

In the Name of the Mother: From Fascist Melodrama to the Maternal Horrific in the Films of Dario Argento

Marcia Landy

Melodrama is a literary and cinematic form in Italian literary and cinematic culture, with a contentious life. In its identification with violence, the family, social class, gender, political power, and theatricality, its excessive forms of expression are aligned with a type of politics of the body. The melodramatic imagination borders on—even metamorphoses into—the horrific, through scenarios of murder, monstrosity and bodily mutilation, aligned to attempts to expose and punish the perpetrators of crimes. Crime and horror depictions rely on stylization, ritual, and myth to hover between actual and virtual reality, and one of their most unsettling figurations and mysteries is the maternal body, a topic that has been less critically examined than more general forms of domestic melodrama (Fischer 1996, p. 10).

I begin this essay with a discussion of the cinema under Fascism to examine select maternal melodramas during the Fascist era and in post-World War Two cinema, and end with a discussion of Dario Argento's

M. Landy (✉)
University of Pittsburgh, Pittsburgh, PA, USA
e-mail: mlandy@pitt.edu

films in their self-conscious examinations of the myths of the mother. His films that involve the maternal figure are engaged in exploring Italian history, memory, vision, and trauma through the lens of crime and the supernatural. From a perspective of the sublime they address a world where the real and illusory have lost their clarity, to produce ‘an intensity that dazzles or annihilates our organic being, strikes terror into it, but arouses a thinking faculty’ (Deleuze 1986, p. 53) that challenges clichés about the family, and especially the mother.

In the cinema prior to Fascism, motherhood is rarely treated. However, during the twenty years of the Fascist regime (the Ventennio, 1923–1943),—given the Fascist emphasis on population—the mother emerged as a prominent figure of melodrama. In the post-World War Two era, maternal melodramas in which the dilemmas of motherhood were featured became popular in the 1950s and continued until the 1970s, particularly through the productions directed by Raffaello Matarazzo. The controversial films of Argento, from the 1970s to recent years, offer unsettling figurations of the maternal body, ritual, and folklore that hover between actual and virtual reality. Through a focus on specific Argento films such as *Profondo rosso* (1975), *Suspiria* (1977), *Inferno* (1980), *Fenomena* (1985), *Trauma* (1992), and *La terza madre* (2007), I assess how this treatment of the horrific mother constitutes a dialogue with constitutes a dialogue with past forms of melodrama that function as counter-historical and counter cinematic.

FASCISM, MATERNITY, AND THE NATION

During the era of Italian *divismo* in the late teens and 1920s, the heyday of the theatrical prima donna, the silent cinema produced one of the most eloquent maternal melodramas, *Cenere* (*Ashes*, Febo Mari, 1917), starring Eleonora Duse as a mother of an out-of-wedlock child. Rejected by the natural father, her grown son and his wife, Rosalia experiences abjection as a dishonored mother, doomed to suffer for her sin and to perish over time, incarnating the ‘mater dolorosa’ (Dalle Vacche 2008, pp. 138–139). Duse’s acting eschews the glamour of the femme fatale but her suffering elevates her to the spiritual intensity of melodrama characteristic of *divismo*. In contrast to the era of the diva as ‘an embodiment of women’s struggle to reinvent themselves between the old and the new,’ Mussolini’s Fascism blocked women’s march toward emancipation (Dalle Vacche 2008, p. 254).

The rise of the Fascists to the government in 1922 saw hopes ended for women's emancipation when Mussolini went so far as to tell a women's delegation, 'Go back home and tell the women I need births, many births' (De Grazia 1992, p. 41). The emphasis on reproduction served several objectives beyond increasing the number of future fascists: enlarging the male population for military service, boosting imperial aspirations, and creating a citizenry to inhabit and rule the future colonies. Further steps to stimulate population growth included legislation to remove illicit sex from the public gaze, proscribe abortion, and reinforce marriage and procreation through state-established maternity benefits (De Grazia 1992, pp. 40–46).

With the development of L'Unione Cinematografica Educativa (LUCE), an organization created for the cinema as a major propaganda instrument for the Fascist regime through the creation of newsreels and documentary film, the battle for births was promoted through film. The growing commercial film industry also began to produce feature films that emphasized the mother's importance to the family through biological reproduction and to the promotion of national pride.

In *Terra Madre* (*Mother Earth*, Blasetti, 1931), Daisy, a modern city woman, attempts to lure Marco (Sandro Salvini), a landowner, away from the country. A fire demolishes the estate and Marco, with the support of a young peasant woman, Emilia (Leda Gloria), saves the land. He marries her, and through her fecundity and industriousness, they and their children become the responsible leaders of his family and community.¹ In Luis Trenker's Italian-German historical epic *Condottieri* (1931), Giovanni delle Bande Nere becomes the savior of Italy from foreign marauders.² He is credited with unifying church and country through his military exploits and through his marriage to Maria Salviati (Carla Sveva). Maria, analogous to the maternal figure in *Terra Madre*, is identified with the earth and also with the Roman church. Thus, Giovanni's image is constructed and reinforced through 'a populist epic of unity of the people, the soldiers, and the land' (Ricci 2008, p. 94) and through the mother.

In *T'amerò sempre* (*I'll Love You Always*, Camerini, 1933) a working-class young woman, Adriana (Elsa Di Giorgi), gives birth to an out-of-wedlock child and is abandoned by her aristocratic lover. A shot of a maternity ward with rows of babies in cribs would have reminded the Italian audience of LUCE documentaries reinforcing the regime's population policy. To care for herself and the child, Adriana finds various forms of work in a hospital, on a farm, and later in an office. She accepts

an invitation from a co-worker, Mario Fabbrini (Nino Besozzi), to meet his family, who welcome her as a suitable partner for him. Having withheld the information about her fatherless child, she resists his invitation to an intimate relationship, but finally succumbs, and the family incorporates her and the child without recrimination or stain to become the basis of a new family, in which the mother, according to Maria Macciocchi, was ‘imprisoned in the iron-ring of an eternal mother-image to the point of extinction’ (1979, p. 73).

