

**CRITICA** **The Cinematic Unconscious and the Gaze in Dario Argento's**  
**CINEFILIA** ***Profondo rosso* (1975)**  
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This article proposes an analysis of the cinematic unconscious in Dario Argento's *Profondo rosso*, a film about the investigation of an unexplained series of murders performed by a violent killer who attempts to keep a dark secret buried: the murder of a father by a mother witnessed by their son. Although this event is clearly a traumatic episode in the life of one of the characters in the film, it is "encapsulated" in the structure of the filmic narrative, and it gradually emerges through specific cinematographic strategies which build and construct the plot until the final revelation about its causes and effects. This dramatic episode is kept secret and hidden by the mother and her child, and it acts as a catalyst on the narrative development of the film where a series of murders are performed to prevent the secret to be undisclosed. In the context of this article, by "cinematic unconscious" it is meant the filmic narrative "truth", the viricide and its consequences, about the story in *Profondo Rosso*, overshadowed by the plot, which is reconstructed and unravelled through deciphering a series of narrative incidents and significant elements in the cinematographic text. These filmic elements represent and manifest the repressed which is "hidden" by the intriguing narrative of the film that unfolds, and which offer the opportunity to question the ultimate meaning of cinematic representation. Drawing on theories elaborated by Sigmund Freud and, later, by Jacques Lacan, this analysis takes a psychoanalytic approach and focuses on the examination of specific key sequences in the film in order to explore where and how the Lacanian Gaze, or a point in the field of vision from which we can grasp the unconscious, emerges<sup>1</sup>.



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Argento is a director who is particularly fascinated with the unconscious and is strongly indebted to psychoanalysis and its symbolism<sup>2</sup>. His filmography abounds with themes such as the presence of a castrating maternal mother, the double<sup>3</sup>, the association of the monster to the repressed, which have been studied in traditional psychoanalytic approaches to horror films<sup>4</sup>. This article, however, does not intend to identify the self-evident representation of specific psychoanalytic themes which recur in the relationships between characters, their psychological traits, or their behaviour within the economy of the film. Rather, by establishing a relationship of "transference" between the film and the critic, which describes the connection between the analyst and the patient in the psychoanalytic treatment, the article aims at exploring and identifying the unconscious of the film and its manifestations, and at questioning

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the cinematic mechanism and how it re-creates certain psychoanalytic phenomena which are “hidden” in the aesthetics of the film, in the formal and expressive aspects of the film. Although psychoanalytic approach to texts is usually criticised for being “hermetic and self-confirming”<sup>5</sup>, this discussion contributes to the understanding of how psychoanalysis helps us questioning film textual processes by opening up new interpretative avenues for the study of a specific work or a genre.

### ***The unconscious***

In psychoanalysis, as known, the notion of the unconscious gained a particular prominence in the writings of Sigmund Freud (where it is known as *das Unbewusste*). Freud refers to the unconscious as one of the psychical systems, and it is separated from the conscious and the preconscious mind. The conscious mind consists of those mental processes the subject is aware of, such as feelings, memories, or thoughts which occur in the mind and which are recognized by the subject in a rational way. The preconscious mind is closely connected to the conscious mind since it includes those thoughts, memories or feelings which are not conscious but they can be retrieved at any time by the conscious mind and enter the conscious awareness of the subject. The psychical system of the unconscious, instead, includes those mental phenomena which can be caused by something repressed by the subject, but they can still be retrieved from the unconscious. Unlike the preconscious, the unconscious includes unpleasant and unacceptable thoughts which have been rejected by the subject; these thoughts can manifest in various (mainly distorted) forms, and accessed by the conscious mind at a later stage in the form of a trauma<sup>6</sup>. This brief illustration of the notion of the unconscious as theorised by Freud, helps us introducing Lacan’s approach to the unconscious which represents the theoretical backbone of our analysis.

