

Casting Call: Profondo Rosso and Blow-Up

When I write, I practice a kind of automatism. I have a film in mind that makes an impression like a sort of universal truth. It's like I have a blank page in front of me, and the story before my eyes. I wait until things play themselves out.

Dario Argento¹

I am going to start my discussion of *Profondo Rosso* not with Dario Argento or Michelangelo Antonioni, but with their forebear Alfred Hitchcock, who changed the territory of horror in 1960 with *Psycho*. After Marion Crane wrapped the money that she stole in newspaper, she pauses at the window of the motel and overhears Norman's Bates' insane mother say, "No! I tell you no! I won't have you bringing some young girl in for supper! By candlelight, I suppose, in the cheap, erotic fashion of young men with cheap, erotic minds!" When Marion sees Norman a little later, he explains that his mother is ill. The visitor replies, "She sounded strong." Given that Mrs Bates was long dead and resurrected simply as a figment of Norman's imagination, one wonders, who does Marion actually hear? One possibility is that she is overhearing Norman, who externalizes his inner dialogue in an act of ventriloquism. An equally sensible conclusion may be, however, that it is *Marion* who is actually imaginary and she is – like Mrs Bates – finally a figment of *Norman's* imagination. Marion's act of theft at the start of the film positions her as someone who is as guilty as Norman. Her death at his hands (while he is dressed as his mother) is, in effect, the violent consummation of their awkward first date. The shock of *Psycho*, then, is not that Hitchcock kills off a leading character so quickly, but rather that he fools us into thinking that this first part of the film is something more than the dream of its main character.² Norman's dream of Marion makes the

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Reproduced in Cooper, Andrew. *Dario Argento*. Urbana: University of Illinois, 2012. Print. p. 153.

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Hitchcock pulls this trick off again in *The Birds* (1963), where Melanie is taunted by her suitor in the pet shop, triggering her trip down to Bodega Bay.

shower scene both terrifying and erotic. As Marion reaches out to the shower curtain she is asking the spectator to rescue her and makes us feel guilty that we cannot help. From that moment on, we identify with Norman as he furtively cleans up the motel and represses his memory of Marion by submerging her body into the swampy recesses of his sick mind.

Psycho is therefore set somewhere in the uncanny: a place where the familiar is strange, and the strange familiar. It is the same place as *Profondo Rosso*.

One of the most common interpretations of Argento's creativity is that he based his directorial visions on his dreams. Argento scholar Andrew Cooper has noted, however, that the master of horror's dream logic is not necessarily linear. How might we interpret his seemingly irrational "series of exaggerated images"?³ Crucial here is the ontological framework of the giallo. The main questions of *Profondo Rosso* might seem to be concluded: Marta killed her husband in order not to return to the hospital, and Carlo covered up his mother's crimes. Yet there are mysteries still to be solved. I wish to suggest that, like Mrs Bate's overheard monologues, there are *aporia* in *Profondo Rosso*, which, if probed, reveal a sophisticated architecture. These include Marta's cross-dressing as a man before Helga Ulmann gets an inkling of her crime, why Marcus Daley claims that he lives above the psychic's apartment (when he lives in a basement), and why his friend Carlo likens piano playing to the joy of heterosexual intimacy when he is actually homosexual.⁴ I suggest that rather than random occurrences or mistakes, such anomalies can be used as clues:

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Ibid (63).

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As Carlo drunkenly admits, "I think the piano is a beautiful woman and I just love to tickle her fanny."

foundational points to help us to better comprehend *Profondo Rosso*'s strangely serendipitous narrative.

