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Cinema's Images of Fashion, Crime and Violence
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The Eyes are Trapped: Dario Argento's *The Bird with the Crystal Plumage* / Betti Marenko

There is an American in Rome, but he is not on holiday and this is certainly no longer *La dolce vita*. Enter Sam Dalmas, a writer who has just finished a book about rare birds and is now stuck for inspiration. In the city terror mounts, as a mysterious killer – a frightening figure in black leather gloves, black fedora hat and shiny patent black PVC coat – is slashing beautiful young women. A few days before he is due to fly back to the States with his girlfriend Giulia, a model, Sam is an accidental witness to the killer's attack on a gallery owner, Monica Ranieri. He tries to help her but ends up trapped between the gallery's two sliding glass doors. Stuck in this transparent cage he cannot reach the wounded woman who begs for help; he can only watch her writhing, utterly powerless.

Using this stunning stratagem, the Italian director Dario Argento, with his debut *The Bird with the Crystal Plumage* (which earned him the moniker "the Italian Hitchcock"), delivers two of the movie's central themes: captivity, imprisonment and encasement on the one hand, and the voyeuristic gaze on the other. In so doing, he sets the claustrophobic tone that so intensely shapes the ensuing events. Moreover, he forces us to watch, powerless and trapped like Sam who can only stare at the woman dying in front of his eyes. Sadistically, Argento espouses his obsession with the gaze and the power that it may (or may not) elicit, like a puppet master who turns us all into voyeurs. Consequently, the viewer is locked in this role, exactly like Sam, trapped in his glass enclosure. What we see is Monica, dressed in a white halterneck top and trousers, crawling on the white floor. A no longer immaculate whiteness pulsates on the screen, now tainted by the red of Monica's gushing blood and the auburn of her hair. In one unforgettable sequence she briefly rests against a creepy sculpture of a rapacious-looking bird, holding onto the animal's claw. For a moment we look at Sam through a gap in the sculpture. Only later will we realise that we are looking through the eyes of a ferocious predator watching its prey.

The only clue found at the site of the attack is a black leather glove. Upon recounting the events to Inspector Morosini, who is conducting the police enquiry, Sam feels that there is a crucial detail escaping his memory. Over and over, flashbacks play in his mind. Increasingly obsessed with the event, he begins a personal investigation that leads him to a mysterious and macabre painting. Meanwhile, more women are horribly murdered and, while Sam is hunting for the author of the painting, which he has realised is the crucial factor in solving the case, the serial killer besieges Giulia in her apartment. "You won't leave this house alive," he hisses menacingly. She is trapped, like Sam at the gallery earlier on.

Indeed, one of the recurring motifs in *The Bird With the Crystal Plumage* is the inability to escape, the notion of entrapment. Throughout the movie, Argento disseminates powerful and often none-too-subtle signals, visual signposts whose purpose is to reinforce these themes whilst engendering a claustrophobic, confined atmosphere. For instance, Sam and Giulia are the only tenants on the top floor of a derelict building about to be pulled down, a prison-like edifice whose windows and doors have been bricked up. A chilling zoom of the camera makes us aware that the windows in their open plan loft-style apartment have heavy metal bars. Similarly, the artist who made the strange painting is a lunatic recluse who has walled up all the ground-floor doors and windows of his house. The theme of imprisonment is utilised on various levels. For instance, Sam cannot leave the country because the police have taken his passport; he is a prisoner of his lack of creativity, and later of his obsession with the murders; Giulia is a kept woman, who will be trapped in her apartment at the mercy of the brutal killer. Furthermore, when Morosini visits Sam after the fourth death, and the two are having coffee together, Morosini describes the murder scene as the "same black wall" (in the English version wrongly translated as "blank wall"). Tellingly, in the background we see a bricked doorway.

The glove, the cage, the glass trap are all signifiers of the idea of entrapment and physical enclosure. However, it is the recurring image of gloves that stands out. Not only because this is the first thriller centred on a serial killer in a black fedora, black coat and black leather gloves, an icon destined to become a blueprint, and later a cliché, for Argento himself and for many other directors in 1970s and 1980s cinema (see *Dressed to Kill*, Brian de Palma, 1980). It is the black glove itself that embodies dread. It represents the urban, sadistic, fashionable killer. It is a fetishised symbol of encasement, a second skin that dissimulates personal identity and disguises the killer in a masquerade: chilling and repulsive, perhaps, but always flawlessly stylish. For this reason, when, at the end of the movie, we see someone taking their gloves off, we sense that the end must be near. The removal of the glove signals a shift in the power struggle between Sam and the mysterious killer.



The Bird with the Crystal Plumage, dir. Dario Argento, 1970

Without this protective encasement – this second skin that, by disguising and altering the identity, signifies the serial killer – the veil is lifted and the game is up.

