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You Won't Be Alone

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Abstract

This is a film review of *You Won't Be Alone* (2022), directed by Goran Stolevski.

Keywords

Witches, Possession

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Author Notes

Sheila J. Nayar teaches at the University of Utah, in the department of Film and Media Arts. Her research interests include the interplay of narrative and phenomenology, especially in the context of orality and alphabetic literacy. She is the author of several books on that subject, including *Cinematically Speaking: The Orality-Literacy Paradigm for Visual Narrative* and *The Sacred and the Cinema: Reconfiguring the "Genuinely" Religions Film*, as well as articles in such journals as *Film Quarterly*, *PMLA*, and the *Journal of the Academy of Religion*. Currently, she is working on a book project on secularism and Hindi popular cinema.



You Won't Be Alone (2022), dir. Goran Stolevski

If readers are looking for a film that employs supernatural horror while also reveling in existentially driven proleptic storytelling, Goran Stolevski's *You Won't Be Alone* will not disappoint. The film opens with a roving, prowling camera following a cat moving in much the same fashion. The feline leads us into a 19th-century Macedonian village, where a woman, at the end of her maternal tether, shoos away playing children and returns to her crying newborn. But then appears Old Maid Maria (Anamaria Marinca), a supernatural figure of local lore, with decrepitude scarred flesh. She has come for the infant's fresh blood. The mother pleads with the witch not to take her baby: Return in 16 years, she offers, and I'll give you my daughter. Agreeing to the bargain, Old Maid Maria scratches the child, eliciting blood, thereby leaving her mark before departing.

Immediately, the mother hastens to the mountains to a "sacred place," a lifeless cavern where she hides the baby, claiming afterwards that the "Wolf-Eateress" took her

girl. For 16 years, that girl (Sara Klimoska) remains holed up in that stony prison, with only occasional visits from her mother. Consequently, she grows up mute, feral, her life now a series of self-fashioned gestures and staccato interior monologues. These are delivered in a cryptic (and perhaps sometimes too philosophically deep) language of her own making, which is made intelligible to us by way of sub-titles. One day, an eagle lands in the cavern. “You won’t take her from me!” the mother exhorts—rightly suspecting that eagle to be Old Maid Maria.

So begin the travels of that legendary witch and her new apprentice, whom Old Maid Maria takes into the Macedonian forest to learn just who and what she really is. Unfortunately for this “Witch-Mama,” her “Witch-like-me” foster daughter is less interested in learning the ways of sorcery than of experiencing the newness of the natural landscape. She marvels at its textures and colors, the odor of its plants, the playfulness of its fireflies. Stolevski captures Witch-like-me absorbing her new habitat with a Tarkovsky-like intensity that permits us, as well, to see the world with new eyes. So uncooperative is Witch-like-me when it comes to bloodletting their murdered prey—a rabbit, an orthodox priest presumably en route to the village—that eventually Old Maid Maria gives up on her, but not before revealing their shared capacity to transmogrify into other life forms.

Now on her own, Witch-like-me embarks on an ontological pilgrimage of her own choosing, which entails learning (and mimicking) how to be human. This she does by taking on a series of people’s skins. While Stolevski concedes to having been inspired by Virginia Woolf’s time- and gender-bending modernist novel *Orlando*, Witch-like-me’s succession of embodiments comes by way of her clawing into her freshly killed victims, so that she can do the requisite placing of their vital organs into her chest. First, she

becomes a young woman who has just given birth. (As for the sudden onset of muteness that ensues in the woman, her mother-in-law blames that on “all the blows” her husband has given her.) Next, Witch-like-me becomes a strapping ax-wielding stud of a peasant; then a dog (which she does for the sake of getting closer to humans); and, last, a young girl, whose surrounding maternal figures are so tender and affectionate that Witch-like-me retains that skin all the way to marriageable age. And if her idiosyncratic ethnography of how to be human is sometimes colored by violent misunderstandings—especially when it comes to human sexuality—her tutorials on sex can also induce levity.

And all the while, Old Maid Maria lurks in the distance, watching, waiting—for what, we may not know, but her repulsion at Witch-like-me’s desire to impersonate the species until she can fully inhabit it is palpable. (Stolevski will sensitively, if also brutally, allow us a window into Mama-Witch’s past, such that we apprehend why she doesn’t share her foster-daughter’s ambitions.)

The bleak, dark color palette of the film lends a gothic fairy tale-like texture to the story—one that, while not always immediately explicable to us, compels us through its sensuousness never to turn away. We also know that Old Maid Maria will not remain on the sidelines forever, that a confrontation between the two Wolf-Eateresses is in the offing. That comes when Witch-like-me marries and, then, gives birth (to “a girl, alas,” as her second mother-in-law says). For Old Maid Maria, it is Witch-like-me’s capacity for loving humanness that will lead to the culmination of their feud, fusing, much as the film has in its totality, literal viscera with philosophical contemplation of how to belong in one’s own body.