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The Flagrance of the Sacred. Notes on the Miraculous Event in *Ordet* by Carl Theodor Dreyer

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Abstract. Can the transcendence of the sacred be represented through the potential of cinema, a medium based on the ontological reproduction of the Real? Can the dimension of the completely Other, whose limits and boundaries are hardly identifiable, come to the screen and become sensitive and perceptible? This contribution, taking as references the phenomenological dimension of the sacred proper to the investigation of Father Amédée Ayfre and the more stylistic one studied by Paul Schrader, intends to propose a reflection on how the miraculous event, understood as an objective suspension of physical laws, of narrative verisimilitude, in which the procedures of representation and rendering in images are configured as a fracture with respect to the customary nature of aesthetic expression of reality, are made evident in Carl Theodor Dreyer's *Ordet*.
Keywords: sacred, realism, style, Carl Theodor Dreyer, religion.

"An incomprehensible light
fills the whole circle of the Earth.
It resounds powerfully on and on
A most desirable word of promise:
Whoever believes shall be saved."
(Martin Luther: *With Peace and Joy I Now Depart)*

Beyond the Threshold: the Experience of the Limit

Can cinema represent the transcendent and render the dimension of the sacred through its own evidence of mimetic reproduction of the real? Can an expressive medium that insists on ontological reproduction convey that completely Other whose limits, boundaries, and pertinences are difficult to identify? If the sacred, according to Amédée Ayfre's reflection (1953), is placed between the fundamental poles of transcendence and immanence, can it be evoked in an aesthetic dimension?

Referring to the lesson of Roger Callois, which reflected on the reduction and internalization of the sacred in the horizon of modern society, within which it appears as a generating and at the same time destructive force from which it is necessary to constantly protect (Callois 1961), Ayfre defines the sacred in an oppositional way, contrasting it with the profane; then, following Rudolf Otto, he underlines how one of his "fundamental characteristics is that of being oriented towards the Other, without however clarifying the specific nature of this Other" (1953, 113–114). The radical problem is linked to "the aesthetic incarnation of Transcendence. It is a question of researching how it is possible to evoke, through the use of human signs forcibly charged with nature and humanity, a reality that belongs to other superhuman, supernatural orders" (Ayfre 1953, 121–122). To do so, it is necessary to take into account the phenomenological nature of reality, identifying the moments in which the process of unveiling makes a religious possibility of cinema evident, concretizing that transition between Incarnation and Transcendence inscribed in the basic ambiguity of the cinematographic image, which for Ayfre indicates the potential for further meaning, an expression of the mystery of the sacred, detached from the concrete, objective, naturalistic datum (1964, 222).

For Paul Schrader, the cinematographic medium manifests the sacred by using peculiar stylistic methods, which are based on two essential premises that he notes by associating the reflection of Mircea Eliade with that of Heinrich Wölfflin: for Eliade, there are hierophanies, that is, "manifestations of the sacred capable of expressing the transcendent in society," while for Wölfflin "there are common representative artistic forms shared by divergent cultures. Transcendental style is each of these" (Schrader 1988, 9). Although artistic works, in different eras and in different ways, have been confronted with the possibility of accessing the otherness of the sacred, having been created by humans "cannot *inform* one about the Transcendent, they can only be *expressive* of the Transcendent" (Schrader 1988, 6). That is, they express the nature of the transcendent reflected in the mirror of mankind, not so much by expressing feelings of a religious nature as by representing the sacred itself; cinema can reach the process of expression of the transcendent by recalling a series of stylistic peculiarities which, by resolving cultural, social, and subjective differences, reach a synthesis of a spiritual type (Schrader 1988, 9).

