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Representations of Witches in the Coming-of-age Subgenre

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Abstract: This paper aims to analyze the portrayal of two teenage characters with supernatural powers. Norwegian film *Thelma* by Joachim Trier and American film *The Witch* by Robert Eggers deal with the topic of self-discovery and maturation through the perspective of characters that could be, at some point, identified as witches. Approaching topics like sexual identity or family dynamics, the paper will explore the mechanisms that integrate the two films in the broad horror genre, and will also identify the elements that define them as coming-of-age films. Moreover, the research will focus on analyzing the symbolic level of the two films, determining the specific aspects that incorporate them in the universe of witchcraft. Regarding the coming-of-age subgenre, the suggested directions of analysis will be mainly based on studying the protagonists' evolutionary course by exploring how their journey of self-discovery affects the social and the family dynamics around them.

Keywords: coming-of-age, witches, horror, self-discovery, family, sexual identity.

In order to discuss about the specifics, impact and thematical universe of the coming-of-age subgenre, it's important to understand that, unlike the continuous debatable definitions of the Bildungsroman (the literary genre that this film subgenre is the easiest to compare with), film studies have 'settled' upon a clear spectrum of elements which define and validate certain films

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that can be integrated in this category. The chapter *The phantom Bildungsroman* from Marc Redfield's *Phantom Formations: Aesthetic Ideology and the 'Bildungsroman'* focuses on how perspectives on the Bildungsroman have been altered and redefined throughout the history of literary theory:

> One would be hard-pressed to find another instance of a genre in which particularity and generality appear to mesh so thoroughly. For since the Bildungsroman narrates the acculturation of a self – the integration of a particular 'I' into the general subjectivity of a community, and, thus, finally, into the universal subjectivity of humanity – the genre can be said to repeat, as its identity or content, its own synthesis of particular instance and general form. […] It is uncertain whether this genre exists to be described in the first place. Scholarship in this area has turned up one complication after another. Problems begin, appropriately enough, on the level of the signifier itself, since the word 'Bildungsroman,' purportedly the name of a nineteenth-century genre, was nearly unknown before the early twentieth century – its widespread popularity is, in fact, largely a postwar phenomenon.[1]

Furthermore, the author cites from Robert Musil's *Tagebücher, Aphorismen, Essays und Reden*, identifying and highlighting a rather 'sinuous' conceptualization of the genre:

> When one says 'Bildungsroman,' [Wilhelm] Meister comes to mind. The development of a personal *Bildung*. There is, however, also Bildung in what is at once a narrower and a more extensive sense: with every true experience a cultured man educates himself [bildet sich ein geistiger Mensch]. This is the organic plasticity of man. In this sense every novel worthy of the name is a Bildungsroman. The Bildungsroman of a person is a type [Typus] of novel. The Bildungsroman of an idea, that's quite simply the novel per se.[2]

[1] Marc Redfield, *Phantom Formations: Aesthetic Ideology and the 'Bildungsroman'* (New York: Cornell University Press, 1996), 38-40.

[2] Robert Musil, *Tagebücher, Aphorismen, Essays und Reden, in Gesammelte Werke*, ed. A. Frise (Hamburg: Rowohlt, 1955), 57.

Any conceptual relation between the literary genre and the coming-of-age is merely the result of a more or less abstract perspective on the evolution of the central character. While the term Bildungsroman is used in order to reflect a certain realistic dimension (of the main character, first of all) that outcomes from the evolution/involution of the character's cultural/moral values and/or social status, in film, the term coming-of-age is representative for stories that depict the emotional/psychological/physiological transformation of young protagonists that find themselves on a 'journey' to maturation. A more popular term for coming-of-age films, the 'teen film' is widely used especially for Hollywood productions that depict certain aspects of American teenage life through the perspective of more or less 'classical' adolescent issues such as high school relationship dramas, external conflicts with adults, with other teenagers or with different kind of systems. Catherine Driscoll identifies some of the elements that include a teen movie in this category:

> There are certainly narrative conventions that help define teen film: the youthfulness of central characters; the content usually centered on young heterosexuality, frequently with a romance plot; intense age-based peer relationships and conflict either within those relationships or with an older generation; the institutional management of adolescence by families, schools, and other institutions; and coming-of-age plots focused on motifs like virginity, graduation, and the makeover.[3]

Of course, these themes and conventions are not to be found only in American teen films, as they are obviously universal issues that concern, one way or another, every filmmaker who wants to approach and explore lives of teenagers. However, we can establish in a more bluntly manner that the straight America teenager from the middle-upper class will face different problems than the homosexual (or sexually confused) eastern European teenager from a disadvantaged environment. Certainly, we should not necessarily discuss about extreme situation of teenage dramas, but it's important to mark a few differences between what a teen film and what a coming-of-age film explore.

[3] Catherine Driscoll, *Teen Film. A Critical Introduction* (Oxford: Berg, 2011), 2.

Nowadays, some of the more appreciated and discussed coming-of-age films produced in Europe present the struggles of self-discovery and the dramas of teenage or childhood years. For example, French director Céline Sciamma continuously explores the theme of self-acceptance and social integration of children (*Tomboy*, 2011) or teenagers (*Water Lillies*, 2007 and *Girlhood*, 2014) by also putting subthemes like gender identity or sexual orientation into perspective. It is also the case of the more popular, Palm d'Or winning *Blue is the Warmest Color* by Abdellatif Kéchiche, a film that meticulously represents an intense and powerful story of sexual discovery through the perspective of teenager Adèle. Although teen films are widely associated with more superficially represented dramas of American teenagers, independent coming-of-age films mainly focus on more relatable/realistic situations that, unlike teen films, don't generally revolve around humoristic misadventures of their protagonists. For example, *Means Girls*, the 2004 teen comedy film by Mark Water, satirizes the appearance-obsessed girls, hierarchized friendships and high-school lives of American upper-class teenagers by focusing on group dynamics through the perspective of a once simple and modest teenager. In a not so different manner, indie coming-of-age film *Juno* (2007) directed by Jason Reitman raises the issue of teenage pregnancy also through a sort of dark-humoristic perspective. The spectator is once again initiated into the universe of high school life with all its typical dramas and social interactions, but the stake is obviously different from the moment when Juno has to decide whether to keep the baby or whether to undergo abortion. Even though these differences seem to transpire in big budget films and in independent productions, it's hard to conclude on a strict 'recipe' that applies to one or the other.

The fact that audiences have been introduced to more or less dramatic representations of teenagers' journey of self-discovery doesn't discredit any other perspectives on this subject. Richard Kelly's cult film *Donnie Darko* (2001) or David Lynch's psychological horror *Twin Peaks: Fire walk with me* (1992) – a prequel of the famous *Twin Peaks* series (1990-1991) – are only two examples that explore what seem to be ordinary lives of teenagers by creating a supernatural dimension around their universe. In this perspective, one of this paper's main purposes is to identify the mechanisms used in order to create a supernatural environment or characters when it comes to coming-of-age films and also

to question and to try to explain the reasons of their creation. There are two films that have recently explored two very different types of stories revolving around teenage transformation, growing up, self-discovery and family dynamics. One of them is *Thelma,* Joachim Trier's 2017 supernatural thriller that depicts a young girl's journey of sexual discovery. The other one, Robert Eggers's *The Witch* is a 2015 supernatural horror that also illustrates a teenager's path of self-discovery, in a darker, more frightening manner that is very much sustained by the story's setting (1630s New England).

One of the main questions that initiate discussions around this type of movies is related to the necessity of such representations of teenagers. Why is it important for some filmmakers to illustrate a coming-of-age story through the lens of one's supernatural powers and what made them make this choice? What perspectives are we 'stimulated' to gain when we are faced with characters that we can't really empathize with? We are being introduced to children/teenagers with superantural powers throughout film history (Brian de Palma's adaptation of Stephen King's *Carrie* or the popular *Sabrina*, the main character of several TV shows, movies and animated series), so that contemporary portrayals of such characters are no longer surprising. However, the nature of the approached themes is representative for this day and age, especially in what Joachim Trier's *Thelma* is concerned. While comparable on some level with Carrie's story and conflicts, *Thelma* establishes a new set of 'ground rules' in order to absorb and reflect, first of all, a very present and powerful theme that's been and continues to be widely debated and analyzed: sexual identity and orientation and how they are perceived or understood by the persons in question and by the society. Although we are in both cases confronted with teenagers who use their telekinetic powers in order to achieve or to obtain something they've been (more or less subconsciously) wishing for, Trier's approach on the matter is more subtle, as one of the film's goal is not to shock (this is not a horror film), but to create an identifiable character whose 'superpower' is merely a metaphor for her struggles in the self-discovery and self-acceptance process.

