

## Seeing Red from the Depths: Daria Nicolodi's Secret Revenge

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## Seeing Red from the Depths: Daria Nicolodi's Secret Revenge

Anne Young

On a moonlit Italian evening, an actress leaves a giallo film set complaining to her husband, “that man is no director—he’s a butcher!” Working with her director husband—“King of the Spaghetti Thrillers”—is different, she claims as they get into the car, but their lighthearted banter on the way home is tinged with resentment about their working relationship. They play a game: she asks him to “identify” a line from a film they’ve seen together. He incorrectly guesses George Burns.

She replies, “you’re infuriating—you know damn well it was Gracie Allen!”

“Feminist!” he scoffs.

“Pig,” she retorts.

They laugh, and she soothes his insecurities about his problems as a big-shot director. They seem the image of domestic bliss, but later she will turn into a witch and her resentment will turn to revenge.

The dialogue in this scene from Luigi Cozzi’s *De Profundis* (1989) was co-written with Daria Nicolodi, best known as an actress and the long-time common-law partner of the real “King of the Spaghetti thrillers,” Dario Argento. It dramatizes feminist theorist and literary critic Dale Spender’s claim that there is a cultural tradition of male appropriation of women’s creativity and a corresponding collective forgetting of women’s contributions. Spender argues “that in a male-dominated society, women are denied the right to their own creative resources and that these resources are taken by men to augment their own” (1986, 22). Citing numerous examples of women’s creativity becoming the property of male artists, particularly partners and relatives, Spender suggests that this view of artistic and literary creation is tied to a cultural narrative of male

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agency and authorship in human reproduction (i.e., children take on their father's name). Many feminist theorists, including Silvia Federici (2004), have gone further to describe the source of this phenomenon, pointing to women's dual position in the economy: while they may participate in the paid labour force, women are also figured as a natural resource (2004). This devaluation of women's work is progressive, beginning most obviously with reproductive labour (bearing and giving birth to the director's child), and pulses outward in a radial spectrum, from the nebulous 'emotional labour' (soothing the director's anxieties),<sup>1</sup> to more murky questions of who came up with a particular idea while talking about a film project "in the bedroom,"<sup>2</sup>—to, in some cases, surprisingly significant bodies of work. That is to say, the problem of under-crediting women's contributions is not entirely solved by eschewing auteurism and reading films as collaborative works (although it is certainly an important component).

As the example from *De Profundis* illustrates, the theme of creative appropriation appears in Nicolodi's (often uncredited) screenwriting and is a theme which captures the nature of her working relationship with Argento. While her work on *Suspiria* (1977) is now widely acknowledged (although not fully recognized), her lesser-known work with Cozzi has been largely ignored. Expressing revenge fantasies directed at Argento, the Cozzi collaborations critique masculine auteurism and meta-critically comment on the inevitability of its (uncredited) writer's disappearance, while not-so-subtly caricaturing Argento's public persona. Considering Nicolodi as a screenwriter and comparing the Cozzi/Nicolodi films with the Argento/Nicolodi films challenges existing criticism of these works, particularly *Suspiria* (1977).

Nicolodi and Argento first worked together on *Profundo Rosso/Deep Red* (1975), in traditional actress/director roles. It is well-known (although, again, not widely acknowledged) that Nicolodi also introduced Argento to the band whose signature sound is now associated with his films, Goblin (Palmerini and Mistretto 1996, 113; Martin 1997, 7). Nicolodi even claims that she "personally supervised the mixing of the soundtrack" (Palmerini and Mistretto, 113). Argento corroborates this claim in his recent autobiography, remarking that "She has an incredible musical background [. . .] so she was able to give me

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<sup>1</sup> Argento writes of his experience working with Nicolodi as an actress on the set of *Deep Red*: "She understood my needs and anticipated my every mood. She was able to tolerate my anger and make light of the nonsense that seemed insurmountable to me" (2019, 157).

<sup>2</sup> "[O]n the big mattress thrown on the floor," Argento reminisces on the co-creation of *Suspiria* (2019, 166).

some important advice on the soundtrack during post-production" (Argento 2019, 157). By all accounts, this was the height of their romance, which culminated in not only the production of the acclaimed film, but the production of their daughter, actress and filmmaker Asia Argento.

Their next project, and Nicolodi's first writing credit, *Suspiria* (1977), takes place in the feminine world of a German ballet school. The American heroine, Suzy Banyon (Jessica Harper), finds her new home strange and her competitive classmates cliquish, but she makes one friend who alludes to a secret at the heart of the school—a secret she is determined to uncover. Shortly after whispering her suspicions to Suzy, the girl disappears under mysterious circumstances and Suzy is left to continue her friend's investigation, embarking on a psychological quest to escape the forces of black magic. Suzy discovers that the dark secret lurking at the heart of the school is witchcraft. Led by the ancient witch, Helena Markos, the teachers at the school lash out violently at anyone who discovers their occult rituals. After a terrifying confrontation with the evil crone, Suzy apparently escapes.

