

‘Why are there always three?’: The Gothic Occult in Dario Argento’s Three Mothers Trilogy

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Abstract

Thomas De Quincey’s essay ‘Levana and Our Ladies of Sorrow’ provided Dario Argento with the spark of an idea, which was further ignited by tales from his then wife, Daria Nicolodi, who told him of her grandmother’s stay at a music school which was run by a coven of witches. From these sources Argento came up with the mythology of The Three Mothers, which were to feature in three of his films: *Suspiria* (1977), *Inferno* (1980) and *La terza madre/The Mother of Tears* (2007).

This article will examine the occult and esoteric sources of The Three Mothers trilogy, and explore how these references work to create a series of films that may superficially appear to use the supernatural and occult to create scares, but actually incorporate elements of Western Esotericism rather than traditional Christian images of evil. By doing this, these films transcend their apparent flaws (in terms of shallow plot and character development, a common complaint directed toward many Italian horror films) and instead imbue the *mise-en-scene* itself with meaning, character and narrative. Although the films are situated within the Gothic genre, and in many respects follow traditional Gothic lines with witchcraft and the occult becoming synonymous with evil, I will argue that the films actually belong to the long tradition of art forms that have attempted to investigate the allure and the danger of occult exploration.

Keywords

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A few lines in Thomas De Quincey’s essay ‘Levana and Our Ladies of Sorrow’ provided Dario Argento with the spark of an idea, which was further ignited by tales from his then wife, Daria Nicolodi, who told him of her grandmother’s stay at a music school which was run by a coven of witches. From these sources Argento came up with the mythology of The Three Mothers, which were to feature in three of his films: *Suspiria* (1977), *Inferno* (1980) and *La terza madre/The Mother of Tears* (2007).

Within this mythology The Three Mothers were actually three sisters, who in the eleventh century turned to witchcraft in order to gain boundless power. They became immortal or, as they claim, Death itself, and in the nineteenth century commissioned an architect, Varelli, to build them three buildings in three cities across the globe. The three films then take place in the present day in these very buildings. Therefore, central to the trilogy is the place of architecture and production design, which contain many occult symbols. Furthermore, within these three films are several references to esoteric traditions, such as Hermeticism, Gnosticism, alchemy, and astrology, as well as esoteric figures such as Fulcanelli and Rudolf Steiner.

In this article I will examine the occult and esoteric sources of The Three Mothers trilogy, and explore how these references work to create a series of films that may superficially appear to use the supernatural and occult to create scares, but actually incorporate elements of Western Esotericism rather than traditional Christian images of evil. By doing this, these films transcend their apparent flaws (in terms of shallow plot and character development, a common complaint directed toward many Italian horror films) and instead imbue the *mise-en-scene* itself with meaning, character and narrative. Although the films are situated within the Gothic genre, and

in many respects follow traditional Gothic lines with witchcraft and the occult becoming synonymous with evil, I will argue that the films actually belong to the long tradition of art forms that have attempted to investigate the allure and the danger of occult exploration.

Previous Scholarship

Examination of the ever-expanding scholarship devoted to Argento's filmography reveals that the exploration of gender representation is central to many studies of Argento's work in both the *giallo* and the Gothic (Reich 2001; Badley 2002; Balmain 2002; Hoxter 2012). Often these studies utilize the framework of psychoanalysis (Mendik 2012; Balmain 2012), and given that the three principal villains in *Suspiria*, *Inferno*, and *La terza madre* are referred to as 'Mothers' leaves them open to interpretation in this vein. For example, The Three Mothers are examined as figures of maternal abjection by Xavier Mendik (2012), who argues that in *Suspiria* and *Inferno* they are presented as overwhelmingly negative forces who dominate, drain, and infantilize those who dwell within their houses. The houses of the Three Mothers are abject spaces, infested with rats and maggots, dripping, leaking, and reeking of death. When materialized and embodied the Mothers assume the forms of an old hag and a skeleton, which links them to the epitome of abjection, the corpse.

The inverse of the life-giving mother is the death-dealing monstrous feminine, as described by Barbara Creed who designated the witch as a recurring image of destructive and monstrous maternity (Creed 1993). The Three Mothers practice witchcraft as a way to enforce their will, and the history of the witch as a potent representation of threatening female power is explored by Jacqueline Reich, who acknowledges the influence of esotericism and the occult stating that:

The provocative imagery of both *Suspiria* and *Inferno* draws extensively on the long tradition of pagan Christian rituals, popular culture, and witchcraft in general and Italy in particular. The films feature abundant iconographic and narrative reference to the witches' Sabbath, alchemy, sorcery, possessed spirits, magical potions, and supernatural events.' (Reich 2001: 89-90)

Despite this acknowledgment, these influences are not addressed much beyond this statement. For Reich, the witch's inversion of Christian ritual is aligned with the subversion of patriarchy, yet these films ultimately maintain 'the hegemonic status quo [...] restoring the female to her rightful place as object rather than subject' (Reich 2001: 102). The destruction of the witch restores the patriarchal order, all oppositional (feminine) forces are eliminated. While Reich presents a sound argument, the article engages with the surface narratives of these films, which I will argue are just a flimsy façade masking a sub-textual engagement with symbols and rituals that belong to an alternative tradition that is purposely kept hidden. The superficial narrative appears to conform to the status quo, while the *mise-en-scene* tells a different story. Argento draws on the tradition of Western Esotericism and incorporates it into the cinematic form, creating films that harness alchemical powers through their use of design and décor, as well as constitutive elements such as light, colour, sound, and celluloid.

