

Two Witches at the School

Aging and Instruction in Argento's and Guadagnino's *Suspiria* Films

André Assis Almeida and João Paulo Guimarães¹

Suzy Bannion decided to perfect her ballet studies in the most famous school of dance in Europe. She chose the celebrated academy of Freiburg. One day, at nine in the morning, she left Kennedy airport, New York, and arrived in Germany at 10:40 p.m. local time.

— Opening voiceover of *Suspiria*
... narrated in the Italian version by an uncredited Dario Argento

Pulp filmmaker Dario Argento and his then partner (and screenwriter for the project) Daria Nicolodi famously drew upon an essay by Thomas De Quincey to sketch the idea for their 1977 horror classic *Suspiria*. The piece in question integrates De Quincey's collection *Suspiria de Profundis* and is titled "Levana and Our Ladies of Sorrow". In it, the English author delves into the topic of education; not of the formal kind we get in school, but that which we acquire by way of experience. Experiences that end in grief are, according to De Quincey, particularly instructive and,

1 University of Porto.

albeit painful, allow a person to grow. If, from an archetypal perspective, the three Furies are the figures responsible for meting out justice and the three Muses have the roles of energizing our creative endeavors, then Levana (the Roman goddess of childbirth) and the three sisters she communes with, creations of De Quincey, the titular Ladies of Sorrow (impersonations of “the powers that shake man’s heart”) (De Quincey 2003: 154), are in charge of our worldly edification. De Quincey gives each sister a distinct personality, thus suggesting that grief can be dealt with in different ways. So, while the Mother of Tears, the eldest of the three, symbolizes overt lamentation, the Mother of Sighs represents quiet resignation, and, lastly, the Mother of Darkness is the patron of lunacy and suicide.

[‘]These are the Sorrows, all three of whom I know.’ The last words I say *now*; but in Oxford I said – ‘one of whom I know, and the others too surely I *shall* know.’ For already, in my fervent youth, I saw ... the imperfect lineaments of the awful sisters. (De Quincey 2003: 155)

The film trilogy that Argento built around this mythos – *Suspiria*, *Inferno* and *Mother of Tears* – sees his main characters confront each of the sisters, whom he has turned into witches, to prevent them from corrupting and dominating the world, which, according to the expository narration that opens *Inferno*, is their malevolent plan. That is: the overarching symbolic implications of De Quincey’s original Ladies, so essential to the essay’s overall structure and meaning, are completely discarded by Argento in his films, in favor of something much more literal-minded and campy (they are now just evil witches wreaking havoc, causing death and destruction in major European and North-American towns).

This departure is obviously not a surprise, since Argento, then already known for his stylishly over-the-top *giallo* thrillers (*The Bird with the Crystal Plumage*, *The Cat o’ Nine Tails*, *Deep Red*), was not the director one would expect a faithful adaptation of De Quincey from, no matter how feverish or oneiric the original material is. In fact, as Alexandra Heller-Nicholas points out in her book on *Suspiria*, “Levana and Our Lady of Sorrows” was actually a late comer to Argento’s 1977 witchcraft

project, arriving only after several other references and ideas were solidly in place. And, to be honest, the names in “Levana” and their sonority do seem to be the only elements that truly survive from text to screen: be it in the title of the film (taken from the whole book and not from the essay directly relating to it), or in the names of the three sisters/mothers, which, particularly in their Latin incarnations, evoke almost by themselves an ancient, eerie atmosphere – *Mater Suspiriorum*, *Mater Tenebrarum*, and *Mater Lachrymarum*. However, despite all these reservations and disconnections, there is at least one thematic concern that clearly links De Quincey’s essay to Argento’s *Suspiria*, and even to Guadagnino’s 2018 remake of it: the preoccupation with learning. Both versions of *Suspiria* take place within school environments, a German dance academy that teaches classical ballet in the first film and modern dance in the second, and have as their main source of conflict/horror an opposition between the youthful students and their menacing instructors, who continue to be teachers even if they are also revealed to be witches. One could argue that the films work like streamlined *Bildungsromans*, telling the coming-of-age journey of our protagonist, Suzy Bannion, from childish (or late teenage) innocence to a state of maturity. Argento and Guadagnino, much like one of the seven Harry Potter novels, seem to directly associate graduating a school year with getting ready for (a sort of) adulthood. And to them, as to De Quincey, but now through horror trappings, this process of growing up can apparently only be achieved via rituals of suffering, violence, and even death.

