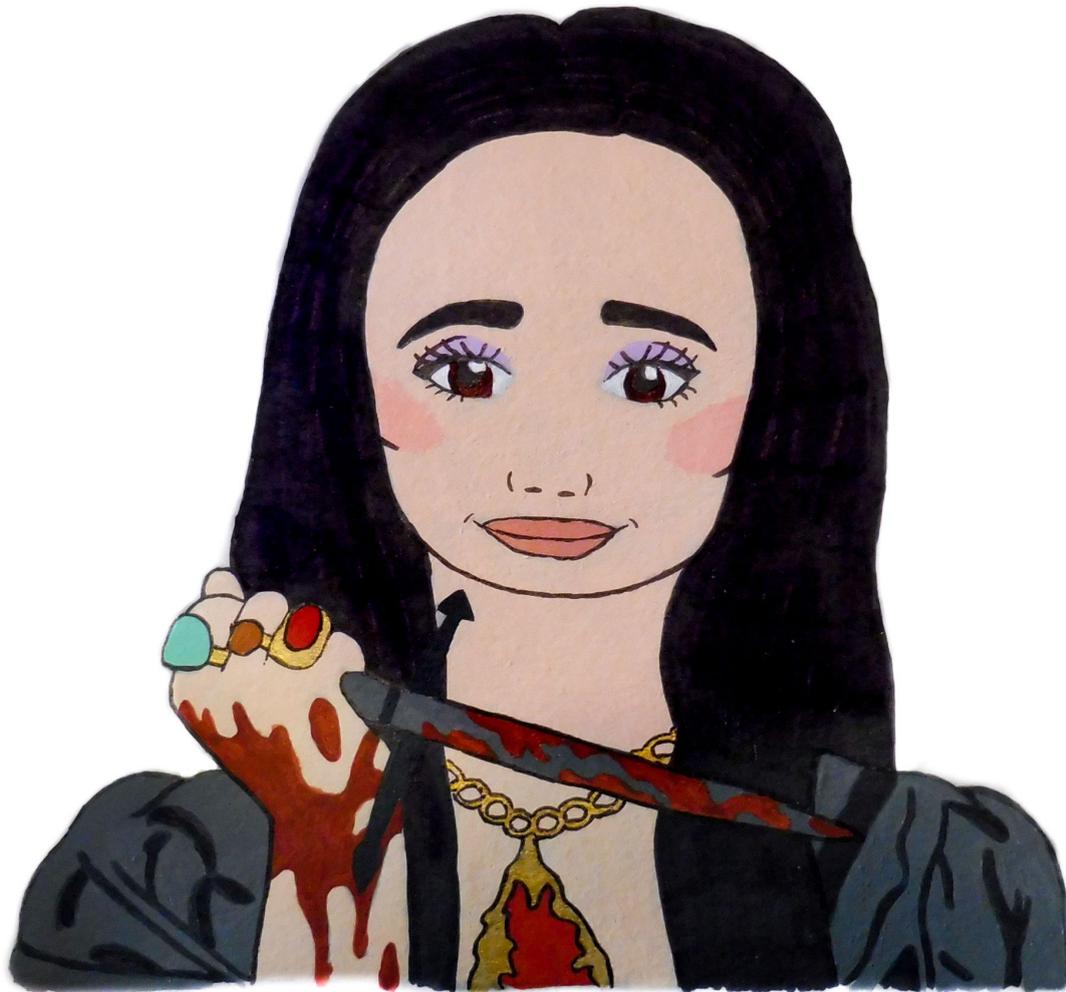


# Fashion, Masquerade and the Gaze in Anna Biller's *The Love Witch* (2016)



Name: Michelle Harthoorn

Student number: 5053358

Supervisor: Anne-Marie Korte

Second reader: Domitilla Olivieri

Program: Gender Studies

Citation style: MLA

Word count: 15795

[TW: sexism, SA, r\*pe, mention of su\*c\*de and murd\*r]

## Table of contents

|   |    |
|---|----|
| Introduction  | 2  |
| 1. Theoretical Framework and Method   | 5  |
| 1.1 Feminist Film Theory  | 5  |
| 1.2 Studying Fashion in Film  | 6  |
| 1.3 Agential Realism  | 8  |
| 1.4 Semiotics   | 9  |
| 2. Fashion as a Reflection of Elaine's Character                            | 12 |
| 2.1 Elaine's Fantasy Symbolized by Fashion                                  | 12 |
| 2.2 Elaine Sexually Objectifying Herself through the Male Gaze with Fashion | 15 |
| To Conclude...  | 18 |
| 3. Fashion as a Masquerade  | 20 |
| 3.1 Elaine's Masquerade   | 20 |
| 3.2 Masquerade as Subverting the Male Gaze on a Textual Level               | 23 |
| To Conclude...  | 26 |
| 4. Fashion as Eye Candy   | 27 |
| 4.1 Masquerade as Subverting the Male Gaze on a Contextual Level            | 27 |
| 4.2 Fashion in <i>The Love Witch</i> and the Female Gaze                    | 30 |
| To Conclude...  | 33 |
| Conclusion  | 34 |
| Acknowledgments   | 36 |
| Bibliography  | 37 |
| Attachments   | 39 |

## Introduction

The independent film<sup>1</sup> *The Love Witch* (2016) by Anna Biller is one of those films that captivates me every time I watch it. The deliciously colorful and carefully put together aesthetics, the eerie but comical score, the complexity of the protagonist and the theatre-esque acting style never fail to comfort and inspire me. The film centers around Elaine Parks (Samantha Robinson), a witch<sup>2</sup> who moves to California after the death of her husband Jerry (Stephen Wozniak). The film hints to Elaine having murdered him after he left her, but this is never confirmed. Elaine potentially being the murderer of various men is a red thread throughout the film. She wants nothing more than to experience a man's love and in order to get it, she uses spells, potions and sex magic to arouse sexual energy in men and transform it into feelings of love. The first man that she seduces is Wayne (Jeffrey Vincent Parise), but the magic that she uses on him is too strong and he can not cope with the infatuation that he suddenly experiences for her. He dies not long after. Elaine moves on to Richard (Robert Seeley), who is the husband of her friend Trish (Laura Waddell). Elaine charms him when Trish is out of town, resulting in an affair between the two. Elaine, however, breaks the affair off when Richard becomes increasingly obsessive. This upsets him so much that he commits suicide. Meanwhile, Elaine is already dating police officer Griff (Gian Keys), who is researching Wayne's death. Even though Elaine is connected to this case, Griff's relationship with her prevents him from arresting her. Griff, however, does differ from Wayne and Richard in the sense that he resists Elaine's spells, for he is not in love with her. When she is then also connected to Richard's death after Trish finds out that they had a love affair and that Elaine performed witchcraft on him, Griff confronts Elaine with her role in these deaths. Elaine, who simply states that these men died of an overdose of love, can not cope with Griff's immunity to her magic and kills him by piercing his heart with a dagger. Since Elaine longs for her own heteronormative fairy tale and submits to normative standards for women to achieve this fantasy, as I will discuss in my thesis, while simultaneously embodying the powerful archetype of the witch, Elaine's character is a complex one that deserves to be analyzed in detail.

Something else that deserves attention is the film's *mise-en-scène*<sup>3</sup> that has been constructed after Biller's own designs. In addition to writing, directing and editing the film and

---

<sup>1</sup> The term "independent film" means different things to different people. I use this term for my description of *The Love Witch* to emphasize its production and distribution by companies other than the largest, most well-known corporate labels and its relatively low budget, as well as the director's dedication to depict her own unique vision (Grove).

<sup>2</sup> Elaine is part of a coven that, based on its celebration of the wheel of the year's eight Sabbats, as well as its honoring of what seem to be the Moon Goddess and Horned God, appears to adhere to Wicca or a similar neo-pagan spiritual path. The coven's exact path is never specified in the film.

<sup>3</sup> For an explanation of what the *mise-en-scène* entails, see chapter 1.2.

writing the music and songs that make up the film's score, Biller has built some of these sets herself. She has decorated them with her own colorful paintings and even a pentagram rug that took her six months to weave. Most of the outstanding costumes have been curated and sewn by Biller herself, proving that this film, which took seven and a half years in total to complete, is produced by a deeply passionate and artistic person (Patterson; Miller). Considering my enthusiasm for this film and the way in which it has been produced, it is no surprise that *The Love Witch* functions as the case study for my Master's thesis. To be more specific, my thesis focuses on the intra-action<sup>4</sup> between Elaine and fashion and what this intra-action reveals about the subordinated position of women, both on screen and in real life. In my research the concept of fashion means more than "dress". While dress refers to clothing only, fashion alludes to all ways in which someone can shape their appearance. Therefore, fashion includes the use of accessories and hairstyles (Kuruc 195). Several academic texts have been written about this film, but what astonishes me is that all of them only briefly mention its incredible hand-made aspects. Therefore, the aim of my thesis is to build upon existing analyzes and interpretations of this film with an examination of the film's fashion and contribute an alternative interpretation on the film based on its fashion. The three sources that I will build upon in particular are Lucrezia Motti's thesis *Feminist representations in contemporary media* (2018), wherein she discusses feminism within *The Love Witch*, among others, Cathy Lomax's article "Makeup as Dark Magic" (2019), in which Elaine's make-up is analyzed to represent the film's subversive female gaze and Jenny Stümer's article "(Un)masking Femininity" (2021), wherein Elaine's masquerade in relation to her fantasies are discussed. All of these topics - feminism, the gaze and masquerading - will be incorporated into my analysis.

Another reason for me to choose the film's fashion as my central focus is to address the lack of feminist literature wherein the cultural significance of fashion as a discursive and material system is acknowledged. According to Ilya Parkins in "Building a Feminist Theory of Fashion" (2008), an explanation for this lack is that the perspective of both activist and popular feminists on fashion has been and still is predominantly negative due to the capitalist and oppressive aspects that the fashion industry encompasses. As a result, feminist theorists either write critical studies on fashion or they do not engage with it at all, while for Parkins fashion is incredibly useful for providing insight into the connectedness of feminist cultural theory and feminist epistemology, the study of knowledge. To support her argument, Parkins draws upon Karen Barad's agential realism, which is elaborated on in chapter 1.3 (Parkins 502). Not only do I recognize the importance of Parkins's aim to integrate feminist epistemology into feminist cultural theory, I also believe it to be an exciting challenge to put

---

<sup>4</sup> For an explanation of what the term "intra-action" entails, see chapter 1.3.

the theory that she provides in her article into practice, since my analyzes of cultural products have always been heavily centered around their discursive aspects instead of their materiality. Therefore, Parkins's article provides me with guidelines for what to pay attention to in my analysis, in order to explore the intra-action between Elaine and fashion, as well as fashion's connection to Elaine's body and character as influenced by dominant discourses.

