

Breathing Back the History of German Modern Dance through the Horror Film Genre in Luca Guadagnino's *Suspiria* (2018)

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A white, female, barefoot dancer with long auburn hair in a messy bun stands in gray sweatpants and a crimson leotard in front of three dance teachers in a paneled, mirrored studio. Initiating with her right arm and flattened hand, she slices the empty space to her left with a direct, sharp motion, curving her back and emptying out her lungs with a resounding exhalation (Photo 1). Throughout her dance, the breathing accompanies nearly every movement, not only assisting with her technique but also becoming the audible soundtrack—exuding both confidence and exasperation. Intermittent and slow zoom reaction shots of the teachers intensify the atmosphere and their empathy. As the dancer performs numerous turns, the camera takes on this disorienting and

Photo 1. During Susie's audition as she carves out space to her left and lets out an audible breath. Luca Guadagnino, Suspiria (2018).



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dizzying perspective. Upon finishing this move, the dancer suddenly sees the reflection of a fourth teacher, the leader of the dance company, suddenly appear in the left corner of the studio.

This scene features the dance audition of the character Susie Bannion for the Markos Dance Company in West Berlin in the Italian director Luca Guadagnino's horror film *Suspiria* (Guadagnino 2019), inspired by the 1977 version by Dario Argento. Guadagnino's remake is set during the German Autumn in 1977, which was characterized by terrorist attacks and kidnappings by the Red Army Faction in West Germany. The motive for shooting this film derived from the director's viewing of an all-female trio dance called *Les Médusés* (2013) by the Belgian choreographer Damien Jalet, which had incidentally also been inspired by Argento's cult film. Meanwhile, after having watched a video of German Expressionist dancer Mary Wigman's *Hexentanz II*, *Suspiria*'s American screenwriter, David Kajganich, began researching her, tracing her lineage of other dancers and choreographers—Martha Graham, Pina Bausch, and Sasha Waltz (Guiducci 2018).

With their similar artistic interests in ambiguity and ambivalence, Guadagnino, Jalet, and Kajganich collaborated to create a feature film that highlights and experiments with dance not as a complimentary dimension but as a powerful and transformative medium thoroughly interwoven with the narrative. While most literature on *Suspiria*—predominantly online magazine outlets (Crimmins 2019; Crucchiola 2018; Guiducci 2018; Kourlas 2018)—merely points to aesthetic similarities with the dance styles of the aforementioned choreographers, none closely analyzes the choreography and filming from a dance studies, film studies, and German studies perspective. This article examines the filmic representation of dance as an aesthetic and political performance steeped in the discourse surrounding the RAF (Red Army Faction), the West German far-left militant organization, and fascism. Led by Ulrike Meinhof, Gudrun Ensslin, and Andreas Baader, this group upheld Marxist ideology and heavily critiqued the futile attempts of denazification of West German officials. Their early protests later developed into terrorist acts and kidnappings.

While the leader of the Markos Dance Company, Madame Blanc, presents an intellectualism associated with her Expressionist choreography during and after the war, her ideals, like the RAF, turn radical by resorting to Nazi-like terrorism—through constant surveillance, behavioral control through torture, and elimination of disobedient dancers—in order to sustain matriarchal control of her coven. Visually inhabiting the body of a young, strong-willed dancer, Susie embodies the complex and conflicted nature of Blanc's choreography in the dance piece *Volk* (1948). She dismantles the patriarchy by integrating her own ideas upon revealing that she is Mater Suspiriorum, one of the three witch mothers. Even while Susie falls into the same trap as Blanc by destroying half the coven at the end of the film, she represents a younger generation who maintains occult ideologies of an elemental Mater Suspiriorum in a new kind of Expressionist dance.

Besides visually, aurally, and tactilely absorbing information in her new environment, the most prominent feature of the film is Susie's use of breath as a primary sensorial mode to facilitate her elemental return. I argue that the new dance utilizes breaths and sighs not only to engage the torso by inhaling and exhaling, but also, introspectively, to take in and critically survey the past and current situation as a form of *Vergangenheitsbewältigung* (in this form, coming to terms with the past during the post-1945 period in West Germany, particularly the Holocaust). By inhaling, Susie embodies Blanc's dance, *Volk*, and can literally feel the movement and the vexed choreographic history behind not only the dance but also the ambivalent legacy of German modern dance. I would like to call this practice "historical breathing." While contemporary dance frequently engages with breath for choreographic and sonic purposes, Guadagnino furthers its dimension by highlighting its historical surveying power. The film suggests that this superhuman mode is made possible through the combination of dance and breath. As a result, I trace how influences of the occult, the nineteenth-century practice of *Turnen* (gymnastics), *Ausdruckstanz*, and Nazism created a path to a new dance practice seen in *Volk*. Despite having the superpower of historical breathing, Susie's actions overwhelmingly perpetuate the cycle of violence. Thus, she ultimately chooses destruction over deep critical engagement and

peaceful reform. While there are several dance scenes in the film, I will focus on two—Susie’s audition and her destructive dance with Olga.

Davina Quinlivan’s *The Place of Breath in Cinema* (2012) highlights the audiovisual elements related to breath by complicating the porous border between the visible and the invisible, using the term “(in) visible” (3). She argues that breathing functions as a mode of embodiment and therefore empathy for the viewer (5) as well as a narrative device and aural signifier (6). One reason for foregrounding the breath in film is to awaken “a contemplation or thoughtfulness towards the film that may preserve our subjectivity as viewers, rather than inviting us to lose ourselves entirely to it” (33). Also, in the horror film genre, she argues that the focus on breath conveys more emotional expression and affect: “The horror genre’s exploitation of heavy breathing, silence and the repression and final release of the scream” (24). Guadagnino’s *Suspria*, however, does not explicitly subscribe to this practice, but rather subverts this convention of apprehension by using historical breath to continually convey the energetic presence of Mater Suspiriorum as an intellectual power surveying the academy space. This reading suggests that the viewer also embodies Susie through her haunting breath and embrace of a new Expressionist dance through the medium of screendance, yet we can remain critical of her actions. While positioning her as a sympathetic character to identify with, we must also ultimately grapple with her violent decisions. Film scholars Alexander Howard and Julian Murphet argue that Guadagnino aggressively highlights the concept of “transference” from other sources like Argento’s 1977 version and Wigman dance practices, which permeates the entire structure of the film (2022, 64). By drawing from Argento’s *Suspria* and then going astray artistically, this transference also “stages the present, ambivalently, as a compulsive repetition of the past it has forgotten” (65). As a result, even Susie’s ultimate attempt to overthrow this patriarchy with her own still perpetuates violence.

