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THE TRIAL OF JOAN OF ARC

ARTISTIC MATURITY, THESE DAYS, is taking some unexpected forms. After *Nazarin* and *Viridiana*, one couldn't help wondering what there was left for Buñuel to say; then with *The Exterminating Angel* he flips back to his Thirties tone and still contrives to tell us something new. Renoir keeps on playing with his favourite themes and subjects, like some jovial grandfather with his old toys. Ford sends the cavalry out on another magnificent charge, without seeming to care very much about who his riders are. But with Robert Bresson the case is reversed: *Pickpocket* took him to an ultimate limit of virtuosity. "You see," he seemed to be saying, "I can apply my vision to *anything*." And after the final fadeout one could only wonder where his cryptic and fastidious extremism would lead him next.

With a master-stroke of self-discipline, however, *The Trial of Joan of Arc* (Sebricon) looks for a way back to the essence of that vision. If it didn't sound dangerously like a paradox, one could say that here Bresson discards all the flourishes of his style. The film concentrates its action into 65 minutes; there is no Mozart mass or Lully on the harpsichord to add an extra dimension of spirituality; Burel's images are more ascetic than ever; and there is no need for close shots of such mundane objects as the sharpened spoon or the splinters of wood which helped Fontaine, the prisoner, on his way towards a spiritual concept of freedom. This film is content with straightforward medium shots of people talking. Everything is stripped of decoration; the enigmatic faces, the settings of curtains and brick walls, the hole in the dark wall through which hostile eyes peer into the cell. Everything that is profane is only there to serve the sacred: the inner, spiritual drama. Even the blackness of the fadeouts suggests something solemn. To Bresson cinema means a church. And the scenes of Joan's repeated interrogations, composed with a splendour of mathematical precision, rise like the solid pillars sustaining the whole arch of the work. We move along under them as if in some ascetic medieval cathedral, advancing slowly and with echoing footsteps, hesitant and yet drawn on by the spiritual grandeur—irresistibly moving towards the altar, the culmination, the inevitable burning at the stake.

This sense of inevitability makes Bresson's film a very modern rendering of Joan's story. It is the product of an epoch resigned to its own false judgments. This Joan is tried by a smoothly running judicial machine. One interrogation succeeds another; the dialogue derives from the curt, accurate sentences of the trial record. An interrogation ends; the door slams behind Joan; the scene fades out. The key clatters in the lock; another interrogation; again the door slams; fadeout. The effect is to give the film a staccato rhythm and also to encourage the spectator to search for the links between the separate scenes. They are all part of the machinery; and it is very much a machinery of an earth which repeatedly proves that it is still not "ready to receive" its saints . . .

"When will it be ready?" Shaw's Saint Joan asks. "How long, O Lord, how long?" Humanly and philosophically, this is a story filled with tremendous question marks. Joan's tragedy lies in her very agony between faith and doubt. An illiterate genius who puts her faith into her questionable visions and unquestionable truths, she stands there as an outcast, representing an idea the greatness of which she is unable to realise, and standing up for it until her last word—"Jesus"—from among the flames. This is perhaps the greatest story since Jesus Christ—and also one of the greatest plots for a tragedy, with the basic problems of human existence offering themselves up for interpretation, from Schiller to Honegger, from Shaw to Dreyer. But one thing, I feel, cannot be ignored: the tremendous human battle for certainty. And this is where Bresson fails to add the decisive final touch to the crystalline brilliance of his conception.

Is it because Joan's replies to Bishop Cauchon are made much too readily and easily? Or because her decision to sign the recantation—a culmination of the drama of doubts—comes too suddenly, with no real hint of the agonising choice that lies behind it? Or is inadequacy in Florence Carrez's performance the trouble? Inevitably, one brings with one a memory of Falconetti's close-up agony, the chapped lips and the slow tears rolling down her cheek. With a peasant stubbornness, Dreyer's Joan wanted to live; Bresson's Joan doesn't mind dying. When Joan sees the pigeons in Dreyer's film, you feel that she *must* leave something behind, something that would have been worth living for. But Bresson's pigeons flutter their wings above a world not worthy of such a sacrifice. Dreyer's heroine is left painfully alone; Bresson's is made lonely by Bresson.

Such comparisons between the two films are, of course, not really fair: Dreyer's is a *Passion*, Bresson's a *Procès*. But along with the juridical meaning of the word, there is also here a tremendous *human* trial. And Joan, "young, rustic, a woman of action, good-humoured, very pious, very temperate, a sane and shrewd country girl of extraordinary strength of mind and hardihood of body," does not easily lend herself to a merely enigmatic image. It seems that she is to be no more than another instrument put to the service of Bresson's vision. But Joan is no pickpocket. And this is exactly where this seemingly so Bressonian subject loses ground.

The characters of the country priest and the condemned prisoner gave us a key to the philosophical outlook, the spiritual territory covered by these films. The battle between the curé and the countess was fought out in the soul but also on the ground. And in the light of these earlier films, Dreyer's Joan seems a much more Bressonian creation than Bresson's Joan herself. This is why the horrifying crackle of the flames may yield up some abstract intellectual or even spiritual message, but fails to burn, movingly and tragically, a flesh and blood human being and her truth. The cross at the end of *Journal d'un Curé* remains for me the more genuine symbol of that charred stake at which are burnt, one after another, those who have the courage to "hear the voices".

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