"Looks Like Cotton Candy": Deconstructing Fascism in Post-War Japanese and Italian Horror Cinema

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Deconstructing Fascism in Post-War Japanese and Italian Horror Cinema

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirement
for the degree of Bachelor of Arts / Science in Department from
William & Mary

by

Nicholas Hall

Accepted for (Honors)
Jennifer Taylor, Director
Professor Keith Johnson
Professor Sergio Ferrarese

Williamsburg, VA
May 8, 2023
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Introduction

“All nello Stato, niente al di fuori dello Stato, nulla contro lo Stato”
Everything in the State, nothing outside the State, nothing against the State.

Benito Mussolini, 1927

On December 4, 1930, All Quiet on the Western Front opened at the Mozartsaal, a large Art Nouveau theatre in Berlin. The American adaptation of the German (anti)war novel was acclaimed by audiences and critics alike. However, the following night, something much more sinister and indicative of the future of Germany occurred. Dozens of Sturmabteilung, colloquially known as Brownshirts, stormed the theatre. SA officers beat moviegoers because they were taken for Jews, released mice into the aisles, and threw stink bombs into the audience. Joseph Goebbels, who had yet to be appointed Hitler’s Reich Minister of Propaganda, towered over the balcony, and watched as the pandemonium unfolded, spewing anti-Semitic vitriol. A Nazi sympathizer viewing the opening night showing allegedly tipped Goebbels off. Leni Riefenstahl later cited this incident as the first time she had seen Goebbels (Doherty 2022). She would later work closely with Goebbels, directing several Nazi propaganda films, most notably Triumph of the Will. This outrage under Goebbels was because the American film painted Germany in a less than favorable light, detailing the tragedy of war and the meaningless deaths of thousands of young German soldiers under their militaristic regime. Goebbels and the Nazis saw the film’s immense success as a threat to their uber-nationalism. They decried Hollywood as being “poisoned” and “run by Jews,” dead set on tarnishing the nation’s legacy. Following the incident at the Mozartsaal, Nazi protests continued unforgivingly for a week, after which the Censorship Office banned the film from being screened anywhere in Germany. This practice
would become commonplace under the Nazis as art, literature, films, and textbooks were banned, burned, or otherwise destroyed across the country and elsewhere.

Clearly, as this incident shows, cinema posed a unique threat to not just Hitler’s Nazism but to fascism in general. After all, why else would Hitler establish an entire position solely for managing propaganda? This continues to be true after the fall of the Nazi Party and similar authoritarian regimes. Nevertheless, cinema is a powerful tool for critiquing fascism and promoting it. Moreover, while there are undoubtedly powerful anti-war and anti-fascist dramas and war films, the horror genre is specially equipped to be used as a vehicle for deconstructing fascism and the violence and war crimes that often accompany it. Notably, horror as a genre is entirely absent in Nazi Germany and, similarly, in Fascist Italy and Imperial Japan. Just a few years earlier, horror had been the staple of the Weimar Republic, and, to a lesser extent, Italy and Japan were producing many films in the genre. Many of these interwar horror films, particularly *The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari* have been read as predicting future events, particularly in Germany.¹

While I will not be examining horror cinema in post-war Germany, I will be analyzing how the horror films of post-war Japan and Italy address and work through their fascist pasts, and in doing so, will occasionally make reference to Germany in comparison.

Horror at its core is the bursting of tension, or more aptly, the return of the suppressed. This assertion has been well documented in literature surrounding Film and Media Studies. Theorists such as Jo Labanyi have noted horror cinema’s unique ability to both represent and deconstruct grief and trauma. In a post-war fascist society, the suppressed “truth” obfuscated through historical revisionism reveals itself through art. The horror film is perhaps the medium best equipped for understanding and deconstructing the fascism that plagued these three nations.

¹ For more information on Weimar cinema’s alleged foreseeing of the rise of Hitler, see Siegfried Kracauer’s 1947 book, *From Caligari to Hitler: A Psychological History of the German Film*.
The tropes, characteristics, and filmmaking techniques associated with horror cinema lend themselves to exploring and analyzing power structures and the unprecedented vitriol experienced throughout the Second World War. After the world was shocked by the real-life horrors that occurred throughout the deadliest conflict in history, including the Holocaust, the dropping of the atomic bombs, and Japan’s horrendous war crimes, the new fears and drives associated with the post-war age had few places but horror to go. Often heavily featuring entangled stories of guilt, leadership, and influence, fascism fits snugly into the confines of the genre. Furthermore, horror offers the antagonist or the “monster” as a stand-in for these nations’ fascist pasts.

In order to identify and subsequently deconstruct the recurring motif and iconography of fascist ideology in horror cinema, it is vital to establish a clear definition of fascism. However, this has proven much more intractable than one may suspect. Since Mussolini first used the term in reference to political ideology in his essay, “The Doctrine of Fascism,” definitions of the term have widely varied from fascists to Marxists and political scientists and analysts. Benito Mussolini describes the totalitarian tendencies of his concept of fascismo as one that “interprets, develops, and potentiates the whole life of people” (14). Here Mussolini is describing the ideology’s capacity to penetrate social strata to invigorate his own campaign and agenda. He refrains, however, from defining the motivating forces at the heart of the ideology aside from nationalism that he famously masqueraded as revenge for the vittoria mutilata or “mutilated victory” of WWI. This definition gives us an idea of the complete power fascism holds over the people and its efficacy in controlling, but we still need to know what it actually is. There is, of course, a sort of ambiguity with which fascists speak regarding their ideology. In his book Fascism, Richard Griffiths cites Francisco Franco’s 1938 interview with Henri Massiss, in which
Franco declares fascism as something that presents “wherever it manifests itself” with “characteristics which are varied” (103). This non-answer tells us more about Franco’s guile than anything about his characterization of fascism. It is undoubtedly true that fascism appears in many different forms and can be executed in various ways to achieve various goals. Francoist Spain was primarily concerned with consolidating Franco’s power rather than expansionism. Still, this is, of course, inadequate in giving us a better understanding of fascism as a general concept. As the rise of Hitler and Mussolini show us, fascism is often an ideology that presents itself as apolitical to appeal to the masses and invigorate those that may otherwise be uninterested in politics.

The third axis power, Japan, presents similar questions about how to define fascism. While it was undeniably an authoritarian state, there has been conscious debate over whether to define Imperial Japan as fascist, given its unique monarchical structure. Part of this contention comes from the political syncretism that defined Shōwa Japan (Hirohito’s rule). A wide array of ideologies had been brewing and popular in Japan from the time of the Meiji Restoration, culminating in Hirohito’s reign as emperor. Fascism is one, but not the only, one of the ideologies that inspired Hirohito, Tojo, and their sycophants. Ikki Kita was a Japanese author and political philosopher often cited as the “father of Japanese fascism.” He initially subscribed to socialist views. However, whereas Marxism roots power in the proletariat, Kita advocated for socialism that would be enforced “from above.” Many Japanese political scientists explore the idea of a political ideology being sourced from above or below and support the argument for fascism in Japan as coming “from above.” Kita’s potent advocacy for expansionism made him a beacon for fascists and fascists-to-be in Japan. Much like how Gabriele D’Annunzio inspired Mussolini’s *fascismo*, Kita’s work and teachings laid the groundwork for Hirohito, Hideki Tojo,
and other Japanese officials leading up to and during the Second World War. Furthermore, Kita subsequently led a failed coup and was later assassinated. Despite this, Kita’s clear grip over Shōwa Japan, and influence over its extremist statism and political agenda, parallels the development of fascism in Italy and Germany and can therefore be understood as fascist.

Now that we have established that Imperial Japan in many ways upheld fascist ideals, given the conjecture popularized in Shōwa Japan by proto-fascists, there undeniably exists a definition of fascism that would accommodate Japan. This thesis must define this umbrella under which Imperial Japan, Nazi Germany, and Fascist Italy can be understood as similar and determine which values are consistent across the board. The aforementioned weaponized vagueness regarding the definition of fascism by fascists may seemingly make it easier to squeeze these three nations into the same framework. However, the lack of clear concepts makes understanding what is being deconstructed through these films difficult. Therefore, we need a definition of fascism that is broad enough to accommodate Imperial Japan without being too unnecessarily nebulous. Furthermore, without a clear definition of a concept, it is impossible to recognize and mobilize against it.

Cultural theorist Umberto Eco offers one more helpful definition of fascism. In his 1995 essay “Ur-Fascism,” Eco acknowledged the difficulty in defining the term and developed a list of fourteen potential tenets of the ideology that can be used to identify and describe fascist societies. He asserts, “It is enough that one of them be present to allow fascism to coagulate around it” (4). In other words, instead of providing a concise definition of the concept, Eco provides a myriad of conditions necessary for fascism to thrive and possible ways to present itself. While this is not perhaps ideal, as we still do not have a clear definition, Eco pushes us much closer than Mussolini or Franco’s vague mumblings.
Furthermore, some of the properties described by Eco are more applicable than others. The ones most pertinent to this thesis include chauvinistic collective narcissism. This is the idea of exaggerated positive self-worth within the “in-group,” commonly referring to a race or nation. This concept suggests that those in the in-group are superior to others simply by virtue of being in the in-group, which goes hand in hand with xenophobia and, ultimately, a “common will.” The “common will” under fascist doctrine often refers to an expansionist policy or ethnic cleansing, for instance, Hitler’s Final Solution. Other principles outlined by Eco that are vital to the understanding of fascism for this thesis are the rejection of dissent and the “cult of death” rooted in machismo. This refers to the hypermasculinity and firm gender roles associated with these political systems that lead to rampant sexism, homophobia, etc., which will be explored further in reference to the horror films discussed.

The definition offered by American political scientist Robert Paxton may be most helpful. In his book The Anatomy of Fascism, Paxton describes a fascist party as one that works in “effective collaboration with traditional elites, abandons democratic liberties and pursues with redemptive violence and without ethical or legal restraints goals of internal cleansing and external expansion” (567). Here, Paxton takes a few of the tenets outlined by Eco and consolidates them into a clear concept with a defined motive. In other words, Paxton focuses on the rejection of modernity seen in many fascists driven by their xenophobic and expansionist agenda, which is pursued with unbridled rage and vitriol. In concordance with both Paxton and Eco, we can define fascism as a totalitarian collectivist political ideology that asserts its extremist, xenophobic goals as a tool of utopianism.

Further, the most relevant methods of achieving these goals are through the perversion of existing philosophical canon, such as Nietzschean beliefs, many tenets of Freudian thought,
media, and language. This way, we have a more concrete idea of what precisely these films are deconstructing, and Nazi Germany, fascist Italy, and Imperial Japan undoubtedly fit into this description of fascist/authoritarian models of governing. The filmmaking techniques of these nations’ horror cinema can now more clearly be seen as a deconstruction of such ideology.

**Fascist Italy’s Role in the Holocaust and Other Crimes Against Humanity**

Throughout this thesis, I will refer to repressed traumas, crimes, or culpabilities. In order to get a clearer understanding of the crimes and trauma I am referring to, I will provide a brief historical digression discussing the role of Italy in the Holocaust. Italy historically had one of the oldest Jewish populations in Europe, with an estimated 50,000 Jews living in Italy in 1933. Jewish communities have existed in Italy for thousands of years. The mass deportation of Italian Jews in the Holocaust did not occur until 1943 under the German-occupied puppet state of the Italian Social Republic, also known as the Republic of Sâlo. However, this is not to say that Mussolini and fascist Italy were not anti-Semitic. In fact, much of the legislation under Mussolini was incredibly anti-Semitic and racist, to a similar extent to that of Nazi Germany. Up until 1938, Jews were allowed to join the Fascist Party. Despite relatively little anti-Semitism in the regime’s early years, this quickly changed as Mussolini’s racial laws began to be put in place starting in 1938. The first of these heavily restricted the civil rights of Italian Jews. This law banned Italian Jews from receiving higher education and holding public office positions. Furthermore, books written by Jewish authors were banned under the regime. These laws also restricted Italian Jew’s travel, and often their property was confiscated.

As other racial laws were passed under Mussolini, the fascists continued to construct the superiority of their “Genus Italicus,” similar to Hitler’s construction of the Aryan race. This
vision of the “pure” Italian race excluded Jewish people and their African colonial subjects. Both ethnic groups were seen as inferior, and marriage between Italians and Jews was banned, as well as miscegenation.

Following the removal of Mussolini and the installment of the puppet state of the Republic of Sàlo, Germany, with the collaboration of Italians, deported almost 8,600 Jews to Auschwitz, with only a few hundred surviving. The role of the Italians in the Holocaust is seldom discussed in academia or reflected upon in the nation. Research by historian Simon Levis Sullam, as outlined in his book, *The Italian Executioners: The Genocide of the Jews of Italy*, concluded that half of the Italian Jews killed in the Holocaust were arrested not by Germans but by Italian officers, typically tipped off by Italian citizens (101). What Sullam calls the “era of the executioner” (141) is ignored in academia and post-war culture. The majority of cinematic depictions of the Holocaust in Italy made by the Italians do not reflect upon the culpability of the Italians in the Holocaust and World War II. However, the trend of *giallo* and horror in the 60s and 70s Italy engages in the hard work of unraveling culpability in a way that films belonging to other genres do not.

**Crimes of Unit 731: Auschwitz of the East**

Now, I will detail how Japan too has a repressed history surrounding World War II that is just as fraught and problematic. The activities and inhumanity of Unit 731, for instance, is one example. Unit 731 of the Imperial Japanese Army, which scholars have often called “Auschwitz of the East” for its incomprehensible and horrific depravity. Unit 731 was the secret biological warfare unit the Imperial Japanese Army used. After Japan invaded Manchuria, the unit built its headquarters outside of the city of Harbin. The purpose of Unit 731 was to create and test
biological weapons. Unit 731 researched, developed, produced, and tested biological weapons. These tests were done not only on animal subjects but humans as well. In Japanese historian Yuki Tanaka’s 2017 book *Hidden Horrors: Japanese War Crimes in World War II*, he explains in depth the extent and the specifics of the crimes against humanity conducted by Unit 731. He notes that these atrocities remained unknown to the Japanese public until the 1980s. At this point, several documents, which were seized by the United States during the Allied occupation of Japan, revealing the activity of Unit 731, were declassified (3485). The documents were hidden for so long because they had been given to the United States (and the Soviet Union) in exchange for granting amnesty to the war criminals involved.

Unit 731 tested biological weapons, such as pathogens, on nearby human populations. These pathogens were introduced into the local water or food supply and through aircraft, as bombs developed by Unit 731 to release pathogens (3523). It is well documented that Chinese people made up most of the subjects used for medical experiments. Chinese people who resisted or protested the Japanese occupation were frequently arrested and sent to Pingfan. Here, they became subject to deprave experiments (3548). However, Chinese citizens were not the only victims of these experiments. Russian prisoners of war were also frequently used to conduct experiments. The Japanese demeaningly called the prisoners subjected to experiments “*maruta*” (logs). Approximately 600 prisoners, or “*maruta*,” are estimated to have been sent to Pingfan annually by the Japanese military police (3550).

Most of these experiments, as aforementioned, involved infecting prisoners with pathogens such as typhoid, cholera, plague, etc. This was done through injection or forced consumption of contaminated food or water. Their vitals and symptoms were recorded by forcibly taking blood and tissue samples (3550). One particularly brutal and infamous
experiment done by the Unit 731 regarded frostbite. Frostbite quickly became a significant problem for the Japanese army, as they could not withstand the frigid Manchurian winters. In these experiments, the subjects were tied up and left outside in temperatures as low as -20 degrees Celsius. Their bodies were regularly sprayed with salt water to speed up the process of frostbite. Finally, experimenters would beat their limbs with hammers to determine whether they had fully induced frostbite. If so, the subjects were dropped in hot water of varying temperatures to determine how to best recover from frostbite. In many cases, victims died immediately, as their skin and muscles sloughed off the bone in response to the hot water (3555). General Ishii and his colleagues were said to be especially proud of this discovery (3561). It is estimated that more than 3000 people were killed because of human experimentation with biological and chemical weapons by Unit 731. These victims were primarily Chinese (3567).

Imperial Japan heavily repressed these crimes, and knowledge of these crimes did not become public until the 1980s. However, despite similarly unprecedented levels of depravity, as seen in Auschwitz and otherwise during the Holocaust, Unit 731 is still mostly unheard of to the general public. This is due to a joint effort made by both post-war Japan and the United States to undermine their role as malicious instigators in the shadow of the Cold War and for the sake of the allegedly essential medical knowledge gained from these experiments. This is one significant incidence of the incredibly revisionist culture of post-war Japan. The crimes of Unit 731 are not taught in Japan and are generally not discussed in academia.

Similarly, as will be elaborated in the coming chapters, other war crimes committed by Imperial Japan have been repressed and removed from textbooks, most significantly The Nanjing Massacre, also known as the Rape of Nanjing. The Nanjing (formerly Romanized as Nanking) Massacre occurred immediately following the Battle of Nanjing during the Second Sino-
Japanese War in December of 1937 and lasted six weeks. During this period, it is estimated that over 200,000 Chinese civilians were brutally murdered by the Imperial Japanese Army, and over 20,000 rapes of Chinese civilians have been documented. Mass rapes and sex crimes were not uncommon under Imperial Japan. Hundreds of thousands of women and girls from countries and territories occupied by Imperial Japan during the Second World War were forced into sexual slavery. These victims were primarily Korean, but many were from China, the Philippines, Burma, Thailand, French Indochina, Taiwan, etc.

The Deconstruction of These Crimes in Horror Cinema

To write poetry after Auschwitz is barbaric.

Theodor Adorno, 1951

Theodor Adorno famously made this statement in his 1951 essay, “Cultural Criticism and Society.” This passage has been cited and invoked in innumerable works and is often misconstrued. Adorno is not suggesting that it is impossible to write poetry about Auschwitz or the Holocaust. This cannot be true, as poets and authors wrote extensively about Auschwitz and continue to do so. Instead, Adorno invites the reader to call into question what it means to write poetry or create art in a post-Auschwitz world. This is especially true because the language was so meticulously manipulated in order to orchestrate the Holocaust. If there is no language to capture the inhumanity and depravity of the Holocaust, then what is the ethical or pedagogical merit of works describing it? Filmmakers in the post-war era face a similar dilemma. If poets do

2 For more information about the Rape of Nanjing, Iris Chang and Xiaming Yang’s 2007 book, Chang, Iris, and Xiaming Yang. Nanjing Hao Jie: Bei Yi Wang De Da Tu Sha or the Rape of Nanking: The Forgotten Holocaust of World War II details and analyzes the event in depth

3 Victor Klemperer writes extensively about this in his book Language of the Third Reich.
not have the language to capture the horror of the Holocaust, then filmmakers certainly do not possess the cinematic tools or language to depict such trauma on screen explicitly. Nevertheless, just as poetry continues to be written, films about Auschwitz and the Holocaust continue to be made. It is a similarly barbaric act to frame the horrors of the Holocaust in a narrative with a beginning, middle, and end, because this signals that the Holocaust, or similarly inexplicable traumas of World War II are understandable and implies that one can completely understand it. Therefore, we must turn to texts that question their own ability to tell the whole story in order to engage cinematically with the Holocaust and other traumas of World War II.

Each of the horror films in this thesis present the traumas of World War II in an incomplete, allegorical, and dissatisfying manner, which requires the viewer to acknowledge the impossibility of complete understanding while engaging with the films’ political ideology, rather than being spoon-fed a framed narrative. In the first chapter of this thesis, I will discuss Nobuhiko Obayashi’s 1977 film *House*. The openness of this film (as well as the genre) allows for an against-the-grain reading and understanding of post-war Japan’s fetishization of the atom bomb. Then in Teruo Ishii’s 1969 film *Horrors of Malformed Men*, we get a similarly nonconventional presentation of malformedness, which in post-war Japan has become inextricable from the imagery of the atomic bombs, as well as the sex crimes committed by Imperial Japan during the war. Finally, in Dario Argento’s *Deep Red* (1975), the audience is thrown into a non-linear web of trauma, in the center of which Italy’s fascist past lies.
Chapter 1:
“Looks Like Cotton Candy”: Re-Examining Japan’s Fascist Past in Obayashi’s House

Film & Genre Background

Nobuhiko Obayashi’s 1977 cult horror-comedy House is a masterpiece that sets itself apart from the rest of the films in this thesis, both in style and content. The film was boundary-breaking in terms of its experimental, surrealist techniques. House was released at a time when the pinku eiga or “pink film” was at its peak in popularity in Japan, with many studios focusing exclusively on them. These pink films were a subgenre that dominated the industry through the 80s and was one without exact Western equivalence, with perhaps the closest thing being soft pornography. Pinku eiga were essentially exploitation films that included sexual content or nudity. House certainly falls into this category in many ways, given the frequent nudity throughout the film. However, while the film does play into the tropes of the pinku eiga, it also subverts the expectations of the viewer as it uses the nudity and sexualized content as a vehicle for the film’s terror, which in turn critiques the post-war culture of sex and gender politics in Japan and Japanese cinema. Rather than offering gratuitous pinku eiga pleasure, the film instead asks the reader to take a critical look at Japan’s inability to be honest about its complicity in World War II war crimes by focusing solely on its role as a victim of the atomic bombs and ignoring the crimes Japan committed, particularly the sex crimes committed across Asia. In fact, as I will demonstrate later, we may read the sexual murders as an acting out of Japanese wartime atrocities. Acting out, a concept Freud outlines in his book Mourning and Melancholia, is an alternative to working through. Whereas when one “works through” a trauma, they come face to face with the source and ultimately attempt to make peace, when one “acts out,” they engage in
fetishized or denialist narratives. The horror film criticizes post-World War II Japanese society by presenting a fairy-tale-like allegory where the girls represent a large portion of the ignorant youth or shinjinrui (new breed) generation. Auntie, or perhaps more precisely, the house itself, which serves as a symbol for memory or the repressed, given its infestation with kaibyo (supernatural cats in Japanese folklore known for their ability to shapeshift or possess humans and dead bodies), subsequently punishes the girls.

