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Realizing the Witch

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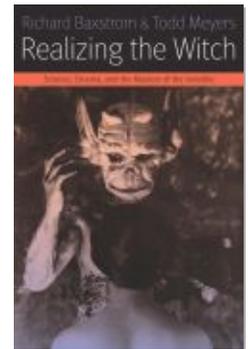
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Hysterias

The history of hysteria seems to cry out for sociological reading.

—MARK S. MICALÉ, “Hysteria and Its Historiography” (1989)

The most remarkable feature of Benjamin Christensen’s presentation of hysteria is what it is not. By 1922, hysteria had been driven to two poles. On the one hand was the image of the “Viennese” hysteric—effete, often affluent, and nearly always female.¹ This figure may be cliché, but it certainly was a real image in the popular imagination of European society in the early twentieth century. Most important, the figure had changed dramatically from the poor, destitute women treated by Pinel and Charcot decades earlier.² The female hysteric had evolved.

On the other hand, a different figure of the hysteric had not so much evolved as it was violently forged. He was male, and he was often a soldier, having survived the conflict of the Boer War and the Great War.³ The sufferer of *kriegsneurose*, war neuroses, or shell shock exists as the living sign of a traumatic event that must be either healed or hidden in order for the society itself to heal. Yet art and cinema take up the challenge in producing experiential works that mine this great catastrophe for whatever purchase



Patient suffering from war neuroses, film still from Arthur Hurst's *War Neuroses: Netley Hospital*, 1917/18). Courtesy of Wellcome Library, London.

may exist for its survivors to truly grasp the event, allowing them to move from traumatically reexperiencing the war to the fading forgetfulness of grieving it. Walter Benjamin is wrong to say that these men returned from the battlefield “silent.” While the spirit of his remark is understandable, it is clear that the utterances and gestures of this tragic, unintended iteration simply required a new clinical grammar.⁴

Owing to the fact that Christensen was actively engaged in a project to bring superstition, hypocrisy, and witchcraft into the clear light of modernity, it would seem that this would include a vanguard effort to link his thesis to the changing profile of the hysteric. The configuration of hysteria at the time *Häxan* was made (1918–21) is not one necessarily shared by Christensen's contemporaries; rather, it more closely resembles the hysterics of Charcot's clinic some forty years earlier. Considering that he was working through *the most* technologically modernist art form as a means to illustrate an empirical connection between the witchcraft of *then* and the nervous ill-

ness of *now*, it is odd that contemporary “hysterics” fashioned by war only a few years earlier have no real place in the director’s account. Yet with its necessary move away from the Freudian centrality of *sexuality*, it is clear that the evolving diagnostics of *war neurosis* would prove to be a serious issue for the respective theses of Freud and Christensen alike.⁵

It should be clear by now that Christensen had not just made a film about either witches or hysterics. Rather, he had made a film about a mobile force that, in particular times and places, has gone by *the name* “witch” or “hysteric.” This is the real source of the film’s power. It is also a serious formal problem for the director. Having dared to express something of this uncanny power, it becomes impossible for Christensen to close the circle of the thesis from within the framework he has claimed for the film. There is also a fundamental disconnect between the hysteric, whose character is clear, and the witch, who only exhibits the character of the hysteric when under torture. The real “hysterics” were those intent on demonstrating their connection to the Devil without the benefit of torture. All the same, to really follow the expressive logic of the first six chapters of the film to its conclusion would destroy the film’s credibility as a documentary work. Thus, Christensen appears to feel that he is faced with a choice that is not really a choice at all. On the one hand, if he seeks to end by attempting to simply rename the witch in the present *Häxan* becomes an exercise of intolerable faux-spirituality. This is the strategy that Margaret Murray took in her own unfortunate attempt to place the witch in history—her transcendentalized earth-goddess version of the figure irritating us to this day through the neutered, self-absorbed identity politics of new-age psychobabble.⁶ On the other hand, to fully embrace a position of objectivity would undermine the *idea* of the entire film, the science of hysteria in the 1920s now concerned with the aftermath of a devastating war and the neurotic sway of modernity on delicate psyches rather than the somatic expressions of a mobile power at one time associated with the witch. Christensen is courageous to attempt a conclusion to *Häxan* anyway. He was sufficiently self-aware to know that he could not close this circle, however, as indicated by the fact that he seriously considered dropping this final section entirely when the film was re-released in 1941.

