Of Mothers and Witches: Performative Spaces of Femininity in Post-Horror Works. *Antichrist, The Witch, Hagazussa, Sharp Objects*

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Abstract: The article will center on three films commonly included in – or considered to have somewhat anticipated and inspired – the recent post-horror cycle: Lars von Trier's *Antichrist* (2008), Robert Eggers' *The Witch* (2015) and Lukas Feigelfeld's *Hagazussa* (2017). Jean-Marc Vallée's series *Sharp Objects* (2018), a TV series that has less explicitly been associated with the cycle or the horror genre as a whole, will be brought forth in the last section. The commentary on gender binding these female-led works together appears to articulate feminine representations in spatial terms: the first part of this essay will therefore strive to delineate these spaces – literal, psychic and narrative – that are imposed on the female figures of the films and of which the masculine agent is the self-appointed architect. As they address the historical containment of their female characters into the figure of the witch – transposed, in *Antichrist*'s case, in a contemporary setting –, these three works moreover depict an excessive adherence to this specific space of representation that reads, in light of feminist theories such as Judith Butler's conception of gender as performance or Luce Irigaray's views on hysteria, as a paradoxical act of resistance. In the final section, it will become apparent that *Sharp Objects*, in its reappropriation of spatial dynamics and folkloric elements outlined in *Antichrist*, *The Witch* and *Hagazussa*, brings the witch back home. The series' portrayal of a poisonous feminine bloodline points out the oppressive patriarchal structures imposed on – and then perpetuated by – women and questions its ongoing consequences.

Keywords: Femininity, Gender, Genre, Space, Performance, Post-Horror, Witchcraft, Motherhood, Patriarchy, Representations, Folklore

 ISSN : 2780-1896. https://imaginaires.univ-reims.fr

Résumé : Cet article se focalise sur trois films communément inclus dans – ou considérés comme ayant quelque peu anticipé et inspiré – le récent cycle de "*post-horror*" : il s'agit d'*Antichrist* (2008) de Lars von Trier, *The Witch* (2015) de Robert Eggers, et *Hagazussa* (2017) de Lukas Feigelfeld. La série *Sharp Objects* (2018) de Jean-Marc Vallée, malgré son association moins explicite au cycle ou au genre horrifique dans son ensemble, sera abordée dans la dernière section. Le commentaire sur le genre qui parcourt et lie ces œuvres repose sur des représentations féminines dont la mise en scène se fait en termes spatiaux : la première partie de cet essai consiste donc à délimiter les espaces – littéraux, psychiques et narratifs – imposés aux figures féminines des films et dont l'agent masculin est l'architecte autoproclamé. Ces trois œuvres, à travers les ramifications historiques – transposées, dans le cas d'*Antichrist*, dans un contexte contemporain – d'un confinement du féminin à la figure de la sorcière, dépeignent en outre une adhésion excessive à cet espace spécifique de représentation ; adhésion excessive qui apparaît, à la lumière des théories d'autrices féministes telles que Judith Butler et Luce Irigaray, comme un acte paradoxal de résistance. *Sharp Objects*, enfin, en se réappropriant les dynamiques spatiales et les éléments folkloriques soulignés dans les films, recompose en filigrane la figure de la sorcière. En dressant le portrait d'une lignée féminine empoisonnée, la série met en évidence les structures patriarcales oppressives non seulement imposées aux femmes mais perpétuées par elles, questionnant ainsi leurs conséquences actuelles.
Mots-clés : féminité, genre, espace, performance, *post-horror*, sorcellerie, maternité, patriarcat, représentations, folklore

Introduction

Over the course of the last decade or so, the horror landscape has been marked by a string of films that have since been gathered inside the porous and shifting boundaries of a new "cycle" somewhat controversially labelled "elevated horror" or, perhaps more consensually, "post-horror". Although its characterization is still ongoing, the attention garnered among viewers, critics and academics by the works of directors such as Jennifer Kent, Robert Eggers, Jordan Peele or Ari Aster allowed for the constitution of a core nucleus of films. The provisional corpus established by David Church in *Post-Horror: Art, Genre, and Cultural Elevation* encapsulates forty-four films released between 2008 and 2020, among which Robert Eggers' *The Witch* (2015) and its European counterpart, Lukas Feigelfeld's *Hagazussa* (2017). The third film that will constitute the corpus of this study, Lars Von Trier's *Antichrist* (2009), is later quoted by Church as part of the "longer and broader tradition of art-horror cinema" (Church, 2021: 3). A tradition, the author argues, picked up and shifted into a more minimalist register by the post-horror cycle. Although the film's release

predates what is perceived as the emergence of this cycle by a few years, rewatching *Antichrist* in light of these recent films indeed reveals the intimate kinship it harbors with post-horror.

Antichrist opens with the infamous, slow-motion fall to death of infant Nick during his parents' enthusiastic primal scene, and goes on to narrate the journey of Willem Dafoe's therapist character "He" as he takes his grief-stricken and guilt-ridden wife, Charlotte Gainsbourg's "She", to their isolated cabin in the woods. While attempting to cure her, he becomes convinced of his wife's – and of female nature's – inherent evilness, as the contents of her stunted doctoral research on witchcraft and female persecutions seem to permeate their shared reality. *The Witch* and *Hagazussa* are period pieces: respectively taking place in seventeenth-Century New-England and fifteenth-Century Austrian Alps, they depict the ambiguous self-fulfilling prophecies of Thomasin and Albrun, two young women scapegoated as witches by their family or peers.

From the outset, all three films appear to be exhibiting common themes, settings and character arcs (folkloric beliefs and esoterism, remote natural environments, small communities…) – all recurring elements of the folk-horror subgenre that have been resurfacing in recent years and overlap, in many places, with the post-horror cycle.[1] But as a seminal art-horror influence, *Antichrist* also diegetically "contains" both *The Witch* and *Hagazussa*'s narratives, an imbrication that conversely informs Von Trier's arguably opaque discourse on gender. By encapsulating the historicity of Thomasin and Albrun's trajectories inside the dissertation, the mind and, soon enough, the reality of *Antichrist*'s "She", the film inscribes the character in a broader feminine lineage and cultural spectrum. This anachronously transfers the critical perspective on patriarchy's historic oppression of women assumed by *The Witch* and *Hagazussa* to the contemporary setting of *Antichrist*.

As for the fourth installment examined in this essay, it departs from the films in format and genre: one of Jean-Marc Vallée's last directorial projects before his untimely death, *Sharp Objects* (2018) is a ten-part series

1. The folk-horror cycle is retroactively ascribed to three seminal British films released in the late 1960s and early 1970s: *Witchfinder General* (Michael Reeves, 1968), *The Blood on Satan's Claw* (Piers Haggard, 1971), and *The Wickerman* (Robin Hardy, 1973). The subgenre's distinctive elements include an isolated setting, the depiction of skewed belief systems and morality, and a resulting action in the form of a happening or summoning. Although this template proved most prolific during the aforementioned period, with films unfolding in rural communities prone to violence – Sam Peckinpah's *Straw Dogs* (1971) or John Boorman's *Deliverance* (1972) are seminal examples – or depicting event – such as Peter Weir's *Picnic at Hanging Rock* (1975) or Collin Eggleston's *Long Weekend* (1978) –, the cycle has been argued to reach all the way back to Benjamin Christensen's silent *Häxan* (1922) and to have undergone a strong resurgence in the last decade or so. *Antichrist* falls within this return of folk-horror, that further expanded and became intertwined with the post-horror cycle in the 2010s : *The Witch* and *Hagazussa* are instances, followed by more recent entries such as Ari Aster's *Midsommar* (2020) or Alex Garland's *Men* (2022).

centered on the investigation of a gruesome, small-town Missouri crime. A teenager has turned up dead in the woods surrounding Wind Gap, and another girl has gone missing since. Camille is a journalist and, knowing she grew up in the town where the murder took place, her editor sends her "home" to write about the event. As she reconnects with her icy mother Adora and versatile step-sister Amma in the family's Southern estate, her oniric journey down memory lane will soon overlap with the official police investigation. Released in 2018, the series is an adaptation of the eponymous 2006 novel, thus nicely bookending the films' corpus.

Thematically, there is a clear concern with femininity and a commentary on gender binding these works together. Despite the tenuous explicit kinship of *Sharp Objects*' main narrative with the folk-horror subgenre and the horror genre as a whole, there is also a definite sense that the series is no stranger to the post-horror cycle. Detailed analysis indeed reveals an array of aesthetic, symbolic and narrative motifs that, although already present in the 2006 novel, are exacerbated by Vallée's mise-en-scene and are akin to the folk-and-post-horror films of the corpus. Such motifs are articulated around the feminine figures and inform the series' discourse on gender, which bears similarities with that of the three films under study. I will therefore attempt to identify and unfold these elements as they echo throughout the corpus, along with the way these are instrumentalized to outline a specific topography of the feminine. This analysis will center mostly on *Antichrist* and *Sharp Objects*, as they relocate the historic female persecutions depicted in *The Witch* and *Hagazussa* in contemporary contexts, thereby actualizing their sociocultural and cinematic legacies.

Writing about the views of French philologist and psychoanalyst Julia Kristeva, Elizabeth Grozs states that "the Virgin Mary's uniquely sinless position, as many have noted, is opposed to the other major figure in the Bible – Eve. Two sides of the same coin." (Grozs, 1989: 83), before concluding: "we are today facing a crisis of representation that inherits its form from religious texts" (Grozs, 1989: 90). There are only so many prescribed representations of femininity, so many spaces which women are allowed to occupy. The first part of this essay will be dedicated to the delineation of these feminine spaces – especially the literal, psychic and narrative spaces imposed onto *Antichrist*'s She and *The Witch*'s Thomasin –, spaces of which the masculine agent is the self-appointed architect.

