**Coherently Incoherent? Dario Argento’s *Phenomena* and**

**the Influence of the Music Video**

**Abstract**

This article examines one of Dario Argento’s most critically overlooked films, *Phenomena* (1985). Scholars have tended to dismiss this film as a confused mess, and frequently point to Argento’s incongruous use of heavy metal music as evidence of its textual incoherence. I challenge this critical dismissal by examining *Phenomena*’s production history and the wider media landscape within which it circulated, and suggest that the emerging form of the music video – which was becoming prominent in Italian media thanks to the rise of the Videomusic channel and several music video television shows – was a key influence on both the film’s overall form and its use of music. Read in terms of this influence, *Phenomena* acquires a formal coherence, and testifies to a key moment in 1980s Italian media history when the country’s film, music and television industries were consolidating.

**Key Words**

Argento, sound, music, television, industry.

Even by the standards of Dario Argento’s own oeuvre, *Phenomena* (D. Argento, 1985) is an outlandish text[[1]](#footnote-1). In the film, Jennifer Corvino (Jennifer Connelly), the 14-year-old daughter of a famous American actor, arrives in Switzerland to take up residence in the Richard Wagner International School for Girls. Jennifer also has a tendency to sleepwalk and the ability to communicate telepathically with insects, both of which lead to her victimisation at the hands of the school’s teachers (apparently seeking to cure her) and her fellow students. However, Jennifer soon meets Dr John McGregor (Donald Pleasance), a wheelchair-bound entomologist who lives in the woods near the school, from whom she learns about a series of murders that have been taking place in the area. Under McGregor’s guidance, Jennifer uses her powers of telepathy and a series of insect helpers to find the murderer, who is eventually revealed to be the severely disabled son of Frau Brückner, one of her teachers (Daria Nicolodi). The film’s generic uncertainty – it sits somewhere between Argento’s gialli and his more supernatural films *Suspiria* (1977) and *Inferno* (1980) – and its combination of bizarre narrative, monotonous, brightly lit aesthetic and «gross-out» gore (at one point in Brückner’s lair, Jennifer falls into a tank of decomposing bodies) have confounded critics since its release – as Stefano Notaro writes, «analysing such a heterogeneous film is not a simple task» (2013, 158)[[2]](#footnote-2). Indeed, the film has been almost universally vilified or, more commonly, ignored by Argento critics and scholars alike: upon its release Kim Newman attacked its «astonishingly awful performances […] Non-stop dialogue howlers [and] washed-out blue look […] that works in short scenes but becomes wearying after a few minutes» (1986, 152). Even longstanding Argento journalist and archivist of his work Alan Jones describes it as «the worst fantasy slasher Dario Argento has ever been involved with […] a nightmare so out of control it’s an incoherent mess» (2016, 129), and it is often passed over quickly in monographic studies of Argento’s work (see McDonagh 2010 [1991]) [[3]](#footnote-3). *Phenomena*’s subsequent critical marginalisation is surprising, however, considering that it represented the greatest box office success of Argento’s career to that point, earning 8.2 billion lire in Italy in 1985 (*Inferno* had earned 4.1 billion lire in 1980, and *Tenebrae* [*Tenebre,* 1982] had earned 6.5 billion), and ranking as the second highest-grossing film of the year domestically (Montini 2008, 65). While not seeking to account for this success directly, I intend to suggest that *Phenomena* is in need of critical reappraisal, and that its ostensible incoherence can be explained if one looks to the media landscape within which it circulated. By analysing the film’s form alongside its wider production history, I contend that both stylistically and structurally *Phenomena* was heavily influenced by the emerging form of the music video and that, when read in such terms, it not only presents as a more cohesive text, but points to an important historical moment in Italian media history during which the film, television and music industries were beginning to consolidate.

