**‘I have a picture of the Monster!’: *Il mostro di Frankenstein* and the search for Italian horror cinema**

**Russ Hunter**, Northumbria University

**Abstract**

Typically accounts of Italian horror cinema have highlighted the production and release of Riccardo Freda’s *I vampiri* (*Lust of the Vampire*) in the late 1950s as marking the beginning of Italian engagement with the horror genre. The logic that follows is often that the nature of fascist censorship impeded any explorations of the genre in the 1920s and 1930s and that in the post war period it was only the commercial success of Hammer Horror that tempted Italian producers to venture into horror film-making. In this way Italian horror cinema is considered to have no antecedents and is frequently seen in relation to its readiness to ape production successes elsewhere. Increasingly, however, *Il mostro di Frankenstein* (*The Monster of Frankenstein*) (Testa, 1921) is being identified as Italy’s ‘first’ horror film. Yet as a lost film that has left little material trace, evidence of its generic position is, at best, ambiguous. This article will examine a heretofore underexplored and obscure film in order to interrogate the extent to which it can be seen as Italy’s earliest engagement with horror production. In so doing it allow us to see a much more complex and nuanced development of the history both Italian *and* European horror cinema, challenging previous assumptions about the history of the genre as a whole.

**Keywords**

Luciano Albertini

Umberto Guarracino

Albertini Films

Ernst Hugo Correll

Frankenstein

silent cinema

genre history

early horror

Italian cinema has always been viewed as an oddity in that its first horror film came relatively late in the genre’s history. Scholars of Italian horror cinema have typically identified *I vampiri* (*Lust of the Vampire*) (Freda, 1957) as the ‘first’ significant Italian example and as such a general consensus has developed around its status as effectively signalling the beginning of horror as a production genre in post-war Italy (Bondanella 2009; Brunetta 2009). Whilst Freda’s film comes several years before the popularization of horror as a genre in Italy (at least as an export commodity), it has nonetheless long been held as a privileged reference point in indicating the beginnings of a new generic production category. The later popular and commercial development of the genre in Italy has traditionally been linked to the success of Hammer in the United Kingdom and the commercial potential it demonstrated for European horror films on the international market (Paul 2005). As such the late 1950s and early 1960s saw an increasing trend for Italian producers to develop gothic horrors akin to what Hammer was doing in the United Kingdom: gothic and gothic-tinged films featuring an array of monsters drawn from legend, myth and literature. In the wake of the success of Mario Bava’s *La maschera del demonio* (*Black Sunday*) (1960), in particular, Italian producers increasingly saw horror films – particularly gothic horrors – as having a strong export market, making them attractive commercial propositions. In this way horror became a genre that would flourish in Italy, driven largely by external demand and appealing to producers for its commercial viability.

Yet there are good reasons to challenge this orthodoxy. In 1921 a highly popular and successful former circus acrobat turned-actor called Luciano Albertini starred in *Il mostro di Frankenstein* (Testa, 1921), an adaptation of Mary Shelley’s gothic novel *Frankenstein; or, The Modern Prometheus* (1818). Although the film remained virtually forgotten after the first decade of its release, it has subsequently been identified by a number of film historians as the earliest example of Italian horror cinema (Paul 2005; Bondanella 2009). The curiosity for scholars therefore has been *why* this is, apparently, the only example of Italian horror cinema until *I vampiri*. Martyn Conterio has argued that, given Italy’s rich heritage of artworks and literature dealing with eternal ‘degradation and phantasmal terror’ it would appear to have been a ‘prime candidate to pioneer horror cinema’ (2015: 23). Yet the impact of this recognition of *Il mostro di Frankenstein* on our understanding of the genre’s history in Italy has been limited by the paucity of evidence available. At some point in the sound period the film became officially ‘lost’ (although it is not clear around what time this occurred) and what little evidence of its cinematic life remained meant it became an obscure and nearly forgotten footnote.