The only other article to explore the occult and esoteric references in *Suspiria* and *Inferno* is Chris Gallant's 'In the Mouth of the Architect: *Inferno*, Alchemy and the Postmodern Gothic'. Gallant states in reference to *Inferno* that, 'Alchemy is integral to the narrative, given supremacy over all its other mythological and religious influences' (Gallant 2001: 27). I would go further to say that alchemy is the primary influence on all three films in the trilogy, in that it inspires a shift away from traditional Christian imagery and narratives in its creation of a new mythology that presents strong feminine forces, both destructive and creative, that are not in thrall to a principal masculine influence. The use of the Gothic emphasizes the importance of

location and the elemental forces of nature, expressed through the *mise-en-scene* and its incorporation of alchemical symbols relating to the elements of fire, air, water, and earth.

While Gallant focuses particularly on *Inferno*, I will examine all three films including the most recent part of the trilogy *La terza madre*, which has not been written about as extensively. *Suspiria* and *Inferno* are not only connected by their shared mythology but also by their closeness in production, being made only three years apart, as well as their use of bold colour and elaborate set design. *La terza madre* is different, having been made almost thirty years later, in addition to being more muted in its palette and use of real locations. Later in this essay I will analyse this last film in detail, arguing that these changes are part of a shift in elemental forces, from air to earth. Before I go on to consider the films in question, I will discuss the trilogy's origins, of how Argento and *Suspiria* co-writer Daria Nicolodi looked to esoteric and occult stories, locations, and practitioners for their initial inspiration.

Origins

Daria Nicolodi maintains that she wrote the screenplay for *Suspiria* taking inspiration from stories that her grandmother had told her as a child. As Nicolodi states in the documentary *Suspiria 25th Anniversary* (Gary Hertz, 2001):

When I was a little girl, I loved listening to fairy tales, like all kids, and my grandmother, who was a great French pianist, Yvonne Loebb, used to tell me this story that really happened to her. When she was very young, she had gone to take a piano course in this Academy, which I don't want to mention by name because it still exists and it could be very dangerous, as they profess to teach biological agriculture, dance, piano, music. But in reality, they teach Black Magic. She got very scared and ran away.

The tale that Nicolodi tells, which she claims is true, speaks of a culture and tradition that still retains old superstitions and beliefs about witchcraft and the occult. Stephen Thrower reports that Nicolodi actually describes herself as a white witch, a role that she later plays in *La terza madre* (Thrower 2001: 141). The forms of evil that these films present are not linked to common Christian notions of Satan as the source of all evil in the world; instead the evil that is purveyed is one that is created by The Three Mothers for their own gain. These women are not in service to the devil or some other masculine power, they are harnessing the elements through their own form of ritual.

In conjunction with Nicolodi's personal connections, Argento has cited other inspirations for *Suspiria* which derive from historical depictions of magic and the occult. As he asserts in *Suspiria 25th Anniversary*:

Suspiria emerged from a lot of thoughts I had during a trip through several European cities, the Capitals of Magic. I was in Lyon, Prague, and Turin [...] I was in the so-called 'Magical Triangle', which is the point in the middle where Switzerland, France and Germany, where these three countries meet each other. Near this point Rudolf Steiner founded his anthroposophic community and even today this University, his Cathedral, and the followers of this Sect and beliefs exist. I'm not joking. We know that when one talks about witches [...] we discover that people have been studying this subject for centuries so there's very little to joke about. It's something that exists.

From this statement we see the significance of setting beginning to emerge, as Argento mentions his travels to 'magic' locations, with each film in the trilogy taking place in a different city around the world. Also in this statement Argento references esoteric figures, in this case Rudolf Steiner, which comes to have a bearing on the forms of magic and the occult that the films portray.

By forming a new and unique mythology these films move away from common horror tropes that rely on Christian images of the devil. Argento himself has remarked that: ‘Witches always fascinated me; I don’t believe in the devil, in the movies he always makes me laugh’ (McDonagh 2010: 125). Instead, Argento reaches further back to more ancient and pagan ideas of evil forces emanating from the elements around us, and human attempts to gain knowledge of these forces and control their power for personal benefit.

It is from Thomas De Quincey’s 1845 book *Suspiria de Profundis*, specifically the essay titled ‘Levana and Our Ladies of Sorrow’, that Argento derived the idea of The Three Mothers. In this essay De Quincey describes three sisters, The Three Sorrows, who accompany the goddess Levana. De Quincey writes: ‘The eldest of the three is named *Mater Lachrymarum*, Our Lady of Tears. She it is that night and day raves and moans, calling for vanished faces’ (De Quincey 1871: 27). He goes on to describe, ‘The second sister is called *Mater Suspiriorum*, Our Lady of Sighs’ (1871: 28). And finally, ‘the third sister, who is also the youngest--! Hush! Whisper whilst we talk of *her!* [...] She is the defier of God. She also is the mother of lunacies, and the suggestress of suicides. [...] And *her* name is *Mater Tenebrarum* – Our Lady of Darkness’ (1871: 30-31). The Three Mothers in Argento’s trilogy share the same names as those in de Quincey’s text, although they differ slightly in characterization (in ‘Levana and Our Ladies of Sorrow’, Mater Suspiriorum is depicted as being meek and inactive, poles apart from the malevolent witch in *Suspiria*).

