CARL THEODOR DREYER (b. 3 February, 1989, Copenhagen, Denmark; d. 20 March, 1968, Frederiksberg, Denmark)

Carl Theodor Dreyer was a journalist, theatre-critic, scriptwriter and film director, who was born and brought up in Copenhagen. It is difficult to speak of a narratological or stylistic consistency throughout Dreyer’s oeuvre, in particular in regard to his late films that comprise the balk of his canon. Nevertheless, in their acute concern with aesthetic self-reflection, be it in terms of the aporetic narrative logic, the circular and/or tableau mise en scène, or the nonlinear and disruptive treatment of cinematic space and time, his late films acquire the title of “minor” early modern masterpieces (Schamus 3). Dreyer is also renowned for his meticulous approach to filmmaking, distinguishing him as one of the first auteurs of cinema. It is a well-established fact that Renée Jeanne Falconetti, the actress of *The Passion of Joan of Arc* (1928), suffered from mental breakdown at the completion of the film’s shooting due to the excessive demands and constraints put on her acting by Dreyer.

In the silent features *The Passion of Joan of Arc* and *Vampyr* (1932), Dreyer breaks away from the traditions of classic and Hollywood cinema. In *Passion*, Dreyer disrupts the established approaches to treating space as a homogenous site subject to the plot’s logic. Instead, he opts for a style of composition and editing that shifts the gaze away from the characters as the primary sites of action and meaning making, engendering a spatial style of visual storytelling. Likewise, *Vampyr*, somewhat influenced by the German Expressionist cinema, employs optical and special effects, in addition to a highly fragmented approach to storytelling, to render the irreducible experience of encountering the supernatural. The next three films, however, return to a more traditional style of storytelling and cinematography, culminating in the theatrical-film portrayal, *Gertrude* (1964). Both *Day of Wrath* (1943), which depicts the account of several witch-burning episodes executed by the church in a seventeenth-century Danish village, and *Ordet* (1955), the story of the resurrection of a Christian woman from death, employ an “absent cause” to motivate events throughout the plot that “cannot be motivated by social or natural causes” (Bordwell 124), since seemingly supernatural events subvert the realist logic of the narrative. While in these two films Dreyer displays a growing inclination toward very long takes, for shooting the drama within the confines of chambers, and for employing theatrical elements in cinema, in *Gertrude* he takes these to the extreme and employs a cast of professional stage actors in sequences that often average 90 seconds or more and typically depict durations of drama that unfold inside strictly domestic spaces. Therefore, *Gertrude* manages, once again, to oppose a very different of set of cinematic traditions that predominate Europe’s 60s cinema. This time, however, Dreyer accomplishes this feat through shifting the emphasis from the visual and temporal capabilities of the cinematic medium to an excessive insistence on gradual rhythms and circular mise en scènes that morph and evolve in accordance to the pace of the drama and character development. He died in 1969 and was unable to work on his final project for the Life of Christ in which supposedly planned to attain a synthesis of his formal and thematic objectives.

**References and further reading**

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California Press.

Kovacs, Andras. (2008) *Screening Modernism: European Art Cinema, 1950-1980*.

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53 and 239 for explications of Dreyer’s take on theatrical cinema.)

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Washington Press.

Selected Filmography

*Gertrud* (1964)

*Ordet* (1955)

*Day of Wrath* (1943)

*Vampyr* (1932)

*The Passion of Joan of Arc* (1928)

***Paratextual Material***

* For a detailed list of videos, documentaries, books, posters, images, and other resources on Dreyer’s life and works in English please visit: (http://english.carlthdreyer.dk/)

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