

# FORUM

University of Edinburgh  
Postgraduate Journal of Culture and the Arts  
Issue 07 | Autumn 2008

<b>Title</b>	Palimpsest, Pasolini, Poe and Poetics, or the phantoms haunting Dario Argento's <i>Opera</i> (1987)
<b>Author</b>	Keith Hennessey Brown
<b>Publication</b>	FORUM: University of Edinburgh Postgraduate Journal of Culture and the Arts
<b>Issue Number</b>	07
<b>Issue Date</b>	Autumn 2008
<b>Publication Date</b>	12/12/2008
<b>Editors</b>	Jack Burton & Jana Funke

*FORUM* claims non-exclusive rights to reproduce this article electronically (in full or in part) and to publish this work in any such media current or later developed. The author retains all rights, including the right to be identified as the author wherever and whenever this article is published, and the right to use all or part of the article and abstracts, with or without revision or modification in compilations or other publications. Any latter publication shall recognise *FORUM* as the original publisher.

**Palimpsest, Pasolini, Poe and Poetics, or the  
phantoms haunting Dario Argento's *Opera*  
(1987)**

Keith Hennessey Brown

University of Edinburgh

Italian horror and thriller *auteur* Dario Argento's films are replete with images and themes of haunting: the solidified residue of malign, murderous thoughts sensed by the medium at the parapsychology conference which opens *Profondo Rosso* (1975) or the literal haunted houses inhabited by the witches Mater Tenebrarum, Suspiriorum and Lachrymarum in the horror films *Suspiria* (1977) and *Inferno* (1980). Above all, Argento's *gialli* – i.e. Italian-style thrillers – from *The Bird with the Crystal Plumage* (1970) onwards present a succession of protagonists who find themselves haunted by some vital fragment of sound or image that they cannot quite recall, going up against antagonists whose inability to overcome the haunting legacy of some incident in their past compels them to kill again and again. Unsurprisingly this has encouraged many commentators to take a psychoanalytic approach to Argento's *gialli* and those of his imitators. As Gary Needham remarks:

The *giallo* literally begs for psychoanalytic inquiry and at the same time stages both the "analytical scene" and the "classic symptoms." As usual, this staging occurs through the conduit of femininity but in some cases — as in (almost) every Dario Argento film — masculinity becomes the focal point. [...]

The *giallo* is a paradigm case in defence of psychoanalysis. It solicits psychoanalytic interpretation and stages every oedipal scenario literally and spectacularly. (2003 138-39)

Already, however, there is the haunting trace of something else here in that the Argento *giallo* is distinguished by its *excessiveness*, as Maitland McDonagh argues. If Argento's *gialli* can be read through the lens of psychoanalysis, Needham in his remarks above and elsewhere recognises that the focus within them is different. Going further, as Chris Gallant suggests, this excessiveness also opens up the space for alternative, non-psychoanalytic readings of the director's films.

In this paper, I wish to undertake such a reading of one specific but in certain respects exemplary Argento *giallo*, *Opera* (1987). Beginning with an outline of the film's narrative for those unfamiliar with it, I will proceed by interrogating some of its most striking images, seeking to bring out an alternative 'hauntology' of their possible meanings based on the notion of the palimpsest and the aesthetic ideas of Pier Paolo Pasolini (1965) and Edgar Allan Poe (1845).

Prior to this it is worth briefly commenting on some of the difficulties we will encounter. An issue in writing about haunting is the absence of a conventionally reassuring theoretical vocabulary for so doing. The terms and concepts that most obviously present themselves to us – hauntology itself<sup>1</sup>, presence, absence, the trace and excess – stem primarily from Jacques Derrida's deconstructionist project. As such, they are deliberately vague, allusive and indefinable, anti-metaphysical. We can only use them 'under erasure,' aware that their own meanings are always also about another deconstructionist neologism, 'différance'. This means that, crudely speaking, the meaning of X depends on how it differs from Y and Z, but the meanings of Y and Z themselves depend on how they differ from X and each another, with the result an endless circular deference of each term to the others<sup>2</sup>. There is no 'transcendental signifier' that can anchor and guarantee the other meanings.

