

*Screenwritten Spells:
Portrayals of the Witch in Early Cinema*

DELIA ENYEDI*

Abstract: The reassessment of early films outside a teleological perspective on the evolution of cinema disclosed them as representing a form of late nineteenth century stage entertainment. Although defined by non-narrativity, catalogues of the era included a significant number of titles seemingly indicating literary adaptations. Exploring the screenwriting practices of early cinema reveal them as making only limited references to famous literary works known to the audiences, by re-enacting key moments or famous scenes. The paper selects early films revolving around witchcraft in order to discuss the intertextual narrative construction of the witch archetype within the context of this cinema of reference.

Keywords: early cinema, witch, witchcraft, screenwriting, cinema of reference, monstration, narration, adaptation.

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* Faculty of Theatre and Film, Babeş-Bolyai University, Cluj-Napoca, Romania. delia.enyedi@ubbcluj.ro

In relation to cinema as the sociocultural phenomenon that shaped the twentieth century, early cinema can rightfully be considered “a fairly long period of trial and error.”¹ Relentless efforts were put into perfecting various devices of recording and rendering images in motion, resulting in numerous technicians and artists claiming to have invented cinema. But as André Gaudreault asserted, what each of them developed was the needed technology before the cultural paradigm institutional cinema came into being. Thus, we should consider most of the views realized or signed by the Lumière brothers as belonging to the cultural series photography, while Edison’s filmed stage performances belonged to the cultural series vaudeville, to name only two among other forms of signification, all integrated into the cultural paradigm late nineteenth century stage entertainment.²

In consequence, understanding the status of narration in early films implies an evaluation of the role performed by the so-called cinematographer. Views that implied almost no involvement from his part other than the supervision of an optimal recording of images indicate a mode of capturing and restoring. Reduced interventions by means of developing cinematic devices and techniques implied that cinema started to put “its singular ability to tell a story to the test”³ by means of monstration. To speak of narration becomes consistent only when identifying a coherent connection between filmed fragments, enabled by certain procedures, mainly editing.⁴

In film history, these three consecutive stages of development extended early cinema up to the outbreak of World War I, when film was integrated into war propaganda. But even more significantly, it was also about that time that narrative features such as *Birth of a Nation* (D.W. Griffith, 1915) contributed to the development of codified film aesthetics. A fixed timeframe is difficult to establish as, for example, Heather Greene listed twenty-eight early silent films constructed around the figure of the witch produced in Hollywood

¹ André Gaudreault, “The Culture Broth and the Froth of Cultures,” in *A Companion to Early Cinema*, eds. André Gaudreault, Nicolas Dulac and Santiago Hidalgo (Chichester, UK: Wiley-Blackwell, 2012), 16.

² André Gaudreault, *Film and Attraction. From Kinematography to Cinema*, trans. Timothy Barnard (Urbana, Chicago and Springfield: University of Illinois Press, 2011), 64-65.

³ André Gaudreault, *Film and Attraction*, 58.

⁴ André Gaudreault, *Film and Attraction*, 52-58.

between 1908 and 1917. As an argument, Greene cited William K. Everson who had claimed that it was the year 1919 when the American filmmaking business transformed into a giant industry.⁵ While equally valid, shifting reference points determine a working method favouring individual case studies as relevant in the quest to identify the delicate balance between the attraction, monstration and narration delineating early cinema.

The Witch as Attractional Character

The three-paradigm model discussed above, that of capturing and restoring, that of monstration and that of narration, refine the dual model of the system of monstrative attraction and the subsequent system of narrative integration⁶ proposed earlier by Tom Gunning. In this opposing terminology lies the understanding of the latter as a first stage in cinema's process of narrativization, while the former relied primarily on the inborn narrativity of the cinematic image. In other words, in the beginning the attractional elements of early films were comprised on a profilmic level, as the demonstration of the recording technology was sufficient in order to elicit amazement from the audience. Monstration signalled a conscious intervention on the part of the cinematographer on the profilmic, by the presence of constructed *mise-en-scène*, or on the filmographic, by applying the stop-camera technique or by the development of various framings and camera movements. But these instruments of cinematic composition did not yet assume the role of conducting the narrative. Instead, they underlined the attractional core of the films that could be identified on multiple levels, from attractional elements embedded into the visual composition to the choice of the subject and the subsequent themes it involved.

⁵ Heather Greene, *Bell, Book and Camera: A Critical History of Witches in American Film and Television* (Jefferson, North Carolina: McFarland, 2018), 13.

