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► **To cite this version:**

Teresa Castro. Gazing at the Witches. From Women on the Verge of a Breakdown to Reclaiming the Eco-Witch on the 1960s and 1970s. *Frames Cinema Journal*, 2019. hal-03814443

HAL Id: hal-03814443

<https://hal.science/hal-03814443>

Submitted on 20 Oct 2022

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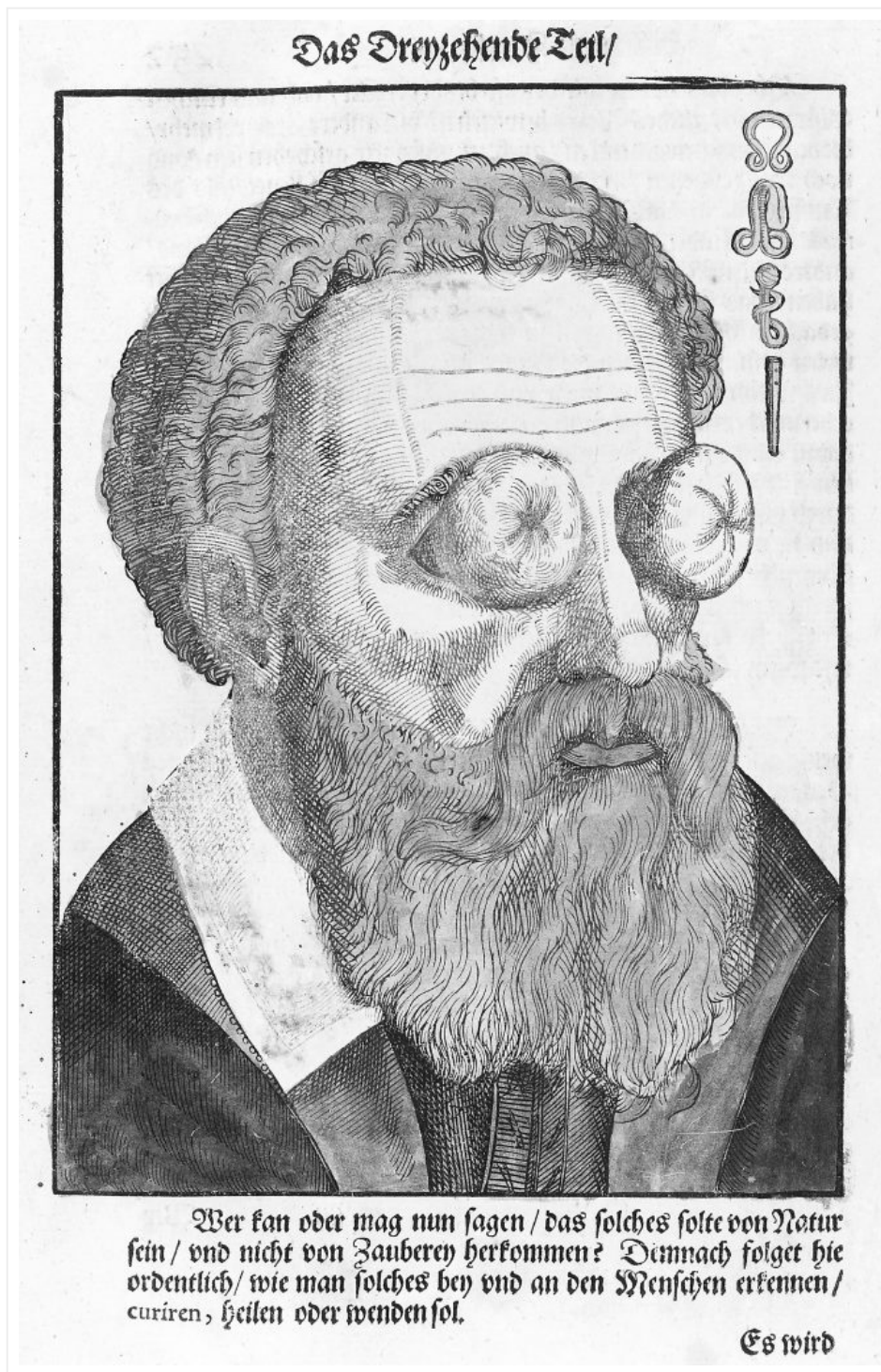
Frames Cinema Journal

Peer-Reviewed | Open Access | Biannual

Gazing at the Witches: From Women on the Verge of a Breakdown to Reclaiming the Eco-Witch in 1960s-1970s Film

By Teresa Castro

Gazing at witches is a dangerous thing, as Medusa's myth reminds us: didn't the mere sight of the snake-haired Gorgon turn men into stone? Don't witches have hurtful eyes, bewitching people and animals with their malevolent glances? Weren't they carried into courts backwards, so as not to cast spells on wary judges with their cunning eyes? There is power in looking, as witchcraft, psychoanalysis and critical theory all argue, and looking is (or can be) a power exercise, as the onlooker turns the subject into the object of his look. Nowhere is this more evident than in film, where the gaze is always at stake. Feminist theory in particular turned "the gaze" – the "male gaze", "the female gaze", the "oppositional gaze", the "#girlgaze", etc. – into a key concept, a ground of contestation, a means of resistance.[1]



— Disease of the eye caused by witchcraft, no date. Credit: Wellcome Collection.

