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

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In a short introduction to the 1941 re-release of Häxan, Christensen addresses the viewer wearing what looks like a white laboratory coat and standing in a room that appears to combine a film set, a doctor’s office, and a classroom. The director discusses Häxan as a film that documents “pictures from the Middle Ages” (“a dark and unenlightened age, both spiritually and intellectually”) with a particular focus on the barbaric treatment of witches by clerical inquisitors. “Doctor”/director Christensen then offers his own taxonomy of medieval witches, four categories described to us in the manner of an ethnographer lecturing his students: there is the “professional,” “the poor old women” (often with a physical disfigurement), “the hysterical woman,” and the “average middle class woman” (who were, he states, wrongfully and often willfully misidentified as witches). Christensen’s lecture, alongside his obvious disdain for what he would have us see as a barbarous medieval religious superstition, privileges the classificatory schemes identified with modern knowledge-systems. Through both his costuming and the mise-en-scène surrounding him, the director casts his introduction as informed by science, medicine, and modern learning. And he explicitly credits Charcot’s work as the key to understanding “past mysteries” surrounding the one type of witch (“the hysterical
woman”). He furthermore deploys discourses of science and medicine in a retroactive reading of the “professional” witch as a “common woman” with a “certain intelligence” and a “knowledge of the human body and the nervous system” that allowed her to make some effective “magic” potions and ointments. This interpretation leads Christensen to conclude that “not everything about magic is nonsense.”

From this introduction, and from earlier interviews with him, it is clear that Christensen hopes his viewers will consider the film that follows as something other than a conventional work of fiction. He positions the film explicitly as non-fiction, and a work with considerable power to teach: Christensen likens the film to a “cultural history lecture in moving pictures” that “throw[s] light on the psychological causes of . . . witch trials.” The director is thus simultaneously cast as historian of science, documentarian, and diagnostician. But for all of Christensen’s attempts to place himself and his film beyond the epistemological problems of “inquisitorial technologies” that tormented the witch hunters and their victims, the film betrays a confusion, an uncertainty, even an incoherence about the issues of knowledge and power circulated around the figure of the witch. In particular, Christensen’s film can’t quite clearly establish the borderline between fact and fantasy.

For example, in the re-release introduction, Christensen discusses silent films as themselves “dream” and “fantasy,” before turning to make the case that his silent production, Häxan, nonetheless operates as a scientifically-informed (and quasi-documentary) account of the past. The confusion implied in this contradiction continues as Christensen immediately reveals that, despite the availability of sound technology at the time of the 1941 re-release, he chose not to add sound to Häxan because of a crucial problem: how to find an appropriate voice for the Devil? Providing a voice for the devil, he argues, could have compromised the

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film’s status as a documented cultural history. The paradoxical suggestion here is that silent (image only) film—a media already linked to “dream” and “fantasy”—lends itself more easily to a realism, at least as far as the devil is concerned. Is this devil fantasy or not? Christensen’s concern for presenting a credible devil—a figure that the film also frequently suggests to be the product of the superstition of the gullibly religious and the hysteria of so-called witches—betrays his own ambivalence not only about the putative “delusions” of religious primitives, but about the status of fantasy as a kind of knowledge best suited to silent film.

Fantasy and realism also combine in Christensen’s own self-presentation. While presenting himself as the scientific documentarian in the 1941 introduction and in the modern sections of Häxan, Christensen also tells us that he “had the pleasure” of playing the role of the devil himself—and in this role he is featured prominently in the quasi-documentary sections that report women’s supposedly hysterical, erotic delusions. By embodying the devil himself Christensen provides a doubled “optical device,” precisely what he needs as filmmaker and historian: he becomes both the optical eye that guides the camera and the demonic figure at which the lens gazes. His demonic appearance visible on screen now enables a new and visually compelling history of Witchcraft through the Ages. Biddick, we recall, linked the visibility of the devil to a set of “inquisitorial technologies,” arguing that, in early modern Europe, the devil operated as a kind of visualizing technique, one “that makes the inquisitor’s [work] visible and therefore something that can be counted as evidence.”60 Christensen’s film literalizes these “inquisitorial technologies,” making his work as a filmmaker visible by occupying the role of the devil himself. With Biddick’s analysis in

