

***Fireworks: The Visual Imagination of Angela Carter.***

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**“NOW YOU ARE AT THE PLACE OF ANNIHILATION”:  
APOCALYPSE, TRAUMA, AND SPECTRALITY IN  
ANGELA CARTER’S ‘THE SCARLET HOUSE’ AND  
ROBERT EGGERS’ *THE WITCH*”**



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Like many of Angela Carter’s texts produced during the 1970s, and arguably across the body of her work, “The Scarlet House” (1977) explores the power of archetypes and symbols as keys to interpreting the ways in which individual and communal experiences are enmeshed in a matrix of power and repression perpetuated by social institutions, cultural practices, and inherited myths or narratives. Although Carter is never directly cited as an influence, Robert Eggers’ film, *The Witch* (2015), appears to follow her lead by creating a visual text that combines historical realism with the surreal atmosphere of fairy tale and gothic horror to examine how these kinds of narratives, as well as their inherited archetypes, function as vital components of cultural and collective memory (thus situating Eggers’ film as an inheritor of Carter’s groundbreaking work on folk and fairy tale). Eggers, like Carter, confronts us with a dense network of images exploring archetypal horrors found within literature, history, and the visual arts (particularly the paintings of Francisco Goya and key scenes from Kubrick’s *The Shining*). Many of these images are derived from or allude to patriarchal fears of the monstrous-feminine, and through depictions of the grotesque figure of the witch or crone, and the association of women’s bodies with animality and abjection, Eggers’ film and Carter’s story expose traumatic histories of violence directed toward women. Both texts present entropic nightmares of increasing chaos, disorder, and degradation, thus utilizing apocalypse as a narrative and thematic framework to engage with cultural and individual traumas prompted by the dissolution of stable identities and disruptive spectral reminders of history’s repressed and marginalized others.

Carter's and Eggers' texts are thus engaged with spectrality (and spectral iconographies) by examining how ghosts and hauntings function as powerful reminders of "particular presences and absences" within narratives that either confront or attempt to repress "traumatic or oppressive pasts" (Blanco and Peeren 20). For Derrida, the spectral is that which returns to haunt the contemporary imagination despite attempts to obliterate traces of its presence or memory, ultimately forcing us to engage with radical otherness and "*respond to the dead*" (136) by learning "how to let them speak or how to give them back speech" (221). Derrida's concept of hauntology calls for the need "to learn to live *with ghosts*," which would create "a *politics* of memory, of inheritance, [and] of generations" (xvii-xviii) and provide witness to the experiences of oppressed "others" and their demands for justice. Hauntology also speaks to the temporal anxieties and instabilities of apocalypse, in which "time is *disarticulated*, dislocated, dislodged...*deranged*, both out of order and mad" (20). However, this apocalyptic rupture or "disjunction," when "The time is out of joint," is what opens us to "the very possibility of the other" (26). The specter belongs to and signifies multiple temporalities, and ultimately unsettles or disturbs us because "no one can be sure if by returning it testifies to a living past or a living future" (123). As Jeffrey Weinstock observes: "To be spectral ... is to be out of place and time," which can lead to "epistemological uncertainty and [thus] the potential emergence of a different story and a competing history" (64).

The spectral narrator of Carter's story is defined by this ontological and epistemological instability, uncertain of what she is remembering or even why, as she struggles with retaining concrete memories of how she came to be a prisoner in the Scarlet House. She herself is haunted by a series of seemingly disconnected and disembodied images and comes to understand that her own body is both the apparitional and material evidence of an accumulated history of violence against women. In summary, the narrator is abducted and tortured by the Count, who appears in numerous Carter texts as a satanic figure modeled after the Marquis de Sade. The Count keeps a harem of women in the Scarlet House, which at first appears to be in the ruins of a post-apocalyptic London, though later the narrator claims this image of a "deserted city" overrun by nature is a "memory" or vision of the future given to her by the Count, who "is dedicated to the obliteration of memory," since the ability to construct patterns is what separates humans from beasts: "Memory is the grid of meaning we impose on the random and bewildering flux of the world" (418-419). The Count is determined to turn the women into beasts, conducting a systematic erasure of their memories while implanting in his victims a multitude of "pseudo-memories" (419). Eventually, they lose the ability to distinguish which of their memories are true or false and end up existing in "a fugue of all the memories of all the women" imprisoned in the Scarlet House (419).

