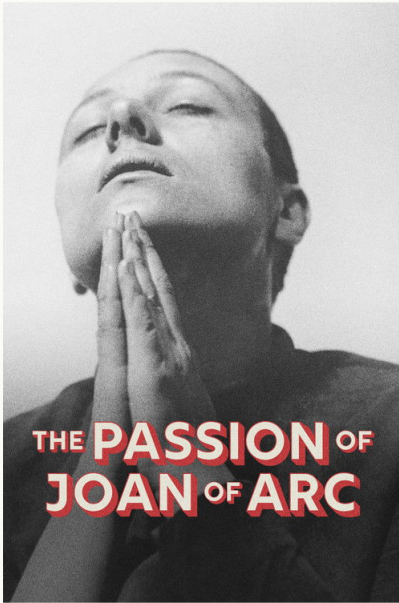




DRAMA · HISTORY

The Passion of Joan of Arc

1928 · Directed by Carl T. Dreyer

Silent Cinema

Art Cinema

Auteur Cinema

Rouen, 1431. A young peasant woman who says she hears divine voices is questioned by a panel of churchmen determined to make her contradict herself. Dreyer builds the whole film around the faces in that room and the pressure between them.

DIRECTOR	Carl T. Dreyer
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YEAR	1928
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RUNTIME	1h 21m (81 min)
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COUNTRY	France
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GENRES	Drama, History
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CAST	Maria Falconetti, Eugène Silvain, André Berley, Maurice Schutz, Antonin Artaud
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IMDB	8.1 / 10 (67,728 votes)
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ROTTEN TOMATOES	98% (critics)
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METACRITIC	98 / 100
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TMDB SCORE	8.0 / 10 (1,136 votes)
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WHERE TO WATCH	Free: Search YouTube (restored / 4K)
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Free: [Search YouTube \(all versions\)](#)Free: [Search Internet Archive](#)

Stream (US): HBO Max Amazon Channel, FlixFling, HBO Max, France Channel Amazon Channel

Rent: Amazon Video, Apple TV Store, Fandango At Home, FlixFling

Buy: Amazon Video, Apple TV Store, Fandango At Home, FlixFling

Part one is spoiler-free. Part two, "After watching", reveals the story, scenes and ending.

Before watching

Spoiler-free

WHY WATCH THIS?

1 The silent era's most famous act of screen acting

Maria Falconetti's performance, held in extreme close-up for much of the film, is the one most often cited when people ask what a face alone can do in cinema.

2 A landmark of Carl Dreyer's art and of late silent cinema

Made at the very end of the silent period, it is Dreyer's best-known early work and one of the boldest experiments in how a film can be shot, cut and staged.

3 History told as an ordeal, not a pageant

Drawn from the actual trial records, it skips battles and spectacle and stays in one room of judges and questions, which makes the story feel immediate and personal.

WHY IT MATTERS IN CINEMA HISTORY

A defining film of the late silent era and a touchstone for art cinema, it showed that close-up, framing and performance could carry a story without the usual machinery of period spectacle.

WATCH WITH INTENTION

YOUR LENS

Treat the faces as the landscape: watch how each close-up shifts power between the accused and the men who question her.

THREE THINGS TO NOTICE

- The backgrounds: walls are pale and bare, and the sets give almost no sense of where one room ends and the next begins.
- Camera angles: figures are often shot from sharply below or above, and people seem to loom over one another, which sets up who holds power in each exchange.
- Skin and texture: with so little makeup, you can see pores, tears and sweat, and the judges' faces are given as much attention as hers.

ONE QUESTION TO CARRY WITH YOU

When a film gives up scenery and spectacle and keeps only faces, what can it show that a wider shot never could?

CINEMA AT THE TIME

- **Technology:** Sound was arriving: The Jazz Singer appeared in 1927. Silent film was reaching peak visual refinement just as the industry was about to abandon it.
- **Industry:** Dreyer, a Dane, was invited to France by the Société Générale des Films. The production built a large, costly set and gave him unusual freedom and time.
- **Dominant styles:** German Expressionist design, Soviet montage and Hollywood continuity editing were the main models. Historical films usually meant crowds, costumes and large-scale spectacle.
- **Director's moment:** After Master of the House (1925), a domestic chamber drama, Dreyer applied the same close attention to faces and spaces to a much larger historical subject.

