

The Voyeuristic Camera of Dario Argento

by

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Chapter One:

Introduction

The “Years of Lead” or “Anni di Piombo” is one of the most violent and unsettling moments in Italy’s history of political unrest. The country was suffering from an economic crisis which began in 1968. Paul Ginsborg writes extensively about the economic status of Italy in his book titled “A History of Contemporary Italy.” He states, “... it is vital to understand how much the crisis limited the room for maneuver and conditioned the actions of all the country’s social and political forces.” The people were feeling suffocated by the overwhelming lack of security and, because of this, militant groups began staging public attacks to show their opposition to government officials. One of the earliest movements during these years were the trade unions who suffered huge losses during the economic decline. The workers began to use hostile tactics to overrun their factories in a fight to keep their wages and government contracts. It was not until 1975 that the unions were defeated by their employers and lost all the benefits that would keep them working. The massive loss in wages and jobs gave way to the extreme militant groups that would soon organize attacks on the country.

Red Terrorism also known as The Red Brigades were formed in early 1970. Ginsborg states “... they described themselves as ‘autonomous workers’ organizations,’ prepared to fight the employers on their own terms.” These workers as one could imagine were a massive portion of the population which caused a serious threat to societal norms. Ginsborg continues “... The Italian red terrorists, like all terrorists before them, wanted to accelerate the course of history.” By accelerating history, The Red Brigade were hoping to launch Italy into a more progressive country and change the way the government operated. The workers unions became increasingly

frustrated with the lack of progress which made the idea of violence seem even more acceptable. Some of the early attacks began in Milan in 1972 and continued throughout the 70s and 80s.

The first acts were simply armed demonstrations in the public eye. These demonstrations proved futile, which caused the group to feel that their actions needed to be violent and cause hysteria to gain attention. The purpose of briefly discussing the “Years of Lead” is to introduce the idea of how these violent events have shaped Italy’s artists but most importantly the new generation of filmmakers. The use of excessive violence in popular genres such as horror and giallo is no coincidence; it merely expressed the uncertain times as well as the fear the public was experiencing. This fear was felt throughout Italy and found its way into the work of Dario Argento. The filmmaker utilized the uncertainties of the 1970s to craft films that have an unmistakable brutality which expresses the political violence seen on the evening news. The influence of the violence in these films also comes from a different form of entertainment such as pulp fiction novels.

Pulp fiction novels have been a part of popular culture since the 20s. It was not until the early 1940s when films such as *Double Indemnity* and *The Maltese Falcon* premiered on the big screen. These films have been classified by French film critics as *film noir*, or when translated to English, black film. The inspiration for film noir came from the hard-boiled detective stories of pulp fiction, which are low-brow forms of entertainment. These types of novels were typically printed on cheap paper, hence the reason they were given the name “pulp.” Italian cinema and the creation of what would become an extremely popular sub-genre, giallo, had very connected beginnings to film noir. According to Kinoeye.org: “In 1929, the Milanese publishing giant Mondadori launched a line of books in yellow covers, hence giallo the Italian word for yellow as part of a large campaign to promote, specifically, tales of mystery and detection. These works

consisted primarily of imported translations of British “rational-deduction” fictions of the Sherlock Holmes variety and the early twentieth century American quasi-fantastic murder mysteries built on the Edgar Allen Poe model.” The Milanese novels began to have remarkable success throughout the 1930s and 1940s because most imported products were under the eye of Mussolini’s strict censorship codes.

Most often, many of the American crime novels would never make it into the country because it was thought they would corrupt the minds of the Italian youth. However, Italian authors began to write and produce these novels “under anglicized pseudonyms” (kinoeye.org). With that said, the focus of this paper is to discuss Dario Argento’s influence on giallo in Italian cinema and specifically his legacy as an auteur of the sub-genre. This paper will frame this discussion through a theme that seems to preoccupy Argento’s mind from the initial stages of his career. Giallo, or the plural, Gialli, had a significant impact on Italian cinema at a time when Italian filmmakers were at the height of their careers. Federico Fellini and Michelangelo Antonioni had recently released some of their most acclaimed films such as *La Dolce Vita* and *L’Eclisse*. In 1964, Mario Bava directed the most influential film in the giallo genre called *Sei Donne per l’assassino*, lit which translates to ‘*Six Women for an assassin*’ which then received the title *Blood and Black Lace* for American audiences. With the release of the film, many tropes that are now associated with giallo films were established. These include but are not limited to animal motifs, serial killers/trench coat killers, hand of death/first person perspective killings, foreign protagonists, and violence towards women. This type of filmmaking influenced a young writer who was eager to begin his own productions. Dario Argento began his filmmaking career and directorial debut in 1970 with *The Bird with the Crystal Plumage*.

Argento found great success with his first film which he quickly followed up with *The Cat O'Nine Tails* and *Four Flies on Grey Velvet*; each film was released consecutively and within one year. Throughout his early works, Argento was able to establish a shadowy world of mystery, murder and voyeuristic pleasures that would soon be a constant theme for the entirety of his filmography. Dario Argento is an auteur filmmaker utilizing a genre and the conventions that come with it to craft an unmistakable film identity and form a thesis on the relationship of the film camera, the audience and voyeurism. The films *The Bird with the Crystal Plumage* and *The Cat O'Nine Tails* will be analyzed first to draw a timeline for the filmmaker and his beginnings with voyeuristic filmmaking. The second half of the paper will be dedicated to two of his later films and arguably the most important in his filmography; *Tenebrae* and *Opera* will demonstrate the continued obsession with this theme but also how the filmmaker evolves and uses cinematic language to form a connection between the audience and his camera.

Chapter Two:

The Bird with the Crystal Plumage (1971)

The Bird with the Crystal Plumage (1971) is Dario Argento's first film as writer and director. It was hugely successful in Italy as well as the United States and paved the way for Argento as a young filmmaker. The film follows Sam Dalmas (Tony Musante) who is an American writer visiting Rome to sell his latest book. Shortly after he leaves the publisher, he witnesses what he thinks is a violent attack on a woman. The assumed attacker is wearing a top hat, trench coat and of course black leather gloves. Sam attempts to save the woman when the assailant traps him in between two glass doors as he is forced to watch the woman suffer from a stab wound. Eventually, Sam gets the attention of a passerby and the police are called to the scene of the crime. Sam, much like other Argento characters, is haunted by what he has

witnessed and must solve the crime on his own and thus we have *The Bird with the Crystal Plumage*.

Argento's first film, much like *The Cat O' Nine Tails*, *Tenebrae* and *Opera* explore the themes of voyeurism and sexual perversity. He does this by putting Sam in situations that force him and the audience to watch others in their most intimate moments. The opening sequence is important for exploring this theme as well as how it evolves through his later work. The first set piece in *Crystal Plumage* is the most interesting one in the entire film because it implicates the audience and Sam as being the voyeur. The scene begins with a long tracking shot following him down a dark street. The camera uses a traditional shot-reverse-shot to show Sam inching closer to the entrance of the art gallery. Each time he is shown on screen his look of confusion slowly becomes that of fear. The scene continues as Sam is drawn into the struggle when the camera edits back to him as he is almost hit by a car. The camera cuts back to the gallery as the masked figure flees the scene and Monica (Eva Renzi) stumbles down the stairs. The camera cuts into the gallery as Sam runs to the glass entrance. Argento frames this as though the audience is watching Sam from the inside. The filmmaker utilizes very quick cuts for the next several shots to heighten the tension and confuse the audience spatially. The camera goes from the inside of the glass entrance with Sam, to looking through the glass at him, to again inside the gallery with Monica as she moans in pain from the stab wound.