**Film Music, Music Video**

*Phenomena*’s soundtrack has garnered more specific criticism than any of its other formal elements. Argento «is well-known for the distinctively skewed, offbeat and often jarringly dominant role that music plays in his films» (Mitchell 2009, 88; see also Lucantonio 2008a, De Carlo 2015, Hatch 2016) and had even pioneered the use of quadrophonic sound in *Suspiria* as a way of enhancing the music which Goblin had composed for the film (see Pollard 2019). However, *Phenomena* was his first film to feature popular music, combining Bill Wyman’s laconic, atmospheric theme *The Valley* and Claudio Simonetti’s more hyperactive, synthesiser-heavy *Jennifer* (both original tracks) with a variety of pre-existing heavy metal numbers from Iron Maiden, Motörhead, and Andi Sex Gang. These latter additions stand out not only due to their disproportionately high volume relative to the rest of the soundtrack, but moreover due to the seeming impropriety with which they overlay certain narrative moments. Motörhead’s *Locomotive*, for example, blares out across a slow, sombre scene that starts with McGregor’s body being carried out of his house by paramedics after he has been murdered. The track’s manic, aggressive tone is strikingly at odds with the emotional weight of the scene and for many critics the incongruity of such musical choices both underlies and exemplifies *Phenomena*’s wider incoherence. McDonagh, for example, argues that the film «is schizophrenic, and this dual orientation is reflected — as is so much in Argento’s films – in the soundtrack […] abrasive hard rock by bands like Motorhead and Iron Maiden […] are interspersed with hypnotic compositions […] there’s no common ground between the two styles» (2010 [1991, 185]). As Gabrielle Lucantonio has explained, such views are commonplace (2008b, 304). Newman writes simply that «the soundtrack is cluttered with inapt and unpleasant heavy-metal excerpts» (1986, 152) and Jones claims that «the Heavy Metal contributions from Motörhead and Iron Maiden are intrusive and deflate any suspense Argento is trying to build» (2016, 130). Beyond these heavy metal imports, even Simonetti’s *Jennifer* finds odd usage when its frantically energetic tempo is added to a scene in which Jennifer slowly follows a firefly through the school’s gardens. In short, *Phenomena*’s musical soundtrack operates almost independently of its images, and calls attention to itself in a way which is disturbing and disorientating.

Those critics who have attempted to make sense of *Phenomena*’s eccentricity have taken their lead from Jennifer’s recurrent bouts of sleepwalking. L. Andrew Cooper concludes his brief (but atypically favourable) analysis of the film by writing that «[t]he film, then, is the dream, and dreams do not need a reason to be» (2012, 127) and, like Alan Jones, Lucantonio likens it to a nightmare (2008b, 304). While such readings provide a neat bridge between the film’s content and its material form, I would like to propose an alternative reading that takes its lead from the film’s historicity rather than its narrative and that, in a sense, reads it as a *refusal* of the dream state. I would like to read *Phenomena*’s structural organisation – at the level of its soundtrack but also more widely – as not modelled so much on the dream, but on the music video. To do so, it is first necessary to account for the roles typically assigned to film music, and then to consider how the music video offers an alternative paradigm. Gary Burns and Robert Thompson (writing, coincidentally, around the time of *Phenomena*’s release) have summarised the former concisely:

Background music serves several purposes. It creates mood, fills in the space that would otherwise have no sound, provides a rhythm that interacts in various ways with the visual editing (e.g. music can «hide the cut» in a film), and can provide cues that link a specific TV program or film with other cultural texts. (1987, 11)

Writing at the same time, Claudia Gorbman has theorised film music from a psychoanalytical, and ultimately more fundamental, perspective:

Music may act as a «suturing» device, aiding the process of turning enunciation into fiction, lessening awareness of the technological nature of film discourse […] It lessens awareness of the frame; it relaxes the censor, drawing the spectator further into the fantasy-illusion suggested by filmic narration. (1987, 5-6)