This problem is essential to bear in mind as we confront our own task in analyzing the final chapter of *Häxan*. Considering the explicit depiction of

heresy, blasphemy, adjuration, sex, violence, nudity, cannibalism, torture, excretion, perfidy, and deceit that composes the raw materials of *Häxan's* visual thesis through the first six chapters, it is striking that the most controversial section of the film for contemporary audiences is this final chapter. Christensen's attempt to carry his thesis full circle to issues of mental health, gender, and the law nearly always elicits sustained condemnations from viewers. His articulation of a halfhearted humanism and vague Freudian framework for explaining the witch craze and its relation to contemporary social issues leads many to disregard the conclusion of the film as antiquated and trite. This final chapter serves to further distance *Häxan* from the serious purpose Christensen intended, despite the film's overt tone of studied empirical indifference. While we would agree with the assessment that hysteria does not serve as a sufficient explanatory framework for witchcraft, we obviously cannot agree that *Häxan* is therefore unworthy of serious reflection, for reasons that must already be clear. It is in this context that our analysis of the final chapter (indeed, of the entire film) must be understood.

Satan Dispossessed

This final section of *Häxan* starts with a series of title cards resituating the setting of the film, leaping over "the Devil's possessions," and bringing the audience into the present. Returning to the demonstrative mode that the film began with, Christensen lays out a series of comparisons between the sixteenth and the early twentieth centuries regarding the status and treatment of the stigmatized groups highlighted throughout the film. Starting with old women, *Häxan* notes that such individuals, often alone and lacking independent means of support and care, are now taken in by "pious organizations" and "nursing homes." The scene is visualized through a sequence that takes place in a nursing home, the female residents shown politely eating together around a large table. Christensen shows several of the women, highlighting the effects of aging on their faces and bodies through close-ups. In the course of this sequence, the director draws a visual comparison between the "old hag" of the witch stereotype and the plaintive faces of these present-day elderly women. Despite the focus on physical anomalies (extreme wrinkling, a missing eye, a persistent head shake, a growing "hump"

on the back), the gestures of the women suggest kindly old grandmothers rather than the dangerous and repellent figure of the witch. Christensen's visual technique remains consistent with the earlier sections, deploying a nimble editing style in generating flowing close-ups to move the scene along.

Even Maria the "witch" is rehabilitated. Christensen repeats several of the powerful facial close-ups from her earlier interrogation, albeit with a caveat. In keeping with his model of demonstration, the *mise-en-scène* is punctured as the narrating cards identify the old woman as an actress. Maren Pedersen, rather than her character Maria, is the person we now see. The specter of Maria remains, however, as Christensen tactlessly explains that it would be a mistake to think that beliefs in the Devil are a thing of the past. He tells us that Pedersen once, during a break on the set, stated, "The Devil is real—I have seen him sitting at my bedside." Christensen cuts to a shot of the old woman gazing upward with a gesture of seriousness and trepidation. Although played less "hysterically," the visual rhyme with the final shot of the previous section is unmistakable: a suffering believer catching sight of a devil we (the viewer) cannot ourselves see.

Persisting with this gauche ethnographic display that personalizes the "ignorance" of one of his key collaborators, Christensen begins (with the permission of "the old woman," although it is unclear if he means Maren Pedersen or someone else) an examination of a prayer book, published the year before the film's release, which provides instructions on how to identify the Devil by sight. Flipping through the pages of this slim volume, the helpful offscreen guide returns, his pointer guiding the viewer to the important parts of the pages. The drawings themselves, however, are vague and Christensen does not linger on them. It is unclear at this stage how these contemporary beliefs figure into the director's thesis. Perhaps they are meant to link religious hysteria to the various forms of nervous exhaustion he claims were misidentified as the "insanity" of the witch. So briefly rendered, however, the scene marks the persistence of "superstition" and little more. Christensen appears more eager to move ahead to his "young, nervous woman" than to continue to engage Maren's old wives' tales any further.