Thelma (Eili Harboe) grows up in a strict, religious family who lives in a somewhat secluded area of Norway. The film opens with a scene that we later connect to the story's ensemble as it represents an important flashback: a young Thelma and her father are out hunting in the woods. In a moment of

hesitation, the father points his shotgun towards Thelma's head, but doesn't shoot. We are basically introduced to a very disturbing family dynamic that obviously raises a series of questions because of the revolting image of a grown-up imagining the possibility of brutally killing a child – the displeasing tableau of an innocent character being targeted in this manner can only lead to questioning that innocence. In the present, high school graduate Thelma prepares herself for moving to Oslo to start university. She's a quiet, introverted and demure girl who's facing difficulties with adapting to the university lifestyle. After having had minimum contact with society, Thelma must acclimate to the typical student activities and campus vibration. During her first weeks at the university she starts experiencing what seems to be epileptic seizures that remain medically unexplained. These are shown to be triggered by her new connection with another fellow student named Anja (Kaya Wilkins), a character who gradually brings about Thelma's sexual curiosities, desires and perception of her own sexual identity. As their friendship intensifies, Thelma's romantic feelings are shown as more of a burden on her emotional and psychological wellbeing, especially as Anja represents everything she's not: she's independent, outgoing, has a healthy social life and no problems adapting to the new environment. Her journey of discovering her sexual identity is interspersed with confusion, rejection and doubt in relation to her sexual orientation, as homosexuality is a concept that stands in strong contradiction with her religious upbringing.

Joachim Trier joggles with the explanations for Thelma's sudden seizures, as while the doctors don't seem to identify their medical cause, the girl resorts to elucidating the mystery through alternative methods. After watching different videos that debate and explore the relation between witchcraft and epileptic seizures through the lens of medieval times and superstitions, Thelma begins to make some connections, especially when she finds out about her grandmother's mysterious past. The film doesn't revolve so much on this particular idea as its objective is not to depict aspects associated to witchcraft and all its narrative and conceptual implications. However, the supernatural dimension this film carefully and subtly installs can't be explored without basing some arguments on this particular information. After all, the film never offers a clear explanation for Thelma's seizures. The storyline clearly lets some room for a supernatural layer that's organically

constructed into the film's atmosphere and universe. The fact that Thelma's seizures sometimes end with another character's disappearance would be one of the major key-elements that one can identify as a 'missing piece' from the girl's vague notion of her own powers. Through flashbacks, we are introduced to Thelma's childhood, more specifically to an event that changed her parents' perception on her. While developing a common type of jealousy and frustration because of her parents' focused attention on her baby brother, Thelma manages to make him vanish through what seems to be the power of her own mind. She obviously doesn't remember this episode and doesn't seem to have any recollection of her brother's existence whatsoever. The flashback scenes are also constructed in a linear manner with the baby's disappearance and reappearance in the frozen sea, under a thick layer of ice serving as a climax for this particular storyline. However, the events unfolding in the series of flashbacks are only presented to the spectators, as their purpose is to clarify the aspects concerning Thelma's sudden abnormal symptoms. In fact, most of the film's narrative or aesthetic elements offer a strong metaphorical weight to the story, leaving enough room for interpretation: a YouTube presenter explains that "even the word seizure comes from being seized by supernatural forces, the Gods or the devils, depending on what century we're in"; one of the doctors Thelma visits also tries to pull a less scientific explanation for her seizures by telling her that "The body reacts to something being repressed," a suitable hypothesis taking in consideration the girl's newly discovered and rejected sexual identity and desires. Furthermore, she visits her sick grandmother (of whom she thought to have been dead for a long time) only to find out that she also had the ability of making people disappear, as her husband simply vanished while being on a boat.