The Three Mothers

It is in the second film in the trilogy, *Inferno*, that it is made clear that the evil force embodied by Helene Marcos in *Suspiria* was actually one of three malignant beings located around the world in three separate dwellings, working together to control the world. *Inferno* opens with a

voiceover from Varelli, who explains that he is the one who designed and built these three households, an experience he has come to regret:

I do not know what price I shall have to pay for breaking what we alchemists call Silentium [...] I, Varelli, an architect living in London, met the Three Mothers and designed and built for them three dwelling places, one in Rome, one in New York, and a third in Freiburg, Germany. I failed to discover till too late that from those three locations The Three Mothers ruled the world with sorrow, tears, and darkness. Mater Suspiriorum, the Mother of Sighs, the oldest of the three, lives in Freiburg. Mater Lachrymarum, the Mother of Tears, and the most beautiful of the sisters, holds rule in Rome. Mater Tenebrarum, the Mother of Darkness, who is the youngest and cruellest of the three, controls New York. I built their horrible houses, the repositories of all their filthy secrets. Those so-called Mothers are actually wicked stepmothers, incapable of creating life, infamous!

From this speech the connection to de Quincey is clear, as is the influence of traditional fairy tale structure. In *Suspiria 25th Anniversary*, both Argento and Nicolodi cite tales such as *Snow White* and *Bluebeard* as formative in shaping *Suspiria's* narrative. As Varelli states, these Mothers 'are actually wicked stepmothers', in the mould of such characters found in *Snow White* and *Cinderella*. They are embodiments of an evil and destructive femininity that takes life rather than creates it, giving birth only to sorrow, tears and darkness.

In *La terza madre* the final mother is defeated by Sarah Mandy, played by Asia Argento, the daughter of Dario Argento and Daria Nicolodi. Nicolodi even plays Elisa Mandy, the mother of Sarah, who communicates to her from beyond the grave. In the final film an opposition is set up between the 'good' mother and the 'bad'. While the word 'witch' is heard on the soundtrack created by Goblin in *Suspiria*, in *La terza madre* the word 'mother' is repeatedly

heard (the score for this film is composed by Claudio Simonetti, a founding member of Goblin), shifting the emphasis to maternal femininity. Elisa is shown in spectral visions dressed in white (she is a ‘white witch’), while Mater Lachrymarum, the most beautiful of The Three Mothers, is usually shown naked or partially nude, a highly sexualized figure. Like the Wicked Stepmother in *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs*, Mater Lachrymarum arrives into the life of the protagonist after the death of her biological mother, and her beauty masks an evil soul. Unlike *Suspiria*, where there is a generational divide between good and evil – the stereotype of witch as an ‘old hag’ – in *La terza madre* the witch is seductive, luring people into frenzies of violence.

Although each of The Three Mothers has their own specific characteristics, as a collective they reference other historical and mythological figures that involve the grouping of three women, such as The Three Fates, The Three Furies and The Three Graces. A scene in *La terza madre* sees Sarah researching in a local library and as she looks through several books she asks herself, ‘Why are there always three?’ Rather than looking to Christian representations of evil, Argento alludes to ancient figures from Greek and Roman mythology. The Three Fates are in control of the destiny of humanity, just as The Three Mothers secretly control the world; The Three Furies are vengeful goddesses who were born from a union between earth and air (the elements play a significant role in The Three Mothers films). The Three Mothers trilogy takes these references and then situates them within the modern world, more specifically in modern cities.

The Three Houses

Referring back to Varelli’s opening monologue in *Inferno*, the dwelling places of The Three Mothers within these cities becomes of utmost importance. Each of these films centres on a

building, a terrible place from which evil emanates. These places not only house but hide The Three Mothers, relating to notions of the occult (the definition of the word 'occult' has its origins in the Latin *occultare*, which means to hide or conceal). In these films Argento draws on references to the occult and the tradition of Western Esotericism, while also situating these films within the genre of Gothic horror. The Gothic has its origins in literary works that have a very particular style. Common to many Gothic novels is the type of place the story is set, often an old dark castle which contains many levels, including those underground, filled with labyrinthine corridors and secret passages. The title of the first Gothic novel from 1764, *The Castle of Otranto* by Horace Walpole, again demonstrates the significance of place within the Gothic milieu with its reference to the house of the novel's villain. Similarly to Gothic literature, Gothic architecture is also distinct in its aesthetic style, with a prevalence of pointed arches, tall spires, ornate frontages and ribbed vaults. Architecture and design are integral elements of The Three Mothers trilogy, often taking prevalence over aspects such as character development or plausible narrative events. The architecture in these films incorporates elements of Gothic architecture, along with aspects of the Baroque and Expressionism, all mixed together to create an effect that overwhelms the senses (in conjunction with the cinematographic composition, colour, sound design, and music score).