Difficulties here are further compounded by the fact that we are interpreting a cinematic text. For Pasolini, as an outspoken defender of cinematic realism, one of the fundamental differences between cinematic and literary discourse is that the former is conducted principally in images rather than words. An example of this can be seen if we consider the hypothetical utterance 'the man got into the car,' as the opening sentence of a novel and as it might be adapted for the opening scene of a film. Taken in literary terms, it is a terse statement, giving no further description of the man or the car. They, like the selection of man and car over other paradigmatic options like woman and automobile, appear as structuring absences, making us aware of what is not directly present but nevertheless haunts the text. An analogous image immediately loses this terseness. Even if adapted in the most straightforward manner possible, perhaps with a static camera positioned as a recording device in front of the pro-filmic reality, we now have this man and this car, uniquely situated in a concrete environment. There is thus a superabundance of material to be described and interpreted if we think it appropriate, such as the man's attire and the make, model and colour of the car, alone and in combination. Moreover, if the director is imaginative - and Argento most certainly is – we will also want to interrogate his *mise en scène* itself: how is the camera positioned; how

does it move; how are lighting and colour used; what is the duration of the scene, is it edited in a distinctive way, and so on.<sup>3</sup>

## Synopsis

Diva Mara Cecova<sup>4</sup> is run over by a car, unexpectedly thrusting her young understudy Betty (Cristina Marsillach) into the limelight on the opening night of horror film director Marco's (Ian Charleson's) avant-garde production of Giuseppe Verdi's *Macbeth*. The performance is momentarily disrupted by a light falling from one of the boxes in the upper balcony; afterwards it is discovered that one of the stage hands has been killed. Conveniently Inspector Alan Santini (Urbano Barberini), himself an opera fan, is on hand to begin the investigation. Betty and her boyfriend Stefano (William McNamara) sneak away from the opening night party to celebrate on their own at Stefano's uncle's townhouse. While Stefano is out the room, a masked figure, whom Betty half-remembers from her past, attacks. He ties Betty up and tapes needles before her eyes, thus compelling that she watch as he stabs Stefano to death. The next morning Santini assembles the cast, crew and staff of the opera to tell them the news of the murders; during the night someone has also broken into the opera house killed some of the ravens and cut up Betty's costume. As costume designer Giulia (Coralina Cataldi Tassoni) repairs it, the masked killer strikes once more. Again Betty is forced to watch. The killer next reappears when Betty is at home, shooting her agent Mira (Daria Nicolodi) through the keyhole before breaking in. This time, however, Betty manages to escape through the building's air ducts thanks to the intervention of her neighbour's daughter, Alma (Francesca Cassola).<sup>5</sup> With the police seemingly powerless Marco hatches a plan. During the next performance he will release the ravens into the audience; the "highly intelligent" birds might be able to pick out the killer. The stratagem works, revealing Santini as the culprit. Despite having an eye pecked out by one of the ravens, Santini escapes. He then ambushes Marco and Betty, knocking the director unconscious and dragging Betty away, ties her to a chair, blindfolds her and gives her his gun. Telling Betty that he cannot bear she gaze upon his mutilated face he requests she

shoot him as he immolates himself. Betty is rescued in the nick of time from the blazing room. As Betty and Marco recover from their ordeal, the television broadcasts the news: in a dramatic *coup de théâtre* Santini substituted a dummy for himself and has evaded capture. Santini strikes as they flee their alpine chalet, stabbing Marco to death. Betty buys time by talking to Santini until the police arrive to incapacitate and lead him away.

### **Palimpsests**

Reading this synopsis, many familiar with horror literature and/or cinema will discern the first phantom presences haunting *Opera*: Gaston Leroux's 1910 novel *The Phantom of the Opera* and its various film adaptations; Argento would himself adapt the novel in 1998. Tracing the palimpsestic forms of Leroux's ingénue, Christine Daaé, and the monstrous phantom Erik behind Betty and Santini respectively, the unsympathetic critic might argue that the film presents a muddled, modern day whodunit take on a classic tale, replete with unpleasant, disturbingly misogynistic and sadistic images – one woman having needles taped to her eyes, another being shot through the eye – that the sensible or sensitive viewer would surely themselves not want to gaze upon.

The first indication that there is more to Argento's images than meets this imagined viewer's eye comes from a closer look at these and other images of the eye itself within the film. *Opera* opens with an extreme close-up of a raven's eye, in which is reflected the auditorium of the opera house (figure 1). Behind this image I would argue that we can discern the traces of three important intertextual influences, Edgar Allan Poe's poem *The Raven* (1845) – to which I will return at the conclusion of this essay – Alfred Hitchcock's *The Birds* (1963) and Michael Powell's *Peeping Tom* (1960).

