**On the *Giallo* Considered as one of the Fine Arts**

**(with Attendant Considerations of the Weird Tale, the Dark Grotesque and Argento’s Philosophy of Composition)**

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Dario Argento’s reputation as an *auteur*, as well as a major representative of the popular genre of the *giallo*, largely derives from his tendency not just to reproduce but also to reflect upon the conventions of horror film. It also rests on his capacity to absorb and digest a variety of high and low styles and registers and draw influence from literature and painting as much as from any previous cinematic tradition. The sheer wealth of explicit and implicit intervisual references contained in *Deep Red* - from Caravaggio to Munch and on to De Chirico, Escher and Hopper - juxtaposes the ‘style’ of the murderer with those of the artists quoted in the film, effecting a mise of abyme of sorts of the myth of the ‘criminal genius’. Among Argento’s literary sources the influence Thomas De Quincey looms large. In a manner reminiscent of «On Murder Considered as one of the Fine Arts», *Deep Red* shows that the conversion of murder into a work of art (and vice-versa) lessens the impact of the crime by emphasizing the narrative’s self-reflexive musings and intertextual references to the detriment of ethical concerns or notions of divine or human justice. This is not to say that the estheticization of murder must necessarily lead to the complete negation or erasure of moral issues per se. Jean-Michel Rabaté aptly summarizes De Quincey’s ’thesis’ that art ‘kills’ the reality of murder as an attempt to articulate ethics *and* esthetics «on the distinction between action and contemplation», the «central argument [being] that as long as we can do something to prevent a murder or help a potential victim we must act - this is the realm of ethics»[[1]](#footnote-1). «Should we happen to come too late,» however, «then we must be allowed to enjoy the crime scene as pure spectacle»[[2]](#footnote-2).

The articulation of ethics and esthetics, action and contemplation, is precisely what Marcus experiences (the same can be said of the audience who is forced to adopt his point of view) after witnessing the murder of Helga Ulmann from the street. The gruesome, tortured portraits which cover the walls of the hallway function as a prelude to the estheticization of Helga’s murder, which is experienced the first time as crime, the second time as a stylized farce punctuated by the obnoxious gesticulations of Superintendent Calcabrini. The appearance of Marta’s face in a mirror which Marcus retrospectively mistakes for a painting missing from the scene adds an additional twist to Argento’s game of mirrors, combinations and correspondences. Marta’s reflection in the mirror is of course both real and not real, a sublime and provisionally useless mirage, a residual trace of the murderer’s presence which sets the mystery into action and, ultimately, serves to resolve it.

*Extinguishing the Detail*

Roland Barthes has memorably written of the «micro-version» of death experienced by the photographed subject whose motionlessness on the picture causes him to contemplate his future «life-likeness» in death.[[3]](#footnote-3) After they leave Helga’s funeral ceremony, an unusually edgy Marcus sardonically ‘thanks’ Gianna for portraying him as a witness on the cover of the newspaper she works for. The published photograph seals their friendship and burgeoning relationship as they both resolve to find the killer and become his or her future potential victims. By assuming Marta to be part of the painting and absent from the premises of the crime Marcus fails to fulfill the testimonial function which the police and the press expect from him. The photograph, however, retains a cautionary value already adumbrated in David Hemmings’s performance in Michelangelo Antonioni’s *Blow-Up*. As for the ‘missing painting’ in *Deep Red*, it recalls Daniel Arasse’s pronouncement that the detail is above all a «shocking» thing which must be «explained so that everything becomes smooth again»[[4]](#footnote-4). Until the mystery is ‘extinguished’, the detail resists absorption into a narrative whole and threatens to interrupt the teleological progression of the plot. One is reminded here of the Freudian notion of the ignored detail as a residual entity - the «rubbish» of observation - which both conceals and reveals meaning. For Freud, as for Argento, the interpretation of details is liable to unleash the full power of psychic displacement and condensation, a process famously illustrated in Freud’s own hypersemanticized close reading of the ‘anomalies’ in Michelangelo’s *Moses*. The function of the detail in Argento’s *gialli* is related as much to repressed memories as to the dysfunctional nature of perception itself as many of his characters spend most of their time trying to remember what they have seen or heard and/or speculating about why they failed to see or remember it. (Think, also, of the pictures documenting Martha’s career as a film actress hanging on the walls of her living room, which Marcus also fails to perceive as so many relics of a forgotten past pointing to the tragic events which terminated her career; ironically, the collection features stills from actress Clara Calamai’s own filmography which ended with *Deep Red*.)

