

CONSTRAINING LARS VON TRIER: ISSUES OF CENSORSHIP,  
CREATIVITY, AND PROVOCATION

A Dissertation

By

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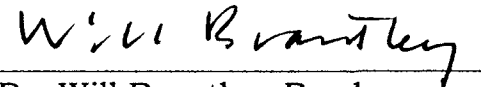
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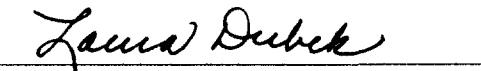
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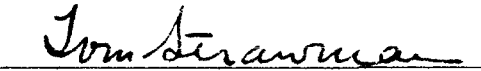
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## DEDICATION

A university's essential character is that of being a center of free inquiry and criticism—a thing not to be sacrificed for anything else.

-Richard Hofstadter, Columbia University, 1968

This dissertation is dedicated to the seventy faculty members in whose classes I listened, inquired, and learned. Thank you for guiding my journey.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Although writing a dissertation may at times be a lonely process, it is never a solitary endeavor. One never begins the climb or reaches the summit without the inspiration, guidance, and support of numerous individuals. While I could never acknowledge or properly thank all those involved, a few must tolerate my feeble attempt.

This dissertation is a consequence of my parents' teaching. My mother, Sharon Aunspaugh, taught me the value of reading early in life while my father, Rusty Boatwright, educated me on the fun and frustrations of good debate. Mom, this book's on me. Daddy, yes, I'd like very much to swing on a star.

In the spring of 2008, I approached three professors who exemplified the qualities I most esteemed in teaching and scholarship. The members of my "Dissertation Dream Team," as I christened the trio, were demanding yet understanding, focused as well as broadminded, passionate but also pragmatic. While they proved their worth long before the dissertation process began, each brought unique talents and perspectives to this project. Dr. Laura Dubek provided evaluations of each chapter as they were completed, commenting on content, structure, and readability, but more importantly, she acknowledged my tendency toward self-criticism and funneled the bulk of her feedback through my dissertation director. While I will probably never be privy to all of her

initial reactions, I will be forever grateful for her initiative in changing the “normal” way of doing things and, thereby, helping me to maintain my sanity. Dr. Will Brantley contended with my unfinished, hurriedly submitted draft at the end of this journey, and his meticulous reading and finely penciled notes (we share an abhorrence of pens) pointed me to numerous errors I had repeatedly overlooked. Although he avoided those early drafts, he is in them nonetheless. Each time a word was discarded in favor of another more precise term, Dr. Brantley’s influence reigned.

Acknowledging the contributions of my director Dr. Linda Badley is a satisfying yet difficult undertaking. She has supported my every step during this journey even when I wandered, as I often do, along the wrong path. When I informed her that I wished to discard twelve months of research in favor of a new subject that had yet to be determined, she not only backed the decision but also suggested several suitable research alternatives including that which is covered in this dissertation. For over three years, Dr. Badley has answered every inquiry, commented on every draft, and provided insight into the subject, theory, and writing process. Her contributions have been both invaluable and inspirational. (She also makes a great lunch.) I despair because I’ll miss our long discussions and her witty, albeit odd, sense of humor, but I will also endeavor to emulate her unending generosity and exceptional scholarship because it is the best acknowledgement I can offer.

Believing that success is a collaborative effort and failure a solitary struggle, it is with unreserved appreciation that I acknowledge the contributions of the faculty and staff of the MTSU English Department, Dr. M.J.H., my family, friends, and felines, as well as those herein named. While any deficiency in scholarship is wholly mine, any success results directly from their gifts of time, energy, patience, and support.

## ABSTRACT

Danish film director Lars von Trier has made a career out of provoking audiences, critics, and the film industry alike. Equally adept at constructing and applying rules, to his own art as well as that of others, he repeatedly defies, thwarts, subverts, and even mocks constraints erected by others. Not without his predecessors—Andrei Tarkovsky, Carl Th. Dreyer, and Federico Fellini—von Trier has always tested the limits of his medium and revealed a willingness to test the written and tacit laws of society. Censorship is a recurrent theme that has affected the subject, style, and reception of the director's work, and he recurrently employs self-censorship in his filmmaking with constraints and prohibitions involving cinematic technique and narrative content. He deliberately provokes censorious reactions in order to reveal or breach unrecognized or unacknowledged incidences of hegemonic censorship or constraint. Von Trier frequently indicts the status quo of filmmaking technique, political ideology, and religious dogma in his films, with censorship or constraint often marking the intersection where art and society collide.

This dissertation explores von Trier's unique artistic approach and demonstrates how the director exploits, exposes, and challenges censorship in its myriad forms and in diverse settings. Additionally, it establishes a link between von Trier's cinematic encounters with censorship—as tool, obstacle, or inspiration—and changes in the film



industry as well as the content, form, and criticism of film. Because this approach employs a global perspective and takes as its focus a director with five decades of experience and more than thirty films to his credit, our understanding of censorship changes with context. Consequently, terms are defined in the first chapter and von Trier's engagement with censorship controls the subsequent chapters. A brief biographical sketch of von Trier—essential to any discussion of the director and restrictions—focuses on issues related to his films, filmmaking, and legendary upbringing and initiates an examination of constraints, as well as cultural censure, within his works and the censure and censorship elicited by them. In addition to exploring von Trier's role as co-creator of the Dogme95 movement, with its proscriptive commandments for filmmaking, I analyze *The Idiots* (1998), the first two installments of the director's USA: Land of Opportunities trilogy, *Dogville* (2003) and *Manderlay* (2005), and *Antichrist* (2009), before returning in conclusion to the broader issues of censorship, constraints, and cinema. After delineating the effects von Trier and his works have had on filmmaking, film content, and film criticism, both locally and globally, I offer an epilogue examining a still-developing situation of censorship stemming from comments made by the director at the Cannes International Film Festival in May 2011.

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## INTRODUCTION

In many respects, asking questions about artmaking is a lot like artmaking itself: the product of one inquiry becomes the source for the next.

-Ted Orland, *The View From the Studio Door*

Despite its inherent aim towards freedom, art—including film—has always been governed by rules. Danish film director Lars von Trier is equally adept at constructing and enforcing rules, to his own art as well as that of others. However, when others have defined the constraints, whether overtly or surreptitiously, the director has defied, thwarted, subverted, and even mocked the constrainers and their constraints, along with the institutions and societies from which they are borne. Censorship is a recurrent theme that has affected the subject, style, and reception of von Trier's work both locally and, since the mid-1990s, internationally.<sup>1</sup> In addition to censoring the work of others (as with his Dogme95 'rules'), the director recurrently employs self-censorship in his own work with constraints and prohibitions involving cinematic technique and film content, and he deliberately provokes censorious

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<sup>1</sup> While commonly excluded when referring to persons by last name, "von" is employed in this dissertation to differentiate between Lars Trier the child, adolescent, and film student and Lars von Trier the director. See Chapter II for further explanation.

reactions—at times to the point of censorship in various forms—in order to reveal or breach unrecognized or unacknowledged incidences of hegemonic censorship or constraint. With his USA: Land of Opportunities trilogy, for example, he directly violates the States' hegemonic prohibition against non-Americans making films critical of the U.S.

An admirer of Andrei Tarkovsky, whom he notes, “made his best movies under Soviet censorship” (Saltzstein), von Trier frequently indicts the status quo of cinematic technique, political ideology, and religious dogma in his films, with censure or censorship often marking the intersection where art and society, as well as reality, collide. Not without his predecessors—Carl Th. Dreyer, Federico Fellini, as well as Tarkovsky—von Trier has always tested the limits of his medium and shown a willingness to test the laws of society, but as Steven Dubin argues, “Artists are significant symbolic deviants in our society” (2), and while the art and the society often seem at odds one with the other, the deviance of the former “signals that something is awry” in the latter (2). While film is a relatively recent art form and “our society” now encompasses the globe, von Trier stands as one of cinema’s most “deviant” and revolutionary artists.

Often credited for reviving a stagnant Scandinavian film industry, von Trier is viewed as both an icon and *cause célèbre* in his native

Denmark; whereas, his reputation throughout the remainder of the world ranges from *enfant terrible*, anti-American, and misogynist to celebrated auteur, “modern-day Dostoevsky” (Beltzer), and provocateur. Scholarly considerations of von Trier and his work often focus on his creation of the Dogme95 movement, his status as a controversial international auteur, his politics and religion (or lack thereof), and his arguably misogynist or, alternatively, feminist views. More mainstream deliberations of the director and his films tend quickly to deteriorate into debates regarding the lines between that which is socially acceptable and politically “incorrect,” provocative art and distasteful or even pornographic “pandering,” and, more recently, between institutionalized censorship and informative rating systems.

Notwithstanding differences in approach, both academic and mainstream critics have contributed a diverse, yet still underdeveloped, body of work about the director and his films; however, none has considered his filmmaking strategies through the theoretical lens of censorship. Jan Simons’s *Playing the Waves* (2007), which argues that von Trier’s films are best understood when viewed visually, technically, and structurally as games, perhaps comes closest. Simons’s application of game theory relies heavily on von Trier’s calculated approach to filmmaking and his persistent creation and redefining of rules. However, while Simons breaks new ground in applying game theory to film, he also

relocates the director's works in the realm of new media as games of simulation and virtual reality that prefigure the cinematic aesthetics of video gaming. Rather than relocating von Trier's work outside cinema, this dissertation explores his artistic deviance within the context of constraints and creativity with the aim of demonstrating how the director exploits, exposes, and challenges censorship in its myriad forms and in diverse settings. A related aim is to determine the extent to which von Trier's cinematic encounters with censorship—as tool, obstacle, or inspiration—have altered the film industry as well as the content, form, and criticism of film.

Contemporary concepts of censorship, cinema, and globalization sustain this project; accordingly, the works of Richard Maltby, "Censorship and Self-regulation" (1996), and Charles Lyons, "The Paradox of Protest" (1996) and *The New Censors: Movies and the Culture Wars* (1997), offer both historical background and modern conceptions of censorship in arts and film. While Maltby provides a brief yet detailed history of conventional film censorship in America, Lyons's writings survey film protests, their origins, and effects, and illustrate how censorious reactions bring about censorial results. Jon Elster, *Ulysses Unbound* (2000), and Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi, "Society, Culture, and Person: A Systems View of Creativity" (1988), expand the discussion of censorship with theoretical considerations of constraints and the creative

process. Exploring myriad motives for, agents of, and reactions to constraints, Elster theorizes that limitations, whether chosen or imposed, facilitate creativity and often maximize “aesthetic value.” Csikszentmihalyi, applying a multidisciplinary systems theory, situates creativity at the crossroads where individual innovation, fields of endeavor, and the status quo (of both the fields and the society) meet. More generally, Dubin’s *Arresting Images: Impolitic Art and Uncivil Actions* (1994) provides insight into the often transgressive role of art in society. Expanding and informing the discussion of film, society, and censorship, Danish culture and film scholar Mette Hjort examines the Danish film industry and its role in the globalization of small-nation cinemas in *Small Nation, Global Cinema: The New Danish Cinema* (2005), underscoring the ways in which filmmaking is both restricted and enriched by state-support. In “Denmark,” included in *The Cinema of Small Nations* (2005), she places von Trier’s influence on Danish cinema within a national context:

While smallness can impede external visibility, it also makes possible an internal impact. The efficacy of individual filmmakers is thus limited and potentially enhanced by their small-nation status, and the trick is to understand the complex dynamics that govern relations between limitations and opportunities. (32)

Likewise, this dissertation is both complicated and enriched by its subject matter, the paradoxical relationships between restriction and liberation, between control and freedom, between censorship and creativity.

Chapter I outlines these connections and defines terms pivotal to the subsequent discussion: censorship practices, approaches to creativity, and cinema as art. Chapter II presents a brief biographical sketch of von Trier—essential to any discussion of the director and restrictions—focusing on issues related to his films, filmmaking, and legendary upbringing while Chapter III explores the director's role as co-creator of the Dogme95 movement, focusing on the constraints connected to the movement, and his subsequent Dogme film, *The Idiots* (1998). The first two installments of von Trier's USA: Land of Opportunities trilogy, *Dogville* (2003) and *Manderlay* (2005), are the focus of Chapter IV, and Chapter V presents an examination of *Antichrist* (2009), his most controversial film to date. These latter chapters focus on the director's use of constraints to engage and enhance his creativity and affect and provoke his audiences. Chapter VI returns to the broader issues of censorship and cinema, delineating the effects von Trier and his works have had on filmmaking, film content, and film criticism, both locally and globally. The epilogue examines his most recent, and ongoing, encounter with censorship.



## CHAPTER I: TERMS, THEORIES, AND THEMES

Censorship reflects a society's lack of confidence in itself. It is a hallmark of an authoritarian regime.

-Potter Stewart, U.S. Supreme Court Justice, 1966

*La coquille et le clergyman* [Germaine Dulac, 1928] is so cryptic as to be almost meaningless. If there is a meaning, it is doubtless objectionable.

-British Board of Film Censors, 1929

Defining "art" or, more accurately, determining what constitutes "art" has been the conundrum of countless scholars in various disciplines throughout history. The development of film as an artistic medium did little to mediate the challenge, and the term "art" as well as the objects it signifies remain as capricious today as when first considered by Plato. Film theorist David Bordwell, exploring "'art cinema' as a distinctive mode of film practice," located artistic essence in the "*functions of style and theme,*" functions counter to those seen in mainstream movies. Eschewing the cause/effect or question/answer mode of narration, art films, like other works of art, pose questions while providing either innumerable answers or none. Additionally, Bordwell contends, the director of an art film, much like an author, "becomes a formal component, the overriding intelligence organizing the film for

[viewer] comprehension.” Danish film director Lars von Trier recognizes the challenge of defining art even as he works to transform his own artistic medium. “The most reactionary attitude to art,” the director explained to Stig Björkman, “has always been the question ‘What is art?’ Followed by the statement ‘This isn’t art!’” (241). Ambiguities notwithstanding, prevailing considerations of von Trier as an auteur and appraisals of his films as “art cinema” acknowledge his substantial directorial control and recognize a body of work imbued with the director’s personal vision.

No less important, or contentious, to the present discussion is the role and function of art within the society. Sociologist Steven Dubin, drawing from humanistic and social scientific considerations of art, views art, and the reactions it engenders, as paradoxical. Art, according to Dubin, “mirrors social reality or ignores it; . . . can help define social conventions or defy them” (1). Consequently, “artists are significant symbolic deviants in our society,” and while the art and the society often seem at odds one with the other, the deviance of the former “signals that something is awry” in the latter (2). While the forms and content of art have changed through the ages, artists and the works they create have continually engendered derision. Film is a relatively recent art form, but its ability to reflect reality quickly yielded to a capacity for enflaming

passions, satirizing citizenries, and signaling societal ills, and like earlier artistic expressions, cinema quickly elicited censorial attention.

Although the history of art censorship is long and well documented, it is one filled with ironies and contradictions. Describing his ideal city in Book X of *The Republic* (380 B.C.E.), Plato spared painters and sculptors but expelled the tragic poets as imitators who incited passions where reason should reside. In *Laws* (360 B.C.E.), his final dialogue, the philosopher extended the banishment to any “composer of a comedy or of any iambic or lyric song” who mocked another citizen (11.935e). On grounds economic, ideological, moral, political, and religious, censors have routinely assailed artists and their artworks as purveyors of blasphemy, immorality, sedition, and subversion, and while not mutually exclusive, disparity between agents, targets, and effects of film censorship are crucial to the discussion that follows. Like various art forms before it, film, since its beginnings, has been the object of wholesale attacks by censors.

In 1895, the “official” birth date of cinema, a Thomas Edison presentation of *Dolorita in the Passion Dance* was banned from an Atlantic City Kinetoscope parlor, becoming the first recorded occurrence of film censorship. The following year, Edison’s *The Kiss* presented actors May Irwin and John Rice re-enacting twenty seconds of their Broadway play *The Widow Jones* (1895). The couple’s kiss, little more than a peck,

prompted Chicago critic Herbert Stone to decry, "Such things call for police interference" (qtd. in Thompson 21). Although early incidences of film censorship like these occurred most often at a community level, by the time cinema emerged from puberty, national censorship bodies had formed in the U.S. and throughout Europe. America's National Board of Censorship was created in 1909 in response to the closing in late 1908 of all New York City movie theaters as fire hazards. Although short-lived, the organization, in association with industry syndicate Motion Picture Patents Company, established standards of content intended to eliminate the need for local regulation and, as historian Richard Maltby observes, "demonstrate the 'respectability' of moving pictures as an instrument for both ordering and explaining a dominant ideology" (235-36). Concerns regarding the safety of theaters prompted Britain's 1909 passage of the Cinematograph Act, which led in 1912 to the creation of the British Board of Film Censors (BBFC) by the Kinematograph Manufacturers Association. In countries such as France and Denmark, restraints accompanied film screenings from the outset but became more definitive during the First World War. As political, cultural, and technological changes occurred, concomitant modifications to film content and constraints regarding that content followed.

Today, film censorship is downplayed through film classification or rating systems, and while organizations administering these

classifications often operate without legal enforcement powers, they wield expansive social, political, and financial influence. The BBFC, renamed the British Board of Film Classification in 1984, avows independence from either government or industry influence; however, the Board stands as the sole “statutory designated authority” for legally mandated exhibition licensing and is financially dependent on the classification fees paid by filmmakers (“BBFC”). Consequently, the BBFC’s “independence” may be more a technicality than reality. Like the BBFC classifications, the recognizable Motion Picture Association of America (MPAA) film ratings used in the U.S. are assigned by the Classification and Rating Administration (CARA), a review board created by the MPAA and the National Association of Theatre Owners (NATO). While the latter group represents over 75% of American movie theaters (“Statistics”), the former comprises an association of “the six major U.S. motion picture studios” (“Motion Picture”).<sup>1</sup> Both the BBFC and MPAA originated as means of circumventing legislative attempts to apply legally defined standards of decency and morality to the film industry, and their classifications and ratings ostensibly exist as a means of protecting children from harmful

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<sup>1</sup> MPAA members: Walt Disney Studios Motion Pictures; Paramount Pictures Corporation; Sony Pictures Entertainment, Inc.; Twentieth Century Fox Film Corporation; Universal City Studios LLC; and Warner Bros. Entertainment Inc.

images and ideas. However, these organizations, and others like them, wield significant power and substantial influence. A BBFC “Certificate of Evidence,” for example, is accepted in British courts as *prima facie* evidence, requiring neither corroboration nor interpretation. Likewise, the MPAA, despite the exclusivity and paucity of its membership, regularly speaks as representative of the entire American film industry, voicing their opinions to courts, lawmakers, and government agencies in the U.S. as well as the U.K., E.U., Japan, and Hong Kong. Classification and ratings boards invariably profess benevolent intentions, for example, the protection of “vulnerable viewers and society” (“BBFC”) or “champion[ing] the creative and artistic freedoms of filmmakers” (“Motion Picture”), but their effect, like that of censorship, is less benign. These organizations act, according to Csikszentmihalyi’s “systems view of creativity” (325-39), as gatekeepers between the status quo (social and cinematic) and artistic innovation. Although their censorship powers may lack explicit government authorization, they are nonetheless employed to preserve and perpetuate conventional ideologies.

Charles Lyons, writing in *The New Censors: Movies and the Culture Wars* (1997) delineated two distinct categories of cinematic censorship: censorship of prior restraint and “de facto” censorship. The former, referring to a legal concept wherein material is enjoined, most often by an authority of the state, from entering the marketplace (5), is uncommon in

most Western nations; however, as recently as 2010, films have been subjected to censorship of prior restraint in both Europe and North America. For example, *The Yes Men Fix the World* (2009), a British documentary about industrial invaders Andy Bichlbaum and Mike Bonanno, was recently barred from release in the U.S. by legal injunction. In June of 2011, the BBFC refused to grant Tom Six's *The Human Centipede II (Full Sequence)* a classification, concluding that the film "poses a real . . . risk that harm is likely to be caused to potential viewers" ("BBFC Rejects. . ."). However, bans such as these often prove temporary as filmmakers concede to the demands of censorship bodies or public attitudes and state concerns change. Four months and 32 cuts after the BBFC's initial censorship of *The Human Centipede*, the Board granted the film a 'suitable only for adults' classification, clearing it for both theatrical and video release.

De facto censorship, as Lyons notes, may or may not involve governing institutions, arises "after an expression has reached the marketplace" (5) and exists worldwide. Also known as extralegal censorship, it may appear antithetical to the democratic policies of the Western world but, nonetheless, thrives in capitalistic economies as a quasi-regulatory mechanism of materialism and standardization, homogeny through hegemony. Comprising a variety of censorial actions effected by individuals or groups and resulting in a censorship through

consensus or cultural censorship, de facto censorship is often anecdotal and, somewhat paradoxically, influential. When, for example, Danish newspaper *Jyllands-Posten* published twelve cartoon representations of the Prophet Muhammad “as part of an ongoing public debate on freedom of expression” (Juste), quiet boycotts in Denmark soon turned to violent protests throughout Europe and the Middle East. In the six months following the initial publication, boycotts of Danish goods gave way to bombings of Danish embassies. Likewise, Ang Lee’s Oscar winning *Brokeback Mountain* quietly premiered at international festivals throughout the autumn of 2005, but prior to its November premiere in the U.S., conservative blogger Matt Drudge heralded “‘Gay Cowboy’ Movie Becomes an Oscar Frontrunner” and media commentators took aim. Accusing the film of “raping the ‘Marlboro Man,’” David Kupelian called for a boycott of Hollywood while Mormon women in Providence, Utah picketed screenings of the film. When a reporter advised Utah theater owner Larry H. Miller of the work’s homosexual themes, Miller pulled the film from his Salt Lake City cinema. The Gay, Lesbian, Bisexual and Transgendered Community Center of Utah emailed a list of Miller’s business interests to its members and urged, “Vote with your hard-earned dollars!” (qtd. in Griggs). Better known for his ownership of a professional basketball team than his film picks, Miller’s decision made headlines worldwide, and the entire state of Utah became fodder for late-



night comedians. As these controversies demonstrate, instances of de facto censorship may derive from and take aim at points of disparity, but they disseminate through market or economic constraint and become more prevalent as the world transforms into a single, global marketplace.

