

Dogville and Beyond: Self-Reflexivity and the Collapse of Morality in Lars von Trier's Cinema

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Abstract

This article examines the recurring themes of morality, ideology, and self-reflexivity in Lars von Trier's films, with a particular focus on *Dogville*. It argues that von Trier's cinema deconstructs societal systems, exposing the fragility and hypocrisy of moral and ideological constructs through a postmodern aesthetic lens. By employing self-reflexive narrative techniques and minimalist visual styles, von Trier critiques human nature, exploring tensions between democracy and tyranny, idealism and pragmatism, and self-interest and altruism. Drawing on philosophical frameworks, including postmodernism and existentialism, the study highlights how von Trier's works unravel traditional ethical narratives, revealing the collapse of morality when confronted with systemic contradictions. The analysis situates his films within broader historical and cultural contexts, such as post-war European ideologies. Ultimately, the article underscores von Trier's use of tragedy to unmask the paradoxes of human behavior and societal order, presenting his works as both deeply critical and profoundly humanist.

Keywords: self-reflexivity, postmodern aesthetics, ideological critique, psychoanalysis in film, deconstruction

Introduction:

Madman, megalomaniac, anti-human, Nazi—such are the judgments that an era obsessed with headlines and definitions, eager to tailor adjectives for every artist, has pronounced upon Lars von Trier. It seems that, to immediately constrain the capricious creativity of a genius—fearing he might continue to broaden our narrow linguistic systems of meaning, pointing out the vast void behind rules and structures and the significant fallacies in their connections—we have readily marginalized him through language. Consequently, when society discusses him, it can transform his shocking imagery into topics about a foreign "other" in the discourse, or hastily situate him within the existing vocabulary, using anti-labels as labels

affixed to him. Thus, the director is reduced to an arithmetic of symbols, a subsidiary within the known concepts of the subject.

Much like Godard's message while went on Instagram live during COVID-19: "(Film as an antibody) is not necessarily against anything, rather next to, or below, or above." (Godard, 2020, 31:16). For von Trier, cinema is a beam of light piercing into the dark crevices between the bricks of the system. He has never readily accepted any rule; instead, he breaks, reorganizes, and reshapes them. New conclusions are born; the framework is shattered once again, entering a new cycle. This is the experiment von Trier conducted in *The Five Obstructions* (2003), and it is also the unceasing action throughout his forty-year career. From installation art to personal diaries, to epics, to passions, to film movements, to social experiments, to miniature models, to apocalyptic fantasies, to video essays—he evades static norms within untraceable genres and methodologies.

Through his limitless modification of rules, we discover his inherent malice from the inside out. Unlike Godard, who has never placed himself within the system, or Abbas Kiarostami, who manipulates the system deftly, von Trier's instincts enable him to keenly capture the grammar upon which the system survives, disrupting, replacing, dissolving, and exposing the void of these grammars from within. In this way, he unlocks the source of his astonishing destructive power. When the term "system" refers to film production, he initiated the Dogma 95 movement. When it denotes faith, he depicted the cold and decaying church through the eyes of a devout believer in *Breaking the Waves*. When it signifies morality, he allowed Grace in *Dogville* to righteously initiate a heinous massacre. When it stands for idealism, he caused the innocent to suffer misfortunes in *Epidemic* and *Europa* that even blood-stained criminals had never tasted. When it represents humanity, he orchestrated the magnificent destruction of the world in *Melancholia*. Any motif that comes into von Trier's hands rapidly reverses to its opposite; opposing poles seem never to exist in his world.

From a postmodern perspective, each renewal of creative context relates to media self-reflexivity. In Lars von Trier's work, self-reflexivity manifests in a subtler yet more essential form. He retains the genres and themes of cinema, but as actions and emotions naturally unfold, the driving force that propels the story forward can be entirely canceled out in an instant by a sudden twist of events. Consequently, the film's tension collapses abruptly upon the realization of fallacies in its own narrative premises.

Similar to Robert Bresson, structures in von Trier's films die from the unknown violence lurking within themselves. For von Trier, such tragedies are not mere appropriations of Schopenhauer's pessimism or facile attributions to the inherent evil of human nature. Rather, they are the consequences of ethical interrogations that, after piercing through intricate ideological shells, land on uncharted grounds untouched by morality. This outcome is not just a conclusion but also the panic induced by betrayed beliefs and actions. It is at this moment of self-destruction that the film transcends its text to become an "act" that pierces through the screen. In other words, tragedy is not the endpoint reached by the sum of events in linear narration but the erroneous starting point of those events themselves: a model built upon lies and illusions, where our arduous journey serves only to reveal that we should never have begun. Yet without experiencing the shattering of illusions, we can never uncover fallacies or ascertain any truths about ourselves. This is the paradox that makes Lars von Trier both fascinating and detestable. His relentless pursuit of truth grants him the acumen and courage to penetrate hypocrisy, but the boundless abyss encountered upon reaching truth casts an ever-present melancholy over him.

To observe and dissect how von Trier constructs systems harboring the seeds of collapse; how he inherits and then dismantles sacred concepts—such as morality, religion, democracy, and reason—that are regarded as cornerstones of contemporary civilization and central to film literature and European culture; and to explore the possible applicability of his revelations to our present and future, this article will be divided into chapters akin to von Trier's films, examining his cinematic oeuvre.

