



Article

Fairy Tale Sources and Rural Settings in Dario Argento's Supernatural Horror

Peter Vorissis

Independent Researcher, Los Angeles, CA 91411, USA; pvorissis@gmail.com

Abstract: This article examines three of Dario Argento's supernatural horror films (*Suspiria*, *Phenomena*, and *Dark Glasses*) and their use of fairy tale imagery and narratives, which distinguishes them from murder-mystery-oriented *giallo* films. In them, Argento locates his characters, rather than in urban environments, in rural spaces (forests, fields, mountains) where the supernatural elements of their stories blossom. *Suspiria* represents a primarily aesthetic exploration of parallels between fairy tales and contemporary horror, while *Phenomena* uses these two modes to examine the conflict between the rational and irrational, the natural and the supernatural. *Dark Glasses* initially appears to be one of his more traditional *gialli*, but it abandons these tropes with a simplified plot evoking the story of "Little Red Riding Hood"; this shift is accomplished by moving the action of the film out of Rome and into the dark forests of the countryside. *Dark Glasses*, I argue, therefore represents a self-conscious move to unite in a single film the two major strands of Argento's filmography and to expose some fundamental elements of his general cinematic approach—namely, the unique capacity of stylized aesthetics and irrational elements to convey the experience of very real, human terror and evil.

Keywords: fairy tale; horror; *giallo*; Italian cinema; Dario Argento



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1. The Cinematic *Giallo*: Settings and Sources

The Italian cinematic subgenre known as the *giallo*, which flourished from the 1960s to the 1980s, is often identified by its consistent use of specific tropes and aesthetic devices—a killer wearing black leather gloves; a protagonist, often a foreigner and/or an artist, who witnesses a murder; an important clue that is decontextualized or only partially perceived; baroque, aestheticized murder scenes; highly stylized lighting, camera movements, and sets; etc. Another aspect of these films by which they might be identified and categorized is their hybridity, one of the *giallo*'s key aesthetic and thematic concerns. This is reflected in its frequent use of eerie liminal spaces and obsessive presentation of other media, especially images and works of visual art (paintings, mirrors, photographs), as key clues in its narratives. *Gialli*, which take their name from the yellow covers of Mondadori's crime and mystery novels, are often structured as murder mysteries following protagonists embroiled in a series of killings who must discover the identity of the murderer in order to save their own lives and, in some cases, exonerate themselves. The most obvious and significant manifestation of this self-aware hybridity is therefore its tendency to bring together these rather standard murder mystery stories and the lurid aesthetics of horror movies.

Dario Argento is widely considered the subgenre's foremost practitioner and its best-known representative internationally. His first film, *L'uccello dalle piume di cristallo* (*The Bird with the Crystal Plumage* 1970), proved popular, inspired a slew of imitators, and catalyzed the development of the subgenre throughout the 1970s. This and many of his other films (including *4 mosche di velluto grigio* (*Four Flies on Grey Velvet* 1971), *Profondo rosso* (*Deep Red* 1975), *Tenebre* (1982), *Opera* (1987), and others), as well as those of other directors working in the subgenre, adhere to the standard definition of the *giallo* as a murder-mystery-horror hybrid; they involve protagonists trying to discover the identity of a blade-wielding killer,

whose motives (most often stemming from not particularly nuanced depictions of “aberrant psychologies”¹ or more pragmatic concerns, including vengeance and financial gain²) and methods, while often outlandish, are decidedly not supernatural in origin³.

The *giallo*, as both a cinematic and literary genre, has always been a hybrid form, and has a long history of interaction with and reflection upon other genres. As Fabrizio Foni points out, from the very early days of the literary *giallo*'s popularity in Italy, “several Italian authors decided to explore the terrains of crime fiction, mixing detection with sentimentalism and adventure (Pistelli 182), but also aspects of the Gothic, the macabre and science fiction” (Foni 2023, p. 67). The creative importation of devices from other literary genres into literary *gialli* eventually made them a “fusion of detective fiction, psychical research, crimenews sensationalism, weird science and—presumably—cinematic influences” (Foni 2023, p. 69). Similarly, a very basic definition of the later cinematic *giallo* underscores its hybridity, describing these films as combining crime or detective narratives with the aesthetics and violence of horror movies. As in the case of its literary forebears, however, the Gothic also played a significant role in the development of the cinematic genre. Roberto Curti discusses how Italian Gothic films were influenced by literature (for example, “Fulci’s Gothic tales, which sported literary influences (from Lovecraft to Henry James)” (Curti 2019, p. 6)), while during the period 1957–79 “new perspectives in the [cinematic Gothic] genre emerged, such as the inclusion of elements of the *giallo*” (Curti 2023, p. 76). In relation to the Gothic and Argento’s work specifically, Curti points out that influence was a two-way street: on the one hand, “the rise to prominence of the Dario Argento-inspired thrillers ... prompted a partial reshaping of the [cinematic Gothic] genre” during the 1970s, while at the same time, “many *gialli* included such themes as precognition, séances, tarot and mind reading, whereas several crossovers borrowed the black-gloved killers and graphic murder scenes from Argento’s films and transplanted them into typical Gothic scenarios” (Curti 2023, p. 85). These pseudo-supernatural, Gothic-influenced trappings of some of Argento’s *gialli* (most notably *Deep Red*) are significant but do not necessarily come to predominate in the films’ plots; however, as Curti also notes, in *Suspiria*, “Argento developed the irrational elements of his *gialli*” by revising “old-style Gothic elements ... through the director’s unique visual flair and taste for over-the-top violence” (Curti 2023, p. 87). The histories of the *giallo* as a broader cinematic genre and of Argento’s films as specific, especially prominent examples of it are, therefore, inextricably linked with the Gothic, detective fiction, and literary and cinematic horror. I will weave in yet another strand—that of the literary fairy tale, which itself came to bear imprints of Gothic horror—that is aesthetically and narratively very informative in Argento’s exploration of the irrational side of his *oeuvre* in his explicitly supernatural films.

Rather than using Agatha Christie-style whodunnits as their literary point of departure, these supernatural films take their major narrative cues from fairy tales written down by the Brothers Grimm or Charles Perrault. This article will focus on three of these films—*Suspiria* (1977), *Phenomena* (1985), and *Occhiali neri* (*Dark Glasses* 2022). The former two of these are overtly supernatural, involving witchcraft, telepathic communication with insects, and other fantastic details; the latter, while it (at least to begin with) incorporates tropes closer to the standard *giallo* (a black-gloved killer dispatches numerous victims), is nevertheless rather unorthodox in that it lacks the central mystery around which such trappings are normally wrapped, instead consisting largely in the killer’s hounding of the protagonist, who neither seeks, nor really needs, to discover his identity. The following discussions of *Suspiria* (Argento’s first supernatural film) and *Phenomena* (his return to supernatural horror after the more standard *giallo* *Tenebre*) will identify the affinities between fairy tales, horror films, and *gialli* that clearly interest Argento, and the analysis of *Dark Glasses*, his most recent film, seeks to position it as the director’s self-conscious exploration of the subterranean connections between the two main strains of his filmography (the murder mystery *giallo* and the supernatural horror film).

