



▼  
The Passion of Joan of Arc.  
Marie Falconetti (Jeanne d'Arc).

“The silence that strips bare:  
In Dreyer's *Passion of Joan*

Falconetti's face, hair shorn, a great geography  
Mutely surveyed by the camera . . .”

—Adrienne Rich, *Cartographies of Silence*

“Oh! but . . . Joan of Arc is also words!”

—Carl Theodor Dreyer, from an interview

## DREYER'S TEXTUAL REALISM

by James Schamus

There is a sense in which *The Passion of Joan of Arc* (1928) is not one, but two films; or, as Kierkegaard might have put it, *Joan of Arc* consists of the relation between two films. 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. A perfectly intelligible narrative of a trial and punishment would unfold, since, as the critic Noel Burch has pointed out, the narrative of Joan “has largely been reduced to its own abstraction,” to the written texts of the intertitles.<sup>1</sup>

The other film would be the oneiric succession of faces, mostly in close-up, that would remain. And here too the story would be more or less intelligible, as we watch what Bela Balazs called “this series of duels between looks and frowns, duels in which eyes clash instead of swords.”<sup>2</sup> For *Joan of Arc* also works as a story on a purely visual level. It is, in Siegfried Kracauer's words, “essentially a story told in facial expressions.”<sup>3</sup>

These two films—the one made of words, the other of faces—play out a battle for narrative supremacy between text and image that is at the heart not only of Joan's story, as the judges try to trap her with their

questions, to force her signature on the confession, but also of Dreyer's. Dreyer, who began his career in cinema writing intertitles at Nordisk Films, was preoccupied with his own relation to the written word: his writings on film return again and again to the question of writing and of the film director's role in the translation of word into image. Who, Dreyer wondered, is the real author of the film, the screenwriter or the director? From where does the director, as an artist, derive his own authority?

Dreyer's responses to these questions were always evolving and often contradictory. But he always saw the relation between the written and the filmic orders as an agonistic one, as a constant battle of wills. In 1922, for example, in an article about his favorite Danish director, Benjamin Christensen, Dreyer argued that “the manuscript is the fundamental condition for a good film.” But he took issue with Christensen's insistence that the director should write his own screenplays, “for the task of the film is and will remain the same as that of theater: to interpret other people's thoughts, and the director's task is to submit to the writer whose cause he is serving.”<sup>4</sup> This rhetoric of written mastery and filmic submission would begin to chafe in later years, when Dreyer would picture the power relations as reversed: “And my approach to working with Kaj Munk's *Ordet* has, therefore, always been and still is this: first, to possess oneself of Kaj Munk, and then forget him.”<sup>5</sup> But the relationship is still basically the

same, so that if in 1920 Dreyer calls for adaptations from great works of literature; and in 1922 demands original scripts from professional authors; and in 1959 thinks that “the screenplay can and should be made by the author and the director in collaboration”; while, in 1950, the “ideal is, of course, that the director writes his own manuscript,”<sup>6</sup> we should remark these inconsistencies not as evidence of a fickle spirit but rather as the symptoms of a lifelong anxiety about authorship and authority. As we shall see, that anxiety informs not only Dreyer's thematic concerns—his repeated focus on heroes and heroines who battle the authorities that attempt to dominate and define them—but also the formal strategies he utilized to present those stories. To understand this dynamic, we should see Dreyer in the larger critical context in which his aesthetic practices can be placed.

Dreyer is most often considered an “avant-garde” filmmaker, a director of difficult “art” films. In most serious studies of his work, such as David Bordwell's, this avant-garde status is thought of as in opposition to the “dominant” codes of Hollywood cinematic realism. On the one hand lie the modernist, truly artistic film works, among which Dreyer's films are figured prominently. On the other hand are the realist films of the mainstream, ideologically suspect because their narratives are constructed so as to appear natural, and the mechanics of their production are kept hidden.

James Schamus is a screenwriter living in New York. He is currently completing his doctoral dissertation on Dreyer for the University of California, Berkeley.

Dreyer's films—at least those after *The Master of the House* (1925)—constantly point to the process of their own making, calling into question the assumptions and ideologies that are usually glossed over in the creation of filmic illusions. We hear the screech of the moving camera in *Ordet*, feel the unnatural weight of the written dialogue in *Gertrud*, account for the constant mismatches in *The Passion of Joan of Arc* as a deliberate deconstruction of filmic space. And such strategies are almost always seen as politically liberating and ideologically progressive. From Brecht to Barthes, mainstream illusion is bad, formal innovation, the “troubling of the signifier,” is good.

