The Sublime and the Sewer: Gothic Dualism and Symbolic Space in Dario Argento's The Phantom of the Opera

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The Sublime and the Sewer: Gothic Dualism and Symbolic Space in Dario Argento's *The Phantom of the Opera*

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ABSTRACT

This article analyses Dario Argento's 1998 film *The Phantom of the Opera* as a distinctive reworking of Gaston Leroux's 1910 novel. Rather than viewing it as an incoherent departure, the study reads the film as a cinematic exploration of Leroux's unstable binaries—human/animal, child/adult, grand opera/carnival, and female otherness—central to the Gothic tradition. Employing close textual and visual analysis, combined with Gothic theory and art-historical interpretation, the article examines how Argento reimagines the Phantom as an attractive yet internally hybrid figure raised by rats, his subterranean lair evoking Arnold Böcklin's *Isle of the Dead* and the *fin-de-siècle homme de génie*. Christine is reframed as a psychologically ambivalent heroine whose descent mirrors a confrontation with repressed desires, conveyed through tableaux referencing artists such as Jean-François Millet and Georges de La Tour. The Paris Opera House becomes a site where sublime artistic ideals are undermined by grotesque caricatures, echoing Victor Hugo's *grotesque–sublime* aesthetic. Blending Gothic symbolism, carnivalesque satire, and art-historical homage, the film emerges as a visual meditation on identity, hybridity, and the instability of moral and social boundaries.

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Analysing Dario Argento's adaptation of Gaston Leroux's *Le Fantôme de l'Opéra* (*The Phantom of the Opera*, 1910) presents a notable challenge, particularly due to the limited scholarly discourse on the film. The tale of the *amour fou* between the physically deformed Erik and the Swedish soprano Christine Daaé, set in the Opera House of *belle époque* Paris, has been frequently reinterpreted on stage and screen since Rupert Julian's 1925 silent horror classic. Undoubtedly, the best-known stage adaptation of Leroux's novel is Andrew Lloyd Webber's musical, which debuted in the West End in 1986 and on Broadway in 1988, becoming the longest-running musical in Broadway history and second longest in the West End after Claude-Michel Schönberg's *Les Misérables* (1980).[1]

Argento initially considered adapting Leroux's novel in 1976 during the production of the director's *Suspiria*, envisioning a filmic version set during the Russian Revolution of 1917 at Moscow's Bolshoi Ballet. This project was ultimately abandoned due to restrictions imposed by the Russian authorities and a shift in the director's artistic interests, culminating in *Inferno* (1980). Argento did not return to *Le Fantôme de l'Opéra* until 1996, when a Mediaset survey revealed strong public interest in an adaptation of Leroux's novel—on the condition that Argento himself directed. Commissioned by the Berlusconi-owned broadcaster, which also controlled the production company behind the 1998 release, the survey polled Italians aged eighteen to forty and cost forty million liras. The results ultimately persuaded Argento to revisit the project (Lucantonio 23; Jones 83, 249; Maiello 215; Gracey 133). In addition to the renewed public interest revealed by Mediaset's 1996 survey, Argento's decision to return to Leroux's novel must also be understood against the broader cinematic climate of the early 1990s. As Sorcha Ní Fhlainn observes, Hollywood had begun a deliberate recuperation of Gothic narratives within more traditional and conservative film circles during this period. Repackaged as prestige literary adaptations featuring high-profile casts, the commercial success of Francis Ford Coppola's *Bram Stoker's Dracula* (1992) opened the way for Neil Jordan's *Interview with the Vampire* (1994), Kenneth Branagh's *Mary Shelley's Frankenstein* (1994), and Stephen Frears's *Mary Reilly* (1996), all of which were supported by substantial budgets and directed by established filmmakers (Ní Fhlainn 151–2). This resurgence of the Gothic on the international stage probably resonated with Argento, whose own reimagining of *The Phantom of the Opera* may be read as both aesthetically continuous with his earlier work and as a European response to the renewed mainstream cultural interest in Gothic material.

This broader cultural context was also accompanied by a significant technological shift. The widespread adoption of computer-generated imagery (CGI) in the 1990s marked a watershed moment in the history of visual effects. Advances in digital software and hardware allowed filmmakers to produce increasingly realistic and dynamic imagery, while digital compositing became central to integrating computer-generated elements with live action. This, as Soumen Das notes, enabled levels of visual storytelling that were previously unattainable (e305). Argento, who had already experimented with early digital technologies in *The Stendhal Syndrome* (*La Sindrome di Stendhal*, 1996), drew selectively on these innovations for a number of sequences in *The Phantom of the Opera*. His use of CGI—at times strikingly anachronistic within the film's nineteenth-century setting—thus reflects both contemporaneous developments in cinematic technique and his own evolving visual practice.

Upon its release in 1998, however, Argento's adaptation received overwhelmingly negative reviews. Even today, the primary material available on the film largely consists of short, non-critical articles published in horror-related fanzines and websites. These writings focus primarily on the film's numerous shortcomings—most notably its weak characterisation and disjointed narrative structure, which fails to convince *aficionados* of Leroux's literary classic—while giving limited attention to its more commendable elements. In particular, the film's elaborate camerawork and unsettling soundtrack—stylistic trademarks of Argento's *gialli* and horror films from the 1970s and 1980s—are frequently overlooked (Lorefice). This critical hostility has also been linked to broader concerns about Argento's late career. As Xavier Aldana Reyes notes, *The Phantom of the Opera* and *Dracula 3D* (2012) reflect a tension between Argento's pursuit of literary prestige and his established reputation for stylised violence. While the Gothic is frequently valued over horror for its perceived intellectual seriousness, Argento's attempt to blend the two—by humanising monsters without tempering his visual excess—has been

1 For a detailed list and critical analysis of the major screen and theatrical adaptations of Leroux's *Le Fantôme de l'Opéra* from 1925 onwards, see Hogle (135–231); Hall (33–94).

seen as uneven and incoherent. The result is a stylistically conflicted film that mirrors ongoing critical ambivalence towards the Gothic horror mode (Aldana Reyes 2, 4). Nonetheless, a more generous reading is offered by Chris Gallant, who argues that "Here is a film that chooses to go against the contemporary grain in retelling the original tale in a radically revised form and yet insisting on dressing it in the period garb of the novel" (240).

Thus, despite its negative critical reception, Argento's film should not be dismissed merely as the only Italian cinematic adaptation of Gaston Leroux's novel. Rather, it can be seen as a distinctive variation and, in many respects, a reconceptualisation of the source text. As Jerrold E. Hogle observes, Leroux's narrative is structured around a series of unstable binaries, with characters frequently "disrupt[ing] or dissolv[ing] numerous attempted cultural distinctions" (14). The Phantom fluctuates between artistic talent and animalistic instinct; Christine is torn between submission and longing; and the Opera House itself becomes a liminal space where elegance collides with excess. These tensions reflect a series of dualities embedded in Leroux's novel—human and animal, adult and child, grand opera and carnival, and the construction of female otherness—that align with the broader Gothic tradition's preoccupation with blurred boundaries, fractured identities, and the collapse of stable moral and social frameworks, a concern traceable to works such as Ann Radcliffe's *The Mysteries of Udolpho* (1794).