Schrader's reflective thinking identifies the three phases in which the transcendental style manifests itself: everyday life, understood as a "meticulous representation of the dull, banal commonplaces of everyday living" (1988,

39); the disparity, or "an actual or potential disunity between man and his environment which culminates in a decisive action" (1988, 42); finally, stasis, which is understood as "a frozen view of life that does not resolve the disparity but transcends it" (1988, 49). These three phases, in which the stylistic practices of staging can be divided, allow to reveal the "mystery" of the representation of the Sacred; if the latter exists as an impenetrable Unity (from which its own mystery derives), the subdivision makes it intelligible, understandable and approachable.

For film scholars, although many directors have made use of the transcendental style, there are two who have rigorously applied it in their films: Yasujiro Ozu and Robert Bresson. Carl Theodor Dreyer's cinema, which also tends towards the representation of the sacred, uses formal models of the transcendental style without fully accepting it: of all the films by the Danish director, *Ordet* is certainly the one that comes closest to the stylistic procedures identified by Schrader (1988, 46), however, stopping after having crossed the threshold of the miraculous event which is the heart of the film, deliberately unable to reach that stasis which is an indication of the manifestation of the sacred.

The film stages the events that happen to the Borgen Family, whose serene and industrious daily file is suddenly challenged by the presence of Death. Old Borgen, who owns a rich farm, has three children: Mikkel, married to Inger, Johannes and Andersen. The latter, who is the youngest of the three, is in love with Anna, the daughter of the tailor Peter; but Peter and Borgen oppose his marriage to the girl for religious reasons. Mikkel, on the other hand, is an atheist and resists the attempts of his wife, who would like to lead him back to the faith; while Johannes has become so immersed in theological studies that he has been struck by a religious mania and believes himself to be Jesus Christ himself. Inger, who was expecting a baby, dies in childbirth. Inger's death upsets Johannes, who runs away from home. He reappears on the day of the funeral, perfectly cured of his mania. Sometime before he had promised one of Inger's daughters to resurrect his mother if she died: animated by profound faith, he orders the dead woman, who is about to be locked up in the coffin, to get up. The miracle takes place: confronted with the prodigious fact, Mikkel finally finds faith.

However, it is clear that *Ordet* is based on the clarification of the completely Other that occurs in the miraculous event of resurrection, starting from the work with which Kaj Munk – staging an "articulated diatribe between Pietists and Krundtvighians on what meaning is to be given to the 'Word' par excellence, that of God" (Martini 2000, 90–92) – proposed to represent "not only the promise of the miracle, but the miracle itself, such as a mystical juggler wavering on the

abyss of madness, Johannes, the young theologian who believes he is actually Jesus" (Papi 2009, 11–12).

The major difference with respect to Schrader's thinking lies in what we could define as the moral question of representation. For the Danish director, it is a priority to make the mystery of the life of human beings manifest, and it is no coincidence that the film ends with a kiss between Inger – who, after Johannes has brought about her resurrection by means of the "word," has returned to life – and her husband Mikkel: the carnality of love can finally return to fulfillment; and this, implying an action that directly modifies the state of things, makes it impossible to achieve stasis.

For Dreyer, the split allows a return to life and the everyday; he claims to love "life deeply, all beings that are truly alive. My films are intended to be a serene meditation on the great mystery of life, not on death, the denial of life" (Salvestroni 2011, 18). The sacred event, undermining the profane limits of the experience of death, questions the limits of representation: can it allow a stylization of reality "capable of showing, beyond appearances, the hidden filigree of a supernatural substance?" (Ayfre 1962, 123). Dreyer's films operate within a universe of limits, reaching certain extremes of human experience, beyond which there are dimensions – real or imaginary – that cinema can make visible or at least it can suggest and evoke its presence (Ayfre 1971, 135; Perrin 1969, 63–68; Rollet 1998, 71; Tone 1978, 92–93). They are limits in which to be contained or to be overcome, where the act of containment or the tension to escape and for movement produces not only a creation of meaning but allows the actual life (or death) of the characters. "*Vampyr*, kingdom of shadows, stages disjointed signs in which bodies are shapeless, ghostly presences. The image – the bodies and the souls – is placed in a limbo, from which it seems unable to become incarnate in order to exit, so as to be present. *Ordet* deals with the representation of borders, with the passage from the concentric and centripetal context of the home and the dispersion of the desert space of the dunes that surround it." (Rollet 1998, 71.)