In *The Bird*, Argento employs the idea of dressing up as both a compelling disguise and as a vehicle for gender-bending. For example, in the nightmarish vision of the hotel hall packed with identically dressed men, Sam, following his aggressor, stumbles upon a boxers' convention. Their lurid uniform of yellow bomber jacket and blue cap, which would otherwise have made his aggressor instantly recognisable, becomes instead the hideous device for a seemingly endless multiplication, a cloning gone wrong, an ocean of replicas where no original is to be found. Clothes are never what they seem. They always conceal, hide, create a different reality; they are used to suggest an identity that is never what it appears to be; they skew appearances, divert attention, like a grammar of subtle digression.

Even the food is not what it seems. Sam joins the painter Berto Consalvi for a rustic dinner, and when he realises that he has just eaten cat meat (Consalvi keeps cats in cages) he flees the scene, horrified. This profound uncertainty is key to the unfolding of the plot and it is expressed, most notably, through role reversal and gender inversion. Not only do we see a woman donning masculine garb to kill her victims; it is precisely because she is *not* dressed in what we have already identified as the killer's attire that we fail to recognise her as such at the beginning of the movie. Led to assume that the sinister dress code of black gloves, fedora hat and raincoat signifies the killer, we cannot but fall for the visual trick that Argento is playing on us. In this sense, the killer contravenes the codes of femininity twice: first, because she is wearing masculine clothes; second, because those clothes embody the killer, whom we assume to be male.

And Giulia? She is a typical trophy girlfriend. Highly decorative (she is a model after all), she is portrayed as the type of woman who is prone to smooching and asking her boyfriend "Do you really love me?". We see Sam often being dismissive and patronising towards her. Even when he shows passion and grabs her in an embrace, it is frequently because other people are present, as if his goal is to show off his ownership of her body and, in so doing, reaffirming his masculinity. In spite of his Latin lover uniform of unbuttoned dark shirt, tight trousers and wavy, unkempt hair, Sam comes across as a man profoundly, if unconsciously, unsure of his masculinity. The more he insists on wearing and appropriating the signifiers of maleness, the more it becomes clear that they are a cover-up, semantic aids in his attempt at performing a masculinity increasingly under threat. Let us remember that Sam suffers from writer's block, and he ends up trapped not once but in fact twice in the art gallery, where he is physically constrained and forced to watch passively without being able to intervene. This insistence on Sam's powerlessness and inability to deliver seems to hint, none too subtly, at his emasculation and impotence. This theme finds its climax when Sam, chasing the killer, finds himself in the gallery for a second time, immobilised and powerless under a huge, spiky, Iron Maiden-esque sculpture. Crushed underneath this artwork, Sam is destined for a slow torture, or else, radical emasculation. Encumbered by failure, Sam resists the imminent loss of control by playing the *macho*, only accentuating the fact that gender and identity are nothing but a performance.

It is interesting to compare Sam's version of masculinity – brazen, overconfident and oozing sex appeal – with Inspector Morosini's manliness. With his classic hat and beige raincoat, short hair and thin moustache, he is a stereotypical police inspector, whose appearance speaks of a restrained, logical and "scientific" mind. He inhabits a world of white coats, of proven data fed into a huge (nowadays almost comical) computer, of proof – hallmarks of a forensic rationality that counteract sharply with Sam's instinctive spontaneity. It is no coincidence, then, that Sam's obsession with the murders spurs him back to writing, as if his creative juices needed the victims' blood in order to flow. His writing frenzy is ultimately the mirror of the maniac's killing frenzy.

As for the female roles, it comes as no surprise that Argento has been accused of misogyny for his tendency to choose attractive women to be subjected to the worst possible violence, an accusation he has always refuted by simply saying that in his movies it is not only women that are killed. However, he admits a predilection for *beautiful* victims: "I like women, especially beautiful ones. If they have a good face and figure, I would much prefer to watch them being murdered than an ugly girl or man." Certainly, to indulge in the cinematic killing of attractive women does not have to equate to misogyny. Nevertheless, it is true that the female gender in *The Bird* emerges as rather one-dimensional, frozen and predictable. Seemingly, the only role available to women is as decorative prop, either for sex (Giulia) or for violence (victims). Even the killer, who unsettles gender divisions



The Bird with the Crystal Purnogs, dir. Dario Argento, 1970. Courtesy The Cinema Museum

by performing a male role in male garb, is ultimately confined to the psychotic realm. In fact, women are either coupled, and thus contained within heterosexual normativity, or else they diverge (the lesbian, the prostitute, the hysteric, the psychotic) and are thus open to a violence that is almost condoned.

The themes of disguise, role reversal and gender-bending are woven through the fabric of the movie via a spellbinding visual grammar which betrays Argento's obsession with vision being first and foremost illusion and deceit. Nothing is what it appears to be. The victim is the killer, the man is a woman, the suspect is innocent and the playboy is impotent.

