

## **The House of the Screaming Child: Ambivalence and the Representation of Children in *Profondo Rosso* (Dario Argento, 1975)**

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While broadly renowned for hyperactive visual spectacles of color and carnage over complex narratives, the plot of Dario Argento's *Profondo rosso* hinges upon an urban legend known as "The House of the Screaming Child". It concerns a derelict old house where the film's protagonist Marcus Daly (David Hemmings) is told, "a strange thing happened. One night, a hunter woke up before dawn and heard a child singing in a shrill voice. Soon after, the voice stopped, and he heard shrieking, screams and weeping". Throughout the film's investigation into a series of gruesome murders that provide the film's key visceral spectacles, the image of the traumatized "screaming child" is a crucial motif. Argento's most admired *giallo* hinges on its construction of the child as evil even as it blurs its representation of children with the infantilization of elderly people as a method of misdirecting attention away from the identity of the killer. The mystery around which *Profondo rosso*'s narrative is structured therefore relies on the conscious Othering of what we are calling "non-adult" knowledge. As such, the ethical ambivalence of its representations of children and elderly people overlap in its structuring system of subterfuge and revelation.

This paper explores Argento's ambivalent representations of children in *Profondo rosso* that deconstruct the mechanics underlying a number of assumptions about the ethical status of children in horror more broadly. *Profondo rosso* demonstrates the broader ambivalence of the *giallo* category in its ethical construction of childhood as it subverts and collapses these assumptions. The film offers three significant non-adult characters upon whom much of its narrative and thematic propulsion relies, despite the fact that the primary focus on the film is on the adult protagonist Marcus and his investigative quest. This paper explores the linkages and intersections that run across and beyond the privileged sphere of adult perception, flagging *Profondo rosso* not as a film that seeks to cast non-adults in a necessarily positive or negative light, but rather to destabilize the assumptions surrounding the dominance of adults as the site of normative subjectivity.

### **Dario Argento and "The Cinema of Ambivalence"**

As one of the most internationally recognizable instances of the Italian *giallo* film, *Profondo rosso* features many of its defining characteristics. Meaning simply "yellow" in English, the origins of *giallo* lie in the yellow-covered mystery pulps published by Mondadori from the 1920s onwards, which according to Mikel Koven were often translations of English-language stories by writers such as Agatha Christie and Edgar Wallace (2)<sup>1</sup>. These viscera-rich movies straddle horror and crime thriller genres<sup>2</sup> but are marked by their own distinct iconography, most notably the omnipresent black-gloved hands of the killer and an emphasis on graphic sex and violence.

For Koven, the most “disturbing and upsetting” appearances by children in *giallo* are when they are cast in the role of murder victim, as *Solamente nero* (*The Bloodstained Shadow*, Antonio Bido, 1978), *Chi l'ha vista morire?* (*Who Saw Her Die?*, Aldo Lado, 1972), *Non si sevizia un paperino* (*Don't Torture a Duckling*, Lucio Fulci, 1972), and Umberto Lenzi's 1975 film, *Eyeball* (66). The emotional impact of this mode of representation stems from the symbolic fetishization and destruction of childhood innocence. Children are victimized in more complex ways in *Profondo Rosso*, suggesting that death is not the only way that their representation can unsettle. With the bulk of the film implying that the killer is the adult version of the androgynous knife-wielding child that appears in the film's famous opening credit sequence, Argento implements a number of formal, narrative and thematic strategies associated with the so-called ‘evil child’ trope. Although this construction is revealed to be a consciously deployed deception, it is not rejected completely: the small but significant figure of the sadistic young child Olga (Nicoletta Elmi) remains one of the film's most ominous and important lingering enigmas.

Crucial to the arguments of this paper is Koven's emphasis on ambivalence in the classic *giallo* film. This aspect is so fundamental that he confidently defines the category broadly as “a cinema of ambivalence” (58), particularly in its relation to and treatment of modernity:

The changes within Italian culture, across all the different regions of the country, can be seen through the *giallo* film as something to be discussed and debated—issues pertaining to identity, sexuality, increasing levels of violence, women's control over their own lives and bodies, history, the state—all abstract ideas, which are all portrayed situationally as human stories in the *giallo* film. (16)

As one of the most well-known instances of the Italian *giallo* film, *Profondo rosso* offers a particularly useful case study with which to consider Koven's claim that *gialli* “open up a discursive space wherein modernity itself can be discussed” (59), specifically in regard to its ambivalent construction of children and childhood, and the ethical mechanics that underpin it.