But how are the feminine trajectories of the films articulated around these patriarchal, binary representations striving to mold and contain them? As Francesca Matteoni writes, "inside early modern patriarchal society women gained a recognized identity thanks to the idea of motherhood" (Matteoni, 2009: 60). The immaculate Mary and the sinful Eve

are both embodiments of motherhood, a role intersecting with femininity to the point of complete overlap. The second part of this analysis will aim at charting the expression, in the films, of these feminine figures' slippage toward a third term: the witch. The porosity of the spaces represented, together with the depiction of feminine fluids (water, blood, milk), convey a "seeping through" dynamic that is strongly feminine-encoded. According to Judith Butler's conception of gender as performative, "to be a woman is to have become a woman, to compel the body to conform to an historical idea of 'woman', […] to materialize oneself in obedience to an historically delimited possibility, and to do this as a sustained and repeated corporeal project" (Butler, 1988: 522). The depiction in the corpus of the female characters' complex relationship to witchcraft, in light of these feminist theories, poses their excessive adherence to this specific space of representation – the figure of the witch – as a paradoxical act of resistance. From the Virgin mother, through the pivotal Eve and to the witch "seen as the anti-mother" (Matteoni, 2009: 60), this performative "becoming" takes the form of a historic materialization, a subversive testament of "the way in which oppression structures the ontological categories through which gender is conceived" (Butler, 1988: 529).

The exploration of the performances of femininity in *Antichrist*, *The Witch* and *Hagazussa* eventually brings us to *Sharp Objects*. Although the films as well as the series were all directed by men, *Sharp Objects*' original 2006 novel was written by Gillian Flynn, a woman; it is therefore interesting to compare this female discourse on gender, and Jean-Marc Vallée's audiovisual expression of it, to that of the rest of the corpus. As will become apparent, the folk-horror template of the films, although pushed under the surface of the narrative, still echoes throughout *Sharp Objects*. Its reappropriation of the feminine spaces and fluids brings the witch back home, thereby articulating these figures inside a poisonous feminine bloodline. This portrayal outlines and interrogates the ongoing consequences of the oppressive patriarchal structures imposed on – and then perpetuated by – women, thus echoing Luce Irigaray's project of "challenging and deconstructing the cultural representations of femininity so that it may be capable of representation and recognition in its own self-defined terms" (Grozs, 1989: 101).

Containing the feminine: *Antichrist, The Witch, Hagazussa*

Man as architect: building the feminine space

One of *Antichrist*'s main concerns is exposed when Willem Dafoe's "He" undertakes the construction of his wife's "pyramid of fears": in this crude triangular structure, He will attempt to lay out and hierarchize the objects of her anguish in order to rationalize them. The drawing will recur sporadically throughout, and closer analysis reveals the plural and important role it occupies. Although the story is already divided into a prologue, chapters and an epilogue,[2] the pyramid acts as a clear catalyst and provides a second narrative structure to the film.[3]

The shape He chooses to give this dubious therapeutic instrument strongly evokes Freytag's pyramid, a schematic rendition of the five-act dramatic structure.[4] Moreover, the narrative seems to shift according to his modifications of the diagram. He first guides his wife throughout its designing: "let's make a list of the things you're afraid of. At the top, you put the situation you fear the most" [21:00]; and soon after, She suffers a very violent fit, hurting herself, then aggressively having sex with him. He whips out the pyramid again, stating: "if you can't tell me what you're afraid of, maybe it would be easier for you to tell me *where* you're afraid?" (my emphasis). Right there and then, She is tied to the pyramid, forcibly projected into its spaces. Visually and symbolically, it is instrumentalized in order to expose the spatial quality of the gender dynamics at play. When she responds that she is most afraid of the woods surrounding their cottage, nicknamed "Eden", he writes the word at the bottom of the pyramid. "Where" she's afraid is where He will put her, as this new addition prompts their departure to the cabin, ends the "exposition", and launches the "rising action" part of the plot.

The second occurrence of the happens midway through *Antichrist* [51:00]: She states that "Nature is Satan's church" and He feverishly crosses the word "Nature" previously written beside (not quite inside) the pyramid's top, adds "Satan" above it, and immediately proceeds to cross it too. These infructuous attempts at mapping out the content of She's psyche

2. "Grief", "Pain" (Chaos Reigns), "Despair" (Gynocide) and "The Three Beggars".
3. He's pyramid of fears. *Antichrist*, Zentropa Entertainments, 2009, URL: https://posthorror7.wordpress.com/2024/10/28/pics/#jp-carousel-27.
4. From German playwright and novelist Gustav Freytag's study, *Die Technik des Dramas* (1863). Its five stages, consisting in exposition, rising action (sparked by the inciting incident), climax, falling action, and resolution, are set in a pyramidal shape.

seem to elicit confused reactions in her: she successively declares herself "cured", relapses into depression, and exhibits aggressive sexual behaviour. When finally, He decidedly writes the word "ME" *inside* the top space of the pyramid, his gesture immediately shifts the narrative towards the film's "climax". This last part ends with her execution at his (literal) hands.

Following Auerbach's *Mimesis*,[5] Dorothy Geller distinguishes a masculine-encoded "foreground" narrative, that "can be associated with simple, schematic and mainstream tales such as those in mainstream cinema" (Geller, 2010), from a feminine "background" narrative in *Antichrist*:

> On one level it is an isolated domestic drama. On another level it repeatedly conjures a background of disavowed passion and violence that invoke the coming into being of gender via the history of witches, gynocide, and the question of "nature" in a form that prefigures modern notions (Geller, 2010).

Both narratives run parallel with, Geller states, the feminine one striving to come to the fore while being kept under masculine control. *Antichrist*'s (Freytag's) pyramid of fears therefore appears as the diegetic materialization of She's background narrative, doubling the foregrounded one of the domestic drama. But the pyramid not only provides a visual template to this secondary narrative, it also participates to the topography of the gender dynamics at play, and in particular, the containment of the feminine. The spatiality of the device is double-sided: it is the space He builds for her, to contain her, and He places her inside of it – the narrowness of this space made all the more apparent by the quotation marks he adds around the capitalized "ME" (see figure 1). But it also represents her own interiority, which He tries to decipher, manipulate, and control.

This duplicitous apprehension of the feminine space is made explicit through its domestic, diegetic equivalent: the cabin's attic. Indeed, his visit of the room which – as a recurrent and explicit metaphor of the mind – contains her research upon the persecutions of women seems to influence the architecture of the pyramid. Him inscribing her in the top part of the diagram also reads as a schematized rendition of the "madwoman in the

5. In the first chapter of his *Mimesis* (1946), Auerbach opposes in literature a "foreground" narrative template, best exemplified by the "starkly illuminated Homeric text" (Geller, 2010), to a "background" narrative characterized by ambiguity and symbolism, and of which the prime illustration is the Genesis. Geller extends Auerbach's theories by outlining the implicit gendering of these two levels of narration: "If Auerbach describes both foreground and background types of text as emerging from patriarchal orders, he emphasizes the presence of the dominant maleness in the straightforward linear and implicitly mainstream narrative progression of the heroic Homeric text, linking visible orderliness with control, domination and the adventures and explorations of men. In contrast, the background text is shaded by angst and personal complexity, layers of mood and sense of a past" (Geller, 2010).

attic" trope.[6] This marginal space of the cabin's attic and the top of the pyramid of fears mirror each other as both a metaphor of interiority and the feminine character's space of confinement.

Another look at the last occurrence of the drawing shows that besides playing a decisive role in the narrative structure of the film and exposing the way He both manipulates her interior space and shapes a space to contain her into, it further serves as a substrate to expose another mechanism of phallocracy: the "masculine mirror".

In *Sexual Subversions*, Elizabeth Grozs writes that "we live in a resolutely homosexual culture […] [that] leaves no space for woman as such. Women can be represented only by means of a violence that contains them […] within masculine sameness" (Grozs, 1989: 107). Elaborating on the topic, the author then mentions the work of Luce Irigaray, who reinterpreted the Lacanian mirror phase as the feminine formation of identity in a phallocentric environment:

> The mirror reflects only an image placed in front of it: the (implicitly) masculine being. The specular relation is thus composed of a man and his self-reflecting other, an image of himself that he takes to be his other, woman (Grozs, 1989: 130).

Man, wherever he looks, only ever contemplates echoes of himself.