Despite her understanding that the Count "erases the tapes of [her] memory and makes his own substitutions," the narrator insists on determining which of the "tapes" is the "real" memory of her capture, and that if she could "remember everything perfectly" then she would be free (424). We are given three different versions of her capture, each one expanding in detail and realism, yet all of them, the narrator concludes, are fabricated from books and films, and are only exaggerated fantasies and representations of imagined pasts and futures, which inevitably play out in a continuous loop of violence, chaos, and disintegration since the Count's only interest is in "the

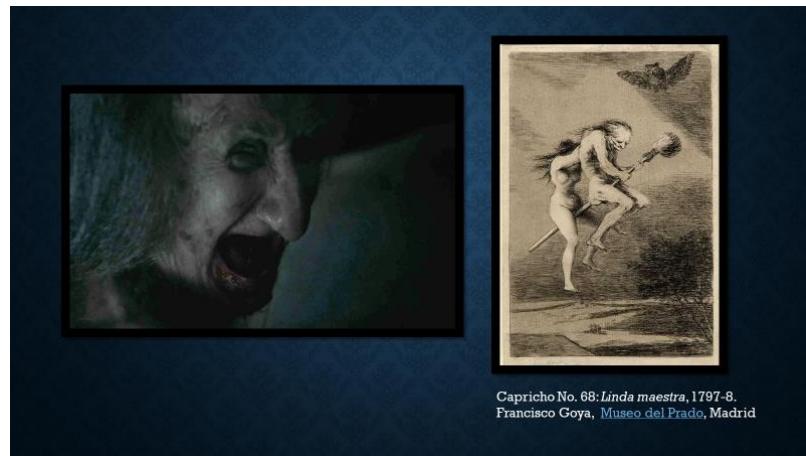
dissolution of forms” (423). The narrator remains unable to locate her memories in a specific time and place, and the Scarlet House is an unstable space, shifting in its appearance and architectural structure until we realize, with the narrator, that it is a symbolic maze representing the multiple, intersecting paths of women’s collective experiences of trauma and violence. Ultimately, the Count is the patriarchal operative of history (and historiography) in his attempt to erase their identities and narratives, and thus any record of their existence. Through his “grisly machinery,” he mercilessly degrades and denies them subjectivity until they are only “Phantoms of the dead, phantoms of the living” (425), reduced to “one single woman with a multiplicity of hands and eyes and no name, no past, no future,” merely a collective “being in a void” (426).

The Count is not the only monster in the text, since Carter is equally interested in exploring monstrous women. She deploys another archetypal figure that haunts the cultural imagination, the Crone, typically represented in Carter’s texts as an older woman whose power is derived from aligning herself with the forces of patriarchy. Madame Schreck, who reappears in *Nights at the Circus*, acts as the “cruel” caretaker of the women in the Count’s harem. She is a consuming force, through her voracious appetite for small birds and the fetuses of unborn rabbits, as well as her vagina: “She throws open her legs and shows us her hole” (419); she reminds the women of their common animality by forcing them to lick clean her bare belly after she has messily eaten, or, she compels them to “crawl into the oblivion of her hole” (424, 422). Their fear of Madame Schreck begins to take on more power than their fear of the Count, and even “far more than death itself, since death is finite” (421). The narrator confesses that Madame is always “waiting for me in the subterranean torture-chamber deep at the heart of the maze of my brain, the Minotaur with the head of a woman and the orifice of a sow” (423), at which she and the other women are forced to “pay homage as if it were the mouth of an oracular cave” (424).

Madame Schreck, or, “the unimaginable wound of her sex” (421), is representative of the abject abyss of horror and fascination projected onto women’s bodies by a phallocentric economy; she is the Lacanian Thing, which Gary Farnell describes as “a phantasmic reference to an unnameable void at the centre of the Real, that amorphous, chaotic, meaningless physical level beyond all reference that both resists and provokes symbolization” (113). As the “archaic mother,” whose generative and destructive power marks the place of both birth and annihilation, she represents a confrontation with women’s bodies and desires as these exist both within and outside the patriarchal imagination. In other words, she is the myth of the monstrous-feminine that imprisons women, “through whose hole we must crawl to extinction, one day,” or, the narrator goes on to observe, her hole is perhaps “the way to freedom” since it is empty of meaning (428). As Farnell argues, within “the primordial Gothic tale” we often encounter “an emptiness which materializes as form,” an apparition that “blends the animal, the human, and the supernatural enough to blur all distinctions – an abject condition that is itself no more than a representation of the Real and its ungraspable Thing” (117-18). The Crone thus functions as a spectral embodiment of patriarchal fears; these fears construct women as monstrous and disruptive to justify the denial and repression of their bodies and desires; thus, embracing the overtly grotesque yet sensual

appetites and flesh of the monstrous-feminine might also present women with the way out of a repressive imaginary (a subversive yet problematic strategy Carter explores in multiple texts).