While *Suspria* has been called a horror film, it does not sit squarely in this genre. As a “forbidden fruit,” horror tends to repulse, scare, and shock the viewer who curiously might enjoy these emotions. Horror remains in a “constant state of flux” with a hybridization of evolving subgenres such as gothic, supernatural, psychological thriller, monster film, splatter and gore, slasher, and exploitation (Cherry 2009, 3, 5). Guadagnino’s intervention takes the often lowbrow appeal of horror and combines it with the avant-garde fields of contemporary dance and screendance to further complicate and widen the purview of this genre. He, Jalet, and Kajganich conceptualize dance and Susie’s actions as futilely addressing the Nazi past (*Vergangenheitsbewältigung*) in an alternative occult manner with historical breathing. While doing so, the team nevertheless perpetuates the use of violence, like the RAF’s terrorist response, and thus maintains the role of the horror genre by engaging with the supernatural, splatter, and psychological terrorism. According to Brigid Cherry, horror films tap into the current anxieties of societies’ cultural moments, representing them as monstrous entities that perform violent acts and disturb social order (11–12). The viewer of *Suspria* therefore has to grapple with the ethical decision of the directorial team to indulge in an experimental and destructive dance but also perpetuate the violence and racism of the Nazi past. This is particularly pertinent if we think about the Trump presidency and other far-right movements like the Unite the Right rally in Charlottesville in 2017.

Background on *Suspria* (2018)

After having seen Argento’s *Suspria* (1977) for the first time, Guadagnino attended a performance of Pina Bausch’s “Palermo Palermo” (1989), recounting, “Why is it that I am watching something that is nonverbal and I’m understanding everything?” and realizing, firsthand, how dance could communicate without words (Kourlas 2018). Seeing the film and then Bausch’s dances may have suggested to him to include more German dance references in his own version of *Suspria*.

The following paragraph provides a summary of the plot to better situate my analysis. The American dancer Susie Bannion, played by Dakota Johnson, arrives in Berlin in 1977—at the height

of the German Autumn—to audition for the Markos Dance Company led by Madame Blanc, portrayed by Tilda Swinton. According to one student, Sara Simms, Blanc kept the company going during the war when women were told “to shut off their minds and keep their uteruses open.” Susie’s arrival coincides with the disappearance of another dancer, Patricia Hingle, who reveals to her psychiatrist, Dr. Josef Klemperer (also played by Swinton, in heavy prosthetics and makeup), that the dance academy is run by a coven of witches: “Ich hatte Recht. Sie sind Hexen... They’ve been underground since the war.” Meanwhile, when the Soviet dancer Olga Ivanova refuses to dance the lead in Patricia’s absence in *Volk*, which Blanc originally choreographed in 1948, Susie offers to dance it. In doing so, Susie unknowingly takes on the witches’ power and participates in the destructive dance, completely mangling Olga’s body. Quickly rising through the ranks, Susie becomes the chosen dancer to host Markos, who has won the vote as the leader of the coven over Blanc and lives in the *Mutterhaus* below. Klemperer becomes suspicious of Patricia’s allegations and enlists Sara’s help to look at his former patient’s diary, which triangulates the three mothers and the constellations of all the witches and dancers in pagan iconography; he also sees a drawing of the RAF symbol. He attends the final performance of *Volk*; however, Susie purposefully derails the choreography. Klemperer escapes to his *Datsche* in East Berlin and encounters his long-lost wife Anke, who had supposedly escaped to Bristol to evade Nazi capture despite having proof of Aryan blood. While aiming to bring her back to the West, he realizes that her appearance was a witches’ spell to lure him to the Sabbath at the *Mutterhaus* in the dance academy. During the last ritual dance scene, Susie reveals herself as Mater Suspiriorum and destroys all who voted for Markos. In the epilogue, Susie comes to Klemperer and reveals that Anke had been surrounded by women who cared for her as they all died of exposure in Theresienstadt, but she denies him his memory of that moment.

Surveying the Scene through Historical Breathing at the Dance Academy: Susie’s Audition

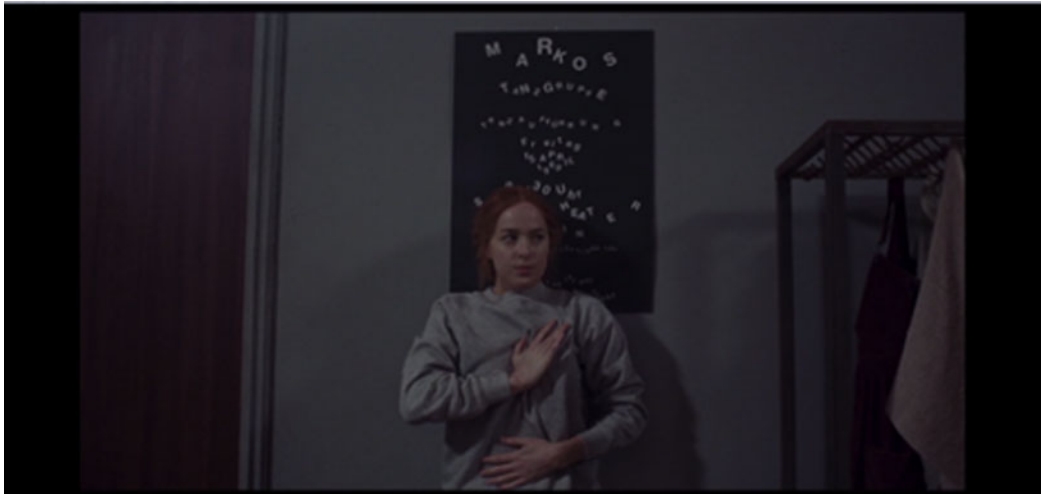
Susie’s audition introduces the viewer to the supernatural communicative power of dance through breath. After having arrived and been greeted by Miss Tanner at the dance academy, Susie prepares for her audition, expecting to also meet Madame Blanc. The dancer stands and breathes heavily as she massages her sternum. Both diegetic and non-diegetic exhalations are also heard, pointing not just to Susie’s but to an omniscient presence. The incessant breathing, therefore, establishes a ubiquitous and palpable spectral atmosphere. These audible sighs are not only a sign of contemporary dance practice but also a leitmotiv signaling the vigorous presence of Mater Suspiriorum. However, they also allow Susie to investigate the complex and haunting continuum of embodied histories by exploring aesthetic and political ties to the occult across Wigman’s *Hexentanz II*, Nazism, and the nineteenth-century idea of “*Volk*.” By drawing from these ideas, Susie can critically review the past and develop her new Expressionist dance.

