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**THE VISCERAL BEAUTY OF OBSESSION:
ENNIO MORRICONE, DARIO ARGENTO, AND THEIR MODERN VISION
OF MYSTERY AND TERROR**

A thesis submitted in partial satisfaction of the requirements for the degree of

MASTER OF ARTS

in

MUSIC

by

John Bissett

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ABSTRACT

*The Visceral Beauty of Obsession: Ennio Morricone, Dario Argento and Their
Modern Vision of Mystery and Terror*

by

John Bissett

This work examines the cultural significance of *L'uccello dalle piume di cristallo* (Dir. Dario Argento, 1970), its imprint on the Italian cinematic murder mystery genre known as *giallo*, and how this influence is represented in the score. By acknowledging the historical context of Dario Argento's film within both the cinematic and literary traditions of the *giallo*, analysis of the interaction between sound, image, and narrative yields insight as to how Ennio Morricone's score embodies the film's most noteworthy contributions to the genre. The film's success internationally was unprecedented within the genre, and inspired the most prolific era of *giallo* production in the early 1970s as well as the predominant narrative structure of the cinematic *giallo*. *L'uccello dalle piume di cristallo* features an amateur detective pursuing an anonymous psychotic killer whose murders become the emotional and technical centerpieces of the film. The amateur detective and the emphatic presentation of murder would be lasting tropes in *giallo*, highlighting the genre's central themes of mystery and terror in the setting of contemporary Rome. Morricone's score seizes upon these precise traits by juxtaposing simple melody with experimental atonal tension scoring emphasizing improvisation in conducting and

performance. Analysis reveals how specific techniques in the implementation of these musical languages amplify themes of obsessive mystery and visceral manipulation, while choices in compositional style provide a similarly contemporary backdrop for the visual narrative. Morricone's score displays an acute awareness of the thematic and aesthetic relevance of the film, which is evident in the resounding influence of *L'uccello dalle piume di cristallo* in the style and narrative of a plethora of *giallo* produced in its wake.

DEDICATION

For my family:

Thank you for your constant love and support in pursuing my passions along my journey for greater knowledge.

**The Visceral Beauty of Obsession:
Ennio Morricone, Dario Argento, and
Their Modern Vision of Mystery and Terror**

Art associated with the thriller, horror, or slasher genres presents an interesting phenomenon: people pay for art that inspires fear. Whether in film, theatre, or literature, this art never presents any true danger, so it relies on the creator's ability to engage the audience in the emotional potency of the situations, images, and sounds at hand. The clarity of the creator's vision can be the difference between what genuinely involves a viewer in the thrill of the experience and what shatters suspension of disbelief. Few environments are as apt to maintain such an illusion as a movie theater, where the darkened atmosphere isolates and magnifies the sounds and images of the film. In this setting the aesthetic features of the film can be used to a startling degree to evoke emotion and visceral response.

There are many methods of conveying terror in film music, and tropes associated with horror have evolved over time. This thesis focuses on the score to Dario Argento's *L'uccello dalle piume di cristallo* (1970), which is credited with initiating a wave of Italian murder mystery films known as *giallo* (yellow). The film redefined the national genre by combining disparate elements of previous *gialli* in a modern urban setting while portraying violence with distinct sexuality. My research examines how Ennio Morricone's score reflects the film's unique place in cinema history as an attempt to create a modern vision of the murder mystery that emphasizes

the sexual underpinnings of violence and as a significant stepping-stone to the modern slasher film.

Low Art, Aesthetic Distance, and the Giallo/Slasher Connection

The horror and (more particularly) slasher film genres have been consistently associated with low culture because of a reduced aesthetic distance between audience and the text.¹ This is achieved through an increased focus on the visceral and sensational, that which mimics and induces moments of involuntary bodily reaction. This emphasis on excess of physically represented emotion is not limited to horror, but occurs in pornography and melodrama as well, as the success of these genres relies upon this desired effect.² Mary Anne Doane considers the pointed and calculated nature of this lack of textual separation so emotionally violent as to refer to these invocations of visceral reaction as “textual rape.”³ The slasher as a genre is of particular interest in the body genres as it “encroach[es] vigorously on the pornographic.”⁴ The sexualization of this interaction between killer and victim along with the sheer gruesomeness of the acts committed creates an incredibly ambivalent level of identification with these entities onscreen for the viewer and the manner in which the plots are resolved play out in specifically gendered ways.

¹ Body genres are genres designed to produce effect through the exploitation of bodily sensation/reaction, as termed by Carol J. Clover. (189).

² Williams, 5.

³ Williams, 144; Quoted in Hawkins, 4.

⁴ Clover, 187.

Carol J. Clover and Linda Williams both present excellent works of analyses on the gendered elements of the slasher and body genres in general, however an interesting historical leap is made when addressing the slasher in particular. *Psycho* (1960, dir. Alfred Hitchcock) is recognized as the prototypical slasher film, but there is a leap from this film to Tobe Hooper's *Texas Chainsaw Massacre* (1974) or John Carpenter's *Halloween* (1978). The final chapter of Mikel Koven's *La Dolce Morte* lucidly portrays the slasher tradition as being prefaced by the Italian form of thriller known as *giallo* via an analysis of the formal structure of the film *Torso* (Sergio Martino, 1973). Though *Torso* broke away from many elements of the perceived "classic *giallo*," it is nonetheless in the vein of this film tradition that the production came into fruition.

Established tropes such as the overt use of angles from the killer's point-of-view, the sexualization of explicit violence and the ambivalence of audience identification with victim and murderer that have become synonymous with the American slasher were explored profusely in the explosion of *gialli* production following Dario Argento's *L'uccello dalle piume di cristallo* in the early 1970s. The *gialli* were not strictly horror films per se, but an unprecedented focus on murder itself made these murder mysteries play out in a more sensational manner, like horror films.⁵ Kim Newman goes so far as to state that the murders played out like musical

⁵ The closeness of slasher horror and the *giallo* cognitively is seen as Carol Clover assigns Argento the title of "slasher director." This is despite the structural differences between the *gialli* of Argento and the slasher format outlined in Clover's article (Clover, 205).

production numbers, drawing focus away from furthering the narrative in order to display the technical ingenuity of the filmmakers in these central scenes of violence and terror.⁶ As the genre progressed, the violence and sexuality of these films became increasingly explicit, further reducing the aesthetic distance between the audience and the text and creating a precedent for the extremely violent slashers that would follow.⁷

Although this model of visceral manipulation of the audience set the stage for the slasher, the *giallo* film genre worked in its own set of traditions hearkening to its roots as a literary genre of murder mysteries. The film genre was born in the early 1960s with influential films such as *Sei donne per l'assassino* (1964, Bava), but it was the success of *L'uccello dalle piume di cristallo* that drove producers to release a slew of these films, and defined the template of elements Mikel Koven attributes to the “classic *giallo*.”⁸ The film is first and foremost a murder mystery featuring an amateur detective obsessively attempting to solve the case, but it showcases scenes of explicitly sexualized violence carried out by an anonymous murderer, emphasizing the reduced aesthetic distance and ambivalent audience identification associated with the slasher.

This balance of obsessive mystery and visceral response through sex and violence became the calling card of the *giallo*, and Ennio Morricone's score

⁶ Newman, 20.

⁷ Although filmmakers such as Herschell Gordon Lewis pushed boundaries of violence with gore exploitation films such as *Blood Feast* (1963), these films relied entirely on shock value rather than elements of mystery and suspense.

⁸ Koven, 6.

represents this combination aptly. My thesis examines how Morricone simultaneously conveys a story of obsession in the protagonist and the ambivalent identification of the audience with victim and murderer. Though Argento's screenplay and direction are credited with transforming the genre, Morricone's score emphasizes the trademark elements of the "classic *giallo*" found in *L'uccello dalle piume di cristallo* and is the foundation for the majority of his future contributions as the genre's most prolific composer. This score was Morricone's first foray into the *giallo* and explored compositional techniques that reappeared frequently in his work within the genre. His compositional language juxtaposes sweet simplicity encapsulating the allure of obsessive intrigue, and highly experimental suspense scoring that reduces aesthetic distance by accentuating the potently sexual and violent body identifications of the viewer. In this structure Morricone recognizes the power of the central conceits of the *giallo*, and provides a score that would prove inseparable from the genre and its most successful film.

However, Morricone's score and Dario Argento's film are not entirely unprecedented. A brief history of the genre as a literary and cinematic tradition will outline how *L'uccello dalle piume di cristallo* both incorporates and deviates from older genre pieces in stylistic emphasis and narrative form. Two films of Mario Bava that are credited with establishing central traits of the genre will be examined to reveal how they reflect and differ from the first film of Argento. Then a thorough analysis of the form and function of Morricone's score for *L'uccello dalle piume di*

crystallo will display how Morricone seizes upon the elements of Argento's film that would come to define the "classic *giallo*" in his composition.

Morricone's score in *L'uccello dalle piume di cristallo* and his subsequent works vividly capture the psychological role of music. His compositions reflect and enhance the viscerally engaging films they accompany through his emphasis on psychological subtext. According to Morricone, "Music in a film with certain artistic value should tell the things that are not told in the film's dialogue, and therefore underline the psychological and sub-psychological aspects, the characters, the relationships between the characters, the core relations between different situations and persons."⁹ It is with this thought in mind that the analysis of relationships between sound, image, and narrative is conducted.

