

REVISITING AND UPDATING H.P. LOVECRAFT'S "THE DREAMS IN THE WITCH HOUSE": JAUME BALAGUERÓ'S *VENUS* AS A CONTEMPORARY FEMINIST WITCH TALE

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ABSTRACT

Jaume Balagueró's film *Venus* (2022) adapts H.P. Lovecraft's short story "The Dreams in the Witch House" (1933), which amalgamates characteristic traits of cosmic horror, but presents them around the horror archetype of the witch. Balagueró's adaptation transforms Lovecraft's tale into a cinematic narrative which arises as a contemporary feminist story that vindicates female empowerment in the era of fourth-wave feminism and the post-humanities. A comparative analysis between both textualities based on Gérard Genette's narratological theories will pave the way for identifying intertextual, metatextual and hypertextual connections, while it will also underscore the evolving interpretation of the witch from a figure of monstrosity to an icon of feminist struggle against patriarchy.

KEYWORDS: Witchcraft, Adaptation, Narratology, the Monstrous-feminine, Post-humanities.

REVISITANDO Y ACTUALIZANDO "LOS SUEÑOS EN LA CASA DE LA BRUJA"
DE H.P. LOVECRAFT: *VENUS* DE JAUME BALAGUERÓ COMO CUENTO
DE BRUJAS FEMINISTA CONTEMPORÁNEO

RESUMEN

El largometraje *Venus* (2022) de Jaume Balagueró adapta la narración breve "Los sueños en la casa de la bruja" (1933) de H.P. Lovecraft, la cual amalgama rasgos característicos del terror cósmico, aunque los presenta en torno al arquetipo clásico de la bruja. La adaptación de Balagueró transforma el cuento de Lovecraft en una narración cinematográfica que se erige como una historia feminista contemporánea que reivindica el empoderamiento femenino en la era de la cuarta ola feminista y las poshumanidades. Un análisis comparativo entre ambas textualidades, basado en las teorías narratológicas de Gérard Genette, servirá para identificar conexiones intertextuales, metatextuales e hipertextuales, a la par que subrayará la interpretación evolutiva de la bruja de una figura de monstruosidad a un icono de la lucha feminista contra el patriarcado.

PALABRAS CLAVE: brujería, adaptación, narratología, lo monstruoso-femenino, poshumanidades.

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1. INTRODUCTION

Jaume Balagueró has become one of the most acclaimed contemporary Spanish filmmakers who specialize in genre cinema, particularly in horror fiction. Along with cinema directors like Alejandro Amenábar, Juan Antonio Bayona, Paco Plaza, Álex de la Iglesia, Guillem Morales, Eugenio Mira and Carlota Pereda, Balagueró belongs to a generation of consolidated horror filmmakers. According to Julio Ángel Olivares Merino (2011), as a cinema director, Balagueró integrates the influence of classic filmmakers along with his own authorial creativity, thus giving rise to his unique creative eclecticism, which involves a series of distinguishing thematic traits, such as the apocalyptic, the monstrosity of the postmodern city, recurrent loneliness, manifestations of the double, the individual's fragility, and references to existentialism and even nihilism. Additionally, as Olivares Merino further argues, Balagueró's cinema has been acclaimed both by audiences and critics, shifting alternatively from experimental films to commercial cinema. Likewise, from the beginning of his career, Balagueró has explored a significant array of archetypes from the horror tradition, such as demonic sects in *The Nameless* (1999), ghosts in *Fragile* (2005), and zombies in *REC* (2007). In his most recent film to date, *Venus*, released in 2022, Balagueró revisits and updates the archetype of the witch, insofar as it consists in a contemporary narrative of witches which is set in one of the districts in the city of Madrid. In the advent of the fourth-wave of feminism—which promotes women's empowerment all across the globe, the use of internet tools, transversalism, intergenerational relationships, and the struggle against patriarchy and sexual harassment (Moracho 2019)—Balagueró envisioned his film *Venus* as a narrative of female empowerment. *Venus* thus revisits classic tropes attached to the figure of the witch, and it takes the baton as a representative of a new generation of witches seeking to overcome pervasive practices of patriarchy that extend to present days.

