

# In a Stranger Field

Studies of Art, Audiovisuals  
and New Technologies in Fantasy,  
SciFi and Horror Genres

Eds. Mario-Paul Martínez  
& Fran Mateu

ASOCIACIÓN DE DESARROLLO Y DIFUSIÓN  
DEL GÉNERO FANTÁSTICO  
"UNICORNIO NEGRO"

**MASSIVA**  
GRUPO DE INVESTIGACIÓN UMH

  
**FANTAELX**  
CONGRESO INTERNACIONAL DEL GÉNERO FANTÁSTICO  
ALTERNATIVAS Y NUEVAS TÉCNICAS

In a Stranger Field. Studies of Art, Audiovisuals and New  
Technologies in Fantasy, SciFi and Horror Genres.

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## **GIALLO. AN AESTHETIC INNOVATION IN CINEMA**

Vicente Javier Pérez Valero

### **From classic horror films to aestheticization in the digital age**

We live in an era in which any artistic manifestation receives aesthetic and conceptual influences from other fields, or from its past «I». Transversality, revision and homage have come to stay, and cinema is no stranger to this reality. While it is true that the new digital technologies allow us to revisit previous places, themes and aesthetics, but with a different result –due to the change of the means and tools used–, in the end, when we are in front of the screen, we recognize the heritage of those who, for more than a century, have contributed to creating the art of cinema.

This thematic line has infinite ways or ramifications to deal with, but in this case we will address the influence, in current audiovisual productions –including in fantasy and horror films– of the aesthetic and expressive contributions around the cinematography that the *Giallo* introduced in his film contributions. It will be taken for this, as a notable example for the analysis, the work of Darío Argento and that of Mario Bava and other creators of this subgenre. In the same way, the work in the photography and art direction of these films and, in particular, the cinematographer Luciano Tovoli in the film *Suspiria* (1977) will be examined. The study will also cover the influences that the authors of this period have had on fantasy and horror films, reaching

their projection in current cinema, highlighting certain aspects of the transition from cinema in photochemical to digital support.

In general, the recurring stylistic aspects that can be extracted from *Giallo* are: the use of hard, punctual and contrasted lighting; pronounced angulations, in which one runs away from any signal that may give rise to a «natural» interpretation of the scene and, lastly and more importantly –because it is the differential factor with respect to the previous horror cinema<sup>1</sup>–, the use of lights in saturated colours that bathe the composition with an unreal environment and with which the effect and sensations that the director intends are transmitted without dissimulation. This last factor is supported by an art direction that also uses colour in the same way, as well as decorations and unique locations.

With regard to fantasy and horror cinema, at present, this work investigates how *Giallo* cinema has influenced and enriched the works of filmmakers such as Panos Cosmatos or Nicolas Winding Refn, among others, and also how that imprint has conditioned and enhanced the work of cinematographers such as Natasha Braier or Benjamin Loeb, an extreme that has led to the identification of it as a personal brand, within the film industry.

On the other hand, it should be noted that the use of the aforementioned formal aspects is not always justified –within the context of the film genre or the script– in some current productions, where there are cases in which the aesthetic and the effective and decorative use predominate over the theme of the cinematographic work or fiction series.

### **Classic horror cinema and Hammer Film Productions**

The visual codes and aesthetics that we currently understand and fit into the category of horror or fantastic cinema are due, in large part, to the first works of cinema and, of course, to the great painters who,

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<sup>1</sup> Referred to *German Expressionism*, the classic horror films of the Universal Pictures and the fantastic and horror films of the Hammer Films Productions.



throughout Art history have established certain formal factors that we all recognize. From authors such as Goya and his *Pinturas negras* (1819–1823) or their *Caprichos* (1799) and *Disparates* (1815–1824), to the Cubist avant-garde of the early twentieth century, through the influence of part of Friedrich's romantic painting, Delacroix or Géricault, the painting has formed the foundation of the codes by which, today, we recognize the cinematography that goes deeper into our fears.

The beginnings of this projection and aesthetic evolution were evident in the so-called *German Expressionism* of the interwar period. In a short space of time a whole compendium of technical resources was developed that would take us to the classic horror cinema.

The first example of this is Robert Wiene's film *The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari* (1920) and photograph of Willy Hameister, emblematic work that marks the beginning of *German Expressionism* and that already proposed the use of hard lights, unnatural angles and projected shadows in key moments of the footage, as well as close-ups that connected the viewer with the protagonists. The particularity of this film is the use of unreal-looking sets, aesthetically related to the cubist avant-garde and painted by artists Hermann Warm, Walter Röhrig and Walter Reimann, who move us to a state of madness or reverie and that bring their own light to the composition of the shot. To accentuate the theatricality that Wiene brings to its actors, these are provided with a makeup that increases the feeling of nightmare. Finally, the tinting of the film is introduced, which projects, towards the viewer, different visual sensations.

