When paintings appear in the films of celebrated auteurs such as Peter Greenaway or Rainer Werner Fassbinder, critical debate tends to ask how, rather than if, the inclusion of these works impacts the broader meaning of the film as a whole. But despite the prevalence of painting in horror—from the clichéd moving-eyes-behind-the-portrait as typified in Hammer Horror’s *Theatre of Death* (Samuel Gallu, 1967), to Bernard Rose’s graffiti-laden *Candyman* (1992)—the same questions are not so readily addressed. Perhaps this is due to orthodox considerations of the horror film as a supposedly lowbrow cultural form, rendering art historical analysis a relatively impotent critical pursuit. Alternatively, maybe the hyperactive theatricality of this emphatically visceral body genre invites more well-trod approaches to critically privileged aspects: the repressed that keeps returning, the final girls and the phallic weaponry have all had more than a brief moment in the analytical spotlight. But the appearance of paintings in horror films—particularly recognisable and famous works—encourages readings outside of more popular critical approaches such as psychoanalysis. This article investigates the utility of Dutch Master Johannes Vermeer’s painting *The Love Letter* (1669-70) in cult Italian director Lucio Fulci’s giallo *Sette note in nero* (*The Psychic*, 1977), uncovering a complex relationship that is pivotal to the film thematically and stylistically. While at first glance these two texts may seem random (even anachronistic), *Sette note in nero* suggests that the use of painting in the horror film potentially offers rich insight into a field that, for orthodox film studies at least, has traditionally been considered incapable of such sophistication. As this analysis will argue, the inclusion of recognisable paintings within a horror film such as this encourages a deeper comprehension that reflect the genre’s unique ability to address the mechanics of representation.

**Paint it Black: Art and/in the Horror Film**

Both Angela Dalle Vacche and Susan Felleman agree that the use of recognisable works of art such as painting within the mise-en-scene in narrative films permits an exploration of the broader function of artistic representation from within a film’s own diegesis. For Dalle Vacche, this stems from cinema’s unique ability to blur “the distinction between high art and popular culture,” rendering film uniquely able “to challenge not just painting in isolation but rather the whole system of the arts, thus disclosing the possibility of new configurations, hierarchies, alliances and hostilities (1996, 3).” Felleman concurs, observing that

> when a film undertakes the representation of ‘art’ as a theme or engages with an artwork as motif it is, whatever else it is doing, also more or less openly and more or less knowingly entering into a contemplation of its own nature and at some level positing its own unwritten theory of cinema as art. Narrative films, then, can reveal much about their individual and collective undertaking and their sense of their own and their medium’s origins through the incorporation or figuration of art (2006, 2-3).

By appearing within the ‘exhibition space’ of the cinematic frame, the inclusion of recognisable paintings exposes both their own status as a representation, while also reflexively identifying the broader structure of the film itself as a representational apparatus. The inclusion of recognisable artworks in a film therefore acknowledges a significant aspect of how ‘the arts’ as a whole tackles the relationship between the real and the represented image: as Dalle Vacche puts it, “the meeting of screen and canvas makes visible the invisible and favours absence over presence, mind over body” (1996, 12). In his discussion of art critic Philip Hayward, John Walker addresses the intertextual mechanics of this process, noting that “works of art appearing on cinema and television screens are…‘representations of representations’” (1993, 5). For Walker, the application and inclusion of famous paintings within fictional film narratives converts the finished art piece into “raw material” for a filmmaker’s new artistic endeavour (1993, 6).

