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Dario Argento

"IT NEEDED A LOT OF LIGHT"

The maestro of highly saturated horror meets the painter of dangerous disquiet. Here, DARIO ARGENTO and JILL MULLEADY discuss professional strangling and the most eerie of colors

In the early months of 2024, when I had an art exhibition at the Schinkel Pavillon in Berlin, a writer told me that my paintings made him feel as though he were immersed in a horror movie by Dario Argento. Not only did the series' theme revolve around a woman's murder but, without realizing it, I'd also incorporated the distinctive red and green lighting of the Italian director's giallo classic *Suspiria* (1977).

Coincidentally, the brilliant filmmaker Gaspar Noé, an old friend of mine whom I hadn't seen for a decade, mentioned that Argento had appeared in his latest film, *Vortex* (2021). Noé's father is the neo-expressionist Argentinian painter Luis Felipe Noé, and we all share an intense passion for color. So Gaspar suggested that I meet Argento and immediately arranged a video call. We spoke briefly, and earlier this summer I went to visit him at the hospital in Rome, where he was undergoing routine checkups. Argento and I formed an instant connection.

Born in Rome in 1940, Argento began his career as a film critic before transitioning into screenwriting and directing. His debut feature, *The Bird with the Crystal Plumage* (1970), established him as a master of suspense and innovative visual motifs, a reputation

that has solidified over the decades with numerous iconic films, including *Deep Red* (1975) and *Inferno* (1980).

It was *Suspiria*, however, that not only cemented his standing as a visionary director but set new standards for what horror cinema could achieve. Alongside cinematographer Luciano Tovoli, Argento employed a vivid, almost surreal palette heavily favoring reds, blues, and greens. This bold style created an immersive, dreamlike atmosphere that heightens the film's tension and dread.

During the summer, after a few phone conversations, I felt a compelling urge to discuss the extraordinary use of color in *Suspiria*, and to paint a portrait of Argento. So, we arranged another meeting at his house in Rome.

JILL MULLEADY: You shot *Suspiria* in 1977, when you were 37. Was this your first film shot outside of Italy?

—DARIO ARGENTO: Yes, and also my first film about magic, devils, illusions—all these things I have inside of me, things that have accompanied me for years.

The film mainly takes place at a baroque dance school in Germany's Black Forest, and it features mostly women.

—Yes.

It's a veritable rainbow of femininity, all kinds of women and witches. The protagonist is an American girl, a bit androgynous, her beauty very strong but fragile too.

—Very fragile, very modest. She is so gentle that everyone is fascinated by her. Outside the school, she meets a professor who doesn't believe in magic, who is skeptical about all things superstitious, and he tells her something like, "It isn't real, it's just made up."

He says, "Bad luck isn't brought by broken mirrors, but by broken minds."

— Exactly. The actor Udo Kier is a great friend of mine. He lives in the United States, near Los Angeles, in Palm Springs. He also made films with Andy Warhol. He was very beautiful, with positively magical eyes. And then, in the same scene, there's this professor who *does* believe in magic. He says another famous line: "*Quoddam ubique, quoddam semper quoddam ab omnibus*

"Suspiria was my first film about magic, devils, illusions—all these things I have inside of me, things that have accompanied me for years"

creditum est." It means, "Magic is everywhere, and all over the world. It's a recognized fact. Always."

The film's opening sequence lasts 14 minutes. You've compared it to the crescendo of a volcano about to explode. And with the insistent music by Goblin—*ding, ding, ding*—the viewer feels like they can hear the footsteps of witches slipping through the night. All the while, the tension rises until the body of a hanged woman drops. Suddenly, there's no more struggle, no more life, only the violence of this body pierced by shards of glass.

— It sets the tone.

Even if it ended here, the film would already be fantastic.