Mario Bava & the Origins of the Giallo:

The *giallo* has a specific heritage that is apparent in the moniker of the genre. In the 1920s, the Italian company Mondadori published series of mystery novels with yellow (*giallo*) covers to separate themselves from other companies and as a continuation of the company's technique of color-coding popular literature. These were often translations of English texts by authors such as Edgar Wallace, Agatha Christie, Sir Arthur Conan Doyle, and Dorothy Sayers, and soon thereafter other companies released their own competing murder mystery series retaining the *giallo*

⁹ Karlin, 83.

term. *Giallo* in literary terms today is associated with the entire genre of crime fiction and mystery in Italy, and Mondadori continues to publish these novels with yellow covers.¹⁰ The artwork as well as the plotlines of these books provided the germ of *gialli* film content with novels often appealing to visceral emotions as most covers featured paintings of beautiful women threatened with some form of severe brutality.¹¹

In Germany, a series of Edgar Wallace works (one of the most popular authors in the *giallo*) were adapted into film by the Dutch film company Rialto. These films were known as *Krimi*, and seem to be the closest cinematic genre to the *giallo*. These overtly stylized mysteries often took place in London and featured exotic elements as well as masked murderers. The first *Krimi* preceded the *giallo* as it is known in cinema, but they were also produced contemporaneously. By the 1970s certain Italian *giallo* were advertised as Edgar Wallace adaptations to the German audience to capitalize on this craze as this era of Rialto productions was coming to a close. However, as Kim Newman describes, despite similar source material the *krimi* displayed a markedly different tone, often involving humor: “In films like Alfred Vohrer’s *Die Toten Augen von London/Dead Eyes of London*, Wallace’s plots are set in a German fantasy Britain that intermingles *Die Dreigroschenoper*, P.G. Wodehouse, gaslight melodrama and embryonic stirrings of the swinging 60s.”

¹⁰ Koven, 2.

¹¹ Tim Lucas (*Blood and Black Lace*, DVD commentary, 2:47).

Although the tone is different, the films hearkened to a common literary heritage in a similarly style-conscious manner.

Many people cite Mario Bava's *La Ragazza Che Sapeva Troppo* (Fig. 1) as the first *giallo* film.¹² The film follows Nora Davis (played by Leticia Roman), an American on vacation in Rome who witnesses a murder. The homicide appears to be one of a series that have happened in the years past known as the "alphabet murders," but there is no body to be found at the crime scene. The police are skeptical of her story, but she continues to pursue the truth on her own with the aid of the enamored Dr. Marcello Bassi (John Saxon) until the murderer is revealed. According to Mikel Koven the film establishes the narrative structure of the *giallo* film: "An innocent person, often a tourist, witnesses a brutal murder that appears to be the work of a serial killer. He or she takes on the role of amateur detective in order to hunt down this killer, and often succeeds where the police fail."¹³ Bava's film seems self-aware that it is invoking the literary murder mystery tradition as Nora is portrayed explicitly as a fan of written *gialli* in the opening scene. She is introduced while reading a stereotypical *giallo* entitled "After He Got The Knife," on her flight to Rome. In fact, the police often ignore her pleas ascribing them to a wild imagination inspired by her fascination with the novels.

The film's narrative structure is undoubtedly reflected in *giallo* to come, and the use of novels directly links the film to the literary tradition, but the murders have

¹² Smith, Introduction, i.

¹³ Koven, 3-4.

yet to be turned into spectacle. Bava's choice to shoot in black and white, and the title (translation "The Girl who Knew Too Much"), suggest the film is largely a nod to Hitchcock. Even the inclusion of *giallo* novels in the plot serves to aid "the Hitchcockian theme of the foreigner who can't make the authorities believe her story."¹⁴ Thus, others argue that the first true *giallo* is Bava's 1964 film *Sei donne per l'assassino* (entitled *Blood and Black Lace* in America), which defined many of the trademarks of sexualized violence associated with the genre.¹⁵



Fig. 1: Posters for *La Ragazza Che Sapeva Troppo*; for international release the title was altered for respective nations, as is common in film. A poster for the American release, *The Evil Eye*, is on the left.

¹⁴ Newman, 23.

¹⁵ Tim Lucas (*Blood and Black Lace*, DVD commentary, 2:31).

Sei donne per l'assassino (translation "Six Women for the Murderer," hereafter "*Sei donne*") is a classic *giallo* in almost every sense: the look of the film models the covers of the literary *gialli*; the title explicitly mentions a female body count; graphic murder receives unprecedented attention in elaborate set pieces; and the movie creates an iconic faceless visage in black as the murderer (Fig. 2).¹⁶ The murder scenes manipulate the emotions of the audience through concurrently horrific and erotic imagery, but the story primarily concerns suspicion among all of the characters. The plot is straightforward and delivers exactly what the title implies. Murders begin at a fashion salon, while red herrings keep the viewer constantly guessing the killer's identity. Within the first five minutes, the masked killer claims the model Isabella as the film's first victim. The mystery careens onward as the murderer relentlessly pursues Isabella's missing diary and eludes the police. As promised by the original Italian title, six women fall dead by the end of the film, and the fundamental mystery as to the identity of the murderer is revealed. Beyond the simplistic nature of the plot, the movie provides a template of structure for multiple murders and visual gestures seen throughout decades of *giallo*.¹⁷

Many of the concepts in *Sei donne* remain relevant in *giallo* and horror because of the visceral nature of the themes they explore. Bava's potent imagery embodies primal elements of fear, such as helplessness, the unknown, the predator,

¹⁶ Lucas (*Blood and Black Lace*, commentary, 2:54).

¹⁷ "The faintly ridiculous and mechanical plot, the unbelievably slim motivations for committing homicide and, perhaps most significantly, the emphasis on stylishly filmed, overtly sadistic, methods of murder seem to encapsulate the very essence of what most people define as *giallo* cinema." (Smith, 11-12).

and personal harm. Cloaked and featureless (Fig. 2), the killer becomes something inhuman, and the mortal consequences of the character's actions purely associate this being's image with death. As an alien, seemingly unstoppable force, the antagonist becomes death incarnate, and Bava's specific image resonates powerfully throughout future *gialli*.¹⁸ The murder scenes rely on the strength of such a villain's presence, sonically and visually, to give credence to the victim's sense of danger and instill fear in the audience.¹⁹ The image of the killer is surely cultivated so that the audience might identify with the terror of the victims. However, the excitation of sexual



Fig. 2: Bava's faceless killer, sporting the iconic *giallo* fedora and trench coat.

¹⁸ "Anyone with even a vague knowledge of *gialli* will be aware that certain (fetishistic) attire, such as black (usually leather) gloves, (leather or PVC) trenchcoats and fedora hats, have become intrinsically associated with the genre, almost to a point where their appearance becomes essential." (Smith, Introduction) "This archetypal disguise is singled out by Mikel Koven as the most important visual trope established by the film." (Koven, 4).

¹⁹ An oft-cited failure in sound design regarding the killer is Lucio Fulci's *The New York Ripper* (1982), "But what really defeats most Fulci apologists is the fact that the killer talks like Donald Duck. This was a really stupid idea that dispels any of the suspense and reduces the film to an unintentional comedy. Pity." (Smith, 79).

imagery and the voyeuristic nature of a camera tracking human prey prod emotions further, making the audience uncomfortably unsure with whom they are identifying. These scenes of violence, sexuality, and anxiety are the heart of these thrillers, and as such, the directors and composers of *giallo* use these sequences to display their most prevailing visions.

In contrast to the deep thematic and stylistic influence Bava's film had on the *giallo*, Carlo Rustichelli's sense of creating tension hearkens to older horror works with the exception of the title theme, "*Atelier*" (studio). The motivic relevance of the title theme is probably where the film's score bears the greatest resemblance to future scores in the *giallo* genre. The film driven score builds around a theme in **Eb** minor that opens the film and reiterates in different arrangements throughout. A jazz combo with prominent Latin percussion first plays the theme, with a solo trumpet carrying the melody slightly behind the beat at a moderate tempo. The jazzy ensemble evokes the atmosphere of a nightclub, while the trumpet's particularly sultry interpretation of melody invokes the seediest associations of nightlife. The primary melodic motive is instantly recognizable as it repeats, arpeggiating from the third up to a sustained ninth scale degree three times over before descending in chromatic motion. Providing harmonic direction, the bass line is full of deception, avoiding standard jazz motion around the circle of fifths (ii-V-I) through chromatic movement and elusive tritone substitutions. The minor tonality and emphasized chromatic motion in the melody

and bass imply certain deviousness, especially when accompanied by the imagery of the opening sequence (Transcribed melody/bass line Fig. 3).

The film introduces its players in the mystery amongst the lifeless human forms of the salon's mannequins. As the title theme blares loudly, each actor is credited individually, bathed in color and shadow.²⁰ With the criminal nature of the plot evident from the title, as well as Bava's reputation as a master of horror, the film cultivates an air of suspicion immediately. The noir-like framing of each character (Fig. 4) reinforces the implication of distrust and crime: Some characters' eyes shift; a mirror makes another literally two-faced; and a red mannequin signals the fate of almost all the victims in the film. All the while, the main theme plays on, cementing the melody's association with suspicion and murder. Thus, the melody's reemergence becomes a powerful symbol of impending violence or unrevealed misdeeds.

The primary component of *Sei donne* beyond costume design that links it to the future of *giallo* is its graphic and protracted depiction of murder scenes. The second death of the film reveals Mario Bava's mastery of "setting the stage" for murder. Tim Lucas (editor of Video Watchdog) goes as far as to say that it "may well be the quintessential sequence of the entire Bava canon...[It's] a definitive example

²⁰ Both the mannequin motif and the heavy use of bold colors are seen in many *gialli* and other Italian horror films. Mannequin examples include: *Spasmo* (1974, dir. Umberto Lenzi); *La Tarantola Dal Ventre Nero* (1971, dir. Paolo Cavara); *Il Rosso Segno Della Follia* (1969, dir. Mario Bava). Color examples include: *Suspiria* (1977, dir. Argento); *Lo Squartatore di New York* (1982, dir. Lucio Fulci); *Delirium: Le Foto di Gioia* (1987, dir. Lamberto Bava).

of how to shoot a horror sequence in color, because it proves that expressionism is by no means limited to...black and white...A hallucinatory tour-de-force.”²¹

The plot sets a foreboding tone as the model Nicole dons the first victim’s dress in a fashion show (a task shunned by the other models due to superstition) and discovers Isabella’s diary in view of most of the suspects. A stinger sounds on a close-up of Nicole’s purse containing the diary, emphasizing the importance of this clue.²² The main theme plays prominently as Bava cuts to Nicole driving up to an antique shop along a street cast in blue light (Fig. 5). A sense of seedy nightlife ensues as she arrives to the destination of her murder as a green sign next to the shop pulses “DANCING,” backed by the full jazz band arrangement of the central melody. Bava reveals the killer’s presence to the audience almost immediately upon Nicole’s entrance to the shop. As Nicole leaves the frame, the camera pans to a gloved hand that slowly emerges from behind a doorframe and lands its finger on a light switch. The theme continues unchanged and uninterrupted by this discovery as Bava cuts back to Nicole and follows her through the shop in an elaborately planned tracking shot. The green light of the sign outside bleeds through the windows, heightening the already surreal palette of blue, red and purple lights within the shop. Nicole hears a crash upon entering the owner’s room, and the lights dim to black when she inspects the cause of the sound. She quickens her pace in an attempt to leave, but a falling

²¹ *Blood and Black Lace*, DVD commentary, 20:47.

