

# Chaos Reigns: Women as Witches in Contemporary Film and the Fairy Tales of the Brothers Grimm

By Annette Schimmelpfennig, University of Cologne, Germany

## Abstract:

The image of the witch is etched on the memory from childhood on, characterised by her portrayal in fairy tales and shaped by popular culture, especially contemporary film. Although of pre-Christian origin, and exploited during the peak of the witch-hunts from the late 15<sup>th</sup> to the middle of the 18<sup>th</sup> century, the belief in witches has barely forfeited its sometimes dubious popularity. While the commercialisation of other magical and monstrous creatures such as vampires, elves and werewolves follows the trend of Hollywood marketing experts and the development of youth culture, the witch appears to be a constant fictive companion in bed-, child's and living rooms. Be it as animalistic grandmother-gone-bad in the Grimm's *Hansel and Gretel* or as narcissistic queen in the form of Charlize Theron in *Snow White and the Huntsman*, the depiction of female witches is versatile.

1 An obscure hut in sinister woods, secluded from the outside world, inhabited by an old and wicked, often deformed woman. The image of the witch is etched on the memory from childhood on, characterised by her portrayal in fairy tales and shaped by popular culture, especially contemporary film. Although of pre-Christian origin, and exploited during the peak of the witch-hunts from the late 15<sup>th</sup> to the middle of the 18<sup>th</sup> century, the belief in witches has barely forfeited its sometimes dubious popularity. While the commercialisation of other magical and monstrous creatures such as vampires, elves and werewolves follows the trend of Hollywood marketing experts and the development of youth culture, the witch appears to be a constant fictive companion in bed-, children's and living rooms. Be it as animalistic grandmother-gone-bad in the Grimm's *Hansel and Gretel* or as narcissistic queen in the form of Charlize Theron in *Snow White and the Huntsman*, the depiction of female witches<sup>1</sup> is versatile, as can be seen by comparing diverse cinematic witch characters with their literary ancestors by the Brothers Grimm.

2 Like every legendary figure, real or imagined, the witch is attributed a certain set of characteristics which distinguishes her from others and makes her identifiable. First of all, it is curious that while there is no consistent definition of witchcraft (Kiekhefer 7), many resources are able to draw a clear picture of it. Jacob Grimm in his work about German mythologies for example described witches as old women, who have become unable to love

---

<sup>1</sup> The term witch is not exclusive to the female sex but it is less common to use it for a male, who would more rather be described as sorcerer, wizard or warlock. However, in this paper I will use it exclusively for female characters.

and work (cf. Grimm 599). He considered women in general to be predestined for clandestine magic because they, as opposed to the hard working and war conducting men, have enough time to dedicate themselves to the preparation of healing ointments and from there on it is only a small step to the practice of witchcraft (cf. 599). Their high powers of imagination make them receptive for superstition of any kind. Further it was believed that witches are women who had been seduced by the devil<sup>2</sup> and “achieve their malevolent, destructive effects only with the aid of Satan and demons” (Easlea 7). The use of “malevolent” here clearly shows a value judgement. The witch’s magic is equated with black magic that is used to harm others, for example by bringing them illness, turning them into animals or objects or influencing their love lives. This is opposed to the so-called white magic, which for example was believed to restore health with herbal medicine among others. The witch’s magic however is a “tapping into the forces of nature” (Berger 19) which changes its order, as often believed to the worse.

3 The witch’s outer appearance may not be further described by sources, but her supposed behaviour and disposition all the more. From a sociological perspective, the witch was the opposite of the woman’s image as propagandized by the church, “the repentant woman who spent her life cloistered or serving men in order to do penance for her original sin” (van Vuuren 72). She was used to point out difference (Sempruch 2), namely between the good, virtuous woman and the foul one. Especially sexuality plays a crucial role here, because witches were believed to fornicate with the devil and precipitate the demoralization of society. While the ordinary woman was chaste, the witch was characterized as knowing no sexual boundaries and seducing helpless men whenever she got the chance to do so. But it was not only men who were threatened by witches. It was common belief that witches engage in infanticide and cannibalism (cf. Levack 20), which not only changed but also perverted the idea of the woman as nurturing mother. The witch-hunts hence functioned as a necessary means to secure society’s “moral boundaries” (Ben-Yehuda 14). In times reigned by poor survival conditions, witches became scapegoats that were held responsible for moral decline and epidemics and led to the so-called witch craze.

4 A popular instrument which played an important part in the witch-hunts, and also focussed heavily on women’s sexuality, was the so-called *Malleus Maleficarum*, the “Hammer of the Witches”, a tract composed in 1486 by Heinrich Kramer and James

---

<sup>2</sup> It is important here to remark that it was general belief that the women let themselves be seduced by Satan and were not forced by him to do so. This is crucial because it denies these women the role of the victim, since they deliberately chose to turn away from God, a popular argument used for example by the Church in the famous witch trials.