Contemporary dancers perceive inhalation as filling the inner cavities of their torso-to-sacral region: by taking hold of the outside air, they also take part of the universe inside of them (Louppe 2010, 55). This Western movement practice seeks a continuum rather than a break from ancient Mediterranean and Eastern civilizations, who also placed such emphasis on the importance and connection with breath. As in movement forms like yoga or martial arts, and dance techniques like Graham or Humphrey, breathing represents a search for the self. Breathing passes air through us, and is taken but not kept. Here I see its connections to the superhuman power of Susie breathing back the history of German dance. It can create a percussive “state of resistance” as well as an “aesthetics of exasperation” (60–61). Breath is used to willingly explore the “wild and animal character, as a sonorous analogy with the sighs and inner voices of strong emotions: pain, rage, fear, sexual pleasure” (61). This breathing practice was used in the late 1970s and early 1980s as another form of auditory and visual expression (61). Breath found its way more broadly into the women’s liberation movement. Jean-Thomas Tremblay recalls the documentary *Some American Feminists*

(1975–1976), in which the practice of consciousness-raising (CR)—women collectively sharing experiences through narrative—involved “the ecstatic breathlessness of breakthroughs cohabit [ing] with the delightful inhalation and exhalation of self-recognition and mutual support” (2019, 93). Susie’s constant use of breath could also be viewed as a means of female liberation, gaining insight into the dance academy, and later, destruction.

Outside of the audition room, on the board with removable letters behind her, is an announcement of a dance performance of the “Markos Tanzgruppe, Tanzaufführung, Freitag 15. April, 1969,” with the time and place blocked by Susie’s head (Photo 2). While an announcement board usually maintains current information, this one has not been updated. Its spirit of older times reflects the other posters periodically shown throughout the film to represent the company’s historic performances. This announcement board revels in the ethos of the past, begging the viewer to further explore its earlier dance histories. While the words are legible, the letters are placed in a nonlinear, serpentine-like pattern, evocative of active and living movement—or how the letters would look if Mater Suspriorum were to exhale them. This breath-like image also underscores her omnipresence throughout the film.

Photo 2. Before her audition, Susie rubs her chest and breathes heavily in preparation. Luca Guadagnino, *Suspiria* (2018).



Moving from Susie in front of the announcement board, the camera fades to a slow tracking shot from the academy’s hallway, displaying two large turquoise pillars, a baroque iron railing, and a wooden sliding door inlaid with downward-facing check-mark patterns that reflect the angular choreography of *Volk* and the triangular shape of occult culture. Centered in this frame is Madame Blanc in rehearsal with her dancers in the Iris studio. A non-diegetic exhalation cuts back to Susie, as Miss Tanner calls her into a rehearsal studio filled with partitioned mirrors. This establishing shot highlights the reflective yet fragmented dimensions of the paneled mirrors as well as the importance that the director places on space as an active, affective partner to the dancer. Normally, a dance studio would have larger continuous mirrors; however, in this film, these paneled reflections give the impression and false perception of continuity. The camera in the studio is placed in the far corner of the room, giving the viewer ample time to digest the architectural space in which the protagonist will dance. Susie attempts to put her cassette tape into a player to cue her music, but the dance teacher, Miss Millius, insists on watching her dance in silence. Wearing a gray sweatshirt and sweatpants, with her long auburn hair in a messy bun, the protagonist takes off her outer layer to reveal a crimson leotard. After taking center stage with the camera shooting from

behind, Susie removes her ballet flats, rejecting the bourgeois, nineteenth-century dance form and becoming more grounded with the floor. Miss Tanner dims the lights at the far ends of the room to almost darkness as Susie remains lit in the center. This lighting creates the impression that Susie's dance comes from internal rhythm, and the illusion that she is by herself. However, the dance teachers watch her in the dark, connecting them again to their mysterious witch identities.

Susie's audition engages with contemporary dance practices. Dance historian Laurence Louppe's poetics of contemporary dance relies heavily on Rudolf von Laban's terminology and ideas, including the poetic body, breath, the four efforts—weight (light, heavy), flow (bound, free) space (direct, indirect), and time (sudden, sustained)—style, time, poetics of flow and tension, space, and composition. Besides an actual performance, contemporary dance also considers the work involved in creating a choreographic piece (2010, 6). Louppe characterizes this dance form as

individualisation of the body and original movement expressing a non-transferable identity or project; the production, not reproduction, of movement; work on the matter/material of the body, of the self; the non-anticipation of form; importance of gravity; authenticity, respect for other's body, non-arrogance, the need for a solution that is right and not simply spectacular. (13)

In some ways, because contemporary dance developed out of modernism from an “absence of dance” without referencing an existing style (24), it moved away from mimetic forms like ballet to symbolic signification by valuing the torso, successive movement, the gravity of body weight, the tactile, and groundedness (31). In contemporary dance, space becomes an active, affective partner that engages with the dancer's changing states of consciousness (127). These are many of the characteristics seen in Susie's dancing in *Suspiria*, which develops a new style of Expressionist dance, placing emphasis on the breath.

Susie's dance begins suddenly with a cut to the perspective of the dance teachers as she performs a quick, strong, and direct carve into her space to the left. The movement causes her to exhale heavily, emptying out the lungs and curving her back. The breathing becomes the active soundtrack throughout the audition, conveying command of her movement and also allowing her to supernaturally survey the surroundings. The camera cuts to the dancer Olga during rehearsal walking up to Madame Blanc, who looks like she wants to ask the dance master a question. Having not yet felt the presence of Susie's dancing and breathing, Blanc smokes with her back to the viewer as she gives corrections to Sara who performs a cradling hand gesture.