Lacan’s theory of the unconscious follows the Freudian model in a post-structuralist perspective; for Lacan, “the unconscious is structured like a language”<sup>7</sup>, and that

[we] only grasp [it] finally when it is explicated, in that part of it which is articulated by passing into words. It is for this reason that we have the right – all the more so as the development of Freud’s discovery will demonstrate – to recognize that the unconscious itself has in the end no other structure than the structure of a language<sup>8</sup>.

In this psychoanalytic frame, the unconscious is considered as the necessary “key” to understand and discover the very nature of one’s mind and experiences. Since it is structured like a language, it needs to be deciphered after passing into meaningful, symbolic elements of the language which appear, according to Lacan, in the scopical field in the form of the Gaze, or an elusive spot in the line of vision where the seer can extract him/herself<sup>9</sup>. Moreover, Lacan sees the unconscious as a temporal pulsating mechanism which opens and closes, which reveals and conceals the truth alternately<sup>10</sup>. We should imagine the unconscious as a mechanism which performs a regular movement of expansions and contractions where the keys or clues to understand the subject’s unconscious are revealed and yet subsequently kept out of sight.

In the context of *Profondo Rosso*, the unconscious of the film includes those phenomena which emerge throughout the filmic narrative, and provide the necessary clues to solve the investigation of the series of murders performed by a mysterious killer. These narrative events occur in a distorted manner where editing, cinematography, and *mise en scène* play a crucial role in creating this effect. The revelation of the truth about the original murder and the identity of the perpetrator is built upon pieces of evidence which analectically and alternately anticipate the final and dramatic epiphany of the film where the repressed comes to light. As with the psychoanalytic treatment, which aims to explore events in the life of the subject from which the unconscious traumas emerge, our aim is to focus on the film as the subject

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of the analysis and to establish a relationship of transference which allows us to discover how these events have shaped and contributed to the film narrative development.

***The Process of Transference and the Unravelling of the Unconscious***

The method of analysis employed in this article is strongly indebted to psychoanalytic approaches to the analysis of films in the context of Italian studies. Fabio Vighi, who one of the major scholars of Lacanian psychoanalysis applied to cinema, has explored new and original avenues to study Italian cinema in a psychoanalytical (mainly Lacanian) perspective, and interrogated the cinematic unconscious and its representation in the film<sup>11</sup>. According to Vighi, the Lacanian approach is useful “to assess if, how and to what extent a given film allows us to locate and describe the dialectical relationship between its narrative structure and what ‘ex-sists’ therein”<sup>12</sup>. For Vighi, traditional psychoanalytic approaches to Italian cinema have focused on directors such as Pasolini, Fellini, Bertolucci, Antonioni, Bellocchio who are strongly influenced by psychoanalytic culture; however, this Lacanian approach to films allows us to discover and analyse the filmic text regardless of its director’s interest in specific psychoanalytic issues<sup>13</sup>.

Following this methodological trajectory, it is possible to examine how specific psychoanalytic theories take shape within the filmic mechanism, and not exclusively in the ways in which they originate from the director’s inclination to psychoanalytic themes, or in the ways psychoanalytic features characterise the psychological traits of each character and their relationships. In order to understand how to access the cinematic unconscious, we need to imagine, as Vighi has suggestively observed, the process of transference. Transference is at the core of the psychoanalytic method, and it aims at discovering the repressed and hidden realities of the unconscious<sup>14</sup>.

In the process of transference there is an analyst (the psychoanalyst) and there is an analysand (the patient). What Vighi suggests is to apply this structure to the analysis of films where one substitutes the analyst with the critic/us, whilst substituting the analysand with the filmic text and its narrative. The result of this juxtaposition is that the film/analysand “expects” the critic/analyst (or “the subject supposed to know”<sup>15</sup>) to unravel the film’s/analysand’s unconscious. Following this association, the focus of the psychoanalytic analysis is the filmic text and not its creator.

