

Horror Movies as Witchful Thinking: False Society, Fake Films, Phonic Forces and Other Hexed Issues in Cinema 1922–2012

Drehli Robnik

Abstract

This essay takes off from: a) the play of names, signs and allusions as well as the references to social/political power formations inherent in horror film and its history; b) a quotation from Theodor W. Adorno's according to which "false society", that is, a society based on capitalist rationality, is the "principle that casts a spell over everything" ("das Prinzip, das alle verhext"). Along these lines, and drawing heavily on the powers of punning (as poor people's deconstructionism), the hexed questions of political theory and a *witchful thinking* that runs through cinema and its insight-generating capabilities are traced in their mutual entanglement. The relevant names and titles that come into play here are *Witchfinder General* (1968), *Suspiria* (1977), *Berberian Sound Studio* (2012), *Häxan* (1922), Jules

Michelet, Herbert Fux and, above all, *Mark of the Devil* (1970).

Keywords: Theodor W. Adorno, deconstructionism, critical theory, political theory, horror cinema, social history, social theory, cinema as a site of insight, punning.

Heavy Punning: Adorno and Adrian, Hex and Fux – *Mark of the Devil*

Since this is a montage of film scenes plus some theory-based jokes, or joke-based theorising (which amounts to the same thing), thus an *attempt* at an article, the kind of attempt that some people call an ‘essay’ in the narrow sense, I might as well begin with A for Adorno and with his essay on the essay. In 1958, Theodor W. Adorno writes in “The Essay as Form”: “for the essay, culture is not some epiphenomenon superimposed on being that must be eliminated, but rather what lies underneath is itself artifice (*thesei*), false society. [...] The essay owes its freedom in its choice of objects, its sovereignty vis-à-vis all priorities of fact or theory to the circumstance that for it all objects are equally near the center, to the principle that casts a spell over everything.”¹ This “principle that casts a spell over everything”, which in its god-like status maintains an albeit false equality between all facts and fictions, humans and theories, before it – this principle of “false society” is in Adorno’s original text called “[das] Prinzip, das alle verhext”.² The principle, that behexes or

bewitches “alle” – ‘them all’, ‘all of them’ or ‘everyone’: in false society, all are *verhext* or *verwunschen*, as the German fairy tale term goes, meaning ‘enchanted’, but with an evil twist, literally ‘wished into something’ – which makes for my first pun, blending *verhexen* into *verwünschen*, witching into wishing, in an attempt at wishful witchful thinking. (Reading about how the principle of false society bewitches all of them, I feel reminded of *All of Them Witches*, the title of the book which the heroine of *Rosemary’s Baby* [Roman Polanski, 1968] is given by a friend who tries to warn her about a satanist conspiracy against her; that book title, in one of the film’s scariest and memorable scenes, gives rise to some twisted word play.)

This essay is a matter of heavy punning, a question of questionable translations. I will think, write and argue with – rather than speak about – certain scenes from quite well-known horror films dealing with witches, in order to comment on the following questions: how do these films translate power relations in false society into images that have us perceive,

experience these power relations, images that affect us, which is another way of asking: how do these films force us to think power relations at the thresholds, at crisis points, of perception? And how do the following two aesthetic factors – these two perception-related rather than art-related – factors come into play here? The first factor is an emphasis on phonic forces (which might be sonic forces pronounced with a lisp; and thus, as a mutation of what is said and what is heard, it might already be an example of itself, of the sonic-phonic in a performative mode). It is an emphasis on the auditory in film that points toward a crisis of social representation, especially of the visual representation of the social. The second factor is a certain ‘fakeness’, which, as we know from many horror films, is hardly ever a deficiency; much rather, it is a key to the making of sense. It is also a key to the torture chambers of unequal society, maybe even to those of cinema.