Thelma decides to undergo an induced epileptic seizure hoping this would identify the causes of her symptoms and therefore could begin treating them properly. After epilepsy is ruled out and no other medical explanation seems to exist, she discovers that Anja disappeared. The girl's disappearance is also presented through a parallel montage that only 'allows' the viewer to observe the effects of Thelma's strong epileptic seizure on a different person. After making the connections to her grandmother's past and supernatural powers, Thelma returns home to her family feeling frightened and confused.

The family's decision to hide all the information from Thelma, creating a restrictive and ultra-protective environment for her upbringing seem to backfire in the second part of the film where the father starts feeding his daughter certain medication that make her rather passive, sleepy and somehow lethargic. One can immediately make the connection to the state of Thelma's grandmother who's hospitalized in a psychiatric ward in a deep vegetative state. This part of the film represents a major turnover for Thelma's perspective on her own identity and powers as it culminates with her decision to 'eliminate' the father, a person she can no longer perceive as family, but as an immediate danger to her life and freedom. She's ready to confront her domineering father by truly accepting who she is. In her last attempts of praying to God, she's actually addressing her insecurities and desire of being able to be herself and accepted by the ones around her. We can finally see her father bursting into uncontrollable and unstoppable flames while he's on a boat on the deep lake, having no chance of rescuing himself. This event is not only linked to how Thelma's grandmother made her husband disappear, but also to how her father made her burn her own hand as a child, just to see "what hell is like all the time". Thelma's relation to witchcraft is presented in subtle manner, as we can discover and understand her superpowers only through her own perception of the changes she's going through. The fatal consequences of her uncontrollable telekinetic abilities can easily define her as more of an antagonist, an aspect that brings her much closer to what it means to be a witch. "A witch is one who knowingly tries to accomplish something by diabolical means,"[4] explains Jean Bodin in the book *On the demon mania of witches*. Of course, in Thelma's case the diabolical means don't represent actual spells or other consciously done actions, as the girl is unknowingly and unconsciously controlling the disappearances. However, one of the elements that make this a coming-of-age film is also shown through the evolution of Thelma's supernatural abilities, as she willingly kills her father and gives her mother the ability to walk again. If these actions were once controlling her and her environment, now she's finally able to control them and use them consciously in her advantage. She understands that she needs to

[4] Jean Bodin, *On the Demon Mania of Witches*, trans. Randy A. Scott (Toronto: Centre for Reformation and Renaissance Studies, 1995), 45.

eliminate the elements that represent a threat to her or that would eventually confine her, but she also realizes that her powers can be used in beneficial ways, too.

Joachim Trier introduces a symbolic dimension to his story through the presence of crows and snakes, creatures that are invisible for the characters, as they appear only to mark different key-moments from Thelma's evolution. For example, the snake appears at a party where she's unconsciously sitting on a couch, fantasizing about her and Anja kissing. Although the snake has been linked to magic in numerous ways, in this case it's a symbol of transformation as they regularly renew their skin and as Thelma needs to go through a process of rebirth herself. The crows appear before Thelma's first seizure and also when she uses her powers to kill her father. These can be interpreted as omens for bad news and in this case they somehow announce the fatality of an immediate event.

Regardless of the films' obvious realistic approach towards student life and somewhat average teenage problems (conflicts with older family members, difficulties in adapting to the social aspect of university lifestyle), the metaphorical layer manages to transmit the message in a quite shocking manner. The uncomfortable and disturbing image of a daughter so consciously and lucidly killing her own father definitely provokes an initial revolting reaction. However, as the father is carefully and strongly antagonized right from the first scene of the film (the one where he points his shotgun to Thelma's head for a few seconds), the more natural reaction to his death would be one of relief.

