INTRODUCTION

What Is Häxan?

Witches always claim that they do not believe in spells, object to the discourse of witchcraft, and appeal to the language of positivism.

— JEANNE FAVRET-SAA DA, Deadly Words (1980)

It is not living life for an art form to serve merely as an echo of something else.

— BENJAMIN CHRISTENSEN, “The Future of Film” (1921)

To think is always to follow the witch’s flight.


The Wild Ride. The Sabbat. Child sacrifice. Diseases, ruin, and torture. The old hag. The kleptomaniac. The modern hysterical. Benjamin Christensen took the threads of phantasm and wove them into a film thesis that would not talk about witches, but would give the witch life. Häxan is a document, an amplified account of the witch insistent on its historical and anthropological qualities, presented through excesses so great that they toyed with his audience’s skepticism as much as their sensitivity. Christensen created an artistic work filled with irrationalities that not only made the witch plausible, but real.

By the time Benjamin Christensen (1879–1959) began filming Häxan in 1921, he had already spent nearly three years conducting research for his film and securing a studio in Copenhagen to accommodate his costuming and elaborate set designs. Häxan was not the Danish actor/director’s first foray into filmmaking, but it would be his most ambitious. The silent film was the most expensive ever produced in Scandinavia.1 The Swedish film production company, Svensk Filmindustri, provided Christensen with funding
(in addition to buying back the director’s own studio facility from creditors) in 1919 to make what Christensen called “a cultural–historical film in seven acts.” With Swedish funding came a Swedish title for the film (the Danish word for “witch” is heksen). The film was shot in Copenhagen in 1921–22, and premiered in Stockholm in September 1922. Despite laborious planning, seemingly endless trouble with censors, and the unprecedented scale of his project, Häxan was only the first of a trilogy imagined (but never realized) by Christensen—the other films in his unfinished series were tentatively titled Helgeninde (Saints [feminine]) and Ånder (Spirits).

Before filming, Christensen obsessively gathered historical and contemporary sources for his “lecture in moving pictures.” His “witch” would be a visual account with direct reference to original writings, art, and literature on witchcraft and witch trials from the Middle Ages through the Reformation and beyond—materials which he considered alongside and through his reading of the modern sciences of neurology, psychiatry, anthropology, and psychology. Taking up an argument made by a long line of eminent scientists—a line dominated by the preeminent psychiatrist and neurologist Jean-Martin Charcot—Christensen intended to make a case for witchcraft as misidentified nervous disease and to highlight the incompatibility of superstition and religious fanaticism with modernity and science. What resulted was something very different; it is this productive gap between intent and outcome that forms the core of what follows in this book.

Perhaps with the exception of a select group of Scandinavian film experts and enthusiasts, Benjamin Christensen is regarded—when regarded at all—as a weirdly interloping figure, much in the way his masterpiece is seen as wild and unmoored from other parts of cinema. Born the last of twelve children to a bourgeois family in Viborg, Denmark, Christensen had been active on the Danish arts and theater scene since 1902, after having trained first in medicine and then as an opera singer. Although highly praised for his singing ability, Christensen developed a nervous illness that resulted in the loss of his voice, a debilitation that led to a brief career in commercial sidelines (most notably the sale and distribution of champagne for a French importer), but this did not end his artistic career. Breaking in as a film actor in 1911, Christensen quickly moved to the director’s chair; his first film, The Mysterious X, also known as Sealed Orders (Det hemmelighedsfulde X), was released in 1914. The Mysterious X foreshadowed his work in Häxan and was
highly praised for its innovative command of cinematic technique; it was also a worry for its producers, as the film ended up costing four times its original budget. *The Mysterious X* was followed in 1916 by *Blind Justice (Hevnens nat)*, which was celebrated for Christensen’s intense performance in the tragic lead role of a man wrongfully jailed and separated from his child.

Christensen demonstrated an impressive command of filmmaking well in advance of his contemporaries. These early successes established for Christensen a reputation as an ambitious, innovative, and commercially reliable director within Scandinavian film circles. Now a proven auteur, Christensen signed with Svenska Biografteatern (renamed Svensk Filmindustri shortly after) in February 1919 and received full artistic control over his projects.\(^3\) Rewarded for his previous efforts with unusually generous support, Christensen found the means to pursue the pioneering, bizarre, and lavish project that is the subject of this book.

