

Arguably, one of the main purposes of horror films is to scare viewers by building up on moments of high-level suspense. To achieve elevated levels of suspense, horror films use a wide variety of techniques that instill in the spectator a sense of fear for what is to come. Some supernatural horror films like *Suspria* by Dario Argento create suspense in the audience by building upon the expectation of the appearance of a fantastical element (many times a supernatural creature) without physically displaying it within the frame. A specific scene [51:55-55:00] of *Suspria* depicts Daniel, the blind pianist of the ballet academy, walking with his guide dog to what one can assume is home. On the way home, however, while crossing through Königsplatz Square, Daniel's guide dog stops in his tracks and starts barking. Given this unusual behavior from his dog, Daniel suspects that something is wrong and becomes increasingly anxious as the scene progresses. His blindness, however, forces him to remain put in the middle of the square. The scene climaxes with the dog suddenly attacking and killing Daniel. Using this scene as an example, one can show how Argento's use of off-screen space, camera angle, and shot distance evoke suspense in the audience without ever having to reveal the nature of the supernatural creature haunting the characters.

The scene at hand opens up with extreme long shots of Daniel and his guide dog moving into the center of Königsplatz Square. Here, the dog starts to bark, demonstrating the first visual element of suspense in the scene. Given that other shots will focus more on the dog's incessant barking, the suspense created from the extreme long shot is not built upon the dog's behavior; rather it is built on the mysterious nature of the setting. The shot of the Square depicts it at pitch black where nothing but two buildings and the center of the floor are bright and can be contrasted with the darkness of the night. This contrast between the center of the floor and its surroundings is a type of masking technique used to heighten tension within the audience. By

allowing only a certain portion of the square's floor to be contrasted with the background, Argento creates a situation where the viewers become obliged to focus on the central part of the square as it is the only region that is bright. By providing the viewers with only a small portion of the frame at which to look at, Argento's masking, combined with the extreme distance of the shot offer a situation where the frame is shortened in all four of its borders, allowing for a greater participation of off-screen space (Burch 17). While masking the frame might usually only mean that the audience is confined towards focusing on a single part of the frame, Argento's seemingly natural masking here extends the boundaries of the four main off-screen segments. By expanding the boundaries of the off-screen, Argento allows the viewers' imagination to come into play given the false sense of conscious that the extreme longshot provides for. Usually the nature of an extreme longshot as such is that which would best place characters in a setting as it provides for the physical placement of most of the characters' surroundings. In this case, however, the audience is fooled into thinking that they have an appropriate notion of Daniel and the dog's location when in fact all that surrounds the both of them is complete darkness. The magnitude of the shot then instills fear in the audience where the size of the square itself combined with the lack of precise contour around it imply that Daniel and the guide dog are, like the audience, completely lost. Their size on the screen compared to the size of the frame itself is so miniscule that their depiction in the square seems almost like an empty screen; their entrance and presence provides for only a slight change in the shot's look. The effect that this has on the audience is that even though they do enter an empty screen, unlike in closer shots, this extreme long shot does not gain a preferred off-screen direction that predicts future character movement. Rather, the magnitude of the frame is such that it provides for a space "appreciably equal in potential" (Burch 19). Argento's extreme long shot, then, makes the audience feel dwarfed by an

enigmatic frame where off screen elements can appear from any border. In this way, while the audience has no clue as to what will happen, the tone of the scene is such that something is bound to occur; this creates an initial shock of suspense in the audience.

The next shot that demonstrates how Argento uses certain techniques to create tension is the scene's first low angle. Using a low-key lighting effect, the low angle shows the dog and Daniel contrasted with a completely black background behind where the lack of clear spatial elements doesn't allow the viewer to pinpoint the contours of the frame. This has the effect of demonstrating the character's anxiety on a more personal level given the distance (now shorter) of the camera to them. The low angle's close up of the dog's head serves to emphasize his nervousness and to foreshadow the attack that occurs later in the scene, as the attack is also shot from a low angle. In addition to this, the low angle serves to remind the viewer of the relationship that Daniel has with his dog. Low angles in films are commonly used to demonstrate superiority of characters as it exhibits them in towering positions over the camera. In this case, both Daniel and the dog are captured by the camera, yet the dog, being closer to the camera, and therefore occupying more of the frame, is shown to have a greater authority than Daniel in dealing with the situation at hand. This is evidenced by both of their reactions. While the dog is barking nonstop, Daniel stands there motionless, hoping that his dog can free them of the situation they have found themselves in. By emphasizing the dog's position of power through this low camera angle then, Argento cleverly reminds the audience of the essence of the situation at hand: a blind man's guide dog has suddenly stopped in his path in the middle of a mysterious square; the only way the blind man will escape from what seems like a hostile situation is with the help and leadership of his guide dog.

