

Frighteningly female

Subversion of horror film tropes in Oz Perkins' Gretel & Hansel

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Abstract

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This essay aims to examine the portrayal of the reproductive and aging female body as horrific in Oz Perkins' *Gretel & Hansel* (2020). It proposes that the reinterpretation of the Grimm brothers' classical fairytale as a feminist coming of age story, centering Gretel as the protagonist and the witch as a mentor, allows for a subversion of horror film tropes pertaining to the reproductive female body. The essay identifies and discusses various tropes surrounding horrific renditions of women, focusing mainly on the figure of the European witch and the figure of the Mother, before giving an analysis of their appearance in *Gretel & Hansel* (2020).

Keywords: Feminism, horror, *Gretel & Hansel*, subversive, women

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1. Introduction

Women's bodies are a battleground that hosts many wars. Whether it be laws about reproductive rights, societal rules about how much of it can be shown or norms of attractiveness, it is under constant scrutiny. The scopophilic nature of film, with its dominating modes of sexualization and violation of the passive female body, arguably has a history of perpetuating patriarchal values that govern female experiences, as female bodies often only figure as tools aiding male stories (Mulvey, 2011). Although hegemonic cinema have taken several steps in the right direction, that of equality, the innate male perspective ingrained in the film medium itself has proven difficult to surpass. Horror film, a genre where 'the body' is an integral element in many ways, naturally precipitates the creation of a wide array of tropes pertaining to the female body. Whether it be as a screaming, bleeding victim or an abject horrific monster, the portrayals are often governed by society's patriarchal norms. The reproductive and aging female body in particular is frequently the source of horror and can be found in many horrific renditions. Horror film is a productive mode for exploring taboo or uncharted subjects and has the ability to convey lived experiences in an unbridled way. I will therefore be looking at how tropes depicting the female body as monstrous are used in Oz Perkins' *Gretel & Hansel* (2020) by drawing from Barbara Creed's ideas on the monstrous feminine and Erin Harrington's discussions on the cultural contexts surrounding the reproductive female body in horror.

1.1 Aim and Method

The aim of this essay is to examine horror film tropes that render the reproductive and aging female body horrific, by doing an in depth film analysis of Oz Perkins' *Gretel & Hansel* (2020). What horror film tropes pertaining to the female body can be seen in the film and how are they used? I propose that by refocusing the traditional narrative of Hansel and Gretel as a feminist coming of age story, centering Gretel as the protagonist and the witch as a mentor, traditional renditions of women as horrific are displayed, questioned and even subverted. I aim to examine the film's use of the reproductive and aging female body by focusing on two main tropes; that of 'the witch' and that of 'the mother'. What is rendered monstrous on screen often reflect societal attitudes and by examining the portrayals of the female body in *Gretel & Hansel* I aim to discuss deep running structures of patriarchal norms governing female existence and visibility. I work from a feminist

perspective and aim to analyze characterization as well as aesthetics by drawing from Barbara Creed and Erin Harrington, who are both substantial feminist voices within this field. Between them, Creed's *The Monstrous Feminine* (1993) and Harrington's *Women, monstrosity and horror film: Gynaehorror* (2018) make up an extensive vocabulary for discussing female tropes in horror film. As the dominating monstrosity in the film is 'the witch', I examine the onscreen as well as the real life history of this trope and phenomenon. When analyzing this aspect of the film I also rely on the perspectives on the European witch hunts as a result of the rise of agrarian capitalism, that Silvia Federici puts forth in *Witches, Witch-hunting and Women* (2018), as this will give context to the trope of the European witch.

1.2 Outline

I will begin by establishing the theoretical framework and source materials I will be using, as well as give a register of the tropes and conventions I will try to identify in *Gretel & Hansel* (2020). Since the monstrous in *Gretel & Hansel* mainly take the form of 'the witch', I provide a deeper perceptiveness on this figure, both with a historical context put forth by Silvia Federici and a summary of her status on screen. I will begin my analysis by establishing the film's setting within a patriarchal society, as this will aid my analysis further on. I have then divided my main analysis into two main tropes; 'the witch' and 'the mother'. In part 3.3 'The Witches' I identify three main representations of the witch; the beautiful child, Gretel and Holda. In part 3.4 'The Mothers' I identify three representations of the mother figure; Gretel and Hansel's mother, Gretel herself and Holda. I will then account for my conclusion and finally summarize my essay.

2. Theoretical Framework and Source Material

Academic contributions on the subject of the female body in horror are many. In *'Men, Women and Chainsaws - her body herself'* (2015) Carol J. Clover discusses the female body as a 'vehicle' for male sadomasochistic fantasies in slasher films. She places the slasher in the same lowbrow category as pornography, due to their excessive nature and position as scandalous in the eyes of critics and middle-class audiences (p.1). She identifies in the slasher film a 'final girl', a single female character who survives all the horrors inflicted on her by a killer brandishing a weapon of

phallic nature (p. 35-41). While all her sexually transgressive peers die one by one, her street smarts and 'tomboy' expression allows her to either escape or actively seek out and overpower the killer. Clover notes that gender operates like a 'penetrable membrane' that allows for men to identify with the screaming bleeding victim, a part usually reserved specifically for women (p. 46).

In '*Film Bodies: Gender, Genre, and Excess*' (1991) Linda Williams discusses the body in what she identifies as 'gross' genres, namely porn, horror and melodrama. The genres all relate in their excessive displays, of either sex, violence or emotion. She expands Carol Clover's ideas on the body as spectacle in horror and pornography to include melodrama, since they all similarly portray 'ecstasy' of the body; either through orgasm, terror or weeping. She also notes that while pornography is primarily aimed at active men, melodrama or 'weepies' aimed primarily at passive women and gory horror aimed at both sides on the scale of masculine and feminine adolescents, it is the bodies of women that embody these spectacles of pleasure, fear and pain (1991, p. 3, 4, 9).