In another Camerini film, *Come le foglie* (*Like the Leaves*, 1938), Giulia (Mimi Aylmer) is the frivolous bourgeois mother of a spendthrift and spoiled son, Tommy (Cesare Bettarini). Her morally responsible daughter, Nennele (Isa Miranda), seeks to undo the mother’s indifferent behavior toward the inept and passive father, Giovanni (Ernesto Sabbatini). While the disintegration of the family is attributed to the mother, its rehabilitation is attributed to the daughter’s adherence to family and to her fiancé Massimo (Nino Besozzi), emblematic of the industrious ‘new man’ of Fascism.³

In melodramas of the 1940s, the maternal is increasingly portrayed as a destructive force, more rarely as redemptive. In De Sica’s *I bambini ci guardano* (1943), an urban melodrama, Isa Pola as Nina portrays a mother bored with her husband Andrea (Emilio Cigoli). She has been carrying on a torrid affair with Roberto (Adriano Rimoldi) and neglecting her young child Pricò (Luciano De Ambrosis). After her attempts to conform to domesticity for the sake of the child fail, she succumbs to her lover, abandoning husband and son. The father places the child in a military academy and commits suicide, and the mother’s attempt to reestablish contact with the child is rebuffed, as Pricò abandons her and exits with a priest. The film foreshadows the melodramas of the 1950s, in which the maternal figure serves as a pretext to expose the mythology underpinning the family romance, namely the conflicted desires of and for the mother, the weakness of the father, and the vulnerability of the children, in which the Church plays a pivotal role in loco parentis.⁴

NEOREALISM, DARK MELODRAMAS, AND SUFFERING MOTHERS

Neorealism was a form of filmmaking predicated on the aesthetic and ethical dimensions of realism, critical of Fascism, of commercial genre narratives and its stardom, and identified with an Italy critical of but

cleansed of its fascist past. The critical writings and films of the post-World War Two era gave rise to a cinema of auteurs associated with Luchino Visconti, Roberto Rossellini, Federico Fellini, Vittorio De Sica, and Giuseppe De Santis. One of the most celebrated icons of this cinema was a maternal figure identified with a martyred nation: Anna Magnani in *Roma, città aperta* (*Rome, Open City*, Rossellini, 1945).⁵

With neorealism excoriated in the 1950s as a travesty of Italian culture, the Italian cinema industry turned to more familiar, popular, and commercially profitable forms such as melodrama, comedy, romance, crime. One form of neorealism was identified as ‘pink’ in comedies, involving social inequities resolved through reconciliation of conflict, as in *Pane, amore e fantasia* (Luigi Comencini, *Bread, Love and Dreams*, 1953); *Ieri, oggi, domani* (Vittorio De Sica, *Yesterday, Today, Tomorrow*, 1962), which features Sophia Loren as a mother who keeps having babies to avert the law; and Fellini in *I vitelloni* (1953), focused on a critical dimension of Italian mother and son relations, with Alberto Sordi enacting an Italian *inetto*, a ‘*mammone*,’ attached to his mother.

Another form of melodrama was ‘black’ neorealism that dealt with social problems often connected to crime, gangsterism, the black market, and the Mafia, reacting against the demolition of communal values (Mary P. Wood 2005, pp. 100–104). One of the most popular, *Il bandito* (Lattuada 1946), starring Amedeo Nazzari, is characteristic of a cinema in search of a new language. This cinema is motivated by desire for change but also expresses “traditional values, such as protecting the family, and looking after the family’s honour and name” (Wood 2005, 101–102). As Margaret Günsberg puts it, ‘Gender representation in post-war melodrama from 1949 to 1955, the golden era of the genre, is shaped by a preoccupation with the patriarchal families, especially with motherhood and childhood’ (Günsberg 2005, p. 39).

A key figure in this form of melodrama was Raffaello Matarazzo, director of a number of popular comedies and melodramas during the Fascist era, whose career boasts some of the most successful melodramas of the late 1940s and 1950s: *Catene* (Chains 1947), *Tormento* (1950), *I figli di nessuno* (Nobody’s Children 1951), *Torna* (1954), *L’angelo bianco* (1955), and *Malinconico autunno* (1958). Matarazzo’s maternal melodramas can be traced to the abject position of the young mother, as in *Catene*. The maternal figuration ‘fulfills the stereotype of motherhood-as-suffering, portrayed as subject to the vengeful whims of the patriarchal head of the family, and glorified deterministically in the films

as the embodiment of the ideal quality of resignation in the workings of destiny' (Günsberg 2005, p. 39).

Yvonne Sanson, a star in Matarazzo's popular films of the 1950s, often played the suffering mother, *a mater dolorosa*, a woman whose fate is to be confined, presumably through marriage and maternity, but her physical attractiveness, her sensuality, and her weakness for music and dance, draw men to her. Regulated by the husband, the children, and community, her desire is punished, the most common punishment being the loss of her children—as in *Catene*, *Tormento*, *I figli di nessuno*, *Torna*, *L'angelo bianco*. Starring with the popular Amedeo Nazzari as her husband, Sanson plays a tormented mother misunderstood by her husband, harassed by lovers who seek to destroy her marriage, to become an object of surveillance by children confused about their allegiances to father or mother and their 'paternity.' In *Tormento*, *I figli di nessuno*, and *Torna*, the mother is victimized by a malevolent woman, often a mother herself, who is the agent of separation between the husband and wife, and responsible for separating the young mother from her children. These malevolent maternal figures are older, envious, adherents to an archaic and violent world, but they are further indications of the persistence of the idealized mother-child dyad that will be investigated, if not challenged, in the thrillers and horror films of Argento.