In addition to contemporary dance practices, Susie's dance also references *Ausdruckstanz*, an expressive dance form comprised of heterogeneous movement styles and movement philosophies in German-speaking areas around the early 1900s, with practitioners like Wigman, Laban, Kurt Jooss, Gret Palucca, and Harald Kreutzberg. Despite varying ideas, the movement form aligned generally with the following characteristics: it understood itself as its own independent form, different from the other arts, and connected with the cosmos; it valued the expression of an internal or psychological state; and it thrived by using improvisation (Franco 2008, 81). More specifically, Wigman's movement ethos consisted of retrieving and transforming subconscious impulses into emotions that created conscious physicality (Newhall 2009, 138). While Wigman, like Laban, choreographed group and choric pieces, she was best known for her solo work. Like Isadora Duncan, Martha Graham, and Doris Humphrey, Wigman discovered the vitality of dancing harbored in the living breath (82).

In addition to conceptualizing space as a living, invisible, and cosmic partner, Wigman believed that rhythm resided in the body instead of originating from an external or predetermined source (83–84). While she sought a bodily awakening of its Dionysian potential by channeling inner emotions into movement, Wigman also established a structure and skilled craft in her set choreography:

“Ohne Ekstase kein Tanz! Ohne Form kein Tanz!” (Bach 1933, 19). Currently, Wigman’s work is experiencing a revival in choreographic circles because of her movement genius and humanity. Despite these contributions, her work is still deeply troubling because of its profound association with Nazism. Dance scholar Mary Anne Santos Newhall proposes that this interest “reflects an impulse toward a new kind of expressionism for the twenty-first century” (2009, 3). Jalet’s work on *Volk* and his choreography in general are examples of this renewed desire. Many of these practices and movement philosophies are not only thematized but also problematized in Guadagnino’s *Suspiria*.

Susie’s contemporary dance form harks back to the distinct animality found in Wigman’s work. The camera cuts back to Susie in the studio, with a close-up in a deep lunge position as she quickly raises her head in a predatorial fashion. Staying on her right knee from the lunge position, she arches her back and inhales, and then exhales to cave in and sweep her legs under herself to turn on her posterior. She crawls backward on all fours animalistically, increasing the pace to a standing position in the darkness, as if gathering more power—both surveying her surroundings through historical breath and making her presence known. Susie exhales once again and performs a forward curved *ronde-de-torso* movement and then five *chainés* from the darkness back into the light with arms slightly bent to the side. Breathing out, she wraps her upper body around her left side and then inhales, looking forward with both arms extended. Throughout the audition, the reaction shots of the teachers, whose emotions brew and intensify, are also captured. The camera cuts to Blanc in the Iris studio looking to the left and upward, as if finally sensing Susie’s dancing, and then back to Susie, who performs a small run into a turned-in *fouetté* variation that whips her body to the ground. She does a turning movement and the camera takes on her spinning and disorienting perspective (particularly because she does not spot). Whereas before, only the sound of Susie’s steps and amplified breathing could be heard, a synthesizer-type track heightens this transformation. Upon finishing the turns, Susie recognizes Blanc, who has magically appeared in the corner. By breathing in the past during the audition, her dancing beckons Blanc to appear in the studio.

The animalistic aesthetic and narrative of this scene certainly draws from Wigman’s *Hexentanz II*. A video fragment from this dance shows a seated figure wearing a mask and a large gown that leaves the hands, forearms, elbows, feet, ankles, and back exposed. With knees toward the chest, the elbows are bent, with the hands splayed to obscure the face. Lucia Ruprecht remarks, “At the beginning, the dancer joins thumbs and index fingers in front of the upper half of her face to form a triangle, indicating a shape that is suggestive” (2010, 264). We see this triangle iconography continually reflected in *Suspiria* (e.g., when Patricia sees a Freemason symbol printed on one of Dr. Klemperer’s books in his office, or when Susie sees a pyramid printed on a US dollar bill in the U-Bahn). The triangle breaks apart, and the fingers round slightly and tense up in order to form claws in the next movement sequence: as the right arm straightens abruptly overhead, the left stays retracted close to the face. The left then makes two small clawing gestures with the right pulling back down, only to be again suddenly straightened toward the sky (Photo 3). The same sequence is repeated with a wooden block instrument correspondingly being played to the figure’s accented movements. Both hands in *Hexentanz II* then create sequential, rippling wave movements with the fingers in front of the face, evoking the conjuring of a spell. The figure engages with the energetic semiotics of the hand beyond their everyday communicative function. On viewing *Hexentanz II*, Newhall remarks, “Indeed it is the movement that initiates the sound. Because the movement slightly anticipates each percussive note, it appears to generate the very sound itself” (2009, 109). This choreographic effect also adds to the bewitching power that this animalistic and mysterious figure controls. In contrast to the block sounds, the sonic emphasis in *Suspiria* relates to the aesthetic of Susie’s breaths, forming an overwhelming percussive soundscape of increasing intensity that takes stock of her current surroundings and the histories of dance.



Photo 3. Claw-like gesture of Mary Wigman. *Hexentanz II* (1926).

In an interview, the screenwriter Kajganich notes that he aimed for the dances in *Suspiria* to avoid the eroticizing male gaze. He states:

I went back and watched Mary Wigman and Pina Bausch and Martha Graham, and ... Sasha Waltz, and I tried to understand how they were using the body of the dancer to communicate anxiety. I was focusing on movements and repetitions and juxtapositions that made me uncomfortable. Not just as a man receiving that information, but as a body receiving that information. (Crimmins 2019)

Inspired by Wigman's *Hexentanz II* and informed by his work in the film horror genre, he describes his experience of watching this dance clip: "The dancer is moving across the ground very slowly, and then opens her legs. It is not a sexual gesture, but because 90% of the connotations are sexual it immediately has you in the palm of its hand. It curates your experience of watching it. Movements like that are instructive to me" (Crimmins 2019). In other words, his attention is perhaps maintained through the expectations of sexuality, but it is then completely diverted. However, by not being steeped in the field of dance, Kajganich erroneously clumps Wigman, Bausch, Graham, and Waltz into a homogenous group of dancer/choreographers. Practitioners of *Tanztheater* like Bausch continued some of the legacies of *Ausdruckstanz* by highlighting the work of women choreographers, turning attention to the social construction of gender, bringing back the solo, and instilling improvisational practices (Manning 1993, 246). Influenced by Artaud and Brecht, these practitioners blurred the boundary between dance and theater. They reacted to the return of classical ballet to the stage in the 1950s through Konrad Adenauer's influence, which reflected West Germany's turn toward consumerism and Americanization (246–247). *Tanztheater* was an appropriate form of *Vergangenheitsbewältigung*, which "challenged the previous generation's denial of the German past and attempted to understand that past difficulty" (246). Guadagnino and his team seem to also be attempting *Vergangenheitsbewältigung* by drawing heavily from *Ausdruckstanz*, yet their dealings with the past are ultimately futile, as violence returns at the end of the film.