*Unmasking the Red Death*

Hemmings’s celebrated status as the protagonist of Antonioni’s *Blow Up* inevitably assimilates him to a voyeur even before contemporary audiences watched *Deep Red* for the first time. As if this wasn’t enough the American «When was the last time you were REALLY SCARED!!!?» ad sheet for *Deep Red* emphasizes this connection by establishing Alfred Hitchcock’s *Psycho* as one of the film’s recent ancestors, placing *Deep Red* against a background of voyeurism and repressed childhood trauma. The transformation of scenes of suffering and murder into a spectacle which simultaneously or alternately teases and repels the viewer can trigger a wide variety of effects and responses. Typically, in *Deep Red*, the scene in which Marcus lifts Helga’s blood-covered corpse from the window eroticizes the dead body in a way which betrays the director’s fascination with Edgar Allan Poe. As the ecstatic look on Helga’s face suggests, Argento, who has claimed that «Poe’s handsome and intense face watches [him]»[[5]](#footnote-5) when he makes a film, never misses an opportunity to explore connections between the pleasure principle and the death instinct and investigate the deepest implications of his master’s claim, in “The Philosophy of Composition”, that «the death … of a beautiful woman is unquestionably the most poetical topic of the world»[[6]](#footnote-6). Controversies over sex, violence and misogyny aside, the moral landscape which emerges from *Deep Red* is less ambiguous than ambivalent: its moral polymorphousness manifests itself in its constant blurring of the boundaries between perversion and attraction, compulsion and duty, empathy and voyeurism. The extreme, Bunuelian close-up of the ‘big eye’ rendered grotesquely prominent twelve minutes into the film seems as grossly collaged into the plot as it is symbolically connected with it, especially if we consider it as an extension of the previous sequence in which the camera glides over a series of sinister, grotesque objects indicative of the murderer’s troubled mind (one is reminded of the red ‘voodoo’ doll, the child’s drawing of a murdered woman and the red demon toy). Is Argento’s ’giant’ eye a statement on the audience’s voyeuristic complicity with the murderer? And if so what would be the meaning or gendering function of the make-up, other than manipulating the viewer into speculating about the sexual identity or orientations of the killer (especially after Carlo’s homosexuality has been revealed)?

The answer to this question probably matters less than the general metaphorical significance of the make-up, which reminds us that what we see (or would like to see) is only a small (or disguised) part of what is really there or, better, a representation of what we think about what we see. Argento’s big eye does not merely manipulate us into misleading ideas or interpretations - it also functions as an alienating device interrupting the narrative’s logical progression and urging the viewer to reflect upon the mechanics of narration and representation. As Carlo clumsily puts it, using a drunken mixed metaphor, «certe volte quello che vedi realmente e quello che immagini si mischia nella memoria come un cocktail del quale tu non riesci più a distinguere i sapori» («sometimes what you really see and what you imagine are mixed up in memory like a cocktail from which you can no longer distinguish one flavor from another»[[7]](#footnote-7)).

*From the Weird Tale to the* Giallo: *Dark Grotesques & Metaphysical Catastrophes*

One of the sources of *Deep Red*’s ongoing popularity and the fascination it has exerted upon several generations of viewers is its proximity to the *weird tale*, a subgenre of horror fantasy made famous by H. P. Lovecraft (whom Argento has considered adapting for the screen) who defined it as «the literature of cosmic fear in its purest sense»[[8]](#footnote-8). For Lovecraft, the weird tale «has something more than secret murder, bloody bones, or a sheeted form clanking chains according to rule»[[9]](#footnote-9). It has to convey «a certain atmosphere of breathless and unexplainable dread of outer, unknown forces . . . and there must be a hint, expressed with a seriousness and portentousness becoming its subject, of that most terrible conception of the human brain - a malign and particular suspension or defeat of those fixed laws of Nature which are our only safeguard against the assaults of chaos and the daemons of unplumbed space»[[10]](#footnote-10). Lovecraft’s influence on Argento’s filmography is most apparent in the latter’s tendency to blend the psychological, the supernatural and the mythical, as became even more obvious in the director’s later *Three Mothers* trilogy, which was loosely based on the Levana chapter of De Quincey’s *Suspiria de Profundis*. In Argento’s films, however, what Lovecraft identifies as ancient cosmic deities threatening to be awakened and wipe mankind from the face of the earth becomes a more interiorized model exploring the *inner* ‘unplumbed’ space of human consciousness and memory. This aspect of his work is reflected in the use of ‘deep’ Jungian imagery which, according to Argento himself, blurs «the border between psychology and magic»[[11]](#footnote-11).

