If popular magazines circa 2013 are any indication, the figure of the witch remains a “go-to” girl for Modern Horror. The popular cable series, *American Horror Story*, focused a recent season on a coven of witches, and the upcoming film adaptation of *Into the Woods* stars Meryl Streep, with gorgeously witchy visuals, in the main role. Gothic signifiers proliferate in these visual texts, usually to a distinctly medievalizing effect. We have seen such associations before. Nineteenth-century literature gave us the Gothic spaces of Victor Hugo’s *The Hunchback of Notre Dame*. By the early 20th century, and with the advent of film, a “medieval” iconography of horror seemed if not ubiquitous at least alive and well—the evil Rotwang from Fritz Lang’s *Metropolis* (1927) is caught in a twilight world between gothic black magic and futuristic science as is, of course, Christensen’s anachronistic meditation on the “medieval” history of witchcraft in *Häxan*.

In these and other contexts, the figure of the witch regularly crosses boundaries (temporal and narrative) or confuses categories (epistemological and cognitive). In this

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5 For a reading of Hugo’s medievalism as important to the Gothic in subsequent decades, see Elizabeth Emery, *Romancing the Cathedral: Gothic Architecture in Fin-de-Siècle French Culture* (Albany: SUNY Press, 2001), especially 14–22.
regard, one might expect that the witch would figure prominently in the emerging field dedicated to elucidating the problems and pleasures of category confusion: Monster Studies. A cross-historical set of inquiries with an explicit interest in figures of the “in-between,” Monster Studies engages what Asa S. Mittman calls “the oddities of creation,” those “somewhat magical” figures occupying a place “outside of the ordinary.” Dedicated to wide-ranging inclusivity, Monster Studies generally welcomes scholars (and monsters) of an enormous historical, temporal, and geographic range. Yet the witch has been kept apart from its array of strange creatures. Publications in the field silently ignore her. She has seemed, perhaps, a monstrous creature too far, or, alternately, a creature not quite monstrous enough.

Such a problem of definition might instead offer the best case for her inclusion. The monster, as Jeffrey Jerome Cohen put it decades ago, “is harbinger of category crisis,” and questions of definition regularly bedevil its categorical aspect. The field as a whole has made such crises constitutive, and crucial to the monster’s cultural power. As Mittman does when, in the introduction to the Ashgate Companion to Monster Studies, he renders the power of the monster in active terms: the monster “defies the human power to subjugate through categorization.” Monsters are, for this very reason, “cognitively threatening,” even “a

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revolution in the very logic of meaning.” So, too, is the figure of the witch. This is, in fact, precisely what makes her so interesting to Freud, to Weyer, to Christensen, and to a history of witch hunters, all of whom relentlessly, if unsuccessfully, try to define, to classify and sub-classify, to “solve” the problem of her testimony, or to pin her down.

Admittedly, on the score of the witch’s ability to “defy” subjugation “through categorization,” the historical record is mixed. If, as Cohen also once put it, the “monster always escapes,” the same cannot be said for all those particular women accused of being, or of having been, witches themselves, many of whom were tortured or put to death. Historians of witchcraft are rightfully wary of reifying the “witch” as some kind of cross-cultural or essential reality; local studies deftly attend to the particular bodies and particular histories, the specific localities and specific seasons relevant to the “witch craze.” As historical people, witches haunt across time; they are less monsters themselves than victims of monstrous treatment, denizens of the bad old days when inquisitors stalked the heretical and the heterodox, the renegade and the unlucky alike. Yet we would emphatically assert that while such historical people show the troubling effect of the witch as the monstrous, they are not identical to that figure. The witch’s monstrosity is more diffuse, a figure and a body produced in cultural transactions across a range of times, places, figures, and disciplines. She represents, in this way, the monster as diffuse “cultural body.” When was she real and when was she not? Who can tell? “The binary of real and unreal,”

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writes Mittman, “is problematic when applied to monsters.”\textsuperscript{13}

The witch seems to us uncannily pertinent to all such claims. Undeniably human, she dangerously tarries with the extra-human;\textsuperscript{14} she marks the confusion of fantasy with history, and blurs the borders of victim and victimizer, insides and outsides, pleasures and perversions. The problem of the real and unreal converges in the witch quite precisely. We will venture further: she not only crosses those boundaries, but also, and paradoxically, explicitly \textit{contains} them, displaying real and unreal as a crucial internal problem. On all these grounds, the figure of the witch might well be Monster, Exhibit A. For what more compelling claim can be made for a figure in whom the real and unreal converge in impossible—and troubling—epistemological conflict?