Following the same line, but with greater sophistication, it was presented in 1922 *Nosferatu* by Friedrich Wilhelm Murnau. In this case, the cinematographers Fritz Arno Wagner and Günther Krampf, introduced hard and contrasted lights (with respect to the background of the frame) in certain parts of the film, leaving a more conventional lighting, in medium key, for the rest of the film. Murnau also applies tints to emphasize the differences between day and night or exterior

and interior, as well as cast shadows and makeup on the actors. The novelty of Murnau's proposal is the introduction of *chiaroscuro* in the compositions and the backlights that, on the one hand, define the contour of the characters (almost always Nosferatu) and, on the other, create a gloomy atmosphere by allowing visualize the suspended particles that remain between the light source and the character.

In that same year of 1922, Fritz Lang premiered *Dr. Mabuse, der Spieler*, a film that introduces a more modern configuration in the composition of the shots and a greater depth in them, accentuated not only by the physical perspective of the objects or constructions, but also for the placement of the lighting in each of the framing shots. The cinematographer Carl Hoffmann explores, like Murnau in *Nosferatu*, the attention to detail and the success in changing angulation and the hardness of the key lights in the foregrounds, within the key moments of the plot, as well as the use of a great contrast in them.



*Nosferatu* by Friedrich Wilhelm Murnau.

Photography by Fritz Arno Wagner and Günther Krampf, 1922.

But, without a doubt, one of the works that marks a change between the style of *German Expressionism* and what was already seen as modern cinema (mainly in Europe and North America), is *M* (1931) by Fritz Lang, with photography by Fritz Arno Wagner. Almost ten years after *Dr. Mabuse*, Lang proposes a varied repertoire of shots that breaks with the previous narrative visual inflexibility (no doubt, still limited by technical aspects). To all this, he adds daring compositions

and unusual camera views at this time (chopped and low angle ends), always casting hard lights on the protagonist and casting shadows on the shot, letting the viewer be the one who identifies them with the film theme: the danger of evil. The *chiaroscuro* in the key scenes is evident, but the factor that generates more restlessness in the entire footage is the shots in which the absence manifests: fixed shots of concatenated silence and solitude, which lead to another in motion where the ball dropped of one of the victims rolls until it stops. In this case, the light does not project positivity or hope, but anguish and restlessness. Lang culminates his aesthetic proposal with an improved composition of the wide shots in terms of perspective and lighting, following the aesthetic line proposed in *Dr. Mabuse*.

In 1932, the Danish director Carl Theodor Dreyer, applied the aesthetic proposal that he had already experienced in *La passion de Jeanne d'Arc*<sup>2</sup> of 1928, but, in this case on a horror story. It's about *Vampyr. Der Traum des Allan Gray*. Together with its cinematographer, Rudolph Maté, Dreyer develops the cinematographic expressionist proposal, composed of shadows and lighting of an unnatural appearance, adding the introduction of camera movements, character tracking and indirect lights (bounced to walls and ceilings), low angle, candle or even backlights. The oppressive frames on the actors, at key moments (closely related to *La passion de Jeanne d'Arc*), as well as the representation of death by arranging the character with the head at the bottom of the shot (backwards), and the introduction of almost subjective shots (as in the sequence of the interment), give this work an innovative character that influenced later authors of the genre.

In the same decade of the 1930s, films with clear influences of *Cinematographic Expressionism* from Europe begin to be produced in the United States. The producer that introduced more titles in the market

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<sup>2</sup> In this work of Dreyer, the use of close-ups (with normal angulation, chopped or low angled) on the key roles, as well as frames in which Joan of Arc's own character is represented oppressed, either because his face is cut off by its upper part or it is in the lower part of the composition, leaving a large amount of air around it, which causes loneliness before the process in which the character is immersed.

was Universal Pictures, specializing in the *monsters movies*<sup>3</sup>. Works such as *Frankenstein* by James Whale –with photography by Arthur Edeson– or *Dracula* by Tod Browning –with photography by Karl Freund–, both from 1931, emphasize European Gothic, the use of hard lights and the contrasting aspect of the image *chiaroscuro* mode. The influence is such that, in *Frankenstein's* case, angled wall decorations and cast shadows of the characters are used, in clear reference to the film *The Cabinet of Doctor Caligari* of Murnau. However, there is an element, between these two works, that makes the difference between them. While in *Frankenstein* there is a clear differentiation between the «normal» world and the environment in which the Doctor moves<sup>4</sup>, in *Dracula* the contrasting tone of the film does not change, making the narration always retain uncertainty through the image.

In 1934, Hammer Films Productions was founded in the United Kingdom, a producer that competed with the big Hollywood companies for the horror genre market and also for the fantastic cinema. This company became part of Exclusive Films Limited that William Hinds founded in 1935 with Enrique Carreras, a Spanish businessman who owns film theaters throughout the country, being the first one located in Hammersmith (London) (Memba, 2007: 13-15).

After some first productions such as *The Public Life of Henry the Ninth* (1935) or *The Mystery of Marie Celeste* (1936) and other titles before and after World War II, it was from the 50s when the aesthetics

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<sup>3</sup> Within fantasy and horror or science fiction cinema, *monsters movies* is one in which fictional creatures intervene in opposite interaction or in collaboration with humans. In the decades of the 20s and 30s Gothic literary stories were adapted, incorporating, over the years and historical events, other types of monsters such as, for example, animals or humans affected by mutations due to scientific experiments or exposure to atomic energy.

