The Aesthetics Of Passion And Betrayal Essay, Research Paper

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In The Passion of Joan of Arc, Carl Theodor Dreyer uses the visuality of spatial relationships in each shot with the human face and its ability to convey unspoken emotion in his portrayal of the demise of Joan of Arc. Unlike most film, the message is almost entirely told by just the eyes and expressions of the actors. There is very little reliance upon props and background. The camera angles and close-up shooting accentuate emotions and reactions. The editing style is almost methodic in keeping the emotional pace; it is much like an argument, alternating images of Joan’s tenacity, and the judges’ contempt. The artistic elements of the film are found in the subtle elements of the setting in contrast with the story that is realized by looking into Joan’s eyes as she witnesses her lifelong beliefs condemned and destroyed by her martyrdom.

The stylistics of Dreyer’s vision in The Passion of Joan of Arc are unique in that they cannot be characterized by one particular conventional style or definition. Joan’s beliefs and character are often described as being transcendent. Transcendental style came about in the artistic world as a way to portray that which is considered “Holy” on a more elevated level. In many cases, especially in film, transcendental style can leave a film slow in pace, and create a lack of empathy for the characters and their plight. Dreyer therefore must not be concentrating on the transcendental style alone since the film is methodic in pace and the audience easily feels the grief Joan is experiencing.

There are at least 2 other major stylistic influences at work in The Passion of Joan of Arc. According to Paul Schrader, “Each of Dreyer’s individual film “styles” is, to be more accurate, a synthesis between three basic and opposing styles at work in his films. In order to define Dreyer’s aesthetic, one must confront to opposing artistic schools: the Kammerspiel and Expressionism.” The Kammerspiel or chamber-play style concentrates on just the basics, placing reality front and center. This is most evident in the concentration Dreyer places in the close ups of the faces. The expressionist style is less evident since the power of reality is what is most important. The expressionist elements are found mostly in the sets. German Expressionist master Hermann Warm who designed the wildly distorted sets of The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari designed the sets for The Passion of Joan of Arc. He deliberately created sets without sharp angles to make the backgrounds focus the emotion created by the actors instead of changing or contradicting it. The overall stylization of the film’s world can be taken to indicate the state of Joan’s consciousness with the flat spaces and shifting angles and framing.

The methodology used in shooting the film also holds metaphorical significance. There is a great feeling of uncertainty created by the lack of accurate depth. With all the shots so close up and backgrounds devoid of angles, color, and reference points, everything on the screen is placed in the same plane visually. The lighting is also deceptive since there are few definitive shadows cast to give definition to depth. The Passion of Joan of Arc is not without geometric motifs however. It is noticeably evident that even though there are few well defined lines in the sets, when lines do appear, they appear as a pair of lines intersecting in sharp angles. This is suggestive of the sharp difference in Joan’s viewpoint with that of her judges.

The eerily evil presence of the judges is due in part to the camera angles. The action of a scene is rarely centered and the action position jumps around from scene to scene. Mocking grins from the upper left corner and judges leaving Joan’s cell in the bottom left corner. Also, the low camera angles make the judges appear larger and more looming. They appear sheared off at the chest, making them seem to float and glide instead of walk.

Carl Theodor Dreyer’s editing style is also part of the artistic method that makes the emotional value of The Passion of Joan of Arc so powerful. The lack of continuity directly parallels the inner conflict and emotion Joan is feeling as the judges question and condemn her for going against the “Holy Mother Church.” Of the film’s over fifteen hundred cuts, less than thirty carry a figure or object over from one shot to another; and fewer than fifteen cuts constitute genuine matches on action. Since objects and characters cannot be used to link shots, there is only the neutral white void of the background that remains continuous. It is possible to consider the white background as a metaphor for God surrounding and watching the proceedings.

The actors in The Passion of Joan of Arc were unique in that they remained in the most natural physical state without makeup or masks. Expressionist film of the late 1920’s usually included actors that wore thick makeup or masks to obscure the individual identity of the character. Since obscurity was the furthest thing from his mind, Dreyer used a more “documentary” approach by using the actors’ own faces. To Dreyer, each face contained a wealth of detail: craggy ridges, puffy cheeks, bulbous eyebrows, sclerotic warts, and globes of sweat. It was the combination of the natural impurities and extreme close ups that produced so much emotion from single faces. The emotions in the faces of Joan and the Judges are also important in showing the active aggression and the passive fear in the trial. As the judges angrily ask question after question, demanding answers from Joan, the tension and fear they create reflects in Joan’s eyes. The reflection makes the reaction and fear genuine, and genuine fear encompasses even the audience.

