As a film, *Häxan* stages a use of the past that sediments early modern anxieties about witchcraft even as it traffics, for much of its running time, in a sense of awed “medieval” wonder over the figure of the witch. One explanation comes from setting the film within its immediate cultural context, briefly described in the preceding section. To summarize this context: in the late 19th- and early 20th-century Europe, particularly in France, religious authorities and secular scientists were engaged in a bitter struggle for control of important social and political institutions, the hospital among them. One popular tactic for discrediting the position of the church—particularly of the powerful Catholic Church—was to link it to regressive notions of “the medieval,” and thereby cast it as a primitive and retrograde bastion of superstition to be contrasted with the “rational” and “enlightened” work of modern science and medicine.

Thus, an “alliance between psychiatry and anticlerical politics” developed in the late 19th century, epitomized by the works and practices of figures like Bourneville and Charcot, as well as those of Charcot’s student, Freud. Benjamin Christensen was clearly familiar with many of
these men’s works. The bibliography drawn up to document the director’s background reading for Häxan offers evidence that he was well-versed not only with medieval and early modern texts about witches and witch trials, particularly Malleus Maleficarum, but with the scholarship of the scientists and polemists surrounding Charcot. Included in Christensen’s extensive bibliography on the subject (a bibliography duplicated and distributed to the film’s first-run audiences) are Bourneville’s Bibliothèque diabolique and Charcot’s Les démoniques dans l’art (with Paul Richer) and Nouvelle iconographie de la Salpêtrière, clinique des maladies du système nerveux (with Richer, Georges Gilles de la Tourette, and Albert Lordes). Studies authored by certain followers of Charcot, drawing upon various religious works from the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries—texts that purport to offer scientific “modern” and “progressive” theories about women’s mental problems, especially hysteria—are also included.

Given these influences, it is not surprising that Christensen constructs his film not as an account of the late 19th-century and early 20th-century struggles between Catholic authorities and secular psychiatric doctors, but as an account of history whereby a monstrous medieval religiosity is superseded by a putatively more benevolent and modern scientific rationality. As with the anticlerical campaigns of its time, Häxan ignores the religious polemics driving the early modern clerical debates over witchcraft, to say nothing of the culpability of early modern Protestant clerics in conducting mass witch hunts. With only one or two intertitle allusions to the Renaissance, the film insists upon a strictly medieval context for its often grotesque and horrifying representation of clerical witch hunting. This has the

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55 McGrath, Freud’s Discovery of Psychoanalysis, 156.
effect of associating mistreatment of women with a “medieval” Catholic Church. Christensen, like Bourneville and other anticlerical campaigners, reinforces the image of that Church as a regressive and medieval space, one that stands in distinction to the apparently more progressive architectures of modern science and medicine. To be sure, the repressed modern Church returns, specifically via a brief mention of the “pious” organizations that continue to care for poor old women in the twentieth century, and, again, in a two-shot comparison of a mad nun with a bourgeois female hysterical, a point to which we will return. Yet primarily in Håxan, medieval religion occupies a dark and sinister space; it shares this disturbing location with the women persecuted by Inquisitorial Friars and other religious figures. Moreover, Catholic nuns finally feature in the film’s Charcot-inspired “retroactive diagnosis” whereby religious women who believed they were possessed by the devil are presented, in fact, as nothing more (or less) than hysterics.

While the major thrust of the ideological narratives of anticlerical politicians and scientists—and of Håxan—is to effect a clear separation between religion and medicine by employing a conventional contrast between a religious superstition from the Dark Ages of Europe with a secular and rational modernity, the medievalism of these narratives is often a good deal more complicated than this overarching narrative suggests. For one thing, considering scientific work on women and hysteria as extrapolations from—as well as advances upon—the conclusions of religious men regarding women and demonic possession establishes certain shared points of interest, if not agreement, between modern doctors and medieval clergymen. From the evidence of Håxan, both groups of men appear to agree that there is something very wrong with many women. By and large, and following the lead of modern men of science and medicine, Håxan implicitly suggests
that the Church was on to something in its suspicions that certain women posed dangers and threats to themselves and to society at large.