This ambivalence permeates Argento's work, arguably most apparent in *Tenebre* (1982) and *La Sindrome di Stendhal* (*The Stendhal Syndrome*, 1996). So fundamental is this trait that Ray Guins succinctly mapped Argento's broader ethical vision to it:

Boundaries between good and evil are so unclearly demarcated that one is left to wonder which position has been really conquered while the films' protagonists are frequently left both mentally and physically scarred. (141)

It is not only thematic matters that are treated with such ambivalence by Argento: a number of critics have identified his general disinterest in cohesive narrative, sacrificing it for his trademark baroque visual spectacles (Knee 1996; McDonagh 2010; Gallant 2001). So too, Argento's representation of childhood exploits and defamiliarizes the iconography of the nursery, ridiculing its nostalgic associations with menacing sonic and visual phantasmagoria.

## Evil Children and *bambini malvagi*

*Profondo rosso* was released during a peak period in the production of evil child films in the 1970s. The surge in popularity of these films is commonly attributed to the financial and critical success of *The Exorcist* (1973)<sup>3</sup>. However, since the late 1960s a steady stream of evil child characters had already started appearing on cinema and television screens arguably in response to Polanski's 1968 film, *Rosemary's Baby*.<sup>4</sup> Having accumulated a list of over 200 evil child films, Karen Renner notes that the subsequent proliferation of narratives containing evil children has since become "almost a trite plot device" (85). In her analysis of the convergence of the horror and science fiction genres with the family melodrama at the end of '60s and into the '70s, Vivienne Sobchack observes that the child in these films was portrayed as "an alien force that threatened both its immediate family and all adult authority" (183). She contends that representations of children as malevolent at this time mirrored social anxieties concerning youth rebellion in the late 1960s. Traditionally a signifier of purity and innocence and often cast as a victim whose suffering was emblematic of broader social concerns, Sobchack states that within horror films of the period, "generic emphasis was on the child not as terrorized victim, but as cannibalistic, monstrous, murderous, selfish, sexual" (182). Through such representations, the established social order vilified the child and effectively forced children to shoulder the blame for existing social problems.

William Paul examines portrayals of children and their cinematic transformation from victims to villains, claiming this shift in representation is "the central defining feature of horror films of the 1970s and 1980s" (267). At first glance, the deployment of the evil child trope as the central deception in *Profondo rosso* appears to be simply an example of Italian post-war cinema's tendency towards adapting Hollywood genre conventions for its own localized ends (Hutchings 128). From the outset it must be acknowledged that Italy had its own independent cinematic traditions of this figure, most overtly in Mario Bava's *Operazione paura* (*Kill Baby Kill*, 1966) and Federico Fellini's segment of the anthology *Histoires extraordinaires* (*Spirits of the Dead*, 1968), "Tobey Dammit". In these films, the child is an opaque figure onto which adult characters project their own fury, fears and fantasies. It is from this tradition that Argento draws, interrogating and criticizing adult tendencies to blame children for their own faults.

Argento's employment of evil child tropes is a deliberate misdirection. Julian Granger correctly described *Profondo rosso* as "all one big wind up" (124) as throughout the film we are invited to believe that the killer child seen at the start, now an adult but still with the psychology of a child is on the rampage to conceal his/her identity. Argento effectively toys with the audience's willingness to accept that a child might be a killer, exploiting attitudes towards children that view them as monstrous Others. He achieves this through the simplest of visual strategies: dropping a bloodied knife at a child's feet. Through proximity alone, the child is cast as monstrous: the rest is supposition. That the murder is *not* shown on screen until the final minutes of the film is crucial, demonstrating Paul's observation that the murders committed in evil child films generally take place off-screen. He argues this is largely due to the difficulty of showing a child physically overpowering an adult so that it is believable rather than "ludicrous" (283).<sup>5</sup> In the case of

*Profondo rosso*, it also fuels assumptions concerning the guilt of the child by playing with the conventions of evil child films. By maintaining a “dramatic strategy of slow revelation that makes us both anxious and pleased at discovering evil in children” (283), Paul contends that films like these indulge, vindicate and acquit the proclivity in adults towards paedophobia. It is precisely these adult desires that *Profondo rosso* explores.

