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*Allegory, Allegoresis, and Suspiria*

Is ours an especially allegorical age? Do we routinely—if not automatically—reach for further levels of meaning behind every cultural datum? It is a time of excruciating literalness, to be sure, each passing year seeming to diminish the shared connotational repertoire to some bare minimum of available reference points, as the total mass and weave of “text” (now superabundantly audio-visual and digital) exceeds any capacity for collective, let alone individual, incorporation.<sup>1</sup> That sheer proliferation of cultural material, its unstoppable differentiation and diffusion, may well occultly call out for higher-order synthesis and reunification—as if, reassembled aright, the innumerable pieces might be seen to spell out a tale of the tribe. But efforts at doing so—like Propp’s Russian folktales, Levi-Strauss’s *“pensée sauvage,”* Barthes’s *Mythologies*, or Aby Warburg’s *Atlas Mnemosyne*—are thin on the ground these days; testimony, no doubt, to the impossible scale of the task. Here, indeed, allegory suggests itself as a working solution to the acephalous and multiplying infinity of cultural “stuff” in an ethno-religiously diverse, ever-expanding world population, as some of us desperately strive to work from each centrifugally charged fragment towards a usable collective reservoir of sense.

Often enough, of course, the task is done for us by a marketplace of gratifying capital-intensive artefacts whose master code is the prevalent one of surplus value: our attention to the object, and the price of admission, amounting to the not-so-elusive meaning itself. The allegory here catches us in its web and demotes the “literal level” of the text to a mere prop within a ubiquitous cultural drama, namely consumption. Adorno’s mandarin shudder—“Every visit to the cinema leaves me,

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<sup>1</sup> Perhaps the prime exhibit here comes in Fincher’s *Se7en* (1995), where Detective Somerset (Morgan Freeman) heads to the municipal library to chase up some leads on a serial killer’s criminal deployment of the “seven deadly sins”: stylish close-ups of illustrated editions of Milton, Dante, and Chaucer convince us of nothing so much as the fact that these “classics” can no longer be counted among the communal lexicon of the audience.

against all my vigilance, stupider and worse”<sup>2</sup>—surely elicits more than a passing spasm of empathy today. Joshua Clover and Chris Nealon’s grim assurance that “it is not possible to conclude [...] that there is some kind of value external to capitalist value” sends salutary shock waves through the edifice of philosophical aesthetics, and recalls us to our ineluctable enmeshment within a unilateral horizon of sense.<sup>3</sup> To posit values and meanings over and above this crushingly banal one is to persist with a bankrupt idealism. Everything would indicate that, in the general “dissolution of an autonomous sphere of culture,” exchange value has so radically suffused quotidian existence that the older “ontological cleavage of ideal from material values”—once so critical to a conception of “culture” that exonerated and exalted the abstract liberties of bourgeois society over and against the grinding monotony of everyday life—has been stapled shut.<sup>4</sup> Indeed, not only the “affirmative” character of culture, but its “negative” character too, once hypostasized by Adorno as the homeopathic relationship of the modernist work of art to the commodity sphere, has vanished without a trace. Commodity fetishism does not, once exposed and comprehended, dissolve in waves of enlightenment; it persists objectively in the ritual of exchange whatever subjective irony one brings to it. Having shifted from a situation of “they know not what they do” to one of “they know very well what they are doing, and they are doing it,” we are increasingly resigned to the fact that *the things themselves believe for us*—and presumably “mean” for us as well.<sup>5</sup> As Jameson has observed, in the obscenity of full postmodernity, the negativity of critique has become a redundancy:

Now all the complex and subtle forms of evasive and ideological philosophy shrivelled back down to the original simplicity of the right to

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<sup>2</sup> Theodor W. Adorno, *Minima Moralia: Reflections from Damaged Life*, trans. E. F. N. Jephcott (London: Verso, 2005), p. 25.

<sup>3</sup> Joshua Clover and Christopher Nealon, “Literary and Economic Value,” in *The Oxford Research Encyclopedia of Literature* (2017): <https://oxfordre.com/literature/view/10.1093/acrefore/9780190201098.001.0001/acrefore-9780190201098-e-123?rskey=XM1qns&result=1>.

<sup>4</sup> See Fredric Jameson, *Postmodernism: Or, the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (London: Verso, 1991), 48; Herbert Marcuse, “The Affirmative Character of Culture,” in *Negations: Essays in Critical Theory*, trans. Jeremy Shapiro (London: Free Association Books, 1988), pp. 93ff.

<sup>5</sup> Slavoj Žižek, *The Sublime Object of Ideology* (London: Verso, 2008), pp. 30–31.

make money; while the new climate of cynical reason rendered the exposés and discoveries of ideological analysis unscandalous and even uninteresting: everyone knew it already.<sup>6</sup>

Nothing needs interpreting; which is a far cry from the ecstatic allegorical cry of “everything means something else,” surely Jameson’s most infectious aphorism.<sup>7</sup> The paradox being, of course, that both positions refer to precisely the same historical epoch, our own.

