

## **“Witchcraft is just a way of concentrating energy”: An Interview with Writer/Director Anna Biller**

MAI Journal, Editors – Dr Anna Misiak, Prof Anna Backman Rogers

### **AUTHOR**

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### **BIOGRAPHY**

**Dr Kingsley Marshall** is Head of Film & Television at the CILECT accredited School of Film & Television, and a member of the project team at the Sound/Image Cinema Lab, both based at Falmouth University, UK. As a film practitioner, Kingsley focuses on sound design and music composition for film, and the production of short and micro-budget feature films. He has served as executive producer on the feature films *Wilderness* (Justin John Doherty, 2017), *The Tape* (Martha Tilston, 2021) and *Long Way Back* (Brett Harvey, 2021). He developed and produced *Backwoods* (Ryan Mackfall, 2019), and composed the score to *Hard, Cracked the Wind* (Mark Jenkin, 2019) and *Dean Quarry* (Rachael Jones, 2021). Kingsley's academic research focuses on cultures of film and television production, sound design and music, and the representation of the technological development as part of the 'fourth industrial revolution'. He has published widely, and speaks regularly at international conferences.

### **TITLE:**

## **“Witchcraft is just a way of concentrating energy”: An Interview with Writer/Director Anna Biller**

In 2016 Anna Biller's second feature film introduced audiences to Elaine Parks; “The Love Witch” of the title who has recently lost her husband and is embarking on a new life in the Californian town of Arcata. This unforgettable movie situated an explicit critique of patriarchy in an alternate universe where witchcraft formed a grudgingly accepted part of American life. Though seemingly set in the present, Biller's meticulously constructed world cut vintage and contemporary costume and design with presentational performance and filmmaking techniques (and the occasional Ennio Morricone music cue) that drew upon a history of cinema ranging from 1960s Technicolor melodrama to Italian genre movies of the 1970s. With Anna's third feature “Bluebeard” delayed by the pandemic, she met with staff and students at Falmouth University's Sound/Image Cinema Lab in a conversation that took in her introduction to cinema and film education, her writing process, and approaches to collaboration. More of Anna's work can be found at [www.lifeofastar.com](http://www.lifeofastar.com).

### **MAI: KINGSLEY MARSHALL**

What first drew you to study filmmaking?

### **ANNA BILLER**

I always wanted to make films and really started in high school. I was doing performances and videos, then got a Super 8 camera and started shooting. Later, I applied to graduate school as a painter but, when I got there, the department was more interested in my films than my paintings. I wanted to work on a bigger format in 16mm, so went into the film school to use their equipment and studios. At the time, the film department at UCLA was very Hollywood, and very corporate. While I was fantasizing about avant-garde work and doing “Ubu Roi” on stage, everybody there was very straight and normal. They wanted to go right into the industry, where I felt like more of an artist.

### **MAI: KINGSLEY MARSHALL**

You felt you didn't fit in?

### **ANNA BILLER**

It just didn't interest me at all, you know? Film fascinated me from the beginning but I wanted to do interesting work and create something original. I was trying out everything I could as a means to expression. When I quit, I had gone to an acting audition with all the undergraduates. Every white person I knew was called back from multiple roles but I was only called back for two roles, and both were ethnic. That's when I realized there was no way I could have a career in acting because they couldn't see me in any other parts. There's nothing I could have told myself that would have been different, but that environment and the

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system that made my decision for me. I'm glad I've taken my own path and I'm just sorry that I didn't get more support earlier.

**MAI: KINGSLEY MARSHALL**

Your early shorts make striking use of performance and staging, and that theme forms a significant component of your feature films. Was that something you had always been interested in?

**ANNA BILLER**

I really wouldn't mind giving out some control if people would do it right! In my first 16mm short, I gave up a lot letting the Director of Photography control the lighting and shots. I had a storyboard but he was like: 'well, let's just do this. I'm going to move the camera there.' I argued with him a little bit and, in the end, the whole thing was unusable. I was making \$10 an hour, working incredibly hard, and thought that it's not worth it unless you can find people with whom you can communicate. I have an idea about how it should be, and as I expanded my work I realised I couldn't do everything myself. With *The Love Witch* I had a really good makeup artist and DP, and it made a world of difference to create with people on exactly the same page as me. I'm still looking for great production designers and composers and would love to create a team of creatives around me as Ingmar Bergman did.

**MAI: KINGSLEY MARSHALL**

You took on a lot of roles in those early films, something that you have continued in your features - is that something you enjoy?

**ANNA BILLER**

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**MAI: KINGSLEY MARSHALL**

Costume is such a prominent part of your work. Had you studied fashion at all?

