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Lee Haven Jones, *The Feast* (2021): A Tale of retaliation



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Abstract: Lee Haven Jones's 2021 film *The Feast* would be yet another witch's tale were it not for its contemplative aesthetics and its underlying appeals to an idealized, pristine state of nature reclaiming its due. The intrusion of a witch in an elegant family during a formal dinner actuates the retaliation of a land desecrated and exploited by modernity and industrialism. The witch's – and, through her, the land's – revenge is enacted through punctual paroxysms of body horror, all the more striking since the overall atmosphere of the film is one of silence and morbid contemplation of the toxic interpersonal dynamics between the protagonists. Punished by the witch for their respective sins, while she, in the meantime, seems to fill, in a horribly distorted way, their individual gaps and failures, the members of the family are killed one by one, in what is shown not as gratuitous aggression but as the justified vengeance of a discarded past, a past symbolized by the land on which the family's house is built as well as by the witch herself. The fact that the entire film, a Sianel 4 Cymru production, is in Welsh, a language by essence striving for survival in a globalized world, must also not be overlooked as a meta-discourse on cultural resilience. This article examines the dynamics of duality inherent to *The Feast*, from the intertwining of past and present to the aesthetic and narrative contrast between contemplative moments and peaks of extreme violence. I will also consider the manner in which the film eventually complexifies these dynamics of duality and eludes simplistic characterization, allowing the viewer and the critic to interpret the ultimate destruction of the family as fair retaliation.

Keywords: Wales, Post-Horror, Witch, Environmentalism, Body Horror, Family

Résumé : Le film *The Feast*, écrit et réalisé par Lee Haven Jones et sorti en 2021, pourrait être considéré comme un simple conte de sorcière parmi tant d'autres si ce n'était son atmosphère contemplative et ses références plus ou moins explicites à une nature idéalisée et intacte mais vengeresse. L'intrusion d'une sorcière chez une famille élégante alors que cette dernière tient un dîner mondain amorce la vengeance d'une terre profanée et exploitée par le monde moderne et l'industrialisation. La vengeance de la sorcière (et, à travers elle, de la terre) est traduite dans le film par de ponctuels

paroxysmes de violence physique subis par les membres de la famille, paroxysmes d'autant plus saisissants que l'atmosphère générale du film relève d'une esthétique du silence et de la contemplation morbide des relations extrêmement toxiques entre ces protagonistes. Punis par la sorcière pour leurs péchés respectifs, quand bien même cette dernière semble combler (certes, d'une manière horriblement détournée) leurs failles et manquements individuels, les membres de la famille sont tués un par un, dans ce qui est dépeint non pas comme un enchaînement d'attaques injustifiées, mais comme la vengeance légitime d'un passé renié. Ce passé, ici, est symbolisé par la terre sur laquelle la maison familiale fut construite autant que par la sorcière elle-même. Le fait que le film, produit par Sianel 4 Cymru, soit dans son entièreté en gallois, une langue menacée d'extinction à l'époque de la mondialisation, peut ainsi être compris, à un autre niveau, comme un appel à la résistance culturelle. Cet article se propose d'analyser les dynamiques de dualité qui sous-tendent *The Feast*, depuis le jeu d'alternance et de confusion entre passé et présent jusqu'aux contrastes esthétiques et narratifs entre plages contemplatives et paroxysmes d'extrême violence. Je m'attacherai aussi à étudier la manière dont le film s'appuie en réalité sur la complexification de ces dualismes et évite ainsi la caractérisation simpliste des personnages, ce qui ouvre vers une possible interprétation de la destruction finale de la famille comme vengeance légitime.

Mots clés : Pays de Galles, *post-horror*, sorcière, environnementalisme, *body-horror*, famille

Introduction

Released on March 17, 2021, *The Feast* originates in director Lee Haven Jones's "desire to say something, and passion for horror" (Bradbury, 2022). Set in contemporary countryside Wales, the plot revolves around the encounter between a young woman, Cadi, and a wealthy, upper-class family. As the family gets ready for a dinner given at their modern, sophisticated country house, Cadi, hired as help for the night, arrives. Her subsequent intrusion into the intimacy of each member of the family (and of one of the guests as well), as she shares with them moments of happiness, apparent friendship or sexual intercourse, reveals Cadi as a witch figure, a goddess-like embodiment of nature who punishes the family for their relentless exploitation of the land on which they built their house. Cadi is also occasionally portrayed as the embodiment of the family's ancestor punishing them for their toxicity, reciprocal abuse and disrespect of their heritage.

The narrative of *The Feast* follows dynamics of duality articulated along the oppositions between nature/industry, modest rurality/upper-class sophistication, and ageless past/fleeting modernity. These oppositions are translated, on the aesthetic level, through a temporality divided

between periods of contemplation during which the toxicity between the members of the family is exposed, and culminations of violence and horror. *The Feast* thus seems to belong to the “elevated horror” or “post-horror” subgenre, which is to say, “horror films that merge art-cinema style with decentered genre tropes, privileging lingering dread and visual restraint over audiovisual shocks and monstrous disgust” (Church, 2022: 1). Horror is used in *The Feast* as a sensorial means to highlight the ambiguity of its protagonists, neither of whom, Cadi included, fit the “villain/hero” dichotomy. This ambiguity, paradoxically revealed by the dynamics of duality infusing the film, is at the core of *The Feast* and allows for a new take on the ecological and social questions which seem to constitute the message of the film. This message itself does not elude the dual dynamics which underlies *The Feast*, as it is both universal and tied to the director’s and actors’ native Wales, a geographical and cultural attachment revealed, from the very first minutes of the film, by the Welsh language of the dialogues and chapter titles. In an interview given to *The Upcoming* on August 21, 2022, Lee Haven Jones stated his desire to “create a horror film” as well as “to get a Welsh-language contemporary story out there into the world” (Bradbury, 2022). Horror, as a narrative device and an aesthetic stance, as the depiction of “slicing up, tearing holes into, crushing, rotting, and their mental corollary – mental torture,”¹ actuates in *The Feast* the extreme tensions underlying the dual dynamics of the plot while bringing the regional specificities of the film to the foreground.

