

GOTHIC NATURE



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COVER CREDIT:

Model IV, 2017

Artist: D Rosen

Cast Aluminum (Original Objects: Buck Antler and Stomach (Decorative Model), Camel Mask

(Theatrical Model), Whip (Didactic Model), Stiletto (Decoy Model), Goose Neck (Decoy Model),

Nylons, Bra Underwire, Calvin Klein Dress, Facial Mask, Necklace, Wax

21 x 25 x 12 in.

Photo credit: Jordan K. Fuller

Fabrication: Chicago Crucible

WEB DESIGNER:

Michael Belcher

Folktale Failure: *Gretel & Hansel*

(United States: Orion Pictures, United Artists Releasing, 2020)

Shelby Carr

Oz Perkins' *Gretel & Hansel* attempts to reimagine the folktale 'Hansel & Gretel' as an empowering coming of age story for its titular female heroine, complete with an ecoGothic stylistic flare. However, the film is just that: style over substance. While it seeks to, on the one hand, prioritise the feminist development of Gretel and, on the other, foreground its moody natural environment, it ultimately falls short on both counts. The overall result is a rather overwritten and poorly executed 'girl power' film which fails to unnerve or excite us with its ecoGothic aesthetic.

Gretel & Hansel, fittingly, is set in a time of extreme famine. The film opens with Gretel (Sophia Lillis) attempting to feed her family by finding work in the home of a wealthy man, but the work in question—advertised as general housework—turns out to be prostitution. After Gretel returns home emptyhanded with her brother, Hansel (Sam Leakey), the siblings' mother (Fiona O'Shaughnessy) turns them out of the house quite violently, refusing to continue feeding them. Sister and brother wander aimlessly, hoping to find food or work. A huntsman (Charles Babalola) points them in the direction of some foresters, telling them that here they will be able to find food, work, and shelter, but warns them, ominously, to keep their wits about them in the woods—highlighting from the outset the dangers of this landscape. In line with the well-known fairy tale, the two soon encounter a witch's house in the woods, which is filled with as much food as they could ever want. The witch, Holda (Alice Krige), takes them in and puts them to work, taking a particularly keen interest in Gretel. Breaking with the original tale, this witch teaches Gretel her witchcraft and eventually tries to turn her against her younger brother. Gretel and Holda's relationship comes to a head when Holda takes Hansel to the basement of the house, hoping to turn him into more food, but Gretel kills Holda, and the film ends with Gretel sending Hansel back to civilisation, while she—in perhaps the film's most interesting twist—stays in the woods to grow her powers.

The film is incredibly visually appealing. Throughout, it plays heavily with warm and cool tones, often contrasting them to great effect. Additionally, *Gretel & Hansel* experiments freely with its architecture, creating spaces littered with ornate and eye-catching windows and dwellings that seem impossible in their layout—Holda’s house among them. While the exterior of her house looks like it wouldn’t be out of place as an Airbnb Plus listing, the interior adheres to the Gothic edifice’s labyrinthine insides. As viewers, we never get a clear sense of where rooms are in relation to each other—especially Holda’s stark white basement, where she turns human flesh and refuse into food. While this spatial disorientation could have been effectively utilised to provoke terror, it instead reads almost as an oversight, as the sets and set designs are not realised to their fullest potential. Perhaps if the spatial confusion of Holda’s house was more clearly portrayed as frightening to the siblings, it would have read less like the film was clumsily sampling such Gothic conventions just for the sake of it. Up until the final showdown between Holda and Gretel, the two siblings are apparently very comfortable in this strange place, with Hansel more than happy to stay.

