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## Postscript: It Is Very Hard to Believe . . .

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**It Is Very Hard to Believe . . .**

That mythology is, today, an imaginative exercise for us, should not obscure the reality it had for those who lived by it. And since the greater part of knowledge of primitive societies was a mythological knowledge, the art was an art of knowledge.

—MAYA DEREN, *An Anagram of Ideas on Art, Form, and Film* (1946)

“How would the Devil speak?” This is Benjamin Christensen’s question in a filmed introduction to *Häxan* produced to accompany the 1941 rerelease of the film. Christensen poses this question as part of his defense of his masterwork as a *silent* film. Hearing voices after the fact would “shatter the illusion,” the director asserts. And yet, as we have continually marked throughout this book, there is ample evidence that Christensen has a very good sense indeed of how the Devil speaks. Like the witches, inquisitors, possessed, hysterics, and doctors that have come before him, the director displays all the signs of being caught by the mobile power we have largely been referring to by the name “witch” throughout our own engagement with the film. This power to touch, to grasp, is almost uniformly disavowed by more contemporary authorities, but this fact cannot divert our focus from the signs of being ensnared by a force that resists direct expression or experimental proof. Christensen, nearly twenty years after the fact, betrays himself in the intensity of his relationship with the witch in the short introduction

to his rereleased film. His relish in recounting witch tales, experiential proof culled from his own life and the lives of his friends and acquaintances, overtakes the clinical disposition he starts from in the filmed addendum. The impression left by this strange introduction on the viewer is plain: “It is happening again.”

We could ask how Christensen, even two decades after the fact, could truly not *know* that in producing a work as singular as *Häxan* he bore all the signs of being caught by the witch himself—of believing he had objectively, scientifically, humanistically mastered witchcraft while giving the witch the last word. This would be the wrong question to ask, however, as the unmarked tension we are referring to stands as the key to the film’s continued influence. If we limit ourselves to judging influence through direct citation of the narrative or the “text,” then we must truthfully argue that *Häxan* has had almost no direct influence within the history of cinema. At best, the reformulated Antony Balch version of Christensen’s film, titled *Witchcraft through the Ages* (1968), has given the work a persistent, if truncated, presence on the midnight movie circuit. This is a somewhat unfortunate legacy. Balch’s strategy of having William S. Burroughs intone curses and commentary in his distinctively flat vocal pitch is a nice addition to this sound version, which is organized according to Burroughs’s methodological experiments with cutting up other works.<sup>1</sup> For the most part, however, the tone of this shortened, reformulated version (particularly because of Daniel Humair’s wildly inappropriate “free jazz” score) unfortunately tars Christensen’s original vision with the brush of being a wacky “head” film.

In the years since the 2001 restoration and limited theatrical rerelease of *Häxan* and its subsequent availability on DVD, critics have retrospectively sought to associate Christensen’s film with the emergence of the horror genre, citing its cinematic style as a formal precursor to the foundational classics of this variety that emerged in the 1930s.<sup>2</sup> There is some logic to this claim, but to go any further to argue for *Häxan*’s direct influence on films such as *Dracula* (Tod Browning, 1931) and *Frankenstein* (James Whale, 1931) would be wishful thinking, if for no other reason than Christensen’s film went largely unseen at the time of its release and, with the exception of limited rereleases such as the ones we started with here, almost entirely disappeared from the history of the medium until its restoration and reemergence in the first decade of the twenty-first century.

Yet *Häxan* has always been murmuring under the surface of canonical histories of cinema. In order to make sense of this seemingly paradoxical claim we must shift our focus from that of searching for narrative references to the devices the film uses in bringing the power of the witch to life. It is in these devices, sympathetic tools for sensing the *truth* of the witch, where the crucial importance of *Häxan* lies. Within this context we can group the film among those which in the first half of the 1920s called into question the ways cinema could provide an empirical, truthful account of phenomenon located in the “real” world. Alongside films such as *Nanook of the North*, *Häxan*’s heterogeneity in this regard helped to force attempts to formulate genres that could “definitively” separate fact from fiction and gave rise to the Griersonian documentary ideal discussed in Chapter 2. With the benefit of hindsight, we can say that Christensen provided a clear signal as to the impossibility of this ideal, an indication that recurs in later decades through Maya Deren’s documentary experiments (*Divine Horsemen: The Living Gods of Haiti*, filmed 1947–48, released 1977), in Jean Rouch’s ethnofictions (*Moi, un Noir*, 1960; *Jaguar*, 1970; *Petit à Petit*, 1971), and via the poetic art–ethnographic meditations of filmmakers such as Robert Gardner (*Dead Birds*, 1963; *Forest of Bliss*, 1985), Harun Farocki (*An Image/Ein Bild*, 1983; *As You See*, 1986; *In Comparison*, 2009), and Lucien Castaing-Taylor (*Sweetgrass*, 2009; *Leviathan*, 2013). Creatively deploying many of the same formal devices that Christensen puts to use in *Häxan*, these filmmakers (among many others) succeed in producing an affective, truthful narrative about the world that rejects dogmatic positions of hard objectivity and absolute relativism alike. Taking their cues as much from artists such as Paul Klee as from empiricists such as John Grierson, all of these films engender a certain grasp of the real through providing an amplified, haptic, *affective* sense of the world. *Häxan* is almost never directly acknowledged as a precursor to nonfiction works such as these; it is our contention that it should be.

