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Report on the Conference 'Charming and Crafty: Witchcraft and Paganism in Contemporary Media', Harvard University, Cambridge, USA – May 18th-21st 2006

Jenny Butler

The quirkily titled 'Charming and Crafty' conference was a three-day event, exploring expressions of Witchcraft and Paganism in the media. Hosted by the Harvard Film Archive, Harvard University, Cambridge, Massachusetts, USA and sponsored by the Committee on Degrees in Folklore and Mythology at Harvard University and the Department of Visual and Media Arts, Emerson College, this was the first international academic conference of its kind. It brought together scholars, filmmakers, authors and media specialists to discuss the range of different portrayals of Paganism, Witchcraft, magic, and the occult in the media. The meeting was called to explore the depictions of Paganism and Witchcraft in film, television and other media from the 1900s to contemporary times.

One of the most interesting aspects of the conference was its international perspective. An impressive roster of presenters from an array of disciplines in the social sciences, film and media studies, cultural studies, sociology, folklore and English literature, from various countries including America, Mexico, Australia, Israel, the UK and Ireland came together to examine the cultural imaginings of Witchcraft and Paganism across media forms. Delegates included postgraduate students, established academics and a special-guest practitioner. Keynote speakers included Stephen Mitchell (Professor of Scandinavian and Folklore, Harvard University), Tanya Kryzwinska (Reader in Film and Television Studies, Brunel University, London, UK) and Mikel Koven (Lecturer in Film and Television Studies, Aberystwyth, Wales, UK). There were thirty-two speakers and up to ten non-presenting attendees.

The thematic diversity was evident in the variety of papers, with topics ranging from the influence of Paganism on popular fiction, publishing of popular books on Paganism and Witchcraft, Pagan subject matter in the world of gaming, and analyses of films drawing

on Pagan or Witchcraft themes. Speakers analysed their chosen media genre from their respective disciplinary perspective and this worked well within the interdisciplinary format of the conference. There were many discussions on the sphere of fantasy literature that has been inspired or influenced by Pagan themes. Specific books mentioned were J. K. Rowling's Harry Potter series and Marion Zimmer Bradley's *The Mists of Avalon* among others. Visual media featured in presentations throughout the conference and ideas were exchanged on the underlying Pagan themes of popular films. There was a shared interest in the contexts and representations of Witchcraft and Paganism and what interpretations have been given to historical Paganism in different forms of media. TV shows such as *Bewitched*, *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*, the Australian television drama *Little Oberon* and movies such as *The Craft*, *Rosemary's Baby* and the Mondo Genre of filmmaking were reviewed for insight into the perception of Paganism the creators of the shows or films seemed to have. There was analysis of the ways in which programmes have been thematically influenced by the esoteric. Also covered was reality TV, comics such as Alan Moore's *Promethea* and musical genres inspired by Paganism or the occult. There was also a paper on the relationship between the Pagan community and the News media and TV journalism. Another paper dealt with images of the Witch figure in Salem village and discussed the use of the motif in advertising.

The conference began with a keynote address by Stephen Mitchell on '*Häxan*, Folklore and Cultural History'. Stephen's lecture was followed over the following three days by a series of panels, organised according to theme. Panel 1: 'Black Books – Magical Languages and Literatures', Panel 2: 'Cult/Occult – Underground Aesthetics of Witchcraft and Paganism', Panel 3: 'Burning Times and New Ages – Imagining Histories and Remembering the Present, Panel 4: 'the Others – Outsiders, Subcultures and Discourses of Difference', Panel 5: 'Enchanted Landscapes – Paganisms and "Place"', Panel 6: 'The Glass Teat – Witchcraft, Gender and the Small Screen', Panel 7: 'Devouring Mothers, Absent Fathers – Family in Witchcraft Narratives and Panel 8: 'Crafting the Art of Magic: Philosophy, Modernity and Ritual'. There was a 'filmmakers forum' in which the docu-films *Witch City* (written by John Stanton and produced by Bob Quinn) and *Bodies of Water: Voodoo Identity and Transformation* (made by Lilith

Dorsey) were shown and discussed with the producers of each film present to take questions and comments. The conference included a night of screenings of the classic films *Häxan: Witchcraft through the Ages* directed by Benjamin Christensen, 1922 and *Day of Wrath* (*Verdens Dag*), directed by Carl Theodor Dreyer, 1943.

There was a special guest appearance by the Australian-born 'media Witch' and author Fiona Horne, who gave a talk and did a question-and-answer session. She spoke of her media involvement and discussed her role as regular panellist on the Australian daytime talk show *Beauty and the Beast*, her experiences on the SciFi Channel's 'reality TV' show *Mad Mad House* in 2004 and her ideas for her own show *Hex and the City*. She talked about how her personal beliefs and practices influence her writing and the response her publications have received in the media and among her readers.

A concluding roundtable symposium allowed for scholarly networking and exchange of ideas between keynote speakers and other participants. There were reflections on the issues raised over the course of the conference and discussion of plans for further research into these areas. Future directions of this avenue of research were considered. The conference organisers, Peg Aloi (Department of Visual and Media Arts, Emerson College, Boston) and Hannah Sanders did an excellent job and the assisting students ensured that everything went smoothly for the duration of the event. Overall the conference was an interesting and thought-provoking one, successful in its aim of facilitating discussion on various facets of Paganism in the media and of making inroads into a novel area in Pagan Studies. There are plans to publish the conference proceedings and a publisher is currently being sought. A similar conference is in the planning stages for Spring/Summer 2007, again to be held at Harvard University, with possible sponsorship by the Committee on Degrees in Folklore and Mythology. The main theme will be 'Paganism and the Arts', with sub-themes on visual art and performance in Pagan culture.