

Häxan: Delicious Blasphemy at Sage Chapel

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TEXTO COMPLETO

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Courtesy of Janus Films

There was something deliciously blasphemous about sitting in Sage Chapel among the religious icons, waiting for Häxan: Witchcraft Through the Ages to begin. Presented in connection to the Surrealism and Magic exhibit at the Johnson and the Ithaca International Fantastic Film Festival, with a live score by electro-acoustic group TRANSIT New Music, the nighttime showing of this 1922 Swedish/Danish avant-garde silent film drew a crowd that completely filled the pews.

When the lights dropped, leaving Sage in a glowing dimness, the film -- part documentary, part fiction -- proceeded in three parts. The first gave some history of the belief in witchcraft and sorcery in the 15th and 16th centuries as an attempt to understand the "incomprehensible," alternating black text screens (in silent film fashion) with images of superstitious art. The music remained low and rumbly for this section, until a picture of devils torturing humans suddenly came to fiery life in a jerky, chaotic animation, to the violin screaming and the piano pounding. That was when the film really started.

The second section was fiction, and began with a hump-backed old woman limping around a tiny cottage. She opens a bundle of twigs to reveal a decomposed corpse, and complains that the thief's finger is too dried up to have any healing power. Then, she prepares a snake and frog to be stewed into a potion, except the frog keeps comically jumping out of the pot, to "boings" from the percussion. Witch!

The scenes began to show that belief in witchcraft stemmed from belief in the devil, a belief so strong he "became real" for people. The director, Benjamin Christensen, played the devil -- a humanoid, horned, goat-like creature who constantly had his brow furrowed and his tongue wagging. (He also played Jesus Christ in the one scene he appeared. Hmm). Christensen portrayed the medieval superstitious imagination through grotesque and fantastical scenes, including ones of witches flying and dancing and doing generally witchy things, the devil showing up at windows and putting people in trances and women dancing with the devil and lining up to kiss him in the "behind."

These scenes were interspersed with more realist scenes of the progression from fear that someone had been bewitched, to hysterically making an accusation, to women like Maria the Weaver being dragged off and interrogated by bald, overweight, power-hungry priests who would stop at nothing short of a confession, and spin any action into proof of guilt. Did you know that the test of throwing a witch in the water to see if she floats was actually practiced? I thought Monty Python made that up! The most disturbing part of the film showcased

medieval torture devices, driving home the point that innocent women were manipulated and tortured into confessing their witch-hood. Each "witch" gave away 10 other witches, and protesting a witch's arrest or refusing to witness against one meant you were a witch too: "It was dangerous to be old and ugly, but not safe to be young and pretty either." The film took a very sympathetic angle toward the accused and a harsh and critical angle toward the church -- rightly so, as eight million people were burned as witches during this period.

Häxan was engrossing to watch and TRANSIT's rich live music made the experience so much better -- there were beautiful piano solos and jumpy chords, rumbling atmospheric cello, eerie violin, strange electronic mumblings and pretty much every type of percussion, from a gong to what looked like a xylophone. The music captured the mood of the scenes perfectly, going from minimal to all-out at the intense moments, ringing against the echoey chapel walls.

The final section of the film jarringly compared the hysteria around belief in witches of the middle ages to modern treatment of the mentally ill, implying that persecution of "witches" often derived from a lack of understanding mental illness. Scenes depicting a nun in a church, compelled by the devil to leave her bed with a knife and drive it into the host in the tabernacle, cut back and forth with scenes of a modern woman compelled by an "unknown force" to get up in the middle of the night and light matches. In both cases, the women were sleepwalking in states of hysteria, acting out their greatest fear -- the nun had a paralyzing fear of the devil, while the modern woman had a paralyzing fear of fire.

The subtitles (which somehow managed to have a dry sense of humor and be dripping with irony, even in translation) pointed out that yes, in medieval times they burned people as witches, but in modern times, we still mistreat and put away the mentally ill, the unhappy, the old and the poor, consoling ourselves with the thought that we are not as barbaric as they were in the middle ages. No wonder Häxan was banned in the United States when it came out. The final image of the film was one of bodies burning at the stake, which then cut to a black screen with a single word: "SLUT." For a second I thought that was hilariously thought provoking and feminist, until I realized that's the Swedish word for "END." However, the whole film was fascinating, informative and still very thought-provoking, and the experience of watching it in Sage with live music was definitely one of a kind.

DETALLES

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