

# Journal of Historical Fictions

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*Juliette Harrisson*

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Editor: Dr Juliette Harrisson, Newman University, UK

Faculty of Arts, Society and Professional Studies  
Newman University  
Genners Lane  
Bartley Green, Birmingham  
B32 3NT  
United Kingdom

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## **Editorial: 'Historical Fictions' When the World Changes**

Juliette Harrison

On 22<sup>nd</sup> February 2020, a date that feels like a long time ago but was actually less than four months before I write this editorial, I presented a paper at our annual Historical Fictions Research Network conference on the subject 'What is historical fiction?' The paper looked primarily at whether or not there is a certain amount of time that has to pass between an event and the creation of a fiction based on it, in order for it to qualify as 'historical fiction', but the question is a broad one.

Fictions are stories – the stories we tell about ourselves, about other people, about the world we live in and the world of the past. Fictions can be liberating and provocative – as Jerome de Groot puts it, fictions 'challenge, pervert, critique, and queer a normative, straightforward, linear, self-proscribing History' (2016, 2). They can also be conservative, reactionary, or backward-thinking.

Historical fictions are all around us. In films, television programmes, and novels, of course, but also in advertisements, paintings, murals, docu-dramas, graphic novels, board games, video games, ghost stories, and statues. A statue or portrait is in itself a work of historical fiction. A living subject is carefully posed, or a deceased subject is re-created from photographs, memories, and other images. The pose is carefully chosen to represent the person in the way the artist and/or commissioner wants them to be represented.

The choice of what statues are placed in public spaces, of who is represented and who isn't, of how these people are represented, then forms new stories, narratives about the past that are told across the landscape. A statue or other form of public art is not a neutral device for the presentation of facts, but a story put on public view in the expectation that it is something to celebrate.

How these stories are told is important. A running joke in the NBC sitcom *Parks and Recreation* (created by Greg Daniels and Michael Schur, 2009-2015) featured the 'horrifying' (Episode 1.01) murals lining the corridors of City Hall. The murals were considered offensive because they depicted violent incidents from Pawnee's past, mostly violence against Native Americans (a Chief being executed, everyone present at a mixed race wedding being murdered). "We... need better, less offensive history" says Leslie of one mural that the town actually considers replacing (but doesn't) (Episode 2.09). But it is not the mere depiction of past violence and injustice that forms the basis of the joke – it's the fact that a mural in a City Hall is expected to be celebratory. There are places and forms to tell violent stories of injustice, but when a story is portrayed as an emblem of what a place or a people are, that is when the aspects chosen for celebration become significant.

World-changing events can also bring into sharp relief the question of time that I addressed in my conference paper; the question of how ‘historical’ a historical fiction has to be. Definitions of what makes a fiction ‘historical’ in the genre of historical novels often focus on the idea that a certain amount of time must have passed between the events and the writing of the novel, whether that’s 40-60 years (Fleishman 1971, 3-4), 50 years (The Historical Novel Society, 2020), before the author was born (Stocker 2019, 78), or before the author ‘came to consciousness’ (Atwood 1998, 1510). The idea that there is some set amount of time that shifts a work from being ‘contemporary’ or about the ‘recent past’ to being ‘historical’ appears deeply engrained.

As Emma Darwin has pointed out, many of these definitions exclude a very well known historical novel, L. P. Hartley’s *The Go-Between*, because it is based on the author’s childhood memories and is therefore too autobiographical (Darwin 2010, 266). I mention *The Go-Between* in particular because its famous opening line rather neatly sums up my own approach to this problem of how old something has to be in order to be ‘historical fiction’. ‘The past is a foreign country’, Hartley said, ‘they do things differently there’ (Hartley 1997 [1953], 5). Historical fiction takes the reader to a world that is not the world they live in and that they cannot visit because it no longer exists, and that is as true of Hartley’s work, infused as it is with his own memories, as of a work written entirely based on research. It would be fair to say that the world depicted in historical fiction never really existed in that form, being the creation of its author or maker, but that is where the research (or memory, in Hartley’s case) comes in – historical fiction represents an attempt to recreate something like a world that once existed, whereas fantasy and science fiction, for example, invent a world that never has.

In my conference presentation back in February I looked at two examples of screen representations of the recent past: the film *Good-Bye Lenin!* (dir. Wolfgang Becker, 2003), set in East Berlin 1989-1990, and the TV series *Chernobyl* (created by Craig Mazin, 2019), set in Chernobyl, 1986-1987. Both are set behind the Iron Curtain, before the fall of the USSR; so both are set in a world that no longer exists, and both make a clear point of that fact. Mazin makes this clear in the podcast accompanying the show, saying, ‘this could only have happened in the Soviet Union; only the Soviet Union could have solved this problem’ (Mazin 2019). *Good-Bye Lenin!* is even more explicitly about a world that has vanished, or an idea of a world that has vanished. It is a self-conscious nostalgic reflection on an idea of what the DDR was, ‘Ein Land, das es in Wirklichkeit nie so gegeben hat’ as main character Alex says (‘A country that never really existed’). The film, in fact, is about a historical fiction within a historical fiction. Although the film was made only eleven years after its setting (it was filmed in 2001), everything in it, from pickle jars to clothing to cosmonauts, is of the past and no longer part of the world we now live in, in Berlin or anywhere else.

I've been thinking about this even more over the past few months. I mentioned at the beginning of this piece that February 2020, less than four months ago, feels like a long time ago. That's because the world we lived in last February is not the world we are living in now. Last February, I could travel by plane from the UK to Austria for the conference; we all met and shook hands; we all sat in hot rooms together for hours without fear. Perhaps some day (in late 2020? Early 2021? Later than that?) the current coronavirus pandemic will pass and all those things will happen again, but the world will never be quite the same. Businesses will have disappeared, people will have shifted in their attitudes and feelings, many will work from home more often. Millions of people will hug their mums more often. Many people have learned to use new technologies to communicate with each other, and will keep doing so to keep in touch with friends and family spread across the globe more often and in different ways than they have before.

