

Casting Idols: The Golden Women of Lars von Trier

Submitted to:

Reel Theology CC1738
Spring 2009
Professors Ron Beard and Cliff Guthrie
Bangor Theological Seminary

from Robert Diamante

CASTING IDOLS: THE GOLDEN WOMEN OF LARS VON TRIER

Theological concerns are evident in Lars von Trier's films *Breaking the Waves* (1996), *Dancer in the Dark* (2000) and *Dogville* (2003). The theology in these films is not neatly decoded even when the theosophical strands are uncoiled and studied closely. Further complicating queries concern the director's ethical position regarding the status of women in his films. He manipulates controversial constructs of femininity within his cinematic vocabulary superimposing them onto questionable theological systems in order to deliver his narrative. Von Trier's female characters, Bess (*Waves*), Selma (*Dancer*) and Grace (*Dogville*) vocalize his shocking calls to action particular in each story. These three women become agents of profound and often disturbing love, either through fatal self-sacrifice (Bess and Selma), or by becoming the retributive Pantocrator of Revelation (Grace).

Lars von Trier is "among the more evocative and provocative contemporary filmmakers [that] has a particular affinity for outcasts who in some way are punished by those around them for their 'outsiderness.'"¹ The women of *Waves*, *Dancer* and *Dogville* are truly on the margins of the societies they inhabit, persecuted for their actions or beliefs. "The old punk aesthetic of publicly reveling in the display of the socially forbidden"² seems to be a key motivational ingredient to the artistic disposition of the "Golden Heart" trilogy,³ while "religiosity marks his discursive structuring of the films."⁴ Those elements, combined with a documentary-style film technique, contribute to the uncomfortable realism felt from von Trier's films; his style is a cinematic evolution that embraces melodrama and updates its emotional potency for contemporary audiences. Yet it is not always welcomed, and the controversial

¹ Todd Penner, and Caroline Vander Stichele, "The Tyranny of the Martyr: Violence and Victimization in the Martyrdom Discourse and the Movies of Lars von Trier," in *Sanctified Aggression*, ed. Jonneke Bekkenkamp and Y. Sherwood. (New York: T&T Clark International, 2003), 184.

² José Arroyo, "How Do You Solve a Problem like von Trier?" *Sight & Sound* 10, no. 9 (September 2000): 14.

³ The "Golden Heart Trilogy" consists of *Breaking the Waves*, *The Idiots*, and *Dancer in the Dark*. Because *The Idiots* is not distributed widely, *Dogville's* overt theological message substitutes well for any discussion on von Trier's theology and attitude towards women.

⁴ Caroline Bainbridge, *The Cinema of Lars von Trier: Authenticity and Artifice* (New York: Wallflower Press, 2007), 87.

emotional textures his films elicit have garnered much negative criticism for the director. The three films examined in this paper depict women who will sacrifice through sexual acts, be executed to song and dance, and destroy a town with redemptive violence. Without questioning his status as auteur one can submit concerns whether or not von Trier is being fair in his portrayals of women, and further ask if the Danish director is assuming responsibility for the theological vocabulary in his films.

I. FLESHING OUT THE ROLES

Religion, Melodrama & Modalities of Femininity

Von Trier was raised in a liberal environment devoid of any overt religious inclination. It was not until later in life that he converted to Catholicism. The need for religion in his life has been described as, “difficult despite the fact that he has always had a longing to submit to external authority.”⁵ As with Carl Theodore Dreyer (whose influence on the contemporary director is well documented), von Trier seems more concerned with the idea of God than with the overlaying constructs of religion “drawing on an important distinction between religious practice grounded in dogma and the transcendent possibilities of a relation to the divine.”⁶ In his own words, “I don't know if I'm all that Catholic really...perhaps I only turned Catholic to piss off a few of my countrymen.”⁷ Nevertheless, one can tease from his films a religious (if not theological) disposition. Caroline Bainbridge, who writes most sympathetically about von Trier, is quick to note the character of von Trier's *Dogme 95 Manifesto* as having the “self-conscious rhetoric of asceticism and faux-religious discourse [that] recalls a great deal of von Trier's personal investment in religious belief.”⁸ Regardless of any inability to firmly locate von Trier's spiritual position, his films do reveal a grounded tendency toward religious aesthetic.⁹

⁵ Bainbridge, 88.