This analysis of *Profondo rosso* engages with the cinematographic text in that same dialectical relationship which develops in the psychoanalytic treatment between the analyst and the patient. Transference, according to Lacan, is based on the symbolic aspects of language which are determined by the subject and ordered by repetition<sup>16</sup>. The filmic text becomes the locus in which one can interpret certain systematic manifestations which help identifying the ultimate meaning of the filmic representation. In the position of the analyst, the critic excavates the inner truths unravelled by a close analysis of the filmic language, and examines how these engage with a discourse of repetition from which one can extract the analysand unconscious, and the trauma that is temporarily undisclosed.

The analysis of *Profondo rosso* cinematic unconscious focuses on a traumatic event narrated in the film. This trauma, introduced by a sequence as the incipit to the film where we see a child playing nursery rhymes before hearing a terrifying scream followed by the fall of a bleeding cooking knife at his feet, is a murder witnessed by this child and performed by a mother against the father. This event is the pivot around which the plot revolves as well as the key to understand the narrative construction of Argento’s film. Furthermore, this “key” narrative nucleus is discovered only at the end of the film, but it is introduced and anticipated by a series of analeptic narrative elements and images which retrospectively help unravelling the plot.

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## *The Hidden Trauma*

As known, in narratology, story and plot address two trajectories of narration: the sequence of the events in a chronological order (story), and the events of the story reordered in a different sequence to cause the effect of a process of revelation (plot)<sup>17</sup>. The story then is a sequence of events as these happen in the non-diegetic time of the film; whereas the plot, or discourse, refers to the ways in which the events are rearranged in order to give a certain effect to the narration (the diegetic time of the film). In the context of *Profondo rosso*, the traumatic event is located on the level of the story of the film, and in the past of one of the characters.

The first scene of the film is very significant as it represents the original murder in a distorted and unclear manner. In this sequence the camera, positioned at the floor level, frames what looks like a dining room decorated with Christmas ornaments. In the background we can see a Christmas tree and two fighting shadows cast on a wall whilst a nursery rhyme is playing; suddenly, an enormous bleeding knife falls in the foreground, and a child steps in the frame. The childish music and the uncanny scene fade into the rock music theme of *Profondo rosso*, composed by Goblin, and into the rest of the opening credits. This event produces a series of violent murders which occur in the “present tense” of the film, and which are investigated and then solved in the final epiphany of the film. In this context, the cinematic unconscious is retrieved in this final narrative revelation, and the elements of the cinematography represent clues and symptoms which need to be deciphered in order to locate and recognize the filmic narrative unconscious of *Profondo rosso*. Following Vighi, these “clues” can be considered as images “that retroactively [erase] the narrative framework within which we attempt to decipher the meaning of the film”<sup>18</sup>. These pieces of evidence occur repeatedly and provide a guide to unravel the meaning of the film.



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*Profondo rosso's* plot narrating a series of murders performed by an enigmatic killer is very convoluted. Whilst having a late night conversation with his colleague and friend Carlo (Gabriele Lavia), an English jazz pianist based in Rome, Mark Daly (David Hemmings), witnesses the brutal murder of his neighbour, Helga Hulman (Macha Meril) a famous psychic who that same night was a speaker at a conference on parapsychology. During the conference, the clairvoyant Helga feels an uncanny presence in the theatre. At the end of the convention, Helga confesses to her partner and colleague, Professor Giordani (Gluco Mauri), that she knows the identity of a "twisted mind", a killer, she recognized in the audience. This scene is framed with a point of view shot of a mysterious presence in the theatre and later, in her apartment, Helga is brutally killed. Mark arrives on the crime scene, finds Helga already dead, and catches a glimpse of the killer waking away from the apartment block. As he is the only witness, Mark is interrogated by both the police and the reporter Gianna Brizzi (Daria Nicolodi); Mark's identity is revealed by the press, and this makes him vulnerable to the killer who will unsuccessfully attempt to kill him throughout the film.