To aid my exploration, my main focus is the following research question: in Anna Biller's *The Love Witch* (2016), how does the intra-action between fashion, main character Elaine and director Biller demonstrate the complex ways in which fashion is connected to female embodiment when living in a patriarchal society with a dominant male gaze<sup>5</sup>? With the words "female embodiment" I refer to how those who identify as women experience their lived bodies under the influence of cultural and social constructs. Answering this question consists of three parts. After chapter 1, wherein I outline my theoretical framework and method, I begin my analysis in chapter 2 with an interpretation of Elaine's character, wherein her internalization of patriarchy's expectations for women and Laura Mulvey's male gaze is demonstrated, as well as how this connects to fashion. Then, an in-depth analysis on Elaine's masquerade, including Stümer's claim that her pleasure in the ultra-feminine masquerade subverts the male gaze and a look into how witchcraft complicates her conformity to idealized normative femininity follows in chapter 3. The analysis is finalized with chapter 4, wherein I transition to the film's context by delving into Biller's work on the film's fashion, for which I draw upon Jill Soloway's definition of the female gaze and the notion of "feminine texts" as described by Annette Kuhn. Each analytical chapter discusses multiple sub-questions that are listed at that chapter's introduction and is wrapped up with a section called "To Conclude..." wherein I relate what I have discussed in said chapter to the main research question that is stated above. My thesis is concluded with an answer to the research question and suggestions for further research.

---

<sup>5</sup> For an explanation of what the term "male gaze" entails, see chapter 2.1.

## 1. Theoretical Framework and Method

I begin my thesis with an outline of the theories that I base my analysis on, the perspectives that I am guided by and the research method that I apply. Most central to my research is feminist film theory, which serves as both a perspective and a source for relevant theories and concepts, such as Laura Mulvey's theory on the male gaze, Mary Ann Doane's theory on the masquerade, Barbara Creed's theory on the monstrous feminine and Jill Soloway's concept of the female gaze. This chapter provides contextual information on feminist film theory, while the specific theories and concepts are explained in detail in later chapters when they are needed for my analysis. Since my research focuses on fashion in film, this chapter includes a brief section on fashion studies, as well as fashion's functions in film according to film theorists. Then, fashion is elaborated on through Ilya Parkins' connection of fashion studies with agential realism, which serves as a perspective through which I view fashion in *The Love Witch*. Finally, this chapter provides an explanation of semiotics and why this method is useful for my analysis.

### 1.1 Feminist Film Theory

The main source of information on feminist film theory is the book *Women's pictures* (1982) by Kuhn. Even though this book is published a while ago, Kuhn's explanation of feminist film theory is still applicable. She writes that within cultural studies like feminist film theory, cultural products such as films are referred to as texts, because the elements that they are made up by can be read like a text (Kuhn 8). One method for reading these texts is semiotics. Chapter 1.4 contains an elaborate explanation of this method, but in brief it alludes to interpreting the so-called "signs" that compose a text, both on a connotative and denotative level. In turn, the meanings of the signs may point to certain discourses<sup>6</sup> that are hidden within the text (Kuhn 44). What makes feminist film theory feminist, is its aim to uncover these discourses, particularly when they reinforce the oppression of marginalized groups, which includes but is not limited to women. Generally, films that adhere to the status quo contain elements that can be considered to be discriminatory in one way or another. Through socialization and continuous reinforcement, these discriminatory elements are regarded as natural and normal for spectators and because of this naturalization, the discriminatory elements are not recognized as harmful (Kuhn 73). In *naked without shame* (2014), bell hooks gives an example of this regarding the film *Menace II Society* (1993), wherein the representation of a black, female character did not align with racist and sexist stereotypes about black women. Because of this, those who viewed a screening of the film

---

<sup>6</sup> The notion of "discourse" by Michel Foucault refers to how the social system that generates knowledges and meanings that are assumed to be true, are closely related to and influenced by power (Rocamora and Smelik 8).

before its release demanded this character to be rewritten (read: sexualized) in a way wherein she would conform to racist and sexist stereotypes, so that she would be more “believable” (hooks 71). hooks notes that everyone is subject to the naturalization of such stereotypes, even those who are addressed by these stereotypes (hooks 72). Therefore, she argues that we should strive towards the decolonization of our minds and imaginations by recognizing the discriminatory images as societal constructs instead of as a reflection of the truth (hooks 73). Feminist film theorists attempt to decolonize the mind with what Kuhn calls “making visible the invisible”. According to her, “feminism (...) offers not so much a methodology as a perspective - a pair of spectacles, as it were - through which we can look at films” (Kuhn 70). By doing research while applying this perspective, feminist scholars are able to recognize the naturalized and normalized discriminatory elements in a text and call attention to their constructedness in order to demonstrate that they are in fact not natural and normal (Kuhn 73). How my research relates to making visible the invisible does not entail pointing out sexist elements that appear within *The Love Witch* in order to denaturalize them, since the film itself already presents patriarchal elements as absurd and untrue, as I elaborate on in chapter 3.1. The aim of my analysis is making visible the nuanced and complex ways in which fashion is connected to female embodiment when living a patriarchal society, both within *The Love Witch* in particular and on a more general level.

## 1.2 Studying Fashion in Film

When it comes to fashion studies, *Thinking through fashion* (2016) by Agnès Rocamora and Anneke Smelik functions as my main source of reference, for it outlines the most important concepts within fashion studies. For instance, Rocamora and Smelik emphasize the importance of fashion’s materiality in addition to its symbolic qualities, which complements Parkins’ article, for she does the same thing. In Rocamora and Smelik’s words, fashion is comprised of “things and signs, as well as individual and collective agents, which all coalesce through practices of production, consumption, distribution and representation” (Rocamora and Smelik 2). It is entwined with the context in which it appears and, thus, with the social structures that operate within that context based on, for instance, gender, race, class, politics and religion (Kuruc 198). Because fashion consists of many layers, Rocamora and Smelik advise applying theory to one’s analysis on fashion in order to grasp its dynamics (Rocamora and Smelik 3). Semiotics, or the study of signs, is one of the theories that is suggested in their book, an elaborate explanation of which is given in chapter 1.4.

In film, fashion is part of the *mise-en-scène*, a word that is adopted from theatre studies and that translates into “to put on stage”. Definitions of what the *mise-en-scène* entails vary. While David Bordwell and Kristin Tompson divide it into 1) the set and props; 2) costuming and make-up; 3) lighting and 4) staging, including the acting and movements of

the actors, John Gibbs simply describes it as everything that is shown within a frame and the way in which these elements are organized (Bordwell and Thompson 115; Gibbs 5). I prefer Gibbs' definition, for it prevents me from missing elements that Bordwell and Thompson do not specify and it emphasizes the intra-action among all elements within the frame. This intra-action between elements is especially important, because the interpretation of a garment depends on the context wherein it is positioned, as established above (Gibbs 26). For example, lingerie in a scene wherein Elaine performs a strip tease carries a different meaning than lingerie in a scene wherein she is undressed without her consent. Additionally, the interpretation of a garment is influenced by who wears the garment. In John Carl Flügel's *The Psychology of Clothing* (1930), a canonical text within fashion studies, clothing is described as an "extension of the body" (Flügel 38). With this Flügel suggests that clothing contains all sorts of information on how the wearer is perceived: who are they, what is their job, how wealthy are they, what subculture or political views do they identify with, how do they feel (Flügel 16)? The answers to these questions rely on the associations that one has when observing the clothes and these associations are based on conventions (Gibbs 8). Film takes advantage of this communicative quality of fashion, by dressing a character in a style that matches their personality. Similarly, a change in one's personality can be indicated by a change of one's fashion style (Bordwell and Thompson 119). As written by Stella Bruzzi in *Undressing Cinema* (1997): "Clothes are not mere accessories, but are key elements in the construction of cinematic identities" (Bruzzi i). "Fashion as communication" (2008) by Katarina Kuruc is an example of a semiotic analysis that indicates how fashion is utilized to reflect the personalities of the characters in the television series *Sex and the City* (1998-2004). Her analysis is based on the idea that fashion is a tool to communicate one's identification with a specific (sub)culture, since "representation and identification with certain groups occurs on a visual level" (Kuruc 194). She demonstrates this with multiple examples from history wherein fashion was used for identity construction and she notes that over time fashion has become a way to express different parts of one's personality and lifestyle. However, she also mentions that functions can function as a mask that hides one's "true identity" (Kuruc 195). This is applicable to *The Love Witch*, since Motti, Lomax and Stümer<sup>7</sup> a large part of Elaine is the masquerade that she performs.

In addition to reflecting and hiding a character's personality, fashion in film can also carry symbolic meanings, for example in the shape of a motif, a recurring element of which its connotation refers to one of the film's themes. Since Biller has been said to use symbolism in order to "tell stories and create meaning", I take symbolism into account for every outfit that I analyze (Lomax). Another function of fashion in film is assisting the

---

<sup>7</sup> As mentioned in the introduction, these are the authors whose scientific articles about *The Love Witch* I build upon.

spectator to immerse themselves into the film's cinematic reality, helping them with the suspension of disbelief. Here, fashion works with the narrative to establish the cinematic world and create a sense of continuity and "realism" (Street 5). The opposite of this is also possible: garments of which their significance transcend the narrative and are just there to be admired as the spectacle that they are. Stella Bruzzi calls these garments "iconic clothes" (Bruzzi xv, xvi). While it can not be denied that Elaine's outfits are eye candy, or as described by John Patterson "eye-popping coordinated (...) costumes", I would not consider them to be Bruzzi's definition of iconic clothes, for they arouse have the same level of awe as the rest of the *mise-en-scène*<sup>8</sup> (Patterson). I do, however, want to emphasize the aesthetic qualities of *The Love Witch's* fashion, so I have incorporated their function as "eye candy" into my analysis. To summarize, fashion in film can be a reflection of one's personality (chapter 2), a mask to hide one's identity (chapter 3), a tool that allows the spectator to immerse themselves into the cinematic reality (chapter 4) and a source of visual pleasure that disrupts the narrative.

### 1.3 Agential Realism

As mentioned in the introduction, Parkins suggests that fashion through the lens of agential realism has the potential to act as a bridge between feminist cultural studies, like film theory and fashion studies, and feminist epistemology (Parkins 502-3). Since it is my aim to incorporate agential realism into the perspective through which I perform my analysis, I will discuss the most important aspects of how this can aid my analysis according to Parkins here. One key concept within agential realism is intra-action, an alteration of the word "interaction" to problematise the idea that there is a clear distinction between multiple "entities in a relationship" as Parkins calls them, for instance the relationship between the human body and a piece of clothing. Whereas these two entities are customarily defined as "human body" and "piece of clothing" and seen as separate categories of matter, the concept of intra-action questions their boundaries and shows recognition for their interconnectedness. As a result, the distinction between "human" as an active subject and "piece of clothing" as a passive object is called into question (Parkins 503). To comprehend this questioning of humans as active subjects in opposition to their surroundings consisting of passive objects, I like the example of the human body itself. In her work on trans-corporeality, a theoretical field wherein corporeal and environmental theories come together, Stacy Alaimo discusses the human body as a form of matter that contains a complex system of intra-actions. She writes that even though

---

<sup>8</sup> I elaborate on this in chapter 4.1.

“all embodied beings experience corporeal agencies, (...) one’s body has its own forces, which are interlinked and continually intra-acting with wider material as well as social, economic, psychological, and cultural forces” (Alaimo 250).

Thus, because all matter is mutable, dynamic and continually and actively intra-acting with its surroundings, there is no clear distinction between active subjects and passive objects. When this is acknowledged, “agential” qualities become apparent in all forms of matter, not just in humans. Traditionally, agency connotes someone’s capacity to act, which excludes the agency of non-human agents. Barad argues for the removal of human intentionality and subjectivity from the concept of material agency, so that it includes the agency of non-human agents (Parkins 504). Instead of regarding agency as an attribute, she defines it in a more abstract way as a “doing”/“being” in its moment of intra-activity (Alaimo 248).

