

Institute of Art Design and Technology, Dun Laoghaire

Faculty of Creative Technologies

# Horror, Colour and Design in Dario Argento's *'Suspiria'*.

By

Rebekah Bustos.

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**Declaration of Originality**

This dissertation is submitted by the undersigned to the Institute of Art, Design and Technology, Dun Laoghaire in partial fulfilment for the BA (Hons) in Design for Stage and Screen. It is entirely the author's own work, except where noted, and has not been submitted for an award from this or any other educational institution.

**Signed**

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Things were very daunting for me when I began college but being surrounded by such wonderful, creative people has inspired me and allowed me to make many lifelong friends.

## **Abstract**

This dissertation's focus is to investigate director Dario Argento's vision for '*Suspiria*' (1977) and identify the key areas in which it was effective within the horror genre. The key strategy will be looking at how the film's visual language of Art Direction and Cinematography paved a new aesthetic in supernatural horror and was effective in evoking fear within the audience. This dissertation will give an in-depth analysis of the key spaces showcased within the film and how they were effective in creating the consuming horror atmosphere. The spaces will be explored from a literal point of view taking note of décor, colour schemes and camera shots that gave the abstracted world Argento had envisioned. It will also delve deeper and look at the decisions made by the design team to create the film's shocking poetic imagery.

Key words: Horror, Production Design, Space, Abstracted, Psychology

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## Introduction

This thesis will be examining notable horror film '*Suspiria*' (1977) directed by Dario Argento looking specifically at how the aesthetic of the film exaggerated the horror as a whole. This text will consider this film as a case study attesting to the methods of Argento's horror filmmaking with a focus on Art Direction and how it effectively provoked fears in audiences worldwide. Being the first film of Argento's 'Three Mother's Series' and the first of his films to take on a supernatural element, '*Suspiria*' is a keystone of his filmography, and has a great deal to be investigated within it. This heavy influence of art direction within '*Suspiria*' is the framework in which this thesis will be set.

Before articulating the key strategies of the thesis argument, it is important to firstly give a brief overview and context of the film to set the scene and give background to the argument. The film opens with the lead protagonist, Suzy Bannion arriving to Freiburg, Germany where she will be attending ballet school. When she arrives, she sees Pat Hingle (another student) running away from the school. The viewer then follows Pat, who goes to a friend's apartment for help. This sequence ends with an evil entity ambushing Pat and causing her gruesome and untimely death. Suzy returns to the school the next day and meets Miss Tanner and Madame Blanc, the two main teachers in the school. She also meets classmates like Sarah and Olga. It is clear from the design of the school and demeanour of the students and staff that the world within the school has an abstracted sense of reality.

During her first-class Suzy passes out and is quickly treated by a doctor with a strict new diet for her. One peculiar event that occurs is when maggots fall from the ceilings of the student's rooms from a crate of spoiled food in the attic. The students must sleep in one of the dance studios. Attention is brought to a woman's shadow behind a curtain hung around the room's perimeter. Sarah recognises the shadow as the school's headmistress, who is supposedly out of town. Shortly after, the pianist is fired when his dog bites a servant. He is stalked by the unseen entity while walking that night when his dog rips out his throat, killing him. Suzy is told of Pats strange behaviour before her death and that she left notes behind. This unseen entity learns of this information and corners Sarah into a pit of razor wire in the attic and kills her.

Suspicious of Sarah's disappearance, Suzy contacts Sarah's friend and former psychiatrist, Frank Mandel. He reveals that the school was established by a Helena Markos, who was allegedly a witch. Suzy also contacts a professor of the occult, Professor Milius regarding the hierarchy and power structures of a coven of witches. Suzy sneaks to Madame Blanc's office and is instantly reminding of Pat saying the words secret and iris the night she fled the school. She discovers a hidden door that opens by turning a blue iris on a mural in Blanc's office. Suzy enters the corridor and finds the academy's instructors, led by Madame Blanc, plotting her demise. After coming upon Sarah's corpse, she retreats to Helena Markos's bedroom where she is sleeping. She accidentally wakes her by breaking a decorative peacock with crystal plumage. Markos renders herself invisible and brings forth Sarah's mutilated corpse to murder her. When flashes of lightning inadvertently reveal Markos's silhouette, Suzy

stabs her in the neck with a part of the peacock. Markos's death causes the school to begin imploding. Suzy escapes into the rainy night as the school is consumed by fire.

It is clear from the plot synopsis that the film showcases heightened scenarios of drama and the fear of the unknown. *'Suspiria'* is highly regarded for taking the series of horrific events and communicating them in a visually stimulating way through the art direction of the film. The scenes seen in the film are gruesome and intense especially for the time. Dario Argento known by many as the 'Italian Hitchcock', has earned a reputation from a wealth of horror films particularly in from the 1970s and 1980s. His films often adopted this macabre aesthetic formed by the subgenre of horror 'Giallo'. However unlike like a typical Hollywood film, Argento utilizes the camera and set design to create a dreamlike and expressive horror with the gory features seen in the 'Giallo' movement.

Obscure as it is to use, Cinematography and Production Design to spark fear in an audience, it is very enticing. From modern day horror we see that production design is used to create a haunted house that contains scary, and dark attics or the old and uninviting cellars. Cinematography uses long shots from a distance to show another presence or quick cuts to catch the viewer by surprise. This is what Argento utilises in his films, but in a deliberately exaggerated way. He seems to be creating his horror by evoking the viewers worst nightmares and fears in a direct and aggressive way. Subtlety is not found in the art direction of this film and that is what the corpus will examine in depth.

Although it is not talked about at length within the main body of the thesis, the subgenre 'Giallo' greatly influences '*Suspiria*'s' macabre aesthetic. After examining the features of 'Giallo' it's logical for Argento to be guided by the style of these films. The 'Giallo' movement was established in the mid-to-late 1960s in Italian cinema. It peaked in popularity during the 1970s. It was considered a precursor to the later American slasher film genre on which it had a major influence. In the early research stages of this dissertation, a case study based on the first 'Giallo' film by Mario Bava called 'Blood and Black Lace' was very useful in giving more context to the movement and its features.

The plot of a Giallo film typically revolves around the efforts of an amateur or professional detective to solve a chain of grisly, sexually-charged murders committed in an urban setting by a faceless, black gloved killer whose methods are elaborate, whose motives are ambiguous, and whose identity is always in question. As in other types of Euro horror cinema, however, the story often takes a backseat to the style; the plot can frequently seem like little more than an excuse to present a series of extravagantly staged sequences showcasing the gory deaths of the killer's victim's, who are often beautiful young women.<sup>1</sup>

It is important to recognize that Argento's film history started in this movement and a lot of the ways that he creates horror within '*Suspiria*' is synonymous with the Giallo features.

This thesis will involve examining a space within the film per chapter that is influential and illustrates how Dario Argento uses these spaces to elicit fear in the viewer. This investigation will be undertaken in a few different ways. To clarify, the thesis will be discussing the literal form and design of the space and its influences as well as delving

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<sup>1</sup> Olney, Ian. Euro Horror, Indiana University Press, Bloomington & Indianapolis. USA. 2013. Prints.

deeper into the psychological teachings of Gaston Bachelard and Carl Jung regarding space and its meaning and the theory of hierarchy.

In Gaston Bachelard's book 'The Poetics of Space', he talks at length about the way people think about domestic space or 'the house' on a subconscious level and these ideals will be interlaced through each chapter of this dissertation as they relate to people's perception of safety and fear. The space that people inhabit is of great importance to storytelling because of the ways in which a structure can change the narrative. The primary function of a room, house or shelter is protection. Hence when one is entering a space, the human psyche expects it to be a place of protection. This opens the possibility to create our subliminal worst nightmare by subverting that idea and weaponising the space we think is going to protect us. This is what I will be investigating with regard to '*Suspiria*'. I feel it is important as well to consider this theory from Gaston Bachelard that discusses the house as a living entity with reference to '*Suspiria*'.

The image is created through co-operation between real and unreal, with the help of the functions of the real and the unreal. To use the implements of dialectical logic for studying, not this alternative, but this fusion, of opposites, would be quite useless, for they would produce the anatomy of a living thing. But if a house is a living value, it must integrate an element of unreality.<sup>2</sup>

The meld of reality and unreality are present throughout all the spaces in the film. This will be introduced in the following chapters. This work is important to reference as it speaks to a person's intrinsic fears.

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<sup>2</sup> Bachelard, Gaston. 'House and Universe' The poetics of space. Presses universitaires de France. 1957. Print. p. 59-59

To give a brief structure of the thesis outline, chapter one will consider the opening sequence and the set in which that takes place. The ten-minute bloodbath seen in the opening sequence of '*Suspiria*' is notable for its intense shock value. As said by Ben Cobb in an article entitled 'Dario Argento on his macabre masterpiece, '*Suspiria*'. ' He speaks to the effectiveness of the opening sequence and reference to the method of generating fear "it starts how most horror films end – out of control, blood-soaked, terrifying – and just keeps going, building and building, like a never-ending operatic crescendo, dragging the audience deeper into a maddening nightmare."<sup>3</sup> It's this idea of a crescendo of horror at the beginning of the film that's effective and this chapter will dissect and understand how Dario did this to create fear in the viewer. The sequence will look at under form, colour, cinematography, and design to grasp a strong sense of how Argento uses these elements to trigger fear.

