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De nåede færgen (They caught the ferry), Dreyer, Carl Theodor, 1948

Mikaël (Chained), Dreyer, Carl Theodor, 1924

Storstrømsbroen (The Storstrom Bridge), Dreyer, Carl Theodor, 1950

Thorvaldsen, Dreyer, Carl Theodor, 1949

Landsbykirken (The Danish village church), Dreyer, Carl Theodor, 1947

Mødrehjælpen (Good mothers), Dreyer, Carl Theodor, 1942

Præsidenten (The President), Dreyer, Carl Theodor, 1919

Glomdalsbruden (The bride of Glomdal), Dreyer, Carl Theodor, 1926

Vampyr - der traum des Allan Grey (The vampire), Dreyer, Carl Theodor, 1932

Gertrud, Dreyer, Carl Theodor, 1964



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# CARL DREYER



Dreyer's films have been admired equally by bourgeois critics, avant-garde theorists and film-makers. On the one hand his work figures in the tradition of cinema classics – the pantheons of *Sight and Sound* or André Bazin – while on the other Dreyer's work is claimed as an exemplary avant-garde cinematic practice, deconstructing the codes of cinema (Noël Burch), revealing the ferocity of bourgeois society (Jean-Marie Straub). Why these two contradictory sets of positions? Carl Dreyer was born in 1889 of a Swedish mother, but was orphaned as a baby and adopted by Danish parents. He began a career in journalism writing for Copenhagen newspapers, and was engaged in 1912 by Nordisk Films Kompagni, then one of the world's leading companies, to advise on script purchases and adaptations. He was allowed to direct his first feature (*The President*) in 1919 and soon developed a reputation as the 'tyrannical Dane': his demand for total control led to a belief that his work was uncommercial and during the 30s he directed no films at all. He re-entered production via an apprenticeship in documentary films with *Mødrehjelpen* (*Good Mothers*) in 1942. Towards the end of his life the Danish state, in recognition of his cultural services, gave him the lease of a cinema in central Copenhagen where he could show the films that he liked. He died in 1968. Traditional cinema journalism found in Dreyer's demand for total control a basis for their assessment of Dreyer as a great artist, a genius in the European cinema. The usual arguments about 'sensitivity' and 'profound' psychological insights, particularly around his preoccupation with women characters and women's problems, were trotted out. Simultaneously his work was described as 'majestic', 'cool', etc. In short, all the standard

features of the 'artistic Scandinavian' stereotype. What I argue in my Occasional Publication on Dreyer, and which can be explored during a seminar/discussion accompanying this season (18th October), that these readings of 'the great artist' and his 'sensitivity' is the product of the work of Dreyer's films on the mechanisms of cinema itself, the ways his cinema binds the spectator into the film, the way basic psychological phantasies around vision and hearing are put in play. His bringing into focus such fundamentally cinematic processes does indeed make Dreyer's work available for a superficial appropriation into the traditional canons of 'high art'. But the real interest of his films lies elsewhere: they, perhaps more than any other 'classic' director's work, engage directly with questions relevant to the way cinema works, but also directly address the essential issues at stake in artistic production itself. Obviously, which reading and what type of pleasure individuals produce while viewing the films depends on the position adopted in the field of cultural politics.

The juxtaposition of this season with the Sjöström/Stiller season will enable some assessment of Dreyer's place within the particular representational concerns of Scandinavian cinema. Critics have ignored this work for too long; little consideration has been given to the literary culture on which Dreyer's films are based and from which they create a 'Great Tradition'. This critical neglect has a material base, however. Even today many of his films are still unavailable for public exhibition.

