ACADEMY OF PERFORMING ARTS IN PRAGUE

Film and Television School of AMU

Cinema and Digital Media - Screenwriting

MASTER'S THESIS

Constructing a Heroine

The Agency of Lars von Trier's Protagonists

Noar Sahiti

Thesis advisor: Bára Kopecká
Examiner:
Date of thesis defence: 18.09.2020
In partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Fine Arts

Prague, 2020

AKADEMIE MÚZICKÝCH UMĚNÍ V PRAZE

FILMOVÁ A TELEVIZNÍ FAKULTA

DIPLOMOVÁ PRÁCE

Tvorba hrdinky

Aktérství protagonistek Larse von Triera

Noar Sahiti

Vedoucí práce: Bára Kopecká
Oponent práce:
Datum obhajoby: 18.09.2020
Přidělovaný akademický titul: MfA

Praha, 2020

DECLARATION

I hereby declare that I have prepared my Bachelor's Thesis/Master's Thesis, Dissertation independently on the following topic:

Constructing a Heroine
The Agency of Lars von Trier's Protagonists

under the expert guidance of my thesis advisor and with the use of the cited literature and sources.

Prague, date: Signature of the candidate

18.08.2020

ABSTRACT

This thesis examines the conception of a heroine in fiction screenwriting by analyzing the work of Danish filmmaker Lars von Trier. It mainly focuses on the inscribed qualities and characteristics of his female protagonists, and interprets their instrumentality and influence over their narratives, outlining each character's social, emotional, and intellectual entanglements and utilizing their predicaments to assess their agency and empowerment within Lars von Trier's universe. It also addresses the peculiarities of what constitutes a von Trier heroine, referencing Freytag's technique of the drama, and offers a comparative approach between the heroines themselves. The thesis also concentrates on what each of these characters have to say about the state of society, and their resolve in confronting the hardships imposed upon them.

RESUMÉ

Tato práce zkoumá pojetí hrdinky ve scenáristice analýzou díla dánského režiséra Larse von Triera. Práce se zaměřuje především na vlastnosti jeho ženských protagonistek a interpretuje jejich vliv a účel v narativech, vykresluje sociální, emocionální a intelektuální dopady jejich neblahé situace a využívajíc je k analýze jejich schopnosti jednat a účinně působit na své bezprostřední okolí v rámci světa vytvořeného Larsem von Trierem. Práce téže pojednává zvláštnosti konstituce von Trierových hrdinek odkazujíc se na Freytagovu techniku dramatu, a téže provádí vzájemnou komparaci konstrukce hrdinek v rámci palety zkoumaných postav. V neposlední řadě práce také klade otázku, co tyto postavy se svým odhodláním čelit obtížím vypovídají o povaze danné společnosti.

User's Log

By signing below, the user attests that he/she has used this thesis solely for study purposes, and he/she declares that he/she will always cite the thesis appropriately among the sources used.

Name	Institution	Date	Signature

TABLE OF CONTENTS

1. INTRODUCTION

Since Danish filmmaker Lars von Trier burst out onto the international film industry in the mid '80s with his feature debut *The Element of Crime*, it has become evident that the now-prolific auteur has a penchant for dystopia, both in the embroidery of his fictional domains, as well as in conjuring singular characters. Most notoriously, he became renowned and polarizing (Badley, 2011, p. 1) for conceiving protagonists who exhibit inherent traits that, to this day, are perceived as bold and dissonant, at odds with their surroundings, and in palpable discrepancy with societal norms and expectations (Butler & Denny, 2016, p. 12).

With the exception of Carl Theodore Dreyer, Bille August, and to some degree Benjamin Christensen, there has arguably not been a Danish film director who has managed to carve a luminary path of recognition and acknowledgment to the extent of Lars von Trier, especially when cataloged among modern Scandinavian directors.

Growing up in post-war Europe, von Trier witnessed a shock revelation in his mother's deathbed, when she relayed to him that Ulf Trier, whom Lars had known for a father his entire life, was in fact not his biological parent (Badley, 2011, p. 8). Instead, Inger Høst - Lars von Trier's mother - had conceived him with her employer Fritz Michael Hartmann (Badley, 2011, p. 8). Inger considered Michael, who was related to one of Denmark's most famous composers, Johan Peter Emilius

Hartmann, as a fitting match to subscribe "artistic genes" onto her child (Badley, 2011, p.8).

The filmmaker, who by his own admission (Badley, 2011, p. 39) loved his foster father Ulf, was profoundly affected by this revelation and his mother's allegedly manipulative scheme to birth a child with a man she had considered a suitable partner - and who stood in stark contrast with her actual husband Ulf - whom she had described as someone with "no goals and no strength" (Badley, 2011, p. 39). Owing to this admission on his mother's part, von Trier felt that he was a by-product of a "Mengele-like genetic engineering" (Badley, 2011, p. 39), and subsequently attributed the intricacies of his identity to a creative treachery committed by Inger, which became the "foundational trauma or origin, the wound or gap around which his identity is constructed" (Badley, 2011, p. 8).

The discovery impacted von Trier profoundly, nearly igniting a breakdown, as he felt he'd lost both his mother and father at once (Björkman, 2005, p. 76) and the revelation itself overshadowed the grief for his mother's death (Björkman, 2005, p. 76). It has thus been a topic of discussion and speculation whether this particular experience fueled him into conceiving characters that divide critical opinion and ignite discussion from an agglomeration of vantage points (Honig & Marso, 2016, p. 135). It is perhaps not a coincidence that the nucleus of von Trier's work as a screenwriter is found in the conception of his female protagonists.

Whereas his work includes a variety of topics and amalgamation of styles, his most acclaimed work has featured a woman at the epicenter of his stories.

Despite the central role women play in his films, Lars von Trier has often been accused of being a misogynist and male chauvinist, mainly due to the depiction of women in his films, and the amount of suffering that cascades their storylines (Elbeshlawy, 2016, p. 2). A controversial career ridden with polarized and highly divisive offerings — including his 2000 *Palme D'or* winner *Dancer in the Dark* (Badley, 2011, p. 86)—has nourished and sustained audience and critics' reservations that Lars von Trier may possibly harbour prejudice and hostile feelings toward women (Ungar-Sargon, 2014). At the same time, women are to be found within the very marrow of his storytelling inclinations and his journey as a screenwriter.

While acknowledging that Lars von Trier's work extends beyond films that feature a female protagonist and the thesis is not an exhaustive commentary on the filmmaker's oeuvre, this study contemplates the depiction of agency and the particularities of constructing a heroine in Lars von Trier's universe by looking at four of his films that share similarities but also diverge in developing his characters and represent different epochs in von Trier's work. The films that will be examined are *Breaking the Waves*, *Dancer in the Dark*, *Dogville*, and *Melancholia*.

2. OBJECTIVES OF THE RESEARCH

This dissertation intends to explore the construction of a heroine in fiction filmmaking under the veil of Lars von Trier's protagonists, principally by analyzing the approach he assumes in writing, developing, and depicting his female characters, whom I will refer to as "the heroine," as well as examining the macrocosm of circumstances in which these characters navigate within the plots of Lars von Trier's cinematic offerings.

The analysis intends to specifically examine the approach, patterns, and peculiarities von Trier employs to construct several of his female protagonists and asks the question of what *constitutes* a heroine in von Trier's films. It seeks to determine the agency of these protagonists, by extracting and delineating their abilities to cause disruption within their own narratives and elicit an emotional response in the viewer - not only by appealing to the gamut of human sentiments, but also offering a meditation on the overall state of society. While accompanying these heroines through their perilous journeys, the study intends to investigate and emphasize the dignity of the protagonists, and their resolve and dexterity in a world that is not friendly to women.

The thesis presents its arguments highlighting four Lars von Trier films, and their respective protagonists, as subjects of the analysis. These heroines share similarities and notable differences alike, and their creation is spread out over a

timespan of fifteen years, encompassing distinct eras in von Trier's journey as a storyteller, while offering a look at how his attitude, and method, has evolved in representing the human condition.

The characters and respective films to be dissected are:

I. Bess McNeill in *Breaking the Waves* (1996) - a religious and painfully naive woman living in the Scottish highlands who is put through a motion of ruthless and humiliating events following an accident that leaves her husband bedridden.

II. Selma Ježková in *Dancer in the Dark* (2000) - a Czech immigrant and single mother in Washington state, North America, who struggles with a deteriorating condition that affects her sight and resorts to unimaginable measures to protect her son from inheriting the ailment.

III. Grace in *Dogville* (2003) - an enigmatic woman who seeks refuge in a remote town in the Rocky Mountains, and is pitted against the townsfolk while attempting to hide from gangsters who are pursuing her.

IV. Justine in *Melancholia* (2011) - a newlywed bride who suffers from major depression, attending her lavish wedding in the company of her dysfunctional family, while a bigger threat looms over all wedding guests.

The study embargoes von Trier's directorial approach and film style as narrative tools, and instead focuses on the particularity of what conceives a Lars von Trier heroine and how the author engineers his lead characters. In addition to dissecting Lars von Trier's heroines, and recognizing and/or compartmentalizing the psychological traits and personality trajectories he bestows upon them, this study also interpolates auxiliary sources that provide context and nuance to the analysis, such as information about the Danish society in which von Trier lives and works in, and its seemingly progressive set of values, including in terms of female empowerment and gender equity - anticipating that one's surroundings and understanding of the world greatly impacts the individual in his capacity as a screenwriter.

It should be noted that while the aforementioned are not the only films by Lars von Trier to feature a female protagonist—*Manderlay*, *Antichrist*, *Nymphomaniac*, and *Medea* all feature a woman in the leading role—the selected films are highlighted due to a combination of critical acclaim and commercial success, and their typology in terms of representing a specific character or particular surroundings.

The chosen selection is utilized to avoid thematic or prototypical overlapping, and accordingly offer a starker contrast and comparative approach between the heroines themselves (i.e, Grace in *Dogville* is analyzed instead of Grace in

Manderlay; Justine in *Melancholia* instead of She in *Antichrist* and Joe in *Nymphomaniac*). *Medea*, a TV film directed by Lars von Trier in 1988 is mentioned in relation to its tragedy properties in composing modern-day story arcs that are grounded in the classical framework of character-versus-antagonistic environment.

3. RESEARCH METHOD

To determine the agency of what embodies a Lars von Trier heroine, each character is analyzed using a subdivision consisting of three pillars that appear in Lars von Trier's storytelling: a) the physical, emotional, and intellectual attributes of the protagonist; b) the predicaments and adversity bequeathed to them - narrative tools known in classical narrative cinema as the antagonistic force, or namely a set of circumstances that pit the central character against an arduous situation or formidable enemy, thereupon igniting and sustaining their *conflict* with the external world; and c) the reciprocation and measures the protagonist undertakes to meet, combat, and/or succumb to the circumstances in place.

The study also utilizes Gustav Freytag's theory of dramatic structure to analyze and outline the trajectory of Lars von Trier's heroines, mainly by applying Freytag's notion of play and counterplay in dramatic writing, in order to highlight and underscore the response each heroine implements to battle the antagonistic entity she faces:

> In every part of the drama, both tendencies of dramatic life appear, each incessantly challenging the other to its best in play and counter-play; but in general, also, the action of the drama and the grouping of characters is, through these tendencies, in two parts. What the drama presents is always a struggle, which, with strong

> perturbations of soul, the hero wages against opposing forces. And as the hero must be endowed with a strong life, with a certain one-sidedness, and be in embarrassment, the opposing power must be made visible in a human representative. (Freytag, 1895, pp. 104-105)

The theory also identifies Freytag's pyramid which divides dramatic storytelling into five key elements: introduction, rising movement, climax, falling movement, and catastrophe (Freytag, 1895, pp. 114-115). Building and modifying on Aristotle's *Poetics*, Freytag's pyramid can be adopted to map out specific dots and/or patterns in von Trier's work in screenwriting and character development, and identify the classical tools he uses to heighten the circumstances of the protagonist - and thus depict their agility to maximize one's surroundings in order to escape, or at least change oppressive environments. In other words, it seeks to unearth and establish their ability to exert agency.

It should be noted that many screenwriting theories owe a great deal to Aristotle's definition of dramatic structure; he anthologized the essentials of human interaction in relation to each other and examined them in the context of myths, and to this day, experts work with variations of this embryonic scheme. This study opts to utilize Freytag's technique due to its proximity to Lars von Trier's conception of heroines, and its applicability to earlier and modern modes of storytelling.

Thirdly, the thesis creates and defines the concept of *domestic anguish*, a state of affairs where the villain, in three out of the four films is the village, town, and/or community, and in the fourth one, the family. The thesis argues that each of the protagonists from *Breaking the Waves, Dancer in the Dark, Dogville and Melancholia,* exists in a substratum of empowerment while simultaneously navigating through a savage, tyrannical, and bloodthirsty surface that systematically inflicts pain on them, painting a grim picture of society as a whole in the context of universe-building in fiction writing - and in fact critiquing society's own perverse corrosion and depravity.