Still, rare objects there are which, trapped along with us on this plane of immanence, appear to emanate meanings with some precarious extra-economic foothold, not entirely tethered to the regime of equivalence that is the “cash nexus.” At least, that is the hope of Nicholas Brown, who writes: “if a moment of autonomy with regard to the commodity form is analytically available, if there is something in the work that can be said to suspend its commodity character—then it makes entirely good sense to approach it with interpretive tools.”<sup>8</sup> Unavoidably commodities, such works are also (somehow) more than that, and require the application of something other than routine cynical reasoning to draw out their ductile aesthetic heteronomies. It is at any rate those eccentric artefacts, radiating a potentiality for allegorical decryption, that Fredric Jameson wants to feature in the final substantive chapter to his *Allegory and Ideology*: weird one-off performances, “ephemeral conjunctions,” non-iterable and un-foundational, irreducible to any single interpretive code, yet all somehow showing that “meaningful narratives today, in late capitalist globalization, tend to find their fulfillment in structures that call for allegorical interpretation.”<sup>9</sup> Only, in a context of radically compromised “centralization,” and the disappearance of universal master texts, allegory itself—the four levels of Jameson’s adaptation of Origen—is upended and destabilized:

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<sup>6</sup> Fredric Jameson, *Valences of the Dialectic* (London: Verso, 2009), p. 358.

<sup>7</sup> Fredric Jameson, *The Geopolitical Aesthetic: Cinema and Space in the World System* (London: BFI Publishing, 1992), p. 11.

<sup>8</sup> Nicholas Brown, *Autonomy* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2019) (Kindle Edition), loc. 225 of 5164.

<sup>9</sup> Fredric Jameson, *Allegory and Ideology* (London: Verso, 2019), p. 309. Subsequent references are cited parenthetically.

the old levels enter on a variety of new and impermanent relationships and complex structural readjustments. These can range from the substitution of this or that level with one another, as when a thematic level momentarily takes the place of a textual one; to the relations of identity and difference among the levels, as when the traditional interpretive identification of moral and anagogical levels gives way to a play between the allegorical key and individual or collective motifs, rather than the classic combination of text and allegorical or mystical sense. These displacements are meanwhile unstable and in contemporary texts in perpetual dissolution and recombination in such a way that durable structures cannot be formed. (310-11)

Everything still means something else, but it is henceforth undecidable which “thing” is what; without any secure grounding in a stable ontological order of things, allegory tips over into what he calls “allegoresis,” “the reading of a text as though it were an allegory” (xx). Such is the working solution proposed by this book to the paradox of allegory in a world that has disburdened itself of interpretation.

Jameson’s analytic instances are, it must be said, curiously disappointing in their evidentiary function; and his presiding opposition (between minimalism and maximalism) signally fails to operationalize what he discerns in postmodernity’s “volatile” allegorical matrix. Doubtless this has to do with America as the eye of the geopolitical economic storm, a vantage point from which it becomes impossible to find native symbolic acts—like Bolaño’s *2666* or Krazsnehorkai’s *War Is War*—of potent allegorical intent, because there aren’t any. As Jameson wrote elsewhere, postmodern globalization can best be felt, allegorically, from the outside:

In the displacement of national literature by international or American bestsellers, in the collapse of a national film industry under the weight of Hollywood, of national television flooded by US imports, in the closing down of local cafés and restaurants as the fast-food giants move in, the

deeper and more intangible effects of globalization on daily life can first and most dramatically be seen.<sup>10</sup>

To look for any of this in the belly of the beast seems at best misguided; at worst, ideological. So, nothing can really excuse his settling for two middling novels by white Englishmen (David Mitchell's *Cloud Atlas*—up for its second Jamesonian appreciation—and Tom McCarthy's *Remainder*) as exemplary of our current condition.

In what follows, then, I propose to explore the boundary between allegory and allegoresis via an analysis of a cultural text somewhat better suited to this task, as it explicitly occupies the contested zone—between “original” and “remake,” “central” and “marginal,” “high art” and “trash,” “film” and “media”—that defines our cultural *contretemps*, and discloses the true extent of that “perpetual dissolution” in which we find allegorical significances today. Moreover, this text explicitly treats the historical line in the sand that divides the postmodern from what preceded it, and thereby makes a claim to be an allegory about the very break into allegoresis itself, our inveterate desire to rack any given text for meanings above and beyond the superficial. So how might one go about constructing an *allegory of allegory* in an age for which there is no sacred or master text, no universal referent other than money?

One solution might be to select, as a primary reference, an older text that has sunk from public view into the cultic appreciation of fans and aficionados; a text for the cognoscenti. This would ideally be a text belonging to an extinct genre, yet for which there exists a small, international band of obsessive devotees—as for instance, the Italian *giallo* film, to which a number of contemporary experimental works have referred themselves: Strickland's *Berberian Sound Studio* (2012) and *In Fabric* (2018), Cattet's and Forzani's *Amer* (2009) and *The Strange Color of Your Body's Tears* (2013), to name a few. This minor wave of “neo-*giallo*” exults in the fetishistic form-signatures of the earlier movement, while tactically distancing itself from the aggressive misogyny of its exploitationist origins, thus maintaining a contemporary fidelity to the genre's roots in anti-elitist populism and a “'60s” alignment of style with sensationalism. One derivative of the *giallo*

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<sup>10</sup> Jameson, *Valences of the Dialectic*, pp. 470-71.

film is generally taken to be the masterpiece of a whole movement, and it has the added benefit—for an allegorical engagement—of launching an entire mythos of its own, a fully elaborated extension of some late-Gothic writings by Thomas de Quincey, and spawning two sequels, each dedicated to one of the primordial “Mothers”: *Suspiriorum*, *Tenebrarum*, and *Lachrymarum*.<sup>11</sup>