While the relationship between painting and the horror film has received some critical attention, it is marked predominantly by a preference for more highbrow and well-known examples. Dalle Vacche’s book *Cinema and Painting: How Art is Used in Film* (1996) has a whole chapter on horror, comparing the F.W. Murnau’s *Nosferatu*, eine *Symphonie des Grauens* (*Nosferatu: A Symphony of Horror*, 1922) to German Romantic artist Caspar David Friedrich’s paintings such as *The Monk...*
by the Sea (1809-10) and The Cross in the Mountains (1807-1808). Dalle Vacche concludes that they are both “an accurate product of its time and, at the same time, an elusive statement about a whole epoch” (1996, 196). In her otherwise excellent book Incorporating Images: Film and the Rival Arts (1995), Brigitte Peucker initially suggests a clear distaste for popular horror, condemning slasher film to the same fate of “the pornographic film…and the snuff movie” as “marginal” texts (1995, 166). Her critical evaluation is clearly more comfortable with examples of an altogether more highbrow category: Éric Rohmer, Alfred Hitchcock, Rainer Werner Fassbinder, Peter Greenaway and Derek Jarman (166). In the 12 years between this book and her more recent effort, The Material Image: Art and the Real in Film (2007), this bias appears to have been adjusted to reflect a broader postmodern embrace of lowbrow forms, as it includes references to George Romero’s Day of the Dead (2007, 164) and features a lengthy discussion of both Texas Chainsaw Massacre and Texas Chainsaw Massacre II (177-182). But while Peucker openly acknowledges the influence of Carol J. Clover’s Men Women and Chain Saws (1993) in the creation of a critical environment where “no special dispensation should be required to take Hooper’s film seriously (2007, 177), her acknowledgement of trash horror culture appears incomplete and perhaps even tokenistic. It is unclear, for example, why her chapter on cannibal films that—outside of the Texas Chainsaw Massacre films—refers only to mainstream instances when it is such a key exploitation subgenre. While Silence of the Lambs (Jonathan Demme, 1991), Hannibal ( Ridley Scott, 2001), Red Dragon (Brett Ratner, 2002) and the film’s of Alfred Hitchcock certainly support her central claims, the omission of any reference to the notorious Italian cannibal films such as Cannibal Holocaust (Ruggero Deodato, 1980) and Cannibal Ferox ( Umberto Lenzi, 1981) seem a glaring omission (particularly in the face of her Clover-sanctioned embrace of films once deemed “marginal”).

This shift in Peucker’s work from an outright rejection of trash film to an attempt to apply the same rigour and insight as more highbrow examples reflects broader shifts within Cinema Studies during this period. This movement began (at least in part) with the publication of Jeffrey Sconce’s seminal essay “Trashing the Academy: Taste, Excess, and an Emerging Politics of Cinematic Style” in 1995. Expanding upon the work of French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu on the political significance of taste, Sconce identifies a “gradual emergence of a growing and increasingly articulate cinematic subculture, one organized around what are the most critically disputable films in cinematic history” (1995, 372). Basing the claim on evidence gleaned from exploitation film fanzines across a 15 year period, he defines the broad range of films of interest as falling under his umbrella term ‘paracinema’, which “includes entries from such seemingly disparate subgenres as ‘badfilm’, splatterpunk, ‘mondo’ films, sword and sandal epics, Elvis flicks, government hygiene films, Japanese monster movies, beach-party musicals, and just about every other historical manifestation of exploitation cinema from juvenile delinquency documentaries to soffcore pornography” (1995, 372). For Sconce, paracinema is “a particular reading protocol,” less a generic categorization than “a counter-aesthetic turned subcultural sensibility devoted to all matter of cultural detritus” (1995, 372). The defining function of paracinematic culture is to assign value to films which have fallen outside the purview of so-called “legitimate film culture” (1995, 372). The very tensions demonstrated across Peucker’s work in regard to her shift towards trash film is a manifestation of the challenge that Sconce argued paracinema presented to the discipline more broadly:

The study of trash cinema suggests a struggle over the task of cinema scholarship as a whole, especially in terms of defining the relationship between aesthetics and cultural criticism. Whether attacking traditional cultural markets and intellectual institutions as a fan, or attempting to bridge the two worlds as a student, the paracinematic audience presents in its often explicit opposition to the agendas of the academy a dispute over how to approach the cinema as much as a conflict over what cinema to approach (1995, 380).

