Realizing the Witch

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In the beginning there is a word. That word is “Häxan.”

Benjamin Christensen’s biblical echo is intentional. From the first frame of Häxan, Christensen is seeking to dismantle the conventional cinematic image. This is an image of a word. In light of what is to follow, the formal conventions of the silent film by definition destabilize any easy relation to the object “Häxan”; it exists multiply. Already reaching into his source material, Christensen borrows Italian inquisitor Zacharia Visconti’s categories of language to show us how the word relates to meaning, expressed in the distance between the thing and the thing signified. Visconti designated this “the language of the voice,” the language proper to humans.¹ Yet, in a silent film there is no obvious voice. Certainly, a printed word occupies the domain of language for Visconti, but for this to be formally consistent the word requires the syntax that would allow the reader to insert her inner voice, the memory of a voice, in order to make this so. “Häxan” appears to lack this syntactic force at this opening instant to be properly a statement.
“Häxan”—the witch—appears to be an impossible object. In Visconti’s schema, this word also appears to speak “the language of the mind.” This is a language the inquisitor reserves for angels, a language resulting in non-statements. From the very beginning, there is no claim made about the witch—no question is asked. The witch is simply announced. In an instant, “Häxan”—the witch—is there and this is all.

“Häxan” is simultaneously a word, an image, and a thing. Benjamin Christensen makes every effort to craft a witch that is real to us. It is a grand ambition. Playing with the ontological fluidity of a cinematic image, the director expresses himself through an image-world that seems entirely of his own creation. “Häxan” in the opening moment of the film is a monad, containing the totality of this world in its most basic element. Not just a word, the Word. Visconti reserved this language, “the language of things” to God alone; yet for scientists and filmmakers, it is the language of things that holds the greatest appeal.

To the World a Witch

Christensen’s first task is to open the world of the witch to the film’s audience. He does this by immediately following the word with a preposition, albeit still denying us the calming language of voice that is proper to us. This preposition, denoting both agency and possession, comes in the form of a face. His face. The commanding, scowling face of the director stares out at the camera. Christensen’s film will make full use of this art of metoposcopy. Dating back to Girolamo Cardano and the Renaissance, metoposcopy defined the operation of reason as the weaving together of images in the mind. In turn, the expression of reasoning was to be found on the face (a proto-cinematic theory of the relation between image and thought if ever there was one). Christensen’s face is one of many revealed; these faces—of the old woman, of the ecstatic nun, of the novice sorceress—will be offered as primary evidence of the power of the witch and the logic of demonological thinking. It is telling that Christensen’s face is the first shown, not in order to place his seal of authorship, but as a way to assert to his audience that it is his argument that resides in the foreground. This is no ordinary film. It is not merely entertainment. Häxan is a thesis.
After this dramatic beginning, Christensen provides some immediate reprieve through a scarcely noticeable addendum to the opening title card: “A presentation from a cultural and historical point of view in seven chapters of moving pictures.” Claiming a reassuring authority, Christensen now signals that he intends to enlighten us in the manner of a professor giving a lecture. The technology of the motion picture is not simply a medium here; in the service of Christensen’s thesis, it is a precise, deliberate method.

The title cards that follow identify the director, the cinematographer, and turn the audience’s attention toward the list of sources for the film distributed as part of the original program (which has been reproduced in the back matter of this volume). Like any respectable scholar, Christensen indexes himself through his sources. Yet his mode of citation is unambiguously rooted in the formal elements of cinema and the image rather than texts, and is ultimately put to different uses from that of the historian or human scientist; this difference will constitute the focus of our own analysis in this chapter, as we move through his textual materials and the production of his images shot by shot. In short, Christensen makes sure the audience
knows that it took three years to research and produce his visual thesis. As with the word and the face, this is stated abruptly for the benefit of context.

More title cards follow, filled with an authoritarian, first-person tenor. Lacking any established provenance for a voice-of-God tone that would only later become standard in the Griersonian documentary mode of the 1930s, Christensen takes it upon himself to invent this voice. The common suggestion that Luis Buñuel first generated this instrumentally impersonal tenor in *Land without Bread* (*Tierra Sin Pan*, 1933) is off by a full decade, ignoring the fact that silent films were anything but silent.³ The director begins in this voice by establishing the witch as a chapter within a much longer constellation of practices, discourses, traditions, and institutions. This is empirically correct, as scholars from Gaston Maspero to Stuart Clark have emphasized in their own studies of the witch.⁴ Among many others, Richard Kieckhefer has demonstrated how the long history of practical natural magic was enfolded into the specificity of European witchcraft in the late Middle Ages.⁵ These findings have only taken root in the historical debates on witchcraft since the 1970s, which Christensen anticipates by some fifty years.

It is at this point in *Häxan* that Christensen gives us an image of the witch. It is a well-known woodcut that first appeared in Ulrich Molitor’s *Von den Unbolden oder Hexen* (1489), at the dawn of the witch hysteria in Europe, depicting two women feeding a boiling cauldron. Many of the stereotypical visual characteristics of the witch are not yet established: the age of the women is difficult to determine and they are far from the withered old crones we see later in Albrecht Dürer and Hans Baldung Grien.⁶ Yet they are unmistakably witches. Their boiling brew evaporates into the air, appearing to cause a storm. Drawing on a trope that would instantly signify “the witch” from Shakespeare’s *Macbeth* to the present, Christensen introduces the viewer to the subjects of his film via a classic example of the *maleficium* that people greatly feared from witches in the early modern period.

