

HUMANITIES INSTITUTE
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THE GRIM REAPER (LA COMMARE SECCA) 1962

Bernardo Bertolucci

OVERVIEW

The structure of the film—a sequence of different perspectives on a single event—is reminiscent of Akira Kurosawa's *Rashomon* (1950), although Bertolucci denied that he had seen the film. The Italian title of the film literally means the 'dry housewife,' or 'skinny gossip,' which is Roman-dialect slang for 'death.' The English title is highlighted within the film by its final shot, which shows an image of the Grim Reaper (as a winged skeleton with a scythe) sculpted on a building and bearing an inscription: 'Today me, tomorrow you.' At the same time, a line of verse from a nineteenth-century poem in Roman-dialect slang is read by a narrator: 'E gia la commaraccia secca de strada Giulia arza er rampino'. Although it is notoriously difficult to understand, the quotation can be roughly translated as: 'The Dry Housewife of Giulia Street [i.e., Death] is coming for you again.' The film itself is a loose adaptation of a short story by the film-director Pier Paolo Pasolini, who was originally intended to direct this film. But Pasolini was preoccupied with his next film and the baton passed to Bertolucci, who had assisted Pasolini on his previous film and for whom this was a directorial debut.

MAIN CHARACTERS

Luciano	Luciano is a young man and a petty thief.
Bustelli	Bustelli is a pimp, who is engaged to Esperia.
Esperia	Esperia is a 'madam' who controls a group of prostitutes.
Theodore	Theodore is a demobbed soldier from the south.
Francolicchio	Francolicchio is a teenage boy.
Natalino	Natalino is an idle waiter from out of town.
prostitute	The unnamed middle-aged prostitute lives alone.
Homosexual	An unnamed homosexual plays the role of the Grim Reaper.

SYNOPSIS

The story is ostensibly a police investigation into the murder of a prostitute in Rome. Several suspects are interrogated by an off-screen officer, each of whom tells his version of the events. As we listen to their verbal testimonies, we see what actually happened, sometimes contradicting the suspect's statements. At the end, the police arrest the murderer, but the film is much more than a crime story. Through the individual vignettes of the suspects—boys who snatch purses, a useless pimp and his domineering fiancé, an idle soldier and a foursome of teenagers—the film shows us the underlying social conditions that make such a horrendous murder possible, and even likely.

SCENES

Death The film opens with shots of a desolate location, near a long, concrete bridge over the River Tiber in Rome. The camera moves closer and we see a dead woman's body, lying face down on the ground, with debris blowing all around her. The rest of the film consists of short vignettes depicting the movements of suspects on the day of the murder.

Suspect 1: Luciano

Thieves Luciano Maialetti sits alone in a large, empty room being interrogated by the police. He is 19 years old, has lost his father and lives with his mother on a hill overlooking Rome. He tells the police that on the afternoon of the murder he went into the city to look for work. His family needs money and he has been unemployed for a long time. He tells the police that he had an appointment with two priests, who had a letter of recommendation for him. As he speaks, we see that he actually met with two friends and that the three of them set out to steal handbags from lovers who are distracted as they lie down in the woods. The thieves are successful, but their haul only includes a couple of pieces of fruit.

Caught and released Drawn by the music on a portable radio, Luciano crawls on the ground toward his prey and reaches for the radio. His hand is grabbed by an older, stronger man, who slaps him hard and says he will take him to the police. Luciano begs for him to let him go, that he didn't see the couple and that he thought the radio had been lost. 'I am a poor orphan,' he cries. 'Don't take me to the police.' His pleas fall on deaf ears, and the woman asks her lover to 'kill this thief. He interrupted our love-making.' But, in a moment of compassion, the man lets Luciano go.

Skinheads Humiliated in front of his friends, Luciano swears to them that he will get even and screams insults into the air, aimed at the couple with the radio. His cries only attract a gang of skinheads, who stare at him menacingly, with the implication that they either beat or rape him or both.

Soldier? Luciano tells the police that he got a good job and then walked home, through a park. The police want to know every detail of what he saw there. He saw, he says, a woman and a group of men. 'Not a soldier?' the police ask. He says that he didn't see a soldier.

