

Giallo and the Cold War

Deep Red and Yellow

“The difference between you and me is purely political... I’m the proletariat of the keyboard. And you’re the bourgeois. You play for art and you enjoy it. I play for survival. That’s not the same thing.”

– *Deep Red* (Argento, 1975)

Film as media has been a tool for propaganda since its inception. From the silent propaganda films of World War I and the Russian Revolution to the monstrous masterpieces produced by the Nazi regime, its inception was very fast and very ugly. A tool for nationalism and racism in the most undiluted format yet invented by humankind.

But this is no chicken-vs-egg scenario. The politics that drove propaganda had been around for millennia before the invention of the still and motion picture. But, like parasites latching on to their latest meal ticket, the propaganda of politics found a quick and easy home in the motion picture industry the world over.

Film history is rife with examples from countless genres, all of them the beneficiaries (or victims) of their own period and their director’s point of view. From the tear-jerking rendition of ‘La Marseillaise’ in *Casablanca* to the drumbeat of war from early Looney Toons, filmmaking in its most powerful and earliest form was as much a vehicle for political action as it was entertainment.



Castel Sant’Angelo and the Sant’Angelo Bridge (1949).

No film can be fully understood outside of its contemporary political context. And of all genres from around the globe, none proves more illustrative – and subversive – than the Gialli of post-war Italy, films

so controversial and influential that they gave birth to Hollywood's glut of modern horror. And it did so while operating in (and mirroring) a political and social hellscape the likes of which we, today, would find very difficult to comprehend.

Italy was one of several nations that remained critical front lines at the height of the Cold War between the Russia and the West. Political battles were as much fought in the street as they were in parliament, most of it funded, provoked and stirred up into regular bloodbaths by KGB, CIA, and the alphabet soup of intelligence agencies hard at work influencing Italy's post-war future.

Everything from the economy to the people themselves were playthings of the great international powers. And it would be through the vibrantly horrendous imagery of directors like Dario Argento that would alert the world, however indirectly, to the horrific human cost of the Cold War in Europe.

Deep Red (1975)

There may be earlier and more overt examples, but there are few more stylish depictions of this silent struggle than Dario Argento's classic *Deep Red*.

While James Bond, Harry Palmer and George Smiley had all been saving the west from Communism for over a decade but the time *Deep Red* was released, Giallo



David Hemmings and Daria Nicolodi in *Deep Red* (1975, Dario Argento).

as entertainment was nothing new. But its value as political commentary most certainly was, and growing every day.

Genre entries that had once been valued as pure entertainment were suddenly forums for political commentary, from screenplay to cinematography. And as with independent horror

today, these films were not only abundant but were made by hungry filmmakers eager to take a stance and influence their country's direction in its time of need. Even if that stance was neutral by choice or ambiguous by necessity.

Deep Red is one such film. Made at a time when the Cold War in general, and the conflict to control Italian politics in particular, was at its peak. From the lurid and

frequently competitive use of blue gels and ornate red sets to the setting itself – a painfully divided Cold War Germany – everything speaks directly to the kind of conflict, greed and sin that make the film’s fantastic wickedness and perversion possible.

Throughout the film there remains a constant struggle between blue and red, between greed and lust and virtue. And beneath the surface, that half-forgotten struggle between East and West. One interesting plot device sees David Hemings constantly holding, twirling and gesturing with a Marlboro cigarette... Which he never actually smokes. Not even once during the entire film. The Marlboro brand was once as ubiquitous a symbol of American capitalism abroad as McDonalds or Starbucks are today. Argento seems to think that the Marlboro, like America, is nice to have around amid all this red death. Perhaps even comforting. But still dangerous and not to be partaken of lightly.

Helga Ullman (Macha Méril), the unfortunate psychic whose murder sets off the events of the entire film, is a Jewish woman recently emigrated to Italy from Lithuania – a nation that was squarely behind the Iron Curtain, very much under Moscow’s thumb, and well known for its Nazi collaboration during World



Macha Méril in *Deep Red* (1975, Dario Argento).

War II, and the continued persecution of Jews during its aftermath, the Cold War. Emigres were being murdered all over Europe at the time by the KGB, including Italy itself, for their religious and political views. This was a known fact, regularly reported by the international press based on intelligence from defecting Soviet assassins. Poor Helga was as much a sacrifice to the bloody politics of the Cold War as she was to her butcher’s cleaver.

