

Friday Spotlight: The Passion of Joan of Arc

Carl Dreyer's 1928 masterpiece "The Passion of Joan of Arc" deserves special attention, for it is one of the first true "art" films, bringing prestige and credence to that title. It put Dreyer at the forefront of not only Danish and French cinema, but World cinema as a whole, cementing his legacy before sound became popular in film. The Passion of Joan of Arc endured a passion of its own after the first edited version was destroyed in a fire. In an unlikely and almost humorously morbid turn of events, the second edited version was also destroyed by fire and it was out of the third-string, originally discarded footage that Dreyer crafted his uncompromising masterwork. Now, to further add to the legend of this film, the third and final version was believed to be lost until it was discovered inside a closet in a Norwegian mental hospital in 1981. Because of this miraculous find, the film is now available on Criterion Collection, remastered with the options of French or English subtitles and accompanied by Richard Einhorn's staggering musical magnum opus "Voices of Light." Everything about this film is light-years ahead of its time; the camerawork, the set design and the unprecedented absence of makeup on the actor's faces, which was extremely uncommon in the silent film era. The dialogue was kept as accurate as possible from the original transcriptions taken directly from the real trial of Joan of Arc and this dedication to the film's subject matter and the utter originality of its execution has made The Passion of Joan of Arc one of the most enduring films from World cinema.

Maria Falconetti's performance as the frightened and emotional Joan of Arc burns itself into the viewer's mind, despite her voice never being heard. Her eyes seem to be constantly flooded with tears as she answers questions about her beliefs and her claims that God has spoken to her on behalf of France. Throughout the one-hundred years or so of cinema, few performances have ever captured raw emotion as perfectly as Falconetti in The Passion of Joan of Arc and for her astounding work, her performance has been called one of the best ever committed to film. The Passion of Joan of Arc stands among Dreyer's greatest works, perhaps even earning the title of his most important contribution to film. It is much more than a movie, it is almost a historical document, a thumbprint on the vast window of filmmaking, but above all, it is an experience worthy of the highest caliber of art.