As each scene of The Passion of Joan of Arc is played out, there is a reality of what really happened that is portrayed by a great actress who performed only in this film. Renee Falconetti’s performance is considered to be one of the finest and most important performances ever in film. The artistry also is the responsibility of the director’s vision, and in reading the original film screenplay, it is obvious that Dreyer was very specific and knowledgeable about the emotional mood he was trying to create. While watching the film, it is sometimes difficult to notice specific technical elements because the visual content is so encompassing. However, each scene can be viewed on its own in addition to its influence on the whole.

The opening of the film serves to set up the history behind the story. The original trial transcript was used in recreating the events for the film. Then, it begins; the opening scene is a perfect example of the use of irregular camera angles and the position of objects in the shot. The camera pans across the rear of a large room. The view is odd from the start since the backs of the judge’s heads are all that is seen. Across the room there are guards, but the center of the shot seems placed on their torsos. Those same guards are later viewed by only their helmets and spears as they leave the room. Our first view of Joan is from above, her figure is placed only in the bottom third of the shot. She appears very small an oppressed. The judges are looming over her from their platform. Joan’s face remains static and full of emotion from every angle.

Once Joan is condemned to prison, the action goes in two directions. Shots of Joan interacting with a cross created by the light of her window in her cell are inter-cut with shots of the judges plotting to deceive her. The same cross is also used as a sign of the truth when Loiseleur enters the cell to appear to be her confidant. His shadow completely covers the cross as he presents Joan with the false letter from the king. This is one of the few moments where the set becomes an active part of the film.

Another important scene is in the torture chamber where the fast and erratic cutting style is most prevalent in order to create tension. It is here where Joan is offered the opportunity to sign the written confession for the first time. The shots begin to happen quickly as Joan refuses to sign and the judges try to convince her. The camera then pans around the room to view the horrible devices and forms of torture at the judge’s disposal to make her confess. The shots are rapidly alternated from the torture devices, to Joan, and to the judges. The scene rapidly approaches a climax and it so overwhelms Joan that she faints. Shortly afterwards, she is returned to her cell where her caretakers are told that under no circumstances should she be allowed to die a natural death. The words are few, but are almost as powerful as the images in demonstrating the amount of contempt Joan had to face.

The power and realism of Falconetti’s performance is evident as she is placed in front of a crowd to abjure as a sinner and submit to the judge’s wishes. She appears exhausted and unsure of what is real anymore. Her face shows a lost battle as her hand is guided to sign the confession. She realizes she cannot win no matter how true she is to herself. To watch Falconetti be carried to sign away everything she has believed in is to feel the oppression Joan felt in her lost battle for truth. It is later that she realizes she has betrayed herself – a sin much greater than the betrayal of the “Holy Mother Church.” It is at this point the consignment in her eyes is read as acceptance of her martyrdom and at the same time anticipation of the freedom it will bring to her.

As Joan is prepared for death in her final hours, shots of the gathering crowds are placed between the shots of Joan in an effort to show that she is not truly alone in her beliefs. She will not die without leaving an influence. The shots of the crowd are unique because they are viewed running upside-down into the square from high above on an arch. This view sets up the futility the people will face as Joan as burned as they fight back saying “You have killed a saint!”

Whether or not something is considered art is highly dependant upon the point of view of the observer. Art can be defined as the use of skill and creativity to produce aesthetic works. Carl Theodor Dreyer was not conventional by any means in creating The Passion of Joan of Arc. He melded transcendental and expressionist styles, as well as mise en scene elements to create a film that not only tells a story, but also engenders emotional involvement in the viewer. His technical methods were also different with an erratic editing style to generate tension and the anomalous placement of the characters and objects in the shot. He also defied the conventions of the time by using actors with natural faces unchanged by makeup, and extreme close-up shots for a realistic feeling of the power in the portrayal. Art often comes from a looking at things in a different way or from a different angle. Dreyer did exactly this in his portrayal of the trial of Joan of Arc.

For me The Passion of Joan of Arc was artistic because it was powerful emotionally, and accurate in its distinctive approach to the story of a saint. The oppression displayed by the judges made anger an easy emotion to feel. The emotions can also encompass the ideals the judges represent. I found it easy to feel anger towards religion as a whole, but it also made me think about Joan’s plight and what might have been done to accept her. In my opinion that is what art does best; it makes you think about your own ideals and how your emotions affect your view of the world around you.

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