Realizing the Witch
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Published by Fordham University Press

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Sex, Touch, and Materiality

The figurative expressions used in the Bible to convey truths are not lies.
—ST. THOMAS AQUINAS, Summa theologiae (1265–74)

The Devil uses them so because he knows that women love carnal pleasures, and he means to bind them to his allegiance by such agreeable provocations. Moreover, there is nothing which makes a woman more subject and loyal to a man than that he should abuse her body.
—HENRI BOGuet, Discours des sorciers (1610)

Possession is the sadist’s particular form of madness just as the pact is the masochist’s.
—Gilles Deleuze, “Coldness and Cruelty” (1967)

Christensen, having dazzled the viewer with a visualization of the witch stereotype of the sixteenth century in the film’s previous section, moves in his fifth chapter to a seemingly more familiar cinematic approach. Focusing on the interrogation under torture inflicted upon the Young Maiden—herself arrested as a witch after Maria’s vengeful accusation during her trial (because all witches know one another)—the film now highlights the intrigue, manipulation, and underhandedness of her inquisitors. Interspersed within this personalized narrative are Brother John’s struggles with his sexual desire for the Young Maiden. Thus, while this section of the film expands Christensen’s thesis regarding witchcraft and its relation to psychological states, illnesses, and diagnoses, the mode of presentation shifts to accommodate a more explicitly melodramatic style. Although skillfully rendered, it is fair to say that this chapter is not as innovative as the others in regard to its cinematic technique. The importance of this section of the film should not be underestimated, however, as its somewhat more conventional, theatrical
style allows Christensen to carry forward his thesis regarding what the criteria for felicitous evidence had become in the context of the witch craze.

At this stage in the film, the reality of the witch becomes more explicitly multiple and simultaneously subtle. Moving away from a furious presentation of the witch stereotype, the interpersonal melodrama raises questions regarding the power of touch and the status of bodies that are explicitly understood to be *virtual*. Although essential to Christensen’s realist aim in presenting examples of what inquisitors and officials at the time understood to be admissible evidence, the complexity of the virtual body folds back on to the film itself at this juncture. In precise terms, *all* the bodies in Christensen’s *Häxan* are *virtual* bodies. Thus, building from Aquinas’s linked assertions that the parables of the Bible nevertheless teach us something *true* and *virtual* bodies of angels and devils are *real*, *Häxan* self-consciously extends this claim to incorporate its own relation to the empirical. In keeping with the naturalism of *Häxan*’s style, Christensen begins by again populating his shots with clichés, but this time with those of romantic melodrama rather than supernatural proto-horror. And, as before, by the conclusion of this chapter the director will have emptied the screen of these clichés, locking in the relation between sex and materiality that has been established in the previous sections and, in the process, opening the door to a critical engagement regarding the very nature of a “real” body as it is contained in the image. Crucially, in emphasizing the centrality of sex as evidence for inquisitors in conducting witch trials, Christensen moves from his focus on a relationship formed freely through a pact and solemnized through sexual acts to violently totalizing acts of possession.

*Contagion*

Chapter 5 of *Häxan* opens with a series of title cards asserting that Maria’s confession has set off a chain of events that were inevitable during the witch trials of the sixteenth century. As the inquisitors are successful in gathering evidence against the accused, the network of members in the cabal of witches that were to have existed becomes apparent. In all likelihood, Christensen was aware of the controversial character of the roving inquisitional teams that went from town to town in Germany and elsewhere in Europe during
this time; considering the influence of the *Malleus Maleficarum*, he appears to be referring to the violent social disruptions directly caused by its author Henry Institoris (Heinrich Krämer) during his time as an inquisitor in the 1480s.¹ What Christensen does not show the audience is the stout resistance to this kind of persecution and upheaval demonstrated by civil authorities and some members of the clergy. Nor does he explain that often (as Institoris’s case demonstrates) inquisitors were criticized for precisely the blinding zeal and the tactics depicted in the interrogation of the Young Maiden shown in this chapter. Christensen offers a streamlined version of “the witch” in presenting his cinematic thesis; here, the generally effective strategy is occasionally pushed beyond popularization and takes the film into moderately deceptive territory in relation to its subject.

