



**A University of Sussex DPhil thesis**

Available online via Sussex Research Online:

<http://sro.sussex.ac.uk/>

This thesis is protected by copyright which belongs to the author.

This thesis cannot be reproduced or quoted extensively from without first obtaining permission in writing from the Author

The content must not be changed in any way or sold commercially in any format or medium without the formal permission of the Author

When referring to this work, full bibliographic details including the author, title, awarding institution and date of the thesis must be given

Please visit Sussex Research Online for more information and further details

**‘A Film Should Be Like a Stone in Your Shoe’:**

**A Brechtian Reading of Lars von Trier**

**Angelos Koutsourakis**

**DPhil**

**University of Sussex  
July 2011**

I hereby declare that this thesis has not been and will not be submitted in whole or in part to another University for the award of any other degree.

Signature.....

University of Sussex

Angelos Koutsourakis DPhil English Literature.

‘A Film Should Be Like a Stone in Your Shoe’: A Brechtian Reading of Lars von Trier.

Abstract

This central premise of this thesis is that Lars von Trier is a political director. Through a detailed formal analysis of five films I proceed to discuss the political implications of form, something that has not been acknowledged by scholarship so far. In this thesis, I employ Brecht as a methodological tool so as to discuss the shift from a dialectical cinema devoted to the production of knowledge effects, to a post-Brechtian one that brings together points of tension that remain unresolved.

Chapter 1 proceeds to a historical evaluation of Brecht’s reception in film theory and considers the ways that Brecht’s theory and practice can address the cinematic and political concerns of the present. The chapter also locates von Trier under the rubric of the post-Brechtian by comparing him to past film practices.

Chapter 2 moves to a discussion of von Trier’s *Europa* trilogy and focuses on issues of historical representation. Emphasis is placed on formal elements that challenge the narrative laws of classical cinema. The chapter argues that von Trier follows Brecht’s mistrust of a historical representation based on pictorial verisimilitude, without however sharing his forward-looking politics and his view of history as Marxist science.

Chapter 3 discusses *Dogme 95* and *The Idiots* (1998). Firstly, the chapter discusses Dogme’s combination of a political modernist rhetoric with a realist one and places Dogme’s return to the past in a historical context. Secondly, the chapter considers the role of performance as a formal and thematic element in *The Idiots*. I draw attention to the ways that the camera becomes performative and brings together material of dramaturgical importance with moments that are the product of cinematic contingency. My discussion is very much informed by contemporary post-Brechtian performance and film studies invested in the discussion of ‘corporeal cinema’.

Chapter 4 discusses *Dogville*, a film with obvious references to Brecht. Unlike previous readings, I shift the emphasis from the film’s assumed ‘Anti-Americanism’ and proceed to a formal analysis that can rethink the film’s politics and innovations.

While Brecht has been thought to be as a fleeting presence in von Trier’s films by most critics, this thesis suggests that our knowledge of von Trier’s formal innovations can be deepened and enlivened by discussing them in conjunction with Brecht’s theory. By returning to Brecht, we can also rethink the importance of form as the key to a film’s politics.

## **Contents**

<b>Acknowledgements</b>	vi
<b>Notes to the Text</b>	vii
<b>Introduction</b>	1
<b>Chapter 1 — Brecht’s Position in Film Theory and Practice</b>	
Brecht on the Film Medium	21
Brecht’s Critique of the Institution of Cinema	31
Brecht’s Theory as the Road to Film Radicalism	34
Rethinking the Cinematic Institution	43
Defining Post-Brechtian Cinema	48
Straub/Huillet and Fassbinder: Two Different Tendencies	53
Locating von Trier in Post-Brechtian Cinema	66
<b>Chapter 2 — Historical Fragments in the Europa Trilogy</b>	
Introduction	70
Accumulation of Visual and Narrative Materials	79
Epistemological Uncertainty	91
<i>Epidemic</i> : Literalization of the Medium. The Essay as Film Form	98
History as Transition	115
On Film Voyeurism	124
<b>Chapter 3 — Rethinking Realism: Dogme 95 and <i>The Idiots</i></b>	
Dogme 95: Ascetic Realism and Anti-Illusionism	132
Technology and Productivity	138
Dogme 2: <i>The Idiots</i> : The Film’s ‘Performant	151

Function	
Performative Camera	156
Interrupting the Narrative	161
Performance as the Subject and the Object of the Film	168
Characters as Bodily Effects	175
Performing out of Character	179
 <b>Chapter 4 — <i>Dogville</i>: Theatricality as Experimentation</b>	
Representation as an Experiment	185
Theatricality	202
Performativity and Performative Contradictions	213
Narrative Openness	227
 <b>Conclusion: Dialogue with the ‘Dissensual’ Past</b>	234
 <b>Appendix</b>	
<b>Illustrations by Chapter</b>	
Chapter 2	240
Chapter 3	252
Chapter 4	258
<b>Interviews</b>	
Interview with Lars von Trier	267
Interview with Alexander Kluge: Brecht Today	276
<b>Manifestoes</b>	
MANIFESTO 1	280
MANIFESTO 2	282

MANIFESTO 3 – I Confess!	283
The Dogme 95 Manifesto and the Vow of Chastity	285
“Defocus	288
The Dogumentary Manifesto	289
<b>Bibliography</b>	291

### **Acknowledgements**

This thesis would not have been possible without the help and support of a great deal of people. Firstly, I am most grateful to my supervisors, David Barnett and John David Rhodes. Their patient readings and their merciless criticism have been a context in which I have been very fortunate to work. David made me understand Brecht beyond the limits of Orthodox Brechtianism, while J.D. taught me to think of films as more complex objects and not as materials that justify predetermined philosophical ideas.

I am most grateful to the Danish Agency for International Education for funding my writing year and giving me the chance to spend ten months in Denmark as a guest researcher at the University of Copenhagen. Many thanks also to the department of Media, Cognition and Communication at the University of Copenhagen. My deep gratitude goes to Lars von Trier who allowed me to interview him and to his secretaries Katrine Sahlstroem and Emilie Spliid. I would also like to thank von Trier and Zentropa Productions for allowing me to incorporate the former's Manifestoes along with stills from the films I discuss. I am very grateful to Alexander Kluge, who also gave me an interview. I am indebted to Beata Wiggen for organising this interview.

During my stay in Copenhagen, I was lucky enough to discuss von Trier's films with Peter Schepelern. These discussions have greatly deepened my understanding of von Trier's cinema. Peter was very generous with his time and always there to share his knowledge. I am also grateful to him for setting up my interview with Lars von Trier. There are also some people at the University of Copenhagen, whose help and support was invaluable. Tine Weidick and Nete Nørgaard Kristensen were always there to help me with any practicalities. Jespe Kappel from the University's audiovisual archive provided me with materials that have enriched my knowledge of von Trier's cinema. Camilla Dindler and Eva Novrup Redvall were always there to share my concerns about the project. Giannis Stamatellos' companionship was the beginning of a good friendship and intellectual collaboration.

I am indebted to Nikolaj Lubecker for sending me his article on *Dogville*, which is currently in press. I would also like to thank the staff at the University of Sussex and in particular Margaret Reynolds. I am also grateful to Darrow Schecter for our long discussions on Critical Theory. The help of friends has also been indispensable. Amongst them, Peter Blake, Martin Trigg-Knight, Karin Berg, David Tucker, Tatiana Kontou, Seda Ilter, Alex Pestell, Manolis Galelianos, Katie Reid, Karen Veitch, and John Caddle helped me keep my sanity throughout the project. Thanks also to Mary Davou for reading a first draft of the thesis. My deep gratitude goes to my family for their emotional and financial support. Many thanks to my brother, Vangelis Koutsourakis, for introducing me to the films of Lars von Trier. Lastly, my gratefulness to my partner, Eszter Katona, for her support and for sharing a passion for European Art Cinema.

**Notes to the Text**

UK English is used throughout the text. Quotations using American English remain unchanged.

All illustrations (in the appendix) and Lars von Trier's Manifestoes are courtesy of Lars von Trier and Zentropa Productions.

In each chapter, I put in parenthesis the release year of the films only the first time I refer to them. Similarly, references to characters from the films are accompanied by the actors' names in parentheses only the first time they are mentioned.

## Introduction

### Aims: Politics as Form in Lars von Trier

The central premise of this thesis is that Lars von Trier is a political director and a formal study of his films can reveal their dialectical aspect, something that has not been acknowledged by scholarship so far. The title of the thesis refers to a quotation from his second feature film *Epidemic* (1987), in which von Trier – who performs himself – reflects on the filmmaking process and firmly asserts that ‘a film should be like a stone in your shoe’.<sup>1</sup> This quotation has either been ridiculed by the popular press or has been used as a means of strengthening the understanding of von Trier as a ‘provocateur’, an egocentric director who wants to be in the spotlight. This emphasis on the director’s persona is largely responsible for the overlooking of the political implications of the films’ form.

This thesis follows a different line of argument and aims at discussing formal aspects of von Trier’s films that can be understood politically. By the term political cinema, I understand a formal elaboration of the subject-matter that is concerned with changeability. Thus, instead of reproducing a static view of history, social relationships and ethics, political cinema is interested in historicising them and showing them as susceptible to change. In this way, my understanding of politics in cinema is not informed by a *modus operandi* that produces political content. A broader definition would acknowledge that all films are political, since consciously or unconsciously they propagate certain values, beliefs and evaluations of certain aspects of social reality. A more useful definition would understand as political, objects that employ formal elements

---

<sup>1</sup> Von Trier quoted in *Epidemic* dir. by Lars von Trier (1987) (Electric Parc, 2005) [on DVD].

that are concerned with representing and not reproducing reality. Seen through the prism of this definition, political cinema aims at ‘de-naturalising’ our perception of the world and revealing its constructedness instead of treating it as ‘normal’ and ‘permanent’.<sup>2</sup>

The logical question that arises is how cinema can achieve this effect. Very schematically, I suggest that the prerequisite for rendering social reality and relationships as changeable is a film practice that starts by questioning the means of its own articulation. By challenging the established film language and the standardised subject and object relationships, one asks the audience to make the dialectical leap from the habitual perception of film as a reflectionist medium, to one that understands it as a medium which employs aesthetic practices that shape our understanding of the real. In this way, one does not offer the audience ‘an eternal and unchangeable picture of the world’, but she/he shows the world in its changeability.

Changing a medium’s function so as to render the familiar strange is the cornerstone of the theory and practice of Bertolt Brecht, whose writings were hugely influential in film theory and practice from 1968 until the late 1970s. Brecht’s radicalism resided in his conviction that the political implications of the medium do not rest on the reproduction of political subject-matter. Quite the opposite, Brecht suggested that changes in social and historical reality demand new modes of representation that are not keen on reproducing reality as one experiences it in every-day life. Brecht advocated formal abstraction that would guarantee a distance between reality and representation, so as to politicise aspects of social life that one considers as apolitical. The prerequisite for

---

<sup>2</sup> As I proceed to explain below, the process of de-naturalisation describes Brecht’s work who considers that one needs to make the audience think of the real not as self-evident but as subject to process, since reality is socially constructed. The process of de-naturalisation has its origins in the Russian Formalist idea of the *ostranerie*, which as Fredric Jameson says describes the ‘opposition between habituation and perception’. See Jameson, *The Prison House of Language: A Critical Account of Structuralism and Russian Formalism* (Princeton, Chichester: Princeton University Press, 1972), p.50.

‘denaturalising’ the audience’s view of the world was the questioning of the medium’s language.

Embedded in his will to change the medium was an interest in revealing that the reproduction of the experiential aspect of reality fails to grasp the ‘real’ processes and historical developments taking place. Viewed from this standpoint, Brecht’s aesthetics intended to deconstruct the reality that one experiences with her/his direct senses into its social/historical laws. The ultimate aim was that the audience would question the portrayed reality and the established tropes one uses to make sense of the drama. This politicised aesthetic introduced the idea that social relationships and history cannot be simply perceived dramatically. Drama presupposes processes that can be understood in terms of subjects and individuals, whereas capitalism valorises processes that take place at the level of the masses.<sup>3</sup>

In this thesis, Brecht’s theory is the methodological tool that I employ so as to identify the political implications of form in certain films of Lars von Trier. I suggest that our knowledge of von Trier’s formal experiments can be deepened and enlivened by discussing them in conjunction with Brecht’s theory. Furthermore, this thesis stages an attempt to explore the filmic applications of Brecht’s theory in a historical reality where Brecht’s certainties are not applicable. In this context, the thesis takes von Trier as an example of a director that pushes forward certain aspects of Brecht’s theory and practice and makes us rethink the widely used and at times abused epithet ‘Brechtian’, when it comes to the art of cinema.

Let us first briefly discuss von Trier’s stance towards Brecht and politics in cinema. Despite the fact that the thesis is not concerned with identifying Brecht’s ‘influence’ on von Trier, I consider it instructive to demonstrate the latter’s awareness of

---

<sup>3</sup> See Bertolt Brecht, ‘Against Georg Lukács’, trans. by Stuart Hood, in *New Left Review*, 84:1 (1974), pp.39-53, here p.40.

Brecht's theory and practice as well as to investigate his views on form as the key to one's understanding of a film's politics. In an interview given after the editing of *Dogville* (2003) – which along with *Manderlay* (2005) is the only film that has been critically received as 'Brechtian' – von Trier explains that the film was inspired by Brecht and when asked about him he said:

Brecht was something of a domestic God when I was growing up, whereas my generation has tended to view him as a rather old-fashioned genius. Fashions and tastes are constantly changing, of course... I experienced Brecht's dramas at a fairly young age and have never returned to him or his work. They exist in my memory mostly as feelings and atmospheres.<sup>4</sup>

Similarly, in an interview after the completion of *Manderlay*, von Trier discussed the film's formal austerity in relation to Brecht's practice. As he says:

I thought of Brecht's work, which is not exactly the same as this, but requires stylised settings. My mother was crazy for Brecht and dragged me to the theater to see his plays. I'm always looking for ideas that I believe are good for film.<sup>5</sup>

In an interview von Trier gave me during the editing of *Melancholia* (2011), I asked him about Brecht and he stated:

I know in principle Brecht's basic theory of the *Verfremdungseffekt*. I can understand this effect. On the other hand, truth is difficult to define and in particular, when we are dealing with the media. It is not just how a character says something, but it has to do with all aspects of cinema. It is more the feeling you have as a director. There are moments that I can understand that I got a second of truth, though it is a banal word. For me, it is very obvious when I capture a moment of truth.<sup>6</sup>

Von Trier's comments indicate his awareness of Brecht's theory and practice. However, one senses a different perception of the author/director's role in the sense that the artist is

---

<sup>4</sup> Von Trier quoted in Stig Björkman, *Trier on von Trier*, trans. by Neil Smith (London: Faber and Faber, 2003), pp.243-244.

<sup>5</sup> Von Trier quoted in, Jennifer Merin, 'Interview: Lars von Trier', in *New York Press*, available online at <http://www.nypress.com/article-12778-interview-lars-von-trier.html>, accessed 2 April 2011.

<sup>6</sup> Von Trier quoted in Angelos Koutsourakis, 'Interview with Lars von Trier', see appendix, p.272.

not the person who holds epistemological mastery and aims at communicating an unequivocal piece of knowledge to the audience. This position helps to expose the shift from an aesthetic that intends to align dialectical contradictions so as to communicate knowledge effects, to one that brings together points of tension that remain unresolved. I shall return to this point and elaborate on it in detail in the first chapter.

My desire is to investigate the ways in which von Trier challenges film form and the cinematic institution in order to produce a certain degree of indeterminacy that activates a more productive participation on the part of the audience. I see that indeterminacy as part of an anti-commodity aesthetics that aspires to restore the communicative aspect of the medium and go beyond the perception of the filmic object as a consumable product. This idea is of political importance given that the changes afforded by technological development in the field of cinema and the media allow for a highest degree of verisimilitude in the representation of reality. By reducing the medium's role to the production of reality effects, one intensifies the separation between producers (artists and their crew) and consumers (the audience).

On this basis, the politics of a film does not hinge on the reproduction of political content that reduces the audience to the status of consumers, but on formal elements that aim at disorientating and shocking the audience. The goal of such an aesthetics is the production of visual narratives that make the audience question the portrayed reality and the established dramaturgical tropes. The connection between formal complication and political effects has been acknowledged by von Trier in an interview given after the completion of his graduate film, *Images of Relief* [*Befrielsesbilleder*: 1982]. When asked, whether Erik Clausen's films (a Danish social realist filmmaker) are more politically dangerous than his own, von Trier stated that a film that has an 'oppressed people is always right' thematic content can be easily co-opted by the industry. Von Trier suggests

that film experimentation can be more political rather than the reproduction of political content using conventional film language. As he says:

I mean that if you make a film that is reactionary in its form, then the contents are insignificant. This is the way it is: you can't have rebellious or reformist content without adapting the form at the same time. You can't separate the one from the other.<sup>7</sup>

Von Trier's argument is very much informed by his lack of interest in a very popular genre of Danish cinema of the time, namely social or humanistic realism (examples include directors such as Kaspar Rostrup, Eric Clausen, and Helle Ryslinge). His film aesthetics and his understanding of politics were formulated by his interest in Danish filmmakers, such as Jørgen Leth. Leth was very much influenced by the theory and practice of Brecht and Jean-Luc Godard. His films inaugurated a type of cinema, which employed formalist experiments so as to 'adopt an analytic stance towards what is most natural, obvious and mundane'.<sup>8</sup> This experimentation with film language and its capacity to represent reality is key to one's understanding of the politics of von Trier's cinema too.

The politics of von Trier's films does not reside in the elaboration of class-conflict or the dramatisation of political subject-matter. It is rather his employment of distancing effects that challenge the concreteness of iconic information, complicate the narrative structure and draw attention to the processes that intervene in the transformation of the given raw reality into filmed object. In the *Europa* trilogy [*The Element of Crime* (1984), *Epidemic* (1987), *Europa* (1991)], sound and image are organised contrapuntally and do not allow for the total subordination of speech to action, a process that generates chronological transgressions and challenges the linear representation of history. In the

---

<sup>7</sup> Von Trier quoted in, Lars Schwander, 'We Need More Intoxicants in Danish Cinema', in *Lars von Trier Interviews*, ed. by Jan Lumholdt (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2003), pp.13-23, here p.23.

<sup>8</sup> Jørgen Leth quoted in, Mette Hjort and Ib Bondebjerg, 'Jørgen Leth', in *The Danish Directors: Dialogues on a Contemporary National Cinema*, ed. by Ib Bondebjerg and Mette Hjort, (Bristol, Portland: Intellect, 2000), pp.58-74, here p.61.

*Goldheart* trilogy [*Breaking the Waves* (1996), *The Idiots* (1998), *Dancer in the Dark* (2000)], von Trier employs hand-held cameras and a shooting style that is concerned with finding material instead of framing it.<sup>9</sup> In effect, the filmic process is incorporated in the final product. In both trilogies, the aim is the introduction of a certain degree of abstraction that accumulates material which does not necessarily have a story-telling function, a method that acts as a resistance to an imposed unequivocal meaning. Additionally, in *Dogville* and *Manderlay*, von Trier challenges film language by means of an ascetic aesthetics that reduces action to a set that consciously resembles a theatre stage and allows for a 'clinical' examination of the depicted social relations.

Another point that merits attention and displays von Trier's interest in involving the audience in a more productive way is his utilisation of a Brechtian separation of elements and his preference for a fragmented representational strategy. In certain films, such as *Breaking the Waves* and *Dancer in the Dark*, he employs a Brechtian separation of elements that makes one aware of music's intervention into the narrative.<sup>10</sup> The parts that have music do not intend to embellish the image or guide the viewer emotionally. For example, prior to Selma's (Björk) execution in *Dancer the Dark* music connotes optimism, which is radically negated by the scene that follows. Furthermore, the complete absence of music in the most intense scenes in *Epidemic*, *Breaking the Waves*, *Dancer in the Dark* and *The Idiots* does not suggest plausible attitudes that the viewers shall adopt towards the material, nor does it reveal the director's viewpoint. Consequently, the audience needs to assume a more productive role instead of anticipating certain unequivocal feelings.

This refusal to offer clear-cut explanations is strengthened by a formal organisation that shows preference for a fragmented narrative structure which privileges

---

<sup>9</sup> In *Dancer in the Dark*, this method applies mainly to the non-musical scenes.

<sup>10</sup> See Brecht, 'On Film Music', in *Bertolt Brecht: On Film and Radio*, ed. and trans. by Marc Silberman (London: Methuen, 2000), pp.10-18, here p.14.

the production of images at the expense of a text-bound dramaturgy. In *The Element of Crime*, the story line functions as a skeleton for the production of visual tableaux that do not strictly follow the laws of narrative continuity. In *Epidemic*, fragmentation is achieved through a complex narrative structure that shifts from the storyline of the filmmakers while preparing a film, to a film-within-the-film narrative, which is their imagined film in-process. In *Europa*, the voice-over intervenes to introduce spatial and temporal changes and to blur the boundaries between the diegetic and the hypodiegetic levels of narration. In some cases, such as in *Epidemic*, *Breaking the Waves*, *Dogville*, *Manderlay*, *Antichrist* (2009) and *Melancholia* the films are divided into chapters. Each chapter has a title that introduces certain expectations to the audience and highlights the literary associations of this structure. Finally in *The Idiots*, the loose dramaturgy, as well as the film's emphasis on performance, – as a formal and thematic element – demonstrate a preference for a paratactic/episodic style which is not interested in unifying the various fragments but opens the film to moments that go beyond dramaturgical consistency. Obviously, all films produce a certain amount of meta-effects that break the diegetic world apart and give the audience time to reflect on the material.

The fragmented narrative and the lack of dramaturgical cohesion have their bearing on the films' content and place action, narrative scenes and units of meaning into collision asking the audience to sort all this out themselves. As I elaborate in the next chapter, the aesthetics of the fragment figures importantly in Brecht's theatrical/film theory and practice. Brecht argued in favour of a film practice that treats film form as a series of tableaux that do not follow the rules of dramatic continuity and render the representation of reality ambiguous. Similarly, von Trier's films privilege narrative discontinuity over the view of the narrative as a unified whole. Such a discontinuity aims at instigating questions so as to make the audience participate in the construction of

meaning. The point of rupture between von Trier and Brecht is the shift from the Brechtian to the post-Brechtian something that I discuss in detail in the first chapter. This shift can be largely attributed to the political and historical changes that have invalidated Brecht's political certainties. Brecht's contention that making the familiar strange is the prerequisite for the politicisation of art is still valid. What one needs to question is his belief that certain formal complications may produce specific political effects and responses.

On this basis, the thesis argues that Von Trier brings together dialectical contradictions that act as provocations towards the audience and do not allow for a 'passive' viewing of the films, but force the audience to respond. For instance in *Europa*, the detached view of history that shows the reversibility of roles between Nazi sympathisers and Western allies negates the reduction of history to a humanised narrative of victims and perpetrators. This method advances a historical depiction that favours processes taking place on a mass level over a dramatisation of history and confronts the audience's ideological certainties. In other films, such as *Breaking the Waves*, *Dancer in the Dark* and *Antichrist*, the subject matter raises ethical questions in relation to gender issues, going beyond a politically correct representation. This *modus operandi* reveals the conservative aspects of certain genres that von Trier manipulates, such as melodrama, the musical and the thriller, and operates as a critique of the cinematic institution. As I will discuss in chapter one, the critique of cinema as an institution is an important part of Brecht's film theory and practice and I will expand on the political implications of this gesture.

En route to stimulate new perspectives on the politics of von Trier's films, the project deals specifically with five films and in particular with the *Europa* trilogy, *The Idiots* and *Dogville* and not with his whole filmography. This decision is mainly for

reasons of space and because my desire to engage in a formal analysis demands a more exhaustive discussion of the objects, which goes beyond a study of their content. I have chosen to discuss these five films because I suggest that a study of their portrayal of history and the individual along with their employment of theatricality and performativity can help us identify the politics of form in von Trier's films. Furthermore, I am convinced that the *Europa* trilogy's interest in the European traumas of the past acquires a renewed historical significance in the contemporary historical circumstances, since the optimism for an integrated Europe has been called into question by the problems that have arisen from the current financial crisis. My discussion of *The Idiots* and *Dogville* intends to focus on the films' dialogue with performance art and theatre so as to rethink their politics and innovations. What connects my analysis of the five films I discuss is my interest in discussing von Trier's predilection for a film practice that is keen on producing questions and conflicts instead of narratives that make the characters fit the actions and the other way around. On this basis, I explore the contradictions that arise from the films' dramaturgical inconsistencies.

Other films that I have left out, such as *Breaking the Waves*, *Dancer in the Dark* and *Manderlay* can benefit from a Brechtian discussion. I do not discuss *Manderlay*, because the film shares many formal similarities with *Dogville*. My analysis of *Dogville*'s form can make up for the film's absence from this thesis, by covering formal and thematic issues common to these two films. I have already mentioned some formal aspects of *Breaking the Waves* and *Dancer in the Dark* that allude to Brecht. The films' politics resides in the fact that they produce temporary feelings of empathy with the main characters. However, empathy is eventually replaced by anger and both films become a meta-commentary on the relationship between film and reality, art and life, a gesture that can be aptly characterised as Brechtian.

Another important object absent from this thesis, is *The Five Obstructions* [*De Fem Benspænd*, 2003], a film which is a ‘treatise’ on the filmmaking process and makes evident von Trier’s interest in challenging the established film grammar. The film is co-directed with Jørgen Leth and is based upon von Trier’s willingness to challenge his mentor and assign him the task of remaking his avant-garde film *The Perfect Human* [*Det Perfekte Menneske*, 1967] in five different ways, each time with a different formal obstacle. The film demonstrates von Trier’s tendency to make virtue out of necessity by employing obstacles in the filmmaking process. These obstacles lead to a loss of ‘authorial style’ and stimulate the director’s productivity, since he has to avoid the repetition of formulas that have been previously proved successful. These are some issues that I discuss in my analysis of *The Idiots* and *Dogville* so as to make up for the film’s absence from the thesis.

Finally, the rest of the films that have not found their place in this thesis, such as *Medea*, (1988) (an adaptation of Carl Theodor Dreyer’s script), *The Boss of it All* (2006), *Antichrist*, and *Melancholia* share von Trier’s preference for a loose narrative structure that does not allow for the complete fusion between script and image. This aspect of the films, that is, the employment of the script as material, can be understood under the rubric of the post-Brechtian something that I elaborate in detail in the first chapter. From an early point of his career, von Trier explained that his aim was to work his way from the script towards the image and stated that the cornerstone of a counter-cinematic aesthetic is the making of films that are not ‘plot-bound’. As he says: ‘We have to make some “counter-films”, that give you the opportunity to experience something broader than this plot-bound thing, which is so hackneyed and only exciting from a craftsmanship point of view, like when a carpenter makes a table’.<sup>11</sup> Von Trier’s point demonstrates laconically

---

<sup>11</sup> Lars Schwander, ‘We Need More Intoxicants in Danish Cinema’, in *Lars von Trier Interviews*, pp.13-23, here p.15.

the function of his films, which do not simply narrate stories. The central topos of all his films is that they all reflect on the film as medium, produce meta-commentaries that explore the very relationship between cinema and reality, and aspire to change the habitual ways of viewing a film.

### **Review of Secondary Literature**

There is a plethora of articles, film reviews and interviews devoted to the study of Lars von Trier. The numbers have increased after the international success of the Dogme project. Much has been written on von Trier's views of cinema, his personal background and the way his films reflect his persona. Little has been written on the political implications of form and the ways that von Trier's cinema can be understood beyond the individual von Trier. In this section I proceed to discuss the monographs published so far and some articles that discuss von Trier's career so as to trace the dominant trends in his reception. In the chapters to follow, I expand on the critical reception of the films under discussion with reference to other resources not mentioned here.

Peter Schepelern has offered a detailed and thorough study of von Trier's films that has produced many advances in the field. Schepelern's book, *Lars von Triers Film Tvang Og Befrielse* – unfortunately unavailable in English translation – explores von Trier's career from an early stage. Schepelern starts by discussing von Trier's early/student films, such as *Why Try to Escape from Which You Know You Can't Escape from? Because You Are a Coward* [*Hvorfor Flygte Fra Det Du Ved Du Ikke Kan Flygte Fra? Fordi Du Er En Kujon*: 1970], *The Orchid Gardener* [*Orchidégartneren*: 1977], *Mint the Blessed* [*Menthe: La Bienheureuse*: 1979], *Nocturne* (1980) and *Images of Relief* [*Befrielsesbilleder*: 1982]. Schepelern's book examines in detail von Trier's career until *Dancer in the Dark*. The book is more or less predicated on an understanding that there is

a connection between von Trier's life, his background and his education which, as Schepelern claims, can help us understand the films he makes. Schepelern offers a variety of resources that enrich our understanding of von Trier's works. His book refers to the impact that artists, such as August Strindberg, Richard Wagner, Ernst Jünger and Brecht have on his films. Schepelern also offers plenty of evidence regarding von Trier's critical reception on the part of the Danish press and explains the director's gradual establishment as one of the leading figures in contemporary European cinema.<sup>12</sup>

Schepelern's study is one of the most important in the field, because of the richness of his research material – consisting of rare pictures, press reviews and various interviews that von Trier has given him. Schepelern insists a lot on the individual von Trier, but his analyses of the films help us understand their formal complexity and place them in a historical context.<sup>13</sup> Jack Stevenson proceeds to discuss von Trier the individual too, but unlike Schepelern, he does not analyse the films and he is mainly busy describing the process of their production and their reception.<sup>14</sup> The same applies to his book, which is mainly devoted to the Dogme project and, like the former one, offers little insights into the films' form.<sup>15</sup>

Another important point of reference is Torben Grodal, who conducts a cognitive analysis of von Trier's films. Grodal acknowledges von Trier's employment of 'distancing effects', but he does not understand them as political, but as reflections of von Trier's life. In his view, von Trier's combination of 'distancing' and 'lyrical' effects aims at the creation of 'subjective images'. Grodal suggests that 'Trier's *oeuvre* is part of his

---

<sup>12</sup> Peter Schepelern, *Lars von Triers Film Tvang Og Befrielse* (København: Rosinante, 2000), p.11, p.31, pp.54-55 and pp.132-133. Previously published as *Lars von Triers Elementer: En Filminstruktørs Arbejde* (København: Rosinante, 1997).

<sup>13</sup> See also, Schepelern, 'The Making of an Auteur: Notes on the Auteur Theory and Lars von Trier', in *Visual Authorship: Creativity and Intentionality in Media*, ed. by Torben Grodal, Bente Larsen, Iben Thorving Laursen (Copenhagen: Museum Tusculanum Press, 2005), pp.103-127, here pp.118-124.

<sup>14</sup> See Jack Stevenson, *Lars von Trier* (London: BFI, 2002), p.3 and pp.76-102.

<sup>15</sup> See Stevenson, *Dogme Uncut: Lars von Trier, Thomas Vinterberg and the Gang That Took on Hollywood*, (Santa Monica: Santa Monica Press, 2003), pp.51-93.

ongoing interpretation of central problems in his own life – especially the establishing of unambiguous relationships with other people and the problems of achieving some kind of personal control'.<sup>16</sup> Very problematic is his point that von Trier's films activate 'cognitive and emotional dispositions that are universal and innate'.<sup>17</sup>

If we turn our attention to the audiences' reception of von Trier's work, it can be clearly seen that the films divide the viewers and deny any sense of 'universal' human feelings. This point can be reinforced by the strong reactions stirred by certain films. For instance, *Breaking the Waves* has instigated a variety of responses and has even divided feminist viewers/scholars. Certain critics see it as a film that reproduces the patriarchal ideology, whereas others understand it as a feminist film *tout court*.<sup>18</sup> *The Idiots* was banned in Ireland and censored in the USA.<sup>19</sup> Similarly, *Dogville* and *Manderlay* caused a huge controversy during their projection in the Cannes film festival.<sup>20</sup> These pieces of evidence dispute Grodal's argument concerning 'the universality' of von Trier's films.

Grodal's critical approach is indicative of a tendency to see von Trier's films as objects that can be explained through an examination of the director's personality. In the same way, Caroline Bainbridge discusses the evolution of von Trier's career and argues that von Trier's cinema searches for 'authenticity in artifice'. Bainbridge understands this to be von Trier's search for 'an authentic sense of self'.<sup>21</sup> Nonetheless, her book offers much to the study of von Trier. Drawing on theories of psychoanalysis and intertextuality, she analyses the form and the content of the films. Then again, one senses that, like most

---

<sup>16</sup> Torben Grodal, 'Frozen Flows in von Trier's *Oeuvre*', in *Visual Authorship: Creativity and Intentionality in Media*, pp.129-168, here p.130.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid., p.132.

<sup>18</sup> For feminist reactions in the film, see Stevenson, p.130.

For a different reading see, Alyda Faber, 'Redeeming Sexual Violence: A Feminist Reading of *Breaking the Waves*', in *Literature and Theology*, 17:1 (2003), pp.59-75.

<sup>19</sup> See Richard Kelly, *The Name of this Book is Dogme 95* (London: Faber and Faber, 2000), p.142.

<sup>20</sup> See extras in *Dogville* (2003), dir. by Lars von Trier (Lions Gate Entertainment, 2004) [on DVD] and *Manderlay* (2005), dir. by von Trier (Lions Gate Entertainment, 2010) [on DVD].

<sup>21</sup> Caroline Bainbridge, *The Cinema of Lars Von Trier: Authenticity and Artifice* (London, New York: Wallflower Press, 2007), p.x.

of the aforementioned critics, she sees the form as subordinate to the content and focuses on the ways von Trier has shaped his own image.<sup>22</sup>

One major exception is Jan Simons who conducts a formalist analysis based upon the argument that von Trier's films can be understood 'as cinematic games'. Simons' book proceeds to explain von Trier's cinema from a theoretical angle that draws on game studies, game theory and the aesthetics of the new digital media. Simons suggests that 'von Trier's films are a cinematic version of contemporary computer games' something that he supports through a game analysis of the films' form and content.<sup>23</sup> His argument is stated on the basis that von Trier's films do not strive for a direct correspondence between representation and reality but they literally see the filmmaking process as a game. He compares the role of the narrator in von Trier's early films with the role of a computer game player and claims that the characters can be seen as 'avatars' either in the hands of the narrator or of other game players that remain unidentified by the protagonists.<sup>24</sup> Simons suggests that in von Trier's films characters enter an unknown world and are confronted with the task of adaptability, which is the rule of the game.<sup>25</sup> Consequently, he understands von Trier's films to be iterations of a game that produces certain outcomes. The problem with his argument is his insistence that game theory is the only valid way of approaching the films. Simons goes so far as to suggest that von Trier's Dogme project cannot be seen under the rubric of political modernism or André Bazin's theories of realism, but mainly as part of a postmodern game culture.<sup>26</sup>

Simons' analysis is less inclined to discuss issues of spectatorship and the ways von Trier challenges audience expectations. This is something that Linda Badley's recent

---

<sup>22</sup> Ibid., p.7 and pp.44-59.

<sup>23</sup> Jan Simons, *Playing the Waves: Lars Von Trier's Game Cinema* (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2007), p.8.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid., p.178.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid., p.188.

<sup>26</sup> Ibid., p.20.

book does. Badley discusses von Trier's dialogue with cinematic genres and the ways his films challenge audience expectations. Like some of the previous writers, Badley is committed to an 'auteurist' reading of Lars von Trier's films. As she says: 'Lars von Trier after all is a performance and his work a narration of his signature'.<sup>27</sup> Badley understands von Trier's life 'as a public myth featured in the elaborate metatextual apparatus that accompanies all his productions'.<sup>28</sup> Elsewhere, Badley acknowledges the political aspects of von Trier's cinema, but she resorts to von Trier the individual to explain some very complex aspects of his films.<sup>29</sup>

One contradiction that arises when looking at the scholarship, is that most of the aforementioned critics understand von Trier to be part of a postmodern culture, but they still insist on an 'auteurist' reading that draws attention to the director himself and his creativity. These two approaches are in conflict with each other, given that postmodern culture has radically redefined and questioned terms, such as originality and creativity. Certainly, von Trier has absolute control over the films' final cut and refuses to conform to the standards of the mainstream film industry, but his work raises questions that cannot be simply answered by resorting to the directors' intentions.

### **Structure of the Thesis**

One can conclude that though useful bits are to be found on the critical works on von Trier's cinema, none of the aforementioned studies is interested in marrying formal analysis to a discussion of the films' politics. An advantage of this thesis is that it can fill this gap by proceeding to a discussion that goes beyond the director's life and his personal background. I take quite seriously von Trier's views on the film medium, but I do not let his biography and his interpretations over-determine my work. After all, I think that Schepelern's book has successfully explored the connection between von Trier's

---

<sup>27</sup> Linda Badley, *Lars von Trier* (Urbana, Chicago, Springfield: University of Illinois Press, 2010), p.16.

<sup>28</sup> Ibid., p.6.

<sup>29</sup> See for instance her analysis of *The Antichrist*. Ibid., p.150.

biography and the way his life has affected his filmmaking practice. Following Barthes' famous essay, which treats the author as an 'instance of writing', this thesis considers that the films' formal complexity and contradictions defy a hermeneutical approach that draws solely on von Trier's life and his own interpretations.<sup>30</sup>

By contrast, this thesis wants to pose a set of questions not considered so far. How and why do the non-linear representation of history and the problematisation of agency in the *Europa* trilogy challenge a unified view of history and force us to question the historical present? Why can historical pessimism be understood politically? Why does the Dogme Manifesto marry a political modernist rhetoric with a realist one and how does *The Idiots*' emphasis on performance in the form and content go beyond a pure reproduction of reality? How and why does *Dogville* – a film with obvious references to Brecht – go beyond the closed form of the Brechtian fable? These questions are integral to our understanding of the films' formal richness, their dialectical contradictions and their politics.

By using Brecht as a methodological apparatus and by re-reading von Trier as a post-Brechtian director, I intend to answer this set of questions and identify the political implications of form in the five films under discussion. One could object that going back to Brecht to understand von Trier might be a conservative approach. I would refer the sceptics to Jacques Derrida's argument that in moments of crisis radical thought needs to return to the past and proceed to criticise it and borrow from it at the same time. Derrida intimates that Marxism is still alive when it is ready to undertake its 'self-critique'.<sup>31</sup> I suggest that the same applies to Brecht's theory, which can still enliven film theory and practice. Changing historical circumstances alter the ways we use certain theoretical

---

<sup>30</sup> Roland Barthes 'The Death of the Author', in *Image, Music, Text*, ed. and trans. by Stephen Heath (London: Fontana Press, 1977), pp.142-148, here p.145.

<sup>31</sup> Jacques Derrida, *Spectres of Marx: the State of the Debt, the Work of Mourning and the New International*, trans. by Peggy Kamuf (New York, London: Routledge, 1994), p.111.

apparatuses. Thomas Elsaesser and Malte Hagener, for instance, explain the revival of André Bazin's theories in light of the transition from analog cinema to digital. As they explain, 'a theory is never historically stable and takes on new meanings in different contexts'.<sup>32</sup> According to Elsaesser and Hagener, film theory does not necessarily extend into the future but to the past as well, so as to rethink certain arguments from a different perspective.

Rethinking Brecht's theory in relation to film can be beneficial for film theory, since cultural studies' emphasis on issues of minorities, race and the representation of 'the other' has enriched film theory, but it has tended to privilege content over form. Formal issues have been downplayed while certain readings highlight moral questions as opposed to political ones, since the changes proposed suggest the reformation of a system and not its radical transformation. As Mike Wayne points out, issues of 'diversity, subversion and resistance' that are the cornerstone of contemporary thought 'are also the stock-in-trade of capitalist mass culture'.<sup>33</sup> Brecht can help us re-examine the connection between form and politics and appreciate the formal complexity that characterises certain films.

With the previous comments in mind, the first chapter of the thesis proceeds to a historical evaluation of Brecht's reception in film theory. The chapter investigates aspects of Brecht's theory that can still be beneficial for film theory and practice and others that have been outdated. This chapter also considers the ways in which Brecht's theory can address the cinematic and political concerns of the present. Furthermore, the chapter locates von Trier under the rubric of the post-Brechtian by comparing him to past film practices.

---

<sup>32</sup> Thomas Elsaesser and Malte Hagener, *Film Theory: An Introduction Through the Senses* (London, New York: Routledge, 2010), p.6.

<sup>33</sup> Mike Wayne, 'Introduction', in *Understanding Film: Marxist Perspectives*, ed. by Mike Wayne (London: Pluto Press, 2005), pp.1-33, here p.2.

Chapter two moves to a discussion of the *Europa* trilogy and advances a dialectical reading of the films. The purpose of the chapter is to focus on formal elements that challenge the narrative laws of classical cinema. I suggest that the films' preference for visual constellations over the reproduction of a concrete historical narrative with a beginning, middle and end problematise historical representation and question the view of history as a teleological process. My ultimate purpose is to discuss the formal abstraction, which permeates the films, in ways that go beyond an understanding of it as a 'subjective' narration. In particular, I want to explain how the ruptures in dramatic linearity defamiliarise our sense of temporality, question teleological stories and valorise processes over concrete dramatic narratives. On this basis, I suggest that von Trier follows Brecht's mistrust of a historical representation based on pictorial verisimilitude, without however sharing his forward-looking politics and his view of history as Marxist science.

In Chapter three, I discuss Dogme 95 and *The Idiots*. The aim of this chapter is twofold. Firstly, I am interested in analysing the reasons why the Dogme manifesto employs a political modernist rhetoric so as to place Dogme's return to the past in a historical context. Unlike other critics, I do not see Dogme as postmodern parody or solely as a marketing trick. What I find particularly productive and worth-while analysing is that Dogme reconciles a political modernist language that alludes to Brecht with a realist aesthetics. As I discuss in the first chapter, during the 1970s this gesture was out of the question, given that Brechtian cinema was seen as oppositional to the realist aesthetics of the long-take and deep-focus cinematography advocated by André Bazin. Secondly, the chapter considers the role of performance as a formal and thematic element in *The Idiots*. I want to draw attention to the ways that the camera becomes performative and brings together material of dramaturgical importance with moments that are the product of cinematic contingency. I discuss the film's emphasis on performativity in light of the

developments in post-Brechtian performance art and argue that the film valorises its ‘performant’ over its story-telling function.

The last chapter discusses *Dogville*, perhaps von Trier’s only film that has been unanimously received as political on the part of the commentators and the critics and whose form has obvious references to Brecht. This chapter wants to move the discussion from the film’s assumed ‘Anti-Americanism’ and proceeds to a formal analysis that can rethink the film’s politics. I concentrate principally on the film’s employment of theatricality and performativity. I identify the conflicting forces that set apart identity, in order to disrupt ideological certainties and expose the simulative aspect of certain values and morals. I want to show as well that *Dogville*, despite its employment of Brechtian tropes, goes beyond the closed form of the Brechtian fable. I consider this point key to our understanding of the film’s politics, which does not share Brecht’s ideological certainties. I hope that the discussions that unfold will open the way for further exploration of the formal richness that characterises the rest of von Trier’s films and will open up readings that shift the interest from von Trier’s personality, to a more focused discussion of the political implications of the films’ form.

## **Chapter 1- Brecht's Position in Film Theory and Practice**

### **Brecht on the Film Medium**

Given that Brecht provides the methodological framework of my thesis, this chapter investigates Brecht's own writings on film and his reception in film theory. More precisely, I am interested in discussing Brecht's writings on film form and the cinematic institution and identify how his theory became a theoretical apparatus for the rethinking of film theory and practice. My intention, overall, is to distinguish between certain aspects of Brecht's writings on cinema that can be productive in film analysis and practice. I also want to differentiate my methodology from the 1970s reception of Brecht so as to open out my reading of Lars von Trier under the rubric of the post-Brechtian. Certain aspects of Brecht's cinematic writings that I discuss below, such as the representation of the individual, the aesthetics of interruptibility, the loose dramaturgy and his dissatisfaction with the commodification of cinema figure importantly in my discussion of von Trier.

Brecht as a modernist was fascinated by the film medium and its potential to offer representations of reality that could encourage critical reflection on the part of the audience. One of the aspects of the medium that he considered to be revolutionary was its ability to do away with character psychology and show the individual as representative of his/her social role. Influenced by Marx's theoretical antihumanism, Brecht saw the individual as the product of the historical and social circumstances as opposed to the bourgeois concept of "human essence". According to Marx, a theory of subjectivity cannot allow for a scientific investigation of human relationships and lapses into an abstract humanism. The effect is that such an abstract humanism fails to see the individual as a historical emergent and as a producer of history.<sup>1</sup>

---

<sup>1</sup> See Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, *The German Ideology*, trans. by W. Lough, ed. by C.J. Arthur (London: Lawrence and Wishart, 1970), p.47.

Part of the aims of Brecht's *Verfremdungseffekt* (making the familiar strange) is the demonstration of the individual's dependence on processes that defy its self-determination. For Brecht, cinema could show the individual as historically defined in a more effective way than the theatrical and literary dramaturgy. As Brecht explains, in contrast to bourgeois drama's and novel's psychologically motivated characters, cinema presents socially motivated type characters. Consequently, the audience cannot dissociate the portrayed characters from their historical and social positions. As Brecht says:

For the theatre for instance, the cinema's treatment of the person performing the action is interesting. To give life to the persons, who are introduced purely according to their functions, the cinema uses available types who encounter specific situations and assume in them particular attitudes. All motivation from within the character is excluded; the person's inner life never provides the principal cause of action and seldom its principal result; the person is seen from the outside.<sup>2</sup>

From these comments, one can see that Brecht draws his conclusions from the early cinema's experiments, which treated characters as types motivated by their social functions and not by psychology. Equally important is to acknowledge Brecht's interest in the Russian avant-garde and in particular in Eisenstein's cinema. Martin Walsh suggests that Brecht's meeting with the Russian director in Berlin in 1929 was crucial for the formulation of his film and theatre theory too.<sup>3</sup> Indeed, Eisenstein's paradigm fits into Brecht's perception of the cinema as a medium that does away with psychological motivation. Eisenstein's concept of the dialectical conflict created by the juxtaposition between seemingly unrelated materials and his prioritisation of actions and historical events that surpass the characters might be the type of cinema that Brecht had in mind.

---

<sup>2</sup> See Bertolt Brecht, 'The Threepenny Lawsuit', in *Bertolt Brecht: On Film and Radio*, ed. and trans. by Marc Silberman (London: Methuen, 2001), pp.147-199, here p.164.

<sup>3</sup> See Martin Walsh, *The Brechtian Aspect of Radical Cinema*, ed. by Keith Griffiths (London: BFI, 1981), p.16.

The early cinema's portrayal of type characters was also influential in Brecht's valorisation of a gestic acting as opposed to a dramatic one. For Brecht, the social *gestus* can offer simplification, through an exposition of attitudes that minimise psychological traits. *Gestus* assists in the depiction of the individual as the product of forces and laws that cannot be discerned in the phenomenology of human relations. According to Brecht, a gestic acting is concerned with showing an action; that is, quoting it rather than imitating it. This acting activates the audience's critical faculties and allows them to reflect on the characters' attitudes. Of paramount importance in Brecht's favouring of a gestic acting was Charlie Chaplin's depiction of characters in his films. Brecht considered Chaplin as an actor who did away with past dramatic traditions based upon the imitation of feelings. His acting placed emphasis on the very process of creating a character. By shifting the emphasis from the act of imitation to that of showing, Chaplin showed his characters being motivated by their social roles and conditions. In effect, Chaplin's acting corresponded with Brecht's Marxist conviction that the individual is changeable and not fixed.<sup>4</sup> Brecht's admiration of Chaplin is emblematic of his view of cinema as an art form that could combine political analysis with popular entertainment.

In the same manner that Chaplin's acting demonstrated the process of creating a character and his/her actions, Brecht thought of film as a medium that had the potential to represent dramatic actions and include the very process of copying them. Thus, film could turn into a non-empathetic medium given that the focus would be on actions over characters' psychology. As Brecht says:

In fact the film demands external action and not introspective psychology. Capitalism has an impact on this by provoking, organizing, and mechanizing certain needs on a mass scale, revolutionalizing everything. It destroys great areas of ideology by concentrating only on external action, by dissolving

---

<sup>4</sup> Brecht, 'The Question of Criteria for Judging Acting', in *Brecht on Theatre: the Development of An Aesthetic*, ed. and trans. by John Willett (New York, London: Methuen, 1964), pp.53-57, here p.57.

everything into processes, by abandoning the hero as the medium and mankind as the measure of all things, and smashes the introspective psychology of the bourgeois novel. The external point of view is proper to cinema and it makes it important. For the cinema the principles of non-Aristotelian drama (a type of drama not depending on empathy, mimesis) are immediately acceptable.<sup>5</sup>

This quotation reveals Brecht's utopian view of the medium and his belief that certain formal principles can lead to the production of radical effects. By valorising actions over characters, cinema could become a means of teaching historical awareness. The prerequisite for this effect is that the medium adopts an external point of view that de-individualises the narrative and focuses on the historical processes and their changeability. By implication, Brecht aspired to make the act of representation more complex so as to encourage responses on the part of the audience. In encouraging the audience to reflect on the filmic material, Brecht thought that the viewers would be able to see the historicity of human relationships and the very falsity of their 'naturalisation' on the part of the bourgeois society.

Brecht's understanding of cinema as a medium that could analyse social relations aimed at stimulating the audience's capacity for action in the social sphere. One important document that offers some practical examples of his valorisation of external actions at the expense of character-based dramaturgy is the film *Kuhle Wampe: or Who Owns the World?* [*Kuhle Wampe, Oder: Wem Gehört Die Welt?*, (Bertolt Brecht, Slatan Dudow, Ernst Ottwald :1932)]. *Kuhle Wampe* tells the story of a German working class family in Berlin and raises questions regarding the rise of unemployment in Germany during the 1930s. The film consists of four independent parts that are interrupted by musical compositions accompanied by images of factories and council houses. *Kuhle Wampe* is heavily influenced by Eisenstein's intellectual montage. As Marc Silberman observes, the montage sequences in the film interrupt the narrative with material that does not serve

---

<sup>5</sup> Brecht, 'The Threepenny Lawsuit', p.171.

diegetic purposes. Story development is minimised in favour of a loose sequence of episodes that deconstruct dramatic actions. This deconstruction aims at linking dramatic actions with the social conditions of their construction.<sup>6</sup>

As a result, characters are shown as representatives of their social roles and not as individuals with unchanged psychological traits. The scene that demonstrates Brecht's interest in identifying the social drive in the characters' behaviour is the one that portrays Fritz's suicide (Ernst Busch), the youngest member of the Bönike family. What precedes this incident is a family argument regarding the son's inability to find work. Tired of the lack of prospects, Fritz decides to end his life. The camera remains immobile focusing on the character, while the lack of extra-diegetic music heightens the grotesque atmosphere. A different frame follows and shows a banner hung in the kitchen wall saying: "Don't blame the morning that brings hardship and work. It is wonderful to care for those one loves".

This banner juxtaposes a protestant/capitalist ethic into a working-class environment. Later on, Fritz approaches the window in a very 'clinical' manner as if it is part of an every-day routine and takes off his watch. While preparing to jump from the window he is careful enough not to damage the family's flowers. The mechanical approach towards the portrayal of the suicide fails to establish empathy for the victim. The filmic treatment of the material draws upon Brecht's concept of *gestus* which aimed at connecting an inner attitude with the outside social reality. In this scene the camera becomes 'gestic' and as Silberman points out:

The camera here becomes the ideal instrument 'for looking from the outside'; the camera as sociologist allows the filmmaker to construct each sequence with distinct cinematographic techniques and a visual rhythm dictated by external action. Brecht's critique of mimesis and illusionism transfers here to the

---

<sup>6</sup> See Marc Silberman, 'The Rhetoric of the Image: Slatan Dudow and Bertolt Brecht's *Kuhle Wampe or Who Owns the World?*', in *German Cinema: Texts in Context* (Detroit, Michigan: Wayne State University Press, 1995), pp.34-48, here pp.41-43.

cinematic medium where the goal cannot be the duplication of external reality, as if it is there, waiting to be reproduced.<sup>7</sup>

This scene connects the personal with the political/historical through an anti-humanist methodology that does not portray suicide as a personal tragedy, but as a phenomenon that can be understood historically. This passage of the film summarises some of the fundamental Brechtian tenets, such as the valorisation of historical/social forces over characters and the detached portrayal of dramatic actions, which intend to identify the social laws that regulate one's actions.

As maintained by Brecht, certain formal choices make the cinematic medium more effective with regard to the minimisation of character-based dramaturgy and produce a fragmented form that de-individuates actions and reveals their social/historical significance. Brecht understands cinema's political effectiveness in its ability to create a fragmentary diegetic pattern. This preference for an incomplete and episodic narrative served the purpose of preventing the audience from being carried away by the plot. This episodic form could freeze the actions and give the viewer time to ponder the represented social relationships and the questions/contradictions introduced by the narrative. His argument is reminiscent of his point in the notes to *Mahagonny*, in which he explains that the episodic form of the epic theatre expects the audience to stand outside and question the portrayed events instead of adopting an empathetic attitude.<sup>8</sup> The following quotation clarifies Brecht's perception of the cinema as a medium that benefits from an episodic/paratactic style.

Film obeys the same laws as static art. It is essentially static and must be treated as a series of tableaux. Its effect must arise from the clear interruptions, which would otherwise just be common errors. The tableaux must be so composed that

---

<sup>7</sup> Silberman, 'Brecht, Realism and the Media', in *Realism and the Audiovisual Media*, ed. by Lúcia Nagib and Cecília Mello (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009), pp.31-46.

<sup>8</sup> See Brecht, 'The Modern Theatre is the Epic Theatre', in *Brecht on Theatre*, pp.33-42, here p.37.

they can be taken in at a single glance like a sheet of paper, but yet they must withstand separation into details so that every detail corresponds in the larger scheme with the centre.<sup>9</sup>

Underlying Brecht's preference for arranging a film as a series of tableaux is his conviction that this visual style leads to a formal abstraction that renders the represented reality enigmatic. In this way, the audience's critical faculties are aroused and the viewer is confronted with material, which she/he has either to confirm or dispute. As I explain later on, Brecht's early thoughts on the medium have an optimism born of little experience of the medium, while later he developed a more sceptical attitude.

Brecht's emphasis on an aesthetics of interruptibility by means of a succession of fragments/tableaux aims at confronting the viewers with images of reality, in which they are asked to recognise themselves and see, at the same time, reality as a construct.<sup>10</sup> The collection of different fragments brings together contradictions that are offered to the audience to be resolved. Moreover, in his film writings, the valorisation of the fragment is also interested in showing reality as discontinuous rather than unified. This attitude of detachment could make the audience doubt the images' veracity and negate the stereotypical perception of representation as reproduction of a seemingly unified reality.

Brecht's argument draws upon the Marxist rejection of empiricism according to which the outward appearance of social phenomena does not offer an understanding of their historical/social significance.<sup>11</sup> Thus, Brecht distinguished between the reproductive and the constructive use of the medium. The former paradigm is keen on reproducing the empirical reality, whereas the latter is more interested in showing that what appears as 'real' is subject to transformation, because reality is socially constructed. As such, a

---

<sup>9</sup> Brecht, 'From the ABCs of the Epic Theatre', in *Bertolt Brecht on Film and Radio*, pp.6-8, here pp.6-7.

<sup>10</sup> See Silberman, 'Whose revolution? The Subject of *Kuhle Wampe* (1932)', in *Weimar Cinema: An Essential Guide to Classic Films of the Era*, ed. by Noah Isenberg (New York, Chichester: Columbia University Press, 2009), pp.311-330, here p.321.

<sup>11</sup> See Brecht, 'The Threepenny Lawsuit', p.165.

constructive use of the medium presupposed the presentation of a familiar reality in a way that it would appear strange and changeable.<sup>12</sup>

The constructive method is predicated upon a process of selecting fragments of reality and of showing, at the same time, this very process of assembling. In this way, the relationship between the profilmic material and its reproduction is made evident and the final cut does not appear as an uncritical portrayal of the empirical reality. The key principle of the constructive method is montage, a term Brecht employs in his theatre writings too. Montage stresses representational discontinuity and serves the role of isolating moments that can reveal aspects of reality which are not necessarily visible. As Brecht says:

The film image is limited by its frame, everything which is inside of this frame takes on dimensions and a significance which is relative to this frame and does not exist outside of it. In other words, the frame limits and delimits a field which determines a number of geometric, architectonic and plastic relations which do not exist in reality. At least, by limiting certain relations which in reality are lost among an infinity of others since reality is not limited by a frame, it underlines them.<sup>13</sup>

In Brecht's view, montage is a formal element that reinforces the productive over the reproductive use of the medium. His valorisation of this formal principle was very influential in the post-1968 film theory, which I am going to discuss later on.

In many respects, this preference for the fragment indicates an interest in the process over the product. Montage operates as a means of interrupting the diegetic flow, in order to enact questions that go beyond the film's dramaturgy. Of particular interest in Brecht's theory is the connection between montage and his concept of the gestic acting,

---

<sup>12</sup> See Dietrich Scheunemann, 'Montage in Theatre and Film: Observations on Eisenstein and Brecht', in *Avant Garde: Interdisciplinary and International Review*, ed. by Jan Van Der Eng and Willem G. Weststeijn (Amsterdam, Atlanta, GA: Rodopi, 1999), pp.109-136, here pp.130-131.

<sup>13</sup> Brecht quoted in, Roswitha Mueller, 'Montage in Brecht', in *Theatre Journal*, 39:4 (1987), pp.473-486, here p.483.

which has been acknowledged by Roswitha Mueller.<sup>14</sup> Neither of the practices is content with the reduplication of reality; both are interested in the very process of interruption, with the view to preventing the audience from being absorbed by the story development. In Chapter three of this thesis, I will discuss the ways von Trier employs a film practice that pushes forward Brecht's concept of *gestus*. The distancing effects are achieved by a film style that does not employ montage sequences, but long-takes that focus on the actors' performances. The produced gestures create clashes between the diegetic and the meta-level and reveal unforeseen connections between the bodies.

Brecht's writings on film are infused with enthusiasm over the new medium and its potential to create complex representations of reality. Yet Brecht is busy identifying 'intrinsic properties' in film, without taking into account the fact that the medium is also subject to historical transformations. As a modernist, he was fascinated by the possibilities offered by technological development. However, his initial enthusiasm over the film as medium fades away, and the main reason for that can be attributed to the fact that he became suspicious of cinema's ability to make the audience participate productively. As he says:

In the theatre the public regulates the representation. The cinema in this respect has enormous weaknesses which seem theoretically insurmountable... the rigid fixation of the perspective: we see nothing except what the single camera eye has registered... Due to the fact of mechanical reproduction, everything tends to present itself as a finished result, constraining, unchangeable. We return to the fundamental reproach: the public has no opportunity to modify the actor's performance, he does not find himself confronting a production, but the result of that production, which was produced in his absence.<sup>15</sup>

This quotation taken from a discussion between Brecht and Theodor Adorno is directly reminiscent of the latter's suspicion of the political efficacy of the film medium. Brecht maintained that theatre's division between text and performance allowed for a more

---

<sup>14</sup> Ibid., p.477.

<sup>15</sup> Brecht quoted in Walsh, p.60.

productive spectatorship, in which the actor is influenced by the auditorium. Brecht concluded that cinema was prone to producing dramatic material that is consumed without critical reflection on the part of the audience. An important factor that made him doubt the medium's ability to make the familiar strange was the fact that the audience's viewpoint in the cinema is always fixed. As he says: 'we only see what one eye, the camera, saw. This means that the actors have to act for this eye alone'.<sup>16</sup>

Certain directors, such as Alexander Kluge, Jean-Marie Straub/Danièle Huillet and Jean-Luc Godard, who have consciously adopted Brechtian strategies in their films have tried to solve the unalterability of film's performance through a representational strategy that makes the relationship between text, performance and camera viewpoint problematic. Similarly, von Trier's preference for uneven camera movements that destabilise the represented material pays equal attention to the process and the product so as to create a perceptual instability. As I discuss in the third and the fourth chapter, in *The Idiots* (1998) and in *Dogville* (2003) the camera's role is not that of the panoptic master that determines and controls every movement on the part of the actors. The camera is rather dedicated to a process of movement and readjustment and generates conflicts and contradictions that defy the understanding of the object as a 'finished result'.

To sum up, Brecht's evaluation of the film medium is, to a large extent, restricted by his historical experiences. For instance, one can see that certain formal aspects that he considered to be revolutionary, such as montage, have been co-opted by the commercial film industry. Furthermore, Brecht's initial optimism regarding cinema's ability to break with the dramatic realism that characterised other art forms, such as literature and theatre, has been invalidated. The merit of his cinematic writings lies in his dissatisfaction with the mere duplication of the empirical reality and his valorisation of representational

---

<sup>16</sup> Brecht quoted in Ben Brewster, 'The Fundamental Reproach (Brecht)', in *Ciné-Tracts*, 1:2 (1977), pp.44-53, here p.45.

strategies that aim at activating the audience's responses. It is his distinction between productive representation and reproduction that has much to contribute to film theory and practice.

### **Brecht's Critique of the Institution of Cinema**

Brecht, aware of the film industry's understanding of film as a commodity, argued in favour of a radical film practice that would be combined with a criticism of the institution of cinema. The argument rests on the assumption that film's means of production are capitalist and without questioning its commodity status the filmmaker unconsciously reproduces the capitalist ideology.

As long as cinema's social function is not criticised, film criticism remains a critique of the symptoms and has itself only symptomatic character. It exhausts itself with issues of taste and is limited by class-given prejudices. It cannot recognise taste as a commodity or the weapon of a particular class but rather accepts it as an absolute (what everyone is able to buy is accessible to everyone, even if not everyone can buy something).<sup>17</sup>

The redefinition of the relationship between the filmed object and the audience is a necessary step for overcoming the commodity aspect of the medium. Brecht explains that mainstream film production does not question the reduction of the audience to the status of a consumer and the dominant view of the film object as a saleable product. In effect, the institution of cinema ends up reproducing a division of labour, in which the film director and the crew are perceived as the producers of work, while the audience is relegated to the status of the consumers.

As a result, the public's influence on the produced works is analogous to the customer's influence upon the product. The root of the problem is social, since the relegation of the audience to a position of 'non-production' serves the interests of the capitalist mode of production. Brecht's point is clearly based on the assumption that the

---

<sup>17</sup> Brecht, 'The Threepenny Lawsuit', p.169.

film industry's *modus operandi* reproduces a normalised image of the social structure, which cannot be influenced by the collective body, namely the auditorium. As he says:

But mainly the sharp description between work and recreation characteristic of the capitalist mode of production divides all intellectual activities into those serving labour and those serving recreation and makes of the latter a system for the reproduction of labour power. Recreation is dedicated to non-production in the interest of production.... Those who buy tickets transform themselves in front of the screen into idlers and exploiters. Since the object of exploitation is put inside them, they are, so to speak, victims of 'imploitation'.<sup>18</sup>

By participating in this exchange-value process the audience unintentionally becomes an accomplice in the legitimization of its status as 'non-producer', something that has consequences on the viewers' understanding of themselves as social subjects.

Thus, Brecht's critique of the institution of cinema is dedicated to rethinking the role of the audience, with the intention of re-evaluating its role and transforming it from a passive observer to a producer. On this basis, Brecht saw the revolutionary potential of the cinema in its ability to become a public sphere that could be entertaining and educative at the same time. But in order to achieve its productive potential, cinema should go beyond the industry's adherence to 'public taste'. For Brecht, 'public taste' is a synonym for the reproduction of the familiar.<sup>19</sup> Here the familiar stands for the production of objects that show a harmonised image of social reality and perpetuate the division between producers and consumers. A productive use of the medium, on the other hand, is concerned with the exposition of the familiar as commodity, so as to demonstrate the interrelation between aesthetics and politics. Thus, producing for a medium without changing its function is not enough.

The latter point constitutes one of the most crucial aspects of Brecht's film theory. To change the medium's function it is not enough to introduce revolutionary topics within

---

<sup>18</sup> Ibid., p.170.