Sprenger, which was supposed to serve as evidence for witchcraft and the evilness of women. Unlike the fairy tales, this is not a work of fiction, which is why it serves well to offer valuable insight into the historical understanding of the witch and why she was feared. Divided into three parts, their work argues that “the fragile feminine sex” (Kramer and Sprenger 99) is “chiefly addicted to Evil Superstitions” (ibid), an opinion similar to the one of Jakob Grimm, as mentioned earlier. They reinforce their implementations with quotes from Roman thinkers such as Cicero and Seneca and, more importantly, the Holy Bible, a policy stroke in this regard because by doing so they could count on the church for support of their theses. Kramer and Sprenger conclude that “since [women] are weak, they find an easy and secret manner of vindicating themselves by witchcraft” (101). Particularly the mention of “secret manner” is remarkable here because it emphasizes the devious character of the witch, yet this is not the strongest point they try to make. If one accords credibility to their ideas the most crucial reason for woman’s fascination with witchcraft lies in her degenerate sexuality, or as they put it, “the natural reason is that she is more carnal than a man, as is clear in her many carnal abominations” (102), with its origin in the biblical Fall of man.<sup>3</sup> Were it not for the sexually tainted woman, man would not have to fear the horror of defenceless seduction. Ultimately it appears only logical for them to declare that the woman “is an imperfect animal, she always deceives” (ibid). It is remarkable how throughout the text the terms “woman” and “witch” become synonyms. What begins as a treatise on the witch turns more and more into a polemic pamphlet on the evil nature of women in general. The *Malleus Maleficarum* proclaims in summary that women are credulous, deceptive and sex-driven creatures who are bound to fall for the temptations of evil, or more exaggerated: there is the potential of a witch in every woman.

5 How is the historical image of the witch now translated into the fairy tales of the Brothers Grimm?<sup>4</sup> Initially, the typical witch appears in the tales either as old woman or as a stepmother without further age statement. As already mentioned, descriptions of physical appearance are rare in their tales. *The Riddle* is one of the few tales by the Brothers Grimm which offers a minimal description, where the old woman is described as having “red eyes” (Grimm 22) and consequently established as a more animalistic rather than human creature. Apart from that, characters are often either labelled young and beautiful or old and ugly

---

<sup>3</sup> The fall is caused by Eve who is tempted by the serpent to taste a fruit from the forbidden tree and then shares it with Adam. According to the *Malleus Maleficarum* this scene repeats itself whenever a woman seduces a man.

<sup>4</sup> The fairy tales the analysis is based on were chosen on how often the witch appears and how explicitly her actions are described.

without further explanation. This procedure may serve several purposes. On the one hand it may train the reader's or listener's<sup>5</sup> power of imagination and give him or her the freedom to create his or her own image of the characters presented. On the other hand it may not have been necessary to further describe the differences between the appearance of a princess and a witch because of the social propaganda burnt into the mind of the collective society. Good in a multitude of tales is personified by either already wealthy royalty, as in *The Frog King*, or *Iron Heinrich* where a princess later marries a prince who was turned into a frog by a witch, or poor but beautiful peasants who marry into the noble rank towards the end, as the poor maiden in *The Old Woman in the Forest*. Evil by contrast is always ugly and often moves in the opposite direction, namely by either losing their rank and/or wealth, as for example the old woman in *The Blue Light*, or not owning anything to begin with. Using the model of the witch in this way reveals a lot about the thinking of the estate-based society. She cannot win because her rotten character is already displayed in her outer appearance and vice versa.

6 The typical witch as presented in the tales is envious, nobody loves, likes or pities her. She seems to have brought disaster upon herself and lives on the margins of society, visualised by her residence in the woods. However, the woods are also of importance for another reason:

As in real life, forests are places through which one wend one's way uneasily, especially if one is alone, most especially if woman or child, not knowing what to expect from the dark solitude. The sounds of forest or waste are not part of the villager's symphony: their dwellers do not participate in the net of relations that makes one feel secure. (Weber 97)

The witch's residence immediately establishes her as a vile character who cannot be trusted because she uses the uncanniness of the woods to her advantage. In *Brother and Sister*, the protagonists' "evil stepmother, who was a witch" (Grimm ch. 11) abuses her stepchildren after their mother's death, until one day they run away and end up exhausted in a forest. The stepmother slinks after them, "as witches often slink" (ibid), and curses all springs since she knows that sooner or later the children will be so thirsty that they will have to drink from them. Shortly afterwards it is the boy who cannot bear the thirst anymore, drinks and is changed into a fawn. Nature appears here as the witch's ally. She may be unable to control the children but the forest is her territory. Where the normal, i.e. the good and pure human experiences terror, that is to say in the woods, the wicked woman is at the peak of her dark power. Remarkable is also the solution of the curse, especially with regard to the historical

---

<sup>5</sup> It shall be kept in mind that during the time of the first publication of *Grimm's Fairy Tales* in 1812, fairy tales were still a strong part of the oral tradition and not, as often assumed today, exclusively for children.

witch-hunts. In the course of the story, the witch not only casts a spell on the boy, she does even more mischief. Unbeknown to her, the girl does not die in the forest, as she assumes, but grows up to become the wife of a king. This causes the witch's daughter, who is "ugly as sin" (ibid) and has only one eye, great jealousy and they plot to kill the new queen and her newborn baby. They temporarily succeed but the queen returns as a ghost, is recognised by the king and returns to life. The witch daughter is taken into the forest, "where wild beasts [tear] her to pieces" (ibid) and her mother is burnt to death. The tale closes with a happy ending: "When there was nothing left of her but ashes, the fawn was transformed and regained his human form. From then on sister and brother lived happily until the end of their days" (ibid). Here an example is made of the witch. By burning the origin of all evil, chaos, in the form of the transformed male, is eradicated and order is restored.<sup>6</sup> Also it is shown that from a witch, nothing good can come which is demonstrated by her offspring. The daughter is in no way inferior to her mother. What she lacks in beauty, she compensates in viciousness and malice.