A Nervous Young Woman

The refusal of modern “enlightenment” to treat possession as a hypothesis to be spoken of as even possible, in spite of the massive human tradition based on concrete experience in its favor, has always seemed to me a curious example of the power to fashion in things scientific. That the demon theory will have its innings again is to my mind absolutely certain.

William James, *Proceedings of the American Society for Psychological Research* (1909)

At this stage Christensen makes his most direct claim in the film: “The witch’s insanity can be explained as a nervous exhaustion.” A title card promises examples to follow, all portrayed by the same actress. Although mimicking the dry style of the diagnostician, this almost apologetic statement hardly qualifies as a diagnosis. In light of the powerful scenes that intensively build to a strong visual association between witchcraft, possession, and nervous illness that came before, again taking up the arid tone of the scientific demonstration film threatens to disrupt the film’s rhythm.

The audience sees the woman. “I have personally known a very nervous young woman,” Christensen assures us. While the specter of the *Malleus Maleficarum* hangs over the entire film, never is Christensen more explicit about the *epistemological* analogy that exists between this famous text and *Häxan* as he is here. Compare Christensen’s attempt to index the film’s authority with Institoris and Sprenger’s own assertion of expertise, worth citing again, in the *Malleus*:

We are now labouring at subject matter involving morality, and for this reason it is not necessary to dwell on various arguments and explanations everywhere, since the topics that will follow in the chapters have been sufficiently discussed in the preceding questions. Therefore, we beseech the reader in the name of God not to ask for an explanation of all matters, when suitable likelihood is sufficient if facts that are generally agreed to be true either on the basis of one’s own experience from seeing or hearing or on the basis of the accounts given by trustworthy witnesses are adduced.⁷

This *demand* for the reader/viewer to take experience, witnessing, and testimony seriously as empirical evidence is an innovation that was until recently ignored in historical accounts of demonology and witchcraft.

Christensen's own reliance on the claim that experience and testimony must legitimately occupy the space of evidence is similarly forgotten in the course of the demonstrative cinematic reenactments. Yet both works present themselves as *factual* accounts, whatever our assessment of this claim may be, and work accordingly to innovate and secure their respective definitions of *a fact*.

What has Christensen witnessed? What is the evidentiary value of having "known a very nervous young woman"? First of all, Christensen has witnessed a somnambulist. In turn, we witness the nervous woman serving as Christensen's evidence with a medium shot, the actress in profile, standing upright yet sound asleep. In a posture very similar to that of the possessed nun shown in the previous section abjuring the communion host, Christensen's actress/example extends her arm, palm upright, and turns dreamily toward the camera. The woman's sleepwalking tendency does not factor further in Christensen's argument. Rather, this introductory shot merely serves to introduce the character and index her as a sufferer of the type of nervous disorder that *Häxan* asserts as both cause and explanation for being taken for a witch in earlier times. The somnambulist is a powerful symbol of the melancholic (a "gateway" condition for the witch, as we discussed earlier), images of Charcot's hysteric, and Freud's portrayal of the neurotic in equal measure. The shot requires no further explanation because it brings forth the intersecting categories as a singular image in the mind simply by virtue of what it is. Against the director's better judgment, we have almost come back around to the point where we started, as Christensen finds himself again trying to speak *the language of things*. As before, he will find it impossible to escape *the language of voice* that the inquisitor Visconti centuries before outlined as the proper language of humans.

A Forced Return to the Archive

It may be stated, I believe, as an invariable truth, that, whenever a religion which rests in great measure on a system of terrorism, and which paints in dark and forcible colours the misery of men and the power of evil spirits, is intensely realized, it will engender the belief in witchcraft or magic. The panic which its teachings create, will overbalance the faculties of multitudes. The awful images of evil spirits of superhuman power, and of untiring malignity, will

continually haunt the imagination. They will blend with the illusions of age or sorrow or sickness, and will appear with an especial vividness in the more alarming and unexplained phenomena of nature.

