

# The Obtuse Space of Carl Theodor Dreyer's *La Passion de Jeanne d'Arc*

## *A Visual-Essayistic Approximation*

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### **Abstract**

The spatial peculiarities of three remarkable aspects of Carl Theodor Dreyer's *La Passion de Jeanne d'Arc* (1928) make up the kernel of this essay. The intertitles, the tragic climax of the film in the dialogue between Massieu and Jeanne d'Arc, and the existence of a scale model of the film set betray a complex relation to the overarching theme of the unbearable sorrow in the film. They suggest an alternative layer of meaning which does not coincide with the symbolic layer of the film and exists relatively autonomous. As such, they come close to what Roland Barthes identifies as the *sens obtus*. In accordance with our subject – a silent film, made up of images and intertitles – this essay relies on a visual (photographic) and textual (essayistic) component.

### **Résumé**

Les caractéristiques spatiales de trois aspects marquants de *La Pasion de Jeanne d'Arc* (1928) de Carl Theodor Dreyer forment l'essence de notre essai. Les intertitres, l'apogée tragique du film dans le dialogue de Massieu et de Jeanne d'Arc et l'existence d'une maquette du décor du film ont une relation complexe vis-à-vis le thème global de la souffrance intolérable du protagoniste. Ils suggèrent un sens alternatif qui ne correspond pas au sens symbolique du film et qui existe de façon relativement autonome. Ainsi, ils s'approchent de ce que Roland Barthes définit comme le *sens obtus*. Conformément à notre sujet – un film sourd fait d'images et d'intertitres – notre approche s'appuie sur un registre visuel (la photographie) et textuel (l'essai).

### **Keywords**

Carl Theodor Dreyer, *La Passion de Jeanne d'Arc*, sens obtus, spatiality, Roland Barthes



## *Itch'*

In one of the many close-ups of Renée Falconetti, who plays Jeanne in Carl Theodor Dreyer's *La Passion de Jeanne d'Arc* (1928), a fly enters the screen. At this point in the film, which narrates the process leading to the death of the 15<sup>th</sup>-century French heroin, Jeanne becomes more and more terrified and uncertain during her interrogation. The hesitation and terror of having to answer – her life is at stake – is accentuated by the fact that she brings her trembling hand to her mouth. Shortly after, the fly lands on her face. For less than a second, it sits on Jeanne's forehead and descends to her right eyebrow before being swept away with a simple gesture of Jeanne's hand: instinctively, the hand moves up from the lips, brushes the eyebrow and returns to its previous position.

This fleeting moment in the film seems insignificant. In this scene and in the film in general Dreyer portrays the spiritual dilemma and the complex emotive interaction of fear, doubt, perseverance and courage. Dreyer's Jeanne d'Arc is shown as torn apart by multiple, irreconcilable motives: her vocation by God, an earthly, nationalistic ambition and the preservation of her own life. In a way, holding up Carl Theodor Dreyer's film *La passion de Jeanne d'Arc* as an example of the unbearable is therefore a self-evident choice. Both the highly praised acting performances and Dreyer's inventive cinematographic techniques – overwhelmingly – depict sorrow. The polysemy of the concept of “the unbearable” (and its tempting rhetoric potential) makes it applicable to even more aspects of the film: *La passion* not only shows the *intolerable* suffering of a human being, it also narrates the *impossible* reconciliation of an ethical dilemma. *La passion* is unbearable, moreover, because as one of the last silent films it tells a story that *does not stand* the sound of voices or a musical score. The film underwent an almost *implausible* reception history that echoes the story it narrates. Among the numerous interpretations of this historical episode (one of France's founding myths), none has embodied its subject so painstakingly as Dreyer's: the original film was lost in a fire, a restored version based on alternative takes lost in another fire. In 1981, an original version was found in a Norwegian mental institution.<sup>2</sup>