7 Nevertheless it is interesting to see that while the witch remains an outsider in society, she has a strong bond with her biological children, who are invariably daughters. As in *Brother and Sister*, the witch appearing in *Sweet Roland* is both mother and stepmother, yet she feels love only for her ugly and evil biological daughter and not for the nice and beautiful stepdaughter. Again, her hatred makes her attempt murder, as she tries to chop the beautiful stepdaughter's head off, but she is deceived and accidentally chops off the head of her own daughter. There is a certain tragedy in this solution but interestingly enough the tale makes the death of the witch daughter seem as a necessary evil. Generally peace is only restored when the witch and her whole family, again the biological one and not the innocent stepchildren, are dead. Yet remains the question why there is never a father figure mentioned in the witch families. Since the witch herself is always introduced as a single mother this prompts two conclusions: either her child was conceived while fornicating with the devil or the father is absent because he cannot exist next to a woman possessed of dark forces. The lack of a male equivalent in the stories, and with it the lack of a male scapegoat, may therefore be interpreted as a continuation of female oppression by men (cf. Green and Bigelow 199). Bluntly said, in a patriarchal society as portrayed in the fairy tales single, unattractive women like the witches appear suspicious and must be involved with the devil because they lead lives diverging from the norm.

---

<sup>6</sup> The burning of the witch as solution of the story and deliverance from all evil can also be found in *The Six Swans* and *The Two Brothers*.

8 Two of the Grimm's most popular fairy tales, *Hansel and Gretel* and *Snow White*, contain simultaneously two probably iconic witch characters, when it comes to the portrayal of witches in literary fiction. Albeit it shall be pointed out that only the old woman in *Hansel and Gretel* is explicitly denoted as witch, whereas in *Snow White* the term is used not once. Nevertheless she can clearly be identified as one because of her magic mirror and her dark intentions, i.e. to pamper her own vanity and so replace Snow White, her stepdaughter, as "the fairest of all" (Grimm ch. 53) by poisoning her. Her death is also typical in its cruelty, although it appears as a stylised version of the known witch-burning. The evil stepmother is punished by having to wear heated iron slippers and dancing herself to death. The old witch in *Hansel and Gretel* by contrast dies, one might say, the traditional witch death, when she is pushed into the fire of the oven by Gretel. Snow White's stepmother and the old witch in the gingerbread house may appear different in their relationship to the children and their intentions for killing them but both women succeed in luring their victims into a trap with food. Again it seems as if the role of the mother as the child's nurturer and guardian is perverted. Instead of nurturing the children the witch feeds on them and reveals a preference for cannibalism. This aspect further emphasises her inhuman character. The witch is not only a dangerous woman, she is downright a monster and a "familiar female monster" (Creed 2) at that.

9 The monstrous appearance of the witch may be ascribed to her affinity for animals. Many mythological figures have been attributed animalistic features, such as the vampire with its bat-like fangs and wings and the werewolf as half man-half canine creature. In early illustrations of storybooks the witch is often drawn with claw-like fingers and a long, bent nose, similar to the beak of a bird. Again in *Hansel and Gretel*, one can find the following comment on witches in general: "[w]itches have red eyes and cannot see very far, but they have a keen sense of smell, like animals, and can detect when human beings are near them" (Grimm ch.15). The witch is clearly separated from other humans here and it is emphasised how her animalistic skills enable her cannibalism. Once again the witch is denied her humaneness. If she is not depicted as animalistic herself it is striking how the fairy tales of the Brothers Grimm that feature a witch almost always contain a multitude of animals as well. Take for example *The Two Brothers*, *The Golden Children* and *The Old Woman in the Forest*. All three contain several animals, among them typical forest dwellers such as foxes and hares, but also magical and precious creatures, such as a talking dove (*The Two Brothers*), a talking golden fish (*The Golden Children*) and a living bird made of gold (*The Old Woman in the Forest*). This peculiarity may be interpreted in two different ways. On the

one hand, since witches were thought to be close to nature it does not come as a surprise that they get along well with wild animals and are able to use them for their purposes. On the other hand it was also common belief that witches are able to morph into animals themselves (cf. Merrifield 175). The appearance of golden and talking animals may then be read as a reincarnation of the witch, which also revalues her. Her life is enhanced by the golden skin or plumage, her complete outer transformation into an animal enables her to contact people on the other side of the woods, who would otherwise be repelled by her witch-like looks. Ironically enough this would also mean that for the societies described in the fairy tales a manlike, i.e. talking animal is easier accepted, or even welcomed, than an animalistic woman. The circle of human animals and animalistic humans is finally completed in *The Bremen Town Musicians*. Here, the cat, unexceptionally referred to as “he” throughout the tale, is mistaken for a witch by a robber. “There’s a gruesome witch in the house! She spat on me and scratched my face with her long claws” (Grimm ch.27). In a way mistaking a male animal for a woman can be seen as yet another depreciation of the witch’s femininity. Not only is she a gruesome creature, she is also not seen as a real human being.