Film music, for Gorbman, works to help the viewer disavow the fact that they are watching a film, but in order to do so film music must first disavow itself: its «effectiveness often depends on its not being listened to» (ib., 57, see also Brown 1994, 1). Crucially, the effects of such *unnoticed* film music are akin to hypnosis or lullaby: it «lessens the spectator’s degree of wakefulness» (Gorbman 1987, 64), and «[i]n practical terms this means a deeper sleep, a lowered threshold of belief, a greater predisposition for the subject to accept the film’s pseudo-perceptions as his/her own» (ibid). If film music typically works to engender a dream state, however, *Phenomena*’s abrupt and incongruous use of music does the opposite – the film’s soundtrack is perhaps more akin to an alarm clock than a lullaby. Despite Cooper and Lucantonio’s oneiric readings of the film, the critical displeasure which the soundtrack has generally inspired testifies to its self-insistence, and to the powerfully «de-suturing» effect that this musical self-insistence has. In a sense, these critics exhibit all the irritation of those suddenly and repeatedly *awoken* from deep sleep.

At the technical level, the soundtrack’s disruptiveness derives from its reversal of film music’s underlying audio-visual paradigm. The model of film music described by Gorbman is one in which the narrative-visual axis is the sole source of meaning in a film, to which music (and sound more widely) relates as a supporting accompaniment (see Kalinak 1992). To be clear, such a supportive musical model *is* employed occasionally in *Phenomena*: Wyman’s *The Valley* is effective at adding a sense of sinister space to the film’s opening scene, set in the countryside of the «Swiss Transylvania», and Simon Boswell’s short score *The Maggots* infuses some of Jennifer and McGregor’s conversations with a subtle, unsettling gravity. However, Argento’s use of heavy metal and, often, of Simonetti’s *Jennifer* introduces a new audio-visual relationship, one in which music dominates over a scene’s generation of meaning and in which the image becomes subservient to sound, functioning as an illustration or accompaniment. In this way, the film shifts from the paradigm of film music to the emerging paradigm of the music video. Michel Chion describes music videos as «image-radio»:

I am thinking in particular of program slots on MTV [Music Television] that offer a bloc of music videos you can follow along with as you continue working or reading […] The image here no longer touts itself as the essential ingredient; no longer stage center, it’s more like an unexpected gift. (1994, 165)

Andrew Goodwin, who was amongst the first to seriously analyse the music video, similarly describes it as «a cultural form whose visual codes *illustrate* its sounds (and not the other way around)» (1992, 50. Original emphasis), and Giulia Gabrielli has discussed a variety of ways in which image may support sound in the music video, whether by illustrating the content of the lyrics (literally or thematically), by enhancing a sonic atmosphere or by offering alternative interpretations of a song (2010). By replicating this formal hierarchy, *Phenomena*’s musical *interventions* come to seem like music video mini-texts inserted uneasily into the overall text of the film. The juxtaposition of these two audio-visual paradigms perhaps explains *Phenomena*’s «schizophrenic» incongruity – like Jekyll and Hyde it combines two opposed formal models in one text. As the film alternates between the image-led film music model and the sound-led model of the music video the spectator is repeatedly forced to change their own position or perspective relative to the film which in turn, as the critics above make clear, comes to seem incoherent.

**Formal Shift, Industrial Motive**

By comparing *Phenomena*’s moments of «intrusive» musical interlude to the emerging form of the music video, I am not seeking an abstract formal comparison but, rather, one firmly rooted in the film’s industrial historicity. While making the film both Argento and his assistant director Michele Soavi made music videos for the film’s two principal, original tracks: Soavi’s, for Wyman’s *The Valley*, includes shots from the film with shots of Wyman playing his bass guitar and behind-the-scenes footage from the shoot; Argento’s, for Simonetti’s *Jennifer*, comprises a bright, purpose-filmed sequence in which Jennifer Connelly runs through a series of corridors (often filmed through a water-screen) intercut with shots of an unknown woman and Simonetti playing his keyboard. Though Argento’s video is aesthetically unremarkable, it is highly significant for the fact that it is, to date, the only music video that he has ever directed (Lucantonio 2008b, 303). The videos’ recourse to the actors, scenes, bright visual style and in some cases actual footage from the film itself demonstrates how closely the film and its soundtrack were intertwined as «symbiotic» commodities within *Phenomena*’s overall conception. Luigi Cozzi, one of Argento’s long-time collaborators and *Phenomena*’s visual effects supervisor, has said that «music was a very important, key element in *Phenomena* […] great care had been taken [with] its music soundtrack as it meant a lot of monetary income» (correspondence with author, 2020). Indeed, the first words to roll during the film’s end credits – before the names of any actors or technical crew – are the music credits and an advert for the film’s soundtrack CD (which included both the pre-existing and original tracks). Viewed historically, *Phenomena* seems torepresent a point of intersection where not only different forms but different industries were becoming mutually implicated. In fact, the imbrication of the film industry and the popular music industry was fast becoming typical during the mid-1980s. Goodwin explains that:

the movie industry […] in the 1980s began increasingly to use pop sound tracks in order to recruit young audiences, with films such as *Flashdance, Pretty in Pink,* and *Dirty Dancing.* Such sound tracks often yielded promotional clips that simultaneously advertised a song, a film, and perhaps a sound track album (1992, 38. See also Kinder 1984; Calavita 2007).

Jones, who has been close to Argento throughout the director’s career, has suggested to me that it was this form of industrial integration that determined *Phenomena*’s approach to music: «[t]he reason why the *Phenomena* soundtrack is the way it is, issolely because [Argento] was aping soundtracks of the day like *Top Gun* […] The soundtrack market was changing, Dario went with the flow» (correspondence with author, 2020)[[4]](#footnote-4). Indeed, Cozzi writes that the music videos yielded by the film/soundtrack received considerable airtime on Italy’s expanding commercial television networks (2012, 71)[[5]](#footnote-5). *Phenomena* as an overall project (film, soundtrack, music videos) would thus seem symptomatic of the wider consolidation of the 1980s’ film, music and television industries which Goodwin describes. If the film attempts to sell records, the records attempt to sell cinema tickets, and the music videos help to sell both, then *Phenomena*’s box office success and the television airplay garnered by its associated music videos suggest that, commercially speaking, this integrated relationship was a mutually fruitful one.

In fact, Argento’s film testifies to an important moment of evolution within the mid-1980s Italian media landscape specifically. On the one hand, the film’s soundtrack – which the music videos as well as the music-dominated scenes within the film also served to advertise – was released by Cinevox, an Italian record company that specialises (and has done since the 1960s) in releasing domestic film soundtracks, and was particularly prolific in releasing the soundtracks of horror and giallo films directed by Argento, Mario Bava and Lucio Fulci. The intersection of Italy’s domestic film and music industries was thus longstanding, but *Phenomena* suggests that the growing involvement of the country’s television sector was making the relationship more complex in the 1980s. Though cinema’s assimilation of music video attributes in the 1980s soon came to be referred to, often unfavourably, as the «Mtv aesthetic» (see Calavita 2007), Mtv did not reach Italy until after *Phenomena*’s release with the launch of the station’s European variant in 1987[[6]](#footnote-6), and the film’s historicity rather seems to be altogether more domestic in its anchorage. In fact, the music video was prominent on Italian television even before the arrival of the American station. The show *Mister Fantasy* was launched on Rai 1 by Carlo Massarini in May 1981, and was Italy’s first television programme dedicated to screening music videos, popularising the format’s new audio-visual language (Sibilla 2013, 325). *Mister Fantasy* (which ran until 1984) was followed on the Fininvest-owned commercial networks Canale 5 and then Italia 1 by *Deejay Television*. On April 1st, 1984, Italy became home to Europe’s first channel dedicated to music videos, Videomusic, which aired on a Uhf frequency and, though stylistically indebted to Mtv, offered a wider range of content and maintained a strong loyalty to Italian music in particular (ibid, 329-30; see also Di Marino 2010). Cozzi’s claim that both of the music videos shot alongside *Phenomena* received heavy airplay on commercial television suggests that outlets like *Deejay Television* and the Videomusic channel were the destinations for which these videos were designed. *Phenomena* as an overall project (film, soundtrack, music videos) therefore signals the increasing importance of Italy’s growing commercial television sector as an advertising medium for the country’s film and music industries. Additionally, it indicates the pressures that Italian music television had begun to exert on contemporary cinematic form – Cozzi has suggested as much, saying that «Videomusic was quite popular in 1984 here in Italy and it’s probable that Dario had been influenced by it too» (correspondence with author, 2020)[[7]](#footnote-7). As such, *Phenomena* testifies broadly to the huge growth in Italian commercial television that followed the de-regulation of the country’s media in the 1970s (see Hibberd 2007, Balbi and Prario 2010). More specifically, it gestures toward both the accelerating entwinement of Italian commercial television with the country’s film and music industries, and to the growing importance of the music video as one of the formal mechanisms through which this entwinement was effected and cemented[[8]](#footnote-8). In short, the film and its paratexts reify a dense network of specifically Italian commercial relationships. Film industry and commercial television industry, film industry and music industry, and music industry and commercial television industry. In her book *Off Key*, a study of ‘mismatches’ between pieces of film music and the scenes with which they are paired, Kay Dickinson argues that «[w]hat is usually happening in a mismatch is an unsuccessful effacement of labor» 2008, 39). Incongruous music, that is, unusually brings to the surface the heterogeneous flows of labour and commercial interest that go into creating the typically seamless-seeming film text. *Phenomena*’s ‘inapt’ musical interludes certainly offer an opening through which its deeper commercial foundations may be glimpsed. By variously – and, crucially, awkwardly – assimilating the form of the music video *Phenomena* lays bare both international developments in the cinematic use of popular music, and points up a distinct process of industrial consolidation at play in Italy’s domesticmedia landscape at the time of its production

