

Deep Turquoise: Centrelink sets the scene for psychic bloodlust

It is said of Dario Argento, the Italian horror director, that he fetishises murder.¹ I perceive in the operations surrounding Australian welfare parallels between this depiction of killing as an art form and the endless fascination with bureaucracy that state agencies promote. The prioritisation of transactional means over the results echoes strangely the director's innovation of the horror genre where elaborate performativity is presented as a means by which the performer's impotence is concealed.

Ray Guins' observations, like that he fetishises murder, lead the reader to suspect that Argento's work is largely at odds with the impulse said to drive much of the horror genre, where murder acts as a device by which desire is satisfied. When this isn't the case, the narrative unfurling serves only to resolve the mystery that makes sense of the preceding violence. It does not satisfy the quest for knowledge ignited by these acts. Worse, we as viewers are exposed to the uncomfortable light effected by a psychic disruption, a position that denies both closure and logic. Films like *Suspiria*, for example, linger on the after-effects of bloody slaughter: the murder of a ballet dancer is staged as artfully as Christ's passion; the victim hangs from the end of a rope, her face sliced and still bleeding decadently due to her recent descent through stained glass, fragments of which can be seen below her dangling feet [FIG 1]. The loving care with which such sequences are shot usurps the diegetic reason behind such bloodshed, since the usual site of narrative force is in a horror film's ending. (In this instance, the girl poses a threat to the coven-like ballet school hierarchy.) This concentration upon individual acts saps the closing sequences of their storytelling strengths and has the benefit of leading viewers to conclude that what drives the spectacle of on-screen murder, and thus desire for textual resolution (psychoanalytically speaking), is less important than each violently orchestrated act itself. By dispersing, rather than distilling these hooks, the texts tend to bear the loose ends indicative of discursive ambivalence. Argento is a smart-arse observer of narrative power and, in following his own desire for artful displays of torture, blood and gore, has created a way of knowing murder space that disrupts comforting associations between voyeurism and power. If we remain ignorant despite the primacy of our post-Renaissance vision, we may well be driven to hysteria or at least a soundless scream.

Perhaps, then, it is a spurious accountant who draws parallels between this work and the dynamics of space that inform weekly visits to the local Social Welfare offices. The connection would seem to be little more than a play on the word 'horror': a master of the form presents us with the overall powerlessness of the *giallo*², a scenario that a lesser-versed smart-arse like myself assimilates with the horror and dreariness of suburban, welfare-dependent life as it is represented by local branches of CentreLink. Still, I am inclined to claim that the very bloodlessness

of these bureaucratic sites witheringly indicates a horror of absent proportions, inversely related to the *giallo*'s serial abjection. Centrelink, as a production authored and financed by no singular authority over time, and exponentially deputised as it is, articulates an extreme lack of subjectivity where any sign of 'the body' is impermissible. Even to curse whilst speaking with CentreLink staff recalls a last vestige of power attributed to the speech-act: at their discretion, it may be noted on the computerised client records. The closest thing to the body here is the impetuously uttered "Bloody hell".

I have been reminded on more than one occasion that it is improper to complain about the free money occasioned the hapless, casual worker more wholly employed in a bygone era. I agree. But it's not the money that bothers me. It's the way in which it's administered. If we describe 'our' social welfare network in terms of power concentrations, we would seem to be employing an obvious division that exists between 'us' and 'them'. What I'm more interested in here, though, is the lack of change to material conditions that creates of recipients 'agents' within the neutral vocabulary of corporatism. Under these conditions, 'clients' of the new state stand in a line, waiting as one would at any other service centre while people behind desks assess each claim, assisting said 'clients' with paperwork errors and so-forth. The mere fact that these offices are like elaborate sets makes me suspicious as to what exactly is at stake, apart from the desire to sustain that image of a business-like exchange being conducted between two people of equal status.