⁶ *ibid*, 137.

⁷ Jack Stevenson, *Lars von Trier* (London: British Film Institute, 2002), introduction.

⁸ Bainbridge, 87.

⁹ Michael Patrick Murphy, *A Theology of Criticism: Balthasar, Postmodernism, and the Catholic Imagination*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008). Murphy suggests that von Trier's aesthetic of the body is fundamentally Catholic. This paper cannot address the scope of his argument, but he is quoted below in several instances.

In his “Golden-Heart” trilogy” von Trier chose to articulate a view of goodness and sacrifice specifically through a female lens aligning martyrdom with femininity, “thus the martyr is a devoted wife, a loving mother, the affirmation of essential features of female identity in the modern world.”¹⁰ Von Trier juxtaposes the trauma each woman experiences with the “possibility of attaining transcendence.”¹¹ Their trials of the flesh are punctuated cinematically with perverse depictions of suffering to obviate the corporal pain each is “meant” to carry. It is as if her charge—like all women—is to suffer for having transgressed in the garden. In all three filmic instances it is for the sake of a man that the women enter into their contract with sacrifice. Each male (who also suffers) has a strong enough appeal for Bess, Selma and Grace for her to willingly adopt his trauma for the sake of his salvation; female suffering is made to appear as an ontological condition, while the male suffering is either circumstantial (Jan’s paraplegia), genetic (Jean’s failing eyesight), or existential (Thomas’s inability to transcend). Were these stories told from the perspective of the man it is possible that their suffering would be heroically depicted or—as Camille Paglia might say—Apollonian; for men any corporeal or psychological exigencies must be valiantly conquered. The cool distance of a leonine male alone in his affliction has been depicted in film *ad nauseam* while the universe of melodrama has been the habitat of the emotional female. Of Bess and Selma’s tragic journeys Todd Penner argues, “the characterization of the female as relational serves to heighten the tragic dimension of their death, and the spectator looks on in horror at the fate, but also in admiration for the [women], who fulfill [their] truest essence as lover at the very moment in which [they] sacrifice [themselves] for the other.”¹² It is as if their deaths are inevitabilities, not consequential.

Von Trier’s melodrama is characterized and heightened with his use of hand-held video and his pseudo-documentary style placing the viewer in disturbing proximity to the emotional dislocation of each character; it is a precursor to “reality television” and Western culture’s desire for emotional voyeurism, and von Trier is not shy about indulging that excess. Additionally, each of the films in the trilogy makes important use

¹⁰ Bainbridge, 149 & Penner, 190.

¹¹ Bainbridge, 115.

¹² Penner and Stichele, 189.

of close-up shots during key moments of sensitivity. This emotional surrogacy ties the spectator “into a complex structure of identification with the female protagonist, offering insight into their unspoken emotions.”¹³

Von Trier has a Marion view of women. Certainly his conversion to Catholicism positions him to conflate interpretations of the Queen of Heaven with the marginalized woman. Ute Ranke-Heinemann notes, “it may be that some individuals long for the image of a Queen of Heaven, but many more long for a human person...it is a grim fate for a woman to have to live in a dogmatic corset made by men.”¹⁴ We receive from von Trier three images of the feminine divine: prostitute; sacrificer; punisher. None of these depictions necessarily indicts von Trier as acting willfully sadistic, misogynistic or dishonorable toward women. The contradictory constructs of woman as whore/mother are as evident in him as they are evident in any male brought up in the West whose epistemological substrate (whether he knows it or not) is Judeo-Christian, and who has not questioned and overcome that debilitating construct. Michael Patrick Murphy makes a strong argument that von Trier’s depictions of female heroines are really “analogical post-event depictions of Christ” in a Balthasarian theo-drama that grows from a decidedly Catholic aesthetic. As an example he cites *Breaking the Waves*:

“It is clear that [von] Trier also has a specific theological point in *Breaking the Waves*; and though he does not designate the socio-religious force that propels or explains Bess’s actions—so as to fall into the trap of cinematic dogmatism—it is clear that Bess’s theological personality is explicitly Catholic; a bold assertion to be sure, but it becomes clear upon close inspection. The logic, the imagery, and the trajectory encoded in the responses to her prayer reveal a ‘theology of the body’ that is articulated and negotiated most consistently by Catholic aesthetic tradition.”¹⁵

¹³ Bainbridge, 117.

