The Witch Recast: Gender, Power, and Resistance in Contemporary Screen Cultures

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Gender, Power, and Resistance in Contemporary Screen Cultures

MA thesis | Jasmyn Jingyi Xu | 14/06/2025

Leiden Universiteit

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Program: Film and Photographic Studies

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Title: The Witch Recast - Gender, Power, and Resistance in Contemporary Screen Cultures

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Word count: 19131

June 14, 2025

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Introduction

The word “witch” first appeared in the late 800s in Western regions, with variations such as “wicche” and “wicca,” and did not initially hold specific negative connotations. Early witchcraft was associated more with religious meanings than with magical practices. Meanwhile, in the ancient Middle East, the narrative of the witch was often intertwined with healing and medicine. Women who possessed medicinal knowledge were regarded as wise beings and goddesses in spirituality, capable of conducting indispensable and sacred rituals while holding a respected role in society (Whaley 2011, 176-177). However, with the spread of patriarchal monotheism, a system institutionalizing male-dominated religious power structures across Europe and the Middle East through male-exclusive clergy, doctrinal vilification of feminine spirituality, and clerical appropriation of healing practices, women experienced systematic marginalization. Compounded by limited medical understanding of natural diseases, these institutional forces relegated women, already socially constructed as the “second gender,” to increasingly inferior positions. Those capable of performing medical treatments amid widespread health crises were increasingly viewed with suspicion. Their healing practices were attributed to supernatural powers, eventually leading to their perception as harbingers of death. This was especially evident during widespread disease outbreaks, such as the plagues of the 14th century. As communal anxieties escalated, women were scapegoated and blamed for causing devastation through witchcraft (Whaley 2011, 174). Religious institutions played a significant role in amplifying and spreading the fear of witches. The Catholic Church was instrumental in hunting down and punishing alleged witches, often accusing women of causing disease outbreaks through magical practices. Additionally, The Hammer of Witches, written by Jacob Springer and Henrik Kramer under the supervision of a Catholic environment, provided misguided instructions for identifying witches. This so-called witch hunter’s manual fueled widespread ignorance, leading to the brutal oppression and execution of countless innocent women across Europe (Whaley 2011, 178). The situation persisted until the late 17th century, when the era of witch hunts gradually declined. However, the trauma left behind remains long-lasting and unforgettable in history.

This historical persecution crystallized into the symbolic witch figure that dominates Western cultural imagination, as a composite of male anxieties about female power. The term “wicked witch” embodies this stereotype, portraying women who deviate from societal expectations as monstrous. Early visual and textual media reinforced this through physically grotesque caricatures, such as green-skinned crones with pointy noses, flying on broomsticks, casting spells and brewing potions. These show misplaced images of cultural shorthand for all that patriarchal society feared and revered - the mysterious, the uncontrollable, and the feminine, projecting repulsion from all angles related to power, gender, and the supernatural. History is filled with inaccurate and untrustworthy records of women as witches who destroyed and persecuted men, which, however, were contrary to the facts. A woman whose behavior did not align exactly with societal, particularly male, expectations was arbitrarily considered a witch. In patriarchal Western society, this was accepted as the only truth, and any other attitudes or actions that deviated were seen as villainous and evil, eventually condensed into one word to describe such misbehaving women - witch. These stereotypical influences have persisted throughout history, appearing in written and visual media from the very beginning and significantly shaping the portrayal of women in some modern and contemporary visual works. In early artworks and later films, witches frequently served as characters that embodied the evil side of humanity, predominantly in the 18th and 19th centuries. Even today, these persistent representations surface in Halloween costumes and casual metaphors, proving how deeply the witch stereotype has penetrated collective consciousness. What began as a neutral term became a weapon of oppression, transforming knowledgeable women from respected figures into embodiments of evil.

The image of the witch, shaped under a patriarchal society and overwhelmingly imprinted with negative perceptions, has stood out as one of the most notorious evil figures in early literature, film, and television, dictated by narrative needs. Although the term “witch” was not inherently gender-specific until the fourteenth century, historical context established a negative connotation around it and laid the foundation for unfavorable judgments toward women. In early literature, much of which was influenced by Christian ideas, the witch represented horror, darkness, evil supernatural powers, and a crime against Christendom.

Beyond the stereotypical monstrous facial features that visually “otherized” feminine nonconformity, the figure also often exhibits recurring behavioral patterns in media reinforcing the demonization, such as the theft and murder of infants, poisoning victims, casting curses, performing harmful actions, and causing damage to societal order. Witches are viewed as threats and dangers that defy and deviate from established social norms, resisting assimilation within patriarchal systems. They are often depicted as symbols of female sexuality and power in a demonized form. Early modern European literature frequently portrayed witches as cannibalistic, murderous, and satanic, with these depictions appearing in folklore and mythology. Even fairy tales commonly featured evil witches with magical abilities who used their powers for nefarious purposes. Furthermore, audiovisual media within the supernatural genre often includes witches as villains or antagonists, using them to construct cautionary messages against deviation from social norms. These narratives reinforce patriarchal ideologies, ultimately decentering and delegitimizing female power in a male-dominated society by generating conflict and fear in audiences. The images of witches presented in visual media also directly reflect the societal and political tensions of specific historical contexts, reproducing the anxieties of their time and place.

In contemporary media, the representation of witches has undergone a significant transformation, from one-dimensional villains to multidimentioanl and complex agents of feminist resistance, which can be largely attributed to the ongoing influence of feminist movements and a re-evaluation of historical narratives written by men. The following chapters will discuss this shift and how the feminist reclaiming of witch history, reframing witch hunts as patriarchal suppression of female knowledge and how the deconstruction of androcentric narratives in visual media. No longer simply depicted as antagonists who function as the counter experience to the “adventurer” in a story, creating chaos and narrative conflict; instead, modern witches now appear as ambivalent figures who destabilize binaries. Sometimes, they even perform good deeds and take on protective roles, despite often still being visually depicted according to outdated, stereotypical historical representations. In response to feminist movements, contemporary visual media has become more conscious and intentional in reshaping the portrayal of witches. The archetype of the witch has been reclaimed, not as a

figure of abnormality or deviation from preconceived standards for women but as one who seeks empowerment, autonomy, and resistance against patriarchal norms and oppression. This shift presents witches in a more positive light, associating them with themes of emancipation, nature, and ancient deities. Moreover, contemporary representations move away from the trope of uncanny femininity and instead explore witches' vulnerabilities, strengths, and individual agency. Films and television series now feature witches who embrace both their sexuality and power without necessarily being villainous. There is also a growing trend toward historical re-evaluation, with narratives striving for greater accuracy in portraying witches not just as supernatural figures, but as individuals historically connected to roles such as early nurses, healers, and wise women, aligning them with the most original nature of the witch. For instance, Disney's *Maleficent* franchise (2014-2019) transforms from *Sleeping Beauty*'s flat image of villain into a more complex antiherine whose maternal love subvers fairy tale conventions, showing a rather different witch character than former series with the same story. Recent transformations like this all reflect third-wave feminism's emphasis on intersectionality, where the witch becomes a vessel for critiquing overlapping systems of oppression.

Among Eastern media production, the witch is also a frequently used element in storylines. In contrast to their Western counterparts, the witch often symbolizes attributes such as wisdom, courage, authority, and resourcefulness. We can observe cross-cultural differences from Eastern media, also reflecting the other side of the representation of the term witch that is not composed of a long-lasting history that also shapes people's perception and binds an interpretation to women who do not fit into the criteria. Eastern cinema views the witch as an independent character that does not associate with pre-conceived negative definitions, particularly evident in Japanese animation films, which portray a positive image and accents feminine. However, there are still some productions in horror genres within Japanese cinema that contains negative connotation, depicting witches as monstrous figures, which, according to Barbara Creed, is often constructed through men's association with female body functions to create monstrous femininity and is possibly shaped by a male-gaze-dominant Western cinema history (1993, 83). The evolving representation of witches across different national cinemas reflects broader ideological and societal shifts regarding gender equality and power dynamic. In

contemporary Japanese society, for instance, there is an increasing cultural openness to alternative female identities in media, while in the West, especially in post-#MeToo America, witches have become potent symbols of feminist resistance. Even on social media platforms, global trends in postmodern witchcraft extend beyond aesthetic or branding, signaling a collective response to historically manipulated and commodified images of women in both Western and non-Western pop cultures.

In this study, the research will focus on the evolution of the witch character throughout the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, from textual to visual media, with a comparison of mainstream Western cinema and Hollywood-style dominated films to Eastern cinema, mainly in Japanese cinema. The social status of women in modern society has been gradually but not yet fully realized through several waves of feminism, and female writers and directors are in the minority; representations of female figures in mass media are recurrent subjects, and it has been an ongoing discussion for equality between women and men. This research adds new insights into the representation of women in films and how we, as the audience, can notice the reflection of real-life social issues, departing from examining the role of the witch in visual media.

My research centers around the questions: “How have witches been represented across different historical and cultural contexts?”, “What factors contribute to shifts in their portrayal?”, “How does this evolution reflect changing societal attitudes toward power, gender, and stereotypes?”, and “Can the altered representation of witches be interpreted as a form of modern iconoclasm?” I argue that, despite the historically villainous and marginalized depiction of witches in visual media, their evolving representation reflects broader societal shifts in attitudes toward gender, power, and cultural identity. Traditionally, the witch archetype has been shaped by patriarchal narratives that portray her as a disruptive and malevolent figure, reinforcing fears surrounding female autonomy. However, in contemporary film and television, this archetype is increasingly being reimagined as a complex, multidimensional character, sometimes even as a symbol of empowerment. This transformation is particularly evident in the way female creators and audiences engage with and reinterpret the figure of the witch, using visual media as a space for resistance against gendered stereotypes. Additionally, cross-cultural

comparisons reveal distinct portrayals of witches, with Western media often emphasizing their danger and otherness, while Eastern narratives, particularly in Japanese animation, depict witches as wise, authoritative, and resourceful figures. Through this research, I argue that the evolving representation of witches serves as a form of cultural iconoclasm, challenging long-standing stereotypes and reflecting shifting ideologies related to power and gender. This study will demonstrate that the changing image of the witch in visual media not only mirrors broader feminist and socio-cultural movements but also highlights the role of media in both reinforcing and subverting traditional narratives.

My analysis will be based on a context-oriented semiotic analysis, looking into the visual representations and aesthetic choices in the selection of cases. Chris Vos emphasizes the significance of the context in which film is made, and the role of that context in the formation of meaning. Using this method, not only symbolic and ideological elements in films can be identified, but also the meaning of the film in relation to its historical and cultural context. From the Wicked Witch of the West and the sinister figures in horror cinema *Suspiria 1977* (1977), a more complex character towards positive sides in *The Love Witch* (2016), to Eastern representations in Japanese cinema and Japanese animation film *Kiki's Delivery Service* (1989), witches have been a symbol in how the society views the women.