Yet Häxan also suggests that medieval witch hunters erred in casting their net too widely. The medieval men of religion represented in the film seem unable to distinguish genuinely disturbed women from poor women, more disturbing than disturbed, and feared by both their accusers and by the religious men who interrogate them. The film depicts several old, poor women as well as a few young, attractive women with no apparent connection to diabolism being taken into custody and tortured for the misfortunes of their socio-economic status, or on account of their unfortunate position as the object of male lust. In this way, the film, like the medical profession of its time, considers the modern man of science as a better informed, and more discriminating authority figure than their medieval, religious forebears. This association also forges a compelling and largely positive connection with the prestige and authority of the medieval clergymen while, at the same time, representing the modern men of science and medicine as sophisticated, humane—in fact, epistemologically and ethically superior to the “medieval” Catholic clergy. This, we should note, structures a specifically male version of historical progress. The progress made by the male authority through time, however, requires the disturbed “victim,” now “patient,” to remain essentially, invariably disturbed, even monstrous, across time: the figure of the troubling woman remains, her disorder always requiring intervention by the male expert.

After an opening chapter of quasi-documentary material on the history of witchcraft—which generally uses sixteenth and seventeenth-century woodcuts, drawings, and other artwork to illustrate a long archaic history—Häxan’s second chapter stages a series of episodes that, cumulatively, encapsulate complex continuities and discontinuities between the two eras. The first section of Chapter 2 shows
a day in the life of medieval “sorceress” Karna and her female assistant. We watch the two witches spike a curative “brew” with the finger of a hanged thief, and concoct a potion made from cat feces and doves’ hearts. The two sorceresses are clearly coded as both monstrous and grotesque: Karna’s hovel is decorated with the skeletons of small animals and skulls. A woman arrives and asks for a love potion to use on her employer, “a pious man of the church.” As Karna describes the power of her potions, the screen cuts to two scenes of the woman’s erotic fantasies in which we see her in compromising positions with a tonsured, and apparently lascivious, monk. The woman buys a potion and leaves.

The very next episode depicts two young men whose scientific curiosity leads them to steal a woman’s dead body to use in medical experimentation. Renegade scientists, yet pious nonetheless, they pray for forgiveness, and an intertitle assures us of their humanitarian motives: “It is not from untimely curiosity that we so boldly sin,” the title reads, “but so that the cause of many terrible diseases might be revealed to us.” The two medical men are caught by a female onlooker in the act, just as they move to cut open the cadaver in the dimly lit room; she denounces them, running through the streets shouting, “The peace of the cemetery has been desecrated by two witches.” Hers is a decidedly “medieval” reaction, the narrative intertitle informs us, at a time “when witchcraft and the Devil’s work were sought everywhere. And that is why unusual things were believed to be true.”

What is particularly striking about these two episodes is Christensen’s juxtaposition of witches and black magic with shots of early men of medicine. Like the two old women, these young men are up to unusual things; they