²² “Stinger” is slang in film scoring for an often-short musical phrase used to connote immediate significance to a item or action onscreen. Sometimes referred to as a “sting.”

Musical notation system 1 (measures 1-4). Treble clef, 4/4 time signature. Bass clef accompaniment.

Musical notation system 2 (measures 5-8). Treble clef. Bass clef accompaniment.

Musical notation system 3 (measures 9-12). Treble clef, key signature change to two flats. Bass clef accompaniment.

Musical notation system 4 (measures 13-16). Treble clef, two flats key signature. Bass clef accompaniment.

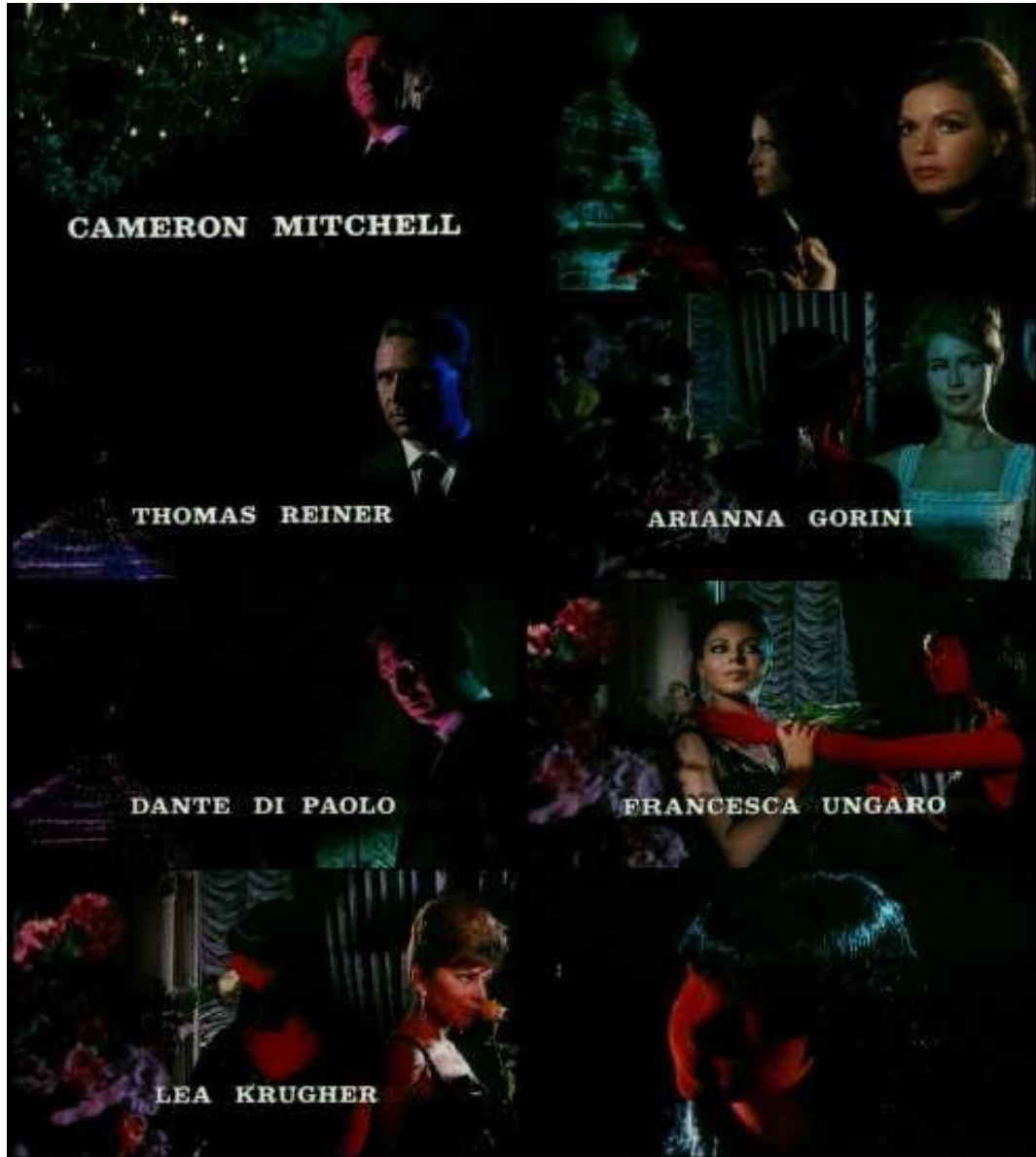
Musical notation system 5 (measures 17-20). Treble clef. Bass clef accompaniment.

Musical notation system 6 (measures 21-24). Treble clef. Bass clef accompaniment.

Musical notation system 7 (measures 25-28). Treble clef, key signature change to one flat. Bass clef accompaniment.

Musical notation system 8 (measures 29-30). Treble clef, one flat key signature. Bass clef accompaniment. Ends with double bar lines.

Fig. 3: *Atelier* melody and bass line (Author's transcription).



CAMERON MITCHELL

THOMAS REINER

ARIANNA GORINI

DANTE DI PAOLO

FRANCESCA UNGARO

LEA KRUGHER

Fig. 4: *Sei donne per l'assassino* title sequence.



Fig. 5: Outside the antique shop.

dresser suddenly cuts off her path, causing her to run out of the frame in terror. The camera continues rolling to reveal the killer fully for the first time in the scene (Fig. 6). The camera cuts to Nicole running in fear through the dark shop, prompting a cut to her point of view.

Here the film displays brilliant spotting.²³ When the pulsing green light of the neon sign outside swells to reveal the killer, Nicole gasps. At that second, the foreboding theme concludes abruptly (though precisely at the end of the AABA cycle of the melody). The complete absence of the music drops the viewer into the victim's perspective, allowing a total aesthetic connection with their onscreen surrogate. The audience now looks through Nicole's eyes, and the silence gives them her ears as well. The scene continues as a surreal exercise in dread, as colors become radiant and

²³ Spotting is the determination of when music sounds in a film, as chosen by the director and composer.



Fig. 6: The killer is revealed for the first time in the antique shop.

explicit film tricks give the sense of hallucination in complete musical silence. Nicole gets her first glimpse of the killer standing still at the other end of the shop, bathed in the slowly pulsing green light (Fig.7). When the light dims a second time, an attentive eye can spot a cut used to make the killer disappear before the light resurges. This cut on the same background imbues the killer with an unnatural ability to move, and brings Nicole's perception into question. As she stumbles through the dark trying to find her way out of the shop, the audience hears only her footsteps and whimpers among the clutter of falling antiques. Imminent danger increases as a spear misses her head by inches, followed by the killer grabbing her from behind and exposing her bra as she rips free from his/her grasp. As she fumbles with keys trying to escape, she is wholly vulnerable. The music re-enters dramatically in a classically



Fig. 7: Left, Killer is illuminated in a green light; Right, Nicole's final scream.

dissonant full orchestral horror cue when her death is inescapable and she lets out her final loudest scream drenched in red and blue lighting (Fig. 7). The music drops to silence again as the killer grabs Nicole from behind and chokes her screams into silence, reconnecting the audience with the victim's cries. The music returns on a high-pitched drone as the killer reveals a spiked iron glove, upon which winds, tremolo strings, and brass are layered in harsh harmonies in a controlled massive crescendo. As he prepares to attack a brief climactic whole tone gesture brings melodic motion to the layering of dissonances and peaks as he strikes...falling into silence after mortal contact is made, allowing the audience to hear her body drop from the killers arms to the floor.

Bava and Rustichelli create an atmosphere for this scene that strikes at core elements of visceral response that resonate throughout the *giallo* tradition. The immediate silence at the sight of the killer and increasingly alien lighting accentuate the terror of the victim. However, witnessing each step toward her demise stirs darker emotions than empathetic fear. Nicole's dress rips, thereby exhibiting her complete vulnerability, but sexualizing her as well. The next cut furthers this



Fig. 8: Left, The killer unveils the iron glove; Right, Nicole's final vision.

eroticism as her breasts come deliberately closer into view in the reflection of a mirror. The blatant sexual imagery gives the scene a strong voyeuristic quality that underscores the emotions of the killer. The result is a conflict of empathy and excitement; the scene's sounds and images have made the victim's fear palpable to the audience, but the scene takes on an almost pornographic quality as the viewers know they have paid to see six models murdered.

Perhaps the clearest representation of this divergent identification with characters is the revelation of the murder weapon. First, the killer reveals the weapon slowly and methodically, reveling in the action about to happen. Yet Bava is sure that the last image the audience sees is from Nicole's point of view before he strikes (Fig. 8).

Bava quite deliberately invokes this simultaneous conflict of emotions, and he has his own way of displaying the ultimate tragedy of the murders. After portraying these deaths with gruesome vividness, he mourns the loss of beauty that once was. Tim Lucas describes,

There's something about the sheer intensity and cruelty of the murders of this film that seems unprecedented... This is more than a mere murder mystery; it's a film about beauty and its ruination. Which is actually a theme that's present throughout Bava's work... Despite the brutality of these scenes, Bava always redeems them by showing us what I like to call "the angel in the wreckage." Either with overhead lighting, which always denotes a spiritual or religious effect, or with an ironic transition to a nearby stone carving of an angel or a cherub.²⁴

Although homage is often paid to the tragic nature of the situation, they are an afterthought to the extended scenes of destruction and emotional manipulation that are at the core of the entire *giallo* tradition.

