



## DARIO ARGENTO: DOORS INTO DARKNESS

# Phenomena

### Phenomena

*Director:* Dario Argento  
*Production Company:* Dacfilm  
*Producer:* Dario Argento  
*Production Executive:* Angelo Jacono  
*Production Manager:* Cesare Iacolucci  
*Assistant Directors:* Michele Soavi, Bettina Graebe  
*Screenplay:* Dario Argento, Franco Ferrini  
*Director of Photography:* Romano Albani  
*Special Entomological Photography:* Ferdinando Armati  
*Underwater Photographer:* Gianlorenzo Battaglia  
*Camera Operator:* Stefano Ricciotti  
*Steadicam Operation:* Nicola Pecorini & Co.  
*Special Optical Effects:* Luigi Cozzi  
*Special Stage Effects:* Tonino Corridori  
*Editor:* Franco Fraticelli  
*Production Designers:* Maurizio Garrone, Nello Giorgetti, Luciano Spadoni, Umberto Turco  
*Set Dressers:* Rina Villani, Renato Lori  
*Costume Designer:* Giorgio Armani  
*Wardrobe:* Marina Malavasi, Patrizia Massaia  
*Make-up Artist:* Pierantonio Mecacci  
*Special Make-up Effects:* Sergio Stivaletti  
*Titles:* Moviecam 2000  
*Music/Songs:* The Goblins  
*Music Producer:* Vincent Messina  
*Music Editor:* Piero Bozza  
*Sound Recording:* Giancarlo Laurenzi  
*Sound Re-recording:* Danilo Sterbini  
*Supervising Sound Editor:* Franco Fraticelli  
*Sound Editor:* Nick Alexander  
*Stereo Sound Effects:* Studio Anzellotti  
*Stunt Co-ordinator:* Giorgio Ricci  
*Entomology Consultant:* Enrico Stella  
*Dolby Stereo Consultant:* Federico Savina  
*Dialogue Coach:* Sheila Goldberg  
*Animal Trainer (Tanga):* Daniel Berquiny  
*Cast:*  
Jennifer Connelly (*Jennifer Corvino*)  
Daria Nicolodi (*Frau Bruckner*)  
Dalila Di Lazzaro (*school director*)  
Patrick Bauchau (*Inspector Rudolf Geiger*)  
Donald Pleasence (*Professor John McGregor*)  
Fiore Argento (*Vera Brandt*)  
Federica Mastroianni (*Sophie*)  
Davide Marotta (*Patau*)  
Fausta Avelli, Marta Biuso, Sophie Bourchier,  
Paola Gropper, Ninke Hielkema, Mitzy Orsini,  
Geraldine Thomas (*schoolgirls*)  
Fiorenza Tessari  
Mario Donatone  
Francesca Ottaviani  
Michele Soavi (*policeman*)  
Franco Trevisi  
Italy-Switzerland 1985  
113 mins

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*Contains violence and gore*

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

At the time of its release, *Phenomena* was greeted with a rousing chorus of disapproval, even from Argento's most die-hard supporters. In retrospect, this disapproval seems unjust for although *Phenomena* is a damn silly film, it's also entirely consistent with Argento's then current preoccupations and was, in many ways, a logical if rather hard to swallow extension of the work he'd begun with *Tenebre*. Like that film, it features a maniacal serial killer, but instead of the 'hyper realism' (Argento's words) of *Tenebre*, *Phenomena* marks a return of sorts to the paranormal milieu of *Suspiria* and *Inferno*.

Like Suzy Banyon before her, Jennifer Corvino (Jennifer Connelly) is a young American immersed in a hostile world of European academia, enrolled by her actor father ('the great Paul Corvino') in the prestigious Richard Wagner academy in a region ominously known as 'the Swiss Transylvania'. Before her arrival, a young student (Argento's elder daughter, Fiore) has been murdered in spectacular style by a subhuman creature that escapes its chains in a remote villa, stabs her in the hand with a pair of scissors, tries to strangle her and eventually pushes her backwards (in slow motion yet) through a plate glass window. And she wasn't the first victim as Jennifer soon discovers – other girls have gone missing from the school in the past, their decapitated bodies littering the countryside.