The (supposed) nature of the subject matter – based largely on the title – is seen to automatically qualify it as a horror film and can be seen as a kind of quick stopping-off point before getting on to when horror ‘really’ begins. But it is unclear precisely where the film sits generically, either at the time of release or now, as we have few generic indicators. As things stand several Italian posters for the film have survived, as well as several newspaper and magazine advertisements, a single promotional photograph, a flyer that appears to be advertising the exhibition of the film in Brussels, one review and a small amount of production correspondence.[[1]](#endnote-1) The limited evidence that remains has meant that the film has developed an enigmatic aura that tends to see it increasingly referenced but rarely explored in histories of Italian horror cinema. This article will interrogate the evidence available in order to both elucidate a previously obscure film and attempt to explore its generic status. In short, to what extent is it legitimate to call this the ‘first’ Italian horror film? As I will suggest below, this is a complex process given the push–pull between how films were viewed at the time of their release and how we might now wish to place them in terms of genre. In examining what the extant sources can tell us about the film itself this article will therefore reflect upon *Il mostro di Frankenstein*’s place within Italian horror histories, suggesting that labelling the film as a horror film is both problematic and ignores the complexities of the generic context within which it was released.

Prior to *Il mostro di Frankenstein* there had been two previous cinematic attempts to adapt *Frankenstein* both of which also had periods of relative historical obscurity. The first was the Edison produced *Frankenstein* (Dawley, 1910), which was itself considered a lost film for several decades until a print held in Wisconsin by private collector Alois Felix Dettlaff Senior was gradually made available by its owner in the late 1970s and early 1980s. The second adaptation was *Life Without Soul* (Smiley, 1915), a film that remains lost but which appears to have more similarities to *Il mostro* than either J. Searle Dawley’s 1910 adaptation or James Whale’s later version, *Frankenstein* (1931). *Il mostro di Frankenstein*’s lost status means that it is possible to impute various generic positions into the film, to see it as a potential starting point for Italian horror cinema and to reflect on ‘what might have been’ had the film not been released when it was. In fact, precisely because it is lost allows scholars to speculate as to why it appears to be such an outlier.

Despite some previous recognition of the film as the ‘first’ Italian horror (Glut 1973), *Il mostro di Frankenstein* has only relatively recently become a reference point for scholars concerned with the history of the genre in Italy. As such, whilst for much of its life it has remained historically obscure for genre historians, it is now recognized as being a *potentially* significant moment in accounts of Italian horror cinema’s history. Writing in 1973, in his introduction to Donald Glut’s *The Frankenstein Legend: A Tribute to Mary Shelley and Boris Karloff*, Forrest J. Ackerman laid stress upon the unknown nature of the film, excitedly stating that ‘for the first time in English, you are about to read the name of a Frankenstein film made in 1920! […] And I have a picture of the Monster, too!’ (Ackerman in Glut 1973: xxv). The film is referenced in a number of recent sources and whilst it is clear that little is known about it beyond a few basic details, the fact that it was an adaptation of Mary Shelley’s *Frankenstein* often leads authors to *assume* that it is a horror film. This appears to be due to both the status of the novel and how subsequent adaptations are viewed. What appears to occur, given their historical proximity, is a retrospective application of the current generic status of James Whale’s *Frankenstein* as a horror film to *Il mostro di Frankenstein*. In effect there is a genre loop-back at play. Given that Whale’s film was a key part of Universal’s tranche of Monster Movies and has since therefore become intimately associated with the development of horror as a genre, all Frankenstein adaptations become de facto horror films.

But the application of the generic label of ‘horror film’ is not straightforward and is often marked by its complex and amorphous usage. As Harry M. Benshoff has observed both ‘[c]onventional wisdom and most histories of the genre mark its start with the release of *Dracula* in 1931’ (2014: 207), with Universal also releasing *Frankenstein* in the same year. There is a danger therefore of ‘doing violence to our sense of history’ (Geraghty and Jancovich 2008: 2) if we attempt to generically label films before those self-same genres are seen to come into existence. Many of the silent-era films that we might now term as horror were for a long time referred to simply as *cinéma fantastique*: a broad term that has tended to encompass horror, science fiction and fantasy films of all kinds and that has persisted to have more resonance in continental Europe but which rarely has currency in an English language context. In addition to this, filmic elements designed to evoke fear, those congruent with contemporary usage of the term ‘horror cinema’, were sometimes also present in works that were marketed as ‘adventure films’ and sometimes even ‘romances’ during the 1910s and 1920s. Indeed, in this period the discrete category of ‘horror film’ did not exist, nor was it a distinct frame of reference for producers, distributors, exhibitors or audiences. Care needs to be taken therefore in the ways in which the term ‘horror’ is mobilized in relation to films such as *Il mostro di Frankenstein*.

