

# The Fifth Cord (Giornata nera per l'ariete)

Italy | 1970 | 90 minutes

## Credits

<b>Director</b>	Luigi Bazzoni
<b>Screenplay</b>	Luigi Bazzoni/Mario di Nardo/ Mario Fanelli (based on a novel by D.M. Devine)
<b>Photography</b>	Vittorio Storaro
<b>Music</b>	Ennio Morricone
<b>Cast</b>	
<b>Andrea Bild</b>	Franco Nero
<b>Helene</b>	Silvia Monti
<b>Police Inspector</b>	Wolfgang Preiss
<b>Isabel Lancia</b>	Ira von Fürstenberg

## In Brief

Franco Nero plays a boozy journalist who must solve a crime to clear his own name in this supremely stylish entry lensed by none other than Vittorio Storaro. The quality cast also includes genre regulars Rosella Falk, Ira von Fürstenberg and Renato Romano. Morricone again contributes a top-notch score.



While wandering home in a drunken state from a New Year's party alcoholic journalist Andrea Bild (Franco Nero) is one of the witnesses to the assault and robbery – possibly attempted murder – of a fellow guest, Joe Lubbock, an Australian teacher of English at a language institute.

Assigned to the story by his editor, Troversi, for reasons that become clearer as the sordid tale unfolds, Andrea's unofficial investigations continue as killer strikes again, murdering wealthy invalid Sofia Bini (Rossella Falk) – who just happens to be the wife of doctor Richard Bini (Raf Vallone / Renato Romano) who had earlier treated Lubbock.

The maniac also leaves a calling card in the form of a guanti neri with one finger cut off. Since a glove was also left with Lubbock, Bild and the police conjecture, not unreasonably, that the killer is not finished and that the next victim will be found with a missing two fingers...

Discretely following Bini, Andrea witnesses him talking to another, younger man (Luciano Bartoli), who then gets into a car with his on-off girlfriend Lu (Pamela Tiffin). Back home, they have an uncomfortable exchange:

*Andrea: Where have you been all this while?*

*Lu: Ask me no questions and I'll tell you no lies. I was at home studying. I have this, eh, history exam on Thursday. Didn't I tell you? What's wrong?*

*I telephoned your house and your mother said she hasn't seen you for over a month. You're a lying little whore! What kind of home did you come from!? Your mother didn't take care of you, your father's gathering mould in a state home for the aged and you play tramp in one sports car after another!*

*Was it a red sports car?*

*That's right*

*Well that car happens to belong to my brother Walter, you idiot!. You know, ever since you've been playing detective you just can't get anything right!*

Next Andrea goes to see Lubbock, who clams up as another teacher and party guest, Vermont, enters. Outside, however, he confesses that he has since received threatening telephone calls, following which Bild receives one of his own..

Bild then finds that his investigations have also attracted the attention of someone wealthy and powerful – also the killer? – who tries uses his or her influence to have Troversi tell him to drop the story. This only encourages the headstrong reporter to continue following up leads, as does the subsequent murder of Troversi himself – his body also being found with the requisite glove, this time missing two fingers – and the way it seems to implicate him as far as the Inspector (Wolfgang Preiss) is concerned:

*“We have an attempted murder and two murders. In all three instances you are one of the few people who knew all three victims. Funny coincidence, isn't it? Especially seeing as you have no alibi in any of these three cases. Still, we haven't decided to formulate charges against you – for the moment.”*

Watching this post-Bird with the Crystal Plumage giallo from Luigi Bazzoni makes for a fascinating insight into the evolution of the form, using as it does Argento's cinematographer and composer Vittorio Storaro and Ennio Morricone there – two names that virtually guaranteed the visual and aural qualities of a film at this time regardless of the merits or otherwise of the work – and bringing in more familiar themes and visual motifs – voyeurism; the amateur detective; the sexual revolution (“if you want to get laid go ahead; you know it doesn't bother me,” Lu remarks in a note at one point); the black gloved killer; subjective killer's eye view; the park as beautiful place to die; an exciting mano a mano showdown in an abandoned factory at the finale; the omnipresent J&B bottle etc. – absent

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from the director's previous, more sui generis entry made prior to the generic codification of what giallo-as-film meant, circa 1971. (It would be interesting to read David McDonald Devine's 1967 source novel and see what the film-makers had added or subtracted from it.)