Christensen carefully limits what we can see of this image, narrowing the visible edges of the shot into a severe vertical line bisecting the screen. The shot is abrupt, barely onscreen for a few seconds before the intertitles return. Our focus is taken to the statement that primitive men “always” confront the inexplicable with tales of sorcery and evil spirits. This is obvious
hyperbole, but not entirely out of step with the evolving scientific explanations of the time regarding the origins of human society. Echoing E. B. Tylor’s argument that civilization always begins with the imaginative, superstitious responses of humans to a world they do not yet understand, Christensen then shifts to consider the power of belief.7 Häxan at this stage appears to be aspiring to Max Müller’s dream of presenting an objective, empirical “science of religion.”8

Interestingly, the next image takes us to “imaginary creatures” thought to cause disease and pestilence in ancient Persia. A row of six human–animal hybrids confronts the viewer. Christensen immediately divulges his sources for this claim, citing Rawlinson9 and Maspero10 as authorities that trace the European belief in witches back to antiquity. Several shots of monstrous hybrid demons, drawn from Maspero, follow. Christensen is operating in a firmly rationalist mode here, linking these monsters to “naïve notions about the mystery of the universe” held by ancient people.

A re-creation of Egyptian astrological notions of the nature of the world immediately follows. This is the first explicit set to appear in Häxan, depicting (according to Maspero’s information, the intertitle asserts) a world of high mountains, stars dangling from ropes, and a sky supported by strong pillars. A nameless assistant out of frame helpfully draws the viewer’s attention to the important details.

As with any Universalist approach, Christensen traverses time quickly in the presentation of his thesis. No sooner have we glimpsed this scale model of the Egyptian cosmos than we are catapulted into the folklore of early modern Europe. Perhaps the singular feature of the witch craze in Europe is bluntly stated when Christensen informs us that the generalized evil spirits of ancient times are transformed into devils by the fourteenth century. Cutting from one to another, four iconic images of devils particular to the period flash across the screen, the film stock tinted an ominous, rusty red to heighten the effect.

These devils lived at the earth’s core, Christensen tells us, with the earth believed to be a stationary sphere in space surrounded by layers of air and fire. Beyond the fire lay moving celestial bodies, ceaselessly rotating around the earth with the fixed stars far above and, “in the tenth crystal sphere,” sits the Almighty and His angels, keeping the whole celestial system in mo-
tion. Intercut title cards offer explanation before Christensen helpfully reveals a working model of this cosmology, in this case drawn from Hartmann Schedel’s *Liber Chronicarum*, slowly pulling back the iris to reveal the medieval universe that he has described. This moving representation of a terra-centered universe resembles the elaborate wonders found in Baroque *wunderkammer* meticulously assembled by the German elite at the time. It is an effective use of parallel editing to bring this lecture, delivered in text, to life in a visual manner.

While not explicitly designating the scene as such, Christensen is visually marking here what Frances Yates has called, after Cornelius Agrippa’s handbook of the same name, “the occult philosophy” of the Renaissance. The “rediscovery” of a large literature in Greek attributed to the name “Hermes Trimesgistus” by Marsilio Ficino (1433–1499), Giovanni Pico della Mirandola (1463–1494), Henry Cornelius Agrippa (1486–1535), and most powerfully of all, Giordano Bruno (1548–1600), galvanized a critique of the mainstream Church and represented a strong effort on the part of an elite
group of scholars for an energized spirituality rooted in an Egyptian-derived wisdom handed down prior to that of the Old Testament. The core of Renaissance Hermeticism was a deep concern with astrology and the occult sciences, the secret essences of natural things, and the sympathetic magic that was made possible for those who mastered such essences and their relations to one another. In short, the writings of Hermes Trimesgistus progressively provided the foundation for Ficino’s relatively mild natural magic, Pico della Mirandola’s Christian Cabalist, Agrippa’s Christian magus, Tommaso Campanella’s (1568–1639) utopian City of the Sun, and eventually Bruno’s full-blown Hermetic–Cabalist philosophy that sought through the power of astrology and magic to bypass the Church altogether, “operating” in such a way that the skilled magi could reach the Divine directly.

The fact that, starting with Ficino’s Latin translations of the Corpus Hermeticum, Renaissance Hermeticism, while not widespread or necessarily revolutionary, was based on a massive historical error in determining the provenance of the texts is relatively unimportant for Christensen’s thesis here. This does not blunt the historical accuracy of the connection Christensen is making between what was presumed to be “Egyptian” wisdom regarding the nature of the world and what he understood to be a religious tumult that arose out of this challenge in the decades preceding his witch. A full account of the rippling effects of the Hermetic–Cabalist tradition well exceeds Christensen’s purpose here. It is clear, however, that the scrupulously mathematical astrology of Girolamo Cardano (1501–1576) and the rigorously empirical studies of the natural world demanded by Bruno’s attempts to operate as a magus paved the way for the science of Newton and Copernicus and for a new metaphysics to emerge that, over time, would come to be credited as the precursor to the modern scientific self. The visual references to this tradition that flash by in Häxan’s first chapter argues in its own way for the central importance of this tradition well before scholars such as Yates and others revolutionized our historical understanding of this tradition in the middle of the twentieth century. It is also relevant to Christensen’s thesis that the violent refutation of the Renaissance magi was a crucial element in the battle with witches and Satan that demonologists and inquisitors took up in the sixteenth century. Jean Bodin’s De la démonomanie des sorciers (1580) is an excellent example of the relation, as Bodin excoriates key Renaissance figures such as Mirandola and Agrippa as satanic precursors to
the scourge of witchcraft that he felt was plaguing the faithful at the time. While often lost by modern scholars “in a hurry” to get to the details of witchcraft emblematic of demonological texts such as Bodin’s, it is commonly the case that such anti-witch treatises begin with attacks on Renaissance magic and the Hermetic–Cabalist tradition that authorized it.20 The stakes were quite high, as Giordano Bruno’s execution demonstrated. In the sixteenth century, Hermetic magic and Cabalism became associated with the notion of “superstition” for Protestants and Catholics alike; for both reformers and counter-reformers by the close of the century, such superstition was a crime.21 What appears elliptical in its presentation in Häxan is Christensen’s reference to the twisted relationship between “Egyptian antiquity” and the witch trials in sixteenth-century Europe.