For the film historian a number of problems immediately present themselves in attempting to categorize exactly what kind of film *Il mostro di Frankenstein* was. A major issue here is the lack of evidence as to what the narrative and generic features of many early films actually are. That is to say, it is not always clear what lost or obscure films were actually about. There is a temptation to ‘out’ a number of films that based on their titles, at first glance, appear to be horror films. In this way one could look at a film such as *Il mistero della mano* (*The Mystery of the Hand*) (Pezzinga, 1921) and, perhaps, assume it to be a kind of supernatural thriller. Surviving intertitles further reinforce this, with scene two listed as ‘L’orribile supplizio’/‘The horrible torture’. Starring Linda Albertini, the film was in reality part of the *Sansonette* series, a serial playing upon her husband Luciano Albertini’s identification with the *Sansone* character.[[2]](#endnote-2) Or one might look at the title of Luciano Albertini’s only US film for Universal, *Cage of Death* (Albertini et al., 1923), and assume that could be a horror film. In this case the film was actually an action-adventure film that made great use of Albertini’s athletic skills, where its star is described by one local British newspaper as being ‘a mixture of Houdini and Douglas Fairbanks’.[[3]](#endnote-3)

Indeed for most scholars its existence as – apparently – the sole horror film in Italian cinema until *I vampiri* is puzzling. The film’s lost status has also led to a great deal of speculation for which the evidence base is frequently unclear. In line with later writers, Glut is unable, due to the limited evidence available, to outline any substantial textual details, other than to note that all that is known of the film is that ‘there was a confrontation between the creator and creature in a shadowy cave’ (Glut 1973: 67). In line with this Kris Hirschmann notes that ‘not much’ is known about the film but that it ‘reputedly included a confrontation between Frankenstein and his monster that was lifted straight from Shelley’s novel’ (2012: 42). These assertions would appear to be drawing upon a Belgian flyer for the film that has survived and which shows a hand-drawn sketch of The Monster in what appears to be a cave with someone visible in the background entering the scene (who we can only *guess* is Baron Frankenstein). It is from very limited evidence like this that scholars have been forced to make what can, at best, be speculative conclusions. More problematically, Louis Paul (2005) cites it as the earliest example of an Italian horror film, whilst Gino Moliterno in his *Historical Dictionary of Italian Cinema* locates it alongside *Malombra* (Gallone, 1917), viewing them as Italy’s sole early entries as ‘Italian silent cinema appears to have little interest in the horror genre’ (2008: 159). The film also appears in a number of annotated filmographies as well as generating a lot of discussion online, particularly on forums dedicated to silent cinema (where it has developed the reputation of a kind of cult curio).[[4]](#endnote-4) But, despite its regular citation, significant details about the film remain obscure.

Recent work by Gary Rhodes (2010) in relation to the lost Hungarian film *Drakula halála* (*Dracula’s Death*) (Lajthay, 1921) has shown how it is possible to begin a process of ‘reconstructing’ lost horror films by utilizing a number of extratextual sources, such as publicity photographs and trade and tie-in publications. In such cases the absence of the film itself means that researchers need to be creative (and thorough) in attempting to piece together the fragmentary evidence that remains and in so doing can offer a partial insight into lost works. Rhodes’s work is important for a number of reasons, partly in stressing that the film has good grounds to be considered the very first on-screen adaptation of Bram Stoker’s character of Count Dracula.[[5]](#endnote-5) But it is also helpful in other ways. Perhaps more significantly, in exploring and uncovering the existence of *Drakula halála*, Rhodes gives weight to the idea that the history of the horrific and supernatural in European cinema can be traced back much further than is ordinarily suggested. Indeed, the film can be seen as one amongst a number of features and early shorts that contain the kind of supernatural elements that have long been associated with the horror film.

In fact, from the birth of cinema and its early epicentre in Europe, film-makers used the medium to present and explore a number of supernatural and horrific themes and images. The existence of a range of short and feature productions that either played on contemporary fears or used fantastical themes, ranging from films as diverse as *The X-Ray Fiend* (Smith, 1897) to *The Red Spectre* (de Chomón, 1907) to *Häxan* (*Haxan*)*: Witchcraft Through the Ages* (Christensen, 1922), points to an early engagement with tropes and imagery that would later be closely associated with the horror genre. In effect in drawing upon a variety of mythical, literary and real-life frames of reference the pre-sound period contained a significant number of films that we would now identify as horror films (that is, were they to be released tomorrow).