What about the way film has gazed at the witch? Not simply the way in which it has imagined the witch, but *gazed at* it, i.e. confined it to ideological power structures that are as much about cultural stereotypes and sexual politics as they are about narrative and formal devices? This is the general question I would like to ask, in order to explore the multifaceted politics of female witches on screen. Due to this being too vast a project, I will focus on one political potentiality of the female witch: the way in which she hinges upon the gendered reason/nature dualism at the heart of modernity and western patriarchal culture.

The gendering of nature as female didn't begin with modern era. In the context of a deep-rooted association between women and nature (and the resultant feminisation of nature and naturalisation of women), it was modernity, however, that replaced the archaic metaphor of nature as nurturing mother

with the image of nature as a wild and unruly female who needs to be (technologically) tamed. As Carolyn Merchant put it in her groundbreaking *The Death of Nature* (1981), the woman-as-witch came to encapsulate this negative image. "The witch", writes Merchant, "raised storms, caused illness, destroyed crops, obstructed generation, and killed infants. Disorderly woman, like chaotic nature, needed to be controlled".[2] And so it was. In the early modern period – the heyday of witch-hunting – reason set upon itself to subdue and dominate nature, and with it the woman and her body/emotions/animalism and so on. In the process, hundreds of thousands of (mostly) peasant women were brutally eliminated. They were accused of all sorts of crimes, among which was that of kinship to the non-human: tending to animals, healing with herbs, worshipping springs and stones.

The mechanistic paradigm declared war on witchcraft's magical and animistic views, denying nature any form of agency of its own. The primitive accumulation of capital depended on this: the earth was now to be drained, mined, assarted; women's bodies and activities had to be put at the service of labour-power.[3] In the meantime, the witch was systematically persecuted. Initially, it was demonised; then equated with the "primitive", the "irrational", the "pathological". In sum, the witch came to embody a terrifying "otherness" from abstract reason, an ominous threat to patriarchal power. Such misogynist clichés were perpetuated by the scholarly approach of witch-hunting, which so often portrayed witches and their victims as wretched fools, raging shrews, hysterics afflicted with hallucinations, if not "an enormous mass of severe neurotics [and] psychotics".[4]

It was not until the 1960s and 1970s, as the women's movement gained momentum, that the discourses on the witch started to change and that her political potential became widely apparent and reclaimable, empowering. Anticipating our contemporary fascination with the figure of the witch, the latter became a feminist icon, as the American group W.I.T.C.H. (Women's International Terrorist Conspiracy from Hell) descended on Wall Street in 1968 wearing capes and black pointy hats and Italian women chanted, on the streets of Rome, "*Tremate, tremate, le streghe sono tornate!*".[5] Moreover, as feminism and ecology began to converge, struck by the collusion between the exploitation of nature and the exploitation of women, the witches' in-tuneness with nature appeared as the model for a more respectful and less oppositional relationship to our non-human counterparts. In many regards, the witch's current popularity, driven by the swell of fourth-wave feminism and summed up in the titles of two recent *New York Times*' articles, "Witches Are Having Their Hour" and "When Did Everybody Become a Witch?", echoes this foundational moment, aptly captured by German feminist literary critic Silvia Bovenschen as early as 1978. [6],[7],[8] Nonetheless, one of the specificities of this "Return of the Witch 2.0" is perhaps its blatant eco-feminism and hence the way it brings to the fore the problem of the woman/nature relationship.



— Bev Grant, W.I.T.C.H. Hexes Wall Street, October 31 1968. Credit: Bev Grant Archive.

In order to understand how film has tackled the reason/nature dualism that shrouds the unruly body of the female witch, I've chosen to confront alternative filmic visions around this topic. On the one hand, I will briefly evoke two films adhering to the classical model, essentially gleaned from horror filmographies of the 1960s: *The Witches* (1966) and *Night of the Eagle* (1962). In these pictures, witchcraft refers to the irrational and the pathological. On the other hand, I will draw on experimental films shot in the 1970s / early 1980s by women filmmakers, such as Barbara Hammer (1939-2019), Maria Klonaris (1950-2014) and Katerina Thomadaki (b. 1949). In these films—*Women's Rites* (1974), *Dyketactics* (1974), *Psychosynthesis* (1975), *Unheimlich II: Astarti* (1980), *Selva* (1981-1983) – the figure of the woman-as-witch is appropriated, reinvented, reclaimed. Beyond the limiting reason/nature dualism, they open up new points of view and new gender constructions. More than a simplistic opposition between a “male” and a “female gaze” (notions to which I will briefly return), what I wish to highlight is the historical shift facilitated by second-wave feminism. In this context, the second-wave's still largely ignored (or derided) spiritual versant is crucial. In fact, as a significant number of women embraced, in the 1970s, the so-called “Goddess movement” (a neo-pagan trend rejecting patriarchal religions and endorsing instead Goddess worshipping matriarchies), new archetypes – the “nurturing mother”, the “warrior”, the “virgin”, the “crone”, etc. – provided what was felt as a liberating alternative to the more common dichotomies opposing the “housewife” to the “career-woman”, or the “mother” to the “lover”.^[9] This ultimately led to the on-going revision of the witch's figure and to the emergence of the “eco-witch”: a complex and paradoxical figure in itself, making the link between political activism (eco-feminism) and spirituality. In this framework, this essay should then be understood as a modest contribution to the tremendously rich visual history of the witch, envisaged here as an ideological, gendered figure whose 1960s and 1970s cinematic avatars seem inseparable from the way in which feminism revisited – and *opposed* – mainstream representations.