Suspect 2: Bustelli

Girlfriend Bustelli is middle-aged man well-known to the police, although he has, he says, quit his stealing habits. The interrogating officer says that he is implicated in the death of a prostitute and asks him about his movements on the afternoon of the previous day. He says that he met his girlfriend at the race track. She is very much in love with him, but he disappoints her when he says he can't take her for a ride in his new car. She starts to go home, but he tells her to wait for him at a place in town. He'll return in an hour, he says, and gives her some money to buy a magazine to read while waiting.

Esperia Bustelli goes off to see Esperia, his fiancé, whose mother hates Bustelli for taking all their money and wasting it on the new car. Bustelli says he's leaving them anyway because he can't live with them in that apartment for another day. Esperia rounds on her mother and shouts at her to leave the apartment for good. Mother and daughter argue loudly and even issue death threats while brandishing a kitchen knife and an iron. Bustelli listens nonchalantly and eats a hardboiled egg. He lies down on his bed and plays with a doll, while the mother again accuses him of stealing all their money and spending it on fancy clothes, which she rips from the closet.

Prostitutes Esperia accompanies Bustelli on her rounds to collect fees from prostitutes. They are pimps, but she is in command. They argue when Bustelli wants to cut the trip short (and get back to his younger girlfriend), but Esperia orders him to stay with her. 'Do you want me to kill you?' he asks, jokingly. Cold-hearted Esperia collects the money and hands a portion to Bustelli. When one woman can't pay up, they calmly walk off with her beloved dog.

Knife attack Bustelli leaves Esperia, but he doesn't go to meet the girl who is patiently waiting for him. Instead, he goes to meet someone else, when he is unexpectedly confronted by an enraged Esperia, who rushes at him with a knife. He throws her on the ground, and runs away, having sustained a cut on his cheek.

No details Bustelli finishes his story by saying he, too, went through the park. He saw a woman and some guys, just like Luciano, but doesn't remember any details. He walks back to his car and sees Esperia sitting in it. 'What am I going to do?' he wonders.

Suspect 3: Theodore

Soldier Theodore is a young soldier from Calabria, who at first denies that he was in the park, and then admits it. He says he was coming home from seeing a film and was admiring the young women on the streets of Rome. He tries to chat them up, smiles at them and chases them. Some of the women are angry, others laugh and a few slap him on the face. He wanders off to the Coliseum, where he watches a group of tourists addressed by a tour leader. When they leave, he is bored and sits alone on a stone seat. Singing a religious hymn, he passes by a line of prostitutes. When the rain falls, he shelters in an underpass with them. He says he went to the park and fell asleep on a bench.

Man with clogs When he left the park, he says he saw a blond man wearing clogs and carrying something under his jacket. 'I didn't like the way he looked, and he gave me a dirty look.' He says he could recognise him if he saw him again.

Suspect 4: Natalino

The present of a cat Natalino, the man wearing clogs, has been identified by Theodore in a line-up of suspects. Asked what he was doing there, near the scene of the crime, Natalino says he doesn't remember, he was just wandering around. The thing hidden under his coat, he says, was a cat, a present for his girlfriend.

Testimony After a pause, he says he'll tell them everything. He got off work at 6:30 in the evening and went wandering, as usual. He saw a young man walk by (we see that it is Luciano). Then he saw another man, this one with blonde hair (Bustelli). At the edge of the park, he also saw a soldier (Theodore). Finally, he saw two young men he knows from the restaurant where he works. They met a third, older man, and the three of them walked past a woman. He names the two young men as Pipito and Francolicchio and tells the officer where they live.

Suspect 5: Francolicchio

Teenagers Francolicchio is a teenager, who says that he knows nothing about the woman in the park. He and his friend Pipito met a man to raise money for a meal. 'For a meal?' the interrogator asks in disbelief. Francolicchio explains that he and Pipito met their girlfriends that afternoon and ate some snacks they gave them. The four youngsters laugh, flirt together and talk about getting married. The boys make light of it, focusing on the meat balls and potatoes their wives would feed them, while the girls point out the practicalities of marriage.

