

Benny Goetting

Linda Mokdad

Film History

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The Evolution and Retelling of German Expressionism

In *Suspiria* and Italian Horror

Suspiria (Dario Argento, Italy, 1977) is a fairly recognizable name in the genre of horror films, and it stands as a 70's horror classic that spawned a 2018 American remake. While the film has influenced many future horror films with its music, use of color, and other thematic elements/iconography, the film itself overflows with influences from the furthest points of the horror genre past, dating all the way back to 1920 during the era of German Expressionism and what films like *The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari* (Robert Wiene, Germany, 1920) did to lay foundational work in the horror genre. Through in-depth analysis of these two films (*Suspiria* and *The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari*¹) and more information surrounding both German horror during the expressionist era and the history of Italian horror, we will see how a film era from the 1920's reaches across years and countries to influence the evolution of horror cinema. Each film contains unique aspects of mise-en-scene, specifically with color, makeup, and sets, that show close connections between them. In addition to what makes them similar, we will discover how horror was evolving in both the era of the 70's in Italy. When these aspects of mise-en-scene and cultural backgrounds combine, we can see how Argento creates *Suspiria* to call upon German expressionism and reinvent the horror genre relationship with German expressionism.

To begin the analysis of *Suspiria*'s qualities as a film, we must realize its inspirations and relationship to German expressionist cinema. Very similar to German horror, Italian horror emerged during Europe's postwar era in the early 20th century. In the sense of theme and what *Suspiria* does similarly to *Caligari* is how both films draw upon dark folklore and mythology (or a

¹ To save space and word count, *The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari* will be referred to as *Caligari*.

fictional mythology, in Argento's case) as their source for horror material. Yet it's necessary to note that *Caligari* and *Suspiria*, despite being an indisputable influence on the latter², are two films from very different points of cinematic history and European history, and thus *Suspiria* is additionally influenced by German expressionist ideals. To clarify, *Caligari* is a prime example of how German horror sought to critique the current postwar climate of Europe by depicting class and political others within the "demonic fun fair" within the film (Coates, 28-29). Since *Suspiria* arrives into the horror genre multiple decades after both World Wars, it's not so easily said that the film contains the same political commentary as German expressionist films. However, the two films do share a psychoanalytic aspect, despite the generational and cultural gap between them. Both films plunge themselves into the psyche's of their protagonists, dealing with the ideas of degrading sanity and how the paranormal bleeds into reality. It is this aspect of horror that paves the way into the Italian branch of horror and how Argento created *Suspiria* amidst a generic shift of his decade.

Italian horror films did a lot more than just be influenced by German expressionism; the genre evolved through different stages across multiple decades, and *Suspiria* was born amidst a cycle of this change helmed by Argento himself (Bondanella, 321). Thanks to German expressionist inspirations, Italy's horror genre also began in the 1920's with films very similar to *Caligari* in subject matter — *Il mostro di Frankenstein* (1921) for example — and went through different eras of trends and themes. While *Frankenstein* was the only notable horror film of Italy's silent era, the genre regained production in the mid 1950's with *I vampiri* (1956), which began the trend of Gothic thrillers (307). This period is also known as Italian horror's classical period. Naturally, as film does, the horror genre evolved from the early German expressionist influences to a type of gothic/mystical hybrid with somber themes before the Italian horror trend hit a lull. That is, until Argento brings his polarizing brand of giallo³ which in turn created his films' trends of blending horror and thriller. I strongly believe the use of new subject matter — like the occult and

² "A History of Italian Cinema" (Bondanella, 306), "Terror in Technicolor" (Manders, 68)

³ An Italian film term meaning something characterized by "graphic violence, serial murders, and psychoanalytical plots" (Bondanella, 321-322).

psychoanalysis — and giallo tradition is what establishes Argento's successful reinvention of German expressionism in horror.

A gratuitous amount of gore and blood in horror films may seem very commonplace today, but in many places around the world where *Suspiria* was released/shown, it was a jarring shift. As previously mentioned, horror films from around the world contained focal points around monsters, or a mysterious other. Think of what films like *Caligari*, *I vampiri*, and *Il mostro di Frankenstein* have in common: a monster⁴ that terrorizes humans and must be killed or stopped. These classic horror films play on this trope quite heavily, as it worked well to instil fear of a violent other that, while being able to be stopped or was being controlled by a human, proposed a threat. *Suspiria* somewhat follows this concept with its inclusion of witches of folklore, but Argento took this tried and true format and added the giallo spin and more psychoanalysis. *Suspiria* is a film that dives deeper than the surface-level horrors of witches and violence by taking concepts on deep cultural folklore and perverting it into something demonic, grotesque, and psychologically haunting. As Bondanella describes Argento's process, he "managed to give the modern horror film the sense of a magic fairy tale or fable, an innovative style the enabled him to exploit the elements of the subconscious in his audience. (324) Examining this demented-fairytale trademark of Argento, it can be seen how calculated and structured *Suspiria* really is. In terms of subject matter and use of color (an aspect that will be examine more in-depth later), "*Suspiria* is heavily influenced by *Snow White and the Seven Dwarves*," (Quote from Argento, McDonagh, 125), which reinforces Argento's deliberate choices in how he crafted his film. This is just another example of how *Suspiria* reaches to different points in film history, more than the average horror film of *Suspiria*'s time; while most horror was content with just drawing from German expressionism, Argento's film does more to introduce new reasons to be scared, and using frankly un-horrifying inspiration for his film's characteristics.