It is in this spirit that the following art historical treatment of Sette note in nero has far a far greater ambition than merely ‘rescuing’ a supposed trash text by attempting to ascribe to it some kind of highbrow credibility. Rather, at the core of this article lies the claim that Fulci’s film—and arguably Italian giallo and horror in general—have always held the capacity for this type of analysis. When studied attentively, Sette Note In Nero demonstrates a highly developed and perhaps surprisingly complex visual and art historical literacy.

The Giallo: Dario Argento and Beyond

Sette note in nero is not the only giallo film that depends heavily upon an artwork, but it is perhaps the one that relies most explicitly upon extradiegetic knowledge of a particular canonical pieces’ position in the wider cultural imagination. While not a defining sub-generic trait as such, the preponderance of gialli that hinge upon an enigmatic work of art (often a painting) is worthy of note, including films like La dama rossa uccide sette volte (The Red Queen Kills Seven Times, Emilio Miraglia, 1972) and Pupi Avati’s La casa dalle finestre che ridono (The House with Laughing Windows, 1976). As arguably the most famous of the Italian horror directors, the work of Dario Argento in particular is marked by a painterly aesthetic, with artworks (often paintings and murals) acting as crucial plot devices in La sindrome di Stendhal (The Stendhal Syndrome, 1996), Profondo Rosso (Deep Red, 1975) and L’uccello dalle piume di cristallo (The Bird With Crystal Plumage, 1970). 2

Mikel J. Koven identifies the ‘classic’ period of the giallo film as between 1970 and 1975 (2006, 7), but its influence—and influences—extend far beyond this period. Mario Bava’s La ragazza che sapeva troppo (The Girl Who Knew Too Much, 1963) is popularly identified as the first giallo, with his Sei donne per l’assassino (Blood and Black Lace, 1964) widely recognized as establishing many of the sub-genres identifying traits (Hunt, 1992, 71). But Koven argues that the first cinematic giallo may stretch as far back as 1943, in Luchino Visconti’s Ossessione (itself an adaptation of James M. Cain’s 1934 novel, The Postman Always Rings Twice) (2006, 3). The influence of the giallo has also been considered to be
far-reaching, influencing the American slasher cycle of the late 1970s and early 1980s (Hunt, 1992, 71). The giallo film has been described by Leon Hunt as a “peculiarly Italian mixture of thriller, exploitation and horror/terror” (1992, 71), what Koven defines as “a short-lived cycle of films ‘in the vein of’ or ‘in the tradition of’ the murder mysteries of Wallace, Poe, Conan-Doyle, and Christie” (2006, 15). Evidence of this literary heritage is contained within the very name ‘giallo’ itself: as the Italian word for yellow, it refers to the colour of the covers of a series of mystery books that began to be published from the late 1920s by Milan-based publisher Mondadori as part of their widely-mirrored system of colour-coding their genre releases (Koven, 2006, 2).

But this literary ancestry belies the uniqueness of the cinematic giallo in contrast to other mystery genres. As Koven observes, the giallo seeks to actively blur the lines between traditional murder mystery and the horror film (2006, 74). For Ray Guins, it is the influence of horror that establishes the uniqueness of the giallo film through its spectacular displays of physical violence: “Whereas traditional horror and mystery films emphasise a struggling yet surviving protagonist who overcomes tragedies or solves the horrific conundrum, the giallo places equal (if not more) importance on the actual method of killing as well as solving the crime” (2002, 141).

