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Horrific Opera, Aesthetic Violence: *Genere* in Dario Argento's *Opera* (1987)

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Abstract: This article explores Dario Argento's invocation of classic musical gestures of opera and horror film in his 1987 film *Opera*. I propose a theoretical concept, *genere*, to explicate the construction of genre and gender through music and memory. Argento juxtaposes musical registers, as Michael Long conceives the term in *Beautiful Monsters: Imagining the Classic in Musical Media* (2008), to construct the quintessential female protagonist of both opera and horror who simultaneously embodies a dominatrix and a victim. Through the analysis of four scenes from *Opera*, I demonstrate how Argento employs musical gestures considered classic to both opera and horror film in order to question the status of heavy metal as lowbrow and opera as highbrow. Indeed, the soundtrack of *Opera*, in conversation with its sets and camerawork, suggests the precise opposite. These classic musical gestures point to what is politically and theoretically at stake during an encounter between opera and cinema: a subversion of the generic categories that segregate art into unproductive categories of high and low. This subversion allows for an articulate communication between creator and spectator.

GENERE

If opera is the "Italian national genre,"¹ then Italian director, producer, and screenwriter Dario Argento represents its slasher Other who creates horror films, frequently described as operatic, which delight his fans and anger his critics. Though critics have argued that Argento's films inherently resemble opera because of their roots in native Italian musical and literary genres, it is in fact his juxtaposition and conflation of the generic musical features of Italian opera and horror that achieve sophisticated expression in his 1987 film, *Opera* (known in Anglophone releases as *Terror at the Opera*).² The musical patchwork of *Opera* depends upon the misogynistic reputation of Mediterranean opera and Italian horror to subvert hetero-normative structures of film spectatorship. Argento's invocation of classic³ musical gestures critiques the association of horror with gratuitous violence and of opera with monumental achievements of Western art. He employs these gestures to aid in the construction of a female protagonist, Betty (Cristina Marsillach),

who embodies the archetypal female of both opera and horror while simultaneously subverting generic conventions of the two genres.⁴

The Italian word *genere* provides a useful entryway into the intersection of music, genre, and gender in the analysis of this film. In Italian, *genere* can mean both an aesthetic or biological classification (such as a literary genre or plant genus) and gender. *Genere*, in both of these connotations, merely represents an ideal type that cannot exist in reality. Genre, like gender, is performed and negotiated, oftentimes only an aspect of the artwork or person, not constitutive of the entire work of art or personal identity. Thus, genre is also a socially constructed aesthetic category, contingent upon reception. Gender, too, generates from numerous repetitions of gestures and signs that have been socially designated as particular to a certain classification (transgender, queer, female, male, etc.).⁵ Throughout *Opera*, Argento simultaneously plays with the generic markers of opera and horror as categories, as well as how these markers constitute a female protagonist within the two genres. In doing so, Argento renders the processes by which society constructs generic and gender distinctions as dynamic, contingent, and unstable.

Through this conception of *genere*, I place two crucial elements of Argento's *œuvre* into conversation: music and misogyny. While numerous scholars have identified sonic excess and primacy of music as key characteristics of Argento films, few have been more specific than classifying musical genres (sometimes incorrectly),⁶ describing volume as "aural hysteria,"⁷ or condemning its excess as "schizophrenic."⁸ The only substantial Anglophone music scholarship on Argento, written by Tony Mitchell, has focused on the director's use of prog rock,⁹ in general, and his various collaborations with Ennio Morricone and the band Goblin, in particular. Few analyses have delved into Argento's employment of heavy metal and opera, especially in his films from the late 1970s through the 1980s. In addition, an ongoing battle wages regarding whether or not Argento and his films support patriarchal, hetero-normative structures of horror film spectatorship as set forth by feminist film theorists such as Laura Mulvey and Carol Clover.¹⁰ Though scholars and critics dispute the issue,¹¹ Argento has been blatantly accused of misogyny because of his famous quote: "I like women, especially beautiful ones. If they have a good face and figure, I would much prefer to watch them being murdered than an ugly girl or man."¹² Argento uses the soundtrack of *Opera* to create a musically grounded argument about opera, horror, and misogyny, which critiques the one-dimensional stereotypes and criticisms that attempt to define these genres.

Argento juxtaposes three distinct musical genres throughout the film: ambient electronic music,¹³ heavy metal, and nineteenth-century Italian opera. A single track

stands apart from these genres—Claudio Simonetti's child-like lullaby with operatic vocalizations, entitled "Opera" on some soundtrack releases. This distinctive music accompanies the film's final scene, often referred to as the film's coda. The soundtrack of *Opera* has been described as an "unnervingly schizoid tapestr[y]." ¹⁴ Although Simonetti, former keyboardist of Italian prog rock band Goblin and long-time Argento musical collaborator, is credited in both the film's final credits and one of its soundtrack releases, the score actually conglomerates a diversity of musical artists and genres. Brian Eno, Terry Taylor, and Bill Wyman all composed music for the film and *Opera*'s signature metal tracks come from multiple bands. ¹⁵ Steel Grave, a pseudonym for Italian heavy metal band Gow, provides some of the persistent heavy metal accompanying murder and flashback scenes. Gow released only one solo album, *Mr. Tippel* (1984), before sinking into relative obscurity following the songs recorded for *Opera*. ¹⁶ Swedish heavy metal band Shadows from the Wilderness released a single heavy metal track from the film, "No Escape," on its *Norden Light* (1987) album. ¹⁷ Also included on one version of the film soundtrack are famous works of the classical canon composed by Giacomo Puccini (1858–1924), Vincenzo Bellini (1801–1835), and Giuseppe Verdi (1813–1901). These are only to name a few among numerous other pre-existing musical works that Argento puts to use in *Opera*. In an extra to the American release of *Opera*, Argento explains that he wanted the soundtrack to represent a variety of musicians and particularly unknown bands.