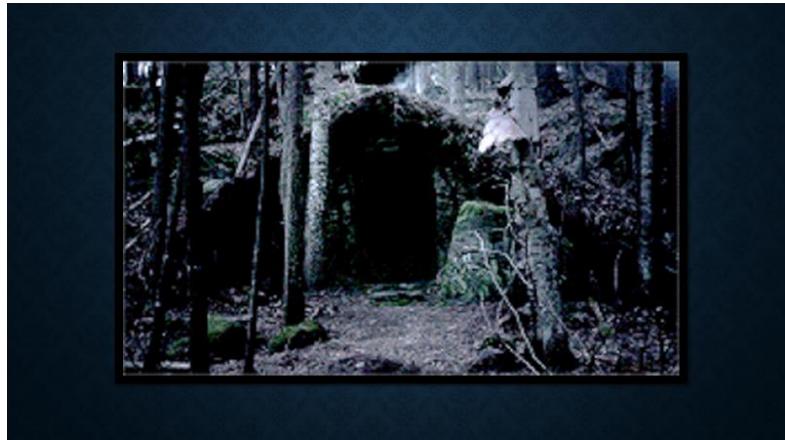
The Crone and her disruptive power of course play a central role in Eggers' *The Witch*, as the film is engaged in questioning why our culture is so haunted by this archetypal figure (S1).



In a note to the reader prefacing the original unpublished screenplay, Eggers describes his film as an “inherited nightmare” (ii), and he claims that by “going into deep, dark, horrific psychological places,” the film aims to demonstrate how “the shadows of the past live on today” (Robinson). For Eggers, those shadows are closely associated with a history of fear and repression of “feminine power in the male-dominated society [of] the early modern period,” fears that remain with us today even if we no longer believe there is a “little old lady who live[s] down the lane … flying on a broomstick and cutting up children” (Bitel). For the family in Eggers’ film, although she primarily remains an unseen presence, the witch is real and not simply imagined, yet Eggers explains she is also constructed from “a specific fairytale mythology built around her” (Bitel). This mythology is clearly transplanted from European folklore to the wilderness of the New World, a gothic, abject space that borders and threatens to engulf the family’s isolated settlement (S2).



This primeval space is associated with “the dark feminine” power of the witch, whose hovel is represented much like the opening to the cavernous abyss of Madame Schreck’s “hairy hole” (S3):



Eggers’ screenplay makes this imagery explicit: “Matted branches overhang its sagging moss-grown thatch-roof, upon which there is no chimney, just a hole puffing smoke. The whole thing looks held together by ill-omened weeds, plants, and sinister roots that grow all over and through the muddy walls like a plague” (55). The unruly, threatening wilderness of the witch’s domain—and by extension her sensuous and bloody appetite for male children (revealed in a surreal montage that references Goya’s *Saturn Devouring His Son*) (S4-below)—is set up as savage, primordial territory that must be tamed (or destroyed) by the colonizing forces of patriarchy, as represented by the father. William claims: “This is our home now. Fear it not. … We must conquer this wood. It will not consume us” (14) (in the film “wood” is changed to “wilderness”).

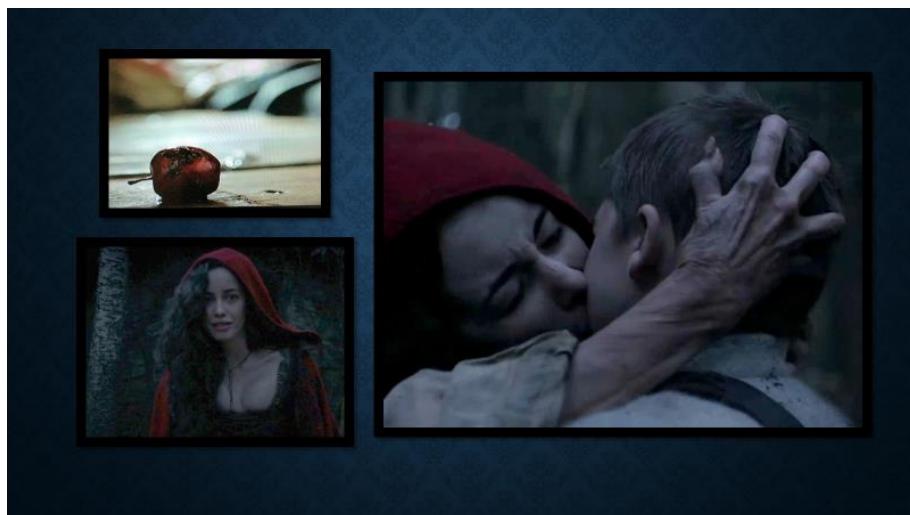


The father is also represented, somewhat anachronistically and in contradiction to the severity of his religious faith, as the voice and authority of Reason pitted against feminine superstition and hysteria. However, the more William rigidly clings to both his reason and faith the more this is shown to be deeply irrational, as his authority completely unravels, and it becomes clear that he holds no real power to “conquer” either the wilderness or the supernatural, demonic