Thus, Christensen’s characterization of the scene of the inquisition is only partially “correct.” The assertion that demonological beliefs were widely accepted within both scholarly and popular discourses is true. From the vantage point of the early twentieth century, this fact appeared to ratify claims that the period was one where naïve superstition circulated as a kind of misguided, yet common, sense. Yet *Häxan* gives no real indication at this point as to how, to paraphrase Alasdair MacIntyre, doubt, skepticism, and opposition from within this style of reasoning is critical to our historical understanding of the period.² As Stuart Clark has shown, by 1600 there were strong efforts to undermine the conceptual basis of witchcraft beliefs, refute the idea that witchcraft could be understood legally to be a crime, and criticize the severe social disruptions and potential injustices likely to occur within the viral movement of the witch hunts. Johann Weyer’s *De praestigiis daemoniorum*³ was a landmark volume in the growing corpus of skeptical writings for its attempt to extend the concept of delusion to all elements of witch confessions. In the coming decades others would follow, from Tanner and Meyfart to Thumm, to name but a few.⁴ It is important to note that none of these works fundamentally challenged the overarching theological logic of demonology or the style of reasoning it upheld. Rather, based on combined appeals to theological conservatism (through a different take on Aristotelian method and harking back to the *Canon Episcopi*) and a proto-humanist concern over the injustices resulting from potentially erroneous confessions, these theorists suggested that witch trials should be resisted because they constituted errors according to the very demonological logic that guided
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their resistance to a transcendent evil. Christensen therefore provides the viewer with an indication of how violent and disruptive witch trials were and clearly marks these events as the material signs of the discourse that authorized them. What the director does not sufficiently demonstrate in Häxan is the diversity of opinion that existed within this discourse and the concrete ways in which elites and everyday people alike resisted the trials and worked to mitigate their often-catastrophic effects.

Bearing this criticism in mind, the chain of events that Häxan shows in this chapter have a historical basis and represent precisely the outcomes that troubled many, even in the sixteenth century. Staying with his case study, Christensen returns the viewer to the Printer’s household, opening with shots of Jesper’s wife, the mother, and the Young Maiden still tending to the stricken man. The magistrates who earlier arrested Maria are shown quietly sneaking in to the house through the kitchen. The mother is in tears; the implication is that they are now grieving the death of the Printer, although the film does not spell this out. The servant Sissal enters the kitchen and is immediately collared by the magistrates. The mother, hearing the commotion, rushes in and is also grabbed by the arresting authorities. Christensen’s editing suggests a repetition of what happened with Maria, using largely the same camera setups as before.

Anna, the Printer’s wife, distraught and grieving, reacts with horror at seeing her mother and trusted servant shackled in the small wooden wagon used to cart Maria off earlier. Christensen emphasizes the horror of the scene by cutting to the faces of the mother and Sissal, heads of wildly flowing hair, their faces contorted by screams. Aghast, she struggles briefly with the men and then rushes back into the bedroom, dropping to her knees with a fervent petition to God. The men having hurried off with their suspects, this prayer is intercut with shots of her sister Anna, having been knocked down in the melee, struggling back to consciousness and attempting to rise. Anna’s face is streaked with the grime of the floor. She stands and then stumbles toward the open door to the street.

Noting that to oppose the accusation of a witch was generally taken as tantamount to being a witch oneself, the title card matter-of-factly states that Anna’s destiny is now “sealed.” Moving to the interior of a torture chamber, Anna is shown suffering the same trials to which she had condemned Maria earlier. Strung up by the wrists, the young woman hangs in the middle of the
chamber as her torturers go about their work. The sense of routine is emphasized, as several of assistants are shown occupied with a game to pass the time. A title card reminds the audience that there are only two people remaining in Jesper the Printer’s “haunted house”: a crying infant appears, sobbing, followed by a glimpse of the child being attended to by a young, frightened girl.

Masochism and Voice

The film [Häxan] is not just scientific and artistic, it is an ethical event.

*Film-Kurier* magazine (1924)

Informing us that “during the witchcraft era it was dangerous to be old and ugly, but it was not safe to be young and pretty either,” Häxan fades in with a shot of cherry blossoms in full bloom. Brother John is staring out to the
courtyard, framed by the edging of the window and the hazy limit of the blossoms. He sighs, closing the wooden shutter as he ducks back inside. This brief sequence shifts the tone of the chapter considerably, to a well-established visual cliché of unrequited love. The expected exposition of precisely who or what is on the youthful friar’s mind is not long in coming, as the young man approaches his older colleague Johannes, explaining that his “thoughts are sinful” and asks for help.

Taken aback, Johannes accompanies his troubled colleague to his cell, regaining his stern composure. In keeping with Häxan’s internal logic, the more experienced priest does not offer to talk things out with the troubled younger man. Instead Johannes simply asks the younger man to “bare his body,” which he does after a brief hesitation. Taking a small whip in hand (which is quite handily hanging on the wall near the door), the priest promises to whip the “sinful body” and “poor soul” of the wavering young man, effecting a kind of “faith healing” in the process. Brother John is now kneeling, stretched out and steadying himself with a small stool. The upright older man begins to deliver on his promise and whips the prostrate Brother John.

Using a similar superimposed special effect to the one deployed earlier with the Wild Ride, Christensen presents a close-up of the younger man’s face, grimacing and crying out, with the medium shot of the two men while the act of whipping taking place. Thrusting his body violently forward with every crack of the whip, Brother John’s facial gestures suggest a combination of ecstasy and pain. The explicit homoeroticism of this scene is impossible to ignore, amplifying not only the earlier gestures in Häxan that hint at the role of repressed desire but also inferring a reinforced sense of the depravity of the inquisitors themselves. The barely disguised insinuations of this series is pushed further when, the whipping quickly at an end, the young man fervently demands, “Oh Brother, why did you stop . . . ?” Johannes regards his tearful, spent younger colleague and tenderly bends down to comfort him.

