LARS VON TRIER'S WOMEN

Edited by Rex Butler
and David Denny

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Introduction: The feminine act and the question of woman in Lars von Trier's films

Rex Butler and David Denny

'I understand Hitler. I can sympathize with him a little bit.' The 'Nazi' remark made by Danish director Lars von Trier at the premiere of his film *Melancholia* at the Cannes Film Festival in 2011 is infamous, but as the website *Senses of Cinema* reminds us it is other comments made just before this that are equally as concerning.[1] Sitting in front of a crowd of journalists and photographers at the press conference with the two lead actresses of the film, Kirsten Dunst, who plays the character Justine who suffers melancholia in the film, and Charlotte Gainsbourg, who plays her sister Claire who is trying to help her, von Trier begins by saying that his next film will be a porn film, starring Dunst, who immediately says no, and Gainsbourg. Dunst, then trying to make things up, emphasizes that she and von Trier are still friends, while Gainsbourg for her part admits that after three films with him she feels as though she doesn't really know him. In response to this, von Trier then says to Gainsbourg that he 'knows her well from every angle', at which Gainsbourg nervously laughs. He then extraordinarily suggests that Dunst asked him for a 'beaver shot' during the making of *Melancholia*, despite him telling her it wouldn't be suitable, before elaborating on his hypothetical porn film: 'Charlotte is behind it. I said there would be lots of dialogue, but Charlotte replied: "We don't give a shit about the dialogue". So there will be lots of unpleasant sex, a hard core film.' By this point, Dunst has her head in her hands, while Gainsbourg can be seen edging away from von Trier on her chair, trying to put as much distance between the two of them as possible.

There is no shortage of controversy surrounding von Trier and women. A search on the Internet entering the two terms 'von Trier' and 'women' will produce some 42,000 hits. On the first page of entries, we have a

website entitled 'Sometimes a Misogynist is Just a Misogynist', which is balanced immediately after by another asking 'Lars von Trier Doesn't Hate Women, So Why Won't the Myth of Misogyny Die?' The pattern is repeated just a few entries down with the posting of an article from the *New York Times* entitled 'Hard Life for a von Trier Heroine', followed by a series of clips from his films, purporting to show that he is not a misogynist but is in fact pro-woman. Then just a click away on the next page – less popular, naturally – comes the first of the academic essays, 'Women, Suffering and Redemption in Three Films of Lars von Trier' by Carleen Mandolfo, originally published in the journal *Literature and Theology*, and then again another essay, this time not an individual posting but a feature from the long-running online politics and culture magazine *Slate*, which asks 'Is Lars von Trier a Misogynist?' before tentatively concluding 'maybe not'.

The question of Lars von Trier and women is obviously a complex and controversial one. Women fill central roles and dramatize the abiding concerns of his cinema, all the way from virtually his first film *Menthe – The Blissful* (1979), in which two women decide together to leave a religious order, through to (at the time of writing) his latest film, *Nymphomaniac* (2013), which tells the story of Joe and her sex life from adolescence to adulthood. And in between there are a whole series of important roles for women and celebrated performances by women actresses, who either become well known as a result of working with von Trier or bring to his films the prestige built up over long and successful careers. There is the Danish actress Kirsten Oleson, who plays Medea, a role previously filled by the great soprano Maria Callas, in von Trier's film version of Euripides' classic play. There is the now highly regarded English actress Emily Watson, who plays in her first major film role Bess, the naïve young woman who sacrifices herself to cure her crippled oil worker husband Jan in *Breaking the Waves* (1996). There is the cult Icelandic rock musician Björk Guðmundsdóttir, who plays the almost blind Selma, who is hanged for stealing money for her son's eye operation in *Dancer in the Dark* (2000), for which she also wrote the music. And, perhaps finally, there is the American actress Bryce Dallas Howard, who plays the character Grace in *Manderlay* (2005), in a role previously filled by the prominent Australian actress Nicole Kidman, and who later went on to play the part of the park manager in the recent Hollywood blockbuster *Jurassic World* (2015).

The roles these women play have been culturally resonant, prompting widespread discussion about the social situation of women in western society more generally. In this sense, von Trier can be seen to go against the commonly perceived dearth of substantial roles for women actresses – especially for those not young and beautiful – not only in Hollywood but also in independent cinema. And they are not merely roles as the complementary other half in a standard drama or romantic comedy. The roles are varied; the backgrounds and occupations of the women are richly

sketched. They are often understood to stand alone and not simply to attain their identity as the other half of a heterosexual couple. Indeed, von Trier frequently asserts – again, further challenging the conventional sexual division – that he actually identifies more with the female than the male characters in his films, that they more truly represent him and his inner self. In this regard, we might even describe von Trier, invoking a prior tradition of especially Hollywood cinema of the 1940s and 1950s, associated with such figures as George Cukor, Douglas Sirk and Vincente Minnelli, as a 'woman's' director, a director for whom women and not men are the central characters (and, like those other directors, von Trier often explores melodramatic constructions in his films).