forces that have targeted his family. By the end of the film, the family has disintegrated into madness and only Thomasin, the eldest daughter and central character within the film, is literally left standing in the aftermath as the sole survivor (S5):



Perhaps the devil wanted her all along, or, she gives in to the rationale of this world where the only possible freedom for women is on the margins. As noted by David Ehrlich, throughout the film Thomasin's "maturing body is [viewed by her family] as great a fount of evil as the woods outside her house" and she is "made to feel as though the devil lurks in her bones just as the witch resides in the forest." The family's fundamentalist Christian, or more specifically Calvinist, perspective, explicitly views women's bodies and desires as an "expression of original sin" (Ehrlich). At one point the eldest son Caleb—who is religiously fervent and fearful yet often shown incestuously peering at his sister's breasts—spits up a rotten apple right before his death, presumably inserted there by the witch. Earlier in the film, she seduces him in the guise of a voluptuous young woman; appearing like an eroticized version of Snow White (or Rosaleen in *The Company of Wolves*), her withered claw violently grasps his mouth to her own, all the better to consume his soul (William, after all, had insisted it was a wolf not a witch plaguing their family) (S6).



Eggers layers multiple cultural references like this to explore the various sources of fear and persecution directed toward women, thus building sympathy for Thomasin and her ultimate choice. Thomasin is scapegoated as the possessed, demonic force destroying the family from within, as they become increasingly afflicted with religious paranoia, starvation, incestuous claustrophobia, and the menacing infiltration of the “Witch in the Wood” (Eggers 35). Thomasin resists yet also realizes the futility of struggling against her parents’ hypocrisy (since William is arguably to blame for much of the family’s suffering while allowing Thomasin to take the brunt of her mother’s anger, suspicions, and jealousy). Consequently, Ehrlich argues, Thomasin comes “to recognize how she’s refracted through a male gaze [which] then spurs her to plot her escape from it”—though I might add only after her entire family has died—and her narrative arc leads to the conclusion that “[p]erhaps, *The Witch* suggests, making women afraid to own their bodies is a sure route toward helping them recognize their power.”



Indeed, the film opens and closes on Thomasin’s face, tracking her transformation from a “sweet” farm-girl—“Afraid. Tense. Confused” (Eggers 1)—to: “Laughing, ever increasing in pleasure and freedom … *Pure ecstasy*” (105) (**S7-above**). After accepting Black Phillip’s offer “to live deliciously” (103), she removes her shift (and thus any remnants of her former self, including shame and fear of the body), and walks naked into the forest to join the coven of witches chanting and levitating into the darkness of the trees (referencing Goya’s *Witches’ Flight*) (**S8-below**). It is only by claiming her own desires that Thomasin perhaps secures her survival and freedom, at least depending on one’s reading of the film’s ending, which is one of the most debated aspects of Eggers’ attempt to present a feminist narrative.

