



Michael (1924) (Blu-ray Review)

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Format: Blu-ray Disc

Director

Carl Theodor Dreyer

Release Date(s)

1924 (July 18, 2023)

Studio(s)

Decla-Bioscop AG/Universum Film (Kino Classics)

Film/Program Grade: B+

Video Grade: B+

Audio Grade: A

Extras Grade: B-

Review

Michael (aka Mikaël or Chained: The Story of the Third Sex) was the Danish filmmaker Carl Th. Dreyer's sixth silent film, produced in Germany for UFA/Decla-Bioscop, and it's a landmark in terms of LGBTQ representation in the cinema. It wasn't the first feature to explore gay themes, with films like *A Florida Enchantment* (1914) having already broken ground in that regard. Nor was it the first German film to do so, since it was preceded by *Different from the Others* (aka *Anders als die Andern*) in 1919 (although that film ended up being suppressed by the authorities). It wasn't even the first adaptation of Herman Bang's 1902 novel *Mikaël*, with Mauritz Stiller having already directed *The Wings* (aka *Vingarne*) in 1916. The difference with *Michael* is in terms of psychological impact, with Dreyer relying on

visual abstractions like the closeup in order to represent the inner rather than the outer life. As he noted in his 1943 essay *A Little on Film Style*, “The soul is shown through the style, which is the artist’s way of giving expression to his perception of the material.” With all due respect to Bang’s source material, the real power of Michael lies in Dreyer’s perceptions of it.

Dreyer wrote his adaptation along with German screenwriter Thea von Harbou. Claude Zoret (Benjamin Christensen) is a famous painter who lives with his artistic muse Eugène Michael (Walter Slezak). Since Michael can’t support himself, Zoret has taken the model under his wing in more ways than one. (Given the differences in their ages, wealth, and social standings, there’s something of an uncomfortable power dynamic at play in Michael, although that doesn’t necessarily seem to have been Dreyer’s intent.) When the penniless Princess Lucia Zamikow (Nora Gregor) commissions Zoret to paint her portrait, she’s hoping to use that as a way to seduce him in order to gain access to his money. Zoret is impervious to her charms since he can’t find inspiration in anyone other than Michael, but Zamikow quickly realizes that the bisexual model is far more open to her advances. She uses him to steal from Zoret, driving a wedge between the two that spirals into tragedy. Michael also stars Robert Garrison, Max Auzinger, Didier Aslan, and Grete Mosheim. (Watch for cinematographer Karl Freund in a cameo as Zoret’s art dealer.)

While the exact nature of Michael’s relationship with Zoret is left unspoken, he’s obviously a kept man, both financially and emotionally reliant on his mentor. By 1924, many of the familiar tropes of the cinema were already firmly established, and Dreyer used them to his advantage in order to make the implicit nature of their liaison explicit. Micheal is clearly coded as feminine by the way that he’s photographed, with Dreyer frequently giving him the kind of glamorous, soft-focus female closeups that would become so prevalent during Hollywood’s Golden Age. Micheal is the primary love interest in this triangle, torn between his older male lover and a gold-digging woman. They’re both using him, although only Zoret’s affections carry any real emotional weight.

Michael was indeed Zoret’s muse, and without his young protégé, Zoret can find no meaning in either his art or his life. The motto that opens Michael actually consists of Zoret’s closing words in the film: “I can die in peace now, since I have seen true love.” But has he? The disturbing ending of Michael shows the young man in the arms of the Princess, held at the bottom of the frame like an ingénue swept off her feet by Rudolph Valentino. Yet there’s no room in Zamikow’s heart for anyone but Zamikow, and Michael’s passiveness with her exemplifies the hollow nature of his own relationships with everyone else. That Zoret genuinely loved his muse is beyond doubt, but the ease with which Zamikow has led Michael astray begs the question of whether or not that love was genuinely returned. Dreyer may have coded Michael as feminine, but the young man is actually effete in every sense of the term—he’s incapable of taking effective action on his own without being pushed to do so. The tragedy of Michael isn’t just in terms of the social marginalization of homosexuality; it’s also in Michael’s inability to live the lifestyle that he’s chosen. In that sense, Michael presaged later films like *Brokeback Mountain*.

Karl Freund shot Michael on 35 mm film using spherical lenses, framed at 1.33:1 for its theatrical release. This 1080p version is derived from a 2006 restoration by the Danish Film Institute in collaboration with the Friedrich-Wilhelm-Murnau-Stiftung (aka the F.W. Murnau Foundation), using the original negative held by the Bundesarchiv-Filmarchiv. Scanning and digital restoration was performed at 2K resolution by Digital Filmlab, with final mastering work done by Omnimago in Germany. (Note that the post-war German intertitles were recently replaced with newly typeset digital

titles). The resulting image is generally sharp and detailed, although a few shots throughout the film look like they were derived from dupe elements since they're coarser and grainier. There's some instability that wasn't ironed out (the digital tools at the time might not have been up to the task), and there are frequent scratches, speckles, and larger blemishes still left behind, but they're all mild and not very bothersome. The grayscale is good, as is the contrast range. The only possible issue is that a few of the highlights were mastered a little hot and verge on being blown out, but that may also have been due to issues with the source. Regardless of any minor flaws, it's a solid presentation for a silent from this era.

Audio is offered in 2.0 DTS-HD Master Audio, with optional English subtitles for the German intertitles. The extraordinary musical accompaniment for Michael was composed by Pierre Oser in 1994 for a trio of clarinet, cello, and piano. He later arranged it for a small orchestra of woodwinds, brass, and strings in 2006. This is the original trio version, although it's not clear when it actually recorded. Regardless, his efforts are well-represented here in lossless quality audio. It's definitely a modern work, as Oser played around with various modes to create a disquieting sonic landscape. Even when he strays into light jazz for a few scenes, the emphasis is always on dissonance—he loved having the pianist hold the sustain pedal down to maintain discordant overtones in the background. Come for Carl Th. Dreyer's Michael, stay for Pierre Oser's music.

The following extra is included:

Audio Commentary by Amanda Doxtater and Maxine Savage

Amanda Doxtater is an Associate Professor in the Department of Scandinavian Studies at the University of Washington, while Maxine Savage is a doctoral candidate at the same institution. They describe this commentary as the results of a series of conversations, with Doxtater providing general background information on the film and its place in Dreyer's filmography, and Savage giving context about the its literary source. In practice, however, they both speak equally fluidly about the film and the novel. They talk about Dreyer's use of visuals to convey the differential power relationship between Zoret and Michael, keeping the nature of their relationship subtextual rather than overt. Per Susan Sontag's definition in her essay *Notes on Camp*, they define much of Dreyer's imagery in Michael as being campy, and note how that's in stark contrast to his other work. They also argue that there's a possibility that he was maintaining some ironic distance to the material, with the finale being too unsettling to be read as a convincing resolution. Dreyer said that Michael was before its time, and the fact that its seemingly simple story can be interpreted on different levels stands as proof of that fact.

It's a valuable commentary, but note that it's replacing the one with Casper Tybjerg that Kino Lorber had originally included on their 2004 DVD release of Michael. They ended up licensing that track to Eureka Entertainment for their 2018 *Masters of Cinema* Region B Blu-ray release, so it's possible that's why they couldn't offer it here. That Eureka disc also included a David Cairns Video Essay and an audio interview with Dreyer. I don't have their version, so I can't compare the transfers between the two, but it's likely that they both use the same basic master. The primary differences come down to the extras and the Region coding, so for anyone without Region free capability, Kino Lorber's Blu-ray is the only way to fly. Michael deserves to be seen regardless.

- Stephen Bjork

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