The Word (*Ordet*, 1955)

Amanda Doxtater

dir. Carl Theodor Dreyer; prod. Tage Nielsen; screenplay Carl Theodor Dreyer; photography Henning Bendtsen; music Poul Schierbeck. 35 mm, black/white, 126 mins. Palladium, distrib. Film-Centralen-Palladium.

Courtesy of the Everett Collection

Ordet is one of the late major works by Danish director Carl Theodor Dreyer. Based on a 1925 play by the same name, written by Kaj Munk, *Ordet* tells the story of a prosperous farming family led by the curmudgeonly widower, Morten Borgen (played by Henrik Malberg). Borgen professes a life-affirming faith in the Christian God and a profound love for his three sons: Mikkel (played by Emil Hass Christensen), the eldest, married to Inger (played by Birgitte Federspiel), who is pregnant with the couple's third child; Johannes (played by Preben Lerdorff Rye), the middle son, a theology student who after an undisclosed trauma at school believes he is Jesus Christ resurrected; and Anders (played by Cay Kristiansen), the youngest. Anders falls in love with Anne (played by Gerda Nielsen), the daughter of Peder, the tailor (played by Ejner Federspiel), who believes in a more fundamentalist version of Christianity and forbids the marriage. As the two stubborn patriarchs, Morten and Peder, quarrel over the match, Inger undergoes a difficult birth and loses her child. Although she initially appeared to have survived, she also dies. *Ordet's* climactic resolution still moves audiences today. In an eight-minute-long sequence, Inger's corpse lies in an open casket when Inger's daughter, Maren, prompts Johannes (who at this point no longer believes himself to be Jesus) to ask God to bring her back from the dead. Miraculously, Inger awakens, stirs to life, and once again embraces her husband, converting Mikkel to her own loving faith and reconciling the two families.

Ordet was perhaps Dreyer's greatest critical and popular success, winning multiple awards on the international film festival circuit: including a Golden Lion at the Venice Film Festival, a Bodil Award for Best Danish Film (the Danish equivalent of an Os-

car), and a Golden Globe. Effectively, the film secured Dreyer's position as Denmark's most distinguished *auteur* and a filmmaker of a particularly »austere« form of art cinema (Neale). Even today *Ordet* regularly gets voted onto »best film« lists by cinephile journals like the BFI's *Sight and Sound*, alongside two of Dreyer's earlier features in his melodramatic repertoire, *La Passion de Jeanne d'Arc* (1929) and *Day of Wrath* (1943).

Various strands of critical acclaim for *Ordet* and its miracle combined to elevate it to the status of an art film. As Paul Schrader argues in his 1971 study, *Transcendental Style in Film: Ozu, Bresson, Dreyer*, this is the film in Dreyer's oeuvre that most intently employs »transcendental style,« thus confirming Dreyer as an »artist with spiritual intentions« (143). The film's formal innovations—extensive long takes and flowing, ethereal dolly shots; stylized acting and slow, deliberate pacing—further enhanced its status as a formalist, or modernist, work that foregrounds cinema as a medium, in experiments that draw out and make perceptible tensions between form and content, and narrative and non-narrative elements (Bordwell). C. Claire Thomsen has discussed Dreyer's use of long takes and the sensation of extended duration in *Ordet* in relation to slow cinema, while also showing Dreyer to be equally versatile at speed.

But Dreyer's austere provocations to formal and spiritual reflection are also passionate and emotional. *Ordet* agonizingly elicits our identification with Inger and those who grieve her: The film's miraculous reconciliation elicits tearful relief in the face of implausibility. The film demands again and again that the spectators contend, lovingly, with the very material corporeality of its filmed bodies. When Mikkel kneels beside Inger's open casket, sobbing, his father attempts to comfort him by saying, »Mikkel, her soul is with God. It's not here any longer. Surely, you see that?« To which Mikkel weeps in reply, »But her body. I loved her body, too.« Art cinema alone is not enough to account for the persistent, and undertheorized, melodramatic impulses in Dreyer's work, nor for the way in which formal estrangement and strong feeling coincide in the film.

Ordet is emblematic of what I call *art melodrama*, a film genre and critical category that is an iteration of the melodramatic mode inflected by art cinema. Art melodrama explicitly combines, on the one hand, melodrama's privileging of the expressive potential of the suffering human body, emotion, and spectacle, with, on the other hand, art cinema's claims to ambiguity, aesthetic distance, media consciousness, reflexivity, authorial subjectivity, and formal experimentation. As a composite, essentially hybrid form, art melodrama marries sensibilities commonly deemed antithetical to one another: popular and elite, mainstream and independent, obvious and ambiguous, feminine and masculine, passive and active, conservative and experimental. Art cinema alternately draws the spectator toward immersion in the fictional world, and more decisively estranges them from it than other forms of melodrama.

