mention needed to be considered.

Equally the little considered issue of negative coding needed to be taken into account. Negative coding can occur when the tool of analysis being utilised – in the case an Access database – is not able to differentiate between mentions of, for example, review stating “this is certainly a horror film” and one that states “this is certainly *not* a horror film”. If one were to code this as a mention of the concept ‘horror film’ in both cases – given that the idea of coding is not to enter every word mentioned – it would give a false picture as to what, generically, the two reviewers considered the film in question to be. In this sense it is possible to lose the nuances in review materials and group reviews together that explicitly do not reflect the same (or similar) ideas and discourses. Barker et al have noted the importance of this modality of response, noting that such modifications qualify the nature of the issue or thing being discussed in often important ways.<sup>xxxiii</sup> I combated this by tending to ‘over-code’ my entries. That is to say, instead of merely entering the term ‘horror film’ in each case, I was careful to assign a modality in such instances and then to run queries in Access that showed several words before and after each coded entry.

To a great extent this methodological approach is subjective in that I as the researcher was selecting the categories and was the one who privileged what is identified as a reception strand. But this is true of all forms of research and it is perfectly possible for others to contest findings such as those presented here and provide an alternate or parallel reception without this negating the methodology in any sense. Crucially here, then, this chapter has been presented in the spirit of illuminating the possible *repeatability* of this work. The aim was also to follow various ‘strands’ of reception rather than attempt the impractical (and arguably impossible) task of highlighting all of the receptions for Dario Argento’s work.

Thomas Austin has noted that has become important within recent academic works to cite one's own personal investment and standing in relation to one's work.<sup>xxxiv</sup> Whilst this is not always a necessarily *a priori* requirement it can be important if one is exploring the position of others if for no other reason than people will *assume* a position if one is not stated. For my own part I must say that I do not consider myself to be a fan of Dario Argento and did not start this project out of any desire to correct any slights on his name or promote his critical status in the genre within which he works. Rather my own *disengagement* with his work (and, I must confess, initial ignorance of it) seemed a good starting point. After nearly four years of engagement of this topic I have come to admire some of Argento's work (his camerawork, in particular) and have developed a much wider fascination with Italian horror. This came as somewhat of a surprise to me but I do not feel it has affected the judicious nature of my work here.

In many ways not being a particular 'fan' of the object of my study has helped me to maintain a certain critical, but I hope not 'cool', distance with regards to the debates I have explored herein. Perhaps more importantly, with cross-cultural research, personal investment and relations to the object of study become an imperative. There is, I believe, a justifiable need to 'prove' one's pedigree when it comes to commenting upon other cultures. In order to not only recognise but understand the implications of any given frame of reference the researcher in a cross-cultural study needs to be sufficiently embedded within that culture to understand it. A knowledge of the language (should this not be English) is also therefore crucial both for practical (relating to the imperative to translate) and cultural (given the relationship that exists between language and culture) reasons. This can be achieved in one of two ways. Researchers can either be part of a larger international team or gain the necessary cultural knowledge themselves. In this spirit, I should outline my own 'qualifications' to carry out

such a project. Having been married to an Italian for the last five years I have both learnt the language and have made extended visits to Italy for the last eight years. As such I have become embedded in discourses and debates surrounding Italian popular culture. I recognise that this is ever a ‘work in progress’ for a foreigner in such a context but it is important to stress such connections in order to give the reader faith in my ability and appropriateness in carrying out a cross-national study such as this.

This project was initiated in order to interrogate some of the ‘common sense’ notions of reception that exist. Anecdotally I have heard several conference delegates mobilise the notion that Argento is popular with the Italian critics, for example, to prove a point about ‘foreign’ filmmakers and their reputation in their own national context. However, it was a desire to not just substantiate such notions that motivated this project but, crucially, to provide a future framework for so doing with other such ‘common sense’ ideas relating to the critical reputation of any given cultural figure (or object). The aim of this thesis has therefore been not just to substantiate Argento’s reception in order to move beyond the anecdotal (he is, after all, but one potential case-study) but to provide a methodological framework for future reception studies.