¹⁴ Ute Ranke-Heinemann, *Eunuchs for the Kingdom of Heaven*, (New York: Doubleday, 1990), 345.

¹⁵ Murphy, 103.

Von Trier has answered the criticism of his treatment of women with a somewhat bizarre explanation that contrasts his relationships to women with his relationships to men:

“It's like the problem you have if you're a deer: The old buck with the long antlers has all the females gathered around him and he has a hell of a job keeping the youngsters away. They all try to piss up against him, just a little bit, you know, to make their mark. For some reason, in my little environment, everyone is allowed to piss on me. Which is fine, of course, but it's tiring...I'm looking around all the time, saying, ‘Okay, who did that!?’ as another youngster comes to piss on my back. And that's my problem with men. The women don't do that. Then again, if you can handle the constant pissing, you can have wonderful relationships with other males.”¹⁶

This commentary reveals von Trier's posturing vis-à-vis both sexes and elucidates a psychology of confrontation that translates into his films. One can almost predict the stock representations of men and women that will spring from his well.

At best we humanly seek to rectify any injustice caused by—or is the cause of—marginalization. The realm of art has been granted the caveat to negotiate with these social constructs in order to amplify plight and trauma. Art can be a liberating agent. Audre Lord and Judy Chicago come to mind as vocal forces for the feminist movement. Von Trier circumnavigates any overt political position regarding the problem of female trauma and seems wary about drawing “conclusions about the ways in which the feminine is wrought in relation to trauma in contemporary cultural context.”¹⁷ If indeed the female has been confined to a “dogmatic corset” as Ranke-Heinemann suggests then we should ask von Trier whether he is tightening or loosening the strings, and whether he is drawing attention to female plight or seeks for them a liberating trail to freedom. One

¹⁶ Compiled quotes, “Dogville: interview Lars von Trier on Dogville” accessed 10 May, 2009. www.celebritywonder.com

¹⁷ Bainbridge, 136.

need not become didactic, dogmatic or tendentious to emancipate.

II. SALVATION, SACRIFICE & REVOCATION

There is no common agreement among scholars or critics about what constitutes a Christ-figure in film. Some believe that “the Christ figure has to stand independently without an explicit reference to Christ,¹⁸ while others believe, “there are two ways to deal cinematically with the cross: either re-create the first-century experience through a literal depiction of indifferent Roman soldiers pounding nails into the hands of a condemned man, or tell a parallel story inspired by the initial event.¹⁹ Feminist theologians have questioned the significance of God becoming incarnate as a man and not as a woman, and what it means theologically today.²⁰ Any depiction of Christ as a woman would be a subversive rendering. But what is at stake for atonement, salvation or redemption if Christ’s gender is questioned? While the historical Jesus was indeed a man, his maleness itself “is not an essential role in God’s incarnation among us. Further if Jesus’ maleness per se does not bear any soteriological meaning then his sex can have no more significance than other historical details, such as his ethnicity in terms of our contemporary portrayals of Christ.²¹ Further, “female Christ-figures in films are particularly intriguing because they raise issues both about Christ’s identity and about women’s ability to represent Christ, whether it is on the movie-screen or at the alter in church.²²

A broad analysis of contemporary Christ-figures cannot be fully studied here, but through the characters of Bess, Selma and Grace we can make analogies to Christ- or Jesus-like behaviors and ask how they are adapted to von Trier’s theology.

Bess

Breaking the Waves was von Trier’s first venture into melodrama and he pulled out all the stops. Reactions to the film ranged from praise to derision. In *Waves* von Trier

¹⁸ Arnfridur Gudmundsdottir, “Female Christ Figures in Films: A Feminist Critical Analysis of *Breaking the Waves* and *Dead Man Walking*,” *Studia Theologica* 56 (2002), 28.

¹⁹ James M. Wall, “Paradoxical Goodness,” *Christian Century*, 5-12 (February 1997), 115.

²⁰ Gudmundsdottir, 29.