Dario Argento cast David Hemmings to play the role of Daley because he had seen him in Antonioni's film *Blow-Up* (1966). A voiceover on its trailer announced, "Sometimes reality is the strangest fantasy of all." In *Blow-Up*, Hemmings plays Thomas, an isolated, arrogant, middle class photographer making the most of Swinging London whose world is shattered when he believes that he has accidentally recorded evidence of a murder. In Antonioni's film, Thomas has the means to live comfortably amidst the glamour of Swinging London. He is a young, single, commercially successful, middle class photographer whose approach to the workplace can be unethical, both in the way it objectifies its subjects and the way that he callously treats his female models. The film starts with Thomas leaving a doss house after he has voyeuristically photographed specimens of the urban poor. It is as if the film is saying that Thomas is willing to be unethical in his urge to aestheticize, objectify and exploit the suffering of other people. Love and companionship seem to mean nothing to Thomas and he rarely escapes his cocoon of self-interest long enough to treat anyone else as a valuable individual. This attitude is reflected in his treatment of women in the film: a subspecies that he uses simply for financial gain or erotic pleasure.

To understand one dimension of both *Blow-Up* and *Profondo Rosso* necessitates that we need introduce another element: the influence of Sigmund Freud's work. According to Alan Jones *Profondo Rosso* has "an intricate plotline rife with Freudian subtexts."⁵ Xavier Menik has

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Jones, Alan. *Dario Argento: The Man, The Myth and the Magic*. Godalming: FAB Press, 2012. Print. p. 63.

equally claimed that “*Profondo Rosso* (1975) centres on a psychic who discovers a dark and incestuous secret relating to the murder of a patriarchal figure.”⁶ Such statements are hardly surprising. Argento was, of course, fully familiar with psychoanalysis. In one of his previous co-writing assignments, for example, for the script of director Ricardo Ghione’s film *The Sexual Revolution* (1968), which loosely capitalized on Wilhelm Reich’s book of the same name, he told the story of an Austrian psychoanalyst who encouraged couples to participate in orgies.⁷ Speaking to Stephane Derderian, Argento explained *Profondo Rosso* by saying “it’s not just the characters that are very important: the film is also very psychoanalytical.”⁸ Just like Hitchcock and Antonioni before him, Argento had therefore makes use of Freud’s idea. The Italian director previously portrayed ‘spousification’: the overly close relationship that happens when a parent assigns its child the role of a lover.⁹

In *Blow-Up*, Thomas has a friend called Bill who is an abstract painter. He may also be having a casual affair with Bill’s wife, Patricia. Taking some photos in a park one day, Thomas realizes that he may have accidentally caught evidence of a murder, perhaps motivated by a female stranger’s marital affair. He tries to exploit the woman when she wants the negatives. As Thomas looks into the photos, however, he cannot be sure of what he sees. This parallels an earlier claim by Bill about his painting: “They don’t mean anything when I do them. Afterwards I find something to hang onto... then it sorts itself out and adds up.” If

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Mendik, Xavier. ‘Dario Argento,’ *Senses of Cinema* 29, December 2003. Web <
<http://sensesofcinema.com/2003/great-directors/argento/> >

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Gracey, James. 2010. *Dario Argento*. Harpenden: Kamera Books, 2010. Print. p. 61.

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Cooper (61).

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In Argento’s second film, *Cat O’Nine Tails* (1971), for example, the surrogate father and daughter relationship between the retired, blind journalist Franco Arno and his young niece Lori seems both unusual and affectionate.

the day in the park represents Thomas's witnessing of an abstracted primal scene, the moment is reiterated when he returns to Bill's house one night, and unobtrusively watches as Bill makes love to his wife. When Thomas tries to point the body in the photo out to Patricia, she replies that it "looks like one of Bill's paintings" – in other words it is residual figment of Thomas's Oedipal attachments and not an objective reality. After this, Thomas seems to become disillusioned with the shallow distractions of Swinging London. The film ends with an indication that he is beginning to question the temptations of the scene and reconsider his uncommitted, pragmatic approach. Read in psychoanalytic terms, one might say that Thomas has Oedipal issues that make him distrust women and treat commitment with contempt. From this perspective, his photography can be seen as a continual series of his own projections which, when closely analysed, cannot produce anything clear except the inference that they express a general sense of guilt. Taking the alienated perspective of a spectator seems to exonerate him from what he sees, but he becomes dissatisfied with that position in the end as a way to go beyond his own selfishness.

