The Witch and the Hysteric: The Monstrous Medieval in Benjamin Christensen's Häxan

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Benjamin Christensen’s Swedish/Danish film *Häxan* (known under its English title as *Witchcraft Through the Ages*) has entranced, entertained, shocked, and puzzled audiences for nearly a century. First premiered in late 1922, the elaborately staged and produced 108-minute production holds the title as the most expensive Scandinavian silent film in history. Interest in *Häxan* has endured well beyond the silent era: it was re-released in 1941 in Denmark with newly-edited intertitles, and including an extended documentary introduction starring Christensen himself; the film would be released yet again in 1968 (this time in an abbreviated 77-minute format) as an avant-garde event, featuring dramatic narration by Beat Generation icon, William S. Burroughs, and an eclectic jazz score. In 2001, *Häxan* appeared in a DVD edition as part of *The Criterion Collection*, including both a fully-restored print of the original film and Burroughs’ shorter 1968 version, and featuring extensive production notes and commentary by Danish film scholar Casper Tybjerg. New soundtracks for the original silent version continue to be imagined, most recently in 2010.¹

¹ For an account of the history of film scores, see Gillian Anderson, “About the Music,” in the 2001 Criterion DVD booklet.
**Häxan**, it seems, won’t quite let its audiences go. Yet despite this impressive production history, Christensen’s film has received relatively little critical commentary. Scholars have noted Christensen’s influence on 20th-century filmmakers Luis Brunel and Val Lewton; and critics have described the film’s surrealism as well as its “audacious theatricality,” as entrancing in the psychedelic 1960s, becoming, as Mark Bourne puts it, “the Reefer Madness of devil-worshipping witchcraft movies.” Yet no one has yet explained the film’s uncanny mix of documentary and fantasy, history and theatrics, or queried its odd juxtaposition of religion and science, its irreverent mixing of the distant past and contemporary culture. The film’s uncanny content is compounded by its formal strangeness, a mixture of quasi-documentary with fictional episodes, illustrated lectures alongside docudrama recreations and dreamscapes. Is this a documentary, a horror flick, or both?

Organized into seven “chapters” of varying length, Häxan begins with a formal lecture and filmic slide show purporting to narrate the history of demonic belief through the ages. The opening tracks belief in the devil as a primitive instinct, a version of pre-scientific error and superstition in a lecture illustrated via woodcuts and artistic renderings of worldviews dating from ancient times. Chapter 2 offers, in contrast to the documentary tenor of the preceding section, a series of short dramatic recreations, episodes dramatizing “medieval” belief in witches, or dreamscapes visualizing the devil’s seductive attractions. The third chapter—the longest focalized narrative in the entire film—relates the story of a woman unjustly accused of witchcraft and tortured by the hierarchy of the medieval Catholic Church. Chapters 4 and 5 depict aspects of

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witchcraft trials and practices of torture, showing precise details of torture devices and their use. Chapter 6 returns to the non-narrative form of the opening to show a range of related delusions or perversions as contributing phenomena. And, suddenly, with the seventh and final section, titled “1921,” the film leap-frogs over four centuries of history to the time contemporary with the film’s original release. This final section repeatedly cross-cuts the “medieval” witch and the “modern” hysteric, highlighting diverse commonalities as well as differences between “then” and “now.”

Christensen offers a complex view of the medieval era as deeply entwined with monstrous imaginings, and Christensen’s häxan (the Swedish word for witch) is, we will argue, a monstrously medieval figure. Yet if, throughout Häxan, the film juxtaposes medieval witches with modern women, it is neither entirely consistent nor entirely clear precisely what this means. Nor are Häxan’s historical temporalities secure. Christensen’s film is, paradoxically, both chronologically specific and anachronistically out-of-joint. Intertitles emphasize the witch as an unrelentingly medieval phenomenon (“Such were the Middle Ages,” claims one early on, “when witchcraft and the devil’s work were sought everywhere”). Yet the film’s recreations of particular episodes are strangely specified as to date, and associated with a later (arguably post-medieval) time: the first fictional reenactment (in the film’s second part) identifies the setting as the “Home of a Sorceress,” circa “A.D. 1488” (i.e., an early modern time). Particular witchy figures, furthermore, generate wildly ambiguous representational effects in similarly confused terms: Häxan’s medieval witches include “mad” nuns, homeless widows, eroticized seductresses, and Karna, the “sorceress” given to dispensing apparently reliable love potions. In a final sequence of film dissolves, Christensen compares and contrasts these “medieval” women with a series of modern ones. The latter group is eclectic, and includes an aviatrix, old and poor women, actresses,
pyromaniacs, professional women, and well-to-do hysteric