**ANNA BILLER**

I grew up with it. My mother's inspiration for becoming a fashion designer came from watching old 1930s glamour films all day long. I watched with her and developed these fantasies about glamour and costume. A lot of the reasons I'm interested in film is because of the clothes and all that stuff. The 1930s was a time of feminine glamor and also a gay male sensibility. We had camp and glamour for decades but then it was almost as if someone had said: "That's enough. Let's topple Joan Crawford, let's topple glamour and make movies about men. Those movies will be grimy and gritty, filmed outdoors and we won't have beautiful lighting but it's just going to be like reality." I mean, it's one type of reality but I like movies that reflect my inner reality, a fantasy life. I think movies used to be about an idealized world but now they're almost about a world that's under-glamorized, less glamorized than how life is! There are so many wonderful, realistic gritty films, but it's weird how it has become an invisible style. TV commercials are using the same style, and it has almost become odd for audiences if filmmakers go outside of that. In the 1940s, the style was incredibly contrasty lighting, beautiful chiseled faces. That feels like naturalism to me - I don't want to get more natural than that!

**MAI: KINGSLEY MARSHALL**

Your first feature "*Viva*" (2007) represents an LA that I would like to visit. A sun-kissed city where everyone drinks bourbon in the morning, flirts and reads poetry by the pool all day, and

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spends their winters skiing in Aspen. It’s interesting those ideas have fallen out of fashion in cinema, and that this ‘invisible style’ you describe has dominated Hollywood for over 50 years now.

**ANNA BILLER**

It’s a long time, it really is. By the time I was starting to make movies, it was already tired for me. I felt let’s have some glamour now, let’s have something else.

**MAI: KINGSLEY MARSHALL**

You’ve talked in interviews of the conflation of glamour as being against feminism, when your own work embraces and brings together both of those ideas. Initially “Viva” was considered an exploitation movie, and in “The Love Witch” many critics were so focused on the look of the film and its aesthetic that they failed to consider that at the centre of the film is a strong woman who knows her mind. A certain body of critics have continued to cast you in that light.

**ANNA BILLER**

Yeah, I don’t think it comes from audiences. When I first started making narrative films was in graduate school, I had this epiphany about how I wanted to make feminist work. All of my work, starting from those 16mm films, are feminist and they’re very consciously and very deliberately constructed to try to make people understand what it is like to live as a woman of the world. The way you have to constantly negotiate. Basically “The Love Witch” is about a woman who’s been driven crazy by the patriarchy. If you don’t understand it in that way, then you don’t understand it at all. I mean, that’s the only way to understand it. Certainly, some people looked at it and said it’s just pretty and has nothing to say but, to me, they didn’t get anything about it. If you’re looking at it through a feminist lens then every single moment of that film funnels into the idea that the struggle this character has is to maintain a central personhood in the midst of only ever being looked at as an object and how she negotiates that. Sure, she’s a sociopath and she’s a narcissist but you can be driven to that by *always* have been looked at as an object right from your time as a little girl, where your core has been hollowed out because there is no self-esteem beyond physical appearance. That’s a frightening way to live.

**MAI: KINGSLEY MARSHALL**

In “The Love Witch”, Elaine is so exceptional precisely because she expresses how she genuinely feels, rather than in relation to male characters. She’s thinking about herself, for herself. I wanted to ask about the mystical elements of your films; “Viva” features a love potion and “The Love Witch” explicitly places witchcraft front and centre. What is it about spells or witchcraft that kind of interest you as a writer and filmmaker?

**ANNA BILLER**

Cinema to me is sort of about falling in love with images, falling in love with sound and music, and falling in love with the characters. My films are about eroticism and I wanted “The Love Witch” to cast a spell on the audience. I feel femininity is a magic spell, in that it can cast a spell on men. The potion in “Viva” allowed her to release herself as a sex goddess. I wanted her to lose her inhibition, and go where she wanted – to be wild and lose herself. It’s sort of a nightmare, in that she’s not actually having fun. She’s imagining something eating her alive. It’s not pleasurable for her because she’s still in love with her husband, but she’s having this deeply personal experience.

Cinema is a radical form naturally and I think I’m a voyeur or a kind of a pervert and that’s the way I watch movies, you know? I’m interested in glamour but I’m also interested in the sensuality of female stars like Ingrid Bergman and “Notorious” (1946). I write female characters who are flawed but who don’t necessarily want to see themselves as a character who is flawed, and I think that’s unusual. Let’s say there’s a woman in a film and she makes a bad decision or can’t see the flaws of the man in her life. A lot of women don’t want to see themselves in that character. They don’t want to believe that a woman could ever make a mistake or could ever choose the wrong man. Most movie plots are based on a conflict with women getting stuck with somebody or, you know, love blinding them to the flaws of the other

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person. Do we really live in a world where we have a husband or wife who is perfect and always makes exactly the right choice?

