

**The cinematic witch: The
development of the witch in
popular horror films**

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ABSTRACT

The film *Häxan: Witchcraft Through the Ages* (1922) established certain conventions related to the witch horror film genre. These conventions are specifically related to the witch's body and her supernatural abilities and have appeared continuously in subsequent witch horror films in the twentieth and early twenty-first century. To trace and analyse the textual ripples that originate from *Häxan* I used Marjorie Levinson's New Historicist approach in combination with Bloom's six revisionary ratios to problematize the links that exist between the films, the sociocultural contexts in which the films were produced, as well as historical events that occurred before or during the time of production. In addition, Camile Paglia's theories regarding Dionysus and Apollo were included to expand on the abject and how the abject relates to the witch.

With each new film the witch reflects and is influenced by sociocultural norms and ideals of the times in which the films were created. Her physical body changes in accordance with the sociocultural norms and ideals to create horrific elements in the films, most likely due to a fear response society harbours towards powerful women. In many instances her body is used in opposition to some of these potentially negative norms and ideals, thus fostering change. The same can be said where her supernatural abilities are concerned, since the supernatural imbues the character with power and agency which is ostensibly linked with the sociocultural but also to historical events.

The witch was found in most instances to be aligned with nature and in opposition to progress and industrialisation. The witch was also found to collapse the boundaries between Baudrillard's real and hyperreal, especially in horror films of the twenty-first century. Furthermore, Bloom's revisionary ratios enabled me to trace the influences that exist between generations of filmmakers. I have demonstrated that horror filmmakers rely heavily on the conventions established by their predecessors while simultaneously changing and expanding on these conventions.

Keywords:

New Historicism, *Häxan*, historical contexts, sociocultural influences, film, gender, embodiment, female body, horror, witch, supernatural, Dionysus.

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INTRODUCTION

RESEARCH GAP AND PROBLEM STATEMENT

According to Annalee Newitz (2006) and Steven Shaviro (2006:20-23, 142-144) there is an overabundance of film studies done from psychoanalytical and psychodynamic perspectives, especially in the fields of gender and feminist studies (Freeland, 1996:742-743).¹ Certain feminist critics focus on gender and the *other* from within the aforementioned perspectives, while neglecting historical, social, and cultural influences (Acuff, 2018:201, Din-Kariuki, 2015; Freeland, 1996:742-746). For instance, there are many studies relating to the history of the technical aspects of film-making and how it has been used to strengthen and perpetuate the male gaze and patriarchal power relations in horror cinema, yet there are very few studies that consider sociocultural contexts or historical events and their influence on horror films. The only recent examples that I found were Nicholas T. Nelson's 2019 master's thesis "*What's Your Favourite Scary Movie?*": *Sociocultural Anxieties of America Represented in Post-Millennial Horror Films* and Victoria McCollum's *Rural Horror Films in an Age of Urban Terrorism* (2016). Additionally, there are almost no studies of the historical development of the horror film continuous with the sociocultural contexts of the times during which they were produced and released, nor about how the films and contexts influenced one another, with the exception of Paul Wells' *The Horror Genre: From Beelzebub to Blair Witch* (2000). Wells' book is however a general and brief introduction to over 300 horror films of all genres.

The sociocultural context incorporates ideas regarding social norms and ideals. Examples of norms are our socially approved behaviours, like the way women or people who adhere to different religious or political beliefs are frequently treated in the west. Ideals, however, is that which society aspires toward or craves, for example, our ideas regarding beauty and perfection, or the best and most comfortable neighbourhoods we would like to live in.

This thesis explores the relationship between historical sociocultural norms and ideals, and horror films by specifically analysing how these norms and ideals are reflected and/or challenged in the specific films and how they influenced the development and portrayal of the witch's body and the supernatural abilities associated with her. But why specifically study the cinematic witch?

¹ See Carusi's *Lacan and Critical Feminism: Subjectivity, Sexuation, and Discourse* (2020), Chare, Hoorn, and Yue's *Re-reading the Monstrous-Feminine: Art, Film, Feminism and Psychoanalysis* (2019), Duschinsky and Walker's *Juliet Mitchell and the Lateral Axis: Twenty-First-Century Psychoanalysis and Feminism* (2015), and Doane's *Femmes Fatales: Feminism, Film Theory, Psychoanalysis* (2013).

According to Heather Greene (2018:1, 2):

Within fictional narratives, the witch is, at her most basic, a woman who lives in the space society has chosen to abandon. She practices her crafts that community marks as unacceptable or that religion defines as sinful. She is the adolescent girl discovering her sexuality, the woman who commands it, and the crone who no longer needs it but still understands it. ... At her essence, she is the woman who knows too much – about society, about life, and about herself. She is both oppressed and the empowered. ... Upon closer observation, it appears that the witch archetype is not only dependent upon traditional religious or political views stemming from a male-centered eye, but she is also dependent on shifting social contexts with regard to gender politics, sexuality, demographics of perception, and even modes of storytelling[.]

In other words, as a fictional and historical character the witch is uniquely positioned in the space where gender, power, and culture intersect, which of course includes questions regarding race, class, and sexuality. She embodies some societal fears, but also reflects parts of ourselves. In addition, she is frequently found in the horror genre, which enables us to trace various manifestations in the popular media over time.

Numerous literary works from the past contain elements of horror. Greek classics like *The Odyssey* filled many with visions of giant monsters and dangerous female-like creatures (Circe, Calypso, Medusa, Scylla, and The Sirens) (Kawin, 2012:3). *The Bible* also mentions monstrous beings and demonic possession. Over the centuries these monstrous entities evolved, leading to the creation of numerous classic and contemporary horror stories (Hutchings, 2008:xi).

Horror, while containing fantasy elements, often has a strong connection with the real world (Fabrizi, 2018:3). In most instances horror stories take place within the very real world of the past (for example, works by Bram Stoker and H.P. Lovecraft), or the present (any Stephen King or Dean Koontz novel), and often elicit a cathartic response from the viewer (Carroll 1990:201). The reader's experience of dread or horror is ostensibly heightened by the unreal manifesting within reality and wreaking havoc and destruction (Fabrizi, 2018:3). Why this occurs is unclear, but some studies have suggested that the human brain accepts realistic environments in the media better than unrealistic ones (Lynch & Martins, 2015:299). This could partially explain why some find interacting with horror texts so pleasurable. This connection with reality can result in reciprocal influences between film and society, since they (horror and reality) overlap more readily with one another than for instance many fantasy or hard sci-fi films, yet studies on horror films mostly relate to male/female power relations and biological difference, the *other*, and the psychological theories relating to deriving pleasure from horror. This makes sense if one considers that horror could potentially stem from white European fear directed at the *other* (Wetmore, 2014:883). It should be noted that more recently scholars have also

been focussing on ecological fears and the destruction of nature as is discussed in more detail later in this thesis.

In many instances horror is ignored or ridiculed by literature theorists and critics and dismissed as not having critical or aesthetic merit (Burger, 2016:1-2, Fabrizi, 2018:1; Hutchings, 2008:vii). Due to this lack of academic discourse there are gaps in our understanding of the genre and the varieties thereof.

Mark Fabrizi (2018:2) explains in his introduction to *Horror Literature and Dark Fantasy: Challenging Genres*, that horror literature has no concise or accepted definition, which might partly explain this problem relating to varieties. Similarly, horror films are vaguely defined within contemporary film discourse and often grouped together irrespective of theme. There are numerous varieties of horror films; for instance, witch horror (*The Witch* – 2015), eco horror (*Swamp Thing* – 1982, *The Toxic Avenger* – 1984, and *The Happening* – 2008), body horror (*The Fly* – 1986 and *Boxing Helena* – 1983), to name but a few. Using psychodynamic theory as a one-size-fits-all theory to analyse these films, as some have done and continue to do with regard to especially horror films, is problematic and reductive.

Critics and theorists often focus on the male gaze and patriarchy, or a connection between violence, aggression, and spectatorship, or the viewer's reasons for enjoying this type of content and the resultant psychological effects (Fabrizi, 2018:1; Freeland, 1996:742-743). These are mostly linked to feminist theory, psychoanalysis, and psychodynamic approaches. There is also an observable link between fear and empathetic fear, where individuals learn empathy by observing fear responses in others (Madsen, 2015:142). This learnt empathy connects with Lev Vygotsky's proposed sociocultural theories, according to which individuals often learn social skills from others, including the ability to empathise (Keskin, Keskin, & Kirtel, 2019:1-2). Though western society can benefit from learnt empathy, most studies on horror are concerned with the psychological effects it has on individuals (Mundorf, Weaver & Zillman, 1989:656) and the pleasure or the disgust derived from viewing them (Mayne, 2002:1).

Barbara Creed, author of *Horror and Monstrous-Feminine: An Essay on Abjection*, expands on Freud's theory of castration anxiety. In this work Creed argues that the female cinematic monster's ability to create and sustain fear originates from the maternal and reproductive female body, as well as her ability to castrate men, as opposed to being the castrated object to be feared (Creed, 2007:7).

Creed's theories are interesting, but she often bases her ideas on a single film and at times incorrectly interprets the films. For instance, she uses the 1976 film, *Carrie*, about a young woman manifesting psycho-kinetic (non-supernatural) abilities at puberty as basis for her chapter on the cinematic witch, while ignoring other more appropriate films. It is also erroneous to claim that all horror originates from a woman's ability to castrate or from just being a woman.

The above theories are often discussed and appropriated in feminist discourse. Gender plays a significant role in film studies and is indeed important, but psychodynamic approaches tend to work within naturalised or standardised frameworks of male and female, thus excluding contemporary ideas regarding gender fluidity.

It is evident that modern film theory on horror is entrenched in psychodynamic theories. Even though there is merit in using these theories in the analysis of films, it could be argued that the over-reliance on one theoretical field is reductive and not scientific. No in-depth studies have been done which focus on new-historicist or sociocultural perspectives on horror films. Horror and film studies in general can benefit from broader analysis and the application of different theoretical perspectives. Steven Shaviro (2006:ix, 11) states that the unanimous acceptance of psychodynamic theories is totalitarian, which results in monolithic interpretations of films. More importantly, he posits that power is not isolated in and confined to the disembodied realms of discourse or representation, but can be found to lurk in the depths and the surfaces of the body if one widens one's search (Shaviro, 2006:viii).

Others, like Cynthia Freeland (1996:745-747), echo these sentiments and argue that many contemporary theories inhibit our understanding of horror movies and are too reductive due to their focus on the reasons why the viewer finds certain things horrifying, the potential mental illnesses associated with finding pleasure in viewing the films, and the potential prejudices the viewers and producers of the films harbour. She suggests that the study of horror films should be grounded in an awareness of the genre's historical varieties and origins (Freeland, 1996:750), but also conducted in relation to sociocultural contexts (Freeland, 1996:751). Though Freeland and Shaviro's statements are from 1996 and 2006 respectively, their observations are still relevant today as not many have attempted to study the horror film genre in relation to sociocultural or socio-historical contexts.

A horror film antagonist who is both popular and has appeared in various sociocultural and well-known historic contexts, is the witch. The witch is entrenched in old folklore and popular culture, and has appeared in horror cinema for 100 years. We find her in everything from children's books to horror and pornographic films. The original witch is one that instils fear and induces/causes nightmares (Cordey, 2013:104; Mencej, 2017:9, 56, 322). She wields immense power and abilities, which is rare for a female character, not just in horror films. In most horror films, one finds powerful male antagonists, while women are generally used to spur the hero into action, or to provide titillation (Mulvey, 1989:19).

Westerners often describe the witch in a universal framework: an old wart-ridden hag, wearing a pointy hat and having a hooked nose protruding from beneath the shadows of the hat, who flies around on a broom with her cat, and who is generally mean-spirited (Anczyk & Malita-Król, 2017:206, 209). Others include in these descriptions the witch as having animal familiars, being

associated with dead and putrid things (graveyards, coffins, blood, and potions), assembling in covens at night, flying through the air with demonic assistance (brooms or shapeshifting), having orgies or sexual relations with animals and/or demons, and performing bewitchments in the form of potions, spells, and/or curses (Hutton, 2010:243-244; Kieckhefer, 2006:79-80).

Theorists typically build on this model of the witch, but, as previously mentioned, mostly from phallogentric or psychoanalytical perspectives. In most cases they argue for correlations between the witch's gender and her characteristics and motivations (Creed, 2007:73-74; Esler, 1997:158; Gibson, 2008:92, 95, 102; Kellner, 1995:111).

One of the most important characteristics of the witch is her ability to create and sustain fear, whether it is fear of power, death, or castration. Fear and fascination with horror films are linked (Winter 2014:151). Her body is in many cases decaying, extremely old, or mutated like in the film *Drag Me to Hell* (2009), but the body can also be physically invisible or absent while still being able to terrorize the protagonists, for example in *The Blair Witch Project* (1999). There is also a third option, as in the case of *The Autopsy of Jane Doe* (2016). The witch, Jane, in this instance is the corpse of a beautiful young woman. This might hint at a more metaphysical kind of horror that does not rely on the object.

A controversial perspective on the female body is one proposed by post-feminist Camille Paglia – the author of the seminal, book *Sexual Personae: Sex and Decadence from Nefertiti to Emily Dickinson* (1990). According to Paglia (Chapkis, 2002:213):

Men are run ragged by female sexuality all their lives. From the beginning of his life to the end, no man ever fully commands any woman. It's an illusion. Men are pussy-whipped. And they know it. That's what the strip clubs are about; not woman as victim, not woman as slave, but woman as goddess.

From this, one can conclude that, according to Paglia, power does not solely reside with men, but within the bodies of women as well. The power of a man might manifest in his physical ability or the financial control he has over others. These require great effort to acquire, while a beautiful woman can rob a man of either of these with her sexuality. This is a very different perspective from the common feminist portrayal of men or patriarchy wielding most of the power. It is the same type of perspective that could potentially yield new interpretations of the role of the female body and its construction in horror films since power is often reversed, especially where the witch is concerned.

The supernatural abilities the witch displays in horror films are evidently and intrinsically linked to power, agency, character construction, and plot. It is thus important to study how these abilities manifest in the films and to what end. In the 2015 film, *The Witch*, an old witch kidnaps a baby,

Samuel, from an English farm in 1630. Fat is boiled out of the body and consumed by the witch and, in a later scene, rubbed on the shaft of an old broom which she uses to fly through the night sky.

A feminist reading could, for example, state that this scene was influenced by a man's fear of an independent woman and that the murder of the baby suggests the death of the nuclear family (which entraps many women to a lifelong prison of motherhood and servitude). A historic sociocultural reading of the scene points to a different meaning. The family is led by a staunch Puritan patriarch who has the family move to a farm in the rural English countryside, away from the 'false Christians' in the village they previously occupied. The film illustrates the effects of blind faith and progress on western society. It can for instance be interpreted as symbolising religious intolerance and terrorism that has been experienced all over the Western world in some way or form (Russo, 2017:80). One can argue that the baby was lost due to the father's zealous religious beliefs and what we would refer to today as toxic masculinity – a metaphor for the religious violence we are experiencing. It could also be interpreted on an environmental level where commercial farming encroaches on the forest (the witch's domain), resulting in the death and destruction of future generations (symbolised by the baby Samuel).

From the evidence posited by the previously mentioned theorists, the female body features prominently in the study of horror, as do the power relations interwoven within it. There is much more to be gained regarding the body and these power relations by examining the film as a sociocultural artefact.

According to Lev Vygotsky (1978:53-54) much can be learned of human social and mental activities by analysing and understanding culturally constructed artefacts. Furthermore, it is argued that these artefacts (like films and their production) change as they are handed down through subsequent generations due to the ever-changing needs of social networks (Lantolf, 2000:1-2).

New Historicist theories scrutinise specific historical conditions or events that led to the creation of artistic texts while also influencing sociocultural change and ideologies (Brannigan, 2001:169-170). The text and the time or era during which it was created are equally important, meaning that the two are linked on a deeper level and can only be understood in relation to one another (Barry, 2009:166). Of importance though is that New Historicist theorists posit that literature reflects how history was shaped due to how the texts represent history which in turn affects how we experience and view history (Brannigan, 2001:170).

Sociocultural evolutionary theories on the other hand encompass ideas from all the above-mentioned theories examining the extent to which human behaviour is influenced by progress and new ways of thinking (Klüver, 2002:5). More specifically it relates to the development of societies and cultures on micro or macro levels (Klüver, 2002:25). Some sociocultural evolutionary theorists tend to place more

focus on either social or cultural forces of change, while other factions combine these forces with biological change or Darwinian evolution (Klüver, 2002:25). For this study, however, an attempt is made to explain both positive and negative social and cultural changes as brought on by progress, with recourse to cultural studies and New Historical theories. In some instances specific events are considered, while in other instances the larger sociocultural context is brought into play. It is also important to note the development of film production, filming techniques, distribution of films, and the experience of the viewer in a cinematic or home viewing context.

The theories mentioned above overlap in various instances while their differences fill the gaps where shortcomings might be experienced. All of these theories posit that the time of production is important, while New Historicists go one step further by stating that a text can offer much more with regard to meaning than just mirroring history. Furthermore, sociocultural evolutionary theory draws attention to the changes and the developments a society experiences and how it influences their narratives. Simply put, social and cultural forces, can be argued, are to some extent influenced by the creators of literature and films through their texts, which in turn are entrenched in the zeitgeist, politics, and progress of the time. These films, or artefacts, not only mirror these social and cultural forces, but also influence them through reinforcement or change. This can be demonstrated by evaluating and comparing the way the witch's body and supernatural abilities are constructed in film and the zeitgeist of the time in which the films were produced.

The socio-historic context in which a film was produced is mostly inaccessible nor can we hope to gain an absolute holistic truth about the past. We can however glimpse a socio-historic context of a text by engaging with the ripples it creates through time (Levinson, 1989:108). According to Marjorie Levinson (1989:108-110) texts are timeless and reverberate through time, influencing not just other texts, but society as well. Furthermore, as these texts flare up over time new generations of viewers or readers reinterpret the texts from their current sociocultural positions (Levinson, 1989:110). In other words, as many horror films are presented to new generations with different sociocultural backgrounds, new meanings will be produced and experienced that might differ from the original contexts. Without a thorough and documented understanding of each film's historic context and the sociocultural aspects that influenced it, these new interpretations will only illustrate part of our understanding of the horror genre.

As this study is concerned with the cinematic witch in horror films, one would need to identify the original witch horror film first, which is Benjamin Christensen's *Häxan: Witchcraft through the Ages* (1922). After having identified the film one would need to establish the conventions or tropes of the genre, which can only be done after viewing a large sample of similar films, which in consequence means that one would need to identify all the seminal horror films that fall under the same witch horror film sub-genre.

Only after the witch horror film tropes are established can one attempt to trace the ripple through all the films. As one identifies the manifestations or ripples of these tropes in subsequent films they will invariably differ in some respect from the original trope, suggesting the influence of historic events or the sociocultural.

By using this method of analysis to study a pervasive and decidedly female cinematic character, new interpretations of said character can be created to expand upon the various other studies relating to gender and psychodynamic perspectives in horror films. It can potentially support or deviate from these perspectives, creating new avenues of research in film studies.

Main research problem

To what extent has the Swedish witch horror film *Häxan: Witchcraft through the Ages* (1922) influenced other western witch horror films over subsequent decades? And to what extent has the cinematic conventions established in *Häxan* influenced the body and supernatural abilities of the witch in these films? How have these conventions related to the witch's body and her supernatural abilities been influenced by historical events and sociocultural contexts? And has the witch's body and supernatural abilities had a reciprocal influence on said events and contexts?

Research aims and objectives

The objective is to identify and analyse the extent to which the witch horror film *Häxan*, has influenced other witch horror films, the cinematic witch's body, and her supernatural abilities as found in the horror film genre. In addition I aim to find instances of how the character has influenced and/or mirrored the historic and sociocultural contexts in which the films were produced. This will link horror films with sociocultural and historical currents. It will also demonstrate that an in-depth analysis can be conducted from a non-psychoanalytic angle where the female body and horror are concerned.

Thesis statement

The film *Häxan* established certain conventions related to the witch horror film genre. These conventions pertain specifically to the witch's body and her supernatural abilities and have appeared continuously in subsequent witch horror films. With each new film the witch reflects and is influenced by sociocultural norms and ideals of the times in which the films were created. Her physical body changes in accordance with the sociocultural norms and ideals to create horrific

elements in the films, most likely due to a fear response western society harbours towards powerful women. Furthermore, in some instances her body is used in opposition to some of these potentially negative norms and ideals, thus fostering change. The same can be said where her supernatural abilities are concerned, since the supernatural imbues the character with power and agency which is ostensibly linked with the sociocultural but also to historical events.

Selection of texts/films

The following films containing witches were analysed: *Häxan: Witchcraft through the Ages* (1922), *Black Sunday*² (1960), *Night of the Eagle*³ (1962), *The Witches*⁴ (1966), *Season of the Witch* (1973), *Suspiria* (1977), *The Blair Witch Project* (1999), *Antichrist* (2009), *Drag me to Hell* (2009), *Witching and Bitching* (2013), *The Witch* (2015), *The Autopsy of Jane Doe* (2016), *The Neon Demon* (2016), the 2018 remake of *Suspiria*, and *Hereditary* (2018).

From my position as a South African researcher it would have made sense to include South African or African horror films as well. This was difficult as there are very few South African horror films, never mind horror films containing a witch even though witchcraft is widespread phenomenon in South Africa. Other African countries, like Nigeria, produce films, and there are some films containing witches, but upon viewing them I found them too far removed from the horror genre.

The film selection was informed by the following considerations: All the films are of the horror genre and have enjoyed international release at cinemas. Studying the portrayal of the witch in international releases is crucial for understanding the pervasiveness of this cinematic model, or conventions, in different western cultures. The next important criterion was that the films should be popular among horror movie enthusiasts and/or have a cult following. Other factors involved in the selection were artistic merit and historical importance due to pioneering cinematic achievement.

Chapter outline

In the next chapter I discuss the various theories related to the focus of my study, starting with the known psychoanalytical, psychodynamic, and feminist perspectives related to the horror film. After discussing these perspectives I give an account of the horror genre and academic discourses pertaining to it. This discussion then dovetails into a section regarding the witch in literature, popular culture, and film. The literature review chapter ends with a discussion on historical perspectives and New Historicism.

²Original Italian title: *La Maschera del Demonio*.

³Released under the title *Burn Witch Burn!* in the USA.

⁴Released under the title *The Devil's Own* in the USA.

The literature review is then followed by a discussion on chosen methodology and the methods I use to expand on the study of the witch and the reciprocal influences that exist between her, sociocultural cultural contexts, and certain historical events.

Chapters 4 to 8 are each devoted to a specific decade and the witch horror films produced in those decades, while chapter 9 focusses on the witch horror film of the twenty-first century. In chapter 10 I summarise my major findings and contribution to the study of the cinematic witch as found in horror films.

LITERATURE REVIEW

As one attempts to understand the cinematic witch in horror films as a woman with supernatural abilities and how she relates to sociocultural norms it is imperative to have a good understanding of the literature associated with gender, power, sociocultural norms, and film.

First one would need to consider what respected scholars have written about the portrayal of women in horror films. The female body is, for instance, frequently portrayed along stereotypical lines of beauty and sexuality. This adds meaning to the character which can be interpreted in various ways. Horror films are also a product that developed out of the horror genre of fiction, making it equally important to consider horror fiction and how it relates to horror films. For example, conventions in literary fiction have been adapted and/or changed to accommodate film production. These differences can influence the narrative and embodiment of the characters.

The witch appears in both literature and film, but also in toys, games, comic books, and house decorations for Halloween, to name but a few types of media. She is pervasive in popular culture and one would need to take this into account as it has a bearing on her numerous incarnations. The witch's myriad different embodiments are tied to the society and culture in which they are created in, meaning that it becomes especially important to understand how society, culture, and these embodiments intersect and why. It is thus important to have a good understanding of sociocultural and new historical perspectives as it would help make sense of the witch's various portrayals over time and the reciprocal influences that exist between her and the western society that created her.

From the above one can see that the literature review starts with the very wide net of gender discourse in film which then dovetails into discourses about the horror genre. This is then filtered down to perspectives on the witch and her embodiment in popular culture, which in turn links sociocultural perspectives.

PSYCHOANALYSIS, PSYCHODYNAMIC FRAMEWORKS AND THEIR INFLUENCE ON FEMINIST PERSPECTIVES ON HORROR FILMS

The horror film witch, like most monstrous antagonists in horror films, is frequently portrayed by critics and theorists in a negative fashion. Most studies focus on the male 'gaze' and patriarchy, a connection between violence, aggression, and spectatorship, or the viewer's reasons for enjoying this type of content and the resultant psychological effects (Fabrizi, 2018:1; Freeland, 1996:742-743). These interpretations are in most cases linked to feminist theory, psychoanalysis, and psychodynamic approaches. These fields make it difficult to understand the witch's role in society at a specific point in time as the male gaze, patriarchy, and viewer experiences are in a state of constant flux and change. In most instances academics are only interested in the extent to which the witch is a product of the male gaze and the problems regarding sex and gender she embodies. These types of studies do not, however, give us a better understanding of the society in which the film was created or if the witch challenged power structures. For instance, there seems to be an observable link between fear and empathetic fear, as individuals learn empathy by observing fear responses in others (Madsen, 2015:142). If a viewer empathises with the cinematic witch then it would suggest that she challenges sociocultural norms, consequently resulting a challenge to the status quo. Lev Vygotsky, a proponent of sociocultural theory, suggested that individuals generally learn social skills from others, including the ability to empathise (Keskin, Keskin, & Kirtel, 2019:1-2).

Similarly, Linnie Blake (2008:1-2) states that horror films explore trauma or traumatic events vicariously through symbolic storytelling techniques in order to deal with loss and death. This can theoretically lead to empathy towards others due to learnt shared experience, thus contributing further to the connection between sociocultural phenomena and horror films.

According to some scholars, spectatorship, or viewing a film relates to the pleasure or the disgust derived from viewing (Mayne, 2002:1). Judith Mayne (2002:1) suggests that spectatorship, or the consumption of films and the myths they contain are cultural events of importance and a type of symbolic activity that reflects much about the spectator. Disgust while viewing suggests that the viewer could readily tear themselves away from the subject matter. This is often not the case and many derive pleasure from experiencing fear, viewing the gruesome, the violent, and the abject (Lynch & Martins, 2015:313). Fear also serves a function in identity formation and life experiences (Alexander, 2008:176-178). According to Alfred Hitchcock, fear is immeasurably pleasurable and the enjoyment and thrill of it contributes much to our lives and even to an extent to our identity formation (Hanich, 2010:4). Personal identity has a direct influence on the sociocultural norms found in social

circles and vice versa, where identities reinforce or change psychological development of individual members (Gommans et al, 2017:1724; Poldin, Valeevam and Yudkevich, 2016:460-461 and 464-466).

Laura Mulvey (1989:xi-xii, 8-10), author of the Freudian inspired *Visual and Other Pleasures*, speculates that the pleasure in viewing horror films originates from the male gaze and man's fear of castration and woman as a "castrated" human being. A woman's reason for being is to draw attention to her shortcomings, thereby exalting the penis. She states that women are made objects of fetish, or commodities, that are traded and exploited for sexual and financial gain, while being represented and constructed by the male gaze (Mulvey, 1989:xii, 7, 19). In this way, the female body is often sexualised while emphasising beauty and/or sexual availability (Mulvey, 1989:7, 19-20).

Furthermore, she believes that women are punished in film for their lack of a penis, resulting in the overuse of phallic objects like knives, guns, snakes, and other phallic extensions as instruments of their death and torture (Mulvey, 1989:8). This robs a woman of her ability to castrate and makes her less of a threat to the male viewer (Mulvey, 1989:8). The threat of woman lies in her ability to distract and mesmerise with her sexuality and body (Mulvey, 1989:8). A man likes to believe a naked woman is vulnerable, when in fact she is not (Mulvey, 1989:8). The introduction of a phallic object in addition to the male penis is not unlike calling reinforcements. The penis can only penetrate in certain ways and though it can kill through STDs or sexual assault, a knife, for instance, is an immediate and visual threat.

Women are frequently rendered powerless in western films and are often objectified and fetishized in popular culture to sustain the status quo. After viewing a one-man exhibition of photographs by Alan Jones in 1970, titled *Women as Furniture*, Mulvey was inspired to formulate her own ideas regarding women in film (Mulvey, 1989:6). The exhibition replaced popular pieces of furniture, like tables, hat-stands, and chairs with life-size statues of women leading to the objectification of the female body and making it fetish (Mulvey, 1989:6).⁵ These women are without identity, context or motivation and are stark, literal and figuratively stripped-down versions of women as often seen in the media. From this, Mulvey suggests that the image of women has three distinct aspects (Mulvey, 1989:7). They are: woman plus a phallic substitute; woman minus a phallus who is often humiliated and punished by a woman with a phallus; and finally, woman as a phallus. Her theory rests on the perceived power the male penis holds, which seems reductive and too simplistic. She delves into the complexities of castration and the male gaze, yet never considers the female gaze or other sources of power, like the sexualised female body or competition amongst men. According to Mulvey's various abovementioned theories, film can be construed as a medium where women are put in their place as subordinate to men

⁵ Much like the décor pieces we see in the Korova Milkbar in Stanley Kubrick's *A Clockwork Orange* (1971).

which in turn gives the male viewer pleasure, since the woman's potential to castrate has been removed. This would suggest that when a woman derives pleasure from viewing a film, the patriarchal media's brainwashing was successful, and that women are easily manipulated.

Isabel Cristina Pinedo's *Recreational Terror: Women and the Pleasures of Horror Film Viewing* (1997) considers why women enjoy horror films. Pinedo (1997:70) says feminists tend to focus on male spectatorship and the male gaze when studying horror films while ignoring female audience pleasure. She argues that feminist scholars are inclined to categorise female viewers of horror films as either masochists or sex traitors (Pinedo, 1997:71). Pinedo (1997:84) posits that women derive pleasure in horror film through Carol Clover's so-called 'Final Girl' who survives the onslaught of the killer or monster by being capable and resourceful.⁶ The Final Girl disrupts the status quo and enables a powerful female character with whom women can identify while simultaneously giving women a female vehicle of rage and violence that leads to catharsis (Pinedo, 1997:84, 86, 95).

Related to the above is the idea that all men are power-hungry, heterosexual beings who derive pleasure from viewing women in the ways described. The popular male action hero also does a disservice to men in that she suggests that the epitome of manhood is to look and act like the male characters often portrayed by Bruce Willis, Sylvester Stallone, Arnold Schwarzenegger. Mulvey's theories thus do not just draw attention to the objectification and suppression of women in cinema, but also reinforce certain patriarchal stereotypes regarding women.

She does, however, make a valid point regarding the desire to see the hidden, forbidden, and the private (Mulvey, 1989:16-17). The viewer finds pleasure when that which is usually hidden, is revealed. She posits that the darkened cinema is the perfect arena where the viewer can be anonymous while viewing forbidden and hidden things (Mulvey, 1989:17). In the modern world of online streaming and downloads, this has become even more prevalent, since the viewer can now view these films in the privacy and comfort of their own homes away from prying eyes.

Mulvey (1989:17-18) also equates pleasure in viewing a film to the act of self-recognition or difference to the self. In other words, the viewer finds it pleasurable to identify the image of one's self with the image of another on screen. This contributes to the formation of the self (Mulvey, 1989:18). She misses the opportunity though to explore how difference between the viewer and the screen image might also illicit a response in fascination. Neuroscience has shown that difference and even more so, exaggerated difference, illicit a pleasure response from the viewer (Ramachandran &

⁶ See page 6 for more on Carol Clover's Final Girl.

Hirstein, 1999:16-20). The more pronounced the difference is from the norm, for instance, overly muscular men and large breasted women, the more pleasurable some viewers find the objects or beings they are viewing. This seems more plausible than the idea of gaining pleasure from viewing a subordinate woman, since a heterosexual viewer could find pleasure in viewing someone of the opposite sex they might find physically attractive. The same can be applied to homosexual viewers, since actors on screen are often far more physically attractive than an ordinary person, meaning that the difference creates fascination and pleasure.

Like Laura Mulvey, Linda Williams (1991:6) also suggests that some viewers might find the punishment of women in film pleasurable, but her reasons differ. She states that women in film are punished because they are aligned with the monsters (both can be described as the *other*) and represent a threat to patriarchy while reinforcing the idea of the active or sadistic male viewer and the passive or suffering female object (Williams, 1991:85, 90, 97). This influences the way the female body is constructed, where women are often turned into physical monsters (David Cronenberg's *Rabid*, 1977) or where their bodies are maimed and/or tortured (Rob Zombie's *House of 1000 Corpses*, 2003). A crucial gap in her theory though is that she does not align the monsters and male figures in the films. In other words, she does not attribute male characteristics to the creatures even though there are obvious links between them. In this instance, she also does not consider sociocultural aspects that are not entrenched in the abject or the patriarchal, like social status or non-binary genders.

Williams makes an interesting observation regarding the similarities between pornography, horror, and melodramas. She suggests that these three genres represent excessive emotional states in their female protagonists and that the audience finds it pleasurable to observe these characters in said state (Williams, 1991:3, 4). In pornography women cry and scream due to sexual ecstasy, in horror they do the same, but because they are in physical pain caused by violence and terror, while in melodramas they are in emotional pain – all portray women that are experiencing intense uncontrollable emotions (Williams, 1991:4). The female body seems to be able to express emotion far more readily than the male body, which might also suggest why pornography tends to focus more on her than the male performers. Williams (1991:4) posits that the cinematic female body is and always has been the primary embodiment of fear, pain, and pleasure. This could indicate why horror, pornographic, and melodrama genre films have been and still are popular among viewers. Still, her views are in many ways one-sided, as she makes stereotypical assumptions regarding men and women, like women being more emotional or more prone to express their emotions than men.

One could suggest that due to the way western society constructs masculinity, men are often unable to express their emotions and that they could potentially and vicariously experience their emotions

through films. In some instances it can be positive, for example when Ang Lee directed *Brokeback Mountain* (2005) and publicly admitted how deeply the narrative affected him on an emotional level (Hicklin, 2015). Ridley Scott has directed many films with strong, independent, and physically capable women as protagonists, like *Alien* (1979), *Thelma & Louis* (1991), and *GI Jane* (1997). Scott has never shied away from sharing his views about women, stating in interviews that a strong woman is someone to be lauded and that any woman is just as capable as any man in any situation (Ollove, 1997). Lee and Scott's statements thus suggest two things, firstly, that men can be just as emotional as women, and, that some men do view women as equal to men, implying that their level of emotive emotionality can be the same as well.

In other instances a film can mirror a director's toxic masculinity, like the rape scenes in Roman Polanski's *Repulsion* (1965) which could potentially mirror the director's attitude towards women. Roman Polanski has been charged numerous times for rape and sexual assault (Wakeman, 2017). If a film director can potentially experience some form of emotion for a female character then it is likely that the male viewer could have similar experiences. From these above paragraphs it is clear that women are not always objectified victims when men direct films, but that there are instances where they wield much more power than society gives them credit for.

Williams (1991:7-9) also refutes the idea that women who enjoy horror or pornography have submitted to the systems of patriarchal society and that women enjoy the power plays and the physical pleasures found in the films just as much as their male counterparts. She uses the example of sadomasochistic pornography where a woman is tied up and exposed to prolonged periods of suffering and compares it to the suffering experienced by the female protagonist in a melodrama or horror film (Williams, 1991:8). As a consequence, it becomes cathartic for the viewer when the woman is finally released, reaches orgasm, or kills her assailant. Hence there is a bisexual oscillation that takes place when viewing these films, where the male and female viewer has a myriad of experiences through the protagonist and the antagonist (Williams, 1991:8). Though Williams suggests that men can also identify with female characters and that there are instances of male femininity in films, many men still find these types of scenes uncomfortable which points to a much larger and engrained problem in society (Williams, 1991:8-10). This problem makes identification less intense or more subdued where men are concerned (Williams, 1991:9). Though this approach has merit, it still seems one-sided, since Williams maintains that at the core, horror, like pornography, is increasingly violent due to the sexual differences of the portrayed characters (Williams, 1991:9) and that this violence hinges completely on castration (Williams, 1991:10, 11).

Carol J. Clover maintains a similar notion in respect to the aforementioned oscillation of the sexes. According to her the horror movies, or specifically slasher films (a sub-genre of horror films), enable the viewer to experience what the victim experiences throughout the duration of the film, irrespective of the audience's gender (Clover, 2015:x-xi). These experiences usually manifest through what Clover (2015:x) calls the Final Girl. The Final Girl is the last person left alive in horror films who acts as a type of tour guide for the viewer (Clover, 2015:x). The Final Girl is usually a tomboy with an ambivalent name like Stevie or Will making her more gender fluid and subversive (Clover, 2015:x). Clover (2015:xi-xii) also finds that most modern horror films employ camera techniques so well that it becomes difficult for male viewers to identify with the antagonists. She is also one of a few theorists to insist that horror film enthusiasts have a diverse spectatorship that includes women, individuals from all races and ages, which goes against the claim of feminist scholars that assert that horror film enthusiasts are predominantly male (Clover, 2015:xii).

Specifically, Clover (2015:xii, 5) mentions that the male viewer is much more able and ready to place himself in the shoes of the victim and to experience the brutal, sexual, and humiliating attacks than some feminist discourses would presume, which is in contrast with Williams's stance regarding the subdued, self-distancing response of male viewers. In this way the male audience experiences the brutality of phallic imagery visited upon the human body from the perspective of the female victim (Clover, 2015:xii).

To achieve this sense of gender malleability, the female character has to be constructed according to specific guidelines. Clover (2015:xi, xii) suggests that the character has to be boyish in some way or form (sometimes by having a boyish name or by having tomboy attributes) while still being feminine as not to disturb or threaten male competencies or sexuality. By doing this the male can more readily place himself in her body and experience her emotional state. The female body consequently becomes a virtual surrogate for the male viewer allowing him to vicariously access her lived experiences. She does ask a very important question (Clover, 2015:xii):

For although I continue to marvel at the way female screen figures have been so relentlessly deployed for her-body-himself sensations, the question in retrospect, given the real-life sex/gender transformations in the intervening decades, is whether the brazenness of the move in slasher films was an act of dishonesty or of admission or of something in between.

She thus questions the motivations of the fluidity of gender presented in horror films and if it genuinely attempts to disrupt the status quo or if it is simply a parlour trick to sustain fascination. I would like to contend that horror films may be ahead of their time by unconsciously appropriating

fluid gender identities not just in characterisation, but in the audience as well, which is counter to what many theorists postulate. Clover's book, *Men, Women, and Chain Saws: Gender in the Modern Horror Film* (2015), makes an in-depth case against various assumptions held by cinema theorists. Most importantly she presents evidence that the cinematic apparatus as we know it identifies more with the victims than the antagonist and not as much as some would believe with the male voyeuristic gaze or the perpetuation thereof (Clover, 2015:8-9).

Another aspect that Clover considers is the formulaic structure of horror films. She and others have noted and observed how the audience is in most cases able to foresee who is going to die when, and how the film will end (Clover, 2015:9). She attributes the success of horror movies to this predictable structure and the ritualised formulaic characters found in horror cinema (Clover, 2015:9). This is congruent with Alfred Hitchcock's statement about horror films being like rollercoasters. The patron or viewer expects to be scared and to have a rush of adrenaline. One knows what to expect when climbing into the rollercoaster and the same can often be said about horror films. These fixed structures of narrative and characters resemble folklore albeit in a modern medium (Clover, 2015:10).

Sequels are also often found within horror cinema and these are usually very similar to the original film, but with new characters and some variation⁷ (Clover, 2015:10, 11), which is not unlike the various versions of the Grimm fairy tales many of us have been exposed to. Take for example the consistency and frequency of the witch's appearance in the original tales of the Brothers Grimm which are closer to horror than fantasy. The witch is always trying to kill or enslave children and she always dies at the end. This is the formula and that is what the audience expects. This was true during the time they were created and is as true now for modern audiences. Some would disagree and cite Disney's 2014 *Maleficent* as example of this not being the case, but one has to consider that *Maleficent* is not a horror movie and that in this film the character was changed to a fairy, which is not a witch at all. Technically, Angelina Jolie's *Maleficent* character was symbolically raped when her wings were cut off by her paramour which makes her a rape-revenge hero, like Jennifer Hills in *I Spit On Your Grave* (1978).

Clover (2015:10) mentions that camerawork in horror does not set terms relating to identification as many film theorists would like us to believe. She rather suggests that that these identifications are already in place before the producer or director lays the groundwork for a film and that the camera simply plays with these already established notions (Clover, 2015:10). In other words, the

⁷ This does not mean that there are no original horror films. Lars von Trier's *Antichrist* (2009) and André Øvredal's *The Autopsy of Jane Doe* (2017) are all prime examples of what can be accomplished by applying interesting variations to the tropes of horror cinema as will be explained later.

camerawork merely conforms to the biases of the viewer, which draws attention to the importance of sociocultural study. Though Clover seems to understand the sociocultural aspects that are at play within horror cinema, she still connects it back to Freud⁸ by linking the pleasure in viewing horror films with the audience's repressed fears and desires as well as the residual conflicts associated with these feelings (Clover, 2015:11). She also places emphasis on the phallus, but in a decidedly different way than the typical Freudian scholar. She equates fear and fascination not with the absence of the penis, but the vagina as inverted penis, or a penis that is hidden from view (Clover, 2015:13-14). The penis is a visible construct or mapping of the invisible vagina (Clover, 2015:14). The penis lays bare the secrets and structures of the vagina, though in inverted form.

Finally, Clover has some interesting insights regarding gender and the sexes based on the idea of inverted penis. She explains that there are three sexes, male, female, and the "one sex" which is both sexes combined (Clover, 2015:14). The male and female sexes are more modern social constructs, while the "one sex" comes from a time before the upheavals in society created divisions between sexes (Clover, 2015:14). Werewolves, vampires, demons, and all the other monsters originate from the "one sex", which means that horror is in a privileged position to study this one-sex phenomenon due to the malleability of the sexes we find in the genre (Clover, 2015:15). Even though this specifically deviates from Freud's theories, most of her theoretical assumptions are very much entrenched in psychoanalytic theory and also quite outdated as she does not consider gender fluidity.

Another psychoanalysis theorist of renown within film studies and who is on par with Carol J. Clover, is Julia Kristeva. As a successor of Lacanian psychoanalysis, Kristeva also rejects the idea of castration anxiety as the source of pleasure in horror literature, but posits that the pleasure is based on the preoedipal stage in an infant's development as well as the maternal body (Kristeva, 1982:14, 20, 54, 55, 64). She hypothesises that pleasure stems from transgressing boundaries in the struggle to form an identity free from the influence of our mothers, hence the dual nature of the viewer's simultaneous attraction and repulsion of horrific scenes (Kristeva, 1982:123-125, 126-129, 205). These boundaries manifest in the form of menstrual blood, excrement, open wounds, and things that decay or are unclean, which all threaten the natural symbolic orders of society (Kristeva, 1982:4, 67-71). This in turn influences the way bodies are constructed in film. In 1979's *Alien* we find Ripley, who displays maternal characteristics towards her cat and the other crew members. She is in turn hunted and nearly killed by a monstrous alien with a head resembling a dripping and erect penis. She only survives and escapes the alien after she takes off her clothes at the end of the film revealing a young and curvaceous body which suggests sexual availability. She is thus not viewed as a mother

⁸ She cites psychoanalytic theory as her predominant method of analysis in the introduction of *Men, Women, and Chain Saw: Gender in the Modern Horror Film* (Clover, 2015:16).

any more, but as something to gain pleasure from, which in turn saves her life and enables her to vanquish the alien.

Kristeva says the following regarding the abject:

The abject is not an ob-ject facing me, which I name or imagine. Nor is it an ob-jest, an otherness ceaselessly fleeing in a systematic quest of desire. ...The abject, has only one quality of the object – that of being opposed to I. If the object, however, through its opposition, settles me within the fragile texture of a desire for meaning, which, as a matter of fact, makes me ceaselessly and infinitely homologous to it, what is abject, on the contrary, the jettisoned object, is radically excluded and draws me toward the place where meaning collapses. (Kristeva, 1982:1-2)

In other words, the abject is that which causes conflict and/or is the separation between the human, or the I, and that which is not human. Furthermore, it is something that is difficult to categorise or catalogue. Kristeva (1982:4) explains that the revulsion we have towards bodily wastes does not originate from a desire for good health and cleanliness, but because these excretions disturb order, identity, and power systems. She suggests that these excretions are hidden within the body, but they are not part of the body and is something that the body needs to expel to survive (Kristeva, 1982:3-4). An example she uses in *Powers of Horror* is the corpse where the human body is separated from God, but also from science (Kristeva, 1982:4). The immobile corpse does not function, but its state of being is beyond comprehension as we inevitably experience it, but we cannot become alive again and explain the experience to others. The same idea applies to human waste where it is processed by the body but is never part of the body. Our experience of it is a need to expel it from our orifices, because it is not part of us. The dark side of a person, like being a liar, traitor, or criminal, is analogous to bodily waste as it is something hidden within the boundaries of the human body that others are not privy to. The hidden disrupts identity because there are hidden aspects of our identity that others have not been exposed to. It similarly disrupts order and power systems through the hidden.

I find the above fascinating as it can be linked with Camile Paglia's ideas regarding Dionysus which are discussed in detail in the next section on horror. Paglia (2001:5-12, 18) suggests that Dionysus represents the foul liquids and wastes of the human body. She also states that Dionysus is the embodiment of chaos that has no bodily boundaries and that he can shape shift between genders and animals (2001:6, 30, 92-93). Paglia's Dionysus and Kristeva's abject overlap in interesting ways, especially with regard to the witch as is discussed in detail in the next chapters.

The inherent problem with Kristeva's theory, however, is that she only attributes the pleasure of the experience of fear to a mother and does not consider other possibilities. Human beings are not monotonous or homogenous beings and our drives and pleasures differ. My own pleasure in horror texts stems from the hidden parallels these texts share with reality. For instance, I find pleasure in being able to connect the fear of the vampiric succubus to a greedy and insatiable woman who preys on week-minded men. Similarly, I find it both fascinating and terrifying that zombies are not far removed from every day members of society who go through life without ambition, who are addicted to social media and reality television, and who are unable to think for themselves. The most frightening aspect of it is how contagious this type of lifestyle is and how easily brilliant and creative minds can find themselves trapped in it. My personal pleasure in fear therefore originates not from my mother, but from society itself. The emphasis on the mother being associated with fear is Freudian and inherently patriarchal (Horrocks, 2001:132-133). Therefore, Kristeva's ideas being so heavily influenced by Freudian developmental theories can be perceived as questionable and limiting.

Barbara Creed, author of *Horror and Monstrous-feminine: An Essay on Abjection*, returns to the idea of castration anxiety, and expands upon it. In this work Creed argues that the female cinematic monster's ability to create and sustain fear originates from the maternal and reproductive female body, as well as her ability to castrate men, as opposed to being the castrated object to be feared (Creed, 2007:7, 87). An example of this can be found in 2007's *Teeth* directed by Mitchel Lichtenstein. In this film a teenage girl undergoes mutations as a result of exposure to a neighbouring nuclear power plant and teeth grow inside her vagina. When a classmate attempts to rape her, the young male is castrated. This is a literal example of what Creed proposes, but there are also more subtle variations of this type of castration. Creed (2007:110-111) argues, for instance, that Medusa's head can also be seen as *vagina dentata*, due to her head resembling the vagina. She states that the writhing snakes are pubic hair and that her open mouth is the vaginal opening, while her tongue resembles a clitoris and the boar tusks are the castrating teeth (Creed, 2007:111).

Through the course of *Horror and Monstrous-feminine*, Creed discusses women manifesting as monsters in seven guises, namely, the archaic mother, monstrous womb, vampire, witch, possessed body, monstrous mother, and castrator. Since the witch is most relevant for this study, the paragraphs below will focus on the specific chapter regarding this cinematic archetype.

Creed (2007:74-76) defines the cinematic witch as a woman who inspires dread, wields terrifying abilities, collaborates with the devil, and a sexual deviant with an innate desire to commit evil acts. She is the antithesis of patriarchal order and visits destruction on families, communities, and the boundaries between the rational and irrational (Creed, 2007:76). Her powers manifest not from an

external source, but are irrevocably linked to her feminine and sexual nature as well her close relationship with the natural world (Creed, 2007:76). Furthermore, the witch is associated with the abject, like decay, rats, bats, putrid potions, and cannibalism (Creed, 2007:76). Though these observations are correct and fit the accepted description of a witch, Creed then creates a tenuous link between some witches' supernatural powers and the female reproductive system and menstruation.

Creed uses three films as evidence of this link, namely, *Carrie* (1976), *The Exorcist* (1973), and *Omen IV: The Awakening* (1991). In these films, the women seem to display abilities with the onset of their menarche, though *Carrie* is the only one of the films where there is explicit evidence of this. Carrie displays telekinetic abilities and is able to move objects with her mind, while Regan in *The Exorcist* exhibits a disfigured pustule-ridden face, great physical strength, and the ability to projectile vomit hundreds of litres of pea soup. *Omen IV*'s Delia is the only one who can be considered a witch, due to her grandfather being Satan himself and the supernatural abilities she exhibits to murder others.

Though there is a definite connection between menstruation and supernatural ability in *Carrie*, the link seems tenuous where Regan and Delia are concerned. Delia's power manifests when her nanny Jo, who has psychic powers, senses the evil in Delia. It is later revealed in the film that Delia is the protector of the Antichrist, who is growing inside her adoptive mother's womb. Similarly, Regan in *The Exorcist* only starts displaying abilities due to demonic possession after playing with an Ouija board. She is in fact not Regan anymore, but merely a vessel for the demonic Pazuzu entity. It is not Regan who has the abilities, but Pazuzu.

The rest of Creed's analysis rests solely on *Carrie*, which does not possess an accurate example of a witch. Carrie displays telekinetic abilities which can be linked to biology, especially due to her abilities manifesting when she has her first period. These are the same abilities the mutants manifest in the X-men and other superhero films, and in comic books (heroes and villains). In the case of mutants, their powers originate from a mutation in the individual's genes, while the powers of superheroes, like Spider-man, the Hulk, and even Superman, originate from external forces, like being bitten by a radioactive spider, being caught at ground zero during a gamma bomb detonation, or by having an alien genetic structure that is susceptible to exposure to the yellow rays of the sun. These abilities thus have a basis in science and science fiction, and not the supernatural. Like these characters, Carrie does not commune with the devil, nor does she associate herself or is she associated with abject things. In the strictest sense, Carrie is either a mutant or an individual with super powers, or, alternatively, a female victim-hero who exacts revenge on her tormentors, much like the protagonists in *I Spit On Your Grave* (1978 and the 2010 remake) and *The Last House On The Left* (1972 and the 2009 remake).

Though Creed's theories are interesting, largely basing one's theories on a single film is not evidence enough. There are numerous more appropriate films that contain actual witches. It is also erroneous to claim that all horror originates from a woman's ability to castrate or from just being a woman.

Noël Carroll (1990:196, 200) argues that the pleasure in horror is derived from the cognitive interest of gradual disclosures, revelations, and the existence of the impossible monster. He goes further by stating that exposure to unpleasant images is the price the audience pays for their curiosity or to live vicariously through a terrible experience (Carroll 1990:167, 170, 184, 186). One has to consider that these puzzles reinforce interest in horror films and interest often leads to discussions among individuals with similar interests. This means that social learning is again taking place, which has further bearing on sociocultural development.

Even though Carroll's theories share ideas with sociocultural theories, he still mirrors the ideas proposed by Freud, specifically pertaining to the field of trauma studies, which in turn laid the foundation for many feminist film theories. Feminism deals specifically with female agency and the representation of the female body and gender (Barry, 2009:117). Feminists, however, do not share the same consensus regarding the female body or about gender. In many instances the female body is linked to her potential for creating sexual pleasure for men through the male gaze, like Laura Mulvey argues at the beginning of this chapter. Other times a woman's body is linked to her ability to castrate or being a castrate. In all instances mentioned above it links back to female power and agency. This power and agency is either lacking or, when present, drives the women mad with power and vengeance. I find that the manifestation of power in a woman, as represented in horror films, differs dramatically from power acquired by men. With woman they either have too little power, are driven mad when they gain too much power, or are in league with the *other* or the monstrous as seen throughout this thesis. Where men and power are concerned, power manifests in much more varied and nuanced ways, as seen in the *Warlock* and *Hellraiser* films. Women who wield or gain power are often discussed by feminists along similar lines, leading to many studies with similar findings. There are other scholars though who approach the female body and her power from other angles.

A challenging perspective on the female body, for instance, is one proposed by the aforementioned post-feminist Camille Paglia – the author of the seminal, yet controversial, book *Sexual Personae: Sex and decadence from Nefertiti to Emily Dickinson* (1990). According to Paglia (cited in Stein & Williams, 2002:213):

Men are run ragged by female sexuality all their lives. From the beginning of his life to the end, no man ever fully commands any woman. It's an illusion. Men are pussy-whipped. And

they know it. That's what the strip clubs are about; not woman as victim, not woman as slave, but woman as goddess.

From this, one can conclude that, according to Paglia, power does not solely reside with men, but within the bodies of women as well. The power of a man might for instance manifest in his physical ability or the financial control he has over others. These require great effort to acquire, while a beautiful woman can rob a man of either of these with her sexuality. This is a very different perspective from the more prevalent feminist perspective of men or patriarchy wielding most of the power. It is the same type of perspective that could potentially yield new interpretations of the role of women in horror films since power is often reversed, especially where the witch is concerned.

Though gender plays a significant role in film studies and is of concern, psychodynamic approaches tend to work within naturalised or standardised frameworks of male and female, thus excluding contemporary ideas regarding gender fluidity (Dirse, 2013:15). Similarly, in the approaches described above, one only finds assumptions and theories based on generalised portrayals of male and female. Further analysis is required to create a more comprehensive analysis of horror and the construction of the characters found in film, especially with regard to the construction and representation of female and non-male characters.

In addition, I find that the over-emphasis of the penis in feminist rhetoric troublesome. Though there are nuanced differences in their approach to the male phallus I posit that by focussing on it so much, gives it more unjustified power. Additionally, associating the fear men experience as a result of castration anxiety seems reductive, as does fear associated with the mother. There are undoubtedly instances where these assumptions could be true with certain individuals, but it would be unlikely that this could be attributed to all men who enjoy or produce horror films. Many of the arguments made by the feminists above, like Carrol, Creed, Kristeva, and Mucley, come across at times as one-sided. The idea of the camera, for instance, solely representing the male gaze seems tenuous to me, especially as the scholars discussed up to this point seem to also reject the notion. Similarly, I have yet to find a convincing argument in support of such claims. Cameras emulate our natural ability to see objects. In most instances cameras frame and record subjects from a personal point of view. Other times camera angles are from above or below, but these are for technical reasons or to create a specific effect for the narrative. A person shot from a low angle, for example, seems to be endowed with power, while a person shot from a slightly elevated angle may seem less powerful. These angles could potentially be used to subvert female power, but I have found instances in the horror films discussed elsewhere in this thesis where the camera angles empower women.

Though I find less issue with camera work, I am concerned about the way women are often portrayed as helpless victims or vehicles of male desires as I am about their lack of agency. I also take issue with the way women who gain power are often driven mad by power and are unable to control this power, like Jean Grey (Phoenix) in the Marvel comics and films, and Carrie in the self-titled novel and films. With this study I endeavour to shed more light on the women and their link to power and agency, and how it relates to society, culture, and history, without having to rely on outdated models of gender, the male penis (or lack thereof), or the mother.

THE HORROR GENRE: LITERARY AND OTHER ACADEMIC DISCOURSES RELATING TO THE GENRE

In the previous section I discuss Kristeva theories regarding the possible origins of the abject, or that which causes us to experience horror. She describes feelings of horror emanating from disgust and revulsion at that which defies expectation and explanation, but also that which defies the boundaries of the human body. The Latin root of the word “horror”, *horrēre*, means “bristling” (Santilli, 2007:181). This seems apt, since “bristling” is what a character feels against their leg when the monster toys with him or her in the dark. Leaves bristle in the cold dank air of Slaughter Swamp under the bat-ridden sky. The rushes below the open window rustle while teenage Tammy and Jim are making out on the couch while watching *I Was a Teenage Werewolf Part 3*. A reader also bristles in fear while devouring the latest Stephen King or Dean R. Koontz novel.

The horror genre ostensibly has its origins in mythology, folklore, and religion (Corstorphine, 2018:1). In mythology we find that Medusa’s head full of snakes can turn any man who looks upon her into stone. A horrifying prospect and spectacle. All over the world we find folktales of a young woman who hitchhikes and promptly vanishes, or turns into a frightening spectre, or kills the driver if he is male. In the *Book of Revelations* we find descriptions of devils, demons, and strange beings who will inevitably lay waste to the world. Mythology, folklore, and religion are all part and parcel of society and they inform our cultural ideals and motivations (Belsky, 2007:226-227; Croft, 2006:1071-1072; Lynch, 2001:1174). These stories and the monstrous beings contained within them, though influential and a mirror of societal values and fears, are not constant and their meaning changes and flares up over time. There is however a relative constant, namely power structures, and these power structures influence and are influenced by sociocultural norms. When we look at the past and the power structures that reigned throughout history we find that cultures succeed and attain longevity through control and scientific achievement. Control only occurs when many individuals conform to the same norms and ideals. Historically control was and still is enabled through the combined efforts of many individuals to control or overcome nature. To control nature, scientific progress is required. In many instances western cultures have always aligned this control and scientific achievement with the male gender, but also with their gods and heroes. For instance, the Abrahamic religions historically attempted to control women’s bodies and female agency. Medusa (woman and nature) was defeated by Perseus when he surprised her with her reflection in a mirrored shield (a man with a weapon based on science). Red Riding Hood trespasses in the forest to visit her grandmother and is saved from a wolf by an axe-wielding lumberjack. Hansel and Gretel, the product of a nuclear family (progress), kill a witch who lives in the forest (nature) by shoving her into an oven, a manmade device. Western stories are filled with similar scenarios of man versus woman, order versus chaos,

and nature versus progress. Early examples of these conflicts are mirrored in the children of Zeus, Apollo and Dionysus.

In her aforementioned influential work *Sexual Personae: Art and Decadence from Nefertiti to Emily Dickinson* (2001) Camille Paglia discusses works of art and Western culture through Apollonian and Dionysian perspectives. Apollo was, after Zeus, the most revered god of the Greek pantheon (Taft, 2014:30). He was the god of religious law who purified men, and with the exception of Leto and Zeus (his parents) none of the other gods could endure his presence (Taft, 2014:30). To this day he is associated with the sun and with brightness and purity (Taft, 2014:30). He, like Christ, is the son of a god of the highest order who helps mankind by negotiating their sins through divine law.

Dionysus was also a son of Zeus, but his mother was Semele, a mortal woman and the daughter of the king of the Thebes, Cadmus (Taft, 2014:57). Zeus accidentally killed the pregnant Semele when he appeared to her. He was able to save Dionysus though by slicing open his own thigh and carrying Dionysus to full term (Taft, 2014:57). Dionysus was the god of nature, ecstasy, and wine – he represented the sap and blood of nature (Taft, 2014:57). The Dionysus cult was popular among Greek and Roman women, but he never gained the same notoriety among men (Taft, 2014:57). Dionysus is also able to turn men mad, blind, and impotent (Taft, 2014:57).

Paglia links the Dionysian with the chthonian. The chthonian, which means “of the earth”, existed and ruled as unnamed and pagan belief system before the Olympian Greek religion gained a foothold in ancient Greece (Paglia, 2001:5). Paglia (2001:5-12, 18) associates man, order, the sky, science, logic, and western civilisation with Apollo, while connecting rot, fear, woman, chaos, nature, pregnancy, the unknown, menstruation, putrid swamps, and the underworld with Dionysus – in other words, things usually linked to the horrific in horror films. Paglia (2001:5) says that the Apollonian is western society’s hope “that by naming and classification, by the cold light of intellect, archaic night can be pushed back and defeated”. In other words, science is humanity’s struggle and attempt to understand nature. By understanding nature, humanity can control nature. Since Dionysus is the god of nature, fertility, and wine, it makes sense that Apollo represents notions that seek to control that which Dionysus stands for. The sciences like biology and geology contain the liquid shapelessness of nature by establishing boundaries in which nature exists (Paglia, 2001:6, 30). Comparably, the Christian church is Apollonian as it attempts to control women and nature (Paglia, 2001:18-19).

Paglia (2001:57) argues that man fears nature because it is primal, rugged, and turbulent. The concept of beauty is used by man against nature as weapon – boundaries, proportion, and symmetry are all used to objectify and constrain nature within a set of boundaries (Paglia, 2001:57). Beauty is used to

freeze nature in place, rendering her harmless (Paglia, 2001:57). Dionysus is an extension of the chthonian as he is associated with the shapeless sap, blood, and liquids of nature – that which the Apollonian seeks to control through naming and classification. The female body's curves and shapes, namely the hips, breasts, and buttocks are fluid-like, which is why man is obsessed with the female body (Paglia, 2001:30). Just as man objectifies nature in order to control it, so does he objectify the female body in the hope of containing its fluid curves (Paglia, 2001:30). Paglia (2001:29-30) makes a similar case for art and says that the creation of artefacts is intertwined with man's objectification and conceptualization of nature and woman.

Man seeks to control woman because their fluidity reminds them of the unclean and primal swamp that she embodies – the miasma that all life crawled from, or as she describes it: “menstrual albumen, lukewarm matrix of nature, algae, bacteria ... uterine jellies ... blood” (Paglia, 2001:92). This shapeless mass is psychologically and aesthetically disturbing to man (Paglia, 2001:92). Apollo's torch is extinguished by Dionysus's “fleshy muck of generative matrix” (Paglia, 2001:93). Nothing disgusts Dionysus, because he embodies everything that man has labelled as disgusting or putrid (Paglia, 2001:93). Disgust is an Apollonian concept, an aesthetic judgement which originates from man's fear of losing control of nature and women (Paglia, 2001:93).

Purity and the virginal are all concepts created by man to control a woman (Paglia, 2001:94). The chaste woman is rendered holy by men, because she embodies a sexually non-threatening woman who cannot lead a man astray (Paglia, 2001:94). The virgin woman is the Apollonian ideal created by man for a woman and which sets her aside from nature's raw and unbridled sex. The virgin is pure pleasure for a man as the unsullied woman cannot compare him to other men or sexual experiences she has had in the past.

Dionysus in comparison is wanton, promiscuous, and destructive (Paglia, 2001:96). Dionysus is also the god of free love and rape (Paglia, 2001:98). Women being aligned with Dionysus are thus threatening to the hierarchy of the family and western society. She will devour a man sexually and discard him when done. She will repeat this exercise over and over again, as Dionysus is cyclical, a being who destroys just to rebuild (Paglia, 2001:94-96). Where Christians eat the body of Christ for the sake of sacramental ritual, the Dionysian cult members saw babies, people, and animals as representations of gods which they then viscously dismembered and ate in an effort to become gods themselves (Paglia, 2001:95).

From the above it becomes clear that Dionysus is linked to horror, disgust, and the abject. These feelings and experiences are not new and have been part of society long before the horror genres in

film and fiction existed. What we find horrifying has changed over the centuries to fit the current zeitgeist. The horror story evolved and changed over the decades, leading up to Horace Walpole's *The Castle of Otranto* (1764), which is regarded as the first gothic novel, which in turn paved the way for Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* (1818), Edgar Allan Poe's short novellas (first half of the nineteenth century), Robert Louis Stevenson's *The Strange Case of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde* (1886), Oscar Wilde's *The Picture of Dorian Grey* (1891), and finally Bram Stoker's *Dracula* in 1897 (Hutchings, 2008:xi).

When it comes to the study of horror literature, Gothic studies seems to dominate over all other studies of the genre (with the exception of gender and psychoanalytic studies). Some attribute this domination of the genre in academic discourse to the popularity of the late eighteenth century Gothic novel (Corstorphine, 2018:2). Interestingly, Gothic novels were especially popular amongst young women during the late eighteenth century (Corstorphine, 2018:3; Kilgour, 1997:6). The idea of young women reading lurid tales of death and murder was controversial at the time and deemed inappropriate by many (Corstorphine, 2018:3; Kilgour, 1997:6). There were complaints that the novels were not preparing young women for their future domestic lives and that these types of stories were causing harm to their "fragile" feminine minds (Corstorphine, 2018:3; Kilgour, 1997:6-7). This type of reasoning is still prevalent today and many question and harshly judge those men and women who enjoy horror novels and films (Martin, 2019).

Most of these literary analyses concerning Gothic literature hinge on the inescapability of the past and how it forces itself into the present, bringing destruction and chaos to all those it touches (Corstorphine, 2018:2; Kilgour, 1997:6; Morgan, 2002:54). It is therefore not just about fear, but how we perceive the world and the internal systems and mechanisms we create in it (Corstorphine, 2018:2; Morgan, 2002:61). In Bram Stoker's *Dracula* (1897), for instance, Count Dracula is from Eastern Europe's violent past and he goes to a then present England to murder and seduce. The monster in Mary Shelley's 1818 novel *Frankenstein* is abandoned by his creator and then exacts his revenge on him in the present. Both novels have also been shown to play with sociocultural issues of the time. *Dracula* can easily be interpreted as an enemy of repressed Victorian era sexuality while *Frankenstein*'s monster can be seen in terms of scientific advancement going awry when it attempts to appropriate the power of God. Again we find these monsters aligned with Dionysus.

In a similar vein, H.P. Lovecraft's novellas were more concerned with the anxiety brought on by scientific discovery and the realisation that for all of mankind's efforts on Earth, the universe is indifferent to our actions. Even more so implicit in Lovecraft's work we find the fear of the unknown which is compounded by scientific discovery where the more we discover about the universe the more

we realize how insignificant we are (Corstorphine, 2018:5; Morgan, 2002:100). Lovecraft's monsters are also frequently formless and shapeless creatures that defy explanation, much like Dionysus.

From the wealthy trappings associated with the characters in the Stoker's *Dracula* to the rural farm house in George Romero's *Night of the Living Dead* (1968), we find a strong socio-political undercurrent that asks questions about social class, race, and society as a whole. These are often discussed in academic discourse with some notable works by Wendy Fall, Dara Downey, and Anya Heise-von der Lippe. Dracula, a wealthy nobleman, feeds on the poor, and justice only prevails when he starts feeding on the wealthy Lucy Westenra and her compatriots. *Night of the Living Dead* is an exaggerated spectacle of the trappings of modern society. This becomes even more apparent in the sequel when the protagonists are trapped in a mall with shambling zombies all converging on the shopping centre due to old habits of commercialism.

It is thus safe to assume that gender, culture, society, and scientific advancement all seem to intersect upon and influence the horror genre. Feminist discourse and psychoanalytic theory form but a very small part of cultural and societal schemas, yet they seem to be the focus when it comes to horror. While many academic discourses appear to be preoccupied with the Gothic novel or psychodynamic approaches, others focus on why individuals enjoy horror. According to Carol Clover (2015:167) horror cinema is about eyes, especially the eyes of the audience.

Judith Mayne (2002:4) regards spectatorship as the most important area in the field of film studies and the most misunderstood. She finds issue especially with the preoccupation some academics have with critical versus complacent spectatorship and argues that there is an on-going relationship between the viewer and film after they have left the theatre (Mayne, 2002:2-4). According to Mayne (2002:5), the idea of complacent spectatorship leading to a society of complicit individuals, as touted by some academics, is flawed (Mayne, 2002:5). Film viewers do not consume films or any other imagery without some contemplation taking place afterwards, in fact, the consumption and resulting contemplation on visual media has replaced many forms of human communication as we see, for instance, with the use of memes, animated gifs, and emoji's on social media (Mayne, 2002:5). This could mean that the viewer's enjoyment of a film reflects much more about society than just mindless viewing to fill a void of boredom in modern society. It would also mean that popular films that are often disregarded by academics and critics as low art, like the horror genre, may say more about society than critically acclaimed films that were only viewed by a small audience. It has to be noted however that an art film can and often do explore the same topic as a popular film, but it is presented in a much more challenging way and therefore sometimes inaccessible to the layman, as will be explored in the upcoming section on Lars von Trier's *Antichrist* (2009).

Horror films seem to fall in an in-between of popular ‘trash’ and film, attracting a small viewership with even the most popular horror movies not being as financially profitable as other genres. According to *The Numbers* (2021a), an online resource that records financial data of films, the three highest grossing horror films of all time are *IT* (2017) with \$701.01 million, *IT: Chapter 2* (2019) with \$469.57 and *The Exorcist*⁹ (1973) at \$428.21 million. There is a 46 year period between them where only 29 other films broke the \$200 million barrier (The Numbers, 2021). The same website reveals that *IT* (2017) does not even rank among the 120 highest grossing films of all time and is placed 126th on the list of highest grossing films of all time (The Numbers, 2021b). There is also not a single horror movie on Rottentomatoes.com’s list of the 50 highest grossing films of all time (Childress, 2019). This could also indicate why the horror film genre is not a popular subject amongst film scholars as the viewership might seem inconsequential.

Those who do study horror film viewership tend to focus on the viewer’s experience. Judith Mayne (2001:1), and many other theorists as noted in Martin (2019), suggests that viewing a film relates to the pleasure or the disgust derived from viewing, while others experience pleasure from experiencing fear (Lynch & Martins, 2015:313). Fear has also been shown to contribute to identity formation and life experiences (Alexander, 2008:176-178) and can be pleasurable within the right context (Hanich, 2010:4). As the individual’s identity is formed and changed by these experiences, they often spill over into peer groups, thus creating a ripple effect that changes those around us (this is discussed in much more detail in the Sociocultural and New Historical Perspectives section on pages 42-58).

According to Andrew Tudor (1997:444), studies concerned with the viewer relating to horror cinema can be grouped into two categories. The first category asks questions about the type of person that enjoys horror. The second category asks what is it about horror that viewers find appealing. Tudor (1997:445-446) states that these questions are fundamentally flawed, since they imply generalised and reductive answers.

Some theorists argue that viewers enjoy horror films because of the catharsis they receive (Tudor, 1997:445), while others believe that only a perverted or severely deranged and repressed mind can enjoy these types of narratives (Grixti, 1989:86, Tudor, 1997:449). Some believe that pleasure is gained by way of experiencing dangerous and impossible situations in safe surroundings (Tudor,

⁹ If we adjust *The Exorcist*’s global receipts according to global inflation it would \$1.154 billion in 2019 (Bean, 2019). The popularity of this film can be described as a fluke and could be attributed to the notoriety of the film at the time (Kline, 2018:16-17).

1997:449), while another group equates pleasure with indulging in the taboo (Tudor, 1997:449). Though these ideas are plausible, they are still too entrenched in Freudian theory and too simplistic.

Noël Carroll makes some intriguing observations regarding horror in his 1990 book *The Philosophy of Horror: or Paradoxes of the Heart*. The work does not rely on psychoanalysis or psychodynamic theories as mode of analysis, but advances two core arguments to explain his theories. The first of the two is his “universal” theory which suggests that the anomalies found in horror, like the monsters, create attention and curiosity (Carroll, 1990:189-190, 195). The second of the theories, the “general” theory, focusses more on the structures of the horror narrative where the monsters are involved in the narrative and its disclosures (Carroll, 1990:190).

What Carroll neglects to mention though is the role of fear in horror films. Fear is a complex emotion and is an important evolutionary trait (Shepard, 1996:29). Mathias Clasen (2012:222) also questions why individuals find pleasure in horror cinema and seeks the answers in evolutionary psychology and biocultural analysis. In his paper, *Monsters Evolve: A Biocultural Approach to Horror Stories*, Clasen (2012:223) states that ancient man lived a life in constant fear. Dangerous predators roamed the landscapes and the world was very much unknown, making early man prone to superstitions and running amok with their imagination. This served an important biological function and kept human beings alive for centuries (Clasen, 2012:223). Studies have also shown that man is still equipped with these biological traits and that horror films like *The Shining* (1980) and *Silence of the Lambs* (1991) can engender genuine fear responses. Even more interesting is that these fear responses seem to be quite universal across all people and that people will often have the same reactions (Clasen, 2012:224). Not only did studies reveal these universal feelings of fear, but they also revealed changes in attention and arousal states which suggest that horror captivates the audience while also terrifying them (Clasen, 2012:224).

What is interesting in most of the arguments mentioned in this section is that many of them attempt to create and employ basic and universal distinguishing characteristics on the viewers of the horror genre. Not only are the purveyors reduced to generic categories of users, but so is the whole genre reduced to an all-encompassing and unsophisticated genre where only Gothic literature (from which the horror genre extensively borrows) seems to hold any value. Assumptions are thus created about the viewers which *others* these viewers in relation to the rest of society. It is precisely this *othering* of individuals that sent many to the pyre during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. Though it does give the critic a foundation from which to analyse the witch’s body and supernatural abilities, such a study becomes one dimensional due to its overreliance on gender and the power struggles linked to it. Also, it ignores societal norms of the time in which the films were produced.

THE WITCH IN LITERATURE, POPULAR CULTURE, AND FILM

The term “witch” first appeared in the English written language in the year 890 and was initially used to describe a male practitioner of witchcraft (Mills, 1992:263). It would take another 110 years for it to be used to describe a woman with the same proclivities (Mills, 1992:263). For approximately 300 years witches were generally midwives, healers, and sorcerers, with some practicing white magic, while others practiced black magic (Mills, 1992:263-264; Schimmelpfennig, 2013:29). During this time they were well-respected individuals in society, but by the thirteenth century the Roman Catholic Church attempted to discredit them and labelled them as heretics (Mills, 1992:264). This culminated in the witch trials and hunts of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries when many people lost their lives after being accused of witchcraft (Mills, 1992:264; Zwissler, 2016:179).

Some scholars have suggested that women were accused of witchcraft during these times simply due to them challenging patriarchal norms (Jackson, 1995:72; Zwissler, 2016:183). While others have refuted this claim stating there is little evidence to support such theories (Barstow, 1994:201). Others, like Diane Purkiss, a notable academic and writer of one of the more popular books on the history of witchcraft, *The Witch in History: Early History and Twentieth-Century Rrepresentations* (1996) refutes the validity of empirical and historical evidence where the historical study of witches is concerned (Purkiss, 1996:71-72). Willem de Blécout, on the other hand, offers a more nuanced explanation in his study on the witch. He proposes that women were at the centre of witchcraft accusations because of women’s position in society (2000:303). He explains that due to women having different interpersonal relationships with their neighbours and their domesticity, it put them in a unique position to be more readily accused of witchcraft (De Blécout, 2000:303).

Pamela Moro (2017:1) argues that witch accusations and the resulting witch hunts are responses to social tensions. Though the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries gave birth to the Renaissance, religious reformations, and the Scientific Revolution, it was still an age marked with famine, poverty, political turmoil, and religious conflicts (Qihong, 2008:148). De Blécout (2000:303) states that witchcraft was a simple and believable scapegoat when a person was met with misfortune or something beyond their control, due to religious indoctrination of the time.

This changed dramatically in the eighteenth to nineteenth centuries, and by the twentieth century the witch had become a pervasive pop culture icon and is still being shaped by the media today (Schimmelpfennig, 2013:28). During Halloween it is not uncommon to find paraphernalia and decorations featuring a short and stocky green-skinned witch with a wart-ridden nose, black robes and a black pointy hat. It is precisely this broom-riding, howling old hag that has become the accepted

description of the witch (Purkiss, 1996:277). This same appearance we first find in film in 1939's *The Wizard of Oz* and then in 1952's Disney produced, *Trick or Treat*.

From the above it is clear that the witch is not an unchanging character type. She is constantly evolving as the society around her changes. It appears, however, that the witch generally fits a negative stereotype which originates from her being a female with supernatural abilities and having exaggerated negative attributes. One of the oldest texts in the world, the *Bible* (2010), is filled with tales that paint the witch, or those who practice witchcraft, as evil. I Samuel 15:23 equates witchcraft to rebellion, while Micah 3:7 calls on Christians to disgrace all those who practice witchcraft (Bible, 2010). Leviticus 19:26 and Deuteronomy 18:1-13 similarly describe witchcraft as a sin and an abomination (ibid.). The *Bible* goes as far as to mention in the book of Revelation 18:23 that sorcery is instrumental in setting the stage for the apocalypse.

The most well-known witch in the *Bible* is colloquially referred to as the *Witch of Endor*. In I Samuel 28:7 Saul visits a woman who conjures him the spirit of Samuel. Samuel rebukes Saul and tells him that God has abandoned him and that he and his sons will die the very next day at the hand of the Philistines (I Samuel 28:17-19). Interestingly, the witch noticed Saul's distress and weariness and consequently took it upon herself to feed him and his servants (I Samuel 28:21, 25). She baked them bread and slaughtered a calf for them (I Samuel 28:21-25), which correlates with the idea that many witches of old were also healers.

The *Bible* in many instances links witchcraft to death, destruction, and the fall of man to one specific end, namely, that a true Christian follows only the word of God and should only trust God for fear of death (Isaiah 8:18-22). This was most likely an attempt to steer society away from seeking advice from something other than the church and the clergy thus reinforcing the power of Abrahamic religions.

Greek mythology also mentions three women who share characteristics with the modern-day witch, namely, Circe (*The Odyssey*) and Agamede/Perimede (*The Iliad*). Circe is described in *The Odyssey* as a goddess, but also as human who lives on the island Aeaea between "oak thickets and wood" (Homer, 2003:2329-2339). The narrative describes her as having great and terrible power and having familiars (mountain lions and wolves) who she charms by use of potions (Homer, 2003:2359). In the tale she gives Eurylochus's men potions to drink to lull them into a false sense of security and then turns them into pigs by striking them with her wand (Homer, 2003:2368). She also has the ability to heal as Odysseus discovers when she bathes him after he foils her attempt to bewitch him (Homer,

2003:2417). Lastly, she has forbidden knowledge of the Land of Dead and dominion over the weather (Homer, 2003:2466, 2504).

In *The Iliad* we find Augeas's daughter, Agamede, who can also be described as a witch. The character is only mentioned in one sentence of the entire epic, but this one sentence describes her as being world-renowned due to her potions and knowledge of herbs (Homer, 2005:3837).

In the very first act and scene in Shakespeare's *Macbeth* the reader is introduced to three malevolent witches. These witches conform to the western stereotype of the witch as they make reference to their animal familiars (Graymalkin, a grey cat, and Paddock, a Toad) and meeting in ill-weather (Morrow, 2000:29; Wilby, 2000:283-284). In scene 3 of the same act, one of the witches describes a plan of revenge on a woman who has refused to share her chestnuts with her. Instead of taking revenge on the woman she plans to exact her wrath on the woman's husband, a sailor, by controlling the wind while he is at sea. Her revenge would not just harm the husband but also all the other crew members on board. Curses and amputated parts from the dead are also mentioned in this scene¹⁰ linking the characters to the stereotypical witch who surrounds herself with dead and putrid things.

The witches also predict Macbeth's arrival before he enters as well as his ascension to king when they greet him, implying their power of foresight and prophecy. While chanting they refer to themselves as the 'weird sisters' implying their *otherness* in relation to society. In Act III, scene 5, Hecate, the queen of the witches is introduced into the play and she sheds light on the physical appearance of the witches by referring to them as 'bedlams', which in this context eludes to their hag-like appearance¹¹ (Morrow, 2000:110). The witches only appear again when Macbeth visits them in Act VI, scene 1. In this scene the witches are preparing a vile potion in a bubbling cauldron. As they chant and move around the pot one is reminded of many such similar scenes in fiction and films where witches throw body parts, toads, and entrails into a bubbling cauldron.

Shakespeare was not the only writer who described the witch along these lines. In the various fairy tales by the *Brothers Grimm* the witch is often portrayed as an old woman who due to her age is unable to work or to find love (Schimmelpfennig, 2013:28-29). Interestingly, many of the stories written by the brothers were in fact tales collected with the help of informants, friends, or from other books (Grimm, J. & Grimm, W. 2014:xxi). Many of these informants, in turn, were young middle-

¹⁰ The scene has historical roots to when King James VI of Scotland ascended the throne to become the King James I of England (Morrow, 2000:20). It is also believed that he was a patron of Shakespeare's acting company shortly after becoming king in 1603 which may have influenced the appearance and actions of the witches within the narrative (Morrow, 2000:20). News from Scotland (1591), for instance, recounts a trial where a group of Scottish witches were accused of attempting to kill King James by means of scuttling his ship during a voyage to Denmark (Morrow, 2000:20).

¹¹ Similarly, Macbeth also refers to them as hags in Act IV, Scene 1.

class women from Kassel and Münster who would congregate in gardens or houses to tell the stories to one another (Grimm, J. & Grimm, W. 2014:xxi). Most of the story elements did not originate from them, but from other women who in turn heard them from others. These women had been seduced by demons and devils and are described as wielding magical power, since Jacob Grimm himself viewed women in general as having a predisposition for magic due to them having more free time than men (Schimmelpfennig, 2013:29).

The witches in the tales by the Brothers Grimm are in some instances from different social and economic backgrounds. For instance, in *Little Brother and Little Sister* the witch was an evil stepmother who abused the brother and sister (Grimm, J. & Grimm, W. 2014:34). In *Hansel and Gretel* the witch is an old decrepit woman who lures children to her isolated gingerbread house in order to fatten them up and eat them (Grimm, J. & Grimm, W. 2014:47). In *Little Snow White* the witch is the second most beautiful woman in the world and also a queen (Grimm, J. & Grimm, W. 2014:171). In most instances however, she is portrayed and described as an old woman, most notably in *Rapunzel* (Grimm, J. & Grimm, W. 2014:xl), *The Twelve Brothers* (Grimm, J. & Grimm, W. 2014:30), *Hansel and Gretel* (Grimm, J. & Grimm, W. 2014:47), *Mother Holle* (Grimm, J. & Grimm, W. 2014:82), *The Six Swans* (Grimm, J. & Grimm, W. 2014:160), *Briar Rose* (Grimm, J. & Grimm, W. 2014:163), *Sweetheart Roland* (Grimm, J. & Grimm, W. 2014:183), to name but a few.

The above was gathered from a translated version of the 1812/15 edition of their collected tales, meaning that they still mirror the original voices from where they collected their stories (Grimm, J. & Grimm, W. 2014:xx). These stories originated from popular and lesser-known folklore that was passed down through the generations orally (Grimm, J. & Grimm, W. 2014:xxi-xxii). It is reasonable to assume that many of their tales involving witches were influenced by the earlier witch hunts and the events that transpired over Europe and the Americas during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. This becomes even more evident when one considers that all the witches in their original stories were either, burned, drowned, or torn apart, mirroring the execution methods used during the witch trials.

The cinematic witch was also influenced by these stereotypes created during the witch trials (Buckley, 2013:25) as we find in the very first film about witches, *Häxan: Witchcraft Through the Ages* (1922). The film, produced by Benjamin Christensen, resembles a documentary in many respects, but does contain shorter vignettes which can be described as short silent films. Each of the tales are fictions about witches and what they do during the night and how women were often accused of witchcraft during the Middle Ages. Many of the tales portray witches as old, lustful, and surrounded by dead things and boiling potions, while one in particular shows how an old crone who collected firewood

and kindle for affluent households was falsely accused of witchcraft. There is also one segment about a witches Sabbath which seems more like a masturbatory fantasy with naked and pretty young women cavorting with the devil and demons under a full moon than a scene of horror.

It would take another 19 years before another witch would make an appearance in film, namely, 1939's *The Wizard of Oz*. The film is based on the L. Frank Baum's famous 1900 children's book, *The Wonderful Wizard of Oz*. Margaret Hamilton plays the role of the Wicked Witch of the West who seeks revenge on Dorothy, the protagonist, for killing her sister and taking her ruby slippers. The film portrays her as old and having green skin, a sharp long nose and chin, black robes, and a large, rimmed, black pointy hat. This seems to have popularised this representation in the popular media and we find witches that resemble her in especially children's cartoons. The very first of these portrayals can be found in Disney's short film, *Trick or Treat* (1952), this was followed by Warner Bros. *Bewitched Bunny* (1954). Both these witches also shared the same name, Witch Hazel. She makes four more appearances in Warner Bros. short films over the next 12 years, namely: *Broom-Stick Bunny* (1956), *A Witch's Tangled Hare* (1959), *Transylvania 6-5000* (1963), and *A-Haunting We Will Go* (1966). She also made further appearances in other Warner Bros. shows over subsequent decades with her last appearance being in the 2011 animated series *The Looney Tunes Show*.

Warner Bros. and Disney are not the only studios to make use of this representation of the witch. 1969's *Pink Panther* episode, *Pink-A-Rella*, stars the same green-skinned witch, as does the 1956 *Tom and Jerry* episode entitled *The Flying Sorceress*. A blue-skinned version of this witch also makes her appearance in a 2007 episode of *Tom and Jerry*, *Which Witch*. Lastly, in the updated version of the *Ducktales* (2017) television series, Magica De Spell is also a green-skinned witch, though she is a duck-human hybrid. Interestingly, an IMDB (2019a) search revealed that June Foray, a popular voice actor of children's animated shows, originally voiced Magica De Spell, and the witch's voices in the aforementioned *Trick or Treat*, *The Flying Sorceress*, *Broom-Stick Bunny*, *A Witch's Tangled Hare*, as well as every other appearance of Witch Hazel in Warner Bros. productions. She also did voices for the live action television series *Bewitched* in 1966. Ironically she would also be the voice of Dorothy Gale in all the episodes of the animated series *Off to See the Wizard* between 1967 and 1968. This series title seems to be based on the iconic song featured in the 1939 production of *The Wizard of Oz*, "We're Off to See the Wizard".

One should not forget Maleficent from Disney's *Sleeping Beauty* (1959), who is referred to as a fairy in the film, and who does seem to resemble this green-skinned animated archetype. The ancient fairy cults of Hungary, Croatia, and the Southern-Slavic, and Romanian territories of the Balkans describe witches as transformed fairies (Pócs, 1989:7), while in Britain they were independent mythical

creatures (Wilby, 2000: 289). According to Èva Pócs (1989:7) modern witchcraft as we know it was preceded by these ancient cults; the systems and beliefs originally attributed to them were integrated into what became latter-day witchcraft. Interestingly she also mentions that whenever the fairies acted in kindness towards humans they were simply referred to as fairies, but when they acted malevolently they were called witches (Pócs, 1989:8-9, 27; Wilby, 2000:284, 289).

The Hungarian witch, for instance, is a sub-specie of evil souls, or half-dead/half-alive creatures, generally referred to as the *strigoi* (Pócs, 1989:28). If the creature was blamed for harming livestock, stealing crops, or breaking into homes, then it was referred to as a werewolf, but if it was blamed for destroying cultural values, bringing illness or infertility, then it was a witch (Pócs, 1989:28). In most cases the witch or her supernatural abilities were blamed when they met with misfortune that could not be explained (Moro, 2018:5). Many of these same views and beliefs, as well as various characteristics of the witch have been observed in Africa which suggests that there are notable similarities between the origins of the witch in Europe and Africa (Moro, 2018:5, 6). Some of these beliefs can still be found among many modern-day communities in Africa (Koning, 2013:158-159).

Another witch that resembles a fairy more than a witch is the popular witch, Samantha, from the *Bewitched* television series that aired from 1964 to 1972. Some argue that she is the most important witch in American popular culture (Baughman, Burr-Miller, Manning, 2007:104). The plot of the series revolves around a young married couple, Samantha and Darrin Stephens, played by Elizabeth Montgomery and Dick York respectively. They are a normal, suburban, upper-middle-class couple. Samantha is a typical homemaker, but with supernatural abilities, while Darrin is an advertising executive and bread-winner of the family. Even though Samantha is shown to have great power, she mostly uses it to complete her chores as housewife or to assist her husband – many times for comedic affect. One can argue that this was done as to not upset the patriarchal status quo or to convince women as a whole that even when they have more power than a man, they should still be subservient to their spouses. This is discussed in greater detail in the chapter on the sixties witch.

Others argue that the domestication of the witch in *Bewitched* was not necessarily problematic and that it made the witch and her powers more acceptable to western audiences by demystifying them (Baughman, Burr-Miller, Manning, 2007:104). Where previous witches were old and decrepit, Samantha was young, beautiful, and energetic. She embodied a new and playful witch who just wanted to settle down with her husband in marital bliss. Some feminists would vehemently disagree with the idea of a woman only wanting to get married and settle down as a housewife, but there are women who choose this lifestyle as is their prerogative.

The *Internet Movie Database* (IMDB, 2019b) lists *Bewitched* as having eight seasons between 1967 and 1982, meaning that it was popular with audiences. So popular in fact that it spawned a film in 2005 starring Nicole Kidman as Samantha. *Bewitched* introduced to western audiences the concept of a beautiful witch who wanted to be part of society, a trend that would continue with popular television series like *Charmed* (1998-2011), *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* (1997-2003), and *Once Upon a Time* (2011-2018). The made for television witch which seems to have had the longest longevity though is *Sabrina the Teenage Witch*. Originally created by writer George Gladir and artist Dan DeCarlo for *Archie's Madhouse* #22 comic book in 1962, the character has gained an immense following since her inception. The comic book series stars a white-haired teenage witch, Sabrina Spellman, who lives with her aunts, Hilda and Zelda, and Salem, the talking black cat. Sabrina is a good witch who, like *Bewitched's* Samantha, is romantically involved with a mortal, Harvey Kinkle. Hilarity ensues throughout the first four volumes of comics printed between 1971 and 2019. According to another IMDB (2019c) search three animated Sabrina series were released between 1971 and 2004. A live action series also premiered in 1996 starring Melissa Joan Hart as the lead with seven seasons worth of episodes running between 1996 and 2003. Currently, a new version of the character appears in the series *The Chilling Adventures of Sabrina* (adapted from a horror comic of the same name) which departs to great extent from the light-hearted tone of the original comic books and television series. This new series is produced exclusively for Netflix which is sure to elicit controversy due to its violent and horrific content, especially amongst the over-zealous religious communities of the West.

Similar teenage witches are also found in films, with the most noteworthy being Hermione Granger from the *Harry Potter* film and book series and the four teenage witches of *The Craft* (1996). Young adult witches though seem to be more prominent in films and examples of young and beautiful cinematic witches are Cher, Michelle Pfeiffer, and Susan Sarandon in *The Witches of Eastwick* (1987), Sandra Bullock and Nicole Kidman in *Practical Magic* (1998), Rachel Weisz and Michelle Williams in *Oz the Great and Powerful* (2013), and the aforementioned Angelina Jolie in *Maleficent* (2014). With the exception of *The Craft*, none of these films are horror films though and the beautiful witch seems to mostly appear in productions of the fantasy and comedic genres.

Most of these witches do come across as intelligent and even though the contexts in which they appear are influenced by patriarchy, they do seem to challenge and subvert it in various ways. To undertake a study of all the witches in film and television would be folly as there are too many that fall within different genres. *Sabrina the Teenage Witch* warrants a study of its own, while numerous studies exist regarding the films mentioned above. Most of these studies are preoccupied with the male gaze, psychoanalysis, and how these influenced their production. Horror films are also most often analysed from these perspectives as mentioned in the previous section, but due to the enormous

number of horror movies produced over the last century there is a large pool of data that one can source information from. Witches appear prominently over the decades of film history, making it a good subgenre of horror films to study.

The witch's otherness (in terms of gender, age, social status) in horror films and how that is translated to her physical appearance combined with the supernatural power she possesses and who it is directed to (mostly males) seems far more complex than psychoanalysis would dictate, as are the neat categories viewers of horror films are boxed into. The character is pervasive in popular culture and appears in all forms of media, despite the negative connotations associated with her. By gaining a deeper understanding of the construction of the cinematic witch's physical form and her supernatural abilities from a sociocultural and new historical perspective will lead to and contribute to our understanding of cinematic bodies and their relation to history and society, as well as the machinations of the cinematic experience.

SOCIOCULTURAL AND NEW HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVES

As the cinematic witch is female and has much supernatural power available to her, it is clear that her position in societal power structures is important, as is her ability to influence said power structures and those who enable them. To aid in the study of the witch as found in horror films one would need a theoretical framework that would assist in identifying and analysing her appearances in horror films over the last century. New Historicism seems apt in this regard due to its focus on the intersections between text and sociocultural contexts and how texts and the sociocultural reciprocally influence one another over time. New Historicism is discussed in detail later in this section. Before discussing New Historicism, we need to understand its prehistory.

In the preface of *Mind in Society: The Development of Higher Psychological Processes*, written by Michael Cole and Sylvia Scribner, Vygotsky is credited as the father of sociocultural theory (Vygotsky, 1979:341). As mentioned in the introduction, much can be learned of human social and mental activities by analysing and understanding culturally constructed artefacts (Vygotsky, 1978:53-54). These artefacts (like films and their production) evolve as they pass from one generation to the next due to the ever-changing needs of social networks (Lantolf, 2000:1-2).

This is similar to the ideas posited by cultural studies theorists who study the tension and relationship between cultures and the resultant effect they have on the literary texts that cultures produce (Womack, 2001:243). This theoretical framework enables the reader to explore a myriad of cultural codes embedded throughout a text as they intersect sociological, linguistic, and historic forces and how they impact the dissemination and reception of a text (Womack, 2001:243).

New Historicist theories are related to both these schools of thought due to their focus on specific historical conditions or events that influence the creation of literary texts as well as sociocultural change and ideologies (Brannigan, 2001:169-170). The text and the time during which it was created are linked on a deeper level and cannot be separated from each other (Barry, 2009:166). New Historicist theorists argue that literature reflects our notions of history due to how the texts represent history which in turn affects how we view and experience history (Brannigan, 2001:170). In other words: it studies a text as something that reflects a broad historical context and not just as recorded objective truths. Texts or films can also warp our sense of history and the way history is recorded. Vygotsky (1978:64-65) argues for a similar approach and states that to discover the true essence or nature of something, whether it is a book, a painting, or a film, one must study it in all its phases from its inception to end.

Simply put, social and cultural forces, can be argued, are influenced by the creators of literature and films, which in turn are entrenched in the zeitgeist, politics, and progress of the time. Films, or artefacts, not only mirror these social and cultural forces, but also influence them through reinforcement or suggested change. This can be demonstrated by evaluating and comparing the way the witch's body is constructed in film and the zeitgeist of the time in which the films were produced. Furthermore, those who produce horror films adhere to various tropes and conventions which are frequently reframed or reinvigorated in later films. The tropes themselves can be described as the reverberations as they reappear and are reshaped by sociocultural influences over time, as will be elaborated on later in this section.

The most prominent New Historicists are Michel Foucault, Catherine Gallagher, Stephen Greenblatt, Alan Sinfield, Catherine Belsey, Lee Patterson, and Marjorie Levinson¹². They all have made significant contributions to the theory, as is discussed below.

In 1979's *Panopticism*, Michel Foucault makes a case regarding the separation of social classes due to plagues and diseases which ravaged villages and cities at the end of the seventeenth century and thus lays the foundations for New Historicism. To curb the spread of the plague, those in power created structures within these congested areas that kept a watchful eye on the citizens, while also enforcing a strict curfew (Foucault, 1996:11-12). Certain individuals were granted carte blanche to keep the curfew in effect, by doing so keeping the diseased rabble away from those in power (Foucault, 1996:11-12). Society is consequently broken up into two groups, namely the pure community (monarchies and those in power) and the disciplined society at large (the rest of society) (Foucault, 1996:13). These groups are further diversified and organised with only the depth of control and surveillance intensifying as one goes further down the proverbial social ladder (Foucault, 1996:13).

Foucault (1996:13) states that control is exercised by grouping certain individuals together, depending on financial status, power, and race (level of inherent danger), and then controlling their relations with others. In other words, society is organised according to binaries and brand (mad/sane, normal/abnormal, et cetera) (Foucault, 1996:14). In consequence power contains society as opposed to subverting it (Patterson, 1987:95). Foucault's theory suggests that power directs the structure of society and that those who have the means will influence society through whatever means (the media and religion) necessary to sustain and perpetuate the status quo.

¹² These theorists can all be referred to as New Historicists or cultural materialists. The only difference between the two labels is the geography of the two groups, with the New Historicists residing in the United States of America and the Cultural Materialists residing in the United Kingdom (Ryan, 1996:ix).

Over time, Foucault's ideas led to the rise of two schools of thought based on the abovementioned proposed theories. In the United Kingdom it led to the formation of the Cultural Materialists and in the United States of America the New Historicists were born (Ryan, 1996:ix). The schools have much in common and it has become difficult to differentiate between them (Ryan, 1996:x). Initially New Historicists focussed on power structures and how they only permit identification and counter identification of those within society, while the cultural materialists were more interested in the possibility of individuals' refusal to accept their place in society and thus producing new ones (Brooker, Seldon, Widdowson, 2005:185-186). This is not the case anymore, since and in essence they all more or less agree on the following (Ryan, 1996:xi): "...united by their compulsion to relate literature to history, to treat texts as indivisible contexts, and to do so from a politically charged perspective forged in the present."

The only differences between these theorists are the different routes they take to achieve the same objectives and the resulting different conclusions they seem to draw once the said goal has been achieved (Brannigan, 1998:119; Ryan, 1996:xi). John Brannigan for instance argues that both are concerned with difference and how the past differs from our contemporary understanding and uses of the past (Brannigan, 1998:119). Like Ryan, he argues that both originally examined differences in history, or histories, but later changed their focus to the differences in race, gender, nationality, etc. (Brannigan, 1998:120). Along with Foucault's theories, one also has to consider the role of New Criticism and Historicism in the formation of New Historicism. These perspectives will be discussed in more detail later in this chapter.

Catherine Gallagher is the first of these New Historicists to consider. She disagrees with Foucault's assumptions about power and suggests that it is erroneous to insist that these divisions are solely caused and influenced by power and politics (Gallagher, 1996:45). She posits that the structures become political after they are formed and that they are not necessarily formed by individuals in an attempt to wield power over others (Gallagher, 1996:45). In other words, patriarchy was not initially the goal, but was borne spontaneously out of the mechanisms put in place by said society at large due to historic events. Politics are therefore secondary and that which subverts, becomes the norm later on (Gallagher, 1996:45-46). By resisting the urge to categorise those in society and by ignoring labels and identity creation, those with non-identities will not be subversive and will inhibit cultural hierarchies (Gallagher, 1996:54). Politics are, in other words, a secondary layer and the New Historicist must be able to transcend politics (Gallagher, 1996:46). Stephen Greenblatt has a similar stance and states that theorists' obsession with power and gender is fundamentally flawed (Greenblatt, 1990:18). Instead he proposes three stances or guidelines for historical studies.

His first stance suggests that agency is inescapable and whether one decides to act or not to act, implies intent (Greenblatt, 1990:15). Every person in society is conditioned by the expectations of the class, gender, religion, race and national identity they find themselves in. These variables are constantly in flux with the world around us, effectively changing the trajectory of history (Greenblatt, 1990:15). He suggests that even though historical processes are unavoidable and unchangeable, these processes do seem to indicate that the individual's power is bound within a societal collective and that attempts to subvert might lead to legitimisation of societal structures (Greenblatt, 1990:15).

His second stance is that the past and the present are inexorably linked with one another as events of the past created the foundations for the present (Greenblatt, 1990:16). Furthermore, the past often lends itself to the future as an analogy from which we can analyse the present, which means that the theorist's values cannot be suspended when attempting an analysis (Greenblatt, 1990:16).

His third contribution to the study of history is to avoid viewing every miniscule part of a text as important or having deeper meaning, or to attempt to marry these insignificant events to the main plot (Greenblatt, 1990:17). The New Historicist should not attempt to integrate every event or sub-plot into the larger narrative, but should be more interested in discovering what the contradictions and unresolved conflicts communicate on their own (Greenblatt, 1990:17-18). He especially makes a case for the study of cultural expressions such as witchcraft accusations, technical manuals, and even fashion to reveal the complexities of society (Greenblatt, 1990:19).

From these three tenets, Greenblatt configured his theories regarding *resonance* and *wonder*. Greenblatt (1990:19) defines resonance as the ability of a text to reach out to the viewer irrespective of the time and place the viewer finds themselves in. He says:

By "resonance" I mean the power of the object displayed to reach out beyond its formal boundaries to a larger world, to evoke in the viewer the complex, dynamic cultural forces from which it has emerged and for which-as metaphor or, more simply, as metonymy-it may be taken by a viewer to stand. By "wonder" I mean the power of the object displayed to stop the viewer in his tracks, to convey an arresting sense of uniqueness, to evoke an exalted attention (Greenblatt, 1990:19-20).

According to Greenblatt a text is not confined to the limitations of the medium in which it is created. The text reverberates a complex network of cultural meanings which are interpreted and often originate from the viewer's sociocultural position at a specific point in time, while the aesthetic

experience forces the viewer's immediate attention. These influences change over time and are uniquely interpreted by each subsequent viewing. The interactions between viewer and text lead to influence and can be reshaped, redirected, or assimilated by the viewer which. This is however directly related to the ability of the text to engage with the viewer at a deeper sociocultural and intellectual level as well as the visual aesthetic experience of the viewer (Greenblatt, 1990:20-21, 23, 29-31, 33-34).

Alan Sinfield is from the school of cultural materialism and the gist of his theoretical assumptions can be found in an article he wrote in response to the aforementioned Stephen Goldblatt's 1990 article, *Resonance and Wonder* (Sinfield, 1992:61). Sinfield (1992:63-64) suggests that society produces ideology in an attempt to find meaning for ourselves and for others in the world. It structures society and places the individual into an understandable social context. Ideology lends itself to stories and narratives by giving shape to them, which in turn supports the various levels of power (Sinfield, 1992:64). These power structures influence the way the individual thinks, but individual thought is unable to influence or change these power structures (Sinfield, 1992:68). Even when the individual stands as oppositional force to these structures, he or she simply legitimises the structures even more. For example, feminism was not created in isolation or from a privileged position away from societal norms, but originated and evolved from within a patriarchal society. Sinfield (1992:72) suggests that these conflicts and contradictions are formed within a society in an attempt to sustain itself. A society cannot be deemed as patriarchal without having an understanding of the matriarchal. The same can be said of texts and their implied meanings. The text is not self-sufficient in meaning, but is a site rich in conflicts borne from ideology (Sinfield, 1992:80). A text thus relies on the reader's ideologies to create meaning which means there are no homogenous interpretations of texts. According to Sinfield (1992:81) a text's meaning is derived from its ability to reinforce or challenge the reader's notions of society or how it ought to be.

Catherine Belsey (1989:83) believes that all texts are to an extent policed and that the texts that challenge the structures of power relating to class, race or gender are considered to be of little value and/or flawed. She posits that these literary standards were created by those who wield power (Belsey, 1989:84) and that New Historicists are able to transcend this by not avoiding distinctions between literature and history, or in other words, text and context (Belsey, 1989:83). This means that interpretations are more open and varied, since traditional oppositions and distinctions are ignored.

She takes her argument a step further than the previously discussed theorists in the sense that she wants theorists to treat works of art and texts from the same time as equals (Belsey, 1989:84). This means any visual text, like a film, a television series, the news, a printed or television advertisement

can be used for analysis as they are all products of the cultural-historic context in which they were created.

Finally, she stresses the importance of understanding that the meanings of these products are not fixed (Belsey, 1989:89) and that truth can only be subjective (Belsey, 1989:90). Those who wield power are often challenged, for instance, by the others which lead to alternative interpretations of knowledge. It does not mean one is more right than the other, but it does create new avenues for discussion which inevitably leads to changes in society as we have seen over the last 50 years where gay rights, climate change, colonisation, and women's rights are concerned.

Lee Patterson (1987:92) believes that history should be read as a poem – not as fact, but as something textual with a myriad of interpretations. Interestingly, he theorised that power is part of culture and not something that is possessed by an individual or a group (Patterson, 1987:94). He uses the example of public and state executions to illustrate this point. In the past the state would display its power by ordering the execution of those who committed crimes of treason or other crimes which threatened the hegemony (Patterson, 1987:93-94). This display of power is absent in most western and developed countries yet individuals still conform to these rules without the state having to thrust upon them the fear of death or torture (Patterson, 1987:93-94). This power or invisible force which drives the individual to conform is thus engrained into society. This same power also cannot exist without freedom, since to attain freedom one must have power (Patterson, 1987:93). For example, to have a society where crime is kept relatively in check so that families can feel safe and experience freedom, certain structures of power have to exist to maintain the law and to punish those who threaten those who conform to societal and cultural values.

Much like Alan Sinfield and Catherine Belsey, Patterson (1987:100) posits that history and meaning are not fixed and that meaning is subject to the struggles and contradictions in a text, but with a new meaning generated with each new interpretation. Hence there is no “norm of correctness”, but only the reader/viewer's historical moment in the here and now which influences his or her normative ideals (Patterson, 1987:99).

Finally, there is Marjorie Levinson (1989:107), who focusses more on the reader, viewer, and researcher's role in New Historic studies:

“...we really are part of the object we study, subject to the changes that our study effects...”

She continues (Levinson, 1989:108):

“...we are the effects of particulars, to which we are related by distance and difference.
...name ourselves as products of the past as past and thus of history’s meaning.”

For Levinson, we are products of the past and conditioned to view the past through a present perspective that is also and continually influenced and shaped by the past. This past was also experienced as the present by individuals within that particular society and it was also shaped by past events. It is thus not about the past or translating it for a contemporary or even future audience, but more about the differences between the present and the past age that are being scrutinised (Levinson, 1989:108-110). Works of art and text do not just survive, they also flare up at certain points of time through the ages due to their timelessness and the way they can be interpreted by new and future audiences to find truth in their present (Levinson, 1989:109-110). We consequently change the past and the meanings attributed to it by finding new ways of analysis, which in turn influences these meanings and also the methods of analysis.

The theorists discussed up to this point laid the foundations for New Historicism. Their work is not without problems and has elicited criticism from various quarters. One of these is the sometimes over-reliance on a single text as evidence to prove a statement (Barry, 2009:171; Levinson, 2012:359; Veese, 1989:x). Another is that Marxism is very often tightly embedded or closely associated with the New Historicist process (Barry, 2009:171; Veese, 1989:x-xi, xiii)¹³. These issues can be problematic for those who would attempt a New Historicist research project, since they have the potential to make a study seem too prescriptive. One cannot rely on a single and often anecdotal text as sufficient evidence to make any scientific observation. The aforementioned problem of New Historicists often building on Marxism can also lead to unoriginal and narrow studies. This leads to similar findings between researchers, but that does not mean that the findings are correct or without fault.

Marxism as ideology is a reaction towards western capitalism and is concerned with the dismantlement of capitalism in favour of creating a socialist society (Worsley, 2003:1). Marxism is an especially popular approach amongst those in the realm of cultural studies and it is very often used as a starting point for those in that field (Hutnyk, 2004:2). For the New Historicist, Marxism is valuable for the same reasons as it motivates why certain power structures exist in society. As discussed earlier, Foucault and Gallagher also focus on power structures with regards to economic class which

¹³ See Eagleton, 2018:ix-xii; Gallagher & Greenblatt, 2000:9; and Sinfield, 1992:66-67 in support of this claim.

in turn manifests negatively with regards to race, gender, religion, and sexual orientation. Marxism is however not a monolith and is reinterpreted and appropriated in different forms by different scholars, much like New Historicism or any other popular theoretical approach.

Like the first New Historicists, Marx's writings also contained many errors and little evidence to support the ideology's suppositions (Worsley, 2003:2). The most obvious point to be made is that institutionalised Marxism, communism, has failed in every country which adopted it (China, Cuba, Lao, North Korea, the USSR, and Vietnam), often leading to widespread poverty and social collapse (Brown, 2009:3, 4, 482, 485-486). Another problem is that even though cultural and social sciences have been able to record and understand history with impeccable detail while working from a Marxist framework, their theories have in most cases been unable to predict or anticipate future social and/or cultural developments, like nationalism (Lipset & Bence, 1994:170). The fact that Marxism and communism have failed repeatedly as social and cultural ideology, along with it being of little use as predictor of socio-cultural developments, makes it difficult to employ for practical and scientific use.

Sylvia Federici's much lauded 2004 book *Caliban and the Witch: Woman, the body and primitive accumulation* takes a closer look at witches and the role of capitalism in their creation. Federici (2004:16) finds fault with any approach that reduces humanity to universal and asexual abstract objects throughout history like we often find in Marxism. She argues that witches are in fact a product of capitalism and states that "the goal of capitalist society is to transform life into the capacity to work" (Federici, 2004:16). Women are central not just to a capitalist society, but to a socialist society as well, since women produce the workforce which are essential for the sustainability of all societies. To create and maintain a society one needs a steady influx of new workers to replace those who cannot contribute to society in a meaningful way anymore. It is because of this that Federici (2004:8-9, 12) argues that keeping women at home to carry and raise children is an essential capitalist commodity and one that Marxists tend to ignore.

Classic Marxist ideology mostly ignores women's capacity of childbirth and expects women to sacrifice their bodies to the greater good, while at the same time also expecting them to work the fields. Marxist ideology also at times conveniently ignores the witch-hunts, because those who ascribe to it cannot be seen to admit that women are, because of their ability to reproduce, in a higher socio-economic class than men which makes it difficult to reconcile with Marxism where everyone is supposed to be equal (Federici, 2004:8, 14). Women cannot be equal to men if they are forced to work and to raise children, while men are not required to do the same. Similarly, a woman that leaves the collective to live independently and without children in the woods proves that the collective is unnecessary.

Marxism like capitalism thus reinforces the idea of biological destiny, robbing women of choice and agency. This also has direct implications for transgender individuals who cannot contribute to society by adding to the population through birth. Homosexuality is also impacted in this way, since same-sex partners are unable to produce offspring themselves. Children are needed in order for capitalism, socialism, and communism to flourish. This puts transgender and homosexual individuals in a precarious position. In my opinion, capitalism is the least likely to have issue with LGBTQ individuals, since there is less emphasis today on childbirth in capitalist countries with major manufacturing taking place in other countries like China, India, and Africa. Furthermore, LGBTQ individuals contribute in other ways to a capitalist economy both directly and indirectly in ways that do not require producing offspring. In fact, many LGBTQ individuals often adopt children or use surrogate mothers to produce children, and as a result negate this perceived affect.

The modern day image of the witch resembles the abovementioned image of the LGBTQ. Modern day witches contribute to the economy in the form of new products (books, lotions, et cetera) and in entertainment like the Harry Potter films, and horror films (like the ones discussed in this thesis). The witch as a product of capitalism is consequently difficult to reconcile with Marxism. Being an avatar for female agency and freedom further complicates the connection between herself and Marxism. “Magic” for instance was used by women to take control of the reproduction in the form of lotions and tonics (Federici, 2004:109-110). In other cases these witches used their knowledge to help other women take control of their sexual agency and fight sexual discrimination (Federici, 2004:110). The witch presents us with an image of someone who does not conform to society, in other words, of someone who cannot be controlled or coerced, and who refuses to submit to any kind of authority, capitalist or socialist. Furthermore, a person who is specially endowed with supernatural ability, whether real or imaginary, is a threat to those in power who want others to submit to them as labourers or employees (Federici, 2004:142).

Federici (2004:141) attributes the decline in the belief in magic to society’s reliance on labour-power. Belief in the magical was deemed irrational as magic is the means of gaining something without working for it, a notion that cannot be reconciled especially with socialism or communism (Federici, 2004:142). If a whole society therefore believes in luck and superstition then your workforce becomes lazy and unpredictable. Prayer takes precedent over physical labour, which affects production. Similarly, a society where those who work give tithes to the church and not the state also becomes problematic, unless the state and church are one and the same.

It thus becomes difficult to reconcile the witch with Marxism and the Marxist approaches in New Historicism. Furthermore, the modern witch is mostly found in cinema and other fictional texts like

books, games, and comic books, which are all products of a capitalist society, which is more a reflection of this type of society than in opposition to it. And even if and when the witch opposes capitalist society, it would be disingenuous to refer to it as Marxist. If anything, the witch and notions related to her and her position in society precedes Marxism's by many centuries, meaning that one can just as well argue that Marxism borrowed extensively from the witch's way of life. The Wiccan movement today is, like Marxism, a reaction to and a product of capitalism and though they overlap in some instances they differ vastly, especially where personal freedom, female agency and the LGBTQ are concerned.

The various problems mentioned in the previous pages have led new generations of New Historicists to re-evaluate their methods. Marjorie Levinson, for instance, welcomes criticism and sees it as part of the New Historicist process (Levinson, 2012:355). She argues that when theories elicit criticism they lead to a validation of the scholar's efforts as it challenges conventions while also forcing others to engage with the work on a deeper level (Levinson, 2012:356-357). Her New Historicism is based on her personal feelings of pleasure she experiences while engaged with a text, whether it is a poem, novel, or painting (Levinson, 2012:356). This aesthetic experience is enhanced by a familiarity with the layers of contexts associated with these texts (Levinson, 2012:356-357).

These contexts shift and change as we wrestle with the texts from different viewing positions. These viewing positions are numerous. If we use Herman Melville's *Moby Dick* (1851) as example, we find that it can be interpreted from various angles without first considering the historical context. Someone who is a collector of priceless gemstones might for instance see the parallels between Ahab's search of the whale and their own obsessive quest for a perfect diamond. On another level it resembles the quest of fulfilling a nearly unattainable goal in life and upon finding it realizing how futile it was. There are also ecological parallels one can draw if one understands the reason for the whaling industry existing in the first place. One would need to consult a reliable historical account of the whaling industry of the time. One can consult letters and official documents of the time as Wilson Heflin did for his highly regarded and peer reviewed historical text about nineteenth century whaling, *Herman Melville's Whaling Years* (2004). Or one can simply purchase the Heflin text and accept its veracity. According to Heflin (2004:231) oil obtained from the blubber of whales was extensively used during the Industrial Revolution to lubricate machinery and for illumination. Accepting this as fact creates a new position to view *Moby Dick* from as it then becomes a metaphor for the struggle between man and nature or industry and ecology. In the rush to conquer nature mankind harms itself in the process just as Ahab loses limb, sanity, and finally his life without ever conquering the whale. There are of course other layers of the tale to interpret, like the racial tensions that exist in the book, and Ahab's solipsism.

One must consider that there are other viewing positions to consider as well regarding Moby Dick. The Greenlandic Inuit are ocean-faring hunters of whales, seals, and fish who, unlike the whalers of nineteenth century, have a strong sense of conserving their hunting grounds while only hunting for survival (Caulfield, 1997:2-3). Japan on the other hand has a thriving commercial whaling industry to this day (Estes, et al, 2006:85, 92). Both the Greenlandic Inuit and Japanese would undoubtedly have different interpretations of the text and the act of whale hunting.

The New Historicist of the last two decades understands that a text can have numerous interpretations and that these interpretations make more sense when observed from varying positions thus contributing to our understanding of culture and the power structures contained within.

Christopher Grobe ignores power structures and focuses on the pleasure derived from the act of reading. In his 2016 New Historicist study on the performance of reading he suggests that literature scholars are generally indifferent to the sensations the individual experiences while reading a text and that there are more differences between these individual experiences than similarities (Grobe, 2016:568). He describes the reading experience as the ultimate and impenetrable personal freedom which leads the reader down a path of self-discovery and personal transformation (Grobe, 2016:568).

There are problems, however, relating to the study of the act of reading. Observing the act is difficult, since we cannot trace what is transpiring within the mind of the reader (Grobe, 2016:569). Furthermore, the medium of the book is not as static as it used to be with the invention of devices like the iPad and Kindles which influences the reader's experience (Grobe, 2016:569). As an avid reader and collector of books I find the texture of paper and the smell of books inseparable from the act of reading. Electronic devices seem cold and sterile which would have a conscious and unconscious effect on my experience of a text.

Grobe and Levinson base much of their theoretical assumptions on the individual's experience and the importance thereof for literary study. Reader-response theory focusses on similar ideas regarding the reader's experience of a text, but is more concerned in providing more generalised accounts of the human/text interaction (Davis & Womack, 2002:51; Harkin, 2005:411). Reader-response theory enjoyed popularity during the late 1970s and early 1980s, but lost favour with academics over time (Davis & Womack, 2002:51; Harkin, 2005:410-411, 412, 417). Unlike reception study, reader-response theory ignores differentiating between specific types of readers (women, children, individuals of a specific geographic region or neighbourhood, et cetera) and is concerned more with unconscious processes experienced by the individual when reading or interacting with a text (Harkin, 2005:411). Over time the field was assimilated by cultural studies which in turn changed the original

methodology of the reader-response theory in practice by developing different strategies for different types of reading (Davis & Womack, 2002:51; Harkin, 2005:412). Unlike New Historicism, reader-response theory does not attempt to draw any significant conclusions about place, history, or the reciprocity that exists between reader, author, and text as it simply attempts to understand how a reader is affected by a text. Where these were novel concepts 40 plus years ago, we now understand without a doubt that an author has certain intentions when producing a text and that the reader will interpret a text in their own individual way, while also being somewhat influenced by the author's intentions (Harkin, 2005:413).

Since the emphasis is not on the text's cultural or historical context one can argue that both reader-response theory and New Historicism lend themselves to Formalism. Formalism and reader-response theory are closely related as both are concerned with aesthetics, albeit it in different ways (Davis & Womack, 2002:9). In fact, reader-response theory is based on Formalistic tenets while at the same also being a response to Formalism (Davis & Womack, 2002:52). While the Formalists engage with the aesthetic values found in a text, the reader-response critic attempts to understand the reader's aesthetic experience while engaged with a text (Davis & Womack, 2002:9, 51). New Historicism creates a bridge between these as it attempts to understand the cultural-historic context of a text and how that context lends itself to the pleasure derived from engaging with the text. According to Stephen Cohen (2007:1) Formalism gave rise to New Criticism which in turn paved the way for New Historicism. Formalism focussed on the aesthetic values or qualities of a text and a distinction between language and reality, rejecting the notion that a text could serve as a documentary of reality (Barry, 2009:155; Erlich, 1973:627). Where Formalists rejected the so-called "extraliterary" motives of a text, New Criticism moved that focus towards the relationship between the structure and meaning of a text, while also emphasising the aesthetic pleasure experienced while reading (Fry, 2000:184). New Historicism goes further than Formalism and New Criticism by assimilating them both and adding the relevance of the socio-historical context into the mix (Menand and Rainey, 2000:2). Similarly, Levinson (2012:359) readily admits that her theories are informed and heavily influenced by formalist tenets.

According to Levinson (2017:145, 146) Formalism, or New Formalism as she describes it, is much like New Historicism, and does not adhere to specific theory, method, or scholarly practice, and is more a movement than a theory. This makes it difficult to define Formalism, or more specifically Russian Formalism. Ramen Selden (1995:1-2) mirrors this statement in *The Cambridge History of Literary Criticism*, vol. 8: *From Formalism to Poststructuralism* and states that there are no clear boundaries that define Formalism. There is a variation of Formalism in many cultures with the only difference being the methods which they adopted (Selden, 1995:2). Some examples of these are:

Russian Formalism, Czech Structuralism, New Criticism, and to a degree, Structuralism (Selden, 1995:2).

Levinson does not specifically say which mode of Formalism she uses, but one can infer this by comparing her methods with the various Formalist doctrines. She describes her approach as focussing more on the reaction the reader or viewer has when interacting with a text (Levinson, 2012:356 & 358-359). Universal historical truth is an impossibility and thus not important to her, but what is significant is how contexts change over time and how readers or viewers experience texts at different points in time from their unique cultural positions (Levinson, 2012:356 & 358). That being said, she still relies on texts to inform her of past events, but states that contradictory texts produced at the same time as an event are valuable because they contain more nuanced observations of said event or context (Levinson, 2012:359).

The most obvious similarity between Formalism and New Historicism is that there are as many modes of Formalism and New Historicism as there are individuals adapting the theories for study. Levinson seems to borrow parts from many Formalist theorists. Like the Russian Formalists, Levinson does not ascribe to outdated historic, aesthetic, or psychological axioms (Levinson, 2017:145, 146; Le Huenen, 2006:701). The Russian Formalists focussed on the essential qualities of a text rather than the historical conditions at the time of a text's creation (Le Huenen, 2006:701). This is similar to Levinson's position of ignoring the idea of comparing texts created at similar times.

She deviates from Russian Formalism with regards to formal arrangements found in literature. Russian Formalists are very much obsessed with the specific features of literature and how it differs from other artistic and cultural products, while Levinson, as previously stated, is more concerned with the response a text elicits from the reader and how these responses change over time (Le Huenen, 2006:702). From this we can infer that she might find inspiration from Shklovskii's theories.

Victor Shklovskii was one of the major contributors to Russian Formalism (Le Huenen, 2006:701; Lemon, Morson, & Reis, 2012). In Victor Shklovskii's *Art as Technique* (2012)¹⁴ he argues that art employs a process of making the image unfamiliar or abstract so that the reader or viewer can discern the meaning of the text with the least amount of effort. In other words, the less effort the author or creator of a text employs to evoke the maximum amount of thought in the reader, the more satisfactory the style of the text is and, consequently, the more enjoyable it is for the reader. This could be why popular films are very often not complex as general audiences find them easy to

¹⁴ Originally published in 1917 and reprinted in Lemon & Reis's *Russian Formalist Criticism: Four Essays* (2012).

understand. He goes further and explains that a text's goal is to make the reader feel or have a sensory reaction to what they perceive (Shklovskii, 2012). Shklovskii (2012) theorised that the more the individual is exposed to an object, the less likely it becomes that they really see the object. He explains that the individual internalises the attributes of an object and creates an idea of the object (Shklovskii, 2012). This seems very likely as from my own experience as an artist and illustrator I am able to produce more detailed works of art from a reference when the reference is placed upside down. This forces me to view the object in an unfamiliar form, bypassing what I assume to know about the object. This leads to more striking and much more detailed artistic works. Shklovskii's theories obviously link with Levinson's focus on the reader's experience while entangled with a text in this regard. These experiences can remain static or change over time, but they are experienced differently by each individual who interacts with them.

Just like the viewer experiences texts in individual and unique ways, so does the scholar have the same experiences. An academic though possesses far more knowledge about certain fields than the layman and can draw more comprehensive and in-depth conclusions from studying a text, and do so from different perspectives. By recording the experience of peeling away the different meanings of a text the researcher not only creates new information regarding the text, and like Levinson proposes, becomes part of the history of the text they study, while at the same time elevating its sociocultural value.

A good example of the scholar's unique experience of a text is Zekiye Er's (2005) fascinating study comparing Tom Stoppard's writing process to the New Historicist methods when approaching texts, while at the same time using these methods to assess his play, *Travesties*. She found numerous similarities between his methods and the methods employed by New Historicist critics.

Gallagher and Greenblatt describe New Historicism as a playful act which leads to serious argumentation in other disciplines (Gallagher & Greenblatt, 2000:3). Similarly, Stoppard writes comedic plays with serious ideas at its core (Er, 2005:230). Where the New Historicist uses a combination of non-literary and literary texts to create new perspectives on history, Stoppard uses these texts to create new events and ideas for historical settings (Er, 2005:231). Stoppard, for instance, used old letters as inspiration for *Arcadia*, an old diary for *Indian Ink*, and old newspapers for *Travesties* (Er, 2005:231). The New Historicist theorist understands the impossibility of a pure and objective past. Likewise does Stoppard base *Arcadia* and *Travesties* on the impossibility of an objective reality and a restructuring thereof (Er, 2005:232).

Er (2005:232) goes on to note that like the fleeting moment the two traveling protagonists in Stoppard's play, *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead*¹⁵ (1966) glimpse Hamlet for a moment and potentially misinterpret everything they see, so does and can the New Historicist only glimpse a small part of the full reality of any past event or era. And like the New Historicist uses Marxists theory and postmodernism against each other, so does Stoppard use these theories in his plays - informed by his self-confessed lack of knowledge (Er, 2005:232).

This idea of an incomplete text or a text based on a fragment of another text is in itself postmodern, as many postmodern works are fragmented and often incomplete texts (Bennett & Royle, 1995:180). These postmodern texts also challenge our understanding of time since a historical text created at any point in time is only a snapshot of something that happened at that specific place and point in time, much like the single scene of Hamlet Rosencrantz and Guildenstern witness upon their travels (Bennett & Royle, 1995:179). Literary texts also become fragmented when they are adapted for other media as anyone can attest who read Tolkien's *Lord of the Rings* and compared it to the Peter Jackson trilogy of films. Films are also reinterpretations of texts not just by converting it from the written text to audio and visual media, but also with regards to their physical production. Costume designers in the film industry create facsimilies of wardrobes that reflect certain periods of time found in specific regions. Set designers create stone and marble palaces made out of wood, plaster, and paint. Actors are copies of both fictional and historical figures. The ease at which films are disseminated throughout society due the nature of modern recording mediums is also important. The loss of the original spool of films through duplication and distribution channels is postmodern in itself (Bennett & Royle, 1995:181). All films can thus be said to be decidedly postmodern due to their combination of fragmentation, simulation (copy, facsimile, and reinterpretation), dissemination (Bennett & Royle, 1995:179-183). Some New Historicists approach texts in much the same way. As mentioned before, New Historicists view any past event as incomplete and inaccessible to later generations (Er, 2005:230; Gallagher & Greenblatt, 2000:7-8, 63). The New Historicist draws conclusions by analysing fragments of history as found in various textual forms, like paintings, murals, poems, and so forth and combining and/or comparing them (Er, 2005:231; Gallagher & Greenblatt, 2000:9-10, 12-13, 31). These isolated fragments of a text are representative of a specific culture in which the text was produced while also mirroring those who the texts are created for (Gallagher & Greenblatt, 2000:35).

Similar to the previously mentioned theories and Levinson's approach to New Historicism is Ingo Berensmeyer's media ecological analysis of Shakespeare's *The Tempest* and its influence on the 2012

¹⁵ *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead* is an absurdist play where the events of Hamlet serve as a backdrop for the narrative. They are found watching a small part of the Hamlet play at the start of the film and then re-enacting parts of the film in their reality.

Olympic games. Berensmeyer (2014:517) proposes that Shakespeare's stories change as they are adapted for different forms of media, such as plays, operas, cinema, new media, and other printed media like graphic novels and games. These different iterations reverberate through society and influences sociocultural events like the 2012 Olympics (Berensmeyer, 2014:531-533). An old text (*The Tempest*) is therefore renewed and reframed by later generations of directors, costume designers, and choreographers. The sociocultural influences they experienced throughout their lives are different from those that Shakespeare experienced, meaning that these new interpretations of the texts and the media they inhabit will project different meanings and connotations onto those who interact with it.

The similarities and overlapping that occur between formalism, reader-response theory, post modernism, New Criticism and New Historicism frameworks lend further credibility to New Historicism and its methods pertaining to the study of texts. It also gives credence to the study and comparison of different types of texts at different points in time as it gives us new avenues of thought when approaching fragmented and paradoxical texts and the reciprocal effects they have with the sociocultural.

From the new historicist theorists discussed above certain assumptions can be drawn that have in most cases informed the practices of the New Historicist as we know it today. First and foremost, according to most in this field of study, there is no difference between literary texts, poems, letters, films, paintings, and advertisements as they are all texts created by different individuals at a specific point in time (Er, 2005:231; Gallagher & Greenblatt, 2000:9-10, 12-13, 31). Due to the texts being created by different types of tradespeople and artisans these texts will reflect some of their personal sociocultural norms. The more different types of texts one has from a specific point in time, the easier it becomes to cross-reference and compare them. Secondly, we can only make educated guesses about sociocultural contexts from the past by studying historical documents or other texts since the past is inaccessible (Er, 2005:230; Gallagher & Greenblatt, 2000:7-8, 63). History is not fixed and cannot be viewed objectively. Thirdly, every expressive act is informed by the culture and society it was created in (Gallagher & Greenblatt, 2000:8, 13). These acts or texts can be oppositional towards society or not, but their existence signify a wilful act, meaning that there was a need for creation. Fourth, by using the tools of analysis, critical methods, or language created within society or culture, we are legitimising the power structures of the time, even though we might be in opposition to them (Thomas, 1991:24-25). Fifth, even though we legitimise these power structures through analysis, we unwittingly foster change in society by wilfully seeking meaning, and not truth, in these texts and works of art (Er, 2005:231; Thomas, 1991:25). New Historicism is thus not just about being in opposition to power structure or focussing on power structures, but also on finding new meanings that do not solely rely on these structures or other opposing forces. Sixth and last, unification within a text

should be avoided (Er, 2005:231). Fringe events, unresolved conflicts, and contradictions carry just as much weight as the central plot of a text and do not necessarily have to be unified or connected to the main plot (Er, 2005:231, 232; Gallagher & Greenblatt, 2000:49-59).

As mentioned, films are cultural artefacts created for society as a means of entertainment. People are entertained in different ways and where the one may find fantasy films entertaining, the other prefers horror films. The pleasure in viewing a horror film might originate from the genre's ability to challenge sociocultural norms and power structures. If different individuals enjoy different types of film genres and if films are culturally constructed artefacts that have evolved over time, then the enjoyment of these films might stem from specific mental processes and structures learnt from others in a specific historical social context. These contexts change over time as does the meaning of the films as they are viewed by later generations. The historical context in which a film was produced remains static, but as many of these films are presented to new generations with different sociocultural backgrounds, new meanings will be produced and experienced that might differ from that arrived at in the original contexts. Without a thorough and documented understanding of the initial historic contexts and the sociocultural norms of influence, these new interpretations will only illustrate part of our understanding of the horror genre. Additionally, horror films influence one another and contain numerous tropes and conventions that are shared between the various films. The tropes and conventions similarly change and evolve over time to suit, engage, and challenge the social conventions at certain points in time. This approach is beneficial when analysing films that have been remade, like the recent 2018 remake of *Suspiria*, in relation to the original 1977 version, since it will trace new sociocultural developments and influences.

By using this method of analysis to study a powerful, pervasive and decidedly female cinematic character, new interpretations of the witch and women in cinema can be created to expand upon the various other studies relating to gender and psychodynamic perspectives in horror films. It can potentially support or deviate from these perspectives, creating new avenues of research in film studies.

METHODOLOGY

This chapter outlines the scope of this study and aims to provide a step-by-step formula for the analysis and interpretation of the cinematic witch's body and her supernatural abilities as found in horror films. I start with a short exposition on New Historicism, its position within the larger field of literature theory, and how its use as tool for analysis can benefit a study of the witch in popular culture. This is followed by a comprehensive description of Marjorie Levinson's New Historicist method, and the uses and shortcomings of her methods. I premise my own approach and method for the most part on Levinson's approach to New Historicism, but I deviate from her with regard to my choice of texts to expand upon my analysis and interpretations.

To accurately gauge the cinematic witch's development and portrayal over time I used the original cinematic witches in *Häxan* (1922) as prototypical beings to compare to the witches in the other films chosen for this study. *Häxan* (1922), the first film in this study, seems the most likely point of origin for these ideas and types of portrayals. The two prototypes found in this film are the young, beautiful, and almost powerless witch and the old, decrepit, and powerful witch. These prototypical witches feature prominently throughout one hundred years of horror films, which suggests that the portrayals were influential to a great degree.

Erica Tortolani (2020:24-25, 39) and others credit Benjamin Christensen's *Häxan* (1922) as having influenced many filmmakers including Ingmar Bergman, Luis Buñuel, Robert Eggers, Val Lewton, and Lars von Trier (Baxstrom & Meyers, 2016:208; Hall, 2016). Interestingly, Robert Eggers and Lars von Trier both directed horror films starring a witch, namely *The Witch* (2015) and *Antichrist* (2009) which is discussed later in this study. *Häxan* (1922) being the first horror film of its kind, the time of the film's production, and the obvious influences the film has historically exerted over filmmakers, confirms it as the prototypical witch horror film. I therefore employ *Häxan* (1922) to delineate the parameters of the study, but also as the point of the origin for the various tropes which are found throughout the witch horror film genre. The repeated use of these cinematic tropes suggests influence. Bloom's ratios of influence are used to make sense of these ripples of influence and how filmmakers reused and reframed horror film conventions to achieve unique results in their productions.

New Historicism as a theoretical approach is well-suited for a study where an analysis of the historic exchanges between gender, culture and power come into play. According to Veenser (1989:ix-xi) the New Historicist is anti-establishment and deviates from literary theory while embracing history and overlapping it with science, art history, literature, anthropology, and ethnography. He argues that literary scholars have become entrenched in dogma and limited by the institutionalised boundaries of the humanities and their peers (Veenser, 1989:xi). This leads to homogeneous studies that break no

new ground, nor that lead to profound new insights (Veesser, 1989:xi). New Historicism borrows extensively from other disciplines, leading the scholar to interact with subject matter and texts from other fields, thus laying the foundations for new and future findings. In general, where the witch and horror films are concerned, some literary scholars, like Barbara Creed, Marion Gibson, Diane Purkiss, and many others, regularly take a limited approach in analysing the films by viewing the films through psychodynamic and/or gendered perspectives. New Historicism as a method of analysis is less prescriptive and can be applied parallel to findings and theories from other disciplines while still staying true to the spirit of studies in the humanities, namely to understand a text, the creators of the text, and the reciprocal influences that exist between a text, the reader/viewer, the historical context, and sociocultural norms.