Places and spaces, bodies and souls, proceed from the organic and carnal concreteness of existing in a historicized here and now that is gradually bent towards a dimension that extracts the bodies from the brute concreteness of reality and abstracts them in a questioning about the possible meaning of faith, through the (ambiguous yet vivifying) possibility of miracles, or through the destruction of the order of reality.

The Dialectic of Opposites

In presenting *Ordet* at the Edinburgh Festival in 1955, Carl Dreyer cited Munk's statement that the task of any authentic art is to "shock the soul" (Vaughan 1974, 156). This task can be achieved by abstracting from reality, by abandoning naturalism to arrive at an essentiality in which the perception of the experience of the sacred can unfold, placed "outside of time and space" (Solmi 1956, 31). Dreyer's protagonists are confronted with this possibility and their bodies are charged with a *sur-reality* that upsets and changes them, as happens to the character of Inger in the film's finale.

In Dreyer's cinema there is a strong formal dimension, which tends to build and define the meaning of the work. Especially in the last part of his career, the Danish filmmaker, particularly in long shots, identifies a formal model of representation which is typical of cinematographic language and which guarantees the latter the possibility of achieving artistic results. For Le Fanu, "both *Ordet* and *Gertrud* were adapted from theatrical plays and a highly abstract meditation on the dialectical relationship between cinema and theater can be seen in these films. Dreyer seems to be wondering what makes a film different from a play, provided you allow yourself the ability (through the use of exceptionally long takes) to bring something of the experience of real time and of performance that is proper to the theater into the film?" (2003, 30). David Bordwell (1987, 70) also underlines the pictorial dimension of Dreyer's last feature films, in which the characters are presented as if they were to pose for a portrait within environments in which rarefaction and abstraction are sought.

Dreyer began working on Kaj Munk's drama in 1932. It took him more than twenty years to finish the project, after a series of reflections. For Montanari, the director conveys Munk's message through an "existentialism drawn directly from its sources, and not yet degenerated and impoverished in the formulas in which it circulates today in public opinion," where "the dark sense of anguish, a Kierkegaardian anguish, forms the leitmotif of the film" (1958, 55). Those reflections led him towards a style of great sobriety, in which the possibilities of staging are aimed at restoring the ambiguity of the sacred, starting from a theatrical origin that finds its own cinematographic specificity linked to the experience of time and duration of the actual event (Le Fanu 2003, 30).

Referring to the work of adapting the play, Dreyer stated that "a reorganization of the matter and a simplification is necessary. It can be said that it is a purification, because all the elements that do not contribute to the development

of the central idea are removed. You have to concentrate and compress. […] This job of simplification is a radical job. It happens for the film that an action must be interrupted or even suspended to give viewers time to reflect, the time necessary for them to continue to follow the film" (Rasmussen 1955, 48).

Everything must lead rigorously towards the central event, the scene that closes the film: a resurrection that takes place when the transcendent rips off the veil of immanent reality and makes an alterity of reality emerge in a disruptive way. To achieve this effect, there can be no uncertainty, no hesitation, no corollaries to action or reflection can be added. For this reason, the style of staging adopted by Dreyer is deliberately bare, preferring static shots that capture the characters in an everyday environment and using with sobriety camera movements that focus on characters caught in moments of reflection.

Ordet is a radical work both in the fideistic conception that questions the spectators and confronts them with a choice of acceptance or rejection of the miraculous event, and in the rigorous and inexorable dramaturgical scansion, in a narrative flow which proceeds without leaving room for hesitation or digressions. *Ordet* is a source of bewilderment for both the believing and the non-believing spectator. For those who believe, the film directly questions the dimension of faith in the possibility of the miraculous event in the age of science; for those who do not believe, it is the absolute rigour of the staging of this possibility that causes scandal.