What has the viewer just witnessed here? This is a more difficult question to answer than it seems. The simplest answer is that Christensen has shown a technique critical to the cultivation of piety and ethical practice for sixteenth-century Christians. Quite unlike modernist, secular reasoning on the status of pain and suffering, for Brother John the experience of pain through techniques we would now associate with torture would have
been essential to the cultivation of a pious self.⁵ Bearing the mark of an Aristotelian logic whereby experience at the outer limit of the self worked to shape the character of the soul within, the disruption of Brother John’s lustful desires would have to be addressed through the production of somatic experiences giving him the tools to resist his own thoughts. Thinking of himself in these terms, it is not surprising that the young priest actively seeks out his older colleague to inflict injury upon him. As Judith Perkins argues regarding early Christian martyrs, openness to pain lay at the heart of what structured individual agency for these believers as Christians.⁶ Brother John would have certainly sought to emulate historical figures revered as saints by the Church. In light of this fact, Brother John can be figured as an active agent seeking to cultivate the pious disposition expected of an instrument of God, a reading that also (unintentionally, we argue) allows the audience a peek at the ethical basis for torture in general, including the torture of suspected witches.

Christensen does not actively deny this particular reading of this scene. This is hardly, however, the interpretation toward which he appears to be cajoling his audience. Instead, the director emphasizes the obvious Freudian echoes the passage conjures, particularly in regard to Freud’s association of ecstatic religious ritual with neurosis and practices of pious bodily mortification with sadomasochism.⁷ But as Niklaus Largier has shown in great detail, despite the inscription of sexuality onto scenes like these, “medieval and early modern sources specifically do not establish any relation between the effects of flagellation on the body and soul and what is now termed ‘sexuality.’”⁸ Nevertheless, it is difficult for the viewer to see anything but a sexual passion on Brother John’s superimposed face as he endures the whipping from his elder. The reciprocity eroticism demands is strongly evident on the older priest’s face as well, indicating an exchange, albeit one where the real passions driving the act are displaced within the violence of the affair. The image is among the most graphic in Häxan and continues to qualify for this appellation even by today’s standards. Fully invested in the overloaded realism of naturalist cinema, Häxan almost achieves the direct truth effect for Freud’s empirical reality that Bill Nichols controversially ascribed much later to ethnographic film and pornography.⁹ It does this via the affect generated through the passion of the character’s gestures and the visibility of Brother John’s open, suggestively vaginal back wounds. Lacking
an intellectual commiseration with the meaning of pain for these priests, Christensen instead engenders an affective sympathy toward them, seeming to anticipate that disapproving censors would not allow him to go any further in giving Freud’s religious, repressed neurotics a cinematic, virtual body. As it turned out for the censors, he had already gone too far with scenes such as this one.  

There are fissures in Freud’s many accounts of sadomasochism, however, and such fissures are evident within the image of sadomasochism in *Häxan* as well. Although one finds varied accounts in Freud’s writings, the popular gloss of his theory asserts that sadism and masochism are rightly coupled into a single term because masochism is a derivation of sadism through a process of reversal. Freud’s claim here is based on duality he proposed between the sex and ego instincts. This chain of psychoanalytic associations appears to neatly parallel with demonological logic that presumed the power of witchcraft as being a reversal of the logic of the sacraments. As we have already noted, this characterization is not precisely accurate, and while Christensen was clearly familiar with the writings of Freud, he was also likely familiar with Richard von Krafft-Ebing’s popular *Psychopathia Sexualis*, which takes masochism and sadism as distinct categories of neuroses (a view even shared by Krafft-Ebing’s critics, such as the physician and writer on human sexuality, Havelock Ellis). Again with the sadomasochist, a simple duality does not quite hold up, as this scene from *Häxan* demonstrates.

The most obvious issue is that *there is no sadism here*. A characteristic element of the libertine in Sade is his elaboration of the demonstrative power of language, his victims figured as unwilling listeners and participants in acts of cruel passion intended to reflect the superior forms of violence to which the demonstration affirms. Brother John is neither an unwilling participant, nor seeking to “learn” anything from his older colleague in submitting to the whip. Rather, the younger priest is faced with a desire that cannot be brought into expression in any other way. While the older man overtly initiates the flogging, Brother John would have certainly known what form of penance would result from his feeble, stumbling confession (“I am having sinful thoughts”). The senior friar is only fulfilling an implied contract of sorts here, providing a vehicle for Brother John to “speak the language of the torturer he is to himself.” Confronted by a sexual desire that is nevertheless undoubtedly his, it is *Brother John* who fully executes the
function of the torturer here, demanding to express himself in a way that
not only results in his own obligatory flagellation but also the torture and
eventual death of his object of desire, the Young Maiden. Thus, the young
friar in Häxan, far from being the naïve victim Christensen figures him
as, exists as an agent more consistent with characters in Leopold von
Sacher-Masoch’s pornological fiction than Freud’s descriptive typologies.
The character of Brother John ultimately confirms the indivisibility of the
masochist that was intolerable to Freud’s science.