²¹ *ibid*, 30.

²² *ibid*, 31.

conflates romantic melodrama with Christian allegory rendered through “a quasi-realistic lens.”²³ Most notable praise went to Emily Watson for her stirring depiction of the psychologically frail Bess who, during the course of the film, encounters sexual awakening, despair, and death. Von Trier’s desire to make an erotic film “had gone back to his school days when he would tell anyone who would listen that he wanted to make a porn film.”²⁴ But his first attempt to realize that goal falls short of overt sexual pornography. Saturnine, fetishistic, and suffused with theological tendency, any sexual overtone in *Waves* becomes disrupted by full-scale trauma. Sexual pleasure and eroticism are contexts in which the narrative unfolds but do represent something positive for Bess as she surrenders to prostitution. “If Bess had in some way derived enjoyment from the sex that would have been far more controversial and would have led many to label the film pornography.”²⁵

Further controversy arises in *Waves* when assigning Bess status as a Christ-figure.

Bess “is not imbued with agency, but rather becomes a powerless victim of others’ powers. *Breaking the Waves* exemplifies what feminist theologians have justly labeled an abuse of the cross, that is when the cross of Christ has been used to justify the suffering of the powerless, which have so often been women. This is a film about violence and abuse, which portrays a harmful misinterpretation of the cross of Christ.”²⁶

In her love for Jan, Bess construes his misguided commands as her obligation to fulfill matrimonial fidelity. What’s more, the unhealthy “God” that exists in her head (a construct inherited from the strict religious community in which she dwells) compels her toward self-destruction. This is not an easy film to watch. Bess truly believes her acts have healing power for Jan. *Waves* creates an image of Bess “as the template of

²³ Ilana Shiloh, “Breaking the Waves; Dancer in the Dark; Dogville,” *Modern Language Studies* 35, no. 1 (Spring, 2005): 87.

²⁴ Stevenson, 89.

²⁵ *ibid.*, 93.

²⁶ Gudmundsdottir, 35.

bittersweet sexuality that heals and wounds deeply.²⁷ But it also places her within the shadow of mental illness. Love may be “the film’s topic and very purpose”, it may be the binding expression in its “conjunction of religion, eroticism and possession,”²⁸ however Bess’s self-sacrifice for Jan, while positing itself as an act of sanctity, ultimately invests her in a masochistic and violent program of “redemptive religious meaning.”²⁹ As she sets out on her journey even she is a troubled. Bess’s occasional glances into the camera make us complicit in her psychological devolution. “Von Trier composes through Bess a politically dangerous apotheosis of breaking a woman’s body as an event of encountering the holy.”³⁰ The audience cannot help but watch, and therein beats the heart of melodrama. One understands Augustine’s view of theatre in this light, the perverse verisimilitude of the stage that confines compassion and empathy to vicarious experiences. Such can be the nature of art.

Von Trier asks us to accept Bess’s noble sacrifice through perverse sexuality as a canonizing act. Even she, at the moment before her death, questions whether or not it was right. Her doubt is perhaps the darkest and most emotionally wrenching moment in the film. But her uncertainty is a mere moment before the parting of her spirit from her holy shell, and von Trier “enthrones female moral superiority”³¹ by revealing a miracle at the end of the film. Not only can Jan walk, but the theophanic moment is realized when heavenly bells materialize and peal over the oil-rig. It is not just God’s agency to which the miracle is assigned, but also the frail sacrificial lamb who offered herself so that her man may walk again: “Bess,” whispers Jan knowingly while gazing up toward heaven. We weep.

Since the sixties feminist theologians have raised significant questions about the Christian model of love as self-sacrifice and its history of effects upon women.”³² Von

²⁷ Alyda Faber, “Redeeming Sexual Violence?: A Feminist Reading of *Breaking the Waves*,” *Literature and Theology* 17, no. 1 (March 2003), 67.

²⁸ Stephen Heath, “God, Faith and *Breaking the Waves*,” *Literature and Theology* 2, No 1 (March 1998): 94.

²⁹ Faber, 65.

³⁰ *ibid*, 73.

³¹ Brian Goss, review of *The Cinema of Lars von Trier: Authenticity and Artifice*, by Caroline Bainbridge, *Journal of Communication Inquiry* 32, no. 3 (2008): 316.

