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Extended abstract of the PhD dissertation

Reprezentări ale vrăjitoriei în filmul de groază şi fantastic

Representations of Witchcraft in Horror and Fantasy Films

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This work is intended to be primarily a starting point for its author, but also for Romanian filmmakers who may wish to enter the realm of horror and fantasy films. Thus, the work aims to elucidate and concretize both the theoretical and practical elements of construction of the genres mentioned in its title. The interest is primarily to provide a tool for practitioners in the film industry, but one that is solidly grounded scientifically. I found that Romanian cinema is underdeveloped in the field covered by this project, most likely due to a lack of knowledge of the subject and/or the lack of knowledge to put it into practice, the non-existence of a tradition on the subject, an over-saturation of the market by imported genre films, and a general reluctance to study the complex phenomenon of fantasy and horror films at university level.

Romania has a huge reservoir of beliefs in the supernatural, of traditional (rural) mythological figures, of high fantastic literature from which very few people in the film industry seem to want to draw inspiration. The current approach aims to make research work in the pre-production of a fantasy or horror film much easier, or at least to point out possible research directions for writers, directors, operators, and film critics. So the major question of the paper is: Why don't we have a tradition of fantasy/horror film in Romanian culture and what could we do to build one? In order to outline possible answers as plausible and conclusive as possible, I have chosen witchcraft as the main theme of investigation. This theme is one of the most interesting, because of the fascinating anthropological and aesthetic openings that its study implies.

I have set out to structure this dissertation as well and as logically as possible in four broad chapters that complement each other. During my doctoral training and during the writing of my thesis, I realized that scientific research, carried out with a well-defined purpose and according to a well-organized plan, is similar to making a film production. As in the film editing, I tried to link the chapters to each other based on the best and most fluid connections, starting from a chapter that presented a brief history and some possible typologies in the films with wizards and witches, passing through a chapter on fantasy films in the Romanian film tradition, through a third chapter on

elements of cinematographic technique and reaching the final chapter, in which I describe in a few stages how my personal directorial project, the film *Straja*, was made (but I do it in echo with the considerations of the previous three chapters).

In *Chapter I. Some historical landmarks in horror and fantasy film. Witch and Wizard Figures* (p. 21-118), I proposed a history and typology of the witch and wizard in cinema, based on a careful analysis of some twenty films. I started from the idea that the central character of my study is the witch and tried to identify how this character is portrayed in cinema over time. Watching a significant number of films that contained such a character, I studied cinematic genres and how they intertwine, intersect, creating new and unexpected possible classifications of characters. I then chose for closer study and delved into the construction and structure of a few films, those that, in my view, were relevant both to the history of witchcraft (*Häxan*, directed by Benjamin Christensen, 1922), cinema (Méliès' films) and to me as an independent filmmaker (*The Blair Witch Project*, directed by Daniel Myrick and Eduardo Sanchez, 1999). In addition to these films, I have devoted many passages to cinematic occultism, which developed remarkably in the 60s and 80s of the last century, through the films of directors such as Roman Polanski, Kenneth Anger, Terence Fisher, Dario Argento and many others. I finally stopped on two contemporary films, Robert Eggers, *The Witch* (2015) and Robert Zemeckis, *The Witches* (2020). Since this phase of the research, I discovered the scarcity of film projects that present characters from the Romanian, indigenous folkloric mythology. In world cinema, there are a large number of productions dealing with mythological themes, taking characters from Greek, Egyptian and Norse mythology.

That is why, in *Chapter II. Fantasy and Horror Films in Romanian Cinematographic Culture. Sorcerous and magical figures* (p. 119-153), I focused my research on the production of local films with fantastic themes. I have rediscovered some Romanian films that I consider real cinematographic works, worthy of the greatest interest, even today when the national debate is dominated by productions of the Romanian New (Realist) Wave. During the communist period, the most significant names that can be mentioned are Ion Popescu-Gopo, Elisabeta Bostan and Gheorghe Naghi. Their work showed a certain continuity in the field of fantasy, as far as it was

possible in an era dominated by the ideological imperatives of "socialist realism" and of reflecting the realities of "multilaterally developed socialist society". I have studied the appearance of the witch character, in various guises, in films such as Elisabeta Bostan's *Youth without Old Age and Life without Death* (1969), Ion Popescu-Gopo's *Steps to the Moon* (1964) and *The Bet* (1985), but I have also looked at equivalent characters such as fairies, witches, the Mother of the Forest, or the magician of scholarly tradition portrayed by the same Gopo in *Faust XX* (1966).

