

Troubling Portrayals: Benjamin Christensen's *Häxan* (1922), Documentary Form, and the Question of Histor(iography)

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Abstract: This essay discusses the 1922 Benjamin Christensen film, *Häxan* (or, *Witchcraft through the Ages*), and ways in which it complicates genre, narrative, and historical representation. Combining historical facts backed by real artefacts from the era with narrative reenactments inserted throughout, *Häxan* blurs the lines between reality and fiction, history and storytelling, which, at first glance, de-legitimizes its positioning as a documentary film, and thereby undermines its historical representations. To the contrary, *Häxan* should instead be placed in a different category of nonfiction, one that is not bound by the limitations of documentary filmmaking as we have come to know it, in that it provides a rich, multifaceted account of the medieval era that must not be ignored. Offering a view of history that accounts for social, cultural, religious, and medical perspectives, the film is in fact a representation of the past that challenges dominant notions of witchcraft in the Middle Ages and beyond, and can thus be regarded as an important contribution to the historiography of the period. Moreover, the film makes important (and rather troubling) claims regarding the oppression of women during this era, which is introduced towards the end of my analysis.

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In a 2016 interview with the movie review website SlashFilm, director Robert Eggers discussed some major influences for his horror film of that year, *The Witch*, citing cinematic classics including Ingmar Bergman's *Cries and Whispers* (1972) and Stanley Kubrick's *The Shining* (1980). One interesting point of reference, however, was a little-known Danish silent film: *Häxan*, alternatively titled *Witchcraft through the Ages*, directed by Benjamin Christensen and released in Stockholm, Sweden in September 1922 (Baxstrom and Meyers, 2016, 2). 'There really is no other film out there quite like *Häxan*', interviewer Jacob Hall explains, 'which blends the horror and documentary genres together in a big, boiling cauldron during an age when cinematic language was still being invented' (Hall 2016, *slashfilm.com*). Eggers, throughout the interview, confirms his admiration for and fascination with the film:

'*Häxan* is really cool... But... I'm not saying that the mass persecution of witches had to do with a male-dominated society's misunderstanding of female power, because that's what it is. But it was manifesting itself in this idea that there were these anti-mother ogresses who could steal your children and use their entrails to help them fly on their sticks. So that's a very scary thing, you know?' (Hall 2016, *slashfilm.com*).

Macabre imagery, evocative storytelling, and the graphic depiction of torture and ritualistic Satanism make *Häxan* an enthralling cinematic experience; but, as Hall, Eggers, and critics since its release have implied, the film is even more interesting in its presentation and representation of otherwise real, historical events.

Staking its claim as a documentary from the opening credits, *Häxan* explores the mass persecution of women (and some men) during the so-called 'European Witch Holocaust' (Hall 2016, *slashfilm.com*) during the fifteenth to seventeenth centuries, though much of the film itself focuses on what it calls the 'Middle Ages' ('medeltiden'). Combining historical facts backed by real artefacts from the era with narrative reenactments inserted throughout, *Häxan* blurs the lines between reality and fiction, history and storytelling, which, at first glance, delegitimizes its positioning as a documentary film, and thereby undermines its historical representations. To the contrary, *Häxan* should instead be placed in a different category of nonfiction, one that is not bound by the limitations of documentary filmmaking as we have come to know it, in that it provides a rich, multifaceted account of the medieval era that must not be ignored. Offering a view of history that accounts for social, cultural, religious, and medical perspectives, the film is in fact a representation of the past that challenges dominant notions of witchcraft in the Middle Ages and beyond, and can thus be regarded as an important contribution to the historiography of the period. Moreover, the film makes important (and rather troubling) claims regarding the oppression of women during this era, which will be introduced towards the end of this analysis.

On *Häxan*

Divided into seven chapters, *Häxan* recounts the influx of witch hunting and accusations of witchcraft during the medieval period in Europe, compiling a comprehensive assortment of historical documents, literature and art, first-hand accounts, and folktales to build the framework for its central thesis statement. Described by Christensen himself as a 'lecture in moving pictures' (in Baxstrom and Meyers 2015, 2), the film argues (in a similar vein to neurologist Jean-Martin Charcot) that mass hysteria caused by 'witchcraft' and Satanic possession stems from a misunderstanding of psychological disorders, ultimately undiagnosed due to an overall lack of scientific knowledge and

cultural emphasis on superstition and Christianity. Consequently, modern-day ills throughout society in the 1920s – including insomnia, kleptomania, Alzheimer’s and related diseases, and even fanaticism towards celebrities in popular culture – all stem from the same types of hysterical, irrational behaviours exhibited by the ‘witches’ of yore. Demonizing or simply ignoring these behaviours, *Häxan* concludes, can lead to the same types of social persecution and destruction witnessed several centuries prior.

