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The Witch's Body as a Narrative and Symbolic Tool

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Abstract: This paper aims to propose an exploration of the corporeality of witches insofar as it has been used as a medium or nexus for narratives, or as a symbolic sign in various artistic forms and arrangements. The starting point is the highlighting of an antithesis, which is permanently nuanced and overcome in the long evolution of culture, namely between the beauty of young witches and the ugliness of old ones. A first section of the article focuses on painting, looking at works by Baldung Grien, Salvator Rosa, Frans Francken, Luis Ricardo Falero. A second section looks at the corporeal duality that characterizes witchcraft and its resolution in synthesis in Vasile Voiculescu's short story *Magical Love*. The last section is devoted to cinematographic works and how they have incorporated in their complex visual and textual narratives an ancient representational and iconographic tradition with roots in Renaissance and Baroque painting and in the literature of Greco-Latin Antiquity.

Keywords: witches, body, narration, symbolic, visual arts, literature, cinema.

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Introductory words

If one looks at how witches have been represented throughout European history, one discovers certain significant constants both anthropologically and artistically. In this article, we start from the premise that artistic representations are worthy of study rather than other types of representations because they condense very well the ideas, beliefs and social practices that have been linked to a particular topic over time. Let's take witch stories, for example. Whether one refers to fairy tales, cartoons, painting and photography, children's literature, fantasy, and horror films, one will notice a particular attention paid to the appearance and corporeality of witches, the transformations they undergo, etc. The witch's body is a revealer of phantasms and a highly effective artistic sign, a fundamental support for all essential stories, and can therefore be defined as a narrative and symbolic tool, regardless of the type of art in which one encounters it. The body of the witch tells something by its mere presence, by its simple semiotic inscription in a text or in an image: it is vital to understand these meanings, these complex narrations by crossing a great multitude of points of view. In the following paragraphs, we will be more concerned with some cases taken from the visual arts, literature, and cinema.

The European cultural tradition – rooted in Greco-Latin Antiquity – describes the body of witches[2] in a dualistic perspective, insisting on two poles. On the one hand, there is the beauty of Circe[3], who seduced Odysseus and his companions to the point of making them forget their way back to Ithaca, while on the other hand there is the ugliness that Horace attributed to his favorite witch, Canidia, who appears in several *Epodes* and *Satires* (Epodes XVII, Satire VIII of Book I, Satire I of Book II, Satire VIII of Book II)[4].

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[2] Sarah Ferber, "Body of the Witch," in *Encyclopedia of Witchcraft. The Western Tradition*, Volume 1 A-D, edited by Richard M. Golden, 131-133. ABC-Clio, 2006.

[3] Ioan Pop-Curşeu, "Circé à l'écran: portraits d'une sorcière séduisante ou la force de l'Eros," in *Etudes comparatives sur la sorcellerie. Anthropologie, cinéma, littérature, arts visuels* (Cluj-Napoca: Școala Ardeleană, 2021), 25-53.

[4] Ellen Oliensis, "Canidia, Canicula, and the Decorum of Horace's *Epodes*," in *Horace: Odes and Epodes*, Edited by Michèle Lowrie (Oxford University Press, 2009), 160-187; Christine Walde, "Canidia and Erichto: Snapshots from their Postclassical Life", in *Ancient Magic and the Supernatural in the Modern Visual and Performing Arts*, edited by Filippo Carlà and Irene Berti (London, Oxford, New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2015), 119-134.

Canidia is a hideous old hag and her face is "fierce;" she hides her body under a black dress, walks barefoot and has "untidy hair entwined with little snakes" (Epodes, V)[5]. This opposition, which implies both aesthetic, narrative, and psycho-sociological issues – briefly described in the conclusions of this article –, was taken up again in the Middle Ages, but especially during the witch hunt (15th-18th centuries[6]), in demonology treatises written by Institoris and Sprenger, Jean Bodin, Pierre de Lancre, Guazzo, and in visual representations. The body of the witches is depicted either as very beautiful, seductive, sexually attractive, endowed with all physical perfections, or as monstrously ugly: old[7], full of wrinkles, pustules, with a slimy appearance, exorbitant eyes, a big nose, rotten or sharp teeth. We will see the reasons for this representational tradition, developed by cinema, at the end of this journey, which will therefore respect a historical and thematic criterion for the presentation of materials.

1. Visual arts

In the course of time, certain artists have insisted on the beauty of witches, but without occasionally neglecting its opposite (Albrecht Dürer, the Pre-Raphaelites, Clovis Trouille) or on their ugliness (Goya, Fuseli), depending on the messages they wanted to convey to the public and which were often situated between the glorification of magic, seen as a technique capable of offering mastery of universal correspondences, and its condemnation

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5 Horace, *Odes and Epodes*, Edited and translated by Niall Rudd (Cambridge & London: Harvard University Press, 2004), 280-286.

6 Nicole Jacques-Chaquin, "Représentation du corps sorcier à l'âge Classique," *Revue des sciences humaines*, n° 198 (1983): 51-68; Yves Pelicier, "Le Corps de la sorcière", in *Le Corps à la Renaissance: Actes du XXXe colloque de Tours, 1987* (Paris, Aux amateurs de livres, 1990), 139-45.

7 On the question of witches' social, marital status, and old age, several sources can be consulted: Alan D. J. Macfarlane, *Witchcraft in Tudor and Stuart England* (New York: Harper and Row Publishers, 1970); Edward Bever, "Old Age and Witchcraft in Early Modern Europe," in *Old Age in Preindustrial Society*, ed. by Peter Stearns (New York: Holmes and Meier, 1982), 150-190; Deborah Willis, *Malevolent Nurture* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1995); Alison Rowlands, "Witchcraft and Old Women in Early Modern Germany," *Past and Present*, n° 173, nov. (2001): 50-89.

in the name of Christian morality or Enlightenment philosophy. More important than these rather clear choices of some painters, there is a series of composite representations or combined iconographic types, where ugliness and beauty are set in opposition, while instituting a kind of strange synergy and dialogue between them. We will focus on some of these complex oppositional compositions below, trying to contextualize and explain them as best we can.

