

NOTES ON THE CULTURE

The Witch Continues to Enchant as a Feminist Symbol

In film and art, the figure has moved from the edges of the action to become the very plot.

By **Kate Guadagnino**

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“THIS WITCH,” BEGINS the recently released documentary on Ruth Bader Ginsburg. It’s a recording of the conservative talk-radio host Michael Savage, who often characterizes the justice this way. He’s hardly alone in his fondness for the word, which has only grown in popularity in the 300-plus years since the infamous Salem witch trials of 1692. These days, though, it’s often women — Lana Del Rey and Björk among them — deploying “witch” (or related terminology) to describe themselves, not as a pejorative but as a badge of honor. They may not all recite spells or worship a moon goddess, but at a time when misogyny is rampant and women’s rights are on shaky ground, they relate to the witch as a feminist symbol. A witch, after all, is a woman with power. She has the ability to heal, satisfying wellness types who like to gift potions of hyssop and mugwort, anise seed and bladder wrack from Enchantments, a decades-old occult-themed shop in Manhattan’s East Village. More than that, as the prophetic “weird sisters” of “Macbeth” make clear, she has the power to drive the plot.

Lately, witches have moved from the edges of the action to become the plot themselves. “Wil-o-Wisp,” a video work by the artist Rachel Rose, which debuted last May at the Philadelphia Museum of Art, is set in 16th-century agrarian England and concerns a fictional mystic named Elspeth Blake. On a night when there is a full blood-red moon, her family’s house catches fire and she disappears, only to turn up a few towns over 30 years later. Meanwhile, Kiernan Shipka is starring in “Chilling Adventures of Sabrina,” a new series about the teenage witch from Roberto Aguirre-Sacasa, the creator of “Riverdale,” and Chloë Sevigny is at work on a short film she wrote about self-proclaimed witches in contemporary culture. Last month saw the release of “Suspiria,” Luca Guadagnino’s remake of the 1977 horror film, in which the matrons of a Martha Graham-style dance school are revealed to be members of a secret and violent coven. Set along the border between East and West Berlin, where echoes of wartime anxiety persist, the women have little need for men or society — an independence that attests to their strength as much as any feat of magic.

How, though, to perform the trick of growing fashionable but not diminished? Much has been said about the ongoing commercialization of feminism, but the symbol of the witch is perhaps not so easily corrupted, retaining both an earthiness and a hardness, one born of an instinct for self-preservation. Because whatever the nature of their abilities, women — often those already on the outside, such as the poor, the old and women of color — have a very real history of being accused of witchcraft and suffering greatly. “We are the granddaughters of the witches you weren’t able to burn,” read a sign at the 2017 Women’s March. A few months later, the president began to tweet “witch hunt” whenever he felt picked on by Robert Mueller. The moral outrage implicit in this cry depends on the fact that witches do not exist. *Oh*, comes the collective response from multitudes of women, persecuted yet powerful, *but they do*.

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A Weekend at Witch Camp Oct. 31, 2018



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