Christensen is also playing a somewhat dangerous double game in this
scene in its expression of a barely concealed homoerotic desire between the
two priests. Scandinavian film in general at this time exhibited a complex
relation in its portrayal of same-sex desire that was ahead of its time.
Depictions of this desire and the intricate affairs that they often generate
in a wider milieu of repression and disapproval are dealt with openly and in
a manner that, while still often referencing clichés, nevertheless displayed a
compassionate realism when compared to other contemporary examples. Christensen would soon play such a role himself in Dreyer’s *Mikaël* (1924). In bringing a convincing depth to the character of painter Claude Zoret, in love with the titular male model, Christensen’s sympathetic acting is a real accomplishment that resists the lisping mawkishness inflicted on nearly every gay male character in cinema right to the end of the twentieth century.

The scene of Brother John’s submission to the whip is not markedly different in this respect, but it does conjure a set of associations unlike those arising from Christensen’s role in *Mikaël*, notwithstanding their formal similarities in the use of compositional techniques associated with tableaux and faces discussed earlier. First, the explicitly somatic focus strongly indexes the scene as solely one of repressed sexual desire; we do not know the characters in the scene well enough to intuit deeper emotions they may have toward one another. In light of our general argument here, locking in the primacy of sex as evidence for the real is internally consistent. However, it is also somewhat dangerous, as the implied erotic dimension of this scene is read in the context of Christensen’s overt message that the priests are hypocrites and zealots in their pursuit of a strict, moralizing denial of sexuality. As the image surely must be read in the context of its time, it is very difficult to avoid the conclusion that the homoeroticism at this point in the film is being figured as a manifestation of a repressive illness and to some degree serves the purpose of amplifying the Freudian sense that the priests are neurotics—ideas and a descriptive language of which Christensen was keenly aware. Reacting to these signs with either “pity” or “disgust” for the priests is left entirely to the viewer.

The homoerotic coding of the scene can also conjure more obscure associations. If we extend the reading of this repressed same-sex desire on the part of priests, the logic of the scene leads us back to some of the most unpleasant associations that exist in the demonological literature. In particular, the collapsing of the witch, the Jew, and the homosexual into the singular category of the sodomite is brought to mind. This chain of associations was not universal within the demonological writings, but it was not uncommon either. The most explicit articulation of this synthesized category is found in Manuel do Valle De Moura’s *De incantationibus seu ensalmis*, published in Lisbon in 1620 and beautifully analyzed more recently by Armando Maggi. Reflecting the particularly virulent anti-Semitism of the Catholic
Church in Portugal, De Moura designates the term “sodomite” to include any individual person who is understood to have given himself or herself over to Satan. This would include the full list above and was flexible enough to potentially include others, such as the supposed cannibals of the New World. Significantly, De Moura’s focus was on the assumed perversion of Catholic idioms evident in the language and practices of so-called sodomites. In other words, the ultimate crime of the sodomite was the perverted inflexibility of what De Moura designated as their ensalmus, a concept used to denote any invocative act.17

Haunted by the specter of such a ferocious concept, Christensen’s insinuated linking of the priests with the sodomite collapses the numerous discrete contexts latent in the latter’s potential meaning. The lashing of Brother John is itself figured as an ensalmus: the insinuation of homoeroticism would likely evoke sodomy directly in the mind of the viewer. Buried deep within this association is a discourse that would link the sodomite to the hypocrisy and heresy of giving oneself over to a false law, denying the idioms of “freedom” and “morality” reserved for the proper language of Christianity. Speaking in the name of science, Christensen joins the hypocritical priests with the witch under the sign of superstition. The relay that acts to abut these subjects in this particular scene, once held as absolute opposites, is the invocation of sodomy in the course of executing what for the director would have been an infelicitous, false expression of the truth of the world and a “proper” ethics in the face of “objective,” scientific reality.

The Possessing Touch of the Other

Faith is still a matter of passion, of affect and nothing else.