Christensen’s post-*Häxan* struggles are hardly surprising in retrospect. After previewing an uncensored print of *Häxan* in 1924, Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer studio head Louis B. Mayer asked, “Is that man crazy or a genius?”\(^4\) Banking on “genius,” Mayer offered Christensen the chance to make films in Hollywood, which Christensen accepted in 1926. As was often the case for European directors who moved to the major American studios in the 1920s, Christensen found that both his creative freedom and, crucially, his monetary resources were severely limited within the Hollywood studio system. After working on three lackluster projects for Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer,\(^5\) Christensen moved to First National Pictures in 1928, directing a number of largely forgettable films, including *The Hawk’s Nest* (1928), *The Haunted House* (1928), *House of Horror* (1929), and with minor praise, *Seven Footprints to Satan* (1929). While at times these films display some of the spark of Christensen’s previous work, they are hardly remarkable and are today remembered only because the director of *Häxan* stood at their helm.

Christensen, in uncharacteristically quiet fashion, left Hollywood behind in 1935 and returned to Denmark. After a period of reassessment,\(^6\) he entered filmmaking again, this time for Nordisk, producing four sound features between 1939 and 1942. While several of the “social debate” films Christensen directed at this time were critical and commercial successes,\(^7\) the failure of his last project, the spy thriller *The Lady with the Light Gloves (Damen med de lyse Handsker)*, brought his filmmaking career to an unceremonious
close. Not even the fêted rerelease of Häxan to theaters in Denmark in 1941 could offset this final, humiliating disaster. After losing studio backing for an adaptation of Tove Ditlevsen’s novel A Child Was Hurt (Man gjorde et Barn fortred), Christensen “retired” to manage the Rio Bio cinema in Copenhagen until his death on April 1, 1959.

Häxan stands as the filmmaker’s lasting contribution to the history of cinema. And yet, it is fair to ask what precisely this masterwork is, because of its troubled and often clandestine status in the years since its initial release, and also because it resists easy characterization. It is typically associated today with the horror genre and simultaneously with proto-documentary or nonfiction film, but neither designation fully captures the film’s unique character. Its reemergence in the middle of the twentieth century as a “cult classic” has only worked to further obscure its place within the history of cinema. Häxan is, perhaps more than any other work in the medium, a singular film, but for reasons that require a detailed look at Christensen’s project that goes beyond the narrow lens of its seemingly strange subject matter. In the following pages we attempt to think alongside Christensen, through his vast library of source materials and within the structural logic of his film thesis, to better appreciate Christensen’s project. And with this appreciation come questions—questions about the relationship between the image and the word, questions about the kind of new and unexpected visual historiography the film seems to produce, and finally, questions about what types of conclusions we are meant to glean from Christensen’s cinematic vision.

Christensen’s vision for Häxan was quite radical. Eschewing typical notions of “drama” and “plot,” the director described his project as follows: “My film has no continuous story, no ‘plot’—it could perhaps best be classified as a cultural history lecture in moving pictures. The goal has not only been to describe the witch trials simply as external events but through cultural history to throw light on the psychological causes of these witch trials by demonstrating their connections with certain abnormalities of the human psyche, abnormalities which have existed throughout history and still exist in our midst.” In unambiguous terms, Christensen expresses his thesis and his method in this short statement prior to the release of the film. Even if this were “all” the film did, it would still represent a significant work within the history of early nonfiction filmmaking. Yet there is so much more in Häxan as Christensen struggles to realize his thesis. As an enthusiastic
scholar and an unusually innovative artist, he puts cinema to work not only in explicating the witch and the hysteric, but along in bringing their shared power to life.

*Häxan* exists as one of the most innovative films to emerge during the silent era. The film also affords a fascinating view into wider debates in the 1920s regarding the use of film in medical and scientific research, the evolving study of religion from historical and anthropological perspectives, and the complex relations between popular culture, artistic expression, and scientific ideas. *Häxan* therefore bears a unique relation to all these areas and yet is not reducible to any one of them. Christensen spent years gathering classical and anthropological sources on sorcery and religion to form the narrative background of *Häxan*. Our study of *Häxan* simultaneously offers an analysis of the scope and influence of Christensen’s remarkable work and an examination of the sources that made *Häxan* a “living” cinematic tableau.

**Future Forms**

Like every other artist, film artists must display in the future their own personality in their works.