mind, we might say that *Häxan* is as much a striking enactment of *Malleus Maleficarum* as it is a documentary of a history of medieval monstrosity displaced by the progressive breakthroughs of science and medicine. The objective, scientific distance that the filmmaker claims via his performance in the introductory lecture included with the 1941 re-release collapses into his own obvious delight in casting himself as the demonic star of the show. Rarely has the repressed returned with such élan.

Not surprisingly, the same boundary-blurring juxtaposition of dispassionate, scientific “fact” alongside spectacular witchy monstrosities is also evident in the work of the modern men of science and medicine, the “inquisitorial technicians” who inspired and informed Christensen’s film. Under the guise of greater scientific and documentary objectivity, for example, Charcot and his collaborators photographed hundreds of physically and mentally afflicted patients at Salpêtrière, and Christensen mimics these clinical photos in the fourth chapter of his film. This section opens with a series of close-up shots displaying images clearly inspired by a belief in the documentary veracity of the camera: an old woman with a humpback (who slowly turns for the camera to reveal her hump); a woman’s head shaking with palsy; a woman with a missing eye and scarred-over eye socket. The documentary film is understood to share in the evidentiary protocols of Charcot’s clinic. The lens of the camera, like the gaze of the doctor, lingers over the figures in an apparent display of clinical distance and objectivity. And the preceding intertitle proclaims the epistemological superiority of medical science, as the title card opines that “during the witchcraft era” poor, old women like these would be condemned as witches for the bodily “traits” they possess. This once again contrasts the cruel and humiliating treatment of poor, old women by medieval clerics with the more humane treatment they receive at the hands of doctors and documentarians. Yet only the intertitles work to convince us of this.
Taken on their own, these clinical shots of the four old women retain elements of the grotesque, the sensational, and the voyeuristic, elements found equally in Christensen’s “medieval” representation of witches as in the illustrations collected by Bourneville and subsequently used not only by Charcot, but also by Christensen in the opening section of his film.

More than once in Häxan, then, Christensen betrays his position and perspective (and that of modern medical men with whom he identifies) as not entirely superior to those inquisitorial members of the medieval Catholic clergy that the film condemns. In fact, many reviewers and commentators at the time the film was released complained that Christensen’s use of close ups to emphasize grotesque scenes of torture was tasteless, sensationalizing, and even insensitive. The film was, on these accounts, banned in the United States and heavily censored elsewhere. It is not at all clear, however, the extent to which Christensen was consciously aware of the possible ironies of these stylistic and formal choices. Take, for instance, the striking juxtaposition of a psychiatric doctor’s treatment of a hysteric and medieval clerical inquisitors’ treatment of a woman accused of witchcraft in the final section of the film. A dissolve moves from a shot of a clerical judge looking on as his assistant uses a pointed prod to find numb spots on the naked back of a female as evidence of where the devil touched her, to a shot of a psychiatric doctor poking the back of his female patient looking for numb spots as verification of her hysterical disorder. Using a dissolve here encourages viewers to draw a strong comparison, as Charcot did earlier, between the medieval and the modern, at least in terms of the recurrent bodily affliction of the woman under examination and the methods used to detect it. But the appearance of a voyeuristic onlooker in the first shot—

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61 Casper Tyberg, DVD Commentary, Häxan (Criterion, 2001).
a figure who, crucially, has no apparent double in the second shot—signals a desire to sharply distinguish the work of the psychiatric doctor from that of the clerical examiners. The doctor is thought to offer comfort, discretion, and privacy for the woman he is examining, whereas the clerics offer only aggressive public humiliation and exposure.

