Directed and written by Carl Theodor Dreyer
Based on the play Gertrud by Hjalmar Söderberg
Produced by Jørgen Nielsen
Original Music by Jørgen Jersild
Cinematography by Henning Bendtsen and Arne Abrahamsen
Edited by Edith Schlüssel
Gertrud's costumes by Fabielle

Nina Pens Rode ... Gertrud Kanning
Bendt Rothe ... Gustav Kanning
Ebbe Rode ... Gabriel Lidman
Baard Owe ... Erland Jansson
Axel Strøbye ... Axel Nygen

CARL THEODOR DREYER (February 3, 1889, Copenhagen, Denmark—March 20, 1968, Copenhagen, Denmark) has 23 directing credits, among them Gertrud (1964), Ordet/The Word (1955), Et Slot i et slot/The Castle Within the Castle (1955), Storstrømsbroen/The Storstrom Bridge (1950), Thorvaldsen (1949), De nåede færgen/They Caught the Ferry (1948), Landsbykirken/The Danish Church (1947), Kampen mod kræften/The Struggle Against Cancer (1947), Vandet på landet/Water from the Land (1946), Två människor/Two People (1945), Fredens dag/Day of Wrath (1943), Mødrehjælpen/Good Mothers (1942), L’Esclave blanc/Jungla nera (1936), Vampyr - Der Traum des Allan Grey (1932), La Passion de Jeanne d’Arc/The Passion of Joan of Arc (1928), Glomdalsbruden/The Bride of Glomdal (1926), Du skal ære din hustru/Master of the House/Thou Shalt Honour Thy Wife (1925), Michael/Chained: The Story of the Third Sex/Heart’s Desire (1924), Der var engang/Once Upon a Time (1922), Die Gezeichneter/Love One Another (1922), Blade af Satans bog/Leaves from Satan’s Book (1921), and Præsidenten/The President (1919).

NINA PENS RODE (22 May 1928, Denmark—22 July 1992, Denmark) was primarily a stage actor. She appeared in only six films, of which Gertrud was the last. The others were Kispus (1956), Arvingen (1954), Husmandstøsen (1952), Kærlighedsdoktoren (1952) and Dorte (1951).

BENDT ROTE (9 May 1921—31 December 1989) appeared in 49 other films, among which were Babettes gæstebud/Babette’s Feast (1987), The Counterfeit Traitor (1962), Bundfald/Sin Alley (1957), Diskret Ophold/Discretion Wanted (1946) and De tre skolekammerater (1944).


HENNING BENDTSEN (9 March 1925, Copenhagen) was cinematographer on 67 films, among them Europa (1991), Epidemic (1987), Elsk... din næste!/Love They Neighbour (1967), Pigen og millionæren/The Girl and the Millionaire (1965), Gertrud (1964), Guðrún/Suddenly, a Woman! (1963), Oskar (1962), Nødlogi betalt/Night Girls (1957), Ordet (1955, uncredited), Min søn Peter (1953) and De hvide kryds (1948).

ARNE ABRAHAMSEN was cinematographer on 16 other films, some of which were Havet og menneskene (1970), Der var engang en krig/Once There Was a War (1966), Giift/Venom (1966), Døden kommer til middag/Death Comes at Noon (1964), Tre piger i Paris/Three Girls in Paris (1963) and Duellen (1962).
Dreyer directed prest studios in Berlin, was now at the height of its influence and isolated suffering woman victimized by intolerant society….

and white in starkly dramatic composition of the décor, which was clean and uncluttered, contrasting black nonprofessionals in the interests of authenticity, and his treatment handling of some of the smaller roles, where he cast.

I saw my mistakes on the screen."

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“Mikael,” in Tom Milne’s opinion, “is perhaps Dreyer’s first masterpiece, assured , reticent, and radiant with subtle inner connections.” Certainly it enabled Dreyer to explore, more fully than in any of his previous films, his technique of expressing his characters’ inner moral condition through the décor that surrounds them.…

Master of the House (1925) also displays Dreyer’s increasingly assured use of facial closeups as a key element in the construction of his films. “Nothing in the world,” he once wrote, “can be compared to the human face. It is a land one can never tire of exploring. There is no greater experience in a studio than to witness the expression of a sensitive face under the mysterious power of inspiration. To see it animated from inside, and turning into poetry?"