The *giallo* has often been characterized as an “urban” form of horror. This is generally true (for example, all of Argento’s more realistic murder mystery *gialli* take place in cities),

but not in all cases. A good number of films meeting the generic criteria in fact take place in rural locations (e.g., the collection of dark waterside houses in Mario Bava's influential *Ecologia del delitto* (*A Bay of Blood* 1971); the isolated cliff-top villa in which the second half of Sergio Martino's *I corpi presentano tracce di violenza carnale* (*Torso* 1973) takes place; or the provincial backwater of Lucio Fulci's *Non si sevizia un paperino* (*Don't Torture a Duckling* 1972), to give just a few notable examples). While we may not be able, therefore, to make such menacing city scenery a decisive criterion of generic categorization, we must also recognize that many *gialli* are indeed emphatically urban in their setting and in their preoccupations, and notably more so than many of the American slasher films that they largely inspired, which tend to play up the isolation of the countryside or relish in tearing into the perceived safety of the suburbs.

One way to consider the occasional but significant use of rural settings in *gialli* is as a means of exploring differences, or, in the case of movies that pointedly juxtapose them with city scenes or characters, tensions between the urban and that which exists beyond its circumscribed sphere. The *giallo* is, in general, interested in the conditions of the modern subject in the twentieth century, taking up in particular the explicitly constructed urban vistas of postwar Italy as a framework through which to explore ideas of interpersonal and social alienation, gendered viewing practices, and the saturation of images that constitutes modern/postmodern life. When they do employ rural settings, they can constitute the flipside of this coin, creating opportunities through which the films can explore ideas of provincialism, historical stasis, class difference, etc., which become more visible across this geographic gap and atmospheric differentiation. To provide one example, Fulci's *Don't Torture a Duckling* takes place entirely in the fictional Southern town of Accendura, in which a string of child murders and the ensuing paranoia enflames the region's latent xenophobia, leading to a horrific scene in which a local "witch" is brutally murdered by vigilantes in retribution for the crimes she, in actuality, did not commit (nor is she really a witch) (Fulci 1972). Several of the main characters come from the big city and find themselves at odds with the provincial townspeople, lamenting their hostility towards outsiders and their overpowering superstitions. As Austin Fisher points out, "Fulci's film utilises this local significance of the setting to provide a stage for a *giallo* murder mystery around a series of child killings, and also one on which to examine a culture clash between a dark, benighted underbelly and the onset of cosmopolitan modernity" (Fisher 2016, p. 168). The culprit, it transpires, is the local priest, a narrative move in which Fulci pointedly paints the Catholic Church as an institution harboring and tacitly legitimizing the real wolf lurking amongst the flock and even occupying a position of prominence and respect—a metropolitan envoy sent to the provinces and tasked with retaining control through the buttressing of a religious institution that, per the movie's point of view, takes advantage of and perpetuates superstitious and prejudicial ideas (Fulci 1972). I provide this very brief gloss of certain aspects of just one film to point out the kinds of themes and topics a rural setting can allow a *giallo* film to explore, and which would not be as easily incorporated into a city narrative (or, at least, not with the same vigor and venom as Fulci evinces in this remarkably cynical commentary on the institutional predations of the Church and deep-seated intolerance persisting well into the second half of the twentieth century in rural Italy).

It is worth highlighting this type of approach as a counterexample to the main subject of this essay: the Argento films that take place in rural settings, beyond the zone of the city, concern themselves much more with metaphysical, abstract, or primordial threats than does Fulci's concretely political *giallo*. Argento's forests, fields, and mountains are, nevertheless, zones of eerie otherness. This has to do with Argento's approach in these particular films: rather than basing them purely on the generic template of a murder mystery with an identifiable assailant, Argento mixes elements of that framework with narrative structures, themes, and images lifted from traditional fairy tales, thereby allowing for the supernatural to encroach upon these stories. I see Argento's use of rural settings as, rather than a means of exploring the specific differences of lived experience beyond the boundaries of the city, a

primarily aesthetic choice that stems from these dark and open spaces' evocations of a kind of pre-urban vulnerability that becomes a vehicle for his cinematic elaboration of suspense and horror; indeed, as cinematographer Luciano Tovoli points out when discussing his work on *Suspiria*, "a horror film brings to the surface some of the ancestral fears hidden within us"⁴ (cited in Venturini 2014, p. 138). Likewise, Argento's use of the fairy tale narrative template represents a departure from the almost always convoluted, often totally far-fetched, murder plots of standard *gialli* and a movement towards older stories that traffic in primordial kinds of fear and images unmoored from the specificities of historical time.

Shawn Edrei and Mayrev Koren-Kuik point out that fairy tales present "a specific binary configuration in the representation of space, consisting of an enclosed human community (for example, a village or city) and a space which is defined as Other" such as "a dark forest . . . a haunted lake, or a seemingly-abandoned castle" (Edrei and Koren-Kuik 2019, pp. 13–14). In their general adherence to this delineation, the films Argento sets outside of significant urban zones align well with traditional fairy tales. This adherence also further distinguishes them from other rural *gialli*; in Bava's *A Bay of Blood*, for example, the carnage is catalyzed by avarice and an attempt to circumvent inheritance laws. But Argento's films display no such consideration of the legal, the bureaucratic, or the otherwise worldly. They are depictions of ancient evils and deep-seated anxieties—of flesh-eating monsters, child-sacrificing witches, and unyielding predators—that he distances, thematically, aesthetically, and geographically, from the recognizably "everyday". It is also true that Argento's films, even when set in cities, occasionally blur the lines of delineation between the urban and the rural through the use of specific locations that pointedly evoke the latter, or suggest the incursion of untrammelled nature into constructed spaces. *Four Flies*, for example, includes a set piece in which a character is stalked and killed in a leafy park that has closed for the night; the key murder sequence of *Trauma*, despite the film's notable Minneapolis setting, plays out against the rainy woodlands at the far edge of a backyard; and *Deep Red* and *Non ho sonno* (*Sleepless* 2001) feature decrepit villas with overgrown grounds. Likewise, in these films, Argento makes use of atmospheric elements that are strikingly incongruous within their urban frames—torrential downpours that render geography and architecture illegible, the inexplicable, sudden desolation of busy public spaces, or profound darkness. However useful an urban–rural/crime–supernatural dichotomy might be for general categorization of the works of Argento's *oeuvre*, such designations are evidently imperfect because Argento himself, to different degrees in different films, is also always playing with and subverting them. Nevertheless, in the first two films I will discuss, it appears that their rural primary settings, recalling their fairy tale sources, represent a choice that empowers Argento to indulge in supernatural themes with more freedom than is generally the case in the primarily urban films, in which these elements may be peripherally present but less developed. The countryside in Argento's fairy tale films is an aesthetically heightened zone in which he centers supernatural elements and allows them to play significant roles; through his use of light, color, and extensive distortions of landscapes by natural phenomena like rain, wind, and darkness, Argento immerses his characters in a fairy tale world in which the rules and structures of the city fall away.

