

# Invoking *Practical Magic*: New Social Movements, Hidden Populations, and the Public Screen

Julie Kalil Schutten

*This essay explores the relationships between mass media and new social movements with hidden populations. The Neo-Pagan Movement and the film Practical Magic are examined to identify possible relationships between media and movements' identity constructions. Using the concept of polysemy I argue that social movement scholars need to consider the active interpretation and incorporation of media by social movement actors, not only the interpretation and incorporation of the movement by the media. Previous studies primarily examine what the culture industry does to social movements. This study explores what members of movements can do with texts provided by the culture industry.*

*Keywords: Hidden Populations; Media; Neo-Pagan Movement; New Social Movements; Polysemy; Public Screen; Witches*

In 1998 the film *Practical Magic* was released, exemplifying the mounting cultural visibility of alternative spiritualities, specifically Neo-Paganism.<sup>1</sup> Neo-Paganism is a growing social movement with many differing sects, the largest group composed of witches.<sup>2</sup> Beginning with the film *Witches of Eastwick* (1987), *Practical Magic* is part of a recent trend of “witchy” Hollywood depictions in film: *Hocus Pocus* (1993), *The Craft* (1996), *The Crucible* (1997), *The Blair Witch Project* (1999), and *Bewitched*

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Julie Kalil Schutten is a doctoral candidate in the Department of Communication at the University of Utah. The author wishes to especially thank Richard Rogers and Danielle Endres for their continued dialogue and helpful suggestions about this essay as well as Tarla Rai Peterson, Vicky Newman, Craig Rich, Helene Shugart, and Amber McKee for their continued support. She also wishes to thank the two anonymous reviewers and Cheree Carlson for their suggestions and guidance. An earlier version of this essay was presented at the Western States Communication Association conference, Rhetoric and Public Address Interest Group, Palm Springs, CA, February 2006. Correspondence to: Julie K. Schutten, University of Utah, Department of Communication, 255 South Central Campus Drive, LNCO 2400, Salt Lake City, UT 84112, USA. Tel.: 801 359 5355; Fax: 801 585 6855; E-mail: julie.schutten@utah.edu

(2005). The popularity of on-screen witches is also apparent on television where viewers tune into *Sabrina the Teenage Witch* (1996–present), *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* (1997–2003) and *Charmed* (1998–present). Not to be excluded is the ever-thriving *Harry Potter* book (first released in Britain in 1997 and the U.S. in 1998) and film series. Among the proliferation of film and television shows that portray witches, *Practical Magic* is an important text because of its messages and popularity both within and outside the movement. Opening to “hit-status at the box office” (Vincent, 1998), *Practical Magic* reflects multiple ideologies and practices central to the Neo-Pagan Movement. Based on a reader poll, *Practical Magic* was ranked the number one “pagan-friendly movie” by the Pagan magazine *PanGia* (“Creating a Pagan Bookshelf,” 2005, p. 55).

Today, individuals can participate in movements through a variety of ways other than public gatherings or protests, including becoming fans of media programs/films that embody certain identities or political ideologies, purchasing products (e.g., symbolic jewelry and knick-knacks, or organic products), and by publicly displaying symbols (e.g., via bumper stickers and t-shirts). Specifically, when looking at “new” social movements<sup>3</sup> that are stigmatized and/or ostracized by the dominant culture, such as witches, the relationship between media and social movements is even more important than in movements where members are free to publicly identify themselves because media can offer covert access to the movement’s ideologies. This issue raises important theoretical questions regarding not only the representations of movements *by* the media but the relationship *between* media and social movements where “hidden populations” (Berger, Leach, & Shaffer, 2003, p. xvii) are involved. In other words, what is the relationship between mass media and social movements when the media, particularly film, are the primary means of dissemination of information about the movement within the public sphere? While other media and social movement studies look at what the culture industry *does to* social movements it is also important to look at what members of movements could potentially *do with* the texts that the culture industry disseminates.

The purpose of this essay is to discuss and delineate aspects of mass media articulations with social movements composed of “hidden populations.” In what follows I present an overview of the literature regarding the relationship between social movements and media pointing to the gap in this literature. This literature does not address the central question raised above regarding the mass media’s relationship with social movements comprised of hidden populations and the potential use of media texts by those populations. Next, I briefly discuss “new” social movements and locate the Neo-Pagan Movement as an illustrative case. I ground my discussion of the relationship between mass media and social movements by treating *Practical Magic* as an example of the potential relationships between media and a movement’s ideology and identity construction when mainstream media become the primary means of dissemination, not simply a representation, of the movement. Finally, I conclude with the implications of this essay for understanding stigmatized social movements under the conditions of late capitalism.

## Mass Media and Social Movement Theory

Two major themes arise in the literature surrounding mass media and social movements. The first supports the idea that the mass media co-opts social movements, undermining their potential for oppositional resistance. The second theme argues that mass media have the potential to advance social movements. To explore the first of these themes I begin with Bonnie Dow's (2004) "Fixing Feminism."

Dow (2004) examines the first television documentary aired in 1970 discussing the Women's Liberation Movement. Dow argues that even though the creators of the documentary were working to expand and clarify notions of the Women's Liberation Movement, the more radical elements were lost in production of the documentary. Among these lost elements were "systemic critique; an awareness of the intersections of race, class, gender, and sexuality; and finally, recognition of the difference between the liberal, pluralist concept of choice and the radical notion of freedom" (Dow, 2004, p. 76). In short, the documentary hindered rather than supported aspects of the movement by functioning to "sustain the legitimacy of the economic-political system as a whole" (Dow, 2004, p. 76). The focus of the Women's Liberation Movement was depicted as subscribing to the liberal feminist aspects of the movement, that is, on equal access and equal pay for equal work, rather than the more radical goals of the movement. Although these concerns are legitimate and important topics to be brought into public conversation, they bypass radical aspects of the movement because they do not fit what constitutes "legitimate" grievances by social movement actors as dictated by the public sphere.

Dow (2001) also discusses mass media and the Gay Rights Movement in her analysis of the "coming out" episode on the television show *Ellen* by exploring what gay visibility is and is not allowed to mean within the realm of commercial media. She concludes that *Ellen* does allow the mass media to increase legitimacy and visibility for gays and lesbians simply by granting a space to "have one's confession acknowledged" (Dow, 2001, p. 136). However, Dow cautions her readers that "saying the success of *Ellen's* initial coming out means the end of prejudice against gays and lesbians is like saying that the success of *The Cosby Show* in the 1980's signaled the end of racism" (p. 128). Much like the Women's Liberation Movement documentary, the media does not address the major issues surrounding gay and lesbian individuals and *Ellen's* "coming out" works to make audiences "like characters, not issues" (Dow, 2001, p. 137). Multiple mass media techniques work to make the movement palatable for audiences rather than addressing the difficulties of truly challenging the status quo.

Kathleen Battles and Wendy Hilton-Morrow (2002) echo Dow's (2001) claim in their essay "Gay Characters in Conventional Spaces." The most common assumption circling the explosion of "Pink TV" is that more visibility equals greater social acceptance (Battles & Hilton-Morrow). This is problematic for audiences and members of the movement who look to television for representations depicting the "reality" of minority groups. Specifically, as Battles and Hilton-Morrow show, the characters on *Will and Grace* are written within the lines of popular culture conventions, creating an illustration of gayness equated with "lack of masculinity, and through the

familiar situation comedy genre conventions of romantic comedy and delayed consummation, infantilization, and an emphasis on characters' interpersonal relationships rather than the characters' connections to the larger social world" (p. 101).