<sup>4</sup> The world outside the castle of Doctor Frankenstein is luminous and without contrasts, soft light predominates. However, while the action takes place during the night or inside the fortress, the lights are hard, with extreme angulations and the shot is contrasted as a *chiaroscuro*. Even in the scene of the monster and the girl, despite being performed outdoors, the light is predominantly soft except in the shots in which the monster itself appears where, with the help of characterization and direct sunlight, the shades fall on his face.

of Hammer with *The Quatermass experiment* (1955) directed by Val Guest, a good combination of Edwardian science fiction and Hollywood monster movies (Carver, 2012: 2). In parallel, the producer also takes advantage of the popularity of classic horror stories, and releases *The curse of Frankenstein* (1957) by Terence Fisher, a version of the Universal Pictures movie.<sup>5</sup>

The competition for the entertainment business, which the incipient television began to assume, caused the producer to exploit more adult resources, such as sex, sadism, violence and even lesbianism, in order to attract the public to the halls of cinema (Carver, 2012: 3-4). While it is true that already in the *Frankenstein* of Whale, sex is subtly introduced –in the scene in which the monster paves the rooms of the Doctor's fiancée– it is with productions of the Hammer where that theme is explained, playing always with horror and desire.

As for Hammer's contribution to the aesthetic evolution of the horror genre, it could be said that he had two distinct periods, with a director as the main catalyst: Terence Fisher. In the first era, framed in the 50s, *chiaroscuro*, shadow thrown and gothic influence are still present. These features are evidenced in *The curse of Frankenstein* (1957) and *Dracula* (1958), both signed by Fisher. At this time, the introduction of colour in Hammer films is bounded in the art direction. Due to the low budget of its productions (Memba, 2007: 16-18), the company is forced to use with ingenuity, albeit roughly, any element of the scene to cause a greater impression towards the viewer projecting, in this way, an exaggerated effect through, for example, red curtains, laboratory liquids of strident colours or the red colour of the blood itself.

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<sup>5</sup> The American producer yielded the rights of adaptation of *Frankenstein* of James Whale, but not what concerned the aesthetics of the monster, which had to perform a different characterization. Far from being a remake, this Fisher movie places Dr. Frankenstein in a less lukewarm position than in the Whale version, criminalizing his actions and not those of his true victim: the monster (Memba, 2007: 30-31).

However, at the beginning of the 60s and due, in large part, to a tendency to change the aesthetics of cinematography, we can highlight a leap in the key or tone of the films being chosen, in most cases, a middle key. Even so, this general tone contrasts with a few climax scenes in each film, in which it becomes a very contrasting *chiaroscuro*. In this sense, it should be noted that, for example, the character of Dracula, played by Christopher Lee, is always illuminated in the same way in all his films: hard lights, in low angle and / or lateral, whatever the light of the rest of characters in the same scene.<sup>6</sup> With this visual appearance, characterized by the type of light scheme and the physical aspect –tall, thin character and dressed in black (Memba, 2007: 36-37)–, it is as we remember the vampire in our visual memory.

On the other hand, in the films of this decade the *Gothicism* begins to disappear, which had marked the horror cinema since its inception, and other stylistic elements are introduced in the production design, whether from other historical or even contemporary times. The colour begins to be noticed, for example, in the association of red with evil and with the vampire –in the case of *Dracula, prince of darkness* (1965) by Terence Fisher– where even the lighting itself, in some areas of the scenery is done with red leaks without being justified.<sup>7</sup> Although this film is probably not the best in the series, it is undoubtedly the one that, thanks to its cinematographer, Michel Reed, brings more expressive innovations in terms of the use of colour, being, directly, inspiration for the creators Italians of the *Giallo* cinema. This is the opposite of Freddie Francis's *The evil of Frankenstein* (1964), where blue lighting (mainly in the night and lightning sequences) is completely justified. In this way the effects of light are integrated into the narrative and does not stand out as a strange element.

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<sup>6</sup> This characterization of the Count, made by screenwriter Jimmy Sangster, is a compendium of all previous versions of Bram Stoker's work from the 1922 *Nosferatu* de Murnau.

<sup>7</sup> The placement of a light source can be justified if there is an element in the scene that emits that type of light. But in this case, the red light only serves to emphasize the presence of Dracula and support the tension of the moment in a purely aesthetic way.



*Dracula, prince of darkness* by Terence Fisher. Photography by Michel Reed. 1965.

Already in the 70s, the technical possibilities –greater sensitivity of the new supports (films)– and a tendency to use a more natural light, leave almost hard illuminations. In fact, Christopher Lee appears in Roy Ward's *Scars of Dracula* (1970) with a soft, direct illumination, with hardly any shadows on his face: the new film narrative believes in a more adult viewer, making evil no longer so obvious and leaving his own interpretation on the ground of the audience. In the same film, the use of zoom is introduced as another technical resource to capture the attention of the public, trapping it in shots of rapid optical movement. As a climax, at the time of the film's climax, Dracula appears in his coffin, with bright red eyes, superimposed thanks to the visual effects that the technique allowed at that time. Effectism takes over the argument and increases blood and morbidity in the key scenes of the story, as does the sexual burden. This is a trend that, at this time, practically all Hammer productions follow.