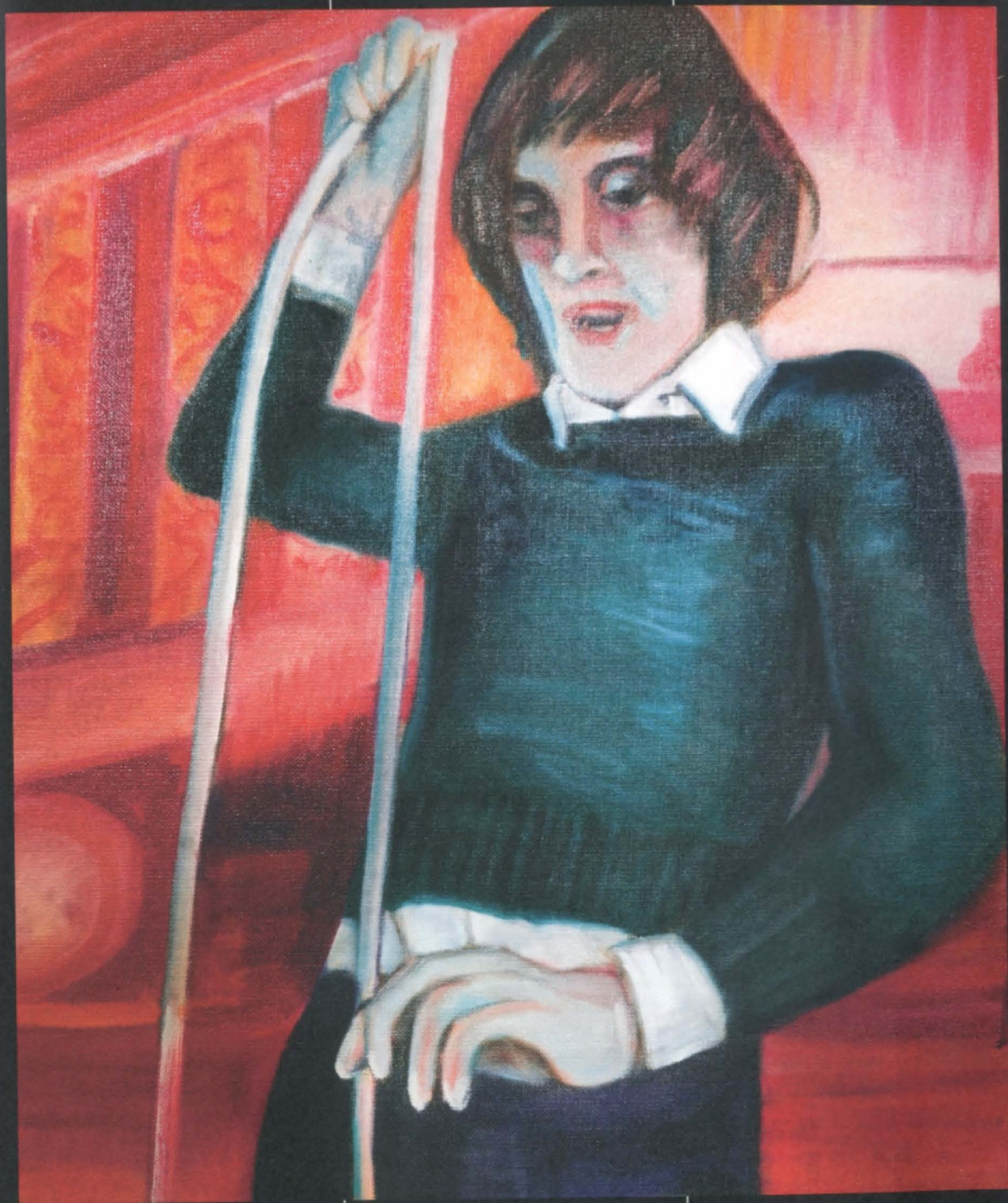
— That's it, it's over.

The soundtrack and images are really linked—they cannot be separated. But the colors and light of the film are connected to its emotions. You were basically painting, like a painter.

— Yes, because it's important. I even snuck in an artist's work. The wallpaper in the girl's room, with the fish and the birds? It was based on M. C. Escher's *Study of Regular Division of the Plane with Reptiles* (1939). Do you know that painting?

SUSPIRIA, 1977
Opening spread: DARIO ARGENTO at his home in Rome, photographed by JILL MULLEADY for BLAU International





DARIO, 2024
Oil on linen, 46 × 38 cm



Yes, and there is an animal symbolism in your films, one that's connected to the crucial relationship between animals and humanity. Only unlike what's happening in our society, in your work animals tend to haunt humans or dominate them. You leave it unclear whether the animals symbolize some internal fear or whether they are physical manifestations of a kind of spirit. In *Suspiria*, there's the blind man's dog that changes from helping and guiding him, to attacking and eating him.

— It changes its very nature.

Also in the film, a great witch transforms nature to direct it against other characters. But the protagonist, played by Jessica Harper, never seems afraid. When she catches a bat and kills it, we know she's going to end up killing the witch too. There is a logic to each element in the film. The narrative is filled with synecdoches, each little part representing the whole. It's a rhetorical movie in that way.

— Yes, each part represents the whole.

And you created this tragic suspense. Even the music has something tragic to it.

— That's also because we took a summer break during the shoot. Because Helena Markos, the great witch, is supposed to be Greek, I went to Athens to see a play. It had traditional Greek music. That's where I discovered an instrument called the bouzouki, and its sound has this strange spirit, like it's emerging from the depths. I thought, "This absolutely has to be in the movie!" So the next day, I went to buy a bouzouki, and I brought it back to Italy. I went to see the musicians I was working with on the music for the film, a band called Goblin, like you said, and I told them the bouzouki simply had to be in the movie. It kind of resembles the spirit of the movie. So they agreed, and it was beautiful. I've worked with a lot of musicians, like Bill Wyman from the Rolling Stones. I

don't know how many others, all very well known...

Ennio Morricone.

— Perhaps the greatest film musician in history. I made five films with him between 1970 and 1998. Music is one of the most important things in my films.

In *Suspiria*, you really worked on color too, which you did with your cinematographer, Luciano Tovoli.

— We made three films together. We're still great friends. This film is a strange case, because we chose to make a new color scheme for it. We went and looked at Japanese colors, the colors of Japanese industry. Really strong colors... The colors that *Suspiria* needed at the time.

How did you come up with this idea of having these greens and reds color the characters' skin? It is like the colors come from within.