⁶ Tom Gunning, "Early Cinema as a Challenge to Film History," in *The Cinema of Attractions Reloaded*, ed. Wanda Strauven (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2006), 373.

Monstrative attractions dominated early cinema up until about 1908,⁷ the same year when the Vitagraph production company promoted *The Witch*, directed by Van Dyke Brooke, as the first Hollywood film to contain a witch character or the theme of witchcraft. As this title is lost, a review published in *The New York Dramatic Mirror* reveals significant aspects regarding the synopsis treatment of its narrative. The plot was summarized as “young hero fights with the templar Brian du Bois Guilbert (sic!) to prove by trial of combat that Rebecca, the Jewess, is not a witch.”⁸ The name of the characters together with the plot indicate Sir Walter Scott’s widely popular historical novel *Ivanhoe* as the literary source material. Set in twelfth century England, it follows the story of Sir Wilfred of Ivanhoe, a Saxon among a nobility overwhelmingly Norman, on the background of the clash between Christians and Jews. In the novel, the trial for witchcraft of Rebecca, daughter of money lender Isaac of York, takes the form of trial by combat at the secret request of the templar Brian de Bois-Guilbert. Despite wishing to defend her personally, the Grand Master orders him to fight against Rebecca’s champion, chosen to be Ivanhoe. Despite appearing to have advantage, Bois-Guilbert dies of natural causes during the combat.

The reference to the protagonist of the literary work simply as a “young hero” indicates a reconfiguring of Bois Guilbert and Rebecca ceasing to function in the unit of central characters of the novel and becoming protagonists of an autonomous scene extracted from it, re-enacted in the new medium of film. The story developing on screen seems to have consisted in a dynamic display of male physical force and combat strategy. Human movement completed by that of the horses gained the role of central attraction, in an indication of the dominance of monstration, a cinematic act of showing, supported by minimal narration. However, illustrating a dynamic confrontation between two knights in the form of an early film would have not needed a literary source of inspiration, except for the case in which additional references would have accentuated its attractional dimension.

⁷ André Gaudreault, *Film and Attraction*, 53.

⁸ Quoted in Heather Greene, *Bell, Book and Camera*, 15.

To speak of film adaptations during the first decade of the twentieth century is an overstatement. Instead, placing early filmmaking among other alternatives of entertainment of the time reveal vaudeville as a model of content structuring with its “‘peak moment’ approach, excerpting a famous action from already well-known works.”⁹ As a sample of this cinema of reference,¹⁰ *The Witch* enhanced the atmosphere deriving from the Middle Ages unfolding on the Old Continent with the mystique of a divisive female figure. The inciting incident, the trial of witchcraft, had been built by Walter Scott on the innocence of the accused woman, as both contenders were convinced of it. Keeping the same names doesn’t necessarily support a similar stance of the two male characters as the short length of the film would have eliminated sub-plots from the novel. Regardless of its extent, the reference to a literary work in early cinema was supported by what Charles Musser defined as “audience foreknowledge.”¹¹ This concept captured the complicity between the filmmakers and the audiences in regard to the plot and characters of a certain widely known narrative. But as reality had demonstrated, the number of novels or plays familiar to most Americans was in fact limited. In the best case, the disparity between what the filmmaker assumed to be known and what the spectators actually knew was often resolved by the exhibitor in the form of hiring a lecturer narratively guiding the spectators as the projection unfolded. As Tom Gunning also noted “the film industry in 1908 wanted to make films that would recall the tradition of the bourgeois drama, but found this difficult without exterior aid.”¹²

The alternative option of simply leaving the public in confusion was rare and the prestige and financial resources of the Vitagraph production company ensured wide distribution of its films, so one can assume that *The Witch* benefited from the narrative support of accompanying lectures, all

⁹ Tom Gunning, “The Intertextuality of Early Cinema. A Prologue to *Fantômas*,” in *A Companion in Literature and Film*, eds. Robert Stam and Alessandra Raengo (Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing, 2004), 127-29.

¹⁰ Tom Gunning, “The Intertextuality of Early Cinema,” 129.

¹¹ Charles Musser, “The Nickelodeon Era Begins: Establishing the Framework for Hollywood’s Mode of Representation,” *Framework: The Journal of Cinema and Media*, no. 22-23 (1983): 7.

