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CAST

Jennifer Connelly Jennifer Corvino
Daria Nicolodi Frau Brückner
Fiore Argento Vera Brandt
Federica Mastroianni Sophie
Fiorenza Tessari Gisela Sulzer
Dalila Di Lazzaro Headmistress
Patrick Bauchau Inspector Rudolf Geiger
Donald Pleasence Professor John McGregor

CREW

Produced and Directed by **Dario Argento**
Written by **Dario Argento** & **Franco Ferrini**
Production Manager **Angelo Iacono**
Director of Photography **Romano Albani, A.I.C.**
Production Designers **Maurizio Garrone**, **Nello Giorgetti**, **Luciano Spadoni**, **Umberto Turco**
Film Editor **Franco Fraticelli, A.M.C.**
Music by **Goblin**
Costume Designer **Giorgio Armani**

THE POETRY OF THE GROSS-OUT: ARGENTO'S *PHENOMENA*

by Mikel J. Koven

Even die-hard Argento fans must agree, *Phenomena* is minor Argento; while the film never reaches the heady heights of the director's best work, like *Deep Red* (Profondo Rosso, 1975) or *Suspiria* (1977), neither does it scrape the bottom of the barrel, like *Giallo* (2009) or *Dracula 3D* (2012). What is missing from *Phenomena* are the meticulously orchestrated set-pieces of terror which occur when Argento is at the top of his game, like the "Mad Puppet" sequence in *Deep Red*. Instead of these sequences, Argento focuses attention on images of putrescence, of rotting bodies, and on close-ups of maggots and insects, designed to turn the audience's stomach rather than truly horrify or terrify (both of which suggest an emotional connection with the film, which *Phenomena* never really tries for).

I've written elsewhere regarding the use of the set-piece as organizing principle for gialli, and also how, excerpted from their place as a narrative device within the film, can be viewed as moments of visual poetry (cf. Koven 2006). *Phenomena*,

while ignoring many of the classic tropes of the giallo, like the black gloved killer, is still a gory murder mystery where an amateur detective (Jennifer – played by Jennifer Connelly) hunts down a serial killer of beautiful young girls. In this regard, *Phenomena* has two killers: Frau Brückner (Daria Nicolodi) and her unnamed deformed son (Davide Marotta). But Jennifer's telepathic link with the insect world, as a device, makes the film more of a *giallo-fantastico*, as Kim Newman calls them: gialli with supernatural elements (Newman 1986: 23).

In his 1981 non-fiction tour of the horror genre, *Danse Macabre*, Stephen King summarizes the effects he hopes to have on his readers: "...if I cannot terrify him/her, I will try to horrify; if I find I cannot horrify, I'll go for the gross-out. I'm not proud" (King, 26). In this, King suggests that, of the various affects the horror writer tries to achieve, the gross-out is the lowest of the lot. It is, as King states later in the book, the "wanna-look-at-my-chewed-up-food?" factor (201). Despite these "childish acts of anarchy" (King, 201), King does recognize that the gross-out is not artless, that there is a certain artistry used to create truly stomach-churning moments of revulsion. In *Phenomena*, Argento seems wearied by his earlier films' successes at terrifying and horrifying us, and all he has left are gross-outs. Even though there is an absence of classic Argento moments of terror, the moments of gross-out are not without their poetry. These are what I wish to discuss.

Phenomena does include a few classic Argento moments which horrify the audience: the sequence of Inspector Geiger (Patrick Bauchau) having to break his own thumb in order to

slip out of the shackles in which Frau Brückner has trapped him is pretty horrific. Likewise, Inga the chimp slashing away at Frau Brückner's face with a straight razor is a classic Argento gore moment. But the opening chase sequence, where Vera Brandt (Fiore Argento) is chased by an unseen killer until her head smashes through a glass window near a local waterfall, has a strong echo of Helga Ulmann's (Macha Meril) death in *Deep Red*. And if that allusion is a bit fuzzy, Jennifer witnessing Gisela Sulzer's (Fiorenza Tessari – daughter of Italian exploitation filmmaker Duccio Tessari) murder, later on in the film, makes it explicit: Jennifer and Gisela have similar eye-contact just before Gisela's head goes through another window, as do Mark Daly (David Hemmings) and Helga in the earlier Argento film. If these moments feel like classic Argento, it is because they are repeats from earlier (and, I would argue, better) films. Even *Phenomena*'s basic narrative – a young American girl comes to an esteemed private academy in Switzerland only to discover nefarious goings on – suggests *Suspiria* with bugs and more maggots.

Instead of the intricate set-pieces fans have come to expect from Argento, *Phenomena*'s affects are mostly close-up gross-out shots: the reveal of Vera Brandt's decomposing head, covered in maggots, is one of the more memorable ones. Elsewhere, this same gross-out is repeated with close-ups of maggots, found inside gloves, or on hands and floorboards. We also see close-up shots of the insects (and arachnids – which are not insects, but those biologically accurate factoids don't seem to bother most horror filmmakers) in Prof. McGregor's

(Donald Pleasence) laboratory: flies, beetles, tarantulas and scorpions. We also see microscopic images of fly larvae. The presentation of these creatures, filmed in close-up, suggests we should recoil in disgust. Most of us, I hazard a guess, don't particularly like bugs, of any sort. So the close-ups of them in the film are an intentional device to repel us.

