

Book review: *Visions and Victims. Art Melodrama in the Films of Carl Th. Dreyer*

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AMANDA DOXTATER: *Visions and Victims. Art Melodrama in the Films of Carl Th. Dreyer.* The University of Wisconsin Press. 2024. Pp. 236. ISBN: 978-0-299-34750-5.

It has been a real pleasure to dive into Amanda Doxtater's book on Carl Th. Dreyer's films and their relation to his manuscripts for Nordisk Film and other primary sources. The purpose of working with The Dreyer Collection at the Danish Film Institute (DFI) in Copenhagen was to pinpoint the often-neglected melodramatic traits in Dreyer's oeuvre. Throughout the book Doxtater gives substantial evidence of this, while arguing for a new film genre or category named 'art melodrama' to cover "that space of distance and intimacy within art cinema's larger impurities – the space in which cerebral pleasures and perplexity intertwine with a broad spectrum of bodily sensations, from melancholy, delight, fear, anger, and unease to overwhelming, lingering feelings of dread and pathos." (p. 6)

To cover this broad definition, she references Barbara Klinger's work on Jane Campion's *The Piano* (1993) and John David Rhodes' work on a couple of so-called European art cinema directors (Bergman, Akerman, Pasolini) respectively. It is furthermore her aim to bring 'art melodrama' to the fore across "institutional histories, conceptualizations of cinema spectatorship, questions about national versus international film cultures" (op. cit.). This is already very complex. The book's point of view is clearly informed by dominant narratives of melodrama fabricated in Hollywood, while most of the directors mentioned apart from German-born Douglas Sirk belong to the Scandinavian so-called 'art-house' cinema. Doxtater agrees with John Mercer and Martin Shingler's opinion, that Bergman's films from the 1960s and 70s, and Lars von Trier's works from the 90s and onwards represent a "scholarly frontier" regarding a new sensibility in the filmic melodrama (p. 7). In line with these later works it is Doxtater's approach to Dreyer that his films belong to 'art melodrama' despite his pronounced dislike of the genre. Apart from the well-known interpretations of melodrama by Peter Brooks and Linda Williams, Doxtater's broad approach is an open invitation to present-day film scholars, who might be more inclined towards queer studies, camp, disability studies, and questions of race, feminism and vulnerability.

The book proceeds with meticulous co-readings of Dreyer's manuscripts (to Nordisk Film in the company's heyday at the beginning of the twentieth century) and the major independent films of his: *The Passion of Joan of Arc* (1928), *Vampyr* (1932), *Day of Wrath* (1943), *Ordet* (1955),

Gertrud (1964). She notices how the *variété*-tradition (performing the-play-within-the play) with alternate viewing positions for the spectator enhances the “transmission of affect” in *The Passion of Joan of Arc* just as in his film *Michael* (1924). As a Dane teaching film with a special interest in both melodrama and Lars von Trier’s films, this is a fascinating finding. But even though the word ‘affect’ is mentioned several times in the text – also (as mentioned above) as a reason for widening the genre of melodrama towards ‘realism’ in becoming an ‘artistic frontier’– no definition of the word is found. Instead, Doxtater uses compounds like “‘Authentic’ Melodrama” about *The Passion of Joan of Arc*, stating that ‘Dreyer uses the body to represent the soul and express feeling’ (p. 63). This statement could just as well pertain to a reading of affect throughout the film, if emphasis was put on the fact that the court record from the historical inquiry was followed, rather than the choice to emphasise solely costume in opposition to nakedness in the priest’s interrogation of her. The script was simply followed, and in taking this action Dreyer succeeds in making a contemporary audience wonder about the strange questions, bearing witness to the religious ignorance of the priests.

The nakedness is certainly explicit in Falconetti’s non-existent make-up and the shaving of her hair in a close-up scene. This scene is dealt with in Doxtater’s chapter, but not as part of an aesthetics aimed at affect. Dreyer’s preference for a two-dimensional visual framing and close-ups points to a haptic visuality that has been elaborated by Laura U. Marks (in relation to documentary film and new media) and me (in relation to both Dreyer’s and Lars von Trier’s films). Along with the camera’s dwelling on the smoke rather than Joan’s naked but non-visual body shrouded in fog in the film’s ending, the above examples clearly demonstrate a haptic style aiming at affect-reactions in the audience. So, what I miss in Doxtater’s otherwise clever reading of melodramatic traits is Dreyer’s obvious experiments with the potential of the camera to register haptic forms of realism. The nakedness of a face and its pores in close-up was not accessible to theatrical melodrama, and neither was it used in filmic melodrama. To my mind, *The Passion of Joan of Arc* is one of the most exemplary haptic films ever made due to putting emphasis on the filmic materiality and its ability to document authenticity beyond genre – even though genre traits are also used. In highlighting haptic images Dreyer directly inspired Bergman’s experiments with the haptic image in *Persona* (1966) as well as Lars von Trier’s attempt to turn melodrama inside out in *Breaking the waves* (1996). Doxtater reads both films as ‘art melodrama’ paying less attention to the obvious camera work flooding the drama. So, my question would be whether