And then there are the ways millions of people right now are more deliberately trying to bring about permanent change addressing problems that already existed. The Black Lives Matter movement has been around for a long time (and the Civil Rights movement far longer again) but the hope for many is that now, this summer of 2020, is a turning-point; that these protests, on a scale not seen since the 1960s, will bring about real change. And in the background of all of it, there is climate change. Our world is changing, and whatever we do, we will start to feel the effect of those changes over the next 10-20 years. The hope of many is that we will change ourselves in response; even if we don't, change will come anyway. The historians of the future will see 2020 as a turning-point in the history of the world, and we have the unusual and sometimes uncomfortable experience of knowing that is the case even as we live through it.

The speed of change over the course of this year reminds me of something Margaret Atwood said in her 2017 'Introduction' to her most famous work, *The Handmaid's Tale*. Part of the inspiration for the novel, she said, was her awareness that 'established orders could vanish overnight. Change could also be as fast as lightning' (Atwood 2017, ix). Perhaps our world will not change quite so much or quite so quickly. Perhaps the widespread lockdowns will come to look more like an aberration; perhaps the protests will not bring about the change their organisers hope for, and the Earth will limp on a few more years while we continue to try to keep going as we have been. But I think one of the things this pandemic has taught us is exactly what Atwood was saying with *The Handmaid's Tale* – the world can change, and quickly. People can change their behaviour and everything we thought we knew about how society works can be turned on its head. Perhaps that's why the protests in the wake of George Floyd's death are happening on such a scale – perhaps people have been given hope by the extraordinary (if temporary) changes brought about by the pandemic that real (and lasting) change can happen. Perhaps, with shifted values, real action in the face of climate change will become possible.

If the world is really changing, I think there is a very real argument to be made that a novel written in 2021 but set in 2019 may be a work of historical fiction. A novel written in a year or two's time but set in 2020 will surely feel like historical fiction. The world we will be living in next year will not be the world we lived in last year – and that will change the stories we tell, along with everything else. We won't ever be able to return to that past world – and that is what will make the stories we tell about it 'historical fiction'.

Juliette Harrison  
June 2020

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## John Fowles's 'Manchester baby': forms of radicalism in *A Maggot*

Julie Depriester, Université d'Artois, Arras, France.

**Abstract:** *A Maggot*, John Fowles's last published novel, reflects the author's disrespect for conventions both as a man and as an artist. Its formal structure is unorthodox. Besides, the choice of the birth of a radical sect, the Shakers, as a subject matter allows him to explore the limitations of social conformity, while his subversion of the codes of the historical novel questions the constraint of traditional literary conventions. This paper explores the way in which John Fowles plays with history and the past in order to impose a desire for radicalism in the reader.

**Keywords:** *A Maggot*, John Fowles, radicalism, the Shakers, historical novel

*A Maggot* (1985), John Fowles's last novel, is as unusual as his other works and the multiplicity of meanings in the title creates this impression from the beginning. The whole work offers numerous different interpretations to the reader, none of them entirely satisfying. This is a part of Fowles's radicalism and the way he tries to encourage the reader to resist conformism. Indeed, through the development of the plot and the confusion raised by the structure of the novel, the reader is invited to emulate the Dissenting character in their radical principles.

The novel starts by narrating a late April afternoon in 1736, when five travellers arrive in a city in Devon. Through the dialogue, we learn that nobody is who he seems to be. Mr Bartholomew, a gentleman, has hired two actors, Francis Lacy and David Jones, to play the roles of uncle and soldier. Louise, the French maid, is Fanny, a famous London prostitute who is ordered to have sex with Bartholomew's deaf-and-dumb servant, Dick. Then, all of a sudden, the narrative breaks and a newspaper article informs the reader that the servant was found hanged in a wood and that nothing has been heard of the rest of the group for two months. Aside from reproductions of authentic newspaper pages of the time which are interspersed throughout, most of the rest of the book is composed of letters and transcriptions of depositions, in which the aim is to discover what happened to Mr Bartholomew. As the witnesses appear one after another in front of Henry Ayscough, the lawyer, the reader understands that something mysterious happened in a cave not far from where Dick was found, which involved either a satanic ritual, or a meeting with three holy women who had come from the future in a spaceship shaped as a maggot, one of the meanings for the title. There, Rebecca, alias Fanny, was supposedly given a vision of the

Shakers' ideal community (June Eternal) as well as seeing televised images of the horrors of the twentieth-century wars. Whatever happened in the cave transformed her into a saintly woman. The few narrative sections, told from an external point of view, do not lift the veil from the mystery but only help the reader better to understand the personalities of the characters and so stress the discrepancy between the two time periods. At the end of the novel, Rebecca, now married to John Lee, gives birth to a daughter she calls Ann. Only the epilogue makes clear that this infant is destined to become the real historical person Mother Ann Lee, founder of American Shakerism or the United Society of Believers in Christ's Second Coming.

The religious sect Mother Ann Lee initiated was quite radical in its beliefs and way of life, advocating celibacy, but also equality between men and women. In 'I write therefore I am', Fowles states that 'my first ambition has always been to alter the society I live in; that is, to affect other lives... Society, existing among other human beings, challenges me, so I have to choose my weapon. I choose writing' (Fowles 1998, 6). History thus becomes a tool for Fowles, who fictionalizes it in order to have the reader reflect on the past, but also on the present. As such, the novel is radical in the political or social sense, that is 'advocating or based on thorough or complete political or social change' (Fowles 1998, 6). Through the story, Fowles advocates some sort of radicalism, an escape from conformism.