In this way, the underlying logic of *Phenomena*’s bizarre aural aesthetic begins to come into focus. In general, the industrial consolidation of the film and music industries (with the television industry acting as an intermediary) started to propagate and normalise precisely the formal paradigm which, I have argued, grants *Phenomena* its incoherence. In Gorbman’s words, «[t]he changing status of music in films is […] producing an altered system of relationships between popular music and image […] Behind this phenomenon, of course, lies the motive of commercial profit through the consolidation of large financial interests» (1987, 162-3). Since the soundtrack as a whole was, clearly, a key component of the film’s overall commodification, *Phenomena*’s several incongruous musical moments would seem to function not *like* music videos but precisely *as* music videos – moments designed to advertise the music itself (and thus the film’s soundtrack CD) in the same manner as standalone music video clips. Undoubtedly, the scenes which feature the film’s heavy metal tracks do not always mimic the music video form as effectively as their Hollywood equivalents – the second use of Iron Maiden’s *The Flash of the Blade*, for instance, accompanies a static and slow scene in which Jennifer tries to escape from a locked room in Brückner’s house, and the lyrics of Motörhead’s *Locomotive* distractingly overlap diegetic dialogue in the scene in which it is used[[9]](#footnote-9). However, the impulse to construct the sort of audio-visual relationships outlined by Gabrielli (above) is evident. The first usage of Iron Maiden’s high-tempo *The Flash of the Blade* accompanies a scene in which a student is chased through the school by the knife-wielding killer – the frantic pacing of the scene renders visual the manic rhythm of the song as, at the same time, its visual content underscores the lyrics’ references to blades and death. Similarly, Motörhead’s *Locomotive* is paired first with images of McGregor’s body being taken away by medics and then with shots inside an insane asylum (complete with «monstrous» inhabitants). Though, as mentioned above, the song is inappropriate according to the film music paradigm described by Gorbman (and although its lyrics interact awkwardly with diegetic dialogue), according to the paradigm of the music video, the scene’s images of death and madness fittingly thematise the song’s chaotic and ominous sound. In fact, searching for either *The Flash of the Blade* or *Locomotive* on YouTube today yields clips of the scenes from *Phenomena* in which the songs are used – over time, the scenes have literally come to stand as the music videos for these tracks. Further, the *overt* influence of the music video on *Phenomena* – which becomes palpable in Argento and Soavi’s paratextual videos for Simonetti and Wyman – is already clear in the scenes which accompany the film’s synth-pop scores. The extensive use of wind machines, backlighting, overexposure, blurry shots of corridors and abstract cutaways during these moments is oddly but strikingly reminiscent of the video for Bonnie Tyler’s *Total Eclipse of the Heart*, which was released in 1983 and follows the singer as she too wanders around a surreal school building[[10]](#footnote-10). Indeed, these visual motifs were common to 1980s music videos in general (Burns and Thompson 1987, 19). Lee Baron and Ian Inglis briefly suggest, during an analysis of music in Argento’s work, that *Phenomena*’s use ofmusic «is, in fact, perfectly in keeping with the nature of a film characterised by impaling, decapitation and mutant-murderers» (2009, 191), but I would suggest that they have it the wrong way around – the film’s images are perfectly in keeping with its music.