One of the great artists of German Renaissance, Hans Baldung Grien, seems to have had a fascination with witches, to whom he dedicated several works, distributed in time between 1510 and 1544 (paintings, drawings, engravings)[8]. These works tell complex stories through the skillful articulation of meaningful visual elements. Baldung Grien knows how to use spatial relationships and oppositions to great visual effect. Thus, in most of his compositions or at least in those that have the strongest visual impact, beautiful young witches appear in opposition to ugly old ones. They relate to each other, they have relationships of power or collaboration, they interact in many possible ways, which makes Baldung Grien's paintings highly translatable into narrative and symbolic patterns.

A woodcut dating from 1510, with versions in München, Staatliche Graphische Sammlung[9], in the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston[10], and in the British Museum[11] represents one of Baldung Grien's most famous witchcraft

[8] See these works, accompanied by extensive comments, in Charles Zika, *The Appearance of Witchcraft. Print and Visual Culture in Sixteenth-Century Europe* (London & New York: Routledge, 2007), 10, 14, 33, 71, 79, 80, 82, 83, 85 and *passim*. An interpretation of the sexual signification of these works can be found in Charles Zika, *Exorcising our Demons. Magic, Witchcraft and Visual Culture in Early Modern Europe* (Leiden & Boston: Brill, 2003), 237-267. See other relevant interpretations: Linda C. Hults, "Baldung and the Witches of Freiburg: The Evidence of Images," *Journal of Interdisciplinary History*, Vol. 18, No. 2. Autumn (1987): 249-276; Margaret A. Sullivan, "The Witches of Durer and Hans Baldung Grien," *Renaissance Quarterly*, vol. 53, nr. 2 Summer (2000): 333-401; Claire Sandberg, "Boil and Bubble and Male Trouble: The Visual Representation of Masculine Anxieties in 16th Century Witchcraft Prints," *Renaissance Reframed*, 28 Oct. 2020, https://renaissancereframed.com/2020/10/28/boil-and-bubble-and-male-trouble/.

[9] Viorica Guy Marica, *Baldung Grien* (Bucharest: Meridiane, 1976), 31, 51-54.

[10] Charles Zika, *The Appearance of Witchcraft*, 10.

[11] https://www.britishmuseum.org/collection/object/P_1852-0612-105 (accessed 27.02.2023).

scenes. Four witches sit on the ground beside a dry tree trunk, focused on a pot in which a magic potion is boiling, filling the atmosphere with smoke and steam. The two in the foreground appear to be still young, though strong-bodied, but the other two are stranger. The first, an old woman with her hair unfurled and her body bare, holds up with her hands a strip of cloth and a platter on which animal remains seem to lie, and the second is so strange that she looks more like a mask[12] than a human being, even a decrepit one. Amidst the steam and smoke, a goat's head can also be seen. The most interesting witch, however, is another one, flying above the others on a goat, but facing the animal's tail. She is young, beautiful, muscular, with very long, curly, unfurled hair, and in her hands she holds a fork with two horns between which is a bowl of potion, from the steam of which a desperate human face seems to rise. With this woodcut the spectators find themselves amid Sabbatical debauchery.

In a chalk drawing by Hans Baldung Grien, dated 1514, kept in the Albertina Museum in Vienna and entitled *New Year's Greeting with Three Witches*[13], one sees a group of women in twisted positions full of erotic allusions. One of the women is crouched on the ground, without her face or breasts visible, her posterior turned brazenly towards the spectators. The two other women, standing, seem to dominate and crush her with their authority, especially since one of them has her right foot resting on the shoulder of her companion. These two witches form an extremely interesting couple. The one on the right, young and beautiful, has firm and voluptuously rounded breasts. Moreover, she holds her left hand (and the symbol is transparent) in front of her vagina, while with her right hand she lifts a small container in which is probably boiling a love and death potion. The other witch, the one on the left, the old one, has sagging and flaccid breasts, with large nipples. The flesh is withered, the skin is wrinkled, and the vaginal region inspires disgust and horror, because the flesh has lost all its firmness. Jean Palou, a researcher of Western witchcraft, makes a distinction between the visual representation of the ugly witch and that of the beautiful magician,

[12] Ioan Pop-Curșeu, Ștefana Pop-Curșeu, "The Mask of the Witch: from Ritual to Carnival and Theatre," *Studia Universitatis Babeș-Bolyai. Dramatica*, vol. 65, nr. 1 (2020): 17-50, DOI:10.24193/subbdrama.2020.1.01, https://dramatica.ro/index.php/j/article/view/29

[13] https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Baldung_hexen_ca1514.jpg (accessed 06.02.2023).

in his book *La Sorcellerie*. This distinction should, in fact, be subject to nuance and criticism, but nevertheless Palou's considerations on the representation of the witch's breast remain interesting: small, thin, and round in the case of the young, drooping, and ugly in the case of the old. In many cases, the breast comes in opposition with the belly and the lower abdomen, monstrous and profaned, expression of the horror that maternity causes to witches, but also clear symbol of the satanic births, because these damned women usually give birth to the agents of Satan[14].