This essay aims at examining how the confrontation between, on one hand, the dynamics of duality inherent to the narrative and aesthetics of the film, and the moral ambiguity of the protagonists on the other hand, confirms *The Feast* as a portrayal of the tensions between regional and national cultures in the specific setting of countryside Wales. The analysis of the dynamics of duality in the film will lead to the second part of this essay and its focus on two examples of the film’s more ambiguous components. The essay concludes with the examination of two ways in which the film seemingly offers a resolution – albeit violent to an extreme - to these tensions.

1. « D’abord tenter de définir la représentation de l’horreur à travers quelques images emblématiques : soit ce qui tranche, ce qui troue, ce qui écrase, ce qui pourrit, et leur corollaire mental – ce qui torture l’esprit. » (Desserre, 2015) [my translation].

Aesthetic duality and narrative dichotomies

Nature, the house, and the family

The Feast is articulated around multiple occurrences of duality and oppositions, all of which inscribe the film in specific aesthetics as well as allow for the plot to unfold. This duality is brought to light as soon as the opening scene of the film: a man running from something or someone stumbles in a field and collapses to the ground. The very next scene shows an industrial drill boring into the soil in an eruption of metallic noise, smoke and oil spurting from the drill hole. The black, viscous liquid symbolically reappears in the following scene, in the form of a beauty mask which Glenda, the mother of the family, has applied on her face as she gets ready for the formal dinner she and her husband are hosting.

In these few minutes during which the settings shift from the field and the oil-drilling hole to the family's modern designer house, the contrast dynamics between authentic nature and sophisticated domesticity are obvious. The family's craving for social recognition, their relentless desire to detach themselves from Glenda's modest origins, is symbolized by the almost absurd refinement of the bathroom in which Glenda is getting ready: this bathroom, situated at the center of the house, is an empty room with no windows except for a skylight, with walls painted in black, and an artificial waterfall. A mockery of nature in its sophisticated yet artificial minimalism, the bathroom denotes the family's need to exploit, dominate and even outshine the natural environment on which they built their house. The irony underlying this proud display of tamed nature, in a house surrounded by fields, woods and natural lakes, serves as the first hint at the family's conflictual relationship to their environment: nature to them is both a convenience and the proof of social and financial accomplishment. Moreover, this scene installs a possible interpretation of *The Feast* as a film articulated along the punishment, by the witch, of the cardinal sins committed by the family. As Glenda declares to her friend Mair, the minimalist, dark bathroom with its artificial waterfall is her favorite place in the house, the only one where she can truly rest. The pride she shows at having mastered a natural element for her own convenience, and her pleasure at being praised for it by her visitors, is indubitable.

Glenda's control of nature for her own pleasure and social validation is also symbolized, in the same scene, by the viscous, black charcoal mask that she applies on her face (all while listening to Vivaldi's "Cum

Dederit²²), seconds after the opening scene in the drilled field. The color and texture of both the mask on Glenda's face and the oil spurting from the field signal a parallel as well as an irreconcilable dichotomy between the natural world from which the oil originates as it is exploited by industry, and the –explicit or symbolic– exploitation of nature claimed by the mother as part of her social status. The same presumptuous exploitation of nature is later depicted in a scene in which Gweirydd, Glenda's older son, is training on an exercise bike in the front yard of the house. This scene, verging on absurdity as the camera backs up to a long shot of the son intensively pedaling on his overpriced bike, yet fully immobile before the rolling hills surrounding the house, is another hint at *The Feast's* denunciation of the family's vapidness and misdirected pride. By condensing in these first minutes several clear depictions of the family's problematic relationship with the land they live on and profit from, the film seems to offer a justification for the extreme violence which Cadi will subsequently inflict on them as a punishment.

Punishment and culminations

The aesthetics of *The Feast* therefore alternate between the contemplative quality of art films and scenes depicting extreme physical violence. For the most part, the film

evinces minimalism over maximalism, largely eschewing jump scares, frenetic editing, and energetic and/or handheld cinematography in favor of cold and distanced shot-framing, longer-than-average shot durations, slow camera movements, and stately narrative pacing. (Church, 2022: 11)

These contemplative scenes are counterbalanced by peaks of physical violence verging on body horror which serve as aesthetic and narrative evidence of the witch's wrath and subsequent punishment. The witch's defense of her land and revenge for the family's betrayal of their own heritage are achieved through her extreme bodily punishment of the various cardinal sins the members of the family have committed. Perhaps the most obvious examples of Cadi's retaliation occur when the father's and elder son's lust for Cadi's body is punished exactly where they have sinned: Gwyn, the father, is seized with debilitating headaches as soon as his face, posture and words betray his desire for the young woman. Gweirydd, the family's elder son, bleeds to death, unable to stop his sexual intercourse with Cadi even as the glass shards she had inserted into her vagina tear

