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Haevnens nat (Night of revenge), Christensen, Benjamin, 1916

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Shades of the Master: Benjamin Christensen

"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 Th. Dreyer, 1920

Benjamin Christensen (1879-1959) directed only fifteen films, eight of them outside his native Denmark, in a career spanning thirty years. His brilliant debut features, *The Mysterious X* (1913) and *Night of Revenge* (1915), and his notorious fusion of the documentary and supernatural fiction film, *Häxan* (*Witch*, 1918-1921, rereleased here as *Witchcraft through the Ages*), have earned him international recognition as a visionary Scandinavian film stylist and pioneering master of light, shadow, staging, and narrative in the cinema of the 1910s and early 1920s. His influence on fellow Danish auteur Carl-Theodor Dreyer was also substantial. Yet film historians have tended to undervalue the remainder of the Christensen canon. Of the six films Christensen made in Hollywood between 1926 and 1929, three are still considered to be lost, but the archival rediscoveries of *The Devil's Circus*, *Mockery*, and *Seven Footprints to Satan* reveal that Christensen's stylistic creativity, idiosyncratic experimentation, and sardonic wit all remained intact during his American emigre period. After a failed attempt at financing independent productions in Hollywood in the early 1930s, Christensen returned to Denmark, directing four films for Nordisk Films Kompagni between 1939 and 1942. The first three were contemporary "social-debate" films which re-established Christensen (then in his sixties) as a serious Danish filmmaker, social provocateur, and gifted director of both veteran and younger actors. His last film, *The Lady with the Light Gloves*, was a misfired return to the WWI-era espionage plot intrigues and expressionist silent-film visuals of *The Mysterious X* thirty years before. This critical fiasco abruptly ended his career, and Christensen managed a suburban cinema (the Rio Bio) in Copenhagen for the last fifteen years of his life.

—Arne Lunde

This series is sponsored by the Royal Consulate General of Denmark in New York. It was organized by Jytte Jensen, Associate Curator, The Museum of Modern Art, Department of Film and Video, with the generous collaboration of The Danish Film Institute/Film Archive, Fondazione Cinemateca Italiana, and Swedish Film Institute.

A series booklet with essays by notable scholars, produced by The Museum of Modern Art, will be available, free, at PFA.

Arne Lunde, who contributed many of the program notes for our Calendar, is a doctoral student in the Department of Scandinavian Studies, UC Berkeley. His dissertation focuses on directors Christensen, Victor Sjöström, Mauritz Stiller, and the Scandinavian Colony in twenties Hollywood.

Our series title is borrowed from an essay by Casper Tybjerg.

SATURDAY OCTOBER 16

Jon Mirsalis on Piano

The Mysterious X 7:00

Benjamin Christensen (Denmark, 1913)

(*Det hemmelighedsfulde X* / U.S. release title, *Sealed Orders*). One of the most astonishing film debuts in cinema, Christensen's spy-melodrama concerns a naval lieutenant (played by the director) accused of treason who is saved at the very last moment. Conventional as the story is, it is transformed by the visual power of the images and a narrative style and sophistication which announced a uniquely gifted film artist. The first-time director/writer finds physical expression for psychological traits and manners with seeming ease, and creates starkly contrasting images as well as (with cinematographer Emil Dinesen) scenes of shadow-light interplay of unusual authority and eloquence. The dramatic editing gives the film an unusual energy and a unique attention to detail makes the situations palpably real. Three months' production time (one to two weeks was the norm) paid off in glowing international reviews and successful runs at home and abroad.—Jytte Jensen

• Written by Christensen. Photographed by Emil Dinesen. With Christensen, Karen Sandberg, Otto Reinwald, Fritz Lamprecht. (85 mins, Silent, Live translation of Danish intertitles, B&W, 35mm, Courtesy Danish Film Institute/Film Archive)

Night of Revenge 8:45

Benjamin Christensen (Denmark, 1915)

(*Hævnens Nat* / U.S. release title, *Blind Justice*). Christensen gives a great performance in the lead role as "Strong John," a man falsely accused of murder, on the run with his small son. Recaptured and imprisoned for many years, he plots a complex revenge. A social melodrama of guilt and redemption with masterfully constructed scenes of sophisticated suspense and artful cinematography, the film had an unprecedented eight months production time and was the most expensive Danish film of its time. The story, inspired by *Les Misérables* and written by the director, attempted to reveal the ineffective aspects of European prison methods and advocated reforms. At the American premiere Christensen was invited by the warden of Sing Sing prison to screen his film for the inmates—an interesting experience for the director on his first visit to the U.S.—Jytte Jensen

• Written by Christensen. Photographed by Johan Ankerstjerne. With Christensen, Karen Sandberg, Peter Fjelstrup, Charles Wilken. (106 mins, Silent, English intertitles, B&W, 35mm, Courtesy Danish Film Institute/Film Archive)

SATURDAY OCTOBER 23

Bruce Loeb on Piano

The Devil's Circus 7:00

Benjamin Christensen (U.S., 1926)