The weird and the grotesque have long been a favored mode in giallist esthetics. Argento’s main model of the grotesque is less Bakhtin’s life-oriented Rabelaisian carnival than Wolgang Kayser’s darker version, with its emphasis on the disjunctive, the horrifying, the regressive, the arbitrary and, ultimately, the shattering realization that «the familiar and apparently harmonious world is alienated under the impact of abysmal forces, which break it up and shatter its coherence»[[12]](#footnote-12). The anxious grotesque which informs Argento’s gialli enacts a metaphysical catastrophe not unlike the epiphany Flitcraft experiences in Dashiell Hammett’s *The Maltese Falcon* when he is almost killed by «a beam or something» fallen «eight or ten stories down», an accident which leaves him feeling «like somebody had taken the lid off life and let him look at the works»[[13]](#footnote-13). Faced with the daunting enormity of the contingency and injustice of life, there is a temptation to either reject intelligibility in the presence of a fundamental ontological absurdity or impose a pattern on the picture and try and see something meaningful there. In Argento’s films, the pattern is a complex and intense matrix of associational interrelations and creative tensions (e.g., between the clinical and the irrational, or the stylized and the realistic) whose lowest common denominator is a fascination with art and its effects (traumatic or exhilarating or both) on the depths of the human psyche. This pattern reaches a climax in the final scene of *Deep Red*, where the pool of blood - far from being reduced to a prototypical elicitor of digust and abjection - becomes the dark mirror in which Marcus sees himself reflected, his expression changing from fear to puzzlement. As the closing credits («You have been watching DEEP RED, directed by Dario Argento») roll over the scene, the film produces a Brechtian self-reflexive move drawing the audience away from an identification with Marcus into a more disturbing realization that the spectacle of Marta’s decapitation has been both horrifying and pleasurable.

The film’s final narcissistic moment also suggests that what lies at the root of Argento’s spectacle of murder is an investigation of the color red itself, a color whose complex history remains to be written. A full survey of its cultural avatars would conjure up a wealth of often contradictory archetypal and historical functions and meanings, from Adam (who was made of red earth) to the fundamental color triad of Paleolithic paintings and on to the symbolism of fairy tales, warfare, legal and illicit sex (wedding dresses were red until the 19th century), not to mention the Brigate Rosse, whose heyday was contemporary to *Deep Red*. Besides enacting another unsettling transfer from the ethical to the esthetic, the film’s final scene brings to the fore the horror and embarrassment of *being watched watching* horrible things, a process in which viewers becomes implicated by virtue of the film’s multiple thematic and perspectival mises en abymes. In this respect, Argento’s *Deep Red* - with its twisted logic, baroque juxtapositions and perverse complications - comes closer to a phenomenological mystery story or, some will argue, a “metaphysical” detective story in which the sleuth «finds himself confronting the insoluble mysteries of his own interpretation and his own identity»[[14]](#footnote-14), opening up a space which complicates and confuses accepted dichotomies of perception and recognition, abstraction and representation, action and contemplation.

1. Jean-Michel Rabaté, *Crimes of the Future: Theory and its Global Reproduction*, London, Bloomsbury, 2014, p. 163. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. *Ibidem.* [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Roland Barthes, *La chambre claire. Notes sur la photographie*, Paris, Éditions de l’Étoile, Gallimard, Seuil, 1980 (Camera Lucida, trans. Richard Howard, London, Vintage, 2000, pp. 13-14). [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Daniel Arasse, *Histoires de peintures*, Paris, Gallimard, 2006, p. 290 (my translation). [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Cited in James Gracey, *Dario Argento*, Harpenden, kamera books, 2010, p. 18. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. E. A. Poe, “The Philosophy of Composition” (1846), web document, unpag. http://www.poetryfoundation.org/learning/essay/237848?page=3 (accessed July 12, 2015). [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. My translation. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. H. P. Lovecraft, “Supernatural Horror in Literature” (1927), web document, unpag. www.hplovecraft.com/writings/texts/essays/shil.aspx (accessed July 12, 2015). [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. *Ibidem.* [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. *Ibidem.* [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. Cited in Maitland McDonagh, *Broken Mirrors/Broken Dreams: The Dark Dreams of Dario Argento*, Minneapolis: University of Minneapolis Press, p. 241. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. Wolfgang Kayser, *Das Groteske, seine Gestaltung in Malerei und Dichtung*, Oldenburg, Stalling, 1957 (*The Grotesque in Art and Literature*, trans. Ulrich Weinstein, Gloucester, Mass., Peter Smith, 1968, p. 37). [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. The Hammett/Argento connection was suggested to me by Maitland McDonagh’s *Broken Mirrors/Broken Minds: The Dark Dreams of Dario Argento*, Minneapolis, University of Minneapolis Press, 2010. [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. Patricia Merivale and Susan Sweeney, *Detecting Texts : The Metaphysical Detective Story from Poe to Postmodernism*, Philadelphia: University of Pensylvania, 1998, p. 2. [↑](#footnote-ref-14)