W.E.H. Lecky, *History of the Rise and Influence of the Spirit of Rationalism in Europe* (1865)

It is impossible for humans to speak in God's language, the language of things. Thus, a barrage of title cards follows Christensen's display of the somnambulist. The director poses the question of why the woman compulsively reenacts "the very thing she was most afraid she would do." The woman, "like the witch forced by the Devil," compulsively strikes matches, and is shown awake in bed igniting the matches for no apparent reason. Christensen speculates that her compulsion is rooted in the traumatic memory of a fire that once broke out in her home, cutting immediately back to the woman lying uneasily in her bed, eyeing the box of matches on her nightstand and stiffly reaching out for them. The title cards continue to roll by, informing us that the woman felt she was fighting "an unknown force stronger than her own," followed by a shot where the compulsive grasping for the matchbox is repeated. Christensen's skill as a filmmaker is evident in this sequence, as he has combined rather wordy intertitles with shots of very simple, almost static action in such a way that sense of the unceasing return of the melancholic/hysteric is conveyed to the viewer with an unnoticed economy. And yet it is clear that the director has regressed in his method. Unlike previous chapters of the film, face and tableau on their own no longer move Christensen's thesis forward. He now needs words—an abundance of words—to express what he means.

Christensen also makes a key claim at this stage: the root of the woman's nervous compulsion is one of *excess memory*. This logic would resonate with Freud's theories of the unconscious, of memory, and of trauma for an audience in 1922, and Christensen glosses popular understandings of Freud in a manner that will become all the more obvious when the female character, marked as a hysteric, is visited by an aggressor in her nightmare, repeating a seduction scene. Less obviously but no less crucial to the specificity of *Häxan's* thesis, the notion of excess memory was also at the heart of theories of melancholia—in the case of Freud, the melancholic's inability to complete the mourning process due to the development of a love attachment to a new object, a chain of (mistaken) associations leading to inevitable fragmentation,

which he called melancholy.⁸ Furthermore, although limited to an elite group of demonologists and theologians, the mechanics of possession was often linked to concepts akin to excess memory as well, particularly in piecing together how the Devil was able to possess individuals and force them to act according to his will. As Maggi has demonstrated, the logical framework of exorcism not only required techniques that allowed the exorcist to speak the Devil's language himself without becoming possessed but also demanded a renewed agency on the part of the possessed to domesticate and repossess their own memories.⁹ In other words, the possessed, like the melancholic and the neurotic, had to be restored to a forgetfulness that Satan simply will not allow of those caught by him.

Christensen emphasizes the connection by again showing us Sister Cecilia in the chapel, driven to unspeakable acts by the Devil. The scene retraces the events shown earlier, although interestingly the sequence is not identical to the one shown before, affording the viewer a slightly altered look at the action. Even this seemingly straightforward strategy of comparing and contrasting case studies across time conveys a sense beyond its explicit purpose in Christensen's hands, as the fluid ontology of memory itself is evoked by presenting the remembered event as a "repetition, but not quite." The director does not explicitly focus on this visual resonance between strategy and content. Rather, he moves directly to his claim that the dazed and delusionary condition of both of these women is characteristic of "nervous diseases we call hysteria." Christensen has finally come around to stating his thesis outright, but the scientific effort to complete his argument is running against the image of the witch he developed in earlier chapters, making it impossible for him to close the circle.

There is still more we are told. Recall the witch who received nightly visitations from Satan in the second chapter. Christensen jumps abruptly to another "memory," this time of the Devil looming over the sleeping couple, the wife writhing responsively as he calls her. As with the previous sequence, the action is the same, but the shots used are slightly different from the ones the audience viewed before. Christensen claims that visitations such as these are still taking place, but in the present it is likely to be "a famous actor, a popular clergyman, or a well-known doctor" who makes the lusty, spectral visit. *Häxan* moves on to a sequence that visually mirrors the earlier visitation depicting the modern hysteric being visited by a well-dressed

