

# Behind Idealism: The Discrepancy between Philosophy and Reality in The Cinema of Lars von Trier

MADS BUNCH

## ABSTRACT:

“All my life I’ve been interested in the discrepancy between philosophy and reality, between conviction and its implementation.”  
(Lars von Trier, 2005)

Most scholarly attention has so far been directed towards the elements of form and cinematography in Lars von Trier’s work. In this paper I will instead focus on the thematic and philosophical qualities of his work. Through analysis of protagonist types and plot structures, I will show how “the discrepancy between philosophy and reality” functions as a central underlying structure in the films. But also how this discrepancy shifts according to gender and over time in von Trier’s later production. I will also examine von Trier’s ties to nineteenth-century Scandinavian drama and German philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche. These are important connections which have as yet not received the attention they deserve.

## RÉSUMÉ:

« Je me suis intéressé toute ma vie à la divergence entre la philosophie et la réalité, entre les croyances et leur mise en application »  
(Lars von Trier, 2005)

Alors que la plupart des critiques se sont jusqu’à maintenant intéressés à la forme et à la cinématographie dans l’oeuvre de Lars von Trier, cet essai se concentrera plutôt sur la thématique et les qualités philosophiques de son oeuvre. À travers l’analyse des types de protagonistes et des structures de l’intrigue, je démontrerai de quelle façon la « la divergence entre la philosophie et la réalité » sert de structure centrale sous-jacente aux films du réalisateur. J’examinerai également les liens qu’entretient Trier avec le théâtre scandinave du dix-neuvième siècle et avec le philosophe allemand Nietzsche, liens importants qui méritent qu’on s’y attarde davantage.

Mads Bunch, Mag. Art., is a Lecturer at The University of British Columbia, Department of Central, Eastern and Northern European Studies.

## The Europe Trilogy

A common main theme in the last twenty-five years of Lars von Trier's filmmaking has been "the discrepancy between philosophy and reality, conviction and implementation." It occurs already in his first feature film, *Forbrydelsens Element* [*The Element of Crime*]<sup>1</sup> (1984), the opening film of the Europe Trilogy, where detective Fisher embodies this discrepancy. While he is investigating the Lotto Murders, we slowly find out that it is actually he who is the killer. It's a textbook example of the detective who got "too involved," as the more down-to-earth and cynical police commissioner Kramer points out in the final scene. The system, Fisher's "philosophy" about the nature and pattern of the Lotto murderers, and his own careerist ambitions have unconsciously overshadowed the initial goal: to prevent the next Lotto girl from getting killed. Instead he ends up killing her himself without really being conscious of what he's doing. Within this framework the title, "The Element of Crime," can be interpreted as follows: All crimes are characterized by a certain "element." In this case the element that von Trier points to is "blind involvement" or "idealism," albeit of a depraved kind.

This type of set-up (a young idealist ending up causing death and destruction) is explicitly discussed in von Trier's second feature film: *Epidemic*, from 1987. In a scene in the film in which von Trier and co-screenwriter Niels Vørsel outline the story by writing on a wall, von Trier says that their main character—the young doctor Mesmer—"must be an idealist in the beginning" and that "without his idealistic effort, no problem." The irony of the film is that it is the young idealistic Mesmer (who wants to go outside the city to prevent the people from the rural areas from contracting the disease) who is himself the main source of contamination, an irony that plays on the increasing realization that much disease is iatrogenic. The scene is depicted with much irony when we see von Trier, who himself plays Dr. Mesmer, being transported out to the rural areas, clinging to a rope that hangs from a helicopter—the Red Cross flag in his hands—while the soundtrack plays the overture from *Tannhäuser*.

The illness is furthermore called "DIN-sygdommen" [YOUR-disease], so in the case of *Epidemic* the gap between "philosophy and reality," "conviction and implementation" couldn't be made more obvious, nor could the irony—compared with the more serious mode of *The Element of Crime*—be more pointed.

In the last part of the Europe Trilogy *Europa* [released in the USA as *Zentropa*] (1991) we encounter an American by the name of Leopold Kessler as he arrives in Germany shortly after the end of World War II in order to help in the reconstruction of the country. He is of German descent and the German part of his family helps him to get a job with the railroad company "Zentropa." While

working as a sleeping coach conductor he, without knowing it and against his own will, helps the Nazi-underground guerilla “Werewolf” to carry out an assassination on a newly appointed mayor. Later Kessler is manipulated and blackmailed by the “Werewolves,” who take advantage of his love for the female protagonist to place a bomb in the train going across the Urmitz bridge. He has his regrets, but for various reasons the disaster happens anyway and Kessler drowns in the river in the final scene.

The male protagonists in von Trier’s Europe Trilogy are all obtuse and naïve. They are depicted as young men with good hearts who just don’t know any better. All of them end up causing death and destruction, even though they acted with the best of intentions, and, in the turmoil of the unfortunate events they set in motion, they are destroyed themselves.

The concept of hypnosis, which plays a role in all three films, can be seen as a metaphor for the protagonists’ lack of self-insight. They are in a state of hypnosis, driven by unconscious desires and motives that they do not themselves understand and on top of that they are victims of manipulation by their surroundings.