Censorship of prior restraint and de facto censorship achieved through censorial constraints evoke overwhelmingly negative responses from artists at whom they are directed. Yet, sociologist Jon Elster has identified a third form of censorship as integral to creativity and the creation of art. In *Ulysses Unbound* (2000), Elster theorizes that the “emotional value” of artistic works may be enhanced if the creative process is constrained (205-07). Applying Marxist theories of labor and production—“labor obtains its measure from the outside, through the aim to be attained and the obstacles to be overcome in attaining it. . . . [and] this overcoming of obstacles is in itself a liberating activity” (qtd. 178)—Elster’s constraint theory, while neither ignoring nor negating the effects of imposed constraints, portrays artistic creation as the construction and navigation of self-imposed constraints and “artistic precommitment,” censorship in the form of self-imposed constraints intended to enhance the artist and his art, as foundational to that process. For example, opting to write a short story instead of a novel is not, as Elster explains, “dictated by the desire to exclude any specific words or sentences, only by the desire to use fewer of them” (2). Artistic

precommitment, unlike de facto forms of self-censorship, which would in this example target specific words or sentences in order to avoid negative consequences, invites innovation, fosters change, and is, according to Elster, a prerequisite to the creation of art. While artistic precommitment is often a conscious decision of the artist, it may, like other censorial constraints, be imposed by others.

### *The Five Obstructions*

Danish filmmaker Lars von Trier employs, exposes, and provokes censorship, in all its forms, throughout his body of work, but his use of constraints to affect artistic creation is most overtly demonstrated in *The Five Obstructions (De fem benspænd, 2003)*. Part documentary, part reality film, and part psychotherapy, the project was conceived by von Trier as a vehicle for bringing his former teacher Jørgen Leth—director, documentarian, film producer, poet, and television commentator—out of a self-imposed exile in Haiti. The filmmaker charges his mentor with remaking *The Perfect Human (Det perfekte menneske, 1967)*, Leth's critically acclaimed cinematic examination of man. Placing himself in the role of obstructor, von Trier defines five sets of constraints—the obstructions—under which Leth must revisit and recreate his original masterpiece.

Meetings between the two filmmakers reveal artists comfortable in their roles and cautiously optimistic about the obstruction project. Von

Trier begins by constraining the technical and logistical aspects of Leth's filmmaking: no shot may exceed twelve frames; filming must take place in Cuba and without sets; and voiceover narration must answer questions posed in the original film. Pleased with the outcome, the obstructer next attempts to eliminate the "highly affected distance" documentarian Leth normally maintains from his film subject. To achieve this objective, Leth is required to shoot in a location he considers "the most miserable place on earth" without showing the misery on screen. He must also play the role of the Perfect Human and recreate a scene in which the human eats a solitary meal. The resulting short, shot in Bombay's red light district, is painfully beautiful, with a tuxedo-clad Leth sipping champagne and slowly devouring the perfect meal as beggars, prostitutes, and starving children look on. The filmmaker defends his decision to "hide" the crowd behind a transparent screen as a loose interpretation of von Trier's prohibition against exhibiting misery aimed at improving the artistic quality of the film, a choice Elster refers to as transcending constraints (267-68). Nonetheless, von Trier concludes that one of the obstructions has been thwarted by the crowd's visible inclusion in the background and offers Leth another choice: remake the latest rendering of *The Perfect Human* in strict accordance with the stated obstructions or start anew without the "benefit" of either obstructer or obstruction. In an interview with Anne Mette Lundtofte, Leth described

the punishing effects of attempting artistic creation without the benefit of constraints:

I'm used to working with formalist rules. In my own work I like to challenge myself with restrictions. . . . It might sound paradoxical, but for me that constitutes freedom: to be able to create something within a certain frame. When I had to respond to Lars's requirement that I must produce a film with no formal restrictions, I really didn't know where to go. I felt desperate.

Nevertheless, the filmmaker exercises the option of "total freedom" by producing a film noir version of *The Perfect Human*, viewing the conventions of the sub-genre as a "playful solution to the obstruction" of no obstruction (Leth). While Leth acknowledged that this approach required he break many of his own self-imposed rules, he said of von Trier's obstruction, "It gave me the opportunity to do something I'd always wanted to do." In light of this penalty turned reward, the obstructor's fourth constraint seems almost maniacal.

Intended to exile Leth from his comfort zone while demanding copious technical and aesthetic decisions, von Trier requests the next remake be a cartoon. The documentarian, lacking either time or desire to learn the art of animation, enlists the help of computer animator Bob Sabiston. Using rotoscope software he designed in 1997, Sabiston

animates scenes from the previous remakes as well as the original short, creating a work that comments on its predecessors and establishes a clear link between art and technology. Both filmmakers, despite an avowed abhorrence for animation, appraise the completed cartoon as “beautiful,” a realization of the aesthetic over the technique. Leth, who described *The Five Obstructions* to Lundtofte as “a documentary about the creative process,” credited von Trier’s well-chosen constraints with fostering innovation. In the last and “ultimate obstruction,” von Trier, though still playing the obstructor, makes the film and writes the narration, a letter from Leth to “Silly Lars” that the former teacher must read as his own. In the final remake, the voiceover and edited footage of the two filmmakers discussing the various obstructions and the resulting shorts effectively blurs separate entities: obstructor becomes the obstructed, obstruction becomes opportunity, and documentary becomes art.

*The Five Obstructions* locates constraints and creativity in the same sphere, but the film also underscores the proximity of control to chaos and authenticity to artifice, issues von Trier confronts, and challenges, with every project. Invited in 1996 to celebrate Copenhagen being designated European Capital of Culture, von Trier devised *Psychomobile 1: The World Clock*, a performance art exhibit that employed ants in New Mexico to dictate the emotions of actors in Denmark. His Dogme95

movement, as discussed in Chapter III, subverted hegemonic rules of the movie business by authoring new conventions of film aesthetics. As well as obstructing Jørgen Leth, the director continually obstructs his own filmmaking technique in the interest of creativity, as in *The Boss of it All* (*Direktøren for det hele*, 2006), which used a computer randomization program to regulate camera movements and shooting angles. Maltby notes that “censorship is a practice of power, a form of surveillance over the ideas, images, and representations circulating in a particular power” (235). This dissertation builds on the theory that art that challenges and defies this power is necessary to society’s continued development. Furthermore, censorship in the form of artistic constraints is necessary for creating art that challenges and defies constraints, both societal and artistic, and Lars von Trier recognizes and exemplifies these paradoxical truths as he simultaneously employs and challenges censorial power.

## CHAPTER II: ARTIST, ARTIFICE, AND ART

Heretofore most information available on Lars von Trier in the English language has been, while not censored in the classic sense, heavily filtered.

-Jack Stevenson, *Lars von Trier*

I'll gladly assert that everything said or written about me is a lie. [. . .] My own life is a fabrication.

-Lars von Trier, *Tranceformer: A Portrait of Lars von Trier*

While much of von Trier's biography remains clouded by family secrets, his own contradictions, and the director's verve for creative license, his approach to filmmaking is unquestionably and inextricably linked to a childhood of controlling freedoms and paralyzing restrictions. Born the youngest child of Ulf Trier and Inger Høst on April 30, 1956, Lars Trier inherited his aging father's sense of humor and his mother's multiple, and often exploited, neuroses. Both parents were educated, life-long civil servants, and political progressives—Ulf a socialist and his wife a communist. Although Ulf was half-Jewish, neither he nor his wife subscribed to either the rituals or the refuge of religious belief, embracing instead a belief in human reason, social justice, and absolute truth. This latter precept produced any number of difficulties for the young Lars who, like most small children, frequently asked life's difficult questions. "Will I die tonight?" a question he often posed, typically

elicited a truthful, albeit discomfoting, response from his mother. As recounted in Nils Thorsen's "Lars von Trier: Self-made Man," Inger's invariably told her son, "The possibility is very small, but of course it is possible." Moreover, the boy was left to decide for himself when he would go to bed, get a haircut, or visit a doctor, "freedoms" which the director now disdains as anxiety producing but also credits as the origin of his indomitable self-discipline. On the other hand, as biographer Jack Stevenson details, when young Lars attended school, he encountered an environment of rigid control: standing in lines, moving en masse, and asking permission before undertaking any action not specifically commanded by an adult (9). His freethinking parents answered the boy's complaints about the authoritarian Lundtofte School with a surplus of reasoning and a dearth of understanding; why, they asked their son, did he not just leave. According to Stevenson, "[t]he collision between a home-life with no borders and a school life with too many was fairly traumatic" (9). The director's recollection of a childhood characterized by contradictions suggests an origin for the paradox of constraint that facilitates his work: "I had two small figures, who sat on my shoulders and pulled in opposite directions," he told Thorsen ("Self-made Man"). Not surprisingly, Lars became an obsessive, anxiety-ridden child. He often completed his homework at the bus station in order to comply with the wishes of the schoolmasters without disappointing his parents with



his conformity. He obsessed over nuclear annihilation and appendicitis. Labeled a “problem child,” he was repeatedly assessed by psychologists who agreed that he had “adjustment difficulties” (Stevenson 9). By the age of fourteen, he had dropped out of school and, as von Trier revealed to *Politiken* in 2009, enrolled in the Nordvang psychiatric institution as a day patient (Thorsen, “Self-made Man”).

Lars adopted various means for adapting to the extremes in his life. His earliest experiences revealed the world to be a frightening chaos, and he sought refuge in worlds he could control, worlds that he himself created. As Stevenson remarks, “he had to make his own games, form his own rules and create his own inner discipline” (9). Many of the games Lars devised were artistic in nature; he wrote, painted, and filmed his worlds into being. Inger, whose emotionality “dominated” at home, showered her son with praise at his every artistic effort. The director’s self-discipline showed itself, if not in the quality of his childhood designs, in the sheer quantity of his early artistic creations. He “dictated” a novel at the age of seven, started filming with his mother’s movie camera at ten, and by eleven had begun experimenting with various editing processes using a film splicer and old film prints given to him by his uncle, Børge Høst, co-founder of the Copenhagen Filmstudio and the Union of Danish Film Directors (10). When he was twelve, Lars earned his first income from the film industry, acting the lead in a four-part

television series titled *Secret Summer* (*Hemmelig sommer*, 1968). Series director Thomas Winding later recalled the youngster as one who “was in control of his own life and didn’t trust anybody. He was,” according to Winding, “not particularly charming, but a good and focused boy” (qtd. in Stevenson 11). The youngster used his 3,000 kroner salary (\$525) to purchase an electric organ, which he employed throughout his teens in his own filmmaking. Excluded in 1973 from Denmark’s required military service “on grounds of his earlier psychological problems” (13), Lars Trier focused his energies on art. In 1975, perhaps searching for direction, he applied to and was rejected by Denmark’s Art Academy, Journalist School, National Theatre School, and Film School. Despite the numerous rejections, he sat for and passed his Higher Preparatory exam the following spring and, in September 1976, enrolled at the University of Copenhagen as a student of “cinema history” (Lumholdt xxi; Stevenson 12-13). While Trier never completed his degree at Copenhagen, his time there was productive in two important ways. Within his first year of studies at the university, the young film student joined the all but defunct filmmaking collective Film Group 16. Characterized as nothing more than a “discussion group,” the association was nonetheless well equipped, and Trier’s acceptance into the collective granted him access to and use of their filmmaking gear. Using the group’s equipment, along with its members, Trier produced two films while at Copenhagen. The

first, *The Orchid Gardener* (*Orchidégartneren*, 1977), introduced many of the themes that continue to typify von Trier's films and exploited many of the director's insecurities, depicting its central character, a Jewish painter named Victor Marse (played by Trier), as a dysfunctional, emotionally impaired, artistic failure. Just as significant to the filmmaker's career, however, the 31-minute black and white short accompanied his second application to the National Film School of Denmark, where he was accepted as a directing student in 1979 (Lumholdt xxi; Stevenson 15-17).

Lars Trier managed childhood and adolescence by constructing rules that provided stability and refuge, but he succeeded in film school by breaking or manipulating the rules of others: the school, its teachers and administrators, and the cinematography they undertook to teach. This is not to suggest that he stopped fashioning his own rules, on the contrary. He now applied his rulemaking to his filmmaking, and as often as not, making films according to his rules often appeared to others as a violation of the established rules. Located in a society driven by the Nordic tradition of Jante Law, hegemonic rules that esteem the group and disparage the individual, the Film School required that students collaborate with one another. While Trier was not averse to collaboration, as his work with Film Group 16 attested, he claimed as his right the

decision of how, with whom, and on what he would collaborate. Fellow student Åke Sandgren recalled:

The rest of us knew we would somehow make films. He already knew what kind of a filmic universe he would create. He had no wall between the idea and the practical implementation. He had no fear making decisions. (qtd. in Stevenson 20)

In his three years at the Film School, Trier seemed to be constantly at battle with the institution and its faculty, whether over his refusals to work with specific students or in his attempts to secure funding and resources for his own projects. According to legend, Trier literally became “von” Trier when a teacher at the school accused students in an editing room of “behaving like the gentry of Sealand” and snapped, “they might all just as well have ‘von’ for a middle name” (Stevenson 20-21). Although the director acknowledges he first used “von” in 1975 and an article he authored about Strindberg was published in January 1976 with an author photo captioned “writer and artist Lars von Trier” (qtd. in Björkman 2), the legend, its content as well as its existence, implies much about the student and the filmmaker.

Although he fashioned his own worlds in adolescence and constructed his identity in film school, von Trier also learned that creativity often struggles under the control of others. In what was

perhaps his first personal experience with censorship of prior restraint, the student director wrote and submitted a film script for an adaptation of a literary work only to have it rejected as offensive. His lighthearted recollection of the incident belies the repressive result:

At one point I wrote a script for *La Philosophie dans le boudoir* by the Marquis de Sade. A grade drama in three acts, splendidly vulgar. I thought I might use it to practise on. But Gert Fredholm, who taught direction, told me to destroy the script. It wasn't enough that I couldn't make the film. Any evidence that a script like that had been written at film school had to be destroyed! (Björkman 33)

This incident, which the director included in his fictional autobiographical film *The Early Years: Erik Nietzsche Part 1 (De unge år: Erik Nietzsche sagaen del 1, 2007)*, stands as one of the few instances in which von Trier would be thwarted by censorship. Notwithstanding the prohibition against the de Sade treatment and the battles regarding collaborators, the director's three years at the National Film School of Denmark, like those at the university, yielded significant films and pivotal relationships.

Von Trier's first 16mm production at film school, *Nocturne (Den sidste detalje, 1980)*, is perhaps most notable for its obsessive application of cinematic rules. With painstaking "geometrical

storyboarding,” the director constrained cinematographer Tom Elling with demands that the movement of each shot anticipate that of the next. Likewise, he and collaborator Tómas Gislason edited the footage so that the focal image of one scene dissolves into the central visual element of the next frame. A tear falling down a woman’s cheek, for example, becomes a water droplet falling onto a fern, and a round church spire in the distance replaces the face of a watch in close-up. The protracted cinematography (the one-minute opening shot took over a year to film) and precise editing were, according to von Trier, grounded in eye-scanning theories (von Trier and Gislason). The resultant eight-minute experimental short, described by von Trier in the DVD commentary as a “very complicated film,” evinces the director’s early predilection for the visual. Stark images dominate the screen and serve to disorient the viewer as the dialogue of a three a.m. phone call imparts a nominal narrative; a woman (Yvette Weibacher) living in almost total darkness worries about an impending trip to Buenos Aires. While von Trier and his collaborators brought the National Film School of Denmark its first award with *Nocturne*, the director’s graduation project moved beyond showcasing his technical acumen and brought him into the public eye.

Having established with Elling and Gislason an approach to filmmaking “based upon extremely detailed scripts and storyboards” (“Downtown Europe”), von Trier’s focus on the visual now possessed a

purpose beyond the application of theories in the creation of interesting images. The making of *Images of a Relief* (*Befrielsesbilleder*, 1982) was guided, as before, by the director's self-imposed rules. Employing what Elster terms "hard constraints" (190), or technical restrictions, von Trier prohibited certain camera angles and movements. "Panoramic shots and tilts, horizontal and vertical camera movements, they weren't allowed," explained the filmmaker (qtd. in Björkman 45). Additionally, the filmmaker combined documentary footage of Denmark's liberation from Germany, including violence against captured Danish collaborators, with the fictional story of Leo Mandel (Edward Fleming), a German officer betrayed by his Danish lover Esther. "We're trying to get the most out of the pictures we're showing," von Trier recalled in 1984. "We're trying to incorporate as much history into them as possible" ("Downtown Europe"). Paradoxically, the student director was also challenging history.

While many of von Trier's early film school productions were intended on some level as rebellions, "only done to be contrary" (Björkman 33), *Images of a Relief* was rebellion aimed at provocation. The graduation film departed stylistically from Danish cinema's tradition of social realism. More specifically, von Trier's inclusion of "previously unseen documentary footage [. . .] of Danish civilians beating and torturing suspected collaborators" (Badley 18), his privileging of the

German perspective, and the depiction of Leo as a sympathetic character was, according to Gislason, “very politically incorrect” (“In Doctor von Trier’s Laboratory”). Although it divided jury members at the European Film School Festival in Munich, *Images of a Relief* earned critical praise and won a sponsored award from the British-based Channel Four Television Corporation. A limited theatrical run in Denmark garnered mixed reviews with critics often praising the film’s technical and visual elements and repeatedly criticizing its pretentiousness. Despite the criticisms, *Images of a Relief* established the director as a provocateur and foreshadowed many of the techniques and themes he would explore during the first decade of his professional filmmaking career.

Having intended to create a balance between “the beautiful and the grim” (Schwander 19), von Trier expressed regret about the aesthetic beauty of *Images of a Relief* being primary. Nevertheless, the director’s first feature film, *The Element of Crime* (*Forbrydelsens element*, 1984), is visually akin to its antecedent. Set in a future Germany of decay and disorder depicted through alternating shades of sepia—achieved with sodium lights and dubbed “Piss Christ: The Motion Picture” by reviewer Matthew Dessem—and misplaced collections of everyday objects, the narrative follows expatriate detective Fisher (Michael Elphick) as he returns from Cairo to track down suspected “Lotto Murderer” Harry Grey. Co-written with Niels Vørsel, a published author and playwright who



worked as a walk-on during the filming of the director's graduation project, *The Element of Crime* is a marriage, albeit a rocky one, of plot and images. The religious motif introduced when Leo ascended heavenward to end *Images of a Relief* continues visually and narratively in *The Element of Crime*. Although von Trier rejects readings of Fisher's former mentor Osborne as Father, the detective as Son, and Harry Grey as Holy Ghost, he concedes Jan Kornum Larsen's assessment of the film as "a kind of battle between the quest for heaven and the attraction of the earth" (81).

Joined once again by Elling and Gislason, along with most of the *Images of a Relief* crew, the director approached the making of his debut film with the same determination, vision, and precision that had served him in film school. Having secured development support for *The Element of Crime* from the Danish Film Institute (DFI), von Trier was later advised to change the final script to ensure full funding. As revealed in the DVD documentary "Downtown Europe: About Lars von Trier and *The Element of Crime*" ("Ennenstadt Europa: Om Lars von Trier og *Forbrydelsens Element*," 1984), the director refused:

I've made it my business to show people things which you normally refrain from due to moral reasons because it's important that the things that exist in real life are being

described to people. . . . And things that exist should be shown.

The murder of a young girl by the protagonist remained, as did the suicidal leap of a young man from a construction crane.

More than a decade before Elster proposed his constraint theory and wrote of precommitment as its first principle, von Trier was applying it to his creation of art. The director described *The Element of Crime's* storyboard as “a kind of expanded script, where every camera angle, setup, and scene in the film is drawn, described, and timed” (qtd. in Alling 28). Self-imposed constraints abounded as the film was shot, according to Simons, “exclusively in the dark; [. . .] cross-cutting and cross-editing are not used, and optical effects are not created during post-production but during filming” (82). As much an act of provocation as artistic decision, the director deliberately chose to film in English. In addition to viewing English as more befitting film noir, von Trier saw possibilities in making English-language films; “in the back of my mind I also had the idea that it might get noticed outside of Denmark if I filmed it in English,” the director explained to Björkman (66). “There’s nothing to say that just because I make films in Denmark I have to make them in Danish” (66). In reality, filming in English was in effect a contravention of Denmark’s Film Act of 1972, which, as Hjort explains in *Fifty Contemporary Filmmakers*, defined a Danish film, and thus a film eligible

for DFI support, by its use of the Danish language (361-70). Although the DFI had initially agreed to the use of English (perhaps more occupied with substance than delivery), they almost pulled support after filming was completed. Five years later, the Film Act was altered to allow funding of English-language films. Motivated, according to Hjort, by von Trier's predilection for making films in English, the 1989 Act redefines a Danish film as one that "employs the Danish language or is deemed to make a special artistic or technical contribution that helps to further film art and film culture in Denmark" (367).