Party The four of them visit an older woman friend, who lives on the top floor of a tall building. She says she's been waiting for a long time. The two boys are told to take a seat, while one of the girls puts on a record of the song they had been singing together earlier. A second woman puts on some dance music, and the girls ask the boys to dance. They say they don't know how, so the two girls dance together, while the boys ogle them. The second woman tells them to come back the following day and bring some food so she can cook them all a meal of potatoes and meatballs. They need 2,000 lire to buy it all.

Homosexual The two teenage boys meet the third man in the park, who is staring at the woman and asks them if they have a comb. The three of them walk off together, the boys thinking they might rob him and the man wondering if he could seduce one of them. He hands them his coat, while he goes to pee, and the boys run off with it, thinking it has a gold lighter.

Police chase The next day, the police arrive at their slum dwelling and chase the fleeing boys. Francolicchio jumps in a river, while the frightened Pipito screams from the shore that he can't swim.

Suspect 4 (again): Natalino

Murder Natalino, the man with the clogs, is asked if he remembers any more details. 'No,' he says. 'It was cold and I went home.' Then we see what actually happened. He spoke with the woman, who asks where he's from. He says he comes from a long distance and doesn't know anyone. She leads him from the park to a lighted road, where she tells him about her friend, who stopped 'working the streets' and opened a bar. But her friend hasn't written to her in a long time. 'Maybe she thinks I'm dead,' the woman says. She asks if Natalino has the money because too many guys don't pay her. She leads him down some steps to the riverbank, to one of her favourite spots. When she lies down and looks up at him, he asks her to put her purse to one side. She refuses, he tries to grab it and she runs. He catches up, beats her to death and runs off with her purse. The gay man, whose coat was stolen by the two boys, is watching.

Arrest Cut to couples dancing on a make-shift dance floor on a floating barge. As the music plays, the gay man enters the pavilion and walks among the dancing couples, looking for someone. He hears the sound of clogs clicking on the dance floor and identifies the blond-haired killer. The police, who have been led there by the homosexual, move in and arrest Natalino. The murderer struggles violently with the officers and cries, 'She was only a whore!'

Grim Reaper: A final shot shows a bleak concrete building with a sculpted image of the Grim Reaper while a voiceover reads a line from a 19-century poem: 'The Dry Housewife (Grim Reaper) of Giulia Street raises her scythe once again.'

THEMES

Reality vs appearance

As indicated by its title, this film is an essay on death, especially the conditions that result in the murder of a prostitute, whose prone body is shown in the opening shots. Although there is only one murderer, the man in the clogs, the film's structure of separate yet linked vignettes creates a composite picture of a society in which her death is almost inevitable. The ostensible motive for the murder is money—the blond-haired man beats her in order to grab her purse, which, of course, may contain little or nothing. More important is that the handsome Natalino is a lonely man, a stranger, from a distant region. He has no friends, he walks idly in the park after work and he wears clogs. 'Why do you dress like that?' the prostitute asks him after they meet. 'You're a strange one.' He is clearly an outsider in a big impersonal city. His purse-snatching is paralleled in the first vignette of Luciano and his friends, who attempt the same thing because they are poor and without prospects of work. The only thing they manage to steal is a coat, entrusted to them by the gay man, who is also lonely. Yet another lonely stranger is Theodore, the soldier from the south, who pesters young women on the street. Added to the poverty and loneliness is the vulnerability of women, whether as ordinary people or as prostitutes. It is also striking that the 'grim reaper' is personified by the gay man, who happens to witness the murder from a little distance and leads the police to the culprit. His walking up a ramp to the barge with the dancing couples echoes the quotation of the Grim Reaper 'coming up the stairs.' Certainly, his implacable face is grim. The total picture compiled through the various sub-stories is that poverty and loneliness, plus prostitution, is a good recipe for murder.

Loneliness

Isolation The other topic that the film comments on is love and marriage. During the course of all the vignettes, we do not meet a single happily married couple or a harmonious relationship. The prostitute lives alone. Natalino, the murderer, is a loner. The soldier pesters women on the street. Bustelli cheats on his fiancé, who mistreats him anyway. The gay man is by himself. Luciano and his friends spend their time disrupting lovers, and the only pair they encounter argue among themselves about what to do with Luciano when he is caught. It is left to the shy and inexperienced teenagers to hold out some hope for love in the future. They, at least, are kind to each other, giggling and singing a love song together. And, yet, even among these innocents we glimpse trouble ahead. When they discuss marriage, the boys focus on the food their wives will cook, while the girls are worried about the practicalities of marriage. 'What do you mean problems?' one of the boys says to the girls. 'You just go to church and get married.' We wonder if, ten years later, those boys and girls will be happily married couples. Bertolucci's film does not offer much hope.