Of course, the big gross-out of the film comes when Jennifer falls into the pool of putrescent liquid in the basement of Frau Brückner's house. This gray stagnant water is filled with decomposing bodies, and Argento intercuts close-ups of cadavers in various states of decay. It isn't just that Jennifer falls into this pool, but that it appears to be bottomless (or at least the bottom is invisible due to the murkiness of the water), and several times she goes under. Given how much she is screaming during this sequence, the thought of how much of that water she's swallowing must occur to everyone. Even the thought of coming into contact with the contents of this pool is horrific, let along ingesting some of it.

The anthropologist Mary Douglas, in her most well-known book, *Purity and Danger* (1966), discusses the variety of categories different cultures have for filth, and what makes something unclean. In particular, Douglas is concerned with how conceptions of pollution and contamination operate within a society, and what a culture does to prevent accidental contamination, and therefore becoming "unclean". Douglas offers a useful paradigm for discussing the poetics of the gross-out, particularly in *Phenomena*.

Firstly, why the repeated images of maggots? The nastiness of the maggot has to do with its apparent in-between nature, what anthropologists would call "liminal". The maggot is alive, as it moves on its own volition, but feeds on dead bodies. The maggot suggests that the plague of death attaches itself to anything which comes into physical contact with it. Death can spread, like a disease, if it pollutes our cleanliness, or if what *has* come in contact with it, comes into contact with us. Do you want plague? Because this is how you get plague. So the tiny maggot becomes the symbol for contamination by dead bodies – for, as *Phenomena* keeps telling us, the presence of maggots indicates the presence of cadavers. And yet, it looks like rice – a staple grain in many cultures – but squirms and wriggles on its own; it looks like food, but is in fact still alive. The maggot confuses the categories, at least superficially, between the living and the dead and as such further suggests increased contamination of our body-politic.

And in the process sickens us, makes us weaker and more pervious to further contamination. We respond to the maggot with revulsion because it suggests the pollution of our own (clean) world, free from disease and sickness.

Consider, if you will, Vera's maggoty head. Prof. McGregor unveils Vera's head dramatically by unveiling the clear box which sat on his laboratory table in front of him, covered with a cloth, for Inspector Geiger. Vera's pretty features are unrecognizable; maggots and mealworms infest her eye cavities and the corners of her mouth; they also cover her ears. The infestation

of maggots in the eyes and ears, but particularly around the mouth, suggest how these indicators of death have polluted the once living girl. The maggots around her mouth further suggest an ingesting of these larvae, that they are *inside* her mouth, increasing the revulsion-factor as we imagine the maggots inside our mouth. And eyes. And ears. But Vera's head is further liminal, in that it is both recognizably human, but also not-human (in that it is beyond all recognition as human). With Vera's lips gone, revealing the teeth in a silent scream, the image is disturbing because it both is, and is not, Vera. The image of putrescence is in-between the human and the not-human of the skeleton. There is extra flesh left on the skull that has yet to be eaten by the maggots and the blackened skin is dried and papery. We know this once was human, but is not anymore.

One of the joys of Italian horror cinema is their seeming obsession with death and decomposition. Perhaps it is a factor of growing up Roman Catholic, and the ritual of transubstantiation, wherein the wine and wafer become the actual blood and body of Christ during communion. In that light, Italian horror cinema depicts an almost perverse pleasure and simultaneous disgust at putrefaction; a putrephillia, if you will. While the Eucharist transcends the human body, all other flesh is defiled. And Italian horror films wallow joyously (and unapologetically) in this defilement.

Of course, central to any Italian, or Roman Catholic, understanding of defilement is the nature of sin. Frau Brückner

tells Inspector Geiger that when she was working at the local asylum, in the most secure ward, she was raped, through the bars, by a dangerous inmate. The product of that rape was Brückner's deformed son. While not dramatized, the story of her son's conception illustrates graphically Douglas's schema regarding pollution contaminating cleanliness; that is, what is filthy (in this case the dangerous inmate) is able to cross the rigid separation societies demand (the bars) in order to defile that which was clean and pure (presumably Frau Brückner). That which society insists must stay separate is contaminated by some form of violation. And the product of that violation is Brückner's deformed son, who wears his mother's sin (of being defiled by the inmate) in his diseased and malformed body. When Jennifer first sees the boy, and the embodiment of his mother's sin is revealed to us too, his face is also crawling with maggots. The boy is not just the product of defilement, he is perpetually defiled by his close proximity to death symbolized by the maggots crawling on his face. And his is a face, designed by special make-up effects master Sergio Stivaletti, intended to disgust, deformed and with a severe cleft palate, and crawling with maggots. Regardless of any sympathy we might show towards an innocent deformed child, the product of a brutal rape, we are instead repelled and disgusted by his monstrous deformity. While he may be the tell-tale sign of his monstrous conception, an embodiment and reflection of his mother's sin, he wears the mark of a ghoul by the maggots on his face.

Let us return to Jennifer's immersion in the polluted waters in the basement of Frau Brückner's house. This moment acts as a kind of perversion on the sacred rite of Baptism; Jennifer, throughout the film, but in this sequence in particular, is dressed in white. She falls in clean, but is made unclean by the filthy waters. Her contact with the dead bodies in the putrefying liquid is a form of contamination – particularly, as I noted above, the likelihood of her ingesting some of that water too. If Jennifer's swim in this horrifying pool pollutes her and makes her unclean (both symbolically and literally), her later emersion in the lake purifies her back to her natural innocent state. The clear waters of the lake double and reverse the images of the putrid pool. The explosion of the small boat she was on, and the ring of fire which spreads across the surface of the water, burns off any contaminate that might remain. It is because Jennifer is now in a state of Grace which prevents her from killing Frau Brückner; that blood is on Inga's hands, and the film's central villain is killed without the film's protagonist having to do it herself.