an emphasis on haptic visuality and a deeper concern for how Dreyer makes affective relations perceptible could have made Doxtater's reading stronger.

In her chapter on *Vampyr*, Doxtater mentions Dreyer's experimentation with film styles, while putting more emphasis on his work with how victims could be depicted including the queer or non-normative body in relation to horror. The chapter gives numerous examples of both camera movements and how bodies are shaded, made transparent and grotesque, concluding that "Dreyer never abandons corporeal spectacle for psychological interiority." (p. 89). Again, Doxtater shows signs of interest in readings of affect, but she prefers to integrate those traits into 'art melodrama', stating that it is her hope it "might also be capable of employing corporeal spectacle in ways that ultimately repulse its entanglement with ageist, ableist, gendered logics". (p. 92). However, she doesn't deal with one of the most striking scenes in *Vampyr*, where Gray's dead body stares out from a window [sic!] in his coffin, which to me is a clear metaphor for the ability of the (dead) camera eye to see even more. In my view Dreyer is far from censorious towards nonnormative bodies; he shows in *Vampyr* how the bodiless can transform haptic shadows to alternate visions of insight, that cannot be aligned with oppositional structures altogether.

Doxtater's in-depth reading of *Day of Wrath* in relation to Dreyer's plot in the manuscript to "Kniplinger" is both informative and consistent. *Day of Wrath* is surely a melodramatic film, and clearly a great example of maternal melodrama with a twist. Doxtater argues that it is the very physical shots of Herlofs-Marthe's back and her scream that generates a new expression, labelled (again) 'art melodrama'. Her argument is here sustained by Christine Gledhill's idea of the melodrama enabling a 'third way' between realism and modernism "simultaneously depicting what is and what is not" (p. 117). Moreover, she comments on Dreyer's ability to demonstrate "telepathic powers of transmission" (p. 118) in the figure of Anne – powers that are transmitted directly to the spectator. While this might suggest a similarity with Lars von Trier's later use of hypnosis in his *Europe Trilogy* to directly affect his audience, Doxtater puts emphasis on the reiteration and resurrection that characterise the genre of melodrama.

Likewise, it is the resurrection of Inger in her reading of *Ordet* that interests Doxtater along with a specific emphasis on the figure of Johannes, who almost becomes a positive incarnation of queerness and inspires to this labelling: "Dreyer's art melodrama explored bodies in extremis – not only dead-but-not-dead and resurrected but also bodies experiencing ecstatic, aesthetic pain of labor as well as hypnosis and hysteria." (p. 123). She rightly notices that while the classical temporality of melodramatic narration is 'too late' according to Linda Williams, Dreyer succeeds in transforming this

mode to 'just in time' due to the miraculous resurrection of Inger. While agreeing that this "reaffirms corporality and unites competing temporalities of past and present" (p. 124), I would put more emphasis upon Dreyer's tribute to the technical feature of the camera to play backwards. With this focus, Inger's kiss-becoming-a-bite as she wakes up to the desires of life could rather than "one of the most impassioned reunions ever to be captured on film" (p. 137) be seen as a new affective form of realism in which the technical side of the image is embedded.

The reservations stated above regarding the project of framing a new 'art melodrama' rest partly on the impression given throughout the book that the definition becomes very broad and diffuse; partly on wondering why the observations recorded should not rather point towards another genre of affect or new realism than 'art melodrama' – given the development in recent years. Doxtater's aim to invite new film scholars into the fascinating films of Dreyer is admirable. Her detailed readings of how his former work on manuscripts from Nordisk Film has impacted his own film oeuvre is impressive. Altogether the book is a great manifestation of a scholarly project providing new material for further study, and I certainly recommend the book to everyone interested in film studies.