Christensen advances the analysis of visual culture in Häxan in the next scene, in an extended set piece devoted to the close examination of a miniature from the twelfth-century manuscript Hortus deliciarum. Tacking back and forth between the intertitle lecture and the careful consideration of details from the painting (again, with offscreen “pointers” to direct our gaze), the gory, elaborated reality of hell produced by the nun/artist Herrad of Landsberg jumps to life onscreen. It is clear that Christensen is overreaching by attributing a largely cohesive image of hell to a period when the nature of hell’s location and “topography” was a subject of fierce theological debate. Although the early image corresponds to well-known later depictions of hell in literature (Dante) and art (Bosch) that filmgoers in 1922 could have reasonably been expected to know, Christensen’s lecture strategically ignores debates and alternate conceptions of damnation that existed in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries in Europe. For example, Sylvester Prierias’s influential De strigmagarum daemonique mirandis22 argued that fallen angels lived in the air, ungrounded and shapeless, manipulating the physicality of this air to act through witches and the wicked on earth.23 While Christensen gives ample attention to the manipulation of air and environment later in the film (largely through the Wild Ride to the Sabbat), his authoritative approach is occasionally strained in close examinations such as the one he offers regarding the Hortus deliciarum miniature.

Despite the serious purpose Christensen asserts for Häxan, he appears to realize that spectacular moments of titillation are also necessary to carry through his visual thesis. This is evident in the following scene where a
working mechanical presentation of hell is revealed—the first real scene of movement in the film. The title cards suggest that Christensen “found” this visual machine dating to antiquity. It is unclear if the billowing smoke that at times completely obscures the actual mechanism onscreen (a rare technical misstep) is part of the workings of the apparatus or Christensen’s own attempt to heighten the fiery terror of the scene. Either way, it works to amplify affect more than further analysis, leaving the title cards to offer a generic explanation that “during the Middle Ages, devils and hell were considered real and constantly feared.”

After lingering on this spectacular hell device, Häxan returns to unfolding the necessary facts of witchcraft to the audience by moving to a shot of a woodcut depicting novice witches signing a pact with the Devil. Correctly following the procedural descriptions of famous witch-hunting texts such as Institoris and Sprenger’s Malleus Maleficarum and Nider’s Formicarius, Christensen emphasizes the essential agency of individuals in making a pact
with Satan. The woodcut shows a novice witch being raised into the air by the Devil, foreshadowing the procedural reenactments that follow later in the film. Returning to his scholastic mode, Christensen notes that these images are drawn from Gustav Freytag’s “A German Life in Pictures.” Two additional woodcuts from this source immediately follow; one depicting a witch milking an axe handle and the other showing a woman bewitching a man’s shoe. While the ability to manipulate and pervert inanimate objects is empirically consistent with the historical record on witchcraft, Christensen offers no additional commentary or explanation of these bizarre images.

Christensen’s visual narrative moves to the second essential element of medieval witchcraft: the Sabbat. Molitor’s Female Witches Acting Together woodcut (ca. 1493) is used to visually illustrate the gathering. Not lingering on the Sabbat itself, the film proceeds to witches acting in groups in order to cast spells on a cow, an entire village, and an unfortunate person who has fallen ill, drawn from Bourneville and Teinturier’s Le sabbat des sorcières.

Throughout this sequence of maleficium, Christensen emphasizes the arcane symbols used to ward off spells and the fact that the sick person is shown naked, a practice “that was habitual in the past.” This vaguely salacious detail is emphasized further in the rapid succession of images finally revealing a group of nude women dancing around a demon at a Sabbat.

Though not explicitly stated as such in the title cards, a palpable sexual dimension has crept into Christensen’s thesis. This element will be prominent throughout the film, depicted here in images of women “sneaking away” to attend Sabbats. Using woodcuts “passed on” to Christensen by “the French doctors Bourneville and Teinturier,” the viewer is then taken through the typical rituals of a “secret satanic rite”—the abjuring of the Church by desecrating the cross, Satan renaming his initiates, and the horrific ceremonial banquet of the Sabbat. Christensen notes that the food for these banquets was often prepared using the corpses of executed prisoners (though in fact it was babies), continuing with an image found in Molitor, reproduced in Le sabbat des sorcières. Saving the best for last, witches (both male and female) are shown kissing Satan’s anus as a sign of devotion. The image is a climax of sorts, and Christensen’s textual accompaniment simply notes the activity without additional embellishment.
Molitor’s *Female Witches Acting Together* as it appears in *Häxan*, film still (Svensk Filminindustri, 1922).

