

THE FIFTH CORD

Directed by Luigi Bazzoni
(1971) Arrow Video Blu-ray

Among the dozens of giallo films that flooded the market after the success of Dario Argento's *The Bird with the Crystal Plumage* in 1970, *The Fifth Cord* stands out from the crowd owing to two closely interrelated factors: director Luigi Bazzoni's artful notion of camera placement and legendary cinematographer Vittorio Storaro's luxuriant lighting schemes, which look to have been heavily indebted to his recent work on Bernardo Bertolucci's *The Conformist*. Bazzoni and Storaro conspire to pack *The Fifth Cord* with recurrent visual motifs, expressive details of décor and architectural design, so that practically any frame of the film could be isolated and displayed as an artwork of stunning pictorial beauty.

The storyline, on the other hand, is a sprawling, interlocking jumble of incidents that most closely resembles a jigsaw puzzle. The film opens with a striking fisheye-distorted POV sequence at a New Year's party that handily introduces viewers the sizeable dramatis personae, followed quickly by a botched murder attempt in a shadowy passageway. Like a lot of *The Fifth Cord*, this initial sequence is replete with red herrings and false implications, setting up a series of murders to follow, with the killer leaving behind a black leather glove (a requisite piece of giallo iconography) at each crime scene.

Our amateur detective (another mainstay figure of the genre) is Andrea Bild (Franco Nero), a world-weary, booze-soaked reporter with a personal connection to the murders. To illustrate the fact that Bild's perception of events is usually blighted by partial knowledge and imperfect assumptions, Bazzoni and Storaro repeatedly frame him through window blinds, reflected in slightly distorted mirrors, or otherwise masked by elements of the décor. It's a brilliant stroke that perfectly blends the thematic and aesthetic levels of the film.

The murder set pieces are each expertly staged and varied enough to keep things lively. One standout involving a wheelchair-bound invalid (Rossella Falk) is particularly rich in Gothic atmosphere, like something out of Mario Bava, while others make the most of the film's preoccupation with modernist architecture. Not to mention the fact that eerily deserted parks and cloverleaf overpasses are definitely locations to avoid in these films.

The ultimate revelation of the killer's identity isn't particularly surprising, particularly if you're at all familiar with Agatha Christie type whodunits, but his motive is comparatively unexpected. In part, this could be attributed to the genre's preoccupation with what was then referred to as "aberrant sexuality," resulting in the presence of a "mad gay killer," as Michael Mackenzie so aptly puts it in one of the disc's extras. Then again, it might be an unintended result of the script's cut-and-paste job with regard to the source material, transplanting the locale from Scotland to Rome, rebranding the characters as Italian, and even swapping the killer's gender, while still preserving the motivation for his crimes.

Arrow's 2K restoration of *The Fifth Cord* constitutes a major upgrade compared to Blue Underground's earlier DVD release. And when you're talking about a film this ravishingly gorgeous, not to mention filled with so many layers of visual motifs, that's definitely cause for celebration. The image is a good deal brighter overall, with a significant boost to details in the lowlight scenes, satisfyingly cinematic grain levels, and a lot of really vibrant colors throughout. Where the BU disc had only the English dub, here you have your choice of English or Italian-language tracks, both in LPCM mono. An interesting tidbit: your language selection cues up alternate title cards, each of which has a very different appearance. For my money, the English track is still the way to go, but it's always good to have the option.

There are a bevy of choice new extras as well. Travis Crawford delivers an engaging commentary track, full of references to *The Fifth Cord's* formal strategies and visual aesthetics, in particular its almost expressionistic use of architectural structures. Crawford delves into the careers of director Bazzoni, star Nero, and DP Storaro in much detail. He also delivers an intriguing disquisition on the ubiquitous presence of J&B scotch in giallo films. Speaking of which phrase, Crawford lays out his reasons for preferring "giallo films" to the currently more in-vogue plural "gialli." (Think "films noir" versus "film noirs.")

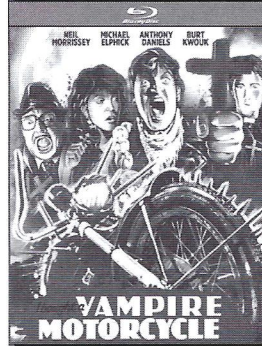
Rachael Nisbet delivers a whirlwind video essay, "Lines and Shadows," that just may leave you breathless by the end, but it's packed with acute observations about class and modernity in giallo films, with some nifty readings of the pervasive spiral symbolism. Michael Mackenzie, a regular contributor to Arrow's giallo releases, gives a rare on-camera interview, in which he tries to decide whether *The Fifth Cord* is politically progressive or reactionary, discusses D. M. Devine's source novel (and how unusual it is for a giallo to even have a direct literary basis), and goes into the film's thematic emphasis on literal and figurative foreignness.

