



**DARIO ARGENTO: DOORS INTO DARKNESS**

# Tenebrae (Tenebre)

## Tenebrae (Tenebre)

Director: Dario Argento

Production Company:

Sigma Cinematografica

Presented by: Salvatore Argento

Produced by: Claudio Argento

General Production Manager:

Angelo Iacono

Production Manager: Giuseppe Mangogna

Production Supervisor: Cesare Jacolucci

Production Accountants: Carlo Du Bois,

Ferdinando Caputo

1st Assistant Director: Lamberto Bava

2nd Assistant Director: Michele Soavi

Continuity: Francesca Roberti

Screenplay: Dario Argento, George Kemp

Original Story: Dario Argento

Director of Photography: Luciano Tovoli

Camera Operator: Giuseppe Tinelli

Gaffer: Francesco Giulivi

Key Grip: Mario Moreschini

Still Photographer: Francesco Bellomo

Special Effects: Giovanni Corridori

Film Editor: Franco Fraticelli

1st Assistant Film Editor: Pietro Bozza

Art Director: Giuseppe Bassan

1st Assistant Art Director: Davide Bassan

Set Decorator: Maurizio Garrone

Props: Giuseppe Pagnotta,

Oswaldo Monaco

Costume Designer: Pierangelo Cicoletti

Costumes Supplied by: Annamode 68

Mr Anthony Franciosa clothes are by:

Carlo Palazzi

Mr John Saxon's clothes are by:

Franco Tomei

Make-up Artist: Pierantonio Mecacci

Hair Stylist: Patrizia Corridoni

Wigs: Rocchetti-Carboni

Titles: Studio Mafra

Music: Simonetti, Pignatelli, Morante

Sound Recordist: Mario Dallimonti

Boom Operator: Giancarlo Laurenzi

Sound Mixer: Romano Pampaloni

Sound Effects: Luciano Anzellotti,

Massimo Anzellotti

Cast

Anthony Franciosa (*Peter Neal*)

Christian Borromeo (*Gianni*)

Mirella D'Angelo (*Tilde*)

Veronica Lario (*Jane*)

Ania Pieroni (*Elsa*)

Eva Robins (*girl in dream*)

Carola Stagnaro (*Detective Altieri*)

John Steiner (*Cristiano Bruni*)

Lara Wendel (*Maria*)

John Saxon (*Bulmer*)

Daria Nicolodi (*Anne*)

Giuliano Gemma (*Inspector Germani*)

Isabella Amadeo (*maid*)

Mirella Banti (*Marion*)

Enio Girolami (*store detective*)

Monica Maisani

Marino Masè (*John, Peter's chauffeur*)

Fulvio Mingozzi (*Alboretto, the porter*)

Giampaolo Saccarola (*coroner*)

Ippolita Santarelli (*prostitute*)

uncredited

Michele Soavi (*man by swimming pool*)

Lamberto Bava (*elevator repairman*)

Italy 1982

101 mins

*Contains violence, gore and sexual violence*

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

As far removed from the Technicolor phantasmagoria of *Suspiria* (1977) and *Inferno* (1980) as it was possible to get, *Tenebre* marked Dario Argento's dazzling return to the *gialli* that made his name a decade earlier. More concerned than his other films with sex, transgenderism and body dysmorphia, and filmed in a blinding chiaroscuro, it is an oddity in the Argento canon, albeit a hugely impressive one.

Anthony Franciosa plays the standard issue American abroad, writer Peter Neal who arrives in Rome to promote his latest thriller, *Tenebre*. No sooner has he landed than he is being stalked by his unstable fiancée Jane (Veronica Lario) and the city is being stalked by a black-gloved killer who forces pages from his new book into the mouths of his victims. But all is not quite as it seems and there maybe more than one killer at work...

Argento has frequently expressed his deep disinterest in the machinations of plot and narrative, yet *Tenebre* features one of his strongest and most complex storylines, full of twists and unexpected revelations. The plot revolves around the audacious and quite unexpected transference of guilt from the maniacal killer (about whom we learn very little, itself unusual for Argento) to the eminently likeable hero, surely the film's boldest stroke. As indeed was the revelation – made in a series of cryptic, dreamlike flashbacks and dreams – that Neal had already killed before, stabbing the object of his humiliation to death before running off with her bright red stilettos.