Based on Stuart Hall in his Representation Theory, the construction of meaning through language in the process of perception between individuals or groups by society is central to understanding how witchcraft has been depicted and how the cultural identity of the witch was established across time within specific contextual discourses (1997). In the case of the witch in early Modern Europe, this meaning has been deeply influenced by power structures that shape cultural narratives. Moreover, Michel Foucault mentions that knowledge and supposed truths are intertwined with political and economic conditions and could be seen as a creation from the institutions of power (1998). This is no different for the figure of the witch, who for centuries was undoubtedly the victim of feudal society. The representation of the witch was determined by a complex of institutions of power, namely the Church and the government, which held political, religious, and economic power under a gender-specific dominated regime that benefited their own motives, further perpetuating their control over all. Hence, a constructed

reality was later widely spread, leading to institutional oppression, persecution, and long-lasting stereotypes. In further understanding how the witch has functioned as a constructed site of fear and otherness in historical and cinematic contexts, Monster Theory by Jeffrey Jerome Cohen explains that images of monsters are reflections of cultural anxieties, embodying the fears and contradictions of their time. The witch, as a female monster, has historically been used to enforce social norms and control women's behavior. As Cohen states, "the monster is difference made flesh" (1996, 7), positioning the witch within a broader tradition of monstrous figures that challenge hegemonic structures, reinforcing patriarchal fears about female autonomy and power. Building upon these frameworks, Feminist Critical Discourse Analysis, as developed by M. M. Lazar (1999, 2007), provides a way to critique the gendered power dynamics embedded in witchcraft narratives. Lazar's approach interrogates how language and discourse sustain patriarchal structures, making it particularly relevant for analyzing films and literature that depict witches as either victims of misogyny or agents of feminist resistance. Just as Lazar states, "discourse is a site of power, struggle, and ideological reproduction" (147), for us to critically examine how witches are framed in media. Moving on to further examine contemporary feminist interpretations of witchcraft through contemporary films, this study draws on Feminist Killjoy, a concept introduced by Sara Ahmed (2021). Ahmed describes the feminist killjoy as someone who disrupts societal norms by calling out sexism, racism, and exclusion. This concept is particularly relevant in analyzing how modern witches, both in fiction and reality, use their platform to challenge oppressive structures. As Ahmed states, "to be a feminist killjoy is to disturb the fantasy of happiness, to reveal the costs of sustaining that fantasy" (2021, 50). In contemporary media, witches are increasingly depicted as feminist figures who resist patriarchal expectations and redefine power on their own terms.

However, as the figure of the monstrous witch has many similarities across regions, this essay will mainly focus on how the historic memory of witches can be successfully used to challenge pre-existing stereotypes. Despite this absence in academia, the figure of the witch is undergoing a revival in art and popular culture, being further propelled by popularized fantasy forms and commercial successes on television and animations, mostly in Eastern productions. This commerciality and the rich history of the witch equate to a large amount of source material

for authors and creators to draw from. This thesis aims not only to address this gap but also to illuminate other areas for potential research into representations of witches and their historical accuracy, in the hope that the mass persecution of witches and their subsequent transformation can gain the same recognition and accuracy as other atrocities in fictional depictions and depictions that have recently also received a revival in literary and media forms. Using Christine Hine (2015) and Pink et al. (2016)'s study on Digital Ethnography will further help to discuss the evolution of the witch in both historical and contemporary contexts through an ethnographic lens, examining how witches are represented across different media forms and how contemporary practitioners engage with these representations in online spaces.

The role of commercialization in contemporary witchcraft is viewed through Branding Religion, as discussed by Lynn Schofield Clark and Sarah Banet-Weiser. The commodification of spirituality, particularly within digital spaces, raises important questions about authenticity and market-driven representations of witchcraft. Banet-Weiser argues that "spirituality, in its branded form, functions within the logics of late capitalism, where belief becomes a marketable identity" (102). This framework is essential for examining the commercialization of witchcraft in contemporary film, television, and social media, where witchcraft is often packaged as an aesthetic rather than a spiritual or political practice. Additionally, Aesthetic Elements of New Age Movements, as analyzed by Giovanna Parmigiani, provides a framework for understanding the sensory and visual components of modern witchcraft representation. Parmigiani highlights how aesthetic choices, such as the use of specific symbols, colors, and visual motifs, play a role in shaping spiritual identity. In the digital age, this aestheticization of witchcraft is particularly evident on platforms like Instagram, where the visual appeal of witchcraft-related content contributes to its popularity and accessibility.

Finally, to see this evolution of representation from a broader perspective, as a reflection of social change, Affect plays a crucial role in the reception and impact of these representations, making Affect Theory an essential part of this analysis. While Douglas Spencer and Ruth Leys critique the uncritical embrace of affect theory, Gilles Deleuze, drawing on Spinoza, situates affect within a spectrum between active agency and passive consumption. I will use this

framework to analyze how emotional engagement with witchcraft narratives, whether in literature, film, or digital spaces, shapes audience perceptions and cultural discourse.

Chapter 1 - The Witch in Western Cultural History

The early 15th century was the rise of witch hunts in Western Europe, mainly the accusations dominated by political and religious persecution, and normally would not involve civilian population. For instance, the French patron saint, Joan of Arc, was sentenced to be burned at the stake for heresy and witchcraft by the Inquisition, which was under the control of the authorities in England in 1431 (Bovenschen et al. 1978). The stigmatization of witches gradually evolved into a large-scale witch hunt incited by the Church, and in 1484, Pope Innocent VIII issued *Summis desiderantes affectibus*, condemning witchcraft as the worst of the heresies, which had officially set the political and social attitude as a standard towards the term witch (Broedel 2003, 14). Witchcraft was gender-neutral at the time, but since the sentences was given by the church and people who were form higher status, witch's notoriety was intended as an outlet for the "indulgences" of fervent Christians, women, who at the time were of lower social status, bore the brunt of the blow.

In 1487, Heinrich Krämer, who was appointed as inquisitor by the pope, published the infamous book *Malleus Maleficarum* jointly with other authors. It was instrumental in propagating the idea of the evil nature of witches and served as a catalyst for accusations and persecution, branding witchcraft as a sin against the Church and leading innocent people to their deaths. Interestingly, the term witch initially did not refer exclusively to women but also to individuals accused of causing harm to the local village. The witch was essentially a label used to scapegoat certain members of society. A witch was often described as a figure, regardless of gender, who mysteriously caused harm to others. The acts they were accused of committing were known as maleficium (Jabłońska 2024). Not only was gender not the only defining factor, but age was also not a safeguard against accusations. Children were not safe during this period and could easily be accused of witchcraft. Under institutional oppression and cruel detainment practices, many people, including children under the age of fourteen, came forward as self-confessed witches, often under duress. These children were convicted and executed in the same manner as adults (Jabłońska 2024).

The so-called “dark ages” of the Middle Ages in Europe was mainly due to the multiple waves of cold snaps, famines and epidemics, which made life so much difficult for the people; especially at the end of the 15th century, people’s survival situation deteriorated to an extreme. Under conditions of such heavy natural disasters, “witches” became the easiest way to “explain” the disasters or to be responsible for them. If eliminating witches could result in the long winter cold subsiding and the plague disappearing, then it became convincving and persuading for themselves to that conclusion of persecuting innocent people. Hence, accusations of witchcraft expanded indiscriminately, often engulfing entire communities. Men, women, and even children were swept up in the fervor, but gender played a role in shaping the nature of the accusations. Men were accused of crimes typically linked to male-dominated areas, such as crop destruction and livestock harm, while women faced charges related to domesticity, including infanticide and food poisoning. This period of witch-hunting coincided with a broader legal crackdown on women’s roles in society. As witchcraft accusations grew, so did the criminalization of behaviors seen as defiant of female societal expectations. Crimes such as infanticide and prostitution became more heavily prosecuted, furthering the effort to control and suppress women’s conduct through legal mechanisms. Scholars like Christina Larner (1981) and Susanna Burghartz (1992) have interpreted this as an extension of patriarchal power, a means of subordinating women via judicial repression (Broedel 2003). As men solidified their dominance, women’s connection to the sacred was redefined as dangerous. Illnesses, which had no clear cause, were attributed to supernatural forces, thereby tying female power to concepts of death and destruction.

However, it is undeniable that women made up the majority of those being persecuted. European culture had deep-rooted biases that pointed to women as the most likely culprits, as they were widely recognized as having less physical, economic, and political power. Examining existing records, including illustrations in books and artworks from the same period, women were often depicted in peripheral positions unless they were religious figures or central to religious tales. They were consistently shown as needing male support and were regarded as the “weaker vessel,” which contributed to the belief that they might turn to magic practices to gain influence. Additionally, broader societal conditions played a role in fueling these

accusations. Marriage patterns and poor public health meant that many people died at a young age, leaving women widowed early. Widows often became scapegoats, blamed for the deaths of their husbands, children, or other members of their households. Even if they remarried, they frequently carried the stereotypical image of the "evil stepmother," a figure that later became an enduring archetype in folklore. Contents in *Malleus Maleficarum* were written in all its unabashed:

> *"But because in these times this perfidy is more often found in women than in men, as we learn by actual experience, if anyone is curious as to the reason, we may add to what has already been said the following: that since they are feebler both in mind and body, it is not surprising that they should come more under the spell of witchcraft."*

Institutionalizing the witch hunts in *Malleus Maleficarum* was divided into three, each reinforcing the notions for identifying, understanding, and prosecuting witchcraft through a crafted, deeply misogynistic and theological lens (Broedel 2003). The first section described the three essential elements of witchcraft what it claims are the three essential conditions for witchcraft to occur: "the Devil, the witch, and the permission of Almighty God." The book started by warning people that witchcraft is heresy, only for the later text to immediately extend to sensational claims, including witches mating with demons, their supposed ability to control men's love and hatred, create illusions that could entirely remove male genitalia, and the various methods by which witches could terminate pregnancies. The second section mentioned how the devil luring the ignorant into this terrifying trade through the agency of witches; the ways in which formal pacts with demons are sealed; how witches can instantly transport themselves from one place to another; how they obstruct procreation; how they are said to steal male reproductive organs; and how they commit the horrific crime of murdering children, sometimes even handing them over to the Devil. Additional accusations include harming livestock, conjuring hailstorms and tempests, and causing lightning to strike both humans and animals. Which, all according to the authors, is "methods of assisting and enabling the effects of witchcraft, as well as how to successfully break them." The third and final sections then explained the judicial process of prosecuting witches, detailing the legal procedures and

methods of trial used in both Christian and secular courts. As Hope Robbins once put it, “It opened the floodgates to a madness of trials.” Prior to this point, the Church had merely dabbled in purging remnants of the old religions; following the release of this book, they sought nothing short of the total eradication of heresy, which was anyone who was contrary to their views (Friedman 1960).

Ronald Hutton concludes the phenomenon of witch trials as a power struggle, including political and family feuds due to the power vacuums resulted from patriarchy’s fear towards women’s power under the time (2017). The manifested connection between unbridled feminine sexuality led to witchcraft, which manifested in sexual, reproductive, or marital dysfunction, with the defining the “sin,” the act of a witch being sexual intercourse with the devil, makes witchcraft to be seen as an embodiment of sexual anxietry and disorder of power through the contemporary lens. Because of the propaganda of believing Men with unrestrained lust were also seen as liable to witches’ spells, leading to a perceived inversion of the natural order where men were dominated by women. Thus, witches and witchcraft served to reify the anxieties posed by human sexuality in the form of a wholly corrupt female body. Categorizing witches as embodiments of sinful female sexuality provided a means to control women’s sexuality, which was seen as leading to misfortune and disaster. From the dominant culture’s perspective, witches were sexual outsiders threatening the natural order. This categorization imposed order by creating a conceptual system where disordered sexuality was identified with the devil, inverted gender roles and sexual dysfunction with witchcraft, and defective social hierarchies with women’s sins. Any perceived disordering manifestation of women’s power, influence, or behavior was interpreted in terms of sexual perversity because men tended to view women primarily as sexual beings within a rigid hierarchy.