But Jennifer has other problems to contend with – the other girls (like the students of the Tanzakademie in *Suspiria*) are a bitchy lot and our heroine is the butt of their taunts and cruel jokes. Her unexplained sleepwalking doesn't help much and the revelation that she enjoys telepathic communion with insects (Argento maintains that his research in this field has revealed that the phenomena is more common than we might expect...) more or less seals her fate. During one of her nocturnal wanderings, she witnesses the murder of another young girl but is unable to convince her sinister tutors of what she's seen. Her only ally is paraplegic entomologist Dr John McGregor (Donald Pleasence) whose expertise in insect behaviour is assisting the otherwise clueless police in their search for the killer. Together, Jennifer and McGregor hatch, aided by his faithful 'housemaid' Inga the chimp (played with scene stealing intensity by the talented Tanga), a wild plan to use the great sarcophagus fly and its affinity with rotting human flesh to track down the killer's lair.

By any standards, this is a half-baked narrative indeed but, as has already been established elsewhere, Argento has never made any bones about his feelings for the strictures of formal plotting. The narrative is absurd, yet the sheer overkill of generic elements (deformed maniac killers, a hellish asylum, a psychic teenager, sinister, almost Nazi like tutors) creates a swirling, kaleidoscopic film that frequently resembles someone else's bad trip. Weirdness is everywhere – Jennifer's doomed roommate who eats baby food; the surreal corridor that Jennifer sees as she's sleepwalking; the jolting use of heavy metal during the murder set pieces; the razor toting killer chimp.

## **DARIO ARGENTO: DOORS INTO DARKNESS**

### **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

### **Suspiria**

Sat 20 May 18:10

### **Inferno**

Sat 20 May 20:45

### **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

### **Deep Red (Profondo rosso)**

Tue 23 May 18:10

### **Tenebrae (Tenebrae)**

Tue 23 May 20:50

### **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

#### **With thanks to**

Camilla Cormanni and Paola Ruggiero at Cinecittà. Presented in collaboration with the Italian Embassy in London and the Italian Cultural Institute

#### **Co-produced by**

Cinecittà, Rome

All restored titles courtesy of Cinecittà

## **CINECITTÀ**

*Phenomena* is very clearly set in a fantasy world that is only superficially like our own, a twisted dreamscape where cute teens in telepathic contact with the insect world is accepted as perfectly normal, the same perverted fairy tale world as that inhabited by the characters in *Suspiria*, perhaps.

In this literally strange new world, so strange that it may or not even be part of the real world we all live in (an illusion partly defeated by Argento's insistence on filming the Swiss countryside perfectly straight, with none of the flourishes we might expect from him), the weird goings on seem entirely consistent. In a scene initially missing from English language prints, Jennifer is taken to a Spartan examination room to be checked out by a team of doctors, worried that she might be schizophrenic. Although Jennifer denies that she is ill, it's tempting to see Argento's narrative as a visual representation of some of the symptoms of that debilitating illness. The reconstruction of the world as an icy, detached fantasia echoes the way many schizophrenics themselves are dislocated from reality.

Should the clearly unhinged *Phenomena* seek psychological treatment, it would of course need a Freudian approach as, once again, Argento gives lie to his own claim that his is a Jungian approach. The killer, revealed as a pubescent boy, stalks his pretty female victims with an explicitly phallic weapon which at one point is rammed into a hapless victim's mouth. Clearly then sexuality was going to play a key role again in *Phenomena*, even if we are to accept the notion that its milieu is an entirely artificial one detached from any notion of consensus reality. Connelly was cast as Jennifer because her 'almost sexless beauty' appealed to Argento and Jennifer seems curiously uninterested in boys for a relatively healthy young teenager. Her denial of sexuality (she is mauled by a pair of teens who find her wandering the road after a sleepwalking session, but she easily fights them off) is the key to her vanquishing of the sexually awakening libido monster, spawned from an act of appalling sexual violence.

Of all of Argento's films – many of which have moments of head-scratching strangeness – *Phenomena* is the most peculiar. Nothing about it makes any sense, it defies any attempt to take it seriously and the plot is so far out there it's almost unreachable. And yet it's a hard film not to like. It's so strange, so wilfully eccentric that you just have to accept that Argento was having us on with this one and go with its beautifully photographed and almost hallucinogenic madness.

Kevin Lyons, [eofftvreview.wordpress.com](http://eofftvreview.wordpress.com), 27 October 2018

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