It comes as no surprise to the devoted Argentophile that these dream sequences should hinge around and feature so prominently the red shoes that Neal covets so much and which he later sends to Jayne before killing her. The Freudian psychology that informs almost all of his work (despite Argento's protestations that he is Jungian at heart) virtually demands it after all. The red shoes act as a fetishistic totem for Neal and signal the more seriously sexual overtones with which Argento imbues *Tenebre*. The Freudian connotations are obvious (and somewhat complicated by the fact that the woman is played by the transsexual Eva Robbins) though one mustn't overlook Argento's oft-stated admiration for director Michael Powell, director of *The Red Shoes* (1948).

Though sexual identity had played a prominent role in his earlier works (most notably in *Il gatto a nove code* (1971) and to an extent in *Profondo rosso* (1975)), nothing in his canon thus far had hinted at the unbridled sexuality of *Tenebre*. As Maitland McDonagh notes in *Broken Mirrors, Broken Minds*: '[the earlier films were] about madness and spiritual corruption revealed through sexual deviation... *Tenebrae* is fraught with free-floating anxiety that's specifically sexual in nature, but it doesn't spring from a particular act of sexual transgression'.

Sex has been there in all of Argento's films of course, but it was never quite so prominent as it was in *Tenebre* and it is here where Argento chooses to dabble his toes in the murky waters of Catholic morality. An uncomfortable exchange between television book reviewer Christiano Berti (John Steiner) and Neal confirms that both men were raised strict Catholics, yet both are capable of the most extreme acts of sexual violence. Desire is the catalyst for Neal's rampages (initially a repressed desire for the mysterious woman on the beach, later a jealous rage that his agent Bullmer (John Saxon) is having an affair with Jane) and a fear of either non-conventional sex or overt sexuality drives Berti. In both cases, the men are driven by a heady mix of Catholic guilt and perverse puritanism – Neal's initial murder had been inspired by his conflicting mixture of disgust with and desire for the woman's wanton ways which caused him to intervene when she attempts to seduce his colleagues. The ensuing humiliation at her hands (but mostly feet...) is enough to tip him over the edge. And Berti explicitly nails his flag to the staff with his insistence upon reading the novel *Tenebre* as a study of human perversion and little else. The irony is that Berti is himself a rather effete figure, much more irritatingly camp than most of the largely sympathetic homosexual figures in Argento's earlier films.

Sexual politics plays a more important role in *Tenebre* than it had ever done in Argento's films prior to this date, and at times *Tenebre* can only be seen as Argento's response to critics who have accused him – not entirely without justification – of misogyny. At times, Neal is clearly a surrogate Argento, fielding accusations that his work denigrates women. Tilde's first meeting with Neal (although they seem to have been friends years before in New York) culminates in her accusing Neal of sexism: 'Why do you despise women so much?' This sniping between the sexes continues throughout and there isn't a single relationship in the film that doesn't end in conflict, murder or guilt. Examples of isolated skirmishes in the ongoing gender war are prevalent and Argento almost seems to despair

## DARIO ARGENTO: DOORS INTO DARKNESS

### **Tenebrae (Tenebre)**

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

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

Sat 13 May 20:45; Tue 16 May 21:00

### **Inferno**

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

### **The Cat o' Nine Tails**

(Il gatto a nove code)

Thu 16 May 20:45

### **The Five Days (Le cinque giornate)**

Fri 19 May 18:15

### **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

### **Suspiria**

Sat 20 May 18:10

### **Sleepless (Non ho sonno)**

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

### **Two Evil Eyes (segment: The Black Cat)**

(Due occhi diabolici: Il gatto nero)

Mon 22 May 20:55

### **Deep Red (Profondo rosso)**

Tue 23 May 18:10

### **Mother of Tears – The Third Mother**

(La terza madre)

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

### **The Card Player (Il cartaiolo)**

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

### **Opera**

Sat 27 May 20:45

### **Trauma**

Sun 28 May 15:40

### **Do You Like Hitchcock?**

(Ti piace Hitchcock?)

Tue 30 May 20:40

### **Dark Glasses (Occhiali neri)**

Wed 31 May 20:40

### **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**

Camilla Cormanni and Paola Ruggiero at Cinecittà.

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of any meaningful dialogue between the two parties. The casting of Robbins (mid-way between male and female at the time of filming) as the catalyst for Neal's murderous desires merely adds to the sexual delirium.