Outsiders : Prostitutes Prostitution itself deserves its own place in any commentary on this film. In fact, in addition to the short vignettes of suspects presented serially, Bertolucci has inserted another series focused on the victim herself. In the middle of each vignette, right after the rain storm, the camera switches to the woman's bedroom. She rises in one vignette, dresses in the next and so forth, as she prepares for her work that afternoon in the park. Bit by bit, we gain a picture of this woman, who lives in an ordinary flat, makes an ordinary breakfast and puts on ordinary clothes. She has a job to do, to make money, in order to feed herself, for she seems to live alone. Not so the other prostitutes who appear in the sub-story of Bustelli, the put-upon pimp who is under the thumb of his fiancé, Esperia. As they make their rounds to collect fees from their 'girls,' we see the nasty face of prostitution, the poor women who do it to put food on the table, the humiliation they face from their families and the merciless mercenary instincts of their 'madam.' But the saddest story is that of the murdered woman, who speaks to Natalino as they walk toward her favourite spot for entertaining her clients. She is out of breath climbing down the steps to the riverbank. 'I get the most desperate guys,' she says. 'First they act like big shots. Then they don't have the money. All the low-lives come to me, they know I'm a soft-touch.' She is a friendly, sympathetic woman, just doing her job. Then the grim reaper comes for her.

CHARACTER ANALYSIS

The homosexual The unnamed gay man in the film is the only character whose sexuality is prominent. He appears in three sections of the film. First, he meets the two boys Pipito and Francolicchio in the dark park and tries to lure one (or both) of them into a sexual encounter. Next, he is the silent witness to the murder of the prostitute. And, finally, he leads the police to Natalino, the murderer, who is dancing with other couples on a barge. The key feature of this gay man is his

silence—he is the only character in the film who never speaks. He is, as some critics have suggested, the Grim Reaper, the silent figure in western mythologies who comes to collect your soul and take it to the land of the dead. In casting the gay man in this role, the film-maker is not castigating him but rather employing his status as a figure beyond social norms. He alone is the one who can make a judgement about the petty human behaviour that is shown in all the vignettes.

The prostitute The unnamed prostitute is a congenial woman in her thirties or forties. Rather than being a sexualised character, she is shown as an ordinary person—just doing her job in order to make ends meet. In her only appearance, in the second vignette of Natalino, she shows her vulnerability. She has lost contact with a friend who, she says, might think she is dead. She is professional but also personable, telling Natalino that he has a ‘lovely accent from the North’ and that she ‘likes him.’ By de-sexualising the prostitute, the film-maker forces us to focus on the social rather than any erotic content of the story.

Luciano Despite being poor and fatherless, the nineteen-year-old Luciano is a positive and light-hearted person. When his friends in the purse-snatching gang get angry and frustrated, he maintains his cheerfulness.

Positive Luciano wears a winning smile, even when he and his purse-snatching friends face the prospect of no one to steal from. They have been prowling through the woods outside the city, looking for distracted lovers but find none. Then a rain storm forces them inside a cave. ‘Who’s gonna come here and make love now?’ one of his friends says in despair. ‘What’s the matter?’ Luciano says, ‘You gone senile? Don’t you know that love has no limits?’ He laughs and breaks out in a rendition of a popular song to his ‘little rain-soaked love.’ Positive and bursting with joy, this sweet-faced boy could not be a killer.

Bustelli Bustelli is a man of appearances, including expensive clothes and a shiny car. All are provided, we later learn, by his fiancé’s income from running a network of prostitutes. He is her ‘associate,’ but he is under her control. Empty inside, he shows disdain toward others on the outside.