Building on Hogle's insight, this article contends that Argento's adaptation, far from representing an incoherent or exaggerated departure from its literary source, can be understood as a cinematic reinterpretation of those same unstable binaries. While retaining key narrative and spatial elements from *Le Fantôme de l'Opéra*, the film reworks the dualities highlighted by Hogle—human/animal, adult/child, grand opera/carnival, and female otherness—through a stylised *mise en scène*, heightened atmospherics, and a symbolic visual language rich in art-historical and pictorial reference.

Through close analysis of character transformation and visual symbolism, this article examines how the film reinterprets Gothic binaries, using *mise en scène*, plot, and character psychology to foreground instability, ambiguity, and transgression. In doing so, *The Phantom of the Opera* develops an aesthetic and cultural identity that remains rooted in its literary source while articulating a distinctly original variation of the Gothic mode.

BORN OF THE SEWER: EMBODIED INSTINCT AND THE ANIMAL-CHILD IN ARGENTO'S PHANTOM

Argento's adaptation of Leroux's *Le Fantôme de l'Opéra* was co-written with screenwriter Gérard Brach, a long-time collaborator of director Roman Polanski. The film represents the Italian filmmaker's second engagement with a Gothic literary classic, following his loose interpretation of Edgar Allan Poe's short tale *The Black Cat* in the two-part anthology *Two Evil Eyes* (1990), co-directed with George A. Romero. It also constitutes his third involvement with Gothic literature when considered alongside his reinterpretation of Bram Stoker's 1897 novel in *Dracula 3D* (2012).

As for Leroux's classic, this was originally published as a *roman feuilleton* in the French newspaper *Le Gaulois* between 23 September 1909 and 8 January 1910. The novel's serialised format shaped its hybrid narrative style, which blends multiple literary genres to sustain the reader's engagement. Erik's backstory, for instance, is constructed through a combination of detective fiction and journalistic reportage, reflecting Leroux's earlier career as a freelance reporter for *Écho de Paris* and *Matin*. At the same time, the text's broader narrative structure and its depiction of space draw heavily on the conventions of late eighteenth-century Gothic fiction (Razzini 11).

Narratively, Leroux's decision to set the entire novel around the enclosed space of the Paris Opera House, Christine Daaé's forced incarceration in the basement at the hands of Erik, and the consequent descent of Christine's courtly suitor Raoul de Chagny into the labyrinth of this horrific place to rescue her, make the basic plot of *Le Fantôme de l'Opéra* strikingly close to that of Emily St Aubert in Radcliffe's *The Mysteries of Udolpho* (Hogle 29). In Radcliffe's novel, Emily shares a close bond with her father, accompanying him on a journey from France across the mountains, where they meet Valancourt, a handsome young man who captures her interest. After her father's death, Emily is sent to live with her aunt and becomes the target of psychological harassment by Montoni, her aunt's husband, who eventually imprisons her in

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the castle of Udolpho until the final denouement and her reunion with Valancourt. Similarly, Leroux's Christine shares a special bond with her father, a renowned fiddler with whom she travels across Sweden performing folk and religious music. During these travels, they meet Baron Raoul de Chagny. After her father's death, Christine moves to Paris to live with Mamma Valerius and later joins the chorus at the Paris Opera House, where she falls prey to Erik's obsession, culminating in her entrapment.

In terms of spatial representation, as Joëlle Prungnaud has observed, at the heart of Radcliffe's narrative structure lies a representation of spaces based on the principle of inadequacy and violation between their function and their nature (308–10, 379–80). While on the surface Montoni's castle is presented as a conventional place of residence, the basement—where Emily is eventually imprisoned—becomes a site of danger and degeneration, where "the living-space darken[s] and contract[s] into the dying-space of the mortuary and the tomb" (Baldick xx). This spatial representation operates metonymically, reflecting Montoni's psychological and physical traits. Environment and villain are constructed through parallel narrative codes, with the character's appearance at times mirroring the architectural features of his surroundings—both evoking a pervasive sense of threat.

Hogle, meanwhile, argues that the Gothic—conceived as a hybrid mode across fiction, theatre, film, and other media—relies on archaic settings and haunting figures as mechanisms of *othering*, employed to perform specific ideological, social, and psychological functions. Within this framework, Gothic fiction recurrently confronts its predominantly middle-class readership, along with its socially mobile protagonists, with monstrous or spectral embodiments of cultural contradiction. These figures serve to unsettle and expose the latent instability and internal diversity of the very identities and social structures that both characters and readers seek to stabilise through the Gothic mode (Hogle 103). This latent instability and internal diversity are particularly evident in the multilayered portrayal of the Paris Opera House, or Palais Garnier, where space becomes a vehicle for exploring human dualities through the symbolic division between upper and lower realms. In this sense, Leroux's use of space is metonymic: the architecture of the Opera House—especially its subterranean layers—mirrors Erik's psychological and physical traits, symbolising both his divided human psyche and, more broadly, the buried tensions within civilised identity. The Opera House structure thus becomes a site of psychological depth and cultural anxiety, a terrain where monstrosity and genius are entangled in the same haunted reflection.

In the novel, Leroux presents the Phantom as a figure who deliberately blurs the boundary between human and animal. Described as corpse-like and simian—with a skull-like face, sunken eyes, a near-absent nose, and yellowed, parchment-like skin stretched over bone—Erik evokes a distinctly troglodytic image. His posture and movements further reinforce this resemblance to a primitive, pre-human form. This depiction reflects broader *fin-de-siècle* anxieties shaped by Darwinian theories of reversion and fears of atavism: the return of primitive traits beneath the surface of civilisation (Hogle 12). By the early twentieth century such concerns were deeply embedded in British and French cultural discourse, particularly in Gothic fiction, where degeneration often signified a monstrous regression to earlier evolutionary or psychological states. Leroux draws on a longstanding mythic-symbolic tradition that associates the monkey with the half-man—a transgressive figure situated between human and animal, and by extension, between self and other. This tradition frequently links simian imagery to culturally marginalised figures: women, androgynes, magicians, and other liminal beings. Within this framework, Erik's subterranean realm functions not only as a space of concealment but as a symbolic site from which counter-hegemonic impulses and anxieties about regression emerge (Hogle 13).

Building on this hybridity, Hogle also highlights the Phantom's fusion of refined genius and infantilism. As recognised by both the Persian[2] and Christine, Erik is *un vrai monstre*—"a veritable child, presumptuous and vain"—whose identity merges animal instinct with technological sophistication, and cruelty with aesthetic talent (Hogle 11). A gifted architect and composer, Erik led a nomadic life before secretly assisting in the construction of the Paris Opera House during the Commune de Paris in 1871. It was then that he withdrew like an outcast, creating

2 In Leroux's novel, the Persian is an Iranian character who once served as the Shah's chief of police. He is fully aware of Erik's past, as the two were in the Shah's service at the same time. This character, however, is entirely absent from Argento's adaptation.