The Sleep of Reason Produces Witches

“One-time witches are to-day called hysterics”, observed Hungarian psychoanalyst Sándor Ferenczi in 1919, reiterating what his friend Sigmund Freud had already proposed.^[10] As soon as 1603, the

British physician Edward Jorden published a pamphlet arguing that the unfortunate victim of one so-called Elizabeth Jackson (a witch condemned to prison and pillory) was actually suffering from hysteria.[11] Even though hysteria as a strictly nervous disorder wasn't fully theorised before the 19th century (when it became the tragic lynchpin of modern psychiatry and gynaecology), Jorden's medical opposition to what he saw as superstition (celebrated in many histories of witchcraft as an enlightened critique of witch-hunting) reminds us that the pathologisation of witchcraft as a specifically female condition has a long, complex history. In the late 19th century, the witch and the hysteric became yoked together in an eminently disciplinary way. Even after the term hysteria fell out of medical use, the association between witchcraft and feminine "illnesses of the nerves" stuck around, as so many films evince.

Completed one year after Ferenczi's paper, the much-celebrated *Häxan* by Benjamin Christensen (released in 1922) peremptorily affirms that the "witches' insanity" is "consistent with the nervous diseases we call hysteria". In his original portrayal of modern witches as (among others) wealthy and unhappy hysteric young women, Christensen, however, is rather ambiguous: by choosing to end his picture with a dissolved cross-cut between the shot of a woman forced to step into a shower by two unsympathetic nurses and the image of three witches being burned at the stake, he seems to suggest that the methods of modern psychiatry are not much different from those employed by the medieval Catholic church. Moreover, his evocation of the female pilot as modern witch – "The witch no longer flies away on her broom over rooftops" – is immensely thought-provoking. Beyond the simple flying analogy, the subversive and therefore witchy dimension of the aviatrix seems to be her arrogation of an essentially male position of power: to technically master the world, but also to see from above.



— The Aviatrix. Screen capture from *Häxan* (*Witchcraft through the Ages*, Benjamin Christensen, 1922).

In *The Witches*, a 1966 Hammer production starring Joan Fontaine (dir. Cyril Frankel), one particular female character perversely echoes the usurpation of power illustrated by the aviatrix as modern witch: Stephanie Bax (Kay Walsh). A middle-aged journalist, Bax is a strong, opinionated and influential

woman, who drinks straight gin and who is obviously unmarried. But as Gwen Mayfield (Joan Fontaine) will discover, she is also the cruel priestess of a witches' coven in the cheerful little village of Heddaby. This is all the more surprising as Bax shams a strongly rational persona for two-thirds of the film, in particular when Mayfield confides in her after a number of dramatic incidents involving, among others, a headless doll covered in pins. Bax cunningly remarks:

I did some articles on witches once. No, not witches—damn them—people who though they were witches. The psychology of it. It's a sex thing deep down of course. Mostly women go for it—older women. (...) They relish the idea of a secret power. Especially when their normal powers are failing.

The evil is done. Mayfield – a spinster teacher who suffered a “nervous breakdown” after an encounter with tribal witchcraft in Africa – will eventually suffer another crisis, triggered by the vision of African masks and fetishes. A good deal of the film dwells on Mayfield's “fragile nerves”, in particular when she wakes up amnesic in an eerie nursing home. Narratively, the film interests me for two reasons: firstly, because of its caricature-like association of witchcraft to “the primitive” – Africa, of course, still and always reduced to a continent plagued by fetishism and fear; but also rural Heddaby, described by Bax herself as “primitive” – and to women, older, independent women (such as the more conventional character of Granny Rigg, a witch who speaks to cats and heals with herbs). As women, and this is my second point, both Bax and Mayfield verge on the unreasonable (“You must be sure what you're saying, or they'll laugh at you”, advises Bax when Mayfield understands that a ritual sacrifice might be in the making), if not the irrational (Bax's project of sacrificing a 14-year old virgin in order “to live a second life-time”, quickly labelled by Mayfield as “insane”). Not surprisingly, Bax, the character with the most evident manly attributes (confidence if not arrogance, assertiveness, social recognition) is “punished” at the end.

In patriarchy, too much extrication from the rigid boundaries of marriage, home or self-effacement is indeed an ominous thing.[12] Unlike the smiling aviatrix of *Häxan*, Bax is (still/once more) portrayed as a “real” witch, a crone capable of controlling animals (an unsuspecting herd of sheep) and demonically thriving on virgin blood. Formally, the film's garish use of Technicolor echoes the psychosexual excesses of the hysteric, in particular when Bax, in the picture's final sequence, appears in colourful pagan attire wearing bold red-lipstick.



— Bax, the crone, wearing red lipstick. Screen capture from *The Witches* (Cyril Frankel, 1966).

