FEMINIST ETHICS AND MAGICAL FEMINISM IN *THE WITCH*, BY ROBERT EGGERS, AND *GRETEL & HANSEL*, BY OZ PERKINS

Ética feminista e feminismo mágico em A bruxa*, de Robert Eggers, e* Maria e João*, de Oz Perkins*

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ABSTRACT: Based on notions of feminist ethics and magical feminism, we illustrate the initiation into witchcraft as a shift to a new morality for the teenage protagonists of the films *The Witch* (2017), by Robert Eggers, and *Gretel & Hansel* (2020), by Oz Perkins. These folk horrors subvert the character of the witch of the woods by giving her a coming-of-age background story, all the while keeping some key-elements from traditional fairy tales. We suggest that the leading girls undergo a moral transformation: in becoming witches, they cease their roles as caregivers, abandoning a care-oriented ethics that was imposed on them and embracing a new hedonistic, egotistical one.

KEYWORDS: Feminist ethics. Magical feminism. Cinema. *The Witch*. *Gretel & Hansel*.

RESUMO: Baseando-nos em noções de ética feminista e de feminismo mágico, ilustramos a iniciação à bruxaria como a adesão a uma nova moral por parte das protagonistas adolescentes dos longas-metragens *A bruxa* (2017), de Robert Eggers, e *Maria e João* (2020), de Oz Perkins. Como filmes de terror do subgênero *folk*, ambos subvertem a figura da bruxa da floresta ao retratar sua trajetória de amadurecimento, ao mesmo tempo mantendo alguns elementos-chave dos contos de fadas tradicionais. Sugerimos que elas passam por uma transformação moral: ao se tornarem bruxas, saem de seu papel de cuidadoras, abandonando a ética de cuidado que lhes foi imposta e abraçando uma nova moral hedonista e egoísta.

PALAVRAS-CHAVE: Ética feminista. Feminismo mágico. Cinema. *A bruxa*. *Maria e João*.

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Witches and cinema enjoy a long, mutually advantageous relationship, born from the fascination around such characters and reinforced by their versatility, widely explored on screens. Cinema, perhaps even more than literature, has been responsible for colonizing our imagination with different versions of witches – not always evil and often fun, seductive, even romantic. "The witch moves from feared and hated devil to much-admired role model and back again in the popular imagination", as stated by Kimberly Wells (2007, p. 3).

In this article – focused on the character construction of two transgressive young witches – we illustrate the initiation into witchcraft as a conscious ethical decision with two contemporary films: *The Witch: A New England Folktale* (2017), written and directed by Robert Eggers, and *Gretel & Hansel* (2020), directed by Oz Perkins and adapted from brothers Grimm's "Hänsel und Gretel" by screenwriter Rob Hayes. Considered arthouse folk horror, produced with relatively low budgets but sharp in their creation of disquieting atmospheres, these films revisit the evil witch of the woods from traditional fairy tales and provide her a background story. Both portray the transition of oppressed teenage girls into a new code of morals, one that permits them to live accordingly to their own values. We suggest that these characters – Thomasin (Anya Taylor-Joy), from *The Witch*, and Gretel (Sophia Lillis), from *Gretel & Hansel* – embrace a new intuitive ethics, one that corrects for them the ruling one.

Justyna Sempruch (2008, p. 1) suggests that contemporary representations of the witch may work as a locus for the cultural negotiation of genders. Such negotiation is also an ethical one.[1] As a discipline, feminist ethics dates to the 1970s, thus to the so-called second wave of feminism, when programs of Women's Studies were first established, and a body of feminist philosophy began to be formed (NORLOCK, 2019, n.p.). Currently, it is of course a diverse area, with different approaches and internal controversies. For this study, we base our conception of feminist ethics mainly on the idealistic, even utopian propositions by Mary Daly (1990), because of her treatment of the witch and her detailed study around the "witchcraze of patriarchy";[2] on Sempruch (2008),

[1] We understand ethics as the philosophical approach to morality (NODDINGS, 2003, p. 1).