— I was inspired by the first technicolor movies of the 1930s.

Like John Ford's?

— Yes, but others too. The cinema of the Disney era inspired me a lot, like *Snow White*.

The blacks, golds, and reds were very difficult to copy, almost impossible. We searched everywhere for a type of film stock that could render these colors. Finally, we chose the old Kodak, with only 100 ASA, because it makes for these magical colors—much more magical than any others, but it needed a lot of light.

Did you use lighting gels, or what was it that made those colors?

— Well, we built these sets, only we made some of the walls out of fabric, putting lights behind it. Then the actors who stood or moved alongside these walls, their bodies took on those colors, especially their faces. This was a great idea of Luciano

"The cinematographer Luciano Tovoli and I went and looked at Japanese colors, the colors of Japanese industry. The colors that *Suspiria* needed at the time"

Tovoli's. We did a lot of experiments in the film that were later used by many other directors, American ones, French ones...

Peter Greenaway too, right?

— Yes, and Guillermo del Toro. He's a great friend of mine.

But after your films, colors like that are rare. It's very much like expressionism in painting, like Edvard Munch. Now, when you were a critic, you had a conversation with the great Italian writer and filmmaker Pier Paolo Pasolini, and you asked him about his theory that there are two kinds of movies: the cinema of prose and the cinema of poetry, and he suggested his was a cinema of prose, right?

— Yes, and I told him it wasn't. It's a cinema of poetry. The discussion was very fierce. I admired him, he was a great poet. He staged things different from reality. But after that, we never met again.

He was murdered?

—Yes, and his murder was never solved.

Like Caravaggio's.

—In a way, Caravaggio *is* violence.

The 1970s were very tormented, turbulent, ambiguous, violent times in Italy, and there was the Marxist-Leninist terrorist group the Red Brigades running amok. It must have influenced giallo movies a lot. When you went to shoot *Suspiria* in Germany, you chose to shoot a scene at the Hofbräuhaus in Munich. This was the place where, in 1920, Hitler founded the Nazi Party in front of 2,000 people.

—His famous first speech.

In a way, where evil was born.

—In the film, when the character of the blind pianist betrays the witches, it's clear that he will die for his transgression. Die alongside his dog, his great friend. He exits the beer hall into a strange atmosphere—and of course the huge deserted square where he ends up was used by the Nazis to host these massive rallies. So he walks to the center of the square, in front of the grand neoclassical façade of the Bavarian State Collection of Antiques, the triangular pediment of which bears an eagle insignia, and that's where the dog suddenly turns on his master and tears his throat out.

Jessica Harper's character, who ultimately ends up in the witch's bedroom and kills her, does not let herself be swept up by either fear or this evil spirit.

—Exactly, and it's because of her gentleness. She never resorts to violence. She contemplates things, talks to people. But she never says anything awful. She just listens.

In your films, many women are killed. Of course, a lot of men die too, but you seem to have a special fascination for women, like they're a kind of sacred icon.

“The cinema of the Disney era inspired me a lot, like *Snow White*. The blacks, golds, and reds were very difficult to copy, almost impossible”

—*Suspiria* is about a world of women, women who have lots of ideas. It's a world that interested me. A world of men never interested me very much. Maybe it's because my mother was a very well-known photographer. I have some very celebrated books of her work. She specialized in portraits of women, very famous women like Sophia Loren, Claudia Cardinale, well-known Americans too—female celebrities from the 1930s to the 1950s. When I was a kid, my school was very close to my mother's studio, so when classes finished at 4pm, I went to there to do my homework. I sat in the corner of the actresses' dressing room, and I could see them with all the lights in their faces as my mother took their picture. I'd stay there for four hours until we went home together at 8pm. I spent years with the incredible beauty of these women. This beauty really cannot be described. It's fantastic. I remember how they reflected the light from different lamps and different colors over

the years. Then, when I started making movies, all of a sudden, like a trance, all these memories came flooding back. Bam! I remembered these women, their beauty, the colors. Yes, the face of a beautiful woman really is a marvel. So I always found myself much more comfortable around women than men. With male actors, I'm nervous, ill at ease every time. Perhaps that's why, in most of my films, the protagonist is always a woman.

Gold, *oro*, is a very important color in *Suspiria*. I see a lot of gilt in your house too. It's not the color *argento*, which means silver, right? But both are metals.

—*Precious* metals.

When you talk about the women in your mother's studio, it almost sounds like an illusion. You've said that doing *Suspiria* was a way for you to crystallize this illusion on celluloid. It's like an alchemy of reality—from *Argento* to gold.

—In fact, *Inferno*, the film I made after *Suspiria*, was about the transformation from metal into gold. For that, I went to France. Because France plays a very important role in the history of alchemy. It's about this man who has an antique bookshop, and he says that women have a greater capacity to understand mysteries than men.

Is it really always your hands strangling someone in your POV shots?

—Yes, it's always me, in all my movies, until my last film, with gloves or without. The role suited me well. As my father said, “Dario always does the best job of it.”

Jill Mulleady's solo exhibition at Sant'Andrea de Scaphis, Rome, closes January 5, 2025.