Parkins connects feminist fashion studies to agential realism in multiple ways. First, she notes that fashion emphasizes the materiality of discourse, due to the intricate ways in which fashion as a system of symbols and meanings and fashion as consisting of material agents and practices are connected to each other. Second, because of its materiality, fashion acts as a reminder that its form is dynamic instead of static, which obstructs completed knowledge to be obtained about it (Parkins 506). Recognizing this not only establishes the observed object as an active agent that is impossible to be defined by objective knowledge, it also emphasizes that the capacity to make meaning of this agent is dynamic, as well as restricted by its ever-changing environment. The latter points to Donna Haraway’s situatedness of knowing, that rejects so-called universal truths and instead argues for the existence of an infinite amount of knowledges that are all subject to the context in which they are formed (Alaimo 251-253). And last, because fashion as an active agent is closely connected to human bodies and the construction of their identities, fashion challenges discourses that are centered around dualism and objectification, such as Mulvey’s theory on the male gaze, as I will elaborate on in my analysis (Parkins 507).

#### **1.4 Semiotics**

The method of my analysis consists of semiotics, the study of signs, particularly how they operate within society and how meaning is produced through them (Kuhn 44). A sign is the smallest element of any entity, examples of which are images, gestures, sounds or material objects. Each sign consists of two elements: the signifier and the signified. The signifier refers to the material carrier of meaning, while the signified refers to the mental concept to which the signifier references. Take for example Elaine’s red dress in attachment 1.1. This dress is a sign that consists of the fabric out of which the dress is made (the signifier) and of the conventional association of this material object to our understanding of a dress (the

signified; Jobling 135). The relation between the signifier and the signified is arbitrary, because the connection that is constituted between them is constructed by humans instead of inherently and naturally present (Rocamora and Smelik 7-8). A sign produces meaning on two different levels: a denotative and connotative level. Denotation means describing something based on the conventions that exist about it, so on a denotative level Elaine's red dress is commonly understood to be a dress. Connotations are more open-ended, because they are based on the interpretation by the reader of the sign after actively engaging with it. According to Roland Barthes, the first theorist to have connected semiotics to the study of popular culture, there is no proof for an interpretation, only a probability, which opens up the possibility that multiple interpretations exist about the same sign as long as they are supported with theories and research (Jobling 136; Rocamora and Smelik 7). To return to Elaine's red dress, one person might form an interpretation based on the color and the associations that are connected to the color red, while another person might base their interpretation on the fit of the dress and link it to a period in time when dresses with such a fit were fashionable. The perspective with which I perform my semiotic analysis is based on the theoretical framework that I have outlined above, so my interpretation of Elaine's clothes is mainly based on various feminist film theories and the concepts that are used in agential realism.

In her analysis of fashion in *Sex and the City*, Kuruc notes that the meanings that are produced through semiotic analyzes of fashion are connotative rather than denotative, for they look further than the shared understanding of what garments are and instead provide "a secondary reading of fashion as a sign system" (Kuruc 199). When she analyzes the outfits of the individual characters, she looks at the connotations of these clothes based on a gender studies perspective. In her analysis of what the character Miranda wears, for example, she notes that both her short hairstyle and business-like pant suits reflect her practical, professional personality. As a corporate lawyer, Miranda works in a field that is dominated by men, so Kuruc interprets her style as having to dress conventionally masculine in order to be successful in this field (Kuruc 208). When Miranda goes through pregnancy, she begins to wear more make-up and conventionally feminine clothing, like skirts and dresses in colors that are brighter and patterns that are softer than her usual pant suits. Kuruc interprets this as clothing reflecting the situation that one is in based on traditional gender roles (Kuruc 209). The conclusion of her analysis, wherein she shares similar observations, is that gender stereotypes, wherein women are portrayed as superficial due to their relationship with fashion, are reinforced within the show (Kuruc 213). Her analysis demonstrates Kuhn's making visible the invisible of feminist film theory. In my analysis I examine fashion in a similar manner as Kuruc, meaning that I closely read the signs that make up Elaine's outfits, as well as their intra-action with their surroundings, and connect

them to their connotations based on my feminist and agential realist perspective. In other words, I connect what I observe to the discourses that they represent. By uncovering the underlying discourses in Elaine's fashion, I hope to demonstrate fashion's ability to either conform to dominant discourses or subvert them when they appear in a story.

## **2. Fashion as a Reflection of Elaine's Character**

I start off my analysis with an introduction to Elaine in the form of an exploration of her heteronormative fantasies. The reason for choosing this as my starting point is to gain understanding of Elaine, in order to deepen my analysis of her intra-action with fashion later on. Since my interpretation of Elaine's character shapes the rest of my analysis, I clarify my interpretation in this chapter. My understanding of her is based on an examination of her actions throughout the film, as well as her thoughts and memories, to which the spectator has access through the use of voice-overs and flashbacks. The ability to peek inside Elaine's head allows us as viewers to map out her motives for behaving the way that she does and to recognize these motives as highly influenced by traditional gender roles and patriarchal standards for women based on Mulvey's male gaze, as I argue in this chapter. In order to highlight how fashion in film functions as a carrier of messages about the character who wears the garments, this chapter includes an analysis on two of Elaine's outfits: the wedding dress that she wears at the Renaissance fair and the white dress that she wears during the second time that her and Trish are in the Victorian tea room. Within this analysis I examine how fashion symbolizes what I call Elaine's "ultimate fantasy". In my analysis on her internalization of the male gaze, I will look at her intra-action with fashion during the strip teases that she performs for Wayne and Richard in order to indicate the agential qualities of her garments and the materiality of discourse. The questions that I pose in this chapter are the following:

- How can Elaine's motives be described, based on her thoughts and actions?
- How does fashion symbolize Elaine's "ultimate fantasy" of obtaining her own heteronormative fairy tale?
- How has Elaine internalized the male gaze, when examining her method for receiving a man's love?
- In what way does fashion aid Elaine with the sexual objectification of her body?

### **2.1 Elaine's Fantasy Symbolized by Fashion**

Within the first ten minutes of the film, Elaine already reveals a substantial amount of information about her fantasies to Trish. The two are sitting in a Victorian tea room, where waitresses in a French maid-style uniform serve tea and cake to the customers and a harpist with flowers in her hair sings about a fairy capturing the hearts of all men. Elaine tells Trish that she loves this fairy-tale environment, after which Trish asks Elaine whether she herself has 'fairy princess fantasies.' Elaine replies with a wholehearted 'of course' and establishes her idealization of the traditional fairy tale by sharing her wish to be carried off by a prince on a white horse. She longs to be loved by a man. This desire, which Elaine herself compares to an addiction, is the driving force behind many of Elaine's actions throughout the film. As a

witch she uses spells and sex magic to attract men and influence them to love her. And when they fail to commit to the happy ending that she has in mind, she moves on to someone else. In her conversation with Trish, Elaine claims to understand men and the way in which women should treat them, in order for them to give women what they want. What men want according to her is 'just a pretty woman to love, to take care of them, to make them feel like a man and to give them total freedom in whatever they want to do or be.' Her idea on receiving love as a woman from a man mirrors the role that women have fulfilled and are still fulfilling within dominant cinema. Here, the task of a female character is to support the male main character with his pursuits, while little to no attention is paid to her own ambitions and drives. In contrast to their male counterparts, who are likely to be valued for their personality, the value of non-male characters in film is often based on their relation to a male character (Murphy 8). A conversation that Elaine has with Richard demonstrates that both of them have internalized this division of roles in film. Richard shares his fantasies about being the main character from a Steve McQueen film<sup>9</sup> where he is a gangster with a "messed-up girl" on his arm or a cowboy who visits the local prostitutes "after shooting up a town". While Trish would roll her eyes to this, Elaine calls it "very sweet" and assures him that she understands. With this conversation Richard confirms Elaine's beliefs on what men want and a woman's role within it. Trish, who recognizes the sexism that Elaine's beliefs entail, responds by saying that Elaine sounds like she "has been brainwashed by the patriarchy". Similarly, in her aforementioned article Stümer mentions that Elaine appears to be a "quintessential feminist nightmare" who has developed a sense of cruel optimism<sup>10</sup> towards "normative ideas of love and romance". As a result, she submits herself to normative expectations of women in order to obtain the heterosexual happy ending that she is promised through her submission (Stümer 2). How, then, does Elaine submit to these normative expectations of women? Thomas writes in her review of the film that Elaine attempts to give men what they are supposed to want based on the binary opposition between men and women and its accompanying gender norms. Thus, Elaine takes on a traditionally feminine role of being tender and caring towards men by cooking for them, listening to their stories without questioning them, being passive in bed and soothing them with words like "poor baby" and "it's alright, you're with me" (Thomas 572). This answers the first question on what Elaine's motives are. She behaves in a way that is in accordance with how men, based on normative conventions, want women to behave, so that they in turn fulfill

---

<sup>9</sup> This is a reference to the American actor Terrence Stephen McQueen (1930-1980), who starred in films wherein men dominate the screen, such as the western films *The Magnificent Seven* (1960) and *Nevada Smith* (1966).

<sup>10</sup> Cruel optimism is a term used by Lauren Berlant to describe someone's desired object or situation that is perceived as possible to obtain, while in reality the desired thing is actually an obstacle for what this person is trying to achieve (Berlant 2).

her own ultimate fantasy of finding a man with whom she can experience her own heterosexual, fairy-tale happy ending.

There are two outfits that visualize Elaine's ultimate fantasy in a symbolic way. The first one is the wedding dress that she wears during the Renaissance fair. After stumbling upon the fair, which is a celebration of the summer solstice, Elaine and Griff end up performing a mock wedding after being appropriately dressed by the fair's attendees. Elaine's dress is made from a shiny, white material with a golden trim, matching her gold and white accessories. Her shoes are also white with a low heel and she wears a golden crown that is decorated with red gemstones (see attachment 2.1). In an article by Jenni Miller on the film's costumes, Biller is said to have noted that Elaine and Griff's outfits from the mock wedding are inspired by 16<sup>th</sup> century dress and are therefore positioned 100 years later in time than the costumes of the fair's other attendees. The reason for this is because Biller wanted the two of them "to be more typically fairy-tale-like". Their outfits are inspired by the film *Peau d'Âne* (*Donkey Skin*, 1970) by Jacques Demy that is based on the fairy tale by Charles Perrault (Miller). Not only is this inconsistency in the temporal origin of the costumes a sign of the creative liberty that Biller has taken to create an aesthetic that pleases her<sup>11</sup>, it also reflects Elaine's aspiration to experience her own fairy tale. In *Peau d'Âne*, a king is determined to marry his daughter, the princess, because he has promised his deceased wife to only remarry if it is with someone who is as beautiful as his wife. Their daughter is the only woman who fits that criterion. The princess understandably does not want to marry her father and flees his kingdom, disguised by wearing the skin of a donkey. The prince of the kingdom that she flees to falls in love with her and eventually marries her. This ending is a happy one according to heteronormative standards not only because the princess does not have to marry her father, but also because she has found herself her own literal prince. Even though Elaine's wedding dress is quite plain compared to the ornamental dresses in *Peau d'Âne*, it does mirror their puffed shoulders, large sleeves and long, multi-layered skirt. It also has the exact same color palette as the princess' wedding dress with its white base and gold details (see attachment 2.2). The mock wedding, during which Elaine and Griff are both playing make-believe and Elaine transforms into a fairy tale princess that marries her prince, depicts the fulfillment of Elaine's ultimate fantasy. Her thoughts after the mock wedding demonstrate this, for they reveal the state of bliss that she is in. They also reveal that she experiences that her love for Griff grows the more that she gets to know him, until it, in her own words, becomes her entire life. Her love for a man becomes the essence of her being, reflecting the films wherein women take on the supporting role of a man (Murphy 8).