Except as a biographical footnote (McDonagh 1991; Reich 2001) or interesting anecdote (McDonagh; Paul 2005; Thrower 2001; Knee 1996), Nicolodi's role in conceiving and co-writing the story is not given much consideration. Instead, the film is traditionally read as male-authored and an expression of Argento's signature misogyny or fragile masculinity (Creed 1993; Gallant 2001; Reich 2001). But this view does not hold up if we consider female creators and fans. Reflecting on her role in the film, lead actress Jessica Harper remarked that "It was completely dominated by women. [. . .] That was very unusual at the time. [. . .] . It was rather nice working with a mainly female ensemble for a change" (Jones 2004, 91). This female-focus, Bridget Cherry notes in her analysis of *Suspiria* fandom, is one reason for the film's enduring popularity with women. Cherry speculates that "it is the feminine and perhaps Gothic elements of the film that allow the female fans to elide any perceived misogynistic themes in Argento's work" (2012, 32). But Cherry also notes that *Suspiria* is typically seen as having a very "authorial" stamp as "the work of Dario Argento" (26, 32). This perception has perhaps blinded critics to not only female fandoms, but the participation of female creators, particularly co-writer Nicolodi.

According to Nicolodi, her idea for *Suspiria* was influenced by her grandmother's story of life in a boarding school and the three mothers of Thomas de Quincey's *Suspiria de Profundis* (which form the organizing principle for Argento's trilogy):

I was reading Thomas De Quincey's 'Confessions of an Opium Eater' at the time and I put my finger on the story of the Three mothers—Mater Suspiriorum, Mater Tenebrarum and Mater Lachrymorum—and told Dario that **Suspiria**, named after the Mother of Sighs, would be an astonishing title for a film and he agreed. (Jones 2004, 72)<sup>3</sup>

Claiming she had to fight to have her name in the credits, Nicolodi has said "Everything belongs to me in SUSPIRIA, even the individual quotations [from Jung and Saint Augustine]" (Palmerini and Mistretto 1996, 114). However, Nicolodi remarks that "Dario isn't that forthcoming when it comes to giving other artists credit for his movies. He is the ultimate auteur in that respect" (Jones 2004, 73, 74). Nicolodi compares herself to Mary Shelley, whose *Frankenstein* was first published anonymously and later misattributed to her husband, Percy (Jones 74). She recounts a particularly painful moment when Argento's mythologizing removed all trace of female influence, recasting her grandmother's story as his own experience: "I couldn't believe it when he told my story to the press passing it off as his memory. I was horrified and upset by his actions and ran away for a year because I was so angry" (Jones 74).

It was during this time apart that Nicolodi starred in Mario Bava's *Shock*, playing a woman "haunted and spiritually tortured by the ghost of her first husband" (Jones 2004, 75). Of her experience in this role, she says "I was emerging from the madness of SUSPIRIA and Mario helped me a lot . . . he could put me perfectly at ease" (Martin 1997, 32). Nicolodi praises Bava's ability to work with actors, a talent Argento—even by his own admission—lacks. More specifically, of her work with Bava, she remarks, "I knew he appreciated my contributions" (Jones, 76).

While Nicolodi focused on this project, and her own recovery, Argento began work on a sequel to *Suspiria*, *Inferno* (1980), "[w]orking from Nicolodi's central concept" (Lucas 2007, 1011).<sup>4</sup> However, although she stars in the film, Nicolodi would not help him complete the script they had begun together, and Argento laboured under a curse: he became severely ill, delaying his progress, and was ultimately less than satisfied with the resulting film (Lucas, 1011), which recalls the aesthetic of *Suspiria* but lacks a compelling narrative structure.

<sup>3</sup> I have maintained my sources' original font choices for highlighting titles throughout.

<sup>4</sup> Incidentally, Bava's special effects for *Inferno* were also uncredited, although Bava—a well-known auteur himself—does not seem to have suffered for it (Lucas, 2007: 1010; Cooper, 2012: 99]. It matters who is being appropriated, as John Martin describes Bava "agreeing (with characteristic self-effacement) to leave his name off the picture, so as not to steal his disciple's thunder" (1997: 11).

Although she apparently declined to work on the script any further,<sup>5</sup> Nicolodi stars in *Inferno*, playing the final amateur detective protagonist, who like her predecessors, is violently killed before she can stop the powerful witch who terrorizes the city. But while Argento has Nicolodi tortured and killed onscreen (in *Inferno* [1980], *Tenebrae* [1982], *Phenomena* [1984], and *Opera* [1988]),<sup>6</sup> she is writing powerful and immortal women off-screen.

Around this time, Nicolodi also collaborated with director Luigi Cozzi on *Paganini Horror* and *Demons 6: De Profundis (Il Gatto Nero)* (1989), re-appropriating her material for *Suspiria* to critique the notion of male genius, gendered power dynamics between artists, and Argento himself. Although Cozzi is more generous than Argento when it comes to giving credit in interviews, Nicolodi—who also stars in *Paganini Horror*—was still initially uncredited as a writer.<sup>7</sup> While these films suffer from budgetary constraints, even Cozzi, although disappointed with the completed product and lamenting *Paganini Horror*'s many problems, notes that it had a “beautiful, ambitious script” (Palmerini and Mistretto 1996, 37).<sup>8</sup>

*Paganini Horror* (1989) is reminiscent of Argento's *Demons* (1985), which itself seems to re-make Michael Jackson's *Thriller* (1983). Argento wrote and produced *Demons*, which was directed by Lamberto Bava as “a tribute to one of the most important horror films of all time, [Lamberto's] father Mario's *La Maschera del demonio/ Black Sunday* (1960)” (Argent 2019, 209). In both meta-films—*Paganini Horror* and *Demons*—an evil mask (as in *Black Sunday*), a dead genius (Paganini and Nostradamus, respectively), and a haunted artifact enable art to come to life in terrifying and deadly ways. But while *Demons* presents women's sexuality as a conduit for evil (two sex workers spread the demon plague), *Paganini Horror* warns of the dangers of male ‘genius,’ especially for creative women.