**Flashback Sequence**

The house punishes the girls for breaking a major taboo in their post-war culture, namely for showing no interest in war history (a specific kind of war history that post-war Japan has manipulated). They are ignorant toward not only the suffering of Auntie but of Japan as a nation during the war. Their naivete is best captured in an early sequence in the film. As they travel to Auntie’s house, Gorgeous tells them all she can remember about Auntie. What follows is footage of Auntie, as Gorgeous remembers, presented as a short silent film, even including title cards. She details what she knows about her life during the war. The strange qualities of Auntie’s narrative cue the audience to the subjective bias of both the narrative and Gorgeous’ rendition. For example, Auntie appears as an old woman even in her alleged youth, the only version of Auntie Gorgeous is capable of conjuring up. This reveals how far removed from the war the girls feel, as it only exists as a distant folktale passed down from generation to generation. Their vapid intercutting narration underscores the girls’ flippant enchantment with the war. At one point, when footage of the atomic bomb dropping over Hiroshima is shown, one of the girls excitedly comments that the mushroom cloud “looks like cotton candy.” The sequence is brief but critical to the understanding of the film.
Auntie’s story in the flashback is deeply tragic. We learn, for instance, that her fiancé died after enemy troops downed his plane, the only footage of warfare shown throughout the entirety of the film. The girls are depicted as ignorant of the official narrative, which aligns with Auntie’s, of Japan as a victim, and simultaneously are unaware of Japan’s war crimes. There is, of course, no mention of any action of the war apart from the dropping of the bombs. While the girls meet the iconography of the bomb with ignorance, that image still stands out within the film and is presented as the ultimate tragedy and culmination of the war. In Auntie’s film, though, there is no mention of or allusion to Japan’s atrocities and war crimes. Auntie’s narrative, presented in the “official” newsreel-like film, in which she loses the love of her life and is a victim of the atomic bomb, is thus linked to the official narrative pushed by post-war Japan and similar films. Therefore, the girls represent large swathes of post-war Japanese youth, and the character of Auntie is connected to WWII Japan, or more aptly, the Emperor.

This is not to say that the official narrative necessarily is false. Obayashi himself read the film as a portrayal of the intergenerational conflict between Auntie, who experienced the traumas of World War II, and the girls who were born too late to experience such traumas, reflecting a deep divide in Japanese culture today over how to remember the past. In this sense, House is reminding the girls, and the viewers, of the tragedy of the atomic bombs and encouraging us to commemorate these atrocities so that those who have suffered and died may be remembered and celebrated, lest they be forgotten. This reading is undoubtedly compelling and legitimate. Obayashi noted in an interview with Criterion that the young girls are “unaware of how precious peace is,” as they belong to the generation born after World War II. However, Obayashi does not belong to this generation, born in 1938 in the Hiroshima prefecture. He was only 7 when the atomic bomb destroyed the area killing many of his childhood friends and family. Because of the
closeness of this subject to his personal life, the atomic bomb informs almost all his work, with *House* being the most notable example. The film does function to show the divide between the young and the old over past trauma, as the naivete of the girls is emphasized through both the morality play-like structure of the film and their characterizations.

Nevertheless, the film also shows the reader that solely clinging to the personal and cultural traumas of the atomic bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki has transformed Auntie into a monster devouring young girls who come to visit. The film suggests that concrete villainy and deception are associated with these traumatic memories of the bombings. Focusing only on the amnesia regarding Japan’s victimhood covers up how much this narrative has damaged Auntie herself, signposting to the reader that something is wrong or incomplete with the story Auntie is telling us. While this reading is at variance with what Obayashi claims to have intended with *House*, it is not important if this second layer of critique is conscious by either the writer or the director, Obayashi, and Chiho Katsura in this case. I think this is particularly true because of Obayashi’s extremely personal link to the bombing of Hiroshima. The film exists as a kind of snapshot of trauma and a reflection of the cultural moment. Even if unintentional, especially from the standpoint of the modern audience, which allows for reconstructive hindsight, the covert narrative still seeps through the cracks of the film and is brought to life to the audience.

**The Fetishization of the Bomb**

The film then depicts the bomb as a fixation or fetish in addition to the real evil associated with the dropping of the bombs themselves and furthermore insists on horror as a genred representation. The image of the atomic bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki haunts the film, not because it acts as an unprocessed agony for the Japanese people, but because it
represents a distraction from a second separate trauma, the Japanese war crimes, such as the Rape of Nanking and the sexual exploitation of “comfort women.” These crimes hover in the background in the post-war -- or post-Hirohito -- era of Japan. At the same time, the atomic bombs dropped over Hiroshima and Nagasaki, “Fat Man” and “Little Boy” act as the two favorite specters of the period as they are represented everywhere. The bomb images take up so much psychological space in the collective consciousness of post-war Japan and, therefore, obscure access to other traumas. As such, the discussion of Japan’s wartime culpability has been relegated to whispers among dissidents.

_House_ critiques this official narrative of post-war Japan through the content and genre, namely the _pinku eiga_. Obayashi’s choice of genre is interesting and significant because the 1970s were a time when Japanese studios and Hollywood were striving for realism. The _jitsuroku eiga_ or “actual history” films replaced the popularity of the _ninkyo eiga_ films. These films were noted for their gritty, realist, matter-of-fact depiction of violence in Japan, contrasted to the highly unrealistic and fantastic pink film. However, Obayashi dared, mainly in response to the immense success of Steven Spielberg’s _Jaws_, to release his own horror blockbuster using the unique ideas of his daughter’s childish imagination in concordance with his avant-garde filmmaking techniques he learned in his time as a student of film. While initially critically panned, the combination of the “soft porn” _pinku eiga_ framework and horror revealed itself to be the perfect vessel to open up questions about the effects of World War II on Japanese society. This combination is further significant, given that the film’s release corresponds with the initial rise of Japan’s first wave of _kawaii_ culture. Much of the media put out by Japan at this time was “cute” or marketed towards children. There are many subgenres of _kawaii_ media, however, with one of them being the _kimokawaii_.

The combination of the “cute” and “grotesque” is referred to as *kimokawaii* in Japanese culture. This term has been used to describe media that confuses our understanding of cuteness and the socio-political forces behind Japan’s presentation as a “cute” society. These films, anime, and video games surged during the 90s and 2000s, during Japan’s so-called “new wave” of *kawaii* that coincided with their indigenous economic crisis. *House* predates these projects and may be the first actual notable *kimokawaii* work, contrasting the initial rise of *kawaii* culture in Japan in the 70s with figures like Hello Kitty coming to the forefront of Japanese iconography. While hailed for its experimental nature and avant-garde filmmaking techniques, in the documentary by Mark Walkow, *Constructing a House*, Obayashi states that the film more aptly belongs to the Japanese subgenre, *kaii*, which roughly translates to “strange” in English. In these stories, the Shinto concept of *urami*, or grudge, plays a prominent role. This concept corresponds to the Western idea of “unfinished business” among spirits or religious/mythical beings tying them to Earth. Shinto imagery and description of the afterlife are consistently vague, but an essence of purity is required to enter the realm of the afterlife. Purity not being achieved is one way a spirit may be trapped on Earth because of its *urami*. These spirits then become *aragami*, or evil and vengeful *kami*.

In the case of *House*, the film presents Auntie’s, the main specter of the film, who is depicted as completely a victim of the war, *urami* as originating in the death of her husband during the war. Obayashi points out in his Criterion interview that “the old woman’s bitterness about the war turns into an evil spirit.” In this case, her lover’s death is a stand-in for the trauma of warfare. This is further emphasized in the archival sequence in which Auntie attends her sister’s wedding. This memory is linked to the war as the flash of the camera is superimposed with the mushroom cloud of the atomic bomb. Flashes of light, and therefore the bomb or the
trauma of warfare, haunt the film as they persist in the flashes of Gorgeous’ own camera and the
glimmer in the eyes of Blanche, Auntie’s cat. This consistent flash immediately antagonizes
itself. As the girls enter the house for the first time, a glimmer in the chandelier, identical to the
one seen in Blanche’s eyes, flashes. Immediately, pieces of the chandelier fall from the ceiling,
attacking the girls. From the moment we first see the titular house, this flash, which the film
encourages the audience to associate with both Blanche the cat and the atomic bomb, becomes an
omen of false security and danger to come. This visual motif of flashing light establishes the
nuclear bomb as a tool of the
horror film’s antagonist rather
than the locus of its grief or fury.
It represents both the bomb, but
also because the cat later goes on
to carry out the murders, the
danger of focusing solely on the
bomb. The bomb becomes a
fetish in post-war Japan and the
motif of the flash of light suggests the damage of not acknowledging other events of the war. The
sequence of Gorgeous applying makeup in the mirror is another instance of this. While she is
gazing at her reflection, she is transformed into Auntie, and her body peels away to reveal that
she, or rather Auntie, is purely made of flames (Figure 1).

The mainstream reading of the film and Auntie’s narrative suggests that her urami is the
loss of her fiancé and the trauma of warfare on the Japanese civilians. However, suggesting the
locus of Auntie’s urami to be solely in the loss of her husband downplays her agency as a violent

Fig 1. House
propagator of destruction. Reading the film against the grain, we might think of her urami as two-pronged, originating not from her victimization but in her culpability regarding involvement and antagonism in World War II. While the film does not show her to be guilty, her ignorance of the war crimes her narrative is deflecting from is harmful to her and those around her. The film cues the audience to pair the symbol of the glimmer of the cat’s eye with the blast of the atomic bomb, as the flash of light almost always proceeds some violence or death. The glowing eyes of cats are one reason they have been mystified or, in the Japanese sense, “yokai-fied” (monster-ified) in both folklore and the Shinto religion. The term kaibyo for these ghost or monster cats derives from this term yokai, for monster, and the Japanese kanji for cat. These figures are famous and feared for their ability to shape-shift and manipulate the dead, among other things.

Further, the fluffy white cat is often used to invoke the image of the bomb, with one shot superimposing them onto each other. Because Blanche is essentially Auntie’s sidekick who terrorizes the girls at her request, we can understand the manipulation and antagonization of the bomb (Figure 2). Auntie weaponizes the iconography of the bomb by having Blanche either carry out or oversee the murders of the girls. The film then calls into question the parallel ideological weaponization of the atomic bombs by the Japanese government following the war. The film links the actual bomb and

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Fig 2. House
images of it, which symbolize the victimization of Japan with the weaponization of the bomb that Japan and, by definition, the Emperor, exploits this image to cover up war crimes committed by the Japanese during the Second World War. Further, Blanche possesses household items that subsequently attack each of the girls, killing them one by one, until ultimately, Kung Fu’s severed legs kill Blanche, who, in an expulsion of filth and repressed guilt, floods the home with blood.

It is significant that Obayashi should use *kaibyo* to imbue the film with imagery of the bomb, as *House* is the most recent Japanese film to feature the feline phantoms prominently. Depictions and beliefs in Shintoism, including *kaibyo*, massively declined following the war, perhaps because Japan became quickly secularized following the humanity declaration, in which on New Year’s Day of 1946, Emperor Shōwa, at the request of the Supreme Commander of the Allied Powers, Douglas MacArthur denied the concept of divinity and proclaimed that from therein the Emperor would represent “the symbol of the state and of the unity of the people,” as well as because of a new era of secular fears in the atomic age (“Constitution of Japan,” art.1). Therefore, it is interesting that Obayashi should choose to depict *kaibyo* in reference to the war atypically. The fictional film thus asks us to reflect upon the authentic post-war narratives and the associated denial in Japan. It is helpful to sketch out concrete examples of these narratives before continuing with our analysis of the film.

**The State of Post-War Denial**

This official post-war narrative of Japan and its associated denial has evolved over the years. While Japan has apologized for “bad treatment” abroad, it is mainly the Rape of Nanking and the sexual exploitation of the so-called comfort women across thirteen Asian Pacific
countries that Japan has historically tried to deny. Historical textbooks were meticulously regulated until the end of the Allied Occupation in 1952 to prevent Japan’s aggressive militarism from being glorified (Masalski 1). However, textbooks were not regulated after this point, and teachings about Japanese war crimes were almost entirely erased (2). During the early 70s, Japanese officials’ tactics turned from silence to fervent denial. This was in response to a wave of Japanese WWII veterans coming forward about their involvement in war crimes and issuing formal apologies.

More recently, in October 1990, Playboy quoted Shintaro Ishihara, a Japanese writer, and politician, saying, “People say that the Japanese made a holocaust there, but that is not true. It is a story made up by the Chinese” (63). In 2018, after a memorial for the “comfort women” was erected in Atlanta, Georgia (Osaka’s sister city), Osaka’s mayor Hirofumi Yoshimura said the “comfort women” monument “destroyed the two sides’ relationship of trust” (Quackenbush). Yoshimura decided to end the sisterhood with the city established in 1957. Yoshimura’s ten paged letter to the mayor stated that the main problem with the monument was its inscription, which he claimed: “presents uncertain and one-sided claims as historical facts.” He then explained that there is disagreement among historians “regarding the historical facts such as the number of ‘comfort women,’ the degree to which the former Japanese army was involved, and the extent of the wartime harm” (Quackenbush). Thus, the sexual themes in this horror film are also far from gratuitous.

**Three Readings of the Sexual Violence in the Film**

There are three different ways to understand the sexual violence in *House*. In the first reading, we can read the girls as being punished by the house because of their ignorance toward
the war and Auntie’s victimhood, i.e., the atomic bomb. Secondly, we can read the girls as being violently punished for being fooled by the allure of fascism. As Susan Sontag writes in her 1974 essay, “Fascinating Fascism,” fascist art “implies an ideal eroticism: sexuality converted into the magnetism of leaders and the joy of followers. The fascist ideal is to transform sexual energy into a ‘spiritual’ force” (317). In other words, she acknowledges the sexual prowess fascist leaders practice over their inferiors. The eroticism associated with the idolatry of fascist leaders becomes an impulse that needs to be repressed and further conquered.

Nevertheless, more than that, the sexual nature of the imagery evokes the crimes of the Japanese during World War II, which is potent in Obayashi’s *House*. Just as the girls are sexually drawn to fascism and its trappings, such as the iconography of the uniform, namely in Fantasy’s crush on Mr. Togo and her daydream sequences of him saving her while clad in traditional knight regalia, the girls are also attracted to the house, and all that inhabits it. This is shown in Melody’s excitement about the piano, Mac’s obsession with the vast supply of food in the house, particularly watermelons, and the scopophilic abundance of reflective surfaces to Gorgeous. In turn, the girls, in their naivety, cannot resist the sexual allure offered by the house that Sontag outlines as fundamental to fascist conjecture. To the naive young generation, the fascist imagery looks sparkly and new.

Nevertheless, the film simultaneously shows us the danger of such desires, as the girls are subsequently punished for indulging in their desires as they are consumed/killed, literally in the case of Melody, in concordance with each of their fascinations. Mac is decapitated, and her head is thrown into a well. Gorgeous then pulls up her head in a basket, thinking it is a watermelon. After being trapped inside a grandfather clock, Sweet becomes mangled and torn to death by gears. The piano she was so tempted to play devours Melody, which subsequently leaves her
fingers, possessing them to play the piano after her death. Kung fu is killed by a light fixture, which separates her legs from her body, allowing for one last karate kick. Prof is dragged into a pool of cat’s blood and drowned by a sentient pill bottle. Finally, Fantasy is killed off-screen by a possessed Gorgeous after succumbing to her. Here, the girls’ deaths occur due to their weak-willed resistance to the sexualized mystique of fascism.

In the final third reading, the sexual violence associated with their punishments and subsequent deaths become a symbolic rape as the house malevolently entices them sexually both overtly, in that they are often stripped nude and allegorically, like how when Melody is consumed. The indoctrination of the girls into a narrative propagated by fascist figures and media alike robs them of the child-like innocence integral to their character throughout the film. At the same time, this robbery of innocence can stand in for both the sexual nature of fascism and, subsequently, the consequences and the danger of fascist ideology. However, Auntie’s altered narrative ignores a second trauma, the sexual crimes committed by Japan. The violent sexualized deaths of the girls then become the rape missing from her narrative. In a metatextual reading, the film argues that the very popular pink films are a vehicle for post-war Japanese society to engage in a voyeuristic acting out and displaced fetishized reenactment of sexual crimes. This genred critique is further emphasized through the casting of Obayashi’s former models. The house itself is re-enacting the memory of sexual violence to bring it to light. Therefore, the house serves as an agent for the return of the suppressed, a concept coined by Sigmund Freud. In Beyond the Pleasure Principle (1919), Freud writes that “unexpressed emotions will never die. They are buried alive and will come forth later in uglier ways” (12).

The assertion that Japan solely exists as a victim of the Second World War, Auntie’s reading, is exposed in the film as purposely misguided. In this reading, the girls’ deaths represent
the return of the suppressed. The house acts out the sexual violence committed by Japan during the Second World War as that underlying tension explodes in the house of memory and unfinished business. Their deaths become the deaths and suffering across China, the Pacific Islands, and the Prisoner of War camps that Auntie’s story obfuscates. Furthermore, depictions of the atomic bombings have their own sexual undertones, with one nation forcing another into submission and the bombs being given masculine identifiers of “boy” and “man.” This is precipitated by the fact that all the girls cast in the film are Obayashi’s former models. The sexual tension and atmosphere are put in conflict with the child-like nature of both the film and its subjects, as much of the story is adapted from interviews with his young daughter, who is credited in the film.

In inheriting the role of master of the house from Auntie, Gorgeous has been robbed of her innocence. As Gorgeous has taken on this role from Auntie, she believes she has achieved some sort of enlightenment. However, the opposite is true as she has been manipulated into accepting a perversion of the truth, encouraged by the allure of fascism and her young, developing mind. The robbery of innocence is shown in the film through her sudden weirdly omniscient characterization after she has inherited the house from Auntie as well as her violent tendencies when she kills Ryoko. She shows that she has now bought into this narrative that ignores Japanese culpability during World War II. Gorgeous is now the one to indoctrinate young girls, or the post-war generation into the established norms of post-war Japanese society just as was done to her by Auntie.

Furthermore, the transmogrification of sexuality into spirituality, which Sontag suggests is the ultimate fascist ideal, also appears in Obayashi’s House. Gorgeous’ inheritance of the house that parallelly occurs in her possession by Auntie is supervised both by sexuality and
spirituality. As Erin Nunoda points out in her 2020 article “Breaking the Mirror: Hausu and Bad Love Objects,” a queer reading of the film, when Auntie first possesses Gorgeous, which occurs in a sequence where while sitting at Auntie’s bedroom vanity, she stares at her reflection in the mirror, the image in the mirror begins to oscillate between herself and Auntie. Finally, the glass shatters in a burst of blood, and Gorgeous’ face falls apart. At this moment, Auntie’s face, according to Nunoda, is “fixed in a gasp locatable somewhere between orgasm and sublime terror” (29). While Nunoda points this out to lay out her assertion that homoerotic relationships between women may serve as an escape “from injurious bonds and also interrogates heteronormative attachments,” the sexual bliss Auntie derives from her spiritual dominance over Gorgeous reflects the transmogrification of derived from the spiritual dominance of Auntie over Gorgeous reflects the transmogrification of sexuality into spirituality Sontag describes (28). As Gorgeous succumbs to her narcissistic self-desire, transposed onto Auntie, her inheritance of fascist prowess and the house is secured, thus concluding Gorgeous’ punishment. At the end of the film, she also inherits Auntie’s narrative. She becomes the bride that was left behind at the altar, left alone to ruminate and fixate on a narrative fetishized to victimize herself. Unlike her friends, Gorgeous outgrows her ignorance, but not because she has been enlightened by some benevolent objective truth of Japan’s sole victimhood as an agent in World War II. Instead, through her narrative, the film depicts the opaque narrative that purposely obfuscates the true story of Japanese complicity.

In opening her mind to the narrative of Japan solely existing as a victim of the war, Gorgeous has opened herself up as a vessel for malevolence, reviving the monster associated with the house within herself. Feeding into the revisionist fantasy of post-war Japan, Gorgeous steps into Auntie’s role as the master of the house, or perhaps more aptly in this reading, the
Emperor. House’s final sequence presents this power transfer as problematic and detrimental to the mainstream reading of the film, which asserts that the film’s violence is sourced from the girls’ disinterest in the bombings. In Gorgeous’ final sprawling close-up, she tells us that love is the “only promise” that “never perishes” as sappy strings fade out with the image. The last image suggests that now that Gorgeous has replaced Auntie, peace and prosperity can come to the house, that is, with the acknowledgment of the trauma of the war and Japan’s victimization, a culture or nation can move forward. However, the clear dissonance here is that moments before this assertion, Gorgeous kills her stepmother, Ryoko, with a flash of her eyes, igniting her into flames until she disintegrates into nothing. Further, immediately after Ryoko is killed, Blanche crawls over. She curls into a fluffy white ball transposed over the flames, encouraging the audience to recall the image of the mushroom cloud one final time and to associate the fixation with this image with death, destruction, and villainy.

**Auntie and the Post-War Narrative**

Following the war, a similar narrative of self-exculpation was widespread among Japanese officials. Gorgeous tells us that her deceased friends are simply sleeping and that they will “wake soon,” erasing their deaths from the canon of the film. This overt revision of the narrative we just watched underscores the dangers of post-war revisionism and the damage resulting from ignoring Japanese complicity in war crimes. In post-war Japan, it became taboo to acknowledge or call attention to the war crimes committed by Japan during WWII, with Japanese officials still to this today denying the use of sex slaves across East Asia, cleverly rebranded under the euphemism of “comfort women.” While to the house, or rather Japan, Gorgeous’ endorsement of memory seems to have resolved the conflict of the film and
established an ideal reconciliation between the generations, this moral dissonance is showcased by the murder of Ryoko as well as the assertion that the girls are simply sleeping suggests that, in reality, nothing has changed. The adoption of this fetishized narrative of subverted complicity that is insidious to Japan will continue to perniciously haunt the culture of post-war Japan, as well as the youth through reviving and once again rebranding the narrative of Japanese culpability, now with the idealized consumer of culture, the adolescent girl, as the figurehead.