For Guido Aristarco, whose reflection comes from a Marxist cultural background, the film is "a disconcerting work, full of internal contradictions that lead to a question that cannot be answered with ease. We cannot share, as they appear at a first reading, the subject, the content, and the thesis of the film; yet a particular charm springs from it, not the illusory and empty one of the *Vampire*, or which can be confused with a handwriting, albeit exceptional" (1955, 172). As Le Fanu points out, "although the real meaning of the film is shrouded in an impenetrable mystery, at its core, there are the same untouchable Christian mysteries: incarnation, resurrection, and the promise of eternal life" (2003, 32).

For Dreyer, "the strength of the drama consists in its absurdity. Among other things, this is the purpose of art. Art must give us the truth of life in a strong, concentrated form. One of the truths that it can demonstrate and confirm to us is our certainty that the spirit is power, that the soul can be stronger than the flesh. [...] There is a condition for resurrection to take place. And this is that one knows that it can happen. Those who are intelligent know that it cannot happen. The unintelligent, the foolish, or children believe in the wondrous. This is why the wondrous can become reality [...] A crazy idea was conceived: resurrection from

the dead – and this idea is debated and carried out until it is finally carried out in the staging. All with great simplicity and realism" (Stender Clausen 1987, 32–33).

The core of the film is the unfathomable tension that places the man who approaches the event of death and the subsequent "scandalous" resurrection, in the shadow of doubt and bewilderment, deriving from Dreyer's decision to stage the miraculous dimension of a return to life without misunderstandings. In fact, "the director trimmed and radicalized the theatrical text; for example, Munk leaves ambiguously undecided whether Inger's death is true or apparent, Dreyer instead makes an unequivocal choice for the miracle" (Rocca 2004, 494; Perrelli 2020, 138–139). If it is possible to insist on the aesthetic dimension of the representation, underlining how the ambiguity of the question is such as not to allow us to be sure of how much belief determines what aesthetic pleasure is, it should nevertheless be noted that the director reaches a staging of such effectiveness in which "everything bends to a sublime and overwhelming emotional force, which penetrates and demolishes even the best-protected skepticism" (Le Fanu 2003, 32).

The film stages the question of faith, its presence or absence, in an environmental context that generates anguish (Solmi 1956, 67), in which "Inger's death does not come unexpectedly, but has the numinous sense of the event that comes to interrupt and fulfill life, realizing the hope of overcoming the hidden pain of things" (Tone 1978, 94).

The idea of anguish is built on a dialectic of opposites, grafted onto a discourse of fundamental contrasts: life and death, faith and doubt, immanence and transcendence. The dramatic tension that arises between these antithetical values of the spiritual dimension is rendered in a spasmodic and non-resolving way until the moment of the miracle. Although dark tones prevail, negative and always painfully annihilating notes, there is however a positive note that wants to be present in the scandalous possibility of the expected miracle, sought after and at the same time rejected by the logic of faith itself which has become a dogmatic–religious system (Montanari 1958, 55).

The Struggle to Believe

The characters are defined on the basis of their relationship with faith and the possibility that they accept the event in which the sacred is manifested. Old Borgen, embittered by life, no longer believes in miracles; Peter feels he is the bearer of a chosen faith but is unable to forgive; Mikkel has a materialistic attitude; lastly, Johannes, who has gone insane, believes himself to be Christ. On the other

side of this gallery of male characters are those who "seem completely refractory to faith or those who have always had it. On the one hand, Inger and her daughter Maren, who have always believed in a God capable of intervening "here and now." On the other, the pastor and, in part, the doctor, officials of a religion and a science who would like to share the care of body and soul, but who know nothing of that 'life' that Inger invokes at the end of the film" (Rocca 2004, 494).