WHERE IT CAME FROM

TRADITION

Religious painting and devotional imagery

Dreyer's frontal faces, stark compositions and attention to expression echo devotional painting, which asks the viewer to look at a face for a long time.



FILM

Master of the House (1925)

Dreyer's earlier chamber drama already used close observation of faces and enclosed spaces, a method he scaled up for this film.



MOVEMENT

German Expressionism

The stark, non-realistic set design, with Hermann Warm among its creators, draws on Expressionist ideas of space reflecting inner states.



THIS FILM

The Passion of Joan of Arc (1928)

NEW AT THE TIME *It strips a historical subject of spectacle and builds it almost entirely from faces, using bare backgrounds, unusual angles and unbroken scrutiny of an actor's expression.*

SOCIAL CONTEXT

A Danish director's film made in late-1920s France, when Joan of Arc had recently been canonized and was a potent national and religious symbol.

- **Country and moment:** France in the 1920s was recovering from the First World War's losses. Joan of Arc, canonized in 1920, was embraced as a symbol of national unity and Catholic faith, making her a charged subject.
- **Politics and religion:** Joan's story touched sensitive ground in France, where Church and state had been formally separated in 1905. The film drew on the surviving trial records and faced scrutiny from church and state censors, who demanded changes.
- **The filmmaker's situation:** Carl Dreyer was a Danish outsider, a Protestant by background, invited to make a film in France. He had struggled to finance projects in Denmark and Germany, and the Société générale des films backed this production.
- **Society and audience:** Audiences of the time knew Joan as a patriotic heroine. The film instead stresses her ordeal as a young woman facing institutional power. Its reception was mixed at first, and it was cut and reedited after censorship disputes.

WHAT TO EXPECT

- **Pace:** Slow, intense and concentrated. It is short at roughly 81 minutes, but it asks for sustained attention, and the drama sits in interrogation rather than action.
- **Style:** Extreme close-ups, tilted angles, bare white sets and a restless, gliding camera. Unconventional editing sometimes disregards the continuity rules you may be used to.
- **Performance:** Large, direct emotion played largely in the face, without theatrical gestures. It feels closer to modern screen acting than much silent film.
- **Format:** Silent, black and white, roughly 1.33:1, with intertitles taken from the trial record. Music depends on the version you watch.
- **Versions:** The original negative was lost, and for decades only altered prints circulated. Modern restorations use a copy found in 1981, and their running speed and scores differ.

WATCH WITH KIDS?

12+ SUGGESTED AGE

German and French ratings are both 12 and the US has none, so 12 fits: the content is intense and emotional rather than graphic, and the silent format suits older children.

Official ratings: US NR · Germany 12 · France 12

- **Good for:** Older children and teens curious about history, faith or film craft may be absorbed by the extraordinary close-up faces, the powerful central performance and the way a story can be told without sound.
- **May unsettle, intensity:** Relentless emotional pressure and distress throughout, with a heavy, sombre mood and almost no lighter moments.
- **May unsettle, violence:** Includes threats and some harsh physical treatment, plus a disturbing climax. Little is graphic by modern standards, but it is upsetting.
- **May unsettle, mature themes:** Religious persecution, abuse of power and the pressure placed on a young person standing by her beliefs.
- **May unsettle, pace:** Silent, black-and-white and slow, built mostly from close-ups and intertitles. Younger children may struggle to stay engaged.
- **Explain first:** It is a silent film: dialogue appears as written title cards, so readers need to keep up, or you may need to read them aloud.
- **Explain first:** The story is based on a real 15th-century trial, where church officials judged a young woman's religious claims during a time of war.
- **Explain first:** The acting is deliberately intense and theatrical, and the camera stays close to faces. This is a style choice, not a mistake.

Talk about it after: *>How did the film make you feel what the characters were feeling without using sound or spoken words? Which faces or moments stayed with you?*

Cinespective's own guidance, a draft. Check it against the official ratings and your own judgement.

After watching

CONTAINS SPOILERS

THE FILM, UNPACKED

CENTRAL IDEA

The film can be read as a study of conviction under pressure: a single person's inner certainty set against an institution that holds every outward advantage, with the human face as the place where that struggle becomes visible.