By presenting this and other images which recall *The Birds*, notably the creatures pecking at a door in an attempt to get at Santini and his enucleation, Argento raises the spectre that continues to haunt contemporary horror and thriller filmmakers, that of Hitchcock, and endeavours to exorcise it. As Argento, known since early in his career as “The Italian Hitchcock,” explained: “[T]he

problem in using birds is that everyone screams Hitchcock. I'm used to that conclusion now so I don't really care. My major reason for writing them into the script was so that I could be really inventive with Louma crane and Skycam shots." (qtd. in Jones *Mondo* 43)

Like *Opera*, Powell's film opens with a close-up of an eye, albeit a more familiar, recognisably human one (figure 2). It tells the story of the young man behind the eye, Mark Lewis. Mark is compelled to film women in absolute, abject terror at the moment of their death. To achieve this end he uses a camera mounted on a spiked tripod equipped with a mirror, so that the victim sees the expression on their own face at the moment the spike fatally pierces their flesh. The otherwise quiet and introverted Mark develops a hesitant, awkward relationship with one of his lodgers, Helen, thus gradually bringing the origins of his sadistic scop(t)ophilia to light. Mark's father, a psychologist researching the subject of childhood fear, recorded every scene in his early life. Mark eventually films himself committing suicide with his apparatus as the police close in.

Besides their strong correspondences at the levels of character and theme, such as the presence of a ambiguously sado-masochistic murderer and a high degree of self-reflexivity, the strongest palimpsestic traces of *Peeping Tom* (tellingly known in Italian by the title *L'occhio che uccide*, 'The Eye That Kills,' also the title of a 1996 book-length interview with Argento) can be felt in *Opera*'s 'murder set-pieces'. These push the perverse logic of their counterparts in Powell's film further while also bringing out some of their inadequacies. The meek, mild Mark with his spiked tripod may strike present-day viewers as a somewhat silly, improbable maniac, especially when contrasted with the terrifying, unknowable figure of Santini, whose speed, strength and powers seem almost supernatural at times, like Leroux's phantom. Mark's murderous apparatus does nothing to prevent his victims from running, fighting back, or merely closing their eyes against his assaultive, murderous gaze. This last act, it is suggested, would render him fundamentally impotent. The one woman who sees through Mark and whom he is himself afraid of is in fact Helen's blind mother. Santini, by contrast, pointedly refuses Betty the options of looking away and closing her eyes. As the director explained:

For years, I've been annoyed by people covering their eyes during the gorier moments in my films. I film these images because I want people to see them and not avoid the positive confrontation of their fears by looking away. So I thought to myself, 'How would it be possible to achieve this and force someone to watch the most gruesome murder and make sure they can't avert their eyes?' The answer I came up with is the core of what *Opera* is about. The psychopath in *Opera* is so obsessed by the young ingénue opera singer that a spectacle of devotion is required. [...] The needles are taped under her eyes so that if she tries to close them her eyelids will be pierced and the pain so great that she will have to keep them open. And then the murder is orchestrated in front of her while she is powerless to act or look away. The murderer needs her to see it all as her enforced restraint will bring the ultimate orgasm – the perpetration of death being the clearest act of love. (qtd. in Jones *Profondo* 158)

This inability to look away is also crucial to another key filmic palimpsest, *A Clockwork Orange* (1971). In Stanley Kubrick's film a young man, Alex DeLarge, is sent to a young offenders' institution after being found guilty of a number of crimes, including rape and murder. As a means of securing early release he consents to undertake the experimental Ludovico treatment. This entails having his eyes clamped open whilst horrific images play before him, until he is rendered physically sick whenever he contemplates or witnesses violence by a kind of Pavlovian conditioned reflex or behavioural response (figures 3 and 4). Released back into society, the treatment initially seems to have worked too well, with Alex finding that Beethoven's Ninth Symphony, which had accompanied the images, also induces nausea.

