WITCHCRAFT’S SPELL OVER HOLLYWOOD REFLECTS SOCIETY, NOT MAGIC

DURHAM, N.C. – Move over, angels. Make way, Shakespeare. The witching hour is at hand.

“The Blair Witch Project,” a cheaply made pseudo-documentary about three filmmakers who vanished while searching for the fabled enchantress, is breaking Hollywood box-office records as it rides an Internet-driven frenzy of hype. “Sabrina, the Teenage Witch” and “Charmed,” two fashionably hip looks at witchcraft in the late-1990s, attract millions of TV viewers each week.

Children’s literature, too, has fallen under witchcraft’s spell. Books about warlocks and sorcerers now fill library and bookstore shelf space once reserved for pirates and cowboys. The wildly popular “Harry Potter” series about an adolescent wizard-in-training dominates bestseller lists – and a big-budget, big screen adaptation is already in the works.

Changing attitudes about religion and women – not magic – have helped shift attention away from cherubim and the Bard to shape 1999 into the Year of the Witch, according to three Duke University scholars.

“The recent run of TV shows and films dealing with witchcraft results, at least partly, from the constant need for new material in these media,” according to Thomas Robisheaux, an associate professor of history who teaches a course on magic and witchcraft. “There’s more to it than this, however, because these films and TV shows are responding to particular currents in American culture in the ‘90s. If they didn’t, no one would watch.”

Still a part of the “shadow side” of American culture, witchcraft in 1999 has escaped its association with Satanism and heresy for many people, said Wesley Kort, a Duke religion professor whose academic focus is on religion and modern culture.

“It’s dissonant. It’s different. It’s powerful. It’s outside the mainstream. There’s that appeal,” he said. “It’s not necessarily evil anymore.”

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Americans’ historical fascination with witches can be traced back beyond the infamous Salem Witch Trials. Countless movies, television shows and books have dealt with the topic in the past 300 years, often featuring lurid images of satanic worship and bizarre rituals. But witchcraft began emerging from the dark fringes of society earlier this century.

“It is an interest and a phenomenon that is not new. Not by any means. It goes back at least 20 years,” said Harry Partin, associate professor emeritus and 30-year member of Duke’s department of religion faculty. “Maybe Hollywood’s just catching up. Movies and television are capitalizing on a topic they may be just realizing there will be an audience for.”

American society’s growing affinity for new religious movements is a major reason the audience now exists, Partin said.

“I think there’s a great interest in so-called alternative religions – that is religions which are not traditional in their customs. People are not hesitant to explore new alternatives,” he said. “We’re living in a society with more religious options than ever before. A century or so ago, there were very few. You were a Christian or a Jew – or known as the town atheist. You really didn’t have any other options. Now, people do.”

Witchcraft has attracted hundreds of thousands of adherents – most of them women – to its mixture of female-centered spirituality, environmental concern and value on self-knowledge.

“It responds to those Americans who find the Judeo-Christian tradition no longer meets their needs,” said Robisheaux. It is a trend that broadened and deepened in the 1960s and ’70s. “It also responds to the desire to reject authority in institutionalized religion altogether. Witchcraft acknowledges a broader interest among American women and men who want to see women in some positions of authority and responsibility in their religious institutions. It is one of the new religions professing to find a more harmonious relationship between humans and nature. And, finally, modern witchcraft has responded powerfully to the need to develop feminine deities and spirituality.”

Witchcraft’s growing popularity also is related to our seemingly insatiable appetite for the supernatural and the occult, from “The X-Files” and “Buffy the Vampire Slayer” to angels and UFOs, Robisheaux said.

“There is still the mystery of the unknown or the non-rational, the legendary and the strange, particularly around subjects that invoke anxiety or fear,” he said. “Some sociologists have argued that one feature of a modern culture is the decline of the supernatural – but it hasn’t happened. Indeed, there may be wider belief in and access to a wide variety of supernatural phenomena today – through the modern media – than at any time in the past.”

Kort agrees.

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“I think the culture has been led to take all of this a bit more seriously than it might have a decade or 15 years ago,” he said. “And it suggests a more complicated world than perhaps we normally ask ourselves to encounter or contemplate.”

Another current at work in Hollywood’s fascination with witchcraft is the changing role of women in our society, Robisheaux said. The genre enables film makers and TV producers to explore women living and working on their own and wielding their newfound power. Far from celebrating that empowerment, though, the depictions of witches on television and in recent movies, including “Practical Magic” and “The Craft,” can be seen as part of the backlash against the women’s movement.

“These TV and film witches are all women on the margins of the mainstream. And most of them go to some lengths to hide the fact – especially from men – that they have extraordinary power,” Robisheaux said. “They use their power to deal with troubling domestic problems or relationships. It is not a stepping stone to power and respect in the community as a whole. Witchcraft is one way to explore this fear and fascination about women’s power.”

Of the three academics, only Robisheaux has seen “The Blair Witch Project.” And he left the theater unimpressed with what it had to say about his academic interest.

“A big disappointment,” Robisheaux said. “It has little to do with witchcraft, and a lot to do with how three young people can scare themselves silly, get lost and become victims of a crime.”

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