Just as with the ancient division between theocracy and monarchy in Europe, we will first split the thematic nexus that von Trier obsesses over into two paths—politics and religion—for separate exploration, even though these elements often reflect each other and coexist symbiotically in his narratives. Next, we will incorporate the dimension of time in his three-dimensional life models. Over a forty-year career—not counting experimental works like *The Five Obstructions* and *The Boss of It All*, the television production *Medea*, and the TV series *The Kingdom* produced to raise funds for his company—his style and subject matter have traversed four trilogies ("Europe," "Golden Heart," the unfinished "USA," and "Depression") and the standalone *The House That Jack Built*. Through a dual deconstruction of his complex chain of signifiers (philosophical) and his chronological authorship (psychological), this text attempts to reconstruct Lars von Trier: a portrait that is rarely been directly observed.

Tyranny or Democracy?

All discussions of von Trier's self-reflexivity invariably begin with this pair of antonyms, as they are perpetually embedded, in prototype or variant form, within each of his works. From this dichotomy of power structures, one can broadly derive ideological divisions between left and right, or reduce it to less politicized personal inclinations toward elitism and philanthropy, implicitly questioning whether human nature is fundamentally good or evil. In a 2005 interview, von Trier confessed that his fascination with this pair of archetypes stems from his long-standing interest in World War II—for him, the history of Nazi tyranny could, under favorable conditions, recur (von Trier, 2005).

Positioned at the most acute intersection between *The Republic* and "The Grand Inquisitor," we naturally turn our gaze to *Dogville* (2003)—Lars von Trier's quintessential work. Here, he exercises his dramatic methodology to the fullest extent, to the point where each of his films, though seemingly focused on different themes, can be viewed as magnified segments of *Dogville*. The story follows Grace, who, while fleeing from gangsters, inadvertently arrives in *Dogville* and meets the kind-hearted Tom, who offers her shelter in the town. The villagers initially harbor hostility toward this new member but gradually lower their guard as Grace selflessly devotes herself to them. Unfortunately, the harmony is short-lived. The residents, uneasy about her refugee status and keenly aware of her isolation and vulnerability, exploit their position of power as benefactors. Beginning with acts of sexual aggression, they reveal their malevolent intentions. After Grace's failed attempt to escape, the villagers decide to cease concealing the fact that they have been harboring her. It is then revealed that Grace's pursuer is actually her father, a mob leader wielding power over life and death. Having previously fled home due to dissatisfaction with her father's autocracy, Grace now takes up his weapons, exacting lethal retribution on every *Dogville* resident who had perpetrated unspeakable acts against her.

Within this framework, we discern all the elements recurrent in von Trier's oeuvre: an innocent individual in a cold, unfeeling world (*Breaking the Waves*, *Dancer in the Dark*); a person battered by their own idealism (*The Element of Crime*, *Epidemic*, *Europa*, *Manderlay*); the absurdity and hypocrisy of moral systems (*Breaking the Waves*, *The Idiots*, *Nymphomaniac I & II*); and the legitimacy of slaughter and destruction (*Antichrist*, *Melancholia*, *The House That Jack Built*). These seemingly disparate elements are, in fact, varied manifestations of von Trier's penetration into human nature and the flawed foundations of modern civilization. They

appear individually or collectively in his narratives, but only in *Dogville* does he articulate his complete deductive process into a consummate thesis. To casually attribute the revelations of *Dogville* to a simplistic conclusion of inherent human evil is to greatly underestimate von Trier's earnest endeavors and to overlook the underlying causes of the tragedy that unfolds in *Dogville*.

Prior to Grace's arrival, the town is indistinguishable from any other village worldwide: a mundane layout, unremarkable inhabitants, and, as Camus describes in *The Plague*, "everyone is bored, and devotes themselves to cultivating habits" (Camus, 1947/2020, pp. 1-2). In other words, the villagers are bewildered about the purpose of their lives, yet they strive, albeit ineffectually, to fabricate the semblance of labor and focal points in life to mask the decline of their own beliefs. A quintessential existentialist model of the post-Christian era emerges before us. As if fearing we might not fully grasp his implications, von Trier informs us that the town's church is dilapidated and deserted.

It is important to note that, at this juncture, the town's capacity as a vessel of evil remains latent. The residents of *Dogville* maintain an ecological balance in their long-term interactions. We might liken this to Freud's description of the latency period between infancy and adolescence; the villagers' inner malice is suppressed by social contracts, each person adhering to their role. Without a catalyst, much like any peaceful community around us, the malevolence within the village might have remained dormant indefinitely.

However, von Trier embeds two hidden X-factors within the village. The first is the farmer Chuck, whose urban background leads him to *Dogville* out of a yearning for rural life. Reality, however, forces him to acknowledge that greedy human nature is no different under any living conditions; the dormant evil within him is like a volcano ready to erupt at any moment. As the only one who foresees the tragedy, he also becomes the first adult to enact it. His profound understanding of human nature makes it easy for him to internally excuse his crimes and lose fear after committing them. The town's persecution of the fugitive must begin with Chuck; no one else could confront evil alone without precedent. His awareness of evil becomes the reason for his unbridled indulgence in it. The villagers have always been waiting for the farmer to take this step. In von Trier's long-shot staging of this scene, Chuck's heinous act of sexual assault is witnessed by all the villagers, yet they turn a blind eye—this serves as the best proof of their complicity. Chuck's pathological fantasies about Grace also explain why he, who initially rejected the fugitive during the vote, allowed her to stay. He clearly knows he

can exploit her vulnerable position to fulfill his desires. In fact, from the moment the fugitive was granted the right to stay, the seeds of evil were already sown.