**The Vicissitudes of Truth Telling in Early Cinema**

Christensen’s peculiar strategy in opening *Häxan* becomes apparent as the film progresses. Grounded in the realism of nascent nonfiction filmmaking, the director establishes his authority on the basis of citation. Inverting the typical structure of the monograph where the notes and sources would come last, *Häxan* visually grounds itself in citable evidence from the start. There are historical reasons for why this is done. Although hailed from nearly the moment of its invention as an instrument for “recording reality,” the value of cinema as a vehicle for “telling the truth” about the world was increasingly regarded with suspicion by professional historians and social scientists in the early 1920s. Dominated by the “actuality” film, where the provenance of the images and the “historical tracks” of the observer were often obscured or even erased, purportedly nonfictional visual media were increasingly being judged inadequate to the tasks and protocols of the serious scholar at the
time of *Häxan’s* release. Michael Chanan has summarized this period in the history of nonfictional filmmaking as follows:

When documentary was not yet documentary (but then fiction wasn’t fiction yet either), when the medium was mute and each film ran only a minute or two, moving pictures hardly amounted to more than a miscellany of visual tidbits, which made no demands on literacy and thus spread easily and rapidly far and wide. The world on the screen exerted a magical attraction but remained anecdotal and predominantly iconic. In terms of public discourse, it was practically inarticulate, other than to reinforce already stereotypical images or create some new ones; in short, intensely fascinating but apparently ill-adapted to serving intelligent purposes.

It is not as though scientists, journalists, and others devoted to making nature speak did not give filmmaking a try. In the waning years of the nineteenth century, anthropologists such as Alfred Cort Haddon, Walter Baldwin Spencer, and Frank Gillen were already using the new technology to fashion, with mixed success, proto-ethnographic films. Charles Urban founded the *Unseen World* series in 1903, merging the technologies of the microscope and the cinematograph to attempt to unlock the secrets of nature at its most minuscule level. Films such as *Attack on a China Mission Station* (1900), *Hunting Big Game in Africa* (1907), and *With Captain Scott, R.N., to the South Pole* (1912) sought to bring the immediacy of news headlines to life onscreen. State-sponsored war propaganda generated during the First World War, including *The Battle of the Somme* (1916) and *With Our Heroes at the Somme* (*Bei unseren Helden an der Somme*, 1917) mutated the desire to see far-off contemporary events through visual meaning-making machines that demanded not only attention but belief. The fact that these films nearly always made this demand by staging, as real, reenactments of purportedly real events only added to the early suspicion of cinema’s ability to convey unvarnished, objective facts. Even for films not surreptitiously staged, the reliance on actualities of iconic clichés, giving the viewer what they largely expected to see, proved to be a serious problem for those who wished to convey the complexity and depth of the world and of nature.

The issue, widely discussed well before John Grierson’s proclamation of the “documentary value” of Robert Flaherty’s *Moana* in 1926, concerns the relation between a fragmentary visual artifact drawn “from life” and the
truth value of any such fragments. Ultimately, this issue hinges on mimesis. What sorts of filmmaking practices can felicitously mimic life as such? Grierson’s own elaboration of documentary recognizes this in asserting that the filmmaking form is the “creative treatment of actuality.” Grierson was not the first to conceptualize the matter in this way, as Brian Winston shows that the Polish writer Boleslaw Matuszewski stated the issue in these same terms as early as 1898. Crucially, mimesis was not only permissible for writers such as Matuszewski and early documentarians such as Edward Curtis; it was indispensable in the creation of valuable documentary works. Thus, a film such as Curtis’s *In the Land of the War Canoes* (a.k.a. *In the Land of the Headhunters*, 1914) adhered to prevailing standards of expressing the real not despite its status as a reenactment but because of it. The truth of Kwakiutl (Kwagu’l) life is evident through the spirit of Curtis’s expert cinematic expression of what that life is, just as the reality of war was only truly evident to viewers through gaining a sense of the fighting as re-created in otherwise opposing accounts of the truth in the British and German Somme films.

Later accounts by film historians positing “fact” and “fiction” as oppositional binaries arising out of the earliest approaches to filmmaking were further exemplified by pitting the “realist” Lumière against the “fanciful” Méliès within a crypto-structuralist origin myth that falsely represented what “documentary” meant to pre-Griersonian filmmakers. The “ahuman” witness of the camera is not enough, as this merely produces a blind sight that cannot, on its own, educate, enlighten, or even fully record the real in any ideal manner. This is not the first time that the gap between witnessing and the real has erupted in European history. As Häxan demonstrates, the question of evidence occupied inquisitors and theologians long before the invention of cinema.

Playing on the fact that, while the traces serving as evidence are quite different, a larger ontological issue binds them across the centuries, Christensen takes the unique tack of assuming the role of the art historian in this opening section of the film. This is a risky strategy, particularly given the static nature of the materials on display, but it does allow Christensen to shift the locus of the empirical to the materiality of images accepted as historical. Taking up this position in the opening chapter of Häxan also allows Christensen to have it both ways, in that he can simultaneously confront the viewer directly in the manner of an earlier cinema of attractions while
also preparing viewers for the “diegetic absorption” that was coming to dominate the grammar of cinema in the 1920s.\textsuperscript{36} Given the impossibility of filming witches several centuries “after the fact,” Häxan creates present-day empirical images from artifacts of the time. Yet this analytic position does not guarantee that the images will be “brought to life” in any way. To the contrary, the vivisection of the historical image would tend to produce the same outcome that any vivisection would: death or deformity. Thus the risk, quite evident throughout the first chapter of the film, is that the presumed pastness of these images, their “deadness,” will subvert the appearance of life that distinguishes cinema from other visual forms such as photography, painting, and printmaking. How well Christensen is able to elide this deadness is open to debate; undeniably, many viewers experience the opening minutes of the film as a plodding exhibition of “pictures of pictures.” This reaction notwithstanding, the strategy of “reimaging” is methodological and intentional, an acknowledgment on Christensen’s part that for a very long time “knowledge” in European terms consists first and foremost of “recitations of the known.”\textsuperscript{37}