Antichrist's He, as he writes "ME" at the top of the pyramid, simultaneously mutters "Herself": the confusing combination of what is written and what is spoken betrays the self-reflecting nature of the masculine relationship to his phallocentric environment. What is more, a retrospective look at the film from the perspective this particular shot offers reveals that this "masculine mirror" has been repeatedly held at He by Von Trier's editing. Quite early on indeed, the couple's dialogue at the hospital [9:52] displays a noticeably stilted shot/reverse-shot dynamic: caught in one of his patronizing monologues, Dafoe's character is made to look like he is facing himself. The operation recurs when the couple arrives to Eden [37:57]. She goes ahead of him, and as He is shot scanning the woods, presumably looking for her, He again only finds himself: the reverse-shot, a deliberately subjective-looking hand-held span, "meets" him.[7]

The double movement of spatial containment inside phallocentric representations these analyses reveal is one of Luce Irigaray's concerns in her text "And the One Doesn't Stir Without the Other": "Captive when a

6. Inspired by Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre* (1847) and echoed throughout Victorian literature.
7. The masculine mirror held by Von Trier's editing. *Antichrist*, Zentropa Entertainments, 2009, URL: https://posthorror7.wordpress.com/2024/10/28/pics/#jp-carousel-25.

man holds me in his gaze […]. Immobilized in the reflection he expects of me. Reduced to the face he fashions for me in which to look at himself" (Irigaray, 1981: 66). *Antichrist*'s He puts She in the top space of the pyramid and contains her there. The self-reflectiveness of his supposedly therapeutic method is betrayed by the "ME" he writes for the "Herself" he says, and further exemplified by his multiple mirrored shots. These elements make the masculine character's role as architect of the feminine space clear. What is more, the performative role of the pyramid in the arc of Gainsbourg's character suggests that this space of representation is directly tied to the male character's desire to control the narrative. On that subject, Elizabeth Grozs writes that "the masculine is able to *speak of and for* woman because it has emptied itself of any relation to the male body, thus creating a space of reflection, of specul(aris)ation in which it claims to look at itself and at femininity from the outside" (Grozs, 1989: 128) (my emphasis). The command and manipulation of the narrative, therefore appearing as a pivotal aspect of *Antichrist*'s gender dynamics, invites further inquiry.

Man as narrator: rewriting the story

At face value, the tale told by Von Trier is that of a man selflessly trying to cure his grieving wife after the death of their infant son. In the painful process, he uncovers the extent of her involvement in the child's accident and correlative madness or evilness – a decisive twist in the narrative that I will elaborate upon below. But what we are given here is the male narrator's perspective on these events,[8] which could be suggesting the crux of the matter lies elsewhere: as Dorothy Geller suggests, "*Antichrist* can be understood as a narrated episode not unlike Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*, in terms of Willem Dafoe's 'He' character reconstructing the events that led up to the annihilation of his wife" (Geller, 2010). The trial She undergoes, blaming herself first for neglecting to prevent the child's fall then for having caused it, might then be a decoy: He's version of the events designed to justify murdering her. This process of containment and control of the feminine narrative by a masculine instance has been extensively surveyed by Kaja Silverman in *The Acoustic Mirror: The Female Voice in Psychoanalysis and Cinema*, where she states that in Classical Hollywood films, "female characters are incorporated within an exaggeratedly diegetic locus, and male characters assigned a seemingly extradiegetic position" (Silverman, 1988: 54). She also mentions the "talking-cure films" of the period which, despite giving space to the female voice,

8. Dorothy Geller elaborates on that: notably, on the fact that he is seen alone multiple times and for entire scenes, which is not her case (Geller, 2010).

"deprivilege the female psyche by denying any possibility of arriving at self-knowledge except through the intervening agency of a doctor or analyst" (Silverman, 1988: 65). *Antichrist* could very well, in fact, categorize as a "talking-cure film", whereby She is led by her husband and therapist to a skewed form of self-knowledge, manipulated to adhere to a narrative he has constructed for her.

Indeed, the most incriminating piece of evidence we are presented with can be interpreted as a rewriting of the fateful opening sequence. The sequence is partly repeated [1:28:00] through fragments of the couple's embrace and of Nick's accident showing that She opened her eyes to witness, impassive, her child's fall. Although it reads like a belated admission of guilt on her part, it arguably presents confusing traits as to the accountability of the narrative: two of the three shots alternating with the flashback include Willem Dafoe's character in the frame and, therefore, do not decisively impute these reminiscences to She. Whereas the first shot of the infant could be interpreted as her subjective perspective on the scene, the second shot breaks this tie by filming Nick's fall from the outside of the flat. The flashback ends and, in the film's most infamous scene, She excises her genitals. In response to her shriek, we are then presented with a shot of a deer so monochromatic that it almost looks like it is part of the preceding black-and-white flashback.[9]

Up to this point in the sequence, Dafoe's character had appeared nearly unconscious with pain or exhaustion. Here, he comes to and seemingly picks up the flashback's narrative where She left it off: encapsulated in two close-ups of his face, Nick's fall resumes from the same exterior point of view and in an enlarged shot that now includes a deer in the background, inside the flat. This shot of the fall, now attributed to him, relocates the whole episode in his mind. As for the deer, a liminal element previously associated with her by the editing, it is as though it traveled from the diegetic present to the flashback: its irruption signals Her intervention into the reconstruction of the event, an attempt to regain control of this narrative imposed on her – a point I will come back to.[10]

These elements of the episode's cinematography thus undermine its reliability as proof of her guilt in the fall and could be read as his interpretation of the incident. This rewriting of Nick's literal fall heavily shifts the blame on the feminine agent, thereby echoing another one: the patriarchal rewriting of the biblical Fall, of the original sin, which transpires in *The Witch*.

9. The rewriting of the fall (1). *Antichrist*, Zentropa Entertainments, 2009, URL: https://posthorror7.wordpress.com/2024/10/28/pics/#jp-carousel-36.
10. The rewriting of the fall (2). *Antichrist*, Zentropa Entertainments, 2009, URL: https://posthorror7.wordpress.com/2024/10/28/pics/#jp-carousel-26.

In his review of the film, Mark Kermode notes the family's obsession with sin,[11] as underlined by a puritan quiz on the subject taking place between William and Caleb [14:38]. To his father's questions, Caleb replies: "I was conceived in sin and born in iniquity […]. Adam's sin imputed to me and a corrupt nature dwelling within me. […] My corrupt nature is empty of grace, bent unto sin, only unto sin and that continually." As Lauren Zwissler points out in her article, these lines are from Puritan John Cotton's 1646 *Milk for Babes, Drawn from the Breasts of Both Testaments* (Zwissler, 2018: 8). Indeed, the breast appears to be the equivocal site of Christianity's concept of sin, and is portrayed accordingly in *The Witch*. Eggers uses the motif to associate Thomasin and Katherine, the adult females of the narrative, to the feminine figures evoked in the introduction – the Virgin Mary, the pivotal Eve, and the witch. In Thomasin's case, the mirroring of Caleb's interactions both with her at the stream [22:40] and with the witch in the woods [40:30] most tellingly links this motif of the breast with Christian sin. The scene at the stream is described, in the script, as follows:

> The long dead tendrils of a WILLOW TREE hang around THOMASIN. She wades in a small stream scrubbing her father's shirt and breeches against some rocks, quietly humming a psalm. CALEB is nearby, filling buckets with water, WATCHING HIS SISTER. THOMASIN'S apron and petticoat are tucked into her belt, EXPOSING HER BARE LEGS in the water. CALEB WATCHES HER LEGS... AND HER SMALL CHEST RISING UP AND DOWN AT THE TOP OF HER BODICE.[12] (Eggers, 2013: 32)

As for the encounter between Caleb and the witch, it starts with the boy following a faint melody in the distance that echoes Thomasin's psalm,[13] and the confrontation that ensues makes explicit mention of the witch's breasts:

> Her face is greasy, but stunning. Her filthy bodice is cut quite low. There are a few small moles on her ample breast. CALEB sees this all. He stays still. The rain falls. THE WOMAN beckons him. CALEB walks toward her, he is drawn to her. He can't help it. She strokes CALEB'S head and embraces him. (Eggers, 2013: 56)

11. "Just as the family are obsessed with the concept of sin (poor Caleb recounts his putrefaction by rote and anguishes about his lustfully hell-bound heart), so Eggers not so slyly suggests that such anxieties perversely invite horror into the home, where shadowy faces flicker in the firelight" (Kermode, 2016).
12. This is not the first mention of Thomasin's prepubescent brother lustfully (and shamefully) staring at his sister's breasts: "CALEB looks down and notices THE SIDE OF HIS SISTER'S BREAST in her somewhat open shirt, and her faint armpit hair" (Eggers, 2013: 11).
13. "IN THE DISTANCE IS A SWEET MELODY. A WOMAN HUMMING. […] CALEB continues to walk toward the humming" (Eggers, 2013: 54-55).

The script's emphasis on female breasts is conveyed in the film by the framing, which assumes Caleb's gaze – and to confirm the analogy with sin, the apple, the most emblematic symbol of the fall, is narratively woven into the two aforementioned scenes:

> CALEB goes to THOMASIN and she takes him in her arms. […] THOMASIN strokes CALEB'S hair as he nestles up to her. THOMASIN (CONT'D): I have seen no apple since we went from England. I would thou hadst found em. I so wish for one. THOMASIN MIMES BITING CALEB'S SHOULDER AND MAKES A GROWLING/GNAWING SOUND. […] THOMASIN starts humming her psalm again, almost rocking CALEB. (Eggers, 2013: 33-34)

Not only is the witch's embrace foreshadowed here, but Thomasin also playfully languishes for an apple – an apple she will ironically get when agonizing Caleb, presumably bewitched during his encounter in the woods, regurgitates one [55:21].