However, while this intertextuality and almost hyperfocus on the context are promising for the creation of new research methods and reaching new conclusions, most New Historicists are entrenched in Marxist thought or in reaction against it (Barry, 2009:171; Eagleton, 2018:ix-xii; Gallagher & Greenblatt, 2000:9; Sinfield, 1992:66-67; Veesser, 1989:x-xi, xiii). New Historicists also rely heavily on anecdotal evidence often derived from a single text to support their claims (Barry, 2009:171; Levinson, 2012:359; Veesser, 1989:x). These two problems make New Historicists equally guilty of that which Veesser accuses literary theorists, namely limited and repetitive studies that all lead to similar conclusions.

Repetitive conclusions are not just found in New Historical studies. Numerous studies have been completed on the relationship between gender and power in horror films with many scholars arriving at similar conclusions due to an overreliance on psychoanalytic methods. It is for these reasons (in this and the previous paragraph) that the witch is an excellent cinematic schema to study. The witch is a being who is located at the intersection of fear, society, power, and womanhood, and this study attempts to decipher how these four notions manifest in Western society's production of horror films and the reciprocal influences that exist between her portrayals and Western society at large.

The Witch

The witch as found in contemporary popular media originated during the witch trials of the 16th century (Buckley, 2013:25). Some like Isaac Bonewits (2001:14) argue that many profited during the 16th and 17th centuries from the death of convicted witches as the condemned's assets were seized by inquisitors and their civilian helpers. Diane Purkiss (1996:24) argues that the witch-hunting process resulted in the creation of the popular witch as we know her today. Central to the witch-hunts was the *Malleus Maleficarum* (1487) – not for instigating the witch hunts, but what the text reflected about

society at the time¹⁶. The book is a treaty on the identification of witches, written by Henry Institoris and Jacob Sprenger, which played a significant role in the creation of the stereotypical witch found in popular culture (Broedel, 2003:3). Hans Peter Broedel (2003:19) argues that witchcraft was rarely a serious concern for the church before the publication of the *Malleus Maleficarum*. The women described in the book were construed from blending rumour, folklore, theology, fabricated accounts, and the old and decrepit woman into one catch-all version of the witch which could be applied to any context or situation (Broedel, 2003:21). The text's reframing of the church's concept of evil and its accessibility in printed form made it a popular novelty at the time (Broedel, 2003:19). High profile scholars who endorsed the text similarly fuelled the book's popularity (Broedel, 2003:19). Due to the *Malleus Maleficarum*'s novelty, popularity, and usefulness in any situation, one could argue that it possessed all the qualities centuries before modern product designers established these traits as something to strive for when creating commercial products. One can argue that the *Malleus Maleficarum* did not just establish stereotypical tropes related to the witch, but that it was also a precursor to the modern-day successful product which mirrors capitalist notions regarding the selling of products.

From the above it becomes clear that the *Malleus Maleficarum* was a work of fiction which was inadvertently well-marketed to the clergy and wealthy land owners. It also brought fame and fortune to its authors. Additionally, it enabled others to indirectly gain financially through confiscated property and assets. It is decidedly capitalist in form and function. This same witch described within the text became so entrenched in the imagination of the Western European populace of the time that it endures to this day. The witch as we know it today in popular media is thus not a reaction to capitalism, but a product thereof.

According to Immanuel Wallerstein¹⁷ (1974:18, 20, 36–37) modern capitalism as we know it today originated from the loss of income the propertied classes of the fourteenth century experienced due to climate change, stagnation of technology, and the limitations of the peasants in their employ. This led to poor agricultural yields as well as diminished financial returns which forced many land owners to establish new markets and forms of trade (Prak, 2001:5; Wallerstein, 1974:37).

As noted in the literature review, the witch is a product of a capitalist society and she contributes to a capitalist society on various levels. We find her in various disposable media like film, toys, games, comic books, and Halloween decorations – all products that can be bought and sold for profit. It is for this reason that the cinematic witch is viewed from a capitalist societal position for this study as it is also the social position I find myself in. Though the witch mirrors notions of capitalism in form and

¹⁶ This is explained in more depth in the next chapter.

¹⁷ Wallerstein's theories remain widely accepted by scholars since their original publication in the 1970s (Prak, 2001:6; Rozhkova, 2020:61).

function, the point of this study is not to use the witch to benefit or to the detriment of capitalism or Marxism. The witch did not originate from capitalism, but she did originate from the same societal structures from which capitalism emerged from.

It is difficult to reconcile the witch with a Marxist world view due to problems of agency, gender and social class. Where Marxism proposes an alternative to capitalism, the witch is emblematic of the subversion of power of all authorities while also promoting individualism and the power that resides within the individual to take control of their own agency, not unlike a modern day capitalist (Federici, 2004:174, 191).

The aim of this study is not to find instances of the witch threatening western capitalism or of her supporting Marxist ideas. This study is focussed on finding instances in horror films where witches threaten or perpetuate cultural norms related to the female body, gender, and agency in western society, subsequently fostering or inhibiting societal change and what these changes mean. Furthermore, the recorded mediums these films were distributed on are equally important, since said mediums had a direct influence on the witch's portrayal, but also because these texts are products of a capitalist society.

Marjorie Levinson's approach to New Historicism

Marjorie Levinson, a well-known academic and pioneer in New Historicism, deviates from the Marxist focus often found in New Historicism. In her 2012 article, *Reflections on the New Historicism*, Levinson (2012:357) proposes that we should judge the past by its echoes in the present, and not so much by the past conflicts between classes, since it is impossible for anyone to give an accurate and unbiased account of events and contexts from the past. However, Christopher Prendergast (1999:91-92) contends that a text created in a past era is influenced by the creator's biases, influences, and interpretations of their position within society. The academics and theorists who study older texts are also not exempt from the aforementioned bias and are also influenced by the socio-historic contexts they find themselves in, meaning that it is impossible to distil universal historical truths from either the original or the various interpretations of the text. These biases are also valuable as it is evidence of nuances within society and culture. Catherine Belsey's New Historic method states that a semblance of a truth can be produced by taking into account many texts irrespective of author, medium, intention, or style (Belsey, 1989:84). Levinson seems to follow suit and breaks from classic New Historicism where only a single text is often used as anecdotal evidence for an argument. I explain Levinson's approach below.

Levinson (1989:108; 2012:359) argues that the past is always present due to its far-reaching influence on society over and throughout time (as discussed in the literature review). She states that all that

matters, is how the contradictions in the texts in relation to the sociocultural are played out over time, the eventual shapes that they take, and how they create new points of view with each new interpretation (Levinson, 2012:358). These new angles of interpretation are smaller truths and part of a larger truth that changes and evolves over time due to the interpretations of those who interact with the texts. Her New Historicism, like many others who adopt the moniker of New Historicist, does not attempt to polarise viewpoints, but instead attempts to synthesize them (Levinson, 2012:355). Similarly, New Historicism suggests that different perspectives of texts are all equally valuable in the study and analysis of these texts.

She centres her theoretical method on the ability of a text to provoke a reaction from those who read (or view) it at different points in time, and the different cultural positions of those interacting with the text (Levinson, 2012:356 & 358). The intersections of cultural experience and interpretation of a text at varying points in time is the focus of her New Historicism along with how these intersections are dependent on one another and change over time.

She interprets texts according to three criteria (Levinson, 2012:359): First, one must consult texts created at the same time the chosen text of study was produced as supporting evidence of the sociocultural historic contexts in which the text in question was created as these productions are seldom ubiquitous. For instance, *Black Sunday* (1960) was filmed in Italy (Hughes, 2013). According to Penelope Morris (2006:8) in *Women in Italy, 1945-1960: An Interdisciplinary Study*, the late 1950s showed Italian society to be more sensitive to the concerns of women, yet they still held on to traditional roles of women. These traditional roles of women are similarly obvious in Bava's *Black Sunday* (1960) where the female victim, a generic rich man's daughter, is saved from the clutches of a vengeful witch. The young woman is saved due to her conforming to her role within Italian society, while the witch who opposes her station within society dies due to entropy and a rapid onset of old age. These scenarios mirror the Italian society of the early 1960s where the concerns of women were acknowledged by having a female character in a main cinematic role. Due to the character's unwillingness to conform, she is marginalised and expelled as her rapid transformation to an old and diseased woman attests.

Contrary to the above, Nadia Zonis (2006:77) claims that women received very little media attention in 1960 due to the ongoing societal debates in Italy at that moment. If a woman on display was not for commercial purpose, like in the entertainment industry, women were kept out of the public eye (Zonis, 2006:77). Her article links with Morris's findings regarding Italian women of the time and their portrayal in the media with the women in *Black Sunday* conforming to or perpetuating Italian cultural norms of the time.

The two contradicting examples above demonstrate how different texts can support and contradict the interpretation of a context. Contradicting texts are not a necessarily a requirement, but should not be

ignored, nor should one point of view be favoured above another. Similar contradictions would exist even if one had the ability to go back in time to experience past events, since the time traveller can only insert themselves into a specific moment in time and never really be a part or product of the time.

Levinson outlines a second criterion in her 2012 New Historicist method. Contemporary, inconsistent, and contradictory reports about a historical context lead to more objectivity, since they are more inclusive of experience and the viewpoints of others from different sociocultural positions. Gruner (2016:2) for instance, argues that the US of the 1960s was marked with drug abuse, sexual promiscuity, and hippie culture which all potentially could have influenced the production and subject matter of film. Strain (2017:78-79) contradicts Gruner's claim and states that only a very small percentage of Americans aligned themselves with this counter-culture or counter-cultures and their extra-curricular activities. Though these claims contradict each other to an extent, they are still valuable and give us a more nuanced version of what the 1960s looked like in North America and how perceptions of cultural norms differed not only within the US, but also vastly differed from sociocultural norms in Italy. These norms have a definite bearing on the production of films of the time and how women were portrayed in texts.

Lastly, the extent to which a text can be interpreted by subsequent generations and how the text's meaning changes from one interpretation to the next is important according to Levinson (2012). The ripple effect a work elicits from those who interact with it at different points in time adds to the meaning(s) of the text. The witch's portrayal in films changed very gradually over the last century. Each new decade brought with it new versions of the witch with new interpretations as envisioned by the next generation of directors and producers. The popularity of cinematic texts and the relative ease of archiving the medium have made films readily available for subsequent generations, with many raised in these eras becoming directors and film-makers themselves. Benjamin Christensen's *Häxan: Witchcraft through the Ages* (1922) could potentially have had an influence over Daniel Myrick and Eduardo Sánchez's *The Blair Witch Project* (1999) as they have stated in an interview that their production company was named after the film (Kaufman, 1999). The similarities between the two films, for instance, do not end there. Both films used a faux-documentary film style, but in different ways. In *Häxan: Witchcraft through the Ages* the witches are shown, while in *The Blair Witch Project* (1999) the witch's presence is only suggested. Both films drew such a visceral response from viewers that some left the cinema out of fear and disgust (Rossen, 2015; Stevenson, 2007:5, 56-58, 64). *The Blair Witch Project* (1999) in turn had a significant effect on Oren Peli, the director and creator of the successful *Paranormal Activity* film franchise influencing his style of directing and subject matter (Spitz, 2016).

This ripple effect manifests over time in various ways. As the audience changes over time, so do their interpretations of the films due to the prevailing cultural norms of the time of interpretation. A

teenager accustomed to the current CG-laden superhero films would still find *The Blair Witch Project* unsettling, but would also immediately understand the masturbatory allusions in *Häxan*. This film, though unsettling upon its original release, would most likely not prompt the same response from contemporary viewers. The scenes of Satan churning butter in *Häxan*, for instance, would undoubtedly be met with laughter and rude comments by contemporary audiences used to the likes of *Rick & Morty* and *South Park*. Similarly, a woman as witch would have been interpreted very differently by audiences in the 1920s than she is interpreted in the 2020s.

When a study is completed along these lines, the researcher, like Levinson herself experienced, inadvertently creates a record of their own institutional formation and the degree to which they are entrenched in their own sociocultural contexts (Levinson, 2012:360). She states: "... the truth ... its concept of nature and the human, of art and critique, came right out of the profoundest (formal) arguments...of the poems (texts) themselves." (Levinson, 2012:360). In other words, it is only when we discuss and grapple with a text on a deeper and multifaceted level that we start to comprehend the essence of the text and how it relates to and influences society and other texts created by that society.

It is thus not solely the text itself that lends itself to our understanding of the past, human nature, and pleasure in viewing or creating art, but also the experiences the individual has when interacting with it. A text only has merit or meaning as long as a person can find meaning in it. The New Historicist should attempt to record these interactions, their own experiences and interpretations of a text. Only once interpretations are collected from various positions within a sociocultural context, does one come closer to an objective understanding of a text and what it represents. Invariably this will also change over time as the sociocultural positions of future interpreters differ from those held by the creators of the original texts and the subsequent readers thereof.

For this study I can only analyse the texts, in this case films, from the position of a heterosexual, white, middle-aged male who enjoys a middle-class lifestyle in a South African context, and who is fond of horror films. From my sociocultural position I cannot lay claim to what it is to be a witch or a woman. If a person, for instance, underwent a sex-change, they would not be able to make comparative claims relating to being a woman who was raised as a woman as they would lack the experience of being a woman at various stages of her development and how these stages influenced the formation of her personality. Similarly, I can only rely on the definitions and explanations regarding the supernatural as related and interpreted by other scholars and writers as they have recorded it over the centuries. Similarly, in an attempt to avoid accusations of solipsism, I relied on readings created by reputable scholars in various fields to further my arguments. This study makes available to others recorded interpretations of how one scholar of the above description interpreted between 2017 and 2021 a sub-genre of horror films created over a 100 year span.

The method of this study is based on Marjorie Levinson's practices borne out of over 20 years of constant revision which as a practice is one of the hallmarks of good science. Some of her ideas have been met with resistance and she has drawn criticism from her peers (Levinson, 2012:355-356). Karl Heinzelman (1990:91) states that Levinson often makes claims regarding history without any supporting evidence. Though this is problematic, one needs to consider Levinson's focus, namely the individual's aesthetic experience of a text at a specific point in time. It has more to do with personal experience than citing historical details from the past. This does not differ much from the limited number of texts and anecdotes many New Historicists often supply as evidence for their findings. Nor does it mean that Levinson (or other New Historicists for that matter) are absolved from adhering to sound scholarly practices. Supplying no evidence is a problem, but it is not crucial for this type of study. What is important for this field of study is thorough analysis and argumentation based on sound reasoning built on existing research. In this way I deviate from Levinson's approach and opt to approach my assertions and experience of the aesthetic by referring to more recent and reliable texts whenever possible, and do so in a responsible scholarly manner.

Other criticisms against Levinson's work include Morris Eaves (1990:491) stating that she often relies too much on what is not present in the texts and then attributes meaning to absence. This is true in the sense that Levinson (2012:356) admits that she follows the Kantian theory of transcendental knowledge in her New Historicism, which is knowledge based on prior experience (Falkenstein, 2004:2). Kant believed that a person gains intuitive knowledge through sensory experiences over time and space (Falkenstein, 2004:xv). This knowledge is referred to as transcendental knowledge. Levinson (2012:356) follows suit, but she figures her "transcendence" as originating from within the text itself. In other words, she asks how a text is transcendently figured from a specific cultural position at a specific point in time, since the past is impossible to reconfigure truthfully in a different point in time. Different readers find different meanings in a text irrespective of the author's intentions. Similarly, the author of a text is influenced by their own transcendental knowledge which could potentially be found in the margins of a text. I both concur and disagree with this idea. I agree that one can only view fragmented slivers of the past from your position in the present and future, but I disagree with the notion of only building an analysis on intuition and aesthetic experience. It is important to acknowledge personal aesthetic experience, but it should not be isolated from rigorous textual analysis and the reception history.

Eaves (1990:494, 495) also claims that Levinson has a tendency to fetishize binary oppositions. Binary positions relating to power are at the core of New Historicist debates as they are in many other literary fields of study, like feminism, narratology, and psychoanalysis (Wilson, 2007:173). Eaves's comment seems disingenuous as the study of difference or the "other" has to do with binaries. It is true that many theorists over-simplify binaries, like male/female, thus ignoring all the other genders

under the *neutrois* umbrella. Levinson (2012:361-362) acknowledges and is fascinated by the constant changes in these binaries over time, especially the man/nature and man/technology binaries.

The critics mentioned above all also agree that her earlier work from the late 1980s is sometimes difficult to follow, overly complex, and seems lacking in a specific direction, other than creating a new-found appreciation for Keats and Wordsworth (Eaves, 1990:492; Newey, 1990:272). In her 2012 paper, *Reflections on the New Historicism*, she does address many of these problems. For instance, she states that her rationale focusses on the aesthetic experience gained from interacting with a text and how these experiences differ from one person to the next at different points in time and cultural positions they occupy (as mentioned earlier in this chapter). The same can be found in her 1989 essay, *The New Historicism: Back to the Future*, which seems to have either been ignored or inaccessible to Eaves and Newey in 1990. Interestingly, these same critics state that these problems are also what makes the work unique, and while provocative, her theories are interesting and to be admired precisely for being anti-academic (Eaves, 1990:495).

Scott Wilson (2007:162, 172-173) states that this is the point of New Historicism as the New Historicist's role is to generate financial¹⁸ and symbolic capital by aestheticizing the spectacle of oppression and powers on display, while also deviating from theoretical discourse. The symbolic capital can be described as new and valuable theories and arguments made by the theorists who, in turn, inspire others to expand upon these initial ideas through new research. It is not about conceiving a repeatable methodology or finding, but about a unique mode of research driven by the individual's personal views, rules, and concepts (Levinson, 2012:355, 356, 359; Wilson, 2007:162). The New Historicist's role, like any other literary critic, is to determine and contribute to a text's vast array of cultural meanings while at the same time finding new forms of analysis not typically used by literary critics (Levinson, 2012:359-360; Wilson, 2007:169). This type of approach is exactly what we find with the aforementioned Marjorie Levinson, Christopher Grobe, Zekiye Er, and Ingo Berensmeyer, where they use new forms of analysis to reach new and novel conclusions. The New Historicist approach creates new and unique interpretations of texts by allowing the scholar to find personal meaning in the texts on their own terms without external institutional and dogmatic interference which is becoming more prevalent across the Arts and Humanities. In this way the study of literature and film is developed further and diversified.

While ascribing to Levinson's approach, I do so with scholarly circumspection. Levinson does not say much regarding her choices or preferences to the types of texts she uses in her studies. I find this to mirror the New Historic approach of placing equal value on any and all texts. For this study I did not

¹⁸ Financial gain is generated in various ways. For researchers this translates to research grants and the writing of books and being hired as a consultant or speaker. In other instances, the scholar makes available findings to the general public where it is disseminated in the form of news articles and other types of media and publications as products for profit.

follow her approach regarding the choice of texts. All deductions made throughout the course of this study are informed by rigorous and structured research of textual evidence and existing scholarship to support my claims and observations. With regard to the co-texts used I focussed on texts relating to the witch's body, her supernatural abilities, the films themselves, and the contexts in which the films were created. Furthermore, I endeavoured to concentrate on academic and peer reviewed texts. In some instances, I do refer to texts that are less scholarly, but which are still of great value as they contain interesting perspectives by those from non-academic spheres. I also at times refer to sociocultural events as they are reported to the general public by reputable news agencies through blogs, websites and printed materials as they illustrate a given situation from a different, sometimes populist, perspective. The texts used for this study all focus and/or contribute to arguments relating to: the female body and how it is portrayed in popular media; the sociocultural meanings of the portrayals and how they manifest over time; female agency/power; how the witch wields supernatural power to gain agency; how this exchange of power manifests over time and what it means; and finally the films themselves and the contexts in which they were created.

Tracing influences and tropes with Bloom's Six Revisionary Ratios

Having viewed numerous films and series starring witches over the years, certain tropes and conventions, which could be linked to the respective genres of the productions, started to emerge in my thinking. Filmmakers have to consider some filmic conventions related to the horror film genre in order to position it within the genre. I especially noticed that the witches from different films in most cases shared many similarities in both appearance and motivation, but that their appearances and motivations do not always denote the same meanings. It became clear that the horror filmmakers in most cases shared the somewhat similar ideas regarding the cinematic witch and that they may have been influenced by the films and the filmmakers that came before them, but they would reframe these ideas in subtle or extreme ways to distance themselves and their work from their predecessors.

To trace these tropes and their ripple effect I employ Harold Bloom's theories regarding influence as found in *The Anxiety of Influence: A Theory of Poetry* first published in 1973. Harold Bloom (1997:xi, xvii) argues that influence is found in all texts and that the poet is influenced/inspired by the poetry that came before, meaning that "*imaginative literature* is indistinguishable from literary influence". These influences are at times intentional or unintentional misreadings of texts that came before in an attempt to seem original (Bloom, 1997:xix). Bloom (1997:xxiii) states that the result of writing or the creation of a text is anxiety. This anxiety is born from the creators' fear of their work being derivative or being compared to creatives that came before them (Bloom, 1997:xviii-xix, 29). The influence that Bloom describes is a metaphor that implies a network of relationships which includes the imagistic, temporal, spiritual, and the psychological (Bloom, 1997:xxiii). In other words, influence is more

related to tensions evoked by conscious or unconscious similarities between texts, and not with the poet or writer's psychological state originating from attempting to outdo their predecessors. Bloom (1997:xxii, 110) describes the conflict with the predecessor as almost Oedipal, but argues that it is incorrect to do a Freudian reading of Shakespeare as Shakespeare's *Hamlet* most likely influenced Freud's theories regarding the Oedipus Complex. It has more to do with a strong misreading of a predecessors text(s) which is then creatively reinterpreted or distorted by the latter-day writer to distance themselves from the predecessor's work. If a writer consequently experiences anxiety then the anxiety most likely emerges as a consequence of denying knowledge of the predecessor's text (Bloom, 1997:xxiii). The latter day poets and writers thus attempt to create something new while building on what came before (Bloom, 1997:26-28, 30, 51). Bloom (1997:14-16) proposes six ways in which these influences manifest and distort between texts which he calls the Six Revisionary Ratios.

The first one, *clinamen*, is derived from a Latin name given to the unpredictable swerve atoms make (Bloom, 1997:14). In poetry or written text this occurs where a writer appears to make a corrective movement in a convention established by a predecessor (Bloom, 1997:14). A previous text or trope in the text was correct up to a certain point but then should have gone in a different direction according to the new writer. In *Häxan* (1922) for instance, the witches use powders and tonics to entice a man, while in the film *Black Sunday* (1960) the witch merely has to make eye contact with a man to enthrall him. The enchantment of the man is the goal and similar in both films, but the method to achieve this seems cumbersome in *Häxan* (1922). In *Black Sunday* (1960) the witch is far more powerful and threatening due to her more expedient methods at harnessing the supernatural, which adds a new dimension to witch's gender.

The second of Bloom's ratios is *tessera* which means 'token of recognition' (Bloom, 1997:14). Like a piece of a shattered vase the individual piece is still recognisable as belonging to a larger whole. With this revision the creator completes the work of the predecessor by adding new pieces of meaning. They then elaborate on these meanings by pushing the boundaries of what came before. In *Häxan* (1922) the witch is shown to be a creation of hysteria and superstition. In *The Autopsy of Jane Doe* (2016) the witch is also created by fragments of hysteria and superstition, but it is reframed to be literal. The witch in *The Autopsy of Jane Doe* (2016) is an innocent woman with no knowledge of witchcraft or the supernatural who is falsely tried for witchcraft. The bodily and psychological torture she endures transforms her into a nexus of supernatural rage which she uses to murder throughout the ages.

The third ratio, *kenosis*, refers to the process of emptying or humbling of the self (Bloom, 1997:14). This is done in an attempt to deliberately and consciously disregard what their forerunner established in an effort to come across as new or original (Bloom, 1997:14-15). An example of this would be the witch in *Neon Demon* (2016). Every trope usually found in witch horror films is set aside or made

unrecognisable to the audience, a blatant disregard of prior conventions. She is only revealed to be a witch later in the film, but not by other characters or dialogue, but by the audience who has to infer it from the clues in the film. These revelations are at first absent, but gradually become more pronounced. Only in the final third of the film does it become obvious who the antagonist is and that she is a witch.

Closely associated with this is the fourth ratio called *daemonization*. Bloom derived this term from its Neo-Platonic use where a person is aided to complete a task by a being who is not human or divine (Bloom, 1997:15). In other words, the predecessor is removed, depowered, and dehumanised while the writer seeks for the point of original influence beyond the predecessor (Bloom, 1997:15). By then linking themselves to the predecessor's forerunner the new creator exalts him- or herself and their ability to identify that which came before. An example of this is Lars von Trier who directed the 2009 film *Antichrist* which is discussed in detail in a later chapter. Lars von Trier and Thomas Vinterberg wrote a manifesto which denounced modern film technology and claiming that "[t]oday a technological storm is raging, the result of which will be the ultimate democratization of the cinema" (Badley, 2010:54). Before the invention of modern special effects filmmakers had to create desired effects by building models and lighting them with special lights and filters. Von Trier and Vinterberg ignore their immediate predecessors and seek out film conventions that were in use between the early 1900s and the early 1990s. They then glorified themselves by claiming that they democratised film production for film makers by resorting to these stripped-down measures of film making.

Askesis, the fifth of Bloom's revisionary ratios gets its name from pre-Socratic philosophers where a person isolates themselves in an attempt to be purged of influence (Bloom, 1997:15). By doing this they hope to find a spark of originality and create a rift between their own work and that of their forerunners (Bloom, 1997:15). An example of this is when a film director changes their perspective about a theme and reframes it for the viewer. Luca Guadagnino's 2018 remake of Dario Argento's *Suspiria* (1977) is a good example of this as the director deviated completely from the cinematic techniques used in the original, but also changed the core meaning of the film for contemporary audiences.

The final of these ratios is the antithesis of *askesis*, namely *apophrades*. The term comes from Athenian observed days when the dead were believed to return to their old homes (Bloom, 1997:15). In other words, the new is haunted and inhabited by the old. Bloom (1997:15) describes this as 'the return of the dead'. This influence is experienced when a creator deliberately links their text with their predecessor's text, but it is done in such a way that the predecessor's text is read in terms of the new creator's text. In this way the predecessor's efforts are diminished, while the current creator's skill is exaggerated (Bloom, 1997:16). An example of this is Dario Argento mimicking Mario Bava's exaggerated and unnatural colour in *Suspiria* (1977) (Lucas, 2007:26). To add further insult to injury,

Mario Bava worked on *Inferno* (1980), the sequel to 1977's *Suspiria*, with Argento, but the latter was not credited for his contribution (Lucas, 2007:26). Mario Bava has languished in obscurity for many years till his death in 1980, while Dario Argento is still referred to as the master of horror cinema while riding Bava's coat tails (Lucas, 2007:16, 17; Navarro, 2019).

These types of influences manifest in various ways and forms through the one hundred years of films I trace in this thesis. In some instances, the influences are overt, while in other instance the influence are much more subtle. Using Bloom's influences as a tool kit I am enabled to trace the ripple effect of the tropes found in *Häxan* (1922), the aforementioned prototypical witch horror film, and how they manifest in other films produced at different points in time in different sociocultural contexts. To trace these influences and conventions through subsequent films we first have to be able to identify said conventions.

Merriam-Webster (2021) defines the word convention as "an established technique, practice, or device (as in the theatre)". Any technique, practice, or device has to start with a prototype or prototypical behaviour. Eleanor Rosch's prototype theory suggests that all concepts within the human mind have a real world example that best exemplifies said concept (Rosch, 1973:348-349). For example, when you mention the word "tree" to someone, ideas and visuals appear in the mind's eye, like 'trunk', 'leaves', 'brown', and 'green'. In isolation these terms are meaningless, but combined they form the characteristics of a tree. Horror films have similar conventions, like 'blood', 'screaming', 'death', 'annoying teenagers who deserve to die', and many more. The appearance of the annoying teenager who is murdered in a grizzly fashion within the first 20 minutes in a horror film is a trope and can be found in the *Nightmare on Elm Street*, *Friday the 13th*, and the *Halloween* film franchises to name but a few. Similarly, when a supporting character is portrayed as the most popular or attractive female in a horror film and she starts undressing to bathe or shower, the horror film enthusiast immediately understands that this character is going to die within the next 5 minutes, but not before the audience glimpses a part of her naked body. Examples of this trope can be found in *Return of the Living Dead* (1985) where Linnea Quigley does a strip tease in a graveyard before being eaten by zombies. In *American Psycho* (2000) all the women who remove their clothes are brutally murdered afterwards by Christian Bale's character. Julianna Guill's character is impaled on an antler rack within minutes after exposing her body in 2009's *Friday the Thirteenth* reboot. These tropes are popular and manifest repeatedly in horror films. Each new director finds innovative ways to kill and maim these lusty young women in an attempt to not come across as unoriginal. Many similar tropes exist in the witch horror film and they originated from *Häxan* as this study will show.

The personal aesthetic experience and scholarly approach

As my previous experiences with these films are important to draw conclusions regarding influence and to recognise tropes, so does my aesthetic experience of the films also feature prominently in this

study. My experience in the subject matter informs the meanings I ascribe to texts, the pleasure I derive from deciphering their meanings, and the resulting conclusions I make. In addition, as previously noted, my aesthetic experience of any film is very often connected with prior knowledge I have of history and society and how they are represented in the artistic text. In this way I create a record of my own aesthetic experiences while viewing a strictly catalogued sub-genre of horror films which will arm future critics with another recent and reliable text. These interpretations also appear in lieu of unavailable scholarly texts related to some of the films, like *Witchcraft II* (1989) and *Night of the Demons* (1988).

Timothy Aubry's *Guilty Aesthetic Pleasures* (2018) cites and mirrors Levinson's ideas and examines the pervasiveness of the new critical effort where the aesthetic experience sometimes rests on "paradox, irony, and ambiguity" (Aubry, 2018:32, 125). He argues that history itself has been translated into an object of personal pleasure and contemplation which should not be constrained by reigning academic discourse (Aubry, 2018:9-10, 20, 103, 112). The act of viewing a film can prompt a stream of thoughts which enables the viewer to engage with a film on a different and deeper level. A film about a woman who shuns a controlling father by becoming a witch engages different viewers in different ways. A young woman who is in a similar position as the character in the film would undoubtedly find parallels between her own life and the witch in the film and consequently relish in the mayhem the witch unleashes. A controlling man might find different meanings upon viewing the film and could, for instance, realize that the women in his life (wife, mother, and/or daughter) share similarities with the characters in the film and then make a conscious effort to change his attitudes and behaviour. This realization might cause pleasure for the man, as he uncovered a negative aspect of himself and by resolving to change this aspect, he can help to repair the relationships between the women and himself. Pleasure is thus derived in different ways while originating from the same source, namely the cinematic witch.

Timothy Aubry and Marjory Levinson are not alone regarding this stance on personal aesthetics. A 2019 issue of *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism*¹⁹ contains seven book reviews where scholars grapple with these same notions concerning personal pleasure and visual aesthetics, further lending credence to this mode of analysis. The reviews delve into books like Dominic Lopes's *Being for Beauty: Aesthetic Agency and Value* (2018) which attempts to track the individual's experience of beauty. Another review is about Lars Aagaard-Mogensen and Jan Forsey's *On Taste: Aesthetic Exchanges* (2019) which seeks to understand personal taste and how it relates to culture. Darren Hudson Hick and Reinhold Schmücker's fascinating study about the pleasure we find in forgeries and copies of beautiful works in *The Aesthetics and Ethics of Copying* (2016) is also reviewed. All the

¹⁹ *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism*, 77(3):321-351.

reviewed books attempt to uncover why we find pleasure in creations like art, food, literature, and film (amongst others).

Another example of a New Historical study approached in this way, but in a different field, namely geopolitics, was recently published in *Geography Compass*. Alexander J. Harby (2018:1-2) cites Levinson throughout the article and uses her insights regarding non-empirical historical accounts to find connections between geopolitics, embodiment, and practices of consumption. In other words, Harby does not accept the veracity of historical texts as a given, but attempts to expand on it by thoroughly evaluating the contexts from different perspectives as well as his own experiences derived from the texts. His study sheds light on the continuing influence of the ahistorical on geopolitics.

In literary studies, Richard Z. Lee (2019:5) uses Levinson's ideas regarding the unique position of the reader within society and their aesthetic experience to contemplate the tension between aesthetic experience and social praxis in Edmund Spenser's *The Faerie Queene* (1590). He concludes that a text created from the fringes of a political context can lead to social transformation by simply being aesthetically engaging (Lee, 2019:25).

From the above it becomes apparent that Marjorie Levinson's approach to New Historicism is enjoying recognition in various disciplines, even though there are some more conservative and traditional theorists who express reservations about it.

As many New Historicists contradict the academic establishment, so does the witch contradict established ideas about womanhood, making her a personification of contradiction. Terry Eagleton (2010) in his New Historicist book, *On Evil*, devotes his whole second chapter to the witches in Shakespeare's *Macbeth*. He describes them, approvingly, as violent, a threat to hierarchical social order, fluid in identity (in other words not confined by social restrictions), and unconstrained by their physical bodies or by time itself (Eagleton, 2010). They thus embody the ultimate freedom while also being at odds with dominant hierarchical societies that are in turn reciprocally influenced by sociocultural norms. His study is limited however to a single text, namely *Macbeth* – Shakespeare being the most popular subject of study for many New Historicists (Wilson 2007:171). Due to the amount of horror films starring a witch, I was able to draw upon films created over the span of a century, making nuanced observations regarding the tropes and influences that shape the cinematic witch's portrayals in horror films. Many of these observations may or may not mirror Eagleton's statements. At its core, New Historicism is concerned with power exchanges and power on display and how this resonates with culture (Drakakis & Fludernik, 2014:499, 504; Wilson, 2007:173). The cinematic witch is therefore well suited for such a study, since she is a woman with power. Her power does not originate from an external source, like riches, a man, or a bauble, but from within her.

With this study I seek to gain understanding of the embodiment of the cinematic witch and her supernatural power and how it manifests over time within different contexts. This is done from my position as an academic and middle-aged Caucasian male born and raised in a South African capitalist culture. My sociocultural position is relevant as I am entrenched in this society and it influences my perspectives²⁰. I also track the influence of cinema's technological evolution and how these technologies exerted influence over the construction of the witch's body and power in cinematic productions. Marjorie Levinson espouses the importance of tracing the ripple effect of texts on later texts.

As previously noted, these films are the products of society and the cinematic witch reflects societal norms and contexts in different ways at different points in time. The medium and the character are also inseparable from one another and exert an influence over each other. Since New Historicism focusses on exchanges of power it is pertinent to consider the witch's supernatural power and who it is directed to, and how it manifests along the lines of cinematic technology along with embodiment. H.A. Veaser (1989:xi), a renowned New Historicist and editor, states specifically "that every expressive act is embedded in a network of material practices". This means that the narrative cannot be separated from the medium or the practices used to create it. Similarly, the cinematic witch cannot be read in isolation from the analogue or digital medium we view her in or the practices associated with her creation. While completing this study I found numerous instances where the material practices had a direct influence on the portrayal of the cinematic witch.

I also borrow from Russian Formalism with regard to analysing the film technologies used to record and distribute the texts. Victor Shklovsky (2012), one of the most revered Formalist critics, argues that art makes the familiar abstract while also condensing various strands of meaning and ideas into a small coherent package (Lemon & Reis, 2012). The less effort required from the reader or viewer to notice or engage with these meanings the more the pleasurable is derived from the aesthetic experience. Familiarity with certain ideas and meaning rely heavily on knowledge gained from studying other texts and not so much on transcendental knowledge, or knowledge based on feeling or personal experience. Film being a mix of audio and moving images is able to condense a lot of meaning into a short amount of time and with very little exposition needed. Furthermore, film technologies changed and evolved over time. At first films were short, black and white, and without audio. Over time colour and audio was introduced to the medium adding more layers of meaning to the texts. This makes the medium and technologies used in their production just as important as the texts themselves.

²⁰ I am a born and raised South African. Though an African country, the South Africa that I was born and raised in shares many similarities with Western countries like the UK, USA, and even some European countries due to its colonial past.

The films were interpreted according to Levinson's previously mentioned proposed methodology. First one needs to consider the films themselves, followed by a rigorous literature review about the films, the contexts of the films, the reciprocal influence or ripple effect that the film has on the sociocultural and said contexts over time. Reliable and scholarly texts to provide contextual evidence of the films and the times of their production are ideal, but not always readily available, nor should they be relied upon to accurately illustrate a historical context. In some instances, old reviews or related publications were used to expand upon the context and meaning of the films. Similarly, in some instances films from the time of production were also used to draw comparisons. Levinson proposes that only texts from the time of the event or context should be considered. I both agree and disagree. These films were not created in a vacuum, nor do they exist in one. There are constant forces within society and culture which shape texts from point of origin to publication and distribution and beyond. It would be erroneous to exclude more recent texts. For instance, in some cases few old or recent texts were found which relate to the films chosen for this study, like in the case of *Witchcraft II* (1989), leaving no alternative but to use whatever is available. It is after all, according to New Historicist theory, important not to prioritize different texts created at the same time within a sociocultural context.

Secondly, if texts were found to support contradictory documentation then both texts were used in the analysis with neither receiving preferential treatment. For instance, if two texts are found to contradict one another with regard to a historic event, then both were used as this is evidence of potential different perceptions regarding said event²¹. This makes the study more inclusive and objective.

Thirdly, the hundred year span of this film archive, enables seeing the ripple effect Levinson mentions. It also becomes possible to trace the influences the films exert over one another and how the representation of the witch's body and supernatural power changed over the decades. These influences are in many instances apparent in the films without the director having to acknowledge or draw attention to it. It is also at times more subtle, like in the case of *Häxan* where no other horror films existed before and therefore it laid the foundations for many of the visual elements and conventions still found in horror films to this day. There are instances where this influence has been observed by other scholars which leads to more credibility regarding the influences between these films. This thesis is part of that ripple effect as my choice in undertaking this study arose from the pleasure I derive from viewing these films. It also contributes to this effect by becoming a recorded text that future scholars can use along with other similar studies to expand our knowledge related to horror cinema and the pleasure derived from experiencing them.

²¹ As seen with the example on page 3.

Lastly, the format and technologies of the films are also considered as meaning-making devices. I am able to study these films due to their digital formats. These films exist in physical and digital formats due to the technologies that evolved over time making it possible to view them from the comfort of my own home. I am also able to pause, rewind and forward certain scenes of the film for purposes of close analysis. The technologies also influenced the portrayal of the witch as well as her supernatural abilities making films like *The Blair Witch Project* possible while at the same time adding an extra layer of meaning to the film. If personal home video equipment did not exist, *The Blair Witch Project* would also not have existed, nor would society have a notion of found footage as a genre.

An attempt was made to ground my interpretations within my own sociocultural position and to draw attention to it. This means that some interpretations might be at odds with other academic practices, since the idea is to unearth new insights related to my sociocultural position as someone who, for instance, enjoys horror films. This is in keeping with the New Historicist tradition to break from academic and institutional leanings in an effort to break new ground. It is thus not about providing definitive answers, but more about enquiry itself into past sociocultural contexts, specifically dealing with the exchanges between culture and power, and how they have been shaped and changed over the decades viewed from my own and unique position within the culture I find myself in.

This multi-pronged approach to the study of the cinematic witch aims to contribute to the study of horror films, the reciprocity that exists between culture and power, and the popular media which enables both.

HÄXAN: THE ORIGINS OF THE CINEMATIC WITCH'S APPEARANCE AND SUPERNATURAL ABILITIES

This chapter serves as an introductory New Historicist analysis and interpretation of the cinematic witch's appearance and her supernatural abilities as portrayed in Benjamin Christensen's 1922 film *Häxan*. This section of the thesis starts with a description of the film and a discussion of the sociocultural context in which it was created, which is followed with an in-depth literature review of the film. The film is significant as it is the prototypical witch horror film which influenced other films in the genre for decades, as this thesis will elucidate. After the literature review I consider the film's various visual representations of the witch's appearance and supernatural abilities and what they represent of the sociocultural context at the point of the film's production. What is of importance in this section on the body and the supernatural are the tropes that are established and connected with the cinematic witch in horror films. These tropes are listed and discussed at the end of this chapter as it makes little sense to discuss them without first considering the film in detail. The witch's appearance and supernatural abilities are discussed in subsequent chapters while being compared to the tropes found in *Häxan*. In this way the influence, or ripple effect, of this particular film can be traced through subsequent decades, as this study will illustrate in the successive chapters.

Howard Bloom's theoretical models of influence and how influence manifests in texts, is central to this abovementioned ripple-effect as it enables us to trace and identify specific types of influence and how they could have occurred. This chapter gradually reveals how the *Bible*, the Catholic Church, and medieval societal values influenced the creation of texts during the witch-hunt era which in turn had an influence on Benjamin Christensen, the director and creator of *Häxan*. These influences played a significant role also in the cinematic tropes that originated from *Häxan* and influenced other witch horror films through subsequent decades.

As discussed in the literature review, studies about horror film antagonists mostly rely on psychodynamic or gender theories. My study deviates from that approach by considering the degree to which the cinematic witch challenged and still challenges sociocultural norms related to the female body, her appearance, power, and agency. In some instances, sociocultural problems related to women and female agency from the past persists to this day. In many instances the cinematic witch's embodiment, actions, and the historical contexts we find her in, mirror and/or challenge these sociocultural problems. In addition to these New Historical interpretations of past and present contexts my own aesthetic experience of the films is discussed at the end of each of the film analyses. These interpretations are informed by my own sociocultural position within an early twenty-first century society.

The Swedish-Danish produced pseudo-documentary, *Häxan*, directed by Benjamin Christensen, is a silent black and white film in seven chapters. One has to consider that the film medium was still in its infancy in the 1920s and that sophistications like genre distinctions were not as well-evolved as they would become later (Cook, 2007:3). Films of that time were, for instance, typically silent and shot on monochromatic black and white film (Brockman, 2010:32). To complicate matters of genre related to *Häxan* further, the film is often credited as not just the first feature length documentary, but also as the first cult movie ever produced (Stevenson, 2007:5).²² Erica Tortolani (2020:25) disagrees in part with the idea of *Häxan* being a documentary and suggest that the film distorts the lines between reality and fiction and is thus not a documentary. Christensen also disregarded the documentary filmic conventions developed during the 1920s, lending further credence to Tortolani's argument (Tortolani, 2020:33). When one considers the various tropes found in modern day horror films, like cannibalism, mutilations of the human body, combinations of sex and death/violence, the supernatural used as a tool to harm others, and references to fictional and obscure pagan practices, it becomes apparent that *Häxan* is in fact a horror film which is framed by lectures on witchcraft and female hysteria.

Häxan offers much to the scholar on various levels, as the film complicates many ideas of fictions and history. This leads a scholar to a more nuanced perspective on the witch's appearance, supernatural abilities, and societal notions of witchcraft during the witch hunts of the medieval era due to its blend of fictional, ideological, political, religious, and cultural themes (Tortolani, 2020:24, 27). Similarly, the witches as presented in *Häxan* are fictional constructs created by societal, cultural, and religious factors of the time in which the film was produced (Tortolani, 2020:25-26).

Background and plot of *Häxan*

Häxan's theatrical release was accompanied by a live orchestral music score. The content of the film was also directly inspired by the *Malleus Maleficarum der Hexenhammer (The Witch Hammer)*, a guide to witch-hunting originally written in 1487, and *La Sorcière* (1862) by Jules Michelet which is a study on witchcraft and the resulting persecutions, along with numerous other publications on the subject (Doty & Ingham, 2014:4-5; Stevenson, 2007:17). Production started in the winter of 1921, two years after World War I had ended, and was completed in October 1922 (Stevenson, 2007:26). Though filmed in a semi-documentary style, this was only used to frame and narrate the seven fictional sequences that each function as an independent fictional short film. Furthermore, the film

²² Jack Stevenson's *Witchcraft through the ages: The story of Häxan, the worlds' strangest film, and the man who made it* (2006), is regarded as the most comprehensive and accurate text relating to Benjamin Christensen's oeuvre and masterpiece, *Häxan: Witchcraft through the Ages*. The only other source is John Ernst's, *Benjamin Christensen*, which was published in 1967 and is only available in Danish.

does not contain the thematic or representational techniques one expects from a documentary film production (Tortolani, 2020:35).

Häxan is divided into seven chapters which each contain various short vignettes. Many of them reuse the same characters to tell different stories of the witch-hunt era. The film's first chapter gives a bit of background about the medieval context of the witch-hunt era while also describing common beliefs held by society regarding witches at that time. This chapter features no vignettes about the witch and only uses medieval engravings and text pieces to illustrate her appearance and attributes associated with her during the fifteenth to seventeenth centuries. The text and images explain that witches were blamed whenever any disastrous event befell anyone. Witches were blamed for causing disease, setting villages on fire, cursing people, and bewitching inanimate objects and farm animals. They are also described as taking part in Sabbaths where they consume the flesh of rotting corpses found at the gallows.

The first short stories about the witch only appear in chapter two of the film and centre on three old witches living in an underground home. One of them seems to be the leader in charge of a big black cauldron. The other two witches are subordinates who gather ingredients and prepare said ingredients so that these can be added to the pot for the production of potions and salves. These ingredients include, but are not limited to, herbs, snakes, toads, cat faeces, animal and human organs and other body parts. One of the witches arrives back in the lair with a hanged thief's dismembered hand and upper arm. Since it is not fresh anymore, she rehydrates it in a barrel of perhaps water or wine – the content of the barrel is unclear.

The inside of the lair is also dark and untidy. A complete skeleton of a dog dangles above the cauldron, while skulls of cattle and other creatures adorn the walls. A snake slithers over a table while a toad is hopping nearby. The ambience is morbid and foreboding.

A middle-aged woman hurriedly enters the witch's home and asks for a love potion to ensnare a pious monk. A cut-scene reveals her fantasies as she serves the monk plates of food and wine. The monk is a lecherous and obese man who spills food and drink over himself as he gorges on the meal the woman has prepared for him. She is shown to empty the contents of a potion – made of cat faeces and the heart of a sparrow – into his mug. He is soon overcome with lust and chases her into the forest and back into her home. Having secured the sale of the potion after the woman's daydream comes to an end the witch also offers her a salve that would enable her to have an out of body experience and to fly through the night sky.

The combination of the setting, the unsettling ingredients, and knowledge of elixirs that can entice and rob a man of his free will are just some of the more obvious tropes associated with the witch in horror films.

As the film progresses more associations come to fore. Young women are shown to be vexed by the Devil in their dreams. They sleepwalk into the night with their bodies naked and exposed, bowing down in front of a stone effigy resembling a demon. The woman awakens to find herself still in her bed, but the Devil is waiting by her side. She falls passionately into his arms.

A slide appears and reads: “The Devil’s companions can be young and beautiful, but she is more often old and poor”. In the rest of the film the witches appear in only two guises, namely young, beautiful, and undressed, or old, hunched, diseased, and decrepit. The young witches are never shown to handle any of the aforementioned ingredients or potions and seem to be relegated to sexual spectacle. They are, for instance, shown to cavort and dance with demons in the forest under a night sky which culminates into an orgy. There is also a scene where the witches kiss the naked buttocks of the Devil and dance and spit on a crucifix. The only other young woman who appears in the rest of the film is accused by one of the monks of the Inquisition. He accuses her of witchcraft after she touches the arm of one of his compatriots which results in the monk muttering that his arm is ‘burning’ where the lady touched him. It is however made clear in the scene that he finds her exquisite and that the burning sensation and desire for her has more to do with lust than with witchcraft.

The rest of the film dramatizes witch accusations and how they might have occurred. The wealthy printer in town falls ill and immediately his wife, her sister (the aforementioned young woman who made the monk swoon), and his mother all accuse an old woman who gathers firewood for households of being a witch and causing the printer to fall ill. Their accusations result in the old woman revealing to the inquisitors that her accusers are themselves witches. She claims that they were all present when she gave birth to the Devil’s children, along with other woman who have treated her ill.

The old woman mentioned is never shown to partake in anything related to witchcraft. She is just old and unclean. The monks drag her off and she is stripped, searched, and her hair cut off in case she is hiding any powders. At one point she is taken to one of the chief inquisitors where her breasts are exposed, and she is subjected to psychological torture. Most of the physical torture transpires off-camera, but there are some scenes where the naked backs of young women are prodded by sharp metal objects or by the Devil’s claws.

From the above paragraphs it becomes apparent that the witch’s body is the focus of the film. The witch’s body is only framed in two stereotypical ways, namely, the young, lustful, and beautiful, or the old and decaying. The witch’s supernatural abilities come second after the physical appearance of the witch.

The supernatural appears prominently in a later vignette of the film by way of numerous witches in flight on brooms. This is followed by a scene in the woods where the witches are shown in a cave with the Devil’s grandmother presiding over a ritual. In the centre of the cave the witches have

created a macabre arrangement of skulls, tarot cards, an hourglass, bones, and candles, all placed within two concentric white circles. In the corner a large devil stirs the contents of a steaming cauldron. An old witch is shown to rub salve on a young bare-chested witch's back while she readies herself for take-off with broom in hand. The skeleton of a horse solemnly passes them. An old strange book is also shown on an altar – a devil towering above it with a dead and bloodied baby in his right hand. This is followed by the same devil pouring goblets of water over young and naked witches while making gestures at the heavens. These same witches are then seen trampling, dancing, and spitting on a crucifix while devils scream and laugh at them. A reference is made to a ritualistic feast consisting of toads and the flesh of unchristened children. A bloodied baby is held aloft by a warlock as its blood is drained into a jar, after which its body is unceremoniously thrown into a cauldron. The night ends with an orgy between devil and the young women under the pale night sky. A devil is shown to feverishly churn butter as the women revel in sexual pleasure. Similarly, the inquisitors hearing all this from a tortured old woman revel in the yarn she spins them in an attempt to escape their wrath. The viewer is bombarded by unsettling yet sexually arousing images all within the space of five minutes as this vignette comes to an end. All of the abovementioned pagan acts serve as tribute to the Devil in exchange for supernatural benefits. The benefits are never revealed, suggesting that the benefits the witches receive are less important than their actions to receive said benefits.

There are also other scenes in the film that show the viewer what the witches do when they attempt to harm others. One scene, for instance, depicts two witches defecating into pots which they then throw at a house's door as a curse, killing the occupant inside. Some witches are shown to transform themselves into human-cat hybrids who relieve themselves on the altar of a church. Others use a piece of rope to measure the length of a newlywed couple's bed. They then tie knots into this rope. Every knot symbolises and causes a failed pregnancy. The results of the curses are never shown nor is it divulged to the audience whether the curses succeeded or not.

These types of images where the violent and the gruesome are juxtaposed with sexually arousing images of naked young women are well-known in horror films, especially those produced during the later 1970s and the 1980s.

The film ends with dramatizations of young women from the 1920s where Christensen draws comparisons between women of his time and the accused witches portrayed in the film. He explains hysteria as a psychological phenomenon which plagues and has plagued women over the centuries and that most likely had an influence on the witch-hunt era. Christensen reframes these stereotypical constructs of the witch in *Häxan* by arguing that society had no understanding of hysteria or mental illness resulting in women being labelled as witches when they acted out of societal norms. Mental illness thus supplants Satan as motivation for abnormal actions while at the same time both are applied exclusively to women.

The sociocultural context of *Häxan*

Before proceeding deeper into what scholars have written about the film, we need to consider the time when the film was created and released. During the late 1910s and early 1920s society was still reeling from the social and economic fallout of World War I (Streissguth, 2006:ix-xi; 1-2). This society was still very much influenced by old Victorian era values, an era which lasted approximately from 1815 to 1914 (Frost, 2018:vii). According to Lucy Williams (2016:ix,x) Victorian societal norms demanded that women achieve the traditional nineteenth century feminine ideal, which meant they were expected to be chaste, docile, passive, and maternal. Men had to adopt the traditional masculine ideal: to be strong, aggressive, virulent, and intelligent. Consequently men enjoyed power and freedom during this era, while women of even the highest standing were told how to dress, conduct themselves, and what to do with their lives (Williams, 2016:ix). Women were expected to base their lives entirely around family and home domesticity, which included cleaning, laundry, dressmaking, and raising of children (Williams, 2016:ix). Women were also expected to have a certain appearance as it lent credibility to their standing in society (Williams, 2016:63). Women were thus expected to act, look, and dress in certain ways, which suggests that their appearance and agency were constructs brought on by sociocultural norms.

In Sweden and other Scandanavian countries similar notions of morality related to sexuality and the nuclear family were found up and till the early 1900s (Kent, 2008:191, 195-196, 201, 204-205, 254). This was the same Scandinavian culture Benjamin Christensen was born to on September 28th, 1879, to a prosperous merchant family (Stevenson, 2007:7). Capitalism had also spread to most western nations at the time due to the Industrial Revolution (1750 to 1914), making abrupt and monumental changes in Victorian society (Farr, 2002:xxv-xxvi; Moore & Smith, 2018:1-2). Christensen understood concepts of industry, trade, and production and how new technologies like film could be used to generate fame and fortune for himself. His entrenchment in Victorian society also suggests that he harboured reservations toward women, while also having expectations of women, their appearance, and their agency.

Societal norms changed slowly during this time and the middle to upper classes of society were repressed, especially with regard to women's rights and feminine sexuality (Hwang, 2018:129). Among the poor, prostitution and sexual activities outside of marriage increased significantly, which further segregated the economic classes (Farr, 2002:253). Being poor went hand in hand with sexual promiscuity, while the idea of the nuclear family was associated with the middle or higher classes (Farr, 2002:253; Frost, 2018:11). It should be noted that secretly many affluent men also partook in prostitution and sex outside of wedlock, but at the same time it was frowned upon and would create quite the scandal if made public (Frost, 2018:11). Sexual norms related to women and their agency

undoubtedly had an influence over the media, at first only where printed publications were concerned but later this included photography and film after the advent of the camera.

For example, in England, all visual media and publications were required to further the advancement of the British Empire in some way or form (Davidson, 2018:149). These limitations had direct implications for erotica or pornography. According to Alan Moore (2009:20) erotica and pornography were largely viewed during the Victorian era as:

...a wretched ghetto with which no respected artist would desire to be associated, and which therefore rapidly becomes the province of those with no literary or artistic leanings whatsoever.

Licentious material was often banned and/or censored following Victorian societal demands (Frost, 2018:1). This censorship caused the exact conditions that fanned the desire and need among all the classes for more erotic and pornographic products (Moore, 2009:20).

Though inroads and concessions had been made benefitting the social position of western women by the 1920s, they still were not equal to men with some men still perceiving women as infantile, socially and economically unnecessary, and lustful/sinful (Carlisle, 2008:vii, 19; Melman, 1988:i; Streissguth, 2006:xi, 31, 33, 35, 103, 229, 269, 272). Women were more for adornment at social events, but were required not to have an opinion about politics, society, the economy, or anything else for that matter that was deemed the domain of men. Men still in other words controlled the narrative of women. In some instances, women led the way in social change, like the Women's Christian Temperance Union in the USA which to a great extent influenced and led to the enactment of the Prohibition Era (Streissguth, 2006:28). At the same time the International Federation of Catholic Alumnae (also in the US) lobbied for the sanctity of the nuclear family and for women to adhere to their role as mother and wife (Carlisle, 2008:31). In Sweden and other Scandinavian countries similar conservative norms prevailed with regards to women (Gustafsson, 2015:18, 33). In the Swedish film industry, for example, women were used only as window dressing or to run errands for male producers and directors (Åhlund, 2020).

Häxan is riddled with scenes of nubile young women in various stages of undress bowing to the whims of devils and male torturers, emulating their feminine place in Swedish society at the time. These scenes are interspersed with scenes of decrepit old crones who dabble in witchcraft and the making of putrid potions. This creates a clear division between young and old where the young and beautiful have value due to their beauty and sexual availability, while the old women are *othered* by linking their abject appearance with abject acts and materials.

The witches in *Häxan* resemble a common trope and racist stereotype found in Swedish cinema during the 1920s, namely the *tattare* (Gustafsson, 2010:92). The *tattare* is the collective name given to migrants from other countries who travelled through Sweden to find work (Gustafsson, 2010:92; Wright, 2010:293). They are described as scheming, immoral, dirty, and incredibly attractive to the young Swedish men and women (Gustafsson, 2010:92; Wright, 2010:294). The women were especially troublesome to Swedish society as they were accused of causing breakdowns in traditional Swedish families (Gustafsson, 2010:92; Wright, 2010:293). They were thus often the villains in melodramatic films where the focus was on traditional and conservative values (Gustafsson, 2010:93; Wright, 2010:293). Most of these films were set far away in the past in an attempt to disassociate the narratives from the very real xenophobia in Sweden at the time (Gustafsson, 2010:93).

The *tattare* can be compared to the stereotypical description of the witch as mentioned in the literature review. This witch is dirty, immoral, and can make herself attractive to the opposite sex. She is an outsider to society and can steal husbands away from wives, and children from parents, leading to disruptions of traditional family units. These are all characteristics that the Swedish people attributed to the *tattare*. The witches in *Häxan* are similarly inspired by folklore from the Middle Ages and the early modern period. The witches in the film mirror Swedish society's views and attitudes regarding migrant, or the *tattare*. Only the film's the medieval setting and the fictional characters disassociate it from the xenophobic society of the time.

The *tattare* and the witch also raise questions regarding agency. The *tattare* entice men sexually, drawing them away from Swedish society and morality. This raises the question of whether it is a choice the Swedish people willingly make, or are they beguiled and possessed. By turning the female *tattare* into a witch, men escape liability as they are portrayed as having been magically indoctrinated, which absolves them of responsibility for their actions. Christensen in his role as the 'masturbating' devil evokes this possession of men by the lustful enticements of women who are deemed inferior while at the same time seemingly admired for their sexual adventurousness. This evil possession by women turns men away from God and the conservative Swedish society.

Benjamin Christensen was undoubtedly influenced by these reigning social standards of the time. Along with his strict Christian upbringing, these could have had an influence on his perceptions of women and morality (Stevenson, 2007:7). Similarly, *Häxan* was influenced by older Christian texts concerning the witch (Stevenson, 2007:25). Despite some of the clearly misogynistic and xenophobic elements in the film, some of the film's themes were (and to an extent, still are) rebellious in nature if one considers the time which it was produced. This focus on an old subject matter like the witch hunts combined with the rebellious spirit of the film makes Benjamin Christensen a typical modernist and his film a good example of a modernist text (Williams, 2002:2, 6, 37, 138). According to David Ayers (2004:x) some modernists ask if art could have a social purpose. The film clearly has a social purpose

when viewed in relation to the *tattare*. Modernists were also decidedly anti-Victorian (Ayers, 2004:x). Some of the erotic scenes in the film are not in keeping with Victorian moral values. Peter Barry (2009:78-79) describes modernist method as the activity of producing a work of art or text by unconventional and untraditional means (highly experimental) like the film medium was in the 1920s. Additionally, modernist texts, for instance, are fragmented and discontinuous and in most instance do not conform to genre conventions as an emphasis is usually placed on the subject rather than the object – in other words modernists focus on how we see or the viewer's experience while viewing and not what the viewer specifically sees (Ayers, 2004:x, 17, 38; Barry, 2009:79).

Häxan follows similar conventions as the narrative is comprised of smaller narratives that are only linked by their subject matter. These stories contain fictional events and beings from the fantasy genre framed and packaged as a documentary (thus purporting to be a true life events) meaning that the film does not fit into a single genre. The film has no clear-cut moral position, as Christensen seems to simultaneously position the witch as pornographic spectacle and a victim of society and ignorance. By sexualising the witch he is himself guilty of victimising the witch. Furthermore, in the early 1920s the film undoubtedly challenged the last vestiges of Victorian and Edwardian social norms.

Christensen was in other words a modernist and his work mirrored the modernist tenets of the time. The film may rebel against the conservative thought of the Victorian Era, but it simultaneously manifests the male gaze which is problematic. One could argue that the film was an exercise to experience his own sexual proclivities, and like James Joyce, Franz Kafka, and D.H. Lawrence, his art exemplified it.

Though Victorian morals and values were still highly regarded in many European societies, *Häxan* was met with much acclaim in Sweden and Denmark, but experienced resistance in other countries upon release with many protests, and patrons calling it perverse and morbid (Stevenson, 2007:5, 56-58, 64). The most common criticism was that it was immoral and mocked the church, with the United Kingdom and the United States of America not releasing it theatrically (Stevenson, 2007:64-65).

The witches in *Häxan* symbolised certain ideas encoded into the moral fabric of 1920s Swedish society. Xenophobia was not limited to Sweden and similar societal ills were experienced, though to a slightly lesser extent, in Denmark and Norway (Lindström, 1983:6, 9, 22, 58-59, 62; Mosse, 1978:108). The witch mirrors the xenophobia of the society, while also alluding to the sexual repression and conservatism of the Scandinavian people of the time of production. The style and production of the film also mirrors the modernist movement of the time, while also sexualising young women as window dressing in film. Women and their level of attractiveness and danger to society are in *Häxan* directly linked to their age. The young and beautiful witches seem mostly powerless and non-threatening, while the older crones are powerful and decrepit and unattractive.

A literature review of research on *Häxan*

I mention earlier in this chapter that Benjamin Christensen was heavily inspired by the descriptions of the witch in the *Malleus Maleficarum* and borrowed extensively from it while producing *Häxan*'s script. According to Diane Purkiss (1996:24) the witch stereotype popularised by the current media is the same witch that was killed during the witch hunts of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. The witch we find and fear in contemporary horror films shares many similarities to the witch described in the *Malleus Maleficarum*. The witch from 400 years ago is as much an imaginary being as the witch we see in horror films. It is highly doubtful that these accused women could actually fly through the air on brooms, or could have had intercourse with demons. Bengt Ankarloo and Stuart Clark (2002:ix) mention in *Witchcraft and Magic in Europe: The Period of the Witch Trials*, that it is difficult for us in a modern society to comprehend the context of the time of the witch trials, but argue that “poisonous hatreds and animosities, the fantasies and imaginings” were all at the heart of prosecuting witches. Witches were a reality for many in society at the time even though the witch as described in the *Malleus Maleficarum*, and subsequently popularised by society, never existed (Monter, 2002:11).

The *Malleus Maleficarum* is often cited as being central to the identification and the resulting persecution of witches on grounds of it being the most striking anecdotal text regarding witches to come from the period (Purkiss, 1996:11). The witch trials did not originate from the publication of the *Malleus Maleficarum*, but the book did to a degree fuel the imagination of those who read its contents (Monter, 2002:19). One has to consider that the witch hunts and subsequent trials were the result of more widespread social, legal, political and economic tensions (Bailey, 2015:362). Disputes between neighbours, for instance, led to many witchcraft accusations (Rider, 2015:317-318). Another example is the case where the Inquisition was at odds with a harmless yet popular fertility cult in Friuli, Italy (Ankarloo, 2002:62). The Inquisitors believed the cult to be a threat to the Catholic Church in the region and gradually persuaded the peasants that the cult was demonic (Ankarloo, 2002:62).

When one considers the anecdotal importance of the *Malleus Maleficarum* and its subsequent use and reinterpretation by Christensen in the creation of *Häxan*, one could argue that Christensen was unknowingly attempting a New Historic study of an old text before the field came into existence. According to Erica Tortolani's study on *Häxan* Christensen was influenced by Jean-Martin Charcot's pop-psychology of the time (Tortolani, 2020:25-26). Charcot, an early pioneer of neurology, studied hysteria and its origins (Didi-Huberman, 2003:18, 157-160). His theories were popular and widely discussed during the 1910s by many in society especially due to his photographic documentation of hysteria (Justice-Malloy, 1995:135, 136; Tortolani, 2020:35). Central to his argument was that hysteria did not originate from something unseen, but from everyday stressors like fever, syphilis, environment disasters exaggerated religious practices, and chosen profession (Didi-Huberman, 2003:72). He produced theatrical productions to display and illustrate hysteria in Charcot's *Theatre of*

Hysteria which were attended by peers and the general public (Justice-Malloy, 1995:136).

Christensen was not just influenced by the Charcot's ideas regarding hysteria and the possible implications it presented in the accusations of witchcraft, but also the way Charcot used images to present the hysterical woman (Tortolani, 2020:25). In other words, Charcot reframed prevailing ideas regarding the emotional states of women at the beginning of the twentieth century which Christensen in turn used to reframe the medieval witch of the past for a then-contemporary audience of the 1920s. Christensen was influenced by Charcot to rethink the reasons why women were accused by their peers three centuries before. I do not agree with Charcot's ideas regarding female hysteria, but Christensen did and Charcot's influence is explicit throughout the entire film.

By employing Charcot's theories to reframe the anecdotal evidence of witches found in other older texts one can argue that *Häxan* functions as an early, yet unconscious, attempt at a New Historic analysis of medieval witchcraft. One can see how Christensen's *Häxan* could have been a precursor for a New Historicist text due to the methods he employed to produce the film to reframe an older historical context in his own time, but also due to the sociocultural influences that shaped his construction and embodiment of the witches in the film. It could be for this reason that *Häxan* has enjoyed some recent in-depth scholarly attention. Before 2006 though, the film received very little critical commentary (Doty & Ingham, 2014:2). One can only speculate as to the reasons for the dearth of studies related to such an influential film, but as a collector of films I believe that the relative rarity of the film in a physical format greatly contributed to this. Also, as explained in the literature review, the horror film genre is historically regarded by many academics as juvenile and unsophisticated. Similarly, films from the silent era of cinema are regarded by many as primitive and immature (Abel, 2007:3). It was only in the early 1980s that archivists and academics started to work together to discuss and research newly rediscovered prints of films from the early 1900s (Abel, 2007:3). I believe that the advent of VHS tapes in the 1980s and DVDs in the 1990s contributed to the rise of scholarly interest in horror films due to the relative ease of obtaining horror films produced from the 1950s and onwards. Earlier films are however difficult to transfer to VHS as it takes considerable skill and high costs to transfer 60-80 year old celluloid to modern day formats. Many of the old prints have to be restored before transference can occur. The high costs and the low expected financial returns on such exercises made these old films even more difficult to source. The old *Häxan* prints were, for instance, only restored in 1976 and the restored version was released on DVD in 2001 by Criterion (Mair, 2016). A severely edited and censored version of *Häxan* was released in the United States of America on VHS by Embassy Home Entertainment in 1984, while an even more severely edited version was released in the United Kingdom by Redemption. The unedited and restored version was thus only made available to the general public and scholars in 2001, indicating that it is reasonable that studies would only have been completed by the middle of the first decade of the twenty-first century.

The first of the scholars to engage with *Häxan* is Jack Stevenson. He wrote a book on the history of *Häxan* and its creator, Benjamin Christensen, *Witchcraft through the Ages: The story of Häxan, the World's Strangest Film, and the Man Who Made it* (2006). The book traces the history of Christensen, the influences, production, release, and reception of the film, and the rerelease of the film in the 1960s. Stevenson includes restored film stills, film reviews, and recorded public reactions to the film which gives the reader an in-depth overview of the film's history and reception. It avoids academic analysis and interpretations of the film as these types of discourses were not the focus of his book.

Alexander Doty and Patricia Clare Ingham's *The Witch and the Hysteric: The Monstrous Medieval in Benjamin Christensen's Häxan* (2014) on the other hand is a thorough interpretive analysis of *Häxan* and the film's tenuous connection with medieval hysteria. Doty and Ingham (2014:3) argue that the witches in the film are monstrously medieval figures borne from the imaginations of medieval society while the film itself is historically inaccurate in its portrayal of the witch. In other words, the witch as we find her in the film was imagined from folklore and legend as popularised in texts like the *Malleus Maleficarum* (Doty & Ingham, 2014:3-4). Christensen's medievalism is influenced by the *Malleus Maleficarum* which he then interprets and reframes from his own societal position (Doty & Ingham, 2014:3-4). They suggest that Sigmund Freud, Jean-Martin Charcot, and Josef Breuer, all figures who emphasised a connection between medieval/early-modern witch hunts and the modern-day mental problems of women, influenced Christensen's schema of the witch (Doty & Ingham, 2014:4).

Doty and Ingham (2014:5) assert that:

The witch sits at the center of this project (*Häxan*), and her image resonates with analyses of a certain kind of monstrosity in gendered and historical terms. Precisely as a mother/model for the later figure of the hysteric, the witch highlights a diverse asynchrony of gender, one keyed to the representational politics surrounding the female subject and her male examiners, whether persecutors or rescuers.

In other words, the stereotypical witches found in *Häxan* that are still popular in the media to this day, mirrors imagined fears attributed to women by men. Christensen's lecture that frames the vignettes suggests that he sympathises with the prosecution of medieval women (and the modern woman) by connecting medieval society's misinterpretation of hysteria to the witch hunts of the sixteenth and the seventeenth centuries. He errs though by singling out women to carry this affliction, and does not consider that hysterical men or clergy could have been just as guilty when accusing women of witchcraft. Similarly, with the exception of one warlock in the film where a baby is drained of blood and thrown into a cauldron, Christensen does not discuss a man as warlock. Finally, the nudity, the sexual acts, and the way they are presented in the film seem to be at odds with Christensen's plight for women.

I find Doty and Ingham's interpretations compelling as they open *Häxan* for further interpretation where the portrayal of women is concerned. The witch is considered to exalt the occult and to worship supernatural deities in exchange for some form of benefit, be it riches, power, or immortality. The witch also surrounds herself with effigies of the dead. This would mean that the Catholic priest or inquisitor was just as guilty of witchcraft as the witches they accused. Those who ascribe to Catholic, or any other Christian doctrine, also worship a supernatural deity in exchange for some personal benefit and they also surround themselves with effigies of the dead in the form of crucifix's, statues of a tortured and malnourished Christ, and participate in symbolic cannibalism when partaking in the body of Christ through the Eucharist or Holy Communion. Christensen not drawing similar comparisons between the clergy and hysteria paints his notions as one-sided and sexist, making him guilty of repeating stereotypical norms related to women and power. Doty and Ingham (2014:60) state that Christensen's witches and women in general simply evolved from being possessed by devils to having mental illness, perpetuating the *othering* of women in society.

Richardt Baxstrom and Todd Meyers' *Realizing the Witch: Science, Cinema, and the Mastery of the Invisible* (2016:1) describes Christensen's film as a thesis on the witch which does not discuss the witch, but gives her life. They say (Baxstrom & Meyers, 2016:2):

Häxan is a document, an amplified account of the witch insistent on its historical and anthropological qualities, presented through excesses so great that they toyed with his audience's scepticism as much as their sensitivity. Christensen created an artistic work filled with irrationalities that not only made the witch plausible, but real.

They suggest that Christensen breathed new life into a forgotten stereotype of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries and reframed her for the modern audience of the twentieth century and beyond. The cinematic witch embodied in *Häxan* is more tangible due the witch being visualised on behalf of the audience. Before the invention of cinematography, the audience had to rely on written text and engravings in books to visualise her in their mind's eye. With film this process is expedited. The sexualised images of the young witch most likely contribute to this process, along with the abject and scandalous (at the time) imagery.

Baxstrom and Meyers' text considers the history of the witch like the previous two texts, but it is framed in a unique way. The authors describe their work as a text which attempts "to think alongside Christensen, through his vast library of source materials and within the structural logic of his film thesis, to better appreciate Christensen's project" (Baxstrom & Meyers, 2016:4). Their study attempts to understand the relationship between the film and the texts Christensen consulted while producing the film and what conclusions the audience was meant to arrive at after viewing the film.

Baxstrom and Meyers (2016:4-5) frame and approach *Häxan* as a thesis or cultural history lecture translated into moving pictures which not only discusses the medieval witch, but also the sociocultural context of the 1920s. In addition to this, they discuss and analyse the influence and scope of *Häxan* and the sources which influenced it.

One of the more noteworthy arguments in the Baxstrom and Meyers book is where they compare the pseudo-documentary style of *Häxan* to Robert Flaherty's *Nanook of the North* where a similar style is used to enact the daily life of an Inuit (2016:88). Though real Inuit were filmed, most of the events were staged (Leacock, 1990). Both *Häxan* and *Nanook of the North* present characters and events that do not represent definite events in time, but suggest to the viewer events and characters typified in their respective historic contexts. In other words, these characters and events are drawn from numerous similar contexts and distilled to a typical representation of the event and/or character (Baxstrom & Meyers, 2016:88-89). Christensen mined these typical situations and characters from texts like the *Malleus Maleficarum* and then reframed these from a psychological perspective focussing on hysteria. Similar to Doty and Ingham, Baxstrom and Meyers (2016:92) also note the parallels that exist between the 'powers' of the inquisitors, exorcists, the church clergy, and the witch.

Baxstrom and Meyers (2016:92-94) say much about the camera work used in *Häxan*, especially with regards to the use of close-ups. For instance, in one scene an old woman is accused of being a witch. A close-up shot of the woman reveals in detail the texture of her dry and wrinkled skin, but also the remnants of food which dribbled over her chin. The camera focuses on her loathsomeness by zooming in on it and presenting it to the audience in full detail. In this instance Christensen seems to again contradict his self-proclaimed sympathies towards women accused of witchcraft during medieval times. Christensen's insincerity becomes somewhat apparent in this scene by using such a specific shot to repulse the audience. This very same technique is later employed to great effect in horror films.

Other shots in the film suggest the social hierarchy of women (Baxstrom & Meyers, 2016:97-98). The male priests are, for instance, filmed slightly from below suggesting power, while the women are at times filmed from a high angle with the women looking up, suggesting their lower position in society. The older members of the male clergy are similarly portrayed as calm and sure of themselves, while the women, irrespective of age, are portrayed along emotional and hysterical lines (Baxstrom & Meyers, 2016:98). These differences between the clergy and the women further mirror not only Christensen's misogyny, but also the sociocultural norms held towards women at the time.

In the postscript for their book, Baxstrom and Meyers (2016:208) argue that witchcraft, possession, and hysteria in horror films was introduced by Christensen in *Häxan* and subsequently used by such noted directors like Ingmar Bergman in *The Seventh Seal* (1956) and Lars von Trier in *Antichrist* (2009). This contributes to my study as it makes a connection between *Häxan* and these films, thereby

suggesting a measurable ripple. Robert Eggers has made similar assertions regarding *Häxan* stating that the film influenced his own production and direction of *The Witch* (2015) (Hall, 2016).

Jacob Hall (2016) argues:

It's easy to see how *Häxan* influenced *The Witch* (and every other witch-themed horror movie ever made). It's a barebones, straightforward depiction of the Christian view of witchcraft, which means old hags and flying brooms and magical potions. This is the witch movie template – everything that followed had to provide its own twist on this material.

Hall's statement rings true, especially regarding *Häxan* as the prototypical witch film. His statement however also falls short for reasons which will be explained as this study unfolds. Both *Antichrist* (2009) and *The Witch* (2015) are discussed in detail in later chapters with various instances of influence becoming explicit.

Erica Tortolani builds on the previously mentioned three studies with her 2020 published paper, *Troubling Portrayals: Benjamin Christensen's Häxan, Documentary Form, and the Question of Histor(iography)* (sic – it is likely that the author intended it to be "Histor(iograph)y"). She refers extensively to Baxstrom and Meyers as well as Doty and Ingham, and uses their texts to argue the extent to which *Häxan* complicates genre, narrative, and historical conventions. She draws comparisons between the fictions and realities presented in *Häxan* and how they relate to genre and history. She concludes that *Häxan* is important and pioneering because of the way and extent to which Christensen muddled the waters of history, psychology, art history, sociology, and rhetorical studies (Tortolani, 2020:36). This hybridity influenced other Scandinavian film makers who similarly attempted to explore historical, psychological, and mythological themes through the female body (Tortolani, 2020:38). Tortolani (2020:39) believes that *Häxan* thus contributes to the *othering* of women in Western society and I am inclined to agree.

Tortolani (2020:35-36) makes an additional important contribution to the study of *Häxan* by arguing that the film opens the viewer up to various possibilities of a past time as it rejects the notion of a singular perspective about a bygone time. The film is in itself a point of view about medieval witchcraft from a person in a completely different sociocultural position than those who lived in the sixteenth and the seventeenth centuries, which conforms to Levinson's proposed New Historicist mode of study. Christensen consulted medieval texts regarding witchcraft created at the same time the witches he portrays are from. These same texts, like the *Malleus Maleficarum*, contain collected and reworked cultural anecdotes from the time which frames the witch according to specific stereotypes.

Häxan is a good example of Harold Bloom's theories regarding influence. As mentioned in the methodology chapter, Howard Bloom devised six revisionary ratios of influence that describe the way

writers (or film directors) are influenced by what came before. This influence is unavoidable and is the result of latter day authors, directors, and artists attempting to create new texts while simultaneously building on their precursors. With *Häxan* Christensen made a corrective movement regarding the witches described in these old texts (*clinamen*). Christensen breaks from *Malleus Maleficarum*'s (1487) theory that witches are possessed by demons and devils and 'corrects' it by arguing that the women were in fact plagued by hysteria. This corrective measure is also a deliberate shift (*kenosis*) from what came before in two ways, namely the visual medium of film to present the witch, but also to reinterpret demon possession as a neurological problem.

These reinterpretations and elaborations of old anecdotal documents reframed from a new sociocultural present at a different time mirrors Levinson's approach to New Historicism. The perpetuation of the subordination of women in *Häxan* combined with the sexualisation of the young female body similarly links back to Laura Mulvey's feminist theories regarding women in film where women are sexualised while emphasising their beauty and sexual availability. Christensen also displays undressed women in various states of torture and anguish, which is one of the hallmarks of horror films according to Linda Williams (1991:85, 90, 97). The portrayal of women in *Häxan* can be linked to many of the feminist scholars mentioned in the literature review of this study.

Julia Kristeva proposes that pleasure in horror stems from the vanquishing of those who threaten the symbolic order in society. The medieval witch threatened the church, so she was vilified, tortured, and killed in *Häxan*. The same witches are often shown in various stages of undress. Kristeva proposes that the undressing of a woman in a horror film renders her powerless while emphasising her sexual availability. The young witches are explicitly eroticised by Christensen in the film as they are undressed and shown having sex while Christensen churns butter and flicks his tongue while watching them. The old woman who is accused is also stripped and paraded in front of one of the Inquisitors. Though this might not be an attempt to sexualise her, it is undoubtedly done to shame and dehumanize her. I find this similar to the way Western colonists presented African women in texts in the past. Naked African women were often pictured and victimised in similar fashion by Western publications in an attempt to prove African primitivism and as justification of colonialism (Coly, 2010:654). The old European woman is *othered* by stripping her of her clothes and shaming her. By doing so the clergy demonstrate that the old woman is too different from their idealised version of a woman suggesting that she does not have the same rights as women who do fit the idealised model of womanhood.

The film constantly fluctuates between young and nubile witches and old and frail witches. Middle-aged women are not presented as witches in the film. The only middle-aged women in the film are clients and accusers of witches.

In the first half of the film the viewer is mostly exposed to the witch as an old crone. The first of these scenes shows an old crone stirring a pot in a dilapidated house surrounded by dead and decaying things. Some of the ingredients that she is shown to use in her potions are the hand of a thief, a skull, snakes, and toads. Another older woman visits her in the dead of night asking for a love potion. She mixes cat faeces and dove hearts in a pot, boiling them under moonlight to create the requested potion. This witch conforms to the previously mentioned stereotype popularised during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries and is used extensively throughout the film.

The witch as a lusty young woman features prominently in the second half of the narrative. These women dance and fornicate in the nude under the moon while devils and demons have their way with them. All this transpires while an onlooker, the Devil (played by the director Benjamin Christensen), vigorously churns butter and flicks his tongue. These scenes make the film seem more like a masturbatory fantasy than a horror film. There is a definite contrast between the aforementioned and the old crones and their morbid ingredients found earlier in the film. Both these portrayals of women, the alluring and the abject, suggest that Christensen might have viewed women along lines of sexual availability and age-linked levels of attractiveness. Tortolani (2020:37-39) proposes that *Häxan* is guilty of three more things. First, though the film sympathises with women and the prosecution of women during medieval times, it perpetuates the link between irrationality, mental illness, and hysterical women (Tortolani, 2020:37). The second is that it inspired other filmmakers to follow suit and they used the female body to explore themes of history, psychology, and mythology through it (Tortolani, 2020:38). And third, the previous two problems contributed to the *othering* of women in Western society (Tortolani, 2020:39).

Where the body of the witch is concerned in this production the witch fluctuates between a hideous, bent old crone and a beautiful, young, and lusty woman with no other types in between. The young witches, except for a broom-flying scene, also do not take part in the making of potions or any other witch-like activities and only dance naked and have sex with demons and other terrors from Hell. There are also some scenes that can be compared to modern BDSM (bondage, discipline, sadism, and masochism) practices due to the witches having to kiss the naked buttocks of the Devil and being bound and whipped, which gives the impression that the film is more about sex than about witchcraft. Supernatural elements play but a small part in the various vignettes, but are subdued in scope and reach. The only magic found in the film is when a witch creates a love potion which makes a monk fall in love with her client, while in another scene witches fly on brooms through the night sky.

The witches in *Häxan* mirror much more about society than the abovementioned suggests through their bodies and their lack of supernatural abilities. According to Linda Badley (2013:19) *Häxan* “is an investigation into the history, psychology and mythology of misogyny”. In mythology we find a good example of this type of misogyny in the form of Dionysus which is the focus of the next section.

The Dionysian

In medieval Christian Europe the witch was frequently blamed when inexplicable events of misfortune occurred (Moro, 2018:5; Pócs, 1989:28). The *Malleus Maleficarum* and the witch-hunt era in Europe are testament to how engrained some of these beliefs were. The witch was believed to be a servant and concubine of Lucifer, making her the Satanic antagonist to God's Catholic clergyman. I specifically say clergyman to emphasise the gender of those who wielded power in the Catholic Church in past and still do so in present. Popes have historically always been male. Catholic nuns have never been ordained and are to this day subordinate to priests (McClain, 2018:55, 197). This is why no woman in the Catholic Church has ever been able to perform any sacramental rites or to function in the role as mediator between the general populace or God (McClain, 2018:197, 211). A woman in the Catholic Church has no power or authority within the church (McClain, 2018:211). The Catholic Church deem women as divinely imperfect as the first woman was created after Adam, making a woman inferior in comparison to a man (McClain, 2018:212). Furthermore, women were, according to the Catholic Church of the sixteenth century, inherently sinful and would drive men to lustful thoughts if they were to preach or officiate over sacraments (McClain, 2018:261). As only men were created in God's image and Christ manifested on Earth as a man, only men can represent God (McClain, 2018:261).

Witches, being associated with the Devil of the Christian Bible, are granted power and authority and are similar to the Christian male clergy but in an oppositional position. Warlocks are hardly ever mentioned in folklore or myth, while the witch is pervasive throughout western culture. Similarly, the only notable horror films starring a warlock as an antagonist are *Warlock* (1989) and *Warlock: The Armageddon* (1993). This suggests that women are favoured by Lucifer as clergy or disciples, similar to the way the Catholic Church believes that men are favoured by God in the same roles. Just as God and Satan are opposite, so were their followers during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries.

These opposing belief systems and their deities are comparable with the Apollonian and Dionysian. In the main literature review of this thesis I give a detailed exposition of Apollo and Dionysus. I remind the reader however of their characteristics and what they represent: Apollo is overtly connected to the male gender and represents order, purity, control, rationality, and science. Dionysus is aligned with women and those who are gender fluid, but she also represents chaos, violence, wanton sexuality, putrefaction, and the unknown. Apollo and Dionysus represent various other binaries, like sun/moon, light/darkness, life/death, sky/earth, and industrialisation/nature. From these binaries we can see that Dionysus is mostly associated with negative aspects like darkness and death, but there is more. He is frequently associated with cannibalism, shape-shifting, and abject liquids like blood, uterine jellies, menstrual blood, and stagnating swamps. In addition, Paglia describes him as a destroyer and thoughtless murderer.

When we consider what Dionysus represents it becomes difficult not to link him with witches and witch cults. Dionysus represents everything western society fears. The Dionysian will destroy civilisation through its rejection of hierarchy and societal norms. The witches in the *Malleus Maleficarum* and *Häxan* conform to the Dionysian archetype in every respect, from being a violent woman to the grotesque, from revelling in sexual pleasure to being associated with liquids – the liquids being the salves and potions witches make out of putrid substances like cat urine and rotting hands soaking in barrels of wine. The witch has no scruples when it comes to sex or sexual partner as she is shown to crave sex from demons and devils. She is anti-familial and has the ability to destroy everything and everyone in her path. She is at home in nature among the trees and like nature is vicious and violent, but not for the sake of being evil. There is no evil or malicious intent when a lion hunts, kills, and dismembers its prey. Dionysus and the witch are similar to the lion in this respect as dismembering another is no less malicious than breathing or sleeping in the light of the sun. Lions have been known to eat the cubs of other lions. The witches in *Häxan* are shown to be cannibals at one point as they drain a baby of all its blood and then throwing its remains in a stew. The witch, like Dionysus, can shapeshift into other animals through cannibalism by becoming what she eats. And if the witch can change shape, it means that she is formless and without boundary. She is unrecognisable for the Apollonian eye and has the ability to self-perpetuate through her unbridled fertility, her liquid breasts and thighs, and the amniotic swamp in her belly. She can use her ‘liquidy’ assets to bend men to her whims and thus flaunt any laws. Laws and definitions related to human agency and actions are Apollonian. They are there to limit societal members. The witch is free from notions such as guilt and shame. She has no need for purity or morals as they are just societal constructs meant to keep her in a submissive position.

Interestingly, Dionysus seems like an extension of modernist thought (see Foster, 1989 and Gooding-Williams, 2002). His wantedness, depravity, and violent tendencies challenges Victorian values. As he is man, woman, animal, plant, and none of these mentioned, he is fragmented. By cannibalizing others he absorbs them, further fragmenting himself. He has an obvious social purpose to fulfil and that is to stand in opposition to the Apollonian, which in turn gives meaning to the Apollonian. Also, Dionysus is liquid, an abstraction with no bounds which suggests alignment with the subjective and the rejection of Apollonian symmetry and beauty.

From the above it becomes clear that the witch is an extension or perpetuation of the Dionysian or the chthonian. Like Dionysus existed as an antithesis to Apollo, so does the witch exist today as an antithesis to the church and western society. The witch serves a function in popular media like horror films. There seems to be a need for this type of challenging and chaotic archetype in society otherwise she would not exist. This constant repetition and reframing of the Dionysian through the centuries, first as a Greek deity, then as a woman with power, surely says something about humanity, society,

and societal norms. By studying one sub-genre of film specifically related to fear, like the witch-horror film, might lead to new realizations about society and ourselves.

My personal aesthetic experience of *Häxan*

Paglia (2001:98) says that notions of individuality and identity are Apollonian. Furthermore, she asserts that artefact creation, like film making, is tantamount to freezing the natural world on celluloid and limiting and objectifying everything caught by the camera's eye (Paglia, 2001:29-30, 57, 93, 106). The irony is not lost on me that I am not only studying films (artefacts created to control and objectify the natural world), but that I am devoting sections of this study to my own personal aesthetic experience. This is not meant as an act of hubris nor do I believe that I am guilty of solipsism. The reasoning behind these sections is three-fold, namely to mimic the New Historic methodology and to break new ground and expand on our knowledge of horror films and the way the female body and woman's agency is reframed to induce fear. The second reason is to give an honest account of who the researcher (myself) was, my background, and how I arrived at the conclusions I did with the completion of this study. This will give future researchers some understanding of my sociocultural context and societal position enabling them to expand even further on the knowledge-base of horror films and fear and how fear and horror films relate to gender, women, the female body, and women's agency by inserting their own subjectivity from their own unique sociocultural positions. The third reason is that some of the films discussed in this thesis have little to no literature devoted their study. This means that I had to rely on my own experiences of those films to facilitate connections with scholarly texts that are not directly focusing on these films.

I find Christensen's film enjoyable and well made. The constant allusions to masturbation are in my opinion somewhat juvenile and laughable. The most noteworthy scene in the film is where the witches dance under the full moon and are fornicating with the Devil and other demons. This is one of three instances in the film where I felt a sense of horror and foreboding, but also fascination. That being said, the nude scenes are tame in comparison with other horror films produced since 1970 with only the women's backs exposed and their buttocks always strategically obscured by props or shadows (see figures 1 and 2 on the next pages).

The night-time orgy reminds me of the *Genesis* 6 verse 1-4 (King James version) where it is mentioned that some of God's angels descended to Earth and took mortal women as wives.²³ In both the *Bible* and *Häxan* women have sexual relations with supernatural beings borne from the Christian faith, namely angels (*Bible*) and devils (*Häxan*). In both narratives the lines of fact and fiction are

²³ I should mention that though I perceive some of the tales in the Bible to be somewhat historically accurate, I do not see the Bible as an exact historical document, even though I do view myself as of the Christian faith. I also believe that many of tales contained in it to be fictional, embellished and/or exaggerations of events.

similarly blurred depending on the beliefs of the viewer/reader. There are many similarities and deviances between the women in *Genesis* and *Häxan* as explained in the next paragraphs. These differences and commonalities can be linked back to Bloom's ratios of influence where the creator of *Häxan* was influenced by *Malleus Maleficarum* which was in turn influenced by prevailing sociocultural norms of the time and the Catholic Church. Devils, demonic entities, and women with supernatural abilities are fairly common in the *Bible*, which is the focus of the *Malleus Maleficarum*. The *Malleus Maleficarum* can be considered an extension and expansion of biblical knowledge which links to Bloom's ratios.

With regards to Bloom's *clinamen*, the authors of the *Malleus Maleficarum* accept the truth of malicious women of power found in the *Bible*, but corrects it by expanding upon the threat it poses towards the Catholic Church and society as a whole. Where the *Malleus Maleficarum* suggests that witches originate from pacts with Satan, Christensen corrects this assumption in *Häxan* by suggesting that the witch was a product of female hysteria.



Figure 1. *Häxan: Witchcraft through the Ages*. 1922. [Film still from Blu-ray]. Directed by Benjamin Christensen. Sweden/Denmark: Skandias Filmbyrå.



Figure 2. *Häxan: Witchcraft through the Ages*. 1922. [Film still from Blu-ray] Directed by Benjamin Christensen. Sweden/Denmark: Skandias Filmbyrå.

Bloom's *tesserae* also features strongly in the relationship between the *Bible* and the *Malleus Maleficarum* as the latter is a new text with bits and pieces of the *Bible* scattered throughout its contents in an effort to lend credence to the *Malleus Maleficarum*. The *Bible* also does not refer to all the definitions, attributes, or characteristics of a witch as found in the *Malleus Maleficarum*. Similarly, *Häxan* contains numerous references to old books, etchings, and manuscripts, which add tokens of recognition throughout the film while explaining and reframing them through a psychoanalytical perspective. As the perspective shifts from the satanic to the psychoanalytic, we find another one of Bloom's ratios appearing in the form of *askesis*.

Finally, Bloom's *apophrades* also appears in the relationship between *Häxan* and the *Malleus Maleficarum*. Christensen deliberately links *Häxan* with the *Malleus Maleficarum* and other similar texts. By doing so the *Malleus Maleficarum* and the old etchings and paintings used throughout the film inhabit it like a ghost inhabits a home. The *Bible* similarly inhabits the *Malleus Maleficarum* and these etchings, making a ripple effect clear as it originates from the Bible and ripples outward through written texts and films. This relates to Levinson's New Historic approach as a golden thread emerges that ties the *Bible* with later written texts and films over the span of approximately 2000 years.

Another obvious divergence is that the witches in *Häxan* are visually portrayed in a film, while the *Bible* is a book containing only text. One could argue that film as a medium is a corrective measure (Bloom's *clinamen*) where the recording and sharing of stories are concerned. In the main literature review of this dissertation I mention Victor Shklovskii's *Art as Technique* wherein Shklovskii argues

that the less effort the author or creator of a text employs to evoke the maximum amount of thought in the reader, the more satisfactory the style of the text is and, consequently, the more enjoyable it is for the reader. The visual nature of film enables a director to effortlessly shower the viewer with numerous complex ideas with little exposition, making the images and narrative far more accessible than it would normally be through textual exposition.

For instance, Benjamin Christensen, who appears in his own film as a perverted and masturbating devil. He also displays sexist, yet contemporary, notions of the 1920s regarding women. I find it difficult to believe that Christensen had noble intentions when filming the orgy scenes. It would be more accurate to suggest that Christensen added these scenes for the sake of being sensationalist and scandalous. If this is true then Christensen commoditized the objectification of women in order to gain success. The witches in the film are commodities who are traded with the audience for sexual edification, facilitating further sin. The witches are shown to enjoy having sex with demons and devils perpetuating the idea that they are adept at weaponizing sex. These witches, in a chthonian sense, denote women's skill at harnessing sex to entice men and to lead them away from society.

Furthermore, though the witches in *Häxan* are shown to have intercourse with devils and demons, the film makes no mention of pregnancies or children. Where women often fall pregnant after sexual intercourse, the witches do not. Witches have been mentioned in the *Malleus Maleficarum* to beget children from having relations with demons or other creatures associated with a more infernal host (Mackay, 2009:159-160). As Stevenson (2007:17) himself mentions, Christensen was consumed with the witch as found in the *Malleus Maleficarum*, meaning that he was aware that witches could be impregnated by demons and devils. Christensen omitting mention of children while often portraying sex on screen might indicate that he disregarded it on purpose. The allusions to male masturbation and naked women suggest sexual pleasure devoid of responsibility or consequence – a further enticement to lead a man astray and away from traditional norms and the church.

As mentioned, one of the most common criticisms against the film was that it was immoral and mocked the church (Stevenson, 2007:64-65). Reviews for the film at the time (reprinted in the same aforementioned Stevenson book) share their disgust and appal for the numerous nude scenes (Stevenson, 2007: 57-58). Censors followed suit and the film was banned in many Western countries due to the 'shocking' scenes of nudity and the general disdain displayed for the Christian religion (Stevenson, 2007:117-118).

According to Cheryl Anderson (2004:77-98²⁴) in the context of the *Old Testament*, biblical laws segregated men and women through scripture and the laws described therein. Furthermore, these laws

²⁴ Please note that Anderson's arguments are much more complex than portrayed/summarized here. I just condensed her lengthy expositions into single sentences for expediency.

created and fostered a system of male dominance and female subordination and informed the construction of gender in numerous instances (Anderson, 2004:51-66). An example would be the relationship between rape and marriage in the book of Deuteronomy (chapter 22:25-29) where if a woman is raped but is not married then her rapist is obligated to marry her, thus trapping the woman with an abusive husband. If she was married before the rape occurred the rapist was condemned to death. No thought is given to woman or her experience, while everything hinges upon her sexual relationship to men.

There is a link between male dominance and female subjugation and this has been perpetuated throughout the centuries by means of belief systems (Anderson, 2004:102-105). Christianity (specifically Catholicism) and Judaism have been instrumental in the construction of Western society as a whole and has influenced everything from religion, judiciary, politics, culture, entertainment, and Western (and Middle Eastern) conflicts with other regions, to the West's acceptance or rejection of sexual preference (Prodromou, 2013:194, 207; Sherwood, 2018). Horror films are very often inspired by, associated with, or a reaction to Christianity in some way or form. *The Prophecy* film franchise is about a war between the armies of Heaven and Hell, while the films in *The Omen* and *The Warlock* franchises are about the Antichrist. The witch is a reaction against Christianity, inferring that she cannot exist without it. Christensen basing the ideas and contexts evoked in *Häxan* on the *Malleus Maleficarum* further establishes that connection as the book was written by two Dominican friars who were instrumental in the witch hunts of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries (Mackay, 2009:2).

As society at times ignores the various hypocrisies in the *Bible* so do Christians often gloss over atrocities committed by fellow Christians, like the previously discussed conservative Swedes and their treatment of the foreign *tattare*. The aforementioned friars', Jacobus Sprenger and his anonymous co-author's, treaty on witchcraft contributed to the ruthless torture of women, men and children all over Western Europe and the Northern Americas during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. Numerous employees of the cloth at the time took part in these atrocities with support of the state and the general populace (White, 2007:3-4). The *Bible* is also widely recognised by scholars as being misogynistic (Mackay, 2009:25). The *Malleus Maleficarum* emulates the misogyny of the *Bible*, and a society influenced by the *Bible* further perpetuates the subordination of women. This subordination is still experienced to this day by many women all around the world.

Though Western society has changed much over the last 100 years, some beliefs remain constant to this day. Conservatism is still firmly rooted in some parts of society and there are still those who cloak their prejudice in religion to justify their own immoral behaviour and rejection of logic (Margolis, 2019:23). A film like *Häxan* reminds the viewer that women are still blamed by some in western society for various societal problems and that their choices are severely judged if said choices do not mirror societal norms and beliefs. The societal reactions *Häxan* evoked from many in the USA and

UK in the early 1920s mirrors society's hypocrisy, sexism, and xenophobia at the time of production, the same social ills experienced in the west to this day.

Horror film tropes that originated from *Häxan*

At the end of the previous section I mention societal ills that have plagued the Western world for many centuries. These same societal ills can be found in all classes, genders, and other societal positions. They influence our attitudes towards others while also influencing popular culture. Andrew Tudor (2014:25) states that a film producer or director is influenced by social and cultural contexts they are entrenched in and this has an impact on how and what they communicate through film. Film directors are also influenced by their predecessors in various ways similar to the way writers are influenced by their predecessors, as Harold Bloom proposes with his six revisionary ratios of influence. These same cinematic conventions and sociocultural contexts influence the viewer's interpretation and symbolic interactions with the film (Tudor, 2014:25). Some of these social issues have at times evolved into tropes associated with specific genres of film. Feminist and gender scholars, for instance, frequently study horror films as there are connections to be made between power, gender, and the abject.

Horror films with the witch as an antagonist present the viewer with specific ideas regarding women that are deeply rooted in the sociocultural norms of society. Many of these norms have existed in stories for hundreds and even thousands of years. We find them throughout the *Bible*, but also in Greek mythology. The Greek gods, like Apollo and Dionysus, are likened more with super heroes today than with gods. The Greek gods were at one point worshipped, indicating that they had a profound influence on Greek civilisation and, subsequently, on the later Roman society that absorbed much of their belief systems. The Roman Empire dominated the area between Northern England, Syria, Portugal, and Egypt by 200 AD (Kelly, 2006:1). Not only do many of their roads and architectural wonders still exist today, but Roman law forms the backbone of the modern Western legal system (McSweeney, 2019:8-17). Sophia Anezeri (2009:222) has found evidence through her studies that artists and performers associated with Dionysus during the Hellenistic period and the era of the Roman Empire were protected by the Roman legal system and the emperor, while other artists and performers were regarded as inferior with no legal or social status. Dionysus, and the perceptions and ideas that he represents, could have had a potential influence over not just the latter Roman Empire that unseated the Greeks, but also the modern Western world as we know it today.

Scholars agree that Dionysus featured prominently in the Roman civilisation of old (Góráin, 2019:1). Dionysus polymorphed into the Roman Bacchus (god of wine), Liber (god of wine, fertility, and freedom), and Ceres (god of agriculture) after Rome defeated the Greeks and took over their lands

(Góráin, 2019:1). Dionysus's attributes and characteristics trickled down to three Roman gods, which in turn trickled down to Christianity (Fischer-Lichte, 2014:121). Some have associated Christ with Dionysus, due to their associations with death and rebirth and the eating of the body as communion (Fischer-Lichte, 2014:121, 150, 151; Henrichs, 1993:14). Dionysus can also be associated with Lucifer as both embody death, beauty, music, chaos, freedom, the underworld, and boundless sexual pleasure. Camille Paglia, as already discussed, associates Dionysus with women and effeminate men. These Dionysian associations can be described as tropes, due to their constant manifestations in the Western world over time. The tropes are reframed according to the needs of different societies at different points in time and influence said society's law, religion, and entertainment. Just like Dionysus is found in stories of the Greek Pantheon, so is he found in different guises in Roman and Christian beliefs. I find that just as Apollo has morphed into the guise of Superman in films and comics of the twentieth century, so has Dionysus donned the guise of the witch in horror films and fairy tales. Whereas Superman is viewed as the epitome of the Western ideal, or more specifically, the American ideal, so has the witch been relegated to the opposite end of the mythical spectrum as someone who we should shun and not aspire to become. The witch embodies western prejudices not just regarding women, but also other races and cultures, or anyone for that matter who does not fit the parameters of the idealised model of the Western man or woman. These normative ideals are found in western religions, but also in western stories which are recorded in the form of books, series, games, graphic novels, and films. Where the horror film is concerned, *Häxan* is ground zero for what was to come with regards to the cinematic witch. Through *Häxan* Christensen established numerous tropes we find in horror cinema to this day regarding women, their agency, and power.

The first trope is the sexualised young woman. Horror films are rife with young women in various stages of undress or lovemaking. These women are often tortured or killed. In *Häxan* however these women are shown to fornicate with devils and demons and to gain some form of power or benefit from it. I find the concept of sex with a demon not unlike Paglia's reading of Dionysus' followers ingesting people or animals to become more like those they ingest. A trade is made where a sacrifice leads to power. Similar films from later decades deviate from this practice and in most instances presents young and beautiful women as victims of the antagonists – this corrective measure (the irony is not lost on me) links back to Bloom's *clinamen*. It is common knowledge to horror film enthusiasts, like myself, that the instance a young woman takes off her clothes to make love or to shower, she will most likely die within the next 10 minutes of the film. A corrective measure was therefore introduced soon after *Häxan*'s release where the sexually objectified young woman is not a villain, but a victim. As mentioned, Kristeva suggests that changing a woman to an object of sexual pleasure makes her less threatening to a man. The sexualised young woman with power to destroy a man thus seems incongruent with societal expectations. There are however instances in horror films where powerful young women are sexualised to create specific tensions in the mind of the viewer, as is discussed in

later chapters of this study. This renewed use of the powerful sexualised woman pushes the boundaries of the stereotyped powerful woman as their primary function is not to titillate. This recognisable trope, or recognisable shard from narratives that came before, evokes Bloom's *tesserae*. Sexual arousal is used as a precursor for something much larger in the context of the film, like, for example, luring slow-witted troglodytes to their doom as seen in *Night of the Demons* (1988). The naked female body can also at times be used as evidence of primitivism or to place women in a lower economic class as discussed earlier in this chapter. The unclothed and wanton woman can also be linked to Paglia's description of the Dionysian or chthonian.

The second trope is the link between power and age. The older the witches are the more power and knowledge they possess. In *Häxan* the young women are shown to be initiated into the coven via orgies and ceremonies in the forest. Only the old women are shown to possess knowledge of spells and potions. Witches are often portrayed in horror films as either young or old, but almost never as middle aged. The young witches are overtly sexual and beautiful, while the old witches are old hags. In some instances the witches' ages are exaggerated to such an extent to make their appearance even more horrific or monstrous, like Helena Markos in *Suspiria* (1977). The idea of a young witch having less power than an older witch makes sense, as it takes time to master their abilities. The young witches have to rely on the magic and mystique of their beauty to gain what they desire while the older and powerful witch is depowered for the sake of the viewer by making her unattractive and sexually unviable. This is emphasised by having lingering close-ups of the old and decaying in horror films; this is discussed further in later chapters.

The third trope is the connection with dead and dirty things (the abject). Paglia makes associations with the rotting and decaying and associates it with the Dionysian. She also associates cannibalism, bodily fluids and festering liquids with the Dionysian. The witches in *Häxan* make use of faeces, human and animal body parts, and slaughtered and drained babies in their potions and magics. Not only does the use of these items result in power for the witches, but it also shocks the viewer which lends even further power to the witch – power that crosses over from the fictional milieu of the film to the viewer's imagination. As Paglia says, eating something or someone results in becoming who or what that has been consumed – a stomach-turning transference of power therefore occurs through consumption. Shock and revulsion are also part and parcel of the horror film viewing experience and the witch in these films serves as a guide and intermediary to these experiences. According to Ali Bilgiç (2018:17) fear and disgust are produced by Western masculinities in an attempt to *other* minorities and women. Therefore, the witch's connection with witchcraft and the abject segregates her from not only other women who have accepted Western societal norms, but draws parallels between her and minorities which bears associations with the trope discussed below.

The next trope is where the witch in horror films is associated with nature or primitive/pre-industrial pagan religions and societies who have a connection with nature. This is another instance where Paglia's notions regarding the Dionysian is mirrored in the witch. Dionysus is referred to as the god of fertility and agriculture – all things associated with nature. In *Häxan* the witches have their ceremonies and orgies in the woods and in caves, emphasising this link. Nature and the old pagan traditions are posed in defiance of or in conflict with the Apollonian or more modern societies (industrial and agricultural progress) and religions (specifically Christianity). Nature in these films also frequently symbolises a matriarchal chaos (Dionysus) in opposition to a patriarchal order (Apollo). Many of the male protagonists in horror films denote a hetero-normative patriarchal or western society, meaning that their triumph over a witch symbolises man's ability to subdue nature or the chaotic. In *Häxan* these associations are clear with the Inquisition and the clergy standing in opposition to the witches.

A fifth trope is the symbolisms associated with the witch as adversary to the traditional familial unit. The witch in *Häxan* is portrayed as a seducer of men and a killer of babies. Furthermore, she is able to make men fall in love with women whom they might have no interest in through the use of potions and magic. Related to this, and the sixth trope, is the association between the witch and possession alluded to in *Häxan*. One scene in the film depicts the witch being led backwards into the torture chamber. This is done to ensure that she cannot bewitch the judge. The witch is able to enchant others through magic and potions, but also through sex. In one scene a young clergyman describes a burning sensation where one of the accused witches had touched his arm. Afterwards he complains to one of the other monks that he is plagued by lustful thoughts and cannot stop thinking about the young woman, claiming that she appears to him in his quarters. One of the inquisitors describes this man as being spellbound. He is therefore not in control of his thoughts, which can be regarded as a form of possession. Possession is associated with agency or the loss of agency as one loses control of the self. This is very prominent in horror films with religious elements, like *The Omen* (1976) or *The Exorcist* (1973). Possession is similar to becoming or turning into something or someone else. Dionysus is described as having similar abilities. This ability coupled with powers of sexual desire and fertility makes Dionysus and the witch especially problematic for an Apollonian society where sexual conduct is frequently controlled by state and society. This control of the sexes is not unlike the control of sexuality observed and reported on in Foucault's *The History of Sexuality* (1978). Foucault (1978:6) states that sex is repressed because it interferes with man's productive ability which is why power structures and society tend to regulate sex. Merely speaking about sex or sexual freedom is, according to Foucault (1978:6), transgressive, and challenges power structures. Dionysus not just embodies sexual freedom, but transgresses normative heterosexual boundaries by being able to change between male and female.

The seventh trope is that supernatural power is bestowed on women by a demonic entity or a devil in exchange for some form of a benefit. The supernatural is used by the witches to acquire love, youth, riches, freedom, immortality, the death of a man, something precious that was lost, or simply to rule the world. The price exacted by the devils can range from sexual favours, to the witch's first born child, or the acquisition of virginal and/or unsuspecting young women to give birth to the Antichrist or a similar being. Other payments include the murder or ritualistic sacrifice of an animal, a baby, or someone pure, the eternal damnation of the witch's own soul, or to assist the minions of Hell to manifest on Earth in order to bring about the apocalypse, to name a few. In *Häxan* we find most of what is mentioned above. The witches have intercourse with devils and they stand in opposition to the Catholic Church. They use potions to lure clergy away from God and into the arms of lustful women. Babies are drained of their blood and used in potions and/or cannibalised (again linked with the Dionysian). The witches are also shown to crave riches, power, and freedom. Later films would use Christensen's tame allusions to the conflict between the witch and the church and amplify it, like in *Witchcraft II* (1989) or *The Witch* (2015) (Bloom's *tessera*).

The last trope is where the witches are very often women who had been slighted, tortured, or murdered by a man or men. This usually results in the witches being depicted as angry, erratic, isolated, spiteful, murderous, and unhinged. They regularly seek revenge for something that was done to them in the past. In *Häxan* the witch is an innocent yet hysterical woman, which is much more subdued in comparison to films produced in later decades. Subsequent horror films in most instances portray witches as being overly violent and vengeful with their supernatural ability acting as vehicle for their anger. Here again we find similarities between Dionysus and the witch. Dionysus is also referred to as the god of chaos and madness so it makes sense that the witch would share this characteristic.

These eight tropes feature extensively throughout horror films starring witches which suggest that their creators were influenced in some way or form, either directly or indirectly by traditional European Christian ideas of the witch and witchcraft which in turn influenced the production of the *Malleus Maleficarum*. Interestingly the witch seems to share many similarities with the pre-Christian Dionysus which suggests influences from before the birth of Christianity. Bloom's six ratios of influence are used throughout this study to illustrate these influences as well as the way these tropes have evolved over the last 100 years. Many of the films presented in this thesis have received very little scholarly attention which prompted me to find scholarly texts concerning similar subject matter to expand upon the films and the influences they contain.

In closing I refer back to my own experience of the film. As mentioned, I found the demonic orgy scene both unsettling and fascinating. The women having implied sexual intercourse with demons is strange as it deviates from most individuals' ideas (including my own) regarding sexual partners. The

ambience of the scene along with the lighting techniques creates a sense of foreboding emphasising and separating the scene from the rest of the film. As a heterosexual male the scantily-clad women enjoying themselves sexually was fascinating and even somewhat arousing. Emphasising scenes through the use of the young female body as is done in *Häxan* and many other films, irrespective of genre, results in conflicting emotions within my own mind which in turn leads to a subversion of western authority as it forces me to question ideas and hypocrisies found within religion, but also about sex. In an earlier draft of this chapter, for instance, I severely condemned the idea of angels taking women for wives as I did not fully realize how problematic it is to project my own sociocultural norms on the scenario. Only after reading Ronal Hendel's aforementioned interpretation of the text did I recognize my own bias to the context. My own initial contemporary bias is in consequence and to a degree similar to the biases the 1920s Swedish people harboured towards the *tattare*. These two contexts suggest that if a society's beliefs and norms are influenced and steered by authoritative systems that employ a combination of politics and religion, it often leads to the unfair treatment of those who do not conform to said systems. Sexism and racism, for instance, become institutionalised and veiled in a self-righteous guise of religious morality which is detrimental to society.

I find that the witches in *Häxan* seem to fluctuate between old, hunched, diseased, and powerful to young, attractive, and nubile women who display very little supernatural power and/or knowledge. The young sexually available women are rendered less threatening because they are naked. Their nakedness makes it difficult to conceal a weapon with which to kill a man, rendering them less threatening which lends further credence to Laura Mulvey's stance on the same topic. I also personally find that their choice of unattractive demons as lovers coupled with the witches' promiscuous nature gives the less desirable male viewer hope in also coupling with attractive women with questionable morals.

The old decrepit waifs on the other hand are not considered a sexually viable option. Their aged and diseased appearance is internalised and linked to their supernatural ability. As they are ravaged by time, so will their victims be ravaged by their power. In this way the old witch perpetuates certain norms and beliefs in Western society. Christensen's film suggests that the old woman is sexually and economically unproductive, so she should be avoided and even discarded. Her age and appearance are not just unattractive, but a reminder of entropy and our eventual end. It reminds me as a male heterosexual viewer that at some point in my life, due to my advancement of age, young and beautiful women will find me less attractive, if attractive at all. I found this notion quite frightening, not because I want to have sex with young woman, but because I would feel less valued by society. Similarly, the old crone reminds this viewer of the future and my own mortality. Women as portrayed in popular culture are often found to physically embody the fears of white heterosexual men (Botelho, 2015:191-195; Chewing & Montemurro, 2018: 462-463; Dolan, 2020:3). The witch at different stages

in her life thus serves as a stark reminder of death and our diminishing societal value as she advances in age. This categorizing of the witch along periods in a woman's life is expanded upon further and in more detail in later chapters. This 100 year old film corroborates Levinson's idea of texts having the ability to reverberate through time while prompting new interpretations and meaning with every subsequent reading of the text by later generations. This might be why the film was rereleased theatrically at later stages in the twentieth century. The film itself can also be interpreted as a New Historicist text because of the way it reframes societal contexts from the 300 year old *Malleus Maleficarum*, but also due to its theatrical rereleases in 1941 and 1968 where it is assimilated by new generations.

Häxan was all but forgotten until 3 March, 1941, when it was rereleased in theatres throughout Denmark (Stevenson, 2007:97). One should consider that at this time Denmark was occupied by German soldiers (Stone, 2020:44, 185) and that the themes of hysteria and blame in the film, were mirrored by the Third Reich which resulted in the torture and deaths of thousands during World War II. Much like the Catholic Church changed European society with the witch hunts during the sixteenth and seventeenth century, the German Nazi army had changed it again while riding the coattails of religion.

Society had also changed much at this point and the staunch Victorian era morals had little influence over the film industry by the 1940s (Thompson, 2007:71-72, 80, 106). *Häxan*'s rerelease was well-received in 1941, much better than upon its initial release 20 years earlier (Stevenson, 2007:104-105). The film was released in theatres in 1968 for a third time, but initially only the United Kingdom (Stevenson, 2007:111-112). This time it was cut down to a running time of 76 min (from 104 min), with a dubbed jazz score and narration done by the late William Burroughs (Stevenson, 2007:111, 114). It proved popular once again, but still managed to outrage the British censors (Stevenson, 2007:111). Within a few months, due to renewed interest, the film was rereleased theatrically in Paris, Stockholm, and Copenhagen, but in its original uncut form with a live piano score accompanying it (Stevenson, 2007:114).

The film remains so popular to this day among horror aficionados and cinephiles that it was added to the famous Criterion Collection²⁵ on October 15, 2019 (Lund, 2019). The influence on future film makers also becomes apparent when one considers that the producers of the 1999 film, *The Blair Witch Project*, credits the name of their production company, *Haxan Films*, to Christensen's film (Kaufmann, 1999).

Even though the film is influential, witch horror films are not as popular as other sub-genres of horror. Between the original release of *Häxan* in 1922 and first rerelease in 1941, there was a relative dearth

²⁵ The Criterion Collection is a curated collection of films of historical importance (Criterion, 2021). The visuals and audio of the films are restored to preserve their original beauty for future generations (Criterion, 2021).

of horror films starring a witch. An exhaustive search of the Internet Movie Database reveals that 46 horror movies were produced in the 1920s with the majority of them being film versions or complete retellings of classic horror novels, like *Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde* (1920), *Frankenstein* (1920), *Dracula's Teeth* (1921), *Nosferatu* (1922), *The Hunchback of Notre Dame* (1923), *Wolfblood: A tale of the Forest* (1925), *Faust* (1926), and *The Fall of the House of Usher* (1928). The horror film landscape was dominated by films starring classic²⁶ monsters like werewolves, vampires, zombies, and Frankensteins (even though the monster in the original novel was never named Frankenstein) for the next five decades. Between 1920 and 1969 seven films were released containing a version of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde, 13 containing mummies, 16 containing werewolves, 17 starring “Frankensteins”, 24 with ghosts, 26 with zombies, and 51 containing vampires²⁷. There were only eight films released during this period starring a witch as an antagonist, including *Häxan* in 1922, with the other seven released between 1960 and 1968. The reason for this absence might be an interesting study and a challenge for other scholars. That being said I find that some of the most complex and innovative developments in the horror film genre have occurred in specifically witch horror films between the 1990s and 2020 as this thesis will illustrate.

²⁶ ‘Classic monsters’ is a well-known and accepted term amongst horror film enthusiasts.

²⁷ These figures were obtained after searching the Internet Movie Database between 20 and 23 February 2020. The list might not be completely accurate, since films could have been omitted or misrepresented on IMDB and is thus solely for illustrative purposes.

THE WITCH OF 1960s: YOUTH, BEAUTY, AGENCY, AND POSSESSION

With this chapter I trace, and expand upon, the tropes and influences established in 1922's *Häxan* by studying witch horror films produced from 1960 to 1966 with reference to Bloom's Revisionary Ratios. This is done to gauge the extent to which the conventions established in *Häxan* have changed or endured. By finding evidence of reused and/or reframed conventions in the witch horror film, I mirror Levinson's New Historicist approach of identifying a text's influences, or what she refers to as ripples which manifest and flare up over time. Careful attention is also given to critical engagements the films have provoked since their release as this gives us further insights into the past, but also how these texts echo at different points in time and the present. These same studies are therefore used to further elaborate on the films' analyses. To thoroughly engage with the New Historic method my analyses of the films are informed by the historical contexts of the era in which the films were produced. In addition I attempt to identify instances of the reciprocal influences that exist between the sociocultural and the cinematic witch. Furthermore, each chapter contains a section on my own aesthetic experience of the films.

For many the sixties conjure up images of John F. Kennedy, free love, tie-dyed T-shirts, hippies smoking marijuana, colourful headbands, and LSD-inspired posters. According to Gerrard de Groot (2009:1-2), a professor of Modern History, our perceptions of the sixties are imaginary constructs informed by nostalgia. He argues in his book, *The Sixties Unplugged*, that the sixties were in fact a decade of cynicism, chauvinism, sexual assault, political chaos, shallow commercialism, and unrestrained cruelty (De Groot, 2009:2, 136, 215-218). With this chapter I attempt to find examples of these problems in three internationally released films, namely *Black Sunday* (1960), *Night of the Eagle* (1962), and *The Witches* (1966) and how these social ills relate to and influenced the tropes and the construction of the cinematic witch. These three films share themes regarding the youth and beauty of women, the agency that youth and beauty affords women, and the supernatural abilities witches employ to possess others and rob them of their agency. Furthermore, the study of these three films together activates Levinson's New Historic method of analysis as all three were produced within the space of roughly six years – similar to Levinson's approach of comparing texts that were produced at roughly the same time.

BLACK SUNDAY (1960)

Introduction

Horror-based witches only started to appear in earnest in the horror film genre from 1960 (Hutchings, 2008:338). *Häxan* as discussed in the previous chapter was the point of origin for the witch horror film tropes and influenced the horror film genre, but it was not technically a horror film as it did not follow the narrative structure or conventions of a proper feature film and was more similar to a documentary in some respects. *Häxan* is composed out of short fictional vignettes that serve as frames connecting lectures about witches. The characters in *Häxan* are one-dimensional and have no character development, nor does the film follow a well-developed plot like latter day films do.

The first proper witch horror film was Mario Bava's directorial²⁸ debut *La Maschera del Demonio* (1960), or *Black Sunday*²⁹ as it is known in the United States of America (Hutchings, 2008:338). The film is considered by many as one of the most stylised horror films ever produced (Conterio, 2015:63). Like *Häxan*, *Black Sunday* drew inspiration from religious iconography, fairy tale illustrations, and other works of fiction, with Nikolai Gogol's gothic horror novella *Viy* (1835) being the most prominent source of inspiration (Lucas, 2007:16, 115, 319). *Viy* (1835) is a story about a witch who exacts revenge on a young philosopher after he nearly beats her to death. The story, like *Black Sunday*, is filled with sexual allusions and was inspired by European folklore and religion (Connolly, 2002:253).

Black Sunday is referred to as the bridge between the adolescent classic horror cinema of the 1930s (the aforementioned horror films based on classic novels popularised by Universal Studios at the time) and the more well-known cinematic conventions in the horror genre we know today (as initiated by Hammer Films in the 1950s) aimed at more sophisticated audiences (Hughes, 2013; Lucas, 2007:21, 23). Producing a horror film for mature audiences, seems like a corrective exercise on Bava's part which makes the film as a whole an example of Bloom's *clinamen*. In addition, it perfectly marries the fairy tale and the surreal through its expert use of *mise-en-scène* (Conterio, 2015:63). The film expanded on the horror conventions hinted at in the Hammer Films productions and took the genre into the art film domain (Lucas, 2007:23, 24, 327). The film retains recognisable elements related to the horror film genre, but it is elevated due to Bava's technical prowess. By elevating it to art film status the film can also be described as an example of Bloom's *tesserae*.

This gothic and modernist film was an international sensation at the time and Bava would ultimately follow it up with a bevy of similar gothic films which in turn laid the foundations for Italian horror

²⁸ *Black Sunday* was Bava's first credited work as a director. He unofficially directed *Caltiki the Immortal Monster* in 1959 (Lucas, 2007:16).

²⁹ The title *Black Sunday* is used in the rest of this thesis as it is more widely recognised under the title.

cinema that would remain popular internationally until 1980 (Hughes, 2013, Lucas, 2007:16, 23). Bava is often referred to as the Italian Alfred Hitchcock and the ‘Master of Italian Horror’ by his peers with even Martin Scorsese praising his prowess as director (Hughes, 2013; Lucas, 2007:13, 16). Despite the film’s numerous accolades, it was ill-received by critics and censors in the United Kingdom and the United States of America (like *Häxan*) due to the scenes of violence, torture, nude female bodies, and corpses (Lucas, 2007:16, 23). The film was subsequently excessively edited, censored, and redubbed for its US-release (Lucas, 2007:16, 23). When compared to excesses found in modern-day horror films, *Black Sunday* seems tame and dated. It has a pronounced gothic ambience, however, which is often absent from latter day horror films.

As mentioned, while the American horror films were aimed at a juvenile audience, Bava’s *Black Sunday* was meant for a mature and sophisticated audience. The sophisticated horror film was unheard of at the time in the USA (Lucas, 2007:23). The film fared even worse in the United Kingdom as the edited US version was banned by the British Board of Film Censors in 1961 (Lucas, 2007:317). The film was well-received in Italy, even more so in some other Europe countries, like Belgium, Denmark, France, Finland, Germany, Spain, and Sweden without any censorship or post-editing (Lucas, 2007:282). *Black Sunday* thus shares many similarities with *Häxan* where the reception and censorship of the films were concerned. Both films were widely accepted through Europe, but had to be censored for the audiences in the United Kingdom and the United States of America.

Black Sunday has a simple plot that starts with a woman, Asa Vajda (Barbara Steele), the daughter of Prince Vajda of Maldovia, accused by her brother, Griabby Vajda, the Grand Inquisitor in the year 1630, for associating with the Devil’s servants. Her crimes are unclear and not expanded on in the scene with the exception of her brother stating that she is repudiated for her association and ‘monstrous love’ for Igor Juvatich. Her scantily clad body is tied to a wooden stake and her naked shoulder is branded with the mark of Satan – a branding iron with the shape of an “S” at its end. Before an iron mask with long spikes on the inside is hammered onto her face, she curses her brother and his male lineage. As the villagers attempt to burn her at the stake, a storm breaks loose making it impossible for them to complete their task. It is not revealed exactly what kills Asa, but from the length of the spikes inside the mask that is hammered to her face, it is safe to assume that it was the mask that killed her. Her remains are buried in an ancestral tomb from which she is resurrected two centuries later.

The rest of the film centres on the resurrection of Asa. Dr. Kruvajan and Dr. Andrej Gorobec are on their way to a conference when their coach breaks down. While waiting for the coachmen to repair the wheel, the doctors explore a nearby ancient crypt containing Asa’s remains. She is inadvertently resurrected when Doctor Kruvajan is attacked by a bat and he cuts his hand on a glass panel above Asa’s face. Drops of blood fall in an empty eye socket and she is soon sufficiently revived to

reanimate her dead lover, Juvatich. Juvatich later lures Dr. Kruvajan to the crypt where Asa hypnotises him and he kills the current Prince³⁰ Vajda, father of Princess Katia Vajda, and Prince Constantine Vajda. Juvatich, however, only seemingly kills the prince and he is later found battered and broken in a hidden passageway. Dr. Kruvajan is also slain by Juvatich after which he kidnaps the princess at Asa's behest and brings her to the crypt where Asa lays.

Asa tries to absorb the life force and youth of Princess Katia Vajda through supernatural means in an attempt to take her place and to enjoy the freedoms which were denied to her centuries ago. She does not succeed in the end and is thwarted by a crucifix pendent around Katia's neck. Katia is unconscious as the pendent is exposed around her neck, causing Asa to recoil. The villagers then storm the crypt and the film ends with Asa being burned at the stake.

Literature review

Black Sunday has received very little critical attention from scholars since its release. With the exception of Martyn Conterio's book, *Black Sunday* (2015), the only other studies available are three books on Mario Bava's oeuvre.

The first of the texts dealing with Bava's oeuvre is Tim Lucas's *Mario Bava: All the Colours of the Dark* (2007) which is the most comprehensive and detailed text on Mario Bava ever produced. The nearly 1200 page tome opens with an introduction by Martin Scorsese. In this introduction Scorsese lauds Bava's skill at capturing dream-like atmospheres on celluloid (Scorsese, 2007:13). He mentions *Black Sunday* by name and expresses his admiration for the film (Scorsese, 2007:13). Other notable directors (and the specific films which were inspired by Bava) having admitted to being influenced by Bava are: Alejandro Amenábar's *The Others* (2002), Dario Argento's *Suspiria* (1977), Tim Burton's *Batman* (1989), *Sleepy Hollow* (1999), *Charlie and the Chocolate Factory* (2005), and *Corpse Bride* (2005), Francis Ford Coppola's *Bram Stoker's Dracula* (1992), Roman Coppola's *CQ* (2001), Roger Corman's *Pit and the Pendulum* (1961), Joe Dante's *Gremlins* (1984) and *Twilight Zone: The Movie* (1983), Ernest Dickerson's *Bones* (2001), Sam Raimi's television series *Hercules the Legendary Journeys* (1995), and Quentin Tarantino's *Pulp Fiction* (1994) (Conterio, 2015:85-88; Lucas, 2007:23, 26, 326-327, 511, 1037-1039). Roger Corman was so enchanted with *Black Sunday* that he would go on to imitate Bava's cinematic style for his own film, *The Pit and the Pendulum* (1961), going so far as to cast Barbara Steele as the antagonist. Corman's *The Raven* (1963), *The Haunted Palace* (1963), and *The Masque of the Red Death* (1964) all also share overt stylistic similarities with *Black Sunday* (1960) *Black Sunday* (Lucas, 2007:26). Bava's *Blood and Black Lace* (1964), along with Alfred Hitchcock's *Psycho* (1960), are credited as starting the so-called slasher film genre which

³⁰ There is no king or queen mentioned and father and children all share the moniker of prince or princess.

would later dominate the horror film industry during the 1980s (Lucas, 2007:544, Mason, 2014). It would therefore be disingenuous not to acknowledge Bava as a powerhouse of influence. His cinematic style reverberates through many films to this very day with *Black Sunday* dominating as a template to imitate.

Lucas's book is an exhaustive collection featuring a detailed biography of Bava, as well as a complete history of each film credited to him. It includes intimate details about the production and reception of every film, film stills, promotional material and posters from different countries, as well as biographic info of the cast and crew that worked with Bava on each film. Numerous anecdotes litter the chapters which flesh out the production contexts of Bava's entire filmography. There is however little critical engagement with the films with the exception of descriptions of Bava's gothic cinematic style as well as his obsession with colour and colour pallets. Lucas (2007:23) argues that Bava was interested in exploring the subconscious or the unconscious with his films gradually becoming more existential as the 1960s progressed. For Bava it was more about the truth of a moment being felt through the use of colour, textures, and *mise-en-scène* (Lucas, 2007:23). The characters and script were thus secondary to the lighting, camera techniques, and set arrangements which were used to capture the truth of a moment to be felt by the audience as opposed to being understood (Lucan, 2007:23). The idea was not to have a complicated story, but to evoke a dream-like atmosphere in the viewer (Lucas, 2007:327).

Inspired by the black and white horror films produced by Hammer Films in the 1950s, Bava chose to shoot *Black Sunday* in black and white, despite his investors' preference for Technicolor (Lucas, 2007:283, 296). Bava argued that a black and white colour pallet would be better suited to the Gothic sensibilities he was trying to capture in the film, the same sensibilities found in the aforementioned gothic novel, *Viy* (1835), that inspired *Black Sunday* in the first place (Lucas, 2007:23, 296). Some of the transformation effects in the film would also not have been possible if it was shot in colour (Lucas, 2007:296). Interestingly, Bava used colour gel lighting while filming *Black Sunday* to create a specific stage mood for the actors, but also to capture nuanced grey scale tonalities which natural lighting could not provide (Lucas, 2007:296).

Hammer Films did not just inspire *Black Sunday*'s (1960) colour pallet. The antagonists, Asa and Juvatic, were both modelled after the vampires found in 1950s Hammer horror films (Lucas, 2007:283, 297). Even the original Italian title for the film, *La Maschera del Demonio*, was inspired by the Italian titles of popular Hammer films *La Maschera Di Cera/House of Wax* (1953) and *La Mashera di Frankenstein/The Curse of Frankenstein* (1957) (Lucas, 2007:283). There were also other instances in Bava's films where he admits the influence of Hammer Films, like in *Caltiki Il Mostro Immortale* (1959) (Lucas 2007:255). In time, however, Hammer Films would start to imitate Bava's more complex and intellectual approach to horror and mystery, especially after the release of Bava's

Operazione Paura/ Kill, Baby...Kill (1966) (Lucas 2007:673).³¹ Lucas (2007:21) argues that the directors employed by Hammer Films were not known for experimenting with film. Also, the violent scenes in their films were, though graphic, rather clinical (Lucas, 2007:21). Bava mimicked the gothic style of the Hammer Films productions, but expanded on it by experimenting with colour and obsessing about every detail in every set. Lucas (2007:21) states:

It was not the ugly things in his films that frightened audiences; instead, Bava unnerved them with instances of beauty, poetry, symmetry, inverted imagery, metaphysics, mysticism, and above all, color. Color of abnormal intensity. Color that drew the eye to places it would not normally wish to linger. Color that shouted or whispered warnings. Color that did not belong—that, in a realistic setting, could not possibly be there, thus intimating the presence of the supernatural.

Bava used set designs and colour to create dreamlike atmospheres in his films. Where other directors attempted to shock audiences with blood and gore, Bava created tension by juxtaposing scenes of murderous mayhem with meticulously designed sets with exaggerated, even garish, lighting.

The most compelling argument that Lucas (2007:319) makes regarding *Black Sunday* is that Asa Vajda is the first truly female monster in the history of the horror film. Unlike other female monsters who predated her and who were divorced from the female gender and unattractive, Asa Vajda has agency, drips sensuality, and is a complex and thoroughly developed female character (Lucas, 2007:320). I found this especially true when comparing Barbara Steele's performance as Asa with her performance of Princess Katia. Princess Katia is a shallow, pathetic, and virginal character who resembles the typical Hollywood paramours of the male heroes of the time, while Asa is vicious, sensual, and has dominion over men, and not just in one point in time but over the stretch of 200 years while rotting away in a crypt. I was confounded by the final scenes where Asa is burned at the stake as Katia's demeanour seems to change in her last scene to mirror Asa's. This led me to wonder if Asa had not succeeded. Steele's portrayal of Asa was so visceral that it led to fame and producers clamouring to cast her as an antagonist in numerous horror films (Lucas, 2007:322). Fellini even cast her as a supporting character in his monumental *8½* (1963) (Lucas, 2007:322). Lucas (2007:322) describes Barbara Steele's character in the following terms: "...the seductive allure of superstition, the beauty at the heart of darkness." Asa can consequently be seen as the embodiment of sex and death combined into a beautiful woman who most heterosexual men would undoubtedly crave and fear.

³¹ *Kill, Baby...Kill* (1966) is Bava's second most influential film (Lucas, 2007:683). The film also stars a female monster, but this time in the form of a child who appears to adults and drives them to commit suicide. The film features Bava's signature exaggerated use of colour and meticulously designed sets. Fellini also drew inspiration for his *Toby Dammit* (1968) from this film (Lucas, 2007:33).

Considering the abovementioned, it becomes clear that Asa conforms to the Dionysian prototype described by Paglia. According to Paglia, as discussed in the section on *Häxan*, woman is aligned with Dionysus because Dionysus is the god of fertility and nature, but also because of the liquids associated with the female body. Like Dionysus, Asa is feminine, wanton, deadly, and connected with the abject (coffins, corpses, rotting flesh). Asa is one more ripple in the pond that sprang forth first from Greek mythology, then Roman mythology, and followed by European folklore, Catholicism, and *Häxan*.

Howard Hughes's *Mario Bava: Destination Terror* (2013) mirrors much of the content of Lucas's text, but on a smaller scale. He also draws attention to the cinematic importance of *Black Sunday* and the same focus of style over content (Hughes, 2013). He suggests the same parallels between *Black Sunday* and the Universal Studios and Hammer Films's productions (Hughes, 2013). Hughes's book is however far less thorough and reads like cliff notes for Lucas's *Mario Bava: All the Colours of the Dark* (2007).

Similar in scope to the Hughes book is Troy Howarth's *The Haunted World of Mario Bava* (2018). Howarth, like Hughes and Lucas, mentions the boundaries between sex and death which Bava traversed and at times ignored (Howarth, 2018). Some sections of the book seem as if he copied the most interesting sections from the Lucas book. Howarth's text adds very little to the history or study of Bava's oeuvre.

Martyn Conterio's book, *Black Sunday* (2015), is part of the *Devil's Advocates* books series which explores a different horror film with each subsequent book. Conterio's book fills the gaps related to intertextuality and scholarly analysis of *Black Sunday* that is found to a lesser extent in Lucas's book. Conterio offers the reader a concise view of the real world context of 1660 and how it aids the opening scenes of *Black Sunday* where Asa is branded and tortured. Like in the case of Christensen's *Häxan*, *Black Sunday* mirrors a historical milieu when the supernatural was real to people as opposed to being an invention or reflection of society and culture (Conterio, 2015:53). He also supports other scholars' view that witchcraft was invented by the Inquisition in an attempt to stamp out other pagan ideologies that posed a threat to their power (Conterio, 2015:53).