Chapter two of my thesis moves you from the outside world into the heart of the dance academy, 'Tanz Akademie'. During research stages, I came upon the book 'Corridors: Passages of Modernity' by Robert Luckhurst. In the book, Luckhurst describes the corridors of '*Suspiria*' as an undisclosed extra agency, trembling on the edge of a revelation'<sup>4</sup>. This is the idea of something ominous hiding in the hallways. He

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<sup>3</sup>Cobb, Ben. DARIO ARGENTO ON HIS MACABRE MASTERPIECE, SUSPIRIA. Dazed Media Publishing. UK. 28th March 2018. Online. <https://www.anothermanmag.com/life-culture/10256/dario-argento-on-his-macabre-masterpiece-suspiria> (date accessed: 23/09/20).

<sup>4</sup> Luckhurst, Robert. Corridors: Passages of Modernity. Reaktion Books. May 2019.



also makes a point of explaining that the cinematography has aided the portrayal of this supernatural entity. 'The camera crawls through corridors in *Suspiria* that imply a malevolent machinic agency at work'<sup>5</sup>. As a result of this, chapter two will be focused on hallways, the role they play within this film and how they are effectively used to heighten the feeling of fear. To fully discuss this, the chapter will first look at the hallway as a broad term and how it is represented in our subconscious which links back to Bachelard's 'The Poetics of Space'. It will also look at the psychology of hallways as a liminal or transitional space and what that means from a psychological point of view. The chapter will then refine the topic to just the hallways within '*Suspiria*' and how they are used to horrify the audience. This will be debated under Cinematography and Décor. This chapter also examines how the hallways portrayed in '*Suspiria*' are linked to the historic expressionist horror films who also utilise the eerie hallway trope using '*The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari*' as the primary example.

Finally, the thesis' concluding chapter will be concentrated on the space that is regarded as the 'epicentre of evil' within the film. This is Madame Blanc's office. This space holds high importance in the film as a place of authority and is seen as a place of safety for a lot of the students. It is ironic that by the end of the film this idea seems to be turned on its head. The reason this is relevant to the thesis is because it shows another way in which Dario Argento uses a space to evoke fear in his audience. The space is masked as a formal but soft office where the students can talk to their concerned head mistress or be consoled. However, the students are unaware that this

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<sup>5</sup> Luckhurst, op.cit., p279-280

is the secret entrance to the lair of the witch's coven. This method of subversion will be discussed and analysed in chapter three with reference to the contrast in style from the office on display and the concealed lair underneath. This chapter also focuses on the architecture of the space which is feminine above and occultist beneath. This comparison and contrast will showcase how the method of subversion is utilised through the production design and is effective in creating and communicating terror to an audience.

## Chapter 1: The Opening Space of '*Suspiria*'

*'Suspiria'* explores a multitude of different spaces that not only stimulate the eye of the audience, but also exemplify the narrative with a wealth of imagery. In this chapter, I will be exploring the apartment building in the opening sequence of the film. The opening sequence had a very deliberate function, put plainly to unnerve, and agitate the audience. The set or space in which an audience is immersed initially points to the overall purpose of the film. Over the course of this chapter, this thesis argues that Dario Argento wanted to create a feeling of instinctive terror in his audience in the opening scenes of *'Suspiria'*. He did this by using the set and cinematography to persuade the viewer to fear this distorted world presented to them.

To clarify and to fully explain how the space of an apartment building incited such horror into an audience, it is important to give a brief description of the opening sequence of the film. In contrast to the typical trope of a horror film opening sequence, Argento delves straight into the tension and gore seen throughout the film. The film opens with the main character, Suzy Banyon's arrival to Freiburg Germany where she will be attending the prestigious dance school the *'Tanz Akademie'*. In true pathetic fallacy, there is a storm happening when Suzy is leaving the airport that continues for the rest of this sequence. When she arrives at the school no one will let her in. We encounter Pat, a young ballet student fleeing the school in fear. The camera follows Pat's movement that brings us to the exterior of an ornate apartment building. Here is where she is seeking refuge from the school. It is clear Pat is shaken from her experience. Moments following her arrival, the audience is aware things are not as

they should be. The soundtrack by 'Goblin' and the introduction of the heavily saturated primary colours contribute to the tension. An evil entity infiltrates the apartment and drags Pat to the roof, from the bathroom window. At this point, her friend is trying to seek help from neighbours. Having stabbed her multiple stabs, the evil being ties a noose around Pat's neck and throws her through a stained-glass window located just above the apartment lobby. This action not only kills Pat, but the broken shards of glass also hit Pat's friend, killing her instantly. The scene ends with a blood-soaked apartment lobby, two dead girls and a sense of terror for the audience. This thesis discusses how the production design of the space, and process in which it is shown (cinematography) elevates this feeling of fear.

## **1. 1 Theory of Space**

When thinking about the space created by Argento in this opening sequence, the path of research was directed towards the ideals of French philosopher Gaston Bachelard in his book 'The Poetics of Space'. Bachelard speaks about the concept of phenomenology relative to architecture in terms of lived experience in architectural places, with a large emphasis on the house. He explores on a deeper level the personal, emotional response to buildings in life and in literary works, in prose and in poetry with an in-depth look at spaces like attics and cellars and what they signify. It suggests that some of the architecture around us is coined in the inner psyche of the creator's mind. If this is correct what does that mean for some of the space seen in '*Suspiria*'? Bachelard talks at length about the intimacy of the house however in this quote he refers to the exaggeration used in dealing with the stories of Edgar Allen Poe and how effective that can be to showcase true and raw childhood fear.

Here, so far from reducing and explaining, so far from comparing, the phenomenologist will exaggerate his exaggeration, then when they read Poe's tales together, both the phenomenologist and the psychoanalyst will understand the value on this achievement, for these tales are the realisation of childhood fear<sup>6</sup>

The exaggeration of the opening sequence space of *'Suspiria'* makes a clear example of this idea for Bachelard, in terms of taking a home and warping the idea of safety and protection using weaponized form and colour to showcase something resembling a house of horror. This is achieved through form, colour, design, and cinematography.

## **1.2 Form, weaponising architecture**

When considering the form and construction of the set it is important to note the use of scale, and the use of contrast between the Interior and Exterior of the space. These aspects of the space are some of the most important factors that make the building feel so unconventional or uncanny from start to end, especially in terms of the lobby area. Firstly, the size of the interior lobby dominates in size in comparison to the actress playing 'Pat'. The actress performs within a looming and ominous set. Argento challenges our sense of reality with the size of this building. The towering ceilings and large architectural features make the actors look tiny. This can also be used a visual way of exhibiting Pat's state of mind at that time. Both the space and the actress are working together to showcase the emotion of being overwhelmed. (see Fig. 1)

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<sup>6</sup> Bachelard, op.cit., p. 56–56.

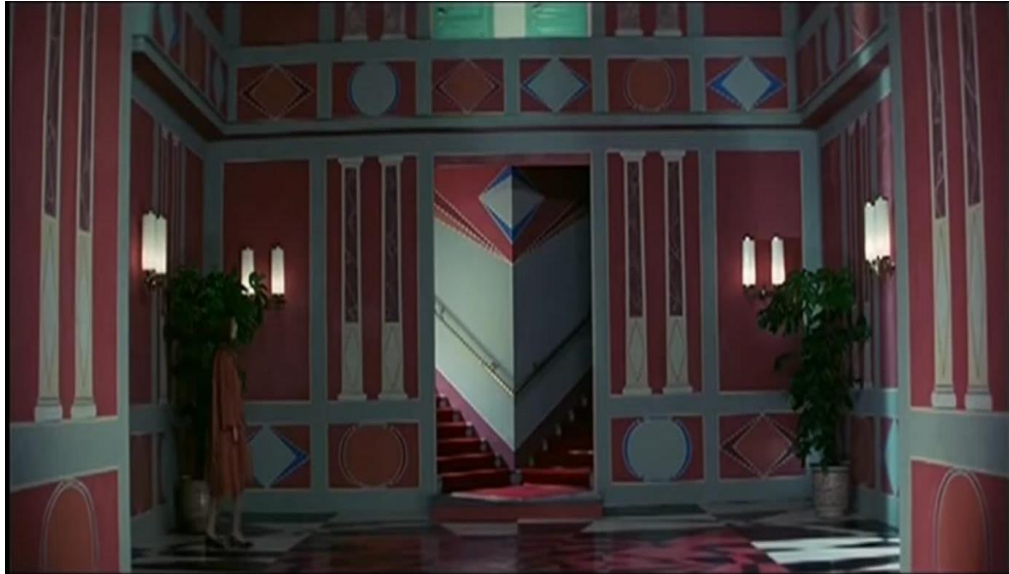


Fig. 1. *Suspiria*. Directed by Dario Argento. 1977. Still of opening sequence apartment foyer featuring Pat. (7:25).

This idea of huge scale sets is seen throughout the film and is part of Argento's bigger concept explains Giulio. L. Giusti in his in-depth analysis of '*Suspiria*' in relation to its ties with the Expressionist movement.