While the opening chapter of Häxan may test the patience of the viewer, the logic of Christensen’s visual strategy in this section becomes clearer as the film progresses. The director is laying a foundation for what comes next, though he is quite sensitive to the fact that a visual thesis demands a different relation to its sources. Thus, the parade of classic visual works in this opening section provides the ground not only for the arrangement of a thesis but also for the creation of new images, constituting its own evidence for what is at stake. Christensen accomplishes this by continually triangulating between paintings and woodcuts, photographs, and cinematic dramatization. This movement between formally distinct media at times more firmly aligns Christensen with those who affirm that “nonfiction” is a designation determined by techniques of presentation rather than simple content, including art historian Aby Warburg, filmmaker Chris Marker (particularly in reference to his famous 1962 “film of photographs,” La Jetée), and the recent photography of Jeff Wall, Cindy Sherman, and Hiroshi Sugimoto, much more than with his own contemporaries in the cinema of the 1920s.\textsuperscript{38} There are also echoes in Häxan of the creative displacements effected through Soviet montage and the use of fragments of found footage to assemble a singular work, with Esfir Shub’s film The Fall of the Romanov Dynasty (1927)
being the most obvious example.\textsuperscript{39} \textit{Häxan}, not having access to archival footage for obvious reasons, nevertheless re-presents the documents of the visual archive of the witch in a manner recalling the methods of Shub and other Soviet filmmakers such as Dziga Vertov. In formally similar films like Harun Farocki’s \textit{As You See} (\textit{Wie man sieht}, 1986) and \textit{Images of the World and the Inscription of War} (\textit{Bilder der Welt und Inschrift des Krieges}, 1989), the “truth” gained by the reproduction of archival images is unlocked only through their \textit{mobility} in the context of their new use.\textsuperscript{40} As with Farocki, Christensen does not seek to embellish such visual artifacts in citing them, but rather \textit{empties them out}, expressing through their preestablished frame a meaning that was hidden, resisted, or not even invented at the time of their origins. Understood in this way, the disconcerting effect of the opening chapter becomes more plausible, as \textit{Häxan} disrupts what the audience can expect from the film. While the medium of expression is undoubtedly modern and allows for these uniquely moving images, the method Christensen deploys helps to cultivate a position that draws authority from an expertise based on the interweaving of the artistic and the scientific rather than an ideal “scientific self” premised on the polarization of the two.\textsuperscript{41}

\textit{Visual Strategies: The Wild Ride}

Two themes prefigured in this first chapter and foregrounded later in the film deserve treatment in terms of the visual strategies they employ: the Wild Ride and the hysterical. Our claims as to the methodological element of Christensen’s image-making practices become clearer if we temporarily skip ahead to \textit{Häxan}’s depiction of the violent moral disorder of the Wild Ride of the witches to their Sabbats. This scene appears in Chapter 4 of the film and is presented as a visual account of the old woman Maria’s confession to the “crime” of witchcraft. We will fully analyze the density of this scene in the corresponding chapter of the book, but for now we will focus only on Christensen’s complex use of works of art that originally appeared in fifteenth- and sixteenth-century texts by Hans Vintler and Johann Geiler\textsuperscript{42} in the course of creating new cinematic images in \textit{Häxan}.

Christensen’s presentation of the Wild Ride is thrilling by any standard.\textsuperscript{43} Making use of the special effects available to him at the time, the fury and
terror of Häxan’s female wild riders stands out as one of many highlights of the film. By the early sixteenth century, the Wild Ride had become a standard element of both demonological and popular literary accounts of the activities of witches, folding older legends of wild hunters, the restless travels of the dead at night, and tales of the Furious Horde into the standardized script of the Ride. Particularly strong in what is today southern Germany and Switzerland, variations on the myth of the night people retained their durable immediacy deep into the twentieth century. Charles Zika claims that in its various tellings the Furious Horde consisted of “cavalcades of demonic spirits and souls, especially of those who died before their time and enjoyed no peace—soldiers killed in battle, young children, victims of violent acts, and so on.” Folded into the exegesis of the ninth-century text Canon Episcopi, regarding the power of demonic illusion to deceive women into imagining that they could travel great distances at night, often in the company of the goddess Diana, the Wild Ride violently collapsed a multitude of characters and beliefs into a particular time and a singular image of the witch in sixteenth-century Europe. Christensen’s own image of the Ride compels the same collapse, though one that assumes fidelity to empirical evidence in the time of the witch hunts. This is characteristic of Häxan’s cinematic naturalism.

There are many classic examples of images of the Furious Horde and the Wild Ride; two in particular stand out in relation to Häxan’s own visualization of the spectacular event. First is a clear correspondence between a woodcut from Hans Vintler’s Buch der Tugend titled Wild Riders on a Wolf, Goat, Boar, and Stool (1486) and the special effect of Christensen’s image of his witches flying through the air as part of Maria’s confession in Chapter 4. This woodcut reflects its origins as a portrayal of Waldensian heresy (the subject of Vintler’s text), depicting the riders, men, and vehicles as mostly animals. While Christensen’s image substitutes iconic objects such as brooms and cooking forks for beasts and reflects a discourse of the witch (found in Kramer in 1486) as being almost singularly female, it nevertheless takes direct inspiration from the classic woodcut in its perspective, its positioning of the riders in the frame, and the emphasis of the subjects that suppress depth of field against the void of an empty background. Vintler’s woodcut, modified naturalistically to mirror the seemingly unnatural and impossible Wild Ride of the witch, moves in the film.
Christensen also modifies and brings to life characteristic representations of the Furious Horde, a supernatural band that was not originally associated with witchcraft at all. Again, this conjoining of witch image to demonological discourse reflects an empirically verifiable invention in the late medieval period and the Renaissance. In particular, Christensen’s long shots of the witch’s Sabbat, unfolding in the twisted chaos of the deep forest, recalls the woodcut *The Furious Horde* that appears in the 1516 version of Johann Geiler’s *Die Emeis*. As with the echo of the Vintler woodcut in the Wild Ride, the perspective, framing, and composition of the image of the Sabbat in *Häxan* updates and transforms *The Furious Horde*, much as demonologists transformed the meaning of the Horde in the invention of the sixteenth-century witch. Again, Christensen is not only “inspired” by Geiler’s image; he has in his creative activation of the image simultaneously produced an effect that corresponds to the empirical evidence of the witch’s coming into being and exhibited what Charlie Kiel has termed “the oscillating value of the non-fiction.”