Koven has suggested that both victims and killers in *gialli* are often marked by their Otherness (55-6), a crucial observation when considering the construction of non-adult villainy in *Profondo rosso*. Ray Guins underscores that neither Argento’s male or female characters fully satisfy the assumptions that underlie traditional gender roles, observing that male characters have a tendency towards femininity, and that both male and female characters are equally capable of murderous violence (141). As Adam Knee indicates, in almost all cases the identity of the killer is not revealed until the conclusion and this anonymity allows the audience space to speculate on the guilty party’s identity, including gender (215). In his insightful analysis of Argento’s 1970 giallo *L’uccello dalle piume di cristallo* (*The Bird with the Crystal Plumage*) Frank Burke suggests that this aspect of Argento’s work was responding to historical context: this was an era that saw dramatic changes for women in Italy with the rise of the women’s movement, coinciding with a steady increase in representations of violence. In *L’uccello dalle piume di cristallo* this manifests as a collision between “women’s self-expression, political protest and violence” (199), a legacy that arguably can be seen continuing through other works of this period through their gender fluidity: the chromosomally abnormal killer in *Il gatto a nove code* (*The Cat/Nine Tails*, 1971), the insane killer tomboy in *4 mosche di velluto grigio* (*Four Flies on Grey Velvet*, 1971), and of course, the ambiguously gendered Marta in *Profondo rosso*.

Otherness functions as a site of thematic interest in *Profondo rosso* not only through gender difference, but also through the binaries of both adults and children and adults and elderly people. From this perspective, age difference can also be conceived as part of what Knee has labelled Argento’s “narratives of perceptual uncertainty” (224). While the blurring of gender in Argento’s work from this period has received the most critical attention, it is indicative of a broader thematic desire to collapse a *range* of assumed binaries. By doing so, Argento exposes and questions normative distinctions between male/female and masculine/feminine, and crucially to the concerns of this paper, between young/old. By entwining the mystery component of *Profondo rosso* around the false impression that its murders adhere to the trope of the evil child film, that its guilty party is in fact a woman in her mid-60s exposes the complex overlap between representations of children and elderly people in terms of yet another set of key thematic binaries: past/present, intelligence/ignorance, and innocence/guilt.

### **Approaching *Profondo rosso***

An initial consideration of critical approaches to *Profondo Rosso* provides a useful context to delve into the complexities that mark Argento’s depictions of children and childhood in the film, and its conflation with elderly people. On a first viewing, *Profondo Rosso* implies that the killer is Carlo, encouraging the spectator to link the troubled alcoholic adult with the androgynous child who

appears in the film's infamous primal scene that opens the film. The significance of the introductory sequence is only revealed in the film's final moments, showing Marta killing Carlo's father (the body Marcus finds behind the wall in the mansion) as the child watches in terror before picking up the bloodied knife. This event traumatizes Carlo, supposedly sparking both his alcoholism and homosexuality (the latter problematically deemed aberrant in the context of the film). In the final scene, Marta attacks Marcus, recalling Grendle's mother avenging her son's death. Like Beowulf, Marcus decapitates the monstrous mother with the film ending on a close-up of a pool of her eponymous "deep red" blood.

The overt Oedipal drama that structures the whodunit element of the film and its emphasis upon childhood trauma makes it clear why psychoanalysis has proven an enduring critical methodology with which to consider *Profondo rosso*. Chris Barber's observation that *Profondo rosso* is a "very literal depiction of the Freudian Oedipus complex and confrontation with the incest" (5) adheres to a tendency for *gialli* and their killers to be broadly predicated upon elements of Freud-oriented pop psychology (Koven 105). Argento's films in particular typify the fact that,

the *giallo* literally begs for psychoanalytic enquiry", suggesting that the typical Argento protagonist is the victim/witness of trauma who must keep returning to the scene of the crime (the Freudian 'nachttaglichkeit' or retranscription of memory; popularly represented via flashback sequences), often committed by a killer who just can't resist serial murder (the psychoanalytic 'compulsion to repeat'). (Needham 297)

For L. Andrew Cooper, the child standing over the bloodied knife in the opening credits flags Freud's notion of the "return of the repressed" (55)<sup>6</sup>. This is manifested most clearly when Marcus concludes Carlo is the killer because his name is on the archived school drawing that depicts the original 'primal' murder scene identical to the image on the wall in the abandoned mansion. For Cooper, the drawings are significant because they point to a repressed trauma "that could very well return as a murderous impulse" (57). He sees the centrality of childhood trauma and the Oedipus complex in *Profondo Rosso* communicated through the identification of privileged elements of the film's mise-en-scene. Thus the focus on toys (56), and Carlo's homosexuality (and his mother's 'responsibility' for it) are read as particularly pertinent to the construction of Carlo's supposed monstrosity (58)<sup>7</sup>.

At the film's conclusion, however, it is the revelation of Marta's—not Carlo's—guilt that exposes this Oedipal plot as little more than a conceptual booby trap. Guins argues that while the murder in the film's primal scene clearly depicts "a symbolic exchange of power (where) Marta uses the phallus signifier to free herself from the oppressive father figure" (142), it is privileged as *Carlo's* primal trauma. This again is supported by the focus on the children's toys and the nursery-rhyme style musical motif so crucial to its unfolding narrative (143).

