



DARIO ARGENTO: DOORS INTO DARKNESS

Four Flies on Grey Velvet

Four Flies on Grey Velvet

(*Quattro mosche di velluto grigio*)

Directed by: Dario Argento

©: 1972 by Seda Spettacoli S.p.A.

Production Companies: Seda Spettacoli, Rome/Universal Prod. France, Paris

Produced by: Salvatore Argento

Written by: Dario Argento

Original Story by: Dario Argento, Luigi Cozzi, Mario Foglietti

Lighting Cameraman: Franco di Giacomo

Film Editor: Françoise Bonnot

Special Effects: Cataldo Galiano

Production Designer: Enrico Sabbatini

Make-up Artist: Giuliano Laurenti

Hairstylist: Paolo Borselli

Music Composed by: Ennio Morricone

Sound Engineer: Mario Ronchetti

Filmed at In.Ci.R-De Paolis - Rome

Cast:

Michael Brandon (*Robert Tobias*)

Mimsy Farmer (*Nina Tobias*)

Jean-Pierre Marielle (*Gianni Arrosio*)

Francine Racette (*Dalia*)

Bud Spencer (*'God' Godfrey*)

Calisto Calisti (*Carlo Morosi*)

Marisa Fabbri (*Hilda, the maid*)

Oreste Lionello (*the professor*)

Fabrizio Moroni (*Mirko*)

Stefano Satta Flores (*Andrea*)

Costanza Spada (*Maria*)

Aldo Bui Landi (*coroner*)

Tom Felleghy (*police commissioner*)

Dante Cleri (*'2 person' coffin salesman*)

Corrado Olmi (*porter*)

Guerrino Crivello (*Rambaldi, neighbour*)

Gildo Di Marco (*postman*)

Fulvio Mingozzi (*music studio manager*)

Jacques Stany (*psychiatrist*)

Pino Patti

Stefano Oppedisano

Ada Pometti

Leopoldo Migliori

Gianni Di Benedetto *

Sandro Dori *

Renzo Marignano *

Luigi Cozzi (*masked killer*) *

Italy-France 1971

104 mins

* Uncredited

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SIGHT AND SOUND

SPOILER WARNING The following notes give away some of the plot.

Dario Argento's third feature film as director was intended to be his farewell to the *giallo* that he'd helped to reinvigorate with the successes of *L'uccello dalle piume di cristallo/The Bird With the Crystal Plumage* (1970) and *Il gatto a nove code/The Cat o'Nine Tails* (1971). Of course, that wouldn't be the case – the box office under-performance of his 1973 comedy drama *Le cinque giornate/The Five Days* would lead him back to the form, albeit in a typically offbeat manner, with his masterpiece *Profondo rosso/Deep Red* (1975). For many years, Paramount Pictures, who owned the English language territories rights to the film, declined to allow its release and its relative scarcity compared to the rest of Argento's canon has made it seem more important, perhaps, than it really is. But it's still a fascinating film, a step up from *The Cat o'Nine Tails* and a pointer towards the highly distinctive and very strange films still to come.

Indeed, *Four Flies* was Argento's most experimental film to date and it begins as it means to go on with an odd musical sequence – Roberto Tobias (Michael Brandon) is bashing out a drum solo that segues into a piece by a progressive rock band. Tobias suddenly stops playing to look at a mysterious figure watching him through the window of the music shop that the band are rehearsing in (though the drums continue regardless). Elsewhere, the camera peeps out from the inside of an acoustic guitar though no-one's actually playing one and the music periodically cuts abruptly as the image switches to the title cards, the main title itself adorned by a beating heart. It's all very peculiar, the perfect curtain-raiser for the oddball plot about to unfold.

Leaving the rehearsals, Tobias is stalked by the mystery man who he corners in an abandoned theatre (here we get the first look at the subjective camera pushing aside curtains that would turn up again in later Argento films) where he accidentally kills him in a scuffle, a masked figure looking not unlike the clockwork doll that would appear in *Deep Red* photographing the killing from a balcony. In the coming days, Tobias confesses to his wife Nina (Mimsy Farmer), receives menacing letters about the killing (the address tells us that he lives on 'Via F. Lang') and is attacked one night by the masked photographer. Amelia (Marisa Fabbri), a maid, witnesses the attack and having worked out the killer's identity is stalked and murdered in a park. But it turns out that Tobias' victim, Carlo Marosi (Calisto Calisti) is still alive and that the 'killing' was staged. Several more murders occur – of Marosi, for real this time, of the private investigator Gianni Arrosio (Jean-Pierre Marielle) that Tobias hires and Nina's cousin Dalia (Francine Racette) with whom he has a brief affair – before both the identity and motives of the killer and the meaning of the title are revealed.