The mis-identification of the victim with the perpetrator hints at Freudian and psychosexual overtones – the idea that a visual trigger can be responsible for madness repressed for too long. We discover that Monica has been subjected to the vicious aggression shown in the painting, and upon seeing the image she re-enacts her experience, this time identifying with the killer, not the victim. Opposites conflate: white turns into black, black swaps places with white. One of the most striking features of this movie is that it exhibits a masterful use of black and negative space, contrasting starkly with vast expanses of white and light. Argento achieves this not only with a sophisticated treatment of light and dark, thanks to Vittorio Storaro's photography. Again and again, he uses the costumes to build a narrative of hard-edged contrast, where black and white are the opposite poles of a continuum shot through with an intermittent rivulet of red.

For instance, as the movie opens we see a white typewriter, a black-gloved hand typing and a white sheet of paper. Then we see the new victim, a girl whose red coat becomes a crimson, bloody trail that trickles back to the knives laid down on a red cloth, then onto the black and white photograph of the victim-to-be, upon which the black-gloved hand scribbles the number three in red ink. Another example is found when we see Monica emerging from the shadows behind a red leather chair, impeccable in her white shirt and black tuxedo, coat and hat, which she theatrically removes to reveal a cascade of flaming red hair. Other "flags" are more subtle, but nonetheless potent. When Sam chases his mysterious assailant, he runs past a cinema showing *La donna scarlatta* (*La femme écarlate / The Scarlet Woman*, 1969). And the black and white contrast recurs again in the clothes that Sam and Giulia wear on a night-time walk. She wears a black patent leather hat, white coat and black trousers, while Sam is dressed in his customary black shirt and white trousers. Later, we see Giulia at home (with a prominently exposed white poster pinned to the wall saying "black power"), wearing a white towelling robe in contrast to Sam's black shirt. Again, they are perfect opposites, yet complementary. However, the proximity of opposites here is a mark not of harmony and coexistence, but rather of a world under threat. Speaking the symbolic language of chess, their garments fail, however, to transform the wearers into controlled players. Argento's insistence on black and white speaks of an impending checkmate on a living chessboard. Semiotically, white and black relates to the opposition between good and evil, which here are indeed turned upside down.

The emphasis on visibility is clearly stated at the beginning of the movie. The events at the gallery exploit a complex criss-cross of gazes and roles. The aggression unfolds in silence: as in a dream or nightmare sequence, we hear the sighs of the victim and can only look on. Here, the real protagonist is the eye. When, later on, the killer carves a hole in the apartment door with his knife, we see his eye staring at Giulia who, increasingly hysterical, tries to attack him, frantically and pointlessly stabbing at the hole in the door with a pair of scissors. Through the very same hole, we also see the eye of Sam's friend (and here, "Peeping Tom" is actually mentioned). The idea of being able to see the horror is taken further when another victim screams as she sees the petrifying shadow of the killer approaching her bed. Here, we are actually made to see this scream from *within*, as the camera pans out from her throat, a spectacularly effective device Argento uses again when, later on, we see Monica Ranieri's husband fall to his death.

Argento willingly confounds vision and gaze, appearance and reality. He plays tricks with memory and freely mixes the two- and the three-dimensional. Indeed, he has spoken of memory as the main theme of the film, and the aggression in the art gallery is played over and over again, as Sam tries to remember the important detail that he feels is missing.

Furthermore, the three-dimensional theatricality of the architectural modernist surroundings, shot with odd camera angles, turns buildings into menacing, dense, almost expressionist entities. For instance, when we see one of the victims climbing the stairs, the camera lingers on the sharp angles of the stairwell that create a hypnotic, somehow disturbing, design. Pointed lines and triangular shapes



The Bird with the Crystal Plumage, dir. Dario Argento, 1970

converge into a negative geometry that mirrors and frames precisely the girl's outfit of white shirt and black waistcoat. Moreover, the two-dimensional world of photographs, newspaper clippings, paintings and visual art flatten reality into a reiteration of details that leads us beyond the threshold which transforms everyday items into symbols of terminal horror. Art references abound: Sam and Giulia's apartment is littered with works of art, and it is precisely within the confines of an art gallery, among weird and ghastly sculptures, that the movie begins and ends. Both the killer and Sam use photography to decipher reality, the former to stalk and meticulously prepare his fetishistic killings, the latter to uncover the links among the murders. When Sam and Giulia begin to investigate, we are shown photographs of the first three victims – crude details such as stockings crumpled around the ankles to suggest a possible sexual assault; hands grasping the earth; a throat cut, the victim resembling a mannequin. The effect is strangely dehumanising and rather Cindy Sherman-esque. There is a moment when Sam looks at the painting – he does so by looking straight into the camera. We are the painting; there is no escape; we are all being transformed into voyeurs; we are forced to watch the killings. Indeed, watching and killing are often synonymous. And thanks to a stunning use of the camera that offers plenty of subjective gazes of the killer and the victims, we sometimes see through the killer's eyes; at other times we are being spied on, stalked, followed, and attacked.

However, we can never forget who is looking. And this increasingly deranged logic of paranoia engulfs us, makes us captive, exactly like the rare bird at the zoo or a fish in an aquarium – incidentally, an image that gave Dario Argento the inspiration for the movie's core sequence.



All images: The Bird with the Crystal Plumage, dir. Dario Argento, 1970