The motifs of the female breasts and of the apple, articulated both narratively and visually with the idea of sin throughout the film, hint toward a patriarchal rewriting of the original Fall.[14] This new narrative seems to have gained traction in the sixteenth century, and imputes Adam's sin entirely to Eve's seductive manipulation. As Wioleta Polinska writes in her article "Dangerous Bodies: Women's Nakedness and Theology":

> When the *Malleus Maleficarum* blames Eve for seducing Adam to sin, there is no ambiguity; the text refers to carnal seduction. […] This connection between Eve's sexuality and Adam's sin is made explicit visually in the work of Hans Baldung Grien. In a woodcut, *The Fall* (1511) […] Adam sins actively, as his stretched-out arm grasping the apple suggests, but clearly under the deceptive influence of Eve's body. The association between Eve's breast and the forbidden apple, between her sexuality and Adam's sin, is unmistakable. The same association is made in the work of other artists, such as Hering (*Adam and Eve*, 1525), Frans Floris (*Adam and Eve*, sixteenth century), and Henry Fuseli (*Sin Pursued by death*). (Polinska, 2000: 50)

14. The rewriting of the Fall (3): the breast and the apple. *The Witch*, Parts and Labor, 2015, URL: https://posthorror7.wordpress.com/2024/10/28/pics/#jp-carousel-32.

Left: Hans Baldung Grien, *Adam and Eve*, 1511, Rosenwald Collection, National Gallery of Art, CC0, Wikimedia Commons; Righet: Johann Heinrich Füssli, *Die Sünde, vom Tod verfolgt*, 1794-1796, Public domain, Wikimedia Commons.[15]

These elements all coalesce in the idea of the man as architect and narrator. He is the architect of *Antichrist*'s pyramid of fears and attic space, both of which conflate as constructs of She's interior and exterior space, jointly designing her psyche and her site of confinement. Less tangible spaces are narrative, and a certain masculine manipulation of these is made apparent with *Antichrist* as well as *The Witch*'s patriarchal rewritings of the films' respective "falls": Von Trier's She, guided by lust, allowed the fall (of her infant son); Eggers' Thomasin is associated through breasts and apple to the mischievous Eve – portrayed during the late-modern period as luring Adam into sinning – and later accused by her parents to have "bewitched" Caleb and caused his death.

But how is the feminine resistance to this patriarchal claim for narrative control portrayed? Going back to *Antichrist*'s double narrative structure, a struggle seems to emerge following the "rewritten fall" sequence, with the final segment of the film showcasing She's resistance and attempt to regain control of her narrative. About Willem Dafoe's character, Dorothy Geller writes:

15. The rewriting of the Fall (4): sixteenth-Century representations, URL: https://posthorror7.wordpress.com/2024/10/28/pics/#jp-carousel-38. Left to right: *Adam and Eve* (Hans Baldung Grien, 1511. https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Hans_Baldung_Grien,_Adam_and_Eve,_1511,_NGA_4125.jpg), *Adam and Eve in Paradise* (Loy Hering, circa 1550. https://artsandculture.google.com/asset/adam-and-eve-in-paradise-loy-hering/GgG3setnOK50uQ), *Die Sünde, vom Tod verfolgt* (Henry Fuseli, 1794-1796. https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Johann_Heinrich_F%C3%BCssli_031.jpg).

> As the film's hidden narrator, he perceives himself as having an absolutely integral position within his wife's emotional life. He has the capacity to see his wife's imaginings and to construct them. Still, even in those constructions, parts of what is not him seem to get through. (Geller, 2010)

And indeed, a succession of shots indicates his failure to contain the feminine narrative: first, the deer in the background as Nick is falling suggests her invasion of his mind, her intervention in the rewriting process unfolding. When He gazes across the room, as if looking for the culprit who disrupted his mental storytelling, the camera pans up to stop on Charlotte Gainsbourg's character [1:30:40]. She lets out a scream, a harrowing "no" that unequivocally expresses her resistance, and picks up the "masculine mirror" so far attributed to Dafoe's character: the editing then "mirrors" several shots of her face.[16]

Immediately after this, hail starts to pound onto the cabin's roof, the three beggars invade it, and the masculine character reacts to his apparent loss of narrative control by proceeding to strangle his wife to death. The constant struggle to control this "background" female narrative, Dorothy Geller states, "foreshadows a certain kind of vantage point on film […]. A hand on the throat, which places women inside the story as objects […] but not as storytellers" (Geller, 2010). Willem Dafoe's character's very literal "hand on the throat" is a way to shut down the feminine voice and claim back his status as storyteller, and Lukas Feigelfeld's *Hagazussa* makes an eloquent use of the motif as well. The main protagonist, Albrun, lives in a quasi-total mutism until she is befriended by a woman from the village; just as she starts warming up to this new companionship, the woman lures her into a situation involving her own husband that escalates into rape. The man's hand, in the last shot of the sequence, is placed around Albrun's throat – she will not, from that point on, utter another word.[17]

Our analysis of *Antichrist*'s pyramid of fears thus presents it as the double-sided, metaphorical site of interiority and confinement of the feminine as well as its "background" narrative structure, and the instrument of the man's attempt to control all three. From this point on, the cinematography's ambiguous editing and framing choices cast doubt on the ownership of the narrative and on its reliability: *Antichrist* exposes a patriarchal rewriting of the original sin that strives to blame it all on Eve's sexuality, just as *The Witch* articulates symbols around its female characters

16. The "masculine mirror" picked up by She in her attempt to regain control of the narrative. *Antichrist*, Zentropa Entertainments, 2009, URL: https://posthorror7.wordpress.com/2024/10/28/pics/#jp-carousel-35.
17. The "hand on the throat". *Hagazussa*, Deutsche Film- und Fernsehakademie Berlin (DFFB), 2017 / *Antichrist*, Zentropa Entertainments, 2009, URL: https://posthorror7.wordpress.com/2024/10/28/pics/#jp-carousel-28.

pointing in the same direction. Although the attempts of both *Antichrist*'s She and *Hagazussa*'s Albrun to control their own narratives are met by a "hand on the throat", a retrospective and comparative examination of the corpus reveals the modalities orchestrating the female characters' resistance against these enforced traditional spaces of femininity. By the climax of *Antichrist*, the diegetic world's boundaries between representation and reality, inside and outside, and between the characters' respective interiorities have become very porous – and just as She "leaked" into her husband's reconstructed narrative of the fall, the characters of *The Witch* and *Hagazussa* all transgress their allocated spaces. The feminine cannot be successfully contained, and all three films express this excess through spatial dynamics conveying the characters' journey through, or resistance against, the representations of femininity enforced upon them.

Becoming the witch: contamination and performative materialization

Contaminations: blood, milk, water

As Anne Carson points out in "Putting her in her Place: Woman, Dirt, and Desire", texts dating back to Ancient Greece transcribe the common association of femininity with water. The female physique is considered opposite to the masculine "condition of dry stability", remaining "cold and wet all its life" (Carson, 1990: 137). This analogy is not solely based on some dubious scientific ascertainment of physiological moisture levels, but also on water's spatial properties as "that which is not bounded by any boundary of its own but can readily be bounded" (Carson, 1990: 153). "If we consider the ancient conception of gender in the light of this distinction", the author goes on to write in a section titled "Women leak", "we see that woman is to be differentiated from man […] not only as wet from dry but as content from form, as the unbounded from the bounded, as polluted from pure, and that these qualities are necessarily related to one another" (Carson, 1990: 153). Since woman's "boundaries are pliant, porous, mutable" (Carson, 1990: 154), "she must be *bounded*" (Carson, 1990: 156) (the author's emphasis). But the masculine efforts to contain the feminine are met with excess and contamination. Accidental though it might be, Lars Von Trier's introduction of *The Kingdom* (1994) therefore rings as a good metaphor of this feminine leaking: "for it is as if the cold and the damp have returned. Tiny signs of fatigue are appearing in the solid, modern edifice."

Expanding on ancient Greek thought, and as Kwasu D. Tembo argues in his article "The Left-Hand Path: On the Dialectics of Witchery in *The Witch* and *Hagazussa: A Heathen's Curse*" (Tembo, 2019), a clear dichotomy of the Apollonian versus the Dionysiac is at play in Eggers and Feigelfeld's films. The religious order impersonated by Thomasin's father as well as the objective, scientific authority of *Antichrist*'s He both incarnate the Apollonian principle, which is defined by "structure, marked boundaries" (Thomsen, 2009: 2). The Dionysiac, on the other hand, is described as the "drive towards the transgression of limits, the dissolution of boundaries, the destruction of individuality, and excess" (Tembo, 2019). There is a clear spatial component to the Dionysian force as a way to exceed and escape the constrictive representational spaces imposed upon femininity. This struggle to transgress representations is expressed in *The Witch* through Katherine's (Thomasin's mother) successive connections to paradoxical iconographies.

