

Playhouse Cinema, Eden Court, all at 7:15pm

Carl Dreyer Season:

Tuesday 27 November: **ORDET** (Denmark, 1955) (126 minutes)

Tuesday 11 December: **DAY OF WRATH** (Denmark, 1943) (100 minutes)

Tuesday 08 January: **VAMPYR** (Germany, 1932) (73 minutes)



Film art as passion by Casper Tybjerg (University of Copenhagen)

(sourced and translated from the Danish by Tony Janssens (InFiFa))

Carl Dreyer remains the solitary giant of Danish film history, but even in his native country, his name has been more familiar than his films. He established himself as the greatest Danish film artist as early as the mid-1920s, but he was also labelled a sombre, severe and artistically demanding director who made unreasonably expensive films with no chance of attracting a large audience. Dreyer's name is still well known, yet the preconceived opinion that his films are difficult lives on as well.

It is in many ways an unfair prejudice. True that the tempo is slow, particularly in his later films, and the effect may seem very unfamiliar to a contemporary spectator. Dreyer's brooding rhythm is intended to give his characters great psychological presence, to give us time to weigh their words and the emotions they express. **Ordet**, perhaps his best known film, is a good example of this. It is an austere, realist work on one level as it joins a farming family in their Jutland home over a short but devastating period of time. Most of the drama unfolds in their living room, with Dreyer's camera patiently following a father and his three grown-up sons in their struggle with atheism and the illness of a pregnant wife, with a desire to marry a girl from a family of a more stringent branch of Christianity and with a madness that brings on a Christ complex. This is a deeply spiritual, mysterious and wonderfully odd and bold work, as Dreyer reaches to the heavens and beyond for answers. Its extraordinary coup de cinema that graces the film's final scene is one of the greatest moments in film history. In Dreyer's films, faith in God and the supernatural is

never ridiculed, explained away or reduced to psychology. It is a faith well placed because the spiritual realm is as present and real as the material realm, and both are completely interwoven. Although Dreyer is always a severe, uncompromising critic of organized religiosity, he is also always an inspired champion of incarnational spirituality. Once seen, **Ordet** is unlikely to leave you. The same, of course, can be said about **Day of Wrath** and **Vampyr**.



Ordet (1955)

Dreyer came from humble circumstances. He was born out of wedlock to a Swedish housemaid, who went to Denmark and put the infant up for adoption there. His adoptive father was a typesetter who could not afford an advanced education for the boy. After leaving school, the young Dreyer managed to get a job as a reporter. He worked for a popular Copenhagen newspaper and assumed a snooty, supercilious style. He did have a great deal of respect for modern-day heroes like polar explorers and airline pilots: Dreyer was fascinated by aviation and covered it closely. In 1911, he fearlessly had himself carried across the narrow sea between Denmark and Sweden sitting in a chair strapped to the undercarriage of a French aviator's plane. He also got a balloonist's certificate and made several well-publicized ascents.

The distance between the cheeky aviation reporter and the Dreyer who directed **Ordet** may seem enormous, but in fact one may discover some of the same personality traits in both. His insolent articles portraying various celebrities show a self-assurance bordering on arrogance, and that was also the foundation of the uncompromising artistic ambitions he showed as a filmmaker. Not just a swaggerer though: he treated aviation with respect and seriousness, and that also became his attitude to film.

In 1913 he began working for Nordisk Film, then one of the leading film companies in Europe. After some years as a scriptwriter and editor, he directed his first film in 1918. In those days many people regarded moving pictures as a worthless sideshow amusement; Dreyer sought to make cinema an art form by using sophisticated narrative structures and nuanced character portrayals. However, he did not feel that Nordisk supported his artistic ambitions to the degree he wanted. He made films in Sweden and Germany before returning to Denmark in 1922, where he made *Once upon a Time*, a charming and beautiful film which was a big success in Denmark.

In 1924 he returned to Berlin and made *Mikael*, an adaptation of a novel by the celebrated Danish writer Herman Bang. It tells the story of an ageing artist who is cruelly betrayed by his pupil, a young man to whom he has a deep emotional attachment. Returning to Denmark a year later Dreyer made *Master of the House*, a witty and heart-warming film about a domestic tyrant, an unkind and grumpy husband who constantly bullies his family. The wife

finally breaks down, and her place is taken by the husband's wise, old nanny, who takes charge of the household and puts the husband in his place. Her harsh but well intentioned discipline brings out his kinder self and teaches him to appreciate the love and care of his children. The film is briskly shot and full of life; never sentimental, it subtly portrays the everyday joys and sorrows of the family. Dreyer brilliantly meets the challenge of telling a story where the action is largely confined to one tiny, two-room apartment and consists mainly in seemingly insignificant domestic activity.