The *Opera* soundtrack critiques predictable musical categories and instead proffers that the engaging aspect of an artwork (and indeed horror film should be considered as such) is in the unresolved tension, juxtaposition, and conflation among registers—in this case the musical registers of opera and metal. This collision of musical registers, as Michael Long explains, allows for multifaceted artistic creation that depends in part upon both collective and personal musical memory and imagination. ¹⁸ Long employs the sociolinguistic theory of language-registers to eradicate the unproductive labels of high and low art and to more precisely explore the dialogue achieved by classic ¹⁹ musical gestures in film and other popular artistic forms. The concept of register acknowledges the dialogue among creators, critics, and spectators, which ultimately attach meaning to aural gestures in film. Long's framework demonstrates that the soundtrack Argento crafted for *Opera* is anything but maniacal. Institutions that surround musical objects, such as academia, the music industry, and music criticism, try to force musical works into genres and categories that do not do justice to the moment in which spectators experience the classic fragments put forth by creators. In Argento's

case, the precise sonic patchwork of *Opera* constructs critiques that would be otherwise absent from the film. In comingling his own work with classic musical registers of opera and horror, Argento places a legitimizing frame around the film, a frame that spectators can listen through in order to understand its poignant argument.

Michael Long particularly highlights the use of classic registers by aesthetic and social outsiders²⁰—a status Argento has earned through the ostracization of horror film producers and directors by the broader artistic and critical community. Numerous scholars and writers have described *Opera* as Argento's answer to his critics.²¹ In the plot of *Opera*, the director of *Macbeth*, Marco (Ian Charleson), began his career as a horror film director. In one scene, Marco reads reviews written by elitist critics who inevitably pan his *Macbeth* production because of his past in horror. Marco is a semi-autobiographical depiction of Argento himself, who, a few years before the release of *Opera* in 1987, had been slated to direct Verdi's *Rigoletto* at the Sferisterio Theatre in Macerata, but was dismissed when the company disagreed with his plan to portray the Duke as a vampire.²² Some scholars have argued that these critics who condemn horror directors and their art as misogynistic unwittingly uphold hetero-normative structures of film spectatorship themselves.²³ Argento has suffered violent attacks from critics who flippantly label his films as misogynistic. Listening to *Opera* provides an opportunity to hear Argento's response to such myopic critiques.

Opera continually places visual and aural spectatorship into question. Betty's attacker forces her to watch his attacks by taping pins beneath her eyelids. A spectator might feel compelled to close their eyes to a horrific scene, but the ears cannot be closed so easily. At various points during the film, Betty is blinded, by eye drops and then by a blindfold. Her attacker is blinded when a crow pokes his eye out, and a bullet through the eye kills Myra (Daria Nicolodi), Betty's agent. In these moments of obscured vision, sound and listening take on a prominent role. Although scholars have frequently pointed to the primacy of seeing and the eyes in *giallo* films,²⁴ Argento creates scenes in which the sonic environment and musical gestures perform an equally significant role both within the diegesis and in the experience of the film.

Argento's *Opera* depicts a young soprano understudy, Betty, who is suddenly thrown into the role of Lady Macbeth in the Parma Teatro Regio's²⁵ staging of Verdi's *Macbeth* when a car hits the prima donna on opening night. Following Betty's successful debut as Lady Macbeth, a madman begins stalking her. He ties Betty up with ropes, tapes pins beneath her eyelids, and forces her to watch as he ruthlessly murders innocent victims from the production. The opera's cast and stage crew, particularly Betty, blame

the violent incidents on the fabled bad luck of *Macbeth*. Since William Shakespeare wrote the play, actors have feared the infamous witches' curse from Act IV, Scene 1. Cast and crewmembers worldwide perpetuate the urban legend by refusing to utter the name Macbeth on stage and a history of the production boasts an uncanny number of on-stage accidents and even deaths.

The investigator sent to solve these crimes, Alan Santini (Urbano Barberini), turns out to be the culprit. When a live bird from the production identifies Santini as the murderer by poking his eye out during a performance of *Macbeth*, Santini drags Betty to an upstairs room of the opera house, ties her to a chair, blindfolds her, and reveals his dark reasons for the murders. Betty's dead mother, also an opera diva, was Santini's lover. Betty's mother forced Santini to commit brutal murders while she watched for sadistic, voyeuristic pleasure. Santini belongs to a well-established category of characters in Argento movies that are unable to solve the primal scene—in the case of *Opera*, Santini cannot solve Betty's primal scene because of his involvement in it as the lover of Betty's mother.²⁶ His attacks on Betty attempt to recreate and consummate the sadomasochistic relationship he began with her mother. It is not until the end of the film that Betty finally realizes that a lifelong recurring nightmare is actually a memory of catching her mother and Santini during this violent sexual game.

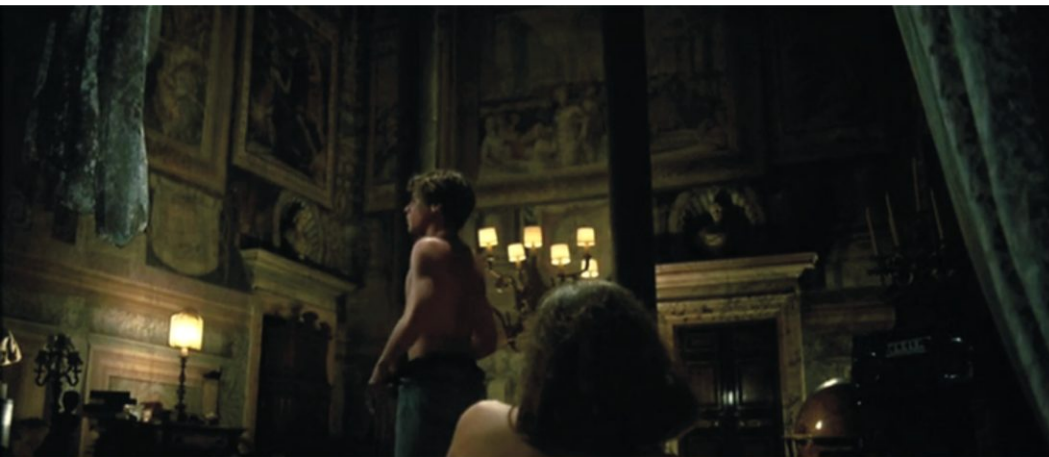


IMAGE 1
The operatic register
in the bedroom scene

CLASSIC GESTURES OF OPERA AND HORROR

Four *Opera* scenes demonstrate Argento's sophisticated use of these classic musical gestures of opera and horror. In the very first murder scene of *Opera* (28:21), Argento underscores the operatic stage with heavy metal. Argento's cult followers have come to crave the prog rock turned heavy and speed metal soundtracks of Argento's