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his subterranean lair beneath the building—a hidden domain accessible through a concealed mechanism behind the mirror in Christine's dressing room. This secret entrance leads to a series of spiralling passages surrounding the Palais Garnier, descending fifteen feet below ground into a narrowing conical subsoil. The path ends at a still, subterranean lake, which must be crossed by boat to reach Erik's lair. The lair itself reflects the duality of Erik's character. On one side lies a domestic space, a modest room furnished in the petit-bourgeois style of Louis-Philippe-era France (1830–48), with a grand church organ signifying Erik's artistic sensibility. This area represents what remains of his humanity and his thwarted desire for a normal life. On the other side stands the *chambre des supplices*, a space that embodies Erik's cruel ingenuity. This small, hexagonal torture chamber is lined with mirrors designed to disorient victims through infinite reflections, ultimately driving them to madness or suicide. Here, the grotesque coexistence of the familiar and the horrific—cosiness and terror, art and death—mirrors the inner fragmentation of the Phantom himself.

This tension between animal instinct, technological skills, and self-imposed isolation is reimagined in Argento's adaptation, where the Phantom's upbringing in the basement—closely intertwined with the animal world—and the visual depiction of the subterranean space offer a narrative and aesthetic reinterpretation of Leroux's original motifs. Argento's Phantom is an abandoned child with no name or past, whose primary fault is having been abandoned by his biological mother. Raised by sewer rats and capable of telepathic communication with them, he was initially conceived in the director's early script as a rat-like mutant with hidden rodent teeth. In the final version, however, the Phantom is portrayed as physically attractive, with his animalistic traits internalised rather than externally visible (Jones 251). It is his profound love for Christine that ultimately drives him to ascend from the subterranean world and reveal himself to the realm above. Thus, in Argento's adaptation, the Phantom's dual nature is shaped by the tension between his "bestial hell-raising subterranean creature side and his ennobled and lofty operatically conditioned humanity" (Jones 251). This reimagining is consistent with his upbringing, which cultivates a primal instinct to protect and preserve his underground domain, punishing those who violate its boundaries. The deep bond between the abandoned child and the sewer rats is later revealed through the Phantom's own words to Christine:

> Dalla mia nascita fui abbandonato sul fiume del tempo e dello spazio. Ma fui nutrito e cresciuto da creature, che sono diventate i miei amici, i miei fratelli, questa è la ragione della mia doppia natura e perché ritengo questo mondo sotterraneo la mia casa.[3]

The Phantom's physical attractiveness adds a further layer of complexity to his relationship with Christine. The woman, in fact, is immediately attracted to him during their first encounter on a balcony of the Opera House, and throughout the film she will call into question both her morality and social etiquette to indulge him carnally. However, following their initial sexual encounter, the Phantom swiftly reasserts his animal nature—caressing and kissing the rats he considers his family, and removing his shirt to allow them to scurry across his bare chest and body in a gesture that is both intimate and erotic.

Apart from what the plot reveals, this fusion of the animal and the human within the Phantom is also symbolically reinforced through the nature of Argento's basement. In the director's adaptation, Leroux's Opera House basement is reimagined as a pristine, timeless space, showing no signs of human presence. The setting, filmed in the grottos of Pertosa near Salerno (Italy), is a tranquil natural landscape of rocky passages lined with stalagmites and stalactites, sandy shores, and a leaden lake at its centre—an image which, as Argento has noted, closely evokes Arnold Böcklin's painting *Isle of the Dead* (*Die Toteninsel*) (Joisten 118; Giusti 496). Böcklin's *Isle of the Dead* is made up of five different *tableaux* of the same theme, all painted between 1880 and 1886. All five depict a desolate and rocky island seen across an expanse of dark water. An oarsman dressed in black manoeuvres a boat from the stern. Facing the island is a standing female figure clad entirely in white, and in front of her lies a coffin (Burroughs 146–8). The direct inspiration of Böcklin's painting in Argento's film is perceivable through *plan-tableau* when Christine, standing and dressed in white, is guided by the Phantom's telepathic skills and eventually takes the boat to reach his hideout, filmed in extreme long shot.

3 "From my birth I was left on the river of time and space. But I was nurtured and raised by creatures who have become my friends, my brothers, this is the reason for my double nature and for considering this underworld my home." Unless otherwise indicated, all quotations from the original Italian have been translated into English by the author.

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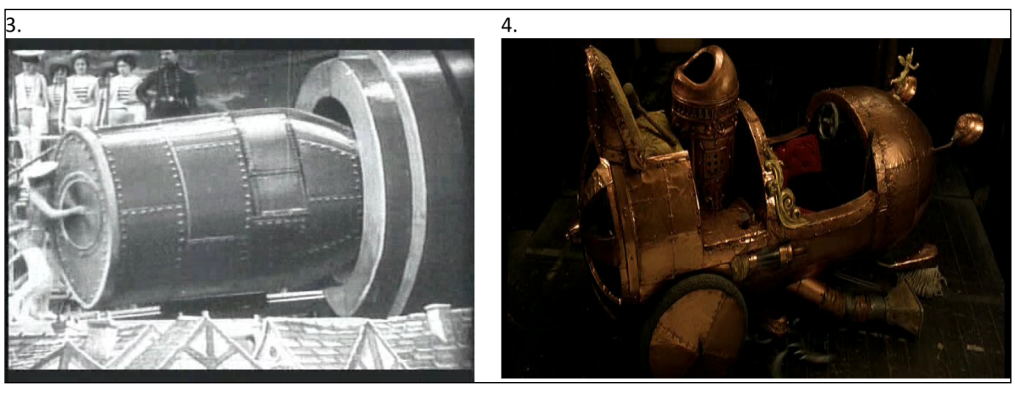
Figures 1 and 2 Arnold Böcklin's *Isle of the Dead* (1880–86) **(1)** and the extreme long shot of Christine rowing to the Phantom's lair **(2)**.

As Schmidt has suggested, Böcklin's painting evokes the theme of voluntary isolation from human society that was typical of the artistic *milieu* in late nineteenth-century Europe. Specifically, many *artistes* and *hommes de génie* in the historical period of the Second Industrial Revolution in Europe (1870–1914) did not feel at ease in a society that only aspired to economic power and profit through industrial and technological innovation. Thus, Böcklin's deserted and rocky island is to be symbolically associated with this artist's extreme condition of psychological loneliness and voluntary retreat from a world they do not feel to be compatible with their own art (Schmidt 262–4). In this context, Schmidt's reading of Böcklin's painting is applicable to Argento's portrayal of the Phantom, who functions as a metaphor for the artist/outcast—his sensibility rooted in a state of primal purity and a profound love for both Christine and music. These qualities mark his estrangement from a society he views as alien and hostile.