**MAI: KINGSLEY MARSHALL**

I wondered how you would portray the ideal man in your visual world?

**ANNA BILLER**

The ideal man would be like those classic heroes in classical films, right? He'd be flawed, he'd have to be brave with a sense of humor. He'd be able to look at himself honestly and keep wanting to protect women - Gregory Peck in “Cape Fear” (1962).

**MAI: KINGSLEY MARSHALL**

A lot of your cinema references reach back to an earlier era, what do you think contemporary writers can take from that?

**ANNA BILLER**

That's maybe because they were beautifully constructed, intense and exciting with clearly written, strong characters. In terms of female writers, people should look at the pre-Code movies, you know, where there were incredible parts for women. I don't think we've ever had parts for women that good after the Hays Code. At that time there were a lot of female writers in Hollywood, and they were a lot of fun novels that were being adapted. There were a lot of women involved too, and a lot of female producers in the 1920s and 1930s too before films became giant, giant money.

The studios have a lot of projects and development on their slates that are just pure exploitation; action and horror but not like in an interesting or complex way. So much of that is within that budget range but they're doing stuff that is very simple as they are trying to sell quickly overseas.

**MAI: KINGSLEY MARSHALL**

Can we talk about your approach to writing, and pitfalls to avoid from your perspective?

**ANNA BILLER**

Usually, when scripts are bad, it's because the characters are poorly written. It takes me a long time to get a good draft because I'm discovering who the character is, and all of the changes I make are about that. I rewrite the dialogue over and over and over and over again as I try to understand them. I don't write really complex back stories, but instead write and rewrite until the script feels authentic to the character I have in my mind. That contrasts with a lot of the scripts I read where there isn't a consistent sense of a character from scene to scene, or as a thread throughout the movie. For me, you need a thorough psychology.

People talk about how I spend so much time on my sets and costumes but I actually spend more time writing, and I think the thing that is most unusual about my movies isn't the visual but the writing. What's funny for me is that I'm never compared to someone like John Cassavetes or people who write in a very character-driven way. The visual pleasure confuses people a little bit, making audiences think my films are a different kind of movie. I get compared a lot to Russ Meyer, who was neither a character-driven writer and definitely not a feminist one!

**MAI: KINGSLEY MARSHALL**

Can I ask you about the “Bluebeard” movie that you've been writing?

**ANNA BILLER**

Right before the pandemic, it was all set to go with a producer but the company folded. It got going for a few months and felt like it was happening, and then fell apart. In the meantime, I wrote a horror script that I'm thinking may be easier to get out but, you know, my films are very ambitious. I think it's a great script but it's just a risk for people to get behind a project that's so different than anything that's being made now. If this were 1958 it would just be green lit but, like “The Love Witch” which was set today but felt like 1969, this new film is set

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today but feels like 1958. I think that sometimes producers are afraid to work with me because they look at what's on the page and they think: “Oh my God, this is going to be hard to put together.”

**MAI: KINGSLEY MARSHALL**

After the critical and commercial success of “The Love Witch”, I’m a little surprised that producers and financiers didn’t gravitate around your next projects right away.

**ANNA BILLER**

I’ve had a lot of interest from producers and studios and many, many meetings. I’d say my new scripts are now much more mainstream and accessible, in that I’m writing for a wider audience purposely, but I get meetings with people who are like: “We’re huge fans, we want to do your next project” and they’re excited and act like it’s already going ahead, then they read it and don’t understand what I’m doing. We live in this very odd culture where people have an anger about toxic or conflicted relationships or where they can’t empathize with the woman in my films. Often with blockbuster or mainstream cinema the gender positions are very clear, that you’re a conquering hero or whatever, or you’re being punished for transgressing. I think there needs to be more space within movies where we don’t punish transgression and for the industry to have the capacity to make those films that enable audiences to talk about the patriarchy and thinking about themselves.

**MAI: KINGSLEY MARSHALL**

What has kept you motivated through the pandemic?

**ANNA BILLER**

Writing, you know? I didn’t try to get anything made and it’s only when people started getting vaccinated that I started sending my new project out. I thought that the end of the road is in sight, but people are still kind of sluggish right now. The pace is different, but the way to keep motivated is to keep excited about your ideas and be completely ready when things open up. Again, you just have to believe in what you’re doing and to know that it’s good and know that eventually, you’re going to get there. You get a certain amount of positive feedback and it’s frustrating when things don’t end up happening but you know, it’s just a bunch of little cuts and the main thing is to love what you’re doing you. That’s what gets me through.