### **The innovation of *Giallo***

The vernacular subgenre we call *Giallo* cinema comes, in its origins, from the murder and mystery novels published by the Milanese publishing house Mondadori at the end of the 20s of the last century. The name *gialli* (yellow in Italian) is due to the colour used in the covers of the books, which made them especially identifiable among its plaintiffs. Among the published authors were translated novels by Agatha Christie, Edgar Wallace and Arthur Conan Doyle. Such an

attractive theme, whose penetration into the public was considerable, could not be ignored by the interwar period cinema, being Luchino Visconti himself, the creator of what is considered the first *Neorealist* film, the precursor of the *Giallo* cinema with the film *Ossessione* (1942). At this time, Italy said goodbye to the oppression of the Mussolini fascist regime and opened up to the world to tell, through cinema, its own stories, but at the same time, with contextualized influences in a world that, after the Second War World, began to be more global (Koven, 2006).

Labeled in the category of *exploitation film*<sup>8</sup>, the *Giallo* cinema takes up the stylistic line of sensationalism –which the producer Hammer Films already introduced in her films– with the explanation of violence, sadism, misogyny and sex (Sevastakis, 2016: 1-2). In the Italian case, the monstrous characters are replaced, included in nineteenth-century literary stories, mainly, and located in distant times and distant countries, by other terrifying roles, more in line with the current era: murderers living among us, who they can even be known and, in many cases, whose appearance is not strange to us. They appear, in the majority of the occasions, with the hidden face, with black gloves and with hat and dark jacket. The public has matured, it does not demand easy solutions: it wants to feel that, really, it can be the protagonist of any of the stories it sees on the screen. For this reason, detective and police plots are introduced, in which the protagonists can embody an amateur investigator who decides to investigate on their own, or suffer harassment of the murderer as if he were the spectator himself.

To make this immersion more plausible, the *Giallo* cinema, except for a few occasions, is located in current cities and in the contemporary era, making the characters come true. The visual aesthetic also changes: we start from the influences of Hammer and *Film Noir* on Mario Bava's films until we reach a higher degree of aestheticization in the works of Darío Argento, where design, composition and a more modern narrative, take over the screen.

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<sup>8</sup> The cinema of exploitation or *exploitation film*, is the cinematographic category that groups the themes that are outside the «socially acceptable» and that affect the dark face of the human being, such as violence, crime, highly eroticism sexualized and drug use. These issues are provided, by their great impact, by the producers to obtain the maximum benefit with, generally, a modest investment.



Reality, through the scenes of death and horror, are explicitly exposed, reinforcing the approach of the theme *Giallo* with the viewer (Partyka, 2014). The use of visual effects, more and more plausible, which gives the impression that blood can splash into the camera and, ultimately, the viewer, cause extreme sensations that reach the deepest of human fears.

Emphasizing this aspect, the camera's point of view alternates the subjectivity between the murderer and the victim:

The camerawork and editing in giallo murder scenes further destabilize identification with the characters onscreen. The camera typically adopts the first-person perspective of the approaching killer as the suspense crescendos. During the murder itself, the screen explodes in a flurry of edits: the screaming victim, the plunging blade, cloven skin, flailing hands, gushing blood, gaping eyes, and repeat. The cuts of the film mimic cuts into the victim's flesh, captured in the quasi-abstract detail of the extreme close-up. Identifiable perspectives disintegrate in an ecstasy of thrashing bodies (Roberts, 2018: 124).<sup>9</sup>

Another way to make the product more attractive to the new audience focuses on the introduction of foreign characters and actors, with which it is intended to show some internationality in the productions.<sup>10</sup> This renewal is also included in the plots, where independent and often frequently sexualized women can appear as protagonists –even, sometimes they reveal lesbian relationships or a certain sexual ambiguity– that are used to mix two extreme passions of the human being: sex and violence.

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<sup>9</sup> Related to this, remember the exaggerated use of commercial aircraft shots, in flight and on the ground, by Mario Bava at the beginning of *The girl who knew too much* (1962) and in the final scenes of *The bird of crystal feathers* (1969) by Darío Argento.

<sup>10</sup> Within the perspective of sex, the production of *Giallo* films could be divided into two categories: *M-Giallo*, when the protagonist is male; and *F-Giallo*, when the protagonist is female. This aspect also introduces a certain destabilization in the traditional notions about the masculine–feminine roles that began to arise in the socio-cultural field of the 60s and that left other gender perspectives open (Mackenzie, 2013).

The thematic schemes in *Giallo* are repeated, production after production, giving rise to the term *filone*, a generic characteristic that will be reflected later in the *slashers* of the 80s and 90s (Roberts, 2018).