¹² Tom Gunning, *D.W. Griffith and the Origins of American Narrative Film: The Early Years at Biograph* (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1994), 92.

the more so as the practice was receiving renewed interest at the time of the film's premiere. Whether already known to the spectators or narrated by a lecturer, the fate of Rebecca revolved around her innocence for which at least her champion, if not both contenders as in the novel, was willing to risk his life. Set off as central element of the filmic narration from the title, the figure of the witch added depth to the attractional dominant of the film by triggering the preconception associated with witchcraft. The fear of the unknown, the temptation of the supernatural and ultimately the wrongful condemnation of women came together in a character empowered in its literary version. The synopsis of *The Witch* did not mention her marriage to the unnamed winner of the combat, on the model of the novel in which Ivanhoe strategically marries Saxon Rowena. Thus, the original literary subplot fitted a cinematic storyline comprising monstrative attractions to visually conduct the dynamic plot, on the basis of an inciting incident referencing the attractional collective imaginary related to the figure of the witch.

The Witch as Attractional Narrative Agent

The European early cinema explorations of the witch date back to 1903 with George Méliès's short trick films *Beelzebub's Daughters*, *The Enchanted Well*, *The Witch's Revenge*, while *The Merry Frolics of Satan* and *The Witch* followed three years later. As technical aspects of film production such as the increasing length of the film stock supported more complex narratives, the presence of monstrative attractions was still being demonstrated by 1913 in titles such as *Christmas Eve/ The Night Before Christmas*. It would become the first film in a series of adaptations of Nikolai Gogol's short story *The Night of Christmas Eve*, one of the most appreciated writings belonging to the Russian writer. Set in a Ukrainian village, it tells the story of the blacksmith Vakula who tries to win the heart of Oksana by accomplishing her wish to own the Tsarina's shoes. The picaresque story is populated by a witch, a sorcerer and a demon causing mischief before contributing to a happy ending.

Praised to have been faithful to the letter, and even more importantly, to the spirit of the highly popular text, *Christmas Eve* was addressed primarily to Russian audiences. As the notion of film adaptation was undergoing a

process of defining due to lawsuits related to copyright issues of American film productions based on literary sources, this film was considered a visual illustration of Gogol's short story. The title card indicates Vladislav Starevich as art and camera director, as well as author of the script. Indeed, almost all narrative details were translated into images, from the characters and the plot, to specific supernatural scenes. The film opens with a devil and the witch Solokha flying on a broomstick before stealing the moon from the sky. The devil will later prove his supernatural ability to fly Vakula to the palace of Prince Potemkin in St. Petersburg and back to the village. These scenes of flights are emphasized by their duration, even though they appear static and rather unskillfully managed. They are overshadowed by that of the demon shrinking in size and hiding in Vakula's pocket, a visual effect obtained by stop motion animation. Subordinated to the film's system of narrative integration, the attractional role of such scenes was to support the genre of the film, constantly reminding the spectator of the fantasy coordinates in the story unfolding.

The chain reaction of strange events revolves around the secondary character of the witch, Solokha, integrated into the community of the village as a single woman, mother to Vakula. One intertitle reads "Solokha had no husband, but she had many visitors," and on the holy night of Christmas eve one of them was a devil. Her screen presence revolves around the promiscuous physical relation she develops with men. During the flight and in the intimacy of her household, she accepts and encourages an erotic exchange of gestures with the devil. Some inebriated Cossacks who can't find their way home stop by her house, ending up hidden in sacks so that none of them see the other one entering. Finally, she engages in a kiss with the one she can't further hide because of the arrival of his son in the house. In this way, she unintentionally facilitates Vakula's confrontation with the devil, leading to the resolution of her son's romantic tribulation.

As *Christmas Eve* faithfully develops on screen the same building of characters as in Gogol's short story, the characterization of the witch extracts elements from Slavic folklore dominated by the mother and witch figure of Baba Yaga. Etymological analyses reveal a wide and rich circulation of this figure in Central and Eastern European countries. Brian Cooper suggested

that she was originally “a personification of the Russian winter,”¹³ a plausible explanation for Gogol’s choice of a winter religious celebration as background of the events which include a snowstorm started by the devil Solokha hosts. However, she departs from the grotesque appearance and menacing presence hidden deep in the forest that characterize this folk figure. Instead, she constantly exerts her seductive power to subordinate not only the male villagers, but also the devil, reflecting late nineteenth and early twentieth century Russian folklore that “underscored the sexual prowess and unnatural sexual propensities”¹⁴ of witches. Starevich’s film portrays the witch by repetitive scenes depicting her as an object of desire. On the level of composition, the focus on her is obtained by placing her in front of the devil and the men hovering around her figure. Instead of representing the traditional role of passive receptor reserved to women, she embodies a sexual aggressor capable of luring and holding captive several men and a devil. Her open display of sexuality functions as an attractional element actively shaping the development of the narratively constructed screenplay.