---

<sup>11</sup> I elaborate on this topic in chapter 4.

Knowing this about Elaine, it is not surprising that receiving a man's love is more of a priority to her than being a friend to Trish. In the second scene that takes place in the Victorian tea room after the mock wedding, Elaine and Trish are sitting across from each other. While Elaine wears an above the knee white dress with a high neckline and frills, combined with a romantic gold and pastel pink necklace, Trish is dressed in a black, lace blouse and black dress pants (see attachment 2.3). For Biller, symbolism is a tool with which stories can be told and meaning can be created. This includes the symbolic use of color, which is vital in this scene (Lomax). The white color of Elaine's dress symbolizes both her joy about the mock wedding and her suspicion that Griff will ask her to marry him soon. Trish's full black outfit, on the other hand, indicates that she is mourning the recent suicide of her husband Richard. She is unaware that the reason for Richard's death is sitting across from her. In this scene, Elaine comes across as incredibly insensitive. She shows no empathy for Trish's grief, nor guilt for being the reason for her husband's death and she makes no effort to hide the happiness that she feels concerning her own love life. The juxtaposition of the opposing colors, black and white, in respectively Trish and Elaine's outfits is a visual representation of not only the contrasting states of being that the two are in, but it also highlights how self-centered Elaine is. How fashion, then, symbolizes Elaine's fantasy to obtain her own heteronormative fairy tale, is firstly through the reference to clothes that visualize the fulfillment of Elaine's fantasy and secondly through the symbolic use of color consisting of a juxtaposition of contrasting colors. While the former equates the situation that Elaine is in to a cinematic moment wherein her idea of a happy ending is achieved, the latter showcases Elaine's insensitivity towards Trish's grief, which in turn highlights her fixation on her own happiness.

## **2.2 Elaine Sexually Objectifying Herself through the Male Gaze with Fashion**

A large part of Elaine's character is her adherence to the male gaze. This term was coined by Mulvey in her article "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema" (1975). In her article the term refers to the male perspective that the cinematic gaze has in classic Hollywood films, particularly from the 30's, 40's and 50's. From this perspective a man is regarded as the hero of the story, while a woman, who is often sexually objectified, is to assist him with his ventures. I have already discussed this in chapter 2.1, as well as Elaine's adherence to this opposition. With the help of cinematic techniques, like framing and editing, spectators of all genders are encouraged to identify with this perspective (Chaudhuri 31). Mulvey's theory on the male gaze, then, is built upon a heterosexual binary opposition between the man as active and the woman as passive. An important aspect of this distinction between male and female characters is that, through the active male gaze, the passive woman is reduced to a source of visual, often sexualized, pleasure (Mulvey 347). This resembles Elaine's belief that

men just want “a pretty woman to love”. Her strategy for finding love is based on the premise that with magic, a man’s sexual energy can be transformed into love and in order to arouse this energy, an attractive appearance is essential. For Elaine, a great way to tap into a man’s sexual energy is by performing a strip tease, in other words, turning one’s self into an erotic visual spectacle. There are two strip teases in the film, one for Wayne and one for Richard. For both strip teases Elaine employs a similar format. First, she cooks a meal and makes the men drink a potion disguised as an alcoholic beverage. Then, Elaine initiates the start of her performance by positioning herself standing up in front of them, while they are sitting down and looking up at her. What Elaine introduces the men to is *scopophilia*, denoting the pleasure of looking. When it comes to film in particular, the scopophilic male gaze is performed by three agents: the camera that captures the image; the actors on the screen within the narrative and the spectator that watches the end product (Mulvey 352). In these scenes from *The Love Witch*, therefore, it is not only Wayne and Richard who apply the male gaze, it is also the camera that records the scene and us, the spectators, who watch the finished scene. For the purpose of examining Elaine’s internalization of the male gaze, however, I only discuss the second layer of the gaze, so the gaze by the actors on the screen. Mulvey brings up the power dynamic that occurs when someone is subjected to being a visual source of pleasure. While being regarded in such a way can itself be a source of pleasure and therefore a form of control, as I will elaborate on in chapter 3.1, within traditional cinema the person who has the most control in a scopophilic situation is the one who exerts the gaze. A power imbalance is present, since regarding someone as a visually pleasurable object forces them to take on the role of a passive spectacle, even if they do not want to be subjected to such a gaze. According to Freud, who coined the notion of scopophilia, due to the sexual instincts that humans possess, gaining pleasure from looking at someone as if they were a visually pleasurable object automatically contains an erotic dimension (Mulvey 344). For Mulvey, therefore, sexual objectification of women in film is a crucial component of her theory. Through scopophilia, Elaine signifies and is reduced to what is called ‘*to-be-looked-at-ness*’, there to be looked at (Chaudhuri 35). Since Elaine genuinely believes that she as a woman should sexually objectify herself in the same way as women in cinema that men have been taught to desire in order to receive a man’s love, I interpret her method for receiving this love as having internalized the male gaze.

One scene in particular showcases how Elaine has been socialized to believe that men’s validation for a woman depends on how attractive her appearance is. The scene consists of Elaine preparing herself for a solo sex magic ritual, coupled with voice-overs of memories wherein men have made sexist remarks to her. The sequence starts with Jerry scolding Elaine for not taking care of her appearance. When Elaine remembers Jerry’s displeased comment on her unkempt hair, she is shown brushing her hair in the present with

a grim expression. Following Jerry's comments are those of her father calling her "a crazy bitch" and "stupid". He remarks that she should lose weight and after she has done so, he says that she looks "hot". What he says next indicates that Elaine was sexually harassed or even raped by him, for they are: "Do you like it when I touch you like this? Or like this? I wanna make you come." Unfortunately, this is not the only instance wherein Elaine seems to have been sexually assaulted. The last voice-over comes from Gahan, the high priest of her coven. While he claims that he would never hurt Elaine, we are shown a flashback of her initiation into the coven wherein her body is used as an altar. Despite her face showing discomfort and fear and her breath shaking, Gahan continues the ceremony by climbing on top of her and clasps his hands around her wrists, insinuating that he also assaulted her. Throughout the film, Elaine acts tense and annoyed around Gahan, turning her face when he attempts to kiss her on the mouth and when he tells her he teaches a class on sex magic, passively-aggressively responding with "oh, are you still teaching that?" There is even a moment when Gahan grabs Elaine's breast, to which she responds by saying "please don't touch me" and walking away. That sexual abuse by men to women is regarded as common, is reflected in one of Elaine's thoughts: "My therapist told me that I'm not unusual at all. People are abused all over the world. Every day. Much worse than me." Knowing that Elaine experienced all of this, it is not far-fetched that she connects receiving male attention to sexualizing her body through the male gaze.

By using fashion in her strip tease performances, Elaine is able to take advantage of the voyeuristic and fetishizing aspects of the male gaze in order to invite Wayne and Richard to sexually objectify her body. Voyeurism is invited by displaying the body in an exhibitionistic manner, which Elaine does twice in her strip tease for Wayne by opening up her arms after peeling off a layer of clothing to let Wayne shamelessly observe her body. The first time is when she opens up her trench coat, revealing the dress that she wears underneath, and the second time when she has removed all garments except for her underpants, causing Wayne to groan: "Oh Elaine, look at you" (see attachment 2.4-5). When she strips for Richard, she takes a more fragmentary approach. In film, fragmentation of the female body is achieved through close-ups of body parts. This type of voyeurism creates an erotic atmosphere, because the gaze of the objectified woman is absent and therefore unable to shame the spectators from gazing at her body. Additionally, fragmentation eliminates the complexity of the person whose body is fragmented, leaving their character flat and empty and emphasizing their object status (Mulvey 347). Elaine mirrors this by directing Richard's gaze to different pieces of clothing, so to individual parts of her body: when she wants Richard to observe her shoulder, she slides her dress down and strokes her bare shoulder with her hand, while keeping the rest of her body covered; when she wants him to look at her buttocks, she pushes this part of her body towards him with swaying movements, while

moving her dress down towards her legs and when she wants him to focus on her leg, she promptly places it on the coffee table in front of him while rolling down her stocking (see attachment 2.6).

Observing these strip teases from an agential realist perspective would indicate Elaine's close intra-action with fashion. By subsequently covering and uncovering her body, her clothes actively influence Wayne and Richard's reaction to her body, which points to the agential qualities of fashion and questions the distinction between Elaine as the subject and her clothes as the object (Parkins 502). This distinction is challenged further when the supposed boundaries between Elaine and her clothes are taken into account. As written by Barad, "boundaries do not sit still" and this is exemplified by both Wayne and Richard handling the pieces of clothing that Elaine tosses at them after taking them off (Parkins 504). Wayne rubs Elaine's stockings and bra into his face and takes her garter belt into his mouth, while Richard fiddles with Elaine's stockings and laughs and gasps when she throws her garter belt and bra in his face. By touching Elaine's clothes, in a way these men touch her body, for she has probably left her smell, sweat and skin cells in these garments. In the same way, these garments may have left marks in and dust on Elaine's skin, so both garment and body shape each other (Parkins 511). Apart from indicating fashion's agential qualities, Elaine's strip tease illustrates the materiality of discourse. Due to a garment's capacity to make a body intelligible through signification, clothes can indicate how the wearer has been influenced by a specific discourse, which in turn emphasizes the material effects that discourses have (Parkins 506). The lingerie that Elaine wears during her strip tease for Richard, for example, is described by Biller as a "very fetishistic kind of 1960s underwear", which allows a reading of Elaine's body that indicates her desire for wanting to be fetishized through the male gaze (Miller). Her act of performing a strip tease is a material manifestation of discourses on the sexualization of female bodies. Fashion, then, aids Elaine with sexually objectifying her body on both a material and a discursive level. Because of clothing's agential qualities, fashion works together with Elaine on a material level in directing the gaze of Wayne and Richard and influencing their perception of her body. On a discursive level, fashion helps Elaine with tapping into of discourses on the sexualization of the female body due to its quality to signify.

### **To conclude...**

When it comes to the main research question, this chapter reveals how Elaine's intra-action with fashion is connected to her experience of living as a woman in a patriarchy. Not only does what she wears reflect what she has been taught to desire according to patriarchy's standards of women, it also reflects her submission to these standards, which indicates how influential societal discourses are on women's lived experience, including their desires.

Elaine's belief that women are to look attractive in order to be valued by men shows how closely fashion is connected to these expectations of women.