The naïvety of their psychological makeup is so pronounced that it—significantly in *Epidemic* and to a lesser extent in *Zentropa*—takes on a comical dimension, delicately balancing on the edge of the caricature. The comic reveals itself in this “discrepancy” between their naïve ideas and intentions (their “philosophy”) and the raw facts of the surrounding world (“reality”). The discrepancy between their “conviction” (solving the Lotto murderers, curing mankind, reconstructing a country) and the actual “implementation” of their intentions (killing the girls, contaminating mankind, destroying the country) is as wide as it can possibly be—a “discrepancy” we as viewers can detect, but which remains hidden from the characters themselves, until it is too late.

These prototype characters also have about them something of the early Lars von Trier—the young, ambitious director, struggling with his own demons and the surrounding world in order to make his films. The films all have an older powerful man (respectively Osborne, Claes Kastholm and Colonel Harris), whom the young protagonist is dependent upon and who, to a certain degree, is able to control and manipulate (like a “hypnotist”) the destiny of the young naïve protagonist. This structure (the young, naïve idealist vs. the older, cynical realist) can be seen as a metaphor for von Trier’s struggle with the authority figures of the world of filmmaking and the great works of the film tradition as he strove to make himself an artist and director. Thus, we could label the male protagonists of the Europe Trilogy “Naïve Novices,” if we want to apply an overall designation to these early, prototypical protagonists.

## The Goldheart Trilogy

The TV series *Riget* [*The Kingdom*] (1994) which von Trier wrote together with his co-screen writer from the Europe Trilogy, Niels Vørsel, marks a brief intermezzo before a new trilogy emerges—a trilogy in which von Trier clearly departs from the “femme fatale” figures who motivate so much of the action in the Europe Trilogy (Kim and Katharina Hartmann) and launches a new female protagonist type: the “Goldheart.” This protagonist type is represented by the characters Bess (*Breaking the Waves*, 1996), Karen (*Idioterne*) [*The Idiots*] (1998), and Selma (*Dancer in the Dark*, 2000). The Goldheart character is a self-sacrificing female idealist who is unconditionally faithful to the people she loves.<sup>2</sup> She is willing to do anything for them, even though her personal happiness is jeopardized. The Goldhearts all end up paying dearly for this honesty and loyalty by being ostracized by their social environments. Bess stays true to her love for Jan and is ostracized by the powerful religious community in her home town. Karen throws a fit, or, to use the Danish word that has been adopted into English to describe her behaviour in the film, “spasses”<sup>3</sup> in front of her own family out of loyalty for the group (namely “The Idiots”) making the gap between her and her family irreparable. Selma insists on not seeking another trial in order to be absolutely sure that her son will get the eye operation he needs.

The Goldheart Trilogy is a study in female loyalty and emotional idealism which occasion behaviour that sometimes seems to suggest mental retardation. Both Bess and Karen do have significant psychological issues, and in her hysterical breakdown Bess can be seen to “spass.” “Spassing” is indeed a major theme of *The Idiots*, especially as exhibited by Karen. Mental instability bordering on the clinical seems to be a consistent element in the psychological makeup of von Trier’s female protagonists from Bess and Karen, all the way up to the female protagonist in *Antichrist* (2009).

The Goldhearts can be seen as female versions of the young idealistic male protagonists of the Europe Trilogy, the “Naïve Novices”, but with some very significant differences regarding the nature of their idealism and loyalty. The Goldhearts all stay loyal to their loves, emotions, and nearest ones (they’re emotional idealists) and the Naïve Novices all stay loyal to their intellect, career, and large scale philanthropic projects (they’re rational idealists): the juxtaposition and differentiation of the male and female is a consistent theme in these two trilogies.

Even though the actions of the Goldhearts do not destroy the people around them, they still exemplify a significant “discrepancy between philosophy and reality, conviction and implementation.” Due to this gap they all go under just like the Naïve Novices of the Europe Trilogy, but the major difference is that they are seen by von Trier as true female Christ figures, sacrificing themselves for

their loved ones, whereas the male protagonist in the Europe Trilogy ironically and comically dies as a result of obliviousness and dilettantism. It seems that von Trier morally and emotionally stands entirely behind the Goldhearts since his depiction of them completely lacks the irony that is so pronounced in the treatment of the male protagonists from the Europe Trilogy. The Goldhearts thus represent von Trier's idea of the last and only human locus for unconditional generosity and unselfishness: true womanly love. He later discovers that this is (of course) a romantic idealization and sets out to explore and deconstruct this Goldheart character in the America Trilogy (*Dogville*, *Manderlay*) only to undertake a direct reversal in *Antichrist* (2009).