The essays mentioned above address my first theme, mass media cooptation of social movement messages, and emphasize whether media representations hinder or support a particular social movement. Highlighting media representation and framing, the authors question whether or not visibility via the media helps a movement. The media may give credence to some of the movement's goals as with Ellen's "coming out" story but for the most part many of the concrete problems addressed by the movement are ignored in favor of creating appealing characters, not the need for social change. Furthermore, the media tends to frame the movement's goals in terms of civil rights issues rather than focusing on the more radical aspects of the movement.

Some social movements work to gain visibility and disseminate information through the media, switching the focus from the way that media frames the social movement to the way the social movement strategically uses the media. This second theme is exemplified in the literature focusing on the potential for mass media's advancement of social movements. Key to this thematic is Kevin DeLuca's (1999) *Image Politics*. Expanding what counts as rhetorically significant and adapting to the landscape of contemporary society as heavily impacted by visual media, DeLuca offers a new look at image events or "spectacle" as a form of agitation used by environmental social movements. Image events do not fit within the tenets of traditional rhetorical theory and as a result the activists utilizing these forms of persuasion have not historically been viewed as credible contributors to social movements. DeLuca is concerned with the disciplinary requirements for what is deemed a legitimate text or form of persuasion. He criticizes scholars who dismiss image events as merely a way for the rhetor to gain attention, and therefore not having "real" rhetorical value. DeLuca defines image events as, "crystallized philosophical fragments, mind bombs that work to expand the universe of thinkable thoughts" (p. 6). He contends that the image event is not only a means of gaining attention but that it creates a "mind bomb" that agitates for change through breaking an individual's "comfortable equilibrium" and expanding their "universe of thinkable thoughts" (DeLuca, p. 6). Whether the image is co-opted or not is irrelevant because the image still tears the discursive fabric operating in the public sphere. DeLuca credits environmental groups for their awareness that image events are significant aspects of any direct action because the "spectacle" works to give the movement access to the public sphere. Considering the image event as rhetorically significant adds to social movement theory by furthering the ability to explore how "radical environmental groups [use] image events to attempt both to deconstruct and articulate identities, ideologies, consciousnesses, communities, publics, and cultures in our modern industrial civilization" (DeLuca, p. 17).

How the mass media can advance social movements is addressed further in Kevin DeLuca and Jennifer Peeples's (2002) essay, "From Public Sphere to Public Screen." DeLuca and Peeples argue that the conception of the public sphere needs

a supplement in order to be fully viable in late modernity. They propose the concept of the “public screen,” a term that takes seriously “the work of media theorists suggesting that new technologies introduce new forms of social organization and new modes of perception” (DeLuca & Peeples, p. 131). The public screen creates new spaces for politics and citizenship to occur, spaces that do not require certain “appropriate” political activities to be counted as “worthy.” DeLuca and Peeples state,

The public screen is a constant current of images and words, a ceaseless circulation abetted by the technologies of television, film, photography, and the Internet. These technologies’ speed, stream of images, and global reach create an ahistorical, contextless flow of jarring juxtapositions. (p. 135)

The concept of the public screen combined with the image event illustrates how violence (a type of communication not acceptable in the public sphere) during the World Trade Organization (WTO) protests in 1999 forced media coverage and in turn fostered substantial public discussion of humanitarian issues (DeLuca and Peeples, 2002). The public screen supports the view that visibility is potentially good regardless of the type of visibility. As such, movements with hidden populations whose only means of gaining mainstream visibility is through the media may use the public screen to their advantage whether or not depictions are sympathetic to their cause.

The authors discussed thus far focus on the important topics of mass media visibility, representation, and framing as it relates to social movements. The first set of authors emphasizes media appropriations of movements and the second focuses on movements’ use of the media to create visibility. Neither addresses how members or potential members of a movement may interpret and appropriate mainstream media depictions of the movement’s lifestyles/identities in a way that is not entirely determined by whether those depictions are sympathetic or accurate representations of the movement. This issue is especially significant when discussing movements with hidden populations since mainstream media representations may substitute for direct interaction with and immersion in the movement.

### **New Social Movements**

In order to explore the relationship between mass media and social movements it is important to discuss what constitutes a “new” or contemporary social movement. The debate about social movements has moved from a sociological approach (Simons, 1970) to a historical approach (Griffin, 1980) and most recently to a rhetorical perspective (Cathcart, 1980; McGee, 1980). Social movement theory in the field of rhetoric has been largely dominated by Herbert Simons’s sociological approach emphasizing organizations and resources (DeLuca, 1999). For example, Simons views rhetoric as a tool used by members of a movement rather than understanding rhetoric as what constitutes a movement (DeLuca). Regarding Simons’s focus on rhetoric as instrumental for a movement, DeLuca writes, “The end result is that Simon’s hegemonic rhetorical theory of social movement is a disciplinary

achievement that renders invisible many groups and tactics” (p. 27). In contrast, an identity-oriented paradigm calls for viewing discursive activity as constitutive of social and political collectivity and is necessary for making sense of new social movements (DeLuca).

Based on Simons’s (1970) instrumentalist view, classic social movement theory often tended to *measure* the “legitimacy” of a movement by its written manifestos and how a group assembled within the Western paradigm to *enforce* change (e.g., Stewart, Smith, & Denton, 2001). Due to these requirements dominant modes of social movement theory overlook important elements of new social movements. As Steven Buechler (2000) writes in his text, *Social Movements in Advanced Capitalism*,

If the standard for a social movement is that it consists of an organized, enduring association of leaders and followers pursuing deliberately chosen strategies and tactics in opposition to other groups, a good deal of contemporary resistance in the interstices of everyday life will not even register on the scale being used to measure social activism. (p. 156)

Buechler admonishes against sole reliance on traditional theories of social movement and calls for examination of the everyday life instances of resistance and activism. There are multiple theories of new social movements that I briefly outline here.

Much of traditional social movement theory has been based on the Marxist view that privileges proletarian revolution located in the sphere of production, marginalizing other forms of social protest (Buechler, 2000). This standpoint is illustrated by Simons’s focus on resources and organization of groups. Buechler writes, “New social movement theorists, by contrast, have looked to other logics of action (based in politics, ideology, and culture) and other sources of identity (such as ethnicity, gender, and sexuality) as the sources of collective action” (p. 46). Furthermore, he discusses several themes important for new social movement theorists that can inform rhetorical criticism of social movements, many of which are central to understanding Neopaganism as a movement. First, according to Buechler,

The ability of people to engage in collective action is increasingly tied to their ability to define an identity in the first place. This places a premium on the social construction of collective identity as an essential part of contemporary social activism. (p. 47)

In keeping with DeLuca (1999) and other theorists’ shift to view social movement as constitutive, Buechler places identity construction at the center of new social movements.

Second, contemporary social movements’ emphasis on identities becomes more important as the relationship between the individual and the collective becomes blurred; “The equation of the personal and the political fosters not only identity politics but a life-style politics in which everyday life becomes a major area of political action” (Buechler, 2000, p. 47). Key to understanding new social movements is recognizing that politicization of everyday life (private and public) “means that social locations become sites for resistance to power” (Buechler, p. 156). However, as Buechler insightfully points out, much social movement theory is ill-equipped to

address political aspects of everyday life as part of a social movement and is thus a challenge for scholars. For example, media are a part of everyday life; film specifically can become a space where identity may be constructed or contested by contemporary movements, particularly in those movements where hidden populations are involved.

