

Witchcraft through the Ages

Thursday, October 31, 2013 ~ Grand Illusion Cinema, Seattle ~ Presented by The Sprocket Society

Originally released by Svensk Filmindustri as *Häxan* (Sweden) and *Heksen* (Denmark), both translate as *The Witch*. Premiered on September 18, 1922 in Stockholm, Sweden; and November 7, 1922 in Copenhagen, Denmark. Retitled in 1926 as *La sorcellerie à travers les âges* (“Witchcraft through the Ages”) for its French premiere. Re-released in 1941 with a musical soundtrack by Emil Rosen, and a sound introduction by Benjamin Christensen.

Written and Directed by Benjamin Christensen
Director of Photography: Johan Ankerstjerne
Art Director: Richard Louw
Edited by Edla Hansen
Original score by Jacob Gade
Produced by Charles Magnusson

1968 English sound version:
Produced by Antony Balch
Narrated by William S. Burroughs
Musical score composed by Daniel Humair
Recorded at Studios Europasoner (Paris)

1968 score performed by Jean-Luc Ponty (violin), Michel Portal (flute), Bernard Lubat (piano organ), Guy Pedersen (double bass), and Daniel Humair (percussion).

Danish-born Benjamin Christensen (1879-1959) had originally planned this to be the first in a trilogy about superstition throughout history, but the intense controversy *Häxan* caused upon its release meant that *Helgeninde* (The Woman Saint) and *Ånder* (Spirits) would never be made. A review of the Danish premiere called it “unvarnished perversity” and demanded theaters “take it off the screen as fast as possible!” In France, 8,000 Catholic women protested outside the theater. A number of countries, like Germany, demanded massive cuts. Many simply banned it outright. In the US, when the New York censorship board pre-screened it for a small, hand-picked audience, the chairman was fired and Christensen was thrown out of his hotel.

It all began in 1914 while the budding film director was traveling in Europe. He came upon two old books about witchcraft. *Malleus Maleficarum* (“Hammer of the Witches”), written in 1487 by two Dominican monks, was the most infamous witch-hunting manual used during the Inquisition. *Le Sorcière* by Jules Michelet, published in 1862, was more sympathetic. It portrayed witches as wise peasant women who simply worship pre-Christian gods, rebelling against feudalism under the Roman Catholic Church. It caused scandal when first published, and was seized by French police.

Struck by the dramatic power of these books, Christensen began collecting as many as he could find on the subject. With the end of WWI, he decided to make his trilogy. He spent two full years doing research and writing. When he ran out of money, he sold the family antiques. The strain of it all finally led his wife to divorce him.

Finally, Charles Magnusson of Svensk Filmindustri stepped forward to back the project. He was a producer

largely responsible for the groundbreaking quality of Swedish film, nurturing the likes of Victor Sjöström. Christensen persuaded him to buy and equip an entire studio for the production. After extensive preparation and casting, filming began at last – in utmost secrecy – in late winter 1921, continuing well into the following October.

Christensen drove his cast – a mix of professional actors and amateurs – very hard. He usually shot at night, sometimes for extra-long hours in an effort to create the right atmosphere of tension or mania. Great care was also taken with the sets and props, including the torture instruments, with enormous effort taken to create exacting verisimilitude.

Scandinavian cameramen had long been among the best in the world, and cinematographer Johan Ankerstjerne was one of the best in that circle. In addition to his stunning camera work, he invented an experimental multi-head optical printer to create the sequence of legions of witches flying to Bloksbjerg. This allowed him to combine nine strips of film, all of which also had multiple exposures – some as many as nine. At the premiere, the audience applauded the scene.

In the end, *Häxan* cost between 1.5 and 2 million kroner (much of that the cost of buying the studio), making it the most expensive Scandinavian silent film ever made.

Antony Balch (1937-1980) turned a childhood love for horror movies into a career as an exhibitor, distributor and occasional filmmaker. While living in Paris in the early 1960s, Balch befriended William S. Burroughs and his circle while the author was living at the “Beat Hotel.” In 1963, they collaborated on the 10 min. experimental film, *Towers Open Fire*. The two

went on to make the even more radical film *The Cut-Ups* (1966), and the 70mm *Bill and Tony* (1972).