A major independent study commissioned by the Government and released under Freedom of Information by The Australian newspaper in November last year indicates that two out of three unemployed people who have participated in work for the dole activities did not afterwards find work... The name mutual obligation suggests some kind of onus on the part of two or more parties; but don't be fooled. Mutual obligation, as Dr Lyn Turney, Lecturer in Social Theory at Swinburne University, says, is a one-way obligation. The obligation directed solely at the benefit recipient. Whereas the previous Labour government tried to engage industry, government agencies, and the unemployed in the process of helping those out of work to gain experience and to subsequently find work, the current Liberals have no such intentions. They are, arguably, penalising people for being on the dole. Peter Hallbury, of the Welfare Rights Unit, a Community legal centre that specialises in Centrelink issues, argues that Centrelink is designed to make those who are unemployed believe that it is their fault that they cannot get work. The latest figures from the Australian Bureau of Statistics from last year show that there are presently over one and a quarter million people in Australia looking for work, including just under six hundred thousand who are unemployed. But there are only one hundred thousand jobs on offer.

Peter says “people in the system think that it’s their fault that they don’t get work, that they are job snobs, dole bludgers, there’re malingerers, they’re whatever, when in actual fact there just isn’t any work.”

Tinted, automatic, glass doors welcome visitors into a bank-like environment. The front-desk staff/tellers are divided between two desks, one that serves the purpose of processing the forms that each welfare recipient is required to lodge once a fortnight. The other is reserved for the veritable cornucopia of administrative queries that accompany a CentreLink account. The division between them is less determined than a bank’s though, since the movement of queues is not necessarily faster on one desk than another; no ‘Express Desk’ exists for business or high-priority clients. The counters are curved in front and built of a light-coloured wood, perhaps white pine. Racks line the left hand wall, adorned with colourful and useful pamphlets assisting with the many different products and services that CentreLink offers. The corporate logo, part of a nineties rebranding strategy, modifies the harsh yellow and green of traditional public service colours to a younger, friendlier turquoise and orange. That logo and the desks are curved, accessible, warm, friendly.

The consequences of a breach in the contract between Centrelink and a recipient results in a reduction of payments for a period of time. This, effectively, is a form of punishment that Centrelink exploits in order to force people to do what they are told. The Centrelink system is made up of an extensive set of rules and regulations that the unemployed must comply with to get a benefit. But in order to make these people comply, the same system has the power to effect what those in charge of Centrelink know will hurt most: the hip pocket.

Like the local branch sites occupied by banks, the physical existence of these offices leads the customer to imagine that his/her interactions with that institution are direct, somehow manageable. What these spaces also articulate is a client’s real access to meaningful exchange with the institutional powers that be: pretty much zilch. It does, sort of, make sense. In a large population of democratic persuasion, there is very rarely such a thing as direct exchange between an elected representative and the body politic. (It would probably be physically impossible for the one person assigned each electorate to attend to all concerns that his or her constituents present.) The mediation or dispersal of that responsibility occurs through the many state institutions, from galleries and museums, transport and other infrastructural authorities, local government and council operations, and is inevitably the case with CentreLink. As such, the receptionists and security guards employed at each branch are little more than gatekeepers with only the most superficial authority in terms of dealing with the less superficial concerns that welfare recipients often voice. The illusion of control or power that direct, over-the-desk contact implies is nothing more than a metaphor for the very powerlessness represented by those spaces. Where Argento’s *giallo* serves as a view into the mechanisms of power misrecognised and dissipated (creating in each killing the real locus of pleasure) Howard’s CentreLink *assemblage* creates of bureaucracy, a fetish that distracts us from the problems engendered by the notion of representation in contemporary democracies.



FIG 1. Still from Dario Argento, *Suspiria*, 1977.

But what about this money? How much is it and how far does it go? On Newstart, the name Centrelink gives to the payment received by those newly out of a job, a person can get up to four hundred and thirty dollars a fortnight. This is just over eleven thousand dollars per annum as the maximum a person on the dole can receive. Of course people on the dole can earn more than this, by working part-time or casually at which point the benefit is reduced or stopped. But the average earnings for an Australian citizen, according to the Australian Bureau of Statistics from August last year, is just over nine hundred dollars a week gross, which works out to be over forty seven thousand dollars a year.