This unfulfilled potential spills too into the woods that surround Holda’s house. From the moment that Gretel and Hansel enter the treeline, the film seeks to make it abundantly clear that it’s a supernatural space, yet the seemingly unbothered attitudes of the characters within it and then the further plot inconsistencies put a dampener on its supposed dangers. As the siblings journey through it, Gretel, who seems to have the gift of psychical ‘sight’, sees shadowy figures in the distance, unmoving and shrouded in mist. These are never fully explored, but seem somehow to relate to Holda’s origin story, which Gretel knows before she even meets her. The source of these ghosts in the landscape becomes clearer the longer Gretel and Hansel stay with Holda. Surrounding the house are small reminders of the children she has lured, over the years, to their demise. As the two siblings become more comfortable in the woods around Holda’s home, they begin to see evidence of these children—but neither appear to be very worried about it. At one point in the film, Hansel stands wonderingly beneath a tree strung up with hundreds of children’s shoes, simply curious rather than scared. He’s not the brightest boy, but the film fails to capitalise on the significance of this discovery. Later, Gretel finds herself by a stream. On the opposite bank, crammed into the crevices in the rocks, are an assortment of children’s dolls. These objects, which signify a seeming profusion of people in a place so ostensibly devoid of humanity should stand as

a stark warning to the siblings—but both of them are unquestioningly content to ignore them if it means a roof over their heads. Yet, this is not to say that Perkins' depictions of the forest are without merit. Despite this landscape's lonesome quality, there is no denying that it is a beautiful setting: looking over the environment proves more entrancing than paying attention to the plot of the film. It seems difficult to see just how the film manages to fail to sell the terrifying past and its ghosts inscribed into the forest, but with the help of flat and ineffective character development, it unfortunately does just that. If audiences are supposed to identify with the actors on the screen, the identification here is one that produces utter indifference to environments and events that should be horrifying.

A lack of follow-through is also apparent in the film's 'feminist' message that is at some points embarrassingly heavy-handed and at others disappointingly vague. From the cutesy reversal of the folktale's original name to privilege Gretel to the rather unneeded internal monologue of the film's heroine, *Gretel & Hansel* tries so hard to position itself as feminist that we're uncomfortably aware of this 'branding' at every stage. Its early scenes appear to comment that famine and ecological disasters affect women most heavily, and that motherhood is fraught and restrictive for women—ideas perhaps with potential, but they do not play out. As the film progresses, 'mother' figures are unendingly punished for their transgressions and cast as monstrous, especially if they appear to be too powerful, like Holda. At the end of the film, the now dead Holda stands as a stark reminder of what Gretel could become. The film makes it clear that women with power must wield it with the care and good intentions of an ideal mother, not the terrifying 'selfishness' of the solitary older woman. Additionally, the ending of *Gretel & Hansel* reaffirms the oft-troubling alignments of woman with Nature and man with civilisation, as Gretel stays in the woods and sends her brother back to town. However, in the end, clad in an all-white dress, Gretel does not seem too sure about her decisions and, for once, looks scared. If we are to understand Nature in the ecoGothic as a space just as fraught with complexity and crisis as the classic Gothic castle, the final scene is one of the few places we see it. Left to her own devices in the woods, perhaps Gretel has an inkling that her newfound power is indeed terrifying, as is the prospect of trying to manage it alone. Like Holda before her, perhaps she is destined to grow her power at the expense of those she was supposed to care for. Here, it seems the non-nurturing mother—the *bad* 'Mother Nature'—may

thrive. An interesting, provocative image, but one that seems too ‘tacked on’ by this stage to encourage deeper consideration.

While visually gorgeous, *Gretel & Hansel* offers little in the way of terror or a cohesive empowering message. Scenes of lush forest landscape and beautiful set design, lighting, and costuming really shine in this film, as does Alice Krige’s performance as the witch. However, the film doesn’t unearth its potentially ecoGothic and feminist undertones to any great effect. Ultimately, *Gretel & Hansel* probably won’t be remembered as a quintessential ecoGothic *or* feminist film: a pretty picture, but a waste of one of our greatest folk stories.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Gretel & Hansel. (2020) [Film]. Perkins, O. dir. United States, Orion Pictures.