He continues to panic and attempts to break into the gallery when the camera cuts to a close-up of black gloves clicking a button. The next shot reveals the door to the outside street closing behind Sam and locking him between two paths. Each window represents different forms of voyeurism that Argento will utilize throughout his career. The first and most traditional is seen through the character of Sam. When the sequence begins, he is already looking into the windows

throughout the street. He cannot help himself from looking because it is an inherent need for Argento's characters to watch others in pain. Argento's characters typically are looking for a way out of their own suffering and thus need to live voyeuristically. For instance, in the film *Deep Red* David Hemming's character Marcus is a successful jazz musician but as we begin to follow his journey it becomes clear that he is sexually repressed and questions his masculinity when a strong female is present. These aspects of his life that seem to be lacking which make him irrational much like Sam and they become heavily involved with the murder to prove their worth. Sam finds himself in the same situation and must pay for becoming the voyeur in the film. It is because of this that the audience becomes the voyeur as well and forced to watch violent set pieces that the filmmaker creates for this reason.

The sequence continues when the realization sets in that he is trapped between the outside world and the art gallery. The camera becomes increasingly unstable when the shots become handheld as he struggles to open the glass door behind him. The camera cuts back into the art gallery but uses a shot that views the characters in a completely objective way. The filmmaker utilizes an overhead angle that shows Monica crawling on her hands and knees surrounded by giant sculptures and other pieces of art. Argento frames this to make her look like one of the art pieces when she crawls across the floor. Her movements look inhuman much like the art that surrounds her which creates a visually striking but equally disturbing scene. This shot is important when viewing Argento's work because it becomes a common theme and one that evolves throughout his filmography. His association with violence and art is something that will be seen again many years later in *Tenebrae*.

The camera cuts to Sam still locked in between the two glass doors when Monica obtains the strength to pick herself up off the floor. The camera cuts to a first-person perspective looking

through the glass at her. She collapses on the art piece when the camera utilizes another first-person perspective shot looking through the piece at Sam. This shot captures a look of fear but the shot frames this in way that implies that he may not necessarily be looking at Monica. Instead, the framing indicates that he is looking at the sculpture and is horrified by the combination of violence and art. It is also interesting because the camera is aimed at him which creates a dynamic that the sculpture is watching him just like the patrons who visit to look at the art. This one shot has a strange connection to the final set piece in the film and is discussed later in this paper. It is still important to mention that the final set piece traps Sam and almost leads to his death. Argento is simply foreshadowing what is to come later in the film and begins his career long discussion on the relationship between violence and art. This is shot in a more traditional gialli style and simply playing with perspective but also implicating the audience in the violent acts.

Argento is using a technique that draws the audience into the frightening situation. It also complicates the relationship between the audience and the camera because the audience begins to question their role within the film. This relationship is quickly broken when the camera cuts back to Sam looking through the glass at Monica. Suddenly, there is a knock on the glass that disrupts the constant back and forth between them. Sam quickly turns around as the camera follows his quick movements and zooms in on the bystander peering in with an aggressive stare. For the first time in several minutes the camera cuts back out onto the street in a medium wide shot which relieves some of the tension. The camera frames this situation in a distant perspective where the shot is simply showing the events happening rather than being directly involved in it. The camera movements between the outside world and the strange see-through trap reveals that Sam cannot be heard. This revelation speaks to his fractured masculinity and why he becomes engrossed in

solving the mystery. Shortly after this sequence the audience is introduced to Julia (Suzy Kendall), Sam's beautiful girlfriend. This leaves the audience wondering why Sam fought so hard to save another woman. Most people would have fled the scene only to bring the police back but instead Sam put himself in harm's way to be the hero. This is certainly not the case for characters in an Argento film.

In a short sequence later when Sam returns to the art gallery with Inspector Morosini (Enrico Maria Salerno), there are a few lines of dialogue that imply flirtation between Sam and Monica. The characters seem a bit too comfortable around each other considering that they have never met. The voyeuristic experience in Argento's films is typically based on men watching women in vulnerable situations. It was sexually exciting for Sam to watch Monica struggle and nearly die at the hands of an unknown assailant. This is confirmed as soon as he returns to his apartment; he has sex with Julia after he is nearly decapitated. Not only was it sexually exciting but it is also made clear that the danger has cured his writer's block. This early sequence creates a sexually perverse character who thrives from danger much like other Argento characters.

Colette Balmain argues the sexual objectification of Monica in a moment of terror. Balmain states "Instead, the embedded detective, Dalmas, is stripped of all motor capacity, unable either to act or to react to the disturbing images that are played out in front of his gaze on the other side of the glass window." This scene ultimately castrates Dalmas because of his infatuation with beautiful woman and peeping through windows allowing the male gaze to control the narrative of this story. Balmain continues, "... Dalmas's enforced inactivity and inability to determine the course of narrative events serves to situate him in the position of passive femininity. This is codified by a series of sharp edits, which switch perspective from Dalmas to the outside to Monica on the inside." The "passive femininity" that Balmain discusses

is important to all Argento's characters whether they are male or female. For instance, this passivity is crucial to the character of Betty (Cristina Marsillach) in *Opera*. Throughout the film she is trapped and forced to witness acts of murder against her will. This leads to her obtaining her autonomy as a woman and breaking free from the sadomasochistic torture Inspector Santini (Urbano Barberini) forces on her. The main difference between these characters is that Sam puts himself in this situation whereas Betty has an unfortunate relationship with Santini without her knowledge.

Balmain continues this discussion "...There are at least three gazes that circulate in the art gallery sequence: Dalmás's from the outside in, Monica's from the inside out and a third 'inhuman' gaze that constantly disrupts and cuts across the flow of visual information: on a number of occasions, the camera pulls back from the embodied point of view to offer the extradiegetic spectator a panoramic vista of the setting..." This third gaze that Balmain discusses is the second form of voyeurism I alluded to earlier in this paper. These "inhuman" camera movements are used to service the audience and draw their attention to the violence but also position them as the voyeur. The "third gaze" will come up repeatedly in Argento films but much more prominent, especially the extended tracking shot in *Tenebrae* and the extended point-of-view shots in *Opera*. Those sequences draw more attention to the filmmaking aspect while *Crystal Plumage* uses quick edits that break continuity and force images upon the audience. She continues "... it is clear that the so-called rules of cinema, such as the 180-degree rule and the shot-reverse-shot convention, are constantly disrupted, and that what we see – what is contained in the scene/seen - is not determined by the limited visual field associated classical cinema." Argento employs these conventions only to break them. As a filmmaker of gialli, he enjoys employing sadistic visual games with his audience to eventually implicate them as the voyeur.

Later in the film, the killer, who is revealed to be Monica continues her murder spree of young women. The scene opens with a medium-wide shot of a white car that quickly cuts to an overhead angle much like the shot in the opening sequence. A young woman exits the car and enters an apartment building. Before she enters the apartment the camera again cuts to an overhead angle but instead it looks down a flight of triangle shaped stairs. These two overhead shots give the scene a feeling of being watched but again Argento implements quick edits to break up the continuity of the scene. The camera is now placed in a medium wide shot as the young girl attempts to use the elevator. Of course, it does not work and she is forced to walk up the dark triangle staircase where the camera was once watching. The shot reverts to the overhead angle as the young girl looks up at the camera. In a quick edit the camera takes her perspective looking up through the triangle staircase. As she ascends the stairs the camera remains static but begins to slowly pan with her movements until an abrupt cut to total darkness. The sounds of her footsteps and Ennio Morricone's unnerving score accompany the darkness until a flick is heard. A small warm light from a match shines on her face as the camera continues to pan across the stairs until a light from the elevator breaks the total darkness.

The camera breaks all continuity with the scene and swiftly tracks inward toward the girl. A black gloved hand appears in frame and hits the back of her head which stuns the girl and causes her to fall forward into the elevator. In a series of quick edits and a low angle shot the audience can only see the black gloves that reach into a jacket pocket. The camera reveals a straight razor that the killer joyously unsheathes directly in her face. The camera cuts to the girl screaming directly into the camera lens but then cuts to her point-of-view where the razor is slashing the camera. Again, quick edits are used to cut between the point-of-view shot and the young girl being slashed many times over. In her final scream the camera remains static on her

corpse. The black gloved hand reaches into frame, takes her by her hair and lifts her head toward the camera. The last image of this sequence is truly disturbing as the killer forces the young girl's blank stare at the camera and by doing so at the audience. The camera then cuts to the killer raising the blade and in one last slash cutting the girl's throat which ends the scene. This sequence exemplifies an idea that comes to fruition in the filmmaker's later works. Through his use of a first person view he assaults the audience with the violence they in fact come to see. It is an implication that Argento will perfect in films like *The Cat O'Nine Tails*, *Tenebrae* and *Opera*.