Indeed, John Fowles's interest is in the founding moments of such Dissenting groups, how a few people chose to go against tradition and social norms and become 'revolutionaries' (Fowles 1996 [1985], 457). As a result, *A Maggot* ends with Ann Lee's birth – the 'Manchester baby' – and does not narrate her life. Following Walter Scott's example – the 'traditional historical novel' according to Lukács – John Fowles focuses his story around minor fictional characters rather than a real historical figure (Lukács 1983 [1962], 35). Yet, he warns the reader in the prologue that,

[t]his fiction is in no way biographically about that second woman, though it does end with her birth in about the real year and quite certainly the real place where she was born. I have given that child her historical name; but I would not have this seen as a (*sic*) historical novel. It is maggot (Fowles 1996 [1985], 5-6).

In this sentence, the term 'maggot' refers to a whim from the author's imagination and is still another meaning for the title. Despite this refutation, *A Maggot* has been considered an historical novel for more than thirty years. Fowles himself later admitted that he had written two historical novels. Yet this demonstrates Fowles's desire not to be confined to a category or literary tradition. As such, it proves his own radical approach, i.e. the fact that his writing is 'characterized by independence of or departure from what is usual or traditional; progressive, unorthodox or innovative in outlook' (*Oxford English*

*Dictionary*). I will thus consider the way in which the novel is also radical in its structure and form.

When combined in *A Maggot*, Fowles's social and literary non-conformism provide the reader with a guide to express his or her own radicalism or transgression of the norm. I shall try to demonstrate how Fowles's playing with history is radical both in its intent and its impact, especially on the reader. Indeed, his choice of subject matter, i.e. the Shakers, is consistent with his own radical principles as a man and as an author, and this shows through the unorthodox views that he tries to impart to the reader, but also through the originality of the novel itself. But, before stating how Fowles transgresses the conventions of the historical novel, we must first examine what these norms are.

**'I feel exiled from many present English conceptions of society, social behaviour and so on' (Vipond 1999, 70).**

This particular last day of April falls in a year very nearly equidistant from 1689, the culmination of the English Revolution, and 1789, the start of the French; in a sort of dozing solstitial standstill, a stasis of the kind predicted by those today who see all evolution as a punctuated equilibrium, between those two zenith dates and all they stand for; at a time of reaction from the intemperate extremisms of the previous century, yet already hatching the seeds... of the world-changing upheaval to come (Fowles 1996 [1985], 16).

From the very beginning, the narrator stresses the stillness of the period in between two momentous revolutions, the English Revolution and the French one, thereby encouraging the reader to expect some sort of movement during the story. This culminates in the last sentence of a rather long paragraph: 'Certainly England as a whole was indulging in its favourite and sempiternal national hobby: retreating deep within itself, and united only in a constipated hatred of change of any kind' (16). The hyperbolic language, the redundancy of generalising terms ('as a whole', 'sempiternal', 'national'), together with the oxymoronic association of 'united / only' and 'constipated / change' create an impression of unease rather than peacefulness. In those circumstances, the reader will welcome any form of reaction against such apathy, which they will find in the situation – a mysterious Lord disappearing, a servant hanged, a prostitute turned chaste, a spaceship coming from the future – as well as in the ideas advanced by the characters.

Throughout the novel, the author plays on opposites and contradictions to elicit a radical response from the reader. Therefore, the character of Ayscough, the lawyer, becomes a type, a representative of conformism. The stress laid on his puny stature – for instance, he is referred to as 'the very small, frail and bewigged man' (Fowles 1996 [1985], 113) or 'the diminutive lawyer' (114) – prompts ridicule as it contrasts with his haughty attitude towards people he

considers to be his social inferiors. His attachment to a hierarchical social order is emphasized in different ways. He expects humility and obeisance from the lower orders, such as Rebecca or Jones, while he plays the dutiful subordinate to nobility, as the obsequious language of his letters to Bartholomew's father demonstrates. These letters are addressed to 'Your Grace', a term he uses and abuses (no less than twenty-nine mentions in one letter; 105-109); they are brimming with Latin phrases and generally end on an acknowledgment of his subservience with such expressions as 'with that every diligence which Yr Grace's past favours have lain as a hallowed duty upon ever his most humble and obedient servant' (109). In the depositions, however, according to the social status of the person interrogated, they may be addressed with 'thou' or 'thee' for the maid Dorcas (81), 'sir', 'Mr Beckford' or 'you' for the curate (95), or simply 'Jones' (201) for the Welsh actor. Language is thus a means to impose social order.

Ayscough is portrayed as the representative of all that is prejudiced in society. Retracing his reaction to Defoe's pamphlet *The Shortest Way with the Dissenters*, which proposed to hang or deport all Dissenters, the lawyer had failed to see the irony underlying the text and 'backed the idea of ridding England of seditious conventicles and meetings by depositing them all in the convenient dustbin of America' (Fowles 1996 [1985], 236). As the narrator stresses, '[a]ll ancient and established professions must be founded on tacit prejudices as strong as their written statutes and codes; and by those Ayscough is imprisoned as much as any debtor in the Fleet by law' (236). Consequently, the laws and conventions are presented as another constraint for the man, just as the Bible confines the believers in a set doctrine. This is why, when Rebecca evokes a female goddess, Holy Mother Wisdom, Ayscough cries out, voicing the traditional patriarchal view that, 'this is rank blasphemy. 'Tis writ clear in the Book of Genesis that Eve came of Adam's seventh rib' (380). The lawyer cannot accept any religious belief that is not consistent with the Bible, underlining the importance of the written word for Protestant Christian faith.

Language becomes constraining when one cannot escape from its content. Regularly Rebecca stresses her inability to make herself understood by the lawyer as they do not speak the same 'alphabet': 'Thee hast thy alphabet, and I mine, that is all' (Fowles 1996 [1985], 317). Ayscough speaks the language of the law; his letters to the lord are redolent with obsequiousness, while Rebecca speaks the language of emotion and tries to impart her experience but does not have the words for that, since they do not exist yet (television, napalm, planes, etc.). On the contrary, Dick and Bartholomew are able to understand each other without words. This leads Tarbox to conclude that '[t]he very medium of expression – language – tends to obscure meaning and inhibit understanding' (Tarbox 1988, 140). The plurality of meanings of the title 'maggot' is proof of the unreliability of language.