Finally, Amanda Lotz (2003) has also attempted to illustrate what a new social movement may include. She approaches this challenge by discussing points of departure from traditional social movement theory, "First, they de-emphasize class based allegiances while emphasizing other sources of identity. Second, new social movements are often loosely constructed and fragmented rather than centralized and bounded movements" (pp. 6–7). The above definition appears to advance a more heteroglossic view of movements. Like Buechler (2000), for Lotz identity is a central focus of new social movements.

Traditional social movement theory fails to account for movements whose end goal is ideological change and the cultivation of alternative lifestyles and identities. Movements as traditionally defined use ideology as a means to obtain or achieve structural or material changes. However, new social movements do not only use ideology as their means for change but ideology can be their *raison d'être*.

Thus far I have shown that the literature regarding the relationship between social movements and media has focused on how the media affects movements. The media either frames movements in ways that appropriate their goals or the media (public screen) can create visibility for movements in the form of image events. Moreover, classical views of social movement theory do not recognize new social movements that focus on lifestyle and identity. I contend that social movement theory needs to include and conceptualize how members of a movement incorporate media into understandings of the movement and their everyday lives. Put another way, social movement scholars need to consider the active interpretation and incorporation of media by social movement actors by exploring what members of movements can *do with* media texts provided by the culture industry. For this reason, the Neo-Pagan Movement and the film *Practical Magic* are useful to begin exploring these issues.

### *Neo-Pagan Movement as Illustrative Case*

This section will give a brief history of the Neo-Pagan Movement's inception and ideologies, and discuss relevant issues for understanding Neo-Paganism as a social movement. Witches represent a marginalized group who are part of a new social movement, Neo-Paganism. In 1940 Gerald Gardner resurfaced aspects of the/an "Old Religion," "modernizing" it for people in Great Britain by developing the basic principles of Wicca or Witchcraft. According to Helen Berger, Evan Leach, and Leigh Shuffer (2003), "Neo-Pagan is an umbrella term covering sects of a new religious movement, the largest and most important form of which is Witchcraft, or as it is also called, Wicca" (p. 1). The Neo-Pagan Movement can be characterized in part by the beliefs of its members. Neo-Paganism describes individuals who see "divinity manifest in all the processes of nature" and as such, Neo-Paganism is a "constantly evolving philosophy

that views humanity as a functional organ within the greater organism of all Life” (Adler, 1989, p. 10). Within this movement lie strong intersections between the feminist and environmental movements. Brought to the United States by Raymond Buckland, “Once on American soil, the religion was influenced by a number of features of American culture in the 1960s and 1970s including the growing women’s movement, the counterculture, the environmental movement, and American individualism” (Berger et al., p. 12). Specifically, Neo-Paganism intersects within the discourses of ecofeminism (a blending of the ecology/environmental movement and feminist movement) as it works to illustrate the cyclical connections between humans and other-than-humans. Moreover, the reclaiming of the Goddess by Neo-Pagans could be viewed as a radical and/or revalorist aspect of the feminist movement.

As members of a social movement, Neo-Pagans and witches face many difficult tensions directly resulting from reified stereotypes related to their past. These tensions complicate members’ drive for “legitimacy” in a culture that has stigmatized the word *witch* with little understanding of the practice of Witchcraft. “Witches and Neo-Pagans represent what social scientist call a hidden population. Because they fear discrimination and persecution, many Neo-Pagans are apprehensive about making public their identification with this movement” (Berger et al., 2003, p. xvii). For example, as with the Gay Rights Movement, Neo-Pagans have different considerations related to expressing public identity than do members of many other social movements.

Neo-Pagans have two annual events: Pagan Pride and Pantheacon. For the first, adopting the word *pride* was a conscious choice by the creators of this international gathering as told by its creator and former Executive Director for International Pagan Pride, Cecylina Dewr (1998):

While some people feel that the phrase ‘Pagan Pride’ is too confrontational, the result accomplished through the word ‘Pride’ in the gay/lesbian community states to me that it is an effective phrase to communicate how we feel. We will not hide in the shadows any longer, practicing our spirituality privately because we fear reprisals from members of monotheistic religions. (¶6)

Data from the seventh annual Pagan Pride Project recorded an attendance of 44,833 people in six countries (Pagan Pride Project, 2004). Additionally, every February Pagans gather at the Pantheacon conference in California to be “out and proud” about their beliefs. According to one attendee, Angus McMahan (2004), last year there were 1,700 witches present for the workshops, presentations, rituals, and other events. Although Pagans are linked together by national conferences (Pantheacon) and international Pagan Pride days, the movement, as a whole is very much a decentralized effort. For example, diverging from traditional social movement theory, there is no single leader but rather there are prominent and respected persons in the movement who are widely known.

Although the Neo-Pagan Movement exhibits some similarities to social movements as traditionally conceived, the stigma associated with Witchcraft as well as the failure of the public sphere (e.g., news) to take the movement seriously may increase members’ reliance on information provided by “popular” media (public

screen). The failure to take the movement seriously extends to academics. As Margo Adler (1989) comments,

I have noticed that many intellectuals turn themselves off the instant they are confronted with the words witchcraft, magic, occultism, and religion, as if such ideas exert a dangerous power that might weaken their rational faculties. Yet many of these people maintain a generous openness about visionaries, poets, and artists, some of whom may be quiet mad according to “rational” standards. . . . If Neo-Paganism were presented as an intellectual and artistic movement whose adherents have new perceptions of the nature of reality, the place of sexuality, and the meaning of community, academics would flock to study it. (p. 5)

We might ask why people are not skeptical of environmentalism or feminism as social movements but are hesitant to grant the status of social movement to Neo-Paganism. In this respect there is a strong link to the argument I am putting forth in this essay. Both environmentalism and feminism have been granted access to the public sphere via mainstream news media. Regardless of how the media works to appropriate or silence feminist or environmental issues, these movements on occasion have a serious, respected voice because the public sphere recognizes them. However, Neo-Pagan voices are comparatively muted. In fact, with the exception of Web pages constructed by various Pagan groups, the Neo-Pagan movement is predominantly covered in entertainment venues (film) rather than newsworthy media channels. As Mirko Petricevic (2004) comments, “Popular culture has helped bring paganism into the mainstream in North America” (¶26). However, issues that are important to members of the Neo-Pagan Movement such as animistic beliefs, reclaiming female deities and questioning the hegemony of Judeo-Christianity are not issues that warrant much mainstream media attention (with the possible exception of *The DaVinci Code*).<sup>4</sup> The postmodern conflation of news and entertainment combined with the modernist attitude that news is more “real” and “relevant” is one reason people do not take the movement seriously and an important reason why the relationship between media and social movement is so important for the Neo-Pagan Movement and other movements with hidden populations.

Neo-Paganism is a growing social movement with a wide following both in the United States and internationally. Members of this group are stigmatized, constitute a hidden population and are not granted much visibility within the public sphere. The tendency to dismiss the movement’s significance is reflected by its visibility in entertainment but not news media. Finally, these factors combined with the limitations of traditional social movement theory result in a failure by rhetorical and social movement scholars to grant the movement legitimacy by making it a subject of scholarly investigation.

