



Ordet (The Word)

The Danish playwright and Lutheran country priest, Kaj Munk (1898–1944), whose play *Ordet* (1932) is the basis of Dreyer's astonishing 1955 film, once declared that the aim and object of all true art is to produce a 'shock in the soul'. Munk, a charismatic public figure, resisted the Nazi occupation of Denmark, urging defiance of the exorbitant demands of the State: 'By our death we shall conquer. We must obey God before man.' He was found in a ditch with three shots in the head near the German headquarters at Silkeborg on 5 January 1944. That is, he lived and died by the 'word' – the literal meaning of 'ordet' in Danish. Dreyer's film, made a decade after its author's shocking death, has a special place in many hearts because of the 'shock' it gives us. If you have not seen it you may wish to go through that extraordinary experience before you read on.

The film is set near Munk's parish of Vedersø in the rural community of West Jutland, dominated by religious divisions between the life-affirming 'Glad Christians' of Grundtvigism and the dour puritanical devotees of the 'Inner Mission' (both are found wanting). *Ordet's* theme is faith, its climax an apparent modern miracle – and the miracle of Dreyer's direction, his delicate control of every element, is that the sensitive spectator who submits to the experience is drawn to will and accept, this transcendence of the common fate. How far this mysterious work is specifically Christian is, in fact, an intriguing question: Dreyer insisted in 1956 that 'I have not rejected modern science for the miracle of religion', but the 'science' he uses to account for what takes place is 'recent psychic research', which for him 'in the simplest manner explained the seemingly inexplicable happenings of the play, and established a natural cohesion behind the supernatural occurrences that are found in the film.' At any rate, Dreyer is as passionately committed to life and love here as he was in his masterly early comedy *The Parson's Widow* (1920).

In the course of his duties as a dramatic critic, Dreyer first saw Munk's play 'Legend of Today', as *Ordet* was subtitled, at the Betty Nansen Theatre in Copenhagen in 1932. He appears to have known he wanted to film it from that moment. In his 1933 essay on 'The Real Talking Film', he offered the cinematic possibilities of the play's third act as an example of 'a certain rhythm-bound restlessness', reflected in the movements of actors and images: 'If *The Word* were to be filmed... the actors going to and from the sickroom would contribute to creating the two types of restlessness or excitement that condition the rhythm of the film to an essential degree.' In the 21 years before he fulfilled his ambition to film *The Word*, Dreyer directed only two feature-length films, *Day of Wrath* (1943) and the interesting but disowned *Two People* (1945), yet his passion for cinema – 'my only great passion' he called it in 1950 – was unabated.

Dreyer's adaptation of Munk is radical, and intriguing. He states in 'The Cinematization of *Ordet*' (1954) that plays work very differently from films. 'Situations and remarks that are effective from the stage often turn out to be deadly dangerous on film. A revaluation and simplification must take place.' Dreyer cuts great swathes out of Munk's text, and writes whole new scenes as well as drastically shortening others and moving elements around. 'The essential is all one needs', he told a *Cahiers du cinéma* interviewer in 1965.

Accordingly, the script is less structured like a 'well-made play' as in Munk's original. And it is toned down. Dreyer's pastor, doctor and Peter the tailor are

not as satirically presented as they are by Munk, whose play offers a debate about miracles between characters who hold a wide range of views from the materialistic to the piously hypocritical. Munk also leaves the more conventional, secular 'explanations' of the story's strange events open to discussion.

The play traces the madness of Johannes, in crudely Freudian terms, to the death of his fiancée, so that his return to sanity can follow from his reliving of that trauma, on seeing the dead Inger. Dreyer pointedly negates any love-plot. His pastor asks young Mikkel, 'Was it love?' – and is told with bitter sarcasm, 'No, Kierkegaard.' Most strikingly, given the film's climax, Munk's doctor complains of West Jutland's 'antiquated system' of issuing non-medical death certificates. After the final 'miracle', his materialism unaffected, he simply declares, 'These amateur death certificates must be done away with!'

Dreyer, in contrast, stripping away such explanations, digressions and exaggerations, creates a potent air of mystery around the main action. Whereas his *The Passion of Joan of Arc* (1928), as he wrote in an essay called 'Realised Mysticism' (1929), was 'a hymn to the triumph of the soul over life', *Ordet* might be seen as 'a hymn to the triumph of the soul over death'. It is also a triumph of style. For Dreyer in 'A Little on Film Style' (1943), style and soul are inextricable: 'The soul is shown through the style, which is the artist's way of giving expression to his perception of the material.' And superficially, the style of *Ordet* is strikingly slow. It only has 114 shots, averaging 65 seconds each, and correspondingly took a mere five days to edit, whereas *Day of Wrath* had 436, averaging 14.8 seconds, and took 12 (*Gertrud* was to take three). Rhythm is crucial to its effect – or rather, the complex combination of rhythms: 'The total rhythm of the film,' he says in 1954, 'is again an amalgamation of many different rhythms, from the gliding camera right to the way the lines are read.'

