

Carl Theodor Dreyer

(1889–1968)

The illegitimate son of a maid and a factory-owner from Sweden, Dreyer was born and brought up in Copenhagen, where his adoptive family subjected him to a miserable and loveless childhood. To earn a living as soon as possible, he found work as theatre critic and air correspondent for a Danish newspaper. He also began to write film scripts, the first of which was made into a film in 1912. The following year he began an apprenticeship at Nordisk, for whom he worked in various capacities and wrote some twenty scripts. In 1919 he directed his first film, *The President* (*Præsidenten*), a melodrama with a rather clotted Griffithian narrative structure which nevertheless showed a strong visual sense. This was followed by the striking *Leaves from Satan's Book* (*Blade af Satans bog*), an episode film partly modelled on *Intolerance*, shot in 1919 but not released until 1921.

The young Dreyer proved to be something of a perfectionist in matters of *mise en scène* and in the choice and direction of actors. This provoked a break with Nordisk and the director embarked on an independent career which led him to make his remaining silent films in five different countries. *The Parson's Widow* (*Præstænkens*, 1920) was shot in Norway for Svensk Filmindustri. While owing a stylistic debt to Sjöström and Stiller, it shows a marked preference for character analysis at the expense of narrative development. This impression is confirmed by *Mikael*, made in Germany in 1924, the story of an emotional triangle linking a painter, his male model, and a Russian noblewoman who seduces the boy away from the master, depriving him of his inspiration. Although heavy with symbolist overtones (derived in large part from the original novel by Hermann Bang), *Mikael* represents Dreyer's first real attempt to analyse the inner life

of characters in relation to their environment.

Dreyer fell out with Erich Pommer, the producer of *Mikael*, and returned to Denmark where he made *Master of the House* (*Du skal ære din hustru*, 1925), a drama about a father whose egotistical and authoritarian behaviour wreaks terror on his wife and children. Here the close-ups on faces take on a crucial role. 'The human face', Dreyer wrote, 'is a land one can never tire of exploring. There is no greater experience in a studio than to witness the expression of a sensitive face under the mysterious power of inspiration.' This idea is the key to *The Passion of Joan of Arc* (*La Passion de Jeanne d'Arc*, 1928), in which the close-up reaches its apotheosis in the long sustained sequence of Joan's interrogation against a menacing architectural backdrop—all the more oppressive for seeming to lack precise spatial location.

Dreyer's last silent film, *Joan of Arc* was shot in France with massive technical and financial resources and in conditions of great creative freedom. It was instantly acclaimed by the critics as a masterpiece. But it was a commercial disaster, and for the next forty years Dreyer was only able to direct five more feature films. *Vampyr* (1932) fared even worse at the box office. Using only non-professional actors, *Vampyr* is one of the most disturbing horror films ever made, with a hallucinatory and dreamlike visionary quality intensified by a misty and elusive photographic style. But it was badly received, and Dreyer found himself at the height of his powers with the reputation of being a tiresome perfectionist despot whose every project was a failure.

Over the next ten years Dreyer worked on abortive projects in France, Britain, and Somalia, before returning to his former career as a journalist in Denmark. Finally, in 1943, he was able to direct *Day of Wrath* (*Vredens dag*), a powerful statement on faith, superstition and religious intolerance. *Day of Wrath* is stark and restrained, its style pushing towards abstraction, enhanced by high-contrast



photography. Danish critics saw in the film a reference to Nazi persecution of the Jews, and the director was persuaded to escape to Sweden. When the war was over, he returned to Copenhagen, scraping together enough money from running a cinema to be able to finance *The Word* (*Ordet*, 1955) the story of a feud between two families belonging to different religious sects, interlaced with a love story between members of the opposing families.