<sup>19</sup> See Brecht, 'The Threepenny Lawsuit', p.166.

the established language. A mere portrayal of a political subject-matter leads to comfortable contemplation and consumption of the material. On the contrary, a political utilisation of the medium is predicated upon the preference for the unfinished, for the object that raises questions and makes the audience respond actively. Consequently, a radical rethinking of the institution of cinema is concerned with altering the established relationship between screen and audience, so as to activate the latter's productive faculties.

To achieve this transformation, Brecht proposes a practice that pays equal attention to the process and the product. In demystifying the productive process, Brecht aims at denying bourgeois society's distinctions between the artist and the public and the very idea of the artist as a gifted individual. In this context, technological development is seen as a positive evolution that can reveal art's reliance on apparatuses that are social *tout court*. These apparatuses defy the bourgeois concept of art as something deriving from an individual experience. The nub of Brecht's analysis is that the director's dependence on apparatuses renders the understanding of cinema as a reflectionist medium obsolete. The social aspect of the apparatuses denies the idea that cinema can offer a candid/neutral depiction of reality. Without perceiving the role that the apparatus plays in the finished product, the director reproduces the traditional forms of expression, which are determined by the capitalist reality.

Brecht's argument rests on the assumption that film does not rely much on the 'creative individual' but on the technological apparatus. As Steve Giles points out, for Brecht, this concept is not something restricted to film. Human activity involves apparatuses that traditional art theories fail to acknowledge, partly due to their essentialist approaches towards the 'artistic' and the 'human'.<sup>20</sup> From this perspective, Brecht

---

<sup>20</sup> See Steve Giles, *Bertolt Brecht and Critical Theory: Marxism, Modernity and the Threepenny Lawsuit* (Berne: Peter Lang, 1997), pp.148-149.

understands the technological aspect of film production to be a form of transcending the bourgeois perception of art. The intervention of the technological apparatus brings to the surface art's dependence on technological developments, and as an extension, to the economic and productive forces. The camera is engaged in a process that records reality and produces a copy of it at the same time. This dual function collapses the distinction between the original and the copy. In this way, cinema's reliance on mechanical reproduction could strengthen the audience's understanding of the visible – and here the term refers to the filmic visible and the social one – as something that can be constructed and not as unchangeable.

Brecht's critique of the institution of cinema aspires to address film's reliance on the capitalist means of production. On this account, a demonstration of film's dependence on social factors can be beneficial for film practice too. The core of his argument is that cinema cannot be politically effective, unless it is liberated from capitalist exploitation. What I want to keep from Brecht's critique of the cinematic institution is his call for objects that denounce the relegation of film to a medium that reproduces the commodity. What I see as historically relevant, is his idea that spectatorial passivity conditions people to be socially passive, something that I discuss in Chapter two, in my analysis of von Trier's critique of cinematic voyeurism. Brecht thought that passive spectatorship relegates the audience to the status of the consumer, whose power relies on its buying and not on its productive capacity. In many respects, his critique of the cinematic institution follows his theatre writings and his inspiration to bridge the gap between the author and the public.

### **Brecht's Theory as the Road to Film Radicalism**

This section discusses Brecht's reception in film theory. As I have organised Brecht's work on cinema into his critique of form and his critique of the cinematic institution, I

will organise Brechtian film theory into those works preoccupied with film form and those works preoccupied with cinema as institution. I am interested in identifying the ways that Brecht's film's writings were employed by certain critics as a means of envisaging a counter-cinematic film practice. Given that my focus is on Brecht's impact on film theory, I have omitted numerous film reviews that employed Brecht's theory to discuss various films.<sup>21</sup>

One of the central points of Brecht's theory and practice was his re-evaluation of the term realism. As I discussed in the first section, Brecht thought that the mere reproduction of reality resisted the medium's ability to produce radical effects. For Brecht, realism is a set of historical conventions and not a transhistorical aesthetic form that gives absolute access to social reality. In his view, reality can be understood by means of experimentation and not through reduplication. In this context, realism in art can be achieved by means of a practice that takes things apart and analyses them in order to show their changeability. Correspondingly, the first writings, which utilised Brecht's materialist dialectics in film theory, employed an anti-realist approach towards the film as medium. The main line of argument was that radical cinema should go beyond the understanding of the medium as a means of reflecting reality.

What was opposed by these critics was the school of thought inaugurated by André Bazin's writings which were described as idealist. Bazin thought that cinema, unlike other arts, gives its audience a more genuine image of reality because of its dependence on the photographic image. The photographic image becomes an image that results from a process of mechanical reproduction, a process that he considered to be more 'objective' as opposed to other arts that relied on imitation. As he says: 'Originality in photography as distinct from originality in painting lies in the essentially objective

---

<sup>21</sup> Certain of the omitted discussions can be found in, George Lellis, *Bertolt Brecht, Cahiers du Cinéma and Contemporary Film Theory* (Ann Arbor, Michigan: University of Michigan Research Press).

character of photography'.<sup>22</sup> Bazin advocated a film aesthetics that freed the audience's vision and did not simply focus on events of dramatic importance. His essays on Italian Neorealism, Jean Renoir and Orson Welles advocated certain formal principles, such as the use of continuity editing, depth of field, and deep focus, on the grounds of their ability to incorporate aspects of reality that did not serve dramaturgical purposes. In his view, these formal features allowed for more spectatorial freedom and gave the audience a more direct access to reality than a type of cinema that relied on analytical editing.<sup>23</sup>

The popularity of Brecht's call for a constructive realism led critics, who valorised a dialectical film practice, to oppose Bazin's theory as an uncritical appeal for reproductive realism. In chapter three, I discuss Dogme 95 and von Trier's *The Idiots* (1998) and I identify the signs of convergence between Bazin and political modernism. I want to show that certain aspects of realism are not antithetical with a type of cinema that does not efface the process of its own production. Yet this was not the case in the 1960s and 1970s, because realism was seen as equivalent to pure reproduction.

This line of argument can be identified in an essay written by Jean Narboni and published in *Cahiers du Cinéma* in 1967. Narboni lays out his anti-realist position and argues that a materialist film practice is predicated upon an interest in challenging the direct correspondence between image and reality. He explains that films can be political through a process that integrates 'lived experience' into their formal elaboration of the content. Thus, a political film is one that is not content with reproducing conflicts, but one that reveals the gap between image and reality. The crux of the argument is that the interest is not in the reproduction of a coherent and unquestionable reality, but in the process of 'staging a spectacle'. By turning towards itself and the process of its own

---

<sup>22</sup> See André Bazin, 'The Ontology of the Photographic Image', in *What is Cinema?* Vol. I, ed. and trans. by Hugh Gray (Berkeley, Los Angeles, London: University of California Press, 1971), pp.9-16, here p.13.

<sup>23</sup> See Bazin, 'An Aesthetic of Reality: Neorealism', in *What is Cinema?* Volume II, ed. and trans. by Hugh Gray (Berkeley, Los Angeles, London: University of California Press, 1971), pp.16-40, here p.28.

making, film becomes a theoretical activity that foregrounds its material construction and connects the very act of seeing with a process that takes things apart. The aim of this practice is to educate the audience that there is not an unequivocal association between appearance and reality.<sup>24</sup>

A similar approach can be observed in Jean-Paul Fargier's article written in 1969. Fargier employs a Brechtian language in his writings, which is made evident in his assertion that a politically orientated cinema is concerned with the production of knowledge. Fargier explains that the cognitive effects produced by a film are directly related to the production of knowledge about the film's own making. Like Brecht, Fargier asserts that a self-reflexive practice is a theoretical process that allows for a detached processing of the material. Thus, the production of images is not concerned with an illusory reflection of reality, but with the theorisation of the medium, a process that interprets the production of images as writing. From this perspective, the audience adopts a reading attitude and sees the production of images as a procedure that merits analysis and not as an unequivocal reflection of reality. As he writes:

A dialectical film is one made in the consciousness, which it is able to transmit to the audience, of the exact process whereby an item of knowledge or a depiction of reality is transformed by degrees into screen material to be then reconverted into knowledge and a view of reality in the audience's mind.<sup>25</sup>

Fargier's comments resonate with Brecht's discussion of a constructive realism, which is predicated on the audience's productive participation. In the same way, Fargier explains that the audience's role in dialectical cinema is to decipher the images and read the signs in contradiction and not in combination. What is problematic in his argument is his

---

<sup>24</sup> See Jean Narboni, 'Towards Impertinence', trans. by Norman King, in *Cahiers du Cinéma Volume 2, 1960-1968. New Wave, New Cinema, Re-evaluating Hollywood*, ed. by Jim Hillier (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1986), pp.300-301, here p.301. Originally published in *Cahiers du Cinéma* 196 (1967).

<sup>25</sup> Jean-Paul Fargier, 'Parenthesis or Indirect Route', trans. by Susan Bennett, in *Screen*, 12:2 (1971), pp.131-144, here p.143. Originally published in *Cinéthique* 5:1 (1969).

assertion that such a film practice ‘transmits knowledge produced by historical materialism’.<sup>26</sup> This point reveals the theoretical tendency of the time to assume that certain formal aspects can teach the audience the Marxist methodology.

Such an anti-realist rhetoric permeates Colin MacCabe’s essay ‘Realism and the Cinema: Notes on Some Brechtian Theses’, published in *Screen* in 1974. MacCabe spends some time laying out the basic principles of Brecht’s theory and practice. He focuses on Brecht’s mistrust of the empirical reproduction of reality and compares it to the classic realist text, which represents the world without questioning the means of its own production. As MacCabe says:

The relationship between the reading subject and the real [in the classic realist text] is placed as one of pure specularity. The real is not articulated – it is. These features imply two essential features of the classic realist text: 1. The classic realist text cannot deal with the real as contradictory. 2. In a reciprocal movement the classic realist text ensures the position of the subject in a position of dominant specularity.<sup>27</sup>

MacCabe’s evaluation of classic realism’s characteristics aims at investigating the possibility for a subversive filmmaking practice based upon Brecht’s theory. In his view, the question that radical cinema needs to address is that of the position of the audience towards the material. In this way, revolutionary objects start by questioning the spectator’s role as a viewing subject. This change in the subject and object relations can be achieved by a narrative structure that does not provide ‘ready-made’ knowledge but creates diegetic gaps that encourage the audience’s productivity. MacCabe sets as an example *Kuhle Wampe* and *Tout Va Bien* (Godard, Gorin:1972), because both films portray historical reality not as self-evident but as a problem.<sup>28</sup>

---

<sup>26</sup> Ibid., p.143.

<sup>27</sup> Colin MacCabe, ‘Realism and the Cinema: Notes on Some Brechtian Theses’, in *Screen*, 15:2 (1974), pp.7-27, here p.12.

<sup>28</sup> Ibid., p.25.

Evidently, MacCabe's investigation of the route towards a Brechtian cinema does not go beyond Brecht's writings on the film medium. He rightly points out the importance of the contradiction principle in dialectical cinema. What his analysis lacks is the demonstration of certain formal structures that may lead to the productive effects that Brecht envisaged. Stephen Heath's discussion, on the contrary, which was published in the same *Screen* issue, is perhaps the most detailed attempt to explore the productive effects that Brecht's theory may have in filmmaking practice. According to Heath, a Brechtian film practice needs to question the 'fetishistic' facet of the photographic image. Following Brecht, Heath proposes an aesthetics of interruptibility, which gives the audience the ability to be inside and outside the film. Thus, a necessary step is the overcoming of the 'novelistic' unifying portrayal of actions. Interruptibility can be achieved by way of montage sequences that disrupt the diegetic flow. As Heath says:

The focus of this possibility seems to be the capacity of film to hold back the narrative, not to exhaust the images in the momentum of revelation, and this is the meaning of Brecht's emphases on the static nature of the film and its potential for non-introspection, the presence of the image against the consciousness of developing presence.<sup>29</sup>

This emphasis on narrative interruption is identical to meaning-making production. As Heath explains, this method abandons organic unity and the singularity of meaning and is interested in creating a 'multi-perspective' that denies continuity editing and 'the fixity of depth'.<sup>30</sup> What emerges is not the production of a coherent narrative structure but an aesthetics of 'negativity', which defies identification with the characters and the story. Like the preceding writers, Heath stresses the fact that this aesthetics endorses a reading attitude that is in opposition to dominant cinema's emphasis on providing a perfect illusion of reality. In this formulation, Heath seems clearly influenced by the anti-realist

---

<sup>29</sup> Stephen Heath, 'Lessons from Brecht', in *Screen*, 15:2 (1974), pp.103-128, here p.125.

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*, p.105.

language of the time. His understanding of montage as a formal element that can make representation more complex comes in contradistinction with Bazin's valorisation of continuity editing.

In many respects, Brechtian/materialist cinema was seen as the exact opposite of Bazin's realist theses. This distinction between the two traditions is made evident in Peter Wollen's article "'Ontology' and 'Materialism' in Film", published in 1976 in *Screen*. Wollen distinguishes between the materialist film language and the one advocated by Bazin, according to which meaning emerges naturally from the mechanical registration of the profilmic reality. Moreover, Wollen discusses materialist film practice as a process of 'semioticization' of the filmed object. Brecht plays a significant role in his diagnosis of dialectical cinema, something that can be seen in his valorisation of a self-reflexive film practice that renders the filmed material complex, with the view to exploring the reality outside the cinema. As he writes:

A reversal of the relations of dominance between non-cinematic and cinematic codes, between signified and signifier, can lead to the production of the film-text rather than the film-representation or the film-object. Film-making can be a project of meaning with horizons beyond itself in the general arena of ideology. At the same time it can avoid the pitfalls of illusionism, of simply being a substitute for a world, parasitic on ideology, which it reproduces as reality.<sup>31</sup>

The major point of convergence between Wollen, MacCabe and Heath is that in their examination of Brecht's role in radical filmmaking, they all proclaim the primacy of the text as opposed to the film object. Wollen's essay is the first to clarify this issue. As he says 'the concept of text' needs to be introduced into film practice, something that he identifies in Godard's reading of Brecht.<sup>32</sup> Along these lines, the essential concern of a Brechtian film practice is the creation of a film language characterised by fissures and

---

<sup>31</sup> Peter Wollen, 'Ontology and Materialism in Film', in *Screen*, 17:1 (1976), pp.7-23, here p.22.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*, p.20.

gaps. In contrast to mainstream cinema, this paradigm does not intend to simulate actions but to introduce ideas that remain incomplete and transform the viewer to a reader, something that at the time was equivalent to productive spectatorship.

A different line of argument can be identified in Peter Gidal's essay 'The Anti-narrative', published in *Screen* in 1979. Gidal's point hinges upon the consideration that radical film practice should retain Brecht's basic theoretical axioms and go beyond his preference for presenting contradictions through narrative. According to Gidal, all narrative films are reactionary because they cannot avoid perpetuating the passive spectatorship that defines commercial practices. Gidal affirms that narrative unconsciously reproduces bourgeois society's gender and racial stereotypes. What this article proposes is a film practice devoted to an aesthetics of negativity and 'meaninglessness', which is committed to destroying the visual pleasure granted to the audience by the narrative cinema.<sup>33</sup> Doubts over the effectiveness of this 'meaningless' cinema proposed by Gidal have to do with the fact that an anti-narrative structure fails to employ self-reflexivity in ways that go beyond the tautological assertion that the audience is viewing a film.<sup>34</sup>

It is fair to conjecture that all the aforementioned discussions have stimulated thinking with respect to Brecht's position on radical film practice. However, one can take issue with the critics' tendency to read film objects in canonical ways, as if certain film practices reproduce pre-existing Marxist ideas. Thus, despite the critics' interest in form, one senses that film form held a secondary status in the discussions, as if it was the means for the reproduction of theory. Partly, this can be attributed to the understanding of Brecht as a 'didactic' writer, something that can be seen in more recent writings.<sup>35</sup>

---

<sup>33</sup> Peter Gidal, 'The Anti-Narrative (1978)', in *Screen*, 20:2 (1979), pp.73-93, here p.80.

<sup>34</sup> See Heath, 'Afterword', in *Screen*, 20:2 (1979), pp.93-99, here pp.98-99.

<sup>35</sup> See Hans-Bernhard Moeller, 'The Marriage of Maria Braun. Veronika Voss. Lola. Fassbinder's use of Brechtian Aesthetics', in *Jump Cut*, 35:1 (1990), available online at

Certain critics have expressed their reservations regarding the way Brecht's theory was used as a way of envisaging a political film practice. Dana Polan, for instance, argues that while many writers paid much attention to the ways that specific filmic codes could be transgressed by dialectical cinema, these discussions failed to clarify how formal transgressions could change the audience's perception of the historically formed reality. Polan concludes that film theory needs to be more open to the possibility that Brecht's theory can be operative in films that manipulate familiar aspects of the dominant cinema. His argument is predicated on the basis that defamiliarisation can only be fruitful if something familiar is rendered strange.<sup>36</sup>

The validity of the anti-realist trend has also been called into question, since films were classified as political on the grounds of certain stylistic traits that were assumed to be transhistorically radical. As Sylvia Harvey argues:

In one of those odd reversals of history, some of the anti-realist theorists of the '70s made a mistake very similar to that of Lukács: they tended to assume that texts could be defined as 'radical' on the basis of stylistic properties alone, rather than on the basis of the tripartite relationship between textual properties, contemporary social reality and historically formed readers. It is the engagement with knowing the world in order to represent and transform it that is central to Brechtian aesthetics. This process of knowing is to be understood as historical in the sense that it involves the question "by whom?", "for whom?" "under what circumstances?", and a sensitivity to the problem of access whether to particular sorts of buildings or to particular sorts of discourses.<sup>37</sup>

The questions that Harvey asks at the end of the previous quotation are the necessary step that one has to take so as to rethink the currency of Brecht's film writings. The core of Brecht's theory is that forms are changeable and historically determined. Consequently, in

---

<http://www.ejumpcut.org/archive/onlinessays/JC35folder/MariaVonBraunTrilogy.html>, accessed 25 November 2010.

<sup>36</sup> See Dana B. Polan, 'Brecht and the Politics of Self-Reflexive Cinema', in *Jump Cut*, 1:1 (1974), available online at

<http://www.ejumpcut.org/archive/onlinessays/JC17folder/BrechtPolan.html>, accessed 12 March 2010.

<sup>37</sup> Sylvia Harvey, 'Whose Brecht? Memories for the Eighties', in *Screen*, 23:1 (1982), pp.45-59, here p.51.

the course of time certain formal elements become de-radicalised or co-opted, whereas others require second thoughts. For instance, contemporary films by the Dardenne brothers and Béla Tarr, which follow a long-take Bazinian aesthetics, challenge our habitual viewing of films in a more effective way as opposed to films that employ montage sequences and fast editing. Thus, the prerequisite for rendering the familiar strange is to understand the historicity of both the term ‘familiar’ and ‘defamiliarisation’.

### **Rethinking the Cinematic Institution**

Brecht’s critique of the cinematic institution became very popular during the 1970s and especially in the wake of the popularity of Louis Althusser’s writings on ideology. Althusser’s writings inspired many critics, who discussed the cinematic institution from a Brechtian angle. Althusser’s theory of ideology has many similarities with Brecht’s understanding of social relationships and structures. Brecht’s privileging of human history over nature seeks to demystify social relations and demonstrate that what appears as natural/fixed is socially constructed. Similarly, Althusser’s theory of ideology is busy exploring the ways that capitalist reality reproduces itself in non-forceful ways. Accordingly, key terms in his theory are ‘the real’ and ‘the imaginary’. Ideology is a representational system that reproduces the current relations of production and normalises structures in ways that appear to be self-evident.<sup>38</sup>

The currency of Althusserian Marxism led critics to rethink the cinematic institution. The crux of the argument was that failure to criticise the medium’s reliance on the capitalist means of production would uncritically reproduce the dominant ideology. A major example of this tendency can be seen in Fargier’s essay that I discussed earlier. Fargier discusses cinema as an institution that naturalises social relationships and conditions. As he explains, cinema’s dependence on economics turns it into a medium

---

<sup>38</sup> See Louis Althusser, ‘Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses (Notes Towards an Investigation)’, in *Essays on Ideology*, trans. by Ben Brewster (London: Verso, 1976), pp.1-60, here p.39.

that reproduces the current relations of capitalist production and presents them as ‘real’ and unchangeable. Film industry depends on a capitalist productive process, which affects the finished product in an indirect way. Thus, the medium unconsciously reproduces the capitalist ideology and the ideology of the visible as ‘real’. Fargier sets as an example the working classes’ ability to consume images that justify their position in social reality and make them complicit in a process that ‘presents the existing ‘abnormal’ relations of production as natural and right’.<sup>39</sup>

Fargier’s analysis puts forward the conjecture that any serious film analysis cannot refrain from analysing the medium’s capitalist means of production. This argument echoes Brecht’s critique of the cinematic institution, which proposed that criticising the industry’s *modus operandi* can be a way of changing the medium’s social function. More detailed contextualisation of Brecht’s argument can be seen in an essay published by Jean-Louis Comolli and Jean Narboni in 1969. The writers discuss how the production process of a film determines its content. According to Comolli and Narboni, film is a commodity and thus a material product of capitalism. Consequently, it is not solely the film’s reproduction of stories that can reproduce the dominant ideology, but also the way one uses the very tools and materials of filmmaking production. As Comolli and Narboni write:

Clearly, the cinema reproduces reality: this is what cinema and film stock are for – so says the ideology. But the tools and techniques of filmmaking are part of reality themselves, and furthermore ‘reality’ is nothing but an expression of the prevailing ideology. Seen in this light, the classic theory of cinema that the camera is an impartial instrument which grasps, or rather is impregnated by the world in its ‘concrete reality’ is an eminently reactionary one. What the camera in fact registers is the vague, unformulated, untheorized, unthought-out world of the dominant ideology.<sup>40</sup>

---

<sup>39</sup> See Fargier, pp.136-138.

<sup>40</sup> Jean-Louis Comolli, Jean Narboni, ‘Cinema/Ideology/Criticism’, trans. by Susan Bennett, in *Cahiers du Cinéma Volume 3 1969-1972: The Politics of Representation*, ed. by Nick Brown (London: Routledge, 1990), pp.58-67, here p.60. Originally published in *Cahiers du Cinéma* 216 (1969).

The writers conclude that it is the ‘nature’ of capitalism to turn cinema into an instrument of the dominant ideology. On this basis, one has to manifest the relation between economics, ideology and filmmaking production, in order to challenge the view of the medium as a candid reflection of reality.

This essay expresses a utopian belief that can be identified in Brecht’s film writings too. The demonstration of the commodified aspects of the industry can be a means of doing away with the bourgeois ideology. In revealing the capitalist aspect of the medium, one can disclose the social aspect of the technological apparatus and bring to light cinema’s relation to ideology. Similarly, Brecht’s view of modernity celebrated the very forces that produced commodification and alienation.<sup>41</sup> According to Brecht, the exposition of the film as a commodity could become a means of debunking bourgeois values that appear as natural.

Brecht’s discussion of the cinematic institution intended to emphasise cinema’s reliance on social and economic factors, with the purpose of showing that the medium’s technological means of production are primarily social. Echoing this argument, Jean-Louis Baudry’s essay ‘Ideological Effects of the Basic Cinematographic Apparatus’, published in 1970, places emphasis on the social aspect of cinema’s technical base, with the view to showing that film practice is not simply a neutral process of recording. Thus, the manifestation of the medium’s technical base refutes the idealist perception of the medium as a reflection of an objective reality. As Baudry says:

In which case, concealment of the technical base will also bring about an inevitable ideological effect. Its inscription, its manifestation as such, on the other hand, would produce a knowledge effect, as actualisation of the work process, as denunciation of ideology, and as a critique of idealism.<sup>42</sup>

---

<sup>41</sup> See Giles p.98.

<sup>42</sup> Jean-Louis Baudry, ‘Ideological Effects of the Basic Cinematographic Apparatus’, trans. by Allan Williams, in *Film Quarterly*, 28:2 (1970), pp.39-47, here pp.40-41. Originally published in *Cinéthique*, 7:8 (1970).

What Baudry condemns as idealist is the pure reproduction of the visible. On this basis, the manifestation of the technological apparatus denies the synthetic unity that the film industry strives for. The aim is the exposition of the apparatuses involved in our perception of social life as opposed to the cinematic institution's embracement of the ideology of the visible. His argument clearly recalls Brecht's cinematic writings, in which he compares the process of making social realities visible to the process of producing a picture from a photographic negative.<sup>43</sup>

All the aforementioned essays embody a willingness to draw attention to the apparatuses involved in the reproduction of reality. The arguments combine a Brechtian critique of the perception of the image as a self-sufficient projection of reality with an Althusserian conviction that the visible reality involves ideological apparatuses that cannot be easily discerned. The common vantage point was that the effacement of the film's process of production entails an ideological motive, which is the objectification of the surface reality. However, none of these essays discusses the institutionalisation of cinema in the former socialist countries which produced socialist realist narratives for consumption. Socialist realist films of the time followed the same closed system of meaning that one can see in the western dominant cinema and did not really challenge the film as medium or the cinematic institution.

The aforementioned essays follow Brecht's argument that representations of reality have to show the apparatuses that insert themselves between reality and the images they produce.<sup>44</sup> Brecht's interest in showing the capitalist foundations of the cinema was combined with a belief that technology can be used in radical ways, which might disrupt

---

<sup>43</sup> Brecht quoted in Giles, 'Photography and Representation in Kracauer, Brecht and Benjamin', in *"Verwisch Die Spuren!" Bertolt Brecht's Work and Legacy: A Reassessment*, ed. by Robert Gillet and Godela Weiss-Sussex (Amsterdam, New York: Rodopi, 2008), pp.115-125, here p.123.

<sup>44</sup> See Silberman, 'The Politics of Representation: Brecht and the Media', in *Theatre Journal*, 39:4 (1987), pp.448-460, here p.450.  
See also Brecht, 'The Threepenny Opera Lawsuit', p.195.

the public's perception of the world as 'natural'. The exposition of cinema as an institution and the demonstration of the process of commodification and consumption can be still a valid way of showing that film technology produces images that correspond to a specific social reality. Brecht's inference that the technological advancement of capitalism has inserted more processes of mechanical reproduction between reality and our perception of it is germane to the postmodern reality, in which image production is practically the same as commodity production. When looking back at these essays, one can keep their strong commitment to a film practice that prioritises processes over a mimetic reproduction of actions. However, one needs to consider that capitalist processes have become much more intricate rather than being expressions of the dominant class.

Jean Baudrillard's well-known discussion of the simulacra has eloquently shown that in our contemporary reality simulations of reality and real historical conditions merge. The effect is that the distinction between facts and simulations becomes problematic and any sense of knowing reality by means of representation is called into question.<sup>45</sup> Partially, this shift can be attributed to the hegemonic presence of the media that transmit replications of the real and render the act of communication one-dimensional. Baudrillard suggests that 'the revolution lies in restoring the possibility of response'.<sup>46</sup> However, such a 'responsible' spectatorship is not predicated upon the audience's confirmation of some pre-existing theoretical ideas that run the risk of institutionalisation. The restoration of responses can be rather achieved by a process that calls attention to form as a means of aligning contradictions that make the audience more productive.

---

<sup>45</sup> See Jean Baudrillard, 'The Precession of Simulacra', in *Simulacra and Simulation*, trans. by Sheila Faria Glaser (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1994), pp.1-42, here p.30.

<sup>46</sup> Baudrillard, 'Requiem for the Media', in *For a Critique of the Political Economy of the Sign*, trans. by Charles Levin (Saint Louis: Telos Press, 1981), pp.164-184, here p.170

It is this restoration of ‘responsible’ spectatorship that is crucial to understand von Trier’s politicised aesthetics that concerns me in this thesis. In his films, he employs a series of practices that play with cinematic clichés and call attention to the artifice of representation so as to demonstrate how much artifice is involved in our perception of the real. As I explain in chapter two and three, his preference for a loose dramaturgy and his post-Dogme strategy of allowing unpredictable and anti-systematic moments to enter the films’ narrative offer a degree of imprecision which is essential for the very restoration of responses that Baudrillard speaks of.

Following Baudrillard’s comments, one can state that the Brechtian and Althusserian understanding of representation as science which goes beyond the dominant ideology is obsolete. What I see important in Brecht’s theory and pertaining to my discussion of von Trier is the preference for a representational strategy based upon formal abstraction, which is aware of its own incompleteness. The issue at hand, therefore, when dealing with politics and representation requires a rethinking of the dominant film language. Otherwise, cinema runs the risk of reducing complex issues to clear-cut polarities and of propagating the reality that it negates.

### **Defining Post-Brechtian Cinema.**

So far I have discussed Brecht’s writings on film and his reception in film theory. In this section I intend to offer a definition of the very term post-Brechtian cinema, so as to clarify the ways that we can understand politics and representation in the current historical circumstances. Very schematically, the term post-Brechtian describes a postmodern rethinking of Brecht which shares his preference for a fragmented representation and formal abstraction but not his political certainties. In order to clarify things further, I want to consider Roland Barthes’ analysis which elucidates the basic aspects of Brecht’s work and foresees a post-Brechtian aesthetics.

Barthes argues that in Brecht's theatre and in Eisenstein's cinema the meaning lies in the instant rather than the whole. Each scene does not necessarily complement each other, but proceeds to contradict or question the preceding one. Therefore, Barthes explains that the tableaux in Brecht and Eisenstein are infused with meaning but not a final one. Meaning is produced by a series of fragments and not through dramatic development. Brecht's tableaux operate as a means of bringing together different materials that the audience is asked to assemble. For Barthes, this aesthetics is concerned with the production of knowledge effects.<sup>47</sup> Barthes' essay envisages the possibility of a post-Brechtian and post-Eisensteinian aesthetics, which is grounded in the withholding of a precise political meaning. As Barthes says:

Doubtless there would be no difficulty in finding in post-Brechtian theatre and post-Eisensteinian cinema *mises en scène* marked by the dispersion of the tableau, the pulling to pieces of the 'composition' the setting in movement of the 'partial organs' of the human figure, in short the holding in check of the metaphysical meaning of the work – but then also of its political meaning; or, at least, the carrying over of this meaning towards another politics.<sup>48</sup>

Thus, the ideal would be a disturbance of the relation between the visual representations and their meaning. Instead of an imposed reified meaning, a series of interpretations are produced, which do not form an organic unity and what Eisenstein named a 'synthesis of art and science'.<sup>49</sup> In effect, a film's epistemology is not grounded in the communication of a certain degree of knowledge, but in the very questioning of the ways that cinema produces a certain understanding of the world.

The question that arises is how such an aesthetics produces political effects. A pertinent starting point would be that a film interested in questioning current political

---

<sup>47</sup> See Roland Barthes, 'Diderot, Brecht, Eisenstein', in *Image, Music, Text*, ed. and trans. by Stephen Heath (London: Fontana Press, 1977), pp.69-78, here pp. 70-73.

<sup>48</sup> *Ibid.*, p.72.

<sup>49</sup> Sergei Eisenstein, 'The Dramaturgy of Film Form (The Dialectical Approach to Film Form)', in *S.M. Eisenstein: Selected Works Volume I*, ed. and trans. by Richard Taylor (London, Indianapolis, Bloomington: BFI and Indiana University Press, 1988), pp.61-80, here p.80.

reality should follow Brecht's *modus operandi*, according to which challenging the audience's perceptual abilities by means of formal abstraction can make one question aspects of reality that one takes for granted. In valorising points of tension and contradictions, a post-Brechtian aesthetics is not interested in the reproduction of a political content to be consumed. Brecht's conviction that the medium needs to enter into self-criticism is still valid; what the post-Brechtian questions is his certainty that the complication of representation can result in precise enlightening effects and in social change based upon the socialist doctrine.

The collapse of a socialist alternative that led to the globalisation of the market as well as the de-radicalisation of the working class have redefined the political polarities that characterised the world in which Brecht worked. Then again, the current economic crisis, the resurfacing of political extremism and the emergence of a new sub-proletariat class – 'the precariat' – living on the border of working insecurity and destitution question the outward 'triumph of the market'.<sup>50</sup> Dialectical analysis becomes the prerequisite for those dissatisfied with the current political circumstances. Brecht's theory can be a way of questioning the 'naturalisation' of capitalism but in ways that can deal with the different historical conditions.<sup>51</sup>

The transition from modernism to postmodernism is integral to our understanding of the different ways that one can understand politics and representation. In his often cited discussion of postmodernity, David Harvey argues that the establishment of late capitalism and the new forms of production aided by the development of the new technologies have created a time-space compression that has led to a crisis of

---

<sup>50</sup> See Guy Standing, *The Precariat: The New Dangerous Class* (London: Bloomsbury, 2011).

<sup>51</sup> See David Barnett, 'Brecht/Directing/Acting', in *New Theatre Quarterly*, 17:1 (2001), pp.88-89, here p.89.

representation.<sup>52</sup> According to Harvey, this continual process of compression has rendered yesterday's representations of reality inoperative. Postmodernist art follows the modernist aesthetics of the fragment without sharing the former's epistemology. Modernism employed the fragment in an utterly different way, aiming at the discovery of a concrete reality. As Harvey says:

Understanding had to be constructed through the exploration of multiple perspectives. Modernism, in short, took on multiple perspectivism and relativism as its epistemology for revealing what it still took to be the true nature of a unified though complex underlying reality.<sup>53</sup>

Unlike modernism, postmodernism takes uncertainty as a given element. The construction of reality and identity are very much based upon a process of image construction, which intensifies the ephemerality of experience and the de-materialisation of reality.<sup>54</sup> Consequently, politicising perception does not solely rely on uncovering processes that give us an insight into 'the real' historical/social conditions. It is rather a matter of valorising processes and contradictions but not as a means of reaching a conclusive endpoint. One has to deal with this challenge when trying to identify Brecht's relevance in late capitalist societies.

Along these lines, a post-Brechtian aesthetics follows Brecht and places the audience at the centre of the action. Martin Brady suggests that a post-Brechtian film can be broadly defined as the deployment of 'Brechtian devices in films which no longer adhere to the principles of ideology or leftist political modernism'.<sup>55</sup> Brady's brief definition is accompanied by two examples amongst which are von Trier's *Dogville* and

---

<sup>52</sup> See David Harvey, *The Condition of Postmodernity: An Inquiry Into the Origins of Cultural Change* (Cambridge, Oxford: Blackwell, 1990), p.284 and p.298.

<sup>53</sup> Ibid., p.30.

<sup>54</sup> Ibid., pp.286-291.

<sup>55</sup> Martin Brady, 'Brecht in Brechtian Cinema', in "*Verwisch Die Spuren!*". *Bertolt Brecht's Work and Legacy: A Reassessment*, pp.295-306, here p.297.

Michael Verhoeven's *The Nasty Girl* [*Das Schreckliche Mädchen*: 1988].<sup>56</sup> While this definition has some validity, it does not address dialectics as a constitutive element of post-Brechtian cinema. I suggest that dialectics – the use of the fragment as a means of producing a collision of theses and antitheses – is still the principal method, but not as a means of subordinating the contradictions to a totalised meta-narrative, but as a way of reflecting its very motion and the very inadequacy of the medium of its own articulation.

A more precise definition is offered by Alexander Kluge. Kluge gave me a short interview and when I asked him about his views on the shift from the Brechtian to the post-Brechtian, and the role of the fragment in his films, he responded:

We are only giving you comments when we make a film or write a piece of literature. We do not guide you to a counter-reality. We only give you hints. We are like scouts. Take as an example my last film *News from Ideological Antiquity: Marx, Eisenstein, The Capital* [*Nachrichten aus Der Ideologischen Antike - Marx – Eisenstein – Das Kapital*, 2008]. This is a new film and shows the ways I employ Brechtian practices in the present. The author does not take any decisions. The author analyses or counter-analyses, or repeats, or makes comments.<sup>57</sup>

Kluge's point suggests that the dialectics between the medium and interpretation is not a matter of an agitational call for change. Conversely, the role of dialectics is to turn the medium inside out so as to pose the problem of interpretation itself. The produced interpretations play against themselves and aim at undoing a stable relationship between ideas and representations.

Jacques Rancière's contribution to the exploration of a 'politicized art' can also illuminate the previous points and help us bracket the very idea of the post-Brechtian. Rancière considers Brecht's theatre to be the archetypal form of a 'politicized art'. In his investigation of a contemporary politicized aesthetics, Rancière draws upon the notion of 'heterology'. As he says:

---

<sup>56</sup> Ibid., p.297.

<sup>57</sup> Kluge quoted in Angelos Koutsourakis, 'Interview with Alexander Kluge', see the appendix p.277.

The notion of ‘heterology’ refers to the way in which the meaningful fabric of the sensible is disturbed: a spectacle does not fit within the sensible framework defined by a network of meanings, an expression does not find its place in the system of visible coordinates where it appears. The dream of a suitable political work of art is in fact the dream of disrupting the relationship between the visible, the sayable and the thinkable without having to use the terms of a message as a vehicle. It is the dream of an art that would transmit meanings in the form of a rupture with the very logic of meaningful situations. As a matter of fact, political art cannot work in the form of a meaningful spectacle that would lead to an ‘awareness’ of the state of the world. Suitable political art would ensure, at one and the same time, the production of a double effect: the readability of a political signification, and a sensible or perceptual shock caused by the uncanny, by that which resists signification.<sup>58</sup>

Particularly productive in Rancière’s comments is his point that art attains its political function not by way of ‘messages’ and concrete moral polarisations, but through a process of disturbance that intends to shock and disorientate the audience. This understanding of politicized art is congruent with my perception of post-Brechtian cinema as a cinema that presents the audience with dialectical conflicts that defy synthesis.

### **Straub/Huillet and Fassbinder: Two Different Tendencies**

Let us now discuss post-Brechtian cinema with reference to some concrete examples. A variety of directors have been discussed as part of a counter-cinematic tradition that drew on Brecht’s theatre and film aesthetics. Certain works of Jean-Luc Godard, the films of Straub/Huillet, Alexander Kluge, Rainer Werner Fassbinder, Volker Schlöndorff and Theo Angelopoulos have been seen as products of Brecht’s legacy. In this section, I intend to focus on Straub/Huillet and Fassbinder so as to address both formal and institutional issues that can prepare the ground for my discussion of Lars von Trier as a post-Brechtian director. Unlike previous discussions so far, I argue that the body of work of these directors can help us identify the shift from a Brechtian to a post-Brechtian aesthetics. The essential concern of this section is to look at Straub/Huillet and Fassbinder

---

<sup>58</sup> Jacques Rancière quoted in, ‘The Janus-Face of Politicized Art: Jacques Rancière in Interview with Gabriel Rockhill’, in Rancière, *The Politics of Aesthetics*, trans. by Gabriel Rockhill (London, New York: Continuum, 2004), pp.47-66, here p.63.

as precedents for cinematic practices that combine the representation of history with Brechtian concerns/strategies. Furthermore, I focus on the ways they employ the actors' performances as a process of exploration/discovery and not as a reproduction of a fixed script. I analyse these key issues that pertain to my discussion of von Trier's representation of history in chapter two and his employment of performativity and theatricality in chapter three and four. On this basis and given the vast filmography of these directors, I restrict my discussion to specific films that give us an insight into these ideas.

Straub/Huillet and Fassbinder represent two different tendencies in filmmaking. The first one is strongly committed to an austere/experimental formal practice that intends to challenge subject matter, habitual film-viewing and the very cinematic institution. Fassbinder had the same ambitions, but the fundamental difference between him and Straub/Huillet was his interest in commercial genres and patterns from the mainstream cinema, whereas Straub's/Huillet's work positions itself in direct resistance to popular cinema. Thomas Elsaesser makes a very accurate distinction between these two tendencies and asserts that Fassbinder manipulates the industrial products of the cinema, while Straub/Huillet understand their works as 'resistance of their materials to the filmic process'.<sup>59</sup>

Yet both paradigms oppose the institution of cinema and proceed to produce distancing effects that alter the subject and object relationships. Straub/Huillet achieve this through a film practice which reduces the actors to linguistic quotations, separates the acoustic and the visual elements and resists diegetic flow. On the other hand, Fassbinder makes use of extreme affect and emotionality, which foreground an excess of artifice in

---

<sup>59</sup> See Thomas Elsaesser, "'Lili Marleen': Fascism and the Film Industry', in *October*, 21:3 (1982), pp.115-140, here p.136.

the acting and the *mise-en-scène*. This excess creates a hyperbolic gap between reality and representation and produces a sense of critical distance and detachment.

Of particular interest in both paradigms is the way they portray history. History in their films becomes a subject of investigation and not a reproduction of historical events. In Straub's/Huillet's case, history is portrayed as a problem and not as a linear narrative with a beginning, middle and end. The narrative downplays the characters' personal stories so as to demonstrate that personal relationships are historically defined. This effect is achieved through a division of the diegesis into segments that do not follow a discernible chronological order and blur the boundaries between past and present. Prime examples are their films *Machorka-Muff* (1963) and *Not Reconciled* [*Nicht Versöhnt Oder Es Hilft Nur Gewalt Wo Gewalt Herrscht*: 1965].

In the first film, Straub/Huillet depict the life of Machorka-Muff (Erich Kuby) – a former Nazi colonel – in post-war West-Germany during the years of the military rearmament. The directors follow Brecht's axiom that individuals and social relationships can be understood through the study of history and not through unchangeable psychological characteristics. However, in contrast to Brecht's preference for typage, Machorka-Muff is portrayed as a normal individual and not as person, whose external characteristics indicate his politics.<sup>60</sup> The pseudo-documentary form heightens the directors' intention to de-individuate the narrative and to explore the West-German historical past and present. The voice-over creates temporal ellipses that blur the boundaries between past and present and make one rethink West-Germany's movement towards historical progress.

In avoiding the chronological succession of the narrated events, the film aimed at showing that fascism is a historical problem that cannot be simply reduced to the past.

---

<sup>60</sup>Certain Left-wing groups objected that the film did not show the main character as a Nazi. Straub responded that 'Militarists do not exist. The Military does'. Straub quoted in, Richard Roud, *Jean-Marie Straub* (London: Secker, 1971), p.30.

Straub's/Huillet's aspiration is to explore the historical evidence of the remaining traumas of fascism and not to personify fascism, a practice employed by Hollywood films concerned with history. As Martin Walsh says, 'impersonality is the key note in the film's form'.<sup>61</sup> This 'impersonality' is made evident by the directors' employment of the camera, which does not simply register the moments that serve a concrete dramatic function. The camera lingers persistently on space, to explore its materiality, and assumes an investigative rather than a reproductive role.

Straub's/Huillet's treatment of history becomes even more complex in their next film *Not Reconciled*. Again, the directors refuse to reproduce history as a narrative that follows a clear-cut chronological sequence and the characters are deprived of any psychological traits. Based on Heinrich Böll's novel *Billiards at Half Past Nine*, the story focuses on a German middle class family and consists of narrative segments that show the characters during the beginning of the century, the Nazi Germany and the years of the re-armament. The succession of montage sequences leads to an episodic diegesis that complicates narrative temporality. As such, history is shown as dialectical in the literal sense, that is, as a problem that needs to be solved by the audience. Quotation plays a very important role in the film. The term quotation refers to the acting style employed, which manifests the fact that the actors quote their lines, and the pseudo-documentary form that reduces the narrative to quoted material and not to a dramatic reproduction. As Barton Byg says:

For Straub/Huillet documentary is fundamental to all film art. Even the fictional drama contained in *Not Reconciled* is documentary on one level: a documentary of its (re) enactment; its quotation from the novel. Just as the words of the novel do not openly express emotion, neither does the style with which Straub/Huillet

---

<sup>61</sup> Walsh, p.44.

present them. The texts are offered as documents, facts, placed in a context but not interpreted.<sup>62</sup>

Thus, the cinematic elements are used as material given to the audience, which is asked to assemble them and assume a more productive role. For Straub/Huillet this practice serves a dual role, which is to redefine the way form solidifies into content, as well as to challenge the cinematic institution.

The lack of formal unity conjectures that to understand history one should avoid looking at it as a logical sequence of events. The argument clearly recalls the Marxist belief that the phenomenological manifestation of the historical phenomena cannot give us an insight into the workings of history. In this way, *Not Reconciled* presents its materials in a 'mechanical' way, so as to make the audience go beyond the surface presentation of the story and understand history in its complexity. This 'mechanical' approach concentrates on the presentation of the fragments without adding any feelings that compel the audience to perceive the material in a specific way.<sup>63</sup> This is a very important observation that can help us understand the passage from a Brechtian to a post-Brechtian aesthetics.

This shift was not clarified in the 1970s analyses of Straub's/Huillet's films.<sup>64</sup> Straub's/Huillet's formal elaboration of their material draws on Brecht's valorisation of the fragment, but their films resist a unifying political interpretation. They are offered to the audience as materials to be worked out, but they do not produce specific knowledge effects. Consequently, their aesthetics of fragmentation and the separation of the elements of film narration denounce the understanding of the final object as the repository of

---

<sup>62</sup> Barton Byg, *Landscapes of Resistance: The German Films of Danièle Huillet and Jean-Marie Straub* (Berkeley, Los Angeles, London: University of California Press, 1995), p.113.

<sup>63</sup> Byg observes that the term 'mechanical' derives from Straub's/Huillet's influences from Robert Bresson, who argued for a mechanical approach in acting. See Byg, p.23.

<sup>64</sup> See Heath, 'From Brecht to Film: Theses Problems (On *History Lessons* and *Dear Summer Sister*)', in *Screen*, 16:4 (1975), pp.34-45.

authorial power. This formal elaboration of the material operates as a means of questioning the cinematic institution too. For instance, the detached portrayal of the subject-matter of history in *Not Reconciled* constitutes an attack on the audience's habitual consumption of images. The depiction of the characters as objects in the hands of history serves the purpose of criticising the audience's voyeurism and their complicity in the formation of history too. In criticising the audience's passivity, the filmmakers make an allegorical parallel between passive spectatorship and passive acceptance of the historical reality. In this way, Straub/Huillet challenge the institution of cinema, to show that the reduction of the audience to consumers of dramatised stories with a self-evident meaning is analogous to capitalism's relegation of the collective to voyeurs of history.

While in Straub/Huillet the dissolution of the *dramatis personae* is used as a means of problematising historical narratives, Fassbinder focuses on the individual, with the intention of showing the political/historical aspects of personal life stories. The traumas of fascism in the post-war West-German society play an important role in his narratives and, like Straub/Huillet, he does not see fascism as a historical phenomenon that has come to an end, but as something that pervades social and personal relationships. *The Marriage of Maria Braun* [*Die Ehe der Maria Braun*: 1979] constitutes one of the major examples of a film, in which a personal story operates as a way of raising historical questions. Following the life of a young woman (Hanna Schygulla) in the years after the end of World War II, the film demonstrates the signs of connection between the years of the German economic miracle and the fascist past.

Maria's pursuit of career success reflects the very capitalist ethic of individualism and social apathy. Fassbinder compares this lack of social cohesion to the silent acceptance of fascism on the part of the German populace, in exchange for individual self-preservation. Maria silently accepts the male-dominated business world in exchange

for personal prosperity that will reunite her with her imprisoned husband. But this reunion remains incomplete throughout the film. Her wedding starts with a bombing and finishes with an explosion in her house, an allegory that intends to problematise the distinctions between past and present and the very notion of historical progress.

Unlike Straub/Huillet, Fassbinder allows for a certain amount of identification with his characters. Yet his treatment of the material combines a pseudo-documentary form with excessive melodramatic moments that look like intentional exercises in bad taste. In effect, quotation figures importantly in his works too. In its semi-documentary moments it appears as a quotation of its own dramatisation, while the moments of excessive affect intentionally foreground their artificiality and the references to the genre of melodrama. This incorporation of antithetical formal elements does not simply serve the role of reminding the audience that what they see is just a film. This extreme antithesis opens out questions with respect to the very crisis of referentiality. The film manifestly visualises its dialogue with the film industry, but as Elsaesser suggests, this dialogue is not just a way of pronouncing the directors' cinéphilie. What this dialogue puts forward is also Fassbinder's 'deconstructionist view of the vanishing historical reality'.<sup>65</sup>

In effect, Fassbinder uses Brechtian techniques in his narrative, to show the prevalence of history in personal and social relationships, but he does not share Brecht's adoption of revolutionary models embodied in the Enlightenment tradition. What the film questions is the view of history as an additive series of events that mark out precise boundaries between the mistakes of the past and the present historical reality. At times, Fassbinder uses unmotivated references to the past, such as stories from Maria's mother or from strangers she meets, along with radio extracts that reproduce the character as an

---

<sup>65</sup> Elsaesser, *European Cinema: Face to Face with Hollywood* (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2005), p.375.

observer of the larger historical narrative of Germany.<sup>66</sup> As a result, these references elicit an awareness of the co-existence of heterogeneous stories and memories that call into question historical reference and the medium's capacity to deal with history.

Fassbinder's scepticism expands to criticise the whole image and sound making production and thus, to reconsider cinema as an institution. Towards the end of the film we hear the sport announcer's celebration for West-Germany's victory at the World Cup Final, a year before the nation's rearmament. Here, Fassbinder manipulates one of the major aspects of popular culture, namely the sports entertainment industry, to imply that the very image and sound consumption can make the public complicit in the production of historical mistakes. In *Lili Marleen* (1981) he does something similar and compares the mass entertainment industry with fascism. What he proposes is a reading of fascism as an imaginary commodity of fetish objects and sexual desires, something directly linked to cinema's ability to create desire for image consumption.<sup>67</sup>

Fassbinder's paradigm demonstrates clearly how one can manipulate aspects of commercial cinema and retain its narrative function in ways that challenge film form and the very cinematic institution. Consequently, like Straub/Huillet he is not solely concerned with the production of narratives but with the very questioning of the audiovisual materials. Unlike Straub/Huillet, however, Fassbinder does not intend to abolish any sense of the pleasure principle that characterises the film-viewing process. Despite their initial friendship and collaboration both sides expressed their reservations for each other's work. Fassbinder, regardless of his initial enthusiasm for Straub/Huillet's work, rejected their films as 'too intellectualist' and unable to reach a mass-audience.<sup>68</sup>

---

<sup>66</sup> See Anton Kaes, 'History, Fiction, Memory: Fassbinder's *The Marriage of Maria Braun* (1979)', in *German Film and Literature: Adaptations and Transformations*, ed. by Eric Rentschler (London, New York: Methuen, 1986) pp.276-288, here p.282.

<sup>67</sup> See Elsaesser, *European Cinema*, p.376.

<sup>68</sup> Fassbinder quoted in, Roswitha Mueller, *Bertolt Brecht and the Theory of Media* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1989), pp.124-125.

Straub/Huillet, on the other hand, have repeatedly accused Fassbinder of being an ‘unpolitical’ and ‘irresponsible’ director.<sup>69</sup>

Regardless of this dispute, both paradigms are an emblematic illustration of a post-Brechtian aesthetics. Moreover, their engagement with the art of theatre has influenced their filmic products, something that can be seen in certain films, in which they proceed to a radical separation of elements, a practice that has informed contemporary performance art. In Straub/Huillet’s case, this aspect is visible in a film like *Class Relations* [*Klassenverhältnisse*] (1984). Based on Kafka’s posthumously published novel – widely known as *Amerika* – the film tells the story of a German boy, Karl Rossmann (Christian Heinisch) who moves to the USA with the intention of starting a new life after some family problems in his home country. Straub/Huillet employ a shooting process structured upon a careful and calculated designing of the physical portrayal of the characters. Together with the use of the text as raw material, the film proceeds to create a radical gap between the actors and their lines, with the view to using performance as an investigative tool and not as a hermeneutic one. As Byg says:

Straub/Huillet, however, use their film to explore their relations between the figure of Karl and the narratives within which he is placed. They do so solely on the basis of the pared-down utterances they have selected from the novel fragment, in a manner of speech that Wolfram Schütte has called “an arena where struggles of power and class take place”.<sup>70</sup>

The static camera draws attention to the actors’ recital of their lines and the movement of the bodies within the restricted diegetic space. The filmmakers avoid establishing shots and shot-reverse-shots, in order to place emphasis on the contradictions deriving from the radical distance between the speaking subjects and language, and from the actors’ stylised

---

<sup>69</sup> Straub/Huillet quoted in Joel Rogers, ‘Jean-Marie Straub and Danièle Huillet Interviewed: *Moses and Aaron* as an Object of Marxist Reflection’, in *Jump Cut*, 12:1 (1976), available online at <http://www.ejumpcut.org/archive/onlinessays/jc12-13folder/moses.int.html>, accessed 22 March 2011.

<sup>70</sup> Byg, p.167.

movement within the frames. Thus, the prioritisation of physical movement leads to a stylised anti-naturalism that does not reduce the performers to mere agents of a script.

Straub/Huillet use the extracts from the novel as an object of exploration and not as a script to be mimetically reproduced.<sup>71</sup> In undermining narrative coherence, they intend to explore the contradictions that are flattened in classical film narratives. The script becomes material for performance that voids secure hermeneutic solutions. By focusing on the character's bodies and by renouncing the reproduction of concrete emotional states, they portray the shifting relationships and the power dynamics between Karl, Delamarche (Harun Farocki) and Robinson (Manfred Blank). Along with the use of the script as words devoid of any emotion, *Class Relations* employs performance as uninterpreted material, which avoids the closed dramatic form of mainstream cinema. The *raison d'être* of this aesthetics is similar to what Hans-Thies Lehmann's discussion of post-dramatic theatre defines as an aesthetics of "meaning in retreat".<sup>72</sup>

Straub's/Huillet's form follows Brecht's demands for placing emphasis on the act of quoting a performance rather than on the imitation of dramatic stories. Yet unlike Brecht, their radical separation of elements produces contradictions that problematise the audience's decision-making process. The reason for this effect is that despite their striving for achieving calculated gestures on the part of their actors, performance is not reduced to a secondary status that communicates a concrete amount of information. Their employment of a static camera emphasises the process of recording the actors' performances; in this way, performativity is valorised at the expense of dramatisation. Their emphasis is on the performative process itself and not on the dramatic intentions of the characters. My understanding of the term performative and performativity is informed

---

<sup>71</sup> The employment of the text as 'material' is a practice that characterises post-Brechtian performance too. See David Barnett, 'When is a Play Not a Drama? Two Examples of Postdramatic Theatre Texts', in *New Theatre Quarterly*, 24:1(2008), pp.14-23, here p.15.

<sup>72</sup> See Hans-Thies Lehmann, *Postdramatic Theatre*, trans. by Karen Jürs-Munby (London, New York: Routledge, 2006), p.88.

by Jacques Derrida's reading of John Langshaw Austin's writings on the speech act. Derrida interprets the term 'performative speech act' as a practice that is not solely referential and does not simply communicate the intentionality of the speaking subject. It is rather a transformative process, not concerned with the communication of 'a semantic content'.<sup>73</sup>

Within this framework offered by Derrida, one can define performativity in the cinema as the camera's interaction with the actors' performances in ways that the communication of content is not prioritised. The camera interacts with the performing body in space for reasons that exceed narrative coherence and representational consistency. In many respects, performativity refers to a process in which the act of showing an action is privileged over the action itself and these are some points I shall return to in the third and the fourth chapter. In this context, Straub's/Huillet's employment of performativity as opposed to concrete dramatic tropes aspires to reveal the tension between language, the body and the speaking subject, so as to render the act of interpretation problematic. This valorisation of performativity explores the irreconcilable words, gestures and actions which do not lead to a monocausal thesis but explore the political dimension of the every-day relationships.

A closer look at certain films by Fassbinder can make one draw similar conclusions regarding his treatment of language and the performing body. For instance, the film adaptation of his play *The Bitter Tears of Petra von Kant* [*Die Bitteren Tränen der Petra von Kant*: 1973] is a prime example of a film which employs excessive theatricality and performativity so as to draw attention to the transformation of the cinema's raw materials into performance. Here, the act of showing/quoting the representation is privileged over dramatic action, something that can be attributed to the

---

<sup>73</sup> Jacques Derrida, 'Signature, Event, Context', in *Limited Inc*, trans. by Samuel Weber (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1977), pp.1-24, here p.13.

film's reproduction of a space that consciously resembles a theatre stage. The film narrates the recurrent play of domination and submission in the bourgeois household of a fashion designer, Petra von Kant (Margit Carstensen). Petra falls in love with Karin (Hanna Schygulla), a woman of a lower class background. The film observes the changes in the power dynamics in their relationship. The allusions to the art of theatre and the employment of excessive colours make us perceive the film as a performance of its own making and not simply as a reproduced narrative. Like Straub's/Huillet's *Class Relations*, the film employs static camera movement and places emphasis on the performing body and the reduction of dialogue to performative utterances. Neither the actors nor the camera conceal the fact that they quote.

Fassbinder's aim is to use the performing body and the actors' utterances as a means of investigating the social and political aspect of every-day relationships, without resorting to a typage that flattens out the social contradictions. Elena Del Rio suggests that Fassbinder's use of the performing body brings together Brecht's concept of the social *gestus* with a performative excess that characterises Antonin Artaud's theatre of cruelty. As she writes:

Brecht's legacy is instrumental in enabling Fassbinder's films to produce a 'shock to thought'. However, Fassbinder conceives of this shock as a fully corporeal and performative process rather than a purely mental construct. Insofar as the image in Fassbinder is no longer attached to a stable referent, it ceases to reflect 'external happenings', becoming instead a sensuous surface that is nonetheless intense in its affective provocations.<sup>74</sup>

This 'corporeal shock' described by Del Rio derives also from the fact that the body in conjunction with the spare dialogue does not mirror the characters' emotions. On the contrary, the bodies are subject to an artificial/calculated movement. The combination of

---

<sup>74</sup> Elena Del Rio, 'Between Brecht and Artaud: Choreographing Affect in Fassbinder's *The Marriage of Maria Braun*', in *New Review of Film and Television Studies*, 3:2 (2005), pp.161-185, here p.167.

artificiality with a stylised use of language shifts the interest from the reproduction of dramatic action motivated by psychology to the production of impersonal gestures that suspend the cause and effect linkage of the episodes.

In *The Bitter Tears of Petra von Kant* in particular, one can notice this effect in moments when the camera captures materials, such as Petra's mannequin dolls and paintings that add a sense of cinematic excess and reinforce the film's self-exhibitionistic aesthetics. There are moments that the resulting vignettes show nothing that promotes dramatic plot per se and are concerned with the investigation of corporeal connections and not with the presentation of linear dramatic actions. One should also notice the main character's perception of her life as too tragic, an effect that heightens the film's staging of itself as a performance. Theatricality, thus, permeates and destabilises the narrative and, as Elsaesser observes, the film creates a distance between the excessive *mise-en-scène* that reflects the characters' state of minds and the objective *mise-en-scène* of the camera.<sup>75</sup> Thus, the camera does not function as an invisible observer of actions but becomes performative too, in the sense that it treats its captions as materials for exploration and not solely as events of dramatic importance. By analysing body language and verbal communication, the film turns upon itself and blurs the distinctions between life and performance, self and world, and develops a film narrative which stages itself as theatre and performance.

Straub/Huillet and Fassbinder show eloquently the shift from a Brechtian to a post-Brechtian aesthetics. Their treatment of history follows Brecht's valorisation of processes but in ways that do not lead to a dialectical maturation. Similarly, their emphasis on performativity and their use of the script as material in certain films leads to a radical separation of elements that asks us to rethink the way we watch films. Story

---

<sup>75</sup> See Elsaesser, 'A Cinema of Vicious Circles', in *Fassbinder* ed. by Tony Rayns (London: BFI, 1980), pp.24-53, here p.29.

development and characterisation are downplayed in favour of a performative excess that favours the production of ruptures in the films' narratives. Consequently, the articulated contradictions do not invite the audience to respond within a demarcated realm of signification.

### **Locating von Trier in Post-Brechtian Cinema**

Similar to the aforementioned filmmakers, Von Trier's films employ a representational strategy, which is not simply concerned with reproducing dramatic actions. What is notable is that some of his films, such as *The Element of Crime* (1984) and *Europa* (1991), *The Antichrist* (2009) follow Fassbinder and manipulate the spectacular aspects of the medium. Yet films, such as *Epidemic* (1987), *The Idiots* (1998) *Dogville* (2003) and *Manderlay* (2005) show a preference for cinematic austerity, while *Dancer in the Dark* (2000) combines austerity with spectacular musical scenes that interrupt the narrative. All his films use the cinematic elements to call the medium into question and open out the site of the films' construction. In the next chapters, I suggest that like Brecht, he valorises the process over the finished product, with the view to instigating questions that cannot be answered within the limits of the films' dramaturgy. The point of rupture is that he presents the audience with dialectical contradictions without pointing to any particular directions. This is something that I elaborate on in chapter two and four in which I compare von Trier's narrative openness with Brecht's and discuss the different political effects of this practice. The lack of narrative closure that characterises all of his films encourages the audience to become co-producers of meaning. In this way, the films become material thrown to the audience to be sorted out.

This argument can be supported by the fact that von Trier leaves his films open to a variety of interpretations without claiming hermeneutical mastery of the objects. When I asked him about the lack of political correctness in his films, he responded that the aim of

his work is to avoid ‘the obvious’. As he says: ‘I think that people who see a film should have an opinion about it and form their own views and even protest against it’.<sup>76</sup> Thus, von Trier’s work follows Brecht and proceeds to problematise the self-evident not only in dramaturgy but in the whole film-viewing experience. However, unlike Brecht, he does not share the former’s realist epistemology and the perception of the author/director as someone being in a privileged position of knowledge.

Such an authorial uncertainty is communicated by means of a filmmaking process that privileges a visual rather than a text-bound dramaturgy. This is something that characterises the whole corpus of his filmography. In his first filmmaking attempts he strived for absolute control and precision in the filmmaking production. However, this absolute control did not favour the making of images that simply reproduced a script, while the relationship between sound and image was not necessarily harmonious. This is something that I explore in detail in the next chapter in which I discuss the *Europa* trilogy. In these films, the voice-over is used in a radical way that creates a disjunction between the speaking subject and language. Furthermore, this disjunction complicates chronotopical reality and the boundaries between past and present.

*Images of Relief* [*Befrielsesbilleder*: 1982], his graduate film, is a prime example of an aesthetics that separates the voice from the speaking subject, a separation that casts doubt on the idea of the speaker being the originator of the spoken material. The film is the progenitor of the *Europa* trilogy and tells the story of a Nazi soldier betrayed by his Danish girlfriend the first day after the liberation of Copenhagen. Documented images of humiliation and violence towards suspected Nazi collaborators are followed by dream-like images accompanied by the German soldier’s voice-over. The effect is that the object appears as a quotation of antithetical materials that point to the limitations of representation. Consequently, the variety of stimuli has its effects on the portrayal of

---

<sup>76</sup> Von Trier quoted in Koutsourakis, ‘Interview with Lars von Trier’, see the appendix, p. 269.

history, which is not shown as a photographic reproduction of events, but as fragments that need to be assembled by the audience.

This aesthetics of quotation interests me in this thesis and I am going to explore it in detail in the chapters that follow. In the *Europa* trilogy, which I discuss in the next chapter, this quotation of materials aims at provoking questions with respect to the opposition between the official history and aspects of it that have been overlooked. In *The Element of Crime* (1984), von Trier self-consciously quotes the film noir genre to produce a failed mystery story that defies any sense of linear development. The narrative consists of decomposed fragments that bring together historical references torn out of context with quotations from prominent films and literature verses. These references function as historical indices with which the audience is expected to interact.

In *Epidemic* (1987), von Trier advances a representational strategy that incorporates the filmmaking process in the film's fabula. The film appears as a quotation of its own making and this has its corollary on the portrayal of history, which appears as non-chronologically ordered material. Hence, *Europa* (1991), which deals explicitly with history and in particular with the post-war West-Germany, adopts formal strategies such as overt back-projections and superimpositions that express a dramaturgical scepticism regarding the medium's ability to portray history.

In the chapters that follow I intend to show that von Trier's films are not simply concerned with the reduplication of actions, but hold in check the very limits of representation. The way he employs performativity is also particularly telling and can strengthen the understanding of von Trier as a post-Brechtian director. A careful examination of his camera-work since *Breaking the Waves* (1996) can illustrate this point more clearly. The careful and calculated composition of images is replaced by an interest in using the camera as an investigative tool. The intention, as he says, is to use the camera

as a means of finding things instead of framing material.<sup>77</sup> One should also consider his preference for avoiding detailed rehearsals and allowing the actors to improvise while performing a character. Representation shifts from the reproduction of actions to an aesthetics of ‘showing’ the process of making a scene; the script turns into material for exploration, while the camera becomes a performative tool rather than a neutral agent. Again, this practice demonstrates von Trier’s indifference to treat the story as an end in itself.

