

***Suspiria*, dir. by Luca Guadagnino** (Amazon Studios, 2018)

It has been clear for quite some time that the age of remakes is upon us. Almost every horror classic has been remade in the last several years, from the lifeless *A Nightmare on Elm Street* (dir. by Samuel Bayer, 2009), the pleasantly surprising *The Evil Dead* (dir. by Fede Alvarez, 2013), and of course Stephen King's *It: Chapter 1* and *Chapter 2* (dir. by Andy Muschietti, 2017 and 2019). It seemed inevitable, then, that Dario Argento's *Suspiria* (1977) would eventually also be remade. Naturally, when the project was announced in 2008, it was met with much hesitation; Argento's film is beloved among the horror community, memorable for its shocking and colourful visuals, violent gore, and the Goblin soundtrack. Many modern remakes add little to the originals, simply seeking to capitalise on the success of a known franchise. Thankfully, Luca Guadagnino's 'reimagining', as he has chosen to call it, is something else entirely. Argento's original film takes inspiration from Thomas De Quincey's *Suspiria de Profundis* (1845), which introduced the concept of 'Our Ladies of Sorrow' or, as they are known in Argento's films, the 'Three Mothers'. In De Quincey's essay, they are three witches who rule over their respective dominions on Earth; Mater Lachrymarum (Our Lady of Tears), Mater Suspiriorum (Our Lady of Sighs), and Mater Tenebrarum (Our Lady of Darkness), with *Suspiria* focusing on Suspiriorum. However, where Argento's *Suspiria* simply introduces the concept of the Three Mothers, Luca Guadagnino roots his film in the mythology and expands it, in turn adapting it into something much grander.

Suspiria (2018) opens with the character of Patricia Hingle attending a session with her psychotherapist, Josef Klemperer (Tilda Swinton, credited under the name 'Lutz Ebersdorf'). Patricia is adamant that the prestigious Markos Dance Company, of which she was a student, is actually a coven of witches who have dedicated themselves to the Three Mothers. The coven is headed by Helena Markos (Swinton), who claims to be Mater Suspiriorum and, according to Patricia, watches her every move and 'wants to get inside of [her]'. Meanwhile, aspiring dancer Susie Bannion (Dakota Johnson) auditions for the Company and is accepted. Madame Blanc (also played by Swinton), the academy's choreographer and Markos's second-in-command, entrusts her with the role of the Protagonist in her iconic dance, 'Volk', bringing a seemingly oblivious Susie under the influence of Markos. It is revealed to the audience that whoever dances as the Protagonist will serve as a host body for Markos, whose own body has become aged and decrepit. In addition, a power struggle rages between Markos and Blanc for control over the coven, dividing loyalties among the witches. As Susie becomes engrossed in working with Madame

Blanc and Volk, other dancers become increasingly suspicious of the Company, with the film culminating in a ritual, conducted with the intention of hollowing out Susie's body for Markos. However, Susie reveals herself to be the true Mater Suspiriorum, outing Markos as a liar and a false god, then summoning Death to dispose of her and her faithful followers.

In *Suspiria*, Guadagnino explores themes of female domination, what it means to be complicit, and the lasting consequences of war, all of which flow together seamlessly in a cinematic event that is uncompromising in its vision. Where Argento's original is a fairly straightforward slasher film that incorporates elements of De Quincey's essay, Guadagnino's adaptation takes the mythology one step further, allowing for an almost two-and-a-half-hour spectacle that culminates in a phantasmagorical explosion. The film follows a wave of 'elevated' horror films, with *Get Out* (dir. by Jordan Peele, 2017), *A Quiet Place* (dir. by John Krasinski, 2018), and *Hereditary* (dir. by Ari Aster, 2018) being standouts. While these films have little in common, they have been categorised by numerous critics as a horror subgenre that seeks to go beyond simply evoking fear; instead, they are seen as having 'something to say' and as employing horror in the service of more than a superficial jump scare. One of the most interesting examples of this is Aster's *Hereditary*, which uses typical horror tropes such as demonic possession and the occult to explore familial trauma and grief. Rather than relying solely on traditional horror tactics, the horror of these films is felt in their tense atmosphere and thematic content, and it isn't surprising that Guadagnino's film has been assigned this label. Tyler Aquilina describes *Suspiria* as 'mixing a prestige director and artful filmmaking with some B-movie gore and thrills', and although screenwriter David Kajganich rejects the 'elevated horror' label, considering it to be 'a bullshit concept', the film's themes and prioritisation of complex storytelling over jump scares reflect a more thoughtful approach.¹

To Guadagnino, 'cinema is about emotions' and, in the wake of his tear-jerking Best-Picture-nominated film *Call Me By Your Name* (2017), it isn't hard to see the significance of emotion in his work.² *Suspiria* is a deeply emotional film, albeit not in the same way as Guadagnino's previous work. Where *Call Me By Your Name* centres on one relationship, the

¹ Tyler Aquilina, 'Why Horror Is Having Its Moment', *The Hollywood Reporter*, 28 August 2018 <<https://www.hollywoodreporter.com/heat-vision/suspiria-why-horror-is-thriving-once-more-1137706>> [accessed 16 September 2020]; and Stacie Ponder and Anthony Hudson, 'Episode 82 – *Suspiria* With Luca Guadagnino And David Kajganich', *Gaylords Of Darkness* <<https://gaylords-of-darkness.pinecast.co/episode/561ad4692b3c4f15/episode-82-suspiria-with-luca-guadagnino-and-david-kajganich>> [accessed 24 September 2020].