Domestic anguish is invoked in each of these heroines' story arcs, and the thesis, in addition to identifying and compartmentalizing the source of this anguish within their isolated narratives, also offers a comparative approach between the four heroines, in order to determine the evolution of Lars von Trier as a screenwriter.

4. LITERATURE REVIEW

4.1 The Provocateur

Widely acknowledged as a highly polarizing figure in the cinematic realm (Badley, 2011, p. 1; Butler & Denny, 2016, p. 11; Plate, 2012, p. 528), Lars von Trier and the epithet of the provocateur have become almost synonymous. Unafraid and rather eager and inclined to instigate ferocious debate, and likewise, acclaim and anger in equal measures, von Trier has never been one to shy away from controversy.

His notoriety as a controversial agitator (Badley, 2011, p. 1; Lübecker, 2015, p. 16) caught fire with the release of *Breaking the Waves* in 1996, and ever since his films have served as a mud-hook for his harshest critics (Ungar-Sargon, 2014; Snow, 2019) to call out his alleged misogyny in the conception of female protagonists, reaching peak fever with the releases of *Antrichrist* in 2009 and *The House That Jack Built* in 2018. Scenes from his films have been long debated (Butler & Denny, 2016, p. 12), and while acknowledging the possible misogynistic undertones, critics and scholars have also noted that there might be more to Lars von Trier than mere masturbative provocation, advocating for a more impartial reading of the filmmaker's ouvre (Elbeshlawy, 2016). In *Lars von Trier's Women*, (Butler & Denny, 2016) the authors argue that rather than being misogynistic, these films, particularly *Antichrist* also offer a "metacinematic commentary on

misogyny" (Butler & Denny, 2016, p. 242), an assertion that plunges the viewer into a shadow of self-doubt in terms of how to react and/or consume these particular scenes and characters.

Provocation is also addressed as an antidote to a regulated 'good taste' in cinema, noting Susan Sontag's pronouncement that insults of such kind are "directly interrelated to a will to protest against artistic triteness" (Butler & Denny, 2016, p. 92), and as the authors of *Lars von Trier's Women* further deliberate, "von Trier's films have at their innermost core a similar desire to take issue with representation and shatter ideological certainties as well as the ideology of 'good taste'" (Butler & Denny, 2016, p. 92).

Breaking the Waves, the film that ignited the discussion around von Trier's "female martyrdom" (Butler & Denny, 2016, p. 16) is considered the first in terms of the filmmaker being defamed and, and in certain cases, discredited for what now is known as his "signature use (or abuse) of women to perform an extreme stereotype (of martyred femininity) in order to produce a preternaturally intense affect" (Badley, 2011, p. 76). A film that is said to preserve "the elite tradition of Scandinavian existential melodrama," (Butler & Denny, 2016, p. 16) *Breaking the Waves* has also been recognized for offering more than a one-dimensional portal into relentless suffering. Badley (2011) contends that "*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" (Badley, 2011, p. 76).

Lars von Trier's status as a provocateur has also been linked to the establishment of Dogme 95, as a tool for a so-called "new democracy" (Badley, 2011, p. 2). In *Lars von Trier (Contemporary Film Directors)*, Linda Badley (2011) considers Dogme as an arena where "the provocateur and auteur come together" (p. 2) and that it outlines a "marked out space for independent filmmaking beyond the global mass entertainment industry" (p. 2), in which "anybody can make films" (Badley, 2011, p. 2), while simultaneously and ironically, attempting to destroy the figure of the auteur, (Badley, 2011, p. 13) by disallowing the presence of credits at the end (Badley, 2011, p. 55).

Badley (2011), however, also acknowledges von Trier's half-hearted attempts to abandon his provocateur mantle, albeit temporarily, by taking time off to keep away from the glitz of elite festivals and film events, and undertaking new projects, such as the comedy title *The Boss of it All* (Badley, 2011, p. 132). Badley comments on von Trier's temporary rerouting, noting that "relinquishing his role as reigning provocateur, he premiered his next film, a ninety-nine-minute Danish comedy, in September on his home turf, at the fledgling Copenhagen International Film Festival" (Badley, 2011, p. 132).

Even within that rearrangement of thematic discourse and a perceived departure from highly controversial material, von Trier arguably maintained a degree of political commentary by again rebranding and appropriating the criticism of being too political into a self-inflicted critique on having actually become "too politically correct" (Badley, 2011, p. 132). Even when treading the waters of comedy, von Trier maintained that a degree of damage or mischief is required to birth a meaningful comedic venture, noting that "the good comedies are not harmless" (Badley, 2011, p. 132).

Von Trier's provocation extends not only in the realms of gender politics: he has repeatedly, throughout the course of his career, engaged in providing social commentary too by using a plethora of tools and tricks to convey his own views on societal collision and setbacks. As far as utilizing provocation as a narrative tool, von Trier is usually neither hesitant nor restrained. Referring to Selma's death in *Dancer in the Dark*, Ahmed Elbeshlawy (2016) conjures Koutsourakis in asserting that Selma's demise is "meant to provoke anger rather than pity and fear, forcing the audience to think beyond the limits of tragic unavoidability, implying that different social conditions could have prevented this violent finale" (Elbeshlawy, 2016, p. 77).

There is also the standpoint that "to say von Trier is a provocateur, an enfant terrible, one of the "bad boys" of European cinema, is itself a cliché" (Honig &

Marso, 2016, p. 3), however, all too well acknowledging that this particular "clichéd form of the manifesto" (Honig & Marso, 2016, p. 3) is a regularity in von Trier's favored genres and he uses it *challenge* his own work - either by breaking rules he has previously set for himself or the mere existence of a manifesto, something the filmmaker has used for a number of his films, and most notably with "his first three films" which were "released with accompanying manifestos" (Honig & Marso, 2016, p. 4). Among them, Dogme 95 became well-known, having been invoked by other Danish filmmakers as well, in particular for Thomas Vinterberg's *The Celebration* (1998) and Lone Scherfig's *Italian for Beginners* (2000) (Honig & Marso, 2016, p. 259).

Manifestos are not the sole forms von Trier has experimented with. The filmmaker has also indicated his temptation toward experimenting when lauding the work of fellow Dane Jørgen Leth, pointing out that his work is very untraditional and subverts conventional means of storytelling (Björkman, 2005, p. 83). Observing the way in which Leth uses images, von Trier remarks about his reluctance to define Leith's aesthetics in his films as purely aesthetics, but rather as vessels that "convey atmospheres and experiences and events" (Björkman, 2005, p. 83).

Honig and Marso (2016) also offer a commentary on von Trier's palette of tools, and his confluence of different elements to continually challenge or redefine

his work, and likewise, approach not only his audience, but also his actors and characters, in a style that incorporates "games, irony, and postmodern play" (Honig & Marso, 2016, p. 71). Further on, the authors also highlight the custom-made "new style" that was developed by von Trier to specifically shoot the musical segments in *Dancer in the Dark* in order to transmit Selma's "private visions" (Honig & Marso, 2016, p. 169).

In *Cultivating Extreme Art Cinema*, Simon Hobbs (2018) addresses von Trier's "commitment to extreme ideas and visuals that generates possible conflict and tension within certain areas of the art film audience" suggesting that the filmmaker also utilizes stylistic devices, in addition to dramaturgical ones, to elicit a variety of reactions from the spectator (Hobbs, 2018, p. 165). Hobbs also profiles Mark Kermode's inclusion of Lars von Trier in "The Film4 Extreme Seasons" (Hobbs, 2018, p. 184) noting that according to Kermode the curation intended to "'explore strange ideas in radical new forms', while adding that the season features 'directors with a unique distinctive style following no rules but their own'" (Hobbs, 2018, p. 186).

Von Trier's navigation through provocative and experimental avenues in terms of creating cinematic styles and responses is consistently present, whether grinding against the rules, finding "delight in violating them" and then consequently

attaining "a spur to agonistic creativity" within those very rules he likes to challenge (Honig & Marso, 2016, p. 4).

4.2 The Manipulator

The quintessential components of a seemingly successful character and its conception are arguably the effect or, distinctively, the emotion the character and her journey elicit in the viewer. Different filmmakers opt for various tools in order to evoke an impassioned, poignant, or thrilling response within the viewer's psyche, depending on what the narrative ambition or target audience is being pursued. In this regard, von Trier has an equally notorious reputation for using manipulative apparatus in equal amounts to his doses of provocation (Badley, 2011, p. 79; Honig & Marso, 2016, p. 71). The filmmaker is distinguished for applying or, if you will, resorting to manipulative spells to achieve storytelling objectives - consequently, the measured success of such undertakings depends on the connotation one desires to ascribe to his method of generating a raw response in the viewer (Badley, 2011, p. 79; Honig & Marso, 2016, p. 71).

Butler and Denny (2016) see von Trier's manipulation from a rather neutral angle, acknowledging von Trier's "ability to complicate the audience's emotional responses" (Butler & Denny, 2016, p. 89), and pointing out that even when the filmmaker blends or manipulates a number of genres we as spectators are familiar

with, such as melodrama in *Breaking the Waves*, musical in *Dancer in the Dark*, or horror in *Antichrist*, (Butler & Denny, 2016, p. 89) the films nevertheless resist an assimilation of sorts, refusing to descend into something generic (Butler & Denny, 2016, p. 89). "Instead, they destabilize the generic categories and shatter generically formulated expectations." (Butler & Denny, 2016, p. 89).

In *Politics, Theory and Film: Critical Encounters with Lars von Trier*, Honig and Marso (2016) note that manipulation is indeed one of the key devices in von Trier's toolbox which in addition also employs sensory intensification, music and citation, and even manifesto, thus "invoking and then discarding the knowing position to move us close to an embrace of nonsovereignty, an agonism of equals, or to acknowledgment of 'foreign existences'" (Honig & Marso, 2016, p. 3).

The aforementioned authors also touch upon society's own inclinations to adhere to the sexual politics in place, a recurring motif in von Trier's work, which he then manipulates to incite a deluge of sentiments - pitting the viewer against his own self, and asking the question: is it I or is it the filmmaker's manipulation?

One such example is the somewhat conniving act of setting up scenarios that question our own association with unethical thought. Invoking *Antichrist* and *Nymphomaniac*, the authors note that the filmmaker emerges "in the liberal discourses of sexuality and gender that both films dangle before the unwitting viewer, only to violently foreclose on them, leaving the spectator unexpectedly

complicit in the worst kinds of violence against women" (Honig & Marso, 2016, p. 78).

It perhaps resides in this almost bullying-like manipulation that the filmmaker fleshes out our own complicity - society's own double-standards with feeding and sustaining the very politics for which it condemns Lars von Trier. When called out on it, even if through the sneaky trajectory of having your emotional construct as a spectator taken advantage of, it could be argued that it makes sense for the spectator to find him or herself in a state of anger in relation to the filmmaker; as the latter's manipulative shenanigans corners and forces us to grapple with our own potential hypocrisy.

There's a lingering suggestion that Lars the manipulator, is also the Lars of productivity. In other words, it could be that the practice of maneuvering the spectator's emotions is crucial to his success in provoking outrage, or at least, reaction. "Manipulation of the spectator's complicity is necessary to Lars von Trier's perverse politics of spectatorship. This complicity plays out across our feelings of discomfort as conventionally gendered arrangements of cinematic vision are simultaneously repeated and made unbearable to inhabit" (Honig & Mars, 2016, p. 79).

Further on, Honig and Mars (2016) contend that this is a special skill on the part of the filmmaker: the ability to make the audience suffer, and that "this painful

awareness of complicity with patriarchal vision anchors much of the scholarship on affect in von Trier" (p. 80), also echoing Paula Queigly's description that such awareness represents the "intensification of experience, both on the part of the female protagonist and of the spectator in the cinema" (Honig and Mars, 2016, p. 80).

That von Trier might be a master manipulator is indicated by the filmmaker himself, particularly in the ways in which he instills his own persona onto the typologies of certain characters throughout his films. As it will be deliberated later on with *Melancholia*, there is an inherent and constitutional element of von Trier's own identity in the construction of his heroines and other secondary characters. Linda Badley (2011) makes an example in reference to this by outlining the mirroring of the filmmaker in one, or more, characters in *Dogville* (p. 112). Alluding to the dramatic finale, Badley considers that "the concluding revelation" (Badley, 2011, p. 112) is:

...a final self-reflexive gesture on Trier's part, however, the film is exposed as something entirely different from what it seemed. Dogville (including Tom and, by implication Trier, the manipulative "player" he stands in for) is revealed to have been Grace's experiment in a test of the limits of Christian mercy (grace) that has miserably failed" (Badley, 2011, p. 112).

