'GET ON WITH THE BURNING! PUT AN END TO THIS TRIAL!' Representations of the Trials of Joan of Arc in the Cinema

By Bill Grantham[*]

Virtually all of what we know about Joan of Arc comes from legal texts: the official transcripts of her trials and examinations, sworn witness statements and the reports of investigators appointed by the relevant authorities. Yet these accounts, particularly as they approach Joan's post-mortem rehabilitation, are more concerned with preserving the appearance of legal process than establishing the substantive truth of whether or not Joan was a heretic pursuant to the applicable laws. In these contexts, Joan's condemnation and execution are little more than procedural artefacts. By contrast, the death of Joan is central to the many film representations of Joan's trials (all purportedly based on these same legal texts). Her death is the ineluctable narrative fact that results in the extinction of the law of her condemnation, which is superseded by her insistence that, in law, the sublunary must yield to the divine order.

Introduction

It is a literary requirement that Joan of Arc, like Dickens' Marley, is dead. Typologically, Joan's martyrdom is the essential condition of her emblematic power, as she is restated, refined and remodelled for various exemplary purposes.[1] But how do we get her dead? Most of us are familiar with the main lines of Joan's career — her childhood in rural Lorraine, her 'voices', her mission to save France, her success in convincing a string of worthies, up to and including King Charles VII himself, that she should be put at the head of an army, her great victory at Orléans, the triumph of Charles' coronation at

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1 Notably in contemporary film and television — for example, reincarnated as a Japanese anime heroine (*Kamikaze Kaitô Jeanne* [1999]); plucked from the past to give advice on environmental campaigning to Canadian teenagers ('Raising The Siege' [1998]); a model for aspiring actresses, female spies and young girls (*The Little Drummer Girl* [1984]; *Nachalo* [1970]; *Dramatic School* [1938]; *The Miracle of the Bells* [1948]; *Joan of Paris* [1942]; *Joan of Ozark* [1942]; *Zelly and Me* [1988]; and *The Legend of Billie Jean* [1985]); or, even more improbably, portrayed as a sassy know-all by Lisa Simpson ('Tales from the Public Domain' [2002]). See also Blaetz (2001).

Rheims, her defeat before the gates of Paris, her capture at Compiègne, and finally her trial and execution in Rouen. Of these elements, the trial is the means by which the martyrdom is given its force. Would we feel the same about Joan if she had been successful in killing herself when she leapt from her prison in Beaurevoir, or if she had succumbed to the bad carp that she was fed while in custody in Rouen, or even if she had been summarily executed by a Burgundian or English sword following her capture? The necessity of Joan's trial, and therefore of Joan's death, is the subject of this article, as seen through some of the many films, dating back to the earliest part of the silent period, that have attempted to tell this story.

Joan's Trials

On 30 May 1431, Jeanne d'Arc, aged 19, was sentenced to death in Rouen by the Inquisition, having been declared to be 'relapsed' — she had recanted a prior abjuration of her allegedly objectionable acts — as well as 'heretic and excommunicate'. This finding followed a two-day trial, which she did not attend after her initial examination and probably did not know was taking place. Twenty-five years later, on 7 July 1456, a new Inquisition tribunal declared the Rouen trial to be a nullity. Unfortunately for the vindicated Jeanne, she had been burned to death on the day of her sentencing by the secular authorities in Rouen, to whom she had been handed by the Inquisition.

The long gap between the two trials was largely due to logistical difficulties. Joan's trial papers were preserved in Rouen, which did not come under the control of the French crown for 18 years, in late 1449 when the forces of King Charles VII, Joan's patron, finally took the city. Although Charles sought a preliminary inquiry into Joan's trial within months of the capture of Rouen, a jurisdictional problem arose: since the original trial was conducted by the Inquisition, only the Inquisition could overturn its result. Accordingly, the Church's agreement was required to convene a new trial. The new papal legate to France did not hold his first meeting with Charles until February 1452, more than two years after the fall of Rouen, and it was not until November 1455, nearly four years after that, that the first session of the new trial opened in Paris, moving to Rouen the following month. Some six years had passed since the capture of the city by the French, and more than a quarter of a century since Joan's execution.