Chapter Three:

The Cat O'Nine Tails (1971)

The Cat O'Nine Tails is the next film in Dario Argento's filmography. It was released on the heels of *Crystal Plume* because of the financial successes in Italy as well as the United States. The film follows Franco Arno (Karl Malden) who is a blind retired journalist and a father to a young orphan girl. One night while the two are taking an evening walk, they witness suspicious people sitting outside of the Terzi Medical Institute. They find out through news headlines the following day that the institute was burglarized that night. Arno believes he can solve the crime and soon befriends a newsman, Carlo Giordani (James Franciscus), who is also interested in uncovering the crime. The two become increasingly entangled in the mystery that the killer eventually murders those closest to them and eventually their lives are threatened as well.

The Cat O'Nine Tails works a bit differently than Argento's previous film. Instead of the film opening in a traditional manner, the filmmaker chooses to show a robbery through the first-person perspective. As the viewer watches the opening sequence, many questions are posed due to the lack of dialogue and any present characters. Ennio Morricone's score leaves an unsettling

feeling as the audience is forced into the position of the villain of the film. This is the filmmaker's intention because soon after the sequence ends the viewer is introduced to Arno, the blind protagonist of the film, the opposite of the full-sighted villain. Argento uses this sequence to deceive the audience as they are forced to follow a character who lacks vision and thus so does the spectator. Argento uses Arno to put his audience into extreme circumstances, many of which are horrifying and uncomfortable. Maitland McDonagh states: "This temporal displacement works hand-in-hand with the fact that the shot immediately following the final credit is nothing less than a visual taunt: it's a close-up of the white tip of Arno's cane tapping against the kerb, followed by a long shot of Arno as little Lori guides him along the pavement. Arno's obvious blindness mirrors that of the audience, tantalized by the strange shot as he is tantalized by the sentence fragment that he hears from the parked car he and Lori pass."

Argento again teases the audience by showing the thief in the first few minutes of the film; it's not until a second viewing that the audience can pick up on such a detail. McDonagh continues "This is, it's true, a tactic whose specific purpose is to prevent the viewer from learning prematurely who the killer is; but it's also a disjunctive strategy reinforcing the notion that his process of seeing is fraught with difficulty." The filmmaker uses this as a motif in his film; each time the thief/killer is prepared to kill or in the process of doing so the camera abruptly cuts to a close-up of the killer's eye. The killer's eye is crucial to these films and how they employ voyeurism. The extreme close-up of the eye in *The Cat O'Nine Tails* is used to create a jarring experience for the audience but also a more sinister implication.

The close-up of the killer's eye is again a taunt made at the protagonist's expense, but it's also used as a frightening visual. Early in the film the audience is subject to the killer's gaze, a sequence which happens to take place in a dark room, ironically a place that is used to develop

and study photographs where the spectators gaze is heavily used. The scene begins with Righetto (Vittorio Congia) working to develop pictures for Arno, the camera remaining static when he leaves the frame. Within the same shot the door leading into the dark room slowly begins to open. The camera cuts to several close-ups of Righetto working the machines as a noise is heard off camera. He becomes spooked by this and in typical horror film fashion he decides to investigate without hesitation. The camera becomes fluid, tracking every movement of Righetto as the score of the film begins to increase in volume. Suddenly, everything is quiet as he discovers that a few pictures have fallen off a coffee table.

Much like in *The Bird with the Crystal Plumage*, Argento lets the mise-en-scène and camera movements elevate the sequence. Righetto goes from a brightly lit room to a dark one and then back which gives the audience false sense of relief. Many audience members like to think that brightness means safety but for Argento no character is safe. He subverts expectations as a rope appears out of frame and wraps around Righetto's neck. The shots move at a rapid pace, cutting from his neck, to his mouth and then to a wide shot of Righetto struggling to breathe. Argento then uses this opportunity to draw the audience into the darkest moments of the sequence... the all-seeing eye.

The extreme close-up of the eye stares directly at the audience, in a sense breaking the rules of cinema. It's almost as though the killer knows we are watching which excites him and makes his lust for blood even more satisfactory because of the thought of others watching. The camera cuts from the suffering Righetto back to the eye which shifts from left to right as though it's making eye contact with each viewer. Finally, the camera holds on Righetto in his final moments of life. Each frame of the shot moves closer as each remaining breath leaves his lungs. The sequence ends on a close-up of Righetto's face but emphasizes his lifeless eyes. He looks

back at the audience with contempt which poses the question, who is to blame for this? This sequence highlights most of Argento's talent as filmmaker and auteur. He shifts from traditional horror to putting the audience in a position to question their own morality. It's almost as though he knows the audience is disgusted by what they have witnessed and uses the camera to insult the viewer and pose the question, "why do you choose to watch this filth"? The relationship between the camera and the audience is a bit more complicated and is discussed through some of Argento's more notable works.

The Bird with the Crystal Plumage and *The Cat O'Nine Tails* begin the filmmaker's discussion on voyeurism and the relationship the audience develops with the camera. Each film uses different techniques to achieve this. For example, *Crystal Plumage* uses a first person view to subject the audience to an uncomfortable gaze. *The Cat O'Nine Tails* introduces the audience to Argento's use of human anatomy but specifically the eye. The eye becomes an image that Argento relies on to implicate the audience of succumbing to voyeuristic pleasures. The filmmaker continues to refine and use these ideas and images throughout his career. *Tenebrae* is an important film because it expands on these filmmaking techniques while formulating new ways of exploring voyeurism and sexual perversity.

Chapter Four:

***Tenebrae* (1982)**

Tenebrae (1982) may be one of the most important works in Argento's filmography as it opens with a statement on his career and giallo filmmaking in the 1980's. The scene begins with one of the most iconic images in all gialli: black leather gloves, which flip through pages of a book titled "Tenebrae." The narrator reads passages from the novel: ..."The impulse has become irresistible. There was only one answer to the fury that tortured him. And so, he committed his

first act of murder. He had broken the most deep-rooted taboo, and found not guilt, nor anxiety or fear, but freedom. Any humiliation which stood in his way could be swept aside by the simple act of annihilation: Murder.” As soon as those final words are spoken by the narrator, the black gloves throw the novel into a lit fireplace. The title *Tenebrae* in white font appears on screen and suddenly a jarring synth rock soundtrack by one of Argento’s favorite composers, Claudio Simonetti, plays while the novel burns behind the opening credits.

This opening sequence is crucial to what this paper will discuss, a genre convention that slowly evolves into a theme that Argento uses to implicate his audience as the murderer instead of victim through skilled camera work. As Argento matures and becomes a confident filmmaker, this theme becomes more of a stylistic obsession that simultaneously comments on the relationship between the camera and the audience. The camera in the opening shot of the film places the audience in the perspective of the unknown killer. This simple shot creates tension that cannot be avoided. The helpless audience is forced to view the world through the eye of a deranged person, creating a vulnerability the audience does not feel comfortable with. A voyeuristic gaze is developed early on in this film because it happens to be important to the plot but also the motivation of the characters. Argento purposefully forces his audience into these situations because it creates a bond between the camera, the character and the audience, a bond that he is eager to break. When it is finally clear that the camera has been a stand in, the audience cannot help but feel betrayed by the filmmaker which leads to violent set pieces.