1970s and early 80s horror flicks. The first murder scene of *Opera* satisfies this particular audience and vindicates horror film detractors who bemoan Argento's gratuitous violence. Yet Argento already alludes to the classic operatic register in this scene. The lush setting of the bedroom in which Betty and the production stage manager, Stefano (William McNamara), attempt to make love imitates the opulent setting of an opera house with marble columns, dark wood, high ceilings, oversized furniture, velvet linens, and long curtains. [Image 1] The set looks larger than life, as if the entire scene takes place on stage rather than on screen.

Argento immediately subverts misogyny as a generic marker of horror and highlights sexual violence as an expected operatic convention. Santini murders a man (not a woman) first, by stabbing Stefano through the throat with a knife that punctures into his mouth. Although Argento commonly employs sharp objects as murder weapons, stabbing in particular calls upon operatic tropes. Stabbing serves as a common metaphor for rape in the Mediterranean opera repertory, enacting that which remains impermissible on stage.²⁷ A close-up shot focuses explicitly on the phallic knife within Stefano's mouth. [Image 2] In the first murder sequence of many, despite the sonic signifier of horror, heavy metal, the visual depicts a baroque set piece that calls upon operatic innuendos of homosexuality and sexual violence. Argento is known for the extravagant set pieces he uses for murder sequences, but his use of the operatic in this particular scene establishes early in the film the tension, juxtaposition, and conflation he will maintain between opera and horror throughout *Opera*, and deftly exemplifies the porous boundary between the two.

IMAGE 2
The knife puncturing
into Stefano's mouth



Heavy and speed metal accompany all but one of the murder scenes in *Opera*. The murder scene without metal accompaniment takes place in Betty's apartment as she

attempts to recuperate after another attack by her stalker (60:02, Clip 1). Hearing and listening take a significant role in the scene as Betty suffers from blurred vision after using eye drops. The cinematic scene depicts a dimly lit apartment seen primarily through point of view shots. In what can be called a set piece in both the filmic and operatic senses, Argento maintains the tensions between opera and horror in order to complicate the genres, both visually and aurally. On one hand, the operatic characteristics of this moment are striking. From the moment Betty re-starts her recording of "Casta diva" from Bellini's *Norma*, the spectator realizes this is a set piece in the operatic sense: a piece of music that serves as a self-sufficient unit within the larger work. The side lighting functions as a spotlight around Betty and the police officer that Santini has just murdered. [Image 3] The scene immediately presents a classic operatic scene—the (about-to-be) dying diva, shrouded in dramatic lighting as music suspends the moments before her inevitable and necessary death. The famous cavatina sung by a soprano, like most arias, halts action and offers a moment of reflection at the end of a scene filled with libretto-like misunderstandings. This scene contains a classic operatic case of mistaken identities when Betty realizes the presence of both a real police officer and the stalker posing as this real police officer in her apartment. Nonetheless, the spectators witness this operatic moment through a filmic perspective via a spinning bird's-eye view shot. The cinematic camera angles and scenery combined with the operatic soundtrack and lighting brings forth beauty in the scene's violence, but also invokes violent operatic tropes that fit seamlessly into this cinematic horror scene.



IMAGE 3
Stage-like lighting around Betty
and police officer in apartment scene

When the stalker appears in front of Betty, by opera standards, the scene is set for the diva to die. But by horror standards, this is the moment of intensification calling for a dramatic, nail-biting escape by the female protagonist, who against all odds defeats her

stalker once again. Thwarting operatic mandates and opting for the horrific, Betty shoots at Santini then quickly switches the music on her stereo system from *Norma's* "Casta Diva" on a cassette tape to *La Traviata's* "Sempre Libera Degg'io" on compact disc. Perhaps, to a horror fan, this serves as a mere intensification of the music to support mounting action. However, this is a very particular change in operatic register, from the reserved *bel canto* style of Bellini to the virtuosic vocals of Verdi. This outburst of female vocal power becomes reinforced by the change in medium. The cassette tape recording causes the stalker to flashback to a tender moment when he watched Betty's mother practice the cavatina in her dressing room. The spectator hears "Casta Diva" through Santini's memory when the recording becomes reverberant and the accompaniment changes from orchestral to piano. The sudden rupture of the modern, digital recording of "Sempre Libera Degg'io" into Santini's memory causes the stalker to momentarily pause and cringe. [Image 4] At this instant (72:51), the hetero-normative horror structure collapses²⁸ and Betty controls Santini through his sonic environment, evinced by Santini's frustrated, clenched hands.

