FANTASTIC SPACES IN CINEMA: SUSPIRIA

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Abstract. *FANTASTIC SPACES IN CINEMA* is a project series rooted by Claudio Ulpiano and Gilles Deleuze's philosophies, which topics varying from surrealism, experimental and avant garde cinema through narrative that highlights dreams, phantasms, memories, fantasies, and non-chronological time. The planned filmography will include Luis Buñuel's *Un Chien Andalou*, *The Exterminating Angel* and *That Obscure Object of Desire*; Maya Deren's *Meshes of Afternoon* and *Ritual in Transfigured Time*; Alain Robbe-Grillet's *L'Immortelle* and *The Man Who Lies*; Alain Resnais' *Last Year at Marienbad*; Raoul Ruiz's *Time Regained*; Michel Gondry's *Science of Sleep*; Wes Anderson's *The Grand Budapest Hotel*; David Lynch's *Inland Empire*; Dario Argento's *Suspiria*; Alejandro Jodorowsky*'s Santa Sangre* and *The Dance of Reality*; Stanley Kubrick's *The Shining;* Nobuhiko Obayashi's *Hausu;* Alexander Sokurov's *Russian Ark;* Andrei Tarkovsky's *The Mirror* and *Stalker*; Quay Brothers' *Street of Crocodiles* and *The Cabinet of Jan Svankmajer*; Jan Svankmajer's *Little Otik* and *Alice*; Jiri Barta's *Labyrinth of Darkness*; Catharine Breillat's *The Sleeping Beauty*; Chris Maker's *La Jetee* and Eliane Lima's *Djinn*. *Suspiria* is the first of these series, which is also inspired by Anna Powell's Deleuze and Horror Films.
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The scheme of reality contrasting fantasy is usually addressed in psychoanalytical readings as a signifier to justify interpretations about characters' actions or states of mind. My argument follows Anna Powell's research on Gilles Deleuze to show how focusing on signifiers and interpretations can lead to ignoring the relationship between image and audience. Powell understands very well what Deleuze's taxonomy of cinematic images does, introducing some of Deleuze's concepts into her analysis of horror film scenes. She examines the argument by Deleuze about Henri Bergson[1] regarding the moving image and intensive versus extensive movements in perception images and affection images (Powell, 2005: 119). Agreeing with Powell, Dario Argento uses the relationship between light and color in the moving images to create an event full of intensities. Instead of the narrative being the focus, it is the intensive elements that comprise the *mise-en-scene* that are foregrounded in *Suspiria*. The *mise-en-scene* creates a mood

of horror, where the audience does not fear, but rather becomes attracted to the beauty of the event.

Argento changed the traditional way of making movies through his use of fantastic spaces. In order to reaffirm that the *cinematic body*[2] does not need to be motivated by the *sensory motor link* (Deleuze, 1986: 162), in this paper, I will analyze the world of dreams and the idea of absurdity and/or fantasy, which complicate time and consequently change our perceptions. Fantasy represents a break with the representation of reality so often discussed in film studies. In many films, fantastic spaces are associated with the Labyrinth. In Dario Argento's *Suspiria*, symmetry is used to introduce this association. The film also raises questions about what the Labyrinth represents in space itself. In this paper the optical and sonorous elements that Argento uses to arrest aspects of the narrative will be analyzed to show how *Suspiria* introduces a spectacle of images which explore the ideas of reality versus fantasy.

In *Suspiria*, Argento uses the overture as narration to introduce the story, about an American girl in a European country. The narrative begins in an international airport. Suzy is a foreign student who arrives on a stormy night. The superficiality of the association between international airport, international girl, and foreign country pre-echo the character's initial journey to the fantastic space that she will confront later on. Argento manipulates audience expectations by associating the progressive montage with music in crescendo to heighten the sense that something frightening will occur. The audience's expectations regarding a murder are suppressed because instead of the successive movements of action-reaction, Argento introduces intensive optical and sonorous elements that disrupt the traditional narrative. These elements are in direct relationship to the character's world because they are part of the fantastic space that she is going to encounter. The narrative does not function at the same foreground level as the images.