The giallo is really a journey in which an ordinary, meandering investigator confronts a troublesome side of himself or herself by gradually getting closer to the killer. That is why we are invited to empathize with both the investigator and take the sleazy viewpoint of the killer; they are, in effect, two sides of the same person. The giallo represents therapy dramatized as bloody murder; it is a process of remembering trauma at the point of a knife. *Profondo Rosso* uses Hemmings to frame a study of the Oedipus complex; it also follows a distinctly *therapeutic* – though less socially critical - narrative arc in so far that the central clue is buried in the mind of the protagonist. Its supporting characters are therefore thinly sketched

“ciphers.”¹⁰ In *Blow-Up*, while some of the peripheral characters are total lost souls, Thomas’s commitment to work begins to redeem him. Even so, he is, perhaps - with his glib attitude and callous ways - a character more likely to provoke or commit a murder than any other in the film. In *Profondo Rosso*, Marcus Daley’s investigation culminates in him realizing that he has forgotten what he actually saw, precisely because he took a counter-productive perspective. So what if *Profondo Rosso* is the nightmare not just of Dario Argento, but of Dario using the audience’s understanding of Thomas from *Blow-Up* as his vehicle? Though Marcus Daley is more noble and socially sensitive than Thomas, he shares his failure to romantically commit. His self-absorption is also displayed through his professional interest not in photography, but in music.

Marcus Daley is a jazz pianist: a role that focuses him on his own creativity. This is what he has in common with his friend Carlo. The two friends are introduced together, but Argento’s conspicuous recreation of the bar from Edward Hopper’s famous 1942 painting, *Nighthawks*, indicates that the scene could be from a dream. When Carlo’s moment of original trauma is revealed, it is interesting that he first places the needle on the gramophone record. It is quite possible that his child-like mind might surmise that an act of magic causation occurred and he actually prompted his mother’s heinous act simply by putting on a gramophone record. What is relevant here is Argento scholar Maitland McDonagh’s question: “The child – was he or she... a witness to something dreadful? Or did he or she *do* something dreadful?”¹¹ Of course, Argento gives us no real clues about the murderer’s identity in the first peek at Carlo’s

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McDonagh, Maitland. *Broken Mirrors / Broken Minds: The Dark Dreams of Dario Argento*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2010. Print. p. 121.

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Ibid. (105).

childhood – a point that makes us associate with Marcus, too, because he sees Helga’s murder without seeing its perpetrator. Given, however, that the murder weapon falls into the left hand side of the Christmas scene and the child steps in from the right, the shots indicate that the child cannot easily have used the bloodied knife. McDonagh’s question nevertheless reflects how the narrative itself unfolds; it is through such characteristic contradictions that *Profondo Rosso* fascinates its viewers.

What if *Profondo Rosso* was a dream in which Thomas from *Blow-Up* got closer to understanding his own, Oedipal trauma? The film’s plot is about a man on the trail of a mother who has murdered her husband. Her son not only bears witness to the traumatic event, but dutifully keeps her secret and assists her in her ongoing attempts to cover it up. In that sense, the unspeakable crime of mother-son incest is *displaced* onto the family business of murder. The traumatic scene that initiates the Italian film’s narrative is Carlo unwittingly watching his mother stabbing his father to death. As the boy shrieks, one might ponder the layers of shock he experiences: recoiling from an outburst of violence, losing a parent, realizing that his mother is a murderer. An Oedipal explanation might start off by saying that he thinks his father is a man who is so inadequate that his mother has instead smitten with her child - and behind this is the idea that the father is to blame as competition for the mother. However, there is a sense in which Carlo’s mother kills her husband to buy her freedom (her future is to return her to the mental hospital). A Freudian explanation might start by saying that the death of his father is both a fulfillment of Oedipal desire (his competition is out the way) and a source of guilt (was he to blame?) and distrust (how can he love a woman who can so easily kill?). What is more, when the knife lands at his feet, Carlo is invited to pick up not just the phallic object, but the patriarchal role of protector: as if taking his father’s death

as a shocking demonstration, if he can be man enough he has now acquired the means to end life himself. Marta and Carlo therefore become an Oedipally-bonded team. Murder doubles for incest as the secret at the heart of a family drama that involves perpetually covering up evidence of the crime.