IMAGE 4
Santini cringes to Verdi's "Sempre
Libera Degg'io" on compact disc



The operatic soundtrack presents two ideal type females from both opera and horror in this single scene: the priestess, a submissive woman controlled by a violent man, and the prostitute, a powerful diva who threatens masculinity. Betty simultaneously embodies both archetypes and vacillates between them throughout the film. Norma, an aging female priestess cast aside by her male love interest for a younger virgin sings the *bel canto* cavatina "Casta Diva." Violetta, a beautiful young courtesan who, despite feeling a nascent love, chooses freedom instead, sings "Sempre Libera Degg'io." The change in medium, from cassette tape to compact disc, supports this dichotomy. Santini becomes nostalgic for the past medium of his violence, Betty's mother, while he struggles with the

unwieldy modern medium, Betty. Betty, unlike her mother, resists Santini's violent sexual game. Similarly, the controlled, *bel canto* style of the past is overcome by its excessive, modern Other, Verdi. The soundtrack from scene to scene, or sometimes within a single scene, plays a significant role in achieving this ambivalent construction of Betty's character as the quintessential female protagonist of both opera and horror—simultaneously dominatrix and victim.

The switch from Bellini to Verdi not only portrays Betty as the prototypical, leading lady of both opera and horror, but also belies how the genres opera and heavy metal are socially constructed. In this scene, Verdi accompanies a murder scene in which the spectator would expect to hear metal. Nonetheless, the musical exchange proves effective both dramatically and aesthetically. One of the key signifiers of heavy metal as a musical genre is a bright, powerful vocalization resulting from an "overdrive" of the voice.²⁹ Such metal vocalizations commonly accompany Argento's murder scenes. Argento adheres to this typical vocal accompaniment in the apartment scene, except this time through opera. "Overdrive" amply describes the vocal prowess necessary for this particular soprano role, which intimidates even the best-trained singers. Betty begins Verdi's cabaletta at the moment when Violetta holds a prolonged C6, scream-like and shrill, like the prolonged, high-pitched vocals of speed metal. Argento renders the spectator incapable of distinguishing between the two genres. These two vocal "overdrives" underscore murder set pieces congruently. To a horror fan, this interchangeability may sound like merely an appropriate sonic intensification, but underneath, the swap proves that opera can be equally horrific.

Following this apartment scene, opera and metal temporally confront. Betty escapes from the building where opera continues to blast in her apartment. As she runs through the street, heavy metal ruptures into the film (Clip 2). The song accompanying this scene, "Steel Grave," is a textbook example of heavy metal. Mode is a crucial determinant of this classification. The E-aolian mode of "Steel Grave" coupled with its distorted vocals and guitar, sustains, and high volume, categorize the piece unquestionably as heavy metal.³⁰ The melodic line and vocal timbre of "Steel Grave" also comply with generic heavy metal characteristics: long notes held at the ends of phrases, vocal syncopation against the instrumentation, and a bright, powerful sound resulting from an "overdrive" of the voice.³¹ Though the tempo of the song lends itself to speed metal, its lack of technical virtuosity identifies it more with heavy metal.

This is the only *Opera* scene that employs heavy metal music but does not accompany an attack by Santini. Instead, the music accompanies Betty's flashback to the

primal scene. Spectators witness blurry visions of a blonde woman tied up by her wrists, gently swinging, clearly a memory, which we soon learn, is of Betty's mother. Earlier in the film, heavy metal seems to be associated with Santini's sadistic ritual of forcing Betty to watch his violent acts. Yet ambient electronic music, not heavy metal, accompanies violent flashbacks from Santini's perspective. Heavy metal is not the soundtrack to Santini's ritualistic violence—it is the soundtrack to Betty's traumatic primal scene (01:17:24). While opera caused Santini's flashback to Betty's mother, metal accompanies Betty's flashback to the same woman.

In Freud's primal scene, a child witnesses the parents copulating or projects sex acts onto the parents and interprets the interaction as violent. This experience traumatizes the child. More traumatic for Betty, her primal scene involved actual violence and not merely a misinterpretation of sex as violent. Santini, because of his sexual relations with Betty's mother, now represents a father figure to Betty and his attacks on her become not only violent, but also incestuous. Primal scenes frequently play a significant role in solving Argento's mysteries.³² In Argento films, the investigator's inability to solve the primal scene and re-establish the symbolic order, "...prevent[s] [the detective] from ever defining the self with any real conviction."³³ In *Opera*, Investigator Santini's role within the primal scene further complicates these issues. The film creates an impossibility of returning to a rightful symbolic order. Betty can never resolve her trauma through the investigator's help because Santini cannot resolve his own identity crisis stemming from the same incidents. Slavoj Žižek's quote on detective fiction similarly applies to the primal scene of *Opera* as "an event that cannot be integrated into symbolic reality because it appears to interrupt the 'normal' causal chain."³⁴ Santini and Betty were both traumatized by experiences with her mother and therefore neither can provide the help that they seek in each other—that which Betty seeks from Santini as the investigator and that which Santini seeks from Betty as the diva dominatrix.

An ignorant knowledge of heavy metal might assume a logical connection between the supposedly violent genre and Betty's "impossible" scene. Like horror film, metal has received uninformed condemnation from its detractors, including former Second Lady Tipper Gore. To the contrary, metal generally deals very little with physical violence.³⁵ It does, however, confront gender issues, often in a non-misogynistic manner. The sexual politics of metal, like horror film, are "a conflicted mixture of confirmation and contradiction of dominant myths about gender."³⁶ Though metal sometimes achieves masculinity through exscription of females, misogyny, and androgyny, it inevitably reveals the contradictions inherent in such performances of

masculinity.³⁷ Robert Walser eloquently explains how metal, like horror film and opera, problematizes gender and power: "Like opera, heavy metal draws upon many sources of power: mythology, violence, madness, the iconography of horror. But none of these surpasses gender in its potential to inspire anxiety and to ameliorate it."³⁸ In the case of Betty, her deep-seated trauma, accompanied by metal, relate to a maternal figure, not a male aggressor.

Argento's play with stereotypical opera and horror music demonstrates that these musical registers are in no way fixed or universal, but rather dynamic and contingent. Moreover, a symbiotic relationship exists between the social construction of gender and musical genre. The use of these musical registers in *Opera* points to the similarity between opera and horror, particularly their association with issues of gender and violence. The musical gestures in these three scenes, the murder scene in the operatic setting, the apartment chase scene accompanied by opera, and Betty's traumatic memories accompanied by heavy metal, create a dialogue with spectators invoking much more than just generic connotations of music. These aural gestures question the status of opera and horror as art forms and critique the label of metal and horror as lowbrow and opera as highbrow. In fact, Argento's soundtrack suggests precisely the opposite.



