



Breaking the Waves

Directed by: Lars von Trier

©: Zentropa Entertainments ApS, La Sept Cinéma

Produced by: Zentropa Entertainments ApS

In collaboration with: Trust Film Svenska AB,
Liberator Productions, Argus Film Produktie,
Northern Lights A/S

In co-production with: La Sept Cinéma,
SVT Kanal 1 Drama, Media Investment Club,
Nordisk Film- och TV-Fond, VPRO

Supported by: Det Danske Filminstitut,
Svenska Filminstitutet, Det Norske Filminstitutet,
Stichting Nederlands Fonds voor de Film, Stichting
Co-productiefonds Binnenlandse Omroep,
Suomen Elokuvasäätiö

Developed with the support of:

European Script Fund

In association with: Canal+, Danmarks Radio,
Icelandic Film Corporation, Lucky Red, October
Films, Philippe Bober, TV1000, Villealfa
Filmproductions Oy, YLE, TV1, ZDF

Executive Producer: Lars Jönsson

Executive Producers (Nordisk F&TVF):

Bengt Forslund, Dag Alveberg

Executive Producer (Danske Filminstitut):

Jørgen Ljungdahl

Executive Producer (Svenska Filminstitutet):

Per Lysander

Executive Producers (Norske Filminstitutet):

Oddvar Bull Tuhus, Gunnar Svensrud

Producers: Vibeke Windeløv, Peter Aalbæk Jensen

Co-producers: Axel Helgeland, Peter van Vogelpoel,

Rob Langestraat, Marianne Slot

Unit Production Manager: Lene Nielsen

Production Manager: Leif Mohlin

Financial Controller: Charlotte Vinther

Production Accounts: Ann Køj Slemming,

Ghita Nørrekjær, Ann Vognsen

Location Manager: Morten Kleener

Location Manager (Scotland): Janet Riddoch

Location Scouting (Scotland): Anthony Dod Mantle,

Peter Øvig Knudsen

Post-production Supervisor: Tove Jystrup

2nd Unit Director: Kristoffer Nyholm

1st Assistant Director: Morten Arnfred

Continuity: Linda Daae

Casting: Joyce Nettles

Written by: Lars von Trier

Co-writer: Peter Asmussen

Script Translation: Jonathan Sydenham

Script Consultants:

Kirsten Bonnén Rask, Tómas Gislason

Director of Photography: Robby Müller

2nd Unit Director of Photography: Eric Kress

Operator: Jean-Paul Meurisse

Still Photographer: Rolf Konow

Chapter/End Sequences: Manipulation

Chapter/End Sequences Artist: Per Kirkeby

Special Effects (Scotland): Lars Andersen

Graphic Designer: Morten Constantineanu Bak

Film Editor: Anders Refn

Assistant Editor: Anders Johannes Bukh

Art Director: Karl Júlíusson

Property Master: Peter Grant

Construction Manager: Leo Jørgart

Costume Designer: Manon Rasmussen

Costumes (Scotland): Binkie Darling

Make-up: Jennifer Jorfald, Sanne Gravfort

Special Make-up/Surgical Effects: Morten Jacobsen

Title Sequence/Photographer: Henrik Jongdahl

Music Arranged/Orchestrated by: Joachim Holbek

Sound Designer/Recording Mixer: Per Streit

Sound Recording (2nd Unit): Klas Baggström

Too Much: Melodrama on Film

Breaking the Waves

Lars von Trier on 'Breaking the Waves'

Breaking the Waves has taken five years and four million pounds to realise. Where did the original idea for the film come from?

I prefer to work with unassailable ideas. And I wanted to do a film about goodness. When I was little I had a children's book called *Golden Heart*, which I have a very strong and fond memory of. It was a picture book about a little girl who went out into the woods with pieces of bread and other things in her pocket. But at the end of the book, after she's passed through the woods, she stands naked and without anything. And the last sentence in the book was:

"I'll be fine anyway," said Golden Heart.' It expressed the role of the martyr in its most extreme form. I reread the book several times, even though my father regarded it as the worst trash you could imagine. The story for *Breaking the Waves* probably has its origin there. Golden Heart is the film's Bess. I also wanted to do a film with a religious motif, a film about miracles. And at the same time I wanted to do a completely naturalistic film.