In such a soberly designed (silent) film that narrates the theme of sorrow manifestly, almost every (mostly facial) detail gains an emphasis and symbolic weight. Nevertheless, unlike other objects (such as the crown or ring in the film) it is hard to attribute symbolic meaning to the fly. What it does raise, then, is sudden awareness (in the viewer, rather than in Jeanne) of the materiality of Jeanne's face and the dimensions of the room we are watching: it supplements the spiritual with something tangible. The fly's primary function seems to reside in its contrast: the profound emotions and ethical questions gain emphasis in relation to something as superficial and corporeal as the feeling of itch.<sup>3</sup> Still, details such as the presence of the fly can not be “swept away” as having a mere contrastive function. But what meaning can we then ascribe to the fly? As insignificant as it may seem, the fly precisely raises questions about significance itself. As a viewer, we can feel its disturbing presence. The difficulty in describing the meaning of such conspicuous details produces an irritating feeling in us. It lingers on during the film, long after the fly has left. It *itches*. Such instances of “itching” add a supplementary layer to the

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1. We would like to thank the Danish Film Institute for their kind support and Helena Elshout, Jack McMartin and Dirk De Geest for their useful comments. All the errors that remain are ours.

2. We rely on this version – brought out on DVD by the Criterion Collection in 1999 – for our analysis.

3. The contrastive function of the fly is a recurrent theme in film. In the opening scene of Sergio Leone's *Once upon a time in the West*, for example, a fly contrastively accentuates the mounting tension.

sorrow in *La Passion*. Just as the fly irritates because it suggests concrete spatial dimensions that are not shown, other aspects of the film prove to be intriguing in regard to the spatial composition of the film. In the following pages, we focus on the remarkable spatial peculiarities of three such aspects: the intertitles, the tragic climax of the film in the dialogue between Massieu and Jeanne, and the existence of a scale model of the film set, made by Hermann Warm. These seemingly “insignificant” aspects betray a complex relation to the overarching theme of the unbearable. They suggest an alternative layer of meaning, but are hard to describe. As such, they come close to what Roland Barthes sets out to describe in “Le troisième sens” (1970) – an essay on Sergej Eisenstein that will guide us here through *La Passion*. Barthes distinguishes a *sens obtus* from the symbolic level in film, the *sens obvie* (an obvious meaning). On the *sens obtus*, Barthes writes:

Je lis, je reçois [...], évidemment, erratique et têtue, un troisième sens. Je ne sais quel est son signifié, du moins je n’arrive pas à le nommer, mais je vois bien les traits, les accidents signifiants dont ce signe, dès lors incomplet, est composé [...]. [...] [I]l me semble déjà que son signifiant [...] possède une individualité théorique; car, d’une part, il ne peut se confondre avec le simple *être-là* de la scène, il excède la copie du motif référentiel, il contraint à une lecture interrogative [...]; et d’autre part, il ne se confond pas non plus avec le sens dramatique de l’épisode. (“Le Troisième Sens” 487)

This layer of “meaning”, Barthes argues, resides in particular details. It does not coincide with the symbolic layer of the film and exists relatively autonomous; it can even tell a counter-narrative. The keyword Barthes uses to describe this *sens obtus* is “indifférence”: “liberté de position du signifiant supplémentaire par rapport au récit” (“Le Troisième Sens” 502). The obtuse is a signifier without signified, draws attention to (and thus thwarts) the process of meaning and resides in a permanent state of depletion of meaning, without ever being “empty” of it. While it never destroys the obvious meaning of the film, it subverts and questions its status:

l’histoire (la diégèse) n’est plus seulement un système fort (système narratif millénaire), mais aussi et contradictoirement un simple espace, un champ de permanences et de permutations; elle est cette configuration, cette scène dont les fausses limites multiplient le jeu permutatif du signifiant: elle est ce vaste tracé qui, par différence, oblige à une lecture *verticale* [...]. (“Le Troisième Sens” 502)<sup>4</sup>

Our vertical reading of the way space functions in *La passion* can, nevertheless, only be *approximate*.<sup>5</sup> In accordance with our subject – a silent film, made up of images and intertitles – we rely on a visual (photographic) and textual (essayistic) component.

