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The Forbidden Photos of a Lady Above Suspicion

Le foto proibite di una signora per bene
1970

CAST

Dagmar Lassander as Minou
Pier Paolo Capponi as Peter / Pier
Simón Andreu as the Blackmailer
Oswaldo Genazzani as the Commissioner
Salvador Huguet as George
And
Nieves Navarro / Susan Scott as Dominique

CREW

Directed by **Luciano Ercoli**
Produced by **Alberto Pugliese** and **Luciano Ercoli**
Story and Screenplay by **Ernesto Gastaldi** and **May Velasco**
Director of Photography **Alejandro Ulloa**
Film Editor **Luciano Ercoli**
Music by **Ennio Morricone**
Production Designer **Juan Alberto**
Costumes by **Gloria Cardì**





EVERY MANIAC HAS HIS PRICE

by Michael Mackenzie

At the height of the boom of the early 1970s, the *giallo* came in two distinct varieties. Perhaps most famously, there were the 'M-*gialli*' with their paranoid male amateur sleuths, popularised by Dario Argento in his remarkable debut, *The Bird with the Crystal Plumage* (*L'uccello dalle piume di cristallo*, 1970). A second strain, however, also existed, in which fragile, often emotionally dysfunctional female protagonists were stalked and harassed by an array of unscrupulous male tormenters. These female-centric *gialli*, or 'F-*gialli*', are best exemplified by the films Sergio Martino made with stars Edwige Fenech and/or George Hilton, beginning with the twisty, Freudian *The Strange Vice of Mrs Wardh* (*Lo strano vizio della Signora Wardh*, 1971).

Before Martino arrived on the scene and made the F-*gialli* every bit as bloody and brutal as their male counterparts, however, these films had a very different character. In the mid-to-late 1960s, before *The Bird with the Crystal Plumage* ignited the *giallo*'s mass popularity, numerous filmmakers nonetheless crafted thrillers with a distinctly Italian twist, many of them taking their cues from Henri-Georges Clouzot's masterful psychological thriller *Les diaboliques* (1955). Melodrama *gialli*, sexy *gialli* – call them what you will, these pre-boom *gialli* can be distinguished from their later counterparts by their lower body counts, a lack of explicit violence, and a strong focus on convoluted conspiracies and mind-games, often revolving around the psychological breakdowns of their female protagonists, driven to the brink of madness by the fatal men who seek to control and ultimately kill them.

In both their pre- and post-*Crystal Plumage* variants, the F-*gialli* owe a considerable, if rarely acknowledged, debt to the female Gothic film, described by Tania Modleski as being about "women who fall in love with or marry men they subsequently begin to fear",¹ and who "are often suspected of trying to drive their wives insane, or to murder them as they have murdered other women in the past".² With their female protagonists constantly harangued and on the verge of a nervous breakdown, Modleski's summary of the typical female Gothic plot could almost have been written in response to any number of F-*gialli* – including the one under discussion here.

1 - Modleski, Tania (1988) *The Women Who Knew Too Much: Hitchcock and Feminist Theory*. New York and London: Routledge, p. 57.

2 - Modleski, Tania (2008) *Loving with a Vengeance: Mass Produced Fantasies for Women*, 2nd edition. New York and London: Routledge, p. 12.



Luciano Ercoli's *The Forbidden Photos of a Lady Above Suspicion* (*Le foto proibite di una signora per bene*, 1970) might have come out after *The Bird with the Crystal Plumage*, but it feels like it could have been made years earlier – which isn't entirely surprising, as it began life as a script that prolific *giallo* scribe Ernesto Gastaldi had originally written some years earlier as a potential vehicle for his wife, Mara Maril. A producer by trade, Ercoli had never intended to step into the director's chair, but with his production company in a state of financial peril, he needed a hit fast, and so turned to Gastaldi, who offered him his unfiled script about a fragile housewife who submits to sexual degradation at the hands of a blackmailer in order to protect her husband, accused of murdering one of his employees. Ercoli assumed the role of director and set off for Barcelona, taking advantage of the significantly cheaper production costs in Francoist Spain. The rest, as they say, is history.

Although a production born out of financial necessity, helmed by a first-time director, *Forbidden Photos* is remarkably assured in its execution, offering up several moments of supreme stylishness – most notably in the scenes that take place in the blackmailer's baroque apartment, with its moody lighting, red velvet drapes and bizarre humanoid sculptures sprouting from the walls. At the same time, Ercoli infuses the scenes in which Minou submits to the blackmailer's sexual advances with an unnerving mixture of sadism and eroticism, articulating the fine line between the two that runs through the heart of the *giallo*.

