

May 16 & 17: THE BEYOND

Contributed by BobsBarbs

Don't you just hate it when you inherit a fine old hotel in need of a little work—and then you discover it happens to have been built over one of the doorways to hell? Such is Liza's dilemma. A New Yorker of independent means, Liza's come down to Louisiana to get her multi-roomed legacy back on its feet, no matter the worms, decay or water table. But nothing seems to be going right.

The "help" she inherits with the house, Martha and Arthur, are borderline sociopaths. Joe the plumber seems to have forgotten to take his anti-psychotics. And then there's Emily, the piano-playing blind girl cum psychic specter (?), and Dickie, her somewhat helpful German shepherd—they just keep popping up in the oddest of places. But the worst are all the dead bodies! They keep rising up out of murky puddles in the flooded basement; That really makes renovation difficult for Liza!

The seven dreaded gateways to hell are concealed in seven cursed places; And from the day the gates of hell are opened, the dead will walk the earth.

But enough with synopsis; it won't help you much anyway. Fans don't watch *The Beyond* for story or characterization. As its director, Lucio Fulci, states, "In Italy we make films based on pure themes; my idea was to make an absolute film, with all the horrors of the world. It's a plotless film, there's no logic to it, just a succession of images; which must be received without any reflection." This is, of course, very difficult for most moviegoers to accomplish, and thus no other filmmaker polarizes fans of the genre more than Fulci, the adult-terrible of Italian Horror. Either he's a joke, the man who ruined any chance the genre had at gaining respectability, or he came closest to creating what Italian Horror should really be about — style over, or, instead of substance. Fulci can be infuriating, what with his inexplicably lingering shots and non sequitur plot twists, but when I watch his work I don't mind all that. He obviously loves what he's doing.

The Beyond was Maestro Fulci's third horror film, the second in a trilogy about the "7 Doors of Death", and his fifth in a chain of seven great films he directed from 1979's *Zombie* through 1982's *New York Ripper*. To most disciples of Fulci, *The Beyond* is not only the magnum opus of his 57(!) films, but also the greatest Italian Horror movie ever made. 52 years old in 1979, Fulci had already immersed himself in the making of genre films: soft-core porn, claustrophobic giallos, bloody spaghetti westerns, LSD-infused lesbian-psychodramas, vampire-hunter spoofs, macho-gangster flicks, super-spy movies — you name it. For twenty years Fulci slowly mastered the art of entertaining, eventually creating some of the archetypes of the genres he reveled in: *A Lizard in a Woman's Skin*, *Don't Torture a Duckling*, *Four of the Apocalypse*, *Seven Notes in Black*.

But by the mid-'70s, things were changing in Italy, and the reliable simplicity of a giallo, however well stylized, just wasn't enough to get audiences into theatres. Fulci found himself needing to break into a cinematic world with which he was noticeably unfamiliar—the Italian Horror blockbusters of Umberto Lenzi and Dario Argento. Lenzi had invented the Cannibal Movie genre in 1972 with his organ-grinding *Deep River Savages*, opening the Italian film market up to international dollars never before imagined. Argento's 1975 opus *Deep Red* was the first in a series of six films that cumulatively pushed the alchemical limits of horror and suspense.

Fulci's first foray into the burgeoning genre, *Zombie*, was an unofficial sequel to Romero and Argento's *Dawn of the Dead*. With its then-state-of-the-art gore-effects, "eye-popping" visuals, and redesign of the classic zombie look, Fulci left an indelible mark upon this new strain of horror film, and made a small fortune in the process which kept him safely on par with Lenzi and Argento. After *Contraband*—which should've been just another one of his smuggler vs. gangster grindhouse films, but instead becomes a poor man's *The Godfather* by way of Ichi the Killer—the trilogy came next: *City of the Living Dead*, *The Beyond*, and *House by the Cemetery*.

Of the three, *The Beyond* is by far the best. But all effects aside, the true success of the trilogy lies in the three lead performances of Catriona MacColl. She commands the screen with a horror-maven gusto not seen since the days of Barbara Steele. MacColl infused all the roles, but particularly the part of Liza Merrill in *The Beyond*, with an assurance and determination quite uncommon among the female roles of Italian Horror, or any genre of horror for that matter. You also come away with the feeling that, like Fulci himself, MacColl loves the process of making these movies. Apparently, she was such a trooper in the first film, *City of the Living Dead*, what with millions of live maggots blown into her face, and made to bleed from her eyeballs via a painful FX-pump, that Fulci had to have her back for *The Beyond*. And again, he puts her through the ringer. Screaming, blood-splatters, acid vats, severed tongues, severed heads, throats being ripped open, disemboweling, eye gouging, crucifixions — in fact, few horror films, Italian or otherwise, are as systematically unsettling as *The Beyond*.

The ending of the film is, perhaps, the most talk-about part of the whole experience. With the trilogy steeped in Fulci's Catholicism, something he believed was crucial to the understanding of his films, the hell-bound ending leaves just as many people with their mouths gaping and hair standing on end, as it does those who are left scratching their heads in bewilderment. A pessimist of such extreme, Fulci's vision of Hell isn't even one you could at least feel — no whippings, no fire, no boiling oil, no tortures. Just a "Sea of Darkness"; an absolute world, an immobile world where every horizon is similar. Sounds more like South Hayward.

So there you have it people – from the flesh-gouging chain-beatings that open the film, to the climatic hospital gross-out/shoot-out, and all the spiders and zombies in between, The Beyond truly is one of the most audacious spectacles you’ll ever be lucky enough to see. But The Beyond remains for most, not just Fulci’s testament to his gifts as a filmmaker and, whether he’d like to be labeled as such or not, a storyteller, but also proof that Italian Horror could, in reaching such extreme and outrageous heights of stylization, perhaps find itself in an even higher realm of substance after all. Get a taste of what you're in for with this collection of rare stills from Lucio Fulci's The Beyond,' courtesy of Grindhouse releasing. Click on any photo for a larger image!

{gallery}The_Beyond{/gallery} {moscomment}