Documentary elements can support, contradict, or even wholly become the narrative in early cinema; *Häxan* in this sense is consistent with other contemporary works in the oscillating value of its discrete artifacts.

Visually, *Häxan* offers innovation to the representation of demons that were commonly circulated in woodcuts, broadsheets, and paintings at the time. While the depiction of various lesser demons and fallen angels was quite common, they tended to be rendered as smaller versions of the horned Satan or as hybrid human–animal creatures with each “natural” species being traceable within the complete appearance of the demonic creature (such as in the Geiler woodcut just mentioned). *Häxan* does not simply reproduce these stereotypic images. Instead, Christensen at times broadens his regional frame of reference, drawing on works referring to witchcraft produced outside of German-speaking Europe such as Agostino Veneziano’s painting *The Carcass* (ca. 1518–35) in relation to the Sabbat, or images that portray supernatural creatures that appear in negative sixteenth-century “guides” to pre-Christian Norse myth, particularly some of the woodcuts that accompany Olaus Magnus’s *Historia de Gentibus Septentrionalibus* (in numerous printings from 1555), which appear to provide the inspiration for the “demonic children” Maria claims to have given birth to, revealed in her confession.

Sabbat in *Häxan*, film still (Svensk Filminustri, 1922).
Maria’s confession in Chapter 4 of the film provides additional examples of the breadth of Christensen’s visual assemblage of the witch and her activities. As with the discourse of the witch in the early modern period, figures from antiquity such as Saturn and Circe are also alluded to in the representation of the Sabbat in Häxan. In order to clarify our argument here, it is necessary to briefly analyze Christensen’s composition of a series of brief shots in the Sabbat that refer to sixteenth-century representations of Circe and the link they made between the Roman goddess and witchcraft. In Maria’s confession, Circe is indirectly named as “Satan’s grandmother.”

Images associated with games of chance, gambling, tricks, slight of hand, and illusion were often part of Circe’s repertoire. The logic here was that such games, seemingly minor performative elements of popular tricks and entertainment, were actually rooted in the same demonic power of illusion as more obvious forms of maleficium. Elements of Christensen’s image here appear to be directly referring to a number of well-known visual representations of Circe in the sixteenth century, particularly a woodcut from the workshop of Michael Wolgemut and Wilhelm Pleydenwurff and tentatively attributed to Albrecht Dürer that appeared in the Liber Chronicarum, titled Circe and Her Magical Arts Confronting Ulysses and His Transformed Companions (1493). Although the literal confrontation depicted in this woodcut between Circe and her assistant on the shore and Ulysses and his companions on a boat is absent in Häxan, the flowing beauty of Circe herself is echoed in the film’s image and the table cluttered with instruments of chance and magic directly corresponds to the association Christensen is intending to make here. Other surviving images from the time echo Häxan’s meaning here as well, albeit less directly. These would include the 1473 woodcut Circe with Ulysses and His Men Transformed into Animals from Giovanni Boccaccio’s Buch: Von den hochgeruumenten frauen, and the pen-and-ink drawing The Children of Luna from the Housebook Master or Master of the Amsterdam Cabinet (1480). The hybrid animal–human forms of the demons dancing around the “grandmother,” the woman’s surprisingly young and beautiful appearance, the wind whipping around her, her elevated position in frame as if she is floating in the air (she is actually positioned on a ledge, but this is very difficult to discern until the “grandmother” is shown in medium shot, entering a door), and the array of objects and instruments she wielded all

Close-up of Circe’s instruments in *Häxan*, film still (Svensk Filminindustri, 1922).
point to the refiguring of the mythological figure of Circe as a powerful witch in the service of Satan.49

Visual Strategies: Hysteria

A key component of Häxan’s thesis is that the power of the witch is reanimated in modern times through the signature of hysteria—something foreshadowed in the first section of the film, and reinforced in Christensen’s complex strategy of tacking between painting, photography, and moving cinematic image in Häxan. The “historical framing” in the longue durée of his thesis in the first chapter is carried throughout the entire film. There are a number of scenes in Häxan that activate unconscious associations in the viewer between melancholia, witchcraft, and possession. For example, while none of these paintings is explicitly displayed in Häxan, Christensen appears to have taken direct inspiration for a number of his shots from Lucas Cranach the Elder’s famous Melencolia series of paintings. Produced between 1528 and 1533, these four paintings that depict the supernatural environment haunting a female melancholic bear many similarities with elements that Christensen brings to life in Häxan, including the Wild Ride, terrifyingly unnatural children, and a general sense of sexual and societal disorder swirling around a placid, passive female protagonist.50 It makes sense that Christensen would evoke Cranach as the paintings reflect an empirical strain of the discourse of the witch that highlighted the susceptibility of the melancholic to the Devil’s illusions and hence to witchcraft and especially possession. In the Melencolia series Cranach composes the face of his female subject as a mask, the swirl of activity around her signifying what lay behind her placid, deceptively beautiful façade.