Just after the opening credits of the film the audience is introduced to the protagonist Peter Neal (Anthony Franciosa), taking a bike ride on the Brooklyn Bridge to catch his flight to Rome. It is interesting to note the way Argento arranged the first shots of the film. It is the first and one of many red herrings in *Tenebrae*. The editing implies that the black gloved hands in the

opening shot could be Peter Neal. This implication is later revealed to be untrue as it is intended to be the first of many relationships the camera will create with the viewers. It is not necessarily important to know whose hands are in the opening shot but instead to question the motivation of the shot by the filmmaker. This is soon forgotten when the audience is introduced to a seductive shoplifter in Rome. The camera stalks her through a department store while she browses the book section. The shots are handheld and framed to give the audience the impression that this person is trying to remain hidden. The camera again implicates the audience as the one stalking Elsa (Ania Pieroni) with handheld point-of-view shots. She happens to notice a large display of the novel *Tenebrae* and decides to slip a copy into her purse. She begins to leave the store but is suddenly stopped by a security guard which she then offers him sexual favors in lieu of shoplifting charges. The stalker overhears her sexual advances toward the guard and decides to follow her home for the first murder set piece in *Tenebrae*.

As Elsa walks home, she is attacked by a homeless man which is simply used as another red herring but also to further the theme of sexual perversity Argento explores. When she finally enters her apartment, she lets her guard down and undresses off screen. The homeless man appears at the back door of her apartment and attempts to break in when suddenly a black glove reaches out of the darkness to grab her. At first, these shots are framed in a way that allows the audience to watch the violence without being directly implicated in it. But Argento quickly changes the camera angle, which spatially does not make sense but draws the audience into the violence that is inflicted on Elsa. The audience can only see the arms and hands of the killer and, as in the opening sequence, the hands are wearing black gloves. Argento cuts into a close-up shot of Elsa with a straight razor to her neck. The black gloved killer then takes the stolen copy of *Tenebrae* and begins to rip pages out and violently putting them in her mouth while all of this is

framed in the first person. The camera cuts to a medium-wide shot of the killer's hand raising the blade into the air preparing to strike her. Just before she is killed, the camera cuts to the homeless man peering through the curtains watching her struggle against the unknown assailant. The cut to him is quick but is important to exploring voyeurism.

Several shots before she is attacked, the homeless man looks sexually excited by watching her through the curtains. Only after he realizes that someone else is there, he flees the scene of the crime. The filmmaker frames his male characters in a particularly negative way, especially the homeless man who only shares a few minutes on screen with the Elsa. Within these few scenes of the homeless man, he is not only stereotyped but is shown as sexually aggressive and voyeuristic. He seems to be only interested in taking advantage of Elsa and attacking at her most vulnerable moments. The homeless man is the first of many of Argento's "perverts." In *Contemporary Film Directors*, Andrew Cooper writes, "...the film and the novel within the film- focus a great deal of attention on perverts and perversion, and the film's critique of assumptions about perversion embeds a critique of simple-minded film critics..."(63). Argento takes one of the lesser characters in this film and compares him with critics and audiences alike. In a sense, it is the audience who has been looking through the curtains to watch a beautiful young body but turn away when that beauty is destroyed. Argento uses beauty and the camera to lure the audience into these situations because he understands it is the only way to watch violence and please our voyeuristic needs simultaneously.

The scene continues with a cut of an extreme close-up of Elsa's eye looking directly at the camera. This shot aligns itself with the previous shot of the homeless man as they both seem to look at the audience. It is Argento's way of speaking to his spectators, and having his characters almost acknowledge that they are watched by the killer and viewer through

voyeuristic camera work. The next shot is static in an extreme close-up as she falls in and out of frame. The filmmaker again emphasizes her eyes but this time he shows them in a blank stare as she falls to her death. There is a quick cut to outside of the apartment looking in through closed curtains. This shot puts the audience in the same location as the homeless man, except that he has already fled the scene. This implies that we are in fact the voyeur in this film, like the homeless man, but instead we were forced to stay and watch the violence that Argento meticulously crafts because his camera enforces this.

The decisive moments of this sequence are interesting because they add another layer of voyeurism to the work of Argento. The killer is shown standing over Elsa taking pictures of her body. This offers an interesting parallel to *The Bird with the Crystal Plumage* (1971) in the sense that the killer in that film photographs the victims but instead does so before the murder. These films use the photographic camera differently, as it is never seen in *Crystal Plumage*, the camera lens is only a stylistic choice to convey to the audience that the killer photographs women. While in *Tenebrae* the camera is shown in close-ups which show the delicate moving parts, and the killer taking pictures of the corpse for his own collection of “art.”

The photographic image is important to the black gloved killers in these films, and it can be associated with their own perverted tendencies. For instance, in *Crystal Plumage*, the murderer happens to own an art gallery and relates violence with art. It also appears that a specific painting has negatively affected the killer's mental capacity. The killer, Monica, attacks beautiful young women and photographs them when they look the most attractive and unaware that she is following them. Whereas *Crystal Plumage* views the voyeuristic gaze through the construction of art, *Tenebrae* develops a gaze through the deconstruction of art. The killer in *Tenebrae*, much like Monica, favors young attractive women but instead of capturing their image

from afar, he enjoys a sadistic close-up of mutilated bodies. Instead of owning an art gallery, the killer's home is a modern architectural masterpiece, a stand in for the gallery seen in *Crystal Plumage*: with large glass windows, a beautiful courtyard, a pool, a personal bar, home entertainment system and a basement turned gallery with pictures of young, beautiful, and disfigured bodies on display for his personal enjoyment.

Both films also use art as the final set piece but again it is used to make different statements on voyeurism. In *Crystal Plumage*, Sam Dalmas, the protagonist of the film finds himself back where the mystery began. He tracks Monica into the art gallery only to be trapped by a large painting that she has cut loose and falls on him. The painting looks to be made of clay but has large spikes that nearly stab him. Monica leaps on top of the painting and taunts him until the police can catch up with her and finally end the murder spree. The police lift the painting off Sam, which symbolizes the end of the madness in Rome as he is finally able to fly back to the United States. *Crystal Plumage* has a more optimistic ending compared to *Tenebrae*.

The final scene reveals Peter as the killer when he brutally murders everyone who could identify him as such. Peter is caught by Detective Germani (Giuliano Gemma) and Anne (Daria Nicolodi), but Peter uses a prop razor blade to fake his suicide. Detective Germani and Anne leave the home only to reenter and see that Peter is gone. He appears behind Germani and kills him with an axe. Anne attempts to reenter the home but struggles because a large, silver, decorative art piece is lodged behind the door. Anne pushes it open which makes the large, pointed piece strike and stab Peter in the lower abdomen which kills him. The final shot of the film is Anne screaming directly into the camera which fades to black. The film ends with artwork killing the protagonist, which shows the filmmakers overall disdain for the condemnation of his films. Many critics and audiences alike have deemed the work of Argento misogynist and

too violent but fail to see the conversation he is forming on the relationship between voyeurism and the camera. According to Cooper, “Death by art actually bookends this film: the opening murder of the shoplifter stealing a copy of the novel *Tenebrae* begins with the killer shoving pages of the book down her throat before he starts slicing her with the razor.” (70). The “bookend” of the film that Cooper writes about is a bit too simplified because these ideas and images show up again in later films. But it does show the culmination of ideas presented in *Tenebrae*. The camera is a wonderfully dangerous tool that if used in specific ways can elicit strong emotional responses from the audience.

The important moments in these films depict the transition Argento goes through during his career. In 1971, Dario was a young and optimistic filmmaker who was aware of the pleasures of art but also the camera as a way into a voyeuristic expression. Later in his films but specifically *Tenebrae*, Argento doubles down on voyeuristic violence and the unpredictable movements of his camera. The character Tilde (Mirella D’Angelo), whom we find out has had a relationship of sorts with Peter Neal, meets her untimely demise after she has an argument with her girlfriend/lover Marion (Mirella Banti). They have an altercation which leads Marion to go home with a man. Her bisexuality is a trigger for the killer as well as Tilde’s sexual orientations. The scene begins with a static shot of Tilde and Marion’s modern aesthetic home. The next shot is Tilde walking through the front door as quickly as possible to try and avoid Marion. It is no use when Marion calls out to Tilde from upstairs:

Marion: Tilde? Are you coming up?

