

'Suspiria' (1977) - Color and Space

Suspiria (1977) could be termed as Dario Argento's *magnum opus*, his stylistic jewel. A bare bones film about an American woman, Suzy Bannion, who travels to Germany to train at a world renowned ballet school and comes up against powers and beings way beyond her scope of understanding, *Suspiria* strikes an important yet surreal balance between the beauty in terror and the inherent terror in the midst of that beauty. Argento crafts a tangible nightmarish experience that originates from everything about it being 'wrong'. Through this paper, I wish to demonstrate how *Suspiria* utilizes color, sound, and space in order to skew spectators' preordained formal vocabulary and create something too enchanting to look away from, yet too terrifying to endure. For this film, Argento creates and takes advantage of an entirely unique and transgressive cinematic gambit that succeeds admirably at cementing its place within the ranks of cinematic horror history.

The film's atmosphere stems from Argento's prior and decorated experience with Italian Giallo films – while *Suspiria* is not generally classified as one, it certainly follows Giallo's formal elements. *Suspiria* has got it all – masked killers, gruesome violence, female victims, and an extreme heightening of music and sound. What's different though, is the film's supernatural elements, a characteristic not frequently found in Giallos which mostly follow murder mystery-esque plotlines. This hybridity in the film's construction allows it to manipulate formal and narrative elements of both traditions and create something entirely unique.

The house that our protagonist stays at with her fellow ballet students is designed in a deliberately confusing and imperceptible way. The long spacious hallways and constricting walls suffocate the characters in a maze that seems to be closing in on them as every second passes – this, in turn, suffocates the audience too. Marked by an influence of German Expressionism, the

set design in *Suspiria* follows slanted, linear lines and dark shadows that are accentuated by the wide camera angles and long, sweeping shots that seem to defy the laws of space and time. Many scenes in the film follow the characters in an almost omniscient way in that the camera seems to pass through walls and moves independently of how the film might implore it to, yet Argento manages to retain a sense of realism in the way the shots are composed. For example, the scene in which Sara (Stefania Casini) is being chased, or is running away from, the spirit that haunts her, the camera hunts her down in a very predatory and dangerous manner, heightening the tension and fear present, but it still manages to move around the setting freely and in an antecedent and predictive manner. This tension between free and omniscient movement of the camera within the space and also its more grounded and realistic nature lends a sense of unease to the spaces in the film. The labyrinthian aesthetic of the building and its many doors and passageways leave tons of room for Argento to surprise and terrorize us. Such abject spaces allow for the element of surprise, stemming from the fact that it is this very abjection that defies all that we, as spectators, expect or quantify as ‘scary’.

The film’s use of color is also particularly striking. Murray Leeder traces Argento’s choice to use the old technology in Technicolor for *Suspiria*, in surprising ways in order to heighten the look of the film, “one so overwhelming that it seems almost impossible to discuss the film without taking it into account” (Leeder 202).

[*Suspiria*] would ... be the last ever to be ‘dio-transferred’: the negative was given to Technicolor who split it into three separate black and white negatives – one for red, one for blue, and one for green. These were then printed one on top of the other to create the vibrant look of the finished film. Argento insisted that Technicolor also

use the highest possible contrast to increase the presence of primary colours.
(Gracey qtd. in Leeder 202).

Leeder elucidates that the colored lighting in the film, that bathes so much of the space and the characters within it, “fails to be consistent even within a single scene” (Leeder 203). Much of the color present in the film seems to have no identifiable source – an *acousmatic* element, so to speak. Argento introduced many kinds of shades and hues into the diegetic setting, floating and shimmering across the walls of the ballet house which creates environments of indeterminacy. No single color is used more than once in this same way and as a result, the spectator is given the space and freedom to interpret each colored element however they deem fit. The dissonance between color cues and emotional beats reflects and embodies the chaos and harrowing richness that crowds the world of *Suspiria*. The beauty of the color in the film competes with its other formal elements, and performs trickery on the audience by enchanting the spectator – lurking behind, though, is a deep supernatural imprint that confuses the spectator’s notions of color. Everything must have an explanation in the real world, and since Argento intentionally bypasses this in *Suspiria*, this beauty has an unidentifiable horror preceding it.

Works Cited

Leeder, Murray. *Horror Film: A Critical Introduction*. Bloomsbury Publishing USA, 2018.