Despite being uncredited as a writer, Daria Nicolodi dominates the opening credits as the biggest star in the cast of *Paganini Horror*. It begins with a

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<sup>5</sup> At one point, she explains, “I only wrote the ending and esoteric passages of *INFERNO*” (Martin 1997, 39), but also stated that even the portions written by Argento contained her “ideas” and “knowledge” (Palmerini and Mistretto 1996, 114).

<sup>6</sup> Gavin Hurley remarks that after this period, his films “are forgettable and uninspired,” (2017, 144), and this is consistent with fan opinion and academic interest (e.g., Paul 2005, 51).

<sup>7</sup> Martin also suggests that, because of the poor quality of these films, Nicolodi preferred to remain uncredited.

<sup>8</sup> Nicolodi is less generous, calling the film “cheaply made and unsatisfying” and remarking that “Cozzi is not Mario Bava” (Martin 1997, 17).

little girl carrying a violin. She is dressed in an antiquated style evoking Paganini's era. When she arrives at her Venice home, she practices one of the virtuoso's pieces, "The Witches Dance." She then kills her mother for no obvious reason, and from this violent scene we are transported to a present-day (1980s) recording studio where a pop-rock group and their manager, Lavinia, work on a song that—like every other musical number in this film—sounds distinctively plagiarized. The nearly all-female rock group is experiencing a creative slump, and their manager is dissatisfied.

To cope with their inability to come up with original material, the band's male drummer finds a lost composition by Paganini through a creepy old man (Donald Pleasence of *Halloween*) and suggests they make it their own. The band's lead singer, Kate, decides to call the song "Paganini Horror" and, excited by the prospect of a hit song with a gothic backstory, exclaims "no one has ever done anything remotely like it—except for Michael Jackson with 'Thriller' and his fantastic video clip!"<sup>9</sup> The drummer, Daniel, chimes in: "We could do the same!" There might not be anything remarkable about referencing Michael Jackson's influential music video, but given its similarity with Argento's *Demons*, this scene could also be casting suspicion on Argento's originality.<sup>10</sup>

Their manager is so impressed with "Paganini Horror" that she arranges for a music video, renting an old house from Silvia (Nicolodi), who we later learn was the young girl who killed her mother after violin practice. Their manager also hires a famous horror director who is supposedly "the King of Horror" and "a genius." The music video he makes has the drummer playing Paganini, and the lead singer playing Paganini's bride. (Although Paganini is dressed in period clothing, his bride wears a poufy 1980s gown.) After an extended soft-focus, dreamy, gothic-style montage, Paganini bursts out of a coffin and murders his bride by repeatedly stabbing her. Then, the fourth wall breaks, and we are once again at the scene of movie making. The "genius" director excitedly instructs a masked Daniel to stab his co-star: "hit her again, harder!" Pan out to Nicolodi's character, Silvia, explaining the scene to the band's manager:

According to the legend, it was right here, in this Venetian house, that Paganini sealed his agreement with the devil, and then, killed his bride,

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<sup>9</sup> Music videos are consistently referred to as "clips" in the English dubbing.

<sup>10</sup> When questioned about whether Argento copies other directors, Nicolodi is vague in his defense, and references copying as "one of the rules of filmmaking" (Palmerini and Mistretto 1996: 118).

Antonia, and used her intestines as strings for the violin that he played from then on. In fact, Paganini's violin had really a unique sound, maybe because the strings played forever the screams of his poor bride.

As she speaks, the camera focuses on a close-up of her face (Figure 1), and it is hard not to read this moment as a statement about the real “King of Horror,” especially considering Nicolodi's career as a famous screamer (Figure 2).<sup>11</sup>



Figure 1: “Paganini's violin [...] played forever the screams of his poor bride.”



Figure 2: The iconic scream that ends *Tenebrae*.

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<sup>11</sup> Martin emphasizes her “epic screaming fit at the end of TENEBRAE” which both Nicolodi and her daughter remark on (1997, 18, 13-14), and which Nicolodi in interviews claims represents “resentment [...] rage” and “frustration” over her dealings with Argento (Jones 2004, 75; Martin 1997, 13-14).



Although this was directed and partially written by Cozzi, he notes that in their collaboration, “Mainly, [Nicolodi] wrote all the esoteric<sup>12</sup> scenes, like the one about the pact with the devil” (Palmerini and Mistretto 1996, 37). Scenes such as this one, perhaps. Intentional or not, this close-up mini monologue speaks to Nicolodi’s struggles with a “genius” husband and his notorious cruelty. Not only did he use her ideas, but, as James Gracey observes, “While appearing as a radiant heroine in *Deep Red*, the characters Nicolodi would later portray all met with increasingly violent and bloody deaths” (2010, 16). Nicolodi herself has complained of her poor working conditions on Argento’s sets, which included “dangerous” stunts and general cruelty (Jones 2004, 75; Palmerini and Mistretto 1996, 114; Martin 1997, 14).<sup>13</sup> In a sense, Argento’s “unique” films contain “the screams of his poor bride,” both literally and figuratively.