The film signposts to the audience that Auntie’s narrative of suffering is incomplete or purposefully nebulous through the air of deception surrounding her character. Auntie’s deception is illustrated most notably through her self-handicap. Upon first meeting her, she is presented both to the girls and the audience as confined to a wheelchair. Later in the film, this is revealed to be a ruse as she is seen standing up from her chair, running, jumping, and dancing around the house, even on the ceiling. This self-handicapping of the film’s antagonist asks the reader to consider a cultural trend within Japan around the time of the film’s release. Beginning in the 1970s, shortly before House was conceived, there was a sharp shift in the international perception of Japan and the nation’s cultural output. The nation once feared for its repugnant militaristic aggression and impregnable culture became adored for its manga, anime, and original characters, most notably, Hello Kitty. Cultural theorists and anthropologists have given this trend many names, such as “kawaii culture” and “Hello-Kitty-ification.” However, for this thesis, I will refer to this phenomenon as “pink globalization,” a term coined by Christine R. Yano in her eponymous 2013 book.

The word “kawaii” itself has an interesting etymology in the context of our understanding of Auntie in House. While approximately translating to “cute” in English, it more aptly describes something pitiable and harmless. This is where the revision comes into play. As I have discussed,
the atomic bomb is significantly the only footage of warfare in the film. Importantly, this footage appears at the center of Auntie’s story, shown to the girls and us as a film within the film. We are told Auntie is a victim whose lover was killed in the war. Furthermore, the iconography of the atomic bomb is central to her story of victimhood. The film asks us to connect this victimization with how post-war Japanese *kawaii* culture benefited those complicit in the war, as it achieved the image of a powerless, crippled nation following the war. Auntie’s successful tactic of appearing as a harmless, feeble, cute old lady to the girls and the audience reflects the perception of Emperor Shōwa in the decades following the conclusion of World War II. In January 1989, Emperor Shōwa, known in the English-speaking world as Hirohito, died at 87. He was, of course, revered across Japan for his fearlessness and militaristic aggression. However, when thousands of Japanese civilians gathered in the front yard of the Imperial residence to mourn his passing, a group of teenage girls among them noted that the former Emperor was “cute” (Otsuka 3). This comment perplexed cultural anthropologists and shocked Western intellectuals. This anecdote shows how deeply pernicious and effective this “cute” tactic has been at reshaping the image of post-war Japan both in Japan and abroad. As Auntie is revealed to be, in fact, not confined to a wheelchair, it serves as a critique of the pink globalization as well as the different techniques used by Japanese officials to exculpate themselves during the post-war years by signaling to the audience that the “cute” “harmless” figure is the one that may be the most dangerous and perhaps should be the most feared. Instead of being this lovable, pitiable woman, she is a ghost, restrained to the confines of the house rather than her mortal body. This encourages the audience to associate her supernatural power being misleadingly constrained to a wheelchair with the perception of Japan following the war as a once militant, powerful nation emasculated to a cutesy cultural hotspot. Auntie’s deceptive behavior is also exemplary of the
American characterization of the Japanese as “schizophrenic” that was developed during and following the Second World War. This refers to the tendency for Japanese soldiers during World War II to be gentle at home yet extremely brutal and violent abroad. This characterization is explored in Yuki Tanaka’s *Hidden Horrors: Japanese War Crimes in World War II*. Tanaka points out that this portrayal of Japanese soldiers during the war is “by no means groundless” and certainly characteristic of any imperial nation. However, the discrepancy between these two moral standards (at home and abroad) was probably more substantial in wartime Japan than in the case of Western imperialism (5292). Tanaka goes on to suggest that these stark discrepancies can be sourced in the “emperor system,” whose “oppressive elements,” like any other hegemonic ideology, were not “easily recognized by the general populace” (5293). Here, Tanaka refers to the Emperor’s manipulation of Japanese soldiers and, by proxy, society as a whole. This was achieved through many tactics, with one being the “feudal notion of family ties,” which served to “mask the political control exerted over the Japanese people” as a sort of paternal love (5293). Because of the Emperor’s strict regulation of soldiers within Japan, contrasted with their free reign abroad, the soldier’s pent-up frustration with authority manifested itself in the absolute abuse of power and horrific treatment of civilians in China, Korea, the Pacific Islands, and elsewhere. Interestingly, Tanaka points out that just as “the familiar notion of a father’s love for his children was exploited and expanded in the concept of the emperor’s love for his subjects, so too was the notion of trust and obedience of the child toward the father reiterated in the concept of the subject’s loyalty to the emperor” (5292). This exploited pseudo-familial relationship that Tanaka asserts was exploited by the Emperor is critiqued in *House* through the relationship between Auntie and Gorgeous. Further, this portrayal of the wartime Japanese as “schizophrenic” applies to Auntie’s deception. Auntie, in this reading, is the root of Japan’s
fascist upbringing. Auntie embodies this characterization given her kindness to Gorgeous and, at first, contrasted with her, and by proxy, the house’s, cruel treatment of the girls towards the end of the film as they are each brutally killed. The manipulation of the relationship between the Emperor and his subjects is one of many techniques Japanese wartime officials used to rid themselves of culpability following WWII later. These techniques also included the cultural construction of responsibility, divinity, and *ichioku sozange*.

Under imperial Japan, responsibility was conceived in terms of a pyramidal model. Duties always were upwards to one’s superior. Therefore, the conception of responsibility was unilateral, seen as flowing upwards to the Emperor, as commands flowed downwards (5222). Auntie’s complete reign over the house and the servitude of both her cat, Blanche, as well as the objects of the house, seemingly owe her reflects this ideal of unilateral responsibility. This construction laid the groundwork for the abrogation of responsibility on an individual level, and seemingly it would lay solely with the Emperor. While this defense went all the way up to Prime Minister Hideki Tojo, who was deemed a class A war criminal during the Tokyo Trials, it crumbled when trying to deem Emperor Hirohito culpable as under Article 3 of the Meiji Constitution of 1899, he was regarded as divine, and therefore was infallible (5238). The Emperor existing as a divine source incapable of fallibility is similarly reflected in Obayashi’s *House*, in her dominion over the house and her omniscient and god-like abilities. This further exemplifies the importance of the divine and spirituality that is integral to the allure of fascism, as Sontag describes, which is present in *House*.

The notion of *ichioku sozange*, a term coined by Prince Higashikuni Naruhito, the first post-war Japanese Prime Minister, suggested that the entire population of Japan was guilty, not of the nation’s actions during the war, but of the loss of World War II and therefore owed it to
the Emperor to repent for his salvation. The term roughly translates to “100 million reflecting upon their responsibility as one”. This repentance is an innate sexual masochism of a people who believe they must suffer for their leader and carry an onus that is anyone but theirs to endure (5238). This idea was recently invoked in 2015 by Prime Minister Shinzo Abe when he unveiled his policy of *ichioku sokatsuyaku*, or “100 million making eye-opening efforts as one”. This raised eyebrows among historians given the numbers fraught history with wartime propaganda, going to show that this type of revision and propaganda still exists to this day (Cucek).

The torturous deaths of the girls can also stand in for this suffering that the nation felt was necessary to occur on behalf of their leader or, in this case, Auntie. Her vengeful, sadistic rage derived from her victimhood and her loss (both of her lover and the war) is sublimated through her projection onto the girls, luring them into the house and transferring her sadism into their masochism. In line with this, we see the girls laughing and smiling while witnessing the horrors around them and even while being tortured and killed. As the piano is eating Melody, she laughs hysterically, suggesting the girls are acting out masochistic fantasy to satisfy Auntie and, by proxy, the Emperor. All of this horror and brutality happens in or near the house, which as the title suggests, is the locus of the film’s horror.

**Deconstructing the Hypermasculinity Associated with Imperial Japan**

The film also calls into question Imperial Japan’s wartime efforts by critiquing the hypermasculinity associated with war, fascism, and militarism. Sontag touches upon the hypermasculinity associated with militarism, pointing to the “fantasy about uniforms,” asserting that they “suggest… competence, legitimate authority” as well as the “exercise of violence” (321). The uniform becomes the ultimate symbol of fascist allure and the *machismo* protected
and utilized by the ideology. In *House*, this is represented by the character of Mr. Togo, the schoolteacher on whom the girls, particularly, Fantasy, have a crush. While not clad in SS regalia, which Sontag describes in her essay, we see Mr. Togo dressed as a traditional knight in a fantasy sequence, aptly imagined by Fantasy. This adoration and eroticism of the uniform seemingly endorse the fascist suggestion of uniforms. However, the film asks us to read this adoration due to the girls’ naivete. Therefore, one critique the film offers is that each generation continues to feed into this carefully constructed narrative of truth and trauma. This is endorsed by Mr. Togo’s portrayal in the rest of the film. Where Fantasy’s evocation of Mr. Togo sees him as a handsome savior, outside of her imagination, we see him as an utterly inept klutz constantly falling, being delayed, and in the end, never arriving on time to save the girls from Auntie and the house. Therefore, Obayashi’s *House* subverts this fascist idolization, critiquing the mystique and admiration for wartime officials and militarism.

Further, Sontag points out that “the uniforms are not the same thing as photographs of the uniforms - which are… the units of a particularly powerful and widespread sexual fantasy” (321). In this sense, *House* is consistent with the distinction between reality and fiction or pictorial representation, given the stark contrast between the “real” Mr. Togo and the romanticized image Fantasy has in her head. However, what is not accounted for in this equivalence is the self-awareness or filminess of *House*. The film further subverts the confines of fascist art as, in the first frame, we see a title card that reads, “A Movie,” before fading into the famous title sequence. Here and throughout the film, Obayashi reminds us that we are watching a film, and this is not meant to be a direct representation of reality. He does this by employing intertitles, painted backdrops, tinted film, and other techniques reminiscent of the silent and early sound era, calling attention to the film’s existence as a film and an artifact of art and culture. The
film removes the allure of fascist hyper-militarism through the uniform, as the imaginative and “real” portrayals of Mr. Togo are both pictorial—this ultimate rejection of romanticization of fascism through art assets the film as a clear anti-fascist vehicle. The function of House’s so-called “filminess” or self-consciousness is to emphasize that we are being shown a construed narrative. Therefore, we cannot be objective viewers, just as the characters are not objective witnesses to their trauma or the prowess of the house. We are reminded, as an audience, that this portrayal is not only inherently altered and fictitious but layered, offering a narrative within a narrative within a narrative. None of these are neglected by revisionism or romanticization, giving the reader room to read the film against the grain.

Throughout House, Mr. Togo is emasculated as a tactic of critiquing the hyper-militaristic tendencies of fascism and warfare in general. This is done through homoerotic undertones throughout many of his scenes. In one famous sequence, when trying to reach the house, he falls into a bucket which spins him around the street and brings him down a staircase, leaving him prostrate in the road. Further references to homoeroticism show up in his interactions with food vendors, who notably only sell watermelons, much to Mr. Togo’s dismay, as he is only looking for bananas [a fruit that invokes phallic imagery in contrast to the watermelons]. He is subsequently turned into a bunch of bananas.

Meanwhile, Ryoko, Gorgeous’ stepmother, is also on her way to the house and arrives by the end. Contrasting Mr. Togo, who is imagined to be clad in traditional knight regalia, Ryoko is dressed in an elegant white gown, almost deifying her femininity. While Gorgeous kill her at the end of the film, her arrival emphasizes Mr. Togo’s ineffectuality and further critiques the hypermasculinity of militarism.
The House as a Haunted Space

The house is literally haunted by ghosts and figuratively haunted by Japan’s fascist past. Jo Labanyi explores this idea of haunted spaces in her 2000 essay “History and Hauntology.” While analyzing post-war Spanish cinema, she suggests that specters of cultural pasts are rooted in a refusal to acknowledge national trauma in the post-war era. She refers to the lingering cultural guilt or trauma concept as “hauntology,” coined by French philosopher Jacques Derrida. When noting the relationship between hauntology and history and the tendency for history to be often explained by horror, she invokes American historian Greil Marcus. In concordance with Marcus, Labanyi points out that the horror genre unpacks history like no other because it is “not bent on explaining it, as Marcus comments, one does not explain the abyss, one locates it” (73). In other words, Labanyi and Marcus point out horror’s ability to visualize the locus of horror in historicity and portray the dread and anxiety associated with that pit more than even a historian could. This is partially due to the openness of horror and its ability to readily absorb rhetoric, given that it offers room for any reading. The house in House is, of course, the film’s subject, and as Labanyi and Marcus note, it can easily be understood as the locus of historical horror and trauma. Obayashi has taken advantage of the horror genre to subvert the generalized narrative surrounding Japan during WWII.

When discussing the impetus of hauntings, Labanyi cites Avery Gordon’s book, Ghostly Matters, where Gordon asserts that haunting is “the result of improperly buried bodies,” which raises the question asked by Labanyi, “What should we do with the improperly buried bodies?” Both Labanyi and Gordon advocate for learning to live with the specters in a way that is a “politics of memory, of inheritance, of generations” (79). In other words, Labanyi, vis a vis Gordon, is describing the idea of “unfinished business” or, in the Japanese sense, urami being the
origin of haunting. Because these bodies (or entities or cultural proclivities) have been improperly buried or resolved, this suppressed tension has nowhere to go and rises again through hauntings. In the case of *House*, I see two different levels of trauma that the film reveals. First, the obvious and genuine trauma that was the destruction and loss of life caused by the dropping of atomic bombs on Hiroshima and Nagasaki by the Americans at the end of the war. However, the film also reveals the trauma of using the bombings as a defense mechanism against processing the culpability of Japan’s war crimes. Labanyi advocates for “living with specters” rather than giving them a proper burial. In fact, *House* makes a similar suggestion. This is not, however, the solution Gorgeous opts for. In inheriting Auntie’s narrative, she is not “living with specters” but instead buries everything. To Gorgeous, everything is now buried and settled; there is no more trauma, monsters, or crimes. We the spectators though, are not meant to see this solution as victorious. In fact, the film signposts that this is a horrible solution for Gorgeous. In the end of the film, Gorgeous lightheartedly rambles about love and peace, however we have just seen her murder her stepmother. Clearly, then, the film suggests burying the bodies, or the past, is not a long-term solution. Gorgeous is doing the exact opposite of what Labanyi advocates for and is now continuing the cycle of repression and revisionism, which will once again return, as we already see Gorgeous has, like Auntie, become a monster. In its final moments, *House* offers a sinister warning, a cautionary tale of the glamorized allure of fascist iconography and the cyclic nature of history and politics should accountability and memory not be emphasized culturally or instead “improperly buried.”
Chapter 2: Dancing on the Edge of Consciousness: Re-Constituting the Fascist Conception of Freakishness in *Horrors of Malformed Men*

Scrupulously described, interpreted and displayed, the bodies of the severely congenitally disabled have always functioned as icons upon which people discharge their anxieties, convictions, and fantasies. Indeed, the latin word monstra, ‘monster’, also means ‘sign’ and forms the root of our word ‘demonstrate’ meaning ‘to show’. A fervent and persistent human impulse to account for corporeal exceptions surfaces in nearly every writer who casts his eye on the natural world, beginning with Cicero’s linking of monstrous births to divination and culminating today with Oliver Sacks’ wonderment at men who confuse their wives with their hats. Every historical era reinterprets the figure of the prodigious monster or nature’s caprice, the freak.

Rosemarie Garland Thomas, *Extraordinary Bodies: Figuring Physical Disability in American Culture and Literature*

**Film Background and Historical Context**

Teruo Ishii’s 1969 *Horrors of Malformed Men* premiered eight years prior to the release of Obayashi’s *House* and is considered a classic of Japanese horror. The film takes inspiration from an amalgamation of the literary works of Edogawa Ranpo, particularly the novels *Demon of the Lonely Isle* and *Strange Tale of Panorama Island*. It marks an incredible collaboration between two fathers of Japanese horror. Ishii has been named “The King of the Occult” for his notable works, including *Horrors of Malformed Men*, in the *ero guro* subgenre of the *pinku eiga*. Ranpo is a revered founder of the Japanese thriller genre whose pen name is a Japanese rendering of Edgar Allen Poe. The film marks the production company Toei’s first venture into *pinku eiga*, making it groundbreaking on more than one front. *Horrors of Malformed Men* is an early and formative entry into the “amnesiac horror” subgenre that captivated post-war Japanese society. This trend of Japanese horror films sees a protagonist who is typically institutionalized or incarcerated for a crime they did not commit or have no memory of committing. Other staples of this subgenre in the 60s include *Jigoku* and *The Face of Another*. This trend has continued into later decades with modern essentials of Japanese horror, such as Kiyoshi Kurosawa’s *Cure*,...
featuring criminals experiencing either authentic or faux amnesia. The motif of amnesia is especially compelling in post-war Japanese cinema because of the nation’s complicated relationship to its role in WWII and WWII war crimes.

**Contrasting post-war Japanese and post-war German cinema**

In these amnesiac horror films, such as *Horrors of Malformed Men*, the trauma of warfare is manifested as something simultaneously invisible yet pernicious to each character. These films typically ask viewers to question their own perception and generation’s memory of the war. The subgenre subtly illuminates how the post-war Japanese state has attempted to ignore or deny wartime atrocities. It often covertly brings to the audience’s attention the state’s former fascist ideology and historical revisionism. This indirect critique of the fascist past greatly contrasts the postwar cinema trend in German and other depictions of Nazi Germany, where the critique of the Nazis was quite overt to the point of being overwhelming. Around the same time the “amnesiac horror” was gaining traction in Japan (the late 1960s into the 70s), many cultural theorists and critics noticed the oversaturation of Nazi regalia and iconography in cinema. Many of these films tended to reduce Nazism and the Holocaust to symbols that became trendy culturally, most significantly, the swastika. Critiquing this reductionist portrayal of fascism, Karsten Witte asks, “Haven’t we been exposed to the Nazi past enough under the pretext of ‘immunization’? What is left for the visual analysis of fascism to discover except the tautological reproduction of the material with which we started? This supply of images is exhausted” (8). Witte critiques these portrayals and suggests they leave the audience knowing less than before. They are incredibly damaging to the layperson’s understanding of World War II, its associated inhumanity, and fascism. They problematically locate fascism and the war temporally in the past. Therefore, the
trauma that stemmed from the war is presented as over, done with, and understood by the film’s end. Scholars and Holocaust survivors alike have avidly objected to such portrayals, with Spielberg’s Schindler’s List being perhaps the most cited example. Films such as Schindler’s List, with their apparently objective and complete portrayal of Holocaust trauma, are problematic because it places the trauma and trouble of deconstructing fascism thoroughly in the past; it discourages the viewer from making any further inquiry into such. A profound and compelling portrayal of World War II and fascism, therefore, cannot be done through these sorts of “wholesale” interpretations, and indeed, one cannot be achieved while relying on these easily accessible symbols of evil.

Filmmakers, such as Claude Lanzmann, director of the Holocaust documentary Shoah, have similarly expressed discontent with the contrivedness of Schindler’s List’s narrative. When asked in an interview cited by Utrecht University’s Spring 2007 issue of “Approaches to the Humanities” about the potential influence Shoah had on Spielberg’s film, he answered, “I could not see where my influence was. It was the exact reverse: my influence had been negative. I have the feeling he has made an illustrated Shoah, he has given images where these are absent in Shoah, and images kill the imagination because, through Schindler, the hero that is disputable, at the least, they allow a consoling identification” (11). Here, Lanzmann is critiquing the overrepresentation in Schindler’s List. In the film, as Lanzmann points out, nothing is left to the imagination; everything is explicitly depicted on screen. Because of that, it discourages any profound thought on the matter throughout the film and once it is over. When viewing the film, there is no room for any discursive interaction with the text, in contrast to Shoah, which forces the audience to engage with the incomprehensible and imagine the undepictable horror of the Holocaust while listening to these testimonies. In this sense, the horror film, like those of the ero
guro subgenre, does a similar sort of work through these allegorical representations of fascism. The surrealist images presented by the film do not kill the imagination, like Schindler’s List, but instead provoke it, forcing the viewer to engage with uncomfortable truths and traumas without outright depiction.

Furthermore, a film’s ending is critical to our understanding of its ideology. In the case of all the films in this thesis, the endings are in some way ambiguous and leave the viewer unsatisfied with an incomplete narrative. Claude Lanzmann expressed dissatisfaction with the finality of Schindler’s List’s ending sequence. He points out that the film ends on a relatively happy, cathartic note, with the German Schindler’s life being positively remembered with a flash of celebratory color. The finality of this image presents the Holocaust as something over and done with, once again disallowing any audience engagement, leaving the viewer to think they now understand the Holocaust in whole.

In contrast, he states, “The last image of Shoah is different. It is a train which rides and never stops. It says that the Holocaust has no ending” (11). In other words, the Holocaust is a trauma that is so incomprehensibly obscene that it can never be fully understood. The discourse and engagement with the Holocaust will never and should never be over. In fact, acknowledging this sentiment allows for a better understanding of the Holocaust and other traumas. In contrast, with Schindler’s List and other similar films, the viewer is left worse off than before as they believe they completely comprehend the Holocaust. The films in this thesis have rather unsatisfying endings that distance the viewer, refusing to satiate the viewer’s desire for a complete narrative. In doing so, Horrors of Malformed Men forces the audience to reflect on the entirety of the film, its earnestness, and its allegorical representation, encouraging engagement with Japan’s fascist past.
Horror films, especially the so-called “amnesiac horror” movies and those belonging to the *ero guro* subgenre, offer a more genuine portrayal and deconstruction of fascism, especially in the cultural context of post-war Japan because they engage the audience in more profound thought through incomplete narrative and symbology rather than a straightforward, finished narrative. Because of nationwide manipulation and denial of war crimes by the Japanese government, the symbols of Imperial Japan and its crimes against humanity are not easily reproduced for cultural consumption (unlike the swastika in Germany). Perhaps this is why Japan, more than Germany or Italy, saw such a massive wave of horror in the years and decades following the war. This repressed trauma had nowhere else but the cinematic fringes to burst out. This is not to suggest that post-war Germany was free of these fetishistic texts. Films in the Heimat genre, which idealized the German homeland, and other overtly ideological denial films made solely for entertainment in the post-war society drew attention away from the Holocaust and World War II. However, because of the restructuring of the German government following the end of the war and the rise of affluent critics, Germany had resolved to a much greater degree than post-war Japan, the problem of historical revisionism, which allowed for texts which were overtly critical of the government and its role in World War II to thrive in the post-war period. More open discussion of German culpability occurred compared to Japan, whose wartime government, particularly the Emperor, remained in place following the war’s conclusion. However, the real breakthrough occurred in the 1970s, around the time the amnesiac horror trend peaked, with the American miniseries, *Holocaust*, and the New German Cinema movement, prompting international dialogues about Germany’s Nazi past.