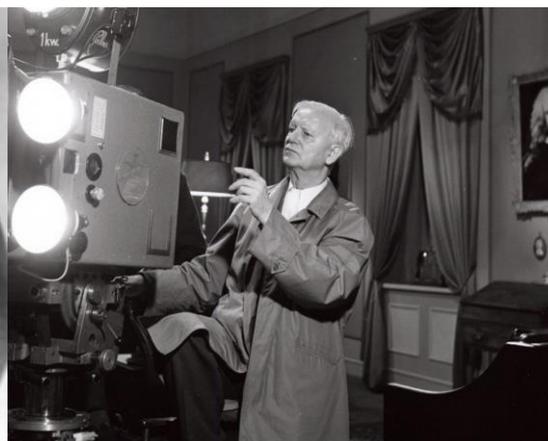
These two films showed Dreyer's talent for close and sympathetic character study and established him as one of the leading film artists of the time. Dreyer himself frequently stated that it was precisely the cinema's ability to create sympathetic understanding of character, particularly through intimate views of the human face, that was the essence of all true film art.

Master of the House was a major success in France and widely admired, paving the way for his most expensive (a full-size mediaeval castle with real walls solid enough for camera crews to stand on, was constructed outside Paris) and ambitious film: *The Passion of Joan of Arc* (1928). A French production company gave Dreyer almost limitless resource. He chose to disregard completely Joan of Arc's exploits on the battlefields of the Hundred Years' War, concentrating instead on her trial and execution. It was shot in sequence, keeping most of the cast on the payroll throughout the six-month shooting schedule. The result was a film, by many critics and historians regarded as the finest silent movie, of an overwhelming psychological intensity. It is utterly different from any historical costume drama and mainly consists of an unbroken series of penetrating close-ups of faces in front of white walls. Its continual variation of framing, angles, camera movement, however, makes the film endlessly fascinating to watch. The human drama that unspools in front of our eyes is so relentless that very few people, even ninety years later, are unmoved by this great film. The struggle between Joan's conscience and her judges' ideological oppression is presented in a way that remains relevant today. The talkies had their big breakthrough the same year the film was released, and because of it, the film was not a commercial success, no matter how many critics praised it.

Dreyer's first sound film, **Vampyr** (1932), was made outside the bounds of the commercial film industry and took two years to complete. He avoided the typical effects of the horror film, but **Vampyr** is nevertheless a deeply disquieting and eerie film. By shooting through very thin, loose-weaved cloth, the images were enveloped in a veil of white mist, blurring the borders separating dream and reality. With its oddly disconnected storyline, expressionless protagonist, and hypnotic camera movements, **Vampyr** creates a different kind of psychological insight, an exploration of nightmarish layers of the soul normally hidden behind the surfaces of everyday existence.



Vampyr (1932)



Dreyer on the set of Gertrud (1962)

After finishing the film, Dreyer's career came to a standstill. The Danish film industry devoted its budget and energies to light entertainment pictures. The director's artistic ambitions were too much of a financial gamble. Only during the war years, with Denmark under German occupation, did a window for serious films open up again. After a ten year unwanted absence from filmmaking Dreyer made his comeback. Urged by colleagues and friends to make a popular one, Dreyer showed with **Day of Wrath** (1943) that he had no intention of compromising his artistic credo.

The rhythm is slow and lingering, but perfectly suited for the severe, 17th-century protestant milieu the film depicts. He creates a cinematic world where the belief in witchcraft and supernatural evil not only seems merely natural, but necessary for the film's characters. It was widely recognized as a major work when it was released internationally just after World War II.



Day of Wrath –Vredens Dag- (1943)

When **Ordet** was awarded the Golden Lion at the Venice Film festival in 1955, Dreyer's stature as one of the greats was confirmed. Not that any producers lined up to hire him, however. For many years he toiled with the preparations for an epic film about Jesus, which was to be shot in the Holy Land with unknown actors and Aramaic dialogue, with huge sets recreating ancient Jerusalem: a project no producer would touch. It had to wait another fifty years for a Mel Gibson to come along.

Dreyer's final film, *Gertrud* (1964), is all about the refusal to compromise. Based on a Swedish play from 1906, the heroine, Gertrud, is loved by four different men, but none of them can meet her high, idealistic demands, and she prefers to stay alone. *Gertrud* is Dreyer's most formidable film: shot in extreme long takes and a constantly gliding camera, every detail of every shot planned meticulously, Dreyer needed only three days to edit the film. The actors move and speak in a manner so controlled and so stylised, they resemble living statues. Opinions about it are sharply divided: some find it insufferably stilted and totally outdated, others admire its amazingly refined and intricate camera movements and lighting effects and believe it offers a profound meditation on life.

Dreyer remained true to his vision, and that was what was of prime importance to him. In his uncompromising quest for authenticity he created a series of works which retain their power to move and inspire those willing to connect. Their cumulative effect is stunning and has a classical dignity, not in any way inferior to that which was created by Greek theatre. As the critic Ebbe Neergaard wrote after *Ordet*: "You have this feeling of a force behind the camera that compels you to the bitter end, into the hearts and minds of all the characters."

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