FILM ART

AN INTRODUCTION

FOURTH EDITION

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The plot's climax occurs when the characters gather at the Magic Club. All of them have been desperately seeking either Susan or Roberta, and all find what they have been looking for. Now the phrase "desperately seeking Susan" loses the romantic aura that Roberta had initially ascribed to it. It becomes literal as the gangster grabs Susan and drags her through the backstage area of the theater. During this chase sequence, the film could have taken a conventional approach by having all the characters chase and capture the villain. Instead, it keeps the male characters in the background. Jim responds to kidnapping by simply looking around in confusion; Gary passes a window and fails to see the gangster outside with Susan. In the end, Roberta saves Susan, and the film concentrates on the two female protagonists. Similarly, in the brief epilogue, we see them both being hailed for having recovered the stolen Egyptian earrings (Fig. 10.39). Roberta's dreams of romance and excitement in New York have been fulfilled.

Fig. 10.39

Despite the fact that *Desperately Seeking Susan* is an independent feature, made outside the Hollywood production system, it conforms to the tradition of the classical narrative cinema. It carefully motivates narrative events by planting information ahead of time. As with the other films we have examined, it creates unity through the repetition of motifs. And like other classical films, it comes to an unambiguous, closed ending. At the beginning, Susan had been attractive but too wild; she imposed on her friends, lived for the moment, and endangered herself and others by her recklessness. In contrast, Roberta had been too bland and settled, living a prosperous existence with little romance. By the end, they have given each other a taste of a different mode of behavior and in the process have become quite similar, meeting halfway. Despite the advertising's emphasis on Susan's extreme lifestyle, the film's slogan could have been, "It's a life so outrageous, it takes two women to tame it."

NARRATIVE ALTERNATIVES TO CLASSICAL FILMMAKING

DAY OF WRATH (VREDENS DAG)

1943. Palladium Film, Denmark. Directed by Carl Dreyer. Script by Dreyer, Mogens Skot-Hansen, and Poul Knudsen; based on the play *Anne Pedersdotter* by Hans Wiers-Jenssen. Photographed by Karl Andersson. Edited by Edith Schluessel and Anne Marie Petersen. Music by Poul Schierbeck. With Lisbeth Movin, Thorkild Roose, Sigrid Neiiendam, Preben Lerdorff Rye, Anna Svierkier.

The films analyzed so far pose few difficulties for viewers who like their movies straightforward and easy to digest. But several films we will be examining from this point onward are not so clear in their form and style. In these films our uncertainty becomes central. In films like *Day of Wrath*, the questions we ask often do not get definite answers; endings do not tie everything up; film technique does not always function invisibly to advance

Fig. 10.40

Fig. 10.41

the narrative. When analyzing such films, we should restrain ourselves from trying to answer all of the film's questions and to create neatly satisfying endings. Instead of ignoring peculiarities of technique, we should seek to examine how film form and style create uncertainty—seek to understand the cinematic conditions that produce ambiguity. *Day of Wrath*, a tale of witchcraft and murder set in seventeenth-century Denmark, offers a good test case.

Like most narrative films, *Day of Wrath* depends on cause-and-effect relations, but the plot also emphasizes a number of parallels. The first half of the film centers on the fate of Herlofs Marthe, the old woman accused of witchcraft. In the course of this half, Herlofs Marthe's progress toward the stake is constantly paralleled to action involving the pastor Absalon; his new wife, Anne; his mother, Merete; and his son, Martin.

Following the execution of Herlofs Marthe, the second part of the film is concerned primarily with Absalon's family and especially with the growing love affair between Anne and Martin. Crosscutting parallels the young couple's idyll in nature with Absalon's solitude or his consolation of a dying friend. After Absalon dies, apparently killed by Anne, Dreyer again uses crosscutting to parallel old Merete, sitting by the coffin, with Anne and Martin wrapped in the fog.

Among all the parallels in the film, one stands out particularly. Herlofs Marthe, the "witch" of the first part, is constantly compared to Anne, the "witch" of the second. From the start, Dreyer uses crosscutting to parallel Herlofs Marthe, fleeing from the mob, with Merete and particularly with Anne. In the course of the film, most of what we see of Herlofs Marthe's progress—the interrogations, torture, and execution—is seen through Anne's eyes. Anne becomes the central focus of the plot, particularly because optical point-of-view shots and eyeline-match cutting often restrict our knowledge to hers. The *Dies Irae* musical motif, associated with Herlofs Marthe's immolation, is scored in a brighter key when Anne and Martin are wandering through the forests. A motif of lighting repeats the parallel: Often a shadow passes across Anne's face, exactly as the shadows of leaves tremble on Herlofs Marthe's face before she is burned (compare Figs. 10.40 and 10.41). Thus not only narrative form but also editing, sound, and lighting guide us to compare and contrast the old "witch" with the young one.