A witchful thinking of cinema (or with cinema, much more than about cinema): we can risk the assumption that such a thinking involves a

playful, twisted, essay-like gesture towards facts and *faitiches* (Bruno Latour’s name for those interspeciary beings in which the parts of ‘given’ fact/*fait* and ‘made-up’ fetish become indistinguishable) within the ontology of cinema. It involves moving from the certainty of well-founded determinations to hegemonic articulations in antagonistic society or disputed discursive fields, that is, to making choices. When André Bazin’s essays on the ontology of cinema were published in English in 1967, this was done under the title *What is Cinema?*³ To an ontology of cinema that makes its choices and unfounded distinctions along the lines of witchful thinking (rather than making definitions on the grounds of essentials), the title question, which implies a twisted definition, would have to be not *What is Cinema?*, but *Witch is Cinema?*

Luckily, I don’t have to make any of this up, because it’s all there, and it has been there all the time staring at us (another lesson that horror cinema teaches us). And I can rely on sources other than Adorno and Bazin. We just have to

take witch movies at their word. So, let's start with the one witch movie on which many of the contributions collected in this issue of *Cine-Excess* are focused: *Mark of the Devil* (*Hexen bis aufs Blut gequält*, Michael Armstrong, 1970). According to that movie's German title, matters seem to be pretty obvious: *Hexen bis aufs Blut gequält*, literally 'witches tortured till blood flows' – this is a promise, and it is, among other things, what we get to see and hear in the film. But, turning to its English title, *what* in this film is the 'mark of the devil'? This is not *The Exorcist* (William Friedkin, 1973) or *The Omen* (Richard Donner, 1976), films in which matters of marking are much clearer and in which the finding or spontaneous showing of marks on possessed bodies carries so much dramatic weight. In the 1970 witch movie in question, 'marks of the devil' are made up, in every sense of the word: they are fabricated by witchfinders. This business of fabricating marks immediately opens up Pandora's Box (to put it in a jargon that is apposite to the topic): the mark could be many things, too many to keep them neatly under control.

Not least, the marks could be brands. Taking our cue from the practices and logics of exploitation cinema, we can easily read the production of statements from wounded bodies, marking them, making them speak, turning them into signs – in short: we can read the branding of bodies as the brand offered by *Mark of the Devil* – its unique selling proposition. But inadvertently and almost immediately, such a brand claim for uniqueness becomes entangled in a web of predecessors, successors and competitors, and this is especially true of exploitation cinema. Think of *Mark of the Devil's* musical main title theme which you cannot hear or hum without confusing it with another title theme to a fake torture horror film that seems to have ripped off Michael Holm's composition. (I'm speaking of Riz Ortolani's *Cannibal Holocaust* [Ruggero Deodato, 1980] theme.)

So we have to ask the witch question: which mark is this about? Which body is held to be acting as a brand? Apart from tortured bodies of women, there are male faces that could act as marks: the faces of Udo Kier, Herbert Fux,

Reggie Nalder. But let's turn to the film's director. If I say 'director', you will say 'what? ... which?', because, as if things weren't hexed enough already, the film has two directors – one literal, one factual, embodied. So, let's turn away from Mr Armstrong whose name in 1970, a year after the first lunar landing, was all-too resonant, and turn to the director who made his own tortured body, his belly even, highly visible in *Mark of the Devil* (also in its sequel). Like so many good movie directors, Adrian Hoven is *in* his (and Michael Armstrong's) own film *as a* director, by way of self-allegory and movie-allegory: he plays a showman who deals in deceptive representations, that is, with fakes that move people in public, in each other's company, in society – which is, of course, cinema.

To be exact: Hoven plays a puppeteer on whose belly one of the marks is to be produced. The scene peaks at a moment that marks most clearly the film's theme of a crisis of seeing, of 'visuality extinguished'. The term applies in a triple sense: on the one hand, what we are shown is how the puppeteer's wife (Ingeborg Schöner),

in defending her husband, pokes a stiletto-like knife into the eye of one of the witchfinder's henchmen (Johannes Buzalski); the way in which this violent moment is staged, however, leans toward abstraction (much more so than the other infamous mutilation scenes in the film), because we get to see a half-second of pop art- or comic strip-like animation of geometrical patterns of pain instead of any 'realistic' gore. But still – and this is the third aspect of extinguished visuality – the eye-poking moment is hard to look at, and probably has many viewers avert or shut their eyes, or even feel their own eyes in an experience of proprioceptive empathy/sympathy.