4. Kristin Thompson rightfully remarks that the term “sens” in *sens obtus*, is somewhat misleading and proposes to use “excess” as an alternative. She also nuances Barthes’ claim that the *sens obtus* does not influence (destroy or weaken) the *sens obvie*: “The critic and his/her reader must resist the learned tendency to try and find a narrative significance in every detail, or at least they must realize that a narrative function does not exhaust the material presence of that detail. Our conclusion must be that, just as every film contains a struggle of unifying and disunifying structures, so every stylistic element may serve at once to contribute to the narrative and to distract our perception from it” (57).

5. “Si l’on ne peut décrire le sens obtus, c’est que, contrairement au sens obvie, il ne copie rien: comment décrire ce qui ne représente rien?” (Barthes, “Le Troisième Sens” 500).



### *A Claustrophobic Construction*

Except for the use of close-ups, most of the critical attention with regards to the many formal peculiarities in *La Passion de Jeanne d'Arc* has been devoted to the film's eccentric cinematic space.<sup>6</sup> Regardless of the differing interpretations of this space, it is generally considered as auxiliary: it functions as the underpinning of the content and effect of the film. A clear example of this interpretation can be found in Paul Schrader's *Transcendental Style in Film: Ozu, Bresson, Dreyer* (1988). In his view, which can also be found in *Sémolué* (1962), the conjunction of tight framing, expressive lighting and the resulting distorted faces evoke the audience's empathy with the protagonist: "The composition and sets of *Passion* serve the same purpose as the faces: they offer an expressive environment in which the viewer can emotionally participate" (Schrader 123). While Schrader accentuates this empathic quality of the film and its space, David Bordwell takes a different stance and describes the style of the film and its cinematic

6. Bordwell states that Dreyer subverts the classical use of cinematic (or filmic) space, which is closed, unambiguous, continuous, balanced, antropomorphic and a container for action (*The Films of C.-Th. Dreyer* 37).

space in particular as disrupted. Although “we grasp it and respond to it” (*The Films of C.-Th. Dreyer* 84), the film is characterized by a spatial vacuum. The use of space, its properties and its cinematic rendering seem to conspire against the spatial unity the viewer strives for. The film creates this effect, Bordwell explains, through various cinematographic interventions.

Most evidently, *La Passion* is often described as physiognomic. It ascribes an unmatched importance to the face as carrier of the narrative through the use of close-ups. This, Bordwell claims, comes at the expense of spatial coherence and stability that would normally be extracted from the background. Dreyer uses a tight framing which leaves out most (if not all) of the scenery. Added to the absence of a clear background, the unadorned and mostly white decor is devoid of reference points. Thus, the viewer gets no clues on the distance between characters and the background. Moreover, without unequivocal establishing shots, spatial references between characters vanish. All seems to occur in one single plane. The scarcity and illegibility of the scenery ensure that even long shots are literally as spatially superficial as the extreme close-ups. A sense of depth is never granted and this is even further compounded by the distorted linear perspective embedded in Hermann Warm’s set design. Besides techniques of framing, the use of skewed perspective and the omission of a clear decor, the film also severs any form of spatial continuity through contradicting camera movements and angles. *La Passion* creates an impossible space by continuously mismatching sightlines and cuts. The wayward editing reinforces this sensation in assimilating and synchronously subverting the classic eyeline match. Ordinarily, this match consists of a gaze shot showing a character looking at something not currently shown, followed by a point-of-view shot showing the object of that particular gaze. The film often suggests such a relation between consecutive shots, but this anticipation is shattered with virtually every cut: “Each sequence contains an astonishing number and variety of false eyeline matches, which constantly make spatial relations at least ambiguous and often downright inconsistent” (Bordwell, *The Films of C.-Th. Dreyer* 80).