### The male protagonists of the Goldheart Trilogy

Von Trier's perception of his male protagonists also evolves significantly between his first two trilogies; in the Gold Heart Trilogy he leaves behind the "Naïve Novice" of the Europe Trilogy in favour of a much more calculating, controlling, and powerful protagonist type. This change in protagonist type actually occurs in the course of one of the films when Jaan in *Breaking the Waves* (1996) is transformed from a sympathetic roustabout, who recalls the "Naïve Novices" of the earlier films, into a controlling and bitter invalid whose character anticipates the male protagonists of the later films. This new type is unfolded with full force in the characters of Stoffer in *The Idiots* (1998), Bill in *Dancer in the Dark* (2000) and later Tom in *Dogville* (2003). Behind their seemingly idealistic missions and positions, they all display a more negative narcissistic, egoistic, and controlling side, which leads in the end to their abusing those nearest to them in order to get what they want. We could call this new male protagonist type the "Control Freak." Stoffer, the main character in *The Idiots* is an especially good example of this type of protagonist, displaying an alarming "discrepancy between philosophy and reality, conviction and implementation," telling people that he acts out of idealistic motives, when the reality is just the opposite. The film offers the first example in von Trier's production of this discrepancy standing out as an underlying thematic structure on almost all levels (even though the elements of true idealism and self-sacrifice survive in the film represented by the Goldheart character Karen). In the following I will analyze how this discrepancy works as an underlying structure of the film.

#### *The Idiots*

Lars von Trier's first Dogma Film, *The Idiots* (1998), has received a lot of scholarly attention in the past ten years, mostly because of its radical, experimental form. But we must not let this striking form obscure the reality

that the existential discrepancy we have been discussing constitutes the organizing principle of the film.

As noted above, this discrepancy has its most prominent expression in the main character, Stoffer, the leader of the group. Throughout the film, Stoffer claims that the “spassing” and mocking of the bourgeoisie is a liberating project. He explains that being together in the house as a group really means something, that it is important to find one’s inner “idiot” in order to get in touch with something “real,” the inner self, beneath the layers of cultural sediment. In Freudian terminology, one can say that the mission is to get rid of the Super-ego (in this case symbolized by the bourgeois society) and the Ego (the reality principle) in an attempt to float along guided by the desires of the “id,” in this quest for the “real,” the “natural” or the “Ur-human.” This mixture of “letting go” on an existential, personal level with an overarching ideological critique of the bourgeoisie can best be described as a mix of radical “Surrealism,” “Dadaism” and “Freudo-Marxism” played out in real life. It turns into a terrifying experiment.

Behind all the liberating and seemingly idealistic intentions, it soon becomes clear that here too we find a significant discrepancy between “conviction” and “implementation.” Stoffer pushes the project, and his role, far beyond his postulated idealistic notions of liberation and solidarity. With him as the front figure, the group harasses an innocent elderly gentleman on the streets of Søllerød, threatening him with prosecution and thereby deceiving him into buying their Christmas decorations. Later, Stoffer pushes Jeppe into a situation where he is in serious danger of being assaulted by a group of bikers who assume he is mentally handicapped and on this basis help him to urinate in the men’s room. It all culminates when Josephine’s father arrives at the house unexpectedly, telling the group that Josephine suffers from a mental illness and that he wants her out of the house immediately. She has stopped taking her medication and he is afraid she is not far from a mental breakdown. Despite the fact that Josephine is in real danger of a breakdown, the group will not let her go and they all turn against the father and reject his demand, which—under normal circumstances—would be entirely reasonable. This situation shows how the project turns out to be more important to the group than the health of its individual members; it is clear that they believe the end justifies the means.

Stoffer’s desire for control and his desire to see his own ego mirrored in the “spass”-actions of the group, which he orchestrates, slowly turn out to be the less ideal source of this seemingly idealistic project. But Stoffer is not the only one who is absorbed in this type of self-deception. Everyone in the group turns out to have his or her own much less ideal and much more egoistic reason for being in the group. Katrine is only joining because she wants her boyfriend (Axel) back. Karen joins because she is lonely, mentally paralyzed, and on the brink of a breakdown. The doctor joins because he can turn the experience into the basis of a Ph.D. thesis.<sup>4</sup> The group claim to be “the revolutionary and idealistic ones”

in opposition to the bourgeoisie and wealthy of Søllerød, “the fake and narrow minded ones.” However, all of the group members (except Karen) belong to the upper middle-class themselves, just as did most of the hippies and revolutionaries who started the collectives and co-ops in the late 1960s and early 1970s. The uproar created by the group turns out to be utterly shallow. The parallel to—and critique of—the “bourgeois hippie collectives” from 1968 is striking. Claiming to be liberated and revolutionary, these hippie collectives were even more narrow-minded and rigid in their lifestyle than the bourgeoisie whom they criticized and disdained. This was a contradiction that Lars von Trier encountered himself when he attended the Danish Film School in the 1970s. Indeed it was this experience which for the first time really made him aware of “the discrepancy between philosophy and reality, between conviction and its implementation” as an immanent existentialistic condition.

Lars von Trier: “The idea has been corrupted by [Stoffer], you could say, in the same way that he tries to corrupt the other members of the group. You can draw parallels to politics or to people who, for various reasons, work in groups.” (Björkman 205)

The project of *The Idiots* ultimately fails when most of the group-members are unable to incorporate their theoretical ideas of “spassing” into their real lives and the group falls apart. The Freud-Marxist project of liberation has failed due to the existential discrepancy here under discussion.