These are grand claims made in a tongue in cheek spirit but within that there are grains of truth and a very real concern. For every visit that I make with my local welfare branch, I am confronted with long queues of people that result in 45-minute waits (at most times of the day) where forms are handed in attesting to the fact that, two weeks on, one still needs income assistance. In these long, hot queues stand a variety of people with problems that range between the purely fiscal and the deeply troubled; within that welfare continuum, the two have become almost inextricably linked. For those troubled by

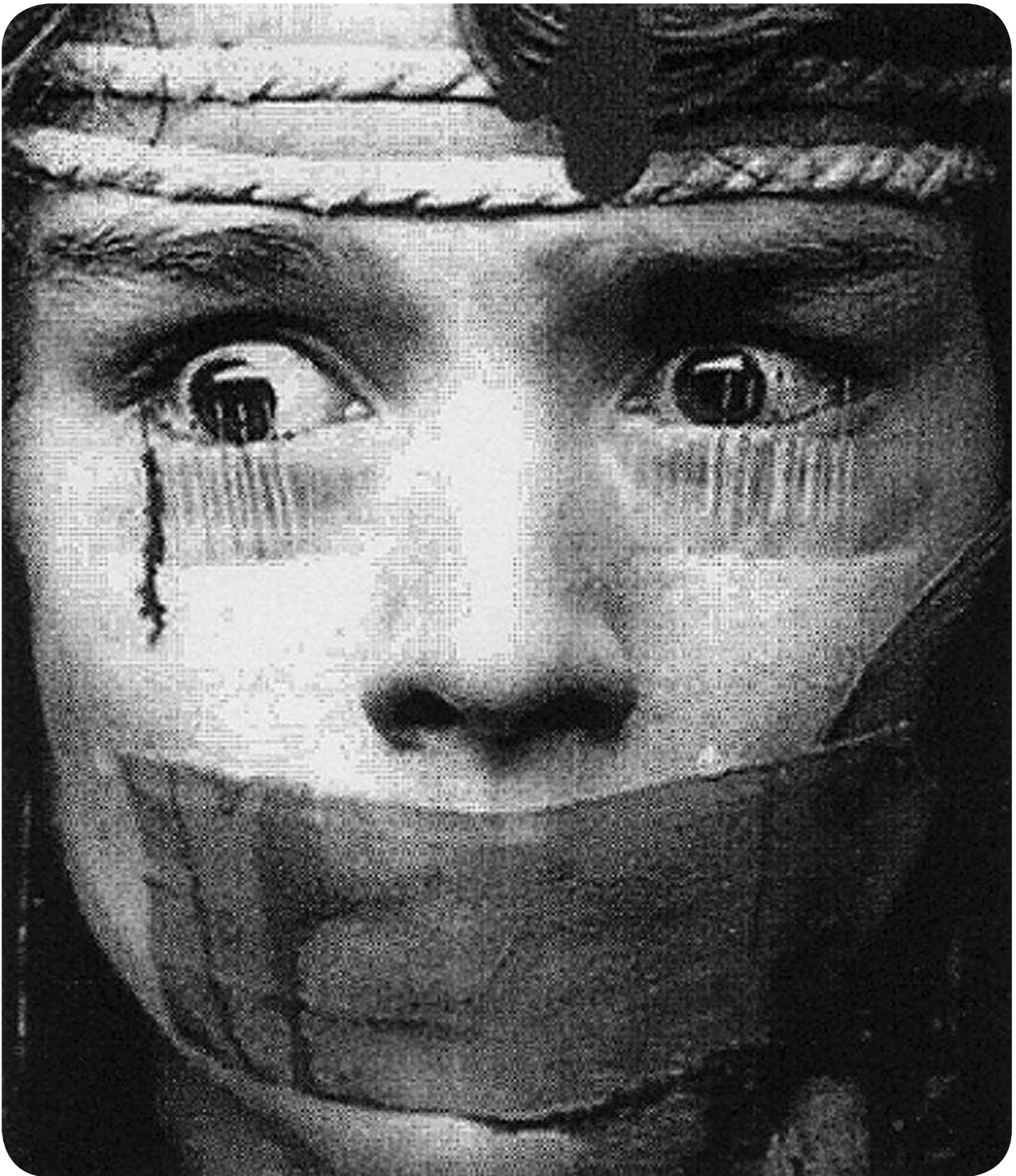


FIG II. Still from Dario Argento, *Opera*, 1987.