Calculating precisely what has been lost from the silent era is a slightly imprecise science, but Peter Bondanella estimates that in Italy ‘of the hundreds of films produced, roughly one quarter has been preserved partially or completely’ (2014: 7). For some lost works we have a relatively good knowledge of key information, such as production details or main plot. But in more general terms such losses suggest that our knowledge of the period can only ever be partially complete, which also means our full understanding of the bit-by-bit development of genres such as horror is necessarily limited. Often evidence that remains varies in terms of scope and quantity of source material, meaning that often we can at best approximate or make a ‘best guess’ as to a film’s production and exhibition history and its content. In the case of *Il mostro di Frankenstein* few potential sources remain.

Although the Italian film sector had enjoyed some success in the first two decades of the twentieth century, enjoying a ‘brief and glorious season’ between 1909 and1914 (Bertellini 2014: 3), the post-war period saw a downturn that continued with increasing gravity into the late silent period. In total 60 films were produced in 1920 but only twenty in 1924, and as Palmieri observed ‘[d]uring the last years of silent films, production averaged 10 films a year and these were only partially Italian as can easily be seen by glancing at the casts of that period’ (1954: 29). But whilst *Il mostro di Frankenstein* came at a time when Italian cinema was less vibrant and beginning to decline, certain kinds of films were still popular. In particular what might broadly be termed ‘strong man’ films – what Palmieri identifies as ‘films of the trapeze and the arena’ (1954: 29) – had an enduring appeal. A number of both muscular and acrobatic actors had become stars in Italy (and to a certain extent abroad) in the wake of Bartolomeo Pagano’s role as the hyper-muscular slave Maciste in *Cabiria* (Pastrone, 1914). The post-war period in particular saw a variety of characters, often drawn from classical mythology, such as Ajax (Carlo Aldini), Ercolo (Giovanni Raicevich), Saetta (Domenico Gambino) and Sansone (Luciano Albertini), form the nub of a highly popular generic format.

Particularly popular amongst these was Luciano Albertini, a former circus acrobat from Lugo di Romagna whose most famous tricks were somersaulting across six chairs and his creation of an eight person trapeze act. Albertini spent his early career working as a daredevil acrobat in a variety of circuses in Italy and, notably, at the Busch Circus in Berlin, before serving in the Italian navy during World War I. Although he is largely overlooked today, Albertini was a genuine star in the late teens and early twenties, having starred in the immensely popular *Sansone* (‘Samson’) film series, a character he first played in *Sansone contro iFilistei* (*Sampson Versus the Philistines*) (Gaido, 1918) and returned to on at least eight other occasions. In fact, throughout his career he tended to play roles that in some way or other relied upon his athletic physique. Such was his popularity – and such was his association with the character – that for the rest of his career he was often billed simply as Sansone, even in films where the character did not feature.

Even taking into account the popularity of adapting literary and historical texts in early Italian cinema, the decision for Albertini Film to both rework Mary Shelley’s novel for the screen and to cast Luciano Albertini in the lead role appears curious. Remembering and reflecting on the late teens and early 1920s in Italian cinema in the mid-1950s, Ferdinando Palmieri, a former theatre and film critic and writer for *Resto del Carlino*, *La Notte*, *Epoca* and *Candido*, described Albertini as being the Italian answer to both Douglas Fairbanks and Tom Mix (Palmieri 1954: 21). In many ways therefore the role of Baron Frankenstein in *Il mostro di Frankenstein* was a curious choice for him, especially as potentially it offered little opportunity to showcase the physical acts of derring-do for which Albertini was famous. But without the print itself it is hard to assess exactly how the film might have correlated with his star persona and physicality as a performer. Certainly Mary Shelley’s original novel on which the film was loosely based does not indicate a central character requiring any particular athletic dynamism. That said, the film’s poster for the Cinema Vittoria in Milan announced the film as ‘sensational adventure work rich with impressive situations’, whilst the Cinema Aurora called it an ‘extraordinary film of sensational adventures’. Evidently a play was being made here to show how congruous the film was with what audiences might expect from a Luciano Albertini/Sansone film.

What is clear, however, is that the film was, almost universally, advertised by making direct reference to the character of Sansone. Albertini’s success and popularity playing the biblical strongman meant that his own name was less a draw as much as the on-screen character with which he was so closely associated. As such a number of cinema posters stressed the name Sansone in larger font than its star’s actual name (which were in any case equated as one and the same thing). In several instances Albertini’s name appeared in parenthesis after the name Sansone, suggesting that it was much less well-known and recognizable. Indeed, such was his association with the role that in its 1922 poster for the film the Milan-based Grand Cinema Pace even went so far as to advertise the film by simply listing the protagonist of the film as Sansone (not even mentioning Albertini’s name at all).