The combination of all these (often innovative) techniques results in what Bordwell calls “an eccentric space”: inharmonious, incoherent, and inconceivable. What is more, through the incessant use of such striking techniques, the spectator is constantly aware of his own position *as* a spectator. The film never stops telling us, via its spatial composition, that it is *a film* we are watching. *La Passion* induces a sharpened awareness of the cinematic as a (re-)construction and is highly self-reflexive. The film thus not only creates an unreadable space in between characters; it exports the same eccentric and illegible spatiality to the viewer. This results in an indefinable triadic field of intersecting gazes between Jeanne, the antagonists and the viewer, who is prohibited from assigning any stability to his own vantage point. The effect the film has on the spectator is nothing less than claustrophobic: although all spaces in the film are small, or at least clearly demarcated (a cell, a courtyard, a torture chamber), the effect they have is, via the filming technique, estranging, uncomfortable and almost frightening.<sup>7</sup> This eccentric space creates the yearning for spatial comprehension. The film builds up to a climax and anticipates

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7. Both Bordwell and Kracauer mention the claustrophobic in regard to *La Passion*, albeit in a different way. Bordwell’s application of the term in *Filmguide to La Passion de Jeanne d’Arc* (1973) refers to the applied framing and the way in which it does not allow the viewer to escape from the expressive faces. Kracauer on the contrary sees the film, from a historical perspective, as *not* claustrophobic. It is the finiteness of a classical historical film in which the viewer senses the claustrophobic boundaries of (historical) cinema: “Looking at such a film, the spectator is likely to suffer from claustrophobia. He realizes that his potential field of vision strictly coincides with the actual one and that, accordingly, he cannot by a hair’s breadth transcend the confines of the latter” (78). *La Passion* evades the claustrophobic stagginess through Dreyer’s relentless use of and focus on the physiognomic and thus obscures the boundaries of the historical film.

the possibility of spatial coherence, comprehensibility and, in its wake, audience empathy. On three occasions, this yearning is brought to a complex height.

### *A Solitary Emphasis*

While most of the critical attention addresses the pictorial side of the film, the intertitles prove to be intriguing as well – especially from a spatial perspective. Dreyer approached *La Passion* primarily from a documentary perspective. While it was Joseph Delteil's screenplay that would initially be the foundation of the film, Dreyer soon rejected it and turned to the historical transcripts of the actual trial: "For me, it was, before all else, the technique of the official report that governed. There was, to start with, this trial, with its ways, its own technique, and that is what I tried to transpose to the film" (Dreyer, qtd. in Schamus 62). The historical representativeness on which the film leans, also shows in the way Dreyer presents it to the viewers. From the outset, the film makes and emphasizes its historical claim: the opening shot shows how someone leafs through the transcript of Jeanne d'Arc's trial. We only see his hands and the sleeves of a (modern) suit. It subtly suggests that this person is reading the medieval document in the present: it marks a temporal distance and authorial objectivity in relation to the historical story that is about to be narrated. What follows is thus framed as based on historical evidence rather than on a poetic interpretation or heroic glorification of Jeanne's life.

This "textual realism" (Schamus 60) is given further prominence through the intertitles. Interwoven with the opening shot, a text moves up the screen that repeats the claim of historical accuracy: "Dans la bibliothèque de la Chambre des Députés à Paris se trouve l'un des documents les plus extraordinaires de l'histoire du monde: le procès-verbal rédigé durant le procès de Jeanne d'Arc, procès qui aboutit à sa condamnation et sa mort...". The intertitles that follow and that narrate Jeanne's story are presented as a truthful selection of the historical dialogue between Jeanne and her judges. These intertitles seem to be neutral, stable, unmediated: against a black background (marking the contrast with the whitish images), white words in a sober font are centred on the screen. Dreyer conceived the intertitles as the foundation of the film. They have a clear, bifold function. On the one hand, they are a structural device in the construction of a linear narrative. On the other hand, they offer a refuge from the pictorial distress. Amidst the spatial eccentricity they function as a counterpoint and meet with the yearning for spatial stability the film creates. As Bordwell points out, the historical figure of Jeanne d'Arc serves as the unifying principle in this pictorially disrupted film: "Jeanne as historical figure assures the passage between stylistic eccentricity and narrative homogeneity; because the viewer's representational position is made unclear, she or he is thrown back upon Jeanne's story as the one certainty in the film" (*The Films of C.-Th. Dreyer* 84). Seen from this perspective, text and image are opposed and break the film into two separate registers. As Schamus states, *La Passion* consists of two distinct films, a pictorial one and a textual one: "You could piece together one of the films by pulling out the 174 intertitles, 168 of which are dialogue cards of the judges' questions and Joan's answers, and projecting them in sequence" (Schamus 59).