But Argento’s messaging is often far simpler, less subtle and much closer to the surface. The blood, for example. Everywhere, and at all times. The film itself is named for the color of dried blood. And red was *very* much associated, in Italy as it was all around the world, with the scourge of international communism. It was the deliberately used as to represent the blood spilled in the struggle. That an artist with Argento’s situational awareness would have made a simple and

accidental correlation between the blood of conflict, crime and communism statistically impossible.

Some sort of stance was being taken. What that stance was – pro or con – is for you to decide. Whatever your conclusion, the correlation between blood, mass murder, and the political climate at the time of the films very controversial release is undeniable. And far from accidental.

Suspiria (1977, 2018)

Suspiria, however, provides us with what is in many ways the most detailed and nuanced example. Not just for the psychedelic messaging of Argento's original, but for the contrast provided by the overt politics of Luca Gudagnino's 2018 remake – modern technology allows filmmakers to make physically darker films,

and those interested in social commentary no longer needed to hide.



Alida Valli in *Suspiria* (1977, Dario Argento).

The creature that spawned so much controversy on its own, not to mention an equally controversial reboot, Dario Argento's 1977 original is a psychedelic horror show so lurid that it's difficult to get past those elements that so frequently

dominate his frame: red walls, blue and red gels, and blood so thick it looks like off-the-shelf paint from your local hardware store.

Of course no director, particularly one of Argento's caliber, engages their viewers in this way simply by accident. There is the blood, of course. So much blood. We are talking about Giallo, after all. But blood red was also the color of the communist cause around the globe, and remains so to this day. And this is no more an accident than Argento's inclusion. The red on the flags of the Soviet Union and its satellite nations literally represented the blood spilled, and yet to be spilled, in pursuit of their cause.

So what's the correlation? In Argento's case, it is not a favorable one. Red is the color of death, and not just for all the blood. The German coven literally bathes

itself in the color, from the exterior of the famed Tanz Akademie to its opulent if overdone halls.

Red and blue gels are used with such weight and frequency that they appear to be competing with one another. Beware of the red lights, they are the tint of magic and poison... Though that's not to say that blue hues on set are a guarantee of safety. Their space just seems less actively malicious. Not unlike the political views of many Italians at the time.

I remember being puzzled the first times I watched Argento's classic, wondering at the violently competitive use of red and blue light... Until I framed the story in the political context of the day. At which point they made perfect sense.

But of course there's more here than just a few red and blue gels and some paint. The curious Bavarian 'slap-dancing' scene, for example – as clear an indication of the perils of dance as anything I've ever seen – seems to imply the violence spreading outward from the coven, not to mention foreshadowing the extreme violence that befalls the blind piano player almost immediately thereafter.

And there's always more. The money-obsessed witches of the coven – it is no accident that the number 50 repeats itself in this context – 50 dollars for 50 states. And on the flip-side there is a culture of betrayal and espionage that permeates the Tanz Akademie in much the same way as it permeated East Germany during the Cold War. There is even a line in the same scene in which young Susie Bannion is introduced to the money-grubbing dancers: 'Squawk, squawk, Mata Hari is about to file her report' – presumably by informing on her fellow dancers. More on that in a moment, but it certainly seems as though Argento has strong opinions with regard to both sides.

Luca Guadagnino's *Suspria* (2018), brings the politics and magic – or rather the dark magic of politics – into much more stark contrast. Visually it is the much darker of the two films. Advances in technology have allowed filmmakers to shoot in far darker environments than



Mia Goth and Dakota Johnson in *Suspria* (2018, Luca Guadagnino).

ever before, rendering the Argento's effectively lurid gels both dated and unnecessary.

Instead, his use of color is much more targeted. The dreariness of life along the iron curtain is in every frame, then suddenly punctuated by the deep red of the dancers' garb. Subtitles in German are highlighted with distinct red drop shadows, while those of other languages (French, for example) are highlighted in blue. Or the chapter title graphics that slowly build a wall of red bars. But these are subtleties compared to Guadagnino's biggest changes, and primary focus: the politics of the Cold War itself, and Berlin in particular. Not only that, but its destructive nature and inherently evil source: the coven.

It is the direct correlation with politics that has now become lurid, a barometer of our own worst impulses. It is every bit as powerful, intentional and lurid as Argento's lighting. And it ultimately has the same disquieting effect. Even the name of the dance they perform, "Volk", or "People" in German, implies the rhetoric of those failed regimes. The early disappearance of one dancer is explained away by her having run off to join Baader-Meinhof. Which may provide the most interesting and direct correlation of all, delivered not via horrific imagery or screams, but an obscure and equally horrendous Cold War political reference.