As the unusually robust narrative and the equally unexpected obsessions with Catholic sensibilities and sexuality mark *Tenebre* as notably different to Argento's earlier work, so the look of the film reflects a perhaps conscious decision to distance himself from what had gone before. The title *Tenebre* had led many to expect the closing chapter of the Three Mothers trilogy begun in *Suspiria* (1977) and *Inferno* (1980). Yet, Argento had apparently tired of his witches as early as the initial scenes of *Inferno* where a notice on a blackboard announces this as the final part: 'I rather lost interest in it after *Inferno*,' he noted later, though he would eventually complete the trilogy with the disappointing *The Third Mother* (2007). *Tenebre*, perhaps as a further attempt to establish his return to his *giallo* roots and to further emphasise his abandonment of the purely supernatural, has a look all its own. The vivid, Technicolor dreamscapes of the Three Mothers duo are replaced by a stark, icy look that often verges on the monochromatic.

One of Argento's most cryptic remarks about the film has been his claim that it is set in a de-populated future: '*Tenebrae* occurs in a world inhabited by fewer people with the results that the remainder are wealthier and less crowded. Something has happened to make it that way but no-one remembers, or wants to remember' (from an interview with Alan Jones, 1983). It isn't clear from the film itself that the setting is futuristic (though Bullmer has what would have been for the early 80s an unusually effective videophone system) but Argento certainly gives us a glimpse of a Rome that is rarely seen in the movies. There are none of the usual travelogue shots, nor any of the classical architecture we normally associate with that city. Instead, it is a dream Rome of post-modern architecture, full of angular constructions, painted in stark white. Interiors are sparse and purely functional and the city streets are unusually quiet and free from clutter: 'For *Tenebrae* I dreamed an imaginary city in which the most amazing things happen. For this reason I stayed away from anything old. My decor is ultramodern. Extreme...' (from an interview with Christophe Gans, 1983).

The *mise en scene* is often dazzling in its clarity, a testament to Argento's admiration for Andrzej Zulawski's *Possession* (1981), a film whose influence is all over *Tenebre*. To realise this vision, Argento was reunited with cinematographer Luciano Tovoli who had given *Suspiria* its memorable look a few years before. Together they created a film that is simultaneously realistic yet wholly artificial. The irony is of course that while the title reflects something altogether darker (it translates from the Italian as 'darkness' or 'shadow'), the film is a voluminous trip through a clearly lit landscape captured on film with crystal clarity. What this serves to do is focus us on the true relevance of the title – the darkness to which Argento directs us is that that lies at the heart of its protagonists, a darkness that Argento had a peripheral glimpse of in an incident that shaped some of the narrative concerns of the film.

'To kill for nothing – that is the horror of today' is a quote that Argento has frequently used when discussing *Tenebre* and stems, perhaps, from an excursion to that land of random murder and serial slaying, the United States. On a visit to Los Angeles, Argento was pestered by a series of motiveless threatening telephone calls, much as Neal is bothered by the then unmasked killer's taunting phone calls and letters after each murder.

While *Tenebre* clearly possesses a more sophisticated and challenging narrative than we were used to from Argento, it would be churlish to ignore the film's sheer visual bravado. As with his earlier – and indeed subsequent work – Argento plays relentlessly with the possibilities of the visual medium, be it the glowing photography or the plethora of brief scenes that purport to show one thing only for Argento to playfully pull the rug from under our feet and show us something different instead.

But the technical tour-de-force is undoubtedly that much discussed and truly awesome tracking shot that sees Argento's restless camera, strapped to a luma crane, exploring every nook and cranny of the doomed lesbian's house before alighting on the gloved hands of the killer forcing entry. Two and a half minutes long, and scored to the pounding main theme from Simonetti, Pignatelli and Massimo Morante (Goblin in all but name), it's a tour de force of directorial excess, utterly gratuitous in terms of furthering the narrative but nonetheless spellbinding for all that.

For some, *Tenebre* was a disappointment, a return to the *giallo* after an all too brief excursion into the realms of dark fantasy. Yet in retrospect, it now appears to be one of Argento's most durable and fully realised films, the culmination to that date of his pre-occupations and themes. Far from being a simple retrograde step, it was in fact the full stop at the end of one phase of Argento's career and the signal that he was ready to move on – though few could have suspected that the direction he would now travel would take him to the extremely weird territory of his next film, *Phenomena* (1985).

Kevin Lyons, [eofftreview.wordpress.com](http://eofftreview.wordpress.com), 27 October 2018