If the Phantom symbolises the desire not to conform to a label imposed by a repressive society, Ignace, the person in charge of sanitation in the film, symbolises the castration of such desire. Notably, the character of the rat catcher is Argento's own invention and represents one of the film's most distinctive departures from Leroux's novel. In Leroux's original, the rat catcher appears only briefly. In a scene where Raoul and the Persian descend into the basement to rescue Christine, they are momentarily alarmed by a torchlit figure approaching through the darkness, with rats scattering at his feet. Mistaking him for the Phantom, they soon realise that he is merely the chief rat catcher, hurrying past with a swarm of rats. In Argento's adaptation, Ignace is identified with a creative torturer and becomes the person responsible for invading the Phantom's pristine world through the medium of a futuristic rat mobile, derived from Georges Méliès's *A Trip to the Moon* (*Le Voyage dans la lune*, 1902) (Jones 256; Thoret 13).The device itself is conceived as a giant copper machine that slices the rats' heads off with a revolving blade fixed to the undercarriage. Ignace's companion then cuts the vermin's tails off and stores them in dated boxes of formaldehyde back at their headquarters. As the Phantom considers himself part of the animal world, the act of killing the vermin by Ignace and his companion becomes an attack on the Phantom's family.



Figures 3 and 4 Georges Méliès's futuristic machine in *A Trip to the Moon* (1902) **(3)** and Ignace's rat mobile in Argento's *Phantom of the Opera* **(4)**.

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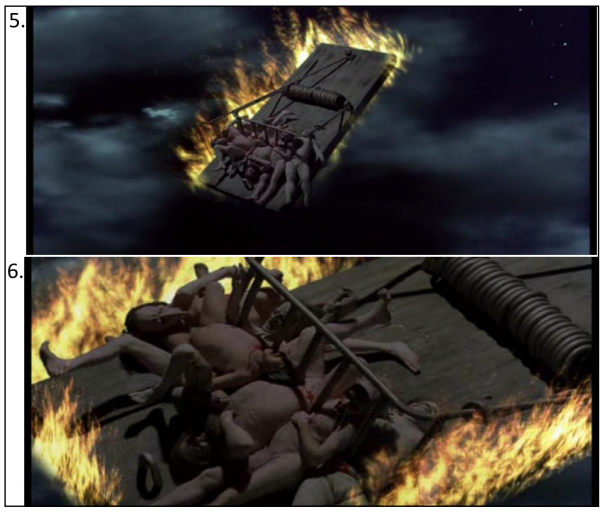
In one crucial sequence, the Phantom's hostility towards the repressive "upper world" is externalised through a nightmarish hallucination on the roof of the Palais Garnier, where he envisions an orgy of rodent-headed figures projected on to the night sky, writhing in agony and dying in a man-sized rat trap. The trap then advances progressively—from long shot to close-up, then extreme close-up—before it finally bursts into flames. The sequence appears deliberately anachronistic and fragmented, with its heavy reliance on CGI and ultra-modern visual effects clashing with the film's refined historical setting. Yet this dissonance acquires meaning when considered symbolically. The rat trap functions as a visual metaphor for the oppressive social order within the Opera House—an order that seeks to punish or exclude those who deviate from normative ideals, as the Phantom does.



Figures 5 and 6 The Phantom's hallucination on the roof of the Palais Garnier.

In this context, the Phantom's violence emerges as a form of retributive justice. To protect his subterranean world, he eliminates intruders, driven by a desperate need for self-preservation. As Aldana Reyes notes, Argento encourages viewers to see the Phantom not as a monster, but as a feral child whose cruelty and ingenuity are motivated by defence—of both himself and his chosen family (5). This reading slightly contrasts with Leroux's original novel, where the feral child motif is more ambiguous, as previously discussed. Notably, in both the novel and Argento's adaptation, other key characters—such as Carlotta and the often frantic managers—also exhibit infantile behaviour, though in less violent forms. As Hogle observes, in Leroux's narrative their exaggerated performances of vanity and control reflect the very qualities they condemn in the Phantom. Here, regression to childhood is not defined by its distance from adulthood, but by its persistence within it—a reminder that childish traits remain embedded in the adult world, which only pretends to have outgrown them. While Erik embodies early twentieth-century anxieties around gender ambiguity, he also figures as the child-as-*Other*—a projection of the traits adults fear within themselves and attempt to repress (Hogle 12).

However, the redolent atmosphere and visual opulence of the Phantom's subterranean home near the lake throws into relief more nuanced aspects of the Phantom's dual nature as well as of his association to the *hommes de génie* in *fin-de-siècle* Paris. In Argento's film, the Phantom's home is a four-tier construction that is divided into two main areas, the elegant Louis Philippe bedroom and the room for playing the organ, in the manner of Leroux's novel. Both sides are connected by a rickety wooden walkway and both the colour and the form of the central wall resemble a cave, as if the home were built inside a grotto. This opulence of the décor shows that although Argento's Phantom is aware of the hypocrisies in class-climbing and class-descent, he does not completely succeed in moving away from his human side. Although the Phantom identifies himself with a rat and injures and tortures the people who penetrate his underworld like an animal (in one case biting the throat of an intruder), he also identifies with a desire for cosy domesticity. In doing so, the Phantom echoes the contradictory attitude towards society of mid-nineteenth-century *homme de génie* Charles Baudelaire. In the poem "The Self-Tormenter" ("L'Héautontimorouménos") from the collection *Flowers of Evil* (*Les Fleurs du Mal*, 1857), Baudelaire writes: "Je suis la plaie et le couteau! […] / Et la victime et le bourreau! […] / Un de ces grandes abandonnés / Au rire éternel condamnés / Et qui ne peuvent plus sourire!" (30–1)[4]

4 "I am the wound and the knife! […] / And the victim and the executioner! / […] One of those great outcasts / To laugh eternally (as) condemned / And who has no power to smile anymore."

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In the extract, Baudelaire opposes his confessed attraction to urban middle-class pleasures to his caustic attack on their hypocrisies and manages to admit that by verbally killing other people, he somehow injures himself. Despite being a poetic "assassin", Baudelaire was also famous for his *flâneur* pose of drug-taking and wandering through mid-nineteenth-century cosmopolitan Paris. Although Argento's Phantom does not wander through *fin-de-siècle* Paris and has retreated from society to live in his voluntary prison, his paradoxical interplay of intoxication with and withdrawal from society is fully conveyed in the double nature of his underworld, comprising a habitable bourgeois space, his human side, in the middle of a pristine site, his animal side. Moreover, although the Phantom symbolically identifies with the idea of the "assassin" of society in the way he injures and tortures the people who penetrate his underworld, he also identifies with the idea of the *flâneur*, leaning towards the pleasures that society can impart. This is represented in the way he becomes attracted to Christine so far as to be eventually killed for her.

FROM SPECTACLE TO SATIRE: ARGENTO'S CARNIVALESQUE OPERA HOUSE

In the opening sequence of Argento's adaptation, a basket carrying the infant Phantom drifts down a river into the Opera House's underground, where sewer rats rescue the child, dragging the basket to dry land. Argento's camera then tilts upwards, breaking through layers of architecture and time, emerging in 1877 outside the Palais Garnier. A medium long shot reveals its grand façade amid the opulence of an evening performance. The sequence continues with shots of the Opera's elaborately painted ceiling, intercut with views of the audience, as the camera glides through the majestic interior.

As Gracey has argued, the Opera House in *belle époque* Paris was an institution corrupted by class snobbery, which people attended mainly to show off their social status. As a result, very little attention was paid to the actual performances on stage (Gracey 136). This element is evident in Argento's meticulously planned and researched historical reconstruction. In the sequence mentioned above, in fact, the auditorium is blissfully unaware of what is happening on stage and the audience seem to be more interested in drinking, eating, flirting, and socialising on the balconies.