*The Element of Crime* elevated von Trier to the international stage of filmmaking originality when it was selected for competition at the 1984 Cannes Film Festival. Nominated for the coveted Palme d'Or, the director's first feature film, like his graduation project in Munich, polarized the jury and led president Dirk Bogarde to threaten a walkout. Von Trier, sporting a leather jacket and shaved head, provoked the press by rebuffing inquiries about his film's meaning. Refusing to offer his own interpretation, the young director described himself as a "revolutionary" and his film as a "bastard between European and American films" (qtd. in Isbell). While he would later align himself with his humanist detective who works, according to von Trier, "from the assumption that good and evil don't exist" (Björkman 81), critics viewed the director as a miscreant. Many interpreted his aloof, seemingly self-confident demeanor as

indicative of arrogance, an impression only strengthened by his less than enthusiastic acceptance of the Technical Grand Prize. While von Trier considered his first feature film “more than a purely technical achievement” (Björkman 82), his fellow Danes were divided. The film won Denmark’s Bodil and Robert Awards for best picture in 1985, but most critics found it inaccessible and moviegoers seemed to agree; despite selling 100,000 tickets in Paris, *The Element of Crime* produced dismal box-office returns in von Trier’s home country (Stevenson 40). Ticket sales notwithstanding, the film’s inclusion in the Cannes Film Festival ended a decade-long absence of Danish projects on the international stage, a stage on which Denmark’s newest auteur would claim the spotlight nine times in the next 25 years.

Von Trier’s commercial success was still years away, and he earned a living writing and directing television advertisements. The commercials, which appeared first in theaters and afterward on television, were quickly produced and extremely profitable, enabling the filmmaker to work on other projects, but they also brought him a certain degree of notoriety. In 1986, an advertisement made for Denmark’s daily tabloid *Ekstra Bladet* earned the director another invitation to Cannes, this time from the Lions International Advertising Festival, which awarded him the Silver Lion Award. The commercial, “Sauna—Take a bath with *Ekstra Bladet*,” featured full frontal nudity, both male and

female, and displayed its product only in the final shot where the newspaper was draped over a young man's erect penis. While Denmark's TV<sub>2</sub> banned the ad, it attained a "cult reputation" elsewhere (Stevenson 57).

Meanwhile, von Trier had been working with Vørsel on a script for *The Grand Mal*, the second installment of what was now envisioned, with *The Element of Crime*, as the Europa Trilogy. Unable to secure financing, the script was abandoned, evincing quite clearly the censorial power of money and those who control it. The director finally obtained funding for another film project, purportedly by betting DFI consultant Claes Kastholm Hansen that he could make a commercial film for one million kroner (\$175,000). The resultant *Epidemic* (1987) coupled 16mm black-and-white, documentary style footage of the script writing process with 35mm mono-color scenes from the drafted screenplay. Still experimenting with various filming techniques, von Trier shot the "realistic" scenes using a single stationary camera and employed previously eschewed methods such as pan-and-tilt camera movements and cross-cutting in the fictional narrative. This experimentation continued in the trilogy's final film, *Europa (Zentropa, 1991)*, which alternates between scenes in black-and-white, in black-and-white with selective mono-color saturations, and in full color. The director also

reimagined the silent film era technique of compositing, employing rear projections and double exposures to hypnotic effect.

*Epidemic* and *Europa* were invited to Cannes, the former in the *Un Certain Regard* category and the latter in competition. While *Epidemic* only confused, *Europa* impressed, earning von Trier his second Technical Grand Prize and sharing the Grand Prix du Jury award with Maroun Bagdadi's *Hors la vie* (1991). The director effectively solidified his position as Denmark's "enfant terrible" when, according to Nigel Andrews, he passed the Grand Prize to a colleague explaining, "He has worked on all my films and is very technical" and gave thanks for his Grand Prix du Jury to "the midget," jury president Roman Polanski (81). Selling only 5,000 tickets throughout Denmark, *Epidemic*, as von Trier estimated in the 1991 Danish television documentary *Trier's Element* (Nikolaj Buchardt), "wasn't exactly commercial and not much of a success either." *Europa* fared slightly better at the box-office and won the 1992 Bodil for best film. In addition to winning Denmark's highest honor, the Best Film Robert, *Europa* also earned Robert awards for special effects, sound, production design, original score, cinematography, and editing.

Von Trier's creation of the trilogy, a structure he continues to employ, has its origins in art and artifice. "When you call three books a trilogy," the director explained in *Trier's Element*, "people will read these books in a different way. I like that feeling of things being connected." In

a discussion with Björkman, von Trier took his explanation further; “Using the word ‘trilogy’ indicates that there’s a theme that’s shown in a new light in each film. Or that you’re trying to expand on an idea” (220). In addition to the stylistic experimentation evident in each film, the Europa trilogy continued the examination of European/German traumas first considered in *Images of a Relief*. Both *Epidemic* and *Europa*, like *The Element of Crime*, are set in a dystopian Europe, the former in the near future and the latter in post-war Germany. Likewise, the idealistic protagonist doomed to failure reappears in the characters of Fisher, young Dr. Mesmer (played by von Trier), and finally German-American Leo Kessler (Jean-Marc Barr). Indeed, many of the trilogy’s themes persist in the director’s current work, most notably those of the failed idealist, good and evil, man and nature, body and psyche.

While preparing the final installment of his Europa trilogy, von Trier’s own psychological world was thrown off its axis by his mother’s deathbed revelation that Ulf Trier, the source of the director’s Jewishness, was not his biological father. Inger Høst told her youngest son that she had engaged in an adulterous relationship with Fritz Michael Hartmann, a former Social Ministry colleague, because she desired a child with artistic genes (Hjort, “Lars” 366; Stevenson 63-64). Only five years earlier, von Trier had explained the muse-like quality of his Jewish heritage:

I am very taken with my Jewish background. Jewishness has something to do with both suffering and historical consciousness, which I miss so much in modern art. People have left their roots, their religion behind. (qtd. in Stevenson 16)

Suddenly, the director was without roots. His fascination with and use of Germany and Jews as cautionary archetypes ended with the final film of his Europe trilogy. Von Trier's personal identity, so integral to his artistic creativity, had been decimated by Inger Høst's confession and the added admission that Ulf Trier had known his wife's secret. Believing that his life had been a fabrication, the director created a new identity; he converted to Catholicism and established a new set of constraints, both personal and professional. The works that followed evinced dramatic alterations in technique as well as appearance.

While *Europa* launched von Trier to international acclaim, the director was an enigma in the state-supported film industry of Denmark. The DFI had refused to grant funding for *Europa* unless von Trier worked with a major studio, and the resultant association with Nordisk Film, Scandinavia's largest production company, had cost the director the rights to his film. In 1991, von Trier partnered with *Europa* co-producer Peter Aalbæk Jensen in founding Zentropa Entertainment with the stated intention of retaining artistic control of his own work and assisting



to produce the films of others. As a director, von Trier's films had earned major awards but bombed at the box-office, and he had gained notoriety but not respect among his fellow Danes. Although a 1988 production of the Carl Th. Dreyer scripted *Medea* had disappointed, von Trier's second directorial foray into television evinced a new approach and a new aesthetic for the director. Shot on location in Copenhagen University Hospital, *The Kingdom (Riget, 1994)* was fast-paced, witty, and frenetic. He shared directing credit with Morten Arnfred and writing responsibilities with Gislason and Vørsel, but von Trier, influenced by Barry Levinson's *Homicide: Life on the Street* (1993-99) and David Lynch's *Twin Peaks* (1990-91), authored the approach. He abandoned storyboards, rehearsals, the 180-degree rule, and the continuity of eye-line matching. Eschewing the constructed aesthetics of the Europa trilogy and the meticulous planning of each shot, he often opted for available lighting, wireless body mikes, and hand-held cinematography. He required that cast members employ a different motivation each time the camera rolled and "consciously changed the actors' position on the set between each take, so that they came to perform the same lines from different positions" (Björkman 146). Editing portions of multiple but distinctive takes together created a visual impression of uncontrolled chaos that parallels *The Kingdom's* farcical narrative of medical malpractice, administrative incompetence, and ghostly visitations.

Although von Trier had broken all the rules except his own, viewers loved *The Kingdom*. Touring the international festivals as a five-hour, made-for-television movie, it garnered comparisons with American soap opera *General Hospital*, Shakespeare's *Hamlet*, and David Lynch's *Twin Peaks* (Stevenson 85). As a four-part serial on Danish television, *The Kingdom* earned "sky-high ratings, favourable reviews and plenty of buzz" (85), clearing Copenhagen streets and making von Trier a ten-year overnight success.

### *Breaking the Waves*

Von Trier continued to develop this new approach in the 1996 melodrama *Breaking the Waves*. The first film made after his mother's death, it is as much about the director's rebellion as it is about the protagonist's goodness. Set in a patriarchal community in 1970's Scotland, the film is perhaps von Trier's most overt work in its depiction of de facto censorship practices. In a closed Calvinist society where marriage requires the permission of elders, religious doctrine prohibits women speaking in church services and bars their attendance at burials, pleasure, sin, and outsiders are viewed with equal disdain, and reprobates are expelled from the church and community, condemned by the latter to hell on Earth and the former to eternal damnation. While the film presents the church as the oppressive, censorial authority in the

isolated community, von Trier, a newly converted Catholic, maintained that *Breaking the Waves* was not meant as a criticism of religious beliefs:

In remote communities, where daily life is tough, a rigid support is necessary, keeping the community together by persuading them that God is forever scrutinizing their behavior, and any misdemeanor has to be punished by excommunication to protect the others. (qtd. in "A Story" 16-17)

What religious doctrine does for the church, social or cultural censorship achieves for groups and society, and it is limited to neither "remote communities" nor those "where daily life is tough." Christianity employs excommunication as punishment for behavior judged—by man—as offensive to God or church while innumerable groups, secular communities, and contemporary societies utilize exclusion, segregation, or marginalization as penalty for nonconformity. From this perspective, *Breaking the Waves*, rather than criticizing religious belief, grants the excommunicated a possibility rarely allowed the oppressed of modern society, liberation from constraint.

In *Breaking the Waves*, a demonstrative and naïve Bess McNeil (Emily Watson) overcomes social and religious impediments to marry Jan Nyman (Stellan Skarsgård), a foreigner viewed with suspicion by the community. Exultant in love and its sexual expression, Bess is

devastated when Jan returns to his offshore oilrig shortly after their wedding. She passes the days until her husband's return in conversations with God—with Bess audibly voicing her prayers as well as His responses—and with phone calls to Jan in which she timidly engages in phone sex. When Jan is medevaced home with a broken neck, Bess believes God has answered her prayers for her husband's return while punishing her for her possessiveness. Reasoning with Bess that her love will save him, Jan urges his wife to engage in sex with other men and share the details with him, thus enabling the couple to “share” her experience of physical love. She is overwhelmed with the enormity of Jan's request, but when he takes a turn for the worse, Bess seeks guidance from God. The response she hears (and voices) echoes the views expressed by the church minister, “you're the one who must show you're strong,” and best friend Dodo (Katrin Cartlidge), “You can do more for him than the doctors.” Consequently, Bess interprets God's answer, “Prove to me that you love him, then I'll let him live,” as instruction to satisfy Jan's request, and thus begins a dangerous sexual pilgrimage, martyring herself in the belief that her promiscuous behavior will save her husband's life.

Jan's condition improves as Bess' sexual promiscuity increases, but her transgressions against church doctrine elicit the harshest penalty. When Bess appears during services dressed like a contemporary

Mary Magdalene and questions the cleric's counsel to "unconditional love for the Word," she is forcibly removed from the service. Offering her own gospel of love, "You cannot love words. [. . .] You can love another human being. That's perfection!" Bess is cast out of the church, turned away from her mother's home, and ostracized by the community. Totally excommunicated, she travels from the island to a large ship known by local prostitutes to be dangerous. She is beaten and sexually abused, sustaining injuries that end her life, and though she dies prior to Jan's miraculous (and apparently spontaneous) recovery and is condemned to eternal damnation by the church, Bess accomplishes her ultimate transgression in martyrdom.

The final scene is made more potent by its imagery and the style in which it is rendered. In an act of love, Jan steals his wife's body, returns to the oilrig, and buries her at sea. As the body slips into the black water, the camera pulls back and affords viewers a heavenly landscape of joyously ringing cathedral bells above the platform heralding Bess' transcendence of the world's constraints. The symbolic imagery and subdued aesthetics magnify the significance of the final scene and contrast the overall style of the film. Throughout *Breaking the Waves*, von Trier had opted for the realism afforded by a hand-held camera, this time with wide-angle CinemaScope. On-location shooting in the dark, forlorn landscapes of the Isle of Skye, often with only natural lighting,

enhanced the realistic effect, as did the director's transfer of the film to video and back to film, which degraded the color and sharpness of the images. Additionally, von Trier shifted his focus, and that of the camera, to the actors. The cast worked without blocking rehearsals and with the freedom to move without violating the camera's frame, and while von Trier urged cinematographer Robby Müller to follow the emotion, multiple takes afforded actors an opportunity to improvise the action, resulting at times in 360 degrees of motion. Editing intended, as the director explained to Björkman, "to strengthen the intensity of the acting," both amplified and abated the documentary-like style of the camerawork (171-72). The multiple takes were intertwined with no regard for lighting or weather changes, continuity of motion, or eyeline matching. Once again, von Trier was breaking myriad rules of filmmaking, but not without purpose. He explained his approach to Björkman:

What we did was take a style and lay it like a filter over the story. [. . .] The raw, documentary style that I imposed on the film, which actually dissolves and contradicts it, means that we can accept the story as it is. That's my theory, at any rate. It's all a bit theoretical. (166)

Like his female protagonist, von Trier was breaking the established rules and replacing them with his own contemplated cinematic gospel.

Ultimately, *Breaking the Waves*' aesthetics mirrored the coarse, restrained tones of its narrative and setting, creating what the director referred to as an "hypnotic" effect (qtd. in van de Walle 126). Ironically, the final scene, one of the most debated among critics, enhanced that effect by replacing realism with symbolism and restraint with freedom.<sup>1</sup>

Winner of at least forty international awards including the Grand Prix du Jury at Cannes, *Breaking the Waves* became von Trier's most commercial and critically successful film yet. Although not immediate, the film also evoked censure from feminist critics who took issue the martyrdom of Bess for the benefit of her husband. This criticism would gain momentum in the ensuing years as the director repeatedly punished female characters (and, some would argue, the actors who played them) for their goodness and naiveté. *Breaking the Waves* also provoked reviewers at the MPAA. According to U.S. film distributor October Films, to avoid an NC-17 rating, the review board required the removal of a scene in which Bess, seeing a naked man for the first time, lovingly

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<sup>1</sup> See Stephen Heath's "God Faith and Film: *Breaking the Waves*" in *Literature & Theology* 12.1 (March 1998); Irena S. M. Makarushka's "Transgressing Goodness in *Breaking the Waves*" in *Journal of Religion and Film* 2.1 (April 1998); and Alyda Faber's "Redeeming Sexual Violence? A Feminist Reading of *Breaking the Waves*" in *Literature & Theology* 17.1 (March 2003).

touches her husband's penis (Johnson). In retrospect, the scene and the reaction it garnered were mere preludes to the waves von Trier would create.



## CHAPTER III: IDIOTIC IDEALISM?

All censorships exist to prevent anyone from challenging current conceptions and existing institutions. All progress is initiated by challenging current concepts, and executed by supplanting existing institutions. Consequently, the first condition of progress is the removal of censorships.

-George Bernard Shaw, "The Author's Apology,"

*Mrs. Warren's Profession*

While in pre-production on *Breaking the Waves*, von Trier marked the centenary of cinema with the creation of a new film wave. Billed as a "rescue action," Dogme95 was, from its inception, as much provocative artifice as aesthetic approach. After discussing previous film movements with historian Peter Schepelern, von Trier joined National Film School alumnus Thomas Vinterberg in authoring the "Dogme95 Manifesto" and accompanying "Vow of Chastity." At an international meeting of directors in Paris, where he was scheduled to participate in a discussion on the future of filmmaking, von Trier introduced Dogme by reading the manifesto, throwing printed copies of the philosophy and vows into the audience, and then disappearing. The manifesto declared former film waves failures, the auteur concept of filmmaking a falsity, and modern film an exercise in technological illusion. Having diagnosed cinema's ailments, Dogme's curative prescription (mostly proscriptive) was its

“Vow of Chastity,” ten quasi-religious tenants aimed at countering the hegemonic rules of commerce driven filmmaking and fostering individual innovation through constraint. The vows forbade, for instance, the use of sets, non-diegetic music, and special lighting, elements that facilitated the production of what the manifesto called “the film of illusion.” Not coincidentally, these elements also represented increased costs and, for most filmmakers, a concomitant inclusion of investors. Given that investors, whether state agencies or individual financiers, attach conditions to their financial support—location of filming, script approval, shooting schedules, etc.—these considerations often constrain a filmmaker’s artistic vision or completely prevent a film’s production.

The censorial effects of financial support, or lack thereof, had forced von Trier to abandon *The Grand Mal* and relinquish the rights to *Europa*, and similar funding issues prompted the creation of Dogme. Despite four years of maneuvering, funding for *Breaking the Waves* was still an issue in 1995, and von Trier, as he told Björkman, “was very tired of waiting for decisions about whether [he] could make the film” (202). Even in Denmark, which boasts a state-supported film industry, filmmakers without independent sources of financing face daunting obstacles. Financial support from the DFI offers artistic freedom, but filmmakers must first appease the DFI consultant, arbiter of a project’s artistic merit and administrator of the state’s limited funds. The DFI’s

refusal to fund a project can constitute a censorship of prior restraint, suppressing material before it even exists. Alternatively, as Hjort explains in *Small Nation, Global Cinema*, “prospective filmmakers [can] circumvent the gatekeepers” (13) by securing partial financing elsewhere and then collecting matching funds from the DFI; however, multi-source funding often comes at the expense of a single artistic vision resulting in what are censoriously termed Europudding films. Though von Trier’s reputation had made DFI funding almost perfunctory, the 42.6 million-kroner budget (7.5 million USD) of *Breaking the Waves* was proving difficult to assemble, and the directors frustrations motivated and shaped the Dogme95 manifesto.<sup>1</sup>

Though financial concerns were the instigating impetus behind Dogme, the philosophy was, in large part, a product of the Danish film industry—culturally and artistically. Denmark’s Jante tradition, a favored approach of the National Film School, resonated in the movement’s renunciation of the auteur concept and the vow’s prohibition against crediting directors. The radical introduction of Dogme, the militant rhetoric of the manifesto and vows, and the provocativeness of the inaugural films aligned the movement with earlier avant-garde film

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<sup>1</sup> On April 24, 1997, the *L.A. Times* reported that final funding for *Breaking the Waves* involved “more than twenty sources in five countries” (Baldwin).

waves, and like Italian neorealism and the French New Wave Dogme95 positioned itself as a rejection of mainstream commercial filmmaking.

Contemporary Danish cinema valued realist tendencies, and Dogme emerged as an aesthetic of cinematic realism, an aesthetic opposed to the “film of illusion” and guided by the “Vow of Chastity.” As Schepeleern detailed in “Film According to Dogma,”

The main purpose of the rules was to create a countermovement against (primarily American) mainstream film’s adoration of genre clichés and special effects as well as its tireless dance around the golden calf. The list of commandments was a jeering attack on the Hollywood mastodon a la David versus Goliath or, more accurately perhaps, the mouse and the elephant. (74)

In this respect, the movement was simultaneously a critique of and a foray into the globalization of cinema, offering an alternative to Hollywood’s global Americanization of film.

At least one journalist, as well as Aalbæk Jensen, declared the movement dead before the first Dogme film appeared while critics argued the merits and purpose of Dogme—practical joke, serious approach, or marketing ploy. Nonetheless, two disparate yet related developments emerged in the last decades of the twentieth century that helped propel Dogme95 from Danish obscurity to international prominence. First,

theoretical concepts of globalization as a melding of societies and cultures began materializing in the 1980s as what William Scheuerman described as “the growing dominance of western (or even American) forms of political, economic, and cultural life” made possible by “the proliferation of new information technologies,” namely the worldwide web and satellite television broadcasting. Concomitantly, concerns mounted that, rather than connecting diverse societies, globalization as it was taking form eroded national identities, replacing them with an homogenized American culture. The 1993 French-American film war epitomized these anxieties. During final negotiations of the General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade (GATT), the U.S. argued for the inclusion of all audio-visual products. If included in the international trade agreement, imported media would no longer be subject to quota restrictions and domestic audio-visual industries, including cinema, would no longer be eligible for state funding.<sup>2</sup> From the perspective of Europe’s many diverse, small-nation states, including Denmark, Hollywood’s global domination amounted to de facto censorship of national cinemas and, concomitantly, national cultures. American films

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<sup>2</sup> Kerry Seagrave offers a detailed accounting of the GATT negotiations and background in “Hollywood Dreams of Hollyworld: 1980-1995,” included in *American Films Abroad: Hollywood’s Domination of the World’s Movie Screens*, Jefferson, NC: McFarland, 1997.

command, according to Ib Bondebjerg, 70 to 80% of Europe's film market (57), leaving little room for domestically produced films, and achieving a "coca-colonization" of culture (61). Introducing the Changing Media—Changing Europe research project, Bondebjerg observed, "[Europeans] live in a local and national culture with global dimensions and we inhabit an American global culture as a natural part of our national and local culture" (55). Already dominating the European market, America's proposed free-trade protection appeared unnecessary and despotic.