After 1989, Viorel Sergovici continued the tradition of literary adaptations, strongly developed in the communist cinema, but this time the preference went towards an author who was not in the first line of preference for those who dealt with cinematographic policies during the Ceausescu regime: Mircea Eliade. Sergovici made two films inspired by Eliade's literature: *The Snake* (1996) and *Miss Christina* (1992) (a Romanian-French TV film). Alexandru Maftei reworked Eliade's novel and made the eponymous film in 2013. The film *Miss Christina*, in both versions, attempts to follow closely the story of the novel and recreate the magical atmosphere of Eliade's literature. In 2014 Ovidiu Georgescu made *The Last Flyer*, a film about love, which remains a foray into Romanian folk mythology intended to show how great the possibilities for its cinematic exploitation remain today.

All these films, while interesting, are insufficient to establish a tradition of fantasy and horror in Romania. Moreover, it can be said that in post-December 89 Romania more fantastic films were made by foreigners – sometimes even with Romanian mythological and narrative material – than by Romanians (these films are mentioned in Appendix 1 of the PhD thesis).

In *Chapter III. Elements of Cinematic Technique in Films with Witchcraft as a Theme (and in Other Related Films)* (p. 154-237), I have undertaken an analysis of the main elements of cinematic technique that I found specific to fantasy and horror films. I have highlighted and analysed them as systematically as possible, in the hope that I will later be able to put together a guide for film-makers who would like to venture into this field. In film, combining artistic elements with technique is a *sine qua non* for success. From a technical point of view, too, there is a major difference between Romanian and international films, as well as between Romanian films before and after

the Revolution of 1989. Technical knowledge, human resources and production budgets have made these differences extremely visible to anyone who looks into the matter. The low interest in fantasy and horror films in Romania is also due to the deficit one can notice in these aspects. From the point of view of film technique, as I stated in *Chapter III*, editing, special effects and sound are essential. Fantasy and horror films cannot exist without effects, both sound and visual, just as editing can play an important role in transforming a realistic scene into a fantasy or horror one. Creativity in making them is mandatory and requires grace, dedication, and patience on the one hand, but also a great deal of technical, practical knowledge, on the other hand.

In order to make the analytical approach as coherent as possible, I have taken again examples from the first two chapters (i.e. both international and Romanian films), which I have technically dissected in *Chapter III*. The same principle goes for other aspects of the thesis, which I have tried to weave into a coherent fabric, as in the editing of a film.

Special effects are extremely important elements in filmmaking, as they allow the creation of fantasy worlds, scenes that would be impossible in reality, the creation of imaginary characters, to add dangerous or destructive elements to different moments of the film's action, but also to make the action in the film seem more real and/or believable. Special effects can be practical (mechanical or physical: Méliès excelled in these), optical (camera and/or lens related) and, after the advent of the computer, VFX and CGI. Today, computer programs such as Adobe After Effects help filmmakers to enhance the filmed image in its various dimensions, whether aesthetic, technical or compositional, as seen in the *Harry Potter* series, where special effects help to create a magical atmosphere.

In both fantasy and horror films, make-up, costume and mask play an important role in creating atmosphere and characters. For example, in William Friedkin's *The Exorcist* (1973), Dick Smith's make-up turned Linda Blair into a monster, her skin cracked and pustular, at once rotten and dry. It is a masterpiece that resulted, over the course of filming, in an innocent child being transformed into a monstrous being. Robert Zemeckis, in *The Witches*, also places great emphasis on the witches' make-up, costumes and masks.

Sound and image are equally relevant, but in some situations the sound can become more important than the image, and in horror films this is usually the case. Moreover, when they are well combined, when they are associated, sound and image are much more than the sum of their parts. A brief note would be at the right place here: my belief is that in order to aesthetically convey a cinematic idea or an "overall emotion" of a film sequence, the image may not be of the best quality (either due to mistakes or when it subsumes a minimalist or miserable aesthetic), but the sound cannot be "bad" because it will take the viewer out of the story. It is obvious that sound has an effect on image, and image on sound, and together they articulate into a sensation. The viewer imagines along with the character what is about to happen and waits for the inevitable. Film sound is both an art and a science. To show how important ambient sounds and music are in the witch horror film, I briefly looked at Dario Argento's masterpiece *Suspiria* (1977).