The second element is Tom, who has always dreamed of becoming a writer. Undoubtedly, the identity code of the writer includes the most self-referential aspects of von Trier himself. He sustains his grand dreams on his father's generous pension. His leisure time and sense of responsibility as a writer give him excess energy to meddle in others' lives and foster a heightened moral consciousness. He realizes the inherently selfish and insular nature of *Dogville*, which appears harmonious and kind on the surface, and attempts—through repeated failures—to prove the town's conservatism. Here, we find the first disruptor confronting this ignorant and mediocre existentialist model.

He welcomes Grace's arrival, which disrupts the town's equilibrium, because her coming, like a "gift," hastens the blossoming of his affections and allows him to demonstrate the villagers' conservatism, thereby placing himself on a moral high ground—a position that his writerly ambitions, at the apex of his value system, could not desire more. Tom regards his own moral purity as a prerequisite for his literary dreams, so he chooses to struggle against all the villagers, gaining a strong sense of achievement in the process. However, Grace's existence is like a mirror reflecting everyone's selfishness; her physical presence ultimately reveals to Tom the desires he harbored from the first moment he saw her. Her status as an intruder exposes to the audience Tom's unscrupulous moral puritanism in maintaining his self-identity. The former and the latter are akin to the subconscious and the conscious; the superficial moral puritanism perpetually suppresses underlying desires. When desire finally breaches the defenses, the threatened morality plunges into unprecedented chaos, and Tom becomes the last person in the village to betray Grace.

From that moment on, no matter how many sincere insights he had, all of the writer's moral admonitions are declared invalid because even the self-aware and lucid cannot escape becoming one of those they criticize. Von Trier's audacity lies in placing the ethics of every storyteller—including himself—under scrutiny amid the collapse of the writer's persona. Is it possible that our narration of misfortune and condemnation of selfishness are themselves impurely motivated consumptions of moral issues?

However, the one who ultimately opens Pandora's box is Grace herself. Carrying a wealth of sacrificial ideals, she descends upon a remote town. Weary of her father's hegemony and driven by fantasies of a simple rural life, she spares no effort to prove herself as one of

them through her laboring hands. It is precisely this untainted enthusiasm and innocence that attract the villagers' selfishness. Grace's decision to become a fugitive from her father means that her life no longer belongs to the realm of law; as a fugitive, she is like a sheep among wolves, reflecting the ravenous faces of each predator.

This is von Trier's typical punishment for the intruder. As we mentioned at the beginning, without a difficult journey, the foundational fallacies of civilization would remain lurking in the unknown; without a saint and a passion, human hypocrisy and selfishness could not be so clearly reflected. Just as Tom said before everything began, "we would probably never have found out." Therefore, in the eyes of the wolves, breaking the originally balanced covenant of good and evil—the undercurrents of coexistence—is the original sin of the sheep. Similar accusations were made by von Trier in *Europa* and later in *Manderlay*. The holy idealist, as an outsider, brings unrealistic standards, which to those accustomed to indulging their selfish nature and lacking moral consciousness, make concepts such as "conscience," "forgiveness," and "democracy" appear as arrogant as "let them eat cake."

Grace endlessly forgives the unruly townsfolk because she believes they are unworthy of her moral standards. Positioned at the apex of the moral hierarchy, applying unbearable moral standards to humanity not only leads to the collapse of the system and the saint's own wounds but also to the shattering of ideals. Upon realizing that ideas such as "conscience" and "forgiveness" are nearly elitist dogmas, and that the only law applicable in *Dogville* is fighting violence with violence, Grace ultimately betrays herself. We can finally explain the unique shock value of *Dogville* in von Trier's body of work: the protagonist of the story is constantly shifting—from the village to Tom, and finally to Grace herself. Each change of protagonist signifies the collapse of an ideological edifice. The first to fall is the morality of the poor, the second is the morality of the intellectuals, and the third is the morality of the savior.

When Grace sits in her father's car, at that moment, it's as if we truly enter the black box of power for the first time after witnessing the mob's atrocities. Only then do we realize that the tragedy of *Dogville* is not a mere isolated incident but a social experiment resulting from the clash of two ethical views—a failed attempt by the power to reconcile with the populace. The root cause of the tragedy is not simply the inherent evil of human nature but lies in humanity's fundamental conservative instinct. The concept of the "Other" is difficult to penetrate and survive in the human heart; the interests of others do not exist—every action is driven solely by the "Self." The primary goal of individuals is to maintain habitual and familiar

trajectories; the external world can only exist as an extension of the known "Self." Once an unknown "Other" appears, the subject instinctively rejects, attacks, assimilates, and exploits it, which becomes what we term "sin." We have repeatedly observed each villager clinging to their own bad habits: the old doctor who believes he acquires a new illness every day; the blind McKay hiding at home to avoid facing the fact of his blindness; Martha managing an unattended church yet requiring the mayor's permission just to open the organ. Compared to the declining *Dogville*, Grace's greatest transgression is her selflessness—she sees too many "Others" in her perspective: we are oppressed and humiliated until one day we finally learn selfishness, and only then are we accepted by the world and called "human beings."

