

LARS VON TRIER:
THE IMPOSSIBILITY OF THE GOOD AS A WORK

Many philosophers have paid a great deal of attention to Plato's assertion in the sixth Book of *The Republic* that 'the Good is not essence, but far exceeds essence in dignity and power'¹. Now, one can only understand a philosopher by meeting her where she begins. F.W.J. von Schelling once wrote: 'If one wants to honor a philosopher, then one must grasp him here, in his fundamental thought, where he has not yet gone on to the consequences. ... The *true* thought of a philosopher is precisely his fundamental thought from which he proceeds'² What is true of the philosopher is also true of the film director, who often becomes entranced and traumatized by one image³ that never releases its grip. This article will show that the one constant pervading the films of Danish filmmaker Lars von Trier is the impossibility of the Good as a work, i.e. as a 'good work' accomplished by the autonomy of the agent. In short, this work aims to show that von Trier criticizes any conception of the Good as a work wrought by and appropriateable by an agent, and instead offers an account of the Good as something that can only occur through self-effacing, self-sacrificial patients who become transparencies for the operativity of the Good itself

Von Trier regularly depicts characters - at least when they are men - who attempt to enact the Good as a work of their own and yet find themselves unable to do so, at least not by means of their own agency. If he represents humanity as depraved, this is because we are estranged from the Good, at least as a result of our own work. If his images are ironic and iconoclastic, and his female Christ-figures self-effacing,⁴ it is because the Good can be neither captured by an image

¹ Plato. *Republic*. 509b.

² F.W.J. Schelling. *System of Transcendental Idealism*. Translated by Peter Heath. (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1978), 130.

³ Ironically, many, if not most of von Trier's films, insofar as they are iconoclastic, attempt to dispense with the visual aspect, i.e. images, and institute themselves as something textual, e.g. as novels. This can be seen from the fact that his trilogy on America - Land of Opportunities - employed sparse, Brechtian sets with words printed on the stage in lieu of an actual object or image. Also, both the Golden Heart Trilogy and the America Trilogy are split up into chapters and prologues with titles and subtitles, as if one were reading a novel rather than watching a film or even a play. Von Trier is, as it were, as the great iconoclast that he is, a writer first and a cinematographer second. Said differently, his great cinematographic skills are normally employed in an iconoclastic or self-effacing way. One must be hypnotized and mesmerized so as to no longer take note of the images and rather become immersed in the textuality of his films. In this sense, he heeds quite well the Platonic injunction against images. All the themes mentioned in this note, however, can only hope to find justification throughout the rest of this article.

⁴ While von Trier does feature men rather women in the films *Element of Crime*, *Epidemic* and *Europa* they are hardly heroes, not even tragic heroes. Unlike the heroines - or are

nor appropriated by an agent. If he emphasizes the heteronomy (i.e. their pathic or affective character, as pathetic rather than antipathetic) of his female Christ-figures over masculine autonomy,⁵ it is because the Good disrupts all individual projects and economies, precluding all arbitrary value-positing by the subject. The argument will focus primarily on the films in which von Trier most poignantly expresses the image of the Good as an impossible work, namely, through the women of the Golden Heart Trilogy (*Breaking the Waves* [1996], *The Idiots* [1998], *Dancer in the Dark* [2000]) as well as *Dogville* (2003). It will also employ, as counterfoil, the films of the Europa Trilogy (*Element of Crime* [1984], *Epidemic* [1987] and *Europa* [1991]) and its masculine protagonists.

ALTERITY AND THE GOLDEN HEART

If one believes that morally good acts cannot stem from self-interest (an autonomous element) but only from altruism and alterity (a heteronomous element), then one already finds oneself on the path to endangering one's identity as a self-posed construction. In the Golden Heart Trilogy, von Trier depicts his female Christ-figures as de-centered subjects who can only execute their identity⁶ in self-effacement, i.e., in self-denial, rather than through autonomous self-positing. Von Trier breaks with the Kantian tradition, for whom 'the *autonomy* of the will is the sole principle of all moral laws, and of all duties which conform to them; on the other hand, *heteronomy* of the elective will not only cannot be the basis of any obligation, but is, on the contrary, opposed to the principle thereof, and to the morality of the will'.⁷ Von Trier's images propose a different kind of heteronomy, one from which good may come, and which bestows upon one their freedom rather than inhibiting one's freedom.

Bess (Emily Watson), in *Breaking the Waves*, is a simple woman who lives in a strict and austere Christian community. There are no bells in her church and no music. Her life is subjected to a stifling formalism bereft of sensuality (although

they rather knights of faith? - who will be discussed in this article, when von Trier features men - however rarely - in his films they turn out to be unwitting perpetrators rather than heroic or messianic figures. It seems, for reasons to be discussed at the end of this essay, that only female messiah-figures, i.e. only women, are capable of goodness for von Trier and even they only as transparencies for the Good rather than as agents who enact the Good as a work of their own.

⁵ In this vein, autonomy operates in the traditional Kantian sense as giving oneself the law or the directive for one's life, i.e. self-governance. The ends do not come from outside the subject. Heteronomy, however, is *not* to be understood in the Kantian manner. Heteronomy here - a good heteronomy - will not have to do with ends and objectives offered by some object, but with that which comes from an Other, from personal transcendence. For Kant, heteronomy is an impediment to freedom, the tyranny of the object over the autonomy of the subject. In this article heteronomy will acquire a more favorable reading as an alterity that precisely bestows or, better, donates freedom upon the subject instead of enslaving the same.

⁶ The term 'execute' is used with two meanings in mind: 1) the enactment or fashioning of their identity and, because it occurs through self-effacement, self-abnegation; 2) the 'putting to death' of their identity, of themselves, for the sake of the Good.

⁷Immanuel Kant. *Critique of Practical Reason*. Translated by T.K. Abbott. (New York: Prometheus Books, 1996), 49.

Bess herself manifests both an extreme sensibility and susceptibility). The film begins with her wedding to Jan (Stellan Skarsgaard), an outsider who does not share the community's austerity, and represents - for the community at least - a dangerous and indulgent secularism. Jan becomes paralyzed in an oil rig accident and from his hospital bed implores Bess to act as vicar, i.e. vicariously to engage in sexual acts with other men. Her obedience to his requests leads to her death (after being raped and murdered on a ship of savages), but also to Jan's miraculous recovery.