2. I will study the role of music in *The Feast* in the third part of this article.

his flesh to pieces, in an obvious reference to the trope of the *vagina dentata*.³ Yet the most gruesome death in the film is that of the younger son Guto, punished for his drug abuse: he snorts powdered poisonous mushrooms that Cadi had selected for him as a recreational drug, which leads to the infection of a cut on his foot. The camera repeatedly lingers on this wound, each close-up more visually shocking than the last as the infection spreads and evolves into actual rotting of the flesh, oozing on Guto's bed-sheets, in a perfect illustration of horror residing "in the details".⁴ These moments of explicitly gory visuals culminate in Cadi licking the maggots from the son's rotting leg, in direct contrast with the film's overall minimalist aesthetics.

These culminations of body horror were foreshadowed by several explicit depictions of waste and physical violence, beginning with the skinning of two rabbits presumably hunted by Gwyn, and Cadi's subsequent vomiting in the dish they were left in to marinate.⁵ Cadi's vomiting is later paralleled with that of Euros, an investor in the industrial exploitation of the family's land, as he slowly extirpates a clatter of wet hair from his mouth after eating the canapés brought to him by Cadi. As scenes appealing to the viewer's physical repulsion, these two segments recall Éric Falardeau's analysis of explicit depictions of bodily functions in pornographic and gory scenes:

[...] the filmed body must remain an anchor point, a sensory point of reference for the viewer. Simply put, the filmed body links the viewer to the image on screen. The relationship between viewer and viewed is necessary, even essential, otherwise the image does not signify anything.⁶ (Falardeau, 2019: 109)

The extradiegetic reception of such physically intense moments inflicted by the witch seems to postulate the viewer's temporary identification with either Cadi or her victims, a thesis developed by Xavier Aldana Reyes (Aldana Reyes, 2016). Moreover, by maintaining sparsity in the depiction of extreme violence, *The Feast* maximizes the impact of its few gory or repulsive segments: "when viscerally shocking moments do occasionally occur in post-horror films, they are more likely used to signal

3. See "The virgin's other: vagina dentata" in chapter 1 of Harrington, 2018, for an account of the trope of the vagina dentata as an expression of "rapacious, unbounded desire in a manner that is coded as threatening and transgressive" as well as "an expression of the agency of the castrator (the *femme castratrice*)."
4. « *L'horreur, c'est le détail. Détail d'un récit, d'une torture, d'une injustice.* » (Desserre, 2015) [my translation].
5. Cadi's vomiting in the dish is shown both as the bodily actualisation of her revulsion and despair at seeing the dead rabbits, and as the beginning of her revenge on the family. It can also be understood as an indirect way of poisoning the dish.
6. « *...le corps filmé doit demeurer point d'ancrage, référent sensuel, pour le spectateur. Plus simplement, le corps filmé lie le spectateur à l'image. La relation regardant/regardé, chair/corps est nécessaire, voire essentielle, sinon l'image ne signifie rien.* » (Falardeau, 2019; 109) [my translation].

major traumatic events, and therefore used to greater thematic effect than as disposably ‘cheap’ scares” (Church, 2022: 18). These sporadic culminations of body horror signal, on an intradiegetic level, the witch’s true intentions. The violence inflicted on the family’s bodies can thus be read not just as revenge but as a way for the witch to confront them to their true human nature, to the fragility and vulnerability of their flesh. Striking each member of the family where he or she has sinned, the witch brings each down to his or her most base –or most genuine– level of existence, to a place where pride, greed or lust become meaningless.

The image of Cadi licking the maggots from Guto’s rotten flesh is therefore more than just another gory scene. Symbolizing the witch’s infinite love for nature, down to the most repulsive insect, this scene also appeals to the viewer’s deepest and possibly most primitive affect: disgust. Xavier Aldana Reyes differentiates abjection, a theoretical concept often used in analyzing horror,⁷ from disgust as a phenomenon induced by external factors: “if abjection explores the boundaries of corporeality, disgust explores those of the clean, pure and proper, which are often articulated by the desire to deny or reject the primal, that is, our animality” (Aldana Reyes, 2016: 54). Repulsion, as the core affect in this scene, seems to hint at the viewer’s fear of reverting back to a primitive state of existence, beyond the control and comfort of logic and reason. More prosaically, this scene appears to refer to the archaic fear of rotting flesh, an image which conveys the threat of contamination and disease and signals the disintegration of the individual. Therefore, while abjection functions on a symbolic level, disgust is what is at stakes here: namely, appealing to the viewer’s senses in order to convey, in the most immediate –and, arguably, effective– manner, the intensity of the witch’s love for nature as well as the extent of the violence she inflicts as retaliation. Not yet a corpse, Guto, in this scene, is nevertheless worse than a dead body: the horror suggested by his progressively rotting flesh signals the film’s depiction of death as a process which could possibly impact the viewer. As a corpse in the making, the dying flesh of Guto is truly, undeniably, horrifying:

[...] decay is repulsive because of the myths attached to it, not necessarily as an objective, putrid, septic fact. [...] decay means the deterioration of the body, the decomposition of the flesh – the locus of life; therefore, it means the dissolution of the individual being, the indisputable loss of his or her uniqueness.⁸

7. A concept mostly based on Julia Kristeva’s psychoanalytical approach in *Pouvoirs de l’horreur - Essai sur l’abjection* (1980).