The omission of walls in each house serves as von Trier's metaphor for this principle. Through this design, we can see the entire village from any corner of *Dogville*. However, once inside the delineated imaginary "door" of a home, no one is willing to look at others anymore; daily social courtesies become illusory. In the director's world, the distinction between inside and outside the home is a subtle excuse for the instinct of "selfishness."

Decoding the political revelations of *Dogville*, we find that adhering to conservative tendencies is an innate human instinct, while left-wing postures, as represented by Tom, the intellectual, merely arise when one's interests diverge from others within the same group. At this point of conflict, they separate from the collective, adopting an ideological facade that pits them against the right-wing. Ultimately, both groups consist of similar kinds of individuals, with the left-wing acting as dissidents whose ideological convictions are little more than a reaction to differing personal stakes, and the masses, blinded by the same ideological facade, are easily swayed. Ideological debates are far removed from the concerns of voters; the real content of the game is the conflict of collective interests among politicians. Consequently, voters lose interest in the system: *Dogville's* residents abandon their right to vote simply because of high registration fees.

The villagers, having exhausted the patience of authority, suffer catastrophic disaster. The power that initially lowered itself also abandons its illusions after being battered and bruised. Once an attempt is made to reconcile between the strong and the weak, between God and man (with Grace's purity and suffering akin to Jesus), both sides are inevitably wounded. The intruder, mediator, and revealer will suffer more painfully than any party; due to the collapse of her faith, she must destroy those she once cherished and protected. So, isn't von Trier—the author of the film and the initiator of the tragedy—also such an intruder? This

perhaps explains why we feel such despair when watching his films: the audience endures the vengeful outcry of his shattered faith. Lars himself is no exception, facing both psychological and real-world repercussions: four years later, he suffered from severe depression; eight years later, he was expelled from Cannes following a controversial press conference.

Europe or the New World?

After the conclusion of World War II, Europe—which had taken pride in its advancements since the invention of Gutenberg's printing press—was left in ruins. The continent was divided by an Iron Curtain and dominated by two superpowers. Germany temporarily lost its sovereignty, and the demoralized Western European market accepted the Marshall Plan, positioning itself as the frontline for the United States' containment of communism in the ensuing decades. The Europeans' longstanding fear of the American classless society and its democratic ideals materialized into reality. Armed only with history and pride, they were compelled by the necessity for reconstruction to serve as a repository for the Americas' surplus economic capacity and as a foothold for military alliances.

The once-mighty Europe accepting American aid serves as the concealed historical metaphor at the outset of *Europa*. In the film, the fear of "denazification" encapsulates Western Europe's experience under the influence of emerging superpowers. As von Trier's first major cinematic undertaking, *Europa* inevitably addresses the establishment of political historical identity: Europeans, for the first time, transition from benefactors to beneficiaries. The term "America" burdened them, overshadowing inhumane crimes (i.e., fascist regimes) and a longstanding shame. Without alleviating this burden and developing a trilogy of reflections on his native continent, von Trier could not reexamine their cultural heritage. Thus, within the trilogy, repeated attempts are made to return to a glorious Europe; however, contrary to expectations, they arrive in a land steeped in dormancy: the damp, sepia-toned nights of *The Element of Crime* and the desolate, virus-ravaged city in *Epidemic*. Similarly, following the grand, séance-like hypnotic countdown at the beginning of *Europa*, what unfolds before us is a piece of dim metal under turbulent skies. Even if the train symbolizing *Europa* is reactivated, it inevitably becomes a battlefield between Nazi remnants and the anti-fascist alliance; civilization and ideals falter within the post-war quagmire.

The later unfinished "USA Trilogy" and the concept of the "Dogville Paradox" represent Lars von Trier's efforts to revisit political themes and address a common historical

trauma among his generation of Europeans: How can one make sense of Hitler and his regime? How can the masses willing to submit to totalitarianism and a supreme leader wielding power over life and death be comprehended? Why does a state apparatus transitioning toward dictatorship possess the credibility to mobilize citizens in modern society? If historical tragedies do not occur by chance but instead stem from humanity's inherent conservative instincts—subconscious desires for an omnipotent ruler that intensify as the theocracies they once depended on are progressively undermined by capitalism—then, much like the black slaves on the Manderlay plantation who continued to yearn for their slave owners even after the Emancipation Proclamation, we can understand why, following Nietzsche's declaration that "God is dead," the ensuing century has been marked by relentless conflicts between modern civilization and totalitarian regimes.

According to von Trier, human instinct lies in maintaining the current state or, ideally, returning to a previously held state. We repeatedly observe *Dogville's* isolation, its stagnant and rigid pace of life, and the numbness and hardened hearts of its residents: for them, God has lost His necessity, and the "slave owner" who once guided their lives has yet to appear. *Dogville* precisely depicts this transitional period from theocracy to democracy in the history of civilization—the hollow and perplexed faces of humanity. Having lost a longstanding "Heavenly Father," their ideology is in tatters; the concept of democracy prematurely casts them into the void, akin to humans in infancy facing the helplessness of nature—modern individuals confront the exile of spiritual life. In von Trier's model, amidst the pain and illusions of exile, humanity regrets destroying God with their own hands and begins to erect new idols among their brethren, thereby placing in their hands the power to reevaluate morality—the dictator thus emerges.