This thesis aims to create new knowledge in several areas. Firstly no other cross-cultural reception work exists that examines either Dario Argento or Italian horror. Importantly it is therefore unique in presenting for the first time Italian critical attitudes towards the horror genre and providing an exploration of Italian conceptions of the *giallo*. In addition to this, the information presented here in relation to the distribution and exhibition of the work of Argento in Italy is the first to outline such information in any detail for a horror director. This is also the first study to explore both the history and dynamics of Italian newspaper film journalism and as such it provides several new discoveries about the development of such

criticism in Italy. With respect to the UK this thesis presents an exploration of the dynamics of film journalism that helps to build a (growing) picture of the ways in which cult and genre have been used in relation to Italian horror, offering by extension a contribution to wider understandings of both cult and genre. Finally, as a cross-cultural Reception Study it contributes to the small body of literature on receptions across cultural and national boundaries. In this respect it also presents a methodological approach that – I hope – contributes to the small but growing discussions surrounding method in Reception Studies. Its chapter structure can be summarised thus:

Chapter Two provides an overview of some of the key interventions into film-based reception studies. In it I argue that, whilst the work of both Janet Staiger and Barbara Klinger has been of crucial importance in initially shaping what a film-based reception studies might look like, a broader and more systematic exploration of the dynamics of film-specific journalism has yet to take place. The chapter seeks to critically reflect upon the work of both Staiger and Klinger in order to demonstrate the ways in which recent interventions have begun to address wider issues within the field, such as a move towards more cross-culturally focused studies, and offer a more systematic approach to reception work.

Chapter Three examines the production context within which Dario Argento has operated, situating him within both a genre that has attracted controversy in the UK but not within his native Italy. In so doing it explores the history of the horror and *giallo* film in order to demonstrate both Argento's closeness and apartness to the way its reputation has developed in both cultural contexts. It also highlights the particular place Argento occupies in Italian film culture, emphasising the differences in both the distribution and exhibition of his work in both Italy and the UK. In providing such an overview it aims to suggest both why Italian

horror has often been seen as problematic for UK critics and the wider significance of Argento within horror cinema. In situating Argento in this way, as a producer of film texts working within a specific industrial context, it aims to provide a context from which to study their reception in Chapters Four, Five and Six.

Chapter Four, in line with Barbara Klinger's seminal work in *Making Meaning*, considers academic debates as a mode of reception, highlighting the ways in which writing surrounding Argento has both intersected and diverged.<sup>xxxv</sup> It explores the reception of Argento as having developed in three broad phases, which I argue are also broadly linked to the ways in which developments within the study of popular culture within film studies ran concurrent with explorations of the Italian director. The chapter also stresses the way in which academic debates can and do transfer into certain types of genre writing, meaning that the boundaries between the 'academic' and the 'journalistic' are not rigid divisions.

In Chapter Five I analyse the British press reception of Argento. In the UK, this thesis argues, the application of the term cult to his work is seen as a culturally ambiguous term that has been utilised because *as a concept* it fitted the idea of a phenomenon critics could not themselves quite make sense of, namely the continued career (and niche popularity) of a director whose work was at best tolerated and at worst critically panned. In order to do so, it systematically explores the UK press reaction to his work from 1970-2005, exploring the changing nature of reactions to his work over this period by examining the changing nature of both the critical and socio-historical dynamics of the period under study. In so doing it uses empirical evidence drawn from the database created for this research project in order to both substantiate and further elucidate the claims I make therein.

Chapter Six argues that Argento's continued popular appeal in Italy has increasingly run against critical opinion of his work, which has been strongly influenced by the highly political nature of the Italian cultural sphere. This work argues that this continued popular appeal has meant that critics have shifted focus from attacking his work on narrative grounds, to instead reflecting upon his national and international significance as an *Italian* filmmaker in order to maintain a culturally 'relevant' position in their discussions of his work. In line with Chapter Five, it also utilises evidence from my database to further expand upon and provide evidence for the claims held therein.

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<sup>i</sup> I have chosen here to focus on the reception of his oeuvre from his first work in 1970 to 2005. There have been several new releases since this date – most notably the conclusion of the much vaunted Three Mothers Trilogy with *The Third Mother* in 2007 – but the dynamics of review material collection and coding means that boundaries need to be set (as does the nature of this as a time-bound project). The focus here is upon the feature films which he has directed rather than those he has been involved with in his capacity as a producer or writer.

<sup>ii</sup> Janet Staiger, *Interpreting Films: Studies in the Historical Reception of American Cinema*, Princeton: Princeton University Press (1992); Janet Staiger, *Perverse Spectators: the practices of film reception*, New York: New York University Press (2000); Klinger, Barbara, *Melodrama and Meaning: History, Culture And The Films Of Douglas Sirk*, Indianapolis: Indiana University Press (1994)

<sup>iii</sup> Myra Macdonald, *Exploring Media Discourse*, London: Arnold (2003), p.1

<sup>iv</sup> James Naremore, *More Than Night: Film Noir in its Contexts*, London: University of California Press (2008), p.11

<sup>v</sup> Robert.C.Allen and Douglas Gomery, *Film History: Theory and Practice*, New York: Alfred A Knopf (1985), p.90. Allen and Gomery argue that with reviews it is not a case of telling people what to think as much as “what to think about”.

