
Hag Witches and Women's Liberation: Negotiations of Feminist Excess in the U.S. Horror Film, 1968-1972

By Amelia Crowther

Introduction

Since the early modern European witch trials, the hag witch has existed as a monstrous incarnation of the aging female body. Non-reproductive and anti-family, she is a spectacular embodiment of the abject excesses of the category Woman that threaten hetero-patriarchal order, and must be controlled. While primarily depicted as an image of patriarchal horror, since at least the 19th century the hag witch has also been appropriated by feminists, who have framed her as an affirmative figure of female resistance and liberation. In this essay, I focus on one of the most prominent instances of this appropriation by second wave radical feminists in the late-1960s. First, I examine the relationship between radical feminism and the hag witch, suggesting that the movement served to legitimise an alternate reading of the hag witch as an affirmative figure of unruly femininity, celebrating non-reproductivity and the destabilisation of the hetero-patriarchal family. Thus, the image of the hag witch became a site of ideological contestation in this period of widespread socio-political turmoil in the United States, one that was articulated and negotiated through horror cinema. In order to assess how the hag witch was used to negotiate this unrest, I interrogate the horror films *Rosemary's Baby* (Roman Polanski, 1968), *Cry of the Banshee* (Gordon Hessler, 1970) and *Season of the Witch* (George A. Romero, 1972). Ultimately, I argue that these three films capitalise upon the anxieties of the period, superficially acknowledging the new "feminist" dynamic of the hag witch whilst minimising her antagonistic power and disruptive excesses. Nevertheless, the slightly different ways in which these films manage the hag witch is significant for interrogating the rapidly changing cultural landscape at this time. In the films of the late-1960s the strength of the radical feminist movement is apparent in the construction of the hag as abject, while from 1970 onwards the hag is increasingly positioned as sympathetic, but her threat is weaker, softened by a cultural feminist framing.

Witches for Women's Liberation

The witch has always been a potent symbol of female transgression. Gerhild Scholz Williams explains that, from their inception during the

early modern witch trials, “witches embodied the essence of disorderliness, for they subverted the order of sexual and procreative practices, family structure, and the divine institute of the state”.[\[1\]](#) It is perhaps unsurprising, then, that feminists appropriated the witch, and have used her as a politically productive symbol since at least the 19th century. At the height of feminism’s “second wave”, radical feminists continued this trend. In New York, 1968, the activist group WITCH (Women’s International Terrorist Conspiracy from Hell) was first established, and was soon followed by “covens” across the United States.[\[2\]](#) The alliance between second wave radical feminism and the witch is understandable, in that the ideology of radical feminism was that of liberation, the destabilisation of traditional values and societal systems. This is evident in Shulamith Firestone’s call for the elimination of the sex distinction in *The Dialectic of Sex*.[\[3\]](#) as well as in Valerie Solanas’s infamous “SCUM (Society for Cutting Up Men) Manifesto”, in which she describes radical feminists as those “who have free-wheeled to the limits of this ‘society’ and are ready to wheel on”.[\[4\]](#) In her antagonism to social order and her refusal to conform to gendered norms, the witch was the perfect symbol for this ideology. Accordingly, the New York WITCH manifesto states that “witches have always been women who dared to be: groovy, courageous, aggressive, intelligent, non-conformist, explorative, curious, independent, sexually liberated, revolutionary”.[\[5\]](#)

Central to radical feminism’s harnessing of the witch’s politically productive potential were three key aspects. Firstly, it relied upon a reframing of the witch in history, constructing the myth of the feminist witch. Here, the radical Witches called upon a revisionist history of the early modern witch trials that had been central to feminist appropriations of the witch since being propagated by suffragist Matilda Joslyn Gage’s 1893 work *Woman, Church and State*.[\[6\]](#) This revisionist history is outlined in the Chicago WITCH coven’s essay, “Witches as Women’s Hidden History,”[\[7\]](#) which describes a utopic pre-patriarchal society in which marriage did not exist and women were the most respected members of society. This society, the radical Witches claimed, was destroyed by agents of patriarchal Catholicism, against whom proto-feminist witches struggled. Thus, the early modern “witches” were re-framed affirmatively as “the original female rebels, hounded, persecuted, and burned at the stake because they had knowledge men wanted suppressed”.[\[8\]](#)

Secondly, radical feminism specifically invoked the archetype of the hag, symbolic of the non-reproductive and anti-maternal woman who violently eschews gendered norms. As argued by historian Alison Rowlands, the construction of the witch as hag was informed by “a fear of the bodies of older women who were no longer fertile”.[\[9\]](#) Thus, the hag witch embodies the excesses of the category Woman, a transgressor of

gendered boundaries specifically in her lack of feminine beauty and non-reproductivity. This fear of non-reproductive femininity becomes clearest in images of the hag witch as monstrous mother, devouring infants or grinding them into a paste for use in wicked spells and potions.[10] In the context of the late-1960s, the archetype of the hag witch is implicated in the radical feminist focus on reproductive rights, in which the right to abortion and contraception was framed as a fundamental aspect of dismantling patriarchal structures dependent on the categorisation of Woman-as-reproductive-body.[11] In response, radical feminists “frequently were accused of harbouring antimale attitudes and promoting antifamily values,”[12] accusations which echo centuries-old constructions of the hag witch as anti-mother, perverting gendered norms, destabilising the family, and threatening all order.