## The America Trilogy

In The America Trilogy von Trier continues to work with the male character-type, the ambitious “Control Freak” from The Goldheart Trilogy, here represented by Tom in *Dogville*. But *Dogville* also marks a very important transition in its treatment of the female protagonist, Grace, since in her von Trier for the first time departs from the one-dimensional, romantic female protagonists of the Goldheart era.

### *Dogville*

Tom in *Dogville* first appears to us as a character whom others perceive and describe as the humanistic, moral watchman of the town and Grace’s loyal helper. He is the son of the town doctor and has ambitions of becoming a writer even though, as the omniscient narrator ironically points out at the beginning of the film, his writing has “so far been limited to two words: ‘great and small’ followed by a question mark.” Tom tries in his own way to “enlighten” the inhabitants of Dogville, not through Christian ideas—as normally practised at that time—but

through the humanistic ideas of the “Enlightenment,” which he presents each week in the small town church.

Young Tom has set himself the task of teaching the inhabitants of Dogville the art of “acceptance.” While playing checkers with Bill in the beginning of the film, Tom develops his idea: “See, if the people of Dogville have a problem with acceptance, what they really need is something for them to accept.” Tom’s prayer is heard when Grace turns up shortly after. Tom seemingly stays loyal to Grace during her time in Dogville, even though the viewer starts to question his motives and decisions as his abuse of Grace takes on more and more unacceptable dimensions. It is only when Grace questions his idealism, upon his attempt to have sex with her, that he—along with the viewer—recognizes that he too has had his own, much more egoistic agenda all along. As the narrator says

Tom stopped. He almost began to shake when the threat to his career as a writer dawned upon him. It didn’t take him long to agree with himself that the risk was too great to run. The danger Grace was to the town she was also to him.  
(*Dogville*)

When he decides that Grace is a threat to his ambition as a writer and she decides to deny him the fulfilment of his sexual desires, he calls her father in order to get rid of her and collect the ransom. In other words, behind his seemingly idealistic decision to help Grace (motivated purely by human compassion—an act that would create an ideal example for the people of Dogville to follow) lie the less noble motives of personal ambition and frustrated sexuality. The irony of his name, Tom Edison Jr., suddenly becomes evident. Thomas Edison Jr. was the real son of Thomas Edison, the American personification of modern science, and inventor of the light bulb. The man who set out to “enlighten” and educate the people of Dogville in the art of acceptance, finally and ironically, reveals himself as a much darker figure: selfish, ambitious, and hungry for power and control, who casts a long shadow over the ideals of humanism instead of illuminating them.<sup>5</sup>

In the final scene a surprising transformation takes place in Grace, the female protagonist. We suddenly find our self-sacrificing Christ-like heroine, the new “Goldheart-prospect,” Grace, choosing gruesome revenge over forgiveness. She orders her father to kill every inhabitant of the town of Dogville, women and children included. The reality and allure of revenge apparently overpowers the humane, New-Testament-inspired conviction with which she began and which guided her behaviour when she met the inhabitants of Dogville and experienced their unfair behaviour toward her:

But I tell you, do not resist an evil person. If someone strikes you on the right cheek, turn to him the other also. And if someone wants to sue you and take your



tunic, let him have your cloak as well. If someone forces you to go one mile, go with him two miles. Give to the one who asks you, and do not turn away from the one who wants to borrow from you.  
(Matthew 5:38-42, NIV)

Instead she embraces to the philosophy of the Old Testament: “An eye for an eye, and a tooth for a tooth.” The gap between “philosophy and reality” finally makes its appearance and it is at this moment that Grace eventually grows out of her self-sacrificing idealism and into the more complex female protagonist we are about to encounter in *Manderlay*.

### Deconstructing “Goldheart”

With *Dogville* von Trier finally departs from the one-sided idealized female protagonists he has been working with so far in the Goldheart Trilogy. For the first time, we see that the female protagonists in *Dogville* and *Manderlay* undergo the same suspicious scrutiny of motive and behaviour as that to which the male characters have been subjected right through von Trier’s production. The last bastion of von Trier’s optimism regarding mankind’s goodness—the self sacrificing, innocent and motherly woman, the Goldheart—is finally being put to rest in the last scene of *Dogville*. This rather bizarre final scene only makes sense when seen in the light of von Trier’s mission to finally bury a character that he, at this point, had been working with for more than five years. No more “Miss Goldheart” and von Trier leaves nobody in doubt that an era of gender bias in favour of his female protagonists has ended at the closing of the first film of the as yet unfinished America Trilogy (we are still waiting for the last part: *Washington*). In *Manderlay* we for the first time find a female protagonist treated with just as much moral suspicion and scrutiny as the male characters from the Goldheart Trilogy.

### *Manderlay*

When Grace, after arriving at *Manderlay*<sup>6</sup> from *Dogville*, decides to take control over a slave colony and free the slaves, she does it with a head-strong notion that freedom, democracy, and the ideal of free enterprise are the cornerstones in the development of civilization and the keys to human happiness.