The audience's attitude is key not just for historical accuracy, but also for foreshadowing Argento's depiction of life inside the Palais Garnier. As regards the people working in the Paris Opera House, Leroux divides them into two main categories. The first comprises the artistic and managerial roles in the building. In depicting them, the novelist makes use of documentary reconstruction and adds some elements of comic relief in the narrative when describing these people's emotional and physical reactions to Erik's threat. The second category includes the people investigating Erik's past and present crimes, such as the Persian, and Mifroid, the commissary of police who is called in to investigate Christine's disappearance. Argento restricts the scope of inquiry to a clumsy reporter from *Le Coq Républicain* who carries out personal research into the crimes in the Opera House, and leaves out all the figures relating to the pasts of the Phantom and Christine. The remaining roles are caricatures of *fin-de-siècle* Paris, whose moral and physical degradation symbolically clashes with the architectural magnificence of the setting.

In this regard, Argento's depiction of the Palais Garnier becomes "il topos ideale di un cinema fondato sull'impurità, sulla mescolanza di nobile e ignobile, di sublime e di triviale" (Rauger 102).[5] Indeed, the people inhabiting the Opera House embody spiritual exaltation and animality at all the levels of its symbolic scenery and visual characterisation, reinforcing this tension between the sublime grandeur of the space and the baseness of its occupants. More specifically, while the architecture and décor of Argento's Paris Opera House exalt the cult of beauty and the nobility of artistic creation, the moral coarseness of its inhabitants serves as an implicit critique of a society whose corruption and cowardice have relegated the Phantom to outcast status, as suggested in the opening sequence. This critique is conveyed through caricature, which Argento uses to depict the moral and physical decay of those in the Opera House, evoking the effect of the *grotesque* in pictorial iconography.

5 "This is the ideal setting for a mixture of noble and ignoble, of sublime and trivial."

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As Connelly notes, the term *grotesque* is problematic in art history, as it refers to imagery that resists traditional iconographic boundaries (5). Since the mid-sixteenth century, it has fuelled debates around artistic expressions that deviate from classical ideals of order and proportion. Over the past two centuries, *grotesque* has come to signify exaggerated forms that challenge classical norms of stability and symmetry, instead embracing the formless, the misshapen, and the ugly (Chaouli 47; Connelly 5). In Argento's film, the grotesque depiction of the people inhabiting and working in the Paris Opera House is rendered through visual exaggeration and hyperbole to create a comic effect. This idea is introduced as soon as Argento turns his attention to Ignace, the individual responsible for sanitation. This character has a filthy appearance and behaviour, exemplified by a scene in which, after dealing with the corpse of a rat, he tastes some of the cheese used for the trap he is preparing. Both the caricatural physicality of the man and the way this gesture is enacted are exaggerated in a way to generate a sudden comic effect and mockery through disgust and repulsion.

In light of these readings, Mikhail Bakhtin's concepts of the *carnivalesque* and the *grotesque body* offer a compelling lens through which to view Argento's depiction of secondary characters in his film adaptation. In his study of François Rabelais, Bakhtin defines the carnivalesque as a temporary suspension of social hierarchies, exemplified by the medieval Feast of Fools—an event during which sub-deacons parodied sacred rituals and inverted the established order (321, 325). Through comic degradation and symbolic reversal, high culture was brought down to the level of the body and its functions, creating a radically democratic space where noble, profane, and grotesque voices held equal dialogic status (Hyman and Malbert 14, 16; Connelly 8). This inversion gave rise to new imagery drawn from folk traditions, centred on the grotesque body—marked by excess, openness, and transformation. In Rabelais's time, figures of authority were portrayed not in idealised form but through exaggerated depictions of bodily functions such as eating, defecation, and sexuality. These representations were not purely satirical; they carried a regenerative energy that momentarily subverted and renewed the social order. The exaggerated mouth, for instance, symbolised gluttony and lust while linking the body to a collective, popular vitality.

This reading aligns with Hogle's application of Bakhtin's theory to Leroux's novel. Hogle interprets Erik, particularly in the *bal masqué* scene, as a grotesque figure whose unmasked appearance disrupts bourgeois aesthetic codes and transforms the ball into a carnivalesque space. His disfigured body—both repellent and fascinating—blurs the line between beauty and horror, life and death, thereby unsettling the Opera's formal order. As Hogle argues, this moment reveals the cultural tensions that Leroux sublimates through Erik's grotesque intrusion, exposing the fragility of class distinctions and aesthetic ideals. The grotesque, in this sense, lays bare the repressed underside of bourgeois respectability (Hogle 68–71).

Argento's depiction of secondary characters continues this carnivalesque tradition. His supporting figures become grotesque caricatures—embodiments of greed, lust, and vanity—rendered through visual hyperbole and metonymy. Though overtly comic, these portrayals operate as implicit social critique, exposing the moral corruption underlying bourgeois decorum. Far from being merely decorative or humorous, Argento's grotesque types visually articulate a repressed cultural logic—one that unsettles the bourgeois fantasy of order, civility, and aesthetic refinement. In the sequence in which the managerial staff in the Opera House are replaced, the outgoing director accuses the incoming one of using political corruption for his personal ends. While doing so, the accuser is seized by an attack of malaria that is meticulously shown by a camera close-up of the copious streams of saliva coming out of his mouth, under the eyes of the new director, who does not show any sympathy. Thus, the mouth becomes a foul orifice through which infection may spread and manifest, metaphorically and metonymically representing the inner corruption and decay of those in power.

Likewise, the physically imposing *prima donna* Carlotta Altieri is consistently portrayed by the people of the Opera House as a repulsive animalistic figure, a perception shaped by both her physical excess and her spoiled demeanour. A typical example of this is provided by the sequence in which she sings an aria from Bizet's *Carmen* (1875) during a rehearsal for an evening performance. The close-up of Carlotta's heavy make-up and vulgar taste in dress makes her into a caricature. The caricatural effect is metonymically highlighted by the woman's foul language. When Carlotta entangles her mantle in a sculpture on the stage, she eventually tears it apart, expostulating "Questa maison è un vero bordello, è scandaloso, vaffanculo."[6]

6 "This house is a real brothel, it's scandalous, screw it."

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The fact that Argento focuses on the degrading side of Carlotta's physicality and rudeness encourages the audience to reflect on the lack of artistic sensibility of the people inhabiting and working in the Paris Opera House. The Palais Garnier is a place dedicated to the art of music and singing, but the people practising there do not embody such art. Specifically, they enact an artistic profession without understanding the nobility behind it. Consequently, the identification of art through these people's attitudes and behaviour becomes overtly grotesque. Carlotta's mouth, for example, is constantly depicted as a filthy orifice whose only function is to produce disgust through comic relief and hyperbole, and not an instrument with which she can move the audiences of the Palais Garnier. In the sequence in which Carlotta is examined by a doctor, her open mouth is shown by an extreme close-up of her pulsating sore throat. As soon as Carlotta realises that Christine might replace her for an evening performance due to her poor health, Argento emphasises her tantrum by zooming in from the medium shot to the close-up of her screaming mouth, which becomes gigantic. Similarly, Carlotta's open mouth is metonymically associated with a series of grotesque noises, such as her gargling or the forceful breath with which, in a fit of rage, she extinguishes the candles as she screams.