Furthermore, with his conformism and devotion to statutes and conventions, the lawyer is the embodiment of reason. Everything must be explained by science. As a consequence, he cannot accept Rebecca's version of events, but, as Foster argues, he 'fails utterly to make her also reject it and to arrive at some truth he can find plausible' (Foster 1994, 165). So, at the end, he is unable to give a satisfactory explanation to Bartholomew's father and he can only propose hypotheses. Yet he is convinced that 'she lies little in any ordinary sense, that is, as to what she believes of these events and their nature and meaning; as *non obstante* [he is] persuaded that her evidence is false in the substantial truth of what passed' (Fowles 1996 [1985], 441). This demonstrates his inability to arrive at a rational conclusion, as the oxymoron 'false / truth' and the emphasis on reason ('ordinary sense', 'substantial') express. This leads him to conclude that, 'it is most (if at all) to be believed because it is impossible to be believed' (441). The contradiction inherent in those words emphasises the limitations reason imposes on the mind.

In all this, Fowles aims at a reflection on his contemporary world. He concludes the novel stating that 'in so much else we have developed immeasurably from the eighteenth century; with their central plain question – what morality justifies the flagrant injustice and inequality of human society? – we have not progressed one inch' (459). Therefore, Fowles makes use of history, and the particular history of Dissent, to reflect on the past as well as the present. Indeed, this novel may have resonated particularly with a reader of 1985, as the United Kingdom was undergoing a time of political turmoil. Fowles, whose political inclinations were towards the left-wing, could not have failed to disagree with Margaret Thatcher's policies. In his diary, he writes after her second election victory in 1983:

the one firm leader and power-manipulator on the scene (that the 'scene' has allowed to be so, of course) is so popular because she aims and thinks backwards; in British terms, is safe. Nothing can change, under Thatcher. All may wait, all may stagnate – and no one will see (Fowles 2006, 275).

This chimes with what Bartholomew affirms at one stage: 'We moderns are corrupted by our past, our learning, our historians; and the more we know of what happened, the less we know of what will happen' (Fowles 1996 [1985], 150). History is stifling, we are imprisoned by the past. By pointing this out, Fowles highlights not only the confines enforced by society, religion, history or reason in the 1730s, but also those still present for the modern-day reader.

As a matter of fact, the lawyer is set as an example of the norm, of conformism, so as to better highlight the extremes, the radicals. This accords with Fowles's philosophy, based on that of Heraclitus, which he expounds in *The Aristos*. He thinks the population can be divided into two categories; the Many, the masses who conform to social standards and follow the norm

established by religion or political power, and the Few, some enlightened persons who are intellectually superior, like artists, and whose duty it is to educate the masses. Interestingly, in *A Maggot* Ayscough embodies the Many, the *hoi polloi*, while Rebecca, an illiterate working-class woman, stands for the Few, the *aristoi*. He describes their difference in terms of the human brain:

Those whom the left lobe (and the right hand) dominates are rational, mathematical, ordered, glib with words, usually careful and conventional;... those dominated by the right lobe... like Rebecca... are poor at reason, often confused in argument; their sense of time (and politic timing) is often defective. They tend to live and wander in a hugely extended now, treating both past and future as present, instead of keeping them in control and order, firmly separated, like honest, decent right-handers. They confuse, they upset, they disturb (Fowles 1996 [1985], 430).

The accumulation of words relating to the lexical field of order, highlighted by the rhythm, together with the redundant adjectives 'honest, decent', strike a note of irony, especially when contrasted with the more disorderly phrases concerning the other group. Besides, the caricatured presentation of Ayscough enhances the ironic note. As a consequence, the asyndetic auxesis 'they confuse, they upset, they disturb' reveals Fowles's inclination. Indeed, the writer despises the conventional as he admits in an interview; 'I was brought up in an intensely conventional suburb not far from London by, in social norms, conventional parents. I have tried to escape ever since, and have admired the unconventional, the breakers of rules' (Vipond 1999, 193). The novel is thus a means for him to express this radicalism, to teach the reader not to conform.

**'I suppose I have a liking for people who are outside society'  
(Fowles 1996 [1985], 18)**

John Fowles, as a writer, sees himself as an exile, an outcast from society. But he also believes it is the role of the artist to teach the reader, to open his or her mind. In an interview, he admits that '[a]ll artists are born contrasuggestibles, odd persons out. But no society can stay healthy without their criticism' (Fowles 1996 [1985], 63). Writing is therefore an instrument he uses to change our vision of society and he inscribes himself in that tradition. In 'I write therefore I am', he seems to hint at the fact that he chose writing for this reason: 'My first ambition has always been to alter the society I live in; that is, to affect other lives. I think I begin to agree with Marx-Lenin: writing is a very second-rate way of bringing about a revolution' (Fowles 1998, 6). This suggests that, although it must necessarily be in a mild form, writing is radical in its intent. And indeed, *A Maggot* has been criticized for being too didactic. In *The Guardian*, Robert Nye argues that 'there are two writers in John Fowles', one who is the poet, 'who trusts his unconscious and has something of the genuine mythopoeic imagination at work in him. The other Fowles, alas, is didactic, a

preacher/teacher with an incurable lust to inflict his views upon us' (Nye 1985). The reviewer thus dubs the epilogue the 'Author's Sermon' and judges it as a failure in an overall pleasant narrative.