However, learning by trauma is not a notion that is exclusive to De Quincey; and, in the sense of it being an inspiration to Argento, a more apt predecessor can surely be traced to several popular fairy tales (or fairy tale inspired works, such as *The Wizard of Oz* and *Alice in Wonderland*), which also thematize this idea. Argento, in contrast to the way he used/dismissed De Quincey, this time actively incorporated these other influences into *Suspiria*’s narrative and aesthetic aspects, constantly referencing fairy tale logic, imagery and even specific stories.

Three quick examples:

a) Without a doubt, the most consistently discussed reference to *Suspiria* is Walt Disney's 1937 animated version of *Snow White*, "which Argento has stated on numerous occasions was a direct influence on the film" (Heller-Nicholas 2015: 30). Its influence can be seen on the color palette, in the overall décor, in Argento's choice of actress Jessica Harper for lead – "I thought she would be perfect for the role of Snow White", he explains in a documentary on the 25th anniversary of *Suspiria* – and notably in the character of the ultimate witch, Helena Markos, who, similar to the Queen in *Snow White*, appears in the conclusion of the film as the typical decrepit old hag with a cartoonishly evil laughter.

b) *Suspiria*'s doors, as in *Bluebeard* and Carroll's *Alice in Wonderland*, are central to the story it tells, often acting as literal passages to fantastic worlds and/or disturbing realizations. In the first scene of the film, the unmotivated attention that Argento gives to an automated door at the airport – the jarring interruption of the soundtrack, the extreme close-up of its greasy gears, the aggressively fast sliding motion of the glass panels – already indicates to us the significance of this motif. The Freiburg dance academy itself can very well be seen as a series of locked/forbidden rooms which Suzy, in her quest to uncover the mystery of the place, must progressively open throughout the film.

c) From *Hansel and Gretel*, another important reference to *Suspiria*, at least two strong echoes can be found. First, in the bright red building of the dance academy, which, despite being a faithful recreation of a real setting, gives us a strong artificial impression, bringing to mind the alluring cake house (she wants to attract kids) of the cannibal witch from the Grimms fairy tale – the building almost looks like it could be bitten into. And second, in the climactic sequence of the film. when Suzy retraces the footsteps of the teachers, finally discovering the hidden location of the witches' coven. As has been noted by several critics, this entire plot point can be easily related to the breadcrumbs and flintstones that Hansel and Gretel use to find (and also lose) their way back home.

Guadagnino's 2018 *Suspiria* takes a markedly different approach to this matter, even appearing to harbor some sort of aversion to the kinship with fairy tales that the first film has. Moments that are objectively repeated, such as Suzy finding a hidden door and retracing footsteps, are

so heavily dehydrated from this connection that they don't even register as fantastic or otherworldly. The feeling is completely different. 2018's *Suzy*, in a kind of a trance, simply finds a hidden door on the wall and then arrives at the lower levels of the school, where the witches are performing some kind of weird, pagan ritual.