The reader may recall my aforementioned discussion of Straub’s/Huillet’s and Fassbinder’s use of the static camera to valorise the contradictions deriving from the performance of the actors. In the third chapter, I elaborate on this in detail and I discuss how von Trier uses the camera in a performative way that combines theatrical and aleatory material. Unlike Straub/Huillet and Fassbinder, von Trier is not interested in the production of calculated and over-rehearsed performances, but he allows his actors a certain degree of performative freedom. This objective is aided by his preference for a hand-held camera that restricts absolute control over the captured objects. By implication, emphasis is not placed solely on the outcome of the filming process, but on the very process of turning the material into a filmic object. With all the aforementioned points in mind, in the next chapters I proceed to discuss von Trier as a post-Brechtian director in order to reveal the dialectical aspect of his films.

---

<sup>77</sup> Ibid, p.270.

## Chapter 2 – Historical Fragments in the *Europa* Trilogy

### Introduction

The main reason why the *Europa* trilogy should be the first of von Trier's works I discuss is the fact that these films occur early in Lars von Trier's *oeuvre* and open up new ways of representing the historical past and present. These films employ certain formal elements, such as loose dramaturgy, segmented plot and meta-filmic effects that can be identified in the rest of von Trier's filmography. In this chapter, I am interested in analysing the ways that form complicates historical representation. I want to draw attention to the films' interest in the European traumas of the past and identify the political implications of certain formal elements, such as the weak causal nexus of the portrayed events, the ambiguous temporality, and the films' preference for a fragmented representation. On this basis, this chapter discusses the ways in which the films problematise narrative agency and historical time so as to generate defamiliarising effects that challenge the notion of the unified individual and the view of history as an ordered series of events. I suggest that the method is dialectical but defies the Hegelian perception of history as a completed whole. Teleological stories and linear patterns are abandoned in favour of non-chronologically ordered fragments that do not follow the strict narrative laws of dramatic cinema. As I proceed to show, this *modus operandi* may help us identify a historical portrayal that retains Brecht's favouring of portraying history as transitional without sharing his forward-looking politics.

Let us now offer a brief outline of the films. The first movie, *The Element of Crime* (1984) borrows stylistic elements from German Expressionism and the film noir genre. *Epidemic* (1987), a black and white film shot on location in Denmark and in Germany, plays a lot with the tension between documented and fictional material. *Europa* (1991) – like the first film of the trilogy – draws upon the cinematic tradition of film noir

and German Expressionism. In *The Element of Crime*, a police officer, Fisher (Michael Elphick), is hypnotised by a psychiatrist to go back to Europe, in order to reconstruct the facts of a case that he was in charge of, in which an unidentified person named Harry Grey committed murders of girls selling lotto tickets. The location is unspecified, but the names of the cities, some of the characters' surnames and certain words, such as *polizei* instead of police, are in German. Furthermore, some allusions are made to German history, for example the appearance of a bunch of skinheads conducting a collective ritual and sporadic references to Auschwitz.

References to German history and culture appear also in *Epidemic*, in which von Trier and his collaborator Niels Vørsel impersonate themselves in the process of making a film inspired by the plague that took place in Europe during the 14<sup>th</sup> century. Along with all the information that they collect from archives and museums, the characters decide to visit Cologne, in order to get material from contemporary history related to the bombing of Germany on the part of the allies. Throughout the film, images of their work in process appear on the screen without prior notice. The film within the film tells the story of Dr Mesmer an idealist (played by von Trier himself again), who wants to cure Europe from the plague and turns out to realise that he is the carrier of the disease. Finally, *Europa* deals explicitly with German history and in particular with the post-war period. Max von Sydow's hypnotic voice-over addresses Leopold Kessler (Jean-Marc Barr) to go back into *Europa*, that is, Germany in 1945. Leo goes to post-War Germany and gets a job in Zentropa, a railway company owned by Max Hartmann, a former Nazi collaborator. After falling in love with Katarina Hartmann (Barbara Sukowa), Leo is embroiled in a Nazi terrorist conspiracy and faces Germany's inability to erase its past.

One has to acknowledge Niels Vørsel's contribution to the trilogy, who has acted as a co-writer of the scripts. The films' thematic interest in the traumas of the European

past reflect Vørsel's interest in German history and art, which permeates his own writings, such as his radio play *Transistor* (1977), in which one of the characters says: 'Jeg er ved at være forpulet træt af Europa' [I am getting fucking tired of Europe].<sup>1</sup> The fundamental idea of the *Europa* trilogy is that Europe is in a state of crisis. As von Trier says, 'the three films are like a sketch painting of Europe that tells us much about the continent'.<sup>2</sup> The first film places emphasis on images of the 'European' (the exact location is unknown) landscape. The film has many references to Germany that can be identified in the expressionist aesthetics and the unmotivated allusions to the fascist past. In *Epidemic*, the narrative starts in Copenhagen but the characters have to return to the German space. With *Europa*, von Trier concludes the trilogy and locates the narrative in Germany year zero.

As Peter Schepelern points out, for von Trier the word *Europa* stands for Germany. Germany is a repository of cultural elements and historical memories that have influenced contemporary Europe. As he says: 'the central theme of the trilogy is first and foremost Europe that points to Germany and Nazi culture'.<sup>3</sup> Elsewhere, von Trier explains that both he and Vørsel see Germany as Europe and states that their interest in Germany stems from the fact that German history and culture is both 'dangerous' and 'beautiful'.<sup>4</sup> Von Trier's equation of Europe with Germany is a very bold decision that has to do with the view of Germany as a country whose history and culture has produced visuals that are as powerful as a 'drug'.<sup>5</sup> In a way, Germany appears as the 'crime scene' where one is repeatedly asked to return, in order to understand the European past and present. Intertextuality plays an important role as well, since the films reference many films

---

<sup>1</sup> Play quoted in Peter Schepelern, *Lars von Triers Film Tvang Og Befrielse* (Rosinante: København, 2000), p.126.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid., p.126.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid., p.126.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid., p.127.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid., p.124.

dealing with German history and Nazi culture. Another quotation by Schepelern can illuminate things further.

The *Europa* trilogy is one of the great feats of European cinema in the so-called postmodern phase. These films are full of quotations from other films, from history and other ideas. It's a fantastic cinematographic, historical and ideological puzzle, full of references.<sup>6</sup>

The films also share some key thematic elements. In all of them, an idealist embarks on a trip to 'save' Europe and ends up causing a catastrophe. In this chapter, I discuss all the films but, unlike previous writings, I am very much interested in intensifying the historical dimension of the first two films.

Let us now see the trilogy's critical reception. Peter Schepelern, Caroline Bainbridge, Jan Simons and Linda Badley are amongst the critics that have discussed the three films in connection with each other. Schepelern has underscored the importance of seeing the films as part of a trilogy. He identifies similarities between the films and certain modernist writers such as Georges Perec, Ernst Jünger and James Joyce. He also discusses certain meta-effects, such as the back projections in *Europa*, and the appearance of the film's title in *Epidemic*, as Brechtian devices. His analysis is very crucial for our understanding of the films.<sup>7</sup>

Bainbridge is committed to an analysis of the films' content rather than their form. She discusses issues of identity, ethics and ideology merging different authority figures, such as Althusser and Gramsci, to examine themes of power and hegemony as they appear in the films' plot. Her focus on issues of plot makes her linger on the sphere of psychology, failing to connect her arguments with her overall discussions of politics and

---

<sup>6</sup> Ibid., pp.126-127.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid., pp.58-60, p.104 and p.128.

ideology.<sup>8</sup> Similarly, Linda Badley is more interested in issues of content and her formal discussion is mainly restricted to an analysis of the films' intertextuality, something that has already been covered by Schepeleyn's and Bainbridge's books. Furthermore, her discussion of *The Element* and *Epidemic* does not strengthen the films' historical dimension, while her analysis of *Europa* reduces the film's politics to issues related to America's imperialist role in the post-war Europe.<sup>9</sup>

Conversely, Jan Simons develops a formal analysis comparing the unstable spatial and temporal relations in the films to the virtual reality of the video games. He is more focused on a postmodern investigation of the material emphasising the importance of the pastiche and eclectic quotation. What is not made clear in his analysis is the interrelation between aesthetics and politics. In a way, Simons connects the films' unrepresentability with von Trier's creativity, a line of argument that contradicts his postmodern rhetoric.<sup>10</sup>

This chapter argues that these three films have to be discussed in relation to one-another, since they raise a set of questions regarding history and the medium's relation to it. I suggest that von Trier stockpiles material from different historical temporalities so as to challenge the continuum of history. Moreover, the films problematise characterisation and present the individual as a product of forces that cannot be understood by psychology. In this way, both history and the individual are depicted in a dialectical way, but dialectics eschews synthesis. This line of argument will clarify my perception of the films under the rubric of the post-Brechtian. Before proceeding to an analysis of the films, I map out the difficulties in representing the past and investigate the ways in which history can be

---

<sup>8</sup> See Caroline Bainbridge, *The Cinema of Lars Von Trier: Authenticity and Artifice* (London, New York: Wallflower Press, 2007), pp.46-59.

<sup>9</sup> See Linda Badley, *Lars von Trier* (Urbana, Chicago, Springfield: University of Illinois Press, 2010), pp.21-36 and pp.40-43.

<sup>10</sup> See Jan Simons, *Playing the Waves: Lars Von Trier's Game Cinema* (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2007), p.102.

represented politically. My intention is to lay out some important Brechtian ideas that are pushed further in the films under discussion.

As I indicated in the previous chapter, directors such as Straub/Huillet and Fassbinder, who have consciously adopted a Brechtian aesthetics, intended to re-write history through the film medium, and go against the predominant historical hermeneutics. This understanding of representation as productivity, that is, as a destabilisation of tradition, is a pivotal aspect of Brechtian theory and practice. Brecht proposes estrangement as a means of overcoming the ‘naturalisation’ of social phenomena, and eliciting their historical function. Such a *modus operandi* acknowledges two very important factors. The first one lies in the Marxist belief that the appearance of the historical phenomena does not provide us with an understanding of the workings of history. It is only by means of a theoretical reconstruction and re-viewing of the facts that historical effects can be appreciated and understood. The second one is based upon the notion of the historical past and present being nothing but an established narrative. Thus, viewed from a different angle, it can offer a different assessment and understanding of the workings of history. Hence, the representation of history becomes a matter of *praxis*, of transformation of the solidified narrative and in the utopian dimension of Brecht’s theory a transformation of the audience’s historical consciousness.

Brecht’s refusal to reduce historical phenomena to ‘mere presence’, that is, to offer an additive reconstruction of historical events is indicative of his view of history as an active process and not as an authentic background. As he says:

The field has to be defined in historically relative terms. In other words we must drop our habit of taking the different social structures of past periods, then stripping them of everything that makes them different; so that they all look more or less like our own, which then acquires from this process a certain air of having been there all along, in other words of permanence pure and simple. Instead we must leave them their distinguishing marks and keep their

impermanence always before our eyes, so that our own period can be seen to be impermanent too.<sup>11</sup>

The impermanence of history is put forward through the representation of historical conditions, which, as Brecht suggests, are not mysterious forces in the background, but are manifested in the relations between individuals. In other words, history and the social state of affairs can be brought to the surface via a constant questioning of the individual and its place in it. Instead of showing characters operating in an authentic historical background, emphasis should be placed on posing questions that reveal the very historicity of human relationships.<sup>12</sup> This feature does not treat history as a reflection of reality, but as a host of possibilities and an instigator for action. In other words, there is a sense of uncertainty/unrepresentability in Brecht's work that aims at undermining the older certainties and showing historical reality as transitory.

As I mentioned in the first chapter, the transition from modernism to postmodernism has complicated Brecht's certainties and our ability to represent history. One important consequence of this crisis of representation is the complication of the distinction between historical facts and fiction. As Jean-Francois Lyotard explains, the spreading out of the media has reformulated the understanding of historical memory. The vast amount of information transmitted shapes the collective perception of the historical past and present. Yet the paradox is that in the last analysis, collective memory is nobody's memory. 'But "nobody"' here means that the body supporting that memory is not an earth-bound body'.<sup>13</sup> Postmodernism, therefore, takes uncertainty as a given element of contemporary reality and the dialectic between the individual and history is

---

<sup>11</sup> Bertolt Brecht, 'A Short Organum for the Theatre', in *Brecht on Theatre: The Development of an Aesthetic*, ed. and trans. by John Willet (New York, London: Methuen, 1964), pp. 179-205, here p. 190.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid, p. 191.

<sup>13</sup> See Jean- François Lyotard, 'Time Today', in *The Inhuman: Reflections on Time*, trans. by Geoffrey Bennington and Rachel Bowlby (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1991), pp.58-77, here p.64.

complicated, since history appears as an impersonal structure, which cannot be explained by means of human agency.

The dialectic between the individual and history constitutes one of the major tenets of Brecht's Marxist view of history and his critique of historical transcendence. Historical reality and the individual are not shown as given but as subject to constant change. This stress on changeability serves the purpose of revealing the possibility of transforming the established political reality. The fundamental condition is that human beings have to perceive themselves as products and producers of history. Historical reality appears as self-evident and, as Marx says, individuals need to realise their potential to become active participants in the making of history.<sup>14</sup> For Brecht, the Marxist dialectic operates as a means of investigating human relationships and revealing their dependence on structures and forces that are not visible. Brecht's view of history as Marxist science is founded upon the principle that capitalism produces the historical conditions for its own defeat.

In other words, Brecht's epistemology is grounded in the belief that by understanding the world dialectically, one can comprehend history and change social reality. This is the point of rupture between von Trier's depiction of history and Brecht's. I argue that von Trier follows Brecht's refusal to offer an 'additive method' in the portrayal of history and prioritises historical/social forces over the view of subjects as the sole historical agents. On the other hand, the *Europa* trilogy aspires to think history in terms of Benjaminian constellations that do not share Brecht's understanding of history as the route to human emancipation and progress. I argue that these constellations offer a materialist view of history that negates the conformist understanding of the past historical

---

<sup>14</sup> Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, *The German Ideology*, trans. by W. Lough, ed. by C.J. Arthur (London: Lawrence and Wishart, 1970), p.48.

catastrophes as aberrations. The concept of history as a heterogeneous temporality which resists teleological progress has been theorised by Walter Benjamin. As he says:

The concept of the historical progress of the mankind cannot be sundered from the concept of its progression through a homogeneous empty time. A critique of the concept of such a progression must be the basis of any criticism of the concept of progress itself.<sup>15</sup>

Benjamin's argument is in line with a dialectical view of history that is not restricted by Marxist teleology, something that characterises the work of certain post-Brechtian practitioners in film and theatre. The works of Straub/Huillet, Hans-Jürgen Syberberg, Alexander Kluge and Heiner Müller are some important pieces of evidence of such a representation of history, which does not propose any unambiguous solution for human emancipation. These directors follow Brecht's favouring of discontinuity and fragmentation but they deny the logic of the Brechtian *Fabel*, which strives to produce a unified meaning out of the collision of different fragments. The *Fabel* is no longer the central driving element; productivity emanates from the production of shock-effects that intend to reveal how the historical present is saturated with practices and conventions from the past. In light of the aforementioned thoughts, I proceed to discuss the *Europa* trilogy under the rubric of the post-Brechtian. I suggest that the films employ the 'presentational' mode of narration, and in particular Brecht's preference for quoting cinematic materials, gestures and genres. Furthermore, all films complicate the representation of the individual and its relation to history. My argument sets out to sketch how the films' complication of historical reference discloses the epistemological break between representation and history and goes beyond Brecht's view of history as a positive movement.

---

<sup>15</sup> Walter Benjamin, 'Theses on the Philosophy of History', trans. by Harry Zorn, in *Illuminations*, ed. by Hannah Arendt (London: Pimlico, 1999), pp.245-255, here p.252.

### **Accumulation of Visual and Narrative Materials**

One important starting point regarding the first film of the trilogy is the way it fuses a variety of voices and images that do not necessarily have a precise story-telling function. Moreover, the film's dialogue with various films and genres, which allude to the European legacy of fascism, downplays dramaturgy and favours images at the expense of plot. On a narrative level, stories interlock within stories and render narrative agency problematic. Thus, the audience is confronted with a multiplicity of perspectives that prevent the viewer from being anchored to a character's point of view. In this manner, the film refuses to subordinate historical representation to a synecdochic articulation of the narrative, that is, to a duplication of an individual story that reflects history in its entirety. The film accumulates visual and acoustic materials that dispute the linear and self-sufficient cinematic representation of history. This aesthetics produces a variety of voices and incompatible materials. The valorisation of disintegration over unity questions not only the unity of the fictive world but of the extra-filmic reality too.

Let us first see how many filmic materials resonate polyphonically within the film's narrative. In *The Element of Crime* action takes place somewhere in Europe which appears as a locus of traumatic memories. The film offers glimpses of history that do not solidify into a coherent narrative. There is no precise temporal and geographical specificity, while the narration consists of intertextual references and images that allude to the European legacy of fascism. During the shooting of the film, von Trier discussed the film's Brechtian presentational mode of narration. He stated that the film is like a 'picture book film', which places emphasis on the act of 'showing', as if telling the audience: 'here you see a house'.<sup>16</sup> As I stated in the first chapter, the act of 'showing'/quoting an

---

<sup>16</sup> Von Trier quoted in, *Ennenstadt Europa* Uncredited director (Petra Film and Hasner TV and Film, 1984) on [DVD].

action instead of imitating it, as well as the exposition of the devices of fiction, is Brechtian per se. This emphasis on a type of narration which privileges ‘showing’ over ‘telling’ minimises psychological motivation, since as Seymour Chatman explains what interests the narrator is the presentation of conflicts and of the narrating devices instead of narrative causality.<sup>17</sup> In this film, von Trier employs this strategy so as to go beyond a mimetic representation of history. As he says:

We are trying to get the most out of the pictures we are showing. We are trying to incorporate as much history into them as possible. We’ve employed a futuristic set which is very patinated. And everything in the film has a history which is also patinated. A chair tells you how it’s used through its patina. If you transfer the idea to the landscape you can tell how the landscape has been used through its patina. The same goes for the people. Their patina will tell you how they’ve lived their lives.<sup>18</sup>

History, therefore, does not emerge solely out of the script but through certain metaphors and allegories created by means of visual effects and intertextual references. Amongst them one can identify Resnais’ *Last Year at Marienbad* (1961), Godard’s *Alphaville* (1965) and Tarkowsky’s *Stalker* (1979). These references are used as a set of historical materials and are not simply part of a postmodern pastiche aesthetics.<sup>19</sup> In other words, von Trier treats these intertextual references as materials which merit historical reassessment and re-evaluation, and not as recycled ‘dead styles’ and objects. Far from the postmodern view that the historical referents have vanished altogether, the employment of these references as historical materials suggests that by going back to the historical/cinematic past we can get a better understanding of the contemporary present.<sup>20</sup>

---

<sup>17</sup> See Seymour Chatman, *Story and Discourse: Narrative Structure in Fiction and Film* (Ithaca, London: Cornell University Press), 1980), p.56, and p.192.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid.

<sup>19</sup> I refrain from referencing all the intertextual references given that this has been repeatedly done so far. For a detailed discussion of intertextuality in the films, see Schepelern, pp.78-83, pp.102-103 and pp.120-129.

<sup>20</sup> Certainly there are other forms of pastiche that do not constitute a coherent and apolitical bloc. For more on this see Ingeborg Hoesterey, *Pastiche: Cultural Memory in Art, Film and Literature* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2001), pp.47-48.

As von Trier admits, in many respects the film 'is a film about film'.<sup>21</sup> The manipulation of German Expressionism and film noir results in a sort of apocalyptic decay that at a first viewing can lead someone to see the film as an aestheticisation of desolation.<sup>22</sup> In my estimation, this aesthetics is interested in producing temporal and geographical defamiliarisation, opening old wounds from the past and reflecting on the contemporary seemingly ahistorical reality. The genres that the film manipulates are well-known for their association with the traumas of fascism. Siegfried Kracauer's famous treatise suggested that German Expressionism's interest in the madness that permeates authority reflected the collective German soul in the years that preceded fascism.<sup>23</sup> Film noir, on the other hand, draws on the post-war traumas of fascism, showing a predilection for fatalistic narratives that frustrate the characters' best intentions.<sup>24</sup> Moreover, film noir's critique of the capitalist social imaginary has been seen as a radical negation of the commodity culture and of the post-war narrative of historical progress.<sup>25</sup>

Von Trier's manipulation of these genres draws upon common clichés and stereotypes of authority, such as the police officer Kramer (Jerold Wells) who stands for a pro-Nazi image, which is suggestive of an authoritarian figure. Moreover, the story of Fisher, who goes back to Europe with the best intentions and turns out to become part of the reality he negates, is evocative of film noir's fatalistic narrative patterns. The crisis of individual freedom preoccupies von Trier's film and the collision of different narrative levels goes against the very notion of the monadic subject. Previous readings of the film have not highlighted this point. For instance, Badley suggests that the film's stylisation is

---

<sup>21</sup> See Jan Korum Larsen and Lars von Trier, 'A Conversation Between Jan Korum Larsen and Lars von Trier', in *Lars von Trier Interviews*, (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2003), pp.32-46, here p.43.

<sup>22</sup> For reviews that criticised the film on these grounds, *Ibid.*, p.41.

<sup>23</sup> See Siegfried Kracauer 'Caligari', in *The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari: Texts, Contexts, Histories*, ed. and trans. by Mike Budd (New Brunswick, London: Rutgers University Press, 1990), pp.242-255.

<sup>24</sup> See Paul Schrader, 'Notes on Film Noir', in *Movies and Mass Culture*, ed. by John Belton, (London: Athlone, 1996), pp.153-170, here pp.157-159.

<sup>25</sup> See James Naremore, 'American Film Noir: The History of an Idea', in *Film Quarterly*, 49:2 (1995), pp.12-28, here p.24.

not interested in historical representation, but in the depiction of the central character's 'subjective vision'.<sup>26</sup> Yet the film employs narrative and visual tropes that contradict the very idea of the autonomous individual.

Critical here is the emphasis on the European landscape at the expense of dramatisation. The landscape acquires a voice of its own and fuses contradictory voices and images. As von Trier admits, people appear as part of the scenography and not as characters.<sup>27</sup> The European landscape becomes a canvas, in which von Trier combines cultural stereotypes with inconclusive images that allude to the European history. Thus, the landscape becomes a dehumanised place, which interlocks visual fragments from nature, history and culture. This visual pre-eminence of the landscape leaves little room for a unified subjectivity and puts forward the primacy of historical forces. On this basis, the emphasis on debris and natural disaster points to a post-Enlightenment era, in which the mythologies that accompanied the age of reason have been invalidated in the course of history.

The employment of 'landscape images' as a means of putting forward the primacy of historical forces has been utilized by post-Brechtian directors in film and theatre too. Syberberg in his film *Hitler: a Film for Germany* [*Hitler – Ein Film Aus Deutschland*, 1977] uses the landscape as a theatre of history, in which images and figures from the past and the present are amalgamated. Certain critics understand this formal element as part of a 'post-histoire' culture.<sup>28</sup> Unlike this reading, I suggest that the use of the European landscape as a canvas that accumulates antithetical materials does not imply that history 'has disappeared'. It is rather a different understanding of historical representation which denies the use of history as a backdrop for dramatic purposes. The purpose of such a

---

<sup>26</sup> Badley, p.23.

<sup>27</sup> Von Trier quoted in Stig Björkman, *Trier on von Trier*, trans. by Neil Smith (London: Faber and Faber, 2003) p.76.

<sup>28</sup> See for example Anton Kaes, *From Hitler to Heimat: the Return of History as Film* (Cambridge, Massachusetts, London: Harvard University Press, 1989), p.48.

method is not the establishment of ‘historical truth’, but the proliferation of visual and aural constellations that reveal the discontinuity between past and present. This discontinuity exposes history as an active process but not as epistemology.

The same applies to the theatre of Heiner Müller, in which the landscape does not function as a concrete historical background but as the locus, in which “‘the nightmare of history’ emerges”.<sup>29</sup> Unattributed voices meet with figures from the European historiography and mythology offering an ever shifting perspective. This emphasis on the landscape draws upon the Marxist approach, according to which historical events can be seen in the light of conflicting forces and broader collective institutions and not as actions instigated by autonomous subjects. By implication, the landscape brings to the surface questions regarding the relationship between self and world, going beyond an anthropocentric view of history. Characters lose their pre-eminence and dissolve into linguistic and visual fragments. One is asked to consider whether the subject is thrown into history rather than being an active agent.

The landscape in *The Element of Crime* has a similar function. It appears as a non-place of cultural and historical fusion somewhere in Europe, in which characters speak English in accented language. An atmosphere of solipsistic withdrawal overrides dramatic forms of story development (figure 1). The result regarding the portrayal of characters is complicated given that the seemingly ahistorical depiction of Europe gives the impression that subjects are abolished altogether. Furthermore, the self-conscious incorporation of genre figures and the inter-textual references make the actors look as if they quote cultural stereotypes instead of embodying dramatic figures. This practice reinforces the questioning of individuality in relation to history, and the historical reality outside the world of images.

---

<sup>29</sup> Müller quoted in Jeanette R. Malkin, *Memory-Theater and Postmodern Drama* (Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 1999), p.31.

The most conspicuous example can be drawn from a scene in which Fisher meets Kramer. Here the landscape predominates over story development. As Fisher informs us, ‘Europe lies dormant and everything seems very peaceful’. In the midst of a lengthy camera movement, the camera focuses on the natural environment, which is dilapidated – an effect that is heightened by the semi-sepia colour. Later on, a scene of police violence is followed by an image of a horse sinking inside the water. As Fisher and Kramer are walking to the scene of the crime, we see images of wretched people placed in beds, hammocks, and rooms that are surrounded by water. Another image of a dead horse sunk into the water emerges (figure 2) and the camera ends up in a sand hill that looks completely dissociated from the previous images (figure 3).

Yet the voice-over constantly informs us that the place is Europe and the portrayed European landscape cannot be dissociated from the crime scenes. Europe appears as a permanent locus of crime and apathy. Following Fisher’s and Kramer’s visit into the crime scene, the ensuing frame heightens the sense of temporal and spatial uncertainty (figure 4). People are shown running in various directions and more images of dead horses are interlocked, while the extra-diegetic music intensifies the dream-style narration. Multiple fragments are attached and the audience’s eye cannot absorb them at once. What is particularly suggestive for the viewer is that the uncertainty communicated by the landscape intimates the film’s lack of interest in dramatic realism, showing preference for constellations infused with history instead of a historical accurate *mise-en-scène*.

Rosalind Galt’s study of contemporary European cinema refers to certain Italian films concerned with history, which have employed landscape images to suggest historical specificity, evoke a past historical period and trigger audience emotivity. She argues that films such as *Cinema Paradiso* (Tornatore: 1988), *Mediterraneo* (Salvatores:

1991) and *Il Postino* (Radford: 1994) employ landscape images to construct narratives of mourning and historical loss, which come as a response to the failure of the left aspirations of modernity.<sup>30</sup> Galt argues that these films cannot be simply seen as ‘nostalgia films’. However, their treatment of the Italian landscape as well as their employment of period film tropes communicate a feeling of nostalgia for a bygone era. Contrary to these nostalgic films, the landscape in *The Element of Crime* plays a different function, since its appearance is not simply narratively motivated and it does not provoke questions of national identity and specificity. Unlike period films that employ landscape images to erase any contradictions between nature, culture and history, von Trier creates a ‘landscape effect’ which conveys a feeling of historical and cultural failure.

Subsequently, the European landscape is not just a dramatic setting, but carries a meaning that exceeds character interiority and action. Despite Fisher’s attempts to solidify his memories into a concrete narrative, his view of Europe as a locus of traumatic memories predominates and infuriates his therapist (Ahmed El Shenawi), who repeatedly asks him to stay focused on the story. In this landscape, von Trier fuses cinematic and historical references, so as to voice a historical anxiety regarding the medium’s relationship to an ever-changing historical environment. Thus, one can understand von Trier’s predilection for visuals at the expense of plot as a means of addressing the crisis of referentiality.

This crisis of referentiality can be brought to the surface via an examination of the accumulation of different narrative levels, which result in a collision of materials that fail to integrate into a concrete narrative structure. Questions of story development are minimised in favour of questions of narrative agency. In other words, the film’s unfolding leaves unanswered questions with respect to who is narrating to whom. Subjective

---

<sup>30</sup> See Rosalind Galt, *The New European Cinema: Redrawing the Map* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2006), pp.32-33 and pp.59-61.

memory, textual/filmic references and collective historical memories overlap, problematising the main character's capacity to map the world around him. That is why I propose a post-Brechtian reading and not a psychoanalytic one.<sup>31</sup>

On the surface, *The Element* appears as a narrative that addresses individual memories. The film starts in Egypt and the main character Fisher is hypnotized by an Egyptian psychiatrist to go back into the past and assemble the pieces of a traumatic experience. In the frame story, Fisher is always absent and the therapist gazes at the camera addressing him and the audience simultaneously. As the therapist implies, what follows is the recounting of a subjective experience on the part of the main character. Fisher's voice-over interjects the reality of the story-time with its recounting. The time of the story and the time of its narrating are intertwined. In effect, the relationship between individual and story becomes problematic. Fisher is a character in the story and an observer at the same time, something that is equivalent to Brecht's understanding of acting. As I discuss later on, von Trier pushes things further to the extent that there are moments when one senses a radical separation between voice and body. As a result, voices are privileged over a unified identity.

Fisher the narrator is the person who is asked to go back to Europe by means of hypnosis so as to clarify the traumatic past events and refamiliarise himself with the memories that cause him pain. In the film-within-the film, which is the re-visualisation of these memories, Fisher is the character whose pursuit of the serial killer Harry Grey becomes the film's plot. Within the story another story intervenes, which is the theory of *The Element of Crime*, a book written by Fisher's mentor, Osborne (Esmond Knight). According to the book, crimes can occur in a certain element and environment. Thus, the prerequisite for a successful discovery of a criminal is the pursuer's identification with

---

<sup>31</sup> See for example, Elizabeth Stewart, 'Hypnosis, Identification and Crime in Lars Von Trier European Trilogy', in *Film Journal*, 12:1 (2005) available at <http://www.thefilmjournal.com/issue12/larsvontrier.html>, accessed 29 November 2008.

her/him. In the end, a puzzling switching of identities takes place, since Fisher kills a girl he uses as a decoy to lay the killer in ambush. He turns out to assume the identity of the murderer and later on the identity of his mentor, who commits suicide having taken the responsibility for the killings.

The switching of identities and the clash between different narrative levels creates a disjuncture between individual experience and pictorial representation, something that defies the films' ostentatious narrative as the recounting of a subjective story. While Fisher is hypnotised in the frame story, a dream-style narration characterises for the most part the film's narrative, in which von Trier presents many narrative layers. In his explanation, the reason for this is that 'it's all about trying to convey the fact that the world is so much more than a trite little story that's inside the head of the film's protagonist'.<sup>32</sup>

The different story layers emanate from an aesthetics that polarises action and narrative voice. A prime example can be seen in the beginning of Fisher's recollection, in which there is a disjunction between the image-track and the sound-track. Fisher says that he visits Europe again, but instead of a clearly identifiable and recognisable location we see images of dead horses (figure 5). What is clear beyond doubt is that these durational images are not establishing shots. Uncertainty is heightened by the voice-over, which does not aim at clarifying the visuals. Both the voice-over narration and the images play with the dialectic between 'showing an action' and telling, something that does not render the story-teller reliable.<sup>33</sup> The disjunction between image and sound creates an audio-visual collage that does not have a story-telling function. The figures of the dead horses

---

<sup>32</sup> Von Trier quoted in Larsen, p.38.

<sup>33</sup> Sarah Kozloff discusses the ways that voice-over is normally associated with the act of telling something as opposed to the images which are associated with the act of showing an action. Kozloff though explains how the voice-over can be used in ways that problematise the reliability of the narrator instead of offering unambiguous information. See Kozloff, *Invisible Storytellers: Voice-Over Narrators in American Fiction Film* (Berkeley, Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1988), p.12-13 and p.63.

are accompanied by a quotation from *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner* on the part of the main character: ‘water, water everywhere and not a drop to drink’. Fisher’s quotation is interrupted by the therapist’s reprimand to stay focused on the story.

Obviously, there is dissociation between the speaking utterances and the body of the narrator. In this regard, the role of hypnosis that provides a dream-style narration is crucial to our understanding of the disconnection between subject and language. The recounting of Fisher’s traumatic experience in Europe by means of hypnosis accords the narrative an element of artificiality, since the aesthetics of the dream is not based upon the experience of a concrete story. Conversely, the dream is always a quoted narrative, which cannot be attributed to a unified subject. As Michael Lambek explains:

The experience of dreaming is not based upon a concrete, bounded narrative or image that we can then repeat verbatim; instead the telling replaces the dream. In other words, it is impossible to know where the images perceived or originating in sleep break off and those in waking life, elicited in what is ostensibly a reproduction but becomes its own creative process, begin. Once formulated in words, it is this version we remember, the representation, not the original experience. What we call the dream is actually the highly mediated retelling.<sup>34</sup>

In light of these comments, one can perceive the film’s complex narrative as a representation revolving around quotation. The act of recollection replaces the authoritative narrative and refutes the notion of a unified identity. Another element that heightens ambiguity regarding the identity of the narrator is that, despite the fact that the film purports to be a subjective-flashback, the origin in the frame story is not Fisher, who is absent, but the therapist.

Thus, the world that is narrated collides with the narrating process itself. At times, Fisher’s suspended critical abilities, which are the outcome of hypnosis, are transferred to

---

<sup>34</sup> Michael Lambek, ‘The Past Imperfect: Remembering As Moral Practice’, in *Tense Past: Cultural Essays in Trauma and Memory*, ed. by Paul Antze and Michael Lambek (London, New York: Routledge, 1996), pp.235-254, here p.242.

the main story and the very act of ‘witnessing’ is problematised. Fisher’s function as a narrative agent is called into question and the boundaries between the metadiegetic and the diegetic world are not clearly defined. As a result, different voices and stories overlap making the film look like an accumulation of materials that are not complete and clash with each other, consistently voiding them of their narrativistic function. Fisher’s voice-over in the frame story is dissociated from the projected events and gives the impression that it is the instigator of movement, as if the character is reading a script, which is actualised on the screen. There are moments that the voice-over blends the frame story with his re-visualised memories making it hard to discern the character’s identity. Flashbacks inside of flashbacks join together and the authority of a sovereign point of view is undermined. This formula de-individualises the narration, since flashbacks are used in such a way that access to character psychology is denied. Their function is not restorative or explanatory, as it is the case in a type of narration structured upon a cause and effect chain.

Pam Cook explains the flashbacks’ function within a narrative, in which action springs from characters as causal agents.

Flashback is a common way of articulating memory in classic cinema and its most usual form is a close-up on a character’s face or eyes, suggesting that we are entering their head or thoughts, followed by a scene that represents their recollection of something that happened to them in the past.<sup>35</sup>

Recollection becomes a form of exorcism. The past is left behind and the individual is asked to move on, a formal choice that implies progress. One senses the difference between the paradigm described by Cook and *The Element*. Von Trier’s employment of recollection does not place the narrator in a superior position of knowledge. The act of

---

<sup>35</sup> Pam Cook, *Screening the Past. Memory and Nostalgia in Cinema* (London: Routledge, 2005), pp.102-103.

recollection is questioned and instead of re-enacting an inner subjective moment, it is the very act of narration that is rendered unreliable. This formulation is telling because von Trier adopts the mode of the art cinema as a historical material – one senses similarities with Alain Resnais – and proposes that the art cinema meditation on issues of historical reference is potentially as suspect as any mode of representation.

Indicative of this practice is a scene in which Fisher re-enacts Grey's trip to Friedingen. The camera remains stationary focusing on his girlfriend Kim (Me Me Lai). Meanwhile, Fisher's voice-over is delivered in the third person and informs us about Grey's trip and Kim's (Grey's former mistress) decision to join him. Here, the voice-over, and the voice on run concurrently. The audience is not aware whether it is the hypnotised Fisher in the frame story or the character in the main narrative who is speaking. The camera then moves away and captures Fisher, who is wearing different clothes and a hat with the initials H.G. Fisher looks at the lens saying: 'Harry Grey', making us assume that he is re-staging Grey's trip that took place three years ago. From then on, the voice-over is delivered in the first person. 'I have waited half an hour for you. The bus is late'. When he asks Kim whether she has missed him, she responds 'you know I like to see you'. Fisher corrects her 'you know I like to see you Harry' something that she is asked to repeat.

Subsequently, the characters look as if they are quoting a script and the temporality of the plot is radically undermined. These transpositions from the third person voice-over narration to the first one and then back to the plot line, where the narrative seems to be a self-conscious restaging of Grey's experiences, create a disjunction between the image-track and the soundtrack. The scene creates a distance between actors and characters, since the roles that they perform are complicated. Agency is problematised and one cannot ascertain whether it is Fisher or Grey who is the narrative agent. Here, von

Trier prioritises voices and images over concrete characterisation and narrative, a formal choice that can be identified in postmodern ‘memory’ plays.<sup>36</sup>

The fact that the characters give the impression of quoting a script confounds matters more. The topos of reading from scripts when they purport to illuminate the fictional characters’ experiences raises questions with respect to identity and authorship. The characters speak as if their words are reported by someone else and given that the film deals with recollection, one is asked to consider whether there is such a thing as a unified subject that can act as the locus of recall. On this account, the voice-over does not follow the logic of the omniscient narrator of the 19<sup>th</sup> century novel, who can address a series of clearly composed events. When it comes to authorship, the audience is asked to re-think the validity of the text as a means of addressing the historical trauma and the role of the director as the person in the seat of knowledge.

### **Epistemological Uncertainty**

Not surprisingly, the crisis of authorship is a theme that preoccupies the film thematically. Osborne’s text, *The Element of Crime*, appears quite often on screen, while Osborne himself is shown in televisual images advocating a scientific explanation of crime. In one of those moments, Osborne is accompanied by two men dressed in SS uniforms, a stylistic element that alludes to the European history of fascism. In a press-conference he proceeds to provide a scientific explanation of crime (figure 6) and explains that ‘*The Element of Crime* is a method based on a reconstruction of a known part of a criminal’s life’. The role of this commentary seems to be dual: it addresses the character Fisher and the audience at the same time, providing a tip-off for the film’s interpretation. However, the unfolding of the narrative contradicts Osborne’s scientific account and his text fails to provide an accurate explanation.

---

<sup>36</sup> See Malkin, p.9.

The crime that Osborne's method aspires to comprehend is an allegory for the European historical traumas. It is not difficult to intimate the parallels between the crime and the wounds of the past. Evidence of this association is offered by the visual paraphernalia that refer to the Nazi culture and the unmotivated references to Auschwitz that appear in the film, and in particular at one point that Fisher visits a forensic surgeon to get evidence from the post-mortem results. But it is mainly the idea of Europe being a locus of traumatic memories which confirms the link between the crime and history. To return to Osborne's theory, the text's (*The Element of Crime*'s) failure opens up issues of representation and demonstrates the epistemological break between fiction and history. In the same way that Osborne's book fails to help Fisher understand and find Grey, the hints given by the story line are unable to connect with its visual actualisation. In the end, the merging of the identity of the policeman with the criminal and the scientist point to an historical era of epistemological uncertainty. Science and authoritarianism are not shown as antithetical but as the two sides of the same coin. Out of all the perspectives that have appeared throughout the film's narrative, none of them is vested with validity. Fisher's humanism, Osborne's scientific reasoning, and Kramer's authoritarianism clash and are shown as equally problematic.

The result is that various levels of meaning and associations coexist, while none of them is privileged by the director. It is fair to conjecture that the failure of *The Element of Crime* – the text within the film – to provide an accurate explanation for the European trauma becomes a self-reflexive comment on von Trier's *modus operandi*. Fisher follows Osborne's method until the end, but the text and its scientific rhetoric do not succeed in offering a unified interpretation of the series of crimes. On one occasion, we see Fisher contemplating while the pages of the text are scattered around the landscape. The text in the film's narrative demonstrates scepticism regarding the understanding of the text – and

as an extension of the author and the script – as the repository of truth. This point raises issues of authorial and epistemological uncertainty.

A narrative that intends to communicate a certain amount of knowledge to the audience is structured upon the basis that the spectator absorbs and imitates certain ideas transmitted by someone who is placed in a privileged position of knowledge. As Edward Branigan explains:

In a communication theory of narrative the narration of a story assumes a literal sense. An author translates knowing into telling followed by a spectator who reconverts the telling into knowing. The attitude or the viewpoint of the author or at least some species of narrator is transmitted with minimal resistance (lessened by the critic) to the viewer. The outcome of the quasi-conversation is knowledge about reality, inflected by the author's or narrator's view of it.<sup>37</sup>

Branigan's comments can help us identify the difference between the metaphysical perception of the artist, who is in a privileged position of knowledge compared to his audience, and von Trier's epistemological uncertainty. Von Trier's aesthetics of fragmentation does not communicate knowledge and this can clarify my argument that his representation of history can be seen under the rubric of the post-Brechtian. Unlike Brecht, the fragments are not used as a means of leading the audience to a reformed view of reality that is structured upon a specific doctrine of knowledge. The fragments crystallise antithetical elements that do not follow each other with dialectical precision. The audience is confronted with a dialectical plenitude devoid of a pre-given hermeneutical designation. The various levels of narration do not cohere, a formal choice that demonstrates an inability to deal adequately with the trauma of history.

It is fair to suggest that the plot in the film comes as an afterthought, something that can be seen in some scenes that we expect an illumination of the events. Instead, the

---

<sup>37</sup> Edward Branigan, *Projecting a Camera: Language Games in Film Theory* (London, New York: Routledge, 2006), p.81.

characters seem to quote lines without a story-telling function; one senses a complete dissociation between the speakers and their utterances. For instance, when Fisher goes to the crime scene to get information for the first murder, he meets with a bunch of kids that start reciting 'Oranges and Lemons'. This nursery rhyme is used in George Orwell's famous novel *1984* as a reference to issues of historical amnesia. This intertextual reference is not accidental and indicates the film's interest in issues of memory and the collective European history. Later, when Fisher meets Kim for the first time she starts reciting 'The House that Jack Built' instead of introducing herself, making the relationship between sound and image quite perplexed.

Consequently, language does not emerge in a verisimilar way from the story. Given that the film is concerned with Europe as a locus of traumatic memories, the outcome of the accumulation of disconnected materials demonstrates a preference for avoiding a unified historical narrative.<sup>38</sup> What appears instead is fragments that subvert the storyline and fuse different temporalities. Therefore, the clashes between images and words do not simply refer to the limits of the character's memory but to the inadequacy of representation to express the trauma of European history. History intrudes in the film's narration in the form of flashes, and one example can be drawn from a scene, in which, while Fisher is laying the murderer in ambush, we hear someone whistling *Lili Marleen*, the German song that became popular during the World War II. The song is also an indirect reference to Fassbinder's homonymous film and demonstrates von Trier's hyperawareness of the European arthouse cinema tradition concerned with history.

Such a fragmented manifestation of history is firmly professed in a scene towards the end of the film. When Fisher assumes the identity of Grey and murders the girl, the

---

<sup>38</sup> Jean-Luc Godard does something similar in films such as *Passion* (1982) and *Our Music* [*Notre Musique*, 2004] in which he questions the unity of the European space, focusing on the dissolving of national boundaries, on issues of migration, movement and religious conflict. Both films question the linear portrayal of history as well as the Enlightenment idea of progress itself.

camera exhibits its indifference to the professed narrative resolution and captures a narratively unmotivated suicidal ritual conducted by a group of skinheads. In the beginning of the sequence, this group is shown in a pool singing a military song. Later on, we see them being brutally attacked by a policeman (figure 7). Meanwhile, a skinhead performs the suicidal ritual (figure 8, 9). Here, the outwardly important story development is deliberately shifted into the margins, and the ritual performs a deliberate pause in the narrative, which has a shock-effect on the audience.

This ritual does not develop the storyline nor does it follow the rules of narrative continuity. The skinheads' appearance operates as an intrusion of the traumatic past, as hallucinatory fragments of European history. What makes the scene more problematic is that the arrangement of the images does not suggest historical reconstruction; rather chaotic memory seems to be at work here. The images refer to the wounds of the fascist past. They are placed in a non-specific landscape and are left to the audience to construct meaning out of them. At this point, the camera ignores Fisher's point of view, despite the fact that we are given the impression that the mystery has been resolved. What occurs is a disturbance in the plot and once again the viewer is asked to reconsider who is the narrative agent.

Thus, the film's treatment of the public sphere of history builds upon Brecht's distrust of the ideology of the visible. The difference lies in the fact that history does not appear as a concrete material reality but as an arrangement of antithetical signs. The appearance of history as non-chronologically ordered images is interconnected with a historical reality, in which a systematic all-encompassing method, including the Marxist meta-narrative (in the form of historical determinism), cannot account for the historical past and present. History is presented as an accumulation of fragments and heterogeneous elements that resist systematisation and narrative order. In this context, the emergence of

fragments that allude to the historical past in *The Element* are in line with Benjamin's understanding of the dialectical image as "involuntary memory" that does not perceive history in a chronological arrangement. For Benjamin, the dialectical image valorises sequential "disorder" so as to change the way the past has been inherited and its relation to the contemporary present. Benjamin's stress on historical discontinuity intended to clarify the revolutionary potential of the present. In *The Element*, von Trier does not pronounce such a potential clearly, but what one shall retain from Benjamin when looking at the film, is the understanding of the historical fragment as "a precise dialectical problem that the present is called upon to resolve".<sup>39</sup>

The aesthetics of the fragments that resist unity and coherence poses problems in relation to issues of representation and spectatorship. In its proliferation of visual and aural signs *The Element* requires a new mode of perception in which the audience is no longer required to reconfirm a predetermined theory, or a specific scientific conclusion. They are asked to concentrate on the film's production of images, signs and intricate constellations, which do not converge at a single point. Fisher's recounting of 'the facts' fails, since neither he nor the audience manage to acquire specific information that leads to narrative closure. The plurality of voices and the intrusion of history in the form of disjunctive images and references deprive the narrative of an authoritative point of view.

The film exhibits a postmodern suspicion towards the ideology of presence, but this aspect does not necessarily set off an apolitical postmodern hermeneutics. In the first chapter, I developed Brecht's idea that photographic realism works out to naturalise one's perception of social reality. Brecht did not see any merit in representing history as a closed series of events, because he was not concerned with offering a detailed portrayal of what happened in the past. He was rather more concerned with asking what could have

---

<sup>39</sup> Benjamin quoted in Susan Buck-Morss, 'Walter Benjamin: Revolutionary Writer (I)' in *New Left Review*, 128:1 (1981), pp.50-75, here p.57.

happened in the past under different circumstances and how the past can be seen as historically specific, so as to make the audience explore the ways that the present can be changed.

In *The Element*, von Trier shares Brecht's mistrust of an empirical historical reproduction. The accumulation of different voices and unconnected images from the European past, which are torn out of context, refutes the illusion of a self-contained historical world. Von Trier is aware of the medium's limited capacity to exhibit the historical and social processes that take place at the level of the masses. Thus, in its refusal to reduce the traumatic European past to an ordered narrative, the film goes beyond the Orthodox Marxist approach to historical evolution, which linked the representation of the past to human-knowledge and emancipation.<sup>40</sup> The audience is asked to co-produce so as to place the shown images in the present and work through collective repressed memories that cannot be enclosed within the fictive cosmos.

The determining question here is whether von Trier's treatment of history proposes a *post-histoire* reading, or whether the film's valorisation of uncertainty can be understood dialectically. I have been arguing in favour of the latter hermeneutics, but in order to elucidate this line of argument, one needs to explain that the abandonment of the view of history as a completed whole does not necessarily imply a postmodern disappearance of history. History persists throughout the film but not as a drama. The relegation of history to a dramatic narrative implies teleology, reconciliation and historical determinism, which are the opposite of a dialectical view of history as an active process of perpetual transitions. On this basis, von Trier organises the film's diegesis upon visual fragments that stockpile points of tension which put forward the persistence of history. The film's formal abstraction and its radical portrayal of different historical sequences

---

<sup>40</sup> This is certainly evidenced in Godard's *Passion* too, in which the formerly polemical director replaces the Marxist rhetoric with a contemplative attitude, implying that the European grand narratives cannot help us understand the complexity of the historical present.

propose that the trauma of history persists and without practical activity our contemporary present appears as the compulsive repetition of past events.

***Epidemic: Literalization of the Medium. The Essay as Film Form***

*Epidemic*, the second part of the trilogy, is also concerned with the chasm between history and its representation. This chasm is heightened by the film's quotation of its own making, which makes one rethink the relationship between history and dramaturgy. The film was shot without a crew and for the most part von Trier and Vørsel acted in front of an 'unmanned' camera. The initial script was one page long and in a way the film foreshadows von Trier's fondness for a more ascetic aesthetics. As Schepeleern explains, '*Epidemic's* interest in delivering art of limited financial means and non-complex film technique anticipates von Trier's ascetic Dogme project'.<sup>41</sup> This preference for cinematic austerity is also strengthened by the Manifesto that accompanied the film's release, in which von Trier argues in favour of a naïve cinematic style that he equates with the bagatelle. 'The bagatelle is humble and all-encompassing. It reveals creativity without making a secret for eternity. Its frame is limited but magnanimous, and therefore leaves space for life'.<sup>42</sup> What one needs to point out is the linkage between naïveté and experimentation, something that brings us back to Brecht. For Brecht, a naïve attitude is the synonym for an experimental approach towards art and reality which aims at rendering the 'obvious' and the 'self-evident' problematic.<sup>43</sup> To return to *Epidemic*, the film's dramaturgical simplicity inaugurates von Trier's new approach towards dramaturgy and his preference for simple and less-complicated narratives.

This section discusses how the film's combination of dramaturgy with the process of its own making reveals the means by which the filmmakers employ historical materials

---

<sup>41</sup> See Schepeleern, p.97.

<sup>42</sup> Von Trier, 'Manifesto 2', see the appendix, p.282.

<sup>43</sup> Brecht quoted in, Karl-Heinz Schoeps, 'From Distancing Alienation to Intuitive Naïveté: Bertolt Brecht's Establishment of a New Aesthetic Category', in *Monatshefte*, 81:2 (1989), pp.186-198, here p.190.

and anecdotes as a means of complicating historical representation. The film starts with von Trier and Vørsel realising that the script for *The Cop and the Whore* (reference to *The Element of Crime*), which they want to propose for funding, has been lost. From their dialogue, we get to know that they perform themselves and not fictional characters. After having mutually agreed that they prefer to make something more ‘dynamic’, they decide to write a new screenplay called *Epidemic*, which deals with the Black Death that ravaged Europe during the 14<sup>th</sup> century. Thus, the filmmakers impersonate themselves. In this way, they are split in two. They act as characters in the story and perform themselves in the process of their filming.

The effects are dual regarding the narrative agents and the story. The characters fluctuate between being and not being the filmmakers, whereas the process of the filmmaking merges with the process of the filmmakers’ quotation of themselves.<sup>44</sup> This contradiction pushes forward Brecht’s understanding of acting, in which a historical subject plays an actor, playing a character. Here, the emphasis is on an acting ‘that shows’ rather than on the actor’s disappearance into the character (figure 10). But there are moments in which it is impossible to determine whether the pauses in the action, which show the characters thinking about their project, are acted or real. The defamiliarising effect is heightened by the fact that von Trier performs Dr. Mesmer, the central character of the film-within-the-film. Certainly there are moments in the film, such as the employment of extra-diegetic music or the appearance of the film’s title in the screen, which destabilise authenticity.

In effect, the meta-level and the diegetic one collide. When it comes to the story, the effect is that the story development and the process of the film’s construction are given equal weight. The interjection of the film-within-the-film – the filmmakers’

---

<sup>44</sup> A similar point is made by Barton Byg in his discussion of Straub’s and Huillet’s appearance in their Schoenberg films. See *Landscapes of Resistance: The German Films of Daniele Huillet and Jean-Marie Straub* (Berkeley, Los Angeles, London: University of California Press, 1995), p.46.

visualisation of their work in progress – complicates matters more, since the ‘imagined’ film appears without any introduction. Subsequently, the process of the film-within-the film production is blended with fragments of its actualisation on screen. What we have is not a concrete fictive cosmos but an exploration of the ways in which the very act of representation takes place. We are clearly dealing here with what Gérard Genette defines as ‘narrative metalepsis’, which plays on the temporality of the story and the narrating at the same time.<sup>45</sup> The film’s emphasis on the process of its making reflects its treatment of history too. The illusion that we are able to formulate the question of historical representation objectively and from a superior position of knowledge is denied.

A closer look at a sequence in the beginning of the film can clarify this argument. While researching for material regarding the 14<sup>th</sup> century epidemic, the two filmmakers visit a museum, in which a Danish historian gives them some information regarding the specific historical period. Initially, the camera pans on the library shelves, while the historian’s voice is heard saying:

Fathers left their children. Wives left husbands. Brother left brother. For the disease attacked both through breathing and sight. Thus they all died. No one would bury them at any price. Family members dragged their dead to open graves without benefit of clergy, eulogy or tolling of bells. Throughout Siena mass graves were buried with victims. I Agnolo di Tura called the Fat one buried my five own children with my own hands. Some were covered with such a thin layer of dirt that dogs dug up their bodies and fed on them.

While the camera focuses on the library shelves, we can hear the historian’s voice in the background and later on the camera establishes a connection with the speaking subject through a close-up of his face (figure 11). At this point, we come to realise that the historian is reading a letter written by one of the victims of the plague, therefore, he is quoting. The letter is read by the historian in a very detached and de-dramatised way

---

<sup>45</sup> See Gérard Genette, *Narrative Discourse*, trans. by Jane E. Lewin (Oxford: Basil Blackwell: 1980), p. 235.

without however weakening the intensity of the delivered lines. This de-dramatisation synopsis the film's interest in avoiding a fetishisation of history. Agency is again problematised, since the collection of historical witnessing and material becomes part of the film's thematic preoccupations. Correspondingly, *Epidemic* consists of many heterogeneous stories that join with the filmmakers' thinking process regarding their project.

The film's complex narrative structure defies dramatisation in a manner, which is analogous to Brecht's suspicion of the reconstruction of historical events for dramatic ends. As I mentioned in the opening of this chapter, Brecht's distrust of reconstructing historical events for the sake of dramatic purposes was predicated on the basis that such a practice separates the portrayed event from the audience's reception of it. Brecht's intention was to force the audience to think about 'a subject' and not 'within the confines of the subject'.<sup>46</sup> If we have a look at contemporary scholarship concerned with cinematic portrayals of history, we can see that there is a tendency to suspect any productive effect from a dramatisation of historical events and in particular of events that raise ethical questions, such as the Holocaust. As Hayden White says:

Telling a story, however truthful about such traumatic events might very well provide a kind of 'intellectual mastery' of the anxiety which memory of their occurrence may incite in an individual or a community. But precisely insofar as the story is identifiable as a story, it can provide no lasting psychic mastery of such events.<sup>47</sup>

White explains that the portrayal of problematic historical events by means of linear narrative reconstruction produces a fetishisation of the event and gives a totalising sense

---

<sup>46</sup> Brecht, 'The Literalization of Theatre', in *Brecht on Theatre*, pp.43-47, here p.44.

<sup>47</sup> Hayden White 'The Modernist Event', in *The Persistence of History: Cinema, Television, and the Modern Event*, ed. by Vivian Sobchack (New York, London: Routledge, 1996), pp.17-38, here p.32.

of “‘intactness’”. The historical incidents are not historicised and the drama is given more prominence rather than any attempt to unveil historical processes and contradictions.

In its structuring of the diegesis as a work-in-progress, *Epidemic* avoids placing emphasis on the dramatic narrative, and the film is concerned with the medium itself and the ways that history can be portrayed. Most critics considered the film’s interest in the process of its own making as uncinematic. The Danish Press suggested that *Epidemic* looks more like a ‘study’ than a film, or like ‘style exercises’.<sup>48</sup> To a large extent, these responses can be attributed to the fact that the film avoids the reconstruction of a realistic *mise-en-scène* in which all the episodes solidify. Even at the moments that the narrative moves from the story to the film-within-the-film, von Trier denies a photographic reproduction of the horror caused by the epidemic.

For instance, the first scene of the film-in-process shows Dr. Mesmer, facing animosity on the part of the scientific intelligentsia due to his decision to leave the fortified town so as to try to find a cure for the epidemic. The scene is very stylised and the actors deliver their lines in a very theatricalised way that point to the film’s construction. Through this scene, we get to know the basic outline of the film within the film, which is the story of an idealist doctor who wants to help Europe find a cure for the epidemic, but he turns out to be the carrier of the disease. What is important for the audience is the contrast between the main story and the film in process. The first one is characterised by formal austerity, while the latter by excessive artificiality. This first shift from the main story to the film-within-the-film is also important because the director’s historical research is followed by dramatisation. In effect, the gap between the researched material and its dramatisation is heightened, and one cannot avoid noticing the medium’s limited ability to deal with traumatic historical memories.

---

<sup>48</sup> See Schepelern, p.95.

The narrative of the film-within-the-film story remains incomplete and it is by no means privileged in relation to the process of the film's construction. The filmmakers are not hesitant to capture themselves thinking about the making of their film. In one of the most provocative scenes, we see them discussing their project and von Trier recommends that at some point they should add some drama, because the audience will consider leaving the auditorium. Here, this comment makes one consider the relations between dramaturgy and history, and whether dramatisation serves the purpose of historical understanding.

The aforementioned scene brings profoundly into question issues of representation. The incorporation of the filmmakers' thinking process about the film in-process invites the audience to think beyond the confines of the story and to adopt a more critical stance. The effect is that a certain 'literalization' of the medium takes place. Brecht introduced the idea of 'literalizing the theatre', a process committed to changing the apparatus. This 'literalization' intends to prioritise the changing of the institution of theatre over its story-telling function. For Brecht, this change was of vital importance because, as he says, 'theatre theatres all down' to serve economic reasons, that is, to preserve an established apparatus.<sup>49</sup>

The process of 'literalization' becomes a means of taking issue with the medium itself rather than with the very story-telling process. Brecht justifies this shift of interest on the grounds that the audience will be able to think beyond the limits of the story. To achieve this effect, Brecht advocated a play-writing that would resort to 'footnotes and the habit of turning back in order to check a point'.<sup>50</sup> His aim was to encourage a reading attitude in the auditorium, which would prevent the audience from being completely absorbed by dramatic action. In *Epidemic*, an analogous process occurs, because the

---

<sup>49</sup> Brecht, 'The Literalization of Theatre', p.44.

<sup>50</sup> Ibid., p.44.

discussions about the medium and von Trier's and Vørsel's commentaries on the filmmaking process are given the same importance as the visual elements. Here the filmmakers seem to take Brecht's suggestion word for word, since the structure of the film does not allow the audience to follow the story without considering how dramaturgy is constructed. Therefore, the minimisation of dramaturgy makes the film medium and history the very subjects that the audience is asked to dwell on.

Brecht's ideas on the 'literalization' of the medium have found their expression in the essay film genre. This category of films is associated with directors, such as Straub/Huillet, Alexander Kluge and Harun Farocki, who have consciously adopted an aesthetics of resistance. As Anton Kaes observes, these directors blend different materials, such as sounds, images, dialogue, and acting without integrating them into a coherent narrative that effaces the signs of its production.<sup>51</sup> Following the Brechtian topos of self-reflexivity, these films complicate the cause and effect linkage of the episodes with the view to introducing a level of imprecision that characterises literary language. As Kluge says, this practice aspires 'to use language and film in an uncertain and open way'.<sup>52</sup>

Film theory has adopted many definitions of the essay film genre. Despite the different interpretations, the common argument is that this genre intends to go beyond the established film grammar, and to downplay the rules of dramatic development in favour of questions that are addressed to the audience. The theoretical formulations of the essay film have been largely influenced by Theodor Adorno's view of the essay-writing as an antisystematic form of writing that refutes the doubling of the existing reality. Adorno suggests that the essay is an incomplete artefact structured upon self-reflection. As Adorno says:

---

<sup>51</sup> See Kaes p.19.

<sup>52</sup> Kluge quoted in, Angelos Koutsourakis, 'Interview with Alexander Kluge', see the appendix p.274.

Even in its manner of delivery, the essay refuses to behave as though it had deduced its object and had exhausted the topic. Self-relativisation is immanent in its form; it must be constructed in such a way that it could always and at any point, break off. It thinks in fragments just as reality is fragmented and gains its unity only by moving through fissures, rather than by smoothing them over.<sup>53</sup>

What Adorno sees as dialectical in the essay-writing is its emphasis on discontinuity that rejects any sense of absolute knowledge and totality. The essayistic writing is experimental and aims at viewing the object from various perspectives. This understanding of the essay as a form of writing that incorporates formal and thematic uncertainty has been strengthened by Lyotard's famous statement that 'the essay (Montaigne) is postmodern while the fragment is modern'.<sup>54</sup> In fact, Lyotard's and Adorno's points that the essay is antisystematic are grounded upon the very idea of fragmentation. However, as opposed to the modernist employments of the fragment (such as in the cinema of Eisenstein that I discussed in the first chapter), the essay does not strive for dialectical synthesis, but places emphasis on the process of assembling materials that defy compositional precision.

With Adorno's and Lyotard's comments in mind, I want to look at some definitions of the essay film genre, so as to relate these findings to my discussion of *Epidemic*. Noël Burch understands the essay film to be the dialectical fusion of fiction and non-fiction, something one can identify in *Epidemic* too. For Burch, the essay film takes its theme as the basis for the exploration of a set of ideas and not as a means of producing dramatic events. Thus, the minimisation of story-development by means of direct address

---

<sup>53</sup> Theodor Adorno, 'The Essay As Form', trans. by Bob Hullot-Kentor and Frederic Will, in *New German Critique*, 32:2 (1984), pp.151-171, here p. 164.

<sup>54</sup> Lyotard, 'Answering the Question: What is Postmodernism?', trans. by Régis Durand, in *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1984), pp.71-85, here p.81.

to the audience, intertitles, and a self-reflexive mixing of the filmic and the extra-filmic cosmos intend to draw equal attention to the filming process and to the final object.<sup>55</sup>

Structuring the film as an essay serves also the purpose of changing one's perspective with respect to the past's relation to the present and of putting together different voices that challenge the narrative homogenisation of a historical event. The result is a collage of different voices and agents. Michael Renov understands this multiple diegesis to be the outcome of a practice not concerned with dramatising the phenomenal world. For Renov, the essay film is interested in representing the world and interrogating it too, and this practice results in a 'pluralization of voices' which challenge every certainty and the director's authority.<sup>56</sup>

This collage makes the audience acquire a distance from the portrayed events. Moreover, the essay film thematises the very act of representation questioning the author's and the audience's positions and the medium of its own articulation. As Nora M. Alter explains:

Like 'heresy' in the Adornian literary essay, the essay film disrespects traditional boundaries, is transgressive both structurally and conceptually, it is self-reflective and self-reflexive. It also questions the subject positions of the filmmaker and audience as well as the audiovisual medium itself- whether film, video or digital electronic. The essay film is as international as it is interdisciplinary. The essay film can be grasped as an audiovisual performance of theory and criticism executed within and by the filmic text, thus producing a productive and/or inhibiting resistance to scholarly discourse, since it appears to have done the latter's work for it. Doubtless all films requires us to resist becoming a mere *Sprachrohr* for the filmmaker's own positions (even or especially when we are in ideological agreement), but this resistance becomes essentially crucial with the essay film because – almost by definition – it offers the appearance of its own self-criticism, threatening to silence the critic's voice in advance.<sup>57</sup>

<sup>55</sup> Noël Burch, *Theory of Film Practice*, trans. by Helen R. Lane Princeton, (New Jersey: Princeton University Press 1981), pp.159-164.

<sup>56</sup> Michael Renov, 'History And/As Autobiography: The Essayistic in Film and Video', in *Framework: A Journal of Images and Culture*, 2:3 (1989), pp.6-13, here p.11.