Tilde: Get lost.

Marion: Come on.

Tilde: You cheap little hooker! I wouldn’t come near you right now if my life depended on it. You make me sick.

Marion: I drank too much. I’m going to throw up.

Tilde: If you have to, go some other place to do it.

Marion: I feel sick!

Tilde: Go call your pimp to look after you.

Marion: All right! You want to know what happened? He was terrific! He made you look pathetic when we made love. For a start, he...

Tilde throws a glass vase at Marion, which abruptly ends their destructive conversation as the camera follows Tilde into a bedroom. The conversation between these characters pushes the idea of sexual perversion to a much darker place. The insinuation that Marion was once a sex worker and bisexual woman makes her out to be Argento's ultimate "pervert." The sequence that takes place after this altercation shows a free moving camera stalking the women that furthers Argento's gaze.

In a medium-wide shot Tilde grabs a pair of scissors from a nearby table and says "One day..." when suddenly a sound from outside can be heard and startles her. The camera tracks behind her as she walks to the nearest window. The camera quickly edits to the outside of the house looking in at Tilde in a medium shot. The shot lingers on her until it starts to arbitrarily track upwards. The shot is steady as it continues to climb the exterior of the home. The shot holds on the only open window to reveal Marion wrapped in white cloth playing music. The camera does something interesting with this shot, tracking inwards as Marion exits the frame and follows her out of the shot. The camera pans throughout the room as though it is someone peering through the window. The camera pulls out of the window and continues to track up and over top of the house and stops in front of a window with wood blinds. A bolt cutter and black gloved hands appear in frame and cut the blinds from the window. The next shot is back inside of Tilde's bedroom. A voice whispers "Pervert! Filthy, slimy pervert." and in the same shot Tilde turns around with her back to the camera. Black gloved hands reach into frame and latch onto her. Argento uses quick edits to show the killers razor blade, Tilde struggling, the razor blade

again slashing through her shirt, then back to the killer swiping the blade and then back to her face covered in blood.

The extended shot is used as a diversion to unsettle the audience. As Cooper states, “The fluid movement prior to this perspective, movement up and around the walls of a tall building, could not have been human--they were the camera’s alone--but the camera enters the killer’s perspective as easily as it glides through a window.” (71). This is not an untrue statement, but he is forgetting an aspect that Argento utilizes in many of his films, not on this scale, but does so often. The camera here is used to force the audience into a troublesome situation; the filmmaker wants to subject his viewers to the unseen and unknown. A different filmmaker would have cut to the assailant breaking into the home which would break any connection and forced perspective the audience gets from the extended shot. Argento is playing a dangerous game with his viewers; he is revealing the inner workings of filmmaking by drawing attention to the camera. Cooper continues, ...“The killer ends up coming at her from the opposite direction, so while the long take has involved marvelous, acrobatic, and expensive continuity, the cut from the part of the long take motivated by the killer’s perspective to the shot of Tilde by the window defies continuity.” (71). Again, Cooper points out a valid issue with this sequence because it defies logical filmmaking and spatial continuity. Argento is not interested in logic but instead opts for specific images that convey an idea. The spatial confusion only helps this disturbing sequence because the audience has nothing to grasp onto. It creates a disorienting number of shots that unwillingly put the audience into the perspective of the killer. Along with these sequences that force perspective, Argento uses flashbacks that draw the viewer deeper into the psychology of the killer while continuing his voyeuristic camera work.

Throughout the film Argento implements flashbacks that are equally distressing and informative about the killer. The filmmaker sets up the flashbacks in a two-act structure that gives fragments of information. The first of these flashbacks take place just after Peter arrives in Rome. The sequence begins with a wide shot of a marble bathroom wall where the shadow of a man is seen. The camera cuts to a glass table that reveals two white pills and an extreme close-up of a glass of water. The shot reverts to the marble wall and the shadow figure drinking from the glass. The scene fades into a wide shot of four young boys surrounding a seductive woman. She taunts and teases the boys by letting the top of her dress fall to only pull it back up before she reveals her breast. The camera tracks her in a close-up as she walks out onto a sandy beach. The boys quickly follow her and watches her walk away in bright red high heels. The camera remains in a wide shot and from afar she reveals her breasts to the boys and entices them to chase her down. The next shot is a medium close-up of the woman on her knees and topless with the boys all surrounding her. There is a strong implication of sexual activity about to take place until someone new appears in frame. In the same shot, the woman gives the intruder a thumbs down of disapproval and he slaps her in the face. The camera cuts into a close-up of the woman in pain and wiping blood from her mouth. The next shot tracks feet running away but in the same frame the others catch up and tackle him to the ground. In the next few shots Argento utilizes his quick editing to bombard the audience with confusing images. The most important shot of this sequence is the final shot before the flashback ends. The woman brutally kicks the boy while he is held down by the others. She then in a close-up shot takes the heel of her shoe and forces it into his mouth. This sequence finds Argento returning to traditional camera work to explore voyeurism and sexual perversion.

The camera in this scene shows the events from a third person perspective, which gives it an objectivity that is lacking in the other sequences. Instead, Argento uses the characters to frame his ideas of voyeurism and how adolescents interact with it. The boys in the scene lust after the woman and stare at her. When this unknown person enters the frame, she looks as though she is disgusted by him and wants him to leave. This insinuates that off-screen this unknown character must have been watching the woman interact with the others. He makes the mistake of assuming she is willing to sexually pleasure him like the other boys. This incites sexual violence, which distorts the character's perception of intimacy. It is later revealed that these flashbacks belong to Peter Neal, which explains the sexual perversion and violence he enacts on others. Cooper states, "The idea that Peter is ultimately a punisher of people outside of sexual norms gains support from Argento's casting of Eva Robins, who was born a male but developed female sexual characteristics in puberty..." (67). The casting of a transgender person complicates this scene because with that knowledge it can be read that the Peter Neal was sexually confused. When he is orally raped by the woman, it repressed his sexual orientation and fractured what it means to be intimate with someone. This builds upon the other flashback sequence when Argento applies his touch of handheld first person shots.

The next flashback sequence begins just after Peter and Anne have sex for the first time. It is important to note the way the filmmaker arranged these shots. Why would Argento link intercourse with a memory that has obviously damaged Peter's mental state? He does this because it reinforces the idea that these memories have in fact caused Peter to associate violence and sex. The scene begins much like the previous sequence with an extreme close-up of a human eye dilating. The eye fades out into a tracking shot of red heels which are associated with damaging Peter's masculinity. The camera cuts to a medium wide shot to reveal the woman from

the beach wearing the same dress and walking beside a businessman. The camera tracks them as the man talks to her, from her facial and body gestures she looks uninterested in their conversation. The camera abruptly cuts to a shaky handheld shot from the bushes. This shot is constructed very similarly to the opening scene in the film which gives the impression that whoever this is wants to remain hidden. The camera holds on these two talking until the man leaves the frame and she is left there alone. The camera breaks from the handheld shot to a close-up of the red heels and then cuts back to the handheld shot. The camera tracks inward toward the woman when the stalker finally makes himself visible to her. At first, she looks a bit scared but that quickly turns into smile, possibly because she recognizes him or she likes being watched. The camera pans downward to reveal a phallic shaped knife that he plunges in her midsection. The sequence ends with the extreme close-up of an eye but it is no longer dilated.

This scene concludes the flashback/memories of Peter Neal. On a first viewing it may still leave many unanswered questions. When watching these scenes together it can be read as though these events have taken place on the same day. What clues the audience in is her clothing and the location. It looks like she has seduced a man at a beach party while Peter has been stalking her. Argento reverts to the camera work he has been using throughout the film to bring his visuals full circle. The visual style of voyeurism can be implemented in many ways but Argento chose to rely on handheld shots and first-person perspective for a specific purpose. From a plot standpoint it is used to keep the killer's identity hidden until the end of the film but he also wanted to bring the audience to unexpected places and the flashbacks are proof of that. He deceives the audience by shooting the first sequence plainly by having the characters interact in front of the camera instead of using the camera itself. The second flashback breaks this continuity, forces a perspective upon the audience, and implicates the viewer as the murderer.