<sup>vi</sup> Klinger (1994)

<sup>vii</sup> A key example of work that addresses this is Ernest Mathijs, ‘Bad reputations: the reception of trash’ cinema’, *Screen* 46:4 (2005), pp.451-472



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<sup>viii</sup> See, for example: Dimitris Eleftheriotis, *Popular Cinemas of Europe: Texts, Contexts and Frameworks*, London: Continuum (2001); Ernest Mathijs and Xavier Mendik (eds), *Alternative Europe. Eurotrash and Exploitation Cinema in Europe since 1945*. London: Wallflower Press (2004)

<sup>ix</sup> Pierre Sorlin, *European Cinemas, European Societies, 1939-90*, London: Routledge (1991)

<sup>x</sup> Richard Dyer, and Ginette Vincendeau (eds), *Popular European Cinema*. London: Routledge, (1992). Reception studies have tended to look at popular culture with far more frequency than other forms of film and cultural studies. Chapter two of this thesis provides a lengthy discussion of this issue. Dyer and Vincendeau's book was one of the first to fully champion popular culture – and especially *European* popular culture - and is therefore extremely significant in this respect.

<sup>xi</sup> David Sanjek, 'Fans' Notes: the Horror Film Fanzine,' *Literature/Film Quarterly*, 18:3 (1990), pp.150-160; Carol Jenks, 'The Other Face of Death: Barbara Steele and *La maschera del demonio*' in Richard Dyer. and Ginette Vincendeau, (eds), *Popular European Cinema*, London: Routledge, (1992), pp.163-180

<sup>xii</sup> See Mary Wood, *Contemporary European Cinema*, London: Hodder-Arnold (2007), chapter 5.

<sup>xiii</sup> See, for example,: Sreberny, Annabelle, 'The global and the local in international communications', in James Curran & Michael Gurevitch (eds.), *Mass Media and Society*, London: Arnold (2000), pp.93-119; Wasko, Janet and Ingunn Hagen (eds), *Consuming Audiences: Production and Reception in Media Research*, Cresskill: Hampton Press (2000)

<sup>xiv</sup> For reference to discussions on such debates see: McDonagh (1991); Adam Knee, 'Gender, Genre, Argento' in Grant, Barry Keith (ed), *The Dread of Difference: Gender And The Horror Film*, Fifth Edition, Texas: University of Texas Press (2005), pp.213-230; Chris Gallant, *The Art of Darkness: The Cinema of Dario Argento*, London: FAB (2001); Alan Jones, *Profondo Argento*, London: FAB Press (2004)

<sup>xv</sup> See, for instance: Egan, Kate, *Trash or Treasure? Censorship and the Changing Meanings of the Video Nasties*, Manchester: Manchester University Press (2007)

<sup>xvi</sup> Donald Campbell, 'Dario Argento's Phenomena (1985): A psychoanalytic perspective on the 'horror film' genre and adolescent genre' in Sabbadini, Andrea (Ed), *The Couch and the Silver Screen: Psychoanalytic Reflections on European*, Hove: Routledge (2003), 128-138; Xavier Mendik, *Tenebre/Tenebrae*. Wiltshire: Flicks Books (2000)

<sup>xvii</sup> Mikel Koven, *La Dolce Morte: Vernacular Cinema and the Italian Giallo Film*, Oxford: Scarecrow Press (2006)

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<sup>xviii</sup> Alan Jones has noted how Argento is regularly mobbed in the streets of his native Italy and that in effect his levels of fame and recognition are those more ordinarily associated with popular musicians than film directors. Indeed, it is hard to think of a similar example within a British context. See: Alan Jones, *Profondo Argento*, London: FAB Press (2004), p.2.

<sup>xix</sup> Peter Hutchings, 'The Argento effect' in Jancovich, Mark, Antonio Lazaro Reboll, Julian Stringer and Andy Willis, *Defining Cult Movies: The Cultural Politics of Oppositional Taste*, Manchester: Manchester University Press (2003), pp.127-141

<sup>xx</sup> Maitland McDonagh, *Broken Mirrors/Broken Minds: the Dark Dreams of Dario Argento*, London: Sun Tavern Fields (1991), p.25

<sup>xxi</sup> Sonia Livingstone, 'On the Challenges of Cross-National Comparative Media Research', *European Journal of Communication*, Vol 18 (4), 2003

<sup>xxii</sup> See, for example: Staiger (1992); Staiger (2000); Klinger (1994); Cynthia Erb, *Tracking King Kong: A Hollywood Icon In World Culture*, Detroit: Wayne State, (1998); Hawkins, Joan, *Cutting Edge: Art-Horror and the Horrific Avant-Garde*, Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press (2000); Thomas Austin, *Hollywood Hype and Audiences: Selling and Watching*, Manchester: Manchester University Press (2002).