Badley's assessment suggests that von Trier is a self-aware filmmaker, and in firm command of his craft. While it could be asserted that he has played with form and content frequently and that indeed remains a part of his legacy as a filmmaker, it is also fitting to analyze von Trier's authorship from a more dramaturgical perspective.

5. BREAKING THE WAVES - Bess McNeill

Breaking the Waves, released in 1996, is Lars von Trier's first entry in his *Golden Heart* series, which begins with the drama set in Scotland, and concludes four years later with *Dancer in the Dark*, set in Washington state. The trilogy, which introduces our first heroine, Bess McNeill, was:

> ...inspired by a children's tale—one that clearly imprinted von Trier at a formative age—about the Golden Heart, a little girl who ventures into the forest and gives away all her worldly possessions, down to the clothes on her back. As von Trier recalls on his *Dancer* DVD commentary, his father "ridiculized" the story and used "Golden Heart" as sarcastic shorthand for do-gooders. But little Lars was touched. Ever the defiant son, von Trier dramatizes both his youthful fascination with the Golden Heart and his father's aversion to her, creating a spectacle out of his heroines' vulnerability and naiveté, then stripping them of their defenses, dignity, and, frequently, clothes. (Winter, 2009)

In the canon of von Trier's heroines, perhaps none is more exposed than Bess McNeill, a young and deeply religious woman living in a remote Presbityrian Calvinist community in the Scottish highlands. Bess, who in the film, is described as "not right in the head" (Trier, 1996, 00:29:54) is presented as a remarkably

innocent person with an immaculate heart. When, to the chagrin of her local church, she marries Jan Nyman, a foreigner who refuses to go to church, a devastating trajectory of events is set into motion. The circuit of these events ends up revealing Bess's sanctitude, devotion, utter defenselessness, and ultimately, an absurd resolve to do right by God.

Freytag notes that:

> …since the dramatic art presents men as their inmost being exerts an influence on the external, or as they are affected by external influences, it must logically use the means by which it can make intelligible to the auditor these processes of man's nature. These means are speech, tone, gesture...It must bring forward its characters as speaking, singing, gesticulating. (Freytag, 1895, p. 20)

By that token, *Breaking the Waves* opens with a close-up of Bess, gradually exposing the viewer to the heroine's exterior; we are familiarized with Bess's way of speaking, emoting, and reacting. Her first line says, "His name is Jan," (Trier, 1996, 00:00:26) referring to her soon to be husband. She is gleeful and bursting with joy. The scene then switches to a room full of men inside the church, who caution Bess that they "do not favor matrimony with outsiders'' (Trier, 1996, 00:00:40). Even as she is objectively ganged up by her village's 'moral bureau,' Bess's attitude remains

steadily child-like. Two minutes into the film, she stares directly into the camera, and smiles - a cruel omen for what is about to unravel.

The following appearance of Bess is in striking contrast with her feel-good, coat-and-scarf highland attire: she is now in a beautiful wedding dress pacing around a small runway, aggravated that her husband, who is supposed to arrive on a helicopter, is late. Here, we are also first introduced to Dodo, a heroine on her own, who once the wrath of the village descends upon our main character, emerges as Bess's only loyal friend. Dodo's introduction is more than meets the eye.

In referring to establishing the universe surrounding a character, and delineating clues about her past, Freytag asserts that, "whoever describes the life of a man, whoever makes an exposition of a section of past time, must set in order his mass of material from an established point of view, must sift out the unessential, must make prominent the most essential (Freytag, 1895, p. 15).

By introducing Dodo in that fashion, the screenwriter inadvertently offers us an exposition on Bess's life: her existing relationships and the rapport of said relationship juxtaposed against her unwelcoming environment. Bess's volatile temper erupts at the mere appearance of Jan, who is walking down the helicopter staircase; she starts hitting him on the chest, the wind from the helicopter's rotor blades messing up her veil—and symbolically, her mood swings—to the point where she needs to be guided by Jan and Dodo.

Her distraught and impassioned reaction is handled rather playfully by Jan, and the film cuts to the wedding ceremony. A beaming Bess is seen as she is commended by the pastor for her selfless acts of devotion to the church, and her unwavering faith in Christ.

Bess's apparent mental unpredictability and unstable impulses are visible from early on, be it when she questions Dodo whether she's happy for her, or switching from a juvenile grin to genuine upset quicker than the rain that begins to pour outside the church soon after Bess and Jan are married.

The first speech at the wedding ceremony is delivered by none other than Dodo, and it directly points to Bess's character. "I've known you for six years, and I can definitely say… you have the biggest heart of anyone I've ever met" (Trier, 1996, 00:09:33-00:09:37). She then utters a line that heartbreakingly foreshadows the upcoming events. "You'd give anything to anyone" (Trier, 1996, 00:10:17). Bess looks at Dodo with awe and sisterly affinity.

The wedding banquet is progressing when Bess locks herself and Jan in the bathroom, and urges him to "have her now" (Trier, 1996, 00:12:11). The writer gives the character a bold, unfiltered and uncurated spirit by firmly acknowledging her sexual desires, while at the same time painting the confines of Bess's community and Bess herself as an extremely religious woman. As Bess and Jan are

married, she is now allowed in God's judgment to seek the pleasures of the flesh. And she does just that, impatiently and indiscreetly.

"What do I do?" (Trier, 1996, 00:12:56) she innocently asks Jan, as we see Bess revel on the bliss of sexual self-discovery. This is later on accentuated in the second chapter of the film, titled "Life with Jan" where she examines Jan's penis with a teenybopper, puerile reaction, and an unhindered enthusiasm. Bess co-exists, simultaneously, both as a sexual being and a paragon of religious purity. These states of being are not mutually exclusive, and the writer presents her as functioning on more than one tangent. Such a complex and contradictory characterisation that might have felt implausible in other hands, here feels solid and convincing.

In *Negotiating Sexual Idioms*, Ilana Shiloh (2008) contextualizes how Bess's early days of domestic bliss are entwined with her relationship with God:

> She and Jan seem suspended in a state of prelapsarian perfection. They have no sense of the sinfulness of the flesh, of the duality of body and soul. For them, the body is the soul. Alone in the church, after her wedding, Bess intimately talks to her God: "I thank you for the greatest gift of all, the gift of love. I thank you for Jan. I am so lucky to have been given these gifts." In bed with Jan, making love to him, she breathlessly gasps, "thank you, thank you," thanking God

> again for the bliss of the body. As aptly observed by Gerard Loughlin, Bess's relationship with Jan is always part of her relationship with God, the form that her loving God takes in her life. (Kohlke & Orza, 2008, p. 8)

The subsequent back-and-forth of Bess conversing with God in church, her Christian guilt well in display, interjected with the joys of sexual gratification, are effective in blueprinting Bess's psychology as a character. Her utmost loyalty is to God, and her unwavering faith and allegiance is proxied out in her relationship with her husband. Even when Jan is snoring right into her ear, Bess is filled with amazement and delight. The gift of love, as she calls it, granted to her by God, begins to build up the heroine in front of our eyes, right before it proceeds to completely destroy her.

Critics have raised the question of whether Lars von Trier's plot developments are a result of stories adhering to reality, or whether they represent his tendency to put his female characters through hell merely due to the pull of sadistic impulses. Addressing the question of credibility, in his paper *"The Heroines of Lars von Trier,"* Eric Bitencourt (2014) quotes screenwriter Paul Schrader and Danish scholar Marie Bodil Thompsen, respectively, to erect a parallel between Dreyer and von Trier:

> The Realism of Lars von Trier, just like the one of Carl Th.

> Dreyer, has an inner tension, from the dissonant figure of the protagonist. Both filmmakers, also scriptwriters of their own films, create protagonists who are strangers in their surroundings, alienated in their own environment. By this way it is established the contrast between the character and the world, which is a source of irony....
>
> Another resemblance is on the frequent theme of sacrifice in his movies. The suffering of the protagonists changes the way we observe the world and ourselves and, in a certain way, points out the transformation course of the artistic work. It is especially in the trilogy *Golden Hearts* that Trier inherits from Dreyer the ambition to connect body and soul. (Bitencourt, 2014, Chapter III, para. 4)

A comparison between Dreyer and von Trier could also be raised in the context of their portrayal of ill-fated heroines. After all, one of Dreyer's most prominent films, *The Passion of Joan of Arc* (1928), chronicles the trial of Joan of Arc, who is arguably a historic trailblazer and an iconic real-life character who embodies the conventional definition of a heroine. While Joan of Arc was a real individual, Lars von Trier's Bess McNeill, navigating hundreds of years after, and in an entirely different setting, nevertheless exhibits the same unswerving devotion, staunch endurance, and religious reverence. Joan of Arc claimed to have received

visions from saints; Bess McNeill, literally speaks to God in her church, using her own voice to deliver God's responses.

Yet, like Joan of Arc who is judged and condemned to death by a court of men, Bess's relationship with God is hijacked by the looming dominance of patriarchy. Following a church gathering, she objects how it is "stupid that only men can talk in the service" (Trier, 1996, 00:24:28), a complaint that is swiftly silenced by yet another man telling her "hold your tongue, woman" (Trier, 1996, 00:24:32).

Linda Badley (2011) conjures Dreyer in further deepening the comparison between the two filmmakers, by noting how Trier has a tendency of exhibiting:

> …the perverse, spiritually obsessed psychodramas of Dreyer, with their persecuted witches and visionary saints, and Bergman, in whose films Nordic repression was pitted against itself to produce moments of naturalistic transcendence. (Badley, 2011, p. 59)

Again, we are offered a clue into von Trier's thought process behind constructing a heroine like Bess, with Badley (2011) corroborating the inspiration

behind conceiving not only Bess, but the entire *Golden Heart* trilogy, including Selma, who, while similar in some ways to Bess, nonetheless also displays contrasting characteristics. This inspiration can be traced back to themes of ascension and *transcendence*, both prominent in Dreyer's and von Trier's work, especially when we take a closer look at *The Passion of Joan of Arc* and *Breaking the Waves*.

In *Breaking the Waves,* after Jan gets seriously injured in an accident at the oil rig, and is left paralysed with little hope of recovering, Bess begins to descend into a manic combination of toxic guilt and obstinate loyalty in relation to her husband's perverse requests to have sex with other men. Jan's demands toward Bess to engage in sexual encounters with strangers, and then narrate the experiences to him while he's bedridden, render the constellation of Bess's emotional and spiritual construction bare for the viewer to witness. Her emotional geography is intrinsically defined by her Christian faith, and thus informs the psychology of her actions.

There is a paradoxical moment, when the pastor of the church, serving as an emblem of Bess's repressive community, inadvertently acknowledges her resolve. "You have the strength your life in God has bestowed upon you...And that is a strength he does not possess", (Trier, 1996, 01:15:15-01:15:19) the pastor says referring to Jan. This appraisal gains another meaning when it is invoked by Jan to

fester Bess's guilt ever more and lead her to succumb to a grievous sacrifice that ends up designing her downfall - but also her *ascension* - as a heroine of pure naivete and devotion, to God and *love* likewise.

Bess is explicitly willing to do anything for Jan, because she genuinely believes her actions will save him, which in turn emphasizes Jan's ruthlessness - particularly when she confides in him twice that she cannot proceed to have sex with another man and come back to chronicle the experiences to him. He nevertheless insists by preying on her utter commitment. In a world where she would do everything for him, and which she ultimately does, one can presume that Bess is manipulated into fulfilling her husband's fantasy out of unconditional, radical love.

In *The Heroines of Lars von Trier,* Bitencourt (2014) argues:

> These moments of conflict, when Jan's health gets worse make Bess believe that her husband's life is in her hands. Here it is possible to note that the apparent naivety of Bess is actually arrogance, since, who does she think she is to have control on someone's destiny? What kind of powers does she have that the rest of mortals don't? Why her sacrifices would keep Jan anyone else alive? (Bitencourt, 2014, Chapter III, para. 10)

This might be a rather premature conclusion, especially when taking into account that the writer does initially depict Bess's actions in what would be considered a common interpretation of such behavior, or a scientific explanation - she is portrayed as out of touch with reality. Her portrayal is used to mislead the viewer into believing her actions are acts of a madwoman. Bess is described by her doctor as psychotic, and subjected to an attempt at being committed in a psychiatric ward.

However, in the finale of the story, we are explicitly, and unexpectedly, led to believe by the screenwriter that Bess was not only an unapologetic crusader of love, but that her love is actually capable of producing miracles. Following Bess's death, Jan and his friends smuggle her corpse to the sea and throw it in the water, filling her coffin back in the mainland with sand - and thus sparing her from a punitive Christian funeral.