But consider this pair of shots more carefully: salacious (and, perhaps, even sadistic) voyeurism is being encouraged in both, at least for certain male viewers. A naked woman’s back pricked by a man dominates both shots. With no on-screen figure to foreground the male gaze, the second shot attempts to efface the fact that as both examiner and diagnostician, the modern psychiatric doctor’s position actually mimics the positions of the medieval examiner and judge. The male inquisitorial gaze becomes the putatively objective gaze of the doctor, the documentarian, and ultimately the viewer. This attempt to efface a problematic connection between the work of the doctor and the work of the clerical inquisitors continues later in this sequence. Leaving his patient (who has, we are shown, a history of kleptomania) the doctor discusses the situation with her mother. The intertitles inform us that the doctor insists that the mother must admit her daughter to his clinic lest the police become involved. During the conversation between her mother and the doctors, shots are intercut of the patient listening at the door and looking increasingly distressed. An intertitle finally proclaims, “Poor little hysterical witch. In the Middle Ages you were in conflict with the church, now it is with the law.” According to the language of the film, modern law enforcement (not the medical establishment) has taken the place of the medieval church as the controller and oppressor of women—the modern medical profession is set up here as both an advance on the ways of the church and as the mediator and savior of “poor little hysterical witch[es].” But by visualizing the doctor’s examination in a manner that allows for some of the same prurient voyeurism more spectacular-
ly on display in the shot of the medieval inquisition, and by representing the psychiatrist’s tactics (the clinic or the police station) as somewhat coercive, Christensen, consciously or not, opens a space for reading this final section, if not the entire film, as suggesting that modern psychiatric medicine—and his own (quasi)-documentary filmmaking for that matter—repeat compellingly and disturbingly the methods of the (medieval) Catholic church from which it sought to distinguish itself.

This reading certainly stands in confused and conflicted relationship with earlier moments in the film. And yet it is reinforced by the film’s final cross-cutting of two scenes, overlapping a shot of a wealthy woman stepping into a “mildly temperate shower” in a clinic with a shot of three witches being burned at the stake. If the film is unambiguously sure about the progressive sense of history it explicitly claims—a move from “the barbaric methods of medieval times” to the comforting and enlightened methods of modern medicine—then why are viewers left, finally, with the scene of witch burning? Why do the film’s final moments regress diegetically from the modern to the medieval rather than progress from the medieval to the modern? And why does Christensen execute this move with a slow dissolve rather than a direct cut, which would more strikingly separate and juxtapose the two periods? The intertitles argue throughout for a progressive view of history, one that strictly separates the treatment of hysterics in the 1920s from that of witches in the medieval period. Like Christensen’s decision to play the part of the devil himself, this final dissolve might be understood to mark the film’s imaginary and visual unconscious, a subterranean current throughout the film, one that isn’t entirely so sure that the present is all that progressive, particularly where the treatment of women is concerned.

There is, however, one further complication to even this reading of the film’s contradictory representation of the
modern treatment of women: the modern New Woman, represented in this film by the figure of the female pilot. The intertitle that introduces her notes, “The witch no longer flies away on her broom over rooftops.” What follows is a shot of the aviator in front of her plane, waving happily to the camera, followed by a shot of her plane taking off. But which witch, exactly, is this pilot supposed to parallel? She is neither old nor poor, neither superstitious, nor delusional—nor does she possess the conventional, alluring feminine beauty that the film would have us believe could get a woman declared a witch. She seems to be a witch because she has usurped a traditionally male position of power; in this she might be understood as akin to Karna, whose “black magic” was juxtaposed to the activities of the young men making medical experiments early in the film. Complicating matters somewhat is the intertitle that follows the shots of the pilot: “But isn’t superstition still rampant among us?” Perhaps the film is separating the modern, New Woman from the other women in this section, who are marked as superstitious and hysterical, and argues that rather than believing in witches who ride broomsticks, our more progressive age has women pilots who, with the aid of advanced technology, really can fly. Even so, “superstition is still rampant” among other women. However positive a reading of the New Woman this is, it also suggests the weakness of feminine things: the masculinized “modern” woman proves the one exception to her gender; she stands out among a group of superstitious, or hysterical females, women still trapped in a regressive “medieval” past.