Even beyond the murders, there is further evidence that Argento is flagging Freud's Oedipal framework with the conscious intention of subverting it. At one point in the film, Gianna asks Marcus why he became a pianist, and he replies: "Well, my psychiatrist would say that it's because I hated my father, because when I bang the keys I'm really bashing his teeth in.

Actually, its because I like music”. Later we see Professor Giordano’s teeth quite literally bashed in: not because of some Oedipal exchange, but because he (like Helga and Amanda before him) has learned the identity of the killer. For Maitland McDonagh, the in-built lure of a readymade Oedipal framework appears impossible to resist, noting of Marcus’ quip, “He’s joking, of course, but it’s a joke that conceals a grain of truth” (102). McDonagh herself argues that *Profondo rosso* is a broadly self-aware film, however, which renders the suggestion that Marcus (and Argento himself) is consciously making fun of the very theoretical assumptions that its red herrings are in large part based not just possible, but highly probable. Most immediately, there is no other evidence in the film that Marcus has issues with his father: he even rolls his eyes before jokingly giving Gianna his bemused Freudian answer. Despite the film seemingly promoting psychoanalysis and consolidating its position as a dominant interpretive framework, there is compelling evidence to suggest it is *mocking* such readings, deliberately undermining this interpretive assumption with its revelatory twist in particular.

From this perspective, new levels of ambivalence in *Profondo rosso* rise to the surface, affirming Julian Grainger’s contention that Argento “packs just about every cliché from the genre into two short hours and sends up the whole lot” (115). The murder mystery elements that govern the film’s narrative trajectory can themselves be seen as “chock full of ideas and theories, clues as to the killer’s motivation, red herrings and pointless asides” (115). As Grainger eloquently surmises, “Argento’s great joke in *Deep Red* is that actually he couldn’t give a damn who did it. It is a murder mystery in which the revelation of who committed the murder is of no importance” (119).

Rather than suggesting Argento’s representation of children and childhood in *Profondo rosso* is ethically loaded in any particular direction, these representations are marked by a similar ambivalence. The centrality of the Oedipal ‘trick’ acts to neither condemn nor rescue the figure of the child from any ultimate moral conclusion. While the film’s climax reveals that the brutal and spectacular murders that preceded it are not the result of childhood trauma acted out *a la* “return of the repressed” as such, the contradictions inherent in the figure of Olga problematize attempts to identify a singular, cohesive treatment of childhood in the film. The fascinating character of Olga will be explored shortly to further develop this argument, but beforehand it is vital to address the curious manner in which Argento’s ambivalent representations of childhood and children are constructed.

### **Monstrous Others in *Profondo rosso***

Crudely speaking, whilst otherness refers to the different, unfamiliar and unknown elements of that which is not self, the other as monstrosity perceives difference as threat. In his analysis of the otherness of children, Owain Jones describes how “children’s worlds are irretrievably alien to adults: bizarre (to us) ‘other’ worlds, closed off by ‘the dark of reason’ that limits adult gaze” (174). The potential threat posed by the otherness of children tends to be subjugated by the adult world, which uses the construction of the child as innocent to disenfranchise children. Such action invariably denies children opportunities for self-agency, controlling and monitoring every aspect of the child’s life. Karen Lury observes that the child’s perspective generally tends to be overlooked by adults who, “presume to know and understand the world

from only their own perspective” (3). Consequently the knowledge and understanding of children is all too often devalued and dismissed. *Profondo rosso* inverts the adult/child dyad so that the adult Marcus is infantilized in various ways (most noticeably when he is a passenger in Gianna’s car and is barely able to see above the dashboard) even as he makes the crucial mistake of dismissing those who know the truth of the mystery he is attempting to solve. Significantly, the film’s two central child characters Olga and Carlo (the latter who can be perhaps best defined as an ‘un-adult’ or just plain old ‘child-like’ due to his arrested development) warn Marcus that he is blundering into danger, but their warnings are ignored.

