



DARIO ARGENTO: DOORS INTO DARKNESS

The Bird with the Crystal Plumage

The Bird with the Crystal Plumage (L'uccello dalle piume di cristallo)

Director: Dario Argento
©: Seda Spettacoli S.p.A.
Production Company: Seda Spettacoli S.p.A.
(Rome), CCC Filmkunst (Berlin)
Produced by: Salvatore Argento
German Co-producer: Artur Brauner *
Production Manager: Camillo Teti
German Production Manager: Rudolph Hertzog Jr *
Italian Production Manager: Ugo Valenti *
Production Manager Supervisor: Umberto Sambuco
Administrator: Angelo Tavazza
Assistant Director: Roberto Pariante
Script Girl: Lida Chitarrini
Written by: Dario Argento
Based on a novel by: Bryan Edgar Wallace
Loosely based on The Screaming Mimi by: Fredric Brown *
Director of Photography: Vittorio Storaro
Camera Operators: Enrico Umetelli, Arturo Zavattini
Stills Cameraman [sic]: Nuova Dial
Editor: Franco Fraticelli
1st Assistant Editor: Cesarina Casini
2nd Assistant Editor: Sergio Fraticelli
Set Dressing: Dario Micheli
Costumes: Dario Micheli
Make-up Man: Pino Ferrante
Hairdresser: Lidia Puglia
Title Design: Luciano Vittori
Music by: Ennio Morricone
Music Conducted by: Bruno Nicolai
Sound Technician: Carlo Diotallevi
Boom Man: Eugenio Fiore
Sound Mixer: Alberto Bartolomei
Sound Editor: Ken Rolls
Sound Effects: Luciano Anzellotti
Dialogue Director: Robert Rietti
Music Publisher: Bixio-S.A.M.
Interiors filmed at: Incir-De Paolis
Cast:
Tony Musante (Sam Dalmas, a writer)
Suzy Kendall (Julia)
Enrico Maria Salerno (Inspector Morosini)
Eva Renzi (Monica Ranieri)
Umberto Raho (Alberto Ranieri, gallery owner)
Raf Valenti (Professor Carlo Dover, ornithologist)
Giuseppe Castellano
(Monti, Morosini's chief investigator)
Mario Adorf (Berto Consalvi, artist)
Pino Patti (Faiena, informer)
Gildo Di Marco (Garullo, pimp)
Rosa Toros (4th victim, photographed at the races)
Omar Bonaro (Morosini investigator)
Fulvio Mingozzi (Morosini investigator)
Werner Peters (antiquarian)
Karen Valenti (Tina, 5th victim)
Carla Mancini (girl in street)
Gino Erba (Morosini investigator)
Annamaria Spogli (Rosita, prostitute - 2nd victim) *
Gianni Di Benedetto
(Professor Rinoldi, psychiatrist) *
Reggie Nalder (Needles, assassin) *
Liana Del Balzo (old lady in the fog) *
Italy/West Germany 1970
96 mins

* Uncredited

While Mario Bava's formative 1963 murder mystery *The Girl Who Knew Too Much* set the giallo blueprint, Argento's soaring debut, about an American in Rome who fears for his life after witnessing an attempted murder in an art gallery, crystallised the sub-genre's popularity. Launching Argento to international stardom and gaining him several Hitchcock comparisons along the way, the film is a veritable checklist of the visual and thematic obsessions that he would return to throughout his career.

bfi.org.uk

Dario Argento was working as a film critic for the Rome newspaper *Paese Sera* when he started writing screenplays, notably collaborating with Bernardo Bertolucci on the script for Sergio Leone's *C'era una volta il West/Once Upon a Time in the West* (1968). In 1969 he adapted (uncredited) Fredric Brown's 1949 novel *The Screaming Mimi* which he took before the cameras under the title *L'uccello dalle piume di cristallo* (*The Bird with the Crystal Plumage*) later in the year. It was an immediate hit when it opened in Italy in February 1970 and launched Argento on a career that would peak in the late 70s but continue on until into the next millennium.

It's a remarkably assured debut, a taut and unrelenting example of that peculiarly Italian genre, the *giallo*, brutal tales of sex and violence named after the yellow-jacketed murder-mystery paperbacks published by Mondadori from the late 1920s, reprinting the likes of Agatha Christie, Edgar Wallace and Raymond Chandler. It's a film that oozes both style and a youthful arrogance, Argento displaying a supreme confidence in his own abilities rare in directors making their first feature. As will all of his best films, he packs it full of memorable set-pieces, innovative camerawork and pioneering use of unexpected musical case (in this case, a jazz-inflected score supplied by Ennio Morricone).

The plot is Argento's first workout of one of his favourite obsessions – the protagonist who sees something that they can't quite remember, a detail that eventually turns out to be the key that unravels the mystery. Here, the protagonist is American writer in Rome (two more of Argento's recurring tropes – the out-of-place American and the creative artist) Sam Dalmas (Tony Musante) who witnesses a woman being attacked in an art gallery while out on a late night walk. Trapped between two glass doors, Dalmas is helpless and although the woman, Monica (Eva Renzi) survives the attack, her assailant escapes. Sure that he saw something vital that he can't recall, Dalmas becomes obsessed with solving the mystery, putting himself and his girlfriend Julia (Suzy Kendall) in danger.