Master of the House enjoyed considerable success, especially in France, prompting the Société Générale des Films to offer Dreyer a contract for the film that would soon make him famous. . . .Dreyer had now directed eight films in seven years. In the remaining forty-two years of his life he was to make only six more features—although they include all the five films on which his reputation now rests.…

Throughout these [earlier] films, too, Dreyer can be seen striving for truth and sincerity on the screen, pressing for naturalistic settings and performances in the hope of achieving emotional truth. “What interests me,” he explained, “—and this comes before technique—is to reproduce the feelings of the characters in my films: to reproduce as sincerely as possible feelings which are as sincere as possible. For me, the important thing is not only to seize the words they say, but also the thoughts behind those words.” Also increasingly evident is what Tom Milne described as “Dreyer’s preoccupation with texture, with the way the material world impinges on the human beings who live apparently detached from it, and with the tangibility of a gesture or a glance and with the equal tangibility of objects.”

from World Film Directors V. I. Ed John Wakeman. The H.W. Wilson Co NY 1987, entry by Philip Kemp

Danish director and scenarist, born in Copenhagen. According to recent research by Maurice Drouzy, he was the illegitimate son of a Swedish woman, Josefín Bernhardin Nilsson. His father, Jens Christian Trop, owned a farm near Kjøstianstad in southern Sweden, where Josefín Nilsson worked as a housekeeper. To avoid scandal, she went to Copenhagen to have her baby in anonymous seclusion. For the first two years of his life, the child lived in a succession of foster homes, before his mother succeeded in having him adopted early in 1891. A few weeks later she died, poisoned by phosphorus, which she had taken in a misinformed attempt to abort a second pregnancy.

The boy’s adoptive parents were a young Danish couple. The family was not well off and often had to move in search of cheaper lodging. Perhaps partly as a result of this poverty, Dreyer’s childhood he described to his friend Ebbe Neergaard, was unhappy and emotionally deprived; his adopted family “never ceased to let him feel that he ought to be grateful for the food he was given, and that he really had no claim to anything, considering that his mother had managed to escape for paying for him by departing this world. As soon as possible he was encouraged to start earning his keep.

Dreyer, always a reserved and reticent man, rarely discussed his personal life, but his marriage was to all appearances a happy one, lasting until his death fifty-seven years.

In 1913 he joined Nordisk Films Kompagni as a part-time screenwriter, becoming a full-time employee two years later. At the time the Danish film industry was at the height of its brief Golden Age, producing a spate of movies that rivaled those of Hollywood for international popularity. Between 1910 and 1916 Nordisk alone turned out over a hundred films a year. Dreyer’s first task was to devise dialogue for intertitles, but soon he was writing complete scripts, editing films, and acting as literary consultant on potential properties. From 1913 to 1918 he was credited with scripts for more than twenty films and worked uncredited on many more. It served him, he later said, as “a marvelous school.”

In 1918, having worked a five-year apprenticeship, Dreyer suggested that Nordisk should let him direct. The studio agreed readily enough, and Dreyer began work on Praesidenten (The President, 1919), to his own script from a novel by Karl Franzos. The film proved a creaky, old-fashioned melodrama, full of seductions, illegitimacies, improbable coincidences, and impossibly stagy acting, all strung around a complicated flashback structure that betrayed the ill-digested influence of D.W. Griffith. Dreyer subsequently attributed the hammy gesticulations to his directorial inexperience: “I let the actors do what they liked. Later I saw my mistakes on the screen.”

More characteristic of Dreyer’s later work was his handling of some of the smaller roles, where he cast nonprofessionals in the interests of authenticity, and his treatment of the décor, which was clean and uncluttered, contrasting black and white in starkly dramatic compositions. Praesidenten also marks the first appearance of Dreyer’s perennial theme: an isolated suffering woman victimized by intolerant society.…

The German film industry, led by the mighty UFA studios in Berlin, was now at the height of its influence and prestige, and it was for Decla-Bioskop, the “artistic” of UFA, that Dreyer directed Mikael (1924), with Erich Pommer producing.…

All these elements coalesce in Dreyer’s next, and still his most famous, film. Invited to Paris, he proposed a choice of three subjects to the Société Générale—Marie Antoinette, Catherine de Medici, and Joan of Arc—and finally (by drawing matches, Dreyer later claimed) settled on Joan. Given ample time and a generous budget of seven millions francs, he spent several months in research and preparation before starting production on an
unhurried schedule. To represent Rouen Castle, a huge concrete complex was constructed of interconnecting walls, towers, houses, a drawbridge, and a church, designed by Herman Warm (set designer on Caligari) and Jean Hugo. Warm drew his inspiration from medieval miniatures, with their disconcerting angles and naive perspective. Dreyer’s script was based largely on the original transcripts of Joan’s trial, though the twenty-nine separate interrogations were telescoped into one single, harrowing sequence.