[2] As "witchcraze", Daly refers to the persecution or hunt of people (particularly women) accused of witchcraft in Medieval Europe.

who relates the figure of the witch to multiple feminist theories; and on Hilde Linderamann (2019), for updated notions of ethics in the feminist context. We also support our discussion on the grounds of magical feminism as approached by Wells (2007), as a means of reflecting on how the filmic return of the annihilating witch can act in alliance with the rise of the witch as a confident woman who embraces a new ethics.

Firstly, however, we offer a brief review on how, after repeated deconstructions of the traditional witch of fairy tales in audiovisual productions of the 20th century, current horror cinema returned to the witch in her old raw and frightening state.

Witches in the 21st century

Horror cinema[3] never abandoned the myth of the evil witch. She is present in classics such as *Black Sunday* (1960), by Mario Brava, *Rosemary's Baby* (1968), by Roman Polanski, and *Suspiria* (1977), by Dario Argento. And in an important event in recent horror history: *The Blair Witch Project* (1999), by Eduardo Sánchez and Daniel Myrik, which promoted a return to the bloodthirsty witch – a lonely woman who annihilates those who venture in her territory. The film marked the beginning of a new phase for the witch in mass cinema: she is back to horror films as an entity to be feared.

A relevant aspect of *The Blair Witch* is the visual absence of the actual witch: "Using the hand-held camera and the fictional documentary situation to misdirect the audience's generic expectations, *The Blair Witch Project* expands the genre of the horror film by refusing to narrate the source of the horror" (WARHOL, 2005, p. 230). This, of course, adds tension to the experience of watching the film, since the image of the witch our imagination creates tends to be more "bone-chilling as anything they could show you" (CHERRY, 2009, p. 55). Despite its innovations as a "found footage" rendering, *The Blair Witch* is clearly rooted in the past as a postmodern version of "Hänsel

[3] Understood here as films made to provoke fear, disquiet or related emotions in the viewers, thus, as a commercial genre focused on the expectations of a niche audience: "At the consumption end of the industrial process, viewers tend to have particular tastes and want to see the kinds of films that they know they will enjoy, so genres have become a major selling point in the marketing and exhibition of films" (CHERRY, 2009, p. 9).

und Gretel" as collected in the 19th century by brothers Grimm (2013), to which we will return later in this discussion.

Following *The Blair Witch Project*, other films have depicted scary and/or aversive witches, such as Sam Raimi's *Drag Me to Hell* (2009). The seductive witch, "the mythical *vagina dentata*" (SEMPRUCH, 2008, p. 7), is also a constant presence, as shown in Anna Biller's *The Love Witch* (2016). Through these films, however, we still navigate the duality of "fascination or revulsion" (SEMPRUCH, 2008, p. 14) traditionally provoked not only by the witch but by all females within a patriarchal society.

The return to evil witches in horror has gradually awaken alternate approaches. These come often from low-budget, arthouse films. In a new 21st-century trend, to which both Eggers's and Perkins's films belong, witches are construed neither as disgusting nor specifically seductive; what is more relevant, neither good-hearted nor specifically destructive. In the context of horror films, a witch who inhabits the gray area between good and evil breaks with the Christian tradition of moral polarization: "The rise of Christianity provided a new roster of monstrous forces out to wreak havoc upon unsuspecting Europeans: chiefly the Devil himself, various assorted minions and minor demons, and the figure of the witch", writes Harry M. Benshoff (2014, p. 209). The Manichean system of absolute good versus absolute evil, as Benshoff points out, fits well together with the usual narrative pattern of classical and contemporary Western horror. Even though folklore and religious intolerance have somewhat been set aside since the Age of Enlightenment, favoring more rational approaches, Romanticism and Gothicism – two major inspiration sources for horror cinema to this date – have counterbalanced it by bringing back folkloric images from the so-called Dark Ages (BENSHOFF, 2014).