In its turn, editing gives the director the ability to manipulate emotions. Every cut must be made with care, attention, and purpose. The way we edit betrays the emotion, style, and overall tone of a film. I ended *Chapter III* by deconstructing frame-by-frame a scene from a relevant film, *The Witches*, directed by Robert Zemeckis, for a better practical understanding of how editing works in a film in my area of interest.

Echoing and directly related to elements highlighted in the first three chapters, in *Chapter IV. The Five Stages (5Ps) in the Making of an (Independent) Witch Film* (p. 238-322), I described the creative process I engaged in for my personal film entitled *Straja*. I chose to follow a five-stage structure, specific to filmmaking, particularizing what is specific to a fantasy film with horror overtones, with witchcraft as its theme, made in Romania in the 2020's. The action of the film takes place in the present day in a village in the Apuseni Mountains, Ocoliș, but there are several intertwining temporal layers. Summed up very briefly, the film tells the story of Margareta Straja, a writer of fantasy literature, who – starting from her work as a writer and delving into her own past through the problem of an inheritance – saves the world by resisting the coming on earth of Asmodai, prince of hell and master of a group of witches who worship him. What she learns in the process will change Margareta Straja's perspective on life.

It seems to me that the practical value of the knowledge gained through scientific research is essential in filmmaking and I have tried to argue this point by describing the key moments in working at *Straja*, with some of the challenges it entailed. I have structured *Chapter IV* using the information detailed in the previous chapters, which I have put into practice in the making of my film, customizing the production according to my own concept and working system. In this chapter, I have presented the main elements of each working stage of my own film production, with a focus on writing the script, finding financial and especially human resources to start production, the actual shooting, and the post-production part. The in-depth discussion of the difficulties I faced is not meant to discourage, but rather to excite potential readers and people who might want to embark on creating a film that is not realistic. Both through my doctoral thesis itself, and especially through my concrete film work (the equivalent of the experimental work that, in science, tests the validity of hypotheses), I have tried to demonstrate that it is possible to make fantastic films in Romania, the basic conditions required being hard work, patience and perseverance.

In the eight Appendices of the work (p. 364-429), which are varied and rich, I have included additional informative and iconographic material necessary for understanding the research approach. First, I have used numerous photographs, because – as the saying goes – a picture is worth a thousand words, and the main working tool in cinema is the image. I included photos taken from various films, images showing graphics, hierarchies, and other useful information especially in the pre-production stage. On the other hand, I have included personal photographs taken during all the sub-stages of the production of *Straja*, as well as screenshots from these stages, which are meant to make the working steps clearer or to exemplify a certain theoretical position I have adopted. Also, in Appendices 2 and 3 I have included the preliminary results of an experimental study on horror film, conducted using questionnaires on a sample of 186 respondents, in collaboration with Prof. Dr. Ioan Pop-Curșeu and Prof. Dr. Petru Lucian Curșeu.

Over the years of research, I have realized a list of Romanian films or films with Romanian participation in the fantasy genre or sub-genres of fantasy films. I have tried to include in this list all the films I have identified, from the beginnings of Romanian cinema to the present. Unfortunately, I have only identified a little more than fifty films,

of which a good part are foreign productions (mainly American and Canadian), but which were filmed in Romania, or used Romanian mythological or narrative material. All these years I had hoped this list would be longer, but, sadly, it is not. Of course, I did not include films inspired by the myth of Dracula in the list, although they would have made the list quite long.

In this doctoral dissertation, I have combined historical and typological perspectives, constantly trying to draw examples and cases relevant to my own directorial practice. I needed the historical perspective to better understand the contexts and evolution of the genres under investigation. From the point of view of film history, my interest was to identify Romanian and foreign films that discussed my subject of interest, on the one hand in order to avoid repetitions or unintentional copying in *Straja* and those that would follow, and on the other hand to study the evolution of specific characters. In my approach, I tried to combine the most rigorous scientific analysis with the most concrete practical openings of the research. Moving from the analysis of genre films to the theory behind them, and then again to practical examples from the filmography of famous directors or from the production of *Straja*, I tried to carry out a theoretical investigation with direct applicability to the production of a fantasy film with horror elements.

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