Borrowing from Freudian psychoanalytic theory, morality, monarchy, and theocracy can be categorized as derivatives of patriarchy. The Oedipus complex, applicable to individuals, is similarly reflected to a large extent in large-scale collective behaviors and historical events. During personal development, individuals internalize remnants of their father's image from childhood into the "superego," which, to punish the child's desire to commit parricide, perpetually supervises and restrains the infinitely expanding desires of the "id" through guilt. Collective life extends the individual's conflicting emotions toward the father; the ruling class and the "Heavenly Father" become the formulators and defenders of morality. The mass despair in their absence; they cherish the security provided yet resent the constraints

imposed—mirroring a child's feelings toward their father. Von Trier's exploration of human rights and dictatorship aligns seamlessly with this model. *Dogville* and *Manderlay* necessitate humanity's "superego": a manager who wields both kindness and authority, a leader capable of balancing "dependence" and "rebellion," and one who can, when necessary, employ force to punish crimes emanating from the "id." This contrasts with any seemingly polished system or the Messiah's forgiveness and absolution, which, by overestimating and indulging human nature, lead civilization astray.

Martyr or Antichrist?

After completing the exploratory "Europe" trilogy, Lars von Trier gradually abandoned genre storytelling. In stark contrast to the dizzying camera movements and audiovisual techniques in *Europa*, rough handheld cinematography became his primary visual language, fostering more personal and raw narratives. The most significant change was that, for nearly the next thirty years until *The House That Jack Built*, the protagonists in his films became almost exclusively female. There is insufficient space to elaborate on how the subtext in *Europa* foreshadowed this transformation or the internal conflicts he may have experienced prior to this shift. However, a pivotal event during the planning of *Europa* must be highlighted: von Trier subtly integrated into the script a change that resulted in lifelong psychological trauma.

In 1989, near the completion of the *Europa* script, von Trier's mother, on her deathbed, revealed that his biological father was not her Jewish husband, Ulf Trier, but Fritz Michael Hartmann, a former official in the Danish Ministry of Social Affairs. Hartmann originated from a long line of German musicians. Von Trier's mother had engaged in an affair with Hartmann as part of a plan for genetic optimization, hoping that her child would fulfill her own unrealized artistic ambitions (Grodal & Laursen, 2005). By that time, von Trier had emerged as a budding director making a mark at Cannes. However, overwhelmed by immense disappointment and anger, he discovered in his early thirties that his life was merely the result of a successfully executed plan. The secret his mother revealed before her death not only caused von Trier to lose the father he had known for over thirty years but also shattered his longstanding trust in her. Consequently, his already precarious identification with Judaism was further destabilized, and he became increasingly curious about his biological father, who later refused contact with him ("Stranger and Fiction," 2003), and his burgeoning German heritage. From that point on,

the absence of a paternal figure became more pronounced in the heart of a man whose parents had never set any rules for their child (Nicodemus, 2005). His hatred toward his biological father and the neglect of his adoptive father shaped his bold transgressions of moral and human taboos in later life. His conflicted feelings toward his mother, whether intentional or not, were transformed into the suffering and transcendence of the female protagonists before his camera—immediately evoking *Breaking the Waves*, released six years later.

This partly explains why von Trier is notorious for his tyrannical strictness toward actors, as Björk decided to quit acting after working with him and publicly accused him in 2017, without naming him, of verbal and physical abuse during filming. Later, Nicole Kidman made similar accusations. In his films, he arguably invisibly vents and transfers his resentment toward his mother. The intense desire for revenge against both parents is fully manifested in *Antichrist*, where the mother smashes the father's genitals with a wooden block and, in remorse for her neglect of their child, cuts off her own genitalia—a clear symbolic rewriting of von Trier's own experiences.

However, the desire for revenge against his mother alone is insufficient to explain the origin of the suffering female figures in von Trier's scripts, especially considering that by the time the secret was revealed, his attitudes toward women had largely been established in his early thirties. The roots of his sadism may have been planted much earlier, only to be brutally awakened by an unexpected event. Examining his later career, we find that in the three films following *Antichrist*, the tragic fates of the female protagonists are almost invariably the result of their own conscious decisions made after confronting themselves honestly, rather than being victims slaughtered under the blade of patriarchy. Transitioning from masochistic victims to self-aware seekers of suffering, the self-referential themes of depression and marginalization become increasingly explicit. Thus, the burden of the protagonists' identities gradually transcends gender, revealing von Trier's own strong masochistic tendencies. A careful survey of his career shows that the tragedies he prepared for his protagonists had already begun to manifest in the male leads of the *Europe* Trilogy.

Perhaps his masochistic complex can be traced back to his identification with Jewish identity before the event that led him to "lose both my mother and my father at the same time" (Björkman, 1997, p. 13). In 1984, he stated that the "suffering" and "historical consciousness" of the Jewish people were precisely what he "missed in modern art": "People have left behind their roots and beliefs" (Stevenson, 2003, pp. 16). Von Trier was born into a family of nudists,

spending his childhood holidays at nudist campgrounds. While the exact details of his childhood are unknown, it is clear that there was no place for religion in his family. A father without goals or power and a family with weak religious concepts led him to identify himself as an "outsider" from an early age. On one hand, this contributed to von Trier's disdain and trampling of all principles; on the other, it made him long for and desire a focal point worthy of his unwavering belief. Between these inherently contradictory emotions, the latter dominated his youth. He chose to identify with the Jewish people and their suffering because such suffering assured him of belonging to certain "roots and beliefs" (Stevenson, 2003, p. 16).

