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Film Theory

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Carl Dreyer's *Ordet* & its Aesthetic uses of The Auteur Theory

The director of a film has always been looked at as the artist that is greatly responsible for a films style, form, and personal themes. Film historians have believed this going back from the early days of the silent era, but the director was never really examined and critiqued as an individual artist until the days of the postwar European films. Many directors, producers and screenwriters quarreled over the artistic merit of a movie on who could be properly considered the auteur, or author of the film (Thompson, 381). But two critics who wrote for the Revue du cinema claimed that the director was the painter behind the paintbrush and helped to support these claims by backing up such American directors like Orson Welles, Nicholas Ray and John Ford.

An important essay written by Alexandre Astruc stated that over the years the cinema had achieved a form of sophistication and maturity and started to attract serious artists who looked at film as a serious form of art in which directors were able to express their thoughts and emotions within the context of the camera lens in which was entitled camera-stylo (the camera pen). Finally in 1960 American critic Andrew Sarris developed the word 'Auteur Theory' which was a way to understand film auteurists and their artistic works from such artists as Federico Fellini,

Luis Bunuel, Akira Kurosawa, Michelangelo Antonioni and Alfred Hitchcock. The auteur theory was finally officially developed by the loosely knit group of critics who wrote for Cahiers du Cinema, as it became the leading film magazine in the world. "It sprang from the conviction that the cinema was worth studying in depth, that masterpieces were made not only by a small upper crust of directors, but by a whole range of authors, whose work had previously been dismissed and consigned to oblivion" (Cohen, 455).

Each artist mentioned above had their own 'auteur theory' within the films they've created, and these themes and styles became known as signatures as to whom the artist was and what their films stood for. For instance, when it came to Federico Fellini, most of his work seemed to revolve around the grotesque of the circus and of his self-doubts as an artist. Luis Bunuel shamelessly enjoyed pointing out the pessimistic and surrealistic absurdities in the most serious of subject matters. Akira Kurosawa created dramas while drawing much of its stories from the genres of the American western. Michelangelo Antonioni explored the emotional alienation between a man and in woman in within the contemporary world of modernization. And Alfred Hitchcock explored murder and obsession along with the fears of being wrongfully accused.

Before Krzysztof Kieslowski, Andrei Tarkovsky, Ingmar Bergman, and Robert Bresson, there was Carl Theodor Dreyer. To understand the auteur a person must first learn to understand the artist. Dreyer began to fend for himself at an early age, as his upbringing was neither strict nor Lutheran. He was born out of wedlock to a Danish father and a Swedish mother who died horribly a year and a half later trying to abort a second child. He was immediately afterwards placed in an orphanage in Copenhagen and was adopted at the age of two in 1891 by a married couple, which named him after his new father. He grew up despising his adopted parents and was

given a nonreligious upbringing. (According to biographer Maurice Drouzy, he worshiped his real mother and hated his adopted one, and interestingly enough bad mother figures are found in much of his work.) After working as a clerk, Dreyer worked from 1909 to 1913 as a journalist at Berlingske Tidende, a celebrity profiler of Scandinavian theater starts, and then entered the silent film world of Nordisk films to writer intertitles (Alleva, 19).

Dreyers film career spans the first half century of cinema, and yet he directed relatively few films, fourteen, as compared with other filmmakers like Hitchcock, Ford, Bunuel and Bergman. Although he has made several short films, Dreyer was able to make only one feature film in the 1920's (*The Passion of Joan of Arc*), the 1930's (*Vampyr*), the 1940's (*Day of Wrath*), the 1950's (*Ordet*) and the 1960's (*Gertrud*), and yet just those films were enough for Dreyer to be placed among the greatest of all directors, and a master in the art form of the cinema. He is most famously adored by director Lars von Trier and critic Jonathan Rosenbaum, making him along with Ozu and Bresson the focus of Paul Schrader's influential 1972 book Transcendental Style in Film. Many look at his film *The Passion of Joan of Arc* as among the greatest films ever made, (clearly its mine) and yet they're those who prefer *Ordet*, which means '*The Word'* in English.

The story of *Ordet* is based on a play by Kaj Munk (a Danish pastor martyred by the Nazis in 1944), which involves its two families: those of Morten Borgen, patriarch of Borgensfarm, and those of Petersen, a nearby tailor. Both families live on a farm in a small town in rural Denmark during the winter of 1925. The father Morten is a widower and a proud member of the local church. He has three sons; the youngest is Anders, a young man who is unfortunately for Morten, in love with Anne – the daughter of Petersen whose family has a religious sect which is not the same as theirs. Their oldest son Mikkel is an Atheist and has two

children and a wife named Inger who is currently pregnant with their third child. And then there is the middle child Johannes, who went insane studying Soren Kierkegarrd theology and soon after went into a sleep-walk like state and now believes he is Jesus of Nazareth. All things are well until tragedy suddenly strikes and Inger dies during childbirth. This sets off a chain reaction that not only threatens each character's faith or not faith, but also threatens the love that holds the family together. I take the time to name the characters because the movie takes the time to establish them, to create them, to ground them in the very fabric of its poetic narrative.

