



## IN PERSON & PREVIEWS

# Dario Argento in Conversation with Prano Bailey-Bond

### Dario Argento

Born 7 September 1940, Rome, Italy  
Selected filmography

#### As Director

- 1970 **The Bird with the Crystal Plumage**  
(L'uccello dalle piume di cristallo) + writer
- 1971 **The Cat o' Nine Tails**  
(Il gatto a nove code) + writer  
**Four Flies on Grey Velvet**  
(4 mosche di velluto grigio) + writer
- 1973 **The Five Days** (Le cinque giornate)  
+ writer  
**La porta sul buio** (TV series, 2 eps)
- 1975 **Deep Red** (Profondo rosso) + writer
- 1977 **Suspiria** + writer
- 1980 **Inferno** + writer
- 1982 **Tenebrae** (Tenebre) + writer
- 1985 **Phenomena** + prod/writer
- 1987 **Opera** + prod/writer  
**Gli incubi di Dario Argento**  
(TV shorts, 9 eps)
- 1990 **Two Evil Eyes** (Due occhi diabolici)  
segment: 'The Black Cat' (Il gatto nero) +  
exec prod/writer
- 1993 **Trauma** + prod/writer
- 1996 **The Stendhal Syndrome** (La sindrome di  
Stendhal) + prod/writer
- 1998 **The Phantom of the Opera**  
(Il fantasma dell'opera) + writer
- 2001 **Sleepless** (Non ho sonno) + prod/writer
- 2003 **The Card Player** (Il cartaiolo) + prod/writer
- 2005 **Do You Like Hitchcock?**  
(Ti piace Hitchcock?) (TV film) + writer
- 2005/6 **Masters of Horror** (TV series, 2 eps)
- 2007 **Mother of Tears** (La terza madre)  
+ prod/writer
- 2009 **Giallo** + writer
- 2012 **Dracula 3D** + writer
- 2022 **Dark Glasses** (Occhiali neri) + writer

#### As Writer

- 1968 **Today We Kill, Tomorrow We Die!** (Oggi  
a me... domani a te!) (d. Tonino Cervi)  
**The Hell before Death** (Comandamenti  
per un gangster) (d. Alfio Caltabiano)  
**Commandos** (d. Armando Crispino)  
**La rivoluzione sessuale**  
(d. Riccardo Ghione)  
**Once upon a Time in the West**  
(C'era una volta il West) (d. Sergio Leone)  
(story)
- 1969 **Cemetery without Crosses**  
(Cimitero senza croci) (d. Robert Hossein)  
**Love Circle** (Metti, una sera a cena)  
(d. Giuseppe Patroni Griffi)  
**Probability Zero** (Probabilità zero)  
(d. Maurizio Lucidi)  
**The 5-Man Army** (Un esercito di 5 uomini)  
(d. Don Taylor, Italo Zingarelli)  
**Battle of the Commandos**  
(La legione dei dannati) (d. Umberto Lenzi)  
**Season of the Senses** (La stagione dei  
sensi) (d. Massimo Franciosa)
- 1985 **Demons** (Dèmoni) (d. Lamberto Bava)  
+ prod
- 1986 **Demons 2** (Dèmoni 2) (d. Lamberto Bava)  
+ prod

Dario Argento was terrifying audiences in all kinds of creative ways long before the marketing term 'elevated horror' began making the rounds. Nevertheless, he is the legitimate godfather of the recent wave of elaborately crafted, profoundly cinephilic films – by the likes of Ari Aster, Jordan Peele and David Robert Mitchell – that inspired the label.

Born in 1940 to a film producer father and photographer mother, Argento developed his passion for the movies growing up. This blossomed into a first career as a critic, an activity that served as his de facto film school and led to a number of scriptwriting gigs, primarily for the kind of exploitation and appropriation pictures that were burgeoning in Italy at the time. The most notable among these is his story credit, shared with his friend Bernardo Bertolucci, on Sergio Leone's landmark spaghetti western *Once upon a Time in the West* (1968).