Grace’s attempts to imbue the group of former slaves at Manderlay with these seemingly logical ideas prove much more difficult than anticipated. The idea of freedom is scary rather than liberating for the former slaves. Democracy and free enterprise also call for responsibility, creativity, and entrepreneurship, ideals foreign to the slaves of Manderlay.<sup>7</sup> The notion of democracy is questioned ironically when the inhabitants of Manderlay decide to vote on what time it is

and, more seriously at the end of the film, whether or not to execute the old lady for stealing the little girl's meals.

Grace has a hard time with the inhabitants of Manderlay and when they fail to comply with her new ideas, she begins step-by-step to apply the Old-Testament "eye-for-an-eye" principle to which she had finally submitted at the end of *Dogville*. She makes an example of the former white farmers, painting their faces black, and making them wait on the former slaves. We start to see how the gap between Grace's humane and liberal "convictions" and her mode of "implementation" slowly begins to widen and her integrity becomes jeopardized. Behind Grace's idealistic will to "do good," we gradually discover other and less idealistic motives. For example, we see the sexual attraction she feels for the black male bodies, her acceptance of being objectified in the sexual act with Timothy (which goes against her previous espousal of equal sexual relationships), and her great need—despite her disavowals—to feel liked and loved by the inhabitants of Manderlay.

Her idealism suffers a final blow when she discovers that Timothy, whom she has romanticized as a "proudly nigger," had deceived her and the inhabitants of Manderlay by losing the money from the cotton harvest in a game of cards. At the request of the inhabitants of Manderlay, she finally agrees to carry out the former "Mam's Law" (which she had initially hated), punishing Timothy with the whip. And she fails to make her escape when she misses the appointment with her father outside Manderlay—not exactly the outcome she expected, when she decided to turn Manderlay into a perfect social-liberalistic society. Despite Grace's efforts, by the end of the film things are back to where they started. The idealistic project has failed once again, just as Stoffer's and Tom's projects failed.

In *The Idiots*, *Dogville*, and *Manderlay*, von Trier shows us how all ideologies fail when applied rigidly to real life. He also shows us how these seemingly idealistic ideologies often mask much more egoistic and despotic impulses, whether the idealism in question is the philosophy of "Freudo-Marxism," "Enlightenment Humanism," or "Social Liberalism," as we have seen in the above analyses of the three films. At a fundamental level, von Trier calls into question our ability as individual human beings to be true to our ideals and act generously. An analysis of his character-types over twenty-five years of artistic development reveals that in no case does the ideal withstand the test of the real.

## The films: Metaphors for directing and acting

It is remarkable that all of the films that we have subjected to in-depth analysis, *The Idiots* (1998), *Dogville* (2003) and *Manderlay* (2005), share a similar structure. They all deal with an isolated group of people and contain a leading figure who tries to take control of the group (Stoffer, Tom and Grace). This setup also works as a subtle metaphor for the relationship between the director and his actors and

the whole process of filmmaking: the director with his actors on the (isolated) set; Lars von Trier behind the camera, giving the actors instructions about which rules he wants them to obey and how he wants them to “spass” (act).

Lars von Trier’s awareness of this parallel is set out in Jesper Jargil’s documentary *De ydmygede* [*The Humiliated*] (1998), in which von Trier openly questions his own motives as an artist, and thereby implicitly acknowledges that this “discrepancy between conviction and implementation” is an inherent trait of his own evolving practice. In *The Humiliated*, he bitterly concludes, when he dictates his daily diary, that he really thought he would finally find something “real” in the process of shooting *The Idiots*, but that it all turned out to be fake, it was all just a game—“Lars’s little game”—and thus that art, no matter how “real” and “natural” it appears for the viewer, is always a product of interpretation, control, and calculation. Art is not “real,” but merely calculated “spass-actions,” like the ones the idiots perform in the film, where the group eventually falls apart as the idealistic intentions and ideals show themselves to be more and more shallow.

In the case of *Dogville* we also find a striking parallel between Lars von Trier and Tom. Young Tom eventually reveals himself to be an ambitious artist, who, behind the idealist facade, seems willing to sacrifice anything in order to live out his ambitions. Von Trier has admitted in many interviews that he is willing to do anything to push his own projects. In the interview book *Trier on von Trier*, we find a passage to support the outlined parallel:

Interviewer: “Tom is a remarkable mixture of idealism and calculation.”

Lars von Trier: “Yes, he’s thoroughly cynical. But then so am I!”

Just as Stoffer and Tom are willing to break down the emotional and psychological boundaries of the people who surround them in order to achieve their egoistical goals, so too Lars von Trier permits himself to abuse his actors, symbolically violating their private, emotional space in order to create a better work of art. It’s a dangerous creative process that almost caused the actor Anne Sophie Hassing to break down psychologically during the shooting of *The Idiots*, as reported in Jesper Jargil’s documentary. The experience led Björk and other actors in *Dogville* to say that they never wanted to work with him again.