It is virtually impossible today, even on a first viewing, to come to La Passion de Jeanne d’Arc (The Passion of Joan of Arc, 1927) with a wholly fresh eye, so familiar have stills from it become. This may partly explain why some critics have tended to dismiss the film as no more than “an extension of still photography.” Certainly few films, before or since, can have contained such a high proportion of facial close-ups—dictated, according to Dreyer, by the inherent nature of the material. “There were the questions, there were the answers—very short, very crisp....Each question, each answer, quite naturally called for a close-up....In addition, the result of the close-ups was that the spectator was as shocked as Joan was, receiving the questions, tortured by them,” There was also a notable lack of establishing situation-shots: deprived of any clear sense of geographical layout of the various settings, we are left as helplessly disoriented as Joan herself.

Jeanne d’Arc comes across, in Jean Sémolué’s term, as “a film of confrontation”—a sustained assault on the heroine (and the viewer) full of unsettling camera angles and off-center framings. “The architecture of Joan’s world,” wrote Paul Schrader, “literally conspires against her; like the faces of her inquisitors, the halls doorways, furniture are on the offensive, striking, swooping at her with oblique angles, attacking her with hard-edged chunks of black and white.” In the title role, Maria Falconetti gave one of the most intense performances of her career, the artifice of the make-up and warts and fleshly pouches, frequently recall the onlookers in dreams and menace resides in the intangible reverberations of sights and sounds that seem to hover just beyond the reach of consciousness. Without gore or Grand Guignol, or the harsh sights and sounds that seem to hover just beyond the reach of consciousness. Without gore or Grand Guignol, or the harsh gothic chiaroscuro of Murnau or James Whale, Vampyr creates an uncannyly convincing universe of fantastic reality.

Vampyr, with a proposal that they form an independent production company. The film that they produced was Vampyr (1932)—one of the strangest, most idiosyncratic horror films ever made. Shot largely in a derelict chateau, with a cast composed almost entirely of nonprofessionals, it conjures up a pale, drifting, drowned world, in which events glide with the hallucinatory slowness of dreams and menace resides in the intangible reverberations of sights and sounds that seem to hover just beyond the reach of consciousness. Without gore or Grand Guignol, or the harsh gothic chiaroscuro of Murnau or James Whale, Vampyr creates an uncannily convincing universe of fantastic reality.

Dreyer’s script was adapted, very freely, from two stories by the nineteenth-century Irish writer, Sheridan Le Fanu. The plot, such as it is, tells of a young man, David Gray, who comes to a remote village where a vampire, the un-dead Marguerite Chopin, preys on the living bodies of young women, abetted by the village doctor. Eventually Gary succeeds in destroying the vampire, and the curse is lifted. But plot in Vampyr is totally subordinated to mood and atmosphere. A grey, floating mist, as if everything were in a state of dissolution, pervades the film—an effect that Dreyer and his photographer, Rudolph Maté, hit on by lucky accident when a light shone on the camera lens during the first day’s shooting. The general incompetence of the acting also contributes to the dissociated mood: the film’s producer, Baron de Gunzberg, himself playing the hero under the pseudonym of Julian West, shambles somnambulistically through the action, seeming (in Paul Schrader’s words) “not an individual personality. but the fluid, human component of a distorted, expressionistic universe.” The film was post-dubbed by the actors themselves into English, French and German versions, thus further heightening the sense of unreality, since few of them were fluent in all three languages.