Also in 1963, Balch initiated his distribution career by securing the British rights (with the help of Kenneth Anger) to Tod Browning's infamous film, *Freaks* (1931), and then successfully petitioning for an end to Britain's 30 year ban on it. Balch went on to manage two art house theaters in London, while also distributing sex, horror, and art films, including *The Corpse Grinders*, Russ Meyer's *Supervixens* and Kenneth Anger's *Invocation of my Demon Brother*.

It is hardly surprising, then, that Balch took an interest in *Häxan*. He called upon Burroughs to perform narration, based on original intertitles (mainly in the opening documentary sequence), which were then cut when appropriate. Some additional cuts were also made, probably to assuage British censors. The spectacular witch's flight to Bloksbjerg, the nun's hysteria in the church and, in particular, several scenes of torture were shortened. A new jazz score was composed by percussionist Daniel Humair (who worked with artists such as Don Cherry and Eric Dolphy) and recorded in Paris.

Balch's version premiered in November, 1968, at London's Times Cinema (now the Baker Street cinema).

It was paired with Luis Buñuel and Salvador Dalí's *Un Chien Andalou* (1929). It hit the US in February, 1970, double-billed with Sergei Parajanov's *Wild Horses*. Despite mixed reviews (especially from cinema purists), it proved successful with art house and cult audiences. This helped to spur a revival of the original. A new print was struck, and was shown in various cities in Europe.

In later years, Balch's version was released on VHS, spurring yet another revival of interest in the film.

In the late 1990s, a full restoration was undertaken by the Swedish Film Institute. For decades, only a single print was thought to have survived. But miraculously, the original camera negative was found. This was fully restored and the intertitles, most of which had been lost, were recreated in the same style. The original color tinting was also recreated. While the full original score is lost, a cue sheet listing titles of classical and stock music was found. Composer Gillian Anderson worked from this to recreate a version of the score. Criterion released this restoration on DVD in 2001. In 2010, a 35mm print was screened at the San Francisco Silent Film Festival, accompanied live by the Matti Bye Ensemble.

Sources and Additional Reading

Jack Stevenson, *Witchcraft through the Ages: The Story of Häxan, the World's Strangest Film, and the Man Who Made It* (FAB Press, 2006) – Remains the only book in English detailing the life and career Benjamin Christensen, let alone the film *Häxan*.

James Kendrick, "A witches' brew of fact, fiction and spectacle: Benjamin Christensen's *Häxan* (*The Witch*, 1922)," *Kinoeye*, Vol. 3 Issue 11 (13 Oct 2003) – Online at <http://www.kinoeye.org/03/11/kendrick11.php>

John T. Soister & Henry Nicoletta, et al., *American Silent Horror, Science Fiction and Fantasy Feature Films, 1913-1929* (McFarland, 2012) – Exhaustive two volume encyclopedia.

Jack Sargeant, *Naked Lens: Beat Cinema* (Soft Skull Press, 2008; orig. Creation Books, 2001) – Includes information about the collaborations of Antony Balch and William S. Burroughs.

This Evening's Feature Presentation is Preceded by these Short Subjects

Spooks (1931)

Celebrity Productions / Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer

Directed and animated by Ub Iwerks. Produced by Ub Iwerks and Pat Powers.

The Tell-Tale Heart (1953)

United Productions of America (UPA) / Columbia Pictures

Directed by Ted Parmelee. Design & color: Paul Julian. Animation: Pat Matthews. Screenplay: Bill Scott & Fred Grable. Music: Boris Kremenliev. Produced by Stephen Bosustow. Narrated by James Mason.

Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde (1912)

Thanhauser Film Corporation

Directed by Lucius Henderson. With James Cruze and Florence La Badie.



Witchcraft Through the Ages

Rare 35mm screening of Benjamin Christenson's
1922 haunted masterpiece ~ Antony Balch's 1968 sound version:

Narrated by William S. Burroughs

Jazz score by Dick Humair & Jean-Luc Ponty

~ Plus: Spooky Shorts and Cartoons ~

Halloween Night

Thursday, October 31, 2013 ~ 8pm Only

Grand Illusion Cinema

1403 NE 50th Street at University Way ~ Presented by The Sprocket Society