
(Un)making of the Witch Archetype: *Suspiria* Then and Now

(A Marxist-Feminist Study of Witchcraft in Horror Films)

Kriti Bisht

Postgraduate Scholar
Department of English, University of Delhi, New Delhi, India
E-mail address: kritibisht15@gmail.com

Abstract

Visual culture has shaped the popular imagination and public consensus more powerfully than any other medium over the last few decades. Horror is one such powerful genre that renders spectacular our latent prejudices. The figure of the 'witch' in its oft-repeated conventions has sustained in popular culture through the many characteristic meanings associated with it. The exploration of this gendered identity reveals the matrix of power within which the gender binary functions. Horror evoked is that of the collapse of the numerous binaries, of civil and vulgar, masc and femme, and so on. The two *Suspiria* movies, set forty years apart, when placed against each other, present this trope in its extensive cultural developments over time. Due to the two drastically different endings, one could sense the absolute contempt for the witches driving the first movie, while a willful disambiguation surrounds the second one. Here, horror does not evoke contempt because there is a simultaneous sense of likeness with the 'coven of witches' and their self-sustaining, wholly female community that revitalizes gender roles. The dilemma this evokes makes visible the borders that mitigate the gendered identity and provides an imaginary possibility for porous borders that allow the women to step over the social threshold. This view presents a counter narrative to the historical process of female vilification that turned their affective powers into evil psychic tendencies. By reclamation of the age-old tropes that sustained this castigation, the movie recapitulates this metaphor of a witch, defying the status quo with its perverted powers, functioning outside the guilt and shame-oriented working of the world. In this paper I will closely analyze how the portrayal of the female psyche in the psychological horror genre has changed over time by comparing the 1977 Italian giallo *Suspiria* with its 2018 radical rendition.

Keywords: Horror films; Feminism; Witchcraft; *Suspiria*; *Guadganino*

The developments in the horror movie genre and its intensive analyses over the last few decades has led to a dynamic understanding of how our cultural anxieties are veiled under spectacular tropes. By comparing the two films, my attempt is to mark the two ends of this development, in the ways that it has contributed to the growth of contemporary gender discourse. Regarding the witch as a category of a radical and subversive capacity accommodating an independent female identity and the threat it poses to the male symbolic order as the central point of exploration, I begin by analyzing Argento's original as laying down these conventions in the new media format and exploiting the popular imagination. As I move on to the 2018 remake, *Guadganino* will be seen to deconstruct the trope. Through this comparative lens, I will not only be able to analyze how female identities in popular media mitigate the historical baggage of inherited stereotypes but also re-evaluate the radical potential of a medium and genre that is excessively trope-dependent.

The catalog of horror films comes with the built-in mechanism for jump scares and adrenaline rush of an unnatural order holding addictive tendencies. Built on this logic of the spectacular, and not systematic cause and effect, the genre holds immense inventive capacity. It claims no moral message, neither chooses political sides. It aims at nothing but spectacle. Inevitably, as the 'medium carries the message', through its tropes and analogies, it gives way to a layered understanding of the world intricately coded within these media productions. Horror identifies and nags at the absolute other in distinctive capacity, becoming a powerful medium for conducting a socio-political breakdown.

Two *Suspirias* Compared

Coming to the two films, Argento's film presents all the tropes attributed to the genre in the most spectacular, genre-defining way; while *Guadganino* imposed ambiguity excels in revealing the subversive capacity of the genre. A noted difference along the plotline of the two films is that while in the first one the movie climaxes in the protagonist Susie destroying the coven; Susie in the second movie is eventually discovered as head of the cult. This fact alone clearly distinguishes the motives of the two works presented. Apparent in the pictures here is also how Argento's work is characterized by a realm of excess and lack of restraint. Critic McDonagh observes how "Argento seizes upon the conventions of a disreputable genre and imbues them with a manic energy" (6). Drawing comparisons from the two pallets here, we can

assess how our implicit demands from the spectacle have changed over time. Our oversaturated vision, due to constant media consumption, is more unsettled by a bleak and cold presentation of reality than a bright fumigation of red and blue. The cultural proclivity for violence and the demarcation of the other in the popular imagination has however remained consistent. With the viewer seeking all the gore in greater graphic intensity, the voyeurism is only aesthetically layered, if not more prominent.

Women in Horror: The Witch and the Angel

Transcendent and subversive female symbolic orders have continued to co-exist as horror movie tropes. The domestic angel in contrast to the subversive witch, one gratifying the man, the other gratifying the self. Both categorizations eventually serve to place women outside the natural order, leading to complete erasure of their subjectivities. Inconstancy in character is therefore a radical assertion, as Gilbert and Gubar write. The ambiguity in Guadagnino's remake converges the two roles in a convoluted fashion. Susie, the virginal woman, turns out to be mother suspirium, the head of the coven of witches; while Madam Blanc as a witch becomes a mother figure to Susie and occasions the rebirth of her character through dancing. The movie thus humanizes all evil, domesticates the witch and turns subversive, the angel, both mutually building a community of care, bringing about a well-balanced critique of all gendered experiences.