Hinging around flamboyant and often gory set pieces (Koven, 2006, 123-139), the key iconographic features of the giallo emphasise its dedication to spectacular excess: this may most immediately pertain to the use of weapons, where Leon Hunt suggests “the choice … seems to be made more on the basis of their aesthetic merits and capacity for disfigurement” (1992, 71). Giallo’s iconographical cache also includes the black-gloved killer, ornate and often bourgeois settings (Hunt, 1992, 72), and character types described by Maitland McDonagh as “haunted protagonists touched by madness and irrational violence, psychopaths whose depredations are as bizarre as they are brutal and petty criminals, perverts and eccentrics who emerge from around every corner and beneath every metaphorical rock” (1994, 15). Additionally, the giallo is often discussed in terms of transgression. While Xavier Mendik’s analyses pertain specifically to the giallo of Dario Argento, his observation that giallo is “obsess(ed)…with displacing the actual logic and mode of detection” (2000, 35) reflects Guins’ claim that “boundaries between good and evil are so unclearly demarcated that one is left to wonder which position has really been conquered “(2002, 141). This ambivalence manifests across a wide range of giallo texts (Koven, 2006, 59), and it is through an art historical approach that this ambivalence is identified as a central feature of Sette note in nero. The following analysis demonstrates its sophisticated incorporation of a recognisable work of art into its broader thematic and stylistic agenda.

**Buried Alive in The Love Letter**

In 1971, a waiter plucked Vermeer’s classic of the Dutch Baroque period, *The Love Letter* off the walls of the Fine Arts Museum in Brussels where it was on loan from the of the Rijksmuseum in one of the most notorious art thefts of the decade. Demanding a ransom for 200 million Belgian francs for Bengali refugees (Houpt, 2006, 95), the thief had the great master rolled up and hidden under his bed. While the painting was eventually restored to its rightful owner, this surprise sojourn into the world of suitcases and mouse droppings caused near irreversible damage to one of the Netherland’s most prized and canonical artworks (Bailey, 2001, 236).

At first glance, Vermeer’s work lacks the heavy metal doom of Caravaggio or the sensory dizziness of Peter Paul Rubens, painters who would perhaps more immediately share a sensibility—aesthetically and thematically—with the films of Lucio Fulci. Vermeer is altogether too domestic, too ordinary, too provincial, and ultimately, far too twee. Fulci, on the other hand, is best known for epic, explicitly gruesome horror films and gialli. At his horror best, Fulci produced some of the more fascinating and loved cult horror films, notably *Tu vivrai nel terrore - L’aldila* (*The Beyond*, 1981), *Zombie* (1979) and *Paura nella città dei morti viventi* (*City of the Living Dead*, 1980). While Fulci did not in his lifetime see the cult success of Argento, he is regardless renowned as one of Italy’s most successful horror directors. If there can be one distinct formal feature that separates them, it would be this: light is to Fulci what colour is to Argento. And it is precisely this point that marks the first intersection between Fulci and Vermeer, the latter of whom has been called “the painter of light” (Ungaretti, 2005, 11). In their respective mediums, both artists relied heavily upon the use of light to create their unique visions. Martin Pops’ description of the light in The Love Letter as “dry and hard” (1984, 96) is equally applicable to the careful strategy Fulci has employed to light Sette note in nero.

Vermeer’s *The Love Letter* is much more than a passing highbrow reference in the unfolding narrative of Fulci’s supernatural giallo3. Critical attention to Vermeer’s work by art historians has often focused upon his signature utilisation of “paintings within a painting” (Gaskell, 2000, 48), and it is common for paintings to appear on the walls of the scenes he is depicting, and these mini, diegetically-contained paintings themselves provide “clues” as to the broader themes of the piece as a whole. This frame-within-a-frame feature of Vermeer’s work is pivotal to Sette note in nero, both aesthetically and thematically, and is emphasised by the privileged inclusion of Vermeer’s painting itself.