³² Gudmundsdottir, 33.

Trier created Bess to become a sexual martyr “through a peculiar valorization of feminine abjection as madness, formlessness, malleability, hysteria. This common reiteration of femininity as weakness...recreates male power over and against feminine power as fascinating debility.”³³ Some see the depiction of Bess’s love as “funding male power³⁴ and the realization of her character as “the worst of male artistic hegemony.”³⁵ Of the arid outcome to her folly Murphy is more sympathetic commenting that “Trier is suggesting, precisely, an ontological ground for exposing one face of Christianity in his portrayal of a mentally ill character that turns out to be the healthiest and “truest” person out there.”³⁶ Which may be a decidedly Catholic point-of-view.

Substantial criticism was directed at the character of Bess, particularly by a female segment of the audience. Her degradation transpired, according to some critics, “under a lurid pall of voyeurism and sadism.”³⁷ After her marriage to Jan “Bess becomes differently literate, literate in desire, overstepping the law of the Elders [church], flinging herself out of its terms and their protection.”³⁸ *Waves* laces love, sex and religion together “as an account of goodness³⁹ that is assigned to Bess who, in a sense, becomes a holy prostitute, the Magdalene, whose sexual acts are meant to heal. “While sex therapy reconfigures commercial sex as a therapeutic art, another strategy of redefinition, ‘sacred prostitution’ seeks to establish sex work as a spiritual practice. Here, exemplary ‘ancestors’ are invoked to create a kinship between contemporary sex workers and such figures as Mary Magdalene.”⁴⁰

Some have seen in Bess’s actions an Anselmian view of atonement: sacrifice as satisfaction or rectification for sin.

³³ Faber, 69.

³⁴ Faber, 70.

³⁵ Murphy, 113.

³⁶ *ibid*, 125

³⁷ Stevenson, 100.

³⁸ Heath, 98.

³⁹ *ibid*, 100.

⁴⁰ Wendy Chapkis, *Live Sex Acts: Women Performing Erotic Labor*, (New York: Routledge, 1997).

“Pastoral theologians and counselors with knowledge about Christian history can easily identify Bess’s sacrifice as a distortion of the doctrine of “satisfaction” atonement. Bess believes she has freely chosen her sacrifice and that it will bring new life. Any sacrifice however, that perpetrates a system in which power is abused through women being treated as sexual objects cannot be redemptive.”⁴¹

Doehring’s clinical assessment of Bess exemplifies a pastoral care model that establishes “relationships of trust in which false symbols of God can be resisted and life-giving symbols can be constructed.”⁴² Victimized by the circumstances into which she was born and coupled with an impenetrable naïveté, “it was not simply that her symbol of God was dead, it was demonic.”⁴³ Were she traveling through the northern Isles of Scotland as Bess was acting out her course of self-annihilation perhaps Doehring could have saved Bess from herself and from Jan. Surely his inevitable recovery would have created a truly happy ending to counter the maudlin conclusion von Trier delivers. But that would hardly serve us melodramatically.

Selma

Less clear in its theological arc is *Dancer in the Dark*. Indeed, Selma may be seen as Christ-like in her willingness to sacrifice herself for the sake of her son. Von Trier’s treatment of Selma (as if responding to the criticism of his violent treatment of Bess) is modulated by interstices where, instead of traumatic silence, he projects song and dance. Fantastic musical numbers filmed with bright colors and choreographed in the anachronistic style of Hollywood musicals allows the audience to conjoin with Selma and escape with her into the world where nothing bad ever happens. “Von Trier utilizes the fundamentals of melodrama but he complicates them and compromises our responses to them by hybridizing them with reference to such seemingly incongruous forms as the documentary, comedy and the musical.”⁴⁴ In a most bizarre rendering where

⁴¹ Carrie Doehring, “Pastoral Care of Bess in *Breaking the Waves*: A Contextual Practical Theological Approach,” *Sciences Pastorales* 23, no. 2 (2004): 65.

⁴² *ibid*, 68.

⁴³ *ibid*, 66.