This is a matter that I have already discussed elsewhere (Patronnat, 2023) and which, just as the association between Thomasin and a sinful Eve,[18] gravitates around the pivotal feminine attribute of the breasts. "Inside early modern patriarchal society", Francesca Matteoni writes, a woman's identity revolved around motherhood, seen as the feminine "capacity to be the channel of life". "From such a perspective", the author explains, "the witch, who was seen as the anti-mother, distorted and enforced the powers and dangers ascribed to women" (Matteoni, 2009: 60). It thus comes as no surprise that, as a metonymical symbol of motherhood, ambivalent representations of breastfeeding convey the transgressive feminine slippage from the virgin to the witch. One of the most persistent beliefs attached to the figure, Francesca Matteoni argues, is the "corrupted lactation":

> At the famous trial at St. Osyth in Essex during 1582, we find the first account of a sucking familiar, that shows a direct contact between the witch and the spirit. The eight- year- old Thomas Rabbet testified that his mother, Ursula Kemp, had four familiars, […] which, "in the night-time will come to his mother and suck blood of her upon her arms and other places of her body. (Matteoni, 2009: 155)

And indeed, the composition of an early shot of Katherine [5:15] replicates the Madone Litta and will reoccur later [1:13:45], reversed, as a nightmarish tableau of the character seemingly breastfeeding blood to a giant raven.[19] The two shots thereby shift the character's iconographical identity around the axis of her motherhood, from the mother-virgin with

18. Addressed above in "Man as narrator: rewriting the story".
19. The nightmare sequence is, moreover, cross-cut with a fleeting (and very dark) apparition of the witch feeding on the family nanny goat's milk in the barn. The witch's mad cackling is prolonged by Katherine's own unhinged laugh in the last shot of the sequence, further confirming the association between the two figures through editing.

her vital nurturing and into the mother-witch with her corrupted lactation. As for Thomasin, the very last image of the film places her in a resolutely ambivalent space: the freshly consecrated witch, blood-soaked and levitating, strongly evokes Christ crucified or the assumption of the virgin Mary – this latter biblical episode consisting, incidentally, of a spatial inversion of the fall.[20]

The common association of femininity with wetness and liquids is thus expressed in these shifting, fluids-related identifications: the porously bounded feminine leaks out of its consecrated space of representation, enacting a contamination at play between different categories of femininity. We find a similar pattern in Lukas Feigelfeld's *Hagazussa*, where the blood as a vehicle of contamination is primarily shown through the visual motif of the stain. The first shot of the film assumes a god's eye view on Martha, Albrun's mother, a dark spot on the immaculately snowed landscape. Later on, this composition is repeated with the menstrual blood on pubescent Albrun's white sheet. These associations signal the character's transition into womanhood and the advent of her mother's poisonous heritage:[21] this is the "curse of Eve" transposed in individual and filial terms. The motif of the stain will recur multiple times throughout the film, from bloody vomit or a fleshy animal's skull lying on the snow, to the red rose painted on deceased Martha's own skull – a gruesome relic entrusted to Albrun by the village priest.[22]

This red-on-white stain extends a milk-blood compound that is made explicit in *Hagazussa*'s own mirrored scenes [21:10 – 39:30]. The first one depicts Martha's fever-fuelled (the character is severely ill with the plague) assault of her teenage daughter, during which she appears to be "tasting" her menstrual blood. This disturbing episode is explicitly echoed in the second scene: adult Albrun is shown milking her goats, and as Kwasu D. Tembo states, "treats the secretions of the goat […] in exactly the same way as her mother treated her blood. It is enjoyed primarily for its olfactory qualities, both blood and milk being brought to the mouth, not fully ingested but still sensually taken in" (Tembo, 2019). The confusion or conflation of the two liquids, as the vector of these categories' contamination and therefore, the key symbol of the mother-witch dichotomy, visually marks the feminine excess out of the spaces the masculine, apollonian principle tries to contain it in.

20. The shifting associations of the feminine figures of the film: from archetypal virgin-mothers and other religious icons, to the blood-lactating anti-mother, the witch. *The Witch*, Parts and Labor, 2015, URL: https://posthorror7.wordpress.com/2024/10/28/pics/#jp-carousel-40.
21. This heritage fits the same pattern as those exposed by *Antichrist*'s Pyramid of fears: Albrun takes over the space that Martha, labelled as a witch by the villagers, was confined to, along with her possibly ill "interior" space – the film hinting at inherited mental illness.
22. The motif of the stain as a visual for contamination. *Hagazussa*, DFFB, 2017, URL: https://posthorror7.wordpress.com/2024/10/28/pics/#jp-carousel-29.

Arching back to *Antichrist*, one may find the same notions of excess and of a transcendence of the spaces arrogated to the feminine, in this case relying on the tension and permeability between inside and outside. Both trajectories – from the outside in, and from the inside out – are enacted in the film. First, the masculine character, encouraging his wife to heal faster from her grief, states that "what the mind can conceive and believe, it can achieve" [32:03]: does it mean that interiority can manifest externally, in objective reality? Say no more. From this point on, the more he tries to contain her, the more she leaks from the inside out into their shared world and his own interiority, the respective boundaries of these spaces crumbling as the movie progresses. His play on the polysemy of the word "nature" – "I'm Nature. I'm outside but I'm also within" [1:03:30] – further solidifies the confusion, and when he contradictorily asserts, far too late, that "obsessions never materialize. That's a scientific fact" [01:08:25], the statement already sounds like desperate bargaining.

Antichrist further stages this growing spatial porosity through a visual and symbolic grammar of openings, invisible barriers, and mixed elements. No blood nor milk here, but another aforementioned fluid ensures the expression of these transgressions: water. As has been observed by Anne Carson in her survey of ancient Greek texts and underlined at the beginning of this section, the fluid is associated with femininity as a shapeless, unbounded material needing to be contained. *Antichrist*'s cinematography emphasizes this element from the outset: the extreme slow motion of the opening suspends the shower's droplets or the snow mid-air, the grieving parents are shot through a windshield speckled with raindrops, and the camera zooms-in on the gravitating particles of a vase's murky water in the hospital. The transparent surfaces combined with representations of this element illustrate the fading of its containing boundaries. The repetitive image of the fog or mist also concurs to this watery, feminine element leaking out of its space of containment: it first appears in the opening, then shrouds She's imagined journey to Eden, and eventually permeates the characters' shared reality in the final segment.[23]

This persistent fog – also to be found in *The Witch*, as Saige Walton observes –[24] was believed to be an attribute of the devil, who "materialises, in particular, through water and air and through their mixing in, for example, mist or hail" (Thomsen, 2009: 4). The motif of fog is therefore

23. The feminine "leaking" through the representation of invisible barriers and mixed watery elements. *Antichrist*, Zentropa Entertainments, 2009, URL: https://posthorror7.wordpress.com/2024/10/28/pics/#jp-carousel-30.

24. "Aerial images are especially obvious during the film's most uneasy moments when smoke, fog, clouds and moving dust particles lend visible form to an invisible, mobile dread. Similarly, Eggers' depiction of the local witch depends as much on the imagery of clouded, deathly air as it does on the forest. Recalling the "maleficent body" of the witch that dominated medieval scholasticism, the witch is portrayed here as not only dangerous but inherently vaporous" (Walton, 2018: 14-15).

both a symbol of the devil's influence and of the feminine resistance to, and exceeding of, its confinement. It stands with blood and milk as the vectors by which the feminine figures of the corpus become the witches.

The figures of the mother and the witch exist back-to-back like two sides of the same coin, polar opposites so close to each other they coalesce. *Antichrist*'s water, marking the porosity of the female boundaries, thus stands with milk and blood as a pivotal element in the mother's shift into the "anti-mother", the witch. As a visual symbol of her supernatural influence, it expresses her "leaking out" of her consecrated space of femininity and motherhood. But because *Antichrist* displaces this folkloric narrative in a contemporary context, its materialization takes the form of history coming alive: She's internalized history leaks into their shared, present reality.

Performative materialization: the images made real

When Willem Dafoe's character, eager to map out his wife's psyche, ventures into her makeshift office in the cabin's attic, he is in for a tour of the persecutions endured by women through the ages. He seems to take particular interest in engravings depicting the witch hunts, and as Thomsen notes,[25] the film's progression suggests that these images have been internalized by Gainsbourg's character as testaments to a certain feminine history, and are now exceeding the boundaries of this containment by manifesting into the diegetic reality. The occurrence of these historically accurate documents, J.M. Tyree highlights in "Horror – On von Trier", recalls Benjamin Christensen's 1922 masterpiece, *Häxan*. Considered one of the first "documentaries", this cinematic inquiry of the evolution of witchcraft-related beliefs through the ages will later be called a cult classic. On the one hand, *Antichrist*'s use of the same historic material betrays a double reference to *Häxan*: it encapsulates the large scope of feminine persecutions that is embraced in the documentary and draws, in the specific scope of film history, a direct kinship between the two films – a filmic lineage that will be addressed at the end of this essay. On the other hand, both films display similar techniques to transcribe the realization of the past into the present, a becoming-real that is particularly relevant to *Antichrist*'s discourse on gender. During his attic excursion [1:00:00], Dafoe's character observes two engravings borrowed from *Häxan*: one depicting the witch-burnings, and one of a naked woman with her hands

25. "There are the pictures from the thesis, which reproduce some of the well-known illustrations of witchcraft and witch burnings, but soon […] the same kind of images start to materialise directly on screen, in the film itself" (Thomsen, 2009: 4).

and feet bound together. The picture is drenched in rain leaking from the attic's roof. From the past of film history, *Häxan*'s voice-over provides context for this image [34:59]:

> A woman accused of witchcraft is thrown into the water to find out whether she is guilty or not. In *History of Customs*, Edward Fuchs shows us how the accused is tied up. Two executioners use oars to move the accused into deeper water where she can't touch the bottom. If she floats, she will be pulled up and burned. If she sinks, the judges thank God for her innocence. (Christensen, 1922)

The drawing of the soon-to-be-drowned witch, eerily and appropriately animated by the pouring rain, is thereby resurrected and bleeds into *Antichrist*'s reality.[26] The operations depicted in the engravings, moreover, confirm the redirection of the film's stakes and foreshadow the course of its narrative: women are presumed guilty, and punishment is inevitable. In a seminal article titled "Performative Acts and Gender Constitution", Judith Butler states that the body is not merely matter but a continual and incessant *materializing* of possibilities" (Butler, 1988: 521) (her emphasis) and that, consequently, gender identity is an "act" performed according to a "set of meanings already socially established" (Butler, 1988: 526). Gender identity, she states, stems from a "historical situation" rather than a "natural fact" (Butler, 1988: 520). And indeed, a specific set of historical beliefs and events – one that has played a critical role in the cultural construction of the feminine and is depicted directly in *Häxan*, *Hagazussa* and *The Witch*–[27] is conjured into *Antichrist*'s present narrative to convey She's "becoming" said witch: it is not her "nature" seeping through, it is her history. The performativity of historical gender constructs is thus incarnated visually with the animation of the still materials borrowed from *Häxan*.