Repeating Paganini’s crime of ‘selling their souls for money and success,’ the band’s downfall can be traced to their drummer, who in turn is corrupted by the mysterious man who sells him the Paganini manuscript, and by extension, Paganini himself. Apparent ‘genius’ turns out to be nothing more than clever appropriation: the rock group steals the work of other artists, including Paganini himself, just as Paganini steals the voice “of his poor bride.” The notion of credit is expanded to include not only metaphorical debts, but literal ones. Mirroring the struggles Cozzi faced in making the movie, payment is also a theme in *Paganini Horror*.<sup>14</sup> After Silvia explains the story behind the music video, the manager, Lavinia, laments her role as one who must “pay, pay, pay,” and a zoom in on her lascivious expression suggests she would like to cut a different deal with the expensive director. But it is not only financial repayment that dogs the rock band. A debt to other creator’s ideas must be paid, including the suffering of Paganini’s wife. As the revenant Paganini comes to collect, lurking in the shadows preparing to slaughter them all, the manager foreshadows their demise, telling the director “I told them you were a genius before—this time I’ll scream it!”<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> I believe Cozzi is using the term to refer to the occult.

<sup>13</sup> In his autobiography, Argento confirms, although seemingly without regret, that his sets could be painful and unsafe, citing in particular the wire scene in *Suspiria* in which Stefania Casini was really hurt and scared (Argento 2019, 177), and an occasion when he bit a child actress to elicit a better performance (163).

<sup>14</sup> Incidentally, no one was paid for their work on this film (Jones 2004, 52).

<sup>15</sup> At this point, the pace of the film actually decreases, but one of the seemingly nonsensical details of this plodding segment is a lingering view of a poster of Einstein: another ‘genius’ whose wife is rumoured to have contributed more his work than hot meals and childcare.

Ironically, Cozzi was accused of stealing from Argento with *De Profundis* (1989) (alternately titled *Demons 6* and *The Black Cat* [all three titles eerily similar to projects Argento had been involved with]). However, this film raises the question of who is copying whom. Alan Jones, despite disparaging the film as an “insult” to Argento, remarks that “It began life as Daria Nicolodi’s setting-the-record-straight take on Levana, the Mother of Tears, from Thomas De Quincey’s ‘Confessions of an English Opium Eater’ titled *Out of the Darkness*” (2004, 52). Nicolodi’s distinctive voice<sup>16</sup> comes through in *De Profundis*, as does a thinly disguised representation of her relationship with Argento, and perhaps instead of Cozzi copying Argento, Nicolodi is re-claiming her own material. Another meta-film about making horror movies, like *Paganini Horror*, *De Profundis* also thematically addresses creative copying and stealing, this time through a series of doubles.

The film centres around the couple whose playfully barbed banter leads to a spat over mis-attributing Gracie Allen’s line to George Burns. But their conversation takes a more serious tone on the drive home. Mark, the director, is anxious about finding a producer for his latest project, co-created by writer Dan. His wife, Anne, naively thinks he ought to “just concentrate on saying things in a way no one’s ever thought of before”; that is, the idea of creativity speaking for itself, as Nicolodi said of her uncredited work on *Inferno*, “the story will talk for me because I wrote it” (Palmerini and Mistretto 1996, 114). Mark reminds Anne that that approach will not work in the tough movie industry, as he says, you need to “blow your own horn.” The film depicts producers as all-powerful, but directors are next in line. As a writer, Dan is low in the hierarchy, and he barely suppresses his resentment. In addition, Dan’s wife Nora, another actress, is having an affair with Mark.

At a candlelight dinner, both couples discuss the movie project about the witch Levana, a character from *Suspiria de Profundis* which Dan and Mark mistakenly attribute to Baudelaire. The men explain their idea, and the women ask leading questions:

“Didn’t someone already make this movie?”

“Yes, Dario Argento directed it: *Suspiria*”

“So why make it again?”

“We’re not! There’s enough material in *Suspiria de Profundis* for ten movies—twenty!

And our story is called *De Profundis*.”

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<sup>16</sup> Further analysis of this voice—Nicolodi’s narrative style—is the next step.

This scene both overtly references the connection between Cozzi's film, the film-within-the-film, and Argento's *Suspria*. In case the dinner party reference was too subtle, Mark insists his wife Anne read for the lead role of Levana, and when she does, the theme music for *Suspria* plays. We see her holding the script: *Suspria de Profundis* is written in the same font as *Suspria*'s credits. The script meta-fictionally narrates the action of the scene (e.g., "opens to the first page and starts reading out loud"). Life imitates art, as this film production revives the spirit of the witch, and the lead actress finds herself battling her good and evil sides, just as Nicolodi remarks in an interview, "I am a multiple personality: Lightness and Darkness" (Palmerini and Mistretto 1996, 112).

Meanwhile, Dan and Mark are unaware of what their adaptation has conjured. They consult a professor, Esther Semerani, an expert in "Occult Studies," who they want to hire as a consultant on the film. She asks incredulously "you want to make a film about Levana, and you don't know what the source is?!" As it happens, she has the original text. Correcting them as to the authorship of *Suspria de Profundis* (De Quincey not Baudelaire), she sounds a bit like Nicolodi herself, who once complained that "Dario only had a superficial knowledge of De Quincey's literature, but I was reading it intently in that period and so I suggested it to him" (Palmerini and Mistretto 1996, 114). Semerani warns the film makers not to use the name "Levana" because that would summon her. As she tells the story of the witch, *Suspria* theme music again plays in the background. According to Dr. Semerani, Levana "can take over the body of anyone who concentrates on her hard enough." Discovering that Levana has already been activated, Semerani meets an untimely demise before she can warn the filmmakers.