⁴⁴ Bainbridge, 103.

convention and innovation are combined, *Dancer* reveals itself to be a complex retelling of maternal sacrifice no less rending than *Madame X*, *Imitation of Life* and *Stella Dallas*.⁴⁵

In *Dancer* the iconic “mother” places all else behind her in order to salvage for her son hope for a future in which he is liberated from the wound she (genetically) imparted to him, his failing eyesight. Marginalized, abused, and nearly blind herself, in an act of desperation she commits murder in response to an injustice that was perpetrated against her by her landlord. Von Trier illustrates Selma’s murderous act as one of mercy bestowed upon a man who knows himself to be evil. During the musical interlude following his death Selma resurrects him, asks him for forgiveness, then baptizes herself in the river beside his house. In contradistinction to her mercy von Trier leads the audience through the merciless injustice that Selma is subjected to as a result of her crime. Selma is hung, and the audience is left empty knowing the true reason why she did what she did, yet is unable to intercede on her behalf—a melodramatic construct that allows us access to the protagonist’s goodness while the other characters remain oblivious of her true nature. *Dancer* tries in much the same way as *Waves* to portray female suffering as heroic, but one questions von Trier’s methodology. Are we meant to experience something transcendent through Selma’s act? Or is the abundance of tears rooted “firmly within a strong tradition of the sub-genre of maternal-melodrama⁴⁶ as pornographic in its emotional indulgences as *Waves* had been. The viewer is left questioning whether or not Selma’s death was a sadistic manipulation by a bent director.

At their core both *Breaking the Waves* and *Dancer in the Dark* are relating stories of love, but as women, “Bess and Selma remain within the boundaries of such traditional female roles as nourishing woman, submissive wife, seductive whore, and self-sacrificing mother.”⁴⁷ Von Trier’s provocations are formidable and he teases the audience with theological assertions, bold religious imaginings, and contemporary filmic devices that seduce the audience as the women sink into greater depths of human despair. Some say the “Christological overtones are hard to avoid” and seem resolved to announce the

⁴⁵ *Madam X* (1966, Rich); *Imitation of Life* (1959, Sirk); *Stella Dallas* (1937, Vidor).

⁴⁶ Bainbridge, 109.

⁴⁷ Penner and Stichele, 189.

patent “imitatio Christi” of both Bess and Selma.⁴⁸ Others reject that reading and see them as tragically misguided muses. While both may appear analogous in their behaviors to a Jesus of the Gospels it is not until we travel to Dogville and meet Grace that Christ arises. And She is not pleasant.

Grace

After much criticism for his seemingly abject treatment of women in both *Waves* and *Dancer*, von Trier began another (as of yet unfinished) trilogy depicting the journey of another woman, Grace, who travels through the United States during the Great Depression. However, the differences between Grace and Selma/Bess are stark.

“*Dogville* is a Brechtian reworking of *Breaking the Waves*.”⁴⁹ It is an allegory where the “grace” that comes to liberate a small town is unfortunately abused, and the messenger—Christ-figure Grace—becomes a scapegoat for the town until finally her father unshackles her. In the end Grace becomes the retributive, eschatological Jesus of Revelation. “No longer is the Von Trier female heroine a Suffering Servant; she turns...when she realizes that forgiveness without judgment is indulgence and infantilizing.”⁵⁰ The unrepentant townsfolk suffer in a hailstorm of bullets and fire. There is no question about the theological implication of Grace’s finalizing act, which drove some critics to view the movie as a political attack of American values. “America is known as the world’s most Christian nation and the land where anyone can pursue their dream regardless of who they are. Yet von Trier seems to be saying (in terms of charitable welfare to the needy and underprivileged) America has not deserved God’s mercy or his grace.”⁵¹ Von Trier has responded to this criticism in several ways:

“I was criticized by some American journalists for making a film about the U.S.A. without ever having been there. This provoked me because, as far as I can recall, they never went to Casablanca when they made *Casablanca*. I thought that was unfair so I decided then and there

⁴⁸ *ibid*, 191.

⁴⁹ Nicholas Rombers, ed., *New Punk Cinema* (Edinburg: University Press, 2005), 166.

⁵⁰ Victor Morton, review of “Dogville,” www.24fpsmagazine.com (archive).