Conterio (2015:55) makes an interesting observation regarding the invented back stories which inform films. As mentioned, *Black Sunday* was influenced by Gogol's *Viy* (1835). *Viy* (1835) was similarly inspired by popular folklore and legend which served as the context for the story (Conterio, 2015:55). *Black Sunday* follows suit, as does *Häxan* as both films explicitly mention other texts as influencing the narrative. The films, in other words, create a bridge between the present day and mythological and supernatural contexts of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries and earlier where people believed in gods, demons, monsters, and where witches were considered fact. Conterio (2015:55) draws similarities regarding created fictional mythologies which serve as a back story in *Black Sunday* and

The Blair Witch Project (1999). This is a common trope found in horror films that deal with supernatural elements of witchcraft where specifically in the case of witch horror films, the narrative frequently harkens back to the early 1600s.

This was an interesting discovery to make and one that I missed while compiling my own list of tropes in the chapter on *Häxan*. Invented mythologies are consequently added to my initial list of eight tropes. I am also using this as an opportunity to make the reader aware that similar instances might be included in the next chapters of this thesis.

Conterio's analysis of the film's lighting is also informative. He notes how Bava used lighting on the inside of a building to create a feeling of openness, while he employed chiaroscuro to create menacing and claustrophobic exterior shots (2015:64).

Another compelling observation that Conterio (2015:67) makes is that the camera dwells and zooms in on the horrific maimed face of Asa, a woman, while the mutilated male face is only shown at a distance and for a mere second. Barbara Steele's face in pain and/or suffering is eroticised while her beauty in other scenes is captivating (Conterio, 2015:67). This contributes to the aforementioned duality of Asa/Katia and sex/death. At the same time the male characters in the film are never shot or portrayed in similar ways which suggests the influence of the male gaze.

According to Conterio (2015:70-71) the mask plays an important role as narrative device. He suggests that the mask that is hammered to Asa's head resembles a grotesque parody of what Satan's face might look like (Conterio, 2015:71). The mask also acts as a device of misogyny as the mask denies the viewer access to Asa's feminine and beautiful face, destroying any connection she might have with others (Conterio, 2015:71). The mask also serves as a talisman in many cultures to ward off evil spirits (Conterio, 2015:70). It thus not only negates interpersonal relationships, but also other evil spirits, meaning that Asa is isolated from spiritual sources of power, namely the demonic entities or devils that give her power.

Conterio observes that there is the extent to which Asa and Katia embody sex and death. Conterio (2015:74) draws similarities between Barbara Steele's portrayal of Asa and Katia and Lucy Westenra in Bram Stoker's *Dracula* where the women fluctuate between pure and sweet and the cruel and wanton. Personally, I found Barbara Steele's Asa/Katia akin to the way Dark Romanticism, a sub-genre of the Gothic, explored and linked beauty/pleasure with death/suffering (Nyman, 1998:23). One of the central tenets of the Dark Romantics was their interest in death and how death and things associated with it, like graveyards and mausoleums, are beautiful (Nyman, 1998:23). The Dark Romantics relished in that which produced pain, horror, and sadness (Nyman, 1998:27). I experience the same conflicting emotions with regard to Asa and Katia as she both demands my attention while simultaneously repelling me. The film's meticulously designed sets and arrangements coupled with

the strange yet mesmerising lighting mimics Barbara Steele's unnerving beauty by creating a beautifully fabricated world for her characters in which to take shape.

Conterio argues that Asa does not draw a proverbial line in the sand regarding female empowerment (Conterio, 2015:74). He also finds fault with the, as he describes it, conservative-inspired fluctuation of the saint and whore Barbara Steele embodies in the film (Conterio, 2015:74). In this regard he references the opening scenes where Asa is tied to a phallic wooden stake with her arms above her head while wearing a ripped and tattered garb. He compares this scene to a kinky bondage scene with the camera acting in the employ of the male gaze. I agree with his argument to a degree, but also think that a more complex and nuanced argument should be formulated. It is, for instance, true that Conterio can make these claims from his position in 2015 when the book was published, but one has to consider the socio-historic context of the time and women's sociocultural position during 1960s, which is the focus of the next section of this chapter.

Italian women in society and horror films

Like in the United States of America during the 1960s, Italy still preferred women in subordinate positions in relation to men (Dunnage, 2002:160). Similarly, working conditions for women were controlled by antiquated legislation left over from the country's Fascist period (Dunnage, 2002:160). The Catholic Church supported these measures in an attempt to dissuade women from working, as they argued it would lead to a breakdown of the family and that women would have the economic power and independence to seek 'sinister pleasures' (Dunnage, 2002:160).

Visiting cinemas were just as popular in Italy as in the USA with over 5000 parish cinemas alone by 1955 (Dunnage, 2002:165). The state, however, still guided and censored films and television programs at the behest of the public at large (Dunnage, 2002:166). Public kissing and the bikini were, for instance, censored by the state during the 1950s (Dunnage, 2002:166). Similarly, film and television was also used to curb female liberty and ambition (Dunnage, 2002:166).

The abovementioned control of sex and sexuality links again to Foucault's *The History of Sexuality* which I briefly referred to in a previous section. Foucault (1978:5) argues that sexual repression coincided with the introduction of capitalism in the eighteenth century. By controlling sex, he reasons, the bourgeoisie was able to "(avoid any useless "expenditure," any wasted energy, so that all forces were reduced to labor capacity alone) and to ensure its reproduction (conjuality, the regulated fabrication of children)." (Foucault, 1978:114). In other words, the middle class could be controlled through sex to enable power structures, like the capitalist economy. The ideal is to procreate and to add another generation of people to feed the capitalist system (Foucault, 1978:36-37). Sexual rules for the enablement of capitalist structures were recoded as sexual morality, with 'perversions' like

sodomy, homosexuality, and other sexual taboos regarded as economically useless and frequently met with condemnation (1978:36-38).

When reading Foucault's theories alongside the examples, discussed above, of control exerted over women in Italy in the 1950s and 1960s, similarities start to emerge. In Italy Christianity was used in conjunction with Fascist legislation to control women's sexual agency as well as their ability to sexually provoke men. Foucault (1978:23, 34) however argues that censoring sexual discourses in advertently leads to an increase in such discourses.

This is what Asa provokes in *Black Sunday*. By simply appearing in the film with an exposed back and dripping sensuality, she enables a discourse about sexuality. As mentioned, Conterio argues that Asa did not sufficiently challenge reigning societal norms regarding women at the time, but from the last mentioned it becomes obvious that she did in fact challenge said norms to a great degree. Furthermore, Asa is an all-powerful witch who is imbued with unnatural powers that enabled her to survive for over 200 years with a spiked iron mask hammered onto her face. She was also able to use this power to exact revenge on an entire lineage of male descendants by uttering a curse while trussed up and tortured. Her power is so great that she can enthrall men to do her bidding, in other words, she can enamour men to such an extent that they become vehicles for her agency while losing all control of their own will. She defies man-made laws regarding who she may choose as her sexual partner and not only survives their cruel (in)justice, but curses their offspring in revenge.

Some might argue that her actions paint her as the prototypical chaotic and unhinged woman we frequently find in films, but I disagree. Numerous films have been produced with men seeking revenge against others who wronged them or their romantic partners, for example, *Mandy* (2018). Other films have been produced with similar plots where a woman seeks revenge, like *Kill Bill* (2003), *I Spit on your Grave* (2010), and *Black Christmas* (2019). Some scholars argue that a female character who is violent and/or takes revenge on others in a similar fashion that some men do in films, is a vehicle for the male gaze as she has masculine characteristics in the guise of a woman (Mulvey, 1989:53-54; Schubart, 2007). Psychoanalysts, like Carellin Brooks (2006:ix), describe this woman – who is actually a man in the guise of a woman – as a *phallic woman*. The phallic woman can be overly masculine and sexually aggressive (Brooks, 2006:x-xii, 45, 117, 118, 129). There are some gender theorists who categorise and label violence and violent acts in films along certain stereotyped male/female dichotomies (Ashby, 2016:1-2; Mulvey, 1989:14, 19). Laura Mulvey (1989:131) and Rikke Schubart (2018:90-92), on the other hand, support this role reversal because it inverts socially constructed gender roles while making revenge and violence available to all genders thus threatening patriarchal societal ideas regarding gender. I agree with Schubart on the grounds that attributing certain characteristics to either male or female individuals is a narrow perception on gender. For instance, some female body builders or mixed martial arts practitioners would undoubtedly find it

offensive to be labelled a man in a woman's body on the basis of them exhibiting traits considered masculine or taking part in traditionally male-cantered activities. Moreover, if one equates Asa with Dionysus in this regard, other arguments can be made. Fluid gender is one of Dionysus's hallmarks. Nature is also violent and turbulent. If Dionysus represents all of the above then Asa's violent actions are not out of place or necessarily masculine.

Asa being vengeful and violent through another man complicates the male/violent and woman/passive dichotomy as she does not physically involve herself in the events of the film. She reaches out from her crypt and exacts her revenge on others. Even though she is destroyed at the end of the film she still succeeds in cursing her brother's descendants for over 200 years, and bringing the Vajda family to ruin. I find this a sufficient challenge to the patriarchal, or Apollonian, order, especially with regard to the Italian sociocultural context of 1960 as I explain below.

In *Black Sunday* we find an early seventeenth century witch, Asa Vajda, who is tortured and killed by her brother, the Grand Inquisitor, and also the second born son of Prince Vajda, for the crime of loving a known 'serf of the devil', Igor Javutich. Her crimes are described as 'evil deeds' done to satisfy her 'monstrous' love for Igor. This monstrous love is perplexing until one reads the film's Italian promotional material which reveals Igor to be Asa's brother (Lucas, 2007:298).³² This especially makes sense since portraits of Igor are seen throughout the Vajda ancestral castle. It is doubtful that a royal family would have commissioned portraits of servants or outsiders. In one of the portraits Igor is shown wearing a tunic with the Vajda coat of arms emblazoning it. The incestuous relationship was removed from the films by AIP (American International Pictures), the American distributor of the film, in an attempt to soften some of the film's sexual elements (Lucas, 2007:309).

Dunnage (2002:160) mentions that women were dissuaded from work by the Catholic Church because it would enable women to be independent, powerful, and able to control their own sexual pleasure, or 'sinister pleasures'. Asa being of royal blood means that she was undoubtedly wealthy, powerful, and independent thus enabling her to pursue 'sinister', or 'monstrous' pleasures in the form of incest. In this instance the film mirrors Italian societal fears, as well as those of the Catholic Church, at the time of the film's production. In addition, incest is described by Foucault (1978:38, 109, 129) as a hallmark of lower classes and primitive cultures – a sexual taboo which is frowned upon by society due to its potential harm to the nuclear family and society as a whole.

The defining rules of marriage and sexual conduct are Apollonian and are society's attempt to control woman and nature. The same can be said of censorship. By censoring a film or any other text, those in power establish boundaries to contain the chaotic and shapelessness of the Dionysian – the Dionysian in this instance being disgust. Incest is viewed as something unclean or revolting in most societies

³² The original Italian version of the film makes no attempt to hide this incestuous relationship (Lucas, 2007:309).

around the world. Disgust can be described as an aesthetic judgement which hinges on man's fear of losing control of women. Asa embodies this fear.

Christian belief is mirrored in the film and it is used as a vehicle for the Catholic Church's desires. Asa being unable to harm Katia due to an ornate and jewel encrusted crucifix is loaded with meaning. The crucifix is a symbol for Christ. Asa and Katia, according to some, embody two stereotypical aspects of a woman, namely the whore and the Madonna. Asa, guilty of incest and taking part in witchcraft, is the whore, while Katia, the virginal paramour, is the Madonna. Katia does not consciously use her pendant to ward off Asa, but it occurs accidentally while she is unconscious. This occurrence seems almost miraculous. Miracles are mentioned throughout the *Bible* and are part and parcel of the Christian belief system. Asa's defeat thus reflects societal Christian values and the protection one gains from seeking out God and Christ.

The pendent being covered in large diamonds and made from precious metals also seems to carry meaning. Not only is Katia protected by a deity, but she also enjoys the protection and privileges associated with wealth which in turn is associated with a high socioeconomic status. Her beauty coupled with her submission to a man under Christian matrimony protects her from the evils and realities of the outside world.

The witch as a young beautiful woman features prominently in *Black Sunday* and is a trope frequently found in witch horror films. As previously mentioned, both Asa Vajda and Katia Vajda are played by the same actress, Barbara Steele, who was often seen in gothic horror films of the 1960s.

Barbara Steele was 23 years of age when *Black Sunday* was released, meaning she was a very young actress. She also has very striking, unique, and beautiful features which, along with her acting ability, enabled her to have a very productive career in no less than 68 productions between 1958 and 2020 (IMDB, 2020a). Most of these productions fall within the horror or fantasy genres which is testament to her popularity amongst horror film enthusiasts. The most notable of these are *The Pit and the Pendulum* (1961), *The Ghost* (1963), *The Long Hair of Death* (1964), *Castle of Blood* (1964), *Nightmare Castle* (1965), *An Angel for Satan* (1966), and *The She Beast* (1966). Barbara Steele played the witch antagonist in four of the seven witch horror films released between 1960 and 1968. The four films are *Black Sunday*, *The Long Hair of Death* (1964), *The She Beast* (1966), and the *Curse of the Crimson Altar* (1968). With the exception of *The She Beast* (1966) where she is drowned at the start of the film, all the others contain a scene where Barbara Steel is burned at the stake.

Due to the other films not gaining the same notoriety as *Black Sunday*, they were not included in this study. They do however share similar tropes and themes where the witch is concerned. Of interest is that in *The Curse of the Crimson Altar* (1968), Barbara Steele is portrayed as a witch with green-skin,

which links back to the cartoon witches of the 1950s and 1960s discussed in the main literature review chapter.

Barbara Steele as the witch, Asa Vajda, only appears for a few short scenes throughout *Black Sunday*, with the longest being the opening and final acts. For the rest of the film, she is mostly seen sleeping, with the hypnosis of Dr. Kruvajan scene being one of the three in-between scenes where she has any dialogue. Steele, however, appears prominently in most of the film as Katia Vajda, the paramour of the young Dr. Andrej Gorobec. The screen time of the two characters seem to reflect Italian societal norms (of the time), with Katia, the good, featuring more prominently than Asa the evil.

Figures 3 and 4, both film stills from *Black Sunday*, illustrate why Barbara Steele was well-suited for these types of roles. She could play the perfect princess but also the most maniacal witch.³³ This becomes even more apparent upon viewing her roles in the other films where she often plays dual roles.



Figure 3. *Black Sunday*. 1960. [Film still from Blu-ray] Directed by Mario Bava. Italy: Kino Lorber Films.

Even though she is physically attractive, she still has the ability to unsettle the viewer. The good and evil roles she portrays in the film seem to mirror this and she changes with ease from the beautiful, virginal, and innocent princess to the lustful, vampiric witch. When she summons and enslaves Dr. Kruvajan, her coffin explodes and she is seen writhing and panting on her back as someone who is in the throes of urgent lovemaking. As she turns her head, she meets the viewer's gaze with a deranged and lustful look, while at the same time her punctured and wound-ridden skin is unsettling (Figure 4).

³³ Figure 4 seems somewhat similar to Regan's appearance after being possessed by the demon Pazuzu in *The Exorcist* (1973).

Her sudden change in appearance is fluid and difficult to define (Apollonian control). As a virgin, Steele's rendition of Katia is defined by Apollonian as holy and non-threatening, while as Asa she is sullied and threatening.



Figure 4. *Black Sunday*. 1960. Directed by Mario Bava. [Film still from Blu-ray] Italy: Kino Lorber Films.

Barbara Steele's body conforms to the popular portrayal of women in film of the time (and currently), namely young, thin, and beautiful (Moore, 2014:1-2, 14-15). In this film though, she attracts while also horrifying the viewer. This differs from the witches in *Häxan* where the old crones wield power and knowledge and the young witches only serve as erotic spectacle. There is a definite division between old/unattractive/power and young/beautiful/powerless in *Häxan*. In *Black Sunday* they are all combined in Asa Vajda. In Bloomian terms, this seems to be an improvement (*clinamen*) of what was established in *Häxan* as the witch has both the youthful appearance of a 23 year old woman, but is in fact hundreds of years old, and she is powerful. Her power does not originate from her old age, since she was able to direct a powerful curse at her brother and his descendants when she was still in her early 20s in 1630 when she was condemned.

Asa's supernatural abilities are much more pronounced and powerful than the ones the witches exhibit in *Häxan*. Her first act is a curse directed at all the male progenies of her brother. The details of the curse are vague and she simply states that they would all be struck down and that their blood (a Dionysian liquid) will revive her one day. When she is resurrected 200 years later though, it is from the blood of someone who is not a descendent. It is not powerful enough however to revive her completely, but does imbue her with enough power to resurrect her dead lover and brother, Juvatic.

Dionysus is cyclical and embodies birth and rebirth. Juvatic's resurrection is another manifestation of the Dionysian in *Black Sunday*. Asa's resurrection and her decaying corpse filling with fluids again after being dead for 200 years also conforms to the resurrection idea. Katia being a perfect copy of Asa does the same, but to a lesser extent.

Asa exhibits supernatural power only twice in the remainder of the film with the hypnosis of Dr. Kruvajan and at the end when she siphons off Katia's life force to restore her beauty and for full resurrection. In *Häxan* the witches' curses are directly aimed at men in their close proximity, while Asa's curse kills a whole lineage of men over centuries. Her abilities exceed those of *Häxan*'s witches suggesting that Bava pushed the boundaries of the tropes as established by Christensen (*tessera*).

These supernatural acts might all seem anti-patriarchal or even feminist, but that is a limiting view on the character and the film. Asa's Satanic beliefs are at odds with her Grand Inquisitor brother's staunch Christian beliefs. Many, including myself, equate Christianity with patriarchy and the Apollonian, meaning that Asa opposes the dominant societal power structures of the West. It can however also be interpreted with the new being imposed on the old. Witchcraft as presented in this film mirrors the witchcraft in *Häxan*, which originated from European pre-Christian beliefs (Parks, 2012:7, 10). Witchcraft was for the first time associated with Satan and demons in the 1520s during the reformation of Europe (Waite, 2007:4). Satanic witchcraft is consequently a Christian invention and never originally a part or a prerequisite of witchcraft. James Siegel (2005:11) argues that European churches did not want to give the impression that there are other powers outside of God's and the Church. Satan, however, was an angel with power derived from the angelic host or stolen from God – power that he could share with his followers. All mystical and supernatural power had to be confined to the realm of the *Bible* and Christianity. If belief in the pagan gods were to be eradicated, any associations of that power had to be erased from society's memory. In this way Asa's supernatural abilities and who it is directed towards can be seen as a reaction to a forced belief brought down upon European society. She merely refused to conform to new norms and religious doctrine, thus her actions were regarded as sinful.

Her sins are never revealed to the audience in the US and UK versions of the film like in the Italian version, with only hints of her incestuous relationship with her brother, Igor, found throughout. One could argue that her death was not the result of her practicing witchcraft and had more to do with her scandalous relationship with her brother. To understand this better, one needs to activate Levinson's New Historic method and access Italian legislation of the time.

In 1960s Italy, incest was only illegal according to state legislation if it provoked or provokes public scandal (Librando, 1978:172). Asa's sexual relationship is hidden from the audience and is gradually revealed to astute viewers. The hidden clues in the film mirror the secret incestuous relationships hidden in Italian families and society during the 1960s. One could argue that at the end of the film

Asa's punishment is enabled through the unconscious use of a crucifix while she is punished not due to the incestuous relationship itself, but because it was revealed to society and not kept secret.

According to Lévi-Strauss (1969:xl) (another 1960s text) incest is considered a threat to societal cohesion and existence of the family. He argues that incest is a universal taboo which signifies humanity's advancement out of nature and the primitive into culture and progress (Lévi-Strauss, 1969:9-13). He states that European society started to reject incest on the grounds of eugenics around the sixteenth century when people started to notice that inbreeding led to less healthy offspring (Lévi-Strauss, 1969:13). This is also, as mentioned previously, the time when the Inquisition and witch-hysteria had spread over most of Europe. The idea of an incestuous witch from the sixteenth century combines three of the tropes outlined in the previous chapter. First, we find that incest shares a connection with primitive cultures and nature-based belief systems. Secondly, due to a weakening of genetics through inbreeding, the incestuous witch is anti-familial. The third trope that manifests with incestuous relationships has to do with the witch as antagonist to the church. The Catholic Church during medieval times was very much opposed to incest in all forms and those who were found guilty received public punishments similar to those who were condemned for witchcraft (Sajaia, 2018:270-271).

The death of Dr. Kruvajan, a medical doctor (Apollonian science), links with the first trope mentioned above. The conflict between himself and Asa could also be interpreted as the conflict between nature (woman/Dionysus) and science (man/Apollo). Nature is chaotic and uncontrollable, while science is man's attempt at organising, understanding and dominating nature. Feminist scholars have drawn similar conclusions regarding the societal constructed duality containing the rational or enlightened man representing the masculine male, and the irrational, chaotic woman at the other end (Jackson & Scott, 1997:553-554). Women still experience this social construct in many forms including in the popular media. Women are often shown in films and television series to cry and give in to their emotions easily, as Katia does in *Black Sunday*. In their most extreme form this uninhibited outbreak of emotion can lead to chaos or violence which threatens a man, like Asa does through her curse and supernatural ability. Men on the other hand are shown to be stoic, brave, and calm, like Dr. Andrej Gorobec in the same film. To this day an open display of emotion is regarded by society as a feminine trait and associated with the irrational.

I found the torture and death of Asa at her brother's hands far more irrational than compared to her sin of practicing witchcraft. When a male character is left for dead and his lover is murdered before his eyes, the audience finds pleasure in viewing him going on a vengeful rampage and killing everyone connected with the crime. The audience never questions the hero's religious beliefs, since the audience can empathise with him as he fights for love, the hope of marriage, and the perpetuation of western Apollonian ideals. The audience however struggles to empathise with Asa in the film,

because the beliefs she exhibits have been aligned for centuries with evil and the fall of man and western authority. Her physical appearance (rotting and punctured face) mirrors this in various instances as do her actions. The problem evidently lies with societal norms and what is perceived as good. If Asa was initially shown as a domesticated housewife who loves her husband while dabbling in witchcraft like Samantha in the sixties sitcom, *Bewitched*, the audience would most likely have empathy with her, and her vengeance would have been applauded.

We should also remember that witches were originally women who healed others by way of potions, powered herbs, and plants (Banerjee, 2003:152; Ehrenrich, 1973:4). Healers were often mistakenly referred to as witches in the sixteenth century due to their knowledge and skill of healing others (Banerjee, 2003:152). Dr. Kruvajan is a modern physician, or healer, who never had to suffer such accusations to practice his craft. Modern medicine is therefore at odds with the old ways of healing as the one craft is accepted while the other is rejected. Dr. Kruvajan consequently becomes a likely target for a 'primitive' pagan healer who might feel enraged by her unfair treatment or threatened by modern skills and techniques. It is ironic in a sense that the witch in this regard was in fact assisting births and thus contributing to the sustainability and growth of families and society. The witch complicates the family ideal by simultaneously rejecting and assisting families.

For families to grow, sexual intercourse, though not a prerequisite, is in many instances required. Physical attraction between two individuals also frequently leads to sexual intercourse. Fertility and sex are both part and parcel of the Dionysian. As anyone who has viewed *Black Sunday* can attest, Asa embodies sexual desire and eroticism. In one of the final scenes in the film, Dr. Gorobec rips open her blouse, revealing a rotting ribcage hidden underneath. Her decaying body complicates future sexual adventures. This act defines Asa as a rotting corpse, something disgusting and appalling, in other words, an Apollonian aesthetic judgement is served against her. She needs Katia's life force, youth, and beauty to be sexually active again. Her need mirrors the male audience's need for a beautiful woman. Andrea Dworkin (1991:115) argues that this obsession with beauty can be attributed to the male directors and producers who are preoccupied with sex which results in the objectification of the female body. It is at times suggested that women are forced to conform to man's preconceived notions of beauty which are enforced and reinforced by the media, but this is a one-sided observation. The obsession with beauty and youthfulness is a larger problem within society and affects both men and women alike, though women experience it in far greater numbers than men as will be expanded on later in this section (Basu et al, 2018:56, 65). Within the context of *Black Sunday*, there might be more to be said regarding beauty and the societal norms associated with it.

With the film industry taking an international foothold between the 1920s and 1940s, more and more emphasis was placed on beauty, not just with regards to female beauty, but also with regards to their male co-stars (Marwick, 2005:161). This was perpetuated by the constant release of new films and the

relative ease with which viewers were exposed to them, not just through the films, but also through other media like magazines, posters, and other promotional media. Technological advancements in film, print, and television, along with better distribution contributed to faster and more widespread dissemination of the films and promotional materials (Wyatt, 1994:19, 23-25, 111). One should also consider that film and the accompanying promotional materials act as a method to preserve beauty – an Apollonian method of freezing beauty in its tracks before it becomes old and abject. As the actors age in real life, the characters they play never age. This meant that society was and is still reminded constantly of what constitutes beauty. Even though some standards of beauty have changed somewhat over the decades, it has remained relatively constant with the exception of body weight and hair styles. It would, for instance, be difficult to argue that Sophia Loren (figure 5) in 1963's *Yesterday, Today, and Tomorrow* cannot be compared to most attractive female stars of today.



Figure 5. *Yesterday, Today, and Tomorrow*. 1963. [Film still from DVD] Directed by Vittorio De Sica. Italy: Kino Lorber Films.

Physical attractiveness is linked to procreation and eugenics. Attractive parents in most instances produce attractive offspring. Incestuous relationships have been shown to potentially result in congenital defects, mental or physical disabilities, and lowered fertility rates (Bittles, 2005:38-39, 45, 47, 49, 52). Alan H. Bittles (2005:52) also suggests that incest occurs more frequently among individuals with physical and mental abnormalities and who have a low socioeconomic status. These are all non-desirable traits when searching for a possible mate. Asa, who is from a wealthy and powerful family, not only loses her life, but also her wealth and prestige which puts her on a low socioeconomic level leading to further segregation from society. This loss of social status paired with the various social stigmas associated with the practice of incest relegates Asa to the lowest of socioeconomic tiers. Hammering a grotesque face of a devil to her face not only isolates her from demonic entities, but also externalizes her deviance and her potential for creating defective offspring. The mask hides her physically attractive face, while the spikes on the inside scar and destroy her face just to add further insult to injury. Asa's great power is negated by isolating her from society in every

possible way. Her portrayal, can be argued, hint at an extremely exaggerated version of societal fears and norms and a context in which state and church seek to control and subordinate women. Asa as a powerful woman with agency represents everything that Italian society feared in a woman who is sexually independent.

While much had changed from the Victorian Age, women in the early 1960s still lacked control over their own sexuality in the USA and Italy and were very much under the control of men (Dunnage, 2002:160, 166; Littauer, 2015:2-3, 36; Unger & Unger, 1998:149). This obviously influenced the way Asa's character was constructed and portrayed in the film. Many women who were raised on Victorian values in the 1910s to 1950s (as discussed in the previous chapter) would undoubtedly have wanted to trade their lives with their younger peers of the 1960s to experience the freedoms their daughters were enjoying. Asa nearly accomplishes this in *Black Sunday*, as she almost takes the place of Katia in society. She is unable to accomplish this goal and is burned at the stake by a mob of villagers – the villagers being a scaled down version of western society. The problem is therefore not just the male gaze or fears, but society as a whole. The torture and violence directed at Asa throughout the film resembles society's punishment.

Scenes of explicit torture and death were uncommon at the time in film yet in the case of *Black Sunday* such scenes met very little resistance not just in Italy, but in most other European countries as well (Lucas, 2007:308, 310). This could be due to the film mirroring European society's expectations regarding deserved punishment when confronted with a woman such as Asa. In the United States of America and the United Kingdom the reaction was different: the film was heavily edited (US) or banned (UK) by the censors (Lucas, 2007:309, 310, 317).

The Italian sociocultural context in 1960 may appear the same as that of the United States's, but there were slight differences in the way obscenity laws were interpreted at the time. In 1960 in the United States of America, for instance, D.H. Lawrence's *Lady Chatterley's Lover* (1928) was at the centre of an obscenity trial (Green & Karolides, 2005:314). At the same point in time no books were banned in Italy (Green & Karolides, 2005:299). Italian law states that censorship only occurs when the judiciary finds that a text is offensive to public morality, and it had been like this since the end of Fascism (Green & Karolides, 2005:299). In the United Kingdom and the United States of America films censorship have historically taken place at the hand of self-regulatory bodies before release (Green & Karolides, 2005:601 & 610). In Italy texts have been censored or banned after release and only after societal members have deemed the works as obscene over the last 80 odd years, while in the same period the United Kingdom and the United States of America texts have been censored or banned by a small group of individuals guided by their own morals, local laws, and what they perceive to be societal norms. Italy thus relied (and still does) on society to make its own moral judgement related to texts, while the United Kingdom and the United States of America at that time feverishly regulated

texts without much input from the populace. The United States of America, however, only censored the scenes of violence in *Black Sunday* and did not ban the film like the United Kingdom, suggesting they were likely more concerned with the profits of selling the tickets to juveniles than with the general portrayal of women in the film. *Black Sunday* was American International Pictures' (AIP) most profitable film at that time, earning them 3-5 times more than they did with Corman's *The Fall of the House of Usher* (1960) (Lucas, 2007:317). This is especially impressive when one considers that AIP only distributed *Black Sunday* (1970) and did not financially back and produce the film like they did *The Fall of the House of Usher* (1960) (Corman & Jerome, 1998:78).

In the United States of America the regulating body, the Motion Picture Association of America (MPAA), is an organisation created by film studios for film studios (privately owned), while the British Board of Film Censors (BBFC) is comprised of a self-regulating body and state officials (Green & Karolides, 2005:601 & 610). The MPAA would undoubtedly be more concerned with profit and the number of people that frequent the cinemas, whereas the BBFC with input from the state would be more concerned about the potential of the film to harm and corrupt the viewer. Censorship is fuelled and influenced by societal norms and can be defined along geographic lines (Green & Karolides, 2005:xx). In the United Kingdom and United States of America, however, societal norms are institutionalised by those in power, creating a reciprocal influence between society, state, and film production houses with the state and film producers acting as gatekeepers. In Italy society holds the power and influences societal norms.

From the above it becomes clear that social norms differ from country to country as well as the way they are interpreted and used by private individuals and the state. What is consistent is that at the time, the major objections officials had against the film were the gore, violence, and slight nudity which was no worse than we find in *Häxan*. The fact that Asa is a witch and that the church and society have reservations regarding the witch and what she represents, is thus irrelevant to the censors, which was a major break from what occurred with the release of *Häxan* in the UK and US. The BBFC at the time was more concerned with the portrayal of sex and sexuality, and to a lesser extent the violence and torture (BBFC, 2020a).

In forty years, global society had not changed much in any of these countries when we compare the receptions of *Häxan* to that of *Black Sunday*, with the only exception being the UK and US's more relaxed stance regarding the church and occult in films, as will be expanded on in the next films' discussion. Issues related to sex, beauty, and gender however persist to this day in the year 2021.

Asa's youthful and beautiful body and how it is employed to possess men

Both of Barbara Steel's characters in *Black Sunday* seem to conform to contemporary standards of beauty and female agency. Asa renders herself immortal through leaching off the life force of others, along with her ability to raise and control the dead. This along with her 200 year old curse on the family paints her as an all-powerful witch. She does not directly kill a single person, while her zombified servant kills and murders those who get in her way. It thus seems contrived to have her comatose for most of the film.

The idea that an obviously powerful woman is subdued to such an extent mirrors some general attitudes held towards women around the globe. Instances have been observed where men abuse women (physically and/or verbally), because they feel threatened by the power a woman wields (Claes & Rosenthal, 1990:216). This power can take the form of social or economic status, to perceived levels of attractiveness and intelligence (Claes & Rosenthal, 1990:216). A woman, like Asa, who is beautiful, of royal lineage, and who wields unfathomable supernatural power becomes an exaggerated threat to men. She can discard and replace a lover with almost no effort. She initially enjoys an elevated social and cultural position due to her family name and history, but is stripped of it when her aberrant sexual desires become public. Her supernatural abilities outmatch even the greatest physical power of any man. Her knowledge of hidden things also places her in a different intellectual position than most men. In order to level the playing field in the film, Asa's power has to be contained (Apollonian) while her beauty is simultaneously put on display through Katia, and hidden behind an iron mask in the form of Asa. We wish to revel in her beauty, while simultaneously we do not want her power to engulf and destroy us. Barbara Steele in the guise of Katia is not a threat. She is fragile, virginal, passive, and dotes on her father. Her only ambition is to find love and be loved. Katia submits to male heterosexual power, while Asa opposes it. Barbara Steele, as both Asa and Katia, plays both the role of Apollonian desire (Katia) and that of Dionysian destruction (Asa). In this way the film explores diametrically opposed female characters, an almost what-if scenario where a choice in favour of one or the other can have a very different effect on the outcome of a woman's life. Asa can also represent Katia's virginal fear of sex and marriage. Barbara Steele portraying the same two women who share the same bloodline can be seen as a woman who has a choice between two different life paths. The one, according to the film, leads to self-actualisation and death while the other one leads to submission and a comfortable life.

Asa's agency should also be considered. Asa dies at the end of the film as punishment for her transgressions, but one has to consider that throughout the film she is never shown to physically harm someone. In every instance it is Juvatich who kills at her behest. This is not done to separate the beautiful woman from something as heinous as killing. Juvatich also does not implicate men as violent or more capable of murder in this instance. While all the other prominent male characters are

upstanding doctors, princes, and clergymen of moral fibre, Juvatich is a reanimated corpse, a shambling ghoul that cannot be classified as a man or even being alive. In this way he becomes a vehicle for violence while at the same time acquitting the male viewer. Asa is however still mostly to blame for orchestrating the deaths by using Juvatich as a tool of destruction. By possessing Juvatich and using him to kill other men, Asa becomes an even greater threat to men than she would have been by just killing the men herself. By possessing others to do her bidding she can infiltrate society and have friends and family members murder each other without ever being in the immediate vicinity.

Another way to interpret Asa's comatose body and not physically taking part in the murders could be to ascribe to society's obsession with beauty. The attractive-leniency effect is a theory that proposes that the more attractive a person is the less likely they are to be viewed by others as guilty and will most likely receive a less severe punishment than a less attractive person guilty of the same crime (Allen, Mcrae, & Walter, 2018:76, 77). Asa's comatose state while committing crimes seems to mirror society's obsession with beauty and the degree to which we want to absolve or separate beauty from wrongdoing.

This could be due to the way beauty has been represented over the centuries. For decades beauty has been linked to morality in paintings and literature (Marwick, 2005:1). Society has been severely affected by these various treatises into believing that the two are intertwined. According to Arthur Marwick (2005:1), a known historian and scholar, beauty is seen by society as: "something transcendental, something beyond human affairs, such as truth, purity, godliness, spirituality, 'the good' to the utmost degree." In other words, some in society at times irrationally turn the physical into something metaphysical or spiritual. This mirrors Paglia's notions regarding the Apollonian freezing of beauty through art as well as the aforementioned obsession with purity.

This thirst for beauty is mirrored in Asa's own grand quest for immortal youth and beauty. She uses her supernatural ability to syphon the life force off another and make it her own. This syphoning of youth results in the victim dying almost instantly from old age. The supernatural becomes a vehicle for wish fulfilment where youth and beauty can be gained by magic and sacrificing another person. The 60 year old film can in this instance be reframed for current audiences in relation to the lengths women will go to, to conform to sociocultural norms regarding beauty, albeit grossly exaggerated in the film. The expression "I could/would kill for (something)" is an apt expression to consider in this instance. Women go through painful surgical procedures often more than once to achieve a desired look. These procedures have high financial implications. According to the American Society of Plastic Surgery (ASAP) (2020:6-7) and the International Society of Aesthetic Plastic Surgery (ISAPS) (2020:9) there were just over 12 million cosmetic procedures completed in 2019 with a cost running into the billions of dollars³⁴ with most procedures (92%) requested by women over the age of 30.

³⁴ Combined cost of \$16.7 billion in the US alone (ASAP, 2020:6-7)

Other women starve themselves or become bulimic or anorexic to achieve a certain body weight in the pursuit of beauty. If one considers the potential self-harm and pain some women and men go through to mould themselves into a societal construct it becomes clear that many have an unhealthy preoccupation with beauty.

Though cosmetic surgery is a fairly recent development, society's obsession with youth and beauty goes back much longer. According to Arthur Marwick (2005:26-27) society only started to notice the beauty of others when they could enjoy comfortable lives brought on by progress. Some of the earliest recorded allusions to beauty can be found in Ancient Greece where older men lusted after beautiful boys and sometimes beautiful young women like Helen of Troy (Eco, 2004:39; Hyland, 2008:32-32; Marwick, 2005:26, 27-28). Interestingly, the writings of both Socrates and Plato connect beauty and youthfulness to one another (Hyland, 2008:85, 94, 95). This focus moved away from young boys to young and beautiful women during the Middle Ages, and to a large extent remained there since (Marwick, 2005:26). One only needs to study the various women in Sandro Botticelli's paintings, like *The Birth of Venus* (1482), to find evidence of the youthful beautiful woman in art. Though society's interpretation of beauty has fluctuated over the centuries, it has nonetheless remained part of society. Titian's *Venus of Urbino* (1534) embodies a different corporeal beauty than the 1990s' heroin chic made popular by Gia Carangi and Kate Moss, for instance. Barbara Steele's embodiment of Asa and Katjia reflects some of these same tenets as a young and beautiful woman, while the makeup effects applied to her as in figure 4 reflect the ageist issues we still find in society.

Black Sunday reflects enduring notions regarding beauty and how almost schizophrenic perceptions regarding attractive and less attractive individuals can be, while also mirroring society's inane need for women to submit to heterosexual matrimony. These pressures all have an impact on a woman's agency where the female body is concerned. In order to be successful in society she has to conform to societal beauty standards. If she does not conform to said standards she has to regulate and change her appearance through makeup, dietary changes, exercising, and/or have cosmetic procedures done to her body. Time, pain, effort, and finances are thus involved which all have to do with agency and embodiment. These are all resources that should rather be focussed on self-actualisation and personal health and not employed for the pleasure of the male gaze. Yet many women are still obsessed with how men perceive their level of attractiveness.

The above is not unlike what John Berger suggested in his highly influential 1970s BBC television series, *Ways of Seeing*, which was later published in book format. According to Berger (1990:46) women have been historically taught to survey themselves constantly, especially with regards to how men see them as they will be treated according to the way they (the women) represents themselves. Moreover, if a women treats herself in a specific way, then others will treat her accordingly (Berger, 1990:46-47). Berger (1990:47) puts is eloquently:

[M]en act and women appear. Men look at women. Women watch themselves being looked at. This determines not only most relations between men and women but also the relation of women to themselves. The surveyor of woman in herself is male: the surveyed female. Thus she turns herself into an object – and most particularly an object of vision: a sight.”

From the above statement it is clear that Asa robbing Katia of her youth and beauty has implications for female agency. If she cannot maintain the male gaze’s focus on her person she has no power. Her power over men and her agency can only be achieved by robbing the submissive Katia of youth and beauty. Katia’s youth and beauty are however societal creations meaning that Asa would become a submissive like Katia upon completion of her goal. The crucifix around Katia’s neck symbolises her submission to God, man, and so society. Her fear is therefore not of the holy powers of a crucifix, but what it represents. This incompatibility results in her destruction and is reinforced by the mob (society) that swarms her and burns her at the stake, but not before Dr. Gorobec rips open her blouse to reveal to the world a rotting chest cavity devoid of breasts. She is violated by a man, made less of a woman, and her beauty is revealed to be artificial and created through supernatural means. Because her abilities were not in the employ of society, but to further her own agenda and independence, she is ostracised by society in the most severe way, through death.

The cinematic witch’s level of attractiveness is frequently linked to her motivations, level of power, and whether she is good or evil, as will be discussed in more detail in the next chapters. *Black Sunday*’s witch deviates from *Häxan*’s old and powerful witch by making a young and beautiful woman (Asa) powerful (Bloom’s *clinamen*). Barbara Steele embodies the two paths an unmarried woman can take and how her choices can potentially impact her life. In the past, unmarried or single individuals have often been stigmatised. Single women in their thirties were labelled as immature, selfish, or as having something fundamentally wrong with them physically or psychologically (Taylor, 2012:7, 40). This stigma has however slowly been eroded by younger generations with more people opting for the single lifestyle than ever before in order to focus on their studies and careers (Gollayan, 2018; Taylor, 2012:39). This was not an option for Asa in *Black Sunday* and, in my opinion, she can be reframed as a modern-day martyr for this type of lifestyle for refusing to submit or to relinquish her independence. Her vengeance wrought upon future generations becomes a plea for freedom, while Barbara Steele’s alternative guise of Princess Katia becomes a stern warning to the trappings of a comfortable western lifestyle associated with conservative matrimonial norms.

Asa’s beauty is also closely associated with her supernatural power to possess others. Possession features strongly in *Black Sunday* as Asa possesses two men to kill for her. She resurrects Juvatic and enslaves him to carry out her orders. He then brings Dr. Kruvajan before her and she possesses him after uttering the following lines to him while on her back and heaving and moaning seductively:

Kruvajan! I've been waiting for you. I need you again. Look into my eyes. Look into my eyes! Come Closer. Just a few drops of your blood brought me to life again. All of your blood will give me the strength to accomplish my vengeance. Come! Kiss me! My lips will transform you. You will be dead to men, but you will be alive in death.

From the dialogue above one can describe Asa as a sexual and insatiable predator of men. The last line suggests that Dr. Kruvajan will be dead to others, but he will be alive by satiating her sexual desires. Dr. Kruvajan is shown to be quite bewildered during this scene, but his lust for Asa compels him to kiss her upon her command. From that moment he is completely under her spell. The dialogue also makes the link between sex and death explicit, while emphasising Asa's control over both (and again linking her to Dionysus). She uses her powers not as a witch, but as a woman to lure Dr. Kruvajan into relinquishing his will and agency to her. She enslaves his mind and possesses his body and soul. In this instance, nature and chaos (Dionysus) conquer and subdue science and rationality (Apollo).

Asa nearly possesses the young Dr. Gorobec, but he regains his faculties after a priest leads a mob to storm her crypt. This is significant, as it marks the second time in close succession at the end of the film where Asa's plans are foiled by Christianity (the first time when Katia's crucifix amulet causes her severe pain and distress). Science and rationality are not able to conquer Asa, but neither is Asa able to conquer Christianity. This implies that the church perceives the powerful and independent young woman who is able to lead men astray with her sexual deviance as much more of a threat to science or rationality. It is ironic since this means that the church suggests that men are able to control nature through science and rationality, but a woman, who is supposedly an avatar of nature and chaos can still control a man and lead him astray. Furthermore, possession is often linked to so-called primitive and unsophisticated societies, especially dark-skinned women, which in turn places Asa at the intersection of race, class, and gender (Keller, 2002:3). This adds an extra layer to Asa as a witch as she has moved further down the societal hierarchy from a Western woman to a 'primitive' woman. Asa being a woman, places her a step down from a western man. Historically westerners have viewed Africans and other races with darker skin tones as inferior beings. It is commonly known that between the sixteenth and nineteenth centuries slaves were, for instance, taken from Africa to be sold in the Americas and England. These African slaves reported to their so-called master, namely a European gentleman of means at the top, his wife below him, and then the children. In many cases slaves were seen as equal to or less than livestock. By associating Asa with those who are already *othered* by western society, Asa is dehumanised and placed on a low social ranking, placing her beneath any westerner.

According to the Merriam-Webster (2020) online dictionary the word 'possession' means: "the act of having or taking into control", "control or occupancy of property without regard to ownership",

and/or “a psychological state in which an individual’s normal personality is replaced by another”. The key word here is ‘control’, meaning to control others, and to control others means to strip away their will, power, and personal desires. When this is done, one also strips away any learnt normative social behaviours – that which creates and sustains a society.

Possession is one of the oldest and most pervasive superstitions in human history and can be found in all religions around the world (Boutwell, Clasen, & Kjeldgaard-Christiansen, 2020:1; Keller, 2002:2). Because of this prevalence it has seeped globally into cultural systems and is a superstition that many devout individuals in third and first world countries still fear to this day even though there is no scientific proof of possession being possible (Boutwell, Clasen, & Kjeldgaard-Christiansen, 2020:2). Boutwell, Clasen, and Kjeldgaard-Christiansen (2020:6) argue that this fear of possession is rooted in a fear of pathogens and parasites invading our bodies. Humanity has been aware of parasitic infections as far back as 3000 BC (Cox, 2002:596). Ancient Greek and Roman physicians recorded the differences between parasitic infections and fevers 800 to 300 BC (Cox, 2002:596). During the Dark and Middle Ages of Europe medical conditions were misinterpreted as having a spiritual or religious origin (Cox, 2002:596). From the above it becomes obvious that there is a link between medical conditions, like fevers and parasitic infections, and the supernatural as possession.

Similar to an immaterial and invisible spirit taking control of our bodies, so do microscopic viruses and bacterium invade our bodies. The host has very little control over the damage wrought on their bodies as well as their resulting mental states. As mentioned, parasites can also affect our appearance, making us less attractive to the opposite sex, leading to less procreation, but also to defects in our offspring – all of which negate the prosperity of the familial unit.



Figure 6. The Exorcist. 1973. Directed by William Friedkin. [Film still from DVD] USA: Warner Home Video.

Another argument that Boutwell, Clasen, and Kjeldgaard-Christiansen (2020:6) make is that supernatural possession leads to loss of agency, causing harm to oneself and to others. A person who is infected with a contagious virus is often isolated socially and cut off from their social networks, as the whole world experienced during the Covid-19 outbreak. In the case of a more dangerous pathogen like Ebola, the individual is completely isolated and alone. The malicious spirit or supernatural being that possesses others in horror films are similar to the parasite in this regard. Regan in 1973's *The Exorcist* (figure 6) looks like she is experiencing an advanced stage of pathogen infection. The invisible threat thus becomes visible. The visible threat, though unsettling, is not as dangerous to a society as that which is invisible and can hide in plain sight. Take for instance John Carpenter's revered classic sci-fi horror film, *The Thing* (1982). In this film an unknown alien force assimilates the host by breaking the body down to its raw materials (Dionysian primordial liquid). It then uses these materials to construct an exact replica of the person which takes their place in society. They mimic the person they ingested down to the smallest details from physical appearance, behaviour, to their memories. Dionysian cultists similarly eat that which they want to become (Paglia, 2001:95). John Carpenter employs a similar theme in the cult classic *They Live* (1988), where an alien race silently and secretly invaded the world years ago and took over by posing as humans.

Similarly, the witch who hides in society and secretly bends others to her will through possession is just as great a threat and even more so, since she has abilities which others cannot start to comprehend or measure. The witch's supernatural ability to rob a person of their agency or to destroy their standing in society through possession draws attention for a need to belong in society and the fear of being ostracised.

Like the witches in *Häxan* mirror societal fears Scandinavians harboured against immigrants, so does *Black Sunday* reflect fear of the *other*. In *Häxan* the witch entices a man through powders, potions, and curses, but in *Black Sunday* the witch simply looks into a man's eyes and seduces him to her will (*tesserra* due to the swerve away from *Häxan*). Asa is not simply a dirty or deceitful immigrant like the witches in *Häxan*. She is made terrifyingly abject by linking her explicitly to death, sexual deviance, disfiguring her face, removing her breasts, and linking her to entropy and disease. She is similarly made a destroyer of families and societal power structures by hiding among us in a familiar and non-threatening guise. Like Dionysus liberates by destroying, so does Asa attempt to destroy those who would attempt to control her.

Possession can also be made a scapegoat for undesirable actions or a way for a person to act out without fear of consequence (Keller, 2002:4, 8, 150; Uszkalo, 2015:11). A person can do things they would not normally do out of fear of being isolated from the collective, like Dr. Kruvajan kissing Asa or killing for her. The witch's supernatural ability to possess others mirrors some individuals' need for freedom from cultural norms albeit in exaggerated form. It enables the possessed to act out of

character and sometimes outside the confines of the law, while being free of any repercussions (Keller, 2002:150). The witch enables this through her abilities and thus symbolises the yearning within society to experience absolute freedom. This is not a novel concept and was observed by those practicing medicine in Western Europe as far back as the early seventeenth century where individuals often accused witches for their own lack of judgement before acting (Petry, 2011:50).

In an overwhelmingly Christian society those who are alienated, melancholic, or feel that they have little control over their lives are sometimes attracted to the occult or Satanism and exhibit behaviour that is at odds with western societal norms which in turn alienates them even further from their peers (Ivey, 1993:186-187). Gavin Ivey (1993:187) argues that individuals who share an interest in the unnatural cluster together and form their own sub-cultures where they support and reward each other for aberrant behaviour. If their micro society is ever exposed, they can use demonic possession as an excuse to deflect responsibility from themselves: They were behaving in a certain way not because they revelled in their newfound freedom, but because they were coerced or controlled by an entity which is at odds with their community's socio-cultural norms.

Asa uses the supernatural and possession with one goal in mind, namely freedom. In one of the final scenes of the film where Juvatich brings Katia's unconscious body to Asa, he mumbles to Asa: "Now you will be free forever." Asa's freedom though is dependent on her replacing Katia. She says: "You felt like me because you were destined to become me, a useless body without life." This is significant, especially if one considers that Katia's characterisation is shallow and without growth. She is an Apollonian puppet frozen in beauty and demeanour – an empty vessel made for inhabiting. By draining Katia of her youth Asa takes her place. Having the identical face and body means that Asa not only replaces Katia but she becomes her. The world would still see Katia and believe it is she, but it would be Asa. This can be reframed as an extreme form of possession. To complicate matters even further, this would mean that Asa has the perfect form and place within society to infiltrate it anew and to possess even more men thus challenging social norms from within her hidden place as Katia. The gain however is at the expense of another woman, albeit a woman who has submitted to societal power structures.

In *Black Sunday* the witch is shown to control this experience and/or related deviant acts, by using her sexual abilities as a woman. This is exaggerated through the supernatural to create a more potent and fast acting possession, but is not that much different from the way some believe a woman can control a man without supernatural means in the real world. This fear of being controlled by a woman where a man harms himself or others can be traced back to the *Bible*. Samson died after being led astray by Delilah (Judges 16:13-18), while King Herod had John the Baptist decapitated after Salome enchanted him with a dance (Mark 6:23-27). The book of *Proverbs* is laden with passages warning men of beautiful and seductive women who will lead them away from God's grace (Proverbs 5:6; 7:24-26;

11:21; 21:19; 27:15-16). Western religion has instilled the fear of beautiful and independent women in not only men, but in society as a whole.

Tying the threads together

Black Sunday's witch is obviously far more complicated than one would expect after the initial viewing of the film. Asa's portrayal and actions mirror the chauvinism, sexual assault, shallow commercialism, and unrestrained cruelty mentioned in the introduction of the chapter. It is difficult to gauge Mario Bava's stance towards powerful women while viewing *Black Sunday*. Asa seems to challenge societal power structures by just existing in the first place as a powerful woman with agency, a character unheard of at the time in cinematic productions. On the other hand, she is tortured, maimed, ostracised, and dehumanised for being an independent and powerful woman. I do however believe that her punishments are so grotesquely exaggerated that it opens up a dialogue about the treatment of women in the twenty-first century. In the context of 1960 though, I find the film too closely mirroring society's attitudes towards women who did not toe the line of their gender and societal morality. The fact that she is a powerful woman in such a prominent leading role was groundbreaking at the time and undoubtedly set the stage for more women to feature in such roles, which is positive.

The use of such a beautiful, young woman seems to conform to the shallow commercialism of not just film studios who made a profit from featuring her, but also the film viewers who had no problem with these types of portrayals. I find definite chauvinism implied throughout the film with Asa being in constant odds with Apollonian beauty. In the guise of Asa, Barbara Steele is asleep for the majority of the film, while her demure and innocent guise, Katia, is prominently featured, which implies a preference for women like Katia. At the start of the film Asa's naked skin is exposed to us and branded by an overly masculine and faceless man. The faceless torturer in this instance becomes an avatar of patriarchal society, since he can be any man. He brands her just like a farmer would brand a cow as proof of property. This same man then dehumanises her by covering and mutilating her face by hammering a mask into it. The mask obscures not just her beauty but her physical identity, while the spikes on the inside of the mask guarantee that her face is ruined. To further ostracise her, she is portrayed as a hateful, vindictive, and cruel person – a hysterical and chaotic woman. A male doctor, an avatar of man's triumph over nature through science in this instance, then exposes her body to the viewers to remind them that she is not a 'real' woman as she not only lacks breasts, but that her chest is a rotting mess of flesh and bones, thus emphasising her lack of sexual availability to a man. These scene mirrors Paglia's perspective on the conflict between the Apollonian and Dionysian. Apollo renders an aesthetic judgement upon Dionysus and exposes his/her fluidity and rotting miasma to the

world. His judgement finds her wanting as a woman and of no consequence as she is useless to society.

The scenes mentioned above can also be linked to the influences and tropes discussed in the *Häxan* chapter. In *Häxan* we find the young and beautiful witch who is readily exposed throughout the film. In *Black Sunday* Asa is embodied in the same way, but while the young witches in *Häxan* are more or less powerless, Asa is very powerful. Asa is able to possess any man by merely making eye contact with them. The supernatural is used to exaggerate her feminine whiles and ability to possess a man through the sexual. This same power shares connections with the primitive or third world, suggesting that Asa's power likely originates from somewhere other than the West. Her non-Western, or non-Apollonian ways threatens reigning power structures and could infiltrate and infect society, changing it from within. Whereas the witches in *Häxan* rely on potions and tricks, Asa entices with promises of otherworldly sex and pleasure.

The inclusion of incest in the film makes it possible to identify even more instances of *Häxan*'s ripple effect, as Asa challenges conventional societal familial norms by choosing her brother as a sexual partner. She not only challenges the rule of Western power structures and their laws, but also jeopardises the health and longevity of potential unborn children making her anti-familial. The act of or inclination to incest again associates her with the Dionysian, painting her as a sinful pagan.

A previously unidentified trope emerged during the study of *Black Sunday* (1922), namely the connection between the film's narrative and previously produced and fictional texts. Many horror films make use of such texts to create a link to the distant and mysterious past. In Sam Raimi's *Evil Dead Trilogy* the plot of all the films hinges on the spells and prophecies found in an old book, the *Necronomicon*. As anyone who has read H.P. Lovecraft's *The Hound* (1924) or *The Nameless City* (1921) can attest, the *Necronomicon* is a fictional text created by Lovecraft in attempt to add an extra layer of history and mystery to the book. This mirrors the gothic tradition where authors of Gothic literature were fond of incorporating old and mysterious manuscripts in their stories (Joshi & Schultz, 2001:187). The use of old texts further links *Black Sunday* to the Gothic genre like Bava intended, while also suggesting a link between the film and *Häxan* which employs similar references to texts between fictional vignettes.

Like *Häxan*, *Black Sunday* also features the dead and the abject. In *Black Sunday* however the abject and the decaying and abject seem to be explicitly linked to a woman (the Dionysian). In *Häxan* the witches are shown to handle dead and putrid things which externalises the abject. In some other instances the old woman's body is framed as an abject object which has more to do with old age than with being a woman. In *Black Sunday* the witch is made abject to mirror societal expectations and stereotypes associated with a powerful woman. Her monstrous ways and actions are hidden, so the mask, the maiming of her body, and her rotting flesh externalise her inherent and hidden threat.

The above is one of the central tenets of a New Historic analysis. The text mirrors and challenges the sociocultural context of the time, while also opening it up to new interpretations at a different point in time. These new interpretations enable the scholar to expand upon the meaning of the film by reframing it. The tropes in the film are also changed and reframed by directors and filmmakers at later points in time. These changes to the tropes are influenced, as discussed throughout this chapter, by societal norms. Italian attitudes to incest, for instance, influenced the depiction of Asa's agency. We find no such influence in the Scandinavian *Häxan*.

It is obvious that *Black Sunday* is laden with mature themes and was intended for more liberal and sophisticated European audiences and was not available in its original form in either the United Kingdom or the United States of America. The next two films that are discussed, *Night of the Eagle* and *The Witches*, were produced by film studios in the United Kingdom and the United States of America for their respective audiences, making them far less complex with regards to cinematic techniques and themes, but not less compelling as they even further complicate our understanding of the cinematic witch.

NIGHT OF THE EAGLE (1962)

Background

The angry and vengeful witch stereotype in horror films was used again in 1962's British-American collaboration, *Night of the Eagle*, directed by Sidney Hayers, and also shot in monochrome like *Black Sunday*. The film is also known by a much darker title in the US, namely *Burn, Witch, Burn*, but it is more widely known by the British title. The film is based on Fritz Leiber's 1952 novel *Conjure Wife* and follows the plot of the novel relatively closely, with only minor changes made at the end of the film.

The plot revolves around a happily married couple, Norman and Tansy Taylor. Norman is a psychology professor at Hempnell Medical College – his research focus is on belief systems and superstition. Tansy secretly practices *obeah*, a West African form of witchcraft that is often associated with spiritual healing techniques and talismans (Paton, 2015:7, 19, 23), as a way to help Norman prosper and to keep him safe. Norman discovers her trinkets hidden throughout the house and destroys them. Soon thereafter events occur which at first threaten his career and standing at the university and then his and Tansy's lives. First a truck nearly kills him, followed by student, Margaret, falsely accusing him of sexually violating her. A male student who is besotted with Margaret then threatens him with a gun, but is arrested. After all these strange occurrences, an invisible entity attempts to break into his and Tansy's home.

Tansy becomes convinced that the abovementioned events are due to Norman destroying all the talismans in the house and takes drastic steps to save her husband, who is still unconvinced that the supernatural has anything to do with his bout of bad luck. Tansy nearly drowns at sea when she attempts to sacrifice herself to save Norman. He rescues her at the crucial moment and takes her back home. She later attacks him with a knife while in a trance, but Norman traps her by locking her in their bedroom. The same evening Norman goes to the university where Flora Carr, the university secretary and wife of his friend and colleague, Professor Lindsay Carr, confronts him and reveals that she is a witch and that all his bad luck was caused by her. Her motivation is much like Tansy's, namely to see her husband succeed. But where Tansy uses her magic to target her husband to help him, Flora wants to eliminate Norman thereby removing her husband's competition. Professor Carr though is not privy to his wife's actions so he is not seen to condone or oppose her actions. She then informs him that she has set fire to the Taylor's residence and that he must run to rescue Tansy. As he tries to run home, she uses a form of hypnosis over the school intercom to convince Norman that a giant stone eagle, a decoration on the outside wall of the main university building, has come alive and is attacking him. Norman is thus frantically trying to escape the eagle so that he can go home and save Tansy. He finally escapes, only to find that Tansy was able to save herself. As Flora exits the

university front door, thinking that she had defeated the Taylors, the giant stone eagle topples down from the wall and crushes her on the lawn.

Literature review

According to Bernadette Lynn Bosky (2007:691) the witch is culturally and historically perceived as someone who harms others. The witch who harms others features prominently in *Häxan* and *Black Sunday* and serves again as an antagonist in *Night of the Eagle*. *Night of the Eagle* however diverges from the previously discussed horror films by also featuring a good witch who uses her supernatural power to protect her husband, and the protagonist, from an evil witch. By protecting her husband and using her abilities to grant him success in life, Tansy resembles Joseph Campbell's supernatural aid as described in his *The Hero with a Thousand Faces* (1949). The supernatural aid, as described by Campbell, is a person or being who helps the hero by providing him/her with supernatural protection or guidance (Campbell, 2004:63-67). Flora is the opposite of Tansy and uses her supernatural talents to harm Norman.

Interestingly, Campbell (1960:62) mentions in *The Masks of God: Primitive Mythology* that the witch is associated with water, and like water she can be life-nurturing or life-threatening. In *Night of the Eagle* we find the first instance where both aforementioned types of witches are portrayed in a film. Another aspect worth noting is that *Night of the Eagle* is the first film to show witches in a suburban middle-class setting. Even though *Night of the Eagle* is a significant historical contribution to the horror film genre as a whole, the film is yet to enjoy in-depth scholarly attention. The film has been mentioned in various books on British horror films over the last twenty years as the film became more accessible.

Leon Hunt (2001:82) describes *Night of the Eagle* as a British production by name only due to the writers and director being American. The supernatural elements in film originating from African *obeah* constitute also a missed opportunity to delve into Britain's pagan and druidic past, further removing the film from British culture (Hunt, 2001:83, 86). The British pagan beliefs would only surface in British horror cinema eleven years later in Robin Hardy's cult classic *The Wicker Man* (1973).

Hunt also draws attention to *Night of the Eagle* (1962:90) being a film about women who wield unfathomable power in secret while the dominant patriarchal society of 1960s England is oblivious to these women who can easily overthrow them. Norman is able to retain his status in society and his place of work only because Tansy protects him. His reputation is nearly ruined and he almost dies at the hands of a powerful and unattractive middle aged woman with a disability. Not only is she a woman, but she is also a rival and accomplished academic. She has succeeded in the world of men,

but also in the world that men are unaware of. Flora and Tansy can change, with little effort, the trajectory of success of any man as well as end or increase his lifespan. The control the two witches exert over men shows the audience how fragile patriarchal society can be.

Though Hunt makes an interesting argument regarding *Night of the Eagle*, he does not say more about the film. Barry Forshaw devotes a larger section to *Night of the Eagle* in his book *British Gothic Cinema* (2013). Forshaw (2013:106) lists *Night of the Eagle* as one of the historically most important British gothic films ever produced. He bases this statement on the director's ability to keep the audience at the edge of their seats, even when obvious, yet unintentional mistakes are made – like the wire keeping the poorly crafted eagle aloft as it attacks Norman in one of the final scenes of the film (Forshaw, 2013:115). Forshaw (2013:116) also credits the flawless plot and dialogue, professional cinematography and editing, and the cast's acting prowess as the many reasons the film succeeds.

Forshaw (2013:117) also notes that the then contemporary 1960s setting of *Night of the Eagle* was unheard of at the time when period-set horror films were the norm. Sidney Hayers successfully breaks from the fairy tale setting the witch is often found in and transports her to 1960s England where she is inserted into not only a suburban household, but also the higher echelons of academia. In my opinion this film can be seen as the precursor for television series like *Bewitched* (1964-1972) and *Sabrina the Teenage Witch* (1996-2000) where we also find witches in suburban settings but to comedic effect.

Forshaw does not delve deeper into the film and for the most part discusses the film's production and hints at the normalised sexism in the film which was typical of the time (Forshaw, 2013:119). Ian Cooper (2016:69) says even less about *Night of the Eagle* in *Frightmare: A History of British Cinema* (2016), but makes the reader aware of the obvious similarities (influences) the films *Repulsion* (1965), *Rosemary's Baby* (1968), *Skeleton Key* (2005) share with their predecessor *Night of the Eagle*, implying *Night of the Eagle's* influence on these films. Cooper (2016:69) makes a case for the uncanny intruding on the real world causing the rational characters to accept the irrational – instances of this are found in all three of the mentioned films. *Repulsion* (1965) makes the link with *Night of the Eagle* more explicit as it shares the same opening scene with the film where a beautiful and feminine eye appears on the screen surrounded by inky blackness (Cooper, 2016:69).

The relative dearth of studies on *Night of the Eagle* is not unexpected as it is overshadowed by other more renowned British horror films of the time, like *Night of the Demon* (1957) or Jack Clayton's *The Innocents* (1961). *Night of the Eagle* has also far less to say thematically, socially, or about the film medium than for instance Alfred Hitchcock's revered *Psycho* (1960), Mario Bava's *Black Sunday* and *Blood and Black Lace* (1964), or Roman Polanski's *Repulsion* (1965). Hayers' film is compared extensively to *Night of the Demon* (1957) due to the similar themes, gothic style, and contemporary settings the films share, with most favouring *Night of the Demon* (1957) (Cooper, 2016:70; Forshaw,

2013:6; Hunt, 2001:82). *Night of the Eagle* is still important however as an influential force as I will illustrate in the rest of this chapter.

The United Kingdom's societal context of the 1960s and its relation to *Night of the Eagle*

Before discussing the influence of the films that came before *Night of the Eagle* or how the Dionysian relates to the film, an in-depth discussion of the socio-historic context of the film is required. As television sets became more affordable during the 1950s, cinema attendance declined sharply all over the UK (Laurie, 2010:74). The 1950s also saw the introduction of the X certification in the UK (BBFC, 2020b). This certification was exclusively applied to cinematic productions (often with heavy cuts) and excluded anyone below the age of 16 from viewing the film (BBFC, 2020b; Laurie, 2010:74). By the early 1960s theatres exploited this certification as viewers flocked to cinemas specifically to view the X certified and British produced *Carry On* films and the *Hammer Horrors* (Laurie, 2010:74). The Beatles craze had also begun and the Bond film franchise became an international sensation (Laurie, 2010:113). This led to a booming film industry in the UK as the US invested heavily in British cinema (Laurie, 2010:113-114). *Night of the Eagle* was released at the height of the Hammer Horrors film craze, though not a Hammer Films production (Laurie, 2010:79).

From 1957 to the mid to late sixties Britain experienced a transformation with regards to the church with many calling for a radical transformation of Christian beliefs brought on by the secularization of society (Brewitt-Taylor, 2018:1-4). Students called for abandonment of religious activities with an increased focus on radical politics and the urge to combat social injustices experienced globally (Brewitt-Taylor, 2018:3-5). These same radical politics would later alienate many of the movement's members causing it to disband by 1969 (Brewitt-Taylor, 2018:6; Castro & Harris, 2014:193; Tranmer, 2014:99).

The church and Christianity thus became less important in Britain in the sixties, suggesting that society was shrugging off the last vestiges of their Victorian sociocultural norms. This would be an erroneous assumption to make as the British shirking of Christianity did not imply that they would also cast off their Victorian norms. This is noticeable when one considers the content of British horror films produced at the time. Between 1957 and 1969 Hammer Studios produced 47 horror films with many containing nudity, gore, and violence (Adkinson, et al, 1994:33, 46, 85, 157-165). By the 1970s Hammer Studios films had created a new vampire film genre, the lesbian vampire film, which included a mix of sex, nudity, and gore, like *The Vampire Lovers* (1970), *Lust for a Vampire* (1971), and *Twins of Evil* (1971) (Adkinson, et al, 1994:82-85). *Night of the Eagle*, produced by Independent Artists, is tame in comparison to the Hammer films released at the time. Though some film studios in Britain were taking chances with the content of their films and society became less interested in

religious practices, there was no grand moral revolution as one would expect and many of the Victorian era norms remained unchanged (Brewitt-Taylor, 2018:13; Sandbrook, 2014:xiv-xv). In fact, British culture remained relatively unchanged between 1950 and the late 1960s (Brewitt-Taylor, 2018:13; Sandbrook, 2014:xiv).

Sam Brewitt-Taylor (2018:13) argues that during the 1960s most British families became economically affluent, but society did not change, nor did people want any changes in their British way of life. Affluence simply made life easier and that was all that the British people desired at the time (Brewitt-Taylor, 2018:13-14; Sandbrook, 2014:xiii). From 1930 to 1970 middle- and upper-class families flocked to the suburbs as it promised a safe environment to raise children, but also a stable and comfortable lifestyle (Dorling, 2018:1-2, 10). This can be linked to the suburban lives of the Taylors in *Night of the Eagle* as will be discussed in the next paragraphs.

As in *Black Sunday*, the evil witch, Flora, only appears in a few scenes, mainly in the beginning and the end of the film. She is old and unattractive, walks with a limp in her left leg, and is always seen wearing black clothing. Tansy, on the other hand, is a good witch – young, beautiful, and always wearing light-coloured clothing. She does have strange things hidden everywhere in the house though, like dead spiders in her dresser drawer. She also has a familiar, a cat, and spell books. Even though they greatly differ in appearance the witches share some characteristics. Firstly, they are utterly devoted to their husbands. It is only in their expression of this devotion where they differ. The second characteristic they share is that both women are suburban wives of upper-middle class men. Tansy, however, is a homemaker, while Flora is an academic. Both live comfortable suburban life which is due to their husbands' positions at the university. This could be less so in Flora's case, but we are not made privy to the details of her position. Her anger at Norman securing the position to which she had hoped her husband would be promoted does suggest that Flora lusts for more money and power.

In both instances Flora and Tansy use their supernatural abilities to better and sustain their suburban lifestyles. Tansy exerts supernatural control over her husband's agency by imbuing him with luck. Flora on the other hand does not use her abilities in the same way to assist her husband, Lindsay, but uses it to negate Norman's trajectory in society and his workplace. Her attempts are futile until Norman destroys all of Tansy's occult talismans and fetishes. Norman's success in life thus stems from the efforts of his wife, but if Tansy is unable to protect him, other women can bring him to ruin. Women who are able to wield power like Tansy or Flora, are not often found in Western films. This exchange of power between man and woman mirrors the British society's shirking off Victorian societal norms during the 1960s.

Another aspect to consider regarding the women and the suburban context is the perceived threat powerful women pose to Western suburban society. As noted, suburbia was (and still is) viewed as the ideal context to live in and raise a family. Suburbia represents a safe and comfortable lifestyle

where the inhabitants' needs are mostly met. A family that settles in a suburban area has room to have more children while also instilling these children with normative Western values. A woman like Flora causes disruptions in the suburban community as she harms others who have conformed to the community ideals. Tansy does the opposite and enables her husband without harming others who strive for the same ideals she and her husband have conformed to.

Flora as a threat is emphasised by her appearance and disability. As mentioned, there is a marked difference between the two witches and their appearance seems to be linked to their motivations or disposition. Many artists over the years have used physical characteristics to evoke a desired response from a viewer (Eisner, 2006:18-20). For instance, when one mentions the name 'Igor', most would conjure up an image of a hunched man with an asymmetrical face who is in the employ of a mad scientist. When we think of male heroes we automatically think of attractive young men with muscular bodies, like Chris Evans in the *Captain America* (2011). When we think of a princess, in the mind's eye we see a soft-spoken, young, thin and beautiful woman with long hair, like Clair Danes in *Stardust* (2007). These stereotypes are part and parcel of the artist, director, and writer's tools to illicit an immediate response from the viewer or reader. This way they do not need to waste time on frivolous explanations. At times these portrayals are also used to misdirect the viewer or reader to accomplish a desired effect.



Figure 7. Night of the Eagle. 1962. Directed by Sidney Hayers. [Film still from DVD] United Kingdom: StudioCanal.

In this film the physical appearance of the women has a very specific function, namely to assist the plot and to keep the viewer guessing. As mentioned, Flora (Figure 7), appears in very few scenes of the film and her physical appearance makes her seem unimportant and forgettable. In the viewer's mind she is thus never a threat. Tansy (Figure 8) on the other hand is beautiful and portrayed in some

scenes as slightly irrational and unhinged.³⁵ The magical paraphernalia hidden throughout the house suggests that Tansy has more to hide from Norman and she becomes severely distressed when he destroys these objects. The viewer assumes that Tansy is consciously or unconsciously responsible for the disastrous events surrounding Norman. Her beauty and prevalence make her a likely target since it places her on a higher social position in the eye of the viewer.



Figure 8. *Night of the Eagle*. 1962. Directed by Sidney Hayers. [Film still from DVD] United Kingdom: StudioCanal.

Flora also has a limp in her left leg which indicates a physical handicap. According to V.S. Ramachandran and William Hirstein (1999:27) symmetry is important from biological and evolutionary perspectives. An asymmetrical face, for instance, indicates parasitic infestation, while lopsided or asymmetrical growth in limbs might indicate prior disease or even infertility (Hirstein & Ramachandran, 1999:27). Noted film scholar Angela M. Smith makes a similar argument regarding the disabled in her book, *Hideous Progeny: Disability, Eugenics, and Classic Horror Cinema* (2012). She argues that individuals react negatively to disabilities due to the potential harm the disabled's genetic material can cause society (Smith, 2012:2). This has an influence on how characters are created and embodied in horror films to elicit the maximum response of terror from the audience (Smith, 2012:2-3). Flora is consequently disregarded by the audience and deemed biologically inferior, and though not a physical threat, a threat nonetheless to society due to her potential to produce disabled offspring. Keen viewers though would notice that when Tansy is possessed in one of the final acts of the film, she has a limp in her left leg. The limp thus further aids the plot by

³⁵ Like Katia in *Black Sunday*, Tansy is also embodied according to the irrational and immature feminine stereotype.

foreshadowing who might be responsible for all the events that occurred, consequently rewarding observant viewers.

Ramachandran, Hirstein, and Smith draw attention to reproduction and the survival of the human race. Reproduction plays a substantial role in the formation and sustainability of society and societal norms and vice versa, which is of importance for the new historicist (Brannigan, 1998:31; Greenblatt, 2000:130-131). In other words, society exists because of successful and sustainable reproduction. The children also need to be raised in a safe environment, like a suburban area, so that society can achieve longevity (Marwick, 2005:25). In order to do so society creates norms and values related to personal relationships to guide the daily lives of the individual that will make it more likely for them to reach reproductive age and then old age (Marwick, 2005:26). This is not unlike what Foucault suggests regarding the control of sex and sexuality to ensure the sustained growth of a capitalist society.

Humanity has not been conditioned by the media or patriarchy to seek beauty in a sexual partner. It is more complex. Western media and societal systems have been shaped by a biological need for successful procreation. The two witches in *Night of the Eagle* embody this concept very well, while also succeeding in effectively directing the viewer's suspicions. Flora is a threat to Western suburban society due to her disability. Her supernatural abilities make her an even great threat as she can entice a man to be enamoured with her through illusion or possession and thus reap his genetic material to give birth to more disabled children who will drain the resources of Western society.

The two witches reflect what British society experienced at the time. Tansy is the modern British lady who has been emancipated from strict religious doctrines due to her practicing witchcraft. She is a young and pretty homemaker, a doting wife, and submissive to her husband. Tansy uses her supernatural abilities to keep Norman successful which would enable them to have a normal middle-class British lifestyle. Flora on the other hand is a domineering and unattractive wife. Due to still present Victorian norms at the time, Flora dominating her husband as she is shown to do in the film indicates a disruption of said British social norms of the time. Similarly, she also creates various incidents which change and disrupt Tansy and Norman's blissful lives. Flora therefore reflects the sociocultural changes in British society in the early 1960s. Tansy and Norman are able to have children, meaning the British way of life endures for another generation, while Flora's disability and age makes it less likely that she would be able to bear children.

Flora being disabled and not having children could also suggest the witch's associations with misfortune. Often when misfortune was experienced in medieval Europe, witchcraft was blamed, as is still the case in rural Africa (Moro, 2018:5). In *Night of the Eagle*, Norman, makes it clear that misfortune, including his own, cannot be linked to the supernatural. By the end of the film though, he is a believer of the supernatural through his personal experience. The supernatural becomes a tool to relieve Norman of his hubris and to strengthen his bond with Tansy. In the previous paragraphs the

importance of procreation is discussed; the supernatural drives this even further by reminding Norman of Tansy's devotion, to accept her beliefs, and to reciprocate her feelings towards him by putting himself in danger's way to save her life. The end goal is procreation and since they do not have children yet, their survival and affection for one another might inevitably lead there.

It is also for the abovementioned reasons that Tansy uses her magic and talismans to keep Norman safe, healthy, and to further his career. Flora does the same for her husband, Lindsay, but directs her magic in a different direction, namely Norman, but not to create a future for her and Lindsay's unborn children. As mentioned, Flora is older and disabled, thus she is less likely to produce offspring. Tansy and Norman are victorious in the end, since they have a markedly higher chance of falling pregnant. Flora's supernatural abilities fail her, as a result of her attempts to destroy a fertile family.

There is still more to Flora that deserves discussion. Margaret Johnson, who plays the role of Flora Carr, was born in on August 10, 1918 (IMDB, 2000b). This means she would have been 44 years of age by the time of the film's production and 27 at the end of World War II. In a way this makes her part of the generation of women who joined the labour force to fill the void the men left by going to Europe to fight in the war (Rupp, 2004:53). This marked a change in the labour force of the time as women entered the workforce as blue collar workers (Bellou & Cardia, 2016:124). In an effort to draw women into the industrial manufacturing sector during WWII, advertising campaigns were launched which persuaded women to join the workforce, like the *Rosie the Riveter* poster campaign created by artist, Norman Rockwell (Welch, 2017:xix). These campaigns claimed emancipation for women, but the campaigns were insincere resulting in short-lived emancipation (Welch, 2017:xxi, 90, 92). Similar fictional women were created for the same reasons in other countries, like *Eve in Overalls* in the UK and *Ronnie, the Bren Gun Girl*, in Canada (Welch, 2017:91). This led to some believing that women were colonising traditionally male spaces in various fields, but most notably in the manufacturing industries (Goodman, 1998:288). As the war ended in 1945, millions of women lost their positions in the factories as these jobs went back to the returning men (Santana, 2017:1-2).

While many women lost their financial independence after the war, many women had made significant contributions during the war in various sectors, from publishing to manufacturing, that created new and positive perceptions of women in the workplace (Weatherhood, 2010:xi-xii, 1, 14, 41, 66). Though women were ousted from manufacturing and some other sectors, they had embedded themselves in the workforce and proven themselves as equal workers to men. Not being able after the war to work in the blue collar segment of the economy any longer, women entered the white collar fields in droves, a segment that grew in leaps and bounds, while the male-dominated manufacturing jobs stagnated (Weatherhood, 2010:265, 352). Not only did women gain economic independence, but sexual independence as well as they did not require the financial support of a man anymore. This

ostensibly led to resentment from some men towards women, which in turn resulted in an increase in divorce rates and alcoholism in men (Rotskoff, 2002:90-92; Weatherhood, 2010:353).³⁶

The above can all be linked to Flora. Margaret Johnson, who plays Flora (44), is only three years older than Janet Blair (41) who plays Tansy (IMDB, 2020c). From Figures 7 and 8 it seems as if Flora could be a decade older. Her hair is a never styled throughout the film and her wardrobe is not as stylish as Tansy's. This along with her less attractive appearance and limp draws the attention away from her, making Tansy the focus. Flora on the other hand is a professor at the same university where Norman works, while Tansy is a homemaker with no mention of any personal ambitions. She is thus not just a villain because of the harm she attempts to cause Norman and Tansy. She embodies the fear and loathing some men displayed and still display towards women who find success in their careers. It is not enough to make Flora just physically unattractive. Every effort is made to make her less than Tansy, even giving her a disability.

In this way similarities can be drawn between Flora Carr and any emancipated or powerful woman today. Powerful women, like Hilary Rodham Clinton, have been compared to a witch by the media and some in the general public (Teresa, 2019:7). Her laugh, or the Clinton cackle, as some refer to it, has been compared to the laugh/cackle of a witch (Lim, 2009:263; Teresa, 2019:7). Clinton had to endure contemptuous derision as comments were made about her physical appearance with some going as far as to call her "unwomanly" – further emphasising society's obsession with appearance (Lim, 2009:260; Teresa, 2019:7-8). According to Susan Bordo (2017b) in an article she wrote for the *Huffington Post*, Clinton's ambitions were seen as unnatural. Furthermore, she has been blamed since the 1990s as having extraordinary powers which led to a recession, the war in Iraq, and enabling her husband's infidelity as she was blamed for them all by the popular press and many conservatives (Bordo, 2017a; Bordo, 2017b:47-49).

Similarly, many women were persecuted from the fifteenth to eighteenth century for similar "crimes" related to their social power (Federici, 2012:25). According to Julia M. Garrett (2013:34) the witch was historically blamed and tried for sexual 'crimes', like causing impotence or taking part in sexual perversions. Additionally she argues that over time the focus shifted from the witch's ability to sexually tempt others to the witch's sexual excesses and the extent to which it is bound to the demonic (Garrett, 2013:34). A man's sexual organ was mostly viewed as potential victim of witchcraft while the female sexual organs were made the instrument of sexual transgression and a threat to the church (Garrett, 2013:34). Garret (2013:34) posits that much of the examinations of the witch's body during the early modern period were more a reflection of the inquisitors' sexual longings, which could be "ambivalently enjoyed, and then ritually purged through judicial process". In other words, the clergy

³⁶ There were also instances where men had turned to heavy drinking while at the front due to the heavy emotional toll of the war (Rotskoff, 2002:90-91)

could partake in sexual perversions without having to accept any blame and responsibility for enjoying these perversions.

In England specifically the more sensational narratives regarding the witch, like orgies with devils, and the violation of the dead were not as prominent as it was in Europe, but were still known to the general populace (Garret, 2013:36-37). Garret (2013:36-37) attributes this to two reasons, namely a lack of recorded incidence of such events, and that women were used to search the bodies of those believed to be witches – in most instances the female examiners were neighbours or family members. It was due to the above mentioned that the English were able to pursue a legitimate inquiry to expand upon their sexual knowledge (Garret, 2013:37). One has to remember that discussing sex and sexuality openly, especially with women in mind, was deemed as amoral (Garret, 2013:39). This is in line with Foucault's theories regarding the historic control of sexuality where sex or sexual fantasies could potentially negate the labour force's production. Discussions about witchcraft were in many instances thinly veiled inquiries related to sexual matters like anatomy, erotic drives, and non-heteronormative proclivities (Garret, 2013:39).

At the same time communal forms of agriculture disappeared and capitalism became institutionalised, so was there a need for labourers who would work from dusk till dawn and who were unfettered by the flights of fancy brought on by supernatural elements and superstitious belief (Federici, 2012:27). Witches promised luck and good fortune which could potentially negate the effort a labourer would put into his daily task of creating profits for his or her employer (Federici, 2012:27). The witch is an avatar for supernatural ability manifested in a mortal human body, meaning that she has power within society as she can grant you your fondest wishes. Instead of working hard and making a good monthly stipend to impress a potential sexual partner, the labourer simply works for two days and buys a potion from a witch that will bring his love to him without any further effort. Therefore the witch gains profits that were earmarked for wealthy traders or statesmen. The witch also deprives these individuals from hard working employees. In this sense the witch is a threat to Western society and Western suburbia as capitalist goals become irrelevant due to the witch's ability to grant wishes through supernatural means. The witch and her ability to subvert through sex are thus made the enemy or ridiculed by Western power structures.

Flora's position of power runs parallel with Hilary Clinton's position of power as both women are villainized by some in Western society. Flora's physical appearance is meant to negate her successful career as a professor. Her appearance mirrors her "unattractive" domination of men. An attractive or beautiful woman, like Tansy, is perceived as less threatening to men (Jeffries, 2005:9). Women who reject beautification processes like dressing well, having their hair done, applying makeup, wearing high heels, or having cosmetic surgery are often met with resentment from men and are labelled as "ugly", "unable to get a man", "loose", "disreputable, unnatural and threatening to the social fabric"

(Jeffries, 2005:32). The effort and pain a woman will endure to make herself visually pleasurable for a man is proportionately linked to her degree of submission to a man (Jeffries, 2005:32). The powerful domineering woman is therefore perceived as a threat to Western society. If she is not ostracised and ridiculed by the Apollonian – a form of control – then other women might follow her example and more women would gain power. Women would become independent, laugh loudly and out of turn, dress the way they want, and not submit to sex with their husbands upon demand. She thus becomes a witch in the mind of staunch patriarchs as she threatens their ideal society and cultural values.

Female sexuality and the feminine ideal can often be found to take centre stage in American politics, sometimes in less obvious ways than their choice in political leaders. A mainstay in US iconography is the bald eagle and it is also linked to a women's place within American society.

A giant stone eagle attacks Norman in *Night of the Eagle*. The eagle is often utilised in Western society as political symbol. The Romans used it in their military campaigns as did the German Nazis and it seems to have become synonymous with conquerors or great military might (Breining, 2008:16, 25; Goodrick-Clark, 2004:145). The United States of America still uses it and it is often found on political posters and in celebration of American values. The bald eagle became the USAs national emblem in 1782 as a symbol of freedom and courage (Breining, 2008:26) This, however, did not spare the bald eagle from being listed as an endangered species for decades during the early twentieth century. By 1963 (a year after *Night of the Eagle's* theatrical release) there were only 500 breeding pairs left in the US (Breining, 2008:16). A great North American success story followed, however, as many citizens, along with government and non-profit groups from the mid-1960s to 2007 brought it back from near extinction to 10,000 breeding pairs (Breining, 2008:10). The campaign mirrors the American post-war family ideal of rebuilding what was lost and cultural perseverance as will be discussed. It also links to the aforementioned role of procreation to sustain the continuation of the Western sociocultural lifestyle.

In Nazi Germany however the eagle was the emblem of the Aryans, an occult and militant symbol used along with two others: primal fire and the sun (Goodrick-Clark, 2004:145). The eagle, like the mythical phoenix, signified death and rebirth to the Germans (Goodrick-Clark, 2004:145). Nazi paraphernalia from World War II prominently feature occult symbols, though whether this had some magical purpose remains unclear yet is widely speculated upon (Black & Kurlander, 2015:1). Films, like *Hellboy* (2004) and *Indiana Jones: Raiders of the lost ark* (1981), and games like *Wolfenstein* (2009), feature these same occult symbols in relation to Nazis, making the Nazis seem far more mysterious, diabolical and even Satanic.

The Nazi and US symbolism of the eagle are connected though. With the end of the Depression and World War II, American and British society could afford to settle into nuclear families and produce offspring (Brewitt-Taylor, 2018:13, Connery & Spillers, 2009:96; Marcus, 2004:19). The nuclear

family was of national and political importance in the post-World War II era, since countries had to rebuild their economies and replace the loss of life they experienced at the hands of the German Reich (Marcus, 2004:3, 40; Moser & Gosse, 2003:11, 69-71). This became especially important during the sixties when divorce rates were increasing, sexual practices and the right of women and minorities changed, and a decline in general morality was on the increase (Marcus, 2004:40; Moser & Gosse, 2003:12, 19, 195, 202). All of these were perceived as threats to the nuclear family and thus to economic and political stability, something that is still experienced in society to this day (Marcus, 2004:40; Moser & Gosse, 2003:202, 209, 229).

The eagle in *Night of the Eagle* becomes something more than just a magical creature out to destroy Norman. The eagle can be seen as representing or suggesting both imminent destruction at the hands of foreigners while at the same time also symbolising the idealised Western way of life pushing a man towards a heterosexual relationship in the hope that children will be produced. Society needs children to perpetuate societal ideas which will lead to economic growth and the spread of these ideas and norms. Tansy's magic derived from West Africa, or the *other*, is not at odds with these ideals and is thus acceptable within the scope of Western ideals. Similarly, Flora does not perish because she uses the supernatural, but because she represents a threat to Western society's sustainability and growth.

Dionysian and cinematic ripples in *Night of the Eagle*

Night of the Eagle contains, like the previously discussed *Black Sunday*, many similarities to the Dionysian, and features a few of the tropes established in *Häxan*. With the socio-historical context of the film thoroughly discussed I discuss the Dionysian and cinematic influence found in the film in the section below.

In *Häxan* the witches are depicted in two ways: The young, sexually available and less powerful witch and the old, decrepit, and powerful witch. Tansy and Flora are markedly different from the witches in *Häxan*. Tansy is played by a 41 year old actress, while Flora is played by a 44 year old actress. Tansy looks slightly younger than 41, while Flora looks much older. Based on appearances one would expect Flora to have more powerful supernatural abilities than Tansy, yet Tansy's magic is able to keep Flora's magic at bay without incident until Norman destroys her talismans. This is a marked departure from the witches in *Häxan*. Flora perpetuates the trope of the old and limping hag, while Tansy deviates from the witches in *Häxan* and falls somewhere between the old and the young witch with powers equal to or better than the old hag's. Two of Bloom's revisionary ratios seem to be relevant with regards to Tansy's age and appearance.

Tansy's abilities and power present to the viewer a model of the witch where an unpredictable turn (*clinamen*) is made as she is an older woman who appears much younger than she is. The second of

Bloom's revisionary theories that can be applied to Tansy is *tesserae*, as tokens of recognition are found within the character. Tansy's youthfulness is emphasised by her appearance while the way Norman speaks to her suggests that he views her as irrational and immature. She is also shown to be anxious and overly emotional, further suggesting that she is not mature. Her youthfulness and immaturity are therefore the tokens of recognition associated with her character as a young witch. As the film progresses however the viewer realizes that Tansy is a powerful and intelligent witch who can take care of herself.

Tansy's emotional and irrational response in some instances suggests the Dionysian. Paglia (2001:18) states that Dionysus represents turbulent and unconstrained emotions. Norman attempts to exert Apollonian control over Tansy by forcing her to reject her talismans and her practice of witchcraft. By doing so Norman (an avatar for Apollo) establishes boundaries for Tansy's actions and agency – in other words, he attempts to confine the fluidity of a woman by forcing her to submit to rationality.

Tansy is linked to nature on various levels which connects her to the witches and tropes found in *Häxan*. For instance, most of the talismans and fetishes which Norman seeks out in their home and destroys are objects found in nature. Some of the artefacts include dried herbs, insects and spiders, animal skulls, teeth and bones, and other large dried parts of plants and seed pods. She even has flasks containing soil samples from various graveyards. Dead things, or things associated with death, are shunned by Apollonian man and are controlled by words like 'putrid', 'rotting', and 'disgusting'. The disgust is simply a manifestation of Apollonian fear (Paglia, 2001:93). Norman's reaction towards these objects is masked by his stoicism and calls for rationality. He burns these objects not to save his wife, but because of the threat it poses not only to him and his relationship with Tansy, but also suburban life as a whole.

Another way in which Tansy and Flora are connected to nature is through their names. Flora was the Roman goddess of flowering plants, budding fruit, spring, and youth (Daly, 2004:51; De Vaan 2008:227-228; Dixon-Kennedy, 1998:134). In Greece she was originally known as Chloris (Falkner, 2020:267). She was one of three goddesses which represented nature (Daly, 2004:51). The other two goddesses are Ceres (originally the Greek Goddess Demeter), the goddess of corn, grains and earth, and Tellus (Roman equivalent of the Greek goddess Gaia), a fertility goddess (Daly, 2004:29, 51, 53, 123; Dixon-Kennedy, 1998:83). Interestingly all three of the deities were referred to as goddesses of the dead with Tellus as their queen (Daly, 2004:123). Tellus was also born out of Chaos, the unending expanse that preceded the cosmos (Dixon-Kennery, 1998:138). This links her to the Dionysian chaos of the primordial substances that everything originated from. These three goddesses resemble the trio, or coven of witches, frequently found in literature, like the Weird Sisters in Shakespeare's *Macbeth*. The trio of witches are discussed in more detail in a later chapter. It should be noted that this is an interesting example of Levinson's theory regarding a text's ability to resonate through time and how it

changes with each subsequent use to mirror the sociocultural. In every instance Flora represents nature and death, but in one she is a Greek goddess, while in another she is a witch in a film. The Greek Pantheon is not worshipped anymore, meaning that the archetype she represents is not as recognisable anymore. By making her a witch she becomes recognisable without the film makers having to resort to lengthy expositions. Interestingly she is now made a villain as Christianity has replaced other older European belief systems, in other words, she is reframed to suit the current religious zeitgeist where that which is not aligned with Christianity is automatically linked with the agnostic, anti-Christian or Satanic.

Tansy's name seems to be derived from the common tansy flower. Tansies are found all over Europe, the United Kingdom, and much of the United States of America (LeCain, Mangold, & Shelley, 2019:2). The ancient Greeks cultivated tansies for medicinal use and it was used for many centuries to treat gout, fever, sunburn, rheumatism, digestive problems, and intestinal worms (Mitich, 1992:242; Watts, 2007:377). In small doses it was believed to prevent miscarriages and even to enhance infertility, while larger doses were frequently used to induce abortions (LeCain, Mangold, & Shelley, 2019:2; Mitich, 1992:242; Watts, 2007:376-377). Tansies are to this day extensively used as companion plants as the oil found within them repel various pests and insects (LeCain, Mangold, & Shelley, 2019:2). It is for this reason that it was also extensively used in the Western world until fairly recently in coffins and wreaths for the dead as it was used to embalm and preserve the dead (Mitich, 1992:242; Watts, 2007:378). Foliage from the tansy plant was similarly used by African colonials to preserve meat and other perishables (LeCain, Mangold, & Shelley, 2019:2; Watts, 2007:376).

The name *tansy* originated from the Latin word *tanacetum* and the Greek *athanasia* which both translate to *immortal* or *undying* (Fisher, 2017:915; Watts, 2007:376). The tansy similarly symbolises immortality in paintings and literature due to its healing and insect-repellent properties, but also due to the flowers' longevity and resistance to withering (Fisher, 2017:915; Watts, 2007:376). Tansies were also frequently used as an ingredient in sweet desserts, puddings, and custards in Europe and the United Kingdom (Watts, 2007:377).

Parallels can be drawn between Tansy and the tansy plant. Like the plant, Tansy protects Norman and looks after his health. She is different enough from Norman to compliment him as a companion like companion plants often do. Some types of companion plants, for instance, increase the amount of nitrogen in soil, making it more hospitable for plants that require soil rich in nitrogen. By being a markedly different witch from the norm, by being a good witch who uses her abilities to assist her husband, Tansy is not much different from the aforementioned companion plants as she gives Norman an advantage above his peers. In a way one could also argue that Norman becomes almost immortal due to Tansy's interventions. Lastly, Tansy's personality in *Night of the Eagle* resembles the sweet

puddings and desserts tansies were used in. She is kind, gentle, and pleasant towards Norman – all attributes of what one would associate with a *sweet person*.

Tansy breaks away from the commonly held notion of the evil witch. There are also other ways in which the witch has evolved and changed in *Night of the Eagle*. Tansy, though beautiful and youthful, is never sexualised in the film. She also does not conform to the various witch tropes I list in the *Häxan* chapter as her power is not linked to her appearance. She is powerful and has extensive knowledge of the supernatural without being old and decrepit. She does however conform to the trope of surrounding herself with dead and unclean things, like dead spiders and animal skulls and bones. I find that these objects simply link her power to the Dionysian. Interestingly, she does not seem to find these objects disgusting or repulsive which further deepens the connection with the Dionysian. Even more interesting, is that Norman seems to be bothered more by her belief in the supernatural than the objects themselves. He seems to perceive them as no different from any other household object. His aversion has more to do with what they represent and how they might be influencing Tansy's state of mind.

As mentioned in this film's literature review, some scholars, including myself, view the exclusion of Britain's pagan past in *Night of the Eagle* (1922) as a missed opportunity. The witch trials reached the British Isles during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries but with much less sensationalism than in Europe. Ancient British pagans venerated nature and the heavenly bodies and took part in ceremonies and practices which were considered during the Middle Ages as witchcraft (Hutton, 2014:81, 373). In *Night of the Eagle* however it is made clear that Tansy's power originates from the Western African *obeah*. The writers of the film most likely chose to have the supernatural originate from Africa in an attempt to *other* Tansy and Flora's abilities – distancing these from the audience and making them more uncanny in the mind of the audience. As a person born and raised in an African context, I can see why this choice was made. If I made a film in South Africa about witches I would also choose the supernatural to originate from somewhere other than Africa as it would make it more mysterious to local viewers. My view might seem to some as being out of touch with current post-colonial sensibilities as it could be interpreted as *othering*. This is not, however, what I mean by making the foreign exotic. I have a deep appreciation for cultures other than my own especially when it is accurately portrayed in film. By adding accurate portrayals of other cultures we can learn much of them while at the same time adding a layer of the unknown to the narrative. The current sociocultural leanings suggest a link between postcolonial *othering* and the exotification of that which is not white European – in other words negative associations are made. I do not agree with this line of argumentation as I believe that it is not always a case of appropriation for exploitation. Mel Gibson's *Apocalypto* (2006) is a prime example of this where a foreign culture is accurately portrayed in an adventure genre film. The film is exciting not because a foreign culture is exploited, but because of their difference to European culture and the respect that was shown to the culture by the film makers

involved. I believe that society is at times overzealous in their attempts to police what is thought to be cultural appropriation and cultural exploitation. It is also true that the choice to have the witches' abilities originate from Africa could, and most likely did, also have emerged from a colonialist perspective where the emphasis is more on using the supernatural as a metaphor for people from Africa. Consider that Flora's motivations are sinister and that her target can be seen as the epitome of the Western civilised alpha male. Norman is intelligent, rational, successful, physically fit, and a devoted husband. Furthermore, he has carved out a stable home for him and his wife in suburbia. Flora is associated with the primitive, chaotic, pre-industrial African who seeks to destroy him. It is thus less about Flora and more about colonialist or racist attitudes. Britain saw a number of riots in the late 1950s and early 1960s due to rising anti-immigration sentiment where clashes occurred between white and non-white minorities (Bleich, 2003:36). Anti-immigration was closely associated with issues of race and racism at the time which led to reformation of many laws in Britain in 1965 (Bleich, 2003:36-37). Those who opposed immigration feared that absorbing non-whites would change the race and culture of British society while also burdening the white population (Bleich, 2003:38-39). This means that African people posed a threat to the homogenous British people of the time, especially if they infiltrated white suburbia. An easy way for this infiltration to occur is if bored and lonely housewives all started to practice *obeah*, thus creating the first avenue for infiltration to occur. This perceived threat would also then have an impact on the traditional familial unit as children would be raised in a culture where *obeah* is normal. This threat to the purity of the white race links with my fifth trope where the witch often serves as an adversary to the traditional family unit.

Another perpetuated trope found in *Night of the Eagle* is the witch as possessor. In one of the final scenes Flora possesses Tansy and attempts to use her to murder Norman with a kitchen knife. Like in *Häxan* and *Black Sunday* the witch uses her supernatural abilities from afar to possess others to carry out her bidding. This helps the witch to hide among others in a suburban setting without drawing suspicion to herself. Her ability as possessor can additionally be used to harm traditional family units. The power of possession or any other supernatural act usually also requires an exchange or a trade that the witch must fulfil. The audience is not made privy to the price Flora has to pay for cursing Norman, but the supernatural as found in *Night of the Eagle* does seem to adhere to these occult mechanics of fair trade. In order for Tansy to save Norman she needs to sacrifice herself by drowning in the ocean. This is interesting as it implies that she is required to submit her life-force to a primordial body of water from where all life is theorised to have evolved from. Dionysus is thus invoked as life returns to the primordial liquid in exchange for the life of another.

The final trope I found in the *Night of the Eagle* is the witch who uses her abilities to exact revenge on a man. As noted earlier in the chapter, Flora does not use her supernatural abilities to assist her husband, Lindsay, nor is this ever mentioned or alluded to, even though she has the ability to do for her husband what Tansy has done for Norman. Flora thus uses her power exclusively to harm Norman

and the traditional familial unit that Norman's family can potentially become. This is another manifestation of the Dionysian. Paglia (2001:96) says: "Dionysus is energy unbound, mad, callous, destructive, wasteful." Flora has power unbound but also wastes it on revenge when she could be improving her own husband's position in society. She is also cruel, vicious, and destructive – everything that Paglia associates with Dionysus. When one considers Flora's position in the film it becomes apparent that Tansy, though a witch, is Apollonian. Paglia (2001:96-97) says that the Apollonian is: "...law, history, tradition, the dignity and safety of custom and form." Tansy's actions and motivations mirror these sentiments. Norman is rational and he craves a safe and normal existence in the suburbs. Tansy fulfils his desires through the use of the supernatural. She goes as far as nearly killing herself to help her husband maintain this course of health and suburban bliss. Her actions however have a surprising side-effect as Norman becomes a believer in the supernatural and his wife's abilities by the end of the film. The witch and *obeah* or the *other* successfully infiltrates Western society in the film, but not through malice and vengeance, but based on love and care.

THE WITCHES (1966)

Background

Cyril Frankel's *The Witches* (1966) is another exploration of the tropes and themes we find in *Häxan*. The physical appearance of the witch and her threat to societal norms and society in general are again central. The film was produced in England by the infamous horror film studio, Hammer Film Productions, which by 1966 had produced their hundredth film, *One Million Years B.C.* (1966) (Hunter, 1995:43). It was also one of seven horror films that Hammer Film Productions released that same year and the only film they ever released containing a female witch (Hunter, 1995:163).³⁷

In this production we find Gwen Mayfield (Joan Fontaine) fleeing from Africa after she has had an encounter with African witchcraft. Stephanie Bax (Kay Walsh), a middle-aged famous journalist, and her brother, Reverend Alan Bax hires Gwen as the new school teacher in the village of Heddaby. Unbeknownst to Gwen, Stephanie is the head of a coven of witches – or more accurately, town's people who she enslaved to do her bidding. Stephanie is only revealed a witch in the last third of the film as are her motives revealed. Similarly, it is revealed at the same time that Alan is not really a reverend. He pretends to be a reverend to ward off Stephanie's influence. Stephanie's end goal is to sacrifice the young fourteen year old virgin, Linda Rigg (Ingrid Boulting), in exchange for youth and an extended life. Gwen foils Stephanie's plans by intervening at the very last moment before Stephanie plunges a knife into Linda's comatose body by soiling the ceremony. She does so by cutting her hand and rubbing blood from her hand onto Stephanie's clothing. This results in Stephanie's immediate demise, releasing the villagers from her spell of possession.

Literature Review

Not much is available regarding scholarly input related to *The Witches* and the film is mostly referred to in passing or as a comparison to other more lauded films like *Witchfinder General* (1968), *Curse of the Crimson Altar* (1968), and *The Wicker Man* (1973) (Hunt, 2001:83). All these films had a similar setting, namely the rural English countryside, which is also why they are frequently mentioned together. There is one marked difference between the latter three films and *The Witches*, namely that sex and the occult are not intertwined in *The Witches*.

Where *Night of the Eagle* features witches living in secret in a typical English suburban neighbourhood, *The Witches* shows us a wealthy and powerful witch residing in the countryside with the local villagers as her servants. Stephanie Bax, along with her brother, Alan, inherited the old

³⁷ After an exhaustive search through the entire Hammer Films Productions filmography I found *The Witches* to be the only film Hammer produced to feature a female witch.

family mansion and accumulated wealth from their father. Similar contexts are found in *Curse of the Crimson Altar* (1968) and *The Wicker Man* where wealthy land owners wield considerable amounts of power and arcane knowledge over lower class villagers. Stephanie not only has wealth inherited from her father, but is also a self-made woman with her prestige and infamy as a well-known journalist. This places her in a higher socio-economic sphere than the villagers and her brother. Alan Bax is later revealed as pretending to be a reverend – an elaborate ruse to protect himself from Stephanie’s sinister magics. The witch in *The Witches* is a departure from the aging witch who lives in squalor in the woods. Stephanie lives in luxury in a mansion and keeps the villagers in tow by supernatural means. This reframing of the witch can be described along the lines of Bloom’s *tesserae* as the recognisable old witch is reframed with new elements.

The small town setting with the inhabitants participating in a malevolent conspiracy is a trope we frequently find in horror literature. Some well-known examples are Nathaniel Hawthorne’s *Young Goodman Brown* (1835), H.P. Lovecraft’s *The Shadow over Innsmouth*, Jack Finney’s *Invasion of the Body Snatchers* (1955), David Pinner’s *Ritual* (1967), and Stephen King’s *Tommyknockers* (1987). Interestingly all of these novels have been adapted into films.

According to John Langan (2007:540) the involvement of many villagers in something like a cult or ritual, symbolises various societal issues, like the universality of sin and how easily it can gain a foothold in any society. The entire town’s willingness to participate in such actions also suggests the latent prejudice and xenophobia found in all societies, but also the outsider-turned-protagonist’s own prejudices (Langan, 2007:540-541, 543). Langan (2007:546) further states that the small town in horror narratives “represent the site of collective secrecy, of monstrosity metaphysical or physical, and of atavism ritual and/or genetic”. In other words the small town horror story perpetuates societal ills in both psychological and biological form bolstered by a sense of community and collectivism. The small town or rural village is a point of origin where the *other* not only gains entry into western society, but infiltrates it in secret. Where the witches in *Night of the Eagle* had to contend with suburbia and hide in small numbers among others, in *The Witches* the whole town had already been infiltrated by a woman in the guise of the Apollonian.

We also have to consider the prejudices that exist in the West between those in metropolitan and rural societies. It is not uncommon to find people from the city speaking ill of those living in a small town or vice versa. Those from the city often view individuals from more rural settings as old fashioned or dim-witted, while the rural individual views the city-dweller to be greedy and without moral fibre. Stephanie in *The Witches* seems more cosmopolitan and well-travelled thus she represents the Apollonian, while the villagers are for the most part under her spell. This would not be a problem if it was for Stephanie’s knowledge and use of the occult. Her disguise is two-fold in the sense that she is a witch hiding behind an Apollonian mask who is slowly infiltrating the English countryside by

building an army of followers. Her followers can easily infiltrate a city due to their non-threatening status as 'lowly' villagers, which further increasing Stephanie's threat to western ideology. The imagined threat in *The Witches* can be described as a threat to the authenticity of a society and the societal forces that can lead to the fall of this authenticity.

Peter Hutchings (2004:35-36) links *The Witches*'s rural setting to society's fascination with alternative lifestyles. He states (Hutchings, 2004:36): "The verdant countryside becomes a residuum of old beliefs that have survived the modernization and urbanization of British society and which in various ways challenge modern social norms."

In other words, the contemporary rural context of the time we find in *The Witches* is a reminder of what was once the societal norm in England. The villagers challenge modern societal norms by giving the viewer a different perspective of what society can be. This idealistic life in the country can be easily shattered by a woman who is wise to the ways of modern society, suggesting that those who live in the country are ill-equipped to deal with such a minor threat. A western woman, a representative of the modern western world, like Gwen, is the only one who is able to overcome this threat.

From the above it seems that the tensions between socio-economic structures are at the heart *The Witches*. This is further suggested by the obvious colonial links that are established in the film. Paul Cowdell (2019:310, 311, 317) draws similar comparisons and argues that the opening scene of *The Witches* where Gwen flees from Africa due to an encounter with African witchcraft, establishes witchcraft as African in the mind of the viewer, while simultaneously separating witchcraft from European society. By establishing this link the English villagers are linked to the savage and primitive and regarded by the audience as *other*, and are consequently isolated from the urban world by using a small rural village as a setting (Cowdell, 2019:311).

Germaine Chloe Buckley (2013:28-29) notes that as soon as the witch, or female monster, is vanquished in *The Witches*, Heddaby becomes more economically active with a new supermarket opening in the village. Stephanie's defeat at Gwen's hands changes the village from the primitive and savage to an extension of the modern western society, and Apollonian social order is restored/established. Buckley (2013:29) argues that Stephanie's demise perpetuates the nonsensical fear of a powerful woman who intrudes on the male-dominated power structures of the Western world and who is then punished for her intrusion. Gwen understands her place in the western society and works to perpetuate western societal ideals. Because she also originates from a modern English society she is an appropriate protagonist as she does not threaten the masculine western ideal, but she also serves as an example to other western women. A powerful woman who does not serve western ideals is turned into a monster, as the Medusa insignia on Stephanie's robes label her in her final scenes when she dies.

Xavier Aldana Reyes (2020:394) discusses *The Witches* in a single paragraph and says that Stephanie perpetuates the monster-female agency narrative where the supernatural is used to aid a woman's agency. In *The Witches* Stephanie tells Gwen that witchcraft is a "sex thing" that women indulge in due to the loss of agency and power they experience as they grow older. By extending her life and becoming young and beautiful again, Stephanie regains her lost power and agency.

Teresa Castro's article in *Frame Cinema Journal* (2019) echoes much of what is outlined in the above paragraphs. She draws similar conclusions regarding powerful women and how they are turned into monsters in film (Castro, 2019). She also notes the penchant of equating the supernatural with the African in films like *The Witches* and the aforementioned *Night of the Eagle*. Castro (2019) argues that both *The Witches* and *Night of the Eagle* perpetuate the stereotypical witch who is old and preys on virgins/children. These witches are never painted in a positive light and, like the witches in *Häxan*, are portrayed as hysterical or psychologically unsound (Castro, 2019).

Dionysian and cinematic ripples in *The Witches*

Stephanie Bax conforms in various instances to the witch stereotype established in *Häxan*, but there are also marked differences. As mentioned in the literature review, Stephanie Bax is different from the forest-dwelling witch due to her Apollonian western lifestyle. There are other ways in which Stephanie is further separated from the stereotypical witch. Hunt (2001:86, 92) notes that Stephanie insists that her magic is no less different from science and that she has a transcendent will – her study of old witchcraft tomes is more academic than the old witchcraft religion that Linda Rigg's grandmother is said to practice in the film. This is further evidence of Bloom's *tesserae* as the recognisable magic originates from academic study, which is more in league with the Apollonian than the Dionysian. As mentioned in previous chapters, the act of naming and defining phenomena in nature is Apollonian as it is an attempt to subvert and limit nature. Stephanie employs the Apollonian to subvert and control the supernatural as a means to extend her own life. Gwen is also an academic, but an academic more suited to patriarchy. As a school teacher Gwen's academic prowess is relegated to the adolescent school yard and she makes no attempt to lift herself from this position. Gwen represents the hysterical and the repressed who develops a phobia towards the occult after one interaction with it in Africa further emphasising her position in relation to a man.

As previously discussed, the cinematic witch is associated with tropes of female beauty and sexual availability. Both of these fall in the realm of physical appearance which is again central in *The Witches* like it is in the previously discussed films. Kay Walsh, the actress portraying Stephanie Bax (Figure 9), was 54 years old at the time the film was made (IMDB, 2020d), while Ingrid Boulting stars as a 14 year old Linda Rigg. Ingrid Boulting was 18 years old at the time of production, but she

does convince the viewer that she is 14 year old in the film due to her youthful appearance (IMDB, 2020e) (see Figure 10). One should also note that Boulting was a model and ballerina during the 1960s representing international cosmetics in advertisements. We thus have a beautiful young blonde woman who is the victim of a witch 40 years her senior who wants to steal her life force and youth.



Figure 9. The Witches. 1966. Directed by Cyril Frankel. [Film still from DVD] United Kingdom: StudioCanal.



Figure 10. The Witches. 1966. Directed by Cyril Frankel. [Film still from DVD] United Kingdom: StudioCanal.

Closely related to beauty and sexual availability is procreation. Stephanie puts Linda's paramour, Ronnie Dowsett, into a deep coma in order to keep Linda's virginity intact. Additionally, she drowns Ronnie's father after he confronts her about Ronnie's coma. Stephanie also never married, but lives alone with her brother, Alan, in the old family mansion which used to serve as a rectory for a church which stands in ruin on the same plot. Stephanie is an old spinster and out of her reproductive prime. All the above mentioned, links her to the anti-familial stereotypes frequently associated with the witch in horror films.



Figure 11. *The Witches*. 1966. Directed by Cyril Frankel. [Film still from DVD] United Kingdom: StudioCanal.

Gwen perpetuates the familial theme in the films. Gwen, the protagonist and aforementioned teacher, is played by the 49 year old, yet attractive, Joan Fontaine (Figure 11) who suffers no permanent harm in the film. This could be due to the motherly role she plays. Linda lives with her abusive grandmother and Gwen comes to her rescue on occasion as well as to other children. She is loving and kind towards everyone while also being a good teacher. In this capacity she serves as part of the idealised nuclear family and as Linda's surrogate mother. As mentioned in the chapter about *Night of the Eagle*, divorce rates and single parent households were becoming more common during the 1960s. Little could be done to stem the tide of this. Gwen's character, being a single yet motherly figure but also a representative of the Apollonian, is developed in such a way to embody the best and idealised version of a single parent family. Gwen is made to be a saviour of the nuclear family even though she is not part of one. Linda's biological parents are never mentioned in the film and she is shown to live

alone with her grandmother, suggesting that her parents are either deceased or not involved in her life. Her grandmother is revealed to be a cruel witch, though under supernatural control by Stephanie.

Children are at times raised by their grandparents, but this is not the western ideal. Joan Fontaine as Gwen is more suitable in the eyes of society, due to her being the right age to be a mother, but also because of her physical appearance and what she represents. Fontaine is one of the most revered actresses of the twentieth century after appearing in films such as Alfred Hitchcock's *Rebecca* (1940) and *Suspicion* (1941) (Pollardy, 2020). She was nominated for Academy Awards for both films and won one for her role in *Suspicion* (Pollardy, 2020). She was again nominated for her role in *The Constant Nymph* (1943) (Pollardy, 2020). Joan Fontaine was regarded at the time as one of the most beautiful women in Hollywood which means that she was not threatening to the audience – which is congruent with the audiences' expectations of beautiful women as discussed in the previous chapter (Bakker, 2008:316; Flander, 1978; TCM, 2020). As an attractive middle-aged woman and teacher of small children she was well-suited as mother to the due her non-threatening appearance but also due to her non-threatening vocation. A teacher of young children creates an image of the good, sweet, and wholesome within my mind, and undoubtedly within the minds of others. Becoming a teacher for that age group seems like an extension of motherhood, or making it a career for which you are rewarded financially. Gwen is thus a *super mother* who does not need a husband to care for and raise children, nor do the children have to be her own. In this way the film draws attention to her abilities as mother which have been fostered through her choice of vocation, while also being pleasurable to the male audience, making her less threatening as single mother. She is not unmarried because there is something "wrong" with her or because she is not attractive, but because she has not found the right man, making her a potential romantic partner in the imagination of the male audience. Furthermore, she protects a beautiful young girl who is on the verge of becoming a woman, another potential romantic or sexual partner in the eyes of the audience, who can become a mother herself. Stephanie thus attempts not just to rob Linda of a reproductive life, but also seeks to tear apart the familial bond between mother and daughter. Further evidence of her motivations is when she drowns Ronnie's father in the river, thus harming a nuclear family.

Stephanie paints a complex symbol of the Dionysian. At first it seems as if Stephanie might be opposed to the Dionysian, as Dionysus represents fertility, but it would be more accurate to argue that she opposes Apollonian structures that seek to control fertility through the nuclear family. The Apollonian seeks to control the Foucaultian boundaries of sex through marriage and the raising of children by limiting sexual excess and promiscuity. On the other hand Stephanie is concerned with Linda retaining her virginity as it is paramount for her spell. The virgin represents Apollonian purity making the virgin woman non-threatening to a man (Paglia, 2001:94). Stephanie does not however require Linda for sexual purposes as she wants to sacrifice her in exchange for youth and beauty. In other words, she does not seek to preserve Linda's virginity as a symbol of holy Apollonian chastity,

but wants to destroy it and feed of it to gain power. This is similar to Dionysian cult members who cannibalised others to gain power (Paglia, 2001:95). In this instance it is not physically eating Linda but the symbolic draining of her life force. This reinterpretation of cannibalism as a metaphysical feeding can be likened to Bloom's *tesserae* as the literal is changed to the symbolic.

Stephanie's supernatural abilities seem to be confined to breaking and/or bending the will and minds of others. She puts Ronnie into a coma and scares Gwen into having a mental breakdown. Gwen wakes up days later in a nursing home with no memory of ever being a teacher in Hebbady, but soon recovers. When Gwen defeats Stephanie at the end of the film, her coven seems to awaken from a mind control spell and wearily disperse from the sacrificial cave. Her supernatural ability becomes frightening to society, since her power could potentially subvert societal norms regarding family and procreation. The witch as mentioned in the introduction is fearsome because she hides amongst us, only revealing herself to us when it is far too late, which is what transpires in this film. In *The Witches* the witch possesses men, women, and children alike, making them do things they would not normally do. The possessed villagers are a threat to society, as it would mean that there are some who hide among us who secretly harbour alien sociocultural norms which could threaten the Western way of life. This possession has similar motivations to the possessions in *Häxan*, *Black Sunday* and *Night of the Eagle* where all these stem from a witch's selfish desires of self-interest.

Stephanie embodies the fear we have of those who live among us who are different from us – a wolf in sheep's clothing so to speak. She also embodies the external force, a scapegoat, who society would rather blame for the aberrant actions of those within their own society instead of acknowledging said society might be flawed. In the fifties to the late eighties this fear was embodied in the popular press by Soviet or communist agents who lived among us and pretended to be like us in an effort to destroy society from within.³⁸ As the cold war ended this fear did not recede, but was replaced by a fear of those who are different from us in other ways.³⁹ The idea of a 'hidden evil' among us that spreads discreetly reminds me of the media and society's initial reaction to the 1999 Columbine shooting in the USA. On 20 April 1999, Eric Harris and Dylan Klebold killed 12 students and one teacher (Brockel, 2019). The media and conservative individuals blamed heavy metal musicians and computer games for Harris and Klebold's actions (Berres, 2002:43-44; Catlin, 1999; Hammond & Hundley, 2020:63-64). It was the third most viewed and followed news event of 1999, and the seventh highest rated media event of the 1990s (Muschert, 2009:165). Glen W. Muschert (2009:164, 167) studied 683 news articles of the incident and found that most of the articles focussed on public reactions with the highest proportion of these reactions focussing on the causes for the shootings. According to various witnesses and news reports of the time both shooters were isolated loners who

³⁸ See chapter 7 on the eighties for more information regarding this.

³⁹ See chapter 8 regarding the nineties.

had a deep interest in the occult, and the so-called anti-Christian musician of the time, Marilyn Manson (Brockel, 2019). Most of this was later dispelled and the shooters were not bullied loners like many believed them to be (Brockel, 2019). It has been revealed that those killed were chosen at random without any forethought (Brockel, 2019). Harris's journals, which were only discovered much later, revealed that he just had a strong desire to kill people, including friends and strangers (Brockel, 2019). Harris and Klebold are a good example of those hidden in plain sight who might seek to dismantle western Apollonian structures like schools.

It makes sense that society would rather choose to believe that some external force like the supernatural or Marilyn Manson's music would possess two high school teenagers. It is far more comforting to have something to blame than to acknowledge that there are people hidden amongst us that would revel in the harm of others for no reason. Someone like Marilyn Manson embodies these societal fears, but does not necessarily entice others to destroy or question society. Marilyn Manson, like the witch, is made a scapegoat because of what they seem to represent and not what they actually do (D'Hont, 2017:1). For instance, Marilyn Manson is not a Satanist, nor is he evil; his music simply criticises American ideologies related to religion and the nuclear family (D'Hont, 2017:1-2). The witch functions in a similar way as she represents the same fears and tensions in society, but because she deviates from the norm she becomes more visible and an easy target for the inexplicable which can be anything from extreme weather conditions to individuals doing things that are perceived as not normal.

A final aspect to consider regarding possession is its similarities to drug addiction and how the youth was perceived by their conservative parents during the 1960s. During the 1960s Timothy Leary publicly declared that LSD and other hallucinogenic drugs were the way to happiness, freedom, creativity, and social awakening (Slack, 1974:1). Leary was so convinced of this that he formed his own religion in 1963 and went to 'war' with the US government in 1971 by requesting his followers to resort to violent acts to get their message across (Slack, 1974:1).

Leary was not the only person to promote change in society by challenging the status quo. By the mid-1960s many young people in both the US and the UK, especially students, were rebelling against capitalism, the war in Vietnam, and their parents through drug use, Beat culture, anti-government/establishment music, and student-led protests (Brewitt-Taylor, 2018:174; Strain, 2017:76, 78). Drug experimentation frequently went hand-in-hand with spiritualism and enabled the user to become more attuned with the esoteric and spiritual world that was free of capitalist and Christian constraints (Brewitt-Taylor, 2018:174). The protests mostly originated from dissatisfaction with the way governments and other power structures were dealing with sociocultural ills like racism and sexism (Brewitt-Taylor, 2018:21, 98-102, 192-193, 220-221). This formed a counter-culture that was recognised by their colourful clothing, laid back/shiftless lifestyle, and taste in music, fashion, and

recreational use of drugs (Gosse & Mosser, 2003:17; Strain, 2017:78). There is a misconception that many students in the sixties took part in drug-induced orgies and that everyone had long hair, but this was only a small portion of the younger population (Sandbrook, 2014:xiii; Strain, 2017:78). Ostensibly premarital sex, drug addiction, and a perceived lazy lifestyle threatened the societal conventions of the time. Parents were horrified that their children were buying records containing music created by African-Americans like Chuck Berry and Jimi Hendrix (Strain, 2016:24). These conservative parents had lived through World War II and the new Soviet threat was looming large in the minds of both Americans and the British (Brewitt-Taylor, 2018:19, 23; Gosse & Mosser, 2003:21). Their children not conforming to their conservative ways was of big concern since it threatened not just American values, but also those of many others around the globe (Gosse & Mosser, 2003:17; Klimke & Nolan, 2018:1). For instance, they feared that their society would end if their children elected a black Marxist as president (Dollinger, 2018:2, 51, 86, 132). At the same time British parents had similar reservations and feared for their children who were listening to the same music, using the same drugs, and enjoying the same sexual freedoms as their American peers (Morris, 2014:37, Tranmer, 2014:90).

As mentioned, the conservative parents of the 1960s wanted to conserve their way of life and their societal norms and values, while some of their children were rebelling against these norms and values. It is not far-fetched to assume that some paranoid parents believed their children were being brain-washed by their peers, that because their children were not bending to their wills then they must be influenced by outsiders or external sources, like drugs, drug pushers, rock stars, eastern spirituality, or Timothy Leary (Brewitt-Taylor, 2018:23; Chávez, 2018:164-165; Langland, 2018:21, 23). A nation of shiftless drug addicts could also potentially be indoctrinated and conquered by the Soviets. A generation of youths addicted to drugs would mean the Apollonian control is lost while Dionysian chaos would reign leading to the destruction of society.

This fear of possession by an external force is thus motivated by societal upheavals and events of the time, making them highly contextual. The witch possessing a young woman, a doctor, or a whole village can be seen in the same way, but as a metaphor of these contexts. Real fears are thus elicited from the audience through the witch's supernatural abilities.

Stephanie's level of supernatural ability is on par with the old witches in *Häxan* further preserving the trope that links the old age of a witch to power. Furthermore, the supernatural in *The Witches* seem to originate from primitive or pre-industrial pagan religions as described in the *Häxan* chapter. The only difference in *The Witches* is that Stephanie does not seem to surround herself with the dead or abhorrent which, could be argued, serves to uphold Apollonian appearances. Her ritual or satanic ceremony does however take place in a cave, drawing another parallel between the film and *Häxan*. Like in all the films discussed up to this point, the witch, Stephanie, is also at odds with the traditional

family unit and uses possession to rip families apart. She is also shown to be angry, isolated, and murderous, further linking Stephanie to the previously discussed malicious witches.

Concluding the witch of the 1960s

The witches found in *Black Sunday*, *Night of the Eagle*, and *The Witches* share various similarities. Throughout the 1960s we find that the witch's body and supernatural abilities are linked to deep-rooted societal fears regarding ageing, loss of identity and/or agency, the loss of societal norms and values, as well as the various unknown dangers lurking within (a changing) society.

The argument regarding agency is complex and very much related to the witch's supernatural abilities. Asa in *Black Sunday* simply wants a chance to live a life she was barred from in her own time. Flora in *Night of the Eagle* aims to get rid of her husband's rival so that she can enjoy the prestige, wealth, and power associated with a better position at a university. Stephanie in *The Witches* is much like Asa and yearns for youth and beauty. Both Asa and Stephanie seek agency for themselves, and are consequently more feminist than Flora who simply wishes to harm a man in order to assist another man, her husband.

Agency is also associated with the act of possession in all three films. When individuals are possessed by a witch, her victims lose their sense of self and agency. The cinematic witch in horror films is thus not just about the emancipation of a wrongfully persecuted woman (or the *other*), but also about controlling societal norms that stifle the individual and the resultant loss of agency that accompanies it. The cinematic witch is thus dynamic and plays the role of both victim and villain, but often within a context that challenges societal norms. In other ways the witch mirrors beauty norms as she attempts to regain her youth or immortality.

Good witches also exist in horror films and other forms of media, but they often use their abilities in the service of the patriarchal order, like Tansy in *Night of the Eagle*. This same witch made her way to sitcoms like *Bewitched* (1964-1972) and more recently in *Sabrina the Teenage Witch* (1996-2003). Hermione Granger and Ginny Weasley are also examples of the good witch as seen in the *Harry Potter* films series. These witches are similar in many ways. They are all young, beautiful, and heterosexual. They also often have vast power which is only ever indirectly alluded to and mostly used in the service of men. For instance, Hermione Granger is shown in the *Harry Potter* films to be much more adept at all the forms of wizardry taught at Hogwarts than her peers, yet she is mostly shown to assist Harry. Sex is also never an option for the good witch and she never mentions it or takes part in it. The good witch is wholesome and interested in family and using her abilities in the service of her family.

Where *Häxan* challenges the way sex is viewed through the lens of Victorian values and morals, *Black Sunday* questions society's obsession with youth and beauty. *Night of the Eagle* on the other hand does not challenge ideas regarding the nuclear family and simply seems to perpetuate it. *The Witches*, like *Black Sunday*, again questions society's obsession with youth and youthfulness, while at the same time, like *Night of the Eagle*, perpetuating western family ideals of the time. Interestingly Gwen and Linda forming a mother-daughter relationship in *The Witches* does not constitute a nuclear family, but a single parent family which was becoming much more prevalent in the 1960s (Marcus, 2004:40).

The body of the witch is also laced with clues regarding societal norms of the time in which the films were created. Old age has always been presented as a problem in films and the old is usually likened to evil, decay, or death, while youthfulness is associated with beauty. None of these films explicitly challenge ideas regarding physical beauty, though in a way they do draw attention to society's obsession with beauty. Although feminists would attribute this to the male gaze, it should be considered that biological and evolutionary processes have a major influence over the individual and this has an effect on societal norms and values as discussed in the *Black Sunday* section.

Beauty and youthfulness in this context seem to have more to do with procreation than male lust, except in the case of *Häxan*. There is also the matter of preservation or stalling change. We see this not only with the witches who attempt to reverse their old age, but also with regards to social change. When the individual's agency is undermined by possession or mind control, that individual's motivations change which has a larger impact on the fabric of society as this change could potentially spread to more individuals. This constitutes a threat to the societal status quo. In other words, even though the cinematic witch is acting in self-interest, she is changing and challenging reigning societal norms and values while also becoming a scapegoat or a martyr for deviant behaviour. This reflects western society as consisting of individuals who sometimes reject responsibility for their actions while also blaming others. It mirrors those in society today who seek external reasons for incidences of misfortune when there is no one or nothing to blame.

The witch and sex also seem to be linked during these eras and *Häxan*'s popularity amongst the Beat generation of the 1960s mirrors many individuals' need for sexual agency. Christensen's thinly veiled horror/pornographic film resonated with the youth of the time, though in edited form. Sex and procreation are also inseparable from one another, with the witch functioning as an avatar for both. Ironically the good witch stands for the nuclear family and wants to have children, yet she is isolated from any mention of sex.

Häxan established the tropes and conventions found in witch horror films, but *Black Sunday*, *Night of the Eagle*, and *The Witches* guaranteed that these tropes and conventions would remain intact for use in almost every other witch horror film that was yet to be produced. Subsequent films referenced the

same mythical and historic origins of the witch, while also challenging societal and filmic conventions regarding age, race, gender, and physical appearance. In all the films discussed so far the witch horror narratives shared various parallels with societal events and conventions, while also emulating the societal fears through the use of the supernatural.

The above paragraph links the analysis of the three films discussed thus far with Levinson's approach to New Historicism. Using Bloom's ratios of influence I was able to trace the ripple effect that Levinson proposes through the conventions that were established in *Häxan* as they reappeared in later films, albeit slightly changed or reframed. In almost each instance the changes made to the tropes mirrored or challenged sociocultural norms of the times and countries in which the films were produced contributing to our understanding of the past which is of great value to the New Historicist. Furthermore, by finding evidence of these tropes in other witch films validates my initial postulations regarding the identification of said tropes in *Häxan*.

The films discussed all gives us an idea of western 1960s societies and how these societies differed, but also their similarities even though the films contain fictional worlds and events. The sociocultural realities of the sixties manifest in these films through the witches' embodiments, their actions and motivations, but also how they use their supernatural abilities and to what end.

THE WITCH OF THE 1970s: SEX, VIOLENCE, AND DEATH

With this section I found many instances where *Häxan* reverberated through the witch horror film of the seventies especially with regards to the engagements between gender, power, and culture. Nearly a dozen witch horror films were produced between 1970 and 1979. The two horror films found in this chapter, 1972's *Jack's Wife* directed by George Romero and 1977's *Suspiria* by Dario Argento, were chosen specifically because of them being the most exemplary of the genre at the time. *Jack's Wife* produced in the USA, is an excellent example of the American exploitation film, while *Suspiria*, produced in Italy and Germany, is the most influential *giallo* film ever produced – both directors are lauded cult directors. The *giallo* and exploitation genres are discussed in more detail throughout this chapter. What is important however to note, especially from a New Historic perspectives, is that both these genres are explicitly bound to the seventies. Elements of exploitation and *giallo* still exist in film today, but to a far lesser degree and not as a genre.

Both films problematize sociocultural aspects related to gender, power, and culture in interesting ways. *Jack's Wife* considers the context of the suburban housewife in early seventies America where men were the breadwinners and women stayed at home and raised the children. The film introduces witchcraft into a suburban context and its effects on a bored and lonely woman who has is aimlessly drifting within the suburban context of the time.

Suspiria on the other hand is more concerned with cinematic techniques, like *mise-en-scène* and the use of stark colours to depict feminine power and evil, but it is also used to separate the male and female worlds from one another, which is interesting. The film additionally problematizes the link between women, power, and the abject in such a way that it becomes difficult to describe these elements as misogynist or not. The colours and *mise-en-scène* seem to make a spectacle of feminine power and oppression – which is what Scott Wilson alludes to when he suggests the role of the New Historicist which is to create financial and aesthetic capital by aestheticizing said spectacles.

In both films it is not just the socio-historic context that should be considered, but the historic context of the 1970s film industry itself. The films from this era were more influential to future filmmakers than those from the preceding decades, especially where content is concerned (Platz, 2012:528-531; Weiner, 2010:41). Hollywood film studios were still very much dominated by men at the time and in mainstream films women were generally still only cast in supporting roles (Platz, 2012:528; Zeisler, 2008:68). However, due to changes in the film industry in the late 1960s and early 1970s independent film studios became prominent and they produced more diverse films (Platz, 2012:528).

Exploitation films were independent productions made on small budgets which often contained lurid and graphic depictions of crime, violence, abortions, drug culture, and sexual violence with some of the films presented as thinly veiled educational productions (Miller, 2010:75; Weiner, 2010:41). The

exploitation film also contains sub-genres, like sexploitation (emphasis on sex and nudity like the Roger Corman films of the era), blacksploitation, which exploited black culture and gangs, and mondo films that were ‘documentaries’ created to shock the audience with brutal images as in *Faces of Death* (1978) (Goodall, 2010:245-246; McKendry, 2010:60, 70, 71). *Foxy Brown* (1974) is an example of a blacksploitation film with a black female lead (Pam Grier), while *Switchblade Sisters* (1975) has a young white female lead (Joanne Nail). Both films have been described as the first films ever produced where women actively control the plot and events of the film (Platz, 2012:528). One also gets the impression that the controversial scenes were more a reaction to the novelty filmmakers experienced in their newly found freedom to portray illicit material. Undoubtedly this was also a new experience for audience members. The way women were portrayed in these types of films was therefore more to do with profits than with what was socially permissible. The youth of the 1960s and their rock and roll lifestyles did however pave the way for this to happen, as seen in the previous chapter.

A Wikipedia search cross-referenced with IMDB revealed that the 1970s produced over 400 horror films, with most falling in the exploitation/sexploitation, slasher/torture, possession, rape/revenge, or vampire genres all generated by independent film studios (Wikipedia, 2020; Platz, 2012:528; Weiner, 2010:41; Zeisler, 2008:69). As stated, roughly a dozen films starring witches were produced during the period of 1970 to 1979 with some falling under the sexploitation genre, like *Virgin Witch* (1970). Sexploitation films featured numerous nude or sex scenes without it contributing to the narrative in any way, often in combination with violence or torture (McKendry, 2010:58; Platz, 2012:528-529). Some of these productions were often directed and produced by women with female leads, like the Doris Wishman films starring Chesty Morgan (McKendry, 2010:58-61, 63; Platz, 2012:528-529).

These films, though empowering for some men and women in the industry, did at times paint women as violent, deranged, hysterical, and overtly sexual, especially when produced and directed by men. Some have argued that this was due to the perceived threat of women gaining power after Second-wave feminism and the resultant fear-mongering ignorant media houses perpetuated (Platz, 2012:529; Zeisler, 2008:60-61, 64). The male-dominant media latched on to and exploited the idea that women would leave their husbands to start careers and decline to do their chores around the house, destabilizing the familial hierarchy (Zeisler, 2008:62-63).

The aforementioned IMDB search revealed that these independent horror movies mostly originated from two countries, namely the United States of America and Italy. *Jack's Wife* and *Suspiria* are very different in plot, production, and their portrayals of the witch. Both films are historically important for different reasons and have maintained a cult following over the years, indication their relevance to new generations over the last four decades. On a surface level *Jack's Wife* has a strong emphasis on sex and nudity, with the witch desiring nothing more but to quench her lust. *Suspiria* on the other

hand is more violent and gruesome than any of the films discussed up to this point, with the witches revelling in death and destruction. Sex, nudity, violence, and gruesome deaths would become prominent in horror films during the 1970s, but even more so in the 1980s. The following sections discuss sex, nudity, violence, and death in the seventies film context and what it means for the witch horror film and how it links back to the tropes and conventions established in *Häxan* which in turn originated from tensions between the Dionysian and the Apollonian.