Privately, Nora and Dan fight because Nora wants the part that Mark has already insisted go to Anne (although Anne has not been consulted). Dan, the weak writer, is unable to stand up to his wife, but we see him type "bitch" in the script he is writing after their argument, during which he explains to her that "there's only one female role." Both women are upset about the casting: one wants the role, but doesn't get it, while the one who gets it, doesn't want it. Nora is also having an affair with Mark and has convinced him to eventually give her the role.<sup>17</sup> Not satisfied with this—and also under the influence of Levana—she tries to drive Anne crazy, unleashing the full force of the ancient witch. Although Professor Semerani has already indicated that concentrating on

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<sup>17</sup> While it may be a coincidence, Nicolodi, who had wanted the lead role in *Suspria*, then turned down the secondary role eventually played by Casini. Argento admits that he "had a brief affair with another actress" on the set of *Suspria*, who he does not identify except to say that it was not Jessica Harper (Argento, 2019: 179).

Levana—for example playing the role in a film—could awaken the witch, it also seems to be the stresses Anne is subjected to that cause her to become Levana. She learns that she possesses the spirit of both Levana and a good fairy within herself, but the stresses of her life led her towards her darker half. As her fairy spirit tells her, “There’s little difference between a fairy and a witch.” Anne faces a choice: her dark double or her light side. Once she has confirmed that her husband is cheating on her and gaslighting her, as well as discovering that the producer, Mr. Levan, is evil, her good fairy brings her back to balance. But first, she chooses Levana, the witch who protects her. She finally stands up to her husband, stabbing him furiously while exclaiming “I don’t need your direction anymore—I can direct myself!” But it turns out to only be a dream, and everything is as it was.

Aside from the direct references to *Suspiria*, there are undeniable parallels with Nicolodi’s ill-fated relationship with her director, co-writer, and life partner. John Martin describes the main characters, the Burns and Allen fans Anne and Mark, as “Argento and Nicolodi clones” (1997, 16). Whether or not *De Profundis* is an attempt at the three mother’s trilogy finale or a story about the making of *Suspiria* is unclear. Nicolodi tells Alan Jones that

I did write a treatment for the conclusion ages ago. It was titled *Out of the Depths*, and concerned Levana, the third mother’s name actually mentioned by De Quincey in ‘Confessions of an Opium Eater.’ It concerned a neurotic horror film director, the break-up of a long relationship with his lover, and their monstrous daughter who turns out to be the third mother reborn. Sound familiar? It was all the tears I’ve cried over the years that gave me the idea. (Jones 2004, 74)

It does sound familiar: this is the premise for *De Profundis*. Although Cozzi had already made the film, Nicolodi proposes Tim Burton as a possible director for this horror story (Jones, 74). In the same interview, she also claims that “[Dario] can’t ever complete the trilogy now without my help” (Jones, 74). However, Argento did conclude the trilogy with the long-awaited yet disappointing *Mother of Tears* (2007), starring their daughter Asia. Apparently having resolved their differences, Nicolodi appears in the film as the ghost of Asia’s character’s deceased mother.<sup>18</sup>

Although their animosity subsided in the years before Nicolodi’s death in November of 2020, and Argento has begun to openly reflect on her

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<sup>18</sup> Argento claims that it was Asia’s idea to have her real mother play her fictional mother (2019: 262).

contributions, Nicolodi's expressions of resentment about her involvement in Argento's films, as well as critical descriptions of her involvement, offer us valuable information and is worth a second look. This seemingly personal aspect gives us greater insight into these films as well as criticism, although it is typically treated as interesting trivia. Nicolodi's stages of grief begin with what she describes as a generous mood of love quickly followed by heartbreak. Despite struggling to receive credit for her work on *Suspiria*, she says, it was "a gift-wrapped present to Dario" (Jones 2004, 74). She also cites "love" and the painful struggle to have her lover credit her for *Suspiria* as reasons for not insisting on a writing credit for *Inferno*. Interviewed by Caroline Vie about her lack of credit for *Inferno*, Nicolodi says that

I didn't take a writing credit for INFERNO [sic], instead the producers paid me with a trip to the Caribbean. That's how I wanted it, I didn't want to be too visible . . . I just wanted to disappear! For a long time I only wanted to be Dario's shadow, but since we separated, I would like some recognition of what I have contributed to his work. (qtd. in Martin 1997, 11).

This resentment period<sup>19</sup> gives us much of what we know about Nicolodi's work on Argento's films in the way of interviews and seems to have influenced her writing for Cozzi.

Nicolodi herself did not promote herself in a way that makes her recognizable to serious criticism, academic or popular; in effect, despite appearing in 'masculine' roles, she often presented herself in stereotypically feminine ways which potentially undercut any serious consideration of her under-the-table contributions. Asked, in response to her bitterness about being overlooked, if she had aspirations to direct her own movies, Nicolodi responded, "No, because to quote Wim Wenders, 'Directors are all gangsters,' and I prefer to remain a softer figure, i.e. an actress" (Palmerini and Mistretto 1996, 117). Her daughter Asia repeats this gendered characterization of actors and directors, although she herself has chosen to play both roles. Having spoken openly about her father's hatred of actors (for example, in *Dario Argento: An Eye for Horror*), even as she acted in his films, Asia describes the role of director as more satisfying: "I became a real totalitarian on set [. . .] I screamed 'Silence' and everyone stopped. [. . .] It was fabulous. No one ever took any notice of me as an actress when I did that!" (Jones 2004, 277). With a critical eye on both parents, Asia describes her parent's battle as extending for her entire life, and