The gendering of witchcraft, as introduced by Mofuoa and Khau, underscores how historical perceptions of witchcraft have disproportionately and unjustly targeted women, a trend rooted in systemic gender discrimination and reinforced by uneven gender standards that uphold patriarchal ideologies (2022). Gender theory further illuminates this process by showing how societies manipulate perceived biological sex differences to prescribe, justify, and interpret hierarchical relationships, among individuals, institutions, and abstract concepts, ultimately

reinforcing misogyny across cultural and historical contexts. From a religious standpoint, Świerczek (2017) argues that religious rights and doctrines, although often framed as neutral, are inherently grounded in male-centric thought systems that privilege male perspectives. This bias is supported by Ghanea, Muldoon, and Wilson, who contend that many human rights violations against women are justified through religious frameworks, with Christianity in particular reinforcing women's subordination, including through Christian-motivated harassment (Jabłońska 2024). Zwissler (2018) also mentions that the recurring stereotype of the male priest battling the female witch, reinforcing the image of women as spiritually weaker and thus more vulnerable to demonic influence, while Deepwell (2019) further discusses this, where male artists have historically portrayed witches through a misogynistic lens, often as hags or crones with grotesque or insatiable sexual appetites, particularly in depictions of sabbath rituals. In this logic, witches came to embody male fears of female sexuality and power, allowing patriarchal societies to categorize and control women through associations with moral and sexual deviance. Ultimately, this framework imposed cultural order by pathologizing women's behavior and power, interpreting any deviation from prescribed gender norms as evidence of inherent disorder and aligning it with the demonic.

Throughout the period of witch trials, various methods were employed to identify witches, including fire trials, water tests, weight assessments, tear examinations, and the needle-pricking, practices that were once widely accepted and led to the torture and execution of countless innocent individuals (Baxstrom and Meyers 2016). Beyond these brutal persecutions, the visual representation of witches became increasingly standardized, with three key elements defining their image: the black dress, the broomstick, and the pointed hat (Harris 2020). The origins of the pointed hat remain debated, it has been argued that the hat derives from the Judenhat, a conical headpiece imposed on Jewish communities in medieval Europe, which became associated with diabolism through widespread anti-Semitic beliefs. An alternative explanation links its emergence to portrayals of Quakers, whom Puritans frequently accused of witchcraft, thereby reinforcing the hat's sinister connotations (Baxstrom and Meyers 2016).

The association between witches and black clothing, meanwhile, can be linked to Western symbolism, where the color black has long signified darkness, death, and malevolence; those qualities then positioned witches as adversaries to purity and virtue (Bovenschen et al. 1978). The broomstick, one of the most enduring symbols of witchcraft, has its earliest recorded connection to magical flight in the Canon Episcopi, a tenth-century clerical text describing women who, under Satan's influence, supposedly flew at night to secret gatherings (Bovenschen et al. 1978). In some cases, folklores from different regions can offer alternative depictions. For instance, the Russian witch Baba Yaga was flying in a mortar, and broomsticks became the dominant motif, likely due to their close association with domestic labor, a sphere in which many accused witches operated (Bovenschen et al. 1978). Additionally, household customs, such as leaving a broom by the chimney or door to indicate an absence, may have fueled the belief that witches used brooms to travel. Beyond their role in transportation, broomsticks were also believed to be used as magical stand-ins, with accused witches like Isobel Gowdy in seventeenth-century Scotland claiming to enchant brooms as substitutes for their physical presence (Jabłońska 2024).

Artworks during the Middle Ages show that the witch was largely depicted as evil hideous creatures just by the appearance, no matther the work was noble and reliable sources as the bibble or plays by Shakespears that has artistic connoisseurship. In those stories and arts, the witches were portrayed as women, only a small portion of male portrayals. The fear and panic causing by the witchcraft was triggering a general horror but also univenitable interest out of unknown by the public, and this interest was converted to the inspirations for artists and the mysterious subject became a frequent used theme for their works. The artist, art historian and curator, Deanna Petherbridge (2013) describes this period as, "Even in the Greco-Roman world, the legends about witches were sources of pottery decorations or the subject matter behind frescoes and sculptures." Since literature, art and plays were more accessible for people from higher class, and became the information sources for them, other than that, frescoes and sculptures were also made to relate to the figuras and stories related to the witch, especially when those were the pubic fecilities funded by the church and donnated by the wealth, and were easy to disseminate information among the public, which also has largely influence how

the public perceive the witch figure other than the lores. Besides, printmaking and texts such as those pamphlets made it possible for these ideas and images to spread widely and cheaply (Baxstrom and Meyers 2016).

After the mythological period, the figure of the witch entered a long and dark era dominated by stereotypes. Figures like Circe, once depicted with mystique and complexity, gradually gave way to images that were simplified, malicious, and villainous. Artists of this period often drew inspiration from mythology and literature, Shakespeare being a notable example where witches frequently appeared to embody chaos and ambiguity, driving the plot forward with their cryptic presence.

If the concept of the witch was shaped by a blend of folklore and real-world practitioners of witchcraft, then Charles Perrault's Contes de fées (Fairy Tales) marked the moment witches formally entered the world of fairy tales (Wallis 2023). In 18th-century France, where the witch hunts were finally subsiding and fairy tales were flourishing, women began to seek comfort, safety, and expression in the magical worlds of storytelling. Their magical powers in these tales became more pronounced, reflecting both a longing for empowerment and a need for narrative justice. To satisfy readers' emotional expectations and reinforce moral clarity, authors like Perrault typically split magical women into two categories: the "true witch," who is evil, jealous, hedious, and threatening, and the fairy or enchantress, who is magical, but beautiful, kind, and generous (Bléourt 2023). This division is essentially a "dichotomy" between good and evil in the image of witches, and it also reflects the expectations and limitations of the society at that time on women's power.

The Enlightenment in the 18th century brought a cultural shift toward rational thinking and scientific exploration, challenging superstition and religious dogma ((Wallis 2023). This transformation also influenced how witches were portrayed in art and literature. From this point forward, the image of the witch began to evolve into a more multidimensional figure. While many depictions still cast witches as symbols of moral decay or societal collapse, reflecting anxieties about disorder and corruption, others began to critique the historical injustices inflicted upon women in the name of witchcraft. The witch thus became both a cautionary symbol and a means of reflecting on how society viewed women and femininity

(Kosmina 2023). This complex representation allowed the enduring link between witchcraft and womanhood to persist, now layered with cultural, moral, and gendered meanings. By the 19th century, a growing academic interest in folklore further preserved the figure of the witch through the collection of fairy tales and rural myths (Bovenschen et al. 1978). In these narratives, the witch often remained a wicked, magical antagonist. However, her role also began to shift: she was no longer simply a source of fear, but increasingly became a vessel for cultural memory and a metaphor for evolving ideas about gender, power, and societal norms.

Chapter 2 - The Monstrous Witch in Horror (*Suspiria* 1977)

Suspiria (1977) is a horror film directed by Dario Argento. Its narrative centers on Suzy Bannion, an American ballet dancer who arrives at a prestigious dance academy in Freiburg, Germany, on a stormy night. Upon her arrival, she experiences a series of strange and unsettling events, including unexplained noises, maggot infestations, and witnessing another student, Pat Hingle, fleeing the school in terror and who is later murdered. Starting from here, the story unfolds as Suzy discovers that the academy is secretly run by a coven of malevolent witches.

Suspiria is often associated with the giallo genre, an Italian film movement characterized by gruesome horror, mystery, and graphic violence, combined with elements of detective and crime fiction. Taking its name from the yellow covers of Italian crime novels, the genre became popular in the mid-to-late 1960s and peaked in the 1970s. They usually follow detectives trying to solve a string of graphic, and often sexually charged murders (Davies and Luke Lewin 2021). The killer is usually faceless in black gloves, and the identity of the killer remains unknown until the very end of the film. Methods and scenes where murders happen are usually elaborate, while the motives stay ambiguous throughout. In many giallo films, the visual styles and the cinematography are more in focus than the narrative. Directors tend to use the murder scenes as opportunities to stage intense, grotesque visuals, where beautiful women are often victims. This explicitly expressed sexualized and fetishized violence toward women through the objectification of the female body via the male gaze in giallo is graphic and theatrical, leaving a strong visual impression, which is also considered a major influence on the American slasher genre that followed (Pinedo and Cristina 1997). According to Michael Mackenzie (2013), giallo can be mainly divided into two types: M-gialli, which center on a male witness to a murder, and F-gialli, which focus on a female lead often caught in a psychological or sexual web.

Although there has been ongoing debate regarding whether *Suspiria* can be definitively categorised as a giallo film. What makes it stand out, though, is how it updates the traditional giallo formula by mixing in supernatural elements. It is the first film in Argento's trilogy about the Three Mothers, who are ancient, powerful witches based on Thomas De Quincey's *Suspiria de Profundis* aiming to rule the world (1891). Most giallo films stay grounded in real life, where

the killer is human and can be caught. But in *Suspiria*, the murderers are witches, and the usual "whodunit" element is more complex. The film also leaves traces to hint at the suspensions within the narrative, and similar to conventional giallo films, it does not fully reveal the full story until the end. However, while giallo often focuses on mentally unstable women and tends to pathologise femininity as victimhood, and the murders involve sexual contexts. *Suapiria* is set in a matriarchal environment. Although men are no longer the central figures in this story, the scenography and pathology are still there (Arabian, 2017).

Women, mothers, and witches are recurring figures often directly linked to goddess-centered myths and matriarchal prehistory; they are the elements that have long been central to feminist thought, particularly in both earlier and contemporary movements that view the witch as a symbol of female power and resistance. The myths of witchcraft and matriarchal prehistory have always been tied to ideology and power, and their history includes being used to justify patriarchal systems as much as to resist them. Simply referencing these myths does not automatically make the film feminist; *Suspiria* aligns with feminist ideologies by reclaiming these myths. While *Suspiria*'s all-female ensemble and coven-centric narrative superficially hint at female power, its visual and mythological grammar do not always escape the very patriarchal paradigms it tries to confront. This unresolved tension between progressive surface and regressive subtext renders *Suspiria*'s feminism inherently unstable and also deeply contested.

To further understand how the film navigates its portrayal of feminine power, it is useful to return to the central theme of the witch and how the stage was set for it, whose presence shapes the film both narratively and visually. Argento used the film's visual language, specifically art direction and cinematography, to establish a new aesthetic in supernatural horror that effectively evoked fear in the audience. Moreover, these visual languages not only create an immersive atmosphere, but also can be read as denotations and connotations to glimpse a deeper meaning. The semiotics help to contextualize within the conventions of the myth of witches, and the story refers to the historical and culturally specific context, as well as connecting the past history to contemporary interpretation.

At the very beginning of the film, the camera strategically focuses on two posters at the airport station, "Black Forest" and "Allgäu," establishing Suzy's (and by extension, the

audience's) point of view in this horror narrative. These are not random locations but deeply significant regions infamous for their witch trial histories, immediately anchoring the narrative in Germany's folkloric consciousness; the Black Forest region witnessed some of the most intense witch persecutions in early modern Europe, while Allgäu's folklore is replete with witch legends (Behringer, 2004). Though these posters appear only briefly, their placement as Suzy's first visual encounter upon arrival creates a subtle but powerful connection to the witch narrative that will unfold. The choice of these specific locations grounds the supernatural story in real historical trauma, lending an air of authenticity to the coming horror. Moreover, the visual presentation of these posters reinforces their ominous significance. The deep red lettering against black backgrounds not only matches the film's distinctive color palette but also evokes the blood-soaked history of witch persecutions and the darkness of occult knowledge. Their Gothic typography recalls medieval manuscripts documenting witch trials and Argento's chromatic symbolism, while their juxtaposition with advertisements for the Bolshoi Ballet—the apparent destination of our protagonist, creates a disturbing contrast between high culture and folk horror. This seemingly innocuous detail operates on multiple levels: as diegetic set dressing, historical allusion, and foreshadowing of the film's central conflict between artistic pursuit and supernatural terror. By embedding these geographically and historically charged signifiers in an otherwise mundane travel sequence, Argento mirrors how witch-hunting legacies continue to haunt modern spaces, their threats invisible until circumstance or directorial intent, renders them horrifyingly apparent.