Thirdly, radical feminism utilised the hag’s excess and spectacle. The hag witch can be considered doubly transgressive for refusing to take up the mantle of invisibility required of aging women. Instead, she embraces her barren body as a source of power, spectacle and magic, becoming an image of unruly excess. The hag witch makes a mockery of the laws and boundaries that structure the symbolic order through her spectacular magic, frequently expressed as flight on broomstick or animal back, transfigurations of herself and others, making potions in smoking cauldrons, or inciting chaos in nature.[13] The hag witch is thus also implicated in the radical feminist Witches’ emphasis on *spectacular* antagonism. As explained by Alice Echols, WITCH favoured anarchic “zap” tactics and guerrilla theatre over more orderly educational work, such as consciousness-raising and discussion.[14] For example, the New York coven’s first action was to dress up as archetypal witches and descend on Wall Street to “hex” the financial district, and a year later they protested a Bridal Fair at Madison Square Garden by appearing in black veils, singing a chorus of “Here come the slaves / Off to their graves”.[15]

This relationship between the radical feminist and the hag witch is significant in complicating the ways in which we can read the image of the hag witch. Constructed within patriarchal discourses, the hag witch can historically be read as an image of abjection, as outlined by Julia Kristeva. The hag witch is horrific because she “disturbs identity, system, order. [She] does not respect borders, positions, rules”.[16] A model of Barbara Creed’s “monstrous-feminine,” abject specifically in her threat to gendered order, the hag witch expresses patriarchal fears of a threatening femininity, which can then be contained or excluded to reinforce the symbolic order.[17] However, feminist work in the late-1960s helped to legitimise an alternate reading of the hag witch as an affirmative figure of disorderly femininity, antagonistic to the oppressive patriarchal construction of Woman-as-reproductive-body, as

self-sacrificing Good Mother. From this perspective, in all her monstrosity, excess, and spectacular transgression of boundaries, the hag witch can be read in terms of Mary Russo's "female grotesque".

Drawing on Bakhtin's carnival theory, Russo reimagines the disorderly woman, the monstrous-feminine, as a powerful symbol of liberation, an image that serves to "resist, exaggerate, and destabilise the distinctions and boundaries that mark and maintain high culture and organised society".^[18] During the short period of radical feminism's activity during the late-1960s and into the early 1970s, the image of the witch became ideologically multiplicitous, contested and almost uncontainable, her meaning evading the boundaries of categorisation, suggesting that she might never be able to be fully recuperated by the patriarchal discourses in which she was initially constructed. At the same time, the abject horrors of the hag witch would have felt more tangible than ever to those who opposed radical feminist ideology. Arguably, horror cinema provided a mechanism through which to negotiate these opposing impulses: the patriarchal fears and feminist fantasies invoked by the image of the hag witch.

As has been discussed at length by film scholars including Andrew Tudor and Rick Worland, in the late-1960s the American horror film was changing. In part, this was in response to widespread socio-political turmoil, the "immense social shifts crystallizing around the Civil Rights movement and growing protests against America's immersion in the Vietnam War".^[19] In response, as Tudor suggests, horror films increasingly looked inward, "expressing a profound insecurity about ourselves".^[20] At the same time, in 1968 Hollywood censorship collapsed in favour of the first ratings classification system, giving way to a new "freedom of the screen".^[21] Consequently, horror filmmakers began to respond to and indulge in the anxieties of the tumultuous cultural climate with new emphasis on shock and spectacle, perhaps best exemplified by the popularisation of the exploitation film. Worland thus characterises the horror cinema in the late-1960s and early-1970s as unleashing "outrageous scenes of gore, sadism, and sexual violence in often coldly ironic films that seemed to feed off the energy and fears of the time,"^[22] implicating the horror film as a key site of negotiation for the excesses and anxieties of the time.

That the horror cinema of this period was specifically a site of negotiation for anxieties around radical feminism is perhaps demonstrated by the boom in witch-centric horror films, or "witchsploitation" films. While witch-centric films of any genre were few and far between in the first half of the 20th century, Tudor points to a growing number of films about witchcraft and the occult throughout the 1960s and into the 1970s, specifically within the horror genre.^[23] The majority of these

witchsploitation films focus on the archetype of the temptress, engaging with fears and desires around women's sexuality brought into the spotlight by the so-called "sexual revolution". However, a small number of these films also deal with the threat of the hag witch. These range from the highly regarded and commercially successful *Rosemary's Baby*, to the low budget B-movie *Cry of the Banshee*, and the cult director George A. Romero's *Season of the Witch*, which was re-cut several times as it tried, unsuccessfully, to find an audience. In order to assess the ways in which the threat of the unruly non-reproductive woman was confronted and negotiated, I thus turn to analysis of these three films, interrogating the extent to which they articulate the patriarchal fears and feminist fantasies embedded in the polysemic image of the hag witch.

***Rosemary's Baby* and the Abject Witch-Midwife**

In *Rosemary's Baby*, young couple Rosemary (Mia Farrow) and Guy Woodhouse (John Cassavetes) move into a gothic mansion turned apartment block, the Bramford, to start a family. Immediately, they attract the attention of their eccentric old neighbours, Minnie Castevet (Ruth Gordon) and her husband, Roman (Sidney Blackmer), who are members of a Satanic witch cult living in the building and plotting to use Rosemary as a vessel for Satan's child. *Rosemary's Baby* is significant due to its engagement with feminist revisionist histories of the witch, presenting Minnie Castevet as the kind of hag witch envisioned by radical feminists at the time. As part of their wider revisionist history of the early modern witch trials, radical feminists reframed the hag by constructing the image of the witch-midwife. Christian conceptions of Satanic witchcraft were merged with vague ideas about pre-Christian folk healers to suggest that witch-midwives were "living remnants of the oldest culture of all [...] before the death-dealing sexual, economic, and spiritual repression of the Imperialist Phallic Society took over".^[24] Within this new mythology, the witch-midwife became a symbol of the oppression of a utopic pre-patriarchal culture, of which the right to abortion and women's bodily autonomy were a fundamental part. Minnie speaks to this mythology in her witchcraft practices, interfering with and manipulating Rosemary's reproductive body through homeopathic charms and potions made from the herbs grown and dried in abundance in her apartment, a behaviour which alludes to a form of folk healing magic that pre-dates patriarchal medical practices.