However, it was precisely his mother's revealed secret that caused a dramatic upheaval in his already conflicted inclination between these two opposing choices. Physiologically losing his father and psychologically losing his mother, coupled with a loss of trust in Jewish history and religion as part of his national identity and a growing loathing for himself as a successful genetic experiment, intensified his self-doubt. The masochistic desire to submit to authority did not disappear with the awakening of sadistic impulses but formed a chain of mutual struggle and offsetting. Therefore, his brutality targeted not only his parents but also himself. In his torment of actors and the tragic fates he arranged for his protagonists, we observe the sum of three layers of psychological strata: as a son, his hatred toward his mother; as a father, his strict discipline of the child (a self-correction of his childhood and fate); and as an individual, his self-loathing. The strict sadist, in his atrocities, betrays his inner deep-seated desire to be whipped. Borrowing from Hegel's dialectic terminology, the "thesis" of "obedience" and the "antithesis" of "rebellion"—a tearing planted in young von Trier's heart that later evolved into the "synthesis" in his body of work—intensified due to this psychological trauma. The more he could not find a national and familial identity, the stronger his questioning of ideology and need for a sense of belonging became, and the more his masochistic desire emerged.

Therefore, beneath the surface of his conflicted feelings toward his mother, we observe a broader and deeper trauma in von Trier's psyche: the unattainable father. The four meetings with his biological father and the latter's firm refusal to acknowledge him intensified von Trier's need and hatred for his father. This further explains why, in the "Golden Heart Trilogy," kind, gentle, and devout women are repeatedly and cruelly harmed by the church, family, and society. Von Trier's hidden "father-seeking trauma" manifests in the fragile and passive states of these female characters.

In *Breaking the Waves*, we encounter Bess, who is rejected both by her biological father and by God, ultimately embraced by the Heavenly Father, with the bells of heaven serving as compensation for her trauma. Through Bess's story, von Trier temporarily found a surrogate for "patriarchy." Starting with *Dancer in the Dark*, rebellion gradually gained the upper hand in the struggle with obedience, and the authority of the savior began to crumble. Continuing this transformation, the story of *Dogville* originates precisely from Grace's rebellion against her father and ends with her betrayal of the Christian spirit and the Heavenly Father. At the conclusion of *Dogville*, as Grace massacres the townspeople, she also kills the part of herself that revered her father. When Grace returns to the luxury car, reaffiliates with her father, and once again becomes a part of him, it marks another shift in von Trier's mentality. This transformation ultimately reconciles his contradictions: after pursuing the destruction of authorities, he takes his father's place, continuously flogging himself while infinitely idolizing his own being. The combination of narcissism and self-destruction thus constitutes the psychological core that both fascinates and confuses unfamiliar moviegoers in von Trier's body of work during the 2010s.

From this perspective, *Antichrist* can be seen as a continuation of the ending of *Dogville*, serving as a necessary ritual before the onset of self-deification. In this ritual, the helpless child must die; the desires for sadism and rebellion, embodied by the mother, will murder the father to replace him as the dominant figure. At this point, the significance of the film's opening scene becomes exceedingly important and clear. Its psychological meaning within the chronology of von Trier's works far outweighs its aesthetic revelations. The child dies under the intentional indulgence of the mother, signifying that the feminine (von Trier) is no longer weak and passive; her (his) reverence for the father ceases from this moment. Moreover, before she (he) establishes her (his) own (Satanic) religion, any future tendencies that might be absorbed into patriarchy—conspiring with the father to attack and assimilate her (him)—must be eradicated. Placing this psychological implication into a larger context and extending the despair toward humanity found in *Dogville*, the loss of the child symbolizes humanity ultimately losing its innocence or, considering the child's series of conscious actions, we might say that innocence actively departs from humanity.

From the completion of this ritual, von Trier's habitual ethical struggles cease to exist, replaced by unending direct conflicts between order and disorder, God and the devil, deity and humanity, male and female—hence, "chaos reigns." The child, representing the premise of

harmonious coexistence between genders, and Christ, symbolizing the bond reconciling God and humanity, both vanish when the child falls into the snow. From this point, von Trier plunges into an opaque universe of depression; ten years after his Palme d'Or, he truly becomes a dancer in the dark.

Establishing one's own religion in opposition to patriarchy adds another layer of symbolic meaning to the choice of a female protagonist. If the symbol of patriarchy is the aggressive phallus, then a post-patriarchal religion likewise requires its own totem. This is where the vaginal worship in *Nymphomaniac* becomes necessary in von Trier's new psychological structure. For him, each of the protagonist Joe's sexual encounters—each time she uses her sacred void to endure and dissolve invasive violence—is a religious ritual in which she offers sacrifice to herself. Ruthlessly manipulating her own allure as a masochist to sadists and destroying ethics and family, the deity of this religion reverses her passive position to rebel against the omnipotent and ruthless "God" and the order He established in the universe.