IMAGE 5
Betty costumed as a horror-inspired
Lady Macbeth

Classic gestures of opera and horror completely conflate during one of the few scenes in which spectators witness the *Macbeth* production. Through this conflation, Argento argues for the artistic legitimacy of his work. Betty, costumed as a dominatrix-like Lady Macbeth in leather and chains raises a gleaming gun, a vision from a horror film or Regietheater inspired by it.³⁹ [Image 5] A black feather cape around Betty's shoulders and a metallic helmet that covers her hair conjure the image of a knight in armor. Once again, she represents the diva that threatens masculinity. Betty's feather cape is part of

the significant attention Argento pays to the live ravens that serve as integral props in the *Macbeth* production. During the scene in which Betty first portrays Lady Macbeth, bird's-eye view shots swoop across the loge seats, over the orchestra and up toward the ceiling. The spectator witnesses the opera house setting as if from the perspective of one of the production's ravens. Clearly the use of birds invokes not merely a cinematic register, but a very specific, classic film register: Alfred Hitchcock.⁴⁰ Camera work continues to encourage this cinematic interpretation of the *Macbeth* production. At one point (10:36), the spectator hears "Che faceste? Dite su!" from a distance while a point of view shot from the perspective of Santini roams through the opera house to a loge seat where he watches Betty through binoculars. By invoking such a register, Argento signifies his classic cinematic influences. Through his simultaneous invocation of classic registers of both opera (Verdi) and horror (Hitchcock), Argento not only creates an argument for the artistic legacy and legitimacy of his work, but also illustrates the affinity between the two artists.

Despite the *Macbeth* score, allusions to Hitchcock in this opera house scene are strikingly musical. This early scene (9:03) takes place before any attacks by Santini. As the *Macbeth* "Preludio" ends, the curtains rise to the witches' curse, "**Che faceste? dite su!**" and the spectator hears the unmistakable sonic marker of horror film: tremolo strings, composed by Verdi in 1847. The frame then flashes forward to the sharp vocal and orchestral attacks of the chorus that could be amply described as horror film stingers.⁴¹ Indeed, the most famous string stinger of all time comes from the shower scene in Hitchcock's *Psycho*, composed by Bernard Herrmann (1911-1975)—a stabbing that itself gestures toward the operatic trope of rape mentioned above. In retrospect, the tremolo strings and musical stingers of the first scene of *Macbeth* seem to foreshadow Betty's role as the horror victim, as do the strings that accompany Marion's panicked drive in *Psycho*. By employing musical gestures that place *Opera* in conversation with monumental operatic works of nineteenth-century Italian opera as well as classic horror cinema, Argento uses the music itself to challenge the flippant denigration of horror film and metal music and the uncritical valorization of opera, which frequently degrades women and promotes violence.

The soundtrack of *Opera* challenges arbitrary aesthetic criticisms and classifications by undermining the generic markers it ostensibly upholds. In the first scene described above, metal accompanies operatic tropes to implicate opera in promoting violence and sexual exploitation while simultaneously demonstrating that horror films' victims are not exclusively helpless females. In the second scene, opera aids

in constituting Betty as the ideal type female of *both* opera and horror, evincing that opera and horror have ideal gender types in common, thus rendering the two indistinguishable. In the third scene, heavy metal relates to Betty's memories of her mother and female trauma. Finally, in the fourth scene, by drawing upon the similarities between Verdi and Herrmann, Argento frames his work with classic musical registers to point out his own intellectual genealogy in (and departure from) the classic registers of both opera and horror.

MUSIC, MEMORY, AND GENRE

Memory plays a key role in the experience of music in *Opera* within both the diegesis as well as in the dialogue among the creator and the spectators, who are left to deal with the subversion of musical generic markers. The entire film revolves around Betty's own rediscovery of her traumatic memory of catching her mother and Santini during their violent sexual game. Betty's flashbacks to her mother are always accompanied by metal, while it is opera that causes Santini to flashback to Betty's mother. These mnemonic musical gestures work to further conflate the two genres. A more traditional use of the two genres would involve metal as a fetish-like accompaniment to the serial killer's rituals. Instead, Argento accompanies Santini's pre-attack rituals with ambient electronic music.

Memory contributes to a significant role in the creation of both genre and gender, or more appropriately, *genere*. Spectators must call upon memories to grapple with the musical gestures of opera and horror offered throughout the film. Michael Long emphasizes "the imagination's reliance upon memory and the essential function of imaginative memory as both a filter and a repository" in the creation and reception of musical gestures in media. He goes on to assert that "the imaginative path taken by an auditor to judge that an item...marks an intersection with the classic is as relevant as the classic's reinvention by that item's creator."⁴² The combined invocation of memory within the film and in its spectatorship suggests that memory constitutes experience, and music plays an integral role in this process. Music and memories contribute to the construction of self (including gender) and to the creation of generic categories as individuals reconcile experience and emotion.

The particular critique of *Opera's* soundtrack as "unnervingly schizoid"⁴³ implies a lack of thoughtfulness. Yet, as evinced by the above analysis, Argento mobilizes musical registers to achieve a variety of quite purposeful effects. The musical registers throughout the film perform a type of *doppio senso*. The music could be heard two (or

more) ways and interpretation lies in the ear of the beholder. Argento sometimes satisfies generic expectations; for example, the heavy metal that underscores violent set pieces bows to what has now become classic slasher scoring. For horror film spectators, the sporadic operatic moments, such as the apartment scene that includes Bellini and Verdi compositions, function congruently as logical features of the film's plot. For some spectators, the sonic tension between opera and metal might be completely non-existent. Perhaps this ambiguity is Argento's goal, at least for his horror fans. These musical gestures would speak differently to Argento's critics or opera fans that detest horror, not to mention spectators who, like myself, are fans of both opera and horror. These personal experiences then stand, especially for Italian spectators, in the shadow of a long collective memory of Mediterranean opera, the *giallo* as both a literary and cinematic genre, and Argento's own *œuvre*.