The 1993 GATT negotiations also underscored the divergent assessments of cinema that Dogme overtly sought to address; whereas Hollywood views films as commodities, Europeans view films as artistic expressions of a society, its culture, and its people. Though fellow Dane Christian Braad Thomsen read Dogme as "an ironic comment on decades of state-supported, social realist Danish films that lack fantasy" (qtd. in Stevenson 73), von Trier located the movement's thesis across the Atlantic. "If you want to protest about something then the thing you're protesting about has to have a certain amount of authority," the director told Björkman. "If there's anything in the film world that has authority, it's the American film industry with all its money and incredible dominance on the global market" (202). Growing discontent with America's cultural intrusion suggested the need for a rebellion. As Carl

Bromley, editorial director of Nation Books, noted in his review of the France-America film war:

[I]n an environment where immediate commercial success is the sole criterion of judgment and where, as [Jean] Douchet puts it, in the name of competition “one must submit to the rules established by an enormous (commercial) machine designed to pulverize,” any attempt to impose contrary cinematic visions—whether auteurist, collective agent provocateurist, or even within the system—is more than just a necessary evil, it is an imperative.

Dogme95 arrived just in time to fulfill that imperative. In its rejection of commerce driven filmmaking in general and Hollywood cinema in particular, Dogme inverted many of the hegemonic rules of mainstream cinematic practice with a published rubric for capturing artistic authenticity.

In addition to growing concern that globalized free trade would eradicate national identities, Dogme also benefited from the “technological storm” that its manifesto had declared would be the “ultimate democratization of cinema.” Consumer-grade digital technology was exploding in the last decade of the twentieth century, and the burgeoning popularity and affordability of digital video cameras (DVC) helped carry Dogme across the globe. Ironically, utilizing DVC required a

loose interpretation or, as von Trier saw it, complete violation of the ninth vow of chastity: “The film format must be Academy 35mm.” The film stock commandment was intended, as the director revealed in a 1999 interview with Peter Rundle, to discourage the “trickery” condemned in the Dogme manifesto. “The problem with video,” explained von Trier, “is that it gives you a thousand possibilities not covered by the rules.” Nonetheless, the first two Dogme films, Vinterberg’s *The Celebration* (*Festen*, 1998) and von Trier’s *The Idiots* (*Idioterne*, 1998), were both shot using digital video. The decision to interpret the ninth vow as a “distribution” commandment rather than a creative restriction, what Elster terms a “choice of format” or self-imposed constraint (195), afforded far-reaching benefits, as von Trier later confessed:

Søren [Kragh-Jacobsen] made the smart move of interpreting the rule as referring to the *distribution* format.

[. . .] We agreed on that which, to be frank, has been hilarious and has given some radically different possibilities. Mainly it has made the process much cheaper, which of course also pleases me. And it has led to a trend where people around the world have started making these cheap, cheap Dogme films. They might not be completely according to the rules, but if it means that people who used to be limited by a notion of how a proper film should be, if those



people now feel that they can make film—then I find that has a certain quality to it. (qtd. in Rundle)

Egalitarian consequences notwithstanding, the perception of Dogme films as “cheap, cheap films” initially gave von Trier some misgivings. When Jytte Hilden, Danish culture minister, failed to deliver on her promise to support Dogme with 15 million kroner (\$2.8 mil.), instead earmarking the funds for “low-budget films” and funneling them to the DFI, von Trier decried both the breach and the associated characterization. “That Dogme films, in highest probability, can be produced cheaply has nothing to do with the original idea,” the director wrote to Hilden in 1996. “Dogme95 is an artistic concept, not an economic concept (qtd. in Stevenson 108-09).” Yet, as Shohini Chaudhuri observes, “one of Dogme95’s most valuable feats has been its legitimization of low-budget digital-video film-making” (155). Ultimately, technology provided the implement while Dogme provided the rules.

Between 1998 and 2002, 31 films from eleven countries earned Dogme certification. Though each film differs one from another, taken together, they suggest the efficacy of applying constraints to the process of filmmaking. In addition to inspiring multiple rule-based approaches to documentary filmmaking, including von Trier’s own *Dogumentary*, Dogme95 also prompted similar movements in other fields: literature (New Puritanism), pedagogy (Dogme English Language Teaching), as well

as computer gaming (Turku Dogma and Dogma 2001). While the director admitted to the Italian press in “A Web-Conversation with Lars von Trier” that he is most gratified that the movement brought filmmaking to people and countries where it had never before been a possibility, he steadfastly maintains that Dogme was personal, its philosophy his own, its rules written for him. The rules “came more as a reaction to my own work,” von Trier told author and fellow filmmaker Laurent Tirard (189). “It was a way to trigger myself into doing more challenging things. [...] I figured that by setting these rules, new experiences would come out, and that’s precisely what happened.”

#### *Dogme #2: The Idiots*

Having written manifestos for each of his Europa films, philosophizing on the current state of filmmaking was nothing new for von Trier; nor was his assessment. Each of the Europa manifestos had targeted artifice, the first likening the condition of film to a “marriage of convenience” and demanding that “we want more—of the real thing, fascination, experience—childish and pure, like all real art.” Likewise, Dogme attacked homogeneity and illusion, while advocating uniform simplicity. Most significantly, the movement embodied a fundamental characteristic of von Trier’s approach to filmmaking, the paradox of freedom through constraint. Dogme was a natural progression for the director, its vows a result of and catalyst for his artistic growth. Shifting

from the meticulous planning of the Europa trilogy to the unconfined filming of *The Kingdom* had forced von Trier to become more “intuitive” about his craft (Björkman 146), but he had not foresaken control, something he intended Dogme to address. “All of these rules are designed for me to relinquish control,” the director explained. “If you look at all the rules, they have been more or less constructed in a way so that I do not do what I have done for a long time” (qtd. in Schepeleern 77). Von Trier’s Dogme film, *The Idiots (Idioterne, 1998)* provided commentary on the movement as well as the urbanized, repressive society from which it was borne. While Dogme95 theorized that cinematic realism could be achieved by censoring technical manipulation, *The Idiots* posited that personal authenticity could be attained by rejecting socially prescribed standards of acceptable behavior (one might say “censored” behavior) by “performing” disability. In an audio journal recorded during production, the director described the film as “a sort of search for authenticity” (qtd. in van der Vliet).

*The Idiots* depicts a group of young, healthy, and apparently normal Danes living in a commune-like atmosphere while attempting to locate their “inner idiots” by feigning mental disability, described as “spassing.” Led by Stoffer (Jens Albinus), group members visit an upscale restaurant, public pool, and local bar, sell poorly made Christmas decorations door-to-door, and tour an insulation manufacturing facility

while “acting the idiot.” As the individual idiots act at freeing themselves from society’s unwritten rules of “civilized” conduct, the film confronts, ridicules, and transgresses both social and cinematic standards. The individual performances of idiocy “function on at least two levels,” notes Linda Badley:

As a carnivalesque reversal of bourgeois norms, [the performances] address issues of concern with resonance for Trier, who had grown up in Sollerød, and his mother’s work involved locating homes for the mentally disabled. On the psychological level, however, their performances challenge socialization itself. (*Lars von Trier* 60)

Prior to the start of shooting, von Trier argued against the larger implications: “This is an investigation in which we’re trying to find the value of [performing mental disability],” he insisted in Jesper Jørgil’s making-of documentary *The Humiliated* (*De ydmygede* 1998). “It’s not about acting up in relation to the rest of the world.” However, in roundtable discussions aimed at defining their characters, cast members repeatedly questioned this insular view. When Albinus asks why it is “of secondary importance that retarded people are a problem,” Knud Romer Jørgensen (Axel) underscores the connection and disjunction between individual idiocy and social mores. “They’re only a problem because of our morals,” Jørgensen asserts. “Our morals prohibit them in having a

sex life and say they're ugly. Aesthetics and morality are being questioned" (*Humiliated*).

Tension between authenticity and acceptability, between concerns of the individual and those of the society persist throughout *The Idiots*, with authenticity most often emerging when the disparate concerns collide. For example, von Trier's on-screen doppelgänger Stoffer, whom the director characterized in the DVD commentary of the film as the "philosopher" responsible for the idiot concept, acts as spokesperson, taskmaster, and judge of the idiot project, explaining (or refusing to explain) the group's ideas, assigning members to spass, and assessing the individual idiot performances. However, Stoffer is surprisingly acquiescent when his uncle Svend (Erik Wedersøe) visits to inquire about the sale of his property, which the idiots' leader is supposed to be caretaking. During what Emma van der Vliet describes as "a pantomime of well-behaved normalcy," Stoffer reveals himself to be a member and beneficiary of the bourgeois society that the idiots infiltrate with their spassing. Notified of his uncle's arrival Stoffer becomes disconcerted and anxiously asks Axel about those who greeted Svend. "Were they spassing?" he inquires anxiously. During their meeting, Svend makes demands and accusations while Stoffer remains deferential and accommodating, unwilling to risk his free housing (van der Vliet). The personification of normality, if only for the moment, Stoffer's behavior

during his uncle's visit reveals the malleability of the leader's commitment to the idiot philosophy. Ironically, it is Stoffer who later accuses the idiots of being apathetic and demands that individual members spass among their families and co-workers to prove their dedication. Although the unwillingness or inability of long-time members to meet the challenge suggests the idiot project has failed, the triumph of Karen (Bodil Jørgensen), a newcomer to the group through whose eyes we witness much of the action, affirms the underlying philosophy: authenticity through idiocy creates freedom.

While Stoffer acts as von Trier's double, the golden-hearted Karen, whom we later learn left home after the death of her child, performs as on-screen representative for the audience. She observes and questions the group as well as their philosophy. Having met the idiots *in medias* spass at an elegant restaurant, Karen is taken in by the performance and, quite literally, by the group. At first she finds their behavior, motivation, and morals dubious, asking Stoffer, "How can you justify acting the idiot?" The response, "You can't," provides little insight for the casual film viewer but is significant as regards von Trier's approach to *The Idiots*. Artless as the statement appears, it derived from 27 failed attempts to capture the idiot philosophy on film, a roundtable discussion with the cast, at least one complete re-write of the scene, and a change of setting. As von Trier explained, "we decided to turn the situation around

. . . the film becomes our argument” (*Humiliated*). Although Karen remains somewhat detached from the group, abstaining from the orgy and absented from interview scenes, she slowly accepts the argument, taking up Stoffer’s challenge and returning home to spass among her family.

The final scene of Karen’s spassing in an environment teeming with tension validates the idiot philosophy but undermines Dogme and von Trier’s pursuit of innovative filmmaking. As revealed in *The Humiliated*, where he had previously followed the action with his camera, the director planned every aspect of the final scene, relying on rehearsals, blocking, and multiple angles to capture “what the whole film is really about.” As Karen and Susanne enter the apartment, for example, reverse angles allow views to both follow and receive the pair into the home. Likewise, careful planning and camera positioning enable von Trier to capture Karen’s husband jumping from his chair and slapping his wife. Despite, or perhaps because of, the conventional techniques, the final scene vividly portrays the collision of emotional freedom and behavioral repression at the center of the film.

Tensions between these two extremes, between authentic behavior (or spassing) and acceptable conduct (or restrained comportment) extended beyond the characters to the actors playing them as well. When, for example, the cast met the reality of mental disability in a visit

from four individuals with Down syndrome, the actors found themselves unable to remain in character. The visitors, arriving at the commune/set for a picnic, introduced themselves with smiles and handshakes, prompting the actors to respond in-kind and out of character. Nikolaj Lie Kaas (Jeppe) explained the transforming power of the interaction:

You simply forgot to stay in character. Suddenly, you couldn't see the project as something fantastic or interesting. Or even as a film. It was uncomfortable, and I guess necessary, too. It didn't feel good. You felt like a complete idiot. You really felt that what we were doing was bungling and lying. ("*The Idiots in Retrospect*")

Imposing a self-censorship aimed, according to Kaas, at avoiding offense, the actors reverted to their socialized selves, giving their real names and fidgeting uncomfortably. In addition to illustrating the tensions between the idiots' "authentic" behavior and society's acceptable conduct, the reactions offer substantial credence to Simons's assessment of spassing as a game ("*Von Trier's Cinematic Games*" 5). However, while the interpretation may be accurate of the film's characters, it extends neither to the actors who play them nor, as Simons contends, to the filmmaker.

The "search for authenticity" applies equally, albeit paradoxically, to von Trier's approach to *The Idiots*. Digital technology and the third vow of Dogme, "shooting must take place where the film takes place," offered



the director freedom and opportunities for innovation. Using a handheld digital camera, he handled the majority of the cinematography himself, and unlike his early films where every shot had been meticulously storyboarded, filming was less deliberate. "I never spent time thinking how I was going to shoot it until I was actually doing it," von Trier recalled (qtd. in Tirard 188). "I never planned anything, I was just there, and I filmed what I was seeing." The lack of planning notwithstanding, the cinematography was as calculating as his earlier works had been controlled.

Von Trier employed myriad techniques meant to foster authenticity in the cast's performances. Copious improvisation and long takes, some lasting fifty minutes and encompassing multiple scenes, supported the actors immersing themselves in their roles. "I wanted the pressure of the filming situation to disappear by doing these long takes," the director explains in "*The Idiots* in Retrospect." As von Trier recalls, "You just got used to it so you could set other energies free. You could disregard the camera." However, Kaas remembers that the long takes also meant remaining in character at all times even when not included in a scripted scene. Because the camera followed the action, actors could never be certain that a scene being filmed elsewhere would not suddenly move into a room where they were taking a break. The stress of being constantly "in character" was aggravated by von Trier's directorial

method, which often consisted of probing his cast for authenticity with therapy-like questions about their memories, emotions, and motivations.

Although cast members opted to forego living in the villa where shooting took place, refusing to live the communal life von Trier had hoped for, the filming experience, like the director's moods, frequently mirrored the on-screen experiment and vice versa. When cast members stripped off their clothing on film, the director and assistant director of photography Kristoffer Nyholm did likewise behind the camera. The roundtable discussions where the cast discussed their characters' identities and the idiot philosophy paralleled the idiots' repeated meetings and group dialogues. Comparable to von Trier's assessments of actor performances, Stoffer judged the idiots' spassing, and both exhorted their group toward more authentic portrayals.

*The Idiots* exemplified Dogme's spirit even as it challenged the movement's philosophy and broke (or severely sprained) several of its vows. Though not specifically addressed by the "Vows of Chastity," the director required that the cast "improvise costumes, makeup, movements, and even lines" (Badley 56). The hand-held digital camera, whether a violation or loose interpretation of Dogme's ninth vow, produced shaky and at times unfocused images but enabled the cinematographer—most often von Trier—to follow (or stalk) the largely improvised action. Forbidden by the "Vow of Chastity," the film lacks

artificial lighting and a non-diegetic soundtrack. These elements or their absence, as with the lighting and sound, combine to create a film stylistically akin to a documentary, an affiliation heightened by *The Idiots*' "leftist social experiment" subject matter (Badley 58). However, the most obvious documentary film element, a series of interviews conducted by an off-screen von Trier, annuls the impression of a depicted "reality" while simultaneously prohibiting a purely fictional reading. In "Lars von Trier: Sentimental Surrealist," Murray Smith attempts to account for this paradoxical effect:

[T]hese sequences compound the self-consciousness of the film's narration, foregrounding its ability to move between different modes of address, and stressing the different conventions of the documentary interview on the one hand, and the improvised dramatic feature film on the other. (114)

Through repeated intrusions, the interviews prohibit passive viewing. However, the interviews with the actors/idiots (it is never clear which) provide no definitive answers to the questions posed—in the interrogations or the film—thus undermining the authenticity of the "reality" depicted. Ultimately, the technique may be Dogme, and von Trier, personified.

The director's obsession with authenticity was manifested in scenes depicting the idiots in the nude and in various stages of sexual

excitement. Von Trier theorized that “you can keep control of your face; you know which side is best and which angle is most flattering. But you don’t have the same control with tits and willies” (Björkman 216). As, for example, when Stoffer develops an erection as Susanne (Anne Louise Hassing) bathes him at the pool. Billed by some as “mainstream pornography,” the film also included twenty seconds of close-up sexual penetration, which incited controversy and censorship in varying degrees, from Ireland where the film was banned outright to Canada and New Zealand where the film was approved as an “adults only” release. Few were surprised by the responses, least of all von Trier. On the eve of *The Idiots*’ Cannes premier, the director had mischievously boasted:

I can promise male frontal nudity, and that will probably not be approved in America. Of course you could place a black rectangle in front of the guy, but then the question is whether it should go horizontally or vertically. But *The Idiots* is not an erotic film at all. (Iversen 127)

The BBFC agreed, approving the film for general release without cuts or other alterations. However, the board’s explanation of the rating decision, penned by BBFC president Andreas Whittam Smith, subtly suggested that nudity and sex were permissible only if portrayed as having negative consequences. The board members, wrote Smith, “considered the view of real sex and group sex to be so brief and so crucial to the story—because

after that the group breaks up—that it was OK” (qtd. in Pendreigh). Likewise, von Trier’s prediction about America proved accurate. Although *The Idiots* was released with the predicted black boxes superimposed over offending appendages, USA Films battled the MPAA for two years. To avoid an NC-17 (adults only) rating, the distribution company added black boxes and cut some scenes, and an R-rated version of *Dogme #2* opened in limited U.S.-release in April 2000. *New York Times* film critic A.O. Scott marked the occasion by declaring the “semi-pornographic” film and the censorship of it “contemptible”:

The point is not that American audiences need to see genitals, but that they deserve to see movies as filmmakers intended. It’s hard to say what’s more idiotic: a director who treats his audience like uptight prigs in need of a gratuitous shock, or an industry organization that treats filmgoers like children. (Scott)

Perhaps just as contemptible was the decision by USA Films to continue the censorship in their video release of *The Idiots*. Citing “no consumer interest in an unrated version,” the distributor maintained the black boxes and declined to restore the deleted scenes (Nichols).

More surprising were the criticisms against *The Idiots*’ depiction of disability. Dubin posits that “the arts have provided an extremely important means for expressing the collective identity of [marginalized]

groups” (2), and *The Idiots* is arguably an entrance to that expression. However, as *Guardian* writer Simon Hattenstone detailed, many critics in attendance at the Cannes premiere “found the film’s subject matter even more offensive than its bristling erections.” Alexander Walker, film critic for the *Evening Standard*, described it as “a grotesque offence against the human condition” (qtd. in Hattenstone). Most vocal in his abhorrence was Mark Kermode of *The Observer* who responded to the film with repeated shouts of “Il est merde!”

Protestations notwithstanding, art, as Dubin asserts and history attests, becomes more or less subversive as time passes and societies change; such was the case for *The Idiots*. Just four months after Hattenstone explained to *Guardian* readers that the film contained content that “makes it illegal for it to be shown uncensored at cinemas in this country,” Brian Pendreigh, writing for the same publication, bemoaned the BBFC’s decision to allow the film to screen uncut in local theaters. The film also aired uncut on British television in 2005, prompting seven complaints to the country’s independent broadcast regulator, Ofcom, which ultimately ruled that broadcast of the film violated no laws.<sup>3</sup> In 2009, *The Times* named *Dogme #2* one of “The Top

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<sup>3</sup>As a point of comparison, *Jamie’s School Dinners*, a four-part documentary about the nutritional inadequacies of school lunches aired

Ten Most Offensive Movies,” and in 2010, *Empire* magazine, also published in Britain, included it in “The 100 Best Films of World Cinema.” Perhaps most significant, *The Idiots* is now included in the Danish Ministry of Culture’s “canon” of twelve “great Danish films” (O’Hagan).

Von Trier finalized his Gold Heart Trilogy with the 2000 release of *Dancer in the Dark*, a melodramatic musical set in Washington state during the 1960s. Starring Icelandic music sensation Björk as Selma Jezkova, a Czechoslovakian immigrant racing against time and imminent blindness to earn enough money for an operation that will save her son from the same fate, the film alternated bleak, grainy scenes of realistic hardship with bright, colorful outbursts of fantasized musical numbers. The main conflict, however, was not Selma’s personal plight but her victimization at the hands of her landlord Bill Houston (David Morse). Overwhelmed by debt, police officer Houston steals the savings Selma has amassed and when confronted drives her to murder, an act which she refuses to defend and for which she is tried and executed. As Stevenson described it, “The film itself was a contradiction in terms: a social-realistic musical” (149). Intended on one level as an homage to the Hollywood musical, *Dancer in the Dark* offered a clear denunciation of

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during the same period on the same channel and provoked 36 complaints for offensive language.

America's justice system and subtle commentary on the plight of its immigrants. Defying the most familiar genre conventions, which Elster maintains are correlated to the "expectations of other artists or the public" (197), von Trier had eschewed the merriment and superficiality of the traditional musical in favor of cultural critique. The film, as Badley asserts, contrasted America's "Technicolor dreams" with a culture in which foreigners "are treated with a superficial generosity that masks condescension and xenophobia" (93).

*Dancer in the Dark* premiered at Cannes amid raging controversy. The director had referred to his leading lady as a "nut" and described working with her as "terrible" (Knight). Björk had been so traumatized by the experience that she reportedly "'ate' her costume in a fit of rage, and enhanced [von] Trier's reputation as a misogynist who enjoyed making actresses suffer—this time to the point of foaming hysteria" (Badley 86). Björk skipped the preliminary media events at Cannes including the obligatory press conference, and during the waning days of the festival, the animosity between director and star was still palpable. Disputes among viewers were also evident. During the press screening, hisses, boos, and "squabbling" erupted, but the film also received a standing ovation (Stevenson 151). Despite, or perhaps because of, the division, von Trier's final Gold Heart installment earned the coveted Palme d'Or., and Björk took home Cannes' Best Actress award. Nevertheless, *Dancer*



*in the Dark* continued to divide audiences. The film was popular with audiences in France and Japan, but some British theaters offered viewers a refund “if they walked out in the first half-hour” (Stevenson 162). In Australia, *The Movie Show* reviewers Margaret Pomeranz and David Stratton disagree on the quality of the work with the former giving von Trier’s film the highest five-star rating and the latter refusing to concede even one star. America’s *Entertainment Weekly* critics Lisa Schwarzbaum and Owen Gleiberman were equally at odds. “In the final analysis,” Stevenson conjectured, “*Dancer in the Dark* might well be the most polarising film ever made” (163).