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<sup>19</sup> On Nicolodi's more recent claims of authorship, see Shearer (2020).

rooted in a director/actress conflict that features feminine vanity and masculine authority:

If I was [sic] to pinpoint the exact moment I knew it was over between them I'd say it was when Dario didn't give Daria the lead in **Suspiria**. I got sick of hearing her say, your father stole **Suspiria** from me. But when you write a script with someone, as she did with my father, you can't accuse that person of stealing what is essentially a collaborative effort. She also hated the fact that Dario only offered her a supporting role in the movie. That mortally wounded Daria's pride and actress ego. If she had played a ballerina she wouldn't have said anything. However, she veiled how upset she was by accusing him of stealing her ideas instead. How Hollywood-pathetic is that? I know in my heart that's really what it was all about. But now **Suspiria** has entered movie folklore as the masterpiece my father dragged screaming away from my mother. Nothing is ever that simple. (Jones, 271-272)

Earlier, in her interview for *Spaghetti Nightmares*, Nicolodi admits to her resentment over not being cast in the film (Palmerini and Mistretto 1996, 144) and has admitted to having an actor's ego when she does not get the part she wants (Martin 1997, 39). She laments that "the thing was that I'd written Suzy's part for myself" (Palmerini and Mistretto 1996, 114), and Argento later (partially) corroborates this, explaining that "we had built Suzy's character together" (Argento 2019, 171). ("I wrote it for you!" Mark tells his wife in *De Profundis*.) Yet, Nicolodi maintained that Argento failed to acknowledge her writing contributions. For Asia, at least at the time of her interview with Jones, her mother's writing was not meant to play a starring role in *Suspiria*. But, as depicted in *De Profundis*, although writers are less often credited for a film's success (and more often women), strangely, Argento's screenwriting has bolstered his fame.

Before now, discussions of Argento's work that mentioned Nicolodi typically described her as his 'muse.' Nicolodi herself has portrayed herself in a feminine role not inconsistent with this gendered description. Her stepdaughter, Fiore Argento, gives a definition that might help us to understand the term, saying of Nicolodi, "she was the muse—lots of poets and artists love her because she makes you think about things" (*Dario Argento: An Eye for Horror*, 2000). More than an object of adoration, the muse in Fiore's description is an active partner in creation, but not the author. In this sense, Nicolodi, at times, seemed content to adopt a traditionally feminine role in relation to creative

endeavors, leaving the genius to the men, almost resigned to her role as uncredited creator, simply wanting to be acknowledged in her role as what Alan Jones introduces her as: “Argento’s lover and muse” (2004, 69). Despite her claim to desire credit for *Suspiria* (and to a lesser extent, *Inferno* and *Phenomena* [Martin 1997, 39; Palmerini and Mistretto 1996, 114]), she seems to consider appropriation a director’s prerogative. Despite complaining about unacknowledged work, Nicolodi has also subscribed to narrative and rhetorical tropes that categorize her as a muse and feminine supporting influence. This feminine persona has a resentful side, however, and, like the three mothers, this vengeful femininity is expressed in her other screenwriting efforts. Just as Levana emerges at a time when the protagonist of *De Profundis* is most wronged, Nicolodi’s “dark side” demands recognition, even revenge.

More recently, the word has gotten out that Nicolodi did more for Argento than serve as a ‘muse,’ and today, there is a general understanding that she was significantly involved in *Suspiria*. But the personal nature of her creative contribution and its corresponding disappearance is a barrier to true recognition and critical engagement. Unlike other Argento Collaborations, the co-writing of *Suspiria* was a date-night activity.<sup>20</sup> L. Andrew Cooper suggests this difference between Nicolodi and other collaborators in his call to read Argento’s films as collaborative works, remarking that there is “a thin, permeable boundary between Dario Argento’s personal life and his artistic work” and that “the most significant collaboration of his career has arguably been with Daria Nicolodi” (2012: 3). However, although he urges us to consider these types of collaborations, Cooper himself “does not focus on the sort of biographical criticism that Argento’s collaborative relationships invite” (Cooper 2012, 3). It is one thing to pay closer attention to the work of collaborators on the payroll and in the credits, and a different (if related) project to unearth women’s unpaid, uncredited labour. (This difference may also partly explain why Nicolodi is simultaneously disregarded as a writer but celebrated as an actress.) We might also remember that even in recent history a common-law partnership was socially less valued than legal marriage, and that this could have influenced critical perception. That is to say, without the official legal status, their relationship is even more *personal*.

As their relationship is personal as well as professional, Nicolodi has been relegated to the popular realm of gossip, trivia, and biographical anecdote,

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<sup>20</sup> Argento recalls the initial stage of the project, the “discuss[ion]”: “I remember we were in the bedroom on the big mattress thrown on the floor [...] [Daria] was fascinated by the occult and I must admit she knew a lot more about it than I did. So *we* started *our* research” (2019: 166-167) [italics mine].

and much of the information concerning her creative involvement in Argento's films comes from popular sources, such as fan publications (for example, Martin). As a result, academics not only steer clear of discussing her, but in fact are prone to error when they do. For example, Louis Paul misattributes Asia's maternity to Argento's ex-wife (2005, 48), and Adam Knee calls her "a long-time friend" of Argento (1996, 225) (while not untrue, this description downplays and misconstrues their relationship). Knee, however, is one of the few to suggest Nicolodi was creatively involved in Argento's films. To be fair, as Jacqueline Reich points out, Argento himself, at least in earlier interviews, downplays the role of women in his life in interviews (2001, 92). But it does not excuse Jones' descriptions of Nicolodi as a scandalous woman whose looks have faded (2004, 72), despite the fact that he praises her in *Daria Argento: An Eye for Horror*, admitting that "Daria Nicolodi put Dario on a completely different track. If it had not been for their relationship, at that particular time, we would not get *Suspiria*" (2000).