Again, my attention to the forest and mountainside primary settings of these specific fairy-tale-influenced films is not intended to imply that they are completely unconnected from his other *gialli*, but rather to emphasize this as a manifestation of their distinctive literary influences. As I have stated above, the form is already a hybrid with literary origins; Argento's supplement of the fairy tale means that these films clearly push at the edges of the cinematic *giallo* proper, but they also constitute a hybrid of a hybrid. *Suspiria* and *Phenomena*, in particular, involve significant investigative quests, the difference being that instead of trying to discover the identity of a human killer, their protagonists use clearly presented clues to verify a terrible truth (for example, that a coven of witches runs a dance academy) or track a monstrous killer to his lair. While some might not consider these films true examples of the genre because they depart from it in their incorporation of the supernatural, I would argue for their qualified inclusion in the broader *giallo* category

because they nevertheless still include many of the subgenre's standard tropes, only viewed through the kaleidoscopic lens of the fairy tales that also inspire them both aesthetically and narratively. They are *gialli* with a difference: *Suspiria* involves the investigation of a magical mystery to which the audience already knows the impossible answer, and *Phenomena* entails the use of fantastic detection techniques like telepathic communication to uncover answers and save its protagonist from her assailants.

While my argument here hinges on a certain distinction between Argento's urban *gialli* and rural fairy tale films, it therefore also proposes a certain hazy generic continuity between the two types, positioning them as, respectively, a sort of more clearly defined, brightly lit metropolitan center and an overgrown, shadowed periphery or hinterland, between which exist subterranean passages that link them to each other. In this sense, they are examples of the specifically Italian genre Fabio Camilletti calls *l'orrore popolare*, a term he prefers to the Anglo-American term "folk horror" for the way it better "grasps the contradictions" of a "profoundly schizophrenic culture, which has always located its distinct trait in the (discordant) coexistence of ancient and modern, high and low, center and periphery"⁵ (Camilletti 2021, p. 14). In his inventory of texts that represent this genre, Camilletti lists the "labyrinthine Rome"⁶ (Camilletti 2021, p. 13) of Argento's films; in the supernatural horror films, Argento leads us into the darkened maze of the forest, and in *Dark Glasses*, he finally explores the zone where the trees shade almost imperceptibly into looming city walls.

2. *Suspiria* and *Phenomena*: Witches, Magic, and Mystery

Suspiria, which Argento co-wrote with Daria Nicolodi, follows a young American ballet student, Suzy Bannion⁷, who arrives in Germany to attend a prestigious dance academy. Over the course of the film, several students are gruesomely killed by mysterious, otherworldly forces, and Suzy begins to believe that the school is run by a dangerous coven of witches. Following her intuition and certain clues, she finds her way to the coven's secret meeting place deep in the school, kills their leader, and escapes as the school is destroyed around her (Argento 1977). The plot is incredibly simple, but *Suspiria* is regarded mainly for its arresting visuals. The school itself is an elaborate building with strange angles, oversized doorways, and ominous decoration, and Argento and Tovoli light these spaces in deep, vibrant reds, greens, and blues. Argento has said that he was "trying to reproduce the colour of Walt Disney's *Snow White*; it has been said from the beginning that Technicolor lacked subdued shades, was without nuances—like cut-out cartoons" (McDonagh 2010, p. 138) and that "in an early draft [he] even planned to have the action take place in a child's school where the witches were teachers who tortured the children" (McDonagh 2010, p. 125). This cartoon representation of a fairy tale clearly informs *Suspiria*'s color palette and stylized aesthetic approach, but it is also worth noting the childlike quality that Argento himself underscores. This can be seen in the ways the characters interact, the infantile language and gestures they use, connecting the film's depiction of dark magic to a certain childhood credulity and positioning Suzy, his protagonist, parallel to the child heroes of many fairy tales.

The highly stylized nature of *Suspiria*'s interiors is echoed in Argento's depiction of the forest that surrounds the Dance Academy. In the opening, a terrible rainstorm rages as Suzy rides in a taxi to the school. When she arrives, she witnesses another student, Pat Hingle, leaving the building in a panic and rushing off, on foot, into the surrounding forest. After some confusion, Suzy is told to return to the Academy the next day, and, as her taxi heads back into town, she glimpses the frightened figure of Pat, still running through the woods (Argento 1977). Threading her way between the towering trunks of trees that stretch off interminably into the darkness, rendered hazy by the driving rain that functions as a distorting screen, Pat becomes an unspecified, almost archetypal figure—a girl lost in the dark woods—that Suzy watches through the window of the taxi, almost as if she were looking at a page in a storybook.

Suspiria abounds in unexplained malevolent incidents set into motion by the arcane machinations of the coven of witches that Suzy soon learns runs the Dance Academy (e.g., the murders of Pat and Sara, both students who discovered the existence of the coven, by a mysterious, hairy, and clawed hand; the appearance of the ancient Directress Helena Markos, who can turn invisible and whose vanquishing results in a magical tempest tearing apart the school; and the reanimation of Sara's corpse as a murderous, knife-wielding zombie) (Argento 1977). L. Andrew Cooper states that "the evil in *Suspiria* is the classic evil of the supernatural fairy tale" (Cooper 2012, p. 77) and that "*Suspiria's* irrational moments—the too-high-to-be-an-entrance entrance, the dancer's weakness that begins with a look from a stranger holding a talisman, the gentle guide dog that suddenly kills its master—[are] motivated by an invisible, magical agency that the film represents through sound and editing" (Cooper 2012, p. 84).

By identifying the film's antagonists and many of its significant events as proper to the fairy tale, we might be tempted to locate the film itself in what Katharine Young calls "the fairy-tale world" (Young 2018, p. 77). She goes on to explain, however, that "Phenomena that would be supernatural if they occurred in the realm of the ordinary are natural in the fairy-tale world" and that "the supernatural is simply constitutive of the fairy-tale world and no longer evokes the awe, horror, or fear it would in the ordinary world" (Young 2018, p. 215). If we subscribe strictly to this delineation of narrative worlds, it would seem, perhaps, that *Suspiria* might not in fact take place in the "fairy-tale world", as Suzy and others certainly experience "awe, horror, [or] fear" as a result of the supernatural forces they encounter. In her quest to find out what is happening at the Dance Academy, Suzy even meets up with a psychiatrist and a professor who tell her the history of the establishment and provide explanations for the existence of witchcraft (capped off with the cryptic but incredibly evocative adage "Bad luck isn't brought by broken mirrors, but by broken minds" (Argento 1977, 01:13:31–01:13:36)). But if in *Suspiria* the supernatural is present, though not, as Young puts it, "simply constitutive of the fairy-tale world" because of the ways in which its characters respond to these forces and events, why does the world the movie depicts feel, nevertheless, so different from that of Argento's other *gialli*, so pointedly alien from our own real world?

If the characters seem to react (to at least a certain extent) in more or less realistic ways to the magic they encounter, they nevertheless fail to comment at all upon the even more exaggerated aesthetics of the spaces they inhabit, which resemble a German Expressionist film or garishly colored cartoon more than they do any sort of realistic rendering of buildings or natural environments. As Cooper points out, *Suspiria* "[creates] a colorful, oneiric, fairy-tale world that contrasts sharply with the cold metropolitan spaces of the *gialli*" (Cooper 2012, p. 75). Instead of naturalistic colors and lighting, "Argento offers a Poe-esque sensorial palette of forces designed to frighten and arouse" made up of "lurid colours [that] lack nuance and assault the sensorium with their perverse mimicry of the Disney cartoon spectrum" (Powell 2012, p. 169). The characters' taking for granted of these incredibly unreal hues, the out-of-proportion and ostentatiously artificial interiors, the forest that is transformed into an almost ornamental motif, the cataclysmic rain, and other aesthetic elements represents, at least, the presence of a particular *form* of the supernatural—an alienating aesthetic approach that makes *Suspiria's* setting a fairy tale world, one that is clearly *not* meant to resemble or replicate our own extra-diegetic reality. Tovoli, the film's director of photography, has said that, in order to make the world of *Suspiria* into "a total abstraction of what we refer to as 'everyday reality,' [he] used normally comforting primary colors only in their purest essence, making them immediately, surprisingly violent and provocative⁸" (cited in Venturini 2014, p. 138).