Thelma's character evolves in spite of her preconceived notions of right and wrong. Her manifestations in relation to the newly discovered sexual identity and orientation are firstly of reluctance, even rejection. The more initiated (or perhaps just more open to experiences) Anja attempts to introduce Thelma to the realm of sexual knowledge and everything this acceptance would involve. On one hand, this character functions like a supporting initiator that leads or indicates the way for Thelma in her journey of self-discovery. On the other hand, Thelma's character arc needs an apparent inconvenience that pulls her out of her comfort zone, surfacing her inner true self – and this is undoubtedly Anja. At first, Thelma rejects the other girl's advances

and consciously tries to inhibit any urges. However, this attitude only leads to her 'eliminating' Anja who vanishes from her own apartment leaving only a hair stuck in the window.

Evidently, the film must be 'read' in a metaphorical key, as the supernatural is organically intertwined with the realistic dimension of the story. If all the supernatural elements of the film were extracted or inexistent to begin with, the story would be about a young girl who goes off to college where she's confronted for the first time in her life with her own sexual desires. Instead of making her friend disappear, she would just shut her down in order to escape the hypothetical temptations. In the film, Anja disappears as if through magic being 'swallowed' by a window that breaks and that immediately reconstructs itself. Anja's disappearance lasts just as long as Thelma needs to know herself and to acknowledge her powers and ability of being independent. After she escapes the domineering father who would never accept or understand the daughter's life choices and newly discovered identity she can finally return to university where Anja is also present. The film's final scene presents the girls as if they would have finally settled on their relationship status.

The Witch, directed by Robert Eggers, raises the issue of teenage transformation in a darker manner, introducing obvious elements of horror and approaching the family dynamics from a much closer perspective. Set in 17th century's New England, *The Witch* tells the story of a numerous family: William, Katherine and their five children: young adolescent girl Thomasin (Anya Taylor-Joy), twins Mercy and Jonas, young boy Caleb and a newborn, Samuel. After being banished from their Puritan Colony they build a farm in a secluded area, near a forest. While Thomasin is playing peek-a-boo with Samuel, the baby suddenly vanishes from under her eyes and we are introduced to the depths of the forests where a witch sacrifices the baby in order to create a flying ointment from his remains. The family's official explanation for his disappearance is that it got stolen by a wolf. However, after a while, Thomasin's younger sister reveals her certitude that their brother was actually stolen by a witch that she actually saw, an argument that could be easily interpreted in two ways: she could have really seen the witch as children are sometimes portrayed as being able to see what grown-ups can't or that she wants to raise disputes and tension in a childish manner, because of an active

imagination. After repeatedly accusing Thomasin that she might be the witch responsible for the brother's disappearance, the girl angrily confirms this, most likely in order to silence her sister by scaring her off. However, this episode launches a series of events that revolve around the family's speculations on Thomasin's witchcraft. These are mostly fueled by the second disappearance, as Caleb also vanishes while being with Thomasin in the depths of the woods. This time, the boy is seduced by a witch that apparently puts a strong spell on him before sending him back home. The boy dies after a few days of agony and the family's despair is increasing.

Like in *Thelma*, the family's isolation plays an important role, as the tension intensifies and they seem abandoned from any kind of outside help – divine or human. However, this story doesn't leave any room for interpretation in terms of veracity when it comes to supernatural forces. The presence of witches and of the devil is clearly represented, as we see all these characters (especially in the final scene where we are presented the performance of a specific flying ointment ritual). Furthermore, the family's black goat named Black Phillip adopts the role of a literally scapegoat when desperate Thomasin is trying to put the blame of all tragedies on the unusual connection the twin brothers have with the animal (their constant playing around and attempts to communicate with it). Nonetheless, the family keeps assuming Thomasin played an important role in all the supernatural and unusual events that happened and decide to lock her in the improvised stable together with the twins and the goats. In spite of this, when the father finds one morning all the other goats killed, the brothers missing and Thomasin the only survivor he's automatically convinced of the girl's evil spirit and witchcraft. After Black Philipp kills the father and Thomasin her mother in an attempt of rescuing herself from the woman's madness, she turns to the goat, her only hope for survival. When her speculations of its incarnation of Satan are confirmed, the girl agrees to make a pact that would make her "live deliciously," as he said. In the middle of the woods she finds the witches performing a ritual and, as her hands are already tainted with the blood of her parents, we can see her happily levitating and therefore, becoming a witch herself.