On the crime scene, Mark remembers having seen a painting representing something significant for the investigation whilst walking the hallway which led to the room where Helga's body was found. Mark is unable to explain or remember what he exactly saw as it appeared not to be there when he returned to the apartment with the police. This mysterious element caught by a glimpse represents a clue which moves Mark to investigate the murder with Gianna's help, and to find pieces of a puzzle which, in the end, will explain not only Helga's murder, but also all the murders that followed it and which were linked by the fact that all the victims knew who the killer was.

Mark begins his investigation and, followed step-by-step by the omnipresent eye of the killer, finds the nursery rhyme and a book written by Amanda Righetti (Giuliana Calandra) about legends and folkloristic tales where the dramatic story of a child singing nursery rhymes whilst witnessing a violent murder is narrated. Amanda, who knows the truth about the primal murder because she wrote about it in her book, is also brutally killed as well as Professor Giordani who, after visiting the crime scene of the deceased Amanda, finds out she revealed the identity of the killer by writing it, before she died, on the mirror of the bathroom where her body was found. With these circumstantial evidences, Mark begins his research and finds the house where the murder was committed. In the end, Mark discovers that the killer is Marta (Clara Calamai), Carlo's mother, who stabbed to death her husband in front of their son many years before because her husband wanted to send her to an asylum. This incident represents the narrative event which moves the narrative until the revelation of the murderer's identity, and motivates the plot of the film.

During the parapsychological convention, Helga recognizes Clara who, suspicious that her "primal murder" would be discovered, kills all the possible witnesses who would recognize her. The murder of Marta's husband witnessed by the child Carlo, is the key to understand the series of murders and to discover the killer's identity, and it is "hidden" in an enormous villa where Carlo and his family used to live, and where Marta buried her husband's body after the murder. This revelation occurs towards the end of the film when Mark finds a drawing by a young Carlo representing the original crime scene (a woman killing a man with a knife, a young child witnessing the scene, and a Christmas tree in the background). Initially, Carlo appears to be responsible for the series of murders; but then Mark remembers that Carlo was with him when Helga was killed (the second victim in the diegetic time of the film); at this stage, Mark goes back to Helga's apartment to look for the painting which might reveal the identity of the real killer and whilst in the apartment, he realises that what he saw the night Helga was killed, was a mirror with Marta's face reflected in it: Mark had already seen the face of the killer in a deformed and camouflaged way. In that very moment, Marta, who has followed him, attempts to kill Mark; they have a fight on the landing and her pendant gets stuck in the elevator's shaft, and she is decapitated. It is this specific narrative device, the disguised reflection of the killer which occurs at the beginning of the film, which holds the narrative until it unravels, gradually towards the end.



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Indeed, *Profondo rosso* abounds with clues which contribute to decipher the meaning of the film. For example, during the investigation, Mark discovers a drawing representing the primal murder of Carlo's father beneath a layer of plaster in the villa where he lived with his family and where his father was killed and buried. A similar stylized representation of the original murder is found in the drawing archive of the school where Carlo used to go when he was a child; this drawing is discovered by Mark after he finds the room where the viricide was committed.

These narrative elements, which contribute to build the filmic suspense around the revelation of the killer's identity by identifying Carlo with the perpetrator, can be interpreted as those moments when the pulsating unconscious opens and reveals clues which motivate the plot. However, these pieces of evidence provide a partial representation of the traumatic truth about the filmic revelation when at the end Mark discovers that the original killer is Carlo's mother as he recognizes Marta's face in the mirror. The killer's face represents the repressed. The impression, Marta's face reflected in the mirror, demands recognition. It becomes the centre of the film. This clue returns every now and then in the film as the formula the 'return of the repressed' as an example of the Gaze, a notion elaborated by Lacan in *The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis*. The Gaze is not an active gaze of a subject, but it is an imperceptible point in the field of vision which returns our look and which shows our unconscious (and in this case the filmic unconscious). In the film, the gaze makes itself "conspicuous" within the symbolic, visible, text of the film, and it returns again and again in the filmic representation.