As mentioned earlier in a quote from Argento, Rudolf Steiner is a key influential figure in the trilogy's use of esoteric references. Steiner was an architect, as well as a philosopher, writer, social reformer, occult practitioner, and founder of The Anthroposophical Society. According to Fiona Gray: 'Steiner used the medium of architecture as a way of repackaging the occult's venerable secrets into a tangible, material form that made their hidden message more readily accessible to his contemporary audience' (Gray 2011: 1). Steiner sought to use architecture as a form through which one could connect with the spiritual realm, taking great inspiration from

the Baroque period with its use of overlapping geometric shapes and the mixing of concave and convex forms that suggested dynamic movement. Gray elaborates further:

The fluctuating concavities and convexities [...] appear to yield to alternating forces of inner and outer space that expand and contract while cleverly exploiting the elusive quality of light. Space and light almost seem to dematerialise the solid forms, creating a sense of the infinite that responds to their shared desire for access to the spiritual realm. (Gray 2011: 11)

The sets in The Three Mothers films also create ‘a sense of the infinite’ with their overwhelming aesthetic properties and their fixation on hallways and corridors that seem to lead beyond the physical realm to places that exist on a different plane. In *Suspiria* the architecture and design of the Tanz Akademie and the building in which the first murder takes place incorporate many overlapping shapes and curved forms, in keeping with Steiner’s style. The dance academy is just a front for its real purpose of connecting to an evil and benevolent spiritual force, and this is clearly expressed through its structure and design. As Suzy Banyon arrives at the academy in the pouring rain, several shots reveal the academy’s exterior. One sign near the door reads ‘DESIDERIUS ERASMUS VON ROTTERDAM’, stating that Erasmus had once lived at the residence (there is a similar sign outside the building in *Inferno*, which states that the residence once housed the esoteric writer and teacher George Gurdjieff). Erasmus of Rotterdam was a Dutch theologian and Catholic priest most known for writing *The Praise of Folly* (1511), which was a satire of religious superstitions of the time. This therefore contradicts the subsequent films which state that the dance academy is one of the buildings designed by Varelli; although the set used in the film is not the actual place where Erasmus lived, it is a close replica of the *Haus Zum Walfisch* (House of the Whale) which still stands in Freiburg. The original building is Gothic in its architecture and the exterior is of a similar red colour (establishing the importance of the colour red, which recurs throughout the film). Inside

the Tanz Akademie the design is completely original, with large staircases and walls that incorporate elements of M.C. Escher and Aubrey Beardsley paintings: most notably on the wall of Madame Blanc's office, which turns out to conceal an entrance to a hidden part of the academy where occult rituals take place (one could argue that this area was designed by Varelli, with the exterior of the *Haus Zum Walfisch* providing further concealment).

The most shocking and violent scene in *Suspiria* happens near the beginning of the film, away from the dance academy. After Suzy's disastrous arrival in Freiburg the action follows Pat Hingle who is seen leaving the academy as Suzy arrives. Pat has gone to stay with a friend, but she is on edge and frightened that the hidden evil that she has uncovered will find her. As she walks into her friend's building the eye is drawn to the abundance of detail in the set design. Through an entrance in the background we see two stairways from either side meet in the middle, creating a series of diagonal lines. Situated above is a very striking stained glass window in bold primary colours, involving overlapping squares which are displayed on their side so they become diamond shapes that are divided through intersections into triangles. There is a lift which Pat enters, and above the lift is another triangular shape, a three dimensional prism with its three sections alternately blinking red. Thus, dominating the scene is the abundance of diagonal lines and triangular shapes. The triangle is a shape composed of three sides, and its traditional symbolic properties relate to the number three. For example, in the Christian faith there is the holy trinity of The Father, The Son and The Holy Spirit, often symbolized by a triangular shape. Reaching back even further, within the Sefer Yetzirah, the first text of Jewish esotericism, the number three is also significant with the Hebrew alphabet including the Three 'Mother' letters of Aleph, Mem and Shin. These 'Three Mothers' are also symbolic of the three primary elements of earth, fire and water. In Freemasonry the symbols of the square and compass are triangular, and the symbol of 'the all-seeing eye' is encased

inside a triangle (which is associated with The Illuminati, but also found on American currency).

In alchemy the symbol of the triangle also relates to the elements: pointing up it symbolizes fire, pointing down symbolizes water. As expanded upon in the second film of the trilogy, *Inferno*, alchemy becomes a central aspect of The Three Mothers mythology. Going back to the scene in question from *Suspiria*, in contrast to the many downward pointing triangular shapes around her, Pat takes the lift upward to her friend's apartment (although ultimately she will plummet downward to her death). After being left alone in a room, Pat looks out of her window and sees a pair of disembodied (all-seeing) eyes, and a hairy arm with pointy claws reaches through and grabs Pat's head and pushes her through the closed window. Throughout the scene sharp triangular forms are used as weapons and torment Pat as she is cut with knives and shards of glass. As the scene ends the camera tracks over the two bodies of Pat and her friend, Pat is suspended from the ceiling by a cable, blood dripping onto the ground; her friend is revealed lying on the floor, a triangular shard protruding from her arm, and two large beams of metal impaling her body – the two ends are embedded deep within her throat and stomach, the two beams meeting above her creating yet another triangular shape.

Colour and Alchemy

Along with the prominence of sharp angles and shapes, the scene is also striking in its use of colour. *Suspiria* was shot using Technicolor, and was one of the last films to do so. Technicolor was one of the first forms of colour film processing and was used widely during the Classical Hollywood period. Technicolor produces very lush, saturated colours, as exemplified in the colour sequences of *The Wizard of Oz* (Victor Fleming, 1939) and in animated films such as Disney's *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs* (William Cottrell, David Hand, Wilfred Jackson,

Larry Morey, Perce Pearce and Ben Sharpsteen, 1937) which is a key influence on *Suspiria*. In the film the colour is almost overbearing in its boldness, sickly in its saturation. Much of the red in the film is almost pink, giving the copious amounts of blood a distinctly artificial look. The coloured lighting in the film is not naturalistic in any way, making it clear that the film is taking place in a world that is not tied to physical reality.