Dario Argento’s *Suspiria* (1977) has the distinct advantage in this context of being a cult film about a cult, drenched in the occult, concerning the revelation of a secret scripture known only to initiates, running secretly against the entire history of enlightenment; an underground world of witches, women deeply invested in their own counter-modernity, their ritualized worship, and incarnation, and of three chthonic Mothers who predate both Judeo-Christianity and its scientific demystification, whose essence it was, in de Quincey’s precise formulation, to *allegorize the allegorical*. “I want a term expressing the mighty abstractions that incarnate themselves in all individual sufferings of man’s heart; and I wish to have these abstractions presented as impersonations,—that is, as clothed with human attributes of life, and with functions pointing to flesh.”<sup>12</sup> Jameson has a good deal to say about the relationship between allegory and personification in his new book, specifically postulating that postmodernity “determines a shift from personification to process-oriented allegory,” in that general dissolution of substantialism and character that typifies modern social existence (xx). And yet he ends his book on the provocative insistence that what we most need, politically and ideologically today, is

a new kind of reification, which must replace the sense of drift and tendency with the identifiable space of a cast of characters, a personification of friend and foe, a movement of social classes in conflict and in alliance: classes in formation, perhaps, where everything static about traditional personification is replaced with the process of personifying and of identifying agencies to come. (347)

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<sup>11</sup> See Dario Argento, *Suspiria* (1977), *Inferno* (1980), and *Mother of Tears* (2007), the so-called *Tré madri* trilogy.

<sup>12</sup> Thomas de Quincey, “Levana and Our Ladies of Sorrow,” in *Suspiria de Profundis: Being the Sequel to the Confessions of an English Opium Eater, Works*, vol. 16 (Edinburgh: Adam & Charles Black, 1871), pp. 25-6.

It is arguable that, at the ripe end of Romanticism and the high age of the Symbol, de Quincey was having similar thoughts. Jameson's chapter on Goethe further includes these surprising words on "the Mothers" in *Faust II*:

Why does this word ("die Mütter") "klingt so wunderbar?" ("sound so strange?"). Why does it induce that "Schauer" ("shudder") which is "mankind's best part" [...] I think it has something to do with the plural, which we so rarely use in any of the modern idioms, each of us having but one of these "mothers," whose generic name or term is virtually a proper name. (295)

There is then a rather fortunate convergence of interests around this curious recourse to Mothers as *allegories of the allegorical*, in de Quincey, Argento, Jameson, and the artist who, in 2018, set about "remaking" (or really repurposing, *Umfunktionierung*) *Suspiria* for our moment.

Luca Guadagnino, fresh from his success with *Call Me By Your Name* (2017), approached his "reimagining" of Argento's gaudy classic as an opportunity to reflect on 1977 in Berlin—fateful year of the German Autumn—and in so doing to ruminate on historical amnesia and the strange European art of forgetting the Nazi past, as an indirect way of thinking about our own contemporary forgetfulness and exposure to a neo-fascist present, to a past that will not die. This historical line in the sand, "1977" (the first chapter of the film's six), thus serves as an overdetermined allegorical referent—simultaneously indicating the eclipse of an entire post-war sequence of left-wing political activism (very much including the anti-colonial, which is bundled into the German Autumn by way of Mogadishu), the shift into postmodernity as such, and, in industrial terms, the end of a certain phase of cinematic internationalism and dawn of a new bloated hegemon in Hollywood (think *Star Wars*, *Close Encounters of the Third Kind*, and *Saturday Night Fever*) after the renaissance of the early '70s. The distinct advantage of Argento's *Suspiria* is that it donates this historical referent without once referring to it, in fact tending to suppress it, thus permitting its "re-maker" to meditate on what remains latent and untapped in the political unconscious of this distinctly fantastic fairy tale. That that fairy tale, again, incorporates de Quincey's Mothers as personifications of affects and moods—lachrymous grief, abject despair, blazing misery—with no official place in modernity, only serves to

sharpen the aptness of the target film for Guadagnino's allegorical reworking—since the momentous reappearance of one of them, *Suspriorum*, will thus come to represent all of this at once, on various levels.

Ingeniously, the film itself—the remake—makes an issue of this matter of personification, and indeed raises it to the status of a form problem: who, or what, is “*Suspiria*”? It has something to do with a dance academy, and with a coven of witches using it as a front. This masking device, a screen behind which darker forces writhe, indicates the depth of investment in the allegorical that sets this narrative in train. In the original, Udo Kier's psychiatrist character reflects that, “among the initiated,” the elder witch and founder of the Academy, Helena Markos, went by the name “the Black Queen,” a suggestion brimming with allegorical possibility; but the expert Professor Milius (author of a study called “magic or paranoia”—his name will migrate to one of the Academy's *repetiteurs* in the remake) brusquely reduces the rich potentiality of this abstract nomination to a two-dimensional meaning: witches seek only material wealth, which they pursue at the expense of others; and are powerless without their leader. Markos/*Suspiria* is thus the allegorical “personification” of avarice and cupidity as such. This hint, left latent in 1977, returns in full-dress allegorical regalia in 2018, from which vantage it will appear that the economic dominant rising in the wake of the German Autumn can very well be characterized in these “moral” terms. The Black Queen, Our Lady of Sighs—whose worldly vessel, Markos, Susie spiritedly kills off at the end of the 1977 film—presides over our own period of history, insofar as its relentless pursuit of wealth, “the right to make money,” is felt by the majority as an insufflating melancholia. “Hers is the meekness that belongs to the hopeless,” writes De Quincey; “every captive in every dungeon; all that are betrayed, and all that are rejected; outcasts by traditionary law, and children of hereditary disgrace, all these walk with Our Lady of Sighs.”<sup>13</sup> Badiou's description of today's divided global population is apropos:

For the crushing majority of men and women in the so-called world, the world of commodities and money, have not the slightest access to this

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<sup>13</sup> De Quincey, “Levana and Our Ladies of Sorrow,” pp. 28-9.

world. They are harshly walled off from it, existing outside of it, where there are very few commodities and no money at all.<sup>14</sup>

Guadagnino's interest in this walled-off, immiserated majority is keenly felt against his presiding attention to the privileged, the wealthy and propertied—as, for instance, in his remake of *La Piscine* (Deray, France, 1969), *A Bigger Splash* (2015), also scripted by *Suspiria*'s writer David Kajganich, where the fugitive presence of African asylum seekers on the Mediterranean holiday island radically alters the political physiognomy of the narrative space.

Certainly, the position of Badiou's "anonymous excluded"—separated from "the grand and petty bourgeoisie of imperial cities"<sup>15</sup> by walls threaded through every public space—is sensed in the symbolically charged spatial disposition of the film along the Berlin Wall, accentuating existing political divisions even as it calls up the Cold War itself, and the idea of the Communist East as a ticking demographic time-bomb pressed like Lowell's nose against the glowing aquarium of the West, its lurid tropical colours and exotic species of commodity fetishism. The Wall is deployed as a multivalent image in its own right, whose primary function in the narrative of the film is to serve as a "portal to the past," through which the analyst Dr Klemperer is obliged to pass on his regular journeys to the dacha in East Berlin where he and his lost bride, Anke, once lived in genteel poverty. The reification of East and West, and the sense of history's standstill in the GDR relative to the FRG's capitalist development, congeals into a time machine. In the film's 1977, the Wall is already such a colossal figure of permanence that it hermetically seals the past from the traumatized present, as an architectural device of the Freudian censorship; and it permits periodic sojourns to the good doctor's fossilized memories, on the condition that he remains in a state of unalleviated melancholia. The Wall as agent of melancholy, then, its grim monochrome expanse eating away at the tissues of the living present; even as its figural status as a symbol of spatial

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<sup>14</sup> See Alain Badiou and Clément Petitjean, "True Communism is the Foreignness of Tomorrow," Verso blog site, 26 March 2014: <https://www.versobooks.com/blogs/1547-true-communism-is-the-foreignness-of-tomorrow-alain-badiou-talks-in-athens>.

<sup>15</sup> Alain Badiou, *Polemics*, trans. Steve Corcoran (London: Verso, 2006), p. 34.

divisions and exclusions serves to recall us to our own situation in one of those “imperial cities” the world’s working poor cannot enter.

In any event, *Suspiria*’s allegorical matrix takes up the demographic dimension laterally, through the insistent media attention (on radio and television) to the Lufthansa hostage crisis in Somalia, where the RAF’s commitment to the Palestinian struggle triggers a chain of international events, and national class politics assume a significant “allegorical” role in the power politics of the Middle East and Eastern Africa. Yet Jameson insists that demography (or population) is one of the three determinants of allegoresis proper—“population, reification, and the problem of universals” (310)—and that we should be attentive to all its traces in the work at hand. One way of thinking that problem through, then, is surely via the heteroclitic ethnic constituency of the Academy itself, dramatically expanded in global scope from the original’s Western European gene pool and doubling down on the idea of the coven as an enclave for the globally dispossessed. Here are Russian, Bulgarian, Sudanese, Serbo-Croatian, French, Balkan, Icelandic, British, and any number of other ethnic complexions, young women brought together under the banner of Dance, but put to work on behalf of a ruthless clandestine political structure that literally feeds on their physiologies to extend the life of the cannibalistic witches who govern it. As an instance of allegory, this one surely fits comfortably among a large number of conspiracy theories about the “lizard people” and “Illuminati” secretly orchestrating the late capitalist world; but it is superior for offering a dissimulation of “care” and asylum—a kind of “Matrix for dancers.” The economic refuse of the world (including our protagonist Susie Bannion, a repressed and impoverished Ohio Mennonite) can take shelter in the narcotic embrace of Art, while their bodies are pulped for metempsychotic proteins: an allegory of biopolitics and what Badiou calls “capitalo-parliamentarian humanitarianism,” or ethical nihilism.<sup>16</sup>

However, as distinct from Argento’s original, Guadagnino’s remake proffers the Markos Tanz Academy as nothing less than a “Ruth Bré collective,” thus also clinching what is surely the film’s most ostentatious allegory: of the vitality of women’s groups and protected enclaves forged in the heady years of First- and

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<sup>16</sup> See Alain Badiou, *Ethics: An Essay on the Understanding of Evil*, trans. Peter Hallward (London: Verso, 2001), pp. 4-39.

Second-Wave feminism, surviving along anti-capitalist lines in the underground and against the grain of the neo-liberal present. In this light, the Academy is a figure of resilient collective militancy: refusing to charge its boarding students any rent, not admitting any male students or faculty, and commemorating its darkest days under the Reich: “She kept the company alive through the war; when the Reich just wanted women to shut off their minds and keep their uteruses open, there was [Madame] Blanc.” On one level, of course, this makes a nonsense of our earlier feeling that the witches (and over them *Suspriorum*) are simply ruthless accumulators of money and power, a claim that ostensibly better describes the coven in Argento’s film, where the girls are always out of pocket due to hefty boarding and tuition fees. Yet this is precisely what Jameson means by the tendency of contemporary allegorical texts toward “perpetual dissolution and recombination” of levels of meaning, dictating “that durable structures cannot be formed” (311): this inbuilt instability is entirely characteristic, and permits the allegorist to toggle between distinct semantic layers at will. The witches are one moment an organized feminist enclave; the next, a machine of colonial extraction and enslavement. Ruth Bré herself, who argued for “state-supported enclaves for single mothers and their children,”<sup>17</sup> presides benignly over the idea of the Markos Academy as a latter-day *Bund für Mutterschutz* (Federation for the Protection of Mothers), while that term “Mothers” now emanates entirely different semantic wavelengths from the pits of a darker source of “women’s power.”

