

## Digital Affect and the Microbiological in Maxì Dejoie's *The Gerber Syndrome: il contagio* and Alex Infascelli's *H<sub>2</sub>Odio*

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The growth of digital film production in the early 2000s initiated something of a revival in Italian horror cinema. Iconic screen figures such as the random slasher and the zombie, which Italian directors helped fashion and popularize in the ‘video nasty’ period, have long since been absorbed into global horror brands.<sup>1</sup> But as technology has widened access to new generations of filmmakers, so too has the digital *per se* created new expressive opportunities for dreadful affect. This article focuses on two post-millennial examples of Italian *orrore digitale* to explore how digital aesthetics capture the transformation of both individual and social bodies in extremely affected states. I examine how these films articulate horror in renewed socio-cultural contexts in Italy and beyond, and how the ‘ontology’ of the digital can be considered as – paradoxically – a material ground for affect in the horror film. “Affect,” defined by Baruch Spinoza as the reciprocal change in state of interacting bodies, is adopted in the philosophy of Gilles Deleuze to describe changed bodily potentials, or the “unknown of the body” forming a new object of enquiry: “digital affect.”<sup>2</sup> In question is how the idea of the digital as a numerical and abstract dimension forms a sensuous and terrifying connection with bodies, fundamentally affecting how we act and how we think. I take “digital horror,” then, not simply as referring to the normalized computer image, but to a sub-genre inscribed with digitality, which is to say, a digital Idea linked to the terror of the virtual, an ontogenetic realm that is both abstract and real in which the body becomes newly vulnerable to threats unseen and “unthought.” Connected to the “unknown body,” I highlight a popular trope in contemporary culture associated with the technologies of digital medical imaging and the microbiological which visualise the hidden dealings occurring beneath the skin. What is often overlooked in the analysis of digital cinema is its competence in imaging the microscopic realm: the miniscule, submerged movements that lie at the heart of bodily transmutation. Images of cellular, genetic and neurological processes have crossed into common circulation in movies, art, and TV news prompting a “symptomatology” understanding of outward bodily change as commencing at a pre-personal, sub-cutaneous level of cellular and molecular interaction.<sup>3</sup> This order of corporeal microscopic activity is also, I argue, an incipient visualization of Spinozian affect. It is precisely the job of digital horror to explore this “unknown” of the body assaulted by not only the usual array of monsters and bogeymen, but by new, more abstract and extrapolated threats (for instance, the precariousness caused by chronic economic instabilities, rapid technological change, and social division).

This article is organised in three parts, moving from a critical discussion of “digital affect” to an examination of post-millennial Italian horror, focussing on Alex Infascelli’s 2006 film, *H<sub>2</sub>Odio (Hate<sub>2</sub>O)* and Maxì Dejoie’s *The Gerber Syndrome: il contagio (The Gerber Syndrome: the Contagion, 2012)*. I will show how these digital films present a “cellular” idea of the organic and the digital, instigating a nuanced microbiological vision of body-horror, and further, how they act as a symptomatology for today’s “biopolitics.”<sup>4</sup> Finally I propose Deleuze’s notion of the superfold to theorise the wider cultural and epistemological developments underpinning the form of digital affect and its connection with the

microbiological. The new wave of “Made in Italy” horror is no doubt spawned from the cost-benefits of digital film production. But it is also true to say that digital aesthetics have delivered a vastly expanded potential for the expressivity of horror.<sup>5</sup> Against arguments regarding the essential flatness and sterility of the digital order, the “molecular” reading I propose is, on the contrary, an analytical move that ultimately argues for a vital creativity of the digital even in the face of homogenising social forces.

How, then, is affect implicated in such overarching discussions of the digital? Against the personalised and privatised categories of feeling or emotion, affect encompasses a sensuous corporeality and embodiment that is prior to the subject and language, resistant to binary overcoding and “narrativization.” Popular culture today is characterised by a supercharged “synaesthetics,” constant incitations for attention, expenditure, and emotional discharge linked to the barely comprehensible speeds, scales and forms of digital media and communications, which are themselves the indices of global capitalism. Steven Shaviro considers that these articulations amount to “blocs of affect” commensurate with the complex social processes of which they are part. Specifically, digital media invokes a malleability of form, a protean nature linked to the inherent constructivity of the digital, seemingly adaptable at every point to capitalization. In the case of film, Shaviro contends that the computer has yielded a “post-cinematic affect” that shatters the reliable codifications of cognition and emotion operating in the era of classical Hollywood.<sup>6</sup> Unquestionably, then, technology plays a central role in the creation and control of affective flows in the digital age, but it has also provided new “ways of seeing,” analytical tools which go beyond technocratic management, quantification, and monetization. One such example is the aforementioned shift of viewpoint from the macro to the microscopic enabled by digital imaging. This scalar change has provoked a detectable consciousness of process, which is to say, a new emphasis on molecular movement and change, the infinitesimal in-between points, that complicates and challenges the finality of forms. These final forms, which in the horror genre typically translate into the actualization of the monster and/or bodily assault, are not at all erased in the new schema of the microscopic, but rather, as I will show, placed within the context of cellular or genetic origin. In other words, what emerges into view is the “mechanics of affect,” a staunchly materialist explanation of bodily change, amounting to a science of efficient causes.<sup>7</sup> Medical imaging’s capacity to permeate bodily surfaces and visualize real-time biological and neurological processes – the pathology of disease, or the workings of the brain, for example – affords something approaching a molecular comprehension of changes of state and, to an extent, answers Spinoza’s call for an understanding of affect.<sup>8</sup>