However, as has often been noted – hence the conflicting interpretations of his films and, indeed, the widespread criticism and condemnation they have received – for all of von Trier's privileging of women, what often happens to them is sacrifice, suffering and hardship. Medea, of course, is left by her husband Jason for Glauce, daughter of King Creon. Bess in *Breaking the Waves* is eventually killed by a shipful of murderous sailors. Selma in *Dancer in the Dark* ends up being hanged for stealing money to save her son's sight. Grace in *Dogville* is mistreated and ostracized by the citizens of Dogville, and in *Manderlay* is driven out by the very plantation workers she originally helped liberate. And the same fate can be seen to befall the female characters of such other of von Trier's films as *Epidemic* (1987), *Europa* (1991), *The Idiots* (1998) and *Antichrist* (2009).

It is as though, for all of von Trier's purported identification with his female characters, he actually enjoys putting them through their torments. And whether this is a simple sadism and hatred of women or a reflected masochism and hatred of himself, it does not ultimately matter. It is certainly something that exercises his critics and leads to their accusations of misogyny. Thus, to return to those websites we looked at a moment ago, in 'Sometimes a Misogynist is Just a Misogynist', Batya Ungar-Sargon writes of *Nymphomaniac*: 'The film and everyone in it hates anything feminine. It's porn for the 21st century man.'[2] Or, in a slightly more nuanced response, David Gritten in the UK's *Daily Telegraph* in a piece entitled 'Lars von Trier: Antichrist? Or Just Anti-Woman?' argues that, while von Trier is not straightforwardly misogynistic, he is nevertheless culpable of putting his female characters (and the actresses who play them) through unnecessary torments: 'The Great Dane, we may deduce, seems to get a kick out of putting his screen women in jeopardy or in violent situations.'[3] And it is certainly something that academic treatments of von Trier also draw attention to, with Linda Badley in her important survey *Lars von Trier* (2011) feeling that she has to begin by justifying as a woman the very subject of her study: 'Prepared by my feminism for an onslaught of misogyny [in von Trier's films], I was instead transfixed, stunned and moved to see more of his films.'[4]

But then, as has also been observed, virtually the only other constant throughout all of von Trier's films is that his suffering female characters perform a 'transformative' act of some kind, which might be regarded as a protest against the treatment they receive and perhaps more generally against the society that would permit and encourage such suffering. Or, if it is too simple to regard the acts by these women as a protest against the treatment they receive, they can nevertheless be understood as opening up an alternative to the world in which they have to endure this suffering. In one way or another, they gesture towards another scene and therefore occupy a political character worthy of a theoretical intervention that transcends common sense and good versus evil pronouncements.

Thus, most notably or at least the instance critics most often return to in discussing this aspect of von Trier's work, the actions of Bess in *Breaking the Waves* in going back to the ship where she is probably raped and certainly killed seem impossibly to lead to her crippled husband walking again and a certain feminine jouissance being restored to the oppressive, male-dominated Presbyterian community that had previously shunned her. But this kind of transformative miracle occurs in virtually all of von Trier's films, from the actress Gitte Lind crossing the boundary between fact and fiction in *Epidemic*, to Grace in *Dogville* unexpectedly exacting revenge against the villagers who have disrespected her, to 'She' in *Antichrist* invoking an amoral nature against her controlling husband, to Joe in *Nymphomaniac* shooting her male and perhaps too inquisitive interlocutor, to, on a truly cosmic scale, Justine in *Melancholia* communing with the rogue planet Melancholy in its path toward Earth, thus doing away with the world that had depressed and oppressed her

The difficult question in the interpretation of von Trier's films is what is the meaning of these acts? How to put together what seem to be the two common factors of von Trier's *oeuvre*: his heroines' suffering and the redemptive act they end up performing? Von Trier himself speaks of the essential drama of his films in terms of a 'clash between ideal and reality',[5] but it is obviously more complicated than this. It appears that in some sense the heroines' suffering and betrayal is necessary so that they can perform their act. It is only at their most extreme point when they are totally excluded from society that these women are in a position to carry out that transformative act that alters the situation completely. But the question is whether this act must be understood as compensation for this suffering or in any way an excuse for it. In other words, it might be not so much that suffering is necessary for the act as that the act is necessary for the infliction of suffering. And it is ultimately this that leads – in the more elaborated accusations of von Trier's misogyny – to the argument that it is not that von Trier directly oppresses women but that he justifies their oppression on the basis of some unlikely and indemonstrable miracle that does not effectively change the status of the woman who carries it out. Von Trier is a misogynist

not for directly imposing suffering on these women (although he does), but for believing that some other-worldly act could somehow alleviate their suffering, and therefore in some way justify it.