The plot, as would become standard in the *giallo* film throughout the 70s, is suitably convoluted. *Gialli* had come to the screen in the early 1960s through the work of Mario Bava (*La ragazza che sapeva troppo/The Girl Who Knew Too Much* (1963), *Sei donne per l'assassino/Blood and Black Lace* (1964)) but it was *L'uccello dalle piume di cristallo* that helped propel the genre into a new

DARIO ARGENTO: DOORS INTO DARKNESS

The Cat o' Nine Tails (Il gatto a nove code)

Mon 1 May 18:20; Sat 13 May 11:20; Thu 16 May 20:45

The Bird with the Crystal Plumage (L'uccello dalle piume di cristallo)

Tue 3 May 18:10; Sat 13 May 20:45; Tue 16 May 21:00

The Five Days (Le cinque giornate)

Tue 2 May 20:35; Fri 19 May 18:15

Four Flies on Grey Velvet (4 mosche di velluto grigio)

Wed 3 May 20:30; Sat 6 May 17:40

Two Evil Eyes (segment: The Black Cat) (Due occhi diabolici: Il gatto nero)

Wed 4 May 21:00; Mon 22 May 20:55

The Stendhal Syndrome (La sindrome di Stendhal)

Fri 5 May 18:05; Sun 7 May 18:20

Deep Red (Profondo rosso)

Fri 5 May 20:35; Sat 13 May 15:00 (+ Q&A with Dario Argento); Tue 23 May 18:10

Do You Like Hitchcock? (Ti piace Hitchcock?)

Sat 6 May 20:40; Tue 30 May 20:40

Trauma

Mon 8 May 15:50; Sun 28 May 15:40

Opera

Mon 8 May 18:30 (+ intro by Michael Blyth, season curator); Sat 27 May 20:45

Dark Glasses (Occhiali neri)

Wed 10 May 21:00; Wed 31 May 20:40

Suspiria

Fri 12 May 20:40 (+ intro by Dario Argento); Sat 20 May 18:10

Tenebrae (Tenebre)

Sat 13 May 18:20 (+ intro by Dario Argento); Wed 17 May 20:45; Tue 23 May 20:50

Inferno

Mon 15 May 20:45; Sat 20 May 20:45

Phenomena

Fri 19 May 20:45; Mon 29 May 15:50

The Phantom of the Opera (Il fantasma dell'opera)

Sat 20 May 15:50; Fri 26 May 20:40

Sleepless (Non ho sonno)

Sun 21 May 18:10; Sat 27 May 17:45

Mother of Tears – The Third Mother (La terza madre)

Wed 24 May 20:40; Mon 29 May 18:40

The Card Player (Il cartaio)

Thu 25 May 20:30; Sun 28 May 18:20

Strange Phenomena: Argento Season

Introduction

This video will be available to watch for free on BFI YouTube from 19.30 on Mon 17 Apr

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decade with a renewed sense of urgency, upping the levels of sex and violence. It acts as a blueprint from which not only so many of the subsequent *gialli* were struck but also from which Argento drew much of his early career. He would almost obsessively rework those key tropes first explored here, most successfully in *Profondo rosso/Deep Red* (1975).

Assured though it is, it's by no means perfect. One of the main criticisms levelled at Argento – an entirely justified one – is that he cares less for the mechanics of his plots than he does for the visuals used to bring them to life. Here, Dalmas' investigations can get a tad plodding at times, as if Argento was just looking for something to keep things ticking over until the next set-piece hoves into view. It tends to meander at times, as though Argento couldn't quite think up anything interesting for Dalmas to do between encounters with the mysterious assailant.

But he makes up for the narrative slackness with ravishing photography (courtesy of Vittorio Storaro) and those extraordinarily memorable set pieces – Sam trapped between the glass doors, impotently trying to save Monica from her attacker; a chase through a junkyard; Dalmas trapped again, this time beneath a bizarre metal sculpture as the truth about the killer is finally revealed. It's in these scenes where Argento really shines, directing with a real sense of energy and with an eye for the unusual angle, the stunning set design and the perfect colour palette. He may not have cared too much about the minutiae of the plot, but he's fully invested in these moments.

Beautiful, thrilling, often deeply unsettling, *L'uccello dalle piume di cristallo* was a debut that Argento found initially hard to follow. His second film, *Il gatto a nove code/The Cat o' Nine Tails* (1971) is another thriller but a rather mundane one compared to his debut. It's by no means bad – far from it in fact – but it rather pales by comparison to his bravura debut. In Maitland McDonagh's 1991 study of Argento's films, *Broken Mirrors, Broken Minds: The Dark Dreams of Dario Argento*, the director admitted that wasn't pleased with the way that the film turned out and has repeatedly cited it as his least favourite film. His third film, *4 mosche di velluto grigio/Four Flies on Grey Velvet* (1971) saw him back on form and for the rest of the decade, Argento didn't look back, constructing a string of outstanding horror thrillers the quality of which he's sadly failed to replicate for many years.

Kevin Lyons, eofftvreview.wordpress.com, 26 October 2018

A contemporary review

Apart from one or two concessions to contemporary fashions in violence in the shape of some gory stabbings, this murder mystery (something of a novelty from the Italian studios) is developed more or less in the classic Hollywood tradition and is all the better for it. Repeated flashbacks to the crucial scene provide ample opportunity for audience participation in true Hitchcock manner, and Dario Argento's direction is well paced throughout, if occasionally a little overwrought. Fluid camerawork, capable performances, and an effectively eerie score by Ennio Morricone all help to mask a few holes in the otherwise tidily written plot. Altogether an eminently watchable film from a director of some promise.

Monthly Film Bulletin, November 1970