Deeply aware of the horror tradition, as a genre filmmaker, in *Venus*, Balagueró aimed to put together a narrative that revolves around the archetype of the witch and that vindicates women's ancestral powers. In this respect, in a recently-published interview following the release of his film *Venus*, Balagueró confessed: “Me declaro fan absoluto de ese grupo de brujas que son como las amigas de tu abuela, de tu tía o de tu madre. Mujeres aparentemente normales que son tus vecinas en el edificio donde vives y que de repente descubres que son como las brujas de Macbeth”¹ (Fernández 2022). At the same time, though, he also added: “*Venus* habla del empoderamiento, no solo relacionado con el feminismo, sino con el concepto de la superación y de la transformación (...) sobre una mujer que se empodera sobre

¹ “I declare myself a devoted fan of those groups of witches who are like the friends of your grandmother, your aunt or your mother. Women who are apparently ordinary and happen to be your neighbours in the building where you live and, all of a sudden, you find out they are like Macbeth's witches” (the author's translation).



ella misma, sobre lo divino y sobre lo demoníaco”² (Fernández 2022). Judging from Balagueró’s words, his film *Venus* was aimed at striking a balance between tradition and modernity, between the conventional portrayal of the witch as grounded in folk tales and horror popular fiction, and its contemporary and updated archetype as symptomatic of discourses intrinsically related to the fourth-wave of feminism. As evidence of the entanglement between tradition and innovation, Balagueró’s film is based on Lovecraft’s tale “The Dreams in the Witch House,” published in *Weird Tales* in 1933, and ninety years after the publication of Lovecraft’s text, Balagueró’s film adaptation retains some of its basic elements, but also transforms the tale and updates it to contemporary times.

In his classic essay on supernatural horror in literature, Lovecraft outlines his concept of cosmic horror, referring to “a certain atmosphere of breathless and unexplainable dread of outer, unknown forces” and “a malign and particular suspension or defeat of those fixed laws of Nature which are our only safeguard against the assaults of chaos and the daemons of unplumbed space” (1945, 15). Some of these features are also recurrent in Balagueró’s cinema, and particularly, in his adaptation of Lovecraft’s original tale. Indeed, Lovecraft’s “The Dreams of the Witch House” partakes in cosmic horror, insofar as its protagonist comes across unknown and malignant forces which remain latent as a result of their invocation on behalf of a witch in former times. In Lovecraft’s tale, Walter Gilman, a student of mathematics and folklore, rents an attic room in the Witch house, in Arkham, Massachusetts, which used to host Keziah Mason, an accused witch who vanished mysteriously from a Salem jail in 1692. As the story goes, Gilman finds out that the attic is supposed to be cursed, and while he theorises that the unusual geometry of the room may enable travelling from one dimension to another, he begins to experience bizarre nightmares about the witch and her giant rat Brown Jenkin (Lovecraft 1945, 90). As Walpurgis Night is close at hand, he suspects that he might have been an accomplice in the kidnapping of a child who will be sacrificed in a bizarre ritual. Gilman finally dies as Brown Jenkin eats its way out of its chest, which leads the landlord and his few tenants to abandon the building. Years later, bones belonging to an older woman, children, and a giant rat are found on the foundations of the abode (111).

Loosely grounded in Lovecraft’s tale, Balagueró’s film *Venus* is set in the city of Madrid and revolves around a young dancer working at a night club, Lucía (Ester Expósito), who flees from her workplace after stealing a substantial supply of drugs and, as she is being hunted by a male gang of drug dealers, she determines to take shelter in an apartment block known as the Venus building, in a faraway district, in which her sister Rocío (Ángela Cremonte) and her niece Alba (Inés Fernández) live, being totally unaware that the building is cursed and inhabited by three aging

² “*Venus* revolves around empowerment, not only in relation to feminism, but in connection with the concept of self-improvement and transformation (...) about a woman who becomes empowered in relation to herself, the divine, and the demonic” (the author’s translation).



witches—including Marga (Magüi Mira), Romina (Aten Soria), and Rosita (María José Sarate)—who worship powerful female demonic entities. As cinema critic Desirée de Fez (2022) argues, Balagueró's horror film revolves around final girls and screen queens, but also witches and fright empresses. In fact, these apparent malignant female forces play an essential role in protecting Lucía from the gang of three men—including Calvo (Francisco Boira), Moro (Fernando Valdivielso), and Salinas (Federico Aguado)—who are in her pursuit, and these ancestral female entities also ensure Lucía's awakening and empowerment as a woman.

Given the narratological parallelisms between Lovecraft's and Balagueró's narratives of witches, this article aims to explore their intertextualities ranging from those passages that are retained in Balagueró's film to those thematic and formal elements that are transformed, while finally underscoring the components that are introduced in the film, which are aimed at turning Lovecraft's original tale into a portrayal of the contemporary witch in a feminist narrative of vindication and redemption. On the basis of Gérard Genette's terminology, intertextuality involves direct allusions between texts, metatextuality means explicit or implicit commentaries of one text on another, and hypertextuality implies the connection between a later narrative known as hypertext that transforms a previous narrative known as hypotext (1982, 23). An analysis of the transtextual correspondences between Balagueró's film and Lovecraft's short story through intertextual, metatextual and hypertextual links will give evidence of the updated and transformed portrayal of the witch from contemporary precepts such as the post-anthropocentric, the post-human, the technological, and the ontological from a feminist perspective.