We see this ambiguity played out symptomatically (and even we might say programmatically) by the successive responses of one of the most important critics on von Trier, Slavoj Žižek. It is notable that in his early and influential essay on *Breaking the Waves*, 'Femininity between Goodness and Act', Žižek, despite a number of hesitations, appears to approve of the 'equation' made in the film between Bess's physical suffering and exclusion and the quasi-divine miracle of her resurrection of Jan. The triumphant outcome appears retrospectively to justify or explain the treatment meted out to Bess or at least to incorporate it within a wider economy that is at once social, psychic and political:

> It is easy to discover in her act what Lacan has defined as the modern, post-classical tragedy: the highest sacrifice is not to remain pure, intact, for the absent (or impotent) lover, but to sin for him, to besmirch oneself for him.[6]

But some five years later in the Introduction to his selection of Lenin's writings, *Revolution at the Gates*, Žižek is no longer prepared to justify Bess's suffering on the basis of some eventual transformative act or necessity of artistic form. He not only does not believe in any 'equivalence' between suffering and redemption, but also cannot justify what von Trier does to his female characters in any sense:

> [Bess's] progressive suffering and inexorable self-destruction can put us in the position of the sadistic observer secretly observing what he officially condemns: this sadistic pleasure is the obverse, the hidden truth, of compassion. And for this, von Trier should never be forgiven.[7]

However – and the question is whether this makes it better or worse for von Trier – it is possible that there is no direct relationship between the suffering these women undergo and the act they perform. There is no quid pro quo or any kind of material or spiritual exchange between them. That is, these women when they perform their act do not necessarily represent any wider cause, not even that of woman. There is simply nothing that comes before what they do, which transforms everything around it. The suffering they undergo is not counted, not remarked, as either the cause of or justification for the action they undertake. Again, to take the example of Bess: when she decides to go back to the boat, she does not do it in any spirit of 'revenge' against the way she has been treated. She is perhaps not even doing it so that her actions will be noticed and recorded on some symbolic ledger. (If she speaks to God while she is deciding whether to do it or not, her decision

also corresponds to her realizing that she does not need God.) And she undertakes it therefore without any guarantee that it will bring about that miraculous course she desires. She does it, we might suggest, in its own terms, as though the doing of it were its own justification.

This is certainly a view of the actions undertaken by the women in von Trier's films that we see in a number of the essays here, drawing on some aspect of Lacanian theory. In Lacan, a distinction is made between the 'masculine' symbolic order, in which something like those acts we are looking at is understood as an exception to the social, undertaken for a reason, spoken in the name of a cause that is opposed to or higher than the existing order, and the 'feminine' symbolic order, in which the act is not understood as an other to the social or performed in the name of some higher cause. The 'masculine' act, for all of its opposition to the existing order, nevertheless understands itself as undertaken in the name of something still nameable within it, as though the values it represents were simply not yet recognized. The 'feminine' act, by contrast, is carried out in the name of something that cannot yet (and perhaps never will) be named and recognized, and therefore seems excessive and unjustifiable. And the success or failure of this second kind of act is not so easily assessed or evaluated, exactly because it challenges the conventional norms of assessment and evaluation.

Indeed, it is this – to return once more to the question of the contrasting, indeed opposed, evaluations of von Trier's cinema – that is the problem at stake in the construction of von Trier's own films. For, insofar as something like this 'feminine' act is at stake in them, it cannot be a question of formal organization, with its assumptions of narrative causality, thematic patterning and psychological plausibility. Rather, the act – if it is to be authentic – must break with all of these. Hence the artistic challenge of all of von Trier's films: to present this act when it is not strictly a matter of introducing it, explaining it or even following its consequences. This again is the difficulty of thinking about the question of misogyny in von Trier's cinema. Beyond any narrative justification of it (that it is his heroines suffering that either allows or is redeemed by their act) or any psychological explanation of it (it is something either in them or von Trier that explains it), it is possible that the suffering of these women is inflicted in itself: their acts neither come out of nor justify any prior circumstance, but break with everything that comes before them, leaving it behind. In a sense, the woman who undertakes the act is simply not the same woman who suffers. Woman's suffering is not something that her act in any way speaks to, explains or justifies.

This is the constant risk von Trier's films run in terms of conventional accounts of cinema (whose assumptions we all in part share): that the events depicted in them appear excessive, unjustified, inexplicable, that von Trier does not master the form of his films, contriving his endings, bringing

events to a too sudden conclusion without properly preparing his audience. It is certainly this accusation that has been levelled at some of his films, for example, Grace's sudden appeal to her Father to restore justice in *Dogville* by killing the townsfolk, the terrible 'revenge' wrought by 'She' in *Antichrist* (She crushing His testicles with a block of wood, and later severing her own clitoris) and even – despite the world-wide publicity campaign attempting to assure the success of the film in advance – the shooting of Seligman by Joe at the end of *Nymphomaniac*. But this is not the proper way to judge these acts and therefore not the proper way to evaluate von Trier presenting them. These acts, insofar as we might say they are 'feminine', are precisely not to be explained by the usual narrative, social and psychological criteria they would render invalid. The paradoxical requirement of von Trier's films might be that it is not when he does not offer explanation for the acts in them that he fails, but when he does, or when the act ends up being able to be explained by something else.