The first of the films Christensen directed in the United States, *The Devil's Circus* is really a European film, from the stark interior set design to the debate over the existence of God (more a Scandinavian theme than one typical of MGM). Great care was lavished on composition of shots, lighting, and montage—the climactic stampede is particularly dazzling—with plot a secondary matter. The circus always could provide a reliable backdrop of atmosphere and danger to stories of high-stakes drama and sexual jealousy. Here, it is also a good excuse for visual pyrotechnics. The characters are archetypes: Norma Shearer's Mary displays a naivete that would make Lillian Gish appear street smart; John Miljan ventures beyond his usual cad to an outright sexual predator. This, of course, is fitting for a film whose events are animated by Satan himself.—Lee Amazonas

- Written by Christensen. Photographed by Ben Reynolds. With Norma Shearer, Charles Emmett Mack, Carmel Myers, John Miljan. (74 mins, Silent, B&W, 35mm, From Warner Bros. Classics)

Mockery 8:35

Benjamin Christensen (U.S., 1927)

Christensen's second completed project at MGM was *Mockery*, starring Lon Chaney as a slow-witted Russian peasant who falls in love with an aristocrat in distress (Barbara Bedford) during the Bolshevik Revolution. While fellow Metro directors Tod Browning and Swedish-emigre Victor Sjöström (in Hollywood, *Seastrom*) both successfully exploited the Chaney star persona and its narrative requirements—betrayal, masochism, revenge, madness, and death—Christensen's original script resisted the formula. *Mockery*'s Slavic beauty-and-the-beast tale exhibits Christensen's legendary chiaroscuro lighting and earned Chaney excellent reviews, but the film disappointed the star's fans and ended the director's relationship with the studio that had imported him from Europe.—Arne Lunde

- Written by Christensen. Photographed by Merritt B. Gerstad. With Lon Chaney, Ricardo Cortez, Barbara Bedford, Mack Swain. (66 mins, Silent, B&W, 35mm, From Warner Bros. Classics)

SUNDAY OCTOBER 24

Jon Mirsalis on Piano

Seven Footprints to Satan 5:30

Benjamin Christensen (U.S., 1929)

The success of German emigre Paul Leni's *The Cat and the Canary* in 1927 spawned a number of imitations in the haunted-house subgenre. During his speediest, most productive filmmaking phase, Christensen made four films for First National during 1928 and 1929—a Chinatown underworld film and three “comedy-mysteries.” *The Hawk's Nest*, *The Haunted House*, and # all remain lost films, but *Seven Footprints to Satan* surfaced again in the 1960s. This second in Christensen's comedy-mystery trilogy suggests that he thrived in this genre, where his gifts for eroticized fantasy and horror, sudden narrative twists, surrealist comic irony, and mobile, expressionist camerawork (in collaboration with Sol Polito) were all given much freer imaginative rein than at MGM. *Seven Footprints* stars Creighton Hale and Thelma Todd as a couple mysteriously kidnapped and taken to the fantasy-nightmare mansion of a hooded cult leader known only as Satan. To give away any more of the plot would spoil too much of the thrill-ride fun and perverse pleasure.—Arne Lunde

- Written by Richard Bee, based on the story by A. Merritt. Photographed by Sol Polito. With Thelma Todd, Creighton Hale, Sheldon Lewis. (60 mins, Silent, Danish intertitles translated live, B&W, 35mm, Courtesy Fondazione Cineteca Italiana, Milan, permission Warner Bros. Classics)

His Wife, the Unknown 6:50

Benjamin Christensen (Germany, 1923)

(*Seine Frau, die Unbekannte*). Two years after *Häxan*, Christensen wrote and directed this tragicomedy for Ufa-Decla in Berlin. In an effort to escape the label “literary experimentalist,” and now working under producer Erich Pommer, Christensen attempted to make a completely commercial film. The result is a strange hybrid. The plot involves a young artist blinded during the war. In love with a mystery woman he met only once at a carnival, the artist ultimately marries a sympathetic Red Cross nurse whom he mistakenly believes to be the same woman. His sight is restored by an American eye surgeon and then the misrecognitions really pile up. The film's feverish series of mistaken identities, masks, conspiracies, and deceptions increasingly destabilize its initial melodramatic premise as it catapults toward farce and even self-parody. The Rembrandt lighting and elegant sets at first seem at odds with the blending of

satire, chases, and sexual politics, but the model may well have been DeMille's postwar marital comedy-dramas. The film's Danish title "Who Is His Wife?" best captures some the film's breezy irreverence.—Arne Lunde

• Written by Christensen. Photographed by Frederik Fuglsang. With Lil Dagover, Willy Fritsch, Karl Platen. (77 min/s, Silent, German intertitles translated live, B&W, 35mm, Courtesy Danish Film Institute/Film Archive)

SATURDAY OCTOBER 30

Children of Divorce 5:30

Benjamin Christensen (Denmark, 1939)