At face value, the film appears to be a fairly simple retelling of the witch trials of medieval Europe, concluding with a cautionary tale to contemporaneous audiences that warns against history repeating itself, for lack of better terms. And yet, *Häxan* is far more complicated than this mere synopsis can express. As Chris Fujiwara suggests, the narrative trajectory of *Häxan* alternates frantically between fact and fiction, hallucination and objective reality (Fujiwara 2001, *criterion.com*), leading to a rather modernized, scientific retelling of the witch trials during the medieval era. Alexander Doty and Patricia Clare Ingham extend Fujiwara’s observation on the film’s inherent structure, going as far to say that Christensen’s film is ‘chronologically specific and anachronistically out-of-joint’ (Doty and Ingham 2014, 3). Certainly, the creative liberties Christensen takes with the basic construction of his film’s plot spill over into the historical timeline that the director maps out. According to Doty and Ingham:

‘Intertitles emphasize the witch as an unrelentingly medieval phenomenon (“Such were the Middle Ages,” claims one early on, “when witchcraft and the devil’s work were sought every-where”). Yet the film’s recreations of particular episodes are strangely specified as to date, and associated with a later (arguably post-medieval) time: the first fictional reenactment (in the film’s second part) identifies the setting as the “Home of a Sorceress,” circa “A.D. 1488” (i.e., an early modern time). Particular witchy figures, furthermore, generate wildly ambiguous representational effects in similarly confused terms: *Häxan*’s medieval witches include “mad” nuns, homeless widows, eroticized seductresses, and Karna, the “sorceress” given to dispensing apparently reliable love potions’ (Doty and Ingham 2014, 3).

As Doty and Ingham suggest, Christensen’s fascination with these distinct, historical time periods, and his subsequent errors in conflating them throughout his narrative are, in large part, a residue of the pop-psychology of the era. The likes of Freud and the aforementioned Charcot, among others (like Josef Breuer and Pierre Janet; Doty and Ingham 2014, 4-5), were guilty of their own oversimplifications of the past in their studies on hysteria. For instance, as Daphne de Marneffe points out, Charcot’s series of studies – referred to as the *Iconographie photographique de la Salpêtrière* – was clinically revolutionary in its categorization of epilepsy and other disorders (de Marneffe 1991, 71-73). Yet, in his observations and later diagnoses of hysteria, Charcot would, more

often than not, develop a ‘clinical picture of hysteria that conformed to rules and laws in much the same way as the other diseases he studied,’ relying predominantly on visual information and so-called ‘universal’ classifications of disease rather than considering the complexities of such neuroses (such as considering past sources of familial/social/structural trauma; 75-76). While Freud would ultimately take issue with Charcot’s eschewal of family history and other past traumas, he would nevertheless mirror his mentor’s methods in his own psychoanalytic diagnoses, showing ‘careful attention to diagnostic distinctions’ that followed through a ‘series of nosographic innovations’ (Lepoutre and Villa 2014, 347). Freud, like Charcot, was ultimately guilty of relying too heavily on, in the words of Thomas Lepoutre and Francois Villa, ‘the observation of singularity’ (350), of underestimating the distinct peculiarities of any given case and instead favoring those observations that can easily be classified into pre-designated categories.

Christensen, through his construction of a disjointed historical timeline of medieval witch trials in *Häxan*, not only ‘emerges... as a crucial index for an unruly intellectual history of enormous epistemological consequence’ (Doty and Ingham 2014, 5), but also takes on the same oversimplification of hysteria as Charcot and Freud, using the witch as *the* case in point for how, historically and culturally, monstrosity has been communicated within Western society. Despite these shortcomings, however, I believe that there are merits to the film’s relative historical disjointedness, in that it attempts, in earnest, to provide a more nuanced look at history as a whole, one that accounts for ideological, political, religious, and cultural facets of daily life. To do so, the film braids together five distinct, yet complementary story elements that build the foundation for its representation of what critics like Hall have informally termed, a ‘European Witch Holocaust’ (Hall, *slashfilm.com*).

There are five key story elements that Christensen utilizes in his film, which can be classified in the following ways. The first, historical artefacts, include excerpts from writings like the *Malleus Maleficarum* and *The Nuremburg Chronicle*, as well as two- and three-dimensional artworks, each of which were hand-selected by Christensen himself during the film’s pre-production (for more information, see Baxstrom and Meyers, 2016; Doty and Ingham, 2014). The second, religious and mythological content, includes depictions of cosmogonic myths and the genesis, and apparent proliferation, of witchcraft and the occult. As discussed earlier, Christensen appears to collapse and conflate a number of different topics throughout his film, with religion and myth being no exception. Despite failing to provide adequate information on when, where, and in what context these dramatized beliefs were held, Christensen nevertheless utilizes this content as context for his later statements on witch trials.