Upon examining the narrative as a mystery, the plot reveals itself as a thin pretext for the stylish presentation of murder scenes. As a mystery it draws its audience to its solution not through the morbid fascination of a surrogate protagonist investigator such as Nora Davis in *La ragazza che sapeva troppo*, but through the desire of survival of a whole cast of characters. The police investigation is not fruitful, and the characterization of the players onscreen is limited mostly to random sordid revelations that act as red herrings. No protagonists expose the murderers or bring them to justice, and instead it is revealed that the culprits are a couple who meet their ends through mutual betrayal. Though this is a clever solution, there is no rewarding the attentive viewer. The mechanics of this mystery are not to put intricately woven strands of information together, but to make danger immediate and anonymous, and thus the solution a withheld necessity. The solution then yields to

²⁴ *Blood and Black Lace*, commentary, 5:24.

the sensational, and Bava's execution of visceral aesthetic engagement set the standard for filmmakers to come.

Argento, Morricone and *L'uccello dalle piume di cristallo* (*The Bird with the Crystal Plumage*)

Bava's *Sei donne per l'assassino* set a number of visual tropes of the *giallo* and brought a newfound stylized emphasis on murder to the screen, but it was the commercial success and critical attention of the 1970 film *L'uccello dalle piume di cristallo* (hereafter "*L'uccello*") that spurred the onslaught of early 1970s *giallo* productions in its model. The film introduced two of the most powerful voices of the *giallo*: Dario Argento and Ennio Morricone. Though this was Morricone's first attempt at composing for *giallo*, and Dario Argento's first foray into directing, the film was an international hit and established a template for the classic *giallo*.²⁵

Before embarking on *L'uccello*, Argento was already steeped in the film industry, which led to his partnership with Morricone. His parents both worked in the industry, and Argento had established himself as a film critic and screenwriter. Morricone was already a renowned composer in Italy and lived in Mentana, where the Argentos owned a home only a few meters away.²⁶ Argento's father was a friend of

²⁵ "When it came out in the United States it was in first place in the box office for a week. It was an unexpected success and it started my career." (Argento, *The Bird with the Crystal Plumage*, 16:18).

²⁶ Argento, *The Cat o' Nine Tails*, DVD interview, 6:30.

the composer and introduced the two. Argento expressed his desire to direct a film in their first meeting and Morricone encouraged him to do so, offering to score it as well.²⁷ Argento held the composer to his word, and Morricone would score his first three films, a trilogy considered immensely important to the *giallo* genre.

L'uccello began as Argento's attempt to write a script that would "do justice to a *noir*-type mystery set in Italy." Utilizing ideas from Fredric Brown's *The Screaming Mimi* (a literary *giallo*), Argento collaborated with future *giallo* director Aldo Lado to create a screenplay that was submitted to Geoffredo Lombardo. Argento refused to let his project be put in the hands of an inappropriate director, and after dismissing some well-reputed candidates he decided to try his hand in the director's chair.²⁸

Argento's vision is one of obsession. His script incorporates a combination of the witness-turned-amateur detective found in *La ragazza che sapeva troppo* and the bravura set pieces of murder established in *Sei donne*. With *L'uccello* Argento creates a fusion of detective and horror stories by providing a clear protagonist that embodies the audience's desire to solve the mystery and heightening the viewer's simultaneous identification with the murderer and the victims. The audience enters into the killer's world, and the connection between violence and sexuality becomes even more overt.

²⁷ Argento, *About the Trilogy*.

²⁸ Jones, 19-20.

The entire opening scene of *L'uccello* follows the murderer's process of selecting and pursuing a victim, as well as preparing implements of murder in an almost fetishistic fashion. Argento augments the audience's sense of both the killer's and victim's perspectives visually through the frequent use of point of view ("P.O.V.") angles, which becomes a favored technique of his and future *giallo* directors.²⁹ This explicit level of identification goes beyond what is on screen, as Argento himself plays an integral role in conveying the thoughts and actions of the murder. Argento continues the trope of the faceless killer from Bava's *Sei donne*. However, he hides the killer's identity, not by an obscuring nylon mask, but by keeping all identifying features out of frame. The audience sees this anonymous figure prepare for dreadful deeds, stalk prey, and commit acts of violence throughout the film. In all of these scenes where only the hands or silhouette of the killer are visible, Argento dons the black gloves and performs the actions in frame, giving the director a personal connection to the killer.³⁰ Argento's efforts reduce the distance between the perceptions of the audience and this figure of evil in the compulsive stalking and murdering of young women, forcing any sexual undertones to the violence to be considered as crucial to the perspective of the film.

Obsession in this plot is not isolated to the antagonist's desire to kill, and is seen even more heavily in the protagonist's pursuit of understanding. As the killer

²⁹ Argento, *The Cat o' Nine Tails*, DVD Interview, 5:25.

³⁰ "In my films, those hands are always mine not because I am an exhibitionist, because you don't even see that they are my hands, but because I know how to do those dramatic scenes with the hands very well." (Argento, *Deep Red*, 8:25).

and victims could be seen as surrogates in physical sensation, the protagonist could be seen as a surrogate in narrative. A brush with danger appeals beyond curiosity toward compulsive fascination and compels the character to delve deeper into this world of violence in hopes of resolution.

In *L'uccello*, American writer Sam Dalmas (played by Tony Musante) is the lone witness to a struggle in an art gallery between Monica Ranieri (Eva Renzi) and an anonymous figure in a trench coat. The figure escapes, leaving Mrs. Ranieri stabbed and bleeding, and a gloved hand locks Sam between two glass doors in the entryway. Trapped and helpless to aid her, Sam looks on as she reaches for help and loses consciousness. Inspector Morosini (Enrico Maria Salerno) arrives at the scene in time to save her life. He then leads the official investigation of the crime, which is seemingly connected to a serial murderer preying on young women of Rome.

Given Sam's proximity to the crime, the police require him to stay in Rome during the initial proceedings of their investigation. Although he could not identify the figure in the coat, and had no previous connection to Mrs. Ranieri, something about his memory of the event feels so vital to the solution that it drives Sam to pursue his own investigation despite attempts on his life. He plays the attack scene over and over in his mind, desperately trying to find what is awry with his recollection. As his investigation continues, his inability to remember becomes an obsession. His pursuit of truth leads to the discovery of an especially violent painting depicting the specific childhood trauma that caused the killer's mania. The painting

becomes Sam's window into the madness of the killer, as well as the manifestation of Sam's fascination with the mystery itself.

This compulsive investigation on the part of the protagonist gives the viewers a personal connection to the mystery that propels the plot onward. However, the most psychically affecting events are the crimes themselves, which allow both director and composer to exploit the visceral gravity of the antagonist's actions. These respective forms of narrative and sensational identification drive the film to its inevitable conclusion in which resolution and final confrontation coincide. Ennio Morricone's score amplifies these strands by providing juxtaposing musical languages that are distinct yet continuously thematically relevant and engaging.

Simplicity, Experimentalism & Repetition

Two drastically different forms of composition appear in this score. The majority of the score is textural, serial, atonal, ametrical music featuring improvising soloists that consistently serves to provide tension. Diegetic music and the main theme on the other hand maintain a diatonic simplicity with simple instrumentation. As Morricone explains:

It used a lot of components of different influences that contributed greatly to contemporary music, that of the total serialization of not only the sound but of the pitch, the values, the timbres, etc... It was the first time in film I used a structural system. I created a framework for the orchestra soloists, and then I directed them with gestures... [The] execution could never be the same because I would direct it with my hands. I'd shape it according to how it had been organized but it wouldn't come out the same. We didn't have a precise meter so it was a bit complicated. This was one of the first cases where I applied this technique. I applied it to only 18 or 19 other films...[In] *The Cat o' Nine Tails*, *Four Flies on Grey Velvet* and *The Bird with the Crystal Plumage* in order to balance this audacious, jarring and traumatic music I wrote, and they are in the films more simple themes almost childish. So this is the origin of the music for Dario Argento.³¹

This balancing act manifests in a controlled manner as one style thrives on the immediacy of affect and the other clearly associates with a larger narrative. The former is the music of terror, and the latter that of the mystery itself. This dichotomy is the foundation of the score and served as a model for future scores of Morricone within the genre.

Though these styles contrast sharply, a persistent element of repetition unites these compositional voices and reinforces the obsessive nature of the plot. Dario Argento recounts this repetitive approach as something the composer explored first in his films:

This is when Ennio Morricone started to write repetitive music. He didn't write like this for Sergio Leone. With my movies he started to write music that had phrasing repeating infinitely, like in a music box.³²

³¹ *The Bird with the Crystal Plumage*, DVD Interview, 1:59.

³² *The Cat o' Nine Tails*, DVD Interview, 8:26.

By having such distinct thematic content share this relentless repetition, Morricone connotes great respective significance to the styles, while reflecting the underlying obsession of both the hero and the murderer.

As the juxtaposition of these compositional approaches bears great significance to essential events of the film, important themes are introduced from the opening sequence to set the stage for this dichotomy. A vital component of this mystery is that the murderer is in fact a psychopath: “In *Blood and Black Lace (Sei donne)*, the violence is not about a psychopath at all, it’s about insurance money. Here we do have a...proper serial killer: A psychopath who kills because they’re compelled to do it. And we also have that notion of the initial experience that turns you into a psychopath.”³³ The incredibly melodic major theme of the beginning credits is associated directly with this idea of initial trauma, and is immediately contrasted with the atonal thematic content linked with murder, psychosis, and the threat of violence.

In the opening sequence, the killer types a note in silence outlining simple plans for a victim’s fate:

“SANDRA ROVERSI. AGE 18. PICK UP BETWEEN MIRTI ST. AND
BELGRADO ST. 9 p.m. FOLLOW TO GARDENS. THERE”

³³ Newman, *The Bird with the Crystal Plumage*, DVD commentary, 29:00.