Film theorist Andrew Sarris believed there were three distinct parts that needed to come from the auteur theory: The first premise was the technical competence of a director as a criterion of value. A badly directed or an undirected film has no importance in a critical scale of value, but one can make interesting conversation about the subject, the script, the acting, the color, the photography, the editing, the music, the costumes and the décor. For instance if a director has no technical competence or visual flair for the medium of the cinema, he will be automatically casted out. The second premise of the auteur theory is the distinguishable personality of the director as a criterion of value. Within a span of several films, a director must exhibit certain specific characteristics of style, and these themes and styles become known as signatures as to whom the artist was and what his/her films stood for.

The third and ultimate premise of the auteur theory is interior meanings, which Sarris believed was the ultimate glory of the cinema as an art. Interior meaning is greatly similar to what Astruc defines as mise en scene, but not quite. It is not quite the vision of the world a director projects nor quite his attitude toward life. It is left ambiguous and cannot be rendered in cinematic or noncinematic terms. The three premises of the auteur theory may be visualized as three concentric circles: the outer circle as technique; the middle circle, personal style; and the

inner circle, interior meaning (Cohen, 452-453). I will explore these three parts of the auteur theory with the film *Ordet*, and explain why this particular film presents the auteur of director Carl Theodor Dreyer.

The first premise and the outer circle of the auteur theory is 'technique' and Dreyer certainly establishes that in *Ordet* with the brilliant use of cinematography and of its extensive and mournful tracking shots. When watching *Ordet* the spectator immediately sees it as a peculiar 'filmed theatre,' and we are reminded by theorist Andre Bazan and his idea that the cinema possesses an ontological realism based on photography. Cinema can find equivalents for stage conventions because its realism opens onto infinity of possibilities. The theater is more abstract than the cinema, as Dreyer demonstrates this by making the film much more abstract than Kaj Munk's play.

For the first time in Dreyer's career he makes extensive use of the long take which gives the film an odd theatricalization between the stage and the cinema, creating a slow tempo from the intervals between the events of the story and the rhythm of the characters. *Ordet* has only 114 shots and across the entire film the average shots lasts about sixty-five seconds and within the central three sections, the average shot consumes over a minute and a half. This means of course that several shots run a very long time, ranging from a minute or two to seven minutes (Bordwell, 150). Even during the 1950's when the long take became popular, such long takes were rare. The primary function of these long extensive takes is to foreground the shot itself as a component of cinematic perception.

> "*Ordet's* long takes stress shot duration. Obviously, the rarity of cuts emphasizes both the cuts and the internal amplitude of the

> shot. More strongly, the long take in *Ordet* deliberately slackens the pace of the narrative action. Dreyer seldom moves his camera through empty space; Dreyer usually follows one character or another. Typically, two or more people have a dialogue exchange and one moves away; the camera follows that figure until he or she encounters another character and becomes involved in another dialogue" (Bordwell, 151).

They're moments where *Ordet* carries the camera movement to another extreme with the use of constructing a circular mise-en-scene. The chamber aesthetic of Dreyer's work is pushed to a new level, as one sequence Dreyer has the camera move in a circular motion within the domestic chamber space of its interior. "*Ordet* seems director-dominated to an extent that deprives the action and actors of all spontaneous, individual life. The impression of Dreyer behind every gesture, every camera movement, is inescapable" (Bordwell, 154).

The second circle of the auteur theory is 'personal style' which isa repeated signature that the artist becomes known for throughout most of his work (Cohen, 452). Most of Dreyer's early films began during the sudden shift between the silent era (*The Passion of Joan of Arc*) and the early experimental days of sound (*Vampyr*), and so it's not too surprising that much of his later work would project much of the aesthetics of silent and early sound cinema, like the awkward use of pacing, dialogue and silent moments in between.

The most remarkable style that Dreyer is known for throughout his body of work is of speech and the spoken word; and *Ordet* perfectly illustrates such aesthetics. Speech in *Ordet* in the literal sense, from word to word makes both the spectator and film hang on its enunciation.

