"Sound of Music" (Robert Wise, 1965), is an anthem for smart girls and boys who both see through and find something compelling about plucky British femininity.

When I proposed elbowing my way into this Cinema Journal homage to Dyer despite having been unable to attend the tribute at SCMS Atlanta, I blurted out that I wanted to write about “Richard’s lesbian ducklings.” I didn’t know what I meant by this, except that through his gentle imprint I feel like I know where I’m going when I follow his lead.

Patricia

Dear Sir or Madman

by Louis Bayman

Dear Vice Chancellor, University of London:

I think now that the perpetrator has retired it is time for me to explain the curious fug that emanated for years from the basement of your university. That you were ignorant of the facts was proclaimed by none other than their executor, Professor Richard Dyer, surmising, to what can be described only as cackles by the assembled students, that the college management had “probably no idea” what he was teaching that autumn morning.

Being only an apprentice to the master of these arts, I did not consider it in my power as teaching assistant to obstruct them. For the deceptively titled “European Crime Film” did not broach our Anglo-Saxon legal statutes, or provide deductive skills to a vigilant citizenry, and still less an appreciation of crime as one of the few remaining gentlemanly pursuits. Dyer began an earlier treatise on Brief Encounter (David Lean, 1945) by remarking that there are good films and there are lovely films. But his intention was to emphasize the really, vilely, nasty realms of commoner tastes. I became aware in terror that this peak to his career dissecting popular culture would be devoted to serial killer cinema. Mr. Vice Chancellor! Have you ever wondered what sonic properties are obtained by the squelches during sex with a corpse? Would you care to know how filmmakers achieve realism on a low budget to show two weeks’ worth of bodily decomposition, or the material they study to verify the results? I didn’t think so. Nor, I suggest, did any of the young charges at your institution.

We were taught that if we wanted to know the films with the most deeply affective charge, those least interested in canons of respectability, those most directly visceral in their appeal, then it was to serial killer cinema that we must look. Delirium is not only the product of
disco dancing or the profane divinities of star worship but also the random mayhem of the lust to kill and the charisma of malevolence. We looked to Weimar Germany, whose artists from George Grosz to Otto Dix, whose entertainments from Waxworks (Paul Leni, 1924) to Pandora’s Box (G. W. Pabst, 1929) to M (Fritz Lang, 1931), took as a natural fact the compulsion to Lustmord, for killing as a pleasure that animated the Werewolf of Hanover or the Vampire of Düsseldorf, the trenches of the First World War or the Nazisploitation cycle set amid the horrors of the Second World War.

For, as De Quincey noted, murder may be treated as a moral issue or as an aesthetic one. In recalling—or eliciting—such murderous urges, the artwork achieves a certain power to summon visions of evil realms. This power is literal in the double-twist ending of Tenebre (Dario Argento, 1982), after a crime writer is revealed as a multiple murderer: a shining spike from a metal objet d’art unexpectedly falls and impales him through the stomach while the only person left alive begins to scream—and scream and scream and scream, as the screen fades to black and the final credits appear over the prog rock of Goblin. And she continues to scream. In a film bathed in bright light but whose title means “tenebrous” or gloomy, in a genre whose set-piece killings have the gleeful abandonment of a musical number, it is “as if beneath all the cleverness and wit there is only the inchoate turmoil of terror.”

Navigating past the claims that serial killing defines the nature of humanity, the truth of masculinity, or the condition of modernity, our discovery at the end of it all was that in fact there was no answer. Beyond the big questions of the universe lies the simple inexplicability of the desire to kill and kill and kill again. Feeling overtook reason in art, and rather than discover the meaning of life, we dwelled upon the thrill of death. The violence pushed artistic experience into sublime disorder.

The investigation’s purpose was to take such wickedness seriously, rigorously, while drawing the focus away from high seriousness toward the pleasures of irresponsibility. This led Dyer to make his most shocking confession, disclosing that the cinema he likes “isn’t actually really popular cinema” and that he prefers the classy drama of Claude Chabrol’s Le boucher (1970) to the schlocky exploitation of Lucker the Necrophagus (John Kupferschmidt, 1986) (Figure 1).

Our populist attempts to find some “really good trash” were in vain, and our desire to wallow in the muck of the most truly awful remained unfulfilled. Anyway, the enigmatic nature of human behavior was compensated for by Dyer’s close attention to the ways that cultures construct meanings from it. Thus the frenzy of the Italian giallo film most frequently found horror in the family, an entity as monstrously perverse as it is in need of defense at all costs. Representations in the United Kingdom, from the Ripper on, present a brutalized working class in conflict with a degenerate aristocracy and a clinically cold bourgeoisie. Germany locates its killers in the undergrowth of gothic fairy tales, compelled by metaphysical and sexual forces. While the class-bound British get the serial killers they deserve, Dyer told us, the Germans discover the serial killers they desire.²

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And despite the solace I sought in the exercise of reason, I was sorely delighted by the depravity. Not that I ever managed to achieve the kind of lecturing-as-gesamtkunstwerk that the professor achieved, the stream of art and pop music references, the methodological analysis and pithy quips. Seeing him one day dressed in black, I solemnly inquired if he had been to a funeral, but he replied that it was for the screening of *Man Bites Dog* (Rémy Belvaux, André Bonzel, and Benoît Poelvoorde, 1992), since he color codes his suits according to topic. I knew before accepting the job that the professor had a penchant for imaginative scenes of gruesome pain and Baroque devices of torture. It added a certain frisson to our supervisory sessions. And only the most nostalgic in the academic community would consider humanity an important component in a humanities faculty. It’s just that it all seems so wasteful in these days of the modern university, where the management philosophy of increased academic efficiency reminds us that our first task is to be good producers of outcomes rather than intellectuals inspiring ideas. And to think that this all took place merely yards from Sweeney Todd’s barbershop on Fleet Street, yet we imbibed precisely none of his unsentimental attitude to the handy repurposing of human resources.

With the delight in nastiness and glee in disgust, we were left with a consideration of entertainment that is not utopic, that does not transport the viewer to a world we would particularly wish to escape into. At the end of the course, with collars upturned, the professor and I went our separate ways. My parting words? Whenever I am in the cinema and I hear the sound of flesh torn asunder, Professor, or the modulating pitch of a scream of searing pain, I think of you.

Sincerely,

Louis Bayman
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