His debut as a director came in 1970 with *The Bird with the Crystal Plumage*. A milestone *giallo* – a genre of lurid crime thrillers and whodunnits – it was a commercial as well as critical success, earning him the backhanded sobriquet of 'garlic-flavoured Hitchcock', courtesy of *Variety*. The violent, increasingly extravagant *gialli* that followed only cemented this reputation and reached a high point with his fifth feature, the magisterial *Deep Red* (1975). (According to an oft-repeated and possibly apocryphal story, Hitch himself saw the film and said, 'This Italian guy is starting to worry me.') He then turned to supernaturally inclined horror, inspired in equal measure by surrealism, German expressionist cinema and the B movies of Val Lewton. Though *Suspiria* (1977) is the most famous, titles such as *Inferno* (1980) and *Phenomena* (1985), which push their dream narrative logic and baroque *mise en scène* to even further extremes, are as deserving of recognition.

In the ensuing decades, Argento has oscillated between *gialli* and horror, maintaining a steadfast allegiance to the genres that are synonymous with his name.

### FIRST LOVES, FIRST TRAUMAS

Dario Argento: My primal trauma as a director didn't take place at the cinema, but at the theatre. At the age of four, my parents took me to see a production of *Hamlet*. When the ghost of Hamlet's father appeared, I was overcome with such emotion that I had a seizure, I started to convulse. I had to be taken out of the theatre. That was a foundational moment and one whose emotions I reproduced countless times in my films. My cinematic *coup de foudre* happened when I was eight or nine years old. My family used to go on vacation to the Dolomites and we would see films at the outdoor cinema. There I saw *The Phantom of the Opera* [1943], the one in colour with Claude Rains. It was a tremendous revelation, it opened a lot of doors for me, introduced me to a lot of ideas. It was one of the most important films of my life, because it made me discover that there were other things in cinema besides the usual westerns, adventure films, gangster stories... there was another cinema, a cinema of fantasy, where mysterious things happened and fantastic things appeared. Many years later, in fact, I filmed my own version of *The Phantom of the Opera* [1998] with my daughter Asia. It was meant as a tribute to this film that first brought me into a world that I did not know.

- 1989 **The Church** (La chiesa) (d. Michele Soavi)  
+ prod
- 1991 **The Sect** (La setta) (d. Michele Soavi)  
+ prod
- 1997 **The Wax Mask** (M.D.C. - Maschera di  
cera) (d. Sergio Stivaletti) + prod

#### As Actor

- 1992 **Innocent Blood** (d. John Landis)  
as paramedic
- 1996 **Bits and Pieces** (Il cielo è sempre più blu)  
(d. Antonello Grimaldi) as man confessing  
to Franciscan monk
- 2021 **Vortex** (d. Gaspar Noé) as Him

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#### PARIS IN THE 60S

In the 1960s, I was studying in Paris and when my classes would finish, at 4 o'clock, I would go to the Cinémathèque. It's there that I discovered cinema, real cinema. I discovered German expressionism, I discovered certain westerns by John Ford, so many wonderful films. That's when I fell in love with American cinema – as in, the films American critics didn't like very much, that they considered commercial. I found them terrific. Discovering Alfred Hitchcock was a wonderful moment. I remember when I first saw *Psycho* [1960]. After the screening was over, I immediately went to get my girlfriend and we watched the film again. Hitchcock is one of the greatest, he taught me a way of making films unlike any other: his mode of storytelling, his way of narrating with images. In Paris I also discovered the *nouvelle vague*. Those directors changed the way films were told, the editing, the emotions, the coldness with which characters treated one another – think of *Une femme mariée* [1964] by Godard! Even films that were more delicate, like Truffaut's, they might have been very different, but they had the same spirit, they expressed the same love for cinema. *Day for Night* [1973] for me is a masterpiece. Unfortunately, I didn't meet any of the French New Wave directors while I was there, I was too young. I was jealous of Bernardo Bertolucci because he met Jean-Luc Godard. It was at a cocktail party, he snuck his way in and managed to be introduced. He was very proud of that.