In contrast, in Japan, the amnesiac horror subgenre arose as a symptom of Japanese postwar taboos and as a subversion of them. Where in Germany, some conversations of
culpability circulated in high political circles, in Japan, in many cases still today, responsibility is overtly denied on principle. In April 2022, Japanese officials threatened to stop sending donations to Ukraine following Ukraine releasing a photograph of Hirohito with Hitler and Mussolini to raise awareness of the modernity of fascism after the 2022 Russian invasion of Ukraine (Yamaguchi). The tension of not discussing the trauma of wartime complicity is suppressed and subsequently resurfaces in their horror cinema. This, in my argument, is why horror dominates and persists in post-war Japanese cinema while mostly falling out of fashion in Germany immediately following the war. The protagonists’ inability to recognize their culpability surreptitiously reflects and critiques the historical revisionism and subsequent collective amnesia that consumed post-war Japanese culture.

Film Summary

Now that many of the film’s historical and political ramifications have been established, I will introduce the contents of the film itself. *Horrors of Malformed Men* follows Hirosuke, a medical student who awakens in an asylum without any recollection of his past or how he got there. To the best of his knowledge, however, he is perfectly sane, unlike the rest of the asylum’s inhabitants. An unknown assailant quickly attacks him, but Hirosuke kills him, and he manages to escape with his life. His only clues to his past and identity are his sole memories of a melody and images of cliffside beaches. While searching for answers, he encounters a circus girl who tells him where to find the island. She also claims to recall the melody, which is stuck in his memory, but an unknown figure kills her with a knife that Hirosuke then finds in his hand before she can finish. Confused, he flees while being pursued by the police for her murder.
After staying with a massage therapist as he hides from authorities, he learns from her that he bears an uncanny resemblance to the late son of the man she once worked for, Genzaburô. Hirosuke then decides to take on the identity of Genzaburô, pretending to have been resurrected, to infiltrate the island he has visions of, which turns out to be Genzaburô’s home. While pretending to be Genzaburô and staying at his house, he suddenly gains memories of Genzaburô’s life, specifically Genzaburô’s father, Jogoro. He remembers his father attempting to get him to travel to a nearby island. Upon arriving at this island, he discovers that horribly disfigured “malformed men” inhabit it. Jogoro, the leader of the malformed men, plans to build an “ideal community” by transforming “normal” people into more malformed men through horrific torturous processes.

Jogoro reveals his intentions to Hirosuke and outlines his decline into madness, which began after his wife Toki cheated on him with her cousin Hayashida, whom Jogoro hired as a steward per Toki’s request. After detailing how he left Hayashida to die in a cave and tortured and raped Toki, Kogoro Akechi appears. Akechi is a detective and a recurring character in Edogawa Ranpo’s work. He is to Ranpo what Hercule Poirot is to Christie. Akechi explains that he found the island after noticing an ad in the newspaper mysteriously disappearing and reappearing every other day, declaring a vacant space for ten days. He then sees an advert put out for work by Hirukawa, whom Jogoro hired after killing Hayashida, but after the girls were employed, the rental space was canceled. Police were also investigating missing girls the same day. After it is revealed that Hirukawa and Shizoku have betrayed Jogoro, he pushes them into the ocean to drown. A chase ensues between Jogoro and Akechi, which ends at the shore, where Jogoro reveals that Hirosuke and Hideko, now lovers, are siblings. After this revelation, they both decide that their love is too strong to dismiss, so they commit suicide together, jumping off
a cliff. While in the air, their bodies explode, and their heads rise above the horizon, calling out to their mother, invoking the image of the rising sun. As Jogoro lies dying, Toki comes to his side and begs for forgiveness, claiming that everyone’s suffering is solely her fault. After forgiving her, he dies in her arms.

**The Island and Japan’s Imperial Memory**

Despite the film’s confusing and, at times, dream-like and nonsensical plot (or maybe because of it), *Horrors of Malformed Men* deeply engages with Japan’s imperial and fascist past, which permeates the text on many levels. The characters and fascist and wartime allegorical figures ask the reader to re-examine Japan’s Imperial past. Several scenes, in particular, illustrate this. Shortly before the film’s climax, for example, Hirosuke takes a boat to the island off the shore, where he will soon be met with the titular horrors. The offshore island emerges from the clouds as he sails across the sea. It comes into view almost spontaneously, as if conjured into existence by the triggering of Hirosuke’s memory. Upon seeing the island, Hirosuke narrates to himself, “It wasn’t a dream or hallucination. I’d been here, but when and under what circumstances?” Here, the film illustrates the manipulation of memory by regimes in authority. Hirosuke has escaped from the authorities and is recovering his memories on his journey to the island. Hirosuke’s struggle with his memories echoes the case of post-war Japan, where the war crimes committed under the Japanese Imperial regime were completely erased through state-mandated history textbooks, etc. However, the film underscores that the memory of these crimes still lives on in two spheres, in the memory of those who committed the crimes and in those of the victims.
In many cases, former soldiers in the Imperial Japanese Army attempted to apologize for the crimes committed, specifically during the Rape of Nanjing. These confessions were fervently oppressed, and these veterans were punished for attempting to speak out against the Japanese government and military. For some perpetrators, this memory was incredibly traumatizing and guilt-inducing. On the other hand, other perpetrators, such as some that survived the war, like General Shiro Ishii, director of Unit 731, celebrated the memory of their crimes, as their crimes went unpunished by authority and unquestioned by the culture.⁴

These crimes, of course, live on in the memories of the victims, both in Japan and abroad. All this is to say that no matter the attempts of the post-war Japanese government to ensure that the memory of these events is wiped out, as long as there are living witnesses, victims, and perpetrators, these attempts will never be successful. Instead, the nation has relegated the trauma to whispers among dissidents, which, as earlier discussed, rears its head in fringe cinematic representations. Therefore, the iconography and memory of these war crimes are latent in the nation’s mind but still exist.

Hirosuke’s lapse of perception invokes both the memory of the victim and the perpetrator. In his amnesia, he constructs himself both as persecuted, as he had been jailed for something he has no memory of doing and is haunted by unfamiliar images. He also sees himself as a perpetrator because he knows that he has an innate connection to these images and that they allude to his origin, given that Jogoro is his father. We are further cued as an audience to understand his role as an instigator by the swastika on his leg, which a masseuse identifies as either a birthmark or a scar.

⁴ For more about the life of General Shiro Ishii and the suppression of these crimes, see Jenny Chan’s book *Ishii Shiro: Josef Mengele of the East*
Swastika: Victim or Perpetrator?

Despite the film’s – and the source material’s – setting in the 1920s, semiotics of World War II sneak their way into the narrative, as I have discussed above. The most potent example of this is the swastika. It is a prominent and poignant image in the film. It only appears in one sequence, but this scene is essential to propelling the plot and the hero’s journey. When Hirosuke gets a massage from the masseuse, she notices what she refers to as a “birthmark” on his body, in the shape of a swastika (Figure 3). The characters do not acknowledge its shape, but the film is undoubtedly asking the audience to recognize it as a swastika in the form of a brand. The fact that it is presented as a birthmark rather than what it appears to be, a brand or a scar, is significant to the construction of the protagonist or, more importantly, the post-war generation as profoundly ambiguous. The characters believe it to be an innate flaw, while the film shows the audience that it is manmade and has been inflicted upon Hirosuke, marking him as a victim. The swastika also cues the masseuse to recognize Hirosuke as the twin or double of Genzaburô. As they are revealed to be both the sons of Jogoro, the main antagonist, it serves as a sort of mark of Cain, signifying their complicity with the original sin of their father.
Ishii’s decision to use a swastika, though, may prove problematic. He may have chosen to include it because the figure of the swastika is such an easily accessible icon of evil in the post-war cultural consciousness around the world. However, it seems odd that, in a film critiquing Imperial Japan, he should use a swastika rather than the rising sun or any other imagery that invokes Imperial Japan. Perhaps simply logistically because the swastika has such a simple design and, as aforementioned, is such a readily accessible signifier of evil across the world. Alternatively, perhaps the film is suggesting, in line with right-wing nationalists in post-war Japan, that the war’s violent militarism and evil were imported to Japan from Germany. However, I think the opposite can be true as Genzaburô and Hirosuke are born to Jogoro, which may posit Nazism as the offspring or successor of Imperial Japan, mainly because the film takes place in the 1920s. The swastika is explicitly referred to later in the film as a “gammadion,” another name for the symbol that predates the use of the Nazi swastika, further emphasizing the contrast between the diegetic and non-diegetic construction of the symbol.

Given that Japan was an Imperial nation long before Hitler’s rise to power, the film calls attention to the cyclical rebirth of fascism. Moreover, because the film ends with Hirosuke’s suicide, it endorses its eradication. Even though he is our protagonist and did not participate in any evil, he is still guilty of complicity in maybe endorsing or being ignorant of the ways of his father and the nation.

The most profound visual metaphor of the war, however, is the malformed themselves, simultaneously invoking the images of those horribly disfigured by the atomic bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki and the victims of the war crimes committed by Imperial Japan, such as those which Unit 731 experimented on. Many of the brutal experiments conducted by Unit 731, as detailed in the introduction, are mirrored in the film. This can be seen in sequences where
“malformed men” appear frozen, starved, or surgically mutilated. While the knowledge of these experiments did not become public until the 70s, the filmmakers and audiences at the time were undoubtedly aware of similar experimentations done by Nazi Germany, particularly Josef Mengele. Audiences at the time may have been unaware of the horrific crimes committed by Unit 731. However, the modern viewer’s perception of Jogoro and the film continues to be informed by this retroactive knowledge.

_Horrors of Malformed Men_ overtly invokes the imagery of the atomic bombings when showcasing its antagonists. The brutally burned, scarred, and disfigured “malformed men” calls on the audience to pair the “malformed men” with the victims of the atomic bomb, reminding the viewer of the images and footage of the survivors of the bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki. At the same time, the film asks us to read the bombs almost as a domestic attack, as the “malformedness” was inflicted upon them by Jogoro. This is not to suggest that Imperial Japan is somehow responsible for the atomic attacks in this allegory, but that Imperial Japan played a role in spreading terror in Japan and across Asia and the Pacific. _Horrors of Malformed Men_ uses physical freakishness to represent the internal depravity of those executing atrocities during the wartime period. In contrast with _House_, _Horrors of Malformed Men_ explicitly asks the audience to recognize the fixation on the atomic bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki while ignoring Imperial Japan’s crimes as harmful on an individual and cultural level.

**The Horror of Facing the Truth**

_Horrors of Malformed Men_, like all good horror films, forces its protagonist to confront personal and culturally repressed memories, such as those outlined in the previous sequence. The traumas rear their head in several significant scenes in the film. In one crucial scene shortly
before the film’s climax, Hirosuke enters the dark, old storage room that has haunted his memories. Upon entering the building, he comes face-to-face with Hideko for the first time. From a psychoanalytic lens, the room and the malformed Hideko are manifestations of repressed trauma and memory, as Hirosuke has completely repressed his “past” life and misdoings.

Before their encounter, Hirosuke searches the island’s cliffs, wondering if this building imprinted in his memory is even on the island. As Hirosuke nears the cabin, he comes closer and closer to the cliff’s edge. The turbulent sea threateningly rages below him. The mise-en-scene of this sequence further underscores the following scene’s psychoanalytic reading and importance. The cliffside represents the threshold of consciousness as Hirosuke reaches the limits of his mind and awareness by forcibly accessing this formerly repressed image. This threshold can also be understood as that of post-war Japanese culture at large. The atrocities committed under Imperial Japan during and leading to World War II have been so fervently and successfully repressed. As an audience, we are witnessing the “return” of these repressed traumas in the fringes of genred depictions alongside Hirosuke, who is uncovering his repressed memory at the edge of the Earth. Furthermore, this violent sea allegorically serves as a hegemonic punishment for accessing such memories and a social barrier to the Japanese people, rendering Japan’s wartime and post-war crimes inaccessible within the collective cultural consciousness.

The cinematography further enforces this analogy. In the next shot, Hirosuke emerges from the horizon; the camera depicts Hirosuke as reborn from the sea – where he will die in the film’s finale. The camerawork re-enforces the allegory of this horizon and cliffside as a barrier between the repressed pre-conscious state and the accessible conscious state. As Hirosuke has traversed across this threshold and been “reborn” in a more enlightened form of consciousness, he is now closer to the truth. As such, he immediately spots the building – a repressed pervasive
image – which now plainly lay in front of him in reality rather than burrowed vaguely in the crevices of his mind. Hirosuke’s identity parallels this rebirth motif as he poses as the resurrected Genzaburô. The location of the scene, as well as other locations of torture in the film, indicate to the audience that these sites of trauma and horror exist outside the realm of everyday representation. In order to access and process the traumatic past of Imperial Japan, one must put in the work of actively engaging with the text beyond typical means. Furthermore, to do so is to enlighten oneself and open one’s mind. This is impossible to achieve through a straightforward traditional narrative passively consumed and completed by audiences. This work’s encouragement makes *Horrors of Malformed Men* and other *ero guro* films so transgressive.

Like the cinematography, the soundtrack also plays a vital role in constructing this allegorical representation of states of consciousness. As Hirosuke approaches the room, he follows a song to the melody that – like the room – he has been trying to locate throughout the film. This melody’s pervasiveness indicates to Hirosuke and the audience that he is now getting closer to accessing the truth of his existence and that of the island. In the song, we hear what is later revealed to be Hideko singing, “Sleep, little baby. Baby is such a good boy,” The haunting lullaby reinforces this rebirth motif. The song verifies Hirosuke’s second “rebirth” into reality as it refers to him, the sole listener, as a baby.

Furthermore, it serves as a warning. It is simultaneously beckoning and dissuading him, given the precariousness of uncovering indigenous culpability in a social climate such as post-war Japan, where these events are repressed politically, pedagogically, militarily, and cinematically. Because the song is a lullaby, it lulls Hirosuke, or the viewer, into sleep. In that sense, he is discouraged from interacting with the repressed truth and instead encouraged to replant this trauma into the pre-conscious it initially occupied to avoid danger or retribution.
Shortly after, this fear of danger is actualized as Jogoro intrudes on his meeting with Hideko. Hirosuke follows the source of the song up a dark, cobwebbed staircase and enters the space that is marked by the film as inaccessible.

This type of space is prominently featured throughout the film and other films in the subgenre. Like in the other two films – *House* and *Deep Red* – the house is of enormous importance as a representation of memory. The localization of these traumatic memories to such decrepit spaces suggests the difficulty and infrequency of being accessed even though it is horrific and inaccessible construction; Hirosuke takes on the work of entering the film and trudging up the stairs. This trip up the stairs is presented as arduous and never-ending as we continuously see shots of the same staircase throughout the film. By periodically showing the audience this image, Ishii reveals the cyclical nature of trauma, which is constantly being processed, seemingly to no avail, from generation to generation throughout the post-war era.

Furthermore, this image of the staircase is subliminally interspersed throughout the film and therefore parallels Hirosuke’s pervasive memories. Now, like Hirosuke, the audience is enlightened to the source of the stairs just as Hirosuke is to the source of the song, the room, and, most importantly, the repressed trauma. In utilizing these alienating montage techniques, *Horrors of Malformed Men* and other films in the *ero guro* subgenre acknowledge and exploit the limitations of cinema in “truth-telling.” Instead of presenting a straightforward all-encompassing “true” narrative, the film breaks up the narrative with seeds of “truthiness,” giving the viewer cues to recognize as bringing us closer to enlightenment. Furthermore, piecing together these images and pairing them with their associated traumas encourages the audience to recognize patterns of “truthiness” that persist in their lives in media, etc.
The confrontation with the repressed is, as in all horror films, a moment of conflict, and as he arrives at the top of the stairs, he sees a young woman – the source of the singing – with her face and body partially obscured by cobwebs hanging from the ceiling. Hirosuke is initially attracted to Hideko and smiles as she introduces herself, appearing and sounding to be a beautiful young woman. Through the cobwebs obscuring her malformedness, the film is once again acknowledging the inefficacy of film as a medium for presenting and preserving truth. This metatextual critique embodies the juxtaposition between what is perceived and what is true and endows the sequence with its suspense and, ultimately, the scare. Hideko remarks that she is not allowed to leave the room because she is “different” from the others. This can be read as a direct reference to the fascist eugenicists’ desire to do away with those who do not physically and mentally conform to what is deemed respectable. Ironically, it is Jogoro who is hiding these people, creating them, and attempting to populate the island with them.

As Hirosuke is unaware of Jogoro’s aspirations to “malform” the island’s population, he is initially confused. He does not understand how she is “different” and asks why she is hidden away. She is shocked that he does not realize it and beckons him to come closer to see the truth. After taking a few more steps, he realizes that she has been artificially attached to a man, her brother. Upon this realization, he is not immediately disgusted or turned off from his initial attraction. Instead, as a medical student, his immediate reaction is to note the impossibility of opposite-sex twins. This proves they have been “manufactured” through surgery rather than naturally occurring. It further prompts the audience to recall the experiments mentioned above by Japanese and Nazi doctors such as Josef Mengele.

While the film is seemingly damning “freakishness” by having them be associated with the antagonists and hidden away, there is also a certain sexiness associated with teratism, as
exemplified in Hideko. The film allows the audience to see her beauty alongside the ugliness of man, not mutually exclusive, given that she retains her beauty while still being clearly malformed and is attached to a man, Takeshi, as a result of Jogoro’s attempt to create the first-ever opposite-sex pair of Siamese twins. Like the experiments, this prospect was heavily sought after and falsely advertised within freak shows worldwide. The film continuously alludes to freak shows and constructs Jogoro’s island as one big freak show as the malformed “freaks” are confined to cages and boasted about by Jogoro to Hirosuke. It would be remiss to ignore the influence of freak shows on cinema as they served as one of the primary models of the cinema of attractions. In this sense, the film not only is regurgitating the cruel treatment of those deemed not respectable or homogenous under Imperial Japan but is again serving as a metatextual critique of cinematic depictions of the traumas of World War II as monetizing and sensationalizing tragedy.

In allowing the audience to see the beauty of Hideko, the film endorses her sexual appeal, as Hirosuke later consummates his relationship with her despite her freakishness. Furthermore, there is a certain bisexuality or inversion of sexuality associated with Hirosuke’s attraction to Hideko, given that, while attached to Takeshi, she is both female and male. Like the freak show, the film challenges the boundaries of the individual and asks the audience, as well as Hirosuke, to resolve this affront to the rigid categories of male and female that fascism has imposed. This is even further confounded by the fact that Hirosuke and Hideko are siblings, making their relationship incestual. Incest is a deviant form of sexuality not in line with the Social Darwinist thinking that dominated fascist Japan. They do end up committing suicide together upon their realization that they are siblings at the end of the film. However, their death is not the result of punishment on behalf of Ishii or the film. In fact, in the suicide note they leave behind to their
mother, they outline the reasoning for their deaths. In the note, they define their last act as one of courageous defiance of the society in which they live, which has deemed their existence as impure. They decide to die not despite but rather in a bombastic celebration of their love. In fact, in a perverted sense of purity, their love can be understood as the purest out of all the couples’ in the film. This is not solely due to their fidelity and sincerity in contrast to the other couples but because of their shared blood, given their incestual relationship.

For this reason, their relationship and lineage are the purest and remain untainted by other persons or forces. In this earnest, wholesome declaration of love, the film suggests a different kind of purity that transcends and surpasses biological basis and therefore is constructed in opposition to the Social Darwinist and eugenicist model, which would deem their love as invalid or non-respectable. At the same time, the film also suggests the impossibility of the notion of purity and therefore scrutinizes the efforts of Imperial Japan to establish a pure homogeneous empire.

The film emphasizes the cyclical nature of fascism and how it thrives from generation to generation if not actively undone. The film does this through both the mise-en-scene and the narrative. We saw above that this repeated imagery of the staircase illustrates the inescapability of fascism and the inaccessibility of truth in a fascist environment. The relationship between Jogoro and his related Shizoku, who he invited onto the island, narratively reveal the way fascism is a generational, often times familial conflict. While to the viewer, the island and the havoc which occurs on it is a result of Jogoro’s insanity and ideology reminiscent of the Japanese fascists. This is certainly true within the film as well. However, to Jogoro and the other characters, this is essentially a family affair as the family business is run from the island, where each member has a hand. Much of the conflict in the film stems from the tension between the
family members and the question of reimbursement and will. This illustrates the pervasiveness of fascism in the domestic sphere and the generational cycle of trauma passed from one generation to the next, particularly the wartime generation to the postwar generation. If the wartime generation does not make a conscious effort to defascistize their home and mind, the next generation will be born without the tools to do so themselves, allowing for fascism to thrive in a co-opt manner in a so-called “post-fascist” or “post-Imperial” society. This is illustrated through Jogoro’s insinuation that the island he is building is Hirosuke’s “world” and his request to create the horse head statue, guaranteeing that his fascist vision for society will outlive him and continue to thrive under Hirosuke.