*A Clockwork Orange's* relationship to *Opera* centres on the image of the immobilised Betty, the witness to the murder set pieces (figures 5 and 6). Unable to avert her gaze, she is Alex's distaff counterpart. The crucial difference lies the motivations underlying the two treatments. Whereas those behind the Ludovico technique claim that they want to eliminate Alex's anti-social impulses<sup>6</sup>, Santini wishes to make Betty's latent sadistic and murderous impulses, which he presumes she has inherited from her mother, his former lover, become manifest. The 'Santini treatment' is antithetical to the Ludovico treatment. This difference perhaps also helps us understand one of *Opera's* most intriguing intertextual departures from its literary source. In Leroux's *Phantom of the Opera* the



opera within the novel is Charles Gounod's *Faust*, alluding to the Faustian bargain the phantom offers Christine: he will make her a great singer on the condition that she then, in a sense, belongs to him, body and soul. *Opera* avoids this intertextual theme. Santini is not a singer. Betty, despite worrying that she is "not ready," debuts with her voice fully-formed, in little need of further training. There are no scenes where Betty's voice alone has an effect on Santini. Indeed, as Argento's co-writer Franco Ferrini notes, these were deliberately excluded:

We'd wanted to give Opera the form of a table in which Betty [...] had a sort of super-power over the murderer, in that she was able to keep him at bay by singing. It was a tempting idea and I was quite taken by it; she would have managed to get outside and escape by singing and it would have been like taking opera into the streets, into the underground, but Dario thought it a bit far-fetched and decided against it. (qtd. in Palmerini and Mistresssa, 1996 50)

I would argue that a number of factors underlie this shift. First, as Colette Balmain (2004) notes, Argento often alludes to Shakespeare in his work. Thus, for example, a psychiatrist's summing up of the facts of the case in *The Bird with the Crystal Plumage* considers that the husband who tried to cover up for his insane wife's murders "loved her not wisely but too well". Likewise, *Four Flies on Grey Velvet* (1972) might be summarised in terms of Hamlet's "time out of joint / O cursed spite, that I was ever born to set it right," the film's protagonist being persecuted because his wife takes him as the reincarnation of her hated father, who had died before she could extract her revenge. Here, besides something of a reversal of this scenario, there are hints of *Hamlet* to the way in which Marco reveals Santini as the killer through his own *coup de théâtre*, the opera-within-Opera at this point performing a comparable function to *Hamlet*'s play-within-the-play. Another factor is the relationship between Betty, her mother and Santini. Santini can be read as something of a Macbeth figure, capable of great acts of violence and cruelty, but needing his Lady Macbeth to really spur him on. His remark, "you've returned," uttered when seeing Betty on stage as Lady Macbeth for the first time, is telling in this regard, ambiguously referring to both the character and Betty's mother. Finally, the use of Macbeth, 'the Scottish play' with the reputation for bringing misfortune in theatrical circles, allows Argento to state through stand-in and mouthpiece Marco his own views on

superstition, luck, magic and the relationship between his fictions and reality:

Betty: "It's the opera – Macbeth brings bad luck"

Mira, Betty's agent: "What are you talking about"

Betty: "Everyone says it – Macbeth brings bad luck. It's a great opera, but I would much rather make my debut in something else."

Marco: "So, you think this opera brings bad luck, huh?"

Betty: "It's what everyone says."

Marco: "Well, I don't say it [...] You must make the most of this opportunity – it usually only happens to people in the movies"

### **Pasolini and poetics**

Pasolini argued that cinematic language differed from its natural counterpart in that its primary unit, the 'im-sign', was already present in the world, in reality. From this, he concluded that cinematic language was inherently irrational. There was no dictionary of images nor any set of rules by which the grammaticalness of any given cinematic utterance could be evaluated. In practice, however, this expressive potential had been quickly reined in with the emergence of the dominant Hollywood cinema, or what Pasolini referred to as 'the cinema of prose'. Cinema came to be understood as being about telling stories in a manner that did not draw attention to their arbitrary, constructed nature. Even here, however, other possibilities haunted the screen and could manifest themselves. Hollywood films themselves sanctioned moments of the spectacular, the non-narrative and the excessive, as with the production numbers in a musical. More interesting, however, was when the arbitrary rules of filmmaking were accidentally ruptured, as with the startling image or incongruous juxtaposition – often, significantly, themselves sanctioned excesses in certain genres including horror<sup>7</sup> – that might provoke an instant of quasi-surrealistic reverie. According to Pasolini, these and other poetic possibilities were becoming increasingly manifest in certain new wave films of his own time, such as Michelangelo Antonioni's *The Red Desert* (1964). Two components of this new 'cinema of poetry' are particularly important for the purposes of this paper. First, contrary to the