Benjamin Christensen, “The Future of Film” (1921)

The formal characteristics of cinema as a medium of expression provide Christensen the means to ultimately exceed the power of his historical source material—to breathe life into his subjects. We argue that this excess makes *Häxan*’s status complicated. While cinema has its own limitations in conveying depth and analysis in relation to reasoned arguments, it is not limited by what James Siegel has called “social[ly] constrained thinking” or a discursive mode of analysis that is, by definition, incapable of comprehending certain situations that lie outside the circle of reason. As Siegel pointedly argues, witchcraft is precisely one of the domains where scientific reasoning finds its limit; this limit is not automatic in regard to cinema, however, and Christensen exploits this fact to the fullest in *Häxan*.9

Most understandings of cinema would attribute this tension between reason and its absence to film’s ability *to bring fantasy to life*. We would
certainly not deny this claim, but it is important to note that Christensen does not conceive Häxan as a fantasy film. The director begins from the position that he will bring errors of belief in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries into our view in order to show just who witches (and later hysterics) really were. Christensen’s strategy is therefore more blunt than those deployed, for instance, in the human sciences, in that it requires the violent, erotic nature of this “error” be emphasized rather than suppressed under the signature of a theory of society as a knowable, structural entity. Jeanne Favret-Saada states it best:

To say that one is studying beliefs about witchcraft is automatically to deny them any truth; it is just a belief, it is not true. So folklorists never ask of country people: “what are they trying to express by means of a witchcraft crisis?,” but only “what are they hiding from us?” They are led on by the idea of some healer’s “secret,” some local trick, and describing it is enough to gratify academic curiosity. So witchcraft is no more than a body of empty recipes (boil an ox heart, prick it with a thousand pins, etc.)? Grant that sort of thing supernatural power? How gullible can you be?  

Christensen’s thesis echoes Favret-Saada’s words loudly; he is concerned (gripped) with abnormalities, events, and causes. The director claims, in other words, to provide a diagnosis, which is precisely the case when measured against the film that resulted. Yet in the details of his chosen form of expression, and through the marked intensity of his personal engagement, Benjamin Christensen does not so much unmask the witch or the hysteric as he brings these figures and the power that animates them to life on the screen. Favret-Saada’s sarcasm highlights the standard objection that bringing a figure to life in this way would, by definition, violate standards of objectivity. In her ethnography of modern witchcraft in the France, the people of Favret-Saada’s village insisted on the ignorance of witchcraft’s power, and yet that power dictated their action and movement—to be “caught” (pris) or bewitched was an awareness and a risk, and as a social scientist deemed “expert” on witchcraft, Favret-Saada was an un-witcher at once caught and catching (contagieux) (concepts we explore in detail in our chapter on the viral character of the witch). Christensen’s answer, like Favret-Saada’s, is that witchcraft is difficult to study because of the inaccessible materiality of the witch to the anthropologist and the believer alike.
The observable epiphenomenon signaling the presence of a witch does not yield any objective, total proof when segmented and scrutinized at an analytic distance. And yet, in the face of the failure by the human scientist to objectively signify her “true” meaning, the witch remains.

In short, bringing the witch to life “objectively” is a contradiction in terms or, to put it another way, nonsense. Christensen therefore only really succeeds in his aspiration by being caught by the power of the witch—caught up in the contest of objectivity, reason, and its necessary and instrumental negation. As we will show in detail in the introductory section to Part I of the book, there is a lengthy tradition in anthropology claiming (even in the same breath as disavowing it) that what lies at the heart of witchcraft’s operations, its resistance, and ultimately the discourses of its depiction and explanation, is precisely this unattributable power.12 The fact that cinema uniquely brings such attributes (among others) to life has led us to pursue an analysis of Christensen’s film as both an anthropological and cinematic object.13 Häxan reveals the logical conundrum Favret-Saada defines. Any claim to knowing the witch implies being caught by her; any claim to objectivity in the face of the witch requires her disavowal as a “real” entity. This operational paradox drives Häxan—and as we shall suggest, it drove efforts to locate and combat witches, and it served to shape similar aporias between sense and distance imbricated in the invention of modern hysteria in the nineteenth century and the “discovery” of the “native’s point of view” by anthropologists in the early twentieth century. Taken in this context, Häxan is perfectly empirical and is able to express the multiplicitous character of the witch, the hysteric, and the institutions that sought to formulate knowledge regarding the real character of such entities.

