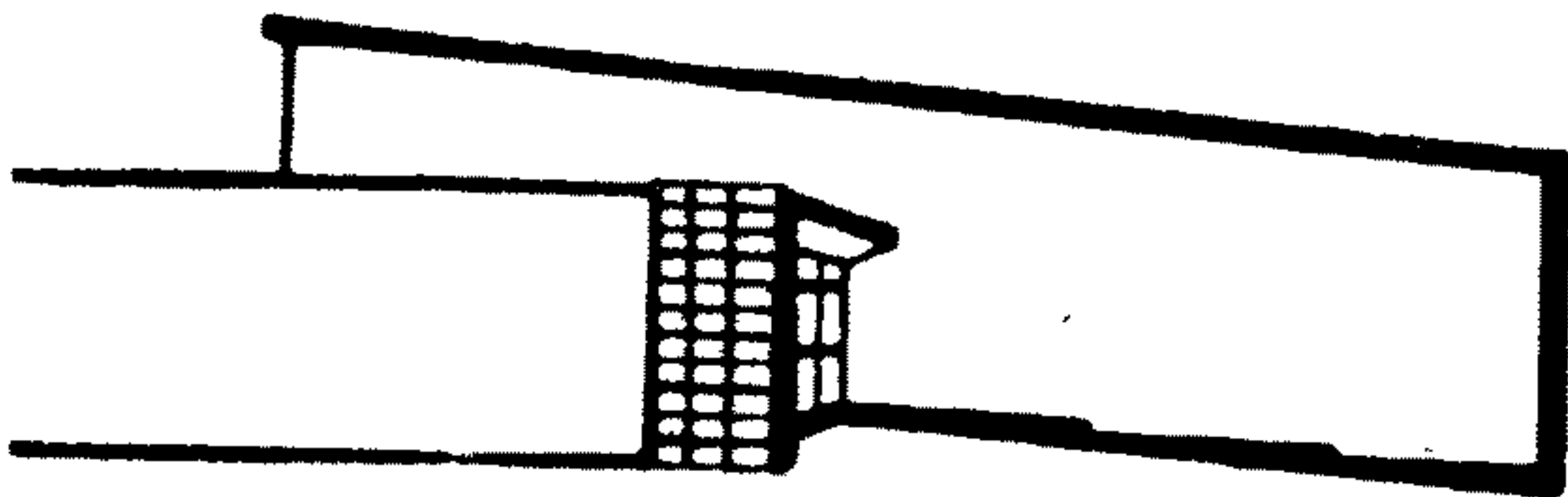


Document Citation

Title	Day of wrath
Author(s)	James Agee
Source	<i>Wisconsin Film Society</i>
Date	1958 Nov 04
Type	program note
Language	English
Pagination	
No. of Pages	2
Subjects	
Film Subjects	Vredens dag (Day of wrath), Dreyer, Carl Theodor, 1943



Wisconsin film society

Program No. 4
November 4, 1958
Day of Wrath
Ansel Adams--Photographer

DAY OF WRATH (Denmark, 1944)

Written, produced, and directed by Carl Dreyer

From a novel by Wiers Jenssens

Cast: Thirkild Roose, Preben Lerdorff, Lisbeth Movin

"Day of Wrath," which is set in seventeenth-century Denmark, is a study of the struggle between good and evil as waged among and within--witches, those who burned them, and the members of an old man--young wife--stepson triangle. Movies seldom contain any material, except by inadvertence or head-on outrage, which can interest the morally curious; this one contains a good deal, and more of it is inadvertent or outrageous. I particularly respect the film's interest in the deeply entangled interproductiveness of good and evil among several people and within single people; its steep, Lutheran kind of probity---that is, its absolute recognition of the responsibility of the individual, regardless of extenuating or compulsive circumstances; its compassion; and its detachment.

Originally this was a novel. As I watched it I had to realize that it could still as easily be a novel, or a play, nevertheless, Carl Dreyer has done a very hard job beautifully. He has not only preserved an amount of psychological and moral complexity which isn't popularly supposed to be possible in movies; he has also made them very clear visually, as a rule by very simple means. I don't ordinarily like stuff that is shot in the dark or that depends on very slow movement, because these are ordinarily the first resources of the merely solemn, or pretentious, or arty, when they have nothing of what it takes except ambition. Even less do I ordinarily care for "art" referenced in camera work---approximations, or reproductions, of famous paintings, or a style derived from painting. I'm not sure I can entirely take this in Dreyer's film, though in general his sense of how and why to use what he wants from Rembrandt and others seems very just, modest, useful, clear of "culturalism" or mere weakness of personal style; and his one conspicuous derivation---from Rembrandt's "Lesson in Anatomy"---lends more than mere ironic vitality to the watching clergymen in a torture scene.

Dreyer's lighting, and pace, and sound---including his use of dialogue---I wholly respect. My impression is that, short of absurdity, he wants to work close to their respective absolutes of darkness, stasis, and silence, and never to deviate from these absolutes beyond the minimum that is justified. I don't think this is the only good way to work; but I suspect for instance that Gluck, and Beethoven, in some of their finest music, were acutely aware of silence. I'm not implying that Dreyer has done anything here to approach their work; I do mean that the style he has worked out for this film has a severe, noble purity which very little else in movies or, so far as I know, in contemporary art can approach, or even tries to. By one seeing, anyhow, I don't think there is a single excess in word or lighting or motion, or a single excessive stopping-down of any of these. Dreyer appears to know and to care more about faces than about anything else; it seems to me a sound preference; and since he is served at worst by very good actors and faces and at best by wonderful ones, the finest things in this film are his close-ups. They are held longer than anyone except Chaplin could dare or afford to hold them; and as a rule they convey the kind of intricate subtlety, mental and spiritual, which one can ordinarily expect to find only in certain kinds of writing.

In these long close-ups, as in much else that he does, Dreyer goes against most of the "rules" that are laid down, even by good people, for making genuine and good motion pictures. In a sense I have to admit that he is far out at the edge rather than close to the center of all that I think might be most productive and original. But there is only one rule for movies that I finally care about; that the film interest the eyes, and do its job through the eyes. Few movie makers do that, few even of those that are generally well esteemed. Dreyer has never failed to, and I cannot imagine he ever will. For that reason alone, even if I did not also respect him as one of the few moralists, and classicists, and incorruptible artists, in movies, I would regard him as a master and this film as a quiet masterpiece.

---James Agee (Nation, May 22, 1948)