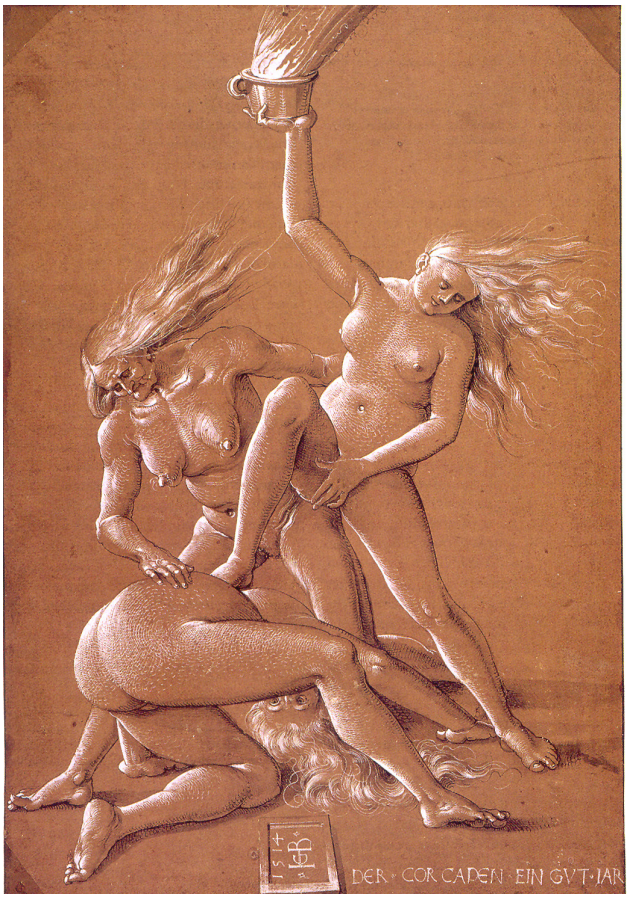

Fig. 1: Hans Baldung Grien, *New Year's Greeting with Three Witches*, 1514

[14] Jean Palou, *La Sorcellerie* (Paris, PUF, "Que sais-je?", 1957).

The painter Frans Francken II (1581-1642) was very much concerned with witchcraft, to which he dedicated several important paintings which could be grouped into two main categories: those called *The Witches' Kitchen* (with three slightly different versions) and those usually called *The Witches' Sabbath* (with three basic versions). The most significant painting for the study of corporeality seems to us to be the one preserved in the Staatsgalerie Neuburg in Bavaria[15]. Here one can find the largest cluster of witches' bodies, in various poses and performing various actions. One is riding a broom and the spectators can only half see her flying through the chimney. Others are brewing filters or potions or reading from forbidden books. In this painting by Frans Francken, the viewers can also identify the biggest accumulation of naked bodies, which allows an analysis of anatomical details. The old witches have masculinized faces or animalistic figures, their postmenopausal bodies

Fig. 2: Frans Francken II, *The Witches' Sabbath*

[15] https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:The_witches%27_Sabbath,_by_Frans_Francken_II.jpg (accessed 10.02.2023).

are grotesque, while the young witches exude attraction and create fascination. In the distance, a beautiful, fleshy witch, who appears to be asleep, is lifted into the air by two devilish figures clearly inspired by Hieronymus Bosch's nightmarish creatures. Those who are dressed are already preparing to undress. In the foreground, one of them, softly beautiful and dressed in a sumptuous silk dress, slowly unfurls her blonde hair in a very sensual gesture. Just behind her is another splendid witch, even more naked, in a sort of spatial progression to the one being lifted into the air by demons.

The Italian artist Salvator Rosa (1615-1673) distinguishes himself among his contemporaries by the constancy and naturalism that he put in painting witches. Salvator Rosa's paintings are part of an allegorical tradition specific to Renaissance and Baroque. In a series of four circular works (*tondi*), dating from 1645-1649 and kept in The Cleveland Museum of Art[16], he combines allegorical depictions of moments of the day with scenes of witchcraft, focusing on a fantastic and terrifying atmosphere. The starting point for these paintings is to be found in a poem by Rosa, *La Strega* (*The Witch*), written in 1645-1646, as Luigi Salerno shows: "In these paintings, Rosa sought to ennoble his realism by reconciling it with a generic allusion to literature."[17] In the morning scene[18], a beautiful young witch sits on a rock, holding a sword in her right hand, and appears to pierce the mouth of a giant frog. Behind them, two gigantic birds, but belonging to no known species, rise ominously, alongside other fantastic figures, while to the lower right, in the background, the sky glows red with the light of dawn. Luigi Salerno and Ira Kohn show that this painting "represents the witch as a beautiful woman, that is, the type preferred in the Italian tradition – as proved by all the images of Circe from Dosso Dossi to Castiglione"[19].

In the daytime scene, projected against a landscape that seems almost idyllic, in the foreground an old, naked witch with messy white hair and sagging breasts sits astride a giant owl. In her left hand she holds a broom,

[16] https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/Category:Paintings_by_Salvator_Rosa_in_the_Cleveland_Museum_of_Art (accessed 27.02.2023).

[17] Luigi Salerno (and Ira Kohn, translator), "Four Witchcraft Scenes by Salvator Rosa," *The Bulletin of the Cleveland Museum of Art*, Vol. 65, No. 7, Sep. (1978): 225-231 [230].

[18] https://www.clevelandart.org/art/1977.37.1 (accessed 27.02.2023).

[19] Luigi Salerno (and Ira Kohn, translator), 228.

and with her right she drips an unfamiliar liquor over a large, pot-bellied lizard. Three other witches, also old, ugly, and grey-haired, clustered on the left side of the *tondo* also link their incantations to the lizard lying belly up. Surprisingly, the main witch has a piece of cloth of a deep, melancholy yellow, which was no doubt her dress.

In the evening scene, three witches (one of whom we guess is prettier than the others), huddled around a fire, perform spells, creating what appears to be a homunculus or operating on a wax statuette[20]. One of the witches, old and grey-haired, holds a mirror turned towards the audience. Above this group, a monstrous skeleton, wrapped in a piece of red cloak, holds a sandglass in its right hand, an allegorical object dear to Baroque tradition. Here, the hourglass signifies the inexorable passage of time and the fact that the witch's beautiful body grows old and decays. In the night scene[21], a few travelers wandering through a forest stumble across witch-made charms in the middle of the road. One of the pilgrims, armed with a wand and dressed in what appears to be priestly garb, tries to fend off the attack of a monstrous and indistinct being. Our interpretation differs from Luigi Salerno's, who sees this male character as a magician[22].

The Spanish artist Luis Ricardo Falero created a very interesting witchcraft painting, signed, and dated 1878, which is currently in a private collection in Italy. As the painter is not well known and information about him is scarce, it is quite difficult to decide whether this painting should be called *Witches Going to their Sabbath* or *The Dream of Faust*[23]. Since it is a

[20] The interpretation that sees a wax statuette in this painting belongs to Luigi Salerno (and Ira Kohn, translator), 228-229.