The set pieces in *Tenebrae* are important to the story as well as Argento's discourse with using the camera to perform a voyeuristic gaze. Firstly, the motivation for the killer is explored when he takes out his frustrations on sexually perverse people, or people he believes to be perverted in some way. Secondly, when the audience is forced to watch the violence through a first-person perspective, it is unrelenting, and it develops a relationship between them. Lastly, the way in which the killer commits these murders. The imagery is sexual in nature and makes Argento's statement complicated. The image of a man putting things into a woman's mouth or stabbing a woman with an oddly shaped knife creates connections between sex and violence that are not normally associated. These ideas presented in *Tenebrae* are fully realized images that continue the tradition of voyeurism in giallo and cult cinema. The filmmaker continues this conversation with the audience and camera in his last great film *Opera*.

Chapter Five:

***Opera* (1987)**

Opera (1987) follows a young understudy named Betty, who is called upon to perform after the lead Mara Czekova is injured before the opening night. It is made clear that someone is stalking Betty as she receives a call from an anonymous "fan" who informs her of Czekova's accident. *Opera* premiered at a time in Argento's career when critics and audiences continued to lament his work and view it from a limited perspective. The word sadism gets thrown around quite often in the same sentence as the filmmaker's name. Is the film sadistic with its violent set pieces? Yes, I would agree with that statement. With that said, it is also much more than a "sadistic" horror film and unfortunately some critics and audiences will not look past that. Leon Hunt uses a term called "spectatorial sadism" when discussing *Opera*. Hunt breaks down spectatorial sadism by using three aspects of the work: violence against the eye, powerlessness

against phallic objects, and the way the film operates which allows the male and female play the passive and active roles within the film. *Opera* complicates Argento's voyeurism but these images and set pieces are critical to his work.

The film opens with an extreme close-up of a raven's eye, the first of many connections to Argento's voyeurism. The eye reveals a reflection of the opera house and the maestro conducting the orchestra. The eye frantically darts to the left and right as the sound of music gets louder; the raven's eye is nervous but it still connects with the audience by staring into the camera lens. The camera cuts to a medium close-up of a black raven and the title appears on screen in white font. The camera holds on the raven as it caws along with the music. As the camera slowly tracks upward on the raven a woman's voice is heard off screen as she demands to start from the top. The camera utilizes a quick cut to the close-up of the raven's eye and then cutting to a behind-the-shoulder shot of the raven as the hand of Mara Czekova is seen in frame. The raven continues to caw which causes Mara to abruptly stop the music and throw her shoe at the animal, which leads into the first point of view shot in the film.

The camera takes the view of Mara as she begins to back track out of the opera house. The audience is now forced to take the role of a high maintenance opera singer and is subjected to the gaze of the crew working around her. Mara's assistant and others briskly follow her out of the opera house when the camera cuts to the street. It is seen from afar that Mara is stuck by a car which is the first act of violence within the film. It leads to the audience's introduction to Betty. She is soon informed by her manager that she will be performing the opening show of Verdi's *Macbeth* in front of a large audience. This is the first sign of Betty's feeling of powerlessness as described in Hunt's article. Betty claims she is not ready for this opportunity and is portrayed immature and weak. It takes the encouragement and the push of others to get her to accept the

role. This leads to the second time in the film that the audience is unwillingly put into a new perspective.

The opening night of the show is about to begin as the camera climbs a set of red velvet-colored stairs. The camera ducks in and out of the opera hallways until it finally reaches an empty box at the highest vantage point in the building. The camera abandons the long tracking shot to a medium close-up of a black glove that appears in frame; very much like the extended tracking shot in *Tenebrae*, which implies that the audience has been put into the perspective of a stalker. The camera leaves the static shot and reverts to a handheld which is simply watching Betty perform on stage. It is also important to note that the black gloved hand has left a pair of binocular's on the ledge of the box seat. The way the shot is framed these can be seen in the bottom right of the screen. Argento's camera cuts to a wide shot of Betty performing on stage and then back to the handheld shot from above. The black glove hand reaches for the binocular's which prompts an iris view from the camera. The shot tilts downward on each portion of Betty's body prompting a new voyeuristic experience in *Opera*.

The camera in this sequence objectifies Betty through several camera movements. This shot is building upon Laura Mulvey's thesis on the male gaze. Betty is a young attractive woman, and the camera movements acknowledge this by focusing on her breasts and the lower half of her body. She is not framed in a way that appreciates her talents as an opera singer but instead relies on male desire. Although Laura Mulvey's thesis can be applied to most of Argento's films it is much more apparent in *Opera*. I believe this is because his films typically do not have female lead characters. When the gaze is applied to the lead in the film it becomes much more uncomfortable and thus becoming clearer than in his other work. Shortly after the opera concludes Argento subjects the audience to one of the most important set pieces within the

film. The scene begins with a failed sexual interaction between Betty and her boyfriend Stefano (William McNamara). Betty abruptly ends the interaction which makes Stefano question his masculinity. She assures him that it is not his fault and that she is a “mess” implying that her other attempts with sexual experiences never go as planned. The camera is set up in a medium wide shot which shows Betty sitting on Stefano’s bed half naked contributing to the male gaze and allowing the audience to feel stimulated by the young actor. The camera cuts into a close-up of Betty’s face and the back of her head as a heartbeat is heard; it is not clear whose heart beat it is but creates an immense amount of tension. A black glove appears into the frame from the right and chokes Betty. The unknown stalker slams her head against the bed frame, which creates a loud thud. That sound and the shot that follows creates an oddly sexual image of Betty and what Stefano wanted to happen between them. She is laid out on the bed with her eyes closed. Her hair hangs seductively over the edge until the killer places tape over her mouth breaking the illusion of an orgasm.

The camera changes angles as the killer ties her hands behind her back when again the camera cuts to a medium wide shot of the room. This is an odd choice but, on several screenings, only shadows can be seen moving around on the bed. It again implies the sexual activity that never happened but instead the intimacy that is built between the killer and Betty. She finally awakens and begins to struggle when the killer approaches her and lifts her from the bed by her throat. The shots in this sequence changes to handheld to allow Argento to place blame on the audience for Betty’s misfortune. In several quick shots, the killer ties her to a large column and puts her on display; this is not the first time Betty will be on display for the audience and killer. The camera cuts back to the handheld shot as the audience is forced to torture her by placing taped spikes under her eyes. The camera cuts to an extreme close-up of her eye much like the

opening shot of the film with the raven. Her eye darts around trying to find a way out of the situation. The killer holds up a small mirror to her face and utters one of the most horrific and important lines in the entire film "...if you try to close your eyes, you'll tear them apart. So, you'll just have to watch everything." This line implies something particularly important to the film and how it relates to those watching it. The filmmaker knows why people watch his films and why many disregard them.

The words spoken to Betty are in fact spoken to the audience because of the camera angle. Just after she is tied up and left alone the camera takes her point of view. The audience is now forced to view the murder of Stefano through her eyes and is subjected to the desires of the stalker. The camera begins to pan throughout the room but viewed behind the spikes over Betty's eyes. The angle changes only when Stefano is finally able to open the locked door. He slowly approaches Betty when the camera cuts back to the first person view behind the spikes. The camera changes angles again to show the violence from an objective view when Stefano finally gets close to Betty. An oddly shaped, phallic knife and black glove appear into frame and stab him in the throat. The camera cuts to a close-up of Stefano's gaping mouth with the blade peeking through his cheek. The camera holds on this shot as he screams in agony; the way this is framed is interesting in terms of sexual imagery. Just before this sequence he attempts to penetrate Betty but instead it is he who is penetrated by the killer. The camera then cuts back to the eye of Betty and then again back to Stefano's gaping mouth filling with blood again employing sexual imagery with violence. Hunt brings up an interesting point in his article "...Not only does the camera look through those needles and provide an even more painfully close view of the murders than the one forced on Betty, but several other shots visually evoke the needles (by framing a scene through a ventilator grill, for example." This is a constant reminder to the

audience that in Argento films the main character is never fully alone. There is always an eye watching them including the audience who secretly enjoys the sadistic violence portrayed onscreen but not willing to admit it.

