

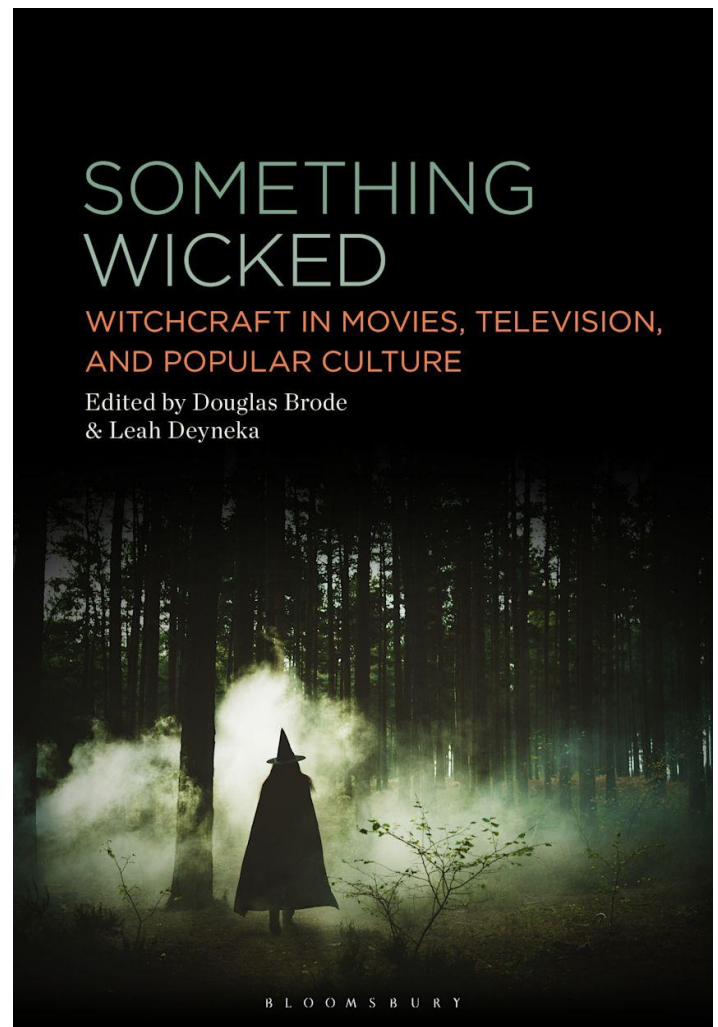
Rezension zu

# Douglas Brode/Leah Deyneka (Eds.): *Something Wicked. Witchcraft in Movies, Television, and Popular Culture.*

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von **Jana Christin Lammerding**

Just as mainstream media and popular culture seem to have been successfully enchanted by witches over the past three decades, so too has scholarship within the humanities. With its 19 transdisciplinary essays mapping the contours of an emerging field of research on witchcraft representations in media, the anthology *Something Wicked: Witchcraft in Movies, Television, and Popular Culture* stands as a perfect illustration of what a "witchcraft renaissance" (p. 211) looks like in contemporary media-cultural studies. The volume's contributions assembled by editors Douglas Brode and Leah Deyneka follow a loose chronological order, moving from ancient folklore and silent films of the 1920s to hit TV series and present-day Hollywood franchises. Though this sequence is neither consistently maintained nor formally divided into sections, editor Douglas Brode's framing chapters attempt to provide the anthology with an overarching argumentative coherence. His introduction "The Villain Still Pursues Us" (pp. 1–12) together with his closing chapter "Something Wicked This Way Comes" (pp. 283–295) state the volume's aim as understanding how and why anti-witchcraft attitudes have persisted in popular culture. To this end, Brode advances two somewhat sweeping claims, namely that Wicca remains the one minority that has yet to experience a meaningful shift in its negative cultural image (cf. p. 11), and that witches have "remained static in terms of our entertainment iconography" (p. 283). Assertions that, as the following non-chronological survey of the chapters will demonstrate, sit uneasily with the anthology's own evidence to the contrary.



Drawing predominantly from a shared body of twentieth- and twenty-first-century theoretical and feminist scholarship, with certain key texts recurring across multiple chapters, the contributions examine witchcraft and witches with a focus that shifts variously across individual witch characters, witch-adjacent figures, relationships among witches, and the worlds they inhabit. The primary objects of analysis are television series, feature films, documentaries, media franchises, and the work of individual directors, complemented by occasional forays into literary texts and explorations of the feminist, political, historical, and pop cultural discourses with which these media (witches) are entangled.