² Luca Guadagnino, 'Luca Guadagnino on his Visceral, "Slow-Burn" Take on *Suspiria*', *Dazed*, 12 November 2018 <<http://www.dazeddigital.com/film-tv/article/42170/1/luca-guadagnino-suspiria-call-me-by-your-name-interview>> [accessed 14 April 2019].

intense romance between Elio and Oliver, *Suspiria* is much more of an ensemble piece. The film focuses on several interpersonal relationships, such as Klemperer's guilt surrounding his wife Anke's (Jessica Harper) disappearance during the Holocaust, which ties in with a larger thread that is woven throughout the film surrounding World War II. The film is set in 1977 Germany during the Cold War, but the effect of the Second World War is a looming presence, both over Klemperer and the dance company itself. Madame Blanc shares with Susie the Company's struggle to keep afloat during the war, and stresses that the art they create is a reaction to the oppression of the Nazi regime. It is in this mixture of historical detail, the gritty backdrop of 1977's 'German Autumn', tensely emotional moments, and supernatural horror that Guadagnino's directing style truly shines through. This is especially evident during Klemperer's supposed reunion with his wife at their second home. The scene is a heartbreaking one that sees Klemperer overcome with relief and remorse, but it quickly turns to terror when it is revealed that Anke is actually one of the matrons in disguise, and he is viciously dragged into the Company.

When questioned about Swinton's portrayal of Klemperer (who functions as the male lead), Kajganich said that 'both Luca and [himself] were adamant that the male gaze never intrude'.³ As such, Swinton's portrayal of him ensures that a female presence is central even when the focus is on a male character. This reasoning is especially evident when we take into account the lack of male speaking roles in the film; aside from Klemperer, there are only two – a pair of police officers investigating Patricia's disappearance, who appear only in a handful of scenes. Guadagnino utilises these characters to flip the male gaze on its head when their investigation takes them to the Company, and we witness them being stripped, mocked, and laughed at by members of the coven. This mirrors the climax of Klemperer's subplot, which sees him used as a forced witness to the witches' ritual. He is berated by Ms Huller, one of the teachers, who snaps, 'when women tell you the truth, you don't pity them. You tell them they have delusions', in reference to Patricia, whom he assumed was mentally ill rather than believing that the Company housed a witches' coven. In light of the #MeToo movement, this moment is especially powerful, and highlights the significance of female unity within the film. However, the themes of war and fascism remain present even within the coven, and Guadagnino never allows the audience to forget that an abundance of power, in anyone's hands, is a dangerous thing. Helena Markos is presented as a fascistic dictator; we see the

³ David Kajganich, 'Suspiria: Why Tilda Swinton is Plating a Mysterious Old Man', *Vanity Fair*, 25 September 2018 <https://www.vanityfair.com/hollywood/2018/09/tilda-swinton-suspiria-josef-klempere-makeup-lutz-ebersdorf> [accessed 4 August 2019].

lengths she is willing to go to achieve her own ends, including hollowing out an innocent girl's body and eradicating the girl's soul to make room for herself. The message is clear; power corrupts. After it is revealed that Susie Bannion as the true Mater Suspiriorum, come to restore order, the coven's structure is entirely overthrown, making clear that replacing Markos with Blanc, another contender for the position of leader and one who was complicit in Markos' actions, would not have been enough to end its corrupt practices, and that total reform was the only way forward.

Among the rich storytelling and prominent themes, another highlight of *Suspiria* is undoubtedly the score, crafted by Radiohead frontman Thom Yorke. One of the most memorable aspects of Argento's film is the Goblin soundtrack that accompanies it, with its prog-rock sensibilities and unexpected guitar riffs. Yorke's score takes nothing from that original soundtrack, instead opting for a slower, less obvious approach. Where the Goblin score is abrasive and cuts through every scene in the original film, Yorke's is piano-led and hinges on guiding the sense of mood and atmosphere in a more subtle and less intrusive way. This technique is especially effective during the climax of the film, which sees Susie reveal herself as Mother Suspiriorum and remove all of Markos' supporters from the coven. The music swells as Susie explodes the heads of all those who oppose her, and Yorke's soft and haunting vocals make the moment oddly emotional, seamlessly melding horror and beauty. The mixing of horrific imagery with beauty is something of a theme within the film, and a standout scene that cannot be overlooked is Susie's first dance in the academy. As Susie prepares to dance the lead in Volk, Madame Blanc touches her feet and hands, casting a spell. Simultaneously, Olga, another dancer, attempts to flee the academy, only to be lured into an eerie mirrored practice room. As Susie begins to dance, Olga's body is viciously yanked around the other room, her movements paralleling Susie's, as though she is unconsciously contorting Olga's body grotesquely. It is one of, if not the most memorable scene in the film due to its shocking nature, and perfectly encapsulates the tone of the film.

The film has received polarising reviews from critics, with some marvelling at its accomplishments and others dismissing it entirely. Many cited the film's length as a problem; at two hours and twenty-six minutes, it is almost an hour longer than the original film. In addition, the Klemperer subplot feels slightly out of place upon first viewing, while other elements, such as the significance of Susie's Mormon background, remain underdeveloped (possibly explained by the fact that Guadagnino himself stated that he struggled to edit the film to under three hours). Nevertheless, *Suspiria* is so beautifully crafted that everything

comes together remarkably well, and the film is one that benefits from repeat viewings, which highlight the extent to which it tells a complete story, one which weaves itself throughout each subplot seamlessly. Each scene, each character, each exchange of dialogue is essential to the overarching story, which ultimately hinges on the notion that those who abuse their positions of power must be held accountable for their actions. Through these themes, Guadagnino hammers home the impact of Susie's words to Klemperer at the end of the film; 'we need guilt, Doctor. And shame. But not yours.'

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