What are we to make of the unsettling effect of Häxan’s associations of “medieval” and “modern” women alongside the film’s startling elision of four centuries of European history? Christiansen’s juxtaposition of past and present, of the history of modern women via the tribulations of the monstrous witch, is provocative and puzzling in equal measure. In this chapbook, we suggest that the puzzle of Christensen’s Häxan might be unraveled by attending to the film’s provocative and paradoxical medievalism, its fantasy of the Middle Ages. We argue here that understanding Christensen’s medievalism is crucial to understanding the politics of gender and culture with which Häxan is preoccupied.

As one might expect, Häxan’s medievalism, like its representational politics, seems confused. What is clear, however, is that in developing Häxan, Christensen was influenced by the collocation of various texts about witches, including an infamous fifteenth-century manual for witch hunters, as well as by early twentieth-century developments in psychiatry and psychoanalysis. Christensen was not the only prominent modern thinker to consult the premodern history of witchcraft in a narrative aimed at the modern female subject. Just over twenty years before Häxan was released, no less a luminary than Sigmund Freud would cite the medieval witch as crucial to the “pre-history” of his controversial work on hysteria.3 The work to which Freud referred was Heinrich Kramer’s infamous 1486 handbook for witch hunters, Malleus Maleficarum, the text that Christensen claimed inspired his work as

well.\textsuperscript{4} Associations between witchcraft and hysteria were promoted by figures like Jean Martin Charcot, Josef Breuer, and their followers, Freud and Pierre Janet—all of whom drew upon medieval and early modern witch hunting in constructing theories about women’s mental problems, especially hysteria. This psychiatric yoking of the medieval and the modern as it concerned women’s lives and subjectivities seems the most likely source for \textit{Häxan}’s striking form.

By his own report, Christensen’s accidental discovery of a copy of Kramer’s work in a used bookstore provided the catalyst for his innovative film. When Christensen deploys medieval history to authorize his own cross-temporal associations, he renders the witch as a particularly hybrid, irregular figure, and one with a specifically, if ambiguously, monstrous past. \textit{Häxan} emerges, in this context, as a crucial index for an unruly intellectual history of enormous epistemological consequence. In this book, then, we are focused on unraveling the complexities of Christensen’s \textit{Häxan}, yet we also read his work as a crucial analytic for wider matters. The witch sits at the center of this project, and her image resonates with analyses of a certain kind of monstrosity in gendered and historical terms. Precisely as a mother/model for the later figure of the hysteric, the witch highlights a diverse asynchrony of gender, one keyed to the representational politics surrounding the female subject and her male examiners, whether persecutors or rescuers.

We will start, then, by suggesting that the witch, usually omitted from taxonomies of the “monster,” might be read as a crucial subcategory of the monstrous in a time out-of-joint. The witch-as-monster signals both a category crisis and a

temporal paradox. And Häxan—with its crossing of “medieval” and “modern,” its juxtaposition of documentation with historicized fantasy, its confused rendering of the witch as (alternately) victim to internal conflicts, and/or the member of a persecuted underclass—offers veritable “one stop shopping” for analyzing the temporal and libidinal categories important to this captivatingly perverse history. Christensen’s film offers a fascinating opportunity to display the fissures and fault lines of the witch as a medieval monster in history, and our attention to the monstrous witch eventually pays off in a reading of the gender politics of Häxan’s monstrous medievalism.