8. « [...] la pourriture est repoussante moins comme réalité objective, nauséabonde et septique, qu’en raison des fantasmes qu’elle déchaîne. [...] la pourriture, c’est le délabrement du corps, la déliquescence des chairs, support de la vie; c’est donc la dissolution de l’être, la perte irrécusable de l’individualité. » (Thomas, 2000; 480) [my translation].

By explicitly depicting the archaic fear of personal dissolution rather than suggesting it, *The Feast* offers a vision of horror anchored in the senses rather than in reason and concept. It appeals to the most instinctual aspect of the viewer's reception, the one which feels rather than conceptualizes.

These scenes of almost unbearable violence also allow for an interpretation of *The Feast* as a tale of retaliation built on undeniable references to the cardinal sins of pride, greed and lust. As such, the narrative could be understood as pertaining to a Christian belief system. Yet the witch in *The Feast* can also be read as a figure embodying an archaic, undefined form of paganism, one which considers every life, human or otherwise, to be sacred, as Cadi's horror at the vision of the dead rabbits suggests. More specifically, every life appears sacred to Cadi as long as it does not overly exploit or endanger to the environment it inhabits. As such, the witch's bloody rampage on the family is perfectly justified when understood as a righteous punishment for them violating the land and its history. This interpretation anchors the narrative in an ancient form of spirituality in which the human is equal with the animal. This temporal duality between spiritual timelessness and fleeting modernity complements the aesthetic and narrative dichotomies in the film and highlights the confrontation between two conflicting representations of the world.

A lament for ancient times



The temporal duality in *The Feast* is perhaps best symbolized by the family's house. A contemporary designer house, it was built on the ruins of the farm of Glenda's mother. The land around the house includes the natural oil deposit depicted in the first scene, as well as deposits of precious metals and minerals, as Glenda informs her friend Mair later on in the film. The conflict between nature and modernity is explicitly shown in the opening scene as the oil drill pierces the ground until it literally bleeds oil, a centuries-old substance which had been until then hidden away by the land. The collision between the world of modern industry and that of ageless land announces, from the beginning of the film, the need for a resolution, for a bridge between these seemingly irreconcilable spheres.

The dual temporality also functions as an aesthetic artefact, allowing for the constant opposition between the contemplative depiction of the family's mundane interactions and the sporadic peaks of physical violence. As such, *The Feast* is articulated along the suggestion of a constant back and forth between the past embodied by the witch and her symbiosis with the land, and the failure of modernity as it is denounced through the

characterization of the members of the family. The witch embodies a permanence, an immutability, against which the aspirations and pretensions of an always fleeting, constantly changing modernity seem contemptible. The family's pride in the modern-looking designer house, the presumptuous absurdity of its bathroom, the hypocrisy of the house's wide windows opening on a landscape which the family has no respect for, translate the modern world's inability to really think in terms of environmental durability and humility before the land it has claimed.

This contrasted temporality also highlights the ambiguity of Glenda's position in the family. As the rightful heir of the land, her betrayal of the land and of her own past is particularly blamable, since she has made the decision to destroy her mother's farm and build the family's country house on its ruins as a sign of her financial and social success. Glenda is especially impacted by Cadi's intrusion whenever the latter is portrayed as the spirit of Glenda's mother, as Cadi is shown using her mother's objects, wearing her favorite dress and ultimately watching her own reflection morph into that of said mother. All these instances of Glenda reverting to a time before her own house and family even existed may be understood as her desire to return to a state of peace and innocence and escape her own family's toxicity, but, since the film shows this reversion as initiated by Cadi,⁹ it rather hints at Glenda's mother reclaiming her land and progressively coming back into her daughter's life. Dysfunctional, modern domesticity is confronted to a resurgence of former times, to a past represented both by Glenda's mother and the witch as the two entities possessing Cadi's body. While neither Cadi nor Glenda is portrayed as the villain of the plot, their inclusion in this dual temporality seems to point at modernity (or, rather, at its excessive pride and greed) as the obvious antagonist of the storyline.

Beyond duality

Beyond the witch

The "witch" or deity embodied by Cadi is indeed a multi-faceted character, at times an ancient deity symbolizing offended Nature, at times the ghost of Glenda's mother, and, at times, an actual witch punishing her

9. At the beginning of the film, as Cadi is asked by the mother to set the table, she purposely uses Glenda's mother mismatched glasses, then soils the elegant tablecloth with her hands (her body at times oozes soil) and replaces it with her mother's outdated and used tablecloth. Cadi also tries on Glenda's mother's earrings, a scene which ends in her joyfully laughing in front of the mirror in the mother's room.

offenders through deceit, potions and curses. This spirit or deity, inhabiting the body of a deceased young woman,¹⁰ is therefore a fluctuating figure open to interpretation. The young witch could be understood as the embodiment of female sexuality, especially since she is occasionally represented in the film in various confrontations with the (supposedly) motherly figure that is Glenda, in an overly simplified Freudian motif of femaleness along the “whore/mother” dichotomy. Yet Cadi’s sexualization does not aim at titillating the viewer, not even in those scenes when she mates with the ground in the forest or has sex with Gweirydd, the elder son of the family: at no point in these scenes is Cadi’s body eroticized by the camera. Her feminine clothes are nothing but a necessary uniform for the day’s work, and the witch never seems to inhabit Cadi’s body in a way that could be understood as either following or challenging gendered expectations. Cadi’s body is a means to an end for the witch, and the only times she inhabits it in a sexualized and gendered manner is when she uses it to punish Gweirydd and his father Gwyn for their lust and greed. What is more, what could be at first understood as a sexual act when the witch mates with the ground and the tree roots is depicted as her communion with nature, the physical actualization of her love for the land, rather than as a sensationalist appeal to the viewer’s senses. There is no overt sensuality in these scenes which are shown with a cold and matter-of-fact eye which only reinforces Cadi’s alienation from the family. Rather, Cadi’s “sex scenes” seem to aim at triggering atavistic awe at the vision of a timeless entity in the full possession and acceptance of her power and inherent connection to nature.