The influence of pictorial art, as in previous productions of the fantasy and horror genre, is also present in *Giallo*, revealing a very evident influence of contemporary trends such as *Pop-art*, *Op-art* and *Camp*, in Mario's films Bava and painters such as Brueghel the Elder, Edward Hopper, Munch or Goya in Darío Argento (Rubio Alcover and Loriguillo-López, 2018).

### **Mario Bava**

*The girl who knew too much* (1962) of Mario Bava, made in black and white, is considered the prototype of *Giallo* film, in which murders and suspense of Gothic style are combined in the surroundings of the Rome of the 60s. In the argument, an American tourist is involved in some mysterious crimes that she will try to solve, thus becoming a hero. The psychology of the protagonist and the events that occur, were inspired by Jane Austen's novel, *Northanger Abbey* of 1798 and the Hitchcock movie *The man who knew too much* (1934, 1956).

As for the cinematographic visual style, Bava (who also signs the cinematography) is based on the aesthetics of Hitchcock films of the 40s, where realism becomes artifice and mannerism through blurring, off-field actions, empty shots (pillow shots), takings in disengagement of the protagonist, subjective camera views –in order for the viewer to put in the place of the protagonist– and camera movements (Sevastakis, 2016: 6-7) (Rubio Alcover, and Loriguillo-López, 2018: 69). On the other hand, the *chiaroscuro* or low key lighting<sup>11</sup> of the classic horror cinema becomes the protagonist, emphasizing hard lights –many times in low angles–, backlights, and spooky shadows (expressionist). The sensation of unreality becomes evident in the moments of more tension in the narration, getting to deform, by means of angulations of

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<sup>11</sup> Introduced in horror movies from *German expressionists* to classic Hollywood movies and Hammer productions.

light, factions of an apparently innocent heroine. The low key in night scenes, both indoor and outdoor, provides a sense of paranoia focused on the direction, angulation and hardness of light (Sevastakis, 2016: 9). Violence and drama of these scenes contrasts with the brightness of the daytime locations, where it is deduced, through a high-key treatment –sometimes without contrast– that nothing will happen that puts the protagonist in danger.

In his following films, produced in colour, Bava continues to introduce the aesthetic elements, mentioned above, most characteristic of *Giallo* cinema, but adds a clearly differentiating ingredient: the contrasted use of colour shades.



*I tre volti della paura* (*The drop of water*) by Mario Bava.  
Photography by Antonio Rinaldi and Mario Bava. 1963.

During the 60s and early 70s, Bava alternates films located both in the contemporary scene and in the romanticism of the nineteenth century, where the first horror stories come from. An example of this is *I tre volti della paura* (1963), where he shares the direction of photography with Antonio Rinaldi. As a declaration of principles and with a stunning art direction designed to put the viewer in a situation, Bava presents the film with Boris Karloff addressing the viewer with a bright blue background and a pink-purple stage created with coloured lighting. As the camera approaches the foreground, lights begin to change the natural tone of Karloff's skin, turning bright red: night, terror and blood make an appearance. Indeed, in this film three gothic

stories are told, based on texts by Chekhov, Tolstoy and Maupassant, in which only the first, *The telephone*, collects the stylistic lines of *The Girl Who Knew Too Much*. However, to a greater or lesser extent, the approximation to the use of colour is made using the contrasts between cold and warm lights, always justified by the night light or the candles and lamps. The last story, *The drop of water* forces that chromatic polarity, both in the direction of art and in the lighting and uses the colour in a more sophisticated way: green as the contrast base tone; orange red in low-voltage scenes, turning yellow later as climax is reached (applying transitional property); and the purple, centered on the ghost, to demonstrate the supernatural, terror, danger and death (using associative property)<sup>12</sup>. While it is true that the intensity of the coloured light permeates the composition of the scenes, the use of golden, warm or neutral tones in a scenographic composition of decadent aesthetics complements the narrative intentionality of the script and the cinematography.

In one of Bava's latest films, *Gli Orrori of the Castello di Norembega* (Baron Blood) of 1972, the aesthetic varies according to the time in which he enrolls. It is a script in which the current era of the film is mixed with the gothic appearance of the interior of the castle where the plot takes place. The daytime scenes are raised in high key lighting, with soft light or with great light intensity, contrasting with the interiors of the castle, where *chiaroscuro* and extreme angulations predominate in the camera position. In this case, the associative property of colour is also introduced, but this time in the garments of the protagonist, in which red predominates. The visual contrast of Bava's proposal transits between the use of shadows and fog –«traditional» in classic horror movie – and the excessive use of zoom or even the introduction of «pop» icons like Coca-Cola in one of the scenes, whose red colour precedes a murder.

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<sup>12</sup> The associative and transitional properties of colour are used in cinematographic narration to reinforce the meanings in the scene. The first is constant during the story, while the second varies to show the change and feelings towards the viewer.

