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**CENTRO DE COMUNICAÇÃO E EXPRESSÃO**  
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**“WOULDST THOU LIKE TO LIVE DELICIOUSLY?”**  
**THE SIN OF FEMALE FREEDOM IN *THE WITCH***

Florianópolis, Santa Catarina

2020

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Trabalho de Conclusão de Curso, apresentado ao  
Curso de Letras – Inglês da Universidade Federal de  
Santa Catarina como requisito para obtenção do  
título de bacharel em Letras – Inglês.

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Florianópolis, Santa Catarina

2020

## **Acknowledgements**

We're done. I can hardly believe it.

I would like to start by thanking my advisor, Prof. George Mousinho, for trusting me with this project and the direction I was going with it because, boy, we know it took some work to get it on the move. Thank you for your invaluable insights, brilliant guidance and never-ending patience. I would also like to thank Prof. Alinne Fernandes for introducing me to the wonderful world of Women's Studies when I was still a clueless little freshman and for making me fall in love with it. Your teachings have been a huge inspiration not only in the making of this work but also throughout the many rocky paths of the academic world.

A huge thank you to my friends for their endless support and the many nights of unhealthy eating that helped keep me sane in all these years of UFSC. Finally, I would like to thank my mom for always being there for me and putting up with me even when I couldn't put up with myself. After all, it's not fair I go about an entire research on women without a shout out to all the amazing women in my life.

## **Abstract**

This study analyzes the protagonist of the movie *The Witch* (2015) in relation to the social and cultural contexts of 17th century New England Puritanism, exploring how the perception of women's independence, sexual liberation and development of self-empowerment were twisted into the general image of witches, translated into elements of horror in the film. Based on feminist theories on the depiction of the female body in literature and films of the Gothic genre, this study analyzes key scenes of the production to observe how the physical representation of female characters can work as a regulatory and symbolic tool of social control. The findings revealed that much of the way the female body is portrayed in horror films today adheres from stereotypes created by the patriarchal dominant order as far back as the 16<sup>th</sup> century, thus subjecting the body to cultural elements that determine how that body is seen in society.

**Keywords:** Witches; Women; Body; Gothic; Puritanism.

## Resumo

Este estudo analisa a protagonista do filme *A Bruxa* (2015) frente aos contextos socioculturais da Nova Inglaterra Puritana do século 17, explorando como a percepção da independência, liberdade sexual e auto empoderamento de mulheres foi transformada na imagem das bruxas que aparece no filme como elementos de terror. Com base em teorias feministas sobre a representação do corpo da mulher na literatura e em filmes do gênero Gótico, este estudo analisa cenas-chave da produção, explorando de que forma a representação física de personagens femininas pode funcionar como uma ferramenta simbólica e regulatória de controle social. Os resultados revelaram que muito da maneira como corpos femininos são representados em filmes de terror atualmente advém de estereótipos perpetuados pela ordem patriarcal dominante desde o século 16, assim subjugando o corpo a elementos culturais que determinam como este corpo é percebido no meio social.

Palavras-chave: palavra-chave: Bruxas; Mulheres; Corpo; Gótico; Puritanismo.

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*“It is perfectly natural for the future woman to feel  
indignant at the limitations posed upon her by her sex. The  
real question is not why she should reject them: the problem is  
rather to understand why she accepts them.”*

Simone de Beauvoir

“Wouldst thou like to live deliciously?”  
The Sin of Female Freedom in *The Witch*.

## 1. Introduction

*The Witch: A New England Folktale* is a 2015 horror movie, written and directed by Robert Eggers, which sparked controversial opinions<sup>1</sup> among fans of the horror genre due to its subtle style relying less on gory violence and more on the psychological thriller format. As stated by Eggers in an interview with *The Guardian* (2016)<sup>2</sup>, the aim of the production was to resemble “a Puritan’s nightmare” as closely as possible, which he did by seeking authenticity through consulting historians and uncovering historical documents such as religious journals and accounts from the Salem Witch Trials of the 17<sup>th</sup> century.

The film follows the story of a Puritan family in 1630s New England who, after being banished from the community in which they lived over an unexplained divergence of religious opinions, settles in a remote farm in the wilderness. Before the adversities faced in isolation, strange events start taking place and conflicts arise between the characters, who accuse the eldest daughter, Thomasin, of being a witch, thus guilty of bringing disgrace to the family.

The representation of women as witches in literary works pertaining to the Gothic genre might be traced back to the Puritan society of the United States in its early stages of colonization (Bosky 692; Botting 75). Although the concept of witches had already been largely disseminated in Europe with the Inquisition in previous centuries, the Salem Witch

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<sup>1</sup> See the user reviews at:  
[https://www.imdb.com/title/tt4263482/reviews?ref=tt\\_q1\\_3](https://www.imdb.com/title/tt4263482/reviews?ref=tt_q1_3)  
[https://www.rottentomatoes.com/m/the\\_witch\\_2016](https://www.rottentomatoes.com/m/the_witch_2016)

<sup>2</sup> For more information, see: “The Witch: ‘Good horror is taking a look at what’s dark in humanity,’” by Alex Godfrey. *Theguardian.com*, Web. 7 Feb 2020.



Trials of the 1600s have influenced the work of a number of writers, prescribing a stereotype of witches that still persists today. Examples of said influence include older pieces such as Nathaniel Hawthorne's "Young Goodman Brown" (1835) and "The Scarlet Letter" (1850), as well as modern representations of the witchcraft hysteria, such as Arthur Miller's play "The Crucible" (1953) and its subsequent film adaptation (1996). As stated by Elizabeth Reis, although the Puritans tended to characterize the sexes as equal before God, there remained an uneven power relation concerning the devil, in which "women's souls were seen as unprotected in their weaker female bodies, vulnerable to the devil's molestations" (24), which could be seen as one explanation as to why there were so many more women than men trialed for witchcraft in history (Boyer and Nissenbaum 213).

In view of that, this research aims to answer questions pertaining to the depiction of female characters as figures that symbolize the social restraints imposed by the patriarchal structures of Puritan society, and how such symbols are translated into cinematic elements. More specifically, this analysis explores how particular aspects of female freedom such as sexual liberation, autonomy and self-empowerment were perceived within the Puritan context as related to witchcraft, and how this relation is rendered as horror.

### 1.1. Objectives

Based on the discussion above, this work aimed to conduct an analysis on the protagonist of the movie *The Witch* and her portrayal in relation to social, historical and cultural contexts of 17<sup>th</sup> century New England Puritanism. This study is based on feminist theories – particularly on the depiction of the female body (Federici, Mulvey, Reis and Romano) – in literature and films of the Gothic genre, and will draw from historical contextualization of Puritanism and a brief history of witchcraft. To this author's knowledge, although a number of studies have been conducted on the relationship between women,

witchcraft and Puritanism (Federici, Hester, Reis, Westerkamp), few have related their findings to the representations of the female body in contemporary horror films. In the context of Universidade Federal de Santa Catarina, I was unable to find any research addressing all the previous subjects. My focus relies on the objectification of the female figure as a symbol of the social regulations pertaining to a male-dominated community, as well as how this image is developed in the film through imagery and symbolism. By focusing on sequences that depict issues of representation of the female body, I related concepts observed in the literature to the aspects depicted on screen, aiming to draw links between the imaginary of the witch that arose from Puritan society to what can be observed in modern film production. Furthermore, another future goal would be to investigate how this representation of women is carried out in other Gothic films.

## 1.2. Method

The methodological framework employed in this analysis relies on the analyzed film itself. The basis for the analysis comes from the concepts retrieved from the literature on feminist studies on the perception of the female body in relation to society.

In her doctoral dissertation, Lucia Romano states that gender works as a regulatory tool of individual behavior (22), relying on what is deemed common sense to control the roles of both men and women in society. Gender, in that sense, could be considered an artificially constructed social element whose only objective would be to dictate cultural patterns for life in community.

One of the most significant elements of said social control in relation to gender, from antiquity to current times, is the body. In Ancient Greece, for instance, Galen would defend that women were simply “inverted men”, whose weaker and less developed bodies render them inferior and less worthy (29). This idea, according to Romano, lays the foundation for the discourses on bodies as they are seen today, in which they exist beyond their own

corporeity by acting as social contracts and representations of social ideals. Judith Lorber asserts that “physical bodies are always social bodies” and that any physical differences between male and female anatomies are “meaningless until social practices transform them into social facts” (60). From that perspective, it is possible to see how closely related gender roles and representations of the body can be when analyzed within a social context.