I am not suggesting that the gross-out moments in Argento's *Phenomena* will mean the same thing to everyone who watches the film, at least not consciously. But we are moved by the poetry of these images; they resonate with us, and disturb us, even if we can't articulate why that is so. To return to Stephen King with whom I began this essay, "...the gross-out *is* art" (201, original emphasis), and Dario Argento, even when not at his best, is still one of Italian horror cinemas most provocative artists.

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ARGENTO, ARMANI AND THE FASHIONS OF *PHENOMENA*

by Rachael Nisbet

In the films of Dario Argento, fashion and style have always played an integral part in adding to the director's unique aesthetic. Mirroring the themes and ideas at play within his work, the fashion on display in Argento's films gives his work a theatrical, stylized look unmatched by his contemporaries. In particular, Argento's 1985 supernatural horror, *Phenomena*, is notable due to the involvement of esteemed Italian fashion designer Giorgio Armani, who put together the looks on display. Although Armani has provided costumes for many films, including *American Gigolo* (1980) and *The Untouchables* (1987), *Phenomena* is of particular interest as it is one of only a handful of films that Armani has served as sole costume designer on, taking responsibility for all of the looks within the film. This makes *Phenomena* an anomaly not only in Italian horror cinema but in cinema in general, as it is one of very few films to have its costume design carried out by a notable figure in the fashion industry. As a result, *Phenomena* is an incredibly stylish film with an exclusively designer wardrobe that encapsulates Armani's ethos of timeless, high-quality clothing as well as evoking the themes present in the script.

Armani was a strong proponent of the "menswear as womenswear" trend that was popularized in the mid-to-late 80s, and this aesthetic is at the heart of the costuming in *Phenomena*. Sharp tailoring, oversized blazers, high-waisted pleated trousers and midi-length skirts were all staples of Armani's 1985 collection and are all pieces that can be seen throughout the film. Originally designing tailored menswear, Armani branched out into womenswear by the 1980s. However, his designs remained in keeping with his male collection, creating suits for women in masculine shapes and cuts mimicking male fashions of the time. This style can be seen on Frau Brückner (Daria Nicolodi) and the Headmistress (Dalila Di Lazzaro), who wear blouses with shoulder pads, heavy textured suit blazers and high-waisted slacks throughout the film. These looks reflect the hardened nature of these characters who feel very much like cold, unfeeling depictions of womanhood whilst still looking like highly polished individuals capable of running an exclusive boarding school for girls. Whilst both women wear outfits from Armani's 1985 collection, the Headmistress's wardrobe is softened with jewels and polished feminine hair and make-up; her character at times feels like a modern interpretation of Snow White's evil queen with her wicked beauty – which ties in nicely with the fairytale elements of *Phenomena*. In contrast, Frau Brückner's character is depicted as more matronly and wears matching two-pieces in masculine cuts accessorized with round spectacles and messy hairstyles, making her appear to be the less imposing of the two women. These two characters illustrate Armani's ability to tailor his designs to create specific looks that suit various

characterizations while still embodying his overall aesthetic and one that remains true to Argento's vision.

The muted color palette of Armani's designs that can be seen in the wardrobes of the aforementioned characters reflects the cold, mystical look of cinematographer Romano Albani's Switzerland. The fashions on display throughout the film are made up of whites, navy blues, blacks and charcoal grays, and these colors are punctuated with glitzy jewelry and embellishment – e.g. Jennifer (Jennifer Connelly)'s gold eagle embossed sweatshirt or the pin on Greta's jacket. This look mirrors the night-time scenes of the film, where metallic blades and bioluminescent insects glint in the dark alongside gold foil sweatshirts and elaborate costume jewelry. This synergy between the cinematography and the wardrobe beautifully epitomizes Argento's aesthetic in *Phenomena*. Where muted colors like white and gray evoke the look of the Swiss mountains and pop against the green rolling grass and cloudy blue skies in the daytime scenes, they take on a different, more magical feel in the scenes filmed indoors at night, again feeling reminiscent of a fairy tale. *Phenomena*'s lighting scheme takes on an ethereal feel in these scenes, with Jennifer bathed in iridescent, oyster-colored lighting inside her dormitory and cool blue lighting in her scenes at John McGregor's (Donald Pleasence) house. This ethereal quality to the lighting is accentuated by the fashions on display throughout these scenes. Jennifer wears long flowing gauzy nightwear in whites and creams in delicate fabrics such as silks, which heightens the dreamlike feel of the subsequent sleepwalking scenes. Armani uses

costume throughout these scenes to show a more vulnerable side to Jennifer's character and refrains from showing harsher, more masculine style fashions, which have more of a utilitarian feel that lends them to the ideas present in the daytime scenes involving the other students and teachers.