[21] https://www.clevelandart.org/art/1977.37.4 (accessed 27.02.2023).

[22] Luigi Salerno (and Ira Kohn, translator), 229.

[23] Title retained by many online reproductions, including the one on Wikipedia http://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/d/d3/Witches_going_to_their_Sabbath_%281878%29%2C_by_Luis_Ricardo_Falero.jpg (accessed 05.02.2023). On the German version of Wikipedia, one finds the title *Walpurgisnacht. Der Aufbruch der Hexen*. A site specializing in realist and neo-classical painting, Art Renewal Center, which reproduces 42 works by Falero mentions the title *Vision of Faust* https://www.artrenewal.org/artworks/luis-ricardo-falero/vision-of-faust/29361 (accessed 05.02.2023). As for Wikipedia, *Faust's Dream* is another painting that contains many feminine nudes, cf. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Luis_Ricardo_Falero#/media/File:Faust's_Dream,_by_Luis_Ricardo_Falero.jpg

modern painting, the accents and nuances have changed. This magical scene is only a pretext for the artist to paint beautiful naked women, placed in a circular composition. Their postures, on brooms or on a goat, are most expressive. The bodies are arched in such a way as to highlight the shapes, especially the rounded thighs and pointed breasts, with clearly marked nipples. However, Falero does not forget, in this aerial debauchery, a crucial element of a centuries-old iconographic tradition: the ugly witch. In the center of the painting, towards the bottom of the composition, an old woman holds a gaunt hand on the rump of one of her young and beautiful companions. Her sagging breasts have lost all attraction and her face offers a condensation of monstrosity. Her hooked nose falls over thin lips, from which a tooth emerges, the only one perhaps that the witch still has. The eyes are bloodshot and haggard, like those of a vampire, while deep horizontal wrinkles bar the forehead. Gray hair ruffles in disorder on her head, in contrast to the profusion of rich, wispy hair, blond, red, or brown, with which Falero fills the visual space of his painting. In addition, her pelvis is wrapped in a purple cloth, in order to hide the ravages of time on her private parts, which young witches both exhibit and hide, with supreme carelessness. Towards the bottom of her back hangs a disheveled black cat, looking straight at the viewer with wicked yellow eyes. This ugly old witch is a surprising sign in the gigantesque visual orgy, as Falero was a specialist in beautiful neoclassical and Orientalist nudes. Besides this main painting, Falero is the author of several other paintings of witchcraft, including *The Witches Sabbath* (1880)[24], *The Witch, Painted on a Tambourine* (1882)[25], not to mention *The Enchantress* (1878)[26] or the many paintings of fairies and nymphs, where it is the plastic beauty of the bodies that is predominant.

(accessed 05.02.2023). On Art Renewal Center, the same painting is called, in French, *Le Rêve de Falero* https://www.artrenewal.org/artworks/luis-ricardo-falero/le-reve-de-falero/43044 (accessed 05.02.2023).

[24] https://www.artrenewal.org/artworks/luis-ricardo-falero/the-witches-sabbath/29360 (accessed 05.02.2023).

[25] https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/1/19/The_witch%2C_by_Luis_Ricardo_Falero.jpg (accessed 05.02.2023).

[26] https://www.artrenewal.org/artworks/luis-ricardo-falero/the-enchantress/29356 (accessed 05.02.2023).

In *Witches Going to their Sabbath*, the bodies of the witch-women tell two diametrically opposed stories, namely that of youth and beauty and that of old age and ugliness, which, however, flow from each other and interpenetrate more than one would like to admit at first sight. The question of sexuality might be the most significant bridge here, as the positioning of the old witch in Falero's painting states. Moreover, a film called *The Witches*, directed by Cyril Frankel (1966), seems to suggest that the older women get, the more inclined they are to witchcraft. Stephanie, the wicked witch in the film, says that witchcraft is an occupation taken up by older women as a substitute for sexuality, a "secret power when normal powers are failing"[27].

As a sort of provisional conclusion concerning the representation tradition in visual arts, it should be said that the art of painting enjoys multiplying the anatomical aspects of the witch's body, with a particular attention to details, supposed to fascinate or horrify the viewers.

2. Literature

Iubire magică (*Magical Love*) is a text written by the Romanian writer Vasile Voiculescu, a specialist in fantastic stories, in 1947. The story is framed as a narration-within-a-narration, and recounts a poet's adventure on holiday in a mountain village, where he accompanies a folklorist friend. The two set off from Bucharest with precise goals, which are not revealed from the start. The poet wants to rewrite a version of the Faustian myth, "Faust, part three, the epilogue in heaven", in which he takes Mephistopheles and the alchemist up to heaven, reversing the roles[28]. The ethnographer, equipped with all that field research entails, is concerned with beliefs, myths, magical practices, and everything that can be gathered in a village to compile its ethno-folkloric monograph. In the mountains, the two are hosted by a peasant who lives there only with his daughter-in-law, because the woman's

[27] Peter Shelley, *Grande Dame Guignol Cinema. A History of Hag Horror from* Baby Jane *to* Mother (Jefferson & London: McFarland & Company, 2009), 100.

[28] *Iubire magică* (*Magical Love*), in *Ultimul Berevoi. Povestiri II* (Bucharest: Editura pentru Literatură, 1966), 275.

husband, his son, is atoning for a crime committed out of jealousy. From the first signs of magic they stumble upon in the village (an old man chases fleas out of the house with a knife and incantations), the two main characters quarrel about the reality of magical phenomena: the poet takes a rationalist and critical view, while the folklorist argues that certain phenomena cannot and should not be explained rationally.