As the critic David Bordwell has shown, Dreyer's constantly tracking camera, using the crab dolly (whose squeak is sometimes audible, due to direct sound), hypnotically follows the characters with an arc-and-pan movement, keeping a steady distance from them – saving the conventional, dramatic track in and the first close-ups till the climax. It traces an intricate, steady path to the overwhelming, mysterious climax. As Dreyer expert Donald Skoller says, 'When Dreyer speaks of "a continuous, flowing, horizontally gliding movement", he is not referring to camera movement alone. His remarks refer to the effect of the whole *mise-en-scene*, the total compositional materialisation of what is envisioned, as it occurs on screen.' Dreyer declared in 1943, 'We can often read a person's whole character in a single expression, a wrinkling of the forehead or a blink of the eye,' and 'there is a certain accordance between a human being's walk and speech.'

The cumulative effect is stunning. Eric Rohmer's *Cahiers* review in 1956 testifies to the spell Dreyer's patiently-paced film weaves, to our deep engagement with the action: 'At the end of the most breathless suspense that any film has even proposed, the awaited miracle, wished for by even the most Voltairean spectator, takes place.' The tragic emotion has in fact, Rohmer continues, a classical dignity. 'The quality of anguish that *Ordet* makes us experience is certainly not in any way inferior to that which was created by Greek theatre.' As Dreyer's friend the critic Ebbe Neergaard wrote in 1955, 'You have this feeling of a force behind the camera that compels you to the bitter end, into the hearts and minds of the characters.'

Ordet is an ensemble piece: it is possible to read different characters as its centre or hero – old Borgen, young Mikkel and Inger all act as focal points. Most haunting of the candidates, perhaps, is the mad Johannes, whom François Truffaut described stimulatingly in 1969: 'The film's hero, Johannes,

is a visionary who thinks he is Jesus Christ; but only when he comes to recognise his delusion does he ‘receive’ spiritual power.’ It reinforces *Ordet’s* strange challenge to us, when we realise that it is a sane Johannes who seems to be given ‘the word that can bring the dead alive’ – through the faith of a child. The power of the cinematic illusion here, if we accept it, makes us believe the unbelievable, if only temporarily: it unhooks the world from its moorings and sends it spinning into a new life.

Philip Horne, essay from BFI *The Carl Theodor Dreyer Collection (Blu-ray Box Set)* booklet

ORDET (THE WORD)

Director: Carl Th. Dreyer
Production Company: Palladium (Copenhagen)
Producer: Erik Nielsen
Screenplay: Carl Th. Dreyer
Script Collaborators: Jesper Gottschalch, Karen Petersen
Based on the play Ordet by: Kaj Munk
Director of Photography: Henning Bendtsen
Camera Operators: John Carlsen, Erik Wittrup Willumsen
Editor: Edith Schlüssel
Art Director: Erik Aaes
Costumes: N. Sandt Jensen
Music: Poul Schierbeck
Music Director: Emil Reesen
Sound: Knud Kristensen
Sound Assistants: Henning Møller, Kai Larsen

Cast

Henrik Malberg (*Morten Borgen*)
Emil Hass Christensen (*Mikkel Borgen, Morten’s son*)
Preben Lerdorff Rye (*Johannes Borgen, Morten’s son*)
Cay Kristiansen (*Anders Borgen, Morten’s son*)
Birgitte Federspiel (*Inger Borgen, Mikkel’s wife*)
Ann Elisabeth (*Maren Borgen, Mikkel’s daughter*)
Susanne (*Lilleinger, Mikkel’s daughter*)
Ejner Federspiel (*Peter, the tailor*)
Sylvia Eckhausen (*Kristine, Peter’s wife*)
Gerda Nielsen (*Anne, Peter and Kristine’s daughter*)
Henry Skjær (*the doctor*)
Ove Rud (*the pastor*)
Hanne Aagesen (*Karen, the servant*)
Edith Thrane (*Mette Maren*)
Kirsten Andreasen

Denmark 1955
126 mins

SIGHT AND SOUND GREATEST FILMS OF ALL TIME 2022

Breathless (À bout de souffle)