Gilles Deleuze, Cinema 1 (1986)

Perhaps we have assumed something here, as careful viewers will note the scene of Brother John’s lashing implies the presence of the witch but she does not actually appear. Thus, the chain of associations that we have suggested is not yet complete. As the next scene shows, Christensen does not wait long to complete this chain. Moving forward from Brother John’s quarters, Häxan cuts to Father Henrik poring over a manuscript. Johannes enters, informing
the senior inquisitor that Brother John is spellbound and that a witch has been tempting him in his cell. Father Henrik is, of course, shocked by this news. Moving to a visualized sequence showing the Young Maiden’s tempting “visitation,” Brother John is shown in close-up, eyes open wide in fear. Cut to a close-up of the Young Maiden, her eyelids heavy, her lips barely open in a look of erotic expectation. Tears run down her cheeks, but her facial gesture is explicitly one of desire. Appearing adjacent to the previous scene of highly charged homoeroticism, the Young Maiden’s “visitation” of Brother John in his cell functions as a suggestive visual rhyme with the inexperienced friar’s earlier agony/ecstasy. The inquisitor’s cell is clearly a space of suppressed, dangerous eroticism in Häxan.

Still in the facial close-up, the Young Maiden coquettishly looks down. She and Brother John are now shown in a medium shot, the young man backing away from the forbidden, dangerous woman. He suddenly cowers down at the table where this confrontation is taking place. The Maiden touches him, but she slowly fades from the shot, a special effect implying that this is all in Brother John’s mind. Christensen returns the viewer to the prurient older men discussing the young man’s bewitchment. “And she has grabbed him by the wrist,” Father Henrik is told, this information offered as apparent proof of the Young Maiden’s lustful, malefic power over their inexperienced colleague. They go to Brother John, shown gingerly lifting his cassock over his bloody, ravaged back. He is worried that Johannes has given the Maiden away, a concern that draws a sharp rebuke from Father Henrik, entering with a formal accusation to be signed. Threatened with the charge of being in league with a witch, Brother John reluctantly swears out the accusation, the intense pressure he feels coming to life through a series of quick reaction shots showing the angry intensity of his superiors. The Young Maiden’s fate is, indeed, sealed.

Viewed in an era after the appearance of ahistorical witch polemics by neo-pagans such as Mary Daly and Starhawk, it would be easy for today’s viewer to interpret the meaning of this scene as a display of the blunt misogyny of the Church that would have ultimately caused the witch craze. As convenient as such a reading is within the identity politics of the present, it is undeniably false in light of what Häxan shows in the scene and in the context of the historical record. The indignities of the Malleus Maleficarum in regard to women are well known and useful to such a polemical reading.
Echoing Jim Sharpe, we claim that it requires more than just this sense of indignation to make such an interpretation ring true.\textsuperscript{20} It is hardly accurate to assert that the \textit{Malleus} was universally used as an authoritative source during the time of the witch trials and, as we have shown, the famous manuscript is not even the primary source for much of what \textit{Häxan} depicts.\textsuperscript{21} Furthermore, the scene shows what the \textit{Malleus} and many other demonological texts \textit{actually} claimed was the causal source of witchcraft. The cause was not women; rather, the source was \textit{carnal lust}.\textsuperscript{22} Within the logic of the witch, women were “by their nature” much more predisposed to giving in to “inordinate affections and passions,” hence their related susceptibility to the power of the Devil. As odious as such logic is, it must be said that this is not the same thing as hating women. Christensen, therefore, does not show inquisitors who merely despise women. If anything, their own carnal desire for these women overwhelms the priests to the point that they pathologically fear them, displacing their own sensed alterity to themselves within this generalized feminine image. While the stereotype of the lustful, rebellious, rancorous woman was wildly inaccurate in its clumsy universalization and certainly harmful in an environment of deadly suspicion, it is a fact that demonologists showed little interest in exploring it as such, as a primary agent of witchcraft. Therefore, the focus in these scenes in the film is squarely on \textit{desire} rather than \textit{gender}, which is both conceptually consistent with the Freudian inspiration within Christensen’s thesis and empirically sound in relation to the historical record itself. Much like Dreyer’s \textit{Day of Wrath} (\textit{Vredens dag}, 1943), where the desires of a young woman unhappily married to a much older pastor spark suspicion and jealously, sexuality itself is the relay between the natural and supernatural—a relay that more completely implicates women but does not exclusively focus on them.\textsuperscript{23} Paraphrasing Katharine Rogers, it is obvious that \textit{Häxan} does not display wicked women; rather, it shows witches.\textsuperscript{24}

There is something else in this scene. Strangely, the report given to Father Henrik does not state that Brother John is having “sinful thoughts” (although this is what he originally confessed), but instead claims “the witch visits him in his cell.” Taken literally, the cinematic grammar of the sequence, seems at first to contradict the older friar’s claim that the witch is anywhere near Brother John’s cell, as Christensen deploys the special effect of having the Young Maiden fade from the scene like a menace from a dream. This effect
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was a well-established sign by 1922 that the spectator was viewing a hallucinated image. The audience is hardly confused by what they are seeing; interestingly, Brother John has come to the same conclusion and does not directly claim that the Maiden “herself” is anywhere near his cell. Why, then, does Johannes appear to either misstate or exaggerate the character of his younger colleague’s torment?