Now, however, this equivocal political character of the coven modulates under our eyes into something quite distinct, namely an avant-garde artistic community, organized around charismatic leaders, driven by a more or less unified vision, and committed body and soul to one overriding imperative: the production of art, or indeed *productivity* as such. This is peculiarly marked in relation to the 1977 version, where the dance rehearsals were rather desultory affairs, lacking any programmatic connection to a future performance, and indeed any obvious flair or talent; here, on the contrary, Guadagnino’s vision dictates a highly disciplined approach to the dancing, which occupies the screen for long stretches at a time and puts to work a team of dazzling young professionals under the choreography of Damien Jalet. Lead actors Dakota Johnson and Mia Goth rehearsed for months to

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<sup>17</sup> Catherine Leota Dollard, *The Surplus Woman: Unmarried in Imperial Germany, 1871-1918* (New York: Berghahn Books, 2009), p. 151.

look at least credible among these performers, and although the agile cinematography of Sayomhu Mukdeeprom and Walter Fasano's lightning-quick editorial cuts contribute much to the flow and grace of their movements, the dominant feeling is one of an actual dance school hard at work preparing for a major public performance: the Academy's 1948 masterpiece, "Volk"—a highly ritualized ensemble piece, steeped in the intertwining legacies of Martha Graham, Mary Wigman, Pina Bausch, and Sasha Waltz. Here, indeed, is crystallized a prototypical avant-garde sensibility, with deep roots in modernist antiaesthetic traditions, that the Academy (and Berlin) has come to represent internationally by 1977—dance branded as degenerate by the Nazis, pitched deliberately away from Beauty and toward more disturbing archetypes of the female form. Screenwriter Kajganich has said that it is "not unrelated to the film to mention that [Mary] Wigman was one of the choreographers to whom Joseph Goebbels was reacting with his 1937 proclamation that dance 'must be cheerful and show beautiful female bodies and have nothing to do with philosophy.'"<sup>18</sup> The choreography of "Volk" is staccato, expressionist, violent; it pulsates with a strong "left puritan" disgust for the "Beauty Myth" and taps into archaic cultic kinetic patterns. It appears to be shot through with an occult signifying practice, as if it were a physical invocation or kinaesthetic spell. Its ugliness, moreover, is explicit; Madame Blanc tells her protégé Susie, "There are two things that dance can never be again: 'beautiful' and 'cheerful.' Today we need to break the nose of every beautiful thing." The Markos Academy, then, is an allegorical configuration of a host of now extinct avant-gardist aspirations, still current in the 1970s, but on the verge of submergence under the garish wave of postmodernism itself. It appeals, within the discourse of the film, to that period of brutalism and graininess, monochromatic antiaestheticism, discord and dissonance, and acerbic proto-punk provocation that Berlin '77 seems to connote for us today, and that is layered and textured into the bleak and colourless production design of the film—in stark defiance of the original's lurid and sensational colour scheme.

And yet, this determined cultural politics of the coven is not to be identified with radical political activism per se, as the film is at great pains to point out. Beginning

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<sup>18</sup> David Kajganich, interview with Mark Guiducci, *Garage Magazine*, 19 October 2018: [https://garage.vice.com/en\\_us/article/mb4xpn/suspiria-director-luca-guadagnino-on-his-tetralogy-of-desire](https://garage.vice.com/en_us/article/mb4xpn/suspiria-director-luca-guadagnino-on-his-tetralogy-of-desire).

as it does with the chants of protestors and sympathizers with the RAF prisoners in Stammheim, ringing with the bomb blasts and sirens of the “Baader-Meinhof complex,” and repeatedly drawn to the fascinating Third-World scene of Mogadishu as a mediated expression of the neocolonialism implicit in late capitalism, Guadagnino’s film is implicitly critical of the Markos Academy to the extent that it has withdrawn from contemporary political history. This avant-garde collective protects its accumulated “cultural capital” by never venturing a wager on the politics of the moment; and however mythic its underground resistance to the Nazis may have become, there is never any risk of squandering its hard-won reputation on ill-advised advocacy for the workers or students. Of course, we have already avowed the feminism of the enclave, and there are some distant echoes of the contemporary interventions of Ulrike Meinhof in the Academy’s promotional self-image; but this is a feminism cut off from the world, an enclave sequestered and cocooned in its own atemporal space (many of these witches are hundreds of years old), uninterested in the clamour and intensity of class struggle. It is, to that extent, a “Utopia” in the bad sense—and this pronounced gap between political activism and the aesthetic Utopia is precisely what shapes the psycho-political “complex” of Patricia Hingle, the young dancer who acts as an analysand in the opening scene. She is the principal dancer at the Academy, cast in the prime role of Volk’s protagonist. When, after her disappearance, Madame Blanc makes excuses to Patricia’s friend Olga, the accent is on Blanc’s hypocrisy and bad faith:

We know that she had dealings with people who were interested in *targets*. And we know there was another bomb in Kreuzberg last night. She wanted to *live* her beliefs. Who doesn’t admire that? And there’s so much to *change* in the world. If she wants to live in a cellar filling bottles with petrol, that’s her choice. And who won’t be heart-broken if she’s shot by the police?