Symptomatic of our lack of understanding of much in relation to *Il mostro di Frankenstein* are the variations of the film’s title that appear in various publicity materials. There appear to have been a series of misunderstandings or miscommunications about the name of the film here both when the film was in circulation and amongst contemporary commentators. Glut, for instance, notes that the name of The Monster was changed for Testa’s adaptation of Shelley’s novel ‘more to accommodate the Italian tongue than any other reason’ (Glut 1973: 67). Setting aside common misconceptions about the name of the creator (Baron Frankenstein) and his creation (normally simply The Monster), Glut’s assertion that the adaptation was renamed *Il Mostro di Frakestein* – with the two n’s removed from the Baron’s surname – is questionable. It seems likely that he derived this information from a variety of sources – most probably some of the posters that still survive which offer a variety of spellings of the film’s title. This seems probable as Glut notes that the film is only known through publicity and reviews (1973: 67). The 1922 Cinema Vittoria, Cinema Pace and Cinema Aurora posters (all Milan based), for example, list the film as *Il mostro di Frankestein*, whilst a later 1926 provincial cinema playbill offers the more awkward *Il mostro di Frankestein*. Surviving correspondence between the distributors and producers that we have available to us tends to use the more familiar ‘Frankenstein’. But that said, even the distributor themselves appeared to have problems in identifying the precise title, calling the film *Il mostro di Frankenstein* in one memo (on 8 December) and *Il Mostro di Frankestein* in another (less than two weeks later on 19 December).

The film was produced by Albertini-Film, which was co-founded by future UFA production manager Ernst Hugo Correll and Italian actor Luciano Albertini, in 1919. Albertini was effectively a figurehead for the company, which was solely owned by Correll (Bock and Bergfelder 2009).[[6]](#endnote-6) After shooting was completed in Turin the film was submitted to the Italian censors on 26 November 1920. Following this, cuts were suggested as quickly as 21 December of the same year but the film was not released in Italy until 4 September the following year.[[7]](#endnote-7) Although the original running time is still unclear, the final film effectively became a short, running at only 39 minutes. There is evidence to suggest that it circulated both domestically and internationally, although the full extent of its distribution is still unclear. A newspaper ad from August 1922, for example, in the *Pathé-Revue* from Port Said, where the film was billed as *Le Monstre de Frankenstein*, lists it as ‘an original tragedy’ and as was standard for the film’s publicity billed the star as ‘Samson otherwise known as Luciano Albertini’. Evidence for its international circulation beyond this is limited but surviving correspondence from the distributor Itala Film shows that new negatives, promotional materials and title cards were being ordered as late as December 1924 in Italian, French, English and Spanish. It is also clear that the film circulated well beyond its initial release period, with the surviving poster of at least one Italian cinema pointing to the film being exhibited as late as 1926.[[8]](#endnote-8)

Only one photograph remains of the film (Figure 1), most likely a promotional shot, which shows the Monster apparently strangling a woman by a washing line inside a decrepit room. The image suggests both the influence of expressionism and gothic imagery more generally on the film. The latter makes good sense given that the film was produced at a time when adaptations (of varying kinds) were extremely popular in Italian cinema and this was an adaptation of a very popular gothic text. It is also tempting, given the rising prominence of German Expressionist cinema at the time, to read into the image various characteristics that might suggest an expressionistic bent to the film. Equally the fact that Albertini Films was owned by the German Ernst Correll, who was much later to become the head of UFA, makes such an association attractive. The apparent *chiaroscuro* lighting of the frame and the various intercutting angles created by the walls, two window frames, lattice window inlay and washing line all hint at a film that might, in the very least, have had an expressionist influence. The only other known image of The Monster comes from an undated Belgian flyer (the sole known such material) that, as noted above, shows an artist’s impression of the monster being pursued into a cave. Physically this appears to accord with the still, with the creature having the same bald head, angular features and large, muscular physique.

**Figure 1:** The one remaining image of *Le Monstre de Frankenstein* (1921).

The *Kines* review for the film – a glossy Italian weekly publication and the only review currently available to us – is less than favourable but does provide some hints as to what kind of adaptation it was. It appears to have been a loose adaptation of the original source material that made some attempt to interpret elements of Shelley’s novel. Critic Guglielmo Giannini noted that ‘the authors have missed a great opportunity for making an excellent film […] because they haven’t taken into account the formidable material they had at their disposal or they only used it sporadically’. Clearly Giannini, whilst adopting a generally playful tone, was hostile towards the film as he also somewhat sardonically noted that whilst the writers had ‘managed to create an excellent story’ they were in ‘all probability […] offended by it – and obtained their revenge’ (Giannini cited in Martinelli 1995: 228).

