



January 2023

Sorcery

John C. Lyden

University of Nebraska Omaha, johnclyden@gmail.com

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.unomaha.edu/jrf>



Part of the [Christianity Commons](#), [Film and Media Studies Commons](#), and the [Indigenous Studies Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Lyden, John C. (2023) "Sorcery," *Journal of Religion & Film*: Vol. 27: Iss. 1, Article 15.

Available at: <https://digitalcommons.unomaha.edu/jrf/vol27/iss1/15>

This Sundance Film Festival Review is brought to you for free and open access by DigitalCommons@UNO. It has been accepted for inclusion in Journal of Religion & Film by an authorized editor of DigitalCommons@UNO. For more information, please contact unodigitalcommons@unomaha.edu.

Sorcery

Abstract

This is a film review of *Sorcery* (2023), directed by Christopher Murray.

Keywords

Witchcraft Trials, Huilliche, Chile, Colonialism, Resistance

Creative Commons License



This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 License](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/).

Author Notes

John Lyden is the Department Chair and Blizek Professor of Religious Studies at University of Nebraska Omaha. He has been the Editor of the *Journal of Religion & Film* since 2011. He is the author of *Film as Religion: Myths, Morals, and Rituals* (NYU Press), and the editor of the *Routledge Companion to Religion and Film* and co-editor (with Eric Michael Mazur) of the *Routledge Companion to Religion and Popular Culture*. He also co-edited, with Ken Derry, *The Myth Awakens: Canon Conservatism, and Fan Reception of Star Wars* (Wipf and Stock 2018).



Sorcery (2023), dir. Christopher Murray

Thirteen-year-old Rosa (Valentina Véliz Caileo) is an indigenous Huilliche who works as a servant for a German colonist family in the 1880s on Chiloé Island off the coast of Chile. When the German family's sheep mysteriously die, their necks found entwined with knots used by the indigenous people, the father attacks Rosa and demands to know who has done this. When Rosa's own father steps in, the German father allows his dogs to attack and kill Rosa's father while she is forced to watch.

After this, Rosa embarks on a quest for justice, but the Chilean mayor of the town will not help, nor will the Christian church. Rosa defines herself as a Christian, but to obtain justice she has to turn to Huilliche religion, and Mateo (Daniel Antivilo), who heads the mysterious organization "La Recta Provincia" (the righteous province) that combats colonial rule by means of indigenous sorcery. The tale is related that an indigenous sorcerer won the secrets of European magic in a duel, and the methods he acquired have been passed down as a means of resistance.

Rosa is eager to learn these secrets, but Mateo is reluctant to share them as he knows that reprisals from the colonials will follow from the Huilliche use of magic against them. When the German family's sons disappear, it is suggested that the sorcerers have turned them into the dogs that are found in the boys' beds, although the colonists believe the boys have actually been killed. The mayor oversees the torture of Mateo and members of La Recta Provincia to try to obtain information on the whereabouts of the boys, and as Rosa feels responsible, she knows that she must do something to help. Initiated into the secrets of indigenous magic through a trip into a sacred waterfall, she renounces her Christian baptism to complete a different sort of baptism into her new power. She is given a vest apparently made of human skin, which the colonials allege is from the missing boys, and this results in Rosa's imprisonment—but her own growing power gives her leverage over the mayor, who fears for his wife and child. It seems that the Huilliche can resist the colonial powers with their magic, at least in this tale.

Mateo was an historical person, and La Recta Provincia a real organization, in the 1880s on Chiloé Island—and there were actual trials of witches at that time. In Murray's retelling, the Huilliche have real magical power that helps them fight colonial oppression. It is also a story of Rosa's choice of indigenous religion over Christianity, as she rejects the colonial religion she formerly embraced: by the end, she can remove the cross she put on her father's grave, and accepts that he is not in the Christian heaven but part of the sea from which the Huilliche people believe they came. At the same time, there is room for compassion even for the colonials in her view, as she offers a way to ease the suffering of the boys she believes are now in the form of dogs. The real story of the Huilliche was not always so triumphant, but this story is a parable of hope and power for indigenous victims of colonial oppression that may resonate even today.