But aside from such general statements, criticism of Argento's films have generally ignored Nicolodi as a significant factor in their *interpretations*. Critics typically treat Argento as the author and his films are often described as misogynist. For example, Jacqueline Reich notes that "There was a struggle between Argento and Nicolodi over the authorship of *Suspiria*" (2001, 104), but she does not discuss this further in her argument that *Suspiria* primarily represents male anxieties. Although Argento himself may be guilty of misogyny and anxieties about women (Asia also remarks on "The problem my father has with women" [Jones 2004, 272]), his films contain more voices than one. While on the one hand, biography is considered passé, and Nicolodi is often considered too personal to be significant, sometimes it seems as if critics biographize under the guise of merely analyzing the text. While it is commonplace to say that "Daria Nicolodi's contribution to shaping *Suspiria* needs to be taken into account" (McDonagh 1991, 137), that is usually where it ends.

For example, in a recent issue of *Horror Studies*, Joshua Schulze notes Nicolodi's co-writing role, crediting her with the female-dominated script (2019, 74). However, he then goes on to explain that this is irrelevant to his discussion of the film, since he is analyzing only the visual aspects, including a scene "coded as masculine" to reinforce his argument that *Suspiria* depicts modernity as masculine and art nouveau styles as feminine (80). The scene in question is one in which Suzy Banyon travels to the nearby university to discuss the problem of witchcraft with a professor of psychiatry. It includes the quotes by Jung and St.



Augustine that Nicolodi claims to have contributed (Palmerini and Mistretto 1996, 114; Martin 1997, 12). Martin explains that “she is responsible for inserting some of [*Suspiria*’s] most well-remembered lines, e.g. ‘broken mirrors... broken minds’ and ‘magic is all around us’ (quotes from Jung and St. Augustine, respectively)” (12).<sup>21</sup> In her interview for *Spaghetti Nightmares*, Nicolodi sounds a little like Esther Semerani, the professor of the occult in Cozzi’s *De Profundis*, noting the actor’s incorrect delivery in this scene:

Everything belongs to me in *SUSPIRIA*, even the individual quotations such as Jung’s phrase, “There are no cracked mirrors, only cracked minds,” that the young psychiatrist (Udo Kier) addresses to Susy, or the famous quotations by Saint Augustine, “Quoddam ubique, quoddam semper, quoddam ab omnibus creditum est,” which, however, is wrong because the actor had lost his lines sheet during the shooting...the exact sentence is “Quod ubique, quod semper, quod ab omnibus creditum est.” (Palmerini and Mistretto 1996, 114)

Of course, these quotes are from male thinkers, which may bolster Schulze’s argument, but it seems ironic that he chooses this scene, particularly “the expository dialogue, correlating knowledge with masculinity,” that Nicolodi was so invested in, to discuss a supposed patriarchal theme in the film (Schulze 2019, 80). While Schultze’s claim about gendered architectural space is convincing, like Reich, he ultimately makes the broader argument that the film is rooted in anxious masculinity, claiming that “*Suspiria* [. . .] demonstrates man’s complicated relationship with the feminine in art” (83). Perhaps, as Adam Knee suggests, Argento’s films are not reducible to a simplistic gender binary (1996). But more than that, criticism needs to move beyond the notion that man creates and woman appears, that the artist is male (and immune to influence), and that representations of women necessarily always represent ‘male fears and desire’ (to use a cliché phrase). To seriously consider Nicolodi’s work as a writer would be to disrupt established scholarship on Argento and perhaps even on horror film studies in general. This break with tradition may even be happening now, as very recently Martha Shearer has published a critique of *Suspiria* that considers Nicolodi’s role as co-creator (2020).

Perhaps one reason that critics—aside from Shearer—have failed to investigate Nicolodi’s work more closely is that they see her role as a cipher for Argento. That is to say, while they acknowledge she did work, or that, as

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<sup>21</sup> Argento (2019: 175) attributes the latter quote to Vincent of Lérins; I cannot confirm the source.

Stephen Thrower remarks, she was “the most important woman in Argento’s creative and personal life” (2001, 141), they do not consider her distinctive creative voice or her critical and inventive capacity. This is in keeping with Spender’s argument that women’s creativity, relegated to the role of helping and supporting, slips into the property of men, who are more likely to be viewed as individual creators. Argento himself, despite finally revealing in his autobiography some of Nicolodi’s considerable contributions, seems to have succumbed to this view. When he describes their research trip together, during a good period in their relationship, it sounds as if they are one person with a single goal: “we formed a precise plan” [for *Inferno*] (Argento 2019, 187). Once this unity dissolves, he does not mention her contributions to *Inferno* any further. His relationship with Asia seems to follow a similar pattern, and he describes a struggle when she decides to stop being his on-call actress and follow her own life path (Argento 2019, 254). Discussing his writing on *The Stendhal Syndrome*, he says that “together with my daughters, [. . .] I had come up with the lead character [. . .] Every evening after dinner we would sit at the writing desk and work on the psychology of Anna Manni” (Argento 2019, 244). Notice the shift in attribution: “together [. . .] I.” As head of the family, the man organizes family labour. Likewise, critics acknowledge that Nicolodi did work, “co-wrote,” and helped in specifically feminized ways. For example, Schulze, above, credits her with the female characters in *Suspiria* (in effect, adding women). They may credit her grandmother’s fairy tale as a resource she provides for inspiration, just as De Quincey is cited as an inspiration for Argento, although it was Nicolodi’s critical mind that in fact revealed these stories to him, complete with musical details (“strange noises [. . .] like a slow samba” marks the witches presence, according to her re-telling of her grandmother’s story [Jones 2004, 72]). Too, Nicolodi’s mischievous sense of humour and flamboyant storytelling style she displays in interviews is often taken seriously, and critics take her clever teasing about witchcraft—like Shirley Jackson before her—at face value. For example, Thrower cites Nicolodi’s supposed belief in magic as another source of inspiration for Argento (2001, 141). In general, her male interviewers seem confused by Nicolodi and her jokes, and their accounts depict her as full of feminine resources that are passively transmitted to the male artist.