In a lot of respects, however, *Forbidden Photos* is an exercise in minimalism. The cast is small, with only six credited roles, plus a handful of smaller, often silent, uncredited ones, and the number of distinct locations is limited too, giving the film an at times almost chamber piece-like quality. Whether this is reflected in Gastaldi's original script or it was simplified after the fact due to the limited budget and compressed shooting schedule, the end result is a film that relies heavily on the talents of a small handful of actors, headlined by Dagmar Lassander as the skittish Minou and Pier Paolo Capponi as her dependable but dull businessman husband, Peter (Pier in the Italian version).

It's in its secondary characters, however, that I feel *Forbidden Photos* comes most alive and distinguishes itself from its contemporaries. As Minou's fun-loving and sexually liberated best friend, Dominique, Ercoli cast Nieves Navarro, an Andalusian model-turned-actress who'd previously appeared in a number of the spaghetti westerns he and his business partner, Alberto Pugliese, had produced, and who would ultimately become his wife. Billed under her usual pseudonym of "Susan Scott", she changes the film's entire dynamic the moment she steps into view, owning the screen in every scene she appears in and foreshadowing what was to come in her future *giallo* collaborations with Ercoli.

Her character is by far the most interesting in the film, and it's hardly surprising that she and fellow Spaniard Simón Andreu, genuinely creepy as Minou's tormenter (in a way that the more conventionally handsome George Hilton never really was), would be elevated to leading couple status for the two *gialli* Luciano Ercoli subsequently directed – *Death Walks on High Heels* (*La morte cammina con i tacchi alti*, 1971) and *Death Walks at Midnight* (*La morte accarezza a mezzanotte*, 1972).

The characters portrayed by the various *giallo* leading ladies were always defined as much by the established 'personas' of the actresses playing them as by the scripts – indeed, perhaps more so. Marina Malfatti always had a glacial 'ice queen' quality, for example, and Mimsy Farmer was invariably cast as a frigid, mentally disturbed paranoid with unresolved 'daddy issues'. Edwige Fenech, with the exception of her striking turn in *Your Vice is a Locked Room and Only I Have the Key* (*Il tuo vizio è una stanza chiusa e solo io ne ho la chiave*, Sergio Martino, 1972), struggled to escape from the 'damsel in distress' role with which she was typecast post-*Mrs Wardh*. Navarro, on the other hand, always made for an awkward fit in a genre typically defined by its panicky, fainting-prone 'scream queens', and, from the outset, she established a distinctive persona for herself that went against the grain of the typical *giallo* starlet. Feisty, assertive, and exuding an unabashed, self-assured sensuality, she is in many respects the anti-Edwige Fenech, which perhaps explains why her career as a leading lady never quite took off to the same extent as those of Fenech or Carroll Baker – though I happen to think her later *Death Walks at Midnight* is her strongest outing, and made all the more enjoyable by the manner in which it subverts typical F-*giallo* tropes, with Navarro's feisty protagonist, Valentina, seeming almost to be battling against the role imposed on her by the narrative.

Returning to *Forbidden Photos*, it's possible to see the seeds being sown for her subsequent elevation to leading lady status. Indeed, while it's nominally Minou's film, and Dagmar Lassander receives top billing, I've always been tempted to regard Dominique as the film's real protagonist. After all, once Minou confides in her about the blackmailer, Dominique is very much in the driving seat, offering her plentiful advice, however misguided, and going on to crack the case, even if she does end up doing it off-screen and filling the viewer in after the fact. And she loves her friend Minou, genuinely and with her efforts to help her out of her predicament never coming across as anything less than selfless. Plenty of other F-*gialli* have included female best friends in supporting roles, but I don't think there has ever been a pairing as genuine as this one, either before or since. This is a woman who thinks nothing of handing over \$10,000 of her own money to help buy off Minou's blackmailer, or shoving her handsome lover out the back door so Minou doesn't get "jealous". The film's lesbian subtext is so blatant as to practically be text, and the sight of the would-be cuckold Peter grinning gormlessly at the two women on either side of him at the dinner table never fails



to raise a smile from me. Indeed, the film is remarkably non-judgemental in its depiction of Dominique as a shamelessly flirtatious pansexual libertine, who either beds, has bedded or appears to be contemplating bedding more or less the entirety of the film's compact cast of characters. Characters with fluid or non-normative sexualities abound in the *giallo*, and the seductive bisexual neighbour or best friend is something of a mainstay, but such characters almost always either end up dead or turn out to be a villain (or both). For a while, *Forbidden Photos* seems to be going down the latter route, with Dominique even decked out in an outfit reminiscent of the black-gloved killer made famous by Mario Bava's *Blood and Black Lace* (*Sei donne per l'assassino*, 1964) – but it's all a clever mislead, and I defy you not to raise a cheer when she comes striding in with the police to save the day at the film's climax.