<sup>57</sup> Nora M. Alter, 'The Political Imperceptible in the Essay Film: Farocki's Images of the World and the Inscription of War', in *New German Critique*, 68:2 (1996), pp.165-192, here pp.171-172.

From Alter's definition of the essay film, it is important to keep her understanding of it as a way of working that problematises the production of image and sound and questions the director's superior position over her/his audience. The essay film collates a plurality of voices and arguments that expose specific tensions and not an authoritative voice that the viewer can identify with. As Farocki explains, the aim of this practice is 'that the sequences and the elements of the film are to be considered as material and not as something finished'.<sup>58</sup> The film's elements do not relate clearly to one another, producing a deliberate disunity and the production of 'unfinished material' introduces a hermeneutic imprecision that activates the audience's productivity.

In *Epidemic*, the Adornian understanding of the essayistic writing as experimentation is strengthened by the film's antisystematic form that incorporates fragments, which go beyond a goal-orientated dramaturgy and offer multiple perspectives on the historical past. For instance, in the third chapter of the film, the two filmmakers go to Germany to get some inspiration for their research. In the midst of a long-shot taking place in von Trier's car, the camera focuses on the landscape, without serving a strictly narrative function (figure 12). The 'unmanned camera' captures images of factories, toxic waste, and of the motorway. These images of the European landscape are torn out of dramatic context and the audience is asked to make its own associations.

At one point, Vørsel starts listing the various cities they drive through. His voice accompanies the visual material captured by the 'unmanned camera' and heightens the film's imprecision: 'We are driving through Dortmund and Essen. Then Duisburg, Krefeld, Neuss, Dusseldorf. We will also be going through Remscheid, Solingen and Leverkusen'. There is sense of fascination with the acoustic associations stemming from

---

<sup>58</sup> Harun Farocki, 'Und Materialität', in *Cine-Fils* - online Journal, available at <http://www.cine-fils.com/interviews/harun-farocki.html>, accessed 27 March 2011.

the pronunciation of those names.<sup>59</sup> The succession of these names connotes an interest in the historical past and present and the cities' names act as signifiers that allude to collective memories that go beyond the speaking subject. Von Trier justifies his interest in the names of the cities on the grounds of the visual associations they create.

When you see or hear the names of these cities, they summon up images. It's a very visual thing talking about cities, because a lot of cities have some sort of soul attached to them, whether or not you've actually been there.<sup>60</sup>

Elsewhere, von Trier explains that the names of these cities produce historical allusions and a quasi-mythological effect with a Teutonic cultural reality about them.<sup>61</sup> The historical allusions are revealed in another scene that follows, in which the characters visit Udo Kier in Cologne. The visit in Kier's house makes clear the film's and the trilogy's interest in the traumas of fascism, since Kier will tell them a story about the bombing of Cologne during the World War II.

Again here a complete separation between art and reality is denied, since Kier performs himself. Moreover, the film's privileging of multiple diegeses and voices is intensified. One can also identify similarities with the tradition of Marxist filmmakers of the past, such as Godard, Straub/Huillet and Kluge, who incorporated material not motivated by the diegesis as a means of splintering the narrative continuum. As Anton Kaes explains, the reason for these interventions was the portrayal of history as a problem.

History in this view no longer unfolds as a neat, self-contained narrative; instead we find a gigantic collection of heterogeneous texts, images, life stories, songs, statistics, and anecdotes, a plethora of fragments and scraps, without center and without internal coherence. As a "bricoleur", the author picks up fragments, selecting them and assembling them. Here art is no longer the expression or confession of a creator but a technique based on reflection and combination.<sup>62</sup>

---

<sup>59</sup> This fascination with the German cities can be identified in the other films of the *Europa* trilogy too.

<sup>60</sup> Von Trier quoted in, *Trier on von Trier*, pp.47-48.

<sup>61</sup> Ibid., p.48.

<sup>62</sup> Kaes, pp.118-119.

In this episode, Kier informs them that his mother has died and in her deathbed she confessed him some details about his day of birth, in which the allies bombed Germany with phosphorus bombs (figure 13). In his description of the facts we identify an indirect reference to the genre of horror movies. ‘My mother told me horrible things, one hand was sticking out of the water, it was only flesh, because the skin was burned.’ At one point, the camera ignores Kier and captures Raphael’s and Raimondi’s painting *The Massacre of the Innocents in Bethlehem* (1509) and invites the audience to make its own associations (figure 14). Kier finishes saying that all these people were not necessarily Nazis. In the beginning of his monologue, Kier remains emotionally detached, whereas towards the end he starts crying. Perhaps, this is the most emotionally intense moment of the film, which entails an ironic aspect if we consider that the story is fabricated.

However, there is nothing that indicates the fictionality of the scene. The material here makes the audience identify with Kier’s fabricated story, which complicates apparent authenticity with unacknowledged artifice and multiplies the perspective on the historical events that followed the German defeat in the World War II. The specific episode has an unfinished/open character and forces the audience to rethink the historical past and present beyond the ideological blinders of victims and perpetrators. Kier brings to the surface repressed memories on the part of the defeated and establishes a dialogic relation between himself as an agent and the audience. The scene remains incomplete and nothing connects it causally with the previous material and the scenes that follow.

The material thus depends on the disposition of the recipient and if we see the film’s form in its totality, we end up realising that it does not conform to the logic of causal narrative continuity. Instead of a reproduction of a historical period, we are faced with fragments from different historical events that the audience is asked to assemble.

This aspect of the film's form exhibits a valorisation of the fragment as a means of formal experimentation. Von Trier juxtaposes different materials/anecdotes from European history, so as to view the object from different angles and to resist any all-embracing conclusions. Short scenes that reflect on the ways a film can dramatise history are not tied to a straightforward plotline. Thus, *Epidemic* aligns antithetical materials and contradictions so as to expose the mechanics of filmmaking process. This *modus operandi* denies the idea of film as the repository of authorial power and the director's function is that of the 'researcher' and not of the 'teacher'.

I would like to support the last point with reference to David Barnett's analysis of the transition from a Brechtian to a post-Brechtian aesthetics in the theatre. Barnett elucidates the difference between a writer/director, such as Heiner Müller who can be situated in the latter paradigm, and the orthodox Brechtian approach. As he says, the director's attitude is more that of the 'seeker' rather than the 'teacher' a shift that exemplifies the basic principle of a materialist aesthetics, which is not limited by an adherence to a political belief.<sup>63</sup> Similarly, Von Trier and Vørsel do not hesitate to show themselves as 'seekers' as opposed to 'teachers', something that is intensified by *Epidemic*'s meta-filmic dialectic, which deconstructs the process by which the filmmakers transform their historical research into filmic representation.

The film's foregrounding of the process of its own making, along with its episodic construction, the narrative digressions, which spring from the complication of diegetic and meta-diegetic levels, and the capturing of documented material that seems unrelated to the story's progression, go against the dominant understanding of cinema as a construction of a clear sequence of events. As such, there is a sense of an anti-style aesthetics that assigns value to the very process of exploration of the problems posed by

---

<sup>63</sup> David Barnett, "'I Have to Change Myself Instead of Interpreting Myself': Heiner Müller as Post-Brechtian Director", in *Contemporary Theatre Review*, 20:1 (2010), pp.6-20, here p.20.

the European historical past, rather than on a subordination of the contradictions to a unifying principle. Similar to *The Element*'s depiction of history, *Epidemic* treats the European historical traumas as constellations that do not solidify.

In many respects, history in *Epidemic* is shown as a question in the same manner as in Brecht. Von Trier's refusal to simulate images of the historical past is in line with Brecht's mistrust of the photographic reproduction of historical events. If a crucial aspect of the dialectical thinking lies in the uncovering of contradictions and the revealing of historical processes, then one needs to challenge the tautological perception of history according to which 'the facts' are taken to be the meaning of a historical event. Hayden White's following comments are illuminating from this perspective:

The distinction between facts and meanings is usually taken to be the basis of historical relativism. This is because in conventional historical inquiry, "the facts" established about a specific "event" are taken to be the meaning of that event. But the facts are a function of the meaning assigned to events, not some primitive data that determine what meanings an event can have.<sup>64</sup>

White's comments need to be seen in a broader historical context. Much discussion has been placed on the fact that human experiences have been transformed to visual commodities. From Guy Debord's excursus that social life has been replaced by the consumption of images to Jean Baudrillard's concept of the simulacrum as a copy that does not have an original, the common ground lies in the belief that contemporary citizens have been reduced to the status of being spectators of history.<sup>65</sup> The circulation of images of historical catastrophes on the part of the mass media and the simulation of history in films interested in the reproduction of historical facts lead to a separation of the portrayed events from the perception of the events shown. What renders these representations

---

<sup>64</sup> See White, p.21.

<sup>65</sup> See Guy Debord, *The Society of the Spectacle*, trans. by Donald Nicholson-Smith (New York: Zone Books, 1995), p.14 and p.32. See also Jean Baudrillard, 'The Precession of Simulacra', in *Simulacra and Simulations*, trans. by Sheila Faria Glaser (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1994), pp.1-42, here pp. 21-38.

problematic is the fact that they strive for representational solidity and stability when it comes to issues that are multifaceted.<sup>66</sup> In their striving for unity and closure these representations fail to implicate the viewers' role in the formation of history.

The task, therefore, of an oppositional/materialist aesthetics is to challenge the understanding of representation as replication of commodities, and to restore spectatorial responses towards the objects. The last scene of the film is suggestive of an aesthetics that invites further discussion touching on issues of film and historical representation. Having finished their script proposal, the two filmmakers invite their producer (Claes Kastholm Hansen) for a meal. To persuade him of the value of the project, they invite a medium (Gitte Lind), whom they hypnotise and ask her to enter into the film's-in-process universe in order to make a vivid description of the project. The woman starts crying loudly and when the filmmakers attempt to calm her down they notice some plague buboes in her armpit. Eventually, all in the room realise that they are infected by a real epidemic.

In the sequence with the medium, what makes the scene more unbearable is that we see a woman crying and screaming without being able to get a visualisation of her experiences. Unlike classical cinema, in which the cinematic screaming is the culmination of a sequence that functions as a machine built to give birth to a scream, here screaming is the outcome of a vision that is not accessible to the audience (figure 15). Michel Chion, in his analysis of 'the screaming point' explains how cinema employs all the means available in order to reach that point and produce fascination. Thus, screaming is justified by the plot and the film's action. As he says: 'The screaming point is where speech is suddenly extinct, a black hole, the exit of being'.<sup>67</sup> From Chion's comments we can understand that the medium's screaming in *Epidemic* does not obey to the dramatic realist

---

<sup>66</sup> Examples can be drawn from films such as Steven Spielberg's *Schindler's List* (1993), Oliver Stone's *JFK* (1991) that place their emphasis on the simulation of events rather than on a hermeneutics of history.

<sup>67</sup> Michel Chion, *The Voice in Cinema*, trans. by Claudia Gorbman (New York: Columbia University Press, 1999), p.79.

rules of classical cinema, since there is no visual material that justifies it. What follows is the eruption of the plague and a general collapse. At this point, the horror is visualised and all certainties and demarcations disappear.

The scene with the medium can be seen as an Artaudian attack on the audience and the institution of cinema at the same time. Artaud's writings for a theatre of cruelty elaborated on the similarities between the theatre and the plague. The aim was to challenge the tradition of good taste and the audience's passivity, and to make the viewers interact with the represented material instead of being passive consumers.<sup>68</sup> Similarly, the aforementioned scene turns into an act of aggression. Thus, the audience's desire for reproduced images of historical catastrophe and horror is challenged (figure 16). When the buboes appear on the screen and the plague is visualised, the film borrows stylistic traits from the B-movie horror genre. The initial fright is replaced by an excess of artificiality, which is offered through the cheap prosthetics used to suggest that a real epidemic takes place. As Howard Hampton explains, the eruption of the plague is a caustic comment towards artists, who base their project on people's suffering. Here, the auteurs' sense of immunity is dissolved, and the audience's and the producer's wish for explicit images is satisfied, 'instead of talking heads a bloodbath'.<sup>69</sup>

Subsequently, the unmotivated visualisation of horror acts as a way of returning the gaze to the spectators with the view to shaking them off from their passivity. What is called into question here is dominant cinema's reduction of the audience to consumers of images, which seem to be separated from their social life, and the very security granted to the viewers by cinema's protected zone. In particular, period films' treatment of the historical past as a consumable commodity transforms the portrayed events to objects

---

<sup>68</sup> See Antonin Artaud, 'Theatre and the Plague', in *Artaud on Theatre*, ed. and trans. by Claude Schumacher and Brian Singleton (London: Methuen, 1989), pp.127-131, here p.129.

<sup>69</sup> Howard Hampton, 'Wetlands: The Kingdom of Lars von Trier', in *Film Comment*, 13:6 (1995), pp.40-46, here p.46.

dissociated from the historical present.<sup>70</sup> As a result, the audience is in a comforting position and feels unaffected, knowing that it can always return back to its security. The viewer is always aware that no matter how horrific the portrayed events are, she/he will always remain invulnerable. Thus, the act of communication, which involves a sender and a receiver, reduces the latter to the status of the consumer. The implication of this passive spectatorship is that the audience is conditioned to a specific way of thinking, feeling that there is no room for intervention in the communicative process. There is certainly a sense that this spectatorial attitude expands into social life too. Consequently, civic life is not much differentiated from the act of spectatorship.<sup>71</sup>

The aforementioned observations can make us see the most problematic scene of the film as a synopsis of its interest in evading the portrayal of history as a mimetic mirroring of actions. This scene also gives us the chance to unpack the Brechtian connection regarding spectatorship. Brecht favoured a type of representation that would represent human relationships historically. His argument is founded on the assumption that this practice could make the audience question the dominant narratives of the past and their current historical circumstances.<sup>72</sup> Similarly, *Epidemic*'s essayistic form challenges the tropes employed by contemporary period films, which reduce history to a museum piece for consumption. *Epidemic*'s gesture is Brechtian, since the minimisation of dramaturgy and the valorisation of the fragment entail an interest in making the audience question the historical narratives of the past and the peoples' role outside the cinematic world.

The film's favouring of disorientation and its placing of the audience at the centre of the action does not serve a transparent thematic purpose. Herein lies the difference with

---

<sup>70</sup> See Baudrillard, 'History: A Retro Scenario', in *Simulacra and Simulation*, pp.43-49, here pp.44-45.

<sup>71</sup> See Samuel Weber quoted in, Hans-Thies Lehmann, *Postdramatic Theatre*, trans. by Karen Jürs-Munby (London, New York: Routledge, 2006), p.184.

<sup>72</sup> See Brecht, 'A Short Organum for the Theatre', p.190.

the ‘orthodox Brechtian’ tradition. Brecht’s fondness for the fragment at the expense of plot is concerned with reanimating the audience’s reception as a cognitive process. Unlike Brecht’s relentless wrestling to establish a central meaning out of fragmentation, *Epidemic* offers the audience fragments liberated from an ideological totality. The practice remains dialectical given that the interjection of historical material stemming from von Trier’s and Vørsel’s research, and its transformation into drama in the film-within-the-film, make visible the functions that insert themselves between historically formed reality and its representations. This method shifts the audience’s attention from the imitation of actions to the film’s assembly of materials that question the homogeneity of the fictive cosmos, and the view of history as a homogeneous series of events.

### **History as Transition**

In all three films that comprise the *Europa* trilogy von Trier’s treatment of historical time posits history very much as a dialectical question rather than a deterministic answer. Different time sequences mix together undermining the narrative temporality and dramatic linearity. In this section, I intend to see these temporal disturbances in *Epidemic* and *Europa* along the lines of Brecht’s *Historisierung*. While the former film employs a complex narrative structure that piles up fragments from the European history of violence, *Europa* has a more discernible narrative. Yet I suggest that both films problematise the linear understanding of historical time so as to transform our understanding of the European present.

Let us now unpack Brecht’s concept of the *Historisierung*, before discussing the films’ treatment of historical time. Brecht in his theoretical articulation of the *Historisierung* is hugely influenced by the fluid shifts of historical time in epic poetry. Epic poetry’s prioritisation of narrative over plot gives the author the possibility to blend different time sequences and move from a historical period to another. One of the most

influential examples of the interplay between past and present and the perception of the future as a call for action has been referenced by Hans Kellner. Kellner discusses the image of Aeneas as presented by Virgil in his second book, arguing that it foreshadows the Western philosophy of action. During Troy's fall, Aeneas manages to escape carrying his father on his back, while leading his little boy by hand. Kellner explains that this image indicates the present as defined by the past, while the future is shown as a promise that can inspire action and change even during historical times of despair and hopelessness. At this point, the present is shown as threefold – 'the present of the past as memory, the present as the experience of history and the future as expectation'.<sup>73</sup>

The intermixing of past and present as a means of revealing the potential for change in the future is characteristic of Brecht's use of the *Historisierung*. For Brecht, the *Historisierung* and the *Verfremdungseffekt* aim at revealing the historicity of human relationships.

Historical incidents are unique, transitory incidents associated with particular periods. The conduct of the persons involved in them is not fixed and universally human; it includes elements that have been or may be overtaken by the course of history, and is subject to criticism from the immediately following period's point of view. The conduct of those born before us is alienated from us by an incessant evolution.<sup>74</sup>

Brecht's *raison d'être* is based on the Marxist idea that analysing the historical forces of the past can show the present as changeable. In this sense, the intermingling of different time sequences evokes the impermanence of human relations and of the social structure too.

In theatre, the historicising effects rely upon acting techniques that estrange the portrayed actions. Paradigmatic of these acting techniques are the actors' transposition

---

<sup>73</sup> See Hans Kellner, 'Beautifying the Nightmare: The Aesthetics of Postmodern Historiography', in *Strategies*, 4:5 (1991), pp.289-313, here p.295.

<sup>74</sup> Brecht, 'Short Description of Acting which Produces an Alienation Effect', in *Brecht on Theatre*, pp. 136-140, here p.140.

into the third person, which dissociates them from the characters and their actions, the reversal into the past and the quoting of the stage directions.<sup>75</sup> As Fredric Jameson explains, the aim of such a defamiliarised acting is to reveal the positive effects that might occur by training people to think historically. ‘What history has solidified into an illusion of stability and substantiality can now be dissolved again, and reconstructed, replaced, improved, “*umfunktioniert*”’.<sup>76</sup> For Brecht, therefore, the *Historisierung* reflects a modernist anticipatory hope of radical revolution. The intersection of the different time sequences operates as prolepsis. As I proceed to discuss, cinematic treatments of the *Historisierung* have proved that the materialist treatment of historical time can be treated in a way that does not necessarily take progress for granted.

Firstly, it is important to explain that the production of historicising effects in cinema does not rely solely on the actors’ performances. A usual method is the production of temporal ellipses that cannot be easily noticed within the film’s narrative. The major example of such a methodology is a film that I briefly discussed in the first chapter, Straub/Huillet’s *Not Reconciled* [*Nicht Versöhnt Oder Es Hilft Nur Gewalt, Wo Gewalt Herrsch* 1965]. Here the temporal ellipses connect different private stories saturated with historical memories. The shifts in historical time are so rapid that the audience is disorientated and cannot easily distinguish between the pre-war years that refer to the main character’s childhood and the post-war ones. Straub’s/Huillet’s intention was to analyse the continuum of history, so as to indicate that the fascist experience in Germany cannot be dissociated from the present, and the remnants of fascism can be observed in the post-war capitalist reality.

The reason for referencing Straub/Huillet once again is because I want to propose that Brecht’s concept of the *Historisierung* can be used in such a way that the dialectical

---

<sup>75</sup> Ibid., p.138.

<sup>76</sup> Fredric Jameson, *Brecht and Method* (London, New York: Verso, 1998), p.47.

tensions pointed by the historical transitions may eschew the political modernist anticipation of radical change. Straub/Huillet's film uses the *Historisierung* to disclose the historical transitions and exhibit at the same time the historical present's reliance upon the past historically formed relations. The aforementioned paradigm indicates that Brecht's *Historisierung* can be used in a way that does not necessarily imply a positive resolution of the contradictions. As an heir of the Enlightenment, Brecht shares with the Enlightenment thought certain ideas regarding what counts as truth, reason and most importantly political progress. Keeping these in mind, the aim of this section is to analyse the production of historicising effects in *Epidemic* and *Europa*, with the view to demonstrating how the films' merging of the past with the present negate the Enlightenment narrative of progress.

In *Epidemic*, historicising effects are created by the film's complex narrative structure, in which the present state of Europe is contrasted to wisps of historical narratives of the past. These narratives derive from the filmmakers' collection of historical material, the appearance of the meta-film into the main narrative and the insertion of unrelated material into the story line (for instance Kier's personal recounting). A very crucial moment in the film is when Von Trier and Vørsel travel in Europe and discuss the future project. They agree to add a dramatic moment, in which the first person to die of the plague will be Dr Mesmer's girlfriend (Cæcilia Holbek Trier). Her death shall follow the fate of other victims of the plague, who were thought to be dead and were buried alive. At this point, the film cross-cuts to the film-within-the-film and we see Mesmer's girlfriend waking up inside her grave and trying to escape (figure 17). The plague here becomes the metaphor, in the literal meaning of the word, namely transition, for the repeatable history of violence in Europe. Later on, the filmmakers visit Kier in Cologne and here the linkage with the fascist past becomes evident. Bainbridge mentions

for example, the parallel between the Black Death of the 14<sup>th</sup> century and the debauchery of Jews, who were accused of having plotted the epidemic. Bainbridge, explains how this moment of European history is linked with Kier's recounting of his 'experiences' that unfolded in a historical context that another massive persecution of Jews took place.<sup>77</sup>

Thus, the bombardment of the audience with material stemming from the European vicious circle of violence leads to an interrogation of the contemporary historical reality. What is placed into doubt is the perception of history as an evolutionary process leading to progress and prosperity. The progressivist philosophy of history characterises Western thought from the very first historiographical attempts until the Enlightenment optimism. What this tendency introduces is the usefulness and the *telos* that sensible individuals can attribute to history. According to it, individuals can learn from the mistakes of the past and deal with analogous situations that confront them in the present.<sup>78</sup>

Such a perception of historical maturity deriving from the knowledge of the past permeates the classical Marxist theory and Brecht himself, as someone committed to it. Von Trier's treatment of historical time in *Epidemic* creates clashes between the past and the present that expose the historical transition in a manner similar to Brecht. These clashes seek to redeem European history as a nightmare, a vision of history similar to Benjamin's conception of it as a catastrophe which keeps piling wreckage upon wreckage. On this account, the cross-cutting from the main story to the film-within-the-film presents us with incomplete stories from the past and the present, offering a Benjaminian moment of recognition, in which past and present illuminate each other.

Evidently, *Epidemic's* mixing of different historical temporalities illuminates connections and interweaves images and narratives from different centuries. The result is

---

<sup>77</sup> See Bainbridge, p. 34.

<sup>78</sup> See Alex Callinicos, *Theories and Narratives: Notes on the Philosophy of History* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1995), p.58.

a dialectical critique of the narrative of progress itself. The conflict between the European past and present shows the transitory nature of history. What is disputed is that the mistakes of the past have reformulated the present for the better.

Similarly, *Europa* defies the post-1989 neo-liberal thought, according to which history is a narrative of progress, liberty, prosperity and equality. The film is engaged in a critical project of providing images that challenge such a liberal optimism. *Europa* provides a view of history, which is counter to European and Hollywood portrayals of it at the risk of appearing Nazi-friendly.<sup>79</sup> The role of the allies in the post-War West-Germany is demystified to the point that there is a sense of reversibility of roles between victims and perpetrators. Former Nazis collaborate with the Americans, a Jew (von Trier) testifies in favour of Max Hartmann (Jørgen Reenberg) – an ex-member of the Nazi Party – and Leopold Kessler, an American visiting Germany with the best intentions ends up causing a massive disaster.

The film's indifference towards historical authenticity is evidenced by the fact that back projections and superimpositions replace authentic images of the German space. Rosalind Galt citing Elsaesser's discussion of the importance of the ruin in post-War German films argues that the absence of ruins and rubble betrays the film's mistrust towards the West-German de-Nazification and historical progress.<sup>80</sup> Moreover, the use of back projections transmits an intentional feeling of uneasiness with respect to the characters' relationship to the diegetic space. This uneasiness gives the impression that the characters do not belong to the temporal reality under which they operate. The difficulty in distinguishing the borders between the past and the present is heightened by the fact that the film starts with a voice-over asking an unidentified 'you' to go back to

---

<sup>79</sup> For example, the French newspaper *Liberation* attacked the film as Nazi friendly. See Eva Af Geijerstam, 'A Conversation with Lars Von Trier, Henning Bendtsen and Ernst-Hugo Järegård', in *Lars Von Trier Interviews* pp.64-70, here p. 67.

<sup>80</sup> See Galt, pp.188-189.

*Europa*. When the story starts and we see Leo in the post-war Germany, we cannot easily determine the diegetic from the metadiegetic level. Given that the voice-over constantly intervenes to interrupt the action, which is meant to take place in the past, one notes that temporal demarcations are quite slippery.

The voice-over connects the viewer with the contemporary historical reality from which the past events are seen. Leo's story motivates the enactment of fragmented stories that appear within the film's narrative and refer to the past. On his first journey, Leo comes across a German Jew, who asks him to calm his wife down and ensure her that Wöldstat has not been inflicted by the bombings. When Leo enters the compartment he meets the Jewish woman who cries 'Palestine'. This is followed by the man's frustrating response: 'We are Jewish, but we are German, but we are Jewish'. During a dinner party in Max Hartmann's house he witnesses through a window the demolition of the German cranes in Westhafen on the part of the allies. Larry Hartmann (Udo Kier) questions the motives of the allies explaining to him that many companies that flourished during the war were owned by Americans.

Thus, Leo acts as the link that connects many heterogeneous stories. The past appears in the form of unmotivated references to it, which connect his story to the broader historical reality of the fascist and the post-war West-Germany. But the most problematic withholding of temporal orientation in the film happens in a scene where Leo walks towards the train's exit and reaches a compartment full of emaciated people who are reminiscent of familiar pictures from the concentration camps (figure 18). Here a radical break occurs in the chronological order of events. Suddenly, there is a feeling that we have returned to the reality of the World War II.

However, the scene does not function as a temporal ellipsis. Its role is the production of collision and not that of narrative transition, something that can be

understood by the fact that it does not have any effect in the articulation of the plot. After, exiting the carriage, Leo follows Larry Hartmann (Udo Kier) and the story unfolds as if nothing has happened. As Serge Gruzinski says:

This destabilisation of the imaginary is all the more unsettling in that it applies to bits of the past that are sufficiently vital to be easily reactivated. As it plows across the Germany of the post-war years, the train of *Europa* transports visions stolen from the world of the concentration camp: skeletons in convicts' rags, piled up on pallets. The post-war and Nazi parts are articulated like the compartments of the train. They confuse the spectator about the meaning to be given to these false archive scenes.<sup>81</sup>

Gruzinski's puzzlement can be understood if we dissect the different temporalities that intermingle in the particular scene. The voice-over speaks from the contemporary historical time and addresses Leo saying: 'you are led through carriages you never knew existed'. The images that Leo sees belong to the fascist past, while Leo himself participates in the narrative actions that take place in the post-war German reality. The result is that this scene fails to affirm a logical, spatial and temporal connection with the narrative content.

This linkage of heterogeneous elements creates historicising effects that call into question the homogeneity of historical time. The distinction between Brecht's use of the *Historisierung* and the effect created here is more than apparent, since the presentation of historical discontinuity defies the evolutionary resolution of historical conflict. Even so, what is Brechtian here is von Trier's concern with the richness emanating from the opposition between unrelated historical materials. A reference to Hans Kellner's understanding of the importance of the historicising effects may illuminate this point. Kellner citing Jameson's dictum "always historicise" explains that the scope of this motto is to force the individual to assume a stance with respect to the historical events, a

---

<sup>81</sup> Serge Gruzinski 'Europa: Journey to the End of History' in *Documenta-X the Book*, ed. by Catherine David and Jean-Francois Chevrier (Ostfildern: Verlag Gerd Hatje, 1997), pp.508-513, here p.510.

stance that will help her/him perceive her/his own historical responsibility.<sup>82</sup> This interpretation is not far from Brecht's call for a responsible spectatorship, which aimed at revealing the audience's role in the making of history. To relate this point to the aforementioned scene, of particular interest is that the voice-over's lines respond to Leo and the audience simultaneously. Evidently, it is not simply Leo who is accused of being ignorant but the collective in the extra-filmic reality too.

The audience is challenged on the grounds of its ability to consume and objectify such an image. Crucial here is the reproduction of Leo as a spectator, as an observer of the largest historical narrative of the post-War reality. His actions do not instigate the narrative, but he is shown as simply witnessing events, as if he is a spectator in a film instead of a narrative agent, a point that I discuss in detail in the next section. His passive status is linked with his decision to remain neutral and choose not to side with anyone. Von Trier explains that:

Katarina Hartmann in *Europa* also illustrates an interesting theory, when she suggests that it's the people who haven't made up their mind, the neutrals, who are the real villains. Looked at in that light, you can see most humanists as villains, because of course, they maintain a neutral position.<sup>83</sup>

Von Trier's comments are important because they establish a link between history and political interests, and help us oppose the denunciation of the film on the grounds of postmodern relativism. One of the charges levelled at postmodernism lies in the subordination of politics to seemingly universal ethics. Thus, a historical event such as the Holocaust fascinates the public simply because it is reduced to an 'excess of evil', an

---

<sup>82</sup> See Kellner, p.306.

<sup>83</sup> Von Trier quoted in Björkman, p.129.

apolitical crime. The relegation of such a political issue to a matter of ‘radical evil’, serves as a way of further depoliticisation of the social sphere.<sup>84</sup>

As opposed to such an apolitical treatment of history, von Trier wishes to divide the audience by means of dialectical contradictions. These contradictions oppose the clear-cut distinctions between right and wrong, historical past and present, and most importantly they negate the very notion of historical progress. Like Brecht, the film’s treatment of this problematic historical reality does not strive for a collective unity in the auditorium ‘on the basis of the common humanity shared by all the spectators alike’.<sup>85</sup> The film invites a more responsible viewing in the literal sense, that is, one that activates responses and generates more questions than answers.

### **On Film Voyeurism**

All the films that comprise the *Europa* trilogy thematise the film as medium, in order to create a parallel between cinematic voyeurism and historical apathy. In *The Element*, the therapist’s look at the camera in the frame story reproduces our own gaze as cinematic voyeurs. The film finishes with a song titled *Der Letzte Tourist In Europa* (*The last Tourist in Europe*). The lyrics operate as an ironic comment on Fisher, who remains a simple observer of the nightmare of history despite returning to Europe with the best intentions. In *Epidemic*, the main characters become voyeurs of their own film in process. The effect is more apparent in *Europa*, a film that starts with a prolonged shot of railway tracks that are similar to a film reel (figure 19). In all the films, the question that arises is how much the characters are ready to witness, before they act. When asked about the connection between voyeurism and history, von Trier responded in a laconic way: ‘Of course, being a spectator can be tantamount to being a criminal! If you are a spectator of a

---

<sup>84</sup> See Slavoj Žižek, ‘The Lesson of Rancière’, in *The Politics of Aesthetics*, trans. by Gabriel Rockhill (London, New York: Continuum, 2004), pp.69-79, here p.73.

<sup>85</sup> Brecht, ‘Indirect Impact of the Epic Theatre’, in *Brecht on Theatre*, pp.57-62, here p.60.

crime'.<sup>86</sup> Certainly, a parallel here exists between cinematic fascination and historical latency.

This inference can be illuminated with reference to some examples from the film. By the time Leo arrives in Germany, the narrative communicates his voyeurism through short scenes that demonstrate the character's interest in witnessing images of history. During his first night in Germany he opens the dormitory's curtains to see what is outside the window. Suddenly he is told off by his uncle (Ernst-Hugo Järegård) who prevents him from looking through the windows. Later on, while on duty he looks outside the window and faces hundreds of wretched people asking for help. Again, his uncle intervenes and closes the curtains justifying his act on the basis of the working rules and regulations. But Leo throughout the film insists on looking outside the windows. Here the window becomes a metaphor for the cinematic screen. As Christian Metz explains:

If characters in a film are watching something from the window they reproduce my own situation as a spectator and remind me both of the nature of what is going on – a film projection, a vision in a rectangle – and the part I am playing in it.<sup>87</sup>

In reducing Leo as a spectator of the larger post-war narrative, von Trier proceeds to confront the audience and argue that the mere fact of being a spectator is not enough. Not unlike Brecht, the renunciation of spectatorial passivity addresses issues that go beyond the film's universe and in particular issues of historical responsibility. Years ago, Guy Debord had warned that the more one acts as a spectator, the less he acts in the social sphere.<sup>88</sup>

---

<sup>86</sup> See Koutsourakis, 'Interview with Lars von Trier', appendix, p.270.

<sup>87</sup> Christian Metz 'The Impersonal Enunciation, or the Site of Film (In the Margin of Recent Works on Enunciation in Cinema)', trans. by Béatrice Durand-Sendrail and Kristen Brookes, in *New Literary History*, 22:3 (1991), pp.747-772, here p.754.

<sup>88</sup> See Debord, p.23.

Nonetheless, von Trier connects spectatorial passivity with historical inactivity without resorting to a radical Situationist critique of the spectacle, as we can see in Debord's film version of his book *The Society of the Spectacle* [*La Société du Spectacle*, 1973]. By contrast, von Trier employs the spectacular aspects of the medium to challenge spectatorial and historical passivity. At some points, the female body becomes the metaphor for the spectacle that distracts the character's attention from the historically loaded environment. This idea is manifested in Leo's first encounter with Katarina. We see Katarina from Leo's point of view shot, while her image in the foreground is in colour, as opposed to the black and white image of Leo in the background. Katarina is framed in an extremely aestheticised way that alludes to the *femme fatale* of the film noir genre (figure 21). This antithesis between foreground and background generates a feeling of cinematic excess. Leo's view of Katarina reproduces our situation as spectators and Katarina appears more like a self-conscious quotation of cinematic material instead of a character in the film's universe. At this point, we assume Leo's point-of-view and the idealised female image addresses both the character and the audience. The overtly dramatic extra-diegetic music in the background becomes ironic and heightens the feeling that the image becomes a palpable quotation of materials.

The connection between the female body and cinematic voyeurism is made more evident in a scene that takes place after the burial of Max Hartmann. Leo enters the car of a Nazi sympathiser, who blackmails him with Katarina's safety so as to force him to help the Nazi partisans in a terrorist strike. Suddenly, the camera captures Katarina, who appears in the foreground, while the background frame is in black and white (figure 22). This colour antithesis intensifies Katarina's depiction as a cinematic material instead of a character. Again, very dramatic extra-diegetic music intervenes and the camera cross-cuts to Leo, who is framed in black and white. Another cross-cutting from Leo to Katarina

follows and when the camera returns to the former he appears in colour, while the German next to him is in black and white (figure 23).

While the image fades out, Leo's face is still visible in colour and behind him an image of railway tracks is superimposed (figure 24). The emergence of the tracks – which look like film reels – in the background as well as Leo's semi-hypnotic state turn the image into a meta-filmic comment. Leo has turned to a consumer of illusion and the image acts as a commentary on the link between spectacle consumption and social apathy. The character's attention is once again diverted from the historical threat; the scene exceeds the limits of the diegesis so as to address the collective in the auditorium.

One commentator understands the film's fondness for these multi-layered images as a postmodern trope *tout court*. He argues that von Trier implies that the medium cannot deal with history. All we are left is 'layers upon layers of faulty perspectives'.<sup>89</sup> Unlike this postmodern relativism, I want to discuss Schepelern's point that 'Leo is the first tourist in the stricken Europe'.<sup>90</sup> To understand his argument, it is useful to consider the role of the train and the metaphor of travel, which can be equated with the very cinematic experience. Not only because cinema and the steam locomotive are emblems of modernity, but also because the allegory of the subject as tourist/observer has preoccupied critical theory. The state of being a tourist and a spectacle consumer are comparable because in both cases the subject cannot really alter the reality facing her/him.<sup>91</sup>

Emblematic from this point, is the scene after the assassination of Ravenstein, a German who collaborates with the Western allies. The camera cuts to Leo and stays still. His face remains in the foreground retaining the same expression, whereas in the background images of railway tracks are superimposed. The background eventually

<sup>89</sup> Udi E. Greenberg, 'The Holocaust Repressed. Memory and the Subconscious in Lars Von Trier's *Europa*', in *Film and History*, 38:1 (2008), pp.45-50, here p.47.

<sup>90</sup> Schepelern, p.126.

<sup>91</sup> See Elsaesser, 'The Irresponsible Signifier or "The Gamble with History": Film Theory or Cinema Theory', in *New German Critique*, 40:1 (1987), pp.65-89, here p.76.

dissolves and then a new layer is attached, which establishes a new spatial connection and shifts the narrative to Hartmann's house. Throughout this spatiotemporal change, Leo's face remains passive and stares at the camera as if he is a spectacle consumer. The character remains unaffected, a mere observer of the historical narrative.

This emphasis on multi-layered images thematises the very act of filmic projection and complicates the distinction between the diegetic and the metadiegetic cosmos. Gilles Visy has offered an analysis of the three different spatial levels that can be identified in the film. The first dimension is the fictional universe, the second one is Leo's conscience, which is extra-diegetic, and the third one is a '*peridiegetique*', which blurs the boundaries between the two previous spaces discussed. According to Visy, the latter dimension aims at producing a 'meta-level' which simultaneously addresses the audience and the character.<sup>92</sup> In the '*peridiegetique*' universe, cinema becomes the metaphor for the role of the individual in the formation of history. Passive consumption of spectacular images is equated with historical irresponsibility. This 'meta-level' manifests itself clearly in the last scene of the film, in which we see Leo dead but the voice-over asserts: 'you want to wake up to free yourself of the image of *Europa*. But it is not possible'. Here, the voice-over's function becomes extra-diegetic and addresses the collective in the auditorium and not just the character.<sup>93</sup> At the same time, the voice-over loses its authoritative function, since it denies hermeneutical orientation and follows a formula that could be summed up like this: 'it is all yours now'.<sup>94</sup>

---

<sup>92</sup> Gilles Visy, 'Europa, Lars von Trier: Un Certain Cauchemar Expressioniste', in *Cadragé: La Revue du Cinema International* available online at <http://www.cadragé.net/films/europa/europa.html>, accessed 3 August 2008.

<sup>93</sup> It is noteworthy here how the voice-over complicates the narrative instead of – in Kozloff's words – 'making us aware of the subjectivity of perception (focalization) and storytelling (narration)'. See Kozloff, p.62. Thus, despite the fact that the voice-over seems to be authoritative, in the end of *Europa*, the narrator shares the audience's uncertainty.

<sup>94</sup> See Koutsourakis, 'The Desire for History in Lars von Trier's *Europa* and Theo Angelopoulos' *The Suspended Step of the Stork*', in *Kinema: A Journal for Film and Audiovisual Media*, 33:1 (2010), pp.93-106, here p.104.

I have been seeking to emphasise the importance of a materialist reading of the *Europa* trilogy through a study of the films' form. To this effect, I have stressed the transformations in Brecht's theory and practice that may help us comprehend the films' historical dimension. The fatalistic ending of the characters who become mere voyeurs in the broader historical narrative raises questions with regard to the audience's role in the formation of history. Thus, by problematising narrative agency, historical temporality and clear-cut ethical distinctions the films aim at introducing contradictions that cannot be resolved within their diegetic borders.

As mentioned earlier, von Trier's interest in the traumas of fascism in this trilogy of films has not been discussed with respect to issues of dialectics, cinematic voyeurism and the relationship between the individual and history. The *Europa* trilogy proposes that as long as the collective continues to perceive itself as a spectator in the larger historical narrative then the remnants of fascism are still strong and omnipresent. In the postmodern media-reality, in which the boundaries between historical images and artifice are not quite straightforward, the question of fascism and image consumption becomes a matter of political importance. Thomas Elsaesser has brilliantly captured this point. As he says:

The question which Nazism raises today is less its relation to material production and capitalism or the monstrous scale and consequence of its demographic planning, than its astounding ability to create a public sphere, a mass audience.<sup>95</sup>

Following Elsaesser's point, one can see the film's equal interest in history and the medium itself not simply as a postmodern trope, but as a way of pointing that historical responsibility requires that subjects perceive themselves as producers of history and not as voyeurs. In this context, the *Europa* trilogy challenges the institution of cinema and the

---

<sup>95</sup> Elsaesser, "'Lili Marleen': Fascism and the Film Industry', in *October*, 21:3 (1982), pp.115-140, here p.136.

audience, so as to bring to the fore a set of questions dealing with the dialectics between the individual and history. Not unlike Brecht, formal complexity aspires to transform the audience and its position towards the object as well as to make them question the current historical circumstances.

I want to conclude the chapter with some reflections on the films' historicity. In one of those lines in the first manuscript that did not find their way into the final film, Leo says: 'I felt old and very tired as Europe'.<sup>96</sup> Apart from the trilogy's interest in Europe's traumatic past, the idea of Europe being in a state of crisis can be seen in its own historicity. For instance, *The Element* was shot during a period that the European political environment was altered by the influence of the neoliberal policies of Margaret Thatcher in the UK and Ronald Reagan in The United States, while the Soviet Union experienced huge transformations that gradually led to its division. The uncertainty that marked the period found its cinematic expression in films interested in apocalyptic stories and as von Trier explained in an interview during *The Element*'s production, 'the growing interest of the time in apocalyptic films can be attributed to the historical insecurity'.<sup>97</sup> In *Epidemic*, the fear that nature 'takes over' continues this interest in the apocalypse. The metaphor of the virus and the plague reflects also the historical anxiety about the increasing symptoms of the AIDS epidemic, which was one of the film's starting points.<sup>98</sup>

In *Europa*, all the exterior scenes were shot in Poland during 1990 and the interior ones in Copenhagen.<sup>99</sup> The back projections connect the exterior scenes with the interior ones and this choice is not just a formalist trickery but reflects the changing European environment and the two different realities of the Eastern and Western Europe. The exterior scenes that include a vast amount of Polish extras become problematic given that

---

<sup>96</sup> Schepelern, p.127.

<sup>97</sup> Von Trier quoted in, *Ennenstadt Europa*.

<sup>98</sup> Vørsel quoted in, *Anecdotes From Epidemic* (2005) dir. by Michael Sandager (Electric Parc, 2005) [on DVD].

<sup>99</sup> See Schepelern, p.113.

these people perform the unfortunate German population after the end of the war (figure 27 and 28). Yet these people are indices of a country, which leaves behind the failed socialist project, while the prospects of its integration into the Western European capitalism are not ideal. *Europa* then completes the trilogy at a time when socialism was no longer a tangible alternative, while the European nations' optimism for an integrated Europe signalled a new era of collaboration. The film's pessimistic ending does not share this optimism and seen under the rubric of the current problems within the European Union, the film acquires a renewed historical significance.

### Chapter 3 — Rethinking Realism: Dogme 95 and *The Idiots*.

#### Dogme 95: Ascetic Realism and Anti-Illusionism

In the previous chapter, I discussed the ways von Trier's *Europa* trilogy raises questions regarding historical representation. In this section, I am interested in placing von Trier's and Dogme's ascetic aesthetics in a historical context. One of my aims is to rethink the 1970s debate about realist and Brechtian cinema through an analysis of the Dogme 95 Manifesto and through a case study of von Trier's film *The Idiots* (1998).<sup>1</sup> I want to demonstrate that certain aspects of realism are not necessarily antithetical with a type of cinema that consciously builds on Brecht's predilection for representations that incorporate the process and the product within the film's dramaturgy. Primarily, the chapter proceeds to explore Dogme's employment of a realist aesthetics as a form of 'anti-illusionism' and sets out to offer a historical interpretation of Dogme's return to the cinematic debates of the past. Then, I want to discuss the ways von Trier's film merges a long-take realist tradition with an investigative attitude that generates tensions between the scripted referents and the filmmaking process.

The first chapter of this thesis discussed the debate between the two different critical traditions, that is, the phenomenological one, influenced by the writings of André Bazin, and the Brechtian one. As I explained, the 1970s opposition between Bazin and Brecht was formulated by critics, who considered that a materialist cinema based upon Brecht's critique of empiricism could not be reconciled with realism. The basis of this argument was that realism gave an illusionist view of the world, that is, a static and unchangeable one, which was not in line with Brecht's call for representations that could demonstrate the historicity of human relationships.

---

<sup>1</sup> I use the word Dogme instead of Dogma and the reason is that this was the word mentioned in the original Manifesto. Some of the texts I quote use the word Dogma and for copyright reasons I keep it unchanged.

One important contradiction merits attention here. These critics conducted an exploration of a Brechtian/materialist cinema against the Hollywood paradigm, which they rejected on the grounds of being illusionist. Yet, as Thomas Elsaesser has pointed out, European Cinema has always distinguished itself from Hollywood ‘on the basis of its greater realism’.<sup>2</sup> Thus, the association of realism with illusionism during the 1970s did not make a distinction between dramatic realism and realism as a filmmaking process that clings into indexicality – the material connection of representation with its referent – in order to incorporate unforeseen incidents and materials within the film’s narrative.

From the term dramatic realism – which one tends to link with Hollywood – I understand the causal linkage of a sequence of events, which consist of a series of coherent psychological motivations. This emphasis on psychology as the motivating element of actions is busy portraying changes in moral and psychological attitudes and fails to show individuals as part of a larger socio-political frame. On the other hand, realism as a filmic process that registers physical reality and interacts with the captured environment allowing for unpredictable moments to enter a film’s dramaturgy, is a *modus operandi* that has marked the practice of European art cinema. Such a practice does not simply reproduce the external environment, but interacts with it so as to question it. For instance, Neorealism’s interest in the concrete historical reality of the post-War Italy and the Nouvelle Vague’s semi-documentary form are some major examples of a European art cinema aesthetics that clings into indexicality.

Dogme 95 constitutes a cinematic movement that holds onto a realist filmmaking process. I suggest that a study of its theoretical and formal principles may help us overcome the distinction between realism and materialism as formulated during the 1970s. I argue that a close examination of the Manifesto as a text demonstrates that

---

<sup>2</sup> Thomas Elsaesser, ‘World Cinema: Realism, Evidence, Presence’, in *Realism and the Audiovisual Media*, ed. by Lúcia Nagib, Cecília Mello (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009), pp.3-19, here p.3.

Dogme's realist filmmaking method is not tantamount to pure mimesis and can help us place the movement in a historical context. Dogme started as a collective of four filmmakers – Lars von Trier, Thomas Vinterberg, Søren Kragh-Jacobsen and Kristian Levring – who shared the belief that cinema could be resuscitated by establishing certain rules and restrictions that would determine the operations of the filmmakers and their crew. However, the films that were the outcome of this Manifesto were quite different and it would be risky to approach them from a totalising perspective.

For instance films, such as *Italian for Beginners* [*Italiensk for Begyndere* (Scherfig: 2000)] and *Mifune* (Jacobsen: 1999) obey the Dogme rules in order to narrate a story and adhere to the classical cinema's convention of characterisation and narrative agency. Others, such as *Festen* (Vinterberg: 1998), *The Idiots* (von Trier: 1998) and *Julien Donkey Boy* (Korin: 1999), adopt a more playful narrative structure that reflects the process of the films' genesis and the restrictions imposed upon them. Furthermore, despite the movement's collective character, the Manifesto was written solely by von Trier and Vinterberg, whose films were probably the most committed ones to Dogme. Of course, the Dogme Manifesto incorporates some anxieties and thoughts about the future of the cinema, but the films shot under the particular rules are not characterised by formal or thematic uniformity. The rules impose certain restrictions on the filmmaking and the post-production process, but they do not intend to produce similar types of films.

Let us now summarise the basic tenets of the Manifesto. In the opening paragraph, the Manifesto distinguishes itself from the 1960s and the Nouvelle Vague and explains that the objectives were correct but not the means. The concept of the auteur cinema is dismissed as 'bourgeois', while it is stated quite emphatically that 'to Dogme 95 cinema is not individual'.<sup>3</sup> Dogme presents itself as a counter-strategy to the individual film and expresses a belief in the productive potential of the new technologies, which can lead to

---

<sup>3</sup> See the Dogme 95 Manifesto in the appendix, p.285.

‘the ultimate democratization of cinema’.<sup>4</sup> Thus, Dogme proposes a set of strategies that resist the illusionist filmmaking and the predictability deriving from dramaturgical clichés. The rules proposed by Dogme are location shooting, direct sound and hand-held cameras. Furthermore, postproduction manipulation is prohibited, while genre films and the director’s crediting are not allowed. Finally, the Manifesto asserts that for Dogme ‘the instant is more important than the whole’ and the director’s ultimate aim is to ‘force the truth out of the characters and settings’.<sup>5</sup>

The Manifesto itself constitutes an important piece of writing that voices some significant anxieties regarding the medium’s radical aspirations in the current historical circumstances. The Manifesto, as a form of writing, attaches itself to the earlier cinematic avant-gardes and their furious production of texts and pronunciations, and demonstrates an awareness of the importance of theory as a means of exploring the possibilities for the foundation of political cinema. The point that I put forward is that Brecht and political modernism can enrich our understanding of the movement and help us answer a set of questions regarding Dogme’s anachronistic language. Such a reading can make us appreciate Dogme beyond the conventional perception, which sees the movement as a postmodern parody. When reading the Manifesto, one recognises that Dogme engages self-consciously with the political modernist film-making rhetoric to the point that one senses a self-mockery of the project’s originality. The work of D.N. Rodowick illuminates the term political modernism. Rodowick explains that:

Political modernism is the expression of a desire to combine semiotic and ideological analysis with the development of an avant-garde aesthetic practice dedicated to the production of radical social effects.<sup>6</sup>

---

<sup>4</sup> Ibid., p.285.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid., p.287.

<sup>6</sup> David Norman Rodowick, *The Crisis of Political Modernism* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1998), p.1.

Elsewhere, Rodowick explains that political modernism is dedicated to the production of radical/political objects that emphasise the material aspects of their representation and assume the form of an 'auto-critique'.<sup>7</sup> Rodowick's definition refers to a variety of filmmakers, such as Eisenstein, Vertov and Godard.

Dogme's rhetoric echoes mainly early political modernist practices, such as Vertov's and Brecht's. Both expressed their enthusiasm over the film medium and equated technology with productivity, something that I discuss later on. As noted in the first chapter, Brecht's theory and practice, which centres on the distance between reality and representation was influential in the formation of a political modernist filmmaking. The production of radical/knowledge effects was predicated upon the changing of the established cinematic tropes. In questioning the dominant cinematic language, a film could modify the audience's habitual spectatorship and offer the audience an alternative view of social reality.

In the Dogme Manifesto, one can identify a polemical language, which aims at changing the habitual spectatorship, but there is a troubling paradox too. The political modernist rhetoric is accompanied by a call for ascetic realism and a disciplined 'avant-garde'. By implication, the Manifesto itself seems to go beyond the 1970s binarisms – dialectical versus realist cinema. The rules that advocate location shooting, direct sound, ban on extra-diegetic music, hand-held camera, and avoidance of gratuitous action clearly articulate a preference for a realist aesthetics. Yet the Manifesto's belief in the new technological means of production, the rejection of predictable dramaturgy and the dismissal of the concept of the auteur cinema resonate with a political modernist rhetoric.

Let us first single out the equivalences to a European art cinema realist aesthetics. The rules imposed by Dogme are redolent of Italian Neorealism's preference for real locations rather than studio settings, unaffectionate acting, and for an aesthetics of reality

---

<sup>7</sup> Ibid., p.12.

that undermines the role of the script in favour of the presentation of fragments of concrete reality. As Bazin says in his discussion of Neorealism, the script and the plot of the Neorealist films are of less importance. For it is the script's adherence to an aesthetics which offers fragments of the historical reality that renders the films unique, and not their dramaturgy, which, as he explains, does not differ from 'moralising melodramas'.<sup>8</sup> Bazin's reading of Neorealism as a movement that undermines the role of the script for the fragments of concrete reality, as well as his conviction that the Neorealist aesthetics leads to the disappearance of dramaturgy, can help us understand Dogme's reconciliation of a raw realist aesthetics with an anti-illusionist one.

By dramaturgy, I understand the selection and composition of a sequence of events for the production of dramatic conflict and action. The predictable dramaturgy that Dogme rejects is mainly the Hollywood one, which structures goal-orientated narratives in which the actions justify the characters and the other way around. Dogme's rejection of predictable dramaturgical tricks and its preference for the 'instant rather than the whole' foreground the movement's interest in an episodic, paratactic style, in which each scene does not necessarily move smoothly from and towards the scenes before and after it. Furthermore, the Manifesto's privileging of the 'instant' – the fragment – evokes Brecht's writings on film. Brecht sees film practice as a process of compressing the dramatic process into independent scenes that do not necessarily serve dramatic ends.

Their [the independent scenes'] sequencing and combination, arrangement and plausibility are contained only implicitly in the original film text. They obey their own principles, which are different from those of the verbal drama and distinct as well from those of pure stage mime. It is the responsibility of the film director not only formally to stage this, but also, in a certain sense, to transpose all of these indispensable things into reality.<sup>9</sup>

---

<sup>8</sup> See André Bazin, 'An Aesthetic of Reality: Neorealism', in *What is Cinema?* Vol. II, ed. and trans. by Hugh Gray (Berkeley, Los Angeles, London: University of California Press, 1971), pp.16-40, here p.21.

<sup>9</sup> Bertolt Brecht, 'The Threepenny Lawsuit: A Sociological Experiment', in *Bertolt Brecht on Film and Radio*, ed. and trans. by Marc Silberman (London: Methuen, 2001), pp.147-199, here p.186.

Brecht's privileging of a fragmented film form aims at focusing on the exposition of arguments and counter-arguments instead of establishing dramatic situations. The camera's investigative attitude is the prerequisite for the formation of an anti-illusionist aesthetics, which is not interested in reproduction but in the presentation of a set of contradictions. Such an emphasis on the fragment rather than the whole, serves also the purpose of overcoming the bourgeois notion of art as mimesis and the perception of the artist as the creative 'genius'.

The devaluation of the role of the artist is part of an aesthetics concerned with assigning a more productive role to the audience. This devaluation figures importantly in the Manifesto. Particularly, the rejection of the auteur cinema and the rule that forbids the crediting of the director clearly recall the political modernist arguments of the past, according to which the author/director is not in a privileged position over her/his audience. From Brecht's understanding of the author as a person who produces work 'from the materials of history' to the Dziga Vertov group's mockery of the director's individuality, the common argument is that the value of artistic practice does not rely on the communication of an 'individual vision'.<sup>10</sup> In Dogme's case, this devaluation of the director coincides with a technological development that leads to the 'democratization of the medium'. Again, this view of technology as productivity aligns Dogme with political modernism, something that I discuss below.

### **Technology and Productivity**

Before I go further with my discussion of Dogme's view of technology and its references to political modernism, I intend to see the critical responses to the Manifesto. After its publication, the Dogme Manifesto attracted the interest of the academic scholarship and

---

<sup>10</sup> Brecht quoted in, Elisabeth Wright, *Postmodern Brecht* (London, New York: Routledge 1989), p.17. See also Peter Wollen, 'Godard and Counter-Cinema: *Vent d'Est*', in *Readings and Writings: Semiotic Counter Strategies* (London: Verso, 1982), pp.79-91, here p.83. Originally published in *Afterimage*, 4:1 (1972).

there have been numerous articles which discuss the movement's popularity and significance. One of the most popular explanations is offered by Mette Hjort who understands Dogme to be Denmark's response to globalisation. Her analysis enriches our understanding of the movement and the challenges that small nations have to face in a globalised cultural environment. However, Hjort sees Dogme as a movement that privileges content over form, placing emphasis on characterisation and psychological depth. What she does not specify is the ways that the formal restrictions liberate film form and challenge the cinematic institution.<sup>11</sup>

Berys Gaut argues that the Manifesto's commitment to the discovery of truth negates any Brechtian reading. For Gaut, the illusionist film is not opposed by Dogme in favour of a self-reflexive strategy, and nothing in the Manifesto states that Dogme's goal is to draw attention to the film as film.<sup>12</sup> A closer look at the Manifesto's principles and its set of rules can negate this argument. After all, Dogme's anti-illusionist rhetoric along with its ascetic realism synthesises an interest in exploring different ways of representation as opposed to the hegemonic ones. As such, Dogme is not solely concerned with the relation between film and reality, but with the very dialogue between different modes of filmmaking, a gesture which calls attention to film as film.

A concrete analysis of the Dogme Manifesto's dialogue with political modernism has not been established on the part of the scholars. Scott MacKenzie has identified similarities with previous film Manifestos. Then again, his discussion is mainly concerned with issues regarding the future of European Art Cinema in the age of Hollywood hegemony.<sup>13</sup> Similarly, John Roberts identifies similarities with film manifestoes of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, but he concludes that the technical and formal restrictions have no political

---

<sup>11</sup> See Mette Hjort 'Dogma 95: A Small Nation's Response to Globalisation', in *Purity and Provocation: Dogma 95*, ed. by Mette Hjort and Scott MacKenzie (London: BFI, 2000), pp.31-47, here p.41.

<sup>12</sup> See Berys Gaut, 'Naked Film: Dogma and its Limits', in the same book as above, pp.89-101, here p.93.

<sup>13</sup> See Scott MacKenzie, 'Manifest Destinies: Dogma 95 and the Future of the Film Manifesto', in the same book as above, pp.48-57, here pp.49-52.

aspirations and effects. In his estimation, Dogme is a call for cheap films for ‘aspirant amateurs’.<sup>14</sup> Peter Schepelern, on the other hand, asserts that the Dogme project originates from ‘von Trier’s works and artistic expressions’.<sup>15</sup> Elsewhere, Schepelern indicates the correspondence between Dogme and Vertov’s manifestoes, while he sees Dogme’s reference to a Marxist rhetoric and the ideological debates of the 1970s as a parody.<sup>16</sup> What is missing is a historical understanding of the movement’s recourse to a rhetoric that clearly recalls the modernist belief in the revolutionary potential of the film medium. Furthermore, what commentators have not discussed is Dogme’s combined optimism and scepticism towards digital technology.

In my reading, Dogme proposes an oppositional realist practice that does not intend to represent reality as unified and concrete, but oscillates between a documentarist approach to the profilmic along with one that signals it as a construct. Thus, the movement can be seen as a call for a productive instead of a reproductive use of the new technologies. It is this distinction between production and reproduction that clarifies the movement’s opposition to the use of digital technology for the production of special effects and ‘cosmetics’. This distinction demonstrates the movement’s lack of interest in using technology as a means of reproducing a perceptually realistic dramatic cosmos by means of post-production manipulation. By contrast, Dogme’s imposition of rules on the

---

<sup>14</sup> Jon Roberts, ‘Dogme 95’, in *New Left Review*, 23:8 (1999), pp.141-149, here p.142.

<sup>15</sup> Peter Schepelern, ‘“Kill your Darlings”: Lars von Trier and the Origin of Dogma 95’, in *Purity and Provocation: Dogma 95*, pp.58-69, here p.58.

<sup>16</sup> See Schepelern, ‘Film According to Dogma: Ground Rules, Obstacles and Liberations’, in *Transnational Cinema in Global North: Nordic Cinema in Transition*, ed. by Andrew Nestingen and Trevor G. Elkington (Detroit, Michigan: Wayne State University Press, 2005), pp.73-107, here p.82 and 84.

Numerous people understand the Manifesto as a parody of political modernism. See Linda Badley, ‘Danish Dogma: Truth and Cultural Politics’, in *Traditions in World Cinema*, ed. by Linda Badley, R. Barton Palmer and Steven Jay Schneider, (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2006), pp.80-94, here p.80.

See also, Jan Simons, *Playing the Waves: Lars Von Trier’s Game Cinema* (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2007), pp.11-12.

See also, Gabriel Giralt, ‘Whatever Happened to Reality: Dogme 95 and the Reality of Fiction’, in *Kinema: Journal for Film and Audiovisual Media*, 12:4 (2003), available online at <http://www.kinema.uwaterloo.ca/article.php?id=110&feature>, accessed 14 February 2011.

filmmaking and the post-production process summarises a will to retain the medium's indexical nature.

Herein lies the main similarity with the political modernist rhetoric and its view of technology as productivity. The heightened realism afforded by the developments in technology is seen as a motivating element in producing radical effects and renewing the audience's perception. In the first chapter, I lingered on Brecht's initial enthusiasm about the cinema, which is grounded in the belief that the intervention of the machine, that is the camera, merges the portrayed reality with the process of copying/reproducing that reality. Brecht considered this overlapping between process and product analogous to the defamiliarising effects he aimed to achieve in the theatre. This point can be clarified by Marc Silberman's following comment.

Brecht recognizes the specificity of the cinema in the mechanized process of its production and exhibition, in its power to make art into a commodity, an insight which, soon after, would inform Benjamin's seminal text on a modernist theory of representation. Finally, in the cinema the perception of the image undergoes a disintegration of visual perspective with the levelling of difference between the image and the original. The privileged centered site of perspective in post-Renaissance representational forms was guaranteed by a stable representational relationship between the sign and the real in the belief that the sign's referent contained a deeper sense. With the collapse of referentiality this centered perspective is destroyed, and the world becomes representable in multiple segments, realized most fully in the fragmentation of the cinematic montage.<sup>17</sup>

Thus, Brecht saw the revolutionary potential of the medium in its ability to abstract concrete images from reality so as to show reality as a construction. In his theoretical articulation of the 'gestic camera' Brecht says that 'the camera searches for motives, it is a

---

<sup>17</sup> Marc Silberman, 'The Politics of Representation: Brecht and the Media', in *Theatre Journal*, 39:4 (1987), pp.448-460, here pp.451-452.

sociologist'.<sup>18</sup> This perception of the camera as a sociologist aims at connecting the reality of the portrayed actions with the audience's historical reality.

Brecht thought that the 'gestic camera' produces 'realism' in the Marxist sense of the world, that is, 'the portrayal of typical people under typical circumstances'.<sup>19</sup> Brecht continually referred to his theatre and film practice as realist. His understanding of realism comes in contradistinction to what he considered as naïve naturalism, that is, 'the reproduction of natural appearances with embarrassing precision, which however, often hides meaningful connections by pedantically accumulating random details'.<sup>20</sup> Thus, the gestic camera's role is not that of the invisible observer of actions. By contrast, the camera points to the process of constructing a copy of reality and the audience is asked to co-produce and not simply to consume a dramatic narrative.

Brecht's approach towards cinema invokes the political modernist enthusiasm over the medium, which was based upon the latter's capacity to go against the notion of the individual being at the centre of the world. One well-known example is Dziga Vertov's valorisation of the Kino-eye (seeing through the camera) over the human eye. Vertov's argument is grounded in the premise that the Kino-eye can give the audience access to processes not visible by the human eye. In many respects, his Marxist antihumanism downplays the role of the director in favour of the cameraman. For Vertov, the Kinos (the cinematographers working under the principles of the Kino-Eye) are primarily constructors and not artists. In his view, the bourgeois artistic cinema is a remnant of the 'old world' and needs to be replaced by a cinematic practice based on

---

<sup>18</sup> Brecht quoted in Silberman, 'Brecht, Realism and the Media', in *Realism and the Audiovisual Media*, pp.31-46, here p.38.

<sup>19</sup> Friedrich Engels quoted in, Ruth Berlau, Bertolt Brecht, Claus Hubalek, Peter Palitzsch and Käthe Rülicke (eds.), *Theaterarbeit: 6 Aufführungen des Berliner Ensembles* (Dresden: VVV Dresdner Verlag, 1952), p. 434.

<sup>20</sup> Brecht quoted, *Ibid.*, p.433.

‘coolness and distrust’. As he says: ‘Film Drama is the opium of the people’.<sup>21</sup> The ultimate aim of the cinema he proposes is the filming of the every-day life, so as to use the recorded material to educate the audiences.<sup>22</sup>

According to Vertov, the act of filming should not be dissociated from any other productive labour. The mediated reality deriving from the intervention of the camera can make the audiences discern processes not distinguishable in the empirical reality. To achieve this learning effect Vertov denies dramaturgy and the praising of artistic individuality.