The status of the intertitles soon turns doubtful, as they appear highly selective in transcribing what the characters are seen to be saying (see e.g. Sémolué). It is all the more surprising that on two moments



the historical or textual realism is clearly undermined by a spatial and typographical intervention in the intertitles.<sup>8</sup> The first occurs during the interrogations of Jeanne in the torture chamber, an instant before the famous graphic, expressionistic display of the torture devices and Jeanne's passing out. Jeanne is presented an abjuration, which she is asked to sign. She refuses, after which one of the judges, Jean Beaupère (played by Louis Ravet), furiously addresses her:

[Intertitle 1, Beaupère] L'Eglise vous tend les bras ...

[Intertitle 2, Beaupère] ... si vous le refusez, l'Eglise vous abandonnera et vous resterez seule

...

[Intertitle 3, Beaupère] ... seule !

[Intertitle 4, Jeanne]... oui, seule ...

[Intertitle 5, Jeanne] ... seule avec Dieu !

The word "seule" is repeated four times and emphasizes Jeanne's solitude. The judge is portrayed as shouting. Remarkably, the second emergence of "seule" is underscored. The line under the word is superfluous, as "seule" is already textually *and* pictorially accentuated. It therefore raises suspicion: as one of the only typographical interventions in the intertitles, it suggests that someone has adapted the text.<sup>9</sup> This detail questions the historical claim of the intertitles, and the film in general, as it marks the presence of an extradiegetical voice who intervenes in the text. Moreover, this underlining echoes an earlier scene. After refusing to recite the Lord's Prayer at first, Jeanne obeys when she is asked a second time. An allegation (Jeanne's refusal to renounce the Lord's Prayer) is subsequently crossed out by the clerk. Dreyer clearly shows the gesture of the clerk drawing the line, but not the line and the text itself. The motif of the line later reappears in the underlining of "seule". Consequently, the two registers of the film (pictorial and textual) are approximated. Their division, which ensured spatial "relief" and historical validity, is questioned.

A second intertitle that marks a spatial interference is displayed in the scene in which Jeanne is burned at the stake. The scene is stretched out unbearably long. The sight of sorrow is never paused. The audience is not granted any refuge from this sorrow-laden spectacle and is not offered a clear spatial position from where to watch Jeanne being burned. The only chance for (spatial) stability could be found in the two intertitles in this scene, that would offer a welcome occasion to "look away" from Jeanne's physical torment. When Jeanne speaks out her last word – "Jésus" –, the intertitle nevertheless frustrates the comfort we expect. "Jésus" is not centred on the screen but placed at the bottom right corner. While this spatial intervention marks the word as Jeanne's last one (although it is not the last intertitle), it subverts, again, the status of the intertitle as a reliable, historical and comforting mainstay throughout the film. The text has become subject to spatial manipulation – although it is all but clear who

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8. The film contains only six intertitles of which the words can not be assigned to a character: four during the opening scene, elucidating the transcripts, further on one as a means of locating the narrative "Dans la chambre de torture", and one at the end, concluding the film.

9. Another important motif in the film is the cross, which equally has a disturbing effect: it marks the complex relation between written language and spoken language (see Desilets, 2003). The cross, as a mark, is also present in the contact sheets of the film, preserved in the archive of the Danish Film Institute. The way in which they echo the motif of the cross in different decorative details of the photograms, and the effect their presence has on the status of written language in the film, would offer an intriguing possibility for further examination.

manipulates. The place where we expect the text is empty. Instead, what we are confronted with is the black, wordless centre of the screen.

### *A bathophobic gaze*

The second point of spatial “relief” – apart from the intertitles – is arguably the most compelling scene in *La Passion*, in which Massieu (played by Antonin Artaud) is alone with Jeanne shortly after she effectively sentenced herself to death: she admits she lied out of fear for the stake and restates her direct contact with God. After this statement, the priest Massieu (in the beginning flanked by a fellow priest) addresses Jeanne: “Nous sommes venus pour te préparer à la mort”. The scene ends with the same word, as it is Jeanne’s answer to Massieu’s question what her deliverance will be: “... la mort!”. The scene lasts three minutes, during which the faces of Massieu and Jeanne occupy the screen. Words are scarcely uttered and Jeanne’s answers are preceded by (unbearably) long pauses. Nowhere in the (silent) film is the silence as prominent as in this short scene.