Bess' world leaves little room for an autonomous female. Whatever identity she might fashion for herself must be within the stifling confines of her community. Jan, as outsider, triggers her liberation. Even before his accident, their marriage forced her to choose between her past (i.e. her community and its restrictively heteronomous law) and her future (her allegiance to Jan, the liberating Other). Bess cannot remain uncommitted. Fidelity to Jan, however perversely conceived, leads to ostracism by the community, while fidelity to the community and its values constitutes a betrayal of Jan. While choosing Jan might appear to be an autonomous choice that enables her to construct her own identity outside of the rigid framework of the community, this is not the case. She never sets her own goals and posits her own ends but is consistently obedient, first to her community and then to Jan.⁸ Something or rather *someone*, i.e. alterity, always orients Bess' will, never its own self-governance.

Bess chooses Jan over her community, decisively faithful to his perverse vision, and in so doing she becomes the cipher through which the Good becomes manifest.⁹ Bess could justifiably have done otherwise, perhaps siding with her community instead of Jan (the outsider, the Other), but what is not permitted is that she remain undecided. She cannot decide for both. The demand placed upon Bess is not that she autonomously define herself, but that she faithfully sacrifice herself to enact not her own will but the Other's. Her will is efficacious but never her own.

Bess' fidelity is *de facto* good not because of what she chooses, i.e. not because she herself has autonomously selected an appropriate end, but because she chooses with faithful and decisive resolve. The object of her will does not make her holy, but rather the earnestness, resolve and veracity with which she wills, i.e. her simple single-mindedness or purity of heart. Kierkegaard phrases it this way: 'Rather than designating the choice between good and evil, Either/Or designates the choice by which one chooses good and evil or rules them out'.¹⁰ For Kierkegaard, failing to choose earnestly and decisively undercuts this crucial

⁸ This, of course, does not mean that she always blindly follows Jan's commands; for, once convinced that she can save him by boarding this boat full of savages, despite Jan's protests, she carries out this action anyway. Ironically, then, even her 'disobedience' suggests that her will is nevertheless bound to the interest of the Other and not to her own self-interest.

⁹ Note that the Good is not a product of Bess' work but the Good manifests itself. Bess is only the locus at which this occurs.

¹⁰ Søren Kierkegaard. *Either/Or: Part II*. Translated by Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong. (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1987), 169.

distinction and is actually to choose evil, while to choose for good *or* evil, either for wheat or for chaff, is to enact their very disjunction and thus to choose well. Bess chooses well because she single-mindedly wills one thing, irrespective of whether it is the more understandable choice (not to have committed adultery), or an incomprehensible one. Her fidelity is self-effacing because, ironically stated, her decisive resolve to be submissively faithful demands the sacrifice of the subject as self-positing.

Von Trier does not affirm the unbounded freedom of the agent who posits her own projects in perfect autonomy. Bess' suicidal act - a literal self-effacement rather than self-positing - was not committed out of cowardice, surrendering herself to the exigencies of life. Rather, she courageously 'exposed' or 'denuded' herself (figuratively and literally), exhibiting her susceptibility (i.e. passivity, receptivity and capacity to suffer) by heteronomously enacting the will of the Other. Bess' 'passivity' is not unlike the lamb-like passion of the Christ.¹¹ She is only a cipher or medium for, rather than the agent and proprietor of, the Good through traumatic self-sacrifice, by '*suffering from* being good' as her doctor diagnosed the cause of her death. Her identity does not center on the ego and its law but consists in 'passionately' suffering for the sake of the Other. She is a true 'patient' (in the etymological sense) as she passively endures her suffering. Bess is receptive and susceptible to the point of transparency. The Good shines *through* her but not *by* her autonomous agency, not by her own means.

In a similar fashion God speaks not *to* Bess, but *through* her. This is literally portrayed when she adopts a masculine voice in prayer, audibly providing God's answers to her queries. The viewer hears her inner battle, the conflict of her will with God's, realizing that her will is not her own but the Other's. Her voice is not due to her agency but God's. Just before agreeing to have sex with others at Jan's behest, there is a scene in which Jan is sleeping and she answers for Jan in exactly the same manner as God in her prayers. Bess' will is never her own but always an Other's. Bess becomes the locus of the Good at the absolute expense of autonomy; for, she becomes a medium, a sacrificial lamb, nothing other than passive transparency, i.e. pathic receptivity. She is a cipher, surrogate or receptacle for the Good, a bearer of the Good but not its proprietor. She is a surrogate, because she bears a work that is not her own; she has only been graced with this charge.

The Idiots' heroine, even more so than Bess, can only find her identity in relation to the group or community and not through the erection of her own ideals. Karen (Bodil Jorgensen), in an effort either to flee her domestic problems (the death of her son) or to solve them by ostracizing herself from her past life, joins an anti-bourgeois group that 'spazzes' (pretends to be mentally handicapped) in order to alienate themselves from the public, the secular and profane. Eventually,

¹¹ There are scenes in *Breaking the Waves* that explicitly play with this analogy, e.g. when the young boys in the community throw stones at her, i.e. 'stone her', even though she was one of their own. Her act redeemed her own, yet her own, at her burial, refused to recognize her. She was both salvation and curse for her community.

the group's leader, Stoffer (Jens Albinus), stipulates that the condition for belonging to the group is to spaz before family members or colleagues. Karen returns home and spazzes before her parents and siblings, as well as the father of her deceased son. In this anarchic fit, she is eating cake and drinking coffee in the privacy of their home and begins to spew it out of her mouth, as if regurgitating uncontrollably.

This, however, is her second episode of spazzing. Once earlier she spazzed, seemingly without volition, as if a state merely lapsed into, when she began to act childishly while sitting in the window of the commune. The members took her to a swimming pool, gathered around her and congratulated her as she continued to spaz. The scene is clearly reminiscent of a baptismal scene, as von Trier makes a habit of presenting social, political and economic issues alongside religious and theological issues. Assuming that Karen is meant to be viewed as a feminine Savior, one could view this as her baptism with water while her second and decisive episode would be the baptism of the spirit, redemptive not only of herself but justifying the entire group despite its ultimate diaspora.

The film presents a thought experiment about the possibility of living apart from institutional society, only to reveal the internal contradictions of this enterprise. The want-to-be anarchists cannot extricate themselves from society without falling prey to the organizational tendency themselves by degenerating into a splinter group. The film forcefully shows the all-pervasive effect of the group on the identity of its individuals as well as criticizing identity-politics. Even when Karen successfully extricates herself from institutional life and identity politics, her ostracism follows the dissolving of her newly found commune of idiots. Her act, as the only successful case of spazzing before loved ones, distances her even from this group of idiots in order that she stand isolated as an absolute individual, outside the crowd and alone before the responsibility that is hers to bear. She becomes Kierkegaard's Knight of Faith who has abandoned the crowd as well as the autonomy and mediation of the ethical to enter into solicitude before the Other, where there is no third party to offer counsel.