2. THE FIGURE OF THE WITCH: PAST AND PRESENT

It was mainly in the nineteenth-century that gothic archetypes and tropes, from vampires to ghosts, became the subject of literary fiction. Although witchcraft and the figure of the witch in literature developed later in comparison with other gothic themes and characters, gothic writers, and subsequently, horror filmmakers began to feel interested in developing witch tales. From her origins, the witch has inextricably been linked with ancestral fears and anxieties toward women which were mostly rooted in patriarchal misconceptions. In fact, according to Freeman, gothic narratives traditionally establish a distinction between witchcraft, which they often associate with women and the worship of nature, and black magic, in which the conventionally male magician makes use of a variety of ritual practices (2019, 745). Nonetheless, from an anthropological perspective, according to Joseph Campbell (1976), women were the first witches associated with magic given women's ancestral ability to create new life. It was also believed that during some periods, such as the time of the menarche, women's magic gift became particularly powerful. In medieval treaties, though, witches were alleged to collaborate with malignant forces and cast terrible spells and curses which could even bring death. Witches were also inextricably linked to sexuality, insofar as they were supposed to have intercourse with the devil, and they were accused of causing male impotence, thus underscoring



ancestral male fears of castration. According to Barbara Walker (1985), the crone personifies a destructive motherly power capable of exerting control in a male-dominated world. Besides, Mary Russo coined the notion of the female grotesque to refer to the cavernous anatomical female body, thus associating women with earthly elements, which contributed to revalorising ancestral images of the female as representative of the earth mother and the witch (1995, 1). Russo further argues that the term grotesque is related to the Kristevan notion of the abject, which blurs physical boundaries, and the Freudian notion of the uncanny, which distorts the distinction between familiarity and strangeness in the human psyche. Accordingly, as a result of patriarchal definitions of woman as other, it was believed that women were more inclined to witchcraft than men as a result of woman's alleged powers of castration.

In the collective unconscious, a series of tropes have been conventionally associated with witches and have contributed to configuring their iconic depiction. White-haired and wrinkled-faced women in black, with a broomstick and a pointed hat, respond to the classical portrayal of witches as legacy of fairy tales. As Barbara Creed notes, though, "there is one incontestably monstrous role in the horror film that belongs to woman –that of the witch" (1993, 73). Mark Robson's film *The Seventh Victim* (1943) is alleged to be one of the earliest exponents in cinema in which the witch becomes a figure of terror. Later on, through films like Mario Bava's *Black Sunday* (1963) and Don Sharp's *Witchcraft* (1964), the witch joins the ranks of popular horror monsters in films that mostly revolve around the witch hunt on behalf of patriarchs. Nonetheless, it is Sidney Hayers's *Burn Witch Burn!* (1962) which has often been considered the first horror film with a witch as a central character. Subsequently, Dario Argento's series of witch films, like *Suspiria* (1977) and *Inferno* (1980), contributed to reinforcing the image of the witch as a malevolent and monstrous figure who aims to destroy the symbolic order. Through understated references to demonic possession, Brian de Palma's film *Carrie* (1976), based on Stephen King's novel, could be interpreted as the portrayal of a contemporary young witch canalising and releasing frustrated desire in the wake of second-wave feminism.

The figure of the witch has been recruited in the service of ecology, feminism, spiritual renewal, and personal development in contemporary times (Freeman 2019, 746), thus marking the figure of the witch as distinctly female in order to accomplish feminist aspirations in the era of the Symbiocene. As a result of a recent revival in folk horror cinema, films like Robert Eggers's *The Witch* (2015) focus their narratives on central female characters who acquire extraordinary influence through witchcraft, esoteric rituals, and a close association with the powers of nature. In the last decade, there has been a proliferation of horror films which portray contemporary witches, underscoring their intrinsic connection with nature, their links between family generations, and their latent power as aged females which symbolises feminist vindications. Films like Ari Aster's *Hereditary* (2018), Natalie Erika James's *Relic* (2020) and Axelle Carolyn's *The Manor* (2021) revolve around aging women, suffering from illnesses such as dementia, who increasingly acquire unforeseen dominion, they defy the established boundaries of life and death through ancestral rituals with nature, and they assert links with other females in



resemblance with a coven of witches. In this context, Balagueró's film *Venus* also partakes in contemporary portrayals of the witch in which women from older and younger generations join each other, vindicate themselves, and achieve female empowerment. These contemporary horror films which focus on the figure of the witch are grounded in theories about transversal post-humanities. According to Rosi Braidotti, "post-humanism prioritizes a critical assessment of the Humanist ideal of 'Man' as the allegedly universal measure of all things, while post-anthropocentrism criticizes species hierarchy and anthropocentric exceptionalism" (2019, 1181). Consequently, transversal post-humanities draw attention to post-anthropocentric reconfigurations of life, decolonial theories, the entanglement of the ecological and the computational, and the prevalence of ontological grounding for critical posthuman scholarship (Braidotti 2019, 1190).