A final way we can see Argento using giallo to distance his film from German expressionist classics is the fact that violence is depicted at all. *Caligari*, despite being a metaphorical great

⁴ In the case of *Caligari*, the monster is Cesare, granted, but is portrayed as a human stripped of sentience and volition, making him not too different from a typical horror monster.

grandfather to the future of horror, censored itself in ways so the film could be what it was without showing violence. More specifically, while Dr. Caligari uses Cesare to commit murders in the film, we don't actually see the murders take place. Referring to Figure 4.a⁵ from *Caligari*, the film uses a self-censoring tactic of having Cesare's first murder be shown on screen using silhouettes — a proverbial shadow puppet show of murder, as I call it — to avoid causing disturbances in public reception of the film. Compare this to the gratuitous, unrelenting, and graphic violence seen in *Suspiria* and its public reception. In Italy, *Suspiria* grossed £1.43 billion, and another \$1.3 million, which are fairly good numbers. However, American audiences were very quick to notice the intense violence of the film, as seen in a movie review written by Janet Maslin for The New York Times only days after *Suspiria*'s US release. Maslin's review, albeit brief, makes some memorable comments about the film, specifically: with the movie title being "carved out of pulsating glands;" how it has "slender charms [that] will most assuredly be lost on viewers who are squeamish;" and most intriguingly, how Maslin states that *Suspiria* is "really quite funny, during those isolated interludes where no one is bleeding." As we can tell from Maslin's review alone, *Suspiria* and Argento's brand of giallo made for a pretty mixed bag of enjoyment — personally, I can't even tell if Maslin's review is positive or negative. However, she does well to point out the lighting, sets, and other imagery seen in the film that shows *Suspiria*'s connection to German expressionism.

As pointed out in the earliest paragraphs of this paper, *Suspiria* is stuffed full of elements that scream "German expressionism," and that's most apparent in the film's mise-en-scene. Within the umbrella term of mise-en-scene, *Suspiria* is noted by multiple sources and reviews for its striking use of primary colors and how it changes lighting, which are noticeably one of the most important stylistic and plot-driving elements of the film. German expressionism used color and artificial/painted light to create a very shallow, painting-esque effect in the frame. Looking to Figure 3.a, we can see how each of the three characters in the frame resemble the colors of their setting; Cesare's dark clothing render him to a slender black rectangle in the middle of the screen, Dr. Caligari's somewhat dark-brown coat and hat are what help him from becoming one with the

⁵ Index of Figures from *Suspiria* and *Caligari* can be found on pages 8-9 .

walls behind him, and Jane is just barely noticeable, thanks to the identical colors and patterns of her clothes making her body look like a continuation of the lines on the wall behind her. Of course, in terms of *Caligari's* and expressionism time period as a whole, these effects are a mix of deliberate and passive. Being a film from the 1920's, technology was severely limited when it came to the process of tinting and toning images in the frames, so it's mostly expected that the characters are colors that blend into their surroundings. However, *Caligari* used this to its advantage by creating this stylistic use of color in German expressionism that we know and love today. Then, moving fifty years forward in film history, *Suspiria* clearly has many more technological advancements when it comes to color and lights, but that doesn't stop Argento and his creative team from making very similar choices to *Caligari*. In Figure 3.b, this is just a singular example of *Suspiria's* many uses of strikingly harsh lighting to give frames one solid primary color to them. Notice how Sara's face is now the same blistering red color as the source of light coming from behind her in the background. Her white dress is just barely a different hue, and even the darkest corners of the frame are a black/red mix. Once the frame is filled with this primary color, it takes on the same painting quality as frames from *Caligari* are. Since the rest of the film is in regular Technicolor to convey reality, these moments and scenes become a lot more noticeable to us viewers and how it affects our feelings and perceptions of the film. When the entire frame is flooded with hot red light, bathing its subjects completely with its color, our eyes and minds are left imprinted by these moments. Yet despite the technological advantages *Suspiria* has, there are other mise-en-scene elements that don't make use of technology and are a bit more true to its German expressionist roots.