This is explicitly positioned in opposition to the patriarchal religious order of Christianity, most clearly presented during the Castevet's first dinner with the Woodhouses when Minnie and Roman openly and loudly mock the pope. Furthermore, Minnie's status as transgressive hag is immediately announced in her appearance and behaviour. She is excessive, flamboyant and eccentric, with pink-hued grey hair, and

dressed in bright colours in clashing patterns, laden with sparkling jewellery. Her face is thick with garish make up that accentuates her old age, and she is unapologetically loud, constantly spluttering, laughing and shouting in her harsh, hoarse voice. As such, Minnie embodies age-old hag witch characteristics but within a framework of new feminist revisionist histories. She is an ideologically ambiguous symbol, potentially able to open up spaces for appropriation by radical feminist perspectives.

Arguably, though, Minnie is largely depicted in terms of abject threat to patriarchal order, a culturally-specific model of the monstrous-feminine. Particularly, in her role as witch-midwife, she invokes a mythic pre-patriarchal feminine power over reproduction. Minnie becomes a figure of what Barbara Creed refers to as the “archaic mother”, a patriarchal construction of woman as “the parthenogenetic mother, the mother as primordial abyss, the point of origin and of end,” threatening to re-engulf what she once birthed.[\[25\]](#) This image reinforces the construction of woman-as-reproductive-body, threatening when in control of her authority over life and death, an authority which pre-dates, eclipses and is beyond patriarchal order. Minnie can be read as a culturally-specific avatar of the archaic mother in the ways in which she links life with death, nurturing with decay. She possesses power over the processes of reproduction while her own body is non-reproductive. Her role in creating life is linked with death and decay through associations with Satanic power, and her homeopathic potions which are used for nurturing are also linked with the abject (they are “filled with snails and puppy dog tails”) and ultimately poison Rosemary’s body.

The scene in which the devil rises from hell to impregnate Rosemary is indicative of how the film expresses the horror of the abject archaic mother, comparing the bodies of the transgressive hag and other coven members with that of the youthful, fertile Rosemary. In her exploration of the archaic mother in the horror film, Creed finds a similar dynamic in *Alien* (Ridley Scott, 1979), when Ripley (Sigourney Weaver) undresses for the camera: “Ripley’s body is pleasurable and reassuring to look at. She signifies the ‘acceptable’ form and shape of woman,” in comparison to the monstrous, boundary-defying archaic mother.[\[26\]](#) In *Rosemary’s Baby*, this sequence is shot to emphasise this opposition. The camera takes Rosemary’s point of view. Her naked body is stretched out on the bed, where her breasts become emphasised in the foreground, highlighting her sexual desirability and fecundity. The older coven members, also naked, stand facing her at the end of the bed, and the low angle camera emphasises and exaggerates their sagging, bent bodies. The camera then roams over Rosemary’s body, revelling in its reassuring qualities. Rosemary’s body, like Ripley’s, represents the clean and proper feminine body, characterised by youthful desirability and potential motherhood, re-emphasising the horror of the unruly aging woman.

In presenting the witch-midwife as abject hag, *Rosemary's Baby* articulates a fear of a mythic primordial maternal power, speaking to contemporary fears and anxieties over radical feminist efforts to gain control over reproductivity. While *Alien* works to “repress the nightmare of the archaic mother,”[\[27\]](#) what is particularly threatening about Minnie is that her transgressiveness cannot be contained. Instead, it contaminates and corrupts, initiating Rosemary into abject motherhood. Firstly, Rosemary’s defilement is depicted in this sequence when she hallucinates an image of corrupted Christianity – the pope offering her his ring, recognisable as the Tannis root pendant given to her by Minnie. The moment of conception is thus marked by the corruption of a symbol of patriarchal order, by a symbol of the witch-midwife, the archaic mother. Furthermore, when Rosemary wakes up the next morning she is covered in red scratches, a physical defilement of her reassuring body. Secondly, in her discussion of the film as a narrative about perverted motherhood, Rhona Berenstein highlights Rosemary’s increasing androgyny, suggesting that “her haircut, boyish features and the eradication of sexual desire and desirability [...] point to a neutralization of [sexual] difference”.[\[28\]](#) In this way, the film depicts Rosemary’s move away from a reassuring femininity towards becoming “an ambiguous figure of motherhood”[\[29\]](#) like Minnie.

The ending of the film offers Rosemary a choice. Having delivered a demon child under sedation, she wakes up and goes looking for it, wielding a kitchen knife, and finds that it has been taken by the coven. Initially horrified at the sight of the child (“what have you done to it?”, she cries), Rosemary is urged by Roman to “be a mother to your baby”. Rather than disavow or destroy the demon child, the last moments of the film depict Rosemary rocking the child’s crib, nurturing him, accepting her role as abject mother to the monstrous child. Here, horror is produced through the uncontainability of the hag witch, the inability to expel the abject and restore hetero-patriarchal order, articulating patriarchal anxieties of the late-1960s over the growing influence of radical feminism.