The history of the witch in cinema can also be seen as reflecting the development of feminism itself. In the 1970s' scholarly feminism, the witch was rediscovered as a benevolent, but neglected wise woman, and a victim of "phallogocentric hegemonies" (SEMPRUCH, 2008, p. 12). In accordance with the "wise woman" perspective, Clarissa Pinkola Estés reminds the origin of the term "witch":

> Like the word *wild*, the word *witch* has come to be understood as a pejorative, but long ago it was an appellation given to both old and young women healers, the word witch deriving from the word *wit*, meaning wise. This was before cultures carrying the one-God-only religious image began to overwhelm the older pantheistic cultures which understood the Deity through multiple religious images of the universe and all its phenomena. But regardless, the ogress, the witch, the wild nature, and whatever other *criaturas* and integral aspects the culture finds awful in the psyches of women are the very blessed things which women often need most to retrieve and bring to the surface. (ESTÉS, 1996, p. 97)

The witch as a wise woman who is in contact with her true self and nature was a relevant trope of radical feminism – we may argue that it still is, perhaps in a non-scholarly, more commonsense understanding of feminism. Daly urged women to embrace their "Wild Witch" when presenting her now classic *Gyn/Ecology*: "It is an invitation to the Wild Witch in all women who long to spin" (DALY, 1990, p. xlix). She considered the journey of women into "radical be-ing" as parallel to the one of the witches, or, more specifically, of the "hag", defined as a female demon, an evil and frightening spirit, a nightmare, or an ugly and evil-looking old-woman. By reminding readers that creative women tend to be seen as ugly by misogynistic standards of beauty, Daly incites them to become "Great Hags":

> As we write/live our own story, we are uncovering their history, creating Hagography and Hag-ology. Unlike the "saints" of christianity [*sic*], who must, by definition, be dead, Hags live. Women traveling into feminist time/space are creating Hag-ocracy, the place we govern. To govern is to steer, to pilot. We are learning individually and together to pilot the time/spaceships of our voyage. The vehicles of our voyage may be any creative enterprises that further women's process. The point is that they should be governed by the Witch within – the Hag within. (DALY, 1990, p. 15)

The image of this ugly, nightmarish woman brought from the Middle Ages is the same source that has been feeding fairy tales, both in traditional form and in postmodern retellings.

The notion of the witch as a "wise woman" and the will to find a witch within every woman have since been relativized and amplified to avoid oversimplifying dualities and to embrace new forms of feminism, considering that not every person (since feminism is not always woman-centered anymore) of every color, socioeconomic status, and culture share the same agenda and needs. This does not mean that the witch as a representation of female agency is obsolete, much

to the contrary; as Wells (2007, p. 3) indicates, the witch comes and goes in different forms, being able "to occupy, sometimes simultaneously, both evil subjectivity and saving good". In another perspective, Sempruch (2008, p. 124) suggests the witch as a less defined figure, "as a boundless fantasy of gender", "a fantasy of un/belonging".

The moral decisions of Thomasin & Gretel

The witches that we see in *The Witch* and *Gretel & Hansel*, even though still rooted in the Eurocentric tradition (both main characters being white young women venturing in the woods), represent such "un/belonging" described by Sempruch (2008, p. 124). Both more disturbing than properly scary, these folk horror renderings portray teenage girls confronted with the evils of witchcraft, of which they manage to take possession for their own benefit.

In *The Witch*, praised as an explicitly feminist film (ZWISSLER, 2018), we follow the journey – or rise – of Thomasin towards becoming a witch, in a macabre coming-of-age narrative set in 17th century Puritan New England. Puritans feared witchcraft, and an interpretation of this fear as collective hysteria is well-established in Arthur Miller's play *The Crucible* (1953). Eggers's film, however, goes in the opposite direction by making witches real, inhabiting dark forests far from the Puritan settlements.