Outside of the canonical giallo *Una sull’altra* (*Perverision Story*, or *One on Top of the Other*, 1969) and *Una Lucertola con la pelle di donna* (*A Woman in a Lizard’s Skin*, 1971), Fulci’s gialli (and one could argue, both gialli and Italian horror in general) is constructed from hyperactively detailed vignettes strung together with little attention paid to the development of complex, coherent narratives4. But Fulci’s gialli are often considered to be, at best, uneven, particularly in comparison to those made by the other key giallo directors, Umberto Lenzi, Sergio Martino and of course Argento himself: *Murderock – uccide a passo di danza* (*Murder Rock*, or *Slashdance*, 1984) holds little allure outside of its spectacular and novel
engagement with its own zeitgeist: Adrian Luther Smith saw it as little more than a cynical marketing ploy on Fulci’s part, “pander[ing] to the perceived ‘youth’ marker which danced by box offices to see Fame and Flashdance” (1999, 75). Non si sevizia un paperino (Don’t Torture a Duckling, 1972) seems stylistically (let alone narratively) disengaged, and outside of some containing some of the most explicit gore in his filmography, Lo Squartaro di New York (New York Ripper, 1982) feels like little more than an exercise in self-congratulation by a director at the end of his career.

Sette note in nero is plot-wise very simple, and its supernatural elements do not dislodge it from its clear giallo foundations. The film begins as an unidentified woman drives through Dover to a cliff, where she commits suicide by flinging herself over the edge (a plummet shown in graphic detail). In Florence, her young daughter Virginia has a psychic vision and “sees” the death occur. But despite this viscerally bombastic opening, the film is uncharacteristically low-key in its depictions of violence and sex, with explicit displays of opened bodies kept to a minimum. Cutting to a grown-up Virginia (Jennifer O’Neill), it is now she who drives, smiling, happy and clearly rich as she takes her husband Francesco (Gianni Garko) to the airport. Virginia is a picture of wealth: with her jodhpurs, furs, pot-o-gloss eyeshadow and fedoras she appears to be living a trouble free life. As she drives away, the film launches immediately into its key enigma. Virginia has another psychic vision, and this becomes the riddle that the film aims to solve. Virginia’s mystery montage consists of a shot of a broken mirror, a shot of a room with a red lamp, flashes of red light on a black screen, a limping man, a cigarette, a dead woman’s bleeding face, a magazine cover, a shot of a black and white reproduction of Vermeer’s The Love Letter, and a first-person shot of a brick wall being constructed. The final component is aural, appearing over a black screen: the haunting seven notes of the films title.5

Using this vision as its structural foundation, the narrative is clear. As each element of the psychic vision is explained, the story moves logically to its next stage. Shaken after her initial vision and peevish at the dismissive response of her parapsychologist ex-lover, Luca (Marc Porel), Virginia visits one of her husband’s many mansions to renovate it “as a surprise”. Entering a room, she is struck immediately: it is the same room, with the same red lamp, as her vision. Compelled, she digs into the wall, where she discovers a skeleton. Francesco is soon arrested for the murder of this young woman (his ex-lover of his), and it is now that Virginia’s investigation begins in earnest despite Francesco’s often-violent dismissal of her psychic abilities. Assisted by Luca and his assistant, Virginia begins to unravel the past. Led to an art gallery, there is a dramatic shift in mise en scene as Luca and Virginia are suddenly reduced from key players to flat black silhouettes:

It is only moments before the sight of the Vermeer painting strikes Virginia. The camera lingers so unnecessarily long on the title plate of the painting that it becomes apparent it is not unnecessary at all: Fulci goes to great lengths to make sure we know what this painting is and who this painting is by. To prove the point, the camera pans up and is intercut between the “original” hanging in the gallery, and Virginia’s memory of it from her vision:

The discovery of the Vermeer leads them to the last of the film’s key players, Emilio Rospini (Gabriele Ferzetti). Rospini is an ex-policeman who was involved when the Vermeer painting was stolen years earlier (note here the synchronicity between the diegetic world of the film and the extratextual realities of this particular paintings history). As the man with the limp from her vision, Virginia is convinced Rospini is involved with the murder of the girl and Francesco’s arrest, and lies her way into his house past his wife to confront him. As she awaits his arrival, Fulci carefully restages in three separate shots Vermeer’s own “picture within a picture” structure, flagging the importance of the artwork to the film’s broader thematic intent:

As their investigations continue, Luca realises that Virginia’s visions may not be a flashback to the past at all, but a prediction of the future. Having proven her husband innocent of the girl’s murder, Virginia is unable to relax, and grows increasingly determined and frantic to discover the truth behind her vision, suggesting that whatever had lay behind her previous motivation to liberate her husband was, by now at least, far from her primary concern. The discovery of the body of an old woman who had promised Virginia information matches an image from her initial vision, confirming Luca’s theory that it was in fact a premonition rather than a past memory. Hastily grabbing “the clue” in question (an envelope, its hiding place also divulged to Virginia through her vision), she is chased through an old church by Rospini, eager to return to the safety of her home.