Barbara Creed's book *The Monstrous-Feminine* (1993) emerge within a field still clasp to very gendered, and frankly sexist, notions of women's role in horror film. While Creed's focus pertains to women as monster, earlier writings focused predominantly on women as victim, with voices like Gérard Lenne even suggesting that the victim role is a good fit for women since it is more in line with women's 'natural role in life' (Creed, 1993, 'Introduction', Paragraph 7). Writings dealing with female monsters mostly did so dismissively in passing. Those who dealt with the subject more in depth tended to do so through a Freudian perspective that render women horrific because they are castrated. Creed, both drawing from and critiquing Freudian theory, challenges this and aforementioned views on women as victim by exemplifying the many horror films with monstrous depictions of women. Using Susan Laurie's writings on women that terrify as castrator, she suggests that horrific qualities in female monsters are almost always linked to her reproductive abilities and her sexuality. Monstrous roles for women are thus exemplified in regards to female sexuality as deadly 'femme castratrice' (castrating female), the castrating mother and the 'vagina dentata' (toothed vagina). Drawing from Julia Kristeva's notion of 'the abject' to convey what renders something horrific, Creed exemplifies monstrous roles in regards to female reproductivity as the archaic mother; the monstrous womb; the witch; the vampire; and the possessed woman. Kristeva's 'the abject' is that which transgress boundaries, for example the boundaries of the human body, rendering bodily fluids and abnormalities horrific. The female body is then in itself naturally abject, as it defies the normalcy of maleness and is abhorrently leaky per the menstrual cycle.

Kristeva defines the term 'abjection' as '[...] that which does not respect borders, positions, rules and that which disturbs identity, system, order' (Creed, 1993). Creed also presses the importance of religious discourse in relation to the horror film, as 'religious abominations' like sexual 'immorality', death and decay, and the feminine body are common themes in horrific renditions.

Creed brings forth an important 'female' aspect of psychoanalysis, where the woman is a force within her own right and not as a 'lacking' man or phallicised woman. However her theory seem to equate woman, female and feminine with reproductive and sexual qualities of the body. I therefor find it useful to widen my view point by incorporating an additional perspective on monstrous depictions of women, namely Erin Harrington's *Women, monstrosity and horror film - Gynaehorror* (2018). Akin to Creed, Harrington also delve into the realm of reproductive monstrosity in her book. She however positions psychoanalytic theories as one of many influential factor for cinematic portrayals of women, albeit not necessarily as an interpretive practice. In her book Harrington focuses on the many cultural, social, political and biomedical contexts surrounding what she identifies as 'gynaehorrors', horrors related to the reproductive female. She notes that biological factors have historically both shaped and suppressed lived experiences. Gynaecology for example, the study of the functions and diseases of the reproductive system, literally means the study of women (Harrington, 2018). I therefore find it important to acknowledge that for the purpose of this analysis I draw from Erin Harrington's angle on biological aspects as an organizing structure, which does not place 'woman' as a definition for the reproductive. This also coincides with the notion of equating all women with 'birthing mother', which I will elaborate further on in part 2.3 'The Mother'.

2.1 The Witch - Historical perspectives

The origins of the figure of the witch can be traced back to a myriad of religious and folkloric texts. One such account being the theological rendition of the creation of woman. While the Old testament depicts how God made both man and woman from the earth and in his own image, this original woman is nowhere to be seen in the rest of the text. In the *Alphabet of Ben Sira*, a divisive Hebrew scripture or possibly rabbinic parody from around the eight century, the mysterious missing first wife of Adam is said to be Lilith (Faxneld, 2017). The Hebrew text depicts how God created Lilith, who fled the garden of eden after having refused to subordinate herself to Adam by laying beneath

him during intercourse. When God sent angels to bring her back and threatened to drown her if she refused, she insisted that she was created to stay by the red sea and cause sickness in children. A later version of the text contains an addition where Lilith is said to have conjugated with 'the great demon', as an explanation for God's powerlessness in the face of Lilith's insubordination. After Lilith's departure God created Eve from Adam's rib, and in doing so restored the God intended balance and primacy of man. Eve herself was later chastised for stepping out of line when she took a bite from the apple that gave her the same knowledge of good and evil as God (Faxneld, 2017). In fifteenth century Judeo-Christian society the witch, like Lilith and Eve, was a woman who disrupted the balance of the great chain of being, where every being on earth had a natural place within an immovable hierarchy. The chain and social order was thus dependent on women complying with patriarchal ideas of womanhood. The fifteen century view originating in Genesis 3 with Eve and Lillith, insinuating that women are naturally always at fault, either by being weak and naive enough to be swayed by the devil or by actively straying from patriarchal norms of womanhood, sanctioned a demonization of women (Faxneld, 2017). Women thus seem to hold a sort of dichotomy of being 'damned if they do and damned if they don't'.

In her book *Witches, Witch-hunting and Women* (2018) Silvia Federici proposes that the root of the witch hunts lie in these religious modes as well as the rise of agrarian capitalism. Privatization and enclosing of communal land in England during the fifteenth and sixteenth century saw the eviction of farmers reliant on the land create immense polarization and poverty. Older women, especially widows and the childless, were greatly affected as this left them without the means of survival that had perviously been provided by the manorial system. Many of the accusations towards supposed 'witches' detailed harm done to the 'victims' assets, such as disease in cattle or crops, which coincided with an understandable animosity the poor might harbor. However the women accused were primarily the ones who actively opposed their abjection. Federici writes;

To the economic factors that are in the background of witchcraft accusation we must add the increasingly misogynous institutional policy that confined women to a subordinate social position with respect to men and severely punished any assertion of independence on their part and any sexual transgression as a subversion of the social order (2018, ch. 3, Paragraph 9).

She notes that female sexuality posed a threat to clerical patriarchal authority, who in turn saw it fit to declare women 'the devils instrument' as an explanation for their own weakness and desires. *The Malleus Maleficarum* (Kramer & Sprenger, 1484) for example, the witch hunters handbook of choice commissioned by the Catholic church, is rife with misogynistic reasons to why primarily women are prone to witchcraft. 'What else is woman but a foe to friendship, an unescapable punishment, a necessary evil, a natural temptation, a desirable calamity, a domestic danger, a delectable detriment, an evil of nature, painted with fair colours!' (Kramer & Sprenger in Creed, 1993, ch. 6, Paragraph 6). The bourgeoisie and rising capitalist power in turn perpetuated this sentiment and condemned female sexuality as only acceptable for procreative purposes and male (marital) satisfaction. Capitalist society thus placed women in the home, where her utilitarian use was unpaid domestic work and 'production' of 'waged/male workers' (Federici, 2018). Martin Luther, the German priest noted as initiating the Protestant reformation, supposedly declared 'Let them bear children to death', as he saw procreation as women's primary purpose in life (Federici, 2018). Federici notes; 'The witch hunts were the means by which women in Europe were educated about their new social tasks [...]' (2018, ch. 4, Paragraph 20). Many women were healers, such as midwives, with knowledge of plants and herbs, which in turn might have been interpreted as magical powers. This made them popular within their communities and consequently threatening to the ruling power. The persecution of women as witches thus aided in suppressing the female powers posing a threat to both religious patriarchal reign and the new modes of capitalism. It allowed the reign to curb both the insubordinate trying to tare down capitalist fencing and generational transfer of female 'magical' knowledge, as well as impose a new social order (Federici, 2018). Despite the documented misogyny behind the witch figure, her iconography is still very much perpetuated. Apart from her unquestionable position as female monstrosity in horror and classic "bad-gal" in many other genres, stereotypical images of the witch adorns souvenirs sold at former witch-hunt execution sites that are presently used as tourist attractions. This in combination with the fact that few governments, nor the church, has officially denounced the witch-hunts makes for a dangerous perpetuation of a fabricated history and toxic ideology (Federici, 2018). Women are still being murdered under the guise of witch accusations, with more than five thousand women a year being executed by methods such as being burned alive in Tanzania alone (Federici, 2018).