This point in the story is where the writer takes a risk that arguably sanctifies our heroine. Once Bess's body is dumped in the ocean, she disappears from the sonic radar, and in the last shot, the film plunges into magic realism when we are introduced to the previously-mentioned, but never-before-seen church bells in the sky watching over the oil rig.

Commenting on von Trier's narrative tendencies and contextualizing them with the musings of Kierkegaard, a Danish philosopher, Honig and Marso (2016)

remark on the discrepancies or the perceived inconsistencies in von Trier's world and reflect on the eventuation of *agency*, by noting that:

> ...these incongruities are often seen as a reason to stress the tragic nature of human life—a view with which Kierkegaard is intimately familiar, as evidenced by his discussions of *Antigone*, suffering, and the passion of Christ. But tragedy is just one mode of response. Kierkegaard goes further by reconfiguring the pain embedded in them. Thus, according to Kierkegaard, we might say that the one "who really is an agent" (i.e., the one who exists "proficiently") is the one who turns existential pain into a passion for life in all its different instantiations. (Honig & Marso, 2016, p. 254)

In this vein, Bess's character and her actions within the plot can indeed be interpreted as exercises in agency, since in a Kierkegaardian, or rather in a Christian fashion, she transforms her pain and suffering into a calling.

Throughout the progression of the story, in addition to Bess's Biblical-like trajectory, we also follow another heroine in a supportive role, both literally, and in terms of character roster. Dodo is essentially Bess's only true friend and fervent protector. Throughout the trajectory of events, she remains the voice of reason. Once the village unleashes *domestic anguish* upon Bess, a severe and traumatic persecution entirely imposed by men—be they the church's townsfolk, or her own

manipulative husband—it is Dodo who whispers words of advice to Bess's stubborn persona.

"A woman has to choose for herself, Bess" (Trier, 1996, 01:43:54) Dodo exclaims. "She has to have a mind of her own." (Trier, 1996, 01:43:57) And Bess, indeed, proves that she has a mind of her own, even if it clashes completely with any parameter of rationality. But rationality cannot be invoked in a community where she is told that "no woman speaks here" (Trier, 1996, 02:06:43) as she is banished from the church.

Nevertheless, despite her ostracization Bess refuses to let go of her faith in exchange of pursuing radical love. Instead, she strives for and achieves *both*. This ultimately leads to her demise, but at least it occurs in Bess's very own terms. She responds to the circumstances in which she finds herself with an unwavering conviction. If, as Freytag asserts, "the story must [show] that the lovely heroine is capable of magnificent emotion, of mighty passion in order that her later, despairing determination may be found consistent with her nature," (Freytag, 1895, p. 34), this is precisely what von Trier does with Bess in the end.

Bess's downfall can also be interpreted as a critique of what overbearing religion can lead to when followed with utmost innocence. Jesus and his crucifixion are perhaps considered the epitome of a hero and what constitutes a heroic act,

and likewise the embodiment of sacrifice. Bess is all but literally crucified in *Breaking the Waves*; she is designed into a vessel to carry the sins of everyone, to the point where even the children in the village follow her around, name-calling and throwing stones. The pure character at the beginning of the story becomes the sacrificial lamb, the seemingly easy target that exposes the tendencies of society's collective hypocrisy to be projected onto those *perceived* as weak.

There has been doubt in relation to von Trier's intention with regard to the finale of *Breaking the Waves*, in particular in terms of its sincerity. In other words, von Trier's supernatural ending has been received both as serious and ironic. Linda Badley (2011) correctly brings attention to a Christian critique of this ending noting that, "many viewers assumed the supernatural ending, which overinsists Bess's 'goodness,' was ironic. But Christian journalists have often taken the film at its word, extolling Bess as a modern Christ figure" (Badley, 2011, p. 73).

Furthermore, quoting Victoria Nelson, Badley (2011) maintains that dismissing the finale of the film as ironic misses the ultimate point of the film, and that in fact, "'going backward' into convention and cliché, Trier discovers "an emotionally richer aesthetic vocabulary" (Nelson as cited in Badley, 2011, p. 73). Badley (2011) argues that "the tale-like simplicity" manages to cover the complexity of the film which according to her is "[an] intellectual as well as

emotionally draining experience," and the most provocative work of Trier up to that point (Badley, 2011, p. 73).

Even after Bess's death, the writer remains firm in his depiction of what a heroine is, as he continues to extend such representation through Dodo, who takes center stage in a short but powerful scene during Bess's burial by the churchmen. As they declare Bess a sinner, and banish her to hell, Dodo comes to her defense once again, as she does throughout the entire film, by soundly telling all of them off, in a powerfully remarkable line that screams, "Not one of you… has the right to consign Bess to hell" (Trier, 1996, 02:29:20-02:29:22).

Likewise, Bess's doctor, in her post-mortem court hearing, briefly changes his diagnosis to declaring that, "Instead of writing "neurotic" or "psychotic,"... I might just use a word like 'good'" (Trier, 1996, 02:25:17-02:25:32), hence rendering Bess's primal sacrifice, not as an act of madness, but as the ultimate display of love, loyalty, and fortitude.

6. DANCER IN THE DARK - Selma Ježková

If at the end of *Breaking the Waves,* the viewer is left to ponder whether the writer is jesting with its audience and is taking them on, the final piece of von Trier's *Golden Heart* trilogy, *Dancer in the Dark*, is gut-wrenching and does not provide any ironic relief at the end. Like the first film of the series, as Linda Badley (2011) notes, "*Dancer in the Dark* was also designed to make men (and women) cry but, in contrast to *Breaking the Waves*, [it] generated one of the more polarized critical responses in film history" (Badley, 2011, p, 86). The 2000 US-set film won the *Palme d'Or* and cemented von Trier's status as an auteur in the film world.

Combining the genres of melodrama and musical to a strange and fascinating result, *Dancer in the Dark* follows the story of Selma Ježková, a Czech immigrant living in Washington state with her son Gene. Selma is portrayed by singer and composer Björk Guðmundsdóttir, who 17 years later in 2017, publicly accused Lars von Trier for sexually harassing her on the set of *Dancer in the Dark* (Savage, 2017), adding fuel to pre-existing criticism on his treatment of women on and off screen.

As a character, Selma Ježková, is initially introduced more in the vein of Bess from *Breaking the Waves*, rather than von Trier's later heroines. She is announced as a painfully innocent, hard-working, virtuous, and likable person with a deep-rooted passion for musicals, and an undying love for her son. She works in a

factory, together with her friend Kathy, whom Selma nicknames Cvalda, and we are inclined to believe is also an immigrant worker as per her apparent accent. On their time off-work Selma and Kathy attend theater rehearsals, something that seems to serve as a source of pleasure for Selma.

Selma's appearance and demeanour suggest an aura of purity: she is soft-spoken, animated with child-like gestures, and a youthful and endearing warmth. In the story, she is referred to as simple—particularly in one of the musicals segments—but she is not a simpleton. Neither is she oblivious or feeble-minded when it comes to her cardinal goal in the story.

In breaking down the five parts and three crises of the drama, Freytag notes that "through the two halves of the action which come closely together at one point, the drama possesses — if one may symbolize its arrangement by lines — a pyramidal structure" (Freytag, 1895, p. 114). The drama "rises" once "exciting forces" in the story are introduced, reaching climax before falling "from [there] to catastrophe" (Freytag, 1895, pp. 114-115).

The exciting force, or rising action in *Dancer in the Dark* comes in the reveal that Selma suffers from a degenerative eye disorder, and it is expected that she will go blind in the near future - something she claims she has known her entire life. However, since the condition is a genetic and inherited disease, it means her son will eventually get it too. It becomes Selma's quest and purpose in the film to save

enough money, so that she can pay for her son's operation once he turns 13, without his knowledge, as worrying might worsen or expedite the course of the disease.

As Selma's workload increases and her eyesight deteriorates simultaneously, she finds solace in music and dancing. It is perhaps the one respite the writer grants the character, in an otherwise harrowing, relentless, and tragic story.

Matthew Lucas remarks:

> The musical numbers in these films resonate with Selma so much that she begins to imagine them superimposed on her own life, as relief and liberation from her impending blindness. The irony here is obvious: the musicals Selma so idolized as a child have given her a completely false impression of America; so now, in her mind, she creates imaginary musical scenes to ease the pain and hardship she faces living in the real America every day. (Lucas, "Dancer")

Placing Selma in the United States of America of 1964, is undeniably essential to the character's development. On this vector, we also notice the first divergence between Selma and Bess, as they begin to part ways in their respective story arcs: it is the source of their *domestic anguish* that splits the evolution of

their narratives. While Bess's torment is imposed from within, a community in which she was born and raised, in Selma's case, it is exactly the opposite.

She is an immigrant, who has moved to America, and in her adopted homeland, she is subjected to two different configurations of attacks: poverty stemming from ruthless capitalism which leaves an overworked Selma so destitute that she cannot even afford to buy her son a birthday gift, as she has to save meticulously for his surgery; and Bill, her seemingly well-wishing landlord, who in a stunning betrayal of trust, steals Selma's savings by using her blindness to design and perform the task, and then proceeds to successfully frame her as the thief.

Selma's illusions about America are displayed early on when she and her son are invited to her landlord's home. Randomly but riddled with nostalgia, she comments on a candy box, saying that, "In Czechoslovakia I saw a film and they were eating candy just like this…I thought to myself how wonderful it must be in the United States" (Trier, 2000, 00:12:17 - 00:12:28). These two sentences echo the sentiments of countless people around the world, throughout different eras who mistake America for the ultimate dreamland of opportunities and wealth. But in Lars von Trier's world no dream is fulfilled without a dreadful cataclysm or a tragic sacrifice.

Already at the outset of the film, Selma is sacrificing herself (and her labor) to enable her son to escape blindness. The love Selma harbors for Gene is stronger

than her fear. She seems to have made peace with the inevitable fact that she will one day be blind. Hence, the song "I've Seen it All," which can be deciphered as a rite of passage: she has had her chance to see through her eyes, and she does not want to deny her son the same opportunity. Instead, she will continue to see through him, and he will see for her - and so the cycle of life will continue.

Selma's portrayal as a heroine is crystallized through a solidifying pattern in the story. *She never victimizes herself*. Even though her predicaments keep piling up, Selma sails through pain and sorrow with such genuine grace, so that it firmly encapsulates the entire concept of 'a *golden heart,'* denoted by the title of the trilogy. This is never more obvious throughout the story, as in one of the most dramatic scenes, when she confronts Bill, and asks him to give her the money back.

Bill's initial well-wishing nature is utilized to camouflage the imminent peril the heroine faces in his presence. Similar to *Breaking the Waves, Dancer in the Dark* employs a remarkably simple dramatic structure to push the plot forward. In Freytag's technique of the drama, we note that:

> ….the first kind of dramatic structure conceals a danger, which even by genius, is not always successfully avoided. In this, as a rule, the first part of the play, which raises the hero through regular degrees of commotion to the climax, is assured its success. But the second half, in which greater effects are demanded, depends mostly on the

> counter-play; and this counter-play must here be grounded in more violent movement and have comparatively greater authorization. (Freytag, 1895, p. 109)

This bout of "violent movement" comes just right at an opportune juncture in the heroine's journey. Bill, who is depicted as a weak, sneaky, and a morally corrupt individual cannot draw the strength to commit suicide, although he claims he wants to die. He repeatedly refuses to give back Selma the money she has earned with enormous hard-work. In these moments of tension, Selma's reaction is initially so untypically gentle and in good faith, that for a second, one may doubt its plausibility. But such is the heroine in von Trier's films. When she manages to snatch the package with money from him, she utters, "I can't count it now… but I trust you," (Trier, 2000, 01:02:41) to the man who'd just instrumentalized her blindness to steal from her, and continues to show no remorse.

The men in Lars von Trier's universe seem to be almost uniformly villains. In Selma's case, in relation to Bill, she is both his nurturer and destroyer, as she firmly takes agency over the newly-arised circumstance. Once the firearm is accidentally shot, and the bullet enters Bill, Selma's first instinct is to tend to him: she is seen gently caressing his back and head as she bursts out crying, despite the fact that none of what transpires includes even an inkling of her own doing. Freytag notes how, "the point forward from which the deed of the hero reacts upon himself, is one of the most important in the play," and that, "[this] beginning of the reaction,

sometimes united in one scene with the climax, has been noted ever since there has been a dramatic art" (Freytag, 1895, p. 99). In *Dancer in the Dark* we observe Selma's, or rather the heroine's deeds, confirming the gullibility and the act of goodness, despite the hardships she experiences as a result of other characters. The "reaction" of the heroine "united with the climax" (Freytag, 1895, p. 99) is well displayed in this moment in the story.