The possibility of resurrection, which causes scandal and disbelief, places the film in a temporal dimension free from the urgency of the present, influencing its slow and hieratic narrative rhythm (Tone 1978, 92–93), showing the protagonists as the last survivors within a world in which "only the dying person – or whoever lives dead among the living dead – can have faith in the ultimate hope: a miracle" (Aristarco 1955, 173). The ministers of worship, Christians today, believe that miracles belong to a past time and can no longer happen today. In contrast to the dominant thought, Johannes makes the power of the Word current when – healed from his conviction of being Jesus – he approaches the coffin of his sister-in-law and asks Christ for the word that gives life to the dead (see Azalbert 2017, 85).

Aristarco notes that it is "surprising that in an age like ours – which is largely summed up in the name of Einstein – Dreyer assumes, so to speak, attitudes contrary to science in order to believe in the miracles of religion instead" (1955, 173), sustaining that "the lugubrious, mournful tone of *Ordet* and its sepulchral characters perhaps mean that only survivors can still be interested in a certain problem, a certain mysticism; that only the dying – or whoever lives dead among the living dead – can have faith in the ultimate hope: a miracle" (1955, 173). But faith and hope in the event that undermines the natural order of events is shown with polemical tones by the director, for whom "only the pure, Johannes or the daughter of the deceased, can communicate – and directly, without intermediaries – with God. Dreyer confirms his nature as a Protestant, and at the same time accuses the Christians of the different churches of no longer believing in the religion they profess" (Aristarco 1955, 173).

In open controversy with Aristarco, Dreyer claims not to have "rejected modern science for the miracle of religion. On the contrary, Kaj Munk's work has acquired a new and richer meaning for me, because the paradoxical thoughts and ideas expressed in the drama have been proven by recent psychic research carried out by pioneers such as Khine, Ouspensky, Dunne, Aldous Huxley, etc., whose theories explained in the simplest way the seemingly inexplicable events of the drama and established a natural cohesion behind the supernatural facts found in the film" (Montanari 1958, 54–55).

Therefore, religion does not replace science but the latter is understood as the tool capable of accounting for dimensions that go beyond the three-dimensional world, allowing us to "learn more about all that is divine." In this regard, the director notes that "Kaj Munk had the presentiment when he wrote his work in 1925, arguing that John is closer to God than the Christians who surround him" (Rasmussen 1955, 48). This leads to a complex relationship between faith, innocence, and agnosticism (Solmi 1956, 70).

The problematic posed is read by Maurice Drouzy in an ambiguous way, which leaves transcendence aside to propose a sort of positivism, in that "for Dreyer a miracle is a psychic phenomenon, a kind of telepathy. If we knew how to stem and channel these still unknown mental forces, we could cause a resurrection. In the same way the madman is not a man who has lost his reason but is instead ahead of it, and his desire, having reached a certain degree of incandescence, could become reality" (1990, 238).

The inability to understand the possibility of a miracle in the absence of faith is what arouses doubt, which reflects the inability to believe that is inherent in the characters themselves in the film, except for Johannes (the madman, an instrument of faith [Aristarco 1955, 173]) and Inger (the body in which the active potentiality of faith is made manifest [Rollet 1998, 72]).

Made by "a profoundly, radically materialist filmmaker, whose work tirelessly questions the enigma of the incarnation" (Rollet 1998, 71), *Ordet* stages the human, carnal dimension of faith and its contemporary leaning towards imperceptible presences that are actualized in the reality of the signs (Ayfre 1971, 139; Bazin 1987, 38).

Barthélemy Amengual, in opposition to a critical tradition that identifies Dreyer as a filmmaker who stages the interiority of the human soul, emphasizes the radical materialism of the Danish filmmaker, indicating that in his films "the soul, the spirit, are present, palpable, flagrant as the presence of stones and bodies" (1997, 640). However, this materialism is activated through a process of stylization, in which the action is situated in a context of religious beliefs, abstracting those elements from it that, in everyday reality, could put it into question. From this point of view, the resurrection at the end of *Ordet* (that of the mother passing through that of the son, returned from death or madness) is possible only insofar as the word finds a body and the image a place of origin (Amengual 1997, 642).