The poet, who uttered blasphemies against witchcraft, retires to work on Faust and concentrates on the character of Margaret, imagined far above Goethean ideas, and transported to heaven. At this very moment, without the poet having felt a thing, a beautiful girl appears before him, who introduces herself as Margaret, the daughter-in-law of their host... A consuming passion is unleashed in the soul of the poet, who is kept at a distance in the procession of Margaret's other admirers (including some grotesque figures, admirably described by Voiculescu), and cannot win her over with money, pleas, services rendered or the most unimaginable humiliations. The paroxysmal state that the poet experiences is compared to a "possession." In the meantime, the folklorist makes remarkable discoveries on the trail of a ballad. He tries to awaken his friend to reality, telling him that he is "bewitched," because Margaret had heard the curses "against the sorcerers and had taken revenge in this way"[29]. His attempts to awaken the poet to reality (be it a magical one) fail, however, because the lover remembers exactly what interests him in the theory of magic that his friend explains to him: namely that through spells he could influence Margaret's will and make her fall into his arms. With this obsessive image in mind, he agrees to be taken to the most powerful witch in the village: this woman is hunched and thin, her cheeks drawn in, her chin lifted, but her eyes are piercing like burning coals.

From the beginning, it rains with warnings: "Margaret is herself a witch," who "works only with charms and that's why men are crazy" about her, but, in reality, she is old and ugly[30]. In the face of the client's disregard, the witch begins to mutter a "spell," accompanied by practices described in detail by Voiculescu. The lover is blown in the cheek, then "down, under the groin,"

[29] *Iubire magică* (*Magical Love*), 286.
[30] *Iubire magică* (*Magical Love*), 288.

he is smoked with "a bunch of stinking weeds, mixed with hair torn from beasts," a four-pointed star is written with a knife on his chest – right next to his heart – and he is given a small piece of bone on which the old woman takes care to write a five-pointed star (a pentagram), of which one corner is turned downwards. He is advised to go back home without meeting anyone (an almost universal recommendation given to those going on or returning from magical expeditions) and to slip the charm onto her beloved's body. The instructions, followed to the letter by the poet, yield an unexpected result:

> In front of me was an undead woman, with eyes like twisted egg whites, slapped by heat; nose eaten by ulcers; scrunched cheeks sucked deep between the shaggy, festering gums. Her cleaved breasts hung like two empty bags, dry and wrinkled. Her ribs played like circles on a dismantled barrel. And in the basin, at the end of the leg bones, the spurred entrails hissed like venomous snakes, and the stench of death suddenly filled the world.[31]

In front of this terrifying revelation, the only solution open to the ex-lover is to flee; he leaps down the mountain and immediately leaves for Bucharest, forgetting his lover and his friend there. In the capital, he realizes that the witch had made "Margaret, like a spiteful woman, ugly," by breaking their waves instead of harmonizing them[32].

After listening to the account of this strange story from the poet's youth, one of the listeners – a doctor – enquires about the folklorist, asking what happened to him and what his name was. The poet, out of shame, severed all ties with the man who had taken him to the mountain, and even forgot his name. The doctor helps him to remember, revealing that he had treated a certain Teofil Kivu when he was a doctor "at the central hospice."

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[31] *Iubire magică* (*Magical Love*), 290. Translation ours. See the original description: "În faţa mea era o strigoaică, cu ochii de albuş de ou răscopt, plesnit de dogoare; nasul mâncat de ulcer; obrajii scofâlciţi se sugeau adânc între gingiile ştirbe şi puruiate. Sânii tescuiţi îi atârnau ca două pungi goale, uscate şi încreţite. Coastele îi jucau ca cercurile pe un butoi dogit. Şi în bazinul şoldiu, pe crăcanele oaselor picioarelor, măruntaiele spurcate clocoteau ca nişte şerpi veninoşi şi duhoarea morţii umplu deodată lumea."

[32] *Iubire magică* (*Magical Love*), 291.

The patient suffered from "an exciting-manic psychosis, with systematized delirium," speaking only of "spells, incantations" and "a charm that was cast on him." Death, "in terrible torments," put an end to his suffering: this story shakes the poet, who is certain that Margaret took revenge on at least one of the two townspeople who had made an irruption in the magical world and in her cortege of admirers. The doctor's explanations, which attribute Kivu's death to a "charged heredity," are not accepted by the poet, who is now willing to give the powers and substance of magic an indisputable reality[33]. Voiculescu's story, one of the best the author has written, is masterfully constructed: the plot is subtly woven, the narrative tension is skillfully controlled, the boundary between reality and fiction, or between reality and madness, always remains permeable, the erotic spells gain consistency and the magic of the style captivates the readers.

3. Cinema

Cinema – continuing the spirit of painting – develops and refines the iconographic tradition that presents witches either as very beautiful women or as women of extraordinary ugliness. Examples are abundant and one could cite dozens, if not hundreds, from horror movies, fantasy films, cartoons, comedies, etc. At first glance, filmmakers do not pursue very different goals from those of painters, but – on closer inspection – one discovers that cinema makes a significant contribution to the development of an ancient iconographic and symbolic system...

The ugliness of witches is exploited by filmmakers in many films, where it serves as a revelation of the wickedness and desire for destruction that animates these satanic creatures[34]. Italian director Dario Argento, in the so-called *Mothers Trilogy*, creates a series of witch figures that have remained

[33] *Iubire magică* (*Magical Love*), 292.

[34] This is also the case in theatre and dramatic literature, as shown in Ştefana Pop-Curseu, "Sorcières et sorcellerie dans le théâtre de Michel de Ghelderode," *Studia Universitatis Babeş-Bolyai, Dramatica*, nr. 1 (2007): 44-59.

iconic landmarks in the history of cinema[35]. In *Suspiria* (1977), he recounts the adventures of Susie Banion (Jessica Harper), a young American girl who comes to Europe to learn to dance and arrives at a school that hides a coven of witches who engage in sinister practices every night. The girl manages to destroy the sabbatical school by killing the old priestess Helena Markos, who has been surviving in a quasi-cadaveric form for a century in the center of a real labyrinth of rooms. At the end, when Susie has the courage to kill her, one discovers, with horror, the cheeks scratched with wrinkles, the flesh of the face green and glowing, where one can hardly distinguish the mouth from which comes a hoarse, metallic, inhuman voice. At the opposite of this sinister old hag are the witches in the film *The Third Mother* (2007). They are all young, beautiful, sexy, punk stylish, but with an evil that comes through in all their actions, as they are violent, perverse, and mean-spirited.