Bruce Woodcock contends that '*A Maggot* is Fowles's most political novel' in that it implies 'an exploration of the diction and folklore of the period, and crucially a recovery of the ideological and political significance of dissent and the powerful critique it provided of the established social hegemony' (Woodcock 2013, 161). His tale is therefore a means to enlighten his readers and encourage them to express difference, as the Shakers did in their own time. They are the model upon which he bases his story, but it does not directly deal with the sect. Rather, John Fowles reinvents the history surrounding the birth of its founder, so as to sow the seeds of their creed in his narrative. As he says in an interview,

it's mainly concerned – in my mind that is, not in textual terms – with the rise of an extraordinary sect called the Shakers. The woman who founded it was a working class woman in Manchester called Ann Lee – I don't say anything directly about her, but the novel ends with her birth. It's really about the rise of primitive Dissent in the 1730s (Vipond 1999, 133).

What appealed to him in their origins was their 'revulsion from the injustices and vulgarities of the Church of England and the other established sects of the time' (Fowles 2006, 240), that is to say, their radicalism. Only one community remains today, the Sabbathday Lake Shakers in Maine, USA, which numbered only nine members in 2000 (Paterwic 2008, xxiii) and only two today according to their official website (<https://www.maineshakers.com/>) – a direct consequence of the celibate life they promote – but the cult counted up to 4,500 Shakers in the 1840s. Rebecca is the main vessel through which their beliefs are conveyed, and, contrary to Ayscough, she represents an extreme, for, in Fowles's mind, extremes are transgressive while ordinary people conform. Here, we can recognize the writer's fascination with women who are breaking free from patriarchal and social fetters – like Sarah in Fowles' *The French Lieutenant's Woman*. Carol Barnum suggests that Rebecca 'is the one who is willing to break out of the wasteland world to enact change' and that 'in this she is the existentialist heroine. Fowles gives her a religious part to play because a radical religious belief, one that isolates her from the world and makes her different, is the only means by which she can achieve freedom' (Barnum 1988, 142). Indeed, in 1988, he defined freedom as 'the ability to withstand the appalling brainwashing that we all get now through the media, to think of yourself and know yourself' (Vipond 1999, 161). In the 1730s, the brainwashing corresponds to the Bible, the laws and the conventions the lawyer lives by. Consequently, as Rebecca defies society and the lawyer, she expresses her individuality, for the only way to do so at the time is through unorthodox religion. This is what Fowles makes clear in his epilogue:

unorthodox religion was the only vehicle by which the vast majority, who were neither philosophers nor artists, could express this painful breaking of the seed of the self from the hard soil of an irrational and tradition-bound society – a society not so irrational it did not very well know how much it depended on *not* seeing its traditions questioned, its foundations disturbed (Fowles 1996 [1985], 457).

Foster further links this to political radicalism and the birth of modern society. He suggests that Fowles positions the founding of movements like Shakerism and Methodism as 'the birth of the modern sense of Self' and that the rise of Dissenting Protestantism, which placed heavy emphasis on the individual believer, went hand in hand with the rise of the democratic ideal, which placed emphasis on the individual citizen. Foster suggests that, 'If *A Maggot* is Fowles's least overtly existentialist novel, it is nevertheless the work that examines the historical framework that ultimately makes existentialism, with its total emphasis on the individual, possible' (Foster 1994, 166).

That Fowles chose a woman to be the bearer of his radical message coincides with his belief in women's superiority as regards emotion and sensibility. Fowles's female characters are always those that dominate his works, for he sees 'man as a kind of artifice, and woman as a kind of reality. The one is cold idea, the other is warm fact. Daedalus faces Venus, and Venus must win' (Fowles 1998, 23). Thus, she is set in opposition to the lawyer and together, they embody the male/female, reason/emotion, conformism/individuality, consumerist/communal dichotomies.

This antagonism is suggested from the beginning with the expression of equality Rebecca's use of the pronouns 'thee' and 'thou' demonstrates. As Ayscough exclaims, 'Enough. Watch thy tongue. None of thy thouing and theeing' (Fowles 1996 [1985], 301), using those pronouns himself to assert his superiority. She calmly proclaims equality between them; 'All are brothers and sisters in Christ... We are equal in this, if not in the world' (301). Her language reflects language use among Shakers, calling each other 'brother' and 'sister', and sharing all they have in a communal life. Fowles's talent shows through his ability to reveal in a simple question-and-answer form the superiority of Rebecca in the dialogue. The lawyer, who tries coaxing and bullying in turn, loses control on several occasions while she never does. Even at the end, Ayscough has been asked to give Rebecca a guinea, which she refuses. He then threatens that she might still be hanged, to which she replies: 'I give thee more love' (Fowles 1996 [1985], 439), the traditional greeting of the Shakers. She opposes money and the consumerist symbol it represents with love, voicing the pacifism and communism of the sect.

Moreover, the Shakers' ideal community life is glimpsed in the vision that Rebecca gets while in the maggot. She also witnesses men and women separated, which reflects the celibacy they advocate. This is why Rebecca, a



prostitute, refuses sexual intercourse with Jones after the events in the cave. She also declines to answer the lawyer's question about her marital life with her husband, suggesting they remain chaste. In fact, the sect rejects sex as the arch sin, following a vision Mother Ann had had of Adam and Eve coupling. This trait of their creed is made even more emphatic with Rebecca, a former prostitute – famous for acting the innocent virgin part, 'the Quaker Maid', at the brothel – becoming a Virgin figure at the end of the novel. By incarnating such extremes in the same person, Fowles renders the change more exceptional. He also spans the whole array of femininity in one character, exemplifying in one both the Virgin and Mary Magdalene, 'the diptych of Christian patriarchy's idea of woman', as Marina Warner points out (Warner 2013, 239). That God could have chosen a prostitute to give birth to the woman who would receive Christlife – their equivalent of the holy spirit – renders even more subversive the feminism heralded by the Dissenters in Fowles's tale.