The film’s ambiguous ending may also speak to the new excesses of meaning embedded in the witch image, allowing them to run free of conventional narrative structure, and perhaps consequentially allowing for an oppositional interpretation that celebrates the destabilisation of the hetero-patriarchal family. Ian Olney has argued that the early-1970s cycle of Euro-horror possession films articulate a similar sense of the horror of the archaic mother’s contaminating excess, which agents of patriarchal order are powerless to prevent. For Olney, these films celebrate transgressive femininity and transmission of excess, partly due to the inability to expel the abject, but also due to the use of aesthetics of excess and spectacle, which serve to destabilise the viewing experience

in a “short-circuiting of the narrative machinery of mainstream cinema”.[\[30\]](#)

This idea of disruptive spectacle and excess, central to the witch’s affirmatively transgressive power as female grotesque and to WITCH’s activism, is present in the hallucinatory sequence of Rosemary’s rape, marking her induction into abject motherhood. Utilising an unstable handheld camera, abrupt changes in mise-en-scène, and experimental sound editing, the scene is disorienting and disruptive to narrative coherence, perhaps opening space for oppositional interpretation, as Olney describes. It is notable, though, that the majority of *Rosemary’s Baby* maintains a cold and restrained tone, by utilising stable camerawork, cause and effect editing, and a slow, steady narrative pace, working to minimise the cinematic excessiveness of the hag witch. The excesses of the dream sequence are confined here, justified and controlled by the logics of classical American cinema. This moment of excess is “allowed” within the normative narrative structure as drug-induced vision, separate from Rosemary’s perception of reality. Lastly, the transgressive potential of this disruptive aesthetic is undermined by the content of the scene, which depicts the violent subjugation of a woman through rape, a cornerstone of patriarchal dominance.

In these ways, *Rosemary’s Baby* denies or manages any cinematic excess that might work to short-circuit the conventional narrative and normative positioning of its characters, or invite visual pleasure in unruliness and transgressive female power, even as it acknowledges and capitalises on the anxieties of the wider cultural climate. This is particularly evident in the film’s construction of the hag witch as mythic witch-midwife and in its ambiguous ending.

Capitalising on Counter-culture

One of the ways in which witch-centric horror films of the period could speak to a cultural climate of social change and political turmoil, but with minimal engagement with methods of destabilisation and subversion, was to use the aesthetics and values of the late 1960s counter-culture. Broadly speaking, as Timothy Miller explains, hippie counter-culturalists were those who opposed the values of dominant society and responded by “dropping out” to build new societies based on the core values of freedom, egalitarianism, community, hedonism, peace, and love.[\[31\]](#) While sharing an opposition to dominant society with contemporaneous political movements, the counter-culture movement differed in that it “proposed not so much a confrontation with mainstream culture as a simple withdrawal from it”.[\[32\]](#)

By 1970, this counter-cultural ideology had intersected with feminist

politics, leading to radical feminism's softening into what Alice Echols terms "cultural feminism." Echols succinctly describes the difference between these two ideologies, writing that "radical feminism was a political movement dedicated to eliminating the sex-class system, whereas cultural feminism was a countercultural movement aimed at reversing the cultural valuation of the male and the devaluation of the female".[\[33\]](#) Thus, cultural feminism depended on the binary sex dichotomy that radical feminism sought to deconstruct, championing the adoption of alternate lifestyles for personal liberation rather than challenging socio-economic structures to enact widespread political change.[\[34\]](#) In this way, cultural feminism perhaps had more in common with the broader hippie movement, which largely "reaffirmed time-tested American values and tendencies, albeit sometimes in new clothing".[\[35\]](#)

By the early 1970s hippie culture had succumbed to "the crass commercialization of its ideas and values".[\[36\]](#) Arguably, counter-culture was a prime target for commercial mainstream media because it could be used to appeal to "modern" cultural attitudes and a growing youth market without giving voice to any radical, destabilising ideology associated with political movements of the time. In this sense, hag witch-centric horror films of the 1970s continued to use feminist revisionist histories, capitalising upon the cultural turmoil invoked by radical feminism, but without casting the hag as abject threat. Instead they spoke to counter-cultural and cultural feminist ideals, appealing to "modern" liberal attitudes whilst continuing to minimise any sense of truly disruptive or destabilising excess.

A particularly clear example of this is Gordon Hessler's film *Cry of the Banshee*, exploiting the success of the British film *Witchfinder General* (Michael Reeves, 1968) by focusing on a tyrannical witch hunter, Lord Edward Whitman (Vincent Price). The film presents a witch coven, led by the hag Oona (Elisabeth Bergner), in white flowing gowns with flowers in their wild hair, dancing barefoot in a woodland clearing on the outskirts of a town, evoking the counter-culture's "natural" aesthetic and valorisation of nature as a space where freedom from the Establishment could be found. In this film, witchcraft is referred to as the "old religion," acknowledging a contemporaneous view of the counter-culture as an alternate religion, drawing on and incorporating various spiritual practices and values from a range of sources, including Wicca and other forms of Neopaganism.[\[37\]](#) This idea of witchcraft as the "old religion," with Oona as the "Mother" who was "born in fire," also invokes feminist revisionist history, suggesting a primordial matriarchal culture associated with nature that was violently erased by the "Imperialist Phallic Society".

Instead of casting Oona as abject monstrous-feminine, the film filters radical feminist tactics through an apolitical counter-cultural aesthetic,

suggesting a desire to safely capitalise upon feminism instead of condemning it completely. *Cry of the Banshee*, though, does not eliminate all sense of conflict. The witch coven is explicitly positioned as an alternative to a cruel hetero-patriarchy, symbolised by Lord Whitman and his family, comprised of his submissive wife, Patricia (Essy Persson), and his sadistic son, Sean (Stephan Chase). Brenda Gardenour Walter argues in part for a reading of the film as speaking to contemporary feminism, writing that “Oona and her coven only turn to Satan when they have been raped and tortured by the true source of evil in the film, the tyrannical patriarch Lord Edward Whitman” and that the film is sympathetic to the hag, allowing her to confront “an abusive and misogynist patriarchy” and enact her revenge upon it.[38] Arguably, though, the film simply uses this narrative strategy to capitalise on the popularity of modern social movements whilst minimising the genuinely disruptive potential of the unruly non-reproductive hag.