But how can we consider “the digital” as not just the technical method of display but as the very conceptual basis wherein a molecular view of a corporeal process is mapped and potentialised? I argue that digitalization in itself instigates a “thinking-molecular,” where molar properties and macroscopic form is atomized through quantification and data-conversion, thereby introducing an imperative of experimentation and change. To use Deleuze and Guattari’s spatial vocabulary, this amounts to a “deterritorialization” of analogue form, an irresistible impetus to alter, to process, to disseminate, and in the case of the media image, to unanchor pre-set meanings, combinations, and symbolic associations.<sup>9</sup>

It is not surprising, therefore, that this move to the microscopic is visible in a range of popular film genres where CGI is most commonly used. From contemporary sci-fi to the superhero film to a slew of neozombie movies such as Danny Boyle’s *28 Days Later* (2002) or Francis Lawrence’s *I Am Legend* (2007), we are now witness to frequent sequences of lab microscopy that graphically show the cellular or molecular changes involved in the superpower or zombie mutation. The scenes of microbiology contained in these films are digital expressions not only because of the computer processing typically necessary for their rendering

but more fundamentally because of their crossing into an abstract cellular domain, a flat plane of interaction that is an intensive zone prior to identifiable “symptom.”<sup>10</sup> Cells, genes and neurons act “algorithmically” to the extent that discrete units of picture-cells (pixels) merge and differentiate according to rules (given by physics or code) to produce qualitative change – Spinoza’s definition of affect.

To explore in more detail the issue of digital cinema, affect and the microbiological I select the aforementioned Italian horror films: *H<sub>2</sub>Odio* and *The Gerber Syndrome: il contagio*, both shot on digital format, both revolving around a microbiological ‘threat’, and both exemplary of a digital affect spawned from a formal deployment of a digital idea. In this way the digital techniques are an iteration or symptom of more fundamental microscopic processes occurring either in the body or in the digital image per se. These case studies are not intended to prove a universal tendency in Italian horror or digital cinema generally. Rather, in an Italian *filone* noted for its unique combination of invention and cliché, the analyses aim to create a symptomatology, which is to say, a molecular mapping of affect and aesthetics onto a political present.

## ***H<sub>2</sub>Odio***

Alex Infascelli’s *H<sub>2</sub>Odio* is a “post-feminist” update on the giallo-horror form where a women-only retreat from the modern world eventually leads to a monstrous take on sisterhood. The film retains many of the traditional stylistic tropes of the giallo, including lurid colourization, graphic violence, and loose plotting. Yet beyond its insular setting and generic recitations, the vision of subjectivation through lifestyle messages is a direct attack on the construction of the female consumer orientated through body-image. This biopolitical construction plays out in the story of a group of girlfriends who travel to an isolated island retreat to embark on a week of water-fasting and solitude, escaping from both the dietary temptations and the frivolous distractions of the outside world – no cellphones allowed!<sup>11</sup> The adventure has attracted women from a range of backgrounds from the world of business to more artistic and eco-conscious outlooks, symbolizing a variegated post-feminism, united by experience rather than politics. The hostess is the genial but psychologically troubled Olivia, who has invited the others to her secluded childhood holiday villa on a hideaway island, the classic *giallo* microcosm traversed by the menace of a mysterious stalker. Notwithstanding the differences between them, the friends are initially united in this sorority of minimal subsistence, taking their instruction from a self-help book, *Fasting to Freedom*, which rejects the consumerist lifestyle said to damage physical and mental wellbeing.<sup>12</sup> The women thus enact a form of voluntary self-constraint, thereby internalising a “virtuous” discipline whose regulatory function is often disguised through indoctrinating messages such as “healthy living,” “emotional wellbeing,” etc. Initially, the women focus on themselves and their life goals, but tensions surface as the fast begins to bite generating a kind of withdrawal symptom in everyone but the hostess. Olivia, it seems, has an ulterior motive expressed through a secret diary addressed to her unseen sister, Helena, whose absence within the group has a macabre implication. Through fragmented flashbacks we learn that the sisters’ mother committed suicide years earlier. But far from exorcising the past, the return to the house provokes a sense of gothic foreboding and a powerful psychotic reaction as Olivia has now reached the same age as her deceased mother. This is just one intimation of a number of genetic repetitions and hauntings that convert into a sensuous and innervating film style.