Karen cannot autonomously formulate her own identity, but she only negatively repudiates the given. *Prima facie*, her identity consists in a No and not a Yes. Admittedly, her friend, Susan (Anne Louise Hassing), witnesses her final exorcism from her former husband, but this friend is not a confidant but only a witness to Karen's individuality and solitude. Karen's identity is intimately her own because she elides identification with *any* crowd. Linda Badley argues that she dissociates herself of the prevailing social order, writing that '[Karen] has broken free of her family's patriarchal order...a rift in the symbolic order, disrupting the phallic economy...'.¹²

Karen only affirms herself ('self-affirmation' is not at all the same as the self-positing and self-governance of autonomy) by decisively rejecting everything else. She does not escape the demands of community by creating her identity atomistically; for, to escape the community is to presuppose it. In saying 'No' she

¹² Linda Badley. *Lars von Trier*. (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2010), 69.

ironically affirms that the community first sets the parameters to be broken, the rhetoric to be repudiated and the rituals to be flouted; she is an *iconoclast*. Even, Diogenes, that mad dog and Cynic (note the capitalization: against his own desires he too belongs to a school), remains in debt to the institutional and sectarian as long as his aim is merely negatively to repudiate the same. Rather, to become what Nietzsche's calls The Child, the child must not merely protest against one's tormentors that one is not an idiot, gay, girl etc.,¹³ but one must affirm something positive as well. Karen's affirmation of her individuality is not a vacuous, autonomous self-positing from nowhere but a local, situational and determinate denial of the given *for the sake of* a greater good. Karen's sacrifice is just as great as Bess'. She does not appropriate as her own the act by which she fixes her identity but expropriates it; she sacrifices nothing other and nothing less than herself and yet without simply surrendering herself in cowardice. She acquires her identity by absolving herself of affiliations; she is the true cynic and the true iconoclast. She becomes holy by setting herself apart as she who can no longer be touched and defiled because she has purged herself of the profane, i.e. the public and secular. Her last act of spazzing is such a purging, an expropriative spewing from her mouth that which had become distasteful.

Dancer in the Dark's Selma (Björk) is a blind immigrant and single mother who works at a factory to save money for an eye operation for her son, who will otherwise surely go blind. Her neighbor, Bill (David Morse), facing financial crisis, steals her money, forcing Selma to shoot him to reacquire it. Selma stands trial for his murder and refuses to spend the money she has saved for her son on a lawyer in order that she might avoid the death penalty. The film, a musical melodrama, ends with her hanging.¹⁴

Selma faces a dilemma: either she sacrifices herself or her son will go blind. Her end and objective, of which she single-mindedly only has one, is also not her own. Selma too, albeit differently than Bess and Karen, is determined by transcendence, by heteronomy rather than the immanence of self-interest. None of the three begin in introspection, immanence and interiority in order to actualize themselves in a centrifugal movement, but they all begin with the good of the Other in mind. The foundation of Selma's identity lies not in herself, but it is altruistically determined from the outside inwards, i.e. centripetally or heteronomously. Her identity too consists in its transparent character rather than in autonomous self-affirmation. She is not a centered subject positing herself from the point outwards, but she first has to retreat from the periphery in order to constitute a center at all, in order to acquire subjectivity at all.

¹³ For adults, more likely accusations might be socialist, queer, tree-hugger etc.

¹⁴ This film is von Trier's only musical and yet clearly less operatic than a film like *Epidemic* which repeatedly uses the overture to Wagner's *Tannhäuser* when attempting to give the narrative of the narrative, i.e. the narrative of the film within the film. *Dancer in the Dark* is less a narrative and rather attempts to play more on the viewer's sensibilities. This is not to suggest, however, that this film/musical was merely sentimentalism, i.e. mere melodrama, without criticism. It strongly criticizes American commerce, the health-care system, the judicial system and the death penalty

One does not begin within oneself and then seek transcendence, but one begins in transcendence or outside oneself through a social bond that ties one to the Other before one can even come to one's own. One is bound to the Other prior to any obligations one might have to oneself. Now, Selma's identity, like Bess', has less to do with the nature of her decision than the veracity of her resolve. *What* Selma has chosen is less important than the fact *that* she did so in earnest.¹⁵ Had she lived and done the best she could for her child in a bad situation nobody could have faulted her. She is so decisive that she is not even cognizant of the fact that she is making a choice; for, she is charmingly myopic, blind to the other options. Her blindness is both literal and metaphorical; she lacks the vision to peruse and make other choices. Her decisiveness is not a selection amongst options. As far as Selma is concerned, she could not possibly have done otherwise. Selma's freedom coincides with destiny.

Like Bess and Karen, Selma's identity must be affirmed through negation, in self-sacrifice and self-effacement as an autonomous agent, because iconoclasm and expropriation of oneself are the only means to inner singularity, purgative expulsion the only means to salvific interiorization. Selma's entire existence is an inner retreat from the periphery, the externalities of the world. This means, however, that she begins in, or even as, the periphery. She is blind yet she can always find an inner space into which she may retreat in song and dance. The senses depict the means by which an autonomous agent can exercise his efficacy on the outside world, the tools by which the allegedly at first inner and autonomous agent could enact himself in a centrifugal movement, self-actualization through self-exteriorization. Selma, however, first finds herself already outside herself. She is already bathed in the elements, amongst the periphery.

The song sequences not only show Selma's sensibilities through the aesthetic medium of music, but the music itself is generated by the natural pulsation of the elemental world (even if these 'elements' are often artificially crafted object like train tracks or machines in the factory. For her these objects blend into the music of nature as a whole, as do her own footsteps on the walk down Death Row.) She has little need of the senses or objects of the world as *tools* to help her transcend herself; she is already outside herself. She may lack the sense of vision, but she is nevertheless, like Bess, pure sensibility/sensuality. Often when she is singing

¹⁵ One should again think of Søren Kierkegaard's stages on life's way, particularly the difference between the latter two stages, the ethical and the religious. Kierkegaard takes Abraham's near sacrifice of his son Isaac as the prime example. Most would say that Abraham, by faithfully and resolutely deciding to kill Isaac, would have made the wrong decision, a decision for murder. That Abraham decided 'unwisely' does not speak at all to the resolve and earnestness of his decision (even if it was a poor one). It is for his resolve, his decisiveness, and not on account of that for which he has decided, that Abraham is called the father of faith. See Kierkegaard's *Either/Or* and *Stages on Life's Way*. In like manner here, nobody could have faulted Selma for making a different decision - which would have been a more reasonable and so 'better' decision - but that for which she has decided is, so to speak, irrelevant. It is only relevant for dramatic purposes insofar as it easier to dramatize great faith when one decides for what is unpopular and difficult.

during this musical the song becomes interrupted because she nearly falls off a train track or cuts herself. She is blind not to the world as a ubiquitous element but only to its dangers, its menacing side, its *utilitarian* side. Yet, this is already to depict her inner retreat as well, where she abides in her safe, inner and holy space. Selma begins outside herself but not as an external object in the midst of others. She is blind to the *objects* of the world, as she nearly injures herself working in the factory on more than one occasion.