Even within clear-cut examples of texts that take place in "fairy-tale worlds", we can locate this kind of aesthetic estrangement as part and parcel of the experience of the supernatural. Lorna Piatti-Farnell locates a source of this strategy of alienation in the influence of popular Gothic literature on "literary fairy tales from the early nineteenth century [which] proposed disturbing narratives of alienation, entrapment, and perversions"

(Piatti-Farnell 2021, p. 282). In one variant of “Little Red Cap” (or “Little Red Riding Hood”) collected by the Brothers Grimm in their *Children’s and Household Tales*, we find this strange but telling detail: “Meanwhile, Little Red Cap had been running around looking for flowers. When she finally had so many she couldn’t carry them all, she suddenly remembered Grandmother and set off again on the path to her house. She was surprised to find the door open, and when she stepped into the house, she had such a strange feeling that she thought to herself: ‘Oh, my goodness, I’m usually so glad to be at Grandmother’s, but today I feel so nervous’” (Grimm and Grimm 1857, pp. 141–42). There are no specific details here, just the general sense that something is “off”, a relatable and inexplicable sense of unease, “a strange feeling” which seems to render a familiar space, her Grandmother’s house, uncanny. This passage could be read as a description of Red Riding Hood’s intuition, but it also demonstrates the incredible transformative potential of fear and, in the fairy tale’s terms, the ability of the lurking presence of danger or evil to make the ordinary “strange”. Indeed, “the spookiness of the grandmother’s house, while momentarily suggestive of the supernatural, is promptly connected to the very tangible presence of the Wolf” (Piatti-Farnell 2021, p. 289). Whereas this sensation is a brief but important “Gothic addition” (Piatti-Farnell 2021, p. 289) of an element of mystery and terror to the original literary fairy tale, the medium of film allows Argento to elaborate and embellish upon it in visceral, visual ways through *Suspiria*’s unique and striking style, making it a natural extension of the interests of the literary fairy tale via a medium that offers different avenues to explore them.

There are other crucial ways in which the literary fairy tales of the Brothers Grimm influence *Suspiria*. Piatti-Farnell’s discussion highlights another distinctively Gothic trope common to both—“the discovery of secrets, which often puts the heroine in danger” (Piatti-Farnell 2021, p. 288). Indeed, upon Suzy’s arrival at the Academy, “secret” is one of the two words she is able to make out through the raging storm as Pat Hingle flees. (The other is “irises”, which ends up being the key to this secret; a painted iris on a mural turns out to be a hidden switch that reveals and unlocks a doorway leading to the coven’s inner sanctum.) The central secret—that the school is run by a coven of witches—is the main driver of characters’ actions in the film: first, Sara attempts to discover the coven’s meeting place, which, more than merely endangering her, results in her violent death; then, the gruesome murders are the results of the witches’ attempts to preserve that secret; and finally, after Sara’s disappearance, Suzy takes up her quest and sets out to find her friend by following the clues she left behind (Argento 1977). That the bulk of the action in the film is restricted to the Academy parallels how “the importance of set ups such as isolated mansions and dark forests was emphasised” (Piatti-Farnell 2021, p. 286) in the Gothic-influenced fairy tales of the Brothers Grimm, and suggests a connection between the structure as a clearly delineated site of evil and the horror film’s use of haunted houses or other cursed locations more broadly. When we consider *Suspiria*’s deployment of specific tropes which stem from Gothic literature’s documented influence on the literary fairy tale, we might reflect also upon a fundamental affinity between the cinematic *giallo* and the literary fairy tale—that they are both generically hybrid forms that come together especially productively in a work like *Suspiria*.

Another element of *Suspiria* that aligns the film more with fairy tale narratives than a standard *giallo* or another ostensibly realist film is its inclusion of the “*metaphysical constants*, ways of being that are particular to that reality. . . of the fairy-tale world” (Young 2018, p. 215, emphasis in original). Young provides a lengthy list of these constants, not all of which are applicable to Argento’s fairy tale films, but several of which constitute important aspects of the films’ plots or furnish significant tropes. These include the following: “Animals talk⁹; ... Untoward things happen in the forest; ... Punishments are cruel: beheading, burning, blinding, drowning, pushing out a tower window, poisoning, stabbing, rolling in a barrel spiked with nails, cutting off hands; ... murder is pretty frequent; ... Curiosity is dangerous; Interdictions are always violated; ... Girls are often struck either silent, still, or (apparently) dead; ... Witches, wizards, and fairies are natural to this realm” (Young 2018, pp. 215–17).

The third constant (concerning “cruel punishments”), in particular, should be emphasized when it comes to *Suspiria*, a film noted for its gore and its use of vibrant, paint-like red blood—hearts are gouged with daggers, faces slashed with glass, limbs twisted in razor wire, throats sliced by blades or devoured by hounds, eyes poked out with pins (Argento 1977). The violence meted out in this film is excessive and, through the aestheticized nature of its representation, extravagant. This gruesome but clearly artificial gore is another way in which it adheres to these fairy tale source texts and links them to the modern horror film. It is also another marker of *Suspiria*’s setting in a visibly unreal world. That this violence is inflicted almost exclusively upon young women relates to another constant (“Girls are often struck either silent, still, or [apparently] dead”) of the fairy tale that parallels the proclivity of the modern horror movie (especially the *giallo*) to depict and often fetishize violence against women. I do not believe that Argento is attempting any kind of critique, feminist or otherwise, by inviting this comparison, but rather that he is merely content to zero in on a certain continuity between the older literary genre and the newer cinematic one as it concerns their treatment of gender. This cross-generic identification and highlighting of visual and thematic parallels, uncoupled for the most part here from attendant critiques or questioning, is typical of *Suspiria*’s exploration of the fairy tale as form; in the two later films I will discuss, however, Argento moves beyond this interesting but rather surface-level work and delves into deeper connections between the genres.

Argento continues to develop parallels in 1985’s *Phenomena*, which tells the story of a young American girl, Jennifer Corvino, who arrives in Switzerland to enroll at a prestigious boarding school. The area has been plagued by a series of murders of teenage girls; the killer is still at large and the police appear at a loss. The plot resembles *Suspiria*’s, but it expands as the film progresses to encompass Jennifer’s unexplained sleepwalking (during which she witnesses a murder) and her mystical telepathic connection with insects (which lead her to clues and protect her from aggressors). Argento eventually reveals that the killer is the “monstrous” child of her teacher Frau Brückner, a witch-like figure who hides him in idyllic-looking mountain cottages, covering up his crimes and eventually imprisoning and poisoning the intrepid Jennifer, who is investigating after her roommate is killed (Argento 1985). To a certain extent, *Phenomena* follows the mystery narrative patterns of a *giallo* (which is what Curti describes it as, rather than as a Gothic film (Curti 2019, p. 29)); however, I feel that its marked departures from cinematic realism mean that it is better categorized as one of Argento’s supernatural films.

