*Suspiria*: Turning Dreams into Nightmares

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When one thinks about the typical tropes associated with the horror genre of film, they think of low-key lighting, a realistic setting, and music queues that lead to jump scares. Many famous horror films and franchises use these tropes to their advantage (think of the iconic *Friday the 13th* or *Halloween* franchises). But one film that stayed away from all of the tropes of horror and is still proclaimed today as, “Dario Argento’s Italian horror masterpiece of 1977,” (Bond, pg.47) is the classic Italian horror film, *Suspiria*. The film follows American dancer Suzy Bannion as she travels to Germany to join a dance school that is, unbeknownst to her and her fellow dancers, ran by a cult of witches. The movie, like most of Argento’s work, is light on plot and characters, but thick in lavish production design, memorable music, and gruesome kills- all of which are still remembered to this day. Through Dario Argento’s use of bright, vivid colors, an exceptional music score, and production design that harkens back to silent horror films of the German Expressionist era, he was able to turn horror on its head in his 1977 film: *Suspiria*.

The first aspect of *Suspiria* that directly contradicts the typical horror tropes listed above is the use of bright colors and high-key lighting throughout the movie. Rather than low-key, dim, realistic lighting found in most horror, the film is packed to the brim with bright reds, loud greens, and soft blues. Every color works off of each other so well that the viewer’s eyes are never taken off of the screen. The lighting is also not too high that it hurts the viewers’ eyes to look at. Argento takes these bright colors that many associate with a comforting dream-like aesthetic, and turns them into the aesthetic of nightmares without actually changing the colors at all. When people discuss European horror films, “*Suspiria* is often used as a benchmark,” (Cherry B., 1945 pg. 29). If this lighting were to be used in a more light-hearted film, then it would work for it. But this vibrant spectrum of lighting, paired with other aspects of the film, namely the score, turns the movie into a psychedelic trance of horror and thrills for the audience.

*Suspiria* was one of the last films that was processed in Technicolor, using one of the last three-strip Technicolor cameras found in Europe at the time of its production. This is how Argento and cinematographer Luciano Tovoli were able to capture the vibrant aesthetic that can be found in many key scenes (most of which depict a grizzly murder). Giulio L. Giusti put it best when he wrote, “The final result emphasizes a deliberately unrealistic setting that is much more vivid in colour definition than emulsion-based release print,” (2017). Argento wanted the movie to have a similar look of the first Disney animated films like *Snow White and the Seven Dwarves* from 1937 or the 1951 adaptation of *Alice in Wonderland*. So when both critics and fans alike cite *Suspiria* as being beautiful to look at, they are not stretching from the truth. With any other movie, this choice of lighting would be that of a harmless fairy tale.

What changes this film’s lighting from that of a dream into a nightmare is its accompaniment with Goblin’s iconic score for the film. Goblin is a progressive rock group formed in 1972 that is of Italian origin. Frequently collaborating with Argento on his films, they are most well-known for their scores to 1982’s *Tenebre,* 1975’s *Deep Red,* and even the European cut of George A. Romero’s classic zombie film *Dawn of the Dead* (1978), which in Europe was re-titled *Zombi*. By far though, they are most known for their work on *Suspiria* if nothing else. The music found in this film can be described as nothing short of iconic. After a first viewing, most will find it difficult to get the genius main theme out of their heads. It is the type of score that takes any horror film from 0-100 really fast, right up there with the score to Alfred Hitchcock’s *Psycho* (1960) and John Carpenter’s *Halloween* (1978). The score elevates many scenes, making them feel more chaotic and frantic than how they are actually presented. This is because Argento never puts the score in the background of the movie. Anytime the score is used it is loud, abrasive, and certainly in the forefront. The first scene that comes to mind is the opening when Suzy is leaving the airport after arriving in her destination of Germany. The doors leading into and out of the airport are constantly opening and closing with people coming and going, and every time they open and the camera is focused on them, Goblin’s score rushes in with no warning. It is unsettling, it is tense, and it is here to stay throughout the picture’s remaining runtime. Goblin’s score does not care about the audience’s expectations or how they feel about it or the movie. It is here to unsettle the viewer without ever retreating. It is pure horror through and through. It is safe to say that if the score were used any less throughout, or was used in a more subtle way, then the movie would not be nearly as effective as it is.