*I would like to thank the staff of the British and Danish Film Institutes for their work in preparing this complete retrospective of Dreyer's films.—Mark Nash.*

Sat 1 Oct 6.15. 8.30

## The President (Praesidenten)

Dreyer's first film is a complex melodrama about the ruin of an aristocratic family resulting from the sexual indulgences of its male heirs. The plot concerns the last of the von Sendlings, forced to choose between his judicial career and saving his illegitimate daughter from execution as a child-murderer. The sexual encounters are elided in sensuously photographed lakeside scenes, an element of the naturalistic style Dreyer introduced into the staple Nordisk melodrama. *Denmark 1919.*



Sun 2 Oct 6.00. 8.30

## Leaves from Satan's Book

(Blade of Satans Bog)

Though influenced by the theme and structure of *Intolerance*, Dreyer's implicit interest is with the way male desire (which Satan encourages) disrupts the social and familial order. Satan appears as the Pharisee leading Judas to betray Christ; as a Spanish Grand Inquisitor; as a police officer in the French revolution; as a revolutionary monk in the Finland of 1918. Dreyer continues the experiments with decor and type-casting begun in *Praesidenten*. The montage style editing of the final episode (with average shot length of 3 secs) was also new and extremely accomplished. *Denmark 1920.*



Mon 3 Oct 6.15. 8.30

## The Parson's Widow (Præstankens)

A film influenced by Sjöström, in the quality of its photography and its story – based on an authentic 17th century case of a young divinity graduate, forced to become the fourth husband of a parson's widow to obtain the living she holds. The theme of feminine power is presented in a film which is both repressive and sensual, pointing to the protestant influence in Dreyer's work. "Rarely has a more ferocious malice against the male been seen in the cinema"—S. Pierre. Contradictorily, this film also demonstrates Dreyer's abilities as a director of comedy. *Sweden 1921.*



Sat 8 Oct 6.00. 8.30

## Die Gezeichneten/Der Var Engang

(Love One Another)/(Once Upon a Time)

*Die Gezeichneten*, an elaborate melodrama, linking the 'trouble' of feminine sexuality with antisemitism, is set in Russia during the 1905 revolution, using actors/refugees from the 1917 revolution. *Germany 1922.* *Der Var Engang* was based on a play by the poet Holger Drachmann, on the 'taming of the shrew' theme – a princess forced into domesticity by the prince who abducts her, and learns to love her oppression. Unfortunately, only fragments remain, but enough to demonstrate Dreyer's skill in comedy and exterior locations. *Denmark 1922.*







Sun 9 Oct 6.15. 8.30

### Mikaël

Dreyer's interest in characters in passive, suffering roles finds its most direct expression in this story of a great artist, modelled a little on Rodin, and his love for his model Mikaël, which can only find expression in the fantasy of desertion Zoret causes to be enacted around him, and which forms the subject of his last painting. The Danish director, Christensen, plays the artist Zoret. Karl Freund's photography is very beautiful. The film was a great success in Germany, being called the first *kammerspiel* film. *Germany 1924.*



Tue 11 Oct 6.15. 8.30

### Master of the House (Du Skal ære din Hustru)

An extremely funny film. Its theme, the domestication of a tyrannical husband by the combined forces of his nanny and mother-in-law. Dreyer built an exact replica of a Danish flat in the studio to show the detail of domestic slavery that passes for family life. Its breakdown of the woman's role into elements with a cash value – the husband has to pay for the services his wife normally performs – is still valid today. Its combination of naturalism and comedy (including a struggle over an aspidistra and canary) made it a great success. *Denmark 1925.*



Wed 12 Oct 8.30

### The Bride of Glomdale (Glømsdalsbruden)

"This is much more than the 'little intermezzo' it is sometimes made out to be. Shot in a Norwegian summer, it is the film where Dreyer comes closest to Stiller in its attention to texture and density of emotion" — *Tom Milne*. The story, a Griffith-like melodrama about the love of a poor farmer's son for a rich farmer's daughter, and the socialisation of their sexuality was, unusually for Dreyer, improvised from a short story but which provided exactly the kind of pared-down structure he excels in building on. *Norway 1925.*



Thu 13 Oct 8.45

### La Passion de Jeanne d'Arc

A 'monument' of film history, its montage of extreme close-ups originated from the official report of the trial – "each question and answer demanded a close-up" (*Dreyer*). "An almost intolerable richness of forms pushed the notions of the French avant-garde on angle and close-up to new extremes" — *Langlois*. Memorable, too, for Falconetti, transferred from a boulevard theatre, make-up removed, hair cut short, under the relentless gaze of the camera. Dreyer's project of 'revealing the soul beneath the facade' prompted Bazin to call the film both "extremely realistic and mystical". *France 1928.*