Phenomena is replete with explicit fairy tale references, to an even greater degree than *Suspiria*. By way of example, our protagonist is a modern princess figure (the daughter of a Hollywood star), trapped at a mountaintop castle (a Swiss boarding school), endangered by a villain evoking a wicked witch. The horrific and gruesome finale of the film takes place in the witch’s sinister cottage. Jennifer’s connection with animals and the ways in which they come to her aid (flies swarming the killer as he attacks her; Inge, the chimpanzee “nurse” to the local entomologist Dr. McGregor, slaying Frau Brückner with a straight razor just before she is able to kill Jennifer during the film’s climax) align *Phenomena* with, among others, the Grimms’ fairy tale “The Queen Bee” (Aarne–Thompson–Uther type 554 (“The Grateful Animals”)); (Ashliman 2020), in which various grateful creatures (including, of course, a bee) help a kind prince accomplish three tasks. Moreover, Argento includes references to other fairy tales and fantasies. When Jennifer finds a life-size wooden mannequin of a boy in Frau Brückner’s cottage, she nervously describes it as the woman’s “son”, evidently imagining that Frau Brückner has delusions that it is a living being (Argento 1985). Frau Brückner scoffs at this idea, but Argento uses this reference to Pinocchio as a funny piece of misdirection, evoking at once the classic Italian tale and *Psycho*’s (1960) much-copied use of an uncanny, lifeless human form as a vessel for the antagonist’s anguished psyche. In another allusion, Jennifer knocks a telephone with an improbably long cord through a strange hole in the floor of a closet, then crawls after it. Argento’s camera follows her like Alice down the rabbit hole; the Wonderland at the end of this tunnel, however, proves more of an underworld, as Jennifer finds herself trapped in a deep pit of rotting, liquefying,

maggot-covered corpses (Argento 1985), a scene which even brings to mind the swimming pool climax of 1982's *Poltergeist*. Whether or not Argento intended these to serve as double references (I find the fairy tale referent to be clearer, and that to the horror movie to be a bit murkier), his ability to easily bring into proximity images from both types of texts is nevertheless a clear indicator of a certain affinity between these genres.

To an even greater degree than in *Suspiria*, the idyllic mountain setting is an important part of *Phenomena*'s approach to storytelling. The Switzerland of *Phenomena* evokes the Black Forest setting of *Suspiria* and the Grimms' fairy tales, with its chateau boarding school sitting like a castle above a picturesque village and surrounded by woody slopes. And, as Frau Brückner informs Jennifer upon her arrival, this area is described as the "Swiss Transylvania" (Argento 1985, 00:12:11–00:12:14), its mountains plagued by the *Föhn*, a wind whose baleful influence supposedly brings madness and disease to the region. Argento utilizes the wind to indicate the approach of death, his camera panning across valleys whose trees shimmer in the breeze or craning over forest canopies rustling violently as gales rage about them. While the comments of various characters only hint that the malevolent influence of the wind might be to blame for the murders, this is never confirmed; rather, Argento uses the wind during the film's violent set pieces to suggest less a specific causation and more a general connection between the antagonists and the harsher, bleaker side of nature. This mirrors Jennifer's own more benevolent bond with insects, establishing both the film's protagonist and its villains as supernaturally connected to the natural world in inexplicable ways. The omnipresent wind of *Phenomena* also forms an abstract kinetic backdrop against which play out the film's killings, attacks, and pursuits. It overtakes the landscape, an elemental corruption, another aesthetic distortion that contributes to the dramatization of the films' narrative action. These recurrent images of the wind help to establish the world of the films as one that is at once like and unlike our own, a heightened story sphere that parallels that of their fairy tale source texts.

While *Phenomena* lacks the vibrant primary colors of *Suspiria*, it is nevertheless an incredibly stylized movie in its own right, with its cinematographer Romano Albani working with a different color palette and distinctive lighting techniques. Jennifer faces most of her perils at night and this is not unusual for horror films, but the way in which Argento utilizes light and shadow in these nocturnal scenes reinforces its ability to evoke childhood fears; specifically, the night is used here as an expansive, spatially distorting element that unsettles the rational, discrete, and linear spaces of the daytime. Jennifer's sleepwalking during these scenes is rendered through shots depicting her point of view; as her sleeping gaze (and unconscious body) glides along the corridors of the Richard Wagner Academy, across its forested grounds, or into the nearby village, Argento essentially floodlights these areas, creating washed out, blanched visions that are contrasted with the "natural", darker glimpses of diegetically "real" space, the shadowy Swiss countryside. Jennifer's sleeping vision is presented as supernaturally illuminated, a quality that underscores how, in these scenes, she is witness (as well as potential prey) to the danger that surrounds her. An irrational, unconscious mode of vision, therefore, leads her to danger but also allows her to navigate through it.

Upon a first viewing, one might be forgiven for thinking that after the first hour or so, Argento abandons this somnambulism subplot in favor of a more active investigation by Jennifer into the killer. This is not really the case; rather, it is as if the film itself, in its second half, falls into a dreamy half-slumber, wandering lightly but deeply into the oneiric realm of the irrational. While Jennifer herself is no longer depicted as sleepwalking, the notable brightness of her visions bleeds out into the film's striking and increasingly prevalent white-and-blue color palette (present in interiors, but also in certain exterior shots in which fields or patches of foliage are punctuated by bright white lights), duplicating the appearance of those initial sleepwalking images Argento offers in the first half (Argento 1985). One need look no further than the final sequence at Frau Brückner's cottage, in which the basement corridor—a white cement hallway, lined in dark doors, with a distinct blue light at the end—is presented as a more naturalistic rendering of the uncannily angled, clearly

artificial hall the half-dreaming Jennifer seems to wander down at the very beginning of each of her sleepwalking spells. Appropriately, in the second half of the film, narrative rationality (by any standard definition) collapses, while at the same time *Phenomena*'s distinctive and surprisingly coherent bad dream logic props up Jennifer's increasingly terrifying tribulations and the movie's surprising revelations. The movie, we might say, sleepwalks almost imperceptibly into its "fairy-tale world", taking us right along with it. By the time Jennifer descends into the bowels of Frau Brückner's sinister cottage—the cesspit of decomposing bodies, the incongruous corridors along which the witch's cackling echoes, the hidden room with the "monstrous" child¹⁰ who seems driven by an insatiable bloodlust and disproportionate strength—it appears perfectly natural, logical, that salvation comes in the form of a psychically summoned cloud of flesh-eating flies (Argento 1985).

At the same time, Argento goes to great lengths to blur the lines between that which is "natural" and that which is "supernatural", attempting, in so doing, to establish a kind of internal logic proper to this often dreamlike film. Jennifer's connection with insects is, to some extent, rationalized through the pseudo-scientific explanations of Dr. McGregor, but the behavior of the insects resulting from this bond is presented in such a dramatic and over-the-top manner that it eventually comes across as entirely unrealistic. This is hardly unintentional, but rather part of Argento's interest in these plot elements, a counterintuitive, mysterious dynamic he consciously explores through the character of Jennifer. As her sleepwalking and, finally, her connection to the insects becomes known, she finds herself at an unproductive intersection of the overly rational scientific establishment and the indignantly supernatural; when her sleepwalking is flagged as a disruptive and potentially dangerous affliction, she is subjected to an invasive EEG test and questioned about potential "mental illness" or drug use. And after witnessing a mass of flies descending upon the school in response to Jennifer's angst, the headmistress calls her "diabolic" and resolves to see her locked up, having her involuntarily sedated and placed under guard as they await orderlies from the mental hospital to which she plans to send the troublesome new student (Argento 1985). Argento's dual rejection here of both overly dismissive modern medicine and prejudicial, unyielding religious belief—equally fostering a sinister conformity and both insufficient to make sense of Jennifer's strange supernatural connection to nature—helps us to zero in on the approach he privileges in these particular films: the receptively irrational and childlike perspective of fairy tales.