This departure from authorship by one person or a group of persons to mass authorship will, in our view, accelerate the destruction of bourgeois, artistic cinema and its attributes: the poser-actor, fairy-tale script, those costly toys-sets, and the director high-priest.<sup>23</sup>

Vertov’s downplaying of dramaturgy is predicated upon a preference for an aesthetics that refuses to dissociate the recorded objects by the very process of recording itself. The crucial aspect of the learning effects he wants to achieve lies in the self-reflexive movement of the camera, in which the copy and the original overlap with each other, so as to bring to the surface the hidden aspects of reality. Vertov describes this process as ‘filming life unawares’, in which people are captured by the camera lens without knowing it.<sup>24</sup> The cameraman observes people’s activities without impeding them. Vertov’s *modus operandi* establishes a linkage of shots deriving from the ontological authenticity of the images with dynamic montage sequences that aim at developing constructive effects.<sup>25</sup>

The liberated camera advocated by Vertov is equivalent to Brecht’s valorisation of the ‘gestic camera’, whose role is explorative and revelatory. These approaches to

<sup>21</sup> Dziga Vertov, ‘Kino-Eye’, in *Kino-Eye: The Writings of Dziga Vertov*, trans. by Kevin O’Brien, ed. by Annette Michelson (Berkeley, Los Angeles, London: University of California Press: 1984), pp.60-79, here p.71.

<sup>22</sup> Vertov, ‘We Variants of a Manifesto’, in the same book as above, pp.5-9, here p.9.

<sup>23</sup> Vertov, ‘Kino-Eye’, p.71.

<sup>24</sup> Vertov, ‘The Birth of Kino-Eye’, in the same book, pp.40-42, here p.41.

<sup>25</sup> See Vlada Petric, ‘Dziga Vertov as a Theorist’, in *Cinema Journal*, 18:1 (1978), pp.29-44, here p.34.

filmmaking, that is, the privileging of the machine – the camera, over the director's individuality, and over dramaturgy – summarise the political modernist idea that the emergence of cinema needs to establish a redefinition of art. Brecht thought the same, and his dissatisfaction with the film medium derived from the industry's understanding of the cinema solely as a dramatic medium. Dominant cinema's employment of character point of view shots and its commitment to the creation of dramatic effects led the audience to identify with the camera, an effect totally irreconcilable with Brecht's perception of it as a sociologist. This identification with the camera provided the audience with finished objects, without giving them access to the process by which the objects were produced.<sup>26</sup> The result is that the camera loses its performative/productive function and the very ideas of artistic individuality and dramaturgy, which the new medium wished to oppose, are perpetuated.

For Brecht, these tendencies failed to change the medium of their own articulation, and here it is important to recall his argument that it is not enough to produce for a medium but to change it too. Walter Benjamin has captured the intent of this argument in an essay hugely inspired by Brecht, in which the author is equated with a producer. As Benjamin explains, Brecht introduced the term *Umfunktionierung* [re-functioning] to describe 'certain works that are not so much intended to represent individual experiences (to have the character of finished works), as they are aimed at transforming certain existing institutes and institutions'.<sup>27</sup> Benjamin expands Brecht's argument and explains that technical progress can become the basis for political progress because the writer can shift his attention from the products (the finished works) to the very means of production. In this context, the author's/producer's work becomes a model of 'an improved

---

<sup>26</sup> Brecht quoted in Ben Brewster, 'The Fundamental Reproach (Brecht)', in *Ciné-Tracts*, 1:2 (1977), pp.44-53, here p.48.

<sup>27</sup> Brecht quoted in Walter Benjamin, *Understanding Brecht*, trans. by Anna Bostock (London: Verso, 1998), p.93.

apparatus', which familiarises the public with the very production process and turns the readers or spectators into collaborators.<sup>28</sup>

In a similar manner, Dogme equates technological progress with a film practice that questions the cinematic institution and the understanding of filmmaking as an individual expression. What merits our attention is that this faith in technological development clearly references the political modernist axiom that emphasis should not be placed solely on the product but on the very means of production too. Von Trier has made that quite clear in an interview given after the completion of *The Idiots*, in which he explains that the new technologies give the filmmakers a chance to focus on the very filmic process, and to rethink the cinematic rules.

Film has become very much like magic tricks – you're not supposed to know how it's done, which is also very old-fashioned, especially if you think about the new techniques, the new cameras, and how everybody can produce their own films, which I think is fantastic. So it's about time there was a real debate. Nobody has really talked about film form or film content, not for many, many years, and the arrival of these techniques makes it very good time to have that discussion.<sup>29</sup>

The new small cameras that have emerged out of the digital revolution offer filmmakers the opportunity to shoot scenes in long-takes without worrying about the price of film stock. Von Trier suggests that these cameras can downplay precision in favour of indeterminacy. The result is that the director is deprived of absolute control and the final cut contains the filmmaking process and the product at the same time. This formulation resonates with the Bazinian preference for long-take cinematography and with Brecht's call for a self-reflexive and investigative camera movement. In both tendencies,

---

<sup>28</sup> Ibid, p.98.

<sup>29</sup> Von Trier quoted in Richard Kelly, *The Name of this Book is Dogme 95* (London: Faber and Faber, 2000), p.144.

knowledge about the world and reality is associated with the knowledge about the process of capturing that reality on screen.

The point of rupture between von Trier and the aforementioned modernist and realist rhetoric is that the very process of exploration is valorised over any concrete educative effects. According to von Trier, there are two different ways of working with the camera, framing, and pointing. The framing process involves a passion for perfectionism and absolute control, whereas the pointing one privileges realism and loss of control. Certainly, this view of realism has little to do with dramaturgical and compositional consistency. By contrast, the pointing process opens itself to the contingent and encourages the director to discover things from the surroundings instead of imposing his/her ideas to the audience.<sup>30</sup> Von Trier's dialectical understanding of the medium's investigative potential can be seen in a quotation below.

To hang a mike up in a tree, to use a couple of toothpicks instead of a gigantic technical apparatus, this provides one form of cinematic truth. Or at least it gets more real. Truth is about searching an area in order to find something, but if you already knew beforehand what you're looking for, then it is manipulation. Maybe truth is finding something you're not looking for.<sup>31</sup>

Von Trier's comments summarise Dogme's call for an ascetic aesthetics that aims at breaking the conventional way of filmmaking and film-viewing. The director and the audience have to adopt a more interrogative/productive attitude towards the camera's engagement with the concrete reality. On this basis, Dogme's idea of unveiling the truth does not imply a reductionist revelation of pre-existing ideas, but the restoration of

---

<sup>30</sup> Von Trier quoted in Peter Schepelern, 'The King of Dogme', in *Film: Special Issue Dogme* (2005), pp.8-12, here p.11.

The association of contingency with cinematic realism is also the basis of Siegfried Kracauer's theory of realism. See Miriam Bratu Hansen, Introduction to Siegfried Kracauer *Theory of Film* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1997), pp.vii-xlv, here p.xxxiii. Here Hansen discusses Kracauer's writings on contingency and indeterminacy as formal aspects that may encourage a more productive spectatorship on the part of the audience

<sup>31</sup> Von Trier quoted in, Peter Øvig Knudsen, 'The Man Who Would Give Up Control', in *Lars Von Trier Interviews*, ed. by Jan Lumholdt (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2003) pp.117-124, here p.122.

responses of astonishment to the processes of recording and perceiving reality. Evidently, all these ideas are not new and one senses that Dogme theatricalises its own belatedness.

This view of technology as productivity recalls the political modernist anxiety regarding the use of technological development in a revolutionary rather than a reproductive way. Access to technology was seen as a prerequisite for motivating political change. In Brecht's words:

The technology that triumphs here, and appears to be condemned to nothing more than guaranteeing the profits of some dinosaurs and thus of barbarism, can achieve very different things in proper hands.<sup>32</sup>

Brecht's interest in using technology for the production of radical effects is symptomatic of his forward-looking politics, which sees technology as the synonym of change. Technology signifies the new and heralds the coming of the new society, which will emerge out of the old one. The contradiction that arises with respect to Dogme lies in the fact that the movement appeared in a historical moment when there is no such thing as a tangible political alternative to accompany the productive use of the new technologies.

The question that arises then is why Dogme returns to the past to 'rescue' cinema from its 'decadence'. I should like to venture a first and schematic explanation. I suggest that Dogme's employment of a political modernist rhetoric, the privileging of austerity and the movement's enigmatic commitment to truth can be seen as a desire for orientation in a historical period in which the experience of the world is media constructed. I want to illuminate this point in reference to two later Manifestoes written by von Trier, very much inspired by the Dogme one. I am talking about the Defocus Manifesto (2000) and the Dogumentary one (2002).<sup>33</sup> While the former one manifests its commitment to a filmic

---

<sup>32</sup> Brecht, 'The Threepenny Lawsuit', p.195.

<sup>33</sup> See the Defocus and the Dogumentary Manifesto in the appendix, pp.288-290. The Defocus Manifesto introduced a filmmaking practice that can be seen in von Trier's and Jørgen Leth's film, *The Five Obstructions* (Zentropa Real Aps, 2003).

process that is dedicated to the investigation of something between fact and fiction, the latter one is concerned with the exploration of a documentary form that goes beyond the established ‘documentary and television reality’. Moreover, the point of convergence between these two Manifestoes and the Dogme one is a filmmaking process, in which technology is not ‘the goal itself’. All these Manifestoes valorise the process over the finished product and set as a prerequisite the use of technology as a means of discovering things instead of achieving dramatic perfection. As von Trier says in the Defocus Manifesto:

If one discovers or seeks a story, to say nothing of a point that communicates, then one suppresses it. By emphasizing a single pattern genuine or artificial; by presenting the world a puzzle picture with solutions taken in advance...The ultimate challenge of the future – to see without looking: to defocus! In a world where the media kneel before the altar of sharpness, draining life out of life in the process, the DEFOCUSIST will be the communicators of our era – nothing more, nothing less!<sup>34</sup>

This quotation synopsis an interest in a film language that is not keen on the mere duplication of a story. Conversely, it is a call for a film practice that encourages the registration of unforeseen incidents and materials not firmly controlled by the film’s narrative and the director. Such a process is evidenced in von Trier’s *The Idiots*, which I discuss below; the film’s script is used as a sketch for the production of gestures and unforeseen incidents and not as a story that strives for dramatic perfection.

Von Trier’s call for a film-practice based upon a process of ‘defocusing’ is reminiscent of the theory and practice of another post-Brechtian director, namely Alexander Kluge. As it has been evidenced in his dialogues with Adorno, Kluge advocated a ‘blind shooting’, which is structured upon the idea that a ‘blind film’ can avoid the conventions of a pre-planned filmmaking. The filmic apparatus is responsible

---

<sup>34</sup> Lars von Trier, ‘Defocus’, see the appendix, p.288.

for the recorded material and downplays the intervention of the director.<sup>35</sup> When I asked Kluge to clarify this filmmaking process he said:

This is very essential. You have to be blind, that is, without intentions. You should respect the object or the subject of what you describe. You are the author, but you must not impose anything. Therefore, the object you describe, or the person you film are the second author or the third author. It is an anarchic idea. The author is as important as the object of representation and the object as important as the author. You see, there is a balance between the filmmaker and the product. The author in the classical sense does not exist at all. You might comment on something but you must not dominate by writing or making a film. Heiner Müller, my friend, advocated a blind argumentation and we should never forget that the ancient poet Homer was blind.<sup>36</sup>

In light of Kluge's comments, we can understand the materialist aspect of a filmmaking process that is interested in the search for the object and not in the imposition of a concrete 'message'. In a historical period, in which the simulations of the real coexist with the reality we experience, the restoration of the investigative aspect of the medium is of political importance. It is this employment of film technology as a means of questioning the depicted reality that concerns my discussion of *The Idiots*.

Nevertheless, how can we place Dogme's return to the past in a historical context and what does the movement's anxiety regarding cinema's future indicate? Laura Mulvey's analysis of cinema's role in a new technological age provides the ground upon which to launch an historical explanation of Dogme's anachronism. Mulvey explains that a prospective dialogue between 'the old celluloid cinema of the past' and the new digital technologies can make us return to the old left visions and the modernist aspirations. Through a historical study of the medium and its relation to political radicalism, Mulvey describes the modernist belief in cinema coming together with a belief in political change. Cinema came to be an important means of promoting left politics in the period of

---

<sup>35</sup> See Esther Leslie, 'Adorno, Benjamin, Brecht and Film', in *Understanding Film: Marxist Perspectives*, ed. by Mike Wayne (London: Pluto Press, 2005), pp.34-58, here pp.39-40.

<sup>36</sup> Kluge quoted in Angelos Koutsourakis, 'Interview with Alexander Kluge', see the appendix, p.279.

decolonization and in the 1960s. Accordingly, its evolution became tantamount to the Marxist belief in progress and the view of time as an evolutionary process of historical advancement towards a new society.<sup>37</sup>

Mulvey makes the case that this belief in the medium's radical aspirations terminated during the 1980s with the appearance of the neo-right, which 'captured the dynamic of the new', a gesture that demonstrates its differentiation from the conservative right and its insistence on the preservation of the values of the past. Mulvey sees that as the crisis of Marxism, which after the historical defeat of socialism and the de-radicalisation of the working class is forced to seek progress into the past.

The problem of fissure, gap, loss of continuity faces the left. Its failed aspiration becomes another corollary to the contemporary sense of separation between 'now' and 'then'. This imaginary of left history needs to be challenged, in the first instance by returning to question the significance of the modernity and left politics that seem to have got lost on the other side – the 'before', the 'then'. Now that the idea of progress is relegated to the past, it may be time to look further back, into what is now history, the past of modernity and the radical aspiration.<sup>38</sup>

Mulvey explains that cinema is faced with the same challenge. Returning to past cinematic practices and the political modernist debates can help the medium appropriate the revolutionary potential of digital technology to radical ends. The prerequisite for revolutionising technology is to rethink its function and to go beyond its ability to simulate.

Digital imaging offers the possibility of simulating images of convincing realism, whose lack of reference fails to give the audience access to the process of their own making.<sup>39</sup> This lack of indexical reference annuls one of the political modernist

---

<sup>37</sup> See Laura Mulvey, 'Passing Time: Reflections on Cinema from a New Technological Age', in *Screen*, 45:2 (2004), pp.141-155, here p.151.

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*, p.153.

<sup>39</sup> See Lev Manovich, 'What is Cinema?' in *The Language of the New Media* (Cambridge, Massachusetts, London: MIT Press, 2001), pp.286-308, here p.295.

objectives, what Brecht defines as the moment in which the audience recognises itself in the film's reality and becomes conscious of the social reality as a construct.<sup>40</sup> In opposition to the use of technology as simulation, Dogme rejects accounts of the digital that associate it with figuration/painting and non-indexicality and holds onto indexicality as a means of registering contingency and the plurality of the real. Correspondingly, Dogme's dialogue with the past is motivated by a will to reinstate the revolutionary aspect of the medium, which does not lie in the construction of reality effects, but in the very questioning and rethinking of the filmmaking and film-viewing process.

### **Dogme 2: *The Idiots* - The Film's 'Performant' Function**

In the previous section, I discussed the Dogme project as a valorisation of the process over the finished product. In this section, I discuss von Trier's film *The Idiots* and suggest that the film incorporates the process and the product in its narrative by means of an emphasis on the actors' performances. Given the film's thematic emphasis on performance and its back-to-basics *modus operandi*, my argument is very much informed by contemporary post-Brechtian performance. I suggest that the film creates a tension between the presence of the actors and the embodiment of their roles. I combine this performance analysis with contemporary film studies invested in the discussion of 'corporeal cinema' – a film practice that reduces the narrative to the bodies of the actors. I argue that von Trier's filming strives for a 'self-transformation' of the medium and invites the audience to question the ways dramaturgy shapes one's understanding of the 'real', and the whole idea of 'reality' itself.

*The Idiots* was the second film shot according to the Dogme rules, preceded by Thomas Vinterberg's *Festen*. The script was written in four days and retains a simplicity that is associated with von Trier's understanding of the story line as a material for

---

<sup>40</sup> Brecht quoted in Silberman, 'Brecht, Realism and the Media', p.42.

exploration.<sup>41</sup> The film tells the story of a group of young people, who pretend to be mentally disabled and perform 'idiotic' happenings in public spaces. Their provocative performances intend to challenge middle-class values and conformity. The film starts *in media res*, showing Karen (Bodil Jørgesen), a working class woman, enjoying herself at a fair. This is followed by a scene in an expensive restaurant, where she meets up some people who pretend to be mentally handicapped, in order to challenge the clientele and avoid paying their bill. When Stoffer (Jens Albinus), the leader of the group, approaches her performing the idiot, Karen spontaneously follows them and eventually becomes part of the collective.

The group inhabits an old villa in Søllerød, a wealthy suburban town outside Copenhagen, which belongs to Stoffer's uncle. Despite the collective character of the project, Stoffer seems to be the leader of the idiots and the one who challenges them to go beyond their limits. At times, he reproaches them when he feels that their performances are not genuine and challenges them to explore their 'inner idiot'. Apart from Karen, all of them have the chance to go back to their every-day lives and in the course of the narrative it can be seen that most of them are well-functioning and career focused individuals.

The group disintegrates, when they realise that the whole project cannot be reconciled with their careers and their private lives. In a last attempt to save the group's integrity, Stoffer challenges them to go over their limits and 'spass' in front of their families and their career environments, an effort that comes to nought.<sup>42</sup> Surprisingly, Karen, the only person within the group to explicitly dispute the objectives of the project, decides to 'spass' facing her family. We come to realise that she has recently lost her

---

<sup>41</sup> See Stig Björkman, *Trier on von Trier*, trans. by Neil Smith (London: Faber and Faber, 2003), p.204.

<sup>42</sup> The word 'spass' is used throughout the film to describe the characters' activity of pretending to be physically impaired. This word is used in the English subtitles of the film too.

child and her appearance at the film's beginning, in terms of the story order of the film's fabula, had directly followed her disappearance following the child's funeral.

My discussion is interested in identifying the moments in the film that complicate the boundaries between the actors performing their roles, the characters performing an 'idiotic identity' and the moments when the film hovers between dramatising a story and the process of its own making. Evidence of the connection between von Trier's Dogme film practice and performance art is given in a documentary directed by Jesper Jargil, in which he follows von Trier's conceptual project *Psychomobile 1 – The World Clock*. The project started a few months after the publication of the Dogme Manifesto and is a combination of cinema, performance and installation art. A mobile camera filmed images of an ant colony in New Mexico and the images were broadcasted live in the Art Society Building in Copenhagen. The images triggered light changes on a stage, which consisted of nineteen rooms and fifty-three actors. Changes in the light were accompanied by changes in the actors'/characters' disposition. The actors' responses were pretty much improvised given that they did not have a script to memorise and they were only given a schematic description of their characters' traits by von Trier. At times, von Trier's collaborator – Morten Arnfred – intervened and asked them to justify their characters and their decisions, while the distinctions between actors and characters eventually collapsed.<sup>43</sup> This emphasis on performance as an object of investigation is integral to our understanding of von Trier's Dogme film practice.

To return to *The Idiots*, I suggest that the film stresses its 'performant' function over the story-telling one. My understanding of the term 'performant' function derives from Jean Alter's distinction between, the 'referential' and the 'performant' function of theatre. According to Alter, the referential function of theatre aims at the communicating

---

<sup>43</sup> See *The Exhibited [De Udstillede, 2000]* dir.by Jesper Jargil (Zentropa, 2000) [on Videocassette].

of signs and the transmission of information, while the ‘performant one’ stresses the event itself and the physical aspect of it.<sup>44</sup> In light of Alter’s discussion, I discuss the film’s ‘performant’ function as a process of doing and un-doing the narrative, which blurs the boundaries between filmic and non-filmic reality and allows for certain unpredictable and anti-systematic moments to enter the film’s universe. The ‘performant’ function of the film is also stressed by a shooting style – which I discuss below – according to which technology adapts to the acting and not the other way around. The effect is an unconventional dramaturgy, which constantly defers unveiling Karen’s enigma and places emphasis on the group and its performances. As von Trier stated during the shooting of the film: ‘This is the kind of film they teach you not to do in a film school; because the point is not revealed until the end. And when it is, we need a violent reaction’.<sup>45</sup>

I argue, that this privileging of the ‘performant’ over the story-telling function indicates a different understanding of dramaturgy, according to which the film is not a stable object that communicates a certain amount of information to the audience. This *modus operandi* downplays dramatic realism in favour of a process that places emphasis on the act of quotation as a means of estrangement. The film dramatises a story and the process of its own making and activates an acting style in which the characters are in-between (in and out of character), while the story is based upon the characters’ performing of other characters – the idiots.

So far the critics have mainly discussed performance with respect to the content, that is, the characters’ performing of a different identity, and not as a formal element. Murray Smith conducts a very straightforward dramaturgical analysis that is incompatible with his initial intention to reconcile it with an avant-garde film practice as evoked by the

---

<sup>44</sup> See Jean Alter, Chapter 1 ‘Reference and Performance’, in *A Sociosemiotic Theory of Theatre* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1990), pp.31-90, here p.32.

<sup>45</sup> Von Trier quoted in *The Humiliated [De Ydmygede, 1998]* dir. by Jesper Jargil (Jesper Jargil Film, 1998) [on DVD].

Manifesto and the film's narrative. He discusses the film as a 'character driven one' and identifies avant-gardist elements mainly in the content rather than the form. For Smith, it is the film's romanticising of marginal identities and the celebration of 'idiocy' 'as a tool of mockery directed at bourgeois hypocrisy' that connects it with the history of the avant-garde.<sup>46</sup>

The same applies to Linda Badley's discussion, which focuses on the 'performative politics' of the film's content and understands the film as 'a leftist social experiment' that represents von Trier's 'youthful radicalism'.<sup>47</sup> Similarly, Berys Gaut places emphasis on the film's content; at one point, he suggests that certain formal elements such as the interview sequences and the film's self-reflexivity make it a documentary of its own making. However, this point is not consistent with his character-based analysis.<sup>48</sup>

Caroline Bainbridge is also more focused on the content and suggests that the film's semi-documentary aesthetics is more 'truthful' as opposed to the contemporary narrative cinema. Her discussion merges psychoanalytic theories of trauma with an analysis of the film's rejection of the 'voyeuristic pleasures' of dominant cinema. The problem with Bainbridge's argument is the quick shift from a straightforward dramaturgical and character-based analysis to a political discussion that is concerned with identifying the ways that the film intends to 'get away with passive looking'.<sup>49</sup>

Peter Schepelern has offered some important comments regarding the film's form. Schepelern explains how von Trier employs the camera in ways that the director is deprived of absolute control and supports a new 'liberated and liberating attitude towards

---

<sup>46</sup> See Murray Smith, 'Lars von Trier: Sentimental Surrealism', in *Purity and Provocation: Dogma 95*, pp.111-121, here p.119.

<sup>47</sup> Linda Bandley, *Lars von Trier* (Urbana, Chicago, Springfield: University of Illinois Press), p.58 and p.60.

<sup>48</sup> See Gaut, pp., 93-95.

<sup>49</sup> Caroline Bainbridge, *The Cinema of Lars Von Trier: Authenticity and Artifice* (London, New York: Wallflower Press, 2007), pp.96-97.

acting'. Schepelern explains that this use of the camera derives from von Trier's eventual view of the filmmaking process as a more collective practice. As he says: 'the individualist human being has become a more collective player'.<sup>50</sup>

Anne Jerslev has touched some issues that I would like to expand on, such as the film's complication of the very ideas of 'the real' and the 'performative'. Like most of the previous commentators, Jerslev omits in her analysis a political interpretation of such a complication. For her, the films' complication of reality and performance creates feelings of emotional identification with the characters instead of defamiliarising effects.<sup>51</sup> I will return to Jerslev later on, because there are some fruitful ideas in her argument that contradict this statement and can illuminate my understanding of performance as quotation.

### **Performative Camera**

A starting point for exploring the film's privileging of its 'performant' function is von Trier's employment of the camera. As noted earlier by Schepelern, Dogme 95 constitutes a milestone in von Trier's career, due to the radical break with his past work that paid detailed attention to the visual compositions. This attention to detail denied the films from any great measure of spontaneity and aimed at predetermining every movement on the part of the actors. For instance, *Europa's* (1991) shooting was based on a 'visual storyboard' that provided a detailed description of the optical connections between the scenes.<sup>52</sup> In a way, the release of the Dogme Manifesto coincides with von Trier's different approach to filmmaking that shows a preference for a less stylised acting, which incorporates filmic and extra-filmic responses.

---

<sup>50</sup> Schepelern, 'Kill Your Darlings: Lars von Trier and the Origin of Dogme 95', p.68.

<sup>51</sup> See, Anne Jerslev, 'Dogma 95, Lars Von Trier's *The Idiots* and the 'Idiot Project'', in *Realism and 'Reality' in Film and Media*, ed. by Anne Jerslev (Copenhagen: Museum Tusculanum Press, 2002), pp.41-66, here p.56.

<sup>52</sup> See Björkman, p.133.

The first film that initiated the new *modus operandi* was *Breaking the Waves* (1996), a movie that drew upon some of the Dogme rules, such as the hand-held camera, location shooting and direct sound. On the other hand, the manipulation of melodrama, the use of optical filters and the non-diegetic music are some traits that prevent the film from being classified as a Dogme one. I am not going to linger on it, but I consider it important to discuss some of the techniques employed that signal von Trier's interest in the unexpected moments stemming from a shooting style that valorises the actors' performances.

The crucial aspect of the film was the preference for long takes and its disregard for conventional editing. According to the cinematographer, Robby Müller, the actors were not aware of whether they would be in the shot or not. At the same time, von Trier's preference for protecting the spontaneity of the performances made him skip detailed rehearsals and use, in many cases, the first takes so as to avoid artificiality. This way of working led to an acting style that foregrounded the very act of performing rather than a psychological impersonation of the roles. As Müller explains:

Lars wanted to have this Cinema Scope feeling because it adds an extra dimension to people when you are so close to them – studying them in the center of your frame, as you would when you are already talking talk to them. But Lars wanted to get rid of the compositions you usually see in the widescreen movies. There was to be no extra stuff – only the actors. And that was very exciting, because it forced us to rediscover looking at things innocently.<sup>53</sup>

The process described by Müller does not favour the enactment of a coherent, psychologically complex character but the production of gestures that exploit the split in identification between the actor as persona and the embodiment of her/his role. Therefore, the actors do not simply concentrate upon emoting specific reactions that justify the characters. Quite the opposite, they are captured in the process of embodying their roles

---

<sup>53</sup> Müller quoted in Jean Oppenheimer, 'Von Trier and Müller's Ascetic Aesthetic: On *Breaking the Waves*', in *American Cinematographer*, 77:1 (1996), pp.18-22, here pp.18-19.

and reflecting on them. Von Trier, after the completion of *Breaking the Waves*, explained that this 'liberated acting' derived from the fact that the actors were caught unawares and given a freedom of movement without having to follow a specific plan.<sup>54</sup>

Katrin Cartlidge (Dodo McNeill in the film) explained that von Trier encouraged the actors to make mistakes, allowing them a more productive participation in the filmmaking process. As she said, 'Lars wanted the technical machinery of the film to be as light as a feather'.<sup>55</sup> The latter comment along with the whole process of filming employed in *Breaking the Waves* epitomise in a laconic way, one of the basic interests of Dogme, that is, that technology needs to adapt to the acting and not the other way around. Accordingly, the role of the script is reassessed, since the director and the crew use it as material for investigation rather than reproducing it faithfully in the screen.

As such, the acting style produces an effect of interruption and not a seamless reflection of responses to the stimuli. When I asked von Trier whether this shooting style makes the actors acting out of character he responded:

Oh yes. I am very interested in this. I am interested in capturing the actors when they are in and out of character. The borderline between the private individual and the character is very intriguing. Especially, when it overlaps and you cannot tell whether a reaction can be attributed to the actor or the character. That is where I try to go very often.<sup>56</sup>

The connection with Brecht is more than apparent. Brecht argued in favour of an acting method that would turn the actor into a demonstrator and an observer at the same time. This formula compels the audience to assess the various fragments and reconcile them with the preceding and the following ones. Hence, this acting style establishes an interruption of action and character and negates steady representational development. The

---

<sup>54</sup> Ibid, p.19.

<sup>55</sup> Katrin Cartlidge quoted in *Tranceformer: A Portrait of Lars von Trier* (1997), dir. by Stig Björkman (Trust Film Sales, 1997) [on DVD].

<sup>56</sup> Von Trier quoted in Koutsourakis, 'Interview with Lars von Trier', see the appendix, p.270.

aim is to bring to the surface the contradictions that are smoothed over within a framework of representation based upon imitation. As a result, the audience, like the actors, is drawn inside the story and pushed away into a critical appreciation at the same time.<sup>57</sup>

For Brecht, this method aimed at the production of concrete and calculating gestures that would create contradictions deriving from the actors' showing of themselves and the event at the same time. On the other hand, von Trier's valorisation of the actor's relative autonomy to create more than what lies in the script is related to a whole shift from acting to performance, which demarcates the Brechtian from the post-Brechtian. As Hans-Thies Lehmann observes, for Brecht the act of showing an action and the represented action have equal value, whereas in post-Brechtian performance-based practice 'the showing is emphasised over the shown act'.<sup>58</sup> To connect this point with von Trier, it is important to discuss his camera work. His employment of the hand-held camera adds a sense of mobility, which changes the relationship between actor and director along with that of actor and character, since the final image is the outcome of material not necessarily premeditated. Similarly, post-Brechtian performance art places emphasis on the staging of the signs as a means of increasing the gap between text and performance. The effect is that the entire process generates variations from the script that transcend distinctions between staged and real events.<sup>59</sup>

In the same way, von Trier's use of the hand-held camera poses questions regarding the script and its performance, questions that deny the unproblematic fusion of the two elements within the film. Jesper Jargil's behind the scenes documentary, *The*

---

<sup>57</sup> See Brecht, 'Appendices to the Short Organum for the Theatre', in *Brecht on Theatre: The Development of an Aesthetic*, ed. and trans. by John Willett (New York, London: Methuen, 1964), pp.276-280, here, p.278.

<sup>58</sup> Hans-Thies Lehmann, *Postdramatic Theatre*, trans. by Karen Jürs-Munby (London, New York: Routledge, 2006), p.192.

<sup>59</sup> See Alter, 'From Text to Performance: Semiotics of Theatricality', in *Poetics Today*, 2:3 (1981), pp.113-139, here p.120.

*Humiliated* [De Ydmygede: 1999] has captured this tension quite eloquently. The documentary shows that von Trier avoided very detailed rehearsals for the majority of the scenes. Rehearsals were replaced by collective discussions that aimed at investigating how the characters and their ‘idiotic happenings’ could be presented in a more plausible way. These discussions transmit a theatre ensemble feeling, which is reminiscent of theatre groups of the 1960s, such as The Living Theatre and The Open Theatre.

Furthermore, Jargil’s documentary shows that despite some moments that required a certain degree of perfection (for instance the last scene in Karen’s house), von Trier preferred to keep shots that incorporated moments not necessarily scripted, an approach that is compatible with his perception of the hand-held camera as a productive rather than a reproductive tool. At one point in the documentary, we hear von Trier’s voice referring to the scene prior to the orgy one (which I discuss later on). As he says:

It is interesting that there are so many improvisations. Everything we filmed today are far from the original idea and the script. Basically these are things the actors could have done. They lead up to something and they don’t follow it up for some reason.<sup>60</sup>

One of the reasons why von Trier’s practice privileges improvisations over the detailed script is that he uses the hand-held camera in a way that neither the director, nor the actors know in advance where the camera movement starts and where it ends. Von Trier justifies his fondness for using hand-held cameras (he occasionally operates them himself) on the grounds that ‘a hand-held camera tells you more, while a camera on the tripod tells you less. A hand-held camera is like hand-writing’.<sup>61</sup> As mentioned in the first section, the effect is not a mere duplication of reality but a simultaneous reflection on the process of its construction. This practice is in line with the political modernist interest in revealing reality as subject to change and not as permanent and static.

---

<sup>60</sup> Von Trier quoted in *The Humiliated*.

<sup>61</sup> Von Trier quoted in Koutsourakis see appendix, p.271.

Von Trier's technique relies on the filming of long-take scenes that are not over-rehearsed. Thus, the camera becomes performative, that is, it takes risks that downplay narrative coherence. What is of particular interest here is the merging of a long-take realist tradition with an investigative attitude that generates tensions between the scripted referents and the process of transforming them into a film. Consequently, the camera becomes a provocateur and not a passive recorder of actions. This is a principle that characterises the films of American Independent filmmakers, such as John Cassavetes and Shirley Clarke. In particular, John Cassavetes' ability to make virtue out of necessity (and here necessity stands for the impoverished conditions of his films' production) has been quite influential in von Trier's Dogme practice.

As George Kouvaros rightly points out, in the films of John Cassavetes and Shirley Clarke, the camera becomes a provocateur of gestures and responses that blur the boundaries between performance and life. Thus, the camera adds a sense of mobility and is not concerned solely with the simulation of actions, but is interested in the dialectic between the captured actions and the actions generated by the camera itself.<sup>62</sup> This mobility contributes to an uneven representational aesthetics that demonstrates the camera's ability to construct an image of the real. The notion of the camera as a provocateur of actions is key to our understanding of von Trier's *modus operandi* in *The Idiots*. The camera is used as a performative tool that foregrounds the performance of the actors and highlights the process of transforming the profilmic body into represented material.

### **Interrupting the Narrative**

*The Idiots*' privileging of the film's 'performant' function is made evident by the interview sequences that offer contradictory and non-clarifying evidence regarding the

---

<sup>62</sup> See George Kouvaros, *Where Does It Happen? John Cassavetes and Cinema at the Breaking Point* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2004), pp. 134-135.

causal sequence of events. The film's narrative flow is interrupted by interview sequences with the characters, which are conducted by von Trier and aim to clarify the past events. Von Trier remains off-screen and it is mainly the Danish audience (and perhaps some art-house cinéphiles) that can clearly understand the identity of the person conducting the questions. The reason is that von Trier enjoys a celebrity status in Denmark and his voice can be easily distinguished by the Danish audience. Thus, the meta-effect is much more obvious for those who can recognise him as the man behind the camera. However, the fact that an interviewer poses questions regarding the value of the project produces ruptures in the film's linearity. These ruptures clearly complicate the boundaries between the diegetic and the meta-diegetic universe.

The only characters that do not appear during the interview sequences are Stoffer and Karen. The first interruption of the narrative takes place straight after Karen's joining the group at the beginning of the film. Jeppe (Nikolaj Lie Kaas), Henrik (Troels Lyby), Josephine (Louise Mieritz) and Ped (Henrik Prip) comment on Karen and the reason that led her to become a member of the idiots. What is important here, is that this first interruption does not follow the question and answer format and one cannot ascertain whether the characters are being interviewed or whether they address the audience reflecting on their past. The effect is very disorientating given that the chronological unfolding of actions is suddenly broken down by a shift in time and space.

During this interview break, all characters set out Karen's story as an enigma and offer contradictory responses that complicate, instead of clarifying the story-line. The interviewed individuals succeed one another in a frenetic way, which makes narrative orientation problematic. In the first interview sequence, none of the characters manages to establish a unanimous agreement over Karen's participation in the group. Henrik hints that she could have joined anything, while Josephine cannot ascertain how Karen turned

out to become part of the group. Immediately following Henrik, Ped introduces Karen's scepticism apropos the whole project.

Despite the fact that the interviews are seemingly interested in establishing a causal explanation of the whole project, their function in the narrative becomes more complicating. This disorientation can be attributed to the fact that the sequences appear randomly and without having a cause and effect linkage with the preceding episodes. The second interview sequence, for instance, comes after a scene in Stoffer's house, in which the group reflects on their previous idiotic happening. The scene is suddenly cut and the temporality changes. The location is now Axel's (Knud Romer Jørgensen) flat. Von Trier's voice is heard in the background asking him to give a quick summary of the project. Axel's response is followed by von Trier's point that he has already heard seventeen different versions that fail to give a clear explanation of their motivations. Axel's failure to give a concrete answer is followed by Katrine's (Anne-Grethe Bjarup Riis) argument that the whole project was initiated by Stoffer, a statement that denies his version. Jeppe, the next to be interviewed, asserts that the project began thanks to his initiative. Von Trier responds ironically claiming that none of the rest has told him that Jeppe was the pioneer of the collective.

The interviews bring to the surface the film's dialogue with itself about its own scope and efficacy. Their intervention within the narrative operates as a linkage of the episodes that constitute the film's loose dramaturgy. The contradictory answers given by the characters problematise the audience's quest for a diegetic motivation of the actions. Furthermore, it is important to note that these interviews break the chronological unity of the narrative and make the audience step out of the story and reflect on it. Their function in the film is problematic because they hover between being part of the story and a reflection on it. Their unclear position in the narrative is heightened by the fact that the

interviewer's (von Trier's) position in the diegetic world is quite ambiguous. We can hear his voice but he is in-between, that is, he hovers between being part of the diegesis and an external agent too.

Yet there are moments that these sequences become argumentative, that is, they aim at modifying or undermining the originality of the project or the characters' reliability. One prime example can be seen in the sixth interview break, in which von Trier asks Axel, if he holds some anti-middle-class ideas. Axel responds positively.

INTERVIEWER: Katrine says that you held some very anti-middle-class views or ideologies.

AXEL: I do. (Plays with his baby). How are you darling?

INTERVIEWER: Based on what? Your ideologies?

AXEL: Anti-middle-class ideologies?

INTERVIEWER: Yes.

AXEL: Mainly that there is something more than meaningfulness and purposefulness.

INTERVIEWER: Oh! She made it sound as something that has to do with family.

Axel's response to the first question is problematised by the image that follows which shows him embracing his little child in a middle class flat. Here the scene operates as an ironic commentary. The scene also prepares the ground for the subsequent one, in which Katrine visits Axel at his professional environment in order to embarrass him and challenge his anti-bourgeois rhetoric.

Consequently, the narrative interruptions produced by the interviews tighten the film's loose narrative structure, which is based on a repetitive pattern. We see the characters preparing to embark on their idiotic provocations, their ensuing idiotic happenings and the characters' discussions/reflections on them. By systematically interrupting the narrative, the interviews aim at stimulating the audience's critical alertness. Their role is not to soothe and confirm but to challenge the viewers' conventional forms of perception. This emphasis on interruption serves the role of

combining analysis and demonstration. The actions are interrupted, and the viewer can notice the episodic format of the film's structure and she/he can step back and reflect on the represented material.

This structure can be aptly characterised as Brechtian. For Brecht, interruptions constitute an essential aspect of his work in theatre and film. In theatre, he argued for a knotting of the episodes in a way that could be distinguished by the audience. As he explained, such a structure could provoke different responses that would not lead to a seamless linking of different materials. The audience would be forced to acquire 'a disconcerting look', which would develop their analytical skills.<sup>63</sup> Similarly, his cinematic work strived for the breaking of 'total visibility', in order to deconstruct the portrayed incidents and reveal the social conditions of their construction. Indicative of this practice, is the repeatable biking sequence in *Kuhle Wampe* (Dudow, Brecht, Ottwald: 1932), which places the individual story in a historical context.<sup>64</sup>

The interruptions have a bearing on the acting as well, which is concerned with the act of demonstrating and analysing specific incidents and actions. Walter Benjamin, in his discussion of the role of the narrative interruptions in Brecht's work, explains that this methodology shifts the focus from the unfolding of the actions to a representation of the conditions that lead the characters to acquire certain attitudes.<sup>65</sup> Accordingly, the audience's capacity for identification with the characters is undermined and they are asked to seek the meaning beneath the surface of the actions. In a like fashion, the breaks caused by the interviews in *The Idiots* give the audience time to think and reflect on the portrayed actions, instead of following the narrative passively.

---

<sup>63</sup> Brecht, 'A Short Organum for the Theatre', in *Brecht on Theatre*, pp.179-205, here p.201.

<sup>64</sup> See Silberman, 'Whose Revolution: The Subject of *Kuhle Wampe* (1932)', in *Weimar Cinema*, ed. by Noah Isenberg (New York: Columbia University Press, 2009), pp.311-330, here p.321.

<sup>65</sup> See Benjamin, *Understanding Brecht*, p.18.

One should also add that the interviews problematise the relationship between actors and characters. This practice recalls analogous deconstructionist devices on the part of other European directors. Ingmar Bergman in *Passion* [*En Passion*, 1969] and in *Autumn Sonata* [*Höstsonaten*, 1978] employed similar techniques that unsettled the narrative. His aim was to bring extra-diegetic material stemming from interviews with his actors, who offered their hermeneutical approach towards the characters they performed. Similarly, Jean-Luc Godard has employed parallel tropes in films, such as *Masculin Féminin* (1966), so as to foreground a different type of film-making, which he loosely described as ‘survey film’. Godard’s practice combines fictional material with a cinema direct reportage that aimed at freeing film narrative from a conventional reliance on plot.<sup>66</sup>

Von Trier goes beyond these practices and his interview sequences have a degree of novelty. For instance, in Bergman’s case, the interviews are clearly distinguished from the rest of the narrative. They operate as a ‘break in the diegesis’ but this break marks itself clearly from the fictional narrative. In Godard, on the other hand, the interviews are conducted by the main character and they are part of the story. What renders von Trier’s interview sequences innovative is the fact that their placing in *The Idiots*’ narrative plays a dual role, that is, they are part of the narrative and combine material that exceeds it. In a way, these sequences are self-critical explorations of *The Idiots* project on the part of the filmmaker and the cast. When asked about their placement in the film, von Trier outlined their defamiliarising effect and explained that they were added after the completion of the main filming, because they were not scripted.

They [the interviews] were completely improvised. The actors answer for their characters, and at the same time they defend their characters. You can’t write those sorts of answers beforehand, because they’d look false and constructed at once. The breaks caused by the interviews have a kind of a distancing effect. But they are also an affirmation. This whole idea of a few people running round

---

<sup>66</sup> See Joel Haycock, ‘The Sign of the Sociologist: Show and Anti-Show in Godard’s *Masculin Féminin*’, in *Cinema Journal*, 29:4 (1990), pp.51-74, here p.64.

playing as being idiots gained a whole other significance because of the interviews. If the members of the cast could sit down afterwards and talk about their experiences, then it must have meant something to them. And that validates the interviews, as well as giving impetus to the plot and the film as a whole.<sup>67</sup>

The fact that the interviews were shot long after the completion of the main film adds to the film a semi-documentary aesthetics about its own making, since the actors are not in the position of retaining a continuity of character.

Furthermore, their improvisatory aspect allowed for the intrusion of moments, in which the boundaries between characters and actors collapse. This is clearly confirmed in all these sequences, in which the characters are separated from their previous roles as idiots, and the actors are somewhat separated from their fictional roles. As it has been evidenced in an interview with Anne Louise Hassing (Susanne in the film), von Trier gave the impression that he addressed himself to the actors rather than the characters, a choice that created confusion for the performers involved in these scenes.<sup>68</sup>

The achievement of these split identifications through the interviews shifts the interest from the finished object and draws the audience's attention to the dialectical interplay between the object and its performance, that is, its interpretation. Consequently, these interruptions do not simply question the group or the characters' motives, but they deny the authority of a finished object, opening the preceding and the ensuing scenes to the audience's hermeneutical activity. Reflecting on the film's practice, the interviews defy an unsophisticated understanding of 'truth' and suggest that one can reach 'truth' by means of experimentation.

---

<sup>67</sup> Björkman, p.214.

<sup>68</sup> Hassing quoted in, Jan Oxholm and Jakob Isak Nielsen, 'The Ultimate Dogma film. An Interview with Jens Albinus and Anne- Louise Hassing on Dogma 2- *The Idiots*' in *P.O.V. : A Danish Journal of Film Studies*, 10:2 (2000), pp.11-35, here p.28.

### **Performance as the Subject and the Object of the Film**

The film's pseudo-documentary form accumulates three different representational levels: the reality of the story line, the reality of the characters, who pretend to be mentally disabled, and the reality of the movie's filmmaking process. Such a complex narrative structure deprives the audience of a psychological in-depth access to the characters, since for the most part the film's dramaturgy is concerned with the performing of a non-authentic identity. In effect, the performing of the performance becomes the film's thematic interest and the prolonged scenes of 'spassing' are shorn of a clear dramatic dimension or an illustration of the characters' psychological state.

What renders these scenes more problematic is the combination of a realist/long-take cinematography with an acting style, according to which the actors are not asked to deliver for the camera. As von Trier says reflecting on the film's shooting, 'the handheld camera follows the actors, which allows them to concentrate on acting with each other, and not acting towards a big monster of a camera'.<sup>69</sup> The result is a privileging of a gestural acting, which is not solely concerned with the communicating effect, since the camera captures the 'real' and here the 'real' stands for the process, the documentation of the actors' performances. Brecht aimed for the same result when he argued in favour of a camera movement that would not aim at capturing emotions and psychology, but at revealing the relationship between reality and its representation. The difference is that he aimed to solve the problem via an interjection of montage sequences. Silberman's writings on Brecht's understanding of the role of the camera can help us establish the connection. As Silberman says:

The camera's operation of registering physical reality – objects and gestures rather than emotions and psychology – in other words its *Von-Aussen-Sehen* (seeing from the outside) becomes the cornerstone of an aesthetics of making visible *das Sichtbarmachen*. Finally, in the cinema the perception of the image

---

<sup>69</sup> Von Trier quoted in, Simons, p.48.

undergoes a disintegration of visual perspective with the levelling of difference between the image and the original. Aura is no longer attached to the photographic or cinematic image as material value, but to the process, to the functioning of the reproduction.<sup>70</sup>

This process favoured by Brecht acknowledges an important difference between cinema and theatre. While in theatre identification, which Brecht aimed to abolish, is produced by means of the acting technique and the actors' portrayal of their roles, in cinema a very important element in the production of empathetic feelings is the camera itself.

In *The Idiots*, empathy with the characters and the action is problematised through the very process of the film's production, which combines an emphasis on the materiality of the performances with a handheld camera movement that points to the very practice of recording. Since performance is the thematic core of the film, the camera is concerned with the capturing of a contradictory process, that is, the registering of the characters' simulations in real time. Thus, the film becomes a film about performance and identity, and while this aspect develops into a finished object that is contained in its dramaturgy, there are moments when performance becomes a process of self-discovery.

A prime example of this process can be observed in a moment when the camera registers the cameraman and a sound technician. At this point, the diegetic and the meta-diegetic level collide and once again the film incorporates the process of its own making in the final object. As the film employs the trope of performance to rethink the boundaries between 'self and other', this scene incorporates the basic media of the film's own articulation as a means of challenging the boundaries between inside and outside. Thus, in copying the copying of its own making the film questions the very idea of its own originality and the very idea of a concrete 'real'.

This self-exhibitionist strategy explores the thin boundaries between identity, performance and social construction. In this section I am interested in the dramaturgical

---

<sup>70</sup> Silberman, 'The Politics of Representation: Brecht and the Media', p.151.

effects. Later on, I focus on the moments, in which performance and reality conflate. There is a moment in the film that merits particular attention. There is a scene taking place in a forest, in which Karen and Stoffer discuss the objectives of the project. Karen asks Stoffer for their motives, and while the latter starts his ardent tirade, the camera pans away and captures some members of the group ‘spassing’ (figure 1). Then again, it returns back to Stoffer and Karen, capturing only the lower part of their bodies to end up in a close up of their faces (figure 2). During their discussion, images of the ‘spassers’ intervene making clear that this is not a point of view shot (figure 3 and 4). Here the camera plays a dual role, that is, it manifests its presence and the immediacy of the event; on the other hand, its consciousness of the process of representation is not demystificatory. On the contrary, the staging makes a self-mockery of the immediacy of the event, since what is presented is inauthentic, that is, simulations on the part of fictional characters. Thus, the ontological status of these images crumbles into performance.

During Stoffer’s and Karen’s discussion the camera pans away, and for a moment Katrine’s head appears completely out of focus. Then again, instead of returning to the characters, the camera registers minor details. Stoffer’s voice is heard in the background, but we do not see his face. What appear on screen are fragments from the idiotic performances and minor details from the forest that do not enhance the dramatic aspect of the scene. When the camera returns to Stoffer, Karen asks him how one can justify their game given that there are people that are truly handicapped. Stoffer replies laconically ‘you can’t’. This scene and the short dialogue sequence between Karen and Stoffer indicate that their role is not just to advance dramatic and narrative forms of progression. Here there is a sense of performative excess on the part of the camera and the actors, since

the scene aims at discovering the moments that cannot be contained within a conventional narrative.

The film, therefore, is in constant dialogue with itself and such a manipulation of the materiality of the actors' bodies renders performance – as a thematic and as a formal element – its principal referent. This facet of *The Idiots* can be seen in light of Ivone Margulies' discussion of 'corporeal cinema'. Margulies discusses Chantal Akerman's cinema taking into consideration Neorealism's and direct cinema's 'investment' in the concrete reality, and their simultaneous acknowledging of cinema's artificial nature. As she says:

This double-layered cinema allows only inscription. It is not an idealist cinema, though utterly ascetic, it prizes materiality. In this cinema, in fact, the quality of presence wavers precisely because of its materiality, because of the excess produced in it by hyperbole and redundancy. The radical figuration of this excess is the American experiment with real-time representation: Warhol's films are the signpost to a corporeal cinema, in which the concreteness of both the filmic body and the body represented eludes the very idea of materiality. At the same time that text is perverted by tone, and that gesture is troubled by dialogue, the works of Rohmer, Dreyer, Bresson and Ackerman, create an extramateriality, a surplus, I call, for lack of a better term, "theatricality". The term emphasises that this cinema works its principal effect on the ever fragile link between artifice and nature, the figure and the body of the performer.<sup>71</sup>

Margulies's description of the direct registration of the concrete body and its simultaneous inscription as an 'immaterial' construct is something that applies to *The Idiots*. Similar to the formula she describes in Warhol's films, the camera registers the process of the actors' embodiment of a role and the very embodiment itself as contained in the film's dramaturgy. While Margulies uses the term 'hyperrealism' to describe this process, I am inclined to discuss it under the rubric of post-Brechtian performance art and its emphasis on the performative rather than the referential aspect of the body.

---

<sup>71</sup> Ivone Margulies, 'Chantal Akerman's Films: the Politics of the Singular', in *Nothing Happens: Chantal Akerman's Hyperrealist Everyday* (Durham, London: Duke University Press, 1996), pp.1-20, here p.20.

Earlier, I mentioned Jean Alter's distinction between the two functions, that is, the 'referential' and the 'performant' one that demarcates the boundaries between representation and performance. Let us see Alter's comments in relation to the film's dramaturgy. What characterises the group's idiotic provocations within the film is not a desire to communicate a message. They understand their role to be of political importance, but their happenings do not intend to enlighten but to provoke. Accordingly, they do not provide resistant political messages, but their political effect derives from their challenging of certain aspects of living (that they are also part of it) and their refusal to provide any explanations for it. Stoffer's view of the idiot as 'the person of the future' in the aforementioned scene with Karen is not convincing neither for the characters nor for the audience.

What von Trier omits is an elucidation of the characters' motives, and to an extent his film acts as a performative provocation towards the audience, similar to the provocations conducted by the group towards the people they meet during their happenings. For that reason, the film's 'performant' function is valorised over the communicative one. The restaurant scene, which activates the narrative, demonstrates this characteristic more clearly. The 'spassing' in the restaurant starts unexpectedly after Karen has ordered her meal and the camera has established a rudimentary narrative orientation. Suddenly, the camera points to another table and we see Susanne trying to feed Stoffer and Henrik. When her attempts fail, Stoffer and Henrik burst into hyperactivity, typical of mentally disabled people. At this point, the captured material, which focuses on the idiotic performances and the customers' uneasiness, creates feelings of empathy with the 'idiots'. These feelings are frustrated a few minutes later, when we get to realise that this was just a performance. Like Karen, the audience feels distanced and the question that arises is why?

The story of the group's performing of an abject identity can be seen along with the historical changes provoked by the establishment of capitalism and the decline of the social movements after the late 1970s. The following formation of various groups, who asserted the unique and intense aspect of their oppression, aimed at increasing visibility for individuals with marginal identities. This emphasis on 'identity politics' led to the gradual exclusion of class questions from the political movements that followed.<sup>72</sup> Performance art and avant-garde film practice posed questions concerning the boundaries between 'normative' and 'deviant' identities. Their objective was to raise issues that could give public voice to individuals who remained in the margins of society.<sup>73</sup>

Yet the contradiction that arises when watching *The Idiots* lies in the fact that with the exception of Karen none of them could be seen as representative of a marginal identity. They are all middle-class, heterosexuals, white, and none of them has a mental disability. Their emphasis on mimicry, as a form of 'political radicalism', creates a gap between the characters and their intentional feigning of a marginal identity. This gap is heightened at moments when their non-performative identity predominates over the idiotic one. One example can be drawn in the scene that they dine eating caviar. Initially, they all refrain from wasting it, and they seem to enjoy it. It is only when Stoffer senses that the whole thing will not differ from the bourgeois life-style that they mock, that he provokes them to eat caviar 'as they do in Søllerød' (a wealthy part of Copenhagen) and starts spreading it all over their faces.

This performative struggle generates contradictions and raises questions regarding identity. The question that arises is what it means to assume an abject identity. Is it just a matter of performative choice or a choice based upon the capitalist model of exchange-

---

<sup>72</sup> See Alex Callinicos, *Theories and Narratives: Reflections on the Philosophy of History* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1995), p. 198.

<sup>73</sup> See Britta B. Wheeler, 'Negotiating Deviance and Normativity: Performance Art, Boundary Transgressions and Social Change', in *Performance: Critical Concepts in Literary and Cultural Studies*, ed. by Philip Auslander (London, New York: Routledge, 2009), pp.269-288, here pp.271-274.

value? Thus, *The Idiots* puts forward the conjecture that identity as difference can be quite problematic in a historical period, in which radicalism can be reappropriated and thus commodified. Rebecca Schneider's writings on the mimicry of 'disprivilege' in contemporary capitalism offer an implacable autopsy of this latent commodification of difference. Schneider analyses the connection between terms such as performance and performativity and the tensions between self and other, the individual and the social dimension of performance.<sup>74</sup> Schneider points out the danger in reducing everything to a performative masquerade and especially when it comes to the mimicry of abjection.

The rampant mimicry of disprivilege across emaciated bodies dressed in extremely expensive clothing compels questions about the envy of disprivilege in a culture of insatiable accumulation. Perhaps, the imagining of despair, violence and loss attempt to appease anxiety about reality effects-claiming ownership or control over the signs of wreckage in the wake of capitalism's progress – turning them into artifacts of privilege. Appropriating such images to the dreamscape may reassure the consumer with one of postmodernism's dictates: that even the most troubling 'reality' can be considered masquerade, hype, sham. Such tragedy is not 'really real'. Impoverishment becomes a choice one can buy into, wearing its signs like blackened eye-shadow, re-appropriating fear of the disenfranchised 'other' into the belly of high-cost consumptive desire.<sup>75</sup>

Schneider's observations help us understand the historicity of the film's dramaturgical interest in the simulation of 'disprivilege'. Schneider can also make us rethink whether emancipation is a matter of mimicry of an abject identity. The film's ending with Karen 'spassing' in the presence of her family points to the tensions and contradictions of class and gendered relations within an oppressed working-class environment. At this point, the incommensurability between being someone and performing someone becomes clear, since Karen's performance points to states of marginalism and oppression that cannot be reduced to a masquerade, or to a postmodern surface reality.

---

<sup>74</sup> See Rebecca Schneider, *The Explicit Body in Performance* (London: Routledge, 1997), p.22.

<sup>75</sup> Ibid, pp.122-123.

### Characters as Bodily Effects

Von Trier lays these contradictions bare, and his semi-documentary treatment of the material does not facilitate the audience's involvement in the fiction. There is one particular scene, which draws upon the Brechtian concept of *gestus* and makes one rethink the idea of identity as difference. Brecht introduced this term to point to the differences between an acting style, in which the actor disappears into her/his role, and the one he favoured, in which the actor exhibited the *Haltungen* (the realm of the attitudes) assumed by the characters. In this manner, the development of the character is not unequivocal but takes place in front of the audience. The actor's body combines the very act of showing with the object which is shown.<sup>76</sup> Furthermore, the joining of the two processes produces a character, who is not unchangeable, but one who embodies different attitudes according to the circumstances she/he faces.

To return to the film, there is a noteworthy scene which utilizes a gestic acting to question the group's happenings and the very conflict between the individual and the mimicry of an abject identity. While the group performs their happenings in a swimming pool, the camera focuses on Axel who performs the idiot (figure 5 and 6). After receiving a professional phone call he adopts different bodily attitudes. At this point, he assumes a different identity setting himself at a distance from the performing happenings (figure 7). As a result, the actor is split in two and the *gestus* offers an embodiment of a social contradiction that renders Axel's participation in the group problematic. Here, *gestus* is used as a means of setting at a distance the character as an impersonator of an abject identity, and as a social being that is part of the very reality he negates.

Here subjectivity is characterised by disunity. While this scene illustrates a concrete *antiphrasis*, there are moments in the film, in which the characters' physical attitudes pose stronger questions vis-à-vis identity and offer contradictory possibilities of

---

<sup>76</sup> See Brecht, 'A Short Organum for the Theatre', pp.198-199.

interpretation. I should like to support this last proposition with reference to two scenes. The first one involves Josephine and Jeppe, who engage in a private sexual intercourse, while the rest of the group are having an orgy (a scene I discuss in detail below). The couple's sexual activity is not separated from their performative identity, namely the idiotic one. In a prolonged sequence, the camera captures the couple, which starts their performance in a kind of bio-mechanical way (figure 8). The effect is that there is a constant tension between distance and affect that creates confusion for the audience, which presumes that the whole thing is a simulation. Eventually the two characters come closer to each other and the scene culminates in a dramatic moment, which hovers between being part of their idiotic performance and part of the character's 'real identity'. I refer to the moment that Josephine falls into tears and tells Jeppe that she loves him (figure 9 and 10). Subsequently, the characters move from their performing to their social identity. Later on, uncertainty is heightened when Josephine is forced by her father to leave the group because she suffers from a mental illness.

As a result, the interplay between performing and being raises questions about identity and performance. This aspect of the film has been acknowledged by Ove Christensen. As he says:

Basically the film is about role playing and being. What does it mean to be someone and what does it mean to pretend to be someone? Is being a consequence of acting or does acting make a disguise of an individual's character? Is the individual a persona or a mask? This concerns the status of fiction in relation to art.<sup>77</sup>

Christensen's questions can be clarified by my discussion of the previous scene, in which the individual disintegrates into gestures that cannot be attributed to a unified character. This disintegration connects the scene with post-Brechtian employments of *gestus*, in

---

<sup>77</sup> Ove Christensen, 'Spastic Aesthetics-*The Idiots*', in *P.O.V. A Danish Journal of Film Studies*, 10:2 (2000), pp.35-46, here p.40.

which the body does not simply flatten and clarify the contradictions, but crosses the boundaries between its physical presence and its transformation into material.<sup>78</sup>

A similar effect occurs in the last scene of the film, in which Karen ‘spasses’ in the presence of her family. Earlier, the audience becomes aware of her recent bereavement. During her ‘spassing’, what makes the scene emotionally intense and complicated is the gestic camera which avoids establishing a clear origin of the shots. The camera alternates between Karen and her family capturing different gestures and reactions and generates abstract responses that hover between critical distance and engagement (figure 11-13).<sup>79</sup> Like the character, the camera is in-between, that is, it constantly shifts from a semi-documentary observation to a direct involvement with the material, which cannot be reduced to a pure reproduction. The audience is given space to analyse the material and identify at the same time with Karen as a character.<sup>80</sup> Yet Karen’s convincing idiotic performance splits her in two, it becomes psycho-physical, in the sense that it is a simulation and a response to her trauma at the same time. The camera and the story have her reduced to bodily effects but her body is not simply transformed to a locus of dialectical explication. The process becomes dialectical the moment that the body crumbles into performance and the boundaries between inside and outside cannot be determined.

Anne Jerslev has described this process from a different viewpoint and argues that the film does not privilege ‘the real’ at the expense of the ‘performative’, or the other way around, to the extent that indeterminacy prevails. As she says, ‘are characters performing

---

<sup>78</sup> See Patrice Pavis, ‘Brechtian Gestus and Its Avatars in Contemporary Theatre’, in *Brecht Yearbook* (2000), ed. by John Rouse and Marc Silberman, pp.177-179, here p.178-179.

<sup>79</sup> In her discussion of John Cassavetes’ *Faces* (1968), Ivone Margulies makes a similar point concerning his employment of the zoom lens. For more on this see Margulies, ‘John Cassavetes: Amateur Director’, in *The New American Cinema*, ed. by John Lewis (Durham, London: Duke University Press, 1998), pp.275-306, here pp.298-299.

<sup>80</sup> See also my discussion of this scene in, Koutsourakis, ‘John Cassavetes: The First Dogme Director?’, in *Bright Lights Film Journal*, 63:1, available online at <http://www.brightlightsfilm.com/63/63cassavetes.html>, accessed 9 April 2011.

“spass” or are characters’ innermost feelings being given a means to express themselves through the very activity of being a “spasser”?<sup>81</sup> Despite acknowledging these ambiguities, Jerslev asserts that the film adopts such a reflexive structure as a means of approaching reality with the help of emotions and not as a defamiliarising effect. In my reading, this clash between performing and being advances a hermeneutical approach according to which performance becomes the precondition of identity and not the other way around.

This point helps us understand the ways that the film goes beyond the Orthodox Brechtian acting, which intended to reveal the social drive that motivates the body. Brecht put forward an acting style, in which there was a gap between subject and language, as well as a distance between the character and his bodily attitudes. This distance could expose the characters as products of the social and political relationships. However, his employment of performance sounds too reductionist today judging from the political and historical differences that separate us from the period he wrote. Therefore, the film’s confusion of ‘reality’ and ‘performance’, in a narrative fiercely occupied with ‘reality’ and ‘performance’ employs many Brechtian tropes in its depiction of identity. On the other hand, the film’s treatment of identity cannot be understood as an Orthodox Brechtian one, given that the limits between self and other, and subject and performer are not easily distinguishable and reducible to definite social relationships. These complications become the film’s self-reflexive scrutiny of its own purpose and of the Dogme project as a whole. In this context, *The Idiots* undermine the Dogme ambition to capture the world authentically and reveal ‘the truth’ underneath the appearances.

---

<sup>81</sup> See Jerslev, p.56. See also, Hannah Laakso, *Idioterne-The Idiots*, in *The Cinema of Scandinavia*, ed. by Tytti Soila (London, New York: Wallflower Press, 2005), pp.203-211, here p.209. Laakso suggests that in this scene the actress follows the Stanislavskian paradigm and immerses into her role.

### Performing out of Character

Anthony Dod Mantle, who acted as a cinematographer in three Dogme films (but not in *The Idiots*), has given a summary of *The Idiots*' aesthetics and argues that the interesting aspect of the film is that the audience is faced with a 'sudden experience' of not knowing whether the object is 'real or unreal'.<sup>82</sup> This ambiguity stems to a large extent from the manipulation of the body of the actor as a presence. Jens Albinus (Stoffer in the film) attributes this uncertainty to the acting style, which does not allow for much preparation and for the actors' complete identification with their roles. As he says: 'Even though Dogma might look like method acting, it is something else. You cannot prepare yourself for the part; the fiction can only take shape here and now'.<sup>83</sup> This lack of preparation described by Albinus favours the moments in which reality intrudes, and the performer oscillates between acting as an actor and as a character.

Such an example can be drawn from the film's most provocative scene, in which the characters meet up with some people that are truly mentally disabled (the people performing them are people with disabilities) (figure 14). Here the responses on the part of the characters (or the actors?) heighten the ethical dilemmas and undo the viewer's certainty regarding the fictionality of the portrayed events. Jargil's behind the scenes documentary contains a moment in which von Trier recalls the making of the specific scene. As he explains, during the first shooting none of the actors could remain in character. They also forgot their fictional names and used their real ones.<sup>84</sup> Yet even in the final cut, one senses this clash between reality and fiction that makes the actors acting out of character. This ambiguity is accentuated by the fact that the Down-syndrome sufferers do not act, but literally perform themselves. At this point, the film moves from the symbolic to the literal, since von Trier shifts the focus from the bodies of the group, who

---

<sup>82</sup> Anthony Dod Mantle quoted in Kelly, p.107.