JACK'S WIFE (1972)

Background

Jack's Wife (1972) was written and directed by George Romero who is widely regarded as the father of the zombie film based on his 1968 film *Night of the Living Dead* (Sharrett, 2017:140; Williams, 2011:xvi). Some scholars believe him to have had much greater influence on the horror film genre than any other director (Phillips, 2012:3; Sharrett, 2017:139, 141; Wood, 2003:102; Yakir, 1979:60). His films had the uncanny ability to subvert societal norms through the display of the *other* (Towlson, 2014:105, 108; Wood, 2003:102). Though Romero was already a well-known director at the time, *Jack's Wife*, also known as *Hungry Wives* and *Season of the Witch*, did very poorly financially due to distribution difficulties, and as a result is relatively unknown, even though it is regarded by some as one of the most radically feminist films ever made (Cutrone, Hacket, & Lebowitz, 1973:38; Sharrett, 2017:140; Towlson, 2014:126; Yakir, 1979:57). The film found a very small audience upon release and was subsequently recut and marketed as a soft-core porn film to recoup some of its budget (Sharrett, 2017:140; Williams, 2011:xii). Romero has commented in an interview that *Jack's Wife* was a parallel study of the occult and an upper-middle class suburban housewife who had everything she could possibly desire except a life (Yakir, 1979:57). Romero wanted to show the audience how the occult could potentially work within the mind of a person living in the then contemporary suburban setting of the early 1970s (Nicotero, 1973:19).

The plot is not overly complex and the film stars Jan White as Joan Mitchell, a 39 year old lonely, bored, and sexually frustrated suburban housewife. She dabbles in witchcraft and uses it to seduce her daughter's sex-partner and student-teacher, Gregg Williamson. Reoccurring visions and nightmares of a masked assailant who attempts to rape her prompts her to shoot her husband when he comes home early one evening. Shortly after these events she is inducted into a secret coven of witches and inherits all of her husband's wealth. After she is cleared of her husband's accidental death she attends a party where some of her friends notice her beauty and youthful appearance. Her appearance has also changed in other ways and she seems more confident and at ease with herself. When someone questions her about her transformed appearance she responds that it is because she is a witch. The film ends with this revelation as Joan's confidence seems to suddenly ebb away. As her confident façade melts away and the camera zooms in on her face, she overhears someone referring to her as Jack's wife.

The upper-middle class suburban context of 1972 which Joan found herself in reminds me of Richard Nixon's 'Great Silent Majority' address to the American public on the 3rd of November 1969. America was severely polarised at the end of the sixties and the start of the seventies due to the then ongoing war in Vietnam (Laderman, 2020:95). The majority of Americans at the time were against

the Vietnam War, but simultaneously most of these same Americans were firmly against public protests or displays of resistance against the government (Laderman, 2020:95). Nixon referred to these individuals as the ‘Great Silent Majority’ (Laderman, 2020:95). According to Scott Laderman (2020:96) the silent majority implied “that the radicalism that seemed to be everywhere by late 1969 was not actually representative and that those Americans who were ‘silent’ had in fact been silenced.” The protesting and ‘shouting’ left were blamed for silencing the rest of America (Laderman, 2020:95-96).

The silent Americans were described as white, Christian, conservative, and middle to upper class families (Laderman, 2020:96). These people conformed to societal norms, had sober habits, were patriots of high moral standing, and respected power structures (Laderman, 2020:96).

The above describes the sociocultural context of the American suburbia in which we find Joan. She lives a comfortable conservative life, but this life stifles her. She is bored, sexually frustrated, and uses medication to dull her senses. She is also unable to voice her discontent as that would align her with the protesting left leading to stigma and isolation. Interestingly, by practicing witchcraft she finds her voice and gains agency and autonomy. Witchcraft reframes her protest and makes it palatable for her peers as we see in the final scene of the film where she reveals that she is a witch. Instead of being shunned by her friends, their admiration for her grows. In other words, in this instance witchcraft reframes a challenge to patriarchal power structures as acceptable and even worth revering. In the films discussed up to this point the witch is shown to challenge patriarchal power structures resulting in extreme forms of isolation like death. In *Jack’s Wife* an unpredictable change is made in this regard, making it an example not only of Bloom’s *clinamen* but also of a feminist film. The film is not without problems however, and distributors and the viewing public at the time were unable to identify the socio-political statements the film was aiming to make, as is discussed in the sections below.

Literature review

Much has been written about George A. Romero’s oeuvre, yet considerably less about *Jack’s Wife*, though it is regarded as an early example of feminist films. Romero mentioned in a 1973 interview with *Cinemafantastique*’s Sam Nicotero that he believes that *Jack’s Wife* is a better film than his *Night of the Living Dead* (1968) and *The Crazies* (1973) (Nicotero, 1973:22).

Romero has stated that the two sex scenes in *Jack’s Wife* were not intended to titillate, nor was the film an exploration of the pornographic film genre (Nicotero, 1973:27; Yakir, 1979:57). The sex and scenes of nudity had a definite meaning for him and were deliberate in an effort to give the audience a

glimpse of Joan's private life (Nicotero, 1973:27). Romero also mentioned that the X certification the film received in 1973 aggravated him deeply as it grouped his film with "meaningless pornography" (Nicotero, 1973:27). He wanted the film to be an intelligent commentary on the suburban housewife of the time (Nicotero, 1973:29). *Jack's Wife* was too complex for the film distributors at the time, resulting in a new edit of the film as well as a new title, *Hungry Wives* (Cutrone, Hacket, & Lebowitz, 1973:37, 38). A new film campaign was also launched for the film by the distribution agents reframing it as a soft-core erotic film, much to Romero's chagrin (Cutrone, Hacket, & Lebowitz, 1973:38; Yakir, 1979:57).

The idea for *Jack's Wife* came to Romero while researching a project for a public television show in Pittsburgh (Lippe, Williams, & Wood, 1979:61). He said: "A lot of the people surrounding me there were these suburban women. Feminist awareness was beginning. These all came together when I did the script." (Lippe, Williams, & Wood, 1979:61). According to Romero the title of the film suggests what is at the heart of the film, namely that Joan is nobody to the world, in her own right, and that she is simply Jack's wife (Lippe, Williams, & Wood, 1979:62).

Tony Williams's *The Cinema of George A. Romero: Knight of the Living Dead* (2015) is lauded by some as the most thorough study of Romero's oeuvre (Sharrett, 2017:141). It is also one of two more recent available academic studies I could find in which an in-depth analysis of *Jack's Wife* is carried out. Tony Williams (2015:1) explicitly mentions in his introduction for the abovementioned text that Romero's work can only be fully understood by analysing his films through a socio-historical lens and how these circumstances affected Romero's films from the 1960s to the present day. The problem with this statement is that it sets the reader up to believing that Williams will be discussing Romero's films from a socio-historic perspective which does not happen. Though there are some interesting observations, Williams mostly opens each chapter with a short history of the production and release of each film and then proceeds to transcribe the events of said films in detail while making occasional observations as to these events. In the next paragraphs I discuss and expand upon the ideas from this study that are most relevant for my own project.

Williams (2015:53) suggests that Romero "intelligently recognises the importance of contemporary modes of conduct influencing the behavioural patterns of all characters who appear in his various films". In other words, Romero has shown through his films that he understands contemporary socio-normative shifts and how to incorporate these shifts into the narrative. We see this skill of Romero's manifesting with regards to the subtle incorporation of Nixon's silent majority as sociocultural context for the film. According to Romero (Gagne, 1987:49) and Williams (2015:52-52) *Jack's Wife* centres on a suburban housewife who attempts to redirect her life, but ultimately fails due to her unwillingness to accept that her personal choices are to blame for the course her life has taken. Like

most of the characters in Romero's films, Joan's denial is detrimental to her personality resulting in an inability to realize her full potential as a free person (Williams, 2015:53).

Joan is middle-aged and has never worked since she married Jack. She is a stay-at-home mother and wife and her husband is financially secure enabling her to live a comfortable life. Furthermore, she is bored, lonely, under-appreciated, sexually frustrated, and has a low self-esteem. Her comfortable life is a cage which she can't escape, nor is she allowed by her husband or society to voice objections to this lifestyle. This is emphasised by the opening dream sequence of the film where Joan walks submissively behind Jack through the woods. As they walk Jack completely ignores her and allows branches to scratch Joan's face and skin as he pushes them aside to make way for himself. Along the road she finds an abandoned baby, which according to Williams (2015:54) represent the patriarchal prison created by motherhood. Similarly the organ music playing in the background of the scene represents the oppression religion exerts over the western world and how it can stifle women like Joan (Williams, 2015:54, 55). When Joan sees a swing, an object of freedom and liberation, Jack hits her nose with a newspaper and sets a dog collar around her neck – effectively reducing Joan to the status of a household pet (Williams, 2015:54). Ironically, after Joan accidentally kills Jack by shooting him with a shotgun, she is led into the secret meeting place of a coven by a leash tied around her neck and placed naked and on her knees before an altar. The very last scene in the film shows Joan in an opulent living room with the same friends she had before, indicating that nothing has really changed and that she is still trapped in the very same suburban context. Her friends still introduce her as Jack's wife as the film ends with the camera zooming in on her face exuding utter sadness and discontent. The only difference in her life is that she now inherited a lot of money and is without a husband. Her husband was not emotionally or physically available so nothing has really changed. Joan has not made anything of her life, except becoming a self-proclaimed witch. Her freedom thus becomes another prison – both beginning and end sequences of the film forming a circular narrative with no resolution or liberation, suggesting a never ending nightmare (Williams, 2015:55).

Williams (2015:56) argues that Joan is not any different from the zombies in Romero's *Night of the Living Dead*, as her husband and daughter do not notice her. There is also the hefty supply of tranquilizers in Joan's bathroom cabinet suggesting that she might be in a drug-induced haze to make her life bearable. Tranquilizers like Valium was a major problem in the United States during the 1970s among women who sought to escape the trappings of their middle-class lifestyles and sexist social structures (Herzberg, 2006:79, 95-96). Interestingly she decides not to have her daily dose when her daughter compliments her on her "great body".

Williams (2015:57) also draws attention to Joan's general unhappiness about her appearance and body, but it runs short of making any meaningful conclusions about Joan's appearance. For instance, Joan Mitchell is not an unattractive woman, but in the film she is made to look stern, unhappy, and

older than she really is. Her hair is tightly bound into a bun and the clothes she adorns throughout the film seem more suited for older women (figure 12).



Figure 12. *Jack's Wife*. 1972. Directed by George A. Romero. [Film still from DVD] USA: Anchor Bay.

As the film progresses her appearance changes and she literally lets her hair down along with her stern demeanour. After accidentally killing her husband there is a long and lingering scene where she appears naked in front of the coven and is inducted into their fold by being whipped while on her knees – again submitting control to others. Though this submission is problematic, there is more to Joan's exposed naked body.

Like *Häxan* this film starts with an older witch, but ends with a youthful witch in the nude. In *Jack's Wife* beauty and youth is again a theme, like all the witch films of the 1960s discussed so far. After the death of Jack, Joan is perceived as younger and more beautiful by her peers, and the audience, by the end of the film. The only difference is that unlike Asa in *Black Sunday* and or Stephanie Bax in *The Witches*, Joan succeeds with her sacrifice and gains her youth, sex and attention from a younger man, and is liberated from her oppressing husband. The audience sees this transformation occurring slowly through the film and at the end Joan exposes her body to the audience as proof that though she is middle-aged she is still beautiful and a viable sexual partner. The film ends with Joan gaining what she thought she had lost, but she is still alone. The crux of the matter is that she believes the occult

gave her back her youth and beauty, while it was always there from the start. She remains unhappy in the final scene of the film because she believes that she had to submit to an external locus of control again to gain what she had lost. Williams (2015) does notice the inherent self-denial in most of the characters Romero created over the decades, but fails to follow through on this in his analysis.

Another reason for Joan's unhappiness might have to do with the way witchcraft is used in the film. Williams (2015:58) makes an interesting observation by stating that the ladies in *Jack's Wife*, including Joan, treat witchcraft like a fad and not as a system which can assist in challenging societal norms or structures. In other words, Joan's unhappiness at the end is the realization that her trust in witchcraft is unfounded and did not lead her to freedom. This is different from reality as feminist witchcraft, or Wicca, a popular past-time, or self-help method, for women during the late 1960s and early 1970s, did influence contemporary feminist movements of the time (Feraro, 2013:31; Murphy, 2009:63). Williams does not take into consideration the popularity of Wicca at the time leading up to the film's release.

Where Williams' study at time tends towards the superficial, Bernice M. Murphy's *The Suburban Gothic in American Popular Culture* (2009) is though-provoking and thorough scholarly work. Murphy (2009:1) suggests that injecting the gothic or supernatural into the suburbs is especially disturbing to the viewer as it is the last place you would expect phenomena like this to be present. She suggests that the gothic and supernatural are actually parallels for the dark things that hide under the veneer of polite and peaceful suburban society (Murphy, 2009:1).

With *The Suburban Gothic in American Popular Culture* Murphy attempts to define and illustrate the sub-genre category of the suburban gothic and describes her focus as the unease and anxieties of the white middle classes and how these fears manifest in popular culture (Murphy, 2009:2). Murphy (2009:2) explains:

In the Suburban Gothic, one is almost always in more danger from the people in the house next door, or one's own family, than from external threats. [...] Unlike the small town horror tales of Stephen King, in which the danger invariably comes from a monstrous 'Other', here, it is one's fellow suburbanites, family members and personal decisions which pose the most danger.

One of the central characteristics of the witch is that she is able to hide in plain sight, which draws similarities between her and Murphy's statements. The witch is not a monster that originates from space, a dark dimension, or even a different country. The witches in all the films discussed thus far are all locals to their geographic regions. The witch is someone's sister, daughter, mother, aunt, or grandmother. She infiltrates society without any effort. And just as easily as someone can keep the

most mundane of secrets, so does the witch have her own secrets hidden away in her suburban dwelling. Like Tansy proves in *Night of the Eagle*, no dirty basement or musty attic is required to house occult paraphernalia. It can be hidden in plain sight.

Much of Murphy's study delves into the psychological influence of the suburban landscape. She ascribes the anxiety of the suburban populace as originating from sudden changes to the old patterns of existence in western society's lifestyle during the 1950s and 1960s (Murphy, 2009:2). The horror hence originates from home or the dwellings of the neighbours with their immaculate lawns, wide smiles, and inviting tuna casseroles. She delineates suburban gothic within a set of eleven contradictory attitudes/binary oppositions which are: homely/haunted; home ownership/crippling debt; nice neighbours/neighbours who are hiding something; utopian setting/place of entrapment and unhappiness; safe place for children/obvious haunt for paedophiles/child murderers; a place to make a fresh start/a place haunted by the communal past; refuge from the overpopulated and polluted city/destroyer of the environment; family focused/breeding ground for abuse and dysfunction; proximity to like-minded people/a place of mindless conformity and materialism; white picket fences and perfect lawns/basements, crawlspaces, and back yards; protected from outside world/hidden dangers that strike from within (Murphy, 2009:3).

Murphy (2009:4) describes suburbia as an in-between space that occupies the border between urban city and the rural countryside. It bridges the gap between primitive nature and developed industrialisation – a strategic point of entry for the dangers of both settings. She argues that the most prominent fears the suburban individual experiences are a loss of identity, paradoxical comforts, the dangers of conformity, and destruction of the environment (Murphy, 2009:4).

The abovementioned fears are also embodied by the cinematic witch in horror films. Through the use of supernatural possession the individual loses their identity. The witch threatens the creature and societal comforts of the western lifestyle by being able to conjure objects and wealth out of thin air. Similarly she is able to influence relationships to such an extent that she can break up marriages or cause miscarriages. She can also increase someone's fertility to such an extent that the size of a family outpaces the breadwinner's salary leading to spiralling debt. The witch as an avatar for the *other* represents profound and extreme individualism, but her ability to possess or control the mind of others leads to conformity on a larger scale, like when Stephanie possesses most of the villagers in *The Witches*. The boredom and comfort suburbia offers can also lead to a weak society unable to fend off the supernatural dangers the witch might wreak on them. The witch also represents the Dionysian and nature. Her natural habitat is the forest, her playground is the clearing in the woods under a full moon, and like nature she is violent and turbulent. With all of the associations one can draw between the witch and the suburbs, it seems more than plausible that suburbia is the most natural place for the witch to inhabit. There are numerous suburbs that pepper the landscape in every country around the

globe. Furthermore, the long commutes and the hours thrust upon the husbands and fathers to afford to live in the suburbs means that there are armies of bored, trapped, lonely, depressed, and sexually frustrated women just waiting for the promise of a better life (Murphy, 2009:7). The suburbs are thus a perfect breeding ground for witches, women who are expected to remain silent about their discontent – ground zero for the destruction of the Apollonian western world as we know it.

Murphy applies her theories about gothic suburbia to the *Bewitched* sitcom, *Jack's Wife*, and the novel *Conjure Wife* (Frist Lieber's 1952 novel that *Night of the Eagle* was based on) in the second chapter of her text. She specifically focusses on the combination of the witch with the suburban wife during the 1960s and 1970s. The suburban witch is a fascinating hybrid that combines the modern, maternal, and domesticated with the unruly, ancient, and powerful – a complex figure representative of the western woman (Murphy, 2009:41). The suburban witch, Murphy (2009:41) says, is evidence of the extent to which gothic texts mirror societal truths. In the past the witch was confined to our imaginations where she operated from her base in the woods, but by placing her in the suburbs (during the 1960s), her threat is made more real (Murphy, 2009:43). In order to placate these fears the cinematic witches of the sixties and early seventies were depowered or made less threatening by giving them a choice between being a lonely witch or having a comfortable life with man to love (Murphy, 2009:43).

This comfortable suburban married life in which Joan finds herself in *Jack's Wife* leads to Joan becoming a witch due to many of the fears Murphy describes. Murphy (2009:58), like Williams, describes Joan as trapped in a bored and lonely suburban existence. Joan's fears are shown throughout the film to dwell on her supposed aging appearance and the jealousy she harbours towards her daughter who is on the cusp of an independent and sexually fulfilling lifestyle (Murphy, 2009:58). After considering Joan's circumstances, Murphy (2009:58) questions the origins of the witch and if witches are born or formed by societal pressures. She also finds it ironic that Joan uses a Mastercard to buy all the accoutrements deemed necessary to become a witch (Murphy, 2009:59). Murphy (2009:60) argues that Joan had fooled herself into believing that she has supernatural abilities but that this had positive consequences as it gives Joan an escape from mundane suburban life, but also a new-found confidence. The confidence she portrays in the final scene of the film soon disappears from her face as the incessant chattering of all the women about mundane and superfluous things makes her realize that nothing has changed and that she is still trapped. She is exasperated when she overhears one of the guests refer to her as Jack's wife, solidifying this fear into reality. Murphy (2009:61) stresses that the real horror in the film is not in the supernatural, but "...the soul-destroyingly tedious reality of life as a middle-aged woman in 1970s suburbia". Even if Joan's supernatural abilities were found to be real, they are not enough to facilitate an escape from her suburban prison (Murphy, 2009:61).

Murphy (2009:62-63) closes her chapter on *Jack's Wife* by stating that the entrapment of the 1970s suburbs caused women to question their position within society leading many to embrace feminism and alternative neo-pagan religions. In many instances the two were combined as the witch became an attractive symbol for women's rights groups, like W.I.T.C.H. (Women's International Terrorist Conspiracy from Hell) (Murphy, 2009:62).

Other scholarly engagements with *Jack's Wife* are few and far between. The film does however receive mention in some instances from critics and theorists which I discuss below.

Towlson (2014:126) draws comparisons between Romero's female protagonists in *Jack's Wife*, *Dawn of the Dead* (1978), and *Day of the Dead* (1985) and states that these films employ an ostensible feminist perspective that completely rejects the patriarchal consumer-capitalist society by dismantling it and replacing it with a new social order. This makes sense, as *Jack's Wife* is comparable to Romero's zombie films, but on a smaller and more realistic scale. Joan's life is not much different from a zombie's due to the mind-numbing trappings and comforts of suburban life. Like a zombie needs to consume human flesh to keep mobile, so does Joan crave the attention of others to escape her lonely and depressing life. The tranquilizers she uses on a daily basis similarly puts her in a deeper zombified state. When all her efforts fail to alleviate her suffering, Joan accidentally kills her husband with a shotgun – a weapon frequently used in zombie films on zombies. Like a shotgun releases a zombie from their mindless existence, so does the shotgun release Joan from her existence brought on by a suburban lifestyle, albeit only temporarily.

Katie Duggan (2018:4) suggests that Joan is only able to unlock her repressed sexuality through supernatural means. By dabbling in witchcraft Joan regains some of her self-esteem which reignites her sexuality (Duggan, 2018:7-8). The transformation begins in earnest when Joan's daughter remarks on Joan's "great body" prompting Joan to realize that something has changed and that she is different (Duggan, 2018:7-8). Duggan uses these examples to supplement her own theories regarding a link between spirituality/witchcraft and sex. She links sexual awakening and sexual maturity with the witch's power and the manifestation thereof which in turn leads to empowerment (Duggan: 2018:3-4). Duggan's observation is interesting as this does seem to be the case when I consider my own observations linking the witch's age and her level of power. The young witches in *Häxan*, as an example, are shown to be far less powerful than their older peers. If we reject the implication that Christensen was merely satisfying his masturbatory fantasies in *Häxan* and see the orgies and nude scenes in the film as simply suggesting sexual awakening, then Duggan's argument becomes plausible. Joan, can be said, rejects the Apollonian control of sex on various levels, while also conforming to it on other levels as she indulges in an extramarital affair, but also experiences guilt for her actions. Again we are reminded of Foucault's historic control of sex which was done in the service of economic power structures. If a marriage or a similar societal norm prevents a man or woman from

indulging and/or enjoying sex on their own terms, then it is Apollonian. For example, for many years it was considered a taboo to be in a same sex relationship (it still is for many in the western world). This control is Apollonian, while embracing sexual freedom is Dionysian.

Another scene in *Jack's Wife* draws attention to this struggle between the Dionysian and Apollonian. Joan comes home one evening and hears Nikki and her boyfriend, Gregg, having sex. She is unable to process this and goes to her bedroom. She can still hear Nikki's moans of passion and tries to block them out as her psychological distress increases with every moan. Her reaction is borne from discomfort as she is craving sex herself and finds it torturous that her daughter is enjoying sex with a man that Joan also craves. As the sexual encounter reaches its inevitable climax Joan lights a cigarette while laying on her bed, a typical scene found in many films after characters indulged in sex. Interestingly it is usually a man who lights a cigarette after sex, which suggests a role reversal of the usually dominant male sexual partner. Joan's daughter, Nikki, runs away from home after she realizes that Joan had heard her having intercourse. The shame of her sexual adventure revealed to her mother leads her to run away and hide. Jack comes home from yet another business trip finding his daughter missing. He physically assaults Joan, blaming her for not interceding and maintaining their adult daughter's virginity. Joan and Nikki's shame and exaggerated reactions suggest the extent to which sex is controlled in western society. Nikki's enjoyment of sex has to remain a secret, while Joan is so repressed that being in the close proximity of her daughter's lovemaking causes her severe psychological distress. Jack is only able to see Nikki as his virginal little girl and Joan as Nikki's mother and protector of their daughter's chastity. The realization that Nikki is not a virgin anymore causes him to verbally abuse and physically assault Joan, mirroring western society's control of a woman's sexuality.

The influence of 1970s society and film production on *Jack's Wife*

I found sex to be the most noticeable theme in *Jack's Wife*. Earlier in this chapter I discussed the silent part of the American society at the time and how it relates to Joan. Joan's silence negates her sexual agency, causing her severe psychological trauma. There is however more to discuss regarding sex in the film. The previous decade's films did not feature sex so prominently as in *Jack's Wife*. Joan is shown to crave sex, nearly masturbating to the sounds of her daughter and Gregg's lovemaking, enjoying sex with Greg on three occasions in the film, to exhibit her nude body to other witches, and to take part in light BDSM with these witches. Within the seven year period between *The Witches* and *Jack's Wife* the content of films changed much and left the industry virtually unconstrained due to changes in society and censorship. According to Laderman (2020:96) the conservative and silent America Nixon refers to in the aforementioned address believed that Hollywood was corrupting the

youth through the peddling of pornographic materials. This suggests that *Jack's Wife* was subversive in the American context, while also enabling the conversations around sex, as Foucault suggests had been occurring over the past hundred odd years.

In 1968 the MPAA film rating system was introduced which enabled directors like Francis Ford Coppola and Martin Scorsese to produce the movies they wanted without any creative limitations (Lewis, 2002:8). This shift in the industry reinvigorated the film industry globally and made film production much more lucrative, thus also creating opportunities for independent film makers (Lewis, 2002:8; Miller, 2010:79). It unfortunately also made it relatively easy for anyone to produce and release films of poor artistic merit. All one needed was access to funds and a camera crew. The more exploitive or shocking the production the more film-goers flocked to see the films (Lewis, 2002: 75-77). It also made it possible for women, like Jan White's character, Joan Mitchell, to take charge of her own agency and forge a new life according to her own choices. She is, however, never able to bring this to fruition because of her choices lead to further entrapment.

There is an argument and a counter-argument to be made for the objectification of Joan's naked body in the film. Jan White, who plays Joan, is not the typical beautiful young woman that we find in many mainstream films. There is very little information available about Jan White, and her year of birth is omitted from her IMDB page, but it is safe to assume that she was, like the Joan Mitchell character she portrays, around 40 years old at the time of production. According to various studies, older women are not frequently cast in films, as they are less sexually desirable than their youthful counterparts and less of a box office lure (Chewing & Montemurro, 2018:463; Craig & Treme, 2013:440). In many cases they are cast according to dominant stereotypes as an asexual wife, a mother, or as a caretaker of others (Chewing & Montemurro, 2018:463; Craig & Treme, 2013:442). Joan Mitchell challenges these stereotypes by portraying a mother and wife who has a craving for sexual pleasure and indulges in sex. Her physical appearance is initially constructed according to the aforementioned stereotypes, but as the film progresses the audience is made aware that she is just as sexual as a much younger woman like her daughter. When her nude body is revealed one would not be able to discern between her body and a 19 year old female body. She is ostensibly not a young virgin, yet she is able to arouse another just as much as her younger daughter. This is emphasised by the fact that she is able to entice her daughter's young suitor fairly easily and keep him interested. It is for these reasons that I find Joan's body to complicate the sexualised female body, which implies subversion of the Apollonian control of the female body and her sexual agency.

Popular culture has been shown to shape our ideas regarding gender, sexuality, and ageing and this has a direct influence on casting choices for film and television productions (Chewing & Montemurro, 2018:463). This creates a perpetual cycle that reinforces stereotypes regarding youth and beauty thus reflecting society's desired realities (Chewing & Montemurro, 2018:463; Craig & Treme, 2013:441).

It is consequently not the directors or film producers who are solely to blame, but society as a whole. The 1970s saw further advances in the feminisms of the late 1960s which not only challenged power relations between male and female, but also the way society in general and the media perceived women (Black, 2009:34, 96; Webb, 2014:66). Unfortunately churches across the western world were slow in this regard and still adhered to outdated conventions pertaining to gender (Black, 2009:96).

So-called Goddess Spirituality and Feminist Witchcraft, grounded in the political awareness of the time, took foothold in the US and the UK during the 1970s (Feraro, 2014:31). A witch in the 1970s would possibly have experienced fewer limitations on their freedoms if they abandoned the church. Joan Mitchell being a witch achieves freedom by abandoning the church, and even more so by killing her husband. *Jack's Wife* goes further by challenging conventional and dominant images of beauty and body image in older women, while at the same time mirroring the feminist ideals and trappings of middle class suburban society of the 1970s. Joan Mitchell can live a life of sexual and economic freedom which, though touted in the 1970s, was still difficult for women to achieve (Herzberg, 2006:90-91). The end of the film however reveals that even sexual and economic freedom does not necessarily lead to happiness if society does not change.

Tropes and the Dionysian

Jack's Wife shares many similarities with *Häxan* as shown in the above sections, but also in interesting ways reinterprets some of the tropes established in *Häxan*. Where *Häxan* portrays young women in various stages of undress to elicit a response from the viewer, *Jack's Wife* presents the viewer with a nude and sexually active middle-aged woman. Joan's body is not exposed to the viewer to titillate, but to engage with the viewer's notions regarding the link between sex, youth, and beauty. In *Häxan* the older and more powerful witches are not presented in sexually alluring ways, which emphasises society's fear and rejection of older women engaging in sex. This Apollonian control of sex coupled with Apollonian disgust is deeply engrained in society, further reinforcing stereotypes linked to the age of a woman. Joan as an older woman challenges these notions as she is revealed to be just as sexually appealing as her 19 year old daughter.

While engaging in an affair with Gregg, Jan becomes an adversary to the traditional family unit as she betrays both husband and daughter. Joan having a sexual relationship with Gregg complicates Nikki's relationship with someone who could potentially be the man she can marry and have children with – a union that would ultimately increase and perpetuate the suburban lifestyle. Similarly, Joan's affair also impacts her marriage to Jack which in turn could lead to divorce and the end of a suburban household. There is also the title of the film and its meaning to consider in relation to Joan's affair.

Joan is Jack's wife, as the title of the film also suggests, in other words, like the suburban home he owns, he also owns Joan. Gregg and Joan's affair also suggests a breakdown of the patriarchal system that trapped women in subservient positions to men. Like Joan is trapped in the suburban context of the 1970s, so is Jack trapped as he needs to work long hours to afford their lifestyle. By working these long hours and in the process neglecting Joan, he loses his wife to another. Gregg being much younger than Jack also emasculates Jack, making him inferior to a younger man. At the same time this then causes the viewer to re-evaluate Joan's sexual availability. Greg obviously enjoys having sex with Joan to such an extent that he is shown to actively pursue her. Exposing Joan's naked body at the end of the film further emphasises this and suggests that the age of a woman is irrelevant. Joan is revealed to be attractive and sexually alluring not through the use of the supernatural, but through her confidence and self-realization.

The supernatural is very subdued in *Jack's Wife*. The viewer is at first unsure if Joan's spells to enthrall Gregg are succeeding or not. Also, the visions and dreams of the black-clad assailant who chases Joan through the house and threatens to rape and kill her seems to be linked to her dabbling in the dark arts. An astute viewer of the film would notice that the supernatural is used as a red herring to draw some attention away from Joan's psychological state – originating from stresses she endures as Jack's wife and a homemaker in the 1970s' suburban context. Interestingly the black masked figure seems to be a supernatural manifestation, incarnate, of the Joan's fears. It violates the sanctity of Joan's home, while it also goes to lengths to trap Joan in the house. As Joan flees from the intruder she attempts to exit the house through the front door only to find that he had tied his belt around the door knob in such a way that the door cannot be opened. The belt symbolises Jack's trousers or a man's trousers as Jack is a very common and generic male name. The belt has to be loosened to have sexual intercourse, but also to punish transgressions. Joan may only experience sex when Jack loosens his belt, similarly she is punished with it when she experiences sex with another. The assailant also wears a flimsy and laughable grey rubber mask similar to the ones one can purchase at novelty stores. It is obvious to both Joan and the viewer that there is a man behind the mask. The mask represents the thin veneer that hides beneath it the real danger, namely the stifling Apollonian.

Alternatively, the masked man could be argued to represent Dionysus as he comes to destroy the suburban household through sexual violence. First he violates a supposedly safe space. Then he nearly violates Joan inside this same safe space which has served as her gilded cage. Lastly, he causes Joan so much mental anguish that she kills her husband, mistaking Jack for this strange entity. The man in black thus destroys Joan's world, but gives her the opportunity to forge ahead within new circumstances liberating her in the process (like Paglia's Dionysus does). Joan does not embrace this liberation as she should, but trades her suburban lifestyle as dutiful wife for a suburban coven lifestyle.

Only after discussing *Jack's Wife* can we start to reflect on the film in relation to Bloom's *tesserae*. As noted in the previous paragraphs, *Jack's Wife* has an abundance of recognisable tropes that regularly manifest in witch horror films. These tropes however are reframed in every instance which changes their meanings in surprising ways. The relationship between age and power, for instance, is different from those in *Häxan* where the women are displayed and portrayed to accommodate the male gaze. Joan is not young or old, neither is she extremely attractive or unattractive. She is a realistic avatar for every middle-aged western woman. The audience is allowed to view the sex she enjoys as well as her nude body, not to titillate but to complicate and challenge societal norms regarding sex and age.

Similar to *Häxan* the witch again hides in plain sight, but in this instance humanity has moved away from rural villages into bigger villages, known as suburbs. The witch cannot stay in the forest anymore if she wants to infiltrate society. Romero does not disregard what came before, which would imply *kenosis*, but understands that it would make no sense to have Joan travelling from suburbia into the forest to meet a witch. The idea is to emphasise Joan's entrapment in suburbia while also keeping her mobility and dealings with others in a familiar and realistic setting. The token of recognition is that Joan is a witch with the added meaning being the change of the witch's setting. This change in setting makes it difficult to inject the abject into the film. Any attempt to add dead spiders, boiling cauldrons, and graveyards would draw attention away from suburban horrors like loneliness, conformity, and other common suburban trappings. In *Jack's Wife* Romero attempts to show the audience that the shiny new kitchens are the actual graveyards, the tranquilisers are the putrid potions, and the forest orgy under the Devil's moon becomes the ladies tea at noon. The horrors are still there, but they are adapted to fit a different context, an example of Bloom's *tessera* due to the tokens of recognition that are reframed.

The use of the supernatural is also reframed in *Jack's Wife* with only hints of what came before. We recognise Joan as a witch by her actions, but also by a store clerk who refers to her as a witch because of the items she purchases. Yet it is never revealed to the audience if her spell casting has any real effect. One could argue that her inauthentic supernatural abilities are just as inauthentic as the suburban lifestyle she, her family, and her friends cling to. As mentioned, Romero's intention was to explore the effects of dabbling in the supernatural on the psyche of the individual. The supernatural is nowhere used to harm a man, nor does the supernatural enable Joan to seduce Gregg. She fools herself into believing that her spells enabled her to seduce Gregg, meaning that his agency was always his own. Joan also does not direct any spells at Jack to harm him as witches often do in witch horror films. In fact, she is shown to develop tremendous guilt because she believes that she had taken advantage of Gregg, but also because she was unfaithful to her husband. It is this guilt that leads to stress and anxiety which in turn drives her to accidentally kill her husband.

Romero reframes the supernatural in the film as not something that originates from a devil or a demon, but as something that comes from within a person. Traditionally supernatural ability is used as a way to free a woman or witch in these types of horror films by specifically harming or killing a man or men. The supernatural abilities the witches have are akin to a loaded weapon, but the witch still directs it. A gun without a hand to aim it and choice to pull the trigger is a useless and passive object. Joan does not kill Jack with a spell, but with a loaded shotgun. She shoots him three times through the front door. Joan does not direct a spell at him, nor is she driven mad by power or the devil. She shoots him by accident due to the mental state Jack, society, and her dabbling in witchcraft have placed her in – giving the audience a new interpretation of the supernatural and the practicing of the occult. In *Häxan* Christensen equates witches to hysterical women who were misunderstood by society. In *Jack's Wife* there is a shift as the woman becomes hysterical due to societal pressures in addition to practicing witchcraft. Furthermore, Joan is not vilified when she pronounces that she is a witch or burned at the stake, nor is the witch, Marion Hamilton, who introduces her to witchcraft. Joan's circle of friends during a conversation make light of Marion's practice of witchcraft, but they do not display fear towards Joan, nor do they avoid her in any way. They all in fact seem genuinely interested in her practices. The aforementioned store clerk is similarly impressed with Joan's declaration that she is a witch. At the end of the film, after Jack's death, she is rewarded by her peers through praise and admiration.

Conclusion

In Marion Gibson's article *Retelling Salem Stories: Gender Politics and Witches in American Culture* she argues that when a witch like Joan achieves the power they desire, their gain ends in murder or mutual recriminations between men and women (2006:99). This is true in many films, like *The Craft* (1996) and *The Witch* (2015), but as we have seen in the sections preceding this one, in *Jack's Wife* the matter is more complex. Joan does not attain supernatural abilities or power of any kind, nor is she able to wield it to cause harm to a man. Her belief in the supernatural however does lead to a higher self-esteem, but it is fleeting. Witchcraft and the supernatural in *Jack's Wife* are reduced to the realistic flights of fancy they are. Joan believes that her abilities are real and that it enables her to take control of her agency. The suburban lifestyle makes the same false promises of peace, luxury, and self-actualisation, but this is also a fallacy. Joan in her naivety exchanges one prison for the next based on the same promises. Romero emphasises that society is more to blame for the guilt, neglect, loneliness, and resulting psychological and physical abuse we exact on each other. Witchcraft could just as easily have been replaced by something else like the fear of communism, a haunted house, or aliens tormenting Joan while she is alone at home and the result would have been the same. *Jack's*

Wife illustrates to the audience how we, our beliefs, and society create the prisons we find ourselves in.

SUSPIRIA (1977)

Where Joan in *Jack's Wife* embodied the silent rage of suburb, Argento's witches in *Suspiria* represents the violence of terrorism experienced in Italy and Germany in 1977. During the seventies Western Europe experienced various economic difficulties resulting in a surge of nationalism and the formation of far-right political parties in Austria, France, Italy, and West Germany (Black, 2009:182). Italy experienced three coup attempts during the seventies perpetrated by the far-right as well as extreme terrorism at the hands of the far-left (Black, 2009:182-183). Much of the violence in Italy at the time seems to have been enabled by members of the government and criminal networks, suggesting a larger conspiracy (Black, 2009:183). The sheer scale of the violence experienced in Italy between 1977 and 1982 rivalled all other such occurrences experienced in the rest of Europe at that point in time (Black, 2009:184).

In West Germany the Left-wing Baader-Meinhoff Gang, or Rote Armee Fraktion (RAF), murdered many key figures in West Germany during the seventies (Black, 2009:185). The RAF was involved in various bombings, kidnappings, and assassinations culminating in the hijacking of a German plane during the so-called Deutcher Herbts and the murder of a leading economic official (German Autumn) (Varon, 2004:11). Several of the RAF's founders died of apparent suicide while in the custody of West German authorities (Varon, 2004:11).

Italy and Germany are of importance for the analysis of *Suspiria* because the director, Dario Argento, is Italian, as was the screenwriter of the film, Daria Nicolodi (Heller-Nicholas, 2015:29). Though most of the film's interior shots were filmed in Rome, the majority of the exterior scenes were shot on location in Munich (Heller-Nicholas, 2015:29, 32, 59). The setting of the film is also in Germany, specifically in Freiburg at the Freiburg Tanzakademie. This is of interest as it suggests two different worlds (Italian and German) occupying a fictional version of Freiburg.

The witches in *Suspiria*, like the far-left extremists in Italy and Germany of the time, are brutal, violent, and part of a global conspiracy involving three almost god-like witches, namely Mater Suspiriorum (Mother of Sighs), Mater Tenebrarum (Mother of Darkness), and Mater Lachrymarum (Mother of Tears). Whenever the witches manifest in *Suspiria*, chaos and murder follow, but at the same time their presence warps reality in the film through light and sound, which is expanded on in further detail later in this section. The terrorist activities of the extreme left groups in Italy and Germany undoubtedly left their victims in states of absolute bewilderment where they questioned the unreal situations they found themselves in, most likely brought on by physical shock and fight or flight responses. Something similar happens in *Suspiria*, but the effect is borne from loud raucous music and gaudy neon lights.

Like *Jack's Wife* focussed on the psychology of a user of the occult, so does Dario Argento's *Suspiria* (1977) consider the psychological impact that the supernatural could have on a young woman. Interestingly, Argento and Romero collaborated on many projects in the past (Cooper, 2012:4). In *Suspiria*, Argento problematizes the witch's age and appearance in a different way than was done in *Jack's Wife*, but keeps closer to the witch's portrayal in *Häxan*. The witches in *Suspiria* are older and genuinely evil, with the head of the coven being a rotting and wheezing old woman – an exaggeration of old age and disease. Like Mario Bava's *Black Sunday*, *Suspiria* is also an Italian production with a focus on interesting lighting and *mise-en-scène*. It is considered a masterpiece and cult classic amongst horror film enthusiasts and is referred to, like Fellini's *La dolce vita* and *8 ½* (1963), as one of the most groundbreaking films of the age, with some referring to Argento as the Italian Hitchcock because of this film (Cooper, 2012:94; Dyer, 2011:288-289; Schulte-Sasse, 2002).

Suspiria is one of the better known examples found in the Italian *giallo* cinema sub-genre of horror films. Massimo Locatelli (2020:235) argues that *giallo* is similar to other editorial products, like *Mills & Boon* romance novels, where a familiar and popular narrative formula is used to create new narratives that are time and again proven to be popular. For instance, a common trope in *giallo* is that the protagonists and supporting characters are frequently just pawns that are physically and psychologically tortured and killed in gruesome ways to shock the audience (Locatelli, 2020:235). Mario Bava is said to be the father of the genre where he established the trend of “staging elaborate scenes of creative cruelty and stylish bloodletting, putting mood ahead of plausibility, provoking fear and paranoia in his audience...” (Costanzo, 2014:277). The *giallo* directors were more expressive in their film production and had an interest in visual style and staging (Locatelli, 2020:235). Locatelli (2020:235) says that *giallo* “...soon became a sort of ghetto for venting all the anxieties, physicalities and emotions that could not be reduced to narrative clarity or ideal value”. In other words, these films did not always make sense from a narrative point of view and were more concerned with capturing and displaying pure emotion. This type of film production originated with Mario Bava's films, like *Black Sunday*, which have already been discussed in an earlier chapter. This is important to take note of as *Suspiria*'s plot is riddled with holes and inconsistencies. This however does not detract from the film or its status as a cult favourite.

Background

Suspiria is the first in a trilogy of films referred to as *The Three Mothers* and was influenced by Thomas de Quincey's 1945 collection of essays titled *Suspiria de Profundis*, specifically the essay *Ladies of Sorrow* (Cooper, 2012:88; Schulte-Sasse, 2002). The second film is *Inferno* (1980) with *The Mother of Tears* (2007) as the final instalment to the trilogy. Each of the films focusses on one of

three witches, with Helena Marcos as Mater Suspiriorum (Mother of Sighs) in *Suspiria*. The other two witches are Mater Tenebrarum (Mother of Darkness) in *Inferno* and Mater Lachrymarum (Mother of Tears) in *The Mother of Tears*. Argento has admitted that *Suspiria* is mostly influenced by his fascination with witches and Disney's *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs* (1937) (McDonagh, 2010:153).

The fairy-tale-like film is about a young ballerina, Suzy Banyon (Jessica Harper), who is accepted to a famous dance academy in Freiburg, Germany. She soon realizes that a supernatural force is at work after the death of another student, Pat Hingle, and Pat's roommate, Sonia, on the day of her arrival at the school and she starts to investigate. The school houses a host of young ballerina's who share rooms on the campus grounds. As soon as Suzy moves in, strange things start to occur, like a maggot infestation in the ceiling which causes maggots to rain down on all the students and staff. Others are also killed in the film, like Daniel, the blind pianist who is employed at the school, and Sarah, Suzy's only friend and fellow ballerina. It is revealed that the dance academy is a front for a coven of witches, with the dance instructor, Miss Tanner, and campus administrator, Madame Blanc, as subordinates to Helena Marcos, the Black Queen of the witches. They are motivated solely by greed – wealth that they gain through the suffering of others. The witches and the school are suddenly destroyed at the end of the film after Suzy stabs Helen Markos through the throat with a glass quill.

With the exception of Helena Marcos, the other witches feature prominently throughout the film. Marcos is only revealed at the end when Suzy's investigation leads her down a secret passage to Marcos's living quarters. The witch is revealed to be a rotting old hag with long black nails and severe breathing problems (figure 13). All three of the witches are not young with Alida Valli who stars as Miss Tanner being 56 (figure 14) at the time of production and Joan Bennet as Madame Blanc being 67 (figure 15) at the time of the film's release suggesting an emphasis on the link between age and power (IMDB, 2020f; IMDB, 2020g).

Much has been written about Dario Argento's oeuvre and his work on *Suspiria*. It would be nearly impossible to list all the studies done on the film in this literature review. According to noted scholars, L. Andre Cooper (2012:4) and Lindsay Hallam (2017:212), most of the earlier scholarly engagements with Argento's films from a psychoanalytical perspective explore gender within the *giallo* and Gothic genres. I similarly found many similar studies on the film with comparable findings. I thus attempt here to capture the most relevant and where possible the latest studies concerning *Suspiria*.



Figure 13. *Suspiria*. 1977. Directed by Dario Argento. [Film still from DVD] USA: Anchor Bay.



Figure 14. *Suspiria*. 1977. Directed by Dario Argento. [Film still from DVD] USA: Anchor Bay.



Figure 15. *Suspiria*. 1977. Directed by Dario Argento. [Film still from DVD] USA: Anchor Bay.

Literature review

Suspiria features in Howard Hughes's *Cinema Italiano* (2011) as well as in Ernest Mathijs and Jamie Sexton's *Cult Cinema: An Introduction* (2011) which both serve as introductions to cult and Italian cinema – *Suspiria* being exemplary of both. The two texts are studies about cult cinema where the authors dissect many cult favourite films and discuss those that made the films. Hughes' book is more focused and is specifically a study on cult films originating from Italy, while Mathijs and Sexton's book is more globally oriented with a focus on cult cinema as a phenomenon.

Howard Hughes (2011) mostly discusses the use of colour in *Suspiria*, along with the physical production and style of the film, but does not go into much detail about the sociocultural influences related to the film. Hughes notes the importance of colour in *Suspiria*, but does not attempt any interpretations about the colours. Hughes' book is similar to many other texts published with more general audiences in mind. His study is however of far better quality than most and thus a better example of these types of texts which is why I refer to it in this instance.

Hughes's text though is comparable to Mathijs and Sexton's introduction to cult cinema. Mathijs and Sexton (2011:118) mostly discuss Argento's cult status while also lamenting the fact that he was not able to repeat his success in subsequent films. They do however draw attention to some of the underlying misogyny and sadosexuality found in *Suspiria*, but only in passing (Mathijs & Sexton, 2011:118). They do make a few other thought-provoking observations. According to Mathijs and Sexton (2011:196) and keeping in mind the context of the sixties counter culture and the Vietnam War:

In films such as *Suspiria*, *Day of the Dead*, or *City of the Living Dead* explicit imagery of death and flesh wounds, aided by special effects, emphasized every detail of the violent abuse of the human body, and the literal violation of bodily integrity (the last frontier of humanity) – thus blurring the border between good and evil, man and monster.

The explicit wounds and violent and graphic deaths in these films mirrored the inner turmoil many individuals felt at the time, like the returning soldiers felt after their tours in Vietnam. The violent acts and deaths in films like *Suspiria* remind the viewer of the limits of the human body as well as its fragility. The perpetrators of these acts are in most cases human, and not grizzly beasts or monsters. The witches in *Suspiria* are similarly also just human beings, albeit with supernatural abilities. Helen Markos is the only one who has a monstrous appearance due to her advanced age. Markos's monstrous appearance is thus not linked to something alien, like having a beak, or wings, but to the fragility of the human body and its inability to resist entropy and the ravages of time.

Marcia Landy (2017:35) frames *Suspiria*, *Inferno*, and *The Mother of Tears* as explorations of the mythical and the symbolic mother and her link to Italian Fascism. She argues that these films represent the fear and anxiety we unconsciously harbour towards powerful maternal figures (Landy, 2017:35). Landy (2017:36) dismisses the accusations of misogyny against Argento and insists that the maternal often plays a dominant role in his films and that young women are hardly, if at all, sexualised in any of the films that make up *The Three Mothers Trilogy* (Landy, 2017:36).

Landy's observation is valid, especially with regards to *Suspiria*. One would expect a horror film that focuses on a school of young women to contain one or two scenes of the women frolicking in their underwear, or the obligatory shower scene that is all too common in the genre. There is not a single instance in the film where any of the young women are sexually objectified. Three young women are, however, brutally murdered, but the absence of male deaths does not seem questionable if one considers the nearly all-women context of the film.

Landy (2017:37) compares the friendly face of the brutal mothers (witches) in *Suspiria* with the way Fascism was portrayed in Italy where the visible faces of Fascism were made friendly and caring to sway public opinion. In *Suspiria* the protagonist suspects and has valid reason to be suspicious of the school and the three women who are in charge of it. Maggots rain down from the ceiling, Suzy is constantly ill, and the actions of the two heads of the school, Madame Blanc and Miss Tanner, are often questionable, yet Suzie and the other dancers remain at the school. The similarities Landy invokes is justified when we consider Italy's Fascist period. Fascism lasted from 1919 to 1945 under the leadership of Benito Mussolini during which the Italian people were subjected to intense cruelty and violence (Fogu, 2003:32; Pugliese, 2004:xvii-xviii). Like Madame Blanc and Miss Tanner, Mussolini and his followers were experts at concealing Fascism's call to brutality and violence behind a veneer or idealism, positivism, and patriotism, thus convincing the nation that their circumstances were not as dire as they might believe (Fogu, 2003:33, 56-57).

Landy (2017:37) argues that Argento similarly uses these concealment strategies in his filmic technique. She compares his technique and style to Francis Bacon's use of colour and distortion where the familiar is made unfamiliar (Landy, 2017:37). Anyone familiar with Bacon's paintings would describe his work as hazy, vague, violent, gruesome, colourful, expressionist, and surreal, yet containing recognizable forms/objects – *Suspiria* contains all of this, but in a Gothic form. Landy (2017:38) describes the film as invoking a different kind of narrative where a journey of a character is presented to the audience through a lens of magic and psychopathology.



Figure 16. *Suspiria*. 1977. Directed by Dario Argento. [Film still from DVD] USA: Anchor Bay.

The juxtaposition of the brutally murdered bodies throughout the film compete with the elaborate and beautifully designed set pieces to elicit a complex response from the viewer that defies interpretation and overloads the senses (Landy, 2017:38). From Landy's interpretations of *Suspiria* it becomes clear that Argento succeeds in engaging the viewer's aesthetic experience on a much higher and more complex level than most films. Even the blood that drips from the bodies is not realistic in colour, but resembles a viscous bright red paint (Figure 16). The blood is also clearly visibly in night-time scenes due to expert lighting techniques (Figure 17). The colour and consistency of the blood is indistinguishable from any other colour of paint used on the walls of the sets which consequently blurs the border between brutal violence and decor.



Figure 17. *Suspiria*. 1977. Directed by Dario Argento. [Film still from DVD] USA: Anchor Bay.

The well-known horror scholar Peter Hutchings' 2003 study, *The Argento Effect*, examines the cult film phenomenon by identifying elements or practices which lead to a film receiving cult status. He specifically examines Argento's oeuvre as Argento's films are frequently regarded by fans and scholars alike as possessing cult status (Hutchings, 2003:128). Oddly, the study makes hardly any

mention of *Suspiria*, except mentioning that it is the only film of Argento's to achieve major international success and release (Hutchings, 2003:129). A similar 2012 study by Hutchings focusses on *Suspiria* and attempts to define European horror cinema by comparing audience perceptions related to Paul W.S. Anderson's *Resident Evil* (2002) and Argento's *Suspiria*. What makes the study compelling is that he seeks to find elements of European influence in *Resident Evil*, an American-British-French-German film produced in Europe and to a lesser extent in Canada, and based on a Japanese video game owned by Capcom, by comparing it to *Suspiria*, an exemplar of European horror (Hutchings, 2012:13-14). Hutchings (2012:13-14) questions the notion that a film produced in Europe by a mostly European crew should necessarily contain elements or influences of European horror. Though the films share many similarities like the use of bright colours and exceptional lighting technique, were shot in constructed set pieces, and contain ample scenes of excessive gore and violence, Hutchings (2012:22) was not able to find evidence of *Europeanness* in either film. One reason could be that *Suspiria* is an attempt by Argento to create art, while *Resident Evil* was a purely commercial endeavour to increase the profits of an already established brand (Hutchings, 2012:14-15). Hutchings (2012:15, 16, 18) explains that the prime examples of Eurohorror, *Black Sunday* and *Suspiria*, were never marketed as European horror films, but were just surrealist horror films produced in Europe by directors who were experimenting with filmic techniques. The study reveals that European horror, or the colloquial term *Eurohorror*, does not exist as geography does not make a film more or less European (2012:22).

All the studies discussed in the previous paragraphs comment on Argento's expressionist use of colour and set designs, but none attempt a detailed analysis thereof. Giulio Giusti's in-depth 2013 analysis of Argento's expressionist use of colour and set design in *Suspiria* delivers on this front and is in my opinion thus far the most exemplary of such studies of the film.

Argento embraces the German Expressionistic style of filmmaking pioneered by Robert Wiene with his *The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari* (1920) and Friedrich W. Murnau with his *Nosferatu* (1922) (Giusti, 2013:154). Giusti (2013:154) draws similarities between Argento's cinematography, his use of *mise-en-scène*, elaborate contrast, and film stock manipulation. Giusti (2013:154) uses these stylistic practices to examine how colour and set design mirror or serve as extensions of the characters' bodily and mental states.

Giusti (2013:154), like many other scholars, observe that *Suspiria* can be considered a dark fairy tale. This is not just because of the young female protagonist who resembles Disney's Snow White, or her journey and battle with witches, but the use of bright colours are similar to those we find in children's fairy tale books. Like a colourful gingerbread house looms in delicious and incandescent colours in the dark forest, so do the exterior and interior colours of the buildings in *Suspiria* lull the viewer into lowering their defences. Colour is used throughout the film to indicate the crossing not just between

rooms, but between reality and the hidden world of the supernatural (Giusti, 2013:154). For example, the film opens with Suzy arriving at the airport in Freiburg. The interior of the airport is not unlike any other airport – brightly lit with the occasional colourful sign outside of stores. The colours change abruptly from bland to swirling psychedelic flashes of neon and lightning against an almost black background when Suzy exits the building into the supernatural world inhabited by the witches (Giusti, 2013:154). These colour effects could only be achieved at the time by using outmoded types of film stock in combination with modern gel filters, custom-made reflectors, and mirrors (Giusti, 2013:154-155). Furthermore, the film negatives were developed three times, one for each of the three primary colours (red, blue, and green) and then superimposed on top of each other to exaggerate the artificial colours even further (Giusti, 2013:155). The film's lighting is thus made unrealistic, further emphasising the unreal and dreamlike world of *Suspiria* (Giusti, 2013:155).

Giusti (2013:155) argues that the lighting and colour palette provides the viewer with two types of cinematic spaces. The shots filmed during the day under natural light represent the real and logical world, while the night-time shots coupled with unrealistic lighting and exaggerated colours represent the Gothic and supernatural world (Giusti, 2013:155). In this way the colours warn the viewer when the supernatural will appear, consequently making the presence of the witches' power analogous with bright colour palettes (Giusti, 2013:156). The colour red especially appears on screen as indicates the presence of Helena Markos who we only see in the final scenes of the film (Giusti, 2013:157). This is an interesting observation Giusti makes, as limiting Markos's physical appearance to the end creates an air of mystery, making the viewer ponder and imagine the monstrosity of Markos's appearance throughout the film, while still feeling her influence throughout.

As colour is used in interesting ways in the film, so are the architecture and décor. The characters' state of mind is reflecting in the shapes and geometries of the set pieces (Giusti, 2013:158). For instance, many of the interior shots show the viewer rooms with overly large doorways and high vaulted ceilings, making the characters seem small and insignificant (Giusti, 2013:158). Even door handles are in some instances placed in higher positions than the viewer would expect (Giusti, 2013:158). Argento originally wanted to use children in the film, but no distributor wanted to distribute a film containing scenes of brutally murdered children (Giusti, 2013:158). By increasing the size of the rooms and doorways, and changing the position of some of the door handles, Argento subtly makes children of the adult dancers in both the minds of the audience but also the characters themselves (Giusti, 2013:158). Pat, Suzy, Sarah, Sonia, and Daniel all become frightened children in the presence of the supernatural kaleidoscope, yelling, running, and screaming, with red paint dripping from them when they are slashed and/or killed – a grisly kindergarten pantomime.

The interiors of the buildings with their elegant Art Nouveau lines – the Art Nouveau style drawing inspiration from the organic and nature – creates a striking combination of artifice and nature (Giusti,

2013:159). In some rooms the décor pieces and real plants blend in with the elaborate Art Nouveau-styled murals invoking the works of M.C. Escher where objects and geometry blend in interesting and confusing ways (Giusti, 2013:159). These elements reflect the unnatural world the characters inhabit, but also the obvious anxiety and confusion they feel (Giusti, 2013:159-161). The organic lines and the voluptuous and circular objects and flowers in the academy similarly mirror the female presence that dominates the setting (Giusti, 2013:160).

Consider the lobby of the apartment building (Figure 18) Pat and Sonia are murdered in. The pink colours and bulging circles suggest the feminine, while the hard corners of the angular shapes represent the violence and sharp edges of their demise. Pat is repeatedly stabbed with a butcher's knife and then thrown through an ornate window in the ceiling after an electric cord is wrapped around her neck. Sonia is killed by the falling glass shards – specifically a large plate of glass that nearly slices her head in two (Figure 16). Some of the shapes in the lobby, like the one between the two staircases, form a downward arrow suggesting the fall and death from above. The fact that the academy blows up at the end of the film with the death of Markos makes the association between body and building explicit.

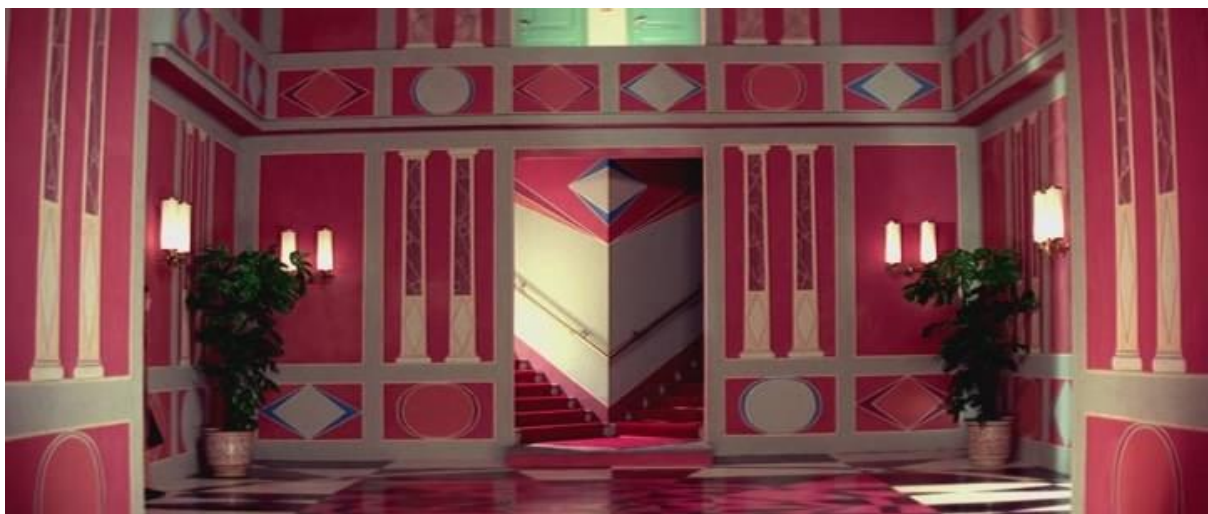


Figure 18. *Suspiria*. 1977. Directed by Dario Argento. [Film still from DVD] USA: Anchor Bay.

Giusti (2013:162) also draws parallels between the architecture and Ariadne's labyrinth from Greek mythology. The various rooms make up a bizarre labyrinth that Suzy has to escape, but escape can only be through exposing the witches and their secrets (Giusti, 2013:162). The door to the witches' secret sanctum is hidden in a mural. Suzy discovers the entrance by following Madame Blanc and Miss Tanner's footsteps one night. As she reaches a dead end she notices that there are three irises in the mural, a red, blue, and yellow one. The blue iris is not like the others and stands out from the wall. Upon turning it a hidden door underneath it swings open, further invoking Escher's art where shapes and forms are not what they seem to be (Giusti, 2013:162). Like Escher's *Sky and Water* (1938) adorning Sonia's bathroom wall where fish and birds shapeshift into one another, so do the characters

and the audience flit between reality and the unreal throughout *Suspiria* by means of colour and set design (Giusti, 2013:162).

Sandra Walters's study on Argento's *Three Mothers Trilogy* shares many similarities with Giusti's text. She also draws conclusions regarding the characters' movement between reality and the supernatural world (Walters, 2015:160). Where Giusti's focus is on the expressionist use of colour and set design, Walters explores the nightmarish and its connection to the dreamlike and supernatural world in *Suspiria*, *Inferno*, and *The Mother of Tears* (Walters, 2015:160). Walters (2015:161) maintains that "...familiar places are thus distorted in nightmares as spaces of the uncanny that then extend into reality". In other words, the supernatural world in *Suspiria* is a warped reflection of reality. She builds on this statement by saying that *Suspiria*'s architecture and the world at large symbolises the male/rational and female/irrational binary (Walters, 2015:162-164). When Suzy is in the real world of order and the laws of physics are obeyed, she is in the patriarchal world, but when she enters the world of the witch with its garish and unrealistic lighting and artificial sets Suzy is in the feminine world. This is especially interesting as it suggests that there are Apollonian and Dionysian worlds or realities within Argento's trilogy. The witches do not just threaten Apollonian society of the west, but can impose a nightmarish Dionysian reality over it as easily as one would cover a chair in a sheet.

Another interesting contribution Walters (2015:160) makes is by pointing out that the three witches in the abovementioned films are not violent murderers like Jason's mother in *Friday the 13th* (1980), or the alien queen in *Aliens* (1986), but that they are the mothers of all evil. Suzie and the others are not murdered to satiate a murderous lust or in revenge, but because their investigations of the school might expose the witches.

Linda Schulte-Sasse (2002) also draws on the aforementioned use of gothic spaces and references to fascism in her study, *The "mother" of all horror movies: Dario Argento's Suspiria* (1977). Schulte-Sasse (2002) views Argento's *Suspiria* as an inverted Disney animated film. She suggests that *Suspiria* and Disney animated films share characters that are based on folkloric stereotypes, and that the protagonist is set on a quest through which she will lose her innocence. Additionally both feature helpers that show the female protagonist the way. A common feature in the Disney animated fairy tale is the witch as antagonist. *Suspiria* however features three witches as antagonists. She makes further comparisons between the inviting artificial and bright colours in Disney productions and the garish and threatening bright (and also artificial) colours used in *Suspiria* (Schulte-Sasse, 2002).

Charlotte Gough's 2018 Jungian study focuses on the cultural, gendered, and psychoanalytic discourses from which the focus of the ballerina in texts like *The Red Shoes* (1948), *The Tales of Hoffman* (1951), *Suspiria*, and *Black Swan* (2011) stem, as well as the ballerina's significance in

fantasy and horror films (Gough, 2018:52). Gough (2018:52) argues that the ballerina embodies the feminine – a feminine figure who wrestles with patriarchal control of the body and ultimately meets a tragic end. *Suspiria* goes against the grain of patriarchal control as the ballet school is controlled by a matriarchy where the protagonist is victorious in the end (Gough, 2018:52). By doing so *Suspiria* offers the viewer “a radical articulation of female-centric identity anxieties” (Gough, 2018:52). She argues that the film’s mostly female cast and lack of masculine males challenges traditional male-centred spectatorship through its focus on women (Gough, 2018:52). In addition, Gough (2018:52) states that the film presents the viewer with a psychosexual manifestation of Suzy’s unconsciousness. Because the film challenges conventional modes of spectatorship and encourages a multi-sensory viewing experience, *Suspiria* cannot be toted as being misogynist (Gough, 2018:52).

According to Gough (2018:69) the dancing female body nullifies the patriarchal control of what a female body should look like and how she should move. The narrative functions as a metaphor for societal norms regarding the female body where mutilation is used as a tool to draw attention to the reduced value of a women’s body when it does not conform to societal standards (Gough, 2018:69).

Anna Powell wrote an interesting study regarding the similarities between the philosopher Gilles Deleuze and Dario Argento’s approaches to the philosophical, the psychological, and art in general (Powell, 2012:167). Throughout the study she uses Deleuze’s insights to re-evaluate the cinematic sensorium of horror. Cinematic sensorium in this context refers to the extent to which the stylistic, and not plot or theme, impacts the screen and viewer (Powell, 2012:168). In other words, the focus is on the aesthetic experience of the film and not the story or characters. Powell (2012:168) also disagrees with the psychosexual themes and symbols some scholars have attributed to the film. She also argues that *Suspiria* should not be read through the lens of the abject as horror films are usually subjected to, but through a lens of sensory experience (Powell, 2012:168-169). The more visceral the experience the more it engages contemplation from the viewer over time (Powell, 2012:169).

Powell’s analysis rests on Deleuze’s theories regarding the extent to which colour, sound, and texture engage the viewer’s sensory experience of a film (Powell, 2012:169). Her conclusions regarding colour do not deviate from the previous discussions regarding the use of colour in *Suspiria*. She does however present interesting ideas regarding texture and sound (Deleuze’s *tactisigns* and *sonsigns* respectively).

According to Powell (2012:172) the textures in the film are mostly linked with the repellent stimuli, like the close-up shots of the wriggling maggots that fall from the ceiling, the stickiness of the artificial blood, and the smooth cold steel of a knife. Simply put, the viewer ‘feels’ the wriggling of a maggot, the sticky warm blood, and the cold, hard, and impersonal steel of a knife as the sensation of

touch is artificially and virtually created within the mind of the viewer (Powell, 2012:173). This tactile experience contributes to the aesthetic experience of the film.

The same effect is achieved through the audio and music of *Suspiria* (Powell, 2012:173). Any viewer would immediately notice that *Suspiria*'s dialogue is dubbed. Most of the other sounds in the film are also artificially created, like footsteps, thunder, squeaks, and rustles (Powell, 2012:173). The film's soundtrack by the band *Goblin* is also layered over scenes as is the practice in most films to add to the mood and ambience of a scene. The fast tempo of the music and alien prog-rock progressions add to the unnerving ambience of the film. Sound bypasses the cerebral cortex and is directly absorbed by the central nervous system which means that you feel sound before you ascribe meaning to it (Powell, 2012:174). For instance, a loud crack of thunder causes an immediate fight or flight reaction in the listener. A beautiful piece of music similarly causes the hairs on the arms, neck, and head to stand up. These are all involuntary reactions which the mind cannot control. This creates a different sensory experience of a film that enhances the narrative in a unique sensory way (Powell, 2012:174).

Similar to Powell's study of sensory experience we find Gavin F. Hurley's study that combines Jean Baudrillard's simulational aesthetics and Kenneth Burke's theories regarding rhetoric, persuasion, and transcendence (Hurley, 2019:131). Hurley (2019:132) uses Noël Carroll's theory regarding horror's paradoxical ability to simultaneously attract and repulse the viewer as foundation for his study. He specifically comments on Argento's ability to strike a balance between the surreal, explicit violence, and aesthetic pleasure (Hurley, 2019:132).

According to Hurley (2019:135-136) *Suspiria* succeeds in presenting the viewer with a hyper-reality where the irrational cannot be compared to an ideal or negative existence. In other words, the brutal murders drenched in fake blood within an artificially constructed and extremely beautiful set with unnatural lighting and use of colour, constitute a scene that is completely removed from reality (transcends reality). These brutal, bizarre, and beautiful scenes are not realistic portrayals of such gruesome and unplanned murders. The scenes become something beyond reality which fascinates and repels simultaneously. I find this distinctly Dionysian as it rejects and challenges defined (Apollonian) notions of a murder scene. Furthermore it creates a miasma of emotion and experience which is difficult to define – a chaotic and unruly battle between emotions.

Many of the scholars' research discussed thus far refer to the set pieces and architecture. In most instances the architecture and set designed is viewed as beautiful artificial boxes in which events transpire. Joshua Schulze (2019:73) has a novel approach to the architecture in *Suspiria* and says that the ornamental style used extensively in the interior sets of the film is feminine which in turn suggests that women are dangerous and deceptive and that their bodies are "unknowable and treacherous".

Schulze (2019:75) specifically uses the word ‘pretty’ to describe the rooms or set pieces in *Suspiria*. The rooms frequently contain beautiful floral wallpaper with equally beautiful ornaments and furniture, all arranged in pleasing ways. Interior decoration and design is generally regarded as a feminine practice in the western world. By creating a safe and beautiful space, the audience is lulled into a false sense of security (Schulze, 2019:75). These decorative spaces seduce the audience in much the same way a pretty girl is able to seduce a heterosexual male (Schulze, 2019:75). A witch can similarly use witchcraft to seduce a man. Pretty interior decoration and architecture and witchcraft are consequently interchangeable in *Suspiria*. This implies that a woman’s touch in a building or home threatens masculinity (Schulze, 2019:75). This decorative cleanliness conceals dread, violence, and the abject (like the aforementioned maggots), of the monstrous feminine (Schulze, 2019:76). Furthermore, the dead bodies are placed in such ways that they also become ornaments within the space (Schulze, 2019:77). The paint-like quality of the blood and the unrealistic lighting and use of colour all make the dead seem like part of an elaborate work of art (Schulze, 2019:77-78). I found this especially fascinating as it implies that the witch is able to use Apollonian order, symmetry, and cleanliness to her advantage to again hide in plain sight. Schultze (2019:83) however arrives at a different conclusion and argues that Argento devalues the female body in *Suspiria* by equating it with pretty and throwaway household objects (Schulze, 2019:83).

Where Schulze’s witch is hidden behind a veneer of western symmetry and order, Lindsay Hallam (2017:211) finds that the witches in *Suspiria* (more specifically in *The Three Mothers* trilogy) draw from western esotericism and alchemy hidden in the *mise-en-scène*. She argues that the three witches and their supernatural abilities are expressed through cinematic elements, specifically light, colour, sound, and celluloid, making the narrative less important (Hallam, 2017:211). Though *Suspiria* is laden with Gothic tropes that link witchcraft with evil, she states that comparable links can be made between the *mise-en-scène* and alternative western occult traditions (Hallam, 2017:211-212).

As noted elsewhere, *Suspiria* is one of three films that together form The Three Mothers trilogy. Each of these three mothers or witches has a house in a different city across the globe. According to Hallam (2017:218) the number three is especially relevant. The first murder scene is littered with triangular shapes (Figure 11). The three witches are like other groupings of three women regularly found in mythology, namely, The Three Fates (popular figures in European polytheism who control destiny), The Three Furies (Greek chthonic deities of vengeance), and The Three Graces (Greek goddesses of charm, beauty, and creativity) (Hallam, 2017:216). These are all pre-Christian deities that are not necessarily personifications of evil (Hallam, 2017:216). One could argue that The Three Mothers are modern iterations of a pre-Christian female archetype (Hallam, 2017:216). In Christianity we find a similar idea with The Holy Trinity, but they are male, which could potentially suggest that three witches are the Dionysian antithesis of Apollonian Christianity.

The three homes of the witches are important not only because they house the witches, but the structure also hides them – the word ‘occult’ originating from the Latin *occultare* which means ‘to hide’ or ‘conceal’ (Hallam, 2017:216). Just as architecture is important in the Gothic genre (old churches and castles) so is architecture integral to *Suspiria* (Hallam, 2017:216). This is a valid argument in light of the previous scholarly engagements already discussed. Architecture and set design is far more important in *Suspiria* than character development or even plot. Hallam (2017:217) notes that the set designs and the various doors and corridors lead the viewer into hidden and undiscovered realities, creating a sense of the infinite just beyond the threshold of the doors or doorways (Hallam, 2017:217). The various triangles found throughout the first murder scene, the three irises that conceal the hidden entrance to the witches’ lair, the triangular shape of the blade that stabs Pat, all emphasise the number three (Hallam, 2017:218). In alchemy we also find the three primary elements, earth, fire, and water, while the Freemasons place the all-seeing eye of God in a triangle (Hallam, 2017:218).

Hallam (2017:219) draws similar parallels between alchemy and the cinematic process. She specifically draws inspiration from Christopher Nolan who describes cinema as a special form of alchemy where dreams are captured on spools of plastic (Hallam, 2017:219). When you shine light through the plastic and unroll it at a specific frame rate, static images become dreams or alternate realities that can be viewed on a screen or a wall which in turn activates the imagination of the viewer – a type of “transmutation of material substances” (Hallam, 2017:219). Additionally, the oversaturated primary colours in *Suspiria* overwhelm the viewer’s senses which are also mirrored by Suzy’s constant fainting and grogginess (Hallam, 2017:220).

Finally we arrive at three books devoted to Argento’s oeuvre. Maitland McDonagh’s *Broken Mirrors/Broken Minds: The Dark Dreams of Dario Argento* (2010), L. Andrew Cooper’s *Dario Argento* (2012), and Alexandra Heller-Nicholas’s *Devil’s Advocates: Suspiria* (2015) are all works devoted to Argento’s filmography and style.

McDonagh (2010:30) focuses on repeating elements in Argento’s work, isolating these elements, and then discussing them. His text starts with a cursory discussion of *Suspiria*’s Gothic roots by comparing the film to Mary Shelley’s *Frankenstein* (1818), Robert Louis Stevenson’s *Strange Case of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde* (1886), and Bram Stoker’s *Dracula* (1897) (McDonagh, 2010:165-167). He specifically takes note of how dreams served as inspiration for the three novels and Argento’s film, while also mentioning how all four works inspired legions of other writers and filmmakers to create similar texts (McDonagh, 2010:165-166). This influence should be taken note of as it links back to Bloom’s theories regarding influence which is relevant for this study, but also Levinson’s New Historicist approach. I remind the reader that Levinson proposes that a text be tracked through time as texts become relevant again at different points in time due to the new sociocultural positions of new

readers. Additionally, these flare-ups are reframed and reinterpreted leading to novel readings and interpretations of said texts. The three novels mentioned have been remade and reimagined into numerous films and works of fiction with each new incarnation being a reflection and product of the society of the time (McDonagh, 2010:166-167).

He also draws on Vladimir Propp's *Morphology of the Folktale* (1958) to illustrate *Suspiria*'s fairy tale-like qualities, like Suzy's supernatural journey, the obstacles she faces along the way which include evil witches, but also references to the bizarre and grotesque (McDonagh, 2010:169-173, 177). He does however suggest that Propp's system was intended to be applied to more primitive Russian folktales (McDonagh, 2010:169-173, 179).

The rest of McDonagh's analysis draws almost the same conclusions as the previously discussed scholars regarding the number three, the use of light, colour, and *mise-en-scène*, but in far less detail than the ones discussed elsewhere in this section (McDonagh, 2010:179-194).

L. Andrew Cooper's *Dario Argento* (2012) focuses on violence in Argento's oeuvre, but not just violence perpetrated towards the characters, but also the violent visual and auditory assault the viewer experiences (Cooper, 2012:1-2). Cooper (2012:2) specifically refers to the previously discussed book by Maitland McDonagh as "groundbreaking", while also distancing his own study from that of his predecessor. Cooper (2012:2) says that he is more interested in the extent to which Argento challenges notions of the filmmaking art.

Cooper (2012:5-7) specifically questions feminist psychoanalytical studies of Argento, like those by Carol Clover and Laura Mulvey, and argues that Argento expects the viewer to identify with his films and characters on more complex levels than just as a male or female. He says this is done though the identities of the killers who are hardly ever overtly identified in the films (Cooper, 2012:7). I partially agree with this assessment as the hands or perpetrators in each murder in *Suspiria* are never the same. Pat and Sonia are clearly murdered by male hands and arms, Daniel's throat is ripped out by his own guide-dog, while Sarah is chased by an unidentified person into a small room where her throat is cut by male or female gloved hands brandishing a sharp razor. On the other hand one cannot ignore this statement: "I (Argento) like women, especially beautiful ones. If they have a good face and figure, I would much prefer to watch them being murdered than an ugly girl or man" (Schoel, 1985:56). This statement can be interpreted as misogynist, but it could also just mean that Argento prefers to see more women in cinematic productions.

Cooper devotes a whole chapter to *Suspiria*. He mostly picks apart the visual strategies Argento uses to draw attention to *Suspiria*'s beautiful imagery while coming to many of the same conclusions already discussed regarding the use of sound, colour, architecture, fairy tales, Escher's art, aesthetic

experience, and the flights between reality and the world of the supernatural (Cooper, 2012:75-88). Cooper's analyses are however far less detailed than those of the previously discussed scholars. His text serves as a primer to scholars who might have an interest in Argento's films, but is not as comprehensive and nuanced as the work of the scholars already discussed.

Alexandra Heller-Nicholas's *Devil's Advocates: Suspiria* (2015) is a remarkable book that specifically focuses on *Suspiria*. Her text combines the various ideas already discussed by other scholars, but between the covers of one text. In her introduction, Heller-Nicholas (2015:8-9) examines the cinematic witch from her origins in *Snow White and the Seven Dwarves* and *The Wizard of Oz*, to her appearance in horror films like *Häxan*, *Black Sunday*, and *Jack's Wife*, as well as their influence on *Suspiria* (Heller-Nicholas, 2015:8-9).

Heller-Nicholas (2015:14) also gives us a concise and informative summary of the feminist arguments that criticise Argento. She argues that because bodies are on display in *Suspiria* it becomes impossible to remove mention of gender from Argento's films (Heller-Nicholas, 2015:15). The most frequent criticism directed at Argento is the accusation of misogyny (Heller-Nicholas, 2015:15). The criticism is not without merit as he frequently in many of his films glamorizes and sexualizes the murder of women (Heller-Nicholas, 2015:15). In *Suspiria*, however, I find this to be not entirely accurate. Though the murdered bodies are placed within a beautifully constructed environment, I was never under the impression that the murders were glamorised or sexualised.

Heller-Nicholas (2015:15) suggests that the accusations against Argento have more to do with Carol J. Clover's judgement against Argento and all other horror film directors in her book, *Men, Women and Chainsaws: Gender in the Modern Horror Film*, than with the viewer's reality Clover immortalizing Argento in her highly influential text and grouping all male directors as chauvinist pigs placed Argento in an unfortunate position in the public discourse (Heller-Nicholas, 2015:15). Heller-Nicholas (2015:15) argues that there are too many instances in Argento's films where he collapses the boundaries between the traditional genders. For instance, Argento hired well-known transsexual Eva Robbins to star in his *Tenebre* (1982). He has also had women playing men (*Deep Red* – 1975) and men playing women (*Four Flies on Grey Velvet* – 1971) in his films. She does however also state that there are other problems in some instances with the way he represents homosexuality which suggests ambivalence at best (Heller-Nicholas, 2015:16).

Jessica Harper, who plays Suzy in *Suspiria*, has been forthcoming about Argento's consistent positive treatment of women on set (Heller-Nicholas, 2015:18). Heller-Nicholas (2015:15) similarly takes note that *Suspiria* does not contain the obligatory naked chest shots of women that was found in almost every horror film at the time, nor did chest size influence him in choosing the cast members (Heller-Nicholas, 2015:18).

Heller-Nicholas's book contains three chapters that dissect *Suspiria*. The first chapter considers *Suspiria*'s position within the international sphere of horror cinema, while the second chapter is a scene-by-scene analysis of the film. The last chapter considers the reception of the film at the time of its release, but also how it became even more popular over the decades and the extent of its influence over other films and popular culture. To discuss these chapters here would be futile as there is just too much to consider and many of its foci overlap with what has been discussed in the previous sections. I thus present below the most relevant of her findings for this study.

Heller-Nicholas (2015:28-29) suspects that Argento might have been influenced by the works of H.P. Lovecraft while working on the script for *Suspiria*. Argento was tasked with producing a film inspired by the works of H.P. Lovecraft before he began work on *Suspiria*, but backed out because Lovecraft's stories contain elements which he considered to be too abstract and unfilmable (Heller-Nicholas, 2015:28; McDonagh, 2010:168). Lovecraft's stories for instance contain references to colours that do not exist, monsters that cannot be described and that drive men to madness. One could argue that Argento could have been inspired to embody the witches through abstract means like colour, lighting, setting, and sound in *Suspiria* due to the initial research and planning he was doing for the Lovecraft film. Argento distancing himself from Lovecraft while making use of the Lovecraftian tropes suggests Bloom's *daemonization*. As mentioned, Argento argued that Lovecraft's stories are unfilmable, yet he found ways around the technical problems and filmed unnatural colours and 'indescribable' monsters. He achieves the same dread and foreboding through style and not narrative that Lovecraft achieved without relying too much on plot.

Suzy radiates innocence which is placed in contrast to the evil and supernatural world of the witches she journeys through (Heller-Nicholas, 2015:45). The music, the sensory overload, and almost claustrophobic ambience of the film threatens to drown Suzy and viewer alike (Heller-Nicholas, 2015:45-47). The witches are in many instances embodied through abstract forms and mostly cause harm while in these forms.

The rest of Heller-Nicholas's book consists of scene-by-scene discussions of the film, the enduring reception the film has to this day, as well as its cultural impact. The final paragraph in the text seems fitting as a conclusion to this section (Heller-Nicholas, 2015:76):

Suspiria's exquisite terror stems from the dark beauty of losing control. It champions the chaos of the senses over the rationality of the intellect. It demands that we let light, sound and colour move us. *Suspiria* is a carnival, a dance, a poem, and above all else, a glorious deathblow to the assumed supremacy of logic and reason.

In addition to the aesthetic experience that drives the film, there is one more aspect that requires a closing statement. As mentioned, Suzy's implied fragility and the torture and death of women in Argento's oeuvre have led to criticism with some accusing Argento of perpetuating stereotypes (Constanso, 2014:280). In most of these instances critics argue that Argento tends to paint young women as helpless victims and older women as embodiments of evil (Constanso, 2014:280). This may be true, but as discussed throughout this section it does seem to be more complicated than that. I found Argento as not trying to make either a feminist or patriarchal statement with *Suspiria*, nor does he seem to harbour ill-feelings or hatred towards women. Argento has expressed on many occasions that his film mirrors his attempts at critical engagement with cinematic conventions (Cooper, 2012:2). Nowhere is this last aspect more obvious than with *Suspiria*. *Suspiria* seems more like a film medium experiment that pushes the boundaries of what can be done with film in the hands of someone who is a master of their craft.

Dionysian tropes and societal influences

In films like *Häxan* and *Black Sunday* we find young witches who are sexualised. In *Suspiria* we find many young women who attend a ballet school, but they are never sexualised. During the 1970s *giallo* films were generally laden with scenes of sex and nudity, yet Argento does not make use of this popular trope of the time (Hughes, 2011:242). One could however argue that *Suspiria* contains a different type of pornography, namely one of violence. Paglia (2001:95-96, 102) associates brutal violence and the rending of flesh with Dionysus. The young dancers are never sexualised, and Suzy, who Argento admits is based in Disney's *Snow White and the Seven Dwarves*, is a virgin princess whose virginity is frozen in time. By freezing her virginity on celluloid film Suzy becomes an example of Apollonian control. There are two ways to interpret this obvious conflict between the Apollonian and the Dionysian.

On the surface the old witches challenge patriarchal western Apollonian society by destroying an avatar of feminine purity and beauty. Another way to interpret this is to consider Paglia's association between the Dionysian and cannibalism. Paglia (2001:96) says that Dionysian cult members dismembered and devoured animals and people in order to become them. The devouring in *Suspiria* occurs metaphorically and has more to do with the buildings and architecture than with literal cannibalism.

Consider the lobby in Figure 11 where Pat and Sonia are killed. The colours, the cased opening in the middle, the stairs, and the walls seem to represent the opening of a woman's thighs, specifically those of Helena Markos. The cased opening and stars suggest the vagina. The same can be said about the

highly ornate elevator in the same area (Figure 12). The elevator is decorated in an Art Nouveau style which indicates the feminine. Above the elevator doors there is a pink triangular light containing three lights – one per floor of the building. The triangles represent the number three and the film contains three witches who embody the Dionysian. The cased opening and the elevator are treaded openings – non-virginal openings – that swallow Pat and Sonia, ultimately killing them brutally. Like new born babies expelled from a female body, so are Pat and Sonia covered in blood (Dionysian liquid). Their birth is also an inversion of the birth of a child, as the women are adults and are quite dead. If this is true, then Pat and Sonia simply return to the primordial Dionysian swamp where they are assimilated by nature and redistributed to the cycle of life. The witches thus do not destroy out of vengeance or malice, nor do they identify as murderers or with the act of murder, since they only destroyed two meat vessels. The viewer's disgust at the murders mirrors the Apollonian. Paglia (2001:93) says: "Nothing disgusts Dionysus because he contains everything that is... Disgust always indicates some misalignment toward or swerving away from the maternal... Disgust is Apollonian fear a melting border line..."

The murders of Pat and Sonia can be considered as decidedly Dionysian as the acts do not just mirror society's disgust, but the inversion of a birth is a swerve away from what we consider to be a normal human birth. Helena Markos is a witch, a colour, and many buildings in *Suspiria*, in other words she is a manifestation of Dionysian reality within the Apollonian reality. The rooms are all beautifully designed and symmetrical – hallmarks of the Apollonian – but they are appropriated by the Dionysian to create a false sense of security in the eyes of the viewer. Dionysus reaches out through the screen and reminds us that she can hide in plain sight and destroy from within.

Much has been said about the *mise-en-scène* in *Suspiria* and how some scholars perceive it as glamourizing the graphic killing of women. From the above paragraph it seems that it is far more complicated. It is true that voyeurism, the frozen woman, and the objectification of a woman are Apollonian (Paglia, 2001:96). The elaborate and artificial scenes framing the murders are voyeuristic and the women are frozen by killing them, thus rendering them immobile objects. Visual aesthetics, however, is Apollonian, as are the boundaries "that lead to convention, constraint, oppression" (Paglia, 2001:96). A reaction and distaste at these scenes reflect Apollonian norms. The norms exist because the Apollonian is so pervasive throughout society. We claim disgust, yet if it disgusted us so much then it would not be allowed to exist. *Suspiria* reflects the constant and complicated challenges that exist within society and how the two manifest within each other, further mirroring the human psyche's battle between the higher cortical functions, our limbic system, and the basal ganglia (the reptilian brain).

Related to the trope of the sexualised witch is the link between age and power. In the previously discussed films we see a definite link between age and power. This trope is again present in *Suspiria*, but with the witches having far more supernatural power than any of those in the previous films. Suzy, however, is no witch and is still able to destroy the three witches and their base of power, the dance academy. Suzy's victory over the old witches could mirror societal norms regarding older women.

Age and youthfulness are prominent features in this film and the camera rarely zooms in on Miss Tanner or Madame Blanc. With the exception of one or two very short scenes for each of the characters, the camera hardly ever comes close to their faces. The young protagonist is often shown up close, at times even unnecessarily. The other co-stars and attractive background ballerinas are also often viewed up close. In this way the camerawork draws attention to youth and beauty, but also to physical appearance as such. Helena Marcos who fills a symbolic space of extreme old age and the abject is only shown in shadow in one scene and then revealed in extreme close-ups at the end of the film. The close-ups zoom in on her eyes and lips in an attempt to shock the audience and to draw attention to her rotting features, further emphasising the focus on physical appearance (figures 19 and 20).



Figure 19. *Suspiria*. 1977. Directed by Dario Argento. [Film still from DVD] USA: Anchor Bay.

Beauty is a similarly reoccurring theme throughout the film. From the beautiful scenes of Italian and German architecture and elaborate and sometimes artificial set pieces to the decorative wallpapers and bright vivid colours and lighting throughout the film, beauty is everywhere. Just as the camera dotes on the beautiful young dancers throughout the film, it also hones in on architectural decoration and symmetrical beauty (figures 18 and 21).



Figure 20. *Suspiria*. 1977. Directed by Dario Argento. [Film still from DVD] USA: Anchor Bay.



Figure 21. *Suspiria*. 1977. Directed by Dario Argento. [Film still from DVD] USA: Anchor Bay.

Beauty and youth are tied to the dated so-called triad of fertility some use to describe a woman's life course, namely as maid, mother, and widow, with the apex being motherhood (Botelho, 2015:189). An older woman, or a sexually barren or unattractive woman, does not fit in the societal schema of fertility and the old are often viewed as a burden to the younger generations (Botelho, 2015:189). This is not a new perspective and old age has been seen as death's herald for centuries (Botelho, 2015:191-195). The old hag or witch is synonymous with disease, old age, anti-fertility, and partially responsible for the witch stereotype in the first place (Banerjee, 2003:63; Botelho, 2015:193; Ginzburg, 1991:70, 73, 74; Parks, 2012:8-9; Waite, 2007:103, 183). The idea of associating the old witch with death seems ironic since some older women who were accused of witchcraft were sometimes mid-wives and healers making the witch stereotype most probably a distortion purposefully created by the church (Ginzburg, 1991:13, 74; Waite, 2007:23, 41, 67).

This distortion hypothesis seems especially plausible when one considers that witches were often portrayed during the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries as having wild orgies with each other, animals,

demons, and the devil (Botelho, 2015:196; Ginzburg, 1991:74; Waite, 2007: 8, 12, 153-154). A righteous Christian man, though titillated by these images, might see himself as less experienced and sexually inferior to a woman who has had so much sexual experience. The church could potentially have ensured that their flocks stayed clear of women with healing abilities and their propagation by praying on their fears of male inadequacy. The church has and still does reinforce the idea of the celibate or monogamous relationship (Apollonian) as the ideal over sexual freedom (Botelho, 2015:195). The idea of sex for the sake of pleasure (Dionysian) was also frowned upon during the time of the witch hunts, and the idea of an older women having sex for pleasure was regarded with fear and suspicion (Botelho, 2015:195). One also has to consider the likelihood of miscarriages or birth defects in older women during the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries which could have caused severe strain on a society and societal resources (Lampi, 2011:365). The fear women experience of late pregnancies is to this day exacerbated by the media and social circles, while the truth is that advances in medicine have rendered these dangers less dire as many would believe (Lampi, 2011:366, 371).

Suzy destroying the witches and their home suggests western society's preference for young and beautiful women, but also women who can bear children – in other words heterosexual young women specifically. The destruction of the academy which was also a home for the witches and the other ballerinas is loaded with meaning. A home represents a way of life and a place where children are raised and develop in a certain way. The destruction of the building means the destruction of a certain way of life, or a specific context in which children are raised. The dancers are children when we consider the big doors, the placement of the handles, and the vaulted ceilings. The predominantly female residents of the school can also suggest a homosocial micro-society, similar to the Amazonians we find in Greek mythology. This micro-society lends power to the witches as the dancers slowly conform to the witches' values and society. As more followers are added, the more their power grows. Suzy's rejection of this way of life is mirrored by her stabbing Helena Markos with an ornate quill (a phallic object) which leads to the spontaneous destruction of the other witches and the academy.

Suzy versus the witches could also reflect western society's ageism. The fear of growing old and dying is a universal one. Average life expectancies have increased significantly over the last century due to research and medical advances and so has quality of life at old age (Dhana, et al., 2016:209-210). Death is commonly regarded by many as an evil, especially amongst the religious, even though no real link exists between death and evil (Small, 2002:308). As old age is the precursor to death, it becomes easier to associate the old and decaying with evil. Negative associations with ageing in society have been well-documented (Allen & Lincoln, 2004:611). Women are especially prone to age-related biases as they become older effectively shortening their careers and economic participation (Allen & Lincoln, 2004:614; Nelson, 2016:194). Similarly women have historically not been cast in

lead film roles due to the notion that the film will not gross as much as a film with a male lead (Allen & Lincoln, 2004:615). These biases, specifically within the film industry, are due to three reasons: the personal biases and preferences of producers, and the composition and preferences of the film audience, and how attractive the woman is (Allen & Lincoln, 2004:627). The first reason is irrational and not based on any scientific reasoning. The second reason may play a significant role, but the audience's composition and choice of film is directly influenced by societal norms. This links with the final reason where the level of attractiveness is concerned – society dictates what is considered attractive and what is not. These standards of beauty are not static and change over time. Furthermore, as discussed in the sections about *Black Sunday* and *Night of the Eagle*, beauty standards could be influenced by socio-cultural conditioning as a result of biological functioning, like the ability to procreate and giving birth to healthy offspring (England & McClintock, 2009:797-816). As mentioned, Argento has on record stated that he enjoys casting beautiful women in his films. Also, when we consider Argento's style and his motivations for creating the film it seems less likely that he had much consideration for the average audience member and was more concerned with creating a work of art. This implies that the women cast in all the roles of the films were chosen by Argento himself and that society had but a small role to play in his choice of cast members. As noted, however, though there are many beautiful young women in *Suspiria*, there are no instances of the women being deliberately sexualised. Furthermore, the older witches are very powerful and do not seem to act irrationally in their choice of victims. Helana Markos's exaggerated age and horrific appearance does however suggest the fear of an aged woman.

Recent studies have confirmed that ageism has not received the same attention as studies on racial and gender prejudices yet it is just as institutionalised in society as racism and sexism (Nelson, 2016:191, 193). This fear or anxiety towards the old can be rooted in societal fears and misconceptions like resources that are used to assist the old who are often unable to contribute economically, or quality of life as one reaches retirement age, but also a fear of loneliness and abandonment. This fear is also likely linked to a fear of the inevitability of death.

Suspiria's Helena Marcos symbolises all these fears and more especially during the 1970s and the 1980s. She is old and powerful and has not relinquished her status and position of power to a younger person, which implies resources that are not shared. She also does not seem to contribute to the training of the new dancers that join the academy meaning that she has an uncanny hold over the other younger witches who are doing all the work. Much like the younger workforce who indirectly experiences the presence of the elderly by contributing to the growth and sustainability of society while keeping the elderly fed, healthy and safe, so is Helena's presence felt throughout the film. Colour and *mise-en-scène* is used throughout the film to suggest the presence of Markos with her physical appearance only briefly revealed at the end of the film. When Markos's appears from the

shadows she does not just look old, but diseased as well. Where the old witches in *Häxan* are just very old, Markos's appearance is exaggerated to unrealistic levels, implying Bloom's *clinamen* as Argento uses the fear of old age and disease to scare the audience. This can be considered a corrective movement on Argento's part as a normal old person is not as unfamiliar anymore as it would have been during the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries. Markos reminds the viewer of suffering and losing control of the physical body as the elderly sometimes experience. Her abject appearance reminds the viewer of society's preoccupation with beauty and attractiveness and that the unattractive will die alone no matter how much power or wealth they wield. Lastly she symbolises infertility and the inability to pass on her genes and thus gaining immortality through her children.

The abject is again associated with the witch in *Suspiria*, but in this film the abject is beautifully lit, coloured, and positioned within elaborate set pieces. In other words, the recognisable abject is placed within an unfamiliar context, making it an example of Bloom's *tesserae*. The maggots raining from the ceiling in the dormitory of the school is one of the few instances where Argento does not use *mise-en-scène*. Like the camera zooms in on Markos's eyes and mouth, so is the audience subjected to close-ups and lingering shots of wriggling maggots between fingers, in combs, on faces, being crushed under foot, and devouring rotting meat (Figure 22 & 23).



Figure 22. *Suspiria*. 1977. Directed by Dario Argento. [Film still from DVD] USA: Anchor Bay.

Maggots are associated with flies, death, and rotting things. The close-ups of beauty, the abject, and Markos's decaying visage are undoubtedly linked with one another and emphasise physical appearance and cultural biases associated with the age of a woman. A young woman is not linked to maggots and death. The young women scream and become hysterical when the maggots rain down on them, while Ms. Tanner is shown to be more annoyed with the chaos caused by the maggots than with the maggots themselves.



Figure 23. *Suspiria*. 1977. Directed by Dario Argento. [Film still from DVD] USA: Anchor Bay.

Interestingly, blood and gore are not made abject in *Suspiria*, due to the colour of the blood and lighting coupled with the set arrangements. Argento succeeds in making murder aesthetically pleasing to the eye in a similar way that Caravaggio's *Judith Beheading Holofernes* (1598-1599) does in Figure 24.

Maggots are also intrinsically linked to nature. In nature death is a veritable smorgasbord for insects, bacteria, maggots, and flies. Decaying and rotting things do not just feed these creatures, but also give them a fertile substratum in which to lay eggs and procreate – an orgy of flies. Life is thus enabled through the vegetation mythology where decay is part of the cycle of life. The maggot is Dionysian because of this. It does not experience the rotting as abject or repulsive. A maggot excretes enzymes over its food to feed (Connor, 2006:117, 121-122). The enzymes liquefy the food making it easier for the maggot to digest (Connor, 2006:117, 121-122, 162). This process is not dissimilar from the Dionysian primal liquids Paglia (2001:92) describes in *Sexual Personae*. The maggot destroys, like Dionysus, to create something new. As the maggot transforms into a fly, so can Dionysus change sex, shape, and form (Paglia, 2001:89, 91, 92, 95). Interestingly, the proverbial expression 'the biting of the maggot of madness' was popular during the eighteenth century (Connor, 2006:168-169). This madness referred to the flights of fancy or reading addictions associated with ungoverned reading (Connor, 2006:168-169). Dionysus is also associated with madness (Paglia, 2001:96, 576).



Figure 24. Michelangelo Merisi da Caravaggio. 1598-1599. Judith Beheading Holofernes. Rome: Galleria Nazionale d'Arte Antica at Palazzo Barberini. Medium: Oil on canvas.

Considering all the instances where the witches in *Suspiria* challenge Apollonian societal structures, it becomes obvious that the witches challenge not just western societal values, but also the traditional family unit. It is however more complex than in the case of *Häxan*. In *Häxan* the witches use potions to make men and church clergy fall in love with them. In *Suspiria* the witches strike down young women who are yet to be married. In other words, the witches do not break up already established families, but destroy potential families before they come into being. This can be described as a course correction, or *clinamen*, as it veers off from what Christensen established in *Häxan*.

There is another similar course correction related to the supernatural in *Suspiria*. In *Häxan* and all the other films discussed thus far, the witch has only possessed people. Daniel's guide dog is possessed and rips out the blind pianist's throat one evening after they visit the local pub. Earlier that day Daniel was fired from the dance academy when his dog bit Albert, Madame Blanc's nephew. Daniel explains to Ms. Tanner that his dog is not aggressive and would only bite if provoked.

Pets turned monster is a common trope in horror films and novels, like Stephen King's *Coju* (1981) and *Pet Sematary* (1983). In many instances household pets are treated like family members. Owners talk to their dogs and cats and shower them with affection like one would a child. All pets, however, are domesticated animals, in other words, pets are creatures that were taken from the wild and tamed.

This suggests a type of control which is in essence Apollonian. Removing domesticity from an animal would result in it becoming wild again. Like a wolf attacks its prey's neck or throat, so does Daniel's German Shepherd, a dog breed that closely resembles a wolf, rip out Daniel's throat. The witches are connected with nature, and thus possess the dog, unleashing his primal nature. A double blow is rendered to the Apollonian through this action, as a man is killed, but his companion and best friend is also killed. The act also challenges western society as it raises fears regarding domesticated pets. In an earlier chapter I also explore the parallels that exist between parasites and possession. Rabies is exactly the type of parasite that could cause an otherwise placid pet to harm children and parents. A large rabies outbreak, for instance, could destabilize a community.

In John Carpenter's *The Thing* (1982) we find almost the same situation where an alien takes the shape of a sled dog and is welcomed into a research station in Antarctica. The dog assimilates the other dogs by turning them into liquid and absorbing their genetic material. It does the same thing to almost all the people at the station. We find a similar context in *Suspiria*, albeit on a much smaller scale. As I have mentioned in previous sections, the witch's greatest skill is her ability to blend in with the rest of society. A witch's connection with nature allows her to have familiars and have these animals do her bidding. A pet, like a dog, cat, or a rat is a potential slave for a witch. She can bend an entire neighbourhood's pets to her will and have them murder entire households.

In *Häxan* witches are reported to serve Satan or other demonic entities, while *Suspiria* makes no mention of this. There are also no symbols or icons of the occult in the film. In the two sequels of the film, *Inferno* and *Mother of Tears* it is revealed that the three mothers are the mothers of evil, placing them on the same level as the Devil. This means that their power is all their own and might not originate from an external force. This resembles Bloom's *kenosis* where the creator of a text consciously disregards what came before. The witch in servitude of a devil or demon is deeply engrained into the witch mythology, like the broom or boiling cauldron. By completely ignoring it and changing what came before makes Helena Markos seem new and original.

None of the three witches seem to be bothered by men or harbour any hate or resentment towards male figures. The only man who is killed in the film is Daniel and he does not represent the typical western male ideal due to his disability. When the witches also strike down their enemies it seems cold and calculated, further removing *Suspiria*'s witches from the mad, angry, and chaotic witch we frequently find in films and literature.

Conclusion

Where *Jack's Wife* challenged societal conventions of age and beauty of the time, *Suspiria* seems to mirror societal norms by emphasising beauty and youth. Helena Markos is an exaggeration of old age, making old age more abject, thus drawing further parallels between the film and society.

Furthermore, in the previously discussed films we see a definite link between age and power. This trope is again present in *Suspiria*, but with the witches having far more supernatural power than any of those in the previous films, mirroring the gradual gains women have made in society to become equal with their male counterparts.

In many instances *Suspiria* challenges western society and even seems feminist. What is most fascinating about the film is how Argento replaces the witch's physical body with light, colour, sound, and *mise-en-scène*. The witches' presence is felt throughout, yet they are never shown to set foot outside the dance academy.

It is unfortunate that the film makes no mention of the societal upheavals that occurred at the time of production in Berlin where the film is supposedly taking place. There are, however, parallels between the witches and the extremist left-wing groups that were active in Italy and Germany at the time. This makes *Suspiria* a valuable New Historicist text in itself to glimpse more of this violent period in Western Europe. I discuss the RAF further in the 2018 remake of *Suspiria* which is analysed later in this thesis.

Jack's Wife and *Suspiria* separately serve as precursors for what was to come in the 1980s. Eighties horror films like *Friday the 13th* (1980), *Nightmare on Elm Street* (1984), *Hellraiser* (1987), and *Night of the Demons* (1988) all feature numerous scenes of graphic violence, sex, and nudity in combination. They also used similar production techniques found in *Jack's Wife* and *Suspiria* but the directors were more focussed on creating film as a product instead of as an artistic exercise or to challenge filmmaking norms.

THE EIGHTIES: *NIGHT OF THE DEMONS* (1988) AND *WITCHCRAFT II: THE TEMPTRESS* (1989)

With this chapter I again problematize the intersection of gender, culture, and power in the witch horror movie by activating Levinson's New Historicist method. As discussed in the methodology chapter I specifically trace the tropes established in *Häxan* and how they reverberate through subsequent films. These reverberations at times remain static, but in most instances they are modified in accordance with the prevailing sociocultural norms of the time in which the film was produced by either challenging said norms or simply reflecting them.

The horror film genre became commercialised during the eighties and many successful horror films spawned a slew of sequels in an attempt to duplicate the success and resulting profits of the original. These films became franchises in their own right which in turn led to many imitators producing similar films. *Gremlins* (1984), for instance, was so immensely popular in the eighties that it led to the production of similar mini-monster films like *Critters* (1986-2019), *Ghoulies* (1985-1994), *Munchies* (1987), and *Hobgoblins* (1988), to name a few.

Films were not the only victims of this oversaturated commercialisation. Pop culture as a whole became increasingly commercialised in North America. Madonna's 1984 album, *Like a Virgin*, contained the popular song *Material Girl*, which was a satirical take on the American materialistic youth of the eighties (Faith, 1997:43). The western world, especially the United States was trapped in the so-called 'decade of greed' (see Barbara Ehrenreich's 1991 book *The Worst Years of Our Lives: Irreverent Notes from the Decade of Greed*; Paarlberg, 2015:115).

Policies in the US changed under the leadership of Ronald Reagan with the most important ones being the revival of the American economy through the ending of confiscatory taxation, public health programs, urban renewal, well-funded schools, and any other programs meant to alleviate poverty (Davies & Hudson, 2008:1). Emphasis was placed on making money and serving a larger capitalist agenda where 'greed is good' – at the expense of society (Bourne, 2008:53; Davies & Hudson, 2008:1-3). Films like Oliver Stone's *Wall Street* (1987) and Dire Straights' hit song *Money for Nothing* (1985) further exemplified this ethos of excess of the time.

Evidence of these excesses of the 1980s can be found everywhere in North American culture to this day. From the fast food they consume and the resultant obesity to the amount of fuel they use annually (Paarlberg, 2015:viii, 1). Robert Paarlberg (2015:1) states that this is mostly due to American society having a general higher income which enables them to afford cheap and mass-produced items that

they do not really need. Due to these income-to-food/fuel ratios, most individuals have excess disposable funds enabling a high living standard, which in turn has led to a bored society who seeks happiness in the acquisition of material goods (Paarlberg, 2015:3; Schaefer, 2003:1-2).

An American horror film produced in the 1980s should be viewed through this lens of American excess and consumption. Like a cheap and disposable McDonalds burger meal which is composed out of extras, like French fries, a soda or a milkshake – all available in different sizes and with or without additional extras like pickles and cheese – so were disposable American movies made available to the public during the 1980s. A horror movie is not just a film filled with supernatural murder, it can have extras, like sex and nudity. With this chapter I use Levinson's New Historicist approach to find evidence of American greed and excess and how it influenced or mirrored the witch tropes in two films, namely *Night of the Demons* (1988) and *Witchcraft II: The Temptress* (1989). Interestingly, both films have many sequels, further aligning these films with the eighties zeitgeist.

One also has to consider the implications of profits in the film industry as it intersects with gender, power, and culture. Women were paid to be sexually objectified in eighties horror films to increase the films' profitability. Women were also frequently brutally assaulted and murdered in these films by male monsters, which suggests questions related to power. Additionally, the popularity of these types of films among the general viewing public raises some interesting issues regarding culture. For instance, why would anyone pay to see a young naked woman in a shower getting sliced in half by a machete? As someone who has viewed hundreds of American horror films I can confidently state that most of the eighties horror films are predictable and have unimaginative plots. Stephen Prince (2007:18) argues the same and says that due to most horror films being straight to home video productions, most of the eighties horror films are cheap, coarse, and vulgar, with only a few noteworthy films like Kubrick's *The Shining* (1980), Wadleigh's *Wolfen* (1981), Cronenberg's *The Dead Zone* (1983), *The Fly* (1986), and *Dead Ringers* (1988). The stories were not the primary draws for these films, especially with each subsequent sequel lacking even more than their predecessors, which suggests that the film's controversial content was more important, which is another aspect many New Historicists, like Levinson, are especially interested in as it relates to the user's experience of the film. It should also be noted that New Historicism was firmly established as an academic discourse during the eighties (Drakakis & Fludernik, 2014:505).

The eighties horror film context

By the mid-1980s 20% of American households owned a videocassette recorder, or VCR (Greenberg, 2008:72). The VHS format used in these machines meant that films became affordable and easy to produce (Picket & Prueher, 2011:7-8). By 1988 approximately 60 million homes in the US alone had a home VCR (Bordwell & Thompson, 2002:680). Thousands of video rental stores consequently opened and by 1986 there were 25,000 retailers in the US alone – and all these store owners needed product to rent out to customers (Greenberg, 2008:123).

During the early 1980s many film studios, like Warner Brothers, Disney, and MGM, allowed video rental stores to rent out some if not all of their back catalogues on tape in exchange for a percentage of the profits (Greenberg, 2008:119). The Motion Picture Association of America wanted to do away completely with these upstart stores that could repeatedly rent out a film thus making a lot of profit which the studios never saw (Greenberg, 2008:118-119). This created the conditions for the so-called straight-to-video market where independent filmmakers sold their productions directly to video rental store distributors and sometimes directly to store owners (Benson-Allot, 2013:1, 2; Bordwell & Thompson, 2002:602, 645, 680, 694). Independent film studios released 200-250 productions per year in the 1980s, with most being low-budget productions that included elements of soft-core pornography (Bordwell & Thompson, 2002:646, 694, 695).

Due to film studios' reluctance to offer up many of their productions on VHS, a format that could easily be pirated, a void was created that left consumers turning to more readily available productions like pornography (Nowak, 2011:187-188). To illustrate this point, the pornographic films *Deep Throat* (1972) and *The Devil in Miss Jones* (1973) were two of the top ten best-selling video tapes for the month of June 1979 (Nowak, 2011:188). This is especially important since both films were produced seven and six years before the introduction of the VHS player. Rental store owners reported that pornographic films generated the largest portion of their profits with half of all pre-recorded tapes being pornography (Nowak, 2011:188). Most importantly however was the fact that video rentals bridged the gap between product and consumer enabling the consumer to browse titles in reputable establishments and viewing the films in the privacy of their own homes, thus negating embarrassment and shame, as these types of films could previously only be viewed in select theatres (Barss, 2011:6; Nowak, 2011:188).

The above is reminiscent of a study completed by Jan-Ad Stemmet in 2005 on the history of pornography in South Africa. Stemmet (2005:198-200, 207) notes that due to sanctions and the absolute control that the conservative and zealous apartheid government exerted over the media in the eighties and earlier, South Africans were not mentally prepared for the introduction of hardcore pornography to the South African media landscape in the early nineties. By 1991 thirteen

pornographic publications were submitted to the South African Board of Censors for classification and not censorship (Stemmet, 2005:207). By 1993 over 250 pornographic magazines were submitted to the board (Stemmet, 2005:207). This suggests that pornographic materials became a novelty that was consumed by the general public at an increasing pace after being deprived of it for decades. It could be argued that the introduction of illicit materials for home viewing had a similar effect on the American populace, and VHS tapes and the films they contained became a novelty. Graham Thompson (2007:102) suggests that the resultant excitement of transgressing the sexual taboo and violence of eighties horror films made them attractive to audiences. Interestingly, Thompson (2007:102) also posits that the horror films of the time were attacked by both the political right and left, which to me suggests that these films might be more subversive than one would believe.

James Kendrick (2009:135, 136) makes similar assertions regarding horror films, but he argues that the horror film of the eighties was popular because of visual atrocities committed by the monsters, but also because film producers were able to make hardcore violence fun. He credits Bava and Romero's (both discussed in prior chapters) pioneering use of gore and blood splatter in previous decades for making the horror film and explicit violence inseparable (Kendrick, 2009:135-136). According to Kendrick (2009:136) the eighties horror film was decidedly subversive as it challenged the decades-old control Hollywood had exerted over film productions and independent production companies, while also relieving the Hollywood giants of sizable profits.

In addition to the proliferation of home viewing options, film production costs also went down significantly. Most of these aptly named low-budget productions were shot straight to video, meaning that no expensive equipment or film was required and films could be completed at a tenth of normal film production costs (Benson-Allot, 2013:136; Nowak, 2011:189). While the sexual revolution started in the 1960s it had become mainstream by the early eighties due to VHS (Barss, 2011:68; Nowak, 2011:189). This without a doubt also influenced the production of other genres, especially horror films as the next paragraphs will illustrate.

Undoubtedly many flocked to the low budget and independent horror films of the time. Due to less self-imposed restrictions with the production and distribution of cassette-only releases, the creators of these films had more creative freedom while also having relatively few problems with distributing their films (Benson-Allot, 2013:21, 51; Nowak, 2011:16). With so many new titles being produced by different companies, independent film producers had to ramp up their efforts to make sales. With pornography selling so well it is obvious that film producers would want to spice up their features with not just sex, but also portrayals of violence and death.

Films like Sean S. Cunningham's *Friday the 13th* (1980) set the standard and popularised the tropes that would influence low-budget horror films for the 1980s (Benson-Allott, 2013:1-2, 5). The film is

excessively violent and sexually explicit and, in some instances, combines the two. These sexual and violent tropes can be found in most of the horror film franchises of the 1980s, namely, *Halloween*⁴⁰, *A Nightmare on Elm Street*, *Night of the Demons*, *Return of the Living Dead*, *Friday the 13th*, and the *Texas Chainsaw Massacre* sequels. This was not confined to horror films with sequels, but also to one-off films like *The Burning* (1981), *Cannibal Ferox* (1981), *Satan's Baby Doll* (1982), *Videodrome* (1983), and many more. *Friday the 13th* was not the first horror film to use these tropes, but it did cement their use and prevalence in 1980s home video.

The same tropes are found in witch horror films of the eighties, with the most notable being *Night of the Demons* and *Witchcraft II*. *Night of the Demons* and *Witchcraft II* proved successful enough to become franchises, with *Night of the Demons* spawning two sequels in 1994 and 1997, and a remake in 2009, while *Witchcraft II* managed another 15 sequels between 1991 and 2016. For this study I disregarded the original 1988 *Witchcraft* film, as *Witchcraft II* embodies the tropes of the franchise better than its predecessor. The *Witchcraft* film series is officially the longest running franchise of all the horror film franchises with the last three films produced simultaneously over three weeks in 2015 for release in 2016 (Barton, 2015).

Both *Night of the Demons* and *Witchcraft II* are however not as popular among horror film aficionados as other eighties horror film giants like *Friday the 13th*, *The Evil Dead*, *The Thing*, or *A Nightmare on Elm Street*. As a consequence, there is very little scholarly engagement with either of the films. *Night of the Demons* is discussed in a few short paragraphs by renowned horror scholar Kenneth Muir in his book *Films of the 1980s* (2007), but he makes no mention of *Witchcraft* (1988) or *Witchcraft II* among the 334 films discussed. Muir's book is however invaluable for this study as *Films of the 1980s* is a detailed recounting of the socio-economic factors that influenced the production and narratives of eighties horror films.

The American horror films from the 1980s were influenced by The Cold War, politicians spouting statements of Judgement Day, and fears related to a nuclear apocalypse and the second coming of Christ (Grindon, 2007:151-152; Muir, 2007:6). This nihilist mentality was mirrored by the then contemporary pop culture in the form of punk rock, death metal, and horror films (Muir, 2007:6). Fears related to a nuclear apocalypse manifests in films like *The Dead Zone*, *The Terminator* (1984), *Dreamscape* (1984), and *The Hills Have Eyes II* (1985).

Another prominent fear that loomed large within societal minds was the sudden introduction of HIV and AIDS (Grindon, 2007:155; Hammer & Kellner, 2007:111). According to Hammer and Kellner

⁴⁰ Though *Halloween* was released in the late seventies the popularity of other horror sequels coupled with the mainstreaming of the low-budget horror film through VHS led to the production of four *Halloween* sequels between 1981 and 1989.

(2007:111) early eighties Hollywood films mostly ignored AIDS, with the exception of the slasher horror film. They argue that Reagan's presidency was marred by right-wing policies, secrecy regarding AIDS and foreign policy, and a penchant for exaggerating fears of communism and terrorism (Hammer & Kellner, 2007:111). These observations are interesting as they describe Reagan as a decidedly impotent president who could not act when required and had to inflate fears artificially to seem effective. The typical eighties monster, or slasher, may be interpreted as hinting at this symbolically by foregrounding sexual impotence (Hammer & Kellner, 2007:121-122). Hammer and Kellner (2007:121) posits that the eighties monsters frequently kill with a phallic weapon young men and women who are about to engage in sexual intercourse. In other words, the monster halts sexual intercourse and has to resort to an artificial phallus for penetration, making the monster an avatar for impotence, or, the artificial phallus could suggest female independence and empowerment. Hammer and Kellner however do not discuss a connection between the monster and HIV/AIDS, even though they suggest a link at the beginning of their study. The eighties monster can represent the impotent male, but the monster can also represent conservative fears in the form of a monster who attempts to stop the young from having intercourse. The monster can be seen as embodying parental fears of an unknown (at the time) sexually transmitted disease.

The disease is commonly known to spread through bodily fluids. In the 1980s testing positive for HIV almost certainly meant death to the infected person. Fears related to sexually transmitted diseases are found in horror films from the period like *The Thing* (1982), *Day of the Dead* (1985), and *The Fly* (1986). In *The Thing* the characters have to prove they are human through a blood test or they are segregated. In *Day of the Dead* the zombie virus is spread through biting and saliva, and in *The Fly*, Seth Brundle becomes so ill that he becomes incapacitated – his sexual partner fleeing at the sight of his horrifically morphed body. Muir (2007:36-38) suggests that people transforming into horrifying creatures, like werewolves or zombies, after physically touching others through sex or bites embody societal fears and stigmas regarding sexually transmitted diseases.

Muir (2007:7) also mentions that the eighties cannot be discussed without also referring to the Republican Party's dominance of the decade's politics. Related to this we find Ronald Reagan and George Bush, whose economic policies shaped and enabled the so-called "decade of greed" (Boozer; 2007:178; Grindon, 2007:147; Muir, 2007:7; Prince, 2007:16). Many horror films of the eighties are a reaction for or against "the dramatic political, cultural and economic changes Reagan instituted during his time in office" (Muir, 2007:7). There was, however, a massive disparity between the socio-economic reality of the USA and what the politicians were selling to the average American (Grindon, 2007:147; Hammer & Kellner, 2007:111-112; Nadel, 2007:93-94). On the one side they tried to convince the general public that they should not worry about the social and economic problems they were facing and should just laugh and smile (Muir, 2007:8). On the other hand they used the line "Be

afraid, be very afraid” as a catchphrase when publicly discussing their opposition, namely the Democratic Party (Muir, 2007:8). The Reagan brand tried to subdue any societal fears by appearing happy and charming – a smiling face selling myth and illusion to the public (Muir, 2007:8). American society accepted Reagan’s promises and positive perceptions of the socio-economic they found themselves in as it was preferable to the reality of the situation (Muir, 2007:8).

The reality was that the Reagan administration’s lowering of taxes and increased defence budgets led to fewer social welfare programs (Nadel, 2007:82; Phillips, 2005:142). By 1986 Reagan’s tax cuts had done so much damage to the country that a new tax act was enacted which resulted in the biggest tax increase in history up to that point (Nadel, 2007:82; Muir, 2007:9). Related to this is that American society and their politicians became more religious due to fears of impending doom, nuclear or otherwise (Buckland, 2007:66; Hammer & Kellner, 2007:120; Nadel, 2007:87; Rapf, 2007:24).

John Kenneth Muir’s *Horror Films of the 1980s* (2007) is an invaluable resource to make sense of the eighties horror film. Over the following two pages I attempt to condense the most central arguments of his 845 pages book. According to Muir (2007:15) eighties horror film production mirrors the American zeitgeist of excess that reigned at the time while restraint and originality were spurned. This same idea is mirrored by Kendrik (2009:136) who says that the eighties horror film “encourages the viewer to see each film as a commodity to be consumed rather than as a text to be read”. The eighties saw a reversal of the peace and free love generation of the sixties and young adults saw the world as violent and artificial (Muir, 2007:18). Horror films at the time reflected this ethos, but also showed the viewer that even though evil is ever present and out to eviscerate you and your friends in both film and the real world, you can survive if you are moral, intelligent, and resourceful (Muir, 2007:18). In other words, young viewers at the time experienced a catharsis while watching horror films while also being subtly preached to regarding societal norms (Muir, 2007:18).

Muir’s greatest contribution to the eighties horror film genre in my opinion is the detailed list of tropes, or conventions, he delineates in his book. The tropes are based on specifically the slasher film genre of the eighties, but I find that they are also relevant to any horror film created between 1978 and 1989. Muir (2007:11-12, 33-35) makes a similar argument and says that the popularity of the slasher film led to the tropes of the genre to be appropriated in the supernatural horror film genres of the time. Freddy Kruger of *A Nightmare on Elm Street* is a good example of this appropriation, as Freddy is a supernatural being who slashes teenagers to death by entering their dreams.

The first of these is what he refers to as the organising principle (Muir, 2007:20). This principle describes the location or context in which the narrative takes place (Muir, 2007:20). In *Friday the 13th* this would be the summer camp where teenagers are sent. The location is linked to objects, practices, and locations unique to the summer camp setting, like a lake, sporting equipment, wooden cabins, and

communal showers. These objects, practices, and locations can then be exploited by the villain to hunt and kill the campers.

The second convention Muir (2007:23) describes as the deadly preamble, or the crime from the past, or the transgression. This is a catalyst that creates the villain or monster. In *Friday the 13th*, Jason, a young boy, drowns in a lake. The counsellors who were supposed to be watching the children were having sex when Jason drowned. This transgression drives Mrs. Voorhees, Jason's mother, to slaughter many camp counsellors over the years. In the subsequent sequels Jason comes back from the dead, reborn from the Dionysian lake to exact his revenge on the unsuspecting teenagers. Women in stages of undress or having sex before being murdered was however not pioneered during the eighties. Scenes of titillation preceding violent murders are common in films of the seventies, as discussed in the previous chapter, but such scenes became increasingly popular in the eighties horror film (Thompson, 2007:102). Some seventies examples that come to mind are Sergio Martino's *Torso* (1973) and Dennis Donnelly's *The Toolbox Murders* (1978).

Character archetypes are next on Muir's list of conventions and he refers to them as follows: the killer, practical jokers/bitches/jocks, the Cassandra figure, useless authority, red herrings, and the final girl (Muir, 2007:23-24). The killer is simple to describe and is the person killing and maiming everyone throughout the film (Muir, 2007:23). The practical jokers, the bitches, and the jocks are the throwaway characters that are only there to serve as fodder for the killer (Muir, 2007:24). These characters usually serve as comedic relief or titillation for the audience (Muir, 2007:24). The Cassandra figure is usually an older figure who knows a bit of the history of the area and the killer (Muir, 2007:24). This character is frequently portrayed as old, mad, or a drunk, but very often issues warnings to the teenagers which they then ignore (Muir, 2007:24). Doctors, policemen, town mayors, or similar characters who have a semblance of authority are what Muir describes as the useless authority (2007:24). Eighties horror film had teenagers in mind as their target audience, meaning that the protagonists had to be relatable (Muir, 2007:25). Older people who resemble parents were *persona non grata* and were thus made to look particularly inept (Muir, 2007:25). Red herrings are another archetype found in eighties horror films which are used to distract or misdirect the audience (Muir, 2007:25). And finally, we have the final girl – the same final girl proposed by Carol J. Clover in *Women and Chainsaws: Gender in the Modern Horror Film* – an archetype who is the moral, clever, and resourceful young lady who uncovers her dead friends for the benefit of the audience (Muir, 2007:25). The final girl is a positive role model for the viewer, irrespective of their gender, implying that she or others with the same moral fortitude deserve to survive (Muir, 2007:25).

The fourth convention Muir (2007:28) proposes relates to the common scenarios to scare the audience. Eighties horror films usually include a first or initial scare where the first person is killed (Muir, 2007:28). This is then followed by a false scare (Muir, 2007:28). False scares are usually

accompanied by a foreboding soundtrack leading the viewer to believe that someone or something is going to attack one of the characters (Muir, 2007:28). The false scare usually involves a character quietly creeping towards a drawn curtain, closed door or closet, and then jumping back as a cat or some other animal or person scares them (Muir, 2007:28).

Nature and a failure of technology is another common scenario in eighties horror films (Muir, 2007:29). Nature in the form of bad weather or storms, are frequently found in many horror films irrespective of the decade the horror film was produced in. An eighties horror film trope however is that the rain, wind, and lightning often assist the villains (Muir, 2007:29). Lightning, for instance, can trip the power plunging a house in darkness, thus providing safe cover for a merciless killer (Muir, 2007:29).

The other common scenarios are: vice precedes slice-and-dice; the final chase and the tour of the dead; the *coup de grâce*; and the sting in the tail/tale. With vice preceding slice-and-dice the audience is shown a scene that is not in line with social conventions, like teenagers having sex or young woman disrobing (Muir, 2007:30). The characters are then punished for their sinful acts which align the villain with conservative social norms. This is interesting as it suggests that Linda Williams's theory aligning the monster with the *other* is dependent on the context and not set in stone. In the main literature review I made a similar statement regarding Williams's reluctance to align the monster with male sensibilities as it is obvious that they are aligned and that the monsters actively punish those who transgress the patriarchal line.

The final chase and tour of the dead is found at the end of the horror film where the final girl is running away from the killer or monster and stumbles over all the bodies left in the killer's wake (Muir, 2007:30). The final girl acts as a hysterical tour guide who believes she is running away from danger, but ends up running towards it (Muir, 2007:30).

The *coup de grâce* is the main and most imaginative death scene in the film (Muir, 2007:31). This scene has one function and that is to cause fear and revulsion (Muir, 2007:31). Closely related to the *coup de grâce* is the *sting in the tail/tale* is the *final scare* in the film after the villain or monster is thought to be dead (Muir, 2007:31). The villain comes back from their apparent death to scare the viewer one last time (Muir, 2007:31). Like the *coup de grâce* the sting in the tail/tale is just to elicit a visceral response from the viewer.

Another convention of Muir's refers to has to do with point of view and space relations (Muir, 2007:31). A frequent trope in eighties horror films is the point of view camera work where the viewer sees what the killer sees when he goes in for the kill (Muir, 2007:31). Due to its prevalence and

associations many directors started to use it as a form of misdirection (Muir, 2007:31). In many instances the point of view was that of a friend surprising the protagonist or simply his or her pet.

One final point of discussion regarding Muir's book is the similarities he draws between music and the horror film antagonists. He is not alone in this regard as other scholars, like James Kendrick (2009:xiii) and Graham Thompson (2007:18), have made similar observations. As mentioned, Muir (2007:6) proposes that the eighties horror film villains resembled punk rockers and heavy metal musicians of the same time. Where Muir draws similarities between the appearances of villains and rock stars, so does he unintentionally note similarities between the rock and pop star lifestyles and those of the teenagers who are eviscerated in these films. The excesses-driven lifestyles of eighties musicians like Madonna, Mötley Crüe, and Metallica are well known to this day. As mentioned, Muir (2007:11) describes many of the victims in eighties horror films as taking part in some vice before being killed, which not only includes sexual revelry, but also drug abuse – all excesses that rock and pop stars are still known for to this day.

Chris Vander Kaay and Kathlees Fernandez-Vander Kaay (2016:165-166) mirror Muir's sentiments regarding the link between MTV stars and eighties horror film antagonists. They posit that the makeup, costumes, and general rebellious attitude are imitated by the eighties villains (Fernandez-Vander Kaay & Vander Kaay:2016:165). Both musicians and antagonists were popular among the youth and thus reviled by conservative parent groups and lawmakers at the time, drawing further similarities between them (Fernandez-Vander Kaay & Vander Kaay:2016:166). With regards to physical appearance I find that Freddy Krueger shares many similarities with *Iron Maiden's* mascot, Eddie. The latex and rubber outfits the heavy metal group *GWAR* wore during live concerts were not that different from how the cenobites look in the *Hellraiser* films.

Kendall R. Phillips (2005:142-143) argues in his book *Projected Fears - Horror Films and American Culture*, that Reagan's political narrative was driven by nostalgia for 1950s America when life was supposedly simpler and moral. Conservative political leaders of the time would quote the *Bible* and argue for a literal interpretation of the book in an attempt to undo the reckless abandon of the sixties and seventies (Phillips, 2005:142). It is for this reason that 1980s horror films are dominated by bogeymen who punish and brutalise wayward teens for their sexual transgressions (Phillips, 2005:143). In most instances the villains or monsters are from the past seeking revenge on the descendants of the society that demonised them (Phillips, 2005:143).

Phillips (2005:143) posits that the reception of John Carpenter's *The Thing* and Steven Spielberg's *E.T.* (1982) mirrors the Reagan era's duality. Both *The Thing* and *E.T.* were released in 1982, but *E.T.*'s portrayal of a friendly and non-threatening alien was extremely popular among filmgoers, while *The Thing* was met with critical condemnation and few box-office receipts (Phillips, 2005:143).

These sentiments are echoed by Muir (2007:38) and he says that some critics went as far as to call Carpenter a pornographer of violence. Both films are today regarded as cult classics, but *The Thing*'s themes of paranoia, pessimism, and the impending apocalypse became a favourite film for discussion among horror film scholars and critics.

Tony Williams (2015:192), another horror film scholar of note, makes similar assumptions to Muir in his 2015 study regarding eighties horror films regarding over the top violence, promiscuous teenagers, and patriarchal avengers. Williams (2015:193) goes one step further, however, and links eighties horror films to conservative family values. The teenagers are, according to Williams (2015:193), not just punished for partaking in vices, but because of their potential threat to dominant conservative societal norms. Williams (2015:204) stresses that eighties horror films have less artistic value than the horror films from the seventies. At the same time, however, he suggests that the eighties horror film is far more complex than their predecessors' as each film emphasises hesitancy over opposition in their respective narratives (Williams, 2015:204-205). According to Williams (2015:205):

Eighties horror films have emerged from a particular set of historical and social circumstances and operate accordingly. Interrogating the textual content of each becomes important. The dominant ideology within each film may also recuperate the supposed utopian implications of a masochistic thesis. At the same time, there may be other elements concerning contemporary adolescent insecurity operating within these films needing elucidation.

In other words, each film reflects different aspects of conservative and male-driven societal yearnings. Jason Voorhees from *Friday the Thirteenth Part II* (1981), for example, is an avatar for a father who punishes his teenagers for having sex while they are supposed to be well-behaved at summer camp. Jason scares younger viewers into being more cautious when away from their parents. Adolescent fears are also embodied in the film as fear of a father's wrath is embodied through Jason.

Understanding the socio-normative context of the eighties and the tropes associated with the horror films created at the time can be read alongside the tropes and influences originating from *Häxan* to gain deeper insights into the cinematic witch. Due to the dearth of scholarly input related to *Night of the Demons* and *Witchcraft II*, Muir's theories regarding the eighties horror film are used to decipher the hidden meanings of the two films related to the Dionysian and the Apollonian.

As mentioned, the witch horror film complicates the associations between gender, power, and culture – all of which are central to the New Historicist method. Dionysus and Apollo not only represent the male/female binary, but Dionysus also represents gender fluidity because of his ability to transform. Related to gender is power or, more specifically, the idea that women have less power in society than men, specifically when compared to white males. Power relates to agency, but it also has an effect on

society and culture. The more certain ideas are normalised within a society – like racism or sexism – the more engrained it becomes in their culture, which leads to manifestations of said social ills in their art, media, customs, and behaviours. By tracing the Apollonian and Dionysian in these films we can get a clearer picture of the eighties sociocultural landscape and the reciprocal influences that exist between the films and the sociocultural.

NIGHT OF THE DEMONS (1988)

Background

Kevin S. Tenney's *Night of the Demons* features a typical cast of young actors in their twenties playing high-school teenagers with Amelia Kinkade as the outcast teenager turned antagonist, Angela Franklin. The film is filled with 'teenage' sex scenes and nudity and their subsequent vicious dismemberments at the hands of a demonic entity who possesses them. At first Angela is a beautiful teen (Figure 25), but after holding a séance party at an abandoned mortuary to conjure past versions of themselves from previous lives, the teens are all possessed by the same demonic entity (Figure 26 and Figure 27). Judy, the protagonist and final girl and dressed as Alice from Disney's *Alice in Wonderland* (1951), and Rodger, the only African-American in the film and dressed as a generic pirate, are the only two characters who escape the mortuary.

Of Angela's nine friends, seven are possessed by demons either through a kiss, sexual intercourse, or through death. Possession in *Night of the Demons* resembles the infection that turns people into zombies, as popularised by Romero in his *Night of the Living Dead* film and subsequent sequels (Figure 27).



Figure 25. *Night of the Demons*. 1988. Directed by Kevin S. Tenney. [Film still from DVD] USA: Starz / Anchor Bay.



Figure 26. Night of the Demons. 1988. Directed by Kevin S. Tenney. [Film still from DVD] USA: Starz / Anchor Bay.



Figure 27. Night of the Demons. 1988. Directed by Kevin S. Tenney. [Film still from DVD] USA: Starz / Anchor Bay.

The first to be possessed after the séance is Suzanne, Angela's blonde and promiscuous friend. After giving Angela a long and lingering French kiss, Suzanne transfers part of the demon into Angela. Angela then performs something akin to an erotic dance and entices Stooge, a sexist and chauvinist male, to kiss her. She then bites off his tongue, infecting him with the demonic entity's essence as well.

With three characters possessed, the demonic infection spreads quickly among the other characters. Helen is killed off-screen by Stoooge and reappears later in the film as one of the demonic creatures. Jay, dressed as Crocket from Miami Vice and a charming alpha-male-type, abandons Judy, his date, in one of the rooms after she refuses to have sex with him. As he slams the door behind him, Judy finds herself trapped in the room. Jay finds Suzanne half-naked in another room while she is outlining her breasts with pink lipstick. They then have sex on the floor. Suzanne's features suddenly change while sexually entangled. Jay becomes hysterical after Suzanne's abrupt change and tries to escape, but Suzanne blinds him by shoving her thumbs in his eyes – infecting him as well.

Max, a generic teenage boy, and Frannie, an Asian girl with a large perm, are shown to be having sex in a coffin. Stoooge, his features now completely changed, breaks Frannie's neck while she is on top of Max. He then brutalizes Max with the lid of the coffin. Judy finally escapes her entrapment and runs into Sal, a character who resembles a 1950s gang member with a duck tail hairstyle. While Angela pursues them they hide in another room, only to find Suzanne cradling Jay's eyeless corpse. Sal is thrown through a window and Judy runs away hysterically.

Judy, while running away from Suzanne, initiates Muir's (2007) tour of the dead. Having first stumbled into Jay's body she then runs into the room where Max and Frannie were having sex. Max's severed and bloody arm on the floor distracts her and then comes alive and attacks her. Behind her the coffin bursts open with possessed versions of Max and Frannie reaching out to her. She then attempts to escape the house but finds all the exits locked. Stoooge, Angela, and Suzanne all give chase to Judy, each scaring her in a different part of the house. When she reaches the building's rooftop she finds Sal and Rodger. Sal dies by being thrown from the roof when Angela tries to kill Judy. Judy and Rodger are then chased again, but possessed versions of Jay and Helen also join the chase. Judy and Rodger finally escape after scaling the outside wall – their friends burned away by the rising dawn. From the above plot description, we can draw comparisons to what Kendrick and Thompson alludes to in the previous section, namely the overlap of the comedy and horror genre which results in making the over-the-top violence and gore fun, or even burlesque.