While there has been much critical attention paid to how the blurring of gender boundaries as a method of challenging audience assumptions manifests in *Profondo rosso*—not only through Marta’s dressing as a man to commit her crimes, but also in the androgyny of the child in the original murder scene—few have focused on another parallel and often overlapping binary: that between children and elderly people. There are only two elderly characters in *Profondo rosso*: Marta herself (Calamai was in her mid-60s when she appeared in the film), and Amanda Righerri’s maid, whose dithering fussiness after her employer’s gruesome murder appears to exist for a brief moment of light comic relief. She also adds a dash of suspense when the professor visits Amanda’s house and the maid begins cleaning the bathroom, threatening to erase from a mirror a name written by Amanda as she lay dying. Initially, Marta too appears to fulfil a comical role as a doddering elderly woman. The shock of her guilt at the film’s gruesome climax stems largely from the fact that she has been presented as such an innocuously marginal figure. This is best represented in the scene when Marcus explores Helga’s apartment after finding her dead. Passing an enclave on his way down the corridor, Marcus sees the Munchian painting reflected in a mirror but fails to “see” Marta in the reflection. Mistaking the mirror for a painting, Marcus interprets the image of Marta as one of a number of Gorgon-esque apparitions. Both Gracey and Xavier Mendik (1998) have identified the figure of the monstrous mother as a recurring feature throughout Argento’s oeuvre<sup>8</sup>, and Marta offers a tangible example of this. That she murders those who seek to expose her and is finally beheaded in the film’s climactic finale adds to the Gorgon mythos. Marcus’ selective blindness is a key theme in *Profondo rosso* as the audience effectively joins with him in their inability to discern the truth concerning both Marta and her son.

What is fascinating about Marta’s character in relation to how her monstrosity is constructed is how it overlaps with aspects of the representation of childhood and the status of children. The low status of children is partly because of their diminutive size, but more so due to assumptions concerning their innocence and agency. Henry Jenkins asserts that innocence and incompetence amount to the same thing when applied to the child. He observes how “children are understood as ‘asocial or perhaps, pre-social,’ resulting in an emphasis on their ‘inadequacies,’ ‘immaturity,’ and ‘irrationality,’ on their need for protection and nurturing” (2). Childhood has therefore come to be characterized by the incompleteness of personhood, a time of ignorance and dependence as the child lacks mastery over his or her body, emotions and impulses. Here, mastery crucially amounts to repression. However, the deficiencies attached to childhood are often applied not just to children, but also to adults and elderly people who lack competencies

associated with adulthood, mastery and self-control. White and Groves point out that stigmatization of old age tends to emphasise “powerlessness” and “dependence”: characteristics considered “child-like” (84). While the infantilization of elderly people is obviously not unique to the representation of Marta in *Profondo rosso*, in this particular instance the character traits shared by elderly people and children hinge upon the ethical mechanics contained within. It seeks to expose them, albeit from a position marked by chronic ambivalence.

This warrants a preliminary examination of the way that age and guilt intersect in the killer herself. While much has been made of the casting of David Hemmings in *Profondo rosso* and its thematic links to his earlier role as the protagonist in Michelangelo Antonioni’s *Blow Up* (1966)<sup>9</sup>, there has been surprisingly little attention paid to Clara Calamai’s casting as Marta. Despite McDonagh’s observation that *Profondo rosso* “casts out allusions in all directions; the more you know, the more it resonates” (97) and spends a great deal of time elaborating on the significance of Hemmings’ past appearance in *Blow Up*, Calamai’s illustrious past receives no mention at all. While perhaps less immediately recognizable to American audiences, Calamai was one of the greatest stars of the Italian screen and her most famous and enduring role is as the female protagonist in Luchino Visconti’s reimagining of James M. Cain’s novel, *The Postman Always Rings Twice* (1934), *Ossessione* (*Obsession*, 1943). In his debut feature, Visconti casts Calamai as the femme fatale in a movie that Koven argues is as important to *giallo* as it is to Italian neo-realism, considering it the first real *giallo* film (3).

For Elena Past, the casting of Calamai in the role of Marta is crucial to understanding the film as a whole. She suggests that the numerous portraits and film stills of the young actress that line her apartment’s walls render the film both “semi-autobiographical”, and that “*Profondo rosso* writes itself as a kind of sequel to Calamai’s early career” (231). At the heart of this linkage between the fictional Marta and the real-life Calamai is her status as a relatively marginal character up until this final revelation. This appears to be true not only within the diegetic confines of the film itself but also in the case of the critics who underplayed (or even ignored) the casting of Calamai in the role of the killer.

A case in point is in the scene where Marcus first visits Marta in his pursuit of Carlo: he is awkward and polite, but disinterested and barely capable of maintaining even the most patronizing level of engagement. As already noted, Marta’s function appears to be primarily comical<sup>10</sup> as she repeatedly refers to Marcus as an “engineer”, despite him telling her that he is a pianist. But the film itself may not be as dismissive of Marta’s insight as Marcus, or—by virtue of the light-hearted tone of this scene—the audience is encouraged to be. When the disguised Marta threatens Marcus in his apartment, the scene is riddled with close-ups of sheet music notations and images of the piano’s small felt hammers hitting strings. In the context of the film’s broader stylistic regime, this all too easily appears to be a simple indulgence on Argento’s part. At best, Koven has suggested they provide a way to visually emphasise Marcus’ intense concentration (149), while for Martin King, the intensity of these tight shots encourage a symbolic association with the intrusion of the killer into the protagonist’s space in what he identifies as “a narrative cul-de-sac” (6).

