

Heard and Seen

BRESSON AT CANNES

The film for which we had waited with such impatience since the beginning of this year's Festival at Cannes, Robert Bresson's *Procès de Jeanne d'Arc*, opened soberly enough with the voice of Jeanne's mother giving her evidence from the rehabilitation trial of some twenty-five years after the burning at Rouen. Then, to the ominous tap of drums, came a long procession of feet pacing over tiles no less startlingly black and white than the religious habits that swept them. It was not until the credits super-imposed upon these countless feet were over that we emerged into a court that it was a mockery to call open. For this is a film of restraint in every sense; of iron bars and rough stone walls and spyholes in the stone; of chains and narrow stairs with railings as inexorable as the bars across the windows. Even when we reach the courtroom we seldom see it all, and the market place at Rouen is reduced, at the close, to ranked benches, a stake with faggots piled about it and—not often—a sudden sweep of sky to remind us how little we and the prisoner have been allowed all this time.

Over the years of his development towards this, his sixth, film Bresson has deliberately stripped his style of every superfluous trick or ornament: in his last work, *Pickpocket*, he conveyed nearly all the conflict by his images of hands in action; this time he has barely allowed himself spatial movement at all and most of what movement there is—progress up and down steps, guards changing watch, entry and exit of ecclesiastical pomp—is far less important than what he has chosen to convey by the eyes of his protagonists.

We are made painfully aware of the characters through their eyes, as one might search the eyes of a witness in just such an enquiry today. The remote judicial gaze of a surprisingly sympathetic Cauchon, the hard assessment in the eyes of the English commander as he judges the next move in his tactical battle with time; the candid unremarkable eyes of the young Dominican who is Jeanne's counsel, all these are exceedingly important in the progress of the action. Above all, in the eyes of Jeanne herself—light and candid as rain-water with the lids dropped submissively after each most unsubmissive answer, we are given the key to a character of heroic sanctity in a very special sense. Not only in court or in full-face do we find this emphasis; as Jeanne back in her cell, droops in dereliction between questionings we see (though she does not) the peering eyes of Englishman or bishop as they squinny at her through the chink in the stone, an intrusion most horribly enlarged in the imagination by the door to the cell, for ever left ajar to underline the intolerable ordeal of her continuous masculine surveillance. Perhaps the most terrible moment of all, however, came when we saw a group of women hurrying up the steps out of the cell, and cut suddenly to Jeanne, clutching the sheet to her chin as her outraged eyes

follow the women sent to report upon her virginity. The impression of indignity was absolute.

Bresson has used only the original words of the actual trial in his text, and they ring with an authenticity that conveys sanctity on the screen as one has seldom felt it before. When they ask Jeanne if she thinks herself to be in a state of grace, the reply, though one had read it before, cuts with a biting simplicity that makes one shiver: '*Si je ne suis, que Dieu m'y mette: si je suis, qu'Il m'y tienne*'. The archaic French in the assured young voice has a nobility that we find again in her description of herself as '*Jeanne la Pucelle fille de Dieu*', or in her cold accusation to Cauchon '*Evêque, je meurs par vous*'; every so often her rough tones drop to a defeated murmur, and one is moved again by the starkness of the verbal style so wonderfully paralleled by the austerity of the direction.

It is the trial alone with which Bresson is concerned, and the final tragedy is dealt with swiftly enough; great billows of smoke rise from the piled faggots, alternately masking and disclosing the cross held up by the two Dominicans, so that we are left with only the retinal image, as it were, of the thin figure chained and roped to the stake which we had seen before the blaze began. The film ends with an image of the charred stake and the chains hanging from it, and the same sound of drums with which it began. It only lasts sixty-five minutes, but one is drained of emotion by the end. Besson plays scrupulously fair with judges, jailers, soldiers and all, none are made ridiculous and it is easy to see why each acted as he did: but the indomitable fortitude of Jeanne is a remarkable achievement for both director and actress, Florence Carrez.

A comparison with Dreyer's *Passion of Joan of Arc* is inevitable, but in my opinion, Bresson's film sustains the challenge unshaken.

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The Church and the Artist

VISUAL ARTS AT SPODE HOUSE

The annual visual arts week held at Spode House is small, badly attended, relatively amateurly run, and unsupported by public funds, and seemingly of very little consequence to the Church. It is thus important, if one judges the genesis of art movements in the last hundred years, or is at any rate in the right category to be considered so. Not that I am trying to establish a rule of importance being always inversely linked with ineffectiveness, but the conception behind the visual arts weeks has been sufficiently difficult and exhausting to put