Interestingly, Christensen’s exploration of myth and religion in the film functions in a similar manner to the medical discourses during the 1920s and

ultimately the larger work of cultural anthropologists in studying human social life. Richard Baxstrom and Todd Meyers argue that towards the turn of the twentieth century, doctors and scholars alike aimed to legitimize the so-called ‘irrational’ within discussions of psychological disorders and motivations for human behavior. In other words, intellectuals strived to explain why certain people gravitated towards unknown and unseen forces – those within religion, mysticism, and the altogether unreal. Why people believed in miracles, or experienced unsettling, un-provable forces, or even mastered magical abilities, all became a valid point of entry into studying society at large. Moreover, the study of society vis-à-vis psychology was not merely undertaken by verbal means – visual media, in fact, was a large component of these psycho-medical experiments. For example, according to Rhona Justice Malloy, psychologists like Charcot (who, according to bibliographic material distributed to first-run audiences, was Christensen’s inspiration while making the film; see Doty and Ingham 2014, 44) frequently turned to the new medium of photography to record, for instance, the ‘erotic misbehavior of [his] female hysterical patients in disturbing detail’ (Justice Malloy 1995, 134). Documenting the physical intricacies of his patients with the newly minted photographic medium, Charcot amongst others would develop a visual language for understanding mental illness, using the medium of photography to not only point out how witchcraft could be visualized, and therefore rationalized, for common audiences, but also how medical discourses formed, and eventually normalized, in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. According to Tom Gunning, Charcot, in the vein of French neurologist Guillaume Benjamin (G.B.) Duchenne, used photography to investigate, and later classify, the visual (predominantly, facial) ways that neurological disorders manifest themselves in patients (Gunning, 1997, n.p.). Later on, Charcot would adopt a more theatrical approach to his visualizations, staging predominantly female patients in elaborate settings, in effect providing ‘a context of ideologically reassuring recognizability necessary to allow the viewer to see these shocking demonstrations of the human face as the play of muscles as part of a visible “natural language”’ (n.p.). These psychophysical experiments were widely adopted in French, German, and American circles during the latter half of the nineteenth century (Gordon 2004, 98). Charcot, however, was arguably one of the first to bridge the gap between so-called ‘nervous pathology’ (94) and visual/performance media, likewise breaking new ground on the historical and cultural contextualization of nervous disorders. In a very similar sense, the way that Christensen rationalizes witchcraft in his film – both with an emphasis on the historical trajectories of myth and religion, as well as the visual explanation of hysterical behaviors – follows the legacy of Charcot in bringing ‘the invisible and nonsensical into view’ (Baxstrom and Meyers 2015, 19), providing a new perspective on historical representation that aligns with modernized accounts of human behavior.

A smaller point to consider when analyzing religious motifs in *Häxan* is its depiction of members of the clergy, who are main characters in the fictional parts of the film. From the outset, religious brethren are the chief antagonists in the film's narrative, irrationally capturing and torturing innocent women who they claim are witches. With the exception of the character of Brother Johannes (played by Elith Pio) – who is meek, soft-spoken, and sympathetic towards the victims of the witch trials – all of the male clergy are shown to be morally corrupt and viciously cruel. Furthermore, nuns featured towards the end of the film are shown to be as irrational as their male counterparts, falsely believing in the satanic possession of innocent maidens while, at times, falling victim themselves to immoral urges. This less-than-savory depiction of the clergy, the 'mockery of the church', was subject to criticism by Roman Catholics upon the film's release outside of the Scandinavian market, along with its explicit portrayal of bodily fluids and display of the nude, human body (Stevenson 2006, 64). Responses ranged from protests (eight thousand Catholic women protested and voiced complaints to local police upon its French premiere in 1926), to outright bans (most notably, in France and the United States) to even threats upon the director's wellbeing (Christensen was asked to 'vacate the hotel where he was staying' after a screening to censors in New York City; Stevenson 2006, 64-66). Nevertheless, Christensen's portrayal of the clergy is fundamental to his commentary on the social and political conditions of the 1400s vis-à-vis the witch trials, painting a portrait of early modern society that eschews the influence of the religious institution and instead considers human behavior, motivation, and belief.

The third key story element that Christensen utilizes in *Häxan* consists of narrative re-enactments, which take the historical artefacts and religious themes featured in earlier parts of the film and use actors to portray them. Christensen adds in storylines, characters, and scenes that are not known to have existed in real life, but that make the plot of the film more compelling, causing the audience to turn their sympathies towards the more innocent characters of the film. These include Brother Johannes, mentioned earlier, who is portrayed as a young, devout clergyman feeling guilt for the torture directed towards the women accused of witchcraft. At times skeptical of the claims circulated by his fellow religious brethren, Brother Johannes is shown to be one of the few rational members of the clergy, and is even shown to speak out against their gruesome acts. While in reality members of the Roman Catholic Church may have been skeptical of witchcraft, or shown distaste towards the persecution of the so-called witches, Brother Johannes does not appear in any of the religious documents featured in the earlier parts of the film. He is simply added to move the narrative forwards, and become a foil for his morally corrupt counterparts.

The main accused witch, Maria (portrayed by Maren Pedersen), is also a fictionalized character, with her storyline constructed within the narrative re-enactments to attach a tangible, human face to the atrocities experienced in the

witch trials. Appearing to be some sort of weaver or tradesperson, who lives with a smaller group of fellow women in a decrepit shack, Maria is first accused of being a witch by members of the wealthy elite, who claim that she is the reason for multiple deaths throughout their family. She is subsequently kidnapped by members of the clergy, her hair practically ripped out in order to search for ‘witch powder’ on her scalp, and is put in various torture devices until she confesses. Of course, in order to be spared her life, she admits to witchcraft and even accuses members of the nobility of joining her in satanic rituals.

