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THE MYSTERIOUS X

John Gillett

"And then came a man—Benjamin Christensen—who did not fabricate his films but created them out of love and an infinite care for detail. He was thought mad. But time has shown that it was he who made a pact with the future."

—Carl Dreyer, 1920

ONE OF THE MOST intriguing aspects of a film festival retrospective is the sheer uncertainty of it all. One sits through hours of early material, sometimes without the slightest excitement, and then suddenly something comes on the screen which makes everyone sit up and realise once again the necessity of rewriting the standard history books. Such a moment occurred at Venice two years ago when we saw a section from Benjamin Christensen's first feature film, *The Mysterious X*. A small boy darts along a road, sidles past the guards and dives into a gallery running round a water-girt prison. The photographic texture was immensely rich, with a fine contrast between inky black and the shafts of sunlight gleaming through the pillars as the boy stealthily made his way to the cell where his father was imprisoned; the camera panned easily with him; each shot cut perfectly with the next. When the lights went up, we checked the programme book warily for the date—1913.

Personally, I always find the obsession of some historians with the problem of "who did what first" rather an academic one; but on the evidence of this excerpt one felt instinctively that here was not only an artist far in advance of his time, but one who appeared to have invented the cinema for himself. Up to then, Christensen was known only as the director of *Häxan* (or *Witchcraft Through the Ages*, 1921), a reliable standby for any Swedish season and slightly notorious for its nudes, shots of incredibly aged women being tortured and slopping food all over their faces, an air of being really an illustrated lantern lecture (the opening sequence, in fact, resembles an early art film, analysing drawings and documents with the aid of a teacher's stick). Seeing it again recently at the National Film Theatre, the novelty seemed to have worn off

slightly. The argument appeared a little naïve, the titles endless, and one was left admiring the remarkable set design and uncommonly precise cutting. But was this reaction prompted simply by a change of perspective? By then, we had seen Christensen's earlier films, with their less substantial subject matter but even richer range of invention and experiment.

Christensen was born in Viborg in 1879. His interest in the theatre led him to become an actor and singer in Copenhagen; later, he became a scriptwriter for August Blom and grew up in what was probably the most advanced film milieu of the time. Griffith was still working on his early attempts at cross-cutting, Feuillade was busy turning out dozens of shorts in preparation for his elaborate *Fantômas* serial; neither had yet perfected what was to become his mature style. When Christensen made *The Mysterious X*, the only element which was unmistakably of its time was the melodramatic narrative—a rambling farrago about a master spy who compromises the wife of a loyal naval lieutenant but is outwitted by the faith and perseverance of the lieutenant's son.

Like Sternberg ten years later, Christensen saw the screen initially as an area which had to be painted with light. The interior furnishings of the country house are brightly striped, mirrors are used to reflect action, and the film abounds in shadow effects caused by people switching off lights as they pass from room to room. Christensen was also the first filmmaker to realise that a single set-up can often hold a greater atmospheric charge than a whole sequence if all its elements are carefully judged. Thus, the house party scene ends with a long-held shot of the guests waving goodbye to a group of cadets driving off in an old car in a sunny, leafy country setting which somehow symbolises all the false confidence of a Europe soon to be catapulted into war. Earlier on, there is a panning shot of horsemen trotting over a marsh backed by several huge pylons, which sees Christensen looking forward (unconsciously, of course) to an age when such shots would serve a much more calculated purpose. And all the way through, lighting and set decorations are used to give the

"NIGHT OF REVENGE".

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interiors a lived-in feeling which was rarely achieved elsewhere at this stage in the silent cinema.

With his second film, *Night of Revenge* (1915), he really came to grips with an elaborate story-line. Again there are obtrusive melodramatic elements, but the varied strands are neatly interlocked, and tinting is used to differentiate the various locations, not merely to separate night from day. The acting, too, shows a great improvement on the earlier film, with less period hand-wringing, notably from Christensen himself (who was probably the first actor-director, playing the loyal lieutenant in *The Mysterious X*, the shambling old convict in this film, and a jovial, hairy Satan in *Häxan*). Most startling of all is the camera style, with its stressing of detail in close-ups and gradual revelation of what the characters are doing, as in the scene where one is shown by a subtly panning camera exactly how the boy, locked in a closet, reaches out with a pole to help his trapped step-father reach a telephone. The story, in fact, is seen *through* the camera and not merely recorded by it, not least in the climax with its veritable flurry of cross-cutting as the avenging convict

stalks the mistress of the house from room to room. Here Christensen's flair for making a sequence come alive is seen at its most sophisticated; the house, the furnishings, take on a nightmarish aspect, as heads loom behind protective windows, keys are turned feverishly in locks, and melodrama is transmuted into art.

With these films, our knowledge of Christensen's creative activity ends. He went on to direct in Germany, act in Dreyer's *Mikaël*, and make several horror films (or so they are described) in America with such distinguished players as Norma Shearer and Lon Chaney. With the coming of sound, he returned to make a few films in Denmark, and died in 1959. Most reports indicate that the American films are lost—at least for the moment. One can only wonder what he did with the greater American technical resources of the 1920s; his contemporaries, Sjöström and Stiller, certainly made the most of them. One thing is now certain: Christensen was not a "one-shot" director, but a consistent innovator who took a primitive toy and gave it a syntax of its own. For that, we can safely claim him as a genuine *auteur*.