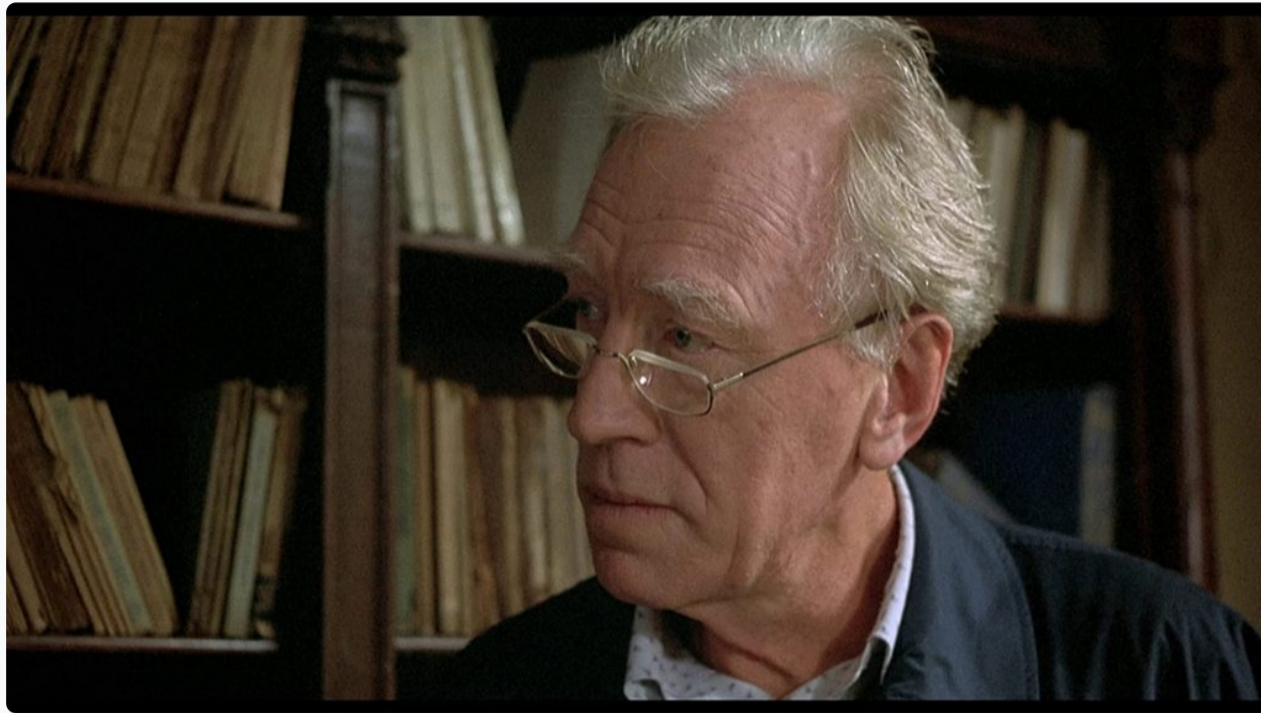


THE INSOMNIAC DETECTIVE: MAX VON SYDOW IN DARIO ARGENTO'S SLEEPLESS

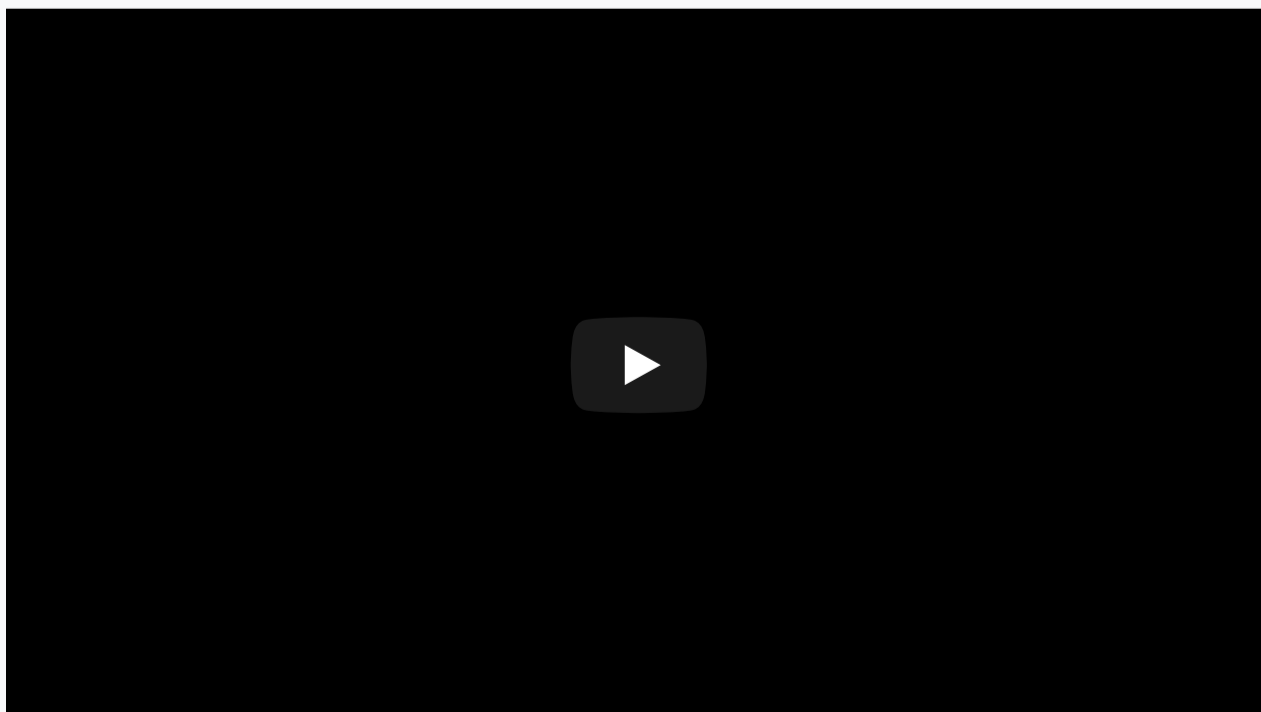
by [Sean Woodard](#)