Contemporary cinematic portrayals of the witch from a feminist perspective are also rooted in the notions of post-anthropocentric theories (Barad 2003), material feminism (Alaimo and Hekman 2008) and the posthuman (Braidotti 2019), which call into question human exceptionalism, draw attention to the ontological component of the materiality of the body, and give emphasis to blurred identities. Post-anthropocentric precepts question androcentric and dominant interests, while they give value to other realities that move beyond the anthropocentric dimension and subject. Furthermore, as Stacy Alaimo and Susan Hekman claim, material feminisms bring the ontology of the human body and of the natural world into the forefront of feminist theory (2008, 1). In this respect, material feminists highlight the materiality of the body, the need to reconceptualise nature as agentic, and the will to turn the focus from epistemology to ontology. Rather than privileging the discursive as was the case of postmodern precepts, material feminisms defend the need for a material turn in feminist theory. Mostly based on Karen Barad's premise about posthuman performativity and agential realism (2003), material feminism involves incorporating the material into the discursive, the nonhuman into the human, and the ontological into the epistemological. Additionally, according to Braidotti (2019), post-anthropocentric precepts are critical of human hierarchies and human exceptionalism. In a historical context characterised by advanced capitalism, climate change and artificial technology, known as the Anthropocene, the normative epistemic structure pertaining to traditional humanities is challenged in favour of the characterisation of the posthuman condition as computational, ecological, and diversified. As Braidotti argues, the posthuman environment is not only the prerogative of humans alone, insofar as it involves "the coexistence of multiple organic species, computational networks, and technological artefacts" (2019, 1187). In this respect, drawing on Donna Haraway, "a cyborg is a cybernetic organism as well as a creature of fiction" (2001, 291), which blurs the boundaries between the animal and the human, the animal-human and the machine, and the physical and the non-physical, while it is considered "a creature in a post-gender world" (2001, 292). Besides, "the cyborg is a matter of fiction and lived experience that changes what counts as women's experience" (Braidotti 2001, 291). It could be argued that the post-humanist approach is thus characterised as mainly post-anthropocentric and post-gendered.



In the same vein, the portrayal of the witch in a series of contemporary Spanish horror films reflects the premises pertaining to post-humanist theories and material feminisms, thus amalgamating discursive and materialist approaches, drawing attention to nature and the body, and the entanglement of the human with the non-human. As cases in point, Álex de la Iglesia's *Brujas de Zugarramurdi* (2013) arises as a folk horror tale emphasising the connection between the witches and the natural environment, Paco Plaza's *La Abuela* (2021) brings to the fore the posthuman through the psychoanalytic notions of the uncanny and the abject, and Carlota Pereda's *La Ermita* (2023) underlines the connections between women belonging to different family generations, giving particular emphasis to the material turn through continuous visual references to nature and the body, but also through feminist psychoanalytic references. In this context, Jaume Balagueró's film *Venus* (2022) amalgamates the notions of the posthuman and material feminism, updating and transforming H.P. Lovecraft's tale "The Dreams in the Witch House" (1933) by means of resorting to instances of transtextuality. Drawing on Mikhail Bakhtin's theory of dialogism and Julia Kristeva's notion of intertextuality, Genette's coins the concept of transtextuality, which responds to "all that sets the text in relationship, whether obvious or concealed, with other texts" (1992, 83). Given the fact that Balagueró's film is based on H.P. Lovecraft's short story, what follows is an analysis of instances of different kinds of transtextuality, comprising intertextuality, metatextuality and hypertextuality in relation to Lovecraft's tale.

3. INTERTEXTUAL LINKS: PLACES, RITUALS, DREAMS

Approaching Balagueró's film as an adaptation of Lovecraft's original tale, there are a series of elements that display the intertextualities existing between both narratives, involving the prevalence of the house, esoteric rituals, and the relapse of nightmares. In Lovecraft's tale, the house where the plot unfolds acquires essential relevance, as is also the case with the Venus building in Balagueró's film, which actually gives it its title. Additionally, in Lovecraft's short story, the male protagonist, Walter Gilman, devotes his time to perusing the rituals that the witch and her partners performed, in which children played a major role, as also happens in Balagueró's film. Finally, in Lovecraft's tale, nightmares become pervasive, as Walter Gilman experiences a series of nightmares which make him aware of the witch's latent presence and, in Balagueró's film, the female protagonist, Lucía, also perceives the malevolent presence that haunts the building through a series of persistent bad dreams. As the plot in the film unfolds, boundaries between initially divergent dimensions become blurred, thus calling into question anthropocentric and androcentric realities in an eminently esoteric and feminine dimension which is regulated by alternative principles and realities. In this post-anthropocentric universe, domestic settings, magic and the unconscious take precedence over the public sphere, rationality, and the consumerist world.