Arrogant Bustelli dresses well and drives a fancy car, though his money all comes from his fiancé’s business (of controlling a network of prostitutes). He swaggers throughout his sub-story, but there is one brief moment that illustrates his arrogance particularly well. He and Esperia have come to an apartment to collect money from one of their prostitutes, who is desperate that her family are kept unaware of the source of her earnings. Bustelli opens the door of the sitting room, where the perplexed family are gathered, and says with a wink, ‘Please, make yourself at home.’ In other words, he (and Esperia) control their lives and their housing. The disdain is complete a few second later, when he watches Esperia count the money just collected from the girl. ‘From the factory to the consumer. Fresh from the seller,’ he says with a smug smile.

Esperia Esperia, Bustelli’s fiancé, is a shallow, domineering and spiteful woman, who threatens to kill her own mother, bullies her prostitutes and only smiles when she is counting money.

Hard-hearted The moment when Esperia’s greed is most on display is one of her visits to collect money from a prostitute. As she rings the doorbell, she says to Bustelli, ‘I’m glad you bought that fancy car. I want everyone to envy you.’ The voice behind the door wants to know who it is, and Esperia screams, ‘It’s me. Open up!’ The woman inside refuses, claiming that she doesn’t have a cent. Esperia bangs on the door and orders her to ‘open up or I’ll break this down.’ More shouting and banging and threats force the women to open her door. The woman pleads poverty, but Esperia won’t take no for answer. ‘Are you tired of living?’ she asks and screams at her, demanding every last penny. ‘Take the radio or the blankets, if you like,’ the woman says, but Esperia rejects her possessions as worthless and full of fleas. In the end, they take away the woman’s beloved pet dog. Esperia is a cold person, with avarice running through her every bone.

Theodore Theodore is a demobbed soldier from the south, who wanders around Rome making passes at young women. He is idle, but also desperately lonely.

Lonely Theodore’s loneliness is dramatised less by what he says (which isn’t much) than by his actions and behaviour. A good example occurs after he has pestered a few attractive women on the street and wanders into the Coliseum, where he listens to a tour group leader speak in English to tourists. Unable to understand a word, he sits down on a large stone and looks around, dwarfed by the mammoth structure above him. Then he casts his eyes down and keeps them there for a long minute before sauntering inside the Coliseum, where he is again made diminutive by the proportions.

He slows down, looks around, sees nothing he can relate to and leaves. It is a wordless three or four minutes of film that perfectly visualises his predicament: a stranger lost in a big city.

Natalino Natalino is a nice-looking blonde man who is also a loner. He stands out from the crowd by virtue of his accent and his dress. This soulless man shows no compunction in murdering a prostitute for her handbag.

Desperate Natalino is the classic outsider, a stranger from the north, who speaks with a different accent and wears those funny clogs. He walks in the park because, as he says, he doesn't know anyone. His eyes and his voice express an inner vacuity and a sense of separation from others. That lack of a social bond is illustrated during his second vignette, when he kills the prostitute. As she talks, smiling and accommodating, he says very little, tightens his lips and looks uneasy. When she is unnerved by his silence and begs him to say something, he says, 'I don't talk much.' The only time he says anything of substance is when she asks him if he has the money and he snaps at her: 'Of course, I've got it.' She says, 'Calm down. I get lots of guys like you.' But he doesn't relax because he is desperate.

Francolicchio Francolicchio is a young boy, maybe fifteen or sixteen, who has close friendships with other boys and girls his age. He has a sunny disposition, although being poor he does not hesitate to steal when the opportunity arises.

Carefree Francolicchio's carefree attitude is displayed during his vignette when he talks to his girlfriend, also a teenager. They are idly walking on a hill above the city. He lays down on a wall and she stands close to him. 'My friend's getting married on Saturday,' the girl says. 'Oh. When are you getting married?' he asks with a gentle smile. She says she can't get married because she's too young. 'Not until you're 80, then?' he says, mockingly. 'It's not that easy,' she says, and he replies, 'What's the big deal? You go to a church and you get married.' He is without a care in the world, except that he has to find some money to pay for a meal that he has promised to his girlfriend. In sharp contrast to nearly all the adult characters in the film, he is neither lonely nor sad.



(The carefree teenagers)



(Luciano, the purse-snatcher)



(Esperia, enraged)