After this arrest scene, for most of the remainder of the film, Hoven is shown only in his memorable appearances as one of the victims of a special torture. In each of these torture scenes that make up a sequence of increased suffering and loss of consciousness on the part of the puppeteer, Herbert Fux's witchfinder henchman character enters the latter's cell with a malicious grin to check for the torture results. Since it does

not become clear what is to be achieved by this version of a ‘Chinese’ water torture which Hoven’s character is being submitted to, we must suspect that what the procedure is about is just this: along with a gradual descent into madness, it produces an unwelcome mark on this handsome actor/director’s scalp, something akin to a ‘tonsure’, and also allows me and the film this pun in German, along with the *Tonsur* a *Tonspur*, which is German for ‘soundtrack’, in this case a soundtrack with plenty of echo that accompanies Hoven’s losing his eyesight, his mind and his hair under the impact of the tonsure torture.

Horrible Hearings: *Witchfinder General*

Let us stick to hearing, but move from hair – another all-too-loaded media-cultural signifier at the time of *Mark of the Devil*’s release – to heirs: in 1970, *Mark of the Devil* is heir to the title of most gruesome witch-torturing film, following the 1968 British production *Witchfinder General*. This is a film not with a director too many, but with a director missing, since Michael Reeves died very soon after

making *Witchfinder General*. We don’t have to know this sad fact in order to note that film’s tone, which is dark, more melancholic than gothic, foregrounding a beautiful autumnal landscape. With this attention to the landscape, the film takes generic and atmospheric turns which are not to be expected from a witch-torturing movie. It does so notably in an action-adventure scene that again emphasizes *acousmatic* sounds (in the sense of Michel Chion: sounds that appear – temporarily – without being securely ‘anchored’ in any source in the visual image). Soon after the film’s beginning, the scene shows a skirmish during the English Civil War. The film’s youthful Roundhead hero is disturbed by ominous and harrowing sounds – shouted military commands, shots and cries of pain – which he hears close by, although he sees nothing but the undergrowth and trees while his comrades fight in the forest around him.

In this 1968 horror film scene, what makes itself felt is a kind of slight detour through the generic terrain of late 1960s dark westerns, with their

invocations of Vietnam War situations. So the allusion to the musical *Hair* and anti-establishment youth protest cultures is not besides the point. In the case of witch movies circa 1970, we have not just an implication of the Vietnam War (and of modern warfare's share of people grotesquely burned and tortured), but also, a conception of state power as grotesquely excessive: a typical '68 constellation, but in a more left-liberal mainstream than radical leftist counter-culture version, with long-haired sons bent on modernising society – *Mark of the Devil*'s Udo Kier, *Witchfinder General*'s Ian Ogilvy – rebelling against a father generation bent on preserving traditions that are seen as imprisoning human life. The way in which state power is perceived as violating the vital senses as well as being ridiculously rule-bound is nicely communicated in another scene from *Witchfinder General* which emphasises the degree to which power relies on intimidation and violence at the same time as it sticks to formalities and insists on acknowledgement through consensus. The witchfinder, played by

Vincent Price, gives an order to a terrified man who has been summoned to serve as a witness to the interrogation of a 'witch'. He tells the man what to hear, or rather: what to confirm what he heard spoken by the tortured suspect: again, this is a matter of acoustics split in half by power (somewhat in the sense of Foucault's split between what can be perceived and what can be 'said', that is, what can be expressed in formalised language) – in this case, a split between what can be heard and what power wants the hearer officially to confirm what they have heard.