It is these considerations that we hope justify this collection of essays. Beyond each of the individual responses, what we seek to show is a range of responses, indeed, the difficulty of knowing how to respond to a von Trier film. In a sense, there is an obvious contradiction in calling this collection *Lars von Trier's Women* because these women and the actions they perform do not form any kind of a collective, are not able to be generalized. We simply do not know how to respond to von Trier's next film on the basis of those before. This is the actual experience of his films when they are 'successful'. We are moved by a series of individual characters, who are defined by a number of general circumstances and constraints and even the narrative and formal conventions of the film; and yet at the same time they leave these behind, gesturing towards something that is not known, has not been seen before and that must be responded to without any recognized criteria to guide us: the sheer idiosyncratic uniqueness of the appearance, psychology and motivations of such characters as Katharina in *Europa*, Karen in *The Idiots* and Selma in *Dancer in the Dark*. And in a way this is also how we must think of the wider social concerns and even social 'critique' of von Trier's films: when he speaks of the Depression trilogy as about his own personal psychology or the USA Land of Opportunities trilogy as a critique of US foreign policy, it is exactly not a matter of him responding to objective circumstances that exist before the act, but rather of what is newly visible through the acts he represents, that part of the meaning of these acts is what else they allow us to see.

The criteria for this feminine act and hence the question of woman in von Trier's films can only ever be judged in themselves. Indeed, it cannot even be properly understood as an act unless it is seen as breaking with what is around it, which is also to say that part of what makes it an act is that it brings about the very criteria by which it is judged. But are there any criteria of judgement implied by the act, and is there any way of saying

that some of von Trier's films are better than others? This is also what is at stake in the essays collected here. Our various contributors disagree about the success or failure of various von Trier films and the acts depicted in them. But there is something else at stake here that is just as important as these individual assessments and what they have to tell us about the impossibility of objectivity, which we might say involves a matter not so much of 'content' as 'form'. It might be put this way: that even when we do make a judgement about a particular film there remains a kind of delay, a distance, a sense of the original ambiguity and un-interpretability of the film that does not go away. In a sense, that is, we would make a contrast between those websites and postings we originally spoke of that make immediate and unequivocal decisions about von Trier's message and the essays we have collected here. And the profound question is whether this is merely a question of academic propriety or some true dimension of the act they seek to capture. Those acts we witness in von Trier's films do finally require a response and reaction and do not exist without them – this is what von Trier means by 'provocation' as a shorthand – but there is perhaps a distinction to be made between a certain hysterical *passage à l'acte*, which is not a real act and simply believes that it succeeds, and a proper act, about which it is impossible to say whether it has fully succeeded or not, which is always in a sense incomplete. These essays attempt to capture something of the time of the experience of von Trier's films when we do not know what we are seeing in their refusal to rush to judgement.

We begin here by reprinting two essays that we see as 'foundational' for our exercise: the first is an excerpt from the chapter 'Performing the feminine' of Linda Badley's *Lars von Trier*, which both of us read and admired. Badley's book offers an excellent overview of von Trier and his range of artistic and intellectual influences (Carl Dreyer, Ingmar Bergman, David Lynch, August Strindberg, Bertolt Brecht, Friedrich Nietzsche), but more importantly makes the point that woman is a problematic within von Trier's films with a strong sense of the challenge this constitutes for conventional approaches to cinema. In her paper she attributes to the militant aesthetic of Dogme 95 the unexpected opening up of von Trier to the feminine, that is, to those more emotionally intense and borderline areas that women have traditionally occupied relative to patriarchy. Dogme 95's formal procedures, she argues, have the effect of pushing the spectator past voyeurism or outright disdain and instead provoking ethical and conceptual discomfort. The other 'foundational' text for this collection, as for any number of other scholars working on von Trier, is Slavoj Žižek's 'Femininity between Goodness and Act', originally published in the journal *Lacanian Ink* in 1999. If von Trier can be seen as a director of the feminine 'act', it is Žižek who first gives theoretical meaning to this, reading his work through Lacan's notorious 'formulae of sexuation'. This groundbreaking short essay inverts the popular impression that *Breaking the Waves* merely

celebrates the feminine act of sacrifice as supporting male masturbatory fantasies. On the contrary, Žižek argues, it is Bess's excessive identification with and realization of this fantasy that not only subverts the male position but also gestures to a space not contained by it – until, that is, her act is redeemed in the end via a typically postmodern obscurantist twist.[8]

The book then loosely follows the order of von Trier's filmography, with the more generally thematic essays towards the front. We intentionally selected essays that covered the USA Land of Opportunities films, and chose two essays each for the members of the more recent Depression trilogy – for the good reason that academic scholarship on the later films is still catching up to the popular press, as well as the desire to provide multiple views onto this important series of films. We begin with an essay by Ulrike Hanstein entitled 'Listening to *Dancer in the Dark*: Singing as recalling the world', which draws from her book *Unknown Woman, geprügelter Held: Die melodramatische Filmästhetik bei Lars von Trier und Aki Kaurismäki* (2011), and which seeks to read von Trier's work through the lens of melodrama, especially as theorized by Stanley Cavell's influential study of Hollywood melodramas of the 1930s and 1940s, *Contesting Tears: The Hollywood Melodramas of the Unknown Woman* (1996). In particular, Hanstein analyses a sequence from von Trier's *Dancer in the Dark* in which the character Selma sings the Rogers and Hammerstein classic 'My Favourite Things', while locked up in a prison cell awaiting execution. Following Cavell's treatment of the human voice as a way of overcoming the isolation of the human in both opera and melodrama, it is noted how in this sequence Selma communicates both with others in the prison and to the audience through her singing.

