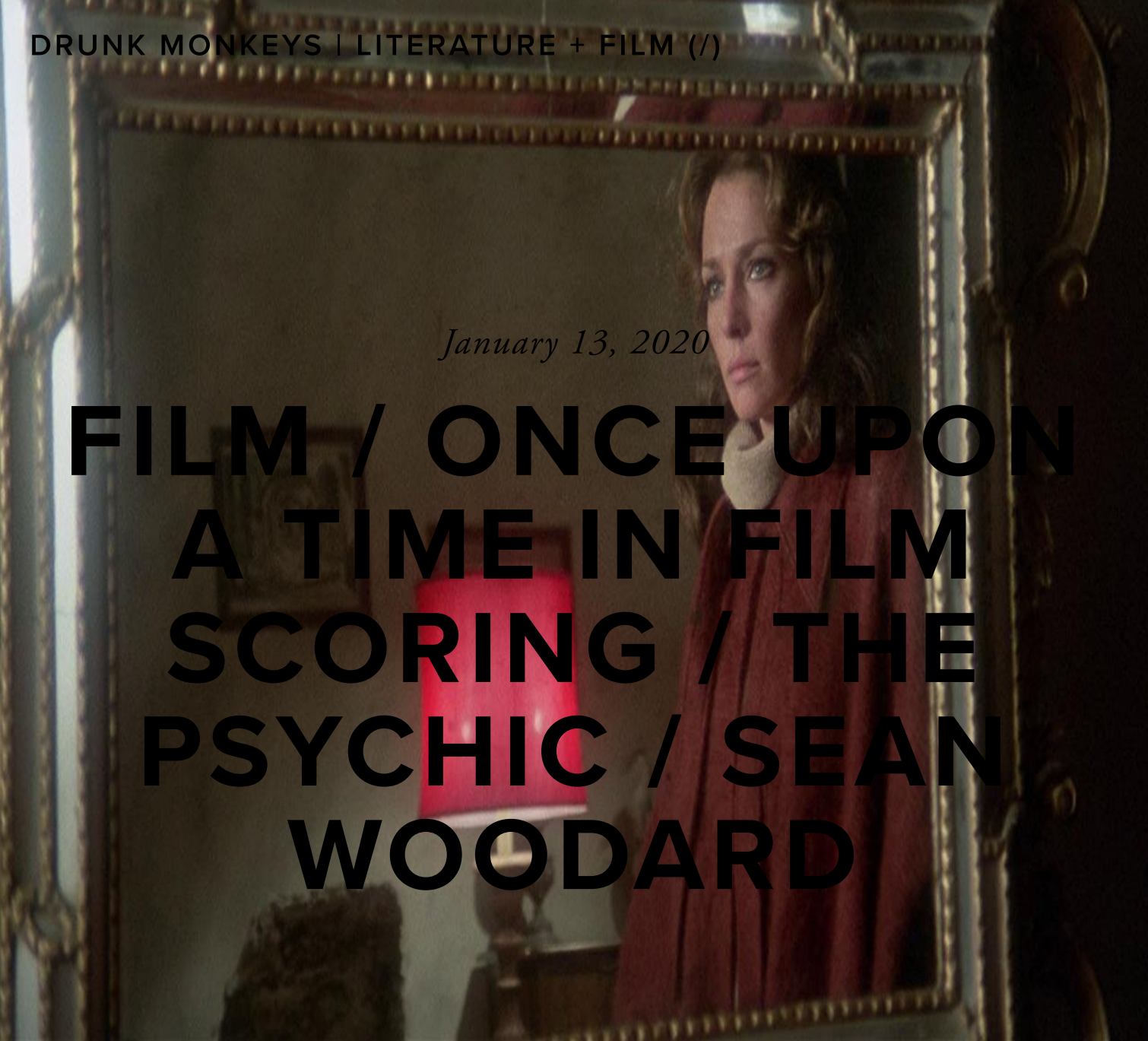


DRUNK MONKEYS | LITERATURE + FILM (/)

January 13, 2020

A woman with blonde hair, wearing a red coat and a white fur collar, is looking out of a large, ornate window. The window has a gold-colored frame and a red curtain. The scene is dimly lit, with a warm glow from the window.

