

Ballet & Body Horror: a Comparison of *Suspiria* (1977) and *Suspiria* (2018)

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It takes a special kind of person to enjoy body horror. There's an unease one has to get used to when watching this genre, a realization that the fear isn't coming from an outside source but from what one's own body is capable of. People who are assigned female at birth are capable of both creation and death, our bodies are full of contradictions, it makes us the perfect subject. However, body horror is not a genre one just decides to write in (or enjoy), instead it is a genre that - like all horror - is trying to portray some larger meaning outside of the grotesque and the unsettling while centering it in the human body - something we all have. The switch from fairytale horror to body horror, seen in the 2018 remake of the 1977 film *Suspiria* is a phenomenal example of how the genre can be used to make statements on femininity as a whole.

Both the original *Suspiria* and the remake share the same base plot: Suzy (1977)/Susie (2018), a young girl from America, comes to Germany to study ballet under a famous academy in the fall of 1977. Girls keep going missing from the academy however, and it is discovered that they're being murdered by the coven of witches that runs the school. One of the most important differences in the plots of these two movies though is the end, in the 1977 version Suzy runs from the academy as it burns to the ground, whereas in the 2018 version Suzy is revealed to be the strongest witch, taking over the academy at the end. Many stylistic differences appear in the films as well, from Dario Argento's last grasp on original Technicolor to Luca Guadagnino wanting his film to look "winter-ish, evil, and really dark," the films look like different ends of the same aesthetic pole.

Genre wise though, they fall from the same tree. If we were to look at the taxonomy of the horror genre, based on the way Daniel Chandler does in his piece *An Introduction to Genre Theory*, we can map the ways in which the two different subgenres of horror these movies fit into are related. The overarching genre here is Horror, the next genre we break off into is Supernatural Horror - this usually has to do with magic and demons - and then from that we break into the genres of Fairytale Horror (*Suspiria* 1977) and Body Horror (*Suspiria* 2018). Fairytale horror is similar to folk horror in the sense that it pulls from well known legends and tales to invoke fear, however while folk horror seems to focus a lot on superstitions, nature, and folk religions, fairytale horror gets its references from fairytales specifically, whether it be direct elements of plot or style. Body horror, on the other hand, refers to the mutilation and violation of the human body usually through violence but sometimes through magic forces (*Suspiria* 2018) or zombification.

The 1977 version of the movie feels like a fairytale more than anything else. At the beginning of the film, we hear a narrator give us the needed exposition in a way very similar to the way in which fairy tales begin: "Suzy Bannion decided to perfect her ballet studies in the most famous school of dance in Europe. She chose the celebrated academy of Freiburg. One day at nine in the morning she left the airport in New York and arrived in Germany at 10:40 p.m.

local time.” This is reminiscent of the “Once upon a time...” trope and audiences are meant to realize that, to immediately see this story in the lens of a fairytale.

After Suzy arrives at the academy in the pouring rain (another classic horror trope: arriving at the castle on a dark and rainy night) she’s told she cannot stay there and needs to go into town for the night. As she rides back into town Suzy sees a girl run from the academy and into the woods - due to normal fairytale lore, people associate the woods (especially at night) with danger and the unknown. The woods also carry monsters, which is why when a very hairy, almost wolf-like hand, reaches out to kill our first victim of the movie (who just so happens to be the girl from the woods) the viewer isn’t phased as much by the hand’s appearance - we are in the fairytale mindset. Another famous wood dwelling monster is the witch, from Hansel and Grettle to Snow White the fairytale canon seems to love a witch in a forest, and so once again it makes a little more sense to the viewer when the school is revealed to be a coven.

The references to fairytales are in stark contrast with the more grounded in reality 2018 version. In fact, in his screenplay Dave Kajganich has a side note that explains why we are seeing protests in the beginning of the film, stating that the film takes place around the events that “marked the end of the Baader-Meinhof terrorist era, and which we will see unfolding in real time on televisions throughout the film,” placing it in a very specific time and place in history whereas the 1977 version is only said to take place at that time because that’s when the film came out.

While the original *Suspiria* goes a classic route with the supernatural aspects of the story - just a bunch of witches killing young women - the 2018 version uses those aspects to enhance the body horror seen in the movie. Through their supernatural powers, the coven of witches running the academy are able to manipulate the bodies of their dancers. This is such an important aspect of the film - this manipulation of the body - that Kajganich has this quote on the cover of the screen play: “Dance must be cheerful and show beautiful female bodies and have nothing to do with philosophy,” (Joseph Goebbels, 1937).