There is a strong material dimension also for Ayfre: "they [Dreyer's films] exist only to reveal imperceptible presences beyond the limits of our everyday world.

But these presences must ultimately be as real as the signs that serve to evoke them. Hence the constant concern of the creator – and here it is necessary to give the word its strongest meaning – to accentuate the reality of the signs. We are always faced with real scenes, with naked faces, with objects of extreme density, with profoundly human attitudes" (Ayfre 1971, 139, translated by the author).

Ordet stages not only the re-generating dimension of the word, but also its destructive side, with the tailor's curse from which Inger's death seems to follow. "But the word, at least that of the madman, of the one who makes a mistake and to whom no one wants to listen except a child, also has the power of resurrection. Then the word can take on bodily shape: that of the mother" (Rollet 1998, 70).

Contrary to what Amengual said, for whom with *Ordet* Dreyer made the only one of his films that requires a believing spectator (although nothing excludes the possibility of a scientific explanation of the resurrection), Derobert argues that the director primarily targets non-believers, "appealing to their reason, serenely affirming the transcendent character of Inger's resurrection" (1988, 108).

Between Faith, Innocence, and Agnosticism

The miracle in this sense, against a blind conception of the existence of God, is an act of faith that certifies that existence; it is neither a question of feeling the presence of the divine nor of acting in the light of a revelation. Instead, the miracle is established within a rational cause–effect relationship, since only the presence of God is able to explain it and therefore to justify faith in the impossible (Derobert 1988, 108).

Vaughn argues that the Kierkegardian leap of faith is necessary, in the absurdity of faith, which is what Munk requested. Anyone who wants to draw the same conclusions for Dreyer must take the miracle as factual (Vaughan 1974, 162). Johannes's reawakening is functional to the narrative dimension and to the creation of a dimension in which the miracle takes place in all its disruptive flagrance. This is because man's insanity could have represented a further otherness, a sort of realistic confirmation of faculties that go beyond the normal, and therefore "the resurrection of Inger would consequently have been weakened by its incredible subversive effectiveness" (Guerrini 2004, 159).

A dualistic process takes place between reason and faith, between the categories of Good and Evil, in a non-Manichean opposition in which the presence of Evil is absolute, pervasive, all-encompassing. Ayfre notes that in Dreyer's cinema "the innocent will always be persecuted, but with his failure not everything is

finished. His death is a resurrection. […] We are […] far from an American-style happy ending, where victory is easy and takes place immediately. Instead, with Dreyer, the victory of evil is very real, heavy and cruel. Jesus dies, Joan is burned like the witch of *Dies Irae*, Inger really dies. The ultimate victory is that of faith and not that of knowledge. It addresses the invisible. It is a victory that is both miracle and mystery until the end" (1971, 139).

Johannes, a man among men, is the intermediary through which the possibility of the miraculous event is given. His actions, calm and measured, act in a direction of concreteness proper to the act of faith. As Derobert pointed out, "resurrection is not the fruit of an evanescent spiritualism, but of an active reflection. What matters is the *act* of faith" (1988, 108). Dreyer's film therefore departs from the temptation to stage a faith that is imbued only with a tension towards asceticism and annihilation in something superior (spiritualism) to instead account for a vitalistic and regenerating power, which is able to act and restore Life even after death.