Argento has stated in interviews after *Phenomena*'s release that he envisioned the film taking place in a world where the Nazis won World War 2. Despite no direct reference to this in the film, there are several allusions to it in terms of the film's overall feel. *Phenomena* seems to take place in a world with few parental figures – the women in the film are cold monstrosities of motherhood whereas the male characters are absent or are cruelly taken against their will – e.g. McGregor, Morris Shapiro (Mario Donatone), Inspector Geiger (Patrick Bauchau). There's a coldness to the world in which *Phenomena* takes place, not only in terms of its isolated setting but also in the behavior of those around Jennifer. Her teachers are unfeeling, running the school in a strict, almost militaristic fashion; her peers are cruel and taunt Jennifer for being different; local teenage boys kidnap her to get their kicks; and the medical professionals around her seem to partake in barbaric and torturous treatment of those with mental health issues and abnormalities. These small details add to the film's peculiar feel and exaggerate the nightmarish fairytale tone of the film, suggesting that the Switzerland the characters inhabit is different to the one we as the viewer are familiar with, alluding to Argento's alternative universe idea. Furthermore, Armani's use of utilitarian, masculine fashions heightens this idea, with

the severe looks of Frau Brückner and the Headmistress feeling reminiscent of fashions favored in the region in the 1940s. In addition to this, Jennifer's white shirt, skinny black tie and black skirt are evocative of the uniforms worn by female members of the Hitler Youth, which again alludes to Argento's vision of the world in which the film takes place. Armani's fashions help to highlight this ambiguity within the film by dressing the characters in styles that feel simultaneously modern whilst having an element of fashions on the past and overtones of clothing worn and favored by certain factions of society in the 40s.

Adolescence is a key theme in *Phenomena* and Armani's costuming effectively conveys the youth of the teenagers of the Richard Wagner School whilst simultaneously showcasing the juxtaposition between Jennifer's naivety and maturity. Armani highlights this by dressing Jennifer in adult clothing reminiscent of work wear but adds oversized touches such as large blazers and shirts to accentuate Jennifer's youth, making her feel at times like a child playing dress-up. In comparison, the teachers of the school wear similar styles but in a much more polished fashion, highlighting the difference between the assured women of the school and Jennifer. The tailored work wear, although adult in feel, paradoxically looks at times like a school uniform with skinny ties, leather loafers and oversized shirts serving as key items in the costuming of Jennifer's character, showcasing her youth without using the obvious visual signifier of a uniform itself.

The film alludes to and explores ideas of womanhood, puberty and childhood on multiple occasions. Despite appearing to be an independent young woman who has been forced to grow up prematurely due to her father's movie star lifestyle, Argento reminds us that Jennifer is still very much a young girl, whether it's through a scene in which she eats baby food or through a wardrobe that accentuates her youth. Her constant search for Morris, her father's agent and substitute father figure, reminds us of her need for a parental figure and her burgeoning friendship with entomologist John McGregor feels grandfatherly in nature. Multiple instances of this idea of Jennifer's transition to adulthood occur throughout the film and Armani plays up to Argento's vision of Jennifer as both a lost young girl and an independent woman in search of answers. Furthermore, in addition to Jennifer's character, we are reminded frequently throughout the film that, despite being away from their parents and living fairly independent lives, the young women of the school are still immature and impressionable. The girls at the school idolize Jennifer's movie star father Paul Corvino and pop stars like the Bee Gees, with one girl wearing a Bee Gees T-shirt in a classroom scene. The other girls wear slogan T-shirts and fashions more in keeping with the high school fashions of the American teen film, feeling at odds with Jennifer's polished, tailored wardrobe. Again, Armani uses costuming to convey key ideas about the characters that inhabit the world of *Phenomena* and points out the differences between Jennifer and her peers through fashion.

Through costuming, Armani echoes the central ideas in Argento's film, primarily that Jennifer is not like those around her. She is different, special. In one scene Jennifer lounges in her dormitory room wearing an off the shoulder Armani jumper embossed with the label's eagle motif in gold. The eagle is a symbol of strength and power and the use of gold gives Jennifer an almost regal quality. The wings of the eagle are positioned on her shoulder blades, suggesting that she rises above the world around her. When Jennifer first encounters McGregor she wears the blazer of his previous assistant, which is adorned with a jewel-encrusted medal brooch, again alluding to her fighting spirit. In another scene, Jennifer rides a funicular wearing her uniform-like clothing accessorized with a black beret, which seems fitting for a character with a rebellious side and again alludes to the militaristic overtones throughout the film. Through these various accessories and items of clothing we see Jennifer's character reflected in her wardrobe, showcasing her strength and power and again reflecting the conflicting elements of her character.

Simultaneously exemplifying Armani's era-defining style of the mid-1980s and the ideas at play, *Phenomena* uses costuming to highlight the central themes at the heart of Argento's supernatural horror – such as adolescence and womanhood – in order to tell a fairy story horror that serves as a morality tale with underpinnings of Catholic guilt. Through his collaboration with Armani, Argento creates a film that is a distinct departure from the style on display in his previous works whilst examining ideas present in his older films and updating them for the

1980s. Armani's approach to fashion has always been to create timeless, quality looks and as such, the fashions on display throughout *Phenomena* feel refreshingly modern – perhaps more so than any other film in Argento's oeuvre, making *Phenomena* feel thoroughly contemporary 30 years after its production. What is perhaps the most satisfying element of Argento and Armani's collaboration is their ability to effectively communicate key ideas and Argento's vision of an alternative Switzerland through contemporary fashion.

Rachael Nisbet is an Edinburgh-based writer specializing in Italian genre cinema, with a slant towards style and gialli. She maintains a blog at http://hypnoticcrescendos.blogspot.com.