Deciding to use Technicolor at the time of its making (1977) means that *Suspiria* looks very different to other films made in that period. Using this process made the act of filming more difficult and time-consuming, but the results speak for themselves in terms of the richness of the images and the film's longevity. Given that we now live at a time where digital video has almost replaced the use of celluloid entirely (due to its speed and simplicity), the use of film has begun to take on a magical, alchemical property. In a speech in which he accepted an Academy Award of Merit on the behalf of those who still operate film processing laboratories, vocal advocate for shooting films on actual celluloid film, Christopher Nolan, repeatedly used the term "alchemy" to explain the magic of cinema:

There are alchemists, who for over a hundred years in various windowless rooms [...] have practiced a very special form of alchemy. That is, turning silver and plastic into dreams. [...] the kind of dream you can unspool from a reel and hold in your hand and hold up to the light and see, frozen, magically. And these dreams can be run through a projector, thrown onto a screen where they will spark the imagination and the emotion of audiences [...] So, I am very pleased to be here speaking on behalf of this award to the many men and women who have practiced this very special dark art. (Oscars, 2013)

The parallels that Nolan is making in this speech are clear, in his repeated use of the terms 'alchemy' and 'dark art'. The process of light striking celluloid, creating a chemical reaction

and producing the images projected on screen is a form of alchemy, as it is a ‘transmutation of material substances’ (Hanegraaf 2013: 24).

Although not shot in Technicolor, *Inferno* brings in more directly the practice of alchemy and its centrality to The Three Mothers mythology. In the film Varelli, the architect who designed The Mothers’ houses, is also an alchemist. Gallant posits that the character of Varelli is referencing Fulcanelli, who, like Varelli, ‘was a modern alchemist who disappeared under mysterious circumstances, leaving behind a manuscript about alchemy and architecture’ (Gallant 2001: 28). The manuscript that Gallant is referring to here is *Les mystère des Cathédrales*, which was first published in 1926. In this book Fulcanelli investigates the architecture of Gothic cathedrals and argues that they display the secrets of the Hermetic tradition, primarily that of alchemy. Fulcanelli decodes the symbols present in different cathedrals found in Paris, Amiens and Bourges, and also discusses the significance of colour in relation to the elements. For Fulcanelli, there is a ‘*language of colours*’ (Fulcanelli 1971: 84), with the base colours being black, white and red. Fulcanelli’s descriptions of the symbolic nature of colours echoes connotations commonly made within Western culture, with black associated with chaos, Satan, and the planet Saturn. It ‘is the hieroglyph for *lead*; in astrology, a maleficent planet; in hermeticism, the *black dragon* or *Philosophers’ Lead*; in magic, the *black Hen*, etc [...] It is the *sable* of the science of heraldry and the emblem of the element *earth*, of *night* and *death*’ (1971: 85). In contrast, ‘White has also been used to denote purity, simplicity and innocence’ (1971: 85). Red is ‘the symbol of fire, it shows exaltation, predominance of spirit over matter, sovereignty, power and apostleship’ (1971: 86). Fulcanelli quotes Paracelsus in regards to other colours and their symbolic properties: ‘there are several elemental colours – the colour blue belongs particularly to earth, green to water, yellow to air and red to fire’ (1971: 86). Here we see a connection between colour and the elements, both of which play central roles in The Three Mothers trilogy in a more significant way than narrative

and character. While the characters in these films are ciphers and broad archetypes (particularly in *Inferno*), the *mise-en-scene* is rich with symbolic meaning and resonance.

Strong primary colours reverberate throughout *Suspiria* and *Inferno*, in the lighting and in the production design. In *Suspiria* the dancers practice in rooms that are referred to as The Yellow Room and The Red Room, a secret passageway is found behind the blue irises (a cryptic message that Suzy finally deciphers). The colour red in particular stands out in this film, most strikingly in a scene when all the women sleep in the same room after an infestation of maggots. When the lights are turned out a shaft of red light is all that is left as Sara tells Suzy about the directoress and her snoring. White sheets divide parts of the room, and behind Suzy and Sara there is a silhouette of a woman, who Sara believes is the academy's directoress. Given red's connotations of power and sovereignty (Fulcanelli 1971: 86), that the scene is drenched in red as Suzy and Sara discuss the directoress (who turns out to be Helene Marcos/Mater Suspiriorum) represents her overwhelming power and control. According to Anna Powell: '[i]n the world of Argento's film, colour forces are vampiric tools for the coven to drain their victims' life' (Powell 2012: 170). The oversaturated Technicolor serves to overstimulate and drain energy, as we see with Suzy's repeated fainting and dizzy spells. However, Powell states that these arousing yet oppressive colours are 'challenged by Suzy's pure white' (2012: 170), again relating back to Fulcanelli's association of white with purity, which is continued in *Inferno* with Rose's light clothing and Elise's nightgown, and in *La terza madre* in Sarah's visions of her mother where she is surrounded by a white light.