⁵¹ Rombers, 167.

that I would make more films that take place in America. That was one thing. Then I was listening to "Pirate Jenny", the song by Bertolt Brecht and Kurt Weill from *The Threepenny Opera*. It's a very powerful song and it has a revenge theme that I liked very much."⁵²

To equate revenge with redemption may be theologically misguided, however, the position Grace adopts as a reaction to her having become the target of every sublimated anxiety and perversion held by the townsfolk of Dogville can indeed be seen as an act of divine retribution. For all their self-righteous piety and humanist aspirations, Dogville's inhabitants stood upon a weak foundation, which eventually gave out and buried them. Grace narrowly escaped their intent to scapegoat her, and, after a protracted period during which she was subjected to humiliating degradations by both the men and the women of the town, Grace revoked her grace and assumed the power given to her by her father. Her swift and violent retribution leveled Dogville.

Theologically, von Trier is narrating a doctrine. Grace is "a theological signifier of 'grace', an eternally suffering servant, and through her final act exemplifies the most unpopular Christian doctrine of all—Hell."⁵³ Perhaps his soon-to-be-released film *AntiChrist* will flesh out von Trier's eschatological vision, but in *Dogville* the consignment of souls is not at all clear; to assert the film represents von Trier's theology of Hell may be overstepping.

"Damnation...The relevant scene is near the end (or The End, as it were) between Grace and her father, played by James Caan, who has come to rescue her from the abuse she has been suffering at the hands of the townspeople. Grace begins the conversation wanting to save them, but the father talks her out of it on the basis of the necessity for judgment. It's not that we have to stand on one side or the other, it's more that because both Father and Son are part of the same Godhead, both justice and mercy have to come on the same side, otherwise you have

⁵²Compiled quotes, "Dogville:interview Lars von Trier on Dogville" accessed 10 May, 2009. www.celebritywonder.com

⁵³ Morton, www.24fpsmagazine.com.

gangsterism (the Father alone) or victimology (the Son alone).⁵⁴

A feminist critique at first glance places Grace's status as woman as the "hated other" in much the same way that Bess and Selma become the marginalized "others" in their own theatres: all three fall victim to patriarchal values, all three are positioned to endure the masochism to which they are subjected.⁵⁵ But here Grace turns the tide, and her agency becomes sanctioned by her all-powerful father. While the status of the female is upgraded by affording her masculine authority, it is still with the permission of a man, and one wonders, having reached the end of the New Testament with his allegory of Revelation, if von Trier has gotten very far in his understanding of women.

III. THE CURTAIN FALLS

Parting Glances

The Director Lars von Trier offers several views of women in his films, all of which are controversial not only in the realm of feminism but also in theological contexts. Serious concerns arise in his treatments of Bess, Selma and Grace causing one critic to ask if "his characterization of woman as hysteric [creates] the distance necessary to disrupt idealization."⁵⁶ The tropes of sacrifice, virtue and other meritorious, and characteristically Christian (if not simply ethical) behaviors are subjected to rigorous tests. In von Trier's vision "martyrdom represents a full immersion of the image in cultural stereotypes. There is no fundamental challenge here; no distinctive articulation of unique, counter-cultural identity. In the end, von Trier has left us with a stereotypical pattern of virtue, which ultimately domesticates the power of the martyr."⁵⁷ Many question his pattern of depicting females as tragic martyrs, and if that is sustaining negative constructs and diminishing the hope for further liberating dialogue.

"Turning the cross into a symbol of self-sacrifice, radical obedience and self-giving suffering this interpretation confers intrinsic (redemptive)

⁵⁴ *ibid.*

⁵⁵ Bainbridge, 150.

⁵⁶ Alyda Faber, "Dancer in the Dark: Affliction and the Aesthetic of Attention," *Studies in Religion* 35, no. 1 (2006): 101.

⁵⁷ Penner and Stichele, 192.

religious value upon suffering and death. Such an understanding of Jesus' death, according to Schüssler-Fiorenza perpetuates the victimization of the socially disempowered because it encourages these believers to accept rather than resist and transform, their suffering.⁵⁸

Von Trier has the final word, however, for we must take into account his own point-of view. "I suppose I can understand that people might interpret some of what I do as martyring women but I would say that these characters are not so much females as they are a part of me."⁵⁹ On his journey as an artist whose audience is global, and whose voice has been deemed relevant in the social and theological discourse, it will be interesting to observe his evolution, listen to what he has to say, then question.