PHENOMENA AS A KEY TO UNLOCKING *OPERA*

by Leonard Jacobs

Dario Argento's *Phenomena* has long been a contentious entry in his body of work. Argento cites it as a personal favorite but many critics, even those adamant in their support of Argento's auteur status, have a harder time praising it. Maitland McDonagh, in her fantastic, book-length study of Argento's films, has nary a kind word for the film. Her criticisms, like most, focus on the movie's "excess of plot elements" – an excess that leaves the film "aimless," "haphazard," and "hysterical":

> There is telepathic communication and – further – telepathic communication with insects. There are both a psychopathic killer and a mutated monster, conflated into one all-purpose bogeyman. There is the academy full of vicious schoolgirls and the terminally weird staff: Mrs. Bruckner – who was raped by a deformed lunatic and bore his dreadful child – and the chic headmistress, who is improbably convinced that Jennifer's sleepwalking is a sign of incipient insanity or demonic possession. A crippled doctor and his simian companion, a chamber of horrors

> and a policeman in chains, a lunatic asylum located somewhere in the ninth circle of hell and a boarding school in the 'Swiss Transylvania'... [*Phenomena*] is ultimately more than just a little silly, and the full panoply of Argento's directorial mannerisms... cannot conceal this deficiency.[1]

So it's an Argento giallo. But it's also a half dozen other things: A fairy tale. A creature feature. A coming-of-age story. A paranormal horror that invokes films like *The Fury* (1978) and *Carrie* (1976). And it is also, I'd argue, the single most important key to understanding Argento's next giallo, 1987's *Opera*.

The ending of that film has been its own bone of contention: for a film that is often cited as the master's last "great" giallo, the film's ten-minute epilogue seems to resist easy classification. Or understanding. It's been called "cloying." "Out of sync" with the movie that comes before it. A WTF ending that nobody seems to really understand.

Even McDonagh mostly glosses over the possible significance – and real dissonance – of these last ten minutes. Her plot synopsis of this section feels rushed, and in her analysis, she does little more than to broadly assert that it represents the moment when the film's heroine, Betty, has finally "let go her tenuous grip on reality and surrendered to madness."[2]

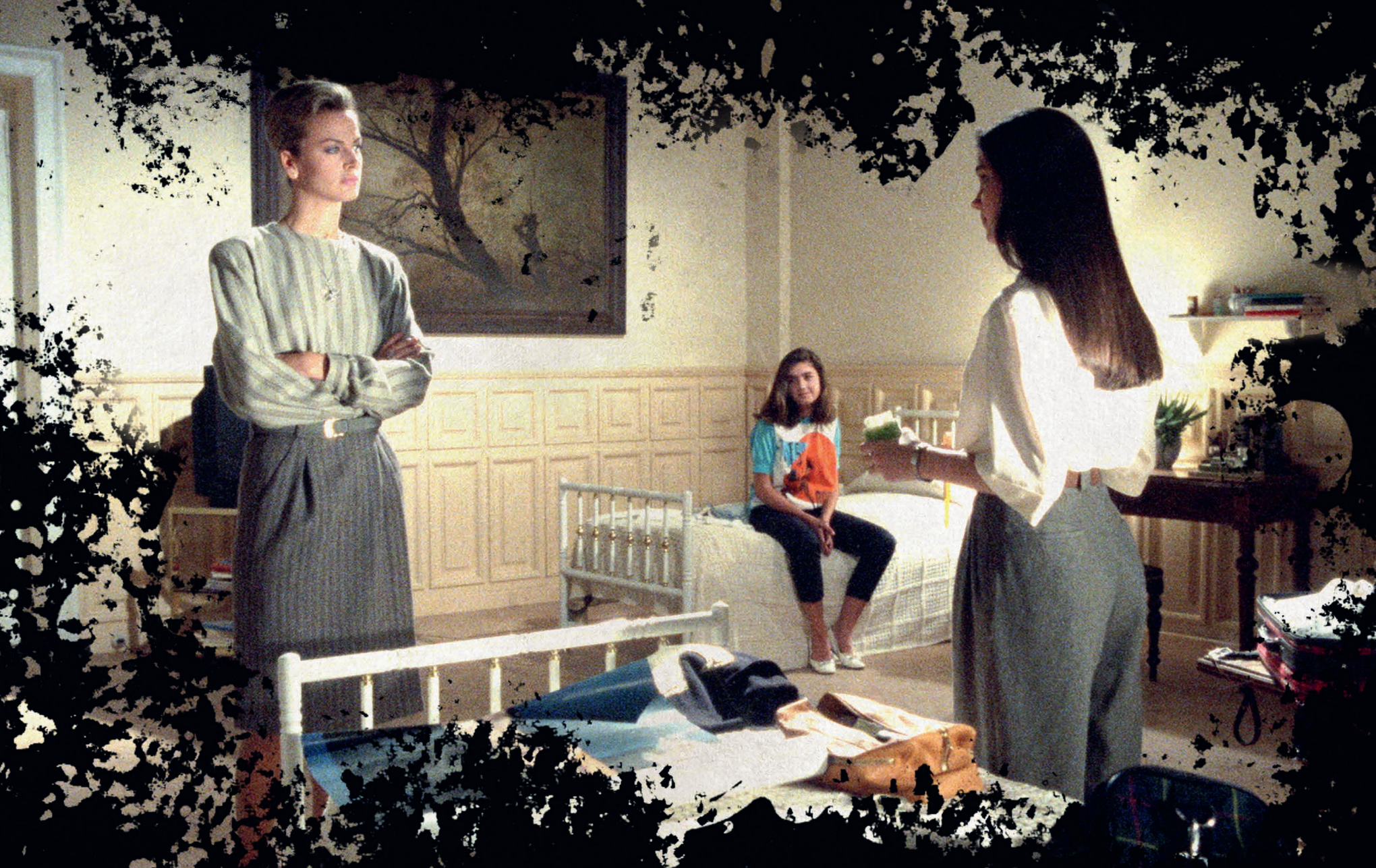
1 - McDonagh, M. (2010) *Broken Mirrors/Broken Minds: The Dark Dreams of Dario Argento*, Expanded Edition. Minneapolis and London: University of Minnesota Press: 184-185.
2 - See the *"Opera and Two Evil Eyes"* chapter in *Broken Mirrors/Broken Minds*.