In Lovecraft's tale, Walter Gilman, as a student fascinated by folklore and witchcraft, takes lodgings at the house where the witch Keziah Jones, judged



during the Salem trials, had her abode. As is stated in the story, “when he heard the hushed Arkham whispers about Keziah’s persistent presence in the old house (...) he resolved to live in the place at any cost. A room was easy to secure; for the house was unpopular, hard to rent, and long given over to cheap lodgings” (1933, 87). In analogy, in Balagueró’s film, the Venus building –where Lucía takes shelter to escape from the male gang who are in her pursuit– is also believed to be cursed and is almost deserted, as it is connected with the deaths of some children. When Gilman explores the attic room, where the witch used to perform her spells, he notices “the timber and plaster walls for traces of cryptic designs at every accessible spot” (88). Analogously, in the film, when the neighbours tell Lucía that the attic has been empty for over thirty years, but still, she hears noises coming from the attic at night, she decides to explore it and finds the walls inscribed with witchcraft symbolism and a series of photographs hanging down from the ceiling as testimonies of offered sacrifices.

Eventually, in Lovecraft’s tale, Gilman’s frequent encounters with the witch and her evil comrades imply that “the Witches’ Sabbath was drawing near” and that it was close to “Walpurgis-Night, when hell’s blackest evil roamed the earth and all the slaves of Satan gathered for nameless rites and deeds” (92). Correspondingly, in Balagueró’s film, the aging witches living in the Venus building are also making the final arrangements for the coronation day, which will sanctify the rule of the female demon known as Lamaasthu. In both narratives, the witches intend to take part in a ritual involving children in which the male and female protagonist in the respective stories are expected to play an important part. Nonetheless, if in Lovecraft’s tale, Gilman suspects he may have been used to kidnap one of the children as a result of the witch’s machinations, in Balagueró’s film, Lucía acts in defence of her niece. Hence, in resemblance with the iconic figure of the witch in popular folklore and fairy tales, the witch usually displays a deviant sexuality and is usually childless, which causes her to kidnap, kill or even eat children. In Lovecraft’s story, it is mentioned that, as a result of the witch’s misdeeds, one of the neighbours in the house assumes “a child or two would probably be missing” because he “knew about such things, for his grandmother in the old country had heard tales from her grandmother” (93), thus handing down prejudices against older women from generation to generation. In Balagueró’s film, in analogy with Gilman’s research, Lucía also finds information about the murders of children in close connection with the building that she is now inhabiting.

In Lovecraft’s short story, after taking lodgings at the witch’s house, Gilman begins to have horrible nightmares, stating that “the dreams were wholly beyond the pale of sanity” (89) and from which he manages to bring some objects, which are described as “organic and inorganic alike” and “totally beyond description or even comprehension” (90), thus blurring the boundaries between dimensions. Analogously, in Balagueró’s film, her niece Alba explains to Lucía that dreams can be interpreted as doors opening to other dimensions, as she keeps a box with all the tokens that the figure of the servant has bestowed upon her while she is dreaming, including children’s tears, teeth, and a cockroach. Accordingly, as a result of her own nightmares, Lucía is also bequeathed several items on behalf of the servant which will have a purpose of their own to protect herself in the future.



4. METATEXTUAL ECHOES: TRIADS, CRONES, AND THE FEMALE GROTESQUE

In Lovecraft's tale, there are a series of latent features which are revisited, transformed, and elaborated on in Balagueró's film in terms of triads established among characters and the perpetuation of female generations, the figures of the crone and the female grotesque, and the psychoanalytic notions of the abject and the uncanny. Insofar as Genette's notion of metatextuality involves critical commentaries on previous texts, it may be argued that Balagueró's film adaptation draws on traditional interpretations of the characterisation of the witch as an archetype, but subverts them in order to offer a contemporary portrayal of the mythical figure of the witch, thus envisioning from a vindicative and empowered perspective. As C.S. Lewis (1964) claims, in spite of their conventionally kind portrayal, fairies were also perceived as demoted angels (135), in analogy with witches, who have been traditionally categorised as malicious (La Fontaine 2016), although they also possessed healing powers (Perrone et al. 1993). Drawing on the premises of material feminisms, the material takes priority over the discursive, the nonhuman over the human, and the ontological over the epistemological. Accordingly, as is displayed in Balagueró's film, the portrayal of witches is not entirely positive or negative—as they are wicked, but protective—in comparison with Lovecraft's narrative, in which the witch is eminently evil. Besides, given the fact that both narratives are illustrative of cosmic horror, some entities evoke mythical goddesses from the classical tradition who were inherently ambiguous in nature.