classical invisible style of filmmaking, the presence of the camera, while always there, was now directly manifest. The viewer was constantly being reminded that he was watching a film, thanks in large part to technological developments like lighter, more mobile cameras and the zoom lens which made their *presence felt* on screen. Tellingly here, Argento has remarked, in quasi-Pasolinian terms, on the importance of new technologies and the expressive possibilities they present him with: “I love the poetry of technology. For me, technological advances are inspiring. I’ll hear of a new camera and it will suggest a story to me.” (quoted in McDonagh, 238) Second, the consciousness expressed and embodied by the camera was not just the subjective one of the character, as in traditional expressionism or shot-reverse shot structures, but could also be that of the filmmaker himself. We could, that is, sense the presence of the filmmaker behind the camera and his characters, haunting the film text. Pasolini explains this new idea<sup>(1)</sup><sup>8</sup> through reference to another linguistic analogy, that of the ‘free indirect subjective’ in literature. This refers to a mode of writing in which the voices of the author and character become confused through the author’s using neither his own ‘neutral’ language nor that of the character, in quotes, but instead one somewhere in between them, using what could be construed as the character’s voice but without the clear attribution provided by quotation marks. With this device, there was no certainty over whose subjectivity was being expressed – that of the character, the author, both or neither. Pasolini’s own emphasis, in his analysis of *The Red Desert*, was however on the intersubjective identification of the character’s viewpoint with the director’s.

Relating Pasolini’s ideas to the giallo, Mikel Koven (2006) suggests that the murder set-pieces which punctuate the majority of gialli – including, as we have seen, *Opera* – might be understood as poetic interludes in otherwise prosaic films. I would agree with Koven that the use of such devices as the subjective and hand-held camera within the typical giallo set piece certainly makes us aware of the camera’s presence and helps convey something of a psychopathic subjectivity. Questions also arise, however. Insofar as the typical murder set-piece also functions in a manner analogous to a production number in a Hollywood musical, it could be argued that they

are not really poetic excesses but instead constrained, sanctioned, and conventional. It is also doubtful whether such moments really see a fusion of the filmmakers subjectivity with that of the character of the sort Pasolini discerned in *The Red Desert*. The key here is that Antonioni and Monica Vitti's character, Giulia, share bourgeois uncertainties and anxieties over modern life, but that these are neuroses than psychoses. Though the giallo filmmaker may share certain elements of misogyny and sadism with the killer on-screen, it is unlikely that he himself is a psychotic.<sup>9</sup> As such, I would argue that the typical subjective 'killer cam' set piece is actually closer to a kind of neo-expressionism, in which the filmmaker uses technique and technology to externalise a character's subjectivity without necessarily sharing it himself.

As far as *Opera* is concerned, the more important specific issue is that it transcends Koven's poetic/prosaic distinction. Essentially, we are made aware of the camera's unnerving presence throughout *Opera*, with Argento's mise en scène anything being but classically prosaic. Early examples of this include the long *plan-sequence* Steadicam shot with which Mara walks out of the opera house backwards; the close-up tracking shot of the objects on Betty's shelves and desk; the frenetic whip pans around the backstage area on opening night; and the self-referential inclusion of cameras, television monitors and other devices for recording and re-presenting Betty's performance and constant cross-cutting between front- and backstage zones within the performance sequences themselves. Significantly, this sense of the camera's presence is also often independent of character, as when we stay in Betty's bedroom after she and the others have left for the opera house, panning around its spaces and into the air-duct to reveal the as yet unidentified, shadowy presence of Alma therein. At times it is also difficult to distinguish between the embodied camera consciousnesses of different characters. It is instructive to compare, for instance, Mira's silent steadicam advance on Betty with Santini's entry into the upper balcony of the opera house moments later. Though Mira proclaims herself to Betty as "not just [her] agent but a friend", the way in which she is introduced is more threatening than friendly.