*Phenomena*’s overwhelming and overt commitment to the form of the music video gives the name of Jennifer’s school – the Richard Wagner International School for Girls – a meta-textual significance. Richard Wagner’s concepts of the motif and leitmotif, and his emphasis on the independent, emotional function of music, are frequently cited as the foundations upon which classical theories of film music are based; Gorbman writes that « [t]he prevailing dialect of film-music language has […] been composed of the nineteenth-century late Romantic style of Wagner and Strauss» (1987, 4, see also Kalinak 1992, 24, Brown 1994, 15). In this context, the school becomes a point of intersection between the film’s narrative and its form. The students rebel against the Richard Wagner school – they smoke, they sneak out at night, they joke and whisper during classes – as, formally, the film itself rebels against the Wagnerian paradigm of film music and, as such, the textual cohesion which that paradigm underpins. This ongoing act of formal rebellion explains not just the audio-visual structure of *Phenomena*’s music-dominated scenes, but its overall structure. Pointing to the literal meaning of its title, L. Andrew Cooper has described the film as «a collection of strange happenings rather than as a deliberately plotted narrative» (2012, 119), and Matthew Coniam calls it «a kind of unofficial ‘best of’ compilation, a distillation of all [Argento’s] quirks, tricks, obsessions and recurring images» (2000, 187). Framing *Phenomena* as a compilation of moments or, perhaps better, a «mix tape» of music videos and gory spectacles articulates the fact that watching *Phenomena* is not unlike watching two hours of music video programming – two hours of clips which are only loosely strung together. In this way, the model of music video television not only explains the incongruity of the film’s music-dominated scenes, but further informs its overall incongruity as a text.

It is worth noting, briefly, that *Phenomena* was not an isolated case amongst Italian genre films in haltingly exploring the form of the music video. A year earlier, Lucio Fulci had directed the giallo *Murderock: uccide a passo di* danza (1984), which he described as «an horrific paraphrase of *Flashdance* [1983]» (quoted in Chianese and Lupi 2010, 174)[[11]](#footnote-11). The film is set in a New York dance school and features several extended, energetic and precisely choreographed dance numbers set to original music by Keith Emerson (who had earlier scored Argento’s *Inferno* to widespread acclaim). Two such sequences, back-to-back, occupy the first five minutes of the film without any substantial narrative action or dialogue taking place, while it ends on another. *Murderock* also features a surreal, slow-motion, backlit dream sequence in which one of the dancers (wearing a billowing translucent dress) tries to escape from a mysterious man who is trying to kill her while the soundtrack is taken up with a synth rock track. Like the moments in *Phenomena* that also pair this type of visual aesthetic with rock music, the sequence seems to echo Tyler’s *Total Eclipse of the Heart.* As such, Fulci’s film seems to embrace the influence of the music video (perhaps as a side-effect of its attempt to exploit the success of a film that was itself heavily influenced by Mtv) as ardently as *Phenomena* but even more overtly. (In another parallel between the two films, *Muderock* alsoplaces an advert for its soundtrack prominently in its end credits – Fulci’s soundtrack was released by Bubble Record, an off-shoot of Cinevox.) Further, Fulci’s recourse to standalone musical interludes was also critically derided. Longstanding chronicler of Fulci’s work Stephen Thrower bluntly writes that the film is «ruined by Keith Emerson’s appalling soundtrack and a host of awkward aerobic dancing scenes […] the music sounds like it was rejected from a satellite TV tampon commercial» (2017, 297; see also Howarth 2015, 281). Notwithstanding the critical hostility with which both films were met, the formal parallels between *Phenomena* and *Murderock* do suggest quite clearly that the music video as a commercial and aesthetic model was making its presence felt to some broad degree within Italy’s popular film industry in the mid-1980s. In other words, *Phenomena* would not seem to be anomalous in evidencing the increasing imbrications – both textual and contextual – of the film, music and television industries at this time.