booze or drug addictions, or just plain anxiety, the mere sight of such a queue is a form of torture, before the unmanned terminals at the front desks are even sighted.³ Other staff wander to and fro, busily immersed in the business of entering and correcting details in the databases. At certain times of the day (near 4.30pm when the office closes, for example) one staff member emerges discreetly from behind the invisible line demarcating the 'open-plan' space and walks the queues in order to collect the paperwork. The ambience recalls *Opera*, where a captured victim must watch the crazed bloodletting of a mad killer. Since her eyes are held open by the threat of needles or razors placed precariously

beneath them the eye itself is threatened, as well as their lids should she blink or close her eyes [FIG II]. The killer's head is always covered, concealing his/her identity bringing into play the aforementioned paradox: that to see, to be able to do nothing but see in fact, does not equate with knowing or the ability to direct events. To see these lines of people, doubled up oftentimes, and to sense that relief from this task of waiting is at the discretion of a single worker is bound to invoke feelings of frustration. In such an office, such small pockets of power are on occasion

wielded by the equally disempowered staff.⁴ To add insult to injury, there are no options, no mechanisms by which that very real frustration may be addressed. For, the person that appears before you, who takes your declaration, who checks it for errors, who logs into a computer to process your claim, who must inform you of breaches that result in the docking of your already meagre income, that person is not 'the reason' behind the frustration. And so there is no such thing as legitimate blood-letting. The closest any line of people comes to an abject state is through the unsober demeanour with which they present at the branch. Occasionally, a bout of verbal fisticuffs explodes. Even more occasionally, the offender is barred from the premises, only to return at some later stage to this open-text nightmare of suppression.

Dr Turney explains that to get the dole these days is a "privilege". She argues, though, that it should be "a right of citizenship to be able to put food on the table and clothes on your children's back." Dr Turney is speaking specifically about the proposed changes to the dole that will force mothers, who receive unemployment benefits, to undertake Work for the Dole. But whether it is single mothers, or any other person dependant on social security, it is, as Dr Turney says, "governments taking an approach to welfare recipients as second-rate citizens." ...Another thing that people who are critical of the unemployed forget, is that, for most, being on the dole is not a life-style choice. Senator Brian Greig, of the Democrats, argues that those who are unemployed "do not choose to be" and are out of work because of "a complex set of conditions and decisions, all within the context of an environment of government policy on education, industry, training and tax." Senator Greig says that when these people do lose their jobs and are confronted with the reality of Centrelink, this reality is, for most, "unrealistic and incomprehensible."

From James Hannan, "Centrelink: A system of and for the people?", The Big Issue

The paperwork, more complicated than a university time sheet and more time consuming to lodge, more complicated in the discussion it requires should anything go wrong, creates between staff and recipients an official relationship that is out of proportion to what is at stake: \$185 a week. Considered alongside the revenue lost from tax breaks afforded big business, one must conclude that such administrative fetishisation is less about a countrywide concern about money and more about what money means – power, or lack thereof.

Anna's look has been created by OnWhee! chief stylist at *Giving You Options* magazine, using Skin Dew (by HydraDerm \$7.95), Rotten Plum Gloss (by Clinique, discontinued line) and hair by B.E.D.

Notes

1. Ray Guins, "Tortured Looks: Dario Argento and Visual Displeasure" in Black, A (ed), *Necronomicon: Book One* (London: Creation Books, 1996).
2. A sub-genre of horror. "This term, first made famous by Italian director Mario Bava, literally means 'yellow' and stems from Italian crime books which were traditionally bound in yellow covers... The *giallo* places equal (if not more) importance on the actual method of killing..." (ibid, p.141).

3. To clarify a little, the reception counters are designed for use by two staff at a time, with two computer terminals occupying the extreme right and left hand sides of each one. To see these positions not in use is a unique torment confronting lines of people under duress.
4. I was told that the reason for this is that the offices are understaffed and that all staff take turns at occupying the front-of-house position. Only when your own paperwork is complete is it possible to begin to process the extra that accompanies processing the Newstart Allowance Claim Forms. Various offices around Victoria had trialled the drop-box method; rather than queueing on the day stated on your form and handing this over to the customer service officer, all that was required was the form to be filled out accurately and deposited into the box allocated. Unfortunately, enough of the forms had been filled out inaccurately on a regular basis that a number of people were not receiving their payments on time (if at all). The powers that be decided on returning to the previous system. Unfortunately, extra staff were not provided to accomodate the changes.