Going back further in time from Susie's contemporary dance and *Ausdruckstanz*, Wigman's *Hexentanz II* is entangled in the problematic and complex nature of the term "Volk," as highlighted throughout the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. According to dance historian Marion Kant, German Expressionist dance has its roots in the nationalist and *völkisch* rhetoric of Friedrich

Ludwig Jahn, who desired a new German body and revitalized people through gymnastics (*Turnen*). This was the first movement-based practice associated with “*Volk*” in the early nineteenth century and desired to liberate itself from Napoleonic oppression (Kant 2011, 580). These patriotic developments created a cultlike community based on physical movements in a sacred space. Members willfully submitted to an authoritarian leader and were taught to feel and not to think (581–582). By the mid-nineteenth century, *Turnen* became integrated into the physical education curriculum in Prussian schools (12). German Expressionist dance drew from this tradition, and thus these communal practices at the *Tanzakademie*, like the name of the dance *Volk* and its integration into a physical body course of study, ring eerily similar to Susie’s life. Practices of the past mysteriously rear their heads in the present.

Dance scholar Alexandra Kolb’s work brings to light some of the connections between witches, dance, and National Socialism. She argues that Wigman’s dances drew from a complex discourse concerning witches, whom the Nazis praised for their occult and esoteric ethos. These ideas fed into the National Socialist ideology and can be traced to the conservative *völkisch* movement (26). Himmler had hoped to regain remnants of ancient German pagan rituals, which he believed had been repressed due to Christianity and the elimination of witches (27). Maintaining an anti-clerical and anti-oriental agenda, Nazis claimed that witch trials were an attack on Medieval German society (2016, 28). Kolb claims that the combination of romantic *völkisch* traditions and Nietzschean thought in Germany profoundly influenced Wigman and Laban, the founders of differing styles of *Ausdruckstanz*. These ideas could be interpreted as cultivating a conservative politics devoid of democratic and rational thoughts by valuing the physicality of bodily lived experience. While their artist communities at Monte Verità from the mid to late 1920s maintained a liberal, egalitarian, and left-leaning ethos, they could just as easily be reframed as beholding *völkisch* features that gave rise to Nazism (31). Wigman’s version of *Ausdruckstanz*, however, was eventually considered too decadent and individualistic for Goebbels and other party members, who preferred a strong, goal-oriented, *völkisch*, happy, and nonintellectual dancing body (Newhall 2009, 54). It is precisely this dualist reading that will influence the complex nature of Blanc’s dance *Volk* as drawing from *Ausdruckstanz* but paradoxically reinvoking Nazism with a spectacular and terrorist RAF aesthetic.

Ausdruckstanz was, at least in the beginning, able to express German character and sensibility in line with National Socialist ideology (Karina and Kant 2004, 88–89). Many Expressionist dance choreographies from the Weimar period were adapted for the Nazi context: this tension allowed the Nazis to both ambivalently claim and hide the genealogy of German modern dance—for instance, at the Deutsche Tanzfestspiele 1934 in Berlin (Buch and Worthen 2007, 217). According to Susan Manning, while Wigman’s dances during the Weimar era emphasized a degenderedness through abstract costuming and frequent use of masks, as seen in *Hexentanz II*, her *Frauentänze* (women’s dances) demonstrated Nazi ideals by embracing archetypes of traditionally feminine roles with dancers in formfitting dresses: woman as wife, mother, mourner for the dead in war, and martyr (170). This cycle included the *Bridal Dance*, *Maternal Dance*, *Lament of the Dead*, *Dance of the Seer*, and *Witch Dance*, which was changed from a solo in *Hexentanz I* (1914) and *Hexentanz II* into a group dance. According to Artur Michel, dancers wildly formed shaking groups that dispersed and then frenetically clumped together to perform circular dances. As “mistress of witches,” Wigman called them back, and they created a heap of extended heads and hands (Michel 1935, 13–14). Manning reads a more formulaic dynamic of less individualized dance movements between anonymous women followers and a charismatic leader (1993, 184–185). This intoxicating and irrational subservience to a higher power clearly demonstrates an ethos in line with fascist ideology. From the *völkisch* beginnings, to Monte Verità and *Ausdruckstanz*, and into Nazism, film scholars Howard and Murphet extract and question the similarities between a “*Weltanschauung* or cult? Modern dance could be interpreted either way, which is how we are obliged to approach the coven in Guadagnino’s *Suspiria*” (2022, 72).

As leading forces in this movement form, according to Kant, Wigman and Laban emphatically self-Nazified themselves without state coercion (Karina and Kant 2004, 91). Despite its modernist roots, *Ausdruckstanz* dodged critique and prospered as a political weapon for choreographing its citizenry (98). However, as the Nazi ideology veered more into radical racism, officials eventually deemed Wigman's individualistic style as too intellectual and did not want to compete with her artistic leadership (132). Kant believes that Wigman and Laban were fellow travelers, "but not true Nazis" (135). This direct opposition manifests itself in the teachings of Blanc and in the choreography of *Volk*.