THEMES

- **Faith against institution:** The judges represent the Church as an organisation, Joan a private, unmediated belief. The film keeps asking who actually speaks for God.
- **Power and humiliation:** The questioning is a form of psychological and physical pressure, with mockery, deception and threat used to wear down one prisoner.
- **The body as evidence:** Tears, trembling and exhaustion are treated as testimony. What Joan says matters, but what her face reveals matters equally.
- **Spectacle versus sincerity:** The crowd and the soldiers treat events as entertainment or as politics, while the film insists on the individual's experience.

Key scenes

The opening interrogation

It sets the film's method at once: question and answer cut as a duel of close-ups, with the judges' faces seen as clearly as Joan's and no establishing shot to orient us.

The false friend and the forged letter

It shows how pressure can arrive as kindness. The film's fascination with faces here turns to the question of how deception looks, and how hard it is to read.

The signing and the instruments of torture

Dreyer builds fear through spatial disorientation and rapid cutting, so the threat feels psychological as much as physical, and Falconetti's face carries the decision.

The final scenes in the square

The film widens to crowds, soldiers and movement after its long confinement. The release of that restraint is the film's greatest formal gamble, and it changes how the whole film feels.

Filmmaking

- **Performance:** Falconetti, a stage actress, worked without makeup under Dreyer's close direction. Her performance is built from small, exposed shifts of expression rather than gesture, and it became the film's centre.
- **Cinematography:** Rudolph Maté's camerawork favours extreme close-ups, steep low and high angles, and slow tracking movements. Faces fill the frame, and the camera often seems to circle or loom over them.
- **Design:** A huge purpose-built set, with pale walls and architecture that resists orientation, gives the film a stark, abstract feel. Hermann Warm, the designer behind *Caligari*, worked on it.
- **Editing:** Cuts often ignore the usual rules of eyelines and screen direction. The effect is of disorientation and pressure, making the viewer feel Joan's lack of footing.
- **Writing:** The dialogue and intertitles draw on the real trial record, adapted by Dreyer with Joseph Delteil. That gives the questions a documentary bluntness that adds to the film's authority.

THE FULL STORY

The full plot, including the ending.

Rouen, 1431. Joan of Arc, a young woman who led French troops, is held by the English and tried for heresy by a court of French churchmen. They question her about the voices she claims guide her, hoping to trap her into a statement that condemns her.

The trial is a long ordeal of interrogation. The judges mock, bully and deceive her, even sending a seemingly sympathetic priest with a forged letter supposedly from the king. Joan answers with simple, steady conviction, though she is weakened and frightened.

When the judges threaten her with torture, she signs a recantation and is sentenced to life in prison instead of death. Her head is shaved, and she grieves over what she has done. She then withdraws her confession and declares her voices true, knowing this will condemn her.

She receives communion and is led to the market square at Rouen, where she is burned at the stake. As the crowd watches, pity turns to anger, and the onlookers rise against the soldiers. The film ends on the smoke and the sense that her death has made her a martyr.

BEHIND THE FILM

- **Faces without makeup:** Dreyer is said to have banned makeup, so the actors' faces appear unadorned. Combined with the close-ups, this gives the film an unusual rawness, and the actors seem exposed rather than costumed.
- **A stage actress's only film:** Maria Falconetti was known mainly for comedies on the Paris stage. This was her one major screen role of this kind, and the performance has defined her reputation ever since.
- **The set Dreyer built:** The production constructed a large set of the Rouen castle and its surroundings, with the buildings made to feel flat and abstract. Much of the film's look comes from that design rather than from realistic period detail.

- **Lost and found:** The original negative was destroyed in a fire, and Dreyer reassembled a version from alternate takes. That one was also lost, and for decades only altered prints survived, until a copy of the original turned up in 1981 in an Oslo institution.
- **Real words, real trial:** The questions and answers come from the surviving trial records, which Dreyer and his co-writer adapted. That grounding in documents shaped the film's austere, almost forensic quality.
- **Myth:** The whole film is shot in close-up. **Reality:** Close-ups dominate, but the film also uses full shots, moving camera and crowd scenes, especially toward the end. The contrast between them is part of its effect.
- **Myth:** Dreyer invented the dialogue to dramatise Joan's trial. **Reality:** The film's words are drawn from the actual trial records, adapted and condensed. Dreyer's invention lies in the staging, framing and editing rather than in the content of the questions.

