

# DREYER

IN DOUBLE

REFLECTION



EARL DREYER'S WRITINGS ON FILM  
EDITED WITH COMMENTARY BY DONALD SKOLLER

# DREYER

IN DOUBLE

REFLECTION



CARL DREYER'S WRITINGS ON FILM  
EDITED WITH COMMENTARY BY DONALD SKOLLER



FILM

## DREYER IN DOUBLE REFLECTION

### Carl Dreyer's Writings on Film

Edited with commentary by Donald Skoller

"Dreyer's essays constitute one of the most condensed, carefully considered, and eloquent expressions of the possibility of cinema as a high art by any filmmaker."

—**P. Adams Sitney**, Princeton University, author of *Visionary Film*

"Carl Dreyer resides securely in a high domain of the film world. His collected writings shed even more light on this humane and noble artist."

—**Stanley Kauffmann**

---

**Carl-Theodor Dreyer** (1889-1968) is universally recognized as one of the great master stylists of the cinema. *The Passion of Joan of Arc*, *Vampyr*, *Day of Wrath*, *Ordet*, and *Gertrud* are the most famous works of this rigorous, austere, and powerful filmmaker. Deeply individualistic, Dreyer's films move us profoundly; they also puzzle us with their subtleties. In *Dreyer in Double Reflection*, Don Skoller, through the medium of Dreyer's writings, provides the reader and viewer with a key to Dreyer's own perceptions of his art, taking particular care to preserve Dreyer's voice in the translation, and to preserve his spirit as he comments on the evolution of cinema through such topics as photography, sound, color, acting, and the film culture and personalities of the twentieth century. A collection of fifty stills from Dreyer's movies are arranged in groupings that visibly underscore key nuances of his style. Each of Dreyer's later films is an experiment, and all have become classics; this book is essential to fully understanding his cinematic genius.

Currently a full-time writer and filmmaker, **Don Skoller** recently completed three decades in academia, teaching, writing, filmmaking, and founding film departments in the State and City Universities of New York and the University of Wisconsin.

Cover design by Virginia Atkinson Design & Company

Cover photograph of scene from *The Passion of Joan of Arc* from Movie Still Archives



DA CAPO PRESS • New York

ISBN 0-306-80458-

## Dreyer in Double Reflection

**710 BOOK STORE**  
**TOP CASH For BOOKS Anytime**  
**"YOURS — FOR LOWER COSTS  
OF HIGHER EDUCATION"**



# **Dreyer in Double Reflection**

**Translation of Carl Th. Dreyer's writings**

***About the Film (Om Filmen)***

**Edited and with accompanying commentary and essays**

**by Donald Skoller**

**A DA CAPO PAPERBACK**

---

Library of Congress Cataloging in Publication Data

Dreyer, Carl Theodor. 1889-1968.

[Om filmen. English]

Dreyer in double reflection / translation of Carl Th. Dreyer's writings about the film (Om filmen); edited and with accompanying commentary and essays by Donald Skoller.

p. cm. — (Da Capo paperback)

Reprint. Originally published: New York: Dutton, 1973.

ISBN 0-306-80458-1

1. Motion pictures. I. Skoller, Donald S. II. Title.

[PN1994.D713 1991]

91-4296

791.43—dc20

CIP

---

This Da Capo Press paperback edition of *Dreyer in Double Reflection* is an unabridged republication of the edition published in New York in 1973. It is reprinted by arrangement with Donald Skoller and Gyldendal.

Copyright © 1973 by Donald Skoller

*Om Filmen* copyright © 1959 and 1963 by Carl Th. Dreyer

"My Only Great Passion," "Who Crucified Jesus," and "The Roots of Anti-Semitism" reprinted by special arrangement with The Dial Press, New York. Copyright © 1971, 1972 by The Dial Press

Published by Da Capo Press, Inc.

A Subsidiary of Plenum Publishing Corporation

233 Spring Street, New York, N.Y. 10013

All Rights Reserved

Manufactured in the United States of America

Thanks go to the Danish Film Museum, especially those responsible for the vast collection of photographs from which I chose most of the stills appearing in this book.





## Contents

### *page*

15	Introduction by Donald Skoller
21	Swedish Film (1920)
30	New Ideas About the Film: Benjamin Christensen and His Ideas (1922)
36	French Film (1926)
47	Realized Mysticism (1929)
51	The Real Talking Film (1933)
57	Peer Gynt at the Palace Theatre (1936)
59	The Gulliver Movie (1936)
62	The Jannings Film (1936)
64	Dreyer's Reply—About Playacting: On the Occasion of the Jannings Film (1936)
71	Film and Criticism, I–III (1936)
72	I: On the Occasion of Dr. Frederick Schyberg's Lecture at the Student Union
74	II: Dr. Frederick Schyberg Answers Film Director Carl Th. Dreyer's Contribution to the Film Discussion at the Student Union
76	III: Dreyer's Reply
77	Behind the Boulevards of Paris (1936)
79	New Roads for the Danish Film—H. C. Andersen (1939)
90	Film Technique and Scripts: Some Comments for Kjeld Abell (1939)
97	Two Plays that Flopped: Was It the Fault of the Direction?, and an Exchange of Letters (1939)
104	The Stage Life of the Dead: Mogens Dam's Reply

*page*

109	“When the Dead Live”: An Objective Reply to Mogens Dam
111	Photography in Danish Film (1940)
120	A Letter to <i>Politiken</i> (1943)
122	A Little on Film Style (1943)
143	My Only Great Passion (1950)
147	Who Crucified Jesus? (1951)
156	The Cinematization of <i>Ordet</i> ( <i>The Word</i> ) (1954)
168	Color Film and Colored Film (1955)
174	Imagination and Color (1955)
187	The Roots of Anti-Semitism (1959)
200	Ebbe Neergaard (1960)

