Lars von Trier
Visual Expressions of Theological Themes in Breaking the Waves, Dancer in the Dark and Dogville

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Lars von Trier
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Presentation
- Introduction to the director
  - Influences
  - Dogme 95
  - Significant works
- General comments about female Christ-figures
  - Quotes and brief contributive discussion
- Look at each movie of the Golden Heart trilogy + Dogville
  - Brief plot synopsis
  - Theological themes in each movie
  - Quotes from those who have studied these works in the theological context

Paper
- Bess, Selma and Grace
  - Feminine archetypes
  - Christ-figures
- How directorial style and visual motifs create an intimate theological space
  - “Reality plane”; fantasy world; generic set
Lars von Trier  *Early Life and Influences*

- Born April 30, 1956 (Taurus-Monkey)

- Grew up in a liberal, politically socialist-democratic, non-religious family in a middle-class suburb of Copenhagen. His mother was strong-willed and self-assured, his father was Jewish. On her deathbed his mother would admit that he was not Lars’ s real father.

- He began making films at age 10. Lars was also a child actor. He studied at university, then went to film school.

- Carl Theodore Dreyer’s *The Passion of Joan of Arc* played a large role in the formation of his visual aesthetic, and von Trier is to this day a fan of his compatriot director. Von Trier produced Dreyer’s unrealized film script of *Medea* for television.

- Bertold Brecht, Orson Welles, Ingmar Bergman, Andrei Tarkovsky are among other influences

- Converted to Catholicism: “I don't know if I'm all that Catholic really. I'm probably not. Denmark is a very Protestant country. Perhaps I only turned Catholic to piss off a few of my countrymen.”

- Lars von Trier’s mode of religious belief is described as humanist and he attributes this to the influence of Dreyer’s view of religion; organized religion is frequently attacked but not the idea of God.
Dogme95: A Manifesto

Announced March 22, 1995 in Paris:

1. Filming must be done on location. Props and sets must not be brought in (if a particular prop is necessary for the story, a location must be chosen where this prop is to be found).
2. The sound must never be produced apart from the images or vice versa. (Music must not be used unless it occurs within the scene being filmed, i.e., diegetic).
3. The camera must be a hand-held camera. Any movement or immobility attainable in the hand is permitted. (The film must not take place where the camera is standing; filming must take place where the action takes place.)
4. The film must be in color. Special lighting is not acceptable. (If there is too little light for exposure the scene must be cut or a single lamp be attached to the camera).
5. Optical work and filters are forbidden.
6. The film must not contain superficial action. (Murders, weapons, etc. must not occur.)
7. Temporal and geographical alienation are forbidden. (That is to say that the film takes place here and now.)
8. Genre movies are not acceptable.
9. The final picture must be transferred to the Academy 35mm, with an aspect ratio of 4:3, that is, not widescreen. (Originally, the requirement was that the film had to be filmed on Academy 35mm film, but the rule was relaxed to allow low-budget productions.)
10. The director must not be credited.
Filmography: Europe *Trilogy*

Highlighting the “past and present traumas” of Europe.

2) Epidemic (1987)
3) Europa/Zentropa (1991)
Named after a popular Danish children’s book in which the female character is self-sacrificing.

Lars von Trier has never been to the United States; he is terrified to fly.

1) **Dogville** (2003) Grace/Nicole Kidman
2) **Manderlay** (2005) Grace/Bryce Dallas Howard
3) **Washington** (sic. Status unverified)
Et al.

Television

• Medea (1988)
• Riget (The Kingdom, 1994)
• Riget II (The Kingdom 2, 1997)

Feature Film

• The Boss of It All (2006)
• Antichrist (2009)
Female Christ-Figures

Who Do You Say That I Am?

• “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.”

• “Feminist theologians have questioned the significance of God becoming incarnate as a man and not as a woman and what it means theologically for Christian communities today.”

• “Female Christ-figures in films are particularly intriguing because they raise significant issues both about Christ’s identity and about women’s ability to represent Christ, whether it is on the movie-screen or at the altar in church.”

• “It may be that some individuals long for the image of a queen of heaven, but many more long for a human person. And all those who might have met the image of a real person in a less miraculous and therefore more truthful image of Mary have been cheated and deprived of that encounter by the doctrine of an incomprehensible and therefore existentially meaningless natural wonder.”

• von Trier “idealizes rather than questions female self-sacrifice in the victimization of his main female characters.”
Theological Theme

Breaking the Waves  Bess McNeill (Emily Watson)

- Revelation
- Faith
- Sacrifice
- Miracle

- “Bess embodies the true nature of religion that von Trier associates with faith, passion and goodness.”
- “Bess communicates in her sexual being a refusal to limit religious expression to what is conventionally assumed to be good or fitting, extending her devotion to Jan into zones of sexuality deemed perverse or degraded by patriarchal sexual standards.”
- “The film commends Bess’s religious devotion to the viewer as a practice of excessive desire that transcends institutional and moral codes.”
- “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.”
Theological Theme

Dancer in the Dark Selma Jeskova (Björk)

- Self-Sacrifice
- Altruism
- Unconditional “goodness” undermined by circumstance

- “…consider Dancer in the Dark to be an unusual and important film to the extent that it creates a distinctive and rare aesthetic of attention to affliction.”

- “If anything [von Trier] naturalizes filmic conventions expressive of religious passion (upturned gaze, extreme close-ups of the face and eyes) into Selma’s ardor for musicals.”

- “As long as woman is characterized as hysteric, as I contend she is in Dancer, she safeguards for man his detachment from susceptibility of the flesh to pain, contingency and death, as susceptibilities that she alone inhabits fully.”

- “Selma is a model of self-sacrificial love. This time her total devotion may seem less scandalous [than Bess’s erotic love] as motherly love is universally sanctified.”
Theological Theme

Dogville Grace (Nicole Kidman)

- Grace
- Scapegoating
- Retribution

“...as a religious work of art, Dogville is a rare breed today–unapologetically moralistic, and displaying and justifying the most unpopular Christian doctrine of all–Hell.” [I would argue it as Judgment]

“If Grace is her name in a stylized, unspecific world overseen by a providential God-like narrator, then She becomes a theological signifier–of grace, an eternally suffering servant–and thus of Christ.”

“Grace’s golden heart and humility elicit the townspeople’s hypocrisy and sadism, and they end up abusing Grace emotionally, physically and sexually.”
Things to Note in Each Movie…

**Breaking the Waves**
- The trailer sets up the plot very well. Listen how the background music escalates into a pathos.
- What do we learn about Bess from the trailer?
- Some nudity

**Dancer in the Dark**
- Selma uses music to escape from the ordinary world. During these numbers think of the tragedy playing out in the “real world” that Selma is experiencing which warrants this level of escapism.
- Watch for religious references throughout both numbers: e.g. what is the significance of the “bell” sound when she touches the overhead lamp? What happens at the bridge? What does the wood pile signify?

**Dogville**
- Does the set support or distract from the plot?
- What is the POV of the narrator?
- Music overlay is Vivaldi’s “Nisi Dominus”: Psalm 127 (Vulgate; Psalm 126): “Unless the LORD watches over the city, the watchmen stand guard in vain.” Listen how the music echoes Grace’s gradual psychological distancing from the townsfolk of Dogville, and also mirrors the narrator’s imperative tone.
- Plot context not withstanding, can each clip be read as a Christian allegory?