From the start, Argento uses a repetition of a specific palette of colors in his *mise-en-scene* while building tension via the soundtrack and the montage. Technicolor film saturates color, resulting in vibrant reds, blues, and yellows. Powell argues that the color "adds tactile to virtual potency" (Powell, 2005: 142). It seems that she is implying that our brains perceive colors as affects, without establishing any kind of relationship with the signifiers. Color is one of the foreground elements of *Suspiria*. The film opens with a camera movement that goes from the bluish airport arrival board to the reddish exit of the baggage claim area. The audience already knows or, at least has an idea, that representation of reality is in play and being brought into question by the intense palette. The viewer is also deceived by the montage, sound, and character expressions, which create an anticipation of murder. For example, in the medium shot of Suzy exiting the airport, a blonde woman in a red suit on the right side of the frame passes Suzy and walks towards the exit door first. The image cuts to Suzy's face, then Suzy's POV in a wide-angle shot of the woman in the

red suit passing the automatic exit door, and after which the soundtrack follows the rhythm of the images. The film cuts again to Suzy's face. This blonde woman with a red suit works here as an element of anticipation-repetition that Argento will use in the next sequences.

The soundtrack intensifies the extension of time and the tension brought on by the montage and the protagonist's expressions. The tension is already apparent to the audience, who also see that Suzy herself is aware of something. A black man leaves the airport, but through the left side door, creating a balanced composition between the movement of both characters. Then the film cuts to a close up of the automatic door accompanied by its sharp sound. The film cuts again to a medium shot of Suzy passing through the automatic door, then the close up of the door mechanism once again. The sound and the image are repeated in order to create tension. Suzy arrives outside where it is dark and rain is pouring down. Argento uses a mix of progressive and parallel cuts between the character and her POV that builds to a crescendo with the mechanical door. The camera follows as she tries to get a taxi. For one moment, we see a close up of her, reflecting a colorful mixture of the traffic light and lightning, showing her frightened expression. When we see the storm outside, that is the moment that we really believe that something frightening is going to happen to Suzy.

In traditional narrative, this acceleration of movements that creates tension made by montage and sound would lead to an action-reaction situation. The situation-action-modified-situation formula (SAS') has been used repeatedly in the action films that Deleuze presents in <u>Cinema 1, The Movement Image</u> (Deleuze, 1986: 157). The SAS' formula is an example of how Argento frustrates the narrative. Instead of giving us what we expect, a murder scene, Argento shows the mundane action of catching a taxi at the airport. In two minutes of film, the audience has already witnessed a spectacle of color, music, and montage. These elements arrest the narrative and play with the audience's expectations. Because Argento is constantly repeating this pattern of intensive forces, the tension will start over in the next sequences. Suzy gets inside the taxi and the camera follows her sight, cutting between her colorful reflected face and her POV from inside the car. But it is not as simple as it appears. First, this repetition of alternating images brings the audience to the previous state of anticipation and, once again, repeats key elements. Images of colorful rain, the gushing of the water in the gutter, and the shadows of trees placed onto other trees introduce a spectacle of fluid, light and color. This is not an establishing shot that works as an introduction for actions, or a presentation of the actors' environment; instead, it is an intensive event in and of itself.

Before Suzy gets to the Ballet Academy, we see a red building that from the outside appears to be part of a theatrical set. The taxi stops in front of the building and we see a blonde girl, Pat, leaving it. Pat stops at the front door for a minute, yelling, and then passes by Suzy. At this moment, this particular character, Pat, propels the

narrative forward. It is a beautiful illustration of how the narrative will not always be driven by the main character. Instead, the relationship between characters and spaces will constantly foreground the structure of the film. This is the brilliance of Argento's work: he makes the narrative subservient to the image.