In Ridley Scott's *Legend* (1985), a fantasy film masterfully crafted, there is a fragment that presents the meeting of the hero Jack (Tom Cruise), who has gone to deliver the world from the grip of the Dark Spirit, with the witch Meg Mucklebones. The witch is a masterpiece of makeup, with her green, slimy skin, hooked nose, rare, sharp teeth, gnarled spidery fingers and menacing figure. The encounter takes place in a swamp emanating stinking miasma and giving off a terrifying atmosphere. The dialogue between Jack and Meg deserves transcription, as it plays on the antithesis between the apparent ugliness of the witch and her conviction that she is not without beauty, which the hero knows how to use to distract the creature's attention and pierce her vulnerable belly with his sword:

> *Meg Mucklebones*: What a fine fat boy you are, Jack!
> *Jack*: You don't really mean to eat me, do you, ma'am?
> *Meg Mucklebones*: Oh, indeed I do! [*she giggles*]
> *Jack*: That would be a shame because someone as fair and lovely as yourself, Miss Meg, deserves far better than scrawny me. Don't you think?

[35] Ioan Pop-Curșeu, "Dario Argento et la mère-sorcière: psychanalyse d'une image obsédante", *Studia Universitatis Babeș-Bolyai. Philosophia*, vol. 65, nr. 1 (2020): 19-37, DOI:10.24193/subbphil.2020.1.02, http://www.studia.ubbcluj.ro/download/pdf/philosophia/2020_1/03.pdf

Meg Mucklebones: Think me fair, do you, Jack?
Jack: All the heavenly angels must envy your beauty.
Meg Mucklebones: [*giggles*] What a fine meal you'll make, be the rest of you as sweet as your tongue![36]

As for beauty, the cinema brings accents unknown in the pictorial tradition, by developing the "sexy" and even "glamorous" dimension of the witch, starting with René Clair's film, *I Married a Witch* (1942), where Jennifer is described in the opening scene as "young, and beautifully fair. Fairer than all women that ever were.", continuing with Richard Quine's, *Bell, Book and Candle* (1958) and Griffin Dunne's *Practical Magic* (1998), and arriving at Anna Biller's *The Love Witch* (2016)[37]. This has been a trend that has run through the history of cinema, often barely nuanced, sometimes questioned, and criticized, but never losing interest altogether.

The aesthetic oppositions between ugliness and beauty, that we observed in painting and literature, are found in cinema, where they are often intersected by ethical oppositions at the level of narrative and symbolic structures. In this logic, which only takes up the main postulates of the Great Theory of Art, ugliness can only correspond to wickedness, evil, perversity, violence, and destruction, while beauty is associated with virtue, goodness, and their corollaries[38]. This kind of perspective is in the spotlight in fantasy movies or in films inspired by fairy tales, especially those made under the patronage of Disney and Pixar studios (*Snow White*, *The Little Mermaid*, *Rapunzel*, *The Emperor's New Groove*, *The Sword in the Stone*, *Brave*).

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[36] This fragment can be viewed at https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pOFQiB391Vc (accessed 18.02.2023).

[37] Heather Greene, *Lights, Camera, Witchcraft: A Critical History of Witches in American Film and Television* (Woodbury, Minnesota: Llewellyn Publications, 2021), *passim*.

[38] This association has been pointed out by a very good historian of witchcraft, Julian Goodare, *The European Witch-Hunt* (London & New York: Routledge, 2016), 275: "Accusers of witches frequently used phrases like 'old witch' or 'old hag'. Whether or not these women really were old, they were being assimilated to a stereotype that assumed that they were. The commonplace idea that old women were ugly was a logical component of misogynistic ideas about feminine 'vanity': young women were supposedly vain about their beauty, but soon they would be old and ugly. And, just as beauty was associated with virtue, ugliness was associated with wickedness."

In Victor Fleming's *The Wizard of Oz* (1939), the Witch of the West is ugly and evil and everyone in the audience remembers her greenish-pale face, while Glinda, the good witch of the North, is radiantly beautiful and blonde, which does not fail to seduce the male spectators. In *Harry Potter and the Deathly Hallows* (2010, 2011), Hermione Granger (Emma Watson), the beautiful and innocent young witch who is learning the secrets of white magic, is confronted by the violent and powerful Bellatrix Lestrange, whose name says both the warlike nature and the strangeness. This one, brilliantly played by Helena Bonham Carter, even if she is not particularly ugly, brings a touch of horror and darkness, maybe more disturbing than the direct physical grotesque.

The aesthetic opposition between ugliness and beauty is nuanced in many films, especially horror films, either by the disruption of ethical oppositions, or by the blurring of separating lines and boundaries. Often, ugliness is associated with goodness, while beauty is associated with extreme wickedness and irreversible moral decay. In Roger Corman's *The Undead* (1957), physical beauty hides a heart of stone, as the dapper Livia (Allison Hayes) will stop at nothing to take the man she loves, the knight Pendragon, while the old Meg Maud (Dorotthy Neumann) shows more humanity. Similarly, a whole series of contemporary beauties hide a vile character, when they personify all-powerful witches: Lena Headey as The Mirror Queen, in Terry Gilliam's *The Brothers Grimm* (2005), Tilda Swinton as Jadis the White Witch in Andrew Adamson's *The Chronicles of Narnia* (2005), Moran Atias, in the fundamental role of Dario Argento's *The Third Mother* (2007), and Emmy Rossum as Ridley Duchannes in Richard LaGravenese's *Beautiful Creatures* (2013). Charlize Theron as Ravenna, in Rupert Sanders' *Snow White and the Huntsman* (2012), as the beautiful and wicked witch, takes up the tradition instituted by Disney in the famous 1937 animation, *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs*.

This kind of sexy witch with a filthy character, imposed and developed by cinema, has greatly contributed to the blurring of aesthetic and moral ideas of contemporary spectators, in the same way that decadent art of the end of the 19th century did in its time, through the figure of the *femme fatale*.

But cinema brings another great novelty, because – thanks to its technical possibilities and astounding special effects – it was able to propose to the spectators exciting stories which bet on the *physical transformations* of witches. Beautiful bodies are transformed before our eyes into hideous masses: the skin cracks and is filled with cankers, the flesh rots and reveals frightening monsters of ugliness.