Night of the eagle (Sydney Hayers, 1962, released in the US as *Burn Witch Burn*) is another interesting (and skilfully shot) example. Based upon Fritz Leiber's 1943 novel, *Conjure Wife*, it tells a story of academic jealousy. Norman Taylor (Peter Wyngarde) is a recently appointed psychology professor teaching in a medical college. As the film opens, Norman dismisses witchcraft as nonsense, telling his class that such views express "a morbid desire to escape from reality" and concluding his lecture with a rotund "I do not believe". Much to his exasperation (he is writing a paper on "Modern Man and Neurosis"), he soon finds out that his wife Tansy (Janet Blair) is a practicing witch, having learnt the art of "conjure magic" in Jamaica. "I'm sure you're convinced I'm quite insane" says hopeless Tansy to him; "I'm not convinced about anything. And if you were to investigate all the strange rituals performed by women based on their so-called intuitions, half of the female population would be in an asylum" replies Norman. The gendered dichotomy between male rationality and female irrationality/"the savage" (central to the film and often formally articulated as an exquisite tension between foreground and background) is perfectly summed up. Following a violent row, he burns all her magical charms in the fireplace. Horrified, she goes "hysterical", claiming that without her magic his wellbeing and professional success are no longer protected from evil influences. Naturally, things start to go horribly wrong. As a matter of course, another college wife (Flora /Margaret Johnson) is also practicing black magic in order to support her husband's career and is keen on eliminating Taylor and his wife. Challenged by a terrible chain of events, including being falsely accused of sexual harassment by a "hysterical" student, the sceptical Taylor doesn't want to believe in witchcraft, "a woman's eccentricity", as Flora puts it. But he is forced to doubt – and to doubt (male) reason is to flirt with (female) madness, or at least with neurosis and paranoia. As the film ends, Norman and the spectator don't know what to believe.



- Flora, “bored housewife” turned witch. Screen capture from *Night of the Eagle* (Sydney Hayers, 1962).

Castigated by her husband as a “bored housewife”, Tansy provides the housewife malaise famously described by Betty Friedman in *The Feminine Mystique* (1963) with a new “neurotic” type: the angelic domestic goddess as witch, the troubled precursor of *Bewitched* (broadcast by ABC from 1964 to 1972). Unlike Bax and the aviatrix, she is unambiguously bound to the domestic sphere; her practice of magic is put at the service of her husband’s career and not directly at herself: she exists only as his wife. But as she insists during a heated argument, everything Norman has got “out of life” is not only the result of *his* “ability” – but of *her* “protection”. Her witchcraft is thus an attempt to regain some sort of agency. Norman reacts badly, calls her a “hysteric”. Witchcraft / female agency are not compatible with patriarchy: despite their conforming essentialism, the “mysterious”, “intuitive” powers associated with women cannot be seen as positive and nurturing, since they shake patriarchy’s foundations. Tansy, of course, speaks the truth when she says that her protection is essential to her husband’s accomplishments; the professional success of many male academics relied heavily on their wives’ abnegation and renouncement to their own careers. As the seismic waves of second-wave feminism prepared to hit the world, elements of a real and present dilemma (the patriarchal oppression of women in the 1960s) cling to *Night of the Eagle*, as if indicating the eminent return of the repressed, an awakening of women to awareness of their repression which was to mobilise the figure of the witch in a different way.

Reclaiming the “Eco-Witch”

In the early 1970s, Barbara Hammer’s life was taking a radical turn. She came out as a lesbian, went on a motorcycle trip to Africa with her first female lover and took to studying film upon their return to San Francisco. As the women’s movement swept the world California (in particular) was blooming with a “whole women’s world”.[13] Some of Hammer’s films of that period, such as the much-celebrated *Dyketactics* (1974), or the lesser-known *Women’s Rites* (1974), are filled with images of women in pagan hippie-like rituals, which are as much about venerating and connecting to nature as about celebrating the female body, tactility, women loving women. In both films we see women dancing naked, embracing trees, meditating, bathing in rivers, caring for each other.



— Fig. 6. Barbara Hammer, *Alone Hornby Island, British Columbia*, photograph, 1972.

Against the general background of the women's movement, the rise of Goddess movements and the intersections of feminism and environmentalism, the figure of the witch was to find a new life from the late 1960s onwards. In many ways, and even if Hammer's only explicit reference to the witch appears in her 1975 film *Psychosynthesis* – a fast-flowing visual poem made of dissolves and superimpositions, punctuated by the cathartic laughter of a sorceress and culminating in a luscious nature sequence – the women in these early films can be seen as magical women. They are witches of a new kind, empowered women in-tune with their bodies, life, trees, the sun, water, nature. In sum,

they are *eco-witches* – or, at least, a joyous prefiguration of what the eco-witch was about to become, especially within the framework of Starhawk's "Reclaiming tradition": an activist whose concerns intertwine feminism, environmentalism and nature-based religions.[14] Given their cultural context, Hammer's "witches" conjure up the pages of *WomanSpirit* (a lesbian feminist quarterly founded in 1974), the sovereignty of the Goddess as rediscovered by Merlin Stone's best-seller *When God Was a Woman* (1976), or the "daughters/lovers of the Earth" famously portrayed by philosopher and theologian Mary Daly in her influential *Gyn/Ecology* (1978).[15] Not surprisingly, "celebrations or dances" were often held after programs of Hammer's films, attesting the impact of "cultural feminism" in the West Coast, as well as its emphasis on rituals and performance.[16] As if proof was needed, in 1976 Hammer shot *Moon Goddess* with Gloria Churchman: "Gloria and I went to the Death Valley in California, an abandoned land", recalled Hammar, "in hope of regenerating it for women's use"; in 1983, the filmmaker celebrated the "pre-patriarchal standing stones, mounds and circles" of the United Kingdom in *Stone Circles*. [17],[18]