Suzy gets back into the taxi after the Academy's refusal to open its doors, passing back through the dark woods. The music now is repetitive, punctuated, rhythmic, layered by voices, and the image is of Pat running in the middle of the woods. In this sequence, Suzy's POV assumes the audience's point of view and her passivity reinforces her status as an outsider. In the chapter of Cinema 1, *Crisis of Action-Image*, Deleuze states how both the sensory-motor link and the situation change when a second element enters the action-reaction system, and in this example Argento uses shadow to foreground this structure. The idea of *event* is also related to how Argento lights the scene, using chiaroscuro to present these outdoors sequences. Unlike Scorsese's *Taxi Driver*, for example, in the taxi sequences, we do not have the common parallel between Deleuze's "actuality of the action-image [and] virtuality of the affection-image," in connection with the inner state of a character (Deleuze, 1986: 207). Instead, the parallel between the actual and the virtual, and also the relationship between shadow and color are presented as juxtapositions of elements that relate to the character's journey. They portray how she will penetrate this particular world, and enter into the fantastic space (the Ballet Academy).

Argento also has a stylized form of presenting death, making it appear as an event. In *Suspiria*, death is not a framed frozen image, but rather a part of a succession, because the composition is full of movement itself. As Anna Powell states, "film theory shaped by psychoanalysis and semiology treats images as static, symbolic components of underlying representational structures" (Powell, 2005: 10). She argues that horror film criticism is heavily informed by these readings. This is why we need to understand what the word "event" means in Argento's work, allowing no misreadings. *Event* here is not an explanation of an action, nor a relationship between actions, nor a relationship between actions and viewers, because in Argento's work, an *event* is not merely an action. The event is the intensification of elements that comprise the framed image in relationship with the rhythm of the movement and the passivity of time (Deleuze, C2, 1986: 100). Argento uses the repetition of these elements in a peculiar way. His repetition is related to mirror images, where walls, windows, mirrors, and even characters' movements are all part of those mirror images. For instance, with the symmetrical repetition of elements in Pat's friend's apartment building, Argento leads our eyes in many different directions. In the sequence where Pat enters her friend Sonia's hallway to ask for shelter, she crosses the frame from left to right in a horizontal path. Here we have the mirroring of images along the horizontal path where each element is equally repeated on both sides of the frame, as a graphic pattern.

A relationship between the verticality of the interior décor and architecture is created through the subjective camera. The character looks up, and the film cuts to

the mosaic ceiling glass, and then to the elevator detail. Next, the character walks towards the elevator, but when she is in the middle of the frame, she looks towards the audience. The relationship made here is spatial. She crosses horizontally and transcends to the *out-of-field*³, making a different kind of movement into both spaces that will play with our perception in connection with spatial orientation. Pat continues the narrative: we saw her for the first time in front of the Academy, then running in the woods, and now we see her entering Sonia's building. We cannot avoid two important factors. First, in this sequence, Pat carries the narrative and maintains it as a background element of the film because she is not the lead actor. Rather, the narrative moves away from the foreground elements that comprise the structure of the film. The second factor is that certain elements have a double function: on the one hand, Argento uses repetition to describe a symmetry that is associated with graphic patterns. On the other, he uses symmetry to question the idea of balance, reinforcing the relationship between the audience and cinematic space.

The main characteristic feature of graphic composition is to describe space and the relationship of the elements that comprise that space. Powell points out, "the film foregrounds art and artifice" (Powell, 2005: 143). After the entryway scene, we find ourselves in the interior of Sonia's apartment. In this scene, Pat is in the center of the framed image. Once again, she is part of a symmetrical composition, but also part of a mirror image created by the repetition of the décor and the movement of the characters. Here we see the beauty of Argento's event as he removes the idea of balance and harmony from the symmetric image to introduce a succession of cuts that will lead to chaotic action. The character is scared and confused; she looks around and seems to be completely unsure of her actions. She does not know how exactly to move into the space and moves towards the mirror. The left window is blown open by the wind and she reacts. Immediately the film cuts to the door opening on the opposite side of the frame by Sonia, who enters the room to close the window.