In the film, the exaggerated ceiling-height, and the vaulted doors of the interiors of the building constantly give the impression of dwarfing the actresses, as if they were being crushed by the massive environment. This impression does not occur at random, as the idea of reducing the actresses' size through architecture and décor was a factor of Argento's original conception <sup>7</sup>

One of the main reasons the sets were enlarged in '*Suspiria*' came from Dario Argento's collaboration with Daria Nicolodi the co-writer of film. According to the

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<sup>7</sup> Giusti. Giulio L. Expressionist Use of Colour Palette and Set Design in Dario Argento's *Suspiria* (1977). . *Cinergie – Il Cinema E Le Altre Arti*, vol. 2, no. 4, November 2013. Online. <https://cinergie.unibo.it/article/view/7375>

article 'The untold truth of Suspiria' by Andrew Ihla both took a lot of inspiration from 'surreal children's stories such as Alice in Wonderland' and both had 'originally envisioned the dance academy's students as very young girls. The pair was intrigued by the dramatic potential of placing children in such heightened mystical danger.'<sup>8</sup> This was rejected by the production companies, so they had the idea of not changing the story and making everything bigger to give the effect that these young women were still like children. Overall, the immense of the space contributes to an increasingly looming and fearful atmosphere. Another way of looking at this idea of creating fear is the contrast of inside and outside throughout this film. In this opening sequence a huge emphasis is put on the outside being dangerous and the inside being safe. This is not an uncommon idea according to Bachelard, it seems the main function of space lived in by people is this function of protection. This can be from nature's elements, other people who can cause harm or anything else that can cause damage.

All really inhabited space bears the essence of the notion of home. In the course of this work, we shall see that the imagination functions in this direction whenever the human being has found the slightest shelter: we shall see the imagination build walls and impalpable shadows, comforted itself with the illusion of protection<sup>9</sup>

It seems to be built into our unconscious that interiors and shelter are seen to be safe. Therefore, there is no surprise when Pat runs into the large apartment building which shields her from the rain and danger, we breathe a sigh of relief that she is safe. This

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<sup>8</sup> Ihla, Andrew. The untold truth of Suspiria. Looper, Static Media. USA. October 12th 2020. Online.  
<https://www.looper.com/135810/the-untold-truth-of-suspiria/#:~:text=A%20Gothic%20fairy%20tale,students%20as%20very%20young%20girls>. (date accessed: 04/09/20)

<sup>9</sup> Ibid, p. 41-41.

feeling does not last long, when she is later pulled back outside by the evil entity.

Figure (2-3) shows the contrast of the interior versus the exterior space



Fig. 2 Suspiria. Directed by Dario Argento. 1977. Still of opening apartment building exterior. (7:22).

This visually outlines how inside could be considered a safer place than outside. When this is not the case it sends the audience to another level of terror thinking that nowhere is safe from the supernatural danger.

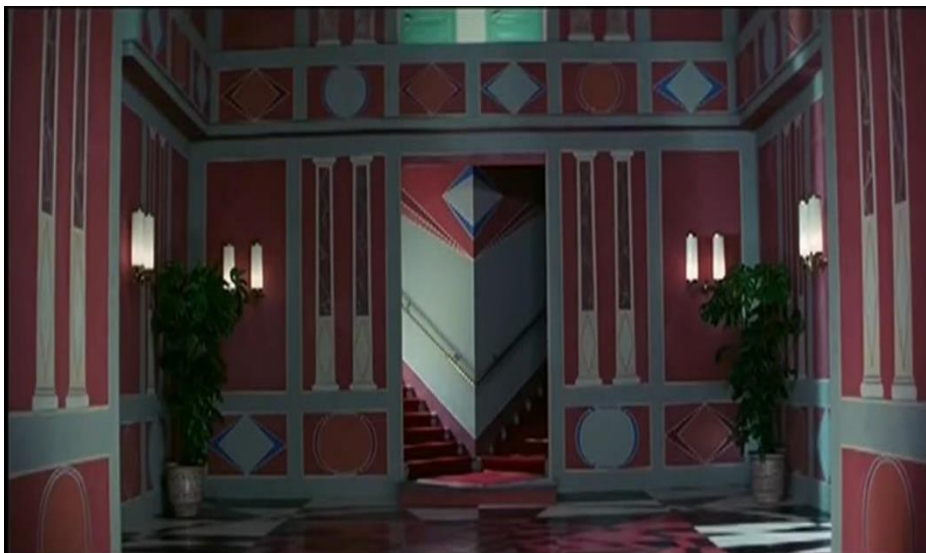


Fig. 3. Suspiria. Directed by Dario Argento. 1977. Still of opening sequence apartment foyer (7:23).



### 1.3 Colour, our perception of primary colours

This feeling of protection and safety is reflected in the use of colour in the opening sequence. In *'Suspiria'*, Argento used a very vibrant colour palette to create a visually shocking piece of work, from start to finish. The most predominant colours used in the film were the 3 primary colours. This idea of pure saturation of colours presented in a film was a visual device used by Argento in the past. It was best put in dissertation by Xiangyi Fu. 'Horror movie aesthetics: how colour, time, space, and sound elicit fear in an audience'. Fu explains that while is 'is a multi-coloured mastery. Colour has also been used to great effect in independently produced horror movies to give audiences hints of looming, dangerous, and creepy plot twists.'<sup>10</sup> This idea of a change in mood is often done with music a change in tempo or the introduction of a creepy song can suddenly change the mood of the scene. However, in this opening sequence it is done with the changing of colour. When you believe Pat is now safe in her friend's comfortable apartment decorated with pastel pink and greens you are relieved. Then the hue of the primary colours reappears and throwing one back into the warped and bizarre terror of the scene. In figures (4-5) you see a strong change in mood truly based on just a change of colours.

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<sup>10</sup> Fu, Xiangyi. Horror movie aesthetics: how colour, time,space and sound elicit fear in an audience. Northeastern University Boston, Massachusetts. USA. May 2016. Online.  
<https://repository.library.northeastern.edu/files/neu:cj82n5571/fulltext.pdf> (date accessed: 14/10/20)



Fig. 4. Suspiria. Directed by Dario Argento. 1977. Still of friend's pastel pink bathroom featuring Pat. (8:46).



Fig. 5. Suspiria. Directed by Dario Argento. 1977. Still of Pat's face being pushed against bathroom window in a bright blue hue. (11:46).

When looking at how much the colour affects the mood of this space, it is important to reference Luciano Tovoli, cinematographer of '*Suspiria*'. Tovoli was one of Dario Argento's biggest collaborators when it came to the colour palette of the film. Tovoli talks about the vibrant palette and how this sense of distorted reality and intense imagery can make the viewer feel frightened and uncomfortable without understanding why. It is almost built into the psyche.

A [horror] film brings to the surface some of the ancestral fears that we hide deep inside us, and *Suspiria* would not have had the same cathartic function if I had utilized the fullness and consolatory sweetness of the full colour spectrum. To immediately make *Suspiria* a total abstraction from what we call 'everyday reality,' I used the usually reassuring primary colours only in their purest essence, making them immediately, surprisingly violent, and provocative. This brings the audience into the world of *Suspiria*." In '*Suspiria*' the combination of light and colour takes an audience out of reality and to a place of genuine horror.<sup>11</sup>

Primary colours traditionally make us feel safe and secure as they are fondly remembered from childhood. Children are usually surrounded by bright vibrant colours to stimulate their growth and development. However, when they are used in horror, there is a false sense of security that becomes apparent. The use of familiarity an uncanny valley type effect, a feeling of uncertainty that has been passed down to us genetically.

These ideals come from philosopher Carl Jung under the method of 'Genetic Memory' in the part of your psyche known as the collective unconscious. While we are not aware of the collective unconscious, it can dictate how we act and feel. It makes sense

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<sup>11</sup> Williams, David E. *Suspiria: Terror in Technicolour*. ASC Publishing. USA. January 10th 2018. Online. <https://ascmag.com/articles/suspiria-terror-in-technicolor> . (date accessed: 10/08/20)

why this theory was used in conjunction with saturated colours because it taps into the primal subconscious of viewers.

#### **1.4 Cinematography, the view of the spectator**

The shooting style of the film works within the space and chooses what to show and how to show it to add to the overall fear factor of the piece. The mise en scene technique, foreshadowing, and unknown approach of where the camera will take you is very effective. In the 1985, documentary 'Argento's World of Horror' by Michele Soavi, we are graced with a lot of first-hand interview material from both Argento and Tivoli, who talk about some of the technique used within the camerawork. At one point the camera takes on the motion of the supernatural presence with a hovering or swooping motion. This was often done using large dollies, cranes and steel wires anchored to the ground to allow the camera to 'free fall 30/40 meters as if it were on a chair lift without breaks'<sup>12</sup> This motion replicating the supernatural as well the dreamscape style shots where the camera moves to unknown regions or watches characters from afar almost builds a rapport between the spectator and murderer. This is quite disconcerting, making the experience more frightening. The best example of this in the opening sequence. In the bathroom the viewer gets a sense Pat is being watched from outside the window. Figures (6-7) reveal the reverse shot from outside

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<sup>12</sup> Soavi, Michele. Argento's World of Horror. World Sales Compass International. USA. 1985. Online. [www.youtube.com/watch?v=ZQSanIfmEck&feature=emb\\_title](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ZQSanIfmEck&feature=emb_title). (date accessed: 2/11/20 ).

bathroom and from inside the bathroom. It also clearly displays the idea of the spectator looking through the window with the viewpoint of the supernatural being.



