



A witch's claw, iStock photo, web, January 12th, 2025

Week 4: Women Are Witches: Contemporary Witch Aesthetics

The Contemporary Witch Story



Intro sequence, "The Craft", 1996

"I don't like it. Scores of movies now centre on the theme of the witch – promoting again the idea that women are demonic beings, with destructive powers they cannot control, and this at a time when violence against women is growing worldwide. I think that's very dangerous. There is a lot of identification with the witches but there is no struggle. There is only commercialisation. I told young women, why don't you boycott these movies? Why don't you protest?... The loss of historical memory is dangerous. This is not a game."

– Silvia Federici, interview with The White Review, 2022

The Contemporary Witch Story

Beginning in the 1960s and 70s, the witch story became very important for feminists.

“It became a story in which a lot of other concerns could be addressed, about marginalization, exclusion and persecution.” - Catherine Spooner, professor Lancaster University, UK

In contemporary culture, witches (women) continue to be represented (and criticized) in the same ways that witch hunters did in the 1500-1800s – equally and simultaneously as haggard old crones and hyper-sexual deviants.



Nicole Kidman and Sandra Bullock in “Practical Magic”, 1997, still

The Contemporary Witch Story



In the 2024 film, “The Substance” not only are we faced with the aging female body as witch-like, casting spells to avoid becoming an a crone without sexual appeal or social role, but also an old female body as a monster, in a genre called “body horror.”



Demi Moore in “The Substance, 2024. still

The Cultural History of Witches – A Post-Witch Hunt Summary

17th Century: “The Wayward Sisters”

“Double, double toil and trouble; Fire burn, and caldron bubble,” chanted Shakespeare’s three witches in Macbeth. Representing evil, darkness, chaos and conflict, they popularized the image of the cauldron and were a sisterhood to be feared.

19th Century: The Fairy-Tale Witch

From Hansel and Gretel’s old, wicked and deformed woman living apart from society in the woods to the narcissistic youth-obsessed bad queen of Snow White and the wicked stepmother in Cinderella, witches were the “bad guys” of Grimms’ Fairy Tales and still dominate childhood stories as evil heroines today.

19th Century: The Pre-Raphaelite Muse

Known for depicting female beauty and mystery, the pre-Raphaelites changed discussion of witches by depicting them as priestesses or prophets. Catherine Spooner said: “Sexy witches emerge in painting, classical witches like Medea from Greek mythology and present them as really powerful attractive women and femme fatales.”

1960s: ‘Bewitched’ and Wicca

The emergence of second-wave feminism coincided with the emergence of Wicca. Drawing on ancient paganism, Wiccans worshipped either the Moon Goddess or the Horned God of Fertility. The most popular mainstream television depiction of witchcraft was “Bewitched,” about a nose-twitching housewife named Samantha, who was battling between the dual roles of perfect housewife and witch.

1980s: You may remove your shoes!

Stereotypical depictions of witches began to receive backlash, and Roald Dahl's witches – who appeared to be normal women but removed their shoes, wigs and faces to reveal hideous disfigurements in “The Witches” – came under fire. Catherine Itzin, a feminist activist and author, said it was an example of “how boys learn to become men who hate women.”

1990s: The MTV Generation

From the irreverent and empowered “Sabrina the Teenage Witch” to the lesbian Wicca witch, Willow, in “Buffy the Vampire Slayer”, witches grew empowered through television and films like “Charmed,” “Practical Magic,” “The Craft” and countless more, there was a resurgence in the popularity of the witch.

1990s: The Muggle-Born Witch

The end of the decade saw the release of the first two “Harry Potter” books, and Hermione Granger cemented witchcraft as a skill, requiring studiousness and endless practice. Witches were now allowed to be like wizards and warlocks – the more accepted and serious side of witchcraft. “The idea that you have to undergo initiation, learn rituals and earn your craft changed in popular cultural representations,” Spooner said. “That’s very different from the 17th century, when the witch is an uneducated person.”

2000s: A new broom

With movies like “Blair Witch” and “The Witch,” set in New England, witches continue to dominate popular culture. There are many welcome examples of stereotype subversion too, like “Witches of the East End.” “American Horror Story: Coven” that features a black witch and a witch with Down syndrome.

“To understand you have to build a context. **It is a magnification, a creation of the monster, the monstrous.** It’s not so different now. Women are still called ‘baby killers’ in the US today. In many states, there are local bills demanding the death penalty for abortion – for the woman and for the doctor [such as a bill filed in Texas in March 2021]. There’s a capitalist, patriarchal order that has continued into the present. **If they could, they would burn us.** And they are burning women. All over the world today they are burning women as witches.”

“Willow” from Season 3, “Buffy The Vampyre Slayer”, 1998-99



...In recent years we have seen a return of witch-hunting in Africa, India and other regions, and there are good reason to think that these new persecutions are **connected with the expansion of capitalist relations in the areas affected**. So, for example, in many communities in Africa if a woman lives alone and has access to land, she's accused of being a witch, and the land is taken away, because the land is scarce and now there is a competition for resources, a struggle for survival. And many times, behind all of this there are **local chiefs who are collaborating with mining companies, with oil petroleum companies**. So, there's a lot underground that isn't visible. But the connection between women being charged as witches, the burning of women, and taking away the land, is very clear. The new violence against women is rooted in structural trends that are constitutive of capitalist development and state power." **SILVIA FEDERICI – Interview, The White Review, 2022**

