

I WILL GUIDE THY HAND



PORTRAYALS OF WITCHCRAFT
IN CINEMA

CUFA FILM CLUB WEEK 2

WHAT IS A WITCH?

The concept of the witch exists in nearly every culture in the world, and as a result cannot be easily or universally defined. Although witchcraft is prominent in African, Asian, and indigenous American societies, this week we are looking primarily at the witch in American and Western European culture.

Since the rise of Christianity, the witch is often considered evil, drawing her (and it is almost always a *her*) powers from the Devil. Those most likely to be described as witches were women at the fringes of society; the unmarried, poor, or supposedly heretical. In the Salem Witch Trials, black and indigenous women were also uniquely targeted because of their perceived barbarity.

However, in recent years the witch has become a complex figure, used both to reinforce but also challenge traditional notions of womanhood and femininity. The practice of witchcraft itself is also surging in popularity.

Cultural depictions of witches are extensive. The 3 Witches in *Macbeth* are perhaps the most famous example, but there's also artwork such as Goya's *Witches' Flight*, plays like *The Crucible* and *Vinegar Tom*, and of course portrayals of witches on film and TV!

Read more about the history of witches here:

<https://www.britannica.com/topic/witchcraft/The-witch-hunts>

WITCHES ON FILM

The witch is a prominent figure in film, taking on a range of traits, features, and characteristics depending on the work. Almost universally, though, witchcraft is associated with women, providing a lens through which womanhood, female sexuality, and gender roles can be examined, ridiculed, or celebrated.

The witch figure can be broadly divided into two types: the old hag, made famous by characters such as the Wicked Witch of the West in *The Wizard of Oz* (1939), or the glamorous young woman, like Elaine in *The Love Witch* (2016).

Witches are most often associated with horror genre, including films like *The Blair Witch Project* (1999). However, practically every genre from comedy (*I Married a Witch*, 1942) to romance (*The Love Witch*) to family fantasy (*Hocus Pocus*, 1993) has at least one film that features a witch or witchcraft.

Read more about the history of witches on film here:
<https://filmschoolrejects.com/witches-on-screen/>

NOW ON TO THE FEATURED MOVIES!



THE LOVE WITCH

YEAR RELEASED: 2016

DIRECTED BY: ANNA BILLER

COUNTRY OF ORIGIN: USA

AVAILABLE ON: AMAZON (RENT £1.99); CHANNEL 4

RUNNING TIME: 121 MIN

CW: NUDITY, DEPICTIONS
OF SEXUAL ASSAULT,
SEXUAL CONTENT,
MENTIONS OF ABUSE

Emulating the style of a 60s B-movie, *The Love Witch* tells the story of Elaine, a witch traumatised by her past relationships now seeking love. However, her spells and potions leave chaos and death in their wake as Elaine gradually descends into madness.

Feminist filmmaker Anna Biller presents a portrayal of witches that basks in visual aesthetics while offering nuanced commentary on women's experiences. The film also caters to the female gaze, which, as Biller describes it, is "gazing at the things that I find interesting...maybe for a man, you know when you're trying to create desire on the screen, one of the most powerful images for a man on the screen is a naked woman. And for me it's not."

BELLADONNA OF SADNESS

YEAR RELEASED: 1973

DIRECTED BY: EIICHI YAMAMOTO

COUNTRY OF ORIGIN: JAPAN

AVAILABLE ON: MESSAGE ARIANNA IF YOU WANT TO WATCH THIS ONE!

RUNNING TIME: 86 MIN

CW: NUDITY, DEPICTIONS OF RAPE



When the young French peasant Jeanne is raped on her wedding night by a local baron, her anger and humiliation gradually draw her into a deal with the Devil. Now a witch, Jeanne seeks revenge on those who once mistreated her.