In her inner retreat, however, one may say that she is essentially iconoclastic insofar as her blindness and myopic inner vision prevent her from ever latching onto the things of the world; she is even resistant to the approaches of a man who genuinely loves her. She is blind not because her eyes have failed her but because she has tunnel vision; she has no peripheral vision, no regard for externalities. She only wills one thing, the well-being of her son, in the purity of her heart. Her center, then, is not herself but her son. Selma never becomes something for herself because her center remains always determined by a veritable heteronomy that, contra Kant but perhaps *pace* Kierkegaard, liberates rather than enslaves.

The three heroines of the Golden Heart are associated with the Good because all sacrifice themselves for the sake of the Other. They instantiate the Good only insofar as they efface themselves, remaining only as transparencies or ciphers. Their propriety consists in dispensing with what they could retain as their own work and property. Insofar as the Good occurs, one cannot properly say that Bess, Karen or Selma enact this work through their own agency, only that they are the locus where the Good deploys itself, where transcendence breaks into immanence. These three show that all attempts to effectuate the Good as a work of one's own, contracting it within one's own economy, fails. They are not to be looked *at* but only *through*. They are transparencies, i.e. sacraments, which implies a moment of iconoclasm, the sacrificial effacement of the medium itself, in order that the bearer of transcendence may never be conflated with transcendence itself.¹⁶

ICONOCLASM AND NIHILISM

Iconoclasm - a theme in almost all of von Trier's films - as a form of active nihilism¹⁷ does not render the holy barren. Quite the contrary, it reveals the holy, exposing what is hidden under the external form and appearance. Iconoclasm, properly understood, is an ironic apparatus that functions *per contrarium* (through its opposite). Von Trier is a master at making his points *per contrarium*, e.g. by depicting goodness through evil consequence or sacramentality through

¹⁶ Note Paul Tillich's Protestant Principle as outlined in his *Dynamics of Faith*. (New York: Harper & Row, 1965). The kerygmatic element always protests against the medium that may erect itself in opposition to the thing it proclaims by idolatrously confusing itself with the reality symbolized.

¹⁷ I am here alluding to Nietzsche's distinction between active and passive nihilism. The active type destroys in order to allot space for new creation and the passive type is destruction for destruction's sake.

an effacing of the sacrament itself. He depicts what is good and holy through the nihilistic or destructive tendency of iconoclasm. The medium is sacramental only if *broken*. It must point beyond itself. Von Trier's images are broken, iconoclastic images. The ideal form of the medium - be it sacrament, film or text - must be effaced, rendered indifferent or destroyed so that the reality symbolized might break forth rather than remain concealed under the sacrament itself. Any medium that would not point beyond itself conflates itself with the reality which it symbolizes and thus becomes idolatrous. The Good is only efficacious through its opposite or *per contrarium*.¹⁸ The Good appears only by breaking the form, i.e. the medium, that can never contain it.

Perhaps *Dogville* best exemplifies the ironic mode of operating *per contrarium*, inasmuch as it depicts the failure of goodness. The heroine (or anti-heroine), Grace (Nicole Kidman), seeks refuge from her father's (James Caan) gangsters in the seemingly simple town of Dogville. As the story unfolds the ugly underbelly of the town becomes increasingly apparent as Grace is subjected to extortion and unwanted sexual advances. Eventually, Grace takes vengeance upon the town by burning it to the ground, treating its citizens as the dogs they have proven to be. Previously, Grace had attempted to subvert the town's less than desirable values (their reduction of all value to exchange-value, i.e. capitalism) and provide them with something invaluable and irreplaceable: grace.

Von Trier contraposes Grace (as character and concept) against Dogville's profaned conception of the Good as a measureable economic value by offering her services to them as a gratuitous gift. Dogville refuses to accept her offer¹⁹ and demands that she receive monetary compensation for her efforts, even if only a nominal sum. The value and meaning of grace is already cheapened thereby to a debt to be paid, a measureable commodity to be repaid eye-for-eye. Chrysanthi Nigianni is certainly correct in stating, 'The gift has a meaning only as sacrifice; that is, the gift as the pure act of giving, a pure loss or an 'unconditional expenditure' without recovery...'²⁰ Gifts imply sacrifice, giving without reciprocation, without economization. Von Trier's critique of capitalism, then, goes hand in hand with the religious criticism of the Law (as opposed to grace). It is his custom to treat socio-political issues and religious issues in tandem, yet without conflating the two. The Mosaic Law (the dog's name in the film is Moses) doles out punishment in terms of eye-for-an-eye, the perfectly reciprocal economy of one-to-one correspondence.

¹⁸ The relation between iconoclasm and the Real is similar to their relation in David Lynch and the interpretation Slavoj Žižek provides. Žižek interprets this relation between the Ideal and the Real through the lenses of the philosophies of Jacques Lacan (the Real is Lacan's Thing) and Schelling (the Real is the unprethinkable That, naked quoddity). See his *The Indivisible Remainder: On Schelling and Related Matters*. (London: Verso, 2007).

¹⁹ A theme constantly posed by the narrator is whether the people of Dogville are capable of receiving a gift, as if the film were a lesson in acceptance or receptivity.

²⁰ Chrysanthi Nigianni. 'Becoming-Woman by *Breaking the Waves*.' (*New Formations: A Journal of Culture/Theory/Politics*, 2010) (68): 121.

