

Robert Eggers' Nightmare: Mythology Meets Misogyny

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Recommended Citation

Collinson, L. (2020) *Robert Eggers' Nightmare: Mythology Meets Misogyny*. PAD Perspectives in Art and Design: Edition 11, Article 9. January 2025.



Within this short article Collinson discusses how Robert Eggers' 'The Lighthouse' (2019) and 'The Witch' (2015) are not traditional horror films. Examining the lack gore, blood-curdling screams and jump scares, and noting on how Eggers creates a new kind of psychological nightmare terror. Collinson talks about themes of folklore tradition and misogyny surrounding the horror genre. Themes include folklore traditions and misogyny.

Read Time (Approx.): 6 minutes

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<https://a24films.com/notes/2020/10/watching-the-witch-with-two-actual-witches>
[Accessed 14 Jan 2025].

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Robert Eggers' 'The Lighthouse' (2019) and 'The Witch' (2015) are not horror films in a traditional sense, with vibrant gore, blood-curdling screams and jump scares that send you under your seat. Robert Eggers crafts a new kind of a terror, a psychological nightmare forged upon the pillars of fantasy and reality to produce a poison so potent to the mind that you will catch yourself dwelling on what you've seen long after you leave the cinema. The experience of watching these films is akin to that of lucid dreaming: you are self-aware and present, yet cannot escape the environment around you, whether it be pleasant or horrifying. The environment Eggers creates is the latter, the combination of mythological and historical references, documenting both the traditions of folklore and misogyny, resulting in a kind of purgatory that at once transfixes and torments the audience.

The plot of 'The Lighthouse' is centred around two lighthouse keepers, Ephraim Winslow and his employer Thomas Wake, who find themselves trapped on a dismal island, enclosed by the treacherous storms engulfing it. As they struggle to remain sane in the bleak conditions, battling disturbing visions which reveal their sins, alcohol becomes their salvation and they drink themselves to madness, only to result in Ephraim committing unforgiveable acts.

Meanwhile, 'The Witch', which may be considered to be a "companion piece" to 'The Lighthouse', is set in New England and follows the story of Thomasin and her family who are cast out from their settlement due to her father's religious beliefs and left at the mercy of the unknown land. Living alone together, they establish a farm and yet find themselves to be plagued by a supernatural being they suspect to be a witch; their new-born son is kidnapped; their crops fail; their goat's milk turns to blood. When their calls to God are not answered, the blame falls upon Thomasin, their teenage daughter, whose cries of innocence are dismissed amidst blatant traditions of misogyny.

Such a tradition of misogyny can be seen through the portrayal, both in the film and in wider history, of the figure of the mermaid in 'The Lighthouse'. As Ephraim descends into madness, he indulges in lust, the mermaid appearing in the film both as a vision and as a small figurehead off a ship which he keeps under his bed. In the grim patriarchal environment, this inanimate figurine becomes the object of the protagonist's lust and is subjected to the male gaze. This literal image of the woman as an object may reflect upon

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the misogynistic objectification of women in society: she is powerless and passive in the hands of a man. Historically, according to critic Annie Lord, men turn mermaids into “mute and child-like” beings and this concept can be applied to this scene with the model, a silent and beautiful woman who he manipulates for his own pleasure. Alternatively, in Ephraim’s vision of the washed-up mermaid, the power balance is reversed and the mermaid is no longer a lifeless carving, but a siren-like creature, luring him to danger. This is when Robert Egger’s nightmare comes alive.

Egger’s employs the technique of vertically panning the camera to slowly scan the mermaid’s naked body from the perspective of Ephraim, his hands lustily caressing her body until the camera shot reaches her gills and we see him trembling with realisation. She sits bolt upright to reveal her true form and laughs maniacally at his misfortune. Eggers forges this nightmare in combining mythology and misogyny with Ephraim’s fear not only coming from being confronted with a mythological creature, but from his shameful behaviour in being discovered sexually harassing a woman he likely presumed dead. The director seems to latch onto the innate human fear of an absent society, a lack of law and order, and reveals the true, animalistic nature of man which comes to the surface in such a situation. We too are trapped in this nightmarish environment where neither the laws of nature nor the laws of man apply, sin and vice ruling over the two men. This fever dream is further enhanced by the cinematic techniques Eggers employs, the director’s choice to film in black and white creating a hopeless landscape which foretells ruination from the start. Equally, the film’s underscoring, a constant drone of the lighthouse horn which runs throughout the film, gradually crescendos as the horror escalates and provides a constant tone of pessimism that sits in the pit of your stomach as you watch.

Eggers crafts a similar, dreary landscape in ‘The Witch’, once again choosing a muted colour palette for the film, the only exception being the bright red of freshly spilt blood. He creates a raw, burning fear as he intertwines the supernatural events of the film with the claustrophobic entrapment of misogyny. Whilst there is in reality a witch in the film, the family never find concrete evidence of this and instead speculate on the cause, their accusation lying on the basis of misogyny rather than logic. The witch herself is terrifying, she is pictured, for example, smearing the blood of the new-born over her body after slaughtering him. But what is more terrifying is the sense of injustice and condemnation that Thomasin is subjected to in her accusation. Eggers highlights the terror women are often subjected to, both in the past and in the world today, as they find themselves entirely at the mercy of patriarchal powers much stronger than themselves. Eggers evokes this feeling of helplessness within the audience so strongly that you could argue this

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is the horror story in itself, the frightening situation Thomasin finds herself in further emphasised by the real-world context of gender-based oppression throughout the world today. Critic, Walter Metz, suggests that in this film Eggers advocates an “exorcism of Puritanism from American social life”, referring to today’s America, which implies that Eggers intended this film to reflect upon our own world on a deeper level.

The film ends with Thomasin abandoning her life of innocence at the farm and joining the witches as they are pictured levitating, naked, into the sky. The protagonist seems to have become a self-fulfilling prophecy as she becomes what she was so harshly accused of being, this regression in her character perhaps reflecting the cruel impact of misogyny upon women in the real world. Whilst it may be argued that Thomasin, in her now naked state, is indulging in her sin, it seems that Robert Eggers supports this transition away from piety in society and as she floats towards the moon, she is liberated and free from the religion that treated her as property to scapegoat and abuse. Unlike ‘The Lighthouse’, which ends bleakly with a Promethean scene of Ephraim, naked and bloody on the rocks, having his guts feasted on by seagulls, ‘The Witch’ ends on a high in comparison to its prior misery, the director showing us a woman relishing in her freedom, bathed in golden light in all her glory.

In contrast to the long enduring history of misogyny that runs throughout our history and into the present day, Eggers at once documents the waking nightmare women must face and celebrates and empowers them as they are liberated from the patriarchy in the film. Misogyny is manifested in mythology as women become monstrous scapegoats for the misfortunes of men and the sense of injustice which is created as a result creates a gruesome atmosphere which is deeply disturbing to watch. Robert Eggers truly masters the horror film as his coalescence of the most frightening elements of fantasy and reality lock the audience in a nightmarish state for the duration of the feature-length. With filming just having finished on his latest film, ‘The Northman’, which is set in the dark ages of the Vikings, we might expect another chilling masterpiece in our cinemas soon.

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