Rex Butler's essay 'A woman's smile' seeks to develop aspects of Žižek's treatment of the act, particularly in terms of what it would mean to think of the act not as any kind of statable exception to the social order (which also means within it), but as what remarks the social order as a whole from somewhere 'outside' of it. In what sense is the act then thinkable or, in terms of von Trier's films, representable? How, nevertheless, might we see a whole genealogy of films, particularly from Hollywood, that similarly raise questions concerning this feminine act? Butler's discussion of the act concludes by providing a frame by which we may consider the feminine acts in von Trier's films as being 'successful' or not, 'authentic' or not. Sheila Kunkle's 'Female fight club: Lars von Trier's women and the paradox of Being' provides a nice compliment to Butler, in that she develops this precise question through an extended discussion of *Breaking the Waves*, *Melancholia* and *Nymphomaniac*. By framing her discussion with regard to the well-known 1999 David Fincher film *Fight Club*, she re-situates the question of masochism from a masculine to a feminine register. Contrary to the men in *Fight Club*, who are responding to the alienating effect of the one-dimensionality of capitalism, the women in von Trier's films are already

out of joint, that is, this is how his women arrive on the scene. As such, they confront an impasse of Being or the Real of a contingent event and must find a way to go on from there. Far from being misogynist, Kunkle argues that von Trier explores the enigmas of love, sex and death, themes that index feminine jouissance and Lacan's feminine ethics. Angelos Koutsourakis's essay, 'Cruelty and the Real: The female figure in *Orchidégartneren*, *Menthe – la bienheureuse* and *Befrielsesbilleder*', provides an important study of the link between von Trier's early student films and his later professional films. In particular, Koutsourakis foregrounds his discussion with Alain Badiou's notion of the passion for the real, and then remarks the influence of Artaudian cruelty and the work of Rainer Werner Fassbinder in order to point out how these early films can help us understand recent developments in von Trier's representation and treatment of his female protagonists.

We then turn to two essays that deal with von Trier's politically charged USA Land of Opportunities films. Lorenzo Chiesa's 'What is the gift of Grace? On *Dogville*' and Ahmed Elbeshlawy's '*Manderlay*: The gift, Grace's desire, and the collapse of ideology' argue, although differently, that the films respectively succeed in traversing the social fantasy of the gift as either a pure or simple act of giving or a way to manage symbolic exchange to offer far more political and socially charged insights that expose the conceits of power and fantasy relative to the gift (of either tolerance or freedom). Chiesa, for example, reads the stunning final sequence of *Dogville*, where Grace orders her Father's men to execute the town's people, as enacting her own traversal of the fantasy of grace as a sacrificial object. She essentially remains faithful, according to Chiesa, to the evental truth of grace – the initial, chance-like character of a gesture that marks a distinction from mere animality – by executing the inhabitants of Dogville, that is, by deciding not to become like them, as she says just prior to having them killed. The transition from *Dogville* to *Manderlay* is significant because now Grace has assumed a positive relation to power; she aims to bring freedom to the slaves who wilfully remain on their plantation after the Emancipation Proclamation. And Elbeshlawy now redirects our focus to Grace's desire: what does she want, especially with regard to a few key scenes in which she fantasizes about, later whips, and is finally raped by, one of the black slaves. Here Elbeshlawy not only provides the context through which the typical Hollywood film treats the black body as a cinematic gift, as an object of desire and fascination, but also elaborates how freedom is always constrained and over-determined by the symbolic. By pushing Grace's desire to the point of exposing its inherent lack, Elbeshlawy demonstrates how these scenes disturb our common-sense understanding of human freedom, which thus takes the film beyond its apparently racist discourse.

The Depression trilogy provides a remarkable shift from the Brechtian austerity of the former two films in terms of cinematic form, as it is shot in

a highly mannered style, with special effects and extensive flashback scenes. In *Antichrist*, we witness the She protagonist fall into a debilitating grieving process after the sudden loss of her child, a process that is never worked out, but rather devolves into a series of violent acts. Both of our essays here, Magdalena Zolkos's 'Violent affects: Nature and the feminine in *Antichrist*' and David Denny's 'A postmodern family romance: *Antichrist*', consider how the signifier nature functions within the narrative of the film, not only in terms of how it relates to a masculine and feminine symbolic economy, but also how it helps put into context the violence that ensues towards the end of the film. Zolkos pays special attention to how the violence affects the spectator, situating us outside of a rationalist or psychological point of identification. Zolkos goes on to make an acute distinction: while the female protagonists in earlier von Trier films became allegorical figures of divine sacrifice or the gift of love, the She protagonist marks a radical departure for von Trier insofar as '[her] body is situated outside the possibility of sacrificial destruction'. Denny's essay for its part attempts to locate the violent acts in relation to a series of flashback scenes. While these flashbacks do not explain the psychology behind these acts, they do suggest a passage, that is, a movement from a feeling of unsurpassable guilt enflamed and mocked by her superego to an act (of freedom) that opens up a space from within a symbolic deadlock that not only defines her relation to her husband, but updates Freud's notion of the modern family romance.