After working on a variety of horror projects in the 1990s, Dario Argento returned to the genre that made his name with *Sleepless* (*Non Ho Sonno*) in 2001. Famous for codifying the tropes of the Italian *giallo* genre—a set of Italian mystery-thrillers featuring stylized murder set pieces, hyperviolence and lurid sexuality—beginning with his 1970 debut *The Bird with the Crystal Plumage*, Argento built his reputation as an auteur with the quintessential *giallo*, *Deep Red* (1975) before exploring different avenues of horror with *Suspria* (1977) and other films.

Since 1987's *Opera*—or, arguably, 1996's *The Stendhal Syndrome*, depending on who you talk to—the filmmaker's work has been on a steady decline. While there are bursts of genius in some of his late career films, they have not lived up to the quality of his earlier work. *Sleepless* is one of the few examples that nearly reaches that bar.

I first became aware of *Sleepless* when I attended a Goblin concert at the Regent Theater in Los Angeles with my friend Harris Smith. The Italian prog-rock band, famous for their horror soundtrack work with Argento and other directors, opened the concert with the track "Killer on the Train" from *Sleepless*. As they performed the song, a clip of a killer chasing a woman on a train played on screen. The synching of the live music and the film sequence encouraged me to seek out the film, even though I heard mixed things about it.



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A few months later, I imported a Region-B Blu-Ray of the film, only to realize later that it contained some censor cuts. Still, I found the strength of the story pleasantly surprising. A second viewing—this time utilizing the [recent uncut release by Scorpion Releasing](#)—revealed more of the film’s structural flaws.

Sleepless concerns an investigation into a series of murders that bear a resemblance to unsolved cases seventeen years prior. Certain the original serial killer has returned, a retired detective named Moretti (Max von Sydow) begins his own investigation with the assistance of a young man named Giacomo (Stefano Dionisi), whose mother died at the hands of the killer. Their sleuthing uncovers clues that show how the killings are reenactments of a childhood nursery rhyme.

For the most part, the film represents a brief return to form for Argento. Although Argento utilizes a more realistic color timing than *Suspiria* or *Inferno* (1980), the visuals are often striking. They pair well with the plot, particularly during the gruesome murder scenes. While the murders may not be particularly inventive, their execution remains in your memory long after the film has ended, especially the chase scene on the train. Argento and screenwriter collaborator Franco Ferrini’s decision to include such an action-packed sequence (usually reserved for the ending) to begin the film is incredibly effective. However, the pacing for the rest of the film suffers due to poor editing choices; the film’s 117-minute runtime arguably could have been condensed for a smoother flow.

In terms of plot mechanics, there are many elements familiar to previous Argento films. This causes many of the contrivances to not feel novel. The nursery rhyme motif can be seen as a rift on the children’s song melody heard in *The Bird with the Crystal Plumage*. Gabriele Lavia’s Mr. Betti character in *Sleepless* possesses hidden motives akin to his Carlo character in *Deep Red*. The twist ending also seems ripped from *Deep Red*. Then again, when did logic really *matter* in a *giallo* plot?

The glue that ties the film together is the late Max von Sydow. Known for his roles in *The Seventh Seal* (1957) and *The Exorcist* (1973), it might surprise casual moviegoers that the esteemed actor would perform in genre fare. A look through his filmography (revealing *Flash Gordon*, *Minority Report*, *Star Wars: Episode VII—The Force Awakens*, among others) would argue the contrary. He felt drawn to the character, von Sydow said in a vintage featurette about the making of the film. Assuming the role of the aging detective with insomnia intrigued him. He even added his own flair to the role: instead of having Inspector Moretti speak to himself as he sorted through case evidence and put the pieces together, he brought the idea to Argento that Moretti should direct his conversation to a pet parrot. Argento liked the idea and added it into the film.

Von Sydow brings gravitas to the production through his involvement. While *Sleepless* had an impressive cast of international actors, his presence elevates the film. The billing of his name in promotional materials for its theatrical release also confirms this. He may only be in approximately two-thirds of the picture, but the scenes he appears in carry a sense of importance. He develops a natural chemistry with the other actors on screen that is quite infectious. Even his untimely death in the film (sorry for the spoiler) has a charm to it: after being surprised by his attacker—another visual homage to *Deep Red*—he chuckles, realizing the identity of the person before he dies of a heart attack. He plays the role straight, choosing not to err toward camp out of deep respect for the material and the director.

Without his involvement, *Sleepless* would have had an entirely different feel; he elevates this genre picture and saves it from obscurity. Because of this, *Sleepless* may be the last relatively good *giallo* of Argento’s career.

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