The story has changed through the years. I first thought of shooting it on the west coast of Jutland, later in Norway, then Ostend in Belgium, then Ireland, before it finally became Scotland. It is probably no coincidence that it largely takes place on the Isle of Skye, where many painters and writers moved during the English Romantic period of the 19th century. I have reworked the script a lot through the years, being somewhat Dreyer-like in cutting it down, confining and reducing. Then just before shooting began, I lost enthusiasm for it. So many years had passed getting the project realised, and I was tired of it, close to leaving it.

That's strange, because this is perhaps the film of yours with the biggest commercial possibilities.

Yes. I have quite a funny story with regard to that. We got financial support for the script from something which I think is called the European Script Fund.

The readers there had been heavily criticised for their work. So to defend their activity they undertook a computer analysis of around ten of the projects they'd received. It was claimed that a computer would be able to ascertain a project's artistic and commercial significance. And *Breaking the Waves* got top marks! That's quite funny. The right ingredients were probably there: a sailor and a virgin and a romantic landscape – everything that the computer loved.

Did the idea of the film's very special technique – handheld camera, CinemaScope format – arrive at the same time as the idea for the story?

No, that comes from the experience of *The Kingdom*. The new film has some of the same cliché-like ingredients as in *The Kingdom*: that's why I felt it important to give it as realistic a form as possible. A more documentary touch. If *Breaking the Waves* had been rendered with a conventional technique, I don't think you could have tolerated the story. I think it is important that you furnish a story with a definite style, so that the project on the whole can be realised. One normally chooses a style for a film in order to highlight a story. We've done exactly the opposite. We've chosen a style that works against the story, which gives it the least opportunity to highlight itself.

Yes, if you'd chosen to do a sort of Merchant-Ivory Breaking the Waves it would certainly be regarded as too romantic or too melodramatic.

It would have been far too suffocating. You would not have been able to stand it. What we've done is to take a style and put it over the story like a filter. Like encoding a television signal, when you pay in order to see a film: here we are encoding a signal for the film, which the viewer will later ensure they decode. The raw, documentary style which I've laid over the film and which actually annuls and contests it, means that we accept the story as it is. That is, at any rate, my theory. The whole thing is very theoretical. Later we manipulated the images electronically.

Boom Operator: Ad Stoop
Supervising Sound Editor: Kristian Eidnes Andersen
Dialogue Editor: Hans Møller
Sound Effects Editor: Peter Schultz
Foley Artist: Julien Naudin
Stunt Co-ordinator (Scotland): Terry Forrestal
Studio: Det Danske Filmstudie
Cast:
 Emily Watson (*Bess*)
 Stellan Skarsgård (*Jan*)
 Katrin Cartlidge (*Dodo*)
 Jean-Marc Barr (*Terry*)
 Adrian Rawlins (*Doctor Richardson*)
 Jonathan Hackett (*the minister*)
 Sandra Voe (*Bess' mother*)
 Udo Kier (*man on the trawler*)
 Mikkel Gaup (*Pits*)
 Roef Ragas (*Pim*)
 Phil McCall (*grandfather*)
 Robert Robertson (*chairman*)
 Desmond Reilly (*an elder*)
 Sarah Gudgeon (*Sybilla*)
 Finlay Welsh (*coroner*)
 David Gallacher (*Glasgow doctor*)
 Ray Jeffries (*man on bus*)
 Owen Kavanagh (*man at lighthouse*)
 Bob Docherty (*man on boat*)
 David Bateson (*young sailor*)
 Callum Cuthbertson (*radio operator*)
 Gavin Mitchell (*police officer 1*)
 Brian Smith (*police officer 2*)
 Iain Agnew (*praying man 1*)
 Charles Kearney (*praying man 2*)
 Steven Leach (*praying man 3*)
 Dorte Rømer (*nurse*)
 Anthony O'Donnell (*boy 1*)
 John Wark (*boy 2*)
 Ronnie McKellaig (*precentor*)
 Peter Bensted (*voice of ugly man*)
 Simon Towler Jorfald (*voice of boy in film*)
 Denmark-France-Sweden-Italy-Netherlands 1996©
 159 mins
 Digital