In terms of corporeal affect, Olivia is susceptible to two invisible forces that are working inexorably in the background: one pharmacological, derived from anxiety medication that she secretly imbibes; the other a possessive power exerted by her unseen sister who becomes her

confidant and ally in the developing tensions with the other women. *H2Oodio* envisages a ground zero of the ascetic body partaking no material ingestion, or modern day diversions. But this purification and abstinence – undertaken to elicit the spiritual and the transcendent – only foregrounds the physical and the immanent at the most basic, cellular level. I say “physical” because of the hormonal and neurological imbalance induced by the fast itself (the women feel sick, bored, and constantly prone to headaches); and “immanent” because the genetic trace of sister Helena begins to manifest itself invisibly, microscopically, in the interstitial tissues of Olivia’s body. In the bathroom, which becomes Olivia’s inner sanctum, the mirror reflects a bruise she has developed on her shoulder, gradually developing into a painful keratinous “tooth” which she pulls out from under her collar bone. This is a sign of Helena, the immaterial being, budding literally ‘under the skin’ of her sister.

In a hallucinogenic flashback, triggered when the group of women meet to celebrate Olivia’s birthday, we learn that sister Helena is an “evanescent twin” – one that was never actually born into the world, ingested as a foetus by the dominant sibling whilst still in the mother’s womb. The subcutaneous tooth is all that physically remains of Helena, the outcome of a genetic remnant, but one that exerts an inexorable pull. This materialization of the unborn sister is a replication which at a narrative level catapults Olivia into a frenzy of schizophrenic violence as the psyches of the two sisters vie for power in one body. The evil Helena is now the more powerful, a symptom of the real genetic and neurological interference taking place at cellular and synaptic levels, signifying the microbiological affect that turns a body “monstrous.”

## **The glitch aesthetic**

In rendering the bodily transformation, *H2Oodio* posits the question of the monster not as a thing that comes from the outside but as having an immanent source in a genetic or developmental “glitch” in the primal cell division that forms an embryo.<sup>13</sup> This important thematic feature is replicated at the level of film form through the adoption of a digital glitch aesthetic whereby Infascelli’s languid style is interrupted at fraught moments by a picture-jitter technique associated with the computer glitch. The disturbance is initially introduced as Olivia confronts her reflection in the bathroom mirror, the frequency increasing towards the film’s final denouement in the cellar in which the evil twin’s enterprise of repossession is finally concluded. In these moments the image track stutters and glitches (complimented by a synchronous audio-hiccup), as if offering a glimpse of another order of reality or double-identity beneath the surface of this one.

As a new aesthetic in film and media art the glitch is a wholly digital technique. A catastrophic failure of seamless digital processing, the computer glitch mercilessly reveals the technologized image in crisis, usually manifesting in the form of gross pixilation or other aberrations which destroy the internal consistency of the image. The glitch also disrupts human perception per se, tripping phenomenological coherence, producing a snap affective shock in its wake. In their online collaboration “Notes on Glitch,” Hugh Manon and Daniel Temkin describe an artistic practice that embraces the glitch as an antidote to the myth of digital perfection. “What otherwise would have been passively received—for instance a video feed, online photograph, or musical recording—now unexpectedly coughs up a tumorous blob of digital distortion.”<sup>14</sup> The allusion to tumors and mutation as having a digital origin corresponds precisely to its adoption in Infascelli’s film to signify the genetic “error” in the sister-sister dyad. In a sense what we have is the corruption of the file-name “Olivia” by the rogue data emanating from “Helena.” This is not to claim that the digital and the genetic operate via a

unified code, but an acknowledgment of the correlation of the two orders at a primary level of organization.

True to its genre, *H2Oodio* invokes the full horror of the digital/genetic glitch, a glimpse into the abyss of another order of reality – material as well as psychological. But far from merely a destructive force, Manon and Temkin argue that the glitch also manifests a “provocative, strange and beautiful” affective power that is inherently creative in its power to reconfigure thought. In relation to language, the glitch would translate as a kind of stammer or stutter, which Deleuze suggests should not be seen as a defect in the speech act, but rather as a creative opening, a movement from within, that interjects official grammar to generate a new syntax, even a “style” (Deleuze 1987 4).