### **3. Fashion as a Masquerade**

Now that I have outlined my interpretation of Elaine and the way in which fashion intra-acts with it, I will dive into the character that she creates for herself with the use of a masquerade. The term “masquerade” here denotes how Elaine uses femininity as a mask, a decorative exterior that conceals her true intentions and the occasional insincere behavior that accompanies it (Doane 102). After outlining the reasons why Motti and Stümer consider Elaine’s appearance to be a masquerade, I will equate the masquerade to a form of witchcraft and dive deeper into the concept of the masquerade with the aid of Mary Ann Doane’s work. Here, I will also discuss how identity construction is an ongoing practice and how this connects to fashion in general and Elaine’s masquerade in specific. Lastly, I will zoom in on Stümer’s argument that Elaine subverts the male gaze through the pleasure that she gains from her masquerade, since this argument conflicts with my interpretation of Elaine submitting herself to the male gaze, and pose an alternative reading on how Elaine’s intra-action with her masquerade can be interpreted. Fashion that is mentioned in this chapter consists of Elaine’s appearance after sleeping with Wayne, Trish’s appearance when she dresses up as Elaine and Elaine’s rainbow coat. The questions that I pose in this chapter are the following:

- Why do Lucrezia Motti and Jenny Stümer describe Elaine’s appearance as a masquerade?
- In what way can Elaine’s masquerade be regarded as a form of witchcraft?
- How does Elaine’s masquerade expose the construction of identity as an ongoing practice?
- How does Elaine’s masquerade, according to Stümer, subvert the male gaze?
- Why do I disagree with Stümer’s argument that Elaine subverts the male gaze with her masquerade?

#### **3.1 Elaine’s Masquerade**

I am not the first person to bring attention to Elaine’s masquerade. Both Motti and Stümer refer to her appearance as a mask and according to Biller, Elaine is “a totally ‘constructed’ woman, with layers of makeup, lashes, fetish lingerie, a wig, and Victorian costumes – all of which she hides behind...” (Lomax). Motti describes Elaine’s expression of her identity with fashion as unnatural and performative, since the character that she has adopted for herself needs to be constructed every day, again and again (Motti 55). Motti refers to two scenes that indicate the constructedness of Elaine’s identity. In the first scene, Elaine wakes up on Wayne’s couch after, how she herself describes it, “a beautiful night of love making” and she notices that her period has started. She goes to the bathroom to use a tampon and put on her wig. The latter is as much part of her routine as the former and “contributes to get her

into character for the start of a new day". This character of hers is fully complete after she has touched up her make-up, has made breakfast for Wayne, has straightened her shoulders and has put on a smile (see attachment 3.1). Because this character includes the role of both an exciting seductress and a traditional wife, Elaine tries to bridge the gap between the so-called "Madonna", who fulfills male desires based on affection, and the "whore", who fulfills male sexual desires. In the film, Griff notices this behavior and describes it as "dolling yourself up and doing the Stepford wife thing", referring to the novel *The Stepford Wives* (1972) by Ira Levin.<sup>12</sup> The routine that Elaine follows before bringing Wayne his breakfast exemplifies the "Stepford wife act" that Griff refers to. The second scene that Motti mentions to indicate the constructedness of Elaine's identity concerns Trish. After Richard's suicide, she reflects on Elaine's beliefs that women should fulfill their husband's (sexual) fantasy to keep them satisfied. "Maybe you were right, maybe you should give a man his fantasy" she tells Elaine. Motti suggests that at this point in the film, Trish "probably started to wish to be like Elaine, to behave like her", so when she is in Elaine's bedroom, she can not help but dress herself up by using Elaine's lingerie, make-up and black wig until she eerily resembles Elaine (see attachment 3.2). Her dressing up as Elaine emphasizes the interconnectedness between one's identity and the garments, as active makers of meaning, that one wears on their body. Without this costume, Trish would not be intelligible as having turned into Elaine's character, so if Elaine were to be without her costume, she would no longer signify what Motti describes as "an ideal of femininity sewn by men for their desires" (Motti 58; Parkins 508).

To Stümer, Trish dressing up as Elaine exemplifies Joan Riviere's description of "womanliness as masquerade", wherein femininity is regarded as synonymous to "the superficial, cosmetic, and ornamental" (Stümer 2). According to Riviere in "Womanliness as Masquerade" (1929), a woman adopting a conventionally feminine appearance does so to mask the potential conventionally male traits that she has as a form of compensation. She compares the doing of womanliness to a thief who "turn(s) out his pockets and asks to be searched to prove that he has not stolen the goods" and to her, there is no difference between this masquerade and "genuine womanliness" (Doane 102). When Stümer refers to Riviere's concept of the masquerade, she points to the assumption that women's supposed affinity with fashion, according to traditional gender roles, makes them superficial, which has resulted in a tradition both within cinema and outside of it wherein women's identities are trivialized and they themselves are reduced to a mere image (Stümer 2). This mindset relies on the binary distinction between men as associated with the rational mind and women as associated with the material body. Because of this binary, the idea that women are not

---

<sup>12</sup> In this novel, a photographer suspects that the submissive housewives in her neighbourhood are actually robots built by their husbands, for their purpose seems to be to serve their husband.

capable of rational thought is justified, which denies them the status of a subject and automatically reduces them to having the status of an object (Parkins 507).<sup>13</sup> Thus, by upholding a masquerade, Elaine reduces herself to the superficiality of the mask, while simultaneously submitting herself to a male fantasy. This, however, does not mean that she gives up her own fantasy. On the contrary, Elaine believes that through becoming the mask, she can fulfill her own desires (Stümer 4). These intertwined but different parts of Elaine are symbolized by one of her garments: a trench coat that is black on the outside, but lined with a bright, rainbow pattern on the inside (see attachment 2.4). When Elaine takes off this coat in front of Wayne he says to her that she has two selves: “Dark and quiet that you show the world. Who do you give that to, the rainbow?” While Wayne’s comment seems to express his amazement that a woman can be both a Madonna (the dark outside) and a whore (the rainbow inside), the duality of this coat also reflects the mask that Elaine wears in order to fulfill her own desires. Motti and Stümer’s comments on the masquerade, then, complement each other. While Motti demonstrates why Elaine’s identity is a constructed masquerade in order to fit the narrative that she connects to her character, Stümer reveals the underlying discourses that Elaine takes advantage of for her masquerade.

The idea that Elaine uses her masquerade as a strategic tool for the fulfillment of her fantasy is supported by Biller, who is quoted to have said that Elaine uses her appearance “as a weapon” in order to live up to “the male fantasies she has been brainwashed to fulfil” (Lomax). The mask provides her with a facade that lures men in and convinces them that it is her purpose to serve them, while allowing her to hide her own desires. Hiding her fantasy is necessary for the fulfillment of the male fantasy, since vocalizing her own wishes and desires is not part of the submissive role that she has to play (Stümer 4). As suggested by Lomax, who analyzes Elaine’s makeup, one of her magical tools is her makeup, “which she equips like a layer of armour in her quest to secure true love” (Lomax). I would extend this comment by noting that Elaine’s so-called “armour” also includes the clothes, accessories and wig that she wears. In the film she says: “witchcraft is just a way of concentrating energy, you can only work with what’s already there. I just use sex magic to create love magic.” The masquerade, then, becomes a tool to manipulate already existing energies in her favor, much like the spells that she performs and the potions that she makes, and can therefore be regarded as part of her witchcraft practice. This scenario demonstrates the instability of the distinction between “subject” and “object”, as suggested in agential realist thinking, for it poses the question: is Elaine an object of the male gaze for inviting men to

---

<sup>13</sup> Important to address here is the role of intersectionality within power structures like these, for throughout history not only women, but also people of color have been associated with the body and with nature, connoting the racist stereotype of being less civilized and more aggressive and sexual. Therefore, it is possible for a white woman to be treated as more of a rational subject than a person of color (hooks 69).

objectify her or does this position of control make her the subject (Parkins 502)? This question indicates that Mulvey's theory on the male gaze is built upon a definition of agency that is, in Barad's words, "aligned with human intentionality or subjectivity", for it assumes a clear distinction between the subject who objectifies and the object who lacks agency, while in this case Elaine expresses her agency to make herself both the subject and the object of her objectification (Parkins 504).

### **3.2 Masquerade as Subverting the Male Gaze on a Textual Level**

According to Stümer, the pleasure that Elaine gains from her masquerade subverts the male gaze. She writes that

"In perfecting the mask, Elaine exposes the tensions of feminine construction as tethered to male fantasy within patriarchal society, articulating the centrality of visibility in negotiating female subjectivity on the one hand and disarticulating the male gaze by way of female fantasy on the other' (Stümer 2).

In other words, Elaine revelling in her feminine masquerade establishes that the wants and desires of women are important. It is a way of reclaiming her femininity, owning the pleasure that she gets from it instead of allowing this to be an instrument of the male gaze that tells women that their subjectivity is subordinate to that of men. I agree with Stümer that it is possible for the male gaze to be destabilized by "a woman taking pleasure in her own image", especially since conventionally feminine pleasures are often deemed as frivolous and unimportant, as discussed in chapter 3.1 (Stümer 6). However, I disagree with Stümer's argument that Elaine in particular gains pleasure from her masquerade. As discussed in chapter 2.2, I interpret Elaine as having internalized the male gaze and as actively catering to the male fantasy with the purpose of fulfilling her own fantasy. This section will therefore function as the countering of Stümer's claim that Elaine subverts the male gaze with her masquerade.

Stümer describes Elaine as a "serial killer, an innocuous psychopath in the mask of the hapless drop-dead-gorgeous loveinterest" (Stümer 3). This understanding of Elaine's character is essential for comprehending why Stümer believes her masquerade to subvert the male gaze, since calling Elaine an "innocuous psychopath" insinuates that she deliberately kills the men that she has seduced, that she derives pleasure from it and, thus, that her destruction is purposeful. The masquerade, here described as the "mask of a drop-dead-gorgeous loveinterest" functions as a tool to make the men lower their guard, so that they are vulnerable to and unsuspecting of their death. Stümer writes that Elaine's motive for killing is that after their death, the men become a fantasy in her head, meaning

that they can no longer say “no” to her love. Griff, for example, does not love Elaine and has never said that he loves her. Right before killing him, Elaine has a vision of Jerry, Wayne and Richard, all dead men, saying that they love her. It is after this vision that Elaine realizes that the only way in which Griff will express his love for her, is when he is dead and she imagines him expressing it in her head. As she predicted, Elaine has a vision of Griff saying “I love you, Elaine” after killing him (Stümer 11). While Stümer interprets this scene as Elaine gaining pleasure from killing the men, I would argue that at least the deaths of Wayne and Richard were not deliberate. As suggested by Thomas, Elaine acts according to traditional expectations of women, while the men that she seduces do not play their part. They either become too emotional or do not care for Elaine’s efforts, so in Elaine’s mind she has done nothing wrong, it is the men that are in the wrong (Thomas). In a conversation with Griff, Elaine denies that she has murdered Wayne and Richard by stating: “Wayne died of heart failure (...) And Richard died because he loved me too much. These men weren’t used to the deep feelings of love that they were experiencing with me.” Stümer would probably argue that Elaine tells Griff these things to prevent him from arresting her, since he is a police officer and she is the main suspect in the deaths of these men, but I think that Elaine genuinely believes what she says and is, to use Trish’ description of Elaine, “brainwashed by the patriarchy” based on the following comment of Biller on the film:

“The big question (...) is what would happen if men loved women as strongly as women want them to; the way women crave to be loved by men. Men are known for being much less emotional than women, but, in my experience, they’re much more emotional. And that’s why they won’t, or can’t, open that gate – it would destroy them. And that’s what kills all the men in my movie – having to experience their own feelings” (Patterson).