Fig. 6. *Suspiria*. Directed by Dario Argento. 1977. Still from outside the friend's bathroom window featuring Pat inside. (10:17).

This narrative is shown through the reverse shots from inside and outside, as well as the dramatic zoom in to create drama.



Fig. 7. *Suspiria*. Directed by Dario Argento. 1977. Still of the bathroom window looking out. (9:39).

In terms of mise en scene or foreshadowing two examples are very apparent in the apartment space. In Figure 8-11 its clear the stain glass window in a visual device or tool from the chronological events that take place involving the window as seen below. Firstly, upon entering the space a shot lingers on a stained-glass ceiling window in the colours red, yellow, and blue



Fig. 8. Figure 8. Suspiria. Directed by Dario Argento. 1977. Still of the stained-glass window in the apartment building foyer. (7:29).

It is an unusual shot to rest upon if you do not know what is to come. Ultimately this is the window Pat is thrown through ending both her life and that of her friend's. It is a climactic moment to hang on to.



Fig. 9. Suspiria. Directed by Dario Argento. 1977. Still of Pat lying on the stained-glass window outside in pain. (12:50).



Fig. 10. Suspiria. Directed by Dario Argento. 1977. Still of Pat's head bursting through the stained-glass window in the apartment building foyer. (13:15).





Fig. 11. *Suspiria*. Directed by Dario Argento. 1977. Still of Pat's dead friends with pieces of the broken stained-glass window stuck in her. (14:04).

This style of mise en scene is synonymous with the German expressionism films from the 1920's-30's. Most accounts of '*Suspiria*' agree there is an influence from German expressionism film's such as '*Nosferatu*' and '*The Cabinet of Dr Caligari*'. A detailed account noted by Giusti above leads me a perfect example of this visual qualities being re-created by Argento. Giusti recounts "...some of the visual qualities of cinematography and mise-en-scene, such as the manipulation of the film stock, the stark contrasts of light and shadow, and the totally artificial and stylized sets, interact graphically to create an overall composition with the characters' states of the body and the soul."<sup>13</sup> It is clear these are the visual tropes of some of the first influential horror films. It is consistent for Argento to make the choice to pay homage to these

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<sup>13</sup> Giusti. op. cit., p.154.



films whilst also using their successful visual devices to create more intense fear in his film.

### **1.5 Design , the exaggeration of Art Deco and Art Nouveau**

When exploring the pictorial imagery and style showcased in the apartment building of the opening sequence there is a quote from Gaston Bachelard which makes the design choices clear. It speaks to the vision of Dario Argento in collaboration with production designer Giuseppe Bassan. ‘there exists for each one of us and oneiric house, house of dream- memory, that is lost in the shadow of a beyond of the real past’ <sup>14</sup>

The idea of the “Oneiric House” is a feature of our unconscious that everyone has however people have different experiences with it. It seems fair to assume that both Dario Argento and Giuseppe Bassan would have grown up around the design features of Art Nouveau and Art Deco in Europe therefore it makes sense that they would draw from these art movements for design influence. Although the focus for this chapter is on Art Deco as the building is heavily influence by this style.

The Art Deco movement originates from the 1920’s, coming after the curvilinear work of the Art Nouveau Era. Art Deco was all about modernity and sleek style design qualities. With reference to Britannica

The distinguishing features of the style are simple, clean shapes, often with a “streamlined” look; ornament that is geometric or stylized from representational forms; and unusually varied, often expensive materials, which frequently include man-made substances (plastics, especially Bakelite; vita-

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<sup>14</sup> Bachelard. ‘The House. From Cellar to Garret. The Significance of the Hut’. op.cit., p. 37-37

glass; and ferro concrete) in addition to natural ones (jade, silver, ivory, obsidian, chrome, and rock crystal).<sup>15</sup>

There is an alternation of Art Deco and Art Nouveau within the Tanz Akademie however this space is the predominantly Art Deco with the exception of the ornate elevator. This may be due to the idea that Pats friend lives in a different area of Freiburg? Giusti reference's the contrast within the building also, in his work.

The alternation of Art Deco and Art Nouveau that is typical of the Tanz Akademie is also present in the building where Pat and her friend are brutally murdered. The interiors of the building are emblematic of the Art Deco movement, characterised by geometric shapes arranged with symmetrical elegance and alternating orange and white the lift has Art Nouveau decoration, with curvilinear lines for ostentatious refinement<sup>16</sup>

In Fig. 12-13 the Art Deco stylised lobby is displayed with a look at the older ornate style lift.



Fig. 12. *Suspiria*. Directed by Dario Argento. 1977. Still the Art Deco style elevator in the apartment building foyer featuring Pat. (7:36).

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<sup>15</sup> The Editors of Encyclopædia Britannica. "Art Deco." Encyclopædia Britannica, Encyclopædia Britannica, Inc. 28 May 2020. Online. [www.britannica.com/art/Art-Deco](http://www.britannica.com/art/Art-Deco). (date accessed: )

<sup>16</sup>Giusti. op.cit., p.162



Fig. 13. *Suspiria*. Directed by Dario Argento. 1977. Still the Art Nouveau style floor in the apartment building foyer featuring Pat's friend. (13:20).

Anthony Vidler's definition of architecture and décor as a "living organism", from Vitruvius to the present, includes the 'notion of the building as a body of some kind, the idea that the building embodies states of the body and states of the mind that are based on bodily sensation, and the sense that the environment is endowed with bodily or organic characteristics'<sup>17</sup>. This is an interesting definition in terms of the design for '*Suspiria*' from two reasons. Firstly, it can explain the expressive design features for the viewer. Is this meant to mirror the state of mind of the characters or the supernatural. If we are unsure, it is not surprising the décor can be disorientating and absurd. It would represent the events taking place within the space. Secondly it seems to give the mural seen in the bathroom of the space more meaning. Research

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<sup>17</sup> Vidler, Anthony. *The Architectural Uncanny: Essays in the Modern Unhomely*. MIT Press Ltd. USA. 1994.

shows that this references the work of Dutch graphic designer, M.C Escher (1898-1972). The wall mural depicts the scene of one of his works known as 'Sky and Water'. This is a reference to Escher's mature period starting in approximately 1937. Although commended as an artist, Escher's work is referenced in many different sectors such as mathematics and psychology.

The function of transition between the rational and the supernatural is also applicable to Argento's reference to Escher's Sky and Water (1938) in the bathroom of Pat's friend. In Escher's Sky and Water, horizontal series of fish and birds are fitting into each other like the pieces of a jigsaw puzzle and the pictorial shapes are alternately foreground or background, depending on whether the eye concentrates on light or dark elements. As the fish progress upward and the birds downward, they gradually lose their shapes to become a uniform background of sky and water, respectively. This gradual loss of shape indicates the futility of objective reality, as everything may change before our eyes and bring us to an indiscernible world of fantasy.<sup>18</sup>

It is clear from the description given by Giusti there is much more to the lithograph than what it depicts, making it another mise en scene visual trope of the film. Figure 14 displays the woodcut 'Sky and Water' by MC Escher and Figure 15 displays its depiction in '*Suspiria*'.

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<sup>18</sup> Giusti. op.cit., p.162.

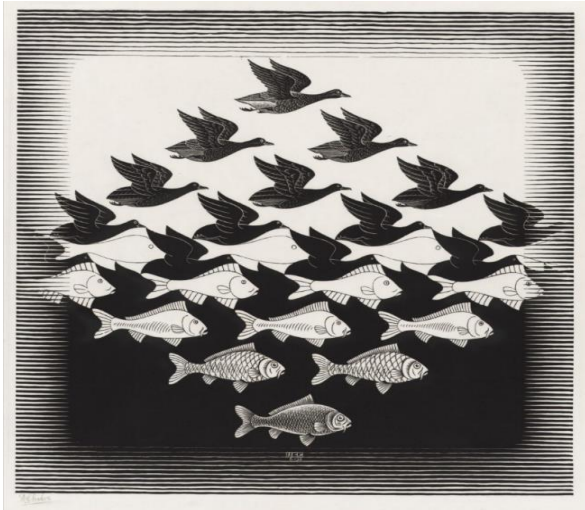


Fig.14. MC. Escher. Sky and Water. Woodcut. 1938



Fig. 15. *Suspiria*. Directed by Dario Argento. 1977. Still of the Escher inspired design in the friend's bathroom featuring Pat. (8:37).

After discussing in detail, the design elements with '*Suspiria*' its clear the décor adds to this idea of horror in a similar sense to how the colour does. When recalling your home and its memories you can picture decorative elements. Taking these elements and visceral experience with 'jigsaw corridors, rainbow-stained glass, geometric

abstractions...golds and secretive flower designs they virtually screamed as loudly as the ballerinas under stress'<sup>19</sup>

*'Suspiria'* by Dario Argento is a modern-day cult classic synonymous with eccentric colour, dizzying cinematography, and preposterous set design, all with the goal to wreak havoc on its audience.