Become a BFI Member

Enjoy a great package of film benefits including priority booking at BFI Southbank and BFI Festivals. Join today at bfi.org.uk/join

Sight and Sound

Never miss an issue with **Sight and Sound**, the BFI's internationally renowned film magazine. Subscribe from just £25*
 * Price based on a 6-month print subscription (UK only). More info:
sightandsoundsubs.bfi.org.uk/subscribe



BFI Player

We are always open online on BFI Player where you can watch the best new, cult & classic cinema on demand. Showcasing hand-picked landmark British and independent titles, films are available to watch in three distinct ways: Subscription, Rentals & Free to view.

See something different today on player.bfi.org.uk

We transferred the film to video, and worked on the colours there, before we transferred it back to film again. In between are also the completely digitally generated panoramic images that lead in to the various episodes of the film.

They also remind one of the classic English novel, with chapter divisions and headings which herald events.

I collaborated on these images with a Danish artist, Per Kirkeby, who used Romantic painting as a base. He is an expert in the field and the result is very interesting. There are many different expressions for Romantic painting. Partly there are those paintings that you can see on walls in people's homes and then there is the more genuine art reserved for museum visitors. Our images have perhaps become more abstract than I'd imagined from the beginning.

Breaking the Waves has a deeply religious background. Why did you want to give the film that?

Probably because I'm religious myself. I'm a Catholic, but I don't worship Catholicism for Catholicism's own sake. I have felt the need to experience a sense of belonging with a religious community, because my parents were convinced atheists. I flirted with religion quite a bit as a youngster. You perhaps search for a more extreme religion as a youngster. You either go to Tibet or seek out the most rigorous of all faiths. With total abstinence and such like. I think I have a more Dreyer-like view of the whole thing. Because Dreyer's religious view is in essence humanistic. He also accuses religion in all his films. Religion is accused, but not God. It's like that as well in *Breaking the Waves*.

You describe religion as a power structure in the film. The mechanics and enigma of power are things that you have treated in several of your films.

My intention has not been to criticise a particular religious community, such as the one that exists in this Scottish environment. That doesn't interest me. That is far too simplistic. And it's nothing I want to concern myself with. To adopt a viewpoint that is easily accessible and universally applicable. That's like fishing in shallow water. In many ways I also have an understanding for – or rather, *that* – people are engaged by spiritual questions and that they are so in an extreme manner. It is just that, if you want to create a melodrama, you have to furnish it with certain obstacles. And religion provided a suitable obstacle.

You have several times named Dreyer as a source of inspiration. Has he been that even here?

Yes, probably films like *The Passion of Joan of Arc* and *Gertrud* have had their relevance in connection to *Breaking the Waves*. His films are naturally more academic, more refined. What is new for me is that a woman is at the centre of the story. All of Dreyer's films have a woman as the central character. And a suffering woman besides. The original title was actually to be *Amor omnie* (i.e. 'Love is Omnipresent'), the motto Gertrud wanted on her gravestone in Dreyer's film. But when my producer heard that title, he almost hit the roof. He found it difficult to imagine that anyone would want to see a film called *Amor omnie*.

Something that unites most of your earlier films is irony. But you don't feel an ironical stance here.

When I was in film school, it was said that all good films were characterised by some form of humour. All films except Dreyer's! Many of his films are thoroughly vacuum-cleaned of humour. You could say that when you introduce humour to your work, you also step back a little from it. You create a distance. Here I didn't want to distance myself from the strong emotions that the story and its characters contain.

I think that this strong emotional engagement was very important for me. Because I grew up in a home, a culturally radical home, where strong emotions were forbidden. The members of my family that I've shown the film to have also been severely critical toward it. My brother thought the film was indifferent and tedious and my uncle saw the whole thing as an abject failure from beginning to end. But with my earlier films, he supported me in all possible ways. So perhaps *Breaking the Waves* is my adolescent revolt.

Interview by Stig Björkman, *Sight and Sound*, October 1996