In what is perhaps the volume's most straightforward engagement with a witch figure, Heidi Breuer coins the term "compulsory maternity" to argue that *Game of Thrones* (David Benioff/D. B. Weiss, US/UK 2011–2019) reinforces a patriarchal social imperative by depicting a witch whose wickedness stems from her rejection of

traditional maternity (cf. p. 267). Building on Barbara Creed's "monstrous feminine" and Julia Kristeva's "abject", "A Witch in Westeros" (pp. 267–282) reads Melisandre as embodying what Breuer terms the "Snow White factor", an "elderly, gnarled, wild-haired, mole-covered" (p. 269), anti-maternal hag concealed in a beautiful disguise, ultimately pointing to the binary that proves central to Jeffrey McCambridge's "Disenchantment, Haunting, and *The Witch's Ghost!*" (pp. 123–141), which traces how *Scooby-Doo*'s formula of "fake witches" (p. 130) and "disenchanting monsters" (p. 126) reinforces a good/bad witch binary.

Fran Pheasant-Kelly and Garret Castleberry, by contrast, both return to well-trodden audiovisual territory to propose a new reading of the witch narratives under discussion by demonstrating how they subvert rather than reinforce dualistic oppositions. Mobilising Steve Pile's concept of "third spaces", Pheasant-Kelly argues in "Sorcery in the Suburbs" (pp. 59–70) that in the TV series *Bewitched* (Sol Saks, US 1964–1972), witchcraft in the domestic sphere functions as a form of resistance, transforming the home into a site of feminist agency that resists the gendered binary of private and public, female and male (cf. p. 62). In "No Safe Spaces" (pp. 233–249), Castlebury similarly makes the case that the horror in Robert Egger's *The VVitch* (UK/CA/US 2015) deconstructs dichotomies like wilderness/civilisation, which underpin the mythological construction of the "American experience" (cf. p. 235), casting the film as a "frontier anti-western horror" (p. 242). Notably, however, the witch remains largely peripheral to an analysis that centers the film's potential rather than its titular figure.

Equally receding from view is the witch in Hafsa Alkhudairi's "Sirius Black and the Wizard World" (pp. 113–121), which examines the legal system in the *Harry Potter* universe through a Foucauldian lens. Centering on the wrongful conviction of antagonist-turned-ally Sirius Black, Alkhudairi interrogates power structures and biases within a diegetic world of witchcraft, yet without making witches (or wizards) its explicit subject.

Very much in keeping with the trilogy's cinematography, witches are however given a close-up in the

two chapters devoted to Dario Argento's *Three Mothers* movies. In "Suzy, We Always Knew You" (pp. 143–155), Allison Craven considers old (Dario Argento, IT 1977) and new (Luca Guadagnino, IT/US 2018) *Suspiria* as gothic horror fairy tales whose *giallo* aesthetics and sensory excess de-emphasise narrative in favour of atmosphere, tracing the connection between witchcraft, body, and motherhood through the figure of Mother Suspiriorum and the role of dance as the primary language of witchcraft (p. 146–150), while contrasting Argento's witches with their "de-Satanized" (cf. p. 145) reincarnation in the Guadagnino remake. Dennin Ellis' "Bodies of Knowledge and Bodies of Power" (pp. 157–171) complements this with a Marxist reading of *Inferno* (Dario Argento, IT 1980), arguing that the film's dream logic reframes the witch as a composite, disseminated figure whose terror invites the audience "to question *why* the Witch is frightening" (p. 162).

What Ellis identifies as an "obsession with the body" (p. 170) resonates across two further chapters that trace the sexual and demonic physicality of the witch. In "Rosemary's Baby" (pp. 71–82), drawing once again on Kristeva's "abject", Jeremy Carr considers how Rosemary's body becomes a recurring site of witches' incursion, violated, manipulated, and consumed from within, particularly highlighting food and drink as vectors of this abject penetration (cf. pp. 73, 77) in Roman Polanski's cult classic. Jack W. Shear, in turn, contents in "So the Darkness Spoke" (pp. 211–232) that Vanessa's trajectory from spiritualist medium to vessel of demonic sexuality and satanic feminism (cf. p. 216) in the *Penny Dreadful* series (John Logan, UK/US 2014–2016), illustrates how the modern witch is simultaneously rendered as a blueprint for empowerment as well as "an aspirational commodity to be consumed" (p. 212).