**Jogoro, Iconoclasm, & Butoh: Dance as Political Critique**

*Horrors of Malformed Men*’s critique of Japan’s history goes far beyond the depictions of the terrifying surgeries; even the dance Jogoro performs on the beach signals that the film takes a critical view of the Imperial past. For example, when Hirosuke arrives on the island, he sees Jogoro dancing on the shore. He swings his arms around him as the sea rises and falls, seemingly at his command, constructing him as a conductor of chaos and consciousness (Figure 4). The dance he is doing is in the style of *Butoh*, a form of dance performance art. Notably, the actor portraying Jogoro, Tatsumi Hijikata, was a prominent Japanese choreographer and founder of *Butoh*. He founded the art form alongside dance guru Kazuo Ohno in the years following the end of World War II. The movement flourished “in the protective shadow of the 1950s and 1960s avant-garde” (Sanders 148). *Butoh* performers typically wore white body and face makeup, as Jogoro and several other malformed men do in the film. The dances featured slow-hyper-
controlled movements and relied on taboo and grotesque subject matter depictions in the same revolutionary and transgressive spirit of the ero guro subgenre. As noted in Sondra Horton Fraleigh’s book *Dancing into Darkness: Butoh, Zen, and Japan*, the first Butoh piece was entitled “Forbidden Colors” and was choreographed and performed by Tatsumi Hijikata (4). The piece explored the topic of homosexuality, which was incredibly taboo at the time. The performance shocked the audience and was met with so much outrage that Hijikata was branded as an iconoclast and lived the rest of his career with that status. The performance style was meant to rebel against the Japanese wartime style, which he felt was too focused on imitating Western dancing styles like ballet. Hijikata stated that the dance form was meant to be a “direct assault on the refinement (miyabi) and understatement (shibui) so valued in Japanese aesthetics” (Sanders 149).

The political and iconoclast conception of Butoh is reflected in the character of Jogoro and the film. In both cases, the casting of Tatsumi Hijikata is of utmost importance, as Hijikata’s iconoclast status certainly informed the audience’s perception of the character and the film. Like Hijikata, Jogoro is an iconoclast, as his “purification” of the nation sees the destruction of the existing aestheticization of the society in which the film takes place. The setting of 1920s Japan further emphasizes this point, as this era saw the birth of the ero guro subgenre and a shift in
aesthetics. Furthermore, *Butoh* performance art is noted as a rebellion against fixity. This sentiment was frequently shared by fascists, with the Italian Futurists and proto-fascists condemning what they called stagnation in favor of speed and dynamism. In this sense, the performance is verifying, reflecting, and emphasizing the efforts of Jogoro to create a virile, zealous, and dominant society, rebelling against the fixity of the “normal” corporeal form.

While the *Butoh* dance is used to establish the motivations of Jogoro, portrayed by its founder, to suggest that their politics align in intention would be dishonest. In creating the *Butoh* movement, Hijikata rebelled against the societal constraints of post-war Japan that clung to traditional aesthetics and ideology that saw to the oppression of numerous groups persecuted during and after the war. In this sense, the politics of the film align with that of *Butoh*. Ishii asks the audience to recognize the distinct style of performance art and the iconoclast status of Hijikata as a manifestation of Imperial Japan’s and the dissidents’ efforts in the post-war era. Jim Reichert offers an excellent analysis of ideological transgression and multivalence of the *ero guro* subgenre in his 2009 essay, “Disciplining the Erotic-Grotesque in Edogawa Ranpo’s *Demon of the Lonely Isle,*” which explores the source material for *Horrors of Malformed Men*. Reichert suggests that rather than treat the text as a static crystallization of any single ideological perspective, it is more illuminating to “highlight the ‘freakish’ nature of the text itself” (360). The distinguishing characteristic of both *Horrors of Malformed Men* and the source material is its transgression and resistance to easy categorization. The film occupies an unstable position, blurring the boundaries of several ideological positions. As a result, the text becomes a “signifying field that simultaneously enraptures and repels. In this sense, the freakish quality associated with its story and characters. It is a veritable Frankenstein’s monster, a disturbing conglomeration of formal elements and ideological signs that have been removed from their
familiar context and then stitched together in unexpected patterns” (363). In other words, in order to present the genre’s anti-fascist ideological leanings, they must be subtly weaved into an otherwise ambiguous text, forcing the audience to interact with it in a way that reveals these ideologies in a novel way within both the text and the audience themselves.

**Freak Shows and Sex Crimes**

When Hirosuke confronts Jogoro on the shore after his dance, Jogoro tells him he is not meant to be here and does not want anyone to witness what is on the island until his “ideal world” is complete. Jogoro’s carefully controlled image of the microcosm of his utopia reflects the efforts of Imperial Japanese figures to conceal their genocidal crimes. Like the cliff sides, the mise-en-scène throughout the film suggests a threshold of consciousness into a reality into which these crimes and wrongdoings can be viewed and processed. After Jogoro agrees to show him the society he has been building, they travel through several crevices in the cliffs and seemingly endless tunnels. These images of liminal spaces are transposed over each other to disorient the viewer and lose spatial grounding and temporality. Therefore, much like the repressed trauma which will be discussed and deconstructed in the Italian film *Deep Red*, this revelation of trauma exists in a simultaneously isolated and ubiquitous plane. It is obviously hidden away deep in the heart of a small island in the raging sea, but at the same time, the cinematography strips it of any indicators of space or temporality. We are unaware of where exactly we are and how long has passed, solely relying on the narration of Hirosuke, which we already know is unreliable given his amnesia and double identity. After the disorienting sequence, we see a line of chained, naked women emerge from the horizon, appearing at first like a stampede. Malformed men leash the women. While some critics mentioned above have read the oversaturation of nudity and violence
against women as misogynistic, I believe this sequence, in particular, not to be simply gratuitous or an intentional suggestion of the danger and recklessness of unbridled and unpampered femininity but rather the opposite. The horror in the sequence is derived from the jarring juxtaposition of beauty and violence.

Nevertheless, the men are malformed in this scene, not the women. The feminine corpus occupies an interesting space within the film. More than a sexual object, which it is undoubtedly treated as by many of the men in the film, the woman’s body is represented as an almost supernatural sphere that exists on a plane that is distinct from that of the malformed men. While the men are malformed in a “traditional” sense, the women, at least those appearing in this and the following sequence, are constructed as mermaids, sirens, centaurs, and alien beings. This contrast is fundamental to the gender politics of the film as it renders femininity as something irrevocable and above the immorality of man. The fascist construction of the feminine corpus as the site of societal and moral “contamination” is completely flipped on its head through this characterization. While the malformed men are beaten, bruised, and made hunchbacks, the malformed men are instead seemingly transformed into creatures like sirens, which are noted for their ability to outsmart and kill men (Figure 5), mermaids, mighty creatures, and aliens, otherworldly figures that dominate humanity (Figure 6). The transcendence of femininity compared to the baseness of man serves to restore power to femininity and womanhood. In this sense, the women are illustrated as morally superior, and this is later confirmed as the malformed

5 For more on the Futurist and fascist conception of femininity, see Anne Bowler’s essay, “Politics as Art: Italian Futurism and Fascism”.
men are corrupt in a way that the women are not. The malformed women are victimized by the malformed men just as they are otherwise.

While there is undoubtedly sexual exploitation of women occurring on the island, it is not solely women. We see both naked men and women perform for Jogoro and later carry his chariot around the island, once again indicating the text’s sexual transgression. The circumstances of their deformities and the conditions in which they live emphasize the sexual aspect of malformedness. The malformed men are made subordinate to Jogoro through castrative measures. This is explicitly illustrated in two examples in this sequence. In the first, we see a man caged being fed by Jogoro, whose enlarged testicles are tied up with rope. Therefore, his masculine “force” has been captured and sublimated, like a bull’s. This image suggests both the repression of sexuality, as he is made impotent, and man’s
subordination. The second of these is Takeshi, who is surgically attached to his sister. In this case, he has been feminized and subordinate to the feminine aura of Hideko.

Throughout this sequence of Jogoro revealing his malformed men, we see people disfigured, burnt, morphed, and attached to animals in cages being fed grass by Jogoro. These images portray the malformed men like animals in a zoo, or perhaps more aptly, freaks in a freak show. While freak shows thrived most in the United States and Western Europe through the 19th and 20th centuries, *misemono* (shows; exhibits) were an inalienable part of the Japanese urban landscape for centuries during the Edo period (from the early 17th century into the late 19th century). These exhibits were characterized by their crudeness and intense cruelty, much like that of American and European freakshows in the 19th and 20th centuries. In both scenarios, the disabled or non-normative body is presented as a spectacle in the same way that both Jogoro presents the malformed men to Hirosuke and the film to the audience. As Rosemarie Garland Thomas suggests in her book *Extraordinary Bodies: Figuring Physical Disability in American Culture and Literature*, these “malformed bodies” have “functioned as icons upon which people discharge their anxieties, convictions, and fantasies” for centuries (14). It is telling that despite these people being members, which he has manufactured for his “ideal society,” they should be confined to cages. The promise of equality and solidarity, as Jogoro himself is malformed, albeit not to the same extent, contrasted with the legitimate treatment of his subordinates, constructs him as a compensative, vengeful figure like those perceptions of fascist leaders, particularly Emperor Hirohito. Particularly the malformedness of the women in the film feeds Jogoro’s security in his masculinity and status as a dominant agent. In this way, as Reichert suggests, Jogoro’s island functions as a freak show as his subjects exist for Jogoro to dispel his insecurities and derive psychosexual power from verifying his own identity by showcasing what he is not.
The audience achieves the same effect. In this sequence, Ishii asks the audience to see and recognize the beauty of the malformed women while simultaneously being disgusted by their malformedness, forcing them to investigate their repressed puritan tendencies. While Hirosuke is horrified by what he sees, Jogoro tells him that this is “your world,” insinuating that despite his protests, he already has and will continue to contribute to the deterioration of man under Jogoro. While both the men and women in the film are disfigured, the men are definitively presented as antagonistic. During the scene, one of the men tells Hirosuke that once their ideal anti-utopian society is achieved, they will “gather beautiful women and do what we want,” a clear reference to the sex crimes committed under Imperial Japan, particularly in South Korea and Manchuria. This strengthens the allegory between the malformed men and militant fascists during Imperial Japan.

**Jogoro**

The antagonist, Jogoro, really exposes the revolutionary importance of the film and multivalent political critique. Jogoro is initially presented as the mastermind behind the plot to create malformed men on the island and responsible for all the subsequent events. While we later learn that Jogoro had much less power than assumed in controlling the events of the narrative, he still serves as the instigator of the conflict in his dream to create an island of miscreants. Jogoro’s character and malformedness presents a bit of a paradox to both the narrative and the viewer. On one hand, he embodies the physical malformedness antithetical to the eugenicists’ (and thus the fascists’) ideals, making him the enemy of fascism. However, his malformedness is not a punishment from God, or a merely biological difference the fascists sought to eradicate. Instead, Jogoro is malformed because he is a fascist. His internal ugliness and horrible fascist soul
manifests itself as external in the film, given his depravity and wickedness, as he commits terrible acts of violence against other individuals in the film. In his essay, Jim Reichert touches upon this tendency of the erotic grotesque to treat the bizarre and the deviant in a simultaneously celebratory and alarmist manner resulting in a multivalent relationship with fascistic outlook, writing, “On… (one) hand, the tendency in erotic-grotesque discourse to treat deviance as an unwholesome pathological condition to be cured, isolated, or obliterated mirrored the fascistic compulsion to assimilate dominate or destroy outlooks and subjectivities deemed incompatible with national interests and cultural hegemony” (370). This urge to pathologize malformedness and cure or isolate it is undoubtedly present in *Horrors of Malformed Men*, as malformedness is the primary physical indicator of Jogoro’s – and the other malformed men’s – antagonism. The audience’s fear of Jogoro primarily derives from his appearance. The film invites us to gape and gawk at his appearance. In this sense, it seems the film’s politics align with that of the traditional Uber nationalist, homogenous strivings of Imperial Japan.

Nevertheless, it would be a mistake to ignore the nuanced portrayal of malformedness offered by the film, a text I read as definitively anti-fascist. Reichert argues, for example, “On… (the other) hand, erotic-grotesque celebrations of deviant practices and their identities defied myths of cultural homogeneity and purity” (381). Here we see that these depictions allude to and critique the hegemonic value of physical and social conformity. The way the film presents some aspects of freakishness as antagonistic does not necessarily serve to endorse any conformist Social Darwinist agenda. Instead, the film presents these values to the audience, forcing the viewer to grapple with them and thoughtfully deconstruct them. The most significant form of deviance the film celebrates is the incest between Hirosuke and Hideko, ironically representing the purest form of reproduction, which will be described in depth later.
This celebration of deformity does not necessarily allude solely to physical or sexual depravity but to general social non-conformity. In antagonizing the physically malformed in the film, which Jogoro is manufacturing, the film constructs social variation as a victim of Jogoro’s regime. In fact, he literally punishes and erases any sense of individuality among his inferiors as he performs surgery on several subjects, artificially manufacturing sets of Siamese twins. Jogoro’s specific attack on non-conformity is deeply rooted in the fascist past. As in the film, the manual formation of Siamese twins, especially opposite-sex Siamese twins, was particularly sought after by Japanese and Nazi scientists. Several of Josef Mengele’s most infamous and inhumane procedures involved his many unsuccessful attempts at doing so. This film references these disturbing practices to establish Jogoro as an allegory for Imperial Japan and for fascism as a whole.

What Reichert refers to as the “multivalent” relationship between malformedness and fascist ideology is at first jarring to the viewer. The film could be read as ambivalent or, worse, indifferent toward its subject matter. Such a reading may lead to the assumption that the film is simply a confused, gratuitous mess. However, the uncomfortable ambiguity with which the film presents its antagonist actually makes it such a thoughtful critique of fascism. Whereas the portrayals mentioned above of the war and Holocaust that have fallen out of favor with scholars and survivors, such as Schindler’s List, tend to break fascism down into vapid terms, spoon-feeding the audience a mind-numbing experience, Horrors of Malformed Men and similar films in the ero guro subgenre actively engage the viewer to work through Japan’s fascist past. The act of working through is difficult and uncomfortable. Reichert points to the complexities the viewer faces in such films, stating, “The erotic grotesque nonsense phenomenon is rife with contradictions and inconsistencies. One of the distinguishing characteristics of this sensibility is
its transgressive quality” (379). As is the case of pink films in general, such as House, this ambiguous attitude towards its content makes the film and the genre so effective in exposing the fascist past and presenting fascist allegories. While the neorealism that swept Japanese – and worldwide – cinema presented a beautifully powerful but often curt and unsubtle depiction of life under Imperial Japan, the horror films, particularly the pink films, offer the viewer a sublime experience where they are forced to engage with the aesthetics and philosophy of the threatening and violent parts of fascism which persists in their modern post-war lives.

Like the pink films the ero guro movement inspired, the art movement similarly offered an active, engaging experience where they contributed to the avant-garde. The post-war Japanese viewer of these films, too, engages in the hard work of working through – which the Germans referred to as Vergangenheitsbewältigung – and releasing into consciousness their own trauma and the culpability of the nation in the war. The aesthetics of Imperial Japan are thoughtfully and definitively critiqued through the character of Jogoro; the society he is attempting to create is terrifying and violent while simultaneously homogenous and isolated, echoing the rampant xenophobia and isolationism under the rule of Emperor Hirohito.

Another aspect key to the ero guro genre, which masterfully critiques fascism, is that of pseudoscience. In Horrors of Malformed Men, this is done through the strivings of Jogoro. Reichert states that “Adding to the cachet of these decadent cultural products was the vague air of science that surrounded them. Replete with pseudoscientific jargon and presented in the form of research, erotic-grotesque discourse cannily exploited the mania for science that was one of the defining features of modern life” (369). Here, he describes how the erotic grotesque genre reflected the fascist obsession and manipulation of science, namely in sexology, criminology, and, perhaps most importantly, eugenics. The ero guro subgenre graphically portrays the dangers
of eugenics in the name of horror. *Horrors of Malformed Men* looks to the 1920s subversive literature for its content. The current complicates the culture-wide fascination with the abject or the “erotic grotesque” in Japan during the 1920s and 1930s, that all orders of phenomena adhered to the principles of evolution, or at least principles that mimicked some of the language of Darwin. In fact, Darwin’s teachings on evolution contradict the assertions of Social Darwinists and eugenicists who used his work to support their pseudoscience. Social Darwinists conceived evolution not as a merely biological process, but also as a system to evaluate and interpret social and cultural phenomena. Social Darwinism allowed fascists to distinguish between what they believed were more or less civilized societies or social practices. This outlook, used to justify their xenophobia and expansionism, was informed by the pseudoscientific practices of sexology, eugenics, and criminology, as pointed out earlier (Reichert 356). These disciplines are each referenced and critiqued in Ishii’s *Horrors of Malformed Men*. In *Horrors of Malformed Men*, Jogoro’s desire to create a society of pure humans free of depravity is reminiscent of Emperor Hirohito’s expansionist and nationalist plans for his empire, where only those of pure Japanese descent are allowed. As aforementioned, the surge in popularity in the pseudosciences of sexology, criminology, and particularly eugenics informed these fascist tendencies.

For the most part, as a film, the events of *Horrors of Malformed Men* are played relatively straight, with the events of the narrative playing out matter-of-factly. However, a few moments in the film are tonally quite jarring as they are presented almost comedically. It is in these moments, though, that the politics of the film are best exposed. One of the most important is the final confrontation between Jogoro and Hirosuke. Here Jogoro describes his ultimate wish and command for Hirosuke to create a massive monument consisting of four living horse heads and human flesh. This laughably asinine request pokes fun at the extreme nature of the
aspirations of Imperial Japan. The comedic pace and delivery of the sequence make it the most potent satirization of the absurd pseudoscientific aspirations in the film. As Hirosuke, a medical student, is receiving this request, he is a stand-in for the Emperor’s subjects, the people. Hirosuke’s refusal to do this seems an endorsement away from eugenics and pseudoscience. *Horrors of Malformed Men*, in particular, ridiculously presents the eugenicist aspirations of Jogoro as laughably alien to the true nature of science, and therefore harshly critiquing the xenophobic, racist, and nationalist ideology that stemmed from the promulgation of pseudoscience under statist Japan.

After this confrontation, we get insight into the events leading up to the film and how Jogoro came to become the leader of the malformed men. This narrative from Jogoro’s point of view further presents him as an Emperor-like figure and therefore critiques the fascist model. In this highly subjective and frequently pathetic backstory narration, Jogoro recalls his peers ostracizing him for his physical appearance, particularly his webbed fingers. Jogoro’s wife, Toki, then exacerbates his insecurities as she is embarrassed to be seen with him in public. The novella on which the film is based, *Demon of the Lonely Isle*, similarly cites a “tragic” backstory. In the source material, Otosan, adapted into Jogoro, wants money to finance a nefarious scheme to create a race of “freaks” scientifically. The motivations behind this plot are complicated, but in essence, Otosan sees the production of freaks as a source of profit (he ships his victims off to commercial freak shows) and a means for exacting his revenge on ordinary -- or non-malformed -- humanity. As a hunchback, he has suffered numerous indignities in mainstream society. The vengeful spirit of Jogoro powerfully captures the post-war perception of fascists, particularly fascist leaders, as angry, compensative, and projecting. For example, this can be seen in the numerous theories surrounding Adolf Hitler, such as that he was himself
Jewish, was secretly gay, or even suffered from syphilis which caused a decline in his psyche. Jogoro is much more aptly a mirror of Emperor Hirohito, which is emphasized through this backstory. In the case of Emperor Hirohito, immediately following Japan, he was presented as emasculated in one of the most famous photographs to come out of the war. The photograph was taken by General McArthur’s personal photographer Lt. Gaetano Faillace and depicted the general’s first meeting with the Emperor on September 27th, 1945. In the photo, the 6-foot McArthur towers over the 5’5” Hirohito. The photo emasculated Hirohito and presented him as a small-statured, human, almost pathetic man, tarnishing his deification. This photo was one of several factors that, like the legacy of Hitler, led to the perception of Hirohito as a projecting figure. Ishii now attributes this to Jogoro, which is accentuated by his hunchback stature.

Finally, Jogoro’s death is another example of these tonally inconsistent moments that leave the viewer unsettled and befuddled. Upon further examination, his death profoundly critiques the post-war Japanese cultural and social model. After Jogoro runs from Detective Akechi, Akechi corners him by the shore, where he cowers over a lever. He claims that if threatened, he will pull it, detonating a bomb that would destroy the island, killing himself and everyone on it. He no longer cares for the lives of his wife and children as his “dream has been shattered.” Here, he refers to his aspirations for a malformed society. This reflects the wartime Japanese fascists’ total disregard for human life, especially those outside of those whom they deemed “respectable.”

As Jogoro lies dying by the shore, he finally admits he is at fault for causing suffering. However, Toki runs after him immediately, claiming that he need not accept the blame for the film’s events and that everything is solely her fault. Instead, she begs for his forgiveness, which he grants her before dying. While it is true that from the perspective of Jogoro, the events may be
somehow Toki’s fault, as her maltreatment of him is the impetus of his rage and vengeance, this is an absurd suggestion to the viewer. So absurd that it calls into question the integrity and political agenda of the film, as it seemingly betrays the entire film thus far, which has presented a nuanced critique of Japanese fascism and constructed Jogoro as an Emperor-like figure. The film then verifies to the viewer that this sequence and assignment of guilt is not meant to be taken as sincere, as immediately after he dies, Hirosuke and Hideko commit suicide together by jumping off the cliff. Their bodies explode into fireworks, and their heads fly into the sun, crying out for their mother. The film ends on this surrealist, cartoonish, and satirical note, asking the viewer to call into question the truthfulness and genuine quality of what they have just witnessed, particularly Jogoro’s death scene, which occurred immediately prior rather than being earnest and misogynistic in blaming the actions of a war and sex criminal on his wife.

This last-minute absurd displacement of responsibility is reminiscent of Prince Higashikuni’s policy of ichioku so zange, or “100 million repenting”. The policy saw to it that the Emperor, military officials, and other high-ranking Japanese officers and politicians were free of guilt and that the onus for not only the events of the war but primarily the loss of the war was to be repented for by the citizens of Japan. In representing this diversion of guilt in such a sharp twist and surrealist manner, the film firmly critiques this ridiculous notion and calls attention to how inappropriate, misguided, and irrational it is even to fathom such a possibility.