Paradoxically, another set of critics, among them the filmmaker Paul Schrader, sees Dreyer's work as anything but revolutionary. His, they argue, is a cinema of the spirit, of transcendence, of, as Father Borgen puts it at the end of *Ordet*, “the good old God, eternal and the same.” No matter how formally interesting, this is hardly the work of a dedicated revolutionary, let alone an avant-gardist out to shock the bourgeoisie.

Rather than being avant-garde or realist, though, Dreyer was both, working within a realist tradition—that of Ibsen, Strindberg, and others—that was, in its heyday, itself an avant-garde practice. Dreyer was one of the few filmmakers to seriously extend the reach of that practice into film, and his engagement with that tradition was articulated not merely in his many adaptations of realist texts—from Herman Bang's *Michael* to Hjalmar Söderberg's *Gertrud*—but more fundamentally in the way he theorized the interplay between his characters and their textual roots. For the realist character—unlike, say, an allegorical figure in a mystery play—is precisely that aesthetic construct that demands to be more than a construct, more than a collection of phrases in a script. The realist character demands to be, in a

word, “real.”

Dreyer's quest for the “real” as a base for his own characters was never ending. With *The Passion of Joan of Arc*, for example, Dreyer rejected the original, poetic script written for him by the French writer Joseph Delteil. Instead, he based his screenplay strictly on the actual records of Joan's trial, working closely with the historian who had recently recited them. The opening shot of *Joan of Arc*, while probably the film's least memorable, is, in this context, its most emblematic: a hand flips through the pages of the transcripts, in which, the intertitle tells us, we can discover Joan “as she really was.”

That opening shot establishes a rhetoric of realism based not on the transparency of the filmic illusions to follow—*Joan of Arc* is, in fact, too avant-garde for that—but rather on

the assertion of the film's respect for historical evidence, as it seeks to represent the real spirit of its characters. This realism I call “textual realism,” an aesthetic practice based on the authority of its documentary sources.

Just as Dreyer researched the “real” Joan, so in *Gertrud* Dreyer claimed that his heroine was not the Gertrud of Hjalmar Söderberg's original 1906 play, but the real woman whom Söderberg himself fictionalized, Maria von Platen. Dreyer went so far as to add the famous epilogue, in which his Gertrud recites words von Platen herself wrote in a letter.

And, odd as it may seem, Dreyer claimed that his adaptation of *Medea* (recently brought to the screen by the young Danish director Lars von Trier) was “not directly based on the tragedy of Euripides, but . . . is an

attempt to tell the true story that may have inspired the great Greek poet.” The true Joan, the true Gertrud, the true Medea—not to mention the true Mary, Queen of Scots, or the true Jesus, to whom Dreyer devoted nearly twenty years of painstaking historical research (even, in his seventies, learning Hebrew)—they are all of them phantasmatic objects of a reality made accessible only through the artistic transmutation of documents into images.

They are phantasmatic, too, in the fact that so few of them ever saw their shadows reach the screen: to visit the Dreyer archives in Copenhagen is like walking through the imaginary libraries of the blind Borges. File upon file of carefully typed or neatly printed notes, literally thousands if not tens of thousands of sheets. And books—whose specialized libraries on Greece, early Christianity, the Scottish Reformation. An entire warehouse, which evokes an uncanny doubleness of purpose—the Dreyer archives, which are themselves Dreyer's archives: the archives of an archivist.

This endless production of documentary evidence took up far more of Dreyer's lifetime than the production of actual films. In fact, his research for the Jesus project most probably substituted for the film itself; it's not far-fetched to say that Dreyer could have made the film had he not kept putting it off to take more notes. Here, the “real” collapsed into its written traces; Jesus remained in a wilderness of texts.