This is perhaps best displayed in the way that the film uses the new “freedom of the screen” and engages with the horror film’s increasing penchant for shock and spectacle. The film contains extended sequences of the aggressive victimisation and sexual assault of young women, inviting viewers to gaze at these women’s violently exposed bodies even as the acts of patriarchal oppression are supposedly condemned by the narrative. Here, the film evidences Tudor’s assertion that horror filmmakers in the 1970s, “freed from the constraints of earlier censorship,” sought to titillate heterosexual male viewers, indulging their “fantasy desires to voyeuristically contemplate aggressive, perverse [...] and visually explicit sex”. [39] This suggestion that the new, liberal “freedom of the screen” was more useful in undermining political movements than in giving voice to them speaks to counter-cultural ideology, which espoused the value of sexual freedom, but was largely focused on enhancing male pleasure, doing little to challenge conventional gendered power dynamics.[40]

Moreover, while privileging the spectacle of sexual violence, *Cry of the Banshee* almost completely denies the potentially disruptive spectacle of the hag witch, keeping her excesses of meaning strictly under control. Oona is only introduced halfway through the film, and her unruly power is communicated through orderly, ritualistic magic. The witches often *talk* to the Whitmans about taking flight, or engaging in other unruly magical activities, but these images of spectacular excess are never seen. This use of spectacle and shock is similar to that of *Rosemary’s Baby*, in that they are only used during sequences depicting violence against women. So, while *Cry of the Banshee* does not so straightforwardly articulate patriarchal anxieties by positioning the hag as monstrous threat to a sympathetic patriarchal order or normative femininity, by no means does it speak to feminist ideology. The film capitalises upon radical feminist

revisionist histories, presented in terms of counter-cultural aesthetics, safe in the knowledge that these do little to destabilise traditional patriarchal values.

Following the general trend of the 1960s and 1970s horror film, the ambiguous ending acknowledges the potentially radical disruptive excesses of the hag witch, suggesting the threat of contamination and uncontainability. Oona is killed at the climax of the film (displaying a need to destroy the unruly, non-reproductive female body, regardless of how sympathetically she has been portrayed), but her magical power over Whitman's servant, Roderick (Patrick Mower), is left intact. Thinking that Roderick has also been killed, and with the intention to mock his corpse, Whitman opens his coffin to find it empty. The final image of the film reveals that the possessed Roderick has killed and replaced Whitman's coach driver and is driving him into the unknown, to continue enacting Oona's murderous vengeance. What is emphasised here is that the witch's destructive magic does not answer to patriarchal law, and that it can transgress the boundary between life and death and transcend the body, exceeding narrative order, unable to be controlled.

Even while the film largely minimises the potentially feminist excesses of the unruly hag witch by evoking the broader, safer, more conservative aesthetics and values of the counter-culture, there is a sense of the fundamental destabilisation of a hetero-patriarchal order that cannot even confront that which threatens it, let alone destroy it. As with *Rosemary's Baby*, while this potentially speaks to patriarchal anxieties concerning the strength of the radical feminist movement, in *Cry of the Banshee's* ambiguous ending the hag's excesses of meaning are able to run wild, opening up space for an oppositional interpretation that revels in the lingering effects of disruptive feminist ideology, celebrating that these disorderly ideas and values cannot be so easily suppressed, even if the bodies are subjected to a controlling order.

One of the last hag-witch-centric horror films of this period is George A. Romero's *Season of the Witch*, which follows dissatisfied and isolated housewife Joan (Jan White), who seeks out witchcraft as a form of personal empowerment and an escape from suburban family life. This film is significant as a conclusion to this cycle of hag witch films, consolidating the move from the spectacularly antagonistic radical feminist WITCH to the almost apolitical, safely antagonistic, cultural feminist witch.

Of particular interest is the way in which *Season of the Witch* manages its cinematic excesses, which appear throughout the film in Joan's narratively disruptive dream sequences. For example, the film opens with an image of Joan's husband, Jack (Bill Thunhurst), walking through a

barren woodland while reading a newspaper, followed meekly by Joan. As they walk, Jack pushes through branches that hit Joan in the face as they swing back, leaving bloody scratches on her skin. They pass a baby on the ground, which Joan surveys apprehensively. The sequence expresses Joan's invisibility in her lifeless marriage, her perception of Jack as violently neglectful, and her ambivalent feelings towards her role as mother. Tanya Krzywinska has noted the disruptive style of these sequences, writing that "the distinctiveness of the film lies in its use of jarring jump cuts, montage and odd camera angles often shot with an anamorphic lens. Such devices [...] reflect the conflicted and hysterical interior state of the central protagonist".[\[41\]](#) Unlike in *Rosemary's Baby*, these fantasies are not carefully delineated from narrative "reality"; they are rarely preceded by establishing shots to mark the distinction between spaces. Additionally, Tony Williams has described the ways in which the dream sequences are frequently displaced within the wider narrative structure, suggesting that these fantasies deliberately disturb the chronological flow of the plot.[\[42\]](#) Furthermore, it is significant that these disruptive aesthetics are not used to underscore sequences of violence against women but to express Joan's own fantasies, fears and desires.