The Act of Suicide: The End of the Film and the End of its Characters

Hirosuke’s and Hideko’s suicide at the film’s end deconstructs and scrutinizes the fascist model of purity apropos their incestual relationship. This final act is integral to understanding the film’s anti-fascist attitude. Japan has a lengthy history of suicide as a means of judicial or
militaristic sacrifice. *Seppuku* – also known as *hara-kiri* (which refers to when state-mandated capital punishment for a crime deemed too heinous for *seppuku*) – is a form of ritualistic suicide in which victims disembowel themselves with a *tanto* (a short blade). Victims are typically decapitated afterward as an act of mercy on behalf of onlookers. The practice was initially reserved for disgraced samurai in the Middle Ages who had broken with *bushido* (the way of the warrior), their code of honor, and persisted through the Meiji period. Harsher punishments were given to criminals or honorless individuals of commoner or peasant classes, including being boiled alive. However, the practice became popular again during the Shōwa period at the end of World War II. Many Japanese military officers committed suicide through *seppuku* or other means as they accepted their incoming defeat. The act was seen as preserving one’s honor and the honor of one’s family, as it is more righteous to die on one’s own terms than to be held prisoner or punished by a foreign entity. This idea was also enforced by the cult of death key to Imperial Japan and fascist regimes in Italy and Germany, where one’s utmost duty was to lay down their life for their leader and nation. It also spared oneself and one’s family from the disgrace of being humiliated, punished, or held responsible for their actions.⁶

In contrast, though, is the reasoning for Hirosuke and Hideko’s suicides. They do not kill themselves to preserve their honor, but rather to preserve their love, which was sure to be tainted by societal pressure which deemed them unfit for each other. This is one of many examples of the film taking fascist ideology or practices and flipping it on its head to reveal its ludicrousness to the audience. The final cue to the audience that this is a conscious critique of Japanese honor

⁶ For more about ritualistic suicide and honor killing throughout Japan’s history, see Andrew Rankin’s book *Seppuku: A History of Samurai Suicide*. 
killings is the ridiculous way their deaths play out. As they jump off the cliff, their bodies magically explode, and their heads fly in the air calling out to their mother, pointing out the frivolousness of this practice and the meaninglessness and emptiness of the fascist construction of honor and righteousness. The Imperial Japanese’s glorification of suicide is further parodied in the film through Jogoro’s intensely self-destructive behavior. This culminated in him threatening the blow up the entire island, as he would rather kill himself and all his subordinates and destroy his anti-utopian dream than be captured by Detective Akechi.

Finally, the locus of their suicide is essential as well. They throw themselves off the cliffsides, which I have previously established as the threshold of consciousness, and into the void of the sea. In this sense, they are leaving reality and ceasing to be in death. They do not die because of their relationship, as they seem content in their love and continue to love each other despite realizing they are siblings. Rather they die because they participate in the malformedness. Hirosuke is a foil to Jogoro and is, therefore, an anti-fascist figure. His status further emphasizes this as a medical student, which firmly roots him in the “real” world of science rather than Jogoro and the associated fascist’s preoccupation with pseudoscience. Hirosuke is a medical student; at the film’s end, Jogoro demands that Hirosuke manufacture his island’s final creation, a statue made from four living horseheads and human flesh. Hirosuke’s refusal to do this seems an endorsement away from eugenics and pseudoscience. However, Hirosuke still participates in the experimentation of his father in the surgery he conducts on Hideko to make her whole. In fixing her alleged freakishness, he is engaging in the freakishness of his father out of love for her. The film encourages the work of working through one’s nation’s fascist past but acknowledges it as an intensely fraught, difficult task. The task of working through the trauma proves nearly as problematic as assigning guilt, as here we see even our protagonist is complicit
in upholding this fascistic narrative and ideology despite his intentions. Therefore, he, like

Jogoro, must die, as the film posits that the only possible way to rid a nation of its fascist past is

for it simply to die out.
Chapter 3: A Twisted Mind: Deconstructing Futurism and the Artist-Dictator in

Dario Argento’s Deep Red

‘Deep Red,’ which opened yesterday at the Cinerama, 86th Street Twin I and other theaters, is an English-dubbed Italian-made bucket of ax-murder-movie clichés thoroughly soaked in red paint that seems intended to represent fake blood. I don’t think that Dario Argento, the director, meant to distance us from the action in this way. He’s simply a director of incomparable incompetence. In the leading role David Hemmings, the English actor, looks wan and in need of a vacation from Rome’s off-screen high life. He plays a music teacher whose friends and acquaintances keep getting hacked up, thus interrupting his composing. The bill at the RKO 86th Street Twin 1 Theater also includes a terribly self-congratulatory Gulf Oil Corporation industrial film, which is about as boring as industrial films can ever be, and during the intermission the management turns its stereo speakers to radio station WTFM so that the audience can listen to music and commercials for Pepperidge Farm French dinner rolls.

New York Times, June 10, 1976

Historical and Genre Background

The giallo subgenre has frequently been derided and written off as B-movie trash. In this chapter, I intend to dispel this myth and prove that these films, particularly Deep Red, are deeply engaged in critical political thought and doing much work to deconstruct Italy’s fascist past. As the introduction outlines, fascism and cinema have an inextricable bond. This is especially true in Italy, where Mussolini was known to be an avid cinephile. Italian and American cinema has a uniquely strong bond with one another, especially in the context of World War II and the post-war period. Benito Mussolini was a well-documented cinephile. He was known to become infatuated with the actresses in his favorite films, such as Hedy Lamarr and, more notably, Anita Page. Mussolini wrote several love letters to the latter American actress, even going as far as proposing to her on multiple occasions. In a 2000 interview with The Guardian, Page described the letters as “so gooey, so sweet, and actually so touching. He obviously loved what he saw on the screen” (Mutti-Mewse).
Mussolini grasped the political importance of cinema and used it accordingly as a menacing tool for propaganda and cultural hegemony. In attempt to strengthen the Italian film industry, he ordered Cinecittà, the largest film studio in Europe at the time, to be built in 1935. Between 1943 and 1944, Allied aircraft extensively bombed the nation’s capital city of Rome. The defunct Cinecittà was then repurposed as a displaced persons camp. Here, thousands of refugees lived on the massive sound stages. The inaccessibility of studios gave way to the era of Italian Neorealism. Films of this era focused primarily on the quotidian life of the lower class. They were shot using documentary-style filmmaking techniques on the streets of Rome, given that most of the film studios in Italy were now either destroyed or bankrupt. The immense commercial and critical success of this era re-established Rome as one of the top cultural hubs in the world. Hollywood filmmakers flocked to Rome because of the cheap costs of labor and facilities, the massive Cinecittà, and the idyllic beauty of the city. This period of American cultural occupation became known as the “Hollywood on the Tiber” era and produced many landmark films such as Roman Holiday and Ben-Hur. The flocking of American actresses to Rome also led to the formation of the paparazzi. Because Mussolini manipulated cinema so effectively to fascitize Italy’s people and culture, it is ironic that these films that are almost regarded as “bad cinema” should be used so effectively as a cultural tool to deconstruct the fascism with which he plagued the nation.

Peplum films, Telefoni Bianchi, and Spaghetti Westerns are just a few examples of post-war Italian film genres heavily informed by Hollywood equivalents – with historical epics, light fare comedies, and the western serving as inspiration. However, the *giallo* may be the subgenre that experienced the most dialogue with Hollywood and other international film markets. The Italian word *giallo* translates directly to “yellow” in English. Then, the subgenre’s name derives
from the trademark yellow covers of crime-mystery pulp novels published by Mondadori. These publications almost exclusively consisted of Italian translations of the works of prominent American and British mystery authors such as Agatha Christie, Raymond Chandler, and Edgar Allen Poe. While in Italy, *giallo* refers to a mystery-crime or horror film of any national origin, in the English-speaking world, the term refers solely to works from Italy. It will be used as such in this thesis. The Italian *gialli* greatly influenced the American slasher craze of the 70s and 80s and harpooned worldwide popularity.

The plot of these films is genuinely pretty formulaic. They typically revolve around a string of violent murders, whose victims are usually young women, by an unknown assailant whom our protagonist is trying to identify. Interestingly, these films’ protagonists are almost always outsiders, usually an American or British tourist visiting or working in Rome. Furthermore, the protagonists of these films tend to be artists. These films are transgressive both in content and form. In reference to the trademarks of the genre, Gary Needham writes in his essay “Playing with Genre: An Introduction to the Italian *Giallo*” that, “By its very nature, the *giallo* challenges our assumptions about how non-Hollywood films should be classified, going beyond the sort of Anglo-American taxonomic imaginary that ‘fixes’ genre both in film criticism and the film industry in order to designate something specific. …however, despite the *giallo*’s resistance to clear definition, there are nevertheless identifiable thematic and stylistic tropes” (12). In other words, perhaps the most crucial characteristic of the *giallo* subgenre is that, like the Japanese pink films, they are, in a sense, ineffable.

Nevertheless, there are still common aspects that make these films distinguishable from other similar subgenres. *Gialli*, like their literary counterparts, always feature a plot of crime or mystery and are not necessarily always horror. However, quite often, they are horror films. It is
essential to make the distinction; however, that *gialli* are always secular in resolution. If a film features any supernatural truths or conclusions, it is, by definition, not a *giallo* film. While there are commonly many supernatural elements, red herrings, and false leads featured in *gialli*, they are always found to be baseless. *Giallo* does, though, inform many supernatural horror works, such as *Suspiria* (1977). These films, however, do not fall into the category of *giallo*.

Stylistically, *gialli* are marked by their elaborate, violent, and often erotic death scenes, point-of-view shots, and great, powerful use of color lighting, particularly the primary colors. Luchino Visconti and Mario Bava, whose masked killer in *Blood and Black Lace* was a template for the stock *giallo* killer, are cited as creating the first *giallo* films. However, with his work in the 70s, Dario Argento propelled the subgenre into the mainstream, making it an international craze. He is often called the “master of thrill” or the “master of horror.” *Deep Red* was released in 1975 at the height of the subgenre’s popularity and was met with immense critical acclaim and is generally considered to be not only one of the best of Argento’s career but one of the best in the genre.

Like the pink films of 1970s Japan, the *giallo* subgenre, which characterized the culture of post-war Italy, and its associated violence, serves to act out the repressed trauma and culpability regarding the crimes against humanity Italy was complicit in during World War II, most significantly, the nation’s expansionist and colonial past as well as its involvement in the Holocaust. Furthermore, the *giallo* acts as a deconstruction of Futurist art, which became the official art movement of Fascist Italy after Mussolini appointed Filippo Tommaso Marinetti, founder of the Futurist movement, to the Accademia d’Italia – Academy of Italy. Marinetti also went on to co-write the Fascist Manifesto. Moreover, the self-referentiality of the genre interrupts the audience’s feeling that they are looking at something complete. This aspect of the
“giallo” reminds the audience they are viewing a cinematic text, which in turn allows for more thinking about what we do not know about fascism as well as for a less problematic filmic and narrative depiction of fascism and its consequences, encouraging greater understanding than other subgenres and movements of the post-war Italian era, such as Italian Neorealism.

The Fascist Model Which the Film Works Against

In order to illuminate what the "giallo" subgenre is working against, it is essential to examine the proto-fascist model and associated ideology that characterized the Futurist movement. Mussolini’s love for cinema is not the only force suggesting post-war Italian cinema frequently unpacks the Fascist period. The fascists, led by Mussolini, extensively manipulated cinema and art as a whole. In 1924, the fascist government established the Istituto Luce to oversee the production of the nation’s cinema. The government made further efforts to control Italian cinema, such as establishing the Ente Nazionale Industrie Cinematografiche (ENIC) in 1934, which bought a chain of movie theaters across Italy to produce and screen fascist propaganda films. The ENIC also barred the import of foreign films. Mussolini made certain he had total supervision over all films produced in Italy and imported into the nation. In a symbolic showcase of power, a huge portrait of himself behind a film camera was placed on the side of Cinecittà. A paraphrasing of Lenin’s famous quote was written across this portrait, “Film is the most powerful weapon” was written across this portrait, a paraphrasing of Lenin’s famous declaration of cinema as the most important of the arts.7 Italy’s Fascist regime never successfully produced propaganda films, which is not to say that the fascists did not have a hand in the film industry, though, as censorship was employed heavily and frequently to avoid

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7 For more information about the Italian film industry under Mussolini, see Elaine Mancini’s book, Struggles of the Italian Film Industry during Fascism, 1930-1935.
material critical of the regime. The fascists also placed limits on the import of foreign films. Several documentaries were produced under Mussolini, however, to record the achievements of the fascist party. The Italian fascist regime did not utilize cinema to the same degree as the Nazi party in Germany, which infamously churned out massive antisemitic and nationalist propaganda productions, most notably *Triumph of the Will* and *The Eternal Jew*. Nevertheless, the Italians still firmly grasped what cinema was produced and released.

Italian fascism’s relationship with cinema goes far beyond censorship and propaganda, however. The Futurist movement, which originated in Italy before spreading to other areas, particularly Russia, took over early Italian cinema in the 1910s into the 1920s and continues to have influence in Italy and abroad. Italian Futurism was a social and artistic movement that captivated all art forms in the teen years of the 20th century. Italian poet and art theorist Filippo Tommaso Marinetti founded the movement and published its first manifesto in 1909. Marinetti’s “Manifesto of Futurism” called for an aggressive cultural change, emphasizing the importance of embracing modernity, speed, militarism, and war, which Marinetti calls “the only cure” (3). Here, Marinetti is suggesting that the past, as well as the present, needs to be obliterated in order to form a new powerful Italy through palingenesis. This concept would go on to infatuate Mussolini. This outcry for war was especially significant for Italy, whose Risorgimento – or unification – had come about through primarily diplomatic means that excluded the people, leaving much of the nation disgruntled. This violent call for the “punch and the slap” rather than the so-called “stillness” and “ecstasy” of the art and politics of the era resonated with the fascists (3). It informed Mussolini’s “Fascist Manifesto.”

The Futurists, and the fascists, were incredibly nationalistic – and therefore xenophobic as well. They fixated on the “genus Italicus” as the only ethnic group fit for leading the world,
perverting Nietzsche’s Übermensch to suggest their superiority over the rest of the world. Furthermore, Fascist Italy implemented a series of racial laws from 1938 to 1943, which enforced racial discrimination and segregation, particularly victimizing the native inhabitants of Italy’s colonial empire, consisting of present-day Libya, Eritrea, Somalia, and Ethiopia, as well as Italian Jews. These laws were so severe that when Nazi Germany established the puppet state of the Italian Social Republic in 1943, they did not need to implement their own Nuremberg Laws, as they were essentially equivalent to the existing Italian racial laws.  

Futurism advocated for a pro-war approach to international relations. It also emphasized the importance of a robust male ego rooted in contempt for women, which Marinetti identified as foundational to the Futurist movement in his manifesto. Both the misogyny and aggression associated with Futurism, of course, aligned with fascism. In his manifesto, Marinetti writes, “We declare that the splendor of the world has been enriched by a new beauty: the beauty of speed. A racing automobile with its bonnet adorned with great tubes like serpents with explosive breath...a roaring motor car which seems to run on machine-gun fire, is more beautiful than the Victory of Samothrace” (3). Here, Marinetti describes beauty in a very non-traditional sense. In contrast, the Romanticism period, which preceded Futurism, constructed beauty as a feminine, loving force; Marinetti suggests the “real” beauty lies in destruction and man’s fetishistic intermingling with machine. Marinetti interestingly references the Winged Victory of Samothrace, a votive monument created during the Hellenistic era, depicting the Greek goddess of victory, Nike. In glorifying the machine over one of the most significant and well-known symbols of the Classical period, he further emphasizes his contempt for the past and, subsequently, his fixation on the future.

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8 To read more about the Italian racial laws and the persecution and discrimination of Italian Jews, see Michael Livingston’s book The Fascists and the Jews of Italy Mussolini’s Race Laws.
In reference to Marinetti’s engendering of leadership as staunchly masculine, Anne Bowler writes in her essay “Politics as Art: Italian Futurism and Fascism” that “Futurism constructs the feminized Italian corpus as the site of both physical and moral decontamination” (771). Here, the degradation of the traditional feminine nature of beauty and the nation of Italy serves as a template for what Marinetti suggests masculinity is not. The Futurists and fascists continue to construct masculinity as a non-concept, needing to annihilate and degrade what is female to know what is male. Bowler adds that Futurism “rescued Italian culture from its subservience to the memory of Classical Rome and dependence on foreign influences for cultural as well as economic direction” (768). Again, the Futurists’ intense xenophobia and misogyny suggest that a nation in crisis, victim to the feminine masses, can only be uplifted by its own men.

**Futurist Art**

While Futurism was most significantly a cultural and ideological theory at its core, it presented itself as an art movement and saw influence and success in every medium. However, particularly for its stark contrast to Romanticism, paintings were the most recognizable and noteworthy works of Futurist art. These paintings typically feature urban landscapes and machinery and were noted for their dynamism or movement, given the ideology’s praise for speed and call for change. Stylistically, these works were unique in the modern Italian artistic sense. They were heavily influenced by cubism in style, often featuring stark geometric figures. The Futurist’s obsession with technology and the mechanical manifested best in their fascination with flight, given that airplanes and aerial photography were recent innovations at the time and
represented the utmost metamorphosis of travel and warfare. Futurist paintings, literature, and architecture heavily featured images of airplanes, representing the peak of human progress and dominion over the land and the air, suggesting the new Italian empire would be all-encompassing and all-conquering. 

As seen in the painting in Figure 7, Luigi Rossolo’s 1913 *Dynamism of a Car*, motion became the modern perspective. It emphasizes the Futurists’ desire for change and their visual fetishization of the machine, which was most frequently a car, given the circumstances surrounding the movement’s conception. Futurists also employed the techniques of their predecessor divisionist artworks. Divisionism was the founding technical basis for neo-impressionism, which emerged a few years before Futurism. It is the practice of separating colors into strokes, dots, or blotches, isolating them from each other. The aim was that from afar, the contrasting adjacent colors would

![Fig 7. Dynamism of a Car](image)

![Fig 8. Simultaneous Visions](image)
blend through optical illusion. As shown in Figure 8, Umberto Boccioni’s 1912 painting, *Simultaneous Visions*, isolating the painting’s color palette fractures the canvas forces the viewer to focus on each aspect of this distorted metropolitan landscape and ultimately find meaning in its contrast rather than its whole. The division of color into sectors also creates violent clashes in their intersections. In this specific work, this is most potent in the center of the painting, where the viewer’s eye is drawn to the pool of red, where Boccioni has endowed the metropolis with animism, looming over and perhaps devouring the pedestrians, once again suggesting the dominion of machine over man.

Furthermore, cinematic works of Futurism, such as *Thaïs* (1917), directed by Anton Giulio Bragaglia (Figure 9), the only surviving film from the movement, had stark color contrasts – albeit black and white – which highlighted their geometricism, which Marinetti was so enchanted by. Like the artwork of the Futurist movement, the film utilized divisionist techniques, separating these shapes on the set into distinct panels. The film was also highly mysticized, featuring heavy mist from ominous masks, cats, and other occult symbology. All of these encouraged the surreal, blurring the line between reality and fiction within the narrative. It also should not be ignored that the sole film of the movement features a femme
fatale at its center, echoing the film’s, and the Futurists’, fear of women, or more precisely, the so-called “feminine masses.”

The French polymath Gustav Le Bon originated the conception of the masses as feminine. In his essay, “The Crowd: A Study of the Popular Mind,” Le Bon identifies “Latin crowds” as the “most feminine of all” (16). Marinetti echoes this sentiment with his contempt for the Italian woman. Le Bon suggests that the crowd is something to be feared and conquered. The urgency of the male dictator to conquer the feminine crowd then takes on a psychosexual dimension, where one party must dominate, and the other must be forced into submission. Le Bon and, subsequently, Marinetti’s homoerotic fascination and fetishization of the male dictator, in this case, Mussolini, ironically undermines the sexual dimension Marinetti is attempting to achieve. The homoeroticism intrinsic to the core of Futurism subverts the explicit goal of psychosexual domination. Bowler describes this dilemma by saying, “Marinetti’s fascination with the physical aura of the dictator betrays the Futurist leader’s own grasping for a new rhetoric of the grandiose: ‘Bent over his desk on large elbows...he bends forward his masterful head, like a squared-off projectile, a package full of good gunpowder, the cubic will of the state... His will splits the crowd like a swift antisubmarine boat, an exploding torpedo’” (777). Here, Bowler cites the extremely homoerotic language Marinetti uses to describe Mussolini, in which the will of the state becomes a product of his virility. In this way, then, what Bowler calls the “disjuncture between the stated goals of the Futurists and their wholesale embodiment in works” arises (764). Futurism became untamable by the fascists and took on a life of its own. Its aesthetic capabilities surpassed its political strivings and then became unmanageable.
**Film Summary**

The eroticism – and homoeroticism – associated with fascism is relevant to the *giallo* subgenre, and *Deep Red* in particular, given the subgenre’s often sexualized violence and their depiction of women and queer characters. *Deep Red* follows a narrative that seemingly subconsciously mirrors that of post-war Italy. *Deep Red (Profundo Rosso)* – also known as *The Hatchet Murders* – follows Marcus Daly (David Hemmings) as he investigates a series of murders across Rome. The film starts with a cold opening. During this sequence, we hear what sounds like the murder of a woman take place but only see the incident through the shadow on a wall, where one figure is stabbing another. Argento immediately makes the audience an unreliable witness as we are unsure what has just occurred and can only trust small, easily falsifiable details. We then see a bloodied knife fall to a child’s feet. After more credits play, the film jumps to twenty years later, and we are introduced to our protagonist, Marcus Daly, an English pianist staying in Rome. We briefly watch as he instructs a small jazz band.

Afterward, we jump to a parapsychology conference hosted in a theater that Professor Giordani oversees. While speaking, medium Helga Ulmann becomes disturbed by visions of murderous thoughts from within the room accompanied by a children’s song. She attempts to identify the person to whom these thoughts belong; while doing so, a figure leaves the theater, presumably our killer. Later that night, a black-gloved figure breaks into Helga’s apartment, murdering her with a meat cleaver. Marcus observes the murder through her window from the street and rushes to her apartment, where he finds her body. He calls the police and watches as a figure in a leather jacket walks away from the apartment building.