### Methods of Analysis

*Practical Magic*, starring Sandra Bullock and Nicole Kidman grossed \$46,611,204, a figure that is larger than the gross incomes of *The Craft*, *The Crucible* or *Hocus Pocus* which also had “all star” casts (IMDb, n.d.). Given that witches are a part of a hidden

population that is often muted within dominant discursive spaces, individuals interested in aspects of the Neo-Pagan Movement may rely more on mass media texts than on personal contacts or public gatherings to learn about and/or enter the movement, making the media a significant means of dissemination of information about the movement. The goal of this analysis is to explore the relationship between movements and the mass media in situations where members are a part of hidden populations. Following Edward Said (1983), *Practical Magic* could be considered a “worldly” text because it is an event that represents the social world and is therefore reflective of a historical moment, in turn affecting aspects of the Neo-Pagan Movement. That members of the Pagan community voted *Practical Magic* the top film representing Pagans (“Creating a Pagan Bookshelf,” 2005) and that the film grossed more than other films portraying witches attests to the text’s significance. Moreover, I have chosen this film over other alternatives for analysis such as the TV show *Charmed* because the Pagan community has indicated *Practical Magic* is “pagan-friendly” and “says that Witches are real people, too!” (“Creating a Pagan Bookshelf,” p. 55), signaling that Neo-Pagans see themselves represented in the film. For these reasons *Practical Magic* is a worthy candidate for addressing the problematic at hand.

My analysis of *Practical Magic* focuses on three factors: romance genre and the public screen, identity/lifestyle, and polysemy. First, as with many filmic representations of witches, *Practical Magic* is firmly cast within the romance genre. Recalling Deluca and Peeples (2002), Hollywood films may work as one potential type of public screen. However, their analysis focused on the public screens of print and television news only. When film is used as a public screen there may be new consequences for the movement as members work to gain a voice in the public sphere. For example, the content of the film must fit into a particular genre, placing specific constraints on the artifact’s representations.

In addition to complicating the implications of the public screen, public identity and lifestyle are important aspects to consider when examining new social movements. Particularly in situations where identities are misunderstood and there is fear of reprisal for a particular identity, media depictions of those identities are central for members of the movement (cf. Epstein & Friedman, 1996). I am most concerned with how the public screen affects aspects of the movement’s public and collective identity as opposed to individual identities. As Buechler (2000) writes, “The dimension of public identity captures the influences that the external public have on the way social movement adherents think about themselves” (p. 189). Collective identities are constructed over time and creation of these identities is often the major achievement of some social movements or a necessary prerequisite to realizing other goals (Buechler).

Finally, in order to explore issues presented above, I conducted a thematic analysis grounded in the concept of polysemy. Polysemy complicates notions of identity and the relationship between media and social movements with hidden populations. According to Leah Ceccarelli (1998) polysemy could be defined “as the existence of determinate but nonsingular meanings” (p. 399). Ceccarelli identifies three

distinguishable types of polysemy: resistive reading, strategic ambiguity, and hermeneutic depth. For this analysis I will evoke polysemy as resistive reading because it focuses on situations when a subordinate audience develops new and contrary meanings of the text (Ceccarelli). Hence, this analysis discovers and categorizes those aspects of the film that allow for polysemic and specifically resistive meanings.

### ***Practical Magic and the Neo-Pagan Movement***

#### *Conjuring the Scene*

*Practical Magic* (Swicord, Goldsman, & Brooks, 1998) opens with a flashback sequence in which a woman named Maria Owens is about to be hanged for the crime of being a witch in Puritan New England. She escapes this death when, presumably through the use of magic, the rope around her neck breaks. She is then banished to an island. While exiled she is pregnant and waiting for her lover to arrive and rescue her. When he does not arrive she casts a spell so that she will never feel the agony of love again and over time the spell turns into a curse. The curse is such that any man who falls in love with an Owens woman would “live briefly in the euphoria of her love until meeting an untimely death.”

After these historical scenes, we meet Maria’s descendants Sally and Gillian who are orphaned as children and go to live with their Aunt Frances (Stockard Channing) and Aunt Jet (Dianne West). The girls are raised in a nontraditional house on the East Coast where their aunts teach them how to practice Witchcraft.

At this point the story flashes forward to an adult Gillian (Nicole Kidman) and Sally (Sandra Bullock). Gillian has moved out west and is dating a stereotypical “bad boy” character named Jimmy Angelov (Goran Visnjic). Despite the curse, Sally is married to a man named Michael (Mark Feuerstein) as a result of a love spell cast by the aunts, and they have two young girls, Kylie and Antonia. Gillian’s character embodies the “wild woman” and embraces her magical skills while Sally (seen as the more powerful witch) is much more conservative, frowning on magic and searching for “normalcy” in her life. When Michael dies in an “accident” (everyone suspects the curse) Sally takes her two young daughters to live with the aunts and vows that her children will never do magic. One night, Sally receives a frantic call from Gillian and she drives to Arizona to help her sister. Upon arrival Sally finds Gillian beaten by her boyfriend Jimmy. Jimmy, awakening from a drunken stupor, threatens the sisters with a gun and they end up spiking his bottle of tequila with belladonna and accidentally killing him with an overdose. Gillian and Sally bring Jimmy’s corpse back to the aunts’ house and perform a spell to raise him from the dead. The spell is successful but Jimmy comes back as something far worse and Sally hits him with a cast iron skillet as he is trying to strangle Gillian, “killing” Jimmy for the second time. In a plot line similar to *Thelma and Louise*, the women feel that no one will believe their story so they take matters into their own hands. Fearing the possibility of being imprisoned for murder the sisters bury him outside the house but he proceeds to haunt them and eventually possess Gillian.

*Romance Genre and the Public Screen*

“For two sisters from a family of witches, falling in love is the trickiest spell of all.”  
 —Tagline from the film *Practical Magic* (IMDb, n.d.)

As mentioned, *Practical Magic* fits clearly into the film genre of romance. This genre follows a common story line in which a barrier to love is presented and is eventually overcome. In discussing the cultural obsession with “utopian love” C. Lee Harrington and Denise Bielby (1991) state, “The traditional notion of love in America is that of a ‘mythic’ union between two devoted individuals. In our mythology, love conquers all” (p. 131). Romance genres typically reflect cultural norms culminating in the lifelong commitment of a man and woman. Because homosexuals are denied the symbolic representation of the marriage contract, the romance genre rarely depicts “the traditional love myth—that of love as permanent commitment” (Harrington and Bielby, 1991, p. 131) for individuals who are not heterosexual. Depictions of romance and heterosexuality in popular culture are thus closely linked. As Linda Badley (2004) states:

*Practical Magic* (1996) [sic] bent over backwards to make its witches sympathetic misfits, cursed by a heritage that condemns them to matriarchy (if they marry, their husbands will die), and who more than anything want a patriarchal family. Post-feminist witches invariably use their charms to attract men but are consequently domesticated. (¶22)

*Practical Magic* appears to embody/operate from what Adrienne Rich (1986) has called compulsory heterosexuality. Compulsory heterosexuality was conceived not “to widen divisions [between women] but to encourage heterosexual feminists to examine heterosexuality as a political institution which disempowers women and to change it” (Rich, p. 23). To this end, Rich comments that “The failure to examine heterosexuality as an institution is like failing to admit that the economic system called capitalism or the caste system of racism is maintained by a variety of forces” (p. 51). Supporting this, Rich states “The chastity belt; child marriage; erasure of lesbian existence (except as exotic and perverse) in art, literature, film; *idealization of heterosexual romance and marriage*—these are some fairly obvious forms of compulsion the first two exemplifying physical force, the second two control of consciousness” (p. 39, italics added). Most noticeable in *Practical Magic* is the glorified ideal of heterosexual marriage and romance. This in turn works to further the institution of heterosexuality as a cultural norm. Following Dow (2004), one could argue that *Practical Magic* is detrimental to the Neo-Pagan Movement by focusing on romance to the exclusion of the radical notion of woman-identified communities. According to Didi Herman (2003) “Heteronormativity encompasses, at a basic level, the view that heterosexuality is natural and normal for individuals and society; however, total heteronormativity may never be fully achieved and therefore heteronormative societies often have to sustain heterosexuality as a political project” (p. 144). The film *Practical Magic* uses the potentially alternative image of witch to hide the undergirding goal of sustaining the larger political project of the dominant paradigm to reinforce heterosexuality as the norm.

