

WHAT IS HISTORY?

FALCONETTI (Keith Rose, 2005) reviewed by C. Holliday

“What is history? Dreams and dust.”

--Vladimir Nabokov

Few films illustrate Nabokov’s poetic reduction of the past—which highlights as well our problematic efforts to document and comprehend it— as accurately as Carl Th. Dreyer’s *La passion de Jeanne D’Arc*. Though the director’s use of the official transcript from the young French martyr’s trial necessarily imbues his work with a shade of verisimilitude, his highly idiosyncratic translation of her experience into cinematic language results in an undeniably subjective account—one designed more to elicit our sympathy for Jeanne and our condemnation of her accusers than to present a truly accurate historical record. For filmmaker Keith Rose, a no-less significant problem faces us when we adopt the role of judge in our evaluation of cinema. Specifically, Rose argues in his short film *Falconetti* that a variety of factors out of our control affect the verdicts we form about movies. By incorporating extensively Dreyer’s cinematic exploration of the very nature of religious, legal, and political judgment, Rose questions the confidence we should have when judging films.

The majority of *Falconetti* consists of a static close-up of a woman (who looks not unlike Maria Falconetti, the actress who plays Jeanne in Dreyer’s film) in profile facing screen left as she watches *La passion de Jeanne D’Arc* on an off-screen television in her living room. Rose reflects the TV image in a small mirror that seems to float in mid-air in the center of the frame. The close-up (which, of course, mirrors the close-ups used predominantly by Dreyer) allows us to observe her critically as she in turn evaluates Dreyer. We see her glance down and squint slightly whenever the subtitles appear, watch her blink at different rates of speed, even appear to almost fall asleep at some points as her head nods forward. Rose suggests here that our own physical state—our near-sightedness, for instance, or whether we are tired—can affect the opinions we form. If we are not physically up to the task of watching a film, especially difficult ones like Dreyer’s, can we honestly hope to assess it objectively? If we were to screen the same film while wearing glasses or contact lenses or when we are feeling physically fresh, would our opinions change? Rose’s composition is carefully designed: the woman’s countenance—serious and focused—and its placement within the frame (especially its juxtaposition next to the mirrored shots of Falconetti) recalls the innumerable close-ups of Jeanne and her own expressions, at times exhausted, enraptured, and exasperated, very much like Rose’s figure. In fact, it is almost as if we are watching our own *Falconetti*.

Another factor—crucial for the cinema—that can negatively color our judgments is the quality of the image itself. Since we most often encounter great works of cinema not in theaters on pristine 35mm prints but, rather, in our homes on consumer-level audio-visual equipment, our evaluations are invariably flawed. Rose addresses this aspect

of our viewing experience by damaging the reflection of Dreyer's film that is projected onto the suspended mirror: washed out, the whites frequently blown, the blacks diluted and crushed, at times even divided in half by a layer mask that shades half of the mirror, Dreyer's images in no way resemble what must have been their original quality. With this, Rose exaggerates one of the biggest obstacles we encounter when watching films: we rely on duplications of original negatives—and the near-devastating issues associated with the prints of this particular Dreyer film are well known—which are then digitized and manipulated further by others (who often cause even more damage). How, then, can we form reasoned, well-informed opinions about films? Rose argues that, like Jeanne's accusers, blinded as they were by their own religious and political dogma, we are irrevocably compromised.

Rose's most salient insights, however, are revealed in his sound design. The film opens by evoking the very experience of watching a movie in a theater: a black screen, over which we hear an audience chatting, laughing, and moving about. The black recalls the darkness that envelops us just before a film's initial flickers appear on the screen while the environmental sounds reflect how easily they can interfere with our evaluations, especially if we are unable to filter them out. Upon cutting to the woman viewing Dreyer, Rose mutes the soundtrack: now, like her watching the silent Dreyer film, we are observing *her* in silence. The subsequent few moments seem to represent for Rose a sonically ideal cinema experience: her physical environment unpolluted by extraneous noise, she can absorb Dreyer's images unaffected by her surroundings. As in real life, though, this is short-lived: soon Rose's shot is accompanied by a cacophony of sounds: a chainsaw buzzing, children laughing and splashing in a pool, a door opening and closing. How might such distractions affect our judgment? asks Rose. Contrasting the obviously harsh (chainsaw) with the otherwise idyllic (children at play) points to how any obtrusive sound can ultimately intrude upon our viewing experience. To dramatize this effect, Rose, at the moment these sounds appear, traumatizes his own image: both the woman and the mirrored Dreyer footage are doubled. This physical aberration reflects metaphorically the mental distortion that may arise when an ideal screening environment is disrupted. These noises—along with those brought in later after a second period of silence, including rain drops mixed with car and truck engines roaring by on a wet road—whether we wish them to or not, become by their very presence a part of the soundtrack, against the filmmaker's will and against our own.

Because he limits the footage from Dreyer's film to just those sections depicting Jeanne being interrogated by her accusers and does not show her final outcome—execution by fire—Rose appears to be arguing that reasoned evaluations of films are not impossible to achieve and that our efforts are, unlike Jeanne, not doomed from the outset. Rather, *Falconetti* is a warning against facile decisions and unexamined conclusions as well as a remarkably concise and controlled portrait of the film-watching experience itself.

C. Holliday, January, 2006