DARIO ARGENTO AND THE *GIALLO*

Dario Argento has been classified as a creator of genres (*filoni*), crime detection (*gialli*) and horror films, the latter often eliciting a strong, critical, and even moral reaction to his treatment of horror, which is labelled as exploitative, thus effacing consideration of its experimentation in style and thought. His crime, detection, and horror films from the 1960s through to the 1990s are hybrid, mixing comedy and melodrama, naturalism and fantasy, to elicit affect and analysis. Disfigurement, loss, and decay are largely inherent in many of his milieus, suggesting a baroque fascination with mortality, a characteristic most critical to Argento's treatment of the horrific. In short, Argento's *Profondo rosso* (1975), as an exemplary *giallo* (the commercial term for Italian literary and film thrillers), breaches the boundaries between fable and realism through a focus on murderous mothers.

Argento's treatment of the mother resembles Pasolini's *Mamma Roma* (1962), which inverts the sacrosanct identification of the maternal

figure with the nation. In contrast to Anna Magnani's martyred Pina, Pasolini's *Mamma Roma* is at first uplifted 'by association with the mother—one of the sacred signifiers of Italian culture—and then degraded in the name of a prostitute' (Viano 1993, p. 90). Argento, reminiscent of Pier Paolo Pasolini, whose work he admires, plays with a form of 'free indirect style' to contaminate the mystique of motherhood through horrific cinematic language. His mode is to unsettle commonsensical theories about sadistic voyeurism and challenge the assumption that the viewer cannot distinguish between art and life. Increasingly, Argento has explored the potential of computer graphics to enhance the surreal landscape.

Rather than presenting himself as a filmmaker who remains committed to traditional cinema by waging a war against incursions by new technologies, Argento's experimentation with special effects by way of digital technology is situated in an interface between cinematic and digital modes, with a fascination for 'special effects' as a dominant feature of Argento's balancing act between spectacle and reflection. His form of treating internal states through his use of special effects, and more recently digital technology, enables Argento to probe the boundaries between the real and the fantasmatic in pursuit of reconfiguring history and memory. His emphasis on an excess of vision is enhanced through the opportunities afforded by cinematic technology in his commitment to a Pasolinian cinema of poetry that has marked his works. Though Argento's films are often treated as being sensational and exploitative, they occupy a place in a cinema that tries to get audiences to feel and think. Commenting on surrealism as an earlier form of treating internal states and his use of computer graphics, Argento has said:

Surrealism used to be hard to put on film properly. Although I was reticent about it at first, computer graphics allow me to depict my extreme dreams and dark fantasies. Exploding heads, slicing up bodies—it's all easy to show today. It's hard to come to terms with the thought that you are only limited by your imagination when it comes to what you can achieve visually, using today's technical tools. (Argento in Jones 2004, p. 230)

PROFONDO ROSSO AND CINEMATIC MOTHERS

Dario Argento's *Profondo rosso* (1975) begins with the sounds of a children's song, and a husband and wife arguing. The woman stabs the man, and a bloody knife falls to the floor by a boy's leg as he looks on

transfixed. The song plays on the soundtrack at crucial moments and it will serve as a coda throughout the film to evoke the past and the presence of the maternal killer. Credits interrupt the action, which resumes with a group of jazz musicians rehearsing the progressive rock music of the Goblins, thereby introducing the leader of the group, Marc Daly, played by David Hemmings. Hemmings also starred in Antonioni's *Blow-Up* (1966) as a fashion photographer involved in deciphering a murder. Argento's style is characterized by his use of allusion to other filmmakers and actors as critical clues to the film form. Marc is constantly in the vicinity of the murder through the criminals and the initial crime, but he 'is misled at every turn by the images that seem to be leading him from the darkness into the light' (McDonagh 2010, p. 41).

The viewer familiar with the conventional genre of crime detection will find himself/herself unprepared for Argentinian surprise and ambiguity in the unfolding of each of the serial murders. The mother in the short episode seen stabbing the father does not visually resemble the other female characters in subsequent episodes. But while the film in retrospect provides clues to the killer, these clues are constantly thwarted, proved erroneous, come too late to be useful, or are in need of elaboration. Not until the ending of the film is the killer identified as Carlo's mother, suggesting the stereotypical 'disbelief that a mother is the murderer even when her crime has been witnessed is similarly framed in *Profondo rosso*' (Nerenberg 2014, p. 85).

The scene cuts to a hall where a talk by a parapsychologist is about to take place. A non-Italian speaker, Helga Ullman, played by Macha Méril, establishes her credibility in clairvoyance when she is able to correctly identify hidden objects. She also identifies the presence in the building of a killer. The emphasis on the intuitive powers of a parapsychologist in the character of Helga Ullman is related to the centerpiece of this *giallo*, involving the issue of sensual perception, of intuition that yields insight, whereas actual viewing will prove in the course of the film to be misleading. The camera directions change to include an unknown presence and montage editing that entails a relay of shots from an uncertain position, creating ambiguity about the fragmented objects filmed and the killer.

The shot from the rear of the hall focusing on Helga in her trance links her to the killer, and the red color of the background suggests rage and blood. Helga confirms her uneasiness to the psychologist and his colleague (overheard by the killer), articulating her awareness of the killer's identity. Thus Helga is marked out as a victim, and the brutal

murder entails a bloody cutting up of Helga, witnessed by Marc from the street. The murder is seen both from the inside of the apartment from the killer's perspective and outside from Marc's, who hears her screams and sees Helga's mutilated and bloodied body being thrown at the window. The scene of her death forces Marc to run to the building and enter the room. In his haste he passes through a corridor of paintings where he sees what he believes is a painting that provides a clue to identifying the killer and unraveling the crime. The police are now involved. In their suspicion and antagonism toward Marc, their ineptness is manifest as they rush to hasty conclusions about the killer. However, Gianna (Daria Nicolodi), a reporter, connects with Marc to become his partner in crime detection.

The film's evocation of the past emerges as a major issue of investigation involving history and recollection, especially knowledge, through the senses of sight and hearing. The fleeting and unsettling elements of Helga's murder involve the history of Fascism and the War, from the image of the menorah in her room to a shadow of a Star of David, her identity as an Eastern European, and her burial in a Jewish cemetery in Italy.