In total, looking at such shots and sequences, it is questionable whether the film's subjective,

embodied camera movements draw any particularly clear distinction between the reassuring and the suspenseful, or normal and abnormal, mental states. This leads us to what Argento has identified as the shared phantom haunting the characters within the film, AIDS. As he explained:

“In *Opera* love is haunted by the spectre of AIDS. In fact, nobody loves in this film. Betty doesn’t want and can’t have sexual relations, and relations between people are generally cold, people are distant with each other. This is surely the personification of the AIDS nightmare.” (qtd. in Jones *Mondo* 16)

Critics could dismiss this as claiming deeper significance for *Opera* than it warrants. There are reasons to argue otherwise. Commentators more familiar with North American than Italian cinemas had little difficulty in reading AIDS subtexts into other horror and thriller films of this time, like David Cronenberg’s *The Fly* (1986) – a film Cronenberg himself has said was more about ageing than AIDS<sup>10</sup> – and Adrian Lyne’s *Fatal Attraction* (1987). The AIDS crisis also represented part of the background to *Opera*’s own production, with actor Ian Charleson, who played Marco, discovering he was HIV-positive during the production. Most importantly, Argento’s *gialli* had always represented sexual and gender relations as problematic, even if the immediate context in earlier films was that of second wave feminism rather than AIDS. Though Needham’s comments earlier might be seen as reining in this characteristic excess, suggesting that Argento differs from other *giallo* filmmakers only in terms of his atypical focus on the male subject, I would argue that the difference is more substantive and poetic. Other *giallo* filmmakers typically present exploitative situations staged for the ‘visual pleasure’ of the implied male spectator, whereas Argento problematises or even denies this same pleasure. This is evident in the equation of love, sex and death made by Argento earlier and manifests in Santini’s torturing of Betty (at one point, after overhearing her conversation with Stefano and murdering him, he disconcertingly tells her that “It isn’t true what you said about being frigid: you’re a bitch in heat!”) and in the conspicuous absence of titillating nude scenes featuring the female performers.<sup>11</sup>

The spectre of AIDS is also, I would argue, the way in which Argento here manages to

overcome one of the challenges Pasolini's theories pose for the socially conscious filmmaker: how to overcome the limitations and purported universalism of his own bourgeois subjectivity. With *AIDS*, Argento found a subject matter which haunted and continues to haunt us all.

### **Poe and Poetics**

After *The Raven*, Poe wrote the essay *The Philosophy of Composition*, using his earlier poem as an example. While space precludes detailed discussion of Poe's ideas, two points are particularly germane. These are Poe's emphasis upon "unity of effect," that the emotional response the author desired the reader to have from his work should dictate his other aesthetic decisions, and his suggestion, actually repeatedly taken up and cited by Argento in defence of his filmmaking practice, that "the death [...] of a beautiful woman is unquestionably the most poetical topic in the world"<sup>12</sup>. The first of these points may help exorcise what can now be acknowledged as one of the spectres haunting this essay itself. This is the perceived weakness of *Opera's* ending. Earlier we only indicated that Betty bought time until the police arrived to apprehend Santini. In fact, what happens is considerably more nuanced and ambiguous: Betty stalls Santini from killing her by indicating that she now realises "I am like my mother" and thus that his murderous activities have finally succeeded in triggered her hitherto latent sadism. Though she then tells the inquiring policeman that she told Santini "a load of nonsense," and thus attempts to reaffirm her difference from her mother, the closing images may still give the viewer pause for thought. Noticing a lizard in the grass, Betty bends down and addresses herself to it, imploring it "go free". The echo of Santini's final words, "I just did it to free their souls," is haunting. Has Betty become infected with Santini's own 'killer disease' – a 'disease' that like HIV is lacking in obvious physical symptoms?

Palimpsestically there are also traces here of the endings to *A Clockwork Orange*, in which the closing image of rape and Alex's voice over ("I was cured all right") intimates to us that he will soon be back to his old, violent self, and *Peeping Tom*, in which a blasé psychoanalyst's reassurance that scop(t)ophilia can easily be cured by "a few years in analysis" fails to prevent

Mark's suicide shortly thereafter.