The main melodic theme begins when the film cuts to a young woman, presumably Sandra Roversi, walking down the street. The shot freezes and a shutter snaps with a photographic frame overlaid on the screen, giving an idea of the resultant photo. The camera assumes the identity of the anonymous stalker, and the voyeuristic nature of the scene directly links this music to the killer's compulsion and desire to end this girl's life. The premise of this song being a window into the murderer's mind is established immediately and gives a marked potency to the theme's reappearance.

After the first full iteration of the melody, the camera cuts back to the silence of the killer's lair. There the killer prepares a set of knives in an almost fetishistic manner. After the largest blade is wiped, a chord on bells is struck and the camera cuts to the murderer examining the developed photos taken in the previous scene. Here, Morricone introduces the first gestures associated with the atonal compositional style: the initial bell chord; ametrical percussion; chimes and bells; a repeated minor 6th dyad between feminine voices on the syllable "la"; and a sustained high pitch played by possibly a bowed bell, a synthesizer, or an organ. The killer conceals an object in the breast of a leather trench coat, and as the knives are stowed away the viewer sees that the largest knife prominently handled earlier (centered in the set) is missing. With the implication of murder established, the killer turns off the lone lamp in the lair and the screen goes black. A disembodied woman's scream concludes this sequence in darkness and musical silence. An immediate cut to a newspaper headline



Fig. 9: Opening sequence, *L'uccello*.

stating, “Mysterious Homicide of a Young Woman. The Third in a Month” informs the audience of Sandra Roversi’s fate...and that she was not the first victim.

The opening sequence (Fig. 9) is a concise and clever introduction to the differing compositional styles: The ritualistic admiration of the prey and her short-lived innocent beauty is associated with the major melody; while the actively traumatic music is saved for an implicit scene of murder, punctuated by a horrific scream. As Argento’s title sequence sets the tone for this story of murder and obsession, Morricone’s clear presentation of his diverging sonic languages resolutely

associates his respective thematic material with key elements of the mystery in a thoughtful and effective prelude.

Significance in Simplicity: The Main Theme

The main melodic theme introduced in the opening credits bears great significance to the solution of this mystery and suggests what drove the murderer's actions. This association builds as Sam fervently tries to understand the meaning of a painting that was sold by the first victim of the serial killer the day she was murdered. He obtains a copy and the theme is immediately linked with the image as he obsesses over it, convinced this painting holds the key to the killer's identity. Unfortunately, to admire the relevance of Morricone's choices in composing this theme, one must reveal the solution to the mystery of the killer's identity. The painting is of a young girl being stabbed in a puddle of blood emanating from her skirt, an act gruesomely imitated in the first explicit murder of the film. The artist Berto Consalvi explains that the painting depicts a true story:

A long time ago...ten years more or less. A maniac got hold of a girl I knew, tried to cut her up. Just stopped him in time, put him in an asylum for life.

The conclusion reveals that this girl was Mrs. Ranieri, who suffers a psychotic break upon viewing the painting ten years later. The reemergence of this trauma drives her to mimic her assailant, compulsively murdering young girls. As the painting provokes her madness, it also becomes an overwhelming presence in Sam's apartment, taunting Sam and the audience with the promise of truth and

understanding. The conclusion of the film exposes that Mrs. Ranieri was not initially the victim in the struggle Sam witnessed in the art gallery, but the aggressor towards her husband. Mr. Ranieri manages to take away her knife and escape, misleadingly dressed in the iconic gloves, fedora and trench coat associated with murder in *giallo*.

Morricone's central theme sensitively represents the character of Mrs. Ranieri, and he varies it creatively to reflect the power the painting holds over Sam's consciousness. The orchestration and child-like simplicity of the melody imply the nature and effect of Mrs. Ranieri's aforementioned trauma, illustrating both her fragile youth and her two-faced identity as the killer avoiding suspicion as prey. The first incantation of the melody heard in the opening credits is in A major and is completely diatonic with a range of only a major 6th (Fig. 10). The instrumentation is a small ensemble consisting of ambient wind chimes, a guitar outlining simple chords (I, IV, V) and two feminine voices in unison on the syllable "La" carry the melody. Innocence is conveyed in the simplicity of the tune, and bolstered by the choice of syllable, sounding akin to something a child would be singing in the street.³⁴ The melody's construction symbolizes youthful beauty lost, which is further implied as the vocals sound only when the first victim of the film is in motion, pausing when her image is frozen in the lens of the killer's camera. Although the melody evokes a child-like innocence, there is duplicity in its vocalization as one woman sings in a

³⁴ "I requested to him a sweet theme, as a kind of lullaby sung by a child or a little girl that I did think as it came from a close apartment and that at the same time it became part of our character's life, coming through a window, a court-yard, from a close house or meadow, some place." (Argento, *About the Trilogy*).

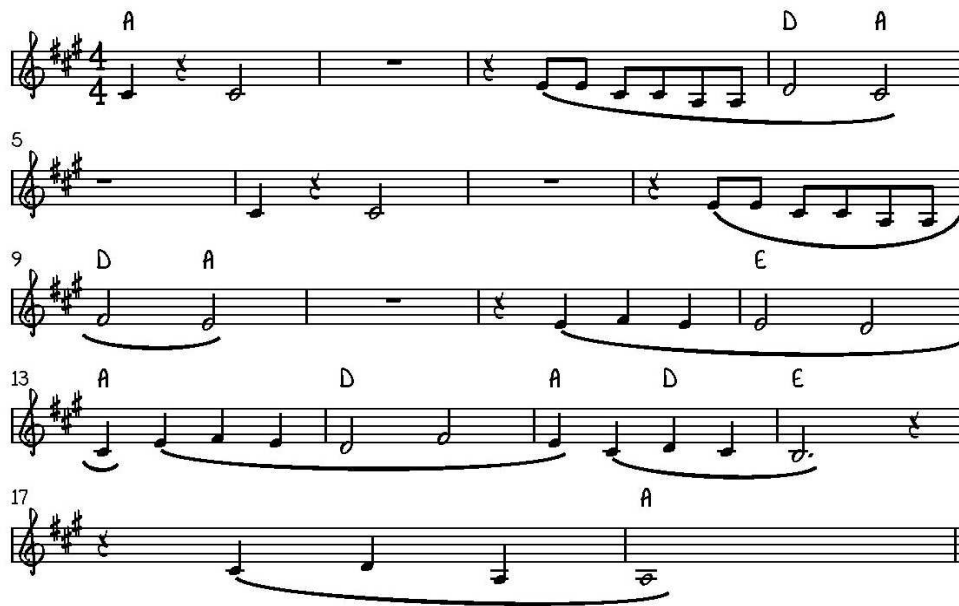


Fig. 10: Main theme, section A (Author's transcription).³⁵

delicate yet pure tone, while the other maintains a heavily breathy timbre. This creates an otherworldly texture as the differing voices blend in unison pitch. Yet, imperfections of tuning make slight dissonances, and never-ending wind chimes convey an underlying madness. As Mrs. Ranieri is doubly victim and aggressor, the song is simultaneously sweet and insidious.

Though the solution to the mystery explains many of the choices in the theme compositionally, the audience is unaware of the relevance of these elements until the conclusion. A second section of the melody, however, promises answers within the song and signals the importance of the central clue of the film. The main theme does

³⁵ The timing of the rests isn't entirely accurate, varying depending on dialogue within the scene.

not reappear until about twenty-five minutes after the opening sequence (0:25:39), when Sam's investigation leads him to an art shop where the first victim of the serial murderer was employed. Here, Morricone introduces a second half to the melody, which represents a sense of development and comprehension of Mrs. Ranieri's past. The B-section of the melody features a duet between male and female voices, alternating sustained notes and moving lines until joining in homorhythm for the last few bars. The melody is consistent with the first section in being relatively simple and diatonic, but Morricone expands the range and intervallic leaps of the female voice, as well as the instrumentation (Fig. 11). Now a larger pop ensemble (including drum set with brushes, bass and xylophone) fleshes out the melody, creating a fuller texture. This half of the melody appears as soon as the curator of the shop begins to describe the painting in question. Thus, as this more lush melodic section brings completion to the total theme, it hints to the audience that answers lie within the painting. Consistent with this section's association with a greater understanding of the mystery, it reappears only once, following a psychologist's conclusive explanation of Mrs. Ranieri's madness in the end credits. Morricone's choice to withhold repeating this section until the end of the film makes the repetition of the A theme particularly taunting, and it enhances the final resolution of the film as the B section plays past the credits into complete darkness.

Fig. 11: Main theme, section B, vocal duet (Author's transcription).

Morricone's use of the B section of the theme is unique in that it does not represent the immediate psychology of the characters onscreen as much as that of the audience in relation to the total narrative. A DVD commentary argues that the protagonist's existence is not meant to understand the nuances of his character, but rather to provide a function to the story: "This is why these films work, because it's all about the story, the murders. It's not really about anything character wise is it? I mean we don't really care..." "We need [Sam] to be obsessive because we are."³⁶ It does seem that Sam's character is pretty much limited to the idea that he is compelled to solve the mystery. That Sam is a writer does not affect his actions, and

³⁶ Jones, Newman, *The Bird with the Crystal Plumage*, DVD commentary, 1:06:09, 1:06:17.

his relationships to other characters are largely serviceable to the plot. He obviously loves his girlfriend, Julia, but his love only supplies greater weight to the idea of her being in danger. The murder mystery also undermines their love, as Sam's compulsion is so strong that it constantly distracts him from her. Despite multiple attempts on Sam's and Julia's lives, Sam chooses to stay in Rome, even after the police return his passport. His decision is not the most logical course of action, so Argento and Morricone have to make his insistent desire to uncover the truth compelling.

The expanded B section melody promises resolution and allows Morricone to tease the audience with the A section of the theme, especially because this promise remains unfulfilled for over an hour of screen time. The painting becomes a symbol of Sam's obsession. Once a copy of the painting enters his apartment, it becomes a consuming presence, visually and sonically. The viewer first sees the image as the B section is concluding, just as Sam has pinned the copy to his wall. From this point on, the A section of the theme is consistently associated with the painting, and sounds mostly when the image is in the frame (Fig. 12). Morricone changes the character of the theme drastically by not allowing the melody to continue past the first two notes. The guitar arpeggiations become achingly repetitive as the instrument stays on the same chord, and the repeated syllables "La, la" take on the taunting quality of a chiding child. Seemingly, the painting teases Sam and the audience. Moreover, its

presence in his home makes it an overtly personal fixation. It incessantly draws him back to the violent mystery even from a place of safety.