It is no question that hundreds of women like Maria existed, and were persecuted, over the course of the European witch trials; nevertheless, there is less of a chance that Maria herself was a real person, in part due to the fact that the character – who, as it is revealed towards the end of the film, was not played by a professional actor – is a vehicle for Christensen to draw an emotional response from his audience, due to her frail body and seemingly impaired movements. Moreover, as Ronald Hutton suggests in his extensive study on the history of the witch, characters like Maria are unlikely to have existed in real life, due to the many historical, temporal, and geographic conditions that surround witch discourses. At least in the context of Anglo-Saxon England, for example, there does not ‘appear to have been any stereotypical witch figure... people seem just to have been expected to yield to the temptation to use magic against their fellow humans at particular moments and for particular reasons’ (Hutton, 2017, 159). Therefore, the common stereotype of the accused witch that audiences had come to know upon the release of *Häxan*, and that Christensen ultimately adopts in the course of his narrative, is dependent upon a specific context that is, more or less, historically incongruent. Even the image of the ‘hag’ which Christensen seems to rely upon in his depiction of Maria, having connotations with the witch and witchcraft, occupied a different space within certain contexts (in some, it referred in general to ‘a malevolent old woman’; 159). Maria is, therefore, a vehicle for Christensen to draw an emotional response from his audience, humanizing the witch trials and justifying the criticism that he elicits throughout his analysis. In line with a number of proto-cinematic and silent-era filmmaking trends at the turn of the twentieth century, Christensen’s film effectively shifts blame ‘from the accused to the accuser’ (Rhodes, 2018, 147) throughout his film in general, but in particular through the sympathetic figure of Maria the ‘witch.’ Consequently, to borrow from Gary D. Rhodes, the director achieves one of the goals of similarly witch-themed media from America during this period – to demarcate ‘the line between the “dark colonial past” and the bright promise of the national future’ (147). Moreover, as mentioned previously, Maria and other witch characters who appear at the end of the film suggest a connection between the hysterical behavior exhibited by victims at the heart of the European witch trials (and, in general, the persecution of so-called witches) and the present-day neuroses

suffered by the elderly population in Europe, bringing Christensen's medical, historical ideas introduced in the beginning of the film full-circle.

The narrative re-enactments during the second portion of the film do not stop merely with fictional portrayals of potentially nonfictional material – on the contrary, *Häxan* recreates mythic tales of ritual, sacrifice, and creation present in the religious treatises referenced throughout the film. One such re-enactment, and one of the most unusual sequences of the film, is featured after Maria's interrogation by religious clergymen. After being physically tortured and humiliated by the men, Maria tells a tale of how she birthed a devil baby and sacrificed it during the Witch Sabbath, an event described in real historical documents early on in the film that features the mystical, satanic rituals thought to be practiced by witches during this era. The sequence begins with the popularized images of witches flying through the night's sky, cloaked in black and riding broomsticks as they cackle and flail in excitement. Intercut with Maria's confession, the sequence features the feverish dancing of young maidens, who are shown to be witches as well, and multiple devils playing unfamiliar instruments while grotesquely wiggling their tongues in the air. The 'Devil's grandmother,' presiding over the hellish activities, casts spells over the maidens while they are rubbed with oils in preparation for a massive orgy with the other devils. Surrounded by skeletal creatures, thick fog, and demonic man-beasts, the maidens are initiated by the Devil's grandmother into a realm of evil and destruction – capping off their Sabbath celebrations, the women defile Christian iconography and, literally, kiss the rear end of their evil leader.

Based on this description alone, it should come as no surprise that none of the events in this sequence were real, in any sense of the word. Nonetheless, this and similar re-enactments help to illustrate in part the religious and cultural environment of those living in the medieval era. By showing onscreen what their accusers thought witches were doing, Christensen offers viewers a glimpse into their mindset, the ways in which socio-cultural factors influenced an often skewed logic in pursuing such religious persecutions. Indeed, the executions of witches that are represented in Christensen's film refer to a period of brutality in geographic and temporal regions spanning 'the Pyrenees and at Rome in 1424 until the final one [execution] in Switzerland in 1782' (Hutton, 2017, 180). The creative liberties that Christensen takes in this type of cinematic re-enactment throughout the film help to paint a clearer picture of a period 'in which the crisis in European religion ushered in by the Reformation came to a peak' (180). Narrative re-enactments therefore give insight into the motivations for the cruelty enacted by the clergy towards accused witches, as well as supporting the central theory, posited by Christensen, that witchcraft can be explained through irrational tendencies both on the part of the accused and the accusers.