Lovecraft's short story comprises subtle mythical references, particularly in terms of triads. In Lovecraft's tale, it is stated that "both Brown Jenkin and the old woman (...) had been urging him to go somewhere with them and to meet a third being of greater potency" (1933, 91). This reference to an ancestral triad is resumed in Balagueró's film adaptation, and given its pervasive witchcraft imagery, the Greek goddess Hecate, who was commonly represented as triple-bodied, is called to mind, as the goddess of the moon, of crossroads, and of the underworld. Additionally, Hecate's triple quality recalls mythical female triads that are subtly evoked in the film, like the Graces who are alleged to be goddesses of beauty and fertility, the Fates who are considered divine figures who control the life of mortals, and the Furies who are regarded as deities of vengeance. When Lucía determines to escape, she joins her young sister Rocío and her niece Alba, who is only a child, thus configuring a first female triad in resemblance with the Graces. In the Venus building, Lucía becomes acquainted with the three aging female neighbours who live on the flat upstairs—Marga, Romina and Rosita—who are welcoming, but inquisitive, and will gradually reveal their identity as witches who are getting ready for the arrival of a female demon known as Lamaasthu and control the destinies of their counterparts, as happens with the Fates. Another female triad comprises a series of female entities who are endowed with preternatural powers as is the case with the Furies. Aunt Galga possesses the gift of divination and her rituals bear resemblance with the mythical figure of Pythia at the Oracle of Delphi, who would fall into a trance to foretell the future. A female entity—who lives in the attic upstairs and is known as the servant—



interacts with the three young protagonists through their nightmares and brings them presents in resemblance with Circe as a mythical sorceress. Finally, a female creature, whose appearance strongly recalls the Venus figurine from the Palaeolithic period commonly known as Venus of Willendorf, makes her appearance in the flat of the young protagonists as a fertility goddess, but also as a goddess of destructive power.

In Lovecraft's tale, the witch lives in perfect communion with nature, and she appears to establish relationships with the sky, the earth, and the underworld. The main character, Gilman, even considers "it was by no means impossible that Keziah had actually mastered the art of passing through dimensional gates," and thus explains the witch's longevity, stating that "Time could not exist in certain belts of space, and by entering and remaining in such a belt one might preserve one's life and age indefinitely" (1933, 102). As a director, Balagueró mentions that he envisioned his film as a narrative of cosmic horror (Fernández 2022), insofar as, at the beginning of the film, it is stated that, "three innocent female children will die at dawn, a new planet will rise from nowhere and it will devour the sun," thus putting forward a cosmology entirely run by females under the protection of Lamaasthu as a female demon. These references to the sky, the earth and the underworld, while making allusion to another female triad, bring to mind Robert Graves's myth of the triple goddess, comprising the goddess of the sky who exerts influence on the phases of the new moon, full moon, and waning moon; the goddess of the earth who exerts control over the seasons of spring, summer, and winter, and the goddess of the underworld, who manages the life stages of birth, procreation, and death. The different female triads that pervade the film reinforce the presence of the mythical figure of the triple goddess, who stand in perfect unison with the seasons, the moon, and the cycle of life. In the film, the figure of the absent mother, Rocío and Lucía, and Alba belong to different generations, thus symbolising the different life stages in communion with the phases of the moon and the seasons of nature. From a psychoanalytic perspective, drawing on Creed's theory of the monstrous-feminine, the diverse female generations respectively represent the archaic mother, the castrated/castrating mother, and the phallic girl.

Moreover, both narratives are rooted in the traditional portrayal of the witch as an aging woman, although Balagueró's film offers an interpretation which reflects feminist reinterpretations of the figure of the crone. In Lovecraft's short story, Gilman refers to the character of Keziah Mason "as an ancient crone" (1933, 119), and he describes her, mentioning that "her bent back, long nose, and shrivelled chin were unmistakable, and her shapeless brown garments were like those he remembered. The expression on her face was one of hideous malevolence and exultation, and when he awaked he could recall a croaking voice that persuaded and threatened" (93). Gilman's description of the witch as a crone complies with Herbert Covey's depiction of the witch in popular folklore, since it highlights old age as one of her most outstanding features, stating that, "by the nineteenth-century, the older woman was firmly entrenched as the image of the witch" (1991, 74). Nonetheless, in the film, even though this image is resumed by means of the three female neighbours living in the Venus building, it gains further complexity insofar as it could be argued that this characterisation in the film rather responds to Walker's precepts in relation



to the crone. As Walker argues, the crone “established the cyclic system of perpetual becoming” (1985, 14), stating that it was “the feminine equivalent of the old man with a white beard who lived in the sky,” and “it represented an “all-powerful Mother, who embodied the fearful potential for rejection, abandonment, death” (1985, 12), whom men found particularly intimidating. As is revealed in the film, despite their apparent power, the men chasing Lucía find themselves totally helpless at the mercy of powerful and destructive aging female forces that exert dominion all over the Venus building.

