

## “GIALLO” (Film Review)

Written by James Kloda  
Sunday, 16 May 2010 07:34

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From deep red to grey velvet, the cinema of Dario Argento drips with pungent pigmentation. Vivid color is deployed for texture and sensuality. The primary hues of *SUSPIRIA*'s Tans Academy pulsate with a primal femininity. The densely filtered light in *INFERNO* creates a heady dreamscape saturated with dangerous allure.

And then there's the fluid crimson, often held in sharp relief against white walls, reflective glass or pale flesh. Argento stains his imagery with baroque fanaticism, a crazed Fauvist painting frenzied nightmares from his psychedelic palette. At first, it comes as no surprise that he has named his latest film after a block of solid color: *GIALLO* (yellow).

This is the shade many associate with the Italian director, who made such significant contributions to the *giallo* genre as *THE BIRD WITH THE CRYSTAL PLUMAGE* and *TENEBRAE*. *Gialli* were stylish whodunits with an excess of violence and gore, based on pulp detective fiction whose editions sported garish yellow covers (hence the name) as if dipped in some pleasurable poison. And Argento (whose own surname means “silver”) laced his films with enough gold fever to cement his reputation as a master surgeon of Italian horror cinema.



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But over the last decade, standards have slipped. For a filmmaker who was always so precise in his construction and cutting, his later films such as *THE PHANTOM OF THE OPERA* and *THE CARD PLAYER* are sloppy, stitched together so carelessly that they leak vital fluid. Gradually, the kaleidoscopic style that once characterized his films has slowly blanched away. It was a hopeful moment when it was announced that *GIALLO* was in production—a return to his seminal genre, perhaps a rekindled embrace of painted light.

Sadly, the film evaporates in a mist of pastel watercolor, Argento’s visual signature feebly dripping away at the edges of the frame, its plot a wishy-washy puddle of incontinent mess. Detective Enzo Avolfi (played with typical skeletal diffidence by Adrien Brody) has been on the trail of a brutal serial killer who has a nasty habit of abducting and defacing foreign women. When the sister of American stewardess Linda (Emmanuelle Seigner) is kidnapped, the two of them are forced to work together to rescue the girl before her face is mangled like an auto wreck.

Our villain (played by, ahem, Byron Deidra) is a deformed misfit who has the misfortune of having the skin-tone of cloudy urine. Taunted by memories of being bullied at school—where classmates picked on the jaundiced pariah by cursing him with that most damaging of playground insults, “Yellow”—the adult Beast cannot now bear to look at Beauty without wanting to disfigure it. So “Yellow” indulges in his own form of reconstructive surgery, snipping off a nostril or injecting a tongue with anesthetic until it swells to bovine proportions.

With its suggestive title, one could be forgiven for thinking that *GIALLO* might have elements of mystery and suspense. But by introducing the killer so early on, the film becomes one long, admittedly brutal, torture scene between captor and victim, while our stilted duo search Turin for people with addled livers. In the absence of any whodunit intrigue, the plot becomes a race against time to locate the whereabouts of the damsel in distress, one who has been introduced so perfunctorily before being strapped to a tool-strewn workbench that it is difficult to care what happens to her. Avolfi certainly doesn’t seem bothered; when he tracks down the flaxen fiend, he proclaims triumphantly, “Gotcha, you yellow f\*\*k,” sparing little thought for the captive woman.

As usual in these types of stories, Avolfi is only a slightly different shade of Yellow—a sour lemon to the murderer’s bitter mustard. Both are fascinated with vicious death, Avolfi’s office littered with images of maimed womanhood. Both violently avenge childhood injustice, with Avolfi turning teenage vigilante in a diseased-sepia flashback after witnessing the horrific stabbing of his mother. And the two are played by actors with frighteningly similar names. In the final scenes, a po-faced Linda chides the sheepishly skeletal detective with the plainly obvious:

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“You’re just like him.” No shit.

This observation might also apply to Argento himself. With black, scraggly locks falling to his misshapen jawline and seeming to stick to his skull, Yellow sports a hairstyle not unlike the director’s trademark bob. It is well known that the director has a penchant for putting himself in his films, lending his hands to the black gloves that mete out death to beautiful women. Here he has formulated a physical self-portrait of awkward cruelty. Like many of Argento’s psychos, this creation, with dark eyes accentuated, searches for voluptuous females to destroy on camera, photographing his victims through the various stages of their demises. But we also see Yellow sitting at a computer screen scrutinizing his “rushes”; using a magnifying glass to enlarge the shots of gashed female skin, he sucks on a dummy, masturbating. It’s hard to know how to take this. If Argento is creating a stronger personal identification with his sadistic voyeur, he is doing so in poor taste. If he is conjuring up some monstrous parody of himself, it is misjudged in a film so deadpan in tone.

Either way, this is a deeply disappointing work from a director who seems to be yellowing with age, his vision progressively jaundicing. After so many consecutive misfires, it might seem that Argento’s creative career is coming to an end. With a film like GIALLO, he only builds the gallows higher.



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