Morricone gradually expands the A section from the initial “La, la” motive to deepen Sam’s obsession as the film progresses. Piece by piece, the A section becomes fuller as it reappears.³⁷ Each time it recurs, Sam is pulled deeper into his investigation. British critics Alan Jones and Kim Newman ponder whether Sam is sexually enticed by the notion of this murderer.³⁸ The way that the “La, la” motive interacts with Julia supports this theory. When she warns Sam that his investigation is dangerous, the accompaniment to the song is persistent, including a subdued iteration of “La, la”, pausing only when they kiss. The music portrays Sam’s line of thought constantly considering the painting, distracted only by Julia’s romantic energy. However, Sam dismisses her warning, and immediately after they kiss, the painting teases once more with another “La, la.”

The last and fullest iteration of the A section (apart from the end credits) epitomizes this sense of distraction. The music begins as Sam and Julia are flirting while packing to leave Italy for America. They become so amorous that Sam’s friend

³⁷ (0:28:05) When Sam first hangs the painting in the apartment, the “La, la” motive is sung only twice and no more of the A-section is played; (0:32:12) After the first murder is shown the camera cuts back to Sam’s apartment, with the painting in the background and the melody is expanded to include the first phrase; (0:55:46) With the painting framed in the center of the shot, Sam and Julia mull over the possible clues in the picture until they receive a phone call regarding an assassin who made an attempt on their lives, and now the music tacks on another two “La, la” gestures to the end of the first phrase of the A-section; (1:02:48) Sam and Julia flirt as they are packing, but the painting distracts Sam and he chooses to seek out the painter, and the music completes the entire A-section.

³⁸ “Dario often said to me too that he felt that Sam Dalmas’ character was actually in a way sexually obsessed with the murderer too.”-Alan Jones (*The Bird with the Crystal Plumage*, DVD commentary, 1:11:40).

Carlo appropriately excuses himself from their apartment. Seconds after they are left alone with the painting, Sam's eyes drift away from Julia when the "La, la" motive sounds. The camera cuts away to the painting on the wall as she asks, "Do you really love me?" The music pauses as if waiting for Sam's reply. The direction of his attention is unmistakable, as his eyes are locked on the painting (Fig. 12, lower left) and his response begins with a disinterested, "Sure," followed by "How much time have we got?" After Julia replies, "How much what?" the "La, la" motive ushers the melody back in, and it is clear that Sam has chosen to pursue the killer over the



Fig. 12: The presence of the painting in Sam's apartment.

woman in his arms. Morricone beautifully portrays the psychology of Sam in his use of the A section in this scene. The melody and vocals are restrained as they begin to flirt, and Carlo continues to talk before excusing himself. However, as the “La, la” motive becomes more apparent, it is clear Sam has been tempted by his curiosity. The music does not end until he begins describing safety measures to Julia. His attention drifts slightly, but his eyes never leave the painting. Julia’s sexual energy, once capable of dropping the music, is now the obvious loser in a contest for Sam’s attention.

Morricone’s theme is simultaneously a nuanced representation of the fundamental mystery and an incredibly effective psychological symbol of the intrigue it presents. Its presence implies no danger, but the enticing and taunting motive of two syllables consistently draws Sam back into a world of madness and violence. It is this obsession with mystery, so clearly represented by Argento’s focus on the painting and Morricone’s instantly memorable accompanying theme and two-syllable motive, that allows the viewer to share in Sam’s fixation through its allure and thrusts the plot toward its inevitable conclusion.

Alien Textures and Traumatic Terror

Despite the narrative importance of the main theme, the majority of Morricone’s score is diametrically opposed to the melody’s compositional style. He contrasts the simple sweetness of the diatonically major melody with music that

exploits common horror and suspense tactics, but situates them in a distinctly modern texture. This darkly chromatic, atonal and ametrical music is constructed primarily of short recurring gestures performed by orchestral soloists that are layered through improvisatory conducting.

Morricone uses a structure consisting of voices with either pre-composed phrases or improvisational roles. Non-improvisational phrases can be classified as such: drone; repetitive; and single statement. Drones such as a sustained organ note or subdued tremolo strings often serve as a foundation, providing a pitch center for other phrases to harmonize as well as a consistent aural representation of tension. Repetitive phrases are short ostinati that play on mechanically, and are often layered upon one another. The appearance and disappearance of these ostinati create important shifts in the timbre of the ensemble. Although the pitch content of individual phrases remains consistent, the pulse and dynamics of the ensemble may adjust according to the action of the scene. Single statements are phrases that play only once when cued and vary drastically in length, activity, timbre, and orchestration. Some single statements are extended phrases that include a large number of instrumentalists, while others are as short as a percussion strike on tubular bell or cymbal.

Improvisational roles differ considerably in length and function, however none of them are inherently melodic. The most active improvisers include a drumset that provides an imitative yet driving force to a chase scene, and a trumpet with a

plunger that interjects almost vocally in atonal bursts. Other improvisers occupy a more textural role, such as an unidentified membranophone (most likely a concert tom played with mallets) that fluctuates in intensity but remains commonly at the bottom of the texture in volume. The most important improvisers viscerally are vocalists that provide moans, groans, and panting. These vocalists create the most overt manipulation of emotional associations, sounding ambiguously sexual, predatory, or fearful. It is a function that invokes the central aural component of Linda Williams' analysis of excess in body genres: "Aurally, excess is marked by recourse not to the coded articulations of language but to inarticulate cries of pleasure in porn, screams of fear in horror, sobs of anguish in melodrama."³⁹ Morricone allows these inarticulate cries to become part of the aural texture of suspense, and through its ambiguity the music as well as the imagery remain ambivalent as to where the viewer's empathy should lie.

Tony Mitchell relates the style of this work to the British Hammer horror film composers of the 1960s such as Richard Rodney Bennett and Elizabeth Lutyens, as well as Ennio Morricone's work in the collective improvisation group Nuova Consonanza.⁴⁰ Bennett's score for *Secret Ceremony* (1968, Joseph Losey) is the most akin to the score of *L'uccello* that I've been able to locate. It does reflect a mode of understated suspense scoring that consisting primarily of amelodic gestures and sparser instrumentation. However, despite eschewing the stereotypical full orchestral

³⁹ Williams, 4.

⁴⁰ Mitchell, 88.

textures of classic horror scoring, certain choices in instrumentation such as theremin, harp and extensive harpsichord and piano, as well as more prominent uses of strings situates the score distinctly within the realm of horror.⁴¹

Morricone's score displays a wide range of influences unique to his experience as a player and composer. Morricone was most widely reputed for his work with Sergio Leone, providing the most iconic scores for the spaghetti western genre. He was also an accomplished arranger for popular music, utilizing household items such as typewriters in a musical context.⁴² However, the most experimental improvisational elements in *L'uccello* can be attributed in part to Morricone's experience with the Italian collective free improvisation group of composers known as Gruppo di Improvvisazione di Nuova Consonanza. The group is considered one of the first of its kind and was formed in Rome in 1964 by Franco Evangelisti and several other composers such as Mario Bertoncini and John Heineman. The group maintained a philosophy of leaderless improvised music performed without structure or form, using the composers' responses to each other's playing as their only guide.⁴³ Morricone often performed on trumpet in this ensemble, and can be seen in taped performances utilizing mutes to achieve bizarre sounds that are echoed in the score of

⁴¹ Janet K. Halfyard analyzes the recurring aural tropes of horror music (instrumentation highlighting harpsichord, the violin, *tremolandi* strings, full orchestra and compositions emphasizing chromaticism, atonality and dissonance) as they are used in parody in horror-comedies. Refraining from utilizing the conventional full orchestra gains further significance when considering her analysis, stating that "the most obvious connection to standard horror scoring is that using a full orchestral score is the most prevalent strategy." 21-22.

⁴² Thompson, (8:50).

⁴³ Austin, 27-28.

L'uccello.⁴⁴ The group would eventually perform on one of Morricone's later *giallo* scores, *Gli occhi freddi della paura* (*The Cold Eyes of Fear*, Enzo G. Castellari, 1971).

The incorporation of Nuova Consonanza's improvisatory emphasis gives Morricone's score a distinctly modern and urban sensibility reflective of Argento's setting in contemporary Rome. The appearance of rapidly improvising drumset and plunger-muted trumpet draws clear links to jazz and the short mechanically repetitious bell motives also invoke hints of modernity in minimalism. However, the music's desired effect is primarily psychological. Morricone's score engages its listener through development of texture in fluctuating dissonance and tempo. The lack of meter or graspable tonality retains the unsettling qualities of horror scoring, but the inclusion of improvisers and an intuitive form of conducting adds a contemporary element of chaos alien to traditional suspense film music. These textures let the viewer simmer in unfamiliarity, disorder and dissonance to heighten a sense of fear associated with the victim, yet, the relentless repetition and devilish mutation of select minimalist motives also lets the audience share the building anticipation of an obsessive and anonymous villain.

Dario Argento's narrative is extremely conducive to the multi-faceted psychological implications of Morricone's music. Although we follow Sam throughout most of the film, the killer appears first and remains our central interest.

⁴⁴ *Nuova Consonanza Komponisten improvisieren im Kollektiv*.

Argento does not introduce this presence from a victim's perspective. Rather, he forces the audience to look through the killer's camera lens as she stalks her victim and bear witness to her methodically fetishistic preparation for her violent deeds.

Argento does not allow the audience to share in the first victim's fright nor commit the act with Mrs. Ranieri. Instead, he implies the first victim's murder by a scream in the dark. All that is apparent is that this procedure is premeditated to the point of being ceremonial, and that the figure in the darkness has been thrice successful in such plans. The audience knows that an anonymous force of death lurks in the shadows, with only their imaginations to fill in the details of the murderer's vicious actions. Now, the surrounding unknown threatens any character left in a scene of perceptible vulnerability. Argento augments this tension by a sinister undertone that the audience is sharing in the murderer's sick obsession.