In on-camera interviews, Franco Nero talks about his long history with director Luigi Bazzoni as both friend and collaborator, and editor Eugenio Alabiso laments how thrillers like *The Fifth Cord* were dismissed as mere "by-product" by the Italian film industry. Alabiso also has a pretty funny anecdote where he's approached by a British fan of Sergio Martino's *Torso*, even though at first Alabiso doesn't even remember that he had, in fact, edited that film. The "previously unseen" deleted sequence shows various characters going about their daily routines, with Morricone's lush score (a lovely lullaby-like trill) playing over top. It would have added nothing to the film, of course, but it's great to have it available.

Budd Wilkins

I BOUGHT A VAMPIRE MOTORCYCLE

Directed by Dirk Campbell
(1990) Kino Lorber Blu-ray / DVD



"High concept" mixtures of horror and humor go terribly wrong more often than not (an irresistible-sounding gimmick can *not* guarantee a feature film's worth of entertainment), but the rare few that truly get the combination right (*Abbott & Costello Meet Frankenstein* remaining the likely standard-bearer to this day) ensure that we'll never lack for variations on the formula. And the best of them work quite well indeed, such as this unsung little gem now given fresh exposure by Kino Lorber.

I Bought a Vampire Motorcycle wastes absolutely no time in realizing its title premise as a Satanic cult holding a ritual in the English countryside is wiped out by a roving motorcycle gang; but not before the high priest manages to drain the last of his rapidly-dwindling life essence into the gas tank of his *own* machine. Said cycle quickly becomes an impulse buy and restoration project for the unassuming Noddy (Neil Morrissey, whose vast television credits include the voice of "Bob the Builder" in the UK!). Nor does it take long for Noddy to realize that he's somehow invited hell into his home: if the nightmares and hallucinations (including an outrageous "talking poo" some seven years before the introduction of Mr. Hankey on *South Park*) don't do the trick, the very real severed head that winds up in his lap certainly will! What takes him a bit longer to realize is that Satan's representative has reincarnated as an actual vampire. In motorcycle form. Noddy himself would appear to be safe so long as he takes proper care of his charge, but anyone or anything else who ventures close enough to touch the machine soon become its sustenance; and neither Noddy nor his girlfriend Kim (Morrissey's then-wife Amanda Noar) can avoid the cross-hairs of revenge when the cycle sets its own sights on the gang that caused its earthly demise in the first place.

Children's television director (!) Dirk Campbell and the screenwriting team of producer Mycal Miller and John Wolskel pull the bizarre project off by decisively selling the central conceit (backed up by the impressive special effects magic of Bob Keen's Image Animation). The title vampire scarcely needs to turn into a bat for efficient locomotion, but it needs to tuck itself into a dark garage before the sun comes up if Noddy leaves it parked on the street; it's efficiently repelled by the standard crucifix and by garlic (cue a wonderful silent cameo by a much-loved Asian actor as Noddy seeks to protect himself with a pungent Chinese take-out order); and it even gains a set of fangs when somebody tries to smash its headlight. (The creators ruefully admit that they forgot the "no reflection" rule until it was too late to fix it, but that's a perfectionist concern at best—don't forget that the aforementioned A&C classic made the same error with Bela Lugosi's *Dracula*!) The character comedy is left to the central couple (and Michael Elphick's hardboiled Inspector Cleaver) through the first half of the film, leading up to a slapstick barroom brawl as the bikers gradually close in. Only in the second half of the indulgently paced (but never boring) offering do we get the rest of the payoff when a desperate (but decidedly non-Catholic) Noddy turns to the Church for assistance and winds up convincing/recruiting priest Anthony Daniels (yes, C-3PO himself) that his machine needs an exorcism. That the initially skeptical (and unnamed) padre is a cycle enthusiast himself certainly doesn't hurt. ("In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the . . . HOLY SHIT!") In brief, the human players draw on all of the potential humor of the situation without making the central menace (no matter how unlikely a central menace) into a joke itself; and *that's* how to make a horror comedy. As a result, the final showdown carries the same level of imagination and inspiration with which the film started off.

The film's low-budget charms stand out appreciably and sharply on this Blu-ray upgrade, which carries over a series of special features previously released on an earlier DVD edition; including a feature commentary from the creative team; a 40m retrospective; two contemporary featurettes and the theatrical trailer.

Shane M. Dallmann