Ordet takes even further the tendency towards simple and severe decors and *mise en scène*, intensified by the use of long, slow takes. Even more extreme is *Gertrud* (1964), a portrait of a woman who aspires to an ideal notion of love which she cannot find with her husband or either of her two lovers, leading her to renounce sexual love in favour of asceticism and celibacy. While the restrained classicism of *Ordet* won it a Golden Lion at the Venice Festival in 1955, the intransigence of *Gertrud*, with its static takes in which neither the camera nor the actors seem to move at all for long periods, was found excessive by the majority of critics. A storm of abuse greeted what deserved to be seen as Dreyer's artistic testament, a work of distilled and solemn contemplation. Dreyer continues to be admired for his visual style, which, despite surface dissimilarities, is recognized as having a basic internal unity and consistency, but the thematic coherence of his work—around issues of the unequal struggle of women and the innocent against repression and social intolerance, the inescapability of fate and death, the power of evil in earthly life—is less widely appreciated. His last project was for a Life of Christ, in which he hoped to achieve a synthesis of all stylistic and thematic concerns. He died shortly after he had succeeded in raising the finance from the Danish government and Italian state television for this project, on which he had been working for twenty years.

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SELECT FILMOGRAPHY

Præsidenten (The President) (1919); Prästänkan (The Parson's Widow) (1920); Blade af Satans bog (Leaves from Satan's Book) (1921); Die Gezeichneten (Love One Another) (1922); Der var engang (Once upon a Time) (1922); Mikael (Michael / Chained / Heart's Desire / The Invert) (1924); Du skal ære din hustru (The Master of the House) (1925); Glomdalsbruden (The Bride of Glomdale) (1926); La Passion de Jeanne d'Arc (The Passion of Joan of Arc) (1928); Vampyr der Traum des Allan Gray (Vampyr / Vampire) (1932); Vredens dag (Day of Wrath) (1943); Två människor (Two People) (1945); Ordet (The Word) (1955); Gertrud (1964)

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Opposite: *Ordet* (1955)

HARMONY AND DISRUPTION

The now legendary conflict between director Germaine Dulac and poet Antonin Artaud, over the making of *The Seashell and the Clergyman* (*La Coquille et le clergyman*, 1927) from his screenplay, focuses some key issues in avant-garde film. Dulac made both abstract films such as *Étude cinégraphique sur une arabesque* ('Cinematic study of a flourish', 1923) and stylish narratives, of which the best known is the pioneering feminist work *Smiling Madame Beudet* (*La Souriante Madame Beudet*, 1923). These aspects of her work were linked by a theory of musical form, to 'express feelings through rhythms and suggestive harmonies'. But Artaud opposed this vehemently, along with representation itself. In his 'Theatre of Cruelty', Artaud foresaw the tearing down of barriers between public and stage, act and emotion, actor and mask. In film, he wrote in 1927, he wanted 'pure images' whose meanings would emerge, free of verbal associations, 'from the very impact of the images themselves'. The impact must be violent, 'a shock designed for the eyes, a shock founded, so to speak, on the very substance of the gaze'. For Dulac too, film is 'impact', but typically its effect is 'ephemeral... analogous to that provoked by musical harmonies'. Dulac fluently explored film as dream state (expressed in the dissolving superimpositions in *La Coquille*) and so heralded the psychodrama film, but Artaud wanted film only to keep the dream state's most violent and shattering qualities, breaking the trance of vision.

Here, the avant-garde focused on the role of the spectator. In the abstract film, analogies were sought with non-narrative arts to challenge cinema as a dramatic form, and this led to 'visual music' or 'painting in motion'. In Jean Coudal's 1925 surrealist account, film viewing is seen as akin to 'conscious hallucination', in which the body—undergoing 'temporary depersonalization'—is robbed of 'its sense of its own existence. We are nothing more than two eyes rivetted to ten meters of white screen, with a fixed and guided gaze.' This critique was taken further in Dalí's 'Abstract of a Critical History of the Cinema' (1932), which argues that film's 'sensory base' in 'rhythmic impression' leads it to the *bête noire* of harmony, defined as 'the refined product of abstraction', or idealization, rooted in 'the rapid and continuous succession of film images, whose implicit neologism is directly proportional to a specifically generalizing visual culture'. Countering this, Dalí looks for 'the poetry of cinema' in 'a traumatic and violent disequilibrium veering towards concrete irrationality'.

The goal of radical discontinuity did not stop short at the visual image, variously seen as optical and illusory (by Buñuel) or as retinal and illusionist (by Duchamp). The linguistic codes in film (written or spoken) were also scoured, as in films by Man Ray, Buñuel, and Duchamp which all play with intertitles to open a gap between word,