middle-aged man. Although it is not Satan this time, the appearance of the man is extremely disturbing nevertheless. The actor slowly produces an ominous, creepy smile very similar to the one we see on Johannes's face earlier in the film, and the traumatized woman understandably screams loudly at the sight of him lurking at the foot of her bed. It is here that the understanding of hysteria as generated by a real or imagined seduction scene from which the hysteric continues to suffer (including in traumatic nightmare or apparition scenes, such as this one) comes to recall both Freud's early and abandoned seduction theory and his post-1897 argument that this scene would be repeated in the unconscious. The scene Christensen stages here—so reminiscent of a traumatic nightmare—would not necessarily have to repeat an actual earlier encounter, merely the hysteric's unconscious belief that a consciously undesirable (and unconsciously desired) encounter with a seducer has taken place. Her shriek wakes the others in the house and brings them running to the woman's room; this action is intercut with shots of the leering apparition approaching the terrified woman and placing his hand on her chest. As she rigidly tightens with fear, it remains unclear if he is intending to harm or comfort her. As the others burst into the room, the man dissolves away, much like the Devil would exit the frame. Catatonic, the woman desperately clutches her bed sheets.

The images in this sequence are explicitly modeled on those produced by Charcot, Ronde, Richer, and other pioneers in the diagnosis and treatment of hysteria. As Christensen is quick to claim in the accompanying title card, the woman is displaying the visual characteristics, diagnosed and verified by medical experts, of the modern hysteric.

This is as close to the clinical hysteric as we will get in this final chapter of the film. If we are paying attention, we realize that this is really not very close at all. The demonstrations that surround this visitation scene may display other types of nervous illness such as kleptomania, but these are conditions of a different order. Certainly, theories have been offered that link this set of disorders, but for our purposes here this is unimportant because Christensen does not himself make this claim. At this late stage, the director appears to have rid himself entirely of referencing precise diagnostic categories, a sharp contrast with his approach up to this point. Unlike the meticulous care Christensen took to ground his spectacular images of witches and the Devil in the details of witchcraft's operation in history, here



Transfixed in *Häxan*, film still (Svensk Filmindustri, 1922).



Augustine, "Attitudes passionnelles: Crucifixion," *Iconographie*, vol. 2, from Désiré-Magloire Bourneville, Paul Régnaud, Jean-Martin Charcot, and Édouard Delessert, *Iconographie photographique de la Salpêtrière: Service de M. Charcot*, 3 vols. (Paris: Progrès Médical, 1877–80).

we find that the director's shots correspond to the singularity of the hysteric only insofar as he is able to render the *distress of the image* that each figure engenders.¹⁰ Visual spectacle defines *Häxan* as a work; in this final chapter the spectacle threatens to slip from being an instrument of the director to a mere characteristic of his expression.

Christensen *knows* this. He was undoubtedly conscious of the lack we have identified here. It is obvious from the materials he cites for the audience that he is as knowledgeable of the contemporary clinical literature on hysteria as his is of the historical accounts and sources regarding witchcraft. Thus, we are *not* arguing that Christensen could not satisfactorily conclude the film due to an inadequate mastery of his subject. If anything, he intuitively grasped the vector formed out of the convergence of witchcraft, hysteria, and the image so completely that it is these impossible elements that are *really* what is at play in his expression in this final chapter.

Charcot's clinical materials on hysteria, particularly the photographs and the narratives of what came next (as best we can tell) for the models, provide an account that, read against their original intent, yields a similar story to the one we are telling about *Häxan*. As with the witch, this same mobile force that animated the phenomenon refused to be fully encircled or named. The entire spectacular enterprise eventually falls apart, sounding off with what Georges Didi-Huberman has described as the resonating tones of a fugue. Didi-Huberman continues, "Each was asking too much: the physician, with his experimental escalation and his director's vertigo, believing he could do, undo, and redo anything with the bodies yielded to him; the hysteric, with her escalation of consent, in fact demolishing all the reserve and graciousness of representation. What stops there is indeed the reciprocal operation of charm, the death of one desire, if not of two. Disconcertment: deception put out of countenance, the rupture of a rhythm by which a structure could be effusive."¹¹ The final chapter of *Häxan* does not summarize the director's findings; it expresses his vertigo.