Argento has suggested that he thought of the evocative title first and worked a plot around it and in fairness, it's no more absurd than any of the plots that would grace his later work. It refers to an abstract image that looks like four flies on grey velvet extracted from Dalia's eye, a reference to the debunked 'science' of optography popularised by the German physiologist Wilhelm Kühne. The image (Argento had at first been unsure about using the optography angle) at first makes no sense but will eventually allow Tobias to expose his tormentor.

We'd soon learn not to worry too much about plots when it came to Argento films – they were really just excuses on which to hang his increasingly surreal and outrageous horror set-pieces. *Four Flies* follows some of the usual

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 2 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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trappings of a *giallo* plot, with Tobias' dogged investigations placing others in danger as he stumbles towards a climactic reveal, but Argento's use of optography as a key plot device suggests that he may not have been taking things entirely seriously. Indeed, there are many moments of comedy scattered throughout *Four Flies*, few of them as effective as the comedic interludes in *Deep Red*, though Tobias' visit to his friend Diomede/Godfrey (played by the legendary Italian comic actor Bud Spencer), known as God, who appears on screen to a burst of the Hallelujah Chorus, is always good for a chuckle.

But Argento takes the set-pieces very seriously. The stalking of Amelia, during which she finds herself briefly trapped in the tightest of alleyways, is excellent, a brief shot of a slow-motion bullet that predates similar scenes in Argento's own *Opera* (1987) and the later science fiction blockbuster *The Matrix* (1999), and above all the unforgettable final shot are all the sorts of tense, unexpected and hugely inventive moments that we've come to love Argento for, and which can be found in even his less effective work. That climax features an extraordinary slow-motion car crash, the driver watching impassively as the glass of the windshield fragments into thousands of pieces in front of them before shock cutting to the car exploding. It's a shattering moment made all the more poignant by Ennio Morricone's marvellously haunting score.

Morricone had scored *Bird* and *Cat* for Argento but a falling out on *Four Flies* meant that they wouldn't work together again until 1996 in *La sindrome di Stendhal/The Stendhal Syndrome*. The presence of the prog rock band that Tobias plays for (though once the mystery starts, he seems to lose interest in his musical career and we barely hear from them again) pointed the way forward for Argento. Giorgio Gaslini would score *Five Days* and contributed to the soundtrack of *Deep Red*, but it was the collaboration with Italian band Goblin that would provide that film's most memorable themes and the band, or various members and permutations of it, would remain regular collaborators for many years to come.

Four Flies on Grey Velvet is a film full of odd ideas (Tobias is haunted by recurring dreams of an increasingly unsettling public beheading), terrific set-pieces and excellent musical cues. It's chief weakness is the performance of Michael Brandon who cruises through the whole thing as if asleep at the wheel. Argento had previously considered Terence Stamp, Michael York (who had apparently been keen to do it but was side-tracked by work on Etienne Périer's *Zeppelin* (1971) which was running over schedule) and even members of The Beatles. Given the parlous state of Argento's first marriage at the time, the fact that Brandon was such a stand-in for the director and that he even looks like him in some shots, one wonders what Argento was telling us about himself by portraying Tobias as a rather unlikable 'hero.'

But it's a minor and easily overlooked failing in a film that's otherwise a riveting finale to Argento's 'animal' trilogy. Had *Five Days* been more successful, Argento may well have headed off for pastures new, but his return to the *giallo*, with added supernatural overtones, with *Deep Red* set him on a course that would result in a string of genre classics. If some of his later work has been, at best, patchy, he often came up with the odd set piece or moment of inspired madness that at least got even the most sceptical of fans talking. In retrospect, *Four Flies* seems like the inevitable stepping-stone between the more realistic *gialli* of his early films and the increasingly fantastical, baroque and just plain weird films yet to come.

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

CINECITTÀ

Programme notes and credits compiled by Sight and Sound and the BFI Documentation Unit

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