At times, art melodrama reworks recognizable tropes of popular melodrama for an art cinema context: for instance, heightening and dramatizing the interrelationship of expressivity and reflexivity more overtly than other iterations of the melodramatic mode, such as the domestic family melodrama or the action film. The hyper-idealized representation of motherhood in *Ordet*, which draws on elements of maternal melodrama and the woman's film, is a case in point. The very visibly pregnant Inger inhabits the farmhouse as goodness incarnate, a fantasy of maternal plentitude and aestheticized, instrumental suffering. Inger suffers and dies so that a community can be healed. But Dreyer also unsettles this disembodied allegory by drawing explicit attention to Inger's embodied, lived experience. This can be spectacular, as in the exqui-

site physical pain of a graphic childbirth sequence, or also plodding, as in the case of foregrounding the weight of quotidian domestic labor, care, and reconciliation. The slow pace of the film makes Inger's labor palpable: She fills pipes, makes endless cups of coffee, reminds slightly soured old men of the goodness of their sons, meets children as they return from school, and advocates for young lovers.

Similarly, *Ordet* reimagines elements of male melodrama, as theorized by Thomas Schatz and Tom Lutz—this time by rewriting gendered scripts about how male bodies are allowed to show emotion. In contrast to the emasculated father figures in postwar American cinema like Nicholas Ray's *Rebel Without a Cause* (1955), released the same year as *Ordet*, the stolid Borgen men are feminized to a degree. Their chins quiver as they cry and mourn, and they openly care for one another, thus nuancing the film's conventional depiction of patriarchy. Johannes also expands the film's representation of masculinity. His slow, stylized movements and speech mark him as quasi-hysterical, a quintessential manifestation of melodrama's aesthetics of embodiment (Brooks). Overwhelmed at the sight of Inger's corpse, he swoons. Typical of Dreyer's art melodrama, empathy for Johannes is inextricable from the reflection prompted by the relatively rare sight of a male body gone limp with emotion.

The resurrection sequence in which *Ordet* culminates is an art melodrama miracle *par excellence*. Art cinema's ambiguity and accentuated duration coincide with the pathos of melodramatic time. Fundamentally a nostalgic, conservative mode, melodrama often elicits pathos by exploiting a desire to return to an earlier moment of lost innocence. Symbolically, the miracle of Inger's resurrection achieves the gloriously impossible return to an undifferentiated maternal state. The funeral sequence itself operates according to the temporal logic of what Linda Williams calls a »paroxysm of pathos« (58) in her theorization of how American melodrama employs a dialectic of pathos and action for emotional effect. Melodrama produces climactic, tearful release by prolonging resolution—by, for instance, cutting to action sequences—and thereby temporarily denying the spectator the satisfaction of either a happy *just-in-time* rescue or the release of a *just-too-late* rescue, when tears flow in surrender to time's inevitable forward progression.

Art melodrama typically subordinates action to pathos, but *Ordet*'s miracle sequence is also a rescue sequence. Dreyer earlier established resurrection as a possibility through a conversation between Johannes and his niece, Maren (played by Ann Elisabeth Groth Hansen), about mothers in heaven. Consequently, when grief and lack of faith compel Mikkel to threaten to close the lid of Inger's coffin and commit her body to rot in the ground—before Johannes can resurrect her—the spectator becomes nervous. Art cinema's long takes and deliberate, lugubrious, and stylized delivery of lines and movement all extend and accentuate the paroxysm of pathos. Mikkel's desperate, final act is just barely deferred again and again, as various parties slowly enter and take their time paying their respects. When Johannes appears, at last, after having been lost for days, Maren implores her uncle to »Hurry!« and the *just-in-time* resurrection-rescue succeeds—and the stilled clock, placed conspicuously on the wall opposite Inger's casket, is again started up. *Ordet*'s miracle reveals melodrama's penchant for implausible endings and wish-fulfillment, coinciding with art cinema's ambiguous temporalities. We can think of this as a shared disregard for Hollywood's continuity editing and narratives propelled by psychological motives.

Throughout his career, Dreyer sought to raise film to the status of the other arts, and he viewed this as antithetical to making melodrama. Dreyer began his long career working at the Danish powerhouse pop-culture studio, Nordisk Films Kompagni, in the 1910s, during what has been called the Golden Age of Danish melodrama. When he left the studio, it was purportedly because Nordisk's profitable mass culture constricted his artistic freedom. Dreyer never openly embraced melodrama during his lifetime. The term held too great a stigma for him. Consequently, Dreyer's art melodrama is a product of continuing to experiment with melodramatic forms—which he was both repulsed by and attracted to—under the auspices of art cinema. More recent art melodrama *auteurs*, such as Lars von Trier, would come to embrace the genre more openly, and even ironically, as in the brutally sacrificial miracle of *Breaking the Waves* (1996), the first film in his Golden Heart trilogy (1996-2000).

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