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THE MYSTERIOUS X (DET HEMMELIGHEDSFULDE X) 1913. Screenplay and scenario by

Saturday, June 9 - 4:30 THE MYSTERIOUS X (DET HEMMELIGHEDSFULDE X). 1913. Screenplay and scenario by Benjamin Christensen. Photographed by Dinesen. With Benjamin Christensen, Karen Sandberg, Otto Reinwald, and Fritz Lanmprecht.

"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.

THE MYSTERIOUS X is the first important work of a legendary director, Benjamin Christensen, whose films were extraordinary isolated achievements -- far ahead of their time in details of narrative and technique. His HAXAN (WITCHCRAFT THROUGH THE AGES), made in 1918-21, has become something of a cult classic: his seven Hollywood silents were long thought lost -- now one of the, THE DEVIL'S CIRCUS (1926), has been rediscovered. After his last American film, SEVEN FOOTPRINTS TO SATAN (1929), Christensen did not direct for ten years. Between 1939 and 1942, he made four melodramatic sound films for Nordisk Film in Denmark. He then operated a movie theatre in the outskirts of Copenhagen, and died in 1959.

The only appreciation of THE MYSTERIOUS X and its director to appear in English to date was John Gillett's homage to Christensen in the Spring 1966 Sight and Sound, excerpts from which follow:

"A small boy darts along a road, sidles past the guards and dives into a gallery running round a water-girt prison. The photographic image 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!"

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 navy 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 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 symbolizes all the false confidence of Europe soon to be catapulted into war ...All the way though, lighting and set decorations are used to give the interiors a lived-in feeling which was rarely achieved at this stage in the silent cinema."