Von Trier, meanwhile, had noted a similarity in many American reviews, both positive and negative. *The New Yorker* critic Anthony Lane, who urged readers to see *Dancer in the Dark* “even if you quit before the end,” pronounced the film “a godsend to those of us who pray for divisive works of art, and who would support any federal measure that introduced legalized scuffling in cinemas.” He also located a peculiar “madness” in the film:

[I]t was shot in Sweden (with his fear of flying, Von Trier has never visited America, and has no plans to do so), and, with its polyglot cast and nameless setting, it feels like an immigrant’s haunted myth of the United States.

Andrew Sarris, who experienced the film as “incoherent babble,” described the setting as “a factory in the middle of nowhere, or actually Norway, which doubles for Washington in Mr. von Trier’s take on Franz Kafka’s *Amerika* .” With uncharacteristic sarcasm, Sarris added, “Like Kafka, Mr. von Trier has never been to America, ostensibly because he doesn’t fly.”

These repeated allusions to his lack of first-hand knowledge about the U.S. provoked the filmmaker, first to comment and then to action. In a 2001 interview with *Film Factory* editor Marit Kapla, von Trier explained the motivation behind his latest project:

I was very provoked by lots of American journalists in Cannes. They were angry because I’d made a film about the U.S.A. [*Dancer in the Dark*] although I hadn’t been there. So I thought: that’s fine . . . at last . . . now I’m going to make lots of American films. I also thought that it might be interesting for the Americans, and others, to find out how someone who’s never been there sees America. . . . it’s interesting to have one’s country illuminated. (208)

Conceived in response to this peculiarly American yet prevalent form of de facto censorship, the filmmaker had embarked on his USA: Land of Opportunities trilogy.

#### CHAPTER IV: THE TRUTH HURTS

The artist's job is not to reject the society, but to engage it.

-Peter Sellars, Stanford University

What's important to me with a film is that you use  
impeccable technique to tell people a story they don't want to  
be told. This is in my opinion the definition of true art.

-Lars von Trier, 1982

In addition to illuminating America, von Trier embarked on creating a new style with the USA trilogy. As Dogme had required that directors abstain from conventional filmmaking practices in order to rediscover the artistry and power of cinema, the Land of Opportunity films would eschew many time-honored cinematic devices in order to foster more attentive and thoughtful viewing. Fusing elements of literature and theater with film, the director sought not to create a fantasy world into which viewers could escape but to suggest a reality that viewers could develop within themselves. Continuity would result from audience deliberation rather than post-production editing. Locations would be outlined and suggested rather than shown, and the use of elaborate scenery, props, and set decorations would be curtailed or abandoned in preference to a minimalism reminiscent of Brechtian theater. Most significantly, this fusion would be in service to political and

social critique, invite detached deliberation, sustain multiple interpretations, and inculcate all.

The first of von Trier's illuminations of America premiered in 2003. *Dogville* followed the exploits (or, more accurately, exploitations) of Grace Mulligan (Nicole Kidman), a stranger seeking refuge in a fictionalized 1930s Colorado mining town. *Dogville's* Rocky Mountain setting, however, was in some respects a narrative element rather than one of location. Originally envisaging a "conventionally formed film" (Björkman 245), von Trier opted to film in a Trollhätten, Sweden airplane hangar on an expansive soundstage built to his specifications. Thick white lines on the black-carpeted stage deck map out and name the streets, and buildings are defined not by manufactured or recreated facades with which viewers are familiar but with painted labels, e.g. "THE MILL," and a few well-chosen props placed on-stage or suspended from the fly loft. Window frames stand in non-existent walls. Doorframes exist, but there are no doors. In the absence of operative props, foley-created sound effects accompany pantomimed action. For von Trier, these aesthetic choices were deliberate. The director described one of his constraints to *MovieMaker Magazine*:

One of the rules we had was that whatever prop would be there would be something that, at one point in the film, was needed. If you look at the props in the film, you will know

that, at a certain point, they will be used for something.

(Crawford)

The nakedness of the stage and diligent application of “Chekhov’s gun” theory also had a purpose. “The idea, von Trier explained to Marit Kapla, “is that the town should take form in the audience’s imagination” (207).

Bo Fibiger, writing in *P.O.V. Filmtidsskrift: A Danish Journal of Film Studies*, confirmed the efficacy of the film’s austerity, finding in *Dogville* a universally recognizable society:

The minimalist scenography [. . .] offers ample opportunity for the story to travel into the mind of the spectator. Thus we are very much interpreters, and this contributes to giving the statement of the film a more universal dimension: *Dogville* is not just a place in the United States, it is also Rønne or Høje Gladsaxe or any other suburban town that we carry with us in our minds. (58-59)

This “minimal scenography” also creates an incriminating openness.

There is no evil lurking around the corner or down a dark alley, for in *Dogville*, hidden and private spaces are nonexistent. However, evil does lurk in the hearts and minds of *Dogville*’s citizenry and, by extension, in inhabitants of the analogous “universal” society.

Inspired by the 1928 song “Pirate Jenny” (“*Seeräuberjenny*”), written by Brecht and scored by Kurt Weill for *The Threepenny Opera*

(*Die Dreigroschenoper*), *Dogville* is a three-hour tale of exclusion, betrayal, and revenge. Consequently, it is also one of von Trier's most character driven works. Told, according to the opening text, "in nine chapters and a Prologue," the film focuses on Grace but is more about the townspeople than the fugitive. Fleeing from gangsters, Grace is presented as both observer and recipient of the community's actions. With the encouragement of Tom Edison, Jr. (Paul Bettany), the town's self-appointed intellectual moralist who exploits Grace to illustrate a lesson on acceptance, Dogvillians agree to provide the fugitive with sanctuary, albeit with increasingly ruthless strings attached. Residents, motivated by the opportunity to prove Tom wrong, grudgingly allow Grace to help with chores around town. After a two-week trial period, the fugitive is welcomed to remain in Dogville and begins to receive small wages for her work. Still, when the law posts a wanted notice at the mission hall, the townspeople, according to Tom, perceive an increased risk to themselves. Despite knowing that Grace could not have committed the crimes described in the posters Dogvillians fear they might themselves be committing a crime by not reporting the fugitive's whereabouts. To calm the community's moral apprehensions, Tom applies a bit of capitalistic logic. "From a business perspective," he explains to Grace, "your presence in Dogville has become more costly. Because it's more dangerous, [ . . . ] there should be some counterbalance, some quid pro

quo.” With nowhere else to hide, Grace agrees to increase her workload and decrease her wages, the latter concession having been described by Tom as “merely a symbolic gesture.”

The narrator (John Hurt), whose frequent interruptions merge the objectivity of Brecht’s epic theater with the insight of literary omniscience, informs viewers that, conversationally, everyone opposed “any changes to Grace’s working conditions.” Verbal opposition notwithstanding, viewers witness the increased demands on the fugitive’s time and labor. Concomitantly, the town begins to view Grace differently. They find flaws with her job performance and intimate that, as an outsider, certain liberties such as walking the path between Ma Ginger’s gooseberry bushes are not hers to take. As Ma Ginger (Lauren Bacall) explains, “They have been living here for years. You haven’t been here that long.” Like the ill-treated maidservant in “Pirate Jenny,” Grace suffers the residents’ increasing contempt and exploitation without much complaint. Perhaps the worst of this exploitation comes at the hands of Chuck (Stellan Skarsgård), who repeatedly forces himself on Grace, but she tells only Tom and begs him to keep it to himself. Nonetheless, when Chuck’s wife Vera (Patricia Clarkson) finds out about the indiscretions, her reaction proves more painful for Grace than the sexual abuse. Vowing to teach the fugitive “a lesson,” Vera smashes Grace’s only possessions, seven porcelain figurines purchased with wages earned

while in Dogville. Forced to witness the destruction and offered a partial reprieve (only two figures will be sacrificed if she can “demonstrate [her] knowledge of the doctrine of stoicism by holding back [her] tears”), Grace openly weeps at the loss. Afterwards, Grace determines to leave Dogville and once again turns to Tom. He devises a plan and provides the money, stolen from his father, to have Ben (Zelko Ivanec) smuggle Grace out of town when the apple harvest is transported to market. When Ben rapes and then returns her Dogville, Tom directs suspicion for his theft towards Grace, and the citizenry moves to “protect” themselves by fastening an iron collar around her neck and attaching it with a heavy chain to a large flywheel which she must drag behind her from task to task. Grace has been transformed from fugitive seeking sanctuary to slave detained against her will. She has become a detestable drudge to the females, a captive concubine to the males.

The change in working conditions, open rebukes, and physical and emotional abuses provide tangible evidence of Dogville's altered view of Grace, but the subtle transformation is also visible in long shots of the stage. Where filming on *The Idiots* followed the action, which meant that actors were often drawn into a scene without warning, von Trier required that all fifteen members of the *Dogville* cast remain on-stage and in character whenever the camera rolled. The panoptic mise-en-scène presents normal people living ordinary lives, but as oppression becomes



the norm, the town's normality becomes oppressive, for Grace and the audience. Extended close-ups of the woman's face during scenes of debasement compel viewers to share her pain. Taken separately, the dissimilar compositions of all-encompassing normality or intimate degradation stimulate identification with or empathy for the characters, but von Trier cross-cuts these contrasting mise-en-scènes together, creating the alienation effect (*Verfremdungseffekt*) of which Brecht theorized. "The point of this 'effect,'" wrote Brecht, "is to allow the spectator to criticize constructively from a social point of view" (125). Spectators repeatedly pulled from the precipice of subconscious escape or emotional identification with Grace are essentially alienated from the socially constructed (in Hollywood) viewing habits with which all moviegoers are familiar. Richard Alleva, film critic for *Commonweal*, described the effect:

To balance the bareness of the setting, the director keeps his camera so close to faces for such long periods of time that we often forget we're watching a setless movie. [...] our subconscious starts to fill in the natural backgrounds that don't exist, and we come close to believing that these dialogues are being spoken in real kitchens, gardens, orchards, and countryside. Then, just as we are immersed in the realism we've conjured for ourselves, bang! Von Trier

jerks the camera back into a long shot, and we see, once again, nothing but actors on a bare stage. (20)

The result constrains and frees the viewer, hindering an emotional connection while inviting conscious consideration of various social issues. As Brecht noted, “true” alienation effects are “of a combative character” (277). This becomes most apparent in *Dogville*’s conclusion as residents and audiences are indicted for their exploitive natures.

Grace’s redemption and Dogville’s damnation arrive via a final scene more reminiscent of a Hollywood blockbuster than avant-garde theatre. Although he expresses a love for Grace, Tom continues his exploitation of her until the end when, fearing for his future and that of his “moral mission,” he summons the gangsters to collect their fugitive. Unfortunately for Dogville, Grace is the daughter of The Big Man (James Caan), leader of the mob. Pushing his child to rejoin the family, Grace’s father delineates the “arrogance” of her thinking: assuming others incapable of “ethical standards” equal to her own, forgiving an evil nature rather than teaching integrity, and failing to hold people accountable for their actions. In many ways, the philosophy espoused by the gangster parallels that which von Trier applies to his filmmaking: imposing constraints and dispensing censures has beneficial results. As Grace surveys Dogville, the narrator explicates her dilemma:

If she had acted like them, she could not have defended a single one of her actions and could not have condemned them harshly enough. [. . .]

No, what they had done was not good enough.

And if one had the power to put it to rights, it was one's duty to do so, for the sake of the other towns. For the sake of humanity, and not least, for the sake of the human being that was Grace herself.

With a desire to make the world a "little better" and the belief that it would be better without Dogville, Grace delivers the vengeance of which the maidservant in "Pirate Jenny" sings. Her father gives the order and machine gun fire erupts. As the town is set ablaze, Grace shows herself equal to Dogville's malice. After ordering that Vera be forced to watch the killing of her children and offered the chance to save them by not crying, Grace kills Tom herself. The only Dogville inhabitant spared is Moses, the town's lone canine who materializes from a chalk outline labeled "DOG" and heralds the conflagration with his barking.

*Dogville* immediately became the favorite to win the Palme d'Or and divided critics, mostly along geographic borders. British film critic James Christopher mused that "Dogville is hell, and it looks suspiciously American" but, citing the "huge ovation and ringing cheers at the end of the film," predicted "big prizes" for von Trier and company. Although the

final scene would inspire similar reactions at the 2004 Sundance Film Festival, U.S. critics at Cannes viewed the film as “sanctimoniously anti-American” (Howe). The most vehement of von Trier’s detractors, Todd McCarthy, accused the director of dispensing his own “death penalty” with an “ideologically apocalyptic blast at American values” and predicted the film would find favor only among the “Blame America First crowd.” In the aftermath of an unsanctioned, U.S. led invasion of Iraq, political animosities between America and France—who had formally opposed a U.N. resolution of war—flourished, and many cited these tensions for the critical divide. However, the eventual Palme d’Or winner *Elephant*, American director Gus Van Sant’s U.S. produced minimalist take on the 1999 Columbine massacre, also incited accusations of anti-Americanism, as did Denys Arcand’s Canadian-French co-production *The Barbarian Invasions* which earned best actress and best screenplay awards.

What differentiated *Dogville* from other “anti-American films of the period was the timeless relevance of von Trier’s cinematic censure, a relevance that crossed national borders but repeatedly echoed American rhetoric, both historical and contemporary. As early as 2001, the director linked the narrative of his film to Danish politics, specifically the long-standing debate and recent tightening of immigration policy in Denmark:

I never thought the film would be a contribution to the immigration debate, but many parallels may be drawn. [. . .]

I think it's shameful, especially as we are one of the richest countries in the world. It is contemptible. The liberalism that [Danes] are all so proud of is based on the freedom to move to where the opportunities exist. When the poor people of the world see how we live, it's hardly surprising that they try to get here, it's only human nature. (Kapla 209).

The director's point regarding parallels to Denmark is as valid as it is specific. However, as Amsterdamian critic Sven Lütticken noted, "the drama of Grace's asylum in *Dogville* has obvious contemporary resonances in the EU no less than the US" (64). The film sustains multiple readings. *Dogville* examines the place of the outsider in society, juxtaposes contradictory Christian tenets of grace and forgiveness with those of judgment and retribution, and presents, as Adam Nayman described it, "a misogynist screed and a satire of same" (94).

Furthermore, the film situates its central conflict in a classical theme of good versus evil; consequently, universal applicability follows unbidden.

Still, von Trier, by his own (often self-contradictory) admission, intended *Dogville* as an observation of America. Explaining his choice of British actor John Hurt, whom David Edelstein described in "Welcome to

the Dollhouse” as a “fairy-tale English narrator [. . .] whose voice drips with condescension,” the director professed, “I don’t want to hide the fact that the USA is being observed from the outside in this film” (qtd. in Björkman 254). Additionally, while decrying accusations of anti-Americanism, the director actively worked to enhance the perception that the societal ills depicted were red, white, and blue Americanism.

In addition to publicizing the “How dare you?” motivation for his *Land of Opportunities* trilogy, von Trier anticipated and baited American critics before premiering the film. In a lengthy pre-release interview for Denmark’s *Film* magazine, the director told Jacob Neiiendaman, “all my life, I have been critical of the American society—the way it looks from my perspective” (6). Talking with *The Guardian*’s Fiachra Gibbons just days before the Cannes premier, von Trier mused, “I don’t believe that American society is very nice to people who don’t have much—to put it nicely.” More extensive, however, was the director’s “Interview,” published in the *Dogville* press book and made available to all 1,300 Cannes journalists:

*Dogville* takes place in America but it’s only America as seen from my point of view. I haven’t restricted myself in the sense that I said, ‘Now I have to research this and this and this’. [. . .] Yes, it’s about the United States but it’s also about any small town anywhere in the world.

[. . .] I learned when I was very small that if you are strong, you also have to be just and good, and that's not something you see in America at all. I like the individual Americans I know very much, but this is more of an image of a country I do not know but that I have a feeling about. I don't think that Americans are more evil than others but then again, I don't see them as less evil than the bandit states Mr. Bush has been talking so much about. I think that people are more or less the same everywhere. What can I say about America? Power corrupts. And that's a fact. (13-14)

Having primed press expectations for a negative portrayal of America, von Trier made an additional move guaranteed to infuriate "freedom for all" sensibilities: the director, as *Newsweek* reported, "refused to show the film early to American buyers, allowing only a few French critics into the screening room" (Thomas). While some interpreted the move as a promotional maneuver, most festival attendees perceived a clear message in the director's provocation: the parable of *Dogville's* universal allegory was aimed directly at the U.S.

Had anyone missed the point, von Trier offered illumination with the film's closing credits. As an overhead shot captures the town mutt Moses materializing from chalk, the final scene fades to black. The

barking of the dog recedes, replaced by David Bowie's 1975 title track "Young Americans," and the darkened screen yields to a montage of Depression Era, black and white photos of deprivation mixed with contemporary color pictures of discrimination and protestation. Stuart Klawans, reviewer for *The Nation*, revealed the powerful effect of the credits sequence:

The movie breaks the usual pattern only in having a bang-bang denouement; someone must always play the victim in a von Trier production, but this time there's a last minute change in cast.

I don't deny that von Trier has talent. He kept me staring in fascination at the story he was unfolding. [. . .] But then came the closing horse laugh. (36)

Describing the montage photographs as "irreplaceable documents of human suffering and resistance" (36), Klawans concluded by advising his readers, "Lars von Trier despises you. Despise him back." Ironically, the critic's advice mirrored the give-what-you-get argument presented to Grace by her father: "The penalty you deserve for your transgressions, they deserve for their transgressions." Equally noteworthy, is the critic's admission that he found *Dogville* "fascinating" until the credit sequence, until the message of the film was unquestionably aimed at America and, thereby, Klawans. Edelstein, too, found the credit montage disquieting,



noting that with this sequence the director “really gives us Yanks the big middle finger” and admitting, “That was when I gave the movie the finger right back.”

Many American critics, like Klawans, inadvertently substantiated the arguments they censured von Trier for making. Consider, for example, David Denby, who apparently overlooked the incompatibility of innocence with savagery and wailfully described *Dogville* as “an attack on America—its innocence, its conformity, its savagery.” Similarly, McCarthy’s representation of von Trier’s initial inspiration for making *Dogville* highlights the very insult with which the critic takes issue. What the director described as criticism “for making a film about the USA without ever having been there” McCarthy interpreted as criticism of the director’s “audacity in making the U.S.-set *Dancer in the Dark* without ever having visited the country.” The difference is subtle but revealing. The earlier criticism, as von Trier accurately reflects, targeted his violation of the tacit rule against non-Americans making films critical of the U.S. McCarthy, however, redefines the offense as von Trier’s “audacity,” a lack of respect proven by the filmmaking itself. Countless American journalists followed suit, acknowledging and thus legitimizing

American (or Hollywood) hegemonies while concomitantly minimizing the inherent insolence of such political and cultural values.<sup>1</sup>

These hegemonies, as well as the criticisms grounded in them, represent a form of de facto censorship. Reading *Dogville* as “a critique of capitalist exploitation,” Todd Ramlow found this enigmatic understanding and application of rules, particularly revealing:

[The] accusation that the film is ‘anti-American’ says less about von Trier than it does about the American psyche. In fact, it demonstrates precisely what Alexis de Tocqueville identified back in 1835, in *Democracy of America*, as the ‘irritable patriotism of Americans.’ ‘We’ are happy to tell anyone and everyone, over and over, of the nation’s greatness, and expect (demand) that they agree with us. But heaven forbid anyone utter the least critical remark about America, or not uphold our own opinion with enough verve;

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<sup>1</sup> These hegemonies extend beyond film as an August 2011 CBS Radio review of “Young Americans” illustrates. The reviewer, identified as “The Archivist,” advised readers, “You can add David Bowie to the rather lengthy list of non-American musicians who compose lyrics going on about all that’s wrong with the U.S. then proceed to set them to music that borrow heavily from American musical stylings.”

we'll bully, berate, and cajole until 'agreement' is met or belittle and scorn if not.

Von Trier refused "agreement" and answered "scorn" with history. Asserting in *Dogville's* press book, "I am better informed about the USA than the people who made *Casablanca* were about Casablanca," the director anticipated and confronted America's primary cinematic hegemony. When journalists at the official press meeting in Cannes took issue with his perceptions, he pointed to the media-perpetuated globalization of American popular culture and retorted, "I've never been to America, so if the picture I gave of America is not truthful, it's not my fault. It's just a mirror; this is the way America portrays itself to me" ("Pressconference Cannes").

Just as nations, artists, and critics change the rules or their application to achieve and maintain power, *Dogville* and its characters repeatedly change the rules to achieve and maintain power. "Artists, critics, and audiences view conventions as normatively compelling," theorizes Elster. "They embody the right way of doing things. The unities of time, space, and action, for instance, are seen as natural constraints" (198). With *Dogville*, von Trier challenged the conventions of cinema, fusing film with theatre and literature and replacing the realism of Dogme with the minimalism of Brecht to illustrate that something is

awry, in society generally and America specifically. The success, or failure, of his endeavor was not immediately calculable.