Of course, this question presumes an agreement between the character, the filmmaker, and the viewer as to what the “actual” character of Brother John’s torment is. In short, each subject position must hold that the image of a dream or hallucination is not real for the question to be a valid one. By now, however, it must be clear that there is a pronounced ontological arrhythmia that exists between characters, viewers, and the director in Häxan. In her recent study of Christian materiality in late medieval Europe Caroline Walker Bynum provides an example of what Christensen is attempting to synchronize in the film. She demonstrates that a theory of the image that would expel it from the domain of the materially real is inadequate to the task of grasping this materiality. Rather, we must understand how the image, even an image known to originate in the mind, was not only real but alive. In making this claim, it should be abundantly clear that we are not arguing that these Christians could not distinguish between the content of their dreams and other forms of reality and life. To the contrary, the deep fissures that existed within the discourse of the witch demonstrate that there was a great deal of sophistication in the various designations of not only what was real, but also how something was real. Christian materiality in late medieval Europe, while not precisely our materiality, was nevertheless quite concerned with determining difference and ascribing designations to discrete things.

It is obvious that the inquisitors are well aware that Brother John is referring to an image that is tormenting him. This image bears a direct relation to the body and self of the Young Maiden in that it originates in her and is projected outward, presumably through the supernatural relay of the power she supposedly possesses as a result of her pact with the Devil. The girl’s visitations to Brother John serve as concrete proof of Satan’s activity, as the Maiden could not do this alone. Crucially, the Devil could not by himself reach a pious instrument of God in such a definitive way. Without the witch, Satan can only annoy, tempt, and deceive. The witch extends the
scope of Satan’s power on earth by lending her fleshy body to his virtual one, a promise literalized through their obscene sexual intercourse. The Devil and the witch depend on each other here, as they together allow each other to unnaturally extend their respective material forms. In this specific instance, this is twice that she has unlawfully touched Brother John.

This is also a very Protestant way of understanding an image, particularly in reference to the relation between an image in thought and things in the world. Although Christensen is clearly depicting Catholic characters, the emphasis he places on portraying a concrete link between what Luther termed “an image of the heart” and the reality of the divine or supernatural beings and forces that correspond to them, bears a close resemblance to early Reformation debates over the empirical relationship between an image and the inner message of Scripture itself. Luther is referring directly to the image of Christ in pictures inscribed in the heart, seeking to find a middle ground between iconoclasts such as Andreas von Karlstadt and Catholic “idolaters” in formulating a theory of the image. It stands to reason, however, that the danger of malevolent images of the heart would likewise correspond to their diabolic counterparts, making the image of the Young Maiden in Brother John’s heart all the more dangerous and real. Christensen’s scene therefore reflects (most likely unconsciously) the fierce debates that took place within early Protestantism regarding the character of what a supernaturally charged image actually is.

The Young Maiden’s erotic presence before Brother John is not, under these conditions, simply a fantasy originating within the mind of the young priest, but a torment invading his very self—a projection from the outside. In this form, the Maiden is not a figment of Brother John’s imagination, but an image that can touch him. The form of this logic is consistent with the rationality Bynum convincingly outlines regarding the ontological status of icons, relics, and other supernaturally charged images. Such special images simultaneously are and are not what they visualize within this style of reasoning, without contradiction.

Easily unnoticed in the erotic swirl of the scene is the fact that what is happening has shifted somewhat. Häxan is no longer displaying to the viewer the terrible events of the Sabbat or the tragic outcomes of maleficium enacted through witchcraft. It shows us the ability of a “fallen” woman to penetrate the soul of a pious priest. She has truly gotten under his skin, a
fact brought home to the viewer through the young friar’s masochistic demand that he be flayed open with the whip. His colleague opens wounds but does not drive her out. “Now my soul will surely be damned,” Brother John laments. But is this witchcraft? The viewer is led to unwittingly carry over this interpretation, but the inquisitors do not actually designate the act of the Young Maiden’s visitation as witchcraft per se. Her spectral presence does provide them with material evidence that she is a witch, but this is due to the originary source of her power and not characteristic of the act itself. In short, Häxan has shifted its focus from an account of witchcraft to a phenomenon more precisely defined as possession.