The film's director, Kevin S. Tenney, is not well-known and his other efforts include *Witchboard* (1986), *Witchboard 2: The Devil's Doorway* (1993), *Witchtrap* (1989), and another half dozen relatively unknown low budget horror films. Though these films all have 'witch' in their titles, they do not contain witches as antagonists. *Witchboard* is about a teenager who plays with an Ouija board and is beset upon by evil spirits, while *Witchtrap* is about a warlock whose spirit haunts an inn. *Witchboard* and *Night of the Demons* have both gained cult-status since their release, but they are the only films of Tenney to have achieved this status (Koestner, 2014; Wade, 2021). Interestingly, *Witchboard*'s protagonist was portrayed by Tawny Kitaen who starred in many well-known rock and

heavy metal music videos during the 1980s like Ratt's *Back for More* and Whitesnake's *Here I Go Again* – another connection between heavy metal and the horror film genre.

With the exception of Tenney's *The Celler* (1988) all of his horror films contain over-the-top violence and gore, and young women stripping off their clothes. All his films are also low-budget productions that are in most instances released straight to video. The same can also be said of his action film *Peacemaker* (1990) and his neo-noir film *Tick Tock* (2000).

Interviews with Tenney are sparse and he does not say much about his cinematic techniques in any of them. What is worth mentioning from one interview however is that Tenney intentionally set out to make a fun horror film and that it was never supposed to be a serious horror film (Topel, 2014). Tenney (Topel, 2014) also states in this same interview that he prefers it when his films are released without any cuts to the sex and violence which suggests that he has a preference for sex and violence in films. This makes his horror films quintessentially eighties as they conform to all the tropes of the decade.

Eighties horror film conventions and the American socio-historic context, and what they reveal about *Night of the Demons*

As mentioned, John Muir (2007:682) wrote a short commentary about *Night of the Demons* in his *Horror Films of the 1980s*. He compares the film to *Evil Dead* (1983) and *Return of the Living Dead* (1985) noting some similarities, but mostly finds fault with the film (Muir, 2007:682). His first issue with the film is that the mortuary's layout and architecture is ill-defined which confuses the viewer (Muir, 2007:682). I do not agree with this assessment as this is frequently found in horror films, like the dance academy in *Suspiria*. Like *Suspiria*, *Night of the Demons* resembles a gothic fairy tale. Judy, the protagonist, is for all intents and purposes Alice from *Alice in Wonderland* who has entered a place imbued with the supernatural. It is mentioned early in the film that the spot the mortuary was built on was always perceived as a place of powerful evil with Native Americans going mad when they slept in the area. The building is supposed to be confusing, with an irrational floor plan, because Judy and her friends have entered a supernatural world controlled by a malign force. Their confusion and the audience's confusion run parallel. In addition, this uncertainty is not unlike that felt by many Americans during the years under Reagan's presidency. As mentioned, Reagan and his fellow-conservative politicians were prone to exaggeration and lying to the general public about the economy and policies.

Muir (2007:682) also criticises the acting as bad and unconvincing, but does not elaborate as to why he says so. Though his statement has merit, I found that the naivety of the actors along with their

weak and shallow acting unintentionally reinforced the archetypes the characters represent, e.g. Stoooge is stupid, Frannie and Suzanne are vacuous sexpots, Jay is the quintessential jock, Sal is an outdated alpha male who clings to the 1950s, and Judy is naïve. These characters are not meant to be complex, but to have easily recognisable traits so that elaborate exposition is not required. Muir makes note of these simplified archetypes in his book, but then neglects to apply it critically to *Night of the Demons*. Additionally, most eighties horror films' productions mirror the consumer zeitgeist of the era where products were produced in great quantity but of low quality, also something that Muir discusses in great length in the same text, but again does not apply it to the film. Due to the film having received so little in lieu of scholarly engagement I apply Muir's theories to *Night of the Demons* in the next paragraphs in an attempt to expand on the film's intricacies.

In *Night of the Demons* the teenagers are possessed by a single demon which transforms their appearances from youthful to decaying and rotting. When we consider Muir's theories regarding the eighties American horror film, three interpretations spring forth.

The first aspect to be considered regarding *Night of the Demons* is the explicit reference to demons in the film title. According to the film title, the teenagers become demons. In western society the mention of demons conjures up Biblical images of angels versus demons, Satan's minions or soldiers, or Christ driving Legion (a demon) into a drift of pigs and driving them off a cliff, to name but a few examples. Demons in the west have a definite connection to Christianity as they serve as the antitheses (or villain) to a good Christian.

In addition to the above, the teenagers are *othered* by making use of allusions to sexually transmitted diseases. As mentioned, the eighties saw the rise of the AIDS pandemic – caused by the spread and prolonged exposure to HIV. The teenagers in *Night of the Demons* are shown to crave and indulge in sex. As soon as penetration of the tongue, sexual organs, or a wooden phallus (Sal's chest is pierced by a sharp wooden fence post) occur they transform into decaying beasts bent on spreading their affliction. Physical touch is thus required to spread the demonic entity's essence and like those afflicted with AIDS during the eighties, the afflicted are stigmatised. In *Night of the Demons* the stigmatisation is externalised by changing their physical appearance to something monstrous.

I should, however, mention that drawing parallels between demonic possession and sexually transmitted diseases can be considered extreme. Another, and more simple, interpretation can be that the demonic appearance of the teenagers mirrors the way conservative parents perceive rebellious and sexually active teenagers who might influence their own children through peer pressure.

Theorists like Muir, Phillips, and Williams suggest that the monsters and villains in the eighties films are in fact representative of the conservative parents who punish the children for their transgressions.

In this film however it is the teens who are turned into the monsters, implying that they are possessed by a conservative entity who exacts judgement over the wayward teens. I find that the conservative parent is analogous with a demon mirroring the opposing images or messages of the aforementioned Reagan era where the government communicated conflicting messages to American citizens. Angela's drastic physical change is not only a physical manifestation of a sexually transmitted illness. By becoming a tool for conservative fears and punishment she transforms into the monster that teenagers believe their parents to be – a gross exaggeration of conservative control.

Reagan at first ignoring the AIDS pandemic along with conservative parents who attempt to control their children's sexual agency is reminiscent of Foucault's theories regarding the history of sexuality. Reagan not wanting to address the AIDS pandemic can be linked to attempts to control the narrative of sexuality by making any reference to sex taboo, while the parents' attempt to control their teenage children is not different from those who want to protect the sanctity of the traditional family.

Another aspect to consider relates to the connection between AIDS and homosexuality during the eighties. I remember that, during the late eighties and much of the early nineties, the average person associated AIDS mostly with male homosexuality

Fathers, and by implication, parents, can be linked to the symbolic order, and in many instances they are also the masters of sexual discourse in the family (Van Schalkwyk, 2013:413). In other words, the parents control what is said about sex, how sex is framed, and when his children are allowed to have sex. The father is not just a male patriarch of a household, but includes and is extended to the mother and the conservative parental unit as well. If the child does not conform to these conservative norms the parents could potentially *other* them (Van Schalkwyk, 2017:413). The same happens in *Night of the Demons* where the *othering* of the sexually active teenagers is made explicit by making their appearance abject through demonic infection.

With regards to the demonic infection we can draw an indirect influence from *Häxan*, namely that of the old witch. When Angela's transformation is complete (Figure 19) she is monstrous. Specifically, she looks like a reanimated rotten corpse of a severely old woman. This witch, like some of the witches in the previously discussed films, perpetuates the idea of advanced age and disease being linked to a violent and malevolent character. Moments before her appearance changes she performs a very revealing and provocative dance to entice Sal. Sal becomes fearful of Angela's obvious sexual advances and leaves her alone with Stooge. Stooge, however, has no moral predispositions and accepts her advances. As he kisses her she bites off his tongue. Angela is revealed to have sharp demonic teeth and yellow eyes as she spits out his tongue. In this instance the witch uses her body to symbolically castrate and silence a chauvinist male, Stooge. She does this in the guise of a beautiful young woman and not as a diseased old crone. Angela thus conceals her true nature behind the façade

of a hyper-sexualised teen. Her power is thus initially not linked to her loss of sexual availability or ability to bear children. When she transforms into the hideous old crone however she does seem to become more powerful and violent, further normalising the link between beauty and submission and the ugly and the threatening as seen in some of the films already discussed. In this instance the recognisable trope of the old witch with power is carefully hidden within a new set of circumstances, making the trope almost unrecognisable, which is another example of Bloom's *tessera*.



Figure 28. *Night of the Demons*. 1988. Directed by Kevin S. Tenney. [Film still from DVD] USA: Starz / Anchor Bay.

Judy dressed as Alice from *Alice in Wonderland* betrays her naiveté and innocence – a pure and virginal Apollonian princess (Figure 28). She lives in the real world, but enters the supernatural world the moment she enters the abandoned mortuary. Angela is the opposite of Judy. Angela's actions as a shoplifter combined with her punk rock attire confirm her rebellious nature (Figure 29). She is portrayed as decidedly anti-commercialist and anti-establishment. Even though she is depicted as a rebel, she seems to be the most normal person amongst the group of teens by exhibiting concern over the others when she notices that something went wrong with the séance. With the exception of Judy, Angela, and Rodger, the other characters seem shallow, condescending, and fickle. It should be noted however that Judy is portrayed as a pathetic and screaming princess in need of constant rescue.



Figure 29. Night of the Demons. 1988. Directed by Kevin S. Tenney. [Film still from DVD] USA: Starz / Anchor Bay.

Judy and Angela seem to resemble societal archetypes with Judy representing the perfect suburban teenage girl, while Angela represents the popular peer or celebrity with questionable morals who parents loath. The singer and musician Madonna (Figure 30) was one of the most popular and influential celebrities during the eighties, influencing clothing, hairstyles, and accessories – a quintessential female rock star (Grimes, 2013:380, 398). An old *New York Times* article from June 7, 1985, describes Madonna’s appearance in 1985 as “...low neckline,...lace tights, anklets, thrift-shop jewellery, fingerless lace gloves...a gold crucifix...Merry Widow black lace bras, chiffon strips as hair bows and jewelled belts....” (Grimes, 2013:398). Another *New York Times* article, this time from 1989, describes Madonna’s style as “aggressively sexual lingerie chic” (La Ferla, 1989:419). These descriptions of the mid to late eighties Madonna seem similar to Angela’s appearance.

Madonna was considered provocative and a poor role model for adolescent girls in the eighties due to her overtly sexual outfits (Phillips, 2008:609). Her music and accompanying music videos similarly and frequently contained sexual and mature themes that many deemed inappropriate for children (Phillips, 2008:609). She also resembled the rock star/heavy metal chic of the time more than the that of her pop star peers. Two of her biggest selling singles during the eighties, *Like a Virgin* and *Material Girl*, sparked much controversy due to the subject matter of the lyrics (Phillips, 2008:609). This was exacerbated by nude photos of her appearing in 1985 in issues of *Playboy* and *Penthouse* (Phillips, 2008:609). Her 1987 world tour included marketing material and elements that criticised religion, Ronald Reagan, and Pope John Paul II (Phillips, 2008:610).



Figure 30. Galella, R. 1985. Madonna at the 1985 American Music Awards. [Photograph] WireImage/Getty.

Some, like Stephanie Walsh (1991:712), argued in 1991 that Madonna's popularity among high school girls coupled with her overt sexual music videos posed a problem for parents as many young children are not mature enough to understand some of subject matter in question. Walsh (1991:712, 713-714) did not condemn Madonna or the music videos, but suggested that parents and educators be aware of the images found and be prepared to discuss sex in a transparent manner with their children. She argued that this was especially important in light of AIDS, and she suggested that the conservative method of avoiding conversations regarding sex and the use of condoms was not helping to alleviate the problem (Walsh, 1991:713-714). Walsh's article published in the December 1991 edition of *The Furrow*, is an invaluable text to make sense of the socio-historical context of the late eighties and early nineties as it gives an account of the then-contemporary conservative American fears, but also links sex, AIDS, Madonna, homosexuality, and the youth in one article.

According to Carla Freccero (1993:77):

The challenges she (Madonna) represents to a monolithic notion of the body and its pleasures deserve mention precisely because progressives have been reluctant to celebrate her, in part because she seems the very icon of postmodern consumer capitalism. Her mass popularity, multimillionaire status, and CEO ambitions make progressives suspicious.

Madonna represents the eighties by not only being a sought after, successful, and provocative brand, but also through the duality she represents by being part of and contributing to the capitalist system of the United States of America while causing discomfort to progressives.

Though a controversial figure, Madonna became increasingly popular and is considered the most successful female solo performer in the world, influencing music, fashion, videos, children's books, and popular culture as a whole (Phillips, 2008:610). Her outright success in the music industry subsequently led to the media to refer to her as the Material Girl (Phillips, 2008:609). Much of her success though is attributed to her constantly reinventing herself to fit the times, refreshing her persona with each new album release (Faith, 1997:139; Phillips, 2008:610). Madonna has even been known to blur the line of gender in some of her live performances (Faith, 1997:139). This reinvention of the self is in essence Dionysian as Madonna blurs the borders of her persona and effortlessly becomes someone else. Additionally, by challenging Apollonian religion and the accompanying conservative society she mirrors Dionysus. Sheryl Garrat (1986:13) describes this ambivalent and Dionysian fluidity of Madonna the best:

Madonna embodies and resolves contradictions that bombard young women: a whore who's still a virgin, a wise woman who's still a naive little girl, an innocent who can bite forbidden fruit and remain untainted.

Angela is portrayed in much the same way in *Night of the Demons*. At first she is presented as a rebel and counter-culture figure, challenging societal norms, but she is also shown to have concern for others. She challenges societal norms even further when she changes from young and pretty to old, decaying, and demonic. From figures 29 and 30 one can trace Madonna's influence on Angela's appearance. Like Suzanne infects Angela, and Angela then infects Stooze and Sal, so did Madonna influence young women (and gay men) during the eighties and beyond, much to the chagrin of conservative parents.

Night of the Demons features all the female characters in various stages of undress at different points during the film. Judy, the protagonist's breasts are very visible through her white and laced bra while getting ready for the party. Angela lifts her dress while doing the aforementioned erotic dance and the audience is privy to her black thong and exposed buttocks. The other two women, Suzanne and Frannie, are shown topless and the camera dwells on their exposed breasts. Though the last mentioned two women differ in physical appearance, with Suzanne as a stereotypical blonde and Frannie from Asian descent, they are equally promiscuous and share many characteristics. This sets Frannie and Suzanne apart from Judy and Angela, drawing more attention to the antagonist and protagonist and the supporting characters. The two supporting female characters are disposable sexual bodies that are presented for titillation and then killed after serving their purpose. One could argue that the women do not convey feminist ideas to the audience, but they do subtly succeed in getting feminist ideas across as discussed in the next paragraph.

As stated in the introduction, Paglia (Stein & Williams, 2002:213) posits that women control men through their naked bodies and sexuality and that the control men believe they have over women is merely an illusion. Paglia has a point. It should however be noted that Madonna was not only about sex and that, as mentioned, she was extremely ambivalent. She challenged societal norms regarding sex, sexuality, and gender in the eighties while simultaneously commercialising it resulting in profits not just for herself, but for powerful men who owned record companies, films studios, and publishing houses, to name a few. Her ambivalence is what aligns her with Dionysus. Madonna was able to build an entire career out of sex, and sexual controversy, while simultaneously interweaving her sensuality with activism (Paglia, 2007:259-260). Additionally, by constantly changing her image she was able to remain relevant in the eyes of the MTV viewership, which also ultimately contributed to her success. Men and teenage boys lusted after her while women and gay men wanted to be her (Paglia, 2007:260). Madonna both challenges and embraces heterosexuality, but on her own terms (Paglia, 2007:260). Paglia (2007:260) suggests that Madonna wears different masks to suit and attract those around her, while also shifting between these different masks to challenge others. In other words, she is a complex and multifaceted being, a Dionysian shapeshifter, who changes and challenges the zeitgeist.

In *Night of the Demons*, however, the characters are not completely aligned with Madonna. When we consider Tenney's proclivity for nudity, violence, and heterosexual sex it becomes clear that his Madonna is the heterosexual and hyper-sexualised version. The male characters in *Night of the Demons* are run ragged by the same hormones and lusts and end up dying due to their lack of control. In each instance the women in the film initiate sex. None of the men are able to initiate sex with one of the women. For example, Sal, a male who represents fifties alpha-male types through his hairstyle and dated sexist colloquialisms, is shown to fear and reject offers of sex from Angela and Suzanne – women who are sexually experienced and confrontational. He constantly chases after Judy, because she is pure and timid, and not a threat to his masculinity.

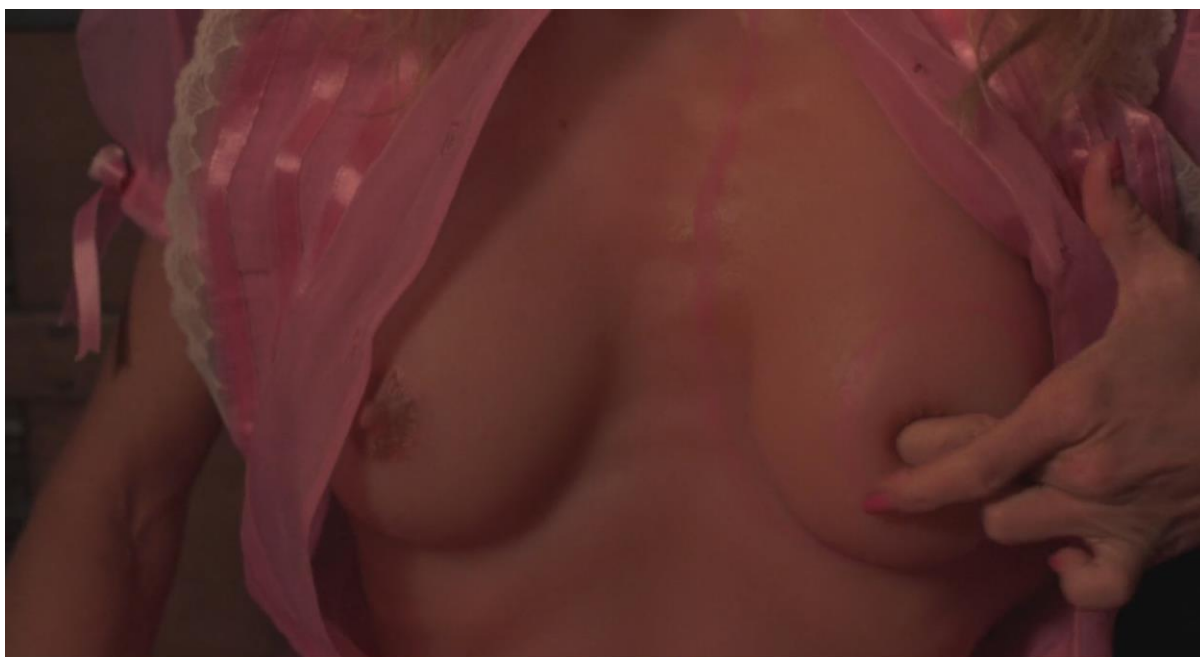


Figure 31. *Night of the Demons*. 1988. Directed by Kevin S. Tenney. [Film still from DVD] USA: Starz / Anchor Bay.

Sex is made terrifying in *Night of the Demon* as it leads to torture and death. As stated earlier in this chapter, Muir suggests that a hallmark of the eighties horror film is for the film to contain one memorable, creative and over the top gory scene that lingers in the mind of the viewer. In most instances these scenes are made memorable due to the addition of sex and/or nudity. In *Night of the Demons* we find such a scene where Suzanne rips open her top and draws a spiral over her chest and left breast with pink lipstick – an obvious eroticisation of the young female body. As she presses the lipstick against her nipple it sinks into her flesh and is swallowed completely. She follows the lipstick's entry point with her finger and finds that she can pierce her areola without pain or causing bleeding (Figure 31). When she removes her finger her breast shows no sign of the intrusion.

The above scene succeeds in making the young female body abject without resorting to gore or blood. Her body is not transformed into something monstrous like Seth Brundle's is in *The Fly*. Nor is her monstrosity in the scene linked to exaggerated old age or entropy. The erotic is made monstrous by changing what the body is expected to do. A finger should not be able to penetrate the body in such a fashion, in other words her body negates Apollonian form and boundaries. Suzanne's body is made liquid, or Dionysian and one wonders what other hidden abilities are concealed within her body and what monstrous things she would be able to do to a man's body. There is a shift or a correction of the way the cinematic witch's body as historically portrayed up and to the point of *Night of the Demon's* release as Tenney does something new and unconventional with the body of the witch (*clinamen*), creating a new way of unsettling the audience with the female body.

Tropes and influences

From the discussion above it is clear that *Night of the Demons* perpetuates some of the tropes we find in *Häxan*, while also reframing them in interesting ways. The sexualised young woman appears in the film and she again seems to gain large quantities of power as she changes from young conjurer to old and decaying monstrosity. The mortuary setting of the film links the witch again to the dead and abject, and thus the Dionysian. The young and beautiful body is also made horrifying, but not through making it abject, but by giving it eerie abilities, like the scene with Suzanne's breast. Suzanne is *othered* to exaggerated levels via this scene, but also to emphasise and reflect society's rejection of the sexually independent woman. By making sex abject society controls (Apollonian) the youth's sexual cravings through fear, which, as said, is another link to Foucault.

Interestingly Angela does not use her supernatural abilities to entice any of the men into having sex with her, nor does Helen, Frannie, or Suzanne when they become possessed. In their possessed states their only motivation is to kill and spread the possession to others. None of the men or women are shown to reach an orgasm, meaning that sexual pleasure is not the goal, nor is pregnancy/procreation. The entity is able to self-replicate without the creation of babies. Furthermore, it does not rely on a sexual union between male and female bodies to create offspring. It simply uses what already exists, meaning that it does not need to increase the population to unsustainable numbers. This suggests that through Angela's conjuring, humanity's threat to nature is neutralised.

There is another link to be made between the entity and nature. Max regales Frannie, Jay, and Judy with a tale of the spot the mortuary was built on. He mentions that the Native Americans who lived in the surrounding areas in the past never ventured into the clearing where the mortuary now stood. Furthermore, the demon seemed to be trapped in the old iron furnace where bodies were cremated. Iron has been referred to in myth and folklore to ward off evil, magic, witches and demons, but also to trap or harm malicious beings (McNutt, 1990:46). This belief stems from iron being a piece of the earth that has been purified by fire (McNutt, 1990:46). Iron is a product of progress and is used extensively in production. It is hard, cold, and unrelenting. We control criminals with it and use it in weapons to subdue and control others. It is also used extensively when erecting buildings. Iron is thus used to control the world and nature. If an iron furnace is able to trap the demonic entity one could argue that it is aligned with nature. Consider that Dionysus is associated with the dead, violence, irrationality, wonton sexuality, and women. Dionysus is also associated with chaos and the formless. If the entity is aligned with Dionysus then it is in most likelihood also aligned with nature.

In *Häxan* the link between the witches and nature is made clear through the living and ceremonial spaces the witches inhabit. In *Night of the Demon* this is hidden and requires an audience that is well-

read with regard to folklore and superstitions. Bloom's token or recognition (*tessera*) is in this instance hardly recognizable, but still present.

As in all the previously discussed films possession and the supernatural in *Night of the Demons* are intertwined and inseparable. In *Häxan* the witches possess others through potions or by making eye contact. Angela and the other possessed teens spread possession through physical contact to both dead and living hosts. The only caveat regarding possessing the dead is that they must be killed by someone who is already possessed. In other words, sex and death are regarded as equal modes of infection. Where *Night of the Demons* deviates from *Häxan* is that in *Häxan* supernatural aids are required to seduce men, while in *Night of the Demons* sex and seduction is used to spread and duplicate the essence of a single demonic force between many individuals (*clinamen*). This combination of sex and death is Dionysian as Dionysus represents both (see Paglia, 2001:19, 92, 94, 96, 102).

Closely related to the above and an instance of Bloom's *kenosis* is the relation between a demonic entity's bestowment of supernatural power on a woman. In *Häxan* the women are shown to receive supernatural power in lieu of a sacrifice. In *Night of the Demons* the men and women are unwilling hosts to a self-perpetuating demonic entity and die when the possession takes hold. In other words, Tenney completely veers from what Christensen established in *Häxan* where a trade or exchange facilitates the manifestation of supernatural ability. Supernatural power is not bestowed on the women who have been slighted by society or want to gain a benefit. The women become empty shells that the demon fills with supernatural abilities, meaning that they have no agency of their own.



Figure 32. *Night of the Demons*. 1988. Directed by Kevin S. Tenney. [Film still from DVD] USA: Starz / Anchor Bay.

The supernatural is used in *Night of the Demons* to also facilitate gender fluidity and androgyny. The demon is not revealed to be male or female, but as something more akin to an insect (Figure 32). It possesses its victims indiscriminately and does not show a preference for male or female hosts in which to manifest its self. This makes the entity even more Dionysian as it inhabits many faces and many genders, while also, in its spirit form, having the appearance of some terrifying, giant, and primal insect.

Conclusion

Muir's negative commentary on *Night of the Demons* mirrors the lack of interest in and scholarly dialogue that the film has received over the last thirty years. When compared to the quintessential tropes of the eighties horror film and the societal norms and fears of the decade, interesting interpretations can be made of the themes in the film. It is far more complex than one would expect upon a cursory viewing of the film.

Furthermore, we find Levinson's proposed echo of a text in the film in the form of the sexualised young witch originally seen in *Häxan*. She is however a combination of the sexualised witch and *Suspiria*'s witch, Helena Markos, who is old and decaying and manifests in architecture. The witch is also used in *Night of the Demons* to embody conservative fears, where parents fear that their children will be corrupted through sexual intercourse, leading said parents to control their children's sexual agency.

WITCHCRAFT II: THE TEMPTRESS (1989)

Mark Woods' *Witchcraft II: The Temptress* (1989) shares many similar themes and tropes with *Häxan* and *Night of the Demons*, but they are slightly reframed. The film is a sequel to the direct-to-video film *Witchcraft* (1988) by Rob Spera which is about a woman who along with her husband and new-born baby are forced to move in with her mother-in-law. There she experiences some strange occurrences and soon realises that her husband and mother-in-law are witches who are trying to kill her and use her young child as a vessel for the Antichrist. The film is universally criticised and is not a cult-favourite. *Witchcraft II: The Temptress*, though not a cult classic, is more relevant than its predecessor due to its elements of soft-core pornography and exploitive content which set the tone for the franchise and making the film popular enough to inspire fourteen more sequels. The *Witchcraft* film franchise is regarded as the longest running horror film franchise ever created.

According to IMDB (2021a) Mark Woods directed three films in his career. The first was *Playboy Video Playmate Calendar* (1989), followed by *Witchcraft II*, and finally *Inside the Dream Factory* (1995) which is a documentary about the forties to sixties film industry. I am also not aware of references to the film in scholarly work despite the film being the point of origin for the fourteen sequels. There is also no entry for *Witchcraft II* in Muir's book about eighties horror films.



Figure 33. *Witchcraft II: The Temptress*. 1989. Directed by Mark Woods. [Film still from DVD] USA: Simitar Entertainment.

Plot

The film's opening scene contains a witch grandmother (Figure 33) of the baby from the first film, William, ritualistically sacrificing a young woman in order to gain the victim's appearance. Her plan is to entice and seduce the now 18 year old William Adams, her grandson, so that she can fall pregnant and give birth to the Antichrist. William is revealed to have been adopted by a pair of white witches and raised as their own after the events of the first film. The grandmother-turned-temptress, Delores Jones (Figure 34), takes up residence next door to the Adams's and sets her plan in motion. In every scene she shares with him she acts in provocative ways to draw William's attention. When he refuses to submit, she murders his mother, takes her place through her shape-shifting ability, and attempts to ruin his relationship with his girlfriend, Michelle, by having a demon sexually assault her. William accidentally kills his adoptive father in a fit of rage when he realises that his mother is in fact Delores. Delores then further isolates William by killing his best friend, Boomer, Audrey, the librarian who helps him, and Michelle's reverend father. She seems to break William's will at the end of the film and he succumbs to her and they end off writhing on the floor of the Adams residence with Michelle bearing witness while pinned to the floor through supernatural means. William finally defeats Delores, partially through Michelle's constant calling of his name, and by plunging a wooden crucifix into Delores's naked chest, turning her to dust.



Figure 34. *Witchcraft II: The Temptress*. 1989. Directed by Mark Woods. [Film still from DVD] USA: Simitar Entertainment.

Societal background of the *Witchcraft II* and initial observations

Sex and the naked body feature prominently in this film and is also the means through which Delores can bring about the end of the world. Though she does not use supernatural abilities to directly seduce William, she does use the supernatural to change her appearance in order to become more attractive. The supernatural is thus intertwined with her physical appearance as without it she would look decidedly different and be unable to seduce William. She also uses her supernatural abilities to kill or harm those close to William, to cause William to have nightmares, and to spy on the Adams family.

There are many aspects to consider regarding the sexual in *Witchcraft II*. The first of which is Delores's surname, Jones. In addition, she is unmarried making her Miss Jones. In 1973 one of the world's most popular hard-core pornographic films was released, the aforementioned *The Devil in Miss Jones*. *The Devil in Miss Jones* is widely regarded by critics and viewers as a classic pornographic film, and like the *Witchcraft* franchise, had many iterations with no less than eight sequels between that 1973 and 2010 (Williams, 2004:173). According to Peter Michelson (1993:235) in his *Speaking the Unspeakable: A Poetics of Obscenity*, *The Devil in Miss Jones*, along with *Deep Throat* (1972) and *Behind the Green Door* (1972), are the only three pornographic films to have existed up to the early nineties to have any artistic merit. Of the three films, *The Devil in Miss Jones* was by far the most successful financially, but also critically (Lewis, 2002:211-212). The film, for instance, has been favourably compared to Jean-Paul Sartre's play *No Exit* (1944) and upon release was perceived as a film to be taken seriously (Lewis, 2002:211). Additionally, in 1973 *The Devil in Miss Jones*'s ticket sales were just behind the latest James Bond film *Live and Let Die* (1973) (Lewis, 2002:212). One could argue that the shared surname, Jones, is a coincidence since it is fairly common, but when one considers *The Devil in Miss Jones*' cultural significance, its rerelease and popularity on home video, along with the sexual themes in *Witchcraft II*, it becomes likely that the two film franchises are connected. The two films similarly share the "devil made me do it" theme where both women are in the employ of the Devil. Using the moniker of Miss Jones, her association with the Devil, and linking her to sex and nudity can thus be regarded as an example of Bloom's *tessera*, as the name and its connotations with the pornographic film *The Devil in Miss Jones* are both found in the film.

As mentioned earlier in this chapter, the shame and embarrassment experienced by the viewer visiting a cinema to view pornographic films could finally be avoided. None of the *Witchcraft* sequels were released in theatres and all went the straight-to-video route. These films were able to be profitable and sustain the franchise because of the home video market as well as the low production costs associated with the medium. One has to consider that by 1981 hard-core pornography was part of mainstream culture (Barss, 2011:68). This would have paved the way for 'softer' films like *Witchcraft II: The Temptress*, making them more socially acceptable.

The social implications for anonymous home viewing of violent and pornographic materials are great. Private viewing of a film enables the viewer to do away with societal norms and have unique and individual experiences. These individual experiences inherently question and challenge societal norms which over time leads to social change. For instance, pornography has to a large extent demystified sex (Barss, 2011:73, Moore, 2009:80). Where perceptions of sex were once controlled by the church or the state, this has become increasingly difficult to do with the prevalence of pornography (Barss, 2011:73, Moore, 2009:13-14). This is similar to what Foucault (1978:20-21) argues in *The History of Sexuality* where he says that the church along with other power structures sought to control the sexual discourse in an attempt to gain more power. Pornography can be seen as a form of sexual liberation, because one could frame it as a detailed and public sexual presentation which enables conversations related to sex (Foucault, 1978:7). On the other hand, Foucault (1978:48) also argues that pornography has been used by power structures to control sexual discourse through the commercialisation of pornography. In this regard I find Foucault's statements ambivalent, but I would like to argue that both abovementioned ideas regarding pornography mirror the truth of pornography and that is that it simultaneously negates and enables power structures, implying a circular influence between power structures and pornography. The more pornography power structures produce or enable, the more pornography they will have to be produced to maintain a semblance of control over it. The same can be argued about horror films. Due to the frequency of teenagers having sex in horror films, similar scenes became a trope in eighties horror films. The idea of teenagers having sex could potentially have been rendered less taboo due to the eighties horror film.

Pornography is a complex genre with some proposing that it leads to decline in society, while others state it liberates society. Paglia (1994:16) says that pornography mirrors the animalistic reality of sexuality. Susan Griffin (1981:1) argues in *Pornography and Silence: Culture's Revenge Against Nature*, that pornography is an expression of fear of bodily knowledge and a desire to excise romantic love from the psyche. Her book describes pornography as normalised violence against women and that it is a reflection of the naturalised violence in society and against nature (Griffin, 1981:2). Others argue now as they did during the eighties that pornography is liberating and that it has more to do with exercising freedom of speech and opposing censorship (Butters, Droubay, & Shafer, 2021:1653-1654; DeCew, 1984:80). When one considers popular culture of 1980s it becomes clear that profit was the end goal when it came to the sexualisation of women in pornography. As mentioned in the main literature review, Hitchcock believed the thrill of the horror film is no different from an amusement park ride – the more thrilling the ride the more people would pay for more of the same experience. The horror film combines fear and titillation in one package, where a pornographic film only contains titillation, making the horror film a far more complex and engaging experience.

It is thus not just about the male gaze or patriarchal politics, but about what American society in the 1980s wanted in exchange for their money. Sex is a biological impulse like hunger. Hunger is quelled by the fast food industry in a fast and affordable way with a certain range of customization. Film can be seen as a similar product, especially since it was a product (VHS) that could be bought or rented for private consumption at low prices. A societal need thus becomes an easily accessible commodity and the more ‘free extras’ the viewer received, the more likely they were to spend their not-so-hard-earned money to alleviate their suburban boredom.

Delores Jones mimics the viewer and pop culture of the time. She lives in a middle-class suburb and is surrounded by all the trappings of what that lifestyle was in the 1980s. She is independent and lives on her own with no visible means of income, much like the middle-class housewives of the time. She looks and acts like Madonna with some of her scenes in the film resembling MTV music videos of the time, further emphasising the materialistic aspect of society (see the resemblance between Figure 34 and Figure 35). Interestingly however she does not yearn to be part of a nuclear family as she makes it explicitly clear that she only desires to have William impregnate her, thus excising romantic love from the equation.



Figure 35. Madonna – True Blue. 1986. Directed by James Foley. [Film still from music video] USA: Warner Bros.

Some might argue that this is decidedly feminist of Delores, but it is more complex than that. The first consideration is that Delores is William’s grandmother in disguise. Like in *Black Sunday* the witch is portrayed in *Witchcraft II* to have no qualms regarding sexual intercourse with a close relative. In *Black Sunday*, however, Asa was genuinely in love with her brother, while Delores only desires to be impregnated. Delores is however shown to enjoy William’s attention and his physical touch which means that there is nothing cold and mechanical about the sexual act she desperately wants to set into

motion. William is also introduced to the viewer in a similar fashion when he and Michelle are in bed at the start of the film. He is manipulative towards Michelle and tries to coerce her into having sex with him. He nearly succeeds in his manipulations, but Delores rings the doorbell, interrupting his plan. For the rest of the film Delores makes sure that William remains a virgin so that he remains pure for her own machinations. William is shown to be sexually interested in Delores, but their union is never completed and William only gets as far as to remove her top and kiss and fondle her breasts at the end of the film. Michelle screaming at William seems to snap William back to his senses resulting in William stabbing Delores through the heart with a wooden crucifix.

The latter scene is loaded with meaning. Michelle is a suitable, and Apollonian sanctioned, lover for William as she does not share the same bloodline with him. Delores represents the Dionysian who revels in sex and feels no revulsion. Michelle's frantic calling to William is tantamount to a moral compass calling William back to the Apollonian side of moral sex. The wooden crucifix is phallic while also symbolising the Apollonian boundary that holds societal norms in tow. By stabbing Delores with the wooden crucifix – a religious object made from a natural resource now dead – William is removing a person who threatens the patriarchal and Apollonian social order. Delores not only threatens Apollonian and conservative sex through her lustful actions, but also through the way she is constructed and portrayed visually.

From the moment Delores bursts into the Adams' house for the final confrontation between herself, Michelle, and William the scene resembles numerous eighties pop and rock music videos that aired on MTV during the decade. Delores dances in a strategically lit living room with very little furniture to get in the way of her gyrating body. Smoke from a concealed smoke machine swirls around her movements as she makes objects explode by pointing her finger to them while a strobe light confuses her prey and creates a dance floor atmosphere. She is dressed like Madonna frequently dressed during from the mid-eighties to early nineties, even sporting the same short silver-blonde hair style. Her movements are sensual and alluring as she rubs her tight-fitting clothes with her hands. If one compares the scene with Madonna's *Papa Don't Preach* (1986) or *True Blue* (1986) music videos there is no questioning the influence. The parallels between Delores and Madonna are striking and an example of MTV pop culture influencing an eighties horror film.

The aforementioned eighties duality is again present in *Witchcraft II*. On the one hand Delores is independent and has her own agency. On the other hand she wants to have a baby that would become the Antichrist who would in turn rule over her and imbue her with power. This suggests that the power she craves resides within a male even though she is a powerful witch. Besides giving birth and

raising a male Antichrist before she can gain this power she also needs a virgin male (suggesting the Apollonian) to willingly impregnate her.

Though it is admirable that Delores portrays an independent woman of the eighties who wants to raise a child as a single mother, there are elements in the film that suggest the contrary. Delores is sexualised in the film and her relationship with William resembles that of a lover's triangle where a married man has an affair with another woman. William is courting Michelle, while Delores attempts to break up their relationship by falling pregnant. William is also shown from the beginning of the film to lust after sex and not being able to tell Michelle that he loves her, going as far as coercing her into having sex with him. Delores though only wants to have sex with him and is not interested in having a relationship with him after being impregnated, meaning that she does not desire a long term involvement with William. Delores is thus the embodiment of the married male fantasy. She is available sexually, but requires nothing else from a man. Contraceptives are rejected, meaning that the man, William, can have unprotected sex with a beautiful woman without any of the responsibility.

Consider the final moments of the film consisting of a lengthy scene of gasping, naked breasts, and William killing Delores. She is reduced to charcoal dust and blown away by the wind. This resembles the male fantasy of infidelity, where you can have sex with someone who is the exact opposite of your partner without fear of repercussions. After having their way with her she disappears, leaving no trace that she had ever been there while also leaving no evidence of indiscretion. Michelle witnessing William in the arms of another is also not a problem, since they embrace lovingly as the witch is defeated and Delores never returning is assured. Delores exhibiting some feminist ideals further provides a smoke screen for William's sins as she is made a scapegoat for William's lusts. Even the subtitle of the film and end credits draws attention to this by referring to Delores as The Temptress. She is the evil that attempts to separate William from a loving hetero-normative, suburban relationship. In other words, *Witchcraft II* portrays the perfect outcome for a man's infidelity. It should also be mentioned that like in *Night of the Demon*, William's reluctance at first to accept Delores's sexual advances is likely influenced by fears related to HIV/AIDS, as is conservative sexual morality.

Throughout the film I found myself morbidly fascinated by the potential sex scene between William and Delores. In addition to the grandmother/grandson taboo that could be transgressed we also have to consider that William is supposedly a minor in the film who is being enticed by a much older woman. The potential of transgressing sexual taboos undoubtedly creates tension in the viewer by defying sexual norms (Dines, Jensen, & Russo, 1997:80; Penninton, 2007:118; Williams, 2004b:74). The young man having sex with an older woman is not unlike the so-called MILF or cougar pornography genre which is immensely popular with viewers of pornography. A 2013 study found, for instance, after analysing 55 million search entries on pornographic websites such as Pornhub, that searches for

older women or ‘MILFs’ constituted the third most popular search in the world indicating how popular the genre is (Currie, O’Sullivan, & Vannier, 2013:254).

The tropes in *Witchcraft II* and their meanings

It is obvious that *Witchcraft II* is a horror film despite its production values and softcore sex and nudity. The film contains manifestations of conservative fears related to the corruption of the youth, but also fears related to the coming of the Antichrist and Judgement Day – all hallmarks of the eighties horror film. Furthermore Delores kills William’s friends easily and indiscriminately in much the same way Freddy does in the *A Nightmare on Elm Street* films. What is interesting however is how little overlap we find between Muir’s other tropes and this film. For instance, there are no point of view shots, red herrings, failure of technology, nature running amok, or the typical common scenarios one would usually find in eighties horror film. There are no vices perpetrated by the young characters that end in brutal killings, nor are there instances of the final chase and the tour of the dead, the *coup de grâce*, or the sting in the tail/tale, suggesting that later horror films do not share many of Muir’s tropes.

The reason for the lack of eighties horror film conventions is likely due to the antagonist not seeking revenge for a past crime, which is frequently central to the horror film narrative. Delores’s main motivation is to have sex with William so that she can beget the Antichrist. She also does not punish wayward teens and only kills those who seem to get in her way, except for Boomer who is killed for pleasure right before Delores enters the Adams’ house in the film’s final confrontation.

With regards to character archetypes we similarly find no final girl, as the plot does not call for a tour of the dead or a final chase scene. Interestingly, the lustful and one-dimensional jock archetype usually murdered in eighties horror films is the protagonist in *Witchcraft II*. Audrey and Michelle are both virginal princess-types who are usually the final girls in eighties horror films and Audrey is killed early in the film, while Audrey is sexually assaulted by an invisible demonic entity. Boomer is the annoying practical joker and best friend of the jock and is also killed.

What seems clear however is that in addition to the links with a classic pornographic film, there is a definite connection between eighties music videos, pop/rock stars, and *Witchcraft II*. The film seems to embody the old adage of sex and rock and roll. The special effect employed to make Delores disappear is not very well executed and reminiscent of the disappearing effect used in ZZ Top’s *Gimme all your Lovin’* (1983) – a popular song in 1983 that reached #10 on the US music charts in 1984 (Official Charts, 2021). In fact, many of the scenes in the *Witchcraft II* are similar to eighties glam rock bands’ music videos like those produced for RATT, Dokken, Scorpions, Whitesnake, and

Twisted Sister at the time. All these groups featured music videos with beautiful young women dressed and acting provocatively. By mimicking these videos the film has an especial artificial feel. By combining the artificial with the violence in *Witchcraft II* the film mirrors the artificial and violent world view of many in American society experienced during the eighties.

Another theme found in *Witchcraft II* is the one pertaining to sexual morality and sexually transmitted diseases. It is more complex in its manifestation as it is interwoven with incest, much like we find in *Black Sunday*. In *Black Sunday* incest is linked with genetic problems in children and sexual morality, while in *Witchcraft II* incest is rendered indistinguishable from sexual morality and HIV/AIDS, making this a change in course of the trope, or an example of Bloom's *clinamen*. This in turn links back to the deviant sexual practices we find the witches committing in *Häxan* and their association with the abject as sex is rendered abject in *Witchcraft II* due to the implied incest. There is no obvious ripple effect to be found between *Häxan* and *Witchcraft II* with the exception of the sexualised witch which we could marginally consider an example Bloom's *tesserae* due to the token of recognition (sexual deviancy and the abject) being reframed. This lack of tropes might be due to Woods' inexperience of the horror film genre while the softcore sex in the film is most likely influenced by his film work for Playboy.

There is also the tension between sexual arousal and disgust to consider as Delores both arouses as a sexually available older woman, while simultaneously creating revulsion with regards to incest. This makes another case for Muir's theory of duality's prevalence in the eighties horror film.

The extent to which Delores is able to function as an avatar for conservative views is also questionable. She is not the punishing avenger we find in many other eighties horror films. It is more accurate to describe her as the embodied fear of conservative parents. She is the older woman hiding in suburbia among their children who ensnares them with the promise of sexual vice and pleasure.

Where influence is concerned we do find some interesting changes and overlaps with regard to the tropes established in *Häxan*. The sexualised young witch features prominently in *Witchcraft II*. She is able to transform herself to look like others, while also disappearing and appearing at will to spy on others. Like in *Black Sunday*, however, the witch is actually an old crone in a young woman's body, whereby notions of power and appearance frequently found in witch horror films, are challenged. Interestingly Delores does not make use of the supernatural to make William fall in love with her. She changes her appearance and age to entice him sexually, meaning that she wants him to come to her out of his own free will. This is worth noting as it paints Delores as self-assured and self-reliant, while also emphasising the obsession of youth and beauty found in popular culture like MTV and Madonna. We again see the duality that Muir mentions in his study of the eighties horror film. Akin to this duality is Delores' use of her powers to fall pregnant in order to give birth to the Antichrist so she can

become powerful. This is nonsensical as she already has power and can change her appearance on a whim to become anyone who wields great power, which further suggests Woods' lack of experience and knowledge regarding the horror genre. This is similar to what T.S. Eliot (1948:14) says regarding the creator who differs from his predecessor where the creator's difference from his or her predecessor is what differentiates them from their predecessor – that which gives the creator his or her unique voice, so to speak. Eliot (1948:14-15) however also maintains that traditions of the art or genre must be maintained as it is only through great effort and experience of working and reworking those traditions that the contemporary creator can truly flourish and attain meaning in their work which reverberates through the entire tradition's past and present. Eliot (1948:15) says "...that the past should be altered by the present as much as the present is directed by the past. And the poet who is aware of this will be aware of great difficulties and responsibilities."

Woods' separation from the horror genre prompts thoughts of the New Historicist tradition described by Gallagher and Greenblatt (2000:18): "[New Historicism] is not for us fundamentally collaborative: it is doggedly private, individual, obsessive, lonely". This implies a separation from others in the same field, even though New Historicism frequently mixes and borrows theories from other fields. It also problematizes Levinson's focus on studying the influences and reverberations that exist between texts.

I am similarly reminded of the New Historicist method of engaging with texts from the past and how these texts are reframed in the present. Woods' film does not engage with the past, nor does he seem to have any inclination of horror film traditions. Just as he ignored his predecessors so did others ignore him because his work brought nothing of value to the genre. He does engage somewhat with the socio-historical zeitgeist of the eighties, but this seems to originate more from MTV music videos and softcore pornography.

There are some instances where Woods applies horror film conventions and can even be said to be pioneering, but they are marginal. Fear and disgust are, for instance, intertwined with the sexualised young woman in *Witchcraft II* as incest and sexually transmitted diseases become congruent. Delores is Dionysian as she challenges prevailing norms regarding sex by making sex abject and pleasurable in the same instance. In other words she blurs the lines between disgust and pleasure making them equal in the process which is something that I have yet to experience in any of the witch horror films discussed up to this point. Related to this is the trope of the witch as seducer of men and killer of babies. Again, Delores confounds expectations as she is definitely able to seduce men, but she does so to have a baby. This is another example of Bloom's *clinamen* as an unpredictable change is made to an established norm.

The last trope that we find in *Witchcraft II* is the exchange of something to gain power. Delores is shown at the start of the film to have killed a young woman in order to gain her exact appearance.

This is the sacrifice she offers to Satan in exchange to become young and beautiful, but also so that she can become the birth-vessel for the Antichrist.

In *Witchcraft II* however we find no other connection to nature or primitive cultures, except for the associations between incest and primitive cultures which have been discussed at length in the *Black Sunday* chapter. Delores's yearning for incest challenges the modern Apollonian society that has hoped to rid itself of these primitive ways. The struggle between the Christian church and the Satanic cult is again a feature in the film with Christianity being parallel with order and morality and the Satanic being associated with chaos and immorality. Giving in to Delores's sexual ways is the path to death as she reminds the viewer of disease and dangerous sexual partners. Delores turning to dust as she is penetrated by a phallic crucifix is further testament to the suggested Christian conservatism of many Americans during the 1980s.

Closing statements regarding *Witchcraft II*

Witchcraft II can easily be described as an especially low-budget horror film which deserves to be ignored by scholars and critics. This assumption is incorrect for various reasons. Even though Woods did not engage with the horror genre on a deeper level and ignored most of its conventions, the film is the longest running horror film franchise in the history of the horror film. With each subsequent release the *Witchcraft* films redefine the low-budget moniker frequently used to describe horror films. *Witchcraft 14-16* were filmed back-to-back over a nine day period in 2015 and released to the public simultaneously in 2016 (Barton, 2015; IMDB, 2021b-d; Rife, 2015). The films were all also produced by the same production company (with the exception of *Witchcraft VIII*), Vista Street (IMDB, 2021b-d; Rife, 2015). With every subsequent release the budget for the films decreased, while the amount of sex and nudity increased (Rife, 2015). It stands to reason then why many of the cast members and film crew and directors throughout the series were drawn from the adult film and magazine industry (Rife, 2015). From a financial perspective the *Witchcraft* series seems profitable especially if one considers the longevity of the franchise, which implies a relatively successful series of films.

The film also to a degree successfully reinterprets many of the witch horror film tropes and reframes them in interesting ways while also mirroring popular media and conservative fears, but Woods' understanding of these fears could also have originated from other media like music videos and pornography. *Witchcraft II* seems to embody the youth culture of the eighties very well through its use of music video styles and imagery. Delores similarly embodies the sexual predator that hides in the suburbs – possibly the greatest fear of suburban parents.

Concluding the eighties

By the end of the 1980s the endless supply of slaughtered suburban teens and their increasingly elaborate and ridiculous deaths had become cliché and predictable (Phillips, 2005:145). The excessive sex, nudity and violence in *Night of the Demons* and *Witchcraft II*, much like the disposable characters found in the narratives, are good examples of the excesses Americans enjoyed (and suffered from) during the eighties. The female characters were most likely shown nude and having sex not because the director or producers are necessarily deviants, but because of the potential sales they might garner by adding extras for the viewer. The murderous monsters in *Night of the Demons* are avatars for conservative powers in society who tried to control the youth through fear and retribution. There are instances though, like *Witchcraft II*, where the witch embodies the fears of conservative powers of the time, but she is ultimately vanquished by reason and morality, like Michelle does when she calls to William at the end of the film.

Both *Night of the Demons* and, to a lesser extent, *Witchcraft II* resonate with tropes and stereotypes established in *Häxan*. Most are changed and reframed in startling ways, while other ideas are unchanged, like the sexualised young woman. The changes to the tropes do however reflect the changes in societal norms, which are excellent examples of the echoes Levinson proposes all texts leave in their wake. For instance, where the young witch in *Häxan* was only used for titillation and to establish links between power and age, in both *Night of the Demons* and *Witchcraft II* the young witches are able to embody the young and old witch simultaneously while also being associated with sexually transmitted diseases and death, creating interesting aesthetic experiences. The young women's bodies are also used as extras to enhance the viewing experience and excess the society demanded at the time.

The supernatural is interwoven with the physical appearance of the women in both films, but is never used to entice or make men fall in love with the witches as is done in *Häxan*. The men are expected to come to the women out of their own volition. This mirrors eighties society's shift towards the idea of being more accepting of independent women and women who are in control of their own agency. This is not just mirrored in the way the witches utilise supernatural abilities, but also in the chosen pop stars the witches emulate in appearance and certain behaviour.

In other words, the films can be described as valuable texts for the New Historicist due to the way the productions problematize the intersections and exchanges between gender, culture, and power. In most instances the two films mirror American greed and the commercialisation of the media, but also suburban fears related to the corruption of the youth.

In another way the eighties film reminds me of Scott Wilson's comment regarding New Historicism. Wilson (2007:172) says that New Historicism: "... through its aesthetic use of the lurid anecdote and its academic mediation of oppression, ... succeeds in capitalising on the spectacle of oppression. It generates both symbolic and financial capital through aestheticising a historical project."

New Historicism and the eighties film are thus aligned when we consider their methods. Both profit from an exploration of oppression which in turn generates similar texts at different points in time further generating symbolic and financial capital. One can argue that there is an ironic reciprocal influence that exists between texts and New Historic texts.

Lastly, I would like remind the reader of the relationship between the eighties horror film and postmodernism. According to Barry (2009:81) postmodernism rejects the distinction between so-called low and elevated art. He explains that the postmodern text is characterised by its excess, bad taste, and gaudiness (Barry, 2009:81). These characteristics of the postmodern are all found in the films discussed in this chapter. For instance, both films feature excessive violence and sex. Both films are low budget films, yet they were profitable (*Night of the Demons*) or inspired a successful franchise (*Witchcraft II*) that generated profits over a long time. The financial gains of the films are not attributed to any elevation of cinematic production or techniques, but to the low art sensibilities and formulaic conventions of the films.

As discussed, both films mimic the conventions and techniques of popular music videos of the time creating a continuous reality between the films and music videos. This links to Baudrillard's so-called hyperreality. Baudrillard (2002:145) states that we reproduce images in the media which result in a new or hyperreality that blurs the boundaries between the real and the imaginary. In other words, this hyperreality is enabled through the reproduction of the same images. The horror films of the eighties resemble the MTV music videos of the same era. Conservative parents believe their children will be influenced by the images and constructed personalities of pop/rock stars and horrific films. Ironically these musicians and films are more aligned with conservative fears than reality. The imaginary fears manifest in reality through the popular media, influencing societal norms. The imaginary in consequence becomes a hyperreality from which it is difficult to escape.

THE NINETIES: *THE CRAFT* (1996) AND *THE BLAIR WITCH PROJECT* (1998)

With this chapter I continue to trace the echoes of the tropes associated with the cinematic horror witch as established in 1922's *Häxan* as per Levinson's New Historicist analytical model. In the previous chapter we saw how these echoes were reframed due to the socio-historical influences at the time in the USA. We saw how HIV/AIDS, pop culture icons, Cold War fears and the related impending apocalypse shaped the way the witch and her motivations were portrayed. The USA of the nineties saw new and completely different socio-historical influences that ultimately had an impact on the way the cinematic witch was portrayed and how she acted in American horror films.

Arguably the biggest event that occurred at the start of the nineties was the collapse of the Soviet Union in December 1991 which meant the end of the Cold War (Walker, 2009:208-209). This created an air of optimism as Americans did not have to fear nuclear war or impending doom anymore (Walker, 2009:209). Americans were also tired of Republican rule under the likes of Reagan and Bush who severely damaged the US economy leaving many without work and the nation in debt (Murphy, 2009:190). By 1993 the American people voted for the Democratic Party with Bill Clinton as the president of the United States of America (Murphy, 2009:188). Clinton's plans for economic turnaround and to assist the poor and middle-class Americans were effective, so effective in fact, that not even scandalous sexual relationship with an intern could fell him (Murphy, 2009:190-191). Attempts to impeach him failed and his approval ratings with the public climbed more making him the president with the highest approval rating upon leaving the presidential office since President Eisenhower (Murphy, 2009:191). When Clinton entered the presidential office the American budget had a deficit of \$290 billion, but when he left the budget had a surplus of \$230 billion (Murphy, 2009:191; White House, 2020:28).

The American economy strengthened as unemployment receded every year and the GDP grew between 12 and 21% between 1990 and 1999 (Trescott, 2009:134). As incomes rose, life expectancies also increased as lifestyles changed and the average American had less stress (Trescott, 2009:134). Despite better lives for most citizens, all was not well as economic inequality widened and this was soon followed by the so-called dot-com bubble that burst in 2000 (Koerting, 2009: 269; Trescott, 2009:137).

One would expect that the film industry would have experienced an influx of American moviegoers during the nineties due to an increase in disposable income. The opposite was in fact true and the motion picture industry noticed that fewer people were buying tickets to see the latest blockbusters (Hurd, 2009:333). Film budgets however soared as did the marketing costs associated with every new

production (Hurd, 2009:333). In response to these challenges the industry reduced the number of films produced per year and opted for ‘safer’ films that would be more likely to lead to higher returns (Hurd, 2009:333). Films were stripped of complexity, and formulaic approaches were applied to film scripts and productions in an effort to make the films more appealing to wider audiences (Hurd, 2009:333). Similarly new technologies, like Computer-Generated Imagery (CGI), made film production less expensive, while simultaneously changing the nature of film (Hurd, 2009:333). Examples of early CGI can be seen in James Cameron’s *Terminator 2: Judgement Day* (1991) and Steven Spielberg’s *Jurassic Park* (1993) – all films with multimillion dollar profits. Other films known for their extensive use of CGI are Cameron’s *True Lies* (1994), Chuck Russel’s *The Mask* (1994), Ron Howard’s *Apollo 13* (1995), *Toy Story* (1995), Roland Emmerich’s *Independence Day* (1996), Cameron’s *Titanic* (1997), Paul Verhoeven’s *Starship Troopers* (1997), George Lucas’s *Star Wars: Episode 1 – The Phantom Menace* (1999), culminating in 1999’s *The Matrix* by the Wachowski’s.

Independent films and films produced in countries outside the USA were of little importance to American film studios as the films were unable to attract large audiences and thus less profitable (Hurd, 2009:334). There were however a small number of independent films that were able to attract large audiences like Quentin Tarantino’s *Pulp Fiction* (1994) and Daniel Myrick and Eduardo Sánchez’s *The Blair Witch Project* (1999) – both films made over \$200 million in profits (Hurd, 2009:334).⁴¹

The horror film sequel was also a mainstay during the nineties as the franchises had established fan bases while the narratives were formulaic (Hurd, 2009:335-336). Many eighties slasher franchises continued into the nineties like the *Halloween*, *Friday the 13th*, and the *A Nightmare on Elm Street* films. Wes Craven’s *Scream* (1996) explored the conventions established during the eighties in horror films and that were subsequently reused in the nineties sequels. Ironically *Scream* was so popular that it became a victim of its own formula as many sequels were produced of the film. It also led to the production of other films like *I Know What You Did Last Summer* (1997) which in turn also spawned a sequel (Hurd, 2009: 336).

As mentioned, during the nineties the emphasis was on producing films that would result in profits. This meant that films had to attract a large audience, especially the youth (Hurd, 2009: 337). In order to attract large swathes of the general public, films had less depth and characterisation in an effort to

⁴¹ Interestingly, the noir film made a comeback during the nineties and films like Jonathan Demme’s *Silence of the Lambs* (1991), Paul Verhoeven’s *Basic Instinct* (1992), Oliver Stone’s *Natural Born Killers* (1994), David Fincher’s *Seven* (1995), and Joel and Ethan Coen’s *Fargo* (1996) were popular and very profitable films (Hurd, 2009:334). All these films however combine different genres making them more appealing to filmgoers (Hurd, 2009:335). For instance, *Basic Instinct* combines a whodunit murder mystery with an erotic, while *Silence of the Lambs* combines horror with a psychological mystery.

make them more accessible to general audiences (Hurd, 2009: 337). Complex shots and scenes were also made less expensive by using CGI, placing further emphasis on the visual but at the expense of the narrative (Hurd, 2009: 337).

In addition to CGI making films easier to produce, the introduction of the DVD format made distribution and production of films for home use easier and less expensive. VHS was phasing out and completely replaced with the smaller and compact DVD format by 1997 (Benson-Allot, 2013:14).

HIV and AIDS was also at the forefront of many public discourses during the nineties (Palmer, 2009:3-4). AIDS was perceived by many as an even greater threat than nuclear warfare or communism (Palmer, 2009:3). William J. Palmer (2009:3) says:

America adjusted its historical gaze, stopped looking for death from the skies, and began looking within at the excess, dysfunction, and the single disease that became a metaphor embodying all the debilitation to which American society was no longer immune.

Threats to the American way of life were not external anymore, but came from within. Americans started to realise that excesses like obesity and substance abuse threatened their lives. Casual sex could also lead to death, irrespective of gender and sexual orientation through the spread of an ‘invisible’ virus.

The nineties horror film context

The context in which the horror films were created in the nineties had a profound impact on the production of horror films. Two of the most well-known and celebrated horror films of the nineties are Andrew Fleming’s *The Craft* (1996) and Daniel Myrick and Eduardo Sánchez’s *The Blair Witch Project* (1999). Both films had a profound influence on the general public while *The Blair Witch Project* also established a new film genre, namely the found footage film.

It is a fortuitous coincidence that both films fall under the witch horror film genre. To fully appreciate the different meanings found in these two films one first needs to understand the eighties horror film and its position within the nineties context, especially in relation to the exchanges that occur between gender, power and culture.

In the pages leading up to this section I describe the North American socio-economic context as affluent and generally upbeat. The end of the Cold War meant that Americans did not need to fear a nuclear war with the Soviet Union anymore and ostensibly fears regarding the apocalypse should have subsided. Instead a vacuum was created and the American public so used to having an unseen enemy

just outside the borders of USA, now feared fictional foes like their own government, large corporations, and the exceptionally rich (Muir, 2011:5). This contention seems correct when one considers the media behemoth Chris Carter's *The X-Files* television series became during the nineties.

The X-Files lasted nine years from September 1993 to May 2002, spawning two motion pictures, and winning various accolades (Brockington, 2009:947-948). The series follows the exploits of protagonists Dana Scully and Fox Mulder as they attempt to solve mysteries which a shadow government has covered up for decades. The series popularised slogans such as "trust no one" and "the truth is out there" which is still in use to this day, mirroring the general distrust many exhibit to this day towards governments and big corporations (Brockington, 2009:947-948). This distrust is not unfounded especially if we consider the context of the eighties where those in government communicated conflicting messages and nearly led the entire country to financial ruin. *The X-Files* spawned many films and series that imitated many of the central themes of the series, like the films *Absolute Power* (1997) *Enemy of the State* (1998) and the series *Millennium* (1996-1999). *The X-Files* was so popular and well-crafted that the average nineties horror film could not compete, thus having a negative effect on the horror film genre's popularity (Muir, 2011:13).

Another television series that had a similar and long-lasting impact on nineties pop culture was Darren Star's *Beverly Hills, 90210* (Charlebois, 2012:v; Penna, 2009:100). The series follows the lives of a group of friends through various trials and tribulations related to sex, AIDS, drugs, racism, suicide, homophobia, eating disorders, teen pregnancies, and many other issues nineties teenagers had to contend with. The series was broadcast for a total of ten seasons between 1990 and 2000, testifying to the series' popularity. As mentioned, genres were frequently combined during the nineties to make films more appealing to wider audiences. Horror films are usually produced with an adult viewership in mind. By combining the teen drama genre with the horror genre the film becomes more attractive to a larger audience. Teenage characters and themes similar to those in *Beverly Hills, 90210*'s can be found in horror films like *Warlock* (1991), *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* (1992), *Warlock II: The Armageddon* (1993), *Brainscan* (1994), *New Nightmare* (1994), *Scream* (1996), *The Craft* (1996), *I Know What You Did Last Summer* (1997), and *Disturbing Behavior* (1998), to name but a few. These films painted teenagers as frequently unhappy with themselves and others, while enjoying the trappings of middle-class lifestyles and affluence.

Bill Clinton becoming president turned the economy around and by doing so made people happier and healthier. The Clinton office was however not without fault and Bill Clinton's affair with Monica Lewinsky was widely publicised. The attention Clinton's affair received by the media can be attributed to society's obsession with scandal that manifested in the nineties' tabloid press. Raymond Gozzi (1999:458) refers to the nineties as "The Tabloid Decade" due to tabloid content becoming mainstream and inseparable from hard news. Gozzi (1999:458) attributes sensationalist news'

popularity to advancements in technology and an increase in acceptable vulgarity in both the media and society. Some of the most widely circulated news stories of the decade were: the aforementioned Clinton/Lewinsky scandal; the OJ Simpson murder trial; the beating of Rodney King; Kurt Cobain's suicide; the death of Princess Diana; the Heaven's Gate mass suicide; and the Columbine High School Shooting (Gozzi, 1999:460). It is fair to say that American culture during the 1990s became obsessed with tabloid stories (Muir, 2011:7). Many horror films from the time inevitably thus also contained characters that were employed as journalists or cameramen, like *Predator 2* (1990), *Scream* (1996), and *The Blair Witch Project* (1999).

It should be noted surveillance seemed to be a common theme in nineties media. On the one hand the American populace feared being watched by invisible threats like shadow governments, but at the same time the general populace required the media to report on every celebrity's movements.

The rest of this chapter delves into the relationship between the abovementioned contexts and two of the most highly regarded horror films of the 1990s, namely *The Craft* and *The Blair Witch Project*. Both films reframe many of the tropes established in *Häxan* which can be measured by using Bloom's ratios of influence. Similar to *Häxan*'s influence I also found manifestations of Dionysus throughout both films. Evidence of Bloom's proposed influences and the Dionysian confirms the ripple effect of texts over time as proposed by Levinson.

THE CRAFT (1996)

Background

Andrew Fleming's *The Craft* follows a group of three teenage girls (figure 36) (from the left: Bonnie, Nancy, and Rochelle) who befriend Sarah Bailey (figure 37), who recently moved to their town. The four friends are social outcasts and are regularly picked on by their peers. The three original friends dabble in witchcraft but are never successful in conjuring real magic, but this soon changes when Sarah joins their ranks. Sarah is revealed to be a conduit for supernatural power and is able to imbue all four of them with supernatural abilities. They use these newfound abilities to exact revenge on the girls who were mean towards them and to make their male peers notice them. The original three friends turn on Sarah when Sarah notices negative changes in the other girls' personalities. Bonnie is the most out of control and turns Nancy and Rochelle against Sarah once they gain power. Sarah defeats the three friends in the end by stripping them of their power. Bonnie ends up tied to a bed in a psychiatric hospital and is shown to have lost touch with reality.



Figure 36. *The Craft*. 1996. Directed by Andrew Fleming. [Film still from DVD] USA: Sony Pictures Home Entertainment.

The Craft was created by Peter Filardi and Doug Wick (Brucculieri & Jacobs, 2016). Peter Filardi, who had previously written *Flatliners* (1990), a film starring Julia Roberts, Kevin Bacon, and Kiefer Sutherland, about medical students who experiment with near death experiences, wrote the screenplay for *The Craft*. During an interview for Huffington Post he revealed that he and producer Doug Fick had met shortly after *Flatliners* and were brainstorming to produce either a haunted house or witchcraft film together (Brucculieri & Jacobs, 2016).

Filardi stated in the aforementioned interview that he was immersed in Satanism, drugs, heavy metal, and magic as he had become fascinated with the real life drama of Ricky Kasso (Bruculieri & Jacobs, 2016). Interestingly, Peter Filardi's next script would be for *Ricky 6* (2000), a film about the teenage boy's struggle with drugs and Satanism. This cult film, never officially released and only available on leaked bootleg VHS tapes and DVDs, is based on the true life story of Ricky Kasso a known murderer, drug addict, and self-reported Satanist (Jordan, 2015).

The co-creator of *The Craft*, Douglas Wick, found inspiration elsewhere. Wick's first film was *Working Girl* (1988), starring Melanie Griffith and Harrison Ford (Bruculieri & Jacobs, 2016). According to Wick, he had grown fascinated with the idea of female empowerment after working on *Working Girl* and on many occasions pondered the idea of supernatural empowerment (Bruculieri & Jacobs, 2016). He had little understanding of the horror genre which is why he collaborated with Filardi after the success of *Flatliners* (Bruculieri & Jacobs, 2016). Wick also mentions in this same interview that one area of contention for the backers at Sony was that the film did not fit neatly into a specific genre (Bruculieri & Jacobs, 2016). This challenges what some film scholars have said about nineties films combining genres for profit.



Figure 37. *The Craft*. 1996. Directed by Andrew Fleming. [Film still from DVD] USA: Sony Pictures Home Entertainment.

The Craft has become a cult favourite over the last two and a half decades with numerous reviews, blog entries and website articles devoted to the film (Bose, 2021; Cohen, 2018). Rosie Fletcher (2021) most recently wrote on *Den of Geek* – a blog devoted to cult favourite films, comics, board games, and books – that *The Craft* gave ‘the weirdo’ teenage girls of the nineties role models through the four young witch protagonists. Anne Cohen (2018) made similar assertions about the four witches in her

Refinery 29 article. Fletcher (2021) especially argues how Nancy, played by Fairuza Balk, still resonates with people today due to her unapologetic and confrontational personality. Angelica Jade Bastién (2017) has similar notions regarding Nancy and says that Nancy mirrored her own loneliness and social status. Nancy's revenge on a boy who ruined her reputation and gave her a venereal disease, for instance, gave young women a cathartic experience (Fletcher, 2021). As I was sixteen years of age when *The Craft* was released, I personally saw the influence of the film on some of my female peers at the time. Many women I knew changed their wardrobes and music taste during the mid to late nineties, emulating the witches in the film. *The Craft's* narrative formula was so successful that it made series like *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* (1997-2003), *A Discovery of Witches* (2018-), *His Dark Materials* (2019-2020), and *The Chilling Adventures of Sabrina* possible (2018-2020) (Bose, 2021; Fletcher, 2021).

In Lisa Lagace's 2016 article for *Marie Claire* she describes *The Craft* as the first film that deviated from the good and mean girl archetypes frequently found in films such as *Clueless* (1995) and *She's All That* (1999). The outsider boy had received screen time in such films as *The Outsiders* (1983) and *The Goonies* (1985), but similar female roles in films had not yet been explored (Legace, 2016). Lagace (2016) argues that *The Craft's* feminist credentials lay in the film's ability to authentically represent the outsiders and to give them power and agency. She says that *The Craft* is more about being yourself and different and not caring about fitting in with others (Legace, 2016). The film also changed the witch cinematic archetype as witchcraft became a tool of female empowerment as opposed to a tool of fear (Legace, 2016). Female empowerment is mirrored in the type of shots employed by the director as there are hardly any shots which place any of the women in an inferior position in relation to the camera. Even in one of the first scenes in the film where Sarah falls to the floor after being scared with a snake by a homeless man, the camera comes as close to her eye level as is possible. In many other instances the camera seems to occupy the place of a fifth member of the coven, maintaining eye level points of view.

Somewhat similar to Lagace's *Marie Claire* article is Julia Brucculieri and Matthew Jacobs' 2016 article for *Huffington Post*. *The Craft* has been touted in the *Huffington Post* as a genre defining teen film that broke with all the clichés found in films like *Clueless* and *Can't Hardly Wait* (1998) (Brucculieri & Jacobs, 2016). Contrary to what the *Huffington Post* claimed about the film, if one strips the film of the supernatural the plot resembles other teen movies where the unpopular girls exact revenge on their bullies, become attractive, and get the boy in the end. The authors of the *Huffington Post* article ascribe the film's success to it being different from all other teen films and that the four women resemble the outcasts we often find in high schools, the so-called 'weirdos' (Brucculieri & Jacobs, 2016). Upon closer inspection however I found that the four women still resemble the beautiful and popular archetypes of teenage girls found in other nineties teen films. The

only difference was that in this instance the pretty and popular girls were dressed in goth fashions and Doc Martens boots. From my personal experience, the popular teen girl archetypes found in the aforementioned films *Clueless* and *She's All That* were frequently the scorned and unpopular ones in high school. The filmmakers themselves mention in the same *Huffington Post* interview that the wardrobe for the women mirrored what was popular amongst teenagers at time (Bruculieri & Jacobs, 2016).

Andrew Flemming, who directed *The Craft*, said the following after receiving the script for the film (Bruculieri & Jacobs, 2016):

The tone was there and the idea was there, but my experience from high school was not “Pretty in Pink”. It was a very serious, gothic, heavy-duty experience. Everybody was under a lot of pressure. So I liked that part of it a lot. I brought to it the idea that the main character had committed suicide. The idea that the Rochelle character was black and that she’d been experiencing racism, that was my idea. The idea that Bonnie had been burned, that was my idea. There was a girl in my dorm room who tried to kill herself and I found her with her wrists cut. There was a girl in my dorm who had burns like that, and I was intrigued by her. There was a lot of weird bigotry in high school. I think I personalized it. I also liked the idea that it was witchcraft, but that it felt real. All the witches you’d seen in movies heretofore had been in black pointy hats with green skin, and weirdly a few years before, somebody in the business, I guess I upset them. It was this woman. I don’t want to go into details, but she said, “I’m a Pagan. I’m going to cast a spell on you and it’s going to fuck you up.” I was really freaked out.

Flemming’s ideas regarding the teenage witch are indeed a challenge to cinematic norms and the notions Hollywood often perpetuate regarding the portrayal of teenage girls. His contribution to the film also did make the film more relatable for young people at the time, but there were still problems with the choice of actresses to embody said witches. Like in the eighties horror films the four women were again in their early twenties while filming *The Craft*.⁴² In other words they did not resemble 16 or 17 year old high school students, which suggest that along with their beauty, their ages also set them apart from the average high school girl. That being said, Wick, Filardi, and Flemming succeeded in creating a feminist film loaded with meaning which teenagers readily internalised at the time. The women’s beauty and older appearance could potentially have contributed to this assimilation of feminist notions as the four women became people to aspire to.

⁴² An IMDB search reveals that Fairuza Balk was 22, Neve Campbell 22, Rachel True 29, and Robin Tunney 23 upon release of *The Craft*.

Literature review and initial observations on *The Craft*

According to Emily Chandler (2016:109) scholarship about *The Craft* tends to focus on negative aspects associated with female friendships, sexuality, and feminine power lust. From the previous section it seems obvious that the central theme found in *The Craft* is female identity and empowerment which seems to be ignored by many scholars. Female identity and empowerment all sit at the intersection where gender, power, and culture meet, which, as mentioned in the methodology chapter, is of cardinal importance to a New Historic study.

Chandler wrote a thought-provoking article regarding female identity for a 2016 edition of *Girlhood Studies*. She says that *The Craft* remains popular to this day among women because of the way it subverts teen film tropes where teenage women are shown to crave understanding as opposed to being popular. The film challenges the idea of having thin, white, European, middle-class, and psychologically healthy women as protagonists in an American film (Chandler, 2016:109, 110, 113, 114).

Chandler (2016:110-111) argues that *The Craft* embodies the fear adolescent girls have of being isolated. She says that Sarah's initial isolation at the start of the film, then becoming part of a group, and her expulsion from the group at the end of the film mirrors these fears of isolation (Chandler, 2016:110). In other words, the horror in the film is linked to being bullied and ostracised by former friends (Chandler, 2016:110). Catharsis is achieved at the end of the film when Sarah realizes her own worth, gains independence, and turns the tables on her erstwhile friends in a non-violent way.

Chandler (2016:114) notes how the race, body disfigurement, economic status, and mental health of the four women, though important for character development, are not the central driving force or characteristic of the characters. She says *The Craft* breaks away from the "tradition of teen cinema in which girls cannot be simultaneously marginalized, visible, and have grand adventures" (Chandler, 2016:114). What I however found most intriguing is Chandler's argument regarding the witches' physical attractiveness in the film. She says that *The Craft* simultaneously exploit and challenge teen film tropes with regards to girls' beauty, visibility, and power (Chandler, 2016:114). For instance, when the four women are imbued with power, they confidently stride the school grounds in form-fitting and more revealing clothes, yet none of their peers look in their direction or notice them. Though their transformation is thus coded along the lines of the male gaze, there are no similar reactions of awe from the students which suggest the makers of the film's disinterest in popularity, but also the four witches' rejection of popularity (Chandler, 2016:114-115). *The Craft* can be said to explore a more realistic high school experience where girls are more interested in getting through high school as opposed to finding ways to become popular – the quest for popularity being an endless trope in teen films (Chandler, 2016:115). Similarly, *The Craft* explores finding happiness in friendship,

whereas many teen films, such as *Can't Hardly Wait* (1998) and *She's All That*, emphasise and explore the trials and tribulations of finding happiness in becoming part of a clique and popular (Chandler, 2016:115). Chandler (2016:115) argues that because the four witches are not all chaste, white, heterosexual, normatively bodied, or mentally secure, they cannot achieve popularity. This proposes that their only recourse for happiness is to find peace and happiness in friendships with likeminded individuals. Their new-found confidence while strutting over the school grounds subverts societal norms because it demonstrates that the others are just as beautiful as the clichéd teen archetypes we frequently find in teen films, but the difference is that the clichéd characters need an audience both on and off screen to acknowledge their beauty and popularity, while the witches in *The Craft* requires none.

Another way that *The Craft* rejects teen film tropes has to do with the cohesion of the group members within the clique (Chandler, 2016:117). In other films like *Clueless*, *Can't Hardly Wait*, or *Disturbing Behavior* (1998) the cliques are shown to be impervious to personal conflicts between group members, while *The Craft* is a more realistic take on clashes between friends and the bullying and manipulation that occur within said cliques (Chandler, 2016:117).

Chandler's notions are especially interesting when one considers New Historicism's approach to contradictions. According to New Historicist scholars, like John Drakakis and Monika Fludernik (2015:499), the New Historicist welcomes contradictions as these contradictions present us with a nuanced perspective of a specific point in the past. The average teen film of the mid to late nineties would have the viewing public believe that young women were only interested in popularity and similar shallow endeavours. The most common trope in those films focussed on an overly simplistic us/unpopular student(s) versus them/popular student(s) plot where the unpopular students become popular and/or exact revenge on the mean and popular students. The central message in this type of film is usually to conform to some imaginary middle ground which is achievable once the protagonists become confident or shame the bullies by turning the tables on them. This type of plot suggests that the producers of these films were also out of touch with the reality nineties teenagers had to deal with. As mentioned, Flemming mentioned in an interview that he wanted *The Craft* to mirror what he had experienced in high school and thus weave witchcraft into a realistic high-school setting. By comparing *The Craft* with other teen films from the time we gain a different and deeper understanding of film production and viewing habits of the nineties filmgoer.

As mentioned, Gallagher and Greenblatt (2000:35) argue that a film/text or a fragment of a film/text represents the culture in which it was created, but also for the intended audience. As all texts are equal to the New Historicist, one could argue that the average teen film and *The Craft* both reflect aspects of nineties youth culture. For instance, teenagers are misrepresented in the average nineties teen film, but at the same time the popularity of these films among teenagers – the intended audience of said films –

shows us that teenagers at the time might have either yearned to be noticed or just enjoyed tales of underdogs becoming victorious. When we add *The Craft* to this analysis a different picture of the nineties teen emerges where realistic teen problems are brought to the surface. *The Craft* succeeds at capturing the realistic fears and anxieties of the nineties teenager far better while simultaneously exploring them through a favourable view of witches and witchcraft, albeit by focusing on a group of beautiful young women who are obviously not teenagers.

There are two arguments to be made with regard to the teenage female bodies in this film and what they meant within the nineties context. First, one has to consider that this film, like all the other films with teenage target audiences in mind, was produced to attract a much younger audience to mall cinemas (Jacobs & Bruculieri, 2016). The other aspect is that the film, though recycling a generic plot, does address four serious issues many teenage girls would have to deal with where physical appearance and the female body is concerned.

The so-called teen film of the 1980s and 1990s was produced for a teenaged target audience with 48% of all cinema tickets sold to persons in the 16 to 24 year old age bracket (Driscoll, 2011:127; Sonnenberg-Schrank, 2020:2-3). In order to appeal to this market the films are required to contain certain elements, like an attractive and young cast for the young viewers to swoon over, much like the *Twilight* (2008-2012) and the *Hunger Games* (2012-) film franchises expertly exploited (Nelson, 127:126-127). The four witches appeal to the young male audience in the form of sexual attraction, while the young female viewers have beautiful and strong female leads to emulate. Interestingly the characters have more to offer than just their physical appeal and 'being weird'.

Rachel True's character, Rochelle, is one of a small number of young actresses of African descent to play such a central role in especially the teen film genre from the era. In the film she is bullied by a popular and racist blonde girl who compares Rachel's hair to pubic hair. Bonnie is suffering through stigma and humiliation after an accident left her with a disfiguring burn over most of her back. Nancy is from a poverty-stricken and abusive home. She also has a reputation as being sexually promiscuous and admits to having had a sexually transmitted disease. Nancy is also the most outspoken and brazen of the four women, making her an especial threat to patriarchy. Bastién (2017) says that Nancy "refuses to play by the rules society lays out for her". Nancy is *othered* more than the other three women, because of her agency. This is emphasised by her socio-economic status and by her sexually transmitted disease. Her incarceration at the end of the film mirrors society's fear of a woman who breaks with societal norms regarding femininity as she is locked away and labelled mentally ill (Bastién, 2017).

Sarah seems to endure less social ridicule than the others, and only has to contend with a teenage boy spreading false rumours of having had sex with her and claiming that she has no sexual prowess. She

does have other personal issues like the death of her mother and a new step-mother, but they are addressed in an in-depth way by referring to her suicide and through her character development throughout the narrative. Each of the four witches thus embodies a different problem or social ill that many teenage girls had to endure and still do. Rachel embodies the non-white girl who has to contend with racism. Bonnie embodies the handicapped young woman, while Nancy represents the lower socio-economic classes. Sarah on the other hand embodies the young woman who is struggling to find confidence and independence.

All four the main characters are well-developed with their own agency. Even though the characters portrayed by Neve Campbell and Rachel True are supporting roles, they are relatable and display compelling character development. Robin Tunney and Fairuza Balk star as protagonist and antagonist, respectively, but only receive slightly more screen time than the other two characters. This promotes equality between the women and places them on an equal footing in the eyes of the audience while also creating the impression that their problems are equal and deserving of attention. Though there is no magical spell to alleviate these problems in the real world, it does emphasise these problems and the audience undoubtedly empathises with the characters. This empathy is similar to what Blake and Madsen (as discussed in the main introduction and main literature review) suggest regarding the idea of a horror film leading the viewer to feel empathy for others. This leads to the audience questioning norms and ideals regarding beauty thus challenging social norms and promoting change. These questions related to norms and ideals are by no means new, nor were they during the previous 100 years of film. Societal norms of every age influence perceptions about beauty, but *The Craft* specifically targets these issues with adolescent women in mind by using attractive yet slightly older women. A global study of young women between the ages of 13 and 17 from the early nineties revealed that most respondents had problems at school which in turn influenced their confidence, self-perception, and identity formation (Gibson, et al. 1991:207). *The Craft* activates these problems and uses the well-known formula of the makeover film to engage with the viewer. Because the four characters become more beautiful as the film progresses, the film becomes a wish fulfilment fantasy like being more beautiful, confident, and older, which most teenagers could relate to.

Chloe Carrol (2021) suggests that *The Craft* was one of the first films to reinterpret the witch in a favourable way as opposed to the witch's representation in films like *Häxan*, *The Witches* (1990), and *Hocus Pocus* (1993). As mentioned, *The Craft* perpetuates certain ideals regarding youth and beauty in cinema and popular culture. When one considers that the film's plot resembles many teen films, especially in the romantic-comedy genre, then *The Craft* takes on a typical makeover plot, or teen makeover film, where the supposed less attractive teen girl gains confidence after a makeover and becomes desirable and popular (Sonnenberg-Schrank, 2020:31). This is more obvious when one

considers the attractive teen cast of the film, namely Balk Fairuza, Neve Campbell, Rachel True, and Robin Tunney, in addition to the high school context where the narrative unfolds.

All four of the young witches are beautiful, despite the artificial flaws they supposedly have. Like Allison Reynolds as Ally Sheedy in *The Breakfast Club* (1985), Brittany Murphy's character Tai in *Clueless* (1995), Lindsay Lohan as Cady Heron in *Mean Girls* (2004), to name but a few, the four actors in *The Craft* were beautiful before their supposed transformations in the film. The only, yet significant, difference between this film and the other teen films mentioned is that the transformation originates from the supernatural and not a friend who gives them a makeover.

Neve Campbell who plays Bonnie was one of the most popular young actors of the late 1990s and early 2000s with starring roles in the series *Party of Five* (1994-2000), and the films *Scream*, *Scream 2* (1997), *Scream 3* (2000), *Scream 4* (2011), and the neo-noir erotic *Wild Things* (1998). Her beauty is obvious and the 'horrible' burn marks she is said to have over her back and predictably stop below her neck does not succeed in making her less attractive. Though Neve Campbell was the most well-known actor at the time of casting *The Craft*, and was initially slated to play the lead role, the studio opted for the unknown Robin Tunney as they found her acting skills better suited for the role (Bruculieri & Jacobs, 2016).

Like Rachel Leigh Cook's 'transformation' in *She's All That* (1999), so the four witches in *The Craft* also transform from shy and beautiful to confident and beautiful – in other words, the physical transformations are superficial and unconvincing. This transformation trope was lampooned later in 2001's *Not Another Teen Movie* where Chyler Leigh's character, Janey Briggs, is transformed into the most beautiful girl in school by removing her glasses and untying her hair. *The Craft* mimics this transformation trope thus perpetuating societal ideals about youth and beauty where beautiful young women have power, while older and/or less beautiful women have less power if any power at all. The more these images related to women are perpetuated in the popular media, the more engrained they become in western culture.

There is however much more to say about the four teenage witches even though they perpetuate the above mentioned societal norms. Anne Cohen (2018) says:

In the two decades since it hit theaters (sic) in May 1996, *The Craft* has developed a cult following, most significantly among women, who recognize themselves in Sarah, Nancy (Fairuza Balk), Bonnie (Neve Campbell) and Rochelle's (Rachel True) attempts to claim the power so often denied to teenage girls using supernatural means. And yet, the initial reviews of the film were mixed at best, earning it a 50% critics' score on *Rotten Tomatoes* that belies its much greater cultural importance. ... Too often, women feel powerless to change

circumstances — political, social, financial, take your pick — that feel beyond their control. *The Craft* presents a universe in which any slight could magically be made right, and in our current climate, that's an appealing prospect.

The Craft cleverly disguises female emancipation within the teenage make-over film thus challenging societal norms in the nineties regarding the position of young women. As noted in the previous section, the themes of female empowerment were intentional as Douglas Wick explained. The combined efforts of the producer, writer, and director of *The Craft* succeeded in hiding feminist messages in a film specifically targeting a teen audience. By mixing two popular genres, the film's message reached an even wider and younger audience that would not have been possible with a strictly horror film. *The Craft* was not the only production to contain feminist messages in a hybrid film genre. Gillian Anderson's portrayal of Dana Scully in *The X-Files* led to the so-called 'Scully Effect' where women were inspired by the character to pursue careers in STEM fields (Finke, 2013; Knowles, 2018; Norman, 2015). This suggests that the witches and Agent Scully were able to challenge and subvert social norms through popular media. By interpreting the last-mentioned subversion from a New Historicist perspective, we glean more of the past, specifically regarding the behaviour of women, by comparing different texts from the same time to one another, namely a film, a series, and academic reports. *The X-Files* and *The Craft* containing elements of subversion and female empowerment suggest that some producers during the nineties were far more open to female emancipation than those in previous decades.

Another scholarly interaction with *The Craft* comes from the esteemed John Kenneth Muir's *Horror Films of the 1990s* (2011) which is a follow-up to his book *Horror Films of the 1980s* that informed the previous chapter on eighties horror films. According to Muir (2011:435) young women in the nineties sought a new belief system that was more aligned with feminism, environmentalism, and New Age discourses in which they could foster a sense of community with each other and which was free of judgement. The characters in *The Craft* embody this ethos, as do the female witches in *Sabrina: The Teenage Witch* (1996-2003), *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* (1997-2003), and *Charmed* (1998-2006) (Muir, 2011:435).

According to Muir (2011:435-436) witchcraft enables the four witches in *The Craft* to change their appearance, like the healing of Bonnie's burns and Nancy transforming herself into Sarah. If burns can be healed, then more superficial problems like acne and blemishes can be removed, which was and still is appealing to many teenagers (Muir, 2011:436). The supernatural also enables the girls to turn the tables on their tormentors and those who seek to harm their reputations, like the slut shaming Nancy and Sarah have to endure, and the racism directed to Rochelle (Muir, 2011:436). Though this reclamation of power and agency can be described as feminist, Muir finds instances where this is not the case.

Muir (2011:436) argues that the girls receive their power from a man, Manon, and that this association negates the feminist credentials of the women – the characters similarly identify Manon as male in the film. Peter Filardi, the writer of *The Craft*, admits in an interview that he chose the name Manon because it is a beautiful woman's name with the word 'man' contained within it (Kim, 2016). Manon was created by Filardi specifically for the film and no such deity can be found elsewhere. I find Muir's line of argumentation unconvincing especially when one considers the link between witchcraft and Dionysus. Dionysus is a shapeshifter and their body fluctuates between male and female make it difficult to attribute a single or static sex to them. As Filardi himself says that he chose the name because it combines the feminine and the masculine. This combination of the male and female can be linked to Dionysus who is able to change between man and woman at will. This is also why Dionysus' followers eat different creatures and other human beings, as it enables them to become what they eat. I find that Nancy, Bonnie, and Rochelle, followers of Manon, feed off Sarah symbolically becoming more like her. In other words, Manon and his followers can be said to be aligned with Dionysus, and his followers.

Muir (2011:436) also notes that the witches' rejection of conformity is questionable as all four of them dress alike, meaning that their identities are influenced by the group's norms. This is made obvious when Sarah rejects the group and then becomes more powerful than her peers, implying that true power comes from individuality and not conforming to others (Muir, 2011:436). I do not necessarily find fault with the women wearing similar fashions, as wearing the same types of clothes does not imply conformity regarding ideology or behaviour. I also found the characters to interpret the nineties goth fashions in individual and unique ways with each character wearing signature looks. Muir can be forgiven for this misinterpretation as he most likely does not pay much attention to or have an interest in fashion. As I am first and foremost a designer by trade, I have been fascinated by fashion and fashion shows for many years so I have developed an eye for trends and the interpretation of trends.

Heather Green (2018:5) associates *The Craft* (and *The Blair Witch Project*) to the Satanic Panic that lasted between 1983 and 1999. Her book *Bell, Book and Camera: A Critical History of Witches in American Film and Television* discusses a small selection of American films and television series from different genres. In the book she links the cinematic witch to shifting social contexts, like gender politics, demographics, and traditional religious and political views (Green, 2018:2-5). She mostly describes the witch as an embodiment of both fear/oppression and empowerment – a conflicting archetype (Green, 2018:2). Green (2018:2) states that the witch is someone she both fears and admires on the ground of the witch's great power and her ability to destroy and self-actualise. Green's associations with the witch are surprisingly close to the modern New Historicist method due to her employing a 'plurality of approaches' as described by Drakakis and Fludernik (2015:496) in the New

Historicist issue of *Poetics Today*. By analysing the history of American film and television with an eye towards cultural aspects like gender, politics, and religion, combined and how these are associated with power struggles, Green's study is New Historicist without making such a claim explicitly.

According to Green (2018:5) *The Craft* resembles the narratives perpetuated by some churches and parent groups where parents feared that their children were caught in a relentless satanic onslaught perpetrated by the media. According to Sarah Hughes (2017:691) the Satanic Panic "involved hundreds of accusations that devil-worshipping pedophiles (sic) were operating America's white middle-class suburban daycare centers (sic)." This panic can be described as a modern-day witch-hunt initiated by politically active conservatives and spread by tabloids and talk shows during the eighties and nineties (Brackett, 2018:271-273; Hughes, 2017:691). Numerous individuals were accused, arrested, and imprisoned, but almost all cases were overturned, but some still languished in prison for many years (Hughes, 2017:692). The abusers and victims were most frequently linked with persons of lower economic status (Robbins, 2002:92). The fears associated with the Satanic Panic obviously grew and soon teenagers were also thought to be converted by Satanists (Victor, 2002:32-33). The general consensus was that teenagers were drawn to Satanism by heavy metal and rock music, music videos, horror films, board games like *Dungeons & Dragons*, and books about the occult (Brackett, 2018:271-272; Victor, 2002:33). This narrative regarding the occult was mostly spread by the so-called New Christian Right (Brackett, 2018:274). The central arguments of their ideology can be described as: capitalism which is free of government interference and legislation; traditional values were threatened by secular humanist teachings and liberal politicians; and that communism was a growing threat and at their doorstep (Brackett, 2018:274).

These fears and protests by the neoconservative religious groups went on far into the nineties (Brackett, 2018:294). Below I discuss a news article and an academic journal article written within a short period of time after the Columbine shootings of 1999. This is an attempt to understand a specific point of time by using the New Historicist method. In the nineties the scope of Satanic/subversive music changed from rock and heavy metal to include rap. The two perpetrators of the Columbine shooting were also erroneously linked to the goth movement, thus drawing negative attention to goth teenagers (Berres 2002:44).⁴³

Allen Berres discusses goth, or Spooky Kid culture of the nineties, in his 2002 article "*Everybody is their Enemy*": *Goths, Spooky Kids, and the American School Shooting Panic*. According to Berres

⁴³ Note that I used an actual newspaper article in combination with academic texts as reference to illustrate the New Historicist method of using different types of texts to inform an idea about the past. The one text was published a week after the shooting, while another was published three years later and another 21 years later. All three texts say the same thing regarding the media and society's insistence to blame rock stars for the incident. In all three instances the authors note the absurdity of the claims, implying that most were well-aware that statements linking teenage delinquency with popular culture were and are preposterous. The veracity of this claim can only be achieved through my position years after the publication of these texts where I was able to combine and compare the texts.

(2002:43) goth culture had permeated to almost every American high school during the nineties. Goths were a later offshoot of the punk movement from the late seventies and early eighties (Berres, 2002:43). Those that identified as goth were known to wear predominantly black clothing and listen to gloomy music, like The Cure, Bauhaus, and Sisters of Mercy (Berres, 2002:43). Marilyn Manson had a profound impact at the time through his music, music videos, and live show performances, resulting in a widespread fanbase that was referred to as the Spooky Kids (2002:43). The Spooky Kids had the same fashion sensibilities as the goth with the only distinction between goth and Spooky Kid being a strong reverence to Marilyn Manson on the part of the latter (Berres, 2002:43). Berres (2002:43) accurately observed that the Spooky Kid craze lasted for only a few months with many of the devotees moving on to the next music-inspired or fashion fad within a year. A large portion had moved on to Eminem by the end of the nineties (Berres, 2002:43).

The goth movement was met with derision from many parents and religious/moral groups, but the Columbine shooting was used to convince the general public into fearing goth culture, even though the two shooters were not goths (Berres, 2002:44-45). During the eighties and nineties the goth subculture was frequently associated with Satanism due to the black clothes and music taste (Berres, 2002:45). Though there were goths who practiced Satanism, most goths did not practice Satanism (Berres, 2002:45). In a 1999 article published in the *Denver Post*, the author, Jim Hughes (1999:17), seems to compare goths to the barbarian Visigoth marauders that plagued and pillaged Europe during medieval times due to their appearance and 'violent' music. The teenage goths were framed by the general media as a new type of gang with predominantly white, violent, suburban, and ignorant members who were a threat to society and who would have no qualm to murder other white and suburban children and teenagers (Berres, 2002:45-56).

Derek Sweet (Briggs & Greene, 1999:11), a scholar researching the goth movement at the time, was quoted in another *Denver Post* article saying that his research indicated that goths were not violent, racist, hateful, or troublemakers. He describes them as scared of being marginalised and attacked in the popular media for being different (Briggs & Greene, 1999:11). In other words, teenagers adhering to the goth lifestyle suffered stigma and marginalisation from society just like those individuals who were accused of witchcraft during medieval time. The Columbine Shooting incident, though taking place almost exactly three years after the release of *The Craft*, serves as a real world example of the irrational societal fears associated with teenagers who act and dress like the women in *The Craft*.

When one considers the goth movement one notices that a fair amount of disposable income is required for someone to become a supposed goth. This implies that to become what some in society labels a Satanist, one would need money. During the nineties music CDs were relatively expensive, as were personal computers and games. As someone who has been collecting CDs since the early nineties and plays tabletop board games like *Dungeons & Dragons*, I can attest to the high costs

associated with these items. In *The Craft* we find a similar scenario as the four witches are shown to frequent a store that sells occult paraphernalia. It is also the store's owner and white witch, Lirio, who reveals to Sarah that she is a nexus for supernatural power. In other words, the support of capitalism by the New Christian Right and other similar conservatives is more likely to blame for teenagers' path to Satanism.

Green's assessment of *The Craft* representing conservative fears is justified when we consider the above paragraphs. Nancy is poor, has an STD, and challenges authority – all things that would horrify most middle and upper class parents. Bonnie has burn marks, a large and physical scar, which separates her from the other girls. Any person reading this now would be able to attest to the bullying and ridicule teenagers with any kind of physical deviation would have had to endure during their school years. Rochelle deviating from the white female archetype is similar to Bonnie, but she poses an additional threat by being an attractive black woman. Rochelle can entice the 'nice' suburban white boys and contaminate their racial purity with her sex and race. Sarah is the girl from a well-to-do and affluent but broken household. The scars on her wrists make her attempted suicide obvious while simultaneously making her a target for gossip and condescending pity.

Nancy, Bonnie, and Rochelle also seem to be closely linked to class. Grace Gerely (2021) makes a similar argument while comparing *The Craft* to *American Horror Story: Coven* (2013). Gerely states that the powers of an all-powerful witch in horror cinema and television series are limited and bound to the same societal structures any normal person find themselves in.

According to Gerely (2016) Nancy is stripped of her supernatural power and her connection with Manon because she is from a lower socio-economic class. It is also why Sarah is worthy of power and Manon as she is from an affluent household. Nancy represents white, western, and middle-class and affluent class fears when she suddenly gains wealth and is able to remove her and her mother from poverty and an impoverished neighbourhood and ascend to wealth and a high-rise apartment in an exclusive building (Gerely, 2016). Nancy also becomes unhinged and autocratic when her social position changes (Gerely, 2016). Sarah, on the other hand, is careful and even-handed with the supernatural power at her disposal and does, though seeking revenge at first, realize that she had made a mistake by casting a spell over Chris (Gerely, 2016). Gerely draws links between Nancy and Sarah's socio-economic positions and the way they are portrayed as good (Sarah) and bad (Nancy).

Gerely absolves Nancy too hastily of wrongdoing and paints her as a martyr for outcasts and women, but also as a feminist icon. She also argues that she is portrayed in specific ways so that the audience finds it difficult to empathise with Nancy (Gerely, 2016). I agree to an extent with Gerely. Nancy, after she is elevated to a high social class, has an opportunity to better herself, but she does not do so and becomes even more unhinged and nearly destroys someone who just wanted her friendship. It is

because of this that I find it difficult to make a hero out of Nancy. I empathise with the character and her history of abuse and poverty, but she and Sarah are not at odds because of social class or what they represent socially. Nancy is too fleshed out as a character for the viewer not to feel some empathy for this character. As evident in some of the texts in this literature review, many experience Nancy positively and as the most intriguing character. An audience member, irrespective of age or gender, could experience Nancy on an almost vicarious level throughout the film and we revel in her mischief, but the moment she turns on her friend, Sarah, I felt that a line had been crossed. Sarah's socio-economic position never makes an impact in the film, nor does it impact the narrative or her or her friends' agency. As they become witches, they are all placed on the same level, in other words, the supernatural makes them equal, as does the camerawork. Their friendship made them powerful, not their supernatural abilities, and when the trust between them is shattered their abilities unravel and they become powerless. Nancy does not go mad at the end of the film because she gained power, she went mad because she could not get over Chris's betrayal, then betrayed her friend, and subsequently lost her power. One has to take into account that at the core of *The Craft*'s narrative we find four young women who seek acceptance and realise that as long as they can accept one another they will not be alone. It is the betrayal of friendship that causes Nancy's downfall.

Filardi, the previously mentioned co-creator of *The Craft*, shares similar sentiments about class and witches, but does not mirror Gerely's sentiments. He mentioned in a recent interview that magic has historically been associated with the poor, but says that the power the girls attain are used purely for self-empowerment and revenge on those who have tormented them (Fletcher, 2021). He drew upon his own experiences in high school when he wrote the first treatments of the script, revealing that he wanted to make a film that addressed the cruelties and terrible things that happen to high school teenagers to this day and how it affects them (Fletcher, 2021). He argues that it is because of how relatable and flawed the four girls are in the film that it remains popular and still resonates with viewers to this day (Fletcher, 2021).

After reading Filardi's statements regarding the film I cannot fully support Gerely's claims regarding Nancy's socio-economic status, even though I do think that she does touch on some important socio-economic aspects surrounding the cinematic witch in other horror films. *The Craft* being linked to capitalism and social positions is of importance for the New Historicist as capitalism is a tool or instrument used by power structures within society (Drakakis & Fludernik, 2015:506). The witches in the film use the tools of the power structures that seek to contain them against these structures in various ways. They subvert not only through their physical bodies, or a combination of film genres and tropes, but also through the use of capitalism to empower themselves, like when Sarah buys the candles and books from Lirio at the occult shop. They do not use capitalism exclusively to empower themselves, as their friendship with one another seems to be the most valuable tool of empowerment

the group has. The trust, support, and acceptance the women initially have for one another are what gives them power and independence. Filardi mentions something similar and emphasises that Nancy's betrayal of Sarah is what destroys the group (Fletcher, 2021). I interpreted it in the same way as Filardi describes the Sarah-Nancy conflict. I also found instances where the supernatural can be read metaphorically. Bonnie's scars, for instance, disappears by supernatural means, but I understood their disappearance in the sense that they did not really disappear, her friends just care enough about her that they did not see it anymore.

There is more to say about the four witches' supernatural craft. The word 'craft', according to the online Merriam-Webster (2021) dictionary, means "an occupation, trade, or activity requiring manual dexterity or artistic skill", but also "skill in deceiving to gain an end". Sarah has supernatural abilities that come natural to her that would describe her as a teenage prodigy. Her friends do not have this inborn ability and have to rely on her to feed their own latent ability. They also practice their craft, but it is mostly to gain something. At the end of the film with the supernatural battle between Sarah and the other three witches, we find that everything that happens to Sarah is merely illusion and that because it is illusion, Sarah is able to wrest their abilities from them through a simple binding spell.

Reverberations and reinterpretation of the cinematic witch

As mentioned in many instances of this study, one of the central tenets of the New Historicist method is the combination and comparison of fictional and non-fictional texts to achieve impressions of the past. The idea is to isolate a text or a fragment of a text and then to compare it with other texts. While dissecting *The Craft* I noticed something I would not have noticed if the film was studied in isolation. In horror films we tend to find the protagonist pursued by malefic beings who are from their first appearance in the film, evil. In *The Craft* the evil beings were at first the protagonist's best friends. The horror Sarah experiences has more to do with the loss of her group of friends, who become her tormentors. Similar events occur in *Night of the Demons* where the witch, Angela, a comparable teen outcast, is possessed by a malignant force and turns on her friends. There is thus an observable ripple effect between *The Craft* and *Night of the Demons* which I have not seen in earlier witch horror films. The only difference is that in *Night of the Demons* the characters change because of possession, while in *The Craft* it is power that corrupts Sarah's friends. This is a good example of Bloom's *tesserae* as the teenage friends who turn on their protagonist friend is the recognisable token. In both instances, however, the change is still associated with the supernatural, as the power Sarah's coven receives from Manon is not evil or malefic in itself. An exchange between Lirio and Sarah after Sarah is expelled from the coven reveals the nature of Manon:

Lirio: You must invoke the spirit.

Sarah: But it made Nancy crazy.

Lirio: She takes it to a dark place.

In other words, like a loaded gun, Manon is simply a tool which is controlled and influenced by those who invoke them. In *Night of the Demons* the teenagers become zombified vessels for demons, while in *The Craft* the invoker possesses the entity, implying Bloom's *clinamen* as an unpredictable change was made to an established trope regarding possession.

With Sarah being able to invoke Manon and access so much of his supernatural power and Lirio commenting on Sarah being the most powerful witch she has ever encountered, the link between old age and increased power as established in *Häxan* is subverted (*kenosis*). Robin Tunney (Sarah) is obviously beautiful and though she plays the role of a teenage girl she is clearly in her mid-twenties, implying sexual maturity and availability. Sarah's power is also shown to originate from within her and not from outside forces. She is also able to latch on to more powerful sources of supernatural power, like Manon, and bend it to her will without fear of being corrupted by power like her friends. It should also be noted that Bonnie, Nancy, and Rochelle were only able to gain Manon's power through Sarah. Sarah is a nexus or conduit or nexus for supernatural power while also being able to generate her own power. In other words, we find simultaneous examples of Bloom's *kenosis* and *tesserae* as the convention of an external entity imbuing the witch with power is both present and ignored.

Earlier in this chapter I suggest a link between Manon and Dionysus based on the assumption that Manon is a combination of both male and female. This association similarly links Sarah to Dionysus as she is able to channel his power. Because she is aligned with Dionysus in this regard, it stands to reason that she would also be aligned to them in other ways.

Associations with primitive cultures or dead and decaying things, for instance, again manifest in *The Craft* but they are reframed. Sarah already has supernatural power in her without worshipping or bringing tribute to any entities of old. The other three witches receive their supernatural gifts through Sarah from Manon, a being who is described as a force of nature and the elements. Nature is however not shown to be chaotic, threatening, or uncontrollable as Manon first manifests in the film as a kaleidoscope of butterflies when the witches call upon him. When they invoke Manon's full power on a beach one evening Nancy is struck by lightning with no harm coming to her. The next morning shark carcasses litter the beach – the danger and violence the animals represent utterly subdued. During the final confrontation of the film between Nancy and Sarah hundreds of snakes, spiders, rats, and other insects are used to scare Sarah into submission. They are merely illusions though, implying

the irrational fear society harbours towards nature. We can draw similarities between this fear of nature and the struggle between the Dionysian and Apollonian where Apollonian fears result in a need to control and contain nature. This would suggest that the four witches are aligned with Apollo instead of nature due to them seeking to control nature. Again we thus find the witch to be ambiguous, which is similar to what Green suggests. She causes fear and respect, while also using supernatural power that originates from a being aligned with nature.

The witches simultaneous fear of nature and resulting attempts to control it does not necessarily negate Dionysus. Paglia (2001:28) suggests that Apollonian control is absolute with rigid societal constructs, while Dionysus is ambiguous. She also argues that the Apollonian gaze sees nature as beautiful and peaceful, while it is in fact dangerous and constantly destroying and reinvigorating itself (Paglia, 2001:28). I have not observed this type of alignment with Dionysus in the previous films which makes this change of the tropes akin to Bloom's *clinamen*.

The final trope to consider with regards to *The Craft* is the witches' repeated association with abuse at the hands of a man. Sarah uses a love spell on Chris after he spreads false rumours about her claiming that he slept with her and that she was bad at sex. Nancy kills Chris because he refuses to have sex with her. Nancy also uses the supernatural to cause her stepfather to die from a heart attack. The death of her stepfather results in her and her mother becoming wealthy overnight as he had had a life insurance policy naming them as the beneficiaries. The power and wealth bestowed on Nancy has a marked effect on her personality and she becomes unhinged and murderous. Sarah on the other is shown to feel empathy for Chris and regrets casting the love spell over him. She is also shown at the end of the film to become more confident and independent after gaining Manon's power, while a powerless, screaming, and deranged Nancy is shown tied to a bed in a psychiatric hospital. The two women are shown to have been affected in opposite ways after receiving supernatural power. This renders the argument of women with power becoming insane or irrational moot, thus swerving away from the hysterical woman trope established in *Häxan* (*clinamen*). Interestingly, Sarah and Nancy being both female and witch can be interpreted as two aspects of Dionysus. Sarah is a nexus for nature, yet does not seek to control it. She lets the supernatural power of nature flow through her, but does not try to control it. Nancy is shown to control or bend this power to her will, but is unable to maintain it, ultimately leading to violence and insanity – all of which are known characteristics of Dionysus.

Conclusion

The Craft relies on very few of the tropes of horror cinema to frighten the viewer and is more subtle in creating unease. The horror in the film, though subdued, originates in the real world problems the characters experience in the context of adolescent life and how the characters (and viewer) perceive their own bodies. In this regard the film uses beautiful young witches to connect with a teenage audience and discuss issues that many teenagers undoubtedly struggle with, like physical appearance and alienation. The film mirrors normal teenage problems of sexuality, self-discovery, and the often explosive repercussions of choices that many teenagers experience and are still experiencing today. This is done through the all too familiar framing and packaging of the nineties teen genre film without resorting to the eroticisation or sexualisation of the four women. The film thus gives us a glimpse into the past and some of the things that some nineties teenagers in the western world experienced. From my own position and experiences I can attest to similar scenarios in the South African high school context of the mid to late nineties. The parallels between the sixteenth century witch hunts and the Satanic Panic witch hunts of the eighties and nineties are especially interesting.

The Craft problematizes the intersections between gender, power, and culture in interesting ways. Though the four women confirm to stereotypical standards of Western beauty, they still subvert sociocultural norms through the way they experience and use power. Nancy raises issues about class, but she is not punished for being poor, but because she betrayed the trust of another woman. Sarah only initially gains power through her friends but loses it again when they turn on her. When she starts realizing her own worth and becomes confident she not only regains her lost power, but becomes even more powerful, indicating the importance of female independence.

THE BLAIR WITCH PROJECT (1999)

The cult-favourite *The Blair Witch Project* (1999) by directors Daniel Myrick and Eduardo Sánchez is frequently lauded as one of the most ground breaking and profitable horror films of all time (Cowan, 2014:1; Kaufman, 1999; Roscoe, 2000). Like *Häxan*, the filmmakers used filmic conventions associated with the documentary genre to weave an atmospheric tale of mayhem and violence. The film utilizes some cinematic horror tropes, but the narrative mostly relies on the audience's imagination to induce fright and anxiety. The witch's appearance is never revealed throughout the film, yet her presence is strongly felt, much like Helen Markos is felt throughout *Suspiria*. Where *Suspiria*'s director relied on colour and *mise-en-scène* to indicate the presence of the witch, *The Blair Witch* relies completely on the imagination of the viewer and the cultural ideas regarding the witch that have been instilled in the viewer through decades of social conditioning and pop culture. The witch that dwells inside the mind of the viewer is far more terrifying than any physical body the witch can occupy and this is proven through *The Blair Witch Project*.

Even though the witch is never revealed in corporeal form, she is still mentioned to be a woman with power which aligns her with my chosen New Historicist method where I attempt to analyse and interpret historic exchanges between gender, power, and culture and how these exchanges evolve over time in different horror films containing the witch.

Background

The Blair Witch Project is a faux documentary following three young filmmakers as they go in search of the Blair Witch in the woods outside of Burkittsville. The characters Heather, Josh, and Mike are all obnoxious and arrogant which is a typical trope of especially 1980s horror films as discussed in the previous chapter. As they go deeper into the woods they lose their way and turn on one another. At night they are terrorised by noises and things in the woods. Soon Joshua goes missing. Heather finds some of his teeth, hair, and a piece of his tongue bundled and tied in a rag and some twigs by the river the next morning. Madness sets in from anxiety and hunger. On the same and final night in the woods they hear Josh calling to them from somewhere in the woods. They follow his shouts and discover an abandoned house. Inside they are separated and attacked by unseen forces. Heather, still holding her camera, finds Mike aimlessly standing in a corner before she is also attacked. She drops the camera and the film ends.

The Blair Witch Project was made for an estimated sum of \$35 000 and went on to gross nearly \$150 million in the US in 1999 and \$250 million worldwide (Hoad, 2018; Telotte, 2001:32). The film's financial success can mostly be attributed to the online marketing (Telotte, 2001:32-33). Missing

person posters were created for the three characters in the film that led people to a website (Telotte, 2001:33). *The Blair Witch Project's* website was different from conventional film websites of the time. Web technology at the time was mostly used to simply promote an upcoming film and contained trailers and some behind the scenes information regarding the films. *The Blair Witch Project's* website however was tied to the narrative of the film increasing the viewer experience of the narrative as it suggested that the filmmaker students had really disappeared while making the film (Hoad, 2018; Telotte, 2001:34, 35). In an interview with Myrick and Joshua Leonard, who plays Joshua in the film, it is revealed that part of the marketing campaign was to list the three protagonists as deceased on IMDB, further spurring speculation about the authenticity of the film's footage (Hoad, 2018). Telotte (2001:36) says that the film combined with a website created a new type of immersive experience where the border between film and reality overlap and blur. By adding elements like news and police reports to the site, along with maps, and found personal items of the characters, the film became much more than a simple piece of entertainment (Telotte, 2006:36). The website containing information not usually used to market films, lent authenticity and authority to the film which changed it from entertainment to something more akin to myth, folklore, and urban legend. This activates Roland Barthes' idea of the Hermeneutic Code where the addition of mystery and enigma enhances the reading/viewing experience of the narrative as those who interact with these mysteries become engrossed in the story in the hope of finding clues or answers (Barthes, 1974:18).

In the same above interview Myrick explains the production of the film. He says that the idea was to create a first-person film with the then-new digital camera technology where the three characters filmed each other while trekking together through the woods over the course of eight days (Hoad, 2018). They had to shoot the footage on their own without the aid of a crew, while cold, hungry and tired (Hoad, 2018). The directors supplied them with GPS coordinates and they were expected to travel to these coordinates and leave their footage near flags or milk crates left throughout the forest in order for the crew to retrieve it (Hoad, 2018). There was no script for the film, except for a 35-page treatment and the actors had to improvise their own dialogue with some direction from the directors via notes left at the coordinates, along with food and other provisions (Hoad, 2018). The names Heather, Joshua, and Michael used in the film are the actors' real names as the directors did not want them to break character, adding further realism to the film (Hoad, 2018). Much of the fear and anxiety the characters display in the film was real, as they were severely fatigued and hungry (Hoad, 2018). Due to these difficulties the cast would frequently lash out at each other with some of these incidents used in the actual film (Hoad, 2018). The crew would also play tricks on the actors late at night by shaking their tents or playing audio clips of children's voices, further unnerving the cast (Hoad, 2018).

The film is widely regarded as popularising the found footage film genre leading to numerous similar films from the mid-2000s to the mid-2010s (Heller-Nicholas, 2014:4, 5, 201; Hoad, 2018; Kring-Schreifels, 2019; Turner, 2019:1). Some notable examples of the genre are *Noroi: The Curse* (2005), *REC* (2007); *Paranormal Activity* (2007), *Cloverfield* (2008), *Monsters* (2010), *Trollhunter* (2010), *Creep* (2014), and *As Above, So Below* (2014).

The found footage genre falls specifically under the horror film umbrella and can be described as planned and directed film footage that was shot by a character or characters in the fictional world of the narrative during a horrifying event and found abandoned after said events (Heller-Nicholas, 2014:13, 16). The fictional footage is then repurposed and edited together to create a narrative that resembles a factual story of the last hours or days of a person or group of persons who died or disappeared under mysterious or otherworldly circumstance (Heller-Nicholas, 2014:13). In the next section I review the academic discussions regarding *The Blair Witch Project* and the found footage genre it popularised.

Literature review

The popularity and cultural phenomenon of *The Blair Witch Project* has led to numerous studies done on the film – far too many to review in this section. I thus carefully curated a sample of the most complete, all-encompassing, and frequently quoted sources regarding the film, which I discuss on the following pages.

From the previous section one can see why most scholarly interactions with *The Blair Witch Project* are concerned with the found footage genre, or the audience reception/immersion, or the hype and marketing that led to the film's success (Castonguay, 2004:65-66; Harris, 2001:75-76; Heller-Nicholas, 2014:93; Keller, 2000:69; Schreier, 2004:205; Telotte, 2001:32-33; Turner, 2019:2). Two books have been written about found footage horror films and *The Blair Witch Project* which are discussed first, followed by peer reviewed studies of the film.

The first is Alexandra Heller-Nicholas's 2014 study *Found Footage Horror Films – Fear and the Appearance of Reality* which traces the evolution and conventions of the found footage horror film genre. Her book examines the aesthetics of the genre and how these types of films are often labelled as amateur productions (Heller-Nicholas, 2014:3). She expands on this argument by stating that these films are pervasive because of their amateur aesthetic (Heller-Nicholas, 2014:3). According to Heller-Nicholas (2014:4) this aesthetic lends itself to the audience's experience of the films, specifically in relation to the blurring of the border between reality and fiction. I agree with this statement as these films have an almost evening news quality to them where journalists are embroiled in some conflict.

Their fear and anxiety has a definite effect on the production of the footage they shoot as the images are at times shaky and out of focus with a first person view of events. The general public has definite associations with this type of footage and undoubtedly link it to hard news, or reality. This blurring between fact and fiction has however been eroded over the last two decades due to the over-use of the genre and its conventions (Heller-Nicholas, 2014:4). She states that by the late 2000s the found footage genre was understood by audiences as a film style and not an indicator of authenticity (Heller-Nicholas, 2014:4). As mentioned, most of the found footage horror films were produced between 2005 and 2015. Heller-Nicholas (2014:4) makes sense of this and posits that the founding of Youtube in 2005 most likely led to an increase in demand for amateur productions.

The above is of importance for the New Historicist as it mirrors Christopher Grobe's New Historicist approach as discussed in the main literature review where the reader's interaction and experience of a text is central. Grobe argues that the medium of a text affects the reader or viewer's experience. With regard to found footage horror films, certain conventions related to the genre had already been instilled in the viewer through video news reporting which then influenced their perceptions and experience of *The Blair Witch Project*. The film's popularity enabled the mainstreaming of these types of productions which in turn could have had an influence on online video productions with the invention of Youtube in 2005 and onwards. This reciprocal influence via medium is not unlike what Grobe and Levinson proposes where the gap between Formalism and reader-response theory is bridged by said medium. *The Blair Witch Project* also succeeds to blur the boundaries between the literary (film and fiction) and non-literary (reality and hard news) which is one the central tenets of the New Historicist approach as discussed by Drakakis & Fludernik (2015:506).

Interestingly, Heller-Nicholas (2014:178) found that found footage horror films reflect different socio-political aspects depending on the country the film was produced in. For instance, *Cloverfield*, a found footage film about a giant monster and its parasites that destroy Manhattan, mirrors American fears and American society's inability to grasp the scale of the terror and destruction during the 9/11 attacks (Heller-Nicholas, 2014:178). *Trollhunter*, a Norwegian found footage film, focuses on the exploits of a modern-day trollhunter; it can be read as representing the struggle between a corrupt government and nature (Heller-Nicholas, 2014:186). Adriana Margareta Dancus (2016:259) on the other hand suggests a link between *Trollhunter* and a 2014 Swedish reality television show where a journalist and his camera crew track down Internet trolls – individuals who bully and provoke others online – and expose them to the public. Dancus (2016:259) argues that *Trollhunter* mirror's Scandinavian society's increased interest in reality, but also a yearning for reality, and a societal vulnerability – this yearning for reality is discussed later in this section in greater depth. Dancus (2016:263) aligns the trolls with individuals who need care and protection. The trolls are frozen in rock when confronted by danger and violence, not unlike many people are when confronted with

imminent danger and/or violence (Dancus, 2016:263). Because the trolls are vulnerable they become more aggressive and bestial in order to protect themselves, further fuelling the fear directed towards them. This is an interesting argument as it could be similarly applied to the witch.

The title of witch was historically applied to women who are often old, frail, and isolated. The old crone version of the witch is described in fairy tales to live alone in the woods, suggesting that they are in constant danger. Many of them were undoubtedly constantly feared for their very lives. It could be said that when they were blamed for harming others through witchcraft they would understandably lash out aggressively in an attempt to protect themselves. Someone who intrudes, for instance, on their domain deep in the forest could potentially meet a swift and gory end. This suggests self-preservation and not evil intent on the part of the witch, which could be what transpires in *The Blair Witch Project*.⁴⁴

Heller-Nicholas also makes some interesting observations regarding the link between independent and corporate film production and the relationship between gender and gender politics. According to her, amateur productions, or productions that seem amateurish, are subversive as the productions break away from mainstream media control enabling narratives to reflect marginal cultural resistances within society (Heller-Nicholas, 2015:10). As the New Historicist focuses on the hidden meanings hidden within the margins of a text, so does the amateur filmmaker zoom in and magnify these marginal texts, making the texts invaluable to the New Historicist. This makes sense as the low-budget nature of the genre allows the producers to produce films without constrain or limitations imposed by film studios. The filmmaker can, for instance, pursue themes related to sex, gender, religion, and culture that might not be acceptable to mainstream film production houses. This can have both positive and negative effects, as Heller-Nicholas explains in the conclusion of her book. She uses *V/H/S* (2012) as a prime example of these effects. *V/H/S* is an anthology found footage horror film created by Brad Miska. The film contains five short horror vignettes by different directors and one framing sequence to tie the stories together. The stories are regarded by many as misogynist and to a large extent some of the short stories contained in the film are, but there are also instances where the film subverts by enabling the viewer to experience the removal of male power and aggression through the eyes of a male protagonist (Heller-Nicholas, 2014:192-193, 195).

⁴⁴ Shirome (2011), a Japanese film by horror film master Kôji Shiraishi, is about a J-pop idol group of six, Momoiro Clover Z, who are followed into an abandoned school inhabited by a god-like entity, Shirome. Folklore surrounding the school suggests that a drawing of a butterfly is hidden somewhere on the premises and if found, one can make a wish. The wish will only come true if the wish is noble and the person sincerely believes in Shirome's power. If not, the person who makes the wish will go insane and/or die. Interestingly, the pop group in the film is a real group in Japan. The post-credit scene of the film reveals that the group members were misled by the director and crew into believing the urban legend and the occurrences they experienced were real. According to Heller-Nicholas (2014:190), the film represents the J-pop idol culture and its commodification of cute and young girls. The girls are cursed at the end of the film, suggesting the end of their innocence at the hands of greater powers, namely their handlers who exploit them for financial gain.

The Blair Witch Project is similarly loaded with subversion, but not misogynist subversion like in *V/H/S*. Heller-Nicholas (2014:96) argues that the film is about failure, the failure of the characters to complete their project, to return the borrowed equipment on time, and the failure of their technology to protect them or to capture a single image of the Blair Witch. Most importantly, the film shows the audience that the documentary is fallible and untrustworthy (Heller-Nicholas, 2014:96).

I find that when we compare this fallibility and untrustworthiness to the trust-no-one theme of *The X-Files*, for instance, a pattern starts to emerge. In *The X-Files*, one of the most popular television series of the nineties, FBI agents Mulder and Scully frequently uncover evidence of aliens and other supernatural beings that turn out to be unusable. A shadow government works against them throughout the series – disinformation being their most effective tool against the two protagonists. Their campaign is so effective that Mulder and Scully both initially doubt the veracity of a mail order alien autopsy tape in episode nine of the third season – a tape containing a real alien autopsy as revealed to the audience at the start of the episode. *The Blair Witch Project* could potentially have the same effect on the audience of the film by instilling in them a healthy degree of suspicion of the media, but can also contribute to an unhealthy mistrust of the media, as we experienced globally during the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020 and 2021.

Another way *The Blair Witch Project* subverts is the way in which it fools audiences and critics into believing it is an amateur film when it is actually a film about amateur filmmaking (Heller-Nicholas, 2014:96). It is the extent to which the found footage film is able to hide obvious messages that makes it especially subversive. One wonders what other ideas and messages could be hidden below the surface of an independent film which is already beyond the control of mainstream film production and distribution companies. With *The Blair Witch Project* there is also the question of authorship as the actors produced the footage themselves (Heller-Nicholas, 2014:97, 98). The murky authorship poses a problem when elements of subversion are found in the film, as blame and intent become difficult to establish. The actors' recording the footage is a subversive act in itself, as they were filming the footage in secret and isolation without crew members. Though the characters retained their real names, they were still expected to act like the characters in the script (Heller-Nicholas, 2014:97). They effectively became other people, much like a spy or a witch would when infiltrating a society.

One of the most profound observations Heller-Nicholas makes regarding *The Blair Witch Project* has to do with masculinity. She argues that Myrick and Sánchez wilfully relinquish part of the control and authorship they have over the production of *The Blair Witch Project* to others, thus breaking with the traditional masculine filmmaker role (Heller-Nicholas, 2014:98-99). This break with the masculine is subversive as power is shared and participants become equals in the production of the film.

Heller-Nicholas also makes a thoughtful counterargument regarding *The Blair Witch Projects*'s subversive credentials. She maintains that the film might be subversive in the way it transgresses the boundaries between online footage and information and cinematic production, but that this transgression or intertextuality between media exploits the user/viewer which further enables the "profit-driven practices of Hollywood film production and distribution" (Heller-Nicholas, 2014:100).

Another aspect that Heller-Nicholas (2014:103-104) considers is how Heather and the witch are aligned throughout the film. For instance, Heather is more respectful towards the environment and the history thereof than her two male colleagues. Heller-Nicholas (2014:104) states that "...Heather can identify and understands the risks of nature disrupted". In other words, Heather understands the danger they find themselves in, suggesting that the wilderness is a feminine space further implying opposition with masculine spaces (Heller-Nicholas, 2014:104). From the film's title, the setting of the foreboding woods, and the horror genre of the film, we can surmise that the witch in the film resembles the witch and grotesque hag as described in *The Malleus Maleficarium* even though the witch's appearance is never revealed (Heller-Nicholas, 2014:104). This is the same witch archetype used in *Häxan* which, as discussed in length in an earlier chapter, is subversive.

Another subversive element in *The Blair Witch Project* which Heller-Nicholas (2014:106, 107) notes to be omitted from academic discussions is that Josh might be the witch as he might have started to believe the myth of the Blair Witch while lost in woods and then become insane leading him to kill the others. She notes that Josh is shown to be more confident and relaxed than Mike and Heather even when they are lost in the woods and hear sounds outside the tent (Heller-Nicholas, 2014:106). Josh also disappears early on in the film which means that he could be the one making the noises in the forest (Heller-Nicholas, 2014:107). He could also have mutilated himself and left the parcel containing his hair and teeth outside their tent to scare them even further (Heller-Nicholas, 2014:107). It is also possible that Josh could have lured them into the basement of the abandoned house and then killed them (Heller-Nicholas, 2014:107). This would mean that the traditional female witch transgressed the boundary of gender by becoming male. The witch, as previously established, is frequently unhinged and mentally unstable suggesting that the feminine can 'infect' a man causing him to lose himself to occupy a position of ambivalent gender.

There is however more to consider regarding subversion in *The Blair Witch Project*. Even though Heather mostly used the video camera throughout the film, the camera is used by the others as well. The characters' use of the camera functions as device which enables the viewer to experience events in the film from different first person perspective, but also different gender perspectives.

J.P. Telotte (2001:37) says the following regarding *The Blair Witch Project*:

...the “pleasure”—along with the frustration—of agency dissolves into transformation, as we do indeed “become,” by turns, Josh, Heather, and Mike, sharing their points of view and often even ex- changing identities and point of view within the same scene, as one character’s vantage through the color video camera shifts to that of another...

This makes the gaze ambivalent with regard to gender which in itself is subversive – much like Clover suggests regarding the Final Girl in horror films. As discussed in the main literature review, viewing horror films could potentially lead to empathy and understanding in the viewer due to the shared experiences and by observing the fear responses in others. The found footage medium lends itself to facilitating a vicarious experience through the three cast members, but also an otherworldly experience in a supernatural space. In *Suspiria*, the vivid colours, *mise-en-scène*, and music transports both viewer and protagonist to the supernatural world. In *The Blair Witch Project* the viewer is transported to the supernatural world through the visual cues of the found footage genre from the first person point of view of a fictional character. In *Suspiria*, however, the line between the supernatural world and reality are clearly demarcated through the stylistic conventions of Dario Argento, while in *The Blair Witch Project* the boundaries are both blurred and clearly marked. The genre resembles hard news video footage general viewers of television worldwide are familiar with, but at the same time the average viewer has in all likelihood not personally experienced the tumultuous events we find on the evening news – and if the viewer had experienced such events they would not have experienced it in exactly the same way a video camera would have recorded the events. A handheld video camera, for instance, would record shaky and out of focus images, while the human eye would not. The hard news footage enables the viewer to experience a terrifying, yet real, event vicariously through their television sets. Terror, comfort, and reality were intrinsically linked in the mind of the viewer before *The Blair Witch Project* was produced causing viewers of the film to conflate these notions while watching. In other words, it was easier for the audience of 1999 to believe the events in *The Blair Witch Project* to be real.

Another scholar who engaged more recently with the found footage horror genre is Peter Turner. Peter Turner’s *Found Footage Horror Films: A Cognitive Approach* (2019) considers the found footage genre from a cognitive theoretical framework by examining the mental processes associated with found footage horror films. Turner (2019:2-3, 6-7) argues through the course of the book that the diegetic camera – a camera that the characters are aware of where the audio and visuals are simultaneously recorded without sound being added afterwards – are central to the audiences’ visceral experiences in the film.

Turner (2019:38) draws similarities between the 1938 radio broadcast of *The War of the Worlds* and the resultant panic it caused among listeners, and *The Blair Witch Project*. He notes that the combination of first person narrator with the medium of delivery affects the viewer/listener’s

experience of the narrative (Turner, 2019:38). He associates these effects with the priming devices related to the viewer/listener's knowledge, awareness, and familiarity with popular media (Turner, 2019:38). For example, a radio news bulletin starts with a jingle which is then followed by a summary of the main news stories for the day. This structure of the radio news bulletin has been used in various films, like both versions of Romero's *Night of the Living Dead*, to inform both character and viewer as to events transpiring the world.

Turner (2019:39) notes that the diegetic camera differs from the point of view shots frequently used in horror films where the director wants the viewer to experience the first person perspective of the viewer. In found footage films a shift occurs where the director is more interested in having the viewer experience the events from the protagonist's perspective (Turner, 2019:39). The characters become more relatable because of this shift, but also because the protagonists are normal human beings, and not supernatural or enhanced beings (Turner, 2019:39). Turner (2019:39) suggests that this vicarious experience of events through others is much like playing first person video games which leads to further immersion and enjoyment of the narrative. He also notes how the final girl (discussed in the main literature review and the chapter on eighties horror films) becomes the camera operator, which has interesting implications for Carol J. Clover's Final Girl theory as Turner's (and the aforementioned Telotte) theories would suggest a deeper association and empathy between the protagonists and the viewer.

Martin Harris (2001:76) arrives at many of the same conclusions regarding the use of different media to market a work of fiction. Harris (2001:76) specifically compares *The Blair Witch Project* with Samuel Richardson's 1740 novel *Pamela*. Richardson used the same tactic of convincing the general public that the events in *Pamela* were true, which fuelled the public demand for the novel (Harris, 2001:76). Harris (2001:95-96) concludes his study by stating that the types of media events that enable the success of texts like *Pamela* and *The Blair Witch Project* lead to loss of creator control of the narrative in the eye of the viewers. Control is of importance for both the New Historicist and those who have an interest in the Dionysian and Apollonian as control is associated with the male gender and societal progress. As mentioned, the New Historicist seeks out instances where exchanges occur between gender, power, and culture – all which are related to gender and power structures that control or seek to control society.

The directors and creators of *The Blair Witch Project* already relinquished much of their control over the narrative by having their three cast members film all the scenes and improvising their dialogue. Giving control of the narrative to the viewer deepens this loss of control. The New Historicist constantly grapples with the notion of a text only being able to exist because of the specific sociocultural contexts, assumptions, circumstances, and structures in which it was created (Drakakis & Fludernick, 2015:499). *The Blair Witch Project* problematizes these notions as the text originated

from five different sociocultural positions (the two directors and three actors). The text was also influenced afterwards by the different media used to flesh out the narrative, like the posters and the website, which in turn influenced audience perceptions. The audience also played an important part through speculation and the way they interpreted the cinematic style of the film. The film and its various media offshoots resemble a controlled production of intertextual narratives in an effort to contain/control (in an Apollonian way) the public narrative regarding the film which then leads to the unpredictable and uncontrollable (Dionysian) spread of *The Blair Witch Project* myth. The result was fame and wealth for those involved in the film, but also unheard of profits for the distribution companies. Drakakis & Fludernick (2015:506) explain that the New Historicist is not interested in the ways resistance of power manifests in texts. They argue that the New Historicist is concerned with the instrumental aspects of power and how it manifests in texts (Drakakis & Fludernick, 2015:506). Wealth and capitalism is considered by many a New Historicist to be a tool or instrument of power (Drakakis & Fludernick, 2015:506). With *The Blair Witch Project* we find an example where this notion is challenged due to power and control being relinquished and shared with the end result being wealth. Harris (2001:96) equates the commercial success of the film to witchcraft. I agree with this statement as witchcraft, a tool of Dionysus, is nature, uncontrollable, without boundary, and gender fluid – all aspects found in *The Blair Witch Project*.

One cannot mention control of nature without making reference to colonialism. Sally J. Morgan, an archaeologist and academic, wrote an interesting paper on the extent to which *The Blair Witch Project* subverts notions related to public histories and heritage. Morgan (2001:137) states:

...the carefully crafted deceit of The Blair Witch Project may be understood as part of a subversive 'public history' project that uses modern history's own scientific motifs and methodologies against itself and challenges its basic tenets... giving its chosen audience a dark and unsettling sense of its own history.

Upon release the basic conceit was that three student filmmakers disappeared under mysterious circumstances while filming a documentary about The Blair Witch (Morgan, 2001:139). The film presented the audience with what was touted as real-life footage of the events leading up to the disappearance of the three students (Morgan, 2001:139). But as already mentioned, this was a marketing ploy to sell cinema tickets. According to Morgan (2001:139) the film, the website, the book, and the DVD release worked in tandem as a subversive 'public history' project. She examined the four media through three perspectives. The first being the constructed history mentioned in the media and how it is disseminated orally and through local histories, and the collection and showcasing of 'evidence' associated with the history (Morgan, 2001:140). The second perspective plays with the audience's expectations from said media and the extent to which it can reflect the truth (Morgan, 2001:140). And the third relates to the extent to which the filmmakers understood their audience and

used that knowledge to prey on their fears and anxieties – fears and anxieties that originate from shared myths and histories brought with the European colonists who settled in North America (Morgan, 2001:140).