Within Puritanism, the mere idea of a sexualized body that did not behave according to the religious stigmas – of only engaging in sexual intercourse for procreation, for example – generated a deviation from the social norm which threatened the balance of the community. It is within this framework that arises the image of the liberated woman as a transgressor of good customs and a threat to the male-dominated social mechanisms. Romano argues that the biological function of reproduction associated women to nature at the same time that this nature was also something to be feared due to its potential to turn into wilderness (52). Thus, women should be controlled and subject to the men who govern and protect them from their own nature. It is not surprising, then, that the image of witches – women who did not conform to such norms – would be associated to nature, nakedness and sexual liberation. In short, any sort of resistance to the patriarchal system imposed by the Christian church, or any kind of autonomous claim over one’s own body, was likely to be considered witchcraft.

When it comes to the depiction of the female body in art production, such as literature or films, it is possible to observe how the body is subject to cultural elements which determine how that body is seen in society, more so than biological factors. The body is directly connected to moral concepts, at the same time that body image is related to the vision of others upon said body (Romano 83). This external gaze exerts a direct impact on how the woman sees herself and, more emphatically, on her behavior. Being the film industry a massive producer of culture, Feminist studies grant space to criticism and allow consumers of culture to question the practices and perspectives represented by the current social order

(Romano 49). Romano argues that some of the negative consequences of such social structure include “mystification (the negative value is lived as if an immutable reality and fate), objectification ... and fetishization (through which others express their own desires and paradigms).” (72)<sup>3</sup>.

This study employed the previously described concepts to analyze Thomasin’s portrayal in the movie. The hypothesis is that the body can be used as a regulatory – as well as a symbolic – tool of social control, which in the movie is represented by the religious oppression of the time in addition to the strict gender roles therein established. These concepts were then related to the role of women in Puritan New England at the time of the Salem witch trials – when the movie is set –, and what the female body represented within the religious mindset of the colony. The goal was to analyze how the Puritan perception of women – especially in relation to themes such as independence, sexual liberation and development of self-empowerment – were twisted into the general image of witches and how this framework is translated as elements of horror in the film.

Whereas other passages of the film were also included in the analysis for the sake of contextualization and source of argumentation, the main sequence analyzed in depth was the ending – precisely the final twelve minutes. The reason for choosing this specific passage relies on the substantial symbolism pertaining to the sequence when it comes to character development, visual elements and depictions of the body. The analysis of the final sequence also addresses the issue of nudity regarding Thomasin, her surrender to another male figure and the family tragedy that allowed for the creation of the “Puritan nightmare”.

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<sup>3</sup> “[...] a mistificação (o valor negativo é vivido como se fosse uma realidade e um destino imutáveis), a objetificação (a falta de objetividade deixa espaço para a ação do outro) e a fetichização (esse outro expressa ali, antes de tudo, seus próprios desejos e paradigmas).” (My translation)

## 2. Review of Literature

Four main themes are herein approached, those being: the Gothic genre, Puritanism, witchcraft and the female body. The goal was to weave in the main themes of this project, particularly the manners in which they interconnect in order to create the image of the woman such as depicted in the analyzed film, *The Witch*, and how such symbolic representation can be observed in other cinematic productions of the Gothic genre.

The first of these themes, the Gothic, is approached from a social perspective, looking to provide some insight on how elements of horror act as cultural symbols of all which is considered disruptive and transgressive within a society. Additionally, it is also explored the means through which horror production function as social criticism and how that related to role of women.

Puritanism is then approached as a medium between the historical context of the film and how the social structures and religious views of the time were translated into elements of horror. This section also brings a particular focus on gender roles in the 17<sup>th</sup> century Puritan community and an overview of the events leading to the Salem Witch Trials of 1692.

The last two themes – witchcraft and the female body and sexuality – are then presented concomitantly due to their complementary nature. Firstly because, as will be shown, the image of the witch both in the Puritan context as well as in earlier period leading to the witch-hunts was directly tied to the issue of female sexuality in conservative societies. These will include actual historical records of the 17<sup>th</sup> century witch-trials. Secondly because many of the concepts therein explored concerning the female body and the representation of women persist still today in modern cultural production.

## 2.1. Gothic and the Horror Film

*“There is no film genre more subversive, more innately critical of the values of white bourgeois patriarchal society, than the horror films”*

(Benshoff 56)

David Punter and Glennis Byron define Gothic as “that which ... resisted the establishment of civilized values and a well-regulated society” (8). Considering that many artistic productions reflect the sociocultural context wherein they are produced, the Gothic functions as an interpretation of the dark side of the social issues related to human psychology. In that sense, it is the “product of the wild and the uncivilized, a world that ... overflow[s] cultural boundaries” (8).

With the rise of the Romantic Movement in the 19<sup>th</sup> century and its focus on the individual, Gothic fiction conquered a new space as “part of an internalized world of guilt, anxiety, despair” (7) to question issues of authority and individual freedom by translating them into elements of horror. These elements were, in fact, nothing but a reflection of real concerns, where the uncanny was perceived as a disturbance to what was familiar and normal. Not surprisingly, the Gothic discourse found plenty of room to develop in scenarios of social, political and economic change, such as the British expansion over the American colonies, where there was a fear of the “primitive infecting the civilized” (40). With the advancement of capitalist mindsets, traditional systems began to fall apart and gave way to new social structures. Capitalism, thus, became a threat that symbolized this familiar being overthrown by a modernized unknown (20).

It is within this framework that we can observe the impact of horror films in modern society. Horror movies first started in the 1930s United States and relied heavily on Gothic literary sources (65). Some of the pieces now regarded as classic horror films derive straight from literature, such as Tod Browning’s *Dracula* (1931) and James Whale’s *Frankenstein* (1931); while others are film adaptations under slightly different premises, such as F. W.

Murnau's *Nosferatu* (1922). These productions marked the beginning of a new cultural era, where the Gothic became not only easily accessible to a larger audience, but also more appealing with the use of visual artifices. With the merging of Gothic writing and film, there arose a new concern for ways to translate elements of horror into visual images. According to Fred Botting, history is an essential part of telling horror stories, in that every element in the composition of a scene must have the function of representing realities (70) or contributing to the formation of characters' identities.

Harry M. Benshoff argues that the illusion of a civilized society rests on people's ability to "repress or censor their worst impulses" (22). Horror films aim to portray these "worst impulses" on screen, provoking feelings of anxiety and dread on the spectators by forcing a rupture with the sense of safety and normality – thus, the "horror". In that sense, it is poignant to wonder why sexuality is such a central theme in most horror films. More specifically, why is it perceived as something punishable and mostly related to female characters? Benshoff defends that punishment is related to the protection and commendation of a particular set of values, and a way to diminish any transgression to such norm. As per Julia Kristeva's definition, the monstrous-feminine in horror films represents that which does not "respect borders, position, rules" and disturbs the normality of the social structure (39).

Gothic productions, then, can be generally understood as a genre that portrays all that which escapes the norm, that is, the "Other" in relation to a heteronormative, male-dominated capitalist society. Botting argues that much of the supernatural fantasy that permeate the American context to this day has its roots in "social and religious forms or order" (75). Therefore, it is likely that many of these elements of social origin have influenced the works of renowned writers in the Gothic genre. Nathaniel Hawthorne, for example, weaved elements of superstition with those of reality (77), employing several aspects of the folktale of New England Puritanism in works such as *The Scarlet Letter* (1850) and "Young

Goodman Brown” (1835), and helping establish stereotypes of horror that are still employed today.

## 2.2. Puritan New England

“New England was a true utopia”, were the words used by Puritan minister Cotton Mather to define the Pilgrim colonies of 17<sup>th</sup> century Early America (ix). The Puritans came from a particular branch of Christianity and, as Protestants, their religious views were based on a “methodical pursuit of moral purism ... or sinless perfection”, characterized by its extreme asceticism in their moral, spiritual and material practices (Zafirovski 3). The main Puritan goal was to create in the colonies of New England a “holy commonwealth”, far from the corruption of the Catholic Church and other political biases of Europe.