Set Pieces, Respective Psyches & Recurring Gestures

The appearance of this atonal material is consistently associated with the world of violence wrought by the killer's presence. This material is showcased in Argento's set pieces in which the violence actually occurs, but the scenarios of these set pieces vary greatly. The tone of individual situations is determined by the psychologies of respective characters onscreen. Within Morricone's wide library of gestures he associates select motives with characters and ideas, making their reappearance and transformation connote great significance.

The introduction of most of this material arrives in the first proper set piece following the introduction in the immediate aftermath of the altercation in the art gallery between Mr. and Mrs. Ranieri. This scene hurls Sam into this world of violence as a witness isolated and helpless to aid the bleeding woman in front of him. One of the most prominent gestures in the movie is a chromatic three-pitch bell ostinato, often preceded by a softly sustained organ chord and usually initially articulated by bells. These two gestures lay a foundation for the atonal aural texture to be layered in this scene, and are used commonly in this function throughout the film. Other reappearing phrases sounding in this scene include an ascending moaning woodwind that reaches the same pitch consistently; a percussion strike through reverb that sounds like a combination between a vibraslap and a cymbal; a quick, higher-pitched, harmonized, and cluttered version of the bell ostinato; and individually struck tubular bells.

Morricone re-uses all of these motives throughout the film. The variation of these gestures as they repeat serves the psychological effect of the particular scene at hand. Yet, some specific associations are not immediately clear. These variations can be as subtle as a quickening of pace, or as obvious as the use of tape editing to make unnatural repetitions, but the deviation is always functional. A pristine example is the three-pitch bell ostinato, which serves mostly as a leitmotiv for the killer. The first time it is heard is when Sam attempts to open the glass door separating him from Mrs. Ranieri, and is layered when a gloved hand pushes a button that traps him in the

entryway by another glass door behind him. It appears a second time in this unharmonized format in the first murder scene, but at a markedly slower tempo. In the former scene, there is a sense of urgency as Sam desperately tries to help the stabbed Mrs. Ranieri before she bleeds to death (Fig. 13). In the latter, the aggressor has not yet struck when Morricone introduces the motive. Thus, the slower tempo gives the scene a paced feel that imitates the murderer as she slowly stalks her prey. As each scene develops, Morricone layers the motive according to the action. The quickness of the layers' addition are respectively hurried and measured to reflect the emotion of the scene.

The art gallery set piece is of particular importance as it is replayed throughout the film as the memory that Sam is trying to recall: The clue he knows will reveal the truth behind the violence but is unable to remember. The only obvious



Fig. 13: Sam lies trapped between glass doors as the bleeding Mrs. Ranieri reaches for help.

use of audio editing to reflect psychology is heard as Sam tries to remember the stabbing he witnessed. This is appropriate as these memories appear in fragments. The scene is replayed in quickly cut pieces that are manipulated with freeze frames and zooms, reflecting Sam's attempt to recall the specifics of the event and the fleeting nature of his memory. Similarly, motives such as the moaning woodwind are repeated unnaturally by overlapping the same iteration of the gesture multiple times in a row. The repeating feminine "La" dyad gives these memories a teasing quality, while the reappearance of the cluttered bell ostinato reflects the maddening effect Sam's inability to recollect has on him. Both of these motives have appeared before, but their meanings change drastically thanks to their mutation and relevance to the scene.

Occasionally Morricone creates a texture for a set piece vastly different from any that has appeared before, but once again, it is psychologically linked. One of Morricone's more adventurous scenes compositionally is a chase scene where an assassin in a yellow jacket hunts Sam with a silenced pistol. The chase occurs in a bus yard, which provides a venerable playground for Argento and cinematographer Vittorio Storaro to create inventive shots, and actor Reggie Nalder (of *The Man Who Knew Too Much*) provides an instantly memorable creviced face as the pursuing assassin (presumably hired by Mr. Ranieri), Needles (Fig. 14). The music is considerably more active than most any scene in the film, and a continuously improvising drumset played with brushes gives immediacy to the danger. An

extended dissonantly atonal motive is the most prominent gesture in the texture, played in full orchestration with piercing woodwinds and percussion sounding in different registers. As the chase continues, the phrase transfers between instruments in the ensemble in overlapping ametrical entrances. This harsh phrase contributes to a constant sense of panic and is amplified by feminine voices panting in the background while a trumpet improvising with a plunger mute further develops the surreal atmosphere of the bus maze. The trumpet's improvisations are short bursts of sound that avoid any sense of melody and highlight the variance of timbre available to a player skilled with the plunger. This obscures the familiar sound of the unmuted instrument and gives instability to the color of its sound, which matches the instability of meter. The trumpet becomes an alien body that lacks recognizable form amongst a texture of gestures that are unfamiliar, dissonant and could strike at any moment. All the while, the pulsing drumset provides a constant reminder that there is no relief from the chase.

Some recurring gestures of the film also appear in this section of music, and their thematic relevance to the rest of the film is remarkably consistent. The repeated feminine "La" dyad motive, first heard in the opening sequence, seems to preface or accompany an immediate threat in the film. In the opening sequence, it plays as the killer inspects photos of the victim. In the chase scene, it appears just as Needles raises his gun to fire his first shot, and repeats only right before the camera cuts to the



Fig. 14: The chase between Sam and Needles displays some of Vittorio Storaro and Dario Argento's most inventive camera work. Light and shadow are emphasized (upper right, lower right) and Needles' presence is both sinister and surreal. The predatory character paces about and appears suddenly in imaginatively unlikely fashions (lower left in a bus' rear view mirror, lower right in a bus' driver seat).

first close-up on his eyes scanning for his prey. Another thematically consistent returning motive is male groaning, which appears less frequently than the breathy feminine panting heard throughout the scene. This moaning masculine voice is heard as Needles paces intently around the bus yard, and later in the film during the second explicit murder scene as the central killer lies in wait for her victim to ascend a darkened stairway into a trap. The noise accompanies Needles as he licks his lips,

and sounds in the later scene as the camera cuts to angles that could only be from the killer's perspective lying in wait at the top of the staircase. This vocal gesture, in combination with the imagery, effectively conveys a predatory presence as the vocals are far less fearful, yet still ambiguously sexual. Both the feminine "La" theme and the male moaning gesture reflect larger undercurrents of the plot, but their simplicity allows their particular thematic associations to contribute heavily to differing surrounding textures according to the pertinent emotions of the respective scenes.

The lack of certain gestures also implies a different psychological reason for violence than that of the first murder scene. The three-pitch bell ostinato is nowhere to be found in the bus chase, and neither is the cluttered bell ostinato. These gestures represent the central killer or madness in general, and the psychologies of Needles and Sam have nothing to do with those themes. Rather, Needles is simply a hired gun doing a job, and Sam is only interested in saving his own skin. What is important is the continuity, danger, and confusion of the pursuit, which is aptly represented by the drums, intermittent gestures, and the improvising trumpet. This selective absence of recurring themes shows Morricone's great care in his choice of thematic material relative to the specifics of respective scenes. That other motives reappear in totally distinct textures displays the capacity of his gestures to reflect larger subtexts about violence and sexuality. The ability of these motives to represent the immediate emotions of the scene, and Morricone's aptitude in stringing these compositional ideas along the larger narrative, reveals the admirable flexibility and nuance of this

atonal motivic language. Furthermore, it highlights the composer's deep understanding and unique talent in conveying the psychological underpinnings of the plot.

First Blood: Blurring Emotions

As Adrian Luther Smith states, a defining characteristic of *L'uccello* is the fact that Argento "made the connection with death even more overtly sexual."⁴⁵ Yet, suspense cannot simply come from exploitative violence or nudity; it requires a cultivated atmosphere of fear. Morricone's scoring of the first explicit murder scene, in combination with Argento's direction and Vittorio Storaro's cinematography, vividly realizes both the terror of the victim and the brewing madness of the killer. The scene is masterfully composed, as the mortal implications are set well before the act takes place, but the music only appears when the threat becomes immediate.

The victim is shown in only one scene before her murder in a cut to a horse race seemingly unrelated to any of the previous action until the shutter of Mrs. Ranieri's camera clicks on the young woman. In that second, the audience connects the scenes and foresees the target's fate. (Silence in the score allows this memorable bit of Foley to have much greater weight).⁴⁶ The murder scene is prefaced by a return to the killer's lair, in which a familiar ritual is taking place. After the gloves of the

⁴⁵ Smith, 7.

⁴⁶ Foley is the reproduction of the everyday sounds in film. Foley refers to the credited inventor of this art Jack Foley (1891-1967).

killer have presented the photos of the woman to the camera, the figure hoists a knife almost ceremonially towards the full color original painting. This prelude to murder is accompanied by a more active incantation of the atonal material introduced in the opening sequence. The music reduces layers to a three-beat bell ostinato that often only appears as three pitches, however the third beat is played this time with a dissonant dyad, furthering its menacing character. Finally, a densely dissonant harpsichord chord accompanies the raising of the knife (a classic horror stinger) and ends the scene.

The film then cuts to the soon-to-be victim. The girl is painfully vulnerable as she walks alone from her bus stop on a path of light enveloped by shadow. It is only after the sound of the departing bus engine fades completely in the distance that a chord enters. The instrument is difficult to identify, sounding somewhat like a bell, but sustaining like an organ. This drone provides the foundation for the mounting layers to come. Morricone introduces each layer with deliberate subtlety, responding to the action onscreen rather than trying to animate it. The camera tracks the victim voyeuristically from behind tree branches, forcing the audience to peer from the shadows with the murderer. A three-pitch chromatic bell ostinato is introduced when the girl pauses in the light, looking to see if there is anyone in the impenetrable darkness around her. The camera's viewpoint becomes explicit as a snapping twig is heard, drawing the woman's attention directly toward the camera lens (Fig. 15, left), and ushering in a new instrument on a different three-pitch chromatic ostinato. This



Fig. 15: Left, the young woman inspects the sound of a broken twig; Right, the woman approaches police officers as the killer peeks from behind cover.

feeling of being in the killer's shoes is furthered when the young woman comes across a trio of policemen. The camera ducks behind a tree to evade detection (Fig. 15, right) before peering around the trunk to view the outcome of this interaction. The audience's sense of dread is then deepened as the woman unknowingly leaves this chance of survival behind and apparently seals her fate. Argento simultaneously gives the audience the killer's vision and links them emotionally to the victim. As she treads alone through the darkness, the audience is acutely aware of the evil waiting to strike.