This feminist approach is also exhibited in the duality of God, viewed as 'Father-Mother'. God has, Stephen Paterwic suggests, 'the traditionally male characteristics of strength and power and the traditionally female characteristics of compassion and mercy' (Paterwic 2008, 214). In *A Maggot*, this is given shape through the woman called Holy Mother Wisdom, standing beside God the Father in Rebecca's vision of June Eternal. She is, in her words, 'She without whom God the Father could not have made His works' (Fowles 1996 [1985], 379). Furthermore, the baby Rebecca is expecting, Ann Lee, was sometimes thought of by her followers as the 'second embodiment of the Christ spirit' (Wergland 2011, 21), therefore an equal to the first male Christ. Indeed, at the end of the story, Rebecca confronts her husband over the name of the baby. He wants to call her Mary and she Ann. She tells him, 'I tell thee, John Lee, when the Lord Jesus come again, He shall be She, and the mother must know Her name' (Fowles 1996 [1985], 453). In this, she is claiming to be another Virgin Mary, having given birth to a new female Jesus.

However, the other radical figure in the novel is a man – the absent, and yet ever present, Mr. Bartholomew. The rebellious son of an aristocrat who, in his own words, has 'no liberty unless [he] steal[s] it' (Fowles 1996 [1985], 43), he appears, in turn, as a 'modern skinhead' (21), a sadist with a 'demonic face' (49), and then, as a 'Buddhist monk' (55), all in the space of a few pages. He remains unknowable until the very end, and his real name, which all the characters seem to know, is denied the reader. He is the male pendant of Rebecca, and the one who teaches her to break free from her tethers, be they cultural or social (here Fowles inverts his usual dynamics of a woman teaching a man existentialist freedom). A dual figure, in Rebecca's first version of what happened, he has formed an alliance with Satan and couples with witches, while in her second version, he is a Christlike figure, taken away to June Eternal on board the spaceship. He is a pure entity, while his deaf-and-dumb servant is endowed with all the carnal sins. Therefore, as she states at the end:

now do I see they were as one in truth, Dick of the carnal and imperfect body, his Lordship of the spirit; such twin natures as we all must hold, in them made outward and a seeming two. And as Jesus Christ's body must die upon the Cross, so must this latterday earthly self, poor unregenerate Dick, die so the other half be saved (421).

This also implies that the baby she is expecting – against all hopes, for she was barren – was conceived of Christ through her sexual relations with Dick. Such extraordinary circumstances would cohere, in Fowles's imagination, with the extraordinary destiny of the Manchester baby. This Christlike quality of Bartholomew is emphasized by the appearance of his ghost at the end of the interview with Rebecca, which mirrors the visions the real-life Ann Lee had which prompted her to found the movement in America (Paterwic 2008, 126-127). At the beginning, Bartholomew is the one who pinpoints the imprisonment of people in history and stresses the advantage of the builders of Stonehenge over our time: 'they who set and dressed those stones lived before the tale began, Lacy, in a present that had no past, such as we may hardly imagine to ourselves' (Fowles 1996 [1985], 151). Therefore, his escape into another dimension or time represents a fictitious liberation from the chains of the past.

The didactic intention of the novel is thus to invite the reader to break free from the fetters of the past, of history. The fact that the mystery of Bartholomew's disappearance remains unsolved, or rather left to the reader's choice, is a way for Fowles to encourage this breaking away from an established historical past. According to Holmes, he means to impart an existential truth to the reader by leaving the mystery unresolved; '*A Maggot* resists unambiguous interpretation and closure... [I]t suggests that to impose finality on narratives is to falsify the existential uncertainty which is an inescapable part of being alive' (Holmes 1991, 233). Here Holmes links this to existentialism, as Barnum does, for they try to interpret this novel in the light of the others. However, if Fowles had instilled that philosophy in his earlier oeuvre, by 1985, he admits that he now rather believes in determinism, that man is free in very little of his actions (Vipond 1999, 121). This is why I see it more in terms of an appeal to become radical, that is, to become independent from conventions and social standards.

Finally, it is also a means to assert the power of fiction over reality, fiction over history. While Ayscough's language is stultified for being too pedantic and obsequious, Rebecca's appears as simple, honest, and truthful, the language of emotions. And as such, the power of literature over science is asserted, since there may not be any logical argument sustaining her story, yet one believes her. Frederick Holmes thus assimilates her narratives as art for, compared with Ayscough's accounts, 'Lee's stories are more richly textured, suspenseful, and thematically suggestive. In short, they are aesthetically superior as narrative literature' (Holmes 1991, 237).

In the epilogue, Fowles links Shaker's ideology with fiction writing, saying:

Something in Shaker thought and theology (not least in its holding that a Holy Trinity that has no female component cannot be holy), in its strange rituals and marvellously inventive practical life, in its richly metaphorical language and imaginative use of dancing and music, has always seemed to me to adumbrate the relation of fiction to reality. We novelists also demand a far-fetched faith, quite often seemingly absurd in relation to normal reality; we too need a bewildering degree of metaphorical understanding from our readers before the truths behind our tropes can be conveyed, can 'work' (Fowles 1996 [1985], 456).

Therefore, one may argue that choosing a radical religious movement as a subject is also related to Fowles's radicalism as a writer, for he tries, as always, to depart from the conventions of novel-writing, and certainly here, to depart from the traditional historical novel genre.

**'I would not have this seen as a historical novel. It is maggot.'**  
**(Fowles 1996 [1985], 6)**

In the prologue and the epilogue, the author disavows the assumption that *A Maggot* could be an historical novel, as he had once done with *The French Lieutenant's Woman*. He warns us; 'Readers who know something of what that Manchester baby was to become in the real world will not need telling how little this is a (*sic*) historical novel' (Fowles 1996 [1985], 455). However, in interviews, he repeatedly states that he wrote two historical novels. This may relate to the difficulty in defining what a historical novel is. Contrary to what Georg Lukács deems to be a traditional feature of the historical novel (Lukács 1983 [1962], 41), Fowles does not represent a time of crisis for the nation. Indeed, from the beginning, he insists on the opposite. In the 1980s, Linda Hutcheon created a new category for such novels, namely historiographic metafiction. Through parody and the narrative voice where it is present, the novel plays on a vast number of 'unresolved and unresolvable paradoxes', such as 'the conventions of history and fiction', or 'the conflicts between truth and lies' (Hutcheon 1988, 47), which are paradoxes fascinating to the postmodern author in Hutcheon's view.