Neither von Trier nor *Dogville*, the odds on favorite for the 2003 Palme d'Or, garnered formal recognition at Cannes, but appreciation did materialize.<sup>2</sup> In the two years following its French debut, *Dogville* was named Best Foreign Film in Brazil, Spain, Germany, and Russia, and it earned various European awards for its screenwriting, cinematography, acting (Kidman), and directing. Although the first Land of Opportunities installment faced none of the prior restraint censorship that had plagued *The Idiots*, Zentropa did anticipate criticisms regarding the film's length and offered two versions of the work, the full-length original running almost three hours and an abridged two-hour version. Prior to the film's opening in Britain, distributor Icon Films screened the shorter rendering for press critics who had viewed the original at Cannes. "The consensus," according to Ryan Gilbey of *The Observer*, "was that the picture had lost quality as well as quantity." Consequently, the film was released in its original three-hour form in the U.K. and most European markets except

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<sup>2</sup> On May 23, 2003, an international jury at Cannes, citing his "contribution [as] vital to the film's impact," honored Moses with the Palm Dog award. It is unclear whether the unanimous decision was meant to honor the chalk outline, the barking that heralds the arrival of Grace, or the uncredited canine that materializes in the final scene.

Italy. Likewise, in America, Lions Gate released *Dogville* in its entirety, albeit to fewer than a hundred theaters. Extremely limited release notwithstanding, U.S. sales accounted for almost 10% of the film's \$16.5 million gross, on par with von Trier's top-grossing *Dancer in the Dark* which generated 10.5% of its earnings from American viewers.

In addition to the dozen awards it earned throughout Europe, *Dogville*, along with *Dancer in the Dark*, was cited by the GhandiServe Foundation as indicative of von Trier's dedication to "fostering understanding among nations" and worthy of the Diamond Cinema for Peace Award presented at the Cinema for Peace Gala during the 2004 Berlin International Film Festival. Although he skipped the ceremony, the director forwarded a videotaped acceptance speech to organizers (appendix A). Ironically, von Trier's speech was censored, according to Neiiendam, "to remove the controversial passages" ("Von Trier Peace Speech Censored").

Irrespective of the initial impetus or ultimate consequences, the director's objective with *Dogville*, as with all his films, was "pedagogical." In 2011, when the mass murderer of 77 people in Norway claimed *Dogville* as a favorite film, a candid and introspective von Trier explained his goals to Thorsen:

My intention with *Dogville* was [. . .] to examine whether we can accept a protagonist who takes revenge on an entire

town. And here I completely distance myself from the revenge. It's a way of making the protagonist and our feelings more nuanced and perhaps even exposing them, so that it isn't just black and white. ("Lars von Trier Regrets . . .")

*Dogville's* accomplishment of this objective remains arguable; however, the success of the director's experimental fusion of cinematic, theatrical, and literary technique may lie in the novelty of its minimalist aesthetic, a premise supported not only by von Trier's approach to the next installment but also by the critical reaction, or lack thereof, roused by part two of the USA trilogy.

#### *Manderlay*

Indeed, [. . .] it is exactly von Trier's pedantry, his strict adherence to rules, which opens the door to new ways of understanding the enterprise of political theory—and the practice of political activism.

-Vincent Lloyd, "Law, Grace, and Race"

Aesthetically, von Trier's 2005 *Manderlay* is unambiguously affiliated with its precursor. For the first time in his career, the director who jokingly claims to tell the same stories in his films (idealism gone awry or oppressed female versus idiotic man) repeated his self-made stylistic rules, applying the same constraints used in *Dogville* to his

second USA production. Despite the repetition, however, von Trier altered perceptions both within and of his work. With a setting similarly contrived with neo-Brechtian minimalism, *Manderlay* relocates Grace (now played by Bryce Dallas Howard) from an imagined Colorado town to a fictitious Alabama plantation. The director contrasted this narrowed “location” with an expanded panorama, decreasing his use of close-ups and increasing the visual perspective, often culminating in an overhead view of the entire plantation. Paradoxically, while the Brechtian scenography and character close-ups facilitated a reading of *Dogville* as any town, in the U.S. or elsewhere, the same approach to set design coupled with pull-outs that culminate in aerial long-shots repeatedly remind viewers of the *Manderlay* locale, Alabama, U.S.A. The specificity of the setting is further bolstered and concomitantly demonized with *Manderlay*'s narrative evocation of one of America's most detestable and taboo historical realities, slavery.

On an enlarged Trollhätten soundstage, painted white and surrounded by a black theatrical cyclorama for the second production, various locations are stenciled in black. Although integral elements of the allegory von Trier creates, only the labels identify “THE OLD LADY'S GARDEN,” the “CHICKEN HOUSE,” “BELOVED MAGNOLIAS,” and other sites on the *Manderlay* plantation where Grace, traveling in 1933 with her father (now played by Willem Dafoe) and his gangsters, discovers

slavery still thriving despite having been abolished seventy years earlier. In the shadow of an antebellum mansion, represented by an immense four-columned Palladian façade, glittering chandelier, and massive spiral staircase, Timothy (Isaach de Bankolé), a slave accused of stealing, is about to be whipped. Despite her father's advice to the contrary and an armed protest from plantation matriarch Mam (Lauren Bacall), Grace perceives the liberation of the slaves as a "moral obligation" and, backed by her father's armed thugs, tells the plantation owners that if they will not comply with the law, "we will compel you to do so." However, freedom from restraint, as Grace learns, requires more than simply removing the restraints. Following Mam's death, aged slave Wilhelm (Danny Glover) expresses anxiety about imposed freedom. As he tells Grace, "I fear we ain't ready for a completely new way of life." Von Trier drew inspiration for *Manderlay* in part from Jean Paulhan's preface to Pauline Réage's 1954 novel *The History of O* (*Histoire d'O*). The prelude, "Happiness in Slavery," the director told *New York Press* critic Jennifer Merin, "[is] about a situation in the Caribbean where slaves were freed by law, but went back to their former master asking to be slaves again." When the man refuses, the freed slaves kill him and his family and move back to their former quarters, an act motivated, according to the director's reading, "[by] the fact that they'd nothing to eat, no way to survive and had been better off under the system of slavery. It's ironic" (qtd. in



Merin). This irony is pivotal to *Manderlay's* plot, in which Grace attempts to liberate the plantation despite her father's advice or Wilhelm's fears.

Grace's pursuit of her "moral obligation" is often fraught with the same paradoxical dilemma that haunts von Trier's filmmaking, freedom through constraint. Repeatedly, Grace learns that freedom for one often means constraints for another. When she realizes that freeing the slaves requires more than simply opening Manderlay's gates, Grace enslaves the property's owners. Detaining them in the old peach house and controlling them with her armed henchmen, Grace appropriates their land and redistributes it to the slaves. Although she blames "Mam's Law," the hand-written text that groups and labels slaves, outlines their assumed traits and prescribes their treatment, for Manderlay's resistance to her endeavors at democratization, Grace accepts Wilhelm's argument that the text remain censored. Describing the laws as "rules for running the plantation," the elderly man reasons that sharing those rules with the former slaves "would be like showing the child the rod with which it's been beaten." Grace tacitly accepts Wilhelm's assessment that while the book "must be made public, we ain't all ripe for it" and vows "to see about ripening [the former slaves], and quickly." The liberal-minded idealist commences daily lessons in democracy, mandates attendance by the former slaves, and orders her mobsters to "make sure that they're there"; Grace compels freedom and dictates democracy.

Grace's "old-fashioned, hands-on schooling" also produces paradoxical results. Instituting a system of voting, for example, leads to majority determinations on everything from the time of day to punishments for perceived wrongs. The latter decision results in Grace being obliged to execute Old Wilma, whom she has befriended and with whom she shares an almost familial relationship while the former causes her to miss a pre-arranged rendezvous with her father, thus impeding her departure from Manderlay. While Grace describes "Mam's Law" as "the most abominable, contemptible document ever written," she nonetheless wields it like a weapon. Shortly after finding the text, she confronts the former plantation owners with their "affront" of rationing the slaves' food based on the categories defined in the book and, dissatisfied with the explanations offered, commands them to serve dinner wearing blackface. The following day, citing Wilma's (Mona Hammond) advanced age and a concomitant belief that she requires less food, the freed slaves vote to use the old woman's potatoes as seeds for planting, suggesting that they have learned from personal experiences of rationing prescribed by assumed traits. *Manderlay's* ending, which echoes the beginning, most clearly illustrates the paradoxical dilemma of freedom through constraint. Grace announces her intended departure and offers two rather ironic "presents" to the former slaves. She returns 80% of the group's harvest revenues, which had been stolen by Timothy,

the slave whose whipping for thievery Grace halted in the film's opening scene. She then presents the former slaves with "Mam's Law," employing its description of Timothy as a "Pleasin' Nigger" to support her indictment of his theft. However, Grace's previous endeavors and future exodus are unsettled by the revelation and explanation of Wilhelm's authorship of the book. What Grace perceives as "a recipe for oppression and humiliation" Wilhelm understands as "the lessor of two evils." According to its author, "Mam's Law," written for "the good of all," defined the restraints by which those statutorily emancipated in 1865 would freely live. As Wilhelm explains, legislated emancipation was terrifying to both him and Mam. They feared that not only were slaves ill-equipped to live in the free world, the free world was unprepared for the former slaves. "Mam's Law," Wilhelm contends, assured the necessities of life and allowed the pleasures of contempt and complaint. Supporting the elderly man's contention that freedom is a matter of philosophy and relevance, the newly democratized residents of Manderlay prove themselves capable of defining their own freedom by voting to reinstate "Mam's Law" and compelling Grace to remain as the freely, albeit involuntarily, elected replacement for Mam.

The freedom versus constraint conflict that advances *Manderlay* is analogous to Elster's aforementioned theory of "artistic precommitment."

Consider, for example, von Trier's explanation of the difference between an absence of restrictions and freedom:

Restrictions [are] a basic thing for an artist. When you paint a painting, the first thing that you have to do is cut out a square of reality. I believe that within that square, you have much more freedom, because the only thing you have to worry about is this little square you have chosen to work with. (qtd. in Adams)

The director employed politically that which he explained and applied artistically. *Manderlay's* credit sequence, presented like that of *Dogville*, strengthens the extension of the film's parable from the historical to the contemporary. As Grace flees the plantation, the camera pulls back to an aerial view of a black on white map of the continental U.S., the opening chords of Bowie's "Young Americans" begin, and a jump cut reveals a photograph of white draped Ku Klux Klan members, their mass procession stretching into a black night. The montage of historical and contemporary photographs that follows, sourced primarily from the Library of Congress, the NAACP, American photographer Jim Hubbard, and Danish photographer Jacob Holdt, highlights the disenfranchised position of Blacks during and after the civil rights movement. Inserted among images of black Americans petitioning for equal access to freedom, sleeping on streets, fighting wars, performing manual labors,

and enduring police brutality, is a vivid portrait of President George W. Bush. With head bowed and hands folded in prayer, he appears, like Grace, unwavering in his moral convictions. In 2005, with disapproval of American foreign policies increasing, the symbolism seemed obvious; as *Slate* movie critic Dana Stevens declared, “*Manderlay’s* allegorical storyline would be perfectly legible to a semicomatose stroke victim.”

Mental condition notwithstanding, commentators worldwide divided over the allegorical rendering of a contemporary American blunder, the Iraq War, and many stateside critics censured von Trier for exploiting a shameful period of U.S. history. Stevens grouched, “*Manderlay* ups the arrogance ante by bonking us [Americans] on the head with supposedly searing ‘truths’” while *New York Post* critic Lou Lumenick echoed a familiar refrain, describing the film as “another ridiculous anti-American screed by the minimalist Danish director Lars von Trier, who has never set foot in this country.” Writing for the International Federation of Film Critics, Jerzy Płażewski offered a broader, more contemporary reading of *Manderlay* as “a comment [. . .] against the United States forcing its only correct solutions upon others in order to make the entire world happy whether it wants it or not.” Although he repeatedly asserted that the second Land of Opportunities installment had been written before the war in Iraq commenced, von Trier also reinforced readings of *Manderlay* as a commentary on U.S.

foreign policy. In *The Road to Manderlay*, Carsten Bramsen's 2005 making-of documentary, the director commented, "There are things about America which I think are fantastic, and things about the way America functions politically these days, which I can't stand." In the Cannes press book for *Manderlay*, he noted that "it is incredibly difficult to impose democracy by force" and concurred with the comparison of Grace to President Bush:

You can say a lot of nasty things about Bush, but don't you think his heart is in it and he believes in what he is doing? Why would Bush trick us? It's because he thinks things will improve this way. There's no doubt about it. He believes in it. And Grace does too. Definitely.

Grace's incursion of Manderlay also paralleled Operation Iraqi Freedom. She introduces democracy with weapons, facilitates its implementation with dictates, and empowers the oppression she attempts to banish.

While von Trier and company received an eight-minute ovation at the conclusion of *Manderlay's* official Cannes premiere, its press screening was comparatively subdued. At the press conference that followed, journalists repeated many of the questions posed two years earlier but with noticeably reduced vehemence. Afterwards von Trier characterized the experience as "very strange." Describing it to Howard and Glover as the "most quiet press conference [he] ever had," the

director claimed he found it “interesting” but had expected the reverse (“The Cannes Experience”). Howard was close to tears as she discussed the absence of “intense opinions.” Overcoming her anxiety, the Cannes freshman laughingly declared, “Of course, *Manderlay* takes all of the glamour out of Cannes.” Previously fervent detractor McCarthy appraised the film “less provocative” than its predecessor and described von Trier as “school teacherish,” a depiction other journalists were quick to develop. The portrayal of racial stereotypes, as well as the director’s press conference assessment of President Bush as “an asshole,” attracted criticism, but the censures were short lived. Asked by the Scandinavian press to interpret the lack of fervent response from American critics, von Trier quickly concluded, “I think it’s because they’re scared witless by the racial conflict” (“The Cannes Experience”). Even as he conceded *Manderlay* to be “a leaner, better constructed and 40-minutes shorter picture than its predecessor,” McCarthy echoed this assessment:

The subject being race relations, *Manderlay* is bound to stir considerable debate in intellectual circles, but given the director’s abstract style and use of characters to enact an agenda, it’s a discussion that will exclude the general public, who will ignore it as they did *Dogville*. (“Manderlay”)

The exclusion, however, extended beyond the general public. *Manderlay* competed for the Palme d’Or and garnered nominations for three

European Film Awards as well as nine Robert Awards, but it went unrewarded. At Spain's Valladolid International Film Festival, the film was overlooked in competition for the Golden Spike, but von Trier shared, with Austrian director Michael Haneke, a special 50<sup>th</sup> Anniversary Award honoring "European filmmakers of great maturity and individual style in every instance" (qtd. in Płazewski). *Manderlay's* box office performance was, likewise, bleak, earning less than a million dollars worldwide. Notwithstanding dwindling American support for the war in Iraq, *Manderlay* originally opened at only two U.S. theaters and never played on more than twenty American film screens at any one time (Box Office Mojo). To date the film has grossed less than \$80,000 in the U.S. Long considered Denmark's "agent provocateur," von Trier interpreted the lack of interest, or outraged reaction, for Germany's *Spiegel International*: "If you kick someone in the ass, they're pretty surprised the first time—not so much the second time" ("We are All Products . . .").

While the third installment of von Trier's Land of Opportunities trilogy, *Washington*, remains unproduced, the indefinite postponement was announced prior to the *Manderlay* premiere. By the time the second installment appeared in U.S. theatres in 2006, von Trier had publically acknowledged an intention to alter his course with a "Statement of Revitality." Citing the departure of long-time producer Vibeke Windelov



and feeling “increasingly burdened by barren habits and expectations,” the director outlined changes in everything from development and shooting to promotion and press. On the eve of his fiftieth birthday and the shooting of his first comedy, the filmmaker appeared focused on the future. Unfortunately, the future that unfolded was shrouded in darkness.

Following his “Statement of Revitality,” von Trier went immediately into production on *The Boss of It All* (*Direktøren for det hele*, 2006), a relatively lighthearted film (for von Trier), a “comedy” about IT company owner Ravn (Peter Gantzler) who, in the midst of selling his firm, must hire an actor to play the nonexistent American “boss” he invented and scapegoated for unpopular decisions. Although a drastic departure from the director’s previous provocations, *The Boss of It All* is noteworthy both for the constraints applied to its making and the reception attendant its release.

In addition to a Dogme-like prohibition against the use of extra lighting on location shoots, *The Boss of It All* features von Trier’s most technical, if not technological, constraint yet. Created, according to the director, “with the intention of limiting human influence,” Automavision applies a randomization program developed by Peter Hjorth to camera and audio settings (“Automavision®”). Von Trier retained control of camera positioning, but a computer dictated camera movements such as

tilt, pan and zoom. The result, interesting to some and disconcerting to others, breaks, or severely mangles, all the rules of composition. It also forces audiences into active viewing, to search for the character or subject in a frame that repeatedly changes without cue or continuity.

The only von Trier film not premiered at Cannes, *The Boss of It All* arrived at the Copenhagen International Film Festival in September, 2006 and opened in Denmark the following December. Many European critics read the film as fun and quirky, but Danes were overwhelmingly unimpressed. While Per Juul Carlsen saw *The Boss of It All* as “a skewed comedy filmed in an idiom that has higher ambitions than the film’s content,” compatriot Tobias Lynge Herler judged Automavision an “untimely mass murderer of every conceivable aesthetic performance.” Danish daily *Jyllands-Posten* pronounced the film a “tame disappoint” and von Trier “an artist in crisis” (Sonne). The latter pronouncement may have applied less to the director’s film than his mental state: as *The Boss of It All* was bombing at the box office, von Trier was battling a deep depression that threatened to end his career.

## CHAPTER V: NO JUSTIFICATION REQUIRED

Leave me to weep  
over my cruel fate  
and that I yearn for freedom.  
May sorrow break  
the bonds of my anguish,  
if only for pity's sake.

-Georg Friedrich Händel, "*Lascia ch'io Pianga*"

The first reports that von Trier was suffering from depression rippled off the Associated Press news wire in May 2007 and registered as little more than waves lapping at a craggy shoreline. While Danes were mourning the possible loss of their cinema savior, other Europeans questioned the veracity of the director's illness (Bradshaw), and more than a few American critics took the disclosure as an opportunity for venting distaste for the director as well as his films. Film review blog *The Playlist* heralded news of the director's depression with "Danish Asshole Lars von Trier Needs a Hug" and presented details with palpable sarcasm:

Von Trier actually checked himself into a Copenhagen hospital in December to treat his depression, but remains

unsure if his next project, the Disney-sounding *Antichrist*, will proceed this year as planned.

Six months after his hospitalization, however, von Trier began working on the script.

Describing the process as “a kind of therapy” and the finished work as “the most important film of [his] entire career,” the director revealed another change in approach:

The work on the script did not follow my usual *modus operandi*. Scenes were added for no reason. Images were composed free of logic or dramatic thinking. They often came from dreams I was having at the time, or dreams I'd had earlier in my life. (“Director's Confession”)

The script von Trier composed begins as a narrative of beauty and grief, proceeds as battle between psychology and mythology, emotion and intellect, man and Nature, as well as male and female, and concludes having answered none of the myriad questions it raises.

*Antichrist* opens with a super slow motion, black and white montage of a couple entangled in passionate and explicit lovemaking while their child escapes the confines of his crib, explores his surroundings, and falls out a window to his death. This prologue, scored by Händel's “Lascia ch'io Pianga” aria from *Rinaldo*, beautifully complements and hauntingly complicates the four chapters that follow.

In "Grief," the mother (Charlotte Gainsbourg) collapses into a catatonic state at her son's funeral, which leads to a lengthy hospitalization. Her husband (Willem Dafoe), a supercilious psychoanalyst, decides his wife's treatment is best handled by him and prescribes a trip to Eden, the couple's secluded forest retreat, where she will face her most paralyzing fears. In chapters titled "Pain" and "Despair," Mother Nature provides the setting and more than one horrific image while Gainsbourg's character, in the role of the "monstrous" (though not always feminine), visits her psychotic torment on her husband and herself in increasingly gruesome acts of sex and violence. The horror culminates in the fourth chapter, "The Three Beggars," and ends when Dafoe's character squeezes vengeance from his wife by strangling her to death.

Although von Trier's weakened physical condition during filming necessitated that he relinquish control of the camera to cinematographer Anthony Dod Mantle, the director was, nevertheless, unable to abandon his penchant for imposing constraints. In addition to requiring himself to draft ten pages of script each day while recovering from depression, the filmmaker crafted his story around two characters. This constraint, which he borrowed from Bergman and likened to a Dogme rule, provided the director with several challenges including how to communicate the characters' background information to viewers. However, instead of fashioning a solution, von Trier opted to exploit the constraint, using it to

focus rather than inform his audience. Except for young Nic (Storm Acheche Sahlstrøm), who appears in photographs and flashbacks after his death, the faces of the film's minor actors (funeral-goers, train passengers, etc.) are blurred and indistinct, effectively obliterating them from existence. Additionally, Dafoe and Gainsbourg's characters are identified only as He and She, an approach that replicates the effect of *Dogville's* neo-Brechtian minimalism setting. As Pablo Villaça notes, "von Trier turns the Man and the Woman into representatives of the human race while forcing us to ignore all the rest of mankind."

The director also applied constraints to the creation and use of sound, insisting on a soundtrack composed primarily of sounds from nature and employing it as a manipulative device. In "The Sound and Music of Antichrist," Kristian Eidnes Andersen, sound designer for the film, explained that scoring the film involved "a mix of sound design and a type of background music" created with "organic materials. . . . rocks, water, voices." In daily meetings between von Trier and Andersen, the pair sampled various sounds of nature, "beat on a rock, snapped branches in two, rubbed stones together, and blew on blades of grass." By far the oddest organic sounds are those heard as the psychologist leads his wife through a visualization exercise after the death of their child. Requiring no fine-tuning because, as Andersen explained, "It was unpleasant enough as it was," the organic "music" of this scene is the

human body at work, “The sound of blood coursing, breathing in the background,” recorded when the sound designer swallowed a microphone. The oppressive sound that recurs throughout the film often signaling malevolence, of nature or the female character, was composed by blowing on different grasses, recording the sounds, and layering the recordings.

