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**Published version**

O'BRIEN, Shelley (2014). Scoring violence : the importance of Riz Ortolani's music in Don't Torture A Duckling (1972)and Cannibal Holocaust (1980). In: Italian Horror Cinema: An International Film Conference, Luton, 9-10 May 2014. (Unpublished)

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This paper is dedicated to the memory of Riz Ortolani who died 23<sup>rd</sup> January this year aged 87.

**Scoring Violence: The importance of Riz Ortolani's music in *Don't Torture a Duckling* (Lucio Fulci, 1972) and *Cannibal Holocaust* (Ruggero Deodato, 1980)**

Lucio Fulci and Ruggero Deodato have created some of the most violent and disturbing images in Italian horror cinema, and both directors have achieved a certain level of notoriety due to this focus on gruesome excess. Although scholarly work has been written about Fulci and Deodato, one aspect of their films which is rarely discussed in any detail, is the way that music is used quite specifically to heighten the impact of their savage set-pieces, as well as to provide continuity and coherent underscoring of the films' themes and imagery as a whole.

Scoring in the horror genre has been the subject of at least two books, but the importance of Italian horror scoring is under-researched even though it often has a significant role to play in these films (for example, the work of Ennio Morricone, Fabio Frizzi, and Goblin). In light of this, my paper will focus on Riz Ortolani's scoring of two key examples of Italian horror cinema - Fulci's *Don't Torture a Duckling* and Deodato's *Cannibal Holocaust*. I will consider how important Ortolani's scoring is in terms of complementing fully the psychological and physiological impact created by the imagery in these two films.

One of the only scholarly articles which addresses music scoring in Italian horror in any detail is Kay Dickinson's 'Troubling Synthesis: The Horrific Sights and Incompatible Sounds of Video Nasties' (2007). Dickinson notes that, although Italian horror from the 70s and 80s has received plenty of academic attention, the focus has been on imagery alone and that "...these films are more than elaborate spectacles; the bewilderment and shock they engender are partially generated by their equally startling soundtracks" (p. 168). She also claims that, unlike most films (horror or otherwise) they do not rely on the usual "idea of music as a support system for the visual imagery and the

narrative agenda". Dickinson therefore contends that we need to think about "the specially written score that refuses to reiterate a closely empathetic message about the film's action" (p.169) and further argues that this can present us with "ideologically laden contradictions" (p.184). She is suggesting that these films deliberately resist a more "normal", and hence acceptable and understandable form of scoring violence and therefore, in turn, this disallows any straightforward engagement or empathy from the viewer. A factor which Dickinson asserts would have been one more underlying reason as to why these films were condemned during the "video nasties" moral panic in the UK.

However, although Dickinson's claims regarding the apparently contradictory nature of the scoring alongside the imagery are valid, I will argue that it is more complicated than this in regard to the viewer response – especially in the two scores by Ortolani. Although some of the examples Dickinson uses to support her argument - such as Argento's *Tenebrae* (Simonetti-Morante-Pignatelli) and Lenzi's *Cannibal Ferox* (Donati and Maglione) which at some points do feature wildly incongruous scoring (in particular, pounding disco music!) - it is not quite as straightforward as it may seem, even in *Cannibal Ferox*. This is significant, because although the use of conflicting sound and image is an important feature of the scoring of these films, it is not the only technique which is used. Even when it is at its most overt, arguably, there are a range of possible responses from the viewer. David Laurencic in 'The Disturbing Art of Sight and Sound in Ruggero Deodato's *Cannibal Holocaust*' follows Dickinson's line of argument when he states that "because a film's symphonic score tends to manipulate our emotions in ways that lend support to its ideas, we find *Holocaust's* deviation awkward." This is a problematic claim, not least because it assumes that all viewers will be manipulated by music score in the same way. In fact, response to music score can be just as much to do with the contextual factors affecting the individual as their reading of a film's narrative might be. Furthermore, because music has the power to generate a wide range of physical and emotional responses in the listener - which can be related to tonality, pitch, timbre, instrument

articulation, and, of course musical connotation – then it seems too simplistic to suggest that the scoring in these films functions to either distance or dislocate the viewer.