This statement indicates that to Elaine it is not the system that is flawed, it is those who do not comply to it. In turn, complying to the system, which for Elaine includes performing her masquerade, becomes a chore more so than something to gain pleasure from. Additionally, Biller is quoted to have said that, even though Elaine is not a sympathetic character, the destruction that she causes is not entirely her fault, since her behavior stems from the sexism and abuse that she has experienced (Miller). Based on various moments from the film I will outline why I believe that Elaine herself does not gain pleasure from her masquerade.

In chapter 3.1 I mentioned that Elaine putting on her masquerade before bringing Wayne his breakfast is as much as a chore as inserting a tampon and making said breakfast. When putting on her wig, for instance, it is as if she puts on her work uniform, for she shows no visible signs of pleasure. The only smile that she reveals is before entering

Wayne's bedroom to get into character. In the scene that I have mentioned in chapter 2.2 wherein she remembers the sexism that she has experienced, there is no sign of her enjoying that she takes care of her appearance, as she brushes her hair with a stern expression. She seems to do it because she is expected to do so, as indicated by Jerry's comment that she should brush her hair more, and not because she wants to. Additionally, her father scolding her for not being skinny enough tells her that maintaining a slender body is another chore that she has to do. During the same conversation with Griff that I have mentioned above, Elaine seems to resent these expectations that men have for a woman's appearance, when she exclaims: "If only you men didn't make us work so hard for your love. If you would just love us for ourselves<sup>14</sup>. But you won't." To Elaine, possessing an aesthetic masquerade is a necessity. Her pleasure in relation to the masquerade does not seem to lie in the masquerade itself, but in those moments wherein her masquerade proves to be successful. When she has seduced Wayne to have sex with her she looks accomplished and when Richard gives in to her strip tease by touching and kissing her, she exclaims in ecstasy: "I'm the love witch, I'm your ultimate fantasy." Stümer, then, writing that Elaine has "a pathological determination to find "true love"" does not recognize that Elaine is a victim of the patriarchal system by which she has been brainwashed (Stümer 4). She exemplifies what happens when a woman were to submit to patriarchal expectations and, as Stümer herself acknowledges, "achieving normative femininity (and the promises of heterosexual fulfillment this entails) is bound to fail" (Stümer 5).

The reason why I disagree with Stümer's argument that Elaine's masquerade subverts the male gaze, is because we interpret Elaine's character in a different way. To me, Elaine has been brainwashed to fulfill the patriarchal feminine ideal and therefore submits to the male gaze and views her masquerade more as a chore than as a source of pleasure, suggesting that she does not undermine the male gaze in this aspect. However, considering that Elaine's masquerade can be regarded as part of her witchcraft practice, indicating that she ultimately puts her own desire before male desires, it is possible to read her masquerade as a subversion of the male gaze while simultaneously being a subjection to it. It is not my intention to argue against Stümer's entire article, for she makes a lot of great points that have been useful for my research. For instance, when she writes that in *The Love Witch*, female desire is not erased or punished, but instead celebrated and portrayed as a form of self-empowerment (Stümer 5). I would argue that this element of the film, the gaining

---

<sup>14</sup> In the first scene in the Victorian tea room at the beginning of the film, Trish claims that she does not have to cater to Richard's fantasy, for he loves her for herself. By wishing that men would love women for themselves instead of for the ideals that she should fulfill, Elaine seems to recall this statement and perceive it as untrue, for Richard has betrayed Trish with Elaine, who did cater to his fantasy.

pleasure of a masquerade, is present on a contextual level. Therefore, I will discuss the pleasure that Biller receives from Elaine's masquerade in the next chapter.

### **To Conclude...**

When it comes to the main research question, this chapter shows how Elaine's active intra-action with fashion, for she manipulates the energy that her masquerade generates as a form of witchcraft, complicates last chapter's conclusion, by taking women's agency concerning patriarchal standards for them into account. While I argue that Elaine is so brainwashed by the patriarchy that she believes it to be necessary to adhere to its standards in order to find happiness, she does so in a self-important way wherein she prioritizes her own ultimate happiness over the happiness of the men she seduces. Next to a vessel for patriarchy's standards for women, fashion, then, can also be a source of reclamation for them by using it, either with or against patriarchal standards, as an expression of their agency and a path towards their own happiness.

#### 4. Fashion as Eye Candy

The last chapter of my thesis is based on Bruzzi's notion of "iconic clothes" in order to connect the visually aesthetic qualities of fashion to the gaze. In the first section, I will continue my discussion on the subversion of the male gaze through a woman's pleasure in the masquerade, but instead of looking at subverting the male gaze within the text itself, I will examine how the male gaze is subverted by Biller on a contextual level. Then, I will shift my focus from the male gaze to the female gaze, as defined by Jill Soloway, and analyze to what extent the female gaze is present within *The Love Witch*. For my analysis, I will examine the *mise-en-scène*, the way in which Elaine as a witch is portrayed compared to witches have been traditionally portrayed in cinema and the extent to which intersectionality and diversity are addressed by the film when it comes to its cast. Fashion that is mentioned in this chapter consists of Elaine's colorful two piece set, her yellow dress from Gunne Sax, her stereotypical witch dress and her coral paisley dress that is shown for only a few seconds. The questions that I pose in this chapter are the following:

- Why can Elaine's masquerade be regarded as a source of visual pleasure for Biller?
- How does Biller subvert the cinematic male gaze on a contextual level?
- In what way can *The Love Witch's* *mise-en-scène* be an example of "feeling seeing"?
- How is the female gaze present within *The Love Witch*?

##### 4.1 Masquerade as Subverting the Male Gaze on a Contextual Level

Bruzzi's notion of "iconic clothes" refers to the idea that it is possible for fashion in cinema to only be present for its visual qualities and therefore transcend the narrative. She calls those items of clothing that are exhibited as a spectacle and there to be admired by the audience "iconic clothes" (Bruzzi xv, xvi). Jane M. Gaines' analysis on Gilbert Adrian's costume design for the 1930 film *Madame Satan* by Cecil B. DeMille is based on Bruzzi's notion of iconic clothes. Gaines emphasizes how these garments interrupt the narrative, or in her words "steal the show". Instead of blending in with the rest of the *mise-en-scène*, iconic clothes stand out from it, therefore "disrupting the normative reality of the text" (Gaines 159). Based on the plethora of praise for Biller's costume design, I would say that Elaine's clothes have a similar visually pleasurable quality as Bruzzi's iconic clothes. What differs, however, is that Elaine's clothes perfectly blend in with the rest of her surroundings, as demonstrated by all of the aforementioned attachments. Take also the two piece set that Elaine wears when she is concocting potions in her apartment (see attachment 4.1), on which Biller comments: "I (...) thought the fabric would be great because I knew she was going to have all these color bottles behind her and all these color potions around her and then her outfit picks up all the different colors" (Miller). Even though Elaine's fashion aids the audience with their submersion into the cinematic reality that she exists in, instead of it disrupting the narrative, I

do want to highlight that Elaine's outfits are a spectacle to look at (Street 5). This is where the masquerade as subverting the male gaze on a contextual level comes in.

From Miller's interview with Biller, it becomes clear that the costume design for Elaine is heavily focused on making her a source of visual pleasure for not only the audience, but also for Biller herself. Another example of an outfit that has been chosen to suit the rest of the *mise-en-scène* is Elaine's pastel yellow dress from Gunne Sax (see attachment 4.2). Biller has chosen to let Elaine wear this dress because it complements the atmosphere of the sun room. "There's the feeling of sunshine coming in the window," Biller says. "...but then there's also a feeling of sunshine in the outfits." There is one dress in particular that Biller has shown, a cotton, coral colored dress with a paisley pattern (see attachment 4.4), that is only on screen for a few seconds, but that she wanted to make an appearance in the film because she likes the idea that Elaine wears a visually pleasurable outfit like this when she is at home, a space that is generally associated with casual clothing and comfortable leisure wear (Miller). In addition to choosing outfits because they would look good on screen, Biller has made clothing that are inspired by costumes that she regards to be a source of visual pleasure, such as Elaine and Griff's costumes at the Renaissance fair, as discussed in chapter 2.1. Another example of this is the long, black dress with the flared bottom and the sheer bell sleeves that Elaine wears when seducing Richard (see attachment 4.3). This dress has been modeled after the classic black dress of stereotypical witches from cinema. Referencing this type of dress allows Biller to playfully create her own version of it and make it fit into the cinematic reality that she creates. The recurring theme, here, is that Biller has a vision of what she wants, so she makes it happen. She is quoted by Stümer to have said that the *mise-en-scène* that she has put together and its spectacular qualities "is at the root of her deepest film fantasies" and Lomax quotes her as having said that "when she watches a beautiful woman in a film she is 'inspired by her hair and makeup. I want to look like her [...]. Maybe I have a fantasy of being that beautiful'" (Lomax; Stümer 14). Based on these quotes and on Biller's seeming dedication to transfer her visual pleasures on the big screen, I read Elaine's masquerade as a source of pleasure for Biller. As a director, she invites the spectator to enjoy - or perhaps oppose - this cinematic fantasy with her (Stümer 10).

If we assume that Biller gains pleasure from Elaine's masquerade, we can return to Stümer's arguments on how pleasure in the masquerade subverts the male gaze, but view it in the context of the pleasure of the director instead of of the text's main character. When she argues that feminine aesthetics are reclaimed within *The Love Witch*, causing the white, cisgendered masculine conventions of cinematic pleasure to be questioned and rewritten, I would suggest that this is because Biller has constructed Elaine in a way that suits her own fantasy, more so than because of the supposed pleasure that Elaine gains from her masquerade (Stümer 2). And when she writes that Elaine reconstructs the masquerade as

“affirmative and joyful - as tethered to female identification and expression, rather than simply male fantasy”, I would argue that, while Elaine dresses in what she believes to be catering to a male fantasy, be it in an exaggerated form, Biller is the one who specifically enjoys reconstructing ultra-femininity in film for portraying it as something creative and fun, seeing that she has made most of the outfits herself (Stümer 5). And finally, when she writes that the male gaze is destabilized when a woman takes pleasure of her own image, I would say that it is not Elaine but Biller who challenges the male gaze through taking pleasure in visual femininity (Stümer 6). While Elaine gives into the male gaze of her male counterparts, Biller challenges cinema’s male gaze that has been dominant for decades by magnifying this gaze with the help of her character Elaine and by applying her own gaze wherein an excess of femininity and creativity are celebrated. Therefore, I suggest that it is not Elaine who subverts the male gaze, but it is Biller who subverts the cinematic male gaze on a contextual level.