The film's obsessive use of red gives the effect of a chromatic violence. It transforms color from only an aesthetic choice into a narrative agent of horror. This crimson motif saturates key elements that the pulsating neon of the taxi that delivers Suzy to the academy, the viscous paint dripping from art nouveau walls, the hellish glow that bathes dormitories, each instance escalating what Luciano Tovoli, the cinematographer collaborated with Argento on the colour palettein *Suspiria*, termed "chromatic assault (Williams 2018)." He stated that in order to make *Suspiria* a total abstraction from everyday reality and bring the audience into its world, he used the usually reassuring primary colours only in their purest essence, making them immediately, surprisingly violent, and provocative (Williams 2018). Beyond signifying blood, this red spectrum

references Renaissance witch-hunting manuals like the *Malleus Maleficarum*, where rubricated text marked passages about “the devil’s crimson pact.” The nighttime forest traversal compounds this symbolism, the gnarled silhouettes against scarlet-lit fog materializing the “Black Forest” of both Germanic folklore and Jungian collective unconscious, a literalization of the opening poster’s threat. The use of primary colors operates on multiple levels of sensory and psychological assault. On a physiological level, their specific wavelengths can elevate viewers’ pulse rates, creating a bodily horrific response that mirrors the film’s themes of violence and hysteria. This chromatic violence finds its art historical precedent in Grünewald’s Isenheim Altarpiece, where the same green or red opposition was used to depict plague-ravaged flesh, connecting modern horror to a legacy of European visual representations of bodily corruption and suffering. The high contrast in colors pushed the film to unprecedented extremes, distorting its capacities until even static architectural elements like walls appear to pulse and hemorrhage, transforming the entire diegetic space into a living, threatening entity. This multilayered approach to color is more than just decoration but what film theorist Kristin Thompson calls “color diegesis,” where hues become active narrative participants. When Suzy enters the red-flooded dance studio, she is not just illuminated, but baptized in the very essence of the coven’s power; the lighting scheme links to what Richard Miesk (2010) describes as “chromatic possession.” Even the blue tones, as cold counterpoints to red’s heat, mirror witch-trial accounts of “devil’s marks” appearing as cyanotic flesh. This polychromatic terror makes color itself the monster.

Beyond color schemes and lighting, the film’s abstract and surreal visual style draws clear influence from German Expressionism. The warped architecture and stylised interiors of the Tanz Akademie recall early horror films like *The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari* (1920) and *Nosferatu* (1922), both of which used distorted settings to reflect inner psychological states. Argento intentionally channels this visual tradition, using artificial sets, stark contrasts between light and shadow, and highly manipulated film stock to create a space where visual distortion reflects the characters’ mental and emotional experiences. As well as the objects and architectures, lighting reflecting on the facade of the red building symbolizing the inner horror caused by the outside world of the characters; the broken window is the sign of the violence. Visual devices like these

not only as the artistic influence of the general aesthetic but also foreshadows the inner mental changes, also hinting at where the plot is headed.

This combination of visual choices is designed to evoke fear on an almost unconscious level, creating horror by triggering the viewer's deepest, most irrational anxieties (Bustos 2021). The setting of the academy itself plays a key role in this. It functions as a liminal space, that is detached from the outside world and heavily stylised to enhance the film's dreamlike and otherworldly atmosphere. Within this space, Argento transforms the female witch figure into the space itself. The hallways, often lit in red, resemble veins, while the deep, hidden chamber that houses the matriarch echoes the shape of a womb. Bustos (2021) describes this process as the "humanisation of space," where architecture takes on bodily qualities that make the environment feel alive and complicit in the witches' actions. Furthermore, Argento subverts the typical horror convention of using darkness by instead relying on bright, saturated lighting to represent magic and danger. He weaponizes architecture by using the form and construction of the sets to overwhelm the characters. The exaggerated building and ceiling heights and vaulted doors give the impression of dwarfing the actresses, an intentional aspect of Argento's original conception, inspired by surreal children's stories and fairy tales. This sense of being overwhelmed contributes to the feeling of terror in a strong contrast to the children's colorful and wonderland, with a dar,k horrific adult world of killings and deaths. Bustos (2021) draws a connection between this highly stylised color design and abstract art movements, particularly the works of Kandinsky and Picasso. The bold color palette visual presentation of the film work on multiple levels: they construct the witch as a terrifying, omnipresent force, they immerse the viewer in an unnatural and emotionally heightened world, and they allow *Suspiria* to build horror not only through its narrative but through every aspect of its visual composition.

Horror is used as a stylistic and thematic tool to build the figure of the witch into something both terrifying and bodily. The film leans heavily into a gothic, surreal aesthetic that blurs the boundary between physical beauty and bodily grotesquerie, often revealing the horror of the witch not through explicit evil, but heavily through the corruption and manipulation of the flesh. The witches of the Tanz dance academy do not appear monstrous at first; they are cultured, poised and artistically driven. However, horror seeps through the cracks of their

elegance, particularly in the way dance becomes a tool of domination. The infamous sequence where Olga is violently contorted in a mirrored room while Suzy performs her solo upstairs exemplifies this. It is not just a horror of violence, but a horror of control; the witch's power is depicted as capable of reaching into another's body, bending it from the inside out. This psychic violence makes the witches terrifying, not because they are only magical, but because they use this power for bodily destruction, often masked by beauty and discipline.

The film also emphasizes horror through the witches' deep connection to the abject. Their power is rooted in the body, blood, fluids, decay, and sacrifice are central to their rituals. This is especially seen in the climactic ritual scene, where naked, chanting women dance around mutilated bodies under strobe lighting and deep red hues. This overt embrace of bodily horror mirrors Barbara Creed's concept of the "monstrous-feminine," which refers to a fear not of women per se, but of women's bodies when they break norms, when they leak, swell, bleed, and rot (1993). Mother Markos, the decaying matriarch of the coven, is the ultimate symbol of this monstrosity. Her bloated and scarred grotesque form contrasts violently with the graceful figures of the other witches, exposing the horror at the heart of unchecked, excessive female power. Her body is repulsive, and that is weaponized by the film to cement her as the embodiment of evil; and this portrayal is not new, it draws directly from historical stereotypes of witches as aging, corrupt women who derive power from perverse rituals and bodily fluids. *Suspiria* revives the ideas during the time of witchhunts and updates them visually. For example, the witches' use of hair and body parts in rituals, and their fixation on sacrifice, links to these old demonological fears, suggesting that female power is unnatural, bodily, and requires destruction.

Dance, embodiment, and ritual function as core expressions of power and identity beyond just aesthetic elements in *Suspiria*. The witches' choreographed movements are not passive displays but active inscriptions of force upon the world, conjuring an embodied language that bypasses verbal communication and directly taps into affect, violence, and transformation. Dance becomes a form of ritualized magic, a performative articulation of the witches' power. The violent contortions that link Suzy's performance to another woman's destruction illustrate how physical expression, in this space, is inseparable from domination and

control. Yet, dance also becomes the witches' primary tool of self-definition, anchoring their world in an alternative symbolic order, one that channels rhythm, the grotesque, and the ecstatic (Kosmina 2023). In this way, the body, particularly the feminine body, becomes the site of both repression and resurgence, hinting at the grotesque female body's disruptive potential under the long shadow of historical persecution. The witches of *Suspiria* may live in a fantastical present, but their legacy is rooted in centuries of real-world violence against women (Kosmina 2023). The twisted body horror is hence historical as well as symbolic, as a confrontation with the buried past of persecution, and a speculative imagining of what it might mean if that power had not been erased, but reconstituted in secret.

The horror also lies invisibly. Several elements, such as the peepholes and hidden doors in the dance academy's labyrinthine architecture, mirror the panopticon of patriarchal surveillance. Monstrous women as visually grotesque figures, but as an invisible force, can be seen as a manifestation of historical witch hunt paranoia and patriarchal anxiety. The film's central witch, Helena Markos, is never fully seen; her presence is instead evoked through disembodied infantile wails, shadowy distortions, and a fleeting glimpse of a rotting face. This deliberate invisibility can be explained by Silvia Federici's discussion on capitalism's systematic erasure of female autonomy, where the witch hunt was a war against women's resistance to the disciplining of their bodies as instruments of labor (2018). Like the marginalized women (midwives, healers, and elderly spinsters) scapegoated during the European witch craze, Markos exists as a projection of societal fears rather than a concrete entity. The dance academy itself functions as a panopticon of hidden passages and peepholes, where witches surveil students through walls, a spatial realization of Michel Foucault's analysis in *Discipline and Punish* (1979), that "Visibility is a trap... the inmate is constantly seen but never communicates with the observer." This architectural horror mirrors the witchhunt mentality that presumed women's omnipresent, insidious threat. Sound design further amplifies this historical parallel. The witches' influence is announced through discordant whispers (Patricia's hallucinated "Witch!") and mechanical, puppet-like spasms (Olga's possessed dance), recalling how "irrational" female behavior was pathologized as demonic. Yet *Suspiria* also inverts victimhood by showing the coven's murders replicate witch-hunt tortures (barbed-wire throat slitting echoing iron maidens;

glass shard storms evoking stoning), framing their violence as historical retribution. This cyclical brutality expressed by Suzy's climactic dagger strike, can be considered a critique of the paradox of liberation through violent mimicry. Thus, horror in *Suspiria* is rooted in the historical construction of the witch as something to be feared because of her body, her power, and her independence.

The concept of the "monstrous" in *Suspiria* is symbolic, mythic, and deeply gendered. What makes the witches truly monstrous in the film is not just their use of dark magic or their manipulation of others, but the way they transgress boundaries, between life and death, beauty and decay, creation and destruction, and crucially, between the feminine and what is deemed acceptable within patriarchal norms. Their bodies and actions refuse containment. This is why horror attaches itself to them so easily, the monstrous here is a function of excess. The witches are excessive in their rituals, in their bloodshed, in their nudity, in their desires. Barbara Creed (1993) argues that the female monster in horror is often constructed around what psychoanalysis defines as the abject, where bodily functions and fluids disrupt identity, order, and cleanliness. In *Suspiria*, the witches are constantly surrounded by the abject. The ritual spaces are wet, fleshy, and decaying. Scenes are punctuated with blood, viscera, and screaming bodies. Even the elegance becomes perverted, turned into a medium for breaking rather than expression. In this sense, the feminine becomes terrifying not because it is unfamiliar, but because it is too familiar, too bodily, too powerful, too present. The horror is not in what is alien, but in what cannot be sanitized or ignored.

In this final metamorphosis, the monstrous-feminine is not destroyed but claimed escapint the victim binary. Suzy embraces her power, her blood, her capacity to destroy and nurture in the same gesture. She becomes a mother, not in the comforting, sentimental sense, but in the ancient, mythic sense, a death-dealing, all-consuming force of nature. In doing so, the film seems to suggest that the monstrous-feminine, long demonized in culture and horror, may in fact be a source of radical power. The monstrosity in the film becomes something that destabilizes patriarchal narratives by embracing exactly what they fear most, the power of women who refuse to be clean, quiet, or contained. This duality between the monstrous and the divine, between historical victim and mythic power, is at the core of *Suspiria*'s feminist

ambiguity. The film does not moralize its witches; instead, it revels in their complexity. They can be grotesque, violent, self-regenerating, and yet undeniably powerful. They dismantle patriarchal order not through assimilation, but by constructing parallel systems of myth, flesh, and ritual. The ambiguity of witchcraft in the film permits the coexistence of horror and liberation, of monstrosity and creativity; it refuses the comforting binaries of good and evil, male and female, victim and villain. Instead, it offers a vision of feminist power that is unstable, eruptive, and embodied, a monstrous feminine that does not ask for redemption, only recognition.