Nonetheless, Dickinson focuses on this incongruous aspect of the scoring, and one key element she highlights in order to support her claim, is the use of the synthesizer. Noting that electronic scoring has often been used to represent “the unearthly, non-human, and supernatural” and also that in Kubrick's *A Clockwork Orange* “we are encouraged to read the instrument as an overtly cold and distancing technology” (p.174) There is no doubt that the electronic sound of the synthesizer is also featured extensively in scoring in 70s and 80s Italian horror - as are the electric guitar, electric bass, and drums – but I contend that the way the synth is used in these particular films is more complicated than she suggests. Dickinson also claims that because of the "synth's lack of depth and a certain sonic flatness" it is oppositional to the scenes of violence and therefore leads to a lack of empathy, or at the very least it has a distancing effect, unlike our usual understanding of scoring techniques. Again, I would argue that the synth does not lack depth – it can achieve many textures when programmed properly, and can serve as one more layer of meaning in scoring. Ortolani's work is far from reliant upon any straightforward juxtaposition of violent imagery with supposedly inappropriate musical instrumentation. He uses synthesisers, electric bass, and electronic effects such as the Echoplex, but he cleverly weaves them in with other sounds and textures in order to create a great deal of depth, and this results in a complex relationship between what we see, what we hear, and how we respond to it.

Ortolani's first film score (along with Nino Oliviero) for *Mondo Cane* (Cavara, Jacopetti & Prospero) in 1962, featured many of the techniques he would later use in his horror scoring, and he also retained them in the other films he scored for Jacopetti and Prospero - *Africa Addio* (1966) and *Goodbye Uncle Tom* (1971). Deodato has talked about *Mondo Cane* as an influence on *Cannibal Holocaust* and has openly stated in interviews that he asked Ortolani to score his film because he

"liked [the] dramatic scenes with sad music" in *Mondo Cane*.

There is much more to it than simply positioning sad music alongside dramatic scenes, however, and Dickinson is correct in saying that we need to explore this relationship further. She does acknowledge, for example, that in *Cannibal Holocaust* "the soundtrack is instrumentally, generically and tonally complex" (p.180), but, she is more concerned with debating the "clash between these distinct and different languages" of music and film and wants to probe the "ambivalence that erupts out of the clash." Although there may be a "clash" of sorts, I am not entirely convinced by the argument that the scoring in these films engenders an ambivalent response. As I noted previously, responses to music can be wide ranging and varied, it can resonate in different ways, and therefore the relationship created between the film, the film music, and the viewer is a complicated one. This needs to be interrogated more fully in order to establish exactly how the apparent musical incongruity can actually serve to enhance the emotional and physical response to the violence, rather than working to distance the viewer from it.

In order to articulate how important Ortolani's music is in terms of this complex process of viewing, listening, and responding, this paper will now focus on his two scores for Fulci and Deodato.

*Don't Torture A Duckling* is set in the rural Italian town of Accendura, and it has been noted for its unsettling narrative, which features a Catholic priest who kills young boys rather than allowing them to become corrupted by outside influences. The town itself is representative of the general themes in the film – externally it seems pure, innocent and peaceful; internally it is corrupt, violent and contradictory. Similarly, Ortolani's score is representative of these factors. Moments of beauty are contrasted with brutality, the old clashes with the new, innocence clashes with corruption. The opening panoramic shots of the stunning rural landscape are overlaid with a solitary voice singing a seemingly indigenous melody - we are not shown a diegetic source – but it is an archaic sound well

suiting to the images, and, provides a sense of space and place which is a common function of film music. However, the sound and image are soon ruptured by a shot of hands frantically digging in the earth to reveal a tiny human skeleton. Sudden, dissonant, reverberating string bursts violently punctuate the image as the strings are played through an Echoplex. This violent motif – an electronically modified version of the “stingers” or “stabs” common to the horror genre – sets the tone for the rest of the film and its themes. The motif not only disturbs the tranquil images with its suddenness, but the extended electronic echo also seems mismatched with the rural space. However, it is not intended to disconnect the viewer – because, as all film music does to some extent, it trains the viewer/listener to have a certain set of expectations, however confused they may be initially by unusual sonic techniques. This short sequence is important in revealing the methods being used by Ortolani in scoring Fulci's film. If viewers are trained straight away to anticipate musical cues which at first appear unusual or incongruent with the image then, arguably, their responses could be quite different to those claimed by Dickinson and Laurencic. In fact, the physical and emotional response can be stronger, for example in viewers who admit to feeling nauseated, and it is not simply generated by the horrific imagery, but also by the accompanying music.