Vampyr, wrote Robin Wood in Film Comment (March 1974), “is one of the most dreamlike movies ever made, and one of the few to capture successfully the elusiveness of dream.
Dreyer has here created a visual style unlike any other film, including many of his own.” David Thomson, though, pointed out that “its intensity reflects back on all Dreyer’s other films, showing how entirely they are creations of light, shade, and camera position.” Most critics would now agree with Tom Milne in seeing Vampyr as “one of the key works in his career...quintessentially Dreyer.”; but when released it was a critical—as well as financial—disaster, and for years afterward could be dismissed as “a puerile story about phantoms.” (Georges Sadoul)

Dreyer had now acquired the reputation of being a difficult and demanding director, averse to compromise, given to disputes and recriminations, and one moreover whose films lost money. Refusing to submit himself to the discipline of any of the major studios, Dreyer found himself unemployable. For the next ten years, at the height of his powers, he made no films. Various projects came to nothing: discussion in Britain with John Grierson; a version of Madame Bovary which eventually went to Renoir (1934); an idea for a film about Mary Queen of Scots. In 1936 he traveled to Somalia to make a semi-documentary film, Mudundu, with French and Italian backing. Several thousand meters of film were shot before Dreyer clashed with the producers and eventually withdrew, leaving the picture to be completed by Ernesto Quadrone.

After this fiasco, Dreyer returned to Denmark and once more took up journalism under his old pseudonym of “Tommen,” writing film reviews and law reports. His chance to direct again came in 1942. With imported films blocked under the German occupation, the Danish film industry had reclaimed a greater share of the market and needed products. To prove that he could work on commission and within a budget, Dreyer directed a government documentary short, Modrehjælpen (Good Mothers, 1942), about social care for unmarried mothers. On the strength of this, Palladium (for whom he had made Master of the House) offered him a contract for a feature film.

Vredens Dag (Day of Wrath, 1943) is, according to Robin Wood, “Dreyer’s richest work...because it expresses most fully the ambiguities inherent in his vision of the world.” It also unites all those elements that are held, perhaps unfairly, to be most typical of Dreyer’s films. Its prevailing mood is somber, lowering, intense; the narrative pace is steady and deliberate, presenting horrific events with chilling restraint, and it deals with religious faith, the supernatural, social intolerance, innocence and and guilt, and the suffering of women. In its visual texture Day of Wrath arguably presents, even more than Jeanne d’Arc, the most complete example of Dreyer’s use of light and darkness to express moral and emotional concerns....

“The interest in Dreyer’s films,” suggested Jean Sémolue, “resides not in the depiction of events, nor of predetermined characters, but in the depiction of the changes wrought on characters by events.”

In considering Dreyer’s work as a whole, most critics, without disparaging his considerable skills as a screenwriter, have stressed the visual aspects of the films as his most distinctive achievement. “Dreyer’s style is wholly pictorial,” asserted Richard Rowland, “it is visual images that we remember...faces, lights, and shadows.”

...During the next ten years, Dreyer worked on a number of film projects: an adaptation of Euripides’ Medea, a version of Faulkner’s Light in August, treatments of Ibsen’s Brand, Strindberg’s Ordet, and O’Neill’s Mourning Becomes Electra—as well as his most cherished project, a life of Christ to be filmed in Israel. But he completed only one more film: Gertrud (1964), based on the play by Hjalmar Soderberg.

In Gertrud can be seen the culmination of a process of increasing simplification and austerity in Dreyer’s shooting style. From the multiple cutting and dramatized angles of Jeanne d’Arc, the endlessly fluid, gliding tracking shots of Vampyr, Dreyer progressively, through Day of Wrath and Ordet, slowed down his camera, restricted his angles, and increased the length of takes until he arrived, with Gertrud, at something perilously close to stasis. The film consists of a relatively small number of mostly long takes, generally two-shots during which both camera and actors often remain still for minutes at a time. Almost deliberately, it seems, in thus taking the principle of Kammerspiel to the extreme, Dreyer invited charges of visual monotony.

Gertrud is about a woman who demands love on her own unconditional terms or not at all, and the three men—one husband, two lovers—who fail to live up to her exacting standards. Finally she leaves all three, for a solitary life in Paris; in an epilogue, grown old and still alone, she speaks her epitaph: “I have known love.” “Of all Dreyer’s works,” Jean Sémolue wrote, “it is the most inward, and thus the culmination, if not the crown, of his aesthetic.” Penelope Houston thought it “an enigmatically modern film with the deceptive air of a staidly old-fashioned one....It is a kind of distillation, at once contemplative and compulsive.” The consensus of critical opinion has come to regard Gertrud as Dreyer’s final tranquil achievement. “The kind of majestic, necromantic masterpiece,” as Tom Milne put it, “that few artists achieve even once in their lifetimes.”