A Blind Piano Player and a Confused Sound Designer: Suspirian Sound Studio

You cannot be sure what it is you heard. In a different sense, this becomes a key problem in Dario Argento's *Suspiria* (1977). This witch movie, which is as canonised as it is bizarre, takes place in a ballet school, so there is the publicness of teaching versus the conspiracy of witches, there is discipline and the need to listen closely (to the music, and to what goes on in old buildings, on plazas, behind screens ...). In

Suspiria, the initial scene of witnessing (a scene that later recurs traumatically, begging to be re-deciphered, as so often with Argento) is a moment of hearing and mis-hearing on the part of the heroine (Jessica Harper) during her night-time arrival at the ballet school. Sound is also how the chief witch manifests herself first, in a blending of sound effects, Goblin's prog rock score, and a simple snore. There is also – in a way, or rather in two ways – a director within the film: Argento's appearance, rather less classically handsome than Adrian Hoven's, is displaced, first, in a structural register, onto the ballet school's directrice on the other side of the screen, audible in her ominous snoring, visible only by way of projections (in the dormitory hall scene); and second, in a physiognomic register, onto the school's blind piano player (Flavio Bucci), who looks very like Argento: in the infamous night-time scene with the guide dog on the huge, empty, small-town plaza, the blind artist acts as a director who lost his eyesight and his way in the all-devouring, grotesque (and, in this case, agoraphobic) spaces of his own film.

Let's move from one fake Argento to another – on to a recent film that pays homage to 1970s Italian horror cinema and to practices of faking it, of making things up, especially things witchful and horrific. From *Suspiria* we move to *Berberian*, to Peter Strickland's *Berberian Sound Studio* (2012), a British film set in a studio in Rome in the mid-1970s. There, a British expert in creating sound effects for BBC television documentaries (Toby Jones) is hired to create the sound for a fictitious witch-torture film of which we see only the stylish title-credits sequence and hear only the horrifying soundtrack of several murder, mutilation and torture scenes. Let me single out just one track of this richly textured film:⁴ in the image of its 1970s retro-media setting, *Berberian Sound Studio* shows the formation of our present regime of governmentality, one that replaces the rule of law with states of exception, replaces regular pay with a discourse that appeals to 'motivation', and replaces standardised administrative procedures with an exertion of power that is 'modulating' (Gilles Deleuze), sticking skin-tight to the life

processes of bodies. We can call this post-Fordism or post-democracy, and the normalisation of torture is one extreme instance of it.⁵ In contrast to this socio-political regime, which increasingly bewitches and engulfs the confused technician called upon to produce more and louder cries of pain, there are repressed memories of an earlier power formation that enter the frame – literally, after the perforated edges of the film frame have violently entered the picture, Peter Tscherkassky-style. This happens in the scene in which the tortured witch comes to haunt the privacy of the sound designer’s hotel room. After we have seen part of the (old, cinematic) apparatus on screen, more production history – the time and the place that images and presences emerge from, usually hidden from view – is exposed. In an abrupt transition into a film within the film, the scene shows us ‘where the man comes from’: the sound- and imagescape of 1970s BBC educational television in a pastoral landscape documentary, with the voice-over of a benevolent, enlightening father figure – in short: the sound and the look of the late-Fordist

welfare state, which, starting in the 1970s, came to be replaced by the post-Fordist regime of constant motivation. In this regime, the increasingly admissible torturous treatment of some unruly or ‘dangerous’ bodies is a flipside to the treatment experienced by many well-behaved, efficient bodies in and through wellness centres, health trends and refined cuisine.

Horror Mockumentary: Two Witchful Founding Films

From the most recent to the earliest film in my selection. *Häxan* is a 1922 Swedish film by Benjamin Christensen. Silently, it shows us witchcraft through the ages, especially the persecution and torturing of witches. *Häxan* does so by posing as an ethnographic historical documentary, and it ends by comparing (in a montage sequence and in title cards) the violence suffered by witches to the treatment of insubordinate women – among them a female pilot, riding a plane instead of a broom – who are being stigmatised as hysterics by modern

patriarchy and its disciplinary institutions. The title cards read:

We no longer sit in church staring terrified at the frescoes of the devils. The witch no longer flies away on her broom over the rooftops. But isn't superstition still rampant among us? Is there an obvious difference between the sorceress and her customer then and now? We no longer burn our old and poor. But do they not often suffer bitterly? And the little woman, whom we call hysterical, alone and unhappy, isn't she still a riddle for us? Nowadays we detain the unhappy in a mental institution or – if she is wealthy – in a modern clinic. And then we will console ourselves with the notion that the mildly temperate shower of the clinic has replaced the barbaric methods of medieval times.⁶

On the print of *Häxan* shown at the Austrian Film Museum during their September 2013 classical horror cinema retrospective (and not only there, I assume), this passionately proto-feminist closing sequence of the film, with its final image of witches burning at the stake, is followed by the title *Slut*, Swedish for 'The End'. Which reads like the English 'slut', close to witches and bitches, if you will. But this is not my *slut* yet. Let us enter one last round of translations. Around the turn of the millennium,

Häxan was retrospectively canonised as a founding film by way of the homage paid to it by an American film which now, almost twenty years on, is in its turn retroactively canonised as *the* film founding the tradition of mockumentary and found-footage horror. I am, of course, speaking of the well-known 1999 flagship production of a tiny US studio named Häxan Films: *The Blair Witch Project*. About this film, directed by Daniel Myrick and Eduardo Sánchez, many things could be said. Let me at this point just refer to a German daily newspaper review of the film from autumn 1999 which, in a lucid comment, suggested that in the imagescape of this – at the time very unusual – film, white middle-class youth could perceive themselves in the image of something akin to their increasing social superfluosity, in the image of their inability to survive (in the woods, let alone in society).⁷ No one would mourn their – or this late-capitalist life form(ation)'s – disappearance, one might sarcastically add. So, along with *Berberian Sound Studio*, we have in *The Blair Witch Project* yet another low-budget, high-concept, fake-happy sophisticated witch movie

that inaugurates an aesthetics of post-Fordist social precarity.⁸

For Fux's Sake! The Witch Turning Red, and a Henchman Going Green

I know that I come across as reading the witch in red, that with my notion of cinematic witchful thinking as a means of diagnosing social antagonism, patriarchic power and post-Fordist reform through deformation normalised, I am portraying a vaguely socialist sorceress. But then, why not? This is not only a product of politico-ideological wishful thinking on my part – provided that wishing points in the direction of Deleuzian ‘machinic desiring’ (although with less vitalist pathos and techno-economistic assuredness). This gesture of mine also follows in the tracks of Romantic historian Jules Michelet and his 1862 book *La sorcière*, translated as *La Sorcière: The Witch of the Middle Ages*. Michelet praised the performative powers of witchful fictions in proto-socialist terms and in the words of an industrialised mankind seen as Prometheus:

The Sibyl foretold a fortune, the Witch accomplishes one. Here is the great, the true difference between them. The latter calls forth a destiny, conjures it, works it out. Unlike the Cassandra of old, who awaited mournfully the future she foresaw so well, this woman herself creates the future. Even more than Circe, than Medea, does she bear in her hand the rod of natural miracle, with Nature herself as sister and helpmate. Already she wears the features of a modern Prometheus. With her industry begins, especially that queen-like industry which heals and restores mankind.⁹

Production instead of prediction: this sounds much like a proto-Deleuzian version of what we've come to know as the reclaiming of industry, of ‘creative industries’ even, as powers of anti-neoliberal resistance (in the work of Gerald Raunig¹⁰), or as the reclaiming of witchcraft as one repressed type of knowledge more in tune than rational formalism could ever be with situations, embodiments and becomings (in the work of Isabelle Stengers¹¹). There is something in the idea of recent post-industrial media culture rehabilitating an old anti-rational wisdom of witches, replacing the ‘Cogito ergo sum’ with the motto ‘Bin Hex’, inscribed in early email-encoding systems, in a secret

language which translates (from German) as ‘I’m witch’.