2.2 The Witch on Screen

The witch is frequently used as a representation of female monstrosity in horror films. Despite the current stream of proclaimed 'feminist witch narratives', such as Robert Eggers *The Witch* (2015) and *American Horror Story's* third season *Coven* (2011), her sinister connotations seem difficult to surpass. The witch on screen is usually a dichotomy of the light and bright 'good witch' and the dark 'bad witch', like Glinda and the wicked witch of the west in *The Wizard of Oz* (Victor Fleming, 1939). The bad witches evil is usually visually represented by ugliness, deformity or old age. Their evil intentions and in turn ugliness is often magically disguised by youth and beauty, like in *The Witches* (Nicolas Roeg, 1990) or *Stardust* (Matthew Vaughn, 2007). The notion of ugly equates evil is a persistent theme accompanying most witchy renditions, none the least in the aforementioned examples. The wicked witch's green skin and pointy nose is a stark contrast to Glinda's fairy like features and the creature behind the skin of Angelica Huston's 'Miss Ernst' is nothing short of repulsing. Embedded in the evil/ugly trope is also the notion of old equates ugly, as many of the unattractive features of an evil witch is that of aging women. In *Stardust* (2007) Michelle Pfeiffer's 'Lamia' is turned young by the help of stardust. Every time she uses the magic for other purposes however, the illusion drops slightly. An attempt to fix her progressively sagging face thus results in a comical drooping of her breasts. Unattractive features, decay and old age likewise accompanies the witch in horror films. In Luca Guadagnino's *Suspiria* (2018) the aging body of 'Mother Marcos', the corrupt and evil leader of a coven run dance academy, is covered with sagging, scarred and rotting skin. In the end Marcos is defeated by the young and beautiful protagonist and 'good witch' Suzy. The archetypical witch with rotting teeth, big crooked nose and decaying skin can be seen in countless horror films, like Sam Rami's *The Evil Dead* (1981) and *Drag Me to Hell* (2009) or Tommy Wirkola's action spin on the Hansel and Gretel saga; *Hansel & Gretel: Witch Hunters* (2013). The religious notion of witches as a threat to children (Faxneld, 2017) often accompanies the character on screen as well. Nicolas Roeg's *The Witches* (1990) revolves around a group of child hating witches aiming to spike candy with a potion that will turn all the worlds children into mice. In *The Witch* (Robbert Eggers, 2015), the protagonist family's infant boy gets taken and suffer a horrific fate at the hands of a witch in the nearby forrest. The tale of Hansel & Gretel and all its renditions is of course also a prime example of this, with the titular children being lured into the home of a witch that is intent on cooking and eat them.

Barbara Creed places emphasis on the witch's power in correlation with menstruation. She notes that the abject figure of the witch is an 'implacable enemy of the symbolic order' with evil powers that are 'a natural part of her feminine nature' (1993, ch.6, Paragraph 7), like her mysterious and exclusive ability to create new life. She notes that originally witches terrified not as 'agents of the devil' but as holders of great magic, believed to be the most powerful during pregnancy. She thus identifies a link between menarche and a gaining of magical powers which she exemplifies with Brian De Palma's *Carrie* (1978). The film's titular character is a shy and timid teenage girl, suppressed by her religious mother and bullied by her high school peers. The film starts with her menarche and ends with a horrific demonstration of all her power as she wreaks havoc and vengeance on her bullies. Creed also notes the connection between witches and many specifically abject things such as decay, cannibalism and last but not least; corpses.

2.3 The Mother

The Mother holds a very special place amongst feminine monstrosities. Creed discusses both the 'Archaic Mother' and the 'semiotic' mother. The archaic mother, based on the mythological view of 'woman as sole origin to all life' once hailed as something great, 'mother earth' if you will, is rendered abominable in relation to the phallogocentric order. The awesome power of this 'mother', reconstructed as 'other' to man, then becomes threatening; '[...]one associated with the dread of the generative mother seen only as the abyss, the all-incorporating black hole which threatens to reabsorb what it once birthed.' (Creed 1993, ch. 2, 'The Archaic Mother', Paragraph 7). Creed exemplifies the 'Archaic mother' with Ridley Scott's *Alien* (1979) where the titular alien represents the castrating cannibalistic mother obliterating her 'children' with big, razor sharp teeth representing 'vagina dentata', while the protagonist 'Ripley' (Sigourney Weaver) represents the fetishized, comforting and acceptable mother.

The 'semiotic' mother is in psychoanalytical terms always represented in relation to the father as; 'An opposition is drawn between the impure fertile (female) body and pure speech associated with the symbolic (male) body.' (Creed 1993, Ch.2, 'The Archaic Mother', Paragraph 4). The reproductive female body is thus rendered abject to 'subordinate maternal power to [male] symbolic law' (Creed 1993, ch. 2, Paragraph 3). The mother herself becomes abject in her relation to her child, as the child functions to authenticate her in the phallogocentric symbolic realm. The child thus

becomes a validation for her existence and the mother must then cling to her child as not to become an abject (Creed, 1993). A good, albeit slightly on the nose example, is the gory finale in Peter Jackson's horror comedy *Braindead* (1992), where the protagonists' overbearing zombified mother rises from the earth and drags him back into her swollen belly that closes like two giant jaws around him. The overbearing mother refusing to let her child become an independent person is present in a myriad of horror classics like *Psycho* (1960) and *Carrie* (1976) as well as in contemporary films like Aneesh Chaganty's *Run* (2020). In *Run* the 'smothering' takes the form of Munchhausen by proxy, a diagnosis where the caregiver, often a parent, consciously causes illness in their child which they can subsequently give/seek treatment for (<https://mesh.kib.ki.se>, Retrieved 9 March 2022). Whereas the archaic mother exists beyond the patriarchal symbolic sphere as the 'subject of narrativity', for example in the Native American creation myth of The Spider Woman who knows the secret to the universe, the 'semiotic' mother becomes 'the object of the narrative of the male hero' (Creed 1993, ch.2, 'The Archaic Mother', Paragraph 7). Creed identifies the 'semiotic' mother within psychoanalytical theory as 'The Sphinx', a mythological figure who, like The Spider Woman, knows the secret to the universe but who will destroy herself after 'the hero' has solved her riddle.