Melancholia is set within a palatial estate that is utterly cut off from the world, and is bookended by a marriage ceremony gone comically wrong and literally the end of the world when the stealth planet Melancholia collides with Earth. The essential question that our two essays, Todd McGowan's 'Not melancholic enough' and Jennifer Friedlander's 'How to face nothing: *Melancholia* and the feminine', ask is: what does it mean to face loss and, in the larger sense, the collapse of the symbolic order, that is, the end of the world as such? McGowan takes seriously, as though it were a Freudian slip, von Trier's public avowal at Cannes of having an affinity with a Nazi aesthetic, discussed earlier, by linking it to the way the end of the world as such is aestheticized in his film. What von Trier fails to grasp, according to McGowan, is the way subjectivity can be thought of as 'an alternative to the suffocating life of capitalist modernity' – rather than the elevation of a romantic pathos that ultimately affirms death. Friedlander, on the other hand, praises Justine's comportment in relation to loss by framing her responses within Lacan's elaboration of the 'feminine position' of sexuation. Friedlander goes on to argue that Justine's final tent-making exercise represents an acceptance of the real over reality, as a way of understanding how the feminine position lives within the contradiction of a certain 'not-all'.

Hilary Neroni's essay 'Lars von Trier's fantasy of femininity in *Nymphomaniac*' carefully explores the double-edged sword of von Trier's

representation of a nymphomaniac. On the one hand, Neroni describes how Joe's fidelity to her sex drive uncovers a radical femininity in the face of a patriarchal social order. On the other hand, Neroni points out how this radicality remains unrealized due to von Trier's fixation on the solely destructive character of such sexual expression. Neroni demonstrates how Lacan's notion of an internal lack or limit that constitutes subjectivity is something von Trier fails to explore or affirm, which goes contrary to his earlier film *The Five Obstructions* (2003). Finally, Tarja Laine's essay 'Mea maxima vulva: Appreciation and aesthetics of chance in *Nymphomaniac*' affirms the film as a polyphonic cinematic event that places important demands on the spectator, especially as it relates to the tenuous relation between trust (needed to immerse and even lose oneself with the film's unfolding) and chance (the cinematic space placed in time). Von Trier's thoughtful manipulation of this relation sets up moments of resistance that intensify aesthetic appreciation and thereby complicate the controversy around his treatment of his female protagonist, allowing for a more nuanced and troubled reading.

To conclude, what is evident is that throughout his career von Trier has wanted his cinema to constitute something of an act. Although deeply personal, even autobiographical, and coming out of a rich social and artistic context, there is something about it that suggests von Trier wishes to break with this context or explanation. The making of the film itself is intended to be unprecedented and self-challenging, which is why we suggest that the formal construction of each von Trier film is so different, from the documentary of *The Idiots*, the musical of *Dancing in the Dark*, the Brechtianism of *Dogville* and *Manderlay*, the special effects of *Melancholia* and *Antichrist*, to the Sadian dialogue of *Nymphomaniac*. But in fact – and paradoxically – the aim of this 'form' each time is to present something that breaks with it, goes beyond it, can no longer be contained by it. This not only is the thrust of the famous Dogme 95 Manifesto von Trier signed, but is seen in different ways in all of his films: the invocation of a 'reality' that cannot be contained by film (the 'fit' that Gitte Lind throws in *Epidemic*, the 'spassing' of the various participants in *The Idiots*, the sexual close-ups in *Antichrist* and *Nymphomaniac*), the way that the action so often continues after the closing credits (the tolling bells in *Breaking the Waves*, Selma singing in *Dancer in the Dark*, the cosmic rumbling in *Melancholia*). Again, in all of this there is the challenge of responding to von Trier's films, the difficulty of evaluation not only of the success or failure of the events depicted in the film but of the film itself. To come back to the differences between our contributors, it is a question perhaps of whether the spectator feels part of the act depicted, for in a sense this act not only is carried on by the spectator but also would not even exist before it is recognized and responded to by the spectator.

Rex Butler and David Denny

Notes

1 Moira Sullivan, *Senses of Cinema* 59, June 2011. http://sensesofcinema.com/2011/feature-articles/lars-von-triers-other-comments-at-cannes/

2 Batya Ungar-Sargon, 'Sometimes a Misogynist is Just a Misogynist', in *Tablet*, 28 March 2014. http://www.tabletmag.com/scroll/167949/sometimes-a-misogynist-is-just-a-misogynist

3 David Gritten, 'Lars von Trier: Antichrist or just Anti-Women?', *Telegraph*, 16 July 2009. http://www.telegraph.co.uk/culture/film/starsandstories/5843594/Lars-Von-Trier-Antichrist-Or-just-anti-women.html

4 Linda Badley, *Lars von Trier*, Champaign, Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2010, p. ix.

5 Gavin Smith, 'Dance in the Dark', in Jan Lumboldt (ed.), *Lars von Trier: Interviews*, Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2003, p. 148.