10 The witch as fictional character owes her popularity partially to the Brothers Grimm for incorporating her in many of their stories. Nowadays this popularity is not restricted to fairy tales, as can be seen in her numerous appearances on screen, both in adaptations of said fairy tales and other fiction. Here, a crucial aspect is the importance of the witch’s visual appearance. In contrast to the historical reports concerning witches and the meagre descriptions by the Brothers Grimm it can be said that Hollywood gave the witch a face, or several, rather different faces. As a movie character, she can be found in every genre, from child- and young adult-oriented movies to horror and romantic comedies which attributes her a versatility that is unexpected if one compares it to her portrayal in fairy tales. In the stories discussed beforehand the witch had neither a name nor a history, just like the majority of fairy tale characters. Nonetheless it becomes clear that her sole purpose in the stories is to cause havoc and trigger an incident the protagonists have to endure in order to “live happily ever after”. By giving the witch a name and telling her own story she sometimes becomes, paradoxically, more human, as can be seen in many horror movies, where a woman without witch powers changes, or is changed, into a witch or witch-like creature. It is also striking how the movie-witch is given a new dimension, that is to say a sexual one. In the fairy tales by the Brothers Grimm, the only hint at the witch’s sex life is her being a mother. Nobody falls in love with her or is attracted to her because of her good looks, the witch even needs spells or potions, such as the stepmother in *The Riddle*, to participate in basic human

interaction. In *The Six Swans* for example the young maiden who becomes the new queen is mute yet the king marries her because “her beauty moved the king’s heart” (Grimm ch.49). At the same time, the witch’s daughter is described as “very beautiful” (ibid) but the king “[does] not like her, and [cannot] look at her without secretly shuddering” (ibid), hence he never fathers any children with her, which causes her to take revenge upon him and his family. The witch is denied sex appeal here, her intention is destruction rather than seduction. However, in many movies the witch is both beautiful and seductive, her sex-appeal is rooted in highly reserved aloofness (*Snow White and the Huntsman*, *The Chronicles of Narnia*) or naïve girlishness (*I Married a Witch*) but it always exists. Nevertheless, this new, sexualized trait of the witch is not free of controversy and besides has become a popular device in many horror movies, as will be seen later.

11 The highest recognition value, with regard to the witch’s classic fairytale-like appearance, can be found in the influx of film adaptations of popular fantasy novels. Here, L. Frank Baum’s *The Wizard of Oz*, Roald Dahl’s *The Witches* and C. S. Lewis *The Chronicles of Narnia – The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe* come to mind. *The Wizard of Oz* (1939) introduces the audience to two different kinds of witches: Glinda the Good Witch and the otherwise nameless Wicked Witch of the West. Their outer appearance already makes it easy to identify who is good and who is bad. Glinda looks more like a cross between a fairy and a princess. She is blond, light-skinned, wears a sparkling crown and carries a magic wand. Her evil sister by contrast is dark-haired with a pointed nose and claw-like hands, has green skin and instead of a crown and wand has a black, pointy hat and carries a broom with her. Character differences are here expressed through beauty or the lack thereof. Beautiful Glinda surpasses her evil sister in every aspect, so much that the Wicked Witch’s death is not mourned but celebrated with the cheerful “Ding Dong! The Witch is dead!”, which Glinda joins in singing. The Wicked Witch’s skin colour may be interpreted as a giveaway of her feelings, especially towards her sister and her beauty. Therefore, as a figure she is yet again portrayed as envious and, in the true sense of the word, green with envy, a character trait that already turned out to be fatal for the stepmother/queen in *Snow White*. *The Witches* on the contrary, released in 1990, draws a parallel with *Hansel and Gretel*, whereby the witches adapted to the modern times. In order to catch children, their favourite prey, they have formed the “Royal Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children”, a pseudo-organisation with the true intention of eliminating all children. The protagonist Luke, who earlier escaped a witch who tried to lure him with sweets just like the witch in *Hansel and Gretel*, randomly stumbles upon the organisation’s annual convention, hides, but is later on exposed by a group



of witches who turn him into a mouse. *The Witches* shows a change, or rather a development of the witch on several levels. Firstly, the witches are not only strictly old women, they come in all ages and also in all kinds of professions, they are chambermaids and business women and part of everyday life, not wicked women living in a forest. Secondly, they know how to disguise, both themselves and their evilness. The Grand High Witch dresses like a businesswoman, she wears a lifelike mask to hide her grotesque witch face and goes in public by the name of “Miss Eva Ernst”. While the witches in the fairy tales of the Brothers Grimm stand out through their appearance alone, precisely through their stooping position and their raddled and scarred faces, these witches know how to blend in with the other hotel guests and society in general. The Grand High Witch is both charismatic and distanced but this may well be attributed to her job as businesswoman. Her dark secret is only revealed when the mask is removed. Interestingly, when she literally drops the mask, her behaviour changes drastically, once she reveals her true self, madness can run freely, including shrill laughter and extroverted manners.<sup>7</sup> But *The Witches* also introduces another good witch, namely the Grand High Witch’s assistant Miss Irvine, who changes Luke back into his human form. She is portrayed as a witch with a conscience, as she undoes the evil work of the boss. The audience is thus presented with a conciliatory ending, as if to say that while there are many evil witches, there may also be nice and helpful ones.