Consequently, even though the film is centered around a female figure, the association of femininity and nature in *The Feast* seems to open a reflection on ecological matters rather than strictly follow the usual horror films’ depiction of “women laying special claims to forested areas that become wellsprings of patriarchal anxiety about ‘monstrous’ generativity” (Church, 2022: 143). Femininity, here, is the vessel of ecological preoccupations rather than the main focus of the film. It is used as a recognizable, familiar component of the narrative, which opens to a deeper understanding of the film’s ecological values. Nevertheless, Cadi’s femaleness, as a witch-like figure, does recall the ancient association of woman with nature, as was beautifully described by Jules Michelet:

“The better to reckon up the seasons, she watches the sky; but her heart belongs to earth none the less....she looks down toward the

10. The actual Cadi drowned in a lake as she was driving to the family’s house, which is hinted at by her wet hair as she first introduces herself to the family as the night’s hired help. Later on in the film, Mair, one of the guests, tells the family that her husband was sent to help retrieve a car from a nearby lake, a car which turns out to be Cadi’s. Her corpse is possessed by the witch, by Nature as a deity and by the spirit of Glenda’s mother. All these entities can be understood both as separate spirits and as a single yet constantly shifting being.

enamoured flowers, and forms with them a personal acquaintance. [...] On her first appearance the Witch has neither father nor mother, nor son, nor husband, nor family. She is a marvel, an aerolith, alighted no one knows whence. Who, in Heaven's name, would dare to draw near her? Her place of abode? It is in spots impracticable, in a forest of brambles, on a wild moor where thorn and thistle intertwining forbid approach. The night she passes under an old cromlech. (Michelet, 2010: "Introduction")

The few portrayals of Cadi as a strictly female figure seem to serve the ideological discussion at the core of *The Feast* only insofar as these portrayals highlight the family's toxicity and its punishment by the witch.

The character of Cadi seemingly eludes the question of gendered representation by subverting the traditional expectations attached to the witch figure as the embodiment of destructive femininity. However, the complexity of Cadi's character is evident when considering her punishment of the father Gwyn's and the son Gweirydd's toxic masculinity, who both approach her as a mere sexual object. The fact that Gweirydd's sexual relation with Cadi causes his death is, indeed, an explicit reference to the traditional figure of the witch as the embodiment of "hostile" and lethal femininity. Nevertheless, since Cadi also happens to embody the spirit of Glenda's mother, her retaliating to Gwyn and Gweirydd's aggressions can also hint, on a symbolical level, at parental discipline instead of sexualized punishment. The character of Cadi therefore appears to fluctuate between various archetypes or traditional figures, and her complexity as a character can be understood as an implicit tribute to the richness and depths of our understanding of femininity and nature alike. Conversely, the mother Glenda is portrayed as a woman trapped in a familial and social setting, which calls for a feminist interpretation of her character. She seems confined to her role as a wife and mother, a role not criticized as such by the film but, rather, condemned when understood as a monolithic definition of femininity. Glenda's apparent simplicity as a character at the beginning of the film is thus questioned as the complexity of her relation to Cadi unfolds. Cadi, the image of a mythical existence not bound by modernity and its various dynamics of oppression, does not bear the burden of the ideological and social chains afflicting Glenda. Consequently, she is straightaway portrayed as a complex character, whereas Glenda's seemingly simplistic characterization at the beginning of the film seems to reflect the weight of social and ideological conventions inflicted on her as a wife and a mother.

Cadi could also be expected to fit the "motherly" cliché usually associated with depictions of nature, all the more since the witch is also the spirit of Glenda's mother - thus a doubly maternal figure. Yet the depiction

of the nature-maternity association is subverted in *The Feast*, as nature is also portrayed as violent and destructive. Cadi eradicates the family, and the woods into which she drags and burns their corpses at the end of the film fit the expectations of horror-film forests, with their moonless nights, menacing trees and overwhelming fogs. The depiction of these woods recalls the Gothic trope of the tunnel, of advancing further and further away into danger, madness and depravity. However, this subversion of the “motherly Nature” trope is further reversed, as most of the film is set among the peaceful, rolling hills and fields of countryside Wales. Covered in a richness of grass, flowers and green trees, the soft curves of the landscape do recall the archaic understanding of nature as a motherly, nourishing, sheltering entity: wilderness itself seems tamed, welcoming, as if it were inviting people to partake in its many benefits. The aesthetic manner in which nature is represented in *The Feast* thus bears as much significance as nature’s narrative position in the film as either an ally or an antagonist. Both nature and women are depicted as indirect victims of unbridled capitalism and/or toxic masculinity in *The Feast*, yet both can be equally violent and destructive when necessary, hence their complex and ambiguous portrayals in *The Feast*.

