



IN DREAMS ARE MONSTERS

Häxan + live score by The Begotten

Benjamin Christensen's *Häxan* is sort of a documentary, and it's the 'sort of' that makes it unlike any other film. The Swedish silent melds historical fact and folk superstition to explore ideas about witchcraft from ancient times, through the medieval period, and on up to 1922, when the film was made. Unknowingly, Christensen extended his examination 100 years into the future, as it's almost impossible to watch without making comparisons to the present time. Today, *Häxan*'s horror lies less in its depictions of witches and witchcraft, and more in the fact that it depicts hundreds of years of the ongoing systematic oppression and abuse of women.

Upon its release, *Häxan* was instantly recognised as 'unadulterated horror' by a critic at *Variety*, who added that, 'wonderful though this picture is, it is absolutely unfit for public exhibition.' *Häxan* is still recognised as horror, and though its graphic depictions of nudity and blasphemy are less of a novelty to modern audiences, the images are still disturbing. Christensen condemns the practice of inquisitions while simultaneously filming the resulting torture with a sort of glee. The images of beautiful women, stripped and strung up, are still used in material meant to titillate. In *Häxan* we see the atrocity of it, but we also see its allure.

Häxan begins with a study of the ancient origins of witchcraft. Gruesome woodcuts are displayed: humans boiled alive in cauldrons, demons pouring sulphur down men's throats. A steam-powered mechanical representation of hell features animated fiends torturing live victims with forks, like a macabre vignette on a Disneyland ride. To punctuate that this is serious business, crucial details are highlighted by a hand – Christensen's own – with an academic pointer, as if we are attending a lecture.

The next part of *Häxan* features live-action sequences, presented as pseudo-historical re-enactments of things witches were purported to do. It's a curious technique, as these recreations of witchcraft rumours make them seem like fact. Local villagers blame every domestic difficulty on women, from cows that won't give milk to stillbirths and house fires. Christensen doesn't just depict the outcomes; he also depicts women in the act of their witchery. In a scene cut by Swedish censors, one old witch rips fingers from the hand of a dead thief to make one of her concoctions. We see young witches fly through the air on brooms and dance naked with the Devil.

It's worth noting that Christensen himself plays the Devil in these scenes. The young women in the film who line up and kiss the Devil's arse are kissing Christensen's arse. The naked maiden who is lured by the Devil to the cemetery at night, where she falls to her knees at his feet, is lured by Christensen. The director wasn't just intrigued by the perversions of witchcraft, but wanted to directly participate in them. This Devil is all the more frightening because he's so obviously a real man, hairy and barrel-chested. His leering, tongue-wagging and miming of masturbation as he furiously

works a butter churn are all the more repugnant because his actions are recognisable to any woman who has tried to walk down a street.

The film's worst atrocities come into play with the introduction of the Inquisition, as we see innocent women betrayed by other women who want to save their own skin. The scenes of a beggar woman being tortured are harsh by any decade's standards, and the extreme close-ups of her face, and the agony it betrays, are forerunners of Carl Dreyer's *The Passion of Joan of Arc* (1928). These close-ups were also cut by early censors, which is a sign of how great the acting is – that mere faces were deemed shocking as they betrayed the severity of the torture so explicitly.

When the innocent Maria the Weaver is tortured until she can no longer stand, she admits to witchcraft, condemning herself to death as relief from her pain. Her confessions are worse than the original false charges. The sins she speaks of are absurd because she is simply rattling off the worst things she can think of: stomping on crosses, changing into a cat and defecating on church altars, boiling infants alive. Maria names names, and a title card tells us that every condemned witch would give 10 others away.

At *Häxan*'s close, we are told that women accused of witchcraft were often suffering from mental illness, and in this enlightened time of 1922 we can commit them to institutions instead, and treat them with psychiatry. Christensen presents their difficulties and the 'modern' treatment as sort of a 'Gee whiz, look how lucky we are today' coda. With our own present-day hindsight, this ending is as disturbing as the rest of the film, because we know how women have historically been treated in institutions. Even worse is the assertion that instead of seeing the Devil, women of the 1920s believe they are visited in the night by celebrities, or even their own doctors. The film considers these fantasies, concocted by disturbed minds, but today we know that women have sometimes been abused by doctors. The scene of a psychologist coming into a terrified woman's bedroom at night is meant to show us that the woman is deranged, but the effect is chilling. (The psychologist, perhaps unsurprisingly at this point, is also played by Christensen.)

Häxan went on to heavily influence future filmmakers, most notably in films like *The Passion of Joan of Arc*, but its shockwaves also ripple through folk horror witch-hunting films such as *Witchfinder General* (1968) and *Twins of Evil* (1971). The film's most powerful impact, though, is cultural. Each generation of women's experiences mingle with the history of female persecution and become a new extension of it. *Häxan* is, ultimately, not merely a witchcraft film, and not fixed in time. It's a kind of living documentary, and we're all part of it.

Kelly Robinson, [bfi.org.uk](https://www.bfi.org.uk), 20 October 2022

The Begotten are a dark ambient noise quartet, comprising William Fowler, Justin Harries, Mark Pilkington and Jo Fisher Roberts. Originally forming to soundtrack E. Elias Merhige's legendary early 1990s experimental film *Begotten*, the group create intense and sustained improvised soundscapes.