Chapter 3: Reclaimed, Feminized, and Ambiguous Power (*The Love Witch* 2016)

Anna Biller's 2016 American comedy horror film *The Love Witch* is a subversive representation of conventional femininity, power, witchcraft, and performance, presented through a hyper-stylized aesthetic that echoes 1960s Technicolor cinema. While looking like a nostalgic pastiche, the film reinvents the signifiers of the aesthetic, reimagines a new genre. Here, the witch not as a monstrous or violent threat, but as a glamorous, hyperfeminine figure navigating love, desire, and power (Goulding 2021). Elaine, the witch, is determined to find true love and uses spells and potions to seduce men; her actions are both a performance of idealized femininity and a rebellion against patriarchal norms. However, her spells work too well, and the men she enchants become emotionally unhinged, pushing Elaine toward madness and murder. Through deliberate retro cinematography, narrative irony, and feminist ambiguity, *The Love Witch* critiques cultural archetypes and constructs of femininity, offering a layered portrait of the modern witch. Elaine can be seen as a transitional figure in popular media, bridging the grotesque horror of the historical witch with the nuanced, postmodern portrayals of empowered, yet conflicted women, and the film reclaims the witch figure through postmodern stylization and ambiguity, engaging directly with cinematic history, feminist theory, and cultural archetypes to construct, perform, and weaponize femininity.

In contrast to *Supiria*, where it maintains a sense of dread and ambiguity around this transformation, *The Love Witch* turns this act into a spectacle. Instead of moral horror and historical repression, Biller offers ironic fantasy. *The Love Witch* is characterized by its deliberate evocation of the visual style of low-budget films from the late 1960s and early 1970s, including exploitation films. This includes a tarot card palette in the set design and the use of 35 mm film stock designed to mimic the look of garish Technicolor during the period (Booker and Lopes 2023). The film visually resembles a cheap exploitation horror film of that era, extending to the sets and costumes, which are designed by Biller herself. Elaine's wig and makeup, while intended to attract men, also align with the highly artificial and anachronistic look of the film as a whole (Hindle 2017). She is presented as a glamour witch, the witch archetype with dramatic makeup and fashion that evoke the period as inferred from the description of the film's visual

style and Elaine's role. This aesthetic is central to her power; her allure to men is carefully curated, reinforcing the idea that beauty, like magic, is performative and artificial. The film even features a scene where young witches are instructed by coven leaders to use make-up to ensnare lovers, highlighting the connection between feminine allure and perceived power within this aesthetic framework. The coven's advice to use "perfume, wear high heels and blue eye shadow" hints at the superficial tools associated with female power within this stylized world.

This visual style evokes nostalgia, presents a world of the paradisical vision of California in the 1960s, although this paradise is interrupted by modern elements, such as the sudden appearance of smartphones, creating a postmodern pastiche, and an unrealistic sense. Anna Biller herself describes the film as a crafted, stylish fantasy of sexual dominance. Even the witch archetype in this film seems to have a strong resemblance to the one-dimensional figure from a Playboy centerfold, from her appearance to her behavior (2017). The crafted external appearance, on the one hand, successfully conveys her attractiveness and sexuality as a young woman embedded within the narrative, on the other hand, creates pastiche as a stylistic strategy. Drawing on Jean Baudrillard's idea of hyperreality (1994), the film's retro, artificial aesthetic becomes "more real than real," turning into a space where fantasy and satire converge to reveal the painful sincerity behind the performance of femininity and the surreal contradictions of gendered existence.

Unlike the traditional, stereotypical portrayals of witches, who are often identified as imaginary haggish or described as old, jealous, and conventionally unattractive, Elaine is the opposite. The film explicitly moves away from those depictions seen in other witch representations. A primary reason for this reimagining of the witch depiction is Biller's explicit goal to "reclaim the figure of the witch, the femme fatale, an old sort of male fantasy figure, and make it a femme fatale seen from the female side (2017)." Embracing a woman's sexuality can be seen as a feminist re-evaluation of the witch archetype; it contrays to the traditional male fantasies, especially a satire to the ones in the 60s and 70s where "playboy girls" were a dominate beauty standard under a male-gaze and the shaped society which tacit follows this rule, and presents a witch who is not afraid of her witchcraft and utilize her sexuality as a tool.

Moreover, the visible contrast between the film's retro aesthetic and its modern feminist message creates a Brechtian estrangement effect (Booker and Lopes, 2023), where the spectator is intentionally prevented from emotionally empathizing with the character. Instead of immersing ourselves in Elaine's story or connecting deeply with her emotions, we are distanced by the film's artificial style and theatricality. Our attention is deliberately redirected toward observing her appearance and behavior, leading us to reflect on the broader social and political messages behind what we are seeing. Rather than feeling sorry for her, we are driven to analyze her choices and consider the systems, such as gender norms, beauty standards, and power structures, that shape her world. In Brecht's terms, the film shifts our reaction from the subconscious and emotional realm into the conscious and intellectual one (Booker and Lopes, 2023). This deliberate juxtaposition prevents a simple nostalgic embrace of the past and instead forces a critical examination of the underlying patriarchal structures and the representation of women within that historical and cinematic context. The "politics of (un)masking" in the film is used to redirect the gendered power dynamics of the witch archetype and cinematic fantasy, humorously exposing the constructed nature of cinematic femininity (Booker and Lopes, 2023). Using an image like this can be considered a way to reshape and retell the witch story of how modern women are finding empowerment in the witch symbol, which is directly linked to identity and sexuality through a female perspective.

The highly saturated colors recall a similar cinematic space through its stylistic choices and thematic concerns, particularly its engagement with exploitation cinema and the representation of women. While *Suspiria* 1977 uses colors and the stylized horror to build a creative fear and character's psychology through stylization and presentation rather thant only constructed through a well-plotted narrative, *The Love Witch*'s deliberate artificiality and "bad" acting, which is clearly a stylistic choice, encourages audiences to sit back and give rational thought to what they are seeing on the screen, giving a strong sense of the third angle, watching below the stage as outsiders, encouraging critical engagement with the presented ideas rather than immersive fear. The dreamlike filter evokes a strong feeling of setted Hollywood movie scenes sites rather than the living world, setting a visible boundary between the real world and the fictional film world by what we can see, as if there is a forth wall and we

all are aware the existence of it, but we choose to leave it unbroken. The film's hyper-stylized aesthetic constructs a postmodern visual arena where supernatural magic is supplanted by the magic of moving images (Booker & Lopes, 2023). We can observe a deliberate evocation of Giallo aesthetics, particularly the technicolor artifice and eroticized violence of 1970s Italian horror, which functions as a meta-commentary on the witch archetype. Significantly, this cinematic era coincides with modern Wicca's emergence (Russell, 2004), both movements reclaiming the witch as a symbol of feminine autonomy through divergent means, where Wicca embraced nature-based spirituality, Giallo rendered witchcraft through sensationalized visual codes. This tension positions the film as a critical interrogation of reclamation itself. This period was also the era when second-wave feminism embraced spiritual practices as part of a wider political and cultural resistance to patriarchy (Goulding 2021). Setting the story in this period, the ideological tensions naturally tie to the feminist movements. The coven Elaine joins in the film, which pledges loyalty to "the Goddess" and practices nature-based rituals, clearly reflects Wiccan influences, including the distinction made between "white witches," those aligned with nature and the Goddess, and "black witches" who are associated with Satan. However, since Elaine's witchcraft is deeply performative, a rather superficial portrayal of the practice, it criticizes how modern spiritualism can be commodified or reduced to aesthetic performance, and we, as the audience, rationally witness this entire process by watching through the image of a witch that goes against the grain.

The femme fatale is a long-standing archetype in literature and cinema, representing the evil woman; she is dangerous, mysterious, and often seductive, mysterious, who will do anything to lead men to destruction (Goulding 2021). As a traditional villainous figure, she embodies traits associated with "dark femininity," including beauty, sensuality, manipulation, and danger, now is also projecting male anxieties about female power and sexuality, in another era. However, in *The Love Witch*, the femme fatale seems to have the same traits but reimagined in a different way. As a witch who possesses powerful magic and is self-aware of it, Elaine's witchcraft is deeply entangled with romantic fantasy, gender expectations, and performance. The witchcraft, in a way, relies relatively little on actual magic; her magic is made from herbs, potions, and visual allure, and is less supernatural than psychological. It is an act of

labor, of careful construction, meant to manufacture desire. She packages herself as a consumable fantasy, advertising her sexuality to men and manipulating their emotions through spells that mirror seduction. While she outwardly seeks love, Elaine ultimately enjoys only the surface of affection, disposing of men once they show emotional vulnerability.

With the background information knowing she has encountered textbook cases of patriarchal oppression throughout her life, including a domineering father, who sexually abused her, as well as the later an unappreciative husband who physically abused her and then left her, her motive of using spells and enjoying the superficial surface of love but disposing of men as soon as they become emotionally invested projects an ironic portrayal of how the pornographic female must become necessarily estranged from her emotions. Her lovers spiral into hysteria or despair, echoing the classic image of the femme fatale. Elaine, rather than showing remorse, remains focused on her internal fantasy of ideal love. She appears to be trapped within patriarchal desires and expectations of love, as reflected in her act of murder after realizing that men's emotions cannot be controlled when around her. Given that the film shows little sympathy toward Elaine's victims, Biller states that the film represents her "own fantasies about being a woman, and overthrowing the patriarchal oppressions that I face in my life (2017)." Hence, we can see this as a satirical example of postmodern self-referentiality, subverting conventional patriarchal society; even when a woman has the capability and power, her actions are still led by patriarchal societal dynamics, and her reactions to the world are only the consequences of what men initiated.

From a postmodern perspective, other than potions and spells associated with traditional witchcraft, her sexuality has played a significant part in her power. In other words, her femininity is her weapon as a witch to seduce and control. This sexual dominance can also be seen as a crafted male fantasy about women who disobey them. According to Biller (2017), she wants to create a film that is the "pornography that is all around us," within the "witchsploitation" genre. The superficial beauty of Elaine, such as the moments where her mascara is smudged, becomes entangled with her emotional estrangement, mirroring exactly what a patriarchal system would expect from a young, glamorous woman. However, this constructed femininity also becomes a constraint for Elaine. Her belief that love can be

orchestrated through spells reveals a misunderstanding of genuine connection. This time, her intention is not to associate with evil or harm innocent people; however, the result is somehow the same. Ironically, these outcomes are all due to the same social structure controlled by men. While Biller (2017) intends to reclaim the femme fatale from a female perspective, Elaine's extreme actions and tragic outcomes could be interpreted as a critique of the very male fantasies she seems to be enacting, thus constraining her within those parameters. By explicitly displaying a male-gaze-driven witch image, the film exists as a ruthless comment towards the conventional pitfalls in mainstream films of reducing female power to a purely external, sexual display, and to revise the witch's reputation and critique reductive sexual politics (Goulding 2021). Biller's presentation of Elaine reveals how femininity itself becomes a kind of witchcraft, a learned, ritualized, and exhausting performance. The superficiality of her relationships and her obsession with aesthetic perfection suggest that femininity, under patriarchy, is a form of spellwork that women are expected to master. But this also becomes her power; through her erotic charms and glamour, Elaine controls the narrative. Yet, the emotional toll of maintaining this façade eventually becomes its own kind of madness, revealing the contradictions in how women are taught to wield power through desirability.

To focus on Elaine's internal desires and motivations, even her fantasies of being a woman, the film centers on a female subjectivity. The film's camp, stylization, and satirical tone function as tools for feminist critique. Through irony, it reclaims female archetypes, not by dismantling them but by inhabiting them with exaggeration, forcing confrontation. The result is a feminist revision of the witch and femme fatale, not as simple rebels or monsters, but as multifaceted women both complicit in and resistant to patriarchal expectations. Elaine's confidence, sexuality, and magic all serve as tools of control, yet she is not portrayed as empowered in a straightforward sense. Her final act in murdering a man who denies her ideal fantasy reflects both her tragic delusion and her defiance. She is shown packaging and marketing herself as a sexual commodity, and the film's undertone critiques these patriarchal attitudes that have persisted through modernization and capitalism. A well as the approach to magic and aesthetics, they can be seen in contrast to how some contemporary witches describe magic as a more mundane, internal feeling or symbolism for energy work, and they may view

overly sensational or commercialized pop culture representations as inaccurate or even damaging.