These oppressive “natural” sounds parallel the plot both as an artistic creation and as a struggle between man and nature. Compare, for example, the coupling and fatal fall portrayed in the prologue with the scenes of sex and death that follow. There exists in the prologue a timeless gentleness; procreation and death are transcendent. *LA Times* music critic Mark Swed concluded that von Trier’s use of Händel in the *Antichrist* prologue “serves simultaneously as turn-on to a pornographic sex scene and as a heavenly accompaniment to a baby’s fall from the window conflating meaningless eroticism with meaningless death.” While viewers may fail to recognize this association, they are less likely to overlook the dissimilar presentation and related character of sex in subsequent scenes. Whether between He and She, performed by her on him, or solely masturbatory, it is insistent, aggressive, and animalistic. Correlatively, it either lacks auditory accompaniment or is scored with the impassive sounds of nature, the screeching of animals, a cacophony of colliding trees, and hailstorms. Likewise, the child that appears to float

on music to a painless death in the prologue contrasts discordantly with subsequent images of death, e.g., a hatchling that falls from its nest and lands with an audible splat on an anthill. Before the ants can proceed with their picnic, a shrieking hawk retrieves the still quivering chick, quickly pulling wing from body. The accompanying cacophony of breaking bones and tearing flesh reminds all that death is neither painless nor transcendent.

In addition to constraining the production of sound, von Trier experimented with the use of audio to cue (or manipulate) viewers. At the conclusion of "Grief," for example, diegetic sounds of nature accompany the husband's observation of a doe in the forest. When the doe turns, revealing a stillborn fetus dangling from its womb, a conventional use of non-diegetic sound suggests the presence of danger or evil. Echoing the horror genre's use of sound to cue and amplify viewers' emotional responses, the high-pitched keening created by Andersen and his director begins at the moment the deceased fetus becomes visible. This "musical" cue, first heard when He and She drive into the forest, accompanies unnatural images of nature such as the dangling fetus, a fox eviscerating itself, and, later, She's "unnatural" behaviors. Breaking with traditional use, however, von Trier often extends the sound into succeeding scenes or, as at the end of "Grief," into chapter breaks. The



experimentation, as von Trier explained, was grounded in theory and employed with intent:

[W]e had a theory that whenever you build up to any emotional sensation, fright or whatever, then a time cut will reset the emotional mood of the spectator. That means that you can build up to something, and if you make a time cut, the brain resets again, and you have to build up a certain mood again. And this wasn't the case if you didn't mark the time cut with a sound cut. (von Trier and Schepeleern)

If, as von Trier seems to suggest, the intent was to increase viewers' emotional reaction to the film content, the director's experiment was an unequivocal success.

Controversies regarding content, possible implications, and potential receptions began swirling around *Antichrist* even before its official premiere at the 2009 Cannes Film Festival. At the pre-premiere press conference, British gossip columnist and film reviewer Baz Bamigboye demanded that von Trier "justify" the film, eliciting from the director a clear refusal and a divine comparison:

I make films and I enjoy it very much. . . . You are all my guests; it's not the other way around. That's how I feel. . . . I never have a choice. It's the hand of God, I'm afraid, and I

am the best film director in the world. I'm not sure God is  
the best god in the world. ("Press Conference: *Antichrist*")

As the festival closed, the Ecumenical Jury, charged with honoring works of "artistic quality which witnesses to the power of film to reveal the mysterious depths of human beings through what concerns them, their hurts and failings as well as their hopes" ("Ecumenical Jury"), recognized *Antichrist* with the first ever "anti-prize." Romanian filmmaker Radu Mihaileanu, acting as jury president, explained that the panel could not remain silent on a film it viewed as "the most misogynist movie from the self-proclaimed biggest director in the world" (qtd. in "AntiChrist"). Thierry Fremaux, festival director, denounced the unprecedented action as a "ridiculous decision that borders on a call for censorship" (qtd. in "AntiChrist"). Despite Fremaux's denouncement, journalists, critics, and public officials heeded the Jury's call, and incidents of censorship, prior restraint and de facto forms, preempted or accompanied screenings of *Antichrist* throughout the world.

In the U.K., the BBFC granted the film a "suitable only for adults" classification, allowing viewing by those eighteen or older and drawing criticism from Members of Parliament, Conservative and Tory alike. Criticizing the BBFC generally and the *Antichrist* decision specifically, Conservative MP Julian Brazier declared the film deserving of the harshest rating classification. In two-inch font superimposed over a

photographic image of Gainsbourg in “one of the horrific scenes from the film,” the *Sunday Express* asked, “How could censors pass this ‘revolting’ sex film?” and quoted Tory MP Anne Widdecombe’s condemnation of the film as “truly revolting” and her estimation that it was “no different [than] hardcore pornography” (qtd. in Fielding 23). Even print advertisements for *Antichrist* came under attack in Britain, with objections lodged against *The Times*, *The Guardian*, and *The Independent*. Public appeals demanding the most stringent rating surfaced worldwide. In the U.S., Movieguide® founder and publisher Ted Baehr introduced a petition demanding the MPAA issue an NC-17 rating to *Antichrist*. The Movieguide® censorship campaign also included a visit to the MPAA by celebrity Pat Boone and an email campaign to video store chain Blockbuster. At the Melbourne International Film Festival (MIFF), Australia’s Office of Film and Literature Classification insisted on a screening before issuing the usual perfunctory exemption and “censorship clearance” (Bodey). Several groups filed suit against the French Culture Minister advocating the harshest rating for *Antichrist*, and Catholic organizations in Poland collected 5,000 signatures supporting a countrywide ban of the film; both attempts to compel official censorship of the film failed (Lindberg). Only Belarus and Malaysia effected censorship of prior restraint, prohibiting the distribution or exhibition of *Antichrist*. However, instances of prior

restraint censorship did occur at various film festivals including the Monaco International Film Festival and Abu Dhabi's Middle East International Film Festival (MEIFF). While Monaco customarily rejects any film that includes violence, MEIFF director Peter Scarlet implied that excluding von Trier's film from the Middle East event was an audience based decision aimed at avoiding controversy (Young). However, Scarlet's stated goal of creating a festival "where it's all Hollywood, Bollywood and malls," as well as the inclusion of Egyptian filmmaker Yousry Nasrallah's *Scheherazade, Tell Me a Story* (2009), a film with more than 10,000 registered protestors, suggests that controversy, as well as censorship, originates from more than simply viewer response (Young).

If, as Dubin suggests, the "challenge" of art censorship "is to discover the reasons why specific targets have been designated" (10), the outrage directed at *Antichrist* appears uncomplicated. Von Trier's first feature-length work in the horror genre provides copious provocation for censors, official or otherwise: a seven-second detail shot of sexual penetration; full-body shots of the wife masturbating, slamming firewood into her husband's exposed penis, digitally manipulating him until he ejaculates blood, bolting a grindstone to his lower leg by drilling a hole through his shin, and performing an auto-clitorectomy with rusty scissors. However, the intensity and nature of censorial actions aimed at or provoked by these images complicates the challenge considerably.

The enraged demand that opened the *Antichrist* press conference at Cannes prefigured a deluge of similar, and similarly voiced, moral indignations from the press. Headlines affixed to news items related to the film revealed many journalists' personal and decidedly negative impressions. Reporting on *Antichrist's* inclusion in the MIFF, *The Australian's* Michael Bodey proclaimed, "Provocative' mutilation movie will be screened . . . uncut." *Sunday Mercury* news columnist George Tyndale introduced news of *Antichrist's* BBFC classification by declaring, "Censors can't see the wood for the trees" while Roya Nikkhah, correspondent for *The Telegraph*, reported the same story under a headline portraying the film's content as "torture and pornography." Critics were equally incendiary. *The Independent* reviewed "von Trier's pornographic first stab at a horror" (Aftab), *TIME* a "porno horror rhapsody" (Corliss), and MTV a "curious mash-up of cutting-edge torture-porn and good old porn-porn" (Loder). While these labels convey inflammatory impressions and may have provided the impetus for numerous acts of de facto censorship aimed at *Antichrist*, they have been misapplied by reporters as well as reviewers.

Unquestionably, *Antichrist* includes explicit sexual content; however, sexual explicitness and pornography are not necessarily analogous. Abandoning the "I know it when I see it" method of recognizing pornography, most Western nations now apply a dictionary

definition to the legal identification of pornographic material: “The explicit description or exhibition of sexual subjects or activity [. . .] in a manner intended to stimulate erotic rather than aesthetic feelings.”

Viewing *Antichrist* through this lens, the sexual activity depicted fails to pass the porno litmus test. For example, differentiation between aesthetic and erotic depictions of sexual content accounted for the BBFC classification as the Board explained in the Extended Classification Information:

A ‘sex work’ is defined as a work whose ‘primary purpose is sexual arousal or stimulation’. It is clear that ANTICHRIST is not a ‘sex work’ but a serious drama exploring issues such as grief, loss, guilt and fear. The brief images of explicit real sex (sight of a penis penetrating a vagina during a consensual sex scene and sight of the man’s penis being masturbated to climax) are exceptionally justified, in this context, by the manner in which they illustrate the film’s themes and the nature of the couple’s relationship.

Britain’s Advertising Standards Authority Council (ASA) cited similar reasoning in their refusal to uphold seven complaints filed against the film’s U.K. distributor, Artificial Eye Film Company Ltd., and three British newspapers that published the international print advertising for the film. Despite objections that described the advertisement as

“offensive and inappropriate for publication in a newspaper,” the ASA ruled in the Adjudication Report that the print ad was “unlikely to cause sexual excitement.”

The sexual content depicted in *Antichrist* falls primarily into two categories. The intercourse portrayed in the prologue might arguably be described as “erotic”; however, juxtaposing sex with death, employing extreme close-ups and super slow motion that hampers identification of explicit sexual images, and spotlighting still undefined symbolic objects arouses questions rather than eroticism. As Chris Wisniewski interpreted it, “the prologue enacts the Primal Scene as primal trauma,” a trauma the audience shares. The frenzied sex that occurs throughout the remainder of the film rages with turbulence as She attempts to replace emotional feelings (grief, pain, and despair) with physical sensations. Far from stimulating erotic feelings, these scenes are more likely to arouse empathetic discomfort. Horror, a film staple since the birth of cinema, trades in depth, and as historian Stephen Prince asserts, the genre traditionally moves beyond commentary on “culture and society as they are organized in any given period or form” (2). Suitably, through the depictions of sexual activity and elsewhere, *Antichrist* “explore[s] more fundamental questions about the nature of human existence” (2).

For von Trier, who earned his auteur status by layering his art with symbolism, cultural criticism, and human analysis, the horror

genre provided a playground for inquiry. However, both horror and pornography have historically been viewed as the bastard stepchildren of cinema, unworthy of serious mention or scholarly consideration. These “body genres,” as Linda Williams describes them, are devalued by “the perception that the body of the spectator is caught up in an almost involuntary mimicry of the emotion or sensation of the body on the screen” (4). In *Antichrist*, von Trier engages genre conventions of pornography (the prologue’s penetration shot) and horror (blood, bodies, good versus evil). Complicating the issue, however, is the director’s simultaneous application of these elements during the final third of the film, a combination that provoked identification of *Antichrist* as torture porn, a horror subgenre with which the film bears little resemblance. When, for instance, the outraged wife digitally manipulates her unconscious spouse until he ejaculates blood, Edelstein’s 2006 description of the bloody violence committed by “masked maniacs” in early slasher films seems eerily applicable: “the spurt of blood was equivalent to the money shot in porn.”

Initially coined by Edelstein in 2006, “torture porn” is as contentious a term as the films it signifies are divisive. While critics debate specific elements of the works specified, torture porn generally refers to the use of lengthy and detailed scenes of violence, to the level of torture, “as focal points for the viewer’s visual pleasure, and (in some



critics' view) for which the narrative is merely a flimsy pretext" (Middleton 2). *Antichrist* confounds the torture porn label in both instances. Violence between He and She is confined to the final twenty minutes of the film and effectually underscores two major themes of the work: misogyny, past and present, and standard gender roles. Debate remains regarding the efficacy of these graphic portrayals, with many echoing the objections Williams found commonly lodged against the body genres, that "heavy doses of sex, violence, and emotion are dismissed by one faction or another as having no logic or reason for existence beyond their power to excite" (3). Dean Lockwood argues against these criticisms, claiming that torture porn, as a subgenre of horror, is more successful with "affect," with manipulating viewers into sharing the feelings—emotional, physical, and psychological—of the victims (44). The critic concedes, however, that despite its capacity for unsettling its audience, torture porn fails to provide viewers with a "transformative" experience, a mainstay of classic horror films. Reviewers of *Antichrist*, however, repeatedly alluded to the film's faculty for unsettling and transforming. Four months after initially screening and reviewing the film in Cannes, Roger Ebert observed:

I cannot dismiss this film. It is a real film. It will remain in my mind. Von Trier has reached me and shaken me. It is up to me to decide what that means.

If you have to ask what a film symbolizes, it doesn't.

With this one, I didn't have to ask. It told me.

Christopher Sharrett, more vehement than Lockwood, asserts that as a subgenre of horror torture porn is “alarming in its diminishing of the genre, and its disregard of the psychological content and social criticism of the horror film at its height” (32). Here too, *Antichrist* rebuffs identification as torture porn. Von Trier specializes in social realism and cultural criticism, and *Antichrist* applies those traits to global society and culture. Moreover, the “psychological concerns” of the film— grief, depression, anxiety, psychoanalysis, exposure therapy—burrow to depths rarely revealed in cinema and never in torture porn. Even in his inclusion of witchcraft, as an historical example of misogyny, von Trier duplicates the use of the supernatural found, according to Sharrett, in the horror of the 1960s as “a device for the exploration of social oppression [. . .] of the entrapment of the female by patriarchy” (32). When the couple engage in sadomasochistic intercourse in the forest, for example, she cites the alleged ability of the “sisters from Ratisbon” to create hailstorms as the image of two Ratisbon sisters condemned as witches appears on screen. The information takes on symbolic significance when, later, her scream appears to invoke a hailstorm, the sounds of which recede simultaneously with the receding of her life as her husband strangles her, applying the ultimate patriarchal oppression.

Ironically, the same critics who mislabeled the film refuted the labels they applied. Despite describing *Antichrist* as “pornographic,” Kaleem Aftab quotes von Trier’s estimation of Strindberg as a playwright who “was always investigating the relationship between men and women” only to conclude, “The Dane could be talking about himself.” Kurt Loder, who branded the film as both torture porn and “porn-porn” offered an explanation that suggested otherwise:

Despite some wild gore touches, [. . .] the picture is too preoccupied with Von Trier’s dismal deep thoughts to exert the crass visceral grip an effective splatter flick requires. And despite a few graphic sex shots, the movie is coldly anti-erotic.

Gory yet cerebral, corporeal not sexual. Even *TIME*’s Richard Corliss contradicted his “porno horror rhapsody” headline, describing von Trier as “a real moviemaker, a composer of rich imagery as evocative as it is provocative.” While Corliss was not convinced by the graphic portrayals in the film’s final chapters, he conceded, “Von Trier means to portray the woman’s dangerous identity with the witches who were the subject of her thesis, and to argue that nature itself may be evil.” Even for critics impeded by the surface visuals, it appears that rather than affective pornography or torture porn, von Trier renders alternate—read as

merciless—perspectives on human nature, Nature as mother, procreation, psychotherapy, religion, and misogyny.

The misapplication of incendiary labels, while disquieting, is not unique. Denmark's *enfant terrible* regularly incites extreme reactions and questionable designations. What one critic reads as anti-American, another interprets as artistic freedom. What one reads as misogyny, another interprets as equal opportunity martyrdom. Conversely, demands for the censoring of *Antichrist* from critics and officials who refused to view the film they condemned were unparalleled. The *Daily Mail*'s Christopher Hart, for example, asked online readers, "What DOES it take for a film to get banned these days?" The self-described "broad-minded arts critic," who described *Antichrist* as "[a] film which plumbs new depths of sexual explicitness, excruciating violence and degradation," altered what it meant to 'review' a film:

You do not need to see Lars von Trier's *Antichrist* [. . .] to know how revolting it is.

I haven't seen it myself, nor shall I [. . .]. But merely reading about *Antichrist* is stomach-turning, and enough to form a judgment.

Although Hart had not viewed the film, he was willing to 'review' it, and though he self-censored his own viewing of *Antichrist*, he criticized the BBFC's refusal to censor it for others, suggesting that while he possessed

the ability and right to make viewing decisions for himself, others did not and should not. Unfortunately, Hart was not the only one willing to condemn a work he had not screened. Conservative MP Brazier introduced his censure with “From the accounts I have heard of *Antichrist*” (qtd. in Nikkhah), while Widdecombe, his Tory counterpart concluded her criticisms by declaring, “This film sounds truly revolting and not at all suitable for viewing” (qtd. in Fielding 23). Reverend Ian Brown, a Northern Ireland minister, condemned the work and questioned its selection for the Foyle Film Festival after having “looked up a number of film reviews from reliable sources” (“*Antichrist*’ Film. . .”). Censorship demands such as these may appear more legitimate and be more influential because of an association, real or imagined, between public censures, those issuing them, and governing institutions. Yet, these public outcries can also produce unexpected or even contrary results. The BBFC Annual Report for 2009 revealed that for all the accusations of misclassification and demands for censorship of prior restraint, the Board received only ten complaints against *Antichrist*, “none from people who had seen it” (Brown). While von Trier’s most recent releases, *Manderlay* and *The Boss of It All*, had fared poorly in the U.K., with less than 9,000 admissions between them, *Antichrist* enjoyed more than 72,000 viewers (*LUMIERE*).

Petition drives, public demands, and individual complaints may produce no official state censorship; however, censorial actions do, and in the case of *Antichrist* did, result. While Britain's ASA refused to uphold charges lodged against advertising images for the film, the grievances and the Council's investigation prompted Artificial Eye to abandon use of the images when advertising the DVD release of the film. Thus, the complainants realized a level of de facto censorship ("ASA . . ."). Likewise, the vehemence of criticisms by journalists opposed to the film affected critics who appreciated *Antichrist*. Karin Badt, covering Cannes for *The Huffington Post*, noted, "many journalists—speaking undercover, as if about a taboo—shared positive responses," including one who quietly affirmed, "This is my favorite film," as he hurried to another screening. Likewise, a Canadian critic declared after screening the film, "Screw it. I'm getting behind it" (Kenigsberg). Reverend Brown's public denunciation of *Antichrist* forced Foyle Film Festival Director Bernie McLaughlin into defending the film's inclusion in the 2009 lineup. "Cinema's purpose," McLaughlin maintained, "is not only to entertain, but also to challenge paradigms and create discussion. In this *Antichrist* delivers" ("Antichrist' Film. . .").

The paradigms challenged by von Trier's 2009 release, were diverse as well as timeless. In addition to challenging traditional cinematic uses of sound, sexual content, and violence, the director upended socially

constructed gender roles, reimagined the Christian view of man's fall, reexamined the nature of evil, and revisited the history of misogyny. "Ultimately," as Badley asserts, "*Antichrist* modernize[d] and personalize[d] the conflict between dominant and repressed cultures" ("*Antichrist* . . ."). The discussions the film created were often antagonistic and remain unresolved, leaving in their wake a new approach to film criticism. Two years after characterizing *Antichrist* with tongue firmly in cheek as "Disney-sounding," *The Playlist* published three reviews of von Trier's most contentious and un-Disney-like film to date before concluding,

This is a film that demands to be seen by serious cinephiles, not because of its stomach churning violence or stunt penises, but because it's more often than not strikingly beautiful, deeply moving and rich with challenging ideas we rarely see onscreen. (Jagernaut)

Denmark's enfant terrible had unleashed his recovery on the world, and the tsunami of controversy that followed attested to his continuing role as cinema's premiere deviant. *Antichrist* was and remains quintessential transgressive art: it presents questions and provokes reactions, confronts the world and challenges the global status quo.

## CHAPTER VI: NO END IN SIGHT

I look for boundaries which restrict my range of activity and aesthetic freedom. Then I can concentrate all my energy in this small space. It's very simple: when you're in a prison, you're in a better position to think about freedom.

-Lars von Trier, 2005

Deviance is, according to Dubin, paradoxical: "It is transgressive yet positive" (2). The same can be said of von Trier and his approach to filmmaking. Lars Trier created rules in childhood because his parents gave him none. The complete freedom was paralyzing, and rules enabled the young boy to navigate through adolescence. In adulthood, the constraints von Trier imposes on himself enable him to control his anxieties and regulate his passions, channeling them into his art rather than living in chaotic torment. Constraining his filmmaking, by prohibiting specific camera movements or prescribing particular editing parameters, for example, facilitates the director's creativity, freeing him to devise unconventional approaches and imagine new possibilities, to discard conventional techniques and create innovative alternatives. These are just two of the paradoxes characteristic of von Trier's filmmaking: Limits afford freedoms and constraints facilitate creativity.

Elster's constraint theory illuminates how the Danish auteur's application of censorship, to his filmmaking or that of others, enables



rather than impedes the creative process. Creativity results, according to Elster, not from total freedom but from choice of and within constraints. From making trilogies to limiting scenography, from experimenting with genre conventions to prohibiting particular camera movements, von Trier's application of constraints provides structure. Equally important, however, is a perspective of limitations not as obstacles to be overcome but as stimuli to ingenuity. As Dogme director Lone Scherfig (*Italian for Beginners*, 2000) said of "The Vow of Chastity," for example, "The fun of the Dogme rules is not in breaking them, but in being inspired by them" ("FreeDogme"). For von Trier, constraints that inspire also ensure that his art remains fresh both as a creative process and as an aesthetic product. Furthermore, his rules often contravene the established (unwritten but dominant) "rules" of filmmaking, particularly commercial cinema. While the most obvious example of von Trier's effect on conventional filmmaking exists in Dogme's pervasiveness, the director's innovative use of digital filming remains popular with directors such as George Lucas and David Lynch.