However, if we explore von Trier's career trajectory with sufficient breadth, we find that promiscuity and self-humiliation, aside from deliberately opposing patriarchy, have more inevitable and concrete implications. The first appearance of this element is in *Breaking the Waves*. To satisfy the pathological desires of her paralyzed husband Jan, Bess engages in sexual acts with other men, suffering humiliation and harm unto death, to declare her love for him, ultimately achieving his satisfaction and recovery. Although Bess's humiliation in *Breaking the Waves* is still out of devotion to God, we can already interpret a dual code in its progression: Jan, having lost his sexual ability, identifies himself with Bess; through her extreme indulgence, he, unable to act physically, gains vicarious satisfaction. Bess, in her promiscuity, demonstrates to the church and her family her ability to initiate sexual behavior independently, outside the bounds permitted by "patriarchy." On one hand, this reflects a fear of sexual impotence and identification with the female identity; on the other, it is also about proving her sexual capability to her family of origin. We can thus infer that unrestrained sexual activity in von Trier's female characters expresses his attempt to overcome the castration anxiety brought by a powerful "father," proving to the father that he has broken free from his support and constraints—a mature and independent bodily symbol.

Notably, *Breaking the Waves* is the first feature film produced after the upheaval in 1989, making such an intense, even pathological, desire for independence less abrupt. If the hints of castration anxiety in *Breaking the Waves* are not yet fully conscious, its presentation

in *Antichrist* is evidently more explicit: every time Chaos attempts to dismantle Order, the wife actively arouses her husband's desires, even forcibly engaging in sexual acts with him. The first act of violence that Chaos inflicts upon Order is harming the husband's genitalia—a metaphor for the child replicating the castration anxiety experienced in childhood, inflicted upon the father who once threatened him. Therefore, the dialogue between the nymphomaniac Joe and the asexual scholar Seligman implies an inversion of childhood trauma: a child with healthy reproductive ability facing a father who has lost sexual capability. Seligman's fate must be to die at Joe's hands, not only because he symbolizes the father and his hypocrisy but also because his sexual naivety and desire to lose his virginity remind Joe of his former self, thus inciting hatred. If we boldly speculate, von Trier's fear of flying may likewise be a manifestation of his sexual anxiety. In psychoanalysis, children's curiosity about flying represents their imagination of adult sexual life. Flying means leaving the ground, departing from familiar environments and family, thus symbolizing adult independence. Von Trier's long-standing battles and reconciliations with patriarchy, his oscillation between rebellion and obedience, are consequently exposed in his anxiety about flying.

At this point, considering the much-discussed similarities between von Trier and Dreyer in film history—their shared preference for suffering female figures—the issue seems to have a new explanation. We should recognize that in their childhood experiences, Dreyer and von Trier share highly similar twists: both were once unaware of their true identities. Dreyer was born from an affair between a Swedish maid and a Danish landowner; his biological father refused to acknowledge him, and he was adopted by a couple in Copenhagen, only learning the truth about his mother in his youth. His mother found him a foster family but died from self-administered poison after another unintended pregnancy when attempting an abortion (Nissen, n.d.). Being "the other," not knowing who they truly were, gave these two Danish legends the same marginal sense as sufferers. If, for Dreyer, Joan of Arc-like women are tributes and remembrances of his mother, for von Trier, they are a complex mix of love and hate. It is not that von Trier actively inherited themes from his Danish predecessor; rather, this theme collided with him through twists of fate and was endowed with new poetic significance through his works. If we recall von Trier's occasionally somewhat awkward and distorted tributes and imitations of Tarkovsky in his works, this behavior likewise gains new direction in psychoanalysis. Tarkovsky greatly loved and relied upon his father, Arseny Tarkovsky, a poet. Not only did he frequently quote his father's voice and verses in *Nostalgia* and *Mirror*, but

Tarkovsky's poetic and religious style itself was profoundly influenced by his father's poetry. A father worthy of complete reliance is precisely what von Trier longs for but cannot attain. His lifelong admiration for Tarkovsky hides, deep in his heart, an unspoken envy of Tarkovsky's harmonious relationship with his father.

Of course, changes in psychological structures are accompanied by and built upon the three moral deconstructions that von Trier fully elaborated in *Dogville*—which we have previously analyzed. The individual psychological state serves as the bone structure that predetermines and guides the direction of his works, while von Trier's profound pessimism about human nature constitutes the flesh and blood. The organic combination of these two elements leads to his later works, which are increasingly personal and instinctual. Patriarchy is castrated and hunted in *Antichrist*, crushed like a slender reed by the wind in the final scene; ridiculed in *Melancholia*; and in *Nymphomaniac I*, it suffers from tremor-induced delirium, dying after immense torment (or punishment), and is ultimately remembered with compassion. After becoming his own idol, the "father" becomes a marginal figure who gradually fades away, dissolving into the warm yet distant black-and-white memories in the nymphomaniac Joe's confessional. The order that patriarchy once represented splits into Justine's sister Claire in *Melancholia*, who, amidst anxious evasion, is forced to confront the reality of the impending apocalypse; and the scholar Seligman, who is killed by Joe after an all-night conversation. Similarly, in *Nymphomaniac*, Charlotte Gainsbourg's character narrowly causes an accident involving her child due to negligence; she later performs an abortion on herself, and after discovering her foster daughter's illicit affair, secretly plans a murder—all of which are rewritings of the motif of infanticide present in *Antichrist*.