While these critical problems may sound antiquated, they remain stubbornly entrenched, continuing to obscure women’s creative work. They are also problems that persist across the board, plaguing feminist, anti-feminist, and post-feminist critique.

This raises question: how can we correct it? Moving away from auteurism and combating overt sexism are important steps, of course, but that

is not where it ends. Recuperative scholarship is important, but so is a theoretical understanding of the processes of erasure, as well as adopting methodologies for recovery. Otherwise, the cycle of forgetting goes on for eternity. Feminist critics have long recognized the value of biography. It might be time to overcome our critical squeamishness and look into the abyss of the personal, which—surely, we know by now—is political.

Meanwhile, a tendency to ignore women's contributions continues in both the production and interpretation of contemporary films, including the 2018 *Suspiria* remake. Director Luca Guadagnino's most well-known gaffe is his outright plagiarism of feminist artist Ana Mendieta, copying her photographic arrangements in his film (Maddeus 2018; Cills 2018). But, in claiming his film is feminist ("a great feminist film" [Douglas 2018]), Guadagnino has also appropriated feminism itself, particularly the Italian feminist movement of the 1970s he cites as inspiration, peddling a false image of second-wave Italian feminism that relies on equivocation: he insists that the movement was more concerned with "difference" than with "equality" (a notion Dakota Johnson also promulgates in television interviews, citing Guadagnino as her source), although for example, Silvia Federici has explained numerous times why they were not fighting for 'equality' in the sense that being *equal to men* was not the goal, but rather the role of men might also be challenged instead of upheld as a model to aspire to. In fact, a primary focus of this movement was women's unpaid labour.<sup>22</sup> In mischaracterizing an entire movement, Guadagnino adds insult to the injury of appropriation. In effect, he has perpetuated a hoax on film critics, who, familiar with feminism only as a buzzword, took his word for it and peppered their praise with vague notions of "empowerment." When pressed repeatedly in an interview for a popular feminist website to explain why he thinks his film is feminist, Guadagnino was unable to answer coherently, except to note that "I really don't have any problems about expressing my own femininity" and "man is created by a woman" (Juzwiak 2018). Incidentally, some attendees of the 2018 *Suspiria* premier wore "Weinstein is Innocent" t-shirts in protest of #metoo, a movement with which Asia Argento has been actively involved.<sup>23</sup> The media frenzy surrounding the remake was unconcerned with Asia's mother's work on the original film, the woman's story that inspired it, or

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<sup>22</sup> For example, *The Wages for Housework* campaign grew out of this movement.

<sup>23</sup> And, in response to both her activism and public perception of her personal life, commenters on online media featuring Asia accuse her of witchcraft with astonishing frequency, ironically echoing the second-wave Italian feminist movement's identification with witches.

any specific, meaningful account of how the remake can be said to be “feminist.”

But, despite the silence, it is not a secret that Nicolodi wrote the original *Suspiria* and influenced Argento’s work in many ways. The evidence I have brought forward to make my case is widely known; this is, after all, as Asia notes, “folklore” and there has been some formal acknowledgment of Nicolodi’s contributions more recently, including Argento’s. But what have we done with this evidence? Scholarly and popular analysis of Argento’s oeuvre has not taken these facts to be meaningful. Argento is the official author, and studies of ‘his’ films are still organized this way. However, as Janet Staiger points out, “another outcome in liberal sociology is to shift authorship to another worker in the system, often the producer or the scriptwriter” (2003: 42). I do not wish to claim that Nicolodi is the ‘real’ author of Argento’s films. That would, in some way, still subscribe to traditional notions of authorship.

Reducing the importance of masculinity for authorship has not re-valued women’s roles; instead, it has merely made masculinity an implicit, rather than explicit, feature of the *auteur*. Similarly, recent attempts to draw attention to the lack of gender parity in *directorship* of films is too limited in scope, since it is yet another attempt to fill a masculine role with token women rather than reconsider the nature of the role itself. As Mark Jancovich argues, “Rather than simply reproduce this marginalization, there is a need to actively search out practitioners that have been forgotten” and perform “research that addresses the contribution of women when they are present” (2019, 45, 3). In a sense, we might go back to the basics of feminist research and to the very same problems that Spender and others have attempted to address. These problems have not gone away. In shifting our focus from explicitly masculine authorship images to gender-neutral or even female ones, we may in fact ignore or reinforce real-world power dynamics that may prevent women’s voices from being heard—that is, besides those echoing screams of Paganini’s bride.

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