God Forgives Everyone but Satan

We are not quite finished with this sequence in the film. Startlingly, the last shot in this series is of Satan strangling a woman. This seemingly out-of-

place edit serves as a relay, moving the narrative forward to consider the correspondence between the Devil's practice of leaving insensitive marks on the bodies of witches and the corresponding symptom of localized loss of sensation common in cases of hysteria—that is, *anesthesia*. Returning to the safety of the distant past, the demonstrative pornography of Christensen's visualization of relations between the Devil and women recurs here. Satan's elongated, clawlike fingers probe a nude woman who is lying with her back to the camera. Although the woman's backside is partially obscured by a strategically placed cauldron, a resurgent sexual overtone dominates the scene. Moving the comparison along, Christensen returns to the executioner checking the Young Maiden's back for these insensitive marks during her interrogation. As expected, there are zones on her back where she cannot discern the executioner's touch. Christensen does not doubt that the loss of sensation is real. The scene cross-fades to a contemporary examination in progress at a doctor's office (interestingly, the doctor is the same leering man who appeared in the nervous woman's room earlier); the viewer is informed that "actually" such insensitivity is a symptom of modern hysteria. As with the comparative mirroring of the night visitations earlier, Christensen has framed this present-day scene as a reflection of its more ancient visual counterpart. The only substantial difference is that the modern woman, nude above the waist, is positioned in a much less salacious manner, muting the sexual overtones of the image and the subsequent affect of obscene desire/repulsion the shots of the Sabbath generate. Again, the literalness of this visual connection weakens a power of correspondence that was at its height in the film when the correlation was suggested according to a subterranean logic that the viewer could easily associate with the witch and the hysteric.

The following scene also functions as a mirror to previous sequences in the film, albeit more loosely given the fact that the correspondence we mark here was likely unintentional. The doctor, having completed his examination of the nervous woman, enters his office, where the afflicted woman's mother is waiting. With all of the oblivious authority the institution confers, the doctor pronounces that, as he suspected, the woman "has hysteria." Again, although less stridently represented, his comportment recalls that of Father Henrik discovering, *as he knew in advance he would*, the witches in his midst. The hysteric, like the witch, will always be found once she

is sensed. The option of naming nobody or nothing does not exist at this point—it is solely a question of *whom* at this stage.¹²

Christensen has sought to overtly align his own position with that of science and medicine, at times assuming the casual, total authority of the physician. Bearing this in mind, it is difficult to argue that the correspondence we are drawing here was intentional. The strategy of continually seeking to activate a state in the viewer that provides the ground for a multiplicity of meanings in singular images, however, is not one that can be easily contained according to the subjective intent of the director. Having skillfully cleared this ground, it is impossible for the viewer to move forward and associate the doctor with the inquisitor and the scientist with the demonologist. As such, from our perspective the strength of *Häxan* exceeds even the explicit intent of its director, particularly in scenes such as this one which otherwise resemble the flat clichés that Christensen has methodically sought to empty out. Of course, this power doubles back on the director, aligning him with the inquisitors and doctors. The director has done his best to speak the language of the Devil without himself being possessed; it is clear by the end that this is much more difficult than it seems.

The afflicted woman, still in the examination room adjacent to the office where the conversation between the doctor and the woman's mother is taking place, begins to dress and drifts over to the door to eavesdrop. She overhears the doctor's recommendation that she be detained in the doctor's clinic, lest she have an "unpleasant exchange with the police." She is alarmed by the prospect of being detained in the clinic, her vulnerability emphasized by showing her in a state of near undress. She radiates a sense of susceptibility, of potentially being at the mercy of the doctor or whoever else may walk in on her at any moment.