But these carefully constructed images may speak of something far more significant. By visually representing the piano as a machine—one complete with a sheet-music ‘blueprint’—the film foreshadows Marta’s insight and implies that if looked at in the right way, she was in fact correct: Marcus *is* a kind of engineer. From this perspective, the film acknowledges Marta’s unique brand of knowledge when it has been dismissed by Marcus (and presumably, the audience), acknowledging that it may simply work on a different plane to the type of logic common to the adult characters. A similar Othering of non-adult knowledge also applies to the film’s children, and the assumptions linked to this alternative knowledge simultaneously permit the film its surprise ending and confirms *Profondo rosso*’s ambivalence to representations of childhood.

### **The Ambivalent Morality of Non-Adults**

There is ample evidence that Argento actively encourages his audience to assume a child is at the centre of the mystery in *Profondo rosso*. Following the opening credit murder sequence, Helga’s description of her psychic vision intimates the child is the killer: “There’s a child singing in that house. Death! Blood!” Here, singing and killing become concomitant actions, suggesting the same individual is responsible for both. Helga later describes her vision to the Professor, recounting how “I heard all those twisted thoughts: cruel and yet childish at the same time”. Her conflation of cruelty and childhood will eventually be literalized in the character of Olga, but also in the scene that immediately follows Helga’s vision, in which Argento’s probing camera slowly fetishizes a collection of childhood artefacts laid out on black velvet. Extreme close ups linger enticingly on each object, falsely promising viewers that these are all the clues needed to solve the film’s puzzle. Among the objects is a tiny toy cradle that is knocked over by a rolling marble as if to indicate a significant childhood trauma. There is also a pair of child’s drawings depicting a figure pierced by a blade. The crude drawing style of the artwork is reintroduced later in the film when Marcus discovers the concealed painting on the wall of the abandoned mansion, showing a child holding aloft a bloodied knife next to a man who has been stabbed to death.

This mural in the mansion eventually leads Marcus to his friend, Carlo. Both Marcus and the audience are encouraged to believe that Carlo’s emotional volatility as an adult—expressed through his alcoholism and homosexual self-loathing—is the result of arrested development. Assuming the killer suffered a trauma as a child, the authoritative Professor Giordani infers that the murderer is male when he suggests that “when he kills he must recreate the specific conditions which will trigger the release of all his pent-up madness”. Carlo even portrays *himself* as guilty in his own childhood drawings that depict him holding the murder weapon that killed his father. The clear implication is that Carlo is the murderer, although in the final minutes it is revealed he is not. So why does Carlo represent himself as a killer in his art? Could it be that, like so many children who witness domestic violence, he takes responsibility for what happened to his father because of his inaction or inability to help either of his parents? Laura Miller suggests that young children’s lack of understanding and insight when witnessing episodes of domestic violence, matched with their inherent egocentrism, “may inflate attributions of self-blame” (11). Certainly Carlo is the film’s most tragic

character: he is introduced to the audience as a miserable, tortured and self-destructive drunkard. When Marcus finds him inebriated outside the Blue Bar and advises him, “You go on the way you are and you won’t last very long”, Carlos retorts, “Who says I want to last?”

When Marcus concludes that Carlo is the murderer, Carlo assumes all responsibility. Argento uses psychoanalysis to conveniently explain trauma experienced in childhood and how it shapes development and determines adult psychology. Carlo’s self-loathing homosexuality and alcoholism are both treated as symptoms of failed adult masculinity resulting from an interrupted Oedipal trajectory. They are treated as disorders associated with his arrested development. During Helga’s connection with the killer’s mind, she utters words presumably spoken by Marta to Carlo after she murdered his father: “We must hide everything, everything in the house. No one must know. No one. Forget it. Forget it forever. Forever.” Carlo therefore is not only the traumatized child who years earlier witnessed his father’s murder, he remains that child frozen in time, tormented by events he is ostensibly forbidden to work through. Despite the quantity of psychoanalytic evidence that leads to Carlo as the murderer, spectators have been provided with an interpretive lens that is ultimately flawed and leads to a literal dead end. After Carlo’s confrontation with Marcus, his flight from the school is only partly driven by the arrival of the police. Running out onto the road, Carlo effectively dies by his own hand. Unable to escape his anguished past, he meets one of the film’s most gruesome and explicit ends as he is dragged mercilessly by a hook on a garbage truck, his body continually smashed against curb sides until his head is crushed under the wheel of a passing car. That it is a garbage truck Carlo is dragged behind also reflects his own sense of self as one that is abject and unworthy.