The film also conceals the killer's gendered and social identity. Of the *giallo* form, Mikel J. Koven writes, 'the sexually confused *giallo* killer is a frequent, but by no means typical, character: More pertinent to these traumatized figures is an issue of history, if often indirect.... The real past trauma is a historical one: the defeat and emasculation of Italy in the war and under fascism: And this trauma has been haunting Italians ever since' (Koven 2006, p. 109). *Profondo rosso* will unfold slowly and deviously through the investigative efforts of Marc and Gianna. The 'clues' for decoding the crime will entail a range of cultural artifacts from sculpture, architecture, drawings, and photography, as embodied in Argento's serpentine method for invoking histories.

The ghosts of history are visual and aural, invoked by indirection and through a range of allusions. Classical Rome is prominently filmed in a sculpture of a fountain, where Marc meets his musician friend Carlo (Gabriele Lavia). A photographic display of Carlo's mother, played by Clara Calamai, reveals her to have been an actress during the Fascist era, which offers another significant layer of memory, that of cinema history associated with Fascism and melodrama. In *Ossessione* (1943), directed by Luchino Visconti, a young Calamai starred as Giovanna, the murderer of her husband. Further, she is pregnant when she and Gino (Massimo

Girotti) decide to escape the husband's trattoria and seek freedom from the past. Visconti's film ends with the death of the young Calamai. Argento's film ends with the actress now older, playing another mother who, like her grown son, also meets a gruesome death, namely a beheading identified in the intertextual terms invoked by Argento as a 'beheading of neorealism' (Bertellini 2004, p. 202), but might also be more appropriately considered as yet another invocation of the horrific maternal as an excessive invocation of maternal rage.

Among the proliferation of clues to the murderer, in *Profondo rosso*, running water is a repeated association with the killer's identity. Initially the killer tracks Helga into a lavatory where a close-up of running water in the sink is connected to the familiar black-gloved hand of the killer, though Helga eludes her assassin at this point. Later, after Marc and Gianna learn from a book written by author Amanda Righetti (Giuliana Calandra) of the decaying house where the murder took place, Righetti's house becomes the scene of another brutal murder. Her house and the one she has written about serve as other important clues to the initial murder scene. Righetti's violent death also introduces relevant clues to the mother's murder of the husband as the child looks on: childhood toys, a caged bird, a naked rubber baby doll identified with childhood. The most significant and elusive clue becomes flowing hot steaming water from the bath tub, the murderer's choice of killing the woman who knows too much. Running water is indicative of Argento's investment in movement. The water becomes the trope for both birth (amniotic fluid death, also cinematic time). Surveying the steamy crime scene, Professor Giordani, the psychologist, deciphers the name of the killer written on the bathroom wall, the victim's last writing. Seen by the killer, Giordani's fate is sealed. He is tracked to his house and murdered in a surreal scene involving a grotesque mechanical puppet as the killer hacks him to pieces. Ultimately Martha is identified as the murderer, seen in the mirror that Marc earlier mistook for a painting.

Marc's mistaken reflection in a mirror is a paradox of seeing as believing. In the extended sequence where he seeks to fathom the face of the killer, viewers recognize that, in retrospect, the mother has actually played a major though 'cloaked presence in much of the rest of the film' (Past 2012, p. 232). After Martha's identification as the killer, the film repeats the initial scene of the husband's murder but endows the killing with a different resonance that leads to the house where the initial murder occurred. As Maitland McDonagh writes, '*Deep Red* permits

supernatural glimmerings while seeking to absorb them back into a context that permits the effect without demanding a paranormal explanation' (2010, pp. 121–22).

Profondo rosso changes into a different film when the mother, now recognized as a killer, alters from a faceless criminal to a figure of melodramatic pathos. Marc's confusion between the mirror and the painting raises problematic dualities, specifically of connections between memory and history, art and life. In horror films, dual identities proliferate, and in Argento's film, Martha's figure seems to hold the key as both the actual and virtual mother who 'bestows mortal life, but life without infinity' (Kristeva 1982, pp. 158–159).

Jacqueline Reich, writing on Argento's treatment of maternal figures, argues that the focus in all mothers of Argento's horror is on male castration anxiety, in which what 'the male subject sees as monstrous in himself... [is] projected onto the female body' (2001, p. 92). His films are not subversive but instrumental in restoring the female 'to her rightful place as object rather than subject in the symbolic order' (Reich 2001, p. 102). In Argento's film, the enigma of the maternal resides in the self-conscious investigation of abjection as a confrontation with 'death inflicting life... from which one does not part' and 'what disturbs identity, system, order. What does not respect order, system, rules' (Kristeva 1982, p. 4). The form of the film violates rules governing narrative. Sexual antagonism is handled in doubled fashion: as melodrama and as comic. The maternal melodrama with the mother as an enraged killer sets in motion the mother's desperate and fatal attack on her husband to evade being sent to a clinic 'as a danger to society' (Past 2012, p. 233). The child's witnessing the primal murder scene also implicates him (Carlo) as both a means of silencing him but also as a reinforcing of the crime, particularly striking in *I bambini ci guardano*, where the child serves as both complicit perpetrator and also victim, occupying social observer and affective personal roles in relation to his mother (Nerenberg 2014, p. 204).

The comic narrative centers on the spirited character of Gianna Brezzi, played by Daria Nicolodi (then Argento's companion and mother of Asia Argento) in her aggressive play with Marc. Gianna's insistence on games such as arm wrestling with Marc involves a struggle over dominance and difference, suggesting a breakdown of gender barriers (as also in the case of Carlo's uncertain sexual identity). In their banter, the film tracks them from outright antagonism, competition, and sexual threat

(his) and her insistence on an encounter. Her desire for combining crime investigation with pleasure exposes his reticence about physical intimacy in his obsession for unraveling the crime. An irony is evident in how Argento offers a playful but resonant aspect of female desire, while pleasure is threatening to the male figure.