This Chapter analysed the space in which the opening gory sequence takes place. It discusses how the visual elements and process of displaying these elements can incite more fear and horror in the viewer. It was argued under the terms of form, colour, cinematography, and design with a parallel discussion on the theory of poetic space. This is a perfect example of taking a space and turning it into a nightmare, which sets up a lovely transition into the belly of the beast that is the *'Tanz Akademie'*.

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<sup>19</sup> Jones, Alan. "Arabesque of Horror: The Legacy of Dario Argento's *'Suspiria'*." MUBI, 13 Nov. 2018, [mubi.com/notebook/posts/arabesque-of-horror-the-legacy-of-dario-argento-s-suspiria](https://mubi.com/notebook/posts/arabesque-of-horror-the-legacy-of-dario-argento-s-suspiria).

## **Chapter 2: Hallways within the Tanz Akademie**

After the first sequence the stories focus shifts primarily to the location of the Tanz Akademie. This dance school has an array of spaces one could examine with reference to Dario Argento's methodology to evoke fear. This chapter will focus on some of the most memorable imagery within the film which are the shots of the long jarring hallways within the school. These bizarre hallways guide the students around the school of terror. The hallways have an important function from a practical architectural perspective. They also served to navigates the story. Similarly, to the spaces described in Chapter 1, The Tanz Akademie utilises the same unconventional colour palette, weaponised set design, and distorted camera movements with the intention of terrifying within the viewer. These hallways are the perfect portrayal of how Dario Argento set this school up to have danger lurking around every corner of the 'Tanz Akademie.' This chapter will be discussing two hallways within the dance school. The hallways on the ground floor and the hallway on the second floor. At first It seemed only relevant to refer to the ground floor hallway but after re-watching the death scene of 'Sarah' (friend of Suzy) it was the role of the upstairs hallway as a guiding space was significant. These hallways will be explored under the ideals of primary function, style, and décor, and how they were utilised narratively. This chapter will also discuss the function of hallways within the film.

## 2.1 The meaning and main function of the hallway

According to Collins dictionary “A hallway in a building is a long passage with doors into rooms on both sides of it.”<sup>20</sup> The primary function of the hallway is a space that moves a person through a home from one space to another with ease. These spaces are usually long and narrow and lined with doors. The two hallways in *‘Suspiria’* mirror this common imagery. The definition stated above is the function of the space in a literal language however in a figurative language the function of the hallway can be perceived a little differently. Figuratively speaking, the hallway is closely associated with the development of time as cited in *Haunted Halls: Ghostlore of American College Campuses* by Elizabeth Tucker.

Corridors symbolize transition passage from one place or state of being to another. In Children’s scary stories and horror movies such as *‘The Shining’* (1980), chases through hallways offer some of the most suspenseful moments<sup>21</sup>

As Tucker states, this idea of transition related to the space is widely recounted in folklore and films worldwide. The concept is what Dario Argento uses to advance the narrative of *‘Suspiria’*.

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<sup>20</sup> The Editors of Collins English Dictionary. Hallway Definition and Meaning: Collins English Dictionary, HarperCollins Publishers Ltd. UK. 2020. Online. [www.collinsdictionary.com/dictionary/english/hallway](http://www.collinsdictionary.com/dictionary/english/hallway). (date accessed: 23/10/20)

<sup>21</sup> Tucker, Elizabeth. *Haunted Halls: Ghostlore of American College Campuses*. University Press of Mississippi. USA. 2007. Print. pp. 104–104.



## 2.2 Link with Gaston Bachelard's work (The Poetics of Space)

In the previous chapter, the ideas and teaching of Gaston Bachelard have been cited when understanding and discussing space and the feeling it brings our subconscious. However, when on the subject of hallways or corridors, Bachelard does not discuss their psychological link to liminality. Consequently, it poses the challenge of understanding the relevance of the hallways within the Tanz Akademie. This question encouraged a new channel of research to open, looking at the ominous spaces of the domestic setting. For Bachelard, the attic and cellar are considered the scariest places within the home mostly due to lack of light “in the attic, the days experiences can always efface the fears of night. In the cellar, darkness prevails both day and night and even when we are carrying a lighted candle, we see shadows dancing on the dark walls”<sup>22</sup>. The link to the cellar and attic as a trope for fear and horror in the subconscious of the human mind is utilized constantly by horror films like ‘Silence of the lambs’ (1991) and ‘Sinister’ (2012) within the horror genre today. However, this quotes from James Wan, the esteemed creator of ‘the Conjuring’ and ‘Saw’ franchises carries significance in the argument of this chapter.

“When you create those characters that people love and care about and put them in a dark hallway, already the audience is on edge and they feel empathy for that character”<sup>23</sup>. This is a likely parallel to the thinking of Dario Argento in ‘*Suspiria*’.

Especially in terms of the upstairs hallway in which we see the horrible demise of the

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<sup>22</sup> Bachelard, *op.cit.*, p. 40-40

<sup>23</sup> Patterson, Cleaver. “The Hallway and Landing.” *Don't Go Upstairs! a Room-by-Room Tour of the House in Horror Movies*. McFarland & Company Inc. USA. 2020. Print. pp. 9–9.

sacrificial lamb, Sarah. Although the hallway gives the impression of monotony and being non-threatening. This long repetitive space lead's people to far darker areas of the Akademie.

### 2.3 Cinematography Aid in Hallways

The corridors in '*Suspiria*' are used to guide the girls to rooms of terror while also creating a sense of fear and suspense. The feature of suspense is used frequently when dealing with hallways particularly using the cinematography as Luckhurst explains below.

The corridor is exploited in horror film because as the camera advances through its restrictive space, it multiplies the anticipatory fear from the off-screen space of the doorways and voids that it passes. Dario Argento's *Suspiria* (1977) uses odd pauses and camera drifts from unmotivated points of view in the highly stylized corridors and secret passageways in the space of the dance academy to generate suspense.<sup>24</sup> (See Figure 16-17)



Fig. 16 *Suspiria*. Directed by Dario Argento. 1977. Still of the hallway leading to the dance hall.(26.03)

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<sup>24</sup> Luckhurst, op.cit., P274-274



Fig.17. *Suspiria*. Directed by Dario Argento. 1977. Still of the hallway leading to the dance hall. Zoom shot. (26.06)

This style of shooting has also been used in used the multitude of hallways to incite fear in the audience of *'The Shining'* by Stanley Kubrick. Like Kubrick film, the halls of *'Suspiria'* have lots of twists and turns in them which Dario Argento uses to his advantage. For example, it allows things to advance or withdraw ominously from the viewer. This is especially seen in the underground hallway of the witches' lair that we will discuss in the next chapter. These sinister camera movements along with the cinematography of the spectator viewpoint seen throughout the film heightening our intrinsic fear.

## 2.4 The Halls connection with Expressionist Films

There have been many debates linking Dario Argento's *'Suspiria'* to the work of Expressionist filmmakers. The elements of sizable oneiric set pieces, harsh shadows, unorthodox lighting, and abstracted visuals used in these expressionist films are very closely connected to the work showcased within *'Suspiria'*. Similarities can be made between *'Suspiria'* and many German Expressionist films however this section will strictly be discussing *'Cabinet of Dr. Caligari'* by Robert Wiene. Firstly, Luckhurst

discusses the relevance of the hall within this expressionist film and how this is where the trope of the hall within horror stems from. “The corridor is even more important in the visual economy of the horror film, where the corridor shot has become a stock trope since at least the claustrophobic Expressionist spaces of *The Cabinet of Dr Caligari* (1920)”<sup>25</sup> (see Figure 18)



Fig. 18. *Cabinet of Dr. Caligari*. Directed by Robert Wiene. 1920. Still of the abstracted hallway. (26.43)

Architecturally, the hallways within the Tanz Akademie seen in *'Suspiria'* accurately fits the description from the sets of German Expressionism. These warped surroundings and abstracted forms seen in *'The Cabinet of Dr Caligari'* have a way of creating a sense of an alternate reality as if you have been transported to another world.

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<sup>25</sup> Luckhurst, op.cit., p273-273

... the small town where Wiene's story takes place is rendered through unrealistically distorted and exaggerated architectural shapes and through a series of curving, oblique, and rectilinear lines converging across an undefined expanse toward the background, for the expressionist purposes of reproducing the dreamlike atmosphere seen through the eyes of a madman<sup>26</sup>

This idea of escapism and lack of reality is precisely what Argento emulates in the architecture seen in the corridors. It also weaponizes the space surrounding the actresses to make them look smaller. This idea of reducing the actresses' size through architecture and décor was a factor of Argento's original conception. This relates back to the concept that the girls in the school would be children. As Giusti recounts the best example of this is from the downstairs hallway where the door handles have been raised to make Suzy look much smaller. (see Figure 19)



Fig.19. *Suspiria*. Directed by Dario Argento. 1977. Still of Suzy's first time walking down the hall for Dance Class, close-up on door handle. (26.30).