Blanc knows perfectly well that Patricia’s hideously twisted body is being stored in an annex of the coven’s Mutterhaus, after a failed transmigration of Helena Markos into her nubile frame. But her discourse dissimulates a paradigm of fellow travelling that her practice has forgotten. Meanwhile Patricia’s sketchy photo portrait is hung up in the local police station with the caption, “Wer kennt die abgebildete Person?”—she is wanted in relation to suspected “terrorist” activities. Patricia, indeed, has internalized the split between avant-garde artistic expression and avant-garde political expression as an existential aporia, which her analyst Dr

Klemperer explains as a tension between Mothers: “Mother Markos, Mother Meinhof; the dance rehearsal, political action. These two areas in Patricia’s life were of equal importance. This is how transference happens, how delusion is made. Delusion, Sara, is a lie that tells the truth.” Her immediate disappearance from the film after the opening scene, her substitution by the mysterious newcomer (who rapidly rises to take her place), thus prepares us for an understanding of everything that follows—the whole body of the film—as an allegorical working out of her “complex”: the complex of 1977 and the German Autumn, of History’s last configuration of the dual commitment—to politics, to Art—that would founder on its contradictions under the emergent postmodern paradigm. And the name given to this allegory’s method—*transference*—is advised.

In his book, Jameson gives preference to one of Guattari’s concepts for thinking about the slippage between distinct levels in a given complex, *transversality*:

That the levels interact with one another in what are sometimes surprising and unexpected ways must also be foreseen, and I have borrowed Felix Guattari’s term *transversality* to designate particular examples of this process. That the levels can change places, and the text shift position into that of its own commentary, while the commentary then becomes a kind of text in its own right—that is also to be expected in a secular society in which nothing is endowed with indisputable centrality, and a multiplicity of interpretive options is virtually guaranteed in advance, depending on what counts as an event, a reality, or a text. (xviii)

How much the more will this be true of a film that appears to spin its primary narrative out of an irresolvable knot in psychic space that makes practical progress impossible (outside of months of intensive analysis)? The “dream narrative” is certainly one way of reflecting intelligently on Argento’s original, its aesthetic commitment to the oneiric and fabulous, without descending into the narrative frustrations of a fantasia pure and simple. By providing the precise coordinates of an historically and spatially situated complex, and demonstrating its aporetic blockage, Guadagnino can then shift into a “diachronic” elaboration and resolution of the “synchronic” contradiction—an allegory of it, a “lie that tells the truth,” in which the transverse wire-crossings and uncanny glissades between

levels of meaning is internally justified by the presence on the dreamer's analyst's desk of Jung's great book on the transference.

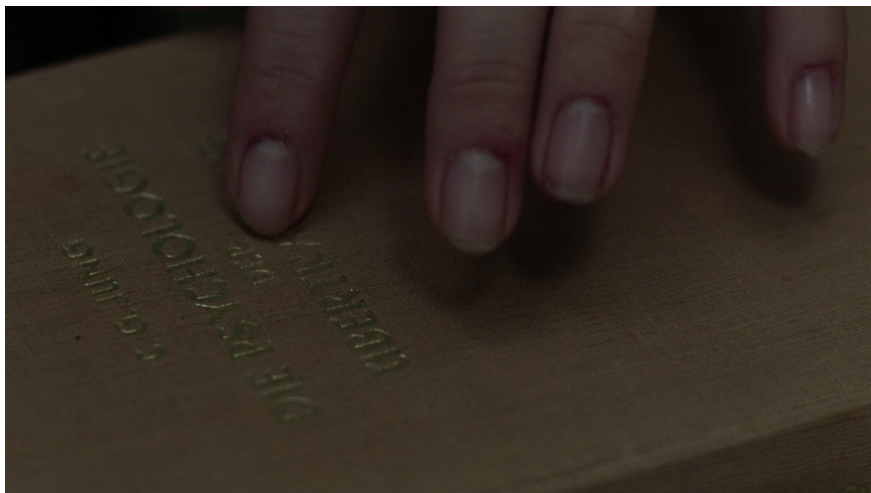


Fig. 1: Patricia Hingle (Chloë Grace Moritz) fingers the cover of Jung's *Psychology of the Transference*.

So, if Susie Bannion is the allegorical personification of Patricia's desperate need to resolve her Mother complex—arriving to smooth her imaginary way through the thorny impasse of a contradiction between two forms of commitment—we are obliged to ask what this character does to make that possible, and also about its political unconscious. But here we have definitely stepped up a level, if you like, from the multivalent tussles between the “literal” and “allegorical” levels that we have been tracking so far, to the “moral” level proper: the level of the Subject and its construction through desire and ethics. It is the Subject who, according to Badiou, has the obligation to follow through on a truth-event, remaining faithful to it at all costs;<sup>19</sup> Patricia's problem is that she has been seared by two truth-events—call them Wigman's *Hexentanz* and Meinhof's great definition of resistance<sup>20</sup>—and cannot remain faithful to both. The summoning of Susie defers the issue and allows Patricia to wash her hands of it; how Susie reacts to the

<sup>19</sup> See Badiou, *Ethics*, pp. 43-4.