We can picture Dreyer's own career—in his last forty years he made only five films—as a heroic battle, and in many ways a tragic one, to image forth his heroes and heroines out of the documents, the scraps of text, in which they lay. His demand for the “real” posed challenges both thematic and formal, and in important ways mirrored his characters' own battles. For the archetypal theme of the realist text itself is the

hero's attempt to transcend his or her own textual status—to become a consciousness. The realist hero—or, more often than not, heroine—is thus locked in a life-and-death struggle with the author who penned him, with the authority who controls the words. Dreyer, in constantly trying to “end-run” his authors—Söderberg, Delteil, Euripides, etc.—tried to solve the problem of realism's exorbitant desires by aligning his heroes with their actual, documentary sources, against their authors' secondary formulations.

Strindberg had solved the problem in his own way, in his famous preface to *Miss Julie* (1888), by claiming that the human soul itself is nothing but a collection of texts:

My souls—or characters—are conglomerations from various stages of culture, past and present, walking scrapbooks, shreds of human lives, tatters torn from old rags that were once Sunday best—hodgepodge just like the human soul. I have even supplied a little source history into the bargain by letting the weaker steal and repeat the words of the stronger.<sup>7</sup>

Strindberg hoped to neutralize the powerful desire his “characters” have for “souls” by neatly conflating the two terms. Meanwhile, his narratives stage the “stealing” of his own words. The tragic irony is that in the modern world the “weaker” beat out the stronger more often than not. Perhaps the strongest figuring of such a “weak” soul is the vampire, so ubiquitous in *fin de siècle* Scandinavian culture, most famously depicted in Edvard Munch's paintings. In Strindberg the vampire is the “soul-murderer,” a weaker soul who literally steals the words that make up the soul of the stronger. In Strindberg's version of “source history,” the author is vamped by his own characters.

The vamp is of course a feminine figure, and the gender politics of Strindberg's realism are virulently misogynistic: “I say Miss Julie is a

modern character not because the man-hating half-woman has not always existed but because she has now been brought out into the open, has taken the stage, and is making a noise about herself.”<sup>8</sup> What Strindberg doesn't mention in his preface to *Miss Julie* is that his tragic heroine is in fact based on a real-life woman writer, Victoria Benedictsson. The threat of the half-woman is the threat of the writing woman, the woman who makes “a noise about herself.” So too in his play *Creditors*: the emasculating Tekla is a writer, her disarmed husband, Adolf, a painter.

The theme of the emancipated woman in Scandinavian realist theater—it is equally prevalent in Ibsen, for example in *A Doll's House* and *Hedda Gabler*—is thus not just a theme, but a textual matrix through which is figured a whole complex of formal and ideological concerns. Realism creates the desire for real characters—characters like those of the “weaker sex” who struggle to produce language of their own—and so creates an internal tension about the adequacy of its own textual authority.

In Dreyer, this realist desire for real selfhood is magnified to truly heroic proportions—and so too is its counterpart, the rhetoric of the authoritative, containing text. And this battle between self and authority is invariably gendered. Indeed, virtually every film Dreyer made—from his first, *The President* (1918), to his last, *Gertrud* (1964)—takes as its theme the confrontation of women with the patriarchal powers that attempt to define and dominate them. Dreyer's insistent centering on the female heroine can thus be seen as a continuation both of realist themes and of realist formal concerns. For the authorities these women battle are not only male, but, significantly, “textual” authorities—legal, religious, artistic. They nearly always represent specific institutions that use language as a primary means of gaining au-

The Passion of Joan of Arc.  
Marie Falconetti (Jeanne d'Arc).





The Passion of Joan of Arc, Michel Simon (Jean Lemaitre).

thority and wielding power.

If *Joan of Arc* clearly depicts this confrontation between woman and word, it enacts that confrontation, too. Remember Dreyer's insistence on basing the film on the actual court records of Joan's trial. His realist textual practice—which takes as a paradigm of authenticity the court document—repeats the forms of discursive power his heroines so resolutely seek to defy, even while making those power relations manifest. "For me," Dreyer recollected, "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." And so the narrative, the "story" of *Joan of Arc*, is precisely that of its own production, a recording of the dialogue between male authority and the body of its female object. For Dreyer, writing was torture.

Dreyer's heroines are constantly

doing battle with authorial figures—their "transcendence" is almost always a martyrdom at the hands of a textual regime. Gertrud, for example, renounces life because her love is too strong to tolerate her lovers' allegiances to their writerly careers—Gabriel and his poetry, Gustav and his law, Erland and his composing. Gertrud's last words in the film, to her friend Axel, are of a supreme irony: "And thank you for your book."