This claim brings us back to the viability of Christensen’s thesis regarding the relations between the witch and the hysteric. As we have mentioned, while as scholars we cannot wholly accept the director’s argument that witchcraft and possession can be fully explained as the result of misrecognized manifestations of hysteria and nervous illness, the logic of the film’s thesis, itself derived from the pioneering work of Charcot and Freud, has

proven to possess a stronger afterlife than is generally acknowledged. The idea 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*.<sup>3</sup> In her written work, based on her field studies of Haitian vodun in the late 1940s, Maya Deren both draws an analogy between these seemingly discrete categories of experience and levels a direct criticism at the Western social sciences for the presumed dualisms at work in claiming that ritual ecstasy “really” exists as a form of pathology or simple “cultural difference.”<sup>4</sup> Taking Deren’s point (largely ignored by anthropologists as being *her* point) further, a long list of studies exist that in some way attempt 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.<sup>5</sup>

The direct linkages between witchcraft, possession, and hysteria that Christensen asserts have also seen a return in contemporary cinema. Unsurprisingly, given the long-standing tradition represented not only by Christensen and Dreyer but also by a host of filmmakers from Victor Sjöström (*The Phantom Carriage*, 1921) to Ingmar Bergman (*The Seventh Seal*, 1956), of taking up issues of religion, demons, and death, this revived interest in the elements of what is essentially Christensen’s thesis has returned via a Nordic filmmaker in Lars von Trier’s *Antichrist* (2009). In von Trier’s controversial, award-winning film, the female lead (“She”) pathologically grieves the loss of her young son, giving rise to “unnatural” visions of talking animals and an aggressively sentient forest surrounding the cabin where her psychotherapist husband (“He”) has taken her to effect a “cure.” Attributing her own experience variously to “witchcraft” or “gynocide,” she is in turn diagnosed by her husband as being a “hysteric,” albeit by the end of the film he, too, suffers the visions and afflictions of the unnatural, demonic force that haunts his wife and (perhaps) is to blame for the death of their son. While von Trier does not in any way position *Antichrist* as a nonfiction film, he has explicitly reformulated the devices at work in *Häxan* (down to using the structuring device of “chapters” to organize the narrative) in order to give the viewer a visceral sense of the abject, literary, erotic, mounting power that has variously been associated with the witch, the possessed, and the hysteric. To our knowledge, von Trier has never publicly acknowledged

*Häxan* or Christensen as a direct influence on *Antichrist*; however, the correspondences between the two films, eighty-seven years after the fact, are plainly obvious.

*Return to Malice*

So you believe the sciences would have emerged and matured, if they had not been preceded by magicians, alchemists, astrologers, and witches who with their promises and false claims created a thirst, hunger, and taste for hidden and forbidden powers? Indeed, infinitely more has had to be promised than can ever be fulfilled in order that anything at all might be fulfilled in the realm of knowledge.

Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Gay Science* (1882)

In his singularly pitiless style, Nietzsche had identified in 1882 the problem of *promise* raised by a science of man that simultaneously offered a privileged relationship to empirical engagements founded on the cultivated critical acumen of its practitioners to bringing the hidden, unnoticed, invisible secrets of this real into view. Or, as Foucault reminds us, as to their aspiration to the status of science, the human sciences arose out of the search “for the locus of a discourse that would be neither of the order of reduction nor of the order of promise: a discourse whose tension would keep separate the empirical and the transcendental, while being directed at both; a discourse that would make it possible to analyze man as a subject.”<sup>6</sup> A remarkable promise . . .

We opened with the silent avowal of this promise in our account of the scholastic debates in the introduction to Part II. What appear to be irreconcilable points of view offered by human scientists such as Malinowski, Rivers, and others were, in the end, genially folded into a discipline (anthropology). The attempt to make man visible through his culture, his society, and his mind cannot help but allow forces other to man to enter zones of observation and experimentation claimed by the human sciences. Christensen, accepting science as epistemology (but hardly bound by science’s rules, methods, or common sense) sought a radically different route of access to this hidden force in *Häxan*. Perhaps it is not too much to say that the serene world dreamed by the human scientist of the near past left him unprepared for the invisible forces embedded within such a world.<sup>7</sup> Perhaps it is not

stretching things to claim that the social scientist remains just as weak and unprepared when faced with the objects and others of her own dreamworld of the “really real.” Benjamin Christensen, for better or worse, turned to face this same hidden power in *Häxan*, an act of turning toward the invisible and the nonsensical. And yet this turning responds to form, or as Dick Houtman and Birgit Meyer suggest, a movement toward materials beyond belief, the material “really real” in the world—or, as Pamela Reynolds offers in her writing on witchcraft, gives clues to the shape of things unseen.<sup>8</sup>

### *Evidence of Forces Unseen: Some Conclusions*

I think that great art is deeply ordered. Even if within the order there may be enormously instinctive and accidental things, nevertheless I think that they come out of a desire for ordering and for returning fact onto the nervous system in a more violent way.

