



DARIO ARGENTO: DOORS INTO DARKNESS

Suspiria

Suspiria

Directed by: Dario Argento

Production Company: Seda Spettacoli S.p.A.

Executive Producer: Salvatore Argento *

Produced by: Claudio Argento

Production Manager: Lucio Trentini

Production Co-ordination: Federico Starace,
Massimo Brandimarte

Production Accountants: Ferdinando Caputo,
Carlo Du Bois

Unit Manager: Federico Tocci

Assistant Director: Antonio Gabrielli

Script Continuity: Francesca Roberti

Written by: Daria Nicolodi, Dario Argento

Director of Photography: Luciano Tovoli

Camera Operator: Idelmo Simonelli

Assistant Camera Operator: Riccardo Dolci

Assistant Cameramen: Giuseppe Tinelli,
Enrico Fontana, Riccardo Dolci

Gaffer: Alberto Altibrandi

Key Grip: Mario Moreschini

Action Stills: Francesco Bellomo

Special Effects: Germano Natali

Film Editor: Franco Fraticelli

1st Assistant Editor: Piero Bozza

2nd Assistant Editor: Roberto Olivieri

Production Designer: Giuseppe Bassan

Assistant Art Directors: Maurizio Garrone,
Davide Bassan

Set Dresser: Enrico Fiorentini

Set Construction: Aldo Taloni

Costumes by: Pierangelo Cigoletti

Wardrobe Mistress: Tiziana Mancini

Make-up Supervisor: Pierantonio Mecacci

Hair stylist: Maria Teresa Corridoni

Titles: Studio Mafera

Music by: The Goblins

With the Collaboration of: Dario Argento

Music Performed by: The Goblins

Sound Recordist: Mario Dallimonti

Sound: Dario Argento *

Boom Operator: Corrado Volpicelli

Re-recording Engineer: Federico Savina

Dubbing Editor: Nick Alexander

Sound Effects: Luciano Anzellotti

Recorded in English at International Recording

Unit Publicist: Nino Vendetti

Cast:

Jessica Harper (*Suzy Bannion*)

Stefania Casini (*Sara*)

Flavio Bucci (*Daniel*)

Miguel Bosè (*Mark*)

Barbara Magnolfi (*Olga*)

Susanna Javicoli (*Sonia*)

Eva Axen (*Patty Newman (Pat)*)

Rudolf Schündler (*Professor Milius*)

Udo Kier (*Professor Frank Mandel*)

Alida Valli (*Miss Tanner*)

Joan Bennett (*Madame Blanc*)

Margherita Horowitz (*teacher*)

Jacopo Mariani (*Albert*)

Fulvio Mingozzi (*taxi driver*)

Franca Scagnetti (*Albert's governess (1st servant)*)

Renato Scarpa (*Professor Verdegat*)

Serafina Scorcelletti (*2nd servant*)

Giuseppe Transocchi (*Pavlo*)

Renata Zamengo (*Caroline*)

Alessandra Capozza, Salvatore Capozza,

Diana Ferrara, Cristina Latini, Alfredo Raino,

Claudia Zaccari (*dancers*)

Italy 1977

101 mins

* Uncredited

Contains violence, gore and animal harm

SPOILER WARNING The following notes give away some of the plot.

Having flirted with the supernatural in *Deep Red* (1975), Dario Argento abandoned the *giallo* stylings of his earlier work altogether for the full-on sensory blitzkrieg of *Suspiria*, his first delve into the purely supernatural. Famously printed using the outdated and soon to be phased out Technicolor IB (imbibition) process (a system developed back in the late 1920s) and scored by the Italian progressive rock band Goblin who had so memorably scored *Deep Red*, *Suspiria* looked and sounded like no other horror film of the 1970s. Although much-imitated since it remains one-off, an almost unclassifiable film that seems as determined to pummel audiences into submission as it does entertain them.