In *Dogville*, the Law, like capitalism, only recognizes exchange-value. Both the Law and capitalism reject a notion of the Good as irreplaceable; everything can find its substitution, its equitable and just price. At first, it appears that Grace's small compensation should not be thought of as wages but rather as a 'reciprocal gift' (were that not an oxymoron),²¹ but this interpretation eventually becomes untenable as Grace becomes enslaved in her labors. She is annexed as an indispensable cog/means for the operation of the town, which is unable to function without her (now no longer gratuitous) work. The religious meaning encroaches upon the economical here, insofar as Grace's treatment at the hands of Dogville's citizens parallels the events of Sodom and Gomorrah. Just like in Sodom and Gomorrah the inhabitants' inhospitality extends as far as rape by every male citizen of the town, save Tom (Paul Bettany) - the useless philosopher - who is nevertheless the one who sells her to her father's men (because she had denied him of her 'other' services). Grace's economic annexation depicts her incorporation as a utility, tool and outlet for the sexual urges of the town's men. It is as if 'the process of her inclusion proceeds in parallel with the process of her submission, her oppression, her exploitation'.²² The reduction of her gift to labor is already rape, even before anyone had ever laid a finger on her.

As a final example of how von Trier's economic and religious critiques overlap, note the image of the apple in the film. The apple represents both the forbidden fruit leading to the Fall of humankind as well as the primary commodity of impoverished Dogville. As the narrator suggests, Grace becomes the apple of temptation for Dogville. The religious and economic critiques overlap because both the Law and capitalism rest on the dictum of eye-for-an-eye, i.e. perfect reciprocity. The surpassing of the Law and the overturning of capitalism - the law of exchange - would require that the entire foundation of reciprocity be uprooted. The Good, then, is not a socio-political good but entirely otherwise, something disruptive of economic recompense, an iconoclasm that shatters its transactions.

In *The Idiots*, von Trier levels his social critique not against capitalism but against an absurd form of anarchy akin to socialism. There, too, exchange-value is depicted as a lamentable form of nihilism, the loss of an irreplaceable, inviolable good. This corrupt good, however, does not annihilate the Good but becomes the mere exterior or façade which the Good must shatter in order to appear. Active nihilism, a destructive moment, belongs to the ironic 'economy' of the Good. Just as Grace initially refused to be corrupted by the system in lieu of using it as an artifice to reveal her own meaning, so too Karen's 'No' against the groups to which she loosely belonged - as daughter, sister and wife - becomes the artifice used as a platform to affirm her authenticity. One commentator writes that for von Trier 'the staging of artifice has as its aim a fascination with the possibility of

²¹ See Jacques Derrida on the gift in his *Given Time, I: Counterfeit Money*. trans. Peggy Kamuf. (London: University of Chicago Press, 1994). and *The Gift of Death*. trans. David Wills. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995).

²² Andrea Brighenti.. 'Dogville, or, The Dirty Birth of Law.' (*Thesis Eleven*, 2006), 106.

authenticity...'²³ It is as if the Good itself requires an artifice to be broken, as if the Good required an iconoclastic moment, as if the Good could only be operative through the denial of its opposite, as if it could only function *per contrarium*. The Good seemingly requires something visible and finite that it might prove to exceed in order to be revealed as invisible and infinite. The Good refuses to be annexed into the system of exchange, the Law of eye-for-an-eye, though it may require it as the artifice to be broken. The Good may appear by subverting the system, the artifice, the Law that enables its own visage. Perhaps the Good can only appear as a broken visage, a broken vessel or sacrament. Iconoclasm makes the Good visible. The Good can only fulfill the Law by nullifying the Law.²⁴ Rules *must* be broken to reveal their true meaning, the spirit of the Law rather than its dead letter.

An iconoclastic moment is necessary because no ideologies, no moral code, no act and no rules, regardless of how praiseworthy they may be, encapsulate the Good. As Bainbridge contends of the Europa Trilogy, 'Von Trier arguably evokes the impossibility of pursing an ideal in the context of the discursive terrain of ideology: the pursuit of an ideal that runs beyond the boundaries of the symbolic order entails taking up an ethical position defined in relation to the space of the other'²⁵This seemingly contradicts von Trier's own words, who once said:

The films that I have made have all had to do with a clash between an ideal and reality. Whenever there's been a man in the lead role, at a certain point this man finds out that the ideal doesn't hold. And whenever it was a woman, they take the ideal all the way.²⁶

It is not significant that women are able to make the ideals 'hold', if that means successfully achieving the ideal. Certainly, his women, save Grace, do seem to have this knack, but does their goodness depend upon their success rate? Is von Trier a consequentialist? Had Jan not recovered, would Bess have been less good? Had Selma's son gone blind, would her act have been profane? What good consequence did Karen bring about? Arguably none!

Ideals must always be shown inadequate as the self-erected ends of an autonomous subject; however, that one has the courage to persist in them, irrespective of the *consequence*, reveals one's inner constitution, one's resolve and purity of heart. This anti-consequentialism is not Kantian, but Kierkegaardian. One should view von Trier's films just as Kierkegaard reads Abraham's sacrifice of his son. Although Isaac was spared at the last minute, one must believe that Abraham still would have sacrificed him had God not intervened. Abraham's

²³ Caroline Bainbridge. *The Cinema of Lars von Trier: Authenticity and Artifice*. (London: Wallflower Press, 2007), 166.

²⁴ Think here of that great subverter, Jesus, who claimed not to have come to nullify the Law, but to fulfill it.

²⁵ Caroline Bainbridge. 'Making Waves: Trauma and Ethics in the Work of Lars von Trier.' (*Journal for Cultural Research*. (8) 2004), 361.

²⁶ Gavin Smith. "Dance in the Dark" in *Lars von Trier: Interviews*. Edited by Jan Lumholdt. (The University Press of Mississippi, 2003), 148-9. (Originally published in *Film Comment* September/October 2000.)

goodness stems from his resolve and not the consequences of his action, namely, whether he actually plunged the knife into Isaac or not. Similarly, whether Jan recovered or not, whether the bells rang in the sky or not, does nothing to change the goodness apparent through Bess' sacrifice. Von Trier's women persist in *impossible* ideals – sometimes, miraculously, making the impossible possible! – but they always approach these ideals *personally* and not as impersonal principles or rules. His women do not relate to neutral and impersonal principles but they relate personally to the face of the Other. Impersonal adherence to an ideal, as something neuter, was precisely the flaw of Grace, the most masculine of his female characters. Hugh S. Pyper asserts, 'By expecting of herself superhuman acceptance, she allows herself to be reduced to something regarded by the people of the town as less than human...',²⁷ something for which Grace's father scolded her in the film's final chapter, accusing her of arrogance for not holding others to her own ethical standards, which are apparently beyond what others could attain. Grace is inhumane because she is impersonal, relating to principles and not to other human beings, to her own ideal as a law without exception rather than to other faces in their fragility.