Returning to the five key story elements of the film, the fourth and fifth both broaden and problematize its nonfictional scope. These are the frequent use of

personal asides, on the part of Christensen, and its references to behind-the-scenes events (Fujiwara, 2001, *criterion.com*), or what can best be described as being ‘the real.’ The former, which is established in the film’s opening shot of a close-up of Christensen’s face staring intensely into the camera, integrates an element of first-person discourse (*criterion.com*) that creates the impression that the film is a more of a lecture than a documentary. In addition, the frequent use of personal claims on the part of Christensen foreshadows the style of contemporary documentarians, who integrate a strong central argument within the confines of otherwise objective material (Morgan Spurlock and Michael Moore are two filmmakers that come to mind; many of their films have a self-reflexive tone and weave their own opinions on content into the fibers of their documentaries).

The fifth element, that of ‘the real,’ is an interesting aspect of the film that takes the line mediating nonfiction and fiction and distorts it even more. The film’s own production and pre-production practices are mentioned within the second half of the narrative, in which the real actors portraying fictional characters are shown testing props, interacting with Christensen, and retelling accounts of their own personal lives that relate to the storyline. One striking instance occurs during the last fifteen minutes of the film, as the elderly actresses playing the witches are shown displaying Alzheimer’s-like symptoms, and asserting their own religious allegiances. Maren Pedersen, playing Maria, tells Christensen about her belief that the spirit of Satan is real, and that she keeps a small prayer book with her as an affirmation of her faith. A rather stark scene, this not only solidifies the film’s thesis expressing the parallels between the medieval era and the 1920s, but also helps to contextualise the production of *Häxan*, within its own social and cultural conditions.

Another example occurs after a longer sequence where one of the members of the nobility are being accused of and tortured for being a witch. Introduced by Christensen in a series of intertitles, the sequence provides a ‘closer look at the props in the torture chamber’ (Christensen 1922), showing the actual, historical instruments of torture that were used during the period. Modeled by anonymous actors and actresses, and supported by historical illustrations and scholarly descriptions of the devices, the props help demonstrate the exact ways in which innocent victims were maimed and even killed in order to divulge information about witchcraft and Satanism. Sets of pincers and metal rods, spiked collars, full-body stretchers, and metal bone-breaking devices are all carefully exhibited by the director’s models during the scene, who are shown to be disturbingly close to the sharp, rusty medieval tools. The sequence is then intercut with a series of personal comments from Christensen, who reveals that one of the main actresses in the film became interested in one particular device, a thumbscrew, and begged to try out the tool for herself. Gleefully holding her hands out to be inserted in the device, the actress is shown in a candid, behind-the-scenes moment with an off-screen Christensen, with intertitles from the

director cheekily explaining that he ‘will not reveal the terrible confessions I [Christensen] forced from the young lady in less than a minute’ (Christensen 1922). This altogether surprising production footage helps to flesh out the immersive ways in which the entire crew got involved with the film’s historical content. Yet, this scene helps to merge reality with fiction, bringing together all of the historical, cultural, societal, and artistic elements featured previously within the film into one complex nonfictional representation.

Documentary Form

Given this blatant oscillation between real/historical and fabricated/fictional content, it is safe to say that *Häxan* does not align with a more formal conception of documentary filmmaking. After all, Christensen ignores the conventions of documentary film-making that developed in the 1920s, and would later become standardized in the 1930s through the writings of critic-filmmaker John Grierson. These conventions include: the so-called ‘voice-of-god,’ third-person narrative tone; an a-human filming style, in which the camera can be envisioned as merely being placed in a location and passively recording events in real-time (and, importantly, not interrupting action in real-time), and mimetic image production, where the cinematic object most closely replicates its real-world counterpart (Baxstrom and Meyers, 2015, 35, 43-45). This final element – mimesis – is both a necessary and a sufficient condition for documentary films, for early scholars like Grierson, and would later become the standard for the genre’s future stylistic distinctions. Despite Grierson himself acknowledging the cinematic medium’s capacity for the ‘creative treatment of actuality’ (44), the filmmaker’s ability and artistic capacity to (re) present reality (or, as close to reality as they can get) is crucial for distinguishing between fictional and documentary films, and consequently picking out those documentaries that are successful or valuable (culturally, politically, and artistically so).

This push towards mimesis has several implications. Broadly, the boundaries that distinguish documentary films from their fictional counterparts help to establish, especially within the context of the early twentieth century, normalized conventions for preserving and communicating historical record(s). Documentary films that are (or, aim to be) mimetic and objective align squarely with historical analyses that depict the past as stable, monolithic, and wholly linear. As a result, classical modes of documentary filmmaking contribute to larger historical lines of inquiry that may have the advantage of logically ordering fragments of the past into a digestible, easy-to-follow format, but also display a tendency towards establishing a rigid, exclusionary binary between what is established as historical, objective ‘fact’ versus ‘fiction’ (44). *Häxan*, despite its clear use of artistic and literary artefacts (the *Malleus Maleficarum*, *The Nuremburg Chronicle*, and so forth), takes creative liberties in presenting these objects, rather than portraying them in a ‘realistic,’ wholly objective

manner. Its status as a formal documentary, and its ultimate contribution to the historical record is, by this logic, altogether dubious.

