

which he had handled a congregation in church in *The Parson's Widow* was not suitable, and his sequences of services are static and rather distant. The film was shot silent for financial reasons, so he could not work too much with close-ups of the pastors, which added to the detached, two-dimensional quality of the film. And though he used every technique of lighting and composition that he could, the scenes have a sameness about them. Although the Danish village churches seem varied and lovely in relation to their surroundings, this sense is not evoked in the film.

The next year, in 1948, Dreyer directed another short, usually considered his best: Eileen Bowser calls it "purest Dreyer." This is *They Caught the Ferry*, a story taken from a short novel by Johannes V. Jensen, aimed at safe-driving propaganda, which Koch Olsen hoped the Road Safety Council would finance. The story is simplicity itself: a young couple on a motorcycle race across the countryside in order to catch a ferry. As they near their destination, their speed constantly increasing, they are finally run off the road by an old car that has been following them across the countryside. They do indeed "catch the ferry"—in two coffins rowed to the ferry by an old man in a small boat.

Acting can scarcely be said to play a role in the film, but motion certainly does. None of the people in the film were actors. The motorcycle rider was Joseph Koch, a professional racer who tested motorcycles for Nimbus, a motorcycle manufacturer. The girl was his wife, Kamma. Death was played by the prop man at the Odense Theater. Kamma Koch remembers the making of the film as the experience of her life. "Johannes V. Jensen was himself a cyclist and owned a Nimbus. The whole thing was like a holiday. After hours we didn't see too much of Carl Th. Dreyer. He didn't mix in much. He was quiet and concentrated, and I never saw him get angry. Every evening he sent a rose up to me in my room, and when we were finished he said, 'I am pleased with you. You're the first amateur who has stayed an amateur after the film has been finished. For all the others I have worked with, it went to their heads after a few days.'"⁶

Indeed, it took a professional rider to meet the requirements of the film. Many have accused Dreyer of directing slow films; such cannot be charged to this picture. It begins with impatience, the couple with their cycle waiting for the slow-moving ferry to dock so that they can be off across the island to catch the next boat on the other side, and then moves swiftly into a wild ride by, with, and around the cycling pair. The camera seems to be everywhere, exploring the rushing landscape, the spinning wheels, the advancing

speedometer, and the abandoned, careless gaiety of the riders—and finally thrashing madly through the air at the moment of the final impact, to be stilled forever in a stunningly contrasting shot that is absolutely immobile at the end.

Frames were fastened to the motorcycle carrying the camera that allowed the cameraman to shoot close-ups of the wheels and riders in motion. Dreyer sat in the sidecar and the cameraman on the pillion for many of the shots. Jørgen Roos, the cameraman, remembers the two of them getting caught in a drenching rainstorm while they were riding the cycle from Copenhagen to Fyn, where the film was shot. "We had to dry ourselves off in the toilets of the ferryboat. Dreyer, in his cap and goggles, thought it most amusing." When they began shooting, Roos suggested to Dreyer that he could lower the speed of the camera in order to make it seem that the cycle was going faster (and spare Roos and his driver from actually having to tear along the narrow country roads at the same breakneck speed that the film was warning against), but Dreyer, as always, insisted on absolute reality, so "if the script said 120 kilometers per hour that's what we had to do. For some shots I had the camera fixed to the sidecar, where I squatted to peer into the viewfinder. We were to do a shot where the solo bike overtook a lorry on the inside. I was to overtake in the sidecar, but on the outside. The solo bike accelerated enormously and the lorry driver got worried. He pulled leftwards and caught us. Our bike swerved and we hit a tree, which came between the bike and the sidecar. I flew off to the right and the driver of the bike went off to the left, thirty-six yards into a field. I came to in the field. The solo rider had fetched Dreyer from the inn, and he was standing there, hands behind his back, examining the camera. It was all right, so then he came over to me."⁷

The film is unambiguously successful in achieving its aim. However, it lacks the subtle, understated approach that characterizes Dreyer in his long films. The old car that races the couple across the island is a Model T Ford garishly painted to simulate a skeleton. This bit of symbolism, too obvious to be comfortable, unnecessarily overstates the message of the picture. What is even worse, though, is the final crash. The face of the driver of the Model T is shown, and he turns out to be Death, white and ghastly, somewhat reminiscent of Lon Chaney in *The Phantom of the Opera*. In the right context, this image might be effective, but in an otherwise totally realistic picture, it tends to jar. Nonetheless, the general impact of the film is probably the greatest of any of Dreyer's short films.



Top: *They Caught the Ferry*. "If the script said 120 kilometers per hour, that's what we had to do."