Of course, when Bainbridge, above, decries ideals, she is speaking of the male protagonists in the Europa Trilogy. She does, however, pronounce a different judgment concerning the women of the Golden Heart Trilogy, one that corresponds to an *ethical* position, defined not by one's autonomous and successful procurement of an ideal but by the personal Other, a traumatic and 'personal heteronomy.' She writes, 'Each of the films of this trilogy [Golden Heart] foregrounds themes of personal trauma but the question of ethics is recast so that it deals not with the notion of ideals but rather with perceptions of goodness.'²⁸ And, '...[T]he "Goldheart" trilogy appears to pursue a moment of transcendence'.²⁹ It is neither individualized ideals nor the power relations operative in ideologies as such that von Trier wishes to depict in the Golden Heart, but it is a 'traumatic perception' of the heteronomous and anterior, of the Good that comes from without. It is precisely (feminine) sensibility, rather than (masculine) discursivity, to the anterior Good – transcendence – which suffers the traumatic and iconoclastic breaking of all ideals and ideologies that might try to violate the Good by discursively inscribing it. The Good is not given as some teleological fulfillment of an end but as the very faltering of the economy of means and ends, as the traumatic perception of the goodness of the Other who escapes one's own economy, one's own autonomous projects. One cannot love agendas and ideals but only concrete faces or as Bess urges in *Breaking the Waves*, 'How can one love a word? One can only love a human being.' Bainbridge states:

In contrast to the films of the 'Europa' trilogy, where the trauma is evoked in terms of the socio-historical framework of the narratives, the trauma at the narrative level in the 'Goldheart'

²⁷ Hugh S. Pyper 'Rough Justice: Lars von Trier's *Dogville* and *Manderlay* and the Book of Amos.' (*Political Theology*, 2010), 332-33.

²⁸ Caroline Bainbridge. 'Making Waves: Trauma and Ethics in the Work of Lars von Trier.' (*Journal for Cultural Research*. (8) 2004), 362-63.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 363.

trilogy is firmly couched within the realm of the personal³⁰...the 'Goldheart' trilogy of films inscribes the subject/other relationship in terms of the 'I/you' (or perhaps 'I/thou') relationship.³¹

Typical of Romanticism's view of genial art,³² which is derived from Kant's notion that 'genius is the innate mental disposition (*ingenium*) through which Nature gives the rule to Art,'³³ is a certain notion of inspiration. With Schelling, the prince of the Romantics, this Kantian notion of geniality becomes the '*identity of the conscious and the unconscious*'.³⁴ Schelling further elaborates, speaking of a power that...

...without our knowledge and even against our will, goals *that we did not envisage*, so likewise that incomprehensible agency which supplies objectivity to the consciousness, without the cooperation of freedom [autonomy], and to some extent in opposition to freedom...is denominated by means of the obscure concept of *genius*.³⁵

The artist, in any event, is certainly not the great manipulator of rational, autonomous calculation, but the transparency through which something other than consciousness appears in consciousness. The conscious artist is inspired, enthused and even traumatized by an unconscious and transcendent origin. In von Trier's world art can be synonymous with a subject de-centered by anonymous drives. Think of Grace who, early in the day before she exacts her vengeance, spontaneously utters, 'Nobody gonna sleep here tonight',³⁶ and then wonders who spoke those anonymous words. Grace does not even possess her own speech-act but is determined by an anonymous textuality.³⁷ As affectivity

³⁰ Derrida also proves useful here, in writing, 'On what condition is responsibility possible? On the condition that the Good no longer be a transcendental objective, a relation between objective things, but the relation to the other, a response to the other; and experience of personal goodness...' (Derrida 1995, 51).

³¹ Ibid., 365.

³² Von Trier certainly loves the Romanticism of Richard Wagner, whose music he uses on a number of occasions.

³³ Immanuel Kant. *The Critique of Judgment*. Translated by J.H. Bernard. (New York: Prometheus Books, 2000), 188.

³⁴ F.W.J. Schelling. *System of Transcendental Idealism*. Translated by Peter Heath. (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1978), 219.

³⁵ Ibid., 222.

³⁶ This is from a Nina Simone song, 'Pirate Jenny,' which was her rendition of a Brecht/Kurt Weill song from Brecht's Threepenny Opera. As is well known, much about the film is in homage to Bertold Brecht.

³⁷ The film that most poignantly portrays the relationship between the textuality and authorship is *Epidemic*. Does the character of the text spring from the identity of the author or does the text determine the identity of the author who, although he may not have chosen this text, must assume ownership for it? In *Epidemic* von Trier, playing himself, shows the viewer the process of making a film. The film he wishes to make concerns a doctor living underground in incubated safety during the time of the plague. Despite the pleas of his fellow doctors to remain in incubation, the doctor resolves to surface in order

before it is a theme or content, cinema itself, von Trier's medium, is a form of hypnosis,³⁸ operative upon consciousness without the subject's autonomous volition. The subject no longer manipulates her actions but she becomes anonymously possessed.

THE GOOD: A WORK OF THE SUBJECT?

In the cinematic world of Lars von Trier, the Good cannot be brought about as a work (or commodity), the possession of an autonomous agent. It must instead appear suddenly as something that happens *through*, rather than as the product of, the agent. If it can be enacted at all, then it must be mediated through its contrary, i.e. ironically.³⁹ In presenting his audience with an image of the de-

to help those in need. His will seems pure enough but he will still fail in his attempt to actuate the Good. One eventually learns that this doctor is actually patient 0 and by leaving incubation contaminates others as the source and cause of the plague. That is the film within the film. In the level of real life within the film, when von Trier's character pitches his film at a dinner party, one of the female participants, upon hearing the proposed story, suffers the effects of the plague herself, screaming violently and uncontrollably. The textuality of the film within the film determined the identity of the original film just as the original film operates hypnotically upon the viewers in the cinema.

³⁸ For more on the role of hypnosis see Greenberg, Udi E. "The Holocaust Repressed: Memory and the Subconscious in Lars von Trier's *Europa*" in *Film & History: An Interdisciplinary Journal of Film and Television Studies*. Vol. 38:1 (Spring 2008) pp. 45-52.