Interestingly, there are several points in Häxan where Christensen self-consciously composes similar faces, simultaneously concealing and revealing the turmoil that lay behind them. In particular, later in the film we find Brother John’s troubled reverie in the face of his repressed, possessing desire for the Young Maiden and the mask/face of the unnamed hysteric that is the subject of most of the film’s concluding chapter. In both cases, Christensen draws a link between these carefully framed faces and possession, a mobile element moving between the pact of the witch and the obsessed state of
the hysteric. Reversing Aby Warburg’s assertion that donning a mask constitutes an active attempt “to wrest something magical from nature through the transformation of the person,” Christensen’s figures invert this polarity by appearing to be worn by the mask.51 Thus, the re-membered face of Cranach’s melancholic in these shots works as a relay between Christensen’s moving images of the witch/hysteric and unseen, but obviously present, iconic images of Charcot’s hysterics. This is entirely consistent with Charcot’s belief that artistic works of demonic possession and melancholia were reliable evidence of hidden and misdiagnosed mental disease. As Avital Ronell has put it, “The scientific imperative, the demand in the nineteenth century for an epistemological reliable inquiry in the nature of things, derives part of its strength from the powerful competition represented by fascination for the freak and the occult, which is always on the way to technology.”52

By formally constructing “the witch” through a cinematic iteration of metoposopic naturalism, Christensen could not agree more. Although left unsaid in the opening chapter, the imperative Ronell cites is progressively etched on the face of the images the director produces, be they explicitly “photographed” icons or evoked as echoes and memories. Using a strategy similar to that famously deployed by his closest filmmaker contemporary, Carl Theodor Dreyer, Christensen will build from the elements of this opening chapter to a complex, expressive interplay of face and tableau in order to bring the witch to life in Häxan.

What Is This Thing?

An image is strong not because it is brutal or fantastic—but because the association of ideas is distant and right.

Pierre Reverdy, “L’image” (1918)

The first chapter of Häxan draws to an abrupt close, its tone descending from the overwhelming affective force of images of explicitly sexual acts with Satan. Christensen actively avoids taxing the audience with any further explanation or lecture. We find images of witches flying (this time “returning home” after a “merry dance”) as a final set of title cards blandly state that
images such as the ones the audience has just seen “are often found on famous witch Sabbath pictures from the Middle Ages and the Renaissance.” Three more dense images then flash in succession (it is unclear if they show Sabbats, hell, or some combination of these on earth) and then a final title card appears and is held several beats longer than those immediately preceding it, having the effect of a door held for a moment before slamming close this chapter of the film.

*Häxan* gets off to an undeniably peculiar start. In our view this is due to the formal, methodological ambition of the work, particularly in regard to the conscious triangulation of ontologically distinct image-objects arising out of paintings/woodcuts, photographs, and cinema. Christensen is trying to make the power of the witch real in a way that seems impossible through a film. Invading the domains of the human sciences, particularly those of the art historian and the ethnographer, Christensen will not remain content to faithfully reproduce traces of the past, devoting the remainder
of Häxan to willing a new life into texts and images. The director’s “atlas of images at work” strategy is strikingly reminiscent of the methodological innovations of Aby Warburg, particularly in relation to Warburg’s unfinished Mnemosyne project. It is worth quoting Philippe Alain-Michaud’s summary of Warburg’s scheme at length:
In *Mnemosyne*, photographic reproduction is not merely illustrative but a general plastic medium to which all figures are reduced before being arranged in the space of a panel. In this way, the viewer participates in two successive transformations of the original material: different types of objects (paintings, reliefs, drawings, architecture, living beings) are unified through photography before being arranged on the panel stretched with black cloth. The panel is in turn rephotographed in order to create a unique image, which will be inserted into a series intended to take the form of a book. The atlas, then, does not limit itself to describing the migrations of images through the history of representation: it reproduces them. In this sense, it is based on a cinematic mode of thought, one that, by using figures, aims at not articulating meaning but at producing effects.54

Heightened by the effect in cinema that *everything in frame appears to be alive*, the strategy will prove to rupture the very perceptions of “deadness” or “pastness” that allows the modern viewer to evade the power of the witch that Christensen will forcefully assert is still with us. The time of the witch,
in all its multiplicity and exigency, will be brought out of the past and into the present by appearing to register the form of life itself on film.\textsuperscript{55} Thus, the alienating distance of both the objects presented in Häxan’s first chapter and the characters they refer to is necessary to begin with, as the task of the film now becomes the closing of this distance between the two-dimensional surfaces of photographs and celluloid and the three-dimensional sense of lived experience. Similar to Robert Wiene’s The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari (1920) in this respect, Häxan shows an affinity with the Cubist art contemporary to its release in the tension it strategically heightens by ignoring or contravening the perceptive “rules” of formally distinct image artifacts.\textsuperscript{56} In later decades, artists and filmmakers such as Gerhard Richter (\textit{Atlas}, 2006) and Jean-Luc Godard (\textit{Histoire[s] du cinema}, 1988–98) have taken up Warburg/Christensen’s methodological logic in their own attempts to link the dimensions of the image with life. Within the arc of this movement in Christensen’s film, the objective knowledge of witchcraft is opened to the perception of otherness in the witch, the demonologist, the hysteric, and ultimately the scientist by way of a visible unity of the senses unique to the director’s method.