Häxan: A Film Thesis

The idea of Häxan is relatively straightforward: in light of innovations in psychoanalysis and the biological sciences, Benjamin Christensen advances the thesis that the appearance of witchcraft in Europe during the late medieval and early modern periods was actually due to unrecognized manifestations of clinical hysteria and psychosis. Lacking the scientific knowledge and insight of the present age, the spectacular symptoms of hysteria (most
often identified in women) were misattributed to the power of Satan and the condition of being in league with him. Deftly weaving contemporary scientific analysis and powerfully staged historical reenactments of satanic initiation, possession, and persecution, *Häxan* creatively blends spectacle and argument to make a deeply humanistic call to reevaluate both the understandings of witchcraft in European history and the contemporary treatment of hysteric and the psychologically stricken. In doing so Christensen takes on an anthropological disposition, offering *Häxan* as an expression of his own creative trials and as an empirical visual thesis to be tested in the world.

While we believe the above synopsis to be accurate, it only begins to characterize the complexity, innovation, excessiveness, and influence of *Häxan*. As concerned as the film is with expressing a particular idea regarding the relation between witchcraft and hysteria, it differs from many of the documentaries that came immediately after it, largely due to Christensen’s explicit understanding that any idea communicated in a film must be expressed cinematographically. Quite unlike the sober documentary ideal that John Grierson formulated at the end of the 1920s and elaborated through the next decade via the influential British social documentary movement, *Häxan* does not confl ate expressing “the real” cinematically with simple “communication.” Displaying an affinity with scientists of the mid-nineteenth century (in particular, Jean-Martin Charcot, who himself claimed only “to record images”), Christensen very clearly aspires to “make nature speak.” What distinguishes *Häxan* is the fact that its creator had no expectation whatsoever that the real will simply “speak for itself.” This distinction marks *Häxan*’s unreservedly singular approach toward conveying a particular truth about the world. Christensen’s explicit refusal to either privilege a sober, generalized, and abstracted form of “truthful” visual presentation in *Häxan* or to divest the film of its serious intent despite the excessiveness of its reenactments was one of the primary sources of controversy at the time—and has continued to be an issue for the film in the decades since. Drawing freely and openly from a variety of representational strategies (scientific, historical, avant-garde, literary), *Häxan*’s status as a truthful representation was/is therefore entirely unclear. In a fashion more extreme than other ambiguously “nonfiction” films released at roughly the same time (including *The Battle of the Somme* and *Nanook of the North*), *Häxan* explicitly demonstrated the highly relational and crosscutting influences that characterized “actual”
cinematic documentation and representation of the world. As such, we argue that one lasting effect of Háxan’s reception in the 1920s was to energize a negative, conceptually dogmatic discourse that formed and hardened cinematic taxonomies, particularly the now-“commonsense” division between “documentary” (nonfiction) and “feature” (fictional) films. Christensen’s own intense fascination—his subjectively fraught relationship to the witch he was so keen to objectify—was unacceptable to nonfiction filmmakers at the time. From our vantage point today, these ambiguous, disturbing, nonsensical elements are some of the strongest reasons for revisiting the film and reconsidering its place within the history of nonfiction and documentary cinema.

We conceived the following pages at the interstice of cinema studies, film theory, anthropology, intellectual history, and science studies. While working in this “between,” we nevertheless treat Christensen’s film as a film, purposeful in its artistic crafting, simultaneously image and object. Our approach is to think alongside Christensen as his film unfolds, scene by scene. Therefore, in the book we follow the narrative and structure of the film closely, dividing our text into two parts that retain and closely track the seven “cultural–historical” chapters (and thus the general structure) of the film itself. As the film has, by design, no overarching plot or main characters in the traditional sense, we feel this close, formalist strategy permits a full reading of the work. And as the film is unmistakably “biographical,” that is, impossible to wrench from the events Christensen’s life, these details surrounding its production are discussed. We should be clear—others have studied Háxan in a variety of ways (see specifically the writings of John Ernst, Jytte Jensen, Casper Tybjerg, Arne Lunde, and Jack Stevenson), however none have fully explored the film through the theoretical framework that Christensen attempts to construct regarding the witch’s material, invisible, mobile force. We insist that in order to appreciate Christensen’s vision, it is not enough to think about the film, one must think with it—to allow oneself to be ensnared by the witch, as Christensen indeed was.