Grierson's emphasis on mimesis, which has had a lasting impact on more traditional modes of understanding the documentary form, leaves a question mark over the status of *Häxan*. Which category does the film belong to, if it has no formal status as a classical documentary film? In my opinion, alternative modes of thought, particularly when considering current documentary filmmaking strategies, are appropriate measures for characterizing the film, and help to navigate its larger claims on historical representation. Gregory Currie, for example, deconstructs the classical way of thinking of the documentary image, in both photography and moving pictures, and gives an insight into the rather complex interplay of the real and the fictional in nonfiction filmmaking. Responding to André Bazin's claims in 'The Ontology of the Photographic Image', Currie argues that all documentaries both represent something in reality, but are automatically mediated by the author's intentions, deliberate or otherwise. Thus, scholars and audiences alike cannot fully claim that all documentaries are one-hundred-percent nonfiction films, one-hundred-percent of the time. Instead, documentaries should be characterized based on their fundamentally narrative, often fictional accounts of real life, being placed on a fictional-nonfictional continuum. One such characterization, the dramatic reconstruction (Currie, 1999, 285, 291), lies near the center of this continuum, using fictional narrative elements to construct the real elements that form the basis of the nonfictional content (n. 3, 296). *Häxan*, which interweaves narrative re-enactments with real, historical artefacts and texts, can therefore be considered a dramatic reconstruction in this perspective.

Responding to Currie, Carl Plantinga also stresses the need for a more fluid conception of documentary filmmaking, one that strays away from requiring strict mimesis and that instead accounts for multiple iterations of nonfictional elements. One important distinction that he makes amongst documentaries is in his description of documentaries as indexical records (DIR) versus documentaries as assertions (DA) (Plantinga, 2005, 105). While DIR films feature technical content that directly represents images and sounds that occur in real life, without any authorial mediation (e.g., a series of pictures in succession with no voice-over narration or interviews), DA films feature the director's stance or opinion towards the material, and make assertions about affairs in the real world (108). Taking this one step further, films of 'presumptive' assertion are documentary films in which 'the audience presumes that it is to entertain the propositions as asserted' by the filmmaker or author (108), directly responding to the claims that are provided throughout its narrative. Acting as a sort of rhetorical mechanism, films of presumptive assertion provide a strong, central thesis statement, or way of looking at the world, that the audience absorbs and responds to, enacting these beliefs in their day-to-day lives.

It is fitting, then, for *Häxan* to be considered a documentary film of presumptive assertion: Christensen relays his own interpretation of the witch trials, communicating the analyses of scholars including Charcot that connect mental illness and irrational, mystical behaviors. What's more, audiences of the time may have been receptive to these claims (after all, Charcot was widely influential during this era, so the ideas presented in the film were nothing new, to mainstream audiences at least), and the film's central messages with them into society at large. While the claims made within the narrative can be looked at with a skeptical eye by today's viewers, the film nevertheless played, and still plays, a valuable role in spreading ideas about medical, scientific, and cultural phenomena, as well as representations of historical events, into society at large.

Bill Nichols, a seminal figure in the study of documentary film, points to yet another way to classify documentary filmmaking, providing an appropriate category for exploring alternative, historically-based films like *Häxan*. He suggests looking at the stylistic qualities of documentaries, as opposed to their thematic or representational techniques, in order to develop a new framework for classifying films that do not align with documentary filmmaking proper. Of the six modes of representation of in documentaries (Nichols, 2010, 142), the poetic mode, which 'shares a common terrain with the modernist avant-garde' (162), is the most abstract form of filmmaking within this classification system. Significantly, as Nichols asserts, the poetic mode 'is particularly adept at opening up the possibility of alternative forms of knowledge to the straightforward transfer of information, the prosecution of a particular argument or point of view, or the presentation of reasoned propositions about problems in need of solution' (162). In other words, the poetic mode demonstrates creative agency on the part of the filmmaker in relaying information about the subject(s) of a given film, in an effort to provide a strong argument or new perspective on its content. Aligning with Plantinga's discussion of documentaries of presumptive assertion, documentaries in the poetic mode allow for the director to draw from historical material and transform it (164), and give an altogether new or altered vision of the subjective world. As a result, subjective claims found throughout the poetic mode combine to create an overall more believable view of history than films claiming to show realistic, objective accounts of events and/or people.

Häxan was made and released during a time when documentary films had no formal definition, nor was nonfiction a recognizable (or well-known) genre of film. Christensen himself did not use 'nonfiction,' 'documentary,' or similar terms to characterize the film, stating instead that:

'My film has no continuous story, no "plot" – it could perhaps best be classified as a cultural history lecture in moving pictures. The goal has not only been to describe the witch trials simply as external events but through cultural history to throw light on the psychological causes of these witch trials by demonstrating their connections with certain

abnormalities of the human psyche, abnormalities which have existed throughout history and still exist in our midst' (quoted in Baxstrom and Meyers, 2015, 4).