A single life, a woman-identified life or any other option is not viable for the young Owens women because they represent the cultural norm of wanting heterosexual love. The “curse” of the Owens women eloquently illustrates one of Rich’s (1986) main arguments—that heterosexual women need to question the institution of heterosexuality as a “choice” and as a “preference” (p. 51). The “curse” leaves the Owens women with the option of living alone or with women. By creating a story line around a “curse” rather than a blessing, the film makes reference to heterosexuality as a desired institution. Yet, in the scene where Gillian is first leaving the house to run away with a man, she implies that she and Sally will grow old together with no mention of men. Sally states, “I feel like I’m never gonna see you again” to which Gillian responds, “Of course you’re gonna see me again. We’re gonna grow old together. It’s gonna be you and me living in a big house, these two old biddies with all these cats. I mean, I bet we even die on the same day.” Despite what seems to be an obvious solution to the curse, a life and love between women, the audience is led to believe that there would be no fulfillment in the sisters’ lives without men. Further, in one scene Gillian is reading Sally’s palm and foresees a man, stating, “I see a man in your future and he is gorgeous. And oh la la, he is big, but you’re scared to death and you wind up like a frigid old hag with your two frigid old hag aunts.” The consequence of not finding this romantic heterosexual love is clear—the sisters will end up like “frigid old hag[s].” Sally and Gillian’s inheritance/heritage—to be woman-centered through the Craft—acts as the barrier to compulsory heterosexuality. The sisters work to reject and overcome their “fate” which is to be part of a community of women. The women are driven to break the curse in order to be completed by heterosexual love. Reflecting this dream of “utopian heterosexual love” in a letter to her sister, Sally writes,

I have this dream of being *whole*, of not going to sleep each night *wanting*. But still sometimes when the wind is warm and the crickets sing, I dream of a love that even time will lie down and be still for. I just want someone to love me. I want to be seen.

The above statement can be read as Sally feeling that her happiness and ability to “be seen” as a *whole* woman depends on a man fulfilling this lack.<sup>5</sup> She is left *wanting* and is incomplete without a man in her life.

Another example of compulsory heterosexuality is in the scene when Gillian and Sally realize that they have accidentally given Jimmy too much belladonna. Gillian says, “Please, God, if you get us out of this, I’ll be good. I’ll have babies.” Gillian’s dialogue indicates that she feels she has not successfully performed the role of woman by settling down and having babies. She has “sinned” and promises to “repent” if the male authority (God) will help her out of the situation. This is juxtaposed to Sally who responds, “I have babies, Gillian, I had normal and I worked really hard to get that normal.” Gillian does, however, clearly want this “normal” heterosexual love/life as seen at the end of the film when Sally asks her what she should do about her current love interest, Gary. Gillian sweetly states, “What wouldn’t I do, for the right guy.” This example quite succinctly sums up *Practical Magic’s* depiction of women doing whatever they can to “get the guy.”<sup>6</sup>

Genres of film categorize subject matter in ways that restrict and limit the reach of the public screen. As seen with *Practical Magic*, the romance genre typically requires a narrative of compulsory heterosexuality. Specifically for hidden populations, the public screen of film may be the only way ideologies central for the movement gain a voice in the public sphere. Due to the restrictions of genre this voice becomes limited. The postmodern condition where news and entertainment collapse complicates discussions of film as a public screen. Specifically, if members of the Neo-Pagan Movement only have visibility in the public sphere through the public screen of film, conflating entertainment with the movement's ideologies could prove problematic. However, following Deluca and Peeples's (2002) discussion of symbolic violence during the WTO protests leading to positive press for humanitarian issues, any public screen attention could be viewed as positive for the Neo-Pagan Movement. Following Dow (2004), mass media representations tend to minimize and distort public understandings of movements' goals; in the case of movements composed of hidden populations any representation provides opportunities for movement members to create relevant meanings and identities from mass media texts, even if those texts encode dominant ideologies such as compulsory heterosexuality.

### *Identity and Lifestyle*

In popular culture there are often only two depictions of a witch's identity: the evil, old hag (e.g., The Wicked Witch of the West and the evil old hags of Macbeth) and the beautiful, bewitching, sexy and seductive type (e.g., Glenda the "good" witch of the East, Morticia from the *Adams Family*, the "Charmed Ones" from *Charmed*). In popular music witches are often seen as seductive as in the song "Witchy Woman" by the Eagles and in Carlos Santana's "Black Magic Woman." If the public screen of film is one of the only ways that witches gain an audience in the public sphere what could the identities and lifestyles portrayed in *Practical Magic* contribute to how members of the movement make sense of what it means to be a witch? In order to further explore this complexity the following section will focus on the lifestyles and identities of the main characters, Gillian and Sally.

The character of Gillian from *Practical Magic* has been described by Philip Wunch (1998) of the *Dallas Morning News* as a "lusty wench of a witch" (¶7). Gillian completely embodies the myth of witch as seductress (Bartel, 2000)—with the power of a succubus, hypnotizing men with her charms. *Practical Magic* pits the lifestyle of Gillian as the deviant and excessively sexed woman (bad girl/whore) against Sally's lifestyle of caution and domestication (good girl/virgin). Hannah Sanders (2004) states, "Gillian is represented in dominant binary codes, as the promiscuous, potentially bisexual body, whereas Sally's appearance and behavior plays into codes that continue to construct her sexual expression and identity in romanticized and heterosexual bodily terms" (¶31). During one scene in the film we see Gillian dancing exotically in a swimsuit and sarong, poolside, with several men gazing at her. When Gillian, in voiceover, says "Jimmy Angelov" the music changes from an upbeat party tune to a stereotypical striptease song. We see Gillian walking down a narrow hallway

presumably on the “hunt” for Jimmy. She is touching her index finger to her lips, head tilted down with her eyes looking up suggestively. Suddenly, Jimmy comes up behind her, grabs her roughly and blindfolds her. The scene ends with Gillian looking pleased by this action. Gillian embodies many id forces throughout the film and Sally is clearly made uncomfortable by Gillian’s promiscuity and sexually free attitude, further solidifying the good girl/bad girl dichotomy.