Von Trier's self-censoring approach to filmmaking is devised to do more than provoke creativity and innovation, however. From his use of documentary footage of Danish citizens assaulting suspected collaborators in *Images of a Relief* to his inclusion of historical photographs depicting social and cultural oppression in *Manderlay*, he

repeatedly exposes the hegemonic constraints of the world's societies. Thus, he fulfills his role as artistic deviant while inviting and invariably provoking censorious reactions and, often, censorship of varied severity. As responses to films like *The Idiots* and *Antichrist* demonstrate, von Trier's works consistently incite the emotions of critics and challenge the intellect of reviewers. Consequently, receptions of his films are invariably divided, with distinctions between film criticism, the erudite consideration of artistic quality and social commentary within a work, and film reviewing, the opinion-based viewing advice for general consumers, collapsing. Furthermore, as audiences attempt to wrestle with the contradictory reviews and diverse critical interpretations inspired by films that simultaneously entertain and inculcate, discussion and debate proliferate. For example, beyond consideration of techniques and aesthetics, discussion board users often apply the philosophical questions raised by von Trier's films to themselves and their communities. They interpret history, question the present, and imagine the future through lenses provided by the director's art. On the Internet Movie Database discussion board for *Breaking the Waves*, Gronnaephos asked, "If you never get confronted, would you be able to put things in perspective? Would humanity have progressed if no-one dared to stand up and do things differently, in order to progress?" While von Trier may offer little perspective, his work abounds with confrontation.

Csikszentmihalyi's application of systems theory to creativity makes it possible to reconcile von Trier's filmmaking approach with the reception his films receive from the cinema industry, film critics, movie reviewers, and the public. Fundamentally, the model outlined by Csikszentmihalyi views creativity as a by-product of an individual in relationship and interaction with a cultural system or "domain" and a related social system or "field" of gatekeepers (32). The artist works within a domain of knowledge, techniques, and customs while the gatekeepers, knowledgeable in the practices of the domain, judge whether the work of the individual is worthy of inclusion in the domain. In effect, a director who makes films according to existing standards of the industry, namely Hollywood's commerce driven approach, is by definition uncreative while one who adopts new approaches to filmmaking may be deemed creative only if the gatekeepers—critics and reviewers—deem his approach worthy of inclusion in the domain. From this perspective, creativity is a byproduct of an inherently antagonistic relationship between the auteur, the cinematic status quo, and select viewers whose judgments censor or accept a film, filmmaker, or filmmaking approach.

From his earliest feature-length films, which prompted Denmark to reconsider the defining characteristics of "Danish" film, to the Dogme95 movement, which razed the gates of filmmaking by erecting constraints

for making films, von Trier has employed constraints and provoked the censors. From his introduction of graphic sex into mainstream movies to his direct engagement with Hollywood hegemony and global imperialism, the director has also provoked and influenced the film industry, film criticism, and film viewers. His work has redefined the boundaries of censorable content, exposed the world's veiled censors, and motivated myriad forms of censorship. With plans for the director's next project, tentatively titled *Nymphomaniac*, said to include scenes of full penetration sex, it is safe to assume the controversies surrounding von Trier will continue, as will attempts to suppress his works. Here too, however, a paradox exists. The more innovative the constraints and persistent the calls for censorship, the more pervasive the discussions and diverse the resulting debates.

In the final analysis, von Trier's use of constraints demonstrates the dual nature of censorship. Although denigrated as antithetical to the liberal sensibilities of the Western world, when employed by the artist, censorship can necessitate resourcefulness, facilitate creativity, and generate innovation. Concomitantly, even as the artist's works are artifacts of constraints, they reveal in content and expose through provocation the existence of myriad forms of censorship—most often in the very nations that congratulate themselves for repudiating restrictions in their own societies and denouncing them in others.

## EPILOGUE

Today's artists [. . .] routinely push boundaries—artistic, moral, and sexual; those of decorum, order and propriety.

-Steven C. Dubin, *Arresting Images*

[It's] the job of artists to attempt to understand and enter into imaginative sympathy even with monsters; what makes artists is their ability to illuminate the darkest regions of the soul.

-Richard Brody, "Lars von Trier: The Melancholy Dane"

In competition at Cannes for the ninth time since *The Element of Crime* premiered at the festival in 1984, von Trier arrived at the 2011 film fest with *Melancholia*, "a beautiful film about the end of the world" (Carlsen 6). Despite the advertising tagline, the film actually offers an examination of contrasting reactions to impending annihilation. When the previously undiscovered planet of Melancholia takes up a collision course with Earth, the chronically melancholic and newly married Justine (Kirsten Dunst) reacts with passive acceptance while her normally stalwart sister Claire (Charlotte Gainsbourg) succumbs to despairing anxiety. Although disparaged by von Trier as being "perilously close to the aesthetic of American mainstream films" (Carlsen 6), the apocalyptic sci-fi feature was generally well received. Many critics compared von Trier's meditations on impending extinction with Terrence

Malick's ruminations on the mysteries of human existence and predicted the Palme d'Or would go to either the American's *The Tree of Life* or the Dane's melancholic counterpoint. However, an imprudent response to a question from the press quickly overshadowed initial accolades for von Trier's film and provoked vehement censures of the director.

*Melancholia* screened for the press at 8:30 a.m. on May 18 and, as is customary at festivals, the official press conference followed immediately afterward. Unlike the *Antichrist* press meeting in 2009, when the director was greeted with jeers and venomous demands that he "justify" his film, von Trier and cast were warmly received with a measure of applause from a genial press corps. For more than thirty minutes, the group fielded routine questions. Asked why he made a film about the end of the world, von Trier commented, "To me, it's not so much a film about the end of the world, it's a film about a state of mind." Dunst described her desire to join the cast: "I was drawn to the project because, to me, Lars is the only director that specifically just writes films for women who can be ugly and messy and emotional and not have this perfect idea of what women should be in film." Gainsbourg, whose return to a von Trier set would seem to undermine the accusations of misogyny made against the filmmaker, reiterated her *Antichrist* view of the director: "I don't really have the impression that we are portraying women in particular. I have the impression that with *Antichrist*, I was playing him [von Trier] and

Kirsten was playing him in this film. Of course, they are beautiful parts for women, but I don't see the separation between men and women characters."

After more than thirty minutes of questions and answers, banter between cast members and director, and a lengthy, obviously comedic description of von Trier's next project—a porn film which “is going to be three or four hours long, . . . [so] this press conference will be a little later”—moderator Henri Behar indicated that time permitted only two additional questions. Reporting for *The Times* of Britain, Kate Muir posed the first:

Can you talk a bit about your German roots and the Gothic aspect of this film? And also, you mentioned [. . .] in a Danish film magazine [*Film #72*] your interest in the Nazi aesthetic and you talked about your German roots at the same time. Can you tell us a bit more about that?

Von Trier's response, based in personal history and imparted with his usual drollness, became the gaffe quoted—and misquoted—around the world:

Yes, well, the only thing I can tell is that I thought I was a Jew for a long time and was very happy being a Jew, um, then later on came Susanne Bier and then suddenly I wasn't so happy about being a Jew. No, that was a joke, sorry. Um,

but it turned out that I was not a Jew, and even if I'd been a Jew, I would be kind of a second-rate Jew because there are a kind of hierarchy in the Jewish population. But anyway, no, I really wanted to be a Jew, and then I found out that I was really a Nazi. You know, um, because my family was German, Hartmann, um, which also gave me some pleasure. So I'm kind of a . . . yeah . . . so I, I, I, I, . . . what can I say . . . I understand Hitler. But, um, I think he did some wrong things, yes absolutely, but, but, but I, I can see him sitting in his bunker in the end. *There will come a point at the end of this . . . there will come, I will, . . .*<sup>1</sup> No, I am just saying that, that, that I think I understand the man. Um, he's not what you would call a good guy, but I, um, yeah, I understand much about him and I, um, sympathize with him a little bit. Yes, not in a, but come on, . . . I'm not for the Second World War, and I'm not against Jews, Susanne Bier, no, no, not even Susanne Bier. That was also a joke. I am of course very much for Jews, no, not too much, because Israel is a pain in the ass, but still . . . how can I get out of this sentence? No, I just want to say about the art of the . . . I'm very much for Speer. Speer I liked. Albert Speer I liked. He was also maybe

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<sup>1</sup> Italicized statements spoken in an aside to Dunst.



not one of God's best children, but he had some talent that was kind of . . . possible for him to use during . . . (sigh) okay, I'm a Nazi.

A few laughs, a bit of handclapping, and a final question about doing a "grander" film than *Melancholia* and the press conference concluded, but the buzz that began with the director's poorly worded reference to his ancestry had already gone viral.

*ScreenRush*, a "cinema information" website in Britain, logged several tweets about von Trier's response before he finished his rambling response. After tweeting that the director was "digging a huge hole for himself" and offering instantaneous descriptions of Dunst and Gainsbourg's reactions (the former "looked like she wanted the ground to open up" while the latter "gave him a wtf face"), *ScreenRush* reminded readers: "We've heard the: 'I thought I was a jew [sic] but then I discovered I was a nazi' thing from Lars before so it's old ground really." Before ending the series, *ScreenRush* prophesied: "the inevitable headlines will ignore the fact that it was a very funny press conference . . . you know, apart from the Hitler bits." Florence Waters, keeping a daily timeline of Cannes events for *The Telegraph*, noted during the conference, "Great hilarity at the *Melancholia* press conference [. . .] Lars von Trier has made a series of cheeky comments including a joke about an absent Kiefer Sutherland's drinking, and an announcement that his

next movie will be a porn film.” Ten minutes later she added, “Von Trier knows how to turn a press call into a cockpit, and opens himself up further to taboo subjects.” Covering Cannes for *Time Out London*, Dave Calhoun tweeted, “Oh dear Von Trier just brought up Hitler in Cannes press conference,” and took time out to wonder, “Did he spend the evening with Mel Gibson?” Two days later the journalist would cite the *Melancholia* press event as a personal highlight of the 2011 festival, predict von Trier had made his last appearance in Cannes, and reveal that he was neither at the conference nor “paying attention” to a video feed of the event about which he tweeted (“Five Personal Highlights . . .”).

Immediate impressions notwithstanding, most critics “credit” *The Hollywood Reporter* with breaking the news that von Trier had, according to Scott Roxborough, “pulled a Mel Gibson.” Two hours after the press conference ended and in a 24pt headline, Roxborough reported that Denmark’s enfant terrible, “Admits to Being a Nazi, Understanding Hitler.” It would be another three hours before the self-proclaimed “definitive interpretive voice of the entertainment industry” published a review of the film. By early afternoon, a media firestorm had ignited. Wire services found the director more newsworthy than his film: the Associated Press, States News Service, Press Association, and Agence France-Presse all privileged coverage of the director’s end-of-conference

ramble over reviews of *Melancholia*. Others, like United Press International, ignored the film altogether.

By early evening, Festival officials had weighed in on the mounting controversy. At 6:00 p.m., “disturbed about the statements” made by von Trier, Festival de Cannes issued a press release indicating that the director had been asked “to provide an explanation for his comments.” The director immediately obliged, explaining, according to Cannes representatives, that he had allowed himself to be “egged on” and apologizing for both his behavior and his comments. In a public apology made hours after the press conference and delivered through his U.S. distributor Magnolia Pictures, von Trier wrote, “If I have hurt someone this morning by the words I said at the press conference, I sincerely apologize. I am not anti-Semitic or racially prejudiced in any way, nor am I a Nazi” (qtd. in Ryzik). The apologies neither squelched the blaze nor assuaged the wounds. The following day, May 19, the Cannes Board of Directors assembled for what they later described as “an extraordinary meeting,” the only topic of which was the fate of von Trier. The board’s decision, made public the same day, fueled the now raging inferno:

The Festival de Cannes provides artists from around the world with an exceptional forum to present their works and defend freedom of expression and creation. The Festival’s Board of Directors [. . .] profoundly regrets that this forum

has been used by Lars Von Trier to express comments that are unacceptable, intolerable, and contrary to the ideals of humanity and generosity that preside over the very existence of the Festival.

The Board of Directors firmly condemns these comments and declares Lars Von Trier a *persona non grata* at the Festival de Cannes, with effect immediately.

*(Statement from the Board of Directors. . .)*

*Melancholia*, which remained in competition, became a footnote as the director declared unwelcome in Cannes became the man most sought after in France.

Following relocation to the village of Mougins, fifteen minutes from Cannes, von Trier continued meeting with journalists. Before groups and in one-on-one interviews, the director attempted to position, contextualize, and thereby explain his remarks. He recounted his long-held belief that he was Jewish, his mother's deathbed confession regarding his parentage, and the loathing his biological father, Fritz Michael Hartmann, and he shared for one another. He upheld his comments on Speer as observations about the architect's aesthetics rather than the Nazi Minister's ideology. The director also clarified his statement about "understanding" Hitler:

If I said to you that I understood Hitler, you would say, “What the fuck do you mean?” And I could say, well, in the sense that watching Bruno Ganz playing him in *Downfall* [Oliver Hirschbiegel, 2004] and all that, I understand that he is a human being and it’s very important for us to recognize that. (qtd. in O’Hehir)

These explanations, however, were weakened by the director’s repeated interpretation of the intense reaction to his remarks as symptomatic of a French history of cruelty toward Jews. Likewise, comments such as, “Saying you’re sorry—what does that change?” were interpreted by many as a retraction of the previously tendered apologies and did little to diminish the controversy (qtd. in O’Hehir). The same was true of von Trier’s averred appreciation for his *persona non grata* status.

At the height of the controversy surrounding von Trier, an Argentinean distributor cancelled its contract for *Melancholia* (Macnab), but another quickly filled the void. Italian production and distribution company Teodora Film expressed “solidarity” for Susanne Bier and vowed to never “distribute a von Trier film in Italy” (Mitchell, Macnab, and Jennings). This promise, however, may have been more symbolic than effectual censorship as the firm has never distributed von Trier’s works. Although *Melancholia* had gone from “top contender” to “also competed,” a makeover most agreed directly resulted from the

controversy surrounding the director, Kirsten Dunst became the third actress in a von Trier production to be named Best Actress at Cannes. On November 2, the film garnered eight nominations (in seven of nine categories) from the European Film Academy, and on the eve of its theatrical release in the U.S., speculation mounted regarding Dunst's prospects for an Oscar nomination. In perhaps the most crucial arena, box office sales, *Melancholia* grossed over \$10.3 million in the six months following its Cannes premiere (*Box Office Mojo*).

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I have reserved as an employment for my old age, [. . .]  
 enjoying the rare happiness of times, when we may think  
 what we please, and express what we think.

Tacitus, *Histories* 1.1

I began this project in the summer of 2009 and, like all dissertators, experienced alternating periods of absorption and detestation, fulfillment and frustration. Having just begun drafting the final material chapter when von Trier was declared *persona non grata*, I was flabbergasted. For an academic examination of constraints, censures, censorship, and the works of Lars von Trier, the Cannes decision was, on one hand, an undeniably powerful conclusion, highlighting how unpredictable and paradoxical the application of control. On the other hand, I found myself unable to fully assimilate the

ensorial action of the Cannes Board of Directors, an organization originally created to avoid fascist oppression had themselves engaged in oppression. Ultimately, I reasoned that the board's de facto censorship served to highlight the inescapable double standard inherent in all censorship.

Von Trier may well be the most provocative director in cinema, but in this instance, the media directed the spectacle. *The Hollywood Reporter*, in its rush to "break" the story, directed readers to an unedited on-line story of disconnected misquotes. Philip Hensher, writing for *The Independent*, contended that it was "beyond human wit to reconstruct the question" that preceded von Trier's damning remarks but quoted the director's three-minute response word for word, sans context. While they abandoned reviewing in favor of reporting, movie critics retained the personal perspectives that normally color their film analysis. Taken to task for "skewing" her blog posting about the press conference, Chaz Ebert, wife of famed cineaste Roger Ebert, wrote, "I would have rather been reporting on his film *Melancholia*. [. . .] But his Nazi statements somehow trumped that." Others, such as Reuters, relied upon expert interpretations, quoting Rabbis and Cannes visitors who self-identified as Jews.

Special interest groups voiced their opinions, and revealed more double standards, independently as well. The Anti-Defamation League,

which two years earlier praised Quentin Tarantino's *Inglorious Basterds* (2009) for its allegorical use of "drama, comedy, and romance" in its depiction of the Holocaust and mused, "If only it were true!" accused von Trier of joking about the same subject and declared, "Hitler, the Nazis and the Holocaust are matters that should be treated with seriousness, not satire."

The Festival, too, is guilty of applying a double standard. While Cannes undeniably provides an "exceptional" forum in which filmmakers can "defend freedom of expression," the board's decision to censor von Trier clearly indicated that filmmakers should not exercise that freedom themselves. No less ironic is the double standard the festival applies to censoring filmmakers. Although von Trier's behavior, compared in the press to the drunken, anti-Semitic outbursts of Mel Gibson, secured the director an expulsion from the festival, Gibson himself received a ten-minute standing ovation for his performance in Jodi Foster's *The Beaver* (2011). The actor/director whose 2004 film *The Passion of the Christ* was perceived by many in the Jewish community as anti-Semitic shunned the press contingent but appeared with Foster for *The Beaver*'s premiere only a day before *Melancholia*, and von Trier, took center stage. Similarly, the Cannes jury president von Trier referred to in 1991 as "the midget" was Roman Polanski, convicted sex offender and fugitive from the law. In addition to his jury tenure, Polanski has brought four films to Cannes,



including his Palme d'Or winning *The Pianist* (2002), since fleeing from the U.S. to France in 1978 to avoid a likely prison sentence.

By far the most obnoxious application of the double standard came from Javad Shamaqdari, Iranian deputy culture minister. Ignoring the fact that Iran had just imposed a six-year term of imprisonment and twenty-year filmmaking prohibition against director Jafar Panahi, Shamaqdari protested von Trier's banishment in a letter to Gilles Jacob, Cannes festival president. Recalling the festival's historic beginnings, the culture minister accused board members of "fascist behavior" and suggested, "Perhaps it is necessary to provide a new definition of freedom of speech for encyclopedias" (qtd. in Brooks). Following the Iranian government's defense of his statements, von Trier responded:

In my opinion, freedom of speech, in all its shapes, is part of the basic human rights. However, my comments during the festival's press conference were unintelligent, ambiguous and needlessly hurtful.

My intended point was that the potential for extreme cruelty, or the opposite, lies within every human being, whatever nationality, ethnicity, rank or religion. If we only explain historical disasters with the cruelty of individuals, we destroy the possibility of understanding the human

mechanisms, which in turn are necessary in order to avoid any future crimes against humanity. (qtd. in Brooks)

Whether time and reflection had enabled the director to attain a measure of clarity regarding the events at Cannes remains arguable, but he was allowed, at least for a moment, the final word.

Throughout the summer, *Melancholia* opened in theaters throughout Europe and screened at various film festivals in the U.S. and elsewhere. Reference to the Cannes press conference became a fundamental, albeit less inflammatory, element of reviews both positive and negative. In September, von Trier was back in the spotlight, fielding questions from Berlin audiences attending prescreenings of *Melancholia* and a retrospective presentation of the director's previous films. As the month closed, *GQ* readers were enjoying (or despising) Chris Heath's in-depth interview with von Trier in the magazine's October edition. Then, on October 5, the saga that began in May took a startling turn, as the director explained in a written statement:

I was today at 2:00 p.m. questioned by North Zealand police regarding a preliminary charge from the prosecutor in Grasse in France in August 2011, on a possible contravention of French law against the glorification of war crimes. (qtd. in Christensen)

Because of the seriousness of the charges, von Trier continued, “I must infer that I do not have the capacity to express myself clearly.” Whether intended to shield him from additional legal problems or stave off further misunderstandings, the director turned to self-censorship for protection, vowing to “refrain from all public statements” (qtd. in Christensen).

Inasmuch as von Trier’s press conference remarks are easily accessible via uncut video streaming at the Festival de Cannes website, this latest chapter suggests that a violation of the law may be determined based not on actions but intentions, not on words but thoughts. Sadly, this episode also suggests that distorted media coverage could result in what Marx referred to as a “tendentious” rendering of law, “mak[ing] the *sentiment* of the acting person the main criterion, and not the *act as such*” (79).

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## APPENDIX A: CINEMA FOR PEACE AWARD

## ACCEPTANCE SPEECH

Dear Peace Committee!

Thank you for the Peace Prize!

I believe in peace just like you.

And we peace-believers see it as our noble task to make everybody in the world feel the same.

But not everybody in the world wants to.

The people of the world are two tribes living in the desert.

One tribe lives in the country with the well in it. The other lives in the country beyond.

The tribe in the country with the well in it wants peace.

The tribe in the country beyond doesn't want peace - it wants water!

The tribe in the country beyond is probably a little bit uncivilized and doesn't even have a word for "peace". But it does have one for thirst, which, in this situation, is more or less the same.

The Peace Committee in the country with the well in it, is made up of good, wise, wealthy, beautiful people who are not thirsty (that's why they have the time and energy for the committee).



The people from the country with the well in it talk a lot about the peace prize the Committee award to other people from the country with the well in it.

The people from the country beyond do not talk a lot about the peace prize. (qtd. in Neiiendaman, "Von Trier Peace Speech Censored")