Erin Harrington similarly identifies a psychoanalytic view on motherhood as the basis for many horror renditions. Both in films building on the sentiment of bad mothering as a catalyst for mental illness in the child, like *Psycho* (1960) or *Scream* (1996), and in the dichotomy of 'bad' versus 'good' mothering. However she contests that psychoanalytic theory is then the only way to analyze these aspects in horror film as '[...] it is important to consider the way that psychoanalysis, as a discourse and an organising structure, not an interpretive practice, has been recirculated in the popular imagination [...]' (Harrington 2017, ch.4, 'Psychoanalytical Discourses of Motherhood', Paragraph 5). Harrington also draws from *Motherhood and Representation: the Mother in Popular Culture and Melodrama* (1992) where E. Ann Kaplan notes how the image of an 'ideal angel mother and a 'bad witch mother' have been manifested in 'myths, images and representations' through 'prevailing cultural discourses' and how 'fictional mother-representations are produced through the tensions between historical and psychoanalytic spheres' (Kaplan in Harrington 2018, ch.4, 'Psychoanalytical Discourses of Motherhood', paragraph 1). Harrington thus steps away from Creed's notion of the monstrous feminine and mother as abject and instead focuses on '[...]the contradiction whereby motherhood, as something that is coded as feminine, embodied and Other, serves to prop up patriarchal systems of knowledge and power [...]' and that horror films relating

to the maternal '[...] suggest, insidiously, that there is something utterly and inescapably horrific about the psychological, emotional and cultural demands of motherhood that compels women in these narratives towards monstrosity and acts of evil' (Harrington 2017, ch.4, Paragraph 10). She counters the idea of monstrosity as something embedded in motherhood itself and instead proposes that it is the demands of being a mother that drives one towards acts of evil and monstrosity. Harrington uses Jennifer Kent's *The Babadook* (2014) as an example. The film centers around Amelia, a mother struggling with grief and depression in the wake of her husband's death, and her son Samuel who was born on the night of the husband's fatal car crash. The little family is plagued by an uncanny storybook monster and it soon becomes clear that the mysterious figure is a projection of all Amelia's grief and resentment. She struggles with raising and loving her son, who lived while her husband died. In her callous treatment of her son she becomes the film's actual monster and as Harrington puts it; '[...] places him in the very danger from which she is meant to protect him; indeed, she is the greatest danger to her son.' (Harrington 2017, ch. 4, Paragraph 1).

Harrington also discusses feminist philosopher Patrice DiQuinzio's book *The Impossibility of Motherhood: Feminism, Individualism and the Problem of Mothering* (1999), wherein she notes that motherhood is constructed as both 'inevitable and natural'. Motherhood as an obvious part of a woman's life is thus not only motivated by biological aspects but also by emotional and psychological aptitude. Parenthood thus; 'requires women's exclusive and selfless attention to and care of children based on women's psychological and emotional capacities for empathy, awareness of the needs of others, and self-sacrifice.' (DiQuinzio in Harrington 2017, ch.4, 'Essential and Ideal Motherhood', Paragraph 5). Cultural notions of motherhood as irrevocably embedded in womanhood thus both places unjust demands on all women and actively excludes those without reproductive abilities.

3. Analysis

3.1 Plot summary

Figuring more like a coming of age story than The Grimm Brothers' original saga, the film centers Gretel (Sophia Lillis) as the protagonist faced with fending for herself and her brother Hansel (Samuel Leakey) after being chased away from home by their ax-wielding mother. Aptly mirrored

in the films gloomy visuals, the story takes place within a dark and dreary world of famine and disease similar to the original sagas medieval setting. The film starts with a intradiegetic fairytale, told through a narration by the yet to be seen witch. The story is about a beautiful child in a pink hat who is saved by an enchantress when she falls terminally ill. However as the enchantress removes the illness she leaves some of her own dark powers behind. The child grows up with powers of her own, which she uses for evil. After she kills her own father, she is returned to the enchantress and left in the woods. Tasked with trying to find work and housing Gretel and Hansel head through the woods where a delicious smell draw them into a black, triangle shaped cottage. The house belongs to an old woman named Holda (Alice Krige), who offers them food and housing in return for domestic help. While Gretel bonds easily with Holda, who helps Gretel develop the same magical powers she possesses, Hansel feels weary in Holda's matriarchal domain. Gretel is visited nightly by nightmares of children and hidden rooms in the cabin and it turns out that Holda has been making all of the delicious food they have been eating out of children's rotting body parts. She was in fact the beautiful child from the fairytale's mother. After the child killed her father and was left in the woods, she began beckoning Holda to give in to her own dark powers. Holda embraced her powers and in doing so rid herself of her biggest weaknesses, her children, by eating them. To grow her powers Gretel now has to rid herself of her biggest weakness too; Hansel. Gretel refused and uses her powers to kill Holda instead. The film ends as Gretel sends Hansel away safely, to find his own way in the world, while she stays in the cabin where she aims to cultivate her powers to be used for good. However in the films final scene, Gretel sees her fingers turning black, just like Holdas.

3.2 Patriarchal structures

Early on in the film we are made aware of how its story world, much like our own, holds dominating patriarchal conventions. In the films opening scenes, as we are introduced to the fairytale of the beautiful child, we are shown how her father seeks out an enchantress to help save her from a terrible disease. The enchantress is shown sitting atop mountain inside a big, sky-facing triangle. Although the triangle holds a lot of symbolism related to witchcraft, the enlightened and divine, it also symbolizes male power. "The blade", an upwards facing triangle and the opposite of the female downwards facing "chalice", is the symbol for male force and dominance (Chwalkowski, 2016). With regards to the film's mindful use of tropes and feminist themes, I

propose that this is a conscious choice to show that despite all her power, the enchantress is still existing within a male dominated society. Her branding as 'witch' is one forged in patriarchal ideas of womanhood. Further connection between the triangle and its patriarchal connotation, reinforcing this idea, can be seen in the film's next scene. This scene shows Gretel and Hansel heading to Master Stripp's house, where Gretel is to apply for a housekeeping job. As the two are standing in front of the gates of Master Stripp's house, two flanking woodpiles together with a dormer window create a big triangle around the entrance to the courtyard. As Gretel heads towards the house, she walks into the triangle, into the patriarchal lordship of Master Stripp. Well into the house Gretel is seen sitting opposite Stripp as if she is being interviewed. However it quickly becomes clear that the job on offer is not one related to household chores and that instead Stripp hosts a brothel. As Stripp speaks of "the incompetence of men" being to blame for their society's current state and Gretel offers her own critique of the hierarchies of feudal reign, the man abruptly stops her and instead asks her to call him M'lord, reminding her of her own status beneath him in the hierarchy. Stripp dismisses Gretel's claims of domestic proficiency and instead eagerly asks if she is "intact" (a virgin). There is then a cut to Gretel walking angrily in the rain as her voice-over asks if she would have felt better if she had slapped him. As she returns home her mother asks if it would have killed her to simply smile at him.