Sometimes, as in the comic vision of *The Master of the House*, the woman's assumption of writerly fluency wins her important victories. Here the wife's ambiguous letters help tame her tyrannical husband. But the threat of male backlash is still, albeit comically, pictured: after Ida is discovered writing, she is inexplicably chased by the gang of old men she nurses.

More often than not, though, the woman simply resists the enforced textual regime rather than write

against it. Siri, the heroine of the fourth segment of *Leaves from Satan's Book* (1919), is a telegraph operator who dies rather than tap out a message for the evil communists who hold her children hostage. Her martyrdom—which takes the form of a refusal of forced writing—prefigures Joan's: Joan is sent to the stake for renouncing her signed confession.

*Joan of Arc* presents the battle between writing and woman at its most fevered pitch. Joan, illiterate (she learned her "Our Father" orally from her mother, as one of the first questions establishes), is tricked by the forged letter from King Charles. And her lowest moment comes when her own signature is forged, with her participation, on her confession. That signature takes place in perhaps the closest close-up in the film, in a shot that is worth pausing over.

Her first mark—a naught, a zero—can be read as a kind of anti-sign, a hole. Then a male hand descends upon her own and forces her hand through the motions of a signature. Her hand again left free, she finishes with the mark of a cross, the icon on which she shall soon be burned for renouncing her signature. That denial is actually prefigured in the cross itself—Joan often used the sign of the cross in the margins of her dictated letters as a secret sign that what was written was actually false, a lure in case the letter fell into enemy hands.<sup>9</sup>

*Joan of Arc* perfectly marks Dreyer's divided allegiance to his authorities and his heroines. Dreyer, as director, must "submit to the writer whose cause he is serving." But, as always, that writer is not the author of the screenplay, but the real person, like Maria von Platen or Joan, whose own written traces Dreyer assiduously tracked down and reproduced. The paradox is, as here in *Joan of Arc*, that this writing is always a writing under duress, a forced submission into the verbal order. To recreate the "real" Joan, he

must reenact her reduction into text.<sup>10</sup> Only by brutally sticking to the original process, Dreyer believed, could he put on film what he called "the martyr's reincarnation."<sup>11</sup>

And brutal it was. As Richard Abel puts it, Dreyer "turned the shooting process itself into a grueling reproduction of history" in his search "for means of authenticity." The film was shot strictly in sequence, and the cast and crew were worked mercilessly; in the words of one of Dreyer's assistant directors, "We were not making a film, we were living Jeanne's drama, and we were often wanted to intervene to save her."<sup>12</sup>

Falconetti's blood was actually drawn, her famous hair actually cut (Dreyer's right to cut it was written into her contract), her real tears photographed. One wonders what would have happened had Dreyer actually filmed the torture scene he originally wrote in the screenplay (a

#### DREYER'S TEXTUAL REALISM

scene suppressed from the Danish and English printed editions of the screenplay).<sup>13</sup>

Dreyer called the realism achieved through this technique "spiritual" or "psychological," a realism unconcerned with verisimilitudinous details and period costuming. And the spirit or psyche he strove to reproduce has as its privileged field of expression the human face. "Gesture endows the face with soul," Dreyer wrote. "Mime is the original means of expression of inner experience—older than the spoken word."<sup>14</sup> Dreyer kept his actors' faces clean of make-up, and kept his camera close to them.

By insistently opposing the word to the facial gesture, Dreyer sets up the regime of the two films—of text and countenance—as a way to stage the fight between the letter and the spirit, between the written and the visual. But these two orders are not as

separate as they seem.

If there is one feature of *Joan of Arc* that is most consistently remarked, it is Dreyer's use of close-ups. Dreyer, as well as most practitioners and theorists of his time, heralded the close-up as a technique that enhanced both the realism of the cinema (by forcing "the actors to act honestly and naturally. The days of the grimace [are] over."<sup>15</sup>), and cinema's autonomy as an art form, especially in relation to the theater.<sup>16</sup> In the theater the human face could be little more than a malleable mask. The cinematic close-up, however, gave us the human face in such detail and with such power that old-fashioned, theatrical forms of facial gesturing could be thrown aside: the face could now remain a window on the soul, a field of natural expression instead of the artificial signification of language.<sup>17</sup>

And *Joan of Arc* is the close-up film



The Passion of Joan of Arc, Marie Falconetti (Jeanne d'Arc), second from left.