Despite Elaine's intentions not directly recreating a killjoy figure, how she stands out and calls out the system actively and weaponizes the only tools accessible within her patriarchal context (her feminine performance and erotiv magic) in fact much align with the spirit of the feminist killjoy. According to Sara Ahmed, a self-described feminist killjoy refers to a figure who disrupts socially accepted norms and the rooted sexism in the patriarchal system (2010). Rather than preserving ease and comfort in social settings, the killjoy arouses discomfort by breaking the mood and refusing to go along to get along, even if doing so causes discomfort or tension. This disruption is not only social but ideological, as the killjoy forces others to pause and reconsider the assumptions they take for granted. Far from being disruptive for its own sake, this role is also deeply ethical and political. It is a critical agent of change, unsettling the habitual assumptions that sustain systems of domination and forcing others to hesitate and reconsider their previously unquestioned beliefs (Ahmed, 2010). When a film makes the viewer uncomfortable by challenging the norms of female depiction, refusing emotional catharsis, or exposing the structures that underlie seemingly pleasurable aesthetics, it can be said to enact the work of the killjoy (Ahmed, 2010). In this way, the killjoy becomes both a character and a mode of reception, something we observe in others and something we experience within ourselves as critical viewers. In this context, the presence of the witch figure alone, shaped by societal expectations, creates discomfort or provokes reflection by reclaiming the witch and the femme fatale through a female lens and using a pastiche aesthetic that both indulges and critiques gendered cinematic traditions. Explicit scenes directly bring the most discomfort to the audience, especially to people who expect women to behave within the existing social norms. Elaine's actions, driven by her desire for love and happiness, which the film hints it is shaped by societal expectations, have a fundamentally disruptive and ultimately destructive effect on the men she encounters. Her attempts at creating love spells led to men becoming emotionally overwhelmed, driven to insanity, and eventually dying. As the witch, she kills the joy of the men; this role also kills the joy of the patriarchal world reflected in the story. Her assertion of power and her pursuit of her desires, however misguided or tragically potent, expose the

fragility and inability of the men and the system they inhabit to handle female agency or intense emotion. Moreover, the film is explicitly discussed as a feminist re-evaluation and a critique of patriarchal structures and outdated stereotypes of women and witches. Through the witch narrative and its satirical look at romance, consumerism, and gender roles, the film aims to challenge conventional, comfortable perspectives. Simultaneously, the film uses this narrative and its stylistic choices to perform a broader critique that challenges audience assumptions and forces them to confront uncomfortable truths about gender, power, and societal expectations.

As a witch, Elaine's magic is driven less by power and more by an overwhelming desire to be loved, positioning longing as both her motivation and undoing. Her obsessive quest for romance exposes how female longing is shaped, distorted, and ultimately frustrated by the societal roles imposed on women. Female longing is a multifaceted theme manifesting in historical, literary, and contemporary contexts. Historically, as seen in the *Malleus Maleficarum*, female longing is pathologized and primarily viewed through the lens of "carnal lust (Broedel 2003)." The authors assert that this insatiable desire in women is the mainspring of contemporary witchcraft, leading them to seek out the devil for sexual gratification, revenge against former lovers, and other sins (Broedel 2003). This perspective frames female desire as inherently dangerous and a deviation from the accepted norms of the time. There is a notion of poets being led by longing to mythological figures, sometimes without acknowledging the realities of women's lives (Bovenschen et al. 1978). Myths and images of the past are seen as reservoirs of unresolved desires and longings. Romanticism itself is described as utilizing women in allegories for the longing for immediacy that transcends the restrictions of commercialized society (Bovenschen et al. 1978). The witch archetype, in general, is said to symbolize desires, fear, and rage. At its core, the film centers on Elaine's intense desire for love and a perfect romance. This longing is her primary motivation, driving her actions and her use of magic. She creates spells and potions to help her pick up and seduce men because she wants for a man to love her. This portrays longing as a powerful, all-consuming internal state. The broader historical context of continual and consistently unfulfilled longing for liberation experienced by women due to gender-specific suppression (Bovenschen et al. 1978). Elaine's longing for love can be seen as situated within this larger history. Is her desperate quest for a man's love a

fundamental, personal need, or is it a manifestation of a deeper, perhaps unconscious, “longing for liberation” that society has channeled into a narrow pursuit of romantic validation? The film seems to suggest the latter, critiquing the structures that limit women’s desires and potential. Drawing a parallel discussing *The Witch* (Eggers 2015), the idea is raised that a societal system might fail to provide a home sufficient to female desire. This concept is highly relevant to *The Love Witch*. Elaine’s inability to find fulfilling love through conventional means, and the destructive outcomes of her magical attempts, suggest that the patriarchal society she inhabits is fundamentally inadequate to accommodate or healthily respond to potent female longing. Her desires, while psychologically legitimate, manifest capitalism’s core contradiction: authentic longing channeled through commodified rituals. The film positions her self-commodification, marketing herself as sexual merchandise for male consumption, not as pathology, but as internalized market epistemology. Her longing is thus not just a simple personal feeling but one distorted and exploited by the very societal forces that are supposed to facilitate its fulfillment. Elaine’s longing, expressed through destructive magic, leads to unfortunate results and the death of the men she desires. The film shows little sympathy toward Elaine’s victims, which highlights how her powerful longing, when thwarted or distorted by the societal environment, becomes a tragic, yet also critically potent, force that disrupts and even destroys the patriarchal status quo. Her unfulfilled desire, and its lethal consequences, serve as a critique of the world that cannot contain or respond healthily to it. The film’s erotic alchemy questions whether Elaine’s pursuit of desire liberates or entraps; her rituals of seduction mirror the very patriarchal scripts they appear to subvert, reinforcing what Van Berge (2023) identifies as cyclical gendered power dynamics. Her tragic end, culminating in a fantasy of domestic bliss after committing murder, suggests that her longing, as shaped by societal expectations, ultimately leads to self-destruction and a warped reality rather than true liberation or empowerment. Therefore, *The Love Witch* delves deeply into female longing by situating Elaine’s personal quest for love within a broader historical and societal critique. Her desire is portrayed as powerful but also as potentially distorted and ultimately made destructive by a patriarchal system that fails to accommodate it, echoing historical fears of female desire while using it as a critical lens on contemporary issues. Contemporary discussions, particularly around TikTok trends like

“darkfemininity” and “divinefemininity,” reveal ongoing explorations of female longing in relation to self-love, seduction, and relationships. These trends often involve advice oriented towards appearance, seduction, and embracing idealized forms of femininity, sometimes with the intent of manipulating or harmonizing with perceived masculine energies. The desire to not always have to perform a counter-hegemonic or pariah form of femininity also indicates a longing for acceptance and self-expression without constant resistance. This “divine feminine” discourse, in particular, touches on longing for self-love, healing and spirituality (van Berg, 2023). Furthermore, the idea of female longing can be connected to the struggle against patriarchal constraints. The witch figure, often ostracized and condemned, can be reinterpreted as embodying a longing for independence from marriage and control over her reproductive capacity. The monstrosity attributed to the witch can be seen as linked to female sexuality and the potential to disrupt the patriarchal order, suggesting a societal anxiety surrounding women’s desires for autonomy.

While *The Love Witch* indulges in hyper-feminine fantasy, it is never naive in doing so. Instead, the film stages a complex tension between agency and internalized oppression. Elaine’s embrace of witchcraft is not about healing or political rebellion, but about fantasy, trauma, and emotional survival. In this sense, the witch becomes a symbol of what Angela McRobbie calls post-feminist irony, where empowerment is wrapped in contradiction, and femininity is wielded as both weapon and prison (Goulding, 2021). This ironic ambiguity marks the witch figure not as monstrous or divine, but as painfully human. The film can be seen as told through the female gaze, where Elaine’s pursuit of love and her attempts at sexual dominance are presented from her perspective, allowing the audience to see her desires and motivations, even if her methods are flawed. This contrasts with traditional horror films where the witch is often depicted as an object of fear through the male gaze; *The Love Witch* inverts this by focusing on the female subject and her complex relationship with her own sexuality and power. Elaine becomes a caricature of the “ideal woman” as constructed by patriarchal standards, but the film exaggerates these traits to the point of grotesque absurdity, revealing the hollowness and danger of such societal scripts for femininity. The fact that Elaine kills in her relentless pursuit of love is a key satirical element. Her extreme reactions and the deadly consequences of her love

spells highlight the absurdity and potential destructiveness of romantic ideals imposed on women. She is both empowered and trapped, worshipped and empty, a paradox that defines the modern witch archetype. The film leaves the audience questioning whether Elaine is truly free or caught in another spell. While she seemingly gains agency through her witchcraft, her understanding of love and relationships remains distorted, and she becomes trapped in a cycle of superficiality and violence. Her dreamy look on her face as she holds the bloodied dagger at the end suggests a disturbing fulfillment of a warped fantasy rather than genuine liberation. Her dreamy gaze as she clutches a bloodied dagger at the end signals not liberation but the fulfillment of a disturbing fantasy. The satirical point is that patriarchal traditions have not only prevented women from exploring their full potential, but also rendered men incapable of dealing with women who do, resulting in a destructive battle of the sexes. Elaine oscillates between being the subject of her own desires and the object of male fantasy, between witch and woman, enchantress and delusional romantic. This constant fluctuation mirrors the film's post-feminist irony. Elaine actively embodies hyperfemininity and takes seemingly empowered actions, yet the film maintains a critical awareness of the contradictions in her performance. Rather than offering a clear message of empowerment or condemnation, *The Love Witch* embraces feminist ambiguity, inhabiting a messy middle that explores the contradictions of female desire and power in a society that both demands and punishes those very traits. The film implies that patriarchy's dual failure in constraining female potential and equipping men for female autonomy. Reflecting through a witch character, Elaine inhabits the liminal space between victim and agent, subject and object, enchantress and delusional romantic; she embodies what Broedel (2003) identifies as witchcraft's essential function, a reflective surface for cultural anxieties. Here, ambiguity becomes radical critique; this time, the witch is no longer the monstrous stereotype yet satirizes simplistic "girl power" narratives. Instead, she is ambivalent, ironic, and contradictory, a figure forged in the crucible of postmodern feminism.

Chapter 4 - Eastern Reimagination: The Everyday Witch (*Kiki's Delivery Service* 1989)

Witches in Western cinema rarely get to grow up; they are frozen as crones or femme fatales in stories circumscribed by male fantasies of danger or desire. If the witches of *Suspiria* (1977) and *The Love Witch* (2016) embody or satirize Western anxieties around female power as monstrous abjection or ironic camp film, *Kiki's Delivery Service* (1989) offers a radical alternative, and breaks this pattern by framing witchcraft as a coming-of-age journey, where a witch whose magic is neither feared nor fetishized, but normalized. Miyazaki's 13-year-old witch flies on her broom not to escape persecution, but to deliver bread and herring pies. What happens when a witch is no longer a symbol of transgression, but of community integration? When her magic is measured not by its capacity to destroy, but to deliver groceries and comfort lonely elders? This divergence reflects a fundamentally distinct cultural imagination of witchcraft, one rooted in Shinto animism and postwar Japan's reconfiguration of femininity. *Kiki's Delivery Service* poses these questions by reimagining witchcraft through a distinctly Japanese lens, where the witch functions not as society's scapegoat, but as its neighbor, a shift that challenges the Eurocentric feminist discourse on witch reclamation.