This complexity culminates in the character of Cadi, whose composite character cannot be narrowed down to a specific entity. As a female figure personifying nature, violence, and archaic powers, she is a witch; as the receptacle of the spirit of Glenda’s mother’s, she is the embodiment of spiteful, malicious motherhood; as the vengeful entity of wounded nature, she hints at ancient, pre-Christian deities. However, the archaism embodied by Cadi as a witch figure is never explicitly associated with a specific religion or pagan system of beliefs, as no forms of worship are depicted in the film. Consequently, *The Feast* cannot be understood as a film explicitly rooted in Celtic mythology, notwithstanding its Welsh settings and language. This uncertainty, or, rather, the lack of necessity for a specific spiritual system here, only emphasizes the witch’s power as a character. Cadi is evocative of a world beyond traditional mythical and spiritual systems, a world which does not need to be explicitly tied to any contemporary or archaic system of belief. What the witch is in *The Feast* is the embodiment of times before the necessity for systematic definitions: archaic, unrestricted, untamed nature not yet circumscribed to human concepts.

Objects and their significance



The complexity and ambiguity of Cadi’s character also permeates the aesthetic and narrative function of objects in *The Feast*. The film offers highly realistic portraits of the persons composing the family through

material details ascribed to each of them: Gweirydd has his bike and his skin-tight training apparel, Guto has his drugs and electric guitar, Glenda has her bathroom, her kitchen, and her art. Each of these material elements or belongings unveils the family members' individual intradiegetic stories and contribute to their strong characterization while eluding presenting them as simplistic archetypes. Guto is not the caricatural rebellious guitar player, rather, he is a teenager whose use of his guitar and drugs is the consequence of his emotional isolation and rejection by his family. In the same way, Gweirydd's consumption of raw meat at the beginning of the film does not simply portray him as a carnivorous predator. Rather, at first glance, it complements his characterization as a sports competitor with a necessarily strict diet. Yet this initially marginal focus on his diet later on opens to further interpretation as a sign of Gweirydd's disturbed state of mind when he seemingly relishes his family's –and their guests'– repulsion at having to watch him ingest raw meat during the actual dinner.

This complexity is also prevalent in the way the objects inherited by Glenda after her mother passed away are insisted upon in the film. Most of these objects (her mother's old tablecloth and mismatched glasses, for example) are of no commercial value whatsoever, but their sparsity and simplicity convey a highly credible portrayal of her mother as someone who is still secretly attached to her past and to her origins regardless of her claims to modernity and wealth. What is more, far from the expected fetishization of such objects either as triggers of demoniacal possession or as explicit symbols of unresolved grief or anger, objects in *The Feast* are not filmed as ominous or as overtly bearing emotional significance. Their relevance in the narrative does not go beyond what they straightforwardly tell the viewer about their owner, their use, their origin. They are nothing but objects and are depicted with a blunt meaningfulness which only emphasizes their ability to subtly suggest the reciprocal grief, resentment and anger corrupting familial bonds. As such, they elude the horror film trope of the object as a vessel of demoniacal intrusion or possession. They are mere objects, but their real significance as symbols of the interpersonal dynamics between Cadi and the family, and between the family members themselves, cannot be overlooked. Much as the raw meat eaten by Gweirydd in front of his family and their guests does not in itself make him, as a person, repulsive, but is engulfed in a subtle network of meaning, these objects stand for themselves in the narrative. As trinkets passed by a mother to her daughter, they do not need interpretation beyond the authenticity they convey through their inexpensiveness, countryside simplicity, and obvious mismatch with the elegance and sophistication of the family's house. Neither is the apparent preciousness of Glenda's mother's earrings and dress - shown for example through the privileged place allotted to them in her bedroom - criticized as a symbol of greed or capitalism: in their sparsity, these objects rather hint at a countryside, working-class

cherishment of belongings made dearer by their comparatively substantial financial value. Their outdated quality and mismatching styles only seem to reinforce their interpretation as loved objects, desired and cherished by their original rural and underprivileged owner, while every stylish yet impersonal item of clothing, furniture or art owned by her successful daughter Glenda seems to be nothing more than an emotionally empty social statement.

By eluding the trope of the demoniacal possession of objects and using the same objects as conveyors of familial toxicity and regret, *The Feast* thus allows for the same ambiguity and complexity found in the characterization of its protagonists. This ambiguity, far from impeding the overall discussion of environmental and cultural issues, appears to perfectly complement the initial, more obvious dynamics of duality inherent to the structure and aesthetics of *The Feast* and opens to a resolution enacted through the characters' final dissolution in chaos and violence.

Resolution

Toxicity unleashed

Just as the witch cannot be considered as the sole antagonist in *The Feast*, Glenda is not characterized as an absolutely negative figure, even though she partakes in the toxicity pervading the interpersonal relationships in the family. Rather, she is the catalyst of the family members' reciprocal toxicity. Each of the people composing the family is tainted by one or several cardinal sins, and by continuously acting on these sins, they relentlessly inflict and endure resentment, anger, anxiety, to and from each other. Even Glenda, as complex a character as she is, can thus be linked to a specific cardinal sin.