Figures 7–12 Grotesque bodies: Ignace **(7)**, the Opera manager **(8)**, and *prima donna* Carlotta Altieri **(9–12)**.

This contrasts with the attitudes of Christine and the Phantom, which consistently demonstrate a profound and unwavering reverence for the art of music. During a sequence depicting a rehearsal for an evening performance, Christine's reaction, while singing Gounod's "Plaisir d'amour" from *Faust* (1859), is to faint in front of the composer. Christine immediately clarifies to herself that she had fainted both because of the emotion of singing in front of such a great composer and because of the Phantom's deep affection, which had overcome her mental and physical stability.

This coexistence of people searching for emotional and spiritual aspiration through the sublime power of artistic creation and people symbolising physical limitation as represented by their grotesque bodies and vices also lies at the heart of Argento's depiction of the Palais Garnier. In this respect, it is interesting to focus on Hugo's romantic ideal of a necessary coexistence of the "grotesque" and the "sublime" to create art and apply it to Argento's types. In the *Preface to Cromwell* (*La Préface de Cromwell*, 1827), Hugo provides a theoretical insight into a new romantic aesthetic that clashes with the archaic idea of theatre by representing the complexity of life from a different perspective:

> La muse moderne [...] sentira que tout dans la création n'est pas humainement *beau*, que le laid y existe à côté du beau, le difforme près du gracieux, le grotesque au revers du sublime, le mal avec le bien, l'ombre avec la lumière [...] Elle se mettra à faire comme la nature, à mêler dans ses créations, sans pourtant les confondre, l'ombre à la lumière, le grotesque au sublime, en d'autres termes, le corps à l'âme, la bête à l'esprit [...] La poésie de notre temps est donc le drame; le caractère du drame est donc le réel; le réel résulte de la combinaison toute naturelle de deux types, le

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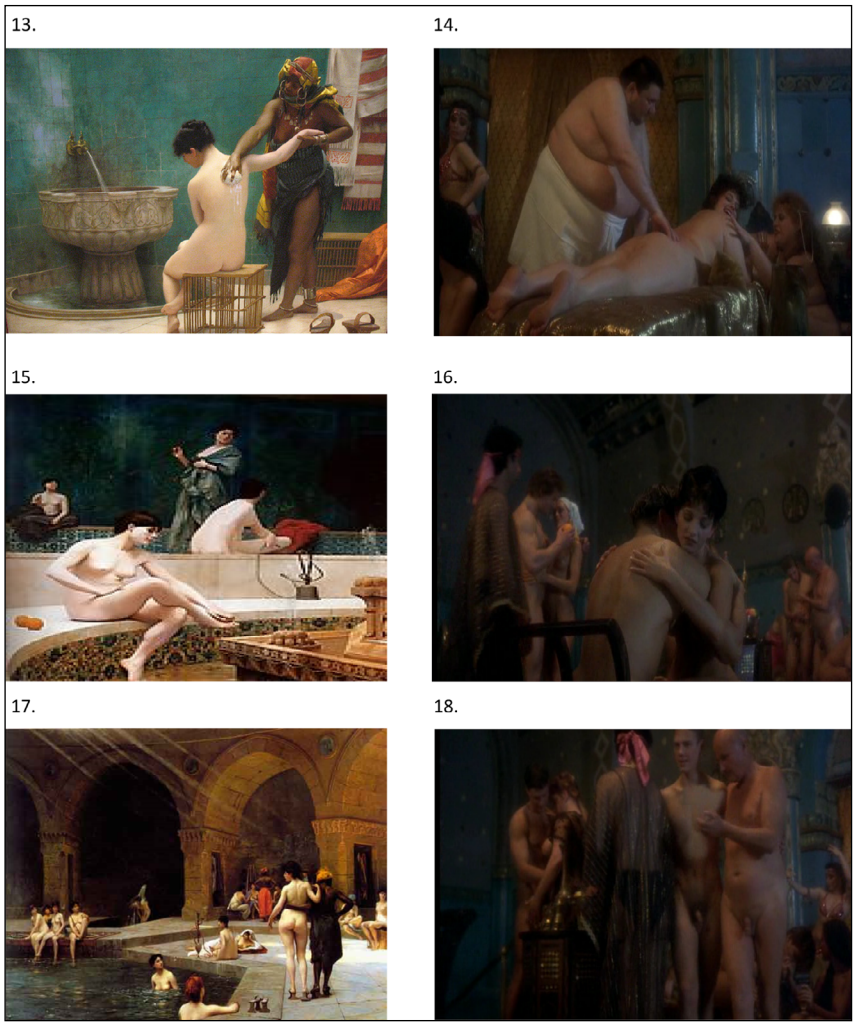
> sublime et le grotesque, qui se croisent dans le drame, comme ils se croisent dans la vie et dans la création. C'est de la féconde union du type grotesque au type sublime que naît le génie moderne (Howarth 129–30).[7]

When Hugo uses the terms "sublime" and "grotesque", he is considering them as opposites, but opposites that must be brought together in theatre to create true art. Specifically, Hugo analyses the grotesque as both contrary and complementary to the sublime in artistic creation. The combination of the two categories gives birth to the modern genius (Chao). Similarly, by combining pictorial symbolism with a grotesque portrayal of society, Argento's creative impulse in his filmic adaptation is based on this *harmonia contraria*.

The coexistence of the grotesque and the sublime in Argento's film is particularly noticeable in three sequences. When Jérôme and Raoul de Chagny visit a bathhouse, the place is metonymically represented as an orgy of bodily orifices, all intent on the pursuit of the sexual act as commerce. The Caligula-esque bathhouse is a hotbed of moral and sexual depravity, shown in a succession of heterosexual and homosexual lovers, odalisques, and prostitutes, whose physicality is expressed through a display of groaning bodies and genitals in a mixture of *sperme et sueur*. These people's physicality and sexual appetites clash with the architectural refinement of the place itself, as if inspired by Jean-Léon Gérôme's oriental *tableaux*, and with the two clothed young men near the swimming pool who are praising Baudelaire and Rimbaud and celebrating the redemption of poetry. However, both the orgy of naked flesh and the violent outburst related to a debate about poetry are in some way linked to each other. There cannot be any redemption through poetry without an original sin through the body, as Baudelaire's double role of "assassin" and *flâneur* in his contemporary society testifies.



Figures 13–18 The grotesque and the sublime through spaces—allusions to Jean-Léon Gérôme's imagery in Argento's depiction of the bathhouse.

7 "The modern genius [...] will feel that everything in creation is not humanly beautiful, as the ugly is near the beautiful, deformity is near the graceful, the grotesque is near the sublime, evil is near good, darkness is near the light [...] It will start doing as nature does, to mingle them in her creations, but without confusing them, shadow to light, the grotesque to the sublime, in other words, the body to the soul, the beast to the spirit [...] The poetry of our time is the drama, the characteristic of the drama is the real, the real results from the natural combination of two types, the sublime and the grotesque, which meet in drama, even as they do in life and in creation. It is from the fruitful union of the grotesque and sublime that modern genius is born."

