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The Jeanne d'Arc musicals work similarly, with the difference being in the abstractions involved. In Jeanne's first scene, Prudhomme kneels to pray, her eyes piercing the sky as she sways and jerks, the young actor's body struggling to maintain balance— the sort of awkward, unstable character introductions that run through not only this film, but all of Dumont's comedic period. This image of Jeanne is less about prayer per se than it is about a young girl in pose, unconsciously negotiating between a persona that isn't hers and a body that is, intent on resembling a devout woman invoking Divinity. And where Pasolini admitted to struggling to “mystify” the essence of The Gospel According to St. Matthew (1964) while he was making it, Dumont's venture is more preoccupied with processes of de-mystification: grounding spirituality so we see that the sacred exists not in institutions (the Church, the Law, the Nation), but rather, as he describes it, “in common things.”

That is what all of Dumont is fundamentally about, which is why there may be a no more encapsulating and rigorous sequence in his cinema than the prolonged trial that makes up the bulk of this film. Filmed before the gloriously gaudy High Altar of the Basilique Cathédrale Notre-Dame d'Amiens, the trial here contains many of the same beats, condemnations, gestures, and poses that any other adaptation would include. (Prudhomme's Jeanne, in the tradition of Falconetti, does gaze up to the heavens quite liberally, something Bresson fervently eschewed in his rendition, lest Florence Delay be bracketed amongst Dreyer's “bufooneries.”) Yet the architecture of her hearings—the clerical scaffolding built around Jeanne, the cathedral's magisterial stone nave—has hardly ever possessed such a zealous and powerful presence as in this scene's mise en scène. Dwarving the very men who created it, the Notre-Dame d'Amiens here becomes the synecdochal Church, Law, and Nation—a veritable operating system that gives form to nature's abstractions and the state's rule, governing and facilitating the actions not only of Jeanne's trial, but also the universe containing it. It is this institutional form of the sacred that defeats the “common things” via sheer spectacle, with Jeanne's conviction (in every sense) following suit—de-mystified, ridiculous, yet still impossibly grandiose.
In the 15th century, both France and England stake a blood claim for the French throne. Believing that God had chosen her, the young Joan leads the army of the King of France. When she is captured, the Church sends her for trial on charges of heresy. Refusing to accept the accusations, the graceful Joan of Arc will stay true to her mission.

Joan of Arc
by Blake Williams

The following article was originally published in Cinema Scope 79 (Summer 2019)

I’ve exited the last several Bruno Dumont films wondering—only somewhat in jest—whether or not their maker had gone completely insane. Until 2014, Dumont was notorious for his straight-faced, neo-Bressonian, severely severe dramas that interrogated the intersection of spiritualism and material form. It’s been said that it was this moment, inaugurated by the four-part TV miniseries P’tit Quinquin, that he “lightened up,” but it’s become clear that this step into ostensible comedy was a lateral move rather than a stark about-face. Indeed, in the funniest of these recent projects—Quinquin, its sequel Coincoin et les z’inhumains (2018), and Ma Loute (2015)—his vision has merely racked focus, accentuating certain components of his direction and thematic interests that have always been present: the naïve purity of amateur actors; the cretinism of powerful members of society; and the aesthetic dissonance that results from representing spiritual transcendence as experienced by impoverished, uneducated, passion is as eternal as it is addressed to The Eternal, and so places his faith in cinema’s capacities for transfiguring the world, for elevating the material (the text, the bodies) into the sacred.

Thus, historical accuracy is far from his ambitions, a hypothesis well-supported in his casting choices. Whereas the first film used two actors to play Jeanne at ages 8 and 14, Dumont re-employed only the younger of the pair (ten-year-old Lise Leplat Prudhomme) to return to act out Jeanne aged 17-19. (Falconetti was 35 in Dreyer’s adaptation, so why not?) Youth, obviously an important theme of Jeanne, is even more crucial and complicated here. We sense Jeanne’s (the character’s) actual age in the text, expressed as history and mythology, a deeply internalized symbol of faith, martyrdom, and France’s national identity; but we respond in a skewed way, with Prudhomme’s age heightening the drama effortlessly, phenomenologically. In the charged space between the

ABOUT THE FILM

137 min. | France | 2019
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Bruno Dumont’s decision to work with a ten-year-old actress re-injects this heroine’s timeless cause and ideology with a modernity that highlights both the tragic female condition and the incredible fervor, strength and freedom women show when shackled by societies and archaic virile orders that belittle and alienate them.

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For long passages, I caught myself simply watching this movie, every so often checking back in to listen to it. This isn’t to say that language doesn’t matter in Jeanne—on the contrary, it’s absolutely necessary for the film’s full force to be felt—but its dance with historical iconography and myth harks back to early, inarticulate modes of image construction, when framing and cutting were undeveloped and curious, and narrative templates nonexistent. Film theorist Noël Burch has noted how early 20th-century cinema only finally reached durations of half an hour when filmmakers made Passion Plays based on familiar Christian stories, their succession of tableaux vivant linked together in well-known sequences, rendering storytelling syntax all but unnecessary. As though relying on this principle, Dumont’s storytelling in Jeanne is at times crude. For one, his efforts to maintain a sense of linear chronology—opening each scene with a title card stating the date, place, and passage of time—is as quaint as it is expendable. But also, the camera is just more attuned to the performances themselves than the script performed. Dumont understands the timelessness of Jeanne’s plight, that the truth of her passion is as eternal as it is addressed to The Eternal, and so places his faith in cinema’s capacities for transfiguring the world, for elevating the material (the text, the bodies) into the sacred.

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