**Conclusion**

Read in terms of the music video, *Phenomena*’s textual logic, its concrete historicity and the interdependence of the two come into focus. I would suggest that most critics approaching the film are waylaid by an automatic impulse to read it in terms of classical filmmaking patterns, according to which it simply represents, in Alan Jones’s words, an «incoherent mess» (2016, 129). Once one relinquishes this critical perspective, however, and attends to the film’s embeddedness in the Italian media landscape of the mid-1980s, one gains insight into the work it is doing to negotiate between Italy’s rapidly integrating film, music and commercial television industries. Indeed, I have argued that *Phenomena* features several scenes that can be better understood according to the audio-visual paradigm of the music video than that of the classical narrative film, and that the film’s recourse to this paradigm is underpinned by complex but concrete processes of industrial consolidation underway in 1980s Italy. In other words, reading the film in terms of its multiple and overt relationships to the music video provides a route away from its longstanding and overwhelming critical dismissal by uncovering its underlying, historically contingent logic. Though the assimilation of a music video aesthetic by Italian cinema was only beginning at the time of *Phenomena*’s production – and the parallel case of *Murderock* suggests that it *was* a trend developing more widely – it soon became ubiquitous (see D’Onofrio, 2017). The film thus encompasses an important, embryonic moment in Italian media history. By attending to Argento’s film on its own textual and historical terms, this shift in the country’s media landscape might be glimpsed (and heard) «in progress», in a moment of flux. In short, the audio-visual logic of the music video, and the fragmentary structural logic of music video programming, hold the film together as a single text which displays a high level of sensitivity to the changing media landscape in which it sits. Read within this framework the film becomes, perhaps, coherently incoherent.

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1. The film’s English dub was originally released, in heavily truncated form, as *Creepers*. However, the full version under the original title has now been available in English for some time. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. «Fare un’analisi di un film tanto eterogeneo non è un lavoro semplice». [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. The film has, however, attracted a small amount of serious interest within the field of disability studies. See Campbell 2002 and McDaniel 2013. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. *Top Gun* (T. Scott, 1986) was released a year after *Phenomena*, but the point Jones is making is clear. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. The mid-1980s were a time when media de-regulation was leading to a massive expansion of commercial television in Italy, led principally by Silvio Berlusconi’s Fininvest. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Mtv had launched in the Usa on August 1st, 1981. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. In 1984 Michelangelo Antonioni made a (much disparaged) video for Gianna Nannini’s song *Fotoromanzo* – Argento’s foray into the world of music video was part of a wider, fluid circulation of professional between the increasingly integrated film, television and music industries. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. Commercial television networks, and indeed Rai, were also becoming increasingly involved in the financing and distribution/exhibition of Italian films during this period. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. By contrast, the music video format is incorporated seamlessly in many of Hollywood’s 1980s films – the Jerry Bruckheimer and Don Simpson-produced *Flashdance* (A. Lyne, 1983) and, again, *Top Gun* are key examples. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. It is unclear whether Tyler’s video had any direct influence on the film, but the similarity is striking. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. «la parafrasi orrorifica di *Flashdance*». [↑](#footnote-ref-11)