A faith which, however, is not placed out of time and which must be acted out concretely, consciously, and if necessary, in opposition to those and what surrounds us. In fact, "the capacity of faith as a saving awareness of one's own existence is the first characteristic highlighted by Dreyer's protagonist" (Guerrini 2009, 309) considered to be crazy because he claims the possibility of the impossible, that is, that miracles can still be worked. He is the center of the construction of the film as a model of the possibility of faith and the miracle is the visible instrument through which to make this possibility evident and acceptable. Evidence that goes beyond rational understanding, where "the resurrection of Inger is not primarily for herself, contrary to that of the evangelical Lazarus […]. The miracle is instrumental to Johannes's affirmation as a model of faith in God: without condemning anyone he judges implacably but, at the same time, with his exemplary action, he helps the desire of a human being who's more human by making a child's will his own" (Guerrini 2004, 161–162).

It is no coincidence that Drouzy identifies the emergence, within the dualist–oppositional dimension typical of Dreyerian cinema, of the presence of a third pole, represented by Johannes and Maren, the madman and the young girl. Unlike the other characters, defined on the basis of their ideological positions and the role they play within society, these two represent the world of the excluded and the rejected. Seeing as "after Inger's death, no one, and especially not those who profess to be believers, took into consideration the possibility of a miracle, of the unexpected. And instead, it is precisely the impossible that happens – and through two characters from whom we did not expect anything" (Drouzy 1990, 238).

Instead, the pastor is in line with the official position of the Danish church, which considers a miracle to be an event operated by Christ alone and in fact, Jean Sémoulé points out that one of the macro-differences between the film and the theatrical text lies in the fact that in the latter "the pastor denies that there was a miracle and the doctor condemns the incompetence of those who verified the death" (2004, 30).

According to another position – which can be summarized as the "pragmatist doctrine of a miracle" – miracles are nothing more than ordinary facts to which a symbolic meaning is granted. In contrast to these positions which are part of Protestant theological thinking, for Catholicism miracles are based on the promise made by Jesus that they would be continued in his Church (Mark, XVI, 17). These are therefore extraordinary facts but, postulating a divine intervention, they are possible and real. In *Ordet* the miracle, understood as a paradoxical event of the order of time, is not conceptually defined with the intention of understanding and accepting it, but is "recounted and respected in its embarrassing contradiction" (Modica 2001, 10). In the rational world, a miracle is the representation beyond all logic, of the act of faith and the possibility of penetrating the daily life of the completely Other, misrepresented by Johannes's madness. As Guerrini noted, in Dreyer's cinema there is "a real 'ontology' of the act of faith. [...] In fact for Dreyer, Johannes does not present distractions or feelings of guilt, he is the interpreter of authentic faith seen according to its aspect of 'madness' in relation to the world of everyday existence and seen as the reality of a single existing that acts by realizing something impossible. His faith is so focused that even when Inger's first attempt at resurrection fails, he affirms his identity with the Son of God" (2009, 310).

For Aristarco, "Dreyer argues that only faith, those who truly have faith – here in particular religious, mystical – can pursue and reach a concrete end. The thematic constancy is the thematic axis of the film" (1987, 133).

There is a relationship between faith, innocence, and agnosticism. The figure of the doctor is interesting from this point of view – when the pastor wants to stop Johannes whom he considers to be mad – he intervenes to preserve the possibility of the miracle. Dreyer summarizes the moral problems of the unbeliever in this character, whose doubt in the expectation of the possibility of the miraculous event first becomes desire, then hope, and finally becomes a shared observation of what is considered impossible, a witness to the scandal of the act of faith and the constancy of an oppressive uncertainty. In fact, according to Tavilla, the film's ending connects to a dimension of existential possibility, expanding the boundaries of Dreyer's realism, fostering a distressing sense of bewilderment and doubt, in that

"no approach to death among the many suggested, none of the opposing concepts of man expressed, none of the existential alternatives present at the same time, persuades the viewer. After all, the miracle does not constitute a certainty, but *the beginning of uncertainty*. In the Western tradition, resurrection, more than any other event, represents the fulfillment of eschatological fullness" (2007, 129).

