

Mario Bava, Flourishing in Captivity

Written by Samuel Zimmerman
Tuesday, 18 September 2012 15:29



A popular sentiment: Limitations fuel creativity. In cinema, it's often a question of budget, or producer notes, or a list of things you can't do that ultimately brings out what you will do to be marveled at.

Recently, I gorged myself on the films of the esteemed Mario Bava, Godfather and patron saint of Italian horror. I dove into three pictures to familiarize myself with a filmmaker who until recently, I had a limited grasp on. The films, selected by Kino for new Blu-ray releases—BLACK SUNDAY, LISA AND THE DEVIL, HATCHET FOR THE HONEYMOON—all stem from various points in the maestro's career, but when viewed back-to-back-to-back seem a perfect and poignant representation of his life and work. And when coupled with the accompanying commentaries/context, leave one wondering just how the aforementioned adage applies to psychological and personal limitations as well.



Lush, surreal, hypnotic, stylish, colorful, meandering, reverent, singular; the list of hallmarks and tropes of the then-coming wave of Italian terror Bava encompassed and pioneered goes on, and are expectedly ever-present in the three films that span 13 years of his oeuvre. What's most exciting about them though is just how many of the flourishes feel intimate to Bava, himself.

For all his creative genius, from directing to visual FX, personality-wise Bava is described over the course of commentaries by Video Watchdog editor Tim Lucas and producer Alfredo Leone as reserved (prudish, even), a quiet homebody who famously refused to leave Italy. Was he

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trapped there, by this refusal? A look at *BLACK SUNDAY*, *HATCHET FOR THE HONEYMOON* and *LISA AND THE DEVIL* could suggest so. The meat of each film is steeped in and confined to sprawling, historic homes, shrouded in old-world macabre, unable to escape their own legacies. Barbara Steele's Katia (*BLACK SUNDAY*), the spitting image of the condemned witch Princess Asa, is doomed to—even if for a moment—resurrect her family's history/misdeeds. In *HATCHET FOR THE HONEYMOON*, John Harrington (Stephen Forsyth) is restricted by both the house and business he inherited from his murdered mother, as well as his own blurry psyche that drives him to kill new brides. *LISA AND THE DEVIL*, meanwhile, feels the culmination of this recurring theme. A tale of an ensemble chained to a manor of misery, Lisa (Elke Sommer), the seeming reincarnation of one murdered Eleanor is drawn back to her home on a surreal journey by the devil, while her young would-be lover Max, is driven mad by his desire to leave. Of course, they're all in the hands of Satan in a cruel illusion as the fantastic opening titles foreshadow and a motif of puppetry/dummies suggest.

This quality of the inescapable, or the inevitable, is what lends Bava's work so much dread. With his own passion palpable, the audience too feels the consequences are dire, which cannot often be said for some of the visually exciting, but often shallow, wholesale rip-off nature of later Italian genre work. So, in the face of the requisite off-dubbing and the old-fashioned charm (*BLACK SABBATH* is positively Hammer-esque), Bava's own energy and deathly grip on the terrors of fate prevail. What's more is just how willing Bava is to explore these aspects that seemingly frighten or hold him down. He may not leave the home, but he and his camera know it deeply, roving the halls and rooms fluidly, animatedly.

Bava was 46 years-old when he directed *BLACK SUNDAY*, his debut feature. This feels telling, as if he had settled into who he was, and always would be; a peace that allowed him to do such exploring of said themes and an acceptance—as the dummies and mannequins in both *LISA AND THE DEVIL* and *HATCHET FOR THE HONEYMOON* indicate—that we're all pawns in the hands of the universe and the consequences of our choices. Nowhere, do these two hit harder than *HATCHET*. John Harrington is a man imprisoned by his insanity and childhood trauma and finally, and most wildly, punished for that which this trauma drives him to do. In an incredible, transcendent twist, Harrington becomes literally haunted by the specter of a wife he so callously murdered for refusing to leave him alone.



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Of course, not all of Bava's films come with such a personal signature (luckily, most retain his visual flair), but with several standout works that do, it certainly isn't difficult to understand his own legacy (which perhaps, ironically, Italian genre may feel beholden to) or significance far outside a country he barely left.

Kino's fantastic new editions of BLACK SUNDAY, HATCHET FOR THE HONEYMOON and LISA AND THE DEVIL/THE HOUSE OF EXORCISM are available now.