Top and bottom: scenes from *Joan of Arc*.  
Bottom: Maurice Schutz (Loyseleur).

par excellence. It is, in André Bazin's words, "a documentary of faces."<sup>18</sup> Or, as David Bordwell puts it, in Joan "every action of mind and heart can be read off the face."<sup>19</sup> It seems that no film could be more committed in its use of the unadorned human face in opposition to the abstract order of linguistic power.

But Dreyer in fact thought otherwise, or, rather, he held two contradictory views of the function of the close-up. For while the close-up brought forward the character's "spiritual realism," its use was in fact actually an extension of the technique of the trial:

There were the questions, there were the answers—very short, very crisp. There was, therefore, no other solution than to place close-ups behind these replies. Each question, each answer, quite naturally called for a close-up. All of that stemmed from the technique of the official report. In addition, the result of the close-ups was that the spectator was [as] shocked as Joan was, receiving the questions, tortured by them. And, in fact, it was my intention to get this result.<sup>20</sup>

Dreyer's happily sadistic reading of the close-up as an effect of torture—of torture by language, no less—runs counter to the simple ideologies of natural expression that inform most critical appraisals of his work. But the term "sadistic" here is not pejorative. As in much of Sade, what is at play is a deadly serious anxiety about the adequacy of writing and representation to express the self at its moment of purest consciousness—a consciousness in the realist tradition that is paradoxically a consciousness of the self's own textuality. In Dreyer, as in Strindberg,

the self is always a "walking scrapbook," but, unlike Strindberg, the heroic self in Dreyer never ceases to desire its impossible freedom from the texts that hold it, and so it dies.

## DREYER'S TEXTUAL REALISM

## NOTES

1. Noel Burch, "Carl Theodor Dreyer: The Major Phase," *Cinema: A Critical Dictionary*, vol. 1. Ed. Richard Roud. (Np: Nationwide Book Services, 1980), p. 299.
2. Bela Balazs, *Theory of the Film*. Trans. Edith Bone. (New York: Dover Press, 1970), p. 74.
3. Siegfried Kracauer, *Theory of Film: The Redemption of Physical Reality* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1960), p. 271.
4. Carl Theodor Dreyer, *Dreyer in Double Reflection*, ed. by Donald Skoller (New York: Dutton, 1975), p. 53. Christensen, like Dreyer, also changed his mind constantly about the status of the script; by 1940 he would be arguing Dreyer's earlier position for original scripts. See Benjamin Christensen, "Film for og nu," *Berlingske Tidende*, November 26, 1940. Clipping on file at the Danish Film Museum.
5. Dreyer, *Double Reflection*, p. 165.
6. *Ibid.*, pp. 28, 55, 91, 146.
7. August Strindberg, *Selected Plays*. Trans. Evert Sprinchorn. (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1986), p. 208.
8. *Ibid.*

9. Marina Warner, *Joan of Arc: The Image of Female Heroism* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1981), p. 140. My thanks to Richard Einhorn for pointing out this reference.

10. David Bordwell, *The Films of Carl Theodor Dreyer* (Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1981), pp. 90–91.

11. Dreyer, *Double Reflection*, p. 48.

12. Richard Abel, *The French Cinema: The First Wave, 1915–1929* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1984), p. 488.

13. Carl Theodor Dreyer, *Oeuvres Cinématographiques 1926–1934*. Ed. Maurice Drouzy and Charles Tesson. (Paris: Cinémaèque Française, 1985), p. 64.

14. Dreyer, *Double Reflection*, p. 155.

15. *Ibid.*, p. 27.

16. "The close-up has objectified in our world of perception our mental act of attention and by it has furnished art with a means which far transcends the power of any theater stage." Hugo Munsterberg, *The Photoplay: A Psychological Study* (New York and London: D. Appleton, 1916), pp. 87–88.

17. The idea being that, for example, when you are scared, you "look" scared, you don't intentionally "make" a scared face. Expressions thus are thought to mean something, even though they don't signify, that is, intend to mean.

18. André Bazin, *What is Cinema?* 2 vols. Trans. Hugh Gray. (Los Angeles: University of California Press, vol. 1, 1967), p. 109.

19. Bordwell, p. 84.

20. Andrew Sarris, ed., *Interviews with Film Directors* (New York: Avon, 1967), p. 145.