What Goblin’s score adds to the nightmare quality of the movie is the fairytale sound of it all. The main theme of the movie, also titled *Suspiria*, has the distinct sound of the type of music that comes out of a music box. This adds layers to the setting of the film, that being a dance academy, making it feel all the more real for the characters found within. For every song found within the score that is more dream-like, there are two or three that are the sounds of pure nightmares. Take the song *Witch* for example, with its heavy use of bombastic percussion in the foreground and witch-like vocals in the background. This song, mixed with the imagery of the character Patricia running through the forest that is painted with a blue hue makes for one of the most memorable sequences in the movie, and it is all found within the first 15-20 minutes. The iconic music and excellent lighting of the visuals work off of each other flawlessly, but what of the production design that encompasses the entirety of the film?

The production design is what solidifies *Suspiria* as a heightened reality with the aesthetic of a dream that has the feeling of a nightmare. All the sets use unrealistic angles and shapes to form the hell these characters are living through. From the bright stained glass ceiling that Patricia falls to her death through, to the secret hallways hidden throughout the dance academy, these sets are here and they want the audience to know it. Are the sets practical for the story or the characters within? No. Do these sets look like something that one would find in a dance academy set in Germany around the late 1970s? Also no. But they do not need to. What fairytales, or nightmares even, have a real, grounded feel to them? Hardly any. That is what makes them unique, and that is what adds a layer to the nightmare-like aesthetic Argento and his crew were going for.

It is clear when watching this movie that Argento and his crew were heavily inspired by the dream-like production design of horror movies from the German Expressionist era. Movies like 1920’s *The Cabinet of Dr. Calagari* and 1922’s *Nosferatu* being the most notable influences, particularly *Calagari* with its use of sharp angles and exaggerated buildings. These movies, like *Suspiria*, shared a dream-like aesthetic meant to carry the viewer off to a world where the bounds of reality cannot hold it back. “With his work on *Suspiria*, Tovoli found himself liberated from the limitations of realism, restraints that he himself had once cherished in a way he has described as almost religious,” (Heller-Nicholas, 2015). Only in this type of cinematic world can Argento, as well as the filmmakers behind silent horror of the German Expressionist era, achieve their goals in crafting a nightmare that is not of this world.

So it is through this composition of lighting, music, and production design that Argento was able to capture the feel of horror without using traditional tropes along the way, and in many cases, doing the polar opposite of what those tropes call for when one crafts a movie in the horror genre. If someone were to take screenshots from the movie without context and show them to someone else and ask if it looked like a traditional horror movie, the response would almost certainly be no. It’s all a mixture of sight and sound that truly brings the horror of this movie to its fullest potential.

True cinematic horror is not something that can be written down and sent in a letter, or even explained to a friend through words. It has to be seen to be truly experienced. One aspect of the film cannot work without the other. If Argento went with realistic lighting, it would feel out of place and too real. If Goblin composed a more subtle score, it would not be able to grab the audience by the ears and tell them to be afraid as well as it does. And if the production design were that of a real dance academy or resembled late 1970s Germany, then the audience wouldn’t feel as entranced or entrapped by the large doors and glass stained windows. No, *Suspiria* truly has to be seen to be believed and seen to fully encompass the viewer.

And although *Suspiria* lacks in character development, story, and memorable dialogue (all of which can be found in Luca Guadagnino’s 2018 film of the same name), it doesn’t necessarily need any of that to achieve the goals Argento and his crew set out to achieve. There is a good reason why so many rank *Suspiria* as one of the all-time great achievements of horror, and that reason certainly is not because *Suspiria* has great characters and memorable dialogue. It is remembered so fondly because of its daring visuals, its one-of-a-kind music score and its opera-like production design. Horror fans return to this film for the same reasons sci-fi fans return to *2001 A Space Odyssey*: they want to be entranced again, if only for one more time. Does any of it make much sense? No, not in a sense of reality. But it does not need to. After all do dreams, or more so nightmares, really make much sense in the end?

References

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