Morgan (2001:140) posits that *The Blair Witch Project* resembles a type of historical enquiry where the filmmakers attempt to find evidence or disprove a piece of history that may or may not have occurred. Heather, for instance, showcases some of the sources she consulted in preparation for the expedition which include historical accounts of the Blair Witch. She also later mentions newspaper articles and other sources when they start filming the documentary in earnest. Heather interviews various individuals local to Burkittsville recording oral accounts related to the Blair Witch, which is an accepted method of collecting anecdotal and historical evidence. Some of the stories are personal experiences, while others recount stories they had heard from others which occurred in the past. The War of Independence is mentioned by name, which links the Blair Witch to a specific point in American history (Morgan, 2001:141). The rest of the film resembles an expedition through an untamed forest in the hope of finding more evidence of the Blair Witch. Heather narrates the film, but remains unbiased in her treatment and exposition of the materials meaning that the filmmakers expect the audience to draw their own conclusions. All the methods of enquiry used by Heather and her compatriots are what researchers use to engage with the past to this day. The New Historicist, for instance, does not discern between different kinds of texts and uses a combination of different texts to comprehend, interrogate, and access the past. *The Blair Witch Project* mimics these methods of enquiry to create a specific aesthetic experience of the film – which is another dimension of textual enquiry that some New Historicists, like Levinson, find valuable.

The filmgoer's experience of *The Blair Witch Project* also differs from one country to the next and is very much influenced by the sociocultural mind-set of viewers (Morgan, 2011:144). With regards to the inhabitants of Northern America, Morgan (Morgan, 2001:144-145) attributes the fear of the untamed landscape or wilderness to a post-colonial anxiety that still lingers among the descendants of the colonisers two hundred years after they settled on the continent. She argues that American folklore is rife with the tales and dangers lurking in the woods (Morgan, 2001:145). Tales, for example, like the strange disappearance of an entire English settlement at Roanoke terrifies children and adults to this day (Morgan, 2001:145). Many of the stories originate from the Puritan settlers, the same Puritans who believed in witches and had many condemned during the witch trials of Salem Village, Massachusetts, in 1692 (Morgan, 2001:145-146; Reed, 2007:209-210). The forest became synonymous with fear and paranoia in the mind of the Puritans, not just because of the witches and devils that lurked within, but also because it turned them into hunters instead of farmers (Morgan, 2001:146). Hunters seek an isolated life because they fear competition from other hunters, which meant that people were hostile towards each other and the formation of close-knit communities

became impossible (Morgan, 2001:146). Where there is no community there are also no churches, which leads the isolated to godlessness (Morgan, 2001:146-147). Like the Puritans of old who fled to exploit the natural world in a different country, so do the filmmakers in *The Blair Witch Project* hope to find fame and wealth by exploiting the forest and those who inhabit it. I find Morgan's theory convincing as I have observed similar beliefs in South Africa where white individuals still fear the informal settlements and suburban neighbourhoods with black inhabitants as suspect and dangerous. Much scholarship has been dedicated to the phenomenon of colonial and postcolonial dread in South Africa, like Andrew Foley's 1993 article *A Poetry of Dread* and John Conygham's novel *Lostness of Alice* (1998).

Morgan is not alone in linking *The Blair Witch Project* with fearsome landscapes. Chris J. Cowan (2000:1) suggests that the real protagonist or antagonist, depending on your point of view, in the film is the woods. The woods feature in almost every scene of the film, hiding hidden dangers from the viewer and the characters, in other words, the woods are the threat (Cowan, 2000:1). Cowan (2000:1-2) believes that the woods challenge the suburban American dream of family and white picket fences. Children often disappear in the woods in fairy tales and folklore, while others narrowly escape witches and diabolical creatures like talking wolves in the woods. Cowan (2000:2) also notes the positive notions found in *The Blair Witch Project* where the characters resemble the frontier's men and women of old who faced danger on a daily basis in order to explore and make something of themselves. Unfortunately Cowan's study of the film is only two pages in length, which left me wanting as he was clearly noticing aspects that most other scholars failed to recognise.

Another academic who studied the intertextuality, like Harris and Morgan, of *The Blair Witch Project* is James Keller. Keller (2000:70) regards *The Blair Witch Project* as the first true intertextual film production. He argues that the "film itself is merely an artifact (sic) in a proliferating cultural phenomenon that threatens to eclipse and dislodge the original creation".

In other words, the film is secondary to the myth created and perpetuated by the public. In the main literature review I discuss Vygotsky's theories regarding artefacts and how artefacts mirror social and cultural forces, but also influence these forces through reinforcement or suggested change. *The Blair Witch Project* does not just reflect lingering colonial anxieties in an American audience as Morgan suggested. It uses it as a marketing gimmick which draws attention to these fears and anxieties thus enabling a dialogue about them. Initially many Americans believed that the contents of the film might be real, but as the public narrative unfolded the viewers realised that they had been duped (Keller, 2000:72, 74, 76). This undoubtedly resulted in many reconsidering their position and beliefs regarding the truth and the media's handling of the truth. In other words, many Americans could have started to question the realities suggested by American media production companies. Keller (2000:75) argues that *The Blair Witch Project* as a film is unable to signify or generate any real meaning, but when

placed within the context of the other media linked to it, the combined narrative of the different media generates meaning. If we consider the scholars discussed so far, Keller's argument does seem to have a ring of truth to it, though interpretations like those generated by Chris Cowan show that scholars might not be digging deep enough.

Another book by Peter Turner considers the aesthetics of *The Blair Witch Project*. The book is part of the *Devil's Advocates* series which I also reference in the *Suspiria* chapter of this study and is simply titled *The Blair Witch Project* (2015). The book combines all the aspects I have also covered in the last few pages, but in more detail. There are however some noteworthy contributions that Turner makes regarding the film. The first of these is where he discusses the name of *The Blair Witch Project*'s production company *Haxan Films* (Turner, 2015:71). He argues that *Häxan* is obviously the forebear to *The Blair Witch Project*, not just because of the witch subject matter and her associations with the woods, but also because of the pseudo-documentary film style employed in both productions (Turner, 2015:71, 72). According to Turner (2015:72) this is problematic as the directors never challenge the notions or stereotypes associated with witches and witchcraft and perpetuate tired ideas of powerful and/or independent women. He especially emphasises the use of a stereotypical female villain, but also the eventual breakdown and hysteria that Heather exhibits at the end of the film as misogynist (Turner, 2015:73). Heather is portrayed from the beginning of the film as a confident and intelligent leader, but also exhibits certain masculine traits like being over-confident and arrogant (Turner, 2015:73). After the first half of the film she gradually succumbs to fear and hysterics and de-evolves into Clover's Final Girl, thus negating the progressive representation of a woman from the beginning of the film (Turner, 2015:73).

With regard to the Blair Witch, Turner (2015:73-74) argues that the filmmakers relied on outdated portrayals of the witch, even though they never reveal the witch's appearance to the audience. I agree with this observation as the witch, or Elly Kedward, was banished to live in the woods, after luring children to her home. The witch is associated with nature not just because she lives there, but because of the way she uses nature to hide and murder those who trespass in her dominion.

Turner (2015:74-75) also discusses the supernatural in *The Blair Witch Project* and posits that the large swathes of American viewers who were frightened by the film suggest that American society is superstitious and fearful of the occult and supernatural while exhibiting instinctive fears like being lost or alone, or being unable to see in the dark. This does not seem far-fetched when we consider the aforementioned Satanic Panic and Columbine Shooting.

The fear of the dark and the unknown are some of the most primeval fears that people have (Muir, 2011:605). Related to this is ambiguity, or uncertainty. Muir (2011:603) attributes ambiguity as *The Blair Witch Project*'s most successful tool in eliciting fear from the audience. He argues that this

ambiguity is reflected by the numerous interpretations that can be made of the film and its ending, but also in society's inability to discern truth from fiction at the time concerning the film (Muir, 2011:603). The ambiguous ending, and the question of whether the witch is real or not, is what keeps the film entangled in the imagination of the viewer (Muir, 2011:603).

What I found most interesting in Muir's evaluation of the film is his observation: "...*The Blair Witch Project* also concerns the ways that mass media often shields the viewer from reality, distancing viewers from it." For all the cameras and technology the three filmmakers have while in the woods, including a digital camera with night vision capabilities, the witch is never captured in a single frame. The viewer is 'protected' from the reality that is the witch in the film. Film and camera technology function in the same way, as do the software we use to edit and broadcast real life dangers to our television sets. Graphic violence and death are rarely broadcast on the evening news. When we do see someone getting shot on the Internet during robberies or heists the footage is usually recorded by security cameras which are far less sophisticated than the film cameras used in blockbuster films. We might see someone getting shot, but we do not see details like the wound or even the victim's facial expression as they fall and bleed to death. In other words, there is a distance between the viewer and these recorded events. The viewer is never placed in physical danger and the film technology effectively dehumanises the victims of crimes and violence through distorted pixels and poor lighting. Also, when reality hits too close to home, the viewer can simply turn off their television – in other words, reality can be switched off (Muir, 2011:604).

David Banash (1999:1) credits *The Blair Witch Project*'s success to its ability to engage the imagination of the audience. He argues that modern films rely too heavily on special effects which alienate the viewer from his or her imagination (Banash, 1999:1). The overreliance on special effects results in a passive and desensitised audience that cannot be frightened (Banash, 1999:1). *The Blair Witch Project* is a frightening piece of celluloid not due to what is shown, but what is hidden from the audience. In the next section I delve further into this invisible horror, but first we need to delve deeper into the commercialisation of fear and the collapsing borders between reality and fiction.

It would be erroneous to ignore the extent to which fear was commercialised with regards to *The Blair Witch Project*. As noted in the main literature review, Hitchcock compares the horror film to a theme park ride. Theme parks have numerous rides like roller coasters which the public flock to. People pay to experience fear and put their bodies through stress in a controlled and safe environment.

Veaser (1989:19) contends that the New Historicist attempts to find "possible configurations of relationship between cultural practices and social, political and economic processes". In other words, the New Historicist attempts to identify and study intersections between cultural practices, like wilfully experiencing fear – an emotion that generally has a negative impact on both mind and body –

in a controlled and social environment. This social need to experience these emotions with others is commercialised, making it also an economic phenomenon. *The Blair Witch Project* is thus a text that mirrors the relationship between these cultural practices and how power structures are exploiting society's need or hunger for shared experiences.

Closely related to this is society's yearning for reality. David Shields (2010:81-82, 86) discusses this hunger in his book *Reality Hunger: A Manifesto* and he suggests that modern society has a hunger for reality due to the extent to which reality has become fragmented. This seems relevant, especially when read alongside the popularity of the tabloids during the nineties. Controversial news stories like the OJ Simpson trial, the Clinton affair, the Columbine shooting, and the gulf war were broadcast globally and repeatedly leaving a definite mark on society.

This is not far removed from Baudrillard's hyperreality which I mention at the end of the previous chapter. Baudrillard (2002:121, 145) argues that the constant bombardment of images through the popular media collapse the boundary between reality and fiction. He says that the objects we see on television, for instance, do not serve a representative function anymore, but becomes more real than reality because it straddles both the imaginary and the real, becoming the hyperreal, "an aesthetic hallucination of reality" (Baudrillard, 2002:145-146). We especially find this hyperreality in the popular reality television genre which started with the MTV-produced series *The Real World* (1992-2019) (Saye, 2004:9). The popularity of this series eventually gave rise to other similar series like *Big Brother* (2000-), *Survivor* (2000-), and *American Idol* (2002-) (Saye, 2004:9). These series along with numerous other reality television series are popular to this day and make up large quantities of television programming schedules. The sheer amount of different series available globally mirrors what Shields suggests regarding a yearning for the reality, but in interesting ways.

On the one hand these shows indicate the populace's hunger for facts and reality, but on the other hand the authenticity of these shows is frequently in dispute (Saye, 2004:10). A recent article in *The Delite* (Gillespie, 2020) explored the various instances where reality television series were shown to be fiction. It has become commonly known that most of these series are in fact planned and even scripted to a degree. In other words, the common viewer understands that what they are viewing is fiction marketed as reality, which causes a glut in authentic presentations of reality in the media, resulting in a yearning for the real.

In 1999 however, the reality television craze was still in its infancy. *The Blair Witch Project* can however be aligned with the scripted and planned reality television series that would become popular one year later. Like the regular people we find in a show like *Big Brother*, the characters we see on screen use their actual names and are not celebrities. The cast of *The Blair Witch Project* became

famous because they appeared in the film, not unlike the people featured in reality television who become short-lived quasi-celebrities after the series wraps production.

The Blair Witch Project employs technologies that are used to create hyperreal texts, but due to the subject matter cannot be labelled hyperreal. It is closer to what Baudrillard (2002:92, 95) describes as a simulacrum – a simulation or an artificial construction of the real. It should be noted that simulacra plays a significant role in postmodernism, but Baudrillard is also of importance to the New Historicist because of his theories regarding human history. He says that the entirety of human history is an enormous simulation model due to the extent to which the history recording process is based on material production and reproduction (2002:105). In other words, like the New Historicist, Baudrillard argues that history is inaccessible and we can only experience fragments of it through material productions and reproductions of historic events.

If we consider the fragmentation of the past and production methods of capturing the past and apply these considerations to a film like *The Blair Witch Project*, interesting observations come to the fore. *The Blair Witch Project* requires that the viewer has some knowledge of witchcraft as portrayed in myth and folklore as the Blair Witch shares many characteristics with the witches we find in fairy tales and the *Malleus Maleficarum*. At the time of the film's release most people understood or were familiar with home video recordings or amateur video recordings of realistic events used in the news, security surveillance systems, and police body cameras. These filmic conventions at the time represented, and were understood by the general population, to be a close approximation of reality. One could argue that this was why *The Blair Witch Project* had such a visceral effect on the general film-viewing public as it seemed 'real'. At that point in time *The Blair Witch Project* could be described as an example of Baudrillard's hyperreality, but as more and more viewers realised it was fake and the cast, crew, and producers of the film divulged more and more of the film's production it lost that distinction.

The material production society busies itself with in an attempt to create simulacra or the hyperreal is, according to Baudrillard (2002:105), a capitalist endeavour. Related to the material production is financial gain and capitalism. According to Annalee Newitz (2006) "capitalism creates monsters who want to kill you". She argues that the capitalist aspect of the monster is in most instances not overt and more a subtext (Newitz, 2006). She uses Brian Yuzna's 1989 body horror film *Society* as an overt example. *Society* is about the social elite who prey on those of lower socio-economic levels. It is revealed at the end of the film that these social elites are alien creatures who melt and merge to form an orgy of congealed bodies who then feed on the poor. *The Blair Witch Project* could be read along similar lines as the witch lives deep in the woods, far away from the creature comforts brought on by progress. The witch can consequently be described as anti-capitalist as she does not contribute to a

capitalist society and murders anybody who attempts to introduce capitalism or capitalist leanings to her domain, like the young filmmakers who seek to make a profit out of exploiting her.

Another aspect regarding capitalism in the context of film is the extent to which the producers and distributors of *The Blair Witch Project* was able to convince the general public to part with their money in order to see the film. According to James Castonguay (2004:65) *The Blair Witch Project* is an extraordinary example of postmodern excess due to the marketing juggernaut that paved the way for the film in the months leading up to its release. He argues that the film was able to generate profits because “its makers were able to exploit, fetishize, and commodify the fiction of reality in such remarkable ways” (Castonguay, 2004:66). In other words, because of the techniques they used, like the ‘objective’ interactive interview used in documentaries, the filmmakers were able to initially market the film as reality, which at the time, as mentioned, was unheard of in films. The marketing media associated with the film (websites, posters, and trailers) were instrumental in creating the impression that the film represented documentary truth. In other words, marketing, a common tool of capitalism, was used to convince the public into believing something which was not true. This mirrors the extent to which society is frequently duped by the media and wealthy corporations into believing something which is not true.

In the above instance the distributors of *The Blair Witch Project* did away with the traditional advertising methods where the marketing of films are concerned. Also, the film does not fall within the parameters of a single genre as it straddled the horror and reality television genres, while the events in film are also completely fabricated. According to Isabel Pinedo (1996:17) one of the central hallmarks of postmodernism is the extent to which a text blurs or collapses boundaries and familiar or traditional categories. This collapsing or blurring of genre boundaries is exactly what we find in *The Blair Witch Project*, but it is not the only postmodernist trait to be found.

Pinedo (1996:17) argues that all horror films produced after 1968 are in fact postmodern in nature. That would include, as per Pinedo’s suggestion, all the films from *Jack’s Wife* and onwards discussed in this thesis, which seems unlikely. *The Blair Witch Project* seems to be the first and most logical entry point to start a discussion regarding the postmodern horror film, due to its blurring of genres and it falling in both the high and low art categories of film, but also because the film has no narrative closure.

Pinedo (1996:17) suggests that the collapsing of boundaries does not just relate to genre, but that it goes much deeper where the horror film is concerned. A film, or any work of fiction for that matter, traditionally contains a beginning, middle, and an end. The end is important as it gives closure to the narrative but, most importantly, it gives the viewer closure which is why satisfying endings are common in film. According to Pinedo (1996:17, 24-25) horror films frequently do not give the viewer

closure, as the monster resurrects after being killed, or the protagonist(s) die(s), or the outcome is uncertain. The audience is not certain about Josh, Mike, or Heather's fate as the end credits start to roll. Also, when the film was initially released in 1999 the viewers were unsure if what they had seen was real or fiction.

Another characteristic of the postmodern is that despite the characters' efforts they cannot change their fate (Pinedo, 1996:17). The characters are shown to try everything to escape the woodlands, but none of their efforts bear fruit. From the moment they enter the woods their fates are sealed.

Because film is a visual medium, horror filmmakers tend to show the monsters and the violence they commit in full gory detail. This is not so in *The Blair Witch Project*. The witch is obviously present in the film, but the audience and the characters never see her. Neither cast or audience ever sees the violent acts that were inflicted on Josh, like the removal of his teeth. By breaking with tradition the film becomes an example of a postmodern text. By not showing the witch or the violence the viewer has to rely on their imagination to fill the gaps of the narrative, which is something readers of fiction have to do more frequently than film viewers. In other words, *The Blair Witch Project* also somewhat collapses the boundaries between written fiction and film.

The invisible horror

Paglia (2001:12, 30, 57, 92, 94, 95) suggests that Dionysus represents the boundless and shapeless, but also nature, madness, insanity, and violence. We find all of these aspects in *The Blair Witch Project*. The Blair Witch is never revealed to the viewer or the characters in the film. She lives deep in the woods and makes little altars and icons out of stones and twigs. At night she playfully torments the three protagonists until they grow weary, angry, and quite mad. Michael standing still in the corner of what looks to be a basement is similar to the scenes we often find in films where characters in psychiatric hospitals or asylums stand in corners soiled and mumbling to themselves.

The similarities do not end there. To create art is to capture a moment or moments in time onto a canvas, a film frame, or on a piece of paper through the written word. Paglia (2001:29-30) suggests that this act of art creation is an act of control as it establishes the boundaries of an object/subject and defines it in a visual medium. Art making is Apollonian. The Blair Witch however is never captured on film. We hear her and her minions crawling around in the dark, but we never actually see them. The Blair Witch is never objectified or put under Apollonian control. Paglia (2001:92) also draws parallels between the swamp and Dionysus. I find the swamp analogy fitting to describe Dionysus and the witch. As anyone familiar with swamps can attest, it is difficult to say where a swamp begins and ends. Swamps shrink and swell with the seasons. Various plant forms float on top or jut from the

murky waters of a swamp, effectively hiding the water. In other areas mud and clay congeal with the water and rotting vegetation to create sludge-like islands into which many boots and watches disappear. Unidentified horrible and slippery things dart and wriggle below the surface of the swamp causing further fear and anxiety as they bump against legs and feet. The Blair Witch is invisible to the viewers and characters due to her being inseparable from nature. She is there every time the camera points towards the trees or streams. We cannot see her because she has not been isolated from her surroundings. Because she is not captured on film or has been seen by anyone the viewer and protagonists do not know what to look for. She is undefined and hidden.

The film does however capture the characters' descent into fear and madness very well and it seems to be the focus of the film when one considers the camerawork. Because of the new technologies at the time that enabled small handheld cameras with night vision capabilities to be produced cheaply, the characters were able to record their own and each other's faces in great detail. Throughout the film we find the characters zooming in on each other while making camp or aimlessly walking through the forest. In other scenes the characters talk directly into their cameras creating video diaries of their experiences and mental states. The unknown is what drives them to fear and madness. Not knowing what the witch looks like similarly unnerves the viewer. Not seeing the witch makes it impossible to describe the witch to others, making her truly 'unspeakable'.

Howard Phillips Lovecraft pioneered the idea of unspeakable horror, the horror of embodiment that drives the characters mad upon viewing or even glimpsing their horrific cosmic antagonists (Burger, 2018:77, 83). Many other authors, most notable Stephen King, have also pointed to the effectiveness of unseen horrors precisely because the reader's experience is much more visceral and sophisticated when confronted with the unknown or indescribable (Burger, 2018:80). Over the next pages I discuss the implications of the invisible women as a threat and how this witch relates to societal norms and the socio-historic context of the nineties.

The Blair Witch Project shares many similarities with Lovecraft's *Call of Cthulhu* (1926). Both are first-hand accounts of events before the protagonists lost their lives and both feature an unseen or indescribable antagonist that drives the protagonists mad. Both also feature protagonists that refused to turn back when they had the opportunity and both describe their characters as rational beings who do not believe in the supernatural. They also end with the characters believing in the supernatural and leaving accounts of their experiences for others to find, including the reader/viewer.

According to Lovecraft "...the oldest and strongest emotion of mankind is fear, and the oldest and strongest kind of fear is fear of the unknown" (Lovecraft, 1927:2). As mentioned, the Blair Witch is never shown in the film, nor is she ever described in much detail. For instance, the characters state that according to folklore she is an old woman whose feet never touch the ground – this is never

verified and thus open to speculation. We do know however that the witch exists due to the neatly constructed rock piles, icons fashioned out of twigs, and muddied handprints she leaves in her wake. Then there are also the strange sounds the characters and audience hear at night and also the dilapidated old house at the end of the film where the protagonists disappear.

Films like *Psycho* (1960) and *Friday the Thirteenth* (1980) use a similar device of not showing the antagonist throughout the film, but reward the viewers and the protagonist at the end with the revelation of the killer. In *The Blair Witch Project* neither are ever rewarded, meaning that the audience is left with only the terrible bodies that they imagined the monster to have. Embodiment is thus imagined by the viewer and the protagonists and thus differs from one person to the next. These imaginings are most likely born from societal conditioning, but could still take any form and can change over time. They can become more or less terrifying, but the experience seems more enduring than where the monster or witch is never revealed.

Lovecraft (Lovecraft, 1927:4) makes sense of this by stating:

“The one test of the really weird is simply this—whether of not there be excited in the reader a profound sense of dread, and of contact with unknown spheres and powers; a subtle attitude of awed listening, as if for the beating of black wings or the scratching of outside shapes and entities on the known universe’s utmost rim. And of course, the more completely and unifiedly a story conveys this atmosphere the better it is as a work of art in the given medium.”

Lovecraft, one of the most popular masters of modern horror, grasped something a hundred years ago which horror cinema producers are reluctant to embrace namely to hint at the hidden things in the dark and let the audience’s imagination create fear and anxiety – something that is usually only experienced by readers of horror fiction. The filmic medium of the narrative more readily lends itself to embodiment, whereas in a written text the reader has to imagine every event and character, while in film, which is a visual medium, there is not much for the audience to imagine. In horror films this is especially prevalent, since the director wants to show the monster and reveal every grizzly act the monster inflicts on the victims, sometimes resulting in unintentional comical situations as seen in *Night of the Demons*. *The Blair Witch Project* succeeds in eliciting a horror response with the documentary-style it was shot in, lending itself even more to the imagining of a monster.

The film’s production was undoubtedly pioneering upon release on the precipice of the new millennium and inspired many filmmakers to pursue found footage productions. It also mirrors, and to an extent, heralded, society’s obsession with home-made productions that in the twenty first century has become common place with popular distribution platforms like *Youtube*, *Vimeo*, and *Tiktok*. Like

the cameraman is invisible to the viewer, so is the witch invisible in this feature film, which makes the film seem forbidden and the viewer a vicarious transgressor. As previously mentioned, the naked body is not threatening (Mulvey, 1989:8). This could imply that the less we can see of a person the more dangers they might be hiding on their person. The Blair Witch's body never being revealed seems like an exaggeration of that implied danger.

With regard to the hidden dangers in the body I am unaware of scholarly texts exploring the link between The Blair Witch and the AIDS pandemic of the nineties. The Blair Witch as an avatar for the hidden can also be linked to the AIDS pandemic of the nineties. AIDS or its precursor HIV infection is closely associated with sex, in other words, something pleasurable that leads to disease and death. Studies have shown that during the 1990s approximately 40,000 persons succumbed to the disease or related conditions, meaning that it was responsible for almost 2% of all deaths recorded in the US (Berman, 2009:18). Those who contract AIDS do not at first appear to be ill, meaning that the disease is hidden within a person. Contracting the virus, one may argue, is symbolised in the film with the characters going mad. The madness and anxiety they display makes the disease visible, while at the same time mimicking the anxiety and stress the infected individual has to cope with. Like the numerous AIDS-related documentaries that were broadcast during the 1990s, so does *The Blair Witch Project* illustrate the slow decent into anxiety and eventual death. The film thus gives the audience an alternative 'documentary' to relay the fears of the AIDS patient, while at the same time reaching a far wider audience due to it being framed within the horror film genre. The witch's body thus becomes the point of origin for disease and death. This further mirrors society's preoccupation with the link between old age, disease, and eventual death.

One cannot mention sexually transmitted diseases without also considering the similarly hidden organs involved in the sexual act, which is something that I have not found in scholarly discussions regarding the film. The hidden Blair Witch can also be interpreted to symbolise the hidden vulva in mainstream films. The witch is decidedly female and from a strictly biological perspective femaleness is linked to the reproductive organs. Emma L.E. Rees argues in *The Vagina: A Literary and Cultural History* (2013:223) that mainstream filmmakers shy away from revealing the vagina as society has deemed the vulva as something "that inspires disgust and brutality". Julia Kristeva (1982:164) similarly states: "the sexual component being everywhere is actually nowhere". This is true, since film viewers frequently see the penis in mainstream films, but the vagina is rarely seen in films for general audiences. This could however be due to the practicality of showing the male and female genitalia. For instance, when we compare a man and woman standing next to each other the penis is completely visible while the vulva is hidden. To expose a vagina to a camera requires a far greater deliberate effort than does the presentation of the penis. There is however something to be said about the hidden and its association with the feminine. As mentioned in the main literature review, a naked

woman seems less of a threat to a man, because a weapon becomes difficult to conceal. Because the vagina is hidden, however, it can be construed as a threat, not unlike the so-called vagina dentata folk tale. According to other feminists, like Susan Griffin (1981:271), even though society is addicted to the female porn star or sex goddess it also hates female sexuality, in other words, female anatomy. Society thus has a complex relationship with the female reproductive organ with it having a prominent role in pornography, but also being labelled obscene in the public sphere. One has to consider that flesh in itself is not obscene. Society dictates through sociocultural norms what is obscene and what is not – Apollonian control. Even terms like *pussy* or *cunt*, which are used to refer to the vulva, are considered two of the most obscene words in the English language (Mohr, 2013:9, 15, 17, 252).

It could thus be argued that *The Blair Witch Project* may embody society's public rejection and revulsion of the female reproductive organs. Like H.P. Lovecraft's wet, slithering, incomprehensible creatures that live in the dark that drives mad all who behold it, so does the aroused vulva drive society 'mad' with its innate, hidden and obscene power.



Figure 38. *The Blair Witch Project*. 1999. Directed by Daniel Myrick & Eduardo Sánchez. [Film still from DVD] USA: Lionsgate.

This allusion to the hidden vulva is emphasised in two ways in *The Blair Witch Project*. First it is done through the twig icons found hanging in the woods closer to her place of power (figure 38). Twigs are arranged and bound to form a stick figure. This figure has a split triangular shaped chest

that resembles the shape a woman's pubic hair forms. This shape points downward to an epicentre between the flayed out legs of the figure. This figure is her avatar and it represents the vagina in exaggerated form while the size of the triangle suggests that woman is reduced to her reproductive system. It also reminds the viewer that women are dangerous due to the hidden dangers, like sexually transmitted diseases, that hide within her wet folds. Syphilis is, for instance, is generally known to, if left untreated, to lead to mental illness and insanity.

Secondly, one must consider the film technology used to film much of the production. Just as the infamous Paris Hilton sex tape, *1 Night in Paris* (2004), was shot using a camera's night vision mode, so was many scenes in *The Blair Witch Project* shot with similar, albeit slightly more dated, film technology (Nowak, 2011:2). This technology was initially conceived in the early nineties by the US military for use during the Gulf War (Nowak, 2011:292). Night vision equipment displays in monochromatic grey (*The Blair Witch Project*) or green (*1 Night in Paris*). The pornography industry was one of the first industries to latch on to this new technology, along with the security footage industry (Nowak, 2011:4). These first users of the technology are mirrored by the Blair Witch narrative. Sex is frequently associated with death by scholars of psychodynamic approaches, but sex can also be associated with death where sexually transmitted diseases are concerned. Death was also on the minds of many colonists when they settled in dangerous new worlds as they had to fight and labour to survive. Man has historically sought to control nature to avoid death, much like man has sought to control woman's reproductive functioning for the survival of bloodlines. Women, nature, and death are all intrinsically linked in *The Blair Witch Project*, like the three corners of a triangle, the same shape of the feminine pubic mound. Death features similarly in the film as all three protagonists are killed in the woods at the hands of a woman after another woman leads them there.

From the above one can argue that there is a link between pornography and *The Blair Witch Project* with a focus on the vulva and female sexuality, albeit in different ways. Night vision technology is also used in the security industry to capture evidence of criminal activity. A crime, the psychological torture and murder of three individuals are caught on video in *The Blair Witch Project*. In *1 Night in Paris* however night vision technology is used to exploit every nook and cranny of the female body, while in *The Blair Witch Project* it is used to reveal the suffering of the victims. As women are often painted by society as victims of the pornographic film industry, so are the three protagonists victims of the unseen Blair Witch. As the camera is unable to be trained on the witch she never becomes a victim within the eyes of the viewers.

If one considers the above I feel it valid to argue that the Blair Witch is the pinnacle of feminine anger and the injustice wrought on women by a society that to this day attempts to deny female sexuality and sexual agency.

Further reverberations

The Blair Witch Project perpetuates the stereotypical witch we find in the *Malleus Maleficarum* and *Häxan*. Though we never physically see the witch the characters in the film describe her actions and appearance as the next paragraphs will elucidate.

At the beginning of the film, Heather interviews the residents of Burkittsville and the surrounding areas regarding their knowledge of the Blair Witch. The residents mention the disappearance and murder of children at the hands of a hermit, Rustin Parr, who murdered the children in pairs with one child standing in his basement corner while he murdered the other. This is also what occurs at the end of the film when Heather follows Mike into the basement of an abandoned house. This either suggests that Rustin Parr and the witch is the same person, or that Rustin Parr was possessed by the Blair Witch. Other residents regale Heather with tales of an exiled witch who lived in and haunted the woods North of Burkittsville and who kidnapped children. The Blair Witch is described by some as an old woman whose feet never touch the ground and who can turn into vapour as she rises from the river.

After reaching the woods, Heather reads an account from an old book about five men who were found tortured and disembowelled on Coffin Rock by the river. They were found with pagan symbols carved on their foreheads and their hands bound to the other's feet to form a crude structure. Their bodies disappeared after those who found them went back to the village for help.

As Josh, Mike, and Heather make their way through the woods they find an old cemetery and seven small piles of stones, or cairns. They also hear twigs snapping in the woods at night. On the third morning they awake to find three small cairns built just outside of their tent. At this point in the film they realize they are lost and that Mike had thrown away their map. Consulting a compass also turns out to be fruitless as it just leads them even further into the woods where they discover strange stick figures hanging from the trees. That same evening they hear children laughing and other sounds emanating from deep within the woods. They run from their tent as something outside shakes it only to find upon their return that Josh's belongings are covered in slime – Josh disappears some time later that evening. Two days later Heather comes across a small parcel made out of a scrap of Josh's shirt and twigs containing some of his teeth, hair, and part of his tongue. That same night Mike and Heather hear Josh calling from somewhere in the woods. They follow the sound of his voice in the hope to find him. This is how they then stumble on the abandoned house with walls covered in pagan symbols and the handprints of children. The house is shown to be falling apart and in a ruined state.

From the above we can draw numerous similarities with the tropes established in the *Häxan* chapter which illustrates Levinson's ripple effect of texts. Interestingly the ripples have changed much from

those we find in *Häxan* even though the film builds on tropes associated with the witch. This is done by not revealing the witch's appearance, which could be described as an example of Bloom's *tessera*. The viewer understands from the title of the film, but also from the characters, that the film is about a witch as antagonist. All the witch's actions reveal to the viewer the necessary clues to confirm that there is in fact a witch, which are the tokens of recognition without the viewer having to see her physically manifest anywhere in the film. The witch is however present just like the witches were present in *Suspiria*. In *Suspiria* the viewer had clues to the witch's presence through music, set designs, and lighting effects, but in *The Blair Witch Project* the witch and nature are synonymous suggesting that the moment the three protagonists set foot in the woods the witch is constantly with them.

Though the witch is never revealed to the viewer the witch is still described by others which to a degree lead to embodiment, albeit in the viewer's imagination. The witch is, for instance, referred to as an old woman whose feet never touch the ground. From her actions and the way she murders and possesses others it is clear that she is all-powerful. As mentioned, the witch's age is frequently exaggerated to make her seem more monstrous and horrific. In the previous section regarding the invisible monster I make a point about antagonists being so monstrous that they defy explanation or definition. Apollonian boundary-making cannot contend with its monstrosity and viewing this monster causes the viewer to turn insane. Insanity and loss of control feature prominently in *The Blair Witch Project* suggesting similar links to those we find in Lovecraft's popular Cthulhu Mythos novellas. The Blair Witch is so monstrous that man-made equipment cannot capture it. The characters go insane because they do in fact "see" her, but because she is inseparable from nature they do not realise that they did in fact capture her visage on film. The viewer is not affected by this, because the equipment being man-made is flawed and cannot capture her all-encompassing monstrosity. In the film we can only see what is captured in the frame, while the characters are surrounded completely by nature. The viewer only sees but a small sliver of the monstrous through the camera, rendering her effect on the viewer no more than unnerving and scary. In a way I found this reminiscent of my own New Historicist attempts at engaging with the past, as I can also only see a moment in the vast ocean of history by engaging with a text from the past using the New Historicist method. Also, I cannot see the whole truth of that moment, and like the viewer engaging with *The Blair Witch Project*, I can only see but one piece of glass from a much larger mosaic pattern.

There are not much of dead and dirty things to be found in *The Blair Witch Project*. This works well in this film, because when the viewer is confronted with a tiny parcel of bloodied teeth, hair, and a piece of tongue the impact is much more visceral. The same happens when Mike and Heather arrive at the abandoned house. The house is falling into ruin and is dirty and covered in handprints and pagan symbols. The state of the building makes an eco-critical statement about nature (Dionysian) and man-

made progress (Apollonian). Everything that man builds will be destroyed and swallowed by nature. It reminds me of the fox in the forest in Lars von Trier's *Antichrist* (2009) who tells *He* (Willem Dafoe): "Chaos reigns". Nature, chaos, woman, magic, violence, eternity, and madness are all aligned with Dionysus. This crumbling and isolated edifice in the sea of green and brown suggests to me the futility of man's attempts to control nature.

Nature thus features in a different way in *The Blair Witch Project* than in *Häxan*. This is an example of Bloom's *askesis* as the directors of the film changed the established link between nature and the witch and reframed it utterly. Nature is not just a place where the witch lives in the film – she is nature and vice versa.

The Blair Witch's actions clearly illustrate her as an adversary to the traditional familial unit as she kills men and children. She also possesses others do to her bidding, like when she influenced Rustin Parr to murder children or possessed Mike to stand in an unmoving state in the basement corner. With regards to the witch as an adversary to dominant systems of power, the family, and children we find the same reverberations from *Häxan*, but without changes to their meaning and function. The same can be said of her power to possess.

Nowhere in the film is there mention of the witch's also mention the origins of her power to possess or her other supernatural abilities. This is a clear deviation from *Häxan* and most of the films discussed up to this point where the witches' power frequently originates from outside forces like Satan or demons (Bloom's *clinamen*). What is clear however is why it manifested in the first place. The Blair Witch, or Elly Kedward as is revealed in the film, was accused of witchcraft and sentenced to death through exposure by the residents of Burkittsville in 1785. She was thus not unlike the other witches we frequently find in horror films. Elly Kedward is an angry and immortal being who lives/is the woodlands and takes revenge on those who trespass in her domain.

It should be mentioned that the trope of invented mythologies manifests in two ways in *The Blair Witch Project*. The book Heather reads from describing events related to the Blair witch was created specifically for the film. The film itself is also an invented mythology that was exploited in the marketing of the film – a cycle of invented mythologies, so to speak.

Summarising *The Blair Witch Project*

Eagleton (2010:81) posits that the witch is a threat to all sociocultural orders. *The Blair Witch Project* succeeds at this in many ways. The found footage genre of film blurs the line between reality and fiction making some viewers question reality. The producers of the film succeed in not only

threatening social order by making a film about a witch, but also by sharing equal power in the production of the film with others. They also challenged power structures by rejecting the physical embodiment of the witch in a medium which relies on visual cues and embodiments. Threats are made invisible but also feminine, thus mirroring the invisible threat to western society hiding within.

The Blair Witch Project is not without problems though. By using the same tropes associated with the witch in *Häxan* the filmmakers perpetuate dated stereotypes regarding women. Heather is clearly the made protagonist of the film and she is at first shown to be rational, in control, and open-minded. I found her initially to be much like Scully in later seasons of *The X-Files*. As she, Josh, and Mike lose their way in the woods, cracks start to appear in her character and she also becomes hysterical and irrational by the end of the film. This seems like a missed opportunity to challenge sociocultural norms to the fullest extent.

Concluding the cinematic witch of the nineties

Both *The Craft* and *The Blair Witch Project* exemplify the sociocultural currents of nineties America. Both also collapse the boundaries of genre, making both films postmodern. In the films we find instances of powerful witches becoming unhinged and motivated towards directing vengeance and violence at others.

Interestingly, film industry conventions lead to these films being able to challenge power structures through the way they were produced. The producers of *The Craft* were forced to mix the horror and teen film genres to get their film funded and distributed by film companies. By conforming to the practices and conventions of the time the film's subversive message about powerful women reached a much larger audience that still resonates with audiences to this very day.

In the instance of *The Blair Witch Project*, Myrick and Sánchez wanted to create a film with the latest portable film technologies. Because they knew they were not going to receive funding and distribution for their film they could film whatever they wanted. The drawback was that they could also only film what they could afford. Having no money for expensive CGI or effects led them to not showing the witch at all. The film proved that outside funding was not required to produce a film, suggesting that film studios had far less power or sway when it comes to producing films than many probably thought.

The Blair Witch Project's blurring between reality and fiction exposed the inability of many in society to differentiate between fact and fiction where media is packaged or stylised in a certain way. This could be attributed to a dumbing down effect of tabloid journalism where fiction and reality are

similarly made indiscernible, something that Foucault warns us about in his essay on hyperreality and simulacra. This inability is still observed in 2021 where many confuse memes and Youtube videos with reliable sources of information which lead them to believing conspiracy theories regarding, for example, politicians and viral pandemics.

Various social ills are also front and centre in both films with *The Craft* mirroring and challenging social ills like racism, sexism, and classism. Nancy is shown to be driven insane by guilt after betraying her friend Sarah, mirroring feminist notions of unity and acceptance. *The Blair Witch Project* only challenges through cinematic style, but fails with regards to female empowerment. Though the witch is not embodied visually, she is described as old and violent. I find her conforming too much to the old witches in *Häxan*. The female protagonist is also constructed along negative lines as someone who is unable to keep calm and collected.

Negative associations with women and sexually transmitted diseases like AIDS are also found in both films. In *The Craft* AIDS is linked to poverty through Nancy, while *The Blair Witch* can be viewed as a metaphor for AIDS. In both instances the disease is carried by women, suggesting that women are carriers along with gay men.

Both films also succeed in mirroring American society's fear of destruction from within where individuals or groups of individuals from within society destroy communities. The four witches in *The Craft* embody the teenage girls from various backgrounds who had the potential of ensnaring middle-to upper-class white boys. These girls corrupt in various ways, like luring them to disease and poor health, but also by making them empathise with the plight of minorities like Rochelle or the disabled like Bonnie. *The Blair Witch* has the same effect as she symbolises hidden diseases within the body, but also the hidden *other* all around us who seeks the destruction of patriarchal power structures.

As the films perpetuate notions regarding women, so do they perpetuate many tropes established in *Häxan*. In many instances they are changed to mirror societal fears and norms while in other instances they remain unchanged suggesting that there is room for more sociocultural changes even after seventy years.

The Craft and *The Blair Witch Project* are extremely popular films to this day with many web and blog pages devoted to the films. Both films have had sequels over the years. Even though *The Blair Witch Project* inspired a whole new film genre and is still popular, the film's two sequels, *The Book of Shadows: Blair Witch 2* (2000) and *Blair Witch* (2016) were poorly received by critics and viewers. The sequels also had no input from the original creators. *The Craft*'s 2020 sequel *The Craft: Legacy* has also had no input from the original creators and received mixed reviews since its release despite

receiving a GLAAD Media Award for Outstanding Film nomination due to the film's portrayal of teenage bisexual character (Ramos, 2021).

THE CINEMATIC WITCH IN THE TWENTY FIRST CENTURY

Introduction

Between 1999 and 2009 we find a relative dearth of new or original horror films starring a witch. For eleven years viewers could only choose between a handful of sequels of some of the films discussed so far, like *Books of Shadows: Blair Witch 2*, and Dario Argento's *Suspiria* sequel *Mother of Tears* (2007). Even the *Witchcraft* film series slowed down seeing only three of its fifteen sequels released in the period.

The lack of witch horror films during this period could be attributed to the horror film audiences' changing tastes between 2000 and 2009. A search on *The Numbers* (2021c) of the top ten performing horror films per year between 2000 and 2009 indicates which horror film genres made the most profits. I created a database where I listed the one hundred films (ten per year) by genre after searching the abovementioned films and found that the top three selling genres for the decade were: ghost stories (20/100), like *The Others* (2001), *13 Ghosts* (2001), and *The Mothman Prophecies* (2002); sequels to horror films from the seventies and eighties came in second (19/100), for example *Jason X* (2002), *Freddy vs. Jason* (2003), and *Texas Chainsaw Massacre* (2003); and in third place, torture or exotic death films, colloquially referred to as *torture porn* films (14/100), like the *Saw* (2004-2021) and *Final Destination* (2000-2011) franchises. Zombie and classic monster genre films tied in fourth place with eight entries each.

From the above it is clear that horror film production was mainly driven by terrifying and original ghost stories, nostalgia, and gruesome or creative death scenes. The popularity of these genres combined with film production companies' hesitancy to invest in unproven material, are the most likely culprits for a lack of new witch horror films. Steffen Hantke (2010:viii-ix) states that most horror films produced after the start of the new millennium lack originality and that film production companies played safe by remaking horror films from the past or making Westernised versions of Asian horror films like *The Ring* (2002), *The Grudge* (2004), and *Dark Water* (2005). With the exception of *Suspiria*, *Night of the Demons*, *Witchcraft*, *The Craft* and *The Blair Witch Project*, there have been no other witch films that have had sequels. Most of the films discussed thus far were films that ended in such a way that a sequel would be difficult, but most importantly, very few of these films were popular enough to warrant further iterations. The five witch films mentioned, that do have sequels, all had a formula or something unique to them that made them important to larger portions of the viewing public. *Suspiria* was ground breaking at the time of its release with a mystery at its core that kept audiences speculating for decades. *Night of the Demons* was a quintessential fun eighties

horror film with enough latex monsters, blood, and ‘teenage’ breasts to make it popular among eighties horror fans. *Witchcraft*’s focus on naked women and sex straddled the fine line between plot and softcore pornography in much the same way the *Emmanuelle* films have been doing since 1974. *The Craft* hit a chord with nineties teens because of its mixture of the real world problems that teens faced, and subdued horror elements. *The Blair Witch Project* started a whole film genre, preying on primal fears of the unknown, while also blurring the lines between fiction and reality. With the exception of *The Craft*, all these films had sequels between 2000 and 2009 – none of which were big financial successes upon release.

This however changed in 2009 with the release of Sam Raimi’s *Drag Me to Hell* and Lars von Trier’s *Antichrist*. *Drag Me to Hell* feels like it closes the book on the eighties horror film on a high note and I discuss this in detail in the next section. *Antichrist* is more stylised and imbued with complex themes relating to grief, women, witches, and the environment. With the latter Lars von Trier unknowingly set the stage for what was to come within the horror film genre in the next decade.

Between 2009 and 2020 the horror film genre seems to have entered a new golden age. Films like David Bruckner’s *The Ritual* (2017), Panos Cosmatos’s *Mandy* (2018), Richard Shepard’s *The Perfection* (2018), and Richard Stanley’s *Color Out of Space* (2019) not only redefine the genre, but are artistic masterpieces in their own right. At the forefront of this horror film renaissance (in order of release) are Robert Eggers’ *The Witch: A New England Folktale* (2015), Nicolas Winding Refn’s *The Neon Demon* (2016), André Øvredal *The Autopsy of Jane Doe* (2016), Ari Aster’s *Hereditary* (2018), and Luca Guadagnino’s remake of *Suspiria* (2018), of which all five have witches as antagonists.

I believe that this resurgence of original horror films can be attributed to two factors. The first is related to the film streaming, while the second has to do with the socio-political climate of the last decade.

The Netflix online streaming service was launched in 2007 and irrevocably changed the landscape of the entertainment industry (Havard, 2021:39, 41). By streaming films and series, production companies cut down on their costs, since physical media and the transport of physical media are not required (Havard, 2021:41). It is also less expensive for the consumer to buy a monthly streaming subscription than it is to go to the cinema. The average cinema ticket costs around \$10 for a single film viewing while a standard Netflix subscription would cost \$13.99 per month giving the user access to all of Netflix’s content (Navarro, 2021; Netflix, 2021). Many new films are simultaneously released on streaming services and at cinemas which have changed viewing habits considerably (Havard, 2021:41). Probably the most important change brought about by streaming is the extent to which it democratised the entertainment industry (Smith & Telang, 2016:3). According to Smith & Telang (2016:3) new technologies, which include digital streaming services, have removed major

obstacles out of the way for content creators like authors, filmmaker, musicians, and artists. The control that galleries, publishers, production houses, and recording studios had over artists is gone (Smith & Telang, 2016:3). In other words, filmmakers now have the ability to create whatever films they want, and sell their content to any of the streaming services. Smith and Telang (2016:3) refer to this age as a golden age of creativity.

The other aspect that should be considered is the socio-political climate of the 2010s. According to Nick Cowen (2021:1, 221) western society over the past few years has become more acutely aware of socio-economic inequalities, which by extension also includes inequalities regarding sex, gender, race, and ethnicity. Anyone with access to the Internet in 2021 can attest to the prevalence of social justice movements like the #MeToo, Black Lives Matter, and the Arab Spring. The ideas associated with these movements have become engrained in many societies, undoubtedly influencing the arts in general.

The witch being a monstrous female antagonist is a good vehicle to address historical inequalities regarding sex and gender, but also race and class. With filmmaking becoming affordable to many and power shifting to filmmakers, it has become easier to create films that address sociocultural issues through allegory and metaphor in horror films. Douglas Keeseey (2017:13) observes the following regarding progressive horror films as opposed to regressive horror:

I define a progressive horror film as one that leads us towards overcoming our fear of difference, enlarging our understanding of and sympathy for ‘othered’ persons and experiences too often considered inimical to ourselves. By contrast, regressive horror solidifies old fears and refortifies traditional boundaries between us and ‘them’, confirming and even exacerbating phobic responses. The most intriguing horror films, it seems to me, are the ones in which the characters (and the filmmakers) are trying to work out how they feel about ‘others’, questioning received notions – and genre conventions – regarding what is threatening or ‘monstrous’ and seeking out new perspectives beyond a dread of difference.

In other words, horror films have the ability to lead to understanding and compassion in those who are not in positions of power and privilege, but also to reinforce outdated fears like racism, sexism, classism, and ageism. Filmmakers use the horror film medium not only to understand their own fears, but also the fears of society. This aligns with the New Historicist method of problematizing the past and past societies through close textual analysis. Both progressive and regressive horror film producers contribute to this understanding of the past. The progressive filmmaker gives the New Historicist evidence of society’s awareness of social issues and fears and how some artists addressed those issues through their art. On the other hand the regressive filmmaker gives the New Historicist evidence of the extent to which social ills are ingrained in society and how some artists were unable to

recognise them as ills. In both progressive and regressive horror films there is a case to be made for reciprocal sociocultural influences.

Kimberley Jackson (2016:1) states in her book, *Gender and the Nuclear Family in Twenty-First-Century Horror*, that patriarchal decline and postfeminist ideology feature strongly in the horror films produced over the last two decades. Because of patriarchy's decline, the bourgeois nuclear family of western culture suffers negative consequences as society is unable to mediate its future while also being unable to shake past configurations of societal structures and hierarchies (Jackson, 2016:1).

Jackson (2016:1) notes that the nuclear family and gender relations coupled with their implied tensions have historically been at the centre of many horror films. I agree with this and from the films I discussed up to this point most of them do deal with these issues in some way or form. The family or suburban home, and how the witch often subverts it or constitutes a threat to it, is discussed at length in chapters five and seven of this thesis.

In this chapter I try to make sense of these reciprocal sociocultural influences between the films, gender relations, the nuclear family, and society at large while also referring to the influence of *Häxan* on the more recent witch horror film. The first film I discuss is Sam Raimi's *Drag Me to Hell* which uses a lot of the eighties dark humour horror tropes which he made popular with his *Evil Dead* film series. This is followed by an analysis of Lars von Trier's *Antichrist* which, as I will argue, started the artistic horror film movement of the last decade. This chapter is then followed by a section on Álex de la Iglesia's *Las Brujas de Zugarramurdi* (2013) or *Witching & Bitching* as it is called outside of Spain to give the reader an additional European perspective on the witch horror film. With the rest of the chapter I analyse and discuss what I believe to be the five most evocative, horrifying, thought-provoking, and socially aware horror films ever produced. These films are: *The Witch: A New England Folktale* (2015), *The Neon Demon* (2016), *The Autopsy of Jane Doe* (2016), *Hereditary* (2018), and *Suspiria* (2018).

POSTMODERNISM AND THE HORROR FILM

To make more sense of the films mentioned above in the context of the twenty-first century I first need to discuss postmodernism and how its sensibilities manifest in some horror films. In the previous chapter I introduce the link between postmodernism and the horror film. In this chapter the postmodern again manifests in varying and interesting ways.

Much has been written about postmodernist films and the influence and manifestations of the postmodern in cinema. To attempt to sum these up here would be unnecessary and a gargantuan task.

There are however three scholars whose work seem invaluable to the study of the witch in horror cinema, namely Jean Baudrillard, Isabel Pinedo, and Slavoj Žižek.

Baudrillard's theories regarding simulacra and the hyperreal were touched on in the section about *The Blair Witch Project*, but they deserve further exposition in this chapter. In his essay, *Simulacra and Simulations*, Baudrillard (2002:166-167) argues that the simulations we produce, like geographic maps, advertising, computer models, to name but a few, are not parodies, reproductions, or representative models of reality, but are symbols that collapse the boundaries between the real and the unreal, as truth and reality do not exist in the first place. The more detailed and precise these simulations are the more they disrupt the borders between the real and the unreal (Baudrillard, 2002:170). The more indiscernible reality becomes from the unreal and vice versa and the more they are reproduced the more the simulation distracts society (Baudrillard, 2002:169-170). Baudrillard (2002:170) categorises the representations or simulacra into four phases of the image, which are: a reflection of reality; a mask that distorts reality; a mask that hides a lack of reality; or a pure simulacrum that bears no resemblance to any reality.

An example of the reflection of reality is a painting of a landscape or a building, or a miniaturised sculpture or model of a person, object, or model. These reflections can be one of a kind works of art, but can also be reproductions, like the mass produced prints of paintings or models available in hobby stores. An example of a mask that distorts reality is for instance a cologne advertisement that suggests that wearing said cologne would make one more attractive to the opposite sex. A mask that hides the lack of reality, according to Baudrillard (2002:169), can be described as the religious icons society venerates in the place of deities that do not exist. In other words, the icons signify or represent something that never existed in the first place. The pure simulacrum, also according to Baudrillard (2002:171-172) is Disneyland which also combines all the other phases of the image. The pirates, for instance, are representations of what a pirate could look like, but the pirate with the peg-leg and parrot on his shoulder is a distortion of reality as such a person probably never existed. An animal-human hybrid, like Mickey Mouse, has never existed and is something Walt Disney imagined and drew on paper. A person in Disneyland wearing a Mickey Mouse mask and outfit and all the branding associated with the character hides the lack of reality. The pure simulacrum is Disneyland itself where all the reflections, distortions, and masks congeal into one larger and boxed-in space becoming a real place that does not resemble other spaces found on Earth – in other words, a hyperreality. Another example of the hyperreal is reality television, where reality and fiction become intertwined and indistinguishable from one another, like in *The Blair Witch Project*. The collapsing between the real and the fictional or the familiar and unfamiliar is described as decidedly postmodern (Pinedo, 1996:17).

Related to Baudrillard's theories of reality we find Slavoj Žižek's theories connecting violence and reality. In his *Welcome to the Desert of the Real: Five essays on September 11 and Related Dates* (2002), Žižek explores the relationship between violence and reality. This is of importance for any study related to horror films as central to the horror film is its unreality as a cinematic production, but also the violence. A film cannot be categorised under the horror genre if there is no violence.

Žižek (2002:5) says that violence is an endorsed sign of authenticity. He explains that violence is the ultimate tool to free society from flawed ideologies, like consumerism and to usher in a utopia of order and reality (Žižek, 2002:7-9). This is similar to people, mostly women, who cut themselves in order to feel alive. Žižek (2002:10) says that these self-inflicted cuts "represents a desperate strategy to return to the Real of the body." In other words, there is a disconnect between the individual and the reality they find themselves in.

Žižek (2002:10-11) that this disconnect occurs due to an increasing virtual world, where we deprive everything of its true substance. Examples of the virtual are: decaffeinated coffee, vegetarian meat, sugar-free candy, virtual sex, friends on social media, et cetera. Žižek (2002:11) also uses the example of the current and popular trend of the virtual celebration of the *other*. He argues that we laud the dances and cultural practices of the *other*, yet turn a blind eye to their misogynist practices and sexual violence (Žižek, 2002:11). Even worse, we reframe the other's flaws as being a product of their oppression (Žižek, 2002:11). By creating these inauthentic images and constantly reproducing them through the media and consumerism we are making the real world unreal and unfamiliar (Žižek, 2002:11).

The popular media has collapsed the borders between fiction and reality, leaving the viewer unable to discern fact from fiction (Žižek:2002:11-12). By disconnecting violence from reality, violence becomes a pleasurable exercise for people viewing violence on their televisions (Žižek, 2002:11-12). The events of September 11, 2001, played over and over globally and resembled the footage we tend to see in high-octane catastrophe films produced by Hollywood (Žižek, 2002:11). The viewer is subsequently able to experience virtual pain through the media, but not physical pain (Žižek, 2002:12). The viewers exposing themselves to these painful images on television are not different from those who cut themselves (Žižek, 2002:12). Both yearn for, or have a passion, for real experience (Žižek, 2002:12). In addition, because these violent acts happen elsewhere and do not directly harm the viewer, pain becomes more palatable (Žižek, 2002:13).

Related to the pain experience fantasy we also have what Žižek (and Lacan) (2002:17) refer to as 'traversing the fantasy'. Traversing the fantasy is a reaction to a reality, a reality as Žižek (2002:17) says is "structured and supported by the fantasy". The psyche understands that the fantasy of reality is lacking and attempts to resist immersing itself in this reality, by substituting one fantasy for another

(Žižek, 2002:17-18). A person thus does not confront reality, but immerses themselves in an artificial reality, which in turn causes the person to yearn for truth and authenticity as both our constructed realities and our self-constructed realities (personal fantasies) do not mirror reality (Žižek, 2002:19). The yearning for the real manifests in society's obsession with reality television (Žižek, 2002:12). The irony is that reality television is also not real, which then restarts the yearning for the real.

Another scholar who problematizes violence and reality is Isable Pinedo. According to Pinedo (1996:20) violence is inherent to the horror film and not gratuitous as some claim. Violence as found in horror films does not resemble reality. It is true that gruesome violence occurs in reality, but one would be hard pressed to find an immortal man-wolf hybrid ripping a man's arms off in an alleyway. It is because of the horror film's ability to collapse the familiar reality that Pinedo (1996:17) argues that the horror film is postmodern. Though Pinedo's study was published in 1996 it seems to be especially relevant to the horror films of the new millennium as is revealed throughout this chapter.

She argues that horror films are filled with various instances where the familiar or traditional reality is made unfamiliar. For instance, no matter what a man does to bely a monstrous antagonist, he will be tortured, injured, or die in some brutal way. Any form of intervention has no effect on the outcome of the film (Pinedo, 1996:17). Figures of authority, like police, doctors, or scientists, are similarly inefficient, which challenges the familiar structures of power, control, and progress that society relies on to keep people in their societal positions and to sustain said power structures (Pinedo, 1996:17, 20, 23, 26).

Related to the last-mentioned collapse of power structures in the horror film is the rejection of morality and rationality. Pinedo (1996:22) posits that the natural orders of the universe are disrupted by irrational forces in the horror film. For instance, Freddy Krueger kills teenagers in their sleep, Angela in *Night of the Demons* kills her peers, but because she kills them they are resurrected as insane zombies. Rational characters who attempt to explain occurrences in horror films frequently die or are punished as soon as they are able to rationally explain these occurrences (Pinedo, 1996:22). The viewer also cannot expect a rational closure for the narrative, as the antagonists frequently resurrect after their apparent deaths to give the audience a final scare, or their end is ambiguous (Pinedo, 1996:24-25). I believe that the ambiguous ending has more to do with potential profits than with postmodernism as the many horror film directors hope that their efforts can lead to sequels. If the monster meets a definite end at the end of the film it becomes difficult to explain their reappearance in the sequel.

Another characteristic that bounds the horror film to the postmodern has to do with the extent to which it collapses the boundaries between genres, especially with regards to the inclusion of comedy in the horror film (Pinedo, 1996:28-29). This is true of many horror films created during the eighties,

like *Evil Dead II* with its laughing deer trophies, possessed dismembered limbs, and cellars that vomit hundreds of litres of blood. We find examples of comedy in witch horror films, like *Drag Me to Hell*, and *Witching & Bitching*, that are both discussed later in this chapter. The inclusion of comedy along with violence, and ill-developed characters makes it difficult to designate many horror films as low or elevated art. Art that straddles low- and high art are regarded as postmodern (Pinedo, 1996:18).

All the above ideas manifest to a great extent in especially the horror films of the new millennium. In the sections below I attempt to identify manifestations of simulacra and the postmodern and how they intersect with the exchanges between gender, power, and the sociocultural in the witch horror film.

DRAG ME TO HELL

Drag Me to Hell (2009), directed by Sam Raimi, cult director and creator of the *Evil Dead* film franchise, plays with many of the sensibilities we find in American horror films from the seventies and eighties where the emphasis is on shock, disgust, the occult, and black humour.



Figure 39. *Drag Me to Hell*. 2009. Directed by Sam Raimi. [Film still from Blu-ray] USA: Universal Pictures Home Entertainment.

The film follows a young woman, Christine Brown (figure 39), who denies a mortgage extension to a poverty stricken woman of Eastern European descent, Sylvia Ganush (figure 40). Christine, a loan officer at a bank who is vying for a promotion, denies the request at the behest of her manager as he requires her to demonstrate that she is able to make tough choices. Sylvia begs Christine on her knees to reconsider, but she refuses. Security guards then remove her from the premises. Later, as Christine enters her car to drive home, Sylvia attacks her and a bizarre altercation ensues which is both disgusting and humorous. As the altercation ends, Sylvia rips a button from Christine's coat, curses it, and hands it back to Christine. A fortune teller reveals to Christine that she is being pursued by a demonic entity. The entity, called the Lamia, is described in Greek mythology as one who eats children (Baker & Baker 2004:15-16). It torments its victims for three days before dragging them off to Hell. The Lamia is an extension of Sylvia's rage and motivations and as Raimi himself notes in an interview, "... there are different demons that exist in many different cultures under the name of 'Lamia'. In one culture it is a baby-eating god. In another, it's a snake. In another, it's a very sexy, but evil woman." (Cineman.com, 2009).

If we compare the Lamia to the witch it is striking how similar they are. The witch (and Dionysus) has historically been associated with cannibalism and the eating of babies. She is also frequently associated with Satan, the snake who tempted Eve. The witch can likewise use glamour spells to make herself appear alluring and beautiful to seduce men.

Christine is attacked in her home that same night by an invisible force. She also has a nightmare that same evening about flies crawling up her nose and Sylvia vomiting maggots over her face. The next day her nose starts bleeding at work and she ends up projectile vomiting a ridiculous amount of blood over her boss. After these occurrences Christine is convinced that the fortune teller was telling the truth and she goes to Sylvia's home to beg for forgiveness, only to find that Sylvia had passed away. She accidentally knocks over Sylvia's coffin during the wake. Sylvia's body falls on top of Christine and as their mouths are pressed against each other large quantities of embalming fluid spill out of Sylvia's mouth into Christine's. As a few mourners lift Sylvia's body off Christine, Christine's hair is entangled in Sylvia's fingers resulting in a large chunk of Christine's hair to be ripped out.



Figure 40. Drag Me to Hell. 2009. Directed by Sam Raimi. [Film still from Blu-ray] USA: Universal Pictures Home Entertainment.

Jas, the fortune teller, explains to Christine that as long as she is in possession of the button she will be cursed and will die after three days. Christine is however unwilling to give the button away to someone else thus passing the same curse on to that person. Jas then suggests that she offer a sacrifice to the entity to appease it and she reluctantly sacrifices her pet kitten. This is not enough and she is again tormented by the Lamia that night when she goes to visit her fiancé's parents. Flies appear again and a disembodied and winking eyeball appears in the slice of harvest cake Christine had brought along for the family. She stabs it and blood comes pouring out of the cake. It should be noted that Clay, her fiancé, is from a very wealthy family, while Christine is a farm girl from a broken family. As result Christine tries very hard to be accepted by Clay's family.

As Christine becomes more desperate to rid herself of the curse she collects her stereo, ice skates, and other goods to pay a \$10 000 fee to pay for a séance. While out in the shed a zombified Sylvia attacks her. Sylvia throws a punch at Christine's face, and because Christine is screaming, Sylvia's fist and arm go elbow-deep down Christine's throat and gets stuck. In typical Raimi fashion there is a rusty anvil hanging from a rope above Sylvia. Christine then drops the anvil on Sylvia by slicing through

the rope with an ice skate. Right before the anvil hits Sylvia's head she rips her arm out of Christine's mouth. The anvil crushes Sylvia's head with such force that her eyeballs shoot from her sockets down Christine's throat.

At the séance everything also goes wrong when San Dena, a medium who has encountered the Lamia before, attempts to trap the Lamia in a goat and then kill it. The Lamia possesses San Dena, then the goat, and finally her assistant – her assistant vomiting up the corpse of Christine's sacrificed cat. San Dena dies after banishing the Lamia from the séance.

Christine contemplates giving the button to Stu, her rival at the bank who stole her work, but changes her mind. She has an idea though after seeing Sylvia's obituary and asks Jas if she can pass the curse on to a deceased person. After Jas does some research he informs her that she can. Christine then proceeds to unearth Sylvia's remains and places an envelope containing the button in Sylvia's hand. This does not work and Sylvia's maggot-ridden corpse again falls on Christine, her fingers again entangled in her hair and ripping out a large chunk of Christine's hair. Christine having had enough of the torture jams a shovel in Sylvia's mouth, pries it open, and shoves the envelope with the button down Sylvia's throat. As there is a heavy downpour of rain while this is happening a sudden surge of water fills the hole in the ground and Christine struggles to get out. A giant ornate crucifix is mounted on Sylvia's headstone which falls over hitting Christine on the head causing her to black out. She regains consciousness moments later and escapes.

With the threat of the Lamia now over, Christine and Clay retreat to a cabin in the woods. At the train station Clay reveals to her that an envelope she gave him containing his Standing Liberty quarter must have gotten mixed up with another envelope as the one in his possession contains a button. Christine reeling in shock from the realization falls from the train platform onto the train tracks. Hellfire erupts around her as demonic hands burst from the gravel grabbing her and burning her flesh. Clay is immobilised with fear and can only stare helplessly as Christine is dragged down to Hell.

Background and literature review

Sam Raimi is mostly known for his *Evil Dead* film series which includes *Evil Dead* (1981), *Evil Dead II* (1987), and *Army of Darkness* (1992). Raimi is also known as the director of *Darkman* (1998) and the *Spider-man* trilogy (2002-2007) (IMDB, 2021e). In addition to this, he is the producer of the popular *Hercules: The Legendary Journeys* (1995-1999) and *Xena: Warrior Princess* (1995-2001) (IMDB, 2021e).⁴⁵

⁴⁵ On a side note, Xena was the most widely syndicated television series in the world by 1999, also Xena and her sidekick Gabrielle are noted lesbian icons among those in the gay community (Hanmer, 2013:609; Maris, 2016:124).

Jeffrey Andrew Weinstock (2013:19) describes Sam Raimi's horror films in general as:

...film about film; the moment at which the room becomes so filled with blood that the projector explodes, the film becomes parody—a horror film so excessive, so “over the top,” that it uses the conventions of horror to poke fun at horror. ...[a horror] film that refuses to play by the rules. In its gleeful transgression of Hollywood cinematic and generic conventions, it is characteristically postmodern....

Weinstock is on the mark with his definition of the Raimi horror film. I attempted to capture the parody, “over the top” violence, and gore while describing the plot in the previous section in an effort to draw the reader's attention to Raimi's methods. The characters in the *Evil Dead* and *Drag Me to Hell* are subjected to tortures and acts of violence that are more suited for Warner Bros. cartoons from the forties and fifties. In *Drag Me to Hell* we especially notice this in the scene where Christina fights the zombie Sylvia in the shed. Fists and arms disappear down throats, anvils randomly hang from rafters just to fall and crush heads. In the altercation in the car Sylvia loses her dentures and she gums Christine's chin while they are rolling around subjecting the audience to sticky strings of spit. The horrific violence we usually find in horror films is made laughable and ridiculous through various absurdities that occur during the film. Like Wile E. Coyote who chases the Road Runner in Warner's *Looney Tunes*, so does Christine run around trying to evade the Lamia and Sylvia's angry spirit. She survives every new assault with not so much as a scratch on her body. When she projectile vomits blood over her boss the amount of blood that she loses seems far in excess of what the human body could possibly contain. These absurdities remind the audience of the fictional and postmodern world in which the events transpire.

According to the *Encyclopedia of Contemporary Literature* (Slethaug, 1993:604) parody is transgressive and is an attempt to subvert convention. Raimi including comedy in his horror films possibly suggests that, according to Raimi, the horror film genre had run its course as early as 1981 with the release of *Evil Dead*. After the brutality of seventies horror films like *The Exorcist*, *The Texas Chainsaw Massacre*, *Suspiria*, *The Hills have Eyes*, and *I Spit on Your Grave* the only thing for horror filmmakers to do was to make fun of the exaggerated violence. It could be for the sake of creating an original film that could not be compared to his forebears that Raimi decided to incorporate black humour into his horror films. In Bloomian terms, Raimi's humour-laced horror would be an example of *tessera*, due to the recognisable elements which are reframed.

If we consider Pinedo's theories regarding violence, even more can be said of Raimi's violence. Pinedo suggests that horror films collapse the boundaries between the familiar and unfamiliar and she posits that violence is inherent to the horror film genre. In other words, violence is a familiar and expected element found in horror films. By making the violence gross and laughable Raimi displaces the normal horror violence and removes it even further from reality. This is also not far removed from

the Baudrillard's statement that "[t]here is no longer a fiction that life can confront, even in order to surpass it; reality has passed over into the play of reality..." (Baudrillard, 2002:146). Raimi's displacement of normal horror film violence can be construed as a form of play, where the typical eighties horror film was fun, Raimi was also having fun with the genre in 2009.

Slethaug (1993:604) suggests that for parody to be recognisable, the reader/viewer must have an understanding of the context and the established conventions. Anyone who is familiar with the old Warner Bros. cartoon will instantly recognise the similarities between the violence in *Drag Me to Hell* and Wile E. Coyote. However, the violence we find in old Warner Bros. cartoons is not gory or horrifying which suggests that *Drag Me to Hell* does not just succeed in being a parody of the excessive violence of seventies and eighties horror films, but also a parody of the Warner Bros. cartoons from the forties and fifties.

By adding these comedic elements, Raimi thus blurs the boundaries between the adult-orientated horror film and the child-orientated horror film. Pinedo (1996:17) suggests that horror films break down moral clarities, which is not unlike what Raimi does with his inclusion of cartoon tropes. It should also be mentioned that by traversing the boundaries between these different genres the film cannot be categorised as elevated- or low art, which again links it with the postmodern. *Drag Me to Hell* can also be described as a simulacrum on the grounds of it parodying these different genres. As mentioned at the beginning of this chapter, a simulacrum is a copy of something that does not exist. The events and characters we find in horror films and cartoons do not exist, which in turn suggests that *Drag Me to Hell* is a parody of parody of something that does not exist.

Drag Me to Hell was well-received by critics and viewers alike and grossed over \$90 million on an estimated budget of \$30 million (IMDB, 2021f). It also won two Scream Awards in 2009 for Best Horror Movie and Best Scream-play (Spike, 2009a; Spike, 2009b). The film is also a noted favourite of Quentin Tarantino (Emerson, 2009).

In an interview with Mark Brown at the 2009 Cannes, Raimi made it clear what *Drag Me to Hell* is about:

"We just wanted to tell the story of a person who wants to be a good person but who makes a sinful choice out of greed, for their own benefit, and pays the price for it ... It's a simple morality tale about how greed leads to destruction. And even though the banking crisis had nothing to do with our writing it, I do think that ... our society is riddled with greed and selfishness."

In 2009 the world was still reeling from the effects of the 2008 global economic crisis (Lim & Mercurio, 2015:1). The crisis was brought on by individuals who speculated with the residential

market from 2006 which lead to inflated and unsustainable property values (Shiller, 2008:1). Individuals would take out loans at sub-prime rates and by 2008 were unable to sell the properties they had bought at inflated prices – some even putting up their own private homes as collateral to buy extra properties (Shiller, 2008:18). This had a domino effect worldwide as many banks on other continents were guilty of the same practices leading to a global devaluation of the financial markets (Shiller, 2008:1).

Like in *Drag Me to Hell*, banks had to change the way they lent money to clients in the years immediately following the recession (Dewatripont, Rochet & Tirole, 2010:30). Christine denies Sylvia an extension on her mortgage which in effect means that if Sylvia cannot pay her monthly mortgage, the bank will foreclose on her home leaving her destitute. Christine is at first empathetic to Sylvia's plight but a potential promotion negates her empathy. There is however more to consider regarding why Christine makes this choice. When Sylvia is introduced, her brown and long fingernails rap impatiently on Christine's desk and she is shown to be coughing and wheezing. Sylvia is a typical old crone and the director makes no attempt to portray her as anything else. She looks diseased, is blind in one eye, wears raggedy clothing, is hunched over, has ragged and dirty nails and chipped and stained dentures. She is also foreign and speaks with a pronounced Eastern European accent. While Christine is discussing Sylvia's case with her boss Sylvia is shown to remove her slimy dentures and placing them on Christine's desk. She also empties out the contents of Christine's candy bowl into her purse. Sylvia is not just physically made abject, but also made a foreigner and a thief.

According to Douglas Keesey (2017:77) *Drag Me to Hell* problematizes gerontophobia (fear of the elderly or growing old). Keesey (2017:77) argues that Sylvia might not in fact be a witch, but that Christine only perceives her as a witch. Throughout the film Christine does seem to have a preoccupation with elevating herself from where she originated from. An old photo taken at a farm fair she finds in a recipe book, reminds her that she was once a farm girl and an overweight child, or as the sign behind her in the photo states, a "Pork Queen". Through promotion and marriage Christine will become wealthy and her marriage to Clay would mean she will not be alone. Wealth would also mean being able to afford medical expenses should they arise. Illness, poverty, and loneliness are ostensibly the three greatest fears of growing old. Sylvia embodies these three fears from the instant she is introduced in the film.

This is further emphasised by the harvest cake that Christine bakes Clay's parents. When they visit his parents in their mansion, Sylvia's disembodied eye that appears in Christine's slice of cake reminds Christine of her own humble background (Keesey, 2017:78).

Throughout the film the viewer's attention is drawn to eating. Christine is shown throughout the film to struggle with hunger in the form of food, but also money and power. When she is first introduced in the film, we only see her mouth framed in the rear-view mirror of her vehicle. In the very next scene

after parking her vehicle she walks by a bakery and stares longingly at the assorted cakes and cupcakes displayed in the window. More of this hunger is reiterated when she displays the same longing while staring at the empty assistant manager's desk across from her. Sylvia, supernaturally embodied through the Lamia, plays on this theme of hunger throughout the film.

The same evening after Christine is cursed by Sylvia, she bakes a traditional harvest cake for her fiancé's family. It is here where the aforementioned photograph of her younger overweight self falls out of the recipe book. She is so disgusted by the photo that she destroys it. The Lamia attacks her right after she does this and then bashes against the pots and pans hanging above her kitchen counter. She is then violently beaten and thrown around the house, yet sustains only a single bruise on her lower lip, which she in turn nurses with a bag of frozen peas. The banging of pots and pans alerts Christine to the fact that she must eat. The bruised lip and the nursing thereof with a bag of frozen peas can be interpreted as the Lamia nearly succeeding in feeding Christine.

There are numerous other such instances which point toward this theme of eating. For instance, the next day when she meets Clay's parents for the first time everyone is very impressed with the delicious harvest cake Christine baked. Everyone enjoys it, except Christine who finds an eyeball looking back at her from within her slice of cake. An eyeball suggests the act of looking or seeing, but in a grossly overstated way. This might be Sylvia's way of telling Christine that she is being watched and that she should eat. She forces herself to eat the cake after which she starts hearing things and nearly chokes on a bite. The hallucinations that she experiences can also be construed as a metaphor for the mental anguish her eating disorder is inflicting upon her, which would explain why she is the only one who experiences the Lamia's torments.

Sylvia seems to have a specific role to play where Christine's disorder is concerned. There are four instances where Sylvia, albeit in ghostly and exaggerated form, attempts to 'feed' Christine. The first attempt is right after the first Lamia attack and the fly crawls into her mouth. Christine wakes up startled as the fly crawls down her throat. As she lies back again Sylvia is in the bed next to her who then proceeds to jump on top of her, bites at her, and then projectile vomits maggots and grubs all over her face and mouth. This is not unlike the way some animals and birds feed their young where the mother regurgitates partially digested insects into the young's mouths. One can interpret it as Sylvia trying to non-verbally communicate to Christine that she has to eat or even to prepare her for the food that will soon be coming out of her mouth.

The second time Sylvia attempts to feed Christine is where Christine goes to Sylvia's house to ask for her forgiveness and Sylvia's body rolls on top of Christine with green embalming fluid cascading out of her open mouth into Christine's.

The third attempt is the day after the incident at Clay's parent's house where Christine ransacks her own home for goods to sell for the séance. Sylvia rams her fist and arm down Christine's throat, but it is removed as the anvil falls down. Sylvia succeeds in feeding Christine as the force of the falling anvil sends her eyes flying out of their sockets with one going down Christine's throat. Having fed Christine, Sylvia disappears.

After this instance we find Christine for the first time eating with no attacks or hallucinations. She is seen eating a medium sized tub of *Turkey Hill Chocolate Marshmallow* ice-cream. The name of the ice-cream brand suggests that Christine has become more accepting of her appearance and hunger, but also of her farm girl origins. The Lamia/Sylvia does not attack Christine again and only appears later that evening when Clay and Christine are on their way home from the failed attempt to exorcise the Lamia. The attack could be argued is in reaction to Christine not having had dinner yet.

In this way the Lamia represents the struggle some, especially women, experience with eating disorders. According to the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders* (2013:345) bulimia nervosa is characterised by sufferers ingesting large amounts of food and then negating the perceived weight gain by self-induced vomiting, misuse of laxatives, fasting, excessive exercise, or the abuse of other medications. The disorder is often triggered by negative feelings regarding perceived exaggerated body shape and weight and/or personal stress (DSM-5, 2013:346-347). It is conceivable that Christine's hunger for promotion might emanate from her physical hunger and vice versa in an attempt to fill a void in her life. Christine controls her dietary habits through her reduced intake of food. The need to control her weight might also manifest in her need to control her career.

Another way to interpret Sylvia's force-feeding of Christine has to do with greed. Sylvia's curse evokes the idea of being careful what you wish for. Sylvia grants Christine her wish, but in exaggerated form leading to torture and death. In other words, Sylvia is the opposite of a fairy god mother, a witch.

There is however another witch in hiding in the film, namely Christine. The protagonist, Christine, seems to be unknowingly running a gauntlet throughout the narrative that involves acts associated with witchcraft. Christine is young, pretty, blonde, ambitious, and has an eating disorder. She is kind and soft-hearted, but tries to overcome this in order to climb in a male-dominated workplace. This one transgression of hers sends her on a downward spiral into witchcraft. Sylvia and Christine in this regard are similar to some of the witch stereotypes that have been discussed, namely the young beautiful witch and the old crone witch. These stereotypes are however used to different affect and lead to novel interpretations and meanings.

Sylvia's withered old body may represent the older pagan and traditional European society. She seems weak and frail, but is still very dangerous due to the power she wields. Sylvia does not personally

torture Christine or complicate her life, barring the first two encounters at the bank and parking lot and is shown to pass away soon after these encounters. The demonic entity, the Lamia, is what causes Christine so much distress, by representing Sylvia's vengeful wish from beyond the grave. Sylvia's hate and vengeance seems to originate more from feelings of shame than being denied a loan extension and she herself reiterates this several times.

The old crone's body in this film is like previously discussed representations of the old female body, an embodiment of the fear of death and old age. Sylvia's pronounced accent combined with her advanced age and appearance sets her apart from American society even further, especially when one considers it from a religious American conservative perspective (Keesey, 2017:77). North American society and culture, and their politics, are historically entrenched in Protestantism (Haselby, 2015:4). Sylvia's violent actions directed at a young, up-and-coming banker, or capitalist, are un-American, and this is exemplified and reinforced by making her grotesque. At the same time that she is made to look diseased and decrepit, she poses no physical threat to Christine, or the western capitalist for that matter. She is blind in one eye, meaning that she has no depth perception and cannot be a predator. When she physically attacks Sylvia in her vehicle, she attempts to bite her, but her false dentures had fallen out and she is consequently only able to gnaw on Christine's chin and slather her with mucous. She thus only succeeds to cause Christine some emotional distress.

One should consider that many American conservatives view any individual or idea that deviates from the white, capitalist American ideal as a threat, even when they are not a threat (McWhorter, 2009:3, 7, 12; Smith, 2009:62, 104). The threat is not physical, but a fear of difference and this fear, much like the audience feels when they see Christine's gummed, moist, and glistening chin, is linked to revulsion and the gross. Since Sylvia passes away within a day after this altercation, she becomes less of a physical threat, yet the threat of her ideology remains in the form of the Lamia that hounds Christine who is an avatar for the young capitalist.

Because ideology is mentioned alongside violence in the above paragraph it seems pertinent to also incorporate Žižek's theories. Žižek posits that violence is used as a tool to initiate and enable ideological change. This need for change originates from others who seek an authentic reality and who feel that they can only achieve their chosen utopia through violence. Christine, as mentioned, represents the white, Christian, American capitalist, while Sylvia represents the pagan European, and the *other*. Sylvia presses for ideological change through violence, but she is unable to overcome American capitalism.

This threat, however, does not seek to destroy the young capitalist, but wishes to turn her into one of its kind. The Lamia is a terrible and powerful entity, but for all its power and malevolence it takes its time and puts the intended victim through various physical trials for three days before dragging them

off to Hell. This begs the question why it takes its time and why it does not just take Christine to Hell immediately.

In many of the films discussed throughout this study the witch is frequently shown to hide in society. By doing this the witch can subvert from within while remaining undetected. According to Barry Keith Grant (2017:15) Christine is a typical young yuppie who works in the financial industry. If Christine could be turned into a witch, then the financial system of the west can be subverted.

Though Christine is represented in a typical protagonist role, there are events in the film which suggest that the Lamia's torments are driving her to become a witch. It can be argued that Sylvia noticed Christine's hunger for power and her struggle to achieve this in a male dominated American society. The conjuring of the Lamia has three goals in this regard, namely to give Christine what she craves by turning her into a witch, to teach her respect and humility towards elder witches like Sylvia, and to teach her self-love by rejecting sociocultural norms like social status and physical appearance.

As Christine thus learns to love herself and to let notions of her physical appearance slip away, she is transformed into a witch. At first she is a good witch who bakes harvest cakes to make her fiancé's parents accept her, much like a love potion would. The Celtic pagans baked harvest cakes or harvest breads for their Lughnasa festival which took place on the 1st of August (Weaver, 2012:53). The event celebrated the harvests and ripening of fruits and grains and had spiritual and magical value to the Celts as it assured them of healthy and bountiful future crops (Weaver, 2012:53, 54). The festival's name originated from Lugh, the Celtic god of the sun's light, who is often represented as a ram or wild boar in Celtic mythology (Weaver, 2012:54). Similar to Lugh is Dionysus who is also, as previously mentioned, a god of agriculture, suggesting an alignment between Christine and Dionysus. Christine presenting this cake to Clay's parents seems significant and might be construed as her not just seeking favour with the parents, but from an old pagan god as well.

There is also the question of how Christine is constantly thrown around and severely beaten, yet her body never sustains any physical damage. Sylvia shoves her fist and arm down Christine's throat and she again suffers no internal bleeding or any physical damage. Christine also ingests embalming fluid, but suffers no side effects. Embalming fluid is highly toxic as it is a mixture of formaldehyde and other chemicals (Elshaer & Mahmoud, 2016:337). These grizzly moments of pain and torture were undoubtedly produced for comedic effect and to give the audience a thrill, but there is another way of interpreting them. Christine being able to withstand such extreme acts of violence without sustaining physical harm is not just unlikely, but impossible, which suggests that she might be unknowingly imbued with supernatural power.

There is also the aforementioned cartoon tropes in *Drag Me to Hell* to consider. Wile E. Coyote never dies when he is shot, dropped from cliffs, or has an unfortunate accident with a dozen sticks of

dynamite. Christine resembles the immortality of cartoon characters like Wile E. Coyote, Daffy Duck, and Tom from *Tom & Jerry*. But there is more to consider regarding her invulnerability. Pinedo (1996:20) suggests that the horror antagonist rarely dies or his/her death is ambiguous, which she then associates with the postmodern due to the collapse of the boundaries between life and death. This suggests that Christine is aligned with the antagonistic, namely Sylvia and the Lamia. Furthermore, by being able to resurrect she is aligned with Dionysus who similarly embodies both life and death.

Other instances that suggest that Christine is becoming a witch is when she sacrifices her cat to rid herself of the Lamia. She takes part in pagan rituals like paying a fortune teller and having a séance, sacrificing a cat, unearthing and desecrating a corpse, and finally attempting to reverse the curse, by giving the curse back to Sylvia. The curse is never transferred, because she does not possess the mental characteristics or resolve needed to become a witch. In order to transfer the curse back to Sylvia she would need to gift the button that Sylvia used to curse her, back to Sylvia. She places it in a plain unmarked envelope and accidentally mixes the envelope up with another. As she exhumes Sylvia from the grave and shoves the envelope down the corpse's throat, she never realizes that she took the wrong envelope. The film ends with Clay and Sylvia going away to a cabin in the woods, which would have completed the cycle of becoming a witch, but because she failed, she is dragged to Hell moments before the train arrives.

Christine never becoming a witch suggests a sociocultural connection between the witch's body and western capitalist culture. Her ambition, bodyweight, and youthful and beautiful appearance make her an avatar for the modern American woman who gains autonomy in society through western societal structures within a twenty-first century context. Both her beauty and ambition are understood as acceptable means to gain power and agency within this society. However, by becoming a witch she transgresses these norms and her power comes from an external source which is deemed un-American. This power is so threatening that the only option is that Christine has to die in case she infiltrates and subverts a western institution like a bank or worse, spreads these ideas to others. She must thus either conform to western structures to derive power from them, or die.

A last aspect to consider regarding *Drag Me to Hell* is the cinematography. Unfortunately *Drag Me to Hell*, like many other horror films has not received much in lieu of critical or academic attention since its release. Raimi's *Evil Dead* films are mostly the focus of scholarly investigation. I suspect *Drag Me to Hell* has been largely ignored since it does not say anything more regarding film production than what Raimi was trying to achieve with *Evil Dead*. At a time when films were mostly using computer generated effects (CGI), Raimi still incorporated practical effects in *Drag Me to Hell*, along with puppetry, a departure from his work on the *Spider-man* trilogy (Universal, 2009). Practical effects are special effects that are created by hand, in other words, no computers are used to manipulate the

images. This does not mean the film is devoid of CGI effects, as Raimi has noted that they added hundreds of subtle CGI effects while post-editing the film (Blair, 2009).

From the official *Drag Me to Hell* website, archived on the Internet Archive's Way Back Machine (Universal, 2021), it is clear that the film is filled to the brim with the artificial, with the exception of the lighting. Peter Deming, the director of photography, was adamant that only natural lighting be used throughout the film and that the lighting should gradually become darker as Christine descends further into the supernatural world (Universal Pictures, 2009). Deming (Universal Pictures, 2009) also states that no corrective lighting was used anywhere in the film as he wanted the lighting to convey reality. The lighting preferences seem ambiguous as natural light used to create a desired effect still conveys the artificial. As I have taught film production for a few years I understand the difficulties associated with using natural light in this film, as scenes had to be carefully planned around available lighting. The use of lighting to indicate the supernatural is not as complex as it is in *Black Sunday*, or *Suspiria*, but it is still important to take note of as darkness is again associated with the witch and her power.

What I find especially interesting is the blurring that occurs between the type of special effects that Raimi used during the making of the film. As someone who adores the *Evil Dead* trilogy and has seen it countless of times, I am well aware of Raimi's cinematic techniques and style. In *Evil Dead II* there is an especially unnerving scene where a mounted deer trophy in the cabin comes alive and laughs maniacally at Ash, the protagonist. In *Evil Dead II* this was accomplished through a simple hand puppet as it was the only way to accomplish such an effect in 1987. In *Drag Me to Hell* we find a similar scene where a goat is possessed by the Lamia. Upon my initial viewing of the film I was unsure if the talking goat was rendered through CGI and made to look like a practical effects puppet to deliberately confuse the viewer, but the official website states that the goat was a puppet.

I experienced something similar to the above regarding Sylvia's floating handkerchief which appears twice in the film. In both instances I was convinced it was done through CGI, but according to the website wires and fishing poles were used to achieve the effect (Universal Pictures, 2009). When viewing the scenes in question the handkerchief has the same artificial sheen we find in older films from the late nineties and early 2000s where CGI was used. Similarly, the end where Christine is dragged off to Hell was mostly done through practical effects where she is lowered down a wide cylinder while sitting on a translucent plastic chair (Universal Pictures, 2009). The hands groping and dragging her down were also those of real people tightly packed in the cylinder below her while wearing green outfits that covered everything but their hands and forearms (Universal Pictures, 2009). I find this blurring of the real and CGI unnerving as it makes me question what I suspect to be artificial as opposed to real. CGI is used to resemble effects that seamlessly blend with reality in order to enhance the experience of the film, but reality is not supposed to resemble CGI which is what

occurs when viewing the examples mentioned above. Raimi's technique in these instances thus challenges cinematic norms related to production techniques, but is also a great example of Baudrillard's hyperreality where the boundaries between the real and artificial break down leading to the viewer (myself) experiencing anxiety.

My experience regarding the artificial should be noted as it is part of the New Historicist method. I experienced the abovementioned when the film came out in 2009 and with every subsequent viewing. This was also many years before I was aware of Baudrillard's existence and theories, which means I was not influenced in any way or form by his thinking. What is important however is that I experienced them which to an extent validates Baudrillard's theory regarding our experience of the simulacra, but also Shields and Žižek's theories regarding a yearning for the real.

Tropes and further allusions to Dionysus in *Drag Me to Hell*

As noted, Sylvia is not the only witch in the film. Christine's actions to rid herself of the curse suggest that she is also a witch. She sacrifices animals, digs up graves, communes with demonic entities, has supernatural abilities which makes her invulnerable, creates pagan concoctions like the harvest cake for consumption, and knows through intuition that she can pass the curse to the dead, implying knowledge of the forbidden. Raimi subverts by hiding Christine as a witch in the film, but also making the audience empathise with her. This unconventional swerve in the film combined with recognisable tropes associated with the cinematic witch, evokes Bloom's *clinamen* and *tesserae* simultaneously.

With regards to embodiment Sylvia is the typical old crone we find *Häxan*. Sylvia being specifically called a gypsy emphasises her association with the *other*. According to Pop-Curşeu (2014:23, 24, 34) the gypsy-witch is prevalent in numerous literary works and folklore and is associated with diabolical magic and the supernatural. The gypsy is a constant scapegoat in various parts of Europe (Pop-Curşeu, 2014:34). According to The Diversity Style Guide (2021), referring to someone as Gypsy is considered a racial slur to Roma people. The term is a negative stereotype that suggests that people of Roma descent are thieves and swindlers (Diversity Style Guide, 2021). Pop-Curşeu (2014: 34, 35) argues that the gypsy-witch embodies an exceptionally low-status individual as she is part of a minority group, but also a woman who practices magic to cause harm and who lives a nomadic or vagrant lifestyle. Gypsy women were also historically associated with witchcraft and the first witch to be hanged in France in 1499 was in fact a Gypsy woman (Pop-Curşeu, 2014:35). A fifteenth century

entry in the *Journal of a Bourgeois of Paris*⁴⁶ describes the Gypsy-witch as follows, as translated by Pop-Curşeu (2014:36):

The women were the ugliest and blackest you could see; they were all as ugly as the plague, with black hair and the tail like a horse's [...], in short, they were the most miserable creatures to have been seen in France since the beginning of time. And yet, despite their poverty, there were among them witches who looked at people's hands and told each of them what had happened and what would happen; and they sowed disorder in marriages, for they told the husband: "Your wife... your wife... your wife... is unfaithful to you", and to his wife: "Your husband... your husband has been... unfaithful to you.", but what is worse is that by speaking to people through magic, through the enemy from hell or through trickery, the foreign women emptied their bags and filled theirs instead.

The witch described above is similar to the cinematic witch established in *Häxan* and she resembles the typical pointy-hat and broom-flying witch we frequently find in cartoons and films. She has horrid features and is diseased like the green-skinned witch we find in the original *Wizard of Oz* film, and the old Warner Bros. and Hannah Barbera cartoons of the forties and fifties. Like the witches in *Häxan* she seeks to sow discord in families and in doing so challenges societal power structures.

From a New Historicist perspective it is especially interesting to take note of these comparisons between the appearance of the witch described in fifteenth century literature and the witches we find in twentieth and twenty-first century films. This constant appearance of the witch suggests how engrained she is in the minds and imaginations of the western population. This witch seems to embody everything western society fears, namely those with marked and different physical features, who are poor and have physical signs of illness. This person is also feminine and lives a nomadic lifestyle, or is unable to stay in one place for long.

Sylvia conforms to many of the tropes established thus far. She is an old and powerful witch who can wreak vengeance on others from beyond the grave, especially those aligned with Apollonian power. Christine is in the employ of a financial institution and mirrors the ruthless behaviour of her boss to climb the corporate ladder which explicitly links her to the Apollonian. She has knowledge of forbidden things like how to invoke the Lamia. Dead and dirty things are associated with Sylvia in different ways than what we usually find in relation to the cinematic witch. The dirty things associated with Sylvia are, for instance, her slimy, chipped, and stained dentures which the audience see removed twice at the beginning of the film. Her one eye is discoloured and possibly blind indicating illness or blindness. When she appears to Christine in a dream she vomits maggots all over Christine's

⁴⁶ Original scans of the French text by Alexandre Tuetey can be found at <https://gallica.bnf.fr/ark:/12148/bpt6k1029253>.

face. Flies herald Sylvia or the Lamia's appearance as a warning to Christine that her torments are yet to begin again. The flies signal to Christine and the viewer that Sylvia and the Lamia are about to intrude on Christine's plane of existence. According to Michael Ferber's dictionary of literary symbols the fly is generally associated with evil, death, disease, the Devil, and the unpleasant (Ferber, 2007:78). The fly emphasises Sylvia and the Lamia's link to death, disease, and the demonic.

The above are also all associated with Dionysus. Death and disease are all part and parcel of Dionysus. The housefly, though an avatar for death, disease, and the Devil is also an integral part of nature. As mentioned in the *Suspiria* section, maggots are one part of the fly's life-cycle. Maggots consume rotting flesh and function as cleaners in nature. When they metamorphose into flies they perpetuate this cycle, contributing to nature. Humanity's disgust at the fly and maggots is Apollonian and we attempt to control that which is uncontrollable. *Drag Me to Hell* is filled with stomach-churning scenes, like embalming fluid running out of Sylvia's dead mouth and into Christine's very living mouth. Raimi exploits Apollonian disgust to make the film memorable, but also to make the audience empathise with Christine, a woman who is becoming a witch.

Christine is young, blonde, and beautiful, but she is never sexualised in any way. We never see her in sexy lingerie nor does she dress provocatively. There is also a shower scene at the end of the film which is expertly edited over Christine emerging from Sylvia's grave in the rain. The shower scene is not sexualised for even an instant. This is interesting as the young and beautiful witch is at times sexualised for the viewer, like in *Häxan*, *Black Sunday*, and *Night of the Demons*. This change is another example of Bloom's *clinamen*, as an unexpected change is made related to the embodiment of the young witch.

Christine can also be associated with Dionysus through her potential fertility. Christine is engaged to Clay who suggests that they might have children at some point. There are also other instances where Christine can be associated with Dionysus. The harvest cake she bakes for Clay's family originate from pagan traditions related to nature and bountiful harvests. The violent acts she commits like the slaughter of a kitten or dropping an anvil on Sylvia's head also aligns her with Dionysus's turbulent and destructive nature. When she ingests embalming fluid, Sylvia's eye, or maggots she does not wretch from revulsion, but recovers immediately pointing to an ability to transgress the limits of the abject. There is also an instance of Bloom's *tessera* when one considers the brutal attacks that Christine constantly shrugs off in the film. The cinematic witch is very often linked to violence, especially to those who wronged her. When the cinematic witch uses her supernatural power, she causes grievous harm and death to those aligned with the Apollonian. Sylvia's violence directed to Christine causes minor abrasions, hair being torn out, and the ingestion of putrid things, but nothing causes her any real or lasting damage or discomfort. This suggests that she is aligned with violence as she actively absorbs it and comes to no harm. Death and rebirth are no different to Dionysus. Death

simply means that an organism returns to the primeval matrix and is reborn. It is similar to a person entering a building through a revolving door. The person remains the same with no lasting change to the body but moves from one space to another. The door also goes the other way and returns a person to the original space from where they entered. Christine as a witch responds to violence, which is the revolving door, in the same way. She might die for a split second but is immediately revived as death and rebirth are inseparable. The same instant healing occurs when she is wounded. Christine embodies the Chthonian matrix and because of this she cannot die.

There is still more to say regarding Sylvia and Christine's associations with the Chthonian and Dionysus. As mentioned, Sylvia's vengeance on Christine can be seen as a typical conflict between Dionysus and Apollo. Sylvia trying to kill Christine can also be argued as being an instance of a witch who tries to break up the potential heterosexual union between Clay and Christine. Clay coming from a wealthy family combined with Christine's ambitions would result in an even wealthier family with children raised with the same norms and values. Sylvia sending Christine to Hell challenges these notions regarding the western, or Apollonian, lifestyle as she breaks up the potential family. Having Clay witness Christine burned and dragged off to hell, instills fear in a western man as he realizes that Apollonian society is but a façade or one side of reality.

Another way to interpret Christine's death is that she was punished for not following through on becoming a witch. Going to the cabin in the woods with Clay, instead of on her own, signals to the viewer that she is submitting to a normative western lifestyle. If she went to the cabin on her own to live on the fringes of society and become a witch, she might not have been dragged off to hell. The coin and button might have been exchanged with one another through supernatural means to give the impression that the contract has been fulfilled.

Related to the supernatural is the witch's ability to possess others. The Lamia's appearance is never revealed to the viewer, but it does manifest by possessing three beings when Christine attempts the séance to rid her of the curse. The first to be possessed is San Dena who leads the séance, then the goat which would function as a mortal vessel for the Lamia so they could kill it, and then Milos, San Dena's assistant. In all three instances the Lamia was able to control and speak through them, suggesting that like Dionysus, the Lamia is gender fluid, but also able to manifest as an animal thus emphasising its connection with nature.

Unlike many of the films discussed, the supernatural is not bestowed on Sylvia or Christine by a demonic entity. This is suggestive of Bloom's *daemonization* as the writers and director ignore what came before which is to have a demonic or the Devil imbue the women with power. Sylvia does invoke the Lamia through a spell, but it is not revealed if payment or an exchange is required. Sylvia

did however die the same night she cursed Christine which might have been the payment exacted by the Lamia, but without evidence of this it is only conjecture.

In closing

The female gender is complicated and *othered* in *Drag Me to Hell* especially with regards to Sylvia who is made exceptionally abject through the exaggeration of ills associated with old age. Sylvia also destroys the potential nuclear family with the invocation of her curse. Patriarchal/Apollonian structures are threatened throughout the film not just through the conflict between Sylvia and Christine, but also the notion that Christine could become a witch and control a financial institution from within.

We again find many of *Häxan*'s tropes regarding the cinematic witch in *Drag Me to Hell*. They have however been altered to mirror the sociocultural context of the 2008 global financial crisis. The old crone witch is disposed of because she is unable to infiltrate sophisticated financial institutions. The new witch, embodied by Christine, is more closely related to the suburban witch discussed in earlier chapters. The suburban witch is however still dependent on her husband to secure her place in suburbia. Christine having infiltrated the bank and shown to be able to make brutal decisions does not require a man to infiltrate. Suburbia has been infiltrated, so it makes sense that the cinematic witch would set even higher goals.

The idea of Sylvia feeding Christine throughout the film via the Lamia suggests an older witch having maternal feelings for a younger witch. Sylvia returns to the Dionysian matrix so that Christine can take her place. Her rotting body manifesting in various instances throughout the film suggests an attempt to separate Christine from the last Apollonian vestiges holding her back, like being preoccupied by her body weight. Body weight is an Apollonian construct meant to limit and control the shape and appearance of the female body. The maggots and flies reassure Christine that nature is with her and on her side and that life and death are meaningless – hence why Christine cannot die.

ANTICHRIST (2009)

Lars von Trier, who both wrote and directed *Antichrist*, is a controversial filmmaker who tends to provoke audiences and critics alike (Elbeshlawy, 2016:135). According to Amy Simmons (2015:9) Von Trier's films "defy and disrupt what he regards as conformist norms of filmmaking in the most provocative way possible". I agree with this statement as I find many of Von Trier's films to blur the lines between horror, pornography, science fiction, psychological thriller, and art cinema genres, like in the case of *Antichrist*, *Melancholia* (2011), and *Nymphomaniac* (2013). Critics mostly group Von Trier's films under the art house genre where films are made according to a filmmaker's unique artistic style or cinematic vision. Von Trier's films seem to adhere to this principle, but I find that his work frequently relies on shock and revulsion more than artistic filmmaking techniques. David Lynch, for instance, is able to unsettle the viewer and challenge power structures and sociocultural norms without having to resort to shocking acts and imagery. As someone who enjoys horror and sci-fi and is not easily shocked, I find that Von Trier's work seems to use shock as a gimmick in the same way M. Night Shyamalan (*The Sixth Sense* (1999) & *Signs* (2002)) uses twist endings as a gimmick in his own films.

Some argue that Von Trier's films are misogynist (Bainbridge, 2007:11; Elbeshlawy, 2016:135). Others label him as a genius and influential filmmaker who is largely misunderstood by critics and viewers (Simmons, 2015:8). Simmons (2015:10) argues that Von Trier's films are about controlling and foolish men who cause women misery. It is also possible that Von Trier abuses his female actors as he is able to film authentic experiences of misery in his films (Bainbridge, 2007:12; Simmons, 2015:10).

The typical Von Trier film stereotypes men and women along specific lines. Men frequently represent control, reason, authority, and domination, while women are shown to represent sacrifice, suffering, and the endless battle with societal power structures (Simmons, 2015:10). We find these same character constructions in *Antichrist* which suggests that the film is subversive as I will argue in the course of this chapter.

Background

Antichrist is divided into six chapters and resembles a novel in cinematic form. The film has a simple plot in which an unnamed husband and wife, simply referred to as *He* and *She*⁴⁷ in the credits, retreat to their cabin in the woods after their child, Nic, falls to his death from their apartment window. *He*

⁴⁷ *He* and *She* will be in italics in the stead of names to avoid confusion.

(Willem Dafoe) (figure 41) is a psychotherapist who endeavours to help his wife (Charlotte Gainsbourg) (figure 42) through her grief while ignoring his own emotional distress. After He experiences some strange events, *She* tries to murder *He*, but is killed by *He* in self-defence.



Figure 41. *Antichrist*. 2009. Directed by Lars von Trier. [Film still from DVD] USA: Criterion Collection.

Prologue: This chapter is shot in black and white and in slow motion. *He* and *She* are shown to be having sex when their child, Nic, falls to his death through an open window.

Chapter one: Grief: This chapter is shot in colour and at a normal film speed. *She* collapses at Nic's funeral and is hospitalised for a month. *He*, her husband, convinces her to discharge herself as he does not believe that the medical treatment she is receiving is beneficial. She then asks him to trust others to be smarter than him and accept that he is not a doctor. At home *She* flushes her medication down the toilet. One night in bed *She* tells *He* that he has always been indifferent to her and their child. She reveals that she never completed her thesis to which he responds that it is unlike her to give up. Later that night she has a nightmare and has a panic attack and *He* helps her through the attack. He explains to her her feelings and anxiety, but she disagrees with his assessment. *He* is also shown to rebuke her sexual advances. He suggests exposure therapy to work through her grief which entails re-living her deepest fears. She then reveals to him that she associates Eden, their cabin, which is located in the woods with fear. They subsequently travel to the woods by train and hike through it to reach Eden. On the way to the cabin, while *She* is resting, *He* sees a deer giving birth to a stillborn foetus.



Figure 42. *Antichrist*. 2009. Directed by Lars von Trier. [Film still from DVD] USA: Criterion Collection.

Chapter 2: Pain (Chaos Reigns): They arrive at the cabin and an air of foreboding seems to welcome them. That first night the cabin's roof is pummelled by falling acorns. *He* awakes to find his hand dangling out the window covered in swollen ticks. The next morning *She* is put through therapeutic exercises to overcome her fears. While sitting outside they witness a bird hatchling falling from a tree onto the ground where it is ferociously attacked by ants. Within seconds an eagle swoops down and flies it up to a branch where it tears it to pieces and consumes it. This unsettles *She* even more. During a conversation about her fear related to Eden, *He* is shown to be dismissive of her experience and she attacks him physically and calls him arrogant. Later that night she explains to him that nature is brutal and Satan's church – he responds by calling her irrational. Then next day he finds Nic's autopsy report in his coat pocket which reveals abnormalities in Nic's feet – a look of distress clearly etched on *He*'s face. While walking through the forest *He* finds a fox in the process of disembowelling itself. It looks up at him and utters in a guttural voice: "Chaos reigns".

Chapter 3: Despair (Genocide): While in the attic *He* discovers that *She* had turned one of the walls into a macabre gallery of witches being tortured. He also finds her notebook and an astrological map on the floor. While paging through her notebook he finds her handwriting becoming more indecipherable with each turn of the page. It is revealed that she had embraced the idea of woman being inherently evil instead of being critical of it. Later when she tries to mount him again she begs him to strike her, but he rebukes both the act of violence as well as her sexual advances. *She* storms out of the cabin and furiously masturbates outside between the exposed roots of a tree. *He* joins her there and he slaps her twice across the face. They proceed to have sex. Dead and unmoving arms and hands appear from between the roots while they are in the throes of lovemaking. The next morning *He* confronts *She* regarding Nic's abnormal feet. He had found photos where Nic is clearly shown wearing his shoes on the wrong feet. *She* denies any wrongdoing. She attacks him soon after this revelation, believing that *He* is going to leave her. They have aggressive sex in the shed and she hits

his penis with a log. While he is passed out she grabs his penis and stimulates it ending with an orgasm of spurting blood. To make sure he cannot escape her she drills a hole through his calf and bolts an old and large stone lathe to his leg. When he wakes he crawls away to an empty hole in the woods, unable to remove the lathe from his leg. Inside the hole he finds a dead crow which spontaneously resurrects and alerts *She* as to his whereabouts.

Chapter four: The Three Beggars: While attempting to dig him out of the hole the chamber collapses and *He* is trapped. *She* digs him out and drags him back to the cabin. A flashback reveals that *She* had noticed Nic exiting his crib, his climb up the windowsill, and his eventual death while she was having sex with *He*. Inside the cabin *He* asks her if she wants to kill him. She responds that she is not going to kill him yet, as they need to wait for the Three Beggars (they are represented by a doe, a fox, and a raven). After removing her pants and finding a rusty old pair of scissors in a cupboard she cuts off her clitoris. This scene is interspaced with shots of Nic's death. *He* awakens and sees the Three Beggars constellation through the window. *She* falls asleep on the floor while a hail storm rages outside. The fox and doe are shown to have arrived in the cabin. *He* hears the raven under the floor boards and rips them out, discovering a wrench on the floor next to the raven. While trying to remove the lathe *She* stabs him in the back with the previously mentioned scissors. He knocks her away and is able to remove the lathe. Once freed, he grabs her by the neck and strangles her to death. As dawn breaks he puts her on a pyre and burns her remains.

Epilogue: Like the first scene this scene is also shot in black and white. *He* is shown to limp away from the cabin. Ghostly versions of the three beggars appear to him while he is sitting on the ground eating berries. As he turns around a large group of faceless women surround him and walk past.

Von Trier refuses to divulge the meaning of the film to others and also describes it as his best film (Elbeshlawy, 2016:135; Simmons, 2015:7). *Antichrist* was a moderate critical success even though some outraged critics called him insane and a misogynist after the film's opening at the Cannes Film Festival, while others like Roger Ebert compared his latest endeavour to those of Ingmar Bergman and Akira Kurosawa (Badley, 2011:142).

Over time *Antichrist* has become more known for its controversial themes regarding femininity and gender than its artistic production, and shares more with cinema's horror genre than the usual fare found at the Cannes Film Festival. As the section on the tropes found later in this chapter reveals, *Antichrist* is unmistakably a witch horror film. As evident from previous chapters, sex and nudity are frequently found in horror films. In *Antichrist* sex and horror are made explicit with nothing left to the viewer's imagination. Furthermore, sex is combined with violence and torture in some instances, further blurring the lines between the horror and pornographic genres. Pornography has historically

been linked to misogyny by scholars, but I am not convinced that the film is purely misogynist. As Lisa Downing (2004:279) states:

These art films are not porn. Nor are they even art films about porn. Rather, they are attempts to disrupt, fragment or destroy the naturalised relationship between the voyeur and the desired spectacle in cinema. These films offer a specifically cinematic intervention into wider, ongoing critical debates about sexuality and subjectivity in postmodern ethical indifference; to reflect on the myth repertoire of heteronormative culture; and to problematise, pluralise or undermine our habitual and lazy ways of looking at sex in a culture saturated with images of it.

I agree with Downing's assessment, even though I perceive Von Trier's overuse of shock as lazy. I also find her statement aligned with Foucault regarding the way narratives about sex are controlled by conservative power structures. Furthermore, the sex scenes in *Antichrist* blur the lines between hard- and softcore pornography, horror, and the melodrama, thus disrupting the traditional categories of not just horror films, but also of pornography and the melodrama. The pornographic elements in *Antichrist* are graphic and leave nothing to the imagination, but the scenes are shot in such a way that they are easily differentiated from pornographic film productions of the past and present. According to the online Merriam-Webster (2021) dictionary, the term pornography is defined as "the depiction of erotic behavior (as in pictures or writing) intended to cause sexual excitement". When viewing *Antichrist* it is obvious that these scenes were not meant to sexually excite. The sex scenes all play an integral part to the narrative and are intended to shock and not to excite. Furthermore, combining sex and violence is transgressive as it is a threat to the moral fabric of society as it defies the sexual-normative expectations of sex and violence (Simmons, 2015:78).

Literature review

In this section I discuss the scholarly interactions pertaining to Von Trier's *Antichrist*. Due to the film's controversial themes and the divisions it creates between critics, *Antichrist* has been the focus of numerous studies since 2009. It would be an impossible task to list and describe them all in this literature review, so I made an effort to seek out papers and book chapters that relate to the themes of my own study.

The first aspect to consider is the cinematic style Von Trier uses to produce his films. Von Trier has no specific filmic style, but based on his encyclopaedic knowledge of other great filmmakers like Andrei Tarkovsky and Orson Welles, he borrows extensively from their work (Bainbridge, 2007:ix, 1). Caroline Bainbridge (2007:1) describes his style as eclectic and intertextual because of his

extensive references to other films. Other influences are the plays of August Strindberg, the poems of Bertolt Brecht, the music of Richard Wagner, the paintings of Edvard Munch, and the writings of philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche (Bainbridge, 2007:3-5, 12).

Lars von Trier was co-founder of the Dogme 95 film movement which asked of participating filmmakers to adhere to a strict set of rules (Bainbridge, 2007:16-17). According to Bainbridge (2007:17) the Dogme 95 filmmakers were mostly concerned with technology, artistic filmmaking, and the democratisation of filmmaking while denying the commercialisation of cinema. They feared digital cameras and proposed that all films only be shot on 35mm film (Bainbridge, 2007:84). Other rules set out by Dogme 95 include that all shooting must be done on location and that the camera must be a hand-held device (Jovanovic, 2017:172). Props may not be brought in and sound may not be added through post-editing (Jovanovic, 2017:172). Also, films may only be shot in colour and special lighting is forbidden (Jovanovic, 2017:172). Lastly, films may not contain superficial action, like murders, which relates to another imposed rule, namely that genre films are not allowed (Jovanovic, 2017:172).

Over time Von Trier has diminished his associations with Dogme 95 and their techniques and grew less interested in technical achievements or stylistic displays, opting for, as Bainbridge (2007:21) describes it, “a commitment to innovate, stimulate, and reinvigorate”. In other words, Von Trier is more interested in creating works of art that will result in novel filmmaking practices, that will stimulate not just himself, but inspire others to also become filmmakers. *Antichrist* conforms to some of Dogme 95 doctrines but ignores the rules in other instances. Large portions of *Antichrist* was, for example, filmed with smaller handheld digital cameras, much like those used in the making of *The Blair Witch Project* (Gross, 2009:38). The fox’s dialogue could not be recorded actually coming from the fox’s mouth and was added in post-production of the film. The fox was also digitally altered to match the movements of its mouth to the dialogue (Power & White, 2010). In addition the fox being able to speak is example of Baudrillard’s hyperreal, but in this instance the artificial speaks the truth about reality, namely that chaos reigns. Not only does chaos reign in the relationship between *He* and *She*, but it also reigns in nature, and the world of the viewer.

The above paints Von Trier as a subversive filmmaker as not only does he denounce Hollywood filmmaking conventions, but also the attempts of others who wish to control the production of more artistic filmic endeavours. Below I outline Von Trier’s subversions from the perspective of other scholars.

Due to the dream-like sequences and the themes related to sex the most obvious angle of study for many scholars would be psychoanalysis. I found numerous studies about *Antichrist* to be from a psychoanalytical perspective. The first and most prominent of these is Amy Simmons’ analysis in

book form simply titled *Antichrist* (2015) – another book in the aforementioned *Devil's Advocates* series.

According to Simmons (2015:19) *Antichrist* is about misinterpretation enabled by self-deception and miscommunication. *He*, for instance, convinces himself that he understands his wife's grief and can treat her. *She*, on the other hand, believes she is evil because she is a woman. *He* also does not listen to *She* and explains her feelings and the origins of her feelings to her even though she understands her own emotions and attempts to explain it to him. Throughout the film, sight, the most reliable of senses, is rendered unreliable making the viewer sceptical of not just what *He* sees, but also that which Von Trier presents to the viewer (Simmons, 2015:23). Does *He* really see the self-disembowelling talking fox or is it a manifestation of his own grief? Are the unmoving hands between the roots of the tree where *He* and *She* are rutting real or do they simply symbolise something that Von Trier expects the viewer to interpret? These are just some of the questions the viewer asks themselves while viewing the film. The answers to these questions are also open to the interpretation of the viewer.

I found the following observation by Simmons (2015:20) especially interesting due to it intersecting with the New Historicist method:

Often resisting any firm sense of space or time, shots from the 'present tense' of a scene are interspersed with subjective flashbacks to things we have seen and to things we have not. Hence, by repeating its own imagery, *Antichrist* suggests that seeing something first-hand is not given primacy over other kinds of knowledge, and that both characters have shared similar experiences and interpreted them in very different ways. Furthermore, the fracturing of time and space that makes up the structure of the film, further reflects the chaos of a splintered consciousness where memory is flawed, broken and indecipherable. Consequently, there is an unresolved tension in the film, between the difficulty of retrieving the past, the conflicting accounts surrounding the child's death, and a sense that a true version of events has been obscured.

The film's plot and structure mimics the New Historicist method where no text is given priority over another. Also, the experiences of the same events differ from one person to the next. An accurate and completely truthful picture of the past cannot be construed from anecdotal evidence as those relating past events are flawed and influenced by their own biases, nor is the self static and unchanging. Similar to this notion is the fact that *Antichrist* has no static interpretation and is open to a myriad of interpretations from different sociocultural positions (Simmons, 2015:20).

Simmons (2015:21) goes further and posits that *Antichrist* reframes the fairy tale for adult audiences by including sex, violence, and the supernatural, something that was part of the original fairy tales before they were censored and reinterpreted for younger audiences.

As mentioned earlier in this chapter, Von Trier frequently uses stereotypical models of gender in his films. This is especially noticeable in *Antichrist*. Simmons (2015:9, 49) defines the male figure, *He*, as a typical rational and controlling individual. He denies his own pain and grief after losing his son and becomes clinically detached from his wife, viewing her as just another patient for him to cure (Simmons, 2015:49). Even though *He* is shown to be cold and rational, he is an untrustworthy character and the viewer is not sure whether to trust what *He* sees (Simmons, 2015:54). For instance, Simmons (2015:55-56) associates the Three Beggars, the doe (grief), the fox (pain), and the raven (despair) with the symbolic return of *He*'s repressed emotions regarding Nic's demise.

Simmons's (2015:9, 40) associates *She* with rage, sacrifice, suffering, narcissism, ambivalent maternity, and an embodied threat to societal power structures. As a mother *She* blurs the lines between caring for her child and caring only about herself. She made no attempt to save Nic as he climbed up the window, yet grieves profusely for the loss of her child. In this way she transgresses the boundaries of not just motherhood, but also as a woman with sexual needs.

The camera also privileges *She*'s perspective throughout the film, enabling the viewer to vicariously feel what she feels (Simmons, 2015:25). This is not the only way Von Trier is able to elicit a visceral response from the viewer. *Antichrist* contains many long takes which creates the illusion of the passing of real-time (Simmons, 2015:24). The camera thus mimics the passing of time in the way the viewer is accustomed to. Another way that Von Trier immerses the viewer into the narrative is by including numerous shots focussing on tactile surfaces (Simmons, 2015:24, 27). I found that these shots create a haptic visuality which anchors the viewer and keeps them from not going astray in the emotional wilderness of the film.

In the main literature review of this thesis I explain the theories of Linda Williams regarding horror, pornography, and melodramas. Williams (1991:5, 9) associates genre to bodily fluids and argues that blood represents horror, ejaculation represents pornography, and tears represent melodrama. Simmons (2015:25) argues that *She* unites Williams' notions perfectly within one female body. I agree with Simmons as *She* cries constantly when she tries to mount *He*. She also causes him to ejaculate blood – a bizarre reframing of Williams' theory where pleasure and pain are combined within the body of a man, but extracted by a woman. When *She* cuts off her clitoris, we find blood and tears, but also that a biological part of her associated with pleasure is permanently removed.

Related to the above are Williams' theories regarding the suffering of the female object. She suggests that horror, melodramas, and pornography represent the excessive emotional states of the female protagonists and that these states, when observed, fills the viewer with pleasure. In *Antichrist* we find these excessive emotional states all manifesting simultaneously, but instead of a pleasurable experience, the viewer's experience is mostly negative.

Bodily fluids are closely associated with Paglia's Chthonian female, or Dionysus, where fluids combine into the amniotic miasma from which all life originates and returns to upon death. These fluids are beyond definition and cannot be controlled by Apollonian power structures. As mentioned, Apollo represents man's inherent obsession to control that which it cannot understand. The emotional female cannot be controlled by defining her as hysterical, so man seeks to control the female body, a source of ecstasy and bodily pleasure. *Antichrist* has numerous instances that confirm this theory. According to Simmons (2015:77) *He* is constantly shown to physically wrestle with *She* in an effort to control her body. He takes away her medication, clasps his hand over her mouth when she hyperventilates, holds her down when she has wild and flaying spasms, and controls her sexual desires by refusing her advances (Simmons 2015:77). I concur, especially as it might suggest one way in which terror is mirrored in the film, namely that women constantly have to battle for control of their own bodies within society.

Simmons makes interesting arguments relating to three other sociocultural fears that are mirrored in *Antichrist*. Von Trier shot the landscape of the woodlands in such a way that the setting becomes, as Simmons (2015:35) describes it, "unsettling, claustrophobic, and mythic environment". *She* similarly describes the woodlands as Satan's church. The woodlands are a harsh and unforgiving environment where the two characters are removed not just from their comfortable urban or suburban lifestyles, but also removed from sociocultural norms and laws (Simmons, 2015:35). And if woman is inherently evil and the woods are her place of power, then man can be killed there without repercussion.

Related to the above is the way in which *Antichrist* peels away the veneer of western society (Simmons, 2015:27). I agree with this statement as I found that the film paints a bleak picture of society where humanity devolves into a shrieking pack of rapists and murderers in the absence of laws, social norms, or power structures. Like the hidden witch who hides in suburban neighbourhoods to infiltrate and dismantle from within, so is the fragility of society mirrored in *Antichrist* where husbands and wives can destroy each other and their children.

The other argument that Simmons (2015:23) makes is that the editing, sound effects, and general ambience of the film leaves the viewer in a terrified and paranoid state. Simmons (2015:23) maintains that the terror and paranoia flit in and out from the fringes of the film making it difficult to discern where these feelings originate from (Simmons, 2015:23). I can attest to these feelings while viewing

the film. I believe that this terror is similar to the one the viewer experiences with *The Blair Witch Project* – that invisible terror that knows no bounds and not just mirrors sociocultural fears, but the darker sides of ourselves which we hide away from ourselves.

In the chapter on *The Blair Witch Project* I discuss the Lovecraftian unnameable threat that is linked to man's fear of the wet and dark sexual orifices of a woman and the hidden dangers they represent. In *Antichrist* the dread and paranoia manifests not through an antagonist, but something hidden in the cinematic technicalities of the film. *Antichrist* is similar to Lovecraft's Cthulhu Mythos in other ways as well. One of the themes frequently found in Lovecraft's Cthulhu Mythos has to do with forbidden knowledge (Burleson, 2015:156). Take for instance the *Necronomicon* – a fictional grimoire created by Lovecraft which surfaces in some of his novellas. The book is described to contain knowledge of the Old Ones, ancient and immensely powerful cosmic entities that have existed since time immemorial. The book also contains knowledge on how to summon these cosmic horrors. In *Antichrist*, *She* possesses forbidden knowledge about the Three Beggars who also seem to be cosmic entities due to their association with a star constellation that appears on the night she dies.

Ahmed Elbeshlawy's 2016 book, *Woman in Lars von Trier's Cinema: 1996-2014*, is another psychoanalytical analysis of the women found in eight of Lars von Trier's films, but from a Lacanian perspective. Elbeshlawy (2016:26) states that *She* is possibly the only woman in the history of cinema to embody Lacan's ~~Woman~~ (an example of Heidegger's *sous rature* which simply suggests that the term is not suitable for the concept it represents) or what he refers to as 'the woman that does not exist'. This ~~Woman~~ is someone who cannot be made a symbol of anything in any way or form, yet she still threatens symbolic order by not existing (Elbeshlawy, 2016:26). Lacan's theory regarding to the woman who does not exist, is in other words outside of the male/female binary and the politics associated with it. A man cannot talk about or claim to understand woman because she is the epitome of the *other* which a man cannot comprehend due to his own position in society as a man with a phallus (Lacan, 1999:7). In other words, the definition of a woman comes from her position in relation to a man as a being without a penis (Lacan, 1999:7). A woman is not a man without a penis, but something else which man tries to control by defining her as woman, suggesting another manifestation of the Apollonian/Dionysian dichotomy.

According to Elbeshlawy (2016:148) *She* is the enemy of culture and religion, but also a woman who understands that her physical body is but a social construct from which there is no escape and thus evolves into a woman who cannot be explained or talked about by others. More to the point, she does not believe in love and she places her own physical pleasure above the life of her child. She is simultaneously responsible for the death of her child and grieves for said child for weeks on end. She also removes her clitoris and attempts to sacrifice her husband for no apparent reason. She removes herself from the role of wife, mother, virgin, and sexual object which are all the roles created by man

to define a woman. She cannot be defined anymore and when she cannot be defined along these lines, she dies and her body is burnt to ash by a man who could not understand her, nor was he willing to understand her.

It is ironic that *Antichrist* is frequently analysed from a psychoanalytical perspective as Von Trier openly mocks psychoanalysis in the film through *He* (Badley, 2011:144). Though I am not a proponent for the psychoanalytical method, Elbeshhlawy's statements do mirror my own notions regarding *She*. I base my notions however on the similarities between *She* and the Dionysian where *She* embodies the ritual madness, the ecstasy, the violence and mutilation, and the undefinable and uncontrollable. She cannot be defined as a mother, wife, virgin, or whore, because she is them all and also not in the same instance. She is the primordial albumen from which life originates and returns to at the end of a lifecycle – in other words, she is the beckoning death that man desperately tries to avoid, the embodiment of death he wishes he could burn at the stake.

Another scholar of note is Linda Badley who wrote two studies on *Antichrist* which resonate with my own approach to the study of the witch. The first of these is her book *Contemporary Film Directors: Lars von Trier* which was published in 2011. Badley (2011:140, 149, 150) suggests that *Antichrist* can be likened to a theatre of cruelty where man, woman, and family are destroyed for the benefit of the audience. The audience is expected to interpret these cruelties to validate the film (Badley, 2011:150-151). I find this destruction of the nuclear family subversive, due to the interpretation being left in the hands of others, like the directors left the control of *The Blair Witch Project*'s filming in the hands of the actors. Control is democratised thus negating power structures.

Rosalind Galt (2016:71) also studies the link between the viewer and the on-screen suffering. Galt (2016:71-72), however, focuses on the suffering spectator who is made complicit to Von Trier's cruelties. According to Galt (2016:76) the viewer vicariously experiences the aberrant or non-normative acts which lead to destabilisation of western society and dominant power structures. Scenes like the one where *She* masturbates *He*, are reminiscent of the so-called 'money shot' found in pornography where the male ejaculates and the scene or film ends (Galt, 2016:84). I found that the scene in *Antichrist* is shot in such a way that it resembles *He*'s point of view from where he is laying on the ground. The viewer thus experiences the torture and pain accompanied with a bloody orgasm from *He*'s point of view. When *She* cuts off her clitoris the same type of medium shot is used, but not from her point of view, but from the point of view of someone sitting on the floor with her. By using these types of shots the viewer experiences abnormal events that they would most likely never encounter in real life. Due to the prevalence of these types of point of view shots the audience becomes a willing participant in a genocidal text (Galt, 2016:91).

Badley's next study also considers the audience, but in this instance she makes connections between the film and Nordic cultural contexts. In her article, *Antichrist, Misogyny and Witch Burning: The Nordic Cultural Contexts* (2013), she argues that the film:

... challenges audiences with an issue that Judeo Christian and contemporary post-feminist culture alike disavow: fear of the chthonic feminine. ...specifically explore(s) a residual tension between modern Christian/secular and pagan beliefs and a commingled fear of and desire for the return of the repressed pagan code while often empathizing with the (female) witch's point of view. Both echoing and upending this cinematic tradition, *Antichrist* is an open acknowledgement of Trier's Scandinavian roots. (Badley, 2013:15)

The film mirrors Nordic roots where the populace began as a decidedly pagan society which over time reverted to Christianity. This change creates societal tensions in the Nordic countries to this day. The aforementioned Simmons (2015:58) gets to the gist of Badley's theory by stating that *Antichrist* is "a metaphor for the fragile modern Europe afloat on a swamp of mythology, savagery, and superstition".

Badley (2013:18-19) specifically draws comparisons between *Häxan* and *Antichrist*, emphasising that both films rely heavily on the stereotypical witch described in the *Malleus Maleficarum*. Both films relish in the torture and mutilation of women, but also the exploitation of the female body (Badley, 2013:19). Badley (2013:19) argues that because the Nordic regions only converted to Christianity in the late medieval period, residual tension between pagan revenge and Christian forgiveness still occur in these regions. Related to this is that witchcraft was historically in these regions associated with the effeminate (Badley, 2013:19). Themes of Nordic women performing witchcraft, who are sexual deviants and heretics, and who are burned at the stake, frequently appear in Nordic cinema (Badley, 2013:18-19). Some examples are Carl Theodore Dryer's *Day of Wrath* (1943) and Ingmar Bergman's *Seventh Seal* (1957). Badley (2013:19) states that the burning of the witch is a manifestation of the pagan belief in revenge reframed to resemble Christ's crucifixion where death implies forgiveness.

The plot of *Antichrist* has the same structure of the fifteenth and sixteenth century witch trials (Badley, 2013:27). *He* controls his wife and forces her to confess her fears. *She* is sexually amoral, controlled by nature/Satan, and intellectually inferior to *He*. Because she is held responsible for the death of a child, she is sacrificed on a pyre and made scapegoat for all the guilt and anguish she caused (Badley, 2015:21). The burning of the witch does not adhere to the Christian doctrine of forgiveness, but it does conform to pagan ritual sacrifice where balance can only be restored through a blood offering (Badley, 2013:20, 23). Badley (2013:28) also argues that *Antichrist* challenges rational and contemporary religious thought by invoking tensions between Christianity's Eden, and the raw brutality of nature.

Christianity and nature are not unlike the Apollonian/Dionysian binary. Christianity requires relatively strict adherence to religious doctrine depending on the type of church members belong to. There are also some who have used verses in the *Bible* to control women and place them in a subservient position to men, especially through the use of verses from the *Old Testament* (Buch-Hansen, 2011:122; Curley & Paterson, 2016:158). Nature, on the other hand, is unruly, chaotic, brutal, and despite mankind's interference, uncontrollable. In the next paragraphs I discuss scholarly contemplations regarding religion and nature's manifestations in *Antichrist*.

Gitte Buch-Hansen's article *Lars von Trier's Antichrist, the Bible, and Docetic Masculinity* (2011) draws from Christianity and the masculinities implied in the *Bible*. He posits that Von Trier attempts through *Antichrist* to produce a savage critique of the male dominant figure frequently found in the *Bible* (Buch-Hansen, 2011:115). Buch-Hansen (2011:115) says that "Antichrist is not a film about the dangerous female psyche, but about a masculinity that has gone astray – or, to borrow a term from theological discourse, become 'Docetic'".

Docetism is defined as the belief that Christ was not human and that he only appeared human, but was actually a phantom or illusionary being (Mueller, 2012:703). This suggests that Christ did not suffer, die, and resurrect, making his sacrifice invalid (Mueller, 2012:703). Christ is believed to be the epitome of manhood or what man should strive to be, but if he was never a man, then man can never become like him (Mueller, 2012:703). It is due to the above that Docetism is a form of heresy (Mueller, 2012:703).

Buch-Hansen (2011:122) devised a three-step methodology to find evidence of biblical masculinities and how this manifest in *Antichrist*. He starts by examining the film's aesthetics, genre, and haptic and optic imagery (2011:122). This is then followed by an examination of biblical concepts pertaining to the Antichrist and the concept of Docetism (Buch-Hansen, 2011:122). And then, finally, he draws comparisons between Nietzsche's *The Anti-Christ* (1895) which Von Trier says influenced the film (Buch-Hansen, 2011:121, 122). I should mention that Willem Dafoe being cast as *He* could potentially be attributed to Dafoe playing the role of Christ in Scorsese's *The Last Temptation of Christ* (1988), further complicating the film's Docetic theme.

Like Galt, Buch-Hansen (2011:124) emphasises the gaze's importance and the so-called real-time viewer, a gaze closely associated with horror and pornography. He bases this on Slavoj Žižek's theory regarding the collapse of gendered gazes in horror and pornography (Buch-Hansen, 2011:125).

In *Looking Awry* (1989:35-37), Slavoj Žižek suggests that the camera becomes objective when shooting horror or pornography as the idea is to show the viewer everything to facilitate perverse pleasure. I find this idea intriguing especially when combined with Williams' theories regarding the

viewer's vicarious experience which leads to empathy. I believe that in *Antichrist* the gaze is rendered genderless, but can simultaneously be gendered depending on the viewer. This then lends credence to Galt's statements regarding the viewer's experience where aberrant acts can be experienced by both male and female viewers in horror films as it is easier for a person to access a neutral gaze than a gendered one. In addition, Žižek's theories compliment Williams' ideas regarding shared empathy through the camera lens.

When we consider the bloody masturbation scene in *Antichrist*, for instance, most men and women cannot know exactly what this painful experience is like. The scene enables both men and women to catch a glimpse of this experience through the camera's lens. The same with the scene where *She* cuts off her clitoris. The majority of men and women cannot claim to know what that would feel like, but the perspective used in the scene personalises the experience for both – hence why I still flinch whenever I view it. The scene fills me with something that I can only describe as a phantom pain, but I cannot unequivocally state that all viewers would have a similar experience. We can however, link these observations to Žižek's theories regarding virtual reality. When a camera is positioned in such a way to give the viewer a first person perspective of an event it is not unlike virtual reality. As discussed earlier in this chapter, Žižek suggests that virtual reality allows the viewer to experience pain without the physical sensation of pain. Something similar happens in *The Blair Witch Project* where Heather films herself. She is in control of the camera implying that it is a recording of her reflection, in other words, female. A man or a woman, however, can experience her fear and anxiety through the camera with the viewer both becoming Heather (female) while simultaneously experiencing her from a male, female, or even a non-binary perspective.

Buch-Hansen (2011:125) suggests that Von Trier forces the viewer to experience the film subjectively from *He*'s point of view. He compares the sex scene in the beginning of the film to the infamous shower-murder scene in Hitchcock's *Psycho*. In *Psycho* the viewer witnesses the murder from the perspective of a fly on the wall, in other words, a neutral point of view (Buch-Hansen, 2011:125). In *Antichrist*, however, the camera dwells on *He*, forcing the viewer to abandon a neutral perspective and relating more to *He* (Buch-Hansen, 2011:125-126). I find this a convincing reading as throughout the film the camera mostly follows *He* and his experiences.

With regards to the haptic visuals in *Antichrist*, Buch-Hansen draws from Laura Marks' *Touch: Sensuous Theory and Multisensory Media* (2002). Simply put, Marks (2002:ix, xii-xiii) suggests that the sense of touch, or the haptic sense, can be accessed through close-up shots of objects where the textures can be 'felt' or experienced by just bringing the camera close to the object. In other words, the eyes can function as organs of touch. Because the viewer has had experience touching various surfaces in their lifetime and has memory of what these surfaces looked like, the viewer can ascertain

from simply viewing a textured surface what that surface would most likely feel like (Marks, 2002:11-12).

Buch-Hansen (2011:130) states that trauma is frequently treated by making the patient aware of the physical body. In *Antichrist*, Von Trier makes the viewer aware that *She* desires physical touch to work through her trauma, which *He* denies her (Buch-Hansen, 2011:130-131). Similarly, *He* becomes more aware of his physical vulnerability as the film progresses as does the viewer (Buch-Hansen, 2011:131). By incorporating numerous haptic visuals, the viewer's body is transported to Eden (Buch-Hansen, 2011:131). These haptic experiences are however mostly associated with *He*, which makes the audience identify more with *He*'s physical experience of Eden and the surrounding woodlands (Buch-Hansen, 2011:131).