Barbara Steel, in Mario Bava's *The Mask of the Demon* (1960) is in a way at the origin of the transformational trend. She plays a princess, Asa Vajda, condemned for witchcraft in a largely implausible Moldavia of the 17th century. The Inquisition, absent in the Orthodox Christian principality of Moldavia, condemns Asa to wear a mask with sharp points on her face, which causes her enormous suffering. Two centuries later, Professor Kruvajan and his assistant, lost in the princess' castle, discover the tomb and inadvertently wake her up. We then see a moving face with tanned skin, with a demonic look, where the marks of the thorns of the mask are clearly visible, constituting real craters. It is under this aspect that Asa Vajda comes back to life and launches into vengeful actions.

Sam Raimi's *Oz, the Great and the Powerful* (2013) offers a more complicated structure in terms of physical appearance of the three witches, who revolve around the male hero, the one who will become the Wizard of Oz at the end of an initiatory journey. Glinda (Michelle Williams), the maid, is beautiful and blonde, as in Victor Fleming's iconic film, from which Raimi takes some iconographic patterns. Evanora (Rachel Weisz), the villain, is also beautiful, but not blonde! A dark dominance characterizes her appearances, whether it is the hair, the look, the makeup or the outfit. Theodora (Mila Kunis), as for her, from beautiful that she is at the beginning of the film, is transformed by jealousy into the wicked Witch of the West, with her unforgettable greenish face.

Similarly, in Tommy Wirkola's *Hansel and Gretel, Witch Hunters* (2013), there is the beautiful and good witch, despite a certain ominous aura, who helps the two heroes, Hansel (Jeremy Renner) and Gretel (Gemma Arterton), in their quest, but there are also a host of ugly and wicked witches, who can

sometimes assume fascinating appearances[39]. Many of them are bicephalous, crippled, hunchbacked, hairy, small, massive, shaggy, in a graphic unfolding of the many possible forms of corporeal monstrosity. Their leader, the great witch Muriel, sometimes presents the viewer with the sovereign beauty of Famke Janssen, the actress who plays her brilliantly, but often her skin fills with cracks that make the blue glow of the eyes or the bloody opening of the mouth more inhuman. Called to Augsburg to stop the child abductions that plague the city, the two legendary brothers are drawn into a journey through their own past. When they arrive at their childhood home in the woods, they learn from Muriel why their father abandoned them in the forest in olden times. He had resorted to this desperate solution in order to save them, because their mother, the beautiful Adrianna, a powerful "white" witch, was about to be attacked by the forces of darkness, who needed her heart to ensure invulnerability. Unable to defeat Adrianna, Muriel unleashes the townspeople against her, knowing that the good witch would never use her magical powers to harm them. So Adrianna is burned in front of her husband, who is hanged near their happy house. In this story where visual kitsch abounds, 3D technology creates a comprehensive and inclusive space, which fully engulfs the viewer's body, who then more easily accepts the narrative shifts and twists.

Despite the fact that it does not use any 3D technology, one of the most spectacular films in terms of physical transformations of the witch and the quality of special effects is probably *The Witches* by Nicholas Roeg (1990), an adaptation of the novel of the same title by Roald Dahl. Anjelica Huston masterfully plays the leader of a coven of witches, The Grand High Witch, whose goal is to eliminate all the children in England[40], after transforming

[39] Willem de Blécourt, "Chapter Twelve. The Witch in the Owen: Exploring *Hansel & Gretel Witch Hunters*," in *The Fairy-Tale Vanguard: Literary Self-Consciousness in a Marvelous Genre*, edited by Stijn Praet, Anna Kérchy (Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2019), 229-246.

[40] On the representations of the witches' infanticide impulse, see: Ioan Pop-Curşeu, "Le Meurtre de l'enfant dans les rituels de sorcellerie: commentaires sur un stéréotype culturel," *Revista de Etnografie şi Folclor / Journal of Ethnography and Folklore*, New Series, 1-2 (2011): 19-32; Ioan Pop-Curșeu, "Signes apocalyptiques: l'infanticide magique et l'enfant monstrueux," *Ekphrasis. Images, Cinema, Theatre, Media*, issue 2 (2012): 145-163; María Tausiet, "Chapter Nine Witchcraft as Metaphor: Infanticide and its Translations in Aragon

them into mice. The moment when she turns the skin of her face over is memorable, because the spectators can see the unspeakable. An aged and decomposed face appears, adorned with a long and pointed nose, which grows larger and larger. The noise that this enormous nose makes, forcing the limits of the skin, makes the audience shudder with fear. Emaciated ears stand out from a skull dotted here and there with sparse hair, as well as the chin of the witch, which is quite masculinized. Moreover, the whole body of the witch has become monstrous in the course of the transformation: the back is afflicted with a hump and the flesh has taken on a purulent and cadaverous, bloody and mummified aspect, with very effective nuances from the visual point of view. Fortunately, The Grand High Witch is half covered by the black dress inherited from ancient Canidia!

A new film adaptation of Roald Dahl's novel *The Witches*, directed by Robert Zemeckis, was released in 2020. Although the novel appeared in 1983, this second adaptation sets the action of the film in the 1960s in the US state of Alabama and uses black main characters. The director's claims about his intentions, which we transcribe below from a television interview, have been translated into practice with great accuracy in the way the witches hide their monstrosity and physical deformities beneath a perfectly elegant exterior:

> As it's indicated in the story, our witches are just normal looking, people who might be walking around on the street. But you have to find these specific clues that tip you off why they're a witch [...], they don't have hands, they have claws, so they have to hide their hands with gloves, and they don't have any hair, so they have to wear wigs to, you know, be incognito. So being able to design witches that have an evil glamour type of look rather than a traditional witch flying around on a broom look. [...]. The witches' wardrobe, which we didn't want to be traditional, black hat, witch stuff, so we went for something that we call Hitchcock glamour. So the witches have this kind of timeless, stylish type of diabolical costume.[41]

in the Sixteenth and Seventeenth Centuries," in *Languages of Witchcraft. Narrative, Ideology and Meaning in Early Modern Culture*, Edited by Stuart Clark (Houndmills: Macmillan Press, New York: St. Martin's Press, 2001), 179-195.