#### ***The Gaze or the Killer's Face Reflected in the Mirror***

What is the gaze? By definition, a gaze is a fixed intent look. However, in Lacanian psychoanalysis, the notion of the Gaze does not have any relationship with the organ of vision; rather Lacan theorizes that the eye and the Gaze are two distinct elements: the first is concerned with the actual seeing, the latter is the look on the side of the object. For Lacan, the split, the difference between the eye and the Gaze is the subjective division itself which occurs in the scopic field, a division between conscious and unconscious, or the ego and the subject of the unconscious. Put in these terms, then, the Gaze allows one to grasp the unconscious in the scopic field, and it has to be understood as a new way of thinking vision in an ontological perspective where, according to Lacan, we can extract our unconscious<sup>19</sup>.

Lacan introduces the notion of the Gaze in *The Seminar of Jacques Lacan, Book I* (they are 27 in total

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from 1953 to 1980), which includes lectures delivered in the years 1953-54. In this first Seminar, Lacan comments on the phenomenological analysis of the gaze carried out by Jean Paul Sartre in his work *L'Être et le néant: Essai d'ontologie phénoménologique* (1943). For Sartre, the gaze is the look related to the organ of vision and it allows the subject to identify the Other as subject, in an intersubjective dimension, where the subject is aware of his/her subjectivity through being seen by another subject<sup>20</sup>. Although initially Lacan seemed to agree with Sartre, only in the 1960s, and precisely in his Seminar XI, *The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis* he developed a distinct and unique notion of the Gaze along with the concept of *objet petit a* as an object cause of desire, which is the Gaze in the visible field.

In presenting the theory of the split between the look and the Gaze, Lacan emphasizes the fact that the scopopic experience is regulated by something that pre-exists the actual subject's active look, and this something is the Gaze positioned on the side of the object, which looks at the subject and where the subject can grasp its essence. But Lacan clarifies that it is not between the visible and the invisible that our apprehension of the gaze should be grasped, not in the limits of the visible but in the ways the visible presents itself as an uncanny presence in the visible field, as a trap for the eye, or in a more clinical perspective as Lacan says, as a "lack that constitutes castration anxiety". As Lacan continues

in our relation to things, in so far as this relation is constituted by the way of vision, and ordered in the figures of representation, something slips, passes, is transmitted, from stage to stage, and it is always to some degree eluded in it – that is what we call the gaze<sup>21</sup>.

The way in which the Gaze presents to us is, according to Lacan, through the phenomenon of mimicry, camouflage, which have the function of giving specific impressions, e.g. that of a stain. For instance, Lacan refers to the *ocelli*, or the fake eyes of a spider, which aim at hypnotizing and impressing the enemy or a prospective victim. In a similar way, the Gaze appears in a camouflaged, mimetic way and traps our look. The gaze is something that looks us back and enhances the apprehension of our unconscious. But as Lacan specifies, this Gaze does not have anything to do with exhibitionism or scopophilia. This Gaze is not active and provocative, but it is elided in the field of vision, it looks back but it also shows, it is camouflaged.

The theme of the Gaze is central to *Profondo rosso*; the camera is mostly anchored to the killer's eye, and when it is not, the eerie and distorted shots draw the spectator's gaze to significant elements which are camouflaged, build the narrative, and offer possible clues to the solution of the enigma, of the repressed cinematic truth. But what is interesting for us is that our look (which in this case is aligned with the protagonist's look, Mark's look) participates to the scene of the crime in the same way as it is deliberately misdirected to other elements which make the unravelling of the mystery more intriguing. This disclosure depends on a meaningful element of the filmic texture which holds the narrative until the very final revelation, and which represent the ultimate meaning of the film and how it is encapsulated by the filmic form.