The members of the family are guilty of three main sins: pride, greed, and lust. Glenda's pride is sustained by Gwyn's greed, as her material and social success are directly caused by his political and financial accomplishments. This sin of greed is what triggers the witch's retaliation against the family's desire to exploit and destroy her land. Incidentally, the intrusion of the witch into the family is facilitated by their having hired Cadi to help during the dinner given to a potential investor in the exploitation of the mineral deposit on their land (as it happens, Euros, the investor, is later on forced by the witch to gorge on food –part of which is Guto's leg–, his greed thus translated as abject gluttony). Gwyn's greed triggers

the downfall of the family, yet his lust towards Cadi, subtly hinted at and confirmed by the mother's anxiety and fear of aging,¹¹ is what initiates the witch's actual attacks on the members of the family: shortly after Gwyn lets his desire for Cadi transpire, he is seized with debilitating headaches, an excruciating pain which will eventually lead to his death. Lust, however, is not the father's prerogative, as his son Gweirydd's openly sexual behavior proves: he engages in masturbation, exposes his body to his brother Guto, and has sex with Cadi. Yet the sexual relationship between Cadi and Gweirydd eludes the traditional abuser/victim duality, as Cadi willingly engages in two sexual acts with the young man, the second of which eventually kills the young man. The sexual relationship between the two young people is even more disturbing when recalling that the witch is repeatedly portrayed as Glenda's mother and therefore as Gweirydd's grandmother. The character of the witch, far from a simplistic embodiment of rightful revenge, is here portrayed as deranged, perverse, blamable for her many wrongdoings. Admittedly, the whole family functions along lines built by sin, toxicity, and veiled abuse. Gwyn's and Gweirydd's lust induce Glenda's anxiety; Gweirydd's lust triggers his parents' anger and resentment;¹² Guto's drug addiction feeds his parents' anxiety and anger, even though this addiction was indeed caused by his parents' blind focus on success. Yet the final destruction of the family is not initiated by its members turning on each other; rather, Cadi embodies the horribly personified punishments for each of the family members' individual sin.

Cadi, therefore, is neither inside nor outside the family. A mostly silent figure on the face of whom the camera sometimes lingers as her immobility contrasts with the restlessness of the other members of the family, Cadi's perspective is portrayed through her sporadic bursts of emotion as she reconnects with symbols of her former existence as Glenda's mother. Her ambiguity as a character transpires through both her position as an outsider and as her portrayal as the only legitimate occupant of the land. As the witch and as the goddess, she is tied to the family's land, and as the embodiment of their grandmother's spirit she is part of the family. Neither is she portrayed as a mere figure of vengeance: by repeatedly taking on motherly, caring characteristics, Cadi seems to fill the fault lines between the members of the family. She does not to bring them together or initiate reconciliation; rather, she at first acts as a silent confidante to Guto, a daughterly companion to Glenda, and a sexual validator to Gwyn and Gweirydd. She, at first, seems to be able to give each of the family member what he or she needs the most, what he or she cannot obtain from the other members of the family.

11. She is once shown sitting in front of her mirror, tightening the skin on her face then releasing it with a sigh of sadness and resignation.

12. Gweirydd was accused of raping comatose patients during his doctor's internship, which ended his medical career.

One scene is particularly striking: as Cadi and Glenda are preparing dinner, the former starts singing a Welsh song. Glenda, pleasantly surprised, joins in the singing and then informs Cadi that her own mother used to sing this song, and that she has never heard it since the latter passed away. This scene, when taken outside of the rest of the film, is the perfect image of a healthy, close relationship between a mother and a daughter figure. Nevertheless, not only is this relationship an illusion, one which reveals Glenda's desperate craving for familial love, but it retrospectively enhances the horror of the merciless destruction subsequently brought on by Cadi to the family. What is more, the reversal of the roles of mother and daughter in this scene is tinted with a sense of sadness and regret, as Cadi, shown here as the spirit of Glenda's mother, appears to delight in this short moment of familial bonding with her daughter Glenda. This scene perfectly reveals the film's ability to elude the traditional dichotomy between hero and villain. *The Feast* shifts this traditional duality to a confrontation between fleeting moments of familial happiness and utmost pain and despair as Glenda later witnesses the successive deaths of the members of her family. Incidentally, the witch does not kill her: Glenda eventually slices her own throat, after changing her clothes for what used to be her mother's favorite dress. Confusion of identities is used here not so much as a narrative means appealing to the fear of losing any sense of reality and certainty than as a reflection on the bottomless, absurd toxicity undermining the family.

Since the clear denunciation of a villain or monster to be eliminated in order to reinstate normalcy eludes both the family members and the viewer, the only resolution to the family's latent self-destruction seems to reside in a culmination of violence and death. The solution to the family's ordeal does not take the form of the destruction of the monster embodied by Cadi: rather, in *The Feast*, the witch acts as the catalyst of the toxicity that had been festering their relationship for years. The resulting carnage enacts resolution through destruction and chaos, which is translated, on the aesthetic level, by a specific use of music in the final scenes of the film.

Beyond the visual:
the sounds of *The Feast*



The end of the film seems to conflate the duality underlying the storyline and its sensorial representation. Images of the family's bodies burning in the pyre lit by Cadi are accompanied by the two main sound pieces of the film, Vivaldi's "Cum Dederit" and Meinir Lloyd Griffiths "Watshia di dy hun" (1969) alternatively overlapping each other. This auditive confrontation between "Cum Dederit", a masterpiece of European "elevated"

art, and “Watshia di dy hun”, a song anchored in a language and a culture whose apparent simplicity and rurality nevertheless shows resilience against globalization and capitalism, act as the auditive embodiments of the conflict at the core of the plot.

