

Dueling Argentos

Dario Argento's fabulously colorful supernatural mystery thriller, **Susperia**, has been released as an equally fabulous *Two-Disc Blu-ray Edition* by Synapse Films (UPC#654930320297, \$44). For those who could care less about interior design and creative lighting effects, the 1977 film still supplies plenty of thrills with its intense suspense (greatly enhanced by the pulsating and, in surround sound, dizzying Goblins electronic score) and enthusiastic gore. It is also quite a good movie, thanks primarily to the cute performance by the star, Jessica Harper. In all of his movies, Argento lacks a substantial sympathetic connection with his actors. He basically leaves them alone and just guides how he wants them to stand or turn. The best actors bring their own professionalism to their parts and make Argento look like a genius, and that is what Harper does. If you watch her expressions even when your attention is suppose to be elsewhere, she is always reacting, believably, to what is going on around her, and often with amusement until the stakes start to increase and her character's fears take hold. The story has a great potential and, for the most part, lives up to it, and it has more of a giallo template than most experts give it credit for. Harper's character arrives at a live-in dance academy the same stormy night that another student runs away in terror and is killed. She makes a few friends, but as they start to discuss and investigate the odd things that seem to happen at night in the building, one by one they meet gruesome demises. That the solution to the mystery is supernatural is in keeping with the story's logic and is perfectly acceptable, enhancing the wild abandon with which the deaths can occur.

But even viewers who cringe at movie gore are going to want to see the wall paper, the paint, the knickknacks, the colored glass, the outfits and the lights, which can be any color of the rainbow at seemingly any moment. Letterboxed with an aspect ratio of about 2.35:1, the Blu-ray is even more colorful and vivid than the film's original theatrical presentations could achieve. The image is stunning, particularly when the colored lights go away and everything is suddenly bathed in natural light. Fleshtones are rich and finely detailed. Whites are a brilliant white. And then the colored illumination begins again and alters everything gloriously, reinforcing the idea that reality can be thrilling, but the supernatural makes things all the more funky.

Alida Valli and Joan Bennett are also featured. There are two DTS audio tracks, the original 4-channel English track and a 5.1-channel Italian track. For the effects as well as for Harper, the English track is preferable. Goblin's music literally swirls around you during the film's most exciting moments, and the mix has a raw, quasi-antique design that the 5.1-channel smoothes over a bit too much. Nevertheless, listening to both will give you a valid excuse to watch the 95-minute feature more than once, and savor its many glorious indulgences. There are optional English subtitles.

The second platter contains a number of special features including three trailers, three TV commercials, five radio commercials, a 2-minute alternate title sequence, a pleasant 17-minute interview with actress Barbara Magnolfi, an interesting 8-minute piece about the German locations and their Nazi past, a very good 27-minute retrospective piece that looks at how the film was conceived and executed, and an excellent 30-minute deconstruction of the film's artistry by Michael Mackenzie, who points out that the film's largely female cast reflects an unusual aspect to the popularity of horror movies. "Horror, for all the accusation of misogyny leveled against it, some misplaced, some not, is in many respects the most female friendly of all genres, affording women a voice, a point of view and a sense of agency denied to them elsewhere."

As an excuse to watch the movie two more times, there are two commentary tracks. One, by Italian thriller expert Troy Howarth, focuses primarily on the backgrounds and legacies of everyone involved, including the actors doing the dubbing, the assistant directors, and every other contributor. He points out the numerous times Argento is accidentally reflected on an object or mirror from behind the camera, and he covers a few other technical details, as well as providing a suitable overview to what was accomplished. "[Argento] is bringing every bit of technical flair and audacity and imagination to the film that he can muster. Everything about this film is big and imposing, and if the script is admittedly a little bit on the slight side, it works because the talent is there to back up its ambition. With his top flight crew of collaborators, Argento creates one of the most amazingly stylistic fever dreams that you're ever going to see."

The other track features Argento expert Derek Botelho and film historian David Del Valle, who provide a more engaging conversation about the movie's artistic accomplishments and idiosyncrasies (there is a brief drop out—something was obviously censored—around the 18-minute mark). Among other things, they suggest that from one point onward, Harper's character could just be dreaming about the horrors that occur. "This is also very dream-like, and I think there is a lot of dream-like imagery in Argento."

"The story, I think, is intentionally kind of simple, like a fairy tale, and the narrative just kind of rolls along as Jessica Harper gets deeper and deeper into this situation."

And they take joy in every detail. "I love how she's polishing the blood-red stained glass window because she's an evil witch, and that's what they do, the dust Satanic-looking things."