The "unnerving" collision among these multiple musical registers is an end in itself that forms an aesthetic critique: opera and horror share generic markers and ideal types. However, Argento also demonstrates that musical tropes and gestures maintain lives of their own that defy such artificially constructed generic boundaries. These musical gestures of both opera and horror point to what is politically and theoretically at stake when the two art forms encounter one another: a subversion of the generic categories on which the West depends to segregate art forms into unproductive divisions of high and low, politically correct and incorrect. In disproving these constructs, Argento's film demands that spectators approach, engage, imagine and interpret art forms with a critical, individual eye (and ear).

ARGENTO'S INCONCLUSIVE CODA

The coda of Argento's *Opera* (Clip 3) completely overthrows the markers of genre, gender, or more precisely, *genere* that remain in flux throughout the entire film. Some reviews have argued that the coda adds nothing to the film. The American film company Orion wanted to cut the coda all together in its release of the film, but Argento adamantly refused. Despite these critiques, the coda of *Opera* mobilizes a musical register absent from the rest of the film and further complicates a definitive classification of Betty as diva, victim, or monster.

In the coda, Betty has moved in with the opera and horror director, Marco, to a secluded home in the Alps. (In an alternative ending of the film that Argento never used, Betty ran away to the Alps with her stalker, Santini). A television broadcast reports that

Santini faked his death and a manhunt is underway. Marco finds the couple's cook slaughtered in the kitchen and yells to Betty, who is standing outside, that Santini is alive and in their home. After a chase scene between Betty, Santini, and Marco, Santini murders Marco in front of Betty. When Marco's blood splatters on Betty's shirt, she realizes helicopters and police dogs are in the area and about to find them, so she ostensibly stalls Santini by looking at the blood and saying "I *am* like my mother. I realize it now. I wanted you to kill him. I'm exactly like her." (01:40:40) Once the police officers arrest Santini, Betty emphatically exclaims, "It's not true, I'm *not* like my mother, nothing like her, nothing at all, nothing at all!" (01:42:20)

The *Opera* theme by Simonetti fades in and Betty commences a voice-over narrative. A celesta-sounding instrument plucks out a simple diatonic harmony while a soprano vocalizes a lullaby-like non-semantic melody. Betty is depicted on screen and the narrative presumably takes place within her mind. She explains that she wants to escape, that she is different from others, and that she loves nature. The coda eerily resembles the dénouement of *Psycho*, yet another allusion to Hitchcock. Just as Norman Bates' mother, speaking through him, insists that she would not even hurt a fly, Betty insists that her gentleness and passion for nature surpasses the rest of humanity.

Betty insists that she has the capacity to feel compassion. In the final shot, Betty touches an ugly lizard-like creature, calls it "my beauty," and urges it to "go free." Betty should by most standards react to the lizard as disgusting—it is, after all, a slimy, green, belly-crawling creature. The lizard might even be seen as monstrous, or in the words of Noël Carroll, "categorically incomplete." It is "interstitial,"⁴⁴ does not make sense, and remains unable to be categorized in these final moments of the film. Betty's gentle caresses of the lizard signal her inability to identify the abject as she emphatically attempts to assert the precise opposite, that she possesses a superior love and compassion for the good and natural. This scene encourages the interpretation that Betty might be implicated in the crimes she watched Santini commit and that she may indeed be like her mother.⁴⁵ The film makes clear that Betty's mother represents the monstrous feminine, a threatening, female Other that created the violent, sexual predator Santini; but the label for Betty—diva, victim, or monster—remains unresolved.

The music of the coda enforces a connection between Betty and her mother. The music box quality of Simonetti's composition conjures a child-like state and the operatic vocalizations sound as if they occur in the reverberant space of memory, Betty's memory of her mother singing a lullaby.⁴⁶ This particular lullaby seems to transform

Betty, though the transformation remains ambiguous.⁴⁷ The lullaby and the lizard together, combined with the recollection of Norman Bates' mother speaking through him, conjure an affinity between Betty and her mother, despite Betty's emphatic verbal denial of such a bond. The operatic vocalizations reinforce the vocal connection between Betty and her mother, both of whom were made famous and powerful through their singing voices. However, Betty's connection to her mother's voice is also traumatic. Like the umbilical web of Michel Chion and auditory pleasure of the mother's voice described by Kaja Silverman, the voice of Betty's mother instills in her both maternal comfort and resentment.⁴⁸ This lullaby accompanies a scene in which Betty en-voices such ambivalence. Within two minutes she states, "I *am* like my mother. I realize it now," followed by, "I'm *not* like my mother, nothing like her." We experience the fine line established by Stan Link between "innocents in danger" versus "innocents as danger."⁴⁹ Argento does not resolve whether Betty ultimately represents an empowered diva, an innocent victim, or a dangerous, monstrous feminine. In fact, one could easily conjure that she simultaneously embodies all three—a schizophrenic nature, like the soundtrack of the film, which leaves the spectators to deal with the generic ruptures they have experienced.

Thus, Betty is, as she states, "different." She "doesn't vaguely resemble others." She is completely different from the ideal female types of opera and horror, completely different from the rigidly defined female character created by hackneyed generic markers upon which so many art forms, from opera to horror, depend. She is complex, unknowable, and incomplete. Contrary to the assertion that the coda of *Opera* adds nothing to the film and could be done away with completely, it in fact forces the issues with which Argento has confronted the spectators throughout the entire film. The coda puts the ideal type female protagonist of opera and horror into question by suggesting that first, such a female cannot exist, and second, that rigidly constructed gender, defined by generic markers including music, limit the possibility for complex female characters. The coda appropriately concludes the film precisely in its rejection of conclusion and closure. Similarly, Argento never musically reconciles the film, opting instead to accompany the coda with music that, like Betty, is "completely different."