Profondo rosso provides visual diagrams for tracing the passages (corridors, reflections, mirrors, windows) of sensation into the lair of common sense, ritual, and/or dream. These passages might be connected to the maternal image and the birth canal, as later the archaic house of the murder will be identified with the Freudian scene of the primal crime. While the film allows Gianna (Daria Nicolodi) and Marc to use memory to reconstruct the crime scene and the motive for the murder, the investigative character of this *giallo* is resistant to resolution.

In *Profondo rosso*, ‘sexual ambiguity... is both part of, and a metaphor for a larger Argentinian theme, that of the perpetual elusiveness associated with the cinematic image’ (Bertellini 2004, p. 216). At the end of the film, with Marc gazing at his own reflection in a pool of Martha’s blood, conventional and uplifting conceptions of identity and truth become uncertain in this sobering image of the mother’s Medusa head reflected in the mirror. The film’s elusiveness is thus inherent in the image of Marc as he reflects on the blood at his feet, where blood in this case, not water, becomes the signifier of the frail mortal body, the killer’s and her victims. By the end of *Profondo rosso*, the viewer has seen that the film ‘hacks open not only victims but also narrative itself, allowing aesthetics rather than investigative concerns to surface’ (Past 2012, p. 225). Actually, the aesthetics of cinematic investigation, not recuperation, is Argento’s mode of working in his films.

MOTHERS, MEDICAL MALPRACTICE, AND MURDER: *FENOMENA* AND *TRAUMA*

Argento’s *Fenomena* (*Creepers*, 1985) involves another murderous maternal figure. Fourteen year-old Jennifer Corvino (Jennifer Connolly) is sent to the Richard Wagner School in Switzerland. Abandoned by her mother, who has deserted her father for another man, Jennifer suffers from somnambulism and is disliked by all except the marginal students. Enrolled at the school by her famous film director father—who has placed Jennifer’s affairs in the hands of his agent, in effect—Jennifer is an orphan, and the school only enhances her isolation from mother and

father, friends, and mentors. The teachers at the school treat Jennifer's somnambulism and her sympathetic bond with animals as a serious defect, an abnormality, and attempt to treat her medically. In one of her sleepwalking moments, she stumbles on the laboratory of Dr. John McGregor, a Scottish entomologist who is investigating the death of a young woman, his assistant. However, in his meeting with Jennifer he identifies her with 'uncanny abilities of perception' that enable the young woman to communicate intuitively with insects and animals. The Great Sarcophagus Fly, an insect that feeds on dead flesh, will ultimately lead Jennifer to the discovery of Mrs. Bruckner's home and to the secret location of her deformed child.

Dr. McGregor's monkey Inga, who also bonds with Jennifer, will save her life from the murderous Mrs. Bruckner. Not until the last quarter of the film is it evident that one of the faculty, Mrs. Bruckner, is a mother with a malformed child, another of the victims of medicine and research inherent in Argento's horrific world. Her house, where she sequesters her son, is overrun with maggots, putrefying flesh, a reminder of the contamination of life by death. The fetid pool of the dead in the lower depths of Mrs. Bruckner's house is a fortress to conceal her misshapen son. A cesspool of decomposition and death in the basement contains the bodies of Mrs. Bruckner's victims. In the case of this film, the rape of the mother and the birth deformity of the child characterize 'a breaking down of a world that has erased its borders... [through] death infecting life' (Kristeva 1982, p. 4). According to Barbara Creed, 'the horror film abounds with images of abjection, foremost of which is the corpse,' which links women—and specifically mothers—to the abject (1993, p. 10).⁶

As in *Profondo rosso*, *Fenomena* entails a vengeful mother, parapsychology, crime detection by an amateur detective, mutilation, and blood. Similarly, the antagonism between jejune and maternal woman is acted out with the maternal figure prevailing. *Fenomena* differs, however, by focusing on dying bodies, death and decomposition: the maggots in Mrs. Bruckner's house, the pool of water in the basement with the floating dead bodies, and excrement situate the film closer to the Baroque fascination with time, loss and death.

The film explores the world of the dead, which is identified with ruins, disarray, vomit, water, refuse, and the mother. Mrs. Bruckner is the creator of the watery tomb to which she attempts to confine Jennifer. Mrs. Bruckner emerges as an irrational monstrous maternity: punishing the world for her humiliation, reveling in the suffering she causes. Her

murderous overprotection, secrecy, and confinement of her child reveal that the boy is 'less [as] a fairy-tale monster than a marvel of extreme science [trisomy 13],' a motif frequent in his films, where monstrosity becomes aligned to difference, whether institutional, physical, or psychic. In *Fenomena*, Argento juxtaposes Jennifer's telepathy also, as a different form of 'abnormality' that aligns the young woman's figure with threats to the integrity of the body of both mother and son.

Trauma (1993) offers a different pretext for the horrific acts perpetrated by a mother, though utilizing similar conventions. The film marks the return of Argento's monstrous maternal figure in the formidable form of Adriana Petrescu, played by Piper Laurie, star of Brian DePalma's maternal melodrama *Carrie* (1976). Adriana underwent a traumatic labour, resulting in the doctor's decapitation of her baby Nicolas when the electricity failed. In this film, Aura, played by Argento's daughter Asia, is another traumatized young woman in Argento's world of maternal horrors.

When the film begins, Aura is contemplating suicide by jumping off a bridge. She is prevented by David (Christopher Rydell), a young reporter driving past. David is recovering from drug addiction, and so is Aura, who was escaping from a hospital where her mother had ostensibly sent her for a drug cure. Later, David attempts to form a friendship with Aura but she eludes him. She experiences another trauma when during a telepathic session at her home a storm disturbs the electricity, and, in the darkness and mayhem, Adriana's husband is beheaded. His decapitation is attributed to a serial murderer identified by the police as 'Head Hunter.' Aura's response to these traumatic events is anorexia and fear of sex, so that David does not make sexual demands on her in an attempt to win her confidence.