HÄXAN (WITCHCRAFT THROUGH THE AGES)

Director: Benjamin Christensen
Production Company: Svensk Filmindustri
Script Girt: Alice O’Fredericks
Screenplay: Benjamin Christensen
Photography: Johan Ankerstjerne
Assistant Photography: Rudolf Frederiksen
Editor: Edla Hansen
Art Director: Richard Louw
Assistant Art Directors: Helge Norél, L. Mathiesen

Cast

Benjamin Christensen (*Devil/the fashionable doctor*)
Ella La Cour (*Karna, the witch*)
Emmy Schönfeld (*Karna’s collaborator*)
Kate Fabian (*lovesick maiden*)
Oscar Stribolt (*the gluttonous monk*)
Wilhelmine Henriksen (*Apelone, a poor woman*)
Elisabeth Christensen (*Anna, bookprinter’s wife’s mother*)
Astrid Holm (*Anna, bookprinter’s wife*)
Karen Winther (*Anna’s younger sister*)
Maren Pedersen (*Maria, the witch*)
Johannes Andersen (*Pater Henrik, chief inquisitor*)
Elith Pio (*Johannes, the young inquisitor*)
Aage Hertel, Ib Schönberg (*inquisitors*)
Holst Jørgensen (*Peter Titta*)
Herr Westermann (*Rasmus Bödel*)
Clara Pontoppidan (*Sister Cecilia, the nun*)
Elsa Vermehren (*self-torturing nun*)
Alice O’Fredericks, Gerda Madsen, Karina Bell (*nuns*)
Tora Teje (*the hysteric in modern sequence*)
Poul Reumert (*jeweller*)
H.C. Nielsen (*jeweller’s assistant*)
Albrecht Schmidt (*psychiatrist*)
Knud Rassow (*anatomist*)
Ellen Rassow (*servant girl*)
Frederik Christensen, Henry Seemann (*commoners*)
Karen Caspersen, Gudrun Barfoed (*women*)
Holger Pedersen (*man*)

Denmark 1922
106 mins

IN DREAMS ARE MONSTERS

The Uninvited

Thu 1 Dec 18:05; Sat 17 Dec 14:30 (+ intro by broadcaster and writer, Louise Blain)

Kwaidan (Kaidan)

Thu 1 Dec 20:00; Tue 13 Dec 17:40

Night of the Eagle

Fri 2 Dec 21:00; Sat 10 Dec 12:10

Daughters of Darkness (Les lèvres rouges)

Sat 3 Dec 20:45; Tue 13 Dec 21:00

Transness in Horror

Tue 6 Dec 18:20

Let the Right One In (Låt den rätte komma in)

Tue 6 Dec 20:45; Thu 22 Dec 18:15

Philosophical Screens: The Lure

Wed 7 Dec 20:10 Blue Room

The Lure (Córki dancing)

Wed 7 Dec 18:15; Thu 22 Dec 20:45 (+ intro by Dr Catherine Wheatley, Reader in Film Studies at King’s College London)

Cat People

Wed 7 Dec 20:50; Mon 19 Dec (+ intro by Clarisse Loughrey, chief film critic for The Independent)

Black Sunday (La maschera del demonio)

Fri 9 Dec 21:00; Sun 18 Dec 18:30

Ring (Ringu)

Sat 10 Dec 20:40; Tue 13 Dec 21:05;
Tue 20 Dec 21:00

Atlantics (Atlantique) + Atlantiques

Sun 11 Dec 14:50; Tue 27 Dec 18:20

Sugar Hill

Sun 11 Dec 18:00; Sat 17 Dec 20:40

Häxan

Mon 12 Dec 18:10 (+ live score by The Begotten); Sat 17 Dec 11:45 (with live piano accompaniment)

Sweetheart

Mon 12 Dec 21:00; Tue 27 Dec 12:40

Arrebato

Wed 14 Dec 20:30 (+ intro by writer and broadcaster Anna Bogutskaya);
Fri 23 Dec 18:05

The Final Girls LIVE

Thu 15 Dec 20:30

One Cut of the Dead (Kamera o tomeru na!)

Fri 16 Dec 18:15; Fri 30 Dec 20:45

The Fog

Fri 16 Dec 21:00; Wed 28 Dec 18:10

Being Human + Q&A with Toby Whithouse and guests (tbc)

Sat 17 Dec 18:00

Day of the Dead

Mon 19 Dec 20:40; Thu 29 Dec 18:20

Society

Tue 20 Dec 18:15; Wed 28 Dec 20:50

Interview with the Vampire

Wed 21 Dec 18:10; Thu 29 Dec 20:40

Ginger Snaps

Wed 21 Dec 20:50; Tue 27 Dec 15:10

A Dark Song

Fri 23 Dec 20:45; Fri 30 Dec 18:20

City Lit at BFI: Screen Horrors –

Screen Monsters

Thu 20 Oct – Thu 15 Dec 18:30–20:30 Studio

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