When the protagonist enters the first victim's apartment, the camera pans toward the end of the corridor where Helga's body is, and bypasses one of the key elements of the film: the face of the killer reflected in one of the mirrors; the camera, in sum, draws our look away from something which is very significant, and it appears, like the Gaze, as a spot in the line of vision, it appears as a distorted image, just an impression. The killer's face which is reflected in the mirror, but which is apparently unseen by the protagonist (and by us), is an image through which we need to decipher the whole meaning of the film and through which it is possible both to unravel the plot and understand the story of *Profondo rosso*.

If we read this sequence in the light of the Lacanian gaze we cannot fail to note that what we see in the mirror, what seems to be an innocuous painting, is actually a meaningful element which represents and

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manifests a significant detail for the unfolding of the plot. If we consider this sequence, it is possible to note how the split between the look and the Gaze emerges; the camera, anchored to the protagonist, is the look which sees consciously an element on the wall which is not recognized as meaningful at once. On the other side is the Gaze, the look on the side of the object, a blurred element in the scopic field which is latent and yet significant for the understanding of the story, the spot in the line of vision where the killer (and its meaning within the narrative economy of the plot) looks us back.

We can note the subjective division which Lacan has theorised as at the base of the difference between the look and the Gaze, the conscious and the unconscious; Mark is consciously looking at something he does not recognize, and only at a later stage when, after interrogating himself about the nature of that impression (the painting), the narrative unconscious emerges, and he is able to understand the enigma and discover and recognize the “already seen” face of the killer hidden in the mirror-painting. We said that the Gaze allows to grasp the unconscious in the scopic field; in the same way Mark unravels the plot he has been caught in, and discovers the truth about the mysterious murderers.

Like the Gaze, the face reflected in the mirror pre-exists Mark’s active look, and it is presented like an uncanny presence in the visible field, it represents a trap for the eye which leads us to question the real meaning of the film, its logic, a question raised by an apparent lack of meaning which drives and triggers our castration anxiety. Echoing Lacan, the camouflaged face of the killer, is that element in the representation where something slips, passes, is transmitted, it is the Gaze. The Gaze, as already observed, is presented like an uncanny presence through camouflage and mimicry, and it is presented as an impression, an image which is blurred, confusing, uncannily represented. As Fabio Vighi observes, drawing on Lacan and Slavoj Žižek, “the unconscious of film can only come about as a traumatic encounter with the disavowed core of cinematic representation”<sup>22</sup>. Until we discover the truth about the murderer through Mark’s investigation, we will spend (together with Mark) the filmic time trying to remember the details he/we missed in the corridor, the disavowed impression which will, at the end, unfold the narrative. The impression represents a traumatic encounter with the truth about the series of murders and their origins.

### **Conclusions**

The analysis of *Profondo rosso* in a psychoanalytic perspective contributes to the understanding of the real story Mark investigates, and which help us to explore the complexity of the narrative. This narrative method is not new to Argento who in *L’uccello dalle piume di cristallo* (1970), *Suspria* (1977), *Trauma* (1993) also deploys a similar plot where the protagonist witnesses a crime, and notices a detail which in the end will lead to the resolution of the investigation. In general it could be said that, Argento’s films do not exclusively show graphic details, but they are finely constructed from a narrative point of view. The use of psychoanalysis in the analysis of this filmic narratives contributes to the critical appraisal of the filmic product in its expressive and communicative potential; the film is a work which displays unconscious fears in the form of contextual representation and, furthermore, it represents psychoanalytic themes and features within its inner structure and organization of – to use a Lacanian terminology – its language.

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Endnotes

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18. Fabio Vighi, *Traumatic Encounters, op. cit.*, p. 7.
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20. Jean-Paul Sartre, *Being and Nothingness: An Essay on Phenomenological Ontology*, trans. by Hazel E. Barnes, London, Meuthen, 1958, p. 256.
21. Jacques Lacan, 'The Split between the Eye and the Gaze', *op. cit.*, p. 73.
22. Fabio Vighi, *Traumatic Encounters, op. cit.*, p. 8.