From the point of view of Poe's theory this effect of haunting uncertainty – an effect antithetical to most mainstream cinema and criticism based on the need for clarity of outcome<sup>13</sup> – could arguably be understood as the end to which the rest of the film was consciously orchestrated by its *auteur*. This brings us back to Pasolini's theories, overtly. As Argento explained: "*Opera* is highly symbolic and the concepts it aims to express aren't by any means obvious. It could be described as a poetic film in the Pasolinian sense of the word, whereby every camera movement corresponds to a psychological interpretation". (qtd. in Mistresssa and Palmerini 50)

Taking a Pasolinian perspective it might also be argued that *Opera*'s concluding words and images encapsulates another of its overarching themes, namely the entire question of (cinematic) reality itself, as most succinctly summarised by the following highly significant exchange between Marco and Santini, tellingly made within the space of the opera house:

Marco: "I don't think it's wise to use movies as a guide to reality, do you inspector?"

Santini: "That depends on what you mean by reality."

The key idea here, on which I would like to conclude this essay by way of opening up other interpretive possibilities, is another Pasolinian one. This is his related notion of 'a certain realism'. As Maurizio Viano explains:

Pasolini did not just want to "represent" reality. Rather, his films aimed at putting spectators in the position of asking themselves questions about reality. As there were no word to express the way in which his films pursued reality while avoiding the pitfalls of classical realism, Pasolini [...] coined the expression "a certain realism" to illustrate his position within Italian cinema. (x-xi)

Or, to invoke Hamlet again, Argento's *Opera* is haunted by the possibility that there are more things in heaven and earth than are dreamed of in psychoanalytic film theory.

Figures<sup>14</sup>



Figure 1 - *Opera*



Figure 2 – *Peeping Tom*



Figure 3 – *A Clockwork Orange*

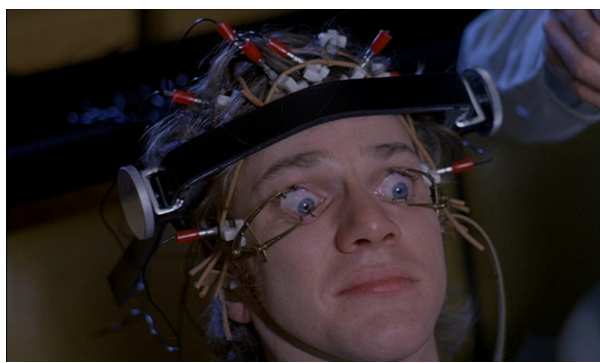


Figure 4 – *A Clockwork Orange*



Figure 5 - *Opera*



Figure 6 – *Opera*



## Works Cited

- A Clockwork Orange*. Dir: Stanley Kubrick. Perf: Malcolm McDowell, Patrick Magee, Michael Bates, Warren Clarke. DVD, Warner Home Video. 1971.
- Balmain, Colette. *Gender, Genre, Giallo: The Disturbed Dreams of Dario Argento*. PhD Thesis, University of Greenwich, 2004.
- Bordwell, David. *Making Meaning*. Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1991.
- Chaw, Walter. "David Cronenberg re-examines David Cronenberg." *Film Freak* [http://www.filmfreakcentral.net/notes/dcronenbergretrointerview.htm]. Visited 18 September 2008.
- Derrida, Jacques. *Spectres of Marx*. London: Routledge, 2006.
- Gallant, Chris (ed.). *The Art of Darkness*. Guilford: FAB Press, 2000.
- Koven, Mikel. *La Dolce Morte*. Maryland: Scarecrow Press, 2006.
- Jones, Alan. *Mondo Argento*. Cambridge: Midnight Media, 1996.
- . *Profondo Argento*. Guilford: FAB Press, 2004.
- Leroux, Gaston. *The Phantom of the Opera*, 1910. [http://www.gutenberg.org/catalog/world/readfile?fk\_files=782472]. Visited 18 September 2008.
- McDonagh, Maitland. *Broken Mirrors, Broken Minds*. London: Sun Tavern Fields, 1991.
- Maiello, Fabio. *Intervista a Dario Argento: l'occhio che uccide*. Naples: Edizioni scientifiche Italiane, 1996.
- Needham, Gary. "Playing with Genre: defining the Italian *giallo*." *Fear without Frontiers*. Ed. Steven J. Schneider. Guilford: FAB Press, 2003, 135-160.
- . "The Bird with the Crystal Plumage." *Art of Darkness*, 87-94.
- Opera*. Dir: Dario Argento. Perf: Cristina Marsillach, Ian Charleson, Daria Nicolodi, Urbano Barberini. DVD, Blue Underground. 1987.
- Palmerini, Luca and Mistress, Gaetano. *Spaghetti Nightmares*. Key West: Fantasma, 1996.