On its first appearance, though, Gertrud aroused an extraordinary degree of anger and hostility. Premiered in Paris, as part of an elaborate homage to Dreyer, it was greeted with catcalls by the audience and uncomprehending vituperation by the French press. In a typical review, Cinéma 65 commented: “Dreyer has gone from serenity to senility....Not film, but a two-hour study of sofas and pianos.” The film was booed at Cannes, and in America the critics were equally unappreciative. In Esquire (December 1965) Dwight Macdonald wrote: Gertrud is a further reach, beyond mannerism into cinematic poverty and straightforward tedium. He just sets up his camera and photographs people talking to each other.” Dreyer reacted with dignity in the face of these attacks, calmly explaining: “What I seek in my films...is a penetration to my actors’ profound thoughts by means of their most subtle expressions....This is what interests me above all, not the technique of the cinema. Gertrud is a film that I made with my heart.”
In considering Dreyer’s work as a whole, most critics, without disparaging his considerable skills as a screenwriter, have stressed the visual aspect of the films as his most distinctive achievement. “Dreyer’s style is wholly pictorial,” asserted Richard Rowland (Hollywood Quarterly, Fall 1950), “it is visual images that we remember...faces, lights and shadows.” Equally remarkable, though, is how utterly different one Dreyer film can look from another, while still remaining unmistakably his in theme and style. Dreyer himself, when this was suggested to him, was delighted, “for that is something I really tried to do: to find a style that has value or only a single film, for this milieu, this action, this character, this subject.” “The characteristic of a good style,” he remarked on another occasion, “must be that it enters into such intimate contact with the material that it forms a synthesis.”

“There is nothing decorative about Dreyer’s work,” André Bazin stated. “Each nuance contributes to the organization of a mental universe whose rigor and necessity dazzle one’s mind.” Most writers would concur that Dreyer’s films, especially the latter ones, are characterized by an intense deliberateness, pared of inessential detail, and some have found this oppressive. Robin wood, contrasting Dreyer’s work with Renoir’s “sense of superfluous life...a world existing beyond the confines of the frame,” found in Dreyer “a progressive stylistic tightening and rigidifying, a movement away from freedom and fluency...into an increasingly arid world where it becomes harder and harder to breathe.” Certainly those films for which Dreyer is best known—Jeanne d’Arc, Day of Wrath, Ordet—have tended to reinforce his image as a purveyor of metaphysical gloom and anguish, a daunting Great Director better written about than seen.

This accepted view of Dreyer was fairly accurately summarized by Eileen Bowser: “his martyrs, his vampires, his witches and his holy madmen are different facets of the same theme: the power of evil, the suffering of the innocent, the inevitability of fate, the certainty of death.” But this doomladen résumé is not all of Dreyer and with his earlier silent films—especially The Parson’s Widow, Mikael, and Master of the House—gaining wider circulation and with Vampyr growing steadily in critical regard, there are signs that the conventional picture of the director may be changing, and that the lighter, often even cheerful, aspects of his work are achieving recognition.

After Gertrud, Dreyer continued to work on preparations for Jesus, completing the script (which was later published), learning Hebrew, and visiting Israel to hunt for locations. His age and exacting reputation, though, made potential backers wary. Finally, in November 1967, the Danish government offered three million kroner. In February 1968 the Italian state company, RAI, announced that it was prepared to back the film. Dreyer’s dream of twenty years seemed at last about to be realized. The next month he died, of heart failure, aged seventy-nine.

There is no other movie like Gertrud. It exists in its own bright, one-entry category, idiosyncratic, serenely stubborn, and sublime. When it opened in 1964, Carl Theodor Dreyer’s last film, one of his greatest, generated a scandal from which it never completely divested itself. New York Film Festival audiences, attuned to the sixties jump cuts of the New Wave and Richard Lester, yet prepared to honor the legendary filmmaker of Vampyr, The Passion of Joan of Arc, Day of Wrath and Ordet, were baffled by its provokingly patient procession of scenes in which the main physical action seemed to be moving from one divan to another. Husband and wife sat on a couch for minutes at a time, talking about the past and the end of their love—audiences hissed, critics accused it of being uncinematic. But, as filmmaker Andre Techine admiringly put it, “an attentive eye on two figures talking even in a prolonged and static shot will never cease to astonish us.”