Using body horror in relation to ballet was a genius move on the part of Kajganich. While ballet is an aspect in the original, it seems to take a backseat to the murders, however in the 2018 version it’s center stage. Ballet is the school of dance that requires extreme amounts of discipline and work, as well as the ability to continue to move through the pain. Kajganich uses this to his advantage, showcasing the torment ballerinas put their bodies through at the whim of their teachers because in this film that’s literal - it *really is* at the whim of their teachers.

This ability to control others movements is first touched upon in what Syd Field would consider the first plot point to the film, even happening on pages 27 through 31 - fitting within Field’s concept that by page 30 a screenplay should be moving from Act I to Act II with the first major plot point. For *Suspiria* (2018) that happens when Olga attempts to escape the academy, but instead goes to one of the dance studios as if in a trance. Here we begin to get intercuts of Susie dancing for Madame Blanc (the head choreographer, head of the school) where her dance moves seem to be causing pain for Olga. From the script:

INT. MARKOS COMPANY, "IRIS" STUDIO -- DAY

Susie pulls her leg back from a kick, but does not lunge, it was a hard kick. She then moves into a series of turns that set up the next kick. When she kicks out--

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Olga's throat is punched in, as is the scream it shocks out of her. The SOUND she makes instead is horrible to hear. She goes to her knees, one hand on her crushed windpipe.

This scene is one of the most jarring in the film, with Olga's face eventually being slammed against the mirror, her jaw completely dislocating.

The second time we see this is when Susie is asked to improvise while the rest of the dancers are in sync around her, she begins to dance over a specific spot on the floor, her body moving in unnatural ways. A close up of her ribcage, visible through her skin and reminiscent of wings happens at this point in the film - and we come to learn in the following scene that Mother Markos, the current head of the coven, wanted to feel Susie dance, contorting her so that Markos could feel her from under the floor.

Our third major example of this happens in two fold - first, we get another example of body horror in the form of a decaying and deformed body of Patricia, only for that to be followed by Sara - who is now sporting a broken leg and a different eye color - getting manipulated by the coven to perform in the recital, finally collapsing at the end when the piece is finished. While not as visually jarring as the other moments, Sara's robotic movements and the sound of her bones crunching together allows for the uncomfortable feeling associated with body horror to arise.

The use of body horror in a film about ballet, specifically the use of the ballet to inflict the horror, is not only commentary on the dance style itself but on the need for women to "work through the pain" and still present to high standards of femininity. While the 1977 film has a co-ed ballet company, the 2018 version keeps the school strictly full of women - this enhances the competitiveness seen in both dance and the way that the world often pits women against one another. This whole film surrounds a conflict of women competing - who will be the head of the coven: Mother Markos or Mother Blanc? - and we see them work this conflict out through the bodies of their young proteges, using them as both figurative vessels for their dancing and then literal vessels for the dying soul of Mother Markos.

Mother Markos loses in the end though, and how that loss works out is a major factor in the drastically different Final Girl endings for our protagonist, Suzy/Susie.

One of the biggest tropes in horror is the Final Girl, a character who makes it to the end of the story, usually a woman, and usually the last one alive. We see Suzy fall perfectly into this trope in the 1977 version, which makes sense seeing as slasher films were still big at this time and they nearly always had a final girl in them. However, by the time the remake came around in 2018, women were gaining more autonomy in film, they had roles with substance and carried whole movies. Therefore, when ending the new version of *Suspiria*, Kajganich writes an ending where we learn that Susie is actually Mother Suspiriorum, a witch who the coven actively

worships. She uses her extreme power to slaughter those working against her as she takes her place as the head of the coven.

This ending seems far more in line with not only modern horror movies which give women more agency besides being a pretty dead body as well as the themes of female competition and femininity in the film. In my opinion, it's a far better ending and gives one sense of completion that 1977 *Suzy* running from a burning building does not.

When thinking about the horror genre one mostly thinks of monsters and slashers, scary things hiding in the dark, but for some of us the true horror is what our body is capable of and for those assigned female at birth that horror can be tenfold. The 2018 remake of *Suspiria* uses this fear to its advantage and tells a uniquely feminine story while doing so, easily making it one of my favorite films.