Crucially, this is *before* his innocence is revealed: Argento has made the spectator complicit to some degree in his death by inspiring a lynch mob response in the pleasure attained from watching Carlo’s graphic and spectacular death. After the revelation that Carlo was not the killer, the director retrospectively allows the garbage metaphor to work in a new direction, becoming a symbol for innocent Carlo’s wasted life, one tragically only half lived. Carlo’s death is the cruellest in the film because the audience—believing him to be guilty—is encouraged to take pleasure in seeing him suffer such a fittingly protracted and agonizing end as punishment for his perceived wrongdoings. At his end he is utterly alone. Simultaneously, however, Carlo *is* guilty of keeping his mother’s terrible secret, which has kept him locked within his tortured childhood, filled with misery and despair: Carlo in many ways died on the day he saw his mother murder his father, and has resembled a walking corpse ever since.

The haziness that inscribes Carlo’s guilt and/or innocence is complicated further by the figure of Olga, whose father is the caretaker of the mysterious mansion where Carlo’s family lived when his father was murdered. In the memorable scene where she is introduced to Marcus, Olga appears to him to be a normal child who is suddenly inexplicably hit in the face by her angry father. When Marcus quizzes Olga about this, she casually dismisses it, explaining that her father is mentally ill and implying she is a victim of domestic violence: a clue pointing to Marta’s mental illness that Marcus fails to pick up on because Marta is invisible to him. What Marcus also does not see (but what both the audience and Olga’s father do) is the source of his fury: her

apparent vicious cruelty. Olga has stuck a pin through a small lizard, torturing it for her own pleasure. Her sadism seems a regular occurrence: “You little witch!” Olga’s father barks just before he strikes her, “I told you not to do that again”. Just as disturbing is her reaction to being slapped by her father. The smirk Olga gives him is joined by a near-erotic lick of her now-bleeding lip, allowing the implied sexual satisfaction of the young child to combine disturbingly with the gruesome nature of her initial act of animal torture, possibly a rehearsal for larger prey. Indeed, the image of the pierced lizard recalls the earlier child’s drawing depicting a figure impaled on a long blade.

Aligned much more closely to the tradition of the evil child figure, Olga is a crucial character when contrasted with Carlo. As Grainger notes, with Olga “we now have an example not of childhood innocence corrupted by the actions of others, but of a child who seems to be inherently ‘simply evil’” (124). Olga forbids Carlo’s innocence from wholly escaping the broader category of childhood from a vision of demonic childhood that typifies the evil child trope. In other words, her sadism towards the lizard, which is in fact a vital clue to the mystery, is read as evidence of her evilness and this in turn extends to Carlo, condemning him for a murder he never committed. All of this confirms that children are easy scapegoats and are often blamed for adult crimes and problems. The construction of the figure of the child as evil is proof of the ease with which adults exploit the Otherness of childhood as they project onto children their own fears, needs and desires.

Olga is first seen peeking through a shuttered window in a manner typically ascribed to the stereotype of the elderly woman, eavesdropping on Marcus and her father’s conversation about the dilapidated mansion. Olga’s prying aligns her with Marta, who seems everywhere at once as Argento’s voyeuristic camera simulates moments of snooping from around corners. The caretaker recounts the history of the house and its reputation for being haunted. When Marcus asks who owned the house prior to its last occupant the camera pans away from the men and settles on Olga who is watching them speak from her window. As her father tells Marcus that his knowledge of the house does not go that far back, Olga smiles mischievously as though she alone is privy to this information.

Kerry Robinson and Cristyn Davies argue that the binarism that separates adulthood and childhood ensures the child remains the “powerless ‘other’ in the world of adults, a world in which adults become the ‘gate-keepers’ of knowledge and experience” (343). Through Olga, Argento inverts the relationship of age to knowledge and experience. Significantly, Olga is present when her father gives Marcus the keys to the padlocked gate of the mansion and sends her along as his guide. Keys are an important motif in the film and first appear when Helga gives a demonstration of her psychic abilities, describing a man in the audience with his hand in his pocket, clasping a set of keys just before she psychically reads the killers thoughts, as though the keys unlocked repressed memories. Olga’s presence during the sequences concerning the mansion compound in meaning and significance when one considers that she is a form of gatekeeper, dispensing knowledge and insights that go unheard and unheeded by the adults around her. At the mansion, she stands at the gate and warns Marcus that there are ghosts inside and to be careful. Marcus is dismissive, and yet ghosts are exactly what he finds as he uncovers old clues to a murder, including the decayed body of Carlo’s father who is bricked in Poe-like behind a wall. Later, Olga also plays

an important role in supplying Marcus with the keys to solving the mystery when he sees her reproduction of Carlo's boyhood painting. Like Marta and Carlo, Olga is privy to non-adult knowledge that is misunderstood both by characters in the diegesis and audiences.