"Cultural feminism" was the derogatory term then ascribed by its opponents to the "ideology of a female nature or female essence": in other words, believing in biological or metaphysical sexual essences and therefore in the existence of properties shared by all women.[19] Particularly strong in the US, this trend emphasised feminist spirituality, especially around the Goddess movement. As Daly was to put it, "sisterhood" was now seen as a "cosmic covenant".[20] In the heated framework of the early 1970s, as "radical feminism" violently fought cultural feminism's spiritualist turn, Hammer was charged with essentialism, of "portraying women as if they were only natural subjects, in other words, only biological, not culturally produced".[21] The accusation is unfair, albeit symptomatic of the debates that haunted the second-wave, as well as feminist philosophy in the 1980s and the 1990s: significantly, Donna Haraway's last words in her famous "Cyborg Manifesto" (1991) are "I would rather be a cyborg than a Goddess".[22] If anything, Hammer's films illustrate what Laura Mulvey called, in the exact same years, the urgent blow against the "monolithic accumulation of traditional film conventions (already undertaken by radical filmmakers)" upon which the "male gaze" rests upon.[23] As Hammer pertinently points out, "I think I was most interested in the performance of the body. The performance of women being active subjects on the screen where they could not be watched voyeuristically, because they were so active".[24] We are at the antipodes from the male, heterosexual fantasies of voyeurism and fetishism that underlie the patriarchal unconscious of narrative cinema, i.e. the "male gaze". But we are also very far from an essentialisation of women / the feminine, that effectively characterises a strand of 1970's feminist art.[25] Instead of a reversed "female gaze", corresponding to cultural feminism's reversal of patriarchy's terms of dominance and subordination (the "feminine" as primary value), Hammer's films illustrate more of an *oppositional gaze*. Of course, this notion was coined by bell hooks in order to address something very specific: the eminently political rebellion and resistance against the repression of *black women's* "right to look".[26] But her discussion of the "oppositional gaze" as a gesture of resistance against both the "male gaze" and the oppression of (black) minorities resonates in many ways with Hammer's filmography, as well as with Klonaris' and Thomadaki's work, which they themselves described as being "primarily concerned with the gaze".[27] If, in the aftermath of Mulvey's controversial essay, many critics were right to highlight issues of female spectatorship and desire, the notion of a "female gaze" as reversal of the "male gaze" appears as problematic, among others for its endorsement of a dichotomous binary construct (male/female), an "either/or" that omits the genderqueer and makes the male/female incommensurable in their oppositional difference. Obviously, the "female gaze" can and has been thought in many different ways, ranging from the elementary "gazing at the gazers" (looking at men through the eyes of women) to the more complex and thought-provoking projects of a visual disruption of the hegemonic – "freeing the gaze from norms", as Klonaris and Thomadaki put it – or even of a "curiosity about the enigma of

femininity itself". [28]-[29] Still, and while being weary of adulterating (or whitewashing) hook's notion (whose call to see blackness differently and to recognise black spectators' agency is more than ever relevant), the idea of a gaze defined less by binary sex differences than by its *resisting* stance – its "ability to manipulate one's gaze in the face of structures of domination that would contain it" – seems to me more adequate in the context of a debate that is as much about gender and other constructs as it is about *filmic forms*. [30] In this regard, everything in Hammer's films is dissentient, defiant, rebellious: if the "male gaze" is put at stake – Hammer is a lesbian filmmaker talking about things "that had never been shown: lesbian sexuality, menstruation, comedies of super-dykes taking over San Francisco, 'psychosynthesis'" [31] and effectively reinventing her own power and freedom through film – so is the (chiefly male) structuralist tendency of experimental cinema of the time as Hammer goes for a cinema of emotions and tactility, inspired by Maya Deren's *Meshes of the Afternoon* (1945). [32]

Essentialism, of course, is one of feminism's worst nemeses, haunting not only discussions about the gaze, but the gendered reason/nature dualism at the heart of my evocation of the witch. In the wake of cultural feminism (almost immediately accused of essentialising gender and of depoliticising feminism), ecofeminism was heavily criticised for its coupling of women and nature. [33] Successively enthused in the 1970s and the 1980s by New-Age neo-paganism, anti-nuclear protests, etc., ecofeminism seemed permanently discredited by the early 2000s, in particular after the anti-essentialist criticism of third-wave feminism. But in our current age of environmental urgency, of despair at a world that more easily envisages its collapse than putting an end to extraction capitalism, ecofeminism is back, inspired first and foremost by ecological activism.

My reading of the witch as an empowered woman who reclaims her-story in order to ameliorate the present and who is able to reconnect with nature is indebted to this contemporary situation, as ecofeminism now intersects with class and race, queer theory, indigenous justice, post-humanism, materialism, etc. [34] Furthermore, as suspicious as I am of gender essentialism (as my sceptical reading of the male/female gaze dialectics demonstrates), when discussing experimental films by women filmmakers on the eco-witch, I'm more interested in their political potential than in discerning their latent or projected reductionism around sex roles, which, judging from Hammer's example, is sometimes a very superficial critique. Incidentally, the same shallow reproach could be made about Maria Klonaris' and Katerina Thomadaki's work, so evidently framed by the questions of "the woman" and the "feminine". However, and as if anticipating essentialist-charges, the latter is wittily understood "as a disruptive force [that] ruins the gender order", the two artists and filmmakers developing a critical and innovative reflexion that was to take them "from the feminine to the hermaphrodite, and from intersexuality to the concept of the Angel". [35], [36] Keeping this in mind, I would like to conclude by evoking one of the most beautiful films I have ever seen: *Selva* (1981-1983), a portrait of Parvaneh Navai by Maria Klonaris. Nowhere is the political potential of the eco-witch more poetically condensed than in this feature-length non-narrative film. [37]



— Maria Klonaris, *Selva*, 1981-1983.