FILM / ONCE UPON A TIME IN FILM SCORING / THE PSYCHIC / SEAN WOODARD

Film (/2017-posts/category/Film)



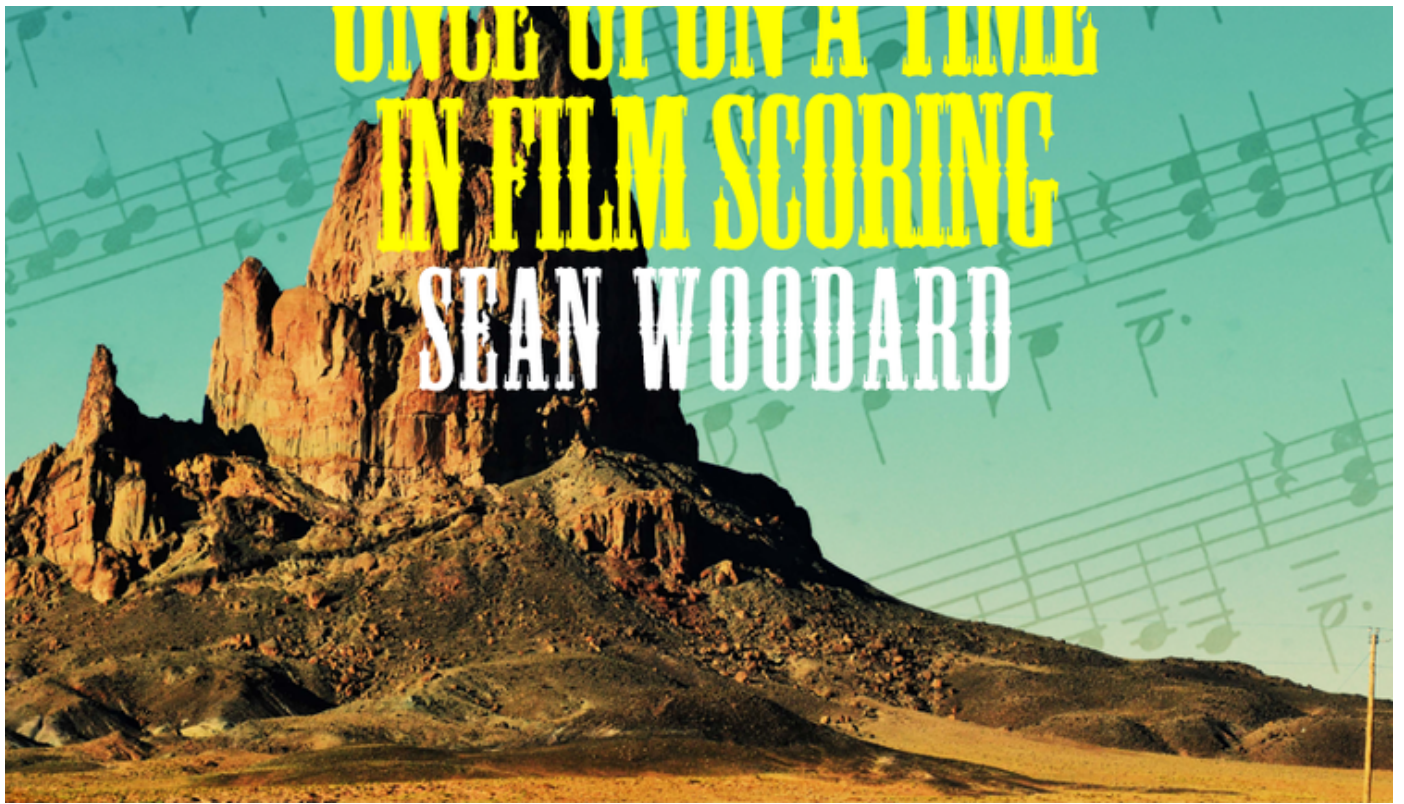


Image © Nathan Alan Schwartz

The Psychic (1977)



Image © Cineriz

Of late I have been watching a number of *giallo* films. Part of the reasoning for reexamining this popular sub-genre of Italian cinema has been for research purposes for an academic paper I've been writing that will potentially be published in a forthcoming book on the subject. The other reason is I was gifted Dario Argento's autobiography as a Christmas gift by my friend Reggie and I have been reading it on a daily basis.

This past week I finally had the opportunity to view Lucio Fulci's 1977 *giallo* entitled *The Psychic*. While the film could easily serve as the subject in my other horror-based column—as I have previously done with Fulci's *Don't Torture a Duckling* (<http://www.drunkmonkeys.us/2017-posts/2018/8/7/film-finding-the-sacred-among-the-profane-dont-torture-a-duckling-sean-woodard>)—I feel *The Psychic* exemplifies the role soundtracks play in this type of film. While much has been written on the scores for quintessential *gialli* such as Argento's *Deep Red* (*Profondo Rosso*), Fulci's film—alternately titled *Seven Notes in Black* and *Murder to the Tune of Seven Black Notes*—inherently ties a music theme to the plot itself. In effect, its alternate titles not only appropriately reference the narrative, but seven particular notes mentioned creates a sense of foreboding. The number of notes is incorporated into the recurring main theme. Each repetition then builds suspense as the film moves toward its inevitable conclusion.

The Psychic follows Virginia Ducci (Jennifer O'Neill), a clairvoyant who believes she has experienced a vision of a past murder committed in her husband's villa, where a woman's body is walled in. With the help of her psychiatrist, she attempts to solve the mystery, only to discover that what she witnessed was actually a premonition of her own death. The image of the victim being hidden in the walled and the murderer sealing the gap with mortar and bricks is one of two references to the writings of Edgar Allan Poe, in this case his classic story "The Cask of Amontillado." The second reference is reserved for the climactic scene, a metaphorical riff on "The Tell-Tale Heart."