Morricone cleverly portrays this duality of empathy, as the paced layering of the ostinati captures both the building tension in the woman and the killer's methodical, obsessively driven pursuit. The atonal material is as alien as the darkness around her, and the ostinati, though at similar tempi, are offset as to when they begin their respective ascensions, convoluting any sense of beginning or end to this consistent pulse. These characteristics invoke primary elements of fear. They deny any sense of familiar tonality and disorient what one might initially consider meter,

which creates an environment wholly strange and unwelcoming. The layering of the different ostinati constructs an intensifying atmosphere of chromaticism and dissonance that could easily symbolize growing terror in the victim or madness in the killer, but the sureness of the tempo implies a sinister sense of control. The audience shares the killer's sight, and there is an undeniable sense of the inevitable. However, through powerful visuals of shadow and light, as well as an incredibly foreboding aural texture, the audience shares in the young woman's plight as well.

The scene's most emotionally trying moment is the murder itself. Argento's transfer of perspective to that of the victim makes the conflict of fear and excitement overt, while the act is vicious and deliberately erotic. The homicide takes place in the victim's home, which Argento presents not as a place of safety, but confinement. As the victim enters her front gate, the shot pauses while the gate shuts behind her, caging her in. In a continuous shot, the camera pans up to reveal a second story window as she enters the front door. The music goes silent as the door shuts, amplifying a sense of captivity. After a brief pause, the killer's silhouette enters the frame accompanied by a tubular bell stinger. Here, Morricone introduces one of the most effective gestures in his library, which reflects the sexual and horrific nature of the scene. Before the killer is revealed, a woman is heard panting and moaning subtly in the score, blurring the line between what could be considered orgasmic or fearful. A similarly breathy masculine voice joins the texture upon the killer's entrance, enhancing the sexual nature of the interaction and emboldening the predatory nature

of the masculine voice. This interaction of voices brings a dark and immediate meaning to the tubular bell stinger, cementing the shadowy figure as the harbinger of the woman's death. Argento pushes the eroticism of the scene further as the killer gazes upon the woman's outline passing in front of the second-story window. The figure is no longer merely a force of death, but a peeping tom invading the victim's sexual privacy (Fig. 16, top right).



Fig. 16: The steadily deliberate amplification of the vulnerability and sexuality of the victim in the final events before the killer is revealed in the bedroom doorway.

The music's role in cultivating tension increases once the woman is indoors. The masculine and feminine voices fade into a reduced texture with unfamiliar gestures, including a more elaborate piano ostinato, improvisatory membranophone (possibly a tom played with mallets), and a contrastingly simple repeated pitch on upright bass. The woman's sensuality and vulnerability amplify as she undresses, the camera waiting until her bra is exposed to cut away. The film then cuts to the murderer's gloved hands rifling through a set of keys and lock picks. When the camera returns to the woman's apartment, her breasts are revealed under a nearly transparent nightgown. At her most exposed, Morricone introduces a dissonantly harmonized incantation of the three beat xylophone/glockenspiel ostinato. This appearance of the ostinato is piercing and implies the immediacy of danger as the victim calmly lights a cigarette and goes to bed. A steady *accelerando* and *crescendo* increase the sense of peril as the camera cuts to a P.O.V. shot from the victim's perspective. Seeing an empty doorway, her view turns to the bedside table to ash her cigarette. The xylophone, piano, and improvisatory membranophone become increasingly chaotic, climaxing when her eyes return to the door and first lay sight upon the killer (Fig. 16, bottom right).

The music drops out entirely as she screams, and the camera cuts to an extreme close-up of her mouth. The scene is most painful to watch, as the only sound is the woman screaming and panting in fear, crying "No!" as the killer slices open her nightgown with gloved hand cupping her jaw. The sequence seems to be sexual, as

the close-up of her open mouth appears vaginal (prefacing the killer's advancement from the nightgown to her panties). Shots of the victim's hands clenching the bed could easily be considered erotic, and the knife of the murderer appears phallic as the figure in black strips her of her underwear before plunging the knife forward (Fig. 17). This strike is punctuated by a final scream and blood splashing on the pillows.

Though the attack is brutal, it is not gory. All one sees of the strike is the motion of the knife and a splash of blood on the covers. Nevertheless, the extremity of the victim's violation makes the sequence particularly difficult to watch. The killer's actions are not in struggle, as the victim lies almost motionless in terror.



Fig. 17: The victim's final moments before death are displayed with overt sexuality. The killer slices open her nightgown (upper right) and tears off her panties before striking (lower right), and the knife and the mouth of the victim are portrayed with respective phallic and vaginal qualities (lower right, upper left). Gestures such as the victim's moaning and the clutching of the sheets (lower left) are ambiguously fearful and sexual as well.

Rather, they are methodical and seem to be satisfying a sexual desire. The woman's moans take on a horrific role as the audience identifies with the victim's plight, but her cries only increase the maniac's fervor. By climaxing the score at the killer's appearance, rather than the murder itself, Morricone gives the victim's cries extreme gravity and lets the inherent dreadfulness of the scene be heard in the voice of the terrified woman.

The scene is followed by a cut to Sam and Julia's apartment, with the painting in frame and the accompaniment of the main melodic theme sounding soon after the cut. The reappearance of this major tonality serves a dual role in its immediate succession to the intense action of the murder sequence. It strengthens the melody and the painting's association with the murderer and provides a contrastingly consonant release to follow the traumatic dissonance of the previous scene as well. The necessity of this release is encapsulated by a bit of dark humor in the script. Immediately following the conclusion to the murder, the first line spoken is, "Tell me, is it really necessary?" Although Julia says this in reference to the painting, the sentiment is easily applicable to the extreme content of the sequence of terror that has just transpired.

Conclusion: *Giallo* and the influence of *L'uccello dalle piume di cristallo*

Sei donne and *L'uccello* are admirably crafted exercises in emotional involvement and the cinematic *gialli* reflect a profound influence from both. Each

film explores visceral affect through extended sequences of sexually charged violence and situates them in a central mystery. However, *L'uccello* bears special significance in that its style and success inspired a “plethora of productions featuring black-gloved killers slashing their way through increasingly violent scenarios.”⁴⁷ It was, without a doubt, this box office success that drew the sudden flourish in *giallo* production, but it was the emotional potency of the film’s construction and execution that resonated with audiences worldwide. The *giallo* had been exploring stories of sexual and psychological manipulation in the late 1960s, but it was Argento’s unique combination of an obsessive protagonist, a psychotic anonymous killer, and elaborate set pieces of murder emphasizing sexuality in violence that proved to be definitive elements of *giallo* to come.

L'uccello would define the *giallo*’s trademark characteristics as a genre through exploiting their visceral effect, and Morricone’s score seized upon these central components similarly. Sam Dalmas is an archetypal example of the amateur detective found in *giallo* and Morricone’s main melodic theme conveys this character’s motivations. Mikel Koven notes an essential distinction between the amateur detective of the *giallo* and the police procedural of a professional detective, “The amateur detectives in these films have an alternative vested interest in solving these cases and are not motivated by the base capitalist desire to get paid.”⁴⁸ In this film the vested interest is Sam’s own obsession to reveal the killer’s identity. This is

⁴⁷ Smith, 7.

⁴⁸ Koven, 94.

embodied by the sweet melody of the central theme and the painting it accompanies. The childish vocalization of the melody provides multiple effects that heighten the intensity of this aural representation of obsession and truth. Argento specifically stated that he wanted the melody to invoke the feel of a song heard in childhood, bringing forth associations of youth and a past that would bring understanding. However, by isolating the “La, la” motive Morricone can actually tease the audience with this promise of truth, and inventively alters the recurrence of the larger melody to withhold a sense of resolution until the film’s conclusion. In effect, Morricone turns the vital allure of mystery and hidden truth that drives Sam Dalmas into the central melodic presence of the film and mirrors the mystery’s narrative through structural variation of the theme.

The amateur detective is characteristic of most of the *giallo* to come, but a cursory glance at the posters and titles of these films affirms that they were primarily sold with the promise of sex and violence. *L’uccello* is credited with making the connection of sexuality to horrific violence more overt through the use of techniques such as P.O.V cinematography and fetishistic imagery, and future films would push this connection to extremes. Morricone explicitly acknowledges the importance of this ambivalent characterization of violence by exploiting the inarticulate cries of the human voice to imply sexuality in fear as well as predatory pursuit. The combination of repetitive composed phrases and improvisatory instrumentalists in an atonal and ametrical texture also provided a mechanical yet disconcertingly alien and traumatic

atmosphere for terror. This balance of control and chaos echoes the ambivalent responses of sexualized violence by intertwining the fear of the victim with the compulsion and madness of the killer.

This connection of sex and violence is obviously the most deeply explored characteristic of *giallo* cinema, but what makes *L'uccello* most important in its resonance in Italian cinema was that it was something new for producers to embrace and other filmmakers to imitate. The film is an attempt to redefine the genre of *giallo* as something modern, and Morricone's score that juxtaposed popular songwriting with minimalism and experimental uses of improvisation was just that.⁴⁹ Argento and Morricone turned the murder mystery into a contemporary tale of obsession in intrigue and amplified the sexual implications of violence within. Although one may argue the merits of exploiting visceral emotions for effect, the audience responded and producers took notice. The flood of productions in *L'uccello*'s wake provides what many consider to be the germ of the American slasher's content, and the impact of the genre is seen as many of its characteristic tropes continue to be used in slashers produced today. It was undoubtedly the success of *L'uccello* that ushered in this new cycle of Italian film, but it was the film's coherent synthesis of narrative, image and sound that was new and viscerally engaging, and connected with audiences internationally.

⁴⁹ Tompkins, 98.

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