Supplementary to the traditional style of the *giallo*-horror *H2Oodio* adds the digital glitch, which reveals a virtual realm that flickers through to visibility at various intensive-transformative moments. How the digital glitch fits into a discourse of the microbiological is easy to see once we note that the glitch is both a model for the synaptic workings of the brain, and the operative term in triggering divergent series, or genetic “mutation” so to speak, through what Henri Bergson (1998) termed *élan vital*.<sup>15</sup> Relating to the molecular biology of the brain, the glitch is a way of rethinking the mechanism of thought not as developing out of a rational synaptic sequence, or mechanistic firing of “logic gates,” but rather as an uncertain system that works through irrational breaks. This endows the glitch and other digital aesthetics a special role in facilitating new contacts in the brain by way of what Deleuze calls a “shock to thought,” refreshing perception and dissolving conditioned reflexes at a point prior to reterritorialization. Insofar as affect is precisely the gap or interstice of the irrational break, the hiatus between perception and action, the synaptic glitch – unpredictable, instantaneous, and productive – acts as a model for digital affect.

How will the body react? How will the mind be affected by the glitch? True to type, *H2Oodio* answers the question in a crescendo of “slasher” violence as Olivia/Helena dispatches her erstwhile friends one by one.<sup>16</sup> But beyond the generic expectation, the fascination of Infascelli’s film is in its translation of outside forces and signs to the microscopic realm where the accident and contingency seen in the physical world of molecular and genetic interaction also operates the digital order. Moreover, from the usual understanding of genetic transmission as hierarchical and generational we have in the Olivia/Helena dyad the alternative of an intra-generational subversion of the supposedly inviable code. This is a radically digital methodology of genetic transfer to the extent that data transmission is not limited to “vertical” genetic events such as the meeting of sperm and egg, but rather pertains to the “horizontal” plane of the recombinant gene. If this is ultimately a body-horror narrative about the vengeful twin, updated with a genetic theme and digital aesthetic, its challenge is also directed at the industry of personalised healthy living and “lifestyle.” Fasting, retreating, and self-discovery – these form part of the biopolitics of today, arguably targeted mostly at the urban female consumer. Ultimately the affective power of the film emerges, in a sense, from the, a combination of health concerns and body-consciousness, whose surface sheen is corrupted in unexpected ways.

### ***The Gerber Syndrome: il contagio***

In contrast to *H2Oodio*’s flamboyant style and individualised focus, *The Gerber Syndrome: il contagio* adopts a more social frame and a contemporary “mediality” taken from documentary, reality-TV and “imperfect cinema” tropes. As the ‘contagion’ moniker suggests, Dejoie’s film is a virus epidemic thriller feeding off the post-SARS anxiety and “bird flu” scares of the early

millennium. The film is set in the modern Italian city-suburbs of Torino which reels from a highly infectious flu virus causing neurological breakdown, disjointed movement and aggressive tendencies. Misunderstood and feared, the sufferers of the syndrome roam the streets and spaces of the metropolis, resembling zombies. But in their disorientated state they are pitiful rather than lethal, suffering not only from their untreatable condition but also from ostracization and oppressive intervention by the state as it seeks to quarantine the infected. In keeping with the microbiological motif, the pathology of the disease is shown in an early clip from the medical lab as we witness the pathogen, described by a medic as an “evil,” attacking and destroying healthy brain cells. But in *The Gerber Syndrome* this is only the primary cause, the trigger event which spreads to affect in equally devastating ways the higher orders of the body and society: the individual, the family, and the entire socius. In terms of biopolitics, the film invites a view of the zombie as a “growth” in the body-politic, or a symptom that articulates the flows of destructive social desire in the populace as a whole. Furthermore, despite its concrete and restricted setting, the narrative makes clear that the syndrome is a transnational crisis, causing the same social upheaval and waves of intolerance across the continent of Europe.

Strategically, the film dissects the affected orders of society along three axes, following the respective protagonists with a mixture of prurience and investigative zeal which largely defines modern televisual media. Firstly we have the individual victim of the syndrome, Melissa, whose developing illness destroys her family unit. Then there is the security state (embodied in the “zombie-catcher,” Luigi). Lastly we have the public health service, whose impotence and contradictory position is personified in a family medic, Dr. Riccardi, caught between Hippocratic duty and government dictat. The intrusive and voyeuristic scenes detailing Melissa’s hopeless degeneration within her family home are particularly tormenting, as the microbiological attack, detailed in the aforementioned scene, breaks out on the surface of her body and face in the form of lesions and convulsions. But despite the manifest traumas invoked, Dejoie shuns the mawkish emotion of Hollywood storytelling, substituting a more distracted and distanced digital affect: a flat and coldly vibrating composition that is nevertheless able to shock with the revelations of its roving eye. This digital-collage form, which includes clip-inserts of government spots-ads, medical explanations, law enforcer body-cameras, street protests and vox-pops, finally evokes the feeling of a society cut loose from traditional values and emotional responses. A new type of radically uncoded affect captured fittingly by the fragmentary, recombinant form.