This shift is significant. In the increasingly mobile exchanges between bodies virtual and substantial, the power hitherto ascribed to the witch is starting to become detached from her. The danger evident in this fluidity is no longer limited to that of the misfortunes resulting from maleficium but now also includes losing oneself to another. Witches are lost to the Devil, but the logic of the pact demands that they do this freely, acting in their own
name. Häxan is in different territory now. The Young Maiden has not “bewitched” Brother John, despite what the senior friar reported to Father Henrik; rather, she has touched him. Taken in light of a theory of images dominated by holy iconography that demanded to be touched, it is not a leap for Brother John’s colleagues to take his visions as visitations and the Maiden’s sexual aggressiveness in this virtual form to be concrete evidence of her status as a witch. In a certain sense, the “realness” of the Young Maiden for Brother John is not radically dissimilar from her status in relation to the viewer, as the object of a film viewer’s gaze is in the end received as a “flesh and blood reality” as well.29

At its most concrete, every body in Häxan has the relation of the Young Maiden’s-body-to-Brother-John or Satan’s-body-to-Maria. They are bodies simultaneously flesh and image. The formal elements of Christensen’s rendering of the scene between the voracious virtual body of the Maiden and the cloistered boy (Brother John is, in the end, nothing more than a “boy” in this sequence) rupture whatever hope the audience may have had that Häxan would somehow either entertain or inform them in any unproblematic way. Yes, the Young Maiden’s visit to Brother John is marked as a hallucination. Yet the affect the scene produces, mainly through the erotic certainty of the Maiden’s tightly framed face, is that she is there. She is staring not at Brother John but at us, reversing the cutting, surgical gaze Walter Benjamin attributed to the camera.30 How, under the demand of hard objectivity, can any film show “reality” within these parameters? There is never more evidence of Christensen being himself “caught” by the witch than the Young Maiden’s close-up in this scene—it qualifies as truthful under precisely the same ontological assumptions on display as a problem in the film. In rendering the Maiden so erotically desirable and so close, Christensen has his audience right where he wants them. Torn between the belief in a film image’s “illusory” status and the sense that what one is seeing is as real as anything else, the audience can only retrospectively and discursively put a distance between itself and the image before it. An avowed pact with the Devil being largely impossible by 1922, Christensen nevertheless demonstrates the power of the witch that has ensnared him through an instrument more obviously available to him—possession.

The shift from an emphasis on those who have made pacts that give them voice to individuals who are potentially victims of invading, unwelcome
others returns us to our earlier discussion of how Christensen has innovated and subverted (most likely unintentionally) Freud’s notion of the “sadomasochist.” Christensen has been leading the viewer to conclude that the authorities that conducted witch trials were violent oppressors in relation to the accused women. More directly, their sadism in pursuing witches is essential to the audience’s sympathy for the “objective” diagnosis of what “really” happened later. Yet, in their own insecure efforts to demonstrate, to educate, and to persuade, these inquisitors do not meet the definition of the sadist at all. The sadist would not attempt to justify or demonstrate the felicity of his actions; he is certain that any reasoning is a form of violence and comes out unequivocally on the side of that violence.\(^{31}\) The entire discourse of the witch undermines any such certainty. In fact, if anything the witches and (particularly in the case of Brother John) even the inquisitors tend to more closely resemble the masochist; this is a serious problem for Christensen’s thesis. He partially resolves the issue in this chapter of the film

The possessor in Häxan, film still (Svensk Filmindustri, 1922).
by attempting to forge a visual equivalence between the witch and the possessed. While blatantly violating established demonological categories, the narrative strategy works in that the possessed more logically occupy the status that *Häxan* requires.

There is an unintended consequence to twisting demonological categories as a narrative strategy in the film. In doing so, Christensen has shifted the power of the witch back to the Devil himself. Satan is, after all, the quintessential sadist. The move appears fluid within the logic of the film, yet it has no actual place in the discourse that Christensen sought as a resource. Like the devils demonstrating their power through their possessed victims, Christensen is now seizing the *idiom* of science in order to express a truth through his own style of reasoning. When we move to the depictions of obsession, hysteria, and illness in the final two chapters of the film, it is critical to bear in mind that the filmmaker has by this time ventured so close to making a case for witches and witchcraft that he can only depict her through images and language already possessed by her power. Christensen, at this point in film, must rely on the witch (her reality, her presence) to make his case. The tragedy of this section brings a logical coherence to *Häxan* that its *Mnemosyne*-like style in earlier chapters had resisted. Whereas *Häxan* previously identified who or what the witch was, now the film identifies *with* her. The coherence Christensen creates at this point resonates more precisely with the world of the witch than with the filmmaker’s claim at the outset, to dissect, analyze, and dismiss the witch as an in-credible phantasm. Now it would seem the witch is an instrument of knowledge and the expression of supernatural reality.

*The Late Arrival of the Sadist*

The Young Maiden’s danger to the inquisitors is obvious from their point of view. Having provided some context for their vicious response to her, Christensen moves to showing the torment of the Maiden’s interrogation. Introducing more elements of the witch stereotype, she is confronted with the awe of the Divine through His instruments in the Church. Unable to cry on cue (a sure sign of being a witch), and having endured the tortures depicted previously (the sequencing here implying that the Maiden was
under arrest for witchcraft well before Brother John’s forced accusation), Father Henrik declares that these “typical” strategies of eliciting a confession will not work on her. The remainder of this section is taken up with the unusual lengths to which the inquisitors will go in order to gain the confession upon which they vitally depend.