⁵⁸ Faber, "Redeeming Sexual Violence", 72.

⁵⁹ Compiled quotes, "Dogville:interview Lars von Trier on Dogville" accessed 10 May, 2009. www.celebritywonder.com.

Bibliography

- Arroyo, José, "How Do You Solve a Problem like von Trier?" *Sight & Sound* 10, no. 9 (September 2000): 14.
- Bainbridge, Caroline. "Making Waves: Trauma and Ethics in the Work of Lars von Trier," *Journal For Cultural Research*, Volume 8, Number 3 (July 2004).
- Bainbridge, Caroline. The Cinema of Lars von Trier: Authenticity and Artifice. New York: Wallflower Press, 2007.
- Chapkis, Wendy. Live Sex Acts: Women Performing Erotic Labor. New York: Routledge, 1997.
- Doehring, Carrie. "Pastoral Care of Bess in Breaking the Waves: A Contextual Practical Theological Approach." *Sciences Pastorales* 23, no. 2 (2004): 55-70.
- Faber, Alyda. "Dancer in the Dark: Affliction and the Aesthetic of Attention." *Studies in Religion* 35, no. 1 (2006): 85-106.
- Faber, Alyda. "Redeeming Sexual Violence? A Feminist Reading of Breaking the Waves." *Literature and Theology* 17, no. 1 (March 2003): 59-75.
- Goudy, June Christine. The Feast of Our Lives: Re-Imagining Communion. Cleveland: Pilgrim, 2002.
- Goss, Brian. Review of The Cinema of Lars von Trier: Authenticity and Artifice, by Caroline Bainbridge. *Journal of Communication Inquiry* 32, no. 3 (2008): 313-318.
- Gudmundsdottir, Arnfridur. "Female Christ Figures in Films: A Feminist Critical Analysis of Breaking the Waves and Dead Man Walking." *Studia Theologica* 56 (2002): 27-43.
- Heath, Stephen. "God, Faith and Breaking the Waves." *Literature and Theology* 2, no. 1 (March 1998): 93-106.
- Morton, Victor. Review of "Dogville." www.24fpsmagazine.com (archive).

- Murphy, Michael P. A Theology of Criticism: Balthasar, Postmodernism, and the Catholic Imagination. New York: Oxford University Press, 2008.
- Nobus, Dany. "The Politics of Gift-Giving and the Provocation of Lars von Trier's *Dogville*", *Film Philosophy*, 11.3 (November 2007): 23-37.
- Pence, Jeffrey. "Cinema of the Sublime: Theorizing the Ineffable" *Poetics Today*, 25:1 (Spring 2004): 29-66.
- Penner, Todd and Caroline Vander Stichele. "The Tyranny of the Martyr: Violence and Victimization in the Martyrdom Discourse and the Movies of Lars von Trier." In Sanctified Aggression, ed. Jonneke Bekkenkamp and Y. Sherwood, 183-192. (New York: T&T Clark International, 2003). 175-192.
- Ranke-Heinemann, Ute. Eunuchs for the Kingdom of Heaven. New York: Doubleday, 1990.
- Romers, Nicholas, ed. New Punk Cinema. Edinburgh: University Press, 2005.
- Simons, Jan. Playing the Waves: Lar von Trier's Game Cinema. Amsterdam: University Press, 2007.
- Stevenson, Jack. "Lars von Trier: Pornographer?", *Bright Lights Journal*, No 43 (February 2004), <http://www.brightlightsfilm.com/43/trier.htm>.
- Stevenson, Jack. Lars von Trier. London: British Film Institute, 2002.
- Shiloh Ilana. "Breaking the Waves; *Dancer in the Dark*; *Dogville*." *Modern Language Studies* 35, no. 1 (Spring 2005): 84-88.
- Wall, James M. "Paradoxical Goodness." *Christian Century*, 5-12 (February 1997), 115-116.
- Watkins, Greg. "Seeing and Being Seen: Distinctively Filmic and Religious Elements in Film." *Journal of Religion and Film* Vol 3, No. 2 (October, 1999): 1-7.