The trigger of the central conflict is the disappearance of Thomasin's baby brother when he is under her care. Viewers know that the child was stolen (and killed) by a red-cloaked figure, later revealed as an old witch who uses the child's blood and entails as an unguent to smear her naked body. As a bad substitute for a mother, having been unable to care for the baby, little by little Thomasin becomes a scapegoat for everything bad that happens to her family, and this escalates to the point in which her parents openly accuse her of witchcraft. As a girl and a Puritan daughter, Thomasin would only be of any use if sold as a servant to a wealthy family or taken in by a husband. At their small farm, even though she helps with the chores, she becomes nothing more than a nuisance, particularly to her mother, who rarely shows her any affection. Her developing womanhood represents a threat: "Thomasin's changing body and growing sense of autonomy

become a source of tension within the family, especially straining the relationship between Thomasin and her mother, Kate" (MADDEN, 2020, p. 138).

There are underlying moral conflicts in Thomasin's situation. As a young woman, she is expected to watch her younger siblings and to lock the farm animals in the evening, making herself useful to her parents. The idea of women being more suitable for caring for others and more inclined to cultivate close relationships has been the object of a heated debate within ethics. On the one side, authors have suggested that women "define themselves as both persons and moral agents in terms of their capacity to care" (NODDINGS, 2003, p. 40) and that "masculinity is defined through separation while femininity is defined though attachment" (GILLIGAN, 2003, p. 8). On the other, such notions are often criticized due to the "burdened feminine history" (NORLOCK, 2019, n.p.), which has been assigning all women the role of caregivers, and not only those who care by choice.

Despite her mother's view, Thomasin seems to be a good carer, and the abduction of the baby is clearly not her fault. She is also not a witch from the start. In a final twist, however, she follows the fate of which she was unjustly accused: after the death of her whole family, she accepts a pact with the Devil and goes deep into the forest, where she manages to float in the air alongside other women, a sign that she has managed to become a witch. Hanging in the night air, she bursts into laughter, and we, as viewers, tend to celebrate this outcome; Thomasin can now enjoy life under a new set of morals – one that favors her.

In *Gretel & Hansel*, with its duly inverted title, teenage Gretel begins her journey of survival alongside her brother Hansel by refusing to prostitute herself in exchange for some comfort. Because she refuses such a job, which could have been an opportunity to earn money and contribute to her household, Gretel is kicked out by her mother and starts wandering through the woods with her little brother. As a retelling of Grimm's fairy tale, the film transgresses and subverts the source while keeping a similar message – the quest for independence is also in the core of the traditional story, in which the children are abandoned, face rejection, and are finally reunited, thus

gaining "psychological independence"[4] (SYLVESTRE, 2011, p. 1702). As a folk horror retelling, it is not targeted at a young audience and can be seen as an expression of the "feminist uncanny",[5] also a current trend in Western cinema (COSTA, 2023, p. 90). Once again, we see the teenage girl as a nuisance to her parents, as if she had no place in the world – unless she uses her body to either get married or prostitute herself.

The film by Perkins is beautiful to look at as a stylistic rendering of the original tale (with touches from other fairy tales as well), full of poetically dark images and long silences. At one point, Hansel asks Gretel to tell him an old fairy tale once more, to which she responds: "It's too scary, and you'll start to see things that aren't there" (16min10sec). This metafictional comment indicates the film's self-awareness as a perverse reinterpretation.

Walking in search of food through the forest, Gretel and Hansel smell the fragrance of cake in the air and find the house of the witch Holda, who invites them to stay there. Gradually, Gretel becomes suspicious of Holda's real intentions. She declares her wish to introduce the girl into magic, recognizing in Gretel the potential to become a witch. Holda says: "We are made from the same matter, the same filth. The same dirt. Otherwise, how would you know my story without me having to tell it to you?" (1h09min57sec). But, once she discovers herself in fact endowed with magical powers, Gretel kills Holda and takes her house for herself. She is now the witch. Her brother Hansel is sent back home, leaving her alone in her new dwellings.