The Elements

Throughout the three films there are many shots and scenes that detail characters walking down corridors and hallways in The Three Mothers' houses, and it becomes difficult to get a sense

of the building's layout as they ultimately reveal themselves to be labyrinths trapping the characters in an impossible maze. In *Suspiria* there is the scene that leads to Sara's death, as she walks through a succession of hallways and rooms, ending up in a pit of razor wire. Later Suzy makes her own journey through the maze of hallways in the hidden section of the academy, ultimately finding the room of Helene Marcos. At one point Suzy walks by a Black Mass, with Madame Blanc involved in an evil inversion of the Christian communion, eating a wafer and drinking wine while shouting that Suzy must 'vanish! She must die!' In *La terza madre*, once Sarah finds Mater Lachrymarum's lair she walks through it in one continuous tracking shot. She walks in and out of darkness (which could disguise edits), is seen walking up stairs and then later down another set, making it unclear where within the house she is. It is within *Inferno* though that this notion of an 'impossible place' is most evidently realized. The architecture of the building becomes a hellscape (Dante's *Inferno* is obviously evoked in the film's title) made up of different levels that seem to be leading ever downward. There is a movement in this space away from a physical reality into an occult underworld.

The first character that we follow, Rose, begins her descent at the beginning of the film as she enters the building's basement and dives even further down into an underwater ballroom. As she enters the basement there is a sound of trickling water, there are puddles gathered around the room on the uneven floor, and there is a tilting camera movement down a drainpipe as water falls through it. The element of water is omnipresent throughout this film, and in this scene Rose immerses herself in it. She comes to find a pool of water and as she peers down her key chain falls into the pool. She climbs into the pool and as she dives down a whole new room is revealed, a ballroom fitted with chandeliers, statues and candelabras, and on the wall is a painting, along the bottom of which is written 'Mater Tenebrarum'. We do not see the painting in full detail, as many of the shots in this sequence are from Rose's perspective, with various objects floating into her view. After Rose retrieves the key she starts to swim upward but then

a corpse startles her and she panics as she tries to escape, her feet repeatedly touching the corpse as she scrambles to find her way out. What is at first a scene of striking beauty, as Rose floats through the ballroom amongst the opulent objects, quickly becomes a scene of abject horror with the introduction of the corpse. In particular, the shots of her bare feet rubbing against the corpse's flesh produce a sensory response of disgust. The purity and cleanliness of the water is sullied, as it becomes a place of wet decay.

The element of water carries many associations in religious and esoteric traditions. Often it is a purifying force, as seen in Christian baptisms, and is a main element in astrology where it is associated with emotion and intuition. This relates to further associations between water and femininity, with its alchemical symbol, an upside down triangle, suggestive of female genitalia. The persistent presence of water is linked to The Three Mothers, a feminine force of evil that is inescapable. Water also plays a symbolic role in Wicca and in magickal ceremonies, and in Jungian psychoanalysis it is a symbol of the unconscious mind. The connection to Jung is significant, as this places *Inferno* within an unconscious landscape. This descent into water that Rose makes in one of the film's first scenes is symbolic of the film itself journeying into the unconscious realm. That the film does not have a clear protagonist – it follows Rose, then Sara, then Mark, with none of the characters having much psychological depth, almost interchangeable – makes each character a broad archetype, an aspect of the unconscious mind rather than a whole being in themselves. As Chris Gallant notes: 'in *Inferno* and *Suspiria*, colour, shape, music and movement do more than simply articulate the anxieties of their characters – they substitute character psychology altogether. The people that inhabit these worlds are ciphers [...] their physical environment is psychologised in the extreme' (Gallant 2001: 22). So, it is within these films' *mise-en-scene* that one must find meaning and character development.

In *Suspiria* and *Inferno* there are scenes where a female character – Suzy and Sara, respectively – travels in a taxi in heavy rain. In both of these scenes the women are dripping wet, and are transported by the same driver, played by Fulvio Mingozzi, despite the fact that the taxi rides take place in two different cities, Freiburg and Rome. Both rides involve similar techniques of repeated close-ups and different coloured lights moving across the women's faces. During the taxi ride in *Suspiria* are intercut shots of a nearby lake and foaming waterfalls, as well as overflowing grates along the road, highlighting the pervasiveness of water. Both scenes are accompanied by the musical score: in *Suspiria* it is Goblin's main theme, with its nursery rhyme tinkling accompanied by menacing whispers of 'la-la-la' and 'Witch!'; in *Inferno* there is Keith Emerson's fast-paced and overbearing prog-rock. Both themes add immeasurably to the scenes, working in conjunction with the coloured lighting to create a sensory overload and an escalating sense of danger and tension. These scores do not fade into the background, they create a sense of 'saturation' – again evoking the element of water – that is similar to the use of colour in which the films are bathed.

Along with the element of water, the element of air is emphasized with repeated shots of wind blowing characters' hair and clothes, blowing open windows and billowing curtains. All three films feature camera shots and movements that seem to 'float' in the air, producing a feeling that all of the events are being watched by an omniscient observer – The Three Mothers see all. This notion of seeing across all realms and realities is demonstrated in *Inferno*'s final scenes. Professor Arnold's nurse is revealed to be Mater Tenebrarum, and as she stands in front of a mirror she disappears while her reflection remains. She says to Mark: 'You think it's magic? No, I'm not a magician. Now we have to hurry because we still have to pass through a number of strange phases and you'll change.' Mater Tenebrarum passes through 'strange phases' as she later emerges from the mirror, and as she crosses over she reveals that The Three Mothers are also known by one name, that of 'Death', and as she crashes through the mirror

she changes form into a skeleton. The use of the mirror evokes the magic mirror of *Snow White*, relating back to the influence of fairy tales on The Three Mothers mythology. The crossing between the sides of the mirror that occurs in the scene is in keeping with the continuous shifting across planes of reality, situating the building within the landscape of a collective unconscious, an occult space that is hidden from the physical world but is also deeply connected to it.