Susie's audition highlights how her dancing and breathing beckons Blanc to join the audition, so they can meet for the first time. Demonstrating her raw prowess, we see the purest and most commanding form of Susie's movement, in which she engages with breath and animality to signal her choreographic identity as *Mater Suspiriorum* as well as to assist with her technique. Through breath and Jalet's choreography, we also witness the vexed and ambivalent histories of Wigman's Weimar period piece *Hexentanz II*—extrapolated from the nineteenth-century understanding of the word "Volk" through to the *Hexentanz* group dance adaptation in *Frauentänze* during the Nazi period. Dancing without time or music—as Laban and Wigman preferred—Susie employs the body's natural rhythm instead of an imposed beat (*Takt*) and performs the sonic soundscape herself. Her historical breathing not only demonstrates her intense labor and strength but also takes stock of the atmosphere in the architectural space, the lighting, and the teacher's immediate responses, forming an autopoietic feedback loop and copresence that helps create her own aesthetic effect. Susie is not the only one performing: the teacher and the audition space are on display as well. Miss Tanner even shows empathy by moving as Susie dances and exhales. Nothing needs to be said, for the dance needs only to be seen, heard, and felt in order to communicate. Even before her audition, when she stands in front of the announcement board—and moreover throughout the entire film—Susie's breath can constantly be heard both diegetically and non-diegetically as perpetually surveying her surroundings. In many ways, the screendance acts as an appropriate medium to convey both the individuality of Susie's dancing as well as the omniscient power of *Mater Suspiriorum* through visual and aural signs.

Susie's and Olga's "Duet": a Terrorist Dance Spectacle

While the previous analysis brings out the complicated strands of the occult and Nazism in *Ausdruckstanz*, this next section further connects these ideas to the RAF. Even though the film does not explicitly thematicize the terrorist organization, it does evenly distribute its presence in the film, demanding us to read it parallel with the events at the dance academy. Taking place in both the mirror and Iris studio, this rehearsal dance scene interweaves two physically separated performances into the narrative by using crosscutting to stage a supernatural cause and effect scenario as a screendance. Similar to the first dance scene, which highlights and establishes the dimensions of the mirror studio from an angled point of view in the corner, this next scene shows Blanc greeting and kissing her students as she enters the large Iris studio hall. Guadagnino uses a backward tracking shot to demonstrate the expanses of the space into a corner to maintain the view from an angle similar to the first scene. The parquet floor is inlaid with brown and dark brown wooden diamonds, giving a regimented yet jagged and fragmented impression.

Demonstrating a sign of embodiment—Howard and Murphet would call this "transference"—through historical breath to feel Blanc's vexed past, Susie now wears her hair in a single braid, which resembles Blanc's hairstyle with its severe part. Olga now dances Patricia's lead role, while Sara dances Olga's. During the rehearsal for *Volk*, Blanc instructs Olga, "You pull it from the ground," and demonstrates a corresponding gesture, implying that the Soviet dancer performed it incorrectly before. While this gesture might seem related to *Ausdruckstanz* by being closer to the ground, *Volk* instead choreographs a pull away from it—a reference to the agrarian and racially nationalistic

Blut und Boden ideology. Blanc even remarks to Susie later that Olga made *Volk* look like “heavy lifting.” Instead of dancing in silence, Miss Tanner begins counting “one and two and three,” switching to “eins und zwei und drei,” pulling the dance back to its “Germanness” with increasing intensity and crosscuts. Blanc helps Olga get into the position of pulling from the ground, but then the dancer gives up, saying, “This is shit.” She openly accuses Blanc and the teachers of withholding knowledge of Patricia’s whereabouts. However, Blanc tries to pin it on the missing dancer’s dealings with the RAF by performatively paying lip service in front of the company to the ideals of the militant organization: “She [Patricia] wanted to live her beliefs. Who doesn’t admire that? And there is so much to change in the world. . . . And who won’t be heartbroken if she’s shot by police.” While speaking about Patricia’s situation, these words could also ironically and easily apply to Blanc’s own actions—and later to Susie’s because they parallel the terrorist practices of the RAF and the cultish coven of witches. Storming out of the studio in a both tearful and enraged state, Olga screams at the teachers “ведьмы”—“witches” in Russian—which not only establishes her national stance and domain within the Russian language, but also draws attention to the term “witches” for not being in German, English, or French, the languages primarily spoken at the *Tanzakademie*. As a Soviet dancer, Olga refuses to align with Blanc’s Nazi-like, terrorist agenda.

Throughout the film, Guadagnino allows the contemporaneity of the RAF to parallel the feminist politics of the *Tanzakademie*. Ulrike Meinhof, Gudrun Ensslin, and Andreas Baader comprised the first generation of the RAF beginning in the late 1960s up until their imprisonment in 1972. The group drew from Marxist ideology and harshly criticized the futile attempt at denazification in post-1945 Germany amidst the Vietnam War and West Germany’s imitation of US politics and capitalist structures. While their means began as protests, they quickly escalated to armed resistance, advancing social justice by any means, similar to how Blanc and the witches enact on the girls in the dance academy. Using urban guerrilla tactics, the RAF performed terrorist acts: killing via hit-and-run actions; robbing banks; and kidnapping leading figures from the banking, police, military, politics and business sectors. Through these actions, they hoped to expose these ideologies that could create dissent among the working class and incite an uprising. Blanc and the other witches are involved in similar acts in the academy: terrorizing the girls and visitors—police officers and Dr. Klemperer—in order to maintain the young dancers’ subservience by dancing *Volk*, which the older dancers presumably no longer perform.

Returning back to the rehearsal as Olga storms off, Blanc asks, “Who will dance the protagonist?” and Susie volunteers. As the repetitive, minimalist score of *Volk* begins, so does rain—exercising a gloomy atmosphere in the following sequences. Susie starts in her position, with a medium shot from behind, and exhales. The camera cuts to Olga entering the circular stairway with baroque metal work, carrying her bags, intending to leave the academy. The camera cuts back to Susie’s dancing solo, which Blanc has forestalled. An overhead shot of both their hair parts evokes Pina Bausch as well as Susie trying to make herself more in Blanc’s form (Photo 4). This angle also awakens the power of the brown, diamond-pattern parquet through their occult fragmentation. Blanc holds Susie’s head momentarily, saying, “This is no joke,” and in a close-up squeezes energy into the dancer’s palms. Upon releasing, a faint indentation and brief illumination of the skin indicates magic or transference of power (Photo 5). She then repeats the process on Susie’s ankles. Howard and Murphet’s idea of transference is evoked here, quite literally. I believe that here, Mater Suspiriorum’s powers of breath have now been enhanced and mixed with Blanc’s influence to create a particularly dangerous force. The complex qualities and histories of this dance—the bewitching quality of the ancient occult merged with *Ausdruckstanz* and contemporary dance practices but for violent means—has unwittingly entered Susie’s body.