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<sup>26</sup>Bordwell, David/Thompson, Kristin. *Film Art: An Introduction*, eighth edition. The McGrawHill Companies. New York, USA. 2008. Print. p. 448.

*'Suspiria's'* original setting was to be a children's school. Argento eventually changed the script after an argument with his Italian distributor however Argento managed to keep the childlike atmosphere through production design. For example, the door handles are placed higher than normal, as if the story were told from the child's perspective.

## 2.5 Décor of the hallways

The style and décor used in the hallways portrays the same style seen throughout the other areas within the school. This style is an 'Art Nouveau' or 'Jugendstil' style and 'Art Deco'. The conical shaped pillars and curvilinear shaped doors (Fig.20) show the school in a regal but bizarre manner.



Fig.20. *Suspiria*. Directed by Dario Argento. 1977. Still of the downstairs hallway in the Tanz Akademie featuring Suzy. 26.15

In Figure 20, A stained-glass window is shown which is quintessential to the Art Deco movement. Like the apartment building discussed in the first chapter we see a meld of artistic influence in these hallways used to distract and lead the students to danger. These features of an overall saturated colour palette and dramatic Jugendstil style are prevalent throughout the design of the Tanz Akademie.



Fig. 21. *Suspiria*. Directed by Dario Argento. 1977. Still of the upstairs hallway in the Tanz Akademie featuring Suzy and a servant. (01.16.58)

### **Chapter 3: Madame Le Blanc's office.**

For my final chapter of this thesis, I will be analysing the office of Madame Blanc (the headmistress) within the Tanz Akademie. I will be illustrating how Dario Argento uses this elaborately designed space to create a zone of terror, through the technique of subversion. On the surface, Madame Blanc's office is a beautifully decorated feminine space that is enticing to the audience and the students at the dance school. However, it is revealed in the climax of the film that this office space has been the epicentre of evil within the school. This visual foreshadowing is a very effective horror element within the film that I would like to discuss more in depth.

#### **3.1. Space masked as a place of protection**

This space is first seen in the film after the arrival of the maggots in the attic. Madame Blanc along with Miss Tanner called a meeting in the office with the girls to shed a light on the situation and makes it clear that they have everything under control. This portrays Madame Blanc's office as a safe space where one can go if there is something wrong. The idea of safety is embodied by the décor and mood of the room. It is clear from this scene that the space is exuding a light and airy sentiment. In 'The Poetics of Space' Bachelard talks about the need to link a house and certain spaces to protection because it makes us feel safe. When Bachelard recounts "we comfort ourselves by reliving memories of protection"<sup>27</sup> there is a correlation between that statement and

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<sup>27</sup> Bachelard, op.cit., p. 28-28



the way the office of Madame Blanc is presented to us. The idea of the soft, ladylike room in conjunction with Madame Blanc's speech about keeping the girls safe could only leave both the audience and the girls to believe this space was a haven of comfort and protection. In Figure 22, Madame Blanc is addressing the group of girls from her desk.



Fig.22. *Suspiria*. Directed by Dario Argento. 1977. Still of Madame Blanc addressing the students in her office (high angle). (36.41).

The shot is set up to display the room from a higher angle. This angle gives a clear view of the ornate furniture and the extravagant artwork as well as creating a round room sense of space. The room has been lit in a soft natural style light to show off a more pastel colour palette that is uncommon in the décor of the Tanz Akademie itself. There is also an emphasis put on greenery and nature in the room. These features of comfort, femininity and nature are elements of a space that would put a person at ease. Effectively Dario Argento created this space to be remembered as a place of

safety to then turn it on its head later by revealing it to be the centre of all evil, leaving the spectator scared and in awe of the illusion of our own pre-conceived ideas.

### 3.2. Style of space (Jugendstil)

Similarly, to all the spaces we have looked at thus far, Madame Blanc's office is no different in terms of the semi-abstracted style that has been adopted throughout the whole of *'Suspiria'*. The décor seen in Madame Blanc's office is ostentatious and derived from the 'Art Nouveau' movement. This curvilinear style is inspired by Jugendstil, an art movement popular in Germany.

Jugendstil, artistic style that arose in Germany about the mid-1890s and continued through the first decade of the 20th century, deriving its name from the Munich magazine *Die Jugend* ("Youth"), which featured Art Nouveau designs. Two phases can be discerned in Jugendstil: an early one, before 1900, that is mainly floral in character, rooted in English Art Nouveau and Japanese applied arts and prints; and a later, more abstract phase, growing out of the Viennese work of the Belgian born architect and designer<sup>28</sup>

Jugendstil style architecture and design is displayed a throughout the Tanz Akademie.

It is appropriate that this same style would continue in the main office of the dance school. In Figure 23 and 24 below you can see a multitude of Jugendstil style pieces, including Madame Blanc's desk and the pink couch. These paired with the highly stylised screens and lamp with an abundance of floral elements creates a complete Art Nouveau tableau.

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<sup>28</sup> Nirala, Satyavrat. Jugendstil, Artistic style, Encyclopædia Britannica, Encyclopædia Britannica, Inc. Nov 18, 2015. Online. <https://www.britannica.com/art/Jugendstil> (date accessed: 11/10/20 )



Fig. 23. *Suspiria*. Directed by Dario Argento. 1977. Still of Madame Blanc addressing the students in her office, leaning on her desk. (36.52).



Fig. 24. *Suspiria*. Directed by Dario Argento. 1977. Still of Suzy sitting on a pink couch amongst other students in Madame Blanc's office. (36.50).

Argento uses Aubrey Beardsley style illustrations on the screens in Madame Blanc's office as an homage to the artist as cited by Giusti in his dissertation "...there are a series of oval pictures on both sides, whose design recalls Beardsley's style"<sup>29</sup>. This type of mise en scene visual trope as seen below in Figure 25 seems to enhance the aesthetic and characterise the world in the art Nouveau style even if it is abstracted.



Fig.25. *Suspiria*. Directed by Dario Argento. 1977. Still of the students in Madame Blanc's office. (37.23).

The definition of protection is reflected by the room's atmosphere and this is as a result of the effeminate style of Jugendstil. Its additive and elaborate features amplify this sense of comfort in feminine spaces.

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<sup>29</sup> Giusti. op.cit., p159-159

### 3.3 The mural or the key

Having expanded on the style of the room, one element that was not discussed was the mural depicted on the back wall on the office. (Figure 26)



Fig.26. Suspiria. Directed by Dario Argento. 1977. Still of Madame Blanc talking to Suzy in her office, also featuring a servant. (56.06).

This mural is so complex and intriguing to look at, it is almost as if you take it at face value. Gaston Bachelard discusses how something that is visually pleasing can hide or distract from the space's familiarity or function. Over picturesqueness in a house can conceal its intimacy<sup>30</sup>

This remark is highly accurate in terms of Madame Blanc's office. The excessive decor and overwhelming style of the room is concealing a big secret underneath. The lair of the teachers lies beneath her office and the complex mural on the wall acts like the

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<sup>30</sup> Bachelard, op.cit., p. 34-34



gate to the with a hidden door. This is the turning point when this beautiful feminine room is turned on its head and subverted into something much more sinister. The mural fits the aesthetic of Jugendstil. It is also indicative of these two sources:

'Relativity' by Mc Escher (Figure 27)

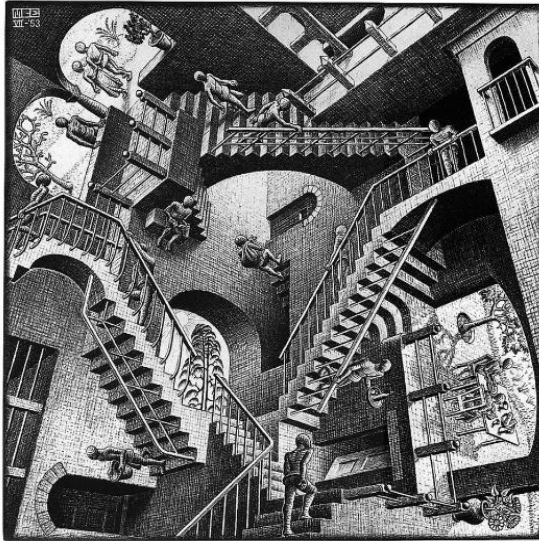


Fig. 27. Escher. M. 'Relativity'. Lithograph Print. 1953

and the illustration of the town depiction in Wiene's '*The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari*'

(Figure 28)

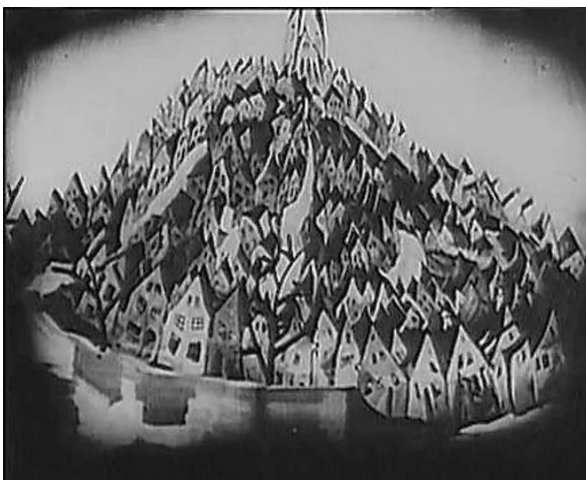


Fig. 28. Cabinet of Dr. Caligari. Directed by Robert Wiene. 1920. Still of the townscape.