Francis Bacon, *Interviews with Francis Bacon* (1987)

The image of the witch in *Häxan* is the point of access into her power. This fact constitutes the lasting achievement of Benjamin Christensen’s film. In pursuing the cinematic strategy that we have analyzed in detail in this book, Christensen effectively, if imperfectly, addresses himself to the insistent murmuring that would imply that an image cannot of its own accord express something singular about the world contained within it. As difficult as it appears for even the director to accept this at times, *Häxan* stands as a great example of a type of violently naturalist filmmaking that Deleuze associated with directors such as Erich von Stroheim and Luis Buñuel.<sup>9</sup> Again, the key to this claim is the manner in which Christensen tactically takes the viewer down the steepest slope separating the power of the witch from a form of knowing that would deny her. “Down” is the correct directional reference here, as the naturalist line Christensen formulates plunges the viewer directly into the image. We do not simply skirt along the surface of such images, a common accusation leveled at cinematic nonfiction then as now; rather, like the ethnographer and the artist, Christensen’s slope is the path by which we descend into the reality of the witch below. Although not referring directly to Christensen, Deleuze’s defense of this form of filmmaking

ing as realist applies here as well: “Never has the milieu been described with so much violence or cruelty, with its dual social division ‘poor–rich,’ ‘good men–evildoers.’ But what gives their description such force is, indeed, their way of relating the features to an originary world, which rumbles in the depths of all milieux and runs along beneath them.”<sup>10</sup>

*Häxan* also descends into the rumbling depths of an originary world, fathoming the relation between this world and the precarious surface of our own enlightened time. This is a higher form of naturalism, a *perverse* naturalism, which crystalizes in Christensen’s film simultaneously as an *ethic* and an *aesthetic*.

The ethics of the film are evident in the fact that Christensen creatively descends into everyday forms of life that are by definition multiple. This fact opposes his work to that which emphasizes a moral position grounded in “identity.” It is precisely in Christensen’s occasional gestures toward a segmented, identity-based “diversity” where *Häxan* appears to be at times at war with itself. Recognizing that such inconsistencies exist within the work, it is nevertheless clear that Christensen’s expression of the witch is most consistent when he poses her power and the myriad attempts to come to grips with this power as a *practical* problem of life rather than an issue of scientific taxonomy or epistemological error. Gaining a grasp of the witch and her other iterations requires another conception of what such forms of life could potentially be, and it is this general disposition that constitutes *Häxan*’s creative importance, anticipating by some two decades the delinking of time from psychological memory and linear causality described by Deleuze as a characteristic of the time-image in cinema after the Second World War.<sup>11</sup> A figure moves differently in relation to multiplicities rather than identity; this accounts for the formal, cinematic power of Christensen’s witch.

In short, the success of Benjamin Christensen’s *Häxan* is twofold. The ethical force of the work is rooted in its vivid expression of a multiplicitous figure, actively drawn through an unusual, *Mnemosyne*-like procedure that empties and creatively colonizes clichéd figures. The aesthetic innovation lay in its formal strategy to then draw lines among these figures rather than make final points about them. The movement up and down the steep slope between the historical worlds of the image and the originary world that is the source of the witch’s unattributable power provides the ground by which Christensen can creatively actualize new forces and powers with which to



experiment. This is more than a simple aesthetic: it is a *neuroaesthetic* in that it simultaneously allows for experimentation and diagnosis, pushing the audience toward a phenomenological grasp of the witch or the hysteric that refers to science but exceeds what such rigorously policed forms of knowledge would otherwise teach us.<sup>12</sup> Christensen is certainly not the first to have deployed such a seemingly intolerable method; Duchenne, Muybridge, Marey, and even Charcot himself all exhibited elements of this impossible expression in their own respective works. Going even further in some respects due to his mastery of that most modernist art form, cinema, Christensen realized what he set out to achieve: a truthful engagement with the reality of the witch. Obviously, however, his method and the very object of his inquiry served to complicate things considerably. In expressing the truth of the witch, Christensen could not help but come to be captured by her in the course of this expression.

*This is all very hard to believe.* Christensen himself never fully comes around to admitting that he does, in fact, believe. And yet, like those figures he depicts in *Häxan*, he *must* believe. The single element that conjoins everything we have described and analyzed in this book demonstrates this and depends on it. Yet this is belief only in the rhetorical sense, and would be more accurately described as a tangle with what Deleuze calls “the powers of the false,” making way for an uneasy but equally unambiguous truth—what Luhmann, in a different context, has described as the epistemological doubling of belief and doubt always integral to the steadfastness of truth and the act of believing.<sup>13</sup> We, too, are caught by Christensen’s witch, exhibiting, if not belief as such, then a will to believe in *Häxan*’s world that generates the conditions for an analytic, ethical engagement that would be as familiar to William James as to Gilles Deleuze—to preserve a space for the false to move within the truth of the witch. If nothing else, being caught serves as a testament to what *Häxan* can do.