Within the narrative, witchcraft is a tool that can be used to give voice to Joan's desires, "a symbolic language through which women can articulate the hidden and the unspoken,"[\[43\]](#) allowing Joan to go from inarticulate and invisible hysteric to a hag witch with agency and autonomy. Considering the disorderly, excessive style of her hysteric fantasies there is a potentiality for the process of their articulation to give voice to the spectacular disruptions of the female grotesque, opening up space for the appropriation by a radical feminist perspective.

Certainly, transgression of women's proper social role within the patriarchal order is key to Joan's transition to witchcraft. Returning home one evening she listens in to her 19-year-old daughter, Nikki (Joedda McClain), having sex with Gregg (Raymond Laine), and masturbates on her bed until she is interrupted by Nikki appearing in the doorway. Appalled at her mother's display of sexuality, Nikki leaves home. Later, as Joan becomes more involved with witchcraft, she performs a spell to call Gregg to her and has sex with him. In becoming a witch, Joan rejects the role of passive, self-sacrificing mother, acting on her sexual desires at the expense of her family, which steadily collapses. Additionally, Joan's expression of sexuality as an aging woman is inherently transgressive; she rejects the boundaries of feminine sexuality within the hetero-patriarchal family that deem it only acceptable for reproduction or according to male desire. But while this representation of witchcraft provides sympathy for the hysteric aging woman and her transgressive desires, its disruptive, antagonistic potential is ultimately minimised.

Witchcraft is presented as an alternative to the hetero-patriarchal family, an all-female coven led by bourgeois matriarch Marion (Virginia Greenwald), who describes it as “a religion, really,” evoking connotations of the counter-cultural commune and feminist revisionist histories of witchcraft as the “old religion.” The counter-cultural appeal of witchcraft is highlighted in the film’s use of Donovan’s psychedelic rock song *Season of the Witch* (1966), during the scene in which Joan browses occult supplies. Rather than dancing barefoot in the wilderness, though, Marion’s coven dwell in comfortable suburban homes, and perform strictly controlled and subdued rituals, with a cinematographic style to match. Witchcraft allows Joan a personal liberation, but in the process of the articulation of her fantasies, her move from hysteric to witch, Joan goes from disorderly and potentially disruptive, to methodical and ritualistic, confined within an orderly counter-cultural space.

The conservatism of this cultural feminist construction of witchcraft is evidenced in that it involves reinforcing normative boundaries around the category Woman, including the patriarchal paradigm of youth as power and age as decline, based on the notion that a woman’s value directly correlates to her sexual desirability and reproductive capacity. Joan’s status as in decline is emphasised early on in the film, when she has visions of herself as an iconographic hag. Joan is horrified at these hallucinatory images of herself with red-rimmed eyes, pallid wrinkled skin, and grey, unkempt hair, often staring lifelessly into the distance. Instead of embracing the transgressive hag of her fantasies, she rejects this potential self in favour of seeking youth and power, which are uncritically equated. As the film progresses, Joan’s growing confidence and self-empowerment are displayed through her increasingly fashionable hair, make-up and clothes, suggesting that increasing involvement in witchcraft manifests in terms of normative patriarchal standards of youthful feminine beauty.

Unlike *Rosemary’s Baby* and *Cry of the Banshee*, the ending of the film, during which Joan is officially initiated into Marion’s coven, is definitive rather than ambiguous, providing a sense of social inequality being “solved” by counter-culture. This is an orderly and ritualistic affair, during which Marion asks Joan why she wants to join the coven. “I would know myself for what I am,” Joan responds, suggesting a fixity of the category Woman and empowerment through “knowing” this essential femininity. Thus, even while *Season of the Witch* is unprecedented in terms of centralising a sympathetic hag as the protagonist, the film speaks to a cultural feminist ideology that foregrounds female experience, personal liberation, and traditional norms of fixed sexual difference, rather than a radical feminist ideology of deconstruction and widespread liberation.

The film is perhaps more complex than this. Tony Williams, for example, argues that the film's witchcraft-as-religion formulation critiques the counter-culture as simply "another socially fashionable path rather than a radical alternative designed to question programmed behavioural patterns".[\[44\]](#) While this suggests the need for a fuller evaluation of *Season of the Witch's* negotiation of feminism in the early 1970s, viewing the film as critique does not erase the fact that it is tonally cold and ironic, never offering the radical alternative that would be Joan embracing her hysteric fantasies and becoming the excessive, unruly hag. As such, it still works to capitalise on cultural negotiations of counter-culture and cultural feminism, without giving voice to any genuinely destabilising ideology.

Conclusions

What, then, can be concluded about the ways in which these horror films address and negotiate the hag witch? In their representations, the three films discussed here do not deviate heavily from the archetypal hag witch, featuring transgressive aging women who are non-reproductive but refuse to fade into invisibility, thus posing a direct threat to the hetero-patriarchal family. As such, they suggest a need to confront and negotiate the threat of the second wave radical feminist movement and its theatrical campaigns for women's right to be unruly, to be non-reproductive, to eschew the role of Good Mother. Indeed, the direct link between the radical feminist woman and the hag witch (due in large part to *WITCH's* appropriation of her image and myth) is drawn upon in these films in the invocations of feminist revisionist histories, positioning witchcraft as the "old religion" of a pre-patriarchal culture. Further, the ambiguous endings of *Rosemary's Baby* and *Cry of the Banshee* suggest an excess of meaning now embedded in the witch that cannot be controlled by narrative order, opening up spaces for the potential celebration of the destabilisation of categories and boundaries represented by the hag witch, which is the lingering effect of the female grotesque, prompting new ways of thinking about social order.