Cinematic Witches from Oppression to Empowerment

Various studies concerning the narratives associated with the female witch, whether in history in general or in film in particular, have corrected a significant misconception. Diane Purkiss argued for the witches to be considered outside patriarchal dominance as “women also invested heavily in the figure as a fantasy which allowed them to express and manage otherwise unspeakable fears and desires.”¹⁵ Tanya Krzywinska further emphasized this dual perspective as studies in horror films have envisioned the witch

¹³ Quoted in Andreas Johns, *Baba Yaga: The Ambiguous Mother and Witch of the Russian Folktale* (New York: Peter Lang, 2004), 11.

¹⁴ Christine D. Worobec, “Witchcraft Beliefs and Practices in Pre-revolutionary Russian and Ukrainian Villages,” in *New Perspectives on Witchcraft, Magic and Demonology*, volume 6: *Witchcraft in the Modern World*, ed. Brian P. Levack (New York/ London: Routledge, 2001), 58.

¹⁵ Diane Purkiss, *The Witch in History: Early Modern and Twentieth Century Representations* (London: Routledge, 1996), 3.

“as a product of male fantasies about the otherness of women’s bodies” while “the cinematic witch is likely to appeal to a different set of fantasies specific to women.”¹⁶ In the words of Heather Greene, “the witch archetype exists in two modes: one of oppression and one of empowerment,”¹⁷ as also demonstrated by *The Witch* and *Christmas Eve*.

In the specific case of early cinema, this dual interpretation depended on several interconnected aspects. During the first two decades of motion pictures recording experiments and filmmaking, the screenwriting process was reduced to composing a synopsis which would be featured in catalogues, for the use of the exhibitor. The defined role of a screenwriter did not exist. In order to give meaning to what was otherwise a bulk of short recordings, exhibitors employed film lecturers who would either expand the received synopsis into a film commentary during its projection or would take the freedom to improvise in the sense of emphasizing the astonishing experience of viewing at the expense of narrative content. As the American system of film production established the norms of the screenwriting process, the role of the film lecturer shifted to that of an external agent in charge with controlling the conveyance of a coherent complex narrative. This task turned out to be all the more difficult in the case of the cinema of reference, as the spectators often found early films echoing literary works as incomprehensible. The later resilience of the system of monstrative attractions in the paradigm of narration might partially be explained by an active role assumed by attractions to deliver to the audiences instances of visual gratification carved in the overall narrative. It was the case of *Christmas Eve*, breaking the narrative plot with genre attractional scenes, such as the one of the devil playing with the burning moon he had stolen from the sky.

Both cinematic portrayals, that of Rebecca and that of Solokha, depended on an intertextual reading on the part of the spectator, who was expected to be familiarized with the source materials and to simultaneously grasp particular feminist narrative nuances in the two characters. For the spectators uninitiated in the literary works of Sir Walter Scott or Nikolai

¹⁶ Tanya Krzywinska, *A Skin for Dancing In: Possession, Witchcraft and Voodoo in Film* (Wiltshire, UK: Flicks Books, 2000), 122.

¹⁷ Heather Greene, *Bell, Book and Camera*, 2.

Gogol, either of the two films would have brought to the screen a female figure already invested with certain features in tales and myths. The witches would have had to be powerful, dangerous, vengeful or deceitful. These attributes were contradicted by the wrongfully accused Rebecca and by the ludic Solokha. For the spectators even vaguely instructed with the referenced literary works, the two witches held the surprising ability of overthrowing gender prejudices as they influenced the destiny of the male characters from a position of power. Attraction and monstration completed the task of the lecturer in constructing two atypical witch characters, Rebecca as the socially rehabilitated innocent not marrying her defender and Solokha as the erotically reconverted positive force, within the cinema of reference or echoing it in the system of narrative integration.

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Delia Enyedi is Assistant Professor Ph.D. in the Cinematography and Media Department, Faculty of Theatre and Film, Babeş-Bolyai University, Romania. Her research interests include silent cinema history and aesthetics. She co-edited *Regards sur le mauvais spectateur/ Looking at the Bad Spectator* (2012) and is revising for publication her doctoral dissertation on Hungarian theatre and silent film artist Jenő Janovics.

