
Bell, Book and Camera: A Critical History of Witches in American Film and Television

By Heather Greene

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A snapshot of current American popular culture, especially of cinema and TV, would reveal a proliferation of occult, pagan, and folkloric imagery. In light of Robert Egger's *The Witch* (2015), Anna Biller's *The Love Witch* (2016), André Øvredal's *The Autopsy of Jane Doe* (2016), Luca Guadagnino's *Suspiria* (2018), Netflix's *Chilling Adventures of Sabrina* (2018-), and The CW's reboot of *Charmed* (2018-), it is well founded to argue that the archetype of the witch is experiencing a powerful resurgence across screen culture in the United States.

Considering the caustic contemporary American political climate, the revival of this quintessentially feminine figure is not coincidental. Since Donald Trump's presidential election in November 2016, his policies have consistently threatened the lives and rights of women, the LGBTQIA+ community, and racial and ethnic minorities. This indisputable re-emergence of the witch in American screen media, then, can be arguably seen and explained as reclamation of what has been a historically repressed, subversive, queer, and/or feminine form of expression, as well as a symbol of resistance to the bigoted, racist, and hyper-patriarchal politics of the Trump administration.

So far, the image of the witch in American cinema and TV has preoccupied scholars on a more intimate scale. Individual films and figures have been studied and discussed in terms of how their respective magical women speak to their contemporary zeitgeist, and how their representations reflect the changes and conflicts of their industrial, aesthetic, cultural, national, or political context. However, a historical and all-encompassing assessment of the image and function of the witch in American screen media, in critical view of her wider cinematic and televisual iterations, has not been produced until now.

Almost as if in response to the current wave of witch films and TV shows, Heather Greene's *Bell, Book and Camera: A Critical History of Witches in American Film and Television* (2018) is perhaps the first academic monograph which traces the witch's onscreen history and trajectory throughout the entirety of this recorded history. In the book, Greene focuses on films which feature a distinctly magical female figure - in either the form of "the accused woman", "the wild woman", or "the

fantasy woman” (the major categories which the author identifies the female witch as appearing under) - to provide a comprehensive chronological documentation of the witch on the American screen. By doing so, Greene aims to primarily discuss two things. First, how the symbolic value of this markedly feminine figure has been modulated over different periods of national political, cultural, industrial, and ideological changes. Secondly, to contend that the witch paradoxically exists as both a tool of feminist empowerment and of patriarchal oppression.

Bell, Book and Camera comprises seven chapters, organised sequentially by their respective time periods. Chapter One, “In the Beginning”, delves into early entertainment films and medium-driven art of the silent era, produced between 1896 and 1919. It looks at the manifestation of the witch in various fantasy, literary adaptation, and historical films, and argues that her increasing presence in culture during this time establishes her as an archetype in cinema.

Chapter Two, “Wild Women, Vamps and Green Skin”, looks at the twenty-year period in Hollywood, between 1919 to 1939, during which colour, sound, and animation technologies were advanced and the Motion Picture Production Code was implemented. This chapter studies Disney’s *Wicked Queen (Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs, 1937)* and MGM’s *Wicked Witch of the West (The Wizard of Oz, Victor Fleming, 1939)* to assess how the relationship between cinematic technologies of that period and conservative censorship popularly entrenched a monolithic and reductive image of the female witch on the American screen.

Chapter Three, “War and Weird Women”, investigates the period from 1939 to 1950. It looks at how World War II affected gender roles and gender relations in American society during and after the war, and how this was reflected in Hollywood films. Though witch films were scarce at this time, the chapter uses a case study of René Clair’s *I Married a Witch (1942)* to argue that the witch figure’s powers are compromised to preserve the status quo and, by extension, patriarchy.

Chapter Four, “Toward a New Hollywood”, concentrates on the period from 1951 to 1967. It explores the emergence of the three most famous television witches, Sabrina, Samantha and Morticia, as well as Gillian Holroyd, the witch from Richard Quine’s film *Bell, Book, and Candle (1957)*. The chapter analyses these figures with respect to the loosening of onscreen morals caused by the decline of the Motion Picture Production Code.

Chapter Five, “Horror and the Fantastic”, examines the era between 1968 and 1982. It correlates the radically changing attitudes in America about sexuality, race, culture, politics, gender, and religion to the birth of

the satanic horror witch in the films *Rosemary's Baby* (1968) and *Carrie* (1976).

Chapter Six, "The Satanic Panic", examines the advent of the "Satanic Panic" phenomenon in 1983. It begins by looking at the Horror genre's obsession with witchcraft and Satanism during the eighties, before observing how technological changes in the mid-nineties brought an end to the "Satanic Panic". The chapter contrasts Andrew Fleming's *The Craft* (1996) and *The Blair Witch* (1999) to exemplify the opposing sides of the witch spectrum during this period.

The final chapter, "A New Witch Order", looks at the various strands of witch films and witchy representations which emerged between 2000 and 2016. It investigates how both indie and mainstream films have supplied, continued, and expanded on stories and imagery of the paranormal, horror, and fantasy. It explores how films such as *Witches Night* (2007) and *Beautiful Creatures* (2013) have collapsed boundaries in terms of the rigidity of the witch's representation, investing the contemporary witch with a subversive, multifaceted, and viral appeal.

An academic monograph which traces and studies the cinematic witch has been overdue for some time in screen scholarship. With *Bell, Book, and Camera*, Greene supplies a long-awaited comprehensive guide to the American cinematic and televisual witch, discussed in the light of changing national outlooks and gender representation through the 20th century and the beginning of the 21st.

Bell, Book and Camera: A Critical History of Witches in American Film and Television by Heather Greene is sure to complement the reading list of any course which discusses onscreen gender, its histories, and those of feminine myth as well.