<sup>83</sup> Jens Albinus quoted in, Oxholm and Nielsen, p.24.

<sup>84</sup> See von Trier quoted in *The Humiliated*.

imitate a fake identity, to the bodies of the disabled people who perform themselves. Schneider in her writings on contemporary performance identifies a preference for an aesthetics, in which the literal, that is the physical presence of the bodies, downplays their symbolic function. As she says:

To render the symbolic literal is to disrupt and make apparent the fetishistic prerogatives of a symbol by which a thing, such as a body, or a word, stands by convention for something else. To render literal is to collapse symbolic space, 'leaving no room for the signified' (Kristeva). It is to pose borrowing Benjamin again and noting his allegiance to Brecht a 'direct threat' to the naturalised social drama of 'comprehensibility'.<sup>85</sup>

An analogous suspension of coherent meaning occurs in the aforementioned scene, in which there is a shift from representation to presence. It should be noted that dramaturgically the specific scene has no connection with the episodes before and after (apart from a brief allusion by Henrik in an interview preceding it) and its placement within the film is quite arbitrary. At this point, dramatic realism is abandoned in favour of a materialist realism (in the literal corporeal sense) given that one cannot affirm whether the parts played by the Down-syndrome sufferers are acted or not. The spontaneity that characterises them intensifies the feeling that these people do not perform but appear in the film's universe as themselves. Their physical presence undermines the film's fetishistic aspiration to become as realistic as possible, simply because the characters' preceding simulations and the disabled persons' 'real' behaviour fuse reality and fiction within the film's narrative.

This conflation of illusion and reality operates as an act of aggression against the audience. Von Trier is committed to an aesthetics, which attacks the unproblematic consumption of images and the pleasure stemming from the certainty that the represented material is illusory and not real. Here, the intrusion of the material corporeal reality of the

---

<sup>85</sup> Schneider, p.6.

disabled people becomes a defamiliarising effect that interrupts the viewer's concentration on the narrative. Von Trier questions the limits of the medium itself and, in placing an excess of reality within the film's diegesis, he does not simply create a scene, but activates medium awareness and points to the medium's ability to intermix the illusory and the real.

This oscillation between illusion and reality forces also an awareness of the audience's voyeurism, which is made abundantly clear in another provocative scene, in which the group decides to have an orgy. Throughout the orgy, there are moments that the camera captures the male actors' erections and at this point the distinctions between the bodies of the actors and the bodies of the characters, who perform the idiots, collapse. The scene documents sexual actuality and fiction, an effect that characterises films of sexual adult content. By mixing actuality and fiction, the scene blurs the boundaries between sexual activity and simulations of that activity. When the camera registers Stoffer's and Henrik's erection, the actors shift from states of acting to not-acting; the effect is that separations between actors and characters, film and non-film are constantly placed into doubt.

This scene does not derive its power solely from the presence of the naked bodies and the sexual activity, but from the coexistence of images of real penetration within a context of artifice, since the characters perform the idiots during the orgy (figure 15). This coexistence is rendered more problematic because of the camera's uninterrupted capturing of the action, which adds a sense of 'liveness' to the film. In effect, the simultaneity of 'real' sexual activity and simulation valorises the very process of making a scene rather than the finished product. For this reason, the audience participates in a different way which mobilises its ability to assess the material critically and activate affective responses at the same time.

At this point, I want to consider Brigitte Peucker's discussion of cinema's ability to incorporate the real through the corporeal presence of the body. Peucker explains that certain portrayals of the body within a film's narrative may provoke material-somatic responses on the part of the audience and challenge the subject and object relationships. Peucker sets as an example Michael Haneke's cinema, which derives its power from an emphasis on austere images that provoke the viewer intellectually and create affective responses too. As she says:

Indeed, these films elicit a spectator who is provoked, feels irritated, on the defensive, and in a situation of conflict, thus moving considerably beyond Brecht's intellectual provocation into the realm of programmed emotion. It is in this affective and corporeal sense that Haneke's films are "interactive".<sup>86</sup>

In her discussion of *Funny Games* (1998), Peucker clarifies her point and suggests that Haneke's shocking images of implied violence create feelings of irritation, feelings that are not solely intellectual but somatic too. Peucker quotes Haneke saying that his way of working intends to activate spectatorial reactions that will render the audience as co-creators in the production of meaning.<sup>87</sup>

Peucker's analysis draws attention to certain film practices that valorise the performative aspect of the medium rather than the representation of a reified product. Similarly, von Trier's incorporation of moments in which the actors are in and out of character creates a split in the represented material and the mode of its representation. The audience is neither totally distanced, nor in complete identification with the characters. The incorporation of truly mentally handicapped people and real sexual activity in the film's diegetic world makes one oscillate between distanced scrutiny of the material and

---

<sup>86</sup> Brigitte Peucker, 'Violence and Affect: Haneke's Modernist Melodramas', in *The Material Image: Art and the Real in Film* (Stanford, California: Stanford University Press, 2007), pp.129-158, here p.132.

<sup>87</sup> Ibid., p.140 and 142.

See also Peucker Chapter 3, 'Incorporation: Images and the Real', in *Incorporating Images: Film and the Rival Arts* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1995), pp.104-167, here p.136 and 167.

somatic participation; this participation is expressed through responses of anger, disgust and/or stimulation. As a result, the film coerces the viewer to respond, and to engage in a process, which perceives the film-making and film-viewing process as a resistance to the consolidation of the movie into a consumable object.

One of the most important pieces of evidence stemming from the critical approach I maintained in this chapter is that a film that benefits from certain aspects of Brecht's theory and practice is not necessarily antithetical with realism. It may also be worth noting, that Dogme as well as *The Idiots* draw our attention to the fact that realism in art is a set of conventions (for example meaningful dialogue and goal-orientated dramaturgy) that may have nothing to do with 'reality'. Von Trier revolts against these conventions and his utilisation of the Dogme rules leads to an oppositional realist practice that is not structured upon the empirical reproduction of reality. My argument has been based on the fact that his employment of a 'performative' camera questions the distance between the film as filmed narrative and the film as a documentation of the process of its own making. In effect, the film does not efface the apparatus of its production, while the intentional foregrounding of its 'performant' function acts as a means of questioning the very idea of 'the real'.

*The Idiots* inaugurates a new trajectory in von Trier's filmmaking, since he starts engaging in a dialogue with the art of performance and theatre. This dialogue is strengthened in his post-Dogme works and in particular in *Dogville* (2003) and *Manderlay* (2005), two films that have pushed the ascetic Dogme aesthetics even further. Action takes place in an empty space reminiscent of a theatre stage and emphasis is placed mainly on the actors' performances. This method is the logical outcome of the Dogme principles, yet certain tenets of the Manifesto, such as location shooting and the negation of extra-diegetic music, are modified. Nonetheless, von Trier continues a

filmmaking practice that calls attention to the performances, with the intention of creating emotional shocks that generate contradictions. The next chapter analyses *Dogville* and delves into these issues in more detail.

## Chapter 4 – *Dogville*: Theatricality as Experimentation.

### Representation as an Experiment

*Dogville* (2003) and *Manderlay* (2005) are the only films by von Trier that have been consistently discussed in relation to Brecht. The two films comprise a trilogy still incomplete – titled *USA Land of Opportunities* – and share thematic and formal similarities. Von Trier has promoted them as aesthetic, political, and moral experiments that aim at challenging the established cinematic language and the audience's film-viewing habits of uncritical consumption. In this chapter I will focus on *Dogville*, so as to place emphasis on certain formal and thematic elements that can elucidate the film's politics and innovations. I am interested in investigating the whole idea of the experiment in the film's form and content, so as to reveal *Dogville*'s dialectical complexity which has been ignored by previous readings. More specifically, I relate von Trier's view of the film as an experiment to Brecht's understanding of experimentation as a dialectical process. For Brecht, this process intends to complicate form so as to question perceptions that are taken for granted.

What I want to keep from Brecht is his view of formal complication as a means of demystifying the aura of timelessness and universality in human relationships, and his understanding of the individual as a process. In this context, I discuss the ways the film employs theatricality and performativity to destabilise the characters' identities. I suggest that *Dogville* investigates the ways that the capitalist law of exchange-value affects social relationships, including the oppositional forces that are concerned with introducing changes on a moral rather than a political level. On the other hand, this chapter concerns itself with reading the film in a way that goes beyond Brecht's understanding of experimentation as a means of envisaging an alternative political reality. In particular, I

analyse the formal strategies employed by von Trier that generate contradictions which resist epistemological mastery of the posed questions.

I want to start this section by unpacking von Trier's definition of *Dogville* as an experiment so as to identify the term's Brechtian resonances. To begin with, I want to address formal issues that can elucidate the way that the film challenges film language. Then, I will proceed to discuss how the film's content dramatises a social experiment. Primarily, the experimental aspect of the film springs from its form. *Dogville* employs a minimalist aesthetics with respect to the set and was shot in a hangar in Trollhättan, a Swedish town. The hangar is used so as to resemble a theatre space where chalk marks are used to define scenography (figure 1). The actors act realistically in a set which is far from being realistic. Despite the stylization that stems from the spatial simplicity, sound effects are used to substitute the lack of frames so there are moments that we hear door-knockings even though there are no visible doors or houses in the set. According to von Trier, the aim of this spatial simplicity and unity is to make the audience focus on the portrayed relationships and reinstate their creativity during the film-viewing process.<sup>1</sup>

The film consists of a prologue and nine chapters, where each subject heading gives a brief account of what is about to follow. The story is told by an omniscient narrator (John Hurt) who pares away with the inessentials of plot and intervenes to comment on the actions and pose questions to the audience. One can certainly see that *Dogville* features literary, theatrical, and filmic elements. In an interview given after the completion of the film, von Trier explained that the film's aspiration is to challenge any stereotyped ideas regarding film form. As he says:

The most reactionary attitude to art has always been the question 'what is art?', followed by the statement 'This isn't art'. Limiting it, labelling it. In the same

---

<sup>1</sup> Von Trier quoted in Stig Björkman, *Trier on von Trier*, trans. by Neil Smith (London: Faber and Faber, 2003), p.246.

way, people have tried to contain and limit film – and literature too for that matter. I'm trying to challenge that now by creating a fusion between film, theatre and literature. That doesn't mean filming a performance in a theatre though. *Dogville* lives its own life, according to highly specific value criteria within the genre which, as of now, can be called 'fusion film'. It's important not to get bogged down in questions of what is cinematic or not cinematic, because it seems like we've reached a position where everything is possible. The cinematic has been purified to the point where it has all become completely lacking in interest. There, a bit of cinema philosophy!<sup>2</sup>

Von Trier's argument that 'film has been purified' emanates from an acknowledgement of the cinematic institution's ability to reduce film-viewing into a process of commodity consumption. Consequently, one of the aims of *Dogville*'s aesthetics is to experiment with a variety of media so as to challenge medium specificity, and transform a set of conventions with respect to film language and film-viewing habits of uncritical consumption.

This aspiration helps us to expose the idea of experimentation as production instead of reproduction. Here, one recalls Brecht's understanding of experimental thinking as a means of changing a medium, rather than simply producing for it. For Brecht, the experiment is a synonym of a new method of production which is not satisfied with perpetuating the institution of theatre/cinema. His argument is rooted in the fact that as long as the medium's function is not criticised, then the final object consolidates in an item to be sold. In this way, one should aim at challenging the established institutions that resist any modification in their function. Brecht's intention to change the cinematic/theatrical institution is in accordance with his view of the dialectical process as a means of confronting certain established ideas by means of practical activity. Subsequently, he equates experimental thinking with praxis and utility of thought.<sup>3</sup> At the heart of Brecht's argument, is his view of representation as science that can make one

---

<sup>2</sup> Ibid., pp.241-242.

<sup>3</sup> See Brecht quoted in Wolfgang Fritz Haug, 'Philosophizing with Marx, Gramsci and Brecht', in *Boundary 2*, 34:3 (2007), pp.143-160, here p.156.

rethink social institutions and the historically formed reality. Such a rethinking is of vital importance, because as Brecht points out, institutions have a tendency to co-opt the most dangerous art objects and turn them into cultural commodities.<sup>4</sup>

With Brecht's comments in mind, one can see von Trier's experimentation in *Dogville* as a means of resisting the commodification of the medium. Furthermore, what I see as a Brechtian gesture is the synthesis of materials from different media as a means of encouraging a more productive spectatorship. To clarify this point, one has to recall Brecht's argument concerning the process of 'literalization', which I discussed in the second chapter too. According to Brecht, the 'literalization' of the theatre refers to a process in which the medium experiments and makes contact with other institutions so as to produce 'complex seeing'. The term 'complex seeing' describes a dialectical engagement with the material that is not concerned with transmitting a single-minded message. By contrast, the audience adopts a 'reading attitude' that guarantees a freedom of thought as opposed to the theatrical institution's tendency to homogenise the audience's perceptions and reactions.<sup>5</sup> This 'reading attitude' invites the audience to experiment with the material and as Brecht says, 'illusion is sacrificed to free discussion'.<sup>6</sup> This 'new attitude' can make the audience question 'the present form of society' and transform certain institutions from places of reproduction to places of productive communication and discussion. For Brecht, this 'reading attitude' is tantamount to an experimental thinking that sees reality as open to transformative practice.

In a like fashion, von Trier's formal organisation of *Dogville* as filmed theatre, the chapter structure, and the omniscient narrator invite a reading response that valorises the

---

<sup>4</sup> See Fredric Jameson, 'Reflections in Conclusion', in *Aesthetics and Politics*, ed. by Ronald Taylor (London: Verso, 1977), pp.196-213, here p.207.

<sup>5</sup> See Bertolt Brecht, 'The Literalization of the Theatre', in *Brecht on Theatre: The Development of an Aesthetic*, ed. and trans. by John Willett (New York, London: Methuen, 1964), pp.43-47, here p.44.

<sup>6</sup> Brecht, 'The Modern Theatre is the Epic Theatre', in the same book as above, pp.33-42, here p.39.

role of the audience in the construction of meaning. The fusion of image, narrated text, and fixed narrative space show the represented material via representation, a process that is not dedicated to the production of a seamless narrative. Moreover, the off-screen narrator interrupts the story and delivers it to the audience to analyse it, something that reinforces the film's interest in encouraging discussion. The crucial corollary of this method is that what are called into question are the cinematic institution itself and the understanding of the medium as a consumable reflection of reality. As such, *Dogville's* impoverished conditions of production become the logical continuation of von Trier's critique of the cinematic institution through the Dogme project. In a way, the film's set turns into a laboratory that aims at reactivating the relation between production and reception.

Brecht thought the same when he argued in favour of a separation of elements and against Wagner's concept of the opera as a *Gesamtkunstwerk* [integrated work of art], which aimed at the total assimilation of different elements. In his view, the *Gesamtkunstwerk* prevented the audience from making the leap from the habitual/empirical perception of reality to a detached view of things that could reveal their dialectical complexity. Currently, Brecht's critique of the *Gesamtkunstwerk* is still relevant, because as Dietrich Scheunemann points out, a large amount of films produced at the present time have inherited the Wagnerian understanding of art as a harmonious integration of elements.<sup>7</sup> This quest for a synthetic integration of elements is evident in the hyperrealism of contemporary 'post-photographic' cinema.<sup>8</sup> In a way, *Dogville's* minimalism aims at freeing the medium from the conventions of the synthetic

---

<sup>7</sup> See Dietrich Scheunemann, 'Montage in Theatre and Film: Observations on Eisenstein and Brecht', in *Avant Garde Interdisciplinary and International Review*, ed. by Jan Van der Eng and Will G. Westeijn (Rodopi: Amsterdam, Atlanta, GA, 1991), pp.109-135, here p.127.

<sup>8</sup> As it is evidenced in earlier films as well as in the recent one *Melancholia* (2011), Wagner is an important figure in von Trier's *oeuvre*. However, von Trier's valorisation of a visual dramaturgy which does not necessarily adhere to the simple reproduction of a script, negates the understanding of his films as *Gesamtkunstwerk*.

hyperrealism of contemporary digital cinema, which perceives cinema as ‘a reality in its own right’.<sup>9</sup> By restricting the action in a bare stage, the film aims at preventing the audience from being completely absorbed by the story and at making the viewers focus on the examination of the portrayed relationships, and their susceptibility to change.

The productive aspect of film’s reference to the art of theatre and the idea that such a method produces an ‘anti-spectacle effect’ that can make the audience focus on dialectical contradictions has been acknowledged by Stephen Heath. For Heath, the ‘theatricalisation of cinema’ leads to a fusion of theatricality, textuality and cinematic narration. This fusion of different media produces heterogeneous effects, which challenge the dominant cinematic language and disturb the film’s representational flow. The result is that this practice favours formal and thematic indeterminacy that leads to provisional and non-authoritative conclusions. Heath’s comments derive mainly from his theoretical engagement with the cinema of Straub/Huillet and in particular with films such as, *The Bridegroom, the Comedienne and the Pimp* [*Der Bräutigam, die Komödiantin und der Zuhälter* (1968)], *Othon* [*Les Yeux ne veulent Pas en Tout Temps se Fermer, ou Peut-être qu’un Jour Rome se Permettra de Choisir à Son Tour*, 1970 (1970)] and *Moses and Aaron* (1974). As Heath writes:

The films of such a textual practice are themselves a constant process of reading, this process then itself demanding new modes of reading, displacing the spectator from the positions in which he is interpellated in the classic film... Classic film is finally less a question of *mise-en-scène* than of *mise-en-place* and anything that disturbs that place, that position, the fictions of myself and my ‘Reality’ can only be theoretical, the theatricalisation of representation in its forms; film theatre, critical cinema, a cinema of crisis and contradiction.<sup>10</sup>

---

<sup>9</sup> Thomas Elsaesser, Malte Hagener, *Film Theory: An Introduction Through the Senses* (London, New York: Routledge, 2010), p.12.

<sup>10</sup> Stephen Heath, ‘Lessons from Brecht’ in *Screen*, 15:2 (1974), pp.103-128, here p.121.

Of great note here, are Heath's comments on the reading attitude encouraged by the 'theatricalisation of cinema', something that I identify in *Dogville* too.

However, Heath's essay refers mainly to Straub/Huillet, who film in open-air theatres (*The Bridegroom* is the only exception) in which their actors use the text as a 'vocal body' separated from the individual who delivers it. Straub/Huillet manipulate the image, the text and the theatre space in order to make the audience experiment with the produced 'sound-body'.<sup>11</sup> For them, this radical separation of elements is the route to a cinema that resists the mainstays of character and plot. In their view, the audience's enlightenment can only take place through such a process of negativity.

Evidently, von Trier does not share this commitment to cinematic unpleasure, which responds to a limited audience of 'experts'. Mainly, because *Dogville* does not go against the story-telling function of the medium as the aforementioned filmmakers do. The film employs a dramaturgical simplicity that can make the 'non-initiated' participate in the questions it poses. Then again, as I explain later on, the references to the art of theatre have their impact on the film's portrayal of the characters, since the limited diegetic space demonstrates the dialectic between the individual and society. This aspect of the film makes the audience understand the characters as the outcome of social relationships and not as self-determined individuals motivated solely by psychology. Furthermore, the understanding of *Dogville* as an experiment which aims at activating the audience is reinforced by its content too; the film theatricalises a social experiment, which aims at exploring how an act of solidarity can result in punishment, animosity and retaliation.

*Dogville*, as the narrator announces at the beginning of the film, is the sad story of a small American town in the Rocky Mountains the year of 1932 and consists of a

---

<sup>11</sup> See Helga Finter, 'Antonin Artaud and the Impossible Theatre: the Legacy of the Theatre of Cruelty', in *Theatre Drama Review*, 41:4 (1997), pp.15-40, here p.30.

prologue and nine chapters. The people living in the town are hard-hit by the great depression and live under adverse conditions. As the narrator says, ‘most of the buildings were pretty wretched, more like sacks frankly’. After having being given a brief introduction to the characters, the off-screen narration focuses on Tom (Paul Bettany), a young self-appointed intellectual, who organises regular meetings with his fellow citizens, aiming at the town’s moral ‘re-armament’. When he meets a young fugitive, Grace (Nicole Kidman), chased by a bunch of gangsters, he protects her and decides to accommodate her in Dogville.<sup>12</sup> To do so, however, he has to gain permission from the people. Therefore, Tom decides to use Grace as an ‘illustration’ for his argument that Dogville is not a tolerant town and its people have forgotten how to receive unconditionally. Grace will be their chance to prove that they are committed to community values. The people accommodate her and Grace for her part, and at Tom’s suggestion, volunteers to help the citizens of Dogville with any errands that need to be done. Initially, nobody accepts her services, but eventually people consent to let her do things ‘that they do not really need’, but can make their lives better.

The people decide that Grace is entitled to stay, but when they realise that there is a large amount of money offered to anyone knowing of her whereabouts, they start abusing her in various ways. Grace is coerced to work more hours, to accept a pay cut and she eventually becomes the victim of sexual assault on the part of the male population. In the last chapter, the citizens of Dogville decide to deliver her back to the gangsters. The ‘big man’ (James Caan) turns out to be her father and after a brief conversation between them, we learn that the two of them had disagreed about his brutal methods. The reason that Grace left him was because of her willingness to prove that human beings are essentially ‘good’. Now that her experiment has failed her father offers her the possibility

---

<sup>12</sup> *Dogville* the film’s title is in italics; Dogville the city’s name as used in the film in normal font.

of sharing his power with her. Initially, Grace hesitates but eventually she accepts his offer and orders the gangsters to burn the town and execute its citizens.

The pioneers of the social experiment are Tom and Grace. Tom suggests that Dogville is a community structured upon individualism and self-deception. The young fugitive becomes ‘an illustration’ that can cancel out his argument and reveal the town’s potential for something else. Grace, on the other hand, disagrees with her father’s practices and flees from him to prove that a mode of conduct based upon unconditional generosity and forgiveness can make individuals show their best qualities. Throughout the film, Tom’s and Grace’s experiments raise contradictions that do not solidify to a concrete resolution. For instance, Tom’s willingness to make Dogville a community based upon values of openness and acceptance leads to Grace’s exploitation and suffering. Eventually, Tom adapts himself to the community’s treatment of Grace and ends up delivering her to the gangsters. Equally problematic is Grace’s behaviour and her shift from a stoic acceptance of her abuses to a violent retribution. This change acts as a provocation towards the audience that has been fooled to identify with her throughout her misfortunes.

The end of the experiment finds one in confusion; the audience has to play a more active role, since von Trier offers us material and asks us, whether we consent to the film’s resolution or not. *Dogville*’s dialectical collisions show conditions from the perspective of their changeability and not as static, but in ways that go beyond a juxtaposition of a ‘correct’ and an ‘incorrect’ political behaviour. I wish to examine this point in connection with Brecht’s *Lehrstücke* (usually translated as learning plays in English). The *Lehrstücke* constitute experiments in theatrical form and intend to experiment with exercises in political, ethical, and social behaviour. In these plays, there are no distinctions between actors and audience, since they are pedagogical exercises for

those who perform them. Brecht intended to raise points of tension that render the very idea of *Einverständnis* [consent] problematic. The most popular examples are plays such as *He Who Says Yes* [*Der Jasager*], *He Who Says No* [*Der Neinsager*] and *The Decision* [*Die Maßnahme*]. In the first two plays, Brecht questions the individual's sacrifice for a collective cause and while *He Who Says Yes* seems to approve the whole idea of the individual self-sacrifice, *He Who Says No* contradicts it. In *The Decision*, a young Communist acquiesces to his own extermination because his actions endanger the Party's mission.

What these plays question is the very idea of consent, and despite criticism's initial condemnation of the *Lehrstücke* as "didactic" and single-minded plays, studies in the 1970s and 1980s have revealed their dialectical complexity.<sup>13</sup> By performing them, the participants learn to think dialectically and to reject one-dimensional solutions to complex problems. A key term here is theatricalisation which is equivalent to the very idea of experimentation. Emphasis is not placed on the actions, but on their theatricalisation, that is, their re-enactment. In re-enacting specific actions and questioning decisions that have been previously taken, the performers learn to think dialectically and discover the thin boundaries between consent and dissent. For instance, in the conclusion of *The Decision* the control chorus approves of the political killing. However, the performers can either agree or disagree with this absolute conclusion. Thus, the *Lehrstücke* generate unresolved contradictions, only to focus on morality itself as the problem, and reveal that ethics cannot be dissociated from social and political interests. On this basis, actions that aim at the promotion of progressive politics are constantly questioned and analysed so as to

---

<sup>13</sup>See Reiner Steinweg quoted in Rainer Nägele, 'Brecht's Theatre of Cruelty', in *Reading After Freud: Essays on Goethe, Hölderlin, Habermas, Nietzsche, Brecht, Celan and Freud* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1987), pp.111-134, here pp.114-115.  
See also, Astrid Oesmann, *Staging History: Brecht's Social Concepts of Ideology* (New York: State University of New York press, 2005), pp.129-171.

demonstrate that unless the moral, traditional certainties of the past are changed, progress can easily lapse into regression.

What I find relevant pertaining to *Dogville* is Brecht's scepticism concerning consent. Obviously given the medium differences, *Dogville* does not assume the *Lehrstücke*'s radical abolition between stage and auditorium, but the film operates as a sociological experiment that activates questions regarding decision-making. Furthermore, von Trier moves away from such binaries like the ones presented in these plays, and one cannot simply identify with any of the conflicting forces (Grace or the citizens of Dogville). The film's similarity with the *Lehrstücke* is that *Dogville* proceeds to confront the audience with experimental situations that show that an act of solidarity can lead to regressive politics. Grace's entrance into Dogville aims at making the town's residents change their individualist ethic. Nonetheless, both parties are more intent on introducing changes that preserve certain norms instead of changing them. Thus, Dogville accepts Grace only to take advantage of her and preserve the community's individualist ethic. Similarly, Grace acquiesces to the gangster rule with the intention of 'changing the world', and one can see how an act of change can turn into a means of enforcing the social norms and customs that it theoretically opposes.

*Dogville* problematises the whole idea of 'social consent' within the reality of democratic capitalism, which is ostentatiously structured upon a 'social contract'. The community consents to saving Grace from the gangsters and later on it consensually agrees to her exploitation. But the most problematic form of consent is advanced by the film's ending, in which Grace consents to her father's view of power as something 'not necessarily wrong'. The audience's identification with her martyrdom may release cathartic feelings when viewing her decision to destroy a whole town. Thus, the question that arises is whether the audience consents to this solution or not. Empirical research

from student screenings shows that reactions can vary. Certain viewers cannot identify with any of the characters. However, other viewer responses can be quite crude. Linda Badley, for instance, brings evidence from plenty of IMDb users, who demand ‘payback’ and, like Grace, they consent to the gangster rule.<sup>14</sup> The feelings of relief that these spectators experience become problematic. Von Trier seems to assault the audience’s desire for solution and revenge, as if he wants to expose one’s ‘indre svinehund’ (inner bastard) – a Danish expression which as Nikolaj Lubecker explains, ‘became popular during the 1980s when it was introduced into debates about xenophobia’.<sup>15</sup> The film does not simply question the character’s decision but the very tropes of identification employed by mainstream cinema and the ways they affect the viewers’ perception of social reality.

Von Trier, like Brecht, employs ‘the negative example’, in order to frustrate any easy decision-making on the part of the audience. By the term ‘negative example’, I understand the predilection for including within an argument something which is heterogeneous to it, so as to stimulate responses that provoke dialectical questions. In certain plays for example, Brecht takes as a starting point the argument that the world must be changed. To explore the ways that change can occur, he sets as examples people supporting changes in moral and ethical attitudes that do not challenge the broader political reality. The failure of these paradigms intends to make the audience understand change beyond the limits of moral reformism. This method is used by Brecht in plays such as *The Good Person of Szechwan* [*Der Gute Mensch von Sezuan*] and *The Saint Joan of the Stockyards* [*Die Heilige Johanna der Schlachthöfe*], in which the characters act good-heartedly only to realise that the reality of capitalism demands different actions. In a

---

<sup>14</sup> See Linda Badley, *Lars von Trier* (Urbana, Chicago, Springfield: University of Illinois Press, 2010), p.110.

<sup>15</sup> See Nikolaj Lubecker, ‘Lars von Trier’s *Dogville*: A Feel-Bad Film’. This article appears in the forthcoming collection of essays *The New Extremism in Cinema: From France to Europe*, ed. by Tanya C Horeck and Tina Kendall (details of publication unknown). While this thesis is being written the book has not been published. Lubecker has sent me a copy of his article.

way, the similarities that *Dogville* shares with these two plays may make one perceive them as ‘models’ that are reworked to open out a set of different questions. Brecht employs the term ‘model’ to refer to the imitation and reproduction of patterns from widely known works with the view to presenting them in a different context.<sup>16</sup>

Von Trier has admitted *Dogville*’s parallels to many Brechtian plays and has explained that one of the film’s starting points was Pirate Jenny’s song in *The Threepenny Opera*. As he says: ‘I listened to that a lot and was seduced by the revenge motif in the song ““And they asked me which heads should fall, and the harbour felt quiet as I answered, all””’.<sup>17</sup> From the aforementioned comments and the obvious similarities that the film shares with Brecht, one can easily understand the reasons why critics have connected *Dogville* with Brecht. Below, I intend to look at *Dogville*’s critical reception so as to detect the ways that critics have discussed the film as part of a Brechtian film practice.

I want to begin with Caroline Bainbridge’s analysis that is based upon a paradox, which states that the film is a ‘Brechtian didactic’ piece that invokes self-reflexivity. These two terms are in conflict with each other taking into account that the process of encouraging the audience to reflect and analyse the material on screen cannot be reconciled with the propagation of a single-minded lesson. Moreover, Bainbridge proceeds to read the film under the rubric of the postmodern, but her reading does not clarify the different ends that von Trier’s ‘Brechtian aesthetic’ serves. Bainbridge concludes her analysis asserting that the film operates as an indictment of the contemporary geopolitical scene and the Bush administration.<sup>18</sup>

---

<sup>16</sup> See Brecht, ‘Masterful Treatment of a Model’, in *Brecht on Theatre*, pp.209-215, here p.211.

<sup>17</sup> Von Trier quoted in Björkman, pp.243-244.

<sup>18</sup> See Caroline Bainbridge, *The Cinema of Lars Von Trier: Authenticity and Artifice* (London, New York: Wallflower Press, 2007), p.141, p.145, p.146 and p.148.

All the same, for Seyhan Özmenek the film's Brechtianism is tantamount to a 'didactic parable' against America. He argues that the film's narrative sees America as a place of 'crime' and articulates a 'universal picture', according to which the dichotomies between 'good and evil' are discernible. For Özmenek, the film's politics is nothing but 'an allegory of the power America exerts on other countries'.<sup>19</sup> Thus, one can see that his interpretation does not go beyond an allegorical reading of the film's content, which he understands to be an indictment of America as a nation. My major disagreement with his point of view and Bainbridge's emanates from the fact that they both tend to see in von Trier's and Brecht's formal choices a willingness to articulate a 'universal truth'. This argument is very un-Brechtian given that Brecht favoured representations that would show 'historical incidents as unique and transitory' and not as 'universally human'.<sup>20</sup>

Equally problematic is the tautological perception of the bare stage as a 'defamiliarising effect' in itself. This line of argument is followed by Linda Badley, who suggests that *Dogville* reflects 'a uniquely American shallowness, the composite result of its pragmatism, parochialism and historical amnesia'.<sup>21</sup> Badley argues that Grace in the film becomes a 'caricature' of Bush and the military idealism of the United States. Moreover, Badley quotes Robert Sinnerbrink's argument that von Trier's employment of 'Brechtian devices' produce the very type of emotions that Brecht wished to abolish. For Badley, the effect is un-Brechtian, because the film intensifies feelings, which she considers to be antithetical with Brecht's practice.<sup>22</sup>

---

<sup>19</sup> See Seyhan Özmenek, 'Dogville: Trier's America à La Brecht', in *Journal of American Studies of Turkey*, 18:1 (2003), pp.85-92, here pp.87-88.

<sup>20</sup> Brecht, 'Short Description of a New Technique of Acting Which Produces an Alienation Effect', in *Brecht on Theatre*, pp.136-140, here p.140.

<sup>21</sup> See Badley, p.103.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid., pp.114-115 and, see also, Robert Sinnerbrink, 'Grace and Violence: Questioning Politics and Desire in Lars von Trier's *Dogville*', in *SCAN/Journal of Media Arts Culture*, 4:2 (2007) available online at [http://www.scan.net.au/scan/journal/display.php?journal\\_id=94](http://www.scan.net.au/scan/journal/display.php?journal_id=94), accessed 10 August 2009.

I am not entirely convinced that her point necessarily holds, given that the feelings in the film are subject to a process of changeability. Furthermore, Brecht did not intend to abolish feelings *tout court*. This is evidenced in a well-known passage, in which he says:

It is not true, though it is sometimes suggested, that epic theatre (which is not simply undramatic theatre, as it is also suggested) proclaims the slogan: 'Reason this side, emotion (feeling) that'. It by no means renounces emotion, least of all the sense of justice, the urge to freedom and righteous anger; it is so far from renouncing these that it does not even assume their presence, but tries to arouse or to reinforce them. The 'attitude of criticism' which it tries to awaken in its audience cannot be passionate enough for it.<sup>23</sup>

My formal analysis intends to demonstrate how von Trier follows Brecht and shows that feelings are motivated by social conditions. Certainly, the film goes beyond an Orthodox Marxist and Brechtian critique that aspires to lead to cultural enlightenment, but this aspect does not render it un-dialectical. Lubecker has acknowledged this point and argues that the film is less about Dogville and Grace. It is rather a 'manipulative machine' which intends to tease out some 'anti-social drives' within the spectator. Certainly, Lubecker's point is valid and I shall return to the film's interest in offending the audience in the second section of this chapter.<sup>24</sup>

Other critics have focused on *Dogville*'s similarity with a variety of Brechtian plays, such as *The Good Person of Szechwan*, *The Threepenny Opera* [*Die Dreigroschenoper*], *The Resistible Rise of Arturo Ui* [*Der Aufhaltsame Aufstieg des Arturo Ui*] and *The Caucasian Chalk Circle* [*Der Kaukasische Kreidekreis*].<sup>25</sup> Again, the majority of these discussions are busy identifying semantic similarities between Brecht

---

<sup>23</sup> Brecht, 'Formal Problems Arising from the Theatre's New Content', in *Brecht on Theatre*, pp.226-229, here p.227.

<sup>24</sup> See Lubecker's currently unpublished article mentioned earlier.

<sup>25</sup> See Bo Fibiger, 'A Dog not Yet Buried or Dogville As A Political Manifesto', in *P.O.V: A Danish Journal of Film Studies*, 16:2 (2003), pp.56-65, here p.59.

See also, Ahmed F. Elbeshlaway, 'Lars Von Trier's Desexualised America', in *Scope*, 10:1 (2008), available online at <http://www.scope.nottingham.ac.uk/article.php?id=991&issue=10>, accessed 12 August 2009.

and von Trier, while others are simply keen on laying out the basic tenets of Brecht's *Verfremdungseffekt*, which they discover in certain formal choices.<sup>26</sup> There are also plenty of articles, popular reviews and festival reports that tend to reduce von Trier's Brechtian elements to a one-dimensional intellectualism structured upon binary oppositions between good versus evil. These reviews normally tend to adopt an uncritical equation between Brecht and von Trier based on the assumption that both see America as a violent place, in which intolerance is the rule.<sup>27</sup> Again, one can recognise a line of argument that strips the film from its dialectical complexity.

Far more complicated is Jacques Rancière's argument that *Dogville* manipulates the Brechtian fable of *Saint Joan of the Stockyards* in which Joan Dark wanted to impose Christian morality within a capitalist system of exploitation. Rancière suggests that the Brechtian play exhibited the impossibility of reconciliation of different interests within capitalism. Unlike Brecht's play, Rancière argues that *Dogville* is an object representative of an era, in which political questions are replaced by an unmediated relativism. As Rancière says:

---

<sup>26</sup> See Sinnerbrink.

<sup>27</sup> See Torben Grodal, 'Frozen Flows in von Trier's Oeuvre', in *Visual Authorship: Creativity and Intentionality in Media*, ed. by Torben Grodal, Bente Larsen, Iben Thorving Laursen (Copenhagen: Museum Tusculanum Press, 2005), pp.129-168, here p.164. Grodal acknowledges the employment of Brechtian devices, but understands the film to be a piece of 'social realism', which makes a nihilistic mockery of American and Marxist values.

See also, Colin MacCabe, 'Cannes 2003', in *Critical Quarterly*, 45:3 (2003), pp.111-114, here p.113.

See also, Jake Horsley, *Dogville Versus Hollywood: The War Between Independent Film and Mainstream Movies* (London: Marion Boyars, 2005), pp.18-20. Horsley's analysis goes that far to suggest that the film's content is not just an indictment of America, but of Hollywood as a system.

See also, Robert Ebert 'Dogville', in *Chicago Sun Times*, 9 April 2004, available online at: <http://rogerebert.suntimes.com/apps/pbcs.dll/article?AID=/20040409/REVIEWS/404090303/1023>, accessed 14 October 2010.

See Mark Kermode, 'A Dog's Life', in *New Statesman*, 16 February 2004, available online at <http://www.newstatesman.com/200402160039>, accessed 22 July 2009.

See also Peter Bradshaw, 'Dogville', in *The Guardian* 20 May 2003, available online at: <http://www.guardian.co.uk/film/2003/may/20/artsfeatures.londonfilmfestival2003>, accessed 14 October 2010.

See also Stephen Holden, 'Dogville (2003)', in *The New York Times* 4 October 2003, available online at: <http://movies.nytimes.com/movie/review?res=9805EFDE153CF937A35753C1A9659C8B63>, accessed 2 August 2009.

By contrast [to Brecht's play], the evil encountered by Grace in *Dogville* refers to no other cause but itself. Grace no longer represents the good soul mystified by her ignorance of the causes of evil. She is just the stranger, the excluded one who wants to be admitted into the community and who is subjected by the community before being rejected by it. Her disillusionment and her narrative of suffering no longer depend on any system of domination that could be understood and destroyed. They depend upon a form of evil that is the cause and effect of this reproduction. This is why the only fitting retribution is the radical cleansing exercised upon the community by a lord and father who is no one else but the king of thugs. 'Only violence helps where violence rules' was the Brechtian lesson. Only evil repays evil, is the transformed formula, the one that is appropriated for consensual and humanitarian times.<sup>28</sup>

For Rancière, the difference between *Dogville* and Brecht's play lies in the gap between political and post-political art. What I find problematic in his reading is the fact that his argument is structured upon the absolute and fixed categories of 'good versus evil'. Such an approach not only simplifies the film's politics, but Brecht's as well, whose work he cites approvingly. I suggest that *Dogville*'s seemingly 'cynical amorality' – that Rancière understands to be apolitical – disorients the audience so as to produce shock-effects. The purpose of disorientating the audience by means of shock-effects is to provoke feelings of astonishment that expose the contradictions within social relationships. These shock-effects do not restrict the film's politics to the transmission of a thesis which assists the spectators in arriving at a single or final understanding of the object. Thus, what Rancière and the aforementioned critics do not address are the historical transitions that have changed the ways in which art attains its political function.

For Brecht, the alignment of contradictions aimed at leading the audience to achieve class consciousness, which he thought to be a position of knowledge. In von Trier's case, the film does not become political through the advocating of a concrete political thesis that can signal social progress. Like Brecht, the film's form is interested in identifying the social and the political in the everyday relationships, but in a way that the boundaries between oppressors and oppressed are not easily distinguishable. Thus, the

---

<sup>28</sup> Jacques Rancière, 'The Ethical Turn of Aesthetics and Politics', trans. by J.P. Deranty, in *Critical Horizons*, 7:1 (2006), pp.1-20, here p.8.

working-class community of Dogville is not shown as a revolutionary subject in-process, but as a historical victim that accepts the very logic of oppression for its own short-term benefits.

### **Theatricality**

To highlight the ways that *Dogville* makes use of Brechtian strategies without sharing Brecht's tendency towards political enlightenment, I am interested in exploring the theatricality with which the film is infused. The aim is to demonstrate the ways that the film problematises identity and blurs the boundaries between the individual and the collective. More precisely, I intend to show that von Trier's complication of identity goes beyond Brecht's Orthodox Marxist dialectics according to which the collective subject is the force of radical change and innovation. I suggest that *Dogville* focuses on the primacy of social processes in the formation of human relationships and negates any binary distinctions between oppressors and oppressed. By exploring these issues, I intend to reveal von Trier's aesthetics of negativity. By the term aesthetics of negativity, I understand the employment of contradictions in ways that produce a collision of theses and antitheses which defy the idea of a conclusive end point.

A good starting point to explore these issues is to discuss the ways von Trier employs theatricality to suggest that the lives of the citizens of Dogville are embedded in an ideological sense of inevitability and unchangeability. While the term theatricality refers to the overt foregrounding of artifice in the acting and the *mise-en-scène*, in cinema the term is associated with a *modus operandi* that produces excessive frames and performances. In other words, theatricality is the intentional foregrounding of artificiality as a means of opposing cinema's self-effacing uses of the medium for the production of narrative content. An enlightening definition of theatricality that addresses the very idea of theatre as a restricted space has been given by Samuel Weber. Weber discusses

theatricality with respect to other media, such as film that concerns my discussion. As he says:

“Theater” signifies the imposition of borders rather than a representational aesthetic-genre. The former focuses upon the manner in which a place is secured, whereas the latter regards the place as already taken or given, and therefore as a means or instrument of that which is to be represented. In respect to its mediality then, theatricality is defined as a problematic process of placing, framing, situating, rather than as a process of representation.<sup>29</sup>

Weber’s definition of theatricality as a process of framing/exploring the borders of a spatial reality applies eloquently to *Dogville*. The restriction of the action in demarcated boundaries becomes an allegory for the community’s isolation.

Dogville, as we learn from the voice-over, is a community that does not have many exchange relations with the world outside its boundaries. The place is inflicted by poverty, but as the narrator informs us from the very beginning, the people saw no reason to change anything in their lives. What the voice-over puts forward is the idea that the people living in this town mechanically reproduce a reality that perpetuates their deprivation. This point is reinforced by the way von Trier uses the camera to frame the action in this limited diegetic space. One particular frame in the film’s prologue is telling concerning the idea that the community uncritically reproduces a reality that seems to be enforced by historical and financial conditions that people fail to challenge. When Tom leaves his house for the first time, the camera follows him and zooms out so that we can see all the characters’ activities in the background (figure 2). The unity of space gives us a panoptic view, but the characters’ movements within it look stylised and they appear as mechanical reproductions of tasks.

Of particular interest here, is the way the combination of image and sound show individuals as part of a collective subject. The camera pans to frame the action, while

---

<sup>29</sup> Samuel Weber, *Theatricality as Medium* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2004), p.315.

characters are reported by the voice-over, making them look like a collection of semes. In doing so, von Trier does away with psychological portrayal, an effect that is strengthened by the set, whose minimalist scenery gives one the chance to detect the interactions between individuals. This aspect of the film follows the Brechtian paradigm of showing the characters being motivated by socio-historical impulses. For Brecht, the portrayal of characters as products of history aims at making the audience understand the individual as historically defined and not as a universal human subject. Brecht's key contention is that representation should aim at transforming the audience's view of reality as natural. Emancipation from nature is imperative for the transformation of the audience's perception and as an extension for any progressive social transformation.<sup>30</sup>

*Dogville's* formal asceticism assists us in seeing the characters as part of a collective reality. Yet what von Trier omits is the idea that the self-realisation of the individual as part of a collective is the route to radical transformation. The residents of Dogville see themselves as part of a community, but what unites them is their acceptance of the social circumstances of their town, which has not really followed modernisation. Their collective spirit is not an act of class consciousness but a way of reproducing the existing reality of their rural economy. As mentioned earlier, Dogville's economic interaction with the outside world is limited something that is constantly underlined by the voice-over narration. This lack of interaction, leads the community to a collective understanding of social-life as a process of self-preservation. Consequently, the collective subject is shown as being implicated in an uncritical mimicry of nature and not as a force of transformation.

What is particularly suggestive here, is that the community's isolation transmits a sense of unfreedom and fixity. Partly, this unfreedom can be attributed to the fact that

---

<sup>30</sup> See Brecht, 'Can the Present-day World be Reproduced by Means of Theatre?', in *Brecht on Theatre*, pp.274-275, here p.274.

Dogville is more or less a 'primitive' and poor, but self-reliant society and not one that has been properly adapted to the reality of modern capitalism. It is this lack of interaction that forces the town's intellectual to argue in favour of 'openness and acceptance'. Tom speaks from the moral point of view which intends to identify meaning in the life of the community, beyond the goals of self-preservation. When Tom meets Grace and asks the people to show an attitude of acceptance, he actually manages to introduce Dogville to an exchange-value relationship with someone beyond the town's limits.

What is theatricalised here by von Trier is the drama of unlimited generosity and goodness as put forward by Grace. Grace offers to the people of Dogville her affective labour in exchange for her survival. But the voice-over intentionally foregrounds an economic vocabulary that makes one rethink the agreement between the two parties. Eventually, the town lets Grace do things that the people 'don't want to be done, but would make their lives better'. A conflict arises here, given that the community succeeds in adopting the Christian values of 'openness and acceptance', but these values are solely achieved by means of an economic interaction. Thus, Tom's intention to let Grace enter into the community does not challenge the attitude of self-preservation that characterises Dogville.

The film does not expose this point until Chapter five, in which a policeman lets the town know that Grace is wanted for criminal activities. Until that moment we are given the impression that Grace's arrival in Dogville has reinforced the community spirit in the town. There is a very interesting scene preceding the policeman's arrival that challenges this idea through jerky camera movements and framings that invite the audience to adopt a more inquisitive attitude towards the material. Dogville's residents and Grace are shown celebrating the Fourth of July. At this point, one senses that the community ties are stronger than before. When people finish singing the American

national anthem, the camera zooms out to capture all characters while dining and then it focuses on Jack McCay (Ben Gazzara). The latter, addresses Grace on behalf of the town and expresses the peoples' gratitude for making Dogville a better place to live. Jack's position in the frame is on the left-hand side, while Grace and Tom are placed on the right one opposite him (figure 3). When Jack starts his speech, the camera zooms in towards him and then briefly captures the people placed on the right side of the frame. Suddenly, a close-up of Grace's face is interjected, but at this point her position is on the left side of the frame (figure 4). The image that follows captures Jack while giving his speech, who is on the left side again (figure 5). Here the characters' position within the frame is changed. Both appear on the left, while they are meant to face each other and not to share the same position. Afterwards, the camera cuts once again to Grace and ultimately ends on Jack who is now placed on the right side of the frame (figure 6). A rapid camera movement captures the people at the table, and at this point the characters are shown in different positions from the ones they had at the beginning of the scene (figure 7).

Here von Trier violates the 180 degree rule (the facilitation of continuity editing through the organisation of narrative action along an imaginary narrative line of 180 degrees line) and the function of this violation is not a matter of formalist trickery. This movement indicates the camera's inquisitive function, which plays a dual role, namely it represents an object and subverts it at the same time. The audience's sense of orientation and stability is challenged and the camera movement functions as a means of urging them not to reconfirm the material facing them. Von Trier here baffles the viewers with the intention of showing the dynamic aspect of image-reading. What distinguishes this violation of the 180 degree rule compared to directors, such as Straub/Huillet and the French New Wave ones, is that von Trier does not simply intend to emphasise the materiality of the shot, or to discover the hidden aspects of a concrete material spatial

reality. Certainly, Straub's/Huillet's, Godard's and other post-New Wave directors' violation of the 180 degree rule was a political gesture that aimed at challenging the established film grammar and at showing the limitations of the medium.

In von Trier's case, the violation focuses on the very act of performance as a simulation. The camera engages in an interaction with the actors and the space, an interaction that is not simply of dramatic or self-reflexive importance. In processing the material from different angles that disorientate the viewer, von Trier aims at focusing on the way the characters perform the 'ritual' of the functional community so that we can question it. The way the camera is employed is analogous to Brecht's concept of the 'gestic camera', which I discussed in the previous chapter. In other words, the camera becomes performative and searches for material rather than simply reproducing dramatic effects. The difference is that here von Trier is not concerned with discovering the character's social identity underneath the appearances. For Brecht, the 'gestic camera' acts as a sociologist that intends to explore and identify concrete social material. In the scene I described above, the camera movement captures the actors embodying the characters and the characters performing a social 'ritual' in an inauthentic space per se. In effect, this formal deviation stresses the simulation of the event. The formulation is telling, for it implies that the reconciled and happy community of Dogville is a copy that does not have an original.

This point is made visible by the scene that follows, in which a policeman informs the town that Grace is wanted for having participated in criminal activities and a reward is offered to anyone knowing her whereabouts. From now on, the social dynamics change against Grace, because another exchange opportunity has been given to Dogville by the outside world. This scene negates the previous image of Dogville as a reconciled and tolerant community. The characters' reactions make clear the economic foundation upon

which Grace's admission is established and the town's adaptability to a reality of exchange-value relationships.<sup>31</sup> The community decides to make Grace work for longer hours, because, as Tom puts it, 'her presence in Dogville has become more costly'. The underlying assumption is that Tom's 'illustration' has unconsciously introduced Dogville to the capitalist reality of making profit through exchangeability. Moreover, by offering services that are not necessarily needed, Grace creates needs analogous to the ones created by advertising in a capitalist society.

Grace's affective labour is replaced by the exploitation of her use-value, that is, of her labour and eventually of her body. In taking advantage of the short-term benefits of Grace's value, the community unconsciously reproduces its forthcoming destruction. Furthermore, the film suggests that violence is an inseparable element of a political system founded on exchange. Indicative of this point, is the rape scene in Chapter six. What interests me here is the way von Trier manipulates the restricted space in a way that unveils the collective dimensions of an individual action. The scene starts when Chuck (Stellan Skarsgård) enters his house and finds Grace helping his children with their homework. After forcing the children to leave, Chuck informs her that the police is looking for her, implying that unless she submits to his sexual desires he will give her away. The camera follows Grace while she confronts Chuck's sexual advances (figure 8). When the latter imposes his body on top of her, the camera shifts away and captures the policeman (who asks information about Grace). Simultaneously, images of Dogville's everyday routine are interjected. The jerky camera shifts from one person to another and juxtaposes different point of view shots that create a sense of disorientation. These shots are interrupted by images of Chuck while raping Grace. One senses that the characters can

---

<sup>31</sup> Sinnerbrink's online article, which I quoted earlier, discusses the film's emphasis on the ethic of exchange. Yet he does not understand this to be a dialectical critique of capitalism. Sinnerbrink argues that the film exposes 'the libidinal economy of desire' that characterises liberal democracy. See Sinnerbrink.

see what takes place within Chuck's house and ignore it (a point to which I shall return to later on), something that heightens the scene's affective impact (figure 9). Then again, panoramic shots follow this uneven registration of different materials and put the very act of rape in the background (figure 10).

The camera manipulates the unity of space in such a way that the impression we get is that the individual cannot be dissociated from the collective. Elaine Canning's analysis of the scene illuminates this argument. As she says:

As the rape takes place, the camera pulls back to provide a panoramic shot of the sordid act in a home which has no walls, no physical boundaries. Chuck and Grace are positioned just a stone's throw from the other residents of Dogville who frequent the street beyond them. The non-existence of frames and boundaries means that the whole community is implicated in the rape of Grace; it is a potent symbol of the manipulation of Grace, both in a physical and emotional sense by the town in general. Clearly then, the theatrical and the cinematic are skilfully interwoven by von Trier not only for aesthetic reasons, but also for the exposition of the film's key motifs.<sup>32</sup>

Subsequently, von Trier exhibits the collective complicity in an act of individual abuse and here this complicity is joined together with the very idea of exchange. The police cars in the background emphasise the price Grace has to pay, in order to avoid being delivered to the gangsters. At this point, the film demonstrates clearly the connection between relationships founded upon exchange-value and violence. The narrator's comments that conclude the chapter highlight this point: 'Yet again, Grace had made a miraculous escape from her pursuers with the aid of the people of Dogville. Everyone had covered up for her, including Chuck'.

This sound and image counterpoint allows us to perceive the scene in its dialectical complexity and not as an isolated dramatic event. Moreover, there is another aspect of the rape-scene that complicates matters more. When the camera cuts from

---

<sup>32</sup> Elaine Canning, 'Destiny, Theatricality and Identity in Contemporary European Cinema', in *Journal of Contemporary Film*, 4:3 (2007), pp.159-171, here p.162.

Grace's rape to the actors, who are shot unaware, there are moments when they are reproduced as spectators of her abuse, as if they cannot avoid looking. For instance, the moment the camera captures Ma Ginger (Lauren Bacall), Liz (Chloë Sevigny) and Martha (Siobhan Fallon Hogan) while Grace is being raped, the minimalist setting gives the illusion that they can see what takes place inside the house (figure 10). The characters seem busy not looking, but the actors as sentient human beings cannot help but look. This effect is a violation of the characters' position within the story, according to which they are ignorant of Grace's rape. Certainly, the actors do not have their vision trained on the rape scene as the audience does, but clearly von Trier plays with their attempt to pretend that they do not see something that takes place in front of them.

Von Trier's rapid camera movement achieves a similar effect in an earlier frame too (figure 9). In effect, the characters reproduce our own status as audience and here von Trier questions the very act of being a spectator. Of particular interest are the way the camera captures the rape scene in the context of the political condition of the town's collective guilt, and the way it shifts from Dogville's collective subject to the collective in the auditorium. In making the characters reproduce our spectatorial position, von Trier makes a parallel between their complicity and our film-viewing process so as to challenge the safe distance between screen and auditorium. Crucially then, the material confronts the audience with aggression and this gesture complicates our position in relation to the diegesis. Thus, the boundaries between what Gunther Kress and Theo van Leeuwen call the represented participants (the participants in the shot) and the interactive participants (the spectators) are complicated.<sup>33</sup> The safe distance that normally protects the interactive participants is negated while the represented ones interact with the audience so as to challenge it.

---

<sup>33</sup> See Gunther Kress and Theo van Leeuwen, *Reading Images: The Grammar of Visual Design* (London, New York: Routledge, 2007), p.47.

Certainly, a parallel here exists between Brecht's intention to implicate the audience in more productive ways. Yet it will be instructive here to clarify the difference between Brecht's and von Trier's practice. Brecht employs dramaturgical strategies that aspire to deconstruct an individual action into its social determinants, so as to put forward a positive affirmation. Thus, by shifting the questions from the collective subject on stage to the auditorium, he aims at revealing the collective subject's potential to become a means of positive transformation of the historical reality. Von Trier follows Brecht's paradigm and exposes the individuals as part of a collective reality; but when the characters in the aforementioned scene challenge our spectatorial position they proceed to denounce the collective in the auditorium with the intention of offending them, instead of declaring them to be a positive force of change. This shock is heightened by the fact that on the diegetic level, the audience identifies with Grace's misfortune. Yet on the meta-level, when the camera captures the actors (or the characters?) looking at Grace's rape we share their point of view and not the victim's.

Evidently, von Trier's aim is to denounce the audience and this gesture operates as a means of preventing us from being placed in a position of superior knowledge that is not accountable for the portrayed reality on the screen. For it is here that von Trier's view of the audience exceeds the Orthodox Brechtian one. To illuminate this point, I want to address Thomas Elsaesser's discussion of 'the institutionalisation' of Brechtian aesthetics in film and theatre. Elsaesser analyses the way that the 'Brechtian Avant-Garde' tended to address the 'initiated' spectator, who can recognise the source of the social and political problems but feels unaffected, as if she/he is not part of the problem she/he acknowledges. As Elsaesser says:

The Brechtian Avant-Garde became vulnerable to the charge of implying in its critical practice not only an imaginary subject of enunciation – be it the artist, the filmmaker or theorist as owner of normative or prescriptive discourses – but

also of speaking to an imaginary addressee: the yet to be constituted revolutionary subject. In this respect, Brecht's own strategy had been ambiguous: because the implied spectator of the Brechtian text is invariably the spectator-in-the-know. He (Brecht's spectator is mostly conceived as male) is the ironic spectator for whom the text provides a complex matrix of comprehensibility based on allusion and intertextuality.<sup>34</sup>

Elsaesser's comments may help one identify the shift from a practice that intends to address an 'imagined revolutionary addressee' to one that is concerned with offending the audience. This argument can be clarified by Elsaesser's discussion of Michael Haneke's employment of Brechtian self-reflexive elements in ways that the audience is deprived of a 'secure' distance. Elsaesser refers to Haneke's meta-filmic elements in *Code Unknown* (2000) and to the direct address to the audience in *Funny Games* (1997). These formal elements defy the very distinction between "reality-versus film". As he says:

The effect is not to make us aware of being voyeurs and in the cinema, but to undermine even the voyeuristic ground on which we normally arrange ourselves as cinema-goers. If until that point in the film we thought ourselves safe and "outside", we now realise how generally unsafe we are and how we may be caught "inside" whenever we are in the cinema: if classical narrative cinema's spectator felt safe at any distance, however close he or she got, the spectator of Haneke's films might be said to be unsafe at any distance, however far that person thinks he or she is.<sup>35</sup>

Elsaesser's comments apply to *Dogville*'s aforementioned scene, which blurs the boundaries between inside and outside and indicates the audience's subordination to a collective reality of violence. In this way, the exposition of the individual's subordination to collective structures and institutions does not necessarily go hand in hand with the idea of progress. From this perspective, neither the collective on the screen, nor the one in the auditorium is produced positively by von Trier. I have already described the ways in

---

<sup>34</sup> Thomas Elsaesser, 'Political Filmmaking After Brecht: Farocki for Example', in *Harun Farocki: Working on the Sidelines*, ed. by Thomas Elsaesser (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2004), pp.133-156, here p.139.

<sup>35</sup> Elsaesser, 'Performative Self-Contradictions: Michael Haneke's Mind Games', in *A Companion to Michael Haneke*, ed. by Roy Grundmann (Oxford: Willey-Blackwell, 2010), pp.53-74, here p.62.

which the collective subject in *Dogville* is depicted as reproducing its own oppression. Primarily, this situation occurs by their apolitical disposition and afterwards through their entry into relationships founded upon exchange value. However, *Dogville*'s portrayal of the collective does not argue in favour of a return to a bourgeois individualism, something that I wish to explore below in my discussion of the depiction of Tom and Grace.

### **Performativity and Performative Contradictions**

So far, I have proceeded to discuss von Trier's treatment of the collective subject as a nexus of conflicting forces and processes. In this section, I suggest that von Trier follows Brecht's critique of identity and explores the discrepancies between the individual's pronouncements and his/her actions. My discussion proceeds to identify the moments that the camera engages in an interaction with the actors' bodies so as to fragment and de-individuate them. In particular, I am interested in the ways the camera splits the body and creates conflicts between the characters' attitudes and their pronouncements. I suggest that von Trier employs performativity as a means of destabilising identity and exhibiting the conflicting forces and contradictions within the subject. The aim of this formal analysis is to identify how the film questions the short-term reformist attitude, as embodied by Tom and Grace, according to which ethics are dissociated from politics.

I put forward the idea that von Trier's criticism of liberal humanism intends to show it as part of the capitalist reality and not as an antithetical force. My analysis is concerned with revealing the performative contradictions of an attitude committed to the pursuit of humanist ideals of progress that backfires into domination and violence. The term performative contradiction has been analysed by Terry Eagleton. Eagleton, in his discussion of ideology, explores the ways that certain ideological beliefs affect the individual's actions, even when they clash with her/his own social interests or her/his own

ideas. Eagleton quotes Denys Turner's perception of ideology as the clash between social ideas and actions. As Eagleton says:

He [Turner] claims that ideology consists in a 'performative contradiction' in which what is said is at odds with the situation or act of utterance itself'. When the middle class preaches universal freedom from a position of domination, or when a teacher hectors his students at tedious length about the perils of an authoritarian pedagogy, we have a contradiction between a meaning conveyed explicitly and a meaning conveyed by the act itself of conveying'.<sup>36</sup>

Eagleton offers an analysis of the ways that social practices collide with 'the ideas by which we live them'.<sup>37</sup> Thus, the term performative contradiction describes the collision between social actions and the theoretical utterances that accompany them. In this section, I intend to reveal the characters' performative contradictions through a study of the ways *Dogville* mobilises performativity.

Before proceeding to a detailed discussion of these ideas I want to unpack the term performativity. While performativity describes the passage from theatre to performance art, its function in the cinematic medium has been acknowledged and discussed by film scholars. The major example is Gilles Deleuze, whose distinction between 'the cinema of action' and 'the cinema of the body' has been influential in contemporary studies of film performance. Deleuze elaborates on Brecht's concept of *gestus* and proceeds to identify the ways that cinema engages in processes of 'theatricalisation' so as to disturb narrative coherency and identify the moments that the camera's interaction with the body goes beyond narrative motivation. This interaction challenges identity which is not treated as fixed, but becomes subordinate to 'a process of becoming'.<sup>38</sup>

Deleuze's arguments have been clarified by Elena Del Rio's recent study on film and performance. Del Rio analyses the ways that performativity can be employed in cinema as a means of challenging identity and revealing the individual as subject to a

---

<sup>36</sup> See Terry Eagleton, *Ideology: An Introduction* (London, New York: Verso, 1991), p.24.

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*, p.24.

<sup>38</sup> See Gilles Deleuze, *Cinema 2: the Time Image*, trans. by Hugh Tomlison and Robert Galeta (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1989), p.192.

process of transformation. She also employs the term ‘affective-performative’ to describe a process in which the mimetic mirroring of identity is replaced by performative moments that fragment the body; these performative moments are not solely subordinate to narrative requirements. As she says:

From the affective-performative perspective I propose, spectacle does arrest narrative, but such arresting by no means inhibits the force of the body. If anything, it favors the unleashing of that force by freeing the body from the tyranny and the rigidity of narrative requirements. Spectacle in this sense is no longer a framed view or fetish, for it indeed becomes an actively dislocating or deforming force.<sup>39</sup>

What I want to keep from Deleuze’s and Del Rio’s arguments is the idea of performativity as a process that reveals the transformability of identity and disrupts, questions, and affects at the same time the narrative.

With these comments in mind, I should like now to return to the film and discuss the ways it mobilises performativity as a means of exploring a set of contradictions. There is one particular scene in chapter five that merits attention. Tom explains to Grace the town’s decision to make her work longer hours after the second police visit to Dogville. The camera alternates between him and Grace. When Tom announces to her the news the camera stays persistently on him and we have a view of the right angle of his face (figure 11). A jump-cut follows, while the character continues speaking. The visual track is interrupted but not the acoustic one and at this point we see his face from the same angle, but his alignment with Grace has changed (figure 12). While he keeps on speaking to Grace, the camera moves back and forth abruptly and we expect that it has assumed his point of view to produce an eyeline match. To our surprise, the camera returns to Tom again and he is now placed at the centre of the frame (figure 13).

---

<sup>39</sup> Elena Del Rio, *Deleuze and the Cinemas of Performance: Powers of Affection* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2008), p.33.

Here the camera disrupts narrative coherency, since the unusual framings complicate the communication of story-telling material. What the camera makes conspicuous is the character's body, which is manipulated in such a way so as to bring forth contradictions that are hidden underneath Tom's pronouncements. As such, the camera's role here is not simply representational, but intends to disembody the character so as to bring our attention to the transformability of his identity. On the narrative level, this transformability is put forward by the fact that the character is placed in-between his fondness for Grace, while he simultaneously reports to her the town's decisions. Throughout the scene, it is quite difficult to distinguish the boundaries between Tom as the member of the collective – whose decisions he reports – and the person who wants to help Grace. It is this performative contradiction that is stressed by the camera, which destabilises the image so as to question it. The question that arises is how Tom's intention to help Grace accepts the very logic of exchange-value, which will eventually lead to the latter's exploitation. Even Grace is astonished at his composure when he outlines the town's rationale behind their decision to make her work more. When he tells her that they expect 'some counterbalance' (a term from physics euphemistically used by economics – and here the film stresses the economic exchange) for their decision to protect her from the police, she responds astonished: 'that sounds like words that the gangsters would use'.