American ballet student Suzy Bannion (Jessica Harper) arrives in Germany to further her studies at the prestigious Freiburg Dance Academy. As soon as she arrives, a recently expelled student, Patricia (Eva Axén) is brutally murdered by an unseen assailant (as is often the case in his films the knife that deals the killing blow was wielded by Argento himself – he also narrated the Italian version). The next day, Suzy meets head instructor Miss Tanner (Alida Valli) and deputy headmistress Madame Blanc (Joan Bennett) and learning that her room isn't ready, she accepts an offer to stay with bitchy fellow student Olga (Barbara Magnolfi). After being taken ill during a practice session, Suzy is relocated to the Academy's accommodation where she befriends fellow student Sara (Stefania Casini). After a consignment of spoiled meat causes maggots to fall from the attic, the pupils are forced to spend the night in a makeshift dormitory and Sara confirms that the laboured breathing they hear coming from behind a curtain is that of the Academy's founder, Helena Markos. The school's blind pianist Daniel (Flavio Bucci) is fired when his dog attacks Blanc's nephew Albert (Jacopo Mariani) and is killed when a supernatural force turns the dog against him, Sara is killed when she's pursued by another unseen assailant and falls into a room full of razor wire and Suzy comes to suspect that the Academy is a front for a coven of witches.

Argento sets out his stall straight away, pitching Suzy into a nightmarish world that assaults both her and the audience the second she steps through those electric doors, out of the comfortable, brightly-lit and blandly familiar airport lounge and into the ferocious storm that accompanies her ride to the Akademie. Unseen by our soaked and bewildered heroine, the film's first victim is meeting a spectacularly grisly end (the close-up of the knife puncturing Patricia's beating heart was a step too far for the British censors who initially ordered its removal), the climax of a particularly intense sequence that Argento spins out for fifteen nerve-shredding minutes.

It's not an entirely original observation to suggest that the film never quite recovers from this tour-de-force opening but there's still a huge amount of weirdness to savour before we get to the fiery climax. The camera plummeting from the roof of the Staatliche Antikensammlung museum in Munich's Königsplatz towards the doomed Daniel, swooping as though one of the building's stone birds had come to life (its descent is accompanied by the unnerving sound of wings flapping) is extraordinary and the climactic destruction of the Academy, torn apart by the death of its founder, is a practical effects triumph.

As with *Deep Red* there's a degree of awkward humour in *Suspiria* (comedy was never Argento's forte) though the exaggerated bitchiness of the locker room scene is a welcome moment of light relief following the almost

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Suspiria

Fri 12 May 20:40 (+ intro by Dario Argento); Sat 20 May 18:10

The Cat o' Nine Tails (Il gatto a nove code)

Sat 13 May 11:20; Thu 16 May 20:45

Deep Red (Profondo rosso)

Sat 13 May 15:00 (+ Q&A with Dario Argento); Tue 23 May 18:10

Tenebrae (Tenebre)

Sat 13 May 18:20 (+ intro by Dario Argento); Wed 17 May 20:45; Tue 23 May 20:50

The Bird with the Crystal Plumage (L'uccello dalle piume di cristallo)

Sat 13 May 20:45; Tue 16 May 21:00

Inferno

Mon 15 May 20:45; Sat 20 May 20:45

The Five Days (Le cinque giornate)

Fri 19 May 18:15

Phenomena

Fri 19 May 20:45; Mon 29 May 15:50

The Phantom of the Opera (Il fantasma dell'opera)

Sat 20 May 15:50; Fri 26 May 20:40

Sleepless (Non ho sonno)

Sun 21 May 18:10; Sat 27 May 17:45

Two Evil Eyes (segment: The Black Cat) (Due occhi diabolici: Il gatto nero)

Mon 22 May 20:55

Mother of Tears – The Third Mother (La terza madre)

Wed 24 May 20:40; Mon 29 May 18:40

The Card Player (Il cartaiolo)

Thu 25 May 20:30; Sun 28 May 18:20

Opera

Sat 27 May 20:45

Trauma

Sun 28 May 15:40

Do You Like Hitchcock? (Ti piace Hitchcock?)