Blue Underground already issued a terrific presentation of Argento's seminal debut, **The Bird with the Crystal Plumage**, on Blu-ray

(Dec 09), but the 1970 feature, which kickstarted Argento's career, is such a complete and satisfying thriller, why not get another copy of it? Arrow Academy has also released a Blu-ray (UPC#760137105480, \$40). The Ennio Morricone musical score is left in mono, but the DTS presentation is so sharp that the mix remains highly satisfying, although it can't match the 5.1 mix that Blue Underground provided. Letterboxed with an aspect ratio of about 2.35:1, the image transfer is an improvement over the Blue Underground release, which had paler colors and faint markings that are nowhere to be seen on the Arrow release. The image remains a little soft and grainy in darker sequences, but the bright hues are highly satisfying and add to the compelling nature of the film's design.

Tony Musante, whose expressiveness cements the film's spine, is an American writer about to return to the States when he witnesses an attempted murder in an art gallery at night, and is held over by the police as a material witness. His curiosity then gets the best of him, as he starts investigating the crime, which appears to be linked to a series of murders.

It was the art gallery, showcasing claw-like abstract sculptures, that changed cinema, introducing the concept of hyper-stylization, which created a stunning counterpoint to the raw emotions of violence and fear. Earlier thrillers in Italy, Britain and elsewhere had flirted with the concept, but it was Argento in **The Bird with the Crystal Plumage** who first recognized and embraced an emphasis on stylistic overindulgence as a distinctive and effective approach to making a thriller. The seemingly wild plot turns (they are entirely logical once the backstory is explained at the end) are easier to accept as part of the film's 'wild' look. More meticulously designed than almost any other Argento movie, there is a motif of birds and enclosures that informs practically every scene, from the killer trying to peck into a door with a knife, to a town outside of Rome that the hero visits called 'Aviano' (chirping swells on the audio track when he arrives), where a character lives in a sort of self-made cage, and onto the airplanes at the airport at the film's end, which have rarely looked more birdlike. The film has humor and a nice romance (although the hero's girlfriend tolerates a great deal), and the more supplementary features that one can gorge upon, the better.

Along with optional English subtitles and three trailers, there is an interesting 11-minute interview with actress Eva Renzi that appeared on the Blue Underground BD; a touching 22-minute interview with actor Guido Di Marco who talks about all of the films he made with Argento, his amazement with their cult following ("To have played such secondary roles and to be still asked for interviews by great people who come from far away just to interview me is something that, to this day, still puzzles me.") and his regrets that he wasn't more aggressive about his acting career (his agent blew it); a good, systematic 21-minute examination of Argento's feature films up to 1996, their overriding themes and artistic components (among other things, a cameo appearance of a 'bird with crystal plumage' in **Suspiria** is identified); an interesting 32-minute deconstruction of the film that emphasizes a feminist perspective of Argento's work; and a 2017 interview with Argento running 31 minutes in which he steps through a fairly thorough history of the film's gestation, production and boxoffice success.

Blue Underground's BD had a terrific commentary track with a pair of Argento experts, and Arrow's talk, with Howarth, is also rewarding, although it is a little drier. Howarth provides an overview of the production, shares as much as he could find on the backgrounds of almost every cast and crew member, points out the basics of Argento's artistry, and celebrates the film's compositional dynamics. "Argento's compositional style would become more and more cubist and fragmented, resulting in some very off kilter, vaguely disorienting close-ups. Here, he's still playing things somewhat conventional, but that's not a criticism. We all have to start somewhere, and **Bird** is about as good a directorial debut as I can think of."

If you have an elaborate home entertainment system, then put up the picture from the Arrow Academy Blu-ray release of Argento's 1971 **The Cat O'Nine Tails** (UPC#760137137580, \$35), but hook up the audio from the Blue Underground Blu-ray (UPC#827058703499, \$30). All of the tracks are dubbed anyway, so it really doesn't matter if you don't get it perfect and it's a bit out of synch. Anyway, the picture quality on the Arrow release is much nicer than the picture on the Blue Underground disc. The Blue Underground transfer has light colors and distinctive grain. If you had nothing to compare it to, it would still look fairly nice, but the colors and fleshtones on the Arrow version are richer and deeper, and the image is solid. It looks terrific. The film's sound was originally recorded in mono, and that is what is presented on the Arrow DTS track, with the options of English or Italian playback. There is an Ennio Morricone musical score, however, and it seems terribly confined by the single channel, which can be confirmed when one turns to the two-channel DTS stereo on the Blue Underground presentation, in both English and Italian. Not only are there directional and dimensional environmental effects, but the music is given the expansion it so desperately needs, adding significantly to the film's suspense and the pure joy of its exposition.

Neither the most stylish, the cleverest nor the goriest Argento film, **Cat O'Nine Tails** is nevertheless highly stylish, reasonably clever (the solution to the mystery is unremarkable, but getting there is great fun), and has enough gore to keep you on your toes. James Franciscus is a reporter looking into the death of a research scientist, and Karl Malden is a witness, blind, who teams up with him to investigate what quite obviously is a murder.