The frenzied sadistic desire ultimately reaches an unprecedented display in the house built of corpses in *The House That Jack Built*. Here, von Trier exercises his sovereign power over life and death without explanation, having ascended to the father's throne. Corresponding to this unapologetic attitude is the fact that his protagonist has finally returned to being male. However, along with this frankness arises another emotion that reveals another secret within von Trier: he realizes that he cannot truly replace the "father." Jack dreams of becoming an architect but has to settle for the mediocrity of an engineer. He uses murder to compensate for his failure to build a house. Von Trier imitates Jack the Ripper in his name, alludes to the poet Virgil in the character Verge, and pays homage to Bach through Gould's performances; the allusion to counterfeit exists in multiple forms throughout the film. Jack cannot fix a car jack;

he is sexually impotent—yet another allusion to castration anxiety—and he cannot even enjoy the same sexual rights as his father. In his earnest attempts to imitate the archetype ("father"), he can only discover the ever-widening gap between himself and the father, along with his growing yearning for him. The immense frustration and escalating crimes seem to form a vicious cycle; behind the madness lies remorse. Thus, after seeing the fathers uniformly mowing their lawns outside the window, Jack sheds long-forgotten and despairing tears. He realizes that human contests with God are but fleeting glimpses cast toward eternity. The rebellious child misses the father and also longs for the self that willingly belonged to the father, just as humanity misses the departed God and the goodness that has been lost. Unfortunately, history cannot be reversed. Jack climbs the precipice, making a final gamble on the path to heaven. His foot slips, and he falls into the abyss of hell; yet, in the negative image, that abyss becomes the most dazzling light, burying the deepest darkness within Jack.

Spectator or Participant?

After traversing Lars von Trier's extensive body of work, it is appropriate to return to the origin of this exploration—*Dogville*—and examine the final revelation that this remote and insular village presents. On that snowy night, Grace sits in the small chapel, recounting to the entire town the injustices and humiliations she has endured since arriving in the village. The villagers sit with their heads bowed in the dim light, silently confronting their own sins. Suddenly, we as the audience experience an equally suffocating pressure and recognize that those facing accusations are not only fictional characters but also reflections of ourselves. This scene serves as a prelude to our viewing of *Dogville*, as each of us is compelled to identify in one of Dogville's evil deeds a sin we have committed. The world resembles a vast *Dogville*, merely masking its own decay with increased hypocrisy and pretense. At this moment, sitting before Grace, everyone must undergo interrogation and reckon with their sins, much like Judgment Day upon Christ's return.

After a prolonged silence, the first voice breaks the stillness: "Lies, all lies!" This is followed by the echoes of every villager's voice. Perhaps among these echoes are reflections of ourselves.

Are the villagers who echo denial not precisely ourselves? Is there anyone among us who, when faced with a vulnerable woman's accusation and given the ease of denial, is willing to confront their own sins? Who can resist the temptation to commit an evil act and then remain

aloof? Who can suppress the impulse to turn away and pretend nothing happened? Will we rationalize by saying, "Anyone else would have done the same," and thus feel at ease? Will we have a moment of conscience yet repeat the same actions when faced with the next temptation? Will we accuse others while secretly committing the same acts ourselves, perhaps even deceiving ourselves? Will there come a day when we forget this awkward confrontation ever occurred? Will we, after the film ends, tell ourselves it was a brilliant story but just a story after all? Will we, after witnessing a disaster, return to our daily lives, much like feeling fortunate to live in the real world after putting down a horror novel? Isn't our casual dismissal of von Trier and dissatisfaction with his malice a form of self-deception?

The audience's morality has also collapsed. Everyone who has experienced *Dogville*, whether as a character, the author, or a viewer, no longer stands on moral ground but is instead falling endlessly into the abyss. This time, the film is not an illusion or a safe platform for viewing, but a reflection of ourselves; the gun Grace ultimately points is also aimed at us. From the moment we began watching as bystanders and decided it had nothing to do with us, we became residents of Dogville. The audience not only realizes they are within the film, witnessing their own sins and hypocrisy, but also experiences collective annihilation, witnessing their deserved demise. After the slaughter, the only thing left between heaven and earth is a dog, which has never been truly seen by any human eye, yet exists with more confidence and hope than ours.

It is precisely a great masochist who can bring us such a miracle. No ordinary person who does not sufficiently hate themselves could have the courage to make such severe accusations against all humanity. At its core, von Trier's self-reflexivity is the heroic act of a depressive individual who musters all his courage to explore the world, only to be repeatedly disappointed upon his return. Through his lens, the monuments humanity erects for itself in the post-existentialist era are destined to become ruins.

The more we live in an age inundated with calls for equality, morality, and humanitarianism, the more valuable his existence becomes. This is not because all his words are irrefutable but because he makes us aware of the falsehoods intertwined with ideals and slogans, and the eternal step that separates us from self-deception. However, if collective life at the beginning of human history involved each individual's voluntary sacrifice of absolute freedom, should we not reassess the sacred values now attached to "human rights" and "democracy"? If human civilization is truly chaos and conflict wrapped within the deceit of

order and goodwill, what hope remains to prevent it from rapidly hurtling toward impending annihilation?

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