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The Witch

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Abstract

This is a book review of Brandon Grafius, *The Witch* (Devil's Advocates) (Liverpool, UK: Auteur Publishing in partnership with Liverpool University Press, 2020).

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Author Notes

Paul O'Connor is a lecturer in Sociology at the The University of Exeter. His research focuses on the sociology of religion, ethnicity, and lifestyle sports. He is the author of the books *Skateboarding and Religion* (2020) and *Islam in Hong Kong* (2012).

Grafius, Brandon, *The Witch* (Devil's Advocates) (Liverpool, UK: Auteur Publishing in partnership with Liverpool University Press, 2020).

In 2015 Robert Eggers walked away from the Sundance Film Festival with the best director award and a prized distribution deal for his debut feature *The Witch*. As a horror film it was an unusual choice for the festival, but then again it was an unusual addition to the genre: a period piece set in 17th century New England with meticulous attention to its era in both costume design and dialogue. The potent religious content is readily apparent to even the most disinterested viewer and permeates the entire film. Despite this period detail, *The Witch* has proven to be influential as part of a nascent subgenre some have termed 'elevated horror,' akin to titles such as *Get Out* (2017), *Hereditary* (2018), and *The Perfection* (2018). Audience responses to *The Witch* have been divided with many nonplussed by its slow pace and surprising conclusion. It has however developed a cult following with at least one line of dialogue, "would thou like to live deliciously," becoming a popular internet meme.

Brandon Grafius's text on the *The Witch* is the first in depth exploration of the film and is published by Devil's Advocates, a series from Liverpool University Press. These slim volumes provide close readings of brevity on an increasingly broad range of classic horror films. As Douglas E. Cowan (2008) has demonstrated, horror is an important genre for exploring religious and sacred themes. However, for scholars of religion and film, Grafius's work is surprisingly brief and spartan on theological discussion. It is however most effective in addressing and unpacking the potent religious content and context

of the film. The triumph of the text is that it succeeds in being both accessible and erudite. It is at once an exploration of the religious features of the production and a close reading of the film. The text would work well in courses on religion and film as it provides a digestible case study accessible to students.

The book begins with Grafius exploring his own relationship with *The Witch*. We learn about how the film has captured his imagination and demanded his repeated viewing. He is clearly a fan and invests time unpacking the way in which Eggers has crafted his message. Conceptually, Grafius draws on *The Laugh of Medusa* by Hélène Cixous (1976), importantly highlighting the feminist message in *The Witch*, the potency of a woman's laughter and joy set aside the fragility of the male ego. This is an idea that Grafius returns to on occasion and particularly in reference to Thomasin's final transformation. We are provided with a synopsis of an English Puritan family banished from their New England settlement because of an ambiguous theological disagreement. The key characters are introduced, Thomasin, the eldest daughter of William and Katherine, their four younger children Caleb, Mercy, Jonas, and Samuel, and their goat Black Phillip.

The book proceeds with an exploration of context where we learn more of Eggers and his experience as a production designer. The first substantial chapter focuses on Puritan religion and its historical place in New England. Here Grafius provides a well measured explanation of the religious and theological context in which the Puritan movement evolved. The key details about Puritans in New England, Anne Hutchinson, and the Salem witch trials are all neatly

interwoven. The real skill with this part of the book is that the context always feels relevant to the film. Those who are quite familiar with the Puritan movement in New England will appreciate revisiting the content of this chapter which is well crafted for the purpose of the book.

A key contribution of the text is the way in which Grafius places *The Witch* in the field of genre. The author explores the literary context of genre and adopts Mikhail Bakhtin's argument that genre is about worldview rather than categorisation. Embracing the notion of worldview leads Grafius to largely dismiss the placement of *The Witch* in the emergent genres of 'art house' or 'elevated' horror. He convincingly asserts that folk horror is the most relevant and applicable worldview that the film can be discussed within. The key tenets of folk horror relate to the presence of a powerful natural landscape, isolation, potent or exaggerated moral views, and a summoning of sorts. These are taken from Scovell's (2017) recent work on Folk Horror. In clarifying the traits of the genre Grafius discusses both British and American folk horror and then zeros in on New England folk horror in the guise of *The Devil and Daniel Webster* (1941). He further unveils folk horror in a discussion of the seminal *faux* "found footage" film, *The Blair Witch Project* (1999). Here Grafius does a remarkable job of tying these folk horror films together and highlighting what makes them work. The natural elements of an imposing and austere landscape are present in these films, and play on what Cowan (2008) discusses as the sociophobics of horror. Yet, Grafius stops short of making broader connections to the work on religion and horror films. His discussion is more squarely on the elements of

folk horror. He notes that in these films the malevolent force is seldom purely an external presence, but always closer to home, the family, tradition, and the self in the guise of a folklore entity.