*Profondo rosso* is marked by a critical ambivalence to the ethical construction of childhood that relies crucially on and around assumptions linked to the evil child trope, which typically sees children blamed for adult inadequacies. It offers three different characters that seemingly demonstrate either evil or the capacity for evil: Marta, Carlo and Olga. These characters are all collectively marked by their status as non-adults, and as such they are effectively invisible to Marcus and his investigation. What he can see, however, is the person he wrongly accuses of the murders of Helga, Professor Giordani and Amanda Righetti: the *adult* Carlo. Marcus's focus on adulthood and its inability to see the age groups that bookend it—manifesting in the figures of the child and an elderly woman—mean he is blind not only to Marta's identity as the killer (and it is a literal blindness: the film goes to great lengths to emphasise that he literally saw her at the scene of Helga's murder), but also to the violent sadism of his inadvertent assistant, Olga. That the latter goes unpunished in one of the film's most disturbing unresolved plot points highlights the ambivalence typical of Argento's work, and his broader refusal to allow clear moral categories to be established.

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## Endnotes

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<sup>1</sup> Wallace's work also inspired the German Krimi films, described by Koven as a "parallel movement" to the Italian *giallo* film (4-5).

<sup>2</sup> Technically, Koven views it more as a *filone* (what he translates loosely as being 'in the tradition of' something else (5-6)), and a similar distinction that is also made by Gary Needham who notes, "by its very nature the *giallo* challenges our assumptions about how non-Hollywood films should be classified, going beyond the sort of Anglo-American taxonomic imagine are that 'fixes' genre both in film criticism and the film industry to designate something specific" (295).

<sup>3</sup> Writing in his 1986 essay, "The Child as Demon in Films Since 1961", Wheeler Winston Dixon asserts that *The Exorcist* established "a series of stylistic and generic conventions that would spawn an endless series (still incomplete) of imitations" (81).

<sup>4</sup> A number of writers suggest that the boom in evil child-themed literature and films was a direct result of the enormous success of Ira Levin's novel and Polanski's subsequent adaptation (Wood 11, Sobchack 183, Renner 83). Among the films containing evil child characters released after *Rosemary's Baby* (but prior to *The Exorcist*) are *Night of the Living Dead* (1968), *Reazione a catena (Bay of Blood, 1971)*, *The Brotherhood of Satan* (1971), *The Nightcomers* (1971), *Blood on Satan's Claw* (1971), *Diabolica Malicia (Night Child, 1972)* and *The Other* (1972). The evil child also made its way to television in 1972 with Spielberg's possession-themed telemovie, *Something Evil*.

<sup>5</sup> This is not to say that children attacking adults is *not* directly portrayed on-screen. As a general rule, an evil child working alone, such as Rhoda Penmark in *The Bad Seed*, tends to rely on trickery and deceit rather than direct physical confrontation. However, children working together in groups—what Andrew Scahill calls "child collectives"—are more likely to be shown physically overpowering unwary adults. This can be seen in films from *Suddenly Last Summer* (1959) in which the character of Sebastian is quite literally consumed by a throng of children, to *Offspring* (2009), which likewise features feral cannibal children who violently overwhelm and ingest their adult prey.

<sup>6</sup> Robin Wood's foundational work on the genre introduced the Freudian concept of the "return of the repressed" to horror with the argument that "in a society built on monogamy and family there will be an enormous surplus of sexual energy that will have to be repressed; and that what is repressed must always strive to return" (15). This repression is embodied externally as the Other, whose "psychoanalytic significance resides in the fact that it functions not simply as something external to the culture or to the self, but also what is repressed (but never destroyed) in the self is projected outwards in order to be hated and disowned" (9).

<sup>7</sup> Explains Cooper: "For Freud, a mother loving her son too much, or vice versa, can make a boy gay, and that seems to be precisely what has happened

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with Marta and Carlo...Carlo fits a classic Freudian profile, and thus he fits perfectly with preconceptions for a killer in the Norman Bates vein” (59)

<sup>8</sup> Mendik identifies this tendency in *Suspiria* (1976), *Inferno* (1980), *Trauma* (1993), *Opera* (1987) and *The Stendhal Syndrome* (1996) (110), to which Grarey adds *Mother of Tears* (2007), *Phenomena* (1985) and *Giallo* (2009) (85).

<sup>9</sup> See: Aaron Smuts (2002) and Chris Barber (1992).

<sup>10</sup> Both Julian Grainger (115) and Gerard Biard (32-4) have noted the significance of the film’s comedic elements.