But what about the sudden, seismic shift in *mise-en-scène*? What about the inexplicable uprooting of the film's action to the Swiss Alps? Even when Argento's movies emphasize eye-popping style over an A-B-C plot, they still make their own kind of sense, whether in the context of the movie, or in the context of Argento's larger body of work, as an extension (even: perfection) of his overall themes – a reiterating of what we fans find so iconic and thrilling about his oeuvre.

And it's in this body of work that we can find some idea of what, exactly, *Opera's* ending is up to – by considering the cinematic "key" that Argento gave us just two years earlier, in 1985's *Phenomena*.

It goes without saying that Argento's work is highly referential – packed to the gills, even, with the flicker of other films. Argento's themes, images, technical prowess and concerns can be traced to those works that have exerted the most influence over him: the cinema of Michelangelo Antonioni; the best entries in the German krimi cycle; any number of horror-*noir* films, from 1943's proto-giallo *The Leopard Man*[3] to 1946's *The Spiral Staircase*[4] to the delirious Southern-fried Grand Guignol of 1959's *Suddenly, Last Summer*.[5]

3 - Adapted from the same Cornell Woolrich novel, *Black Alibi*, that Argento and Luigi Cozzi would mine for set-pieces in *Four Flies on Grey Velvet*.
4 - Whose staging of murders and subjective use of the camera to represent the killer's POV would influence both *Deep Red* and *Tenebrae*. In *Deep Red*, it's the murder of Amanda Righetti, especially that signature image of the killer's single eye in hiding, surrounded by the black shadows of a closet. In *Tenebrae*, it's Argento using *Spiral Staircase's* opening murder as a template for Tilda's "clothes-changing" death. For more on that connection, see http://bit.ly/2cPsHKn5 - McDonagh, M. (2010) *Broken Mirrors/Broken Minds: The Dark Dreams of Dario Argento*, Expanded Edition. Minneapolis and London: University of Minnesota Press: 184-185.
5 - Whose "girl on the beach" scenes, featuring an unbelievably sultry Liz Taylor, serve as the perverted source code for the beach flashbacks in *Tenebrae*; also certainly an influence on Argento's regular flipping and switching of gender roles.



And, perhaps most of all, Argento's work is rife with references to *his* other films. Sometimes these references are labeled as little more than empty rehash, an underwhelming parade of his "greatest hits" (the charge that sometimes get leveled at *Sleepless* [*Non ho sonno,* 2001], for example). Other times this self-referentiality manages to be truly experimental, pushing at the edges of what the giallo can be. Thus it is, I'd argue, in *Opera's* reuse of *Phenomena* as a kind of oneiric fuel, driving Betty's character until she is lost in the look and logic of *Phenomena*.

Consider the following:

1. The Sudden Arrival of the Swiss Alps

It's not just the way that *Phenomena*'s setting suddenly replaces the new-old metropolis of *Opera*. Instead it's the complete effect of *Opera*'s epilogue suddenly being overwritten with details that feel teleported, sometimes 1-to-1, from the world of Jennifer and her insects. Details that are being used anew to define and dress *Opera*'s "set".

Gone is the "hothouse world of the opera" that Argento's been building for most of the film, a world that first comes to us reflected in a raven's twitching eye, and then gets force-fed into Betty's, when the film's killer tapes straight pins to hers. This emotional hothouse of backstabbing divas and sadistic directors leads to a literal one, when the opera-house killer confines Betty to a room in the theater and sets it on fire. Betty escapes, and the killer apparently gets consumed by his own flame.

But almost before we can absorb this apparent climax, *Opera*'s frame is filled with what seems like a non-sequitur: an extreme close-up of an insect. Behind it, shot through a lens that looks blue-green, a bit murky, we see the dark outlines of mountains. The Swiss Alps.

We're shown that the darting fly is attached to a wire, the wire threaded through a metal rod that's part of a movie camera being used by Marco – Betty's director-cum-lover – to do test shots. Getting his insect-actor to do his bidding on film.

Through dialogue, we're given to understand that Marco and Betty, in the aftermath of the opera-house fire, have retreated to this mountain home to plan their next move. But what totally overwhelms this plot information is the non sequitur image – a horror film director who's meant to be an obvious stand-in for Argento, playing with a fly.

Suddenly, as *Opera*'s epilogue, we are getting this meta-reference to Argento the filmmaker and the other cinematic worlds he's built. His fans know, when they see Marco doing these insect screen tests, that they no doubt include the same kind of practical effects used in some sections of *Phenomena*. Argento is making a meta-comment on his body of work by pulling back a curtain – by freely invoking the themes and technical tricks of one film, to help build the world of the other.