Both *Suspiria* and *Inferno* end with the buildings going up in flames, incorporating the element of fire. Like water, fire has cleansing properties and it is the only element that will ultimately destroy the buildings and rid the world of the evil of the Mothers who live there. The alchemical symbol for the element of fire is the upward pointing triangle, symbolizing the rising upward of energy and the power of action. The elemental spirit connected to fire is that of the salamander (Guiley 2006: 86), and there are several images of lizards, salamanders and other reptiles throughout *Inferno* (the title of the film itself is a synonym of fire). While Gallant also notices the repeated lizard imagery, he states that '[t]he connections are there to be made, but ultimately the pattern is indecipherable' (Gallant 2001: 27), yet I would argue that these reptile images are references to the salamander as fire's elemental spirit. On the exterior of the building itself in New York are repeated images of two intertwined lizards; outside the Biblioteca Filosofica in Rome there are black and white tiles with salamanders on them; the key chain that Rose drops into the water looks like a snake; in the room where Rose is murdered are several taxidermy lizards and a crocodile; and there is a shot just before Sara's murder where a live lizard eats an insect. Animals have often been highlighted in Argento's work (going back to his 'animal trilogy' of early *giallo* films: *L'uccello dalle piume di cristallo/The Bird with the Crystal Plumage* (1970), *Il gatto a nove code/ The Cat o' Nine Tails* (1971) and *Quattro mosche di velluto grigio/Four Flies on Grey Velvet* (1971)) and in *Inferno* there are also many shots of cats (cats have traditionally been linked with witchcraft), who seem to be

gathering around the building as if summoned by Mater Tenebrarum (a group of cats kill Elise, and the antiques dealer Kazanian's attempt to drown a sack of cats leads to his death, his body subsequently devoured by rats). In *Suspiria* there is an infestation of maggots, and in a bravura scene Daniel's seeing-eye dog turns on him and bites out his throat; in *La terza madre* the familiar of Mater Lachrymarum is a small monkey who participates in murders and rituals. Animals in these films are connected to The Three Mothers, as beings that are under their control and do their bidding.

The Third Mother

The final film of the trilogy, *La terza madre*, is different in style to the previous films, and was completed thirty years after *Suspiria*. Its making had been speculated upon frequently during this period, and there were many scripts written during this time. According to James Gracey, at one point Argento 'claimed that the film would combine autobiography with "fantasy and sadness. It will revolve around mysticism, alchemy, terrorism and Gnosticism."' Argento reputedly gave himself nightmares due to all his research into witchcraft' (Gracey 2010: 168). As with *Suspiria*, Argento was inspired by aspects of Western esotericism, primarily Gnosticism, whilst continuing to incorporate the aspect of alchemy from the Hermetic tradition. Although this version of the script that Argento refers to here was not made there are still elements of it in the final film, with witchcraft returning as a major theme.

As discussed, *Suspiria* and *Inferno* both incorporate highly stylized sets with a strong use of coloured lighting. In contrast, *La terza madre* has a more muted colour palette and opens up its narrative to include more real locations, contributing to a less artificial *mise-en-scene*. The house of the third mother, Mater Lachrymarum, is shown intermittently throughout the film, but does not figure largely in the action until the film's final act. Rather than creating a

dreamscape, *La terza madre* is set in the physical, material world, and the protagonist, Sarah Mandy, is a scientist who constantly questions her sanity as she delves deeper into the occult realm of The Three Mothers. After an urn containing magic talismans belonging to Mater Lachrymarum is found in a cemetery and later stolen from a museum, Mater Lachrymarum regains her power and starts to influence the people of Rome to commit violent acts. As the film progresses we see the escalating wave of destruction as ordinary citizens descend into chaos, and witches from around the world arrive in Rome awaiting the rise of Mater Lachrymarum and ‘the second age of witches’.

There are continual references to the previous films, with Father Johannes telling Sarah about Suzy Banyon’s defeat of Mater Suspiriorum (who it turns out was in a weakened state after Sarah’s mother Elisa had injured her in a previous battle). There is also Guglielmo de Witt, a wheelchair bound alchemist, similar to Professor Arnold/Varelli from *Inferno*. The third film in particular connects the three films together within an overarching mythology, filling in parts of the story and situating them all within one larger narrative. Yet, this last film, as aforementioned, looks very different, which is surprising given the previous two films’ fixation on elaborate *mise-en-scene* as a tool to convey psychology, meaning and subtext. Instead *La terza madre* is dominated by brown earth tones (the element of earth was previously only evoked through the attention given to the location and space where the buildings stood), with a gradual introduction of red as the film progresses. We see throughout the film actual locations from Rome, such as the Ponte Sant’Angelo (where a mother throws her baby off the bridge, in the first instance of violence provoked by Mater Lachrymarum’s presence), the Piazza San Francesco di Paola, and the church of Santa Caterina dei Funari, which is set on fire by a wild mob. Rome itself becomes a haunted space, as Marta instructs Sarah in the ways of white magic, telling her that all around them are ‘drifting spirits, they are everywhere, especially here in Rome. The old houses are full of ghosts. Think about it, the city’s 2700 years old and we are

standing on five layers of graves'. The film uncovers an occult Rome, a hidden underworld that involves the forces of good, as represented by Sarah's mother's spirit, and the forces of evil that Mater Lachrymarum is unleashing into the physical realm.