Likewise, *Häxan* is one of several films throughout the 1920s and 1930s and all the way into the postwar era that would actively experiment with, and effectively interrogate, topics dealing with both the past and present. Performing what Baxstrom and Meyers identify as 'an affective, truthful narrative about the world that rejects dogmatic positions of hard objectivity and absolute relativism alike' (207), *Häxan* is one of the first films belonging to the larger tradition of what can best be described as 'naturalist' filmmaking (210). According to Robert Koehler, a more recent version of naturalist filmmaking stems from the filmmaker's desire to de-sentimentalize the objects and events that they wish to portray on screen (Koehler, 2003, *variety.com*); this means, in other words, to present a narrative as it would unfold in everyday life, without dramatizing it or adding superfluous aesthetic details. Returning to Baxstrom and Meyers, naturalist filmmaking in its earliest forms also meant, in a nutshell, paying attention to histories that would otherwise be neglected, or deemed not valuable or unimportant, in traditional records of the past (207-209). Lastly, and most importantly, naturalist filmmaking embraces the plural, whether that means taking into account various, simultaneous realities, rather than one objective version of that reality, or approaching some version of reality using multiple different lines of inquiry. While *Häxan* does little with the first condition for naturalist filmmaking – Christensen takes many artistic liberties in the organization and presentation of his film's narrative, rather than presenting medieval history in an unembellished manner – the film adheres to naturalist filmmaking's tenants of presenting neglected histories in a hybrid way. Combining history, art history, psychology, sociology, and rhetorical studies, *Häxan* comes to terms with a piece of Europe's dark past with a patchwork of evidence that moves beyond mere written historical records. Moreover, by concluding the film with a glimpse of the real-life ailments of its actors, the film incorporates voices that have been otherwise silenced, literally and figuratively, and ultimately pushed far outside of the boundaries of mainstream society. *Häxan*, it can be argued, incorporates new and varied perspectives on the present in an attempt to explain the past, in a way that other films, historical or otherwise, had failed to do during the silent era. For these reasons alone, *Häxan* thus becomes a new category of nonfiction filmmaking within itself, lying at the crossroads of the alternative or aesthetic documentary and cinematic naturalism. Pushing the boundaries of historical presentation and re-presentation, as today's audiences have come to know it, *Häxan* is a multi-faceted, well-informed example of early filmmaking that has implications for today.

History, Historiography, and Representation

In analyzing the surreal world created by *Häxan*, broader issues of representation come up, especially when considering the narrative of hysteria reinforced by the film. To put this differently, the emphasis on mental deformity and psychosis raises new questions of the recirculation of ‘Othered’ images of women in mainstream cinematic narratives. Indeed, Christensen brings to life the images of woman-as-witch, and therefore woman-as-Other, in the written histories and oral traditions of the early Western world. As Barbara Creed observes, the notion of the woman-as-witch is one that circulated several decades prior to the publication of the *Malleus Maleficarum* and associated witchcraft with ‘magical, terrifying powers’ (Creed, 1993, 74). These powers, thought to be acquired by women in many cultures through pregnancy or the onset of menstruation, inspired in Creed’s words ‘the deepest dread amongst the members of [a] community’ (74), as they were thought to have the potential for social harm and destruction, regardless of their potential for growth and healing. This sense of dread would later translate into the persecution of accused witches in the medieval and early modern periods, but with a heightened sense of urgency: female witches were not only believed to have mystical control over life and death, but were also seen as carnal, abject, and primeval, automatically coded as such due to their moral and intellectual inferiority to men. What’s more, the woman-as-witch posed the even greater threat of sexual deviancy and violence, copulating with the devil and stealing penises from unsuspecting male victims (75). Already man’s Other, woman-as-witch became explicitly dangerous due to her potential to castrate, giving enough justification, in the medieval and early modern worlds, for their torture and persecution.

Throughout *Häxan*’s narrative, Christensen-as-narrator seems to lend a sympathetic ear towards the injustices committed against women accused of witchcraft during the European Witch Holocaust and, in the context of the early twentieth century, the elderly and those with mental disabilities. However, the film’s finale transmits similar messages about the mental and emotional impurity exhibited by women, both during the medieval era and extending into the turn of the twentieth century, that were popularized in early psychoanalytic writings. To repeat an earlier point, the crux of *Häxan*’s narrative thesis statement derives from proto-psychoanalyst Charcot, who posited a (pseudo)-scientific correlation between witchcraft and hysteria. These ideas proved to be persistent: as Baxstrom and Meyers observe, the notion that ‘ecstatic ritual practice, possession, and practices of witchcraft and sorcery bear some relation to modern categories of neurosis and mental illness persisted in the anthropological literature a full fifty years after the release of *Häxan*’ (Baxstrom and Meyers, 2015, 208). Christensen ultimately presents already widely-accepted psychological concepts, and would later (inadvertently or otherwise), set a trend in filmmaking that would repeat these claims. Perhaps his portrayal of woman-as-witch was a bit less sensational, and more

historically/psychologically intuitive, than different films that would explore the same topic. Linda Badley, for example, observes that other Scandinavian filmmakers, contemporaneous to and following Christensen, quickly developed a so-called 'obsession' with exploiting the female body for the purposes of examining the confluence between 'history, psychology, and mythology' (Badley, 2013, 19). Christensen, while still putting the vulnerable female body on display, attempts to contextualize this violence while humanizing real-life victims of society's mistreatment. Later filmmakers, like Maya Deren, would attempt work towards the same goal in their films, using largely experimental aesthetics to 'link witchcraft, possession, and various elements of psychology without making blunt cause-effect claims in order to elucidate a variety of instances where such occurrences remain an active element of everyday life' (Baxstrom and Meyers, 2015, 208). *Häxan* is an early attempt at using multiple histories as a rhetorical tool for arguing against the societal persecution of real-life women.