We have two witches, therefore, who are close to the ones in fairy tales in their loneliness and mystery, turning the forest into their home. By the end, Thomasin and Gretel take control of their lives, so their outcomes tend to be perceived as positive – representing a subtle transgression in the horror genre, since most viewers will probably not fear nor condemn them. This acceptance is somewhat present in Daly's proposition of a new process of valuation for women, since "the phallocratic categorizations of 'good' and 'evil' no longer apply when women *honor* women, when we become honorable to ourselves" (DALY, 1990, p. 12).

[4] In the original, "independência psicológica".
[5] In the original, "insólito feminista".

A new ethics for the young witches

By breaking with the ethical system presupposed by the culture around her, the witch of the woods introduces to herself – and to those who dare to approach her – a new system, in which her wills prevail, and it is now she who imposes limits on others, not the other way around. She isolates herself either completely or joining others like her in a coven. This is why the forest plays a relevant role in fairy tales (and in horror films alike): not only because, for obvious reasons, children and people in general take risks when walking on their own through such territory, but also because it is an environment immune to external rules and morality. The forest may represent the realm of the psyche and the feminine principle, as well as a place of initiation: "Retreat into the forest is symbolic death before initiatory rebirth" (COOPER, 1987, p. 296).

The villainous character in brothers Grimm's "Hänsel und Gretel" is the witch of the woods par excellence. She isolates herself in a carefully conceived edible house that attracts her target audience: the lost children she intends to devour. Like the evil stepmother of the children, who abandons them in the woods, the witch does not express any maternal impulses – being a "natural" mother is a rule excluded from her ethics.

In most Western societies, women still tend to be seen as care providers, currently spending "as much as 50 percent more time giving care than men do" (LINDERMANN, 2019, p. 104). The witch of the woods is scary because she represents the "threat of cannibalism" (PIATTI-FARNELL, 2018, p. 97) and refuses to abide to that pattern of care. She embodies the criticism of a patriarchy that ignores her wishes and guarantees no pleasure or a purpose of life that suits her. She is also closer to nature and distanced from the common morality reigning outside the forest. The witch is the Other, extending "the boundaries of system towards anarchy" (SEMPRUCH, 2008, p. 3). If it were not for the convenient shelter of the woods, for the self-isolation that also serves as self-protection, these women would be dead (burned or hanged, Salem-style) or locked up so that they would not disturb the prevailing moral order. As Sempruch (2008, p. 127) puts it, "the witch comes to represent not what is contained and sustained by traditional identity but rather what is transgressed and therefore eliminated, restricted, or (r)ejected to confined spaces, such as asylums or prisons".

As Daly (1990, p. 15) suggests when urging women readers to embrace their "Hag within", one possible way of liberation for women is embracing the very qualities that men have ascribed them, such as irrationality and an alleged amorality. Daly proposes a metaethics (using the suffix "meta" to designate a new, but related discipline) that is not male-centered and of a "*deeper intuitive* type" (DALY, 1990, p. 12, her emphasis), something that can be observed in Thomasin's and Gretel's gain of power: they do not conceive ethics in a logical, organized manner, but search it within themselves instead.

In accepting the Devil's offer, Thomasin assigns to a type of ethics that is both contractual (since it involves submission to a set of given rules in exchange of protection) and hedonistic; her decision seems to emerge from her deepest desires. Her moral choice goes fiercely against the Puritan ethics surrounding her in the 1630s – or, at least, against Puritan ethics as we see portrayed in Egger's film, which echoes the way Nathaniel Hawthorne depicted it in *The Scarlet Letter* in 1850: "No content to practice mere self-denial, Hawthorne's Puritans opposed happiness, leisure, and recreation anywhere they found it" (DANIELS, 1991, p. 9). Thomasin allows herself into a life of fun and pleasures, exchanging her former way of life for the very thing it fears.