This distancing intention is also apparent through some of the statements that the screenwriter, David Kajganich, made on the making of the film:

And so, I said to Luca [Guadagnino] when he asked me would I ever be interested in joining him in this ... 'I will take quite a practical approach if you're okay with that. I would want to know how something like this could happen, how it would work, what the hierarchy of the coven would be, you know, all of those practical questions that normally aren't maybe of interest to a typical horror film, whatever that is,' and he was all for it. And so, I did quite a lot of research and to actual witchcraft and covens and we did quite a lot of research into the period that it's set in, what was going on in feminist politics and feminist art then, and how were concerns being exploited from the inside out and how that might look inside of the context of the occult. (Kajganich 2018)

In another interview, Kajganich says that one of his methods for constructing the film was to apply “a lot of practicality to it”: grounding several elements that were only indicated or superficially treated in Argento's original (such as the cultural and political context of the setting: Germany 1977), and removing the ones “that didn't make literal sense to me” (he explicitly refers the scene where a character falls into a room filled with barbed wires). This points us to a clear divide between the two *Susprias*, particularly in the way they choose to approach the codes and conventions of the genres they inhabit, i.e., horror and fantasy.

Argento, for example, is a filmmaker who doesn't shy away from genre clichés. Much the opposite, as noted by Marcia Landy in her study on the director, his films purposefully embrace clichés into their dramatic conceptions (2016: 106), making them a fundamental part of

his kitsch, self-conscious and highly stylized approach to the medium, which often relies on a fusion of commonplace tropes (the black gloved killers, young attractive women as perpetual victims, comedic meet-cutes, cheap whodunits, etc.) and operatic exaggeration.

In *Suspiria*, therefore, Argento was also not trying to break the mold of the supernatural witchcraft film. The subversion that de facto exists within the film does not stem from Argento's rejection of the subgenre's form, but from a hyper-fetishization (in the Freudian sense of the term) of it. It's as if he had a volume dial that he cranked up to the extreme in all the elements that captivated him – such as the violence, the music, the Technicolor –, while simultaneously dialing down, almost to mute, the parts that bored him – psychological characterization, plot logic, the need for justifications. This mix of an excessive, brutish style with bare and extremely naïf elements, and the fact that this blend somehow works (which is not always the case with Argento), is to a large extent what makes *Suspiria*, even today, such a provocative and difficult to interpret project. It is a film “heavily loaded towards the senses,” that combines the rejection of expected narrative paradigms “with an aggressive stylistic hyperactivity, making *Suspiria* a film that needs to be experienced through the body as much as through the intellect” (Heller-Nicholas 2015: 7). To use the film's own words, the story *Suspiria* tells (or the manner it tells it) “seems so absurd, so fantastic” that it almost does not make sense. Whereas Argento's *Suspiria* happily inhabits its horror and fantasy genre traditions, even some of the outdated ones (the maniacal cackling of the old witch, the deformed Igor-like servant, the moldy gothic-looking attic), Guadagnino's *Suspiria* is corrective to the core.

The screenplay solemnly begins with a quotation by Joseph Goebbels: “dance must be cheerful and show beautiful female bodies and have nothing to do with philosophy”. The film, obviously not wanting to agree with Adolf Hitler's propaganda minister, will forcibly go in the other direction. 2018's *Suspiria* carries its critical intentions on its sleeve. The Goebbels quote is even responded to by the character of Madame Blanc, who, different from Argento's film, where all witches are simply unified evil, is on the good side of the story, being the representative of the

militant side of the dance academy/witches coven. She explains to her students, and to us: “There are two things that dance can never be again. *Beautiful* [emphasis added] and cheerful. Today we need to break the nose of every beautiful thing”.

The film’s focus is not so much philosophy – only if we see it in the broadest of senses –, but politics and history. *Suspiria* 2018 opens with a potentially violent protest for the release of the Baader-Meinhof (there’s smoke, people chanting in “organized rage”, throwing things at the police barrier); a character, Patricia, who is the first victim in both works, crosses this chaotic environment to go to her psychoanalyst and talk, in an incoherent and rambling manner, about the coven of witches she fears govern her dance academy. These two worlds (or meanings), political upheaval and witchcraft, are closely connected from the very beginning of the film. The setting of the dance academy is no longer a picturesque and isolated Freiburg (magical, fairy tale Germany), but the capital Berlin, and not any place in Berlin, but right next to the Berlin Wall. The building in the new film loses its red alluring cake-house look, and is transformed into a drab, enormous bureaucratic one: very clean, very monochromatic. The main problem of the witches is an election between two competing factions for control of the coven, the more progressive one, lead by Madame Blanc, who as we said is a positive figure in the film, and the other lead by the villain, Mother Helena Markos, who wants to bring the academy/coven to its old (Nazi German?) ways.