We begin Part I by introducing the historical and epistemological contexts within which Benjamin Christensen’s Háxan emerged, specifically engaging the source material that guided the film’s treatment of irrationality and “nonsense” to form a conceptual framework as a necessary starting point for our analysis. Turning to the film itself, Chapters 1 and 2 are concerned
with evidence—words and things, the theological debates that establish the groundwork for Christensen's thesis, and the forms of evidence found in the writings on witchcraft and sorcery at the time used by inquisitors to identify or “name the witch.” In these chapters we explore the cinematic forms evidence takes—the still image, the vignette, the reenactment, the facial close-up—which Christensen molds as visual strategies, making them tactile, twisting and bending the natural order at the level of the profane in order to show the ways in which the witch is realized.

In Chapter 3, we explore the viral character of the witch. In particular, we highlight how witchcraft allegations were given signification in early modern Europe and how the increasingly formalized criteria as the basis of witchcraft evidence tended to multiply and spread, rather than reduce, the number of individuals who were suspected of being in league with the Devil. The epidemic atmosphere of accusation required and was enabled by forms of experimental practice, and it is through the emphasis on experimentation and evidence making that Häxan finds common ground with other nonfiction films and the production of scientific images during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. In this chapter Christensen demonstrates how witch trials were structured as an experimental process whereby inquisitors and laypeople would labor to establish proof of something they could not yet see but knew to be present. Here, Häxan employs the well-established trope of sickness and diagnosis to demonstrate how maleficium was detected and confronted.

In Chapter 4, we highlight the traces of Christensen’s own demonological thinking. It is in this chapter of the film that Christensen begins to draw links between diagnostic strategies for identifying nervous disease and the forms of interrogation used by magistrates outlined in guides such as the infamous Malleus Maleficarum (1487). Christensen takes inventory of the elements that together created the witch stereotype in the early sixteenth century, including the Wild Ride, the pact with the Devil solemnized through sexual intercourse, cannibalism, and the cauldron.

We begin Part II with an introductory section titled “1922,” where we explore activities in other parts of the arts and human sciences around the time of Häxan’s creation that shed light on Christensen’s deep commitment to the power of evidentiary thinking. In Chapter 5 we turn to the concepts and uses of sex, touch, and materiality in order to examine the personalized,
elaborated visualization of the witch stereotype realized by Christensen in the previous chapters of the film. In this chapter, primary accounts such as Johann Weyer’s *De praestigiis daemonium* (1563) serve to reveal the complex nature of sensual explorations of the flesh through masochism and exorcism.

In Chapter 6, the appearance of possession, ecstasy, and “insanity” reveals the reach of demonic influence and introduces the important genres of transfiguration and metamorphosis. In this chapter of the film, Christensen for the first time uses testimonies to further his cinematic thesis. The chapter showcases instruments and techniques of torture in order to highlight the highly charged expression of religious ecstasy and self-mutilation as part of his visual tableau. It is here that Christensen draws from his most inexhaustible resource: the neurological writings of Jean-Martin Charcot and his followers, especially the volumes they produced in the *Bibliothèque diabolique* that explicitly dealt with the relationship between witchcraft and nervous disease.17

In the final moments in his film, Christensen is clearly anxious to draw the threads of his thesis together at the close. He makes the most explicit overtures to show how those who were once identified as witches are now the objects of medical and social concern in modern life. Despite his effort, what results in the conclusion is something quite different. Christensen does not dispense with the witch as an aberration from the past haunting the unfortunate and superstitious in the present, but instead shows the potency of her various forms over time. In our postscript we use the ambiguity of Christensen’s suppositions to consider *Häxan*’s innovation and singularity within the silent period, the historical and social contingencies that surrounded the film, and its place within the history of cinema more generally.

We seek to understand *Häxan* on its own terms. While this sounds straightforward, it is not without some blind alleys and contradictions. Our narrative is woven in and through Christensen’s historical sources and theoretical commitments, as well as into the technical realities and innovations of his filmmaking. We adopt the existing organizational structure of the film in an effort to show what drives Christensen’s thesis, often in ways that perplex as much as inform viewers. While we certainly seek to clarify rather than confuse, we feel it crucial to allow the film and its thesis to stand. It should be obvious by the end that we regard *Häxan* to be vitally important
as a film precisely due to Christensen’s ability to bring the witch to life while retaining the mysterious core that gives her life in the first place. Like Christensen, we cannot avoid being caught a little by the witch, seeking at some level to only pass along the experience of being rapt by this work of cinematic art in a manner proper to our own positions as anthropologists and human scientists.