To supplement the microbiological vision on a different level, *The Gerber Syndrome* presents the full panoply of disenchanting citizens as a molecular force, a deterritorialized space charged with deep currents of intolerance and controlling impulses. A prime example is Luigi, a front-line operative of the shadowy para-state agency, CS or “Central Security,” set up to intercept and detain infected individuals in secretive quarantine centres. The camera tracks Luigi’s movements closely, identifying his multifaceted and flexible work patterns as pertaining to the increasingly outsourced service and security sectors of the current labour market, demanding target-driven job roles often in high-stress environments. In accordance with reality media’s erasure of the boundaries between public and private, Luigi allows the documentary crew into his home space, where interviews paint him as a more or less “regular guy” who nevertheless harbours some disturbingly dark social prejudices pertaining to fear of the “other.” Enslaved to such discourses, as much as by his labour, Luigi replies “It’s my job” when asked about the ethics of what he does. In fact Luigi’s role only makes official what is already “the intolerable:” a de-humanising discourse that penetrates the social field, serving to that marginalize and divide, opening a space for crass populism and xenophobia.

As the virus takes a grip on its victim the individual subject is lost to the networks previously integrating them into “life.” But this contagion is more than just a personal bodily trauma. *The Gerber Syndrome* translates the microbiology of viral disease onto a social scale, showing how the corporeal tissue of a populace becomes cellular at the point of infection, resulting in corrosive antisocial waves of affect sweeping across a community. In *A Thousand Plateaus*, Deleuze and Guattari already present a micropolitics based not on institutions and macro-political organization, but on the infectious force of everyday imitative practices and micro-relationships.<sup>17</sup> The important thing here is how actions and reactions catch on to form an unstoppable chain reaction in crisis situations. The digital methods of Dejoie’s mobile and furtive camera perfectly disclose this very level of affect and contagion at the cellular level: the seed of fear, confusion and distrust is repeated and reiterated, begetting an irresistible malaise at the societal level, of which the zombie is the unmentionable sign. The “documentary” interlaces its interviews with invasive forays into Melissa’s bedroom and revealing vox-pops on the streets of Turin. Later, the leader of an ultra-right vigilante group is quizzed on his extreme xenophobic views, intercut with footage of his gang attacking infected individuals in the street and burning their bodies on wasteland. Far from the mortal threat of earlier film progenitors, the zombie in *The Gerber Syndrome* is now the target of a dangerously divided social order, caught in an unstoppable contagion of fear and intolerance.

Despite its nominal focus on three individuals, the affective flows pictured in the film are pre-subjective and abstract before they are subsumed and actualised in any given person. At times Dejoie gives us the wracked and tortured faces of the affected in close up – that is, as affect captured and “written” onto the face. But the camera is never still enough to indulge the pre-packaged emotional refrains and the poignant portraiture typical of high-end commercial cinema. In an “imperfect” style the camera instead flits around keeping a febrile yet distanced positioning from its subjects. Clearly, the viral infection is an abstract flow that can be interpreted as a metaphor – or better diagram – of a generalised contemporary affliction that permeates and destabilizes the social and institutional infrastructure of neoliberal Western countries. Exactly what name should be given to this malaise is left open but the socially inscribed intolerance together with the figure of the victim-zombie, points towards a political critique of the governance of difference and in particular the mass phobias stoked and harnessed by populism. Arising from this structure of ostracization and regulation of difference is the emergence of what Deleuze calls a “control society.”<sup>18</sup> Of relevance here is the film’s depiction of information management, data networks, and new state agencies set up to police the medico-social crisis. Power in the control society is retained at a macro-level by the organs of the state, but it is also dispersed and distributed – handed implicitly to non-state and para-state “players,” and to individuals to self-police on a micro-level. As Phillip Roberts argues, “Control presents a variable and modulating system where organization is maintained by managing the virtual components of matter, manipulating possibility and risk to successfully control everyday life” (72). In *H2Oodio* the “possibility and risk” subsists in the barely understood processes and limits of the body, brought to light by the self-imposed, supposedly ‘natural healing’ effects of the water fast. In *The Gerber Syndrome*, control of the viral infection is equally delegated to everyday actors, seen in the atrocity of a mother informing on her own diseased daughter, a parish priest who uses the fear of contagion to reinforce Catholic doctrine on sexuality, and the murderous violence meted out to the zombie “community” by so called ordinary citizens. By the film’s end the social fabric, as reflected in the three ostensible documentary subjects, is in a state of severe crisis. The CS agent is dead, shot in a skirmish as he sought to detain a suspected Gerber patient; Melissa’s middle class family is ripped apart as a consequence of her medicinally induced catatonic state, and finally Dr Riccardi dispairs about his impossible job, and is likely now infected himself. Unlike its more mainstream counterparts that work on marketable and individualised emotions, the affective regime of *The Gerber*