In fact, for all that it disdains to disguise its roots as a play, Gertrud is pure cinema; every frame is composed and lit exquisitely, balancing pools of light and shadow; its small gliding camera movements encircle the characters; it is anything but static, to those who enter its rhythm (and Dreyer was a master of the atmospheric uses of rhythm).

Set at the turn of the century, a period comfortably familiar to Dreyer, the film and its discontented heroine cannot avoid echoes of Nora in A Doll’s House, Hedda Gabler, and Miss Julie. But there is a difference, as the filmmaker tells us: “I had chosen the work of Hjalmar Söderberg because his conception of tragedy is more modern, he was overshadowed far too long by the other giants, Ibsen and Strindberg. Why did I say he was more modern? Well, instead of suicide and other grand gestures in the tradition of pathetic tragedy, Söderberg preferred the bitter tragedy of having to go on living even though ideals and happiness have been destroyed [and he made] conflicts materialize out of apparently trivial conversations.” It is precisely the eschewal of melodrama, and the counterpoint between suffering and triviality that point the way toward a reading of Gertrud as, well, funny.

We do not think of Dreyer as a humorist, yet Gertrud is in many ways a sly, cunning film—a comedy even, if an austere one. There is certainly satiric mockery in the ceremony and pompous speeches honoring the returning poet, and there us a prolonged and static shot will never cease to astonish us.”

“Gertrud is the kind of masterpiece that deepens with time because it has already aged in the heart of a great artist,” wrote Andrew Sarris. Dreyer was seventy-five when he shot it (he would die four years later), and the film belongs to that confidently unflashy, autumnal canon of Old Man’s cinema, along with John Ford’s Seven Women, Ozu’s An Autumn Afternoon, Mizoguchi’s Empress Yamashita, Wilder’s Fedora, Buñuel’s That Obscure Object of Desire, all detached analyses of passion with one foot on the other shore. For years Dreyer had sought funds to make a film about Jesus; instead his last testament was Gertrud, an ironic study of another kind of martyrdom.

**Gertrud, Criterion DVD, 2001.**

Philip Lopate.
Dreyer thought film should register the soul, and in Nina Pens Rode he got a brilliant lead performance form an actress who know how to take a close-up and project uncannily her character’s inner states, from migrained lassitude to ecstatic surrender. She is wonderfully supported by Bendt Rothe as Gertud’s husband, Kanning, a politician about to be named to the cabinet, and Ebbe Rode as her ex-lover, Gabriel Lidman, now a famous poet returning from abroad. Both these middle-aged men seem weighed down by self-importance, expecting the love of a beautiful woman as their due, and, not getting it from Gertrud, RETREATING to self-pity as a fallback position. She accuses them both of lack of feeling, stoniness, caring more about their work than love. We can agree with her assessment of these men, while at the same time questioning her own capacity to love, bolting as she does the minute the man she’s with betrays his limitations. For Gertrud is a zealot: she wants to take men to the raw, emotional place where she is—to make them feel her need for live, not just as a fleshly diversion or hedge against loneliness, but as the highest calling.

In Day of Wrath, Dreyer showed the persecuting spirit of the sanctimonious community. By contrast, in Gertud, the men are surprisingly forgiving of the woman’s carnal straying: it is she who acts the prosecutor. Feeding her resentment are the power relations between men and women, here scrupulously dissected: Gertrud, having been forced to give up her singing career to be Kanning’s wife, rejects these male eminences, while choosing a third man, an upstart composer who will reject her. She dons on the younger man, Erland (memorably played by the fox-faced Baard Owe), and enjoys his sarcastic digs at her husband’s generation; but she takes instant offense when the composer, after having met her husband, reports with wonderment that he’s a pretty nice guy. At that point she knows the jig is up. Even then, she might have held onto the affair had she been willing to compromise, but she takes herself off to Paris, to study psychoanalysis, like a fictional Lou-Andreas Salome. Dreyer, who knew something about inability to compromise, must have seen a bit of himself in his heroine.