The Baader-Meinhof gang, less famously (if more officially) referred to as the Red Army Faction, was a West German terrorist group with known ties to the Soviet Union and its allies. They received funding and training from the KGB to carry out operations against West German and allied targets from bombing to kidnapping and assassination. Their activities actually peaked in 1977 – the year in which both versions are set – during the fall of which year they assassinated at least three leading West German figures:

industrialist Hanns Martin

Schleyer, Dresden Bank heir

Jurgen Point, and federal

prosecutor Siegfried Buback. Not to mention scores of police officers, NATO servicemen, drivers and bodyguards.

Interestingly for our story, their stated cause was to confront the scourge of Nazism they believed their parents' generation had ignored. Even more interesting, they are omitted completely from the original film despite that being their best year. But most interesting of all, and also unlike Argento's version, the



Red Army Faction logo

witches in Guadagnino's *Suspria* seem less concerned with sides than with spreading conflict, chaos and death. Their coven is built directly against the Berlin Wall itself – another Guadagnino addition. They are at the epicenter of the conflict, their evil radiating outward to consume both sides, rather than the director associating their evil with one movement above others.

There are other even more subtle clues at every turn. While the kindly old doctor (Tilda Swinton) crosses the border between East and West Germany regularly, while in the East there is always a shadowy maid about his dacha who he must shoo away from more than one private conversation. East Germany was, in fact, riddled with informants for the STASI, that nation's ruthlessly efficient secret police force. Post Cold War studies have estimated that at the height of their power more than 25% of the *entire East German population* was informing on its own family, friends and neighbors. So whether she is lurking on behalf of the coven, or on behalf of the STASI... the difference is immaterial. For our purposes they might as well be the same thing.

Conclusion

So is all of this intentional? Knowing directors, I'd go with yes. Subconsciously? Quite possibly. How could daily life amidst the battle between capitalism and communism *not* infiltrate one's work in one way or another? But, accidental? I doubt it. These are very talented filmmakers who do not leave the inclusion of script or scenic elements to chance. The real question is what were they trying to



David Hemmings in *Deep Red* (1975, Dario Argento).

say? And barring a straight answer to that, what are we taking away with us?

It seems clear that Argento's battling reds and blues are doing a bit more than signifying that a player or prop is good or evil. The setting, Freiburg in the original, was an unusual choice for an

Italian filmmaker – It is worth noting that the vast majority of Gialli are shot and set entirely in Italy. But whether he was taking a unilateral political stance or

simply pointing out the lesser of two evils, the fact remains that the covert battle between east and west over the future of Italy was in full swing. The red star, the hammer and sickle, these symbols were everywhere at the time – in many places the most popular graffiti in Italy. And only an imbecile completely divorced from the harsh reality gripping their country would splash red about, everywhere from a film's name to almost every wall, even in a horror film, without thinking of the political implications and messaging.

It was *the* color of communism across the globe. And that ideology's influence, the fear and/or love of it, was so hysterically great at times, particularly in Italy, that it would be nearly impossible to make a film devoid of social commentary, even if that was your stated intention. The impact of the battle between capitalism and communism was everywhere in society.

The superpowers were tearing Italy in half and its people were suffering every side effect imaginable from rampant inflation to food shortages and a thriving black market. It would be impossible for any director to avoid slipping these details into their work (the impossibly broken car in *Deep Red*), and equally impossible not to take a stand, even if that stand is only to say that *both sides* were to blame.

But whoever said that hindsight is 20/20 sure hasn't studied their history. Who is to say that a more measured modern take is the right one? Perhaps it works for us, today. Countless atrocities were in fact committed in the name of both sides, most of which will never come to light or see retribution.

And perhaps Argento, who was actually living *that moment* in the Cold War, saw good reason for his coven to lean heavily into the red given the detriment he was seeing pile up around him, even while



Irene Miracle in *Inferno* (1980, Dario Argento).

making clear that those lined up against them offer little to no protection. He makes this abundantly clear in *inferno*, his sequel to *Suspiria*. Set in New York just a few years later, red remains the color of evil and blood magic. But it

becomes immediately clear that you are no better off bathed in blue on the other side of the Atlantic.

Is all of this extremely vague, implied using tricks of the artist's trade as opposed to Guadagnino's detailed narrative dive into Cold War culture? Most certainly. And with good reason. Even today, in certain parts of the world it is a luxury to tackle injustice head-on.

References

Deep Red (1975, Dario Argento)
Suspiria (1977, Dario Argento)
Inferno (1980, Dario Argento)
Suspiria (2018, Luca Guadagnino)

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