One further problem for the Inquisition was caused by Joan's unavailability for the new proceeding. Who had standing to seek review of the original trial? There were apparently no means by which the Inquisition could reopen the case *sua sponte*. Ecclesiastical tribunals such as this required subject-matter jurisdiction (*ratione materiae*) and a recognised class of person requiring the protection of the court (*ratione personae*). The charges against Joan satisfied the subject-matter jurisdiction requirement, but a qualified person was required as well. So in the end it was determined that Joan's immediate family, led by her mother Isabelle, should be the civil party in the case. On 7 November 1455, in the packed nave of Notre-Dame de Paris, Isabelle, supported by her sons and neighbours, made a moving plea for relief from Joan's 'trial perfidious, violent, iniquitous and without shadow of right,'

alleging that Joan's death had caused 'notorious, infamous and irreparable damage done to me, Isabelle, and mine'.[2] This rather bizarre allegation — was it not Joan who suffered the real damage? — has some resonance for common lawyers familiar with the pleading requirements for suits in equity. In fact, in common with many controversial appeals or reviews, the entire form of Joan's ultimate rehabilitation shows relatively little concern with the merits of the underlying case — was she or was she not a witch and a heretic? — and everything to do with such technical and procedural questions.

At the first hearing in Rouen in December 1455, 12 infirmities of the original trial were enumerated, of which 11 were fundamentally technical, raising questions of, for instance, venue and jurisdiction. Only one claim seemed to go to the merits, and that was made in entirely conclusory fashion: that the 12 charges against Joan were 'a tissue of lies'.[3]

Joan's Films

This procedural description has been provided to show that actual concerns behind Joan's legal rehabilitation — the process that transformed her in the eyes of the law from a convicted criminal to an innocent martyr — are as different as they possibly could be from those that preoccupy the many filmmakers who have sought to tell Joan's story. The 'real' law — by seeking to correct its own intrinsic errors — attempts to redeem itself institutionally; the law of these films — by seeking to reclaim Joan from the taint of criminality and heresy — hopes to redeem Joan herself. In this emblematic domain, Joan is our female Christ, sent by God, a miraculous actor betrayed, tried and condemned by secular and religious authorities, put to death and ultimately vindicated. Her films call on us to follow her on her own Stations of the Cross to the inevitable destination. Venue and standing are not pertinent issues. Accordingly, the treatment of such questions in the films is at most perfunctory and usually invisible.

Thus, in Jacques Rivette's film *Jeanne La Pucelle*, Isabelle's plea to the rehabilitation court is movingly enacted, as the starting point for the four-hour work's reconstruction of Joan's story. Robert Bresson also starts his *Le Procès de Jeanne d'Arc* with a portion of Isabelle's address, albeit deliberately

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2 Pernoud (1982), p 265.

3 Oursel (1959), pp 143–44. The 11 technical issues were: improper venue (Joan did not live or commit her alleged offences within the diocese of Beauvais, whose bishop, Cauchon, presided over the trial); the effect of Cauchon's lack of impartiality, raised at the time of the trial; impermissible pressures placed on Jean Lemaitre, the vicar of the Inquisition at Rouen; the denial of Joan's right to appeal directly to the Pope in Rome; the apparent fact that only the Apostolic See had jurisdiction to hear cases involving secret (ie purportedly divine) revelations; the fact that the accused was denied the benefit of counsel; the fact that Joan was a minor; the fact that the trial court's original sentences of abjuration followed by life imprisonment, being immoderate in the light of Joan's youth, inexperience and 'feebleness of sex', her subsequent sentence to death following her relapse being void; falsification of the trial transcript; and the use of *agents-provocateurs* to incite Joan not to submit to the authority of the church.

obfuscating the purpose and context of Isabelle's words. Victor Fleming's Hollywood treatment *Joan of Arc* spends some time on Joan's claim of entitlement to a hearing before the Pope, and the refusal of the trial court to address this jurisdictional defect.[4] In Marco de Gastyne's *La Merveilleuse Vie de Jeanne d'Arc*, one of several silent pictures on the subject, Cauchon's falsification of the record is depicted, as is Joan's outrage at the stacked nature of the proceedings. Otherwise, however — and unsurprisingly — the technical issues of the trials are not much observed in the many films which have been made about Joan of Arc. More typical of the treatment of the trial has been the impatience shown by the Earl of Warwick in the Joan of Arc segment of *The Story of Mankind*: 'Get on with the burning! Put an end to this trial!'