³⁹ Von Trier perhaps illustrates the idea of an action being executed *per contrarium* most lucidly in the second of his films on America, *Manderlay* (2005). This name signifies one of the last remaining slave plantations in the Deep South of America. Grace (Bryce Dallas Howard) witnesses the death of the master and sets the slaves free only to notice that they do not know what to do next, that they do not know how to be free. She therefore decides to stay, i.e. to occupy this plantation in order to teach the liberated freedom and democracy. By the film's end the slaves have proven to be much less oppressed than imagined, demanding that Grace permanently remain as their new master, and Grace, in turn, succumbs to whipping the most defiant one amongst them. Grace would like to bring freedom to the plantation slaves but she finds that her only available recourse is to achieve this end by first instituting a foreign regime upon the newly 'freed' slaves against their own will. She forces democracy and liberty upon them. Von Trier seems to use *Manderlay* as a parallel for the War in Iraq in order to expose the absurdity of the latter. Irony consists in the impossibility of immediately bringing about a desired consequence. The desired consequence is freedom and democracy, but these are only instituted tyrannically from a foreign power. The ironic twist in this film is that the slaves were already autonomous in the literal sense of the term, i.e. they had given themselves the law - Mam's Law - even if it was a law of slavery and oppression. Even more ironically, one could argue that the most institutionalized of the slaves, Willem (Danny Glover), who first formulated Mam's Law, and the one appearing to be the most obstinate and so obverse to freedom, Timothy (Isaach De Bankolé), are the most free. Willem is free in the Kantian sense because he gave himself the law; he was an autonomous, i.e. self-governing, dictator. Timothy is free in Sartrean sense because he is a chameleon, i.e. free *against* his own nature, free to give himself any nature he chooses, free to lie and so free not even to have to be who he is. Timothy's freedom consists in his capacity for subversion; he is the insurrectionist. The slaves, however, are still slaves, even if only slaves to their fear of true freedom. They do indeed prove to be more than their natures, to have given themselves

centered subject, one incapable of full reflection and calculation, von Trier illustrates that the Good is an impossible work or, rather, not a work at all!

Von Trier is obsessed by the goodness of the feminine simpleton and/or idiot (*Golden Heart Trilogy*), and the ignorant intentions of masculinity hypnotized and subject to socio-political relations of power (*Europa Trilogy*). Hypnotized and/or traumatized agents are very ironic agents, agents without agency. Similarly, the entranced film-goer is manipulated and traumatized by the hypnotic images on the screen. The simpleton, the traumatized and/or those brainwashed by an ideal/ideology do not will in full cognizance. Von Trier disparages the reflective agent. Tom, in *Dogville* is the useless philosopher, the sophist, in exactly the sense that Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels criticized, a paralytic incapable of action, and when he finally does act it is to rid his town of that which could not be annexed into his illustration. Tom is pure theory and, therefore – at least up until he delivers Grace over to her father - impotent. His only real action in the whole film proved to be the death of him. Von Trier's female Christ-figures are not knowledgeable but the naïve, bordering on idiocy, while the anti-heroine, Grace, 'knows too much already' as her father tells her in *Manderlay*.

Neither von Trier's golden-hearted females nor his male ideologists can effectuate the Good as a work of their own. The male protagonists fail by becoming victims of the presiding relations of power while the female victims must efface themselves in self-sacrifice. Carleen Mandolfo has commented that '...if von Trier had left his meditations on female suffering at these two films [*Breaking the Waves* and *Dancer in the Dark*], he would have been guilty of perpetuating Christianity and Judaism's long history of misogynistic and masochistic teachings. His rendering of female subjectivity within a 'hermeneutic of sacrifice' results in a troubling sanctification of female suffering.'⁴⁰ Let it first be noted that Mandolfo conspicuously omits *The Idiots*' female protagonist, Karen, from her statement; for, Karen, more so than Bess or Selma, takes charge of her life rather than remaining a victim. She seems to pronounce her 'No' against the powers that be rather than acquiesce to them. Certainly, at least Karen escapes from the 'hermeneutic of sacrifice' imposed upon female subjectivity.

Mandolfo's criticism (and implicit condemnation) of von Trier as patriarchal and/or misogynistic misses the point. Von Trier's images indicate a way of transcending institutional hegemonies, be they economic (the critique of capitalism in *Dogville*), socio-political (the critique of institutionalism in *The Idiots*), religious (the critique of formalism, legalism and Pharisaism in *Breaking the Waves*) or ideological (Bess' and Selma's absurd self-sacrifices in *Breaking the Waves* and *Dancer in the Dark*). It matters not that the hegemonic structures would be ironically corroborated by re-entrenching the value of female sacrifice and

their own essence in the existentialist sense, but von Trier still presents them as not yet free to do the Good, i.e. without grace.

⁴⁰ Carleen Mandolfo. 'Women, Suffering and Redemption in Three Films of Lars von Trier.' (*Literature & Theology*. (24) 2010), 286.

suffering, because these laws are not to be eradicated so much as exploded from within. Von Trier's images iconoclastically break (*open*) the *letter* of the old law, the old regime, by ironically fulfilling the *spirit* of the law. Just as genial art breaks its rules only in order to affirm the spirit of art,⁴¹ so here, albeit inversely, von Trier does not attempt to reform traditional notions of femininity and masculinity, but he does subvert these same values.

Here is a genuine transvaluation of values and not just a mere destruction of values! This is an active nihilism, in the Nietzschean sense,⁴² that hopes for the Good and not a passive nihilism that is merely destructive. In Nietzsche's own words:

- A. Nihilism as a sign of increased power of the spirit: as *active* nihilism.
- B. Nihilism as decline and recession of the power of the spirit: as *passive* nihilism.⁴³

Active nihilism can flout the letter of the law, the externality or form of the image, and yet increase its efficacy in spirit. Passive nihilism destroys the prevailing structures and institutions while affirming nothing in the process, leaving only vacuous rubble in its wake. Iconoclasm is an example of active nihilism because it breaks the exterior in order to elevate the interior meaning. Iconoclasm breaks inside-out; it ex-plodes or breaks *open*. It does not implode for the sake of mere destruction.

Using *Breaking the Waves* as the litmus test, Mandolfo admits:

The commentators are mostly split between those who read Bess's 'goodness' as a good that suggests an unproblematic subjectivity and those who view her 'goodness' as a screen obscuring the patriarchal structures that underwrite her suffering... because this film conflates patriarchy and divinity in complicated, but undeniable ways, this question has both political and theological repercussions...⁴⁴

⁴¹ Von Trier explores this theme quite elaborately in *The Five Obstructions* (2003) in which he charges his mentor with the task of remaking the same film five times, but each time under a different obstacle, e.g. as a cartoon or at a certain setting. The final obstacle is to make the film without rules at all, which proves to be the most difficult of all.