If the modern witch is indeed a commodity, Susan Aronstein's "A Woman Who Walks in the Footsteps of the Goddess" (pp. 199–210) demonstrates how that commodity is tailored "for an audience who grew up reading high fantasy and paranormal romances" (p. 200). By replacing the exceptional woman of vampire romance with an exceptional witch, *A Discovery of Witches* (UK 2018–2022) subverts generic genre expect-

tations in favor of constructing a "cinematic witch" (p. 199) that suits the times (cf. p. 200).

Less a commodity than a device, the witch proves equally deployable and modifiable for narrative and aesthetic purposes according to Mellisa Guadrón's "The Mark May be Gone but the Spell Is Still There" (pp. 173–185) and James Morrison's "Through a Lens Darkly" (pp. 45–57). Guadrón probes how disability functions as a metaphor and plot device in Hayao Miyazaki's *Howl's Moving Castle* (JP/US 2004), tracing a systematic hyper- or hypo-humanisation of bodies depending on their association with nature, caregiving, and magic (cf. p. 177–178), whereas Morrison considers witchcraft an aesthetic device in Carl Theodor Dreyer's work, showing how his solitary, ambiguous witch-like figures serve as embodiments of the "metaphysical mystery that haunts his films" (p. 56).

This quality of being "pervasively felt" (p. 46) rather than explicitly shown can similarly be ascribed to the folk horror movies explored by Kevin S. Flanagan and Kerri-Leanne Taylor. Flanagan's "Whose Law Is It Anyway?" (pp. 83–97) reads the uncanny land- and townscapes in *The Wicker Man* (Robin Hardy, UK 1973) as rendered ambiguous and sinister through the overlay of unfamiliar customs and rituals, witchcraft functioning as a psychological effect and, ultimately, "window dressing" (p. 96). Taylor's "Gaia's Vengeance" (pp. 251–266) traces how the embodied ecological force in *Apostle* (Gareth Evans, UK/US 2018), referred to only as "Her", oscillates between a feral, blood-consuming witch and half-woman, half-plant Gaia goddess, collectively illustrating nature's revenge against those who exploit and enslave it (cf. pp. 259).

No "Mother Earth" but the mother of demons stands at the centre of J.S. Starkweather's "Seen in the Sphere of Lilith" (pp. 13–26), which explores the genealogy of Lilith and her afterlife in present-day media, arguing that her survival across millennia renders her an empowering figure that is "harvested and preserved for use by today's generations of women" (p. 23). The same approach informs Marta Cobb who brings the

evolution of Arthurian legend's Morgan le Fay and her representation across literature, film, and television to light in "In my time I have been called many things" (pp. 27–44).

In place of tracing a witch figure's evolution, Cyrus R. K. Patell's "The Nightsisters of Dathomir" (pp. 99–111) deploys the witches of *Star Wars* as a lens onto the evolution of the saga from successful films to transmedia franchise phenomenon. In "Shadow of Suspicion" (pp. 187–198), Natalie Rosiek similarly engages with the witch as a lens, though to altogether more urgent ends, exposing the "harmful, uninformed ways" (p. 188) governing Western media's depiction of African cultural practices by taking a closer look at contemporary films and documentaries by African filmmaker such as *I Am Not a Witch* (Rungano Nyoni, UK/FR/DE/ZM 2017).

Taken together, the volume's contributions demonstrate that witchcraft in modern-day media is best understood as a palimpsest (cf. p. 215), one that does not take a single form, nor simply shape-shifts between them, but holds all of its layered historical, cultural, and ideological meanings simultaneously, each overlay legible beneath the next. It is all the more puzzling, then, that Brode concludes the anthology by insisting that the witch "mostly remains an abhorrent figure" (p. 283) and equating her with "natural women" (p. 283) and Wicca, both being a projection of modern assumptions onto a figure whose very complexity this volume has extensively demonstrated. Far more than Brode's reductive framing allows, witchcraft and witches resurface throughout the anthology as a remarkably capacious figures, that accommodate readings of embodiment, ecology, colonialism, genre, aesthetics, and empowerment with equal facility, and that clearly make more than compelling research subjects for media analysis, within and well beyond this ongoing *witchcraft renaissance*.

## Autor/innen-Biografie

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is a doctoral candidate at the University of Vienna and a lecturer at the Braunschweig University of Art as well as a former visiting researcher at the University of Oxford, St Edmund Hall. Her research focuses on media-cultural approaches to historical epistemology, combining media studies with archival research, discourse theory, and cultural historiography. In her doctoral project, she examines the mediality and epistemological quality of the witch in reproduction discourse. Lammerding holds an MA Hons in media studies from the University of Vienna, where she served as a teaching assistant and academic tutor during her graduate studies.

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