The scene then progresses to yet another display of profound kindness, mixed with a valiant determination from Selma who wants to achieve the simple goal of getting her money back. When Bill begs her to kill him, explicitly declaring "Can't you just stand up and pull the goddamn trigger?" (Trier, 2000, 01:06:37) Selma delivers on two levels. She is empathetic as to fulfill his request, and just as resolute and strong-minded to fulfill her own goal. She shoots him, but because she cannot properly see, misses, leaving him in even more pain, and leading her to smashing his head with a metal box after the gun runs out of bullets. This relates to what Freytag's technique assumes to be an imminent continuation of the climax:

> The hero has so far been more brilliant, and the more magnificently the scene of the climax has presented his success. Whatever enters into the play now must have all the qualities which have been previously explained — it must present sharp contrasts, it must not be accidental, it must be pregnant with consequences. Therefore it must

> have importance and a certain magnitude. (Freytag, 1895, pp. 99-100)

The course of the events from this point on is indeed consequential, and the qualities of the heroine that have been previously put in display, only become bolder and more apparent. Later on, when Selma is questioned in court as to why she killed Bill, she simply, and truthfully, answers "He asked me to" (Trier, 2000, 01:29:36). And to the follow-up interrogation as to why he would do that, she again exhibits unwavering virtue. "I promised not to say," (Trier, 2000, 01:29:55) she responds, alluding to a promise she had made earlier in the film to Bill when they had exchanged confessions about their financial troubles. Seeing how all this unravels in a court where she is in the cusp of facing the death penalty is certainly a testament of the writer intentionally rendering his heroine as a blameless, morally superior being. It is, in a way, *a form of worship*.

In criticizing Lars von Trier's work in her article "Against Nature", Agata Pyzik claims:

> In the Saints Trilogy [the *Golden Heart* Trilogy n.b.], von Trier positions women as holy masochists and absurd altruists, desperately submissive to the extent that they almost beg to be beaten or mistreated, devoted to the abstract idea of "helping others", even if that comes at the price of their pain, humiliation or even death. The

> films even suggest that their kindness results from a sort of mental disability. (Pyzik, 2014)

It is arguable whether in either of those two films one can spot such an explicit insinuation that the characters are "holy masochists". Selma explicitly acknowledges she left Czechoslovakia to escape accumulating more pain - as her son would not have been able to undergo surgery there. Moreover throughout the story, Selma never signals that she, even unconsciously, might be enjoying the draw of the luck that has befallen her.

Quite the contrary, that is what the musical sequences serve in the story. They provide an escape from suffering. Every time there's a heightened moment in the narrative—be it extreme fatigue at the factory, the murder of Bill, or her prison walk toward the executioner's chamber—the film switches into its musical segments, and it is well established that they serve as Selma's *remedy* - something she pursues consistently throughout the film. So, labelling her, or even Bess, who *voices* the suffering her predicament is causing her multiple times, as "holy masochists" is rather unfounded.

Selma's determination and agency is displayed once again, after Kathy and Jeff, her friend and suitor, try to use Gene's operation money to hire her another lawyer. Selma refuses, and opts for the death penalty. She inadvertently acknowledges that her previous actions would be rendered senseless if she is to

proceed with the proposition.

This is not for a second out of a masochistic desire - she is terrified of dying. Selma faces two choices: death penalty or taking a risk and compromising her son's preventive surgery, and his future. She boldly chooses to sacrifice herself, not out of holy masochism, but out of love. The same goes for Bess, except that her source of motivation is the love for her husband.

In Selma's and Bess's common sacrifice also lies their difference. Badley (2011) points out that:

> Where Bess was inordinately attached to Jan, Selma is stubbornly self-sufficient, insisting she has no use for a man. And if Bess sentimentally embodied Trier's reaction against his communist, atheist upbringing, Selma sentimentally reflects that upbringing, specifically the period when he and his mother legendarily threw bricks at the American embassy in Copenhagen. *Breaking the Waves* explored a range of religious experience his parents had kept off limits. *Dancer in the Dark* is grounded in the material; repression and social alienation are among the deepest emotions expressed, and in place of philosophical allegory it offered cultural and political critique. (Badley, 2011, p. 87)

Therefore, it could be said that the common denominator here is not an "abstract idea of helping others" (Pyzik, 2014) - but actually self-preservation. One can argue that everything derives from a selfish impulse: both these heroines love the person they are sacrificing themselves for, profoundly and unconditionally, and their wellbeing affects their very own existence in every plane. As a result they must mitigate the other's suffering, to in fact escape their own. In Selma's case this is once again confirmed in the very last scene during her execution when Kathy storms into the chamber and gives her Gene's glasses, informing Selma that the operation has been successful. In that moment, she goes from screaming in torment and fear, to a sedative, subdued state of mind, which enables Selma to start singing again and remove the focus from the rope that ends her life seconds after.

Attaching an annulling connotation to her sacrifice would likely be a misinterpretation. These characters go through what they go through, and do what they end up doing, because the society around them is such that it leaves room for no other avenues. While Lars von Trier's fictional worlds and societies are cruel, he did not create them from scratch: he is merely depicting them, and often with an unswerving punctuality. This is why his films can be read as a reflection of women's struggle not only throughout history, but even in the present day. The world still contains societies so atrociously and ruthlessly oppressive to women that actually render some of Lars von Trier's worlds pale in comparison.

What von Trier also does is bring to light oppression from a Westerner's angle. But society and its woes should not be critiqued only through an Occidental lense, even though that is predominantly the case. For the most part, the planet is actually comprised of individuals that do not navigate in Western, so-called 'first-world' establishments, and that part of society is just as essential in conveying the human condition and our collective experience on Earth, regardless of who delineates or decodes it into a format that might appeal to certain demographics.

This is also perhaps why characterizing von Trier's characters as "impossible" (Elbeshlawy, 2016, p. 24) may only be a partial exploration of what actually constitutes a heroine in the real world. It is evident, particularly in the *Golden Hearts* entries, that the writer sides unequivocally with his female protagonists, and in both films portrays society and particularly men as adversaries or antagonists to what is, within the writer's philosophy, but arguably also by conventional wisdom, considered 'good'.

Just as in *Breaking the Waves* with Dodo, von Trier demonstrates another added layer of endowing 'goodness' to his characters, by designating a milieu of sisterhood. The two characters most sympathetic to Selma throughout the film, with the exception of Jeff, who sees her as a romantic interest, are Kathy, her friend from the factory, and Brenda, the prison guard that ends up becoming Selma's only source of support toward the end of her journey.

Brenda creates noise to help Selma ignite her escapist musical segments so she can cope with reality, and even risks her job right before Selma's execution when she demands that, per Selma's request, her hood is taken off, and she is hanged without a hood. In the final moments of the story, the writer again, just as with Dodo during Bess's funeral, depicts human kindness and loyalty through two other female characters, Kathy and Brenda, both of whom have nothing to gain from standing by Selma not only at her lowest final moment, but throughout the story.

Selma's tragic ending which in turn results in the fulfillment of her ultimate goal in the story, or a final moment of peace, unravels along the definition of Freytag's *catastrophe* in his pyramidic scheme, where he delineates that:

> ...the hero appeared up to this point in a desire, one-sided or full of consequence, working from within outward, changing by its own force the life relations in which he came upon the stage. From the climax on, what he has done reacts upon himself and gains power over him; the external world, which he conquered in the rise of passionate conflict, now stands in the strife above him. This adverse influence becomes continually more powerful and victorious, until at last in the final catastrophe, it compels the hero to succumb to its irresistible force. The end of the piece follows this catastrophe immediately, the

> situation where the restoration of peace and quiet after strife becomes apparent. (Freytag, 1895, pp. 106-107)

Selma goes through a narrative arc that is undeniably heart-rendering, but in the end, her goal is achieved in the face of enormous antagonistic forces; and ultimately, the determination she exhibits makes her a heroine with commendable agency.

7. DOGVILLE - Grace Mulligan

Lars von Trier's follow up to *Dancer in the Dark* was the 2003 film *Dogville*, starring Nicole Kidman. Prior to the shooting of the film, Björk had written a letter to Kidman urging her not to work with von Trier (Heath, 2011). Nonetheless Nicole Kidman opted to make the film in which she plays the lead. Set in a forsaken town in the Rocky Mountains, more precisely in Colorado, *Dogville* marked a departure from von Trier's previously discussed films in more than one aspect.

Although set in the United States like its predecessor *Dancer in the Dark*, in *Dogville*, the town is depicted in a rather odd setting, using a floor-plan set as a substitute for a real location, with stage-like elements and props, to create a claustrophobic and contained environment. The set unavoidably plays a role in the character development of our main heroine, Grace Mulligan, mostly by emphasizing her tortuous journey within the enclosed confines of the set.

Another element that sets *Dogville* and Grace apart from *Breaking the Waves* and *Dancer in the Dark*, and respectively Bess and Selma, is that unlike in the latter two, where the heroines are the first person we see on screen, in *Dogville*, the writer takes a significantly unusual amount of time to introduce the main character, which in the film translates to Grace entering the story at the 12-minute mark.

In the span of these 12 minutes, the writer instead, introduces us to the township, through a voiceover that proceeds to hover above the entire film, narrating micro-events in each chapter. As the townsfolk are introduced, it starts to become apparent that each and every one of them will have an impact in the heroine's journey.

The introduction of the townsfolk mirrors Freytag's assertion that in certain types of drama, the existing circumstances, or an existing environment must be presented to the spectator, in order to later on connect the hero/ine and the entities/characters that represent the antagonistic force in the story:

> No dramatic material, however perfectly its connections with other events have been severed, is independent of something presupposed. These indispensable presupposed circumstances must be so far presented to the hearer, in the opening scenes, that ' he may first survey the groundwork of the piece, not in detail, indeed, lest the field of the action itself, be limited; then immediately, time, people, place, establishment -of suitable relations between the chief persons who appear, and the unavoidable ' threads which come together in these, from whatever has been left outside the action. (Freytag, 1895, p. 28)

One of the first sentences of the narration is, "The residents of Dogville were good, honest folks, and they liked their township," (Trier, 2003, 00:00:32) which may be an immediate and not-so-subtle signal that this is not the case - a foreshadowing that the opposite will probably occur. A gunshot is heard, and soon after, a distressed Grace enters the township, disoriented and panicked. She encounters Tom Edison, who provides refuge for her in the township's mine and calmly fends off the gangsters that are pursuing the mysterious Grace.

Grace's physique immediately stands out: even in her anxious state, she is effortlessly charming, with visually arresting features - something that catches the attention of Tom, a self-proclaimed novelist and philosopher who lives in the sparsely populated Dogville. In fact, her "alabaster hands" are continuously referenced throughout the film, indicating that Grace might be a sophisticated city girl, whose exclusion from physical labor has resulted in having soft and flawless-looking hands. It is again ironic and intentional, as labor becomes a central narrative tool in the character's construction, and likewise, the smoothness of her hands fades, as the predicaments increase.

In *Playing the Waves*, Jan Simons (2007) asserts:

> In *Dogville*, Grace, a sophisticated urbanite, is utterly ignorant of the poverty-stricken existence of the inhabitants in this small, isolated community in the Rocky Mountains and obstinately continues to see

> them as 'the good and honest people of Dogville'. The cognitive and social deficiency that marks von Trier's characters is both motivated and symbolised by two psychological attributes of these characters. Firstly, they are in a state of mental confusion which can itself take either of two forms: the troubled mind, or the naïve one. (Simons, 2007, p. 107)

There are two points here that warrant further deliberation. Firstly, Grace's rapport with the townsfolk as an individual who is implied to come from a higher economic standing, an implication that is not confirmed until the very end. As Lars von Trier introduces and then dwells separately in each townfolk's personification and display of circumstances, it is clear the story is unravelling in an impoverished, destitute, and derelict setting. Pitting Grace against this set-up goes in all likelihood against what Grace is used to. However, her life is seemingly at risk, and a cooperation between these two frequencies of capital is required, and eventually, reversed - once Grace becomes the town's go-to laborer.

Intentionally set in the United States, the socioeconomic segregation in Dogville is undeniable, and so is the cultural divide. The latter might signify something about von Trier's work process. If we are to translate the two poles of Dogville's welfare dichotomy into reality, especially since von Trier is often criticized on grounds of implausibility, it could be theorized, that the writer, coming from a highly developed nation, allocates characteristics of his surroundings to and within

Grace; while presenting a harsh critique of capitalist systems which have led to *Dogville* and von Trier being accused of "anti-Americanism" (Elbeshlawy, 2016, p. 85). Agreeing and quoting Mick LaSalle, Linda Badley (2011) contends that, "Trier elucidates a peculiarly American strain of human pathology" in which "people with absolute, unshakable faith in their own rectitude" use it as "a license to commit grossly immoral acts" (Badley, 2011, p. 114).