In this scene, Tom's portrayal crosses the frontier between humanism and self-interest. This performative contradiction is most visible in a scene in chapter eight. People embarrassed by Grace's public disclosure of her abuses challenge Tom to take sides and choose either them or Grace. Frustrated by the town's response, Tom returns to Grace's house. Initially, we get to see both characters lying down and sharing an affectionate moment. When Tom explains to Grace that he has been asked to choose between her and Dogville, the camera alternates between the left and the right angle of the frame. This

alternation is followed by Tom's radical change of attitudes. His calm and passive body composure is replaced by a gesture of aggression and he starts making sexual advances towards Grace. The moment he imposes himself on her, the camera zooms out and the material is captured by a high-angle shot. This high-angle shot remains at a distance from the characters and shows them at a great remove (figure 14). Ultimately, the camera slowly zooms in, and the dialectics between distance and proximity highlights Tom's exaggerated posture and attitude (figure 15).

Tom's shift from passivity to sexual aggression does not advance a psychological change. The scene releases an amount of energy that can be observed in Tom's postural behaviour and in the sudden camera movement that decreases the magnification of the image and then zooms in so as to adopt an analytical stance towards the material. Here, von Trier's representation of the body follows the Brechtian practice, according to which the body becomes the medium that enhances our perception of the social laws that regulate an individual's relations to other bodies. The social law that regulates Tom's relation to Grace's body is the law of exchange-value. What is made profoundly clear is that by rejecting everyone else, he acquires the right to enjoy her body. Tom is siding with Grace hence his attempted rape becomes a reward for his loyalty to her. However, at the level of actions, he is siding with the community by oppressing Grace and his attempt to force himself on her ratifies this. Critical here is the contrast between image and communicated speech. Tom justifies his lust for Grace, arguing that it is the ideals they share that made him choose her, whereas he is portrayed as unable to suppress his carnal passion.

Here, a natural instinct, namely sexual desire is estranged, and calls attention to the connection between sexuality and power. Thus, sexuality is not treated as natural but as part of a relationship founded upon exchange value, which is heightened by Tom's use

of language that alludes to an economic terminology. This particular scene showcases how the camera's interaction with the body of the actor de-individuates an action and embeds it in a social context. Von Trier confronts us with a question that could be summed up like this: 'how Grace's entry into Dogville which is based upon an act of reciprocal exchange assumes the form of a coercive exchange'?

At this point, the performative contradiction, or the false relationship between the character's pronouncements and his social practice is rendered visible by von Trier. Tom, the embodiment of a liberal attitude of 'openness and acceptance' adheres to Dogville's mental outlook and proceeds to impose his sexual desires on Grace following the capitalist law of exchange-value that he introduced to the town. When Grace refutes his sexual advances, Tom aligns himself plainly with Dogville and decides to deliver her to the gangsters so as to benefit from the financial reward. The film offers an implacable autopsy of the 'financialization of social relationships', and of particular importance here is the way von Trier shows that a liberal humanist response is not an answer to the problem.

Tom's example is crucial to our understanding of the film's critique of an abstract 'liberal and humanist' attitude. In the beginning of the film, Tom challenges the residents of Dogville to be more receptive and suggests that the whole country would benefit from mutual collaboration. The contradiction is that the town achieves social cohesion by means of acts, such as sexual exploitation, that promote an individualist mental outlook. In effect, the individualism that characterised Dogville before Grace's entrance is firmly entrenched in the town by Tom's 'illustration'. It will be instructive here to understand how liberalism of this sort perpetuates social oppression. Liberal humanism derives from an idealist standpoint according to which individuals can change morally, without altering the broader social mechanisms. Let us consider Fredric Jameson's explanation, which

demonstrates how the ‘liberal view of the world’ does not actually question the social conditions that perpetuate injustice. As Jameson says:

For the liberal view is generally characterised by the belief that the “system” is not really total in that sense, that we can ameliorate it, reorganise it, and regulate it in such a way that it becomes tolerable and we thereby have “the best of the best worlds”.<sup>40</sup>

In light of Jameson’s comments, one can see that Tom’s initial plea for an attitude of ‘openness’ is centred on a ‘moral righteousness’ rhetoric that intends to restore to the community a higher form of ‘moral purpose’. By the time Tom introduces Grace to Dogville he starts a ‘reciprocal financial’ exchange between the town and the young fugitive. From its very inception, Tom’s ‘illustration’ has to emphasise Grace’s repayment so as to guarantee her the right to stay despite the ethical rhetoric that accompanies it. Consequently, people’s ethics change when they realise that Grace benefits more than them from this exchange.

It is not difficult to intimate the parallels between the film’s portrayal of human relationships and the late capitalist reality, which is structured upon the very idea of ‘reciprocal exchange’ accompanied by a rhetoric that stresses the rights of the individual and the ‘universality’ of human rights. One can identify such a language in Anglo-Saxon liberalism and in Neoliberalism. Both are predicated upon a contradictory language.<sup>41</sup> They valorise a possessive individualism and consider it to be the key to the formation of a meaningful collective life based upon a commitment to moral and ‘universal rights’. Yet the paradox is that the freedom and the rights these policies advocate are premised upon the preservation of the current political relations of domination and the abolition of any

<sup>40</sup> Jameson, *Postmodernism or the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1991), p.207.

<sup>41</sup> See Jacques Derrida’s critique of Francis Fukuyama’s understanding of liberal democracy as a model for a ‘universal and homogeneous state’ premised on universal Christian human values. Jacques Derrida, *Specters of Marx: the State of the Debt, the Work of Mourning and the New International*, trans. by Peggy Kamuf, (London and New York: Routledge, 1993), p.76.

strong collective institutions. This lack of strong social bonds – aside from the ones structured upon financial exchange – is replaced by a religious, Christian language that appeals to freedom and the ‘universalism of human rights’.<sup>42</sup> Another contradiction arises here, given that the freedom and the rights advocated by this religious rhetoric are premised upon the very preservation of the established market economy, which achieves wealth accumulation by dispossession. Subsequently, moralism of this sort propagates the established market reality and the ‘financialization’ of human relationships.

It is instructive here to connect these points with the film’s critique of the capitalist ethic of ‘reciprocal exchange’ and its mistrust of a liberalist humanist attitude. Clearly, *Dogville* manifests the very falsity of the idea of ‘reciprocal exchange’ and demonstrates that the reduction of social relationships to financial interactions is bound to backfire into violence. Embedded in von Trier’s negative view of the ‘financialization’ of human relationships is a mistrust of moralist values predicated upon abstract ideas of freedom and universal rights. As the example of Tom aptly exhibits, oppositional forces based upon such a rhetoric end up propagating the reality that they negate. Emblematic of this point, is a scene in chapter nine in which Tom delivers Grace to the gangsters and asks them in a roundabout way for a financial reward.

Consequently, the performative contradiction that is evidenced in Tom’s and *Dogville*’s attitude is that a gesture of acceptance assumes the form of domination and abuse. The film stresses the economic aspect of this abuse and here von Trier’s portrayal of the characters follows the classical Brechtian strategy of deconstructing an individual action into the social laws that motivate them. Brecht argued in favour of representations that would show the individual as the outcome of ‘the processes of human co-existence’,

---

<sup>42</sup> See David Harvey, *A Brief History of Neoliberalism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005), p. 33, p.50, p.69 and p.119.

something that he thought to have an enlightening effect in the audience.<sup>43</sup> In *Dogville*, the social law that reveals the individual as alterable is the establishment of a capitalist ethic of making profit through exchangeability, which is introduced to the town by Tom's 'illustration'.

Far more complicated is Grace's portrayal, which again follows the Brechtian perception of the individual as a process, something evidenced by her shift from a person acting 'good-heartedly' to a mass-murderer. Nonetheless, Grace as a character gives a more thorough insight into von Trier's mistrust of idealist humanism. A closer examination of a set of contradictions that arise from her depiction may help one perceive the film's intricate texture and go beyond the understanding of it as a story of female exploitation. It is vital here to consider some of von Trier's comments that draw attention to the fact that Grace is not a 'Goldheart figure'.<sup>44</sup> This term describes the role of women in his previous trilogy, which consists of *Breaking the Waves* (1996), *The Idiots* (1998) and *Dancer in the Dark* (2000). In these films, the main characters demonstrate self-renunciation as a means of saving someone else. In contrast to these paradigms, von Trier explains that Grace does not belong to this category.

Yes Grace acts good-heartedly, but she isn't – and will not be – a 'Goldheart figure'. She has to possess a capacity for something else. I tried two or three things to get it to work, but I don't know if it does. This is where the concept of arrogance comes in, a refusal to discuss things and analyse them.<sup>45</sup>

Grace as a character stresses the tension that arises when one is dedicated to enforcing values upon people not prepared to accept them. Apparently, the film's critical reception has not really identified this idea, something that led von Trier to elaborate on it with

---

<sup>43</sup> Brecht, 'Against Georg Lukács', trans. by Stuart Hood, in *New Left Review*, 84:1 (1974), pp.39-53.

<sup>44</sup> The term 'Goldheart' derives from a Danish Picture book titled *Guld Hjerte*. The book's story referred to a young girl 'good enough' who played the role of the martyr. See Peter Schepelern, *Lars von Triers Film Tvang Og Befrielse* (København: Rosinante, 2000), p.15.

<sup>45</sup> Von Trier quoted in Björkman, p.252.

more clarity in *Manderlay*.<sup>46</sup> In this film, Grace naively believes that the empowerment of the former slaves will end their oppression, whereas the members of the community use their democratic rights to their own advantage and eventually lead it to self-destruction.

However, in *Dogville* there are also moments that question Grace's seemingly flat character and her portrayal as the embodiment of unconditional generosity and forgiveness. Apart from her metamorphosis in the last chapter of the film, nowhere is this point more acutely evident than in a scene in chapter three in which she forces Jack, a blind man not reconciled with his disability, to admit that he is blind. Aside from the obvious thematic allegory, what renders the scene quite distinctive is the way the camera observes the character and places emphasis on gestures that somehow disembody Grace and attest to her transformation. Oblique close-ups of Grace's face are followed by frantic camera-movements that capture Jack and the very diegetic space, creating a complex interaction between the bodies and space (figure 16, 17). Furthermore, the scene merges a series of images that have a narrative significance with others that focus on the very idea of performativity as a process of movement and readjustment. The sequence reaches a climax when Grace opens the curtains in Jack's room and the light accentuates the performative space (figure 18). Interestingly, the intrusion of light changes Grace's composure, a change that is irreducible to psychological explanation.

In this scene, von Trier's manipulation of the body in space becomes a process in which character, identity, and space are set apart and reworked. At this point, the actress'/character's relation to the diegetic space becomes multifaceted. The space encompasses the actress performing the character, the character as a narrative agent and the character as a performative persona, namely as a person who is caught in a process of working to embody and display certain social qualities. In effect, von Trier draws

---

<sup>46</sup> See von Trier quoted in, Katja Nicodemus, 'I am an American Woman', in *Signandsight.com*, available online at <http://www.signandsight.com/features/465.html>, accessed 4 April 2011.

attention to Grace's identity as a performative process that is acted out in the process of acting up.

My understanding of performative identity is informed by Judith Butler's discussion of a performative act as an act that is simultaneously “‘dramatic’” and “‘non-referential’”.<sup>47</sup> A performative act is ‘non-referential’ because it does not describe an act deriving from an inner essence or a fixed identity. By contrast, identity emerges out of the performing of specific acts and thus it is performative, that is, subject to transformation. Butler appeals to the concept of performativity to discuss gender construction as a process that reproduces cultural stereotypes regarding gender identity. From this perspective, Butler concludes that gender identity is performative and as she says, ‘it is real only to the extent that it is performed’.<sup>48</sup> For Butler, the revelation of the process of performativity is of political importance, because it may give one access to the very falsity of ‘identity normalisation’ and uncover processes of social construction that are not visible.

Butler's discussion sets up the terms that may help us understand the ways von Trier's camera interacts with the restricted space and the body so as to uncover Grace as a performative construction. Formally and thematically, the scene addresses Grace's performative struggle and the very performative contradiction, which is that an act of kindness results in an aggressive enforcement of values. For it is here that the film alerts us of Grace's capacity for something else, and it is not accidental that the third chapter's title – ‘In Which Grace Indulges in a Shady Piece of Provocation’ – refers to the specific scene. Consequently, von Trier's processing of the material is an index of the idea that the humanist/moralist values embodied by Grace are nothing but a simulacrum, a copy that does not have an original. Grace is implicated in a reality that she opposes, so as to

---

<sup>47</sup> Judith Butler, ‘Performative Acts and Gender Construction: An Essay in Phenomenology and Feminist Theory’, in *Performance: Critical Concepts in Literary and Cultural Studies*, ed. by Philip Auslander Volume IV, (London, New York: Routledge, 2003), pp.97-110, here p.104.

<sup>48</sup> *Ibid.*, p.106.

enforce certain values on people not prepared to accept them, and it is in this vein that her moral attitude involves a violent side. In this context, Grace's performativity involves both the process of integrating herself in a set of relationships that contradict her 'ideals' and the means she employs to resist her complete assimilation into Dogville.

The mistrust of liberal humanism and short-term reformism that informs the film's content demonstrates von Trier's dialogue with Brecht. In a number of plays, Brecht doubts a liberal/humanist response to human misery and exploitation. Amongst them, one can identify some of the plays I discussed in the first section, such as *The Good Person of Szechwan*, *Saint Joan of the Stockyards* and *The Decision*. In the first two plays, the author poses the question whether one can retain moral standards within the capitalist reality, while in the latter he proceeds to investigate whether a humanist response to social misery can be a means of combating capitalism. The conclusion in all these plays is that 'goodness of character' does not eradicate class-exploitation, but reinforces it. In *Dogville*, morality and short-term reformism are called into question too, but the conflict is not as clear-cut as in the aforementioned plays by Brecht. Here liberal humanism is not simply portrayed as the 'incorrect political attitude'. By contrast, liberal humanism and social domination are shown by von Trier as the double side of the same coin. Commenting on Grace's behaviour in *Manderlay*, von Trier stated something that applies to her attitude in *Dogville* too. As he says: 'The idea of spreading your values to other places is that's what in the past used to be called a mission and is problematic'.<sup>49</sup>

This standpoint is rendered visible by the film's ending in which Grace decides that the town's actions 'were not good enough'. What is theatricalised here is the excessive moral polarity of 'good versus evil' only to prove the very fallacy of these two terms. In the midst of a lengthy camera movement, the lighting changes and we get to see

---

<sup>49</sup> Von Trier quoted in *The Road to Manderlay* dir. by Carsten Bramsen, in *Manderlay* (2005) (Lions Gate Entertainment, 2005) [on DVD].

a high-angle shot of Dogville (figure 19). The camera slowly zooms in and in a choreographic movement pans from right to left to capture the people of Dogville in a state of bewilderment. Critical here is the antithesis between the camera's mobility and the static position of the actors (figure 20). Then, the camera returns to Grace, who performs a circular movement that heightens stylisation. In effect, the tableau mobilises a performative energy, whose role is not the framing of dramatic action, but the performing of connections between the bodies; it is by means of this performing that the image dissolves our certainties vis-à-vis the boundaries between oppressors and oppressed. When Grace comes to her final conclusion, she walks backwards in a steady and stylised movement that unleashes an energy which prognosticates the forthcoming catastrophe (figure 21).

It is useful now to go back to Elena Del Rio's discussion of the affective performative that I mentioned earlier so as to explain the effects of this energy unleashed by the tableau. Del Rio explains that the 'eruption' of performative moments that privilege the bodies of the actors is a means of freezing dramatic action and bringing to the fore 'unforeseen connections between bodies and concepts'. As she says:

The affective-performative unfolds as an interval demarcated by first the cessation and then the resumption of narrative. Prior to the affective-performative event, ideology seems to be securely in place, yet certain narrative causes or psychological motivations build up a pressure that leads to the moment of performative eruption. In the aftermath, we witness a certain wreckage of ideological stability, the debris of a passing storm, as former corporealities and their relations appear profoundly altered or dislocated.<sup>50</sup>

In light of Del Rio's comments, one can see the performative excess of the aforementioned scene as a moment that disrupts 'ideological stability' and here 'ideological stability' refers to the ethical certainties that the audience has formed so far. Grace's stylised movement towards her father's car becomes a gestural exposition of an

---

<sup>50</sup> Del Rio, p.16.

attitude and a rhetorical statement that uncovers the thin boundaries between liberal humanism and violence. This rhetorical statement is intensified by the ironic voice-over which asserts that it was one's duty to reinstate order 'for the sake of humanity and for the sake of other towns'. At this point, passive humanism transforms into military humanism. What renders the situation strange is the moralist and humanist *raison d'être* that leads to a rational legitimization of violence. The contrapuntal use of sound and image de-individuates Grace and places emphasis on the performative contradiction of effacing a whole town 'for the sake of humanity'.

Action, images and the recited text are in conflict and the effect is that Grace's identity is deprived of any notion of interiority or psychological motivation. As such, one is asked to rethink a whole set of values and attitudes advocated by Grace. In the course of history, appeals to human rights and 'universal' values have justified acts of military humanism on the part of self-appointed powers.<sup>51</sup> What renders these acts problematic is the appeals to the collective 'human' interest for the perpetuation of a whole set of policies that serve private interests *tout court*. In this way, the film's depiction of Grace becomes a means of exposing how appeals to morality and 'universal values' may serve certain social interests. Consequently, the values of self-abnegation and unconditional giving are exhibited to be simulacra, which conceal deeper political conflicts and processes.

*Dogville's* deconstruction of the characters' identities by means of theatricality and performativity proceeds to frustrate the audience's expectations, and to show the individual as the outcome of conflicting forces and interests. The film's experiment proceeds to reveal the characters' dependence on social structures. In this way, their changeability cannot be reduced to a change in moral attitudes. By contrast, the form emphasises that alterations in attitude are inextricably linked with social interests and

---

<sup>51</sup> See Harvey, pp.178-179.

changes in the social circumstances. The establishment of the capitalist ethic of exchange leads to the subsequent alteration of Dogville's attitudes towards Grace, making one consider the boundaries between 'reciprocal exchange' and violent seizure. Moreover, von Trier's investigation of Tom's and Grace's liberal humanism puts forward the conjecture that the moralist reform of a system is an illusion given that ethics are inextricably linked with a specific social context.

Political cinema is based on the condition that society and the individuals it consists of are changeable and is not anchored in changes in ethical attitudes that merely conceal the roots of oppression. Such an argument figures importantly in Brecht's theory and practice and as the Philosopher says in *The Messingkauf Dialogues*, a dialectical representation 'would treat the moral problem as a historical one too'.<sup>52</sup> Von Trier's depiction of the individual and his handling of ethics follow Brecht's approach and depict the individual as the product of social forces. In this context, the moral questions are not dissociated from political ones. However, the characters' changeability performs conflict and exhibits the persistence of social antagonisms without pointing to a definite resolution. One cannot identify neither with Dogville's depoliticised working-class nor with Tom's and Grace's support of moral values that reproduce the causes of social injustice. This facet of the film led the Cannes Film Festival's jury to accuse the film of 'being anti-humanist'.<sup>53</sup> The issue of whether the film's open-endedness advances a nihilistic or a political interpretation is something that I explore in the following section.

### **Narrative Openness**

The first section of this chapter mentioned the film's critical reception, which has largely focused on *Dogville*'s 'anti-Americanism'. One has to acknowledge that von Trier's view of the United States is important in the articulation of the film's narrative. However, I am

---

<sup>52</sup> Brecht, *The Messingkauf Dialogues* trans. by John Willett (London: Methuen, 1965), p.37.

<sup>53</sup> Cannes Jury quoted in, Extras in *Dogville* DVD.

inclined to maintain that the simplistic dichotomies of the European auteur versus American society, as propagated by friendly and hostile critics of the film above, have paralysed any fruitful investigation of the political implications of *Dogville*'s form. In this chapter, I have avoided entering these debates, because I consider that reading the film as an 'anti-American parable' can distract our attention from its politics and innovations. In my estimation, America in *Dogville* can be seen as the paradigm of the falsity of capitalism and the ideas of progress that have been appropriated by right-wing forces.

The first section of this chapter mentioned Jacques Rancière's denunciation of the film on the grounds of its ethical relativism. This section is interested in addressing the film's narrative openness, in order to theorise a pathway, which sees the film out of the cul-de-sac of nihilism. The reason for addressing *Dogville*'s narrative openness is because I want to clarify the distinction between Brecht's quest for dialectical enlightenment and von Trier's open-ended dialectics. As I mentioned in the previous section, von Trier employs Brechtian strategies of experimentation as a means of exploring the social laws that regulate human relationships. However, *Dogville* as an experiment is not concerned with producing a world view that implies a concrete solution to the social problems. Accordingly, experimentation operates as a means of production, but here the term production refers to the generation of contradictions and not to their synthetic resolution.

To be more specific, I would like to explore the dialectical collisions that work upon the film's key metaphors. Tom's preliminary argument that *Dogville* is not a receptive community is negated by Grace's admission in the town and by her eventual integration. Yet the temporary harmony brought about by Grace's admission is negated by the exchange ethic upon which her residence is founded and by the abuses she suffers. At the same time, Tom's willingness to help Grace is negated by his subordination to the 'reciprocal exchange' ethic, which eventually makes him betray her. Finally, Grace's

attitude of unconditional generosity and forgiveness is negated by her siding with the gangsters, and by the fact that her decision to destroy a whole town is justified upon the same ethical grounds. Thus, the opposite side of the preliminary negative force, namely Dogville's lack of acceptance and community values, is negated by another negative force, which is the town's brutal catastrophe.

One can clearly see that the dialectical collisions do not unify to a synthetic resolution. Von Trier offers them to the audience to stimulate argumentative experimentation and this treatment of the material avoids the pitfalls of easy conclusions. This aspect of the film recalls Seymour Chatman's formulation of the 'antistory'. Chatman employs the term 'antistory' to describe the diegetic structure that opposes the classical narrative. As he says:

If the classical narrative is a network for (or "enchainment") of kernels affording avenues of choice only one of which is possible, the antistory may be defined as an attack on this convention which treats all choices as equally valid.<sup>54</sup>

While von Trier does not offer a resolute choice, his dialectical strategy of examining an argument from different viewpoints does not render all choices as 'equally valid', but problematises them. Each antithesis that comes as a negation of a preliminary thesis does not become a positive force, but an act of negativity that refutes an answer to the questions.

Like Brecht's plays, the film's open-endedness shifts the questions from the screen to the auditorium but without sharing the closed form of the Brechtian *Fabel*. To clarify the difference, I intend to unpack Brecht's preference for narrative inconclusiveness and compare it to von Trier's. One of the fundamental tenets of Brecht's theory and practice is that catharsis should be replaced by contemplation something that

---

<sup>54</sup> Seymour Chatman, *Story and Discourse: Narrative Structure in Fiction and Film* (Ithaca, London: Cornell University Press), 1980), p.56.

has influenced political cinema too. One may recall Peter Wollen's table of counter-cinematic traits, in which he argues that narrative closure that characterises classical cinema is replaced by 'narrative aperture' in 'counter-cinema'.<sup>55</sup> Brecht considered that the Aristotelian valorisation of the emotional purging of the audience flattened out the portrayed contradictions and failed to implicate the audience in a productive way.<sup>56</sup> For Brecht, narrative openness served the role of awakening the audience, so as to perceive its historical role. Furthermore, this formal element aimed at changing the social function of the medium, which restricted the audience to the status of consumers. As I discussed in the first chapter, in Brecht's utopian view, the reinstating of the audience's productive position within the theatre/cinema could be a means of rethinking their productive role in the social field.

Nonetheless, Brecht's interest in leaving the contradictions unresolved is restricted by the closed form of the *Fabel* which implies that socialism can be a means of combating social injustice. One has to recall the last scene in *Kuhle Wampe* (1932), which makes quite evident that socialism could resolve the peoples' misery. Similarly, Joan's assertion that 'where force rules only force can help' in *Saint Joan of the Stockyards* becomes an agitational call for change.<sup>57</sup> According to Brecht, the *Fabel* is the logic of history, and for the socialist left of his time history moved towards progress.

In contrast to Brecht's progressive view of history, von Trier's deployment of narrative openness does not put forward any specific political proposition that might tackle the causes of social oppression. In many respects, *Dogville*'s ending is pessimistic, and this pessimism can be understood historically. The establishment of late capitalism

---

<sup>55</sup> See Peter Wollen, 'Godard and Counter-Cinema: *Vent d'Est*', in *Readings and Writings: Semiotic Counter Strategies* (London: Verso, 1982), pp.79-91, here p.91. Originally published in *Afterimage*, 4:1, (1972).

<sup>56</sup> See Brecht, 'Indirect Impact of the Epic Theatre', in *Brecht on Theatre*, pp.57-62, here p.57.

<sup>57</sup> Brecht, *Saint Joan of the Stockyards*, trans. by Ralph Manheim, in *Brecht Collected Plays: Three*, ed. by John Willett (London: Methuen, 1997), pp.202-311, here p.308.

after the collapse of a socialist alternative forces us to reconsider politics and representation, and radical politics can be joined together with historical pessimism. Thus, a critique of the existing social reality can be effective given that one combines it with a critique of the perception of history as progress, something that I discussed in the second chapter too. Susan Buck-Morss, a Benjamin scholar, has aptly described this process.

Traditionally it was the socialist left that believed in historical progress, while the right, the social conservatives were the nostalgic critics of history's course. But in this century, revolutionary politics and historical pessimism have been brought together because intellectual integrity would not allow otherwise. One cannot have lived in the twentieth century, which is grinding and bumping to a close as we speak and still maintain an unshaken belief, either in capitalism as the answer to the prayers of the poor, or in history as the realization of reason.... Meanwhile as the grey background of these political events, the economic gap between rich and poor not only persists; it has become an abyss, a situation for which the new global organisation of capitalism – unchallenged as the winner in history – no longer even tries to apologize.<sup>58</sup>

Buck Morss' argument can help us see *Dogville's* pessimism historically and clarify *Dogville's* post-Brechtian dialectics. Contrary to the forward looking politics of Brecht's dialectics, *Dogville* exhibits the falsehood of the very notion of historical progress, which informs the rhetoric of right-wing forces that celebrate capitalism's establishment.

One could object that the film's portrayal of violence and – to quote the Cannes' Jury – its 'anti-humanism' offers a very abstract and static perception of social relationships and a fixed view of 'human nature'.<sup>59</sup> However, as I suggested in the previous section, von Trier's treatment of identity is dynamic and not static, since changes in social/economic circumstances modify the characters' attitudes. When it comes to violence, the film takes a dialectical view of it to show the impossibility of mutual collaboration and prosperity within a system structured upon the capitalist ethic of making

---

<sup>58</sup> Susan Buck-Morss, 'Revolutionary Time: The Vanguard and the Avant-Garde', in *Perception and Experience in Modernity*, ed. by H. Geyer Ryan, P. Koopman, and K. Ynterna (Amsterdam, New York: Rodopi 2002), pp.210-225, here p.212.

<sup>59</sup>Cannes Jury quoted in, Extras in *Dogville* DVD.

profit by means of exploitation. As such, the characters' uncritical reproduction of this ethic and the violence that accompanies it assume the form of dialectical negations that indicate the unlikely prospect of change within capitalism. This argument is reinforced by the film's end-credits that offer a succession of still images (taken from the Farm Security Administration's photographs of the Great Depression) of poverty, racism and violence accompanied by David Bowie's song *Young Americans*. The images become rhetorical manifestations against the capitalist narrative of progress and prosperity. At this point, von Trier connects the filmic with the extra-filmic reality. The obvious inference is that the world needs to be changed, but the director is not in the position to provide the audience with a thesis that can lead to social transformation.

I would like to conclude this chapter with some observations on the industrial context in which von Trier operates. Obviously, for a film like *Dogville*, which challenges film language and the cinematic institution, it would have been very difficult to attract funding, under a more conventional film production process. An important aspect (which for reasons of space I have not elaborated in this thesis) of von Trier's ability to experiment with film form and to challenge the institution of cinema is his involvement with Zentropa, a film production company he co-founded with Peter Aalbæk Jensen in 1992. Initially set up to produce von Trier's films, Zentropa has now turned out to be the largest film production company in Scandinavia.<sup>60</sup> Zentropa produces a plethora of films including both risk-taking projects and other films that respond to a wider audience.

The company's *modus operandi* allows von Trier to engage in projects without worrying about the box office success. It is not accidental that both von Trier and Jensen consider *Dogville* as one of their most important achievements, simply because very few

---

<sup>60</sup> See Dorota Ostrowska, 'Zentropa and von Trier: A Marriage Made in Heaven', in *Studies in European Cinema*, 2:3 (2005), pp.185-198, here p.185.

companies would invest their money in such a project.<sup>61</sup> One has also to acknowledge the role of the Danish film policy. Denmark provides state funding for filmmaking and prides itself on being a nation that funds arts. Commenting on the Danish film funding policy, von Trier has stated: 'I can't imagine being able to make the films I've made in any other country than Denmark. Maybe I could have made them in the Soviet Union before things changed'.<sup>62</sup> Von Trier's comments help us understand the amount of freedom he has in the filmmaking process and the reasons why he can still make films that would have been difficult to produce under a more standard financing system.

---

<sup>61</sup> See von Trier and Peter Aalbæk Jensen quoted in, *A Short Film About a Big Company*, directed by Carsten Bramsen (Zentropa, 2003) available online at <http://www.zentropa.dk/zen-video/zentropafilm/>, accessed 7 April 2011.

<sup>62</sup> Von Trier quoted in, Björkman, p.102.

## Conclusion: Dialogue with the ‘Dissensual’ Past

Lars von Trier’s films continue dividing the audiences and the critics and perform conflicts revealing the persistence of historical, social and sexual antagonisms without offering any resolutions. In the previous chapter, I discussed *Dogville* (2003) as a cinematic and social experiment. In many respects, the idea of representation as an experiment describes eloquently the whole body of von Trier’s work. His films keep on challenging film form and subject-matter without offering reductive messages.

It is fair to conjecture that von Trier’s cinema is much more interested in experimenting with different ideas, rather than following the canons of the industry or even repeating formulas that have been previously proved commercially successful. For instance, the international box office success of *Breaking the Waves* (1996) was followed by *The Idiots* (1998), a film whose treatment of the subject-matter made it inaccessible to a wide audience. Similarly, the popularity of *Dancer in the Dark* (2000), which sold 4.4 million tickets globally and earned him the *Palme d’or* in the Cannes film festival, was followed by the release of *Dogville* (2003).<sup>1</sup> The film’s cinematic austerity and experimentation was bound to appeal to a smaller audience, something that did not prevent von Trier from following the same formula in *Manderlay* (2005). Finally, the release of such a provocative film as *Antichrist* (2009) was bound to stir controversy and respond to a smaller audience compared to his past works. Von Trier’s essential concern is to undertake projects that push the limits of film grammar and to explore aspects of the medium that he is not necessarily comfortable with. As he says: ‘You can become so good at producing things that they become nauseatingly boring to look at. That might

---

<sup>1</sup> See Peter Schepelern, ‘The Element of Crime and Punishment: Aki Kaurismäki, Lars von Trier, and the Traditions of World Cinema’, in *Journal of Scandinavian Cinema*, 1:1 (2010), pp.87-103, here p.92.

have happened had I continued to make the same film again and again, as some people do'.<sup>2</sup>

It is of paramount importance to emphasise that von Trier's intention to reanimate film practice is very much influenced by the past historical/cinematic debates. Von Trier can be paralleled to Walter Benjamin's historian, who quotes the fragments of the past to make sense of the past and the present. Many of his formal experiments are not innovative and as he says: 'I don't think I am becoming increasingly extremist within film. I just take some old principles and try to do something funny with them. Like a carpenter, who explores wood's many possibilities'.<sup>3</sup> My discussion of the films' form has already pointed out that some of the films' formal features are not necessarily innovative. For example, how can one characterise the Dogme 95 project as original? Even *Dogville*'s reference to the art of theatre is not something innovative, a point I have already discussed in the fourth chapter. Perhaps, there is something historically important in this dialogue with the cinematic/historical past and this is something that can account for my own anachronistic methodology, which returns to a figure like Brecht so as to understand the politics of von Trier's cinema.

Brecht's theory and practice introduced the idea that political art does not strive for unity and harmony in the auditorium, but for division. The main point behind the *Verfremdungseffekt* is a polemical one and intends to present the audience with experimental situations, with the view to activating conflicts that have been suppressed by the 'naturalisation' of certain aspects of social and historical reality. Accordingly, the role of political art is not to transmit 'humanist messages' that repress social conflict, but to

---

<sup>2</sup> Von Trier quoted in, Ib Bondebjerg, 'Lars von Trier', in *The Danish Directors: Dialogues on a Contemporary National Cinema*, ed. by Ib Bondebjerg and Mette Hjort, (Bristol, Portland: Intellect, 2000), pp.208-223, here p.213.

<sup>3</sup> Von Trier quoted in, Schepelern, 'The Making of an Auteur: Notes on the Auteur Theory and Lars von Trier', in *Visual Authorship: Creativity and Intentionality in Media*, ed. by Torben Grodal, Bente Larsen, Iben Thorving Laursen (Copenhagen: Museum Tusculanum Press, 2005), pp.103-127, here p.120.

confront the audience with questions that can reanimate conflict.<sup>4</sup> This shift from a habitual viewing of the world to a politicised one cannot be achieved by means of political correctness either in the form or the content. If we turn our attention to von Trier's practice, we can certainly identify this willingness to create conflict and not unity in the auditorium. His employment of contradictions makes one rethink aspects of history and social life beyond the limits of political correctness and any abstract 'humanist' ideas.

For example, as I discussed in the second chapter, his portrayal of history in the *Europa* trilogy does not see the mistakes of the past as historical aberrations, but as the product of social processes that can be identified in the present. Furthermore, films like *Dogville* and *Manderlay* portray oppression in a more complex way, rather than offering a 'humanist sympathy' for the oppressed. Equally important is to acknowledge that von Trier's refusal to reduce politics to 'humanised messages' is combined with his insistent belief in the European art cinema narration. In his very first Manifesto that accompanied the release of *The Element of Crime* (1984) he writes:

We will no longer be satisfied with 'well-meaning films with a 'humanist message', we want more – of the real thing, fascination, experience – childish and pure, like all real art. We want to get back to the time when love between film-maker and film was young, when you could see the joy of creation in every frame of a film!<sup>5</sup>

While at that point of his career, von Trier spoke in a derogatory way over the institutionalisation of the European art cinema aesthetics, it is important to highlight his insistence in the art cinema narration of the past, something that can be identified even in his more recent works. For instance, his latest film *Melancholia* (2011) is full of references to European directors, such as Ingmar Bergman and Michelangelo Antonioni.

---

<sup>4</sup> See Bertolt Brecht, *The Messingkauf Dialogues*, trans. by John Willett (London: Methuen, 1965), pp.42-43.

<sup>5</sup> Von Trier, 'Manifesto 1', see appendix, p.280.

What does then this dialogue with the past indicate? A pertinent starting point would be that modernist art cinema's formal experimentation can still perform conflict and reveal contradictions, which do not produce uniform interpretations based upon the 'humanisation' of complex political issues. As a first step in clarifying this point, I want to consider the writings of Jacques Rancière. Despite Rancière's reservation towards *Dogville*, his writings can illuminate the historical aspect of von Trier's dialogue with the past and the historicity of my Brechtian methodology.

Rancière has published various essays on film and it is important to point out his insistence on figures of the past, such as Brecht, Rossellini and Godard.<sup>6</sup> What he identifies as relevant in the aforementioned figures is the sense of conflict, which he considers to be necessary for the politicization of art. The works of Brecht, Godard and Rossellini communicate 'dissensus' that is absent from many contemporary films. According to Rancière, 'dissensus' describes a political process which intends to confront our established framework of perception. As he says:

What 'dissensus' means is an organization of the sensible where there is neither a reality concealed behind appearances nor a single regime of presentation and interpretation of the given imposing its obviousness on all. It means that every situation can be cracked open from the inside, reconfigured in a different regime of perception and signification. To reconfigure the landscape of what can be seen and what can be thought is to alter the field of the possible and the distribution of capacities and incapacities. Dissensus brings back into play both the obviousness of what can be perceived, thought and done, and the distribution of those who are capable of perceiving, thinking and altering the co-ordinates of the shared world.<sup>7</sup>

---

<sup>6</sup> Jacques Rancière quoted in, 'The Janus-Face of Politicized Art: Jacques Rancière in Interview with Gabriel Rockhill', in Rancière, *The Politics of Aesthetics*, trans. by Gabriel Rockhill (London, New York: Continuum, 2004), pp.47-66, here pp.62-65.

See also, Rancière, *The Future of the Image*, trans. by Gregory Elliott (London, New York: Verso, 2007), pp.33-61.

<sup>7</sup> Rancière, *The Emancipated Spectator*, trans. by Gregory Elliott (London: Verso, 2009), pp.48-49.

To retain its counter-cultural force, cinema should avoid generating 'consensus' in the auditorium. Producing a unity of ethics, aesthetics and politics in the auditorium is tantamount to depoliticising the medium and reproducing the social reality as natural. For this reason, contemporary cinema has much to learn from the European films and from the modernist debates of the past.

Rancière's point that there is more to be sought and found in the 'dissensual' politics of Brecht, Godard and Rossellini can be seen as a negation of the reign of the commodity and as a desire to re-activate conflict and re-politicise the medium.<sup>8</sup> Mostly, this gesture implies that films do not become political by reproducing a political subject-matter, but by helping to disrupt our perception of reality as self-evident and unchangeable. If we turn our attention to recent European films, we can certainly see that the mere reproduction of politically sensitive content is not enough for the politicisation of the medium.

Seen through the prism of Rancière's argument, von Trier's dialogue with the past, as well as his insistence on the art cinema narration demonstrate a willingness to avoid the commodification of the medium and to produce films that challenge our social certainties. In a historical period that alternatives find no firm foothold, von Trier's films build upon the 'dissensual' politics of the art cinema of the past so as to challenge the politics of perception. His approach towards filmmaking is rooted in a practice that renders the familiar strange so as to create conflict in the auditorium, in the press, and in the media. It is by means of such a division that he activates questions regarding the world outside the cinema. In effect, his films do not produce relief to the audience by means of moralist assertions, but negations that are not complemented by positive instructions on

---

<sup>8</sup> See Tom Conley, 'Cinema and its Discontents: Jacques Rancière and Film Theory', in *Substance*, 34:3 (2005), pp.96-106, here p.105.

how to overcome the impasse. It is time to draw our attention to the politics of form in the films of Lars von Trier.

## Appendix

### Illustrations By Chapter.

#### Chapter 2.

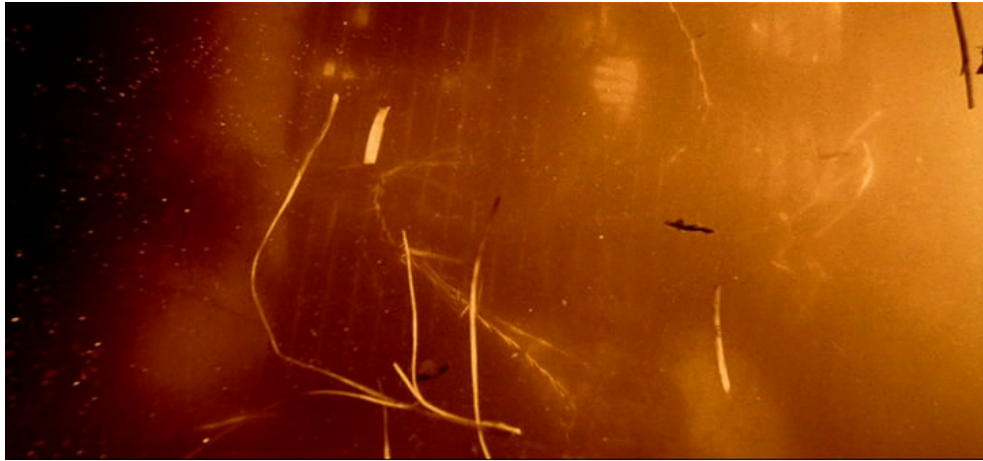


Figure 1.



Figure 2.

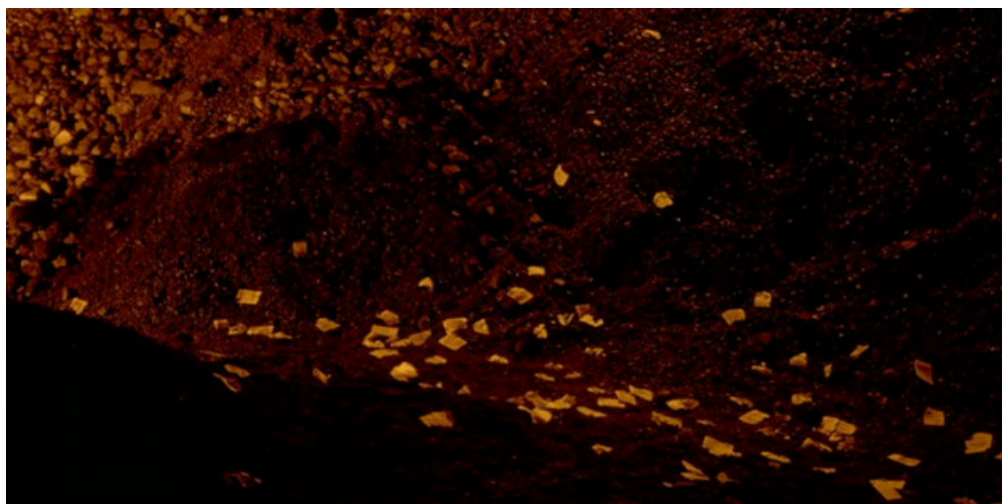


Figure 3.



Figure 4.

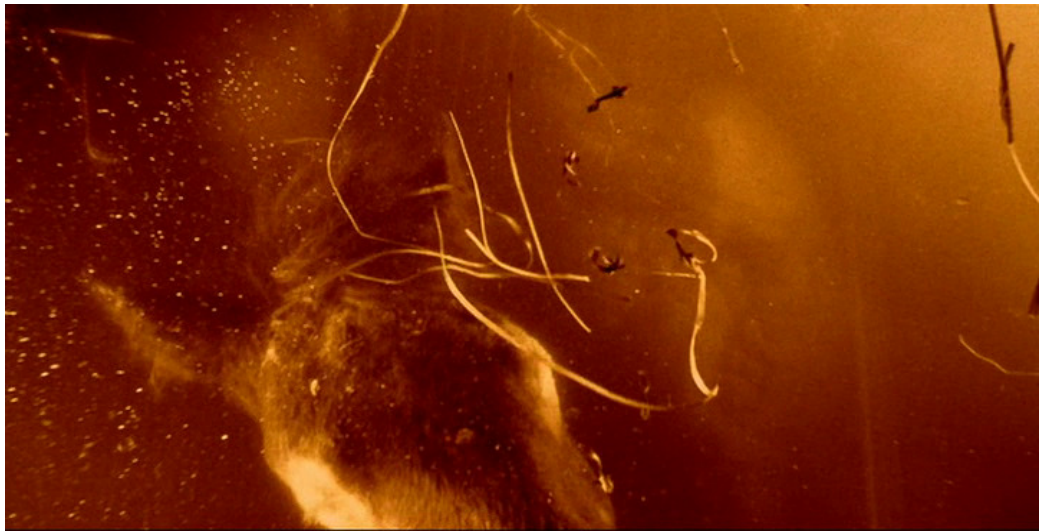


Figure 5.

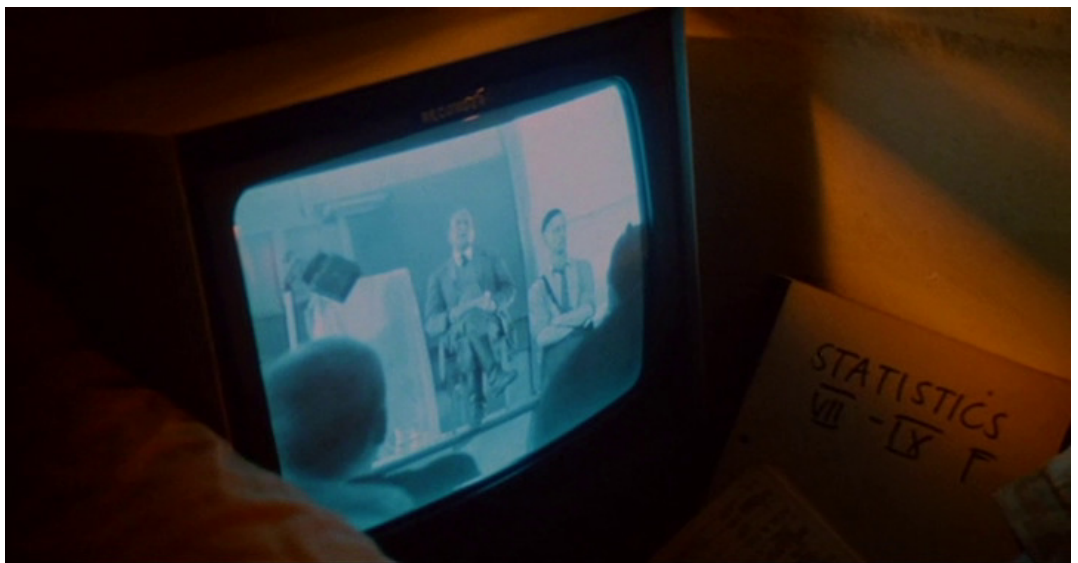


Figure 6.



Figure 7.



Figure 8.



Figure 9.



Figure 10. Lars von Trier and Niels Vørsel performing themselves.



Figure 11. A Danish historian reading a letter from a plague victim.



Figure 12.



Figure 13. Udo Kier performing himself.



Figure 14. Raphael's and Raimondi's *The Massacre of the Innocents in Bethlehem* (1509).



Figure 15. Gitte Lind as the medium.



Figure 16.



Figure 17. Cæcilia Holbek Trier as Dr Mesmer's girlfriend in the film-with-in-the-film



Figure 18. *Europa* - the fascist past merging with the post-War present.



Figure 19. The film starts with the railway tracks.



Figure 20. Leo (Jean-Marc Barr) meeting Katarina



Figure 21. Following the previous frame, Katharina (Barbara Sukowa) from Leo's point of view shot.



Figure 22.



Figure 23.



Figure 24.



Figure 25. Leo witnessing Ravenstein's murder.



Figure 26. While witnessing Ravenstein's murder, Leo is transferred to Hartmann's party.



Figure 27. Polish extras performing the Germans.



Figure 28.

### Chapter 3



Figure 1. Henrik Prip as Ped.



Figure 2. Bodil Jørgensen and Jens Albinus as Karen and Stoffer.



Figure 3.



Figure 4. Troels Lyby and Anne-Louise Hassing as Henry and Susanne.



Figure 5. Knud Romer Jørgensen as Axel.



Figure 6.



Figure 7.



Figure 8. Louise Mieritz and Nikolaj Lie Kaas as Josephine and Jeppe.



Figure 9.



Figure 10.



Figure 11.



Figure 12. Lotte Munk Fure as Karen's sister.



Figure 13 Hans Henrik Clemensen as Karen's husband.



Figure 14.



Figure 15.

## Chapter 4.

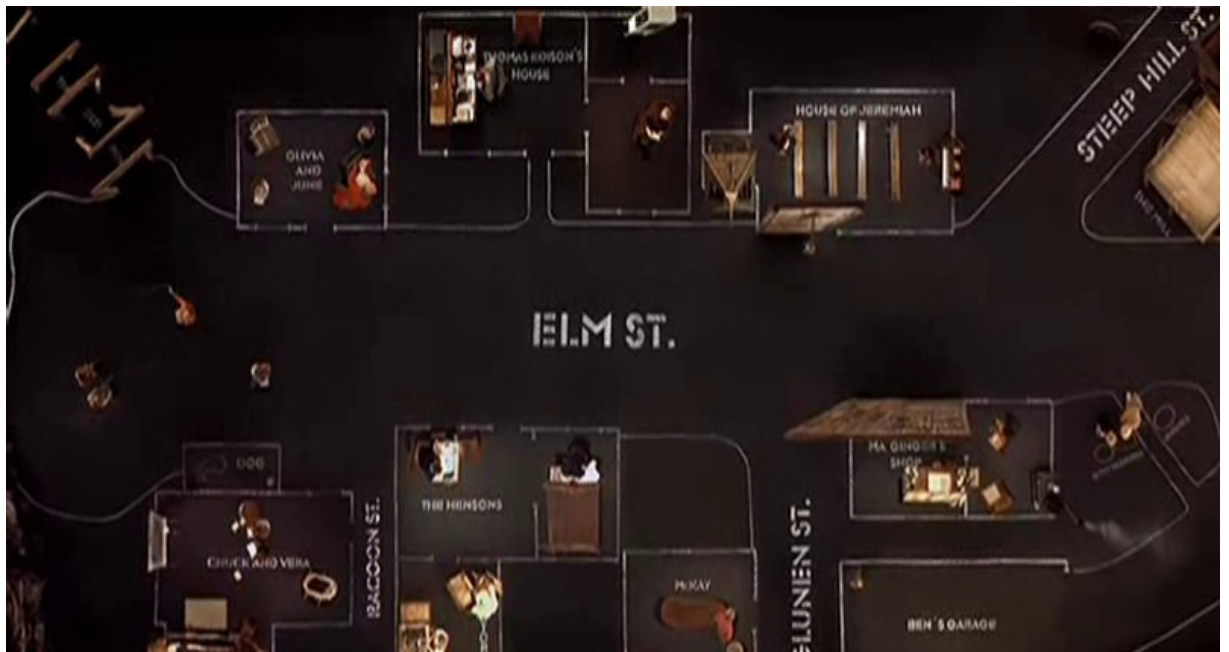


Figure 1.



Figure 2.



Figure 3. Ben Gazzara as Jack Mackay on the left side of the frame.



Figure 4. Paul Bettany, Nicole Kidman and Stellan Skarsgård, as Tom, Grace and Chuck.



Figure 5.



Figure 6.



Figure 7.



Figure 8.



Figure 9.



Figure 10. Lauren Bacall, Chloë Sevigny, Siobhan Fallon, Harriet Anderson as Ma Ginger, Liz, Martha, and Gloria respectively.



Figure 11.



Figure 12.



Figure 13.



Figure 14.



Figure 15.



Figure 16.



Figure 17.



Figure 18.



Figure 19.



Figure 20.



Figure 21.



Figure 21.



Figure 22.

### Interview with Lars von Trier<sup>1</sup>

AK: One of my favourite experiments is showing your films to people that have no background in art cinema. What interests me is that they always provoke discussions and strong responses as opposed to other art films that cannot address the non-expert. I use the term 'narrative avant-garde' to describe your films. What do you think?

LvT: Yes, yes I agree. I am just right now editing *Melancholia* and it seems I am back, for various reasons, to very sentimental issues. It is very strange because even when I am writing a script that has no sentimentality whatsoever, when I am working with the actors extreme emotions seem to take over. It is a kind of perversion. It always comes back to these extreme themes – persons suffering etc – which is very non-art cinema. I do not know. If it is fun to write something it is fun on a narrative level. But when you direct it, it is fun to direct it so that it works on an emotional level. It is different things you are after in a different level of a work. I asked myself today how this film (*Melancholia*) turned out to be so emotional and it should not be at all.

AK. Speaking of emotions, since *Breaking the Waves* some of your films are characterised by an excess of affect and emotionality. It is interesting because this excess becomes problematic. It does not necessarily make the audience identify with the characters. In my point of view, this excess renders emotions and feelings strange.

LvT. I can only say that, when I do something I tend to do it very much. That is technical wise too. I think I started with *Breaking the Waves*. I wanted to do a film that my parents would hate, in order to investigate emotions a bit. It is like bad taste that I like working

---

<sup>1</sup> The following interview took place on Friday 12 November 2010 in Lars von Trier's office in Zentropa Productions.

with. You should not underestimate the pleasure of doing it. It's like painting something and putting blue into green. It is a strange pleasure when things become very emotional. It is also a forbidden area too, because we tend to adhere to logic and rationality. In my childhood we laughed a little at films that were very sentimental. The right way to see a film was to be detached. I am quite emotional...

AK. Just a footnote in this question. Despite this excess of emotionality I think that you do not force feelings to someone. One cannot digest this excess easily. So, I think that there is an element of detachment.

LvT. But here you are talking about technique. Emotion is like using very strong colours in a painting and after you are done with the painting you are using some stuff to hide and disguise it. That is how I see it.

AK. Yet all your films are self-reflexive, they do not just reproduce a story, they reflect the process of their making too.

LvT. Yes that is true. Earlier in my career it was very important to show how things were done. For instance, in *Europa*, I wanted to show that I am superimposing images and not to hide it. Not so much with the last film, which is all about computers. Though you could do that with a computer.

AK. Sometimes your manipulation of genres brings to the surface some of their most reactionary aspects. For instance, *Antichrist* created so much commotion, because it manipulates a genre – the thriller, which has reproduced many misogynist stereotypes. The same with *Dancer in the Dark*, you demonstrate how flat the musical genre is and then you make it more dangerous.

LvT. The portrayal of the sexes in *Antichrist* has to do with my big love for Strindberg. There is something about the battle of sexes that is quite interesting. Strindberg was a kind of a hero also because he allowed himself to be completely unreasonable.

AK. Yet speaking of Strindberg, it is interesting that he was not politically correct. The same applies to you. Your films are not politically correct. Political correctness normally tries to hide something.

LvT. There are different ways of doing a film. I am trying to avoid the obvious. Also, you have no respect for your audience when you do a film that is politically correct. Political correctness kills everything. I think that people who see a film should have an opinion about it and form their own views and even protest against the film. Political correctness is inartistic. Especially American political correctness is really tiresome.

AK. So you see your audience as collaborators in the construction of meaning? The popular press sometimes presents you as somebody who wants to force ideas to the audience.

LvT. Yes certainly. The audience has to participate when watching my films.

AK. I want to go back to the *Europa* trilogy. Recently I organized a screening of *Europa* and it is interesting to see how the film works under the current historical circumstances in Europe.

LvT. Well you know that I used to be a communist. I am still getting fascinated when I see a documentary about Mao. Especially the Cultural Revolution was a great idea. I must admit some of these people, like Lenin and Mao, are icons that I can understand. Even though, they were all quite horrible, because they killed millions of people. Lenin was horrible too. But they have this celebrity status that I feel I know them. The cynical aspect of a film director can be evil also. It is a cynical pursuit of a goal. And I can become a bit cynical with my actors. Of course, I do not gas them or put them into camps!

AK. You just mentioned communism and it is interesting that in the past progress was associated with left-wing forces and nowadays the word progress has been appropriated by right-wing ones.

LvT. It is difficult for me to see that there is any historical progress. I am too old fashioned.

AK. All the characters in the *Europa* trilogy become voyeurs of history and they are punished for that.

LvT. Of course being a spectator can be tantamount to being a criminal! If you are a spectator of a crime!

AK. Let's discuss film form. Since *Breaking the Waves* you have this shooting method according to which the actors are not aware whether they are on frame or not.

LvT. That's how it should be in principle, but I kept telling them off. Especially in *Breaking the Waves* I kept telling them: 'You just waited for the camera!'

AK. Yes but there are moments that one senses that the actors act out of character due to this shooting style. Especially in *The Idiots*.

LvT. Oh yes. I am very interested in this. I am interested in capturing the actors when they are in and out of character. The borderline between the private individual and the character is very intriguing. Especially, when it overlaps and you cannot tell whether a reaction can be attributed to the actor or the character. That is where I try to go very often.

AK. Thus, in a way the characters manifest their own fictionality.

LvT. Yes you could say that.

AK. Also most of your films have a kind of semi-documentary form. As if they document the process of their own making.

LvT. But this is like cheating as well. I had this camera-operator in *Breaking the Waves* that I had to lie to him so as to do these strange movements. I told him for example pan to the left the actors are going to the left, and the actors would move to the right. The aim was to use the camera to find things instead of framing things. But that is not very easy

for a lot of camera-operators. For me, it is not interesting when I am watching a scene and know where the camera movement starts and where it is going to end.

AK. But you have acted as a camera operator in *The Idiots*, in *Dancer in the Dark* and in *Dogville*. Does it allow you more freedom?

LvT. Oh yes I have been a camera operator. Unfortunately, not in my last film, because I was not capable of directing and being the camera operator at the same time. I like it very much because it lets your interest move the camera. That is the best, I like it very much. But that is also because we were using hand-held camera. A hand-held camera tells you more, while a camera on the tripod tells you less. A hand-held camera is like hand-writing.

AK. So it is less an interest of reproduction.

LvT. I become a spectator of the scene and that means that I am going at different places. Anyway, it is not an attempt to capture truth. There is a little scene - very improvised - in *Dancer in the Dark*. Selma's son has just got his bike and they walk around by a bridge. In that scene everybody was pretty much out of character. The actors improvised and they talked about strange things that made no sense. Somebody says something like 'women are like rust'. I do not know where that came from. This is one of my favourite scenes. Mainly because you see Catherine Deneuve and Björk becoming also private and not being in character, while both are used to a more controlled way of performing.

AK I am very interested in the use of language in your films. Sometimes, I have the feeling that language stages its own performance. I have in mind the dialogue between Grace and her father in *Dogville*.

LvT. Ok I will talk to you about this particular scene. I wanted to show Grace's potential for something else and this could only emerge through this long dialogue. It was really difficult for me. Normally, when you have your characters so well laid out they cannot

say anything that contradicts their behaviour. I was so interested in making her do something that she would not do - that would go against the character. That is why the conversation became so long. I struggled to do this. The film's ending became so long because of this. But Nicole and James Caan were great.

AK. Yet out of this conversation Grace ends up justifying the town's catastrophe. This is achieved through rationalised arguments and this is where language's rationalism becomes the synonym for terror. The same happens with the male character in *Antichrist*.

LvT. I know what you are getting at and I can see it working as an argument, but I have not thought about it.

AK. I want to go back to the *Dogme Manifesto*. The Manifesto implies that technology should go back 'to the right hands'. This is something that we can see in political modernist writings too. Brecht, in his cinematic writings, argued that technology should be taken from the 'merchants' so as to be used in a radical way.

LvT. Interesting, I have not seen Brecht writing anything about film. You know better than me where these things come from. I know in principle Brecht's basic theory of the *Verfremdungseffekt*. I can understand this effect. On the other hand, truth is difficult to define and in particular, when we are dealing with the media. It is not just how a character says something, but it has to do with all aspects of cinema. It is more the feeling you have as a director. There are moments that I can understand that I got a second of truth, though it is a banal word. For me, it is very obvious when I capture a moment of truth.

AK. Yes Brecht wrote on film too and he kept on doubting any productive outcome stemming from the simple reproduction of dramatic situations. Previously you have also said that you are not interested in 'pure reproduction'.

LvT. That is right. I am not interested in reproducing a film. But a lot of people are interested in this process. Even though a filmmaker reproduces material or even steals from others.

AK. The *Dogme* Manifesto argued in favour of an anti-illusionist film practice together with a realist style. For many years realism was seen as pure reproduction. In *The Idiots* you manage to make a film, which is realist and self-reflexive at the same time and for me it is a very political film.

LvT. Don't ask me too much about the Manifesto. I remember the rules but not the first page. I used to be a keen reader of Breton's Surrealist Manifesto. And Manifesto is a great word.

AK. But can realism be political? Can you make a realist film that is not reproduction?

LvT. Without being very clever about it. I think that *The Idiots* is a very political film. But I am not sure whether I can explain how and why.

AK. Some of your films have a very dramaturgical simplicity and this simplicity renders them very complex. Brecht favoured an aesthetics of dramaturgical simplicity and naivety too. He thought that naive questions lead to complex answers.

LvT. Well in this film that we are doing now- *Melancholia* - we have this very simple thing that this planet is approaching the earth and they are going to collide, which is very simple, but it leaves you a lot of space and I think it is like a very simple melody in a symphony that you can do anything with it. Imagine a simple theme in a Beethoven symphony, which starts in a very melodic way and then explodes. As long as you have that theme you can do anything with it. Relatively quickly I thought that it is a good idea to start with a simple story. Simple stories want to make you go into the film. It is as if you want to enter a wild and mystical forest and you can only go with a friend that can show you around. And here 'the friend' stands for this very simple narrative level.

AK. A question about the way you employ music in your films. After *Breaking the Waves*, though this applies to *Epidemic* too, your use of music is much more austere. In *The Idiots* you have no extra-diegetic music at all. Some of your best scenes in all your films have no music at all.

LvT. To me it is just extremely irritating when you see a film and then the director tries to force you ways to feel a film by means of music. You just listen to the music and you realise that the way you feel, your idea of the film are just forced to you. I am like oh fuck! I want to see it in my own way. But this is going to be very different in this film. We are using Wagner in *Melancholia*. It is all very romantic.

AK. What strikes me in your films is that the boundaries between the oppressors and the oppressed are not easily distinguishable.

LvT. Oh yes. But I am old fashioned I do not believe in good and evil. I think that there are tendencies inside an individual; it is like a more complex understanding of human nature.

AK. Hmm. Nature is something that I find problematic. This is how the popular press approaches your films, as if they disclose the 'evil' human nature. I have the feeling that the portrayed relationships in your films can be understood historically. You even mentioned in an interview that the most banal films are the ones that have a very definite idea of human nature.

LvT. I am definitely trying not to make one-dimensional films and I intend to show human relationships in their complexity.

AK. People used to consuming very violent films find it difficult to deal with your employment of violence, which is normally kept to a minimum. Is violence a formal tool in your films?

LvT. Well I do not take violence easily. But when you are a melancholic person as I am it is very interesting to see yourself as a victim. By doing that you can easily see how you can make it even worse for yourself. I feel very much from the point of view of the victim and that is what interests me when it comes to violence.

AK. In *Dogville* and *Manderlay* you set up film experiments that fuse elements from literature, theatre and philosophy. After so many years of cinematic production people are still resistant to such a formal experimentation in narrative cinema. Is it because film is still considered to be a reproductive medium?

LvT. Well the main reason for this has to do with the fact that earlier on and right now – maybe not in the future – films are very expensive to make. People tend to reproduce more and only move a little bit, because it is so expensive. People tend to stand on the shoulders of the ones before... Film also depends on a large crew. It is not like sitting in front of your computer and writing a novel. It is not costly for a writer to experiment a lot, but it is not the same when you are making a film. I am in a privileged situation here that I can still finance my films. I am kind of working with this in mind, that is, that I do not have problem funding my films. And this obliges me to be a bit freer than most directors. It is difficult for me to see a film like *Dogville* being made under a more standard financing system.

AK. In my thesis, I see you as a political filmmaker.

LvT. Interesting, people tend to think that political cinema is something like Ken Loach, which I do not think is right.

## Interview with Alexander Kluge<sup>2</sup>

### Brecht Today.

AK. My research is on Lars von Trier and I discuss his films through a Brechtian critical angle. I want to ask you some things about Brecht in relation to your own films and writings...

A. Kluge. Yes I have used Brecht in my films and my writings. In my latest feature film, *News from Ideological Antiquity: Marx, Eisenstein, The capital* [*Nachrichten aus Der Ideologischen Antike - Marx – Eisenstein – Das Kapital*, 2008] I mention Brecht's intention to write the Communist Manifesto in hexameter. It's like Homer's *The Iliad*. There is a discussion between the poet Durs Gruenbein and myself about this subject.

AK. Let's start with Brecht and film then. As a film director you have consciously employed Brechtian strategies in your films. Do you think that Brecht's theory and practice can be still beneficial for film practice?

A. Kluge. Well there are several aspects that we have to consider. Brecht himself got involved in filmmaking and he wrote many essays on film. Brecht's film writings can still inspire us to make films in 2011 and with good results. The questions are different. So the films will be different from the films he got involved in. His theatre and political theory are also very important. Though, I think that his less-ideological pieces, like *Baal*, are more interesting as opposed to plays like *Die Maßnahme*.

AK. Brecht introduced a representation that gives more importance to the fragment, so as to encourage reflection on the part of the audience. There are moments that one senses

---

<sup>2</sup> This is a telephone interview that took place on the 29<sup>th</sup> of March 2011.

that the combination of various fragments guides the audience to a certain response. Conversely, you pile up many fragments that deny hermeneutical orientation.