12     *The Chronicles of Narnia – The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe* builds on as the witch as a children’s nightmare, yet not because of her terrible looks but rather her winning manner. Jadis, the White Witch, is introduced as a caring philanthropist, as she charms Edmund, the third of the four Pevensie children. She wraps him into her coat to keep him warm, conjures up tea and promises, that she “can do anything [Edmund] like [s]”. Jadis knows how to seduce children and she knows her effect on others. Clad in a snow-white dress with a crown made of ice, she lives up to her name and is an impressive appearance. She is not bent over a crutch like the old and ugly witches in the fairy tales yet she seems similarly distanced like the Grand High Witch in *The Witches*, except that she does not need a mask. In all her fake cordiality her chilly demeanor still shines through and her striking complexion can switch between loving and hateful. Jadis is a good example for the visual power of witches in film, which is also apparent in the latest, and very loose, fairy tale adaptations, such as *Snow White and the Huntsman* (2012) and *Hansel and Gretel Witch Hunters* (2013).

---

<sup>7</sup> Bellatrix Lestrange, the witch from the *Harry Potter*-series, can be cited as another famous example of a witch who has gone insane and whose power has gone to her head. Her character does not lack a certain tragedy, yet like the Grand High Witch she qualifies as fright figure for children, because of her unpredictable and violent behaviour.

The evil stepmother of Snow White, called Ravenna in the movie version, looks like an haute couture-version of the Grimm-queen. She can morph into other people and a horde of ravens, always in an aesthetically pleasing manner. Ravenna is almost more threatening in her exquisite fashion taste than in her actions. Where the original stepmother demands the huntsman to bring her Snow White's lungs and liver, and thus makes it sound like the preparation of a cannibalistic meal, Ravenna wants to suck youth and beauty out of her, yet without actually eating her. It is only with her death in the end that she returns to the roots of the witch myth: She is burned and turns into an old, ugly woman.

13 Ravenna is not only a visually impressive appearance, she is also exemplary for the depiction of femininity and evil as expressed through the witch in contemporary Hollywood movies. She is introduced to the audience as a woman on her personal vendetta. When she was a child, her village was attacked by warriors and she was fed a potion of milk and blood by her mother, which turned her into a witch - or did it awaken the witch inside her? By having been fed this potion, Ravenna is established as an impure creature because she drinks the clean life-giving mother's milk and blood, the literary regular nutrient of monsters such as vampires, gained by draining it out of their victims. And now her main intention is to drain the life out of anybody who poses a threat to her; women, who are younger and more beautiful than her, men who have deceived her. Like her fairy tale-equivalent, Ravenna has to deal with the disloyal Huntsman, but in the movie adaption her hate towards men is considerably stronger. Before killing King Magnus, Snow White's father, she provides rare insight into her sentiments: "I was ruined by a king like you once. I replaced his queen, an old woman. And in time, I too would have been replaced. Men use women, they ruin us and when they are finished with us they throw us to their dogs like scraps" (*Snow White and the Huntsman*). By saying that she was "ruined", Ravenna implies that she was raped and her bad experience is also reflected when she says to a young boy, again before killing him, "there was a time I would have lost my heart to a face like yours and you, no doubt, would have broken it" (ibid). She may once have been vulnerable but the trauma she suffered from men has left her unfeeling. In one scene, which does not appear in the fairy tale-original, she bathes in milk, a strongly femininely-connoted fluid, as if she wants to whitewash herself from her crimes but she nevertheless remains menacing in her rage against men and beautiful, young women. Snow White in contrast seems to get along well with everybody, although she turns into a warrioress in the course of the movie, her femininity is still reflected in her charm and tenderness. She, the epitome of innocence, who is referred to as "life itself" (ibid) by the dwarf Muir, is opposed to Ravenna, whose name already refers to the raven, a symbol of bad

omens. Therefore the path through life is for both women predetermined from childhood on. Ravenna's dark style of clothing, again as opposed to Snow White's, emphasises her vengeful and gloomy character even more, her beauty may be striking but also intimidating, as it helps her to literally cast a spell over other people and manipulate them for her purposes. Her femininity is linked with evilness, a phenomenon that is not exclusive to fantasy/adventure movies, the genres *Snow White and the Huntsman* is considered to belong to. As can be seen in the following, another genre employs the witch as a disturbing factor as well and uses the dread and horror she causes as a signature feature.