But this performativity also operates on the level of discourse: in *The Witch*, Mercy and Thomasin both claim to be "the witch of the woods,"[28] and their prophecies have been entirely fulfilled by the end of the film.[29] In *Antichrist*, images, writing and speech have magical per-

26. The burning witch and the drowning witch: historical engravings, commented in Häxan, reappropriated and animated in *Antichrist*. Häxan, Svensk Filmindustri (SF), 1922 / *Antichrist*, Zentropa Entertainments, 2009, URL: https://posthorror7.wordpress.com/2024/10/28/pics/#jp-carousel-39.
27. All of them titled, quite tellingly, "the witch" in three different languages.
28. "MERCY (O.S.): I be The Witch of the Wood. THOMASIN: Mercy, come out. MERCY (O.S.): I be not Mercy. I be The Witch of the Wood. I have come to steal ye! […]" (Eggers, 2013: 34); "THOMASIN: Aye. It was a witch Mercy, you speak aright. […] It was I! […] Twas I what stole him. I'm the witch of the wood. […] I am that very witch. When I sleep my spirit slips away from my body and dances naked with The Devil. That's how I signed his book. […] He bade me bring him an unbaptized babe, and I stole Sam, and I gave him to my master. And I'll make any man or thing else vanish I like. […] Aye. And I'll vanish thee too if thou displeaseth me." (Eggers, 2013: 36)
29. Mercy and Jonas do vanish after it has been suggested that they were conspiring with Black Philip, and Thomasin does eventually sign The Devil's book before joining the covenant of naked witches.

formative properties too. "I have it in writing in my books!", She argues about the alleged evilness of female nature [1:04:46], and when He writes her down inside the pyramid's top space while simultaneously naming her, it elicits immediate action: She attacks him. Right after maiming him, [1:26:38] She finally recites the first verses of a Robert Herrick poem called "Upon Some Women": "False in legs, false in thighs; false in breast, teeth, hair and eyes." Although the duplicitous woman described in this extra-diegetic reference aligns with a patriarchal view of deceiving femininity,[30] further inquiry of its author's work nuances his apparently misogynistic discourse as parodic and critical, thus bringing forth the subversiveness of these gender performances:

> Close examination of his texts reveals that he recognized the ambiguities of gender and the inconsistencies of his era's beliefs pertaining to women, disrupted and interrogated them, and often engaged in outright parodic critique of accepted seventeenth-century gender mores. […] While convention operates on the surface of Herrick's poems on women, a great deal of parodic revisionism is simultaneously taking place. (Landrum, 2007: 181)

This "fake" performative statement, again pointing to existing extra-diegetic material and its context, further invites a "suspicious reading"[31] of the events unfolding onscreen. The reference gives away Von Trier's self-awareness regarding *Antichrist*'s misleading stance on gender and informs, in its pattern, the subversive operation underlying the films' feminine trajectories.

As has been noted by J.M. Tyree in "Horror – on Von Trier", *Antichrist* is "essentially reversing the polarity of Christensen's classic by offering a fiction in which mental illness melds with supernatural irruptions" (no pagination). Indeed, whereas *Häxan* trades its folkloric lens on witchcraft for a scientific one, *Antichrist* unequivocally retraces these steps. This two-way trajectory between witchcraft and what has been – and still is – called hysteria outlines and reasserts a form of equivalence or analogy between them. From this perspective, it seems legitimate to place the supernatural trajectories of She, Thomasin and Albrun under the light of Luce Irigaray's theory of hysteria as "the woman's rebellion against and rejection of the requirements of femininity" (Grozs, 1989: 134). In *Sexual Subversions: Three French Feminists*, Elizabeth Grozs writes that "because it represents

30. "This phantasmagoric topography has haunted representations of femininity across the ages, […] persisting as an intermittent strand of patriarchal mythology and misogyny. It is an image of female beauty as artifact or mask, as an exterior, alluring and seductive surface that conceals an interior space containing deception and danger" (Mulvey, 1992: 58).
31. "The images of witches in the attic are also indications from the point of view of the film about the 'suspicious reading' that we should do of the therapist's discourse about the madness and wickedness of the researcher" (Kruger, 2018).

one of the few possible positions that women occupy in rebelling against the confines of patriarchal definitions, hysteria figures as a central 'figure' in Irigaray's subversion of phallocentrism" (Grozs, 1989: 136). Thus, what is depicted here as reversed, fairy-tale-like self-fulfilling prophecies could indeed embody one of the few feminine paths of resistance against patriarchy: self-equation, in excess, to the hegemonic images of femininity they are expected or suspected to adhere to – the hysterical woman or the witch.

In the case of *Antichrist*'s She, a slippage occurs in the way she is forcefully portrayed (or designed) by her architect husband, going from the mischievous Eve to the neglectful, and even murderous, anti-mother. As for Thomasin's family, their stifling bigotry and consuming paranoia makes it so very little supernatural incentive is needed for them to spiral into self-destruction, leaving her with few choices but to become what she has been scapegoated as all along. Albrun, having inherited – along with terrible childhood traumas and a plausible set of psychological disorders – her mother's reputation as a witch, is persecuted by the villagers into self-fulfilling this prophecy. "Only through its own techniques can patriarchy be challenged and displaced" (Grozs, 1989: 133): far from depicting feminine acquiescence to these norms, this excessive conformism points them out, making their contriving structures all the more apparent. What has been imposed from the outside in gets exposed from the inside out as the feminine figures of *Antichrist*, *The Witch* and *Hagazussa* assume forms that overflow and subvert their patriarchal molds.

Bringing it back home with Sharp Objects

Containing the feminine: the domestic scene

The exploration of these patterns takes us to *Sharp Objects*, where they lurk just under the surface of a contemporary narrative that mostly steers clear from the folk-horror template of the films. Although shrouded in ambiguity, the witchcraft theme unfolds out in the open in the period pieces of *The Witch* and *Hagazussa*, and it resurfaces as subtext in the contemporary context of *Antichrist*, this displacement further informing the actuality and complexity of the gender dynamics it exposes. The comparative analysis of the films provides a lens through which these folklorically-charged representations and spatial dynamics of femininity transpire in *Sharp Objects*' even more subdued treatment of witchcraft.

First, its feminine narrative – here centering around Adora and her two daughters, pubescent Amma and thirty-something Camille – is displaced into the domestic sphere, a lavish Southern estate encapsulating its own miniature replica, a dollhouse cherished by Amma. How does taking the conflict "home" inform the terms of the feminine representations? On both aesthetic and narrative levels, this site of the home occupies a structural and enlightening role in the topography of the feminine while picking up and expanding on the notion of a feminine, familial, and filmic lineage. In an article titled "Home Wee Home – It's Where the Horror Is: Miniature Models, Crime Scenes, and Toxic Femininity in *Hereditary* and *Sharp Objects*", Brian Gibson delivers a brilliant comparative analysis of the dioramas of the series and of Ari Aster's 2018 debut, wherein "miniature domestic objects – scale replicas of rooms and houses – are not just recreations and re-imaginings of scenes of trauma and imprisonment but microcosmic mirrors of toxic and power-intoxicated femininity" (Gibson, 2022). The comparison with *Hereditary* proves very apt in regards to the obvious degree of demiurgic manipulation of the (doll-like) characters involved with the device of the dollhouse. In both works, it stands as the visual metaphor of an over-powering lineage; but whereas Aster uses this apparatus to comment on the horror of family, *Sharp Objects* uses it to comment on the horror of femininity – although articulated within a familial setting.

As Michaela Hermann writes in her semantic study of Gillian Flynn's *Sharp Objects*, "Amma's dollhouse is fashioned to look exactly like Adora's Victorian, a house-within-a-house. A type of Gothic doubling, it represents both the duality of Amma as well as the veneer of artificiality that attends Adora's Southern Belle performance" (Hermann, 2020: 8). In "Housing Gender", Mark Wigley points out "architecture's complicity in the exercise of patriarchal authority": about the house's prescribed design, he quotes an antique treatise stating that "women are to be confined deep within a sequence of spaces at the greatest distance from the outside world" (Wigley, 1992: 332). This "dollhouse-within-a-house" therefore illustrates, on the one hand, the feminine domestic confinement as well as Amma and Adora's duality. Its artificiality, on the other hand, informs the performative role of this "domestic scene". Altogether, these elements set the topography of the spaces devolved to the feminine characters of Adora and Amma, spaces they each exceed and subvert in their own way.[32]

Laura J. Miller, in the article upon which Brian Gibson based his comparative study of *Sharp Objects* and *Hereditary*, comments on the spatial dynamics and sociocultural patterns highlighted by the crime-scene

32. Annie's dioramas and Amma's dollhouse. Hereditary, Palmstar Media, 2018 / *Sharp Objects*, Crazyrose, 2018, URL: https://posthorror7.wordpress.com/2024/10/28/pics/#jp-carousel-34.

dioramas of forensic pioneer Frances Glessner Lee. The crime-scenes, objectified and frozen in time, split open the boundaries of the home and expose the dark undertones of the domestic. "Through her dioramas", Miller writes, "Glessner Lee created her own liminal space, located between the seemingly rigid, proprietary spheres of public and private, inside and outside, and masculine and feminine" (Miller, 2005: 198). The device of the miniature replica, poised between these polarities, makes the liminality of the home apparent; and it brings into play the same spatial patterns exposed in *Antichrist*, *Hagazussa* and *The Witch* – namely, the porous boundaries allowing contaminations and the characters' "becoming the witch". This liminal domestic space, in *Sharp Objects*, is where toxic performances of femininity sprout: removed from the exterior setting to be found in the films, Adora and Amma challenge the inherent boundaries of gender identities by once again demonstrating excessive and subversive self-equation to the prescribed norms of femininity. In Both cases, these toxic performances of femininity escalate in very specific forms of violence. For Adora, it is domestic abuse in the form of Munchhausen Syndrome By Proxy: "an instance of psychological disorder in which the caregiver, in most cases the mother, induces symptoms of illness in the child under her care" (Farhani, 2021: 4). How does this contribute to build Adora's own liminal posture, poised as she is – not unlike the other feminine figures of the corpus – between the mother and the witch?