With such a taut climactic chase scene ending only when her pursuer is injured, a perfunctory dénouement is surely now all that is required. Virginia arrives back to the mansion and awaits the return of Francesco. She takes the letter but, not reading it, places it on a sideboard. As Francesco approaches, he walks with a limp, and Virginia realises that was he (not Rospini) who appeared in her vision. Seeing the letter, Francesco assumes Virginia has learned the whole story and (for the spectators benefit), Rospini recounts from a hospital bed the truth that Virginia had sought: Francesco, Rospini and the young girl were in cahoots in the theft of the Vermeer painting, and Francesco had murdered the girl to keep the spoils, telling Rospini she had in fact escaped with the valuable art. Realising Virginia is now a dangerous witness. Francesco hits her on the head and places her in the empty wall cavity, and begins to brick it up with a clear reference to Edgar Allen Poe’s stories The Black Cat (1845) and The Cask of Amontillado (1846). In a bitter twist, this is the image that Virginia had seen in her vision at the beginning of the film.

By the time Luca and the police arrive, Francesco has removed all traces of Virginia who is now buried beneath the wall,
falling in and out of consciousness. Luca questions the cocky Francesco, but the police become increasingly disinterested until all men decide to leave. It is only here in its final moments that *Sette Note in Nero* shifts from colour-by-numbers giallo to something altogether more unique. A large dresser stands at the wall in front of where Virginia has been buried alive—she is not shown again, nor is it established whether she is alive or dead. Just as Luca is about to leave the room, the alarm to Virginia’s watch—the “seven notes” of the title—once again goes off. The formal construction of these final moments is far more brutal in its ambivalence than it ever could be by showing the dying or dead body of Virginia. The significance of the wall cavity was foreshadowed in *The Love Letter* itself—it is renowned as the only painting Vermeer ever did that had a fireplace in it (Steadman, 2001, 62). Luca approaches the dresser, but despite his position as the rescuer in the scene thus far, this action is instead depicted with so much shadowy foreboding as to make a German Expressionist blush:

There has previously been little evidence to suggest that Luca is anything less than an ally—a little biased towards Virginia, perhaps, considering their implied romantic past and his consequent dislike of Francesco, but certainly nothing warranting the overt condemnation of him to “villain” status inherent in this shot. The camera follows the trajectory of the approaching shadow until the final shot of the film is reached and, to emphasise the savageness of the past moments, the film ends with this image as the credits begin to roll over the sound of Virginia’s alarm:

Privileged with the final shot of the entire film, it is important to ask why is this one final image so important? Take another look at Vermeer’s *The Love Letter*, paying particular note to its composition:

The semantics of this visual match cannot be underappreciated. In effect, Fulci has “cut out” the middle ‘action’ section of the frame. He has removed Virginia, just as the lines of Vermeer’s paintings suggest that centre third of his paintings may be equally detached, as it hovers in a strange feat of perception both behind and above its frame. In this way, the two paintings behind the couple in Vermeer’s work are not the only internal fractures. The painting, in this sense, can be seen almost as a kind of triptych. Not only has Fulci removed this central “panel”, but he has removed all decorative traces from the already less ornate side blocks: there are no curtains, there are no maps. There is just a block of brown, and a block of black. The violence inherent in this image and its relationship to Vermeer’s *The Love Letter* – a reduction at the expense not only of Virginia herself, but also in many ways the narrative as a whole as it was so intrinsically linked to her perspective—is a deliberate and meaningful act of aesthetic subversion. Regardless of whether it is a comparison deliberately encouraged by Fulci, it is difficult to not associate this final duo-tone image with the painting of American abstract expressionist, Mark Rothko:

Flip *Black on Grey* (1969/70) on its side, and the jump that Fulci made at the end of *Sette Note in Nero* becomes even clearer. There are exactly three hundred years between Vermeer’s *The Love Letter* and Rothko’s *Black on Grey*, and Fulci—in a moment of manic formal hyperbole, perhaps—demonstrated the pure force of that leap in 20 seconds of languageless film. Argento came close to completely crashing the framework of representation through his art historical engagement with the Italian renaissance painting in his rape-revenge giallo *La sindrome di Stendhal* but Argento’s self-consciousness and clear highbrow intent render it a close second to the eloquence and simplicity of Fulci’s art historical engagement in *Sette note in nero*.

At stake in these last moments is much more than just painting. Debate has raged over R. H. Wilenski’s suggestion that the image of the women in the room that makes up the centre ‘panel’ of *The Love Letter* is actually a reflection in a mirror (Bailey, 2001, 223-225) – certainly, if looked at a certain way, it is understandable how this conclusion could be reached. But, as Anthony Bailey observes, whether it is or is not a mirror does little to alter the fact that “it is an unsettling picture…we almost feel that we are looking into a perspective box…which gives us a sense of gazing through a keyhole into a Dutch house 240 years ago” (2001, 223). The distancing affect of the strange internal framing compositions of the piece are distinctly uncharacteristic of Vermeer’s painting in general, and *The Love Letter* is the only painting he ever did where a “scene is constructed beyond an open door” (D’Adda, 2005, 138). Aside from adding a strange, almost abstracted aspect to the scene that removes it Vermeer’s traditional depictions of “real life” (Bailey, 2001, 225), the composition in effect compresses the two figures into a confined space. Along with his *A Lady Writing a Letter With Her Maid*, this leads Martin Pops to an observation that has no small relevance to *Sette Note in Nero*: “Vermeer’s enclosed women merge into their environments” (1984, 80). Fulci takes this to its literal conclusion: not only is Virginia buried within the walls itself, that act is formally depicted as epic in scale as the distance between Vermeer’s domestic scenes to the wholly abstracted realm that define Rothko’s work.

Like Virginia herself, the spectator has their senses suffocated. The sense of confusion at the end of the film at ‘not knowing what happens to the film’s protagonist is shattering in its ambivalence. The impact of the film’s conclusion hinges emphatically upon a connection between this physical sensations of suffocation, claustrophobia or being ‘shut off’, with the art historical context provided by Fulci’s sophisticated engagement with Vermeer. This is, as Adam Lowenstein puts it in his book *Shocking Representation: Historical Trauma, National Cinema, and the Modern Horror Film* (2005) precisely the “return of history through the gut” (48) of which the horror film is so uniquely capable. Before this final scene, the thematic intent of the film is no more innocuous from many investigative narratives (including many giallo): good must be able to at least potentially conquer evil, as the murderer cannot be assumed to escape punishment for their crime. But despite Francesco’s attempt (perhaps successful, perhaps not) to murder Virginia by burying her within the walls being exposed to
the police when the sound of her watch alarm chimes, this simple thematic assumption is violently—both formally and narratively—subverted by the film’s own ambivalence to its protagonists survival. Just as Rothko slams the frame closed upon Velci’s already enclosed women, so to does Fulci on Virginia. Regardless of her supernatural insight, she remains powerless in a constructed universe out of her control.