The three characters that Tilda Swinton plays – Josef Klemperer, Mother Helena Markos, and Madame Blanc – also points us to this historical perspective:

a) Josef Klemperer, a Jewish psychoanalyst, victim of the Holocaust, who lost his wife (played by Jessica Harper, 1977 *Suspiria*’s Suzy Bannion) in the concentration camps...

b) Mother Helena Markos, a rotting, repulsive, tumor-filled and almost disabled figure, with evident Nazi ties (she even has those dark Nazi-looking aviator glasses, resembling a more deformed and less funny version of Dr. Strangelove)...

c) Madame Blanc, a more progressive witch, even if suspect at first, who feels guilt over her past actions, is critical of Germany's history, and is trying to change the coven from inside...

This triangular impasse is solved by *Suspiria* through the story-arc of Suzy Bannion. In the end, once she discovers that *she* is the actual reincarnation of *Mater Suspiriorum* – therefore, a witch herself, and the more powerful and wise of all the witches – Suzy consoles Josef Klemperer, offering him the truth about his wife's demise and allowing him to finally work through his grief; dispatches without mercy Mother Markos and all her followers ("Death to any other Mother!"); and imposes Madame Blanc's faction as the dominant one of the coven, responsible for its reconstruction. Suzy becomes the literal manifestation of a well-intentioned *Zeitgeist* of renewal, even summoning a spirit (so, a *Geist*) to do her bidding: exploding the heads of the witches who voted for Nazi Helena Marco.

The learning that Suzy Bannion does throughout *Suspiria* 2018 is both historical and political, although quite basic in the two instances: she essentially learns that Nazism was bad, still lurks in contemporary society, and must be fought against. The film then, despite all its gourmet art-house packaging and seriousness of themes (motherhood, national guilt, alternatives to patriarchal society), ends up nonetheless a rather didactic enterprise. And since didactic is not necessarily a bad adjective, let's be clear – didactic in the worst sense of the word: moralistic, superficial and heavily message-oriented.

A more instructive approach, in De Quincey's sense of the word, would have mobilized the figure of the aged witch in a more productive manner, as a symbol of death and of the inevitability of time's passing, rather than as an enemy that must be dethroned in the name of beauty, sexual liberation and youth. As Robert Graves's *The White Goddess* makes plain, the archetypal figure of the young woman as an icon of vitality is inseparable from that of the crone, harbinger of castration, barrenness and death². This primal witch figure is key to a cyclical understanding

2 Manuela Lopez Ramirez notes that, over time, the figure of the crone, so important for the feminine holy trinity of pre-patriarchal societies, was cut off

of time according to which older age is a natural stage of life. This does not, of course, mean that the witch is unambiguously a friend, which is why the showdown between Suzie Bannion and Mother Suspiriorum, in Argento's *Suspiria*, makes dramatic sense. As much as one would like to see some sort of intergenerational reconciliation between the figures of the older woman and the young girl (which would have made the film politically progressive), it is understandable that Argento opts for a fairytale-like struggle between old age and youth.

Guadagnino handles this conflict in a way that is at first blush more empowering but in fact turns out to be somewhat problematic and perhaps even regressive. The film ostensibly puts a positive spin on the conventional image of the witch, but it in effect promotes a rather conformist view of what an autonomous, progressive and desirable woman should be. Much like her character from the popular *50 Shades* franchise, Dakota Johnson plays a girl that, during the course of her journey of self-discovery, attains sexual liberation, freely expressing sexual desires that would traditionally have been considered perverted and/or depraved. The "good" witch Susie Bannion, represents the modern woman. She comes into her own as a witch and achieves emancipation as a woman by overthrowing the covenant of ideologically conservative witches that run the Markos Dance Academy. This adds a twist to the story of the original 1977 *Suspiria* in which Susie simply dispatches Mother Markos and runs away from the collapsing dance academy, there being no further implications to this fairy tale struggle between good and evil. In Guadagnino's film we realize at the end that Susie is the true Mother Suspiriorum, a title everyone thought belonged to Mother Markos, the old hag Susie dethrones and replaces. This intergenerational showdown is seen as a token of renewal and progress by the film. We argue, however, that by