Tue 30 May 20:40

Dark Glasses (Occhiali neri)

Wed 31 May 20:40

Strange Phenomena: Argento Season

Introduction

This video will be available to watch for free on BFI YouTube from 19.30 on Mon 17 Apr

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unbearable intensity of the opening scene. After that, there are the odd perhaps unintentionally funny lines ('He's really ugly, isn't he?' Tanner says of servant Pavlo (Giuseppe Transocchi), 'Don't be afraid to say so') but Argento's chief concern is slowly ramping up the tension again until Suzy finally gets to the bottom of the mystery, resulting in the destruction of the Academy and leaving Suzy where she started, soaked to the skin in a raging rainstorm.

The combined efforts of Argento, director of photography Luciano Tovoli and art director Giuseppe Bassan ensure that *Suspiria* not only looked quite unlike anything else Argento had done so far but unlike any of its contemporaries. The Technicolor IB gives the film a glowing quality that emphasises the reds and greens that Tovoli bathes the action in (one astute critic at the time quipped that you could develop film in the crimson glow emanating from the screen) while Bassan's glorious sets – including a giant recreation of the façade of the Haus zum Walfisch in Freiburg im Breisgau, which stands in for the Academy and the student halls that have a strange, 'gingerbread house' quality about them reminding viewers of the beleaguered children menaced by a cannibalistic witch in Hansel and Gretel. Tovoli's cameras are restless, barely standing still for a second and he was the first Italian director of photography to make use of the recently developed Steadicam.

The score, a glorious cacophony of clattering percussion, bouzouki, weird susurrations and occasional screeching cries of 'witch!', is as wonderfully strange as the visuals. Written and recorded by Goblin (here credited as The Goblins) before filming began, it was played back on the set at deafening volumes to inspire and intimidate the cast. Switching instantly between a tinkling piano theme (a variation on the hymn 'Jesus Loves Me' by Anna Bartlett Warner) and an *avant garde* onslaught of sound in which individual instruments are submerged in a skin-crawling soundscape, it's the most experimental score of Argento's career, often cited by keyboard player Claudio Simonetti as the band's masterpiece.

The end result of this sensory overload is a film that begins with a bang then slowly gets under your skin until ending with a cathartic blaze that anticipates the title of the film's sequel, *Inferno* (1980). Those complaining that what little plot there is makes little sense are rather missing the point. *Suspiria* doesn't offer a story. Instead it offers an immersive experience that assaults you on every sensory level while its heroine drifts through a weird dreamscape where odd things happen seemingly out of the blue and where excess is the order of the day. The story hints at Grimm fairy tales and even Germany's problematic recent past (Miss Tanner looks like she escaped the post-war *Entnazifizierung* and the *biereckler* that Daniel repairs to after being fired is the Hofbräuhaus in München's 9 Platzl where Hitler arranged his earliest meetings of what would become the Nazi party), but remains in a world all of its own, a nightmarish place where witches are real and exert unusual power – they 'change the course of events, and people's lives, but only to do harm' according to expert Professor Milius (Rudolf Schündler).

Suspiria was another hit for Argento, particularly outside Italy, and it inspired the director to position it as the first in a trilogy concerning the malign influence of the Three Mothers, a triumvirate of witches (inspired perhaps by *Macbeth*) who have built malevolent houses around the world. Markos was re-positioned as Mater Suspriorum (the 'Mother of Sighs') with Mater Tenebrarum (the 'Mother of Darkness' played by Veronica Lazar) setting up shop in New York and Mater Lachrymarum (the 'Mother of Tears', played briefly by Ania Pieroni in *Inferno* and Moran Aias in *La terza madre* (2007)) in Rome. The even more dreamlike *Inferno* followed in 1980 but there was a 27 year wait until the story was concluded in *The Third Mother/The Mother of Tears*.

Kevin Lyons, eofftview.wordpress.com, 21 July 2020