Later, the film reveals the reason why Aura had escaped the hospital: it is the same hospital in which the mother's trauma had occurred. Dr. Judd (Fredric Forest), the doctor responsible for the baby's death, has Aura readmitted to his clinic to destroy her memory of that event. Through flashback, Aura is able to reconstruct the murder of her father and her mother's murderous role in the father's death. Aura's growing relationship with David begins to alter her physical reaction to the world, similar to his own difficulties in overcoming an earlier attachment to drugs. At the film's climax both Aura and David are reunited, determined to track the elusive Adriana to her nondescript house.

The doctor is now accused of being the Head Hunter, since several severed heads have been found in the trunk of the car. However, through

a young curious boy, Gabriel (Corey Garvin), who has been observing Adriana's house and noticing strange events, the identity of the killer emerges. David and Aura, trapped in Adriana's house, learn that Adriana was the headhunter who killed her husband, the nurses at the hospital, and also Dr. Judd. Young Gabriel becomes their rescuer. Through his intervention Adriana is beheaded, without the melodramatic pathos of *Profondo Rosso*. This film qualifies as Argento's self-consciously turning his back on the supernatural, if not on artifice, preferring to offer a more restrained social problem treatment of the problems of anorexia, psychiatry, maternal aggression, and medical malpractice.

The film gives pride of place to the social problem of drug use and anorexia above sensory aspects (other than suspense) and myths that have made Argento's films conceptually and aesthetically challenging. One of the differences between *Trauma* and *Fenomena*, *Profondo rosso* and The Mothers' Trilogy is how *Trauma* introduces familiar psychoanalytic motifs while downplaying the director's well-known and self-conscious critique of the medium through such motifs as incomplete mourning and loss, castration, and sexual repression.

ALLEGORY AND THE BAROQUE: THE MOTHERS' TRILOGY

The Mother's Trilogy, thus named by Argento, consists of *Suspiria* (1977), *Inferno* (1980), and *La terza madre* (2006), and represents Argento's attempt to foray into the world of myth and symbol through mother figures and a more disclosed connection to Fascism. The films are intent on evoking deep-seated fears and anxieties that attach to rage, abjection, and death associated with the powerful maternal figures. Their personas and milieus invite a close examination of Argento's self-conscious uses of the medium as artifice, through the operations of a camera, editing, and attention to clichés through color, spaces, and bodies. The three films are shot in Germany, the United States, and Italy. The phenomenon of witchcraft is associated with the lower depths reminiscent of Dante's *Divine Comedy*, the *Inferno*, but also allegorically with the human body. This Argentinian body is frequently identified with the evil mother, the bad witch, and teachers. Argento's maternal figures, teacher, and witches also include occasional benign witches, most notably in Sarah, Mandy's mother in the third film of the trilogy.

In *Suspiria*, the first of the trio of films, Suzy Bannion (Jessica Harper), a wholesome appearing teenage girl, is a student in a Freiburg

school of dance. Her arrival in a deluge, with no one to receive her except a fleeing young woman, the first victim, who will remark in a kind of proleptic meta-commentary, 'so absurd, so fantastic.' As a protagonist in a quest to discover the evil that has destroyed her classmates, Suzy will lose her innocence; helper figures will show the way; and a malevolent maternal trio composed of her headmistress Madame Blanc (Joan Bennett), Miss Tanner (Alida Valli), and Teacher (Margherita Horowitz) will fall to Suzy to destroy.

Argento's *gialli* and his supernatural films, including the Mother's Trilogy, have been considered controversial for his treatment of gender and sexuality. Sexual ambiguity, as well as charges of misogyny, has been commonplace in Argento criticism. However, the historical, mythical, and supernatural prevail, and it is significant that while fathers are merely alluded to, the maternal plays the dominant role and the issue of sexuality is downplayed in the presence of younger women. *Suspiria* is indebted to Thomas De Quincey's *Suspiria de Profundis* from which Argento borrows his Mothers—Mater Lachrymarum (Mother of Tears), Mater Suspiriorum (Mother of Sighs), and Mater Tenebrarum (Mother of Darkness)—to bring cinema and buried worlds into dialogue, with an especial emphasis on death and grief. *Suspiria* refines *Profondo rosso* in pursuing the unthought and unarticulated in conventional narration, especially in relation to threatening fantasies of motherhood acted out in the films by the young women in their fear of rejection, loss, and death.

The administrator of the Richard Wagner School is Madame Blanc (Joan Bennett). The whiteness of Madame Blanc's name contrasts with the 'Black Queen' of witchcraft, Helene Marcos, a nineteenth century Greek immigrant responsible for the underworld of witchcraft. She and the other teachers, surrogate maternal figures, are not only of indeterminate 'nature,' but are old in contrast to the young women who are their charges and often their victims. The gruesome death of the blind pianist Daniel compels Linda Schulte-Sasse to ask, 'Is the milieu created by the film, especially the house and the square where Daniel is attacked and killed, evocative of Munich rather than Freiberg architecture and redolent of Nazism, thus lending the film a potential fascist subtext?' (2002).

The *Suspiria* text is reminiscent of Klaus Theweleit's study of Fascism in *Male Fantasies* (1987), according to which wives and mothers are degraded, except for the nurses who are presented as desexualized and hence unthreatening. The focus in Theweleit is on the Freikorps'

relationship to National Socialism through violence, architecture, literature, films, and cartoons, expressing their fascist attitudes toward bodies, fluids, women, history, politics, and socialism. Of Argento's supernatural mothers, Schulte-Sasse has written that they constitute a critical aspect of the style and politics of *Suspria*: '[I]f the hidden reverse of fascism's friendly face was brutality, Argento's cinema reverses Disney to show the source of beauty in rottenness and the impossibility of reliance—on the spoken or written word, on technology, on other people, on oneself.' The film language of *Suspria* parallels Argento's desire 'to render visible the invisible, which always entails recognizing and remembering, mapping an unmappable space and returning the other's malevolent gaze' (Schulte-Sasse 2002).