The camera cuts back to Olga as she descends the stairs while two dance teachers approach. One, Miss Pavla, asks, “Olga, alles klar?” switching to a slow-motion, extreme close-up of the teacher’s face with a muffled score. A jump cut shows the witches laughing while going upstairs, as Olga’s eyes begin watering profusely, thoroughly disorienting and preventing clear sight. The terrorist



Photo 4. Similar hair parts for Susie and Blanc along with geometric brown parquet. Luca Guadagnino, *Suspiria* (2018).

Photo 5. Visual sign of power transference from Blanc to Susie. Luca Guadagnino, *Suspiria* (2018).



witches cast a spell on her. Instead of walking to the school's entrance to leave, Olga stumbles to the bottom of the stairs toward the mirror studio, where Susie auditioned. Hearing the disembodied, omniscient voice of Miss Tanner calling her, Olga drops her suitcase and trench coat, and enters; the door closes behind her as if by magic, and she is trapped.

Cutting back to Susie beginning the dance again, Blanc informs her, “And if you feel ill at any time, just stop,” suggesting that the transfer of this power and dancing the solo will make her physically ill instead of just tired. This also implies that the embodiment of such a vexed dance and cultural history is enough to make one unwell—in viewing the continuities, contradictions, and transformations of political ideas and ideologies throughout dance history. A full frontal shot of Susie then cuts to a bird's-eye view close-up, with wrists bent perpendicularly in a triangle position under her jaw (Photo 6). Her eyes convey a bewitched or entranced state, and her angled hand position reflects the occult symbolism of the triangle and the beginning of *Hexentanz II*. Jalet's two dances in different spaces now commence. Susie drops to her knees and exhales, which pushes Olga back. A quick, strong, and direct thrust to the



Photo 6. Triangular and bewitching pose to begin the destructive dance. Luca Guadagnino, *Suspiria* (2018).

right side, with deep exhalation, sends Olga flying into the paneled mirror. Chainés into a forward lunge and exhalation thrust Olga into an arched back position. Susie holds on and pulls, forcing Olga to perform a spectacular barrel turn in the air and to the ground. Susie's sudden and angular hand and wrist movements crack Olga's body parts. Throughout the crosscutting of Jalet's two dances, shots of Blanc's, Miss Tanner's, and the students' reactions are interspersed, showing increasing interest. Sensing the intense effects of her dancing, Blanc tells Miss Marks, who controls the music, "Lauter!" and Miss Tanner emphatically and breathily whispers, "Bravo, Susie." Both teachers are filmed with a zoom medium shot to increase intensity throughout the dance, and it is clear that they know full well that as Susie demonstrates her enhanced prowess, it also results in Olga's torturous demise. Blanc revels in the combining of their powers to create a terrorist spectacle like the RAF but with even more visual revulsion. The increasing number of fast crosscuts resemble Susie's angular and abrupt gestures as well as the paneled mirror, which ever more clearly represent the fragmented nature of Olga's body. Kaixuan Yao argues that the film operates using an "active form" of ventriloquism through spells (2022, 122). We see this particularly when Blanc combines her power with Susie's; she uses the young dancer's body as a vessel to mangle Olga's body.

Sudden, strong, and direct hand, arm, and leg movements continue to inflict wounds and pain, which now cause extreme bodily distortion and deformation. There is a close-up shot of Susie's palms on top of each other, bending at the wrists, which causes Olga to orally excrete yellow-green fluid and to urinate. A firm, direct chopping motion down the midline of the body with bent knees and deep exhalation causes Olga even more pain and thoroughly incapacitates all her bodily functions (Photos 7 and 8). After Susie falls to the floor in either exhaustion or illness, two quick shots of different handprints on the mirror remain as visible and corporeal traces of Olga's supernatural struggle. The camera captures her completely disfigured, quivering, and vegetative body angled toward the ground using a backward tracking shot to show the dimensions of the space where the destructive dance happened. Cutting back to the Iris studio, Blanc places her right hand on Susie's upper back under her leotard as if casting a healing or recovery spell with eyes closed and head pointed upward. As Sara leads Susie back to their room, Blanc turns to Tanner at the barre and says, privately, "How enlightening." A key characteristic of the horror aesthetic is the visual excess of action that highlights the lack of border between the body and its inner viscera. Jalet's choreography adds to this by imagining the body in a mangled and disgusting yet compelling dance. Howard and Murphet laud editor Walter Fasano's masterful parallel montage for its "no fewer than 45 distinct scenic alternations between the two studios in this sequence, comprising a



Photo 7. Hand-chopping gesture. Luca Guadagnino, *Suspiria* (2018).

Photo 8. Olga's spectacularly mangled body. Luca Guadagnino, *Suspiria* 2018.



total of 201 individual shots, with an average shot length of 1.03 seconds” (2022, 81). Such a dance could never be viewed staged, which elevates this screendance as an appropriate mode of representation.

This elaborate and aestheticized dance of death parallels tactics used by Nazis. While they rallied the general population through the radio, the RAF seemed to repulse people more through their terrorist acts, and Olga's dance is even more revolting. Despite this difference, Thomas Elsaesser notes that the RAF:

can also be seen as a legacy of fascism's ambivalently pleasurable subject effects of political spectacle (through the use of radio, loudspeakers, parades and flagwaving), and also its contemporary, updated reinvention by bringing spectacle into the living room, while giving public space over to consumerism and rigorously monitored surveillance, which—as has increasingly become apparent since the 1970s—can perfectly complement each other (2014, 116).

While this terrorist dance is staged in a private setting within the confines of the school, it still functions as a spectacular sight for the viewer and as a scare tactic to keep the girls in line. Diverging from the New Left in 1970, the RAF's armed resistance started the German Autumn of 1977. While the group's primary interests situated it outside the scope of feminism, Meinhof and the others knew that gender and image could be used as weapons (Scribner 2015, 4), and many artists and writers from all over the world, like Guadagnino, have refashioned the group's legacy within a feminist imaginary (11). In contrast to the media, who characterized the RAF as criminals and terrorists, the group conceptualized themselves as militant guerrillas and revolutionaries (12). Blanc and the witches likely see themselves in a similar light: as rebellious yet progressive, and blinded by their own convictions to maintain power over their coven at all costs. According to Jeremy Varon, violent actions "took place despite New Leftists' strenuous efforts to avoid the repression and repetition of the past. No direct lineage, therefore, runs from Hitler to the RAF. Rather, the RAF unselfconsciously repeated tendencies in the past, largely as a result of its efforts to confront and atone for that past" (2004, 250).