Following this low angle image is a series of close-up shots that show Daniel's and the dog's intensity level rising in different ways, which in turn adds to the overall suspense of the scene. Under a slight change from the low angle shot, the camera now closes up on the sideways dog and is at the height of his eyesight. It still aims to exhibit his fear in that he is barking at the idea that something troubling is happening around him. As he turns right and faces the camera, though, the dog eventually becomes calmer and stops barking, at which point the image cuts to a long shot of one of the buildings where a couple of birds are seen taking flight. This implies that the dog has seen something of importance off screen. It must mean, then, that the dog's gaze at the camera, is Argento's way of exploring his relationship to the off screen's fifth segment in the sense that "looking toward the camera defines the space behind the camera where the object of this gaze presumably is located" (Burch 20). His shift in behavior then can be explained by what he saw as he looked towards the camera. In this way, and presuming that the camera's direction here matches that of the mysterious creature, the dog's change in mood after having interacted with the off-screen space behind the camera entails in the viewer the sense that he has been either hypnotized by the mysterious creature at play and/or has become somewhat conscious of the situation he and Daniel are facing. Argento's reasons for the use of the camera at the dog's eye height, however, do not stop there. As soon as the dog looks straight into the camera, the camera's height allows the viewer to look straight into his eyes. Not only is this a way for Argento to remind the audience of the dog's interaction with his surroundings but his eyes' resemblance to the eyes of the creature in the beginning of the film (both are yellowish and are contrasted by a black background) adds to the idea that something is off about the dog.

To gain a greater understanding of why Argento chose to depict the dog's change in reaction in such a manner as described, one should look no further from the way he exhibits

Daniel's simultaneous reaction. As was done with the dog, Argento initially depicts Daniel from a sideways close-up shot where the height of the camera is at his eye level. Instead of turning right and facing the camera like the dog, though, he turns his back to the camera to face one of the buildings. Argento here is exploring the sixth segment of off screen space: the set (Burch 17). Given that the building is in a complete opposite direction from that of the camera and given that the camera was established previously as that which presumably matches the gaze of the dog with the image of the creature, Daniel's turn to the set combined with his shout, show that he is completely lost. While the guide dog has seemed to grasp the notion of the mysterious creature haunting them, Daniel seems far from it. Whereas before the dog was barking and Daniel was quiet, Daniel now shouts and the dog remains quiet. The uniqueness of the situation is further pushed when the shot changes and Daniel now faces the camera. Even though, the camera is at his eyesight level, Argento has made it such that even then Daniel does not look straight at the camera, and instead looks slightly up. This serves as a reminder to the audience of the absurdity of the plight at hand: the camera being placed at Daniel's eyesight level and the fact that he is looking at the correct off screen space is a testament to the fact that Argento is presenting Daniel with all of the correct tools so that he can finally gain a notion of the creature haunting him. Daniel's disability, however, does not allow him to do so, and so, much like the audience and unlike the dog, all he can try to grasp is the imaginary, which in this case is impossible to grasp. Daniel is hopelessly lost.

The next sequence of shots where Argento's use of camera angle, shot distance, and off-screen space adds to the suspense of the scene is one in which he uses an aerial tracking shot to mimic the flight of a bird above Daniel and the dog, presumably depicting the creature's point of view. Before displaying this shot, he portrays a long shot of the eagle on top of a building and

uses a jump cut to shift the camera closer to the eagle in what becomes a medium long shot. In this sense, Argento places the audience's attention on the bird, providing for a smooth transition for the following shot which mimics the flight of the eagle above the characters' heads. From the eagle's perspective, which can be understood as the creature's point of view as well, the audience sees Daniel and the dog at the center of the Square, where the frame around them is being masked by the night's darkness. This masking of the frame once again explores the imaginary boundaries around Daniel and his dog, but what makes this shot unique is the camera's distance to the characters. As the camera descends in a bird-like fashion, it also gets closer to the characters. Combining that with the fact that the music stops at this point, it becomes clear that Argento has positioned the scene in a way where the intensifying suspense is about to be climaxed with some true action. Immediately after this bird flying scene, Argento cuts to an extreme long shot of one of the buildings in the square. On the walls of the building, the audience can see strange looking shadows moving from left to right. This is another example of Argento's use of off screen elements to convey suspense on the screen. The audience never becomes acquainted with the shadows on the building but their appearance and size signifies to the viewers that the mysterious creature is moving off screen behind the camera. Though the image of the mysterious creature is never concretized in the scene, these two shots seem to hint at the notion that the monster itself will be concretized in a way, even if not in the standardized sense put forth by Burch (Burch 21).

Argento's exploration of camera distance and angle and off screen elements allow for him to increasingly add layers of suspense to a scene only to have those layers uncovered by a surprise attack from the dog at the end. In using masking techniques for extreme long shots while maintaining an equal potential in all segments of the off screen, Argento provides for a scene

where the audience's imaginary boundaries are maximized. Combining this technique with that of varying camera angles and shot distances to demonstrate the two characters' relations to each other and the mysterious elements off screen, Argento creates a scene where suspense is heightened without ever falling victim to predictability.

Reference:

Burch, Noël. *Theory of Film Practice*. Princeton University Press, 1981.