Jennifer's ability is a sort of mystical but real connection underscored by Dr. McGregor's humane acceptance of Jennifer and her idiosyncrasies; this itself is an extension of his broader philosophical acceptance of the limits of knowledge and the bottomlessness of the universe's well of wonders, very real concerns that have informed the narratives of fairy tales and continue to preoccupy us today. Marina Warner points out how, in fairy tales, "you can glimpse an entire history of childhood and the family: the oppression of landowners and rulers, foundlings ... the dependence of old people, the rivalries between competitors for love and other sustenance" (Warner 2014, p. 76), just one example of their basis in "the inadmissible facts of reality" (Warner 2014, p. 95). But in these tales, reality is fantastically transfigured, as "it is often more compelling to translate experience through metaphor and fantasy than to put it plainly" (Warner 2014, p. 95). This also means that because "fairy tales in all their mediated forms deconstruct the world", they sometimes serve as vehicles for "alternative views for peaceful, appropriate, intersectionally multifaceted encounters with humans, nonhuman animals, and the rest of the environment" by "making magic real" and, as in *Phenomena*, "sometimes rendering science their proper realm" (Greenhill 2020, pp. 15–16). Argento exploits this inherent possibility of the fairy tale, playing up both its foundation in reality and its sweeping departures from it. Jennifer's telepathic connection with insects, for example, can therefore be read all at once as a reflection upon the very real complexities of insect communication, a magical power that becomes her salvation, and a rendering of the ambiguities and mysteries of nature.

To my mind, *Phenomena*, far more so than *Suspiria* (which I see as being primarily interested in the identifiable tropes and narrative templates of fairy tales, in the aesthetic

possibilities of film to recreate the alterity of fairy tale worlds), represents Argento's exploration of the real, human anxieties and instincts that form the bedrock upon which the elegant, spare edifices of fairy tales were constructed. That is to say, *Phenomena*, despite being an undoubtedly outlandish, imaginatively unfettered film that does not seek to represent reality in any naturalistic way, is a first step along the path towards the more explicit connection Argento will eventually make, in his most recent film, *Dark Glasses*, between the fairy tale world and the real world, between his more "realistic" crime *gialli* and his supernatural horrors.

3. *Dark Glasses: Red Riding Hood and the Dark Forest*

Suspiria (which, in its opening scene, "identifies the... setting as Freiburg, Germany" through a voiceover narration and the inclusion of "a poster showing tall dark trees labeled 'Black Forest'" (Cooper 2012, p. 76)) and *Phenomena* (the opening of which follows a tourist who gets left behind by her bus group and wanders to a menacing cottage, and which then quickly switches to follow the arrival in Switzerland of Jennifer (Argento 1985)) are both films that begin with their major characters having *already* arrived at their destinations and do not depict their travels or homelands. *Dark Glasses*, on the other hand, is clearly structured around the urban-rural division, its first half concerning and depicting its protagonist Diana at home in the city of Rome; there, she encounters a serial killer of sex workers who pursues her and causes her to crash her car (leaving her blind and Chin, a child in another car, an orphan) (Argento 2022). In the former two films, Argento aims to throw his viewers in at the deep end, so to speak, effectively making the experience of the diegetic world immediately estranging; in the latter, he accomplishes a perhaps more unsettling rupture because the first half of the movie presents itself as being of a piece with his more traditional *gialli*, set in an identifiable and more or less familiar area, before unexpectedly veering off course and into the deep, dark woods of its relentless second half.

Despite Argento's clear desire to surprise his viewers with this shift, this jump in locations also represents an important meta-artistic exploration on his part. *Dark Glasses*, I would argue, represents a unique attempt to bring together the two main strains of Argento's artistic output, and its striking opening scene is a necessary interpretive key to this reading. The first images we see, after the opening credits, are of umbrella pines against a blue sky, captured by cinematographer Matteo Cocco in snaky tracking shots angled dramatically upwards. It briefly looks like we are wandering into the woods, but as Argento soon reveals, this initial appearance is deceiving; we are in fact situated firmly in Rome. The sinuous camera movement is that of Diana's car as she drives through residential neighborhoods; we soon see apartment buildings with groups of people clustered on balconies, all looking into the sky. The dramatic upwards angle of these initial images parallels this collective gazing, though Diana does not know at first what everyone is looking at, until she joins a group of people in a park and the reason for this behavior becomes clear—a solar eclipse is occurring and people, most with the protection of cardboard eclipse viewers, are observing this uncanny moment. As Diana puts on her titular "dark glasses" to look on, Argento shows us, against a droning sonic backdrop, the moon moving in front of the sun. Against this depiction of the malevolent-looking eclipse, looming in the center of the shot like a great black eye ringed in a slim, shimmering halo of white light, the dogs in the park begin to bark frenziedly. "They're barking 'cause they're nervous", a father explains to his child. "Not only dogs, all animals are afraid, even our ancestors were afraid of eclipses". "They thought the sun disappearing meant the end of the world", continues the mother, as the scene is enveloped in a sinister darkness (Argento 2022, 00:04:08–00:04:20).

Some reviews¹¹ consider this element of the film to be a crude metaphor foreshadowing Diana's visual impairment, a stylized high point the rest of the film fails to equal, or ultimately insignificant. And while it is true that the direct narrative implications of Diana's viewing of the eclipse, which bothers her eyes because she lacks a proper sun shield, are admittedly unclear (the car crash she sustains later on as the murderer pursues her for the first time could perhaps be attributed to her damaged vision, but this is never made explicit),

the thematic parallels broad and obvious (the all-encompassing and sudden darkness of the eclipse is surely meant to mirror the blindness she suffers as a result of the accident), this opening, to me, is an indicator of the framework through which Argento invites us to view the story as a whole, and therefore an incredibly significant part of the film. The mother and father describe the eclipse to their child in almost rehearsed-sounding dialogue, evoking adults recounting aloud a bedtime story, one told so often that its narrative has become deeply, collectively ingrained. It is also notable that while the parents are ostensibly explicating the odd behavior of the uncomprehending animals to their child, the tone and terms in which they deliver this information instead emphasize this atavistic response to, and unscientific interpretation of, the event (talking about “the end of the world”, and not actually describing the moon passing in front of the sun as its cause), failing to provide any kind of real, rational explanation of what is occurring. This apocalyptic, dread-inducing reading of the eclipse event, then, casts its long shadow over the entirety of the film.