Despite the sense in virtually all the Joan of Arc films that the aim is to get on with the burning, the trial — or at least the completion of a cognisable legal process — is something that must be undergone before the pyre can be lit. The legal text that is the trial, despite the impatience of Warwick the Kingmaker, cannot simply be brushed aside. This is true even in Rivette's film which, in a striking use of absence to denote presence, skips the trial altogether, referring to it only in a caption, depicting instead only the abjuration and the beginning of the rehabilitation. The trial is Joan's dance of death, and the legal process embedded within is its choreography.

In one sense, any film of Joan of Arc is a legal text, since virtually all information that we have about her comes from legal documents, notably the files relating to her condemnation and rehabilitation. As with any trial, investigations were conducted, witnesses examined, controlling law analysed and conclusions reached, all of which — or at least, those parts which were permitted to remain in the record — were written down and preserved. Filmmakers have persistently asserted, with varying degrees of truth, that their versions of the Joan story are 'true' to the written record — which has always, they say, been thoroughly mined and respected for their screenplays. Indeed, the restored version of Carl Theodor Dreyer's *La Passion de Jeanne d'Arc* starts with images of the actual documents in the Bibliothèque Nationale in Paris, asserting the authority of the legal text in determining what is to follow.[5] The opening of Bresson's film also fetishises the legal text by having Isabelle, unseen in a black hood with back turned to the camera and supported by two disembodied male hands (presumably those of her sons), read from a beautifully handwritten document with a large medieval initial dropped capital letter, in the style of a religious, official or legal text. All that is palpable in the

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4 Fleming (1948). Fleming's film was recut and reissued in 1950; pending a restoration of the original by UCLA, the rather botched video and television reissues are the only versions readily available.

5 Dreyer (1928). The Criterion DVD version released in the United States is the best available, taken from Dreyer's original cut of the film, whose negative was lost in a fire. The widely seen 1952 'sonorisation' by Lo Duca for Gaumont, apart from its many other inadequacies, obscures the fact that the text seen in the opening sequence is that of Joan's trial, instead positing only some vague antiquarianism implied by the sight of hands browsing an unidentified old volume in a library.

scene is the voice of Isabelle and the written text itself — the rest, draped in black and avoiding the filmmaker's gaze, is obscured and abstracted.

Joan's rejection of the jurisdiction and law of the court throughout her trial is contrasted in the transcripts with her vehement, if incoherent, insistence on the legal primacy of the direct revelations of God's will that she has received from her voices. By its nature, this law is invisible, available only through the immediate intervention of God, in Joan's case through his agents Saints Michael, Catherine and Margaret. Joan is always reluctant to describe her divine interlocutors, which would give them a form of vicarious visibility. Instead, she sidesteps questions about their appearance, voices and clothing. For the filmmaker, this aspect of Joan's story creates a challenge of representation. The most lurid Joan films — Cecil B. DeMille's silent *Joan The Woman* and Luc Besson's *Joan of Arc* — provide us with visible, flesh-and-blood apparitions, similar to a fairy godmother or genie of the lamp. DeMille's literalist piety — as present in *Joan The Woman* as it was 40 years later in *The Ten Commandments* — is, one assumes, intended to depict the physical reality of Joan's saints. In Besson's work, where the saints are given a waxy, almost painterly look while being presented, horror-movie style, through fast cuts, swift lighting changes, striking colour contrasts and sudden noises, the presumable aim of this representation is to position the 'voices' as aspects of Joan's purportedly delusional psyche. In similar vein, Besson also rather stolidly objectifies Joan's conscience, having it played by Dustin Hoffman. Other versions are equally cheesy. Gastyne, also a literalist, uses in *La Merveilleuse Vie* spooky, white superimpositions, reminiscent of Victorian hoax photographs of ghosts, to suggest that Joan is seeing something real, but only revealed to her. Similarly, a recent television portrayal contained predictable special effects — the clouds parting, shafts of light bearing down on Joan's face from the glowering heavens and insistent, mumbling ghost-voices that only she can understand.[6]