(*Skilsmisens Børn*). After a ten-year hiatus from filmmaking, Christensen returned to his Danish-cinema roots. *Children of Divorce* was a critical and popular success, establishing Christensen as Denmark's most socially engaged and serious director a quarter of a century after his initial breakthrough. The film's framing story opens in New York City, where (in a long flashback) a young Danish woman confesses her sexual victimization as a fifteen-year-old. Adapted by Christensen from Alba Schwartz's 1935 novel, *Children of Divorce* portrays contemporary Copenhagen teenagers and the moral irresponsibility and self-absorption of their single parents. Banned for children in Denmark because of its adult themes, the film was considered by several critics the best Danish sound film made up until that time. Meyer and Holmer are particularly fine as the artist-father and daughter whose close relationship hints at repressed, incestuous desire. Watch for Christensen's unbilled cameo as a menacing, bearded ship's captain who barks in English, "Get the hell out of here!"—Arne Lunde

• Written by Christensen, based on the novel by Alba Schwartz. Photographed by Valdemar Christensen. With Johannes Meyer, Grethe Holmer, Svend Fridberg, Ellen Malberg. (94 mins, In Danish with English subtitles, B&W, 35mm, Courtesy Danish Film Institute/Film Archive)

The Child 7:25

Benjamin Christensen (Denmark, 1940)

(*Barnet*). Christensen's second "social-debate" film for Nordisk tackles the question of illegal abortions. Facing an unexpected pregnancy, a young office secretary, Ilse (Lis Smed), and her law-student boyfriend, Pontus (Mogens Wieth), struggle with the tortuous choice of either having the baby or seeking a backstreet abortion. Adapted from Leck Fischer's play, the film's mise-en-scène never really escapes the story's theatrical origins, despite Christensen's periodic tracking shots and a sunlit, Nordic summer exterior sequence. The fine ensemble acting carries most of the narrative, and the divisive politics within Pontus's family clan microcosmically stand in for conflicted Danish social attitudes about abortion in 1940. Well received by the critics and public, *The Child* further strengthened Christensen's revived reputation as an important filmmaker willing to take on serious and previously taboo subjects.—Arne Lunde

• Written by Leck Fischer, Fleming Lynge, based on the play by Fischer. Photographed by Valdemar Christensen. With Lis Smed, Mogens Wieth, Agis Winding, Gunnar Lauring. (85 mins, In Danish with English subtitles, B&W, 35mm, Courtesy Danish Film Institute/Film Archive)

Come Home with Me 9:15

Benjamin Christensen (Denmark, 1941)

(*Gaa Med mig Hjem*). The last of Christensen's trilogy of socially engaged films for Nordisk, *Come Home with Me* is both the wittiest and most moving of the three, resembling at moments a Danish fusion of Frank Capra (*You Can't Take It with You*) and Eugene O'Neill. Danish theater legend Bodil Ipsen portrays a successful, altruistic attorney who can't help but invite home people in crisis who need

guidance and a second chance. Johannes Meyer (the husband in Carl Dreyer's 1925 *The Master of the House* and the father in Christensen's *Children of Divorce*) plays Ipsen's ex-husband, a charming, roguish salesman-dreamer on a long, slow descent toward drunkenness, poverty, fraud, and prison. Christensen never had two more talented lead performers in a single film than here, and Ipsen and Meyer's scenes together, as John Ernst has suggested, manifest the most deeply human and fully realized characters in the entire Christensen oeuvre. Revealingly perhaps, this was the only screenplay among the director's films in which he had no creative hand.—Arne Lunde

• Written by Leck Fischer. Photographed by Valdemar Christensen. With Bodil Ipsen, Johannes Meyer, Grethe Holmer, Mogens Wieth. (93 mins, In Danish with English subtitles, B&W, 35mm, Courtesy Danish Film Institute/Film Archive)

SUNDAY OCTOBER 31

Witch (Häxan) 5:30

Benjamin Christensen (Sweden, 1918-1921)

Bruce Loeb on Piano

Christensen, fascinated and disturbed by modern notions of hysteria, explored their relationship to superstition and the historical obsession with witches in *Häxan* (recut and released under the title *Witchcraft through the Ages*, a film which bears little resemblance to the complete, tinted print we present tonight). He interprets stories found in trial records from the fifteenth to the seventeenth centuries in painstakingly recreated settings and costumes, using professional and nonprofessional actors, and brings the subject up to date in contemporary sequences. Christensen's presence is felt throughout this strange hybrid of documentary and fantasy (he also cast himself in the role of the devil). Film historian Georges Sadoul wrote, "Treatment of this theme could have been both ridiculous and pornographic, especially in the explicit depiction of the Witches' Sabbath. But Christensen's style is more reminiscent of Bosch, Breughel, Callot, and Goya."

• Written by Christensen. Photographed by Johan Ankerstjerne. With Oscar Stribolt, Clara Pontoppidan, Karen Winther, Tora Teje, Christensen. (108 mins at 18 fps, Silent with Swedish intertitles and English subtitles, Tinted, 35mm, Courtesy Cinemateket-Svenska Filminstitutet)

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