But his review is useful in a number of ways that go beyond simply garnering the general tenor of his criticism (which, in any case, is only one review). He tells us, for example, that the film opens as a ‘purely cinematic affair’ (by which we might speculate that there were fewer inter-titles than would normally be expected or perhaps even none at all) with ‘the artificial creation of a human being’. His review also indicates that, at the beginning of the film at least, the film-makers stay close the some of the plot elements of Mary Shelley’s novel. But whilst it is clear that this is an adaptation that at least vaguely adheres to the basic tenets of the original source material, for Giannini the final result was ‘mixed up philosophy and adventure, sentimentality and religion’ that ultimately led to a film that was ‘a mish-mash full of contradictions’. Ultimately he dismisses the film with the memorable phrase that we ‘have the right to be cross if a church is ruined to make a sacristy instead!’ (Giannini cited in Martinelli 1995: 228).

Crucial information about The Monster can be gleaned from the review, which can helpfully be cross-referenced with the one remaining still photograph for the film. Interestingly the only sustained praise that Gianinni offers is for Umberto Guarracino’s ‘scary’ performance as The Monster. There is here an interesting connection to James Whale’s later treatment of the same character in as much as the reviewer notes that the part is ‘superbly acted by someone who has not been named’. Whilst it is unclear precisely what this means, this has interesting pre-echoes of Whale’s much later work where the actor playing the role of The Monster is simply listed in the credits with an enigmatic question mark. Clear differences are suggested with this later work however in that Testa appears to have desired both a much more physically mobile creature and one that looks far more human-like. Gianinni is almost joyful in observing that the character ‘has extensive knowledge of Greco-Roman fighting’. In this sense Guarracino was evidently a much more agile and physically dynamic monster than Boris Karloff’s later slower and slightly brutish incarnation. In fact the promotional photograph shows The Monster throttling his victim in a manner that would suggest a relatively mobile and lively (as well as aggressive) Monster.

It would appear that The Monster here is much closer to Percy Standing’s earlier portrayal in *Life Without Soul*. Remaining promotional materials and publicity stills show a monster that is physically similar to Guarracino in a number of ways. Standing not only resembled the Italian actor in his stocky, muscular build but also – interestingly – played The Monster with hardly any make-up or aesthetic adornments, making his movements as an actor relatively unencumbered. In both cases the character is seen as fundamentally human in form and contrasts very clearly with Charles Ogle’s heavily made-up, hirsute and physically deformed Monster and Boris Karloff’s later square-headed less-humanoid creation. But the reference to Greco-Roman fighting might also provide a clue as to why Albertini Films decided to re-adapt *Frankenstein* as a star vehicle for Luciano Albertini. If we take Giannini’s statement as meaning that The Monster is involved in at least one physical altercation, the reference to Greco-Roman fighting implies something akin to wrestling. This would therefore be unlikely to refer to the strangling evident in the promotional photograph, but would appear to accord with both Glut and Hirschmann’s allusion to the film culminating with a fight in a cave (which, as I have suggested above, can also be linked to the Belgian flyer for the film). If this was a fight between ‘Frankenstein and his monster’ as the latter asserts then it makes sense that this would be a highly physical sequence that would allow Albertini to make use of the athletic ability he was, at this point in his career in particular, famous for.

Even if we were to accept the proposition that *Il mostro di Frankenstein* was a horror film (or proto-horror), Italy in the early 1920s did not offer fertile ground for the development of the genre. Indeed, the development of horror cinema in Italy, or of films with elements of horror within them, was unlikely for a number of reasons. The censorious nature and role of the Catholic Church in Italy should not be underestimated. Donna de Ville argues that it was the Catholic Churches’ insistence that ‘volatile themes and horrific images’ (2010: 62) be avoided that stymied the growth of the development of horror imagery in the ways that we might see taking place in Germany and then the United States. There has been a prevailing logic that fascism killed horror in Italy, but there were restrictions in place before this and the development of *Il mostro di Frankenstein* pre-dates the March on Rome in October 1922 and the subsequent fascist takeover of government. Although it was undoubtedly important later in subduing the development of horror – a genre that was frequently ‘considered unpalatable by Italian censors for both its fearful and darkly sensual traits’ (Bonsaver 2014: 68) – the earlier decree laws of both 1914 and 1919 were crucial in laying out a framework that would effectively restrict the kind of images horror films would later become associated with. Guido Bonsaver has noted that resultant restriction meant that the general rules for anything screened in public cinemas included ‘anything offensive to public morality and decency; glorification of crime, violence and superstition; adultery for sexual gratification; insulting institutions of the state’ (Bonsaver 2014: 66). Given this it seems unsurprising that *Il mostro di Frankenstein* required cuts to obtain a release and we can now only speculate as to specifically what images led to these changes.