6 Slavoj Žižek, 'Femininity between goodness and act'. http://www.lacan.com/symptom14/?p=43

7 Slavoj Žižek, *Revolution at the Gates: Žižek on Lenin, the 1917 Writings*, London: Verso, 2004, p. 217.

8 In a way, it might be suggested that Žižek is arguing with himself in 'Femininity between Act and Goodness' before reaching this final negative evaluation. It is perhaps for this reason that when he next comes to write about *Breaking the Waves* he can start by making the criticisms of it he does. Nevertheless, we would argue that he largely sets the terms for the evaluation of the female act in von Trier's work, whether positive or negative.

1

Performing the feminine

Linda Badley

Where gender is concerned, Dogme 95 represents a fascinating paradox. A 'brotherhood', it advocated an aesthetic Puritanism and 'military' discipline likened to male celibacy. Yet its purpose was to elicit an 'authenticity' associated with 'borderline areas' to which the feminine is relegated. *The Idiots* revels in non-normative intersubjective experience and ends as a woman's melodrama performed with inimitable compression and rawness. Dogme was therefore pivotal to von Trier's shift from a 'masculine' to a 'feminine' mode: from the Euro thriller to a relinquishment of genre, from ('male') ironic distance to ('female') immersion and emotion. Eventually it lent an aesthetic and performative politics to the exploration of the feminine that began as early as 1992, with the development of *Breaking the Waves* (1996), or even earlier, with *Medea* (1988).

This gender shift was announced in von Trier's manifestos over the years.[1] Equating 'politically correct' film-making with castration, the Europa trilogy manifestos proclaimed a masculinist, individualist (autoerotic) aesthetic. 'Manifesto 1' (for *The Element of Crime*) called for 'heterosexual films, made for, about and by men', and the third (for *Europa*) ended with the 'confession': 'LARS VON TRIER, THE TRUE ONANIST OF THE SILVER SCREEN'. By 'Selma's Manifesto' accompanying *Dancer in the Dark*, however, von Trier was openly projecting himself onto female characters as if to 'perform' and explore 'the feminine'. Many if not most feminists would regard this as a pernicious form of displacement. As Tania Modleski explains it, the male represses and reprojects 'feminine' (masochistic) aspects of himself onto a woman, who suffers for both of them, thereby reinstating stereotypes of female victimization and male dominance.[2]

When asked the (loaded) question of why he makes women suffer in (and for) his films, von Trier's answer is disarmingly straightforward: 'Those characters are not women. They are self-portraits,'[3] and his films are psychodramas in which gender roles are metaphorical projections in a role-playing project whose core is an urgent identity politics. Vibeke Windeløv, von Trier's producer from 1996 through 2006, offers this spin: 'In society, women are allowed to express more, emotionally, verbally. Think how rare it is for a male in a movie to say and do all the things women say and do in Lars' films.'[4] Portraying himself as the victim of a kind of male repression, von Trier claims to be repossessing aspects of himself that his parents had discouraged – emotions, religious yearning, *Guld Hjerte* itself – and that the melodramatic Gold Heart trilogy, being 'feminine', was therapeutic. As he insisted to Gavin Smith, all his films involve 'a clash between an ideal and reality', and his females are stronger than his men. They 'take the ideal all the way'. 'My mother was strong. I think maybe that's why', he adds. 'But let's not talk in terms of men and women. I feel kind of female, myself, to some degree.'[5] Von Trier of course *does* talk in terms of men and women, especially in his role as a moralist whose ethics, Caroline Bainbridge claims, are framed by gender 'as a component of human nature'.[6] The performance of gender is thus central to his explorations of extremes of sadism and masochism in self, culture and politics.

Thus, his most dramatic career move may be approached as a shift from the distanced, cold and 'masculine' to the intimate, florid and 'feminine', and from protagonists who are failures to protagonists who are successful – if in a seriously qualified sense. While all von Trier's protagonists follow a 'failed idealist' trajectory, those in the Europa trilogy become lost in labyrinthine networks of power and end up harming those they sought to help. They are victims of their own logic, limited to the discourses of power that constitute 'Europe' or the symbolic order, and each film ends in a figurative or literal abyss. In contrast, the Gold Heart heroines adopt an oppositional 'feminine' logic and 'transcend' the symbolic in exemplary acts of self-martyrdom, affecting witnesses and shocking audiences. In contrast to von Trier's male failures – who simply fail *at* power relations – his excessively 'good' women oppose power, often (as Bainbridge argues) through a Christian humanist ethic based on love.[7] If, from the perspective of power relations and material conditions, the 'Gold Hearts' re-enact the victimization and failure of women throughout history, they have the dubious consolation of transcendence …

Breaking the Waves was the first of von Trier's films to be disparaged for his now signature use (or abuse) of women to perform an extreme stereotype (of martyred femininity) in order to produce a preternaturally intense affect. While sustaining the elite tradition of Scandinavian existential melodrama, it also drew on the classical era 'woman's picture' or 'weepie' epitomized and ironized in the films of Douglas Sirk. At one time nearly

alone among Hollywood films in articulating women as active subjects (rather than objects of what Laura Mulvey has described as a fetishistic or voyeuristic-sadistic 'male gaze'), this subgenre, as Molly Haskell first noted, put a woman 'at the centre of the universe'.[8] The catch debated by feminists (Mary Ann Doane and Linda Williams) was its inherently masochistic theme (sacrifice for love) and the 'wet, wasted afternoons' that it produced.[9] Von Trier represents the alternatives while pulling out all stops, celebrating a woman's sacrifice for her husband (*Breaking the Waves*), adoptive family (*The Idiots*) and male child (*Dancer in the Dark*). As Haskell sees it, the woman's picture was intrinsically manipulative, based on a conservative, pseudo-Aristotelian aesthetic 'whereby women spectators are moved, not by pity and fear but by self-pity and tears, to accept, rather than reject, their lot'.[10]