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Similarly, in the already mentioned sequence of Carlotta's rehearsal, the woman's grotesque attitude and physicality are symbolically opposed to what is simultaneously happening in the background. Degas is shown painting a group of ballerinas with their teacher, filmed in long shot to represent the *plan-tableau* of *The Dance Class* (*La classe de danse*, 1873–76). Degas is observed by the paedophile Opera manager Monsieur Pourdieu, who is waiting for the ballerinas with a handful of fine Swiss chocolates in the hope of seducing one of them.

Figures 19 and 20 The *plan-tableau* of Edgar Degas's *The Dance Class* (1873–76).

This opposition between the base nature of bodily appetites, as embodied by Monsieur Pourdieu, and the nobility of artistic creation, as embodied by Degas, is repeated during the sequence at the Café de l'Opéra. While Baron Raoul de Chagny is waiting for Christine at the table, he notices Degas painting a sleeping man, shown in medium close-up and mimicking the 1877 sketch known as *La Fille Elisa*. The contrast between the nobility of art and the crudeness of those working in the building is underlined by the waiter's statement: "A lui [Degas] piace ritrarre le allieve della scuola di danza, altri [Pourdieu] preferiscono dare loro dei dolcetti."[8]

Rauger's definition of the operatic *milieu* as the ideal setting for a mixture of noble and ignoble, trivial and sublime, is fully expressed in the aforementioned sequences. In the film, Argento displays the coexistence of sin through the body and redemption through art. Like Baudelaire in poetry and Degas in painting, Argento crystallises the ignoble and the trivial and raises them to a pure art form in these sequences. At the same time, he provides an upside-down vision of good taste and morality through "carnivalesque types" and grotesque iconography. In this resides one of the greatest aesthetic achievements of the director's adaptation.

CHRISTINE'S DUALITY: FEMININITY, SYMBOLISM, AND THE GOTHIC TABLEAU

If the Paris Opera House operates as a site of aesthetic and moral collapse—where sublime ideals are undermined by base instincts—then Christine's passage through it enacts a parallel descent, one that dramatises the psychic and symbolic tensions embedded in the film's broader system of dualities. While the Phantom embodies a hybrid identity—animal and human, child and adult, genius and monster—Christine emerges as his mirror image: a figure equally shaped by contradiction and ambiguity. In Argento's adaptation, she is not simply a passive object of desire, but a liminal presence whose movement through the Opera House stages the threat of female otherness to patriarchal and aesthetic norms. Her role within the Gothic tableau reflects and refracts the monstrous hybridity she encounters, positioning her as both participant in and reflection of the Opera's symbolic tensions.

As Hume argues, the narrative structure of Radcliffe's *The Mysteries of Udolpho* is driven largely by the physical and psychological ordeals inflicted by the villain Montoni. Though often read as a tale of a persecuted heroine confined within a decaying Gothic mansion, the novel, Hume suggests, locates its psychological complexity more in Montoni than in Emily herself. This shift implies a partial displacement of narrative agency from heroine to villain, complicating assumptions about gendered centrality in the Gothic tradition (Hume 283, 287–8). A similar dynamic appears in Leroux's novel, where Christine Daaé's path is shaped by Erik's persuasive

8 "Some are delighted to paint the little ballerinas, others prefer to give them chocolates."

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power and theatrical presence. She initially places her trust in the disembodied voice she believes to be the "Angel of Music"—a figure her father promised would guide her after his death. Erik exploits this belief, presenting himself as the fulfilment of that promise to draw Christine into his emotional and artistic world. Once his physical identity is revealed, however, her response becomes more conflicted: she develops sympathy for his suffering and isolation, yet this is offset by fear and her emotional bond with Raoul. Christine's apparent passivity, then, emerges as a complex negotiation of conflicting impulses—duty, fear, pity, and desire. Leroux thus resists casting her purely as a victim, instead positioning her within a more nuanced spectrum of feminine agency—one that navigates, rather than overturns, conventional gender norms.

By contrast, Argento's Christine is imbued with a psychological complexity that is perceivable from her first appearance on screen**,** foregrounding her inner life in ways that reframe her role in the narrative from the outset. In this initial scene, the audience witnesses Christine singing in front of an empty theatre. Both her long white dress and mantle and her sweet voice symbolically associate her with an angel. When Christine finishes her rehearsal and reaches the corridor leading to her dressing room, the Phantom is waiting in a corner. This first encounter is symbolically framed through colour opposition: while Christine has black hair and is dressed in white, the Phantom is blond and dressed in black. What is more significant is that from this moment, Christine undergoes a physical and psychological transformation, rooted in an emergent self-awareness, as if she has mirrored a shadowed or transgressive aspect of herself through the Phantom. This confrontation with her own inner contradictions reaches its climax when she descends into the basement of the Opera House, guided by the Phantom's telepathic skills. While in Leroux's novel, the woman's descent occurs as a result of kidnapping and thus removes her agency, Argento's Christine chooses to meander downwards, as though compelled by this newly awakened aspect of her identity.

Considering this statement, it is productive to apply Elisabeth Bronfen's definition of "female otherness" in Western art-historical iconography and literary culture to Argento's Christine. According to Bronfen:

> While western cultural discourses construct the *self* as masculine, they ascribe to femininity a position of *otherness*. As *other*, woman serves to define the *self*, and the lack or excess that is located in the *other* functions as an exteriorisation of the *self* [...] Woman comes to represent the margins or extremes of the norm, the extremely good, pure and helpless, or the extremely dangerous, chaotic and seductive. The saint or the prostitute; the Virgin Mary or Eve. As the outsider *per se*, woman can also come to stand for a complete negation of the ruling norm, for the element which disrupts the bonds of normal conventions and the passage through which that threat to the norm is articulated. (181)

In Argento's film, the two opposing poles of the masculine self—embodied by the Phantom and the courtly suitor, Baron Raoul de Chagny—are externalised through Christine's feminine otherness. As an outsider *per se*, Christine is portrayed as psychologically torn between competing versions of herself: what she desires and what society expects her to become. Her ambivalence towards the Phantom and Raoul can be read from a dual perspective. The Phantom represents a life of subversion and emotional intensity, drawing Christine with its defiance of social and moral conventions. In contrast, Raoul embodies stability and normative identity. These opposing forces—subversive allure and conventional security—are projected on to Christine's inner landscape, shaping her evolving subjectivity.

This projection of the Phantom's unruly, destabilising qualities and Raoul's socially sanctioned attributes on to Christine's inner experience is aesthetically expressed through a specific pictorial symbolism, which serves as a visual metaphor for her transformation—from naivety to temptation, from temptation to indulgence, and ultimately to repentance. More specifically, the polarity between the Phantom and Raoul is inscribed in Christine's visual representation as both virgin and courtesan, thereby reinforcing her role as a site of symbolic conflict.