When this is coupled with Diana’s shocking red dress and lipstick, and her wandering through the woods in the initial driving scenes—thus drawing a connection between the fairy tale figure of Red Riding Hood and this emphatic framing of the eclipse (the parents’ lines are the very first words spoken in the movie)—it becomes clear that the opening scene represents an irrational, ancestral worldview erupting into a “real”, contemporary Rome. It tells us that, in order to grasp a sense of internal logic in *Dark Glasses*, we need to read it as a fairy tale, a story of a big, bad Wolf hunting a young woman who finds herself lost in the forest. Additionally, this opening scene helps us to get a sense of Argento’s larger project, which is to create a narrative of two distinct halves evoking different parts of his filmic *oeuvre*, set in two differentiated, contrasting geographical settings; structuring his movie this way creates an opportunity for him to visibly bridge the gap between his traditional detective *gialli* and his fairy tale horrors, exploring both strains’ idiosyncratic aesthetic and narrative qualities and exposing the deep roots that connect them (i.e., fundamental fear and omnipresent peril).

After this opening scene, *Dark Glasses* sets off on a trajectory that very much resembles other *gialli*: we learn that a serial killer is targeting sex workers in the luxury hotels of the Via Veneto, witnessing one successful murder and then his ill-fated attempt on Diana’s life (Argento 2022) in the kind of set pieces—atmospheric lighting, pounding score, the camera’s stalking of female victims and its unflinching gaze upon the bloody murder—that have been the subgenre’s stock in trade since Mario Bava’s *Sei donne per l’assassino* (*Blood and Black Lace* 1964), one of the films frequently identified as the originators of the cinematic *giallo*. Of particular interest here is Argento’s use of urban space in these early sequences of *Dark Glasses*. Broadly speaking, the *giallo* (especially in Argento’s hands) is a cinema of constraint, and this quality manifests itself in a variety of ways across films—from its staging of murders in tight spaces (like elevators, vestibules, and stairwells) and frequent immobilization of victims (e.g., the use of a paralytic agent in Paolo Cavara’s *La tarantola dal ventre nero* (*Black Belly of the Tarantula* 1971) or the protagonist of Argento’s *Opera* (1987), tied up and forced, with a row of needles taped under her eyelids, to stare at brutal scenes of murder), to the subgenre’s consistent deployment of the eyewitness’s limited or fragmented memory that needs to be broadened and contextualized to solve the mystery. These examples relate to the *giallo*’s particular interest in the urban subject as an alienated one, often trapped within ontologically limited and architecturally directed perspectives and surrounded by decontextualized or overlain images. *Dark Glasses* is no exception to this trend, and one might note a pervasive sense of narrowness in the film’s vision of the city. Diana’s house is a very narrow, tall structure on multiple floors, with a tight, long staircase running like a spine from top to bottom. Her residential street and many of those Argento chooses to shoot on (including in the opening driving sequence) are lined in tall buildings and encased in high brick walls. In the final sequence set in Rome, just before the film shifts to the countryside, Diana and Chin (now living with her) must flee his family’s apartment along tight corridors and claustrophobia-inducing alleyways and tunnels (Argento 2022). This is in keeping with conventions, as “many *gialli* confine

themselves within clearly bounded spaces. Some restrict their action to apartment blocks or college campuses” (Koven 2006, p. 52).

When the duo makes it to the country home of Rita, Diana’s instructor, the killer quickly discerns their location, drives out to them, kills anyone who seems likely to help them in their plight (Rita, a couple of passing hunters), and chases them into the surrounding woods and fields (Argento 2022). This shift to the countryside forcefully pushes the film’s trajectory out of the murder mystery labyrinth of a standard *giallo* and onto the treacherous path of a simplified pursuit, in which the protagonist must escape from the villain seeking to kill her. The fairy tale resonances that exist mostly as images in the first part of the movie also begin to affect the plot, in which Diana’s only goal now is to escape from the monster intent on devouring her.

Argento plays with the contrasting senses of openness and restriction in this second half of the film. There are scenes in which the expansiveness of these rural landscapes feels, aesthetically, somewhat liberating—for example, a beautiful shot in which Diana wanders out of the woods and onto an open ridge, silhouetted against a cloudless sky brimming with stars (Argento 2022). On the other hand, these open spaces are, in context, incredibly dangerous. Diana, who cannot see what lies around her, must try to find places in which to hide herself, lest she suffer the same fate as Rita, who is strangled in the middle of a vast field of wild grasses when the murderer chases her away from the road. Even the flowing river, which can serve as a convenient geographic marker and, potentially, as a path to help, proves perilous, as Diana and Chin encounter a nest of water snakes amongst the reeds and are forced to run back into the forest (Argento 2022). Mostly, though, Argento uses the darkness of nighttime as the kind of natural blurring I have already identified in *Suspiria* and *Phenomena* in order to transform these bucolic spaces into death traps.

The rendering of night in *Dark Glasses* not only as a specific time period, but also as a rural *space* that Diana and Chin must traverse, causes it to both approach and distance itself from the first two fairy tale films. On the one hand, to a far greater extent than in *Suspiria* or *Phenomena*, in *Dark Glasses* Argento crafts a deep, dark cinematic woods—maze-like, near-inescapable, inhabited by lurking evil—and utilizes it as the setting of the entire final act of the film. Already associated with Red Riding Hood from the first scene (an association maintained by dashes of red that punctuate her costumes and make-up throughout the film), Diana, now running through the forest and led by the hand by Chin, recreates the storybook image of Hansel and Gretel lost in the woods. There is even a strange industrial pump house in which she seeks shelter (Argento 2022), which again evokes the archetypal witch’s cottage. The cloak of darkness against which these images and allusions are projected serves as a distortion that abstracts the real and defines the distant, archaic fairy tale setting of the last stretch of the movie. On the other hand, however, the more profound, truly obfuscating darkness of *Dark Glasses* seems to snuff out any kind of illumination (which, in the expressionistic, primary-colored lighting of *Suspiria* and *Phenomena*’s blazes of white light, could be seen to represent the incursion or presence of the supernatural in the latter two films, with all the malevolent or beneficent possibilities that force might entail). That is to say, in the woods of *Dark Glasses*, there is nothing truly magical, only the primordial violence that bubbles beneath the surface and occasionally erupts in traditional fairy tales. Diana’s salvation comes not from any psychic connection to nature or managing to slay an invisible witch, but rather from her ability to coax her seeing-eye dog (with which she has a very real connection) into protecting her and Chin from the murderer (Argento 2022).

In certain ways, *Dark Glasses*, of these three films, is the least like a standard mystery *giallo*, and, in other ways, the most like them, which makes it, in my opinion, a far more interesting film than contemporary reviews grant. The killer’s identity is not narratively significant, there is no mystery to be solved, and it becomes, in the end, two characters running for their lives; on the other hand, Argento throws into relief, through these deliberate evocations of fairy tale figures, settings, and images, the fact that the threat they face is more clearly “real” than the comparatively farfetched horrors of *Suspiria* and

Phenomena. More closely hewing to a fairy tale narrative structure while at the same time stripping it of its supernatural elements, Argento thus underscores the very real threat of bodily violence and predation that underlies both folktales and his more conventional *gialli*, going one step further in laying bare this connection than he did in *Phenomena*, which far more elliptically hints at this through its philosophical concerns about the “natural” and the “supernatural”.