Tue 18 Oct 6.30. 8.45

### Vampyr

Dreyer's first sound film, and the film in which his concern with basic properties of film and cinema is much in evidence, particularly with the luminous photography developed especially for the film with Rudolph Maté. Based on the genre of the *fantastique*, where we are constantly unsettled in our reading of the events shown, it also resumes concerns of many of his other films (witchcraft, the supernatural, ambiguous sexuality). The level of visual abstraction is paralleled in the plot which uses the vampire elements to generate a uniquely disturbing film. *France/Germany 1932.*



Fri 21 Oct 6.30. 8.45

### Day of Wrath (Vredens Dag)

*Day of Wrath* continues the structures of uncertainty Dreyer had already explored in *Vampyr*. We are offered both a rational account of the events which lead up to a young pastor's wife being accused of witchcraft, in terms of projected male desire and anxiety about sexuality, but we are ourselves also implicated in the process by which women come to believe themselves witches. Bazin saw the originality of the film in achieving the style and status of painting, in "advancing cinema even at the risk of being out of tune with public opinion". *Denmark 1943.*



Wed 26 Oct 6.30

### Shorts Programme: 1

*Mødrehjælpen (Good Mothers)*, a film about social services available for unmarried mothers made during the German Occupation (1942), shows the influence of the British documentary movement, as does the later *De Gamle (The Seventh Age – 1947)*. *Thorvaldsen (1949)* evokes the sensuality of that sculptor's work; *Den Danske Landsbykirke (Danish Village Church – 1947)* creates a history and memory of the changing architecture and associated ritual of Danish churches; *De Naede Færgen (They Caught The Ferry – 1948)*, a road safety film, and the most celebrated of Dreyer's shorts, is about a literal race with death.



Wed 26 Oct 8.45

### Shorts Programme: 2

After returning to feature film production, Dreyer continued to work on short films: *Storstrømsbroen (The Storstrøm Bridge – 1949)* in which the moving camera 'celebrates' Denmark's longest bridge; two films around the Renaissance castle at Elsinore, its medieval pre-history, and the castle as Shakespeare and his actors would have seen it, intercut with scenes from a production of *Hamlet*; a 'document' on the reconstruction of the towns of Rønne and Nexø (1954) bombarded by the Russians.







Tue 25 Oct 6.30. 8.45

### Two People (Tva Människor)

This screening allows us to assess the value of this film which has never been previously shown in this country. Critics have been overinfluenced by Dreyer's rejection of it because he couldn't control the casting of its two actors. The story is constructed around the events of a single day in a Swedish doctor's flat-cum-laboratory, which the camera never leaves except for a flashback, and in which a marital relationship is subjected to the pressure of a crime which threatens to overwhelm it. The rest of the world intrudes only in the form of messages and shadows. The camerawork links this film crucially with *Gertrud*. The most melodramatic of Dreyer's films, it has a credit sequence with images and music worthy of Douglas Sirk. Sweden 1945.

Thu 27 Oct 6.00. 8.35

### The Word (Ordet)

A riveting film about a central religious and psychoanalytic problem, 'the word made flesh'. Is Johannes a theology student 'driven mad by reading Kierkegaard, or is he really the risen Christ?'. This is the question which the film acts out against the lives of farmers in West Jutland, a struggle for life which enables Johannes to enact his 'miracle'. Based very closely on the play by Denmark's most famous 20th century dramatist, Kai Munk, it was regarded as a masterpiece on its first release. In it, sacred and profane love are equated: the father says of his dead daughter-in-law, "she is in heaven"; the son answers, "but I loved her body". Denmark 1955.



Fri 28 Oct 6.20. 8.45

### Gertrud

If one must talk of masterpieces, films for desert island viewing, then *Gertrud* is my choice. Dreyer's last film, based on a play by Hjalmar Söderberg, according to Dreyer more modern than Ibsen in his treatment of the bourgeois world and woman's uncertain place in it. "What I particularly admire about Dreyer's films... is their ferocity in treating the bourgeois world"—J-M. Straub. It charts a woman's desertion of her husband, home and 'respectability', in the name of a vision of authenticity in human and sexual relationships. As one always expects from Dreyer, the film is beautifully shot, mesmerisingly constructed. It is also a film about music: Gertrud's voice becomes the only vehicle for her desire. Denmark 1964.