If Marcus Daley and Carlo are doppelgängers, then Marcus is therapeutically investigating his own repressed, Oedipally-motivated, murderous impulses. The intricacy of *Profondo Rosso*'s suspenseful plot rests on the contradictory relationship between Marcus and Carlo: they are peers who share the same profession, and they are friends, yet, the story reveals that one has to investigate the other's criminal secret. Along the way, a beleaguered Daley struggles with the flirty, pushy Gianna Brezzi. When Giana appears at the scene of the first murder, she explains that she has come because "I have my own sources" (as if her entrance is magically premised on Helga Ulmann's death). Marcus blames Gianna Brezzi almost for just entering his world: early on, after Gianna exposes him in her newspaper story he says sarcastically, "Ah yes, by the way, I wanted to thank you; it's always nice to let the murderer know who you are." Before Gianna arm-wrestles, she starts talking about gender. He replies, "Oh look, don't start with me about all that woman stuff. It is a fundamental fact men are different from women. Women are -, weaker. Well, they're gentler."¹² When Gianna later suggests that they leave together, Marcus blows up: "Go where? We are not going anywhere! If anyone is going anywhere, I am going by myself... It seems that there are some things you just cannot do seriously with liberated women. So I am going on my own." Marcus's fraught entanglement with Gianna is signified by their awkward journey together in her bubble car:

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What is ironic about this, of course, is that the film's central murderer is a woman – a woman who dispatches men and whom Marcus struggles with and kills only with the fortuitous help of technology in the shape of a moving lift cage.

she blames him for jamming the door while he complains of claustrophobia. Marcus and Gianna's relationship is characterized by her flirtatious over-stepping and constant rebuttal – in other words, while they are not as yet conventionally close as a couple, their interaction is built on their struggle over romantic intimacy. Through the course of the narrative, not only do they partner up to pursue the investigation, visiting the Leonardo da Vinci school together, they also save each other's life: Gianna by pulling Marcus from the burning mansion, and Marcus by taking her to hospital after the school stabbing.

Profondo Rosso is in some senses a progression from *Blow-Up*. What is interesting about this archetypally profound giallo is not only that the victims are actually helpers, but that the destructive characters have forgivable motivations for their actions: Marta is insane and wants control of her own life, Carlo is doing his best to support his mother. According to Nicole Rafter, "Opening a window on exotica, crime films enable viewers to become voyeurs, secret observers of the personal and even intimate lives of characters different from themselves."¹³ Yet in *Profondo Rosso*, Argento gives us characters quite like ourselves who struggle for love against the supernatural forces of their own psychological defense mechanisms. As Argento said, "There's an aura of ambiguity in every single character in *Profondo Rosso* and everyone is a potential murderer."¹⁴ The film ends with Marcus lost like Narcissus pondering his own reflection in a pool of blood.¹⁵ Through its female characters the

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Rafter, Nicole. *Shots in the Mirror: Crime Films and Society*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000. Print. p. 9.

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Jones (64).

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Beginning with its own moment of fraught entrance, *Susperia* takes up this image by showing a glowing reflection of the Tanz Akademie in a puddle caused by a storm. It is as if the wheel of generational change has turned.

dreamlike course of *Profondo Rosso* therefore, in symbolic form, follows the secret arc of a son's guilty, waxing and waning love for his mother: not only must he separate himself from her and accept that the illicit love affair between them cannot continue; when he finally loses her, he has to come to terms with feeling alone in a world without unconditional love, even as his recovering partner is waiting patiently in the wings. Gazing at a traumatic *memento mori*, he is, of course, utterly conflicted: he has halted a monster, but in doing so has become a murderer in his own right. What's more, in apprehending the parent who killed Carlo's (his) Oedipal love rival, he has in a sense lost the "cipher" of *his own mother*, someone who is at last more discernable in her emotional meaning than the mysterious shapes of the abstract paintings and undiscernable photography in *Blow-Up*.