The impact it had upon the career of those who worked on it has become a kind of ’black legend’ that is loosely linked to ideas around the censorship of the film, which has been reinforced by the fact that no known prints of the film survive. In part this feeds off the idea that fascism ‘killed’ a nascent genre and some have suggested that it seriously impacted upon the career of those who worked on it. For instance Frankensteina: The Frankenstein Blog, notes that ‘the film was reputedly censored by Italian authorities, compelling Albertini and company to pursue their film careers in Germany’.[[9]](#endnote-9) At face value there appears to be much to support such a claim. *Il mostro di Frankenstein* was the last film Eugenio Testa was to direct (and he was never to act in Italy again), while Umberto Guarracino worked in Germany for several years, appearing in a loose German adaptation of H. G. Wells’ *The Island of Dr Moreau* called *Die Insel der Verschollenen* (*The Island of the Lost*) (Gad, 1921), not returning to work in Italy until 1923. Perhaps more significantly it was also Luciano Albertini and Albertini Films’ last Italian production.

Yet none of this need be seen as anything sinister whereby the careers of those working on the film were tainted or the film itself was seen as in anyway inflammatory. It is important to remember that, especially compared to the relatively stagnant Italian film market, the German film industry was booming at this time. A move to Germany for Albertini Films and Albertini himself (as well as for Guarracino) was a logical move in 1921. Albertini was a star in both countries and economically and industrially, given the strength and dynamism of the German film market it simply made good sense. For Albertini Films, in particular, relocation to Germany meant that the company could benefit from the production advantages enjoyed by Weimar cinema (particularly in relation to export benefits). In any case, given that the company was owned by a German this move appears far more practical than controversial. For actors such as Umberto Guarracino the move offered greater chances of employment and, in any case, he had a successful career in Italy after this period, appearing in a number of high profile films, most notably featuring in *Maciste all’inferno* (*Maciste in Hell*) (Brignone, 1925) where he played Pluto, Master of Hell. Eugenio Testa’s ‘exile’ from Italy is harder to explain definitively but he had always been more interested in regional dialectic-based theatre and in any case he later toured in Spain and ended up living there for an extended period. Moreover, as we have seen *Il mostro di Frankenstein* circulated well after the period of the fascist rise to power.

Given the ownership structure of Albertini Films and his role as its figurehead, it is no surprise that Luciano Albertini relocated to Germany. Albertini was also immensely popular there and so his disappearance from Italy is not as sinister as has been suggested. In fact, his screen career ultimately ended for a number of interlocking reasons, none of which relate to any problems related to *Il mostro di Frankenstein*. By 1932 he was 50 years old, had developed a serious drink problem and was physically no longer the ‘barrel-chested’ acrobat that Ferdinando Palmieri remembered (1954: 21). For most of his career Albertini’s fame rested primarily upon his ability as a physical performer and by his final film *Es geht um alles* (Nosseck, 1932) he was beginning to play older patriarchs. Albertini’s ultimate end was, for a man who’d been a huge star in his day, tragic. He ended his days in a mental asylum (after having abused a doorman at one of the many clubs he frequented).[[10]](#endnote-10)

What we know about the film is tantalizing and frustrating in equal measure. The temptation is to view the film as a sign of Italian film-makers moving towards a point where horror films *might* have begun to take shape as a genre. However, this is speculation and there is little to suggest this would have been the case (even if we were to accept a variety of counterfactual positions). As it is, we can look at what kinds of films we might *now* view Frankenstein adaptations as and suggest that *Il mostro di Frankenstein* would currently be considered a horror film. Certainly the evidence presented here suggests that the film was not conceived nor marketed using any contemporary understanding of horror cinema, but it also hints at a set of images that we would recognize as such today.