*Syndrome* is more abstract, ambiguous, and social. Yet in this dislocated, digital form, its impact is more immediate and vital, expressing more precisely the composition of forces that shape the now.

## The Superfold

Having noted how *H<sub>2</sub>Odio* and *The Gerber Syndrome* are marked by the dual discourses of the microbiological and the digital, the final question for my study is to ask how affect at the microbiological level and the digital logic of informatic exchange are in fact intimately connected through wider epistemological contexts. This is discernible from Deleuze's account of the passage from "fold" to "superfold," a development pertaining to the creation of the new in the context of pervasive digital technologies. These information societies, as mentioned, harbour new contours of control revealed through the concept of biopolitics. But they also contain new social potentialities yet to be realised, for as Deleuze mentions in "Postscript on the Societies of Control," contemporary informatics-based societies enact a confrontation between enslaving and liberating forces. The notion of the superfold stems from Michel Foucault's analysis of the great explosion in scientific, economic and social thought in the modern epoch (Deleuze 1988). In Deleuze's reckoning, this professionalization of research led to the development of discrete "folds" in thought and action producing epistemes such as "Labour" (the discipline of capitalist production), "Language" (the discipline of linguistics) and even "Life" (the discipline of biology and the catalogue of species). In the contemporary condition, however, the move to the superfold manifests completely new forces of the "outside" asserting "an unlimited finity, thereby evoking every situation of force in which a finite number of components yields a practically unlimited diversity of combinations" (Deleuze 1988: 131). The new superfolds pertain to the fields of genetics (engendering new forms of life); digital technologies (new forms of production and control); and asignifying expression (giving rise to new forms of language). In the phylum of "life," for example, genetics enables a deconstructed understanding of life that displaces the integrity of the organism from the body to a set permutation or codification of genes. All of life, which is a potential infinity of beings, can be derived from the intensive relation between the small number of proteins from which DNA is constituted. This provides the genetic superfold with an immense potential or creative power that supersedes the previously assumed sovereignty of genera and species. In a parallel step, the pervasiveness of digital technics in contemporary superfolds is beyond question: when "man" is taken out of the equation, no longer a limiting factor or determining fold, then the silicon superfold runs amok. In *The Gerber Syndrome*, the digital superfold expands proportionally with the biological pandemic: crisis management by the state means a mixture of disciplinary confinement but also an internalised social control enabled by a specific digital connectivity that activates the separate nodes – the information and security networks of the state, media platforms, health authorities and even human informers. In terms of film form, the mix of documentary filming with surveillance footage, "infographics," interviews, vox-pops, and other digital resources is likewise an indication of the silicon superfold at work, the recombinant construction acting as an equivalent of the genetic superfold.

Within *H<sub>2</sub>Odio* the genetic superfold takes precedence in the suggestion of a mental "echo" of the mother's psychological disturbance which persists in the daughter, Olivia. This intergenerational trauma is typical of the gothic horror tale. But more unusually, and more powerfully, we have the cellular-protozoan growth of the unborn sister inside the body of her twin. Helena actualizes the superfold of the gene challenging the physiological (not to mention psychological) sovereignty of the embodied individual. To be clear, this is not a malignant destruction at a cellular level, but the auto-genesis of a "new" tissue, organ, corpus within an



“old” one. At the end of *H2Oodio* Helena has fully taken over the body of Olivia and a new calm has been restored to the villa, even if at the literal expense of Olivia’s erstwhile friends, their cadavers cocooned in sleeping bags and laid out in a neat formation on the floor. This of course is the expected fulfilment of the horror genre, but in the wider frame of cultural trends the denouement signifies a microbiological “solution” to the problem of the monster double: at the level of the cellular, the reductive purification of the body intended by Olivia through the water fast is superseded by the superfold of genetic, horizontal permutation and possibility.