These two examples of imagery make sense as Dario Argento has already sampled Mc Escher's work in the opening sequence of *'Suspiria'* and there is a lot of philosophy behind the work that relates to the film as explained by Giusti in his dissertation.

The fantasy depicted in the central wall of Madame Blanc's studio is clearly inspired by Escher's lithograph *Relativity*. In *Relativity*, Escher portrays a world in which the normal law of gravity does not apply. In it, there are depicted three stairways that connect with each other... Likewise, the internal structure of the Tanz Akademie resumes the composition and intersection of lines of the lithograph, as it is represented by a repetitive and stratified coexistence of corridors and stairs that make it look like a Chinese box<sup>31</sup>.

As well as this, the set design of *'Suspiria'* was influenced by the set design of German Expressionist films such as *'Cabinet of Dr. Caligari'*. The familiarity between the two cityscapes is remarked by Kelsey Bosch in a column for Walker Art:

"A notable similarity between both films is the cityscape mural in Madame Blanc's office, which appears very similar in geography and perspective to the town of Hostenwall in *The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari*. It is through this wall that Suzy discovers the horrific truth behind a series of murders and within the walls of Hostenwall that Francis witnesses Dr. Caligari's gruesome spectacle."<sup>32</sup>

The key to unlocking the door is hidden in the innovative illustration design that incorporates three irises' in the primary colours into the design to fit the narrative. The blue iris is what conceals the lair from the unsuspecting students at the dance school. Giusti explains how this idea of the primary colours used for the irises was

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<sup>31</sup> Giusti, op.cit., p160-160

<sup>32</sup> Bosch, Kelsey. Dario Argento's *Suspiria*: Darkness, Tears, and Sighs. Walker Art Centre. USA. 26th October 2018. Online. <https://walkerart.org/magazine/dario-argento-luca-guadagnino-suspiria> (date accessed:09/11/20)

carried through the film as a motif of the witches and ended up being the ultimate key to the evil with the Tanz Akademie.

...enables her to trace a hidden door in the wall by turning the blue iris which is in relief. Beyond, she sees a secret lair where a coven of witches is gathered...The three irises dietetically convey the presence of the evil triad, Markos, Blanc, and Tanner, as they evoke the cult-like experiences the coven of witches share by echoing the blue-red-yellow scale of the entire film.<sup>33</sup>

This mural is the point in which the secret hidden in beauty is unleashed and one can now see the hidden space within the office.

### **3.4. The reveal of the evil epicentre**

The lair of the witches is one of the more innovative design spaces because of the stark contrast to the office of Madame Blanc's which conceals this space. There is nothing soft and feminine about this space. It is dark and otherworldly. Although the décor of the space itself does bring us to the conclusion that this is not a safe space. The lair is located underground in the cellar/basement. As previously mentioned in chapter 2, this location is a typical trope of an evil place within the home and in countless horror films. space. The cellar is always dark, and this leaves our unconscious to wonders what is lurking in the shadows that we cannot see. Even with lights now illuminating the space in modern day, one's mind still feels a spark of fear when in this kind of space. Bachelard cites this idea of being unable to change the way we perceive the cellar "In our civilisation, which has the same light everywhere, and

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<sup>33</sup> Giusti. op.cit., p 157-157.



puts electricity in its cellars, we no longer go to the cellar carrying a candle, but the unconscious cannot be civilised. it takes a candle when it goes to the cellar”<sup>34</sup>

Upon Suzy’s discovery of the lair, she encounters large heavy curtains which block out any light. This sense of darkness matches the heightened sense of dread, as Suzy ventures through the curtains. This idea of darkness inciting fear is deep in the subconscious and Argento has created this space to illustrate to the audience that evil is present here. Past the curtains there is a long black hallway inscribed with gold lettering. This lettering shown in (Fig. 29) looks to be Latin and gives the impression the lair has been here for centuries.



Fig.29. Suspiria. Directed by Dario Argento. 1977. Still of the underground tunnel to the witch’s lair. (01.28.19)

The walls of this tunnel are much more gothic and add to the sinister atmosphere of the space. At the end of this hallway, through a doorway left ajar the teachers are

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<sup>34</sup> Bachelard, op.cit., p. 41-41

discussing Suzy and how to get rid of her. This discussion is led by Madame Blanc who is very erratic. A gasp is heard in the hall when Suzy discovers the mutilated body of Sarah and she hides in a nearby room. This room demonstrates a real sense of the occult and mystic with its architecture and décor.

In Lindsey Hallam's dissertation, regarding the gothic occult showcased in Dario Argento's three mother's trilogy she observes that "The superficial narrative appears to conform to the status quo, while the mise-en-scene tells a different story. Argento draws on the tradition of Western Esotericism and incorporates it into the cinematic form, creating films that harness alchemical powers through their use of design and décor, as well as constitutive elements such as light, colour, sound, and celluloid."<sup>35</sup>

.Taking this in account with regard to '*Suspiria*' these elements of mise en scene and alchemy are used dramatically in this space. The First view of the room is seen in Figure 30.

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<sup>35</sup> Hallam, Lindsey. ('Why are there always three?': The Gothic Occult in Dario Argento's Three Mothers Trilogy. University of East London. UK. Date unclear. Online. [https://repository.uel.ac.uk/download/6c9180de92c5edb96821b5051acbe4c89b128f69ca712927ade60500627c1a49/287569/L.%20Hallam\\_Why%20Are%20There%20Always%20Three.pdf](https://repository.uel.ac.uk/download/6c9180de92c5edb96821b5051acbe4c89b128f69ca712927ade60500627c1a49/287569/L.%20Hallam_Why%20Are%20There%20Always%20Three.pdf) (date accessed: 18/11/20)



Fig.30. Suspiria. Directed by Dario Argento. 1977. Still of entering Helena Markos' room in the lair, showcasing an ornate peacock. (01.31.57)

The first thing one's attention is drawn to is the elaborate Peacock statue surrounded by marble balls and crystals. This still fits the overall Jugendstil style of the dance school itself by this looks very luxurious like a gift offered to the dead. On the other side of the room seen in Figure 31 The depiction of the Third eye or the all-seeing eye is hung on the wall. This is a very common emblem in the portrayal of the occult and dark magic.



Fig. 31. Suspiria. Directed by Dario Argento. 1977. Still of Helena Markos' room, showcasing an occult imagery, featuring Helena Markos in bed. (01.32.03).

On either side of the Third eye, we see two conical forms on the wall. These are derived from the architecture ideals of Rudolf Steiner (27 February 1861-March 1925), The founder of an esoteric spiritual movement, anthroposophy.

Steiner sought to use architecture as a form through which one could connect with the spiritual realm, taking great inspiration from the Baroque period with its use of overlapping geometric shapes and the mixing of concave and convex forms that suggested dynamic movement.<sup>36</sup>

Argento referred to his experience of learning about the work of Steiner when visiting “the Capitals of Magic. I was in Lyon, Prague, and Turin [...] I was in the so-called ‘Magical Triangle’, which is the point in the middle where Switzerland, France, and Germany, where these three countries meet each other. Near this point Rudolf Steiner founded his anthroposophical community and even today this University, his cathedral, and the followers of this Sect and beliefs exist. I’m not joking. We know that when one talks about witches [...] we discover that people have been studying this subject for centuries so there is very little to joke about. It’s something that exists.”<sup>37</sup>.

Using his ideas and teaching on architecture and the occult this lair was formed.

As the film progresses the audience is met with the decaying body of the infamous Helena Markos the old head mistress who was thought to be dead but is instead lives in the lair. She is presented behind layers of voile in a silhouette (Figure 32) which enhances the tensions as we fear what is unknown to us.

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<sup>36</sup> Hallam, op.cit., p. 11-11

<sup>37</sup> Hallam, Lindsay. “‘Why Are There Always Three?’: The Gothic Occult in Dario Argento’s Three Mothers Trilogy.” *Journal of Italian Cinema & Media Studies*, vol. 5, no. 2, 2017, pp. 211–227., doi: 10.1386/jicms.5.2.211\_1. Direct Quote from Dario Argento



Fig. 32. *Suspiria*. Directed by Dario Argento. 1977. Still of Helena Markos' silhouette behind of curtain of voile. (01.33.23)

This voile was also used to show the view of Helena Markos as Suzy is approaching to kill her as seen in Figure 33. The voile is used as a trick to show and yet conceal at the same time.



Fig. 33. *Suspiria*. Directed by Dario Argento. 1977. Still from Helena Markos' perspective from behind to voile featuring Suzy. (01.32.21).

This relates back to Dario Argento's vision to place the viewer in the eyes of the evil entity discussed in chapter 1. The distortion of the viewpoint and camera angles in conjunction with the vivid blue and red lighting creates an extrinsic tension and feeling of fear. Overall, this dark, gothic space concealed by the bright feminine office was inspirational in evoking fear in the viewer.