It's possible to imagine a version of *Forbidden Photos* a couple of years later, helmed by Sergio Martino or one of the numerous other jobbing directors who tried their hand at these films. Yes, the plot would no doubt be enlivened by a few judiciously scheduled murders, more nudity, and perhaps an additional, independently operating killer to serve as a red herring, but it's not too difficult to chart a direct line from what Ercoli did with his debut film to what Martino would go on to do just a few short months later. Edwige Fenech would slide neatly into the role of Minou, and it's not much of a stretch to picture blue-eyed devil Ivan Rassimov as the blackmailer. Alberto de Mendoza could replace Pier Paolo Capponi (I confess I used to get the two of them mixed up, before I became more familiar with these films and their casts), and I'm sure Bruno Nicolai would have provided a score to rival Ennio Morricone's. I'm not sure where the ubiquitous George Hilton would fit in, though. Perhaps he'd be cast as a potential lover for Minou, who would either be revealed to be mixed up in Peter and the blackmailer's plan all along, or burst in at the last minute to beat up the bad men and save her. And I can think of no possible analogue to the character of Dominique in any of the Martino or Martino-esque *gialli* that saturated the market in the early-to-mid 1970s, or a role that would have been a good fit for Navarro. (It's telling that her sole collaboration with Martino, a supporting part in his *giallo*/*Rosemary's Baby* [1968] hybrid *All the Colours of the Dark* [*Tutti i colori del buio*, 1972], is one of her least memorable.) She was, in that respect, unique – her sassy, no-nonsense persona perfectly in tune with the playful, irreverent sensibility Ercoli brought to the *giallo*.

'Playful' is probably the word I'd choose if I was asked to sum up what differentiates Ercoli's films from those of his contemporaries. In the liner notes for the 2005 US release of the two *Death Walks* films by NoShame Films, Chris D. opined that the defining characteristic of Ercoli's *gialli*, in the absence of the high style of an Argento or the jaded misanthropy of a Fulci, is that they are, simply put, supremely entertaining, not taking themselves too seriously and demonstrating a knowingness of the conventions of the *giallo* that at times

verges on parody.³ I'd agree with that, and I'd also add that Ercoli succeeded in constructing a trilogy of films that, while not groundbreaking, provided an environment where his leading lady could be more than just a damsel in distress – a rare sight indeed in a genre where, all too often, it's possible to set your watch by how often the heroine swoons and faints into the arms of her hunky lover. And, regardless of any budgetary constraints or their director's lack of prior experience behind the camera, they all possess a slickness and a sense of lavish excess that belies the cash-strapped and often opportunistic conditions under which they were made.

Not that you'd expect anything less. After all, as Dominique will tell you, "Quality is important in every profession."

Michael Mackenzie is a writer and freelance Blu-ray/DVD producer. He has overseen home video releases of films by several acclaimed directors, including remastered editions of Dario Argento's The Bird with the Crystal Plumage, The Cat O' Nine Tails and Deep Red, all from Arrow Video. His first novel, In the Silence, was published in October 2018 by Bloodhound Books.

3 - Chris D. (2005) *The Luciano Ercoli Death Box Set* (Liner Notes). NoShame Films, pp. 2-4.





ORIGINAL REVIEWS

compiled and translated by Roberto Curti

A lady forced to submit herself to the erotic perversions of a mysterious young man, who blackmails her and claims that her husband is a murderer; an ambiguous female friend of the heroine, who collects pornographic photos; and the aforementioned husband, who doesn't believe his wife when she confesses the persecution she is undergoing. These are the main ingredients of the Italian-Spanish *giallo*, *Le foto proibite di una signora per bene*. The development of the plot, in which the dead bodies pop up only at the end, is obviously not to be revealed. But we can safely say that the intrigue is far from unfamiliar for fans of mystery. As for the suspense, a basic element of the genre, it is too diluted, and operates in a mannered resort to gimmicks, rather than to some genuine idea. The direction, leaning on easy imitation but lacking in rhythm, is by Luciano Ercoli, yet another newcomer of poor promises. In the cast, the fascinating Dagmar Lassander (from the all too notorious *Andrée* [1968]) stands out: a modest actress but faring better than Pier Paolo Capponi and Susan Scott.