The coda, several years later, has all the ambiguous poignancy you could ever want. A white-haired Gertrud, now living in seclusion, welcomes the visit of her old friend, Axel, who had once invited her to study psychoanalysis with him in Paris. Axel seems, as ever, polite and gallant, bringing her a copy of his new book; but lest we jump to the sentimental conclusion that friends are better than lovers, she intuits that he wants his old letters back, and he destroys them in front of her by throwing them into the fire. Then he leaves with a sweet wave of the hand, and we are left looking at the door of her cottage: the portal that could stand for the imminent entrance into eternity, a journey she soon will be taking, or, on the contrary, the rigid separation between one human heart and another. Has Gertrud, through all her thrashings, transcended ego and achieved enlightenment? We would like to think so, but there is the rather harsh way she tells her manservant to mop the kitchen floor. It appears she is still poised between the angels and the all-too-humans.

As with everything in this supremely uncoercive film, Dreyer doesn’t tell us what to think, or how to judge: he challenges the audience to draw its own assessment, and this way of treating us like adults, may be even more than its unhurried pace, what continues to make the film a frustrating experience for some viewers. No matter, Gertrud may not be for everyone, but those who take to it will never tire of its subtle beauty.

CARL TH. DREYER. THOUGHTS ON MY METIER (1943)

There is a certain resemblance between a work of art and a person, just as one can talk about a person’s soul, one can also talk about the work of art’s soul, its personality. The soul is shown through the style, which is the artist’s way of giving expression to his perception of the material. The style is important in attaching inspiration to artistic form. Through the style, the artist molds the many details that make it whole. Through style, he gets others to see the material through his eyes.

Style is not something that can be separated from the finished work of art. It saturates and penetrates it, and yet is invisible and undemonstrable.

All art is a single person’s work. But a film is created by a collectivity, and a collectivity cannot create art unless an artistic personality stand behind it and acts as its driving force.

The first creating impulse for a film comes from the writer whose work is the actual foundation for the film. But from the moment the poetic foundation is laid, it is the director’s task to give the film its style. The many artistic details are borne through his initiative. It ought to be his feelings and moods that color the film and that awaken corresponding feelings and moods in the spectator’s minds. Through the style he infuses the work with a soul—and that is what makes it art. it is for him to give the film a face—namely his own.

Because it is like this, we directors have a very large responsibility.
The Drama
In all art, human beings are the decisive thing. In the artistic film, it is the people who want to see and it is their adventures of the spirit that we want to experience. We want to enter upon and into the lives that we see on the screen. We hope that the film will set ajar for us a door into these other worlds. We want to be placed in suspense that originates less from outside action than from the unfolding of the inner conflicts.

Acting
A film actor’s most important means of expression are gesture and speech. When the sound film first came forward, gestural expression was set in the background. Now one had the spoken word. And the words gushed forth to fill empty faces. In the French and American psychological films of recent years, facial expression is again brought to honor and given value, and it is all to the good. This kind of mime is an important element for the spoken film. Gesture endows the face with soul, and facial expression is an extra-important plus to the spoken word. We can often read a person’s whole character in single expression, a wrinkling of the forehead or a blink of the eye. Mime is the original means of expression of inner experience—older than the spoken word. Facial expression is not reserved for people only. If you have a dog, you know that a dog can have a very expressive face.

Music
I cannot talk about film without saying a couple of words about music. It is Heinrich Heine who has said that where the words fall short there the music begins. This is just the task of the music. Correctly used, it is both capable of supporting the psychological development and of deepening a frame of mind that has been previously produced either through the pictures or through the dialogue. When the music really has meaning or an artistic intention, it will always be a plus for the film. But we must, nonetheless, hope for—and work to bring forth—more and more spoken films that have not the need of music, films in which the words do not fall short.

I have, as concretely as it has been possible for me to do, described the technical and spiritual processes that are decisive for the style of a film...I confess that I have talked much about technique but I am not ashamed that I take the trouble to learn my job and know it from its foundations. Each artist knows that the first condition for him ever to become something as an artist is that he knows his trade. But no one who has seen my film can doubt that technique for me is a means and not the goal and that the goal is to give the spectator a richer experience.