## Dario Argento

Dario Argento collects the witness of Mario Bava in the late 60s and drives a stylistic twist that, in some way, will consolidate the *Giallo* as more than a subgenre of cult films. In his first film, *L'uccello dalle piume di cristallo* (*The bird of crystal feathers*) of 1969, Argento presents the assassination attempt that triggers the plot in a clear, crystalline way, in a white-walled art gallery, which it has a great showcase as a frame and where the action materializes with a high intensity of soft light in high key. While the key role (North American) observes the action on the other side of the window, as if it were a movie, the viewer moves between chopped general shots, medium shots and close-ups where the blur is used to provide subjectivity and a sense of reality. With this innovative start and, without a doubt, with the help of cinematographer Vittorio Storaro, Argento manages to get the viewer out of the visual arguments to which he is accustomed.

In his first film, Argento uses inserts of details or objects that reinforce the narration, as well as images frozen in flashbacks in the protagonist's memory. The subjective shots become very evident, especially in the second murder. The lighting retains chiaroscuro, hard lights and sometimes extreme angulations.

A constant in Argento's filmography is the use of red colour with associative property. In *L'uccello dalle piume di cristallo* it is not yet clear at all, going almost unnoticed, but it always appears as a sign of danger in the locker room, on the mat or in the killer's hair, in buildings, decoration and of course, in blood. This relationship with the colour red will evolve in later works, where it will be continuous, but other ingredients will be added that will enrich the visual narrative.

Another feature of this author's films is the importance of art direction and the inclusion of artistic pieces, either with a leading role, as well as in structural (architectural) and decorative resources within the scenes. In *L'uccello dalle piume di cristallo*, the central plot revolves around a painting, inspired by Brueghel the Elder and a modern art gallery, where large sculptures are exhibited. This reference to art is also very evident in

*Profondo rosso* (Dark Red) of 1974, in which Edward Hopper is mentioned visually, in the coffee scene in the square, and Goya, with his *Pinturas negras*, in the house of the first victim. In this work, Argento repeats the plot scheme of L'Ucello, in what is a clear example of *filone*: an English pianist witnesses a murder and launches to investigate to find the culprit. Luigi Kuveiller, the film's cinematographer, introduces novelties such as the use of the murderer's subjective shot with a hand-held camera, as well as framing within frames, taking advantage of doors or windows that frame the figures. These elements are added to the use of empty shots, detailed shots of objects, cut close-ups and the use of red in the art direction (Esquinas, 2012), this time in a more solid and continuous way throughout the footage.

A final aspect, which was first introduced in this film by Argento, is the use of unjustified colour light in the burning house scene, where the protagonist's face is dyed red and the journalist's face is silhouetted with a deep blue. It is to be understood that this effect caused the director's pleasure, because in later productions, such as in *Suspiria* (1977) and *Inferno* (1980), this aesthetic would explode which would make him a reference author in horror movies.

Within this innovative stylistic phase, Argento, fascinated with the use of the colour and theme of the Disney film *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs* (1937), proposes in *Suspiria*, together with the cinematographer Luciano Tovoli and the production designer Giuseppe Bassan, a gothic fairy tale with a triad colour scheme (red, green and blue) almost always contrasted with yellow. This balanced scheme is repeated in scenes in which the «happening of life» is normal (Williams, 2018). The moment a destabilizing element appears, one of the colours of the triad, usually red or green, become protagonists, even «burning» the colour in certain areas of detail. This resource was enhanced by the choice of Eastman 5254 film of 100 ASA and the Technicolor colour transfer process in the laboratories of Rome.<sup>13</sup> Such was Darío Argento's obsession with the colour that he and Tovoli demanded from Bassan more colourful scene paintings on the walls.

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<sup>13</sup> This film development process was carried out by transfer, layer by layer (magenta, cyan, yellow and black) which provided control over the values, contrasts and colours, and a vividness and colour stability that no photochemical technique has been able to



*Suspiria* by Darío Argento. Photography by Luciano Tovoli. 1977.

In the course of film, the *chiaroscuro* or low key becomes, generally, a double of saturated colours that contrast with each other and provide a great impact. These colours can be paired alternately but respond to a specific intention. You could say that the colour blue is the one that constantly appears as opposition from others, especially because it is related to the night. The red colour continues to have a connotation of danger or fear, which Argento previously used, but this time, it acts on three fronts: costumes, decoration / architecture (using mirrors, geometric or textured backgrounds) and light. The third colour, which acts as a sign of the supernatural and that replaces yellow at times, is purple. Bava already attributed that meaning in *I tre volti della paura* (1963) and without a doubt, Argento continued with the same reference. Vivid yellow or orange usually provides the meaning of death, especially in the final scenes through fire. All this light strategy is justified for the sake of a greater visual impact that reinforces the narration. From the first moment in which the viewer perceives this code, he assumes that he is facing a story in which reality is very far away, in which the detective inquiry does not make much sense in the face of supernatural powers outside our understanding. After all, it is an adult story with visual codes of a children's story.

As for the use of camera, both Luciano Tovoli, in *Suspiria* and Romano Albani in *Inferno*, were faithful to the director's style, emphasizing the expressiveness of characters with close-ups, using

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match. Even so, its high production cost caused it to fall into disuse (Eastman Museum, 2015).

chopped, low angles, wide shots that exhibit the architecture or the monumentality of the scene or frames within frames.