At the climax of *Suspria*, comparable to painter Francis Bacon's use of color and distortion, Argento does more than render the invisible visible; he defamiliarizes the visible to render the different faces and bodies of the mothers as in a shadow theater. In *Suspria*, Argento's most innovative and successful film, Argento adopted a Gothic supernatural form. Allegory and surrealism play a significant role in the films. Argento draws on a range of sources: fairy tales, folk tales, De Quincey, Disney films, *The Divine Comedy*, and expressionist art, with their emphasis on extreme affect, distortion and violence. The film takes the viewer from the everyday world into the maternal reign of death, a world of corpses, and antique rituals. The lighting in the film, the uses of color, the uses of sound, and its grotesque dreamlike scenarios are connected to figures from history, legend, and art through a pedagogy of power and perversion that becomes surrealistic.

The casting of the teachers at the dance school is characteristic of Argento's use of famous actors in his films: in *Suspria*, Joan Bennett, of Hollywood fame, and the Italian star Alida Valli, also identified with Hollywood cinema and with Alfred Hitchcock for *The Paradine Case* (1947). Argento's penchant for young protagonists is also evident with Suzy Banyon (Jessica Harper). The familiar generational divide is evident in the dark, evil smelling, and shadowy underworld discovered by Suzy, which is revealed as the lair of the mothers and their engines for destroying obstacles to their survival and maintaining their power over the young.

From an critical perspective, Jacqueline Reich suggests that the films mimic Argento's misogynist designs on his viewers (2001, p. 109). This view would reinforce Argento as a purveyor of decadence and

sensationalism in his reliance on reproducing conditions of imitation, identification, and unselfconscious affect. While Reich is aware of the artifice, special effects, and operatic character of horror, her emphasis seems to be on the mimetic dimensions of violence and the material of cinema as real and influential through being fused within the body of woman, particularly of mothers, as well as the role of narrative endings. This position postulates a cinema that fails to distinguish Argento's distinctive contribution to a mode of cinema that does not merely stimulate affect, but, through formal and aesthetic strategies, incites the viewer to react intellectually.

Schulte-Sasse's comments on the aesthetics of *Suspiria*'s sheer specular-ity invoke a different view of gendered representation. The film invites a mode other than narrative, one of viewing as a journey through magic or psychopathology as the dissolution of the family progresses. The witches' goal is 'systematic and widespread accumulation of capital and will to power', combined with psychosis as 'a destructive power that resembles magic in its capacity to cause real-life disaster' (Schulte-Sasse 2002).

The filming of the deaths of the victims in *Suspiria* vies with the graphic design of the art deco architecture to produce a response that does not elicit reductive interpretation or meaning but a moment of sensory overload: involving jarring camera angles, dazzling coloration, and vertiginous images of the disintegrating Helene Marcos. The intensity of the moment 'is subsumed by the laws of aesthetics that literally reduce her to an *objet d'art*, and our reception shifts wildly from the closeness of identification to the pleasure of aesthetic distance—a pleasure that is disinterested in a very different sense than that meant by Kant' (Schulte-Sasse 2002).

In *Inferno*, the second of the trilogy, the cruelty of Argento's cinema evokes a world that has become exceedingly violent and stylized. Argento's allegories would insert gore into the world both of sitcoms and of popular psychology to unsettle commonsensical theories about voyeurism and maternal bodies. The assumption of many critical commentators is that viewers cannot distinguish between art and life. *Inferno* (1980) establishes a dreamlike work that characterizes the trials of the different protagonists in the New York house erected for Mater Tenebrarum, the Mother of Darkness.

Rose Elliott (Irene Miracle) is the first to penetrate the lower depths of the antique seller Kazamian's shop by descending through a fetid pool of water containing a corpse. She enters the world of the damned, only to be destroyed herself. As in Dante's *Inferno*, Mark Elliott, seeking his sister, Rose, undergoes the same journey to find her and penetrates more

deeply into the inferno. The characters he encounters along the route are vicious and exploitative, such as the caretaker played by Alida Valli and her paramour; also the Countess Elise, played by Daria Nicolodi, afflicted with debilitating anxiety and overrun by cats. Mark continues through the labyrinths until he arrives face to face with Varelli, the architect of the three houses, who informs him of their history, and finally he encounters the Mother of Darkness, who attempts to seduce him to remain in her world.

One of the most horrifying moments in *Inferno* is the gruesome scene of the antiques dealer Kazamian (Sacha Pitoeff), seeking to bury a bag of hated cats in the river, when he is overrun by rats who feed on his body. This moment balances with the earlier scene in which Rose is drawn into the dirty pool in Kazamian's basement, which yields a rotting corpse. In a film of escalating and horrific murders, *Inferno* ends with the lone survivor Mark escaping from the burning house. The film's journey through the inferno appears as a riddle or a perverse game, embodied by the characters in the film as they portray different aspects of greed, romance, paranoia, curiosity, and sexuality. In this film, as in *La terza madre*, the emphasis is on investigation, exemplified in Kazamian's books, in the film's extra-textual allusions to Poe, alchemy, and technological experimentation, all leading to the central enigma, the Mother of Darkness, with her warning that 'all will die,' but Mark flees and finds himself in the everyday world of New York City.

Argento's world in both *Inferno* and *La terza madre* invokes Walter Benjamin's obsession with the pervasiveness of evil, the 'blackness of the soul... the literal hell which haunts Baroque reflexes' (Benjamin 1998, p. 18). The archaic mother figure is identified with the Jungian Magna Mater and/or the three mothers described by Deleuze as embodying the uterine, oral, and the Oedipal mother, connected to the power of the law (Deleuze 1989).

ARTAUD'S THEATER OF CRUELTY AND THE NEO-BAROQUE

Antonin Artaud, in his conception of a theater of cruelty as a violent reaction against representation, called for 'ocular destruction' as a social act. Artaud's theater is, 'At its best... a temporary vehicle for channeling forces; at its worst it makes the power of forces stagnate by captivating them with its process of completion and self-containment' (Deleuze 1993, p. x). Benjamin's *The Origins of German Tragic Drama* offers variants on

the world of the senses through theatrical forms. In Argento, the assaults on cinematic representation function to radically de-realize inherited images of the world. The Argento syndrome is a theater of cruelty created to attack commonplace reality, challenging the spectator to participate in, not merely passively view, the nature and consequences of torture and death so frequently associated with the feminine and maternal figure. Argento's experimentations with cinematic forms are akin to 'baroque effects to render death and terror visible' (Canova 2003, p. 108).