The murder sequence continues with a medium close-up of Stefano on the floor being repeatedly stabbed in the hands as he is covered in blood. The camera cuts back and forth between the bound and gagged Betty and the suffering Stefano. It is crucial to point out the way in which Stefano is dressed in this sequence. Cooper argues “contrary to Argento’s preference, a beautiful male, appearing in shirtless smooth-chested vulnerability...” and the failed sexual moment does make this complicated for the viewer. It changes the normal slasher set piece wherein a woman would be half naked in front of the camera but instead Argento voyeuristically captures the male body and soon after mutilates it much like the women in his other films.

Again, Argento frames the murder in a way that is implicating the audience; only the hands and knife of the killer can be seen. The use of eye iconography is used again here to implicate the audience through Betty’s perspective. When Stefano’s suffering finally ends and he dies, the killer grabs him by his hair and forces his dead gaze upon her and thus the gaze is forced upon the audience. The way in which the film edits this together is important because just after the killer lifts Stefano’s head we cut to a close-up of Betty’s eyes, and then cutting again to the point of view shot through the spikes, another implication that the audience is forced to watch the violence through her perspective. Hunt further explains this idea, “This is corroborated by Argento’s explanation of the scene (teaching us not to look away, a punishment for all those gory horror movies we did look away from)”. This idea is something I completely agree with. I believe that Argento is fascinated by horrific acts of violence and how he manipulates his audience. Just like *Tenebrae*, critics, and audiences flock to see these films with an intent to be

scared; but when they are in fact frightened by how the camera manipulates them, they tend to look away which frustrates Argento.

The filmmaker continues this trend of voyeuristic murder set pieces as Betty tries to uncover the masked killer. The second sequence takes place after the killer breaks into the opera house and destroys Betty's costume and attempts to blame it on the ravens by letting them loose; this comes full circle later in the film as the ravens are noted to have great memory and high intellect for an animal. It also contributes to Argento's obsession with eye mutilation in the film. The costume designer Giulia takes the clothing backstage to repair it but in the process, finds a bracelet that belongs to the killer. Betty follows her as they both attempt to uncover the faded writing on the gold bracelet. This scene operates differently than in *Tenebrae* and, in a sense, connects much closer with *Crystal Plume*. When the killer makes his presence known to Betty, he again ties her up but this time he places her inside of a glass display case. This comments on voyeurism but does not use the camera like in the other films. Instead, Betty is viewed as a mannequin and is also surrounded by real mannequins in glass display cases. Argento frames this to impose the male gaze upon Betty in one of her most vulnerable moments. This again connects to Hunt's discussion on her powerlessness. Hunt continues "...The second scene linked to the first, is the demonstration of Betty's powerlessness, both to her and the spectator. After the second murder, while Betty is still tied up, the killer moves the knife between her stomach and groin and tells her "I can take you wherever and whenever I want." The dialogue between Betty and the killer is critical to Argento's voyeurism because it communicates this idea that the viewer can be taken anywhere by the camera. The audience is just as helpless as Betty is to Argento and the movements of his camera.

Along with the murder set pieces in the film there are flashbacks that play a similar role to those in *Tenebrae*. One of the most interesting aspects of these films is that the memories seem to begin with human anatomy. For example, in *Tenebrae* and as I have discussed previously, the human eye was an image that would indicate to audience that what they are about to watch does not take place in present day. *Opera* indicates these flashbacks with a pulsing brain and the sound of a heartbeat which is also used whenever Betty is attacked. The heartbeat is the first link between Inspector Santini's sexual perversion. The audience finds out through these flashbacks that Santini had a sadistic relationship with Betty's mother wherein she would force him to torture women. The act of violence and torture would cause her to get sexually excited and corrupted the way Santini views pleasure. These scenes play out similarly to most of Argento's films where the camera moves throughout spaces to create a voyeuristic experience. The first flashback takes place just after Santini who we find out is the killer watches Betty perform at the opera. The camera begins to track backwards up a staircase that causes the audience to be spatially confused and creates an unsettling journey into Santini's mind for the first time. The camera cuts to a traditional point of view shot as a young woman in a blue dress is running away from the camera. The look of terror on her face is disturbing as she is backed into a corner. The camera breaks the point of view shot to reveal another woman (noticeably older than the girl in blue) tied up watching her struggle. This scene signifies the beginnings of Inspector Santini and Betty's mother's sadomasochistic relationship.

The next flashback is much different because it does not show any violence but instead uses the camera to objectify a sleeping woman. The shot resembles how Inspector Santini watches Betty from the Balcony at the opera in the opening moments of the film. The camera tracks through a long hallway and back to the same spiral staircase seen in the first sequence.

The camera shows how large this space is as it tracks through different rooms all shrouded in darkness; finally, the camera enters a bedroom with a naked woman sleeping. The camera cuts into to a close-up of the woman and slowly pans over her body as a black glove appears in frame. The black glove pulls down the sheets to reveal the woman's breast; the camera also lingers on her genital area and pans along her legs. The next set of shots are interesting because the camera changes the point of view and is easily missed if you are not looking for it. The camera changes perspective when a non-gloved hand appears in frame handing Santini the knife he uses to kill Stefano is the scene described above. The camera flips perspective and aligns itself back with Santini as the shot reveals him to be tying the woman's hands together. The scene ends with a direct point of view shot of Santini about to strike and kill the woman sleeping in the bed. It is important to note that this sequence is juxtaposed with the image of Betty performing at the opera which relates sadism with Betty.

The final flashback sequence begins differently because instead it is a dream that reminds Betty of her past. The camera tracks through the mysterious space that Santini and Betty's mother perform sexual acts as well as murder in. It is in a point of view shot but when the camera cuts to a medium it reveals young Betty watching the horrific acts taking place between Santini and her mother. This final flashback completes the story and relationship between Santini and Betty. It functions similarly to how Argento uses this type of storytelling in *Tenebrae*. It shows the sexual perversion that defines his murderers and helps the audience understand that these killers are deranged from their environments and the people they interact with. With the conclusion of the flashback sequence Betty prepares for the final show of Macbeth which includes important imagery for Argento's statement on voyeurism.

As mentioned earlier the human eye is something Argento is fascinated with and relies on that image heavily. Specifically, in *Opera*, the mutilation of the eye happens several times in the outlandish set pieces created for the film. A sequence in the middle of the film begins with Inspector Santini trying to murder Betty in her apartment. Mira (Daria Nicolodi), her manager, comes to visit and becomes engulfed in the dangerous game that Santini plays with Betty. The apartment is dark with only fragments of light throughout the hallway leading to the front door. The lighting is similar to films like *Suspiria* and *Inferno* where naturalistic lighting is forgone for atmospheric colors. The hallway is covered in red and green that creates an otherworldly feel to the scene that breaks all continuity with the other set pieces. Betty and Mira lock themselves into the kitchen until the realization sets in, they need to confront the killer to escape.