Häxan then presents a bizarre title card, which is worth reproducing here in full: "Poor little hysterical witch! [Swedish: *Stackars lilla hysteriska häxa!*] In the Middle Ages you were in conflict with the Church. Now it is with the law." Christensen's tone here is extraordinary in that it simultaneously evokes a casual, almost brutal, condescension and at the same time unambiguously claims that women are still being victimized by the various institutions ostensibly in place to protect them. The statement is consistent with Christensen's attempt to align the film with science, but his unthinking paternalism toward the subjects (a paternalism consistent with the very insti-



“Poor little hysterical witch . . .” in *Häxan*, film still (Svensk Filmindustri, 1922).

tutions the film displays) is hard to interpret or ignore. Yes, *Häxan* is a film “of its time,” which may account for the particular way in which Christensen expresses himself here. This interpretation is also consistent to some degree with the style of expression evident in the opening chapter of the film. Despite Christensen’s skill in producing complex meanings from his images and technique, his ability to allow the viewer to feel the power of the witch even as his overt discourse denies their “real” existence, it is still possible that the exaggerated, even offensive mode of expression at this juncture functions to trigger a more complex response in the viewer. Christensen’s willingness to go to extremes calls into question whether even the seemingly careless misogyny of this statement is not, in fact, evocative of a range of associations. The one thing this statement does not do is provide an end to the film.

Stopping Is Not the Same as Ending

Häxan must be watched in the context of logic.

Stan Brakhage, lecture at the Art Institute of Chicago (1973)

How does one bring a film as singular as *Häxan* to an end? It is obvious that Christensen himself never found a satisfactory answer to this question. The final sequence of the nervous woman, caught shoplifting an expensive ring right in front of the male sales clerk in an upscale jewelry store, serves to visualize the “unpleasant exchange” that the doctor predicted for the hysterical woman were she left untreated. The scene is effective on some level in conveying the pathos of the situation, again demonstrating Christensen’s skill as a filmmaker. The director’s established method of exploiting the expressiveness of the face and its potential for conveying a set of shifting, multiple meanings remains on full display here. The suffering and fear of the afflicted woman is palpable, as is the anger, confusion, and finally the sympathy of the clerk upon catching her in the act. Christensen puts this scene “in present tense” through the woman’s reference to the war, the loss of her husband offered as a root cause for her nervous illness. This is the only direct reference to the First World War in *Häxan*.

Christensen does all he can to make us see through what he has conjured with *Häxan*. We are brought back to the “unknown power” in the course of the woman’s explanation of her actions, but there is something slightly flat about the point by now. Christensen has to explicitly *say* this in order for the viewer to make the association. This is a moment of defeat for the film. The owner of the store ultimately pardons the woman, but Christensen has created a situation that will not let the director off as easily. Having gone so very far to locate and face the power of the witch, his attempt to “come back,” to disavow this power in this final chapter, is no longer possible. Christensen *himself* has made this so. After all of this, Christensen’s *Mnemosyne*-like approach has released the power of the images he started with and set them in motion—and once in motion they move of their own accord, ignoring the director’s need to call them back in the name of “explanation.” Thus, the final montage in the film that attempts to synthesize how far we have come in the centuries since the witch craze fails to put any measurable distance be-

tween the contemporary witness and the power of the witch that Christensen has conjured. Intercutting images of the old cosmologies with the new, the director admits that there is not much difference *for him* between the eras after all.

Intuitively knowing that he has gone too far, Christensen returns to forging links across time and space, abruptly claiming that we really do not understand the modern hysteric any more than we understand the witch. Hydrotherapy in the form of a shower, a common treatment for nervous illnesses through the 1920s, is offered as evidence of science's new approach to this phenomenon, but then simultaneously linked visually to the torture chambers of old. It is a *confusing* way to end. The witch will not release her grip on Benjamin Christensen. It is as if he remembers too much, a victim of the excessive memory that he so skillfully illustrated in others. Desperate to draw *Häxan* to an end, the director makes one final cut, inescapably to a bonfire. Women are burning at the stake. Is this *now* or *then*? We reach the darkness at the heart of *Häxan*. We are caught. Christensen wants us to believe that his rational humanist treatment of witchcraft points to a form of hysteria before its time, and yet it is impossible for him to maintain this ostensible objective. The more he pursues his thesis the harder it is for him to stage his thesis cinematically. The tension is between us coming to know the witch according to Christensen, and knowing the witch at all. We are caught, and it is clear that Christensen is caught as well.