A woman with long black hair, dressed in a burgundy dress, performs strange rituals in a forest. Mirrors are spread around her, hanging from mossy trees; she draws circles of salt in the ground, she dances. Due to its exquisite cinematography, incantatory editing and remarkable soundtrack (designed by Klonaris herself and composed of natural sounds, reconstitutions of ancient Greek chants, Indian classical music, etc.), the film has a visionary dimension. When released in 1983, Klonaris described it as following:

The portrait is envisaged as an encounter between two subjects: the filmmaker and the person filmed. In front of my camera, Parvaneh Navaï becomes a mediator who enters in contact and is infused with nature's energies, while her own energy radiates and echoes in the forest ("selva"). The camera amplifies and expands her presence, transforming the forest into an imaginary space. The camera becomes a painter's brush. Trance – dances and out of body projections. *Selva* is the portrait-journey of a woman that I encounter in the unconscious.[38]

The film is part of the couple's "Portrait" series, but can be connected to a contemporary work from their "Unheimlich Cycle" (1977-1982): *Unheimlich II: Astarti* (Maria Klonaris and Katerina Thomadaki, 1980), starring again Parvaneh Navaï, as well as Klonaris and Thomadaki themselves. The three *actantes* – a concept that the artists oppose to the notion of the "actress" and which, unlike the latter, refers to a performer who "is not the vehicle of someone else's phantasies and desires" – evoke the tripartite face of the moon goddess Astarte / Ishtar. Klonaris and Thomadaki's artistic practice (as well as their sharp theoretical thought) is strongly indebted to ancient mythologies and cosmogonies, this "pre-patriarchal feminine" being thought as the means to reach "a post-patriarchal unconscious" [39], [40]. In other words, and as it is often the case with "essentialist" feminist works from the same period, the artists' apparent "nostalgia" for a matriarchal past is neither melancholy nor escapism, but instead a concrete way of engaging with the present and of thinking about the future. Appearing costumed and masked against a black background, their bodies sometimes painted and/or covered with earth,

surrounded by embalmed animals, stones, mirrors, prisms, the three *actantes* are sorceresses, magical women whose power is first and foremost that of *returning the gaze*, of destroying “classic dichotomies of subject/object, acting/transcribing, seeing/being seen”.[41] As previously mentioned, *Selva*'s formal strategy is dissimilar: no more black, nocturnal backgrounds, no more frontality – but a similar absence of words, of *logos*.

In *Selva*, the witch has become again a creature of the forest. What is political about that? Perhaps a new politics of human/nature relationships: no more radical exclusion, but attentiveness and listening, continuity and solidarity. As Klonaris writes, *Selva* is about a *woman* who becomes infused with “nature's energies” – which is different from claiming an organic / natural standpoint for *women*, or from supporting universal and static feminine traits, in compliance to patriarchy. Moreover, there is nothing “irrational” about the eco-witch: on the contrary, she can even be thought to be the model of a new “ecological rationality” for which *Selva* provides today the most striking of allegories. If the film appears as symptomatic of the historical shift that I hope to have briefly sketched in this essay – the reclaiming of the woman-as-witch by feminist experimental film from the 1970s, in opposition to mainstream representations; the opening up of new gender constructions and a new “gaze” – in our age of ecological breakdown *Selva* also resonates with current debates and anxieties. As Australian philosopher (and eco-feminist) Val Plumwood pointed out, Western knowledge and its cult of a narrow form of reason disavowed the corporeal over the mental, devaluating the material (and female-coded) world of the senses, the body and emotions – a world superbly encapsulated in *Selva*. As the need to make reason “a vehicle for liberation and life” becomes more and more pressing, the political potentiality of *Selva*'s eco-witch becomes apparent: it concerns as much gender and the gaze, as the possibility of establishing, *as humans*, better communicative relationships with nature, founded on respect, care and love for the non-human other.[42]

Notes

[1] The body of literature on “the gaze in film” is extremely vast (and still growing): the following references focus essentially on seminal, primary texts. On the notion of the “male gaze”, see Laura Mulvey's foundational essay, “Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema” (*Screen*, volume 16, Issue 3, 1 October 1975, 6-18), as well as her “Afterthoughts on ‘Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema’ inspired by *Duel in the Sun*” (*Framework: the Journal of Cinema and Media*, n° 15/17, Summer 1981, 12-15). On the “female gaze”, see Teresa De Lauretis, *Alice Doesn't: Feminism, Semiotics, Cinema* (Basingstoke and London: Macmillan, 1984); Lorraine Gamman and Margaret Marshment (ed.), *The Female Gaze: Women as Viewers of Popular Culture* (London: Women's Press, 1988); Mary Ann Doane, *Femmes Fatales. Feminism, Film Theory, Psychoanalysis* (New York and London: Routledge, 1991); and, for a more recent reference, Jill Solloway's 2016 Master Class on “The Female Gaze” (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pnBvppooD9I>) (last accessed November 1st 2019). On the “oppositional gaze”, see bell hooks, “The oppositional gaze: black female spectators”, *Black Looks: Race and Representation* (Boston: South End Press, 1992), 115-131. Finally, the “#girlgaze” refers to a digital platform set up by producer and photographer Amanda de Cadenet and gathering female-identifying photographers: <https://girlgaze.com/> (last accessed November 1st 2019).

[2] Carolyn Merchant, *The Death of Nature. Women, Ecology and the Scientific Revolution* (New York: Harper One, 1989, p. 127.