The scene at Master Stripp's house situates the story within a society that resembles the sixteenth century Europe Silvia Federici discusses in *Witches, Witch-hunting and Women* (2018). It anchors a deeper perspective on the 'woman as witch', as it connotes her heritage and lived experiences. The film establishes the biases and limited possibilities for women that both created and was created by agrarian capitalism and in turn witch hunts. By directly situating the Grimm brothers saga within the context of the European witch hunts, it indirectly acknowledges that 'witch' is not only an onscreen monstrosity but also a real life phenomenon with gruesome consequences for women. The scene also establishes that much like the enchantress, Gretel's life is also dictated by the conditions of men. This can further be seen in the scene where the woodsman, after having rescued and fed Gretel and Hansel and thus having proven himself a "good guy", offers to direct them to other woodsmen who can give them work and housing. While the job as woodsman is readily available for Hansel, Gretel will only be offered cooking and gardening work if the men there don't find "better use of her", the implication being that the job available is much the same as the one offered by Master Stripp.

The aspect of dependency and female vulnerability in regards to power structures is poignantly relevant in regards to the film's 2020 release year, with the 'Me too' movement recent exposure of the film industry's hierarchy as a prime location for sexual predators. Gretel's situation as a woman in need of work to provide for both herself and her family leaves her in a position of dependency, which is readily taken advantage of by the men in power. It is not difficult to see the resemblance between women in the film industry having to sacrifice themselves to the desires of men in power in order to be able to keep on working and Gretel's situation with Master Stripp. Much like society's patriarchal structures enables men in high positions within the film industry to abuse their power, so does the patriarchal world within *Gretel & Hansel* dictate Gretel's life and opportunities. However by telling the story from Gretel's perspective, the film is able to convey a patriarchal world without applying patriarchal tools. The intradiegetic sexualization of Gretel is shown without actually sexualizing Gretel. Her perspective and in turn actual lived female experiences with patriarchal hierarchies are told without perpetuating tropes and stigmas that stem from that same hierarchy. While other characters sexualize Gretel, the camera itself never does. For example when Gretel takes a bath, a scene which in horror film often equates female nudity and particularly sexualizing compositions, she is submerged up to her neck in milky white water that hides her body. When she pokes her legs above the water it is to inspect the cuts and bruises she has sustained.

While Gretel is presented as oppositional in regards to patriarchal structures, Hansel is represented as a product of patriarchal values. Throughout the film Hansel's comments indicate socially learned micro misogyny that, albeit not being with malicious intent, emphasize Gretel and Holda's conditions. For example his snickering at the nakedness of a queen chess-piece.

By establishing the story world's patriarchal order with subtle nods like the triangles, concrete situations like with Master Stripp and links to the real life history of 'the witch', the film is able to convey the protagonist's experiences without perpetuating the very same ideals it is exemplifying. It is this foundation that allows the film to subvert stereotypical portrayals of women and that I will carry with me as a basis throughout this analysis.

3.3 The Witches

The main source of horror in *Gretel & Hansel* comes from the witch character. The film displays a sort of lineage of women, who after they come in contact inherit a dark power. The lineage begins with the sorceress in the fairytale, who gives her power to the beautiful child. The beautiful child in turn awakens the powers within her mother, who is later revealed to be Holda. Lastly Holda rouses the powers within Gretel. The beautiful child is presented as the main threat in a large part of the film. Her story is a cautionary tale for children. She is capable of coldly killing both animals as well as committing patricide. She kills her father by forcing him to drive a smoldering iron rod down his own throat. Barbara Creed notes that; 'When male bodies become grotesque, they tend to take on characteristics associated with female bodies; in this instance man's body becomes grotesque because it is capable of being penetrated.' (Creed 1993, ch.2, Paragraph 8). The father's death by 'phallic penetration', in combination with the emphasis of the child's beauty and girly pink femininity, seem poignantly relevant to the film's themes of feminist rebellion against patriarchal values as well as its conscious displays of female monsters. The beautiful child appears as a threatening reminder, as silhouettes in the woods or as prophetic warnings in Gretel's dreams, through most part of the film. There is however a shift in one of Gretel's dreams. In the dream Gretel follows the beautiful child through a cottage. She enters a room where the child with her pink hat sits in a corner. As she cautiously approaches the child we see a mirror behind her. Inside the mirror we see children banging on the glass, as if they are trapped inside. The beautiful child coos: 'oh what a pretty bird am I' and when Gretel reaches her hand towards her and touches her shoulder her head slides off. The scene references another of The Grimm brothers' fairytales; 'The Juniper Tree'. In the story a stepmother chops the head of her stepson. Scared of the repercussions of what she has done, she ties the head back on the child's body and puts him outside. She then tells her daughter to slap her stepbrother if he does not answer her when she speaks to him. When the daughter slaps him his head falls off. The stepmother convinces the daughter that the only thing they can do is to cook and eat him. When the boy's father comes home he eats the entire stew, unknowing of its content, and leaves the remaining bones in a pile. The daughter takes the bones and buries them in the garden. The boy then turns into a bird and flies away. The bird flies through town and proceeds to sing; 'My mother she butchered me, My father he ate me, My sister, little Ann Marie, She gathered up the bones of me And tied them in a silken cloth To lay under the juniper. Tweet twee, what a pretty bird am I!'. In Gretel's dream a similar song can be heard in the background; 'My mother, she killed me, my father, he ate me, and my little sister, my bones she

kept, what a pretty bird am I!'. 'The Juniper Tree' and in turn this dream sequence thus shifts the focus to another threat; the cannibalistic parent, which I will examine further in part 3.4 'The Mothers'.