The alternative to this insistence on the physically perceptible is, of course, silence — in the sense that Wallace Stevens described the pregnant silence that yields the 'beauty of innuendo' contrasted to the present noise that produces the 'beauty of inflection', or the weight that bears upon expression. Tactfully, Rivette's Joan communes with God offscreen, returning to deliver her — His? — decisions to her entourage. Bresson, too, characteristically embraces reticence over the histrionic by declining to depict the 'voices'. And Otto Preminger's *Saint Joan*, in keeping with George Bernard Shaw's play on which the film was based, similarly avoids portraying Joan's 'voices', except through her own characterisation of them. For Rivette, Preminger, Shaw and maybe even the Catholic Bresson, depicting the 'voices' would stand for an endorsement of the miraculous, a kind of taking sides among the competing legal standards of Joan's trial.

This contrast between the spoken and unspoken, between inflection and innuendo, between action and stillness, seems to me to lie at the heart of the filmic depictions of Joan's trials. Both paths lead, as they must, to the stake, to

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[6] Dugay (1999).

Joan's literal annihilation — although only Bresson, of all her adapters, has the courage to leave us with the logical final image: the empty charred stake, around which Joan has literally been reduced to imperceptible ashes, the final silence.

In this sense, expressing Joan is to diminish her. In silent film, by its nature a medium of innuendo, any use of the literal, of explanatory intertitles or captions, appears as a defeat, a recourse to words where none should be necessary. In DeMille's *Joan The Woman*, a scene-setting caption portentously sown with initial capital letters, gives the game away to such an extent that the ensuing film footage appears otiose:

> Joan, Without Counsel, so Baffles Her Tormentors that Cauchon — Finding it Impossible to Trap Her — Stoops to the Most Contemptible Trickery to Gain His End.

More important than such clumsy expositions is the emblematic confrontation of Joan with the law — effectively, a ritualised exchange between competing laws. Keith Reader has correctly described the use by Bresson's non-professional actors of deadpan, clipped, uninflected diction for these exchanges, like lengthy ping pong rallies, as 'almost stichomythic',[7] and the same is true of other treatments, notably Dreyer's — in other words, the form of the ritual is as important as its content in conveying the necessity of the legal confrontation. Joan and Cauchon, stylistically as well as in substance, are in this way the cousins of Antigone and Creon, or Caliban and Prospero.

In the closing minutes of Bresson's film, after a succession of static, dark, interior scenes, Joan is seen in natural exterior light for the first time, being taken to the stake. She wears a long sackcloth gown which, together with her chains, restricts her movement. We see her bare, delicate feet in rapid tripping motion, almost racing along the cobbles to her final destination. If the cumulative result of the Joan films is a kind of composite image, driven by the camera's voyeuristic gaze (sadovoyeuristic as it has been described in connection with Dreyer's film), of Joan's passive agony expressed in her face, this sudden appearance of her naked feet is a shocking transition. Bresson, in fact, has prefigured this moment in the opening shot of his film, where we see Isabelle's heavy black boots marching towards her moments before the rehabilitation trial. Joan's moment is here in her race from one law to another, from theirs to hers, in the passing of the film's gaze from the face — the locus of confrontation and pain — to the feet, the place of action, of willed motion. Despite her terror of the fire, she runs towards it, maintaining her control sufficiently to overcome the booted English foot that emerges from the top of the frame to trip her. At this point, the law is in Joan's ingenuous, tiny, skipping feet. It is the first time, at the point of her apotheosis, that we see her law in command.

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[7] Reader (2000), p 61.

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