However clear such parallel relations may seem, the chains of narrative cause and effect lead us straight to ambiguities. The uncertainty revolves

around the problem of witchcraft. The official whose hand writes and signs documents throughout the first third of the film assumes that witchcraft exists and threatens society. We are tempted to see this belief as simple superstition, the Church's means of oppression in this society.

But things are not so simple. In the first sequence, a woman has sought out Herlofs Marthe for a potion. "This is sure to work," says Marthe. "It is herbs from under the gallows." And she adds, "There is power in evil." So perhaps she *is* a witch after all. Yet after she is captured and tortured, Dreyer's mise-en-scene in the torture chamber depicts her as only a victimized old woman. And yet again, she curses her inquisitor, Laurentius, and he soon dies; she predicts that Anne will go to the stake, and Anne eventually does. Herlofs Marthe's "power" puts us in doubt as to whether certain narrative events have a natural or a supernatural cause.

An even stronger ambiguity hovers over the causes for crucial events involving Anne. In the course of the film, she displays the ability to summon Martin from a distance, to make Absalon fear for his life, and to kill Absalon by saying, "I wish you dead." What causes such events? Supernatural powers? The narrative does not explain how Anne could have acquired them. (There is the suggestion that her mother was a witch and "could call the quick and the dead," but this hardly constitutes a clear explanation of Anne's abilities.) Is, then, the cause sheerly psychological? Does Anne merely *believe* herself to be a witch? Are her "spells" successful only because she called for events that were likely to happen? Martin may have been falling in love with her anyway, and the revelation of her hatred may have caused Absalon's heart attack. As we shall see, her entire behavior does change as she becomes more deeply in love with Martin. Yet again, psychological states do not necessarily explain her power to call or kill from a distance.

Compare, in this regard, the very explicit causes that determine characters' action in any of the classical films we have just analyzed. In *Desperately Seeking Susan*, for instance, Roberta's boredom with her bland life and Susan's reckless feistiness are given at the outset. Yet up to the very end, *Day of Wrath* refuses to specify the exact causes of Anne's actions—supernatural, psychological, or social. "Is Anne a witch?" is a question that Dreyer's film does not answer clearly.

The ambiguity surrounding witchcraft and its effects is stressed in Dreyer's handling of mise-en-scene as well. We have already seen how facial lighting compares Anne with Herlofs Marthe. We ought also to notice how lighting functions to cast an uncertain aura over Anne. When she first sees Martin, she steps into a patch of shadow. When she swears that she did not kill Absalon, a shadow falls across her face. Such lighting reminds us of the possible supernatural sources of her power, even at moments when she seems most innocent.

Other aspects of mise-en-scene reinforce Anne's ambiguous status. Her deepening love for Martin is expressed through changes in her bodily movements—at first constrained, somewhat rigid, but later more sinuous, even catlike. We first see her wearing a prim, rectangular cap; later, with Martin, she wears a softly curving lace bonnet; still later, she simply lets her hair hang free. Props such as her embroidery pattern (depicting a young woman with a baby) and her drawing of an apple tree (Martin's poem had


Fig. 10.42


Fig. 10.43


Fig. 10.44


Fig. 10.45

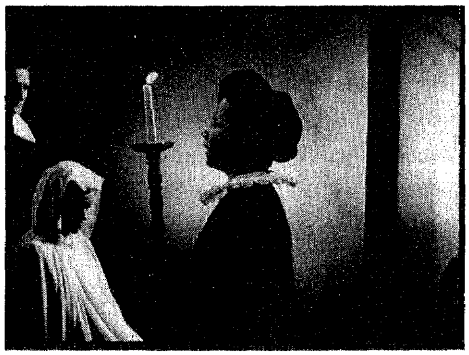
Fig. 10.46

described a "young maiden in an apple tree") also convey her sexual blossoming.

Yet all of these motifs cut two ways. Anne may be impelled by desire or by sorcery. The most obvious manifestation of the ambiguity may be seen in her changing facial expressions, at once cunning and inviting. At one point, both Absalon and Martin seek to read her essence in her eyes, and they come to exactly opposite conclusions. To the old man, Anne's eyes are "childlike and innocent, so clear"; to Martin, they are "fathomless and mysterious . . . in the bottom, a trembling, quivering flame." Dreyer's mise-en-scene brings the ambiguity to the viewer's notice, compelling us to ask at almost every moment what motivates Anne's actions and how we are to understand her.