In short, the inquisitors plan to entrap the Young Maiden, offering her freedom in exchange for knowledge of the “beautiful art” of weather magic, something well established long before the advent of the witch. In a variation of the “good cop/bad cop” routine deployed earlier in the interrogation of Maria, Johannes frees the Maiden from the stocks in which she had been imprisoned. The title cards imply that she has been in this excruciatingly painful device for days, and she is shown to be unconscious from the pain of the ordeal. Liberated from the stocks and brought around with a splash of water, the Maiden is dramatically offered her freedom by the friar. Father Henrik and his subordinates spy on the scene out of sight. The Young Maiden is no fool; she accuses the monk of “taunting” her and flatly refuses to show him how to “make thunder” with the bucket of water that was just used to bring her back to life. Brother John has also slipped into the dungeon and watches this scene, curious and anxious, from a different concealed position than the one used by the others. Father Henrik, given the signal from Johannes that they must intensify the pressure, leads the team of inquisitors, magistrates, and guards in a pantomime of picking up and leaving town, lending credence to the offer of freedom. The Maiden, struggling physically against the monk as he tries to force her over to the water, still refuses, claiming no knowledge of weather magic.

Intensifying things further, the malicious inquisitor remarks that Anna and Jesper’s child is now alone in the world and will die unless the Young Maiden is able to gain her freedom. Christensen’s familiar technique of sequencing matching shots manifests the terrible intensity of this exchange. The Maiden, bruised and brutalized, her hair cut short, and obviously terrified, is broken at last. Father Henrik and his entourage, now inside, produce the child for the Maiden to see (and roust the objecting Brother John, now discovered). The Young Maiden, unable to bear this any longer, tells a story relayed to her by an itinerant stonemason regarding how dipping one’s hands in the water can produce thunder. She does not directly admit witchcraft or claim to have ever used this technique herself. Before she can
even demonstrate, however, Father Henrik triumphantly makes himself known, shouting that the Young Maiden will burn for being a “hardened witch.” The gravity of what has happened sinks in and the Maiden whirls around to strangle Johannes, who has so explicitly lied to her. She is restrained by the guards and bundled off, her “confession” now complete.

The arc of the Young Maiden’s interrogation here is different from what we witnessed earlier with the torture of Maria. The Maiden refuses to give voice to the scripted pact the inquisitors expect her to ratify, which distinguishes her from the old woman who, after a “minimum” of bodily trial (if we can crudely put it that way) almost eagerly takes up the formulaic libretto of the lethal opera in which she found herself cast. The cheap tricks and almost laughable standard of evidence displayed by the interrogation of the Maiden reflects the profound shift in Häxan described earlier. The sadistic inquisitor has now arrived, but Christensen has not yet firmly established the ground for the character. Briefly slipping into a rudimentary understanding of Freud and the witch craze alike, it is clear that Christensen will have
to do better than this to forcefully bring Häxan to its conclusion. Thank-
fully, it does not take the director long to regain his cinematic footing within
the shifting terrain of the film.

The film’s chapter ends with the broad statement that “the witch madness,
like a spiritual plague, ravages wherever these judges go.” Interspersed be-
tween shots of the full inquisitorial party packing up and moving on (almost
identical to the ruse for the Maiden’s benefit), Christensen claims that over
eight million women were murdered in the course of the witch craze. This is
a wildly erroneous figure that was propagated by early historians of witch-
craft such as Étienne Léon de Lamothe-Langon and Joseph Hansen, and the
director uncritically reproduces the number here. Christensen could not have
known that Lamothe-Langon’s figure was based on a fabrication, but the
ridiculous inaccuracy of the claim is still jarring.34 Regaining some sense of
where Häxan is going, and putting this fancifully inflated inaccuracy aside,
the chapter draws to an elegiac close, with the inquisitors crowding through
the gates of the town, moving on to their next site and their next victims.
The sight of the inquisitors marching through the town gate cannot help but recall the fresh memory of invading troops familiar to European audiences in 1922. Anton Kaes has argued that the Great War deprived cinema of its ability to move freely, an observation that holds in light of our earlier discussion of Christensen’s largely immobile camera in Häxan.\textsuperscript{35} This restriction of mobility has another sense in this scene, however, in that the space reserved for Satan and his accomplices is increasingly being colonized by institutions. As in Dreyer’s Day of Wrath, the Church is identified with a coldly dispassionate law, victorious in its repressiveness and institutional contagion.\textsuperscript{36} Now free of their cloistered spaces, the shock troops of God and the Church annex the wondrous space of the demonic, appropriating the satanic power of the witch for its own ends. It is startling to suddenly see the priests outside, moving about in their endless search for the witch. For Christensen’s purposes in Häxan, the scene is a particularly effective one in giving fuller expression to the phenomenon of possession that overtakes the witch in the following section of the film. It is this dynamic of possession to which we must now turn.