Yet the problem of where to locate monstrosity within her complex history persists. For Heinrich Kramer and other inquisitors, witches themselves are clearly monstrous. But from the vantage of historical distance we can ask whether monstrosity figures in those suffering persecution for being witches or in those doing the persecuting. Precisely on account of such questions, precisely because of the shifts over time as to the answers given, and precisely because the witch stalks the boundary of fantasy and history, we will argue that her figure can shed considerable light on how monsters can confront historical change. We explore the witch as monster in order to track her altogether ambivalent historical timing, a temporality entwined with lurid pleasures as much as with remedy or punishment. Christensen’s \textit{Häxan} sheds light on these features of the witch, offering a view of her uncanny temporality, a “category crisis” rendered in cross-temporal terms. Or, to put it

\textsuperscript{13} Mittman, “Introduction,” 4.
\textsuperscript{14} As Cohen puts it in the Preface to \textit{Monster Theory}, “monster and human are coincipient” (xi).
another way, häxan (literally, the witch) “through the ages,” becomes a figure for “progress” that, paradoxically, puts progress on notice. Persecuted by medieval torturers, probed by psychoanalysts, photographed by physicians or documentary filmmakers, the witch persists in the hysteric, repeating “through the ages,” yet with a difference.

This last point marks one more reason why we wish to think the witch alongside the monstrous: her continuous existence over centuries also offers access to an interesting subcategory of medievalism. If, as Mittman also compellingly puts it, “the monster is known through its effect, its impact,” then the witch (bedeviling to influential thinkers for centuries) seems emblematic of a certain kind of distributive monstrous effect. Unlike many of the other categories of monster (whose aspect and threat proliferate in particular times and spaces), the figure of the witch confuses repeatedly, at diverse historical moments, although in strangely familiar ways. This monstrous witch stops change—not dead, but living—in its tracks. A monster documented but not realized, photographed but never captured, the witch is named and renamed, but never named securely. Always threatening to reemerge in other times and places, in this aspect the witch “always escapes.”

Conventional accounts of the history of the discourse of monstrosity frequently (if not universally) describe the shift from premodern to modern times as a shift from the religious register to the scientific. What was once a portent of the divine becomes a specimen for medical classification; a creature of sin and disorder to be redeemed by God is recast as a victim of disease or pathology in need of diagnosis and cure. Rosemarie Thomson’s account is emblematic: “The trajectory of historical change,” she writes, “can be characterized simply as a movement from a narra-

tive of the marvelous to a narrative of the deviant. As modernity develops in Western culture . . . the prodigious monster transforms into a pathological revelation . . . What was taken as a [religious] portent shifts to a site of [scientific] progress. In brief, wonder becomes error.”

Attentive to the specificity of science, such histories offer considerable explanatory power regarding early medical classification of bodily deformity and “strange births.”

Yet if, by the 19th century, non-fictional treatments of “monstrous bodies” veered away from religious wonder and toward medical classification, fictional accounts never quite kept to that path. Even during the Age of Science, monstrosity was not easily delimited to the scientific realm. This is yet another verification of Bruno Latour’s insight: we have never been modern. The regulatory regime of the monstrous can, in other words and as Michel Foucault has long since taught us, be productive for all manner of alternative orders and powers.


The conventional account, helpful as it is, cannot explain the witch as a modern figure staged as medieval; it overlooks the commonalities between the discourses of monstrosity during the two eras. For while it is true that medieval monstrosities were not described in the scientific registers popular in later times, they were certainly imagined as signs of error. However wondrous, medieval monsters frequently signified “error” as sin, deformity, or perversion, a fact that reminds us that “error” functions equally easily (though not identically) in the religious as in the scientific registers.19 Thomson’s own language suggests as much: even as scientific code, the monster beckons in religious terms, a site for “revelation.” This also means that we should not necessarily assume that a religious apprehension of the marvelous ushered in a discourse of premodern monstrosity that was kinder or gentler than its modern analogue.20 Indeed, both older texts and modern film share a fascination with monstrous embodiments precisely as a fascination with “perverse” error. Analyses of medieval representations of monstrosity suggest that such figures often stand in for the heterodox elements of culture, elements that might simultaneously purvey and work to dis-

19 For a review of relevant material see Bettina Bildhauer and Robert Mills, eds., The Monstrous Middle Ages (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 2003).
lodge hegemonic institutions and ideologies. Such work has opened important questions regarding, for instance, ideologies of masculinity in the Middle Ages and/or how a deft use of psychoanalysis might help us to understand medieval culture in all its historicity.