Furthermore, these sexual depictions are linked with Sally and Gillian’s views about the use of magic. Sally displays “proper” sexuality and doesn’t use magic while Gillian is excessively sexual and not only uses but misuses her magic, violating the basic tenet of Witchcraft, that one should do no harm to others.<sup>7</sup> The first violation is that she drugs Jimmy with an herb called belladonna to make him pass out so she can at least temporarily escape his controlling, abusive tendencies. The second violation is when Gillian insists on bringing him back from the dead. Because Gillian’s relationship with Jimmy gets she and Sally into trouble, the ultimate lesson in the film could be that these uncontrolled id impulses cause problems for women and thus embracing one’s sexuality (and magic) is a flaw. Put another way, Witchcraft could be seen as an id impulse, a part of the “natural” intuitive qualities of women that need to be controlled and repressed, as illustrated by Sally. This theme could contribute to the essentializing of women and their perceived ties to their bodies as seen in Gillian’s libidinous drives to do what she wants without “reason.” Hence, the image of evil old hag is banished but we are still left with the playgirl lifestyle verses the domesticated witch and the domesticated witch is seen as the “good witch.” Magic is equated with sexuality and the morality of both is about control or repression of the id.

*Practical Magic* portrays the challenges of living a different and socially stigmatized lifestyle, providing a sympathetic voice for Pagans, but its preferred solution is predicated on the good/bad girl dichotomy: Safety exists in the normal, that is, heteronormativity. If witches are “closeted” because of their difference, the media depiction or representation of the Wiccan voice and how members interpret this voice is even more important to the movement/practice because these individuals are socially isolated. This difference is seen most explicitly within the character of Sally who is described as having been “blessed with a gift” of innate magical skills. Growing up, Sally and Gillian were always teased with a chant of “Witch, witch, you’re a bitch!” Aunt Francis lends her wisdom in telling the young girls “It’s not that they hate you. It’s that, well . . . we’re different.” Early in the movie Sally states, “All I want is a normal life” to which Aunt Frances replies, “My darling girl, when are you going to understand that being normal is not necessarily a virtue? It rather denotes a lack of courage.” Sally continually rejects this difference in her drive for the “normal” family life, which for her means a husband and children. In a letter to Gillian, after Sally has married Michael, she writes:

Today is our third anniversary and all I have to show for it are two beautiful little girls and a husband I just can’t stop kissing. I don’t even mind the beard. I wish you could see us. No more stones being thrown, no taunts cried out. Everything is just so blissfully normal. Life is perfect.

Sally's life perfection is directly linked with her perception that a heteronormative lifestyle is the only way to make the teasing and taunting stop.

Sally's struggle with identity speaks to the difficulty for many modern-day witches who can not just "come out" about their spirituality in public due to commonly held stereotypes about the Craft. In a sense, the witch becomes another form of female difference so negative that many work to "pass" as "normal." A woman who practices self-described "progressive Witchcraft" put it this way: "Although intolerance from the general public led to bloodletting in the past, these days the discrimination is more subtle. . . . Some practitioners [of Witchcraft] have been shunned by friends, family members and co-workers" (McCarvell quoted in Petricevic, 2004, ¶9). The discrimination is real for many witches due to misunderstandings about the Craft embedded in Western cultural consciousness.

In the film, Sally's "coming out of the broom closet" is solidified when she activates the phone tree of mothers from her children's school in order to get enough women together for the coven needed to exorcise Jimmy from Gillian's body. In one scene we hear Sally talking to a mom on the phone tree list, "Linda, it's Sally. I'm activating the phone tree. You know the stuff everyone whispers about me . . . the the hexes, the spells? Well, here's the thing, I'm a witch!" An employee of Sally's is then seen on the phone saying, "I got the best news. Sally just came out!" and the other woman responds, "What a fabulous affirmation."

In discussing the similarities between witch identity and gay identity, Lexa Rosean, a lesbian witch, states, "Being a witch is a lot like being a lesbian. Sometimes you want it all to go away because you are sick of being different, and sometimes you are incredibly proud and feel special" (quoted in Walter, 2001, ¶13). This sentiment is echoed in the film when Aunt Jet reprimands Sally for the mess that she and Gillian got in with Jimmy. Aunt Jet says, "This is what comes from dabbling. I mean, you can't practice Witchcraft while you look down your nose at it." This dialogue seems to suggest the belief that one needs to embrace all aspects of one's self (including "difference") to be "complete." Sally's character parallels a homosexual person dealing with internalized homophobia. Thus, she struggles to accept her "true" self as witch in the face of cultural pressures that strongly reinforce stereotypes and ideologies insisting that the "witchy" aspects of her are negative.

*Practical Magic* clearly illustrates that claiming the identity of witch is a key issue for members of the movement. As discussed previously, public and collective identities are important for new social movements. Especially for movements with hidden populations such as Neo-Pagan, presenting, understanding, and constructing an identity are central to the movement's goal to be publicly "out and proud." Both gay individuals and witches represent marginalized groups who often have to hide their "true" beliefs or identities from others depending on the context. Summarizing this point, Anthony Slagle (1995) states, "To expect members of any marginalized group to deny their individual identities perpetuates the very ideologies that oppress them in the first place" (p. 86). Put another way, both homosexual and Pagan actions of "coming out" are political in that an individual can be oppressed as a result of their "coming out" and that publicly claiming a suppressed identity is itself an act of resistance. In Sally's

case, the trope of “coming out” is used to illustrate for the film’s audience that they should feel comfortable to be both a “normal,” “domestic” woman and a witch. Sally is thus an example of a public identity for the Neo-Pagan movement countering the image of witches as spinsters and old hags, encouraging witches to be their “true” self while simultaneously reinforcing the dominant ideology of compulsory heterosexuality. Public identity is exemplified by Sally’s struggle to make sense of and deal with public views of her Witchcraft in relation to how she views herself as a part of the group (witches/Neo-Pagan Movement), a theme with which Pagan audiences may resonate.

The link between denying a person’s expression of identity and oppression illuminates the consequences of “closeted” identities for some social movements. Stigmas against witches keep them closeted, in turn creating a paralyzing effect discouraging the mobilization of large numbers of Neo-Pagans in the public sphere (hence grassroots efforts such as Pagan Pride). Movements cannot complete goals as a collective if they are still dealing with issues surrounding their ability to express who they are as individuals. As Buechler (2000) argues, collective identity for some new social movement participants can include “a shared salient characteristic, a corresponding form of consciousness, and opposition to some dominant order” (p. 190). Through focusing on identity issues, *Practical Magic* illustrates a shared meaningful characteristic surrounding difference (social stigma), a corresponding form of consciousness through the practice of Witchcraft, and opposition to some dominant order, in this case, the townspeople who are presumably Judeo-Christian and find fault in the abnormal behavior of the Owens women.

Discussing collective identities Buechler (2000) writes, “Fixed identities are the basis of oppression as well as liberation, the deconstruction of collective identities (or at least their oppressive aspects) may also be a viable movement strategy” (p. 194). For example, Gillian’s “bad girl” lifestyle may be looked at as pure seduction and a negative aspect for witches or it could be seen as a way for women to gain access to a stronger type of femininity that embraces sexuality (e.g., as a part of a third-wave feminist tenet). The latter takes the fixed identity of witches as seductress and harnesses the power of that construction toward liberating women sexually. Images, identities, and meanings of witches and Witchcraft are multiple and contested; oppositional images of witches are countered by patriarchal, Christian, and stereotypical representations which pervade Western and specifically U.S. culture. The identities presented in *Practical Magic* may be vital to members of the Neo-Pagan movement. The movement may not have created *Practical Magic*, but Neo-Pagans nevertheless consume it, and the discourse of the film could help or hinder the construction of public and collective identity for Neo-Pagans. Watching the film may be one way a person can situate their identity as a witch, even in the face of the negative aspects of the text, as illuminated by the rhetorical concept of polysemy.