Lately, the terminology has evolved. *A Maggot* is set in 1736, thus in a definite historic timeframe. Yet, the presence of time travel, i.e. science-fiction, as well as Satanic rituals with Gothic overtones, place the novel more in the category of what Bryony Stocker calls 'historically-set speculative fiction', for she concludes her examination of the theoretical approaches to the historical novel genre with the definition: 'a novel is historical when the main setting is a time before the writer was born, and the writer operates within a factual-led framework without seeking to distort the past with an alternative or pseudo history' (Stocker 2017, 78). However, if the reader does not believe any of the tales proposed by Rebecca and adheres to the lawyer's point of view, then this may be an historical novel.

Moreover, although Fleishman cites the inclusion of a real character as necessary to the genre (Fleishman 1971, 3-4), when real personages are inserted but their life is almost completely made up, does this still count? In fact, with every novel he writes, Fowles tries to challenge established conventions and can thus be seen as radical in that sense. Here, he distorts historical elements in order to suit his purpose. At the end of the novel, he insists that he did not do any research and that real characters such as Wardley or Lacy are 'almost all invention beyond their names' (Fowles 1996 [1985], 455). He knows that Ann Lee was born, in reality, on the 29<sup>th</sup> February 1736, that is before even the beginning of the story. Besides, Ann Lee was the second of eight children, and she herself gave birth to four children who all died in infancy, which is not at all in keeping with the plot and the celibacy advocated by Rebecca. One may wonder why Fowles deliberately places the story after Ann Lee's real birth, while she was really born in Toad Lane in Manchester, unless it would be to fit his insertion of the *Gentleman's Magazine's* pages, which are real historical documents (available online). As they relate the Porteous affair in Edinburgh, they may be a disguised allusion to Walter Scott's traditional historical novel *The Heart of Midlothian*, according to William Stephenson, who argues that, 'Fowles's choice to make his novel run simultaneously with the Porteous affair, and to announce this through the *Gentleman's Magazine* excerpts, suggests that he is aware of his own work's connection to a canonical historical novel' (Stephenson 2003, 60). Besides, Fowles explains that these pages add a touch of authenticity to a fictional recreation of the past. It is 'useful because it does give you many authentic facts of the time, and shows how they were printed... And an impression of the cruelty of the time, because the English had a barbarous judicial system' (Vipond 1999, 178). This is why Onega describes the novel as:

an all-inclusive patchwork, made up of both fictional and historical material, stitched together by the wonderfully accurate imitation of diverse eighteenth-century styles; so accurate indeed that the Historical Chronicles – supposedly reproduced in order to act as foils for contrast with them – in practice work in both directions, establishing differences but also psychologically reinforcing the illusion of realism of the created world (Onega 1989, 140).

Thus, reality and different layers of fiction become mixed, but, as a postmodern novelist, this may be precisely his aim. Where is the truth to be found? Is it in the historical pages of the *Magazine*, in the real characters, or in the plot itself? Maybe nowhere. Indeed, as Jerome De Groot affirms, 'historical writing, and indeed all the ways in which we understand and engage with the past, are innately partial' (De Groot 2010, 112). They are rewritings of the past seen through the author's own perceptions and beliefs. Jenkins adds that 'texts are not cognitive, empirical, epistemological entities, but speculative, propositional

invitations to *imagine* the past *ad infinitum*' (Jenkins 2003, 49). Therefore, Fowles's rewriting of the past may be as valuable as another.

But it goes a step further. Indeed, inside the novel itself, a plurality of versions of the same story are offered, none of them reliable. As the witnesses succeed each other in front of the lawyer, one thinks one gets part of the mystery solved, until it is proved a lie by the following witness. Bartholomew invented a reason for the trip for each protagonist he hired, each one being the most appropriate to convince the person concerned – a romantic version for Lacy, a mercenary one for Jones, a sexual one for Rebecca and her employer. Then, what happened inside the cave takes on diabolical undertones when Jones retells the story he got from Rebecca. As she later admits, she had to lie, to give a version her contemporaries could believe. But it is in no way one that a twentieth-century reader could accept as true. Then, when she tells her truthful version, of what a reader might recognize as a space-ship travelling through time and televised images, she lacks the vocabulary and knowledge of the future to understand and interpret what she experienced. It is not something Ayscough could believe in his own time, but it is something which the contemporary reader can believe. This has a further consequence for the reader, for as Brian McHale suggests, 'it obliges us to reconceive the storyworld of *A Maggot* as a *science-fiction* world. The novel asks us – in fact, compels us – to accept UFOs, space- or time-travelling aliens, and alien abductions as realities in this world' (McHale 2013, 183). This leads the reader to reconsider the genre of the novel as science-fiction rather than the supposed historical novel. Of course, no version being really satisfactory, in a manner typical of Fowles, the mystery remains unsolved. In fact, by the very unreality of the possibilities offered, the writer points to the insubstantiality of history. De Groot argues that postmodern historical novelists have manipulated the crisis of representation inspired by postmodern historiography, for 'the very insubstantiality inherent in our relation to 'History' has provided them with a set of tools for challenging legitimating narratives and locating radical dissent' (De Groot 2010, 112). Rewriting Ann Lee's pre-birth history is certainly a means for Fowles to force the reader into a questioning of history, reality, and the emergence of radical movements.