We are given an in-depth exploration of the folkloric elements of *The Witch* including a helpful historical placement of the Devil. Throughout this discussion, religion is a key focus. We learn of the Biblical context of witches, their placement in the notion of original sin, and the bond between witches and their animal familiars. All of these elements are directly relevant to the film and are represented fittingly within its timeline. Grafius succeeds in convincingly placing *The Witch* in the religious context of 17th century New England Puritanism, and also as a prototypical folk horror film. What is lacking is a greater synthesis of the religion and horror film dynamic. It is as if Grafius discusses both religious history and the horror genre with aplomb, but rarely knits these elements together.

One feature of the text that must be applauded was the close attention to each character. I was most impressed and grateful for the analysis of Caleb. The explanation of his death scene and the rapture he expresses is carefully examined and tied to the real life 1662 death of eight-year-old Elizabeth Kelly who died of a stomach disorder in Connecticut. The scene is directly influenced by the final wails of Kelly and her fevered expressions in which she believed her ailments were caused by a bewitching. The allusions and connections Grafius makes throughout this chapter are the result of the fine and detailed exposition earlier in the text. We are able to comprehend fully the interplay of

17th century understandings of the devil in the guise of Black Phillip, and the committed hardships of Puritan life.

Grafius proceeds to provide a close reading of the film, arguing that it presents a re-thinking of the witch in popular culture. Thomasin is treated in a sympathetic way and her pact with the Devil is made only when she is abandoned and turned upon by her parents. She has little other choice, yet her salvation is in witchcraft which provides her with the promise of material comfort and joy which we believe she has been craving. This is set in stark contrast to the patriarchal authority of both her father William, and that of her Puritan faith which seeks to reduce her femininity and her role in the world at large. Grafius highlights that witches have been a metaphor for problematic women. These are widows or elderly solitary women no longer of sexual or family function. They might be framed in the work of Mary Douglas as an anomaly, 'matter out of place' (Douglas 1969). In the film, the social role of the witch becomes a source of power outside of the confines of this narrow and misogynistic worldview.

In the concluding chapter, Grafius expands his focus and reflects on the broader impact of *The Witch* in popular culture. He rightly acknowledges that William is easy to admire in his commitment to his beliefs, while also noting that in the 21st century Puritan fears and anxieties are also close at hand. Here he focuses on capitalism as a religion in itself, and one that has failed to deliver its promises. For Grafius this disaffection has in part resulted in reactionary populist movements notable in the West and across the globe. He returns to the

ending of the film and posits a question: Are we subject to the same fate as Thomasin? In other words, are we faced with a choice between a potentially doomed commitment to a lifestyle positioned to fail, or an embrace of evil and all of its material promises? Grafius's conclusion is bleak, to say the least. It may also be a limited and constrained way to read the film's ending.

Grafius does a laudable job of balancing an exegesis of the film while placing it both within an established historical religious context and genre field. The book is enjoyable and accessible even to those who have not watched the film. From a religious studies perspective the real contribution is the suturing of the religious history with folk horror. Here the research and writing of Grafius simply mirrors that of Eggers. Both have invested in understanding 17th century New England Puritanism in an effort to make the very most of the narrative of *The Witch*.

Despite thoroughly enjoying the text there are a number of reservations that I harbour. The first complaint I have is also the shallowest. The book is brief, at only 100 pages: it teases ideas that could be explored in much greater detail. I realize that this is in itself a "straw man" argument in that the Devil's Advocates books are designed for both academic readers and film fans alike. Secondly, I felt that on several occasions the feminist critique that Grafius was developing was a little misplaced. He reveals that initially he felt William was the key protagonist of the film, while I would argue that it is always Thomasin who is placed centrally in the narrative. He also claims that Thomasin is the ideal Puritan daughter. Yet, the film deliberately makes her position ambiguous.

We spend much of the film wondering if she really is the witch that disappeared Samuel, and her taunting of Mercy only heightens her possible dual nature. In conclusion, when her innocence is uncontested, it is ironic that her release from the Puritan family disaster is again orchestrated by a patriarch, this time in the guise of the Devil.

My biggest criticism of the book is that it fails to read *The Witch* as part of a contemporary enchantment with witchcraft and magic. In terms of popular culture this could be linked back to the 1990s in both the film and TV offering of *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*. More importantly, though, it is relevant to the rise in new religious movements which see a renewed feminist popularity with Wicca amongst young women. Certainly the joyous conclusion in which Thomasin joins the witches' coven fits with the positive reproduction of witchcraft and magic in social media in recent years. This fusion of witchcraft and social media has resulted in a hashtag nomenclature of #witchtok, #babywitch and #witchtwitter. In many ways this pop culture embrace of witchcraft supports the conclusions Grafius offers regarding a modern world both anxious and censorious about the actions and beliefs of others. However, this pop culture embrace of witchcraft also leads to a different reading of the conclusion, as Thomasin's signing of the book may be read as no more evil than her submission to Puritan ideals. In light of new social movements and a new generation of ideas on religion, perhaps the path of a witch is merely an alternative, and for some a more righteous calling.

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