When seen from this perspective, Biller’s reworking of the male gaze would make *The Love Witch* what Kuhn refers to as a “feminine text”: a deconstructive work that intervenes with dominant works in order to offer an alternative, feminine perspective. Feminine texts encourage the spectator to actively engage with the subject that is discussed within the text so that they can question, discuss and revise the matter (Kuhn 166). When it comes to *The Love Witch*, Biller attempts to deconstruct patriarchal expectations of women through her character Elaine, especially her masquerade. Elaine, as Motti describes it, overplays her femininity to the extent that it becomes unnatural and performative. Mary Ann Doane, who builds upon Riviere’s work on the masquerade, calls this exaggeration of femininity a “double mimesis”, a form of masquerade that is explained as being “a dynamic, creative and patriarchy-exposing force” (Girelli 253-4). Elaine’s masquerade in its excess of femininity causes the spectator to rethink feminine pleasure and reflect on patriarchy’s beauty standards for women. Biller has created Elaine to be the embodiment of what happens when these standards are lived up to and since the audience perceives her femininity as exaggerated, the sexism that is present within these expectations of women is exposed. To Kuhn, this is exactly what feminist texts should do: denaturalizing discourses that have become so common that their discriminatory or suppressive aspects are no longer noticed, or in her words “making visible the invisible” (Kuhn 73). The idea behind feminine texts is that within a sexist society, there is no opportunity for women to create their own (artistic) language, for the works of men are favored. Dominant forms of expression are therefore alienating to women and alternative expressions are needed (Kuhn 167). Feminine texts, then, differ from general deconstructive texts in that they not only challenge what is considered to be pleasurable in dominant texts, they also provide spectators with other forms of pleasure that may appeal to and resonate with those who are commonly

discriminated against or forgotten about within dominant texts (Kuhn 168). To me, Kuhn's usage of the word "feminine" in the term "feminine text" resembles Jill Soloway's use of the word "female" in how she describes the female gaze. According to Soloway, the word "female" is used to indicate its opposition to the male gaze, but the word can also be replaced with "other", "queer", "trans" or "intersectional". In Soloway's words: "She (the female gaze) is the non-gaze" (Soloway). Similarly, feminine texts provide a perspective that is different from the male texts that dominate society. Biller, then, provides an alternative to the male gaze by denaturalizing this gaze through Elaine and by giving a platform to a hyper-feminine *mise-en-scène* based on what she herself derives visual pleasure from.

#### **4.2 Fashion in *The Love Witch* and the Female Gaze**

In my thesis I have given a lot of attention to how the male gaze is present within *The Love Witch*, but since I consider this film to be a feminist work of art based on how it denaturalizes patriarchal expectations of women, as discussed in the previous section, I wonder if and how the female gaze is present within the film. I have already mentioned Soloway's female gaze, but I want to elaborate on it in more detail. In her TIFF Talk (2016), she shares what she considers to be the female gaze. According to her, this gaze has three important qualities. First, it allows the cinematic gaze to convey what Soloway calls "feeling seeing". Instead of merely showing the spectator what is happening on screen, the female gaze allows spectators to feel it. The cinematic gaze becomes a "subjective camera, one that attempts to get inside the protagonist" (Soloway). When it comes to feeling seeing in *The Love Witch*, Stümer suggests that the film's *mise-en-scène* can be read as a reflection of Elaine's inner life. She quotes Mulvey when she writes that "[i]nterior"<sup>15</sup> also contains within it 'interiority,' the psychic spaces of desire and anxiety, and the private scenarios of feelings", which can be seen as a way in which the camera captures the feelings of the protagonist and communicates them to the spectator. A literal way in which this is done is through the paintings in Elaine's apartment, that Stümer interprets as expressions of Elaine's experiences (Stümer 14). One example of a painting that Elaine works on visualizes her experience when it comes to finding her prince on the white horse. It shows a woman holding a white horse while thinking about various men (see attachment 4.5). Additionally, the *mise-en-scène* being, as described by Motti, "conceived and composed to be too fake to belong to the natural world" reflects the artificiality of Elaine's masquerade (Motti 55). Its extravagance resembles Elaine's to-be-looked-at-ness and with that her efforts to turn herself into a visually artificial object of the male gaze, mirroring the steps that she takes to achieve her ultimate fantasy (Motti 55). Especially Elaine's apartment reflects her personality

---

<sup>15</sup> Here indicating the *mise-en-scène*.

well, for it consists of signifiers of the occult in the form of symbols and magical tools, as well as to female sexuality in the form of drawings and paintings. Based on the individuality and creativity that Biller has put into the decor, I would say that the mise-en-scène greatly aids with the visualization of both Elaine's and Biller's feelings and therefore with communicating these feelings to the spectator.

Because Soloway defines the cinematic gaze as a "privilege generator", one that creates empathy for the protagonist through storytelling and as a result functions as a political tool, the female gaze particularly gives attention to characters other than those who appear in traditional cinema, which often favors a white, cisgendered man. This is an attempt to generate empathy for marginalized people and, in turn, an increase in privilege for those who are underrepresented or discriminated against. The second quality of the female gaze is, then, to communicate to the spectator how those who are generally the object of the white, cisgendered male gaze feel. The female gaze's last quality is to return the dominant gaze. If someone who is generally the object of the gaze becomes the subject of the gaze, they can make those who are generally the subject of the gaze the object by looking back. How does this relate to the witch Elaine? Before witches were depicted in film as either an old hag or an irresistible seductress, both having to be punished, people were already hostile to them, particularly during 15<sup>th</sup> to 18<sup>th</sup> century Europe, for they believed witches to have sex with demons and the devil, steal and eat both babies and penises and participate in orgies with fellow witches (Rountree 212). Hostility towards witches is still present in Elaine's town. In one of the film's last scenes, Elaine explains to Griff how witchcraft has made her feel empowered, whereas before she felt mistreated by men, except when they only wanted to use her for her body. The conversation between her and Griff takes place at a burlesque bar and when the other customers find out that Elaine is the witch that is connected to Wayne's death, both men and women call out to "burn the witch". The men at the bar physically attack her, tear off her clothes, or as Stümer writes "tear of her (...) markers of the mask", and loosen their belts, suggesting that they are about to sexually harass her (Stümer 7). With this scene in particular, Biller seems to highlight that hostility towards witches goes hand in hand with sexism towards women.

According to Kathryn Rountree, fear for witches is connected to men's fear for (insatiable) female sexuality and women's independence from men, as suggested by the prejudices that witches have sex with each other and the devil instead of with men (Rountree 224). In *The Monstrous-Feminine* (1993), Barbara Creed notes that stereotypes of women who are depicted as monstrous, such as the witch, are remarkably often defined in terms of their sexuality (Creed 3). She suggests, therefore, that depictions of the monstrous feminine as constructions by patriarchal and phallogocentric ideologies are closely related to female sexuality being regarded as "different", something monstrous that provokes fear, often

referred to as “castration anxiety”, in men (Creed 2). Creed writes that in the horror film, witches’ functions as visionaries and healers have often been omitted from contemporary representations in favor of witches that have “supernatural powers and a desire for evil”. Here, they are an abject and dangerous figure that poses a threat to the (patriarchal) community (Creed 76). Sometimes in film a witch’s supernatural powers are connected to her reproductive system, especially her menstruation (Creed 77). To explain this connection between witchcraft and a woman’s reproductive system, Creed refers to Joseph Campbell’s research wherein he argues that women were the first to be associated with witchcraft due to their mysterious ability to birth new life. The magical, yet frightening powers that arose from a woman’s womb were a source of mystery and fear (Creed 74). Menstrual blood in horror films is, considering that it is, mostly by men, still perceived as an uncomfortable and taboo subject, used to portray the witch in particular and women in general as abject beings (Creed 78). Biller counters the disgust for menstrual blood with a scene wherein Elaine makes a witch bottle containing her used tampon, accompanied by her thoughts that “tampons aren’t gross. Women bleed and that’s a beautiful thing”. Her next thought seems to comment on how men fear the unknown qualities of a woman’s body and condemn her for it: “Do you know that most men have never even seen a used tampon?” Additionally, while female characters in film who enjoy their sexuality are often punished through the male gaze,<sup>16</sup> for example the *femme fatale* who is punished with death, Elaine does not die at the end of the film (Creed 79). Instead, she is the one who kills a man who refuses to follow the normative script. The decision to make the protagonist of her film a witch has been a conscious one, for Biller reclaims the figure of the witch. She describes the witch as “an old sort of male fantasy figure”, but by portraying her through Elaine’s own subjective, female perspective, she demonstrates what it is like to be a stereotype of the male gaze (Patterson). Thus, she turns someone who is usually the object of the gaze the position of a subject.

Despite all of this, because of Elaine’s destruction - the deaths and sadness that she has caused - I would say that she can still be considered as being monstrous. The reason why she is considered to be monstrous, however, originates from an interesting paradox: Elaine’s destruction takes place because she embodies a very literal understanding of patriarchal expectations for women. In a sense, what destroys the patriarchal community is submitting to patriarchy itself. Something else that is important to note is that, even though the character of Elaine functions as a reclamation of the witch, this protagonist, as well as the majority of the cast, is white and conventionally attractive. When Caetlin Benson-Allott refers to Soloway’s feminine gaze, she criticizes the whiteness and slimness of women on screen by emphasizing the importance of intersectionality. Because the underrepresentation

---

<sup>16</sup> Similarly, Doane points out that women who masquerade in film are also punished for it (Chaudhuri 41).

of marginalized people in film is a serious issue, a diverse cast that includes non-stereotypical representations of these people is essential to avoid their experiences from being erased (Benson-Allott 66). While it makes sense for Elaine's character that she is conventionally attractive, considering the comments on her appearance and weight that she has received in her past, that does not mean that the rest of the cast also has to fit the same standards. So in conclusion, *The Love Witch* provides a feminine perspective on a story wherein a marginalized woman is given the status of subject, allowing Biller to return the cinematic male gaze by providing her audience with an alternative interpretation of a stereotypical figure that has been objectified by the male gaze. What is lacking, however, is attention for intersectionality through a more diverse cast.

### **To Conclude...**

When it comes to the main research question, this chapter uncovers the political dimension of Biller's intra-action with fashion, proving it to be a way in which she as a filmmaker can challenge the dominant cinematic male gaze. By this I do not mean that (excess) femininity equates female pleasure, since people of all genders have the ability to find pleasure in Biller's creations, but that Biller's expression of femininity through Elaine's fashion exposes patriarchy's standards for women and reveals them to be man-made and artificial. Additionally, Biller portrays fashion as something creative, playful, sensual and imaginary, something that despite its perceived excess of conventional femininity does not belong to one gender only.

## Conclusion

Let us revisit the main research question: in Anna Biller's *The Love Witch* (2016), how does the intra-action between fashion, main character Elaine and director Biller demonstrate the complex ways in which fashion is connected to female embodiment when living in a patriarchal society with a dominant male gaze? Since I have already answered parts of this question in the "To Conclude..." sections, I keep my answer relatively brief. When considering the intra-action between fashion and Elaine first, fashion as a carrier of meanings and a reference to societal discourses has the ability to make Elaine intelligible, so that her appearance can be read. What Elaine's appearance communicates is her desire for her heteronormative fairy tale, as well as her method for obtaining this fairy tale through sexually objectifying herself, both of which show the influence of patriarchal standards for women and its male gaze. Ultimately, however, Elaine conforming to patriarchy's expectations through a masquerade, a form of witchcraft, indicates a sense of agency that, if she were not so brainwashed, she could have used to oppose these expectations. Paradoxically, Elaine views witchcraft as that which gives her power over men in the sense that she manipulates them for her own happiness, but what she believes to bring her happiness is still a result of having internalized patriarchy's standards for women. The interconnectedness of submission to and subversion of these standards within not only Elaine, but within those who identify as a woman in general exemplifies how these standards are inescapable to women. Women are affected by discourses regarding them, whether they submit to it or attempt to subvert them, for opposing something is acknowledging it and being affected by it. That the subversion of the patriarchal male gaze in cinema is possible is proven by Biller's intra-action with fashion. As discussed before, with her depiction of Elaine she uses fashion to magnify standards for women, in an attempt to deconstruct them and inspire the spectator to rethink them. Additionally, by sharing the creative and imaginative way in which she uses fashion as a component in the assembly of a visually pleasurable cinematic reality with an audience, she not only makes the conventionally feminine aesthetics of Elaine's clothes accessible to people of all genders, she also applies her feminine gaze to provide an alternative perspective to the male gaze.