#### WESTERNS WITH LEONE AND BERTOLUCCI

I introduced Bernardo to Sergio Leone. It's a funny story. One day, in Rome, Leone and I went to see a film at the cinema. Once the lights came on, during the intermission, we saw that Bernardo was also there. Leone wanted to meet him and since we were friends, I introduced them. Bernardo said to him, 'I like your cinema, I love the way you film the asses of the horses.' Leone liked that very much and he later asked us to write the treatment for *Once upon a Time in the West* [1968]. The three of us watched a lot of films together as research. *The Searchers* [1956] by John Ford was of course very important, we watched it several times. Also Nicholas Ray's *Johnny Guitar* [1954], because in the movie Leone wanted to make, the protagonist was a woman, so he was looking for westerns with women protagonists and there are only very few of those. That was one of the reasons he wanted to collaborate with us. I was young, Bertolucci was also very young, and Leone thought Italian screenwriters were old and uninteresting, and that they didn't understand women. They were not interested in women, all of their films had male characters. He thought that two young people could better understand the kind of story he wanted to tell. I learned a lot from Sergio Leone. He taught me how to match shots, taught me the importance of the camera in cinema.

#### FROM FRITZ LANG TO SUSPIRIA

I did eventually meet Jean-Luc Godard. I interviewed him when I was working as a critic, though our conversation was unfortunately very short. He told me that French critics were all cretins, and that Italian critics were all cretins as well. I interviewed a lot of important filmmakers who left a big impression on me. I spoke to Fritz Lang when he was in Rome, staying at a beautiful hotel near the Colosseum. He told me the story of when he was summoned by Joseph Goebbels to his office and then immediately fled Germany. Lang had a huge influence on my filmmaking. He had a dual personality, because he was an expressionist – a great expressionist, perhaps the greatest – but he was also full of fantasy. Just think of *Die Nibelungen* [1924]. Although he made films that were so different from one another, he always made them with such style: the shadows, the strange atmospheres. I think that especially in *Suspiria* [1977], his impact is felt. The way of telling the story, the compositions, the

## **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

### **With thanks to**

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# CINECITTÀ

close-ups, it was all very much inspired by Lang. I even cast his muse and former lover Joan Bennett as one of the witches. When I was in New York, looking for actresses, I went to see her act in a play. She was extraordinary. Also, I hoped she would tell me something about Fritz Lang that I didn't know. Something about his life, about their relationship. When we started shooting *Suspiria*, I asked her, 'Could you tell me something about Fritz Lang?' And she said, 'OK, but not now, when we finish the film.' Perhaps something happened between them that should not be told, because when we finished the film she told me nothing!

## **THE GREATEST ITALIAN DIRECTOR**

Of all the Italian directors, for me Antonioni is the greatest. *L'avventura* [1960] is a masterpiece. It's merciless, it spares no one. *L'eclisse* [1962] is another masterpiece, a truly mysterious, beautiful film. His way of representing places, of telling stories by depicting squares, streets. His choices were full of fantasy, inspired by the great Italian painters of the 20th century. I love *The Lady without Camelias* [1953] and the other early films, the ones in black and white, they're so strange, with those detached atmospheres, those characters who hardly speak to one another. *The Lady without Camelias* is set in the world of cinema and it is so fierce. At one point, Lucia Bosè's character slowly begins to be taken over by the world of cinema, by people who are perfidious, without mercy. It is so beautifully done. I remember shots of squares unlike any I had ever seen. It was all filmed in Milan, I think, and the piazzas are so beautiful, they look like metaphysical arenas. Great, great films. I later cast David Hemmings in *Deep Red* [1975], but I don't know whether that was a homage or a coincidence. I guess you could say it was a homage, given that he had acted in *Blowup* [1966], but also a coincidence because when I cast him I honestly didn't think of him as a great Antonioni actor.