Guadagnino's *Suspiria* engages with these discourses by imbedding them throughout the film: Blanc and the witches perform similar acts of violence on their own students who disobey, as well as anyone trying to infiltrate the matriarchal organization. Patricia is eliminated because of her allegiance to the RAF and not to the coven. The RAF plays a continued role in the background of *Suspiria*: there are references to the protests to free Meinhof outside of Klemperer's office in Kreuzberg; a bomb explodes when Sara visits Susie in the hotel; a radio reports that Palestinian hijackers issued official demands, including the release of RAF members incarcerated in Stammheim; and Blanc reads the *Spiegel* issue of the RAF from October 17, 1977, with an image of an airplane, gun, and the word "terror" in large black letters.

In this terrorist dance spectacle, Susie unwittingly dances with an invisible partner who is in another room. Imbued with Blanc's supernatural force, Susie's hands and deep exhalations assume a visually, aurally, and destructive power. Quick, angular, and direct hand and wrist movements deform Olga's body into its own kind of mangled masterpiece, evoking the spectacular aesthetics of the RAF. While Blanc built the company during the war and channeled her intellect into choreography—like Wigman had connected with the internal and the occult—her intentions of coming to terms with the past have become derailed as she harnesses violent powers through the destruction of those who are not willing to agree with her. It remains unclear if Blanc perceives Susie as a threat or as someone with whom to collaborate. In the last example, however, by instrumentalizing Susie to deform Olga, these terrorist tendencies replicate the ethos not only of the RAF but also of Nazi psychological tactics. Therefore, by embodying the role of the protagonist in *Volk*, Susie takes on a complex mythology and history laden with varying conflicting yet perpetually emerging ideologies of German dance. During a private rehearsal, Blanc tells her, "When you dance the dance of another, you make yourself in the image of its creator. You empty yourself, so that her work can live within you." This would be another example of transference of one history into the next. This statement only partially applies to Susie, who further complicates the situation and can negotiate these differing strands of thought instead of being a purely docile vessel. Indeed, she must accept Blanc's choreography into her own body through her aural sighs to survey the situation, but she comes to her own critically informed decision by derailing the final performance of *Volk* and the Black Sabbath.

While this destructive yet dazzling dance scene suggests that historical breath can survey the past, as the film continues, Guadagnino uses more explicit cinematic means at the conclusion of Susie's deliberate derailment of *Volk* in reading Dr. Klemperer's history. In coming to see the performance, he prioritizes gathering intelligence on the coven's terrorist activity. A slow-motion shot of Susie's introspective face in white makeup is then cut into a quick montage of his past life, suggesting that she can see into his past: in a slow-motion shot, he walks in snow falling, which is then contrasted with a cut to a young Anke and Klemperer pointing toward a heart that has been scratched into the

corner of their *Datsche*. Then images of Anke's *Ahnenpaß* ("ancestor pass," to demonstrate Aryan lineage) and of a young Anke are juxtaposed with an aggressive older Anke. These filmic techniques suggest a clear example of historical breathing.

While Susie does destroy some of the witches by forcing their heads to explode in a gory blood bath during the Sabbath, the German characters Miss Tanner and Miss Vendegast are spared—as if to suggest the start of a new direction in German dance without eliminating its foundation. However, by placing power into Susie's hands, her actions still ironically perpetuate those of Blanc. As the embodiment of the coming generation, Susie as Mater Suspiriorum creates an occult alternative essentially drawing from pre-civilization roots for a modern culture. Even though Susie tries to understand and disentangle a complex history, she still resorts to violence. The horror film genre embraces and easily allows itself to be interwoven with the *Ausdruckstanz* and contemporary dance aesthetics. While one could critique Susie's, as Mater Suspiriorum's, killing spree at the conclusion, the film offers a conflicted, supernatural alternative to an already vexed history of German modern dance. In other words, it continues to get even more complicated by repeating the past.

The epilogue of the film helps solidify the ambivalent nature of Mater Suspiriorum, who in the form of Susie, enters Klemperer's room as he sits in bed at home. His eternal desire has been to discover the whereabouts of his wife Anke Meyer, with whom he had lost contact. While the witch's spell caused him believe that Anke had made it to Bristol, escaping persecution, Mater Suspiriorum tells him that his wife was sent to the Theresienstadt Ghetto instead, where she died of exposure. However, Anke was not afraid and maintained solidarity with other strong women. This narrative fills Klemperer with painful memories and little consolation. Mater Suspiriorum then comes closer to his face and says that he will forget everything she just told him: not allowing him to process the pain or the privilege of contemplating this knowledge for himself. Her actions suggest that it is better to know but then to automatically forget. This gesture seems to nullify and problematically wipe clean the memory. She says, "Wir brauchen Schuld, Doktor, und Scham aber nicht deine" (We need guilt, doctor, and shame but not yours.) Guadagnino suggests that a world without shame and guilt is not possible and that the transference (Howard and Murphet 2022) and perpetual repetition (Varon 2004) of the past is inevitable.

Wigman's *Hexentanz II* not only inspires Jalet's choreography but also further opens the door for an exploration into a neo-Expressionist dance with contemporary tendencies. Through the evocation of Wigman's dance, however, this new form demands deeper investigations of German modern dance's complex history with the idea of "*Volk*" from the nineteenth century and Nazism. Guadagnino thoroughly experiments with and integrates contemporary dance as a central form of aesthetic and political importance into his film. He interweaves a horror genre lens by using quick crosscuts, screams, violence, and excreted body fluids to create a spectacular dance of destruction. In character with mystic communication, he cinematically highlights the historical breathing as a key surveying tool for Mater Suspiriorum to gain a sense of her surroundings and to highlight her omnipresence. In breathing in the atmosphere and embodying the protagonist in *Volk* through the enhancing touch of Blanc, Susie feels Blanc's vexed history to create even more destruction. The viewer must also come to terms with the fact that they indulge in the experimental and visually opulent yet fatal dance, but at the expense of critically engaging with the past.

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