The ministers of worship, Christians today, believe that miracles belong to a past time and can no longer happen today. "But then why still believe if it is not possible to believe in miracles? What is the point of repeating the words of the Gospels if one cannot fully adhere to them and make them one's own? Johannes makes the divine word actual, freeing it and making its power effective" (Azalbert 2017, 85) and he does so when – having recovered from his conviction of being Jesus – he approaches the coffin of his sister-in-law and asks Christ for the word that gives life to the dead.

Ayfre speaks of the need for the invention of a style fully capable of bringing into being, between the play of presence and that of the absence of the representation of the transcendent (Ayfre 1962, 123), the possibility of making the sacred arise and become manifest Ayfre 1962, 123–124). If the latter is defined and finds space in the ambiguity of reality, the latter is the place where a defeat is embodied that becomes victory. Inger's death testifies to a defeat of life, which, through the miraculous event, changes into a victory which is that of "faith and not knowledge. It addresses the invisible. It is a victory that is both miracle and mystery until the end" (Ayfre 1971, 139).

Like Bresson, Dreyer tries to reach the sacred through a process of extreme stylization that "allows them to make the hidden mystery they contain appear to be apparent. But the almost liturgical purity of these films, which for them becomes access to transcendence, does not neglect the needs of the incarnation. Only, it is not the case to look for it, especially here, in a vulgar naturalism, in a search for psychological or social verisimilitude, but rather in the precise choice of detail, objects, accessories, gestures, and extremely concrete noises" (Ayfre 1962, 125).

Dreyer conducts the film directly towards the representation of the event, with a construction that rigorously tends towards it. The stylization process works on the dimension of an atmospheric realism that purifies the most marked features of the latter, as do the *kammerspiel* influences (Solmi 1956, 66), an austere, harsh and puritanical realism with a dry prosaic style (Sémoulé 1962, 146). The stylistic dimension of opposition between the fully materialistic dimension and the temptation of the transcendent is highlighted by Drouzy, when he argues that

"Dreyer strives to make us understand that it is an exclusively 'horizontal' drama. Everything takes place close to the ground. No opening to the sky. No vertical panning throughout the film." His purpose is to "create a prison atmosphere, suggesting characters who live under its yoke, as if crushed by their context of life – as well as a symbol of the inner slavery to which they have been reduced by dogma and sectarianism" (1990, 238–239).

The process of purification of the images, spaces, gestures and psychologies leads to that process of splitting in which time is suspended: the event of the resurrection, the potential that becomes real through faith. By preparing the spectator for the unthinkable, indeed insisting on the denial that a miraculous event can materialize, "Dreyer takes the spectator by the hand and disintegrates all our reticences, all our defenses one by one and ends up responding to our deepest desire, which is to witness the impossible" (Azalbert 2017, 86).

In its failure to adhere perfectly to the Schraderian formulation of the transcendental style, *Ordet* therefore presents itself as a contradictory and elusive object like the theme it stages. On the one hand, with an essential and measured style, sober and that little indulges in sophisticated virtuosities, Dreyer wants to show how cinema can approach intangible dimensions, evoking them and making them perceptible by the viewer. On the other hand, once the completely Other has been evoked, the film withdraws from it. This reticence then raises another question: regardless of the style adopted, is there a limit of representation that cannot be crossed? The richness of Dreyer's cinema lies precisely in this unsolved attempt to represent the unrepresentable, with the awareness that a limit can be reached but cannot be overcome. Cinema evokes, does not show. Style is everything that allows to help evoke and suggest what cannot be represented and therefore the shot – understood as the smallest unit of meaning – must be deprived of all that is spurious, of all that can distract. The Dreyerian style to suggest the possibility of the Other is to tend to an "ideally" empty shot, ready to be invaded by the completely Other that it suggests.

Ordet stages this tension, this desire to reach beyond the limit without ever succeeding and in this never resolved tension lies the charm of the question – is a miracle possible? – which it continually proposes without giving a solution that satisfies us completely if not in abandonment to the Faith.

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