And yet, the fact of false society, the fact of all being *verhext*, remains, and with it, what remains is (in the sense of Rancière’s 1998 concept of politics as disagreement¹²) more dissent than Promethean promise. Let me rephrase this, assisted by the man who played the most reliable assistant to *Mark of the Devil*’s witchfinder – and who later became a founding figure in the movements and organisations out of which, in the 1980s, the Austrian Green Party emerged. When Herbert Fux, wearing a shirt and sweater and sporting long, greasy dark hair, was interviewed by Austrian state television ORF on the general election night in 1983, about the reasons why the Green party had missed the number of votes necessary for entering Parliament (they succeeded, however, with Fux becoming an MP, in the 1986 elections), he replied: “The Austrian [in masculine singular:

‘der Österreicher’, D. R.] will continue to sink into a completely subaltern way of life before the power of the [established, D. R.] parties. An Austrian fate: he doesn’t want it any other way.” And facing the camera and the TV audiences (who might have remembered him not least from *Mark of the Devil*) with a sarcastic grin and laughter, Fux added: “Power has been victorious – how nice indeed! And to the citizen: have a good time! *Hallo*, hahaha!” As Fux gave his pessimistic little speech in his native Salzburg dialect, there was an air of heroically humorous desperation about the hexed and bewitched nature of (not only, but especially Austrian) society, voiced by an old B-movie villain turned politician (note: not an old B-movie *hero* turned politician: that was, at roughly the same time, Ronald Reagan) – one whose intimate knowledge about the workings and abuses of power had been gained, not least, at and in the movies.

¹ Adorno, T. W. ([1958] 1984) “The Essay as Form”, *New German Critique*, 32, 151–171: 167.

² Adorno, T. W. ([1958] 1997) “Der Essay als Form”, In: Adorno, T. W. *Gesammelte Schriften. Vol. XI*:

Noten zur Literatur. Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 9–33: 28.

³ Bazin, A. ([1958–1962] 1967) *What is Cinema?* Berkeley, CA: University of California Press.

⁴ Here, I'm following hints from Eschkötter, D. (2013) "In the Loop: Zu Peter Stricklands *Berberian Sound Studio*", *Cargo*, 18, 10–12, and with an eye – or ear – on Fisher, M. (2014) *Ghosts of My Life: Writings on Depression, Hauntology and Lost Futures*. Winchester: Zero Books.

⁵ See Krasmann, S. (2007) "Folter im Ausnahmezustand?", In: Krasmann, S. and Martschukat, J. (eds) *Rationalitäten der Gewalt: Staatliche Neuordnungen vom 19. bis zum 21. Jahrhundert*. Bielefeld: transcript, 75–96: 81–83 on post-democracy in general, and Rancière, J. ([1995] 1998) *Disagreement: Politics and Philosophy*. Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 61–121.

⁶ DVD release of *Häxan* (Benjamin Christensen, 1922), New York: The Criterion Collection, 2001.

⁷ Kniebe, T. (1999) "Wahn, wenn nicht jetzt? Alles Hexerei: *The Blair Witch Project* setzt neue

Maßstäbe für den amerikanischen Film", *Süddeutsche Zeitung*, 24 November, 17.

⁸ On the post-Fordist, neoliberal 'society of precarity' in general, see Marchart, O. (2013) *Die Prekarisierungsgesellschaft: Prekäre Proteste. Politik und Ökonomie im Zeichen der Prekarisierung*. Bielefeld: transcript; Standing, G. (2011) *The Precariat: The New Dangerous Class*. London: Bloomsbury Academic.

⁹ Michelet, J. ([1862] 1863) *La Sorcière: The Witch of the Middle Ages*. London: Simpkin, Marshall, and Co., 3.

¹⁰ See Raunig, G. (2012) *Industrien der Kreativität: Streifen und Glätten 2*. Zürich: diaphanes.

¹¹ See Stengers, I. (2012) "Den Animismus zurückgewinnen", In: Albers, I. and Franke, A. (eds) *Animismus: Revisionen der Moderne*. Zürich: diaphanes, 111–123.

¹² See Rancière, J. ([1995] 1998) *Disagreement: Politics and Philosophy*.