Wed 1 Feb 14:30; Tue 14 Feb 20:50; Fri 24 Feb 18:20

Le Mépris (Contempt) Wed 1 Feb 18:10; Fri 17 Feb 20:50

Daughters of the Dust Wed 1 Feb 18:15; Thu 16 Feb 20:30

Sans Soleil Wed 1 Feb 20:40; Fri 17 Feb 18:00

M (Mörder unter uns)

Thu 2 Feb 14:30; Thu 16 Feb 20:40; Wed 22 Feb 18:00

Moonlight Thu 2 Feb 20:45; Tue 14 Feb 20:30

Blade Runner: The Final Cut

Fri 3 Feb 20:40; Sun 5 Feb 20:40; Sat 18 Feb 18:10

Battleship Potemkin (Bronenosets Potemkin)

Sat 4 Feb 12:40; Sat 18 Feb 18:30

La dolce vita Sat 4 Feb 14:15; Sat 25 Feb 19:30

Sherlock Jr. Sat 4 Feb 17:20; Sat 11 Feb 11:45

City Lights Sat 4 Feb 17:20; Sat 11 Feb 11:45

Goodfellas Sat 4 Feb 20:10; Wed 15 Feb 20:10

North by Northwest Sat 4 Feb 20:20; Thu 9 Feb 18:00

L’Atalante Sun 5 Feb 12:15; Tue 14 Feb 18:30; Wed 22 Feb 14:30

Rear Window Sun 5 Feb 12:20; Fri 24 Feb 20:45

Stalker Sun 5 Feb 17:40; Tue 7 Feb 20:10; Sun 26 Feb 14:00

Casablanca Mon 6 Feb 20:30; Sun 12 Feb 13:20

Psycho Mon 6 Feb 20:45; Mon 20 Feb 14:30; Thu 23 Feb 20:40

8 1/2 (Otto e mezzo)

Tue 7 Feb 18:00; Tue 21 Feb 14:30; Sun 26 Feb 12:50

The Battle of Algiers (La battaglia di Algeri)

Tue 7 Feb 18:10; Sat 25 Feb 11:50

News from Home Tue 7 Feb 20:45; Fri 17 Feb 18:20 (+ intro)

Rashomon (Rashômon) Tue 7 Feb 21:00; Thu 23 Feb 18:20

The Piano Wed 8 Feb 20:35; Tue 21 Feb 17:50

Wanda Thu 9 Feb 20:30 (+ intro by Jason Wood, BFI Executive Director of Public Programmes & Audiences); Sat 18 Feb 18:20

Fear Eats the Soul (Angst essen Seele auf)

Thu 9 Feb 20:55; Mon 27 Feb 18:00

Ordet (The Word) Fri 10 Feb 18:15; Sat 25 Feb 14:30

The 400 Blows (Les Quatre cents coups)

Fri 10 Feb 20:50; Sun 19 Feb 18:40

Bicycle Thieves (Ladri di biciclette)

Sat 11 Feb 11:50; Mon 20 Feb 20:55; Thu 23 Feb 14:30

Barry Lyndon Sat 11 Feb 19:20; Sat 25 Feb 15:30

Some Like It Hot Sun 12 Feb 13:30; Tue 14 Feb 18:10

The Third Man Sun 12 Feb 18:30; Tue 21 Feb 20:40

Killer of Sheep Sun 12 Feb 18:40 (+intro); Sat 18 Feb 20:40

Mirror (Zerkalo) Mon 13 Feb 20:50; Tue 28 Feb 20:50

Pather Panchali Sat 18 Feb 20:30; Tue 21 Feb 20:35; Sun 26 Feb 15:45

The Apartment Wed 22 Feb 20:35; Sun 26 Feb 12:40

SIGHT AND SOUND

Never miss an issue with **Sight and Sound**, the BFI’s internationally renowned film magazine. Subscribe from just £25*

* Price based on a 6-month print subscription (UK only).

More info: sightandsoundsubs.bfi.org.uk

SIGHT AND SOUND

BFI PLAYER

We are always open online on BFI Player where you can watch the best new, cult & classic cinema on demand. Showcasing hand-picked landmark British and independent titles, films are available to watch in three distinct ways: Subscription, Rentals & Free to view.

See something different today on player.bfi.org.uk

BECOME A BFI MEMBER

Enjoy a great package of film benefits including priority booking at BFI Southbank and BFI Festivals. Join today at bfi.org.uk/join

Programme notes and credits compiled by the BFI Documentation Unit

Notes may be edited or abridged. Questions/comments? Email prognotes@bfi.org.uk

The British Film Institute is a charity registered in England and Wales No. 287780