In order to enforce such values, the political authoritarianism of the Puritan settlements resulted in extreme forms of social control, such as repression through laws and “severe sanctions, persecution, terror and tyranny” (40). Thus, Puritanism is mostly regarded as being extremely conservative, orthodox and sectarian. What Milan Zafirovski calls “tyranny” refers to the rigorous political and religious code that faced with serious opposition all those considered “ungodly”, “impure” and “evil”, according to the original sins of the Bible (42). The Puritan laws - listed in the Massachusetts Body of Liberties (dated December 1641) -, which were copied nearly verbatim from biblical passages, state that almost every sin was not only censured, but often punishable by death. For example, offenses such as blasphemy, adultery, rape and sorcery held the penalty of death for the accused (Zafirovski 101). It is important to note that this code of “good morals” was not imposed on society by the authorities, but rather voted by the inhabitants; thus, further evidencing how such ascetic values and the repression of personal freedoms was intrinsic to Puritan society.



Another important point is that American Puritanism was based on a patriarchal society that enforced strict family discipline through oppression and authoritarianism by placing the patriarch as responsible for the “moral righteousness of their households” (Zafirovski 100). Furthermore, only men were eligible for being members of the church, in a time and political setting where the moral guidance and opinions of the clergy were taken very seriously (Bremer 131).

As Marilyn J. Westerkamp argues, rewriting a society also implied maintaining the patriarchal gender dynamics, thus reinforcing the concepts of inherent female weakness and male authority within and outside the domestic sphere. Because Puritan values were centered around conventional Christian family-dynamics, a woman’s greatest achievement was to be honorable and pious in the domestic frame, where marriages were hierarchical structures dependent on the obedience of the wives to their husbands. An account by pastor William Gouge about his own wife, in 1622, provides a good image of what was expected of a “good woman” at the time: “a pious, prudent, provident, painful, careful, faithful, helpful, grave, modest, sober, tender, loving wife, mother, mistress, neighbor” who ‘most prudently and providently ordered the affairs of her house’ (Hughes 297).

William Gouge was also the author of a popular document in 17<sup>th</sup> century New England titled “Domestical Duties” (1622), in which he listed the roles of both men and women united in matrimony. Some of the most significant entries relate to “matrimonial chastity”, in which sexual intercourse should only exist within marriage bonds and for the main purpose of procreation, whereas every other sort of sexual behavior, “fornication”, was considered a sin (Gouge 92). Mostly, though, these duties concern the wives’ utter submission to their husbands, a hierarchy based on Biblical values, “Thy desire shall be subject to thine husband” (Gen 3:16), “For the husband is the head of the wife” (Gouge 129). Given women’s allegedly natural weakness due to the original sin of Eve, wives were generally expected to

acknowledge themselves as inferior to their husbands, and the woman who opposed was said to be of a “monstrous self-conceit, and intolerable arrogancy, as if she herself were above her own sex, and more than a woman” (Gouge 131). Moreover, even small gestures such as “a frowning brow, a lowering eye, a sullen look, a pouting lip” (Gouge 135) could be interpreted as a sign of rebellion and disruptive behavior.

Not surprisingly, by accepting their role of passivity and self-abnegation, women were hardly accounted for in the historical records before the witch-hunts. This patriarchal system resulted in more than just the creation of traditional values, but in a system of power that dictated the lives of all within that community by determining what was the acceptable female behavior (Dennis and Reis 67).

In that sense, the image of the witch served as an embodied representation of what a woman should not be and how she should *not* act; whereas the witch-hunting served as a show for the consequences of such transgressive behavior. This set of superstitious images weaved a pattern of conduct perpetuated even by the women themselves. Dennis and Reis argue that it is possible the accused may have confused ordinary sins - according to the Puritan values - with the grave sin of witchcraft, simply by viewing themselves as natural sinners (75).

Furthermore, when providing an overview of the historical context of the Salem Witch Trials, Boyer and Nissenbaum discuss the rise of a new capitalist class – a new social order that allowed people to ascend economically and alter their social status, which defied the Puritan principle of predestination. This desire for achieving more than one was initially given was often interpreted as a sin of greed by Puritan leaders, threatening the established order that viewed “Rebellion [...] as the sin of witchcraft” (209).

Considering Puritanism was the dominant political and social regime in place during the Early American period, some theorists argue that its strict moral code has “stamped the

nation with a set of conservative values”, such as “authoritarian conservatism, rigid traditionalism and conformity” (252). In other words, the “cultural legacy” of Puritanism in 21st century America is still today depicted in cultural productions.

### 2.3. Burn the witch: Witchcraft and Female Sexuality

*“Witch-hunting is woman-hunting or at least it is the hunting of women  
who do not fulfill the male view of how women ought to conduct  
themselves.” (Hester 291)*

Although sources disagree slightly on the numbers, by the end of 1692, over 150 charges of witchcraft had been registered in the court of Salem, New England, of which 28 people were convicted and 19 executed (Goss, Boyer and Nissenbaum). 15 of these were women. Accusations of witchcraft arose not only from superstition, but also for having their roots in a deeply patriarchal society as a means to justify the social control of women and reinforce male dominance in a context of rapid social change (Hester 289). The ideal female character was based on values that rendered women quiet and “subservient to their husbands” so, not surprisingly, many of the accused were figures who did not comply with the expected gender roles, such as adulteresses and single mothers. Expectations over the ideal female behavior speaks a lot for the accusations of witchcraft, in which in more than one occasion women were convicted simply for cursing or being verbally aggressive (Hester 301).

In a compilation of the documents of the Salem Witch Trials edited by K. David Goss, there can be found accounts of women who were regarded by the townspeople as being quick-witted and independent-thinking. During her trial, Bridged Bishop was accused of responding in a “belligerent manner” with “bold and remarkable observations” (Goss 37), and was later executed. Another example is that of one Sarah Good, who was said to speak in her trial in a “very wicked, spitfull manner reflecting and retorting against the authority with base and abusive words and many lies” (18).

Since women could become a potential threat to the social order, there was a need for those in power - the magistrates - to neutralize the menace and “silence” these women (Westerkamp 52). That was achieved not by eliminating them, but by providing them with an easily controlled role within society. Whereas men were usually praised for their leadership skills, the admired virtues of women were associated with subservience, subjection and passivity. In addition, Puritans held the belief that women displayed a natural inclination towards evil, “Ever since Eve had lured Adam into sin” (Westerkamp 54), which further justified the abnegation of any form of authority or autonomy for women.

It was the combination of these two distinct images that defined the female role in Puritan society - that the passive and pious woman was virtuous, and that the woman who refused to accept a submissive position had succumbed to her natural evil. At the same time that women should be controlled for being “morally, intellectually, and emotionally weak” (56), this vulnerability rendered them more susceptible to be tempted by the devil and, at that point, they ceased being threatened to become the threat instead.

In that sense, “Witches were not merely wicked; their sins were the sins of women writ larger, baser, more destructive” (62). The image of the witch was so strongly constructed around female insubordination that it created an overall consensus that most witches were women. For matters of representation, both in the European witch-hunts in the 15<sup>th</sup> and 16<sup>th</sup> centuries, and later in New England, women represented over 80% of the accused. More than half of the men involved owed their accusation to their association with a suspected female witch. Any account of “a woman’s envy, pettiness and discontent” (63) were enough proof to accuse her of being a witch.

These misogynist arguments, however, were not exclusive of the Puritan values. In fact, they derived from the very Church the Puritans had attempted to distance themselves from when founding the colonies in the New World. Even though witchcraft was already a known

concept in Europe, it had never been of real concern for the Church. It was the publication of the *Malleus Maleficarum* (1486) – The Hammer of the Witches – by the clergymen Jacob Sprenger and Heinrich Kramer – also known under the Latinized name Henricus Institoris – that made evil a real physical threat (Broedel 19).

Their most significant contribution to the issue of witch-hunting was on the topic of female sexuality, establishing it as a source of evil and a direct path to the devil. The authors argued that women were more carnal than men, therefore more likely to succumb to the temptations of the flesh, in a way that “the most lustful of women were witches, whose sexual appetite was insatiable” (Broedel 177). Unsurprisingly, a great number of accused women had been previously accused of some sort of sexual deviation. They were witches not only because “they were simpleminded, vindictive, and greedy, but because they were [also] sexually depraved” (Westerkamp 65).