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1. Maitland McDonagh in *Dario Argento: An Eye for Horror*, DVD, directed by Leon Ferguson (Chatsworth, CA: Image Entertainment, 2002).

2. For this article, I am referencing the American release of *Opera*, DVD, directed by Dario Argento (West Hollywood, CA: Blue Underground, Inc., 2007).

3. Michael Long, *Beautiful Monsters: Imagining the Classic in Musical Media* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2008), endnote 16.

4. In an extra to the above-referenced *Opera* DVD release, "Conducting Dario Argento's *Opera*," Claudio Simonetti notes the care Argento takes with the musical scores to his films and how he follows musical decisions closely compared with other directors.

5. See Judith Butler, *Bodies that Matter: On the Discursive Limits of "sex"* (New York: Routledge, 1993) and *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (New York: Routledge, 1990).

6. Maitland McDonagh, *Broken Mirrors/Broken Minds: The Dark Dreams of Dario Argento* (London: Sun Tavern Fields, 1991), 203-204.

7. Tony Mitchell, "Prog rock, the horror film and sonic excess: Dario Argento, Morricone and Goblin," in Phillip Hayward (ed.), *Terror tracks: music, sound and horror cinema* (London and Connecticut: Equinox, 2009), 94.

8. Douglas Winter, "Opera of Violence: The films of Dario Argento," in Christopher Golden (ed.) *Cut! Horror Writers on Horror Films* (New York: Berkley Books, 1992).

9. Prog rock is a subgenre of rock music that developed in the United Kingdom and then throughout Europe during the late 1960s and 1970s. It is characterized by a typical rock instrumentation of electric guitar, bass, drums, and keyboards and synthesizers. Prog rock musicians broke away from traditional forms and rhythms and mobilized the effects available through electronic instruments. Prog rock tends to be characterized by instrumental and vocal virtuosity.

10. In "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema," from *Visual and Other Pleasures*, 2nd edition (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 1989/2009), Laura Mulvey, applying psychoanalytic theory, asserts that the female image serves as the object of the "voyeuristic active/passive mechanisms" of film in which the active is decidedly male and the passive, female (27). Carol Clover deals with this issue specifically in regards to horror film, "The functions of monster and hero are far more frequently represented by males and the function of victim far more garishly by females. The fact that female monsters and female heroes, when they do appear, are masculine in dress and behavior (and often even name), and that male victims are shown in feminine postures at the moment of their extremity, would seem to suggest that gender inheres in the function itself—that there is something about the victim function that wants manifestation in a female, and something about the monster and hero functions that wants expression in a male. Sex, in this universe, proceeds from gender, not the other way around. . ." *Men, Women, and Chain Saws: Gender in the Modern Horror Film* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1992), 12-13.

11. The work of Adam Knee and Jacqueline Reich aptly represents the two sides of the academic debates on Argento films and misogyny. In "Gender, Genre, Argento," *The Dread of Difference: Gender and the Horror Film*, ed. Barry Keith Grant (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1996), Knee argues the "crisis of category" surrounding gender distinctions in Argento films opens up space for re-thinking traditional accounts of spectatorship in horror films. Knee cites Steven Shaviro's analysis of a scene from *Opera* as a springboard for his claims: "[Betty...is] overtly appalled by the violence [she is] compelled to see, yet there's a latent—secretly desirable—erotic thrill in the way these gory spectacles are being produced for [her]" (217). Steven Shaviro cites *Opera* as a "singular counter-paradigm for film spectatorship on account of...irreducibly ambiguous blurring of traditional polarities between male and female, active and passive, aggressor and victim, and subject and object," in *The Cinematic Body* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1993), 49. In "The Mother of All Horror: Witches, Gender, and the Films of Dario Argento," *Monsters in the Italian Literary Imagination*, ed. Keala Jewell (Detroit, MI: Wayne State University Press, 2003), Jacqueline

Reich specifically countered Knee's work, citing Argento's portrayal of witches in *Suspiria* (1977) and *Inferno* (1980). Reich concludes, "[The witch] constitutes a threat to the entire hierarchical structures of gender subjectivity, and thus she must be mutilated and destroyed. The conclusions of *Suspiria* and *Inferno* leave no trace of her menace, maintaining the hegemonic status quo and restoring the female to her rightful place as object rather than subject in the symbolic order" (102). Reich only mentions *Opera* in passing within a list of Argento's works from the 1970s and 1980s.

12. Quoted in Wright, 9.

13. For a discussion of the perceived incongruence between ambient synthesizer electronic music and horror film violence, see Kay Dickinson, "Troubling Synthesis: The Horrific Sights and Incompatible Sounds of 'Video Nasties,'" *Off Key: When Film and Music Won't Work Together* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008).

14. Winter, 277.

15. Of the two main soundtracks released from *Opera*, the Anchor Bay release that accompanied a limited edition DVD in the United States contains Simonetti's ambient synthesizer score and heavy metal tracks, while the Cinevox release, which was Japanese, includes Eno and Taylor tracks and Italian opera. In both cases, music not heard in the film is included on the soundtrack. See, Various artists, *Opera*, Anchor Bay DV11854, CD, and Various artists, *Opera*, Cinevox SLCS 7156, CD.

16. The only sources on Steel Grave and Gow are metal blogs and fan websites. Fans seem to take particular care in policing misinformation about the band through YouTube comments and social networking sites.

17. On the marketing of popular music through film, see Jeff Smith, *The Sounds of Commerce: marketing popular film music* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1998). On horror film soundtracks and metal music, in particular, see Joseph Tompkins, "What's the Deal with Soundtrack Albums? Metal Music and the Customized Aesthetics of Contemporary Horror," *Cinema Journal* 49 (2009): 65-81. Tompkins' discussion may be useful in explaining the use of the band Shadows of the Wilderness on the soundtrack.