Ortolani's score proceeds to develop in tandem with the story. He adds in more musical devices commonly associated with horror scoring – low bowed and high pitched tremolo strings, and dissonant modernist piano chords. Sometimes these are used in isolation, sometimes in conjunction with each other, but they often function in a conventional manner by underscoring events. He also utilises the common stereotype of a saxophone and softly rhythmic cymbals to connote the sensuality on display from Barbara Bouchet's character, Patrizia. More significantly, however, Ortolani interweaves a beautiful melodic theme, which evolves throughout the score and works on several levels. Sometimes it is played on lushly orchestrated strings; as a musical chime; and whistled by one of the boys; but, most strikingly of all, it becomes an actual song integrated diegetically into the on screen events. Each time it is heard, it is in relation to the theme of

innocence and its most powerful rendering is by Italian singer, Ornella Vanoni, when used at a pivotal moment. It is remarkable in its impact and demonstrates how training the viewer/listener at the start can prepare them for even the most incongruous positioning of image in relation to music. By this point, the film has presented viewers with several potential suspects for the murders. The most obvious suspect is Macciara (Florinda Balkan). Condemned as a “witch”, she arouses suspicion, but is actually a tragic innocent. In a cinematic tour-de-force pulled off by Fulci and Ortolani, the highlight of the film, visually and aurally, is when Macciara is brutally attacked and killed for her supposed crimes.

Pace, rhythm, timing, performance, and direction are all key elements of the impact. The full sequence lasts around 8 minutes as Macciara walks through the town to the outskirts. A plaintive, haunting, tin whistle plays over bowed strings in a minor key, functioning as conventional underscore representing Macciara's state of mind. However, as she nears the gates to a run down cemetery, having been followed by three men, there is a sudden shift in tone. A car radio blares out a cheerful pop song in English. This suddenly changes to a different record which is even more up tempo. Rhythmic hand clapping ensues as a male voice sings “I've seen a lot of women, but I've never seen a girl like you”. Suddenly one of the men crushes Macciara's hand in the gate. An upbeat brass section riff bursts in as they approach menacingly, the lyrics blasting out, “Crazy about you baby...I've seen a lot of bad things. Things that make me mad”, just before she is brutally attacked with a large metal chain. The irony of the lyrics is apparent as Macciara's flesh is ripped open and graphically oozes blood. As she screams the radio announcer says “let's change the mood now...the lovely voice of Ornella Vanoni”. The shift to Vanoni's clear, powerful, heart breaking Italian vocal - (“Quei giorni insieme a te”) translating as “Such days with you, I do not like to live them again, Such days with you I'd like to forget” - is also ironic given the events taking place and, even if you do not understand Italian, the lamentation is apparent in the vocal tone, the beautiful melody and the dynamic range. The men continue chain whipping Macciara as the song continues.

As the violence crescendos, so does the song, in a way that transcends its diegetic radio source. After the men finally leave her, horribly mutilated, she crawls away to die. Again Vanoni's dynamic changes and the vocal decrescendos in line with Macciara's last dying moments. It is an extremely powerful sequence – violent, tragic, strangely aesthetic, but truly disturbing in the way that it is presented. However, it is far from distancing and it does not generate an ambivalent response. The seeming contradiction of the up tempo pop song and then Vanoni's vocal actually sits perfectly with what is happening on screen – the words are ironic but parallel what is happening, plus the melody functions as tragic underscore. Ortolani has carefully established his principal theme in the lead up to this scene and therefore the viewer/listener is already cued into it, and what it connotes. By this point it has gained significance as it is used in conjunction with the theme of innocence. Here, it resonates even more because of its juxtaposition with a horrendous act. The effect is quite overwhelming on first viewing. Although no other scene reaches these visual and musical heights, the scoring does not waver in its coherence and continuity, and Vanoni's rendition of the theme returns over the end credits as an aural reminder of the events which have taken place. The film would certainly not be as effective without Ortolani's richly textured score and its meticulously developed musical themes and motifs.

When Ortolani was interviewed about his scoring for *Cannibal Holocaust*, he said that he wanted to avoid the clichés of the setting in the Amazon rainforest. He wanted to use a big orchestra with some electronic effects because he was “interested in making a musical comment that was very modern and very striking” but he also wanted the “orchestra to comment musically on the film.” This suggests a desire to create an effective underscore for the images. It also seems that he wanted the instrumentation and orchestration to enhance the themes of the film, noting that he wrote a sort of religious adagio “because it had to give, for the public's sake, the tone of a religious piece”, and equally “pieces that were very violent, very aggressive” in line with the images. Having viewed the film before composing the score, Ortolani recognised that it was essential to make sure the music



worked with Deodato's vision, and not against it.