Hans Peter Broedel defends that such principles relate to the fear and anxiety that sprung from said unbridled female sexuality, which threatened the established social structures. By identifying sexuality with a cult of the devil and the female body as a corrupt vessel for the embodiment of evil and sexual sin, it was possible to maintain some of the political hierarchies on the basis of fear and religious superstition. Thus, he claims that “the authors transform the lust of women into witchcraft, and then into an apocalyptic version of a world overrun with witches and sexual deviance” (178).

In a society governed by the patriarchal institution of the Catholic Church, desire was perceived by devoted individuals as a means of the Devil himself to disrupt righteous men. Therefore, female sexuality was faced as a threat and needed to be degraded, which led clerical authorities to “paint the female sex as an instrument of the Devil - the more pleasant to the eye, the more deadly to the soul”. (Federici “Witches” 28). In that sense, it is possible to perceive the witch hunts as a way to negate any form of social power to women. The

regulation over women's bodies and sexual behavior entailed a gradual loss of jurisdiction over women's rights, thus culminating in destitution of power within a political sphere. This is further evidenced in that, by owning their own sexuality, women took up a characteristically masculine role, which evoked the fear of an inversion in the social order maintained by the sexual domination of husband over wife.

The creation of a specific image to define what is wrong and ungodly makes it possible to attribute these characteristics upon real individuals who could pose a threat to the power dynamics. Therefore, witches were women, but not just any woman. They were "adulteresses, murderous midwives, and evil mothers, women defined by the authors [of the *Malleus*] as personifications of feminine sexuality" (Broedel 183). This idea of "bad sexuality" is further accentuated in the manner in which a witch acquired her evil powers, in that "she did not worship the devil, she slept with him" (183).

In her article on the relation of the female body and the devil in Puritan New England, Elizabeth Reis draws a parallel on how the Puritans employed this form of sexual behavior into their beliefs. Although both men and women were vulnerable to the attacks of the devil, Puritans made a point of differentiating sinners from witches. Whereas both acted under demonic influence, the sinner was merely a passive victim, whereas a witch had made the conscious and willing choice of joining the devil, thus demonizing "the notion of active female choice" (16). Moreover, the argument perpetuated by the *Malleus* that engaging in willing sexual activity was somehow graver a sin than being unwillingly possessed by demons portrays desire as a more serious offense than rape (Broedel 55), and reinforces a woman's lack of autonomy over her own body.

Following up on that thinking, it makes sense that some of the requirements for one to become a witch include surrendering her body and soul to the devil, offering him unbaptized babies and engaging in carnal acts with demons (Broedel 24). In fact, most evil acts resulted

of witchcraft were related to sexuality and reproduction, such as disrupting a couple's ability to conceive, cause abortion or sterility and also "influence a man's passion, filling minds with excessive love or hatred" (26). This latter also served as a means to exempt men from the responsibility of their own lustful desires, blaming them on witches instead.

It is only reasonable, then, that most witchcraft cases would involve accusations of "lewd behavior", that is, any shape of female sexuality existing outside the sphere of male gratification and procreation. The idea that witches would kill babies and young children becomes all the more poignant when considering infanticide as an antithesis to reproduction and motherhood – a transgression to the traditional female role.

From this perspective, we can observe two images whose origins may have arisen at the time of the witch-hunts: the old and poor woman, living in isolation, and the one accused of sexual transgressions. Young women were the majority among the accused, considered to be more impressionable and, therefore, prone to be seduced by offers such as "beauty, finery, success in courtship, and freedom from labor", as per the actual testimony of a sixteen-year-old girl thought to have been victim of possession in 1671 (Westerkamp 57). On the other side of the spectrum, old women posed a particular threat for a number of reasons. First, because many old women in the community were widows and, therefore, no longer subordinate to their husbands. Consequently, a significant number of accused witches were widows (Hester 305). Second, because their sexuality no longer served procreation purposes and, in existing solely for pleasure, became deviant of the "tame, domesticated form of sexuality" that was socially accepted (Federici 29). Finally, because in passing "forbidden knowledge" to younger women, they represented a "fear-inspiring presence for a reforming elite of modernizers bent on destroying the past" (32).

Patriarchy also related to economic change as a way to keep women under social control and financially dependent on men. In this context, the witch-hunting phenomenon can be

interpreted as a way of implementing fear in order to shape the ideal female behavior for the new capitalist societies: “sexless, obedient, submissive, resigned to subordination to the male world” (32). The creation and propagation of myths of supernatural nature served as a tool to justify the persecution and terrors inflicted upon those judged as disruptive women, evoking the collective idea that certain behaviors were condemnable and should be punished. Through this process, generations of women were “educated” to fit into the new social order, adhering to new tasks and roles.

This persecution went far beyond their bodies - between tortures and executions -, and aimed at destroying the social power of women. The way to accomplish that was by disrupting their social relations and breaking traditions, such as knowledge on female reproduction and contraceptive methods passed from mother to daughter over generations - now a crime punishable by death. Silvia Federici argues that the female body has been demonized in many different ways throughout history in an effort to destroy women’s social power, but never “have women been subjected to such a massive, internationally organized, legally approved, religiously blessed assault on their bodies” (31).

#### 2.4. Devilish Forms: The Female Body

The witch hunts represented a unique phenomenon in history when it comes to the persecution of women and the destruction of political female power. Although it is hard to affirm how many women lost their lives between executions and tortures, recent feminist studies suggest nearly 200,000 women were accused of witchcraft in Europe and its colonies between the 15th and 17th centuries (Federici “Caliban” 208).

Feminist movements were especially important in uncovering the history behind these episodes, nowadays rendering the witch a modern symbol of female defiance and independence. “Indeed, the witch was the living symbol of the ‘world turned upside down’, a



recurrent image in the literature of the Middle Ages, tied to millenarian aspirations of subversion of the social order” (Federici 177). The witch-hunting can be seen as a means to eradicate any political power ever given to women through the control of their reproduction and sexuality. In criminalizing birth control and demonizing women’s ancient knowledge over their own biology, the female body was institutionalized and put under the control of the State (184). In her dissertation, Romano explains that genders are constructed upon a set of regulatory laws over social behavior in order to not only preserved the established power hierarchy but to also have it generally accepted as common sense. In an ascetic and pious society such as that of the Puritans, for example, it is plausible that this biological knowledge was twisted into something ungodly that hindered fertility and promoted infanticide, thus generating social control through fear and the creation of a common enemy.

According to Federici, “the witch-hunt ... was a war against women; it was a concerted attempt to degrade them, demonize them, and destroy their social power” (186). The fear of female sexuality may be interpreted as a reason as to why women were simultaneously accused of both arousing unrestrained sexual passion in men and of causing male impotence (191). Whereas sexual impotence served as a metaphor for overall powerlessness, the urges ignited by sexual passion threatened male authority, giving women power over men instead. “A sexually active woman, then, was a public danger, a threat to the social order [...] - [therefore] female sexuality had to be exorcised” (191), in a way that exempted men and blamed sexual sins on women from every angle.

Even though the witch-craze phenomenon labeled women as a channel for evil and unbridled perversion, it also created an ironic parallel concerning the power relation between the woman and the devil by mimicking a marriage contract. Reis states that, in Puritan belief, the main difference between a union with Christ or with the devil rested on the fact that, although both unions implied an everlasting connection, the union with Christ was perceived

as a holy matrimony “that assured freedom and salvation”, whereas that with the devil was portrayed as something degenerate - a slavery relationship that implied “perpetual terror and degradation” (22).

The efficacy of this matrimonial analogy relied on the fact that both men and women were aware of their married roles, in which the husband expected his wife’s absolute submission. Similarly, once a woman surrendered herself to the Devil, he became her “owner and master, pimp and husband at once” and could then have sexual intercourse with her, as it was also a commonly accepted image that the Devil was a man (Federici 187). From this perspective, it is possible to observe a need to reaffirm male supremacy, in that “even when in revolt against human and divine law, women had to be portrayed as subservient to a man” (187).