### “Witch” as Polysemic

The word *witch* is polysemic as evidenced by the historical battle for reclamation of its power. As mentioned previously, there are negative and dominant stereotypes

about witches as hags and temptresses. Feminists have also reclaimed the power of the word *witch*. For example, the radical feminist group founded in 1968 called themselves WITCH or the Women's International Terrorist Conspiracy from Hell. The women of the WITCH group sought to reclaim female power from patriarchal institutions and the choice of the word *witch* represented a key aspect of the way these feminist groups agitated and resisted the status quo via language (Purkiss, 1996). Additionally, as Badley (2004) notes, "Seizing on her [the witch's] subversive potential, modern and contemporary feminists have reclaimed the witch as the outspokenly pro-woman woman, the bitch" (§18). *Witch* is a polysemic term and this polysemy enables resistance. Similarly, polysemic aspects of *Practical Magic* offer opportunities for certain audience members to learn about "real" Wiccan ideologies even though the text is laced with conventional fantasies of what *witch*, *witches*, and *Witchcraft* mean. Polysemy accounts for the abilities of diverse audiences to make alternative interpretations (Ceccarelli, 1998). As such, looking to the film through the lens of polysemy allows social movement critics to see what opportunities for resistive or pro-movement readings may exist for movement members.

The multiple meanings of *witch* are reflected in the film when Officer Gary Hallet (Aidan Quinn) questions the locals in the small town about the Owens family. An elderly woman on the street says, "Go arrest her. Their niece owns a shop where they cook up a special placenta and that's why the aunts don't age. I tell you they just don't age." Gary visits the shop Sally has opened called Verbena (after the herb), a very upscale looking boutique where she makes and sells herbal products, soaps, and shampoos. Here he meets and talks with an employee who acts as the "mouth-piece for Neo-Paganism" (Aloi, 2004, ¶13). Regarding Sally's status as a *witch* the employee states, "Witch yeah, evil no. I mean you get your psychos now and then you know animal slaughter, ritual human disembowelment but that's really pretty rare. See, it's a Pagan label but Sally, she's definitely not into that stuff." Later Gary says to Sally, "Do you have any idea how strange this all sounds to me? I got people telling me you're up here cooking up placenta bars, that you're into devil worship." Sally responds, "No, there's no devil in the craft" and he then asks her what type of craft she does. Sally responds, "Do I do? I manufacture bath oil and soaps and hand lotions and shampoo. And the aunts, um, they like to meddle in people's love lives. Magic isn't just spells and potions." The above excerpts illustrate the polysemic meanings attached to *witches* in the film, offering the possibility of resistive readings, especially to members of the movement.

Additionally, the representations of three generations of *witches* in the film could symbolize the Maiden, Mother, and Crone stages commonly discussed in Wiccan religions. For Wiccans, the Goddess is manifest in the trinity or Triple Goddess who encompasses the cycle of birth, life, death, and rebirth. She is represented by three images: Maiden, Mother, and Crone (Griffin, 1995). Most important in *Practical Magic* is the inclusion of the Crone, the facet of the trinity most demonized by patriarchy. Aspects of the Mother and Maiden often serve the purposes of patriarchies (through heterosexual marriage and childbirth) much more so than the role of the Crone. Kathryn Rountree (1997) states:

The first two aspects of the Goddess trinity, the sexually attractive Maiden and the nurturing Mother, appeal to patriarchy and have been built into Christianity in the figure of Mary, the virgin Mother of God. The Crone, the old woman past child-bearing who speaks her mind without fear of losing male approval offers nothing attractive to patriarchy. The Crone symbolized death. The witch is Christianity's diabolized Crone. (p. 226)

The Triple Goddess offers women a more holistic view of their life cycle. The Crone helps young women learn to look forward to old age as she symbolically rejects “the limitations imposed by a culture in which female power, such as it is, is tied to youth, beauty, fertility, and male-directed sexuality” (Griffin, pp. 45–46). Moreover, within compulsory heterosexuality the Crone is only a model of what not to be—alone, a spinster who is an evil old hag, a witch in the most negative sense. However, although *Practical Magic* is firmly rooted in compulsory heterosexuality, polysemy allows for the alternative reading of Crone as a wise woman secure in her woman-centeredness.

At one point in the film the three phases are represented when the Owens women grab hands in an age-appropriate order, i.e., Kylie and Antonia (Maiden: interested and preparing for heterosexual love but not quite old enough to date), Gillian and Sally (Mother, potential and actual), Aunt Jet and Aunt Frances (Crones). One meaning of the film, as I have discussed, is focused on the motherhood stage of a woman's life via compulsory heterosexuality. Another reading rests within the characters of the aunts who present a lively depiction of growing old. Aunt Frances and Aunt Jet are stylish in their attire sporting early 20th-century clothing complete with parasols, large brimmed hats, and sunglasses. In one scene when Gillian has returned home from the altercation with Jimmy, the aunts are seen making a brew in the blender—a concoction of “midnight margaritas.” The aunts, Gillian, and Sally proceed to dance around the kitchen while getting drunk and finally wind up sitting around the kitchen table laughing and bonding over issues of sex and romance.

Finally, the film utilizes the love of the sisters to blur the message of the need for heterosexual romance, in turn opening up readings that question the ideology of compulsory heterosexuality. This fits with the notion that popular culture is always contradictory and will include traces of the struggle between dominant and resistant ideologies in order to increase its “popular” appeal (Fiske, 1989). This is exemplified in the climax of the film when the women come together as a community to exorcise Jimmy out of Gillian's body (a task that could not be accomplished by the primary male authority in the film, Officer Gary Hallet). Aunt Jet says to the women in the circle, “Remember that as we go forth, it is only with our hearts beating as one, that we can save the life of this child” suggesting that they are, together, one female entity. This is the closest the film comes to portraying an oppositional message illustrating that women can overcome the patriarchal colonization of their consciousness (i.e., the abusive man which possessed Gillian) by coming together as a female community through Witchcraft.

*Practical Magic* offers multiple possibilities for resistive readings and ways to understand witches. Members of the Neo-Pagan Movement may make sense of the

film differently than the average viewer, increasing the likelihood of resistive readings. Within the word and construction *witch* there is resistive potential; as Naomi Goldenberg (2004) argues, the word *witch*

brings to mind what every patriarchal institution shuts out: namely, fantasies of maternal, sexual power in all of its complicated, messy, marvelous manifestations. . . . Witches thus are well-positioned to make institutions nervous by calling attention to that which a dominant patriarchal order must occlude. (p. 205)

However, the resistive readings of the film are limited. *Practical Magic* continually takes more empowering aspects (such as the women overcoming differences and bonding together to save Gillian) and splices them together with extensive romantic and heterosexual love themes. The film does illustrate that the power of female community is strong enough to purge the evil male force from Gillian and to break the curse. Yet, this woman-centered impulse/ideology is contained within the concept of compulsory heterosexuality. In short, being a witch means you can't participate in compulsory heterosexuality in turn feeding images of witches as spinsters and old hags. At the same time there are also the resistive readings of woman-identified and empowered women as illustrated in the scenes discussed in this section.