Now that I have answered my question according to my analysis, I want to address the challenge that I gave myself to implement agential realism within my research. As remarked by Alaimo, Barad's theory on agential realism is quite abstract, which sometimes made it difficult to apply (Alaimo 248). Since the theory forces one to radically shift one's usually anthropocentric perspective, I assume it takes practice to get familiar with it and be able to skillfully write about it. Apart from the difficulties, however, I do think that it guided me towards interpretations that I would not have considered otherwise. One example of this is when I analyze Elaine's strip teases and mention how there is not a clear distinction between

her and her lingerie. This blurring of the line between the subject and the object is especially relevant when it comes to Mulvey's male gaze, for it is centered around objectification. Further research could be done on how Barad's definition of agency can be applied to analyzes of the objectification of marginalized people, possibly in film, since the distinction between the subject and the object is not obsolete when it comes to derogatory practices such as the objectification of someone, especially when it is a form of systemic oppression. Something else that further research could be done on is the incorporation of fashion into witchcraft. In my thesis I only briefly mentioned how Elaine's masquerade can be read as part of her witchcraft practice, but there are many more ways of performing so-called glamour magic, so I would like to explore this topic in more detail. Witchcraft in itself is an interesting topic to analyze from an agential realist perspective, for at least Elaine's practice revolves around working with the energies of nature. In a way, one uses one's own agency in order to extend it to the agency of their surroundings.

Lastly, I want to reflect on the writing of my thesis, how it went, what went well and what could have been done better. Many others who have written their thesis will probably agree that for months, this research becomes your full-time job. The most enjoyable part to me was the preparation stage, the reading of books and articles, the brainstorming of ideas. I looked forward to emerging myself into a kind of passion project to which I could add paintings of Elaine's outfits as inspired by Lomax, who added paintings of Elaine's make-up looks to her article. The hard part was to actually put these ideas to paper. Writing everything down went fairly slow. Apart from having so many ideas that I did not know where to start, due to the COVID-19 pandemic there was no separation between my living space and my working space, causing the kitchen table to turn into a quite uninspiring place to write. Once I had my first draft, however, it revisiting paragraphs, deleting them, moving them became easier. I took so long "perfecting" my text, however, that there was little time left for my intention to add a creative component to my thesis in the form of paintings. Therefore, the painting on the cover page of Elaine holding the dagger with which she pierced Griff's heart has to suffice. Concerning the "perfecting" of my thesis, I believe that everyone who has managed to write their thesis after a year of quarantines, lock-downs and being schooled in their bedrooms has to take this school year's stress into account and give themselves permission to be proud of themselves, whether they consider their work to be perfect or not. All in all, I am proud of having finished this work and would like to express my deepest thanks to everyone who has supported me during the writing of it.

## **Acknowledgments**

First, would like to thank my supervisor Anne-Marie for her guidance with my internship and thesis and for her overall good advice. I would also like to thank my parents for their frequent phone calls and for their encouragement and reassurance when I felt stressed. I would like to express my gratitude to my dear friends, to Ester for working with me during our “laptop clubs”, to Anne for taking the time to give feedback on my thesis and to Kim, Amee, Rosa and Yara for their interest in my research and wellbeing. Especially, I would like to give a “bigly” thanks to Sharon for showing me her love and never failing to make me laugh. I am also incredibly grateful to Stijn for being the sweetest, most supportive and understanding partner that someone could wish for, as well as to our kitten Mango for sleeping on my lap when I worked and for distracting me when she wanted to have a play break.

## Bibliography

- Alaimo, Stacy. "Trans-Corporeal Feminisms and the Ethical Space of Nature." *Material Feminisms*, edited by Stacy Alaimo and Susan Hekman, Indiana UP, 2008, pp. 237-64.
- Benson-Allott, Caetlin. "No Such Thing Not Yet: Questioning Television's Female Gaze." *Film Quarterly*, vol. 71, no. 2, 2017, pp. 65-71.
- Berlant, Lauren. *Cruel Optimism*. Duke UP, 2011.
- Bordwell, David en Kristin Tompson. "The Shot: Mise-en-Scene." *Film Art: An Introduction*, McGraw-Hill Education, 2013, blz. 112-159.
- Bruzzi, Stella. "Introduction." *Undressing Cinema Clothing and Identity in the Movies*, Psychology Press, 1997, blz. xiii-xxi.
- Chaudhuri, Shohini. *Feminist Film Theorists: Laura Mulvey, Kaja Silverman, Teresa de Lauretis, Barbara Creed*. Routledge, 2006.
- Creed, Barbara. *The Monstrous-Feminine: Film, Feminism, Psychoanalysis*. Taylor & Francis Group, 1993.
- Doane, Mary Ann. "Film and the Masquerade: Theorising the female spectator." *Hollywood: Cultural dimensions: ideology, identity and cultural industry studies*, edited by Thomas Schatz, Taylor & Francis, 2004, pp. 95-110.
- Flügel, John Carl. *The Psychology of Clothing*. Hogarth Press, 1930.
- Gaines, Jane M. "On Wearing the Film: *Madame Satan* (1930)." *Fashion Cultures: Theories, explorations and analysis*, edited by Stella Bruzzi and Pamela Church Gibson, Routledge, 2000, pp. 159-177.
- Gibbs, John. *Mise-en-scène: Film Style and Interpretation*. Wallflower Press, 2002.
- Grove, Elliot. "What Is Independent Film?" *Raindance*, 19 Jan. 2014, <https://raindance.org/what-is-independent-film/>. Accessed 21 Jul. 2021.
- hooks, bell. "naked without shame: a counter-hegemonic body politic." *Talking Visions. Multicultural Feminism in a Transnational Age*, edited by Ella Shohat, MIT Press, 2014, pp. 65-74.
- Jobling, Paul. "Roland Barthes: Semiology and the Rhetorical Codes of Fashion." *Thinking through fashion: a guide through key theorists*, edited by Agnès Rocamora and Anneke Smelik, I.B. Tauris, 2016, pp. 132-145.
- Kuhn, Annette. *Women's pictures: feminism and cinema*. Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1982.
- Kuruc, Katarina. "Fashion as communication: A semiotic analysis of fashion on 'Sex and the City'." *Semiotica*, vol. 171, 2008, pp. 193-214, <https://doi.org/10.1515/SEMI.2008.074>
- Lomax, Cathy. "Makeup as Dark Magic: The Love Witch and the Subversive Female Gaze." *Frames Cinema Journal*, <https://framescinemajournal.com/article/makeup-as-dark-magic-the-love-witch-and-the-subversive-female-gaze/>. Accessed on 13 Apr. 2021.

- Miller, Jenni. "This Retro Horror Movie Has the Sexiest Costumes You'll See All Year." *The Cut*, 16 Nov. 2016, [www.thecut.com/2016/11/the-love-witch-has-the-sexiest-costumes-youll-see-all-year.html](http://www.thecut.com/2016/11/the-love-witch-has-the-sexiest-costumes-youll-see-all-year.html).
- Motti, Lucrezia. *Feminist representations in contemporary media: an analysis of audio-visual contents*. 2018. Utrecht University, Master's Thesis.
- Mulvey, Laura. "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema." *Media and Cultural Studies: KeyWorks*, Blackwell Publishing, 2006, pp. 342-352.
- Murphy, Jocelyn Nichole. "The role of women in film: Supporting the men -- An analysis of how culture influences the changing discourse on gender representations in film." *Journalism Undergraduate Honors Theses*, 2015, pp. 1-34, <https://scholarworks.uark.edu/jouruht/2>.
- Parkins, Ilya. "Building a Feminist Theory of Fashion: Karen Barad's Agential Realism." *Australian Feminist Studies*, vol. 23, no. 58, 2008, pp. 501-515.
- Patterson, John. "The Love Witch director Anna Biller: 'I'm in conversation with the pornography all around us'." *The Guardian*, 2 Mar. 2017, [www.theguardian.com/film/2017/mar/02/love-witch-director-anna-biller-conversation-pornography](http://www.theguardian.com/film/2017/mar/02/love-witch-director-anna-biller-conversation-pornography).
- Rocamora, Agnès, and Anneke Smelik. "Thinking Through Fashion: An Introduction." *Thinking through fashion: a guide through key theorists*, edited by Agnès Rocamora and Anneke Smelik, I.B. Tauris, 2016, pp. 1-27.
- Rountree, Kathryn. "The New Witch of the West: Feminists Reclaim the Crone." *Journal of Popular Culture*, vol. 30, no. 4, 1997, pp. 211-229.
- Soloway, Jill. "Jill Soloway on The Female Gaze | MASTER CLASS | TIFF 2016." *YouTube*, uploaded by TIFF Talks, 11 Sep. 2016, [www.youtube.com/watch?v=pnBvppooD9I](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pnBvppooD9I).
- Street, Sarah. "Introduction: Changing Texts." *Costume and Cinema: Dress Codes in Popular Film*, Wallflower Press, 2001, blz. 1-12.
- Stümer, Jenny. "(Un)masking Femininity: Desire and Fantasy in Anna Biller's *The Love Witch*." *Feminist Media Studies*, 3 feb. 2021, <https://doi.org/10.1080/14680777.2021.1879195>.
- Thomas, Laura. "'Poor Baby': *The Love Witch*." *The Lancet Psychiatry*, vol. 6, no. 7, 1 Jul. 2019, p. 572.
- Wissinger, Elizabeth. "Judith Butler: Fashion and Performativity." *Thinking through fashion: a guide through key theorists*, edited by Agnès Rocamora and Anneke Smelik, I.B. Tauris, 2016, pp. 285-299.

## Attachments

### 1. Theoretical Framework and Method



Attachment 1.1 - *The Love Witch*, Elaine's red dress.

### 2. Fashion as a Reflection of Elaine's Character



Attachment 2.1 - *The Love Witch*, Elaine and Griff's mock wedding



Attachment 2.2 - *Peau d'Âne*, a happy fairytale ending



Attachment 2.3 - *The Love Witch*, color symbolism in Trish and Elaine's outfits.



Attachment 2.4 - *The Love Witch*, Elaine's strip tease for Wayne no.1



Attachment 2.5 - *The Love Witch*, Elaine's strip tease for Wayne no.2



Attachment 2.6 - *The Love Witch*, Elaine's strip tease for Richard

### 3. Fashion as a Masquerade



Attachment 3.1 - *The Love Witch*, Elaine performing her "Stepford wife act"



Attachment 3.2 - *The Love Witch*, Trish dresses up as Elaine

#### 4. Fashion as Eye Candy



Attachment 4.1 - *The Love Witch*, Elaine's colorful two piece set



Attachment 4.2 - *The Love Witch*, Elaine and Trish in the sun room



Attachment 4.3 - *The Love Witch*, Elaine's stereotypical witch dress



Attachment 4.4 - *The Love Witch*, Elaine's "leisure wear"



Attachment 4.5 - *The Love Witch*, Elaine painting her experiences