I.a. [Leonardo Autera], *Corriere della Sera*, November 28, 1970.

A dull *giallo*, *Le foto proibite di una signora per bene* tries to make up for its plot by borrowing from the usual repertoire some erotic ambiguity. [...] The plot is rather coarse, and suspense drowns slowly in the predictability of the story. The film is signed by Luciano Ercoli, a newcomer director, as can easily be guessed. The two women – Dagmar Lassander and Susan Scott – are beautiful, if not really effective. The industrialist is played by Pier Paolo Capponi.

Uncredited, *La Stampa*, December 11, 1970

Labeling it a “sexy *giallo*” is an exaggeration: there are indeed a few stripteases, but compared to what Dagmar Lassander displayed in *Andrée*, it looks like we have returned to those times where censorship was rigid. There are also two women who are very close friends (the above-mentioned Lassander and Susan Scott), but the story is more crime-oriented than erotic, dealing with the iniquitous scheme concocted by an industrialist on the verge of bankruptcy, to push his wife to suicide and get his hands on her life insurance benefit. Thank goodness, the woman's friend, with a timely intervention, will make the plan

fail. Slowness abounds, whereas suspense is almost absent. Pier Paolo Capponi is neither convincing nor attractive, unlike the two actresses, both mediocre but physically charming.

a.val., "Per un pugno di foto", *Stampa Sera*, December 11, 1970

The director, Luciano Ercoli, puts some formal effort in the film, so as to sustain the mystery until the end, but the actors and the atmosphere are so dull and ordinary that the final twist is rather disappointing.

Uncredited, *L'Unità*, March 10, 1971

A clumsy exercise in the craft of the psychological thriller. A trail of red herrings is dutifully laid, while the heroine's sanity wavers beneath the pressure of feverish sessions of masochistic sex and the fluctuating reality of her perils. Neither the plotting nor the psychology bear much attention, however; like two worn gears failing to mesh they spin ponderously round, a vastly inefficient and unnecessary means of powering the film's standard scenes of exploitative sex.

Richard Combs, *Monthly Film Bulletin*, v39 n461 June, 1972



ABOUT THE RESTORATION

The Forbidden Photos of a Lady Above Suspicion/Le foto proibite di una signora per bene is presented in its original aspect ratio of 2.35:1 with Italian and English mono audio. Scanning and restoration work was completed at L'Immagine Ritrovata, Bologna. The original 2-perf Techniscope 35mm camera negative was scanned in 2K resolution on a pin-registered Arriscan. Thousands of instances of dirt, debris, scratches, picture instability and other instances of film wear were repaired or removed through a combination of digital restoration tools and techniques. The mono Italian and English language tracks were remastered from the optical sound negatives. The audio synch will appear slightly loose against the picture, due to the fact that the dialogue was recorded entirely in post-production, as per the production standards of the period.

The film was graded on Digital Vision's Nucoda Film Master at R3Store Studios, London.

All original materials used in this restoration were accessed from Surf Film.

Restoration supervised by James White, Arrow Films

L'Immagine Ritrovata:

Simone Arminio, Gilles Barberis, Valeria Bigongiali, Julia Mettenleiter, Alessia Navantieri, Charlotte Oddo, Caterina Palpacelli, Davide Pozzi, Elena Tammaccaro, Giandomenico Zeppa

R3Store Studios:

Gerry Gedge, Jo Griffin, Andrew O'Hagan, Rich Watson, Jenny Collins

Surf Film:

Stefania Carnevale

PRODUCTION CREDITS

Disc and Booklet Produced by **Michael Mackenzie**

Executive Producers **Kevin Lambert, Francesco Simeoni**

Technical Producer **James White**

QC Manager **Nora Mehenni**

Blu-ray Mastering and Subtitling **The Engine House Media Services**

Artist **Twins of Evil**

Design **Obviously Creative**

SPECIAL THANKS

Alex Agran, Dima Ballin, James Blackford, Federico Caddeo, Stefania Carnevale, Jon Casbard, Roberto Curti, Kat Ellinger, Ernesto Gastaldi, Steve Green, Chrissie Harper, Uwe Huber, David James, Dagmar Lassander, Chris Malbon, Nieves Navarro, Elmar Podlasly



FCD1838 / AV182