It has a further impact, according to Foster, when considering the dichotomy formed by Rebecca and Ayscough between reason and unreason. He links that to the postmodern revolution:

How can a mode of fiction best suited to capturing the quotidian, the average, be made to accommodate the uncanny, without relegating it to some demeaned category of fable, fantasy, tale? Ayscough, while not a literary creator, represents the turn of mind that led to literary realism being the favoured mode for more than a century. Fowles is the literary creator who seeks to work in the realistic tradition without being dominated by it. His struggle... involves his attempt to account for the

uncanny, the numinous, while working within a tradition designed to reveal the everyday, the phenomenal (Foster 1994, 165).

This had already been prefigured in *The French Lieutenant's Woman* where he parodied the realism of the nineteenth century only to subvert its conventions, thereby creating one of the first postmodern novels. With *A Maggot*, Fowles goes back to the origins of the novel in the eighteenth century. He parodies the style of Thackeray or Defoe, as well as the language of the time. However, the narrator's contemporary point of view reminds the reader that it cannot be a novel written two centuries before, and as such, it has a 'polysemic value', as Onega points out, for it inscribes itself in a long tradition of writers, and recasts 'not only the inheritance of the eighteenth-century pseudo-historical novel, but the bulk of the Western literary tradition' (Onega 1989, 141). Through more or less explicit references, Shakespeare or Richardson come to the reader's mind and Fowles skims over and incorporates the genres of romance and science-fiction, Gothic or detective stories, so much so that the unconventional structure partakes in the subversion. Apart from the fact that one is carried through what appears to be an historical novel, which turns out to be a sort of detective story before its time, to finally become a science-fiction novel, one also has to contend with a multiplicity of voices and points of view, figuring a Bakhtinian polyphony of discourses which form the essence of the novel.

In the first part of the novel, an external point of view is given on the events of the day preceding the mysterious abduction of the Duke's son, but, through dialogue, the reader already understands that nobody is really who they seem to be. Moreover, the reader's confusion is increased by the proliferation of names relating to one and the same individual. Rebecca is first known as Louise, in her role as a maid, then she is Fanny or the Quaker Maid in her bagnio, and finally her real name is revealed. Mr Bartholomew's however, never is. Only Dick's name (a very apt one considering his procreative role) remains the same all through the story. The letters offer the point of view of the writer, either Ayscough or a subordinate, Richard Pygge. But most interesting are the transcriptions of the depositions. This was part of the challenge Fowles set himself in this novel, as he explains:

I've always liked that as a technique, because I'm a collector of books, and I've always loved eighteenth-century trials. And this is where the business of what you don't write comes in. A lovely thing about the Q and A form is that you're cutting off an arm in fact. Because in most novels, you can say, "she smiled", or "she looked sad", or "she went to the window", or whatever. And, of course, you forbid that once you enter this form. So you have to make your dialogue work pretty hard, certainly harder than an ordinary straightforward novel's dialogue. And that kind of challenge always pleases me. I think also, in the novel, you've got to find something you know you're not sure you can do (Vipond 1999, 142).

This technique also removes the narrator from the novel, to give a more ‘trustworthy’ account of what was said. Nevertheless, even this assumption is cut short by the clerk’s telling us that ‘where I cannot read when I copy in the long hand, why, I make it up. So I may hang a man, or pardon him, and none the wiser’ (Fowles 1996 [1985], 347). Once again, the reader is refused any certainties about what was said and language is denied any truthfulness. It seems as if John Fowles has put into practice what was advocated by Roland Barthes in ‘The Death of the Author’:

We know now that a text is not a line of words releasing a single ‘theological’ meaning (the ‘message’ of the Author-God) but a multi-dimensional space in which a variety of writings, none of them original, blend and clash... To give a text an Author is to impose a limit on that text, to furnish it with a final signified, to close the writing... In the multiplicity of writing, everything is to be *disentangled*, nothing *deciphered*... writing ceaselessly posits meaning ceaselessly to evaporate it, carrying out a systematic exemption of meaning (Barthes 1977, 146-147).

Fowles had stated earlier that one cannot completely erase the author from a text, saying, ‘and not even the most aleatory avant-garde novel has managed to extirpate its author completely’ (Fowles, 2004 [1969], 97). However, here he certainly tried to erase at least the narrator and offer a multiplicity of meanings to the reader, none of which is satisfying. What follows is even more striking, for Barthes goes on:

In precisely this way literature... by refusing to assign a ‘secret’, an ultimate meaning, to the text (and to the world as text) liberates what may be called an anti-theological activity, an activity that is truly revolutionary since to refuse to fix meaning is, in the end, to refuse God and his hypostases—reason, science, law (Barthes 1977, 146-147).

Therefore, the very structure of the novel can be seen as radical in its impact, for, by being denied one truthful version, the reader’s own certainties may collapse, even in the real world he or she inhabits. In such circumstances, the epilogue, with its lesson on Shakerism, somewhat undermines the effect, by reaffirming the presence of the author.

The clerk’s statement, ‘There are two truths, mistress. One that a person believes is truth; and one that is truth incontestible. We will credit you the first, but the second is what we seek’, is challenged in the novel (Fowles 1996 [1985], 348). What is sure is that we never get that ‘truth incontestible’. In fact, the various tensions in terms of genre, ideas, didacticism, and language, make the text as a whole both worthwhile and subversive. History is made use of only to underline this fact. Even defining the novel as an historical novel becomes doubtful, which leads Holmes to call it an ‘unconventional historical novel’ (Holmes 1991, 229). Thus the reader is led to refuse conformism in literature as

well as in society. Yet, all this is in keeping with Fowles's philosophy as expounded in *The Aristos*:

We are in the best possible situation because everywhere, below the surface, we do not know; we shall never know why; we shall never know tomorrow; we shall never know a god or if there is a god; we shall never even know ourselves. This mysterious wall round our world and our perception of it is not there to frustrate us but to train us back to the now, to life, to our time being (Fowles 2007 [1964], 10).



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

Erica Tortolani, University of Massachusetts Amherst.

***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.*

*Keywords:* Silent film, Benjamin Christensen, witchcraft, documentary, history, psychoanalysis

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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