## List of Illustrations

- 24 From *The President* (1920)
- 25 From *Mikaël* (1924)
- 26 From *Die Gezeichneten* (1922)
- 38 From *Mikaël*
- 39 From *Mikaël*
- 40 From *The Parson's Widow* (1920)
- 41 From *The Parson's Widow*
- 42 From *Gertrud* (1964)
- 43 From *Gertrud*
- 48 From *Mikaël*
- 49 From *Gertrud*
- 66 From *The Passion of Joan of Arc* (1928)
- 67 From *The Passion of Joan of Arc*
- 68 From *The Passion of Joan of Arc*
- 69 From *The Passion of Joan of Arc*
- 92 From *The President*
- 93 From *The President*
- 94 From *The Bride of Glomdal* (1926)
- 95 From *The Bride of Glomdal*
- 98 From *Vampyr* (1932)
- 99 From *Vampyr*
- 100 From *Vampyr*
- 106 From *Vampyr*
- 107 From *The President*
- 114 From *The President*
- 115 From *The President*
- 116 From *Day of Wrath* (1943)
- 117 From *Day of Wrath*
- 130 From *Day of Wrath*
- 131 From *Day of Wrath*

- 132 From *Day of Wrath*
- 138 From *Day of Wrath*
- 139 From *Day of Wrath*
- 140 From *Two Lives* (1944)
- 158 From *Ordet* (1955)
- 159 From *Ordet*
- 160 From *Ordet*
- 161 From *Ordet*
- 162 From *Ordet*
- 180 From *Day of Wrath*
- 181 From *Ordet*
- 182 From *Gertrud*
- 183 Dreyer on the set of *Gertrud*
- 191 From *Die Gezeichneten*
- 194 From *Die Gezeichneten*
- 198 From *Die Gezeichneten*
- 202 Dreyer on the set of *Gertrud*
- 203 Dreyer directing *They Caught the Ferry* (1948)
- 204 Dreyer directing *Ordet*



## **Dreyer in Double Reflection**



## Introduction

Carl Th. Dreyer's films have a quiet inner unity, a fine weave working within and upon itself. His films achieve their intensity without high-pressuring the viewer, without being hyperactive, and it is not unusual for their strengths to go virtually unnoticed until you suddenly catch a glimpse of something coming from their center and then really begin to listen to and look at it all.

This is true not only of his films but of his writings about film as well. The essays contained in this collection cover a period of forty years, from 1920 to 1960. They are presented chronologically—rather than by subject category or some other device—because they add up to a *biographia cinematografica*, one of the more interesting and illuminating on record. The individual pieces are like entries in a public diary, an artist's log covering four decades of dynamic interaction with the growing film culture of the twentieth century. They are the words and thoughts of a man who lived for film—in Dreyer's own phrase, "my only great passion"—and spoke and wrote with consistently revelatory insight and conviction. What he said and wrote always tells us something about himself at the very least and, therefore, inevitably, about the history and nature of the art to which he devoted his life.

Dreyer's last three great films—*Day of Wrath* (1943),<sup>1</sup> *Ordet* (1955), and *Gertrud* (1964)—were based upon stage plays, and if one includes the ill-fated *Two Lives* (1945), which also came from the theatre, his predilection for "adaptation" becomes more marked. This is sometimes pointed out by unsympathetic critics to support the contention that Dreyer's work grew less and less cinematic after his final silent film, *La Passion de Jeanne d'Arc* (*The Passion of Joan of Arc*, 1928). But to other viewers the later films

<sup>1</sup> In every instance, the date following a film's title is that of its first showing.

are his most cinematic, suggesting that Dreyer was drawn to material that had already been shaped dramatically in order to concentrate on further distillation and transformation of the action's most essential elements into specifically cinematic form. This sense of a director deliberately reducing his areas of concern but intent upon total realization of the remaining basic elements is consistently reflected in Dreyer's writings. The growth and refinement of this unique directorial sensibility, throughout the four decades covered, can be followed in these pages.

In Dreyer's writing about cinema, the reader is exposed to the same problems and possibilities of communication his films themselves present. And it is not unfair—perhaps even helpful—to add that these are not Dreyer's problems, not *his* transmission difficulties, but problems of reception. Of all filmmakers, Dreyer has given more than has been received. The reception difficulties likely to be encountered in Dreyer's articles and essays grow out of the same simplicity and directness characteristic of his films, the same lack of *hype*. He seems to be saying things we've heard before, sometimes things familiar to our ears, just as his images on screen seem familiar, simple, and direct, without the sense of explosion or collision that snaps its fingers in front of one's nose to adrenalate an essentially dead situation. However, in coming upon "the familiar," we have options: on the one hand, there is the *stock response*, by which we perceive just enough (and no more) of the immediately present information to trigger a past, stored reaction—in which case what is actually on screen (or page) is quite rightly experienced as a kind of regurgitation. (But *whose?*) On the other hand, "the familiar" may provide an opportunity for making further distinctions, refining perceptions—discovering what is essential. If the work in question is "familiar" in the sense of being *stale*, then nothing will really help. But many times, one can tune past surface familiarity into highly distilled images or thoughts vibrant on their own wavelengths.

Dreyer cherished the possibility of communicating. Rather than present something that could not express just what he wanted, he would not present it at all. If the odds or obstacles against doing it his way were very great, he would defy them and do it as he felt