Here both authors are hinting at a specific type of culture of victimization, which in turn victimizes even more vulnerable people. In the socio-political context of Dogville, this translates into the increasing exploitation of Grace. As Badley (2011) describes:

> On the most obvious level, Grace is a refugee whose host exploits and ostracizes her while making her increasingly dependent. As the luxuries she offers become necessities, the class gap is widened, especially in chapter 5 after "Wanted" signs appear proclaiming Grace's illegal status and doubling the ante. As reimbursement for her employers' "risk," she is required to work twice as long with lower wages. When her "unnecessary" work becomes indispensable, she develops into a correspondingly greater liability. The surplus of services and "goods" overstimulates Dogville's subsistence economy

> and is devalued into an infinitely exploitable commodity. (Badley, 2011, p. 106)

All attributes or denominators - rich contra poor, sophisticated contra philistine, or conscientious contra ethically degenerate can be found in a Grace versus Dogville postulation. Grace, by no means, is naive like von Trier's previous heroines Bess and Selma. She might be a "troubled mind" (Simons, 2007, p. 107), but she exhibits awareness and independent thought rooted in firm conviction even under the most dire circumstances. As a matter of fact, early in the film, respectively in the third chapter, which is aptly titled "Chapter 3: *In which Grace indulges in a shady piece of provocation,"* Grace does just that - by stimulating distress and inner commotion in Mr. McKay, a man who is blind, but does not desire to be outed as such. And this occurs while Grace is still perfectly in Dogville's good graces.

Accordingly, it could be asserted that, before the lines become blurred, Grace represents sophistication, worldliness, and literacy - she is designated as the children's teacher among her other chores. On the other hand, it could also be argued that the residents of Dogville represent simple-mindedness and hospitality - they take an intruder in through a democratic vote, in part owing to Tom's sermons about acceptance and risk their own existence, however wretched it may be. Later on, the townsfolk also exhibit severe cruelty and mistreatment, which further

underscores the dynamic between Grace and Dogville and parallelly between the heroine and society, and ultimately, human nature and ruthlessness.

There's another word that Lars von Trier persistently uses to describe Grace through one of his other characters: "arrogant." Von Trier, through Grace's father, assumes Grace as arrogant for failing to condemn Dogville's cruelty toward her due to condescension: because she holds herself in high regard as a morally and intellectually superior being and pities the townsfolk for their spiritual poverty. This self-appointment as a model of uprightness and virtue is noted by Honig and Marso (2016):

> Grace shockingly mirrors the ambivalent power that the town demonstrates. On the one hand, Grace's attitude toward the villagers for most of the film is a kind of strangely inverted humanitarianism. She responds repeatedly to the cruelest slights and abuses with a forgiving compassion that seems boundless—and that is unsettling, not so much because of its saintly extravagance but more because it appears so absolute and automatic, the result of an almost mechanical internal "consensus" within Grace rather than a genuine struggle to discern and practice what is good. (Honig & Marso, 2016, p. 197)

This is an interesting point to paraphrase and then recontextualize in terms of critiquing Lars von Trier's entire filmography. The Western gaze of receiving and

examining creative work, and especially the parameters usually employed in Western Europe, including Scandinavia, ought to also be considered under how Simons describes the character of Grace, "utterly ignorant of the poverty-stricken existence of the inhabitants in this small, isolated community" (Simons, 2007, p. 107).

One may call von Trier's heroines as improbable, far-fetched or even impossible to exist in the real world: entirely fictional constructs. However, it would be presumptuous to conclude definitively that a given situation or a certain character would not transpire in reality. All societies are prone to evaluating reality within their confines of what is conceivable and credible, and according to their own definitions. Hence, a circumstance or a character that might seem preposterous or beyond the reach of logic, can easily be a fully accurate reflection of another establishment that functions under a different set of values or customs. More often than not however, fictional exaggerations offer an insight into the underlying structures that govern societies—even when on the surface they seem equal and just.

In terms of devising a setting in which a von Trier heroine would navigate, a story like *Dogville* would have probably not worked if it were set in Denmark. In view of the society in which von Trier lives and works, it might be rather pedestrian to suggest that his alleged misogynistic portrayal of women represents an inherent sexism—be that of the author or the society in which he operates. Even if that were

to be the case for Lars von Trier as an *individual*, a society seemingly as progressive and advanced in terms of gender equality as Denmark (EIGE, 2019) - ordained in the role of the cinema *consumer* - would reprimand creative endeavors that seek to undermine and humiliate women because of their gender or other selfhood characteristics.

Likewise, conceiving an oppressive and nefarious environment such as the town of Dogville to represent the depths of human cruelty would invite a dissonance with the advertised, but not always accurately represented, paragons of Danish identity. That would likely occur even at the cost of acknowledging that such admonishment would paradoxically violate another perceived obelisk of Scandinavian mentality: freedom of speech and intolerance for censorship.

The filmmaker's decision to set not only *Dogville*, but all four highlighted films not in his native Denmark but a conservative community in remote Scotland, a European-averse town in Washington state, in another dead-end town in the Rocky Mountains, and an undisclosed location anticipating the end of the world, appears to be a premeditated calculation. These settings are utilized to enable the writer to create a world in which he sinks his protagonists in *domestic anguish* where the villain, in three out of the four films is the village, town, and/or community, and in the fourth one, the family.

Lars von Trier then uses these settings, specifically in *Dancer in the Dark* and *Dogville* to conjure up a narrative that criticizes America, and its deep-rooted inequality. At the same time however, these films are not simply about America but rather stand in for a universal critique of oppression and exploitation, and in particular, the exploitation of 'good' women by their own families, communities or societies. In *Dogville,* the writer tackles a complex web of power relations and their dynamics, particularly when hierarchies are overturned.

A heroine like Grace, is at first portrayed as good-natured and reasonable: for example, she remarks that she should leave while Tom pleads her case in front of the township. Whereas Grace's character might indeed be well-intentioned, it is later revealed that she descends from a power structure far more dominant, capable and imposing than the townsfolk could have possibly imagined. In their eyes, she is a well-groomed city girl at best, and initially, this marriage of classes seems to work. Dogville not only votes to grant Grace a two-week trial; they accept her indefinite stay - offering her refuge and protection in exchange for labor and handling daily chores.

As the story progresses, Grace fares well in Dogville, and eventually even falls in love with Tom, who seems to be the only gentleman around. Once a poster of Grace is brought in town by the police, who are conspiring with the gangsters and claim she is wanted as a criminal, the unanimous support for Grace's sheltering begins to crack underneath. The police warrant serves as a catalyst for what is to

follow, and leads to Grace's torture at the hand of the townsfolk. *Domestic anguish* is once again utilized by Lars von Trier, and this time, it arrives in many forms and from all directions, except for Tom who continues to be caring—a gesture one might argue is self-serving, as he is firmly in love with Grace. He also labels his fellow citizens as "so uncivilized," (Trier, 2003, 02:06:33) and tries to help Grace orchestrate her escape, an undertaking that eventually fails.

Preceding this display of empathy from Tom, along it and likewise after, Grace is subjected to systematic rape by the "male sex" (Trier, 2003, 02:00:09), at which point, one might as well wonder if Lars von Trier is a misandrist rather than a misogynist. Once again, like in the two previous films in the series, the most deplorable acts committed against his protagonist are carried out by men, and the most repulsive characters are men. In *Dogville* however, the cruelty of women is shown too, albeit it is represented through psychological warfare. One of the townsfolk, Vera, whose husband Chuck is the first to rape Grace, and her son Jason dogs Grace and demands to be spanked by her, exemplifies how women in Dogville are cruel too. Vera falsely accuses Grace of initiating both acts and blames her for both occurrences. As with the heroines previously discussed, Grace's narrative arc follows a wrongful accusation and displays of injustice.

A key dramatic moment in Grace's journey arrives when Vera shatters her figurines. It represents the beginning of what Freytag's pyramid identifies as the

falling action. It is the point where the heroine begins to feel weak before she ultimately assumes her power. As Freytag notes:

> It must be added, that after the climax of the action, the hero must seem weaker than the counteracting figures. Moreover, on this count, the interest in him may be lessened. Yet in spite of this difficulty, the poet need be in no doubt, to which kind of arrangement to give the preference. His task will be greater in this arrangement; great art is required to make the last act strong. (Freytag, 1895, p. 109)

This particular turn in the story marks the dismantling of the heroine's efforts throughout the story to consolidate action with the townsfolk, and the play and counter-play now become more visibly defined. The shattering of the figurines, according to Honig and Marso (2016), symbolizes "the ultimate failure" of the initial social relations displayed in the film (Honig & Marso, 2016, p. 207). Incidentally, this "vindictive shattering" also "...inaugurates a more vicious regime of power in which Grace becomes less useful as a laborer than as a moral scapegoat and a convenient target for the town's paroxysms of self-defensive cruelty" (Honig & Marso, 2016, p. 207).

As Vera breaks Grace's deeply-appreciated figurines, which she acquired through industrious and hard work, the doctrine of stoicism is invoked. Vera challenges Grace not to cry before she smashes her first two figurines, in exchange

for saving the remaining five. In *Letters from a Stoic*, Seneca, the Roman philosopher and dramaturgist muses, "Until we have begun to go without them, we fail to realize how unnecessary many things are. We've been using them not because we needed them but because we had them" (Seneca, 1969, p. 227). There is an understated trifecta of connection between Seneca, a figurehead of stoicism and the playwright of *Medea*, Carl Th. Dreyer who adapted Euripides's version of *Medea* into a screenplay and Lars von Trier who directed the 1988 TV adaptation based on Dreyer's script (Badley, 2011, p. 47). It is also reflective of von Trier's tendencies as a screenwriter to approach his work from an angle of classical structure, despite the experiments he's conducted throughout his career.

Badley (2011) also addresses the similarities between Medea and Grace, noting "the trajectory of *Medea* and *Dogville* in which a gifted woman struggling against a repressive culture epitomized in a male antagonist avenges the crimes against her" (Badley, 2011, p. 146), and also commenting on the degree of retaliation by noting that it is conducted "with the revenge as unimaginable and apocalyptic as her powers have been suppressed" (Badley, 2011, p. 146).

In *Dogville*, the broken figurines are a token of all that Grace has in terms of possessions. However, they are more than simply possessions: they represent her tireless labor, which is unambiguously correlated to her willingness and resolve to survive by not giving in to the gangsters. However, Grace, who we are led to believe identifies as a stoic and has exhibited admirable endurance up to that point

in the story, in addition to having taught the doctrine of stoicism to Vera's children, breaks down crying when the first two figurines are broken. "For the first time since her childhood, she wept," (Trier, 2003, 01:42:01) reveals the narrator.

In contrast to *Breaking the Waves* and *Dancer in the Dark*, in Grace's emotional construct we do not see the frail, mentally and emotionally compromised Bess, or the dreamy, fading Selma. Instead we see a different kind of heroine: one who utilizes self-restraint, charm, and actively endeavors to follow her survival instinct. Therefore, Grace finally breaking down, and disobeying her own doctrine, signifies a change in her journey as a heroine—an evolution of sorts—which is later on materialized in the hyper-violent finale.

Similar to the previously discussed heroines, Grace too, is put through an infernal ordeal: she is repeatedly raped, chained and kept captive on a metal leash, humiliated and abused by the township she had made a pact with, and most heartachingly for her, she is betrayed by the only Dogville inhabitant she loves—Tom—who surrenders her to the mobsters. Nevertheless, unlike in the previous films in which the heroine 'goes quietly,' the final chapter of *Dogville* leads to a surprising revelation.

The mobsters that have been pursuing Grace are actually her father's mob. It turns out that Grace is not just a refined city girl who was running from unknown pursuants, but that she had deliberately escaped to not engage in the legacy of her

father. This renders her agency in *three* stages: first, she performs the highly dangerous act of defecting from a criminal kingdom, well-aware she will be pursued and haunted, and her life will be at stake. This represents an act of courage.

Secondly, abandoning this kingdom and its lush privileges in exchange for preserving her moral sovereignty and decency leads her to syndicate in a different sort of mob - alas in one where she is at the lowest rung and is relegated to a routine that is embroidered in a mosaic of poverty, greed, scarcity and moral depletion. Gradually, Grace finds herself plunging, step by step, into one yet deeper circle of hell, as her vulnerabilities begin to surface and her suffering at the hand of the townsfolk multiplies. Nevertheless, she attempts to safeguard her forgiveness, even at the peak of misery, which is a paramount task to achieve given all she has gone through.

Thirdly, through Grace, von Trier demonstrates that he does not have to necessarily resort to *ultimate martyrdom* to construct a heroine, as we notice in the cases of Bess and Selma. In a poignant exchange that Grace has with her father at the end of the film, new information is revealed that makes the viewer reinterpret Grace's actions throughout the story. Her unnamed father tells Grace that she is "the most arrogant person he's ever met" (Trier, 2003, 02:31:18). He alludes to Grace's aim for morality and rectitude, and her sense of nobility and entitlement, which she actively tries to shed throughout her stay in Dogville. He then proceeds to argue that "power is not so bad" (Trier, 2003, 02:32:14). Whereas Grace might

have had an inkling of what power was before escaping to Dogville, she had not had a taste of powerlessness and subordination.