14 A look at the list of movies containing witches or witch-like characters shows that a greater part of them are considered to belong to the horror genre or at least contain horror elements. *Antichrist*, *Silent Hill* and *The Evil Dead* are all examples of movies which use witches as their central "monstrous element", a device that Paul Wells defines as follows:

The monstrous element in the horror text is usually an interrogation of the amorphous nature of evil, or an address of the limits of the human condition; physically, emotionally and psychologically. The prevailing archetype of the monster is the Devil, the symbolic embodiment of evil that is a constituent element in monist religions and which appears in various forms in myths from across the globe. (Wells 8)

Keeping in mind that witches were believed to be the devil's helpers, have intercourse with him and are often shown as inhuman, this definition can as well be applied to the witch as horror film monster, but also to the witch in fairy tales. The "limits of the human condition" are nevertheless depicted more strongly in the horror movie. The witch is here shown as a border crosser, in particular the borders between the tolerable and the intolerable, physically and emotionally. What is striking is that many of the witches are troubled women, i.e. they seem to have suffered a traumatic experience that turned them into a witch or made the inherent witch come out. *Antichrist* and *Silent Hill* show women who became witches after the loss of their child, one accidentally and one as part of a ritual, and now are unable to deal with their guilt. All the women mentioned here show the witch as an extremely gendered monster, because they are connected to female experiences such as menstruation and childbirth. Mia's witch-turning is also strongly associated with the female body because the demon of the witch-burnt girl enters her through her vagina. As opposed to the witch in the fairy tale, the horror film witch is also highly sexualized, although it needs to be mentioned that here her sexuality almost always has a negative connotation. Mia starts cursing obscenities and She, the nameless woman in *Antichrist*, turns into a sex-crazed maniac who castrates her lover and circumcises herself. The witch as overly sexualized woman seems yet

again undesirable, because she cannot be handled by men. The horror film's usual solution of this problem is hence the destruction of all her loved ones, preferably as brutal as possible.

15 Details are of special importance in these movies because they relate the new stories to the old fairy tales. Lars von Trier, the director of *Antichrist*, indicates watching a documentary about witch-hunts as a main source of inspiration (cf. Knud 8) and sees a connection between sexuality and horror (cf. Knud 5). This is reflected not only in her collection of witch materials and her "thesis", but also in the setting of the movie. The hut in the woods, ironically called "Eden", reminds one of the typical witch residence in the fairy tales of the Brothers Grimm. The same applies to the hut in *The Evil Dead*. The namelessness of *Antichrist*'s protagonists may be read as a warning: there is a witch in every woman that comes out once she suffers a trauma. Interestingly, the death of the child, which occurs while She seduces her husband, may be interpreted as infanticide, because She is negligent, i.e. she keeps the window in the nursery open. She may try to blame him for her condition by telling him "you have always been distant from me and Nic", which can be seen as the average situation of the witch in the fairy tales, i.e. without a husband or father, but it remains the impression that she caused her own misery. While He, a psychiatrist, tries to cure his wife from her demons, she obsesses more and more over witchcraft and almost succeeds in killing him. The woman-turned-witch is here, yet again, presented as origin of all evil and an incurable fanatic. When He encounters a deer suffering a stillbirth in the woods and a talking fox tells him that "chaos reigns", it seems as if his wife is speaking to him through the animals, just like the witches in the fairy tales transform themselves and others into beasts. As long as the witch is alive and in control, there is no order and cruel things happen, similar to the killings in *The Evil Dead*.

16 When it comes to establishing a character as witch the imagery knows no boundaries. Before facing the final demon, i.e. the girl who was burnt as witch in the beginning of *The Evil Dead*, Mia changes into a scarlet-coloured dress, a popular image in the description of man-eating witches (cf. Poole 40). One might wonder why her clothes appear as such a concern to her in a situation like this, especially since the dress does not offer her any protection. The answer may be simple, it must be purely symbolic, much like the river of blood flowing next to the hut, which can be related to menstrual blood. Where the fairy tales are, figuratively speaking, anaemic with the exception of *Sweetheart Roland* which features talking drops of blood, the witch in horror movies seems to think the more blood, the better and she spares no-one. In *Silent Hill* the audience encounters Alessa, a young girl sacrificed in a Christian cult and accused of witchcraft. Her mother is presented like the epitome of the