As soon as the previously virginal and white-clad Christine carnally gives herself to the Phantom, her naked body mimics the voluptuous posture of the woman depicted in Jean-François Millet's *Reclining Nude* (*Femme nue couchée*, 1844–45). Christine's symbolic recasting as the embodiment of male desire continues in the sequence where the Phantom, standing on

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Figures 21 and 22 *Plan-tableau* of Jean-François Millet's *Reclining Nude* (*Femme nue couchée*, 1844–45).

the roof of the Opera House, imagines her semi-naked, projected against the sky in medium long shot, gazing at him in a lascivious pose. Similarly, as soon as Raoul approaches a prostitute in the bathhouse sequence, he imagines this person is Christine, inviting him to have sexual intercourse. Christine's depiction as both a prostitute and a virgin reaches its climax in the sequence in which the young soprano is waiting for the Phantom's return to his secret lair after he has brought down the chandelier of the main hall during an evening performance to ensure that Christine gets the leading role in Gounod's *Romeo and Juliet* (1867). In the sequence, Argento depicts the *plan-tableau* of Georges de La Tour's *The Penitent Magdalene* (*La Madeleine aux deux flammes*, 1625–40). As Argento has stated:

> I went to see an exhibition of the painter Georges De La Tour. For ages, this 17th century painter has been underrated in his homeland but now France has gone delirious over his work that uses light, shade and reflection in the most intoxicating fashion. He evoked an extraordinary atmosphere using the natural light of candles, fires, lanterns and torches emanating in the darkness and it was precisely the look I wanted for *The Phantom of the Opera*. (Jones 253)

Argento's *plan-tableau* recalls de La Tour's motif of candlelight reflected in a mirror. While Christine is shown in medium shot, facing the mirror from right to left, de La Tour's *Mary Magdalene* faces the candle from left to right in full view. Despite compositional differences, the visual parallel draws a significant iconographic link between Christine and Mary Magdalene, underscoring Christine's inner turmoil and transformation. In de La Tour's painting, Magdalene—a repentant prostitute—is depicted meditating on worldly vanity at the onset of her spiritual awakening (Bloch et al. 177; Rosenberg 82). This reading is supported by symbols of lingering material attachment: a gold frame, ornate clothing, and scattered jewels. Similarly, Christine is portrayed at the beginning of her "repentance". Though still drawn to the Phantom, she refers to herself as a prostitute for submitting to a criminal and expresses a desire for moral cleansing.

Moreover, the thematic tension between materiality and spirituality—central to de La Tour's work—is conveyed through chiaroscuro, the *choc des contraires* (Bloch et al. 13–16). Argento mirrors this effect: the interplay of cast shadows and shading becomes a metaphor for Christine's psychological conflict, torn between her attraction to the Phantom and her yearning for lost innocence.

Figures 23 and 24 *Plan-tableau* of Georges de La Tour's *The Penitent Magdalene* (*La Madeleine aux deux flammes*, 1625–40).

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After this sequence, Christine convinces herself that she has gone too far and seeks help from Raoul. The two meet on the roof of the Palais Garnier. The fact that Christine is willing to be taken to the roof by Raoul is highly significant in relation to the woman's previous descent to the basement to meet the Phantom. While the basement is the realm of the Phantom and is a metaphor for the woman's guilty conscience, the desire to reach the top of the building, its opposite pole, suggests the woman's reunion with her good conscience, as embodied by Raoul's presence. This statement is underlined by Christine's confession to Raoul:

> Christine: "Tu sei la mia luce, ma c'è tanta oscurità dentro di me, c'è il buio." Raoul: "Tutti abbiamo dei lati oscuri dentro di noi, fa parte della natura umana. Christine, dov'è lui, è reale o esiste solo nel lato oscuro della tua anima?" Christine: "Tutti e due. La sua volontà è la mia volontà. I suoi pensieri le mie azioni."[9]

Christine's desire to reconnect with a more socially acceptable version of herself, as represented by Raoul, is also conveyed through a colour association that contrasts with her earlier encounter with the Phantom in the basement. While the metaphor of the basement as obscurity clashes with Christine's white dress and her apparent unawareness of transgression, the contrasting metaphor of the rooftop as a place of light is set against Christine's black dress and veil, suggesting that she is externalising a sense of inner conflict or remorse.

Despite this attempt to realign herself with Raoul and the normative world that he represents, Argento's Christine remains uncertain about whom she truly desires. After being kidnapped by the Phantom—shortly after her confession of love to Raoul—she comes to recognise that her emotional and erotic connection to the Phantom is deeply embedded within her. The film's final sequence ends with a close-up of Christine's tear-streaked face as she watches from a boat while the Phantom is shot by the police. At the same time, a beam of light from above grows steadily stronger as the boat approaches the shore. Together, these visual elements suggest that the Phantom's death marks the symbolic suppression of those transgressive impulses within Christine that had found expression through him.

In this sense, the tensions inherent in female "otherness"—as articulated by Bronfen and embodied in Christine's internal struggle—are not entirely resolved but momentarily contained through the Phantom's sacrificial function. The light that floods the closing frame does not necessarily signal redemption, but the return to a socially sanctioned self that remains haunted by what it has repressed.

CONCLUSION

Argento's *The Phantom of the Opera* reconfigures Leroux's Gothic narrative through a complex system of dualities—human/animal, child/adult, grand opera/carnival, as well as the threat of the *other*—which are not only narrated but also visualised through an elaborate pictorial iconography. In place of Leroux's disfigured Erik, Argento offers a Phantom whose monstrosity lies in his inner hybridity: raised by rats, yet refined and sensual, he embodies a fusion of instinct and aestheticism. Christine, too, is reshaped as a psychologically ambivalent figure whose descent into the Phantom's subterranean world marks a symbolic descent into her own unconscious. Her journey from innocence to desire and remorse is staged through visual tableaux that evoke canonical paintings, most notably Georges de La Tour's *The Penitent Magdalene*, which positions her between penitence and seduction.

This visual symbolism extends to Argento's conception of space. The Phantom's underground lair, filmed in the grottos of Pertosa, evokes the melancholic isolation of Böcklin's *Isle of the Dead*, aligning the Phantom with the *fin-de-siècle* figure of the *homme de génie* retreating from a corrupt society. Simultaneously, the grotesque caricatures populating the Opera House—particularly in sequences referencing Degas's ballerinas and *La Fille Elisa*—juxtapose artistic aspiration with moral decay. In this setting, the sublime ideals of music and art are constantly undermined by bodily excess, vulgarity, and vice.

9 Christine: "You are my light, but there is so much darkness inside me." Raoul: "We all have a dark side within us, it is part of the human nature. Christine, where is he? Is he real or does he only exist in the dark side of your mind?" Christine: "Both. His will is my will. His thoughts are my actions."

Chiaroscuro lighting, contrasting costumes, and *plan-tableau* compositions further reinforce the film's thematic tensions, making visible Christine's inner division and the instability of identity itself. Through these devices, Argento does not merely adapt Leroux's text but rewrites its Gothic logic in cinematic terms—foregrounding ambiguity, fragmentation, and contradiction. His film becomes a visual meditation on the Gothic's central concern: the impossibility of fixed categories in a world defined by hybridity and transgression.

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