If we consider the above it becomes clear that *Antichrist* enables a first-hand experience of genocide through the *He*'s visual and haptic senses. This links to Galt's suggestion that the viewer experiences genocide, through the film.

The second to last step in Buch-Hansen's method considers the biblical connotations with *Antichrist* and the extent to which these connotations can be applied to *He*. Buch-Hansen (2011:136-137) argues that the *Bible* aligns women with the Satanic and men with the divine. He also suggests that, like anyone who has viewed the film would also observe, Eden, the name of the cabin, is a reference to the biblical garden where Adam and Eve dwelled. It is here from where Adam and Eve were expelled after the serpent tricked Eve which led to mankind being expelled from the Garden of Eden. According to Buch-Hansen (2011:137-138) the Garden of Eden is the place where gender was created in the first place due to the curses God meted out on Adam and Eve. Eve was cursed with bearing children in pain, desiring her husband and having him rule over her, while Adam was cursed with hard work to feed himself and his dependents. *He* and *She* returning to Eden reopen this negotiation of the genders (Buch-Hansen, 2011:137-138).

I note that when *He* tells *She* to stop taking her medication and to face her fears, she obeys. She also yearns for her husband, but he frequently rejects her. She is in other words renegotiating the gender roles as set out in the *Bible* and accepts her guilt for the sins she has committed (Buch-Hansen, 2011:138). *He* refuses her, refuses to renegotiate his gender, and his own complicity in their sins, forcing *She* to mutilate both of their genitals making them equal (Buch-Hansen, 2011:138). He and *She* thus become an inversion of Adam and Eve where their version of Eden is a house and not a garden and instead of becoming man and woman, they become sexless and the same.

After burning his wife, *He* leaves Eden and where once was colour, the woods become black and white as if the death of *She* calmed nature (Buch-Hansen, 2011:140). The last part of Buch-Hansen's

study builds on Nietzsche's connection between nature, the Antichrist, and Dionysus where they are all the same (Buch-Hansen, 2011:142). The Apollonian and Dionysian are interdependent and cannot exist in isolation (Buch-Hansen, 2011:142). The Apollonian, for instance, would have no function if it could not control chaos and desire that is Dionysian, nor could the Dionysian rage against control if control does not exist (Buch-Hansen, 2011:142). In other words, if *She* is aligned with Dionysus, and *He* is aligned with Apollo and he kills her in a space where gender is renegotiated and loses his masculinity (symbolised through his penis), *He* becomes meaningless and without function – or Docetic.

The woods or nature seem to be the third character in *Antichrist*. It is associated with *She*'s fear and anxiety, but also with *She* herself, chaos, women, witches, Dionysus and Satan. As discussed in the section on *The Blair Witch Project*, the fear of the woods or forest is old and can be traced back to colonists and to our ancient ancestors who found themselves in harsh environments where they would frequently get hurt, succumb to disease, or die. Similarly the cabin in the woods frequently appears in horror films and has become associated with fear and horror. In *The Forest and the EcoGothic: The Deep Dark Woods in the Popular Imagination* (2020) Elizabeth Parker contemplates these fears. According to Parker (2020:69) landscapes are not strictly devoid of agency. The more man attempts to control and extract itself from nature, the more we realise that we cannot survive without it, which causes us anxiety (Parker, 2020:69). The trees and other plants in the forest are alive, suggesting movement and sentience and potential danger, but trees coming alive and harming people in stories are very rare (Parker, 2020:71). Parker (2020:71) argues that in most cases the inanimate and non-threatening woods are animated and motivated by external forces which make the woods appear monstrous.

One of the central notions regarding fear of the woods or forest has to do with the way human beings rely on binaries to create meaning (Parker, 2020:71). Parker (2020:71-72) argues that because trees are 'less alive' than humans, we group them with nonhuman or non-living objects, even though plants are obviously alive. Subconsciously, however, we are aware that the plants are both dead and alive which causes a type of contradictory awareness that makes the plants uncanny (Parker, 2020:72).

Nature similarly fills the viewer with terror in many ways. Nature, for instance, exists independently from society (Parker, 2020:74). In other words, unlike the pets in our homes and the plants in our gardens that require intervention from us to sustain them, nature does not need us. This suggests that the hierarchal position society attributes to nature – being lower than human – is false, since we need it more than it needs us. Nature has the potential to initiate and cause the extinction of the human race (Parker, 2020:74). Furthermore, plants seem like slow-moving bodies with no brains, yet they have motivations very different from ours because they are a completely different life form which we sometimes perceive to be alien (Parker, 2020:9, 27, 35, 75). We also tend to attribute human or animal

biology to plants, like thinking of their branches and twigs as appendages and tentacles which have the potential to grab us (Parker, 2020:76). This specific horror we find in Raimi's *Evil Dead* films where branches and roots not only grab people and drag them away, but rape women as well. Donna Haraway (2016:31-33) refers to this type of tentacular horror where objects, like spiders, branches and vegetation crawl and grab with their feelers or growths at someone, as Chthulucene. The Japanese immortalised the Chthulucene in manga and animated films like *Urotsukidōji: Legend of the Overfiend* (1989) which feature a variety of scenes where demonic creatures sexually assault women by tentacled creatures.

I find Parker's theories interesting. With the abundance of cheap recording devices like cell phones in the twenty-first century humanity seems to have become more aware of the destructive might of nature. Amateur footage of the earthquakes in Haiti (2010 and 2021), Christchurch (2011) and Japan (2011) were shared worldwide, as was footage of the 2004 Indian Ocean tsunami. Along with these televised catastrophes, celebrity adventurers like Bear Grylls and other reality television series, like *I Shouldn't Be Alive* (2005-2012), have contributed to a global awareness of the impact and absolute devastation nature can leave in its wake. Films like M. Night Shyamalan's *The Happening* (2008) exploits this fear of nature's destructive power and its possible sentience, by making vegetation turn the tables on mankind. In the film, plants attempt to rid the world of humanity through the excretion of a toxin that causes people to commit suicide. I also believe that the Chthulucene that Parker and Haraway explore mirrors humanity's fear of becoming one with nature. When the tree or creeping vine wraps itself around a person and drags them off, I wonder what the plant is going to do with them. A decaying body is good fertilizer for a plant, but a sexual act between plant and human suggests the chance of a collapse of the human/nature hierarchy and the end of society as we know it.

In *Antichrist* there is a scene where *She* serenely melts away into green vegetation, implying a melding of not just body and nature, but also mind and nature (Parker, 2020:33, 129). She becomes part of the green but also inseparable from it, meaning that the boundaries of the human body collapse (Parker, 2020:33). The body being absorbed into nature is not unlike the idea of corporality returning to the primordial swamp. The Apollonian limits of the body are destroyed leading to Dionysian fluidity and chaos. Parker (2020:48) says something similar and notes that the haunting line uttered by the fox, 'chaos reigns', reminds the viewer that nature is against civilisation which in turn implies that there are no rules and that *He* has left civilisation. This fear has to do with the potential loss of the civilised self and becoming a primitive human (Parker, 2020:48). Parker (2020:114) associates, like Paglia and others, nature with evil, women, and the primitive which is suggestive of man's fear of all that cannot be controlled by western culture. I find it interesting that she notes that there is a reciprocal influence between ecophobic and genophobic anxieties, like we see in the aforementioned observations (Parker, 2020:114). It leaves the viewer to ponder if their fear of nature

is born from a fear of women or the *other*, or if their fear of the *other* is born from their fear of nature. The same anxiety manifests in *Antichrist* and the viewer is unsure if the woods are just a background context in which the two characters are isolated from civilization or if the woods or something in the woods is causing *He* and *She* to have a psychotic episode (Parker, 2020:126, 129). *He*, as an avatar of order, reason, and masculine identity, sees the woods as recreational space where you go to relax and to heal your wife, while *She* believes the woods to be ‘Satan’s church’ implying that the woods contain living or spiritual energies that can harm and influence (Parker, 2020:126-127).

Parker (2020:127) argues that “the forest is shown, indeed, to be sentient and foreboding: it is *through* its intimacy with the woman, this ‘she-devil in the wilderness’, that it becomes hideously and threateningly animate”. In other words, the forest, though sentient, is not decidedly friend or foe of mankind, but is influenced by *She*’s mental state. Parker (2020:127) attributes this to the empathy that exists between *She* and the woods where both can be regarded as “non-nurturing mothers”. The doe who gives birth to a stillborn fawn and the hatchling that falls from the tree all emphasise not only nature’s fallen children, but also signifies the fall of man (Parker, 2020:127). *Nic* falling out of the apartment window similarly suggests the biblical fall of man, but in more literal terms, but instead of the fall initiating the exit from Eden, the fall preceded the entry to Eden (Parker, 2020:127).

As *She* and nature become one, so is *He* shown to be disgusted and fearful of nature (Parker, 2020:129-130). There is a genuine look of fear and disgust on his face when he sees the dead fawn hanging from the doe. This occurs when he sees the self-disembowelling fox and when he frantically removes the ticks sucking on his arm. Parker (2020:130) says that like the tick that molests his arm, so does *She* sexually molest him, suggesting a reversal of mankind’s rape of nature. Her attaching the stone lathe to his leg can be seen as evidence of nature’s revenge on man, as the lathe is a symbol for the destruction of nature and the torture and murder of women/witches (Parker, 2020:130). The lathe is used to sharpen axes which are used to chop down trees. They were also used in the past to sharpen knives and spikes which could potentially have been used to torture women during the witch trials.

She as a witch in *Antichrist* gives us much to contemplate. What I found most fascinating is how she transgresses the boundaries of the female body. I find that Elbeshlawy’s interpretation of *She* being a woman who cannot exist, compatible with Parker’s interpretation of women and nature being one. This has especial bearing on the tropes and ripple effects as discussed in the next section.

Horror tropes and their associations with Dionysus in *Antichrist*

The first trope is that of the sexy and nude witch who has historically been used to provoke feelings of lust and desire for the young male audience. The film opens with a graphic and pornographic shower

scene where Willem Dafoe's penis is seen gliding in and out of Charlotte Gainsbourg's vagina in slow motion. Where horror films simply simulate sex, *Antichrist* goes further by showing graphic sexual intercourse. There are several more scenes like this which include graphic male and female masturbation. One can find scenes of simulated sex and graphic nudity in most R-rated horror films of the 1980s, like *Friday the Thirteenth*, *Nightmare on Elm Street*, *Night of the Demons*, and many more, but none cross over into hardcore pornography like *Antichrist* (Bloom's *tessera*).

The above is significant for various reasons. The first is that scenes containing graphic sexual acts in a film meant for release at cinemas constitute subversion. The creation of art which includes assigning genre to a text is an act of Apollonian control. By creating a film which blurs the lines between horror, pornography, and a psychological drama the idea of genre is challenged. It also creates a problem for distributors as different countries have different laws regarding pornographic materials.

The other reason why these scenes are subversive has to do with arousal and lust. I attribute this to how far removed the sexual situations in *Antichrist* are from the sex scenes usually found in horror films. In most horror films the women engaging in sex or who bare all for the viewer are usually sexy, pretty, young, voluptuous and playful – they are meant to fill the viewer with lust. The sex scenes featuring Willem Dafoe and Charlotte Gainsbourg did not have this effect on me, nor do I believe it was intended to. Where the women in conventional horror films fulfil an element of fantasy within the viewer, the first sex scene in *Antichrist* is too realistic and not idealised at all. Gainsbourg, who was 38 years of age at the time of the film's release, does not resemble the aforementioned typical young avatar of lust. From a heterosexual point of view, I found the sex scenes in *Antichrist* not to be arousing in any way or form, despite their graphic nature. This is far removed from the young witches in *Häxan* that titillate the viewer. I believe this to be an example of Bloom's *tesserae* where the recognisable tokens of recognition are sex and the witch, but they are rendered almost alien in *Antichrist*. This alienation or transgressing of boundaries is decidedly Dionysian as the witch is *othered* even more by having her body becoming indistinguishable from the woods.

The idea of sex being too realistic challenges what Žižek says about virtual sex being deprived of sex as well as his theories regarding a passion or desire for the real. The sex scenes in *Antichrist* are too real, which creates a yearning for the idealised. Baudrillard's hyperreality also plays a role in this instance. Hyperreality has conditioned the viewer (myself) into believing that sex should always involve beautiful people in aesthetically pleasing sexual acts. When confronted with a sexual act that is not real, but resembles reality so closely, it unnerves me.

Associated with the latter, is the mixture of sex and violence which is usually constructed along Apollonian lines in horror films. The young women are defined as sex objects and when their usefulness has come to an end, they are violently murdered. Bloom's *clinamen* manifests in this

regard as the sex and violence in *Antichrist* take an unpredictable swerve as the sexualised and throw-away woman becomes the aggressor that mutilates and sexually assaults a man. Additionally, with the exception of 1980's *Cannibal Holocaust*, extreme genital mutilation is uncommon in most R-rated horror films produced since films' inception. The horror films in general have numerous instances of sex, violence, torture, murder, and sexual assault, but the graphic mutilation of genitals is extremely rare. The handful of films that do feature genital mutilation, like *I Spit on Your Grave* (1978), *Cannibal Holocaust* (1980), *Cannibal Ferox* (1981), *Cutting Moments* (1997), And *Hostel II* (2007), mostly feature the castration of men or in two instances, the removal of a woman's breasts (*Cannibal Ferox* and *Cutting Moments*). Where a woman's genitals are removed like *She* does to herself in *Antichrist*, is a new development in horror films.

She removing her clitoris and nearly killing her husband seems similar to Pinedo's theory regarding a rejection of master narratives. By attempting to murder her husband she rejects the white heterosexual male and rationality. By removing her clitoris she symbolically rejects her own sexual pleasure, which she deems as partially to blame for Nic's death. By removing sexual pleasure from her life sex becomes meaningless to her, which as a consequence will most likely deprive her husband of sex with her as well. This could potentially lead to dissolution of their marriage, marriage being a tool to control sex and sexuality.

As mentioned, Gainsborough was 38 years old – middle-aged – at the time of the film's release. In *Häxan* the older witches are shown to be more powerful than the younger one, and possess a better grasp and control of the supernatural. Though *She* does not seem to exhibit any supernatural abilities, she is shown to have knowledge of forbidden things. The supernatural, though subdued, still plays a major role. The talking fox seems to be supernatural. So does the dead raven that resurrects in the hole, alerting *She* to *He*'s hiding place. These animals, including a doe, appear in the cabin in the final scenes of the film who *She* refers to as creatures of supernatural origin, namely the Three Beggars. They arrive while *He* and *She* are shown lying on the floor in the cabin in the final scenes of the film. The doe is shown sitting next to a passed out *She*, while the fox trots in through the door moments later. The raven squawks under the floorboards alerting *He* to the location of the wrench he needs to remove the lathe from his leg. The three creatures arriving at the same time hardly seems serendipitous, as they arrive right after *He* sees the Three Beggars constellation appearing in the night sky – something he admits should not exist. They also appear again as ghostly apparitions after he kills his wife and burns her on the pyre. The ghosts of women also appear and walk past *He* where he is standing on the slope of a hill. These are not natural occurring events, thus making them supernatural.

With regards to the animals appearing, I believe they are supernatural manifestations of nature. They do not act aggressively towards *He*, with the exception of the raven giving away his hiding place.

Parker suggests that *She* and nature becomes one and that nature, though sentient, only becomes antagonising because of *She*'s merging with nature. In *The Craft* we found something similar between Nancy and Manon where Manon is neutral but becomes evil due to Nancy's influence. If we apply the same logic to *Antichrist* it does appear as if nature turned on *He*, because of *She*'s influence. It seems unlikely that so many ticks on his arm could have gathered over one night. The raven revealing his hiding place is another example of nature siding with *She*.

Nature does seem to turn on *She* when the raven reveals the wrench to *He*. When *He* and *She* arrive in the woods, *She* complains about the ground burning her feet. The audience gets a glimpse of a burn mark on her sole, even though *He* dismisses it. This suggests that woods, or nature, did not want *She* there, fearing her influence. If the woods are sentient, it most likely understands the connection it has with a woman. This connection can be both beneficial and detrimental. *He* was warned of the danger women represent with the dead child shortly upon their arrival through the doe and dead fawn. Nature also dropped hundreds of acorns on the cabin's roof on their first night – nature warning *He* to listen to it. Nature and *She* merge when the hatchling falls from the tree and nature and woman realise they have the fall of man in common and the two merge. *She* becomes more enraged and unstable because of her loss of bodily and mental boundaries as nature's boundlessness infects her. Nature yearns for a connection with mankind so that it can restore its mythical reputation as the biblical paradise and not a place where mankind was expelled from. *She*, an avatar for women not just through embodiment, but also because of her name, desires the same freedom from guilt by restoring herself and Adam/*He*'s place in the paradise garden. When nature realises that *She* is going to drive *He* away from them, it realises that merging with *She* was a mistake. Nature also realises that because *She* attempted to alter Nic's feet into unnatural positions, that *She* is not compatible with nature's notions of natural growth. This is why nature speaks through *She* right after the autopsy report and photos of Nic's feet are revealed. When *She* attacks *He* with a log (a natural object) and shouts "Bastard! You're leaving me", it is nature's words channelled through *She*. It does not want them to leave. It wants them to stay in the woods, in paradise, and regain its position as humanity's home. It wants to become one with both man and woman again. This blurring of nature, man, and woman is Dionysian as the boundaries of their being collapse and they become like a liquid where we cannot for sure say where one begins and the other ends.

The way the supernatural is framed through nature in *Antichrist* is another instance of Bloom's *tesserae*. Where *Häxan*'s witches live in woodlands or forests, *She* is shown to come from the city and to at first be rejected by the woods. As *She* and nature find commonalities with one another, so did they merge and become one. When nature realised that this union was not beneficial, it used its supernatural power to make ticks attack *He* in his sleep, make a fox talk, rain acorns on their cabin, resurrect a dead raven, and change the very constellations in the night sky. In other words, in

Antichrist power comes from nature as opposed to from a devil or demon. Like in *The Craft*, power is corrupted by those who channel it, as opposed to power that corrupts – which suggests another instance of Bloom's *clinamen* due to the unpredictable change in the use of power when compared to *Häxan*.

Associated with nature is the cabin in the woods where the witch is frequently found in horror films and pop culture. The log cabin is a mainstay in horror films as seen in films like *Misery* (1980), *Evil Dead* (1981), *Evil Dead II* (1987), *Friday the 13th: A New Beginning* (1985), *Cabin Fever* (2002), *Cabin in the Woods* (2011), and *The Ritual* (2017). In *Antichrist* the cabin is old, dirty, and isolated, just like in the other films referred to above. Furthermore it has hidden compartments and rooms, much like the ones featured in the same examples. Willem Dafoe discovers one of these hidden rooms and finds it filled with arcane symbols, strange cut-outs and illustrations from old books, and *She*'s notes and thesis.

The cabin seems to be in steady decline as if nature is reclaiming it. Night and day its roof is battered by acorns. When *He* and *She* have sex among the roots of the old tree, hail falls from the sky, further causing subtle damage to the structure. Trees are shown to fall over in close proximity to the cabin, suggesting that one could at any moment fall on the cabin. The cabin symbolises humanity's Apollonian desire to conquer nature by showing nature that it can build a home from the carcasses of dead trees and live in relative comfort in its chaotic embrace. The construction of the cabin also suggests humanity's schizophrenic desire to be removed from and to remain close to nature simultaneously. Parker (2020:10) suggests that the building of cabins contaminates nature, creating a sinister location in the woods and making the woods by association equally sinister. We are also suspicious of persons who make their homes in the isolated woods and *other* them because they seem to be more aligned with monstrous nature (Parker, 2020:214). Again, the monstrosity does not originate from nature, but from humans who make nature malefic as we tend to view nature as inferior to civilisation (Parker, 2020:214, 215). This links back to the witch's associations with the primitive where we view those who live in nature as primitive.

The primitive is also frequently associated with women and Dionysus while civilization is associated with men and Apollo. *Antichrist* is without question a cinematic take on the female/male binary. As noted in the literature about *Antichrist*, scholars agree that *He* symbolises order, rationality, masculinity, and civilisation, while *She* symbolises chaos, violence, hysteria, femininity, and nature. *She*, letting her child die and torturing and nearly killing her husband, does seem to be anti-familial. In this instance Von Trier simply mimics the stereotypical witch we find in *Häxan*. There is however one difference. The witch is shown to be a seducer of men, which is something *She* struggles with in the film. *He* constantly rejects her sexual advances, as do some male viewers like myself find her unattractive.

In *Häxan* and many subsequent witch horror films, the witches are shown to become witches because they were slighted, tortured, or murdered by a man or men. In *Antichrist* it is difficult to find evidence of *He* inflicting damage on *She* prior to *Nic*'s death. As the plot develops the viewer does become aware that *He* is condescending towards his wife which could be described as psychological abuse. The film does end with *He* strangling and burning her on a pyre due to a combination of rage over her confessions to having a hand in *Nic*'s death, but also the torture she inflicted upon him. She dies at his hands when he realises that he cannot control her, mirroring man's misogyny, but also his shame and frustration due to his inability to exercise Apollonian control over his mate. Her survival could potentially subvert sociocultural power structures, like the nuclear family, as others would learn of a man's inability to control a woman.

Closing observations regarding *Antichrist*

When one considers the tropes it is clear that the film is a horror movie that has been made by a very talented director – or a polished horror film hidden within the veil of an art film. Like the director is able to convince many that *Antichrist* is not a horror film through artistic production, so has he hidden a witch in plain sight from the viewer, making the film subversive.

Again we find gender relations at the core of the witch horror film, specifically where sex and the witch's body is concerned. The witch is often mentioned to converse and have sexual relations with Satan. In *Antichrist* special attention is given to *She*'s sexual agency and the audience becomes privy to every intimate detail of her sexual experience. As mentioned, I found the graphic sex and masturbation scenes disquieting. The shots themselves were beautifully staged and conformed to my own ideas of beautiful cinematography, while at the same time the sexual acts between Dafoe and Gainsbourg are rendered abject.

Von Trier succeeds in reflecting society's Apollonian disgust at female sexuality by making sex and the nude female body (Dionysus) abject. Where *The Blair Witch Project* hides away the entire woman for fear of her sexual agency and her sexual organs, so does *Antichrist* revel in it by making it horrifying and abject. It is not enough to simply display *She*'s pubic mound, vulva, and labia. It is so abject that the apex of her sexual pleasure, the clitoris, needs to be cut off and removed completely. No man should risk physically touching it, thereby catching her contagious evil sexual perversions. She has to cut it off herself with a pair of old and rusty scissors that would not have rusted in the first place if she was a good housewife who used the scissors to mend and make clothes.

Desirable women are often cast in romantic or erotic film roles while unattractive women are type-cast based on their appearance (Harris-Moore, 2014:77). Bodies are thus matched with personalities.

She is not attractive according to normative standards and yet she is often shown completely nude. The sex scenes in the film, though pornographic, are violent, uncomfortable, and not erotic or sensual. According to Deborah Harris-Moore (2014:20), beauty is engrained in culture and it is often expressed or repressed within certain historic milieu in an attempt to erase genetic defects in a population. *She* in this context thus rebels against societal norms and notions through her appearance, and demands sexual pleasure without contributing to society in the form of children.

She's body in this film is the embodiment of what Alan Moore (2009:81) suggests in his study on the history of pornography:

The power of art is that it lets us see, in someone else's work, an idea that we dimly formed but lacked the skill to realize or conceive of today, however, it does the opposite. It [pornography] isn't art, cannot be openly admired or discussed, and serves only to convince us of our isolation, to increase our sense that we are in our secret and most intimate desires alone.

The pornographic body in *Antichrist* is not erotic, nor does it inspire lust in the viewer. It is ugly, uncaring, and without hope or resolve. Its function, similar to the rest of the film, is to question society's norms, beliefs, and religion. *She's* body and sexual pleasure not only challenges societal norms regarding abortion and motherhood, but also challenges norms where the consumption of pornography is concerned. Her body is thus not displayed for sexual pleasure, nor can it be understood if viewed in isolation from *He's* body.

Nic falling to his death further draws attention to the link between the witch and her rejection of the heterosexual or bourgeois nuclear family. Because she lets her child die and is likely too old to have another, her genital mutilation symbolises society's rejection of her and her sexual agency. As she rejects the role of mother and cannot have children anymore there is no reason for her to enjoy sex or to be able to entrap another man in a perverted childless marriage. She mirrors conservative fears of a woman who has the ability to corrupt a God-fearing man.

Witches are very frequently portrayed as Satan's slaves or pawns and he uses them to create discord and distrust within communities. Satan is also the enemy of God, which in turn implies a biblical association between the witch and western belief. *Antichrist* seems to follow suit when one considers the way it was filmed. Throughout the film only *He*, *She*, and *Nic* are shown. Other people are only visible during the funeral scene and they are blurred and out of focus. This suggests that only two people exist in this cinematic universe. The cabin, Eden, is one of only three names mentioned throughout the film, thus contributing to its significance.

He and *She* are binary opposites and the only fully formed characters in this narrative, much like Adam and Eve are as the first human characters mentioned in the *Bible*. Eden is the garden in which Adam and Eve lived, before a serpent tempted Eve with knowledge which resulted in them being expelled from the garden. *She* is Eve. In *Antichrist*, *She* tempts the garden through a union of body and mind, giving the biblical garden hope of redemption in the eyes of man. Where Eve had to relinquish her immortality, *She* had to give up her mortality. There are other factors that link her with Eve, like the constant nudity, the thirst for knowledge (she was busy with her PhD), and lastly, that she lies to her husband. This links *Antichrist* to *Genesis*, the first book of the *Bible*, and the fall of Adam.

The title, *Antichrist*, suggests another link to the *Bible*, specifically to the final book, *Revelations*, which foretells of the coming of the *Antichrist* who in turn heralds the fall of man and the end of the world. The film is also divided up into five named chapters, which suggests that the film is the inversion of a book, or in this case the *Bible*. The Eden found in the film is not the idyllic Garden of Eden mentioned in the *Bible*, but an anti-Eden, a man-made edifice within the woods. *She* refers to Eden and the green forest as Hell and Satan's Church, respectively, which is the opposite of the heavenly Garden of Eden. Von Trier himself has also stated in interviews that to him the forest is a violent place with vast amounts of pain and suffering (Sélavy, 2009).

From this it becomes obvious that *She* is an Anti-Eve and a witch, which draws associations with her body to the religious and the political. In the *Bible* women are frequently mentioned in relation to their ability to have children, or as a virgin, wife, mother, or a prostitute. With her child gone she cannot be a mother and the stress it has wrought upon her relationship with *He* makes it unlikely that she ever will have children again. Her proclivity for sexual deviance combined with an unwilling husband could potentially lead to either prostitution or the corruption of man through extramarital sex.

As a mother who does not intervene to save her child's life and who revels in aggressive and often violent sex, *She* challenges societal norms of motherhood. As the Anti-Eve, she represents Dionysus and subverts societal norms by placing her personal pleasure and sexual agency first. Society would describe her as evil. Evil, being a relative term, is informed by societal norms and ethics. There is for instance no evil in the forest or nature. When a lion kills and eats an antelope it does so without malice or ethical considerations. The *Bible* paints Eden, or nature, as a lush and idyllic garden created by God and filled with beautiful and bountiful fruit trees (Genesis 2:8-9), but that is not what nature is in reality. Thousands of living creatures kill and eat each other every second in nature. And when they are fed they rut or sleep. Most mammals care for their young, but natural selection often kills the weak and assists in the perpetuation of the strong. Ethical considerations aside, natural selection took place in the apartment when Nic fell to his death, since he had no instinctual reaction against climbing up to a dangerous height or to stop himself from plummeting to his death.

Nic, being a young male, and his mother's connection to nature has other meanings as well. The destruction of nature at the hands of man in the name of progress is well-documented and does not need further explanation. Overpopulation and the resultant consumption of resources are at the core of this argument. *She's* affinity to nature and the realisation that her child is contributing to this destruction can be the reason why Nic had to die.

In Genesis 2:24-25 God proclaims the unity of flesh between man and woman, but does not mention anything about bearing or raising children. Only after Adam and Eve partake of the fruits from the Tree of Knowledge does God mention conception. In Genesis 3:16 God states: "I will greatly multiply your sorrow and your conception; In pain you shall bring forth children; Your desire shall be your husband, and he shall rule you." Eve's punishment or curse is to bear the brunt of falling pregnant and giving birth in pain, but also submitting to a man. Her admission to the enjoyment of sex comes at the potential price of falling pregnant with nine months of discomfort which results in further blood and tears. For *She* to let her child die is thus akin to rejection of this curse and further pain and to return to a state of pre-motherhood. It is also a rejection of the implied curse of potential physical stress pregnancy and giving birth can cause to the body making her unattractive to a sexual partner resulting in the loss of sexual pleasure.

Not only does *She* subvert sexually, but also politically. Her association with witchcraft as a pre-Christian pagan activity draws parallels to her as a physical manifestation of an older and pagan European society.

Society is hardly ever uniform in their beliefs and Europe has experienced some societal debates during the last two decades. Since 2003 there has been a facile adoption of terms describing European identity within society and the media, namely 'New' and 'Old' Europe (Bialasiewics & Minca, 2005:365). According to Bialasiewicz and Minca (2005:366-367) the older and traditional Europe can be described as pagan, emotional, irrational, weak, decadent, and declining, while modern and civilised Europe is perceived as sensible, rational, expedient, moral, and powerful. There are various reasons why these distinctions have appeared, including the war on Iraq, the United States of America becoming allies with certain Western European countries, and most recently the immigration crisis as experienced in France, Germany, Greece, Italy, Spain, the UK, and the Scandinavian countries (Bialasiewics & Minca, 2005:366; Bolborici, 2016:1; Davidov, Kuntz, & Semyonov 2017:393). The most common reason for this division in society is the perception that immigration is leading to a loss or diffusion of European identity, Christian identity, culture, and economic strength, enabled by so-called liberal governmental bodies (Bolborici, 2016:1; Davidov, Kuntz, & Semyonov 2017:393; Storm, 2011:75-76).

The legitimacy and veracity of the above claims made by conservative Europeans are all in question and most probably all made in error, but it does fit with the Apollonian/Dionysian struggle that often manifests in other binaries like man/woman, order/chaos, Christian/pagan, rational/irrational, masculine/feminine, and white male/*other*. This association with the sociocultural context of Europe is of especial importance for the New Historicist as the text mirrors and subverts sociocultural norms. It problematizes and mirrors the aforementioned decline of patriarchal power structures by exploring said structures' frustrations related to their lack of control of the *other*.

THE CINEMATIC WITCH AS AVATAR FOR ARTISTIC AND SOCIALLY CONSCIOUS HORROR FILMS

Through *Antichrist*, Lars von Trier established a deeper critical engagement with genre, history, the filmmaking process, and sociocultural themes in the witch horror film. In this final section I explore and discuss these engagements and how they manifest in subsequent witch horror films in relation to the Dionysian and the perpetuation of the tropes established in *Häxan*. Special attention is given to the sociocultural where gender, patriarchy, and the nuclear family is concerned. By doing so we trace the reciprocal influence that exist between the sociocultural and popular texts thus contributing to the field of New Historicism, but also the study of twenty-first century society and horror films.

WITCHING & BITCHING

Witching & Bitching (2013), or *Las Brujas de Zugarramurdi* (direct translation: *The Witches of Zugarramurdi*), its original Spanish title, was directed and co-written by Álex de la Iglesia who is also known for other comedy horror films like *Mutant Action* (1993), *The Day of the Beast* (1995), and *The Last Circus* (2010). Unlike the sombre and depressing tone of *Antichrist*, *Witching & Bitching* is more upbeat and is loaded with dark humour, much like Sam Raimi's *Drag Me to Hell* and *Evil Dead* trilogy.

Like *Antichrist*, the film was produced on the European continent – in Spain specifically. It does not share the same artistic styling or deep contemplation about horror or feminist themes like *Antichrist*, but it is still a well-thought out and polished horror film. The film's central theme is family with a focus on the contemporary power struggles that occur in romantic couples in the western world. Patrick Cooper (2014), a reviewer for *Bloody Disgusting*, describes the film as entertaining and “a wicked battle of the sexes”.

The film contains a tremendous amount of symbolism which is why, like in the case of *Antichrist*, the plot needs to be discussed in detail.

Plot

The film opens with three witches – a beautiful young biker, a middle-aged woman, and an old crone – around a bubbling cauldron. Tarot cards are read by the middle-aged witch revealing images of a sponge, a soldier, a taxi driver, Jesus, and a child of the sun who is their chosen one.

In the next scene two robbers, José and Antonio, along with José's 10 year old son, Sergio, rob a pawn shop of 25 000 gold rings. The men wear elaborate disguises during the robbery to avoid recognition. José is sprayed silver and dressed like Christ carrying a large wooden cross while Antonio is painted green, dressed in army fatigues, resembling a child's plastic toy soldier. Three other men are dressed as Minnie Mouse, The Invisible Man, and Spongebob Squarepants, and are also involved in the robbery as lookouts. Spongebob Squarepants is gunned down by the police while Minnie Mouse and The Invisible Man are caught and brutally beaten. The two men and child make their getaway in an occupied taxi. The passenger is locked in the trunk and the driver, Manuel, is instructed to drive them to the French border.



Figure 43. Witching & Bitching. 2013. Directed by Álex de la Iglesia . [Film still from DVD] USA: IFC Films.

They arrive in the small town of Zugarramurdi later the same night and accidentally run over an old woman, Maritxu (figure 43), with their vehicle. She disappears after they stop to see if she is alive. A few minutes later they encounter the old woman's daughter, Graciana (figure 44), who is searching for her mother. They deny seeing Maritxu. Graciana asks them to give her a ride home after she notices Sergio in the back seat.

They arrive at Graciana's dilapidated mansion outside of Zugarramurdi and she reveals that the house was hers after her divorce was finalised – her husband becoming a priest thereafter. Not long after their arrival, Eva (figure 45), Graciana's beautiful young daughter, arrives at the house on her motorbike and Antonio immediately starts flirting with her, even though he has a girlfriend. The three women are the witches from the opening scene of the film.



Figure 44. Witching & Bitching. 2013. Directed by Álex de la Iglesia . [Film still from DVD] USA: IFC Films.

Earlier in the film it is revealed that Antonio is in a committed relationship with a blonde lawyer, Sonia. He is deathly afraid of her and claims that she has supernatural abilities and always knows where he is at all times. She dominates him and expects him to make dinner and chokes him during sex. José is divorced from his wife, Sylvia, a nurse. She is highly strung, domineering, hates José, but truly loves Sergio. José, though irresponsible, loves Sergio as well and robs the pawn shop so that he can gain joint custody of Sergio. Sergio also prefers to live with José and not his mother. The relationship between José and Sylvia is strained and both refer to each other only in negative terms. For instance, when José's phone rings during the car chase, we see that his wife's number is saved under the name 'Armageddon'. Manuel, the taxi driver, becomes a willing accomplice when he gets to know José and Antonio. He empathises with them and like them is afraid of his wife. The three men constantly refer to women as demons, bitches, witches, and instruments of destruction and erectile dysfunction.

After arriving at Graciana's home Sergio goes missing. José starts searching the premises but is soon distracted by Eva's vivacious ways. Eva is shown to have a definite romantic interest in José. The group finally finds Sergio just as Maritxu is loading him into an oven.

Realizing that something is wrong the three men and Sergio hastily retreat from the house and speed away in their vehicle. Graciana reprimands her mother for almost killing the Chosen One and Eva for not enticing José to stay. As José and the others reach the border they realize they left the bag with the rings at the mansion. They sneak back into the house to reclaim it, but José and Antonio are side-tracked again by Eva. This time they leer at her through a slightly ajar door while she is squeezing black liquid from a large toad over the lingerie-clad body. She squeezes the same substance over a broom and spreads it over the handle in a provocative stroking fashion, then glides it back and forth between her legs (figure 45). She feigns not to notice them, but is acutely aware of their presence and intensifies her provocative movements.



Figure 45. Witching & Bitching. 2013. Directed by Álex de la Iglesia . [Film still from DVD] USA: IFC Films.

They find the bag in the kitchen where they rescued Sergio from, but are viciously attacked by Graciana and Maritxu. The two witches are shown to be able to walk on walls and ceilings and to have great physical strength and severely elongated tongues. Manuel and Sergio are similarly attacked outside the house by Eva while waiting in the taxi for the others. Like her mother and grandmother, Eva seems to be invulnerable with equal physical strength. The men and Sergio are all captured, including the man they locked in the trunk of the car.

Meanwhile Sylvia arrives in Zugarramurdi after using a mobile phone application to track José. Not far behind her are two police inspectors Alfonso and Jaime. Jaime fears women and Alfonso is divorced and fears witches. The two men constantly bicker like a stereotypical old married couple.

Graciana is shown walking upside-down on the ceiling of the mansion's dining hall, while the men are tied up to chairs. Eva tortures the men and through supernatural means forces José and Antonio to kiss each other. Soon many witches arrive in anticipation of a ceremony involving Sergio and the end of civilisation. Some of the witches are shown to be men in drag. It is also revealed that the 25 000 rings – objects of pain and sorrow from divorces and deaths – are exactly what the witches required to complete the ceremony.

The men escape after Sylvia, Jaime, and Alfonso fall through the ceiling above them. Sylvia and the two inspectors are captured and fed the same toad juices Eva was rubbing on her body. Eva separates José from the others and tells him how to escape. When he angers her for first wanting to save the others she becomes jealous and enraged, accusing him of not caring enough about her. Eva is shown to be quick-tempered and jealous – a typical female stereotype we find in films. Her anger causes her to writhe and convulse on the floor, shrieking, and cracking walls with her power. José escapes into a hidden network of tunnels under the house and finds Eva's brother in a dungeon where he has been locked up for decades.

Eva reveals to her mother and the coven that she has fallen in love with José. For this perceived treachery Eva is buried alive in the caverns. Eventually the witches and the men all find their way down to the tunnels and into a giant cavern. Graciana is the matriarch of the household and also the head of a coven of witches numbering in the hundreds. She delivers a speech to her congregation stating that The Great Mother created man and that there is no good or evil. She describes the Great Mother as a cruel mother and merciless daughter. By summoning the Great Mother the hierarchy of order will be changed and women will rule.



Figure 46. *Witching & Bitching*. 2013. Directed by Álex de la Iglesia . [Film still from DVD] USA: IFC Films.

Meanwhile José sets Eva free from her coffin and her brother reveals to José that Eva was condemned for being in love with José. In the cavern inspectors Jaime and Alfonso, while strung up as sacrifices, confess their love to one another. Sylvia, now in league with the witches, serves her child up to The Great Mother (figure 46). The goddess arrives – a giant creature who resembles the Venus of Willendorf (figure 47) – trampling many of the witches to death and then swallows Sergio whole. He immediately passes through her digestive tract and is expelled from her sphincter. He survives and passes through the Great Mother’s body shaken but unscathed becoming the Chosen One. He is said to be ‘the androgyne’ and the man who will betray man and dismantle power structures from within.

Eva defeats the goddess by uncovering her eyes, the light from the nearby fires blinding her and causing her to trip and fall on a pyre. Eva, still angry at her mother, battles Graciana in aerial combat and seemingly kills her.



Figure 47. Venus of Willendorf. Circa 30,000 BC. Anonymous. [Photograph of statue] Austria: Naturhistorisches Musuem, Vienna.

The film ends with an epilogue of events one month later. José and Eva are a couple and attending a talent show with Sergio performing magic acts on the stage. Sergio literally saws a girl in half and puts her back together again, suggesting that he may very well be the Chosen One. The drag-witches are also in attendance along with Graciana, Maritxy, and Sylvia, who has taken Eva's place. Graciana comments that Eva and José's relationship will not last and they will be suffocated and destroyed by their happy suburban lives.

Background and literature review

Witching & Bitching is critically acclaimed and has garnered a cult following in the years since its release. The film was nominated in ten categories for the 28th Goya Awards and won eight of them (IMDB, 2021g). The wins included best sound, editing, special effects, costume design, make-up and hair, production design, production manager, and supporting actress (IMDB, 2021g).

Despite its acclaim it has also garnered a fair amount of criticism. Simon Abrams (2014), a reviewer for *Rogerebert.com*, states that the film is a 'juvenile satire about men that fear women'. He also describes the film as hysterical and energetic, but also callow, irreverent, and misogynist (Abrams, 2014). Andrea Subissati's (2015) review for *The Faculty of Horror* praises Álex de la Iglesia and compares him favourably to Guillermo del Toro and Peter Jackson, but disapproves, like Abrams, of the old-fashioned misogyny found throughout the film. I agree that the film contains scenes that can be labelled as misogynous, but there are also aspects that complicate the film, like the inclusion of drag characters and the two gay inspectors coming to terms with their sexuality.

The film's cult status has not elevated the film enough to encourage much scholarly attention. Interviews with Álex de la Iglesia are also rare, especially in English. In a video interview with Robert Aaron Mitchell (2013) on *Youtube* De la Iglesia describes his motives for the film as a passion project filled with everything he loves, but that it is also contemplative of the difficulties he had been experiencing in finding someone to connect with romantically.

In an interview with *Cineuropa's* Alfonso Rivera (2013) De la Iglesia reveals that the film is riddled with nods and references to Greta Garbo, Frida Kahlo, Margaret Thatcher, Angela Merkel, and Simone de Beauvoir – women he says he fears, admires, and who fascinate him. De la Iglesia also states in the interview that there are many others who make politically correct films, but not all films should be politically correct as films sometimes need to reflect the type of cinema the director enjoys (Rivera, 2015). When pressed about the accusations of misogyny directed at him, De la Iglesia replied: "I refuse to accept that adjective. I prefer to use the term misanthropy. I simply try and have a vision of the conflict between sexes and I am putting myself on the weaker side" (Rivera, 2013).

De la Iglesia's assertions complicate the accusations of misogyny as we have to consider his intentions as an artist and filmmaker. From a New Historicist perspective we cannot claim that a reviewer's assessment of a film carries more weight than the intentions of the director. They should at least be judged equally and given equal attention. For all the negative portrayals of women in the film, De la Iglesia's male characters are portrayed along similar and equally negative terms. José and Antonio, for instance, are both portrayed as incredibly irresponsible and dim-witted.

There are very few studies related to *Witching & Bitching*. Below I discuss some of the studies I found while searching for scholarly interactions related to the film. One delves specifically into the portrayals of gender in the film, while the others briefly mention *Witching & Bitching*.

Irene Baena-Cuder's *Witching and Bitching: Gender Representation in Contemporary Spanish Cinema* (2014) examines the extent to which tensions and anxieties, as experienced by Spanish men in Spain, are mirrored in De la Iglesia's film. According to Baena-Cuder (2014:2) then-contemporary Spanish horror films contained numerous instances of women presented as a threat to the privileged position of the Spanish male. Though Spanish horror films feature many strong and/or independent women, the films also frequently depicted these same women as monsters (Baena-Cuder, 2014:2). Like many other scholars who focus on the horror genre, Baena-Cuder (2014:3) employs Creed's psychoanalytical theories regarding the monstrous-feminine.

She argues that men are depicted in *Witching & Bitching* along masculine stereotypes according to which men cannot articulate their anxieties concerning women (Baena-Cuder, 2014:3-4). The film materialises these anxieties of men who are on the verge of experiencing a nervous breakdown, which in turn leads to catharsis in the male viewer as the film concludes (Baena-Cuder, 2014:5).

Baena-Cuder (2014:5) expands on the above by arguing that the three men are not the typical type of masculine male characters found in Spanish films and that they are quite vulnerable and emasculated. Baen-Cuder's statement seems accurate as the men are shown in the film to find solace in one another, sharing their innermost fears and desires with one another, which is not frequently found in horror films.

Though Baena-Cuder (by implication) challenges accusations of misogyny directed at De la Iglesia, we cannot ignore that De la Iglesia himself admits to both fearing and admiring strong women, which could partially be described as misogyny. On another level he exposes his innermost feelings of fear and anxiety to the world – to which he has publicly also admitted – which begs the question if the film can truly be described to have misogynist intent. The film could be argued represents a recorded documentation of a man's struggle to come to grips with a world where sociocultural norms have changed. He is honest about these anxieties and has attempted to record them through allegory and metaphor in order to exorcise them, but also to understand himself. We cannot dismiss De la Iglesia's misanthropy which is equally present in the film. His disdain for the male characters is obvious which most likely mirrors his own self-hate.

Baena-Cuder (2014:7, 10) states that during the medieval times of the witch hunts women were made scapegoat, tortured, and killed by the Catholic Church. In other words, women were the victims. In *Witching & Bitching* the narrative is constructed in such a way that the men are portrayed as victims of the women and witches and *othered* in the process. The men complain in the film about impotence and how women cause this, symbolising castration (Baena-Cuder, 2014:7).



Figure 48. El Aquelarre or El Gran Cabrón. 1821-1823. Francisco Goya. [Oil on plaster] Spain: Museo del Prado, Madrid.

In addition to the observations regarding masculinities in *Witching & Bitching*, Baena-Cuder (2014:6) draws fascinating comparisons between the film's interior lighting of the mansion and cave with Francisco Goya's painting *El Aquelarre* (*Witches' Sabbath*) or *El Gran Cabrón* (*The Great He Goat*) (1821-1823) (figure 48).

Baena-Cuder (2014:6) argues that the witches in *Witching & Bitching* strongly resemble the witches in the above painting. Not only do the witches correspond in appearance to the ones in the painting, but so does the lighting used in the witches' house and underground caverns resemble Goya's use of colour and chiaroscuro (Baena-Cuder, 2014:6). One notable difference between the film and the painting is that there are no male witches in *Witching & Bitching* (with the exception of the drag queens). In *El Gran Cabrón* the coven includes a friar and a farmer gathered around a large male goat representing Satan (Baena-Cuder, 2014:6). The coven in *Witching & Bitching* do not derive their power from a male devil or demonic entity like in the painting, but from a woman, nor does the coven include men.

The women in *Witching & Bitching* are both empowered and *othered* simultaneously (Baena-Cuder, 2014:8). For instance, when the men come across Maritxu's bar she is shown to be independent and strong-willed. She treats none of her male patrons or the three men with any respect. She is also never placed in a lower position in relation to the camera implying that the director recognises her power and her equal footing with all the men in the film (Baena-Cuder, 2014:8). I observed similar power struggles in the film. When José and Adriano spy on Eva during the erotic broom-rubbing scene, Adriano remarks to José that Eva is definitely not sweeping, nor is she the type of girl that would clean a house, suggesting a clear break with stereotypical portrayals of women while at the same time objectifying her. Eva is later shown to fill José with immense fear, despite her beauty, sensuality, and her revealing her romantic intentions towards him. All the men frequently mention how terrified they are of the women in their lives and how their success in life similarly terrifies them. An independent and strong woman is thus rendered monstrous in *Witching & Bitching*. This feminine monstrosity is emphasised by the appearance of the Great Goddess at the end of the film (Baena-Cuder, 2014:8). The Palaeolithic *Venus of Willendorf*, which the goddess resembles, is regarded by scholars to be an icon of fertility due to the enlarged breasts and womb (Baena-Cuder, 2014:8; Kleiner, Mamiya, & Tansey, 2001:3-4). This links the coven to primitive earth-cults and nature where mother and goddess are inseparable – a being that can both create and destroy (Baena-Cuder, 2014:8-9). We see this simultaneous creation and destruction when the goddess swallows Sergio. He falls through her digestive system and comes out of her anus reborn as a new being. The Great Mother as both destroyer and creator makes her similar to Dionysus.

Xavier Aldana Reyes's *Spanish Gothic: National Identity, Collaboration and Cultural Adaptation* (2017) examines the national identity and culture of the Spanish people through the lens of Spanish gothic texts. *Witching & Bitching* is only mentioned in passing in Reyes's book, and no full examination or study is extended to the film. Even passing comments on the film make no mention of Spanish identity or culture.

The Encyclopedia of Contemporary Spanish Films contains an entry of the film, but only the plot is discussed along with a piece on the Spanish Inquisition (Sánchez, 2018:73-76). It also contains a list of awards the film was nominated for and won.

It should be mentioned that *Witching & Bitching* and referencing Goya's *El Gran Cabrón* and the *Venus of Willendorf* is of importance from a New Historicist perspective due to the influence and resulting reverberations of old artistic texts on modern narratives. In both instances the works of art were reframed and changed in the film. The original *Venus of Willendorf* is a very small effigy carved out of limestone roughly 11 centimetres in length (Kleiner, Mamiya, & Tansey, 2001:3-4). As mentioned, the enlarged breasts and stomach suggests that this figure was most likely an effigy representing fertility, in other words, feminine power. In film I have encountered the Venus of Willendorf on two other separate occasions excluding *Witching & Bitching*, which include John McTiernan's *The 13th Warrior* (1999) and Guillermo de Toro's *Hellboy II: The Golden Army* (2008). In *The 13th Warrior* a cannibalistic tribe of men who terrorize Norse villages are shown to carry carvings that resemble the *Venus of Willendorf*. Later in a terrifying scene in the film the tribe's matriarch is revealed to the audience and she resembles the carved figure. She is shown to be murderous with poisoned claws and living deep inside a dark cave.

In *Hellboy II: The Golden Army*, a film that straddles the horror and fantasy film genres, an auction house is shown to be selling an enormous three meter high version of the icon. The statue stands prominently in the hall where a large group of interested buyers are eaten by a swarm of tooth fairies that resemble and sound like babies. It is also here where Hellboy fights these creatures and where it is revealed that his girlfriend, Liz, is pregnant. Hellboy crushes a large swathe of the fairies a few moments later by rolling the statue over them.

When considered along with *The 13th Warrior* and *Hellboy II: The Golden Army* the Venus of Willendorf is associated with horror, fertility, and power. She also gradually increased in size with each new iteration. In *The 13th Warrior* she is at first as large as the real figurine, while in *Hellboy II* she grows to three metres in length. In *Witching & Bitching* she strides over the coven, crushing them with her steps. I find this increase in size congruent with the growing perceived threat of women in the western world between the late nineties and the first two decades of the twenty-first century.

The influence of the sociocultural and art are further emphasised by the film's associations with Goya's *El Gran Cabrón*. *El Gran Cabrón* is one of fourteen paintings Goya produced between 1819 and 1823 – referred to as the *Black Paintings* (Bozal, 1999:5). The works, or frescos, were painted directly onto fourteen walls of his country house outside Madrid and are regarded by scholars as his most personal and uninhibited works (Bozal, 1999:5; Kleiner, Mamiya, & Tansey, 2001:867). Valeriano Bozal (1999:28) describes the contents of *El Gran Cabrón* not as an attack on witchcraft, but Goya's own ideas regarding the supernatural world of the night. It is difficult however to draw

specific conclusions regarding the meaning of each individual painting, but the consensus is that they mirrored not only Goya's displeasure with Spain regressing again into a dictatorship but also his own misanthropy (Bozal, 1999:6-7; McNeese, 2008:128).

From the above we can draw similarities between Goya and De la Iglesia. Old ideas or texts are resurrected (*El Gran Cabrón*) and reframed for new audiences (*Witching & Bitching*) in both theme and the technical elements found in the different media. De la Iglesia uses a comparable chiaroscuro technique to the one Goya employed in *El Gran Cabrón* with the same amber colours to unmask the darkness for the benefit of the viewer. In both texts witches are portrayed with malefic intent, but where Goya used witches and the Devil to criticize the powers of state, De la Iglesia uses the witches to demonise women. This resurrection of the old which is reframed is a manifestation of Bloom's *apophrades*, or 'the return of the dead'. The *Venus of Willendorf* and *El Gran Cabrón* are texts that have reverberated and changed over centuries to influence the narrative of a film in 2013.

Troping & Reverberating

Even though there are not much scholarly engagement with *Witching & Bitching* this does not mean that the film lacks depth and is underserving of scholarly attention. From the plot it is obvious that the film problematizes stereotypical portrayals of men, women, and witches, while also subverting gender roles.

The witches in *Witching & Bitching* mostly conform to the witches as portrayed in *Häxan*. Eva is the alluring young witch who is there for sexual spectacle. She does however challenge heterosexual norms by collapsing the boundaries of normative male heterosexual desires and the abject by being a witch and a cannibal, but also by squeezing black liquid from a toad which she rubs over herself, between her legs and suggestively over a broom handle. These acts, though abject and grotesque, are nonetheless enticing and does not make her seem less desirable. I would go so far as to say that the scene makes her even more desirable. Apollonian disgust and revulsion are thus not just negated, but completely erased in the face of the Dionysian. Eva as a character is not without problems as she is shown to be unhinged and irrational at times. On the other hand she is also shown to be independent and uncompromising towards both the coven and José even when both reject her.

Sylvia who becomes a witch is a young, beautiful mother who is more unhinged and irrational than Eva, especially after becoming a member of the coven. Sylvia and Eva having romantic ties with José is problematic. When read together the women do make accusations of misogyny against the director seem accurate/founded. José, for instance, constantly refers to Sylvia as a witch even though she is not one at first. She does however become one. Eva is introduced to José at first as just a beautiful and enigmatic female biker and he only later realizes that she is a witch. This seems to suggest that José's

views on the women are similar to wish-fulfilment resulting in the women becoming what he desires them to be. By the end of the film Eva aids the men in destroying the coven and marries José, thus conforming to a monogamous heterosexual relationship, implying submission to Apollonian power structures.

It should be noted that despite Eva's youthful appearance she is not a witch without power. She is shown to have the power of flight, super human strength, to be impervious to physical harm, and to have the ability to call on and control the weather. She does not seem to have less power than her mother or grandmother. This change in the portrayal of the young witch can be regarded as an example of Bloom's *clinamen*.

The older witches, Maritxu being the old crone and Graciana the powerful middle-aged witch, seem to have the same level of power as Eva, making them equal despite their ages, which is another unprecedented swerve (*clinamen*).

Though the equality among the witches in *Witching & Bitching* could suggest subversion of Apollonian social hierarchy, the camerawork in the film seems to suggest the opposite in some instances. As mentioned Maritxu is portrayed to be on equal footing with all the male characters, even invoking fear in them, but at the same time the camera frequently dwells on Eva. Eva receives the most screen time among the three witches and is the only woman in the film to exhibit any character development. The amount of camera time devoted to Eva produces an association between physical beauty and character where beauty and sexual availability is congruent with characterisation.

The camera similarly does not spare the viewer of the Great Mother's abject appearance. Though she is a goddess and has the most power, she is a grotesque parody of womanhood. The goddess does not speak and is a giant, naked, and shambling immortal monster. This mirrors society's fear of a powerful woman where she is rendered a physical monster to embody these societal fears. The witch is frequently portrayed as an old crone where she functions as a person not quite dead, but also not alive. She is frail, diseased, and not in control of all her mental faculties. The Great Mother is an exaggeration of this witch who has been imbued with godlike power, an example of Bloom's *clinamen* where the witch's terrifying physical appearance and supernatural ability is exaggerated to obscene levels.

The Great Mother's revolting appearance is but one instance where the witches are associated with the abject. The witches are shown to be cannibals and to drink black liquid from the mouths of toads. Women and minorities are frequently and similarly linked to the abject in horror films. Eva rubbing toad juices over her body complicates the boundary between abject and beauty by making the abject alluring and sensual, another example of Bloom's *clinamen*.

Another often found trope in the witch horror film is the witch's close association with nature. The state of disrepair the mansion has fallen into seems to suggest several things. As Antonio mentions, Eva is not the type of lady who would clean a house. This is however not just true about Eva, but all the witches in the coven. They reject the stereotypical female role of housekeeper, but most importantly, they reject the idea of the nuclear family home which hinges upon progress and the destruction of nature. By letting the house fall into such a ruined state, it becomes a monument of their rejection of Apollonian power structures and the tools these structures use to force women into submission. This rejection is similar to Pinedo's statements regarding the postmodern rejection of the master narrative and industrial progress.

The house mainly serves as a façade that hides the intricate labyrinth of tunnels and caves underneath it where the witches congregate. According to Antonio Sanna (2013:17, 20) caves in horror films represent primitive man, primal horror, the unknown, entrances to the afterlife, and a place that leads to where Lucifer and other evil creatures dwell. Caves also illicit various negative responses from people like disorientation, claustrophobia, fear of the dark, and feelings of paranoia (Sanna, 2013:17). It is because of all the above that the cave is frequently associated with the *other* (Sanna, 2013:20-21).

Sanna however neglects one crucial argument in his analysis about the cave in horror film. It is common knowledge that caves were used by early man as shelter. The cave is a naturally formed home where man can live in relative safety while also being immersed in nature. The cave could potentially induce fear in the viewer because we have grown too accustomed to urban and suburban lifestyles. The cave represents a life inseparable from nature which fills us with Apollonian dread. From the cave paintings found all over the world it is safe to assume proto-society and -culture begun in caves. To return to a cave means a rejection of Apollonian civilisation and the man-made caves of brick and mortar we call suburban homes. The witches in *Witching & Bitching* use the underground caves and caverns as a church, a giant cathedral, where they can practice their beliefs free from prying eyes. The cave in *Witching & Bitching* is nature's church – a Dionysian place of worship.

The cave emphasises a break from the traditional family unit, a theme we find throughout the film. With the exception of Eva, all the witches in the film reject or challenge the family unit. Maritxu, Graciana, and Eva are related and form a family consisting of grandmother/mother (Maritxu), mother/daughter (Graciana), and daughter/granddaughter (Eva). Men are absent from this family which makes it unconventional. When Eva reveals she is in love with a man her family has her buried alive. Graciana is also revealed to have a son, Luisimi, who is kept in a dungeon underneath the toilet of Maritxu's bar. The patrons unknowingly urinate and defecate in Luisimi's cell causing his skin to rot off his body while alive. Maritxu and Graciana's actions demonstrate how deeply they despise men.

This hatred of men seems to originate from their belief system. At the end of the film where all the witches congregate in the underground cavern Graciana gives a sermon to the coven explaining to them and the viewer that the Christian god is a lie created to subvert women and the female god. She goes on and proclaims that woman was created first and that Paradise is in Hell. Interestingly, the witches' supernatural abilities originate not from Satan or a male devil, but from a woman. The supernatural abilities of the witch match those usually found in popular culture and horror films like *Häxan*, but they originate from an entirely different entity. These recognisable supernatural abilities of the witch originating from a new supernatural entity resembles Bloom's *tesserae* where the recognisable is reframed by its proximity to the new or unrecognisable.

Related to the supernatural abilities of the witch are her motivations. Nowhere in the film is it revealed that Maritxu, Graciana, or Eva, was slighted personally by men. Their motivation comes from a sense of justice. They want justice for their goddess and they want her to destroy the patriarchal power structures that enable men to dominate women. The witches are thus not much different from those we find in *Häxan*. The women are in fact just as violent and hysterical as *Häxan's* witches.

As mentioned in the previous chapters, the violent and hysterical witch is quintessentially Dionysian. As harbingers of chaos and brutality the witches in *Witching & Bitching* drive the anti-Apollonian agenda home to a far greater degree than any of the other films discussed thus far. Most of the previous films merely hint at the eternal conflict between men and women through symbolism or allegory, while the witches in *Witching & Bitching* are explicit about their anger and women's mistreatment at the hands of men. The combination of the irrational and the challenge posed to the master narrative again links the film to Pinedo's postmodern horror film.

Conclusion

Witching & Bitching frequently resorts to clichéd representations of women. The three criminals all refer to their wives and girlfriends as witches who ruined their lives. Their wives are also described and shown to brandish more power than their male partners. José's ex-wife even joins the coven at the end and assists in feeding her child to the Great Mother. Sylvia thus conforms to western society's fear of a powerful woman. The women are also all portrayed as selfish, conceited, and hateful towards men.

Beautiful and sensual Eva, while engaged in abject acts at the start of the film, becomes more human, less savage and hateful towards men as the film progresses. Where in the beginning she had no qualms to use her sexuality to ensnare men, she falls in love with José within moments of meeting him – a typical Hollywood cliché found in romantic films and romantic comedies. He resists her

advances and refers to her as selfish and insane. This inspires her to be a better version of herself and by the end of the film she is both wife to José and mother to Sergio.

Eva's mother becomes the typical mother-in-law who is hated by her daughter's husband. The grandmother and the mother have almost identical characters and are fairly one-dimensional. This type of characterisation mirrors typical Hollywood portrayals of women who are starting to get grey hair where they are only cast as elderly mothers or grandmothers. It should however be mentioned that ill-developed characters are also a characteristic of the postmodern horror film (Pinedo, 1996:18)

In many instance the film conforms to negative stereotypes of women, since it suggests that women can only be categorised according to a few stereotypes which are all related to their sexual viability in the eyes of men. A beautiful woman who engages in vile acts can be rehabilitated if she submits to a man as wife and mother to his children. The allusion to beauty and youth in the film are too blatant and leaves one to wonder if the intent was to create a parody of womanhood in order to draw attention to the way women are often portrayed in films. Repeat viewings of the film, along with the consideration of the production being a horror-comedy, does suggest that the directors had nothing positive to say about women wielding power. It should be noted however that men are not portrayed any better. For example, José convinces himself that his life will be better with Eva, even though Eva exhibits the same mania and domination as Sylvia. José is also oblivious to the fact the Sergio is not Sergio anymore, but a demonic being in the guise of his son.

The film builds on many of the traditional tropes associated with the cinematic witch as established in *Häxan*. I do however believe that Eva collapsing the boundaries between the abject and beautiful is important and something to take note of. In the chapter on the eighties horror film it is mentioned how sex in horror films is usually followed by a gruesome death at the hands of a monster. In *Witching & Bitching* one of the monsters is the sexual object and she is made sexual spectacle with no deaths involved. This poses a conundrum where the abject and desirable become one. Dionysus and Apollo merge in this scene which in itself subverts both.

THE WITCH: A NEW ENGLAND FOLKTALE (2015)

Robert Eggers' first film, *The Witch: A New England Folktale* (2015), uses similar portrayals of the witch as those found in *Häxan* and the previously discussed *Witching & Bitching*, but to different ends. *The Witch* paints a realistic and accurate representation of witches and witchcraft of early-seventeenth century Puritan New England (Stensrud, 2016:1). Like *Häxan* the film was inspired by folktales, fairy tales, and written records of historical witchcraft, thus linking it with societal norms of a bygone age.

Background

The film is centred on a family of Puritans who are banished from their village due to the head of the family, William, disagreeing with the village elders about an unnamed religious issue. The family of six, William, his wife Katherine, the eldest daughter Thomasin (figure 49) played by Anya Taylor-Joy, her younger brother Caleb, and the fraternal twins, Mercy and Jonas, move to a secluded farm next to an ominous forest. Katherine soon after their arrival gives birth to a baby, Samuel. Thomasin plays peekaboo outside with Samuel when he vanishes while her eyes are closed. Katherine blames Thomasin for their missing child and slowly the family starts to unravel.



Figure 49. *The Witch: A New England Folktale*. 2015. Directed by Robert Eggers. [Film still from DVD] South Africa: Universal Pictures Home Entertainment / Next Entertainment.

With their food sources dwindling and the loss of the baby, the rift between the family members widens and they all turn on each other. William, the father and patriarch, refuses to admit fault in his pride and asserts that they will conquer the wilderness and that God will bless them. He steals a silver

cup, a family heirloom of Katherine's, trading it for hunting supplies. Katherine blames Thomasin for the theft and implores her husband to send her away to serve in the house of another family.

Meanwhile, Caleb goes into the forest to hunt for food but is seduced and captured by the old witch who presents herself to him in the guise of a beautiful young woman. He is returned to the farmhouse after a few days in a delirious state. Thomasin is again blamed for his state and his death a few hours later. With the exception of Thomasin, the family is wiped out by an old witch, a black goat named Black Philip, who is revealed to be Satan himself, and by Thomasin herself. Thomasin, however, kills her mother in self-defence in one of the final scenes in the film. Satan promises Thomasin a pretty new dress, the taste of butter, and to see the world, but only if she writes her name in his book. She agrees and is shown to walk off naked into the forest. She finds a clearing with a roaring bonfire in the middle. Around it witches of similar age to her slowly drift into the sky among the treetops while Black Philip bears witness.

Much like Christine in *Drag me to Hell*, the film presently under discussion, *The Witch: A New England Folktale*, follows the journey of a young woman and the circumstances that lead to her becoming a witch. Thomasin is outspoken, independent, and the only family member truly without sin. Her father lies, steals, and is filled with foolish pride which condemns his family, despite his strict adherence to religious doctrine. Katherine falsely accuses Thomasin for much that goes wrong and wants to abandon her to the whims of another family. In the final acts of the film her hatred of her daughter clouds her judgement so much that she attempts to kill her daughter. Caleb, also a liar, is shown to stare at Thomasin's teenage breasts on various occasions. The twins are also liars and falsely accuse her of being a witch while also causing further conflict between her and her parents. The baby Samuel was born in sin and never baptised, which was seen by the Puritans as reason enough not to receive Christ's salvation (Holifield, 2013: 53). It is thus not surprising that the other family members were not swayed to become witches themselves as they arguably already belong to Satan.

The theme of change seems to be a central one in this film. The family uprooting themselves from their Puritan community over a religious dispute, invokes this theme. Similarly does the birth of a new child and the tilling of farm land to raise crops relate to change. To introduce a new farm next to a forest suggests change, due to the reclamation of the wooded land for agricultural use, but also the introduction of an alien species, homo sapiens, to an ecosystem where there was none before. One of the biggest social issues experienced in the last five decades is the problem of humanity's encroachment on nature and the resultant destruction thereof. Human interference has changed the natural landscape in disastrous ways.

Thomasin as a teenager also experiences change in her body. Katherine mentions to William in one scene that Thomasin is becoming a woman, and this is emphasised with Caleb inappropriately staring at his sister's breasts on separate occasions. These physical changes, along with her outspoken and

more liberal nature, leads to conflicts within the family, thus foregrounding change. This is solidified by comparing Thomasin's appearance at the start of the film where she is covered in layers of clothing, her hair hidden under a bonnet, and her reluctance to leave the church, and the end where we see her naked body from behind, and her hair loose as she walks into the dark forest. Her naked body thus not only represents freedom from religious and societal oppression, but also from familial responsibility and gaining personal freedom when one becomes an adult. It can also be tied to the modern women's social and political freedoms within the context of the new millennium. In the context of the film it is more complicated, as is discussed below.

The film appears to be an accurate representation of how the Puritans saw and experienced evil (Briefel, 2019:1; Zwissler, 2018:2). *The Witch* shares similar ideas regarding evil and the witch with other texts like Arthur Miller's *The Crucible* (1953) and Nathaniel Hawthorne's *The Scarlett Letter* (1850). It is also frequently lauded by both scholars and the popular press as a decidedly feminist film (Buckley, 2019:23; Olivetti, 2020:252; Zwissler, 2018:1). Chloe Carrol (2020) maintains, for instance, that the witches in *The Witch* reclaim female power that was stolen from women through the historic prosecution of women, specifically during the witch hunts of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. Carrol (2020) suggests that women were prosecuted because they were women.

Diane Cohen (2016), a critic at *Marie Claire*, titled her review of *The Witch* as '*The Witch' Isn't a Horror Flick—It's a High-Powered Feminist Manifesto* with the added tagline *Find your coven – and yourself*. She describes the film as representing the path to womanhood all women must follow while also claiming that witchcraft is synonymous with empowerment (Cohen, 2016).

In the book chapter titled '*Wouldst Thou Like to Live Deliciously?*': *Gothic Feminism and the Final Girl in Robert Eggers' The Witch*, Victoria Madden argues something similar and says that the film is decidedly feminist as the protagonist is a reformulation of the Final Girl, but also because she chooses to live her life free of patriarchal constraints (2020:135, 136, 147-148). Madden's statements are only partially correct as we will see in the next section.

Literature review

Scholars and writers for the popular press describing *The Witch* as a feminist film miss the point of the film. Laurel Zwissler (2018:1) argues that "conflating witchcraft and feminism is a misapplication of a contemporary idea onto the historical worldview depicted in the film". This is not unlike the corrective suggested with regards to *Witchin & Bitching*. She states that the prosecution of women as witches during the early modern period has been appropriated by modern society and reframed as something it never was (Zwissler, 2018:2). Women were not tortured and killed because they were

women, but because many in society genuinely feared witchcraft and the supernatural (Zwissler, 2018:2-3).

Zwissler (2018:3) expands on the above argument and says that Thomasin does not in fact choose to become a witch and that she becomes a witch because she has no choice in the matter. I fully support Zwissler's assessment. As mentioned, the family exiles itself due to a foolhardy patriarch, William, in the wilderness where they encounter numerous hardships. Thomasin is blamed by her mother, Katherine, for these misfortunes and she pleads with William to send Thomasin away to another family. Katherine blames Thomasin for everything from theft to the disappearance of the baby Samuel and for bewitching Caleb. As the whole family turns on her and is finally wiped out she has no recourse but to become a servant of the Devil.

Zwissler (2018:3, 6) explains that the film is an exploration of a misogynist nightmare, but that it also attempts to communicate a foreign worldview to the audience. The pains that Robert Eggers took with the script so that the characters' dialogue accurately represents the then-contemporary Yorkshire register along with the researched costumes and set pieces, supports the latter (Briefel, 2019:4). Aviva Briefel's study on the histories mirrored in *The Witch* suggests that the film is unusually authentic in its depiction of seventeenth century New England (Briefel, 2019:4). Booker and Lopes's study holds the same (Booker & Lopes, 2020). Briefel (2019:4) argues that the painstaking detail in the film relates a personal nightmare articulated in the present by someone who lived in those times and had a first-hand experience of witchcraft.

Due to the abovementioned production of *The Witch* it can be argued that the film is an example of the hyperreal due to it presenting the viewer with a detailed and realistic vision of a specific point in time which collapses not just the boundaries between reality and fiction, but between two distant points in time. At the same time the film can only present a glimpse of the point in time and not a holistic truth of events, as the story is a fictitious construct.

This resembles the New Historicist theories about texts from the past. Buckley (2019:36) argues that horror film directors and producers frequently subvert historical details and thus fail to reproduce a particular period. The New Historicist perspective suggests the impossibility of capturing an authentic past, but this does not mean that historic accuracy should be completely ignored. It is from tiny and truthful details in art and texts that we can start to build a notion of an authentic representation of the past. According to Buckley (2019:4-5) this is exactly what Eggers accomplishes. Philip Rosen (2001:64-65) probably says it best: "The preservationist goal of imaginatively and perhaps mysteriously being in the presence of the past through the mediation of authentic objects...". In other words, it is from interacting with authentic texts and imagining ourselves in the times that they were created that we start to glimpse the truth of that time.

Chloé Germaine Buckley (2019:36) statements mirror Briefel's in her essay on *The Witch* and she states that the film's narrative matches historical accounts regarding the witch as perceived by seventeenth century settlers. Like Zwissler, Buckley (2019:27) also questions the popular notion of Thomasin representing feminist agency. Buckley (2019:27) argues that the conflation of empowerment and witchcraft most probably originated from a widely debunked theory put forward by Margaret Murray in 1921 which claims that Christianity was preceded by a matriarchal religion that revered nature. This theory then spilled over and influenced scholarly criticism over time, especially where the horror film is concerned (Buckley; 2019:27). She believes that Barbara Creed could be at fault for this perpetuation of inaccurate ideas as Creed builds on the same ideas in *Monstrous Feminine* (Buckley; 2019:27; Creed, 1993:74-75).

Buckley (2019:22) posits that the witch's portrayal in *The Witch* is too ambiguous and does not necessarily subvert patriarchy or misogynist symbols. She has various legitimate reasons for this statement. Throughout the film the witch who lives in the forest and torments the family is shown to be associated with the grotesque suggesting that if woman or feminism is aligned with the witch then it is doing more damage to the movement than good (Buckley; 2019:35). Furthermore, Thomasin having to strip down at the end of the film to join the witches insinuates a heterosexual male control (Buckley; 2019:36). Buckley (2019:36) argues that patriarchal norms suggest that women be categorised according to their sexual availability. The nude woman, though subverting sociocultural norms, is simultaneously rendered an anonymous sexual object and easily made scapegoat (Buckley; 2019:36). This links back to Mulvey's theory regarding the perceived non-threatening nature of a naked woman as discussed in the main literature review. Thomasin has to enter the woods in the nude to appear before the Devil as she is rendered non-threatening to him by being naked.

Zwissler (2018:7) mirrors these sentiments as well and says the only way to fight oppression is to join a rival power that also oppresses, which is what Foucault has suggested on many occasion (Faubion, 2001:273, 354). Satanism in *The Witch* is just another oppressive patriarchal system that oppresses women (Zwissler, 2018:7). As mentioned, Satan promises Thomasin a fine dress, fine dining, and an opportunity to see the world. If his promises were true then why does the old crone live naked and in horrid conditions in a tiny shack in the forest? The dress she is shown to wear when she seduces Caleb is simply a glamour – a spell that gives the impression that she is wearing a finely-made dress. We should also not forget that Satan is behind the murder of Thomasin's entire family and that he put her through severe mental anguish. He kills her family, isolates her, coerces her into a sexual relationship (when she submits to him naked in the forest), and then abducts her. In other words, she is devoured by male power (Zwissler, 2018:7). Thomasin does not join the coven by choice, but is coerced into it (Buckley; 2019:37; Zwissler, 2018:7). Zwissler (2018:22) puts it bluntly: "Is self-annihilation ever a feminist choice?"

The above arguments put forward by Buckley and Zwissler serve to remind the New Historicist of the potential dangers when repurposing texts to suit new sociocultural norms and narratives as these appropriations can lead to error-ridden conclusions. There is no denying that the cinematic witch is subversive, but as the above suggests, these subversions are not always as subversive as we imagine them to be, nor do they always facilitate sociocultural change.

Though Thomasin cannot be a feminist agent she still represents much when we view her through the lens of the Final Girl. Both Buckley (2019:5) and Madden (2020:135-136, 148) apply Clover's Final Girl trope to Thomasin. Both suggest that Thomasin challenges Clover's Final Girl as she is victim, protagonist, and monstrous-feminine combined into one (Buckley, 2019:5; Madden, 2020:136). They also both state that the actual monster in the film is Katherine whose incessant blame-shifting ultimately drives her daughter into the arms of Satan (Buckley, 2019:5; Madden, 2020:136).

Some scholars have studied the theme of scapegoating in *The Witch*, like Alan Bernard McGill (2018) and Kerry A. Olivetti (2020). The blaming of others is inherent to humanity (McGill, 2018:409). Alan Bernard McGill's 2018 essay for *Theology Today* explores scapegoating and the objectification of evil in *The Witch*. He posits that the film mirrors society's penchant to find someone to blame when inexplicable tragedy strikes (McGill, 2018:410).

Olivetti (2020:240) argues that the old witch living in the forest is far less of a threat to the family than the threat that hides in the farmhouse among the family members. This is a surprising shift, since the cinematic horror film witch is usually found hiding in suburban neighbourhoods or in places where they are difficult to detect. In *The Witch* the witch lives deep in the dark forest like the witch we frequently encounter in fairy tales like *Hansel & Gretel* and the proto-horror witch film, *Häxan*. The witch abducts and murders the baby, kidnaps and rapes Caleb, and frightens the children, but the true horror unfolds between the family members that lie and blame. The psychological harm inflicted on Thomasin seems equal, if not worse, than what the witch does to her (Olivetti, 2020:240). The witch and Black Phillip are able to destroy the family because of the familial turmoil.

Olivetti is the only scholar I found thus far to notice the theme of familial abuse in *The Witch*. Abuse, originating from within the family, features more strongly in the film than feminism (Olivetti, 2020:252). Most of us have had friends or family members acknowledge abuse to us at the hands of family members or people who are close to the family. It is also common knowledge today that abuse mostly occurs at the hands of family members or friends. In many instances these accusations come as a surprise to us indicating how well these abuses are concealed.

Olivetti (2020:252) argues that William and Katherine die because of the abuse they direct at Thomasin with the film simultaneously exposing religious zealotry and the failings of patriarchal power structures. In other words, the societal structures of Apollonian society are challenged.

Elizabeth Parker (2020:180), whose work is also discussed in the section on *Antichrist*, posits that the witch is not just the old crone living in the forest, but that Thomasin and Mercy could also be described as witches. She bases this idea on the fact that both Mercy and Thomasin both claim to be a witch in jest (Parker, 2020:180). This is significant as Mercy later admits to have conversed with Black Phillip (Parker, 2020:180).

Parker's study is mostly centred on the natural landscapes where monsters dwell and with the story of *The Witch* taking place in a North American wilderness she makes a few interesting observations regarding the film. The forest is associated with evil and danger from the moment the family arrives (Parker, 2020:181). For the Puritans the forest or the wilderness is closely associated with Original Sin and antichristian space (Parker, 2020:181, 182). Adam and Eve, for instance, were driven out of the Garden of Eden into the wilderness where they would struggle for the rest of their lives. This is emphasised when William says: "...we will conquer this wilderness; it will not consume us". In other words, the forest is conquerable and made female through William's statement, while the farmhouse is rendered masculine (Parker, 2020:181).

Both parents frequently mention to the children that they do not want them to leave the borders of the farm, indicating that the farm is a wilderness that has been tamed and vanquished, making it a safe space (Parker, 2020:182). When Samuel disappears, Thomasin is sitting facing the forest with the baby in front of her. While playing peekaboo the baby disappears. The camera allows the audience to see what Thomasin sees from a first person perspective and her first instinct is to look up at the forest and run towards it, suggesting that something or someone from the forest had taken the baby. This shot mirrors how deeply engrained the fear of the forest is in the minds of family members, while also intimating to the audience the danger the forest represents. Throughout the film the viewer is presented with long shots of the forest, but these shots are desaturated of colour and accompanied by eerie music and terrifying female choruses, further emphasising the forest as a place of evil.

Parker's statements seem relevant especially when we compare the farmhouse to the witch's cabin in the woods which is dark, unsafe, and a place of violence and sexual assault. The witch's home also blends in with the trees and the landscape, almost camouflaging it, collapsing boundaries between nature and man-made space. Nature is however not just presented through vegetation, but through the animals that inhabit the forest as well (Parker, 2020:183). A hare, for instance, is made menacing in one scene where Thomasin goes out one night to check up on the goats. The hare sits in the middle of the pen and stares at her and the audience while the camera slowly zooms in on its unblinking eyes. In another scene Katherine thinks that Caleb and Samuel have returned to her. As she breastfeeds the obvious apparition mimicking Samuel's appearance it is revealed that it is in actual fact a black crow perched on her wrist, ripping and tearing at her exposed breast. William is also killed by the Goat, Black Phillip, who is later revealed to be the Devil in disguise.

A devil in the disguise of a goat is briefly mentioned in the previous chapter on *Witching & Bitching*, specifically with regards to the influences Goya's *El Gran Cabrón* exerted over the film. M. Keith Booker and Elisabete Lopes (2020) make a similar observation about *The Witch*, but they specifically refer to Goya's *The Witches' Sabbath* (1798) and *Witches' Flight* (1798) as influencing the colour palette but also the subject matter. *The Witches' Sabbath* features a black goat with long horns surrounded by women of different ages who are offering babies to him, while *Witches' Flight* shows bare-chested women flying upwards into the night sky.

Booker and Lopes (2020) state that the paintings do not represent Goya's belief in witches or witchcraft, but rather function as a critique on superstition and how power structures use it to oppress society. Booker and Lopes (2020) use this example to illustrate how *The Witch* portrays patriarchal consumerism in the guise of American Calvinism while presenting Thomasin and the other witches as anti-consumerists. I agree with their assessment, especially when one considers Katherine's reaction after her silver cup goes missing. She insists that her reason for being so distraught over the cup is because they could have sold it to buy food for the family, but in another scene she remarks to William that she wishes they were back home in England away from the harsh conditions of the New World. The cup could be viewed as a symbol of luxury or, as the Devil says to Thomasin, "to live deliciously".

The Witch has not received much other attention from academics and most, as mentioned, are more interested in the film's feminist undertones and how Thomasin is a feminist role model, as seen in Carrol (2020), Madden (2020), and Patterson (2017). As evident from the other scholars discussed, and careful consideration of the film's plot, it would be incorrect to label Thomasin as an icon of feminist agency. There are more aspects of the film that I found have not been discussed by scholars.

For instance, the old witch who abducts Samuel in the first quarter of the film makes a total of four physical appearances. In the first scene she is an old hag (figure 50) who smears the slaughtered baby's fat and blood over her naked body and broom which enables her to slowly fly through the air. In the next scene she emerges from her mud hut in the middle of the forest as a beautiful young woman (figure 51) greeting Caleb after he loses his way. He goes to her willingly, obviously enchanted by her beauty and driven by his own lustful desires.



Figure 50. The Witch: A New England Folktale. 2015. Directed by Robert Eggers. [Film still from DVD] South Africa: Universal Pictures Home Entertainment / Next Entertainment.



Figure 51. The Witch: A New England Folktale. 2015. Directed by Robert Eggers. [Film still from DVD] South Africa: Universal Pictures Home Entertainment / Next Entertainment.

She kisses him deeply and grabs his head forcefully with her hand, now that of an old woman's. Caleb is found a few days later shambling naked and severely traumatised from out of the forest. His trauma most likely originating from sexual abuse, but it could also have to do with the realization that the sexual abuse was not at the hands of the beautiful woman in red, but the old hag. The witch's body is

effectively used in this way to evoke feelings of horror and revulsion in the imagination of the audience, especially since there is no clarity regarding the event. From the child's reaction it seems likely that it was not the young woman into whose embrace he rushed.

The old hag makes two more appearances in the film. She is shown to drink blood from a wound on a goat's body after which she abducts the twins. Later, we find her and five other witches writhing naked on the ground around a fire with Black Philip looking upon them. As Thomasin joins them they all, including Thomasin, start rising into the night sky (figure 52). Thomasin is shown to laugh as this happens, but this should not be interpreted as elation, and more as a laughter borne from dread and anxiety.

The old witch, could be argued, represents agency and freedom, though I do not find her being discussed as such by the previously mentioned feminist scholars. By butchering Samuel, the crone displays her disdain for family life and its trappings. By having sex with Caleb she shows that as an old woman she still craves sex and is willing to take it despite the existence of laws and societal norms. Flying around naked and drinking the blood of a goat further points toward her rejection of societal norms and emphasises her freedom and agency. The final scene with the other witches suggests that she does not want to enjoy these freedoms in isolation, but also wishes them for other women who, like herself, had been oppressed and imprisoned by societal norms and ideals. I find that by only viewing Thomasin as feminist and ignoring the old crone along similar lines suggest the scholar's biases. Thomasin, a young woman victimised by power structures, is easier to sell to society as a feminist icon than as a shambling and monstrous old crone who kills babies.



Figure 52. *The Witch: A New England Folk Tale*. 2015. Directed by Robert Eggers. [Film still from DVD] South Africa: Universal Pictures Home Entertainment / Next Entertainment.

There is more to consider when one compares the film to the time of its production and release with respect to the cultural events of the time. A Google search reveals that the film was released at the Sundance film festival on January 27th, 2015, meaning that the film was in production in 2014 (Bitel, 2016). According to an interview in *Sight and Sound*, Eggers admits that the film can be read as a comment on the tensions within American society with regard to the fundamentalism and rationality of the time as well as women's experiences within a patriarchal society (Bitel, 2016).

American society and history is borne from the Protestant faith, meaning that their norms, values, and thus their societal structures are informed in part by biblical ideology. This can be seen in the way some women are treated in American society regardless of social rank. The November 14th, 2014, issue of *Time Magazine* reported on sexual assault allegations against Bill Cosby (Pickert, 2014). This was a watershed moment in the entertainment industry and numerous other similar accusations against men were soon to follow, like the case against Harvey Weinstein (Serisier, 2019: 202). With the proliferation of social media, women have become more empowered which in turn brought much needed attention to sexual offenders which in turn prompted changes in legislations (Andersson et al. 2019:2). In this way Thomasin and the old witch in *The Witch* resemble voiceless and powerless women. They mirror the way societal norms often strip women, young and old, of agency leaving them little recourse but to take drastic measures in order to protect themselves and to gain autonomy or freedom. In many instances these women have no other recourse but to come forward and publicly accuse those who wronged them, but in the process they risk damaging their own reputations and livelihoods. In other words, they are forced into situations that are not always beneficial and can lead to further entrapments.

Häxan's influence on The Witch

The old witch who lives in the forest seems to be an almost carbon copy of the old witches in *Häxan*. She is old, diseased, and decrepit. She rides a broom, murders babies, and seduces men through glammers and enchantments. Her naked flesh is exposed to make her even more abject, especially when compared to Anya Taylor-Joy's Thomasin who is young, pretty, and thin. There is no ratio of influence thus to discuss in this instance with regards to embodiment. There are, however, interesting observations to be made when we consider the Apollonian and Dionysian connotations related to the old witch and Thomasin.

It is important to reiterate the fact that Thomasin only becomes a witch at the very end of the film and not by choice. She is a witch only in the eyes of her family who blame her for all the hardships that befall them. As mentioned in the main literature review, witches or witchcraft was frequently believed

to be the reason behind misfortunes that could not readily be explained. Thomasin is made scapegoat as she is the only witness to Caleb and Samuel's disappearance – the male children are more valuable than a girl given the antiquated belief that men resemble God and because of their greater physical prowess. Thomasin is shown to be religious, rational, and independent as far as the Puritan context she finds herself in allows. She protects her brothers and sister and challenges her father by calling him a hypocrite. She has no power in the family and Caleb, her younger brother, seems to wield more power than she does. Despite her hardships and lack of agency in the family she never becomes violent or hysterical, nor does she seem to yearn for control or domination over anything or anyone. It is for these reasons that Thomasin cannot be aligned to either Apollo or Dionysus.

When she walks out naked into the forest there is an implied sexualisation of her body, but not for the benefit of the viewer. She is sexualised for her master. This sexualisation is also debatable. The forest could be interpreted as an anti-Garden of Eden ruled by the Devil. Adam and Eve were naked in the Garden of Eden and had no comprehension of it as something shameful. Thomasin entering the Devil's Garden of Eden is a rejection of Eve's expulsion. This unexpected change in the sexualisation of the young witch's body can be interpreted as an example of Bloom's *clinamen*.

The old witch, unlike Thomasin, is aligned with Dionysus. She murders a baby and is very much aligned with nature and the abject in both appearance and action. The problem however is that she serves a male Devil that requires her to submit to him. He has power over her and keeps her naked and isolated in a hovel in the middle of the forest. She lives in brutal conditions which I find far worse than what Thomasin was subjected to. The Devil in other words has limited her lifestyle according to his preference, even though he has power to give her anything she desires. This aligns Satan with Apollo, suggesting that Dionysus is controlled by an Apollonian power structure which in turn means that her alignment with Dionysus is a façade to lure others away from one Apollonian structure to a rival Apollonian structure. This reframing of malefic structures as Apollonian is an example of Bloom's *tessera*.

In most other instances the old witch in Eggers' film conforms to the tropes established in *Häxan* without reframing them. The witch is violent, anti-familial, surrounded by dead and abject things, kills men and everyone aligned with patriarchal authority and religion. She has great supernatural power and can fly through the air and conjure up apparitions to drive others mad. She also seduces men through glamour spells. All her supernatural power is granted to her by the Devil. In other words, there are very few changes made to the established tropes. The big difference, however, is that Eggers does not insinuate that female hysteria led to the creation of the witch. In *The Witch*, the hysterical people are those of the Puritan faith, while the 'witch', Thomasin, is perfectly rational and in control. Furthermore, the film accurately portrays the way witchcraft was perceived at the time, namely as something very real and to be feared. This demonstrates another instance of Bloom's *clinamen* due to

the unexpected change made to a frequently found trope as the witch and witchcraft are treated in the same way the Puritans viewed and experienced it.

This is interesting from a New Historicist perspective as the meaning of texts like the *Malleus Maleficarum* and other anecdotal texts about witches and witchcraft are viewed through a similar lens than the perspective of the people who originally lived through these events during the early modern period. This brings the New Historicist one step closer to being able to piece together a more reliable view of a time and place. This can be argued is a reframing of the text itself as the meaning derived from the text is not as focussed on the contemporary viewer's sociocultural position. The film functions more as a veritable hyperreal time machine giving us a glimpse of a point in time more than three hundred years ago and of what the people of that time believed.

THE AUTOPSY OF JANE DOE (2016)

André Øvredal's *The Autopsy of Jane Doe* (2016) seems like a logical sequel to Eggers' *The Witch* on various levels. A witch is found buried in the basement of a suburban neighbourhood. During the autopsy the coroners discover that she is more than three hundred years old and the victim of the seventeenth century New England witch trials. In other words, Jane Doe is not unlike the young witches floating in the sky at the end of *The Witch*. One could view *The Autopsy of Jane Doe* as a type of what-if scenario where one of the witches in *The Witch* was captured, tried, and murdered for being a witch, or, alternatively, a woman from one of the villages from that time who was falsely accused of witchcraft. Nevertheless, the film asks similar questions that *The Witch* asks related to the accusations of witchcraft raised against women at the time, women's position in a Puritan society, and the similar experiences of women from the seventeenth century and how these experiences reverberate in the twenty-first century. Over the next few pages I discuss Øvredal's film from a New Historicist perspective in the hope to find evidence of the reciprocal influences that exists between the sociocultural and the witch and her supernatural power by comparing the film to *Häxan* and Paglia's *Dionysus*.

Background

The Autopsy of Jane Doe is André Øvredal's second feature film and was released six years after his first film, *Trollhunter* (2010). *Trollhunter* is a dark fantasy film about a man who hunts trolls for the Norwegian government. The film is shot in the found footage film style popularised by *The Blair Witch Project*. This is interesting as *The Autopsy of Jane Doe* is a film revolving around the autopsy of an unknown woman – a theme we frequently find in reality crime series. Unlike the jittery camerawork typically found in found-footage films and reality television, the camerawork in *The Autopsy of Jane Doe* has an almost observational stillness to it. The camera, for instance, always hovers above Jane emulating the point of view of a coroner.

The film has generally garnered favourable reviews. Stephen King has publicly stated that *The Autopsy of Jane Doe*'s visceral horror rivals Ridley Scott's *Alien* (1979) and earlier Cronenberg films (Collins, 2017). Howard Gorman (2016) at *Dread Central*, one of the foremost horror media review websites on the Internet, said: "...the most original and chilling film of the year, having shocked and (pleasantly) surprised festivalgoers around the world since it first debuted at TIFF [Toronto International Film Festival] in September."

The film follows a father and son who do a routine autopsy on the body of a young and beautiful woman who is found partially buried in the basement of a house. The elderly couple who owned the property are also found murdered inside the locked house with no evidence of forced entry. The

sheriff's office requests an autopsy done on the woman in the hope that it might give them some indication of what had transpired in the house.



Figure 53. *The Autopsy of Jane Doe*. 2016. Directed by André Øvredal. [Film still from DVD] South Africa: Universal Pictures Home Entertainment / Next Entertainment.

The corpse, played by Olwen Kelly (figure 53), is slim, brunette, attractive, and has no visible tattoos or scars. The film's role required her to remain still and nude for the entire production. Without uttering a word or making any movements she kills both father and son and terrifies the audience. Where *The Blair Witch Project* relied on the imagination of the viewer to embody the witch, *The Autopsy of Jane Doe* succeeds in making the unmoving, beautiful female nude just as deadly and monstrous.

Most of the film takes place in the mortuary where the coroner, Tommy Tilden, and his son, Austin, slowly piece together the mystery woman's death. They find that her wrists and ankles had been shattered, though her body betrayed none of the trauma in the form of bruises or blood clotting. There are also small amounts of peat under her fingernails, toenails, and in her hair. Her tongue had been crudely cut out and one of her molars is found bound in a small rag in her stomach. They are puzzled by the murder, since her body suggests that she had been murdered mere moments ago since there is no rigor mortis, while her grey and clouded eyes suggest that she had been dead for several days. Further inspection reveals that she had suffered severe vaginal trauma with the inside of her vagina riddled with cuts and lesions.

As Tommy prepares to slice into her chest for the internal analysis the weather changes and rolling thunder can be heard in the distance. The AM/FM radio in the room erupts in bursts of static and an eerie 1950s song, *Open up your Heart (and let the Sun Shine in)*, starts playing. At first there is no blood as his scalpel slides from her collarbone to her navel, but then streams of blood cascade from the slits as if she was still alive. This scene seems like a ghastly parody of the romantic stormy night

that first time lovers experience in trashy romantic novels. Jane is the young woman about to be penetrated, while Tommy is the opposite of a young adolescent lover.

As the autopsy continues her lungs are found to be severely damaged by soot as if she had been standing in a raging fire, yet there were no burn marks anywhere on her body. Many of her internal organs are also found to be riddled with scars. Strange events transpire after this discovery and their cat is brutalised by some mysterious force compelling Tommy to reluctantly put it out of its misery. Remains of Jimsonweed, which Tommy mentions can be used to induce paralysis, is found in her stomach along with the aforementioned small bundle of cloth containing her missing tooth. The cloth is covered in strange symbols and letters. Similar symbols are also found on the inside of her skin. Reports on the radio suggest that the thunder had developed into a storm. Tommy then notices something strange with the woman's skin and removes her skin, exposing more of the strange symbols that were on the cloth. The room is flung into darkness as all the lights explode and the power goes out. The other corpses in the morgue have been resurrected and start tormenting them.

As they realise that Jane is causing these events they attempt to incinerate her body where it lays, but the fire has no effect. Scared out of their wits Austin accidentally buries a small axe into Emma, Austin's girlfriend's, chest. They finally overcome some of their fear and complete the autopsy by examining Jane's brain tissue. They find that her brain matter is still active, meaning that she is still alive. Austin then re-examines the cloth and discovers that it is a puzzle that needs to be folded. It reveals a Bible verse, Leviticus 20:27 and the year 1693. The verse reads: "A man or a woman who is a medium, or who has familiar spirits, shall surely be put to death; they shall stone them with stones. Their blood shall be upon them." From this the two men come to a realization that she was condemned to death for being a witch. Tommy asserts though that witches do not exist and never had and that Jane, along with numerous other young women and children, were innocent and were tortured and murdered by hysteric villagers. The torturous ritual performed on Jane was not inflicted because Jane was a witch, but transformed Jane into an immortal witch hell-bent on revenge for all time.

The film ends with both Tommy and Austin dying. Tommy dies after he willingly sacrifices himself to Jane in order to save his son. Jane seems to accept and all her physical trauma is transferred to Tommy, while her body heals itself, leaving no mark anywhere or evidence of the autopsy performed on her. All her broken joints mend, her eyes turn to normal brown, and her skin becomes rosy. Austin succumbs minutes later when he hears the sheriff at the basement door. This is another trick of Jane's, and Austin plummets to his death down a staircase when a ghostly apparition of Tommy startles him. The film ends with Jane's body now in better shape and no evidence of any of the abovementioned having transpired at all. Her body is removed from the mortuary and subsequently transported to another coroner's office in the next county.

Literature review

The Autopsy of Jane Doe has not received much attention from scholars since its release. Below I discuss the only three articles I found regarding the film. The first of these is Jeff Salazar's 2018 article that is a psychoanalytic reading of the film. Salazar (2018:2-3) argues that Jane, Austin, and Tommy all represent different aspects of Freud's structural hypotheses, namely the id, ego, and superego. The id is pure instinct and desire, the superego is what moralises us and makes us critical, while the ego is the mediator between the id and ego (Freud, 1986:19-27).

Jane represents the id and unconscious mind, while also embodying Jung's trickster and shadow archetypes (Salazar, 2018:8, 9, 12, 13). Jung describes his trickster archetype as a malicious prankster and shape-shifter who is half animal, half divine, and a product of a primitive time (Jung, 1981:255). The shadow is equated with the anima (feminine part of man's personality) (Jung, 1981:30). According to Jung (1981:123, 139) the shadow is associated with the dream world, but it also represents the space between different spheres of reality, like the world of the living and the world of the dead, but also the unconscious. Jung (1981:174) links the unconscious to the primal or barbaric man who is not able to be in control or think rationally. Salazar (2018:13) argues that Jane is both witch and hermaphrodite. He says her body is bewitching and delicate while her violent and supernatural-driven actions are decidedly masculine (Salazar, 2018:13).

Austen represents the ego and embodies the Jungian hero, while Tommy represents the superego and embodies Jung's wise old man (Salazar, 2019:9, 11, 12). The hero is associated with the semi-divine and godliness, but also with the child who has supernatural abilities (Jung, 1981:128, 165). Jung (1981:166) argues that the hero symbolises the union between the conscious and the unconscious, or someone who between human and god. The hero's main goal is to triumph over the monster, but he often has a weakness or is destroyed by something insignificant (Jung, 1981:167).

The wise old man represents the spiritual and functions as a guide or an authority (Jung, 1981:215, 216). He frequently appears, for instance, as a doctor, priest, teacher, or a magician (Jung, 1981:216). Tommy does indeed function in this capacity in the film as he is an endless fountain of knowledge and is the one who pieces together the mystery of Jane Doe's past.

In some instances I agree with Salazar's novel interpretations, but there are aspects of his argument that I do not agree with. To describe violence as a masculine trait is problematic. Violence cannot be attributed to sex as both masculine and feminine figures resort to violence. Apollo and Dionysus do however use violence in different ways. Apollo, for instance, uses violence as a method of control and to subjugate that which differs from him, like women and nature. Dionysus on the other hand employs violence to destroy in order for rebirth to occur. Dionysus violently devours in order to become more than themselves.

I find that Jane Doe is more aligned with what Rikke Schubart (2007) describes as a rape-avenger due to the evidence of vaginal trauma Tommy finds on Jane's body. Schubart devotes a whole chapter in her book *Super Bitches and Action Babes: The Female Hero in Popular Cinema, 1970-2006* to a cinematic woman who is raped by a man or men and who then seeks revenge against them. Schubart's examples include Chris in *Lipstick* (1976), Jennifer in *I Spit on Your Grave* (1978), and the Bride in *Kill Bill* (2003).

According to Schubart (2007) the rape functions as a central plot device and is a motive for vengeance. As the film progresses the victim is transformed into an avenger (Schubart, 2007). Schubart (2007) says the following:

The female hero (rape-avenger) pushes the hero down from his pedestal and takes his position. Viewed from a man's perspective, she challenges patriarchy and disrupts masculinity, because masculinity is structured in binary opposition to femininity (male versus female, strong versus weak), and strengthening the female position means weakening the male position. Rape springs from anxiety about masculinity.

This is interesting as the Apollonian boundaries between male and female thus collapse – it is not a case of a woman becoming a masculine, but the disruption of the male/female designations. Schubart builds her argument on the theories of Sue Less regarding sexual violence. It is commonly understood that sexual violence is not about eroticism, but about power, domination, humiliation, and degradation.

Schubart (2007) deepens her argument and suggests that one of the reasons men rape is because of women's alignment with nature. She says that there is not masculinity to be found in nature meaning that men cannot find, or associate with, nature (Schubart, 2007). I agree with her assertions as I have noted throughout this thesis that women and Dionysus are aligned with nature, while men and Apollo are aligned with progress and civilisation. Men in western societies often go on hunting trips or hiking in the wilderness as a rite of passage, or as a masculine past-time that many men claim are not suited to women. This constant need to dominate nature, according to Schubart, stems from his inability to associate with nature, but also because civilisation feminises or castrates men as men become soft in the civilised context. It is also why the word 'rape' is often used to refer to man's destruction of nature. When women or nature are not available to those with predisposition for macho-masculinity then other weaker males become the rape victims (Schubart, 2007).

During the autopsy Austin and Tommy find small amounts of peat under Jane's fingernails, toenails, and in her hair. Peat is formed in nature in areas where large amounts of vegetation constantly die and the remains are constantly kept moist (Bussi eres, Hugron, & Rochefort, 2013:7). The result of this mixture of organic material and water creates an ecosystem that is of the utmost importance for the

wellbeing of the planet (Bussi res, Hugron, & Rochefort, 2013:7). As the plant material decomposes methane is released giving peatlands a distinctive rotting smell (Bussi res, Hugron, & Rochefort, 2013:7). Peat is also used extensively in horticulture due to its nutritional value (Bussi res, Hugron, & Rochefort, 2013:8, 9, 74). Peat resembles the Dionysian primal matrix where liquidity, destruction, and rebirth meet. The rotting odour reminds us of Apollonian disgust. The specific mention of peat under Jane's nails and the way the camera zooms in on it amplifies the affinity between Jane and nature.

The autopsy, as mentioned, reveals that Jane's vaginal walls are riddled with cuts and lesions. In other words, she was sexually violated by her captors, the Puritan torturers, in an effort to make her confess or simply because of her alignment with nature which could potentially have been misread as an alignment with the Devil. Her effortless alignment with nature and by implication, Satan, unsettled them. Being unable to conquer nature or drive nature into submission frustrated them and Jane's unwillingness to submit to their accusations and condemnations drove them to rape her with various objects causing the internal injuries that the coroners find.

The rape of Jane Doe, however, does not end there. Austin and Tommy violate Jane's body in a similar way with scalpels and other medical devices, but not to dominate her as a person. Their investigation is an attempt to dominate a mystery by solving said mystery that relates to her body. Their eyes invariably intrude on every private nook and cranny of her person as there is no other way of solving the mystery. They are shown to record the autopsy on video while Austin is also shown to take numerous close-up polaroids of the body during the examination. This is done for the benefit of the police department and would likely be entered as evidence if court proceedings were to follow. In many respects Jane Doe seems close to the dramatizations found in crime documentaries that have proven so popular that there are entire reality television channels devoted to crime and investigation documentaries.

Rachael Harris's 2020 study on *The Autopsy of Jane Doe* considers the abovementioned societal obsession with crime documentaries and refers to it as 'wound culture'. According to Harris (2020:160-161) *The Autopsy of Jane Doe* mirrors society's obsession with not just dead bodies, but the idea of viewing dead bodies. She argues that the intense scrutiny and objectification of Jane's body is not unlike that which the accused witches had to endure during the time of the witch hunts (Harris, 2020:161).

Harris (2020:161) says that the ultimate goal of forensic pathology is to dehumanise the victim as courts require facts that are not influenced by emotion as it might skew the outcome of the legal proceedings. The photos and videos have to be as objective as possible with very little bias as an emotional response in the viewer leads to bias (Harris, 2020:161). In *The Autopsy of Jane Doe* the opposite occurs and the coroners and the viewer empathizes more and more with Jane as more layers

of her mysterious death is peeled away (Harris, 2020:162). Furthermore, because Jane is somewhere between being alive and dead and because she is so close to death those who are alive and who scrutinise her can understand death a bit more (Harris, 2020:162). By flirting with death so closely Tommy and Austin die (Harris, 2020:162).

Harris's study is compelling, but not without issue. I feel that *The Autopsy of Jane Doe* additionally mirrors aspects of contemporary violent pornography. A recent study tracing the prevalence of violence in pornography showed that visual aggression was found in 30% to 50% of the 269 most popular pornographic videos on Pornhub produced between 2008 and 2016 (Seida & Shor, 2018:8).

The combination of the recording methods the coroners use in *The Autopsy of Jane Doe* is similar to the methods used in mainstream pornography where sexual acts are filmed using a video camera, but a photographer is also available in many cases to shoot key moments for use in pornographic magazines, downloadable photo packs for websites, as well as promotional material (Dines, 2012; Hefferman, 2015:50).

It is apparent that the film is at its core about the female body and how society views the body. A film is an edited recording which enables the viewer to follow and experience a story. As mentioned, the coroners are shown to make a video recording of the autopsy they are performing as evidence for law enforcement agencies. The film not only mirrors society's consumption of violent and pornographic material, but also the way they look at pornography. Pornography creates a disconnection between sex and emotion, since you view sex in a relationship-free context (Bishop, 2007:54-55). *The Autopsy of Jane Doe* challenges this notion, as the coroners grow to empathise with her as more of the mystery is solved. This is not meant in jest, but like lust and erections grow while watching pornography so does empathy grow in both viewer and the coroners as the film unfolds. Like in pornography the viewers and the coroners examine every square inch of Jane, from her skin, eyes, and hair, vaginal walls, and organs but unlike pornography they also examine her brain.

Consider the sequence and method of the examination of her body. They start with an examination of the body as a whole with Austin describing the outward appearance. He starts with her skin, then her eyes, her limbs, and then remarks how exceptionally thin her waist is. This leads to an examination of her nails and then her hair which they notice all contain traces of peat. They then move to her nose, ears, and mouth. Systematically they go deeper. The vagina is next, then they open her chest, examine her lungs, then her heart, and then her other organs. Her stomach is opened and the contents are examined.

From this point on the examination is more concerned with the items they find hidden within her body, like the Jimsonweed, the piece of cloth, and the markings found hidden under her skin. It is only at the end of the film after they had to endure reanimated corpses and other horrors and are

forced to lock themselves in the lab, that they complete the autopsy. They open her skull and find that she was in fact alive the whole time.

This echoes not only the way the viewer looks at the female body in pornography, but also how people in general look at others. They start by the physical appearance of the body, then the eyes, and then body weight. They then move on to details like hair and nails and general grooming. An investigation of sexual availability then takes place, which is most likely followed by intercourse. The vagina is investigated from every angle to emphasise importance of sex and the potential of pleasure it contains, though the viewer is not made privy to this as such scenes create problems for sensors and distributors as mentioned in earlier chapters. Only then are questions sometimes raised about health and longevity. Like Tommy and Austin are distracted from completing the examination of Jane's brain, so is society distracted from examining the brain, or specifically, the personality or soul of others.

Some might argue that this way of seeing is informed by the male gaze and a patriarchal system that attempts to suppress women, but this is only a small part of the argument. Asa, the witch from *Black Sunday*, along with the witches in *The Witches*, *Season of the Witch*, and *Witchcraft II: The Temptress* intersect with regard to the sexual availability of the witch. *The Autopsy of Jane Doe* reflects these ideas regarding the sexual availability of a young and beautiful woman and the domination of her corporeal form. Jane is young, beautiful, and naked, and while she is examined en penetrated from every possible angle, her body is never eroticised nor made obscene. Neither of the protagonists comments on her obvious beauty anywhere in the film, nor is it hinted to in any way or form. She is a statue of perpetual feminine beauty, a doll-like object that some would argue embodies the heterosexual male's sexual desire (Fahy, 2007:77). This frozen beauty resembles Paglia's ideas regarding Apollonian control where the creation of art is an act of control. A motionless woman means that her fluids and the fluidity of her body are contained. She is still fetishized for the viewer and the coroners work as a guide for the viewer, an almost artificial and emotionless eye that allows the viewer to scrutinise the female form without any negative associations.

Another way Jane's body can be interpreted has to do with the fetishized female body as found in the realistic love doll industry. By 2015 realistic silicone sex dolls were being produced at 22 factories across seven nations, including Japan and the United States of America (Nast, 2017:760). These types of dolls have become popular over the years, as there are many lonely individuals with disabilities and others who feel inept in pursuing romantic interests (Musiał, 2019:152). These men often argue that this type of relationship is superior to having a relationship with a real woman, since these dolls make them feel secure in their relationship with the 'woman' never changing (Musiał, 2019:153). The unchanging beautiful woman is again an attempt of Apollonian control. Many of these men also report that they can have their way with their dolls and that they never object or complain (Musiał,

2019:153). Disturbingly, some men claim that they feel like gods with these silicone simulacra, since they control their every movement and existence (Asl & Shokri, 2015:219; Musiał, 2019:153).

One has to remember that for approximately 200 years, men were at the head of the nuclear family and wielded power in society (Asl & Shokri, 2015:216). In the last four decades this has changed dramatically and power has in many instances shifted away from white men to women, persons from other races and cultures. Mousa Asl and Natasha Shokri (2015:229) argue that the popularity of these sex dolls among men is due to these socio-historic constructs of power shifting away from men and them not having the ability to form connections with women of equal or more power than themselves. The power to control is thus key to the rising popularity of realistic sex dolls.

These themes have been explored in films like *Cherry 2000* (1987), *The Stepford Wives* (2004), and *Her* (2013), where men prefer the company of submissive dolls or robots to that of real women. These simulacra are incapable of independent thought and because they were manufactured by men and have no will of their own or feelings, they are akin to kitchen appliances, thus falling short of Baudrillard's hyperreal.

One could potentially draw similarities between these themes and *Jane Doe* and argue that the film is a drawn out symbolic rape of a woman or a sadistic patriarchal fantasy. This is likely if one considers the Puritans who butchered her did so because she could not be controlled, was too aligned with nature, or was simply different from them. With regards to Austin and Tommy's examination of Jane it is clear that solving the mystery of her death is their only motivation. I also find that there are instances that point to the film being more about disability, the inability to communicate, and that the human body can be beautiful without being sexually objectified. It also mirrors society's unwillingness and inability to look beyond superficial.

Philosophers have on numerous occasions struggled with the question of what constitutes life and when disability or physical trauma to a body is so severe that the person cannot be classified as really being alive (Kim, 2012:94). Kim (2012:94-95) argues that these sex dolls embody disability and that their passivity spurs others into accommodating these dolls, much like society is accommodating the wheelchair-bound and the blind. An example of the last-mentioned can be found in Craig Gillespie's *Lars and the Real Girl* (2007). Though the above presents us with a novel approach to Jane, Jane is not a doll, and as the film clearly shows, she has agency and a fully functioning mind. She is just unable to communicate the origin of her trauma and her perpetual pain. Her body mirrors society's obsession with appearance and physical perfection and challenges it by not moving. Movement is essential for the glorification of beauty, otherwise Madame Tussaud's wax imitations of celebrities would be just as notoriously famous as the real people whose appearances they emulate. This might suggest why there is no surge in pornographic material containing men and these dolls, despite the dolls' popularity.

Jane is a young, healthy and beautiful woman, but without a mind and a way to express herself she is just a body. The absence of her tongue reinforces this idea, since if she was able to move then there would be no need to remove her tongue as she could express herself through physical movements and sign language. The tongue is used to communicate, but also for sexual and intimate pleasure, drawing links between communication and sexual attraction.

Her immobile naked body is not meant to be a sexual object on display. She is naked and unmoving so that the viewer does not feel threatened by her. She wants the viewer to explore her, not for sexual gratification, but to find out who she is and what pain she has endured. The transference of her physical pain to Tommy is symbolic of this sharing of her pain, and the reason why no one leaves the lab. Her pain is intimate and private and she means for it not to be shared by anyone else but herself. It comments on society's obsession to know every intimate detail about others through tabloids, day-time talk shows, and reality television. In an attempt to humanise celebrities or gain ratings and advertising revenue through the display of pain, sorrow, or abuse through media platforms, society is making it artificial and cheap.

The naked body also lulls the viewer and the coroners into a false security. Like Thomasin in *The Witch*, the naked body seems less threatening because of its sexual connotations, but also because a weapon cannot be concealed. Jane is however found to be far more dangerous than a normal woman as her weapon of destruction is the supernatural which is hidden within her and cannot be observed through scientific enquiry.

According to Elisabete Lopes (2019:5) Jane's body cannot be considered a normal human body due to the nature of her injuries, but also because of her body being transported to a different time. Austin, for instance, notices her abnormally narrow waist which they later realise is a consequence of wearing a corset, something that women of the twenty-first century rarely wear, if at all. Frequently wearing a corset leads to the displacement of ribs and internal organs which over time results in a much narrower waist (Stone, 2012:57). Pamela K. Stone (2012:53, 75) suggests in her article, *Binding Women: Ethnology, Skeletal Deformations, and Violence Against Women*, that the traditional use of a corset was not unlike Chinese foot-binding, and that the wearing of a corset was a socially acceptable effort to control the mobility and appearance of women. As a consequence, Jane's body does not physically resemble the body of a contemporary young woman of the same age from the twenty-first century. Furthermore, her body betrays the 'acceptable' sociocultural violence that was inflicted on her body in an effort to control her. In addition, Jane inhabits a space between being alive and dead which is not the normal state of the human body (Lopes, 2019:6).

Lopes' essay explores the influence and similarities between Edgar Allan Poe's use of women in his novellas and the female body in *The Autopsy of Jane Doe*. Lopes (2019:2) argues that the film is terrifying because it is the body of a woman that is explored. Her body is *othered* through the

extensive damage to her organs while her body remains intact and in pristine conditions on the outside (Lopes, 2019:5-6). He says that in this respect Jane is like Madeline Usher in Poe's *The Fall of the House of Usher* who also suffers from a strange illness that doctors are unable to diagnose or cure (Lopes, 2019:5).

The influence of *The Fall of the House of Usher* manifests in other ways as well. Lopes (2019:2) makes an especially interesting observation regarding the upper and lower floors of the house in both texts. Like in *The Fall of the House of Usher* the aboveground floors of the house in ... symbolise light, reality, and where the living dwell, while the basement level(s) symbolise darkness, the underworld of the dead, and the realm of the Devil (Lopes, 2019:2, 4, 6, 10). From the last-mentioned Lopes (2019:7, 12-13, 14) argues that Jane causes the two coroners to experience hallucinations and that she tells her story to them and the viewers through said hallucinations. Jane being without a tongue renders her speechless leaving her only recourse to find other ways of communication (Lopes, 2019:7). She convinces Austin and Tommy that they are trapped in the underground mortuary because she does not want them to escape before she is able to tell her story and thus becomes the narrator of her own story through illusions (Lopes, 2019:7). This is a fair assumption as the film starts and begins with Jane and she propels the entire narrative by creating illusions and through the investigation of her body. This draws attention to the power and mystery of the feminine which in turn leads to subversion of patriarchal power (Lopes, 2019:13).

Lopes' ideas regarding *The Autopsy of Jane Doe* align the film with *Suspiria* where the witch is able to change reality whenever she manifests. After the death of Austin and Tommy all trace of Jane's manifestations disappear. Her body returns to its original pre-autopsy form as does the fire damage in the room disappear. The tree that fell on the doors leading out of the building never fell over and the elevator is in perfect working condition. Everything is shown to have reverted back to the way it was before the autopsy, with the exception of Austin and Tommy being dead, and the video recording and polaroids being destroyed. It seems more than plausible that everything they experienced was merely an illusion.

Tropes and reverberations

The body of the young and beautiful witch is reframed in *The Autopsy of Jane Doe*. She is immobile but is just as powerful, or even more powerful, than Mother Suspiriorum in *Suspiria*. This reframing of the witch is an example of Bloom's *tesserae* where the young beautiful witch is the only recognisable trope, but she is not depowered or able to entice men with her sexuality, nor does she need to. Her body is not important, but her identity is. At one point in the film Tommy asks Austin what Jane would look like on the outside if all the internal trauma was reflected on the outside of her

body. Austin responds that she would be “disfigured beyond recognition” which suggests the importance of her as a person and what she lived through. Jane’s body functions as a piece of evidence that tells Jane’s specific story and not a story of the New England witches in general. Jane’s story reminds me of the #metoo movement where an emphasis is placed on individual stories of sexual assault. Jane wants the men to really see her and to empathise with her, which is why she has Tommy experience everything she felt during her torture. This happens because Tommy speaks to her and offers her his help. Her sole reason for being is to tell her story and Tommy becomes another vessel for her tale.

Jane’s body bridges the realms of the living and the dead making her something that cannot be defined by Apollonian reason. Like the Dionysian primal matrix, Jane contains both the dead and the potential of new life. Usually dead and dirty things are found externally to the witch, like skulls, goblets filled with blood, or the remains of dead things, but in this film she contains the dead and dirty inside of her body. Her lungs are singed and burnt by flame and smoke, a dirty rag with symbols is found in her stomach wrapped around one of her teeth, strange symbols are tattooed on the inside of her skin, and her irises are white and grey. A fly is also shown to crawl out from Jane’s nose while Austin takes photos of her. This is a unique swerve where the witch’s proximity to dead and dirty things is concerned, implying Bloom’s *clinamen*.

The peat under her finger and toenails is a form of dirt, but instead of being used to associate Jane with uncleanness its purpose is to link Jane with nature, new growths, and the swampy wetlands. In other words, Jane is linked with Dionysus through the peat under her nails. She is an avatar for nature, which explains why she had to die at the hands of the Puritans. As mentioned in the previous sections on *The Witch*, *Antichrist*, and *The Blair Witch Project* the wilderness was a place of fear for the first American settlers. They saw it as an untamed place of death, darkness, and misery – a place that needed to be controlled by those borne in God’s image, namely man. Nature and the wilderness reminds man of his fragility and his weaknesses which is why nature, and by extension women, have to be subdued and controlled. The clergy who tortured and maimed women during the period of the witch hunts could be seen as a more primitive form of Apollo than the coroners who perform the autopsy on Jane. Austin and Tommy are rational scientists who attempt to find answers to Jane’s death through rigorous scientific enquiry which is initially cold and clinical. As they uncover more clues, both men seem to gradually empathise more and more with Jane and what she went through. The Apollonian is thus reframed (*tessera*) in the film as those aligned with Apollo empathise with the witch but they are also unable to shake their obsessive desire to label and categorise. This is emphasised by Austin and Tommy’s surname, Tilden, which sounds like ‘till’. Tilling the ground is an act of breaking up or turning over soil, or, the act of unearthing which is what the father and son team succeed to an extent in doing. Interestingly this is exactly what Jane needs them to do. If not for their relentless search or digging for the truth Jane’s story would not be told to the coroners or the

viewer. Jane's intention is not for her tale to become widespread, which is why she destroys all the evidence external to her body, like the polaroids and the video of the autopsy at the end of the film. Jane seeks a personal and more intimate audience with the coroners, but also the viewer.

Though Jane has vast amounts of supernatural power at her disposal I do not consider her a witch, though she does become witchlike. In the film Tommy suggests that the rituals used to subdue Jane are in fact the very same rituals that imbued her with supernatural power and made her a primal force of rage and nature. She is shown to have control over plants, electricity, the weather, and to reanimate the dead, all which are part of nature and Dionysus, but because she is aligned with Dionysus' chaos and irrationality she cannot be rationalised with. Jane is like a tornado of anger who lashes out at everyone and everything. She is the personification of pleasure and pain combined who liberates by destroying. As she destroys she also recreates her story over and over again. Like Thomasin in *The Witch*, Jane is not a witch, but becomes one due to the influence of Apollonian power structures who want to control and subdue them. Jane is also not free as she is trapped within a maelstrom of hate and vengeance.

Jane was tortured and killed by men, but they unwittingly created the avatar of vengeance that she becomes. This unexpected shift (Bloom's *clinamen*) where a woman is made witch by the very rituals that were supposed to bind her, is interesting and suggests the Apollonian merging with the Dionysian. Like the Devil is aligned with Apollo in *The Witch*, so is Jane's perpetual beauty and her prison of vengeance an Apollonian construct. In other words, *The Autopsy of Jane Doe* collapses the boundaries between Apollo and Dionysus, effectively subverting patriarchal power structures.

Conclusion

Rape and sexual assault are often found in horror films. Films like *Halloween* (2007), *I Spit on Your Grave* (1978 and 2010 versions), *The Hills have Eyes* (2006), and *The Last House on the Left* (1972 and the 2009 version) do not shy away from graphic sexual assault. Witch horror movies, however, never seem to breach this subject, and in most cases it is just symbolically inferred to in films like *The Witch* where Thomasin has to submit unclothed to the Devil. *The Autopsy of Jane Doe* portrays sexual assault in a decidedly different way. The assaults originate from different motivations. The Puritan's sexually assaulted her because they were cruel and vindictive, while Austin and Tommy's assault on her body is not driven by hate or spite towards women. At first they are shown to be indifferent to her, but as their investigation intensifies they start to empathise with her while also fearing her power.

In the case of *The Witch* the film itself functions as a time machine taking the viewer back to a different and unknown world where people firmly and absolutely believed in witches, witchcraft, and

the power of the Devil. Jane's body functions in the same way and is a veritable time capsule which is opened in modern times, not unlike a reframed version of Pandora's Box.

THE NEON DEMON (2016)

Background on the film

Where Jane Doe refuses celebrity and challenges the socio-normative links between physical beauty and personality, the witches in *The Neon Demon* (2016) are obsessed with youth, beauty, and celebrity. The film was written and directed by Nicolas Winding Refn and was a co-production between France, Denmark, and the USA (Durie, 2014; Tallerico, 2016).

The Neon Demon was released three months before *The Autopsy of Jane Doe*'s release, but due to the various similarities between *The Witch* and *The Autopsy of Jane Doe* I decided to change the order of the films for the sake of the logical flow between them.

The film is Nicolas Winding Refn's eighth production, with previous productions including the *Pusher* trilogy (1996-2005), *Bronson* (2008), *Valhalla Rising* (2009), *Drive* (2011), and *Only God Forgives* (2013) (IMDB, 2021h). It is also Refn's first foray into the horror film genre.

The film divided critics and the general viewing public upon release with some yelling at the screen and others walking out of the theatre during its 2016 premier at the Cannes Film Festival (Nordine, 2016). Others like *Kino-Zeit*'s Beatrice Behn describes the film as an "absurd jerk-off Lolita fantasy in a slow-motion sparkly neon dress with a side order of 90s music video aesthetics" (Nordine, 2016).

Others like *Little White Lies*' Adam Woodward (2016) gave the film five out of five stars and describe it as "predictably, reliably – a gorgeous, grisly work which holds a (vanity) mirror up to modern society's corroded moral core". He continues:

Refn pays tribute to his wife, Liv Corfixen, in the closing credits. That it was shot by a woman, Natasha Braier, and co-written by two more, Mary Laws and Polly Stenham, are key factors also. Consequently – crucially – this is not a film about the trials of womanhood refracted through a patriarchal prism. And yet, *The Neon Demon* is a more transparently personal film than perhaps we've come to expect from Refn, so much as it speaks directly to his innermost anxieties and existential tensions (Woodward, 2016a).

In an interview Refn explains that *The Neon Demon* is about the mystical power of women, but also homage to strong and superficially beautiful women (Woodward, 2016b). Refn goes on and states that Jesse, the protagonist of the film, is his alter ego (Woodward, 2016b). In the same interview Refn opens up regarding his creative process and says that creativity is feminine and by being creative he is able to glimpse and experience what it is to be a woman (Woodward, 2016b).

Refn acknowledges that he needed to relinquish many of the responsibilities of the film to women to achieve the distinct feminise voice he hoped to capture in the film (Woodward, 2016b). It is due to this that so many women were involved in the film's production (Woodward, 2016b).

Woodward (2016b) interprets the film as a study of a male's inability to understand female sexuality and the resultant fear and anxiety it causes. In addition he argues that the film mirrors society's commoditisation of youth and beauty. According to Refn beauty's value or social currency far outpaces the value of strength in modern-day society (Woodward, 2016b). Refn also says the following:

“I actually believe that if more women were in power the world would be a better place – but it's still all about whether you're thin enough, tall enough, more beautiful than the next girl, do you have high cheekbones?” (Woodward, 2016b).

Much of what Refn reveals about *The Neon Demon* is noticeable upon an initial viewing of the film. I also did not find the film to be purely misogynist. There are, however, some problems in the film that cannot be ignored, especially relating to the characterisation of the sole lesbian character as will be explained in the literature section. From my own purely aesthetic point of view *The Neon Demon* is an exceptionally well-crafted film with some of the most inspired and beautifully rendered shots I have ever seen. Many of the shots resemble the ultra-glamorous and stylised photography found in fashion magazines and advertisements for perfumes and high end clothing brands. The film marries the intricate colour use of *Suspiria*, with the cinematic style and sensibilities of David Lynch's *Mulholland Drive* (2001) and Darren Aronofsky's *Black Swan* (2010). Like *Antichrist* the film engages the senses of the viewer with its textured long shots but framed in an eighties' neon glow. Furthermore, the film expertly blurs the borders between high and low art which makes it a good example of postmodern filmmaking. According to Barry (2009:81) postmodernism “believes in excess, in gaudiness, and in ‘bad taste’ mixtures of qualities”. When one reads the criticisms levelled against *The Neon Demon* and consider the plot and Refn's cinematic style then the film seems to mirror Barry's statement.

Plot and initial observations

The Neon Demon follows an orphaned, underage girl, Jesse (Elle Fanning) (figure 54), who moves from a rural town, Georgia, to Los Angeles in the hope of becoming a model. There she meets a makeup artist, Ruby (Jena Malone) (figure 55), who introduces her to two older models, Gigi (Bella Heathcote) (figure 56) and Sarah (Abbey Lee) (figure 57). Jesse's innocent beauty makes her stand out from all the other models and she quickly becomes popular amongst fashion designers and photographers. Ruby falls in love with Jesse early in the film, while Gigi and Sarah are obviously

threatened by her and often attempt to belittle her. Their attitude towards Jesse is perfectly illustrated with the following dialogue, which also foreshadows most of what is to come:

Ruby (at Jesse): “Are you food, or are you sex?”

Gigi: “She’s dessert because she’s so sweet.”



Figure 54. *The Neon Demon*. 2016. Directed by Nicolas Winding Refn. [Film still from DVD] UK: Icon Film Distribution Ltd.



Figure 55. *The Neon Demon*. 2016. Directed by Nicolas Winding Refn. [Film still from DVD] UK: Icon Film Distribution Ltd.

As Jesse becomes more popular and Sarah and Gigi lose more work because of her popularity, Jesse becomes arrogant and condescending, but also shifts from a protagonist to something more enigmatic as the film progresses. Sarah – still in her mid-20s – is said to be too old for the runway and is discarded. Gigi in one scene, before a fashion show, confesses proudly to Jesse that she has had plastic surgery done to her body and face to achieve her appearance. The same night after the show Gigi and Jesse go to a restaurant with the fashion designer, Robert, whose show they worked at. He comments about manufactured beauty and that he always notices when someone has gone for surgery

to change their looks. Robert proclaims that natural beauty is always superior to surgically-induced beauty and then debases Gigi in front of the other models by using her as an example. He then demeans her even more by comparing her to Jesse's natural beauty.



Figure 56. *The Neon Demon*. 2016. Directed by Nicolas Winding Refn. [Film still from DVD] UK: Icon Film Distribution Ltd.



Figure 57. *The Neon Demon*. 2016. Directed by Nicolas Winding Refn. [Film still from DVD] UK: Icon Film Distribution Ltd.

In a later scene Ruby mentions that Jesse is not just beautiful, but that Jesse has a certain indescribable asset which suggests that beauty is something almost supernatural. This is reinforced in a different scene when a fashion designer seems to become enthralled by her mere appearance. He has a look of utter bliss, serenity, and happiness on his face as he watches her walk for him, even holding his breath (figure 58) as opposed to the utter indifference he shows Sarah (figure 59).

When Jesse needs new lodgings after someone attempts to break into her room at a motel, Ruby invites her to stay with her at a mansion she is housesitting. Seeing this as the perfect opportunity, she

attempts to seduce Jesse and becomes even more turned on when Jesse reveals to her that she is a virgin. Jesse however rejects her advances and throws her off the bed.



Figure 58. The Neon Demon. 2016. Directed by Nicolas Winding Refn. [Film still from DVD] UK: Icon Film Distribution Ltd.

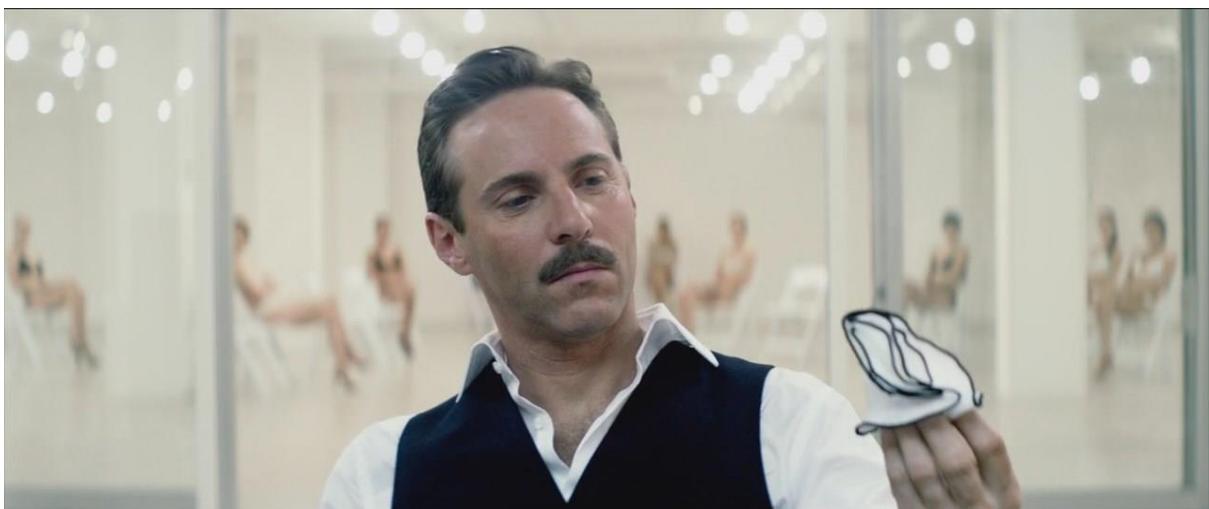


Figure 59. The Neon Demon. 2016. Directed by Nicolas Winding Refn. [Film still from DVD] UK: Icon Film Distribution Ltd.

Ruby, angry and distraught by Jesse's rejection, arrives at the mortuary where she also works as a part-time makeup artist. She locks the door and proceeds to have sex with the corpse of a young blonde woman. While Ruby is kissing her and masturbating over the body, Jesse is shown lounging on a decorative couch rubbing herself provocatively, implying that she might be experiencing what Ruby was experiencing through supernatural transference.

When Ruby comes home that evening Jesse is dressed in a white dress and wearing elaborate makeup. She arrogantly remarks how all women want to be like her and how they debase themselves by having

themselves surgically altered just to be like her. The film ends with Jesse being chased through the house by the three girls and then shoved into an empty pool by Ruby. As she lies paralysed at the bottom of the pool, the three women hack her apart, bathe in her blood, and eat her.

The next evening Ruby is shown lying down naked in front of an enormous window in the mansion with a full moon overhead. She spreads her legs and torrents of blood gush from her vagina as she smiles and looks up into the night sky. Gigi and Sarah are shown the next day at a privately owned home where Gigi is modelling for a shoot. After noticing Sarah, the photographer fires the other model, Annie, and hires her on the spot. Gigi becomes violently ill during the shoot and runs into the house. Sarah follows only to witness Gigi vomiting Jesse's blood and one of her eyeballs. Gigi is distressed and states that she needs to get Jesse out of her. She then grabs a pair of scissors and slices open her own stomach and dies on the spot. Sarah seems shocked, goes down on her knees, picks up Jesse's eyeball and swallows it whole. She then walks away like she was on a cat walk at a fashion show.

From this, one can conclude that Ruby is a witch and that Gigi and Sarah are sub-ordinate to her. By consuming Jesse's flesh, Sarah becomes appealing to the photographer who offers her a modelling job on the spot, even though she had not worked in months and was past her prime. The supernatural and the physical body in *The Neon Demon* are thus inseparable and beauty becomes supernatural, but also linked to the Dionysian. In addition, cannibalism, as discussed elsewhere, is closely associated with Dionysus and her cult. Followers of Dionysus consumed others as a way of absorbing their power and abilities. The same happens in *The Neon Demon* where Gigi and Sarah are imbued with Jesse's beauty and presence. Ruby on the other hand consumes Jesse to become more intimate with her, or to possess her. One could also argue that Jesse was unknowingly a witch with an innate supernatural beauty which would explain her ability to enthrall others.

Ruby's chosen profession and skill as a makeup artist makes her similar to a witch. Her skill mimics the supernatural power of a witch, since makeup artists use powders and elixirs to change the appearance of others. It can be interpreted as a glamour spell which is often used in films and television series where the witch changes her or others' appearance.

The film uses every opportunity to remind the audience of the high currency of beauty and how high it ranks within society. This is emphasised with shots that dwell on the models and the abundance of mirrors in the film. Every shot is meticulously composed with exceptional lighting that enhances or draws attention to the models. Ambient music is used throughout to draw further attention to the visual as opposed to the auditory.

As stated, Jesse becomes more arrogant throughout the film, not because her beauty gives her access to the modelling world, but because she realises that others want to become her. This is also why Gigi,

Ruby, and Sarah cannibalise her to absorb Jesse's beauty and youth. This then links back to when Ruby asks Jesse if she is food or sex. Because she did not want to be sex, she became food. This is a reoccurring theme throughout the film and there are many comments made which refer to women as food. Sarah mentions to Gigi that her career will change and that she, like herself, is sour milk, while girls like Jesse are fresh meat. This is ironic since fashion models are notoriously thin and do not have much 'meat on their bones' in the first place as the colloquial expression goes. After butchering Jesse the three women are cleaning themselves in a bathroom. Ruby is shown in the bath tub staring longingly at Gigi and Sarah as they wash the blood of their bodies in the shower. The shot of the two women is made to be erotic with steam drifting into the air, soft light, and the two women caressing and stroking their own naked bodies in slow motion. For Ruby being a gay cannibalistic woman, seeing two beautiful women covered in the blood of another beautiful woman can be likened to the way a predator looks at its prey. This is also decidedly different from the stereotypical shower scenes found in horror movies where the young women are routinely butchered by the monstrous villain. In this specific scene it is the antagonists themselves who are eroticised but not just for the viewer, but for the alpha female antagonist.