Day of Wrath's final scene only partly dispels the uncertainties that run throughout the film. Absalon's funeral is beginning, and Martin has sworn to stand by Anne. Dreyer creates yet another narrative parallel by opening the scene with a lengthy tracking shot. By following the choirboys through the death room (Fig. 10.42), Dreyer establishes, in a long take, the entire space and all of the relevant characters' positions: the church elders (Fig. 10.43), the judge, Merete (Fig. 10.44), the coffin (Fig. 10.45), and Anne and Martin (Fig. 10.46). The attentive viewer will recall that a similar circular tracking shot previously introduced the torture-chamber scene and later the death of Laurentius as well. Dreyer uses the camera movement to parallel three somber interiors, all associated with the repressive power of the Church. In contrast to the invisible camera movements of

most classical films, Dreyer emphasizes the camera movements as a motif, calling our attention to the parallel and developing situations.

In the course of this scene, Merete publicly accuses Anne of witchcraft. Martin abandons her, and Anne breaks down, confessing to having been in the service of "the Evil One." Does this, then, settle the matter of her witchcraft?

We know that in analyzing a film, it is useful to contrast the beginning with the ending. *Day of Wrath* begins with the image of a scroll unrolling, over which the medieval church melody *Dies Irae* plays nondiegetically. The scroll depicts and describes the terrible events that befall the sinful earth on Judgment Day (the "Day of Wrath" of the title). (See Fig. 10.47.) After Anne confesses, she looks upward for help, for mercy? The scroll now returns to the screen, accompanied by the sweet solo voice of a choirboy, describing how the "bruised soul" will be lifted to heaven. In the eternal context of the scroll, Anne is apparently forgiven. Yet *what* she is forgiven for—seducing Martin, practicing witchcraft, accepting her society's definition of herself *as* a witch—is never stipulated. The scroll seems not to resolve the ambiguity so much as to postpone it. The final image of the film is a cross, but the cross is slowly transformed into the witch motif we saw earlier, during Herlofs Marthe's execution (Fig. 10.48). Presumably, the parallel with Herlofs Marthe is now complete: Anne will be burned. But the causes of certain events, the nature of witchcraft, the desires that motivate Anne—these remain, like her eyes, "fathomless and mysterious." *Day of Wrath* illustrates how a film may fascinate us not by its clarity but by its obscurity, not by fixed certainties but by teasing questions.

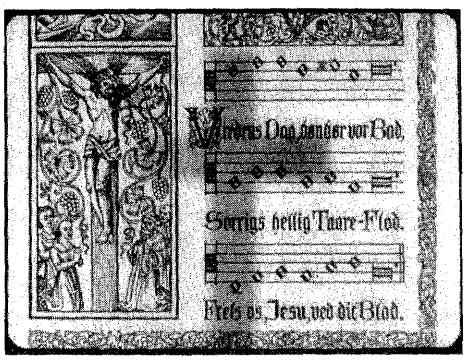

Fig. 10.47

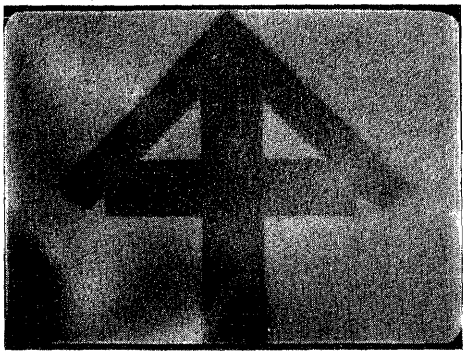

Fig. 10.48

■ *LAST YEAR AT MARIENBAD (L'ANNÉE DERNIÈRE À MARIENBAD)*

1961. Précitel and Terrafilm, a French-Italian coproduction. Directed by Alain Resnais. Script by Alain Robbe-Grillet. Photographed by Sacha Vierney. Edited by Henri Colpi and Jasmine Chasney. Music by Francis Seyrig. With Delphine Seyrig, Giorgio Albertazzi, Sacha Pitoëff.

When *Last Year at Marienbad* was first shown in 1961, many critics offered widely varying interpretations of it. When faced with most films, these critics would have been looking for implicit meanings behind the plot. But, faced with *Marienbad*, their interpretations were attempts simply to describe the events that take place in the film's story. These proved difficult to agree on. Did the couple really meet last year? If not, what really happened? Is the film a character's dream or hallucination?

Typically, a film's plot—however simple or difficult—allows the spectator to construct the causal and chronological story mentally. But *Marienbad* is radically different. Its story is impossible to determine. The film has only a plot, with no single consistent story for us to infer. This is because *Marienbad* carries the strategy of *Day of Wrath* to an extreme by working entirely through ambiguities. As we watch the opening of the film, the events seem to be leading us toward a story, complicated though it might be. But then contradictions arise. One character says that an event occurred,