from the other two, vilified and transformed into the evil hag or witch that became popular in fairy tales: "The suppression of the crone figure results in the appearance of a purely wicked archetype (the witch or the hag), such as we find in fairy tales. . . . In fairy tales, the witch, the crone who stands for values our society rejects for women, is set against the stereotypical figure of the beautiful and good fairy-tale princess" (2020: 43).

championing youth and exalting Susie as a model witch, the film reinforces the idea that old witches are evil, repulsive and inconvenient³. In Guadagnino's film, Susie not only defeats the witch but she replaces her, becoming the leader of the coven herself. As such, the figure of the older woman, one of the three faces of Graves's eternal goddess, is vanquished and superseded. Older age is not needed, the film tells us; not even for the kind of mythic battle dramatized in Argento's film. The only lesson Guadagnino wishes to impart is that liberal values ought to always triumph in the end, no matter the cost.

Author Bios

André Assis Almeida graduated in Cinema from the Universidade Federal de São Carlos (UFSCar) and is currently pursuing a master's degree in Literary, Cultural, and Interart Studies at the Faculdade de Letras da Universidade do Porto (FLUP), where he is developing a thesis titled "The Miscellany as Method in Camilo and Ruiz's *Mysteries of Lisbon*". He is also a screenwriter, his most recent work being the short films "The Strange Disappearance of Comrade Kuliakov" (2022) and "Maputo" (2024).

Joao Paulo Guimaraes holds a PhD in English from the State University of New York at Buffalo. He is currently a full-time researcher at the Margarida Losa Comparative Literature Institute of the University of Porto. He is the author of the forthcoming book *American Experimental Poetry and the New Organic Form* (Bloomsbury Studies in Critical Poetics), editor of the collection *Aging Experiments: Futures and Fantasies of Old Age* (tran-

3 M. Isabel Santaularia i Capdevila contends that we find many examples of witches that are portrayed positively in recent popular culture. However, she notes that characters like Buffy or Hermione Granger "are almost exclusively young" (2018: 60). The "imagining of the old witch as powerful yet benign has been underexplored in popular culture" (2018: 60), Capdevila adds.

script) and is currently preparing a manuscript about older age and contemporary American innovative poetry.

Works Cited

- Capdevila, M. Isabel Santaularia (2018): "Age and Rage in Terry Pratchett's 'Witches' Novels." *European Journal of English Studies* 22.1, pp. 59–75.
- de Quincey, Thomas (2003): *Confessions of an English Opium-Eater and Other Writings*, London: Penguin.
- Navarro, Megan (2018): "Actress Jessica Harper and Writer David Kajganich Cast Spells in 'Suspiria'." In *BloodyDisgusting* <https://web.archive.org/web/20181020011810/https://bloody-disgusting.com/interviews/3524474/interview-actress-jessica-harper-writer-david-kajganich-cast-spells-suspiria/>
- Hagen, Kate (2018): "The Black List Interview: David Kajganich on SUSPIRIA." In *The Black List Blog*. <https://blog.blcklst.com/the-black-list-interview-david-kajganich-on-suspiria-992499211bae>
- Heller-Nicholas, Alexandra (2015): *Suspiria*. Liverpool: Liverpool University Press.
- Landy, Marcia. (2016): "The Argento Syndrome: Aesthetics of Horror." In Stefano Baschiera and Russ Hunter (eds), *Italian Horror Cinema*, Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press.
- Ramirez, Manuela Lopez (2020): "The New Witch in Toni Morrison's *Song of Solomon* and *God Help the Child*." *African American Review* 53.1, pp. 41–54.