## Conclusion

In my analysis of *H2Oodio* and *The Gerber Syndrome* I have shown how both horror films embed two important features of contemporary culture into their strategems: namely microbiological framings and digital aesthetics. The understanding of microbiological processes is mobilized for horror when conceived as primal matter vulnerable to pathogenetic mutation, lying at the root of bodily change. In the above films, a terrible virus and a genetic “malfunction,” invests their respective arcs of affect with a disturbing raw energy by combining the ‘cellular’ and the digital into one machine. Even though both case studies emanate from Italy’s modestly funded independent cinema scene, digital production has prompted new possibilities for an *auteurist* cinema characterised by an acute, singular perception and, arguably, a more penetrating meaning than that achievable by more mainstream cinema. In this way, despite their different aesthetic approaches and affective strategies, each film references a virtual world both sinister and close by. That this sinister and morbid image is the very business of horror should not detract from the significant cultural messages contained within. The new superfolds of genetic manipulation and social control alluded to across the two films may indeed manifest as dark warnings, but the films’ imbrication of the digital and the microbiological is in the first instance the revelation of a zone of virtual intensity or “primary causes” reminding us that we are not necessarily paralyzed in a society of “effects.” Both the microbiological and the digital open out a primary ground of creative and unpredictable connection which exposes matter and image to experiment.<sup>19</sup> In other words, in the shift to the micro, the films enable a Spinozian micro-analysis of the infinitesimal corporeal interactions that in turn transform the individual and social body of the contemporary.

The connection between the microbiological, the digital, and the multiplicity of virtual worlds that exist on the plane of immanence is demonstrated especially in Infascelli’s film. As I have argued, *H2Oodio* deploys digital affect in the form of the glitch – simply put, an interrupted perception motivating thought and hinting at this immanent level of ‘creative disorder’. Cinema is, according to Deleuze, a privileged instrument plugging directly into sensory perception and creating a circuit between world and brain. The concept of the superfold at the microscopic, cellular, or pixelated scale conjoins digital creation to the synaptic level of affect, a connection shown in *The Gerber Syndrome* where digital control is as much a corrupter of the “social brain” as viral infection. The value of Dejoie’s film lies precisely in revealing this destructive societal effect at what seems like a pivotal political moment in globalized Western societies vulnerable to populism and demagogues.

An analysis of these two films shows that the microbiological urge is not an end in itself but rather a symptom of a wider inclination towards the micro-analyses and the micro-technics of affect, a trend which is intimately connected to the unavoidable “contagion” of digital technologies, practices and thought. Digital aesthetics are the *modus operandi* of this new trajectory, its logics and features able to capture imaginative drives, perfectly attuned to a social and cultural pathology which, the films show us, can be far from progressive. In the “Five Star Movement,” Italy has given us perhaps the first Western instance of digital populism, a new

political force that not only utilizes the affective power of social media, but which seems grounded in, and attuned to, the realization of a “molecular” population.<sup>20</sup> Yet it is by no means inevitable that these biopolitical developments will lead to intolerance and creeping authoritarianism, which is the warning of *The Gerber Syndrome*. Neither is it the case that salvation means withdrawing from life into an illusory state of privatised bodily sanctity, which is the warning of *H<sub>2</sub>Odio*. If it is true that neoliberalism’s atomised populations and digital flows have contributed to the growth of populism and control, then a “microbiological” critique suggests that affect cannot ultimately be tamed, channelled or commodified. *The Gerber Syndrome* and *H<sub>2</sub>Odio* are examples of film’s essential role in expressing a barely tangible mood, feeling, or affective trace before-the-fact. More than merely representing a zeitgeist, however, they also remind us, beneath and between the mayhem of their visions, of the power of the digital superfold, not for control but for reaching towards the virtual in the creation of the new.

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## Notes

<sup>1</sup> Among the Italian produced zombie-horror films which gained considerable notoriety as “video nasties” are Lucio Fulci’s *Zombie Flesh Eaters* (1979), *Zombie Creeping Flesh* [aka *Night of the Zombies*] (Bruno Mattei, 1982) and *The Living Dead* (Jorge Grau, 1974).

<sup>2</sup> Deleuze (1988b 17).

<sup>3</sup> The fascination with the mysterious world of the microbiological stretches back to the cusp of the twentieth century during the era of the “Cinema of Attractions”. To illustrate: one of the first calls for film censorship came in 1903 from British cheesemakers angered at a short film called *The Cheese Mites* which revealed the microscopic organisms on Stilton cheese with alarming alacrity. Other film titles fuelled a new public anxiety regarding unseen menaces with examples such as *The Dread of Microbes* (1911) and Edison’s anti-tuberculosis propaganda film, *The White Terror* (1915). See David A. Kirby (2013).