In this particular sequence, we see how Argento uses repetition to introduce the idea of *raccord*⁴, but the raccord here is not used to sustain the narrative. Argento uses it to create a relationship of tension between character and space. Sonia closes the window and then the film cuts to both characters side by side where the same reflection holds between the characters themselves. The camera frames it, repeating the idea of mirror image, illustrating what Deleuze says about how difference works within repetition, "difference lies between two repetitions" (Deleuze, DR, 1994: 76). Everything looks harmoniously balanced, and the audience does not know that both characters will be dead by the end of this sequence. Once again, Argento plays with our tendency as spectators to make an interpretation and relate it to chronological time. In this scene, for example, the audience believes that something frightening will happen only to Pat. After Sonia leaves the room, Pat repeats the movement of the previous scene, but instead of walking towards the mirror, she

walks towards the window. She does not react or confront the situation; instead she is attracted by the double image reflected of herself blended with the outside image. Argento uses the repetition of the characters' movement to extend time and to introduce difference to it. This is especially evident in the way he makes a connection between the mirror images and the audience: the fantastic space of the framed image and the out-of-field.

Other examples of repetition are the relationships made between the ceiling and the floor, and subsequently, both dead faces. Sonia's face is divided by a piece of glass, in the surface of which we can see its reflection. Her face is a double of real and virtual; a double of object and reflection. She also has cuts at two points on her body, in the same areas where the murderer tied and cut Pat's body. The color of the elements, such as the fake blood on her face that seems to be lipstick and the colorful mosaic of glass that falls from the ceiling, and appears to be shaped like paper, are both beautifully staged, creating a highly stylized and artificial image. Argento makes these images appear as an event in the form of a spectacle so that we are attracted to them, instead of experiencing an emotional response to the action.

After this spectacular murder, Argento cuts abruptly to a blind young man walking with his guide dog to enter the Ballet Academy building. This is the second time that we see the school building from outside. This is also the second time that we see Suzy trying to enter the building. Argento presents his next victim, the blind man, but because of the montage, we believe that the man is the murderer and/or has a connection with the murderer. Argento is always playing with the relationship between framed image, action, movement, and audience perception.

Cinema is not a simple connection between moving images, actions-reactions, and plot relations. The layers of elements that comprise each framed image, and the relationship between them as a sequence of images that represent a whole, are not only related by successive actions that produce chronological time. Powell states that psychophysiological experience, especially the afferent stimulation (combination of sound and image) to the nervous system in connection with sensations and perceptions is powerful territory that cannot be fully appreciated by psychoanalytic readings alone (Powell, 2005: 16). In Powell's Deleuze and Horror Film, she details the problems of readings led by interpretations. The problem is that psychoanalysis does not pay attention to the relationship between the cinematic body and the spectator's body as a process of engagement and sensory interaction, except with external presuppositions and interpretations added. "This is a very different process to aesthetic contemplation, [Powell asserts,]…to the subject/object division of the spectatorial gaze" (Powell, 2005: 5). It is the relationship described by Deleuze between the *mise-en-scene* and movement of the images that is the affective phenomenon. The *affection-image*[5] explores how the spectator's body interacts with the cinematic body without following recognition, plot relations, representation of reality, or consequently, the chronological idea of time (Deleuze, 1986: 87 – 122).