The Witches’ Sabbath, for instance, provides an interesting insight on the perception of women’s erotic behavior. Firstly, because it was the place where women supposedly engaged in degrading sexual activities with the devil in a clear subversive image of the Puritan Sabbath - a sacred day reserved for prayer and worship (Federici 165). More importantly, however, it was a place where sexual activity would occur with no male involvement – except for the figure of the devil.

In *Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema*, Laura Mulvey argues that the male gaze, as dominant and active, determines not only how women should look, but also how they should be viewed, constructing the female image as a cut-out of sexual fantasy for male gratification. Similarly, Romano states that the body is directly tied to the social structures of a community, and it is the construct of gender and the expectations surrounding these symbols that define what it means to have a female or a male body, as well as how one should behave in society. She defends that “physical bodies are always social bodies”, in that the physical differences are meaningless until social practices attribute them meaning (32). The social practices, in

this case, can be understood as the separation between men and women sustained by a “heterosexual, hierarchical and male-dominated standard” (28).

The image of the woman demands control in a patriarchal society because her very presence on the screen is a reminder of the sexual differences between men and women. Moreover, it is a reflection of the unequal power relations between genders not only from a sexual perspective, but social, political and economic as well. The fear that these power dynamics might be reversed becomes a looming threat represented by the female body on the screen.

It is within this framework that female sexuality acquires negative connotations. In the male-dominated capitalist social order, women must remain submissive to men and their bodies subject to serving the community. Therefore, the “deviant sexual body”, that which challenges this order and engages in sexual activities unrelated to male needs or with no procreative purposes, becomes a social threat (31). Their reproductive abilities render women both valued and ostracized at the same time. On the one hand, it is this ability of conceiving life that makes women esteemed within their community - however only while under the control of the male-dominated order. On the other hand, this same sexuality is shunned when existing outside the binds of patriarchal standards and controlled by the women themselves.

Taking into consideration this social background, Mulvey suggests that the female body on screen serves two main purposes for the gratification of the male gaze: one, as something to be enjoyed, which Mulvey correlates to Freud’s concept of scopophilia<sup>4</sup> (61), and that often escalates into a fetish as means of turning something threatening into reassuring; and two, as something to be punished, as an attempt to subdue the object that generates the threat<sup>5</sup>.

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<sup>4</sup> “object of sexual stimulation through sight”

<sup>5</sup> The anxiety evoked by the image of the woman relates to the trauma of castration and the lack of male genitalia, according to the psychoanalytic perspective. See more in Mulvey’s *Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema*.

The author refers to the latter as in inherent form of sadism that can only exist by “making something happen, forcing a change in another person” (65). In other words, it is a similar behavior as that which can be observed in relation to the cleric authorities at the time of the witch-hunts. Due to the fear of female sexuality and the power it may exert over men’s desires and self-control, both the body and behavior of women were punished and repressed until they became institutions under the control of the State and, in that, no longer threatening.

Therefore, the woman’s body becomes an erotic object not only for the characters in the film, but also for the spectators watching it. Through close-ups and depictions of a fragmented body, the woman is dehumanized and turned into an object for contemplation instead. Films have the power to reinforce both the male sense of authority and the passive role expected of women.

Mulvey further argues that the goal of film is to represent reality as accurately and closely as possible to human perception. In view of that, it can be said that “mainstream film coded the erotic into the language of the dominant patriarchal order” (59), through the objectification of women as a way of reflecting the gender hierarchy existing in reality. Sexuality, then, and the ways it is expressed, is built within a certain political framework of what is or is not socially acceptable. However, these same laws that dictate the social order also allow space for its disruption, being that “possible ruptures reside within the very regulatory notions of gender and sex” (Romano 60). Romano suggests, for example, that the resistance to homosexuality arises from a male-dominated power concerned with reproduction and the maintenance of a dominant order.

Due to this historical gender hierarchy, it is not surprising that the female presence in historical records is believed to have been largely erased - or at least diminished. Even though history is lived by both men and women alike, facts are experienced differently according to

the power position one occupies in society. Particularly to what concerns women as producers of cultural content, the female voice is still to this day largely overpowered by the male one. Even in events dominated by female characters, such as the witch-hunts, the historical accounts were not only written by men at the time, but also until very recently studied by men as well. As Federici discusses in *Caliban and the Witch*, women were usually discredited as victims of the persecution and portrayed as social failures due to their history having been recorded from a male perspective (164).

The female body, in that sense, can be observed through many different lenses according to the gender attributions of different times, thus influencing the woman's relationship with her own body. It can be observed, for example, that the belief of women being inferior and more fragile than men led to the belief that they were naturally more inclined to corruption and, therefore, had to be controlled - subjected to the male power. Her role as breeding figure gained new meanings before the threat of non-reproductive female sexuality and its impacts on the social patterns, and later as an instrument of labor during the Industrial Revolutions (55). The concept of witches and reproduction as labor force may seem distant from reality, but it is important to highlight that the control over women's bodies comes with a long historical background that needs to be addressed when dealing with the power dynamics between genders in society. This background pertains to current times in that, to this day, feminist movements still fight for women having complete autonomy over their bodies when it comes to sexual and reproductive rights<sup>6</sup>.

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<sup>6</sup> E.g. The international #MeToo movement that went viral in 2017, exposing several accounts of sexual harassment and assault against actresses in the Hollywood film industry, and is now joined by millions of survivors of sexual violence across the globe (<https://metoomvmt.org/>). Following the worldwide response to the #MeeToo movement, Time's Up is an independent, non-profit organization that promotes campaigns against sexual harassment in work environments and advocates a society free of gender discrimination (<https://timesupnow.org/about/>). One example of a more aggressive approach to feminist struggles concerning body autonomy is the Slut Walk (in Brazil, "Marcha das Vadias"), a global movement in which women purposely dress in revealing clothes and organize marches calling for an end to rape culture and victim blaming. The act is a response to the common discourse that victims of sexual assault are only abused because they dress like "sluts", thus originating the name of the march. Besides protesting the blame attributed to women for sexual violence, the movement also launched mottos such as "my body, my rules" and "no means no", advocating for

### 3. Film Analysis

*The Witch* (2015) is a psychological thriller and as such aims to evoke feelings of anxiety through imagery and storytelling. According to Egger's original screenplay, the film is meant to be a "New-England folktale", in which "all of their folkloric and religious beliefs ... are true" (2). The movie tells the story of a Puritan family in the 1600s that is shunned from their village by reason of the patriarch's "prideful conceit", an issue that is no further explored even though it is his feud with the magistrates that condemns his whole family. William makes the decision to leave the settlement without consulting any other party, and both his wife, Katherine, and his other children, Caleb, Mercy and Jonas, follow after him. In this first scene we are already presented with a clear view of the patriarchal structures of the time, and how gender roles were performed within the power hierarchy. However, we also see that the eldest daughter, Thomasin, is the only one who hesitates to leave, thus already introducing her dissident tendencies - and foreshadowing her journey, which is the focus of this analysis.

The family is then forced to live in isolation in the wilderness, which is an important element in the fictional portrayal of the Puritan society, considering that the Puritan belief regarded the wilderness as the place where one may lose their faith in God and, therefore, become more susceptible to be tempted by the devil. Such depiction of nature can be found, for example, in Gothic fiction on the Puritan world such as Hawthorne's "Young Goodman Brown" (1835), and in the very screenplay of *The Witch*, where "the presence of the wood is profound, disturbing, ominous" (Eggers 6).

Naturally, living in isolation imposed a number of hardships upon the family. Before the threat of starvation and the disappearance of their youngest child, the characters suffer a number of strange events that, to their eyes, can only be understood as being the fruit of

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women's sexual liberation and the end of violence against women. Furthermore, we can also mention movements such as International Whore's Day – in which sex workers organize protests in favor of their rights and against the discrimination of sex work -, the Women's March – a movements against oppression that aims to grant more political power to women -, and pro-choice movements across the globe, calling upon the legalization of abortions and demanding women have sovereignty over their reproduction rights.

witchcraft. Thus, the family turns on Thomasin and accuses her of being the medium through which evil made its way into their lives until, in the end, she becomes the very threat she was accused of being.