And he doesn't stop. After we watch Betty leave for a walk on the mountainside, the movie cuts back inside the house. A TV shows the opening titles of a news program, "Tagesschau," and

we find ourselves in the midst of an exposition dump: the news anchor declares that there has been "a new and surprising development in the crime at the opera". He goes on to explain that the killer, believed to be burned to death in the same fire that Betty escaped, actually wasn't burned at all. That a dummy was burned in his place. And that he remains at large.

What is so striking about this plot twist isn't the twist itself, but its method of delivery, one that's lifted wholesale from Jennifer's world. The same news program, with the same title, is used to give a similar info dump in *Phenomena*. Shortly after Jennifer arrives at her boarding school, we're able to watch the broadcast on her roommate's TV, using it to get up to speed on the mysterious killer stalking girls at the school. What both news broadcasts are telling us is: *Phenomena* and *Opera* exist, operate, make sense in the same single world.

2. The Musical Cues

The kitchen-sink nature that some people see in Argento's handling of *Phenomena*'s action is only amplified by the film's schizophrenic soundtrack, one that switches between dreamy, wind-heavy mountain melodies and aggressive speed metal. This film marked the first time that Argento, so known for his groundbreaking use of soundtracks, employed this kind of whiplash jukebox.[6] But it wouldn't be the last. Claudio Simonetti's haunting, undulating *Opera* score gets regularly interrupted by the more aggressive metal used to underscore many of the set-pieces in the film.

6 - A similar soundtrack strategy showed up in films that Argento was producing at the time, most notably the two *Demons* movies directed by Lamberto Bava.

3. The Missing Parents

Both Jennifer and Betty have no access to their actual parents. Betty's mother – the key to all her trauma, the ghostly specter haunting her dreams – is dead. (And there is no mention of a father.) For Jennifer, her globetrotting celebrity dad is ever busy in some far-flung locale shooting his next movie (with her mother having already exited the family via divorce).

Further, both heroines have their stand-in parental figures brutally taken from them. For Betty, her agent-slash-surrogate mother Myra is murdered before her very eyes (in fact, is murdered *through* the eye, in one of Argento's signature images). And when Jennifer's protector of choice, her beloved lawyer Morris, finally arrives to rescue her from her nightmare, she is forced to watch while he is beheaded.[7]

4. The End with the Insects

Much has been made about how incomprehensible Betty's final moments seem to be. After Marco has been murdered, and the cops have arrived to cart off the opera killer once and for all, Betty stays behind, wandering alone on the mountain. She slowly lowers herself onto the ground, and as she does, we're given access to her internal monologue. A monologue that could just as easily be ported in from Jennifer's head:

7 - Interestingly enough, this whole sequence, with Jennifer emerging from a lake that holds a deformed killer child – and that child's mother suddenly showing up to try and take revenge on the girl who's killed her son – strongly recalls the ending of the original *Friday the 13th* (1980).

I no longer wanted to see anybody. I wanted to escape altogether. Because I'm different. I don't even vaguely resemble others, any of them. I like the wind. Butterflies. Flowers. Leaves. Insects. The rain. Clouds.

Note the references to specific motifs in *Phenomena* – remember, for instance, the role that the wind plays in that film, both as an element on the soundtrack and some sort of local excuse for people in the shadow of the mountains to sometimes go a little crazy.[8] Also how deeply different Jennifer is from all the other people she encounters. The students at the boarding school bully her because her "unnatural" connection to insects makes her seem stuck up – her teachers want to keep her drugged and/or hidden away in an institution lest her "differentness" infect the other girls under their care. She truly does not "even vaguely resemble" anybody else in the film. What she resembles instead is one in a long line of Argento's recurring "lost girl" characters – see Catherine Spaak in *The Cat O' Nine Tails* (*Il gatto a nove code,* 1971), Mimsy Farmer in *Four Flies on Grey Velvet* (*4 mosche di velluto grigio,* 1971), Jessica Harper in *Suspiria* (1977), Irene Miracle in *Inferno* (1980), Veronica Lario in *Tenebrae (Tenebre, 1982), and* Asia Argento in both *Trauma* (1993) and *The Stendhal Syndrome* (*La sindrome di Stendhal,* 1996). To name just a few.

Here, unable to cope with her reality, "lost girl" Betty detaches herself from it. And everything about the way she does it – her body language, the playful smile on her face as she grabs at something in the grass, her fixation on butterflies and flowers –

8 - Or how, in *Opera*, Betty stops to free a lizard trapped in the brush, a clear reference to, among other things, Nicoletta Elmi's tendency to pin live lizards to the ground in *Deep Red*.

reads as childlike. Like she is undergoing some sort of regression – a madness that is protecting her from her current horror only because it allows her to disappear down the rabbit hole of a childish fantasy. (Remember that, early in the film, she'd complained that she was "too young" to play Lady Macbeth on the stage. And yet here, she grows younger still.)

McDonagh cites this as her madness onscreen. But I'd take that reading much further. It is not just the insanity of a single character, but the self-reflexive obsessiveness of a director's whole body of work, being stylishly and intricately layered, one scene on top of another.