## **A CHILD OF NEOREALISM**

I was very lucky, because my sister worked as Fellini's secretary during the shoot of *Juliet of the Spirits* [1965], so I went with her to the set several times and I saw the maestro at work. He had such wit, such grace in the way he behaved towards the actors and the technicians. He was classy, full of humour. He invented so many things, he improvised. For me, improvisation is a beautiful thing. You are in the street, you see a man walking by, you talk to him, you put him in front of the camera, you ask him to do things, and he does them, just like that, spontaneously, with great finesse. Rossellini's assistant director on *Stromboli* [1950] told me about when Ingrid Bergman came to Stromboli to work with Rossellini for the first time. There was a scene, in front of a house, and Rossellini had only vaguely told her what she should do. She was surprised by the fact that there were no other actors but she didn't have the courage to ask him, so she said nothing. Rossellini said, 'Now I'm going to the port to get the actors.' He went to the port, rounded up about 15 men, and came back with them. At first she was shocked, but then she understood the spirit of what he wanted to do and got into the heart of the film. She said that these fishermen acted very well; they told their own stories, their adventures. Although my method of working is totally different – I'm more inspired by American cinema, where there is no improvisation, where there are scripts, storyboards, everything is planned – I did act in a completely improvised film: *Vortex* [2021]. When Gaspar Noé came to my house and offered me the role, at first I said no. He insisted and when he told me the film would be improvised, I accepted. That was interesting to me, because I feel I am a child of neorealism, that is, of improvised cinema. Not just Rossellini – think about [Vittorio De Sica's] *Umberto D.* [1952], the main character is played by a university professor, he had never made cinema in his life. I did have my doubts

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**Mark Kermode Live in 3D at the BFI**

Mon 15 May 18:30

**Preview: Beau Is Afraid**

Tue 16 May 19:00

**TV Preview: Best Interests + Q&A with**

**Sharon Horgan and Jack Thorne**

Mon 22 May 18:15

**Preview: The Old Man Movie: Lactopalypse! +**

**Q&A with directors Mikk Magi and Oskar**

**Lehema**

Fri 26 May 18:15

**World Premiere: Straight 8 2023 Top 25**

Sat 27 May 18:00

## REGULAR PROGRAMME

**African Odysseys: Abolition Abolição + intro by  
Brazilian MP, Benedita da Silva (pre-recorded)  
and panel discussion**

Sat 13 May 14:00

**Art in the Making: The Case of Marcel Duchamp  
+ intro by BFI National Archive Curator**

**Steven Foxon**

Mon 15 May 18:15

**Silent Cinema: The Unknown + intro by  
BFI curator Bryony Dixon**

Sun 21 May 14:00

**Seniors' Free Matinee: The Man Within + intro**

Mon 22 May 14:00

**Relaxed Screening: A Glitch in the Matrix  
+ intro and discussion**

Mon 22 May 18:25

**Projecting the Archive: 29, Acacia Avenue  
+ intro by BFI curator Josephine Botting**

Tue 23 May 18:15

while shooting, but when I saw the finished film, I was impressed. It was powerful, because like Rossellini's fishermen, we didn't act, we told our own stories. I feel very close to Gaspar Noé. We first met at the Toronto Film Festival. He came to find me and asked if I would go see his debut, which was a medium-length film called *Came* [1991]. I went to see it and found it fascinating. Ever since, he has seen me as a friend, a teacher, even. He feels his cinema is partly related to mine and he has often sought my advice. When he was finishing *Irreversible* [2002], I was in Paris looking for an actress, so he invited me to see a rough cut. A strong film. I like his cinema, it's free of any pity.

## ITALIAN VS AMERICAN COLLEAGUES

*Gialli* already existed in Italian cinema before I started directing films, but mine are not classic *gialli*. They are very particular, they have an individual personality. I can't say I was inspired by the directors who came before me; rather, the inspiration came from myself. Mario Bava, for instance, had an approach to the genre that was strongly ironic and which I didn't particularly like. But he and I were friends and we also worked together, he did the special effects on *Inferno* [1980]. His son, Lamberto, was also my assistant director [on *Inferno* and 1982's *Tenebrae*]. Otherwise, I didn't socialise much with the Italian genre filmmakers of the time. I was a bit annoyed that they would copy my films. They even copied my titles. That's something particular about Italy, there isn't a feeling of community among filmmakers. Whereas I did find that community in the US. Mick Garris, an American director who is also one of the producers of the series *Masters of Horror*, used to organise dinners in Los Angeles every once in a while. Horror directors would get together and eat, talk, laugh. It was interesting, it's something that would never happen in Italy. George Romero and I were very close friends, maybe the greatest of friends among filmmakers. We hung out, we talked about cinema. His films are very different from mine – they're full of political ideas, there's an interest in religion that is important – but we also collaborated and worked well together, it was a beautiful relationship.

Introduction, interview and translation by Giovanni Marchini Camia, *Sight and Sound*, May 2023