A. Kluge. It is respect for the audience. The 'fiction' has already been told by history or the reality. We are only giving you comments when we make a film or write a piece of literature. We do not guide you to a counter-reality. We only give you hints. We are like scouts. Take as an example my last film *News from Ideological Antiquity: Marx, Eisenstein, The Capital* [*Nachrichten aus Der Ideologischen Antike - Marx – Eisenstein – Das Kapital*, 2008]. This is a new film and shows the ways I employ Brechtian practices in the present. The author does not take any decisions. The author analyses or counter-analyses, or repeats, or makes comments. The spectator is asked to make her/his own associations.

AK. You write somewhere that film has to recover the degree of abstraction inherent in language. I was thinking of Brecht's idea of 'literalization' of the medium.

A. Kluge. Film should include all capacities of language. But language and images should not strive for precision. They will be uncertain and open. I am anti-Wittgenstein. I do not believe in logic, I believe in the power of associations.

A.K. Is there a dialectical aspect in this?

A. Kluge. I am not sure if it is dialectical. It has to do with the medium itself. The medium already exists in people's brains. You find film since the Stone Age, in the people's mind. Then we have the technical invention, which is more than 100 years old. This film exists before in our brain and our emotions. The films in our brain are not logical. They are full of illusion, temperament and music. This world of associations has its own logic. Cinema should understand what it can do and not to suppress film by thought. I believe in thought and ideas, but the clear ideas have to respect what the camera does and what people can do.

A.K. I want to talk a bit about historical representation. You said once that one can represent history only at the expense of dramaturgical accuracy. In what ways can the medium deal with history?

A. Kluge. My book *Cinema Stories* clarifies these issues in detail. You can certainly represent history in film but in different manner than the ways history explains itself. So it is not a matter of reproduction.

A.K. One of the intertitles in the beginning of *Yesterday Girl* [*Abschied von Gestern*] says that 'what separates us from yesterday is not a rift, but a change in position'. The film goes against the idea that the mistakes of the past have reformulated the present. Speaking about the historical present in what ways do you think that we repeat past mistakes?

A.Kluge. History and people repeat mistakes. But these mistakes are different. The complete evolution of life consists of mistakes, which form a new kind of life. We shall not be afraid of mistakes. People and societies are not capable of repeating everything in the same way. They constantly change without even knowing this. Below the conscious processes of history, there is an unconscious one. There is an element of progress but you cannot tell whether progress favours people. It may be progress for the people (more liberty) or progress that leads to Auschwitz. Society sometimes cannot perceive the route it follows.

A.K In one of your essays, in English it is translated 'The Political Intensity of Everyday Feelings', you suggest that in order to politicise art one needs to reveal the political aspects of life that we do not perceive as political. Brecht suggested something similar, when he argued that emotions and feelings are not universal but political per se. With these comments in mind how can cinema politicise the depiction of feelings?

A.Kluge. Well in both ways. By touching form and politics it can be political and by touching an explicit political subject it might be private. Elements of organised policy are

hidden in our personal lives. Then again, organised policy is only part of the society's political life. I wrote a book this week. It is about three political stories of this year.

A.K. In one of your conversations with Adorno, you state that Adorno recommended you to 'shoot blind', that is to shoot without looking. Could you expand a bit on this?

A.Kluge. This is very essential. You have to be blind, that is, without intentions. You should respect the object or the subject of what you describe. You are the author, but you must not impose anything. Therefore, the object you describe, or the persons you film are the second author or the third author. It is an anarchic idea. The author is as important as the object of representation and the object as important as the author. You see, there is a balance between the filmmaker and the product. The author in the classical sense does not exist at all. You might comment on something but you must not dominate by writing or making a film. Heiner Müller, my friend, advocated a blind argumentation and we should never forget that the ancient poet Homer was blind.

A.K. Speaking of Müller, in a very often cited quote he stated that 'to use Brecht without criticising him means to betray him'. In what ways can we use Brecht in film without betraying him?

A.Kluge. Yes because Brecht always agitated. Of course we have to criticise him, you have to criticise me too. This is the correct attitude that one has to criticise everybody, that's something that Brecht says too. But on the other hand it is too 'elegant' for me. In a world where Brecht is neglected, I do not think that we have to criticise him. I agree completely with Heiner Müller. However, at the moment I think that it is necessary to bring Brecht back to the society and place him into our contemporary reality. There is no necessity to criticise somebody relatively unknown and absent from the media and from television. You can criticise Berlusconi, but when it comes to Brecht, we have to disseminate his work first and then criticise him.

## MANIFESTO 1

Everything seems to be all right: film-makers are in an unsullied relationship with their products, possibly a relationship with a hint of routine, but nonetheless, a good and solid relationship, where everyday problems fill the time more than adequately, so that they alone form the content! In other words, an ideal marriage that not even the neighbours could be upset by: no noisy quarrels in the middle of the night...no half-naked compromising episodes in the stairwells, but a union between both parties : the film-maker and his 'film-wife', to everyone's satisfaction... at peace with themselves... but anyway... We can all tell when the Great Inertia has arrived!

How has film's previously stormy marriage shrivelled up into a marriage of convenience? What happened to these old men? What has corrupted these old masters of sexuality? The answer is simple. Misguided coquetry, a great fear of being uncovered (what does it matter if your libido fades when your wife has already turned her back on you?)....have made them betray the thing that once gave the relationship its sense of vitality: *Fascination!*

The film-makers are the only ones to blame for this dull routine. Despotically, they have never given their beloved the chance to grow and develop in their love... out of pride they have refused to see the miracle in her eyes... and have thereby crushed her... and themselves.

These hardened old men must die! We will no longer be satisfied with 'well-meaning films with a humanist message', we want more – of the real thing, fascination, experience – childish and pure, like all real art. We want to get back home to the time, when love between film-maker and film was young, when you could see the joy of creation in every frame of the film!

We are no longer satisfied with surrogates. We want to see religion on the screen. We want to see 'film-lovers' sparkling with life: improbable, stupid, stubborn, ecstatic, repulsive, monstrous and not things that have been tamed or castrated by a moralistic, bitter, old film-maker, a dull puritan who praises the intellect-crushing virtues of niceness.

We want to see heterosexual films, made for, about and by men. We want visibility!

Lars von Trier 3 May 1984.

## MANIFESTO 2

Everything seems fine. Young men are living in stable relationships with a new generation of films. The birth-control methods which are assumed to have contained the epidemic have only served to make birth control more effective: no unexpected creations, no illegitimate children – the genes are intact. These young men's relationships resemble the endless stream of Grand Balls in a bygone age. There are also those who live together in rooms with no furniture. But their love is growth without soul, replication, without any bite. Their 'wildness' lacks discipline and their 'discipline' lacks wildness.

### LONG LIVE THE BAGATELLE!

The bagatelle is humble and all-encompassing. It reveals creativity without making a secret of eternity. Its frame is limited but magnanimous, and therefore leaves space for life. *Epidemic* manifests itself in a well-grounded and serious relationship with these young men, as a bagatelle – because among bagatelles, the masterpieces are easy to count.

17 May 1987

Lars von Trier.

### **MANIFESTO 3 – I CONFESS!**

Everything seems fine: the film director Lars von Trier is an artist and a scientist and a human being. Yet all the same I say that I am a human being, AND an artist, AND a film director.

I am crying as I write this, because I have been so arrogant in my attitude: who am I to think that I can master things and show people the right path? Who am I to think that I can scornfully dismiss other people's life and work? My shame keeps getting worse, because my apology – that I was seduced by the pride of science – falls to the ground a lie! Certainly it's true that I have tried to intoxicate myself in a cloud of sophistries about the goals of art and the artist's duties, that I have worked out ingenious theories about the anatomy and nature of film, yet – and I am admitting this quite openly – I have never succeeded in suppressing my inner passions with this feeble veil of mist: MY FLESHY DESIRES!!

Our relationship to film can be described in so many ways, and is explained in many myriad ways: We have to make films with a pedagogical purpose, we can desire to use film as a ship that can carry us off on a voyage of discovery to unknown lands, or we can claim that we want film to influence our audience and get it to laugh or cry – and pay. All this can sound perfectly OK, but I still don't think much of it.

There is only one excuse for suffering and making other people suffer the hell that the genesis of a film involves: the gratification of the fleshy desires that arise in a fraction of a second, when the cinema's loudspeakers and projector, in tandem, and inexplicably, allow the illusion of movement and light to find their way like an electron leaving its path and thereby generating the light needed to create ONE SINGLE THING: a miraculous blast of LIFE! THIS is the only reward a film-maker gets, the only thing he hopes and longs for.

This physical experience when the magic of film takes place and works its way through the body, to a trembling ejaculation...

NOTHING ELSE! There, now it's written down, which feels good. So forget all the excuses: 'childish fascination' and 'all-encompassing humility', because this is my confession, in black and white: LARS VON TRIER; THE TRUE MASTURBATOR OF THE SILVER SCREEN.

And yet in *Europa*, the third part of the trilogy, there isn't the least trace of derivative manoeuvring. At last, purity and clarity are achieved! Here there is nothing to hide reality under a suffocating layer of 'art'... no trick is too mean, no technique too tawdry, no effect too tasteless.

JUST GIVE ME ONE SINGLE TEAR OR ONE SINGLE DROP OF SWEAT AND I WOULD WILLINGLY EXCHANGE IT FOR ALL THE 'ART' IN THE WORLD.

At last. May God alone judge me for my alchemical attempts to create life from celluloid. But one thing is certain: life outside the cinema can never find its equal, because it is HIS creation and therefore divine.

Lars von Trier

29 December 1990.

### **The Dogme 95 Manifesto and the Vow of Chastity.**

Dogme 95 is a collective of film directors founded in Copenhagen in the spring of 1995.

Dogme has the expressed goal of countering certain tendencies in the cinema today.

Dogme 95 is a rescue action!

In 1960 enough was enough! The movie was dead and called for resurrection. The goal was correct but the means not! The Wave was up for grabs, like the directors themselves. The Wave was never stronger than the men behind it. The anti-bourgeois cinema itself became bourgeois, because the foundations upon which its theories were based was the bourgeois perception of art. The auteur concept was bourgeois romanticism from the very start and thereby...false!

To Dogme 95 cinema is not individual!

Today a technological storm is raging, the result of which will be the ultimate democratization of the cinema. For the first time anyone can make movies. But the more accessible the media becomes, the more important the avant-garde. It is no accident that the phrase "avant-garde" has military connotations. Discipline is the answer... we must put our films into uniform, because the individual film will be decadent by definition!

Dogme 95 counters the individual film by the principle of presenting an indisputable set of rules known as THE VOW OF CHASTITY.

In 1960 enough was enough! The movie had been cosmeticized to death, they said: yet since then the use of cosmetics has exploded.

The 'supreme' task of the decadent filmmaker is to fool the audiences. Is that what we are so proud of? Is that what the '100 years' have brought us? Illusions via which emotions can be communicated?... By the individual artist's free choice of trickery?

Predictability (dramaturgy) has become the golden calf around which we dance. Having the characters' inner lives justify the plot is too complicated and not high art. As never before, the superficial action and the superficial movie are receiving all the praise.

The result is barren. An illusion of pathos and an illusion of love.

To Dogme 95 the film is not an illusion!

Today a technological storm is raging of which the result is the elevation of cosmetics to God. By using new technology anyone at any time can wash the last grains of truth away in the deadly embrace of sensation. The illusions are everything the movie can hide behind.

Dogme 95 counters the film of illusion by the presentation of an indisputable set of rules known as the VOW OF CHASTITY.

"I swear to submit to the following set of rules drawn up and confirmed by Dogme 95":

1. Shooting must be done on location. Props and sets must not be brought in (if a particular prop is necessary for the story, a location must be chosen where the prop is to be found).
2. The sound must never be produced apart from the images, or vice versa. (Music must not be used unless it occurs where the scene is being shot).
3. The camera must be hand-held. Any movement or mobility attainable in the hand is permitted. (The film must not take place where the camera is standing; shooting must take place where the film takes place).
4. The film must be in colour. Special lighting is not acceptable. (If there is too little light for exposure the scene must be cut or a single lamp may be attached to the camera).
5. Optical work and filters are forbidden.
6. The film must not contain superficial action. (Murders, weapons etc., must not occur).

7. Temporal and geographical alienation are forbidden. (That is to say that the film takes place here and now).
8. Genre movies are not acceptable.
9. The film format must be Academy 35mm.
10. The director must not be credited.

Furthermore, I swear as a director to refrain from personal taste! I am no longer an artist. I swear to refrain from creating a “work” as I regard the instant more important than the whole. My supreme goal is to force the truth out of my characters and settings. I swear to do so by all means available and at the cost of any good taste and any aesthetic considerations.

Thus I make my VOW OF CHASTITY.

Copenhagen, Monday, 13 March 1995

On Behalf of Dogme 95

Lars von Trier, Thomas Vinterberg.

### **“Defocus**

We are searching for something fictional not factual. Fiction is limited by our imagination and facts by our insight, and the part of the world that we are seeking cannot be encompassed by a “story” or embraced from an “angle”. The subject matter we seek is found in the same reality that inspires fiction-makers, the reality that journalists believe they are describing. But they cannot find this unusual subject matter because their techniques blind them. Nor do they want to find it, because the techniques have become the goal itself.

If one discovers or seeks a story, to say nothing of a point that communicates, then one suppresses it. By emphasising a simple pattern, genuine or artificial; by presenting the world a puzzle picture with solutions chosen in advance.

The story, the point, the disclosure and the sensation have taken this subject-matter from us – this; the rest of the world which is not nearly so easy to pass on, but which we cannot live without!

The story is the villain. The theme presented at the expense of all decency. But also the case in which a point’s is presumably submitted for the audience to evaluate, assisted by viewpoints and facts counterbalanced by their antitheses. The worship of pattern, the one and only, at the expense of subject-matter from which it comes. How do we rediscover it, and how do we impart or describe it? The ultimate challenge of the future – to see without looking: to defocus! In a world where the media kneel before the altar of sharpness, draining life out of sharpness, draining life out of life in the process, the DEFOCUSIST will be the communicators of our era – nothing more, nothing less!”

Lars von Trier

22 March 2000.

### **The Dogumentary Manifesto<sup>3</sup>**

**Dogumentarism** relives the pure, the objective and the credible. It brings us back to the core, back to the essence of our existence.

The documentary and television reality which has become more and more manipulated and filtered by camera people, editors and directors, must now be buried.

This takes place with the following documentarist content guarantee:

The goal and content of all Dogme documentary projects must be supported and recommended in writing by at least seven people, companies or organisations who are relevant and vital.

In its content and context which plays a primary role in Dogumentarism, format and expression are secondary to this process.

**Dogumentarism** will restore the public's faith as a whole as well as the individual's. It will show the world raw in focus and in "defocus".

**Dogumentarism** is a choice. You can choose to believe in what you see on film and television or you can choose **Dogumentarism**.

#### **The documentarist code for Dogumentarism:**

1. All the locations in the film must be revealed (This is to be done by text being inserted in the image. This constitutes an exception of rule number 5. All the text must be legible).
2. The beginning of the film must outline the goals and ideas of the director. (This must be shown to the film's actors and technicians before filming begins).
3. The end of the film must consist of two minutes of free speaking time by the film's 'victim'. This 'victim' alone shall advice regarding the content and must

---

<sup>3</sup> The words in bold as in the original document.

approve this part of the finished film. If there is no opposition by any of the collaborators, there will be no 'victim' or 'victims'. To explain this, there will be text inserted at the end of the film.

4. All clips must be marked with 6-12 frames black. (Unless it is a clip in real time, that is a direct clip in multi-camera filming situation).
5. Manipulation of the sound and/or images must not take place. Filtering, creative lighting and/or optical effects are strictly forbidden.
6. The sound must never be produced exclusive of the original filming or vice-versa. That is, extra soundtracks like music or dialogue must not be mixed in later.
7. Reconstruction of the concept of the directing of the actors is not acceptable. Adding elements, as with scenography, are forbidden.
8. All use of hidden cameras is forbidden.
9. Archived images of footage that has been taken for other programs must never be used.

Lars von Trier Zentropa Real

October 2001.

## Bibliography

### Films: In Chronological Order.<sup>1</sup>

#### Primary Material: Films Directed by Lars von Trier

*Images of Relief* [*Befrielsesbilleder*, 1982] (National Film School of Denmark, 1982) [on DVD].

*The Element of Crime* (1984), (Electric Parc, 2005) [on DVD].

*Epidemic* (1987), (Electric Parc, 2005) [on DVD].

*Medea* (1988), (Facets Video, 2000) [on DVD].

*Europa* (1991), (Electric Parc, 2005) [on DVD].

*Breaking the Waves* (1996), (October Films, 2003) [on DVD].

*The Idiots* (1998), (Tartan Video, 2000) [on DVD].

*Dancer in the Dark* (2000), (Fine Line Features, 2007), [on DVD].

*Dogville* (2003), (Lions Gate Entertainment, 2004) [on DVD].

*The Five Obstructions* [*De Fem Benspænd*, 2003], (Zentropa Real Aps, 2004) [on DVD].

*Manderlay* (2005), (Lions Gate Entertainment, 2010) [on DVD].

*The Boss of it All* [*Direktøre For Det Hele*, 2006], (Memfis Film, 2007) [on DVD].

*Antichrist* (2009), (Nordisk Film, 2009) [on DVD].

*Melancholia* (2011), Zentropa [currently in the cinemas].

#### Documentaries on Lars von Trier

*Ennenstadt Europa*, uncredited director (Petra Film and Hasner TV and Film, 1984) [on DVD].

*The Making of Europa* (1991), uncredited director, French Documentary, in *Europa* DVD extras.

*Trier's Element* (1991), directed by Nikolaj Buchardt [on Videocassette].

*Tranceformer: A Portrait of Lars von Trier*, (1997), directed by Stig Björkman (Trust Film Sales, 1997) [on DVD].

*The Humiliated* [*De Ydmygede*, 1998], directed by Jesper Jargil (Jesper Jargil Film, 1998) [on DVD].

---

<sup>1</sup> First parentheses refers to the film's release, while the second one to the DVD's.

*Im Laboratorium des Doktor von Trier: Zurück zur Magie des Kinos* (1998), directed by Achim Forst, in *Europa* DVD extras.

*The Exhibited* [*De Udstillede*, 2000], directed by Jesper Jargil (Zentropa, 2000) [on Videocassette].

*The Purified* [*De Lutrede*, 2003], directed by Jesper Jargil (Jesper Jargil Film, 2003) [on DVD].

*Dogville Confessions*, directed by Sami Saif available in *Dogville* DVD extras.

*A Short Film About a Big Company*, directed by Carsten Bramsen (Zentropa, 2003) available online at

<http://www.zentropa.dk/zen-video/zentropafilm/>, accessed 7 April 2011.

*Anecdotes from The Element of Crime* (2005), directed by Michael Sandager in *The Element of Crime* DVD extras.

*Anecdotes From Epidemic* (2005), directed by Michael Sandager, in *Epidemic* DVD extras.

*Anecdotes From Europa* (2005), directed by Michael Sandager, in *Europa* DVD extras.

*The Road to Manderlay* (2005), directed by Carsten Bramsen, in *Manderlay* DVD extras.

### **Films with Brecht's Participation**

*The Threepenny Opera* [*Die Dreigroschenoper*, 1931], directed by Georg Wilhelm Pabst (based on an initial script by Brecht) (The Criterion Collection, 2004) [on DVD].

*Kuhle Wampe or Who Owns the World?* [*Kuhle Wampe Oder Wem Gehoert Die Welt*, 1932], directed by Slatan Dudow, Bertolt Brecht and Ernst Ottwald (Defa Film Library, 2000) [on DVD].

*Hangmen Also Die*, (1943) directed by Fritz Lang (co-written with Brecht) (Orbit Media, 2006) [on DVD].

### **Secondary Material: Films Cited**

*Machorka-Muff* (1963), directed by Jean-Marie Straub and Danièle Huillet (Editions Montparnasse, 2004) [on DVD].

*Not Reconciled* [*Nicht Versoehnt Oder Es Hilft Nur Gewalt, Wo Gewalt Herrsch*, 1965], directed by Straub/Huillet (Editions Montparnasse, 2004) [on DVD].

*Masculin Féminin* (1966) [Nouveaux, 2005] [on DVD].

*The Bridegroom, the Comedienne and the Pimp* [*Der Bräutigam, die Komödiantin und der Zuhälter*, 1968], directed by Straub/Huillet (Editions Montparnasse, 2004) [on DVD].

*Passion* [*En Passion*, 1969], directed by Ingmar Bergman (Twentieth Century Fox, 2004) [on DVD].

*Othon* [*Les Yeux ne veulent Pas en Tout Temps se Fermer, ou Peut-être qu'un Jour Rome se Permettra de Choisir à Son Tour*, 1970], directed by Straub/Huillet (Editions Montparnasse, 2004) [on DVD].

*The Bitter Tears of Petra von Kant* [*Die Bitteren Tränen der Petra von Kant*, 1972], directed by Fassbinder (Arrow Films, 2006) [on DVD].

*Moses and Aaron* [*Moses und Aaron*, 1973], directed by Straub/Huillet (Editions Montparnasse, 2004) [on DVD].

*The Society of the Spectacle* [*La Société du Spectacle*, 1973] directed by Guy Debord (TV resource).

*Hitler: A Film from Germany* [*Hitler - Ein Film aus Deutschland*, 1977], directed by Hans-Jürgen Syberberg (Facets Video, 2000) [on DVD].

*The Marriage of Maria Braun* [*Die Ehe der Maria Braun*, 1979], directed by Fassbinder (Arrow Films, 2006) [on DVD].

*Lili Marleen*, (1981), directed by Fassbinder (Arrow Films, 2007) [on DVD].

*Passion*, (1982), directed by Jean-Luc Godard (Studio Canal, 2004) [on DVD].

*Class Relations* [*Klassenverhältnisse*, 1984], directed by Straub/Huillet (Film Museum, 2004) [on DVD].

*JFK*, (1991), directed by Oliver Stone (Warner Bross, 2006) [on DVD].

*Schindler's List* (1993), directed by Steven Spielberg (Universal Pictures UK, 2005) [on DVD].

*Festen* (1998), directed by Thomas Vinterberg (Metrodome Video, 2000) [on DVD].

*Mifune*, (1999), directed by Søren Kragh-Jacobsen (Alliance Atlantis, 2000) [on DVD].

*Julien Donkey-Boy* (1999), directed by Harmony Korine (Tartan Video, 2001) [on DVD].

*The King is Alive* (2000), directed by Kristian Levring (Nordisk Film, 2001) [on DVD].

*Italian for Beginners*, [*Italiensk for Begyndere*, 2000], directed by Lone Scherfig (Pathe Video, 2000) [on DVD].

*Our Music* [*Notre Musique*, 2004], directed by Jean-Luc Godard (Optimum Home releasing, 2005) [on DVD].

### **Critical Material on Lars von Trier**

Abella, Adela, 'On: *Dogville*: A Parable on Perversion', in *International Journal of Psychoanalysis*, 85:1 (2004), pp.1519-1526.

- Atkinson, Adam, 'On the Nature of Dogs, the Right of Grace, Forgiveness, and Hospitality: Derrida, Kant, and Lars von Trier's *Dogville*', in *Senses of Cinema*, 36:3 (2005), available online at <http://www.sensesofcinema.com/2005/36/dogville/>, accessed 17 March 2007.
- Badley, Linda, *Lars von Trier* (Urbana, Chicago, Springfield: University of Illinois Press, 2010).
- , 'Danish Dogma: Truth and Cultural Politics', in *Traditions in World Cinema*, ed. by Linda Badley, R. Barton Palmer and Steven Jay Schneider, (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2006), pp.80-94.
- Bainbridge, Caroline, *The Cinema of Lars Von Trier: Authenticity and Artifice* (London, New York: Wallflower Press, 2007).
- Baladia, Charles, 'À propos de *Dogville* Grâce', in *Oedipe Le Portail de la Psychanalyse Français*, available online at <http://www.oedipe.org/fr/spectacle/grace>, accessed 27 July 2009.
- Beltzer, Thomas, 'Lars Von Trier', in *Senses of Cinema*, available online at <http://www.sensesofcinema.com/contents/directors/02/vontrier.html>, accessed 3 August 2008.
- Björkman, Stig, *Trier on von Trier*, trans. by Neil Smith (London: Faber and Faber, 2003).
- Bondebjerg, Ib, 'Lars von Trier', in *The Danish Directors: Dialogues on a Contemporary National Cinema*, ed. by Ib Bondebjerg and Mette Hjort, (Bristol, Portland: Intellect, 2000), pp.208-223.
- , 'Dogma 95 and the New Danish Cinema', in *Purity and Provocation: Dogma 95*, ed. by Mette Hjort and Scott MacKenzie (London: BFI, 2000), pp.70-88.
- Bradshaw, Peter, 'Dogville', in *The Guardian* 20 May 2003, available on line at: <http://www.guardian.co.uk/film/2003/may/20/artsfeatures.londonfilmfestival2003>, accessed 14 October 2010.
- Brighenti, Andrea, 'Dogville or the Dirty Birth of Law', in *Thesis Eleven*, 87:1 (2006), pp.96-111.
- Canning, Elaine, 'Destiny, Theatricality and Identity in Contemporary European Cinema', in *Journal of Contemporary Film*, 4:3 (2007), pp. 159-171.

- Chiesa, Lorenzo, 'Tragic Transgression and Symbolic Re-Inscription: Lacan and Lars Von Trier', in *Angelaki: Journal of Theoretical Humanities*, 11:2 (2006), pp.49-62.
- , 'What is the Gift of Grace? On *Dogville*', in *Film-Philosophy*, 11:3 (2007), pp.1-22.
- Christensen, Ove, 'Spastic Aesthetics-*The Idiots*', in *P.O.V. A Danish Journal of Film Studies*, 10:2 (2000), pp.35-46.
- , 'Authentic Illusions: The Aesthetics of Dogme 95', in *P.O.V. A Danish Journal of Film Studies*, 10:2 (2000), pp.111-122.
- Clark, Justin, '*Dogville* or How not to Discover America', in *Bright Lights Film Journal*, 45:3 (2004), available online at <http://www.brightlightsfilm.com/45/dog2.htm>, accessed 22 July 2009.
- Ebert, Robert, '*Dogville*', in *Chicago Sun Times*, 9 April 2004, available online at: <http://rogerebert.suntimes.com/apps/pbcs.dll/article?AID=/20040409/REVIEWS/404090303/1023>, accessed 14 October 2010.
- Elbeshlaway, Ahmed F., 'Lars Von Trier's Desexualised America', in *Scope*, 10:1 (2008), available online at <http://www.scope.nottingham.ac.uk/article.php?id=991&issue=10>, accessed 12 August 2009.
- Elkington, Trevor G., 'Costumes, Adolescence and Dogma: Nordic Film and American Distribution', in *Transnational Cinema in Global North: Nordic Cinema in Transition*, ed. by Andrew Nestingen and Trevor G. Elkington (Detroit, Michigan: Wayne State University Press, 2005), pp. 31-54.
- Faber, Alyda, 'Redeeming Sexual Violence: A Feminist Reading of *Breaking the Waves*', in *Literature and Theology*, 17:1 (2003), pp.59-75.
- Fibiger, Bo, 'A Dog Not Yet Buried or *Dogville* as a Political Manifesto', in *P.O.V. A Danish Journal of Film Studies*, 16:2 (2003), pp.56-65.
- Galt, Rosalind, Chapter 5 'Back-Projecting Germany', in *The New European Cinema: Redrawing the Map* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2006), pp.175-229.
- Gaut, Berys 'Naked Film: Dogma and its Limits', in *Purity and Provocation: Dogma 95*, ed. by Mette Hjort and Scott MacKenzie (London: BFI, 2000), pp.89-101.
- Giralt, Gabriel, 'Whatever Happened to Reality: *Dogme 95* and the Reality of Fiction', in *Kinema: A Journal for Film and Audiovisual Media*, 12:4 (2003), available online at

- <http://www.kinema.uwaterloo.ca/article.php?id=110&feature>, accessed 14 February 2011.
- , 'The Existential Framework of Zentropa's Narrative: a Clash of Two National Identities', in *Kinema: A Journal for Film and Audiovisual Media*, 15:2 (2001), pp.5-28.
- Govedić, Nataša, 'What a Wonderful Fascism: Claiming the Real in Lars von Trier and Dogma 95', in *Filozofski Vestnik*, 23:2 (2002), pp.167-178.
- Greenberg, Udi E., 'The Holocaust Repressed. Memory and the Subconscious in Lars Von Trier's *Europa*', in *Film and History*, 38:1 (2008), pp.45-50.
- Grodal, 'Frozen Flows in von Trier's Oeuvre', in *Visual Authorship: Creativity and Intentionality in Media*, ed. by Torben Grodal, Bente Larsen, Iben Thorving Laursen (Copenhagen: Museum Tusculanum Press, 2005), pp.129-168.
- Gruzinski, Serge, 'Europa: Journey to the End of History' in *Documenta-X the Book*, ed. by Catherine David and Jean-Francois Chevrier (Ostfildern: Verlag Gerd Hatje, 1997), pp. 508-513.
- Hampton, Howard, 'Wetlands: The Kingdom of Lars von Trier', in *Film Comment*, 13:6 (1995), pp.40-46.
- Harsin, Jayson, 'Von Trier's Brechtian Gamble: On *Manderlay*', in *Bright Lights Film Journal*, 51:1 (2006), available online at <http://www.brightlightsfilm.com/51/manderlay.htm>, accessed 18 November 2007.
- Hjort, Mette, Chapter 2, 'Dogma 95: The Globalisation of Denmark's Response to Hollywood', in *Small Nation, Global Cinema* (London, Minneapolis, University of Minnesota Press, 2005), pp.34-65.
- , 'Dogma 95: A Small Nation's Response to Globalisation', in *Purity and Provocation: Dogma 95*, ed. by Mette Hjort and Scott MacKenzie (London: BFI, 2000), pp.31-47.
- , 'Danish Cinema and the Politics of Recognition', in *Post-theory: Reconstructing Film Studies*, ed. by David Bordwell, Noël Carroll, (Wisconsin, London: The University of Wisconsin Press, 1996), pp.520-532.
- , and Bondebjerg, Ib, 'Jørgen Leth', in *The Danish Directors: Dialogues on a Contemporary National Cinema*, ed. by Ib Bondebjerg and Mette Hjort, (Bristol, Portland: Intellect, 2000), pp.58-74.

- , and Jørholt, Eva, Novrup Redvall, Eva, 'Introduction', in *The Danish Directors 2: Dialogues on the New Danish Fiction Cinema* (Bristol, Chicago: Intellect, 2010), pp.9-31.
- Holden, Stephen, 'Review/Film; Allusion; Leitmotif', *The New York Times*, 22 May 1992, available online at <http://query.nytimes.com/gst/fullpage.html?res=9E0CE0D61E3FF931A15756C0A964958260>, accessed 3 August 2008.
- , 'Dogville (2003)', in *The New York Times* 4 October 2003, available online at <http://movies.nytimes.com/movie/review?res=9805EFDE153CF937A35753C1A9659C8B63>, accessed 2 August 2009.
- Horsley, Jake, *Dogville Versus Hollywood: The War Between Independent Film and Mainstream Movies* (London: Marion Boyars, 2005).
- Jerslev, Anne, 'Dogma 95, Lars Von Trier's *The Idiots* and the 'Idiot Project'', in *Realism and 'Reality' in Film and Media*, ed. by Anne Jerslev (Copenhagen: Museum Tusculanum Press, 2002), pp.41-66.
- Kelly, Richard, *The Name of this Book is Dogme 95* (London: Faber and Faber, 2000).
- Kermode, Mark, 'A Dog's Life', in *New Statesman*, 16 February 2004, available online at <http://www.newstatesman.com/200402160039>, accessed 22 July 2009.
- Khair, Tabish, 'The Ideology of Play', in *New Left Review*, 2:2 (2000), pp.125-131.
- Koutsourakis, Angelos, John Cassavetes: The First Dogme Director?', in *Bright Lights Film Journal*, 63:1, available online at, <http://www.brightlightsfilm.com/63/63cassavetes.html>, accessed 9 April 2011.
- , 'The Desire for History in Lars von Trier's *Europa* and Theo Angelopoulos' *The Suspended Step of the Stork*', in *Kinema: A Journal for Film and Audiovisual Media*, 33:1 (2010), pp.93-106.
- Laakso, Hanna, 'Idioterne/*The Idiots*', in *The Cinema of Scandinavia*, ed. by Tytti Soila (London, New York: Wallflower Press, 2005), pp.203-214.
- Lattek, Michael, 'A Reading of *Dogville*', in *Anamesa: (the Violence Issue)*, 4:1 (2006), pp.99-115.
- Lumholdt, Jan, (ed.) *Lars von Trier Interviews*, (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2003).
- MacCabe, Colin, 'Cannes 2003', in *Critical Quarterly*, 45:3 (2003), pp.111-114.

- MacKenzie, Scott, 'Manifest Destinies: Dogma 95 and the Future of the Film Manifesto', in *Purity and Provocation: Dogma 95*, ed. by Mette Hjort and Scott MacKenzie (London: BFI, 2000), pp.49-52.
- Merin, Jennifer, 'Interview: Lars von Trier', in *New York Press*, available online at <http://www.nypress.com/article-12778-interview-lars-von-trier.html>, accessed 2 April 2011.
- Nicodemus, Katja, 'I am an American Woman', in *Signandsight.com*, available online at <http://www.signandsight.com/features/465.html>, accessed 4 April 2011.
- Nobus, Dany, 'The Politics of Gift-Giving and the Provocation of Lars von Trier's *Dogville*', in *Film-Philosophy*, 11:3 (2007), pp.23-37.
- Oppenheimer, Jean, 'Von Trier and Müller's Ascetic Aesthetic: On *Breaking the Waves*', in *American Cinematographer*, 77:1 (1996), pp.18-22.
- Orr, John, 'New Directions in European Cinema', in *European Cinema*, ed. by Elizabeth Ezra (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), pp.299-312.
- Ostrowska, Dorota, 'Zentropa and von Trier: A Marriage Made in Heaven', in *Studies in European Cinema*, 2:3 (2005), pp.185-198.
- , 'Languages and Identities in the Contemporary European Cinema', *Journal of Contemporary European Studies*, 15:1 (2007), pp.55-65.
- Oxholm, Jan, Nielsen Jakob Isak, 'The Ultimate Dogma film. An Interview with Jens Albinus and Anne- Louise Hassing on Dogma 2- *The Idiots*' in *P.O.V. : A Danish Journal of Film Studies*, 10:2 (2000), pp.11-35.
- Özmenek, Seyhan, '*Dogville*: Trier's America à La Brecht', in *Journal of American Studies of Turkey*, 18:1 (2003), pp. 85-92.
- Rancière, Jacques, 'The Ethical Turn of Aesthetics and Politics', trans. by J.P. Deranty, in *Critical Horizons*, 7:1 (2006), pp. 1-20.
- Roberts, Jon, 'Dogme 95', in *New Left Review*, 23:8 (1999), pp.141-149.
- Schepelern, Peter, *Lars von Triers Film Tvang Og Befrielse* (København: Rosinante, 2000).
- , '"Kill your Darlings": Lars von Trier and the Origin of Dogma 95', in *Purity and Provocation: Dogma 95*, ed. by Mette Hjort and Scott MacKenzie (London: BFI, 2000), pp.58-69.
- , 'Film According to Dogma: Ground Rules, Obstacles and Liberations', in *Transnational Cinema in Global North: Nordic Cinema in Transition*, ed.

- by Andrew Nestingen and Trevor G. Elkington (Detroit, Michigan: Wayne State University Press, 2005), pp.73-107.
- , 'Ten Years of Dogme', *Film Special Issue Dogme* (2005), pp.3-7.
- , 'The King of Dogme', in *Film Special Issue Dogme* (2005), pp.8-12.<sup>2</sup>
- , 'The Making of an Auteur: Notes on the Auteur Theory and Lars von Trier', in *Visual Authorship: Creativity and Intentionality in Media*, ed. by Torben Grodal, Bente Larsen, Iben Thorving Laursen (Copenhagen: Museum Tusculanum Press, 2005), pp.103-127.
- , 'The Element of Crime and Punishment: Aki Kaurismäki, Lars von Trier, and the Traditions of World Cinema', in *Journal of Scandinavian Cinema*, 1:1 (2010), pp.87-103.
- Shiloh, Hanna, 'Lars Von Trier: *Breaking the Waves*, *Dancer in the Dark*, *Dogville*', in *Modern Language Studies*, 35:1 (2005), pp.84-88.
- Simons, Jan *Playing the Waves: Lars Von Trier's Game Cinema* (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2007).
- Sinnerbrink, Robert, 'Grace and Violence: Questioning Politics and Desire in Lars von Trier's *Dogville*', in *SCAN/Journal of Media Arts Culture*, 4:2 (2007) available on line at  
[http://www.scan.net.au/scan/journal/display.php?journal\\_id=94](http://www.scan.net.au/scan/journal/display.php?journal_id=94), accessed 10 August 2009.
- Smith, Murray, 'Lars von Trier: Sentimental Surrealism', in *Purity and Provocation: Dogma 95*, ed. by Mette Hjort and Scott MacKenzie (London: BFI, 2000), pp.111-121.
- Stevenson, Jack, *Lars von Trier* (London: BFI, 2002).
- , *Dogme Uncut: Lars von Trier, Thomas Vinterberg and the Gang That Took on Hollywood*, (Santa Monica: Santa Monica Press, 2003).
- Stewart, Elizabeth, 'Hypnosis, Identification and Crime in Lars Von Trier European Trilogy', in *Film Journal*, 12:1 (2005) available at  
<http://www.thefilmjournal.com/issue12/larsvontrier.html>, accessed 29 November 2008.
- Thomsen, Bodil Marie, 'Idiocy, Foolishness and Spastic Jestng', in *P.O.V. A Danish Journal of Film Studies*, 10:2 (2000), pp.47-62.

---

<sup>2</sup> Celebrating the anniversary for the 10 years of Dogme, this issue appeared between the publication of volume 42 and 43. There is no volume number in it.

- Trier, Lars von, 'Project 'Open Film Town' Visions in Connection with the Film Town in Avedøre', in *The Danish Directors: Dialogues on a Contemporary National Cinema*, ed. by Ib Bondebjerg and Mette Hjort, (Bristol, Portland: Intellect, 2000), pp.224-227.
- Umland, Rebecca A. and Umland, Samuel J., 'Child Victims and Excessive Signifiers: Lars Von Trier's *The Element of Crime*', in *Kinoeye*, 2:5 (2002), available at <http://kinoeye.org/02/05/umland05.php>, accessed 6 August 2008.
- Unknown, 'The History of Zentropa', in the company's website at <http://www.zentropa.dk/about/historie>, accessed 7 April 2011.
- Visy, Gilles, 'Europa, Lars von Trier: Un Certain Cauchemar Expressioniste', in *Cadragé: La Revue du Cinema International* available online at <http://www.cadrage.net/films/europa/europa.html>, accessed 3 August 2008.
- Walters, Tim, 'Reconsidering *The Idiots*, Dogme 95, Lars Von Trier and The Cinema of Subversion', in *Velvet Light Trap*, 53:2 (2004), pp.40-54.
- Wayne, Mike, *The Politics of Contemporary European Cinema: Histories, Borders, Diasporas* (Bristol: Intellect, 2002), pp.86-89.
- White, Jerry, 'Fear of Togetherness? Community in the Films of Lars von Trier', in *Parachute: Contemporary Art Magazine*, 102:1 (2001), pp.73-80.
- Woodgate, Ken, 'Gotta Dance (in the Dark): Lars Von Trier's Critique of the Musical Genre', in *The Play within the Play. The Performance of Meta-Theatre and Self-Reflection*, ed. by Gerhard Fischer, Bernhard Greiner. (Amsterdam, New York: Rodopi, 2007), pp.393-404.

### **Brecht's Writings and Plays Cited**

- Brecht, Bertolt, *Brecht on Theatre: the Development of An Aesthetic*, ed. and trans. by John Willett (New York, London: Methuen, 1964).
- , *Messingkauf Dialogues* trans. by John Willett (London: Methuen, 1965).
- , 'Against Georg Lukács', trans. by Stuart Hood, in *New Left Review*, 84:1 (1974), pp.39-53.
- , *Bertolt Brecht: On Film and Radio*, ed. and trans. by Marc Silberman (London: Methuen, 2001).
- , *Brecht on Art and Politics*, ed. by Tom Kuhn and Steve Giles, trans. by Laura Bradley (London: Methuen, 2003)

- , *The Good Person of Szechwan* [*Der Gute Mensch von Sezuan*, 1943], trans. by John Willett, in *Brecht Collected Plays: Six*, ed. by John Willett and Ralph Manheim (London: Methuen, 1994), pp.1-11.
- , *Saint Joan of the Stockyards*, [*Die Heilige Johanna der Schlachthöfe*, 1931], trans. by Ralph Manheim, in *Brecht Collected Plays: Three*, ed. by John Willett (London: Methuen, 1997), pp. 202-31.
- , *He Said Yes/He Said No*, [*Der Jasager/Der Neinsager*, 1930]trans. by Arthur Waley, in *Brecht Collected Plays: Three* ed. by John Willett (London: Methuen, 1997), pp.45-60.
- , *The Decision* [*Die Maßnahme*, 1930], trans. by John Willett, in *Brecht Collected Plays: Three*. ed. by John Willett (London: Methuen, 1997), pp.61-89.

### **Critical Material on Brecht, and Brechtian Film Theory and Practice**

- Alter, Nora M., 'The Political Imperceptible in the Essay Film: Farocki's Images of the World and the Inscription of War', in *New German Critique*, 68:2 (1996), pp.165-192.
- Althusser, Louis, 'The "Piccolo Teatro": Bertolazzi and Brecht', in *For Marx* trans. by Ben Brewster (London: Verso, 1979), pp.131-152.
- Barnett, David, 'Brecht/Directing/Acting', in *New Theatre Quarterly*, 17:1 (2001), pp.88-89.
- , 'When is a Play Not a Drama? Two Examples of Postdramatic Theatre Texts', in *New Theatre Quarterly*, 24:1(2008), pp.14-23.
- , "'I Have to Change Myself Instead of Interpreting Myself": Heiner Müller as Post-Brechtian Director', in *Contemporary Theatre Review*, 20:1 (2010), pp.6-20.
- Barthes, Roland, 'Diderot, Brecht, Eisenstein', in *Image, Music, Text*, ed. and trans. by Stephen Heath (London: Fontana Press, 1977), pp.69-78.
- , 'The Death of the Author', in *Image, Music, Text*, pp.142-148.
- , 'The Tasks of Brechtian Criticism', in *Marxist Literary Theory: A Reader*, ed. by Terry Eagleton and Drew Milne, trans. by R. Howard (Oxford: Blackwell, 1996), pp.136-140.
- , 'The Romans in Films', in *Mythologies*, trans. by Annette Lavers (New York: Hill and Wang, 1972) pp. 26-28.
- , 'Towards a Semiotics of the Cinema: Barthes in Interview with Michel Delahaye, Jacques Rivette', trans. by Annwyl Williams, in *Cahiers du Cinéma Volume*

- 2 1960-1968: *New Wave, New Cinema, Re-evaluating Hollywood*, ed. by Jim Hillier (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1986), pp.276-285.
- Baudry, Jean-Louis, 'Ideological Effects of the Basic Cinematographic Apparatus', trans. by Allan Williams, in *Film Quarterly*, 28:2 (1970), pp.39-47. Originally published in *Cinéthique*, 7:8 (1970).
- Benjamin, Walter, *Understanding Brecht*, trans. by Anna Bostock (London: Verso, 1998).
- Berlau, Ruth, Brecht, Bertolt, Hubalek Claus, Palitzsch Peter and Rüllicke Käthe (eds.), *Theaterarbeit: 6 Aufführungen des Berliner Ensembles* (Dresden: VVV Dresdner Verlag, 1952).
- Brady, Martin, 'Brecht in Brechtian Cinema', in "Verwisch Die Spuren!". *Bertolt Brecht's Work and Legacy: A Reassessment*, ed. by Robert Gillet and Godela Weiss- Sussex, (Amsterdam, New York: 2008), pp.295-306.
- Brewster, Ben, 'The Fundamental Reproach (Brecht)', in *Ciné-Tracts* 1:2 (1977), pp.44-53.
- Byg, Barton, *Landscapes of Resistance: The German Films of Danièle Huillet and Jean-Marie Straub* (Berkeley, Los Angeles, London: University of California Press, 1995).
- Carney, Sean, *Brecht and Critical Theory: Dialectics and Contemporary Aesthetics* (London, New York: Routledge, 2005).
- Comolli, Jean-Louis, Narboni, Jean, 'Cinema/Ideology/Criticism', trans. by Susan Bennett, in *Cahiers du Cinéma Volume 3 1969-1972: The Politics of Representation*, ed. by Nick Brown (London: Routledge, 1990), pp.58-67.
- Curran, Angela, 'Bertolt Brecht', in *The Routledge Companion to Philosophy and Film*, ed. by Paisley Livingston and Carl Plantinga (London, New York: Routledge, 2009), pp.223-233.
- Del Rio, Elena 'Between Brecht and Artaud: Choreographing Affect in Fassbinder's *The Marriage of Maria Braun*', in *New Review of Film and Television Studies*, 3:2 (2005), pp.161-185.
- Dort, Bernard, 'Towards a Brechtian Criticism of Cinema', trans. by Jill Forbes, in *Cahiers du Cinéma Volume 2: 1960-1968: New Wave, New Cinema, Re-evaluating Hollywood*, ed. by Jim Hillier (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1986), pp. 236-245.
- Eagleton, Terry, 'Brecht and Rhetoric', in *New Literary History*, 16:3 (1985), pp.633-638.

- Elsaesser, Thomas, 'Performative Self-Contradictions: Michael Haneke's Mind Games', in *A Companion to Michael Haneke*, ed. by Roy Grundmann (Oxford: Willey-Blackwell, 2010), pp.53-74.
- , 'Political Filmmaking After Brecht: Farocki for Example', in *Harun Farocki: Working on the Sidelines*, ed. by Thomas Elsaesser (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2004), pp.133-156.
- , 'From Anti-Illusionism to Hyper-Realism: Bertolt Brecht and Contemporary Film', in *Re-Interpreting Brecht: His Influence on Contemporary Drama and Film*, ed. by Pia Kleber and Colin Visser (Cambridge, New York: Cambridge University Press, 1990), pp.170-185.
- , "'Lili Marleen': Fascism and the Film Industry', in *October*, 21:3 (1982), pp.115-140.
- Fargier, Jean-Paul, 'Parenthesis or Indirect Route', trans. by Susan Bennett, in *Screen*, 12:2 (1971), pp.131-144. Originally published in *Cinéthique* 5:1 (1969).
- Farocki, Harun, 'Und Materialität', in *Cine-Fils* - online Journal, available at <http://www.cine-fils.com/interviews/harun-farocki.html>, accessed 27 March 2011.
- Friedrich, Rainer, 'Brecht and Postmodernism', in *Philosophy and Literature*, 23:1 (1999), pp.44-64.
- Gemünden, Gerd, 'Brecht in Hollywood: *Hangmen Also Die* and the Anti-Nazi Film', in *Theatre Drama Review*, 43:4 (1999), pp.65-76.
- Gidal, Peter, 'The Anti-Narrative (1978)', in *Screen*, 20:2 (1979), pp.73-93.
- Giles, Steve, 'Photography and Representation in Kracauer, Brecht and Benjamin', in *"Verwisch Die Spuren!" Bertolt Brecht's Work and Legacy: A Reassessment*, ed. by Robert Gillet and Godela Weiss- Sussex (Amsterdam, New York: Rodopi, 2008), pp.115-125.
- , *Bertolt Brecht and Critical Theory: Marxism, Modernity and the Threepenny Lawsuit* (Berne: Peter Lang, 1997).
- Harvey, Sylvia, *May '68 and Film Culture* (London: BFI, 1978).
- , 'Whose Brecht? Memories for the Eighties', in *Screen*, 23:1 (1982), pp.45-59.
- Haug, Wolfgang Fritz, 'Philosophizing with Marx, Gramsci and Brecht', in *Boundary 2*, 34:3 (2007), pp.143-160.
- Haycock, Joel, 'The Sign of the Sociologist: Show and Anti-Show in Godard's *Masculin Féminin*', in *Cinema Journal*, 29:4 (1990), pp.51-74.
- Heath, Stephen, 'Lessons from Brecht', in *Screen*, 15:2 (1974), pp.103-128.

- , 'From Brecht to Film: Theses Problems (On *History Lessons* and *Dear Summer Sister*)', in *Screen*, 16:4 (1975), pp.34-45.
- , 'Afterword', in *Screen*, 20:2 (1979), pp.93-99.
- Jameson, Fredric, *Brecht and Method* (London, New York: Verso, 1998).
- Kaes, Anton, 'History, Fiction, Memory: Fassbinder's *The Marriage of Maria Braun* (1979)', in *German Film and Literature: Adaptations and Transformations*, ed. by Eric Rentschler (London and New York: Methuen, 1986), pp.276-288.
- Kirn, Gal, 'Kuhle Wampe: Politics of Montage, De-Montage of Politics?' in *Film-Philosophy*, 11:1 (2007), pp.33-48.
- Lellis, George, *Bertolt Brecht, Cahiers du Cinéma and Contemporary Film Theory* (Ann Arbor, Michigan: University of Michigan Research Press).
- Leslie, Esther, 'Adorno, Benjamin, Brecht and Film', in *Understanding Film: Marxist Perspectives*, ed. by Mike Wayne (London: Pluto Press, 2005), pp.34-58.
- MacCabe, Colin, 'Realism and the Cinema: Notes on Some Brechtian Theses', in *Screen*, 15:2 (1974), pp.7-27.
- , 'The Politics of Separation', in *Screen*, 16:4 (1975), pp.46-61.
- Moeller, Hans-Bernhard, 'The Marriage of Maria Braun. Veronika Voss. Lola. Fassbinder's use of Brechtian Aesthetics', in *Jump Cut*, 35:1 (1990), available online at <http://www.ejumpcut.org/archive/onlinessays/JC35folder/MariaVonBraunTrilogy.html>, accessed 25 November 2010.
- , 'Brecht and Epic Film Medium: the Cineaste, Playwright, Film Theoretician and His Influence', in *Wide Angle*, 3:4 (1981), pp.4-11.
- Mueller, Roswitha, *Bertolt Brecht and the Theory of Media* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1989).
- , 'Montage in Brecht', in *Theatre Journal*, 39:4 (1987), pp.473-486.
- Mumford, Meg, *Bertolt Brecht* (London, New York: Routledge, 2009).
- Nägele, Rainer, 'Brecht's Theatre of Cruelty', in *Reading After Freud: Essays on Goethe, Hölderlin, Habermas, Nietzsche, Brecht, Celan and Freud* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1987), pp.111-134.
- Narboni, Jean, 'Towards Impertinence', trans. by Norman King, in *Cahiers du Cinéma Volume 2, 1960-1968. New Wave, New Cinema, Re-evaluating Hollywood*,

- ed. by Jim Hillier (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1986), pp.300-301. Originally published in *Cahiers du Cinéma* 196 (1967).
- Oesmann, Astrid, Chapter 4 and 5, in *Staging History: Brecht's Social Concepts of Ideology* (New York: State University of New York press, 2005), pp. 129-206.
- Pavis, Patrice, 'Brechtian Gestus and Its Avatars in Contemporary Theatre', in *Brecht Yearbook* (2000), ed. by John Rouse and Marc Silberman, pp.177-179.
- Polan, Dana B., 'Brecht and the Politics of Self-Reflexive Cinema', in *Jump Cut*, 1:1 (1974), available online at <http://www.ejumpcut.org/archive/onlinessays/JC17folder/BrechtPolan.html>, accessed 12 March 2010.
- Rogers, Joel, 'Jean-Marie Straub and Danièle Huillet Interviewed: Moses and Aaron as an Object of Marxist Reflection', in *Jump Cut*, 12:1 (1976), available online at <http://www.ejumpcut.org/archive/onlinessays/jc12-13folder/moses.int.html>, accessed 22 March 2011.
- Roud, Richard, *Jean-Marie Straub* (London: Secker, 1971).
- Scheunemann, Dietrich, 'Montage in Theatre and Film: Observations on Eisenstein and Brecht', in *Avant Garde: Interdisciplinary and International Review*, ed. by Jan Van Der Eng and Willem G. Weststeijn (Amsterdam, Atlanta, GA: Rodopi, 1999), pp.109-136.
- Schoeps, Karl-Heinz, 'From Distancing Alienation to Intuitive Naiveté: Bertolt Brecht's Establishment of a New Aesthetic Category', in *Monatshefte*, 81:2 (1989), pp.186-198.
- Silberman, Marc, 'The Rhetoric of the Image: Slatan Dudow and Bertolt Brecht's *Kuhle Wampe* or *Who Owns the World?*', in *German Cinema: Texts in Context* (Detroit, Michigan: Wayne State University Press, 1995), pp.34-48.
- , 'The Politics of Representation: Brecht and the Media', in *Theatre Journal*, 39:4 (1987), pp.448-460.
- , 'A Postmodernized Brecht?', in *Theatre Journal*, 45:1 (1993), pp.1-19.
- , 'Brecht, Realism and the Media', in *Realism and the Audiovisual Media*, ed. by Lúcia Nagib, Cecília Mello (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009), pp. 448-460.
- , 'Whose Revolution: The Subject of *Kuhle Wampe* (1932)', in *Weimar Cinema*, ed. by Noah Isenberg (New York: Columbia University Press, 2009), pp.311-330.

- , 'The Rhetoric of the Image: Slatan Dudov and Bertolt Brecht's *Kuhle Wampe or Who Owns the World?*', in *German Cinema: Texts in Context* (Detroit, Michigan: Wayne State University Press, 1995), pp.34-48.
- , 'Political Cinema as Oppositional Practice', in *The German Cinema Book*, ed. by Tim Bergfelder, Erica Carter and Deniz Göktürk (London: BFI, 2002), pp.165-172.
- Smith, Murray, 'The Logic and Legacy of Brechtianism', in *Post-Theory: Reconstructing Film Studies*, ed. by David Bordwell, Noël Carroll, (Wisconsin, London: The University of Wisconsin Press, 1996), pp.130-148.
- Swales, Martin, "'Theatre that Shows....'? Reflections on Brecht's Importance as Dramatist', in "Verwisch Die Spuren!": *Bertolt Brecht's Work and Legacy: A Reassessment*, ed. by Robert Gillet and Godela Weiss- Sussex (Amsterdam, New York: Rodopi, 2008), pp.49-54.
- Tatlow, Antony, 'Ghosts in the House of Theory: Brecht and the Unconscious', in *The Brecht Yearbook* 24 (1999), pp. 1-13.
- Walsh, Martin, *The Brechtian Aspect of Radical Cinema*, ed. by Keith Griffiths (London: BFI, 1981).
- Wollen, Peter, 'Ontology and Materialism in Film', in *Screen*, 17:1 (1976), pp.7-23.
- , 'Godard and Counter-Cinema: *Vent d'Est*', in *Readings and Writings: Semiotic Counter Strategies* (London: Verso, 1982), pp.79-91. Originally published in *Afterimage*, 4:1 (1972).
- Wright, Elizabeth, *Postmodern Brecht* (London, New York: Routledge 1989).

### **Critical and General Works**

- Adorno, Theodor, 'The Essay As Form', trans. by Bob Hullot-Kentor and Frederic Will in *New German Critique*, 32:2 (1984), pp.151-171.
- Alter, Jean, Chapter 1 'Reference and Performance', in *A Sociosemiotic Theory of Theatre* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1990).
- , 'From Text to Performance: Semiotics of Theatricality', in *Poetics Today*, 2:3 (1981), pp.113-139.
- Althusser, Louis, 'Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses (Notes Towards an Investigation)', in *Essays on Ideology*, trans. by Ben Brewster (London: Verso, 1976), pp.1-60.

- Artaud, Antonin, 'Theatre and the Plague', in *Artaud on Theatre*, ed. and trans. by Claude Schumacher and Brian Singleton (London: Methuen, 1989), pp.127-131.
- Baudrillard, Jean, 'The Precession of Simulacra', in *Simulacra and Simulation*, trans. by Sheila Faria Glaser (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1994), pp.1-42.
- , 'History: A Retro Scenario', in *Simulacra and Simulation*, trans. by Sheila Faria Glaser (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1994) pp.43-49.
- , 'Requiem for the Media', in *For a Critique of the Political Economy of the Sign*, trans. by Charles Levin (Saint Louis: Telos Press, 1981), pp.164-184.
- Bazin, André, 'The Ontology of the Photographic Image', in *What is Cinema? Vol. I*, ed. and trans. by Hugh Gray (Berkeley, Los Angeles, London: University of California Press, 1971), pp.9-16.
- , 'An Aesthetic of Reality: Neorealism', in *What is Cinema? Volume II*, ed. and trans. by Hugh Gray (Berkeley, Los Angeles, London: University of California Press, 1971), pp. 16-40.
- Benjamin, Walter, 'Theses on the Philosophy of History', trans. by Harry Zorn, in *Illuminations*, ed. by Hannah Arendt (London: Pimlico, 1999), pp.245-255.
- , 'The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction', trans. by Harry Zorn, in *Illuminations*, ed. by Hannah Arendt (London: Pimlico, 1999), pp.211-244.
- Branigan, Edward, *Projecting a Camera: Language Games in Film Theory* (London, New York: Routledge, 2006).
- Buck-Morss, Susan, 'Revolutionary Time: The Vanguard and the Avant-Garde', in *Perception and Experience in Modernity*, ed. by H. Geyer Ryan, P. Koopman, and K. Ynterna (Amsterdam, New York: Rodopi 2002), pp.210-225.
- , 'Walter Benjamin: Revolutionary Writer (I)' in *New Left Review*, 128:1 (1981), pp. 50-75.
- Burch, Noël, *Theory of Film Practice*, trans. by Helen R. Lane Princeton, (New Jersey: Princeton University Press 1981).
- Butler, Judith, 'Performative Acts and Gender Construction: An Essay in Phenomenology and Feminist Theory', in *Performance: Critical Concepts in Literary and Cultural Studies*, ed. by Philip Auslander Volume IV, (London, New York: Routledge, 2003), pp.97-110.

- Callinicos, Alex, *Theories and Narratives: Reflections on the Philosophy of History* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1995).
- Carlson, Marvin, *Performance: A Critical Introduction* (London, New York: Routledge, 1996).
- Chatman, Seymour, *Story and Discourse: Narrative Structure in Fiction and Film* (Ithaca, London: Cornell University Press), 1980).
- Chion, Michel, *The Voice in Cinema*, trans. by Claudia Gorbman (New York: Columbia University Press, 1999).
- Conley, Tom, 'Cinema and its Discontents: Jacques Rancière and Film Theory', in *Substance*, 34:3 (2005), pp.96-106.
- Cook, Pam, *Screening the Past. Memory and Nostalgia in Cinema* (London: Routledge, 2005).
- Debord, Guy, *The Society of the Spectacle*, trans. by Donald Nicholson-Smith (New York: Zone Books, 1995).
- Del Rio, Elena, *Deleuze and the Cinemas of Performance: Powers of Affection* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2008).
- Deleuze, Gilles, *Cinema 2: the Time Image*, trans. by Hugh Tomlison and Robert Galeta (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1989).
- Derrida, Jacques, *Spectres of Marx: the State of the Debt, the Work of Mourning and the New International*, trans. by Peggy Kamuf (New York, London: Routledge, 1994).
- , 'Signature, Event, Context', in *Limited Inc*, trans. by Samuel Weber (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1977), pp.1-24.
- Eagleton, Terry, *Ideology: An Introduction* (London, New York: Verso, 1991).
- Eisenstein, Sergei, 'The Dramaturgy of Film Form (The Dialectical Approach to Film Form)', in *S.M. Eisenstein: Selected Works Volume I*, ed. and trans. by Richard Taylor (London, Indianapolis, Bloomington: BFI and Indiana University Press, 1988), pp.61-80.
- Elsaesser, Thomas, *European Cinema: Face to Face with Hollywood* (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2005).
- , and Hagener, Malte, *Film Theory: An Introduction Through the Senses* (London, New York: Routledge, 2010).

- , 'World Cinema: Realism, Evidence, Presence', in *Realism and the Audiovisual Media*, ed. by Lúcia Nagib, Cecília Mello (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009), pp.3-19.
- , 'The Irresponsible Signifier or "The Gamble with History": Film Theory or Cinema Theory', in *New German Critique*, 40:1 (1987), pp.65-89.
- Finter, Helga, 'Antonin Artaud and the Impossible Theatre: the Legacy of the Theatre of Cruelty', in *Theatre Drama Review*, 41:4 (1997), pp.15-40.
- Forbes, Jil, and Street, Sarah, 'Ideology and Aesthetics' in *European Cinema an Introduction* (New York: Palgrave, 2000), pp.26-52.
- Genette, Gérard, *Narrative Discourse*, trans. by Jane E. Lewin (Oxford: Basil Blackwell: 1980).
- Harvey, David, *The Condition of Postmodernity: An Inquiry Into the Origins of Cultural Change* (Cambridge, Oxford: Blackwell, 1990).
- , *A Brief History of Neoliberalism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005).
- Hansen, Miriam Bratu, Introduction to Siegfried Kracauer *Theory of Film* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1997), pp.vii-xlv.
- Jameson, Fredric, *Postmodernism or the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1991).
- , *The Prison House of Language: A Critical Account of Structuralism and Russian Formalism* (Princeton, Chichester: Princeton University Press, 1972).
- , 'Reflections in Conclusion', in *Aesthetics and Politics*, ed. by Ronald Taylor (London: Verso, 1977), pp.196-213.
- Herold, Anna, 'The Future of Digital Cinema in Europe: A Legal Challenge for the EU?', in *Convergence: The International Journal of Research into New Media Technologies*, 9:4 (2003), pp.99-118.
- Hoesterey, Ingeborg, *Pastiche: Cultural Memory in Art, Film and Literature* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2001).
- Kaes, Anton, *From Hitler to Heimat: the Return of History as Film* (Cambridge, Massachusetts, London: Harvard University Press, 1989).
- Kellner, Hans, 'Beautifying the Nightmare: The Aesthetics of Postmodern Historiography', in *Strategies*, 4:5 (1991), pp.289-313.
- Kouvaros, George, *Where Does It Happen? John Cassavetes and Cinema at the Breaking Point* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2004).

- Kozloff, Sarah, *Invisible Storytellers: Voice-Over Narrators in American Fiction Film* (Berkeley, Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1988),
- Kracauer, Siegfried, 'Caligari', in *The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari: Texts, Contexts, Histories*, ed. and trans. by Mike Budd (New Brunswick, London: Rutgers University Press, 1990), pp.242-255.
- Kress, Gunther, van Leeuwen, Theo, *Reading Images: The Grammar of Visual Design* (London, New York: Routledge, 2007).
- Lambek, Michael, 'The Past Imperfect: Remembering As Moral Practice', in *Tense Past: Cultural Essays in Trauma and Memory*, ed. by Paul Antze and Michael Lambek (London, New York: Routledge, 1996), pp.235-254.
- Lehmann, Hans-Thies, *Postdramatic Theatre*, trans. by Karen Jürs-Munby (London, New York: Routledge, 2006).
- Lyotard, Jean- François, 'Answering the Question: What is Postmodernism?', trans. by Régis Durand, in *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1984), pp.71-85.
- , 'Time Today', in *The Inhuman: Reflections on Time*, trans. by Geoffrey Bennington and Rachel Bowlby (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1991), pp.58-77.
- Malkin, Jeanette R., Chapter 1, 'Memory, History, Postmodern Drama', in *Memory-Theater and Postmodern Drama* (Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 1999), pp.17-36.
- Manovich, Lev, Chapter 6 'What is Cinema?' in *The Language of the New Media* (Cambridge, Massachusetts, London: MIT Press, 2001), pp.286-308.
- Margulies, Ivone, Introduction: Chantal Akerman's