The public screen of film, despite the requirements of genre, does offer certain means of communicating information for movements. Polysemy often involves an "obvious" (i.e., publicly accessible) meaning operating in the text (e.g., compulsory heterosexuality), alongside hidden meanings only accessible to those with a restricted code (e.g., witches). As such, social movements with hidden populations can covertly communicate information without fear of reprisal from outsiders. These resistive readings can be accessed by Pagans while also offering the potential to spark interest in or reconsideration of witches by audiences interested in, or open to, alternative spiritualities, potentially leading to further investigation of the movement. Although *Practical Magic* is dominated by obvious depictions of family and compulsory heterosexuality, alternative meanings such as maiden, mother, and crone can simultaneously energize the Neo-Pagan Movement. Polysemy provides a critical resolution to many of the inconsistencies discussed earlier in this analysis, demonstrating how a mass media text can be read as both supporting and hindering a social movement.

### **New Social Movements, Hidden Populations, and the Public Screen**

Social movement critics have not considered the rhetorical dynamics of social movements composed of hidden populations where entertainment venues such as film are the movement's primary access to the public sphere. Deluca and Peeples (2002) succinctly argue that the public sphere is no longer the most pertinent way for social movements to gain public attention. Rather, the public screen offers a more realistic venue for awareness of a movement's issues, concerns, and ideologies to surface and circulate. As evidenced by members of the Neo-Pagan Movement, film is an important way to present issues publicly. In the same reader poll listing *Practical Magic* as the number one Pagan-friendly film, the accompanying article states:

Few would argue with the power of motion pictures to shape our culture's sense of cosmos, society, and values. It is precisely for this reason that we as Pagans love movies that explore themes, images and stories relevant to our spiritual path—even when such films may not always be positive in their presentation of Paganism. (“Creating a Pagan Bookshelf, 2005,” p. 55)

However, acknowledging the increasing relevance of the public screen does not in itself answer the question of whether media visibility helps or hinders movements.

Given that the public screen of film is restricted by the requirements of genres, close attention must be paid to how generic constraints shape representations of movements. In the case of *Practical Magic*, the over-arching romance narrative necessitates the containment of female community in favor of compulsory heterosexuality. This has the potential to diminish the empowering qualities of the Neo-Pagan Movement. If the public screen of film is the primary educator explaining a movement's ideologies the ramifications of genre are likely to hinder the movement in some fashion (cf. Battles & Hilton-Morrow, 2002; Dow, 2001, 2004).

In addition, as Helene Shugart, Catherine Waggoner, and Lynn O'Brien Hallstein (2001) state in their discussion of media representations of third-wave feminism, the hegemonic consequences of media appropriations of resistance “are all the more profound because of their status as postmodern media artifacts—the distinction between image and substance is collapsed or imploded such that it is impossible to distinguish between ‘real’ third-wave feminism and representations thereof” (p. 207). Hence, if the public screen shapes people's views of Witchcraft it may become impossible to distinguish between “real” Witchcraft and media representations thereof. In the post-modern condition the line between image and substance as well as between entertainment and information is blurred. This blurring is also illustrated by the successful containment of Witchcraft through New Age commodities in which those commodities are taken to constitute “real” Witchcraft. In the case of *Practical Magic*, Sally enacts the commodification of her Craft by taming and selling it in a bourgeois boutique absent any and all resistant potential. This is the perfect condensation of the ideological maneuvers enacted by the film as a whole. Just as Sally commodifies her Craft, thereby removing women-centered empowerment and supporting commodity capitalism, so the film's narrative ultimately subordinates women's power to compulsory heterosexuality and sells Witchcraft in a familiar form, that is, romance.

On the other hand, following Deluca and Peebles (2002) and as evidenced by the comment above given by a member of the Neo-Pagan Movement, we could say that any recognition via the public screen could be considered helpful to the movement. Furthermore, polysemy allows members of the movement to draw out relevant themes, offering a means of disseminating the movement even in the face of negative representations. The film may help people be more tolerant of the marginalized groups who practice Wicca by demystifying the practice, such as letting the audience know that there is a difference between devil worship and Witchcraft. Many may also feel that the film is making advances for contemporary witches simply because the film is a depiction that is not completely wrapped in fantasy (e.g., *Hocus Pocus*

and *Harry Potter*). More specifically, members of the Neo-Pagan Movement are more likely to produce resistive readings due to their existing knowledge about the Craft. For example, the film's representations of Crones can be understood not only as entertaining but as offering an alternative script for older women. In either case possibilities exist for readers to sidestep the messages of compulsory heterosexuality and commodity capitalism, and draw out meanings of relevance for alternative lifestyles and identities. In short, Pagan audiences can "use" the film to appreciate their identities being portrayed publicly and non-Pagan audiences can become more comfortable with the idea of witches as "legitimate" members of society.

While other media and social movement studies look at what the culture industry *does to* social movements this analysis demonstrates that it is also important to look at what members of movements can *do with* the texts that the culture industry circulates. Specifically this essay argues for the importation of the concepts and methodologies of polysemy (resistive readings) from critical media studies and critical rhetorical studies into social movement studies. This study implies a call for social movement scholars to include extra- and intertextual evidence (e.g., readers polls and documents produced by the movement) in order to more fully understand "how actual audiences have responded to a text with polysemous interpretations" (Ceccarelli, 1998, p. 410). In this way, critics can "conduct a close reading of the receptional evidence, with an eye toward the construal of message content by different interpretive communities" (Ceccarelli, p. 410). Both the analysis and the central argument of this essay illustrate a limitation for social movement critics and ultimately call for exploration of ethnographic and case study methods to enrich our understanding of the relationships between media and new social movements.

Whether or not media visibility supports particular social movements, critical analyses of such visibility are key for understanding movements comprised of hidden populations that are presented via the public screen. Particularly in situations where identities are misunderstood and there is fear of reprisal for claiming a particular identity, media depictions of those identities can be central for members of the movement. Understanding how alternative identities and movements are being incorporated and represented within popular culture is increasingly important as individuals continue to participate in social movements and alternative identities via mediated avenues rather than traditional ways of belonging to a movement. Understanding that systems of representation are used to "make sense of the conditions of an individual's existence" (Hall, 1985, p. 104), whether media visibility helps or hinders movements, social movement scholars need to pay attention not only to the shaping of the movement by the media but to the incorporation of media into members' ideologies, identities, and lifestyles.

## Notes

- [1] I capitalize Neo-Pagan, Witchcraft, and Wicca because these words refer to religions.
- [2] A witch describes a person (male or female) who is a member of the religion Wicca, also known as the Craft (Adler, 1989).

- [3] I use the term “new” social movement to describe contemporary movements that operate within the postmodern condition/late capitalism.
- [4] In much of the media coverage about *The Da Vinci Code* Dan Brown claims that his book is a fiction but the public and its critics keep treating it as nonfiction. This is further evidence of the conflation between news and entertainment in addressing alternative spiritualities.
- [5] It is clear that Sally is referring to a man because she references her previous happiness with Michael.
- [6] One possible exception to compulsory heterosexuality in media depictions of witches is the lesbian character Willow on *Buffy The Vampire Slayer*.
- [7] Most Witches subscribe to the threefold law, stating that they should do whatever they want to do with their spirituality/ritual as long as it does not hurt anyone. If they do hurt someone they should be prepared to face the consequences because whatever they have done will come back to them increased threefold (Adler, 1989; Griffin, 1995).

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