Writing about the horror film in the neoconservative 1980s and 1990s, Christopher Sharrett reflects on Robin Wood's argument that horror films of the 1960s and 1970s "became steadily more progressive, constantly challenging the legitimacy of capitalist, patriarchal rule".[\[45\]](#) Superficially, we might see this emerging progressiveness in the way in which these hags are increasingly sympathetic. In 1968 Minnie Castevet is the primary antagonist, the abject archaic mother, whereas in 1972 Joan Mitchell is the protagonist, a victim of a violently neglectful patriarchy who finds empowerment through witchcraft. However, it is my contention that these later films simply capitalise on the contemporary socio-political turmoil, using counter-cultural aesthetics and values to

appeal to the “modern” sensibilities of the growing youth market, whilst continuing to minimise and control the radically disruptive potentiality of the witch’s excesses, stripping the radical feminist hag witch of her power and speaking to an almost apolitical cultural feminist ideology instead.

Why is it that hag witch films of previous decades, such as *The Wizard of Oz* (Victor Fleming, 1939), allow and even invite some visual pleasure in unruliness and transgressive femininity, whereas the spectacular excess of the hag witch and WITCH’s activism is almost entirely absent from the films released from 1968 to 1972? In her essay on the lesbian vampire, another model of the unruly non-reproductive woman in horror film, Bonnie Zimmerman suggests that when feminism was not perceived as a fundamental threat, the unruly “thrills” of the lesbian vampire could be enjoyed on screen, since the filmmakers “must have felt secure enough in their power and that of their primary male audience to flirt with lesbianism and female violence against men”.^[46] While many of the specifics of this essay do not align with the films discussed here, this central suggestion is a useful one. The other side of Zimmerman’s argument is that when feminism *does* pose a fundamental threat to order, when patriarchal society is unstable and insecure, the thrills, excesses and spectacles of the unruly female monster will be minimised, moderated, or strictly controlled. This is a notion that helps to explain why the hag witches explored here, representing a movement that “transformed the cultural and political landscape,”^[47] are so underwhelming in the threat they pose.

Despite the lack of spectacular excess, these hag witches implicitly demonstrate the *strength* of the radical feminist movement in a wider cultural context. This is particularly significant because, as Ellen Willis suggests, while the radical feminist movement ended in the early 1970s, “its imprint is everywhere in American life”.^[48] In a similar manner, the new feminist excesses of meaning embedded in the hag witch, evident superficially in these cinematic constructions, suggest that she might never be fully recuperated by the patriarchal discourses within which she was initially constructed, just as wider American culture could never return to a state untouched by radical feminism. That is, the hag witch was primed for cinema to engage more fully with her radical potentials, to give spectacular voice to the female grotesque.

Notes

^[1] Gerhild Scholz Williams, cited in Bryan D. Palmer, *Cultures of Darkness: Night Travels in the Histories of Transgression* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 2000), 58.

-
- [2] Alice Echols, *Daring to Be Bad: Radical Feminism in America, 1967-1975* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1989), 96.
- [3] Shulamith Firestone, *The Dialectic of Sex: The Case for Feminist Revolution* (New York: William Morrow and Company, 1970), 11.
- [4] Robin Morgan, *Sisterhood is Powerful: An Anthology of Writings from the Women's Liberation Movement* (New York: Vintage Books, 1970), 579.
- [5] *Ibid.*, 605.
- [6] Matilda Joslyn Gage, *Woman, Church and State* (New York: Humanity Books, 2002).
- [7] Morgan, *Sisterhood*, 606-10.
- [8] Susan Brownmiller, *In Our Time: Memoir of a Revolution* (London: Aurum Press, 1999), 49.
- [9] Alison Rowlands, "Witchcraft and Old Women in Early Modern Germany", *Past & Present* no.173 (November 2001): 57-58.
- [10] Deanna Petherbridge, *Witches and Wicked Bodies* (Edinburgh: National Galleries of Scotland, 2013), 21.
- [11] Kathleen Berkeley, *The Women's Liberation Movement in America* (Westport: Greenwood Press, 1999), 62-65.
- [12] *Ibid.*, 5.
- [13] Diane Purkiss, *The Witch in History: Early Modern and Twentieth-Century Representations* (London: Routledge, 1996), 122-25; Petherbridge, *Witches*, 58.
- [14] Echols, *Daring*, 97.
- [15] *Ibid.*
- [16] Julia Kristeva, *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection*, trans. Leon S. Roudiez (New York: Columbia University Press, 1982), 4.
- [17] Barbara Creed, *The Monstrous-Feminine: Film, Feminism, Psychoanalysis* (London and New York: Routledge, 1993), 2; Kristeva, *Powers*, 210.

[18] Mary Russo, *The Female Grotesque: Risk, Excess and Modernity* (London and New York: Routledge, 1995), 62.

[19] Rick Worland, *The Horror Film: An Introduction* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2007), 94.

[20] Andrew Tudor, *Monsters and Mad Scientists: A Cultural History of the Horror Movie* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1989), 48.

[21] Worland, *The Horror*, 94.

[22] Ibid.

[23] Tudor, *Monsters*, 54.

[24] Morgan, *Sisterhood*, 605.

[25] Creed, *The Monstrous-Feminine*, 17.

[26] Ibid., 23.

[27] Ibid., 24.

[28] Rhona Berenstein, "Mommie Dearest: *Aliens*, *Rosemary's Baby* and Mothering", *Journal of Popular Culture* 24, no.2 (Fall 1990): 63.

[29] Ibid.

[30] Ian Olney, "Unmanning *The Exorcist*: Sex, Gender and Excess in the 1970s Euro-Horror Possession Film", *Quarterly Review of Film and Video* 31, no.6 (August 2014): 567.