The narrator stresses how "the light now penetrated every unevenness and flaw in the buildings, and in the people" (Trier, 2003, 02:35:26). It is as if von Trier is making a statement that might seem redundant: each person, rich or poor, is damaged to a certain extent. But it contrasts well with Grace's own perception and tacit condescension which she originally allots to the Dogville residents in her mind. She finds out that society can be cutthroat and malevolent anywhere, regardless of its specificities — a heavy-handed lesson in misanthropy by von Trier no doubt.

Grace exhibits what may be considered Cartesian doubt. She experiences deep uncertainty in regard to whether there is merit to destroying Dogville, which after all is home to children too, and most of them did not wrong her. This nourishes her skepticism in surrendering to the seduction of power, and exercising that power to wipe Dogville off the map. Grace's very core beliefs are put to question, and it makes her ultimate decision even more significant in terms of agency, as she employs detachment from her previous set of values to assess her predicament, and undergoes a deliberation with herself to inform her next step.

"I want to make this world a little better" (Trier, 2003, 02:37:53) is the last sentence Grace utters before fulfilling her odyssey of evolving into a new version of herself. We believe her when she says that, but it is an overdue realization - the

circumstances have changed, and therefore they call for unaccustomed measures to be enacted. Thereupon, Grace decides to exercise the power she holds, and orders the mob to kill everyone in Dogville, except the dog Moses and Tom, which she opts to do herself.

In a show of poetic justice, Grace gives specific instructions in regard to the elimination of Vera: she must watch her children being murdered, and if she manages not to cry for the first two, the rest can be spared. The doctrine of stoicism in an act of war, naturally fails, and all Vera's children, including her newborn baby, are shot in front of her while she watches in agony.

Grace obtains her power. A critic might argue that this power is inherited - granted to her - by her father, a man*,* so that diminishes Grace's agency as a heroine. But that is not necessarily so. Grace is playing with unfavorable odds, upon which society was built since the beginning of time as we know it. In the Bible, namely in Genesis, the woman is created from Adam's rib to become his companion. In *Dogville*, Grace infiltrates the patriarchy, not by chance or accident, but by undertaking a journey that convinces her to embrace power over servitude. It is a twisted emancipation, and one that Grace sets into motion herself by escaping her family's mob and seeking refuge in Dogville. She abandons a power structure, and then reclaims it, with a firmer grasp on it.

The class divide that looms over *Dogville* strongly suggests that von Trier is denouncing both. On one hand, arrogance and privilege as embodied by Grace's character; on the other, the tribalism, banishment, and ostracism of Dogville. The reluctance to declare an absolute good is also echoed by Honig and Marso (2016), who contend that:

> In Dogville, even the most obvious antagonism turns out to be no antagonism at all. The "right" that Grace represents and the town's "right" simply, chillingly reflect one another, evincing the same vacillation between the pious obligation of compassion toward the unfortunate and the duty to cleanse society of any malignant, degenerative presence. (Honig & Marso, 2016, p. 197)

Yet, in our current society, where those who seek refuge and shelter are demonized and alienated, it is a necessary reminder of the ills of *disproportion*. Grace Mulligan finds out the hard way, and in the end, emerges bruised but with a newfound authority.

8. MELANCHOLIA - Justine

The aggravation with von Trier's nearly homogenous streak of drowning his protagonists in torment for over a decade was reaching a boiling point after the release of *Antichrist* in 2009. In *Woman in Lars von Trier's Cinema*, Elbeshlawy (2016) remarks in regard to *Antichrist* that "on top of its graphic violence, the film is also commonly seen as an epitome of von Trier's perceived misogyny, even though this is an accusation he flatly denies" (Elbeshlawy, 2016, p. 26). But this perception arguably began to change soon, with his next film *Melancholia* which arrived a mere two years later.

It was not that *Melancholia* did not feature a woman in agony—on the contrary, existential anguish burrows deep in the epicenter of the story— but because with Justine, Lars von Trier wrote a visual essay about himself and his own struggle with mental health. A film about clinical depression and anxiety, *Melancholia* serves as a vessel for the writer to cope with his own ailment.

In addition to offering a tangent into understanding von Trier's conception of his protagonists, *Melancholia* also builds on what von Trier has asserted in the past in terms of what nourishes his inspiration when conceiving his heroines: "'Those characters are not women. They are self-portraits'" (Von Trier quoted in Badley, 2011, p. 70).

While that may be perceived as a problematic statement coming from von Trier himself, his claim is corroborated by Charlotte Gainsbourgh who stars in *Melancholia*, and also in the lead role in *Antichrist* and *Nymphomaniac*. In an interview with *Film at Lincoln Center*, Gainsbourgh, referring to von Trier, states that "I know he puts himself into all the characters I've played, though in *Melancholia* I think he was putting himself much more into Kirsten's character. But in *Antichrist* and in this one, I definitely think I was playing him" (Brooks, 2014).

Melancholia can be interpreted as a highly accurate portrayal of a condition which writers throughout history have struggled to describe clearly - precisely because it is such a complex, unpredictable and labyrinthine disease, "*a cancer of the soul"* as some have called it. The story, and this particular heroine, offer a deeply intimate look into the psyche of the author and signal the audience not to take everything he says, or shoots, at face value. In *Melancholia*, he identifies himself with Justine because, following a pattern, it seems that he identifies himself with women.

Set in an undisclosed location, but subtly hinting it is in Von Trier's own general neighborhood due to a brief appearance of the northern lights in the prologue, *Melancholia* introduces characters whose actions are hard to explain because depression is hard to explain. It must be noted that in this film, more so than in the previous three, film language, form, and audio-visual tools engage in a dynamic dance with content, and this undoubtedly affects the development of the

character. However, in line with the previously highlighted protagonists, Justine is also to be considered on a more primal level that focuses on blueprinting her psychology upon which the entire story is built.

Divided in two parts, each titled Justine and Claire referring to the two sisters at the center of the story, it could be argued that this demarcation is a nod to the comorbidity of depression and anxiety. The two conditions often occur simultaneously, thus creating a circle of despair. Justine is the depressive, while Claire also exhibits neurotic symptoms. Lars von Trier has often spoken out about his issues with mental health (Badley, 2011, p. 171; Björkman, 2005, p. 78) and it is evident he is channeling his own condition in this film.

Melancholia, analyzed from its dramatic structure, seems to be driven by what Freytag coins as a "striking occurrence" (p. 31). He notes that, in certain types of drama "the sequence of narrated incidents possesses no close connection. Chance, the caprice of fate, an unaccountable conjunction of unfortunate forces, occasions the progress of events and the catastrophe" (Freytag, 1895, p. 31).

It is in an unrelated series of occurrences that the plot of *Melancholia* is slowly narrated. The story of Justine, the central character, begins just as she has married her husband Michael. The opening is a strangely absurdist and uncomfortably comical and overlong sequence that depicts her and her husband being late to their own wedding banquet, their limousine stuck on a narrow path on

the way to Justine's brother-in-law's fancy mansion. In the limo as the driver struggles, Justine is jovial, in contrast to her husband who is visibly more distressed, but nevertheless maintains his self-restraint. Once they make it to the wedding, two hours late, Justine nonchalantly opts to go to the stable and caress her favorite horse Abraham, much to the chagrin of her sister and brother-in-law.

It is here that she notices a star in the sky, which in the second part of the film becomes a parable of sorts. The star is in fact an actual planet on its way to colliding with Earth. This is a film about the apocalypse - the literal doomsday and the annihilation of the soul. Unlike standard end-of-the-world stories, *Melancholia* stays with its characters throughout, foregoing any tropes until it shows the actual end of humanity in its very last shot.

Commenting on von Trier's occasional outbursts of nihilism, Honig and Marso (2016) note how "it is surely also ironic that the director who is seen as misanthropically and unregretfully willing to destroy the world is one who also invites sympathy for the human estate" (Honig & Marso, 2016, p. 16), before they commence to drawing a comparison between von Trier's brand of destruction and that of other filmmakers, in this case, specifically that of Alfonso Cuarón's *Gravity*. Invoking essays by Christopher Peterson and William E. Connolly which "emphasize *Melancholia*'s depiction of humans as gripped by natural and object forces well beyond human control" (Honig & Marso, 2016, p. 16) and assert that "analyzing von Trier's film along with Alfonso Cuarón's *Gravity*, von Trier stops well short of

those theorists of object-oriented ontology committed to horizontalize the human into equality with all other worldly objects" (Honig and Marso, 2016, p. 16). The authors seem to suggest that von Trier's writing process, even though it may include spectacle, nevertheless places the protagonist - or her very nature of *being* - at the forefront.

Hence, in *Melancholia*, ironically, before the world ends a wedding is to be conducted. In describing the conception of a dramatic macrocosm, Freytag notes the several micro-events that can flush out our understanding of the protagonist:

> First appear single movements; internal conflicts and personal resolution, a deed fraught with consequence, the collision of two characters, the opposition of a hero to his surroundings, rise so prominently above their connection with other incidents, that they become the occasion for the transformation of other material. This transformation goes on to such an extent that the main element, vividly perceived, and comprehended in its entrancing, soul-stirring or terrifying significance, is separated from all that casually accompanies it, and with single supplementary, invented elements, is brought into a unifying relation of cause and effect. The new unit which thus arises is the *Idea* of the Drama. (Freytag, 1895, p. 9)

Von Trier opts to depict all these pit-stops, to varying degrees, and with versatile tactics: Justine and Michael enter the extravagant and lush mansion and are greeted by cheers and pleasantries. It is here that we get to meet supporting characters, who at certain points seem like they are racing each other for a prize in unlikeability. Justine's mother, Gabby, is hateful and bitter, and it is hard to understand why she even bothered to attend the wedding since she, in her own words, despises marriage. Gabby offers an iconic line in the film, when in a cynical and spiteful speech urges Justine to "enjoy it while it lasts" (Trier, 2011, 00:19:56). Several times throughout the proceedings of the wedding, Justine tries to get to her mother, but Gabby firmly remains cold, ruthless, and down right nasty.

Although Claire and Michael seem to genuinely love Justine, in addition to her father who is rather just bumbling around being useless, Justine seems to be surrounded by predominantly negative people. Her boss, Jack, is borderline sociopathic. Initially, he is introduced when he offers Justine a promotion in his advertising company noting that she is "way, way, way too good for advertising" (Trier, 2011, 00:17:30), and upgrading her position from copywriter to art director. At certain points, it feels as if the writer is deliberately testing the limits of the spectator's compassion in order to, later on, heighten their satisfaction at the thought of humanity's extinction. By that token, the exposition of unlikable behavior continues; the crowd cheers again - and we later find out that Jack is there merely because he wants to snatch out a tagline for a campaign from Justine - on her wedding night. "Once you give her a job, she won't let go" (Trier, 2011,

00:40:42), he says. It is a line worth analyzing because it potentially suggests Justine's, and by extension, von Trier's obsessive tendencies.

Justine's depression is exactly the same. It will not let go, and Justine plunges into an episode right in the middle of her wedding, frequently leaving to lock herself in the room or bathroom, which seems like a mother-to-daughter inherited habit as both decide to take a bath while the cake is waiting to be cut. John, Claire's husband, along with Michael, a character that is rather ignored, initially appear as the closest examples to rational human beings in the family. John remarks to Claire that "those bitches have locked themselves in their bedrooms and now they're taking a bath," (Trier, 2011, 00:31:34) referring to Justine and Gabby. There is so much toxicity in the air, that *domestic anguish* almost assumes actual shape and manifests into matter. It is palpable even if in *Melancholia* there's no town or villain from outside to torment the heroine. The anguish comes from within. While John is initially regarded as the voice of reason, as Honig and Marso (2016) remark, this impression is reversed mid-way:

> In *Melancholia* (2011), the scientific perspective, represented by John (Kiefer Sutherland), fails to predict the trajectory of a planet, named Melancholia, crashing into Earth, but Justine (Kirsten Dunst) inexplicably intuits both the world's demise and the number of beans in a wedding-game bottle. (Honig & Marso, 2016, p. 134)

In *Melancholia,* everyone seems to hate each other, be it in full glory or in fragments. Some of the characters voice it explicitly. "Sometimes, I hate you so much," (Trier, 2011, 01:00:30) Claire tells Justine later in the film. The spitefulness, self-deprecation, and inner decay are on display constantly throughout the story. The bride acts out by cheating on her husband with a wedding guest, having intercourse with him in the garden. She then tells her boss that he is "a despicable, power-hungry, little man," (Trier, 2011, 00:57:51) offering a moment of satisfaction to the viewer, and extending it further when she continues lashing out by saying, "I hate you and your firm so deeply, I couldn't find the words to describe it" (Trier, 2011, 00:57:42-00:57:46).