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57 This and all subsequent intertitle citations are taken from the 2001 Criterion Collection DVD of Häxan.
are, on that account, open to charges of witchcraft. Karna’s activities seem to be somehow connected with those of the nascent men of science. After all, the mise-en-scène for both sequences is filled with shadows and pools of light—and dead bodies employed to curative ends (the disembodied finger; the corpse robbed from the grave) are central to the work of each. Yet if the film crafts a (weak) comparison between these two pairs of sorcerers, such a comparison is ultimately undercut by the stronger contrast also at issue in the two juxtaposed episodes: the two sorceresses and the young men will all be accused of witchcraft and persecuted by the Catholic church; yet the two young men of medicine, in contrast to the women, seem engaged in an activity that is heroic and visionary. For one thing, the old female sorceress and her assistant gleefully engage in behavior that is both illicit and stereotypically superstitious: the brew they concoct is a love-potion, made with cat feces, pieces of frog, and snake, all designed to sell to the foolish woman who fantasizes about her Catholic monk. They are not represented as cooking up some curative medicine, nor, in this instance, as experimenting with a medicinal compound that might relieve the suffering of the infirm. The two young men, in contrast, seem clearly on a search for knowledge that will provide a host of good things. Furthermore (and in marked contrast to Karna and her assistant’s help in the seduction of a member of the clergy) the two men seem devout, praying to be forgiven for the “sin” of their scientific curiosity just before they cut into the cadaver. In this way, these two men are positioned between the religious authorities that persecute them and the sorceresses deploying “medicine” in the service of illicit sexual ambitions. They cannot be directly mapped onto either, yet they share attributes with both. Karna’s work, on the other hand, is clearly marked as illicit and superstitious, signaled as a monstrosity converging on the grotesque. Seeking “witchcraft” or the “devil’s work” here, as the intertitle puts it, seems understandable. Mistaking the
nascent scientific method of the two young men for witchcraft, however, is clearly more seriously problematic, and the episode thus makes clear the excesses of a Catholic superstition also spoken by a woman (the female neighbor), one that is not entirely unlike the superstition of Karna. It also suggests something about the gender of desire: black magic women desire sex; their male counterparts are after science.

In this complicated juxtaposition, then, Häxan raises some sympathy for the accused, suggesting that the Catholic Church wrongfully condemned the young men for their medical experiments. Yet while we can see the Church’s crackdown on black magic women like Karna as overzealous (they seem harmless oddities more than menacing monsters), their activity is, like that of the alarmed female neighbor, coded as superstitiously (even humorously) excessive. And the woman customer is similarly represented in humorously excessive terms: the black magic elixir works only too well when her gluttonous monastic employer, greedily gulping the potion, immediately chases her around the squalid dinner table, ready for his luscious dessert. The scene is played for laughs, with the lascivious monk in full caricature: corpulent, tonsured, and gluttonous.

This contrasting juxtaposition of the monstrous medieval work of Karna with the forward-looking scientific experiments of the medical body snatchers becomes clearer in view of the film’s final chapter. Here, some 60 minutes later, Christensen returns to the shot of Karna and her customer (the woman who bought the love potion), cross-cutting the scene with what seems to be its modern analogue in a brief set of shots of the modern sorceress: a woman of the 1920s reading tarot cards; another pores over a crystal ball before her female customer. Some things, apparently, never change. Häxan would have us see that many so-called modern women are still in the thrall of
archaic black magic and superstition. And this is set explicitly in contrast with most men—particularly the director who interpolates himself as historian and documentary filmmaker, and the psychiatrist he presents later in the episode. These knowledgeable men stand apart from medieval spaces, ready to observe, explain, and diagnose them.

Häxan, thus, and on its face, positions its modern male knowers—doctors and documentary filmmakers—as epistemologically secure. They seem confident in their superior method and diagnosis, and their treatment of hysterics is largely presented as a great progressive advance upon a monstrous medieval superstition. And yet there is much more to Häxan and its representation of demonic possession than this view suggests. As with the work of Bourneville, Charcot, Freud, and others, Häxan also reveals a sustained fascination with the very medieval monstrosity it purports to overcome: wittingly or not, Christensen’s lurid representations of the devil, of “monstrous” medieval witches and their clerical interrogators, make clear that his film is not a simple celebration of modern objectivity and progress. As Casper Tybjerg puts it, Häxan’s central idea, “that the belief in witches and demons was simply delusional is somewhat undercut by the extraordinary vividness with which Christensen makes the supernatural come to life.” As we see in the next section, Christensen’s own delighted fascination with witches and devils complicates the claims that modern, scientific, male knowers are ever fully outside these medieval, monstrous, and epistemologically unstable spaces.