Psychoanalytic approaches took this a step further. Lacking enabling 'masculine' distance (the male gaze's defence/displacement mechanisms), the female spectator is vulnerable, positioned to 'over-identify' with the suffering heroine and succumb to deliciously passive melancholy.[11] Nicole Kidman's 2008 *Entertainment Weekly* article might seem a case in point. After seeing the film, she cancelled a dinner appointment, 'went home, got into bed, curled up in a ball, and cried', adding, 'I don't know why I had such a profound, deep reaction … It disturbed my spirit.'[12] Yet rather than simply 'wasting' an afternoon, the film moved her to write about her distress twelve years later and provoked her to work with von Trier on *Dogville*. Unlike the typical tear fest, the experience of *Breaking the Waves* went beyond pleasurable emotion, provoking deep ethical and intellectual discomfort and the sort of boundary transgressing stimulation that Žižek, among others, calls jouissance.

Žižek finds the key to its effect in the tension between its melodramatic narrative and naturalistic style,[13] causing audiences to experience the film in all its excess as 'real'. In contrast to the visual arena projected by the typical camera 'gaze', the spectator's relation to the image is haptic, reflexive-kinaesthetic or, to use Per Kirkeby's term, 'tropistic'.[14] Plunging us into a succession of one- or two-person close-ups, invading spectators' space to the point of inducing nausea, the film insists on proximity, restricting us within Bess's emotional space. Images are always fragmented; faces never fill the screen, an effect enhanced by the widescreen CinemaScope format. Constant panning and harsh edits break up the already washed out, dissolving image, with the visual disorientation projecting her increasing delirium. Immersing us in her unprotected emotionalism, the film forces audiences, regardless of gender, to experience the brunt and range of her desire, pleasure and suffering. Thus converted into an unsettlingly vital experience of the world, Bess eludes fetishization.

Refusing to 'capture' her essence onscreen, von Trier's camera allows her to elude the frame. Or, rather, something of her is constantly moving

outside it, suggesting, as Žižek puts it, 'a mysterious jouissance beyond Phallus about which nothing can be said'.[15]

Complementing this is the self-reflexive gesture in which she looks directly at the camera, breaking the frame and creating complicity with the audience. As Watson has said, 'For an actor to look into the camera' is a 'great privilege', like looking 'into the heart of the film'.[16] Thus *Breaking the Waves* embodies a paradox. If it forces women into a 'feminized' proximity to the image without refuge from the masochism of Bess's position, it also demonstrates the image's ability to gaze *back*, asserting its/her autonomy and control.

One issue often taken for granted in feminist responses is the *male* spectator who, considering von Trier's inspiration in Sade's *Justine*, is important. A related issue is von Trier's conception of the trilogy as a relinquishment of 'masculine' distantiation in an attempt to recover the 'feminine' in himself. The period setting reflects an era of sexual discovery and conflict between the 'sexual revolution' and the nascent feminist movement of which von Trier was acutely aware. While playing off pornographic clichés, the scenes before Jan's illness insist on a female perspective, emphasizing Bess's mixed curiosity, pleasure, pain and wonder as she initiates her own 'deflowering'. In their hotel room, Jan performs a striptease; she, still clothed in bridal white, looks over his body, digs her fingers into his pubic hair and experimentally touches his penis. When Jan calls from the rig she delights in porn cliché transgressions ('It's sooooo huge!') and pronounces words like 'prick' with a blend of childlike and sensual relish. Bess experiences the penis not as the Phallus, the emblem of patriarchal law/word, but as a transgression of its Puritan power, or simply as Jan's body and a living, responsive expression of their connection. To the extent that it is a medium for her discovery of desire and pleasure enabling her to become a fuller, more expressive version of herself, Jan's body takes on a traditionally feminine role.

After his accident, which renders him impotent and suicidal, Jan's requests for male masturbatory fantasies underscore his abject and 'feminized' state while also allegorizing the 'male gaze' as sadomasochism by proxy and a defence mechanism against castration, calling attention to the *issue* of voyeurism in a profoundly disturbing way. It is easy to position von Trier and the hypothesized male spectator with Jan as an unbalanced man manipulating Bess to 'feed his sick fantasies', as Dodo puts it, speaking for feminists in the audience. Elsewhere, the gaze is foregrounded and caricatured, as in the bar lined with bestial-looking, stuporous sailors or on the ship, where Udo Kier plays a leering sadist. What is potentially the most voyeuristic scene, in which Kier tells Bess to 'do it with the sailor while I watch', is overstated then abruptly truncated as she fights her way out, providing information about her final 'sacrifice' while keeping it off-screen. Conversely, von Trier highlights the image of the sexualized woman in order