[3] See Silvia Federici, *Caliban and the Witch. Women, the Body and Primitive Accumulation* (New York: Autonomedia, 2009).

[4] Gregory Zilboorg, *The Medical Man and the Witch during the Renaissance* (New York: Cooper Square, 1969, 73), as quoted in Mary Daly, *Gyn/Ecology: the Metaethics of Radical Feminism* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1978).

[5] "Tremble, tremble, the witches are back!". With regards to W.I.T.C.H., see Robin Morgan, *Going to Far: the Personal Chronicle of a Feminist* (New York: Vintage Books, 1978), 71-77. Note that W.I.T.C.H. were interested in witchcraft for its theatrical potential.

[6] I am assuming here, in accordance with recent feminist scholarship, that "a fourth wave" of feminism emerged around 2012-2013. Characterized, among others, by its engagement with intersectionality, the "fourth-wave" has been barrelled forward by demonstrations against "rape culture" and online activism. According to the "wave" narrative (established in 1968 by journalist Martha Weinman Lear), the suffragette's fight for women's right to vote corresponded, from the mid-19th century to the early 20th century, to feminism's "first wave", while the women's liberation movement from the 1960s and 1970s illustrates the "second wave". The "third wave" is subtler (and definitely more controversial), emerging in the early 1990s and stressing the elusiveness of "woman" as a category and the performative dimensions of gender. While perfectly aware of the problematic and monolithic aspects of the "wave" narrative (and of the way in which generational accounts grossly simplify feminist histories and debates), the idea of a "fourth wave" is rhetorically interesting, in particular with regards to the figure of the witch, since the current popularity of the latter coincides with the acknowledged resurgence of interest in feminism. On feminism's waves see, among others: Imelda Whelehan, *Modern Feminist Thought. From the Second Wave to 'Post-Feminism'* (New York: New York University Press, 1995); Stacy Gillis, Gillian Howie and Rebecca Munford (ed.), *Third Wave Feminism: A Critical Exploration* (London: Palgrave MacMillan, 2004); Kira Cochrane, *All the Rebel Women: The Rise of the Fourth Wave Feminism* (London: Simon & Schuster, 2014, Kindle e-book); and Nicola Rivers, *Postfeminism(s) and the Arrival of the Fourth Wave. Turning Tides* (London: Palgrave MacMillan, 2017).

[7] Laura M. Holson, "Witches Are Having Their Hour", *The New York Times*, October 11th 2019: <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/10/11/style/pam-grossman-witch-feminism.html> (last accessed November 26th 2019) and Jessica Bennet, "When Did Everybody Become a Witch?", *The New York Times*, October 24th 2019: <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/10/24/books/peak-witch.html> (last accessed November 26th 2019). These articles are two of many reporting on the growth of interest in witches and witchcraft in the general press. I would also like to note, on a less "romantic" and "empowering" way, that witches are also "having their hour" in African countries (and other parts of the world), where witch-hunts have been on the rise since the 1980s. Illustrating a violent and broad attack on women, such witch-hunts are also an attempt to destroy communal relations: as Silvia Federici has noted, it is essential that feminist activism not only speaks up and mobilizes against these attacks, but that it also analyses the social conditions that produce witch-hunts –new forms of capitalistic accumulation. See Silvia Federici, *Witches, Witch-Hunting and Women* (Oakland, PM Press, 2018).

[8] Silvia Bovenschen, "The Contemporary Witch, the Historical Witch and the Witch Myth: The Witch, Subject of the Appropriation of Nature and Object of the Domination of Nature", *New German Critique*, n° 15 (autumn 1978), 82-119.

[9] Jungian archetypal psychology proved important in this story, as illustrated by a very popular book published in 1985, Jean Shinoda Bolen, *Goddesses in Every Woman: A New Psychology of Women*

(New York: Harper and Row, 1985).

[10] Sándor Ferenczi, "An attempted explanation of some hysterical stigmata", in *Selected Papers. Further Contributions to the Theory and Technique of Psychoanalysis* (London, NY: Karnac Books, 2002), 110.

[11] See Michael Macdonald (ed.), *Witchcraft and Hysteria in Elizabethan London. Edward Jorden and the Mary Glover Case* (London: Routledge, 1991).

[12] My use of the term "patriarchy" (a trans-historical notion consensually acknowledged by contemporary gender studies as over-simplistic) is here bound to the film's historical context: the 1960s and the rise of the second wave, which put the concept in the full glare of public debate. See Pavla Miller, *Patriarchy* (London, Routledge, 2017).

[13] Barbara Hammer, *Hammer! Making Movies Out of Sex and Life* (New York: The Feminist Press at CUNY, 2010), 30.

[14] (Eco-)Feminist theorist and activist Starhawk founded the Neo-pagan tradition "Reclaiming" in San Francisco in the late 1970s. "Reclaiming" is an earth-based branch of modern paganism, focusing on the Goddess as tripartite deity (Maiden, Mother and Crone) and on ecological struggle. Starhawk's 1979 book *The Spiral Dance. A Rebirth of the Ancient Religion of the Great Goddess* (San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1979) was highly influential.

[15] Merlin Stone, *When God Was a Woman* (New York: Dial Press, 1976); Daly, *Gyn/Ecology*.

[16] "I think the films were enjoyed and they made for great feelings of emotional participation in the audiences. Often celebrations or dances were held after maybe an hour program of my short films from the '70s and I think that was a wonderful community contribution that the films made": Daniela Shreir, "Deconstruct, reconstruct, challenge, celebrate. In Conversation With Barbara Hammer", *Another Gaze* (March 17th 2019): <https://www.anothergaze.com/deconstruct-reconstruct-challenge-celebrate-conversation-barbara-hammer-interview/> (last accessed November 1st 2019).