[31] Timothy Miller, *The Hippies and American Values* (Knoxville, University of Tennessee Press, 1991).

[32] Ibid., 8.

[33] Echols, *Daring*, 6.

[34] Ibid., 6-7.

[35] Miller, *The Hippies*, 126.

[36] Ibid., 3.

[37] Ibid., 16-19.

[38] Brenda Gardenour Walter, *Our Old Monsters: Witches, Werewolves and Vampires from Medieval Theology to Horror Cinema* (Jefferson: McFarland, 2015), 121-23.

[39] Tudor, *Monsters*, 65.

[40] Miller, *The Hippies*, 54.

[41] Tanya Krzywinska, *A Skin for Dancing In: Witchcraft, Possession and Voodoo in Film* (Trowbridge: Flicks Books, 2000), 131.

[42] Tony Williams, *The Cinema of George A. Romero: Knight of the Living Dead* (London and New York: Wallflower Press, 2003), 50.

[43] Krzywinska, *A Skin*, 132.

[44] Williams, *The Cinema*, 53.

[45] Christopher Sharrett, "The Horror Film in Neoconservative Culture" in *The Dread of Difference: Gender and the Horror Film*, ed. Barry Keith Grant (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1996), 254.

[46] Bonnie Zimmerman, "Daughters of Darkness: The Lesbian Vampire on Film" in *Planks of Reason: Essays on the Horror Film*, ed. Barry Keith Grant (London and Metuchen: The Scarecrow Press, 1984), 156.

[47] Ellen Willis, in Echols, *Daring*, vii.

[48] Ibid.

Bibliography

Berenstein, Rhona. "Mommie Dearest: *Aliens*, *Rosemary's Baby* and Mothering". *Journal of Popular Culture* 24, no.2 (Fall 1990): 55-73.

Berkeley, Kathleen. *The Women's Liberation Movement in America*. Westport: Greenwood Press, 1999.

Brownmiller, Susan. *In Our Time: Memoir of a Revolution*. London: Aurum Press, 1999.

Creed, Barbara. *The Monstrous-Feminine: Film, Feminism, Psychoanalysis*. London and New York: Routledge, 1993.

Echols, Alice. *Daring to Be Bad: Radical Feminism in America, 1967-1975*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1989.

Firestone, Shulamith. *The Dialectic of Sex: The Case for Feminist Revolution*. New York: William Morrow and Company, 1970.

Gage, Matilda Joslyn. *Women, Church and State*. New York: Humanity Books, 2002.

Gardenour Walter, Brenda. *Our Old Monsters: Witches, Werewolves and Vampires from Medieval Theology to Horror Cinema*. Jefferson: McFarland, 2015.

Kristeva, Julia. *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection*. Translated by Leon S. Roudiez. New York: Columbia University Press, 1982.

Krzywinska, Tanya. *A Skin for Dancing In: Witchcraft, Possession and Voodoo in Film*. Trowbridge: Flicks Books, 2000.

Miller, Timothy. *The Hippies and American Values*. Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1991.

Morgan, Robin. *Sisterhood is Powerful: An Anthology of Writings from the Women's Liberation Movement*. New York: Vintage Books, 1970.

Olney, Ian. "Unmanning *The Exorcist*: Sex, Gender and Excess in the 1970s Euro-Horror Possession Film". *Quarterly Review of Film and Video* 31, no.6 (August 2014): 561-71.

Palmer, Bryan D. *Cultures of Darkness: Night Travels in the Histories of Transgression*. New York: Monthly Review Press, 2000.

Petherbridge, Deanna. *Witches and Wicked Bodies*. Edinburgh: National Galleries of Scotland, 2013.

Purkiss, Diane. *The Witch in History: Early Modern and Twentieth-Century Representations*. London: Routledge, 1996.

Rowlands, Alison. "Witchcraft and Old Women in Early Modern Germany". *Past & Present* no. 173 (November 2001): 50-89.

Russo, Mary. *The Female Grotesque: Risk, Excess and Modernity*. London and New York: Routledge, 1995.

Sharrett, Christopher. "The Horror Film in Neoconservative Culture". In *The Dread of Difference: Gender and the Horror Film*, ed. Barry Keith Grant, 253-76. Austin: University of Texas Press, 1996.

Tudor, Andrew. *Monsters and Mad Scientists: A Cultural History of the*

Horror Movie. Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1989.

Williams, Tony. *The Cinema of George A. Romero: Knight of the Living Dead*. London and New York: Wallflower Press, 2003.

Worland, Rick. *The Horror Film: An Introduction*. Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2007.

Zimmerman, Bonnie. "Daughters of Darkness: The Lesbian Vampire on Film". In *Planks of Reason: Essays on the Horror Film*, ed. Barry Keith Grant, 153-63. London and Metuchen: The Scarecrow Press, 1984.

Filmography

Alien, directed by Ridley Scott. 1979.

Cry of the Banshee, directed by Gordon Hessler. 1970.

Rosemary's Baby, directed by Roman Polanski. 1968.

Season of the Witch, directed by George A. Romero. 1972.

The Wizard of Oz, directed by Victor Fleming. 1939.

Witchfinder General, directed by Michael Reeves. 1968.

About the Author

Amelia Crowther is a PhD candidate at the University of Sussex, researching the changing face of the witch through cinematic history in the United States, exploring how these images construct, re-construct, and negotiate the category Woman, particularly in cultural moments of socio-political turmoil. Amelia is habitually attracted to the gothic, the horrific and the monstrous, particularly in relation to gender and sexuality. Previous research has focused on the lesbian vampire film trend in the early-1970s Anglo-American cinema, the cinematic history of the artificial woman, and women in 1990s Japanese horror film.