According to Russo, the female grotesque refers to the “cavernous anatomical female body” and underscores “associations of the female with the earthly” (1). In Balagueró’s film, the three aging witches make use of elements from nature, such as toads and herbs, to make the necessary arrangements for the day of the coronation. Female bodies blur their established boundaries to commune with nature and also with other female bodies in a display of the abject. When Lucía finds her sister Rocío imprisoned and injured, her blood tinges her own body and fuses with the blood of her own wounds. When the male gang are in pursuit of Lucía and they consult the pythoness to tell them her whereabouts, she mistakes Lucía’s identity for that of her sister Rocío. When Lucía abandons the building with her niece in her arms, their alliance between generations is graphically displayed. The blurring of identities not only takes place at the level of the body, but also in terms of the psyche by virtue of the uncanny as the conjunction of the familiar and the strange, which blurs identities between female characters. By means of establishing contact with them through dreams, the figure of the servant provides Lucía and her niece Alba with elements from nature which turn into amulets and tokens to protect themselves. In her dreams, Lucía also finds her body covered with insects, which mostly come out from the stab wound on her thigh, thus suggesting a symbiotic and parasitical connection between nature and the female body.

Upon referring to Keziah Mason as the witch, Lovecraft’s original tale also comprises passages that describe her on the basis of the psychoanalytic notions of the abject and the uncanny. Drawing on Kristeva, the concept of the abject situates itself “on the edge of non-existence” (1982, 2), whereas Sigmund Freud defines the uncanny as “that class of the terrifying which leads back to something long known to us, once very familiar” (1964, 2-3). In Lovecraft’s story, the witch becomes a source of the abject, as her actions give way to ludicrous and gory passages that subvert physical boundaries, while she also turns into a source of the uncanny, as the male protagonist feels both attracted and repulsed by her latent presence. As is stated in the tale, “he felt the crone’s withered claws clutching at him” (1933, 130), thus becoming a source of the abject and of the uncanny. Through these notions, the portrayal of the witches in Balagueró’s film brings to the fore the female grotesque as related to the body, which becomes a source of the abject, but also the projection of an inner state that reverts to the uncanny.



5. HYPERTEXTUALITY: IN THE WAKE OF POST-HUMANITIES

Balagueró's film *Venus* also establishes hypertextual connections with Lovecraft's story, insofar as, despite being considered a film adaptation of Lovecraft's classic tale, Balagueró's film, as a hypertext, transforms and elaborates on Lovecraft's short story, which functions as a hypotext with respect to the film. In comparison with the original tale which the film adapts, *Venus* introduces a series of innovative elements that depart significantly from Lovecraft's text, particularly because Balagueró's adaptation is aimed at updating the original short story to contemporary times and presenting it to younger audiences. Moreover, the innovative features that Balagueró's film emphasises in contrast with Lovecraft's tale mostly respond to contemporary theories pertaining to the notions of the post-human from a feminist perspective.

In comparison with the original tale, Balagueró's adaptation arises within the framework of theoretical philosophies like posthumanism. The kind of femininity that is heralded in the film corresponds with the posthuman condition, insofar as women are portrayed in relation to nature, new technologies, and diversity. Insofar as posthuman philosophies leave behind humanism and emphasise the role of nonhuman agents—whether they be animals, plants or technology—both the aging and younger witches in Balagueró's film establish a symbiotic relationship with other non-human elements. Drawing on Haraway's thesis which rejects the rigid boundaries between humanity and technology and Braidotti's development of the notion of the cyborg, in Balagueró's film, Lucía takes advantage of them so that she exchanges the traditional broomstick for a mobile phone and a remote control, while she resorts to the servant's gifts—a stapler and some tape—to cure her stab wound.

While Lovecraft's narrative is set in Arkham, Massachusetts, Balagueró's film is set in the contemporary Villaverde district of Madrid and focuses on the vicissitudes of a young woman who works in a night club and must fight economic constraints and patriarchy on equal terms. In a context that fuses dance music, drugs, and new technologies together with traditional elements from the folklore, Balagueró's film about witchcraft appeals to younger audiences and constructs a contemporary tale of witches that also reflects everyday life. By means of establishing contact with the female entities and witches living in the Venus building, which also happens to be her female relatives' home, Lucía undergoes a process of empowerment as a young woman, but also of personal transformation who leads her to take an active role to save her family and reveal herself as the heiress of a genealogy of witches.