Freytag contends that "the aggressor must arrange the grounds of his attack exactly according to the personal character of his antagonist" (Freytag, 1895, p. 222). Justine does just that; she *retaliates*. She is not like Bess, or Selma, or even Grace, although it must be noted that while Justine and Grace both square accounts with their antagonists and/or the source of their domestic anguish, unlike Grace, Justine starts retaliating very early on - thus exhibiting a more blunt and urgent agency. This does not mean that she is not vulnerable like the other von Trier heroines, but her vulnerability is different, and her strength is eventually revealed to be different too. She is uncharacteristically gentle with her nephew Leo, who calls her "Aunt Steelbreaker," (Trier, 2011, 00:14:18) and in the end we understand why Justine is just that.

The wedding concludes and one could call it a successful disaster. Justine's husband leaves her and the guests disperse, including Justine's father whom she pleads to stay the night. This is the point in the story where we begin to see Justine at her lowest, but also witness her transformation. As she enters a near-catatonic state of depression, her illness manifests in extreme fatigue and lethargy, to the point where she struggles to get from her apartment into a cab or lift her leg to get into the bathtub. Freytag asserts that "the three stages of the falling action are constructed less regularly than those of the first half" (Freytag, 1895, p. 192).

Similarly, as Justine grows weak, before assuming and exercising her full strength in the final act, there are preceding moments of narrative lethargy. Until then, it is Claire whom we see emerging as Justine's caretaker. The sisterly bond that exists between Bess and Dodo in *Breaking the Waves*, and Selma and Kathy in *Dancer in the Dark*, here is made literal in the consanguineous connection.

This is bound to render Claire with a predicament of her own. In her case, it's a gnawing and impending anxiety about the planet called Melancholia colliding with Earth. As she obsessively checks predictions and theories online, her husband John, plays the role of the protector, assuring her with his know-it-all confidence that the real scientists are convinced the planet will only pass by, and in fact, it will be an amazing sight to witness. He also builds up excitement in his son Leo, constantly boasting about the marvel and spectacle that will be Melancholia passing by. He

patronizes Claire about her fear of Melancholia, characterizing her as someone who gets anxious too easily, as if that were a choice for Claire.

In the meantime, Justine begins to surface out of her vegetative state, only to display further symptoms of her devastating illness, including an outburst where she engages in animal cruelty by beating her once-beloved horse Abraham. Her grieving and languishing state of mind is also conveyed by portraying her in ironically idyllic settings: she unwinds completely naked under the moonlight, a wellspring of sorrow - staring directly at Melancholia in the sky.

"The earth is evil," (Trier, 2011, 01:31:06) Justine tells an increasingly volatile Claire, further indicating the depth of her existential anguish. The two sisters feed off each other's conditions in a symbiosis that clearly is leading up to an all-out *catastrophe*. Meanwhile, as John's predictions of Melancholia's trajectory start to prove wrong, and he realizes that the planet will indeed collide with Earth, we witness a different kind of extinction: that of the alpha male as the consoling father figure.

As soon as John finds out there is no escaping Melancholia, he chickens out and kills himself in the horse stable by downing a bottle of pills, thus leaving Claire and Leo to die on their own. But as John's authority over the family fades, Justine's *increases*. As Melancholia approaches and Claire's anxiety starts to get out of

control, Justine ascends into a new state of mind: calmer, fearless, and tending to the most vulnerable person left in the story, her nephew Leo.

On two planes, Justine's agency comes to the forefront. When contrasted with John's cowardly suicide, Justine's boldness to survive up to that point by not having committed suicide herself, despite of her mortifying condition, is a testament to her persistence and inherent strength, even if she welcomes death by Melancholia. Once chaos starts descending upon all life forms, Justine begins to thrive. Chaos is home to her; it is her natural environment - a state of mind, body, and soul that she is used to. She instinctively knows how to react when everyone else shuts down, and she does so with a purpose.

The individual who is the most incapacitated throughout the story, now becomes the key source of strength in the family. It mirrors Freytag's description of a heroine when he writes about *Mary Stuart*, noting that, "In *Mary Stuart*, the heroine has the controlling influence over her portentous fate" (Freytag, 1895, p. 111). And so does Justine, as she assumes her power in the face of the ominous end. The pseudonym Leo has given her, Aunt Steelbreaker, gains a new meaning as she takes it upon herself to diminish the terror of apocalypse in the child's psyche and secure him a make-believe fairytale ending - something neither his father John, nor his mother Claire, who falls apart entirely, manage to achieve.

The people who brought Leo to life leave him unattended at the edge of death and it is Justine, who despised life, that gives humanity one last bit of value by performing a symbolic yet monumental task. She takes Leo to the woods to gather sticks, and builds him a "magic cave" (Trier, 2011, 01:58:49), a nest of safety to seek solace as the horror unfolds. The role reversal between Justine and Claire endows their journeys full circle: a usually functioning Claire has to physically hold and tend to Justine throughout the film; in the end Justine returns the favor.

The story's development keeps up with the motif of women being there for each other in face of cataclysm, a motif that is recurrent in Lars von Trier's work. Their sisterhood: beautiful, twisted, and allegiant comes to a fitting finale. Justine withstands incredible suffering in her life and it amounts to a final critical gesture: a silent display of tenderness as destruction exterminates every ounce of love to have ever been exchanged on Earth.

9. CONCLUSION

Constructing a heroine in Lars von Trier's universe is a peculiar undertaking and perhaps it is also one of the reasons why his protagonists tend to generate buzz and incite a spectrum of passionate reactions. The construction of von Trier's protagonists is deliberate, and each of them follows a particular dramatic structure. His heroines are undeniably subjected to immense adversity and torment, due to the cruelty of society and more often than not, stemming from the actions of men and the durability of patriarchy.

In spite of this, even within the hopeless and brutal environments in which they exist, or the domestic anguish they face, each of these heroines take matters into their own hands at decisive moments throughout their narratives, exercise significant and consequential agency, and can be interpreted as complex and tenacious characters.

This thesis analyzed four films and their protagonists created by von Trier, and while not an exhaustive discussion of the author's screenwriting devices, it represents an investigation at how the writer employs classical dramaturgical tools to construct heroines that stand in stark contrast with their settings. Each one represents a different context, timeframe, and setting, and all four exhibit varying individual characteristics, yet all of them are bound by one thread: they act in distinctly diverse and captivating ways, but they are not passive characters.

Their motivation is known, their goals in the story are known, and the effort they make to alter their status-quo, or that of their loved ones—in other words—their engagement in play and counter-play, sets into motion various chains of events. These events, despite amounting to tragic endings are provoked by the heroines' determination to do their part in the story. In the process, they expose the profound decay of society and urge the viewer to remember that empathy and compassion are crucial elements to humanity's collective health.

A stunning range of emotions are put in display through the journeys of these heroines: from the common domestic anguish they share, to the scarce and extremely brief moments of joy, their suffering in von Trier's stories is not used merely for shock value or perverse entertainment. It is difficult and painful to follow their odysseys, but it is essential that we do, because it reflects the rooted malaise of our society.

Most of them function in settings where they are vulnerable, but nevertheless, they strike back, with few to no odds in their favor. This makes them accomplished heroines: they have next to nothing to hold onto—no movement or protective structure —except for their inner strength and resolve. And although this strength stems from different sources, it is potent, enduring, and ultimately transformative.

The agency of these heroines is colored in various shades, but they all contain a powerful component: the reluctance to give up. Each of them goes through hell, but none of them surrenders until they have had their say, one way or another. The writer provides his protagonists with moral prowess: be it in their sacrifice or retaliation, the audience witnesses characters that take matters in their own hands and refuse to accept the pull of their domestic anguish. Each of these protagonists possess their own brand of counteracting. Only because all of their journeys end in destruction does not take away from the fact that they resist, fight, and weather the storm until they have made their point.

The writer is ruthless to his protagonists, because society is ruthless to women. That does not diminish the impact his heroines and their suffering have in delivering hard and daunting truths about the human condition. The writer may be misunderstood and misinterpreted, because he does not always say what we want to hear. He presents society at its worst, and that does not make it less valid, in fact it makes his critique even more relevant. Through the plight of his characters, he serves as a messenger, and between the lines, his message is clear. The world, him and his heroines all need a bigger dose of the same ingredient: goodness.

10. FILMOGRAPHY

Trier, von Lars. (Director). (1996). *Breaking the Waves* [Film]. October Film.

Trier, von Lars. (Director). (2000). *Dancer in the Dark* [Film]. Zentropa.

Trier, von Lars. (Director). (2003). *Dogville* [Film]. Filmek AB.

Trier, von Lars. (Director). (2011). *Melancholia* [Film]. Zentropa.

11. BIBLIOGRAPHY

Badley, L. (2011). *Lars von Trier (Contemporary Film Directors)* (1st ed.). University of Illinois Press.

Bitencourt, E. (2014). *The Heroines of Lars von Trier* (3rd ed.) [E-book]. https://www.amazon.com/dp/B00LQBDXQU/ref=pe_385040_118058080_TE_M1DP

Bjorkman, S., & Smith, N. (2005). *Trier on von Trier*. Faber & Faber.

Brooks, B. (2014, April 7). "Nymphomaniac" Star Charlotte Gainsbourg on Doing Double Duty for Lars von Trier. Film at Lincoln Center. https://www.filmlinc.org/daily/charlotte-gainsbourg-lars-von-trier-nymphomaniac-interview/

Butler, R., & Denny, D. (2016). *Lars von Trier's Women* (Reprint ed.) [E-book]. Bloomsbury Academic. https://www.bokus.com/bok/9781501322464/lars-von-triers-women/

Elbeshlawy, A. (2016). *Woman in Lars von Trier's Cinema, 1996–2014* (1st ed. 2016 ed.). Palgrave Macmillan.

Freytag, G. (1895). *Freytag's Technique of the Drama: An Exposition of Dramatic Composition and Art*. (E. MacEwan, Trans.). Chicago S.C Griggs & Company.

Gender Equality Index 2019: Denmark. (2019, October). European Institute for Gender Equality. https://eige.europa.eu/publications/gender-equality-index-2019-denmark

Heath, C. (2011, October 17). Lars and Real Girls. GQ. https://www.gq.com/story/lars-von-trier-gq-interview-bjork-john-c-reilly-kirsten-dunst-nicole-kidman-extras

Hobbs, S. (2018). *Cultivating Extreme Art Cinema: Text, Paratext and Home Video Culture*. Amsterdam University Press.

Honig, B., & Marso, L. (2016). *Politics, Theory, and Film: Critical Encounters with Lars von Trier*. Oxford University Press.

Kohlke, M. L., & Orza, L. (2008). *Negotiating Sexual Idioms*. Rodopi.

Lübecker, N. (2015). *The Feel-Bad Film (Edinburgh Studies in Film and Intermediality)* (1st ed.). Edinburgh University Press.

Lucas, M. (2009, December 4). Review: “Dancer in the Dark.” From The Front Row. https://www.fromthefrontrow.net/2009/12/review-dancer-in-dark.html

Plate, S. (2012). Visualizing the Cosmos: Terrence Malick's "Tree of Life" and Other Visions of Life in the Universe. *Journal of the American Academy of Religion, 80*(2), 527-536. Retrieved August 17, 2020, from www.jstor.org/stable/23250993

Pyzik, A. (2014, June 30). Against Nature. New Humanist. https://newhumanist.org.uk/articles/4694/against-nature

Savage, M. (2017, October 17). Bjork elaborates on sexual assault claim. BBC News. https://www.bbc.com/news/entertainment-arts-41657394

Seneca, L. A., & Campbell, R. (1969). *Letters from a Stoic (Penguin Classics)* (Reprint ed.). Penguin Books.

Simons, J. (2007). *Playing the Waves: Lars von Trier’s Game Cinema*. Amsterdam University Press.

Snow, P. (2019, January 10). Rebel Without Applause. The Baffler. https://thebaffler.com/latest/rebel-without-applause-snow

Ungar-Sargon, B. (2014, March 28). Sometimes a Misogynist Is Just a Misogynist: Don’t Excuse Lars Von Trier. Tablet.

https://www.tabletmag.com/sections/news/articles/sometimes-a-misogynist-is-just-a-misogynist

Winter, J. (2009, October 22). Is Antichrist Director Lars Von Trier a Misogynist? Slate. https://slate.com/culture/2009/10/is-antichrist-director-lars-von-trier-a-misogynist.html

12. ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Heartfelt thanks to my thesis advisor Bára Kopecká and my dear friends Lura Limani and Jan Adamec.