<sup>4</sup> Stemming from Michel Foucault’s research on the so-called history of sexuality, “biopolitics” is a socio-political schema for defining and controlling populations based on ‘subjectivity’, an internalised self-knowledge and self-regulation which is in turn founded on pseudo-scientific principles and epistemologies. The main field of operation of biopolitics is not the institutional locations of old like the prison or school (the disciplinary regime), but everyday life itself.

<sup>5</sup> According to Simone Starace, recent Italian horror has been benefitted from the liberating effects of digital ‘auto-production’ outside of the traditional finances of the TV and media industry. For his part, Alex Infascelli claims that the novel distribution model for *H2Oodio* (released as a complementary DVD with a weekly magazine) provided a newfound freedom from commercial interference, whilst at the same time inflecting his work with a distinctive digital style.

<sup>6</sup> Shaviro (2010 2).

<sup>7</sup> When Spinoza said we know nothing of “causes”, he intended that the human individual mistakes the signs registered in and on our bodies as the actual causes of our dis-ease, thereby calling for a discipline not of the symptom, but of the source, a “symptomatology” which refocuses onto the hidden realm of affect.

<sup>8</sup> Gilles Deleuze makes the connection explicit between affect and its causation in his monogram on Spinoza (1988b).

<sup>9</sup> Deleuze and Guattari employ “deterritorialization” as a key concept in their accounts of transformation and creativity. In *Anti-Oedipus*, for instance, they see it as a “coming undone” (354) whereby fixed forms and relations undergo a decoding process that in *A Thousand Plateaus* releases “lines of flight” (10) from fixity and convention.

<sup>10</sup> Manuel De Landa uses the oppositional terms “topological” and “metric” spaces to define how extensive forms are engendered from intensive situations: “As if the metric space which we inhabit and that physicists study and measure was born from a nonmetric, topological continuum as the latter differentiated and acquired structure following a series of symmetry-breaking transitions” (26).

<sup>11</sup> Although the film predates the era of the “smartphone” (Apple’s first I-phone iteration was released in 2007), the standard cellphone was already ubiquitous in the developed world, and the explosion in digital communications and social media was well under way.

<sup>12</sup> The “self-help” culture, which seeks to personalise and privatise the responsibility for physical and mental health, abounds in the network culture. Fasts, including water fasts, are often subtly addressed to women in terms of losing weight and other health benefits achieved in a “natural” and “healthy” way. See for instance, [www.thelifeco.com](http://www.thelifeco.com) or <https://wellnessmama.com> (accessed 22 September 2019).

<sup>13</sup> In Deleuzian philosophy and theories of affect intensive situations or events are distinguished from extensive forms that are said to be their results. Intensive situations are nodes where specific forces converge to produce qualitative change – transitions from one state to another, as in the change from liquid to gas, or from regular cellular growth to mutational growth.

<sup>14</sup> Available at [http://www.worldpicturejournal.com/WP\\_6/Manon.html](http://www.worldpicturejournal.com/WP_6/Manon.html) (accessed 21 September 2019). Critical enquiry into the glitch art aesthetic started gaining momentum in the new millennium and the first symposium dedicated to its practice and theory (called G.LI.TC/H) took place in Chicago in September 2010.

<sup>15</sup> Strictly speaking, Bergson’s concept of *élan vital*, or spontaneous morphogenesis, was based upon a semi-mystical “life force.” This is replaced in modern genetics by the generative power of the combinatorial matrix of genes themselves.

<sup>16</sup> Part of the notoriety of the Italian giallo-horror are the innovative and graphic death-scenes. Arguably, Infascelli is less interested in showing the actual bloodletting than in the bodily takeover of Olivia by Helena.

<sup>17</sup> See especially the chapter “1933: Micropolitics and Segmentarity,” *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, p. 208.

<sup>18</sup> In “Postscript on Control Societies” Deleuze refers to the new forms of subjectivation replacing Foucault’s disciplinary societies. Rather than physical enclosure, or institutional imprisonment the control society operates through continuous, “free-floating” control that appears like freedom but disguises a more subtle, subterranean form of control “as rigorous as the harshest confinement” (Deleuze, 1995 178).

<sup>19</sup> There is no ontological distinction between matter and image in the philosophy of Deleuze and, before him, Bergson. See Deleuze (1986) p. 56ff, and Bergson (1991).

<sup>20</sup> Many political commentators see Italy’s embrace of the “Movimento Cinque Stelle” (M5S) in the 2013 national elections as an unprecedented political earthquake in Europe (Tronconi, 2016). To expand on “digital populism”, see *The Birth of Digital Populism: Crowd, Power, and Postdemocracy in the Twenty-first Century*, Edited by Obsolete Capitalism Free Press. (Davoli et. al.).

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