Balagueró's film can be described as an exercise of feminisation of the original story, inasmuch as the main characters in Lovecraft's tale—Walter Gilman, Frank Elwood, and Joseph Mazurewicz, who all live in the Witch House—are men, whereas, in *Venus*, except for the male gang of drug dealers who chase Lucía, all the characters are women. Hence, there is a reversal of gender, particularly in the main character of the narrative, who transforms from a young man in the original story into a young woman in Balagueró's film.

In comparison with the original tale, the Manichean assumptions that establish a schism between good and evil characters in Lovecraft's narrative are also constantly disrupted in the film. If, in the original story, the roles of Walter Gilman,



as the hero, and of Keziah Jones, as the witch and villainess, are clearly differentiated as representatives of good and evil, in the film, despite being the heroine, Lucía is far from perfect and kind-hearted, insofar as she has neglected her responsibilities with her family and has stolen a stash of drugs from the night club where she works. Conversely, the malignant forces that she encounters in the building where she joins her sister and niece ultimately help Lucía and her family escape from the male thugs who are in their pursuit. As individualism is left behind, drawing on Alaimo and Hekman's notions of porosity, fluidity and interrelations between bodies, the identities between the different female characters are blurred by means of the symbolic overlapping of their bodies and the blurring of the members pertaining to different family generations.

The exploitation on behalf of men that Lucía and her coworkers face at the night club, along with Rocío's struggle to raise her child as a single mother, complies with feminist tenets. In Balagueró's film, even though the female characters are not portrayed as entirely good-natured and kind-hearted, precisely because they are witches belonging to different generations and typologies, aligned with nature and technology, it is ultimately contended that evil comes almost exclusively from the male characters, so that the film turns into a vindictive tale of witches. As the three gang of men –comprising Salinas, Moro, and Calvo– penetrate the Venus building, the different triads of witches slay them. The aging witches kill Calvo when he pretends to be the owner of the building. After stabbing Lucía, Salinas is slain by one of the wicked female forces in the building. Lucía murders Moro when he tries to attack her. The three men are beheaded, which conjures the biblical character of Salome, but also a reversal of the mythical figure of Medusa. In an iconic final scene, as Lucía leaves the building –wearing a crown, with her niece Alba in her arms, and holding the sports bag crammed with the stolen drugs– Arruza, the head drug dealer, kneels down and apologises, while Lucía, who calls herself “la que trae la luz del día,” exonerates him.

6. CONCLUSION

Balagueró's film *Venus* arises as a cinematic narrative that blends the traditional portrayal of the witch with contemporary depictions informed by the discourses of post-anthropocentrism, material feminisms, and posthumanism. Accordingly, it still retains the imagery of the witch as a crone, described as an older widow, dependent and poor, whose practices operate on the edge of moral laws, and who was turned into a social scapegoat to explain deaths, crop failures, and illnesses. Nonetheless, in its plethora of different typologies of witches in terms of age, aesthetics and generations, the film also defends the image of the contemporary witch as an imperfect woman who has been wronged and longs for redemption, thus presenting a narrative of female empowerment.

Accordingly, Balagueró's film offers a post-anthropocentric approach to the characterisation of the contemporary witch which complies with the Symbiocene and moves beyond the anthropocentric and androcentric subject to renew the union with



the forces of nature. As Lucía leaves behind her subjugation to the gang of men, she embraces a female universe in which the values and priorities are radically reversed. Besides, Balagueró's film also conforms to the tenets of material feminism, insofar as the female body takes further protagonism in its diversity and non-normative configurations, the non-human as embodied by alternative realities is also taken into consideration, and the ontological focus on the being is more profoundly revered in comparison with the epistemological. As a case in point, Lucía's normative body is constantly injured and even transformed as a cyborg by effect of artificial gadgets, she acknowledges the transcendental significance of alternative dimensions and realities, and she also appreciates her newly acquired ontology that grants her a new identity as a woman and her status as a witch. Likewise, Lucía embraces the posthuman condition, since, in her communal fight against patriarchy, her body blends with gadgets and artificial substances that grant her the appearance of a female cyborg. Balagueró's portrayal of the contemporary witch is thus rooted in preceding prototypes, but this representation is thoroughly renewed to comply with the prevailing times in which categorisations of the human and the non-human are constantly blurred for the sake of feminist vindication. As has been shown, displays of intertextuality, metatextuality and hypertextuality reach a balance between the prevalence of classic representations of the witch and contemporary portrayals that bridge the gap between the past and the present.

As a contemporary feminist tale of witches, Balagueró's film encourages the prevalence of the female body in its different variants and the reinforcement of collective female identities by establishing bonds with other women, while it calls into question clearly-cut definitions that categorise goddesses, witches, fairies, and female demons. In Balagueró's film, the contemporary witch turns into a fallible and human, but empowered, action heroine, who not only lives on the margins of society, but also obliges those who judge her to kneel down and make amends for the wrongs she was made to suffer in the past.

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