<sup>xxiii</sup> See, in particular: Martin Barker, 'News, Reviews, Clues and other Ancillary Materials' in *Scope: An Online Journal of Film Studies*, February (2004); Martin Barker and Kate Egan, 'Rings around the World: Notes on the Challenges, Problems & Possibilities of International Audience Projects', *Participations*, Vol.3, Issue 2, November (2006); Barker, Martin, Kate Egan, Stan Jones and Ernest Mathijs, 'Researching The Lord of the Rings: Audiences and Contexts' in Barker, Martin and Ernest Mathijs (eds), *Watching The Lord of The Rings: Tolkien's World Audiences*, Oxford: Peter Lang (2008), pp.1-20; Mathijs, Ernest, 'The making of a cult reputation: topicality and controversy in the critical reception of shivers' in Mark Jancovich, Antonio Lazar Reboll, Julian Stringer and Andy Willis (Ed), *Defining Cult Movies: The Cultural Politics of Oppositional Taste*, Manchester: Manchester University Press, (2003), pp.109-126.

<sup>xxiv</sup> Key examples here, whose impact on the field has been significant, are: Janet Staiger, *Interpreting Films: Studies in the Historical Reception of American Cinema*, Princeton: Princeton University Press, (1992); Janet Staiger, *Perverse Spectators: the practices of film reception*, New York: New York University Press, (2000); Barbara Klinger, 'Film history terminable and interminable: recovering the past in reception studies' in *Screen*, 38:2, Summer, (1997), p.107 - 129

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<sup>xxv</sup> One problem here has been the contingencies of the publishing industry. Methodological chapters are often the first to be cut, only adding to the problem. Nonetheless this is not always the case and reception studies cannot hide behind this argument forever.

<sup>xxvi</sup> On a final note, a conscious decision was made not to include fan sites within my body of materials. As noted, professional critics are a particular type of audience and spreading this net further to encompass online journalism or even the amateur critic/fan would be to open the field of enquiry too far, both for what concerns the aim of this thesis and the practical possibilities of taking on such a broad task. The time scale available for this study meant that decisions had to be made as to where the focus of study would be, meaning that to diverge too much would risk spreading too thinly the amount of material available in each discrete area of the public sphere and risk insubstantial analysis.

<sup>xxvii</sup> To follow the mentions of any individual or cultural figure would be a long and highly-involved study that would necessitate a project in and of itself. There is potential here, however, to explore the ways in which my chosen object of study, an Italian horror film director, is used as a reference point and what the implications of mean in terms of what I would call 'cultural shorthand'.

<sup>xxviii</sup> For example, searching for any mentions of 'Red Dragon' in Lexis/Nexis threw up innumerable references to martial arts related and oriental news stories. Given the sheer quantity of these, it would then take a lot of refinement to limit searches to those references that relate in some way to the film or book.

<sup>xxix</sup> Bordwell, David, *Making Meaning: Inference and Rhetoric on the Interpretation of Cinema*, London: Harvard University Press, (1989)

<sup>xxx</sup> Rosengren, K.E. , 'Time and Culture: Developments in the Swedish Literary Frame of Reference' in G. Melischek, K.E. Rosengen & J.Stappers (eds.), *Cultural Indicators: An International Symposium*, Vienna: Verlag der Osterreichischen Akademie der Wissenschaftern, 1984

<sup>xxxi</sup> I think a large part of this was due to my own 'newness' to the approach, an issue exacerbated by a tendency to be *overly* meticulous in attempting to record as much data as possible. Whilst I felt this meant a large coverage of the material, it ultimately generated more material than I could end up using.

<sup>xxxii</sup> Wesley Shrum Jr, *Fringe and Fortune: The Role of Critics in High and Popular Art*, Princeton: Princeton University Press (1996). Shrum's study looked at the way overnight reviews for Edinburgh Fringe Festival performances affected audience attendance. It was not possible to assign a tenor to interviews, for example.

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<sup>xxxiii</sup> Martin Barker, Kate Egan, Stan Jones and Ernest Mathijs, 'Researching The Lord of the Rings: Audiences and Contexts' in Barker, Martin and Ernest Mathijs (eds), *Watching The Lord of The Rings: Tolkien's World Audiences*, Oxford: Peter Lang (2008), p.12

<sup>xxxiv</sup> Austin (2002), p.31. Austin notes that making clear his own 'personal investment' in his research project is important. In fact, the danger here is that if one does not do so others may well assume position that may be at odds with the truth.

<sup>xxxv</sup> Klinger (1994)

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The student has requested that this electronic version of the thesis does not include the main body of the work - i.e. the chapters and conclusion. The other sections of the thesis are available as a research resource.

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