In this analysis, I aim to investigate how the multiple communicative languages articulated in film – framing, light, color, sound (Bordwell and Thompson) - translate the portrayal of women into elements of horror. For this purpose, the focus rests on Thomasin's character, particularly in the final twelve minutes of the film. The main sources of analysis are the representation of her body, dialogues, relationships with other characters and, particularly, how the depicted female body works as a physical culmination of moral values and social constructs. Other points for analysis included minor scenes considered pertinent to the plot development for the sake of argumentation; and other female figures present in the film – namely, the mother and the witch.

### 3.1. "I be the witch of the wood": Thomasin and the witch

Thomasin is a young woman transitioning into adulthood and, in the journey to find her own individuality within a strict set of religious and moral codes, she becomes a source of tension for the family. Her role as protagonist is established from the start, considering her face is the very first thing we see in the film and which foreshadows her key role in the fate of her family. Her portrayal herein is particularly poignant when contrasted with her image at the end of the film, an issue that is further addressed in-depth in the following subsection.

Shortly after the family settles in the woods, we view Thomasin on her knees, praying for forgiveness for her sinful nature (see fig. 1). As previously observed, Puritans "accepted that they were sinners who deserved damnation for their transgressions against God's law" (Bremer 134) and, therefore, were constantly exercising their devotion in hopes of finding salvation for their souls.



Fig. 1. Thomasin in prayer from Abele; *Los Angeles Times*; latimes.com. Web. 18 Feb 2016, <https://www.latimes.com/entertainment/movies/la-et-mn-witch-review-20160219-story.html>

For women, such religious habits were of special importance, considering the general consensus that they were the weaker sex and, as a result, more vulnerable to the molestations of the devil (Reis 24). In this scene, we can identify a number of elements that characterize Thomasin as part of the conventional social structures. She is herein framed as a central and well-lit image, appearing in light clothing against a darker background. This combination of color and lighting contrasts in addition to her physical arrangement - hands joined in prayer, hair pinned up and covered - assign her a nearly angelic countenance. Furthermore, her prayer, almost verbatim from the real record of the possession of one Elizabeth Knapp (1671)<sup>7</sup> reflects the notion of individuality as a capital sin and the view women had of themselves as natural sinners (Dennis and Reis): “I have been idle of my work, disobedient of mine parents, neglectful of my prayer. I have, in secret, played upon thy sabbath and broken

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<sup>7</sup>As per the records written by Reverend Samuel Willard, “shee then also complained against herselfe of many sins, disobedience to parents, neglect of attendance upon ordinances” (<https://history.hanover.edu/texts/Willard-Knap.html>)



every one of thy commandments in thought... followed the desires of my own will, and not the holy Spirit" (00:05:01).

The gender roles are further reinforced in the following scenes that portray the daughters helping the mother with the domestic duties while the sons work with the father on exterior tasks. As argued by Westerkamp, women were expected to care for the household and look after the children while also remaining pious and subservient to their husbands (301). Thus, any kind of behavior contravening these norms tended to be faced with hostility.

It is within this context that Thomasin's character is constructed in a way to justify her transformation into the ultimate transgression in the end. This rendering begins with the disappearance of her baby brother while under her care and continues through a series of unfortunate events – most not under her control – that further inflames the family's suspicions over her affiliations with the devil. That also generates a conflict between Thomasin and her mother, which is readdressed several times throughout the narrative. There is a clear difference in the treatment given to the children, portraying a silent rivalry between the two women.

Thomasin's youth, here, is important because she is not yet a woman, but is also no longer a child. Thus, the issue of her impeding sexuality is constantly brought up as not being under her control but having a negative impact on those around her nonetheless. That can be observed, for example, in the lustful way Caleb often glances at his sister and in the scene in which the mother instructs Thomasin to help her father undress so she can wash his clothes (00:20:45). As much as Thomasin may be innocent in her thoughts and actions, her body persists as an impending threat to the family structure, especially when existing in opposition to the male gaze. At the same time there is a hierarchy regulating the relationship between husband and wife, there is a hierarchy between mother and children that is challenged by Thomasin. This defiance reinforces her dissident tendencies through the portrayal of a

conflict of generations, to the point her mother suggests that she should be sent away to work elsewhere.

Another interesting point in the relationship of Thomasin with her family rests on the fact that she is completely excluded from competence in family conversations. Whereas Caleb, the oldest son, is allowed room for argumentation, Thomasin's voice is usually silenced. However, at the same time, she is constantly taking the blame for the ill doings that befall the family – a theme that is taken advantage of by her younger siblings. In the scene where Mercy is playing around claiming to be “the witch of the wood” (00:24:19), she teases Thomasin about her rivalry with their mother, claiming “Mother hates you” (00:24:40). It is at this point that Thomasin, presumably out of spite, turns the table and plays Mercy's game against her, claiming to be that very witch who stole their baby brother and offered him to the devil. However, when she does it, the joke acquires a menacing connotation and becomes a very serious threat. When Thomasin claims to dance naked with the devil at night, she advances towards her sister in slow, menacing steps. It can be argued that the way she moves, although malicious, is also very sexual – and very similar to the way the actual witch of the wood behaves when seducing Caleb later in the film. This scene, then, constructs Thomasin's character as a spirited young woman, who makes herself heard and is not simply passive before their accusations.

Another similar instance worth mentioning in relation to her transgressive tendencies is the scene in which Thomasin talks with Caleb about the “glass windows in England” (00:36:05). Boyer and Nissenbaum discuss the issue of emergent capitalism in the early Puritan world as one that faced much resistance due to its threat to the established power dynamics (209). It was perceived as a sin to crave material things, or wish for “pretty things”, as Thomasin does, which speaks of her ambitious nature and alludes to her choice at the end of the movie.

Finally, because Puritans believed the devil posed a real physical threat to everyday life, the presence of the witch becomes particularly significant. In the film, the devil appears in many forms: as a hare, a crow, a goat and, finally, a woman. Similarly, the witch appears both as a bestial representation of the elderly woman - the “old hag” type of witch - and as a beautiful seductress - the “young lady” type of witch. When introduced after stealing the baby (00:08:10), the witch is an old naked woman, depicted as something disgusting and disturbing. However, when she seduces Caleb in the woods, she appears as an attractive young woman (00:40:52). It is interesting to note that, when her wickedness is directed towards male desire, the witch suddenly becomes a tempting object that will not only excuse, but also justify said desire. It is a means to exempt men from the responsibility of their own decisions, by placing accountability upon the female figure instead. As previously discussed, the idea of the transgressive woman who breaks with the traditional gender roles of society is as much a threat as the influence of the devil and, in the film, this break is justified by such demonic influence.

### 3.2. “Remove thy shift” – the ending

The ending refers to the final tension that begins after Caleb’s death – the final collapse of the Puritan family structure. At this point, all suspicions surrounding Thomasin have turned into accusations. It is the father who chases after Thomasin once she runs out of the house and, although he first tries to comfort her, he soon tries to get her to confess to her sin of witchcraft. She rebels against him and, before his demand for the truth, she accuses him of his hypocrisy instead. She challenges his manliness and points out his faults, “you let mother be as thy master”, for which her father angrily calls her a “bitch”. Here her body works as a vessel through which evil is allowed to act: “Must I hear the devil wag his tongue in thy

mouth?” (1:03:23); and her father physically dragging her and locking her inside the goat shed can be interpreted as an attempt to contain said embodied evil.

The following morning, the father is attacked and killed by a goat named Black Phillip - one of the many forms the devil assumes during the film; thus, eliminating the last figure of male authority. The mother then finds Thomasin in the scene and naturally assumes she is guilty for the final destruction of her family. Katherine accuses Thomasin of seducing her own brother and father in yet another example of the issue of sexuality being portrayed as directly connected to evil. The lines “You bewitched thy brother, proud slut” (01:17:51) and “And thy father next. You took them from me” (01:18:08) become even more meaningful because they are spoken by another female character, expounding the moment a mother turns against her own child prompted by a patriarchal moral code characteristic of the Puritan structures. That is, we see the conflict of world views between two women herein translated into cinematic language, in which one represents the traditional Puritan morality whereas the other – the younger generation – represents a rupture with said conservative values.

This is the first time we are shown both women with their hair down, an infringement of the usual modest Puritan dress code that upheld that women should wear their hair groomed and/or covered (see fig. 2). Whereas Thomasin still has her hair braided and several layers of clothing, the mother wears nothing but her nightgown and her hair is loose down her shoulders - a symbolic representation of her rupture with the moral values that had guided her conduct until that point.