This dangerous dynamic between director and actor is also found in *Manderlay*, where Grace and her relations to the former slaves of Manderlay mimic Lars von Trier’s role as a director. Grace’s falling in love with Timothy recapitulates Lars von Trier’s habit of falling in love with successive female actors. No matter how hard he tries, he is not able to turn off and put away his own personal feelings and preferences during what is supposed to be a professional process of making a film. As Grace tries to impose her notions and rules on the former slaves of Manderlay, so Lars von Trier tries to impose his ideas and cinematic imperatives

on the minds of the actors on the set. He sees actors as people whose task it is to embody emotion and instinct (the idiots, the common people of *Dogville* and the former slaves of *Manderlay*); as a director his task is to “frame” and guide (or intellectually dominate) in order to get the results he wants. Sometimes this emotional process can approach sadomasochistic dimensions. But this highly emotive way of working also turns out to be crucial to the production of unique and sublime works of art, three extraordinarily vibrant films. His artistic strategies epitomize “the discrepancy between philosophy and reality.” As he himself is painfully aware that he’s the foremost example of this discrepancy.

## Lars von Trier and Friedrich Nietzsche

Lars von Trier’s rather radical view of filmmaking and aesthetics, which is presented above, is very similar to the one Friedrich Nietzsche developed in one of his earliest works, *The Birth of Tragedy* from 1872. This particular book, essentially a long essay, has had a huge impact on aesthetic theory, but it has also struck many artists as one of the most profound treatments of art and its foundations ever written. The work contains a famous sentence: “only as an aesthetic phenomenon are existence and the world justified” (38). This is the position that sanctions Lars von Trier’s devotion to art at whatever cost. When there is no God, and no ultimate belief system, morality becomes a relative concept, open to interrogation. When God is dead, and life—according to Nietzsche—is reduced to manifestations of organic nature engaged in a constant power-struggle (as presented in *Antichrist*), the world can no longer be “justified” or “explained” in a moral sense, or within the framework of traditional ethics. Morality is a relative entity, a social construct, and immoral actions are no longer punished in a Christian hell. There will be no final accounting.

The outcome of this recognition—for Nietzsche and many artists succeeding him—is that only the aesthetic dimension confers meaning on the phenomena of the world, in other words if something is beautiful, touching, interesting, or in any other way stands out as “aesthetically sublime” or “great art,” it justifies its own existence, no matter if it is morally or ethically questionable. This is a view which both Stoffer and Tom ultimately represent, as also to some degree does Grace’s father.<sup>8</sup> All of these figures have a lot of von Trier in them, and all are willing to go to any lengths in their manipulation of others, in their use of morally questionable arrangements, and in their willingness to risk damaging people psychologically in order to carry out their projects. In the case of Lars von Trier as an artist the end justifies the means and the highest end is the sublime work of art.

In *Antichrist* this notion is pursued most relentlessly. In the final scene, we find the un-named male protagonist walking down from the mountain after killing

his wife. Here we find the completely detached artist, Lars von Trier's alter ego, Zarathustra, the Nietzschean "Übermensch" coming down from the mountain alone, detached and free from religion, sexual morality, and family values. Only the immortal work of art, the film *Antichrist*, carried out by the immortal artist, Lars von Trier in the role as "The Übermensch," is left. The interpretation is supported by the protagonist seeing a big black feather pen lying in the tall grass on his way down from the mountain. The haunting, demonic, nestling crow has now undergone a transformation: from a mortal bunch of feathers to an instrument for the creation of the immortal work of art—the pen. Thus the film's overall movement goes from darkness, chaos, and death to art, redemption, and immortality.

Apart from von Trier's decision to name his film after one of Nietzsche's last works—*Antichrist* from 1888—his philosophical connection to the German thinker is underlined by the autobiographical film about the director's early years that came out in 2007 under the title *De unge år: Erik Nietzsche sagaen del 1* [*The Early Years: Erik Nietzsche Part 1*] which underscores the complex connection between the two men. Jacob Thuesen directed the film, but von Trier himself wrote the script and also provides the narrative voice-over. Yet, even though Lars von Trier wrote the script, it is not officially credited to him, but instead to the fictive person Erik Nietzsche. This furthermore emphasizes von Trier's strong feeling of philosophical kinship with Friedrich Nietzsche, whom he has been reading since he was a young man and to whom he has turned more urgently in the past five years.

## The "Fusion Film": von Trier and 19th Century Literary Tradition

Lars von Trier points out in the interview-book *Trier on von Trier*, that *Dogville* and *Manderlay* are "fusion films": "a fusion between, film, theatre and literature" (Björkman 241). So it is not surprising that we—in addition to the avant-garde form and ground-breaking cinematography in these films—find elements from literary traditions as well as drama. More surprising for the most part is that these elements belong to the late nineteenth-century tradition of realism, apart from the technique of the "Verfremdungseffekt," inspired by Berthold Brecht.

In the case of *Dogville*, we find Thomas Edison Senior reading Mark Twain's *Tom Sawyer* in the opening scene; furthermore, von Trier himself has said that much of the inspiration for *Dogville* came from Trevor Nunn's 1982 adaption of Charles Dickens' *Nicholas Nickleby* with the Royal Shakespeare Company (Björkman 245). Another significant literary element is the ironic, omniscient British-accented

narrator's voice present in both *Dogville* and *Manderlay*, a voice very similar to the narrator's voice found in both Dickens and Wodehouse (Björkman 247).