In the last shot of the film, Betty gazes lovingly at the ground beneath her. She approaches it almost with wonder, a smile on her face as she plunges face first into the grass, "hugging" this new world of nature even as she loses her identity inside it. (Note, also, how the last shot of Jennifer in *Phenomena* is her "embracing" nature, as she hugs the chimpanzee who has just saved her life. As the movie cuts from them to the credits, it wouldn't be hard to believe that they're the only ones left alive in *Phenomena*'s world.)

Argento's camera reinforces this merging of one "lost girl's" identity with the other – it follows Betty's plunge, lens-first, into the ground. Until the screen is black, and all that's come before exists in a kind of self-imposed oblivion. An oblivion that is, really, nothing more or less than the one movie disappearing into the other. Betty, then Jennifer, then back again.

Leonard Jacobs maintains the blog* Krimi in the Pocket, Giallo on the Brain *(http://krimi-giallo-casebook.blogspot.com).

ABOUT THE VERSIONS

Phenomena exists in three distinct versions, all of which are included in this limited edition box set.

The longest runs for 116 minutes and is often referred to as the "integral cut". This is the version that was released theatrically in Italy on January 31st, 1985. A complete soundtrack for this cut only exists in Italian, although various attempts have been made to put together an English-friendly version of this cut, including the "hybrid" track presented in this release.

A shorter 110-minute version of the film was prepared for international release. A full English-language mix was produced for this version, and it is this cut that was presented on the film's DVD debut – the 1999 North American release by Anchor Bay Entertainment. In comparison to the 116-minute version, this cut features numerous minor trims, often amounting to little more than a handful of frames at the beginning and/or end of shots. More substantial edits include a woman asking Jennifer (Jennifer Connelly) to close the window during her bus ride to the isolated cottage in the Alps (approx. 21 seconds), and an extended confrontation between Jennifer and Frau Brückner (Daria Nicolodi) when she attempts to phone her father's agent at Brückner's house (approx. 28 seconds).

For its 1985 US theatrical release by New Line Cinema, *Phenomena* was retitled "*Creepers*" and shortened drastically – to 83 minutes. This constitutes a radical overhaul of the film, with large amounts of material excised entirely (such as the EEG Jennifer is forced to undergo by Dalila Di Lazzaro's headmistress), and others significantly abbreviated and in some cases re-ordered.

To accommodate these changes, the soundtrack was reworked, with music continuing over scenes which are silent in the other two cuts, and vice versa – including, perhaps most notably, the removal of Motörhead's "Locomotive" in the scene where Inspector Geiger (Patrick Bauchau) visits the mental asylum.

See the visual essay *The Three Sarcophagi* on Disc 2 for a more detailed examination of the differences between these three versions.

ABOUT THE RESTORATION

Phenomena is presented in its original aspect ratio of 1.66:1 with Italian and English 5.1 and 2.0 stereo sound.

The original 35mm camera negative elements were scanned and restored in 4K resolution at L'Immagine Ritrovata, Bologna. The film was conformed and graded in 4K HDR/Dolby Vision at Silver Salt Restoration, London.

The opening titles for the *Creepers* cut were scanned from a 35mm print in 4K resolution at AGFA and restored and graded in 4K HDR/Dolby Vision at Silver Salt Restoration.

The 5.1 and stereo soundtracks for *Phenomena* were transferred from the original 4-channel Dolby mix mag reels at L'Immagine Ritrovata. The mono English audio for *Creepers* was remastered from the original 3-track DME magnetic mix by Synapse Films, Inc. There are times in which audio synchronization will appear slightly loose against the picture, due to the fact that the majority of dialogue in both languages was recorded in post-production.

All original materials for *Phenomena* were supplied by Intramovies.

The *Creepers* print was supplied by AGFA.

Restoration supervised by James White and Michael Mackenzie, Arrow Films.

L'Immagine Ritrovata:
Gilles Barberis, Alessia Navantieri, Charlotte Oddo, Caterina Palpacelli, Davide Pozzi, Elena Tammaccaro

Silver Salt Restoration:
Anthony Badger, Steve Bearman, Mark Bonnici, Ray King

Intramovies:
Paola Corvino, Paola Mantovani, Manuela Mazzone

AGFA/American Genre Film Archive:
Sebastian del Castillo, Ivan Peycheff

Synapse Films, Inc.:
Don May, Jr., Jerry Chandler

PRODUCTION CREDITS

For Arrow Films
Discs and Booklet Produced by **Michael Mackenzie**
Executive Producers **Kevin Lambert, Francesco Simeoni**
Technical Producer **James White**
QC **Aidan Doyle, Michael Mackenzie**
Production Assistant **Samuel Thiery**
Disc Mastering **Fidelity in Motion / David Mackenzie**
Subtitling **The Engine House Media Services**
Design **Obviously Creative**

For Synapse Films, Inc.
Executive Producers **Don May, Jr., Jerry Chandler**

SPECIAL THANKS

Alex Agran, Dario Argento, Fiore Argento, Gianlorenzo Battaglia, Derek Botelho, Simon Boswell, Federico Caddeo, Luigi Cozzi, David Del Valle, Franco Ferrini, Troy Howarth, Angelo Iacono, Leonard Jacobs, Peter Jilmstad, Mikel J. Koven, Davide Marotta, Pier Antonio Mecacci, Rachael Nisbet, Christian Ostermeier, Vincent Pereira, Claudio Simonetti, Sergio Stivaletti, Fiorenza Tessari

IN MEMORIAM

Daria Nicolodi