Fig. 2. Thomasin is confronted by her mother (property of A24)

The altercation between the two escalates to the point the mother climbs on top of Thomasin and strangles her while Thomasin resists and repeatedly tells her mother she loves her. It is important to note here how Thomasin still attempts to appeal to her mother's affections, a reflection of both her innocence and her attachment to the family bonds now destroyed. Forced to save herself from her mother's grip, Thomasin then reaches a billhook on the ground and hacks at her mother until she stops moving. This scene can be interpreted as a metaphor for the hardships a woman has to go through in order to conquer her independence, even if that implies overcoming personal burdens. In that sense, Thomasin would never be allowed her own individuality whilst living under her parents' influence and their traditional views on womanhood.

Thomasin hugs her mother's corpse while still underneath her, as if clinging to the last vestiges of the girl she once was. There is a transition to the moment she suddenly falls numb, coming to terms with her newfound loneliness and the consequences of her actions. The camera work that had operated around agitated close-ups until that point shifts to the

complete opposite. The next scenes are framed in lengthy shots, either still or moving very slightly, adding to the eerie calmness also prompted by the lack of background music – or any other sound whatsoever. As Thomasin stands quietly in her bloody clothes (see fig. 3), we are allowed a glimpse into her crumbling psyche, voided of everything she had known as safe and familiar. Interestingly, she then walks away from her mother and faces the woods for several seconds, which can be perceived as an inference to the wilderness that they have struggled to conquer at last conquering her instead. She is alone, scared and has just lost her entire family. She knows a trial would sentence her to death by witchcraft and that returning to civilization is not an option.



Fig. 3. Thomasin in her bloody clothes (property of A24)

Back inside the house, Thomasin removes her bloody dress while facing the camera – an intimate moment with the viewer constructed through the exposure of her body that further distances her from the pious Puritan values once so pivotal to her character. In this, she begins the process of liberating herself from the last ties both with her family and with her old self - of everything that restrained her. Once again, her hair here is loose, albeit still braided; that is, there is not yet a complete break of her values. This break comes a few

minutes later when, as if compelled by a silent calling, Thomasin makes her way to the goat shed, where Black Phillip seems to await her by the door.

There are many meaningful elements in the scene that unfolds inside the shed, the first of those being the framing. Thomasin's face is perfectly centered and highlighted by underlighting technique - that is, light that comes from below the subject, very common in horror effects (Bordwell and Thompson 126). In this perspective, even though she addresses the goat, the frame is focused on Thomasin's face, and the other side of the conversation is never shown. Even when he answers, revealing himself as the devil in fact, our focus remains on Thomasin's reaction, thus reiterating the hazardous consequences of the "active female choice", as presented by Reis (16). She is the one who sought him and, therefore, willingly welcomed evil into her body.

Another point worth of mention in this scene is the manner of the devil's speech. He whispers to Thomasin, appealing to her with what she desires the most. "Wouldst thou like the taste of butter? A pretty dress? Wouldst thou like to live deliciously? Wouldst thou like to see the world?" (01:24:02). His offers are, in fact, rather simple pleasures, but which are far more luxurious than anything she currently has at her disposal. He offers her a way to new possibilities, prompting her to pursue comforts like the ones she once had in England. In many ways, it is similar to the conversion most Christian traditions try to carry out, but with entirely opposite values. Nevertheless, the whispering is significant because it comes across as a much more persuasive approach than the oppressive or tyrannical means of Puritan code. Instead, it is manipulative in a manner that implies choice. The women, then, are not victims subjected to servitude to the devil, but guilty for making a deliberate choice to side with him.

As per the Puritan belief, Thomasin is encouraged to sign a book in order to pledge her allegiance. In the same frame the book is presented in the foreground, we see in the back a goat's hoof transition into a booted human foot. Immediately after, the devil commands,

“Remove thy shift” (01:24:42). This is a particularly powerful image because, in the moment she is pledging her submission to the devil figure that has been feared throughout the entire film, she does so when he is in the shape not of a goat, but of a man. Whereas the focus remains on her face, he appears as a barely distinguishable figure behind her, therefore establishing a scale of importance by placing Thomasin as the frontal image – the devil is the one to give her powers, but she is the one to blame for seeking them. Moreover, he is also characterized as a clear allusion to the capitalist ideal of luxury through his clothes - an embodiment of the “delicious life” he promised her -, adding greed and ambition to the sexual sin.

We then see her comply with his command and remove her clothes, albeit hesitant and fearful, but nonetheless giving up her last connection to the religious and moral practices that had veered her life up until that point - a definitive rupture. Thomasin veers towards a new kind of submission in which the conditions include not only her obedience, but also her body, given the pact granted the devil sexual rights over the woman (Federici 187). Her subjection is further evidenced in the moment she claims she does not know how to write her name, and the devil, setting a hand on her shoulder in a clear sign of dominance, replies, “I will guide thy hand” (01:25:14). This segment brings a number of meaningful symbolisms to Thomasin’s decision – one of the most important being that it is not portrayed as being entirely her choice, but dependent on the devil’s will to comply with her request. When she first attempts to talk to Black Philip, he remains silent for a moment and, believing she would be given no answer, Thomasin nearly walks away. That could have resulted in an entirely different outcome for her journey because, as previously stated, women could not become witches on their own accord – rather, they depended on the devil to achieve powers. In that sense, not only is Thomasin rendered her most vulnerable in this scene – orphaned, scared and naked – she is also seduced by the offer of a pleasurable living, which implicated being



subjected to a man. In many ways, this new relationship into which she is drawn can be perceived as a marriage contract as per the Puritan belief, in which the woman, ideally innocent and virginal, is stripped of her autonomy and trusts both her body and soul to her husband, who is then granted full command over her – similar to the “unholy union” Puritans believed to exist between witches and their master. Interestingly, even though Thomasin’s only real action is to obey the commands of this new male authority who is the one to give her devious powers and a “delicious life”, she is still portrayed in the forefront of both the scene and the sin, being the one to blame for the downfall of her virtue.

By embracing her femininity, her sexuality and her own self, Thomasin simultaneously rejects the traditional roles erstwhile imposed on her. This new form of submission comes not from traditional obedience, but from an active dissident choice. The outcome of her decision is portrayed as a long shot of Thomasin walking into the woods in the dead of night, completely naked and followed by Black Phillip. As she enters the woods, she is swallowed by the shadows as if entering an entirely new reality, the very opposite of her previously pious life.

Here, sound plays an important role. The tension established by silence and hushed dialogues in the previous scene is here shattered by loud drums and chanting instead. There is a connection between the image of Thomasin wandering naked through the woods and the sense of uneasiness provoked by both the aggressive singing and the sound effects. Her image herein is meant to be disturbing. This disturbance culminates with the introduction of the witches’ Sabbath – night meetings where, based on the *Malleus*, women were believed to fly and summon the devil. As means of worshipping him, they would slaughter infants, use their flesh to work magic and indulge in orgies in which “they violated as many sexual conventions as the fertile imagination ... could devise” (Broedel 124).

In this scene, it is revealed that there is not one “witch of the wood”, but rather several women, all naked with their hair down, dancing sensually around a bonfire – an image of the witches’ sexual perversion as perpetuated by both the *Malleus* and the Puritan beliefs. As per the screenplay, the event is “Depraved. Subhuman. Bestial” (106). This image of female freedom is thus constructed as a scene of horror for existing outside the male gaze. This “supreme moment of erotic meaning take[s] place in the absence of man” and is, consequently, unsettling (Mulvey 65).

For the first time in the movie, Thomasin is neither alone nor being silenced; rather, she is being encouraged and accepted by the group. The flying performed by the witches in this scene is portrayed as extremely erotic, as it was believed they experienced sexual pleasure from the powers they were granted by the devil. Once again, it is possible to observe the demonization of female sexual liberation and its portrayal as a literal satanic event. When Thomasin begins levitating, we see her at last embracing the circumstances she is in. “Thomasin keeps laughing, ever increasing in pleasure and freedom. Tears roll down her cheeks as she laughs. Pure ecstasy” (Eggers 107). We reach, then, the greatest sin of all: female freedom.

The final issue to be addressed in this analysis relates to the transformation of Thomasin’s character. In this side-by-side comparison between the first and last shots of her (see fig. 3), we can observe a categorical inversion of values depicted through her characterization.