More murders follow, of the 'meet me and I'll give you the name of the killer...ahhh!' sort. Malden disappears for a while during the 112-minute feature, but it is still great casting, and trading off the two stars not only enhances a viewer's involvement with the film (you're satisfied one is on the screen, but you still want the other to return), but puts their fates in greater peril, since one of the two could always be expendable without harming the remainder of the film. Although there are none of the virtuoso cinematic sequences that highlight some of Argento's other movies, there are plenty of stylish moments, exhibiting everything from clever balances and placements of colors to an exhilarating car ride through the cramped streets of Turin. Elegantly staged and enjoyably played—because of Malden and Franciscus, the English track is the preferable playback; Catherine Spaak is also featured, and has one topless sequence, which is the movie's only touch of eroticism but all that it needs to feel like a well-rounded thriller—even the numerous red herrings are presented with a tongue in cheek wit that allows you to embrace their moments rather than dismissing them as dead ends.

The picture is letterboxed with an aspect ratio of about 2.35:1. Both versions have optional English subtitles, and two trailers. The Blue Underground release has a French stereo audio track, optional French and Spanish subtitles, and contains the same special features that were on the Anchor Bay DVD (Oct 01), including a 14-minute retrospective featurette, 8 minutes of radio interviews with Malden and Franciscus, a second trailer, two TV commercials and two radio commercials. Arrow has its usual utilitarian menu, which is fine, but Blue Underground's menu design is very cute, and melted our elaborately-designed-menu-hating heart.

The Arrow release has a third trailer; a 3-minute reconstructed alternate ending combining script passages and stills; a 16-minute interview with Argento who explains how some scenes were staged, talks about his collaborators (he bad mouths the cinematography) and says that he was disappointed with how the movie came out, even though it made a bundle; a 15-minute interview with production manager Angelo Iacono about his experiences with the actors and the other jobs he did working with Argento; and a 35-minute interview with writer Dardano Sacchetti about the early days of working with Argento and how their estrangement led to his working with Mario Bava and others. The interview with Sacchetti appears twice, since it also comes up when you attempt to access an otherwise unavailable interview with actress Cinzia De Carolis.

Finally, there is an entertaining commentary track featuring Italian exploitation enthusiasts Alan Jones and Kim Newman, who share plenty of background information about the cast and crew, talk about what went on behind the scenes of the production, and provide insightful analyses of its artistry and its shortcomings. Malden's character creates crossword puzzles, and they point out that the story itself is structured in a similar manner, seeming to jump around all over the place before eventually making sense. They point out that unlike Argento's other films in this period, "There's no actual point trying to sort of work out who the murderer is in any of this." "It could be any of the suspects, there's no particular reason for it." "If the actor had walked off the film, it could have been rewritten. Any of the other suspects could have turned out to be the killer." "It's so arbitrary who it is in this film, which just goes to show that Dario's not really interested in this kind of thing. It's all about the style, how to film, how to do it. It's nothing else apart from the technique." "This is a film that works on a scene-by-scene basis, and it's got people in it who you like, but it doesn't really hang together."

And they also have fun pointing out the movie's quirks and inanities. "There's the lab with the so many different colored chemicals, which isn't true, because most chemicals which are in liquid form are exactly the same color, so, this is all sort of like an art directed look for the film."

"I love this wallpaper. It's almost like gold blood thrown at the wall. It's so fantastic. Did anybody actually have this sort of wallpaper in their homes?" "I remember thinking that the apartments seen in gialli were unrealistic, until I visited Rome and went to a couple that looked exactly like it."

And during the movie's over-the-top gay bar sequence: "Frankly, Franciscus would have been pounced within 2 seconds of walking through the door."

Elements of clownish humor compromise what is otherwise the excellent suspense thriller that immediately followed *Cat O'Nine Tails* in 1971, *Four Flies on Grey Velvet*, a Mya Communications release (UPC#81-2592010103). A rock drummer played by Michael Brandon is being blackmailed because he believes he has killed someone, but as he tries to discover who the blackmailer is, there are several related murders. Mimsy Farmer plays the drummer's wife and Bud Spencer is also featured. At one point the hero beats up a mailman that he thinks is the blackmailer, and it is played for laughs. There are a few other scenes like that, too, disrupting the film's atmosphere. Nevertheless, the story is strong—the hero's anger often gets the best of him—and the mystery is compelling. Argento, still exploring as an artist, experiments in a number of ways. An elaborately edited sequence depicts the passage of time by showing people in a park suddenly disappearing within a shot. It gives the film a freewheeling tone, encouraging you to think that anything can and will happen, thus justifying later the very slightly fantastically way that the identity of the murderer is discovered. Running 102 minutes, the film concluded Argento's initial burst of creativity

(*Bird, Cat and Flies* are often called his 'Animal Trilogy,' although they have no shared characters), and had he not made another movie, he would still be considered a genius for what he achieved with them.