After Suzy kills Helena Markos with a stake from the ornamental peacock this epicentre of evil within the school starts destroying itself. This final sequence relates to the teaching of Carl Jung in relation to his archetypes of the Great Mother, Fire and Water iconography. As remarked by Maitland McDonagh in her book 'Broken Mirrors/Broken Minds: The Dark Dreams of Dario Argento'

"Archetypes are images that are not derived from the specific psychological processes of the individual dreamer, but rather drawn from the vast reserve of images that inform all cultural phenomena, from religious symbolism to the world of legends and fairy tales...that of the Great Mother who embodies the conflicting aspects of the feminine principle, simultaneously nurturing and devouring. The Great Mother can also be personified in dreams by houses, a particularly provocative association in light of the entire notion of the houses of the Three Mothers"<sup>38</sup>.

This makes sense regarding the story because the Great Mother reigning over this school was destroyed and as she was incarnated within the walls of the school, she will take that with her. In Figure 34, We see Helena Markos' room imploding.

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<sup>38</sup> McDonagh, Maitland. Broken Mirrors/Broken Minds: The Dark Dreams of Dario Argento. University of California Press. USA. 1987. Online.  
[https://www.jstor.org/stable/1212360?Search=yes&resultItemClick=true&searchText=suspiria+1977&searchUri=%2Faction%2FdoBasicSearch%3FQuery%3Dsuspiria%2B1977&ab\\_segments=0%2Fbasic\\_search%2Fcontrol&refreq\\_id=fastly-default%3A945e7e4cad6080c75d5dce2a5e7c31b9&seq=1](https://www.jstor.org/stable/1212360?Search=yes&resultItemClick=true&searchText=suspiria+1977&searchUri=%2Faction%2FdoBasicSearch%3FQuery%3Dsuspiria%2B1977&ab_segments=0%2Fbasic_search%2Fcontrol&refreq_id=fastly-default%3A945e7e4cad6080c75d5dce2a5e7c31b9&seq=1) (date accessed: 12/10/ 20)



Fig. 34. *Suspiria*. Directed by Dario Argento. 1977. Still of Helena Markos' room being destroyed. (01.35.07).

The school breaks down inwardly from the epicentre of the lair, leaving nothing in its trace, using the reference of Jungian symbolism as cited by McDonagh "...and the Tanz Akademie is a house of the damned (destroyed in a Jungian apocalypse of fire and water)"<sup>39</sup>. This whirlwind of destruction to a space that began as a sickly-sweet place of protection has had a full circle transformation in what it means to the audience. Such a transformation and subversion allow the viewer to feel baffled and disturbed by what the space achieves in the film.

The space of Madame Blanc's office inside the Tanz Akademie was examined in this chapter. I felt there are so many layers and techniques used to create horror within this space and it was done in sophisticated complex way and distorting pre-conceived ideas to make them feel unsafe. Through the technique of subversion, Argento

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<sup>39</sup> McDonagh, op.cit., p99-99

elaborately built space of contrasting moods and atmospheres to create a place of uncertainty. Madame Blanc's office is a beautifully decorated feminine room on the surface that attracts the viewer and the students at the dance school. The gothic occult lair of evil underneath is not expected making this a very effective use of space to provoke fear in an audience.



## Conclusion

Over the course of this thesis, my research set out to explain and evaluate how Dario Argento utilised art direction and the visuals of 'Suspiria' to create maximum horror within the viewer. The work's aim was to identify three crucial spaces within the film that added to the overall terror showcased in film. The apartment building from the opening scene, the hallways of the Tanz Akademie and Madame Blanc's office represent many different parts of the film. Each space is so vastly different in terms of location and function in a literal sense, but the text shows the similarities in terms of their underlying function of protection from a person's basic subliminal view of a space that someone inhabits. This means that when a person sees a house, they note the shelter from the harsh dangers of outside world and perceive it as something shielding the people inside from peril. However, recalling the theories of Gaston Bachelard in 'The Poetics of Space' regarding the house as a 'living organism', it's clear the idea of space can be more than a place of shelter but in many ways be its own entity. That is the concept and thinking gone into the spaces of 'Suspiria'. Dario Argento has created spaces that have been designed and shot in such an expressive and visually stimulating way, the spaces themselves have as much character and function as the people who inhabit them. This intricate detail and intense design concept works with the archetypal psychology of Carl Jung and the psychology of the Uncanny by Sigmund Freud to create these spaces to delve deep into our unconscious and uncover the most intrinsic fears and utilise them on screen for our entertainment. This research brings up a question regarding our society today and the idea that excessive décor or over the top visuals grab our attention and keep us engaged for

longer. Do we pay more attention to big, bold visuals? And if so why? could it be a result of instant gratification from social media or the over saturation of content that fills our lives. It is a theory to ponder especially as a young designer beginning a career in the film industry.

While presenting my argument for this thesis, it is claimed that Dario Argento led the way for the use of the concept of space around the characters and set design to be used in a weapon in the horror genre. Other directors have been motivated by its effectiveness, and I felt a more intense insight into the inner workings of this have helped understand how Argento created his horror movies.

At this point, it is important to note some of the films he inspired and touch on the remake of *'Suspiria'* in 2018. Firstly, on a narrative point, with a remake there is a line drawn on whether it is a remake or just an homage to a great film of the same name. Unlike the original, *Suspiria* 2018 makes a clear reference to the political unrest in Germany at the time. One of the ways they achieved this was by changing the setting from Freiburg to Berlin. Berlin was a very divided city at the time and the social unrest is constantly referred to throughout the film. This added cultural context that was absent from the first film which was more focused on the story of what happened within the school. There are clear different in those respects, but it raises the question 'Did Dario Argento leave the cultural context out for a reason and if so why?'

In terms of the Production Design for both films, the approach was worlds apart. The original production design as discussed in the previous chapters showcased with large

architecture with complex patterns derived from art nouveau and art deco as well as stain glass panelling and visual triangular aids or symbols of the occult. Argento used the art and architecture from what came before to create the school. The *Suspiria* (2018) remake production designer 'Inbal Weinberg' had a similar approach to how she planned to go about her design, however she had an extra 41 years of art to look at for inspiration. The mood and atmosphere for this film was dark and bleak. It was clear even architecturally their reference were quite different. In an interview Weinberg talks of looking to different art movements such as Modernism for architectural references.

Some of it was contemporary to the Seventies, so I went deep into historical research of the time. Then we delved back into the beginning of 20th-century modernism, specifically as it relates to Austrian and German architects and designers...who were trying to move beyond Art Nouveau. Adolf Loos was a large influence on us...We liked their use of marble and granite, and different stones and geometric lines.<sup>40</sup>

Although very different from the Jugendstil fairy tale world created in the original you can see in Figure 12 that the design does fit the elaborate design and huge scale set pieces seen in '*Suspiria*' (1977). The set keeps the eccentric nature of original just with a very different colour palette. With reference the colour palette Luca Guadagnino remarks that Argento's colour palette achieves an ultimate horror mood.

So, he went for a level of poetic imagery that has remained unrivalled even after four decades...Dario used the lighting traditions of 1950/60s horror masters Riccardo Freda and Mario Bava and achieved the ultimate horror atmosphere. Now, what is the purpose of me copying what thousands of homages and music videos have tried to emulate?... Browns, rusts, blues and

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<sup>40</sup> Jones. Alan. *Killing the Mother: Luca Guadagnino Discusses "Suspiria"*. MUBI Notebook. UK. 16 November 2018. Online. <https://mubi.com/notebook/posts/killing-the-mother-luca-guadagnino-discusses-suspiria> (date accessed: 01/08/20)

greens were the palette of my *Suspiria* so there would be no antagonism with Dario's vision.<sup>41</sup>

It is clear from this statement that Dario Argento's influence inspired Guadagnino to do the opposite in terms of colour to avoid offense by creating the same thing without the ingenuity of conceiving it which is a noble thing to consider.

This dissertation has challenged me terms of researching and evaluating a film from the past and looking at how deep a concept can be rooted. Having completed this research, I have noted some possible avenues that my argument leads me to. One of the most important conclusions I have come to from this work is how I will continue as a production designer. It has introduced me to the ideology linked between the psychology of the human subconscious with the way we showcase a space to an audience either for stage or screen. This new information has already become useful in my major design project where I am designing 'The Hand that rocks the Cradle' (1992) by Amanda Silver. This psychological thriller focuses on a mother's intrinsic fear of her home and family being threatened. I was attracted to his project as it deals with subverting a place of protection to a place of horror and fear. From my intense exploration of the theories from Gaston Bachelard's 'The Poetics of Space' I feel I can begin the design with a greater understanding of people's perceptions of the different spaces within the house and use it to my advantage to create a house that will operate on a multiple level. I will be using '*Suspiria*' (1977) as an influence on how the

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<sup>41</sup> Marcks, Iain. *Suspiria: Season of the Witch*. ASC Publishing. USA. November 28, 2018. Online. <https://ascmag.com/articles/suspiria-season-of-the-witch> (date accessed: 14/08/20).

production element can be exaggerated to heighten the drama and suspense in the film while being aesthetically pleasing. This thesis has allowed me to understand design work from a different viewpoint and this will only help when designing in the future.

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