witch, a seemingly old unkempt woman who walks bent-forward and utters scattered thoughts. Ironically enough, in the course of the story it is not Alessa's biological mother and the religious fanatic who influences her that are accused of witchcraft, but her loving adoptive mother and the upright police officer who accompanies her. *Silent Hill* clearly refers here to the church's role in the witch-hunts and shows how easily the label "witch" can be applied to practically every woman, not only those who have a witch-like appearance or practice dark magic. The horror here lies in how easily Alessa's mother is willing to sacrifice her for her beliefs. A fairy tale-equivalent is *The Two Brothers*, where a broom-maker abandons his two sons in a forest because a goldsmith tells him that "[t]he devil's got them in his power and can also bring about [him]" (Grimm ch. 60). This gender inversion, at one time it is the mother and then it is the father who sacrifices them, is especially interesting with regard to the prevailing misogyny both in the fairy tale and the horror movie. While the father is never blamed for his actions, Alessa's mother is constantly bullied. "Sinners deserve to lose their spawn", is what she is told by another young woman of her community, which implies that she led an excessive, sinful lifestyle. The father in *The Two Brothers* however is never brought to justice, on the contrary, here as well it is a woman who is mistreated and exposed to misogyny. The huntsman threatens the witch: "You old witch, if you don't tell me right away where my brother is, I'll pick you up with both my hands and throw you into the fire" (Grimm ch. 60). "Witch" has a strong negative connotation here, it is used like an invective. Later on he continues denouncing her by calling her an "old monkey" (ibid). Alessa and her mother are subjected to similar hostilities, whereas the community focuses its deadly hate on the young girl as origin of evil and demonic offspring. This brings up the question why the horror genre seems to favour young women as witches. One reason might be that young women are especially threatening because they are sexually desirous and still physically able to produce a spawn of the devil. From a psychoanalytical point of view the witch in general hence concerns primal fears of the man: "fear of castration, fear of the all consuming mother" (Bovenschen, Blackwell, Moore, Weckmueller 91). Additionally, her role as mother makes the witch even more menacing as a monster because it is a betrayal of confidence, she is willing to kill her own children and men and women alike, thus becomes a universal, both human and inhuman threat.

17     That the sexual witch does not always have to be a monster in the sense of a horror figure becomes obvious when one takes a look at the witch in dark or romantic comedies. Here she may be sexually aggressive as well, but in a sensual, seductive and not consuming, flesh-eating way. Although set in a lighter atmosphere, the witch is nevertheless threatening,

mainly because her ways of seduction are in great contrast to those of the other women appearing in the movies. Good examples here are *Dark Shadows* and *Death Becomes Her*, where women use witchcraft and thereby reinforce their sexual attraction. Both movies are considered dark comedies or horror comedies, as they blur slapstick humour with horror elements. Their behaviour is opposed to the witches of the Brothers Grimm, they do not have cannibalistic or bad intentions to begin with, all they long for is an acceptable partner. Love as the origin of wicked events is here the prevailing motif. In both movies women battle for the love of a man, in *Death Becomes Her* with the use of a magic potion promising eternal youth, in *Dark Shadows* with the use of full physical strength. Madeline, the narcissistic actress may not be a witch in the classical sense but she uses witch-like techniques, namely the ominous potion, to reach her goals but like the witches in fairy tales, she is only temporarily successful as the potion shows side-effects and the man turns out to be not quite the catch she expected him to be. Angelique, the witch in *Dark Shadows* is similarly unlucky. Although blessed with a heavenly name, she turns into a wicked fury when her object of desire, Barnabas, does not return her love. Witchcraft is here not only used as a weapon, it also serves to emphasize their femininity as favourable as possible and the witches are shown as a further development of the 'femme fatale' who seduces man to gain sexual pleasure and is, intentionally or not, responsible for his moral and social downfall. Interestingly enough it is rarely the male character who gets blamed in these situations. Barnabas may leave Angelique for another woman but it is she who is blamed. Helen and her rival Madeleine in *Death Becomes Her* need to stay physically attractive for Ernest so he stays with them while he lets himself go. Like a sexy dress and good make up, witchcraft is portrayed as a female accessory, a must-have to be desirable at all times. Jealousy and envy are, same as for their fairy tale-ancestors, important aspects but in the end they just want to please not themselves but the man they are in love with.

18 The opposite of the highly seductive witch, the good and homely one that wants to live a regular life, is shown in *I Married a Witch* and *Bewitched*. *I Married a Witch* from 1942 introduces the seductive witch who gives up her powers in the end for a life as a supporter of her husband and housewife, with the words "love is stronger than witchcraft". While in the beginning Jennifer is introduced as a seductress that no man can resist, this changes when she falls in love herself. Her attraction for many men clearly lies in her witchcraft which becomes obvious when she tries to make the man she loves fall in love with her without a use of her powers and fails. Witchcraft as a seductive feature is here condemned, the overly sexual woman has no appeal for the morally obliged man and she is

forced to retire. Isabel, the TV-witch in *Bewitched*, choses to abjure her powers voluntarily but sees herself forced to frequently resort to them when she discovers that she is only used as pretty attachment for Jack, the protagonist of the show she stars in. Her appeal lies, as the title already suggests, in her effect on the audience and Jack. Even when angry, Isabel is still charming and enchanting. The destructive power of the classical witch is extremely toned down, her sex appeal tends to approach zero. The destructive side of witchcraft as exposed in horror movies is opposed with a constructive, love-enabling side, the dark, wicked witch becomes the friendly neighbour next door. The absence of a father-figure or husband may nonetheless be read as a reference to the classic fairy tale-witch and her existence as widow, single mother or even old spinster. If the old witches in tales such as *The Frog King*, or *Iron Heinrich* and *The Iron Stove* can cast spells on princes, then young movie-witches can just as well bewitch their modern-day equivalents, intentionally or not. Nevertheless, she is never excessive, but rather virtuous and has mostly good intentions. One might claim that after the over-sexualisation of the witch this is yet another male fetishism,<sup>8</sup> precisely the tamed woman as ultimate fantasy. At any rate it is interesting to see that in romantic comedies the witch may not die the death of the fairy tale-witch, but she nonetheless loses her magic.