Kiki's Delivery Service, directed by Hayao Miyazaki and produced by Studio Ghibli, is an animation film released in Japan in 1989, adapting from the children's book of the same name by Eiko Kadono (Wedhowerti 2024, 418). In the anime version, the fantasy elements that characterized the original fairy tale are downplayed; the magic and witchcraft in the story are described simply as "an individual's talent (Kono 2017, 21)." The story entails an ordinary girl who comes to the city from the countryside and uses her talents to become independent, and depicts the delicate emotions of a girl entering puberty with a touch of realism. The positioning of the witch in the anime version is quite different from the original. In the original, the witch is positioned as a heterogeneous being different from human beings, and is portrayed with the same negative image and social prejudice as the conventional witch. In the anime version, however, magical girls are not viewed as particularly deviant, but rather settle and survive in human society. Miyazaki has created a fantasy world for people, enlightened and colored

through a mix of reality and fantasy, a complication of nature and magical elements. Those significant elements include his imaginative world, which often includes a young female character as the focus, and her journey of changing, growing and eventually having spiritual empowerment. This type of character is generally referred to as shōjo. Freiberg mentions that, shōjo is “in-betweenness” or any age between childhood and adulthood, and shōjo is associated with freedom (2006). In *Kiki’s Delivery Service*, this archetype gains new dimensions through the protagonist’s identity as a witch, visually and narratively aligning her with Western witch imagery while retaining distinctly Japanese traits. This raises a question: How did the European “witch” evolve into Japan’s maho shōjo (magical girl)?

The translation of Western witch lore into Japanese culture began during the Meiji Restoration (1860s–1890s), when encyclopedias first introduced the concept, often translating “witch” as female magician or simply witch (Fujimoto and Thorn 2012). By the early twentieth century, through works like Mori Uto’s translation of Grimm’s Hansel and Gretel in Mannensō magazine (1902), the written form 魔女 (read as majo) became standardized in Japan. Over time, translations of “witch” and “hexe” consistently settled on 魔女, merging the Western witch figure with emerging Japanese interpretations. As magical girl animation developed, beginning with *Magical Girl Sally* in 1966, the first girl-targeted and magical girl anime, as in the boundary between the “witch” and the “magical girl” became increasingly blurred (Kawanishi 2021). Early works, like *Magical Girl Sally*, absorbed Western witch elements while embedding them into uniquely Japanese cultural frameworks, creating a new template for the “magical girl.”

Undeniably, the Western construct of the witch, shaped by medieval ecclesiastical texts, colonial witch trials, and Hollywood horror, has become a hegemonic template that influences a great number of other witch portrayals in cinematic aesthetics. Visual symbols have become one of the ways to confirm the witch’s identity. For instance, in *Kiki’s Delivery Service*, Miyazaki both acknowledges and subverts these Western visual symbols by showing the titular young witch carrying a broom and owning a black cat, iconic symbols inherited from European folklore, yet their aesthetic and narrative functions are radically transformed. Kiki is repeatedly described as wearing a simple black witch dress or black costume. Wearing all black is noted as part of

how she preserves her witch identity. While Kiki only wears a simple and plain dress, her outfit operates as a site of cultural hybridity, simultaneously engaging with and subverting Western witch iconography. While the color aligns with the chromatic coding of Western witchcraft, where black historically signified occult knowledge and transgressive femininity, Miyazaki recontextualizes it through Japanese semiotics. In Shinto-Buddhist traditions, black symbolizes ritual renewal and transitional states, making it the appropriate hue for Kiki's coming-of-age journey as she departs from home (Shalina & Vorobyova, 2022). This dual signification exposes what postcolonial theorist Homi Bhabha (1990) terms "the ambivalence of cultural symbols," where the same garment that evokes Western witch stereotypes also anchors Kiki in specifically Japanese rites of passage. Moreover, her sartorial minimalism further challenges domestic norms by contrasting sharply with the hyper-feminine shōjo archetype. The stereotypical "girl cuteness" often lies in depicting girls wearing stylish dresses, styled hair, and makeup. Kiki's unadorned dress and practical bob haircut reject consumerist femininity. This visual restraint extends to her mode of transportation. The hand-me-down broom, requiring manual repairs, demystifies witchcraft as skilled labor rather than supernatural spectacle. This ability and mode of transport are central to her identity and her delivery service. Flying on a broomstick is a highly recognizable element of the Western witch image, rooted in folklore and extensively used in popular culture and cinema. Since the film industry has opted for the "tried and trusted hat and broomstick image" as a recognizable witch icon, and given that the witch image in American culture includes a broom, these deliberate deviations expose the cultural arbitrariness of Western witch imagery while reclaiming it for a narrative of feminine independence. Where Western cinema deploys broomsticks as fantastical props, Miyazaki frames Kiki's broom as an object integrated into daily workflows. These deliberate deviations constitute cinematic iconoclasm, appropriating universal icons to transmit localized values of feminine self-reliance.

Miyazaki's work, including *Kiki's Delivery Service*, frequently engages with themes involving nature and the spirit world. Studio Ghibli films, in general, are noted for their critical stance toward the damage to nature by human beings (Rahayu 2023). Miyazaki's oeuvre is described as operating beyond the real-magical binary and respecting each ensouled element of nature, often invoking Japanese fairy tales, folk, and Shinto beliefs (Baruma 2010). He tends to

follow the journey of a girl character through a nature-magic-culture conundrum. Girls are seen as stimulated by the energy of the spirit world, as being closer to nature, which aligns with eco-feminist and deep-ecologist principles concerning respect for nature as a foundation for liberation from patriarchalism and industrialism, viewing women as victims of the same patriarchal violence inflicted upon nature (Chaudhuri 2018). On the other hand, certain traits embedded within Kiki's character are constructed to defy common shōjo conventions. She is portrayed as independent, assertive, able to make prompt and clear decisions, and uses any broom as her weapon, a trait that challenges the stereotypical shōjo who relies on only one magical tool. This contrast is drawn with a Japanese character archetype, not the Western witch archetype. Same applies for Jiji, a black talking cat and Kiki's all-time companion. Just as black cats are a common motif associated with witches in Western folklore, as familiars, supernatural entities believed to assist witches in their magical practices, Jiji also draws on this iconography. However, in Japanese traditional belief, black cats were considered good cats with useful skills (Wedhowerti 2024). Similar to the black dress, this again suggests a potential blend of international iconography with local cultural beliefs.

Later in the plot, Kiki's temporary loss of magic, specifically her inability to hear Jiji and nearly losing her ability to fly, is profoundly related to her representation as a witch who is distinct from traditional stereotypes, emphasizing her independence, vulnerability, and journey of self-discovery in a modern context. Traditional witch stereotypes are often rooted in negative connotations, portraying witches as malevolent figures tied to the devil, embodying evil and challenging patriarchal norms in a way deemed monstrous and needing to be destroyed. In contrast, Kiki's magic does not vanish due to external, malevolent forces or a broken pact, but from internal, psychological reasons, her insecurity and disappointment related to social interactions, which her magic, rooted in unconscious talent, could not withstand. This humanizes Kiki, showing that her innate magical power is susceptible to her emotional and psychological state, an "earthy phenomenon," which challenges the archetype of shōjo whose magical power is typically presented as inherent and permanently present (Wedhowerti 2024).

In contrast, Kiki's internal declaration, "If I lose my magic, I have no other redeeming qualities," reveals a deep vulnerability that shadows to this notion, which diverges from the

shōjo archetype, where magical power is typically innate and permanently present. Kiki's magic, while innate, is not timeless and may disappear. Her inability to fly or communicate with Jiji, caused by insecurity about her friend Tombo, reveals the fragility of magic and its close connection to emotional states. This identity-defining vulnerability connects to feminist themes, that adolescent girls often pressure themselves to anchor self-worth to singular talents. *Kiki's delivery service* embodies monetized emotional or affective labor, where her magic, frankness, and bright personality intertwine; losing one signals failed emotional or identity management. Ursula, the painter, equates magic with artistic struggle, highlighting how innate gifts require conscious transformation. Kiki's magic loss becomes preparation for this transformation, a test of independence, concentration, and self-esteem. She regains flight through self-confidence, proving her power stems from inner determination rather than effortless omnipotence. Her journey emphasizes her vulnerability (the fear of losing her talent) and her journey of self-discovery as she learns to navigate challenges and consciously develop her abilities and identity in a modern context. This makes her a representation of a witch who is distinct from traditional negative stereotypes, embodying independence and the development of inner strength.

Conventionally, monsters, including many historical and fictional representations of witches, function to embody societal fears and anxieties, and their actions, often violent or terrifying, serve to mark the boundaries of acceptable behavior, punishing those who stray from norms. When kiki shows her emotional vulnerability, instead of using her magic to "punish" or fight against it, she acts less like a punitive monster and more like a mirror of the normal civilians by grappling with very human challenges and emotions. Her physical appearance, visually contrasts with the "flamboyant power" of Western witches, making her relatable and emphasizing the banality of her magic, which is used for daily human chores like delivery service. Cohen argues that monsters disturb the categories of what we understand in the world, and posits that monsters police the boundary of the possible and that they represent what a culture fears, desires, or is anxious about (Cohen 1996, 4). Witches historically embody cultural anxieties by challenging patriarchal norms, which is precisely why Kiki's duality as both human girl and witch subverts expectations. She resembles ordinary Japanese people settling in the

Heisei era and embodying a public hope for personal growth, and the Japanese ideals of self-improvement: assertive yet compassionate (best witch with a good heart). As the most human nature of a witch, she can fall in love, feel frustrated, need a break, and strive amidst fear, which focus more on her human struggles and vulnerability suggests that her magic is not an all-powerful force that solves everything easily, but rather a tool or skill that she uses as she navigates the challenges of growing up and finding her place. This ideal path of personal growth resonated deeply in 1990s Japan, where her "earthy human" perseverance (delivering goods, regaining flight through self-confidence) mirrored societal values (Kono 2017). Kiki's vulnerability, not power mastery, cements her legacy by reframing witchcraft as grounded self-actualization.

The ūman ribu (women's movement) in the 1960s and 70s allowed shōjo, as a concept, to come to the foreground beyond solely focusing on getting married and bearing children (Chaudhuri 2018). Within the trajectory of post-war Japanese feminism, the portrayal of Kiki, created in 1989, as independent and assertive can be seen as fitting within a broader cultural shift influenced by earlier women's movements, representing a young woman with aspirations and capabilities beyond traditional domestic expectations. Miyazaki's female characters, including Kiki, are described as attractive not for conventional femininity, but for their outstanding ability to fight and/or work despite being women (Kono 2017). *Kiki's Delivery Servic*e can be seen as an example of post-Fordist identity labor, where value is derived not just from material production, but from one's entire action and personality (Kono 2017). This contrasts with traditional labor models, where emotional communication might be discouraged, like the seemingly silent baker in the film. Kiki's labor is also characterized as emotional labor. To frame this discussion within what is defined as the postfeminist era, which is linked to global neoliberalism and changing women's labor paradigms, for example, a 2014 Japanese government strategy aimed at accepting housekeeping support workers in Special Economic Zones is mentioned as a plan to outsource housekeeping labor, often performed by women, potentially to promote "women's social participation (Kono 2017)." This can connect to the ongoing societal discussions and policies regarding women's roles in the workforce and the value of different types of labor, which are relevant to sociohistorical conditions in post-war

Japan. Kiki's portrayal as a working young woman navigating the establishment of her own business can be viewed through the lens of these evolving ideas about women's place in the labor market and society.