What interested him most about making movies, said Carl Th. Dreyer, a few years before his death, was to “reproduce the feelings of the characters in my films[...], to seize [...] the thoughts that are behind the words [...] the secrets that lie in the depths of their soul”.

“Gertrud is a film I made with my heart”, he added. With the heart. About the heart. “What interests me before all, it’s this, and not the technique of cinema.”

Technique, nonetheless, is the tool the heart must use. Accordingly Dreyer mobilizes all cinema for the hunt. “I need a big screen”, he said. “I need the communal feeling of a theater. Something made to move has to move a crowd.” He wanted to do Gertrud in colour. Maybe 70mm too, like Lawrence of Arabia (David Lean, 1962). Isn’t Lawrence (Peter O’Toole) on a camel in a desert like Gertrud (Nina Pens Rode) on a seat in a parlour? Dreyer wanted mass catharsis, the way the Greek theatre did, or maybe the way college basketball does, with thousands of pulses synched to that ball’s movements. With the result that Gertrud is more like a basketball game than Lawrence, has more action, excitement, spills, chills, and thrills, and has some of the “coolest” scenes in movies, piled on top of each other.

Curious it is, then, that some people complain Dreyer is slow and intellectual, talkie and dull. Gertrud particularly. They never spot the ball. As a result, it is unlikely in my lifetime that I shall share Gertrud upon a big screen with two thousand pulses synched to her every movement. Like most people, I shall see Gertrud at home alone, on my television, and even with a large screen and Criterion’s excellent DVD, I shall have to press my player’s zoom button in order to see into her eyes. She and her men sit in full-length compositions like figures in gigantic tapestries. “I don’t like television,” Dreyer said.

Vampyr Criterion DVD. “Vampyr’s Ghosts and Demons.”
Mark Le Fanu.
A glance at Vampyr should begin with its Danish begetter, Carl Theodor Dreyer (1889-1968), whose relatively restricted output has not prevented him from being spoken of as one of the greatest film directors of all time. The accolade rests not so much on some perceived technical prowess as on the recognition of a very special spiritual integrity: everything he touched—and he touched many different genres in the course of his lifetime—he made inimitably his own. Proud, shy, and reticent in his personal life, he gave all he had to the burgeoning craft of cinema. Somehow or other, the profundity and heroism of that sacrifice are communicated as a felt value in his movies. Each of them has a beautiful seriousness.

The bulk of Dreyer’s filmography—nine films out of a total of fourteen, stretching from his debut in 1919 to The Passion of Joan of Arc in 1928—belongs to the silent epoch. And most of it was made outside his native Denmark. The country had enjoyed a brief golden age of cinema just prior to the First World War, but by the time Dreyer was establishing himself, in the late teens, this flowering was ending, and he was forced to seek his fortune abroad, wherever he could find backers, which in practice meant Germany and France. The Passion of Joan of Arc, his last effort in the twenties, is one of the finest of all silent films—an epitome of the art form as it had developed up to that point—but it was not a success with the public. Notoriously, Vampyr, his next work and first sound film, would fail to find an audience too, and even more disastrously than Joan of Arc did, so it is worth emphasizing that
Dreyer—GERTRUD

this strange, hermetic, and experimental film was originally conceived of as, if not exactly a “potboiler” (the concept is impossible in Dreyer’s case), then at least something possessing—he hoped—healthy moneymaking possibilities. After the great expressionistic outburst at the beginning of the decade that had ushered in masterpieces like *The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari* (Robert Wiene, 1920) and *Nosferatu* (F. W. Murau, 1922), vampires, horror, and darkness were in vogue again toward the end of the twenties—both in Europe and the United States. In films such as *The Lodger* (Alfred Hitchcock, 1927) and *The Cat and the Canary* (Paul Leni, 1927) Dreyer discerned, or thought he could discern, instances of a genre where broad popular appeal was allowed to exist within the framework of artistic integrity.

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COMING UP IN BUFFALO FILM SEMINARS XIX:

Nov 3 Eric Rohmer *Ma nuit chez Maud/My Night at Maude’s* 1969
Nov 10 Andrei Tarkovsky *Solaris* 1972
Nov 17 Arthur Penn *Night Moves* 1975
Dec 1 Bela Tarr *Werkmeister harmóniák/Werkmeister Harmonies* 2000
Dec 8 Mike Leigh *Topsy-Turvy* 1999

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