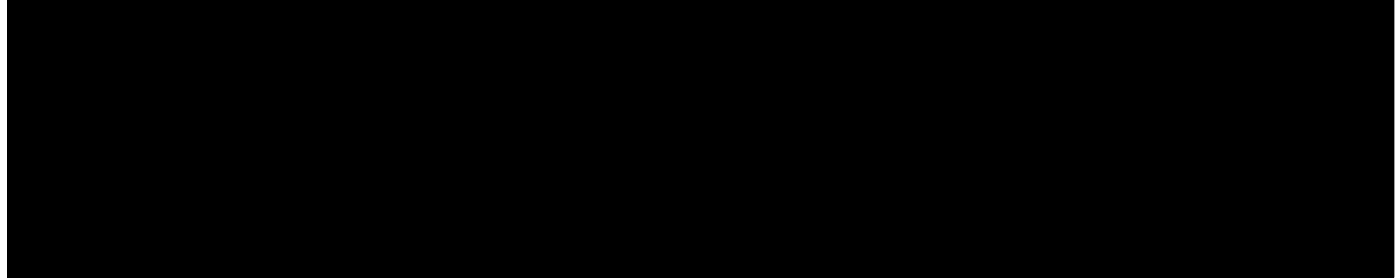
After the film opens with a prologue where a young Virginia presages her mother's suicide over a cliff—the death scene resembling that of the priest in *Don't Torture a Duckling*—the narrative cuts forward in time to show her happily married. As the credits roll, she is seen driving to an airfield with her husband in a luxurious car. After saying their goodbyes, he boards a plane. During this sequence, a song entitled "With You," composed by Franco Bixio and Fabio Frizzi and sung by Linda Lee, plays. To me, this song initially felt out of place in a *giallo* film, with its piano/organ-driven accompaniment and Lee's wispy vocals. However, in retrospect, I've come to the conclusion that the song fits in the sense that it describes the relationship between Virginia and her husband and the life of decadence they have. The song reflects her feelings as he flies away.



As Virginia drives back into town she hears a strange melody. Passing through tunnels, she experiences a sense of uneasiness and claustrophobia as darkness surrounds her. The feeling only subsides when the light at the end of the tunnel can be seen. While driving through one of the tunnels, she blacks out and experiences the first vision of an unknown person's death. She later is awoken by a police officer, asking if she is okay.

Bixio and Frezzi's musical score's primary *ostinato*—a set of repeated melodic notes which plays over a series of changing chords—may actually be most recognizable to moviegoers who have seen director Quentin Tarantino's *Kill Bill: Vol. 1*. Tarantino re-purposes the music for the hospital scene where Uma Thurman's "The Bride" character escapes after awakening from a coma.





Later in the film, she is gifted a watch that chimes an alarm at the top of the hour. To her surprise, the melody is an exact reproduction of the music she heard while her premonition occurred. The music resembles the sound of a music box each time it resounds.

As Jennifer races against time to try to escape her fate, the *ostinato* repeats. This creates a sinister atmosphere that foreshadows the encroaching danger. After the reveal of the killer—I won't spoil it for those who have yet to see the film—Virginia is walled up in the villa as detailed in her vision. When her loyal psychiatrist arrives with the police on the scene, the sequence plays like a protracted reenactment of Poe's "The Tell-Tale Heart." Instead of the body being hidden under the floorboards, it is walled away; instead of an incessant heartbeat heard only in the murderer's head. Convinced they have no proof, they start to leave. But then the watch chimes, its haunting melody filling the room, before the film cuts to its closing credits. This last twist of fate left a smile on my face knowing the murderer would be punished for his crimes.



Over the course of the film Bixio and Frizzi introduce other themes, ranging from cacophonous arrangements to melodic jazz structures, to add to the atmosphere. But the “Seven Notes” theme remains the alternating diegetic and non-diegetic driving force of the narrative. For those who enjoy Lucio Fulci’s filmography or the *giallo* genre in general, I’d highly recommend *The Psychic*, not only for its psychological thriller aspects, but for its effective score.



Sean Woodard is a graduate of Point Loma Nazarene University and Chapman University. Focusing on a wide variety of interests, Sean’s fiction, film criticism, and other writings have been featured in *Horrorbuzz*, *NonBinary Review*, *Los Angeles Review of Books*, *Cultured Vultures*, *The Cost of Paper*, and *Los Angeles Magazine*, among other publications. He serves as the Film Editor for *Drunk Monkeys* and as a co-producer of the faith and spirituality-based *Ordinary Grace* (<http://ordinarygrace.org/>) podcast. A native of Visalia, CA, he now resides and teaches in Orange County.

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DRUNKMONKEYS79@GMAIL.COM (MAILTO:DRUNKMONKEYS79@GMAIL.COM)

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