<sup>20</sup> “Protest is when I say I do not like this. Resistance is when I put an end to what I don't like.”

situation will break the deadlock, but only at the cost of one or both of these subjective fidelities. She is an allegorical alibi, forged in the heat of psychoanalytic transference, in the to and fro between Patricia and her analyst Klemperer, who has his own reasons for wanting to withdraw from history altogether, having lost his beloved Anke to the Theresienstadt extermination camp. Susie is the Subject charged with the power of this transference, which finds its effective platform on the paranoid domain of witchcraft, generated out of the friction between politics and dance, which allows her to resolve the conflict between the two Mothers (Markos and Meinhof) by becoming one herself: *Suspriorum*.

In order to facilitate this transfiguration, Susie will be obliged to reorient the semiotic matrix of the situation in which she appears. No longer will the historical or the political place any claim on her; marked by a total indifference to the struggle in all its forms, she has no convictions forged on the anvil of antagonism, and proceeds solely from that blooming egotism and innocence of the “American Adam”: a conscript to the Party of Hope and not the Party of Memory.<sup>21</sup> At the contextual level, to be sure, this coincides with the abiding policy in the FRG of *Vergangenheitsbewältigung*<sup>22</sup> (“working through the past”), which translated into a kind of ambient amnesia. “In this usage,” quipped Adorno, “‘working through the past’ does not mean seriously working upon the past, that is, through a lucid consciousness breaking its power to fascinate. On the contrary, its intention is to close the books on the past and, if possible, even remove it from memory.”<sup>23</sup> Susie’s only memories are featured in a dissociated grab-bag of lurid dream-images sent to her by Madame Blanc, culled from her childhood in Ohio: snapshots of a puritanical upbringing, punishments, shame, repression, and strange obsessions. Otherwise she is unmoored from history and free to drift in a late adolescent haze of budding sexuality without any object other than her teacher, Madame Blanc. That is, her singular dedication to dance, in which she has invested all her hope, is mediated by a figure other than the elusive and

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<sup>21</sup> Ralph Waldo Emerson, “The Conservative” (c.1841): <https://archive.vcu.edu/english/engweb/transcendentalism/authors/emerson/essays/conservative.html>.

<sup>22</sup> See Michelle Langford, “Vergangenheitsbewältigung: Coming to Terms with the Past,” in Michelle Langford, ed., *The Directory of World Cinema: Germany* (Bristol: Intellect, 2012), pp. 204-215.

<sup>23</sup> T. W. Adorno, *Critical Models: Interventions and Catchwords*, trans. Henry W. Pickford (New York: Columbia University Press, 2005), p. 89.

monstrous Markos; Blanc is charismatic, beautiful, supremely talented yet approachable, an artist of the old school. In an early scene, we witness an election inside the coven, in which all members freely vote for their leader; the two candidates are Markos and Blanc, and the result is a marginal victory for Markos. Blanc is driven by a different vision than her rival, and objects to her presumptive use of the title of “Mother” (she herself prefers Madame); she also has her doubts about the whole business of ritual metempsychosis on which the plot of the film is turning. She who dances the Protagonist in Volk will simultaneously be giving up her body to the ageing, diseased Markos, and Blanc’s growing misgivings single her out as at least relatively sympathetic. So, Susie’s mediation of her ambitions through Blanc, shot through with all the usual transferential eros, is implicitly political, and drives the wedge between the two factions deeper with every *tendu* and *chasse*. Zoom cinematography clinches the reciprocal nature of this desire, as Blanc and Susie are locked into a dyad that will inevitably spell the ruin of Markos’s hopes for immortality.

So it is that Susie manages to subdue both Mother Meinhof (by refusing to acknowledge her at all) and Mother Markos (in the film’s gory finale), and thereby surmount the double-bind of Patricia’s Mother complex by becoming an incarnate figure of the Dance. Only of course, as fantasy formations often will, this one exceeds its authorized place in the structure of the dream and assumes an unwarranted, excessive role. Her final revelation as Mother Suspiriorum herself gives the lie to Markos’s pretensions and allows the awful Lady, in one of contemporary cinema’s more outlandish bloodbaths, to wreak revenge on the entire Markos faction and tendency, by bringing Death into the Mutterhaus and literally blowing off their heads in geysers of blood and brain. Allegory has rarely looked so cathartic; indeed, by its nature, the form prefers gentler and more decorous dénouements than this. But the blockage being perforce a violent one, its resolution clearly requires a desperate and incarnadine intervention. This climactic incarnation of one of De Quincey’s “abstractions presented as impersonations,” his Ladies of Sorrow, brings together all the various allegorical layers and permits a narrative conclusion that shifts everything up another level, from the moral to the anagogical, since here a purely subjective motivation is sublated into something properly collective and fateful for the species as a whole.