*Peeping Tom*. Dir. Michael Powell. Perf. Carl Boehm, Anna Massey, Moira Shearer. DVD. Warner Home Video, 1959.

Pasolini, Pier-Paolo. 'The Cinema of Poetry.' *Movies and Methods*. Ed. Bill Nichols. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1976, 542-558.

Poe, Edgar Allan. *The Raven*, 1845.

[[http://www.gutenberg.org/catalog/world/readfile?fk\\_files=207763](http://www.gutenberg.org/catalog/world/readfile?fk_files=207763)] Visited 18 September 2008.

---. *The Philosophy of Composition*, 1846. [<http://www.eapoe.org/works/essays/philcomp.htm>] Visited 18 September 2008.

Shakespeare, William. *Hamlet*, 1601.

[[http://www.gutenberg.org/catalog/world/readfile?fk\\_files=89](http://www.gutenberg.org/catalog/world/readfile?fk_files=89)] Visited 18 September 2008.

Stam, Robert. *Film Theory*. Oxford: Blackwell, 2000.

Viano, Maurizio. *A Certain Realism*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993.

---

<sup>1</sup> Introduced in *Specters of Marx*, 'hauntology' is Derrida's portmanteau of 'haunt' and 'ology' with a homophonic allusion to ontology in the French language.

<sup>2</sup> Like hauntology, *différance* is a term whose meanings in French would only be apparent when written rather than spoken, in line with Derrida's critique of traditional philosophical notions of speech over writing.

<sup>3</sup> Here we may also consider the remarks of Robert Stam. "Perhaps because it was so intimately linked to language based disciplines (literature and philosophy), Derridean poststructuralism has been a quiet but hardly overwhelming presence within film theory. Often that presence has been lexical, as terms and concepts at least partially derived from Derrida [...] have circulated widely within film-critical discourse." (2000 181)

<sup>4</sup> No performer name is given for Mara because she is herself something of a phantom figure in the film, through the way Argento chooses to represent her via a disembodied point-of-view shot; this example of (dis)embodiment was Argento's response to actress Lynn Redgrave's last-minute departure from the project.

<sup>5</sup> Alma's name, with its connotations of soul, itself has interpretive possibilities that I do not have space to pursue here. It is also worth noting that the protagonist of Argento's next 'diva' film, 1992's *Trauma* was called Aura.

<sup>6</sup> Or otherwise use Alex, with there being a cynical undercurrent to Kubrick's film that questions the motivations of the

---

liberal and authoritarian alike.

7 There is a slippage here: though the *giallo* is understood as a separate type of film in Italy, within the English speaking world it is more usually brought under the rubric of the horror thriller.

8 Pasolini doubted that any film could be fully poetic in these terms.

<sup>9</sup> The critical responses to a number of *gialli* could certainly support the notion that this was the critics' belief, with too ready an equation between author and text being made in cases like Lucio Fulci's *The New York Ripper* and Argento's own *Tenebre* (both 1982)

<sup>10</sup> “*The Fly* is sort of a compressed version of aging and that's where, really, I think its emotional power comes from. If you, or your lover, has AIDS, you watch that film and of course you'll see AIDS in it, but you don't have to have that experience to respond emotionally to the movie and I think that's really its power.” (Cronenberg quoted at <http://www.filmfreakcentral.net/notes/dcronenbergretrointerview.htm>).

11 Though the amount of female flesh on display has tended to increase in Argento's films over time, I would argue that it is not until the last decade that it becomes particularly exploitative or commercial in motivation. Even in 1998's *The Phantom of the Opera*, which features more nudity than all its predecessors combined, there is still an interest in the grotesque body, reminiscent at times of Peter Greenaway's *tableaux vivants*.

<sup>12</sup> From the full text of the essay as published in *Graham's Magazine* in 1846 at <http://www.eapoe.org/works/essays/philcomp.htm>.

13 Inasmuch as academic criticism certainly favours ambiguity and polysemy (cf. David Bordwell's analysis in *Making Meaning*) the problem *Opera* faces here is perhaps that its positioning between 'art' and 'popular' cinemas serves to doubly marginalise it, making it harder for critics to engage with it in its own terms.

<sup>14</sup> These six images were captured from the DVDs of the three films.