In *La terza madre*, Sarah Mandy (Asia Argento) is a student of art restoration who becomes involved in a tragic error involving the opening of a tomb containing items belonging to the third mother, the Mother of Tears. Unfortunately, the seal is broken (the Seventh Seal?) by Sarah's colleague Giselle, who is murdered, and Sarah undertakes to discover the circumstances of Giselle's death. This will lead her into a confrontation not only with the inmates of the Roman house but also with the contemporary inhabitants of Rome, since the evil let loose is more threatening than in the previous films. The streets are overrun with murderous groups, and also, psychoses have become so prolific: mothers throwing their babies into the Tiber, street crimes, thefts, murders, etc. Sarah further learns of her genealogy as daughter of a benevolent witch and of the nature of alchemy that involves white and black magic. At the climax, Sarah joins forces with the police and Enzo Marchi, a detective (Cristian Solimeno), is assigned to work with her. After arduous ordeals, the two reach the underground center, where they confront the Mother of Tears, in appearance first as sensuously seductive, later clothed, and finally as the skeletal figure of Death.

The realm of the mythic mother in each of the versions of the Mothers' Trilogy, but especially *La terza madre*, is tied to Argento's obsessive concern with violence by way of visual culture. The maternal metamorphosis of the maternal body into a skeleton is identified with advertising and commercial television, a specific object of Argentinian contempt. For Argento, 'television is the literal nightmare of cinema' (Thoret 2008, p. 130, my trans.), not only in its censoring practices but more in its commonplace view of the world. Argento's scathing televisual nightmare 'is in the murderous figure of the television talk show as well as in the censoring role of formulaic fixed patterns' (Thoret 2008, pp. 129–130, my trans.) that he identifies with epistemological violence.

In developing his conceptions of the Baroque, Gilles Deleuze invoked Walter Benjamin's *Origins of German Tragic Drama*, writing

that ‘Walter Benjamin... showed that allegory... was a power of figuration entirely different from that of the symbol... [and] transforms history into a nature in a world that has no center’ (Deleuze 1993, p. 125). In this perspective, the figures resist identification in literal or individual terms; they become generators of anxiety, defined in Eugenie Brinkema’s words as ‘the creeping of the flesh’ that she defines as something that is a nothing, it is a not-yet nothing that churns’. Brinkema criticizes the tendency to reduce affect to intentionality by arguing that ‘affect is neither purposive nor intentional’ (Brinkema 2014, p. 187). For her, affect is non-intentional, indifferent, and resists the given-over attributes of a teleological spectatorship. From this perspective the text contests reductive naming and interpretation, leaving the text open to interrogation and uncertainty.

CONCLUSION

Argento’s style does not fall into utopian or dystopian forms common to critical writings on the technological sublime, but it can be said to be an aesthetic of the sublime. His films, especially the *gialli*, are investigations of cinema, television at times, animating and unsettling institutional and cinematic clichés concerning violence and wanton brutality in all its forms. Argento’s uses of media are predicated on the importance of actively engaging his viewers in experiencing and also in contemplating the horrors displayed. Through riddles, deadly games, and dream-like images, he fuses older cinematic forms with current digitalized ones, conventional genre forms and avant-garde styles, and nightmares of sexuality and violence in the midst of everyday banality gone amok. His baroque sensibility as identified by critics (as well as by himself) might be understood as existing in a fourth world where thoughts of infinity give rise (not always felicitously) to reflections on the body, the senses, on organic and inorganic life, and on violence and power.

This essay has traced Argento’s frequent attachment to the figure of the mother through the excesses of melodrama and has appropriated often innovating cinematic styles and languages to propose different conceptions of history, myth, and imagination in philosophic and aesthetic terms, in order to illuminate and perhaps undermine clichés of motherhood. While he has been criticized for his treatments of maternal figures, his work at its most shocking has revealed that in his treatment of them, he has challenged ‘spectators to question their own pleasures in watching

these films... [that] demand that we think about the very ontology of cinema' (Koven 2006, p. 156–157). His uses of violent, bloody, and decomposing figures and situations are substitutes for the repulsive aspects of a world where sentiment neutralizes and cruelty poses the potential to question and reflect on reigning beliefs and actions, especially those that surround the mystique of motherhood.

NOTES

1. See Landy (1986, pp. 123–126).
2. See Landy (2009, pp. 113–136).
3. See Landy (1986, pp. 105–108).
4. See Günsberg (2005, pp. 46–49).
5. See Landy (2004, pp. 85–106).
6. See also Brinkema (2014, p. 138).

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AUTHOR BIOGRAPHY

Marcia Landy is Distinguished Professor of English and Film Studies Emerita at the University of Pittsburgh. Her books include *Fascism in Film: The Italian Commercial Cinema, 1931–1943* (1986); *Imitations of Life: A Reader on Film and Television Melodrama* (1991), *British Genres: Cinema and Society, 1930–1960* (1991); *Film, Politics, and Gramsci* (1994); *Queen Christina* (1996 with Amy Villarejo); *Cinematic Uses of the Past* (1996); *The Folklore of Consensus: Theatricality and Spectacle in Italian Cinema 1930–1943* (1998); *Italian Film* (2000); *The Historical Film: History and Memory in Media* (2000); *Stars: The Film Reader* (2004 co-edited with Lucy Fischer); *Monty Python's Flying Circus* (2005), and *Stardom, Italian Style: Screen Performance and Personality in Italian Cinema* (2008); *Cinema and Counter-History* (2015). Her essays on cultural theory, cinema history, national cinema, and genres have appeared in anthologies and in prestigious scholarly journals.

Italian Motherhood on Screen

Faleschini Lerner, G.; D'Amelio, M.E. (Eds.)

2017, XIII, 293 p. 2 illus., Hardcover

ISBN: 978-3-319-56674-0