The symbolic layer of this film is much anchored in the superstitious spirit of those times' society. The belief in witchcraft is confirmed by the actual existence of witches and reincarnation of Satan. The film doesn't put

much emphasis on the supernatural nature of this universe, as it mainly focuses on the central character's evolution in relation to the family dynamics and conflicts. While observing how the decision power is transferred from father to daughter, it can be concluded that this film also focuses on the coming-of-age story of young Thomasin, a character who's discovering her potential and ability to control her own destiny. The murders and deaths of her family members are merely necessary steps that lead to her liberation and discovery of a better life. Thomasin's family is condemned to an ill-fated destiny from the moment they leave the community: they hardly find any food, whatever they plant can't grow and their few animals are obviously not enough to feed such a large family. Moreover, Thomasin overhears her parents planning to send her off to work for a wealthier family. All these elements accumulated with the family's increasing assumptions that she is indeed a witch, gradually push her away by isolating and stigmatizing her. The tension peaks when the father decided to literally lock her in the barn – an event that directly leads to all other characters' deaths and/or disappearance.

Seclusion and liberation are both major themes in these coming-of-age films, for they are presented as causes and effects in what the evolution of the main characters is concerned. Leaving all supernatural elements and layers aside, they both present teenagers' journeys in search for their own identity. Moreover, sacrifice represents a necessary element that can lead to numerous interpretations: in both films the youngest children of the families disappear through supernatural methods. More in *The Witch* than in *Thelma*, the theme of sacrifice is explored in relation to its effect on the protagonist's evolution. Samuel's disappearance leads to Thomasin's incrimination and banishment, but these are simply necessary and momentary obstacles that eventually benefit the girl on her journey towards liberation. Clearly, all other characters have been sacrificed one way or another, so that Thomasin wouldn't have anything else to lose. Her decision to talk to Black Phillip comes from an unspoken hope that the goat is truly the incarnation of Satan. Therefore, she accepts this last resort as she finally acknowledges that no other force, supernatural or human, is there for her. In the case of *Thelma*, 'human sacrifice' can also be considered a necessary step in the girl's story. Moreover, the implications of sacrificing newly born children are strongly highlighted by how their pureness can be related to the satisfaction of supernatural

beings. Consequently, all these events are directly connected to how these protagonists decide (more or less consciously) to gain their freedom after a restrictive upbringing.

Ultimately, the forced isolation of Thomasin and Thelma has fatal consequences in both cases. The primary purpose of these episodes is that of revealing the ultimate awakening of forces the girls are capable of: Thelma kills her father using her telekinetic powers and Thomasin murders her mother in order to defend herself. However, these scenes create a consistency that the ensembles of both stories need in order to create strong character arcs. Whether it's about discovering the sexual identity or about discovering the passions and joys of life after a lifetime of struggling and hardship, the main idea is that the supernatural dimension can be interpreted as a metaphorical vehicle for their exploration of self-discovery.

Coming-of-age films will always speak about more or less general issues children or teenagers are confronted with, but their 'core' will be in any case the need for transformation and its struggles. The choice of showing these stories through the perspectives of teenagers with supernatural powers (especially in Thelma's case) remains interpretable. However, the discussion should revolve around the type of heroes this subgenre wants to 'deliver' and how they could affect the way any kind of transformation is perceived. Imaginably, discrepancies between mentalities, behaviors and preconceptions that surface due to generation gaps could be easier to attenuate with some supernatural intervention and, of course, sometimes that seems like the only possible measure one could take in order to increase empathy and actual understanding. These films shrewdly explore the social and family dynamics around their main characters and manage to deliver situations that one can identify with (types of relations between parents and children, siblings, first love or sexual experience and so on). The supernatural dimension helps creating extraordinary characters and generates a subtle, uncanny atmosphere that they are forced to escape from. In spite of the tragic events that happen at the end of both films, the general feeling they manage to induce is one of liberation and peacefulness, even in Thomasin's case where she starts levitating in the circle of witches, happily smiling.

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