⁴² By no means is the suggestion that von Trier is managing the co-existence of traditional theological themes with Nietzschean nihilism, which would prove to be a tenuous marriage indeed. Rather, if one may permit a great deal of speculative license, the suggestion is that von Trier's theology - if he has one - is far from traditional in erecting a God only capable of manifestation iconoclastically, a God only capable of reigning over a world of terrors, only capable of appearing over a wasteland, only operative by means of the violence of iconoclasm and nihilism. The very being of von Trier's God's, as it were, would be a theodicy itself, a God that has as the condition of his being the violence of iconoclasm and abyss of meaninglessness.

⁴³ Friedrich Nietzsche *The Will to Power*. Translated by Walter Kaufmann and R.J. Hollingdale. (New York: Vintage Books, 1968), 17.

⁴⁴ Carleen Mandolfo. 'Women, Suffering and Redemption in Three Films of Lars von Trier.' (*Literature & Theology*. (24) 2010), 3: 290.

The problem with this reading lies in her assumption that because von Trier presents political and theological themes in tandem that they must therefore be conflated. The theological and ethical issues of goodness, the goodness of the golden heart, remain untouched and undefiled by external and peripheral socio-political exigencies. This *separation* rather than conflation, in fact, is very much von Trier's point. His female Christ-figures remain *internally* pure and free of the dominant *external* structures of power. The Good of the golden heart supersedes all external conditions. Mandolfo is fond of making claims like the following:

Throughout history racial and gender minorities have been expected to embrace a sacrificial model of devotion for themselves that participates in the understanding of white male privilege as inevitable and 'natural.' ... Von Trier's valorization of his female protagonists' sacrifice is... the best evidence yet that atonement theology can provide a shield for oppression and pathological self-abuse - especially when the sacrificial victim is gendered female.⁴⁵

In pronouncing such condemnations she only offers a political, social and economic reading⁴⁶ while remaining blind to the ethical and theological aspect: the golden heart. In agreeing with the position espoused here, Bainbridge has hyperbolically written that Bess 'transcends the *petty* [emphasis mine] concerns of class-based patriarchal politics and their vested manifestations of power' and that 'power can be based on belief rather than on structure of class and hegemonically-defined exchanges of power'.⁴⁷ Linda Badley adds, "In contrast to Trier's male figures - who simply fail *at* power relations - his excessively 'good' women oppose power..."⁴⁸ I do not wish to dismiss Mandolfo's concerns as 'petty', but I do find that emphasis on these concerns to the exclusion of ethical and theological issues, which are irreducible to political and social conditions, misses the point.

As a final example of Mandolfo's insistence on permitting only the political reading - or, worse still, *subsuming* the ethical and theological readings into the political - note the following comment on *Dogville*: 'The unconditional love, forgiveness and mercy Grace bestowed on the town of Dogville did nothing to resolve her suffering, nor did it bring salvation or enlightenment to those she

⁴⁵ Ibid., 292.

⁴⁶ ⁴⁷ In this vein, von Trier has been quoted as saying that he normally does not have political intentions. 'I don't believe that you can do that in films... But if you make the films personal, then that will also of course reflect your political point of view' (Badley 2010, 164). He also arguably distances himself from his father in this way, who 'worked in the Department of Social Affairs, whose main task was to take care of people and their needs. But he believed that this was the responsibility of politicians, not charities' (Björkman 2003, 105).

⁴⁷ Caroline Bainbridge. *The Cinema of Lars von Trier: Authenticity and Artifice*. (London: Wallflower Press, 2007), 131-2.

⁴⁸ Linda Badley. *Lars von Trier*. (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2010), 71.

loved. In other words, there is *nothing meaningful* about her suffering...'⁴⁹ Mandolfo proves to be a rigorous externalist or, better, consequentialist. Because no external factors were altered, because the situation did not improve, that has apparently rendered Grace's prior attempts at goodness *obsolete*. Had Jan died in *Breaking the Waves* and Selma's son in *Dancer in the Dark* gone blind, i.e. even if the consequences had been tragic, would one judge these characters differently? Would they have been less good on account of this? Bainbridge contends, 'Arguably, von Trier's work is foregrounding the potential of the feminine as that which has been consistently proscribed from the discursive framework of a masculinist order to function as a channel for the *transcendence* [emphasis mine] of the humanistic view of the subject.'⁵⁰ Von Trier does not need to abandon the traditional patriarchal and masculinist framework to highlight feminine goodness. They are not in conflict, but the former is the exterior required simply in order to be iconoclastically broken by the latter, feminine interiority. This is certainly not the interiority of self-positing autonomy, namely, masculine interiority, but interior transcendence or alterity. As Kierkegaard proclaims, 'The paradox of faith is that there is an interiority that is incommensurable with exteriority.'⁵¹ The interiority of the golden heart is not concealed and suppressed by masculinist and patriarchal structures but, quite the contrary, these structures are the very conditions to be broken, exploded from the inside out. Without that artifice the golden heart would have no medium, i.e. no artifice, by which it could manifest its interiority. The exterior conditions falter in vein in their attempt to circumscribe an interiority incommensurable with the exterior, too great and too noble for the exterior - the interiority of the golden heart.

One must persist in believing that exterior conditions, e.g. political, economic and social institutions, can neither circumscribe nor preclude the Good. This is a temptation von Trier does well to resist. He reveals the Good as that which breaks exterior rules and structures, the encapsulating form and political exterior, manifesting itself as 'incommensurable with the exterior.' Iconoclasm, traumatic self-effacement before transcendence, and active nihilism: these are the apparatuses of the Good.

This article has argued that von Trier's images symbolize the Good as an impossible work of the autonomous agent, i.e., as something that is not a 'work' at all. His so-called agents are rather patients, heteronomously subjected by alterity, be it the personal Other (who traumatizes his female figures) or the anonymous textuality that is the ideology operative as the prevailing socio-political milieu that obfuscates the intentions of his male protagonists. Even his feminine Christ-figures have not done the work of the Good as if it were a product of their own volition, but they are merely the sensible receptacle *through* which the Good anonymously occurs. In short, the Good is never a possession or

⁴⁹ Carleen Mandolfo. 'Women, Suffering and Redemption in Three Films of Lars von Trier.' (*Literature & Theology*, (24) 2010), 3: 298.

⁵⁰ Caroline Bainbridge. 'Making Waves: Trauma and Ethics in the Work of Lars von Trier.' (*Journal for Cultural Research*, (8) 2004), 3: 366.

⁵¹ Søren Kierkegaard. *Fear and Trembling/Repetition*. Translated by Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong. (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1983), 69.

work of our own, but it rather possesses us and, sometimes, even iconoclastically annihilates us.

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