Not all medievalists, however, have welcomed these developments. Some, like historians Gabrielle Spiegel and Paul Freedman, have argued that drawing attention to representations of monsters in medieval texts misrepresents the period, returning us to a very old and conservative view of the Middle Ages, and naturalizing the identification of the medieval as stereotypically history’s grotesque. Spiegel and Freedman remind us that in the early decades of the twentieth century, historians like Charles Homer Haskins and Joseph Strayer argued vociferously that the period be viewed as a time of rationality and intellectual rigor, a formative era during which a variety of social, cultural, and political institutions originated. In the wake of this effort, the current interest in medieval monsters, Spiegel and Freedman argue, merely plays into the hands of those who have not learned the lessons that Haskins and Strayer taught us, those who wish to see the period as nothing but backward. It is thus their opinion that current work on medieval monsters puts at risk the massive accomplishment of an entire generation of medievalists. While we disagree with the scare tactics implicit in this essay, Spiegel and Freedman nonetheless make a cru-

cial historiographic point. We must consider a larger and longer comparative history, one that analyzes later associations between the medieval and the “monstrous.”

One such convergence dates to the early decades of the twentieth century, the time when Christensen’s work first appeared. This era witnessed a proliferation of discourses of monstrosity linked both to historical and (if differently) to religious controversy. It was then, for instance, that Haskins and fellow historian Charles Lea argued for a reconsideration of the rational insights of the High Middle Ages, suggesting that the germ of modern civil arrangements could be traced back to the twelfth century, yet it was also then that Pope Pius X insisted upon a return to traditional scholastic method, condemning certain Catholic philosophers’ fascination with secular “Modernism” as a habit “disfigured by perverse doctrines and monstrous errors”; it was then that *Malleus Maleficarum*, Heinrich Kramer’s infamous 1486 handbook for hunting witches, was first translated into English by Montague Summers, who would characterize that translation and publication of *Malleus* as particularly pertinent to the ills of the modernist century, a “world of confusion, of Bolshevism, of anarchy and licentiousness” (1928); it was then, finally, that

23 This citation is taken from the “Introduction” to Montague Summers’ 1928 English edition of the famous handbook of witches, for decades the only available English edition: Heinrich Kramer and James Sprenger, *Malleus Maleficarum* (1486), ed. and trans. Montague Summers (rpt. London: Dover Publications, 1971), xl. Summers’ personal history is strange and untangling it is not easy. An ordained priest and later bishop in the Old Catholic Church of the Utrecht Succession, he was a prolific writer and quirky figure around London in the early 20th cen-
Christensen’s *Häxan* juxtaposed the religious excesses of medieval witches and witch hunters with the modern doctor of psychology and the hysteric.

In both its “medieval” and “modern” incarnations, the witch points to vexing epistemological issues for the cultures of which it is a part. What does it mean, we ask, that these two eras share an interest in the epistemological question of how to disentangle fantasy from “the real,” and a concern with authorities and their oppressions? What does it mean that these questions are focused so persistently on women? These questions will illuminate the incoherence of Christensen’s film, itself a vehicle for purveying the association of the medieval with the monstrous still with us today. On the one hand, the retrospective diagnosis of the witch-as-hysteric that Christensen cites seems to register the standard view of monstrous development just described: from religious wonder to scientific classification. We will argue, instead, that Christensen’s film shows that the figure of the “witch” returns as the “hysteric” not so as to track “progress” from religious superstition to scientific rationality, but precisely as a figure for category crisis, for unsolvable epistemological problems.

To unravel the medievalism of Christensen’s film, we must first turn to select early modern texts and recent scholarship concerning European witchcraft. We begin with the historical specificity of witchcraft, as the question emerged in Europe in early modernity, paying special attention to debates over the meaning of witchcraft testimony, as evinced in the different positions taken by Kramer, author of *Malleus Maleficarum* (1486) and Johann Weyer, author of *De praestigiis daemonum* (1563). Kramer and Weyer, as we shall see, represent two distinct early modern positions on *maleficia*, and they disagree as to whether women’s testimony of their dalliance with the devil ought to be given credence as real or dismissed as fantastical im-
aginings. Christensen’s film recapitulates features of this debate even as it relocates it to the early twentieth century. His witch, in a time out-of-joint, follows a track set in multiple centuries: the fifteenth, the sixteenth, the nineteenth and twentieth. Such untimely temporality takes a monstrous medieval aspect.