Kiki's coming-of-age narrative can be seen as an implicit expression of female empowerment. Although she initially ties her self-worth to her ability to fly ("It's the only talent I have"), the film ultimately reveals a broader feminist theme through her non-magical actions, such as helping Grandma bake a pie. Women's value is not confined to a single "talent" or the fantastical powers of traditional witchcraft, but rather found in everyday labor, community support, and self-knowledge. This resonates with the second-wave feminist slogan the personal is political: Kiki's emotional struggles and growth mirror the real-life challenges women face in navigating professional ambition and personal identity. However, does this empowerment narrative become depoliticized by avoiding direct confrontation with patriarchal structures? In the film, Kiki's struggles, such as unemployment and loneliness, are framed primarily as personal shortcomings rather than symptoms of systemic inequality. Her eventual success depends on her ability to adapt to existing social norms (e.g., opening a business and taking on part-time work), rather than challenging or transforming those norms. This stands in contrast to the radical irony of Elaine in *The Love Witch* or the collective defiance seen in WitchTok. While Miyazaki's notion that "magic is talent" helps to destigmatize witchcraft, it may also dilute the witch's historical role as a symbol of resistance, reimagining it instead within a neoliberal framework of personal resilience and self-help.

The evolution of the witch archetype is explicitly linked to the waves of feminism, including the aforementioned second wave and the Fourth Wave, which is understood to have begun around 2012 and continues to the present day. The Fourth Wave has focused on issues such as sexual harassment, body shaming, and rape culture. Social media has become a new platform to highlight and address these concerns, making it more accessible for people globally to join these movements. It is noted as a prime way for young women and millennials to share information about the feminist movement and educate others. The world of social media is described as heavily saturated with film and television images, influencing perceptions of women/femmes in power through popular representations like the witch. Specifically regarding

TikTok, its research will look at the ways in which the image of the witch is constructed and used on WitchTok. The use of social media and hashtags to connect individuals to accessible feminist theories in artistic works, highlighting WitchTok as an example of this in the digital age. Devon Cole's TikTok hit single "W.I.T.C.H." is cited as delving into themes of feminist resistance, using the acronym to represent a "Woman In Total Control of Herself (2022)." Other contemporary movements mentioned in relation to the witch symbol include the First Official Rally of 21st Century Witches in Poland and the #MagicResistance movement protesting the 2016 election of Donald J Trump. The #MeToo movement is also contextualized within the Fourth Wave of Feminism, having gained popularity around 2017. The 21st-century witch archetype is seen as symbolizing the most feminist icon, and it is considered mostly safe now to be a self-proclaimed witch. More women are reportedly drawn to identifying as witches. This modern witch is depicted as aware of her capabilities, embracing femininity, and challenging her place in society. Popular culture, including film and TV, is described as reflecting and influencing the representation of witches alongside the feminist movement. However, the portrayal can remain ambiguous, sometimes devolving to a misogynistic core or being used to express antifeminist sentiments, demonstrating the figure's capacity to serve very different politics.

This moderate mode of empowerment finds renewed expression in contemporary postmodern witch movements such as WitchTok. In the digital age, the "witch" hashtag has evolved beyond its traditional meaning to become a tool for desexualized and decolonized identity politics; for instance, non-binary individuals may refer to themselves as "they/their witch," while activists adopt tags like #HexThePatriarchy. Kiki's practical magic can be seen as a precursor to this trend: when her flying ability becomes a delivery service, witchcraft shifts from the realm of the occult to a socially accepted form of female labor. Similarly, WitchTok reconfigures spells as forms of psychological healing (e.g., anxiety-relief rituals), political activism (e.g., cursing the Supreme Court's overturning of Roe v. Wade), or entrepreneurial practice (e.g., Etsy Wiccan shops). In this way, Kiki's demystification of magic continues in new forms, but now with a more overt emphasis on collective resistance. Ultimately, the evolution of the witch figure, from *Kiki's Delivery Service* to WitchTok, reflects a central feminist proposition:

the redefinition of power within a patriarchal legacy, turning once-stigmatized identities into emblems of liberation.

Conclusion

The cultural specter of the witch has never dissipated; she lingers in the interplay of light and shadow on the silver screen, becoming a barometer for evolving feminist discourse and societal attitudes toward gender, power, and autonomy. When Dario Argento portrays witches as “invisible uterus destroyers,” a literal disembowelment of patriarchy in *Suspiria* (1977), those squirming blood vessels and suddenly ruptured organs in the darkness are actually the terrifying embodiment of patriarchy’s fear of female bodily autonomy. They are a patriarchal nightmare incarnate that is monstrous, invisible, and violently destructive. Yet beneath the horror lies a deeper subtext; the witch’s villainy is not intrinsic, but rather a projection of patriarchal fears, making her a product of persecution rather than a genuine threat. Argento employs expressionist lighting and grotesque bodily ruptures to invert historical methods of witch persecution (burning, dismemberment, social stigmatization) through the witches’ monstrous violence (dismemberment, psychic control, biological parasitism). Her monstrosity becomes a mirror held up to the structures that demonize female power, revealing the film’s radical subtext: there exists no authentic witch, only a cultural hall of mirrors where patriarchal violence endlessly replicates its own image. The true horror lies not in supernatural threat, but in how the witch-hunt imaginary, when magnified through Argento’s lurid lens, exposes the persecutory structures that manufacture female monstrosity to contain autonomous femininity.

It is precisely within this tension between historical oppression and capitalist alienation that Anna Biller’s *The Love Witch* (2016) executes its masterful counterattack. Elaine’s fiery red lips and teary, misty eyes superficially replicate the 1950s Hollywood femme fatale trope, but actually wrap a deconstructive poison blade in the sugary coating of Camp aesthetics and satire. The hyper-femininity she expresses and the heart-exploding love potions she brews for men are the fatal feedback of the other’s, or men’s desire; when the male gaze demands women to play the role of eternal objects of desire, Biller makes this fantasy physically explode. Elaine reclaims and weaponizes all the “witch traits” designed in the underlying misogyny to diminish her, resisting subversively and in an ironic way, but to confront gendered oppression. The film’s absurd tarot reading scene further transforms male fascination with the occult into

self-referential critique: the naked male body on the Devil card is precisely patriarchy's prophecy of self-sacrifice.

On the other hand, Hayao Miyazaki drags the witch and magic down from its altar to supermarket and bakery shelves with his *Kiki's Delivery Service* (1989). The scene of Kiki flying on her broom through modern cities delivering packages appears to dissolve the Western binary of good and evil witches, but exposes a more covert mechanism of co-optation. When flight capability gets converted into shipping fees, when magic cats are only used for warehouse pest control, witchcraft completely degenerates into a "vocational skill certificate" in the neoliberal toolbox. Kiki's depression and loss of power, that loss of magic moment with which countless viewers empathize fundamentally reflects the exploitative logic of post-industrial society toward female laborers demanding they be as omnipotent as little witches, such as in simultaneous deliveries, childcare or socializing, while denying them social safety nets. Her broom is no longer a symbol of freedom, but has become an utterly ordinary survival tool in daily life. There is an empathetic portrayal of magical disempowerment; the witch here has a rather soft and more grounded power, and this power is rooted practically, with also facing on inner emotional growth. At once celebrating everyday resilience while quietly naturalizing the very structures that demanded her magical exhaustion. This reimagining fundamentally recontextualizes the witch's cultural position. No longer an exiled outsider nor a moral archetype. Yet this depoliticized magic as a talent framework, for all its progressive charm, risks situating the witch from her historical roots as a resistance symbol, rebranding supernatural heritage as a neoliberal self-help parable. The very ordinariness of Kiki's struggles reflects their systemic nature, even as the film presents them as personal growth opportunities rather than collective political challenges.

This contradiction becomes infinitely amplified in the digital age, and the moderate empowerment in Kiki's Delivery Service resonates strongly with postmodern witch movements. On TikTok, the hashtag #witch has evolved into a propaganda tool of desexualized and decolonized identity politics. Non-binary individuals refer to themselves as "they/their witch;" #HexThePatriarchy witchcraft activists curse the overturners of Roe v. Wade with virtual rituals; meanwhile, on Sephora shelves, $89 "beginner witch kits," containing mass-produced crystals

and plastic cauldrons, package shamanism as middle-class playthings. This parallel dynamic is like capitalism's magic power that drains the spirit of resistance, then injects consumerist potion into the hollowed shell, reflecting an eternal struggle between liberation and co-optation in witch culture. When witchcraft is reduced to a branded lifestyle, its emancipatory symbolism is dulled, especially when divorced from historical and structural critique. Non-Western witches, such as Japan's majo, avoid the historical stigma associated with European witch trials due to indigenous belief systems, particularly Shinto-Buddhist syncretism, which positions female spiritual practitioners as respected community figures rather than feared threats. When we gaze at this transforming cultural symbol, what we truly see are the permitted boundaries of female power: she can be a consumer society's entrepreneurial idol (Kiki), or an algorithmic-age cybershaman (#WitchTok), yet she can never escape being exoticized (the romanticization of Eastern witches) or instrumentalized (the appropriation of indigenous witchcraft by white witches). The real breakthrough for the future may lie in returning the witch to her decolonial essence, not as a neoliberal individual magician, but as a collective resistance totem connecting land, labor, and transgender communities. Hence, we can anticipate a broader shift, where witchcraft becomes a socially acceptable form of cultural symbol for women, no longer confined to the occult but intertwined with everyday life.

Moreover, the true breakthrough may begin with reforging the decolonial anchor point of witchcraft. In Mexico's Chiapas state, female soldiers of the Zapatista National Liberation Army call themselves "brujas de la tierra" (witches of the earth), binding spells to agrarian movements; Iceland's strike witch alliance uses "witch strikes" to protest gender pay gaps. They refuse to become neoliberal freelance magicians, instead transforming into entangled resistance totems, their roots digging into stolen land (land back movement), their trunks connecting to queer labor unions, their canopies sheltering all souls hunted by witch-burning fires. As anthropologist Silvia Federici reveals in *Caliban and the Witch* (2018): "When they burned witches, they were burning our last line of defense for collective memory." The transformation of contemporary screen witches is actually the next chapter in this battle for memory; we still need to reclaim that broom appropriated by capital, letting it carry transgender people,

indigenous guardians, and striking female workers to fly toward stars not yet marked by patriarchy.

While witches in mainstream media still often leave an impression as malevolent figures, such as the Wicked Witch of the West or Baba Yaga, yet, global media circulation often reduces these traditions to simplistic stereotypes, trying to elevate the archetype's adaptability across moral and ideological contexts. Digital media has further accelerated the transformation of the witch from a persecuted outcast to a symbol of resistance; it provides chances for participatory myth-making, allowing users to collaboratively reshape the meaning of witchcraft in contemporary contexts. Queer and non-binary communities, in particular, are disentangling witchcraft from its historically gendered associations, making room for more inclusive and expansive magical narratives. We might soon see Kiki's entrepreneurial broomstick reimagined as a tool for female worker solidarity, or modern witches organizing magical unions against exploitation and ecological concerns. Yet this evolution is not straightforward. AI-generated witch avatars could subvert stereotypes or accidentally bake in old biases. Some modern feminist-formed covens are confronting historical trauma directly, connecting #MeToo revelations to centuries of witch-hunt persecution. Most importantly, Indigenous reclamation of figures is deconstructing Western narrative control.

Through all these transformations, the witch's story was never just about magic. It is about power, who gets to define it, and who gets punished for wielding it. Now, as storytellers from Hollywood hand the broomstick to new generations in a digital environment, we are finally seeing her full potential. As Silvia Federici (2018) reminds us, "the witch is the ghost of all women erased by history." We are conjuring a mirror that reflects our deepest cultural fears and fiercest hopes. Her greatest trick? Revealing that the "evil witch" was always just society's shadow puppet, a projected nightmare about women who refused to disappear. In contemporary witch narratives, a witch does not simply return to haunt the past; she rises to shape the future. No longer just a villain, the witch is a shapeshifter; her perceived "evil" was always a projection. Her power lies not in destruction, but in transformation. Her story, now more than ever, is ours to define.

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