Fig. 3. Thomasin at the beginning and end of the film. (A24)

In the first image, she is portrayed as the ideal embodiment of the established gender roles in respect to both her demeanor and disposition, being defined by the implications that come with being a woman in this Puritan society. Here, she stands in a church in chaste clothing – high collar, long skirt, linen cap and hat – and an overall display of sexual continence. Her expression is grim, submissive, and the manner in which she glances up ascribes her a child-like complexion. The color scheme on this scene is cold and revolves around pastel tones and bright lighting, reinforcing the idea of piety and asceticism characteristic of the Puritan lifestyle. Contrarily, on the second scene we can observe the complete inversion of these traditional values through her disengagement from all the oppressive norms imposed by social practices. Instead, she embraces a form of freedom that casts her out of social life and steers her towards an unfettered individuality that, at the time, could only be explained by an association with the devil himself. We can observe these moral transgressions translated into her body language through her depiction as being naked, with wide open arms, and a euphoric – almost maniac - expression. Rather than holding her head low in a clear sign of submission, Thomasin now looks up, and her formerly stern complexion is replaced by delirious laughing. The colors are also inverted, now in shades of orange and red that reflect not only the new environment she is in, but also the changes made within herself. This warm

color palette can also be linked to her newly blossomed sexuality in that, by embracing it, she ceases being a child to become a woman, thus symbolizing the loss of her innocence.

These elements of audiovisual language weaved together manage to convey how the same culture that raised Thomasin to be ashamed of her own will and constructed as meek and subservient to men, in the end, had the opposite effect and led her to become what they feared most: a liberated woman.

#### **4. Conclusion and discussion**

Films exist within a contextualized reality, whether they aim to faithfully mimic the many facets of such reality or not. Through audiovisual elements and the power of storytelling, cinema – and art in general – have the ability to recreate historical moments and ascribe them different values and meanings, depending on the approach given to the topic. For that reason, films have the power to not only perpetuate stigmas but also create new images and shape new worldly beliefs, even if that means resisting established values and forcing a rupture with the sense of normality. One of the main goals of horror films, then, would be to play with the fears and anxieties that threaten the social order by violating the boundaries of what is understood as conventional. The portrayal of women in such productions can thus be observed as conditioned to the cultural elements that determine the gender roles within a given society; and one of the most significant elements of social control is the body.

The depiction of the female body in cultural productions is connected to moral concepts, reflecting the social structures in which that body exists. In that sense, films have the power of reinforcing the existing power dynamics by simultaneously depicting symbols of male authority and female passivity. It is important to note that such power dynamics were constructed over an extensive historical background that established the patriarchal order as dominant in a social, religious and political level.

*The Witch* is set in a time when religious values were not only a significant part of people's lives, but also institutionalized. Ideas perpetuated by the church tended to be enforced as a legal code when, in the 17<sup>th</sup> as well as in previous centuries, the institution of the Church was ruled exclusively by men, which inevitably led to the establishment of a gendered hierarchy that dictated social practices. In this context, American Puritanism was based on a patriarchal society that enforced strict family discipline and, as a result, conservative values through rigorous political and religious codes.

Women occupied a particularly delicate position within this structure because their bodies were considered weaker, which in consequence rendered them more susceptible to being disrupted by evil. Said evil brought by the "influence of the devil" can be herein understood as any sort of behavior considered rebellious and threatening to the patriarchal structures of a conservative society. Thus, the image of the witch was constructed around female insubordination in a way that it created an overall consensus that most witches were women. In reality, the propagation of such supernatural myths can be understood as a tool to justify the persecution of women whose characters were considered disruptive, and transformed the witch-hunting phenomenon in a show for the consequences of transgressive behaviors. By creating the collective idea that certain female actions were condemnable and should be punished, the power hierarchy was preserved through the social control of women and, therefore, stripped them of all political power.

In sight of this connection between immoral behavior and witchcraft, the role of sexuality is particularly significant. Women were seen not only as naturally more sexual than men and therefore more prone to "sins of lust" (according to the *Malleus*), but also as channels of embodied temptation, perverting the minds of otherwise virtuous men. It can be argued that the fear and anxiety that derive from unbridled female sexuality (Broedel) is due

to the threat a sexually liberated women poses to the male-dominated social structures and, consequently, such threat is often transformed into elements of horror and superstition.

Although the witch-hunting craze occurred between the 15<sup>th</sup> and 17<sup>th</sup> centuries, the stigma on female sexuality and the objectification of women's bodies remains a contemporary issue. The image of women demands control in a patriarchal society for being a representation of the sexual differences between men and women and, thus, of the unequal power relations between genders. The depiction of the female body as connected to evil, as can be particularly observed in horror movies, deals with the fear of female sexuality by either punishing or fetishizing women (Mulvey 63). Whereas the first neutralizes its threatening nature, the second objectifies and subdues the body under the gratification of the male gaze.

The concept of women persecuted for witchcraft may seem distant from reality, but it is important to highlight how many of the stigmas perpetuated on women's bodies and sexuality partially adheres from a historical regulation of women's behavior and liberties in a way that, to this day, feminist movements still fight for women having complete autonomy over their bodies when it comes to sexual and reproductive rights.

This "Puritan legacy" disseminated in Early America still lingers in modern cultural productions in the way images around ideals of gender roles are constructed. As much as the twentieth century allowed women the opportunity to produce culture and gender in a different way than in previous history, there is still a male predominance in cultural production that is perceived as standard, because these hierarchical powers are perpetuated by "those who fail to recognize either that they submit to it or that they exercise it" (Nochlin 1988, 23 in Lorber 112).

The sovereignty of this patriarchal structure can be observed in the symbolic ending of the film herein analyzed. Throughout the entire movie we watch as Thomasin struggles

with the oppression of both her family structure and the behavioral codes imposed by the asceticism of Puritan society in a way that, when she disengages herself from all these external burdens, the ending may be interpreted as simultaneously tragic and happy. On the one hand, she becomes a liberated woman who assumes her own sexuality regardless of social impositions. On the other hand, she becomes the antagonist by switching her submission from one male figure of authority to another.

This ending acquires an ironic undertone when recalling Federici's argument on the deeply rooted patriarchal structures in that "even when in revolt against human and divine law, women ha[ve] to be portrayed as subservient to a man" (187). It is by distancing herself from all the oppressive dynamics of her pious life that Thomasin becomes the very monster we were led to fear the whole film. However, even after rejecting the strict values she had been taught to follow her whole life, she is still not entirely free. She does not simply walk into the woods and decides to join the witches' Sabbath on her own accord - she has to come to Black Phillip first. The devil is the one to grant her powers and even guide her hand when signing the book, thus portraying her not as autonomous, but still as a subject.

Such depiction is in accordance with the Puritan belief that witches were neither dangerous nor powerful in themselves, but through the devil who owned their bodies to bid his evil as he pleased. Women, then, were simply a vessel through which the devil – commonly upheld as being male – could act. The main difference between sinners and witches was that sinners were victims of evil molestations, whereas witches made a conscious choice of siding with evil.

In conclusion, the idea that women cannot be entirely independent is so frequently associated with traditional social structures that even when women are accused of forsaking their morals in favor of "sinful liberties", they are still dependent on the permission of a dominant male figure to do so. That is, even when the female character represents the

complete opposite of the traditional values imposed by a heteronormative patriarchal society and is, therefore, a symbol of social transgression, she remains bound to a figure of male authority.

For future studies, it would be interesting to investigate how the female figure is portrayed in relation to her search for individual freedom in other films of the Gothic genre. What would be the implications of maintaining the woman bound to a male character? Does it mean that this sort of female freedom concerning both her sexuality and her autonomy outside the dominance of a male figure is never socially acceptable? Does that imply a choice between living under the restraints of a patriarchal society and forsaking the social sphere altogether? In order to be truly free, women must accept the role of monsters? Considering today's cultural productions, have these ancient views on women's bodies changed or is the female body still a taboo?

Burning women at the stake may be socially unacceptable in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, but other forms of control have been enforced in order to preserve the social hierarchy dominated by the patriarchal order. In that sense, is it possible to affirm that the sexually liberated woman is accepted nowadays, or is female freedom still a form of sin?



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