Beauty, food, and the fashion industry are intertwined not just in this film, but in society as well. Fashion models are expected to be thin and many become anorexic or bulimic. The audience who attends or watches fashion shows devour the models as they strut on the catwalk. But in order for them to be on the catwalk they have to be thin. There is thus a perpetual cycle of hunger. The fashion industry is also portrayed in the film to devour the models and then spitting them out when they are not 'sweet' or fresh anymore. In the next section I take a more detailed look at society's obsession with beauty and how it relates to the fashion industry.

Literature review

According to Isabella Maher (2018:65) society is obsessed with beauty. This obsession, she argues, originates from patriarchal and traditional religious structures and it has led to a culture and industry where beauty causes divisions in society because it is placed on a pedestal above all else (Maher, 2018:65-66). People, especially women, who do not conform to the said standards of beauty, have far less power in society (Maher, 2018:65). In other words, beauty is used to control women and to sustain male dominance in society (Maher, 2018:65).

The above is not different from Paglia's assertions regarding Apollonian control and dominance. The more pleasing to the eye a work of art, or physical body, the more Apollonian society props it up for all to see. This in turn reinforces the idea that the object of beauty is the ideal and what should be strived for. By doing so an amount of control is established over society as individuals yearn to be or

possess that which is beautiful, thus fuelling a capitalist system while simultaneously glorifying those who are physically attractive.

Maher (2018:68) argues that *The Neon Demon* mirrors societal norms and that the film intersects four specific elements as measurement for beauty, namely, age, race, gender, and sexual orientation. She specifically argues that Jesse resembles the epitome of patriarchal beauty by being a young, white, blonde, and heterosexual virgin (Maher, 2018:66, 74). Maher is not wrong regarding. Female virginity, along with physical beauty, is an example of Apollonian control over a woman as her position as sexual being is dependent on what she has or has not done with another man.

Ruby is made the witch and villain in the film because she is a lesbian (Maher, 2018:71). She is portrayed as manic, violent, and a necrophiliac, because of her unavailability as a sexual partner to a man (Maher, 2018:71). There are also other problems in the film related to the portrayal of female characters. Maher (2018:74-75) notes that there are no women of colour in the film and that all the women are dependent on power from men, with the exception of Christina Hendricks' character who operates a modelling agency. The photographers and the fashion designers are also shown to indicate who is beautiful and who is not throughout the narrative (Maher, 2018:75). The result of this power being in the hands of men is that the women compete with one another causing conflicts between the women (Maher, 2018:75-76). This is an interesting observation as it supports the idea of how beauty enables a patriarchal system. The women are at the mercy of the men and cannot gain or regain any power as they are divided.

Jesse, however, has innate power over these men and they cannot resist giving her more power. This mirrors of Paglia's comments regarding men being at the mercy of beautiful women and that women are in fact in control when they use their bodies to entice men. When Jesse's beauty is combined with her virginity her societal value increases, not just because she is more desirable but also because she can be controlled through it. Maher (2018:78) suggests that Jesse represents the Holy Virgin Mary and that the film implies that women should aim to be like her. This is especially emphasised by the use of colour in the film where Jesse is frequently associated with blues and the other women are associated with red (Maher, 2018:81). The Virgin Mary is usually shown to don a blue shawl in Catholic iconography (Maher, 2018:81). Red, for instance, often implies lust and danger which is why Ruby, Gigi, and Sarah are frequently associated with the colour. There are instances in the film where it is made obvious that the three ladies are not virgins. Maher (2018:78-79) suggests that these women are made unworthy by the men in the film. I interpreted the three women and the colour red as demonstrating the fragility of male power and how easily a man is intimidated by women who have had sexual experiences. Jesse as a virgin is not intimidating or a danger to a heterosexual man's sexual prowess as she has no inkling of what a good or bad sexual experience entails. Gigi and Sarah have slept with men which means they can compare a man's sexual skills with another man's which

in turn can emasculate a man if he is found to be wanting, irrespective of how much wealth and power he wields. Ruby is by far the biggest danger to a man as she has sex with other women. If she has sex with a man and finds a man not up to the standard of a woman, then it denigrates a man below a woman, potentially exposing men as irrelevant and unnecessary to women.

I do agree to an extent with some of Maher's arguments regarding the use of beauty in the film, but I also find her ideas outdated especially when we consider the societal context in which the film was created. By 2015 the world of fashion had changed much from the one of the 1980s and 1990s and the fashion industry was not making models famous anymore (Anguelov, 2016:29). The industry shifted away from discovering models to using people who were already famous, like Youtube personalities, established actors, or musicians (Anguelov, 2016:29). Body image norms had also changed with the likes of Kim Kardashian's celebrity influencing the ideal away from the thin, white, and unhealthy to the curvy, black, and healthy (Appleford, 2016:194). If one compares this historic shift in body image to the bodies in *The Neon Demon* it becomes obvious that the film is not attempting to comment on thin, white, blonde, and virginal girls or even the fashion industry, eating disorders, or body weight ideals. It rather comments on society's obsession with youth, beauty, celebrity and the commercialism of these. Each of the four witches represents a different side of society and celebrity. Similar to Christine in *Drag Me to Hell*, their thin and malnourished bodies do not represent eating disorders. They represent a hunger to fill psychological voids created by modern-day societal norms, especially if one considers the impact of social media on society.

By 2017 there were 2.7 billion social media users across the globe with Facebook users accounting for 38% of the market where women more likely to use social media on a regular basis (Mahadevi & Pavithra, 2018:23-25). Studies have shown that the use of social media may potentially lead to a decline in morals, mental and physical health, and the acceptance of false information (Mahadevi & Pavithra, 2018:25). Women make up 65-73% of social media users and much of the content is created specifically with women in mind with 35% of these women between the ages of 11 and 21 (Ormerod, 2018:iii-iv). Ormerod's statements suggest that women are leading the charge where the negative side of social media is concerned. Due to the curated nature of social media, any user can create the illusion of a perfect life where every aspect of one's life is framed and often staged to convey an unrealistic portrayal of life. Where the media was once to blame for creating unattainable goals regarding physical beauty, social media has combined these physical goals with unattainable lifestyle goals. Evidence suggests that these types of portrayals, frequently created by other women, are even more damaging to women, because the other women they compare themselves to are not celebrities, but their more accessible neighbours and co-workers (Ormerod, 2018:xv). In other words, man's power over women as portrayed in *The Neon Demon* does not mirror the reality of the industry at the time of the film's production as much as the power of women over other women.

One has to consider the nature of celebrity and how it is often achieved in the twenty-first century. Where once you had to be skilled in some form of entertainment and be granted a chance by gatekeepers in the entertainment industry, like editors, publishers, producers, and directors, the celebrity of the last decade is dictated to by consumers and are in most cases other consumers (Ormerod, 2018:xv). Social media influencers can be established authors or bloggers with widespread reach across continents, but there are individuals who gain almost celebrity status in smaller societal networks like towns or neighbourhoods. The latter, because of their accessibility to others, creates the impression that this type of celebrity is attainable, even when falsified.

Jesse represents those who crave celebrity. She is an unknown woman who gains celebrity within a small community for a short period of time. She resembles modern-day society's need for constant online affirmation, while also representing the modern-day celebrity where anyone can become famous due to social media, consumed by society, and then forgotten.

Similarly, Ruby represents the audience or society in general. Her role as makeup artists emphasises her normal and accessible lifestyle. Without her however, there would be no celebrity. This is also emphasised by her role as makeup artist whose job it is to make sure the models look their best behind an artificial veneer. Ruby represents society as the enabler of celebrity. Beauty must be affirmed and created by society to be valid. Society props up those that are beautiful, enables the beautiful, commercialises them, consumes, and then discards them. On the other hand, Maher's arguments about Ruby and her sexuality are convincing. Ruby is demonised because she is a lesbian and made a deviant by having her be a necrophiliac as well. She is made unworthy to love and she is rejected by an implied avatar for European and North American beauty, Jesse. In this instance Jesse is aligned with Apollo and Ruby is aligned with Dionysus. For Dionysus life and death are inseparable and equal which means that sex with a live or dead person is the same. Ruby, like Dionysus, is wanton, violent, and a cannibal, while Jesse is timid and virginal. Gigi and Sarah navigate the space between the Apollonian and Dionysian. Gigi, being unable to keep Jesse's eyeball in her stomach represents the anxiety some women experience in Apollonian society. They attempt to gain power through Dionysus but they figuratively do not have the stomach for it and fall back under Apollonian control and guilt. Sarah on the other hand understands that to gain power and independence she needs to align herself with Dionysus no matter the cost. Sarah aligns herself with Dionysus not just by eating Jesse, but also by eating her friend's vomit thus rejecting Apollonian disgust completely.

Ruby also mirrors the sometimes unhealthy obsession some in society have with celebrities where it influences their actions and mental states. These parasocial relationships are bonds that form between the social media user and a celebrity who represents a symbolic target, or a social surrogate (Gabriel et al, 2019:1-2). These social surrogates assist the user in combating feelings of isolation and rejection which in turn can affect the user's attitudes due to repeated exposure (Gabriel et al, 2019:2). For

instance, if their social surrogate endorses a product or political leader, the user will often mirror their surrogate's preferences (Gabriel et al, 2019:1-2). This not only has a negative effect on the individual, but also on society, since the user relies on external sources to make decisions (Gabriel et al, 2019:3, 14-15). This along with society's over-reliance on smart phones has had a negative impact on personal growth and identity formation (Azmitia et al, 2020:1, 9). In other words, by consuming Jesse, Ruby resembles society's consumption of the celebrity and everything that is aligned with the celebrity.

Maher (2018:77) arrives at a different conclusion regarding Ruby's consumption of Jesse and says that Ruby reclaims femininity and womanhood by destroying Jesse. This is especially emphasised with the scene where Ruby sits under the moonlight and she menstruates excessively after Jesse's death (Maher, 2018:78). I find this suggestion plausible especially in light of Ruby's alignment with Dionysus.

Michael Wheatley's 2020 comparative study of Chuck Palaniuk's *Haunted* (2005) and Refn's *The Neon Demon* also considers consumption and cannibalism, but in his study he focusses on the consuming nature of the creative industries. Wheatley (2020:115) argues that Jesse is not unlike people employed in the creative industries where their efforts are commercialised at the expense of the creative person. He states that Jesse represents the youthful and passionate creator who has to rise above or climb over others to become successful (Wheatley, 2020:115). Jesse's thirst for success mirrors the capitalist yearning for more wealth and power and the lengths some will go to, to achieve it (Wheatley, 2020:116). In the end her unchecked capitalism consumes her resulting in her losing her humanity and her being consumed by others (Wheatley, 2020:124).



Figure 60. *The Neon Demon*. 2016. Directed by Nicolas Winding Refn. [Film still from DVD] UK: Icon Film Distribution Ltd.

Wheatley (2020:124-125) demonstrates the commodification of Jesse through the first scene where she is introduced to the audience (figure 60). He explains that she is completely lifeless and presented like a piece of meat which is meant to be consumed – a perfect commodity by being a corpse with no personal agency (Wheatley, 2020:124-125).

Wheatley (2020:126) makes an astute observation regarding the above dehumanisation of Jesse, but also of the other three women. He says that even though Jesse is alive her value lies in her physical body and that her personality is irrelevant to the male gaze (Wheatley, 2020:125-126). In other words, she is both dead and alive. I agree with this statement as I mention earlier in this section that Jesse seems to become more aloof as the narrative unfolds and she gains more power. Wheatley (2020:126) makes similar observation with regard to Gigi, Ruby, and Sarah and likens them to vampires who gain power and a youthful appearance through the consumption of another's blood. By working in both the fashion industry and in morgues Ruby straddles the realms of the alive and dead, or limbo, as she is unable to completely enter either (Wheatley, 2020:126). Ruby is not unlike Jane Doe in *The Autopsy of Jane Doe* in this regard as both traverse the two realms.

Gigi can also be read as a dehumanised person through the great amount of plastic surgery she put herself through (Wheatley, 2020:126). Gigi alters her body to gain a higher value as a commodity, implying that her only value lies in her physical appearance or materiality (Wheatley, 2020:126-127). Her beauty is manufactured and not innate, further emphasising her as a dehumanised product while simultaneously devaluing her as she is not a one of a kind commodity (Wheatley, 2020:127). Gigi can be argued is in fact subversive as she is proof that physical enhancements cannot compete with natural beauty, which suggests that the plastic surgery industry is without value (Wheatley, 2020:127).

Sarah similarly challenges societal norms of beauty and the commodification of beauty. Wheatley (2020:127) argues that Sarah interrogates “the creative industries’ cultivation of competition”. Sarah is shown to be so disheartened after losing a work opportunity to Jesse that she smashes a mirror and uses one of the shards to destroy her headshots. Her psychological anguish originates from the way the creative industries pit people against each other and it becomes so extreme that she is complicit in Jesse’s murder (Wheatley, 2020:127). The industry drives these women, including Jesse, to unhealthy obsessions and eventual murder in order to survive the sociocultural contexts in which they find themselves (Wheatley, 2020:127-128). Like Thomasin in *The Witch* and Jane Doe, the women become witches because of forces at work within patriarchal power structures. Their dehumanisation is complete as they turn on each other by seeing each other the same way as the patriarchal power structures view them (Wheatley, 2020:129).

Wheatley's study demonstrates how patriarchal power structures are able to isolate and prey on women. Mark Featherstone's 2017 essay on *The Neon Demon* deals with similar ideas, but he bases his study on the horror of being orphaned in contemporary western society. He suggests that Refn frequently uses abandoned and desperate individuals in his later films like *Drive*, *Only God Forgives*, and the *Neon Demon* and that these characters are associated with violence, objectification, and estrangement (Featherstone, 2017:268). He describes the core message of *The Neon Demon* as "where the horror show focuses upon attempts to internalise or swallow the violence of objectification and present the mutilated self as somehow indestructible and immortal" (Featherstone, 2017:269). In other words, the women in *The Neon Demon* accept their objectification and abuse at the hand of power structures and use it to elevate themselves within the societal hierarchy. I do not completely agree with Featherstone's analysis as I find that the women also challenge power structures through their acts by showing the viewers the pitfalls of their choices. The women are never shown to become equal to any of the powerful men in the film, despite the atrocities they are shown to commit on each other. Gigi, Ruby, and Sarah do not become immortal or indestructible and the film in fact shows how precarious their positions in the industry really are and how futile their abject actions are. One has to consider that the women will not be able to stave off the ravages of time indefinitely and just as they consumed someone else, so can they be consumed as well.

Reframed tropes in *The Neon Demon*

Gigi, Ruby, and Sarah mirror the young witches in *Häxan* quite closely. They are young, pretty, and not as powerful as some of the witches we find in most of the other films discussed thus far. Interestingly they are a coven of three, much like the covens of three witches we find in *Macbeth* and *Witching & Bitching*. The covens are not exactly the same, as the witches' ages differ in each text. The Weird Sisters in *Macbeth* are old, the three witches in *Witching & Bitching* are from three different generations, and the three witches in *The Neon Demon* are all young. This suggests that the way women have been historically *othered* has changed over time. In 1606 *Macbeth* when Macbeth was likely written, older women could potentially have been *othered* far more due to the relative rarity of older women. Studies suggest that the average life expectancy of English villagers at the time was between 34 and 45 years, making especially older people uncommon (David, Johansson, & Pozzi, 2010:18). In *Witching & Bitching* the witches resemble the wives, mothers, aunts, and grandmothers of the male characters who claim that the women emasculate them. In *The Neon Demon* the women mirror the young and beautiful women who lead men astray with their sexual advances.

In the world of *The Neon Demon* beauty and the supernatural are inseparable. Jesse has definite power over men and her power is transferred to the other three women after they consume her. The witch has

historically been able to entice men through potions and glamour spells. Ruby is able to assist women to glamour men through the use of modern-day elixirs in the form of makeup. Gigi's appearance is also changed, but because the change occurs at the hands of a male plastic surgeon – a Apollonian form of control – her 'glamour' is unsuccessful. Sarah is able to become beautiful by digesting Jesse's remains and is shown to challenge Apollonian control when she consumes Gigi's vomit.

Jesse is a natural witch and her glamour comes from within and requires no effort to maintain. She is able to glamour men and women by just being in their presence. As she gains more power she becomes god-like and views other women as beneath her. Like Christians consume bread and wine that symbolise the body and blood of Christ for spiritual nourishment and strength, so does Jesse's flesh fill the witches with her beauty and virginesque holiness.

The witches in *The Neon Demon* thus share many similarities with the young witches we find in *Häxan*. They are young and beautiful and do not have as much power as older witches usually have in horror films. There are, however, also many differences. Jesse, for instance, is a young witch who seems to have vast amounts of power that she is not consciously aware of at first. This deviation from the young witch's portrayal in *Häxan* is an example of Bloom's *clinamen*.

The four witches are all sexualised to a degree. Even Ruby who is *othered* because of her sexual orientation is still beautiful. The corpse she kisses, straddles, and masturbates over is thin, blonde, with large breasts, aligning her with a heterosexual fantasy constructed parallel with the male gaze. Ruby uses the body like a prop, not much different from the way young women are frequently used in pornographic films. She also stares longingly at Gigi and Sarah in the shower, further aligning her with the male gaze. If one considers this then Ruby seems to become a surrogate figure for the male gaze. It is also why Gigi and Sarah, who seem to have more power than Ruby because of their model-status, are shown to be subordinate to Ruby when they murder Jesse. They look at Ruby like a pack of wolves look to their leader before proceeding with the kill.

A profound shift occurs in *The Neon Demon* with regards to the witches' association with the abject. The witches themselves are beautiful. The witches are constantly shown to be clean and beautiful, to wear beautiful clothes, and surrounded by equally clean and beautiful things and places. This successfully hides the witches from the viewer and I only realized what they are in the final scenes of the film. Right after killing and consuming Jesse they are shown to wash themselves, further emphasising cleanliness. Ruby also washes the bricks where they killed and ripped Jesse to shreds. These witches do not want to be associated with the unclean or the abject. Consuming Jesse is an act of hiding, as others cannot see what they have inside of them. The eyeball Gigi throws up implies that the hidden is revealed for all to see. Because her abject act is not concealed anymore Gigi kills herself, emphasising her obsession with her outwardly appearance. This setting aside of prior

conventions is an example of Bloom's *kenosis* as the witch rejects the abject and yearns for the clean and aesthetically pleasing.

One would be forgiven to think that the witches are not associated with nature in *The Neon Demon*, but there are instances where Jesse is aligned with nature. For the first half of the film many of her outfits have floral or twig-like patterns printed on them. The motel room she rents' walls and curtains are covered in patterns that resemble leafy plants which creates an artificial jungle inside the space. This creates an interesting visual early in the film when Jesse and the motel owner find a mountain lion in her room one evening – a possible omen warning her of the dangers lurking in and around her new home. The mountain lion and artificial jungle is also a reminder of the so-called concrete jungle Jesse finds herself in where progress devours those who lack resolve. Jesse seems to reject nature and Dionysus by the second half of the film as her wardrobe changes to mimic those of Gigi and Sarah. She also leaves the motel implying a rejection of the artificial jungle as well as the mountain lion. Gigi similarly rejects her natural appearance and replaces it with a man-made face. Sarah poses an interesting problem as she both rejects growing old but also accepts her predatory and frenzied nature by consuming Jesse. Ruby does the same, but she is also connected with the moon as we see when she lies naked on the floor under a full moon. This is again another instance of Bloom's *kenosis* as what came before is completely ignored.

A third example of Bloom's *kenosis* in *The Neon Demon* is the extent to which the traditional male adversary or the witch threatening a traditional family unit is reframed utterly. The witches fight among themselves and kill each other to gain a foothold in a patriarchal world. Strangely, this patriarchal world has no space for families or children. Jesse, however, is mentioned to be underage and can legally not work in the industry. She is exploited by men, but she also unwittingly exploits them. Jesse, Gigi, and Sarah are young, healthy, and beautiful – perfect examples of good genetic stock to have children with – yet the men in the film do not perceive the women like that. Dean, an amateur photographer, and the only person who seems to really care for Jesse attempts to build a romantic relationship with her, but she ultimately rejects him to climb in her profession. This could also be why Jesse is punished as she refused to settle down with someone and start a family. Gigi and Sarah do not seem to have any interest in men or women, but can be seen as perpetual maybes – in other words, they are still sexually viable in the imagination of the male viewers especially because they do not have romantic partners. Ruby being a lesbian does not conform to the nuclear family, and she ultimately seems to have the most power in the film, making her subversive and a challenge to societal norms.

The next trope is the ability of the witch to possess others. Possession is reframed (Bloom's *tessera*) in *The Neon Demon* and manifests in a subtle way. Gigi, Ruby, and Sarah do not have the ability to possess, even though they crave it. Jesse effortlessly and unconsciously possesses men like

photographers and fashion designers. They enjoy this possession and give in to it freely and completely which is also different from other horror films where the possessed put in great effort to free themselves of the witch.



Figure 61. The Neon Demon. 2016. Directed by Nicolas Winding Refn. [Film still from DVD] UK: Icon Film Distribution Ltd.

Related to possession is the supernatural. Beauty is likened to a supernatural ability in the film. Blue indicates supernatural beauty on equal terms with patriarchy, while red indicates non-supernatural beauty in the service of patriarchy. There are also instances of purple in the film which are important. Purple is a mixture of red and blue and is used for the first time in a scene right after Jesse meets Ruby. They arrive at a nightclub and exit an elevator which is filled with purple light. The colour suggests that the women are neither blue nor red but somewhere in between. Jesse has not been categorised as beautiful yet and Ruby is made to look equal in power to Jesse. As they walk through the club the colour scheme gradually changes to blue and then purple again where they meet Gigi and Sarah. It's only in the bathroom where red is introduced and associated with Gigi and Sarah. As Jesse's power increases and reaches its apex at a fashion show, the blues change and she is bathed in red light. A blue strobe light frantically flickers on and off as if suggesting a fight for dominance occurring in Jesse – red wins and Jesse transforms from prey to predator. This change in colour is only temporary and the blues return after Jesse dreams about being sexually assaulted and becomes prey again. Jesse's return is similarly suggested when Gigi is unable to keep Jesse's eyeball down. The room in which she vomits has a blue colour scheme which bathes her in a soft blue light (figure 61).

As mentioned, the witches in *The Neon Demon* have no quarrel with men even if the men demean and patronise them. The witches blame Jesse for the men not paying attention to them or sharing their power with them. This seems to be a corrective move that Refn took which implies Bloom's *clinamen*. By cannibalising Jesse the witches are aligned with Dionysus, but they only align

themselves with Dionysus in order to become beautiful, an Apollonian construct that is again used to control them.

Closing statements

From the above *The Neon Demon* paints a conundrum in that the witches are both aligned with and reject Apollo and Dionysus simultaneously. As mentioned in the background section of this film, Refn said about the film being an outlet for his teenage girl alter ego. Refn's fluid gender is reflected in *The Neon Demon* precisely because he is unable to settle on aligning solely with Apollo or Dionysus. He flits between them and this contributes to the anxiety the viewer experiences while watching the film, while also mirroring Refn's own anxiety and self-doubt.

The abovementioned experimentation with gender can be construed as being postmodernist. Barry (2009:81) says that excess, gaudiness, bad taste, experimentation, and outlandish and colourful mixtures of imagery are hallmarks of the postmodern. *The Neon Demon* can be described as containing excessive gore and violence, and the film has been lambasted by some critics who describe it as juvenile and pornographic. Interestingly the film challenges Pinedo's theory related to the collapse of the master narrative, as the women do not kill men to disrupt power structures, but kill each other in order to rise in these power structures.

HEREDITARY (2018)

Ari Aster's film *Hereditary* (2018) shares themes of gender fluidity with the previously discussed *The Neon Demon*. *Hereditary* in novel ways problematizes power and its relation to gender. This film is marked as Aster's first film which he followed in 2019 with the folk horror film *Midsommar*. Both films share themes of family and family trauma where especially children are exposed to trauma.

Hereditary was received very well by critics upon release with most of the praise going to Aster for the direction and screenplay, and Toni Collette, for her role as Annie (Jollin, 2018; Travers, 2018; Rothkopf, 2018; Wolfe, 2018). *Time Out*'s Joshua Rothkopf calls it the new generation's *The Exorcist*. April Wolfe at *The Village Voice* says that *Hereditary* is "wicked existential horror". Dan Jolin at *Empire* writes that the film is "inspired rather than derivative" and names the obvious inspirations, namely Robin Hardy's *The Wicker Man* (1973), Hideo Nakata's *Ringu* (1998), and Stanley Kubrick (Jolin, 2018). I agree with Jolin, especially with regards to *The Wicker Man* which ostensibly served as inspiration for Aster's next film, *Midsommar*.

Like Eggers' *The Witch* and Refn's *The Neon Demon*, *Hereditary* was not well-received by general audiences upon release (Gleiberman, 2018; Newby, 2018). Richard Newby (2018) suggests this can be attributed to general viewers' expectation of the horror film genre. He argues that viewers generally have a good grasp of horror film conventions like what to expect when and how to react (Newby, 2018). *Hereditary*, like *The Witch* and *The Neon Demon*, defy these expectations leaving the viewer anxious and uncomfortable (Newby, 2018). Also, the characters in these films are not the typical one-dimensional characters we tend to find in horror films, but are highly complex and resembling real people (Newby, 2018). *Hereditary* offers no hope to the viewer which alienates the average moviegoer who is expecting a spunky young girl to kill the monster like in *Halloween*, or the young man who eviscerates demons with his chainsaw-hand like in *Evil Dead*.

I agree with Newby's assessment of the current crop of elevated horror films. These films require work on the part of the audience, something that is not required when watching contemporary high octane action film series like the *Avengers* (2012-), *John Wick* (2014-), and *The Fast and the Furious* (2001-). Horror films like the ones thus far discussed in this chapter collapse genre conventions by elevating the horror film genre out of established formulaic conventions, thereby alienating the average film viewer who expects more of the same. Aster's novel approaches to the film are expanded upon in this film's literature review.

Background

The film opens with a long zoomed shot of a miniaturised version of a home. As the camera zooms in it and settles on a teenage boy's room. A father opens the door revealing that the miniature home has been replaced by an actual home where the Graham family resides. The studio belongs to Annie Graham, played by Toni Collette (figure 62). Soon after this Annie delivers a eulogy at her mother's funeral. During the eulogy it becomes obvious that Annie had a strained relationship with her mother, Ellen Taper Leigh (figure 63). Once home again, Annie is shown working in her studio on a new miniature, the hospital room where her mother died. Later that night, Charlie (Milly Shapiro) (figure 64), Annie's daughter and youngest child, asks her mother who is going to take care of her now that her grandmother has passed on. Charlie also makes mention of how her grandmother always wanted her to be a boy, the strain of this revelation clearly etched on her face. Charlie's appearance is unconventional but she also acts in strange ways. For instance, she seems to be quite antisocial and has an odd vocal tick, a 'cloque' sound that she makes with her tongue. She also creates strange works of art out of twigs, twine, dead birds, and other found objects.



Figure 62. Hereditary. 2018. Directed by Ari Aster. [Film still from Blu-ray] USA: Lions Gate Home Entertainment.

One evening shortly after the funeral, Peter (Alex Wolff) (figure 45) claims to want to go to a school function. His mother does not suspect that he is actually going to a party and so convinces him to take Charlie with him. At the party Peter abandons his sister and she accidentally ingests chocolate cake containing walnuts which sends her into anaphylactic shock. Peter hurriedly drives Charlie to the hospital, but she is accidentally decapitated by a telephone pole after she sticks her head out of the window to breath (Peter accidentally drives too close to the pole after he swerves in an attempt to avoid a dead deer in the road). Peter drives home in a state of shock and leaves the vehicle with Charlie's decapitated body in the driveway. Annie discovers it the next morning and screams hysterically.

Annie blames Peter for Charlie's death and does not spare him for a moment. She psychologically abuses him and does not consider that he feels extreme shame and guilt for his sister's death. The relationship between the remaining family members deteriorates as Annie constantly argues with her husband, Dr. Steve Graham (Gabriel Byrne), and her son. She befriends a woman Joan (figure 66) (Ann Dowd) who shows her how to perform a séance and invoke Charlie's spirit which Annie completes by forcing Steve and Peter to assist her. This turns out to be a ruse and Annie unwittingly sends her family down a path of destruction as the spirit she conjures is not Charlie, but a malevolent demon.



Figure 63. Hereditary. 2018. Directed by Ari Aster. [Film still from Blu-ray] USA: Lions Gate Home Entertainment.

Joan is revealed to have been a close friend of Ellen's and they were part of a coven of witches who worship Paimon, one of Hell's eight kings. Charlie is revealed to be Paimon, but he was born to a female body, rendering him powerless on Earth. The coven then conspired and set in motion all the events leading up to Charlie's decapitation. In the last half hour of the film Annie discovers her mother's decapitated and rotting remains in their home's attic. When she shows Steve the body he accuses her of digging up her mother's remains. Steve bursts into flames when Annie throws a book filled with drawings Charlie had made into the fireplace. As he dies Annie becomes possessed by a demonic spirit. That same evening Annie chases Peter through the house and he locks himself in the attic. He hears a noise above him and finds Annie slowly slicing her head off with piano string. Some of Ellen's coven appear from the shadows of the attic and smile at Peter. This proves too much for Peter and he throws himself through a window. A shadow leaves his body while a shimmering orb enters it. Peter stands up and makes the 'cloque' sound Charlie was fond of making, implying that Peter had died and his soul replaced by Charlie/Paimon. The coven of witches, including the headless and reanimated bodies of Ellen and Annie, are shown inside a tree house outside the house where Charlie liked to sleep on occasion. On the wall hangs a picture of the dead grandmother with the

words “Queen Leigh” written on the frame. The coven including the bodies of his mother and grandmother bow down in front of him as he looks upon a wooden mannequin with Charlie’s rotting head placed on top of it (figure 47). Joan reveals to him who he is and that they have corrected his female body by replacing it with a healthy male body. She says that they reject the Holy Trinity and are bound to him, Paimon. She also asks that he bestow upon them knowledge of secret things, honour, wealth, and good familiars, but also that he bounds all men to them. The camera zooms out and we see the inside of the tree house as the coven chant “hail Paimon”. As the camera recedes, the tree house is revealed to be another of Annie’s miniatures.



Figure 64. Hereditary. 2018. Directed by Ari Aster. [Film still from Blu-ray] USA: Lions Gate Home Entertainment.



Figure 65. Hereditary. 2018. Directed by Ari Aster. [Film still from Blu-ray] USA: Lions Gate Home Entertainment.

Literature review

Caetlin Benson-Allot (2018:71) states that like many contemporary elevated horror films, *Hereditary* focuses on the psychological repercussions resulting from contact with the supernatural monster, rather than the monsters themselves, the monster in *Hereditary* being the grandmother, Ellen, and the mother, Annie. She describes Ellen as a monster not just because of her machinations regarding Charlie and Peter's deaths, but also because of the trauma she inflicted on her husband, her son, and her daughter (Benson-Allot, 2018:72). Annie is made monster because of the unconventional ways she raises her children, but also because of the wrath and anguish she directs at her son because of the role he played in Charlie's death (Benson-Allot, 2018:72-73).

Benson-Allot (2018:73) argues that Paimon is able to possess Peter's body because of the extent to which Annie is able to feminise Peter. Paimon is stated to preferring a male body to inhabit, which means that he first has to bring the body into submission (Benson-Allot, 2018:73). In other words, if not for Annie emotionally brutalising Peter for the death of Charlie, Paimon would not have been able to take hold of his body.

Hereditary mirrors conservative fears regarding the contemporary power of a mother or matriarchal figure who is in control of the nuclear family (Benson-Allot, 2018:75). Interestingly it is not the monster or demon that destroys the family, but the structure of the family itself that enables the destruction of the family at the hand of Paimon (Benson-Allot, 2018:75).

Bernice M. Murphy (2018:179) takes a similar stance regarding the role of the mother in *Hereditary*, but she bases her interpretation of the film on Freud's theories. She says that Freud blamed the debilities and illnesses that plague families and family members on mothers (Murphy, 2018:179). The mother's influence is not isolated to the family as the dysfunctional family threatens the existence of the nation as well, which is why toxic mothers are so frequently found in horror films (Murphy, 2012:179).

Murphy (2018:179-180) especially draws upon the trauma that Annie had to endure at Ellen's hands, the trauma Peter endures under his mother, but also the trauma inflicted upon Charlie by Ellen's insistence that Charlie should have been a boy. Ellen and Charlie are shown to obsess over control (Murphy, 2018:182-183). Ellen wants to control Charlie's sex, while Annie's obsession manifests through the intricate miniatures that she builds (Murphy, 2018:182-183). All the doll's houses that Annie builds reflect events and spaces from her life with little figurines who resemble family members. These constructs are her attempts to work through internal emotional events as the events are externalised and then controlled by her (Murphy, 2018:183). Just as she controls the figures in the miniaturised houses so does Ellen control the whole family from the grave, suggesting the inevitable and continuous corruption of the children through what Murphy calls the "Pathological Mommy"

(Murphy, 2018:184). According to Murphy (2018:184-185), the mother's in *Hereditary* depict negative emotions associated with maternity where mothers resent their children or regret begetting them. Where Murphy only finds that Ellen and Annie represent societal fears related to motherhood, I find that they subtly and simultaneously challenge these norms as well by existing in the first place. An astute viewer would notice the one-sided portrayal of the mother figures and question these negative associations. On the other hand, men and women viewing the film could potentially learn from the narrative as well and notice the dangers and pitfalls hidden within the nuclear family, and attempt to avoid these problems.

Adam F. Braun (2020:41) problematizes the family as well through Ari Aster's lens by examining both *Hereditary* and *Midsommar*. He posits that the family in *Hereditary* unravels because of the neoliberal family structure we find in the film (Braun, 2020:42). Braun (2020:52) suggests that the family is neoliberal because of Steve's, Annie's husband, weakness and his obsession with his own identity crisis. Annie makes all the decisions with some of her decisions leading the family to destruction (Braun, 2020:52). The motif of emasculation is implied throughout the film, for example through the emasculated father and the emasculation of Peter; it is also suggested through Paimon's incorrect gender which further contributes to the demise of the family. Braun (2020:48-49) argues that because of the family's queer alignment it can lead to no social good as the family is insecure and has no future.

Hereditary thus suggests that a strong patriarchal figure who is in control of the family is superior to a family that is in control of a matriarchal figure (Braun, 2020:53-54). If no patriarchal figure is found or if he is emasculated and weak, an evil and more powerful patriarchal force will replace him and take control of the family (Braun, 2020:53-54). Paganism and Christianity similarly manifest in *Hereditary* through Steve and Paimon, where Steve represents Christianity and Paimon represents paganism (Braun, 2020:61-62). Paganism destroying the family suggests that it has no place in heteronormative western society (Braun, 2020:61-62).

Braun (2020:55) suggests that *Hereditary* is not completely aligned with conservative norms and posits that the wealth of the Graham family contributed to the weakness and destruction of the family. It is mentioned twice in the film that Paimon rewards his followers with wealth. By conjuring him, like Annie, Steve, and Peter do when they think they are calling on Charlie's spirit, they are in fact asking for material rewards (Braun, 2020:55). Braun (2020:55) argues that a good western family is one that has financial debts and who through those debts feed the patriarchal structures and mechanisms of the west. If wealth is conjured and not earned it negates these systems, and challenges sociocultural capitalist norms (Braun, 2020:55).

To some extent I am in agreement with all three the scholars discussed above. I agree, for instance, that the two mother figures are overtly negatively portrayed because of the power they have in the

family. Though conservative fears regarding women with power are deeply entrenched in the film, I additionally believe there are other aspects that complicate the role of gender and the associated power attributed to said genders. Steve is not weak as Braun suggests. He is not threatened by his wife's obvious success as an artist and he is shown to support her in her career, but also as a mother. He is a loving father who treats his two children as equals and sets boundaries for them that are only in their interest. He seems to have a good rapport with his children and they seem to love and trust him. He is nowhere shown to have less power in the family or to make fewer decisions than Annie. I believe his actions are misconstrued when he indulges his wife, but these indulgences are not born from weakness, but because he cares about her and her mental well-being.

Like Steve's actions are misinterpreted, so do I find misinterpretation regarding Annie's actions as suggested by Benson-Allot and Murphy. Her hysteria originates from a lifetime of psychological abuse, her brother's suicide, the death of her father and mother, and the brutal death of her only daughter. Even though her blaming Peter for Charlie's death is misplaced, it is understandable due to her mother and daughter dying within the space of a week of each other. Annie being blamed for what happens to the family is also misguided as the whole Graham family is manipulated through supernatural forces to do certain things at specific times. Ari Aster himself has stated in interviews that the Graham family have no agency whatsoever and that even if Annie never convinced the family to take part in the séance, Joan and the other followers would have found another way to set the transference of Paimon's soul into motion (Riley, 2018). It is thus not a case of Aster's unconscious fears of the monstrous mother manifesting as suggested by Murphy. The film has more to do with the influence of trauma on the nuclear family as a whole and how fragile the nuclear family really is when confronted by outside forces. It would also be erroneous to suggest that it is due to the heteronormative sociocultural values of Apollonian society as the same problems could manifest in any type of family irrespective of sexual preferences. The film does, however, challenge Apollonian power structures through the destruction of the family and by suggesting that pagan forces would be able to rob the nuclear family of agency.

Benson-Allot's mention of Paimon being able to possess Peter's body because he is feminised by his mother is, though interesting, is also problematic. Peter is a typical teenage boy who smokes cannabis with his friends, dislikes his little sister, is snarky towards his parents, and constantly has sex on his mind. It is true that he is not shown to be physically active or to play sports, but to describe him as feminised due to his lack of muscular physicality or because he is in touch with his feelings seems to betray the abovementioned scholar's prejudices more than it says anything about Peter.

The scholars above all base their interpretations of the film on perceived gender fluctuations in Annie, Steve, and Peter, but no mention is made of Charlie's ambivalent gender. Charlie having the name of a man combined with her physical androgynous appearance seems to position her somewhere between

male and female. The actor who plays Charlie, Milly Shapiro, has said in interviews that she was diagnosed with cleidocranial dysplasia since birth (Russel. 2020). Cleidocranial dysplasia is a rare genetic condition that affects the structure of the face, skull, and teeth (McDonald-McGinn, Robin, & Zackai, 1997:348). The condition has made Charlie's face appear more masculine due to her wider brow and wide set eyes.

Charlie's character seems eccentric and antisocial and she does strange things like cutting the heads off of dead pigeons and drawing pictures of her dead grandmother. This is done in an attempt to emphasise her *otherness*, but also her inbetweenness as someone with an ambivalent gender. As mentioned, it is revealed in the final scene of the film that Charlie/Paimon was supposed to be born male and that her female body was incorrect, which is why they had to transfer their soul into Peter.



Figure 66. Hereditary. 2018. Directed by Ari Aster. [Film still from Blu-ray] USA: Lions Gate Home Entertainment.

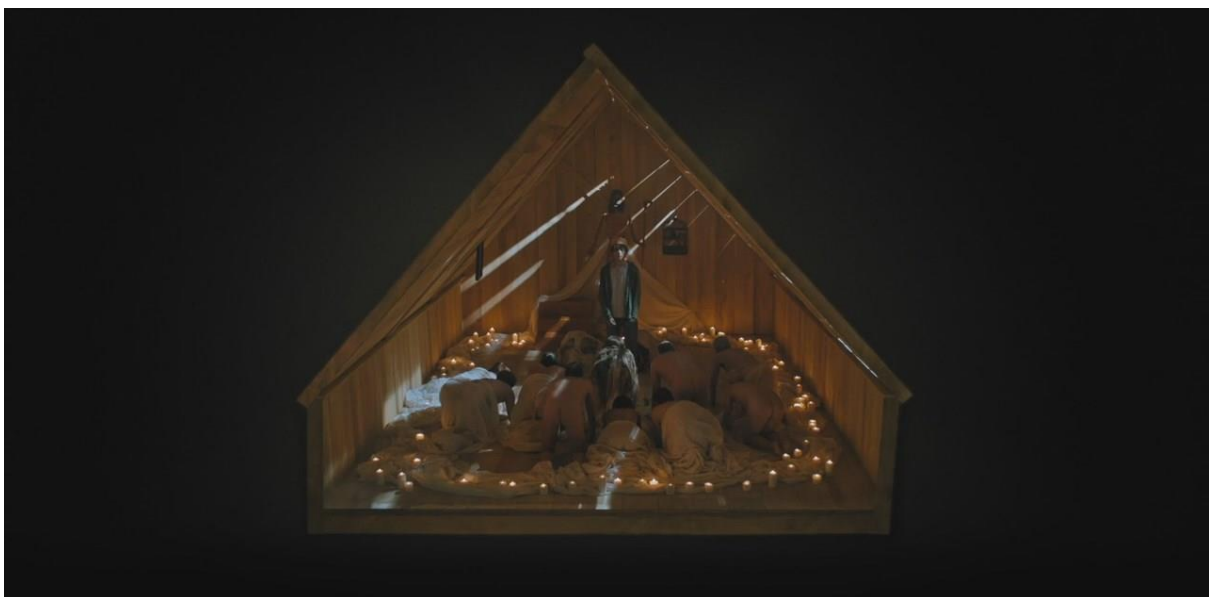


Figure 67. Hereditary. 2018. Directed by Ari Aster. [Film still from Blu-ray] USA: Lions Gate Home Entertainment.

Transgendered individuals have become more prominent in society and have been a focus of study for many years since the late twentieth century (Stryker, 2006:1; Whittle, 2006:xi). The transgendered individual is a person who is born to a certain biological sex, but identifies with a different gender or sexual identity (Whittle, 2006:xi). Being transgender encompasses various roles and includes, but is not limited to: changing sex via surgery and/or hormonal therapy, cross-dressing, living a lifestyle of a different sex, or being queer (Whittle, 2006:xi). One of the major themes in transgender studies, like in gender studies in general, is whether gender is based on biology or if it is socially constructed (Whittle, 2006:xiii). Some academics have argued that prevalence of transgender discourses has marginalised and threatened the experiences of the gay community, since transgender is a marker for gender and has very little to do with sexuality (Stryker, 2006:2). In other words, where gay individuals are sexually attracted to members of the same sex, the transgender person's sexual preference cannot be described as gay or heterosexual. The transgender individual seems to blur the line between biological sex and sexual orientation. One can argue that a person who was born a male and then has a sex-change to become a woman and who enjoys intercourse with men creates a unique situation where it becomes difficult to ascertain if the individual is gay or straight. This has caused tension between transgender and gay individuals with many in the transgender community stating that they receive more animosity from the gay community than from straight people (Fairchild, 2018).

The transgendered person is in a privileged position within society in the sense that they can potentially experience life as a straight male, straight female, a gay male, and a gay female, in various combinations or even all at once. Their experiences put them in a unique position which the gay or straight person cannot fully comprehend having lived experiences in different genders but also sexual orientation.

If we consider the above then Charlie, as a transgender person, is decidedly Dionysian as they straddle both sexes and can easily be viewed as one or the other, but also neither and both simultaneously. Being a product of the supernatural and paganism further aligns her with Dionysus as she challenges Apollonian religion. The switching of bodies that she experiences is not unlike the shape shifting abilities of Dionysus, but at the same time Paimon possesses the body of Peter when he leaves Charlie's body. Charlie/Paimon is in other words embodied in so many various ways that embodiment becomes irrelevant as he could potentially find another body to inhabit through possession. Paimon collapses the boundaries between gender and negates the socially constructed norms that enable these gender constructs in the first place.

Some sources argue that Paimon was originally a Mesopotamian goddess but later became a male and one of the eight dukes⁴⁸ of Hell with Lucifer as their king (Runyon, 1996:147-148). His abilities according to mythology include having knowledge of all secret things, the ability to reveal hidden treasures, knows everything about the world and its elements, granting familiars, reanimating the dead, binds any man to the witch or wizard, and has knowledge of the past and the future (Rankine & Skinner, 2007:111). He is also described in later texts as being male but with feminine features (Rankine & Skinner, 2007:397).

This description of Paimon mirrors what Joan asks of him in the final scene. Additionally, Charlie, like Paimon, is shown to inhabit both male and female bodies. Charlie only fully becomes Paimon after changing from a female to male body. I believe that Charlie knows secrets of society because he has been privy to experiences that very few have experienced by changing from one body to the next and experiencing different genders. Having these experiences and understanding that social constructions around sex and gender are problematic, places him on a different plain of existence. Having gained freedom from societal expectations can potentially make him a god of human experience.

Paimon possessing Peter's body is not the only possession that occurs in the film. Annie is also possessed by a demonic entity while Steve burns to death. Beth Kattelman (2019:1) considers the relationship between sound and music, and fear and possession in her study of *Hereditary* and how sound is used to trigger fear and possession. In an interview with *The Verge's* Bryan Bishop (2018), Colin Stenton, who produced the score for *Hereditary*, reveals what Aster hoped to accomplish using music and sound in the film. Stenton says that Aster hired him as composer as his music was a great influence on him while he wrote the script for *Hereditary* (Bishop, 2018). Aster requested of him to produce music that would make the film "feel evil" and to avoid nostalgia and sentimentality (Bishop, 2018). In order to accomplish this Stenton used instruments in unconventional ways, while also digitally altering the sounds in some instances (Bishop, 2018). For instance, where the audience believe they hear a synthesizer, they are in actual fact hearing a clarinet (Bishop, 2018). Additionally, Stenton also avoided the musical conventions typically found in horror films (Bishop, 2018). Many of the droning sounds in *Hereditary* were produced by Stenton employing a circular breathing technique (Bishop, 2018; Kattelman, 2019:2). Kattelman (2019:2) states that Stenton's production techniques effectively make the score strange and unusual to the listener. Furthermore, the aforementioned droning sounds were incorporated into the music to give the music an added layer of reverberation which subtly creates the impression that the film and audio was recorded in a large enclosure (Kattelman, 2019:3). I find this observation fascinating as it parallels Annie's miniatures and her attempts to control her life, but also the inability of the characters to escape the machinations of the

⁴⁸ Some sources say they are kings, while others say they are dukes.

coven. The Graham family are not unlike rats in a cage who are manipulated by unseen outside forces. This underscores my earlier statements on the family members not being to blame for what happens to them as they are merely pawns in a larger narrative. Annie building the elaborate and detailed miniature dioramas represents the control we all wish we could exert over our own lives. Her control bearing no fruit is similar to the situations most of us find ourselves in where no matter how much we try to maintain control of situations and our lives, it frequently is all for naught.

Kattelman (2019:6) notes that the “cloque” sound Charlie frequently makes indicates when Paimon manifests or warns the viewer of the presence of evil. She also notes that there are no jump scares in the film accompanied by music or any other sound for that matter as scare-inducing scenes are silent where we can only hear the characters breath or talk (Kattelman, 2019:5). In other scenes featuring Annie, Stenton drops the octaves of the music suggesting Annie slow descent into dread and insanity (Kattelman, 2019:4).

Out of curiosity I watched *Hereditary* again after reading the abovementioned observations as well as what Stenton stated in the interview with Bishop and found evidence of all of the above. What is especially interesting is that I did not notice these sound-making techniques while viewing the film which is testament to Stenton’s skill as a composer. The music and sound have an undeniable effect on the viewer, but like the witch, it is hidden in plain sight and we do not realise how it affects the viewer’s experience of the film. Stenton’s score is the opposite of Goblin’s score for *Suspiria*, but is able to similarly affect the viewer/listener.

Where Stenton’s methods are subtle, Aster starting and ending the film with shots of Annie’s miniature reproductions of the Graham family home are overt where the agency of the family is concerned. Aster as not just the writer and director of the film, but also as director of the music and production elements places him in a unique position as an almost god-like figure that rules over the world of *Hereditary*. William Gass (1972:36) has similar ideas regarding the author of texts and states the “author is God” as does Brain McHale. McHale (2004:30) says the following regarding the author as God:

No longer content with invisibly exercising his freedom to create worlds, the artist now makes his freedom visible by thrusting himself into the foreground of his work. He represents himself in the act of making his fictional world— or unmaking it, which is also his prerogative. There is a catch, of course: the artist represented in the act of creation or destruction is himself inevitably a fiction. The real artist always occupies an ontological level superior to that of his projected, fictional self, and therefore doubly superior to the fictional world: behind Jacques and the world he occupies stands “the author,” and somewhere behind “the author” stands the real Diderot. There is a possibility here of infinite regress, puppet-master behind puppet-master ad infinitum.

In other words, the author as omnipotent ruler of the worlds they create is reflected in their work of fiction. The characters they create mirror the author or could be seen as fragments of the author/God's whole person. Ellen, Paimon, and their followers are beings wilfully created by the author to terrorise and destroy a family, but they also mirror aspects of their creator. The world that Aster creates and which he controls absolutely is mirrored by Annie and her control of the miniature models she creates. Annie however is a fictional character who cannot exercise the same control that her creator has, meaning that her efforts are all for naught.

Another aspect that I find thought-provoking is Aster's revelation that he was inspired by Stenton's music during the writing process of the film. If Stenton influenced Aster, and Aster influenced Stenton to create the music for the film, then tracing influence or McHale's puppet-masters become difficult.

There is more to consider regarding the world-building in *Hereditary*. Umberto Eco (1979:234) suggests that the creation of fictional worlds that differ in mechanics from the real world, causes "logical uneasiness" and "narrative discomfort". The supernatural does not manifest in the viewer's world as it does in *Hereditary*. Apollonian power structures incorporate two diverging and conflicting ideologies, namely rigorous science with which to control nature combined with patriarchal religious systems to control man, the nuclear family, and society. These conflicts create an interesting dynamic in society as religion proposes that there is a spiritual realm around us where gods and devils fight over souls, but science has not been able to find evidence of this spiritual dimension. Film technology is rooted in science and physics, but is frequently used to show worlds and events that defy the physical rules of the viewer's world. *Hereditary*, being a product of Aster's filmmaking skill, but also being influenced by folklore and myth, mirrors these tensions between the two Apollonian ideologies. These tensions are subsequently transferred to the viewer upon interacting with the film due to their own ideas regarding science and the spiritual, causing as Eco proposes "logical uneasiness" and "narrative discomfort". The ultimate question is then if *Hereditary* challenges or enables Apollonian power structures. It does and does not.

Related to these anxieties is Eco's ideas regarding fictional worlds within fiction worlds, or what he refers to as 'subworlds'. Annie's miniature versions of the world she inhabits is reminiscent of these 'subworlds'. Eco (1973:235) argues that the fictional world within a fictional world creates further tension as the viewer shifts from one specific point in reality to another specific point in a different reality. For example, the fictional world's physics differ from the viewer's in the sense that the film can be stopped, paused, rewound, and played again at different times in the viewer's plane of existence. Annie's subworld is unchanging and her fate is predetermined as long as the film exists. This realisation in itself is unnerving as the viewer understands the hopeless situation Annie and her family find themselves in as the family's existence hinges upon repeated viewings of the film. The

world of *Hereditary* begins and ends with the beginning and ending of the film, in other words, they only exist when someone watches the film. The film lingers within my mind for prolonged times after each viewing and I constantly attempt to find solutions for the problem the Graham's find themselves in. It also makes me question my own fate and if I am not in fact in a similar situation where I have no agency. This is where Apollonian power structures are challenged in earnest. If I accept that I have no agency and that I am but a pawn caught on the path of fate then there is no point in existence which in turn negates desires to have a family, or a career, or a belief in science or religion. Additionally, it means that I can spiral down into a life of absolute freedom to commit acts of violence and sexual depravity with no thought given to my fellow man. If this occurs then I am isolated from Apollonian society and become aligned with Dionysus and the chthonic.

A final aspect to consider regarding Annie's recreations of the world is related to Baudrillard's simulacrum and hyperreality which has already been discussed in previous sections. The models that Annie creates conform to Baudrillard's simulacrum where an attempt is made to create a more positive version of reality to replace her chaotic reality, which in turn cannot accurately represent reality (Baudrillard, 2002:121-122). Baudrillard (2002:135) proposed three orders of simulation, namely the counterfeit, production, and simulation. Annie's simulacra straddle counterfeit and simulation. The pieces are counterfeit because it is a unique and handcrafted piece which is meant to mirror the real world. It does not fit Baudrillard's production designation because it is not mass-produced. It aligns with his simulation designation because of the coding embedded into it through Annie, Aster, and the production team that actually created the pieces.

There are more connections to be made with Baudrillard's simulacra and simulations, the models, and the film. Baudrillard (2002:170-171) proposes four successive phases of an image, namely, the reflection of basic reality; perversion of basic reality; absence of basic reality, and the absolute break with reality, or a pure simulacrum (Baudrillard, 2002:170-171). The models and the film are inseparable as the world of *Hereditary* is reflected and refracted first through Aster and then through the models that Annie creates. The film itself mirrors reality and conforms to Baudrillard's first phase, but the camera, music, and cinematic techniques employed by Aster distort and pervert reality. As the plot develops, supernatural elements are introduced which leads to an absence of basic reality as natural physics, for instance, changes. Annie is shown to scurry along walls and is able to crawl on ceilings. In this world souls can be transferred to different bodies and decapitated bodies can move and have agency. The film, however, also narrowly grazes Baudrillard's fourth phase as the film begins and ends with scenes suggesting that everything transpired within Annie's miniaturised world and that all the characters and the plot were manipulated by an outside force.

We can also interpret the models in a different way. Annie is shown to build models of the hospital room where her mother was being treated, the funeral home where the memorial service was held for

her mother, as well as the scene of Charlie's accident. These are all simulations of events that Annie had no control over. By miniaturising them she codes the events according to her own world view. For example, her choice of the moment she captures in the model does not represent the entire event, nor do the figures accurately represent her mother or Charlie. These models are stationary and function outside of conventional time as frozen moments of time that can be displaced and travel forwards through time. When we move these simulacra to a gallery and they are sold, the new owners of the pieces would have no inkling of what truly occurred and would interpret the models in line with their own world views. These simulacra are even further distorted through the lens of the camera as they were not built by Annie, but by artists and production houses in exchange for financial remuneration. The models themselves have a deeper value than just being film props or a past-time for Annie. They mirror the aforementioned world-building that occurs through Aster. Just as he controls the characters as puppet-master, so is Annie and her family controlled by her mother and Paimon's followers. Her attempts to control fate has no effect on the narrative, but her actions affect the viewer in the real world as it leads to ticket and physical media sales and fame for Aster and the actors in the film. This results in the film not challenging Apollonian power structures, but enables these structures through symbolic exchange – symbolic exchange, is where labour and raw materials are made abstract and a subjective value in the form of currency is attached to this abstraction (Baudrillard, 2002:64).

Manifestations of *Häxan*'s tropes

Like we find in *Witching and Bitching*, there are four witches in *Hereditary*, where Ellen is the oldest and the head of the coven. Annie, Ellen's daughter, unwittingly becomes a witch because Joan (the third witch) teaches her to invoke spirits. Then there is Charlie, who surrounds herself with dead things and creates little icons out of twigs, animal parts, and other found objects, but is also a demonic king of Hell. The four witches portray the similar triad of witches found in most of the other films discussed, namely, the crone (Ellen), the mother (Annie and Joan), and the daughter (Charlie). Interestingly all three of the women who share the same bloodline are decapitated. The head can be linked to rationality because it contains the mind or the brain, while the face is linked to identity. The faceless witch could potentially be an avatar for all witches and women as embodied through the three generations of witches found in the film.

While the older witches resemble the ones we frequently find in horror films there are marked differences. Ellen and Joan are the only ones who actively worship Paimon. Annie is tricked into practicing witchcraft by Joan, but this also only occurs due to the extreme psychological stress she endures over the space of two weeks. Charlie can only be considered a witch because of their female body, but as noted, they collapse the borders between the male and female gender, thus becoming

something completely new and indescribable. By becoming a person who cannot be labelled or categorised according to Apollonian definitions of gender, they are more aligned with Dionysus than any of the witches discussed thus far. In one scene Charlie is at school and instead of completing a test she is shown building something on her lap in the class. By doing so she ignores the Apollonian education system's norms and focusses on her own activities – which involves the creation of pieces constructed out of items that would normally be labelled as trash or refuse. By reusing found objects like old toys, twigs, and springs, she is not contributing to capitalism. She does not buy the items she reconstitutes into new objects, but she is also not selling these items. Furthermore, her art does not resemble anything natural, nor is she trying to create aesthetically pleasing items, further challenging the Apollonian art-making process. When her teacher reprimands her for building the abovementioned piece under her desk, Charlie is visibly shaken and wide-eyed. Her anxiety manifests with a pigeon that suddenly slams into the classroom window and dying instantly. Charlie immediately sees the death as an opportunity and on her way out steals her teacher's scissors which she promptly uses to decapitate the pigeon. She is shown eating a chocolate bar while slicing off the pigeon's head, indicating that she experiences no revulsion to the dead bird or her abject act. Her quick sideways glances before cutting the pigeon suggests that she realises that what she is doing is questionable and that she could be judged by her peers. The next day she is shown to make another piece out of an old pill canister and strips of metal, the head lying on the desk within reach. Again she is shown to be eating candies while constructing the object.

As mentioned, Charlie's body does not fit the Apollonian ideal of what a young blonde virgin should look like, nor does she resemble the young wanton witches so frequently found in horror films. As someone with a medical condition that affects her body physically, she becomes more aligned with the old crones we find in *Häxan* who also have conditions that affect their body's appearance and function. In other words, not only does Charlie straddle male and female embodiment, but also different stages in life. Additionally, because cleidocranial dysplasia is not life-threatening but needs to be monitored by health professionals, Charlie is also somewhere between completely healthy and being unhealthy (Kanda et al, 1997:1109). If we consider everything mentioned above related to Charlie there are recognisable tokens that come to fore, but they are reframed in many ways to make Charlie almost unrecognisable as a witch, meaning that this is an example of Bloom's *tesserae*.

There is still more to discuss regarding the witch's embodiment in *Hereditary*, especially why the three witches sharing the same bloodline are all decapitated. The body is home to the heart which is spiritually linked to love and emotion. The decapitation of the women seems to refer to their devotion for Paimon where rationality, identity, and the self is sacrificed to their god. Within their bodies reside all the emotional love and adoration that they have for him. Their bodies are also perfect vessels for devotion since it can bend down in worship while also performing ritual dances to appease him while their egos cannot interfere. Sex can also be a potential sacrifice that the followers would have to make

to Paimon. As mentioned, the photograph of Ellen in the tree house suggests that Ellen is Paimon's queen. This indicates a possible incestuous relationship between the grandmother and Charlie/Paimon residing in the body of her grandson. In other words, the potential exists for Ellen to have sexual relations with both of her grandchildren. This is another instance of the Dionysian where the boundaries of disgust collapse in a wanton frenzy.

The removal of the head can also be seen as a loss of identity or vanity where the three witches become equal in the eyes of their god. Their sacrifice is equal in other ways as well with both Ellen and Annie losing their daughters, while Charlie lost her brother and womanhood. Charlie becoming a man and being described as always being male, does change the typical embodiment of the witch. This resembles the change currently taking place in society where transgender and sexually fluid individuals are slowly becoming more commonplace. The witches accept this change with no qualms, which suggests a challenge to the current Apollonian conservatives who regard transgender individuals with disgust, and consequently meet them with protest and controversy.

Death, decay, and the abject are found throughout the film but in levels far exceeding those found in *Häxan* (*tessera*). I found many instances where *Hereditary* is more brutal and horrific than the most flinch-inducing scenes in *Antichrist*. Where *Antichrist* pushes the boundaries of what the human body and psyche can endure, *Hereditary* brutalises the senses and causes the viewer to feel real horror and terror.

Another trope that features in the film is the association between the witch and nature. The Graham family home, an enormous timber house, is not in a town or city but in a lush woodland. Charlie has a tree house outside the house which she frequents and sometimes sleeps in. It is in this same tree house where the coven congregates at the end of the film to pledge allegiance to Paimon. When Annie goes to Joan's house after realizing something had gone wrong with the séance the viewer glimpses the inside of Joan's apartment. On the dining room table there is a bundle of twigs arranged around some of the icons Charlie created, obviously taken from Charlie's room. Charlie's figures are similarly partially created from sticks, twigs, and other objects found in nature. The witches in *Hereditary* seem to be more urban than the witches in *Häxan*, but the Graham home and tree house situates Charlie in nature and far from traditional suburban neighbourhoods like the witches in *Night of the Eagle* or *The Witches*. Most of the supernatural events we find in the film do transpire in the family home which as mentioned is constructed out of wood. Charlie is also decapitated by a wooden telephone pole after she ingests nuts that also come from a tree, suggesting a link between the forest and the witches' power.

The witches' link to the nature confirms her as adversary to patriarchy and by implication to men and the nuclear family. Additionally, Joan specifically asks Paimon that men be bound to them which also points to dominion over men and societal power structures. Interestingly a shift occurs regarding the

witch as killer of babies (*clinamen*). According to Aster, Charlie is inhabited by Paimon from the moment she is born and that a baby girl was displaced from her body (Riley, 2018). In other words, Paimon enabled by Ellen and the other followers, and murdered a baby without anyone realizing what had occurred. Peter's displacement from his body is another murder of a child. Paimon murdering both of Annie and Steve's children is another instance where the witches are complicit in the destruction of the family.

It should be mentioned that like the witches in *Häxan*, the witches in *Hereditary* are still subservient to a man who is in service of the Devil. Like Thomasin in *The Witch*, Annie is tricked into performing witchcraft, thus becoming a witch and possessed by a demonic entity. Ellen being a queen and Paimon being called a king further mirrors patriarchal power structures which negate alignment with Dionysus to a degree.

The abovementioned replacement of power structures implies replacement of ideology which is what Slovak Žižek suggests in his *The Sublime Object of Ideology* (2008) where he problematizes ideology and resistance to ideology. Žižek (2008:xxviii) argues that culture is in a constant reaction-formation process where we react to aspects of ideological thought that some deem as problematic, for example patriarchy. Reacting to these problems does not solve these issues, but just replaces them with new ones and the result may be worse (Žižek, 2008:xxviii, 83-85). Žižek's ideas regarding the replacement of ideological systems and the futility thereof are mirrored in films like *Hereditary* and *The Witch* where an Apollonian power structure is just replaced by an Apollonian structure which pretends to be Dionysian.

I also found similarities between the above and Paimon requiring to be transferred from a female to a male body. Ellen's book specifically says the following regarding Paimon: "it is documented that King Paimon has become livid and vengeful when offered a female host. For these reasons, it is imperative to remember that King Paimon is a male, thus covetous of a male human body." This quote begs the question why a demonic entity that is aligned with Hell prefers a male body as host, unless he also believes that a man has more power in society than a woman. If this is the case then societal structures are not challenged, but just replaced.

Possession in *Hereditary* is different from the possession scenes we find in *Häxan*. In *Häxan* men fear that the witch will make a man act in a way that is not aligned with sociocultural norms. In *Black Sunday* Asa requires a new body so that she can live again, while in *Night of the Eagle*, Flora possesses Tansy to improve her position in society. In *Hereditary* we find a combination of all of the above – Bloom's *tesserae* due to a combination of various tokens of recognition. Paimon needs a body in order to manifest on Earth. His followers need him to manifest on Earth so that he can improve their social position through wealth and knowledge. Furthermore, the act of binding men to his followers implies that the men will lose agency and will have to bend according to the whims of

the coven. To assist Paimon to take possession of Peter's body, Paimon grants his followers supernatural power. In return for their aid Paimon does not increase their supernatural abilities, but grants them riches, which is in line with what the witches receive in *Häxan*.

The final trope that needs discussion has to do with the treatment of women/witches at the hands of men or a man. In *Hereditary* we find that none of the women are shown to have been mistreated by men, which suggests that the witches simply crave wealth and power, and are not interested in revenge.

Closing statements regarding *Hereditary*

Charlie/Paimon is difficult to align with Dionysus due to his insistence of inhabiting a male body. The character does pose an interesting challenge to the current prevailing Apollonian power structures, but due to the nature of the character and his motivations he conforms to Žižek's theories regarding the replacement of ideologies where the new ideologies enable power structures that could potentially be more detrimental to society than those replaced.

There are however instances where gender is thoughtfully portrayed, like the father's support of his wife and children and Peter being forthcoming about his feelings. Women, on the other hand, are mainly portrayed as instruments of evil throughout the film, which is problematic.

Hereditary is another prime example of Pinedo's postmodern horror film, especially with regards to the ineffective interventions of the family members, but also due to the lack of narrative closure and moral clarity. Annie to no avail tries to escape from the intricate web of events her mother had woven for her and her family. Charlie was always going to be decapitated and Peter was always going to be host to Paimon.

With regards to closure the viewer is left to ponder what will happen next to Charlie/Paimon and her family and how will Paimon affect the world. The film ends with the destruction of a family which in turn implies a lack of justice. If there is no justice, then what is the point of morality?

Pinedon's master narrative is also challenged as Joan specifically asks Paimon to make her and the others wealthy and powerful which implies a replacement of power structures. The members of the coven yearn to replace the existing power structures as they do not have faith in said structures and by extension, progress.

SUSPIRIA (2018)

Luca Guadagnino is a surprising director for the remake of *Suspiria* as he is more known for dramas like *I am Love* (2009), *A Bigger Splash* (2015), and *Call Me by Your Name* (2017). It was during the making of *Call Me by Your Name* that Guadagnino and cinematographer Sayombhu Mukdeeprom started discussing a remake of Argento's *Suspiria* (Marcks, 2018). In an interview with *American Cinematographer's* Iain Marcks (2018), Guadagnino reveals that he has been enamoured with Argento's *Suspiria* since seeing it for the first time at the age of thirteen. From various published interviews Guadagnino it becomes clear that he is frequently asked why he chose the film specifically, especially after being so closely associated with *Call Me by Your Name* – a film about the sexual awakening of a young gay man.

Guadagnino (Nordine, 2018) has expressed that he is a "horror fan, horror movie buff". He has also stated in many interviews that his 2018 remake of *Suspiria* is more a homage or a 'cover version' of Argento's 1977 film and also his most personal film (Fendi, 2018; Jones, A., 2018; Jones, N., 2018; Marcks, 2018; Nordine, 2018). It is thus not surprising that he would opt to make his own version of one of the most revered horror films of all time.

The director said the following about his *Suspiria*:

We don't want to replicate a Dario Argento film, because his film is not replicable. It is something that stands by itself and doesn't need to be mimicked by anybody. What we want is to admire Dario's movie and translate the effect and the feeling that happened when we saw the movie, and see if you can create an impact with a new language, so it's something of a companion piece. In this sense, it's an homage because without Dario's movie, we couldn't have made our version. It's not because we needed to copy Dario's, but it inspired us to be very personal ourselves.

The above is interesting as it gives us a glimpse of the director's motives, while the reverence he has for the original is obvious not just based on the quote above but also when viewing his film. Argento was not the only influence. Delfina Delettrez Fendi (2018) in an interview asks him about *Häxan*, to which he responds:

I know *Häxan*. Witchcraft of two centuries. It's a fantastic movie. ... Well, *Häxan* is a very important film for me too and it's an example of what I said in the first place, which is the idea of womanhood that we have to analyze when we discuss witchcraft. That's why the topic of witches is addictive in cinema, as [it] is something about the horror genre. The reality is that horror, in the sense of Freud, is the mirror image of our aim and our aspirations. ... I actually believe in witches historically. I think it's something that has been historically determined, that witches existed. But why did they exist? They probably existed because the

incredible power of womanhood posed such a threat to the patriarchy for centuries, that it had to be, in a way, turned into a phantom of evil. The essence of this power of womanhood was basically swapped out for evil. So I think that witches exist, but they exist as a representation of the power of womanhood.

Like many others, Guadagnino views witches as representative of female power. *Suspiria* mirrors some of the above as the witches challenge patriarchy and they do horrific things, but the film draws interesting parallels between the internal power structures of the witch society and the patriarchal world. Guadagnino does not conflate witchcraft and feminism through his film. The film thoughtfully considers the role of power in society and how it corrupts, irrespective of gender, as will be explained in this section.

Background and initial observations



Figure 68. *Suspiria*. 2018. Directed by Luca Guadagnino. [Film still from Blu-ray] USA: Lions Gate Home Entertainment.

The film is also set in 1977 like the original, but the remake includes references to the German Autumn and the Red Army Faction (RAF) activities which peaked in 1977 as a backdrop throughout the film (Fendi, 2018; Marcks, 2018). The film is divided up into seven chapters. The first chapter opens with one of the academy's dancers, Patricia Hingle, going to her psychotherapist Dr. Josef Klemperer, played by Tilda Swinton convincingly disguised as a man, and telling him that the Markos Dance Academy is run by a coven of witches. He does not believe her. She disappears after leaving

his practice. Susie (Dakota Johnson) (figure 68) replaces Patricia at the academy after her disappearance. It is explained that Patricia is part of the RAF and that she will not return.

The second chapter opens with the witches voting between Madame Blanc and Mother Helena Markos as leader of the coven. Markos wins by a narrow margin. The witches conspire among themselves as to who will become vessel to Markos' soul as the transference using Patricia did not go as planned. Dr. Klemperer is shown to go to his country house on the Eastern side of the Berlin Wall. He gently touches part of an outside wall of the house where he and his wife had carved a small heart into the wall with their initials. After returning home he finds Patricia's purse in his study. Upon inspecting it and finding her diary he phones the police and reports Patricia's disappearance. During a dance rehearsal Olga accuses Madame Blanc (Tilda Swinton) (figure 69) and Ms. Tanner of being witches and runs off to pack her belongings. Blanc casts a spell on Susie by touching her hands and feet. When Susie starts dancing, Olga is shown to be thrown around as if possessed by Susie's dance movements – Olga's body contorting and bones breaking. The witches pierce her body with thin metal hooks and drag her away.



Figure 69. *Suspiria*. 2018. Directed by Luca Guadagnino. [Film still from Blu-ray] USA: Lions Gate Home Entertainment.

In the third act two police officers descend on the academy looking for Patricia after Dr. Klemperer had reported her missing. Three of the witches put them under a spell and lead them down to a basement level where they strip the men and make fun of their genitals and position of power. Susie becomes the best dancer at the academy and Mother Markos instructs the witches off screen that she wants Susie to be her next vessel.

The fourth chapter starts with Dr. Klemperer visiting the detectives who went to the academy, but the witches had put a spell on them making them believe that nothing was amiss at the academy. In desperation he goes to see Sara, another of Patricia's friends at the academy. He tells her about the witches and Patricia's strange disappearance, but she does not believe him. Meanwhile Susie is unable to make the high jumps required for the dance. Blanc uses a spell in the dance hall and transfers another student's jumping ability into Susie. The student soon after has something similar to an epileptic fit. Late one night Sara discovers Markos' hidden living quarters underneath the academy. She reveals her discovery to Dr. Klemperer who also now believes that Patricia was taken by the women in charge of the academy, but he does not believe they are witches and likens them more to a cult.

In the fifth chapter the dance academy presents their Volk dance to the general public. The dancers are dressed in bright red ropes, resembling blood dripping from their body. The dance is a frenzied yet well-choreographed dance which seems almost primitive and pagan. They perform Volk on top a large pentacle and other geometric shapes mapped out on the floor in silver tape. Sara goes to the hidden rooms again and discovers Patricia's mangled and still very much alive body. Two other similar broken bodies crawl towards her causing her to run away in fright. She is however unable to escape. In the darkness a hole opens up beneath her and she breaks a leg. The witches find her and Blanc heals her leg and puts her under a spell. The dance is shown to take place while all the above transpires. Sarah joins the dance but is completely under Blanc's spell, but soon falls to the floor screaming, her leg broken again. Later that night Blanc and Susie converse. Susie hints that the worst is yet to come, startling Blanc.

In the sixth chapter the witches celebrate Volk and Dr. Klemperer is tricked by the witches into seeing his long-missing wife Anke (played by Jessica Harper who was Susie in the original *Suspiria*) who had gone missing during World War II. She is not Anke however and it is soon revealed it is one of the coven who changed her appearance. She leads Dr. Klemperer to the dance academy where the witches capture him and take him to an underground hall under the academy. Suzy returns to the academy right thereafter and is led down to the same hall by a floating light. She finds all the dancers and the rest of the coven in the hall, as well as a severely decaying Markos (figure 70) in a chair. Markos is also played by Tilda Swinton. Everyone is naked, and the young dancers are all in a trance. Dr. Klemperer is also naked on the floor, begging for his life. The witches are shown to disembowel catatonic Olga, Sara, and Patricia with their thin hooks. Susie pretends to offer herself to Markos, but unknowing to the coven, Susie brings Death in tow. Blanc realising that something is wrong attempts to stop the ritual, but Markos nearly decapitates her with a gesture. Susie reveals to the coven that she is Mother Suspiriorum and that Markos had lied. Death then appears and brutally kills all those who

voted for Markos. Susie rips open her own chest during the mayhem while also being shown to be in elated ecstasy. The ritual ends and Dr. Klemperer is left to go.



Figure 70. *Suspiria*. 2018. Directed by Luca Guadagnino. [Film still from Blu-ray] USA: Lions Gate Home Entertainment.

In the final chapter the other dancers wake up the next morning with no recollection of the previous night's events. The next evening Susie visits Dr. Klemperer in his home. She expresses her regret at what happened to him and tells him that his wife had died during World War II. Susie then erases all memory of all that occurred, but also all memories of his wife. The final scene of the film takes place many years later at Dr. Klemperer's country house. The camera zooms in on the little heart Dr. Klemperer and Anke had carved into the wall. The film ends with this scene.

Where the original was filled with primary colours and colourful set-pieces this film evokes the Berlin winter with greys and general bleakness found throughout. Inspired by Micheal Balhaus's paintings of women, Guadagnino attempted to depart completely from Argento's colour schemes by having a colour palette comprised of browns, rusts, blues, and greens (Jones, A., 2018). The idea was to capture a sombre Berlin of 1977 in the film, but also the Cold War suspicion and subterfuge that many experienced at the time (Marcks, 2018). The cinematographer, Sayombhu Mukdeeprom, also only used cinematic techniques and technologies that were available to German New Wave cinematographers in 1977 Berlin (Marcks, 2018). This meant that the film was shot on film and not digitally, nor did they use corrective filters, modern lighting systems, oversized cranes, or Steadicams (Marcks, 2018). The wardrobe was similarly painstakingly researched and inspired by the styles found in *Sibylle*, a seventies GDR fashion magazine (Marcks, 2018). Additionally, no sets were built for the making of the film as Guadagnino insisted that the actors be able to interact with real places (Marcks,

2018). Abandoned hotels and police stations were renovated specially for the making of the film (Marcks, 2018).

Where Argento's film showed no motivation for the witches and perpetuated the depiction of women as passive and non-confrontational, this film portrays the power struggle in a coven between the women who lead it. In the 2018 version we find a power struggle occurring between two factions of witches. Susie, revealed to be Mater Sispiorium all along, destroys Helena Markos and her followers who were attempting to usurp her sovereignty by organising an unsanctioned soul transference ritual.

There are very few men in the film. With the exception of Dr. Josef Klemperer, who is also played by Swinton, there are only two other male figures found in the film, namely the detectives who visit the dance academy. Guadagnino explains that this was done on purpose as he wanted Swinton to represent the id (Markos), ego (Dr. Klemperer), and superego (Blanc) through the three characters (Jones, N., 2018). Madame Blanc is shown to care for her students and the coven, but she also guides her students and peers into making their own decisions. In contrast the disease-ridden and rotting Helena Markos is brutal, vicious, and power mad. She would sink to any obscene depravity to fulfil her desires at great cost to others. As Dr. Klemperer she is a psychotherapist who is kind, thoughtful, and available to help those in need, but also overly rational. In another interview Guadagnino explains that his film is concerned with the feminine point of view and he wanted to make the audience subconsciously experience the film through a female perspective, hence why the only real male characters in the film are minor characters (Jones, A., 2018).

Guadagnino has explained that his point of departure for *Suspria* came about after having discussions with Teresa MccRee and Lea Vergine regarding body and feminist art (Juzwiak, 2018). He also sought inspiration from artists like Marina Abramovic and Gina Pane who are both well-known for their feminist body and performance art (Fendi, 2018). From this we can conclude that *Suspria* has much to say regarding power structures and power struggles. We see these struggles manifest on various levels in the film. The main struggle, however, occurs between the Blanc and Markos functions, but both are destroyed and usurped by Susie. There is also the political climate of 1977 Berlin to consider, especially since the German Autumn constantly appears in the background of the film.

The German Autumn was a period of terrorist conflict perpetrated by the left-wing group, the Red Army Faction (RAF), that lasted for 44 days in Germany from 5 September 1977 (Bielby, 2010:137). The RAF came into being in the late 1960s and lasted till the end of the 1970s in West Germany (Varon, 2004:2-4). It was a leftist group who opposed Germany's authoritarian rule and political extremism through violent means and was composed out of men and women (Varon, 2004:5). The group was driven by an anti-war ideology and their actions were in defence of war-torn countries like

Vietnam and Cuba (Varon, 2004:8). The fact that women were partaking in violent acts overshadowed their ideology and what they stood for. This led to conflict being aligned with the feminine by the media and by some scholars (Bielby, 2010:139; Melzer, 2009:36). Due to women at the time being seen by society as non-violent beings, the female members of the RAF who were involved in violent acts such as bombing, kidnapping, and murder became the focus of the media during the 1970s (Bielby, 2010:140; Melzer, 2009:38-39). Women who suddenly became violent and thus deviated from the passive norm became a curiosity, thus foregrounding the gender and/or sexual identity of the terrorists, which should not have been the focus in the first place.

Guadagnino's witches and dancers mirror both the criticism of war as well as the violent female members of the RAF. Mukdeeprom explains in an interview that the dance performed in the film, *Volk*, is a type of avant-garde expression of the post-war suffering of the German people while simultaneously being a spell-casting ritual (Marcks, 2018). *Volk* can consequently be described as a type of anti-war protest through the movements of the body. On the other hand, the ease with which the witches kill the dancers to protect the coven and Markos is not dissimilar to the RAF members' violent and murderous acts. Some might argue that Guadagnino's witches are vehicles for the male gaze due to their violence, but Guadagnino counters this with a thoughtful statement regarding women and mothers:

If we talk about the Great Mother, we cannot deny the terrible mother. True feminism is something that doesn't shy away from the complexity of the female identity. It's not about sugarcoating and saying, "They're good; men are bad." That's ridiculous. I think that's victimization. (Juzwiak, 2018).

Guadagnino is correct with this statement by not attributing violence to men and passivity to women like many frequently do. According to a recent study done by Kaj Björkqvist (2018:39), men and women display the same amounts of verbal aggression. Björkqvist's study also revealed that men are more physically aggressive than women due to the high levels of testosterone in the male body, while women are more prone to, what Björkqvist refers to, as indirect aggression which involves harming someone socially or psychologically (Björkqvist:39-40). In other words, the types of aggression are different, but both are equal in their capacity to inflict damage on another person. I find that the idea of violence being inherent to both male and female, aligns with Apollo and Dionysus as both prone to violence, but for different reasons and in different ways. These reasons will be explored in the tropes section. In the next part of this chapter, we delve deeper into *Suspiria* by examining what other scholars suggest about the film. Due to its relatively recent production the film has not received much scholarly attention.

Literature review

Before discussing the literature pertaining to *Suspiria* we should consider that Guadagnino's *Suspiria* is deliberately linked to the work of his forerunner, Argento, and that Guadagnino attempted to separate his film from Argento's by making significant changes to the style and plot of the film. The predecessor's work is frequently read in relation to the new one by scholars and this will undoubtedly become a central focus for many scholars in the future.

By linking his film to Argento's, Guadagnino's *Suspiria* is haunted by an old text, which means that *Suspiria* is an example of Bloom's *askesis*. The three scholars I discuss in this section all make reference to the original film and all draw comparisons between the two films. In other words, the two films are read in relation to one another. What is interesting however is that scholars do not diminish either film when comparing them to one another, which breaks from Bloom's *askesis* as he suggests that the predecessor's text is diminished, while the new creator's attempt is exaggerated and exalted. This is most likely due to the two films being vastly different in style and plot. Guadagnino did not want to recreate Argento's film and says:

The model of the narrative Dario invented for himself made him the committed master of the superficial, the surface. That was his take, his angle, his craft and it was never going to be appropriate for me to imitate his idea of cinema or style. What Dario triggered in me was a freedom of thinking, an empathy of emotion that impassioned my approach to the material. (Jones, A., 2018).

Guadagnino, can be argued, used Argento's characters and basic plot, but in other respects he did the opposite of what Argento did. Where's Argento was focussed on the colour, architecture, and surfaces, Guadagnino was concerned with the characters and the expression of power struggles not just as experienced in 1977 Germany, but between men and women, women and other women, and women and society.

The borrowing of characters between different texts is decidedly postmodern. Foucault (1970:xviii) asserts that that there is no commonality to be found between fictional worlds. Brian McHale (2004:56-57) disagrees and says that fictional characters have the fictional universe in common and that authors regularly borrow characters from other author's fictions. In *Suspiria*'s case we find this burrowing or overlap in various instances. Both films take place in a fictional Berlin. Where Argento built elaborate sets, Guadagnino restored abandoned buildings. Though the abandoned buildings are real spaces, they were not in use anymore. Furthermore, some of the buildings Guadagnino utilised in the film are not located in Berlin (Marcks, 2018). For instance, an abandoned hotel was used for the dance academy which is located near Varese in Northern Italy (Marcks, 2018). Another overlap between the films is the dance academy as setting. In Argento's version it is a ballet school, but in

Guadagnino's version they perform modern dancing. This is noteworthy as ballet's strict control of movement, conventions, and traditions are closely aligned with the Apollonian, while modern dancing relies more on the expression of emotion and pushing the boundaries of the body aligning it with Dionysus. The characters also overlap with both versions having a Sara, Susie, Olga, Patricia, Ms. Tanner, Madam Blanc, and Helena Markos in the film. The three mothers are also mentioned by name in the remake, but differs from the original by making Susie Mother Suspiriorum (*clinamen*). Jessica Harper who appeared as Suzy in Argento's film makes an appearance in the 2018 version, but as Dr. Klemperer's long missing wife drawing further connections between the films. All of the above draws the viewer's attention to the intertextuality that exists between the films.

Due to the various overlaps and changes Guadagnino makes in *Suspiria* one could also argue that the film is an example of Bloom's tesserae because of the various tokens that the audience recognises as belonging to the original film. Guadagnino changed these conventions in various ways, but they remain recognisable nonetheless. It is also interesting to note that the fear of powerful women and the maternal manifests in both films which make both films of importance for scholars in the gender or feminist fields.

Yingjie He (2019) completed a comparative study of the representation of feminism in *Suspiria* and *Kiki's Delivery Service* (1989), a Japanese anime written, produced, and directed by the infamous Hayao Miyazaki. According to He (2019:6) witches are and have always been a manifestation of social desire due to the social anxieties she embodies. He (2019:11) draws parallels between Blanc and Western or American-influenced Germany, while also suggesting that Markos represents the brutality of the Soviet Union where people are sacrificed to negate the collapse of the union. Additionally, He suggests that the dancers represent the common German folk living on both sides of the wall who are pawns and caught in the crossfire between the two rival ideologies.

He makes similar divisions regarding to the two factions' portrayal of feminism. Markos' faction acts inappropriately as they control women's bodies and minds, robbing them of their agency (He, 2019:12). Markos is furthermore revealed to be a false god implying that the Soviet Union follows a false ideology (He, 2019:12). Blanc's faction is forced to do Markos's bidding and to sacrifice the young dancers to her to sustain her, which align Blanc's group with female agency under threat (He, 2019:12).

Another observation He makes has to do with the physical appearance of the witch. He suggests that the witches do not conform to the stereotypical crone-witch with a conical hat, broom, and a familiar, and instead wear beautiful clothes and though middle-aged are attractive (He, 2019:12). This is a correct assumption, but very few witches in horror films conform to the stereotyped witch's appearance. The attractive, middle-aged, and well-dressed witch is also found in *Night of the Eagle*,

The Witches, the original *Suspiria*, and *Witching & Bitching* which in turn suggests that she does conform to the cinematic middle-aged witch stereotype in horror films.

Class also manifests in *Suspiria* through the beautifully tailored clothes the witches wear as well as their grooming (He, 2019:12). He (2019:12) posits that a well-groomed and dressed middle-age witch who is employed at a prestigious dance academy challenges the limits society imposes upon women as the witches are on a higher socio-economic scale. Due to this the unattractive and unmarried witch stereotype is reversed and female power and identity is restored (He, 2019:12). He (2019:12) argues, however, that Klemperer, though actually a woman, still lends power to patriarchy as Klemperer is required to bear witness to the witches' power, implying that if a man does not witness female power, it cannot exist (He, 2019:12). I found this last statement interesting, and also agree with it. I do however think that the way he is stripped and beaten negates any form of masculinity in the film. The two policemen's positions in society and their gender are ridiculed by the witches while their minds are easily overtaken by the witches. It is because of these scenes that I found the film to challenge patriarchy, while simultaneously reminiscent of Žižek's ideas regarding power and the displacement of ideology. The factions in *Suspiria* are no different from the German factions of 1977. One might believe that Susie is a lesser evil than Markos, but some scholars would disagree, especially with regards to Susie erasing Klemperer's memory. Guadagnino himself says the following regarding the scene:

You feel that something good has happened to a beloved character. But in truth, it's a monstrous act. Without memory, even the most painful of memories, we are nothing. We are not human. So the person who wipes off the memory is really a villain. (Jones, N. 2018).

Susie is deemed a lesser evil than Markos, but if we consider what she unleashed upon Markos's faction and how brutally they were dispatched, one wonders about her true motivation. She is also shown to lie to both the other characters and the viewer as the revelation of her being Mother Suspiriorum was unexpected. Additionally, she inflicts trauma on witches, dancers, and viewer alike in the final two chapters of the film. Susie being aligned with death and being able to call on her (death being female in *Suspiria*) is suspicious as well.

Cilliers van den Berg's essay on *Suspiria* focuses on cinematic illustration of historical trauma (2020:185). He considers Klemperer's role in the film as central as he embodies historical trauma throughout the film, despite only playing a minor role (Van Den Berg, 2020:186). Van Den Berg (2020:187) notes that the film is ostensibly about the conflict between women and patriarchy but states that Klemperer's role as avatar for historical trauma is secondary to the gender themes (Van Den Berg, 2020:187). He builds his argument on the fact that Klemperer is a holocaust survivor, while his missing wife, Anke, represents the suffering of women under patriarchy (Van Den Berg, 2020:187). Klemperer is blamed by the witches for his not doing enough to save his wife, but also for

not listening to women like Patricia when they seek his aid, traumatising him in the process and contributing to his role as the embodiment of trauma (Van Den Berg, 2020:187). Klemperer represents the men who do little or nothing to support women, in other words he mirrors the collective guilt of men – but is simultaneously a victim, witness, and passive doer (Van Den Berg, 2020:198). The trauma embodied by Klemperer is not just bound to the historical post-World War II trauma which he lived through, but also to more universal traumas that continuously manifest (Van Den Berg, 2020:197). I agree with Van Den Berg's interpretation of Klemperer. During World War II many individuals witnessed atrocities committed against others while being unable to intervene for fear of being killed or named as collaborators. The helplessness manifests as survivor's guilt in those who live through these circumstances making them witness and victim. Furthermore, Klemperer being unable to protect himself or others against the witches is subversive as it suggests how powerless men are with regards to female power (Van Den Berg, 2020:199).

Like Klemperer, Susie also plays a role as a representative of all women and witches as she develops from a shy novice into one of the Three Mothers of the witches (Van Den Berg, 2020:199). Susie also becoming a representative of the female collective completes the narrative's discourse on gender which is also problematic (Van Den Berg, 2020:198-199). Van Den Berg (Van Den Berg, 2020:199) argues that a specific historical trauma is filtered through the current socio-political discourse surrounding gender which is problematic. I find the parallels between Van Den Berg's statement and the way that some feminists have conflated and appropriated the witch as feminist icon striking. From a New Historicist perspective this should be taken note of as it has implications where our understanding and interpretation of past events are concerned. The German Nazis, for instance, did not especially target women nor can we compare the suffering of contemporary first world women to what the Jewish people went through at the hands of Nazis.

Like He (2019:12), Van Den Berg (2020:199) also suggests that Klemperer as witness legitimises the feminine power of Susie and the coven. Van Den Berg (2020:199) argues that the violence in *Suspiria* is perpetrated by both men and women and that they are equally guilty of inaction while witnessing the atrocities. Blanc knows about what had been done to Patricia and where she was hidden. She is just as guilty as Markos for Olga and Sara's murder and initiated the spells that led them to be captured and killed. Susie, as Mother Suspiriorum, was also aware of everything that was going on at the academy and most likely knew what had happened to the other dancers. By erasing all memory of Klemperer's wife she destroys part of his identity, but also the lessons he had learned so late in his life regarding trusting women when they confide in him (Van Den Berg, 2020:199-200). Susie destroying Klemperer memories without his consent means that she is a destroyer and not a saviour of the witches.

Julian Murphet (2021:94) makes similar assertions and says that the coven is simultaneously a haven for women but also a place of enslavement. Murphet's 2021 study explores the boundaries between allegory and allegoresis – which is in essence the reading of a text as if it were an allegory – where the 2018 version of the film can be considered an allegory of the original 1977 film (Murphet, 2021:88). Murphet (2021:89) argues that Guadagnino's *Suspiria* is a neo-giallo that mimics the form signatures of its predecessor, but ignores the misogyny and allusions to the exploitation genre.

According to Murphet (2021:93) the dance academy represents the globally displaced and dispossessed of World War II. Like the so-called lizard people or the Illuminati that proliferate in the online narratives of the North-American far-right political discourse, so do the witches represent those with power who exploit, feed on, and abuse the young dancers (Murphet, 2021:93). The dance, Volk, is also not without meaning. Murphet (2021:95) says:

The choreography of “Volk” is staccato, expressionist, violent; it pulsates with a strong “left puritan” disgust for the “Beauty Myth” and taps into archaic cultic kinetic patterns. It appears to be shot through with an occult signifying practice, as if it were a physical invocation or kinaesthetic spell. Its ugliness, moreover, is explicit;

In other words, Volk is not meant to be beautiful, nor is it meant to showcase the beautiful dancers. Its purpose is to dismantle Apollonian order through Dionysian violence and disharmony. Murphet (2021:95) describes the academy as allegory of lost avant-garde aspirations that is on the verge of being drowned in postmodernism. Furthermore, the three Mothers are aligned with the chthonic (Murphet, 2021:89). Even though the witches and the dancers are aligned with the chthonic, Murphet (2021:95-96) argues that it would be erroneous to identify the coven's politics with radical activism as the coven is never shown to interfere with the world outside of the academy, nor are they interested in these events, despite the hardships many women face in the outside world.

I agree with Murphet to an extent regarding the isolation of the coven, but I also think that by rejecting the outside world the witches reject power structures. In Argento's *Suspiria* the witches manifest in flurries of neon colour, fast-paced music, and *mise-en-scène*. In Guadagnino's *Suspiria* the academy is hidden in plain sight, but also rendered indistinguishable from the rest of Berlin. Outside the academy, the German Autumn publicly rages, while inside the academy the young dancers who board in its dormitory are oblivious to what is going on underneath their feet. Additionally, the women in the coven are seemingly immortal if we consider the age of Markos and that Blanc survives being decapitated. The witches are aligned with patriarchal power structures, but they also seem to be far more powerful than said structures. The witches have survived through the ages suggesting that the power struggles outside of the academy are not worth their attention or any attempts at intervention.

Like the models of spaces and buildings in *Hereditary* so does the academy in *Suspiria* resemble a simulacrum. The power struggles and subterfuge within the academy resemble that of the outside world, where Markos represents the Soviet Union and Blanc represents the world free of Soviet rule influenced by ideology based on personal and economic freedom. The production team created a cinematic version 1977 Berlin which conforms to Baudrillard's first phase of image. Because the world is created and changed for aesthetic reasons the world of *Suspiria* resembles his second phase as well, since reality is distorted. We can visit the buildings they filmed in but they cannot be found in the areas of the city the film suggests they are in, nor do the buildings resemble what they looked like in 1977. By introducing the supernatural the world of the film moves to the next phase of the image where there is an absence of reality. The witches can change their appearance, create phantasms, and mutilate and reshape the human body while also keeping a person alive.

Interestingly, the witches' inaction and ambivalence to the outside world mirrors the callousness and indifference to suffering Baudrillard warns us of. According to Baudrillard (2002:172-173) the collapse between the real world and the simulacra renders the individual unable to discern fact from fiction which causes the individual to deny the veracity of the real as it is filtered through the media to become something both real and unreal. Barry (2002:86) asks: "...if we accept the 'loss of the real' and the collapsing of reality and simulation into a kind of virtual reality, then what of the Holocaust?". In other words, a truthful reality becomes unattainable through film, because it is a reality mediated through writers, directors, actors, and production houses. It warps our perceptions of an event and time to such an extent that even though there are truthful aspects in the film, we are ambivalent towards it. An example of this is the extent to which many people deny that the Holocaust occurred. Stephen E. Atkins (2009:1) says that Holocaust denial goes as far back as a few years after World War II. According to Atkins (2009: 1, 233) this denial has become an international movement in the twenty-first century with advocates in almost every country.

Tropes

The witches in *Suspiria* are embodied along similar lines as the witches in *Witching & Bitching*, but where the young witch is overtly sexualised in *Witching & Bitching*, the young witches in *Suspiria* are not, despite a few nude scenes. I found this interesting as this may suggest that Guadagnino succeeded in his goal of avoiding the heterosexual male gaze.

The witches in *Suspiria* depart drastically from the ones we find in *Häxan*. Susie is young and beautiful, but she is never sexualised, nor is she a lustful and depowered temptress. She is shown to control Death herself, to be omnipotent, and is far more powerful than Blanc or Markos. The middle-aged witch does not feature in *Häxan* at all, but interestingly there are no crones in *Suspiria* like the

ones we find in *Häxan*. The older witches are well-dressed, groomed, and quite graceful. Markos is the only witch of advanced age to be shown in the film. Where Argento's Markos resembled a zombie, Guadagnino's Markos redefines feminine monstrosity. She is naked and her body seems to be an enormous mass of cancerous growths ravaging her and defying normative expectations of the female body. Upon close inspection she has extra hands growing out of one of her upper arms and waist as well as many other unidentifiable parts – a grotesque amalgamation of different bodies. Markos is wanton and shown to be salivating and smacking her lips in Susie's presence. She is violent and murderous and does not give a second thought to any around her. She is closely aligned with Dionysus. Guadagnino introducing so many changes to the embodiment of the various witches can describe this as an example of Bloom's *kenosis*.

With the exception of Patricia and Olga's mangled bodies the witches in *Suspiria* are never surrounded by the dead or the abject which is similar to the witches in the original version of the film. This is however a corrective measure made by both Argento and Guadagnino with regard to general witch tropes, implying Bloom's *clinamen*.



Figure 71. *Suspiria*. 2018. Directed by Luca Guadagnino. [Film still from Blu-ray] USA: Lions Gate Home Entertainment.

Where the witches in *Häxan* dance upon and deface crucifixes, the witches in *Suspiria* are shown to move along the shapes of various intertwined and superimposed pentagrams, which implies that the dance has a similar function than the ones we see in *Häxan*. In the literature review for this film there is also mention of the dance resembling pagan bodily invocations. The dancers' movements are also shown to be frenetic and convulsive, resembling the dances and movements of the possessed priestesses in voodoo horror films like *Angel Heart* (1987) and *The Serpent and the Rainbow* (1988)

(figure 71). These associations with voodoo horror films suggest a link between the dancers and African cultures that are historically perceived as primitive. The dancers being naked and/or dressed in red rope further emphasises these associations when compared to the Umhlanga Royal Reed Dance. Though the pagan and associations with primitive cultures manifest through dancing, no mention is made of nature in the film. In Argento's *Suspiria* the academy is flanked by woodlands, but in the remake it is shown to be surrounded by Berlin's urban landscape. The removal of associations with nature suggests Bloom's *clinamen*.

Nature is not the only trope not found in Guadagnino's film. The witches do not kill babies or seduce men, but they do however pose a threat to the nuclear family (*tessera*). When Susie appears in front of Marcos, Marcos says: "If you accept me, you must put down the woman who bore you. Think of that false mother now. Reject her. Expel her. You have the only mother you need here. Death to any other mother!" In other words, Susie is expected to symbolically kill her mother by renouncing her familial ties.

The supernatural manifests in interesting and unconventional ways in *Suspiria* that are far different from what we find in *Häxan*. Dancing and gestures are used to invoke spells, possessions, and to cause harm to others and not potions or incantations. Like the wands the children use at Hogwarts to create and direct magic in the Harry Potter films and books, the women in *Suspiria* use gestures and movement in a similar fashion. Sometimes a hand is raised and flicked in a certain way to open hidden passages, while at other times a single dance bends, breaks, and contorts another's body into an abject parody of flesh and limbs. Susie manipulates and breaks Olga's body by dancing after Blanc touches her hands and feet. One of the witches opens a door by gesturing with her hands. Blanc possesses Sara by making a few movements with her hands and arms. The soul transference procedure that would have enabled Marcos to inhabit Susie's body is a ritualistic dance involving the whole coven and the young dancers. The body and the supernatural, like in *The Neon Demon*, are thus intertwined within one another and inseparable. The supernatural power of the witches does not originate from a devil or a demonic entity, but from the women themselves – they possess this power inherently. By changing the mechanics of the supernatural we can refer to it as an example of Bloom's *clinamen*.

Related to the supernatural is the witch's ability to possess others to rob them of their agency. This remains unchanged in *Suspiria* as the dancers are possessed to maintain the secrecy of the coven or to subdue patriarchal threats. Throughout the film men never seem to be a threat to the women in the coven. Three witches hypnotise the detectives who come looking for Patricia and beckon them to a dark room where their trousers are removed. The women then point and laugh at their exposed genitals and prod them with steel hooks. They refer to their genitals as "kitty", which is similar to the English "pussy" often used to describe female genitalia or a cowardly man. The men's position of

authority, implies that they are alpha males and not cowards, yet they succumb to supernatural power and their genitals are ridiculed and prodded by middle-aged witches acting like children on a playground. The men are dehumanised and emasculated by these actions. Instead of killing them the witches simply erase all memory of what transpired and release them. This could be because the witches want to make a point. They play with the men to ridicule them and to prove that they do not view them as a threat, but also to lower the men below their own social status. By erasing their memory of these events the witches distance themselves from men whose aggressive acts can only be validated through the act of witnessing. An example of this can be found in George Miller's *Mad Max: Fury Road* (2015) where Nicholas Hoult's character, Nux, attempts to ram Max's vehicle. Knowing that his action will cause his own death, he screams to the other War Boys: "Witness me!", suggesting that his 'valiant' act can only have meaning if there is someone to witness it. The witches seek no such validation for their actions and a man remembering the suffering they mete out would render the idea moot. Though other witches are present when they ridicule the men, it is done in a secret place and it is only witnessed by other witches. These witnesses operate in a different capacity than their non-witch counterparts and are not there to validate the witch's actions. A man who seeks validation for his action could potentially be flawed or vain. She is not there to validate the power of the witch to boost the witch's ego. She is there to validate the power that flows through all witches, in other words the power is important, not the one who wields it. As soon as they are done with the men they release them and utterly forget them. A man who however remembers what was done to him at their hands could at some point remind them of their actions, negating the whole exercise. Also, a man who remembers what they did to him is a potential threat that might lead to the end of their secret existence.

There are numerous instances of men threatening the witch, or women becoming witches due to the abuse they suffer under men and/or patriarchy in the witch horror film. In many instances the women have no recourse but to submit to another patriarchal power structure in the form of devils or demons. Men are also frequently charmed into submission through spells and potions to make them complete a task which the witch is unable to complete or to satisfy her sexually. Guadagnino's *Suspiria* is so devoid of the male gaze or male influence that none of the above manifests in the film (*askesis*). Men are not a threat to them, so they do not kill them and simply play with them and then set them free. Moreover, the witches do not seem to desire men sexually or need them to gain power of any kind. Klemperer is the only man who they attack and subdue through violence, but this is done to have a male witness to their ceremony. As mentioned, Klemperer does have a function as representing all men. Therefore the witches only require him as witness as he represents the guilt and fear of women harboured by men. Their accusations are not just directed at Klemperer, but all men who do not listen to women and who do not act to save women.

Another aspect worth consideration regarding Klemperer is that he is forced to witness the witches' power. According to Foucault (1977:201; 1980:93; Grace & McHoul, 2015:65, 72, 87-88) power only exists when exercised and when these exertions are witnessed. The witches are thus similar to the Apollonian power structures that they claim to oppose.

Closing statements

Suspiria poses interesting questions regarding the sociocultural and its effect on the witch horror film. Scholars and the general public too easily equate historical events to their current socio-political circumstances. This can be attributed to Baudrillard's loss of the real. Baudrillard's essay, *The Gulf War did not Take Place* (1995), for instance, suggests that the Gulf War did not occur and that it was an example of hyperreality where the war was a carefully curated series of photos, video clips, and news articles disseminated by the popular media. Baudrillard does not say that the Gulf War never occurred, but he suggests that the images presented to the public created an artificial vision of the war. This collapse between reality and the media images causes an emotional disconnect between the viewer where we experience these images as no different from those found in Hollywood blockbusters or video games.

Some feminists have appropriated the witch as icon for many years, basing their assumptions on similarly curated images and texts. In doing so, they have unwittingly created a false narrative regarding the witch-hunts of the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries where many people currently believe that the Inquisition only killed women or women who threatened the status quo. Numerous scholars have disproved these notions, but they persist in the imagination of the general public.

In some instances, these ideas become so engrained in society that victims of lesser social injustices compare their own suffering to those who suffered truly incomprehensible cruelties. A recent example of this is when Gina Carano, who played Cara Dune in Disney's *The Mandalorian* (2020-2021), compared the suffering of American Republicans to what those of Jewish descent had to endure under the Nazis (Bella, 2021). These false equivalencies skew our perceptions of history as well as our interpretation of present sociocultural events and circumstances. The last-mentioned is of importance to the New Historicist as it has an influence on our perceptions of historical events and might lead to errors in our judgements and interpretations of said events.

Suspiria offers much to the New Historicist when we consider the efforts and research of the production team to create an authentic glimpse into 1977 Berlin. Actual news footage was used to show the viewer what the public saw on television in Germany at the time. The characters also all wear reproductions of the fashions of the time. What is especially noteworthy is that the cinematic

style and technologies used closely resemble that which was available during 1977. The film and its production is a veritable simulacrum of a bygone age.

With regards to the Apollonian and Dionysian *Suspiria*'s witches collapse the boundaries between these two archetypes. They both mirror and challenge western power structures which suggest a reciprocal influence between the film and the world in which it was produced.

CONCLUSION

With this study I set out to find an alternative method of analyzing witch horror films which does not rely on psychoanalytical, psychodynamic, or feminist methods as there is an overabundance of such studies resulting in fewer novel analyses and interpretations of said films, but also a relative neglect of the influence of social, cultural, and historical contexts. Due to the witch's position with regards to the intersection of gender, power, and culture, coupled with her various appearances throughout history in both fiction and the medieval witch hunts, it became clear that the witch as found in horror films would be the best suited subject for such a socio-historical study.

The witch being female, powerful, having agency, embodying fear, and manifesting in different ranges of age and levels of attractiveness are all aspects that made her an attractive subject for psychoanalytic, psychodynamic, and feminist studies. What many of these scholars frequently do not consider is how these aspects are influenced over time by social norms and ideals, or specific historical contexts that shape society and culture.

In most instances the scholars describe and analyse the witch along negative lines, like her ability to castrate, her sociocultural position as a castrated person, a wicked mother, and a destroyer of the nuclear family and patriarchal power structures. In other words, her ability to cause fear and destroy as a woman is central to most of these perspectives, while her capacity to facilitate social change, for instance, is ignored. One such example of the witch's potential to facilitate change is the extent to which some feminists have appropriated the witch as a symbol for emancipated women.

As societal norms and ideals change over time regarding the female body and women's sociocultural position changes and evolves, so does the witch's appearance and actions mirror and influence these same norms and ideals. In some instances specific historical events also had an influence on society, resulting in changes to the witch's embodiment, but also her supernatural abilities and who these abilities are directed towards.

Over the course of this study I attempted to illustrate how sociocultural norms and ideals influenced and aided in the construction of the body and supernatural abilities of the cinematic witch as found in horror films over one hundred years. In order to do so I employed a combination of tools to identify and trace the manifestations of key tropes associated with the cinematic witch and how these tropes changed over time and for which reasons. The first of these tools is Marjorie Levinson's New Historicist method because it positions this study in the larger field of literary theory. Her theory suggests that we gain understanding of the past by engaging with different historic texts and their ripples and reverberations through time. She states that with each new ripple the text changes as does its meanings. These meanings are dependent on the sociocultural context in which these ripples

manifest. However, due to the impossibility of providing unbiased accounts of past events and contexts we can only judge the past from its echoes in the present.

To make sense of the past through the cinematic witch I had to go back to her first appearance in a cinematic production, namely Benjamin Christensen's 1922 film *Häxan*. Having viewed many horror films over many years I was able to identify definite tropes that echo through numerous witch horror films with *Häxan* being the point of origin for said tropes. The tropes include the witch as sexualized young woman or as old crone. The witch's level of supernatural ability is also dependent on her age and how attractive she is. In other words, the more attractive a witch is the less supernatural power she has available to her. Other tropes include her connection to the abject and nature, as well as the symbolisms associated with her as adversary to the traditional family unit. Her supernatural power is also frequently bestowed upon her by a demonic entity or external power, usually a male power, which she then mostly uses to possess and control others. Lastly, and related to her supernatural power is the extent to which she was harmed by a man or a symbol of masculinity.

When we consider the tropes we see that they all have to do with the witch's gender, her appearance, her supernatural ability, and who she directs the abilities towards. In other words, we have a good overlap with themes that are usually the focal points of psychoanalytical, psychodynamic, and feminist studies. Though this study set out to demonstrate that psychodynamic approaches negate novel approaches and observations, my study at times led to some similar conclusions and overlaps, but also new observations, proving the validity of my methods.

The next step in this study was to trace the tropes as they manifested through subsequent films. Related to this act of tracing was to establish how these manifestations changed and why they changed. To see how these tropes changed I used Bloom's six revisionary ratios. Bloom's theories regarding the influence that exist between texts functions as a camera or recorder that marks, measures, and, to an extent, quantifies and elaborates on these influences that exist between the various filmmakers. In other words, Bloom's ratios illustrate the interconnectedness and intertextuality that exists between the films. According to Bloom, creators frequently make these changes in an effort to distance themselves from their predecessors and/or to make their own work seem more original. I, however, found that sociocultural contexts and historical events also had a role to play thus influencing the cinematic tropes found in horror films.

By analyzing the witch's portrayal in horror films and comparing these embodiments to the sociocultural contexts in which they appeared we can gain a deeper understanding of said portrayals, but also of the socio-historic contexts in which they were created. Below I summarize the major observations I made about each film regarding the witch's body and her supernatural abilities.

As mentioned, during the 1920s the witch surfaced in two different guises in *Häxan*, namely the young and old witch. Their ages are linked to the amount of supernatural power they possess. The one witch is an old, decrepit, but powerful witch who fills the viewer with dread, while the other is sexy, young, and enticing to the viewer. The older witch embodies a challenge to societal norms as her appearance collapses familiar descriptions of old age in both 1922, but also in 2021. The young witch on the other hand embodies the idealized female form, young and beautiful. These two different embodiments of the witch suggest that as the witch grows older and loses her youth and beauty, her supernatural power, or potential for destruction, increases. In almost every instance the witches in *Häxan* mirrors Victorian misogyny where women are controlled and objectified and where their value is dependent on their sexual availability to men. Interestingly, as the witch grows older and receives less attention from men her power increases, which in a twist of irony could suggest that women gain power and independence not by their lack of youth and beauty, but because of the absence of men.

Between 1923 and 1959 there was a dearth of horror films containing witches. That is not to say that the horror genre was not popular as Universal Pictures alone released 41 horror films between 1931 and 1946. Most of the monsters featured in their films were male, like *Dracula*, *The Mummy*, *Frankenstein*, and *The Wolf Man*. Films containing women had titles like *Dracula's Daughter* (1936), *The Invisible Woman* (1940), *Captive Wild Women* (1943), and *She-Wolf of London* (1946). From these titles we can infer a coded message: women's existence is reliant on her relationship with a man, that she should be invisible to other men, but kept by their husband, and that they are but poorly constructed imitations of a man. This is however just conjecture and a separate study on the horror film genre from 1923 and 1959 is required to shed light on the lack of cinematic witches.

The 1960 release of Mario Bava's *Black Sunday* combines the appearance of the young and beautiful witch with the supernatural power of the old witch from *Häxan*. Asa (the film's witch antagonist) yearns for freedom from the oppressive power structures that attempt to control her sexuality. She is in love with her brother and has a sexual relationship with him, something her other brother condemns her to death for. Asa's incestuous relationship is similarly condemned by international film distributors. Fearing backlash from society the distributors had all references to Asa and Juvatic's relationship removed. In Italy, where the film was made, this plot element is left intact, as incest, though illegal in Italy at the time, was only illegal if the incestuous relationship was revealed to the public and it caused outrage.

Asa's embodiment is problematic in the sense that she conforms to the idealized female form. This is exacerbated by her motivations and use of her supernatural abilities, which is to regain her young and beautiful body, and to murder everyone who gets in her way, which paints her as superficial and narcissistic. It should be noted that all her enemies are aligned with the Apollonian indicating that even though she is superficial, she still challenges and opposes society.

During the rest of the sixties the witch appeared in films set in England's then-ideal residential spaces, namely the suburban neighbourhood as a wife of professor, and the countryside as co-owner of a large estate which she inherited from her father. In both instances the evil witches are middle-aged to old, unattractive, and do not resemble the young witches as Asa in *Black Sunday* or the young witches in *Häxan*. The good witch in *Night of the Eagle* however is attractive and has a youthful appearance, suggesting that the witch who works in the service of society is beautiful and deserving of love.

The witch's cinematic placement in early sixties suburbia challenges the idealized family and the suburban lifestyle, both of which are capitalist tools to control society. Similar to the suburban witch is the wealthy witch who infiltrates the countryside – a space that was gradually becoming more preferred by the elite and the rich as the middle classes flocked to suburbia. The evil witches in these films use their supernatural abilities for different ends. Flora in *Night of the Eagle* uses her power to remove a rival of her husband, while Stephanie, like Asa, wants to sacrifice a young girl to regain her youth and beauty. Both witches resemble western fears associated with communism and the encroaching Soviet threat, but in different ways. Flora is a threat to the western avatar of power, the white male, while Stephanie threatens the nuclear family as a killer of children. Flora can also be described as a threat to the longevity of society as her disability suggests that she is of inferior genetic stock.

Society had changed much by the seventies due to the efforts of various social movements in the sixties. Women and people of colour had gained independence and a semblance of equality. The last vestiges of constrictive Victorian norms related to sex and women had mostly been cast aside during the sixties. Filmmakers hoping to make sizable profits jumped at the opportunity to include copious amounts of sex and violence in their films after film restrictions were relaxed in the United Kingdom and the United States of America. The witch in consequence became a vehicle for both sex and violence.

The American witch was introduced to the cinematic landscape in 1970 by the creator of the zombie genre, George Romero. Joan, the witch in *Jack's Wife*, straddles the role of a suburban antagonist and protagonist. By killing her uncaring and controlling husband she is both hero and villain. Joan is shown to be in her mid-forties, but she gradually becomes younger and sexualized as she gains greater independence. It is however not clear if she becomes more independent because she explores her sexual agency or if she gains independence through the practicing of witchcraft. Though she is somewhat sexually objectified through scenes of sex and nudity, she is able to challenge power structures and society to an extent, mirroring the burgeoning feminist movement of the late sixties and early seventies, but also the spiritual and Wicca lifestyles that were attractive at the time to bored suburban women.

Dario Argento's Italian produced *Suspiria* was an attempt to create an elevated horror film with a plot driven by gaudy lighting, experimental celluloid techniques, and an unconventional soundtrack. In other words, he wanted to engage the feelings of the viewer on a visceral level. His witch, Helena Markos, was also far more grotesque and powerful than the previously mentioned witches – an exaggeration of the old witch we find in *Häxan*. It could be argued that this witch embodies societal fears related to old age.

By 1977 sex scenes and nudity were found in almost every horror film, especially the horror and slasher films produced in Italy. Argento, by contrast, ignored sex and the objectification of women, and made them highly stylized objects of pain and torture instead. He maintains that *Suspiria* was an exercise to critically engage with cinematic conventions, indicating that the film was influenced more by cinematic production technology than the sociocultural. His use of *mise-en-scène* and colour supports his argument and to an extent my own regarding the witch's appearance. It is however difficult to ignore the way he portrays powerful women in the film as they are all aggressive and murderous.

Suspiria's witches and their machinations barely resemble the RAF and similar terrorist cells who were active in the mid to late seventies in many European areas. It is a pity that Argento did not engage with sociocultural events of the time through his film, but, as mentioned, his motivation was purely aesthetic. It could be argued that his film enabled him to escape the real-life atrocities that were occurring all around him.

During the eighties film production changed irrevocably with the introduction of the home video system, especially in the Northern Americas. Reaganomics had taken a foothold in American culture and profits became more important than substance or quality and the American horror film reflected this on every level.

Eighties filmmakers took note of the seventies cinematic conventions that led to profits and reduced the cinematic conventions related to sex and violence to a formula they could exploit. The typical eighties horror film can be compared to the roller coaster at the local carnival – it is fun, scary, gut-wrenching, and you might get laid afterwards. Central to the horror film is violence which meant that filmmakers had to find new and creative ways of killing teenagers, who were also the intended target market of these films. Because of this target market and the distribution restrictions imposed on film production the filmmakers could include sex and nudity, but hardcore sex was not allowed. This seems irrational as a woman's breast could literally be cut off on screen, but the instance she touched a penis or her own vagina it would receive an X-rating, effectively restricting female sexuality, which in turn suggests a link with Foucault's theories regarding the bourgeois control of sex.

It is obvious that the eighties horror film was sorted and collated to fit an exact genre formula with exacting standards of morality to maximize profits. These restrictions barred filmmakers from transgressing dominant sociocultural taboos related to sex. The horror films of the time however still hinted at many sociocultural problems, like the AIDS pandemic and conservative fears. These fears were packaged in films that resembled MTV music videos from the time, further enforcing their associations with their intended target audience, namely teenagers.

The witches in both *Night of the Demons* and *Witchcraft II* resemble two of Madonna's identities – the Material Girl and the sexually explicit Justify-My-Love Madonna respectively – from the eighties and early nineties, and by extension, adolescent heterosexual male fantasies. Though Angela in *Night of the Demons* never exposes her body to the viewer she does perform an erotic dance in a sensually lit room. Most of the other women in the film do strip down and engage in sexual acts. Delores in *Witchcraft II* constantly attempts to have sexual intercourse with her grandson, William, in the hope of siring the Antichrist and entices him with revealing outfits. She nearly succeeds at the end of the film after exposing her breasts to William, but he is saved by his girlfriend's conservative morality.

The witches in these two films have some supernatural ability which they use in different ways. Angela's abilities originate from an external demonic entity that possesses her. The entity's sole purpose is to kill others and to possess the dead. Delores uses her magic to change from an old woman to a young and beautiful one and to sleep with a man. As she is in fact an older woman, she has the supernatural abilities usually associated with older witches, like the hags in *Häxan*, but also like Asa and Helena Markos. Ironically, she wants to destroy western power structures by having sex with a man, falling pregnant, and then being subservient to her son when he grows up.

In both instances, the makers of these films were able to create a popular recipe for the films that could be replicated ad nauseam, resulting in numerous sequels for both films, further mirroring the capitalist zeitgeist of the era.

Similar to the eighties horror filmmakers, nineties horror filmmakers also utilized formulas to maximize their film's profitability, but by this time the formulas had been altered and sex and violence migrated to the low budget action film genre of the era. In its stead, horror films, like most of the other film genres of the time, had to include conventions from other genres. Hence *The Craft* contains elements of horror, fantasy, and the teen makeover film. The film also included a host of young, popular, and beautiful female stars to attract the intended teenage audience. Though the film conformed to capitalist strategies of profitability and the exploitation of the idealized female form, *The Craft* is surprisingly subversive through its subtle feminist messages and its promotion of the *other*.

The Blair Witch Project's popularity mainly stems from a gimmicky filmmaking approach which invokes Baudrillard's collapse of the real. Numerous filmgoers were fooled by the marketing that accompanied the film's release and firmly believed that they were witnessing real events leading to the disappearance of the three protagonists. The film mirrors society's voyeurism and addiction to view the suffering of others. Like *The Craft*, *The Blair Witch Project* is also subversive as the filmmakers relinquished control of the film's shooting to the cast, thus undermining Hollywood-dominated filmmaking conventions, but also making interesting comments regarding gender through the film.

The Blair Witch is never revealed to either audience or the characters, even though we can infer from the film that she has the same motivations as the old hags in *Häxan*. In addition, the witch is intrinsically associated with women and the vagina. She is not just a terrifying witch, she is an exaggerated embodiment of the dark and dangerous cavity between a woman's legs in which various dangers are believed to hide which can destroy a man and by implication, society. On the one hand this embodiment parallels misogynist fears, but on the other hand it holds a mirror up to society and confronts it with its irrational fear of women, and just as the witch does not appear in the film, so is the fear of women based on a fallacy. The monstrous woman is a simulacrum which is in turn based on something that does not exist. We flock to see this danger and revel in it when it is presented to us by religious figures or the popular media, but it does not resemble reality. In other words, the Blair Witch is never caught on film because she only exists in the viewer's imagination.

There is more to consider regarding the Blair Witch's embodiment. In the chapter about *Häxan* I identified a trope that links the witch with nature. In each instance between the sixties and nineties this link is covert and merely alluded to. In *The Blair Witch Project* the witch's association with nature is explicit and she is so supernaturally interwoven with it that the boundaries of her body become inseparable from nature.

Between 1999 and 2009 we again encounter a lack of witch horror films. This is mostly due to film production companies' unwillingness to produce new and untested cinematic properties. Endless remakes and sequels were abound during this time, until Lars von Trier released his highly controversial film *Antichrist* in 2009 which would herald a change in the horror film landscape. Before discussing my major findings related to *Antichrist*, the book has to be closed on what came before.

Sam Raimi's *Drag Me to Hell* is a combination of all that is good of the eighties and nineties horror film genres combined into one expressive postmodern film. The two witches in the film are comparable to the young woman and the old crone we find in *Häxan*. The young woman, Christine, is not sexualized in any way or form, but the old crone, Sylvia, is made excessively abject, far worse than her counterparts in *Häxan*. Sylvia's supernatural ability manifests in the form of a personified

curse in *Drag Me to Hell* which she sends to Christine as a torment for not approving her personal loan. The film uses the witch to parody the global economic crisis of 2008 that resulted from greed in the housing market. Sylvia represents the downtrodden and all those who were affected globally by the economic crash, while Christine represents those in the financial industry who enabled it. The curse leveled at Christine has two functions, both of which favour the witch she wronged: The curse will either transform Christine into a witch herself, or it will drag her to Hell.

Von Trier's *Antichrist* collapses the boundaries between high and low art on extreme levels. The witch, *She*, a depressed and lonely woman, becomes a witch because she starts to empathize with the women who were persecuted during the witch hunt era. In some respects, she resembles the witches in *Häxan* who live alone in the woods and who torture children. She is also hyper-sexualised in the film. Her sexualisation poses a conundrum by appearing nude and indulging in pornographic sex, but she is not arousing. She does not resemble the young women we frequently see in eighties horror films. *She* is more comparable to Joan from *Jack's Wife*. Joan, however, despite her being middle-aged, is beautiful to behold and quite sensual. In other words, *She* is not idealized and is someone with average looks. The sexual acts she engages in are also not idealized like sex scenes usually are in mainstream films or pornography. *She's* sexuality is too real and this collapses the borders between the real and the hyperreal.

The supernatural and nature are intertwined in *Antichrist*. Animals talk and act in similar ways as people in the film. The three animals in the film – or the Three Beggars – are manifestations of cosmic beings, not unlike the beings found in Lovecraft's Cthulhu Mythos. It is unclear if *She* summoned them, but she does seem to have knowledge about them. This is likely due to her alignment with nature, but as Nancy in *The Craft* corrupts the supernatural force of nature, so does *She* corrupt Eden.

The witch in *Antichrist* mirrors what I mention earlier in this section about the appropriation of the witch as an avatar for the suffering of women in the twenty-first century. She undoubtedly suffers, but her suffering cannot be compared to those who suffered during the fifteenth and sixteenth century witch hunts. She empathises so much with the witches she is studying that she truly comes to believe that she is one of them.

Related to the above are the witches we find in *Witching & Bitching*. The three witches in this film resemble the young, the middle-aged, and the old witch. All three of them however have equal levels of supernatural power. The older witches use their supernatural abilities to torture men, while the young witch, Eva, is sexualized and later assists a man she falls in love with to escape the clutches of the coven. Eva, like *She* in *Antichrist*, challenges sexual boundaries. She is very beautiful and sensual, but engages in abject acts. Instead of the abject acts reducing her sexual appeal it has no effect and she remains hyper-sexualised.

On the opposite spectrum we find The Great Mother who the witches venerate. She is naked, and her breasts are enormous, as are her hips – a gross and exaggerated symbol of fertility. Her sex is so exaggerated that she becomes utterly abject. Her appearance is undoubtedly related to her great supernatural power. Because she is more powerful than any man in existence, she is made utterly sexually unavailable and unattractive.

Robert Eggers' *The Witch* uses witches similar to the young and old witches we find in *Häxan*. The young witches are meant to sexualize, while the old witch is intended to be abject. The supernatural is used by the old witch in *The Witch* to destroy the nuclear family and to challenge progress which encroaches on her forest. In addition to the old witch being an antagonist, the mother of the family is revealed to be even worse than the witch who sets out to destroy the family. In the end Thomasin, the protagonist, becomes a witch, not out of choice, but because her family and society leave her no other option. She becomes a servant of the Devil and she is no better off than she was under her parents' and society's rule. Some scholars and popular media writers have asserted that Thomasin is a feminist icon, but as we can see, this claim is problematic.

The Autopsy of Jane Doe could be mistaken for a logical sequel of *The Witch*, even though the film is not intended to be. A young and beautiful woman is accused of witchcraft and tortured to death during the seventeenth century. The acts committed on her body transform her corporeal form into an immortal shell inhabited by a vengeful soul. Throughout the film she lies naked and unmoving on a mortuary table, but her body is never sexualized. Jane uses her body and supernatural abilities to tell her story to both the characters and the viewer of the film. As a result, the viewer and the characters empathise with her plight. The film's plot mirrors the #metoo movement where many women revealed on social media that they were victims of sexual abuse and assault. These women were seen as slabs of meat to be violated by men, which is why Jane is laid out naked on a mortician's table while her body is violated by phallic instruments.

Beauty and the supernatural are made inseparable in *The Neon Demon*, a film that suggests that beauty is supernatural, but also artificial due to how easily it is transferred from one person to the next. *The Neon Demon*'s witches are sexualized, glamorous, and beautiful models in the fashion industry. They are shown to have very little supernatural ability, and in that sense resemble the younger witches in *Häxan*. They do not use their supernatural power to directly better their social positions, but use it to prey on other beautiful women in order to absorb their beauty, not unlike what Asa attempts in *Black Sunday*. In other words, the witches exploit each other through supernatural means and cannibalism to improve their social standing and their careers in a male dominated industry.

Hereditary also features three related women from different generations who are witches, not unlike what we find in *Witching & Bitching*. The young witch is not sexualized though and is made to appear

almost androgynous. The matriarch of the coven, the grandmother, sets events in motion that make a witch of her daughter, Annie. Like Thomasin in *The Witch*, Annie is put through many psychologically torturous events which lead her towards witchcraft.

The supernatural in *Hereditary* is used for one purpose, to change the sex of a little girl, who is actually one of the reincarnated kings of Hell. In the process the coven destroys a family. *Hereditary* mirrors some aspects of the current societal focus on transgender politics and critiques ideas surrounding it, like the grandmother who insists that Charlie is in the wrong body. This could be interpreted as an instance of Munchausen syndrome by proxy where a parent or caretaker insists that there is something wrong with their child in an effort to receive attention from others. Ellen never asks Charlie questions about her gender, and merely assumes that she is supposed to be male, forcing transgender modification upon her granddaughter.

The 2018 *Suspiria* remake includes all versions of the witch discussed throughout this thesis. The young sexualized witch is featured, as well as the middle-aged, the old, and the utterly abject and diseased. The witches in *Suspiria* thus embody all the different aspects of the feminine – from goddess, to mother, to daughter. The coven however seems to have a hierarchy, much like the social hierarchies found in other dominating power structures which negate an alternative feminine power structure to replace patriarchal power structures. In this film supernatural abilities are again used in an attempt to facilitate the transfer of an old soul into a ravishing young body. In other instances, the witches use their supernatural abilities to ridicule and feminize men. Interestingly, a young beautiful witch is shown to be the most powerful witch at the academy and her absolute power does not drive her to insanity or irrationality.

Over the course of the last two decades society has become more aware of social injustices and ills that are at times the product of a lack of checks and balances in western power structures. In many instances the films, starting with *Antichrist* and ending with the remake of *Suspiria*, mirror several sociocultural debates especially regarding gender and power. In most instances however the proposed feminine power structures are not in fact feminine or aligned with Paglia's Dionysus, suggesting a post-feminist narrative. In most instances the proposed structures have similar and worse ideologies than the structures they seek to replace. In many other instances the witch is an embodied reaction to Apollonian society, but also a reaction to the hyperreal.

We see the cinematic witch challenge the boundaries between the real and hyperreal in 1977's *Suspiria*'s combination of music, colour, and *mise-en-scène*. Argento used this combination to suggest the manifestation of the witch, but also to create an atmosphere of fear and dread. We also find manifestations of this dissolution of the boundaries in the films of the eighties where the witch's appearance resembles eighties pop stars, like Madonna, while the films themselves resemble eighties MTV music video. The boundaries between the real and hyperreal collapse properly however in *The*

Blair Witch Project through the use of different types of media to market the film as the grand marketing narrative of the film claimed that the protagonists really went missing while searching for a mythical witch.

During the twenty-first century the witch horror film became much more innovative in the way it challenged the boundary between the real and the hyperreal. *Drag Me to Hell* blurs the line between practical and computer-generated effects where the digital effects resemble the practical effects, and vice versa. In *Antichrist* the sexual act is made so real, animalistic and visceral – completely removed from the idealized Hollywood portrayals of sex – that it unnerves the viewer and becomes abject. In *Hereditary*, one of the protagonists, Annie, builds miniatures of the spaces in which events of her life unfold in an attempt to control them. The audience knows that her attempts are futile, as the film's plot is set in stone. Annie mirrors an aspect of her creator, the director of the film, who similarly attempts to work through aspects of his own life in the film. The characters prod and poke at the fourth wall, while the director becomes a godlike creator of to a fantastical miniaturized universe that spans just over two hours.

There is still more to say about the witch's association with the hyperreal. In the twentieth century the witch became synonymous with the *other*, but also a powerful pop culture icon. Because the witch is aligned with Dionysus, she is malleable. And because of her malleability through popular culture, she can become exactly what every individual person requires her to be. She is a perfect product – a product that markets itself by transforming into whatever it needs to be for whomever: a product that changes and evolves to suit every new and different sociocultural context it is reproduced in. We find evidence of this throughout this thesis. In this regard the witch is a simulacrum, a being who is a copy of a being who we cannot prove exists or does not exist. However, the more we reproduce her image the more entrenched she becomes in society and the more she collapses the boundaries between the real and artificial. For instance, the witch has become a symbol for the feminist movement with many women comparing their suffering with the women who suffered prosecution during the era of the witch hunts. This is not only a false equivalence, but it is disrespectful to those who genuinely suffered unspeakable tortures and death, which in turn contributes to society's indifference to suffering.

As mentioned above, the witch is unique in the sense that her appearance is not static like that of other monsters. She easily fluctuates between young, middle-aged, old, extremely old, monstrous, incorporeal, and even invisible. This suggests that her appearance is not central to her monstrosity, while her actions are. This study also suggests that sex is a tool in the witch's arsenal like her potions and talismans.

From the various films discussed and analysed, it becomes clear that the witch's body and supernatural abilities are linked to socio-historical norms of the times in which they were created. In

some instances, like during the seventies and the eighties, the technical aspects of films and film distribution played a significant role in the types of witches and how they were portrayed. The witch horror films have become especially complex with some engaging with feminist narratives, like *The Neon Demon*, while others criticise them, like *The Witch* and *Suspiria*. The witch often fluctuates between young woman, mother, and crone, but the similarities end there. Their motivations and the meanings they embody within socio-historical contexts often challenge the sociocultural norms and ideals of the time, fostering sociocultural change.

In addition to this, the witches are frequently embodied through particular spaces like in *Suspiria* and *Night of the Demons*, and do not rely too heavily on physical appearance. They can, for instance, manifest in reality by possessing spaces like buildings and forests, changing them into labyrinths.

Change is constant where the body and supernatural abilities of the witch are concerned, but certain types of change are more prominent. Bloom's *clinamen*, for instance, is found in every film discussed in this thesis, as does his *tessera*. *Clinamen* is identified in 37 instances in the films analysed, while *tesserae* is present in 34 instances. *Clinamen* occurs when the creator uses a convention up to a point and makes an unprecedented swerve or correction. In other words, the creator views the convention as partially correct, but changes part of it to suit his or her own ends. *Tessera* occurs when the creator deconstructs a convention into smaller sections or parts. The useful parts are then placed or hidden between other parts to make the convention seem unfamiliar. This suggests that the filmmakers rarely formulate new tropes where the witch is concerned and mostly change certain aspects of the tropes. *Tessera* is more prominent in films created in the twenty-first century as filmmakers do not simply want to make superficial changes to the tropes, but aim to deconstruct and reframe them in interesting and challenging ways. It should be noted that Bloom's *kenosis* appears 10 times in this study in relation to the films discussed, *askesis* appears 5 times, *daemonization* twice, and *apophrades* occurs only once. This shows the benefit of using Bloom's ratios in the study of horror films as I was able to trace the evolution of certain horror tropes and how these changes related to the sociocultural. In addition, I was able to show that horror film creators are more prone to build on the conventions established in the genre by their predecessors.

Another term that is frequently used throughout this study is Dionysus. This is not without reason or forethought as he is intrinsically aligned with the witch. One of the main purposes of this study is to trace Levinson's ripple of a text over time. If *Häxan* is the pebble that initiates the ripple and the witch horror films are the expanding and concentric ripples that reverberate outwards from the film, then Dionysus is the point of origin of the ripple. In other words, Dionysus and her opposition to Apollo becomes integral to this study as we can identify the conventions that were established before the advent of film.

Dionysus is more than just an antiquated Greek god – he is an archetype that represents everything that society and religion has taught us to fear, from women to violence, from chaos to death. Society seems to try its best to repress and forget Dionysus, but he (or should we say she, or them?) hides in humanity's imagination, only to reappear in a new disguise every few centuries or decades. Jung was aware of this archetype, but fragmented it into the shadow, trickster, and to an extent the animus. Shaman, demon, fairy, sprite, elemental, Satan, Loki, Anubis, Khonsu, Janus, and Cthulhu are all fragments of Dionysus. Dionysus might also be a mask of something else that came before man created society and culture, like the Australian Aboriginal Baloo, the god of the moon with three pet snakes, or Bamapana, the trickster god who spread chaos, or even Barraiya, the creator of the first vagina. Each new iteration, however, is but another reinterpretation of Dionysus.

Even though his name does not carry the same gravitas as it once did, along with the Greek religion that named him, his chaos, violence, and death-bearing nature could not be erased. When droughts destroyed crops, pests decimated cattle, and babies were stillborn, good Christian people needed someone or something to blame for their misfortune. Later this blame shifted to the witch. There are many instances throughout this study where the link between the witch and nature is made explicit. The witch was a useful scapegoat, but she was also useful to those who sought more power and ways to direct the agency of society.

Due to the scope and length of this thesis, I could not go into more detail regarding eco-horror or eco-criticism. I would suggest a separate thesis to engage with the link between the witch and nature on a deeper level. I have indicated in this thesis a wealth of such instances, and these can be used to initiate a study focusing on the aforementioned specific topic. I would also suggest another study to address the field of body horror and how it relates to the witch. A final suggestion is to reinterpret my thesis from a purely fourth wave and/or post-feminist perspective where contemporary feminists are considered. For this study my focus was on the control of the female body and women's agency in film which the previous generation of feminist theorists adequately addressed and contemporary theorists are building on. Control of the female body and agency was and still is a problem, irrespective of sociocultural contexts.

In closing, this study of the horror witch film suggests that the *other* is a constant threat to those who espouse uniformity and submission to sociocultural norms. Though the witch does not manifest in the traditional sense anymore, witch hunts are still frequent as seen in the eighties with the Satanic Panic and the Columbine Shooting in the nineties.

Making connections between film, historical events, and the sociocultural would have been difficult without the New Historicist method. By using the New Historicist approach I was able to expand upon our understanding of the horror film genre, but also how sociocultural contexts and historical events influence and shape the media we create. In addition, I also found instances where the horror

film challenged and subverted sociocultural norms and ideas, while also subverting power structures. By incorporating Bloom's theories regarding influence I was also able to clearly illustrate and demarcate the influences that exist between films and even mythology and folklore.

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