LEGACY AND CONNECTIONS

Its place in the lineage before → after

TRADITION

Religious painting and devotional imagery

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FILM

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THIS FILM

The Passion of Joan of Arc (1928)



FILMMAKER

Ingmar Bergman

Bergman's long, searching close-ups of faces in spiritual crisis, in *The Seventh Seal* and *Persona*, owe a clear debt to Dreyer.



FILM

Vivre sa vie (1962)

Godard has his heroine watch Falconetti's face on screen, a tribute that shows how the film had become a symbol of cinema's emotional power.



FILM

The Trial of Joan of Arc (1962)

Robert Bresson built a very different film from the same trial records, in a cooler and more restrained style.

Reception and reputation

Critics at release admired its boldness and Falconetti's performance, though audiences were less certain and the film was not a commercial success. Censors and Church authorities objected to parts, and the film was cut in several countries. Its original form was soon lost to fire and alteration.

Its reputation grew as altered prints gave way to the rediscovered original. It is now regarded as one of the greatest silent films, and Falconetti's face is among the best-known images in cinema. It is often taught as a model of cinema's power to show interior experience.

Cultural impact beyond cinema

- **Falconetti's face:** Maria Falconetti's tear-streaked, cropped-hair image became shorthand for martyrdom and raw suffering. She is remembered almost entirely for this one role, which gave her a near-legendary status beyond the film world.
- **Voices of Light:** Richard Einhorn's oratorio *Voices of Light* (1994) was written as a score for the film. It is often performed live alongside screenings, sometimes in churches and concert halls, and has become the film's best-known modern accompaniment.
- **The recovered print:** The story of its rediscovery is part of its mystique. In 1981 a copy of Dreyer's original version turned up in an Oslo psychiatric institution. Its return as a lost work recovered has made it a favourite for restorations and revival screenings.
- **Joan on screen:** Made not long after Joan of Arc's 1920 canonisation, it drew on records of her real trial. It remains a common starting point in classrooms and retrospectives for the silent era and for screen portrayals of Joan.

Its lasting influence

Its sustained close-ups and bare, abstract staging shaped later filmmakers of spiritual and psychological drama, from Bergman to Bresson, and Godard quoted it in *Vivre sa vie*. It remains the standard reference for how a face alone can carry a film.

WHAT NEXT?

CONTINUE THE DIRECTOR

Vampyr (1932) COMING SOON

Dreyer's first sound-era film trades history for dreamlike horror, using fog, shadows and drifting camerawork to make an unsettling atmosphere.

EXPLORE THE ERA OR MOVEMENT

Sunrise (1927)

Another late silent masterpiece, it shows what the art form could do just before sound. It uses a moving camera and expressive design rather than close-ups.

COMPARE ANOTHER APPROACH

Battleship Potemkin (1925)

Eisenstein used editing, crowds and typed faces to move an audience. Compared with Dreyer's single, intimate face, it shows two very different silent-era methods.

SEE ITS INFLUENCE

The Seventh Seal (1957)

Bergman's questioning of faith, with faces held in searching close-up, shows Dreyer's legacy in Scandinavian art cinema.

COMPARE ANOTHER APPROACH

The Trial of Joan of Arc (1962) COMING SOON

Bresson uses the same trial records but a cooler, more austere approach, and the contrast shows how style changes the meaning of the same material.

FULL CAST AND CREW



Carl Theodor Dreyer
DIRECTOR



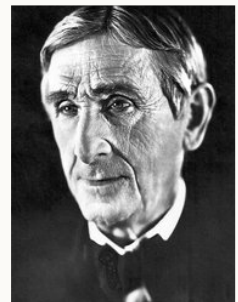
Maria Falconetti
ACTOR
as Jeanne d'Arc



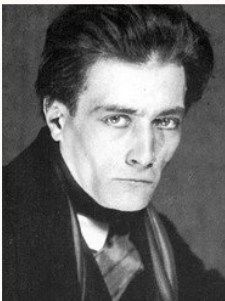
Eugène Silvain
ACTOR
as Bishop Pierre
Cauchon



André Berley
ACTOR
as Jean d'Estivet



Maurice Schutz
ACTOR
as Nicolas Loyseleur



Antonin Artaud
ACTOR
as Jean Massieu