## The Northern Tradition: Lars von Trier, Henrik Ibsen, and August Strindberg

Although von Trier seldom mentions Henrik Ibsen as a direct source of inspiration, it seems relevant to deal with him since von Trier's favourite protagonist type, the un-reflecting idealist, who brings disease and destruction in the name of idealism, is a very significant protagonist type that Henrik Ibsen explored throughout his career. Whether or not there's a formula, we do find this character in Ibsen's works all the way from the character Brand in Ibsen's early play of the same name *Brand* (1865) to the most obvious and prominent example, Gregers Werle in *The Wild Duck* (1884).

Det er observert av mange at Gregers er Brand som ideal musketér tyve år etter, han som vandrer rundt på videne og inkasserer den ideale fordring... Men selv står Gregers uten hjem og bliver fremstilt som en dødsseiler, den flyvende hollender. Han krever kjærlighet og tilgivelse av andre, men selv er han iskald og hateful (Haugan 167)

[It has been observed by many that Gregers is Brand as an ideal musketeer twenty years after, one who wanders around in the wide open spaces demanding ideal behaviour from the people he encounters... But he himself is without a home and is depicted as a phantom ship, the flying Dutchman. He demands love and forgiveness from others, but is himself ice cold and hateful.]<sup>9</sup>

The last part of the above description of Gregers Werle applies with equal exactness to the behaviour pattern and psychological makeup of Stoffer in *The Idiots*, Tom in *Dogville*, and Grace in *Manderlay*.

The more general tension between philosophy and reality also is an obsessively recurrent "leitmotif" in the plays of Henrik Ibsen, especially in his later works (i.e. from 1881 to 1899).

Tar man et overblikk over hele forfatterskapet fra 1850-1899 med utsikspunkt i 1899, så står det fast at alle Ibsens sentrale hovedpersoner i en eller annen forstand er fantaster. Det gjelder om mange av Ibsens selvbedragere at de nok har sine gode sider, som moralisten Ibsen ikke interesserer seg for. I stedet stiller han dem i belastede situationer for å prøve dem, og for å vise hvordan en edel maske av kristne eller politiske dyder krakellerer og avslører en skjult natur— eller "dyrisk"

side. Alle Ibsens kallede menn elsker først og fremst seg selv, noe Ibsen imidlertid først ble klar over i tiden omkring Rosmersholm.  
(Haugan 294-95)

[If one takes a panoramic view of the whole production from 1850-1899 using 1899 as the vantage point, it becomes clear that all of Ibsen's central protagonists are in one way or another dreamers. It is true of many of Ibsen's self-deceptive characters that they have some good sides that do not really interest Ibsen. Instead he puts them in tough situations to test them and to show how the noble mask of Christianity or political virtue cracks open and reveals a hidden nature—or "brutish" side. All of Ibsen's men with a higher mission love themselves first and foremost, something that Ibsen himself first became aware of around the time of Rosmersholm.]

Jørgen Haugan's characterization of Ibsen's protagonists applies equally well to the past twenty-five years of von Trier's film production. And in many ways von Trier uses the same artistic technique as Ibsen, trying constantly to see his protagonists in a clearer light, and to use the insights he derives from this effort to pave the way for the development of new characters, leaving the old ones behind.

Von Trier's development away from standing morally behind the heroic female "Goldhearts" towards a more suspicious and nihilistic viewpoint, apparent from *Dogville* and onwards, is also completely in tune with the overall development in Henrik Ibsen's art. Ibsen too went through a period in which he tended to stand behind his female protagonists and portray them as good and pure idealists, especially Lona Hessel from *Pillars of Society* (1877) and to a certain degree Nora in *A Doll's House* (1879), a position from which he finally departs in the depiction of the Mrs. Alving in *Ghosts* (1881), a change which anticipates von Trier's treatment of Grace and his departure from the Goldheart era as played out in the final scene of *Dogville*. In this quote Lars von Trier sums up not only his own "post-*Dogville*" standpoint, but also Ibsen's "post-*Ghosts*" position:

When all's said and done, most films are about the fact that man is ultimately an animal who cannot control himself or his environment, but is governed instead by his insatiable desires—and by his stupidity. That's true for most characters, heroes and villains alike.  
(Björkman 250-51)

From now on heroes and villains are alike in von Trier's universe as he demonstrates in *Manderlay* and *Antichrist*. The overall development in von Trier's film production also follows a path similar to Ibsen's—from idealism via realism to symbolism (and nihilism)—even though von Trier's more early idealistic phase was much more ironical than Ibsen's.

Even the plot in *Antichrist* is obviously inspired by Ibsen's late play *Little Eyolf* from 1894 (Toril Moi, personal comment spring 2010), where the trauma poisoning the marriage of Alfred and Rita Allmers, is the injury suffered by their child, little Eyolf, who fell down from a table as a toddler and permanently damaged his leg, while they as a young couple were indulging in sexual activity. When Little Eyolf drowns later in the play, the couple is pushed into even deeper grief, despair and mutual recrimination—a situation similar to that of the couple in *Antichrist*, but in the case of Ibsen with a less violent outcome.