Embodying the Body politic: Dancing in the Markos Dance Company

Dancing constitutes a major part of the second film. The act of dancing is that of the body giving in to absolute objectification, surrendering to the gaze. The choreographer Damien Jalett specifically intended to snatch this primacy given to the audience and its gaze by envisioning the dance as an internal experience. He points out that the inspiration for Madam Blanc's character, German artist Mary Wigman, was one of the first expressionist artists following the conviction that "dance should have the courage to be ugly" ("*Suspiria*-Featurette," 00:02:00 - 00:03:00). Thus, completely undoing the power of spectacle, a body indifferent to its appeal to the audience overcomes normative expectations. The ballet from Argento's film transforms into a bizarre and passionate contemporary dance form in Guadagnino's version, presenting the women in a "ritualized trance" while holding remarkable control on their movement (Lodge).

Bojana Cvejic steers the discourse on what in German academia is proposed as "conceptual dance". In its analysis, she writes, one should "minimize dancing as physical in favor of mental labor and thought" (Giersdorf). Caught at a juncture where

the body finds itself divided between deification and condemnation in the practice of its femininity, the essential sense of which is calibrated by forces of patriarchy, the adulterated female body attempts to reinvent itself in the subversive space of the mind. Sex and sensuality thus remain terminally attached to the dancing.

Mark Franko uses the notion of "total technobody" to describe the body of the dancer, negotiating signs and physical demands to produce a body that is neither the body of the individual nor of what it represents (Lepecki 7). The new body emerges through dancing, re-corporealizing an ideal. In the popularly gory scene in the movie, Olga's body disintegrates in a closed mirror chamber as Susie's dances away. Susie's energy linked to Olga's painful destruction further challenges our limited purview of what the dance in the movie really stands for. While Susie develops as a dancer, Olga stands for the compromise in creation of this ideal. The conundrum inherent in the idea of bodies as vessels or sources of energy and their idealistic imaginations at the verge of self-destruction, so as to overcome its physicality while remaining grotesquely tied to it, encompasses the visual horror and mystical force of the movie.

A Marxist Understanding of the Archetype

The processes of spectacularizing and mechanization of the body go hand in hand. Silvia Federici in her book *Caliban and the Witch* defines the figure of the witch as "the embodiment of a world of female subjects that emergence of capitalism had to destroy: the heretic, the healer, the disobedient wife, the woman who dared to live alone" (10). In Argento's *Suspiria*, the protagonist Susie's naive question about what it means to be a witch is answered with the stereotype very telling of this phenomenon. It is a woman with immense knowledge and power, utilizing it only to do harm. It is imperative to enquire what this proposed harm is to reveal the mechanism that paints female knowledge as a threat.

Federici even traces the practice of witch-hunting back to the rise in capitalism. It was a period not only of land enclosures but also the enclosure of knowledge systems into systematic categories, commemorating the ones within the system and disregarding other systems of knowledge as myth and superstition. Women deemed witches were a threat to these structural changes because they provided possibilities for alternative communities and sustenance practices. The doctor at one point compares the coven of witches to Reich's *Insignia*, pointing out at the extent to which rituals and delusions drive all actions in a society. But while the generational knowledge of these women is historically clamped down as taboo, superstition and sorcery; the rituals of the Reich were justified through logic and strategy. The witch as a social figure is immensely positively depicted in Guadagnino's version. Susie is told

how Madam Blanc "kept the dance company alive through the war, when the Reich just wanted women to shut off their minds and keep their uteruses open" (00:20:00 - 00:23:00).

Conclusions

Over the last few years, the distinctive turn towards reclaiming the convention has a lot of female protagonists in the position of "the last girls" turn back to the supposed evil. This could be seen in films like *Midsummer* by Ari Aster and *The Witch* by Robert Eggers, among many others. This does the work of collapsing the boundary between the angel and the monster, liberating both, by demystifying and humanizing them. These movies end with a celebration of freedom by the protagonists, a sense of relief at long last. With the final plot twist, they don't emerge as conventional heroines that bring things back to order and reinstate the status quo, but submit to the chaos marking a rebirth of their character. More explicitly, this denies the audience a conventional closure. There lies no explanation for a moment like this because the sense of this ending precisely lies in the collapse of logic. Here we witness the breakdown of the superficial logic of choices handed down to women. It ends with both a moment of consolation and confrontation in our recognition with the protagonist. To realize how similar the instincts of the "other" are to ours. This emerging plot device eventually does point at the building of a new convention over the debris of an old one, being based on the post-modernist characterization of self-critique and disjunctive narrative.

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Author's bio-note

Kriti Bisht is a postgraduate scholar holding a Masters degree in English from University of Delhi. Her research interests include cultural and media studies, as well as myth, religion and anthropology. Particularly intrigued by visual art mediums like film and theater, she wishes to explore the socio-cultural practices that evolved parallel to them.