In many ways this scene can be regarded as the tragic climax of the film. On the level of content, the story of Jeanne has just reached its peripeteia: the consequences of Jeanne’s truthfulness, courage and perseverance are made explicit in words and facial expressions. Viewed in relation to the rest of the film, the scene stands formally apart in multiple ways. The scene comforts the viewer – a surprising effect after more than an hour of estranging cinematographic techniques. Among other things, this comfort is created by the absence of leaps in the narrative time: the three minutes of film seem to coincide with three minutes on the narrative level. Also, unlike the selective transcription in the rest of the film, the intertitles in this scene almost exhaustively transcribe what Jeanne and Massieu are seen to be saying.<sup>10</sup> Above all, it is the only scene of considerable length in which the film does not radically subvert the spatial coherence through camera angles and editing. Jeanne is alone with one other character: a direct dialogue unravels and is translated cinematically more or less according to the standards of the eyeline match. Although still slightly off-angle, the corresponding gaze and point-of-view shots invite the audience to empathize with Jeanne through an identification with the character Massieu. The editing slows down, cinematic space turns intelligible, vantage points are consistent. Consequently, both on the level of content and on the level of form all variables are in place for a long-awaited moment of compassion – the unmistakable *sens obvie* of the scene.

While the scene brings the theme of sorrow to its climax via a relative spatial coherence, it also supplements this sorrow. The ability to empathize is subverted by the presence, for several seconds, of an excessive detail that draws our attention. Although both characters are not shown in the same frame, Dreyer’s use of camera-angles makes it clear that, after Massieu asks his first question, his and Jeanne’s gazes cross. Massieu seems to stand on higher ground, while Jeanne is sitting down: their gazes draw a diagonal through the room. On this moment (and even more in the two separate photograms that can be derived from it),<sup>11</sup> we perceive a subtle, sparkling and at the same time misty *luster*, a film covering Jeanne and Massieu’s wide-open eyes. This haze seizes our attention: it produces a *sens obtus*. Literally,

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10. The only exceptions are the affirmative answers Jeanne gives to Massieu (“Oui”), which are not transcribed.

11. The photogram, a still from a movie, is Barthes’ means of analyzing the obtuse meaning in film in his essay “Le troisième sens”.

the film before their eyes is what Barthes defines as “le filmique”: “le filmique est donc exactement là, dans ce lieu où le langage articulé n’est plus qu’approximatif et où commence un autre langage” (“Le Troisième Sens” 503).

While its location is clear, the meaning of the *sens obtus* is far less so.<sup>12</sup> Seen in isolation, Jeanne’s gaze harbours a certain kind of madness, a religious mania. Above all it disrupts the spatial coherence that is cinematographically created. Although this gaze-shot is answered by a point-of-view shot (showing Massieu), it is nevertheless clear that Jeanne does not (only) see Massieu. What she sees, is not what is shown to us, viewers. The film in her eyes suggests she sees *beyond* Massieu, the room, the set. Her stare implies a fathomless depth. The space that the lustre in her eyes suggests is unshowable, inconceivable, cinematically insupportable and thus unbearable. It is and cannot be but withheld from the viewer. The moment upon which the claustrophobic experience makes way – because the eyeline match produces a comprehensible, harmonic and stable sense of space – the haze in Jeanne’s stare produces, for the spectator, an effect of vertigo: the incomprehensibility and unbearableness of spatial depth, a *bathophobic* experience. Although less prominent, the same stare is perceivable in Massieu’s eyes. The effect is thus reinforced when Massieu and Jeanne’s eyes meet: just like two mirrors placed in front of each other, both gazes infinitely reverberate and throw beyond one another their suggestion of a space beyond the film. A Droste effect is produced between Artaud’s and Falconetti’s eyes: a dazzling, unbearable bathophobia that alters, subverts and questions the possibility of ascribing meaning – compassion – to Massieu and Jeanne’s encounter.<sup>13</sup>



12. See Sémolué: “L’isolement des gestes, des regards, la volonté significative dans tous les détails concertés d’une représentation insistante aboutissent à la capture de l’inexprimable” (64-65).