Gretel & Hansel is very much Gretel's story, reflected in the least by the switching of names in the title. The film can easily be described as a coming of age story, about a young woman faced with the intricacies of maturing as well as navigating the world around her. She is the hero and not 'damsel in distress' needing to be saved. She is however also a subversive villain. Gretel is at the cusp of 'horrification'; she is a young woman, just about sexually mature and soon to reach menarche. In regards to the aforementioned aspects put forth by Federici in *Witches, Witch-hunting and Women* (2018), Gretel's behavior could most certainly have left her with accusations of witchcraft. Her gaining of a 'fertile power' that threatens religious patriarchal reign and a visible tendency of insubordination in the face of capitalist patriarchal structures, like the Master Stripp scene shows, puts Gretel as a direct threat within the film's presumed sixteenth century European setting and her depiction in line with the construction of the figure of the European witch. She also ticks boxes for onscreen monstrosity. Gretel gains actual magical powers, that emerge with the onset of her period. Holda who senses the same power in Gretel as herself, gives her a tonic to awaken those powers within. During the night Gretel dreams about an underground room with three corpses lying under a sheet on a table. As she begins to pull at the sheet a filthy dark stain appears to spread across the fabric. She awakens startled and discovers that her sheets are stained with period blood. She takes the sheets to the river to wash them. In 'The Monstrous-Feminine' (1993) Barbara Creed notes that in some cultures prophetic dreams in combination with the onset of menarche was regularly attributed as signs of the person being a future witch. As previously noted menarche as a catalyst for the gaining of special powers is a common phenomenon in horror film. The most overt example being Brian De Palma's adaption of Stephen King's *Carrie* (1976). The film's famous first scene shows Carrie in the locker room showers. The flagrant sexualization, set to sombre flute music, is abruptly cut short by the appearance of period blood. The blood and the abjectness of the bleeding female body itself both reveal a change into something powerful and in turn something monstrous. Gretel's experience with her first period is if not relatable at least classic, with the staining of white sheets with red blood that usually leaves the girl embarrassed at her body's uncontrolled leakiness. Gretel however seem unbothered by the incident. The menarche in *Carrie* is treated as an abomination by both Carrie's peers as they taunt her for it, and her mother who attribute religious sin to its sexual connotations. Carrie herself is not even aware of the menstrual

cycles existence and at first believes that she is wounded, due to her upbringing and her mothers religious beliefs. In contrast Gretel's period is ushered on by Holda, who knows that menarche is the onset of her powers awakening. However the dark stain that oozes from the corpses in the dream she has the night after drinking the potion, also connotes the onset of her period with danger. She is becoming a dangerous being, something monstrous. Barbara Creed notes that in *Carrie*; '[...] women's blood and pig's blood flow together, signifying horror, shame and humiliation.' (1993, ch 1, 'Abjection and the Horror Film', Paragraph 8). In *Gretel & Hansel* femininity and menstruation signifies danger instead of shame. The crimson red of blood colors the film throughout whenever there is danger. For example the red smoke that billows out of the chimney as the witch eats her children, the red of the poisonous mushrooms in the forrest and the surreal images of the beautiful child in the pink hat being backlit by red lights. Gretel is thus portrayed in connection to elements that render woman monstrous. The film shows the perspective of Gretel as an abject being, without using her as a scare element. Holda helps Gretel with her personal growth and implies that she should get rid of Hansel as he is holding her back for her true potential. Hansel is portrayed as a product of patriarchy, both in his expressions of learned misogyny and as a dependent child that projects Gretel as a mother. When Hansel protests at Gretel's kinship with Holda and reminds her of the story of the beautiful child Gretel snaps back; 'Fall quiet, boy. For I shall make my own story', before brusquely marching him out into the woods and leaving him there, much like Holda did to her daughter. In the end however Gretel does not adhere to Holda's complete aversion to the female 'caretaking role'. She chooses to save Hansel and kill her mentor. She believed that there is a less radical way of cultivating her powers. They can both live in harmony, separately. This is however still a refusal of the phallogentric notion of women as natural 'fecund and emotional' mother, as she stops being a mother figure to Hansel. Gretel thus figure as a woman who exist for her own benefit, a creator of meaning, a narrative protagonist who takes up meaningful space outside the phallogentric symbolic order. Despite her active aversion to the cannibalistic 'bad witch mother' role, the same black mark that Holda has emerges on Gretel's fingers. Even though she chooses the 'good path', she still wears the mark of the 'bad witch'. Her powers, and in turn femininity, already brands her as dangerous in the eyes of patriarchal society. She is a woman stepping out of her patriarchally ordained role and therefore she is dangerous.

The films 'original witch' and actual threat is Holda. After Gretel and Hansel gets invited into the home of the kindly old woman, whom we may recognize as the original sagas infamous child eater, it quickly becomes clear that she is not your ordinary fairytale witch. From the outset Holda is

shown not obeying the conventions of their patriarchal society. She sneers at being married; 'Mrs!? See a ball and chain at my foot', opposes the institutional church as; 'the convent is hardly a place for a girl with action in her bones' and consistently snaps back at Hansel's socially learned misogyny. As Hansel dismisses Gretel's preference for vegetables over meat Holda notes that; 'She'll grow strong enough, just as the ox with his vegetable-made bones pulls the cart and the fat man who sits atop it'. As Gretel and Hansel plays chess and Hansel snicker at the queen piece that is naked, Holda notes that; 'the king is afraid, as he should be because the queen can do whatever she wants'. When Holda announces that it is going to rain Hansel protest and says that he knows what rainclouds look like and that there were no such clouds in the sky. Gretel scolds him for being rude and moments later the rain can be heard clattering against the roof. When Hansel asks how Holda knew it would rain she simply answers that 'women often know things they're not supposed to'. Holda stands out in other aspects as well. A major witchy film trope is the ugly old witch that disguises herself as a young and often beautiful woman. The best example perhaps being Robert Eggers' *The Witch* (2015), which upon its release received rave reviews and was dubbed the spearhead of feminist witch narratives (Hadsell, 2020). Although the film showcases a young woman named Thomasin who finds the freedom she lacked within her deeply puritanian family and society once she joins a coven, the ugly/old equates evil trope is still very much present. The family's infant boy is taken by a witch who roams the woods behind their house. In the film's most gruesome scene, the witch grinds the baby into mush in a mortar and proceeds to smear her body and her staff with the freshly made baby salve. While committing this horrific act the woman's body is old and grotesque, and the scenes horror seem to emanate from the old woman's nakedness. However at the films ambiguously happy ending, when Thomasin finds her freedom and new family at a sabbath deep in the woods, all the witches are young and normatively attractive. Even more poignant is the scene where the witch in the woods disguises herself as a young voluptuous woman in order to lure the family's oldest boy into her lair. As she bends down to kiss him, a wrinkly old hand grabs the back of his head roughly, revealing her true form. In *Gretel & Hansel* Holda is instead a young woman disguised as an old. She notes that she has taken her disguise as to seem 'kind and weak'. In her younger woman form she represent the epitome of threat towards male primacy and "the great chain". She is sexually mature, yet chooses to live alone and unwed. She is fertile and able to carry children but instead she is the destroyer of children, an anti-mother. She hold a power, that is both different and greater than the power men hold. This is aptly shown in the contrast between Hansel's frustrate chopping at trees to no avail and Gretel's inherited ability to make them bend down to her.