A psychedelic take on the Middle Ages, *Belladonna of Sadness* presents a graphic and often disturbing portrayal of a woman's transformation into a witch. A commercial failure upon its release, the film has become a cult classic, largely thanks to its trippy visuals. The film is also extremely controversial, dividing viewers between those who see it as a feminist portrayal of womanhood and witchcraft, and those who find it exploitative and objectifying.

THE WITCH

YEAR RELEASED: 2015

DIRECTED BY: ROBERT EGGERS

COUNTRY OF ORIGIN: USA

AVAILABLE ON: AMAZON (RENT £1.99)

RUNNING TIME: 92 MIN

CW: VIOLENCE

Set in 17th century colonial America, Thomasin and her Puritan family are cast out of town for their extreme beliefs. Journeying into the Northeastern wilderness, the family soon realise they may not be as alone as they think, as horrific and inexplicable disasters begin to befall them.

Playing into the traditional association of witches with the Salem Witch Trials, *The Witch* is a slow-burn horror illustrating the hysteria surrounding witchcraft at the time. Robert Eggers explores multiple facets of the witch archetype, examining how "in the early modern period, the evil witch [represents] men's fears and ambivalence and fantasies about female power. And in this super male-dominated society, the evil witch is also women's fears and ambivalence and fantasies and desire about their own power."

HOCUS POCUS

YEAR RELEASED: 1993

DIRECTED BY: KENNY ORTEGA

COUNTRY OF ORIGIN: USA

AVAILABLE ON: DISNEY+

RUNNING TIME: 96 MIN

CW:

When 3 witches are hung in 1631, it appears that the town of Salem is finally rid of their terror-filled search for eternal youth. But 300 years later on Halloween, the witches return; its up to siblings Max and Dani and their friends to stop them once and for all.

Where the other films this week largely remain in the drama genre, *Hocus Pocus* offers an interpretation of witches that is more comedic and lighthearted, indicating its skew towards family audiences. However, though the witches may be buffoonish and goofy at times, the film maintains that they are ultimately a menacing and lethal presence, capable of maiming, killing, and generally causing terror and chaos in Salem. Each witch also represents different tropes and witch iconography; Sarah is the glamorous siren, Mary the child-eating terror, and Winnie the hag.

MORE STUFF!

OTHER FILMS TO CHECK OUT:

HÄXAN (SWEDEN, 1922)

I MARRIED A WITCH! (USA, 1942)

BELL, BOOK AND CANDLE (USA, 1958)

BLACK SUNDAY (ITALY, 1960)

WITCHFINDER GENERAL (UK, 1968)

PRACTICAL MAGIC (USA, 1998)

I AM NOT A WITCH (UK/ZAMBIA, 2017)

OTHER ARTICLES TO READ:

INTERVIEW: ANNA BILLER & THE NSFW FEMALE GAZE:

[HTTPS://WWW.SCREENSLATE.COM/ARTICLES/INTERVIEW-ANNA-BILLER-NSFW-FEMALE-GAZE](https://www.screenslate.com/articles/interview-anna-biller-nsfw-female-gaze)

THE LOVE WITCH'S SUBTLE CINEMATIC SUBVERSION - BROWS HELD HIGH:

[HTTPS://WWW.YOUTUBE.COM/WATCH?V=VQQBUZIVIDA](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VQQBUZIVIDA)

REPRESENTATION + BELLADONNA OF SADNESS:

[HTTPS://WWW.FILMCOMMENT.COM/BLOG/BELLADONNA-OF-SADNESS/](https://www.filmcomment.com/blog/belladonna-of-sadness/)

THE WITCH DIRECTOR ROBERT EGGERS TALKS ABOUT BRINGING PURITAN FEARS TO A MODERN WORLD:

[HTTPS://WWW.THEVERGE.COM/2016/2/19/11059130/THE-WITCH-DIRECTOR-](https://www.theverge.com/2016/2/19/11059130/the-witch-director-)

[ROBERT-EGGERS-INTERVIEW](#)