13. The theme of madness is, anachronistically, reinforced. Just as Jeanne can be associated with religious mania, it is, from a contemporary perspective, hard not to see the mythical biographic madness that has imposed itself on the traits of Antonin Artaud’s face in popular-cultural imagery.

The scene is supplemented with a detail that refuses to be framed in the overarching, climactic theme (sorrow). The gaze in both characters' eyes subverts the coherent space (and the compassion it makes possible) *from inside out*. The yearning for spatial comprehension is at once answered and frustrated.

### *An isomorphic indifference*

Paradoxically, the third instance of spatial coherence is present in and in front of the set-models, which provide another compelling “residue” (just as the photograms, or to a lesser extent the intertitles) of *La Passion* that does not (seem to) pertain to the film as such.<sup>14</sup> Currently conserved in the archives of the Danish Film Institute, these highly detailed and extensive scale models were made by the German expressionist set designer Hermann Warm more than thirty years after the film was shot (see Britta Martensen-Larsen, 1992).<sup>15</sup> The set itself, built in Boulogne-Billancourt, was one of the most expensive sets ever made at the time and would come to occupy an important place in film history because of its – Warm's and Jean Hugo's – expressionist design. This design can be identified in the scale model: it represents Rouen Castle where Jeanne was brought before trial. We see the castle walls, the chapel, the stake, the tribune, the drawbridge, a small doll on the stake representing Jeanne, and the courtyard.

These scale models render the spatial attributes of the film in a seemingly unambiguous way. They facilitate spatial comprehension: one look, from a birds-eye view places the different scenes in spatial relation to each other. Suddenly, we can grasp Jeanne walking from the chapel to the stake. As such, the experience of watching Warm's models contrasts with the experience that dominates the film. Just as in the scene between Massieu and Jeanne, it meets with the yearning for spatial comprehension that the film creates and frustrates. The scale model grants a birds-eye view and thus invests an abundance of authority in the spectator: as film viewer, he has, a few scenes notwithstanding, nothing but an unstable, unreliable vantage point, whereas the beholder of the model is presented with a coherent space and an anchored horizon within the steady realm of the archive. In beholding the models, the viewer himself creates the lacking establishing shots.

Nevertheless, the obvious stability the scale model offers, is supplemented by an excessive experience. While it is easily recognisable as a replica of the set, it questions at the same time its apparent residual, derivative status. Here, it is less the material *detail* of the photogram that grips our attention than the material *whole* of the scale model. The model suggests a world beyond the manifest, beyond the perceptible, palpable in the distortion of scale and context between the fragile models and the solid concrete archive where it is preserved. There is a subversive aspect, which resides in the complex relation of Warm's scale model and its context. Just like the photogram, it works as a citation. It stands

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14. Turning to a scale model to analyze a film might seem strange, even from a Barthesian point of view. Nevertheless, the reasons Barthes gives for focusing on *photogrammes* as a means for analyzing films, hold equally true for the *maquette*. To state it differently: while Barthes puts the emphasis on searching *le filmique* apart from the moving images, motivation lacks why this should be limited to the photogram. Like the *photogramme*, a scale model cannot be reduced to “un sous-produit lointain du film, un échantillon, [...] et, techniquement, une réduction de l'œuvre par immobilisation de ce que l'on donne pour l'essence sacrée du cinéma: le mouvement des images” (Barthes, “Le Troisième Sens” 504).

15. Warm made these models, four in total, in the 1960's when *La Passion* received its canonical status as one of the masterworks in film history. Martensen-Larsen analyzes the medieval origin of Warm's design and accentuates the importance of the models: “Da Dreyers Film, wie bereits erwähnt, in erster Linie aus grossen Nahaufnahmen (Close-ups) auf Kosten der Architektur besteht, sind Warms Rekonstruktionen von grosser Bedeutung für die Zukunft” (147).

in a palimpsestic relation to, *amongst others*, *La Passion*, “sans qu’on puisse dire que l’un est le *dessus* de l’autre ou que l’un est extrait de l’autre” (Barthes, “Le Troisième Sens” 505).