In a medium wide shot Mira looks through the peephole in the front the door. The camera cuts to an extreme close-up shot of the peephole to reveal Mira's eye looking out. The camera then replaces Mira's eye and subjects the audience to her view through the hole. A figure is there but shines a flashlight through that further obscures their identity. The camera continues to cut back and forth between Mira and the shot through looking out. The figure on the other side holds up a pistol and fires the gun directly at the camera and through Mira's eye. The structure of the shot and the curiosity of the audience leads to the death of Mira and the mutilation of her eye. It appears Argento wants the audience to feel guilty for her murder and contributing to spectatorship in the crime. Brown states "I do not suggest that one cannot enjoy fantastic screen violence. Nor do I wish to suggest that screen violence cannot function as some sort of release or substitute for the impulse to commit violent acts in the real world." This statement contradicts what Argento sets out to accomplish in his films. The violence is fantastic and over the top which detaches itself from reality but Argento uses the camera to create deeply unsettling images of

violence and causes many to look away from the screen. Brown continues, “My concern here has rather been to explore the ethics of film spectatorship in relation to the extreme cinema of cruelty that is characterized not only by explicit violence or sexual violence, but which also depicts such acts in a “cruel” fashion, namely through an absence of cuts, with long shot, and extended duration being common features thereof.” (39). This statement is interesting when applied to *Opera* because of how the film revels in its violence and bodily mutilations.

The lack of cuts and extended sequences of violence in *Opera* are functioning to implicate the audience as the murderer. Brown fails to mention this aspect in his writing and does not call attention to how the camera can in fact play a much more important role in the violence. His statement does hold value for other films but giallo needs to have a closer examination. For instance, the climax of *Opera* is a crescendo of images and ideas that give the film a satisfying conclusion but also connects *Crystal Plumage*, *Tenebrae*, and *Opera* as some of Argento’s most voyeuristic films. The scene begins with the final performance of Macbeth; Betty and Marco create a plan to catch Inspector Santini. The first shot of the scene are typical establishing shots of the opera house and the crowd. The filmmaker edits between the audience and the performers to establish a relationship between them. The audience watches while the performers are on display. The camera then zooms in on specific characters talking amongst each other. The camera then takes on a point-of-view shot of the nervous Betty looking out at the crowd. The camera then cuts to a wide shot of the stage when suddenly a large cage crashes through the set and lands in front of Betty. It is revealed that the cage is filled with ravens that want revenge for the harm Santini caused them. The camera cuts in on the cage to reveal dozens of them and focuses on one that seems to be communicating with the others. The next shot is of the crowd which then cuts to an extreme close-up of the raven's eye; much like in the opening

shots of the film but this time the raven is not only making eye contact with the audience watching the film but also with the audience at the opera.

The scene begins to escalate when the ravens continue to communicate with each other. Argento cuts between shots of the eye and the ravens in the cage and then cuts to the audience watching them. It seems to be implying that the audience is just like the ravens in a sense that they are trapped in the opera house with a killer. The camera goes even further into a voyeuristic expression when it takes the POV of a raven in the cage. It is on ground level and happens to be the first raven to leave the cage and take flight over the crowd. The shot reverts to a medium wide shot showing the raven flying throughout the room in search of Santini. The camera then cuts to an overhead shot that tracks throughout the room; it continues to circle and begins to descend on the crowd in which the audience is shown afraid of the voyeuristic camera. The POV shot reverts to a medium wide to show the carnage taking place but also the raven locating Inspector Santini. In an extreme close-up, a black beak is shown pecking at the eye of Santini until the raven tears it completely from the socket. The camera continues to cut back and forth between Santini and the raven until the eye is removed. The ravens are shot in a medium close-up as they fight for Santini's eye. The camera captures the raven playfully chewing on the eye, spitting it out and then holding the eye in its mouth which concludes the scene. This shot is critical to this paper and is the genesis of my thesis. The raven symbolizes loss and bad luck for Betty (and especially Santini) but in devouring the eye Argento is commenting on his relationship with the audience and critics. The eye is the physical representation of those who watch his films and those who turn away from the violence. It is the filmmaker's way of saying "I've caught you watching and because of this, these characters must pay the ultimate price." What is that price you may ask; simply put "A simple act of annihilation: Murder".

Chapter Six:

Conclusion

Giallo films have had a distinct impact on Italian cinema as well as the entire horror genre. It borrowed ideas from hard-boiled detective stories and film noir from the 1940s and 1950s. The sub-genre had a slow start with an only a few films premiering in the early 60s; Mario Bava directed two of the most important of all giallo, beginning with *The Girl Who Knew Too Much* and *Blood and Black Lace*. It was not until 1970 when a young screenwriter turned director debuted his first feature film *The Bird with the Crystal Plumage* that giallo began to rise in popularity. The film debuted June 12th, 1970, and became a massive hit in Italy, earning double its production budget. This granted the filmmaker the opportunity to continue writing and directing other gialli films such as *The Cat O'Nine Tails*, *Tenebrae*, and *Opera*. It was with these films Argento began to develop a theme of voyeurism and how he uses it to manipulate the audience.

The filmmaker uses many characteristics of giallo to provoke his audience. For example, the use of extreme violence and gore is necessary to evoke a visceral response from the viewers. Argento continues to use cinematic language to draw the audience into the film with point of view shots and angles. These sequences are certainly important to the filmmaker as well as the films themselves. The extended tracking shot in *Tenebrae* for instance is simply used to prevent the audience from looking away from screen. The longevity of the sequence is meant to disarm and spatially confuse them. Argento uses this as an opportunity to place the viewers in the perspective of the killer and when the time comes implicate them as the cause for the death of Tilda and her lover Marion. He does this by framing the shot so that the hands of the killer

appear on screen as an extension of the audience. This extension becomes much clearer in later films.

In *Opera*, the extension to the audience becomes a new entity which shows the progression of Argento's voyeurism. In the film he not only relies on the hands of the killer to connect the audience to the film, but he also uses the eye of protagonist to draw further conclusions about the audience and the relationship between the cameras. Throughout the film the audience is subjected to point of view shots but instead through the eyes of Betty. This causes the audience to become the victim of the film as many of the murder set pieces are viewed from her perspective. Inspector Santini abducts Betty, uses a small set of spikes, and tapes them under her eyes. This pressures her to watch as he brutally murders everyone around her; the viewers may just think this is another Argento trick. Technically they are not wrong because it is a ploy to attract audiences, but the filmmaker uses these shots to directly implicate the audience as the voyeur. In a sense these shots are blaming the audience for the sadistic acts of violence within his films. At this point in his career, he has set up a reputation of pure excess and lacking any substance.

Throughout this paper and my analysis on these films I have made an argument against this statement. Instead, I would like to propose the idea that Dario Argento is an auteur of a specific genre that calls for the use of excessive violence. Argento develops a theme of voyeurism that is specific to Italy. The Years of Lead shaped the way he viewed his country which had an interesting impact on his work. He uses the camera to capture the fear and anxiety Italy experienced through the elaborate set pieces in these films. It also embodied the undeniable pleasure of watching others suffer, something that audiences in the United States adapted with the 80s slasher craze. This is something that Alfred Hitchcock tapped into in the late 50s and

early 60s, but his films explore the sexual nature of voyeurism. Instead, Argento is interested in the relationship between violence, sex and how audiences react to it. The evolution seen in these films is critical to this discussion as well.

This evolution of Argento's work continues as reports of a new film is set to begin production in Spring of 2021. *Black Glasses* and the minor plot details revealed show that he is still interested in exploring voyeurism. According to IMDB the plot of the film is as follows: "Diana, a young woman who has lost her sight, finds a guide in a Chinese boy named In. Together they will track down a dangerous killer through the darkness of Italy." *Black Glasses* seems to be most associated with *Opera* and how Argento forces the audience to view the film through Betty's perspective. He is taking this a step further with Diana and how the audience will have to follow a blind person throughout the film. It is also interesting to note that she will be forced to rely on a young boy to guide her. It seems that the human eye is still critically important to the filmmaker and his work. The fact that the main character is blind reveals a rather sadistic evolution for Argento and his filmmaking.

Dario Argento became the most successful director working within the sub-genre of giallo for several reasons. His films had a kinetic energy that most in the 70s were lacking. He valued cinematography greatly and used frantic cuts and jarring edits to make some of the most frightening sequences in film history. He also valued the *mise-en-scène* more so than any director because he understood how crucial it was in manipulating his audience. Argento is an auteur filmmaker because each of his films share motifs, themes, musical compositions, genre conventions and an unmistakable style and film form.

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