As with *Duckling*, the principal thing to consider is the opening credits sequence. A softly, plucked acoustic guitar plays an intro, then strings enter along with a steady drum rhythm, electric bass and flutes. The synthesizer is layered over these using a programmed choral sound which does not have a cold or flat timbre at all. In fact, the music has an elegiac feel, especially when combined with helicopter shots of the Amazon river and rainforest. Therefore, it comes as a shock when the film title appears. The two words conjure up a horrific concept, as they have very specific connotations, none of which are positive. So, it is the title which sets up a contradiction here, not the music. What Ortolani is doing again though, is training the viewer early on to expect the unexpected. This music cue, in conjunction with images of serenity, overlaid with a title which resonates with a feeling of horror, is encouraging the expectation that the viewing of this film may be an unsettling experience.

I'm sure I don't need to recount the plot of this film here, so, I will focus on a few necessary points in relation to the score. Key functions of film music can be applied to Ortolani's scoring (despite the incongruity claimed by Dickinson) and he combines conventional techniques with more unusual ones. For example, when we are introduced to anthropologist, Harold Munroe, and his journey to Amazonia, we hear percussive, rhythmic sounds which have no apparent diegetic source (as with the lone voice at the start of *Duckling*). They function as a sonic signifier, a shortcut, to represent the indigenous tribes people (similar to the musical stereotype of Native American chanting, or African drumming). The first main occurrence of musical contradiction would appear to be in the scene where Munroe and his party witness a native Yacumo woman being horribly brutalised before being killed as "punishment for adultery". Low ominous rumblings on a synthesizer are combined with "pows" on syn-drums (a common disco sound as noted by Dickinson) which are then overlaid with richly textured strings playing in a minor key. Using electronic synth sounds here may seem at odds with the atrocity taking place, but due to the aural training in the opening credits, the viewer

has been subtly prepared for this visual and aural onslaught. Not only that, Ortolani scores a combination of dissonant electronic sounds, and the “religious adagio” on desolate strings, in such a way that they reinforce and underscore the violent brutality occurring in a serene environment. This is reminiscent of *Duckling* and the technique is reused throughout the film to support its themes. We see this clash in further scenes of violence committed by the tribespeople – for example, during the enforced abortion scene and the shots of the Yanamomo girl impaled on a pole. More significantly, however, the combination of conventional instrumentation and electronic sounds, is used when Alan Yates and his film crew invade the natural environment on the pretext of making a documentary about cannibals. As they violate every aspects of the space – including real animal slaughter; herding a group of Yanamomo into a straw hut and setting it on fire; and gang raping a Yanamomo girl; the music also effectively rapes the senses. The visual and aural discord is cemented when Alan shouts “It's beautiful!” as the fire rages over the screams and the irony of this is not lost. At times it does have the effect of a physiological and psychological violation - and with good reason – this is a grotesque violation by Alan and his crew. In this way, we can see that Ortolani's scoring - especially in his use of the main melancholic theme - is working with the images and themes of the film. It is not a contradiction.

In the last scene, where the tribe finally turns on the film crew, everything becomes chaotic. The hand-held camera moves wildly, and the score becomes an intense sonic mix - discordant strings with unusual pitch shifts, percussive tribal sounds heard earlier, a descending three note motif on the synth, and syn drum “pows”. Dickinson calls this “positively groovy!” implying the drum rhythms are out of place, but they aren't! The layering up of contrasting motifs, sound textures, and rhythms functions with the scenes of horror not against them, because Ortolani has rigorously trained the viewer/listener to expect this apparent discord between image and sound early on. Therefore, I contend that the most common response to the gruesomely violent scenes in the film is intense revulsion or even nausea, and not ambivalence or distance.

This could be said about many other examples of Italian horror films and their supposedly incongruous scores. Yet, if we watch and listen carefully, the types of musical intervals, the pitch shifts, the dissonance, and even the use of seemingly contradictory instrumentation like the synth – the scoring with the image functions in a not dissimilar manner to other horror scores. Certainly, not all of it is as complex and inventive as Ortolani's work, but more research and analysis needs to be done on this compelling component of Italian horror.