Von Trier explicitly names Strindberg as a major source of inspiration in many passages in *Trier on von Trier* (and again and even more strongly in connection with the release of *Antichrist* in 2009). Thus Grace, as a character, in both *Dogville* and *Manderlay*, has many similarities with Strindberg's most famous female character, Miss Julie. Grace is an upper class girl, in many respects naïve about the world, who enters into social contact with people beneath her class, just like Miss Julie. More strikingly, she has intercourse with men from the working class in both films (although not voluntarily in *Dogville*). Timothy can be viewed as the most obvious parallel to the Jean character in Strindberg's play *Miss Julie*. In this relationship Grace can be seen to mirror the psychology of Miss Julie, as she is both repulsed and attracted to Timothy, and exhibits a form of female masochism. The submissive element in the sexual act is also apparent in both characters, which contrasts with the beliefs about the equality of men and women that both characters were brought up with. The idea of a black man playing the role of Jean in *Miss Julie*, which adds race to the class difference that separates them, was first introduced in 1985 in a stage production at the Baxter Theatre in Cape Town. In the following year Bob Heaney and Mikael Wahlforss caused tremendous controversy by introducing the same mingling of class and race in a made-for-television adaptation, set in contemporary South Africa during the period of apartheid in the 1980s.

Another allusion to Strindberg's play is found in the conversation between Grace and her father in the second chapter of *Manderlay*. A canary and a cage play a significant role as a metaphor for Grace and her relationship to the slaves (the slaves being similar to the canary according to her father's interpretation); the canary and the cage feature in *Miss Julie* too, though their function is a bit different there (Strindberg 1997 140-41). But in both cases the organizing theme is the importance of freedom and in each case the canary ends up dying as a result of the female protagonist's attempt to free it. The overall conclusion in both *Miss Julie* and *Manderlay* is that we will always be limited by our environment (like the canary in the cage) and that ill-considered idealism (the idea of setting the canary free no matter the consequences) is absurd and even dangerous in its naïve forms.

In sum, in *Dogville* and *Manderlay* (and to some extent *Antichrist*), together with the concept of the "fusion film," von Trier establishes himself in the nineteenth-century Northern European tradition of critical realism. These films



also deserve to be taken seriously for their philosophical and thematic qualities, rather than just for their innovative, provocative and groundbreaking form and the style.

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### NOTES

1. I will use the English titles of Lars von Trier's films in the rest of the paper.
2. Judith, the mother of the deformed "little brother" in *The Kingdom*, can be regarded as an early forerunner for the Goldheart character.
3. See Smith. The Danish verb "spasse" may seem to echo the English verb "spazz," and the two words doubtless share a common etymon, but the Danish word is a derogatory term for the behaviour of a mentally handicapped person, whereas the English simply means to throw a tantrum.
4. A similar interpretation of the characters' hidden motives behind joining the group can be found in the article "The Passions of Lars von Trier" by Emma Bell (Thomson 211)
5. The hypocrisy of Tom and the people of *Dogville* and their relation to Grace has also been interpreted—rightly, in my opinion—as a metaphor for the strict Danish immigration policy in the early years of the new millennium. This is von Trier's way of critiquing it (Elsasser 121-23).
6. In the film "Manderlay" is the name of a forgotten slave colony in the 1930s Alabama. It is run by a white family which adheres to the old rules of slavery, even though slavery was made illegal in the United States seventy years before. The name itself makes multiple allusions, for it has been used and reworked in literature, film and popular culture since Rudyard Kipling wrote the famous poem (and later popular song) "Mandalay" in 1892. Although the spelling is a little different in von Trier's film title, the ambiguous notions of imperialism and the clash between Western mentality and Native mentality that we find in Kipling's writings are also very apparent in von Trier's *Manderlay*. Grace's view of the slaves of Manderlay, one influenced by the idea of "the noble savage," is also very similar to attitudes presented in the works of Kipling. Another possible allusion is to the mansion named "Manderley" (again spelled differently) in Hitchcock's famous 1940 film *Rebecca*, an adaption of Daphne du Maurier's similarly named novel of 1938. This allusion points to a similarity in the arrangement of characters in the two works: the "old mam," the late Rebecca, ran the estate differently from the unnamed second Mrs. de Winter whose new and inexperienced way of running the estate is criticized throughout the novel by Mrs. Danvers, the domineering and unsympathetic housekeeper. From a psychological point of view,

the allusion points to the way in which Grace achieves “Womanhood” through the hard insights she gains about herself and the world during her stay at “Manderlay,” for this development parallels the growth of the unnamed protagonist in du Maurier’s novel.

7. As stated in some articles about *Manderlay*, the film can also be seen as a commentary on the American invasion of Iraq in 2003 (see, for example, Harsin and Bainbridge). The idealistic starting point in *Manderlay* points to the ostensibly idealistic basis of the invasion, undertaken in the name of democracy, free enterprise and individual freedom. But these ideas were imposed by force and on a people with a different cultural and religious background, just as Grace, with the help of armed gangsters, attempts to impose her values on the slaves of Manderlay despite their different view of the world.
8. Grace’s father also represents the notion of raw Darwinism as has been pointed out by Harsin.
9. The translations of the quotations from Haugan’s book are mine.

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