3.4 The Mothers

Another central source of horror in *Gretel & Hansel* is derived from the mother figure. I identify three characters represented as 'mother'; the 'bad' mother to Gretel and Hansel, Gretel who in the film is represented as a mother figure to Hansel and the abject cannibalistic mother Holda. Gretel and Hansel's mother, named simply 'mother' in the credits, appears only once in the film. Much like in the original saga the family has fallen on hard times and 'mother' cannot provide for her family. As the children return from Master Stripp where Gretel failed to attain a job, 'mother' who is seemingly both apathetic and deranged tells Gretel that she must take her brother and go or else they might as well start to dig their own graves. The two of them sit at the end of a table in a large dimly lit room as 'Mother' tells Gretel in a small mellifluous voice to; 'please dig a grave for mommy to'. 'Mother' sneaks out of frame as Gretel sits visibly distraught in her chair, only to return slamming an ax into the table top. She screams at Gretel to leave or else she will 'hack her up into tiny little pieces'. 'Mother's actions establish the mother figures position as dangerous, she imposes danger instead of protecting. They also work to transfers the responsibility of mothering Hansel to Gretel.

The second representation of 'mother' is Gretel. In contrast to the other mothers of the film, she performs as a 'good mother'. She takes care of Hansel, hushes him when he is rude, assures him when he is upset and tries to save him when he is in harms way. Just as Gretel's menarche represents her horrification and onset of powers, it also positions her as a reproductive being and possible mother. After the onset of her period as she goes to the river to wash her sheets, she sees dolls and toys as she hears children's cooing. While 'child-related objects' figure in several scenes, mostly as red flags for Gretel and Hansel to hint at the intentions of their hostess, this scene instead seem to indicate the inevitability of motherhood imposed on Gretel. As a reproductive woman she is expected to be a mother to Hansel and to selflessly abandon her own prosperity. As mentioned in part 3.3 'The Witches', Holda urges Gretel to reject this patriarchal bind and rebel against this notion by eating this imposed weakness. While Gretel refuses Holda's extreme stance, she still rebels against her imposed position by sending Hansel away and thus 'earns' the 'bad mother witch' mark of darkened fingers.

Holda is the films main source of horror, she is depicted as both archaic cannibalistic mother and witch. Her maternal role becomes apparent at the end, as she is revealed to be the beautiful child in

the pink hat's mother. The fairytale of the beautiful child opens the narrative of the film and permeates it throughout. The child, visible as silhouettes in the forest or in Gretel's nightmares, seem to be the danger imposed on Gretel and Hansel until Holda's true intentions are revealed. Although she is not depicted as 'mother of all', she unquestionably has an 'archaic' dimension, none the least in her depiction as cannibalistic. As Gretel confronts Holda about what she has done to Hansel, Holda reveals the real story about the beautiful child. It becomes clear that not only is she the child's mother, she has the same dark powers as her. To cultivate those powers she ate her remaining children, as they were her greatest weakness. Holda is thus literally a cannibalistic mother. In the scene where she tells Gretel the true story of the beautiful child, Holda picks up a greasy piece of what looks like 'pigs in a blanket' and bites into it viciously. She then proceeds to pull a lock of hair from her mouth. The lock of hair, bow still attached, appears like a receipt on what has been birthed and consumed. Holda has not only consumed her own children, but has based her entire diet on child meat. The always ready banquet of food that never goes bad, she conjures up from rotting produce and parts of children's corpses. In a scene where Gretel has discovered a big chamber beneath Holda's house, Gretel hides in the corner and watches as Holda dumps a bucket of rotting guts onto a table. Children's screams can be heard as she picks up a severed and decaying baby arm from a barrel. She places the arm in the pile on the table. As she transform the guts into food, the baby arm turns into a roasted pig. Hints to children as pigs and food are present throughout the film, none the least in the 'pig in a blanket' Holda eats in front of Gretel. When the sibling's mother throws them out of their house Gretel's voice over tells us that; 'the big bad world opened up in front of them like a terrible mouth'. Gretel and Hansel refer to each other as pigs and on several occasions perform what seems like a sort of sibling ritual where they stand forehead to forehead and grunt like pigs. This is also echoed by their mother, who before chasing them from their house puts her head against Gretel's and oinks. Even Holda oinks at the siblings at one point in the film. The children are thus presented as food throughout the film, as Holda insidiously notes; 'The air is swirling with abundance. One need only reach out and pluck it.'

Holda is undoubtedly portrayed as the film's horrifying monster. She is classically represented as abject, through witchcraft, bad mothering, cannibalism, death and decay. Although her aged disguise is far from the caricaturesque portrayals in *Drag Me to Hell* (2009) or *The Evil Dead* (1981), some of Alice Krige's facial features are highlighted for a more sinister effect. For example the deep lines around her wide mouth and the black discoloration around the teeth and gums. As mentioned above Holda's abjectness is also paired with what might be interpreted as an expressed

feminism and disdain for the patriarchy. Her abject abandon of the capitalist patriarchal status as housebound, self-sacrificing procreator, imposed during the sixteenth century (Federici, 2018), links her both to the branding as witch and puts her in a similar position as Amelia in *The Babadook* (2014). Much like Amelia Holda resents her child for the death of her husband. Holda does not adhere to her role as mother and unable to love her daughter abandons her in the woods. Proclaiming her children as her weakness, the manifestation of her failure at mothering, she takes up the roles as inevitably monstrous. Children as Holda's weakness thus reflect the oppressive bind equating woman with mother. By eating children Holda eats that which oppresses her. Her actions seem to say 'you branded me as a monster, now watch me be monstrous'. Her actions seem to rebel against the very idea of motherhood as inherently monstrous, that consequently brand women as monstrous since motherhood is culturally embedded in femininity.