18. Long, *Beautiful Monsters*.

19. Long conceives of the "classic" as not only "classical music" as it has come to be defined through canonization, but also as "a collective, not quite definable, yet inescapably powerful 'vernacular imagination [of the classic].' Vernacular here is intended simply in the sense of something commonly shared or understood by a community," (5).

20. Long, 6.

21. See Winter, McDonagh, as well as Will Wright, "Argento and the Giallo: Dario Argento, Mastro Auteur or Master Misogynist?" *Offscreen* 10, no. 4 (April 2006), and L. Andrew Cooper, "The Indulgence of Critique: Relocating the Sadistic Voyeur in Dario Argento's *Opera*," *Quarterly Review of Film and Video* 22 (2005): 63-72.

22. Argento explains Marco as such in his interview for "Conducting Dario Argento's Opera," cited above.

23. Cooper explains: "The pervert-punishing norm established by horror's detractors causes a blindness to horror's potential merits tantamount to erasure, and in doing so it exercises an oppressive power similar to the power it ostensibly opposes. Criticism can be about the interrogation of power structures, as Foucault claims, but it can also be about the exercise of power in the defense of established and harmful structures. The definition of critique as a virtue tells only half the story. Criticism in a larger sense, as most subversive innovators in the history of art could attest, can also be quite vicious, even violent. As an artist who has dedicated himself almost entirely to horror, Argento has endured virulent critical attacks on both his work and his character, and his experience with this form of violence appears in his work in both overt and covert meditations on film theory and criticism" (65).

24. See Wright.

25. Argento wanted to film at La Scala in Milan for its pomp atmosphere, but because the opera house is used year-round for performances, this was not possible and he had to film at the Teatro Regio in Parma, "Conducting Dario Argento's *Opera*," *Opera*, DVD, directed by Dario Argento (1987; West Hollywood, CA: Blue Underground, Inc. 2007).

26. On the investigator's inability to solve the primal scene in Argento films, see Xavier Mendik, "A (Repeated) Time to Die: The Investigation of Primal Trauma in the Films of Dario Argento," in Anne Mullen and Emer L'Birne (eds.), *Crime Scenes: Detective Narratives in European Culture since 1945* (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2000). The investigator's inability to solve the primal scene is also a main theme of Argento's *Profundo Rosso* (1975).

27. See Sam Abel, *Opera in the Flesh: Sexuality in Operatic Performance* (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1996) and Susan McClary, *Feminine Endings: Music, Gender, and Sexuality* (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 1991/2002).

28. In her "Introduction to the Second Edition" of *Visual and Other Pleasures*, Mulvey discusses the displacement of celluloid film by digital media as involving "an immediate sense of loss, of the disappearance of something precious and integral to the beauty of film, and introduces the need for another kind of psychoanalytic interpretation. Psychoanalytically speaking, *the displacement from one medium to another might be compared to a castration of the original*. . . . Now, that lost past is overlaid by the loss of the medium itself" (xxiv) (emphasis added).

29. Robert Walser, *Running with the Devil: Power, Gender and Madness in Heavy Metal Music* (Hanover and London: Wesleyan University Press, 1993), 45-46. For more nuanced, recent definitions of "overdrive" in metal music see Jeremy Wallach, Harris M. Berger, and Paul D. Greene, *Metal Rules the Globe: Heavy Metal Music Around the World* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2011). "Overdrive" also calls to mind technology, such as amplification that pushes the voice beyond its natural capacity toward the impossible. The term could similarly apply to the technique and effect of vocals in Verdi and Richard Wagner (1813-1883).

30. Walser writes that heavy metal typically employs Aeolian and Dorian modes, while Phrygian and Locrian modes occur more frequently in speed metal.

31. Walser, 45-46.

32. See Mendik and endnote 25 (cited above) on the investigator's inability to solve the primal scene.

33. Quoted in Mendik, 36.
34. Ibid.
35. Walser, 139.
36. Ibid., 120.
37. See Walser, "Chapter 4: Forging Masculinity: Heavy Metal Sounds and Images of Gender," 108-136.
38. Ibid., 109.
39. In Regietheater, 20th-century directors take liberties in their productions of classic operas including geographic location, time, space, costuming, and set design. This practice has garnered a reputation among opera critics as lowbrow and generally distasteful. For a discussion of controversial staging of classic operas, see David J. Levin, *Unsettling Opera: Staging Mozart, Verdi, Wagner and Zemlinsky* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 2007).
40. Mitchell cites Argento asserting that he uses music in a more "robust" or "expressive" way than Hitchcock, 94.
41. In horror film parlance, stingers are defined as sharp, short bursts of sound that are meant to startle the audience.
42. Long, 5.
43. Winter, 277.
44. Stan Link, "The Monster and the Music Box: Children and the Soundtrack of Horror," in Neil Lerner (ed.), *Music in the Horror Film* (New York: Routledge, 2010), 43.
45. In Leon Hunt's "A (Sadistic) Night at the Opera: Notes on the Italian Horror Film," *Velvet Light Trap*, no. 30 (1992), Hunt asserts that Betty oscillates between "being and not being the cruel mother" (74).
46. See Link for a discussion of the association between simple lullabies to the ambivalent infant/mother bond.
47. Link asserts that in *The Exorcist*, "sound... becomes the very site of [Reagan's] transformation from innocence to obscenity" (38).
48. Kaja Silverman discusses the ambivalence associated with the mother's voice in "The Fantasy of the Maternal Voice: Paranoia and Compensation," *The Acoustic Mirror: The Female Voice in Psychoanalysis and Cinema*, (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1988). For Michel Chion, the mother's voice is exclusively traumatic and entraps the infant; see *The Voice in Cinema* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1999).
49. Link, 40.