Argento's narrative still lies between fantasy and reality. Argento at first seems to give his audience what they expect, as many scenes progress along with audience anticipation, but are developed only for a couple of seconds. Then he pulls the viewer back to this new fantastic universe, where the audience assumes some kind of passivity in relationship to those imaginary events. When Suzy enters the school for the first time, she meets the two witches, the teacher and Madame Blanc. The audience knows that this particular place is the Witches' Castle. In the first dialogue between Suzy and the two witches, the camera crosses the *axis of action* twice. The spatial movement of the camera is in relationship to the static position of the characters, which tells us that something is unbalanced, and that something unusual is occurring. We also notice right away that the school is a woman's universe, where men are always portrayed as servants. However, these narrative details are superficial, and only take place to sustain the "momentum" that the heroine will need in order to penetrate into the Labyrinthine space that Argento creates in *Suspiria*.

The sequence of actions and the movement of the actors are presented in different ways to introduce the Labyrinthine space. First Argento introduces crossing movements, where we see a blonde character crossing the protagonist's way several times: in the airport scene, in front of the Academy, and in the woods. A blonde victim also crosses the building's hallway, presenting a double of mirror images and symmetrical elements. A second type of image is made between sound and spatial perception. The protagonist counts her steps, and then arrives at the conclusion that the movement of the witches is going in the opposite direction. At this moment, Argento identifies the Labyrinth. He shows us the idea of walking through a Labyrinth, where the heroine will need to count her steps to find the witches hiding-space. In each room, Argento will make a kind of connection with the idea of the fantastic-absurd.

Although the first victim of *Suspiria*, Pat, actually states that everything seems so fantastic and absurd, expressing her amazement with the Ballet Academy events, Argento is illustrating to the audience that the idea of fantastic-absurd marks a detachment from the idea of realism, and this associates fantasy with the labyrinth. Not only the characters' movements introduce this association, but also the production design draws the audience's eye toward pathways, hallways, walls, curtains, windows, and trap-doors where the victims will fall. Actually, Argento's connection between symmetry and absurdity intrigues the audience continually, because it scripts the structure of the film. The repetitive elements used in *Suspiria* have a relationship with the symmetry of labyrinths. For example, in Stanley Kubrick's *The Shining* there is an emphasis on the aerial view of the garden, and the repetitive architectural design of the Hotel. In *Suspiria*, the symmetry of the interior of Sonia's apartment building is associated with the mirror image. Here the idea of the double is presented to create parallels between reality and fantasy, and real and virtual images.

The relationships between image, movement, perception, and different times and spaces described by images are a new path of investigation into the image itself. *Suspiria* puts the fantastic space into play, using the association of the world of reality and the world of fantasy to introduce a different kind of cinematic experience. The relationship made between the framed image and the audience is extended to the out-of-field, which is always in question when the structure of the film applies elements that move beyond mainstream narrative. Usually, mainstream narrative uses the out-of-field, both exteriorized and carried by interpretation, to sustain subjectivity between character and audience. On the other hand, the out-of-field is used to introduce spatial differences in perception and to extend the relationship between the framed image and its audience. *Suspiria* broke not only with the conventional structure of filmmaking, but also with the conventional mode of experiencing film images, moving away from recognition, plot relations, and interpretations, which often make film depend on associations and linearity. The world of fantasy and dreams, and for instance, the fantastic spaces described in *Suspiria*, not only free the movement, but also introduce a complication to this movement. Here space and time play a role that has a relationship to a different idea of *event*, an event as a spectacular element of imagery that creates different worlds, and introduces different spaces and times, thereby exploring the essence of what cinema is about: fantasy and dreams.

NOTES

1. Henri Bergson is the author of *Matter and Memory*, published in the U.S. in 1990 and 2004.
2. *Cinematic body* is comprised of layered elements of image, sound, and character in relationship with the *mise en scene*.
3. *Out-of-field* is the subjective space between the screen and the audience.
4. The term *raccord* represents the fluidity of cuts, which is usually used to sustain narrative continuity.
5. The *affection-image* is presented by Deleuze in two chapters of <u>Cinema1</u>, which goes from the close-ups to the *any-spaces-whatevers* to detail their intensities.

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