It is tempting to view all lost films as potential treasures whose rediscovery would enlighten us as to key moments of cinematic history. For *Il mostro di Frankenstein* its place as a critical reference point in a kind of ‘what could have been’ scenario makes it both an intriguing and a necessarily enigmatic film. The film is fascinating *because* it’s lost, *because* we have one tantalizing image remaining and *because* it is held up as an exemplar of how a political regime (in this case fascism) stopped a genre in its tracks (although the latter claim is often rather blindly repeated for its common sense allure). A number of earlier films, some well-known such as *Malombra*, many more now lost and obscure such as *Il cadavere di marmo* (de Simone, 1915), *Preferisco l’inferno!* (Rodolfi, 1916) or *L’angoscia di Satana* (de Liguoro, 1918) require further research to see the extent to which they might contribute to our understanding of the development of horror-based imagery in Italian, and by extension European, cinema. What we *can* say with certainty is that prior to the release of *I vampiri* in 1957 there were no horror film cycles in Italy. In this sense the existence of a number of earlier, silent Italian horror films suggests a ‘broken tradition’ of engaging with the horrific on-screen. Sometimes history conforms to neat linear narrative but it rarely does. More often than not it is a complex, stop-start affair with vague beginnings and even vaguer end points.

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**Contributor details**

Dr Russ Hunter is Senior Lecturer in Film and TV at Northumbria University. He has published widely on Italian genre cinema, film criticism and European horror cinema, and his edited collection (with Stefano Baschiera), *Italian Horror Cinema*, was published by Edinburgh University Press in 2016. His monograph *A History of European Horror Cinema* will be published by Edinburgh University Press in 2017.

Contact:

Northumbria University, Newcastle City Campus, 2 Ellison Pl, Newcastle upon Tyne NE1 8ST, UK.

E-mail: russ.hunter@northumbria.ac.uk

Notes

1. The Belgian flyer and the posters that remain are currently owned by a number of private collectors and have recently resurfaced, in a variety of forms, on the Internet. The production correspondence is drawn from a folio of communication held by the Museo Nazionale del Cinema in Turin and consists of a collection of print and poster orders and orders for other distribution/exhibition related materials. The remaining review was published in the Italian film magazine *Kines* but is here taken from its reprinting in the Centro Sperimentale di Cinematografia’s *Bianco e Nero* silent cinema series (see Martinelli 1995). The photograph is of unknown provenance but has circulated widely both on and offline for a number of years. [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. These characters formed part of a popular fascination in Italy cinema during this period with muscle-bound or highly athletic actors. [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. *The Whitstable Times and Tankerton Press*, 21 December 1929. [↑](#endnote-ref-3)
4. The film is even erroneously listed in Karin Kaltenbrunner’s *Mad Medicine* (2014) as being from 1915, where there appears to be a mix-up with the earlier (and also lost) *Life Without Soul* (Smiley, 1915). [↑](#endnote-ref-4)
5. The existence of a prior adaptation of Bram Stoker’s Count Dracula, however loose, means that *Nosferatu* (Murnau, 1922)occupies a slightly different place in the development of the horror genre than was previously thought. [↑](#endnote-ref-5)
6. After 1921 the company appears to have disbanded in Italy and relocated to Germany as all subsequent Albertini Films produced works are listed as Albertini Films GmbH. [↑](#endnote-ref-6)
7. This information is derived from the Italia Taglia (literally ‘cut Italy’) project initiated by Dipartimento dello Spettacolo del Ministero per i Beni e le Attività Culturali (now Direzione Generale per il Cinema). For further information see [italiataglia.it](file:///C%3A%5CUsers%5CSumukha%5CAppData%5CLocal%5CMicrosoft%5CWindows%5CTemporary%20Internet%20Files%5CContent.Outlook%5CBDXE18D5%5Citaliataglia.it). Some caution should be applied here, however, and our conclusions regarding the potential censorship need to be tentative. Decisions from Italian censors were notoriously slow and delays were not particularly unusual and so this is not necessarily indicative of substantial issues leading to cuts. [↑](#endnote-ref-7)
8. The poster, advertising a screening of the film on Wednesday 13th and Thursday 14th of October 1926, appears to be for a provincial cinema. [↑](#endnote-ref-8)
9. See: <http://frankensteinia.blogspot.co.uk/2007/11/silent-frankenstein.html>, accessed 19 March 2016. [↑](#endnote-ref-9)
10. <http://filmstarpostcards.blogspot.co.uk/search/label/Luciano%20Albertini>, accessed 19 March 2016. [↑](#endnote-ref-10)