In 2017, under the supervision of Tovoli, the digital restoration of *Suspiria* in 4K was completed, being able to introduce all the advances in current technology and selective colour correction (Williams, 2018).<sup>14</sup>

## Projection in current cinema

In the contemporary panorama of fantasy and horror cinema, a stylistic current called *Neo-giallo* has resurfaced in which the elements of the more «classic» *Giallo* (from the 60s) are reinterpreted and deconstructed but without being influenced by its narrative structure. In it, the sensory stimuli are reinforced, whether they come from the image –powered by digital grading– or from music and sounds (Hallam, 2017). Hélène Cattet and Bruno Forzani capture in *Amer* (2009) sex and violence, not as events to progress in the narrative, but as visceral experiences to catch the viewer. To do this, they use tools such as foreground, blurring, fragmented details on the split screen and typical zoom. Close-ups also emphasize textures, reinforced by the sound that accompanies it: the squeak of leather gloves, the scraping of the razor against the skin and, more effectively, the sound of the shaving rack along the teeth. These sounds translate into the treatment of colour in the manner of Darío Argento but without abusing contrasts and stridencies. In this same line acts the remake of Luca Guadagnino *Suspiria* (2018), where the colour in the lighting is used only at key moments and the weight of it falls on the costumes.

Outside of this trend and encompassing different themes and styles, *Giallo*, in general, and the unmistakable aesthetic of Darío Argento, in particular, have clearly influenced directors as different as Nicolas Winding Refn, Panos Cosmatos, Gaspar Noé or Xavier Dolan, for exposing only a few examples.

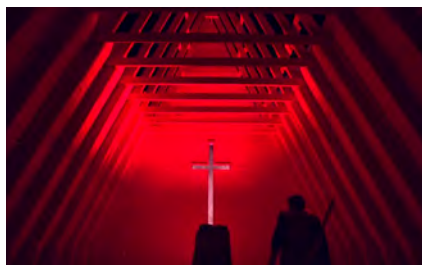
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<sup>14</sup> The restoration has been carried out by the Synapse studio in Burbank, California, which has remastered other horror films such as *Night of the Living Dead* (1968) or *The Texas Chain Saw Massacre* (1974).



If we stick to a close thematic relationship between *Giallo* and current fantasy and horror movies, *Mandy* (2018) by Panos Cosmatos is one of the clearest exponents. After a first approach to the use of colour as a narrative element with *Beyond the Black Rainbow* (2010), Cosmatos, together with cinematographer Benjamin Loeb, creates in *Mandy* a visual atmosphere that transits between the supernatural – remembering, somehow to David Lynch's TV series *Twin Peaks* (1990)– and the most human passions of mainstream revenge movies, embodied by Nicolas Cage.

Cosmatos uses the same colour code in light as Argento, attributing and associating, mainly, purple to scenes where the supernatural transcends, red to danger, and gold to death. In the transition scenes, the orange and green ones appear, or a more balanced colour temperature. Sometimes saturation in the low scene to create a stronger feeling in the following one. This strategy was also used by Argento in *Suspiria* (1977). Low key lighting, backlights and simple lighting schemes leave the prominence of the light composition to the colour, but in the case of *Mandy*, and unlike in *Suspiria*, in part of the scenes the colour is justified (although saturated) by the very nuance of objects or lights of the scene. In the rest, saturation is triggered, creating almost binary contrasts, leading us to a world that, at the end of the film, is unreal.



*Mandy* by Panos Cosmatos. Photography by Benjamin Loeb. 2018.

As for the use of the camera, Cosmatos and Loeb opt for open and simple shots, contrasted with close-ups in which a visual dialogue is created between the characters. There are no blurs or outs of frame. Each composition is perfectly measured and prolonged in assembly

time. That neatness is broken by the effects of light on the frame, especially at the edges –with a burnt photographic texture– and with horizontal flares, due to the use of anamorphic lenses.<sup>15</sup> These aspects approximate the aesthetics of the film to a «retro» concept, in homage to the productions of the *Giallo* and, above all, to the horror cinema of the 80s.

In a more aesthetic line, but still introducing a story of suspense, horror and vanity in the fashion environment, Nicolas Winding Refn presented the 2016 *The neon demon*, a feature film whose photography is signed by Natasha Braier. Braier herself gave the perfect profile for this work, since she had made pieces for advertising in which she combined the use of coloured lights with the delicate treatment of the skin and the faces of the models. The theme chosen by Refn is the myth of Narcissus, where a young and beautiful model makes his way between vanity and his companions - competitors, and it is the latter who end up killing her. Nothing to do with the themes of *Giallo*, not even those of horror movies from previous decades. Death is shown in full light and full colour. But there is, without a doubt, a look from the director, towards the cinema of Argento, which is explained in several aspects of the film, such as the use of coloured lights (in this case, almost always justified by the night environments in which characters move) or wide shots linked to close-ups. The use of the high key, in the scene of the photo shoot with the white background and in that of the casting, and the framing of the image in the latter, also remind the moment in which the plot is triggered in *L'ucello dalle piume di cristallo* of 1969, in which the protagonist observes the scene from the window, while the entire gallery is fully illuminated. But unlike Storaro's photograph, in which resources are used to enhance subjectivity, in Braier's the camera is always objective.