[17] Barbara Hammer, *Hammer!*, 171.

[18] The quotation comes from Barbara Hammer's website: <http://barbarahammer.com/films/bent-time-and-other-films-from-the-1980s/> (last accessed November 1st 2019). In the film's introductory section, Hammer evokes a number of books and diagrams associated to the rediscovery of this pre-patriarchal past.

[19] Linda Alcoff, "Cultural Feminism Versus Post-Structuralism: the Identity Crisis in Feminist Theory", *Signs*, vol. 3, n° 13 (Spring 1988), 408.

[20] Mary Daly, *Beyond God the Father: Toward a Philosophy of Women's Liberation* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1973). "Sisterhood as Cosmic Covenant" is the title of one of the book's chapters.

[21] Hammer in Shreir, "Deconstruct, reconstruct, challenge, celebrate". On "radical feminism" versus "cultural feminism", see Alice Echols, *Daring to Be Bad: Radical Feminism in America, 1967-1975* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1989).

- [22] Donna Haraway, "A Cyborg Manifesto: Science, Technology, and Socialist-Feminism in the Late Twentieth-Century", *Simians, Cyborgs and Women* (New York: Routledge, 1991), 174. Haraway also mentions the "spiral dance", in what constitutes a clear reference to Starhawk.
- [23] Laura Mulvey, "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema", *Screen*, vol. 16, Issue 3 (1 October 1975), 18.
- [24] Hammer in Shreir, "Deconstruct, reconstruct, challenge, celebrate". We should note, however, that Hammer's dismissal of "cultural" or "spiritual feminism" in her early work is perfectly in line with what Jennie Klein has described as the marginalization of references to spirituality and the Goddess in discussions of 1970s art. As Klein puts it, "feminist spirituality – particularly Goddess feminism – was [from the beginning] almost more troubling to feminist critics and academics than it was to the male avant-garde". According to Klein, "the Goddess is [still in 2009, at the time of her writing] the unacknowledged white elephant in the room of feminist body art". Cf. Jennie Klein, "Feminist Art and Spirituality in the 1970s", *Feminist Studies*, vol. 35, n°3 (Fall 2009), 579-580.
- [25] Cf. Jennie Klein, "Feminist Art and Spirituality in the 1970s".
- [26] bell hooks, "The oppositional gaze: black female spectators", *Black Looks: Race and Representation* (Boston: South End Press, 1992), 115-131.
- [27] Maria Klonaris and Katerina Thomadaki, "Dissident Bodies: Freeing the Gaze from Norms. On a Cinematic and Visual Arts Practice", in Insa Härtel and Siegrid Schade (ed.), *Body and Representation* (Opladen: Leske + Budrich, 2002), 143.
- [28] Klonaris and Thomadaki, "Dissident Bodies", 143.
- [29] Laura Mulvey, *Fetishism and Curiosity* (Indiana: Indiana University Press, 1996), 61.
- [30] bell hooks, p. 116. hook's position is clearly influenced by Michel Foucault's discussion of "domination"
- [31] Barbara Hammer, "Barbara Hammer in conversation with Hans-Ulrich Olbrist", *Cura Magazine*, 27, no date: <https://curamagazine.com/barbara-hammer-in-conversation-with-hans-ulrich-obrist/> (last accessed November 1st 2019). Questions of race are addressed in her film *Nitrate Kisses* (1992).
- [32] Moreover, experimental cinema itself has been thought and written as a primarily masculine field. See Robin Blaetz (ed.), *Women's Experimental Cinema: Critical Frameworks* (Durham & London: Duke University Press, 2007).
- [33] Most famously by Brooke Williams, who is supposed to have coined the term "cultural feminism" in her article "The Retreat to Cultural Feminism", *Redstockings. Feminist Revolution* (New Paltz, New York: Redstockings, 1975, 65-68).
- [34] See, among others, and as an example of present-day ecofeminism, Catriona Sandiland's *The Good-Natured Feminist. Ecofeminism and the Quest for Democracy* (Minneapolis, London: University of Minnesota Press, 1999).

[35] Klonaris and Thomadaki, "Dissident Bodies", 146.

[36] Klonaris and Thomadaki, "The Feminine, the Hermaphrodite, the Angel: Gender Mutations and Dream Cosmogonies in Multimedia Projection and Installation (1976-1994)The Feminineidentified .aits).. s trical a Feminist ature) , Witch-Hunting and Women nist body art"identified ", *Leonardo*, vol. 29, n° 4 (1996), 273.

[37] Originally shot in a Super-8 format, *Selva* was blown to 35mm during its 2002 restoration by the Archives Françaises du Film.

[38] Maria Klonaris and Katerina Thomadaki, "Du super 8 au 35mm. La restauration de *Selva* et *Chutes. Desert. Syn.*", *Journal of Film Preservation*, n° 72 (2006), 26-34.

[39] Klonaris and Thomadaki, "Dissident Bodies", 145.

[40] Klonaris and Thomadaki, "The Feminine, the Hermaphrodite, the Angel", 275.

[41] Klonaris and Thomadaki, "The Feminine, the Hermaphrodite, the Angel", 275.

[42] Val Plumwood, *Environmental Culture: the Ecological Crisis of Reason* (London and New York: Routledge, 2002), 5.

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