The picture is letterboxed with an aspect ratio of about 2.35:1 and an accommodation for enhanced 16:9 playback. The colors look very fresh, and while the presentation does not have quite the gloss the BDs have, it still looks quite nice. The sound, on the other hand, is a drab mono and fairly noisy. There is an effective Ennio Morricone musical score—the music for the finale is wonderful—that contrasts quite well with the rock music the band is recording, but having it all centered takes away some of the film's stylistic potential. The film is available in Italian and in English, with optional English subtitles (there are some brief segments that remains in Italian, where the subtitles must be activated to translate what is being said; on the other hand, headlines carrying key information are left in Italian and never translated). There are three trailers, a 3-minute montage of promotional materials, and a 6-minute presentation of the film's English language opening and closing credits.

Even after you know the trick, Argento's 1975 *Deep Red* is still a great deal of fun (provided you keep your hands off the freeze frame for the key moment). Generally following the plot of *Bird with the Crystal Plumage*, David Hemmings is a jazz musician in Italy who witnesses a murder, knows that he has seen something he can't quite remember, and starts investigating for himself. Daria Nicolodi plays a reporter who helps him and also provides an enjoyable love interest. Like *Bird with the Crystal Plumage*, the film is intensely stylish, and has many close-ups of objects and designs to enhance the atmosphere as well as the mystery. There are a couple of terrific screams, and many highly suspenseful sequences to keep a viewer alert and engaged, with a twisty plot that makes sense—pretty much, at least—once everything is over.

Again, there are dueling Blu-ray releases, both of which contain the film's 'Italian version,' which runs 126 minutes, and an abridged 105-minute version that was created for the English language markets, a two-platter release from Arrow (UPC#760137117384, \$40) and a single-platter release from Blue Underground (UPC#827058702690, \$30). And again, if you are a fan, you have to get both. The Arrow release, from a 2014 restoration, has a much better picture. It looks smooth, slick and glossy, with rich fleshtones, while the Blue Underground version, although it looks fine enough on its own, is grainy and slightly pale in comparison. Conversely, although Arrow, along with the monophonic track for the English language version, has provided a 5.1-channel DTS audio track for the Italian release, Blue Underground (which identifies the Italian version by its original title, *Profondo Rosso*) ups it to 7.1, and provides a 7.1 DTS track for the English language version, as well as a 5.1-channel English language track for the longer Italian release, which leaves the added sequences in Italian. Arrow also has the English/Italian version of the longer film, but its track is in mono. With another dizzying musical score from Goblin, the more encompassing the audio (which also has some fine environmental effects), the better. The film is letterboxed with an aspect ratio of about 2.35:1, and every version on both releases has optional English subtitles. The abridged version is pretty much useless, removing too much character substance, so that film feels as stereotypically superficial as detractors to Argento's work in general would expect.

The Blue Underground release comes with optional French and Spanish subtitles for the English language version, two trailers, a great Goblin music video, an amusing Daemonia music video that pays tribute to the film, and a good 11-minute interview with Argento, screenwriter Bernardino Zapponi and all four members of Goblin.

The Arrow release comes with two trailers; a very good 33-minute deconstruction of the film ("The style is the substance, a perfect symphony of form in which every individual element, from the plot to the performances to the set design to the camerawork to the music works in harmony to create a cinematic experience unlike any other. This is a form of filmmaking which rejects the orthodox view that plot is king, and as a result Argento isn't overly concerned if a particular stylistic flourish takes the viewer out of the narrative for a while, because the narrative works in service to the spectacle, not the other way around."); a 12-minute interview with Argento that contains clips from nearly all of his movies; a good 19-minute interview with Nicolodi who shares her recollections about Argento (she married him), her performance strategy, Hemmings ("He was drinking too much.") and many other aspects of the production; a decent 14-minute interview with Goblin member Claudio Simonetti (as well as a half-minute introduction), who talks about the origins of his band, working with Argento and the successes he has had since the film came out; and a nice 14-minute promotional look at the Argento memorabilia shop in Rome that is named after the film.

Arrow's version also features a commentary track over the long version by Argento expert Thomas Rostock, who says that the creation of the shorter version was likely supervised and approved by Argento, who understood the market demanded it, and was overseen by the film's creative team. He provides backgrounds for the cast and crew, a history of the production and some good artistic insights. "Underlined in [the character's] remark that telepathy is a faculty which comes naturally to the newborn in the early stages of life, but they lose it as they learn verbal communication. Argento's giving us a head's up that taking things too literally or verbally will get us nowhere. He's approaching this film with a newborn mind, and if we