19 In summary it can be said that the witch, both in the fairy tales and in contemporary film, is a fantasy. Whether one believes in her or not, she is always connected to extremes, extreme beauty, extreme malice, extreme madness. Her diverging from the norm endangers her and makes her desirable. The image of the wicked woman may have developed further but it can still be traced back to its historical roots and although it may not always be apparent, many movie-witches can be compared to their counterparts in the tales by the Brothers Grimm. Is this intentional? Well, just like beauty is in the eye of the beholder, the same can be said about witchcraft, it can be seen as a deliberate stylistic device or the supernatural appeal of a woman. At any rate, the witch is a fairy tale character come to life on the big screen who keeps up with fashions but never gets out of style. As a gendered monster she lets chaos reign wherever she appears, be it as a bringer of bad luck, social scapegoat or seductress.

---

<sup>8</sup> Fetishism here shall be understood not as applied to an object, but as a sexual stimulus triggered by a certain appearance and behaviour.

## Works Cited

- Antichrist*. Dir. Lars von Trier. Zentropa Entertainments, 2009.
- Ben-Yehuda, Nachman. "The European Witch Craze of the 14th to 17th Centuries: A Sociologist's Perspective." *American Journal of Sociology*. 86.1 (1980): 1-31.
- Berger, Helen A. *A Community of Witches – Contemporary Neo-Paganism and Witchcraft in the United States*. Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 1999.
- Bewitched*. Dir. Nora Ephron. Red Wagon Entertainment, 2005.
- Bovenschen, Silvia et al. "The Contemporary Witch, the Historical Witch and the Witch Myth: The Witch, Subject of the Appropriation of Nature and Object of the Domination of Nature". *New German Critique*. 15 (1978): 82-119.
- The Chronicles of Narnia: The Lion, The Witch and the Wardrobe*. Dir. Andrew Adamson. Walt Disney Pictures, 2005.
- Creed, Barbara. *The Monstrous Feminine – Film, Feminism, Psychoanalysis*. London: Routledge, 1993.
- Dark Shadows*. Dir. Tim Burton. Village Roadshow, 2012.
- Death Becomes Her*. Dir. Robert Zemeckis. Universal Pictures, 1992.
- Easlea, Brian. *Witch Hunting, Magic and the New Philosophy: An Introduction to Debates of the Scientific Revolution 1450-1750*. Sussex: Harvester Press, 1980.
- The Evil Dead*. Dir. Fede Alvarez. Ghost House Pictures, 2013.
- Green, Karen and Bigelow, John. "Does Science Persecute Women? The Case of the 16th-17th Century Witch-Hunts." *Philosophy*. 73.284 (1998): 195-217.
- Grimm, Jakob. *Deutsche Mythologie*. Leipzig: Bernina, 1939.
- Grimm, Jakob and Wilhelm. *The Complete Fairy Tales*. Ed. and transl. Jack Zipes. London: Vintage, 2007 (1987). Kindle file.
- Hansel and Gretel Witch Hunters*. Dir. Tommy Wirkola. MTV Films, 2013.
- I Married a Witch*. Dir. René Clair. Paramount Pictures, 1942.
- Kieckhefer, Richard. *European Witch Trials – Their Foundations in Popular and Learned Culture, 1300-1500*. London: Routledge, 1976.
- Levack, Brian P. *Hexenjagd – Die Geschichte der Hexenverfolgung in Europa*. Transl. Ursula Scholz. München: Verlag C. H. Beck, 1995 [1987].
- The Malleus Maleficarum*. Ed. Montague Summers, 1928. 8 July 2013.



- Merrifield, Ralph. *The Archaeology of Ritual and Magic*. London: B. T. Batsford, 1987.
- Poole, W. Scott. *Monsters in America – Our Historical Obsession with the Hideous and the Haunting*. Texas: Baylor University Press, 2011.
- Romer, Knud. “A Hearse Heading Home – Antichrist. Lars von Trier in Competition.” *Film*. 66 (2009): 3-35.
- Sempruch, Justyna. *Fantasies of Gender and the Witch in Feminist Theory and Literature*. Indiana: Purdue University Press, 2008.
- Silent Hill*. Dir. Christophe Gans. Davis Films, 2006.
- Snow White and The Huntsman*. Dir. Rupert Sanders. Roth Films, 2012.
- van Vurren, Nancy. *The Subversion of Women as Practiced by Churches, Witch-Hunters, and Other Sexists*. Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1938.
- Weber, Eugen. “The Reality of Folktales”. *Journal of the History of Ideas*. 42.1 (1981):93-113.
- Wells, Paul. *The Horror Genre*. London: Wallflower Press, 2000.
- The Witches*. Dir. Nicolas Roeg. Jim Henson Productions, 1990.
- The Wizard of Oz*. Dir. Victor Fleming. Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer, 1939.