Bazzoni's third filone excursion, *Le Orme*, released at the tail end of the giallo boom in 1974, meanwhile represents something of fusion of its predecessors, insofar as it again features a key contributions from Storaro (Nicola Piovani handles the musical duties) but is more akin to *La Donna del lago* in terms of its tone, borderline arthouse sensibilities, and plot as a woman discovers she cannot account for a period of a few days and receives a ticket to a mysterious island that may holds the clue to the mystery.

What all three films have in common is their sheer quality. Film for film, I would say Bazzoni is perhaps the finest director to specialise in the form, with the possible exceptions of Argento and Bava. While his genre filmography may be considerably more limited than theirs, he does not have any films – *Five Dolls for an August Moon*, *Cat o' Nine Tails* – that require a special case be made.

Structurally *The Fifth Cord* is less complex than its predecessor, simply because the mystery begins with the attack on Lubbock and then proceeds from there rather than entailing the investigation of an event discretely in the past (i.e. its is more hard-boiled thriller than classical detective, at least in this regard). Nonetheless the opening sequences, with an unidentified fish-eye lens, irised POV camera – Bild? the killer? a general subjective (altered) state along the lines of a Pasolinian “Cinema of Poetry”? – and unsituated voice-over slightly reminiscent of that which opens *Tenebrae* and unidentified woman's scream establish a number of enigmas and bear close scrutiny in relation to that which

follows.

“I am going to commit murder. I am going to kill another human being. How easy it is to say. Already I feel like a criminal. I've been thinking it over for weeks. But now that I have given voice to my evil intention I feel comfortably relaxed. Perhaps the deed itself will be an anticlimax. But I think not. Already I can imagine the excitement and the thrill, the pleasure I will experience as I stalk my victim. How much effort is required to strangle? Perhaps a knife would be better. No – I want to feel the trembling flesh in my hands as I squeeze the life out of the body. What if there's a struggle and the victim escapes? I must think of a way to avoid that. There must be no mistakes.”

Visually it is equally complex, blending the notion of restricted vision – note how many compositions place us on the outside of a situation, seeing the characters through glass on which fall shadows and reflections, or an almost Von Sternberg-style use of screens and overlaid textures – with Storaro's “painting in light” techniques and a use of modernist architecture and designs strongly reminiscent of Antonioni (also a key influence on Argento, making the lines of descent and influence harder to chart).

What we also get, by way of some insertion of more generic element, such as momentary flashback inserts and zooms in on significant details, is an enigma that is not only soluble but which presents a clear path. Coupled with a greater emphasis on suspense and violence – still relatively restrained, with as much emphasis on the aftermath as the crime – it perhaps lessens the case for *The Fifth Cord* as art, but does give it an immediacy and accessibility its predecessor somewhat lacked.

Aurally *The Fifth Cord* marks an improvement on *La Donna del lago*, whose somewhat conventional romantic themes and *Blood and Black Lace* crime jazz stylings were perhaps its weakest point, with Morricone contributing his usual combination of gentle easy listening and suspense themes – albeit with the former frequently marked by undercurrents of the latter.

Franco Nero makes for one of the genre's most ambiguous protagonists, his consistent gulping down of J&B and violent outbursts subverting the more usual connotations attached to the brand within the filone cinema of the period, even as their deeper rooted cause – a dislike for a father we never see – is very post-1968/9 Italian cinema.

The supporting players are uniformly well cast, bringing the right degrees of glamour, sophistication and / or suspicion to their characters.

Note that the Italian title – literally *Black Days for the Arian*, as in the sign of the zodiac – has resonances that are lacking in its English counterpart but, as with most cryptic titles of the time, is essentially something of a red herring itself whose meaning only emerges at the end.

- Keith Brown

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