3.5 Conclusion

Gretel & Hansel (2020) showcases several classical horror film tropes that render women monstrous. The witch figure is the film's main scare element and defines most of the female characters in the film. Gretel, although not used as a scare element, attains magical powers with the onset of her period in classical witch-style. Her mentor Holda is the film's main horrifying monster with her sweetly malicious appearance and affinity for child-meat. The mother figure also takes up a malevolent place in the film, from the heartless mother of Gretel and Hansel who evicts them in the beginning, to the all-end-all cannibalistic mother Holda. There is however a consciousness behind these displays. The film's establishing of patriarchal structures as a hurdle for the female protagonist, avoidance of sexualizing compositions and feminist undertones creates a foundation that helps to acknowledge the tropes and allows them to be questioned. Holda is represented as candidly anti-patriarchal, actively rejecting her 'god-given' role in the great chain and the constraints imposed on her as a woman. Her actions of eating children, albeit maybe a bit over the top, are thus represented as a reaction to an oppression of the antagonist herself, and not simply a chaotic evil in itself. This theme is supported by Gretel's 'horrific characteristics', that never render her scary but instead make up the core of her coming-of-age narrative. Holda never presents a direct threat to Gretel, and instead presents like an extremist activist trying to recruit her at most. The kinship between the women, the hero protagonist and the monster antagonist, places the true

antagonistic threat elsewhere, visible in the film's last scene with the darkening of Gretel's fingers. The monstrous traits, rooted in psychoanalytical views on women and motherhood, that Barbara Creed identifies in *The monstrous feminine* (1993) figure heavily in the film, for example in the cannibalistic mother and menstruating woman as witch. However the film refrains from reproducing their stigma by also consciously displaying the cultural values, discussed by Erin Harrington in *Women, monstrosity and horror film - Gynaehorror* (2017), that equates all women with mother, and places 'proper motherhood' as an unattainable goal. The figure of the witch thus seems to take up the place as a token for 'female' experience in the face of patriarchally enforced ideals, that for example place biological aspects as a representation for what constitutes as 'woman'. While the sixteenth century clerical patriarchal rule used 'the witch' as a label for nonconforming and 'bad' women, that cemented her legacy as evil scare element on screen, *Gretel & Hansel* subvert her horrific connotations and lets her rebel against its oppressive bind.

4. Summary

The purpose of this essay is to examine the use of horror film tropes relating to the aging and reproductive female body in Oz Perkins' *Gretel & Hansel* (2020). With the help of Barbara Creed's *The Monstrous Feminine* (1993) and Erin Harrington's *Women Monstrosity and Horror Film - Gynaehorror* (2017) and Silvia Federici's *Witches, Witch-Hunting, and Women* (2018) I aim to identify renditions of women as monstrous and how they are depicted. I focus mainly on the characterization of 'The Witch' and that of 'The Mother'. The witch is a complex 'onscreen-character' as the phenomenon correlates directly to real life oppression of women, therefore I also rely on Silvia Federici's perspective on the European witch-hunts as a result of agrarian capitalist, in combination with Creed's writing on 'woman as witch' in horror films. Barbara Creed uses Julie Kristeva's 'Abjection' to examine horrific renditions of women. Kristeva defines the term 'abjection' as '[...] that which does not respect borders, positions, rules and that which disturbs identity, system, order' (Creed, 1993). She identifies a correlation between the gaining of magical 'witchy' powers and menarche. Silvia Federici notes that the witch hunts began as a way for clerical and capitalist patriarchal rule to curb rebellious lower class and at the same time teach women about their new role as procreating housewife. Cinematic renditions of witches usually connects evil with ugliness and virtue with beauty, leaving horror film witches depicted as old and decaying. Creed discussed the mother figure as 'the archaic mother', the sole origin to all life, that is rendered

abominable by the phallogentric script and threatens to consume what it once gave life to. Erin Harrington notes that although psychoanalytical discourse undoubtedly have influenced society and in turn portrayals in film, it is not necessarily through psychoanalysis they should be analyzed. She notes that cultural discourse, created in 'the tension between historical and psychoanalytical spheres', have centered fictional representations of motherhood around 'the bad witch mother' and the 'good angel mother' (Harrington 2018, ch.4, 'Psychoanalytical Discourses of Motherhood', paragraph 1). She also discusses the ways in which motherhood is viewed as an obligatory part of women's life. Women are viewed as not only physically but also mentally predisposed for motherhood and parenthood thus need women's psychological affinities for empathy and self-sacrifice (Harrington, 2018).

Gretel & Hansel (2020) refocuses the original fairytale as a coming of age story centering Gretel. The film quickly establish the story world's patriarchal order and links it to the rise of agrarian capitalism in Europe during the sixteenth century. Hansel is portrayed as a product of patriarchal values and Gretel is presented as both 'mother figure' to Hansel as well as a subversive villain in her roles as 'witch'. Her role as 'mother' echoes the view on women as obligatory mothers predisposed to self-sacrifice as her menarche, apart from being the onset of her position as 'witch', connotes to her fecundity. Holda, the films' actual 'bad witch mother', not only mentors Gretel in her new witchy role but also encourages her to actively oppose the caretaking and self-sacrifice. She insists that Hansel is Gretel's weakness and that she must rid herself of this weakness by eating him. Gretel refuses to fully take on the role of 'bad witch cannibalistic mother' that Holda has so forcefully embraced. Instead she simply lets go of her caretaking role and leaves Hansel to make his own way in the world. Her denouncing of the motherly role is still rendered a 'selfish choice' as the markings of the 'bad witch mother', blackening of the fingertips, still show up on her hands in the end. Holda is the films main villain portrayed as both 'archaic cannibalistic mother' and 'witch'. She is presented as overtly anti-patriarchal. Her failings to live up to the expectations of ideal motherhood leaves her embracing her archaic position as cannibalistic parent. She eats her children, her weakness and in turn 'patriarchy's oppressive tools'. Although the witch figure is usually presented as old decaying women disguised as young and beautiful, Holda is instead a younger woman disguising herself as an old in order to seem weak and harmless. While her features are rendered slightly sinister and children are depicted as food throughout the film, playing in to the trope of the cannibalistic mother and old witch as scare elements, they also connote to the notion of

monstrosity as a result of the demands of motherhood that Harrington discusses in *Women, Monstrosity and Horror Film* (2018).

The films conscious display of horror tropes in combination with an avoidance of sexualizing compositions and use of feminist undertones, that establish patriarchal structures as obstacles to be overcome for the female protagonist, allows said tropes to be questioned and subverted. The figure of the witch thus seem to take up the place as a token for 'female' experience in the face of patriarchally enforced ideals, that for example place biological aspects as a representation for what constitutes as 'woman'. While the sixteen century clerical patriarchal rule used 'the witch' as a label for nonconforming and 'bad' women, that cemented her legacy as evil scare element on screen, *Gretel & Hansel* subvert her horrific connotations and lets her rebel against it's oppressive bind.

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