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<sup>15</sup> The anamorphic lenses were used to optimize the 35 mm format and thus be able to «stretch» the image and, by optical means, make it panoramic. Currently, these optics are still used to broaden the aspect ratio and also for the aesthetic effects it produces with light, such as oval bokeh or horizontal flares.

While it is true that the use of colour is justified in most of the footage, in the pre-murder scenes golds and reds are introduced – an indication that makes us anticipate the outcome– while blues and purples appear after the act in contrast to the blue night. In the same way as Argento, Refn associates colours with certain characters: the blue-green, cold and low saturation tones correspond to the make-up artist, while the vivid tones (which change as the film progresses) and the gold that precedes to death are associated with the protagonist.



*The neon Demon* by Nicolas Winding Refn (2016) and *L'ucello dalle piume di cristallo* by Darío Argento (1969). Photography by Natasha Braier and Vittorio Storaro.

The use of saturated colours in Refn's filmography began in *Valhalla Rising* (2009), where saturated shots of red are introduced when the key role accesses another dimension that rides between the dreamlike and the terrifying visions. Digital postproduction and grading acquire special importance because it allows you to select aspects of the image to manipulate them in their values, either to enhance them or to attenuate them. Subsequently, in *Drive* (2011) and, above all, in *Only God Forgives* (2013) Refn achieves the aesthetics he would perfect in *The Neon Demon*. In *Only God Forgives* the use of colour is more invasive in lighting and art direction, sometimes impregnating the entire scene as red. The night world, no doubt, allows such licenses.

A final aspect, in relation to *Giallo* and Darío Argento, is the introduction of aesthetic elements related to art, whether using a minimal decoration, sometimes and baroque in others, or the constant mention of fashion photography and architecture of avant-garde and *Op-art* in the final scenes.

Another case of using colour in an associative and transitional way is that of *Climax* (2018) by Gaspar Noé. With a theme more related to psychedelia and substances than potency and psychological horror, Noé plays to create scenarios in which the saturated colour and the moving camera are what modulate the moods of the characters. From the lounge area, where a warm, soft, zenith light predominates, to the bedrooms and showers, where it is the coloured lights that take center stage, Benoît Debie, the film's cinematographer, creates a light system practices that do not interfere with the continuous movement in camera tracking shots, as well as their position, sometimes zenithal and, at the end, turned 180°.

From the soft and warm light, Noé passes to a red emergency light that transmits even more the sensations that the protagonists are living. They can only escape to the rooms where they can be safe: green and blue ones. Finally a door opens and the morning light shines reflected in the snowy landscape, the same landscape that has served to start the film with a sequence shot.

Even if it is a subject away from *Giallo* and having used a transgressive mode in camera management, the influence of Darío Argento's aesthetics on *Climax* is evident, even more so when Gaspar Noé himself recognizes him including a *Suspiria* DVD in the shots where the characters are interviewed.

Incorporated as an aesthetic element in other lighter themes, such as comedy, the influences of *Giallo* can be perceived, for example, in Xavier Dolan's work in *Les amours imaginaires* (*The imaginary loves*) of 2010, where the three protagonists are associated with colours that change at the same time as your sentimental situation.

The relationship between coloured lights and the fantastic and horror movies is so assumed in our visual culture that a piece of metacine, in homage to the *Slasher*, as is *The final girls* (2015) by Todd Strauss–Shulson, also used colour codes introduced by Mario Bava in the story *The Drop of Water*, within *I tre volti della paura* (1963) and later also used by Darío Argento in *Suspiria*.

## In conclusion

Creation and human artistic expression is a process in which, generation after generation, knowledges and techniques of artists that have preceded us are assumed, as well as languages and codes with which we convey our thoughts and concerns. The history of cinema in general, and of fantasy and horror cinema in particular, has been gathering the experimentation, knowledge and technical methodologies that have been projected in the films that are part of the history of cinema for more than 80 years.

From *German Expressionism*, inspired by painting, to the classic horror movies of the 40s and 50s of the 20th century, the cinema perfected the visual codes by which a horror movie is identified: the low key, the *chiaroscuro* and the hard lighting and extreme angulation. The Hammer picked up those codes and applied them systematically, adding some colour element, even if it was shy.

But it is with the appearance of *Giallo* when the suspense and horror genre acquires most of the elements that identify it, using new camera resources introduced by Hitchcock, such as blurring, empty shots and triggers and also the subjective camera and inserts with detailed drawings. Manichaeism, excess and exaggeration take over. It is at that moment when the great innovation of *Giallo* enters the scene: the use of coloured lights in an associative and transitional way. Initially, that resource was used in an exaggerated way and, often, out of context. But over the decades, narrative and visual tools that the language of colour provides, have been enhanced by a more measured, contextualized and coherent use, which evidently demonstrates an evolution in the way of telling stories through the moving image.

All of the above remains in the suitcase of the collective visual culture in which we unconsciously identify and translate the codes that we have assimilated. In short, we all know what happens if red takes over the screen...

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