There are two more mise-en-scene elements of both these films that show a very close connection, and those are makeup and set pieces. Makeup used in German expressionism has the effect of making its actors appear cartoonish and exaggerated. This adds to the recurring painting effect that was discussed with color in *Caligari*. Exaggeration is so pivotal to *Caligari*⁶ as seen in Figure 1.a. I was happy to find a frame that contained fairly direct shots of both Caligari himself and Cesare, as both have very unique makeup. Starting with Caligari, his oddly-proportioned face — no

⁶ German expressionism? More like German exaggeration...ism.

offense to the actor — is enhanced by dark lines and areas of gray that give his face deepened crevices and folds, which is underneath the centerpiece of his stark black glasses and topped off with a tall hat, black as night. Also, in moments where Caligari takes off his hat, you'll see that even his hair has the same dark lines spread throughout it to create a more exaggerated appearance. While Cesare's aesthetic is a little more subdued in terms of clothing or accessories, the makeup used on his face, lips, and eyes is what's most iconic⁷. To create the character's balance between life and death, unconscious and sentient, the pale makeup gives Cesare a ghostly appearance, and the darkened lips and angular shadows under his eyes create the effect that Cesare is a hollow shell of a person, which is essentially what he is. *Suspiria* doesn't have as many characters that all have such outlandish makeup, but Figure 1.b shows a key moment where the film uses makeup to get the same effect as *Caligari*'s characters. As Sara's reanimated and grotesque corpse approaches Suzy to murder her, we can see the makeup used to give her this look. There are gashes on her face, chest, and arms, and she's smeared with blood. We as viewers all know this isn't what a real dead body would look like, but that's the point. Every line on Sara's face, especially the circular Caligari's-glasses-esque ones around her eyes, show that her murder was not done by normal humans, and thus strengthens the film's themes that are connected to the occult and how grotesquely the witches mutilated her.

Lastly, both *Caligari* and *Suspiria* have strikingly similar, 2-dimensional sets that create both effects of flatness and an exaggerated blurring of reality. Two figures (2.a and 2.b) from this movie come off as looking nearly identical in structure. In *Caligari*, once the main storyline is over and we re-enter the latter half of the frame story, we see the interior of the insane asylum that our narrator has been in all along. The walls of this room are remarkably flat, which is most noticeable with the three archways in the background, which are much less "archways" than they are just three rounded cutouts from the wall with stairs behind them. The room itself would appear completely flat if it weren't for the human subjects and items of furniture in the midground that give the frame

⁷ This was a perfect opportunity to call his eye makeup "eye-conic" but I remembered this is an academic film paper. That's the last joke, I promise.

some aspects of 3-dimensionality. Now take a look at figure 2.b: other than the presence of a couple different colors, this set is nearly identical. What took me a while to notice is how on both sides of the main cutout of the wall there are four pillars; two on each side. But what I didn't notice is that these pillars are painted on, and not actual 3-dimensional pillars that are real in any sense of the word. And overall, the walls in Figure 2.b appear very sharp and angular due to the shapes on its surface and the stairway in the cutout that appears extremely sharp and symmetrical by the patterns of shapes/colors and the difference in lighting on the left and right sides. Overall, with these examples we've seen, *Suspiria* makes very apparent and conscious stylistic decisions that draw heavily from German expressionism, but uses those elements to create an intensely unique aesthetic.

The long history of horror film has been undoubtedly shaped, swayed, and inspired by works of German expressionism, and throughout that history, we have seen how future filmmakers take these films' groundwork and craft it into new forms. And this process is best seen in Argento's *Suspiria*. What's most important about *Suspiria* and what it does for the horror genre is how it revitalizes the genre by taking a faithful look into the past of German expressionism and fully combining old and new, thanks to technological advancements, while still staying true to key aspects of German expressionism. Argento combines the absurdity of old traditions and mixes it together with psychoanalysis and grotesque violence, thereby introducing viewers to new reasons to be very afraid. And while Argento's films may have a bit avant-garde in these regards, we can see *Suspiria*'s own influence on the horror genre with films like *IT*, *Saw*, *Carrie*, and *Suspiria*'s own 2018 remake. Therefore, it's thanks to *Suspiria* that the horror genre received new life, new directions to pursue, and new audiences to terrify while still doing justice to its Caligarian roots.

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Figure 1.a



Figure 1.b



Figure 2.a

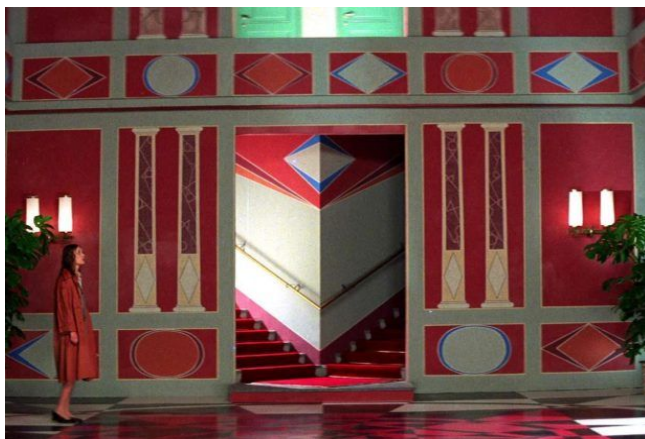


Figure 2.b



Figure 3.a



Figure 3.b



Figure 4.a

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