This brings me to a final aspect of *Dark Glasses* that I would like to discuss and contrast with the two other fairy-tale-influenced films—its antagonist. If, as I have noted, Diana is aesthetically coded as a Red Riding Hood figure, the murderer who pursues and attempts to kill her is depicted as the Wolf. Clad always in dark clothing and decidedly unkempt, with disheveled hair and a rough beard, this character (whose name is Matteo) first appears as a potential client of Diana’s, who shows up at her house one day. She notices a strong, unpleasant odor; this is because he works as a dog trainer, he tells her (Argento 2022, 00:12:45–00:12:55). Diana informs him that he needs to shower before they engage in any sexual activity, a requirement to which he objects, causing him to leave in a huff. As the killer remains largely unseen or cloaked in shadow for most of the film, we do not know that we have in fact already met him (nor is this really suggested), so there is no true mystery surrounding his identity; that we have seen Matteo only very briefly at the beginning means that his unmasking consequently registers as a kind of odd surprise rather than a true revelation with any narrative significance. Diana finally recognizes him by his odor when he catches her after the long pursuit, dragging her and Chin back to the compound where he trains dogs, and he indicates that the impetus for his killing spree is the rage he feels at his perceived humiliation by having his smell criticized or mocked by the sex workers he seeks to engage (Argento 2022).

It is Matteo’s canine quality, then, that primarily defines his identity within the film (we know only that he is the dog trainer who smells like dogs) and which spurs and mirrors the animality of the brutal murders he commits; he is an archetypal Wolf. Lest we miss this connection, in the first onscreen murder, before the initial attack on Diana, a different sex worker is, once again, wearing a vividly red dress (Argento 2022). Argento’s transformation of what looks initially like the standard black-gloved *giallo* killer of so many other films into a wolf relentlessly hunting his protagonist is another point at which he links the two strains of his filmography and unearths a subterranean connection between the real world and the land of fairy tales (i.e., the Wolf here is a sexually frustrated and violent man victimizing young women); this recalls a number of modern adaptations or reworkings of fairy tales, including Angela Carter’s reinterpretations in her celebrated 1979 collection *The Bloody Chamber and Other Stories*, and their adaptation by Neil Jordan in his 1984 film *The Company of Wolves*. In her book, Carter proposes variations on the tale of Little Red Riding Hood, which often foreground twists or subversions of the familiar narrative; in “The Werewolf”, for example, the eponymous predator is revealed to be Red Riding Hood’s grandmother, who is driven out of her home, now taken over by her granddaughter, who consequently “prospered”; in “The Company of Wolves”, Carter brings out the implicit sexual dimensions of the (here, distinctly male) “carnivore incarnate[s]” predations (Carter 1979, p. 118). There are certainly echoes of this latter example in *Dark Glasses*, with its recasting of the fairy tale figures in the form of a sex worker and the predator hunting her, but Carter also aligns well with Argento and the Gothic-inflected Grimms’ fairy tales that inspire both of them in her emphasis on “the element of terror” (Piatti-Farnell 2021, p. 285) and “the experience of ‘something strange’” (Piatti-Farnell 2021, p. 290). A perfect example of this strategy occurs in “The Company of Wolves”, when the Wolf—lasciviously, menacingly—approaches the Grandmother and Carter notes how “night and the forest has come into the kitchen with darkness tangled in its hair” (Carter 1979, p. 116). Argento creates a similar mixture of the realistic and the fantastic in his version of the story, casting very real, tangible evil as a recognizable fairy tale archetype and framing it within the uncanny forests of the night. Unlike the witches of *Suspiria* or the monstrous mother and child of *Phenomena*, who either magically persecute or fall victim to supernatural retribution,

the Big Bad Wolf of *Dark Glasses* is all too human in his blunt violence, and he consequently suffers an improbable but realistically rendered fate when Diana's dog, Nerea, brutally mauls him, tearing his throat apart (Argento 2022). This is yet another demonstration of the perils (this time literally animal in nature) that exist in our real world.

This cruel reality can be effectively, viscerally revealed, Argento demonstrates, by letting it run rampant through the nocturnal forests of a fairy tale. Neither as aesthetically striking nor as imaginatively unhinged as *Suspiria* or *Phenomena*, *Dark Glasses* is nevertheless the film that represents Argento's most sophisticatedly self-reflexive marriage of *giallo* tropes and fairy tale narratives, exploring in an especially fruitful way the significant underlying connections between these genres and forms, between the real and the fantastic.

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Notes

- ¹ Examples not directed by Argento include Mario Bava's *La ragazza che sapeva troppo* (*The Girl Who Knew Too Much* 1963), Lamberto Bava's *La casa con la scala nel buio* (*A Blade in the Dark* 1983), or Carlo Vanzina's *Sotto il vestito niente* (*Nothing Underneath* 1985), to name just a few.
- ² Non-Argento examples include Bava's *Sei donne per l'assassino* (*Blood and Black Lace* 1964), Fulci's *Una lucertola con la pelle di donna* (*A Lizard in a Woman's Skin* 1971), Sergio Martino's *Lo strano vizio della Signora Wardh* (*The Strange Vice of Mrs. Wardh* 1971), and many others.
- ³ It should be noted that Argento makes use of a (seemingly legitimate) psychic character in *Deep Red*, but her vision revealing the killer (which results in her murder, the crime that sets in motion the film's plot) is ultimately of no further significance to the main proceedings; the murderer is entirely human and the protagonist solves the mystery using his own memories and perceptions. That film also features a fictional book entitled *Fantasmidi di oggi e leggende nere dell'età moderna* (*Present-day Ghosts and Contemporary Dark Legends*), which provides an important clue to the mystery's resolution in the form of an urban legend, as well as a commentary by Argento upon the ways in which supernatural folk tales and local history become intertwined (Argento 1975). We might consider these gestures as precursors to the questioning of distinctions between the irrational and the rational that Argento will make central themes of the films I will discuss later.
- ⁴ "un film horror porta alla superficie alcune delle paure ancestrali che si nascondono dentro di noi" (Author's translation)
- ⁵ "una cultura profondamente schizofrenica, che ha da sempre trovato il suo tratto distintivo nella convivenza – dissonante – fra antico e moderno, alto e basso, centro e periferia" (Author's translation).
- ⁶ "La Roma labirintina" (Author's translation).
- ⁷ It is worth noting that the character's surname can be found in different sources as "Bannion", "Banyon", or, in the Italian version of the film, "Benner".
- ⁸ "una totale astrazione da ciò che chiamiamo 'realtà quotidiana', ho usato i colori primari solitamente rassicuranti solo nella loro essenza più pura, rendendoli immediatamente, sorprendentemente violenti e provocatori" (Author's translation).
- ⁹ While I will discuss the ways animals figure into this in the *Phenomena* section a bit further on, it seems worth specifying here that animals "talking" in Argento's films takes the form of extrasensory communication through psychic bonds, or a more realistic understanding of communication between humans and trained animals, rather than the true anthropomorphization of certain fairy tales.
- ¹⁰ The child's violence is graphically linked in *Phenomena* to his physical deformity; this is one area in which Argento unfortunately seems content to rely on old-fashioned prejudices and visual cues rather than to critique them. His questioning of ideas of "normalcy" is more nuanced in other parts of the film.
- ¹¹ For example, reviews by Peter Sobczynski for rogerebert.com (Sobczynski 2022), Jonathan Romney for Screen Daily (Romney 2022), and Carmen Grey for BFI (Gray 2022).

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