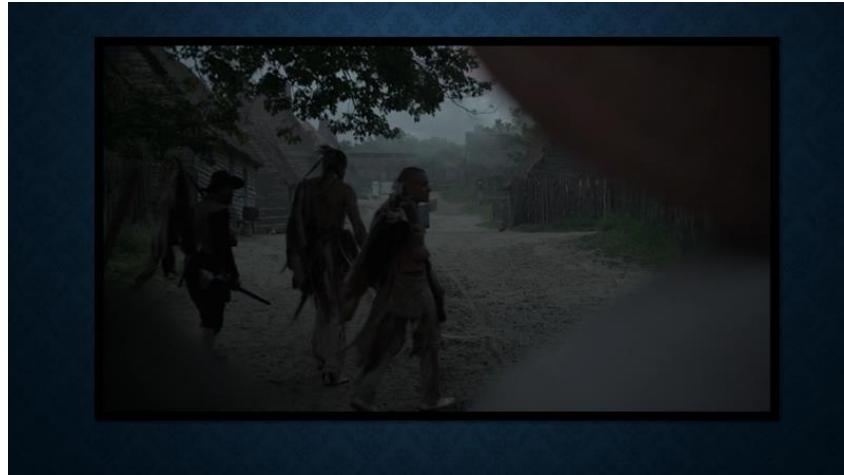


Although the closing images are brief, the screenplay's detailed description of the dancing witches suggests a more ambivalent reading of Thomasin's fate. The women are "grotesque – some humpbacks and cripples. ... All of them are filthy and nude or in strange patches and shreds of clothing. The Witches dance, gyrating, shaking, and quivering in a trance-like reverie around a cauldron and fire. ... Depraved. Subhuman. Bestial" (104). It appears that by joining them, Thomasin will also become "savage" and "depraved," and as murderous and blood-thirsty as the hag who destroyed her family. In the final image before the screen cuts to black, we see the slim shape of Thomasin alone at the apex of the trees, rising into the darkness yet strangely motionless (*S9-below*), as if crucified on the phallus of patriarchy's revenge against women who choose "to live deliciously" (keeping in mind the film takes place *before* the Salem witch hysteria).

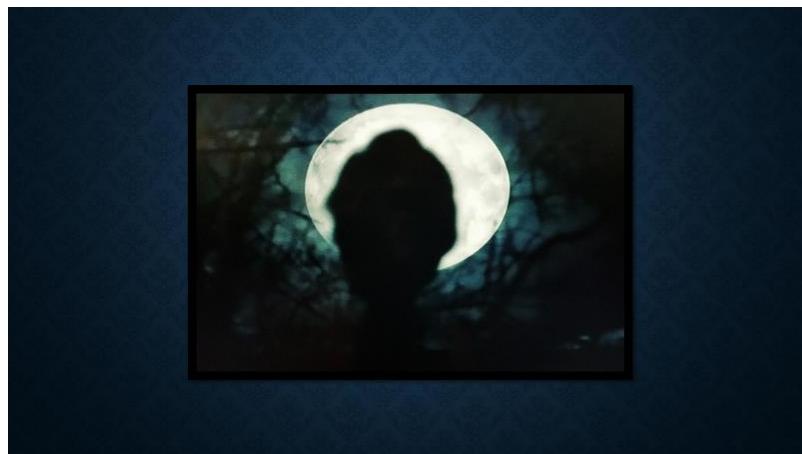


Eggers, however, defends his film as a feminist commentary on the ways in which "the evil witch [represents not only] men's fears and ambivalence and fantasies about female power" but "also women's fears and ambivalence and fantasies and desire about their *own* power" (Robinson). I would add that Eggers offers, through his apocalypse of the patriarchal American

family, an allegory for the history of America's demonization and destruction of its various "others"—including its indigenous peoples who are a spectral absence in the film (*S10-below*)—abjecting them to its geographical, social, and political margins.



Thomasin, after all, can only claim her freedom and power by embracing her own monstrousness. The narrator of "The Scarlet House" reaches a similar epiphany when she realizes that her imprisonment depends on her belief in the Count's "authority" (428). She concludes: "This world is a vileoubliette. Yet in its refuse I will find the key to free me" (428). In other words, the myths of patriarchy are a dungeon in which women's bodies are violently repressed until they become a "face without a mouth" and "eyes without a face" (428). Thus, embracing her body, and making her own patterns and meaning out of seemingly "disparate" images—constructing counter-narratives to the Count's fabricated memory tapes and myths—will allow the narrator to resist and reconstruct "the events that rendered [her] into non-being," and her spectral identity will "grow more substantial" (428) (*S11*).



Ultimately, the narrator and Thomasin undergo extreme ordeals, stripped of their identities until they are reduced to accepting the chaotic horror of their worlds, as well as their marginalized and bare existence in a society that fears and degrades women's bodies. Both characters are brought to the "place of annihilation" (Carter 421), and in an apocalyptic sense, this confrontation with the entropic violence of patriarchy also leads them to a visionary, ecstatic, and transformative understanding of the self. This would seem to imply, however, that women's victimization is an inevitable, or even acceptable, element of their lives, and in the contexts of a classical tragic or apocalyptic vision, that suffering is fundamentally necessary to the acquisition of self-knowledge. Understandably, Carter's and Eggers' representations of female victimization and empowerment have been critiqued, since their protagonists' freedom is gained on uncertain and perhaps just as oppressive terms as those that kept them imprisoned. I would contend, however, that Carter and Eggers offer feminist fables, and if not entirely liberating, at least relevant and timely warnings of the social and cultural forces responsible for the continuing oppression of women. Their texts expose the extreme limits of otherness that women have endured, both in the past and present, and emphasize women's resistance and survival despite their marginalized condition.

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