“The ethnographic surrealist,” wrote James Clifford, “unlike either the typical art critic or anthropologist of the [1920s], delights in cultural impurities and disturbing syncretisms.”\textsuperscript{57} We are not claiming that Häxan is ethnographic in its formal approach, yet Clifford’s description does echo the links we are drawing here between radical approaches to the image in art and subversive methods deployed in documenting the real that were roughly contemporary to the film.\textsuperscript{58} The transgressive approach to the archive, to classification, and to expression that the film exhibits also is akin to methods deployed in the journal \textit{Documents} (1929–30) nearly a decade later. Edited by Georges Bataille, \textit{Documents} willfully transgressed institutional genres through its “subversive, nearly anarchic documentary attitude,” an attitude that Christensen plainly shared.\textsuperscript{59} What distinguished \textit{Documents} from Warburg’s \textit{Mnemosyne} and Häxan is that the former seizes clichéd objects and then systematically empties them out in the course of its own expressions. Bataille and his contributors sought to defamiliarize the clichés, disturbing the placidly deceptive surface of the mundane in their fragmentary, juxtaposing methods of critique and presentation. In contrast, Warburg and Christensen begin by collecting mythological, figurative gives
Words and Things

seemingly quite distant from the “really” real. Starting at radically different places, the outcomes of these projects converge on the same nodal point—unsettling distances between myth and the everyday that in turn produce expressive works that are themselves quite unsettling. It is obvious in light of this shared methodological aspiration why the surrealists would take inspiration from Häxan, brazenly (and unfairly) advocating Christensen over Dreyer as the Scandinavian filmmaker of note in the 1920s.60

David Bordwell groups Häxan, along with Carl Theodor Dreyer’s Leaves from Satan’s Book (Blade af Satans Bog, 1921), Maurice Tourneur’s Woman (1918), and Fritz Lang’s Destiny (Der müde Tod, 1921) within a tradition of “episode films” in the classical period of silent cinema.61 This is consistent with our argument regarding Christensen’s film, as all of these cinematic works weave together episodic fragments in order to draw parallels and correspondences across situations and characters. More explicitly than the others, however, Häxan also deploys the techniques associated with Warburg’s Mnemosyne and Bataille’s Documents for purposes of affectively emphasizing the dark, chaotic forces that lurk under the smooth surface of the everyday. The parallels Christensen draws are therefore not simply between characters or situations but across domains of sense that cut across time. Thus, the episodic structure of Häxan not only allows characters seemingly out of a dead past to live again, it also draws the phenomenology of the hysteric and the work’s own contemporary time to the surface. Shadowed by the specter of an everyday fractured by mechanized global war, Häxan in turn brings its witches, inquisitors, and hysterics alive in the haunted now of the film’s reception.62

In short, Häxan is promiscuous. It is neither wholly artistic nor scientific. It aspires to seize a quality Ulrich Baer granted only to photography when he wrote, “Films fail to fascinate in the same way as photographs do, because they invite the viewer to speculate on the future—even when irresistibly tempted to do so—only on the level of plot or formal arrangement. Photographs compel the imagination because they remain radically open-ended.”63

Häxan calls Baer’s assertion into question. The opening chapter does not offer a speculation as to the future. It disorients the viewer, leaving her with the insistent, fundamental question, “What is this thing?” It compresses times past and future into a sequence of clichéd images that traverses the
The Realization of the Witch

steep slope between past and future in the form of an event. This is not a plot. Rather, it is a strategy to “compel” the viewer, although we would not limit this compulsion to the imagination alone. In other words, the inability to automatically categorize Häxan emerges out of a formal strategy rooted in an epistemic virtue. In science, such virtues demand that the subject know the world and not necessarily the self; Häxan’s demand is greater in its own way as it demands both.⁶⁴ Thus, while Christensen never backs away from his claim that Häxan offers a truthful examination of the witch that can stand up to the test, he also deploys strategies of evidence making that would have been familiar to the subjects of his film. As Joseph Leo Koerner puts it: “In the later Middle Ages, in practices ranging from persecuting witchcraft to meditating on Christ, techniques were developed to draw distinctions among visual phenomena, differentiating, say, physical objects from fantasies, dreams, and diabolical or artful deceptions. Some of the best testimonies of this sorting operation come from artists. This is not surprising given that image-makers specialized in manipulating one thing (their materials) in order that a viewer should see something else.”⁶⁵

While Christensen’s materials might have been radically different than those of an artist in the late Middle Ages, his aim to manipulate these materials in order to make something invisible visible is consistent with his aims. This description, of course, could also be applied to experimental scientific techniques without much alteration to the stated aims of tests taken under the signature of such disciplines.

For Christensen, objective knowledge itself has been possessed by the uncanny, rendering “imagination” or “reason” alone inadequate to bringing the witch to life, to forcing her to speak to what is already known in her pathological language of diabolic proofs. The witch must be experienced in her own milieu, a satanic biome that we will presently argue is one that Christensen represents as her state in nature. As it moves from the first chapter to the second, Häxan constitutes an extension from the techniques and virtues of Mnemosyne to those of the nature film. In other words, the first chapter of Häxan is the presentation of a series of clichés—visual clichés and stereotypes of the witch, fragments which were most likely already familiar to the viewer. This is hardly a waste of time, however, as these clichés (what Deleuze terms figurative givens) will not only provide the empirical evidence for Christensen’s thesis but will also provide media from which the director
will conjure the power of the witch. It is important to note that Deleuze discusses figurative givens in reference to painting, not cinema; thus, the concept would not seem to readily apply here. Yet we suggest that Christensen is attempting to do something quite paradoxical, which is to release the movement of the painting and the woodcut through the cinematic image. Indeed, as we move through the film, we cumulatively gain the sense that Häxan is a living tableau. This is by no means an accident. The film excels in providing the ground for this sense, possessing the spectator through the immediacy regardless of whether the viewer logically knows that the represented event is already in the distance. This quality sets Häxan apart.