Wells (2007, p. iii) argues that female magic "is a metaphor for female unruliness and disruption to patriarchy and, as such, is usually portrayed as evil and deserving of punishment". This is palpable in the case of Thomasin, who is accused of things that she has not done, and punished for them, before abandoning Puritan decorum and engaging in hedonism,[6] in a new life in which she will probably be feared by others but can be free to taste mundane pleasures. This does not mean that she is now totally free and happy – as it is expected from the negotiation of all codes of ethics, hers comes with the price: being bound to the Devil.

To enrich the present discussion, it is relevant to offer a divergent point of view about Thomasin, one that does not understand her fate as a feminist victory at all. Obviously, Thomasin as a character could not be a conscious feminist in colonial New England (and neither could Gretel

[6] We adopt the terms "hedonist" and "hedonism" in a broad sense, meaning a morality oriented by the search of pleasure: "The word 'hedonism' comes from the ancient Greek for 'pleasure'. (…) Ethical or evaluative hedonism claims that only pleasure has worth or value and only pain or displeasure has disvalue or the opposite of worth" (MOORE, 2019, n.p.).

in her sordid adventure). Still, it is worth mentioning that there are those who do not consider Thomasin's turn as a choice, but rather the result of a no-win situation. "Who could describe her final situation as 'free will' in the face of all the coercion to which the Devil has subjected her?", asks Laurel Zwissler (2018, p. 7); we risk answering it by arguing that Thomasin had already shown signs of wanting something more from life.

From the start of the film, Thomasin seems displaced in her family. When her father, due to religious dispute, decides to leave the plantation where they are surrounded by other Puritan families, Thomasin seems to react badly – she resists leaving, but must go. The first time we testify her prayers to God, still in the very beginning of the film, she is trying to negotiate forgiveness: "I here confess I have lived in sin. I have been idle of my work, disobedient of my parents, neglectful of my prayer. I have, in secret, played upon thy Sabbath and broken every one of thy commandments in thought, followed the desires of my own will, and not the Holy Spirit" (5min13sec). Whereas one could argue that in such fanatic environment being a constant sinner is more than expected, Thomasin seems to be especially aware of her non-conformity to her family's ruling morals.

This may indicate an intuition, a wisdom about her true desires to which Daly (1990) alludes when inciting women to find their inner witches. Earlier in the narrative, Thomasin had already given indications of her liking of fun, when she plays peekaboo with the baby (6min47sec); of food, when wishing to eat an apple (24min11sec); and even of luxury, when describing glass windows to her brother Caleb: "We had glass windows in England (...) Well, it was pretty" (41min23sec).

One could understand Thomasin's hedonist inclination as an influence of the Devil all along, but that does not seem to be the case. Would she be coerced by the Devil had she not already demonstrated such inclinations? The Devil can be seen as an enabler of her anti-Puritan character, the one that allows it to flourish at last. This does not mean total freedom. If we understand her pact with the Devil as a contract, and a conscious one, Thomasin agrees to submit to new rules as long as she is able, from now on, to enjoy the pleasures promised to her in return of her purity. If in the previous morality imposed by her family there seemed to be no advantage whatsoever to her, at least now she will have access to the desires she cultivates.

The Devil certainly knows how to negotiate with her, but she is the one who invokes him at first, by talking to the black goat of the farm: "Black Phillip, I conjure thee to speak to me" (1h23min24sec). She asks him what he has to offer. He asks her: "Wouldst thou like the taste of butter? A pretty dress? Wouldst thy like to live deliciously?" (1h24min25sec). She responds yes. Even though Zwissler (2018, p. 10) proposes that Thomasin's choice is an illusion nurtured by anachronist feminist views that romanticize Eggers's narrative, and that, torn between two patriarchal forces, Thomasin "chooses the pimp over the father", we may counter-argue by interpreting that the Devil is persuasive, but not forceful: he offers her a contract, and she signs it not in despair, but willingly. Will her life as a witch be even more awful than the previous one? Will she also kill babies, like the first witch we see in the film? Anything beyond Thomasin's apparent ecstasy at the end is pure speculation. As Booker and Lopes comment about the ending:

> Clearly, *The Witch* offers an ending that can be read in a variety of ways. Even the image of Thomasin ascending with an ecstatic expression on her face can be read in at least two different ways: on the one hand, from a feminist point of view, this ascension can be interpreted as personal empowerment; on the other hand, Thomasin's expression, alongside her body pose, with her arms wide stretched, strongly recalls a crucified Christ, an aspect that entails the presence of a sacrifice. Therefore, the figure of the witch in Egger's film appears to be enveloped by the mist of ambiguity. (BOOKER; LOPES, 2023, p. 40).

This undeniable ambiguity does not interfere with the moral shift that supports Thomasin's choice, because her future as a witch is simply not part of the narrative. The climax of Eggers's film depicts the destruction of Thomasin's family and her determination to become something else.

Early in *Gretel & Hansel*, after refusing to exchange her maidenhood for some comfort, Gretel also displays some wisdom concerning agreements: "Nothing is given without something else being taken away" (9min58sec). Only she does not agree to such contract. Later, however, she is the one who proposes a spoken contract to the witch Holda, offering to take care of the house in exchange for shelter (31min21sec). As the Devil is for Thomasin, Holda is the enabler of Gretel's shift – but Gretel is a righteous girl, always trying to do what is best for her little brother. Knowing that she eats children, Gretel resists Holda's pressure to make her a fellow witch: "I won't do what you want me to do. I'm nothing like you" (1h09min56sec). It is only in defense of Hansel that Gretel

engages in witchcraft, but once he is safe and sound, she realizes that her path is a lonely one, an egotistical one for that matter. She is not her brother's caregiver anymore: "Let him find his own story, and his own courage to live it, just as I now go on to live mine. I have my own power to nurture" (1h20min23seg). She adheres to an ethical egoism (SHAVER, 2023) of sorts – promoting her own good, embracing an open and honest self-interested attitude. Gretel implies an intention to use her powers in a non-destructive way without mentioning the good of others: "I could feed it darkness or give it plenty of light" (1h27min30sec).

Gretel's discovery of her own magic can be also seen as an intuitive attitude regarding morals and the balance of power: "Rather than pretending that women are innately good and more moral than men, the Magical Feminist witch shows us how women can and use power", explains Wells (2007, p. 10), which is aligned with Lindermann's (2019) approach to feminism as mostly about power and the asymmetrical distribution of power. As a means of rebalancing power toward symmetry, magical feminism[7] emphasizes female initiative, the woman's power of choice, as its main pillar.

The idea of magical feminism as proposed by Wells (2007, p. 61) seeks to "avoid the essentializing trap of saying all women are essentially more moral and good than men are, a trap that can be as limiting as the negative one". This bias is palpable, for example, in Daly's (1990) work. Current feminists dealing with the figure of the witch tend to focus more on negotiations of power. As Wells (2007, p. 61) summarizes: "We see that women deserve power and equality not because they are inherently benevolent and good (an argument easily disproved by examples of women who use power selfishly) but because equality and fair distribution of power is simply right".

Final remarks

This work sought to approach young witches in recent horror films from an ethical and feminist perspective while avoiding attributing benevolence to these characters. Going from

[7] The term is believed to have been coined by Patricia Hart when describing Isabel Allende's *The House of the Spirits* (1982).

forced caregivers to hedonist (Thomasin) and egotistical (Gretel), both express the power of female agency and claim ethical flexibility for women.

As recently initiated witches in archaic environments, Thomasin and Gretel pursue a new way of life that is convenient to them. As filmic retellings of tales and legends from the Western tradition, *The Witch* and *Gretel & Hansel* innovate by combining witches and folk horror without making them immoral or amoral, but as followers of a new morality that suits their convenience and desires. All moral systems imply bargaining and come with a price, and both leading girls seem to be aware of this.

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