The character's ambivalence is intrinsically linked to the space of the home here as it resides in her role as caretaker. In "Inscribing Pain: Female Perversion and the Maternal Imago in Gillian Flynn's *Sharp Objects*", Sohella Farhani notes that "the root of [the] glorification of women's role as the sole care-givers goes back to the Victorian ideology of 'angel in the house'" (Farhani, 2021: 3). Excessively adhering to what was once considered the sole function devolved to women, Adora's "caretaking" is an overbearing, poisonous one. Echoing a maneuver that I have outlined in another domestic abuse narrative,[33] the ambiguity of the term itself is exacerbated in the dialogues: mentions of it range from Amma's confession "You know what my favourite part of getting wasted is? Mama takes care of me after" (Ep.7), through her paradoxical statement "I'm not so bad right now, she's got you to care for" (Ep.8) and to Camille's last wish "if anything happens to me you tell him Mama took care of me" (Ep.8). The inherent ambiguity of the condition, a "form of child abuse which is often neglected because it mainly occurs under the guise of intensive maternal care" (Farhani, 2021: 4), is admirably encapsulated in the double-sided

33. In a previous study, I argue that *The Shining*'s intergenerational domestic abuse narrative is notably brought forth through Jack Torrance's ambivalence as the "caretaker": from the narrative handling of his role as caretaker of the hotel to his and Grady's ominous "Red room" exchange, during which promotion of domestic violence and debate over who the "caretaker" is overlap, this figure plays a pivotal part in the evolution of the character and the expression of said domestic abuse narrative (Patronnat, 2023: 5).

meaning of "taking care". The ardent nurturing displayed on the public scene is flipped into the nefarious "care" provided inside, in the confines of the home. Aesthetically with the dollhouse, narratively with MSBP, the ambivalence of *Sharp Objects*' domestic scene is set.

The chosen expression of Adora's perversion seems equally deliberate: she is shown grinding and mixing various powders or liquids into colorful potions she feeds her daughters, inevitably evoking the folkloric healer or the witch. In his critical theory, Jacques Derrida mentions a handful of words endowed with a dual signification: they are "undecidable, poised over binary categories", thereupon challenging these binary categories. One of them is "Pharmakon": from the "Pharmakós" which, in ancient Greece, referred to the ritualistic sacrifice of a human scapegoat, the Pharmakon became a philosophical concept signifying the cure, the poison and the scapegoat. This liminal concept of the Pharmakon serves as a pivot between two modes of motherhood. Adora, an over-caring "ultra-mother" with MBPS, is poised between the nurturing mother, the "angel in the house", and the devouring anti-mother – the witch. The original meaning of the term, this "sacrificial victim", moreover hints at the dual perspective on witches – supernatural malefactors or persecuted scapegoats of patriarchal communities? – onto which the broader argument of the films hinges.[34]

"All of them witches": toxic femininity, poisonous lineage

Again quoting a treatise on the design of the house made to accommodate the woman's male-prescribed domestic role, Mark Wigley points out how, according to the times' prescribed patriarchal norms, "the woman, as she remains locked up at home, should watch over things by staying at her post, by diligent care and watchfulness" (Wigley, 1992: 332) – and when *Sharp Objects*' Allan compares Camille to her maternal grandmother, Joya, who would "stand guard on the house like a witch" (Ep.6), it oddly echoes this injunction. What is expected of the consecrated, domesticated "angel in the house" is readily flipped into a tell-tale characteristic of its polar opposite, and in a way similar to Katherine's switch from the archetypal Virgin mother to the witch,[35] Adora occupies this ambivalent space where extremes coalesce. Just like the instrumentalization of milk and blood characterizes the "undecidable" mother-witch in *The Witch* and *Hagazussa*, the treatment of these two fluids in *Sharp Objects*' contemporary narrative conjures and shapes the toxic feminine "bloodline" at play.

34. Adora preparing the "Pharmakon", a poison posing as a cure. *Sharp Objects*, Crazyrose, 2018, URL: https://posthorror7.wordpress.com/2024/10/28/pics/#jp-carousel-41.
35. In *The Witch*, addressed above in "Contaminations: blood, milk, water", Fig. 9.

Feminist authors explored the specific spaces involved in the mother-daughter relationship which *Sharp Objects*, *The Witch* and *Hagazussa* address. For Julia Kristeva, "maternity satisfies a desire originally directed towards the mother's mother […]. The baby comes to represent the mother herself, and she, her own mother, in a vertiginous identification that brings the mother into a corporeal contact with her mother's maternity" (Grozs, 1989: 80). This "vertiginous identification" is exemplified in Albrun's naming of her daughter after her mother in *Hagazussa*. In *Sharp Objects*, it is echoed by Adora's warning to Camille – "when you are here, you are my daughter. Everything you do reflects on me" (Ep.1) – and evoked by the imbricated spaces of Amma's Russian-dollhouse. The series' last episode also makes explicit reference to the myth of Demeter and Persephone:[36] "I'm Persephone. Queen of the Underworld", Amma tells Camille as they are all sitting at the dinner table. As has been noted by Hermann, the series' reference to the myth evokes Luce Irigaray's conception of the mother-daughter relationship (Hermann, 2021: 20): it is a contriving one, that crystalizes women inside two roles outside of which they have no space to occupy. The narratives of the female characters of the corpus are, indeed, restricted to these two roles. This is most striking in the case of *Hagazussa*'s introduction of Albrun as a child, as a daughter, followed by her transition into womanhood *and* a motherly role all at once – she is forced, not long after her first periods, to become her ill mother's caretaker. A significant temporal ellipse occurs after Martha's death, and the Albrun we return to has now herself become a mother: the film only allows her to exist inside these two spaces of femininity, outside of which her narrative is erased.

In her essay "And the One Doesn't Stir Without the Other", Irigaray invokes the image of maternal milk to articulate this stifling relationship: "with your milk, mother, I swallowed ice. And here I am now, my insides frozen. […] You flowed into me, and that hot liquid became poison, paralyzing me" (Irigaray, 1981: 60). This metaphor is strikingly staged in the evocatively titled "Milk" finale of *Sharp Objects*, wherein it is heavily implied that Camille is poisoned by the only thing she consumes at the dinner table – a glass of milk, presumably spiked by Adora. This is further illustrated by references to infant Camille's refusal to feed on her mother's milk: recalling Joya's spiteful attitude, Allan says that she would only smile when Camille "refused to nurse from Adora" (Ep.6). In *Hagazussa*, Albrun's own toxicity is similarly suggested when she is shown [50:40] struggling to breastfeed her infant daughter Martha.

36. Daughter of Zeus and Demeter, Persephone is the all-pervading goddess of spring and nature. She becomes queen of the underworld following her abduction by Hades, who will also take her as his wife. Demeter obtained from Hades that Persephone would be allowed to resurface and be reunited with her during spring and summer each year.

Witches have commonly been characterized by a general predatoriness and by a specific savagery towards children. Eggers' witch is depicted taking the family's infant, Samuel, to her hatch and turning its body into an unguent [7:00]. Caleb's feverish final diatribe [57:15] revolves around this voraciousness for children's blood: "A toad. A cat. A crow. A raven. A great black dog. A wolf. […] She desires of my blood. She sends 'em upon me. They feed upon her teats, her nether parts. She sends 'em upon me". Moreover, the witch is insistently mistaken for another predatorial figure, the wolf,[37] over the course of the film. Infanticide is involved in *Hagazussa* as well, and furthermore complimented with cannibalism. But it is, unexpectedly, *Sharp Objects* that offers the most extensive expression of this folkloric attribute of the witch. Both Adora and Amma are staged as predatorial figures whose victims of choice aren't just children but, as is repeatedly stressed throughout the series, "little girls" – here again, the pattern is gender-coded. In the novel, Adora is said to have "that voraciousness about children. She swoops in on them." (Flynn, 2006: 84) and in the series, one of Camille's memories depicts Adora biting an infant's cheek (Ep.7). From this perspective, the familial hog-slaughtering industry seems hardly accidental – as the detective reenacts the teeth-pulling inflicted to the victims on a dead pig's head, a visual parallelism is established between the two. Amma is also shown in postures reminding those of a bird of prey[38]: she and her gang of roller-skating ghouls roam the streets of Wind Gap at night, and these shots conjure a very specific representation of the predatory witch. Francesca Matteoni describes it in these terms:

> Though the folkloric motif of the vampire-witch survived almost everywhere, trials in Protestant areas were almost free of these kinds of witches, while they still figured in the trials of Catholic countries, where the witch figure was shaped by the ancient symbolism of the Strix. This was a nocturnal predatory bird that allegedly sucked infants' blood. In medieval times it became the most diffused witch-stereotype, indicating an old woman that killed children during the night. (Matteoni, 2009: 57)

As another symbol of this poisonous feminine lineage, blood here consistently appears on the girls' bodies, and more precisely, around their mouths. Wind Gap's serial killer, Amma, pulls the teeth out of her victims' mouths, leaving them red-lipped.[39]

37. "MERCY: I could go to the brook before you let the witch take Sam. CALEB: It was a wolf stole Sam. MERCY: A witch. I've seen her in her riding cloak about The Wood! CALEB: Father showed me the tracks. MERCY: It was a witch!!" (Eggers, 2013: 35).
38. The victims as prey and Amma as the predatorial Strix. *Sharp Objects*, Crazyrose, 2018, URL: https://posthorror7.wordpress.com/2024/10/28/pics/#jp-carousel-31.
39. The bloody mouths of the murdered girls. *Sharp Objects*, Crazyrose, 2018, URL: https://posthorror7.wordpress.com/2024/10/28/pics/#jp-carousel-33.