While the Welsh song seems to indicate that the witch is truly Glenda’s mother’s spirit, the iconic violence of Cadi burning the family’s corpses in the depths of the forest hints at the presence of the supernatural, through the figure of the witch, in this narrative. The violence displayed by Cadi in this scene is more justified than denounced by her being portrayed as a witch, while the omnipresence of the Welsh song throughout the film recalls her position in the family as Glenda’s mother. This ambiguity is even more reinforced in this scene through the disharmony between the two simultaneous songs. This cacophony is made even less agreeable by the changes in the volume at which the two songs are played, as the sensorial translation of the impossibility of reconciling “high”, metropolitan culture with the preservation of regional history and attachment to a specific land. In this specific sequence at the end of the film, the lyrics of “Watshia di dy hun”¹³ become ominous as they ironically echo the first occurrence of the song in a scene which then seemed to humanize Cady and suggest a connection between herself and Glenda as they sang together in the kitchen. In this scene at the end of the film, however, the Welsh song seems to confirm that Cadi, as the spirit of Glenda’s mother, can reclaim her land, even though the price to pay is the destruction of Glenda and her family. Neither can the Christian spirituality implied by Vivaldi’s “Cum Dederit”¹⁴ offer a resolution to this conflict between two irretrievably separate worlds: “Cum Dederit” here seems a desperate call for salvation to a God who does not belong on the witch’s land. The Christian God is vanquished by the witch’s paganism, by the purifying flames erupting higher and higher from the pile of bodies in retaliation for Christianity’s and modernity’s betrayal of the land, until the menace of the destruction brought on by industrialism and greed is erased. Music thus bears as much meaning in *The Feast* as dialogues and images do. It is not used as a mere aesthetic artefact meant to create a specific atmosphere; rather, it is a sign in itself, an appeal to the viewer’s ability to understand the film’s depiction of conflicting cultural spheres. What is more, the two musical pieces intertwining at the end of the film can be understood not as the promotion of the fusion of modernity and timelessness, or industry and nature, but as the musical depiction of the chaotic confrontation between two irreconcilable spheres.

13. “Better be careful/Walking down the street with your curly hair/You wake up with a smile on your lips/A queen of crows with her eyes full of life/Oh, my dear, Better be careful”.

14. “The Lord will give to his beloved in their sleep/Children are the Lord’s gift/His grace is the fruit of the womb.” [my translation]

The language spoken by Cadi –albeit sparsely– and the other protagonists throughout the film also bears significance: Welsh is the oldest language still spoken in Great-Britain (see Abalain, 1998: 74) and descends from the Brythonic language which dates back to times before the Roman conquest of the British Isles (Abalain, 1998; 67). Welsh as the exclusive language of *The Feast* implies cultural resistance and suggests visions of ancient, almost mystical times. Hervé Abalain also mentions that ancient Wales was a refuge for pre-Christian religious practices: “it is known, through the Elder’s testimonies, that the isle of Môn (Anglesey) was a sanctuary of druidism. The roman invaders feared druidism, thus the druids were massacred in 61”¹⁵ (Abalain, 1998; 74). The Welsh language links *The Feast* to a cultural, spiritual, historical, linguistic and geographical identity, and in itself denounces the hegemony of modern industry and capitalist greed as the utmost marker of social success. On a narrative standpoint, it also seems to unify the whole film under a specific cultural and geographical context, however torn between conflicting ideologies this context is. On an aesthetic level, the specific sonorities of the Welsh language highlight the dichotomy between its voluntary estrangement from its non-Welsh viewers and its inclusion in a cohesive, unified regional history and culture. As such, the Welsh language in *The Feast* anchors the film in the post-horror movement’s interest in “alternative” cultures which detaches horror from the hegemony of white, hetero-normative, English-speaking characters and settings.

Conclusion

The film ends on an ultimate form of duality, as Cadi, covered in the family’s blood, walks in “her” meadow after having burned the corpses of the family, and turns towards the camera, facing the viewer. Her smile of relief and deliverance suddenly turns into an expression of excruciating pain and sadness, a pang of extreme affliction on which the film concludes. In this fleeting yet extremely intense glimpse of Cadi’s pain, the film confirms Cadi’s character as the embodiment of the sufferings of a land and culture fighting for survival amidst constant attacks from a world that it does not identify with. In this final revelation of Cadi’s immense sadness, the link between horror films and art films is obvious, as the final scene does not seem to “conclude” the narrative, thus following the art films’ interest in open endings. Rather, it opens a reflection on the resilience of nature against the various violations inflicted on it by the modern, industrialized, capitalist world. After the screams, sobs and peaks of physical violence inflicted on the family, *The Feast* thus closes on a very subtle,

15. « On sait, par les Anciens, que l’île de Môn (Anglesey) était le sanctuaire du druidisme : les envahisseurs romains, qui le redoutent, massacrent les druides en 61 ». (Abalain, 1998; 74)

toned-down rendering of extreme emotions: “much as death as a meta-physical transition/state cannot be cinematically represented with any degree of surety, the survivor’s grief often evades linguistic representation” (Church, 2022: 71). Suggestion is what matters here: after culminating in horror and violence, the slow, soft moan of despair shown through Cadi’s grimace of pain carries the true horror of *The Feast*, that of a land relentlessly abused and exploited by industry and modernity.

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