As a citation of *La Passion*, it, paradoxically, only minimally and in a distorted way refers to the film. The extensive set hardly appears in any of the tightly composed frames that make up the film. There are barely any establishing shots that require such an elaborate (and expensive) setting. Rather, it is the separate fragments in the film (a bridge, a tower...) that mark the model as linked to the film. This referential obscurity only intensifies when we try to situate Warm’s model historically. As scaled, three-dimensional visualizations of the original two-dimensional design of the actual sets (Warm used his original sketches and drawings to make the model), the models float uncomfortably between a representation of a proposed set, a replica of a no longer existent set and a reproduction of the historical Rouen Castle (on which Warm based his original drawings). They are isomorphic – the defining trait of any model – but have no clear referent that would define, unambiguously, what they resemble.<sup>16</sup> As a result of this irreconcilable referential obscurity, Warm’s models, in the end, seem to refer to nothing but the cinematic production process itself.<sup>17</sup> They are a tangible trace of the cinematic production and accentuate the materiality of a film that is known for its spiritual dimension. They suggest a clear temporal relation to the film as a relic of the preparatory stage of the film. Nevertheless, just as the photogram, they mock the logic of time and the temporality of the “motion” pictures, as they oblige “une lecture à la fois instantanée et verticale” (Barthes, “Le Troisième Sens” 505).

On a semiotic level, these scale models echo the inconceivable depth that characterizes the intersecting gazes of Massieu and Jeanne, albeit this time from *outside in*. While they obviously imply a referential hierarchy and offer a spatial relief and surveyability vis-à-vis the film, they also question it: they keep pushing back their referent, while they incessantly keep asking for an ascription of meaning. Again, we witness the divergence of two layers within the film and the vertiginous, bathophobic effect that this divergence has on us, the viewers. The spatial-typographical emphasis in the intertitles, the lustre on the surface of Jeanne and Massieu’s eyes and Warm’s tangible scale models all harbour this excessive, obtuse quality. Their presence does not destroy the theme of sorrow of *La Passion*. Still, they itch and cannot be swept away: they refuse to be framed in the overarching symbolic meaning of the film. As such, they supplement and subvert the *status* of sorrow as the final and unquestionable essence of *La Passion*. As much as the narrative and visualization of Jeanne’s suffering, the unbearable of the film resides in the space these obtuse details suggest but cannot support. The unbearable lingers on, in and beyond them, indifferently.

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16. Moreover, the scale models are made and displayed when the original film is deemed to be lost. If it would refer to the film, it would be, until 1981, to a “residual” and unauthorized copy of *La Passion*.

17. Warm’s models can therefore be considered as an *œuvre-maquette*, in the way Barthes evokes the term in *La préparation du roman I & II*: “Dans l’ordre de la littérature, du texte, il arrive que l’œuvre elle-même, le produit qui est sacré et consacré comme œuvre, soit ouvertement donnée comme *une simulation d’elle-même*: il s’agit des œuvres qui mettent en scène leur propre fabrication” (*La Préparation du Roman* 230).



## **Images**

Image 1: Point de vue de la côte Sainte-Cathérine, Rue de la Corniche, Rouen. © Michiel De Cleene, 2011

Image 2: Contact sheet with stills from *La Passion de Jeanne d'Arc*. © Danish Film Institute / Stills & Posters Archive

Image 3: Still from the scene between Jeanne and Massieu, selection of contact sheet with stills from *La Passion de Jeanne d'Arc*. © Danish Film Institute / Stills & Posters Archive

Image 4: Archive of the Danish Film Institute, Copenhagen. © Michiel De Cleene / Arnout De Cleene, 2013

Image 5: Point de vue de la côte Sainte-Cathérine, Rue de la Corniche, Rouen. © Michiel De Cleene, 2011

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