Suspirium, after her bloody apotheosis, has all the appearance of a benign deity. Leaning into the deformed, disembowelled bodies of the witches’ sacrificial

victims—Patricia, Sara, and Olga—she gives to each her most heartfelt wish, “to die.” Visiting Klemperer the day after his witnessing this violent orgy, she tells him what he has most wanted to hear for decades—the fate of his wife in the camps—so cures his melancholia, and then wipes his memory banks of that trauma and everything he has learned at the Markos Academy. By ridding the Academy of its conservative Markosites she has set it free to follow another entrepreneurial pathway. Yet each of these benignities carries within it cancerous cells. The application of euthanasia conjures up an entire era of “biopolitics” and the treatment of others as *homo sacer*; Suspriorum here behaves toward these her “daughters” as though they were a priori victims, representatives of an “animal abjection” that transforms politics into the application of power to “to ensure, sustain, and multiply life, to put this life in order,” or else to end it peacefully, thoughtfully.<sup>24</sup> The erasure of Klemperer’s memory coincides perfectly with the very regime of *Vergangenheitsbewältigung* that it might have promised to transcend, and indeed with a more general tendency in the postmodern itself where “the past itself has disappeared (along with the well-known ‘sense of the past’ or historicity and collective memory).”<sup>25</sup> And the eradication of over half the Academy’s faculty in order to pursue another corporate model carries too many connotations of neoliberal institutional reform to reassure audiences repeatedly traumatized by similar measures; Suspriorum the “new broom” predicates her radical management regime on a HR bloodbath. Indeed, the smooth, young, attractive face (which carries in its DNA two previous generations of Hollywood royalty: Dakota Johnson’s parents are Melanie Griffith and Don Johnson; her grandmother was “Tippi” Hedren) reassures and soothes, even as the ruthless Mother kills and lobotomizes: in a pattern that has become all too familiar, a murderous power politics is masked by “care” and a solicitous concern for due process.

What else is Suspriorum, indeed, than precisely what Jameson has asked for? She is a centre of characterological gravity in a

new kind of reification, which must replace the sense of drift and tendency with the identifiable space of a cast of characters, a personification of friend

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<sup>24</sup> Badiou, *Ethics*, p. 11; Michel Foucault, *The Will to Knowledge: The History of Sexuality Volume 1*, trans. Robert Hurley (New York: Pantheon, 1976), p. 138.

<sup>25</sup> Jameson, *Postmodernism*, p. 309.

and foe, a movement of social classes in conflict and in alliance: classes in formation, perhaps, where everything static about traditional personification is replaced with the process of personifying and of identifying agencies to come. (347)

By personifying something determinate and identifiable in the “Zietgeist” of neoliberal late capitalism, she bestows upon this screen fantasy a crucial fourth layer of significance, the analogical, where we are forced to confront the largest social dimension of human history in its agonisingly impersonal contentions between modes of production, and the balances of power within them. *Suspriorum* personifies our collective foe in the vestments and visage of a friend, and allows us, retrospectively and too late, to re-imagine what she has swept aside as a fragile political ecosystem, held in delicate balance by classes and groups clinging desperately to a past that cannot survive this bludgeoning apotheosis of the *Novum*. What that ecosystem now “means,” for us, is a social and historical situation, sustained by the post-War boom and progressive taxation and partial redistribution, where radical political sequences and avant-garde “purism” could intertwine in wondrous braids of militancy and aestheticism; a whole lost way of life, what Badiou calls “The Century,” sustained by a subjectivity driven by “the passion for the real” and placed on a permanent war footing.<sup>26</sup> 1977 marks the cessation of that Century, and the beginning of something else; as the TV commentator puts it at the start of Chapter Six at the end of the Lufthansa hostage crisis, quoting Federal Police President Horst Herold, “The Baader-Meinhof era is done.” Badiou writes:

The years that followed 1980 remind one of what Mallarmé rightly said about those that came after 1880: “A present is lacking.” Since counter-revolutionary periods resemble one another far more than revolutionary ones, we should not be surprised that after the “leftism” of the sixties, we now revisit the reactive ideas that emerged in the wake of the Paris Commune. This is because the interval between an event of emancipation and another leaves us fallaciously in thrall to the idea that nothing begins

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<sup>26</sup> Badiou, *The Century*, trans. Alberto Toscano (Cambridge: Polity, 2007), p. 39.

or will ever begin, even if we find ourselves caught in the midst of an infernal and immobile agitation.<sup>27</sup>

“An infernal and immobile agitation”—nothing could better describe the ecstatic naked whirling dervishes in the gore-streaked Mutterhaus, turning and turning in their gyres, on whom *Suspiriorum* confers the once-*verboten*, now *de rigueur* accolade: “Yes! Dance, keep dancing. It’s beautiful! It’s beautiful. It’s beautiful.” What Jameson sternly described as the “meretricious” return of a discourse of the Beautiful in postmodern culture is yet another aspect of Mother *Suspiriorum*’s personification of it.<sup>28</sup>

We can now conclude by compiling a table of the various levels as they interact and resonate in Guadagnino’s remarkable remake. This is how Jameson means us to construe his four levels:

|             |                                                 |
|-------------|-------------------------------------------------|
| ANAGOGICAL  | clash between (overlapping) modes of production |
| MORAL       | the Subject: desire, sexuality, ethics          |
| ALLEGORICAL | class struggle, dialogical contestation         |
| LITERAL     | individual literary work or cultural artefact   |

And this is how we have mapped them here:

|             |                                                                                                                 |
|-------------|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| ANAGOGICAL  | the emergence of the late-capitalist world; disappearance of “the Century”; personification of the biopolitical |
| MORAL       | Susie as “ethical” projection of Patricia’s double-bind; forgetting History, eradicating the past               |
| ALLEGORICAL | enclaves; collectives; the other; commitment                                                                    |
| LITERAL     | Argento’s <i>Suspiria</i> as ur-text, forgetful of its origins in class struggle                                |

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<sup>27</sup> Badiou, *The Century*, p. 140.

<sup>28</sup> Jameson, *The Cultural Turn: Selected Writings on the Postmodern* (London: Verso, 1998), p. 135.