Through this art historical exploration of Fulci’s Sette note in nero and its utilisation of Vermeer’s The Love Letter, this article has illustrated how crucial a recognition and exploration of the role of painting is within the context of the horror film. There is broad scope for a continuation of this project that extends to not only recognisable works of art (such as in other films such as Mark Robson’s 1946 Val Lewton production Bedlam and Wes Craven’s 1996 hit Scream), but to the inclusion of painting more generally as a narrative and stylistic feature. There are a vast number of horror films in which the inclusion of painting warrants further investigation. From Driller Killer (Abel Ferrara, 1979) and Color Me Blood Red (Herschell Gordon Lewis, 1965) to Messiah of Evil (William Huyck and Gloria Katz 1973) and Wishmaster (Robert Kurtzman, 1997), the use of painting in horror invites the critical eye into a strange, fascinating but as yet still underexplored realm.

Notes:

1. Not to mention the earlier exploitation documentary “mondo” films. For David Kerekes and David Slater, “The Italian cannibal epics…are a natural symptom of the mondo film, continuing a cinematic tradition of racism and animal slaughter” (1993, 109).
2. This is also true of Suspiria (1997), albeit less a giallo than one of Argento’s more ‘supernatural’ horror films. It is worth noting that this separation of his work between the fantastic, supernatural and the comparatively more realistic giallo subgenres is one that Argento himself has dismissed: “I think that’s an artificial distinction; I don’t see a great difference between them. The realistic pictures are not very realistic, even though they’re about psychopaths rather than witches” (McDonagh, 1994, 244).
3. Koven identifies three types of giallo: the ‘classical’ giallo (that features an unidentified killer, usually wearing the iconic black gloves) (2006, 15), the suspense-thriller giallo (less a stalker-detective narrative as an internalized and more intensely psychological drama) (2006, 8) and supernatural gialli (such as Argento’s Phenomenon (1987) (2006, 9) and of course, Sette note in nero).
4. As Maitland McDonagh diplomatically puts it, “At its best, the stylised nature of expectations in the horror film permits a certain poetry of cinematic expression to shine through minimalist storylines unencumbered by complex considerations of characterisations and/or plotting” (1994, 229).
5. This musical motif will be familiar to those who have seen Quentin Tarantino’s Kill Bill: Vol. 1. The titular theme to Fulci’s film by Franco Bixio, Fabio Frizzi and Vince Tempera is played when The Bride (Uma Thurman) escapes from the hospital early in Tarantino’s movie. It can be heard in full at the following youtube link: http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ip5lsGJh2Wg

Bibliography

Dalle Vacche, A. 1996. Cinema and Painting: How Art is Used in Film. Austin, Texas UP.
Felleman, S. 2006. Art and the Cinematic Imagination. Austin, Texas UP.
Koven, M. J. 2006. La Dolce Morte: Vernacular Cinema and the Italian Giallo Film. Lanham, Scarecrow Press.
Filmography

Bedlam. Directed by Mark Robson. 1946.
L’uccello dalle piume di cristallo (The Bird With Crystal Plumage). Directed by Luchino Visconti. 1943.
La dama rossa uccide sette volte (The Red Queen Kills Seven Times). Directed by Emilio Miraglia. 1972.
La sindrome di Stendhal (The Stendhal Syndrome). Directed by Dario Argento. 1996.
Non si sevizia un paperino (Don’t Torture a Duckling). Directed by Lucio Fulci. 1972.
Ossessione (Obsession). Directed by Luchino Visconti. 1943.
Paura nella città dei morti viventi (City of the Living Dead). Directed by Lucio Fulci. 1980.
Sei donne per l’assassino (Blood and Black Lace). Directed by Mario Bava. 1964.
Tales from the Hood. Directed by Rusty Cundeif. 1995.
Una Lucertola con la pelle di donna (A Woman in a Lizard’s Skin). Directed by Lucio Fulci. 1971.
Una sull’altra (Perversion Story, or One on Top of the Other). Directed by Lucio Fulci. 1969.

Author Bio: Alexandra Heller-Nicholas is a PhD candidate at La Trobe University. Her research areas include horror film, sexual violence, ethics and aesthetics, and she has published on these areas in a number of academic journals. She is writing a book on rape-revenge film to be published by McFarland & Company Inc. in 2011. Contact: alexandrahellernicholas@gmail.com