The scenes of violent murder in the film are much more graphic and extreme than in the previous films, which displayed scenes of murder in a way that was 'graphic' in terms of their aesthetic properties. In *La terza madre* murder takes on a nasty, sexualized aspect, in keeping with the style of 'torture porn' horror that was popular in the 2000s. The first murder of Sarah's colleague Giselle involves her tongue being ripped out and her belly cut open so her intestines fall out, which are then used to choke her. While *Suspiria's* first murder scene also involves shots that are very explicit, such as the shot of Pat's exposed heart being stabbed with a knife, the extreme close-ups and bold set design render the violence as somewhat abstract, even preposterous. *La terza madre's* later murder of Marta and her girlfriend is also brutal, as a large spike is driven up between Marta's legs (her nightgown conceals the spike's penetration) and she is impaled. Mater Lachrymarum leans over to lick Marta's tears and her minion then drives the spike further until, in close-up, we see it emerge from her mouth. The body torn open, the insides becoming outside, recurs throughout the film and is in keeping with the earthbound narrative and more naturalistic *mise-en-scene*. As her name suggests, The Mother of Tears is associated with bodily fluids, but also the flesh that contains them. The base matter of the body is displayed in the film in all its raw detail, devoid of the stylization present in the two previous films. The violence is confronting in its brutality, it is not in any way beautiful. This fixation on the body as a base element is most explicitly presented in the film's final scenes in Mater Lachrymarum's lair, which is deep underground in the catacombs of her building.

Once Sarah finds her way to where the Mother is holding her ceremony, there is a sequence which presents her followers' sexual rituals. Unlike the Black Mass conducted by Madame Blanc in *Suspiria* which perverted the Christian communion, these rituals are akin to orgies

described in the works of the Marquis de Sade. The people involved are all there voluntarily, though under the spell of Mater Lachrymarum, and they appear to be experiencing great pleasure. As well as aspects of sadomasochism, with shots of people bound with rope, a woman having her tongue skewered, and another woman having her back cut with a knife, there is also the scatological aspect of Sade in the scene, with a man lying on the floor being smeared with faeces, and a woman eating a cord that is coming out of someone's anus. While we do not see sexual intercourse, it is clear that these acts are sexual in nature and that the violent frenzies that Mater Lachrymarum inspires carry an explicitly sexual charge. Just as the alchemical symbol of earth is a downward facing triangle with a horizontal line through it, the forces associated with Mater Lachrymarum serve to drag its followers downward, in terms of their surrender to the base instincts and their movement to her subterranean den. This Mother is truly an 'Earth mother', but she is of the chthonian earth, for the chthonian, as Camille Paglia explains, 'means "of the earth" – but earth's bowels, not its surface' (Paglia 1991: 5). This reference to the 'bowels' of the earth is exemplified by Mater Lachrymarum's lair which is found underground, where her followers wallow in filth. Unlike the cleansing waters of *Suspiria* and *Inferno*, *La terza madre* is mired in muck.

The muddied palette of *La terza madre* gives the film a much darker and colder tone, but pervasive across all three films is the colour black, relating to The Three Mothers as forces of darkness. Fulcanelli quotes Paracelsus, who says: 'Black is, further, the *root and origin* of the other colours' (Fulcanelli 1971: 86). In *La terza madre* Father Johannes relays the story of The Three Mothers' origins, explaining that they came from 'the shores of the Black Sea'. The Three Mothers are a primordial and elemental force, not linked with Christian ideas of God and Satan but with something more ancient. Beyond thinking of the Black Sea as an actual location, the phrase 'Black Sea' conjures up images of a primordial soup. The element of earth

then dominates this final film of the trilogy, which is associated more with the body and the physical world, hence its less stylized look.

Conclusion

As this essay has explored, Argento looked beyond the Christian tradition to the rich history of esoteric texts as a means to create his own mythology. Although the films present a form of femininity that is evil and destructive, these feminine forces are not in service to a male master and they are usually matched by other strong female opponents in the form of the films' young female protagonists. While these films have often been criticized for their lack of plausible narrative events and underdeveloped characters, instead attention is drawn to the technical components of film style, primarily the *mise-en-scene*, which are infused with psychological subtext and symbolism. The striking use of colour and set design in *Suspria* and *Inferno*, which evoke the alchemical elements of water, air and fire, give way to the darker and more naturalistic look of *La terza madre*, with its association with the element of earth. The Three Mothers Trilogy is situated within the Gothic horror genre, with its emphasis on terrible places that hide secrets and evil powers, yet the occult underworld that is uncovered in these films is one which contains many connections to previous works which also explore the links between the spiritual and physical realms. What Argento has done in this trilogy is to tap into the history of Western esotericism and incorporate it into the cinematic form, using these references to inform his stylistic choices and use the medium of film itself as a magical, alchemical tool.

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