But these are not the only dead girls of the narrative. Camille is haunted by visions, sometimes captured through reflections, of her red-mouthed former hospital roommate Alice. We will learn that the girl committed suicide by "drinking poison", and the poison Adora favours the most, which probably killed Marian, is a bright red syrup. Here again, the blood is used to tie femininity to the figure of the witch, and this bond is even further echoed and consolidated in bloodless scenes: Camille is shown struggling to wipe lipstick off of her deceased younger sister Marian's lips during her funeral (Ep.1), an action later inverted when she helps Alice put on red lipstick. "My Mama always says lipstick makes you look like a lady so, here you go", she says as she does (Ep.3). This "red-mouth" motif, on a metaphorical level, marks *Sharp Objects*' "dead girls" as collateral victims of the constrictive spaces of femininity that forged Adora and Amma, with monstrous results. But it also aligns them with the blood-sucking witch, thus forcefully inscribing them into this toxic feminine "bloodline". As a symbol of this traditional-femininity-gone-wrong trajectory, the red lip that makes you a lady turns into the bloody mouth of the witch.[40]

The motif of teeth achieves to articulate this idea of lineage by reversing the feminine trajectories portrayed in the films: from inside-out, to outside-in again. As another symbol of the predatoriness attributed to the folkloric witch, this element is used to expose spatial operations that strive to lock feminine resistance back into the domestic sphere. When *Sharp Objects*' final twist reveals that Amma collects the pulled-out teeth of her victims and arranges them so they pave Adora's dollhouse bedroom, this mirrors the actual ivory tiling her mother is so protective of. In *On Longing: Narratives of the Miniature, the Gigantic, the Souvenir, the Collection*, Susan Stewart explores – often in spatial terms – the symbolic operations involved in our relationship to certain objects. The souvenir, she states, "domesticates on the level of its operation: external experience is internalized; the beast is taken home" (Stewart, 1992: 134). The parallel between the girls' teeth and the ivory – a result of poaching itself representative of a long, violent tradition of cultural domination and exploitation –, along with their encapsulation in the dollhouse, expressly aligns with this image of domestication. The murdered girls are said to have attracted Adora's nurturing attentions, but rejected it. They are referred to as "biters", and their refusal to fall prey to Adora's poisonous nurturing, their resistance against her pathological mold of consecrated femininity, is met by Amma's own diverted need for control. The exotic souvenir, specifically, "represents distance appropriated […]. It is thus placed within an intimate distance; space is transformed into interiority, into 'personal' space" (Stewart, 1992: 147). The collection, finally, "appears as a mode of control

40. The feminine figures' bloody mouth or red lips. *Sharp Objects*, Crazyrose, 2018, .URL: https://posthorror7.wordpress.com/2024/10/28/pics/#jp-carousel-37.

and containment" (Stewart, 1992: 159). The pattern behind Amma's collection of exotic souvenirs thus becomes apparent: in an attempt to make that "distance" hers, to appropriate that space, she brings it back into the domestic sphere. "This Southern Gothic's revealing of a sister's fury via an upstairs bedroom", Brian Gibson writes about *Sharp Objects*' conclusion, "echoes the Gothic novel *Jane Eyre*'s revealing of a madwoman in the attic" (Gibson, 2022): just as *Antichrist*'s She was locked into the attic space of her controlling husband's pyramid of fears, Amma tames and contains feminine resistance into the attic space of her dollhouse.

Gender and genre: a conclusion

Milk, blood, and teeth – these occurrences align the feminine figures of *Sharp Objects* with the predatoriness attributed to the folkloric witch, all the while articulating it in this paradigmatic feminine "bloodline". Generations of women violently contained into the same alienating representations, and their subversive resistance to these spaces, are encapsulated in the domestic sphere and contemporary timeline of the series.

Through their explicit treatment of the theme of witchcraft and of its affiliated folklore – although to varying extents –, these feminine portraits lay out complex gender dynamics that persisted through time: from *Hagazussa*'s fifteenth-Century Austria and *The Witch*'s seventeenth-Century New England, to the duplicitous modern setting of *Antichrist*, virtually spanning women's history all the way back to the Middle Ages. Von Trier's film has been chosen as a point of departure to establish the gender dialectics at stake within its central couple, dialectics that determine each character's trajectory and echo throughout the corpus as a whole. The pyramid of fears and the masculine mirror convey the idea of spatial containment in male-designed spaces of representation, and this control of the feminine extends to the narrative space of the film. What is more, this space is subjected to manipulations: *Antichrist* hints at a patriarchal rewriting of the biblical fall that is echoed in *The Witch*. The feminine resistance against this figurative and narrative containment is expressed in all three films through fluidity: literal liquids – water, milk, blood – and shifting identifications. Altogether, these motifs inform an ever-unfolding topography of the feminine rooted in folklore, thereby making its contemporary treatment as subtext in *Sharp Objects* visible.

Interestingly, in *Thinking the Difference: for a Peaceful Revolution*, Irigaray establishes a link between Persephone and Eve: "the poisoned

gift that Persephone accepted from Hades is apparently enough to make her his captive at least a third of the year, the cold season. Similarly, yet differently, eating an apple is all it later took to be excluded from earthly paradise"[41] (Irigaray, 1994: 107). This comparison not only underscores the spatial nexus of gender dialectics – these performative spaces of femininity women are held captive of, excluded from, or exceed – but also closes the loop of our corpus. *Antichrist*'s She and *Sharp Objects*' Amma, who have been respectively associated with these two figures, are hereby bound together under the aegis of this cursed femininity: She, Katherine, Thomasin, Martha, Albrun, Adora and Amma – all of them witches. And although the architects of these spaces are directly in control of (*Antichrist*'s He), involved in (*The Witch*'s patriarch, William and, arguably, the devil, Black Philip), or lurking around (*Hagazussa*'s villagers) the films' feminine narratives, they are virtually absent from *Sharp Objects*. We go from women entirely dispossessed of their own stories to a female narrator. There is a clear trajectory here, which is culminating in the series' "gonzo feminism"[42] – as Hermann puts it, "with indictment come possibility: in Flynn's gonzofeminism, it is up to women to undo their own constraints" (Hermann, 2020: 24). *Sharp Objects* is overall charged with the seminal – and still relevant – feminist discourses of the 1970s, and Camille's literal and professional self-writing[43] specifically echoes Hélène Cixous' chosen means of feminine liberation:

> By writing her self, woman will return to the body which has been more than confiscated from her, which has been turned into the uncanny stranger on display […]. It is by writing, from and toward woman, […] that women will confirm women in a place other than which is reserved in and by the symbolic, that is, a place other than silence. (Cixous, 1976: 880-881)

As we mentioned in the introduction, *Sharp Objects* is the only work adapted from female-produced material in a corpus exclusively directed by males; and while the films all bear elaborate, constructive, and progressive commentaries on gender dynamics, Flynn's perspective on the matter takes one more step towards a decisive feminine shift in the narrative. Jean-Marc Vallée's adaptation, as it emerged in the context of post-horror's peek productivity, both betrays the already burgeoning influence of the cycle – given the series' many intertextual links with *Antichrist*, *The Witch* and *Hagazussa* – and feeds into its outgrowing ramifications. Through this canvas of aesthetic and thematic echoes, *Sharp Objects* falls within another

41. In the myth, Hades tricks Persephone into eating pomegranate seeds from the Underworld, thereby making her his captive.
42. Labelled as such in reference to Camille's posture as a journalist, an ultra-subjective writing style that includes the narrator of the story.
43. The words she has been carving on her skin as a way of dealing with her personal history are transferred in her journalistic writing on the case.

kind of lineage: a cinematic lineage of female-centric horror that goes all the way back to *Häxan* and appears to be increasingly picked up and perpetuated by women themselves. Although the core concern of this article, the figure of the witch, was not the focus of these works, the post-horror cycle includes inputs from arising female filmmakers the likes of Jennifer Kent, Julia Ducournau, Natalie Erika James, Prano Bailey Bond or Chloe Okuno. As such, it has provided a channel for the feminine voice and will hopefully continue to do so, thus contributing to shape a space "other than silence" for women in cinema.

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