They're moments where the tone of a characters voice (especially the ongoing ramblings of Johannes) can feel momentous and over weighted, and yet this slow pacing between characters give the film its own chamber of space and time. The decompressing speech with its domestic rhythms and slight pauses between characters is filled with either a movement or a character reacting or listening (Nash, 66).

Dreyer seems to fill silent moments with not only words but diegeticsound effects as well. Since *Ordet* was shot with direct sound, the noises already have a strong presence with the spectator. Tea cups clink, floors creak, sugar lumps clunk as old Borgen stirs his coffee, wind blows outside as a storm is brewing and Inger's rolling pin scratches while he is writing. Other diegetic sounds are heard off-screen and most of them come forward during camera movements like the sound of people's footsteps, horses clopping or Karen calling the hens. The ticking of the clock is one specific sound which not only stresses the duration of the shot but also measures the time consumed by a camera movement or figure movement and forces the spectator to acknowledge the time passing" (Bordwell, 153).

The last part of the auteur theory is 'Interior Meaning' which is the inner circle of Andrew Sarris' theory and the heart of what the artist is trying to say to the audience through all of his/her body of work (Cohen, 452). To many, Dreyer's greatest artistic achievement was *The Passion of Joan of Arc*, in which Dreyer spend over a year and a half researching the story of Joan of Arc by turning to the transcripts of Joan's trial, and magnificently combining all 29 cross-examinations into one inquisition. When he delved into sound he started with the horror film *Vampyr* which tells the story of a traveler at an inn who starts to get supernatural visits in what he thinks to be a vampire. His masterful *Day of Wrath* tells a tragic story of an aging priest falling in love with his son amidst the horror of a merciless witch hunt in 17th century Denmark.

And his last film *Gertrud* told the unsettling story of a woman and of her unfulfilling marriage to an atheist, all the while trying to find ideal love.

Throughout all of Dreyer's body of work the director brilliantly creates a minimalist filmed theater of the chamber drama and brought it to the modern cinema. All of his stories are immensely lean, quite, deeply serious and populated with odd religious obsessives, which all end in tragic proportions. Interestingly enough, Dreyer had a nonreligious upbringing and according to several close friends, he wasn't especially religious at all (Alleva, 20). Religious or Atheist, all of his films equally touch audiences with such existential themes like love, faith, forgiveness, redemption and that the idea that miracles are something that can still occur in modern times. Dreyer presents these subjects in such a poignant way where he doesn't give out the feeling that he is preaching; but merely asking questions.

The unprepared audience member might grow a little restless when entering the world of *Ordet*, especially during the slowand somewhat tedious monologues of the mad Johannes. Many might proclaim the film is too slow, too long and needs extensive trimming in several of its scenes. But I believe *Ordet* and Dreyer's other body of work which include long existential dialogue and extensive tracking shots have audiences slow down, relax, and enter Dreyer's world of complete meditation. When Dreyer allows a sequence to continue for what seems like an unreasonable length, he gives audiences a choice: We can either be restless and bored or we can give our mind a time to consolidate what we've just seen, what we've just heard, and what we've just witnessed. It gives us a chance to process our thoughts and feelings in terms of our own reflections.

There is no denying that the auteur of Dreyer was the beginning stepping stone for other artists who have also deeply pursued the spiritual and cosmic themes of life and death and the transcendence within the cinema. For instance, Kieslowski's various explorations on profound miracles, destiny and freewill; Tarkovsky's use of space and time to consolidate our feelings through poetry and meditative cinema; Bergman's obsession with guilt, death and of living in a godforsaken world; and Bresson's sad projection of human weakness while a society sets out to destroy them. "These directors followed Dreyer's singular path towards the transcendent by staying closely rooted to the earth, to the essential representative qualities of film and by keeping these interests current" (Alleva, 20).

The amazing triumph of *Ordet* is that it's such an odd and unique work, that if you try to simplify it, or look at it realistically, you lose the strange spiritual awe that the characters and the images are trying to express on the screen. The reason films like this don't seem to touch people quite easily is because the film demands the audience's love and attention to the world Dreyer has created. If open to it, than this film has more to offer then almost any other film I've seen. There are also many poignant and transcendent themes throughout this film that are universal for people all over the world. Does it really matter if religions differ between two people who are in love with each other? Is being a non-believer as ignorant as being a believer without doubt? Are people who most would look at as insane, actually saner than the norm? And yet Dreyer's Auteur themes don't necessary make the film a religious or anti-religious film because he gives no explanations or answers to any of its themes and leaves the films message ambiguous. Dreyer instead seems to be reassuring the audience that it's OK to doubt and ask questions, which is one of the many drives why artists keep making movies, because they keep asking questions in which they will never know the answers to.

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