However, in my opinion, rather than complicating and offering alternatives to the trope of woman-as-witch, *Häxan* essentially normalizes it, taking Christensen's rather progressive theoretical claims back to their misogynistic origins. This is done in a number of ways, particularly in the film's conclusion. Firstly, the ways in which the camera treats the female body is one that is dehumanizing rather than empowering; each elderly character, for instance, is framed in a close-up (with their aged and weary faces on display), which then cuts to a long shot of each of their bodies as they rotate, giving the audience a full view of their bodies. An eerie (perhaps unintentional) visual parallel to early experiments in visual ethnography, this approach to portraying such real-life characters maintains a large distance between the women on screen and the audience, encouraging a sort of abject scopophilia where pleasure is derived from ogling, and ultimately feeling pity towards, these real-life 'witches.' Secondly, the film's final sequence explicitly adopts medical evidence that ultimately endorses Charcot's theories of hysteria; one sequence in particular cross-cuts between a medieval witch hunt, in which Christian monks are shown poking and prodding their female victim, and a doctor in the present (the 1920s), performing the same (perhaps pseudo-) medical treatment towards his ailing female patient. The effect of this sequence is to communicate, and make explicit connections to, Charcot's belief that a lack of feeling sensation from sharp objects in a woman, which was once believed to be a sign of witchcraft, can instead be attributed to hysteria. This and other portions of *Häxan*'s finale, rather than discrediting the primitive ways of identifying woman-as-witch, instead re-inserts it back into the twentieth century, using the clinical to further place woman as abject, irrational, and perhaps monstrous. This technique lends itself to the final way in which *Häxan* normalizes the connection between woman and witch: in its endorsement of Charcot's proto-psychoanalysis, the film also acts as an extension of Freudian psychoanalysis, a strain of thinking

that is indebted to both Charcot's study of the 'premodern history of witchcraft' (Doty and Ingham 2014, 4) and 'anti-clerical politics of the... medical establishment' (40). Implicitly, Christensen retraces the centrality of the woman-as-witch in Freudian psychoanalysis which, in Creed's words, positions woman as 'the oral sadistic mother and the phallic woman' (Creed, 1993, 76). That is, the figure of the modern woman in Christensen's film is one that harkens back to the figure of the medieval witch – she toes the line between rationality and the irrational, cleanliness and filth and, above all, is a force that has led to chaos and confusion within the context of a more scientifically-savvy society. It is important to repeat that Christensen, by the final scenes of the film, does not suggest that woman-as-witch should be destroyed by society during the 1920s, just as she was in the European Witch Holocaust several hundred years prior. Rather, Christensen spearheads a complicated dialogue about the treatment of mental illness for those that are on the margins of patriarchal society (i.e. women and the elderly). *Häxan* therefore can be seen as a reflection of, and precursor to, the image of woman-as-witch in cinematic historical records and beyond, contributing a great deal to the persistent Othering of women in Western society.

Benjamin Christensen's *Häxan*, while slowly gaining critical and scholarly attention, is an important yet understudied work that redefines the notion of nonfiction, historical filmmaking. By challenging what history is and how it is portrayed on the screen, *Häxan* helps to create new discourses on genre, modes of representation, and the extent to which cinema stakes a claim in the creation of history. The film is also an interesting case in point of how visual and literary culture contributes to the Othering of women in society, not only providing insight on how manifested during the European Witch Holocaust, but how it has been extended, and has catalyzed debate, through the relatively new medium of film. It is no wonder, then, that filmmakers like Eggers in *The Witch*, and other filmmakers in Europe and abroad, have been inspired by Christensen's work. Echoing Stevenson's film-historical timeline, Doty and Ingham note that those across surrealist and intellectual circles were spellbound by the film, with filmmakers like Luis Buñuel and Val Lewton having clearly been influenced by Christensen's 'surrealism and "audacious theatricality"' (Doty and Ingham, 2014, 2). The rediscovery of *Häxan* by audiences in the 1960s, upon its rerelease with narration by William S. Burroughs, welcomed a new generation of filmmakers, scholars, and fans of underground cinema, fellow Scandinavian directors Ingmar Bergman and Lars von Trier being the most notable admirers of his work (Baxstrom and Meyers, 2015, 208). Indeed, Christensen's *Häxan* is an innovative, cinematic feat, not only securing its status as a unique interpretation of the distant past, but also as a valuable historical record that ultimately preserves 1920s medical, social, and cultural discourses.

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