[41] https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9dFe4lyr3mU&ab_channel=FabTV, min. 2.50-4.14 (accessed 09.02.2023).

As for the physical appearance of the witches, the grandmother of the narrator named Gatsby draws his attention to some specific details. Witches are evil, demons in human form; they have the corners of their mouths elongated almost to their ears, hidden by thick make-up; they always wear gloves, because they have no hands, but claws; they have no toes; they are bald, so they wear wigs, which give them wounds that are called "wig rash"; they have nostrils larger than human ones, for sniffing out children, and when they do this their nostrils can enlarge up to 20 cm. Children have an awful smell to them, all the worse the cleaner they are. The Grand High Witch (Anne Hathaway) is the international leader of the coven. Hailing from the Norwegian tundra, she is all-powerful, evil and merciless, giving everybody orders, setting the steps for the witches' future actions and coordinating the global eradication of all children. "Her voice sounds ugly and squeaky like an exterior door swinging on a rusty hinge. (...)," Grandma remarks. In fact, over the course of the film, the voice of the Grand High Witch is constantly changing, oscillating between devilish and soft. Almost every word is backed up musically. For the first time, during her speech at the Great Witch's Congress, the Grand High Witch uses her mouth completely: she has a forked tongue, like a snake (which appears in Zemeckis' film as an emblematic animal for witchcraft, alongside the black cat).

The arrival of the witches follows the same pattern each time: the first intrusion is that of the Grand High Witch, elegant, imposing, self-assured, with an air of arrogance and malice; she is followed by the other witches walking behind her in military marching rhythm: the image is obviously that of a stern, fierce and impetuous general at the head of his devoted army. Each entrance of the witches is accompanied by music in a cadenced pace, accentuated by the sound of heels on the hotel floor. The witches are dressed differently, but all have modern costumes, gloves up to their elbows, with their heads covered either by very different hats or turbans (we could even see one witch that wears a nightie). The common element is the shoes with very high thin heels and pointed toes; both the sound/music (drums and violins in the orchestra) and the image (the witches' footsteps) create a rhythm that reminds us of an army on parade.

The witches' arrival at the hotel is in this pattern, with a lavish entrance: The Grand High Witch is slender, elegant, blonde, the perfect make-up of a true lady (one can glimpse, however, the lengthening of the corners of her mouth). She wears a striped hat with transparent portions, sunglasses that amplify her mystery, a white tunic with black stripes and diamonds, long black gloves with white stains, all perfectly matched with white shoes with a black rhombus at the extremely pointed tip and a black purse with gold inserts. The Grand High Witch's pet is a black cat (CGI), whose name is Hades, with whom she communicates wordlessly, but it turns out that there is no loyalty between the two characters.

Fig. 3: *The Witches* (2020), dir. Robert Zemeckis, min. 24.40

A few minutes later, the Grand High Witch is presented to the spectators in the privacy of her hotel room (number 666). This time, she is wearing a pink turban to match her shoes, a dark burgundy nightgown, and over this a black robe, which has a burgundy boa, giving it a certain touch of preciousness. One can see the true face of the Grand High Witch in the

mirror, where she reflects and admires it with delight. Her face is full of scars old and new, her nose is missing, her mouth stretches to her ears, revealing a long row of teeth; only her eyes remain unchanged.

Fig. 4: *The Witches* (2020), dir. Robert Zemeckis, min. 30.29

To get revenge for being turned into mice, the protagonists intend to use the magical transformation potion on the witches themselves. They manage to pour it into the pea soup the witches will eat for lunch, and the maleficent women turn into rats, through the same process already seen in the film when children were changed into mice. The rats, unlike the mice from the children, are grumpy and aggressive. At first, the Grand High Witch escapes, but the final confrontation takes place in her apartment. The Grand High Witch is also transformed into an ugly rat. First, she exhales purple smoke, rises into the air, her skin covered in purple pustules. Grandma traps it in a glass jar, leaving it in the clutches of Hades the cat.

Short conclusions

What is the reason, the explanation of this iconographic and narrative tradition that is at least twenty centuries old and goes back to Greco-Roman literature, through Renaissance painting? Why the construction of a dialectic between ugliness and beauty, which returns unceasingly under the brush of the painters, in front of the cameras of the filmmakers, on the table of the film editors? One could sketch a hypothesis which concerns the affectivity of the spectators and another one, aesthetic. Even if they remain partial, the two hypotheses will nevertheless have the merit of opening avenues of reflection to be explored by further researches. First, we would like to point out that painters and filmmakers play with the binomial attraction/repulsion, which acts in a very strong way on the affectivity of the spectators. The beautiful witches attract, even erotically, with the same force with which the ugly old witches reject. When the two poles of physicality are united in the body of one single person (as we showed for some films discussed here), the spectators are plunged into a state of emotional ambiguity from which it is often difficult to reemerge. On the aesthetic level, in the paintings and films that deal with witchcraft, the construction of the images answers the requirement to balance the opposites in a superior artistic synthesis: the beautiful and the grotesque must dialogue and make each other stand out, according to the wish of Victor Hugo in the *Preface* of Cromwell (1827).

In fact, why are people so fascinated by artistic transpositions (visual arts, literature, cinema) of facts related to witchcraft? It is because witchcraft is an inexhaustible resource of excellent stories, full of strong emotional charge, narrative twists, themes that directly touch everyone. These are stories where, whether they are treated in pictorial, literary or cinematographic form, the body of the witch represents a central core of meaning: from this point of view, it is a most effective narrative and symbolic tool, by its simple presence in an image. Moreover, from Hans Baldung Grien to the work of contemporary filmmakers, the history of the witch is also a history of an increasingly accomplished mastery of illusion techniques which, beyond the content of the images, exert by themselves a lasting force of attraction on the audience... Basically, cinema is itself, perhaps more than painting and literature, a *history/matter* of witchcraft!

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