The next day, Marcus returns to the crime scene to discuss his eyewitness report with the detectives. While there, he meets the effervescent journalist Gianni, who will become his partner
as he investigates the murder independently. While there, he notices one of the paintings is missing in the hallway but cannot identify which. Later, Marcus visits his friend, Carlo, but only finds Carlo’s balmy mother, Martha, home. After returning home, he hears someone outside playing a children’s song. The mysterious figure whispers to Marcus, threatening to kill him. Marcus informs Professor Giordani of this, as Helga had allegedly heard a children’s song the day she was killed. Giordani tells him a folktale of a local haunted house where children’s songs are mysteriously heard playing.

After reading the folklore book, Marcus attempts to track down the book’s author in order to learn more about the haunted house. However, before he arrives, the masked killer drowns her in scalding water. Using an illustration in the book, he can track down the allegedly haunted house. While investigating the house, he uncovers part of a mural, seemingly drawn by a child of a figure holding a knife over a dead body. After hearing a noise, he leaves for the night before uncovering the entire mural. At the same time, Giordani uncovers a clue at the death scene of the author but is himself bludgeoned to death before he can inform Marcus after a mechanized doll is released in the room with him.

Marcus then finds a hidden room in the house where a desiccated corpse has been hidden. While trying to escape, Marcus is knocked unconscious by the assailant. He awakens outside of the house, which is now in flames. Gianna finds him and takes him to a caretaker’s home as they await the police’s arrival. While there, Marcus notices the caretaker’s daughter drawing a picture identical to the mural he had found hidden in the house. When he asks her where she has seen this before, she tells him she saw it in her school’s archives.

Marcus and Gianna run to the school, where Marcus finds the original drawing in a student’s record. As Gianna runs to call the police, she is stabbed. Marcus confronts the killer,
who is revealed to be Carlo. Carlo reveals that he had drawn the picture as a child. Carlo flees into a road just as the police arrive and is hit by a garbage truck, which drags him down the street. Carlo is then killed after an oncoming car crushes his head.

After waking up in the hospital, Marcus learns that Gianna is alive. He then suddenly remembers that after Helga was killed, he saw Carlo coming from the opposite direction of the crime scene, meaning that Carlo could not have killed Helga. Confused, Marcus revisits the crime scene and investigates once again. He then realizes that the missing painting he had noticed was not a painting but a mirror, in which he saw the killer’s reflection. He realizes then that the killer is Martha, Carlo’s mother. She then appears behind him, holding a meat cleaver. She explains to Marcus that she murdered her husband while a children’s song played in front of Carlo when he was a boy. She murdered him because he planned on putting her in an insane asylum for her erratic behavior. She then walled off the room where his body remained. Carlo repressed the memory of his father’s murder but continued compulsively drawing it. Martha killed the others on her trail, and Carlo attacked Gianna and Marcus to protect his mother from being killed or going to jail. Martha then beats Marcus with the meat cleaver but is decapitated when her necklace gets caught in the bars of the building’s elevator. The final credits roll as Marcus stares at his reflection in a pool of Martha’s blood.

**Scene Analyses: The Holocaust is not Past**

Several scenes in this incredibly complex story, especially demonstrate the deconstruction of the fascist past and the ideology embedding fascist art, which the film in its entirety is doing. These scenes show that the film, like the rest of the genre, is not just misogynist light fare as some may suggest, or solely a commentary on the social climate of 1970s Italy, but
is instead profoundly engaged with how the fascist past is still pervasive to modern Italy and Italians.

The first, and arguably the most important of these, is the early sequence of Helga at the parapsychology conference and her subsequent death. Upon her introduction, Helga Ullman is neatly framed in the center of the shot, almost presented as a model or picture against a bright red background, a color which Argento reinforces its relationship with violence. Dr. Giordani introduces her as a German-speaking Lithuanian medium who has retained her allegedly innate faculties for telepathy. This identification may appear arbitrary initially, but it is imperative as we later learn through the mise-en-scene that she is Jewish. Interestingly, the first thing Helga states in the film is not a prognostication but a clarification. She tells us that her so-called faculties should not be conflated with “magic, the esoteric, or foretelling the future,” and they have nothing to do with supernatural forces of any sort. She asserts that she can feel and see things the moment they occur but nothing of what is yet to come.

Nevertheless, the sequence still plays out very much like a magic show. The authenticity of her abilities and Dr. Giordani’s intentions are questioned by the event’s staginess, which is conspicuously held in a grand baroque theater, after she tells an audience member who swears he has never met her before he has four keys in his pocket. However, this doubt is set aside when she suddenly convulses and cries out in pain after witnessing perverse and murderous thoughts. Interestingly, she cries out in her native German rather than the Italian – or English, depending on the version – she is previously speaking in the film, suggesting some reversion that this trauma has promulgated within her, perhaps indicating her past trauma (the film offers one trauma after another, and the audience is constantly wondering which one might be the original trauma).
She senses that someone in the audience has murderous thoughts, that they have killed before and plan to kill again. Interestingly, the audience is almost entirely elderly. We know the murderer is in the audience because Helga tells us so and because we see the killer leave the room. Here, the film cues the audience to associate the killer with that audience and, by proxy, the wartime generation. Furthermore, through this violent vision, we understand the true nature of Helga’s ability as an inadequate tool for witnessing. She can identify the number and shape of keys in a man’s pocket but cannot conjure up any helpful image or point out the killer’s identity in the room. More importantly, she cannot bear witness to her own trauma or foresee or prevent her own death. Shoshana Felman has written extensively about Jews as Holocaust witnesses in Claude Lanzmann’s documentary, Shoah, in her book Testimony. On witnessing, Felman writes, “In effect, the victims, the bystanders, and the perpetrators are here differentiated not so much by what they actually see (what they all see, although discontinuous, does, in fact, follow a logic of corroboration), as by what and how they do not see, by what and how they fail to witness. The Jews see, but they do not understand the purpose and the destination of what they see: overwhelmed by loss and by deception, they are blind to the significance of what they witness” (214). A very similar dynamic of both witnessing and failing to witness is found within Helga’s “faculties.” Her ability to “see” paradoxically requires not seeing, as she must close her eyes in order to decipher the images in her mind. As Felman suggests, because of the traumatic source of the image Helga witnesses, she cannot comprehend its significance and is, therefore, unable to decipher it. This representation of the German-speaking Lithuanian Jewish seeress who cannot comprehend her trauma and demise is the first and strongest indicator that this original trauma is a clear allegory for the Holocaust as she is shortly thereafter brutally murdered.
This scene and her subsequent death scene are separated by one of many sequences throughout the film of what I will refer to as the deconstructed original trauma. In this avant-garde sequence, the camera pans through a series of off-putting images featuring knocked-over cribs, ragdolls stabbed with pins, marbles, disfigured baby dolls, and a drawing of the crime shown in the film’s prologue. The last of these objects seem to suggest that these may be the belongings of Carlo, given that we learn later that he originally drew this drawing. However, because this drawing is revealed to be contained in a school archive, as well as the uncanny cinematography and content of the sequence, we can assume this is representative of a non-diegetic amalgamation of trauma rather than referring to one specific traumatic event. Just as the opening scene half-depicting the murder of Carlo’s father has no temporality, these sequences are not placed within the confines of space or time. It is unclear if this is happening before, after, or while the murders occur or if the gloved hand belongs to Martha or Carlo. In her doctoral dissertation, “Genre, Gender, Giallo: The Disturbed Dreams of Dario Argento,” Colette Jane Balman notes this disorienting lack of temporal signifiers, stating that the murder takes place without any “direct temporal positioning” (198). As Balman explains, this is an uncommon practice in cinema, particularly horror films. Almost every horror film will begin with a title card or some other indicator of temporality. We learn from an inter-diegetic title card that Halloween begins in “Haddonfield, Illinois, Halloween Night in 1963”.

Similarly, in Friday the 13th, the film begins with the lettering “Camp Crystal Lake, 1958”. Furthermore, throughout both films, “the movement from past to present is again signaled through the use of inter-diegetic titles” (198). None of this, however, is present in Deep Red. This suggests then that the trauma of the film is ubiquitous, happening everywhere, to everyone, simultaneously. It is Martha, Carlo, Marcus, Amanda, the 1970s, Benito Mussolini, Adolf Hitler,
the Holocaust, etc. However, fascistic undertones deeply embed all of these candidates for the original trauma or “the ultimate trauma.” Furthermore, while the film’s trauma is undoubtedly not singular because this sequence plays for the first time after the brutal murder of a German-speaking Lithuanian Jewish seeress, the audience’s association – forced by Argento – of the murder with the Holocaust, or more greatly the depravity and devastation of World War II, posits that fascism exists as a latent factor, lingering under the surface of all of these subsequent traumas scenes, rearing its ugly head in the film’s violence, misogyny, and gratuity. It is a trauma of which no one is innocent; everyone is implicated, yet witnessing and, more importantly, identifying guilt proves much more problematic than one may expect.

The assertion of the fascist underpinning of the film’s trauma and the association of Helga’s death is supported by the mise-en-scene and cinematography of her death, which interestingly uses many Futurist techniques. Helga’s grandiose apartment in Rome almost resembles a museum’s corridors, which the founder of Futurism, Marinetti, disparagingly referred to as “cemeteries” in his manifesto (4). However, the paintings seen in the apartment are certainly not Futurist works. Their vast, intense depictions of contorted figures and exaggerated countenances prove them to be proto-expressionist pieces – vaguely Munchian in style – which share Futurism’s abstract sensibilities sans the fervent politics advocating for liberation from the past. Furthermore, expressionism was an art movement born in Germany in the years leading up to the First World War which gained immense popularity during the interwar period. Marcus’ fixation on the paintings later while investigating the crime may become more significant when considering the politics associated with these art movements. However, it seems odd that these works should not be definitively Futurist if this were the point Argento intended to make.
Nevertheless, this conscious decision on the part of the art department, led by Guiseppe Basan, is understood when we realize that Marcus’ fixation on the paintings is only resolved when he realizes the “missing” art, from which he can solve the mystery at the core of the film and identify the killer, is not a painting but a mirror. Furthermore, the fixation of art reflects the fascistic preoccupation with representing itself through simulacra. These paintings signify the scene of the crime rather than the impetus or the culprit of the crime, which is decidedly not art, as it is the mirror. This was, Helga’s attack does not simply represent her death, but the destruction of the apartment, decorated in iconography of the past in decorum and style. This disillusionment with the past will be further discussed in reference to a later scene.

Beyond the paintings in the corridor, Helga’s apartment is also decorated with giant, ornate Jewish iconography. Most notably, we see a menorah and the Star of David. These shapes are projected onto the furniture and walls in large geometric figures, creating eye-catching backgrounds and shadows, such as the one cast by the Star of David end table (Figure 10). The cinematography of this sequence is particularly interesting. There is a stark contrast in the cinematography of the murder scenes and the rest of the film. In this contrast, the film’s politics are further elucidated. During this sequence, the camera adopts the killer’s point of view, now for the second time after we previously saw the killer leave the theater during Helga’s conference. Every
other non-diegetic aspect of the sequence embodies the virility and aggression of the figure through which we witness the murder. The camera shakily hops and flies around the scene, scanning shadows and figures. This, combined with the incredibly fast-paced editing, obscures much of the action of the sequence, as we get various close-ups of the blade penetrating Helga and the scenery around her. That this sequence should be almost oversaturated with indicators of Helga’s Jewishness, and these figures should violently jut in and out of the frame while mostly being depicted in part or in shadows place cue the audience to see her death as informed by her Jewish identity, further strengthening the association between her death and the Holocaust. The soundtrack is similarly decidedly modern and jarring. Argento has traded Hitchcock’s violins – or even synthesizers which feature heavily in many 70s horror soundtracks – for the stylings of progressive rock band Goblin, whose work would become a staple of Argento’s as this is their first of many collaborations. Per the Futurist agenda outlined earlier, these techniques promote speed, dynamism, and aggression. However, these techniques only feature in this scene and other murder scenes. Therefore, Argento employs and deconstructs the methodologies of Futurist art in order to not only associate the killers – and the act of killing – with fascism but to allude to indigenous Italian culpability in the rise of fascism and its dire consequences from the Holocaust to its resurgence as an ever-destructive force in modern (1970s) Italian politics and life.

The next scene I will dissect is particularly engaged with the gender politics of the era when the film was released and is similarly critical of the rampant misogyny and hypermasculinity associated with fascism, particularly under Mussolini. First, I would like to briefly describe Gianna to give the scene in question context. Gianna is the main female character, integral to several of the film’s central plot points, and much of Deep Red’s gender transgressions reveal themselves through her relationship with Marcus. When first introduced,
she appears like a stereotypical, bubbly, vapid love interest for Marcus. She rushes into the crime scene with the flash of her camera and a wide, bright smile.

Interestingly, she refers to Marcus as the “perfect witness,” given the evidence he has provided the police. If it were not for her vacuous characterization, this comment would seem tongue-in-cheek considering how little evidence beyond a “figure in a brown coat” and an alleged missing painting. However, as this scene and many others illustrate, she is a much more intelligent and capable figure than she lets on to be when she is introduced. This verbal evocation of the act of witnessing further calls attention to the point above of the film’s central theme of the failure of the individual and cinema to witness.

This scene occurs immediately after we see Dr. Giordani and the detectives re-enacting Helga’s speech in the theater. This ritualistic rehearsal of the trauma of Helga’s death is the ultimate expression of acting out, given its setting in the grandiose theater. After this sequence, we cut to Gianna and Marcus alone in her apartment. This is perhaps the earliest suggestion that Gianna has much more depth than one might expect from a giallo. Throughout the film, Gianna teases Marcus for his lack of tact, intelligence, and decorum. While a romantic dimension to their relationship is hinted at, it is never explicitly spelled out. For instance, this sequence begins with her belittling Marcus for being skittish and nervous, contrasting her stoic and tenacious demeanor. The scene opens with Marcus buttoning up his shirt, and she facetiously compliments him on being able to do so without his hands shaking from nervousness. She assures him that he is “no longer nervous.” This comment, along with him rebuttoning his shirt, seems to suggest a sexual encounter, but it is never explicitly referred to. Regardless, this brief moment powerfully illustrates the dynamic of power where Gianna is clearly in power. Irritated, he snaps back at her to leave him alone, indicating that in this hypothetical sexual encounter, she has worked to
castrate him. This is further emphasized through Gianna’s androgynous presentation. Both Daria Nicolodi’s soft makeup – save for heavy waterline eyeliner, which has earlier been associated with the killer as we see a sequence of Martha applying it before her identity is revealed, dress – in this scene, her blazer and pants – as well as her confident poise, illustrate her as a dominatrix-like figure, where she is both a sexually oppressive and motherly, loving force to Marcus, illustrating Marcus’ and Italy’s complicated relationship with women and misogyny.

Further Scene Analysis: Digging Up and Working Through

Throughout the film, we see several explicit references to the unearthing of repressed trauma. One of these occurs in the grand villa where Marcus uncovers the mural. In order to enter the villa, which he has identified from the fairy tale book given to him by Giordani, he must first retrieve the keys from the landlord. While there, he briefly speaks to his daughter, who seems kind and curious. After retrieving the keys, the landlord slaps his daughter across the face, calling her a witch. This is a shocking and uncalled-for act until the camera pans, and we see that she impaled a lizard with a pin, leaving it to squirm in misery. Based on her father’s scolds, we can infer that this is not the first time she has done this. This sequence is the first of two major plot points – the second being the ultimate reveal that Carlo stabbed Gianna and attacked Marcus on behalf of his mother – that suggest the generation coming of age after the war is somehow tainted by an original sin passed down from their mothers and fathers. Because their parents have failed to process the trauma of the war, their children have inherited it. These children are given no coping mechanisms or instructions on how to process this trauma, as it is taboo to do anything but repress references of indigenous culpability regarding the war, and therefore have no choice
but to act it out, instilling violent and fascistic tendencies within them, here shown in a graphic, superfluous act of violence upon a docile, meek creature.

Just before Marcus enters, the girl warns him to be careful as there are ghosts in there, telling him that “everybody says so.” Her final statement reveals this trauma to be one that everyone knows about, yet no one investigates, or in other words, processes, out of fear. Marcus finally enters the grandiose mansion and immediately becomes overwhelmed with cobwebs, dust, and grime. The decrepit state of the villa suggests it has been untouched for years, even decades. Furthermore, the architecture is quite confusing and non-intuitive, causing the viewer, vis a vis Marcus, to become lost and claustrophobic during several sequences throughout the film, which the erratic score emphasizes. In this sense, the villa’s structure represents the collective consciousness or the mind of post-war Italy, full of dark spaces and twists and turns that have been deeply repressed behind a beautiful, stoic exterior. Furthermore, the dilapidated state of the interior tells the audience that little has been done to upkeep the building, or more importantly, little has been done to comprehend, work through, or otherwise invoke the trauma of the war and their fascist past.

The audience has been primed to associate this leitmotif with either a murder scene or the connected “deconstructed original trauma” sequences, yet no murder occurs throughout this sequence. Besides acting upon the audience’s anxiety, the score also cues the audience that as Marcus peruses through the house and nears the mural, we are getting closer to a more objective truth regarding the murder at the beginning of the film and the heart of the film’s trauma. For the first time, though, this music stops and is replaced with a heartbeat accompanied by close-up shots of his clammy hands. Argento links the discovery of the mural, which is shown after the close-up of Marcus’ hand, with this visceral response, a corporeal manifestation of the return of
the repressed. Whereas Marcus’ repressed trauma manifests in a bodily response of fear and tension, the return of the repressed of one of two of our “original traumas,” the murder of Carlo’s father, is also literally repressed as only a tiny bit of the mural peaks out from behind the peeling drywall. Referring to the return of the repressed, Freud notes in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* that “the patient cannot remember the whole of what is repressed in him, and what he cannot remember may be precisely the essential part of it” (18). What Freud describes as the most critical component of the repressed trauma, in this case, the killer’s identity, is typically not accessible in the mind because it has been repressed. Therefore, this small bit of mural, which will ultimately reveal the truth, acts as what Gary Needham, in his 2002 journal article, “From Punctum to Pentazet, and Everything in Between,” has identified as the punctum. Needham defines the punctum as “an inconsequential detail that pricks the eye, adding something that the narrative and the mise-en-scene itself can neither contain nor foretell” (3). Both puncta in this film are presented deceitfully. The punctum where we see Martha’s reflection in the mirror is almost impossible to spot without pausing the film. The punctum where we observe a bit of mural behind the wallpaper deceptively suggests a now complete picture to both Marcus and the audience of a child stabbing and killing the father. Both instances are conscious critiques of art simultaneously depicting and hiding World War II and its associated inhumanities, most notably the Holocaust. From what Marcus uncovers, we assume that we now have a full understanding of the trauma. This is revealed to be incorrect, as after Marcus leaves, a piece of drywall falls, revealing a third figure in the mural, Martha.

The now familiar Goblin score returns and brings the audience’s attention to the constructed-ness of the film in a metacritique of cinema. In the process of uncovering the mural, Marcus is hurt twice. Once by himself when he is cut while scraping off the drywall and once
later while leaving the house when a windowpane falls on his head and shatters. Two possible readings of these injuries conveniently correspond to each of the scenes. In the first instance, this injury to Marcus can be seen as representing the difficulty of forcing oneself to work through the trauma which has been previously repressed. In the context of the film, though, it also serves as the fascist or post-fascist state punishing those who attempt to invoke truth or work through the truth, something which would have fatal consequences in fascist Italy. The second of these injuries, when the glass pane seemingly falls out of nowhere onto Marcus’ head, is much more staged and unnatural, feeling almost slapstick in nature. This cues the audience to understand that this is a direct punishment from the film itself, placed there by Argento, rather than from within the physical and societal forces within the film’s universe. Here Argento is punishing Marcus for assuming wholesale understanding from the incomplete mural. While Marcus has initiated the process of uncovering the truth, he prematurely thinks he has completed it and can now move on, finishing his investigation. However, as Freud points out, to understand and work through a repressed trauma, one must “repeat the repressed material as a contemporary experience instead of remembering it as something in the past” (19). In thinking he has now solved and unveiled the complete picture; he has improperly temporally placed the trauma as something that is now complete and in the past. In reality, however, this is not the case, and the trauma remains, as of yet, unprocessed and continues to harm everyone involved in the web of the plot.

Throughout the sequence, the mise-en-scene also suggests that an unprocessed trauma is occupying the home, Marcus’ mind, and the society depicted in the film as a whole. The most significant way the film does this is through all the bare spots on the walls of the hallways where picture frames were once hung. This harkens back to the allegedly missing painting with which Marcus has become fixated after the murder of Helga Ullman. This motif is not only a clue to
Marcus and the viewer to think deeper about the alleged missing painting in order to reveal the true identity of the killer, but also represents a repression, as it indicates the remnants of something that was once there but has since thereafter been forcibly removed by an outside force.

Finally, later in this sequence, Marcus returns to the house by scaling up the terrace and crawling into a window. After realizing one wall is hollow by knocking on it, he knocks it down using a sledgehammer. He then uncovers a secret room in which a desiccated corpse, that of Carlo’s father, is the first chronological victim in the film. The walled off desiccated corpse is the ultimate representation of the repressed trauma as it has literally been compartmentalized in this physical representation of the mind. After uncovering this, Marcus is knocked unconscious by the killer, and Gianna comes to his rescue, saving him from the burning building.

**Contemporary Reactions**

While *Deep Red* was, and still is, met with critical acclaim, the works of Dario Argento, and more generally, the entire giallo subgenre, are not without their critics. The main crux of these criticisms, which are often made of horror films, is that they are an exercise in gratuitous misogyny, allowing a male chauvinist director to vicariously exercise his contempt for women under the guise of cinema. In Christopher Fowler’s blog post published in 2016 entitled “It’s Time to Bury Giallos,” he states that the films contain “staggering amounts of Italian misogyny,” ultimately arguing that the highly sexualized murder of often beautiful young women is grounds for their fall from public favor and cult adoration. These arguments certainly have some validity, especially when aimed at Argento, whose own hand is always the gloved figure carrying out the murders in the film – perhaps connecting him with the fascist figure of the artist-dictator. In fact,
these accusations were so widespread that they inspired his ever-so-controversial pseudo-autobiographical metafictional 1982 *giallo* film, *Tenebrae*, which follows an American author visiting Rome who is faced with similar accusations. In a 2011 interview with Arrow Films, Argento tells the Blu-Ray boutique that the film was a reaction to reports that he was “a misogynist… a criminal… a murderer.” He gives a tongue-in-cheek retort that the subject matters of his films are a way for him to understand his dark side better and “let it speak.”

However, such criticisms and dismissals of the genre ignore that gender and sexual transgression are inherent to the *giallo*. While this certainly is a dangerous artistic expression, as it leaves room for interpretations of misogyny, nevertheless, it is similarly dangerous not to depict such violence. New German Cinema director Rainer Werner Fassbinder faced a similar dilemma when depicting antisemitism and antisemitic caricatures in his incredibly controversial play, “Garbage, the City and Death.” The alternative to displaying these disgusting images would be not representing them, proving even more problematic. In the play, Fassbinder invokes antisemitic stereotypes such as the rich or miserly Jew. Fassbinder intended for the play to illustrate how Germany has exploited Jewish people by explicitly depicting antisemitic images. On this controversy, Anton Kaes, in his book *From Hitler to Heimat*, states that “The utterance of antisemitic stereotypes by a fictional character in a play is obviously used to portray him or her as antisemitic; it can never mean that Fassbinder identified with everything his characters say” (91). As Kaes suggests, it is futile to suggest an author or playwright must agree with the ideologies of his characters, but nevertheless, this work can still act as a catalyst for antisemitic behavior or tendencies. Because of this, the play ended up shortly being closed. This controversy raises the question of how to possibly deconstruct these problematic images without looking at them. The symbolic representation of trauma, as seen in *Deep Red* and the other films in this
thesis, is the answer to this dilemma. Deep Red, and to some extent Fassbinder, want to
deconstruct antisemitic imagery, but this is not possible without looking at these dangerous
images. Deep Red engages with these images through the use of symbols, metaphors, and
allegories allows the viewer to interact with and understand fascism, antisemitism, etc., without
engaging in the exploitation or sensationalization of fascism and its victims.

Psychoanalytic Theory

Deep Red is a crime story, a whodunnit, that takes the audience down a rabbit hole of
murder upon murder. At its center is the question of guilt, but also, what is the original crime?
How did this cycle of violence begin, and what are the psychological reasons? Deep Red has
several references to psychology and psychoanalysis, and the film even opens at a
parapsychology conference. Further, Dr. Giordani tells us that when the killer kills, he must
recreate specific conditions to trigger the release of “animus,” suggesting the killer and the film
has suppressed, unprocessed, and pent-up anger as well as trauma. Finally, when Gianna asks
why he likes to play piano, Marcus jokingly replies that his psychologist would suggest that
when he bangs on the keys, he is “bashing in the teeth of his father.” Argento is all but begging
the audience to psychoanalyze him and the text with this supersaturation of references.

The killer, or more precisely, the film, is clearly acting out a repressed trauma, as Dr.
Giordani suggests. The film endows the process of “acting out” or “working through” with great
power, as they only receive verifiable insight into the crimes and the identities of the killer(s)
when they themselves act out or recreate – and subsequently deconstruct – the murders. When
Dr. Giordani is investigating the death of Amanda, his “a-ha” moment regarding the killer’s
identity only comes when he recreates the crime scene by turning on the hot faucet and bath
water to fog up the mirror upon which Amanda has written. He is echoing in practice what he suggested the killer is doing earlier in the film. He is recreating the specific conditions of the murder to unveil the animus of the killer, which has literally been suppressed by the cold air erasing Amanda’s writing. Ultimately, though, this “acting out” is unsuccessful, as Amanda dies before she can write the name or description of her murderer. Dr. Giordani is shortly thereafter murdered.

All of this textual discussion of an “acting out” of trauma raises the question, what is the original trauma? The film offers two scenes that could represent the moment of the original trauma, which has set all the other traumas in motion. Each of these is constructed in a highly stylized, incredibly complex manner. There is Martha’s murder of her husband, which serves as the original trauma for the young Carlo. We also witness the murder of Helga, which acts as an original trauma for our protagonists. Interestingly, both serve as an original trauma for the viewer, who sees the murder of Martha’s husband first – given that it is the film’s cold open and takes place 20 years before the rest of the film. However, narratively the murder of Helga is the impetus of the film’s mystery plot and is the first we see through the point of view of our protagonist.

“Original Trauma”

Martha’s murder of her husband is in itself ambiguous and reveals the film’s progressive gender politics. As her young son, Carlo, looks on, Martha takes on the role of the penetrator as she aggressively stabs her husband, but she also embodies the figure of the castrating mother. From a classically psychoanalytic perspective, the film further manifests Martha’s castration threat to Carlo in his homosexuality, which is revealed to Marcus – and the audience – when his
mother tells him the address where he can find Carlo. Here, Marcus finds Carlo in bed with another man. Carlo’s homosexuality becomes further important when discussing the post-war stereotype of the fascist man as having suppressed homoerotic tendencies. This progressive sexual dimension is not unique to *Deep Red*. As described above, over the years, the *giallo* subgenre has gained the reputation of solely featuring men violently murdering women. However, as in the case of this film, the killers are just as often women as they are men. Furthermore, these women kill both women and men, and their motives typically lay outside the realm of men, as will be discussed in subsequent chapters. This role reversal is especially potent in these films as the fascist myth and its associated misogyny came back in vogue during the 1970s.

Martha herself does not read her murderous act as castration, however. For her, this is an exercise in female empowerment. At the film’s end, she reveals to Marcus that she killed her husband because he intended to institutionalize her for allegedly being hysterical. This transformative and violent act is a blatant rejection of the misogynist characterization that Le Bon, the Futurists, and later, the fascists, promulgated, suggesting women are hysterical and need to be tamed. Through this murder, the film returns power to the woman after her husband – and society – are deemed incompetent. Furthermore, this return of power happens at the hands of a woman, who overcomes and dominates the male figure in the scene, something the fascists suggested was impossible.

*Deep Red* nevertheless makes us – the audience – unreliable witnesses to this murder scene. We only see the stabbing through the shadows projected on the wall. Because we hear the sound of a woman screaming – and indeed, because of the conventions of the horror genre – we assume that we are witnessing a man killing a woman. Argento continuously relies on the
problematic expectations of the audience, which would suggest the killer is male. Whether it be through these projections, mirrors, or drawings, the film is constantly constructing and critiquing the conventions of horror films; he even goes as far as framing the mirror as a piece of artwork. Here, he cues the audience to recognize their shortcomings as witnesses, as each sequence leads us to the incorrect conclusion. The film’s metatextual critique underscores the power of the horror film as the most adequate medium for depicting these traumas. Unlike other genres, such as melodrama, horror does not allege to offer wholesale understanding or comprehension of the subject matter. Instead, the horror film engages the audience, allowing them to draw their own conclusions while presenting both the viewer and the medium’s inadequacies.

The second original trauma scene is the murder of medium Helga Ullman, which is vital to the narrative and the film’s construction as a firmly post-war – and post-fascist – critique of the state of Italy. Following her appearance at the paranormal conference, we then see Helga in her apartment, where an intruder shortly thereafter enters and murders her. Her murder is presented as unnecessary, however. Helga sensed “murderous” thoughts in the room but did not make any attempt to identify the killer. If anything, our killer drew more attention to themselves by leaving the auditorium following Helga’s revelation than she did herself.

Interestingly, Helga is made an inadequate witness to her own trauma (she never saw them), and the viewer is also left in the dark about the killer. This ambiguity regarding the murderer reflects fetishized narratives of the Italian nation following the war regarding their culpability. One good example of such a narrative is the official Italian insinuation, which suggests Italy’s history of antisemitism was imported from Germany and not of its own volition.

In Argento’s *Deep Red* and much of his other work, “seeing” does not necessarily align with viewing the truth, as we have already discussed regarding the mirror and the shadows of the
murder in the opening scene. In her “vision,” Helga both sees the murderer and their perverse thoughts and does not see her own fate. Similarly, in the mirror, Marcus both sees and does not see the murderer. This is heavily emphasized by the editing and cinematography of Helga’s death scene as it is split into two halves by a sequence where Marcus talks to a drunk Carlo. In the first half, as is traditional with the genre, we see the murder from the killer’s point of view. However, in the second half, we watch from Marcus’ perspective as Helga is smashed through her apartment window. Unlike Marcus, the audience sees all the pieces of the puzzle. Like Marcus, though, we are still incapable of being reliable witnesses to the crime, as it is not until the end that we decipher the killer's identity.

**David Hemmings and Gender Politics**

The casting of the film opens up some interesting questions about gender politics. Casting English actor David Hemmings as our protagonist, Marcus Daly is more significant than it may seem. Nine years prior, David Hemmings starred in Michelangelo Antonioni’s 1966 *Blow Up*, which follows a relatively similar narrative of Hemmings – who plays the protagonist Thomas –, a photographer, investigating what he believes to be a crime, which he allegedly witnesses through the lens of the camera. His character is a womanizing misogynist “cool guy,” embodying the mod era of London fashion and aura. *Deep Red* deconstructs masculinity through the casting of Hemmings, who became a symbol of womanizing masculinity because of *Blow Up*. This makes his humiliation at the hands of Gianna even more potent and transgressive, as his male ego is continuously stunted throughout the film. Gianna consistently outsmarts him, ridicules his fragile masculinity, and beats him several times in an arm-wrestling match – to which he responds that she “cheated.” She even has to save him once when he is unconscious in the
burning Gothic home. His character in *Deep Red* is not allowed to get away with the macho activity of *Blow Up*, around which David Hemmings made his fame.

**Deconstructing Futurism**

The film’s formal structure also opens ways to understand how these films deconstruct the Futurist art described and shown earlier. Many elements critical to the only existing Futurism film, *Thaïs*, also appear in Dario Argento’s works and other *gialli*. For example, the cats heavily featured in *Thaïs* have become a staple of *giallo*, which play a significant role narratively and symbolically in Argento’s *giallo The Cat o’ Nine Tails*, which does not feature literal cats but invokes images of them, and Luigi Comencini’s *The Cat*. Furthermore, the genre is renowned for its aурatic quality, often blurring reality and fiction, inspiring future surrealist works. In these ways, the *giallo* subgenre, which emerged as the post-war generation came of age, may be a rejuvenation of the Futurist movement, endorsing its politics through its controversial portrayals of women.

These elements that infatuated the Futurists are now, decades later, being thrown back at the audience but presented in a horrific manner, exposing the machinations of the art movement’s ideology as rancid, predatory, and destructive. Any conception of beauty, which the Futurists so deeply perverted, is torn away from death, destruction – and symbolically, war – and is returned to the feminine. Furthermore, in Dr. Giordani’s death scene, he is distracted by a mechanized doll that explodes in his face. In this sense, the weaponization and mechanization of the doll, which is frequently featured throughout the film, is representative of the Futurists’ – and the fascists’ – weaponization of the machine and further how the art took on its own form, which was uncontrollable by the Futurists, escaping their ideology.
Finally, it is not Marcus, Gianni, or even themselves, that kill the antagonists, Martha and Carlo, but the machine. In both cases, seemingly by chance of fate, they are killed by machines, saving Marcus and Gianna from their harm. As Carlo flees the police, he gets caught on a garbage truck, which drags him through the streets before he is run over by a car, in an almost comical reversal of Marinetti’s fatal car crash that birthed the art movement. Subsequently, Martha dies when her necklace gets caught on a mechanized elevator, which decapitates her. Not only do both of these present a deconstruction of the Futurist’s idolization of the machine, as it is what causes their destruction, but is also a critique of their often-titillating descriptions of the machine, as Martha’s death catches her halfway between orgasm and terror.

Reading Carlo simply a puppet of Martha’s would be consistent with fetishized narratives about the fascist past and further endorse them. The idea of one character being the mindless executioner of a mastermind villain has existed since the beginning of the genre. It has been used to critique militarism and propaganda, with icons of the genre such as Cesare in *Cabinet of Dr. Caligari* and Norman Bates in *Psycho* being two notable examples. However, in *Deep Red*, this doubling of the villain is not used to exculpate either Carlo or Martha. While Carlo attempts to explain himself that he is a victim of his circumstances, neither Marcus nor the film forgives him as he is almost immediately and brutally killed following this revelation as his head is crushed by an oncoming car. Similarly, Martha dies at the end of the film. Interestingly, she dies after her pearl necklace is caught in the elevator shaft. This not only suggests the self-destructive and violent nature of fascism but also seems to be a critique of class and wealth, facing a similarly mechanical death.
The Punctum

Dario Argento’s *Deep Red* and several other *giallo* works, such as *The Beyond*, heavily feature paintings as an aesthetic staple and a significant plot point. The paintings seen in Helga’s apartment are certainly not Futurist works. Their vast, intense depictions of contorted figures and exaggerated countenances prove them to be proto-expressionist pieces, which share Futurism’s abstract sensibilities sans the fervent politics advocating for liberation from the past. Furthermore, expressionism was an art movement born in Germany in the years leading up to the First World War, which gained immense popularity during the interwar period. Marcus’ fixation on the paintings may become more significant when considering the politics of these art movements. As previously stated, these artworks, especially the “missing” painting, are incredibly important to uncovering the killer’s identity. Marcus’ epiphany regarding the paintings and the mirror which bore Martha’s reflection is what Needham calls the punctum.

Here, Needham is describing, what I believe to be, what separates horror representations of the war and the Holocaust from those of other genres. Fixating on these puncta or minute details invites the audience to see its place within the “big picture” but does not pretend to capture the entire scope of these tragedies. In doing so, films that utilize what Needham calls the punctum acknowledge that these events are unrepresentable and ineffable. Nevertheless, they encourage the work of interacting with these traumas from an angle focusing on one single aspect. Martha’s reflection in the mirror is almost uncatchable, and only really visible when the frame is paused. This tiny flash of Martha’s face, though, is what liberates Marcus’ mind on focusing on the whole. Before, when idly imagining the full painting in the mirror, as the unaware viewer stares at the screen watching a melodramatic narrativized version of the Holocaust be spoon-fed to them, he lacks complete understanding. Not only does he lack
understanding, but he misinterprets what he sees. This verifies the point earlier made that viewers of films like *Schindler’s List* are left worse off than before.

In this sense, these jarring consequential details that are present in *Deep Red* not only educate the viewer and engage them politically, but call into question what they think they already know about events such as the Holocaust. These puncta isolate a minute point but emphasize its connections to each character and aspect of the film. The puncta in *Deep Red* tell the viewer of the pervasiveness of fascism in modern Italy and everyone’s inherent culpability, including the viewer’s. Furthermore, the use of the punctum in the film vitally emphasizes the Holocaust not as a singular past event, but as a series of interconnected forces that continue to insidiously manifest themselves in a myriad of forms such as denial, antisemitism, and fetishized narratives.

**Italian Feminism**

Finally, despite the misogyny displayed in the film, *Deep Red* is engaged with feminist conjecture. To further understand how *Deep Red* functions as a feminist film, I will briefly discuss the history of feminist movements under Mussolini and in the post-war years. Leading up to Mussolini’s ascension to power, there were several successful feminist movements and organizations within Italy that made part of the nation’s politics quite progressive for the time. For instance, several achievements were made throughout the latter half of the nineteenth century, including the admittance of women to Italian universities, equal inheritance for women, and property rights. The first national feminist congress was organized in 1911 and advocated for divorce rights. In the following years, just before the rise of fascism, women were granted economic autonomy, and public offices were opened to women for the first time.
Just as suffrage and other desirable rights became attainable, the movement was devastated by Mussolini’s appointment to the office of Prime Minister in 1922. Feminism movements were heavily suppressed, and much of the already described misogynist conjecture was promulgated by the Futurists, fascists, and Mussolini. It would not be until after the end of the war in 1945 that women were again granted full suffrage in Italy. However, much of the misogynist ideology lingered after the death of Mussolini and the fall of the fascist regime. The 1970s would see a progressive second-wave feminist movement in Italy, with the first female-only feminist group *Rivolta Femminile* founded in 1970. These groups were noted for being particularly effective in their tactics, especially in the context of the global feminist movement.

This redefinition and reclamation of femininity that rocked 1970s Italy is present in the film through the character of Gianna and this sequence after the brief interaction, as mentioned earlier. When Gianna notes the importance of a woman’s work, as she works tirelessly as a journalist, Marcus becomes quick to anger and disgruntledly exclaims that women are “fundamentally different from men, they’re weaker, gentler.” After this, Gianna laughs in his face at the prospect of his assertion. This is a further example of her humiliation of him, which is underlined by the casting of David Hemmings as a figure of peak masculinity and charisma. She then challenges him to an arm-wrestling match to prove that women are not inherently weaker. He then scoffs at her and refuses, signaling his threatened masculinity. When she insists, she agrees and immediately beats him. He then condescendingly declares that she cheated. While she

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9 For details about the lives of women under Italian fascism, see Victoria De Grazia’s book *How Fascism Ruled Women: Italy, 1922-1945*.

10 To read more about the feminist movement during this era, see Maud Anne Brack’s book *Women and the Reinvention of the Political: Feminism in Italy, 1968-1983*. 
is seated and he is standing throughout this sequence, it is unquestionable that she is the one in power. She maintains stern eye contact with him as he flinches and stutters, babbling like a child about the unfair parameters of their “game.” This dynamic is so evident that she does not need to stand to gain physical dominance over him, as she, in her relaxed state, still holds power over Marcus. Furthermore, her laid-back position and teasing banter further indicate a sexual undertone to his emasculation, which is the complete antithesis of the psychosexual dominance Le Bon, Marinetti, Mussolini, and the fascists advocated for, where women were representative of an object to be dominated over with ease by the Herculean male hero. Here, Gianna denies that from Marcus, with little to no effort, which is incredibly frustrating to him and the gender politics that have lingered from the fascist era.

He then again condescendingly explains the game’s “rules,” which he makes up himself, and she flippantly agrees. After more of a struggle, she once again beats him, which causes him to lose his temper and shout at her again. By maintaining her composure and refusing to let him upset her, she denies him her subordination and robs him of his machismo. Finally, sensing his rage, she superficially reassures him that he is a “big, strong male,” which further frustrates him. After he forces a subject change, she asks when they will continue their investigation. He insists they will not be doing anything together as there are some things one cannot do seriously with “liberated women.” She then agrees to make a competition out of the investigation and attempt to solve the killer’s identity on their own. This is a telling decision as throughout the rest of the film, she will continue to “come out on top,” outsmarting him and even saving his life on several occasions, most notably when she drags him from the burning villa. Finally, before he leaves the apartment, she asks if she will see him again “tonight,” perhaps suggesting a sexual advance on her part. This final jab of emasculation is emphasized when after he leaves, she adjusts her blazer
and twirls a cigarette between her fingers before bringing it to her lips. The final button on the scene and final word of this discussion of liberated women, cements her successful emasculation of Marcus with her masterful manipulation of the classically phallic symbol. The film ends this conversation with Gianna in the lead and Marcus cowering away, displaying the film’s covert yet powerfully progressive gender politics.
Final Remarks

Before concluding this thesis, I would like to return to Rainer Werner Fassbinder and his experience with his controversial play “Garbage, the City, and Death.” In writing and staging this play, Fassbinder faced the problem of representing the unrepresentable and illuminating the incredibly taboo anti-Semitism in post-war Germany. Fassbinder’s portrayal of archetypes, such as the “miserly Jew” on stage, was met with immense backlash, as it was an image the post-war Germans did not want to interact with. Nevertheless, in order to comprehend the nation’s fascist past and the ramifications of Nazism, modern Germans must not forget these images. In fact, keeping these images and archetypes alive in a pedagogical sphere is imperative. This presents a fraught dilemma for the filmmaker, author, playwright, etc., of how to possibly represent the unrepresentable. If we invoke images and iconography of these traumas in our cinema or literature, it is frequently offensive and distasteful while, on the other hand, it can be seen as romanticizing or minimizing. However, if we do not reference these traumas in our media, they will be forgotten.

In this thesis, I have hypothesized that the answer to this dilemma exists in the allegorical and the symbolic, which are vital to the horror genre. All of the films referenced in this thesis do the same work that Fassbinder set out to do in his play but do so in a roundabout way. Horror films force the viewer to come face to face with these taboos and repressed traumas, which must be done. Modern audiences must be made to look at these images. However, the horror film allows this to occur, almost from an angle. These films ask the viewer to investigate traumas, ideologies, and taboos repressed by modern societies in a way that requires active participation rather than passive consumption. This arduous process can be likened to Perseus’ slaying of Medusa. In order to kill the lethal gorgon without looking at her, Perseus approached her by
looking at her reflection in Athena’s shield. Only then was he able to behead and defeat her. In this sense, staring directly at the horrific fascist visage, which Fassbinder unsuccessfully attempted, is lethal. It results only in misunderstanding, romanticization, or an ignorant sense of comprehension, as discussed earlier in reference to Schindler’s List. In critiquing Italy and Japan’s fascist past (and revisionist present) through allegorical representations and by deconstructing and repiecing many aspects of the past fascist regimes, the filmmakers of horror films are polishing the shield of Athena, allowing for a clearer yet roundabout mastery.

To draw further upon Gary Needham’s work, this shield becomes the textual punctum, in which audiences grasp the vast and pernicious consequences of fascism by exploiting one minute detail rather than attempting to present a complete picture, which is impossible. Rather than attempt to portray the entirety of these traumas on screen, the punctum brings clarity to the viewer by forcing them to look through the lens of one aspect and therefore imagine the remainder by locating this aspect in the scheme of the whole.

The horror film lends itself to the punctum, which acts as a sort of MacGuffin in these films, given the genre’s proclivity towards twisted, surreal, nebulous narratives and convoluted mysteries. These “puncta” act as one thread in an intricate web of trauma, memory, and culpability that, when focused on, allows the entire web to become undone.

The horror film promotes a sort of Brechtian interaction with the text, in which the genre’s tendency towards the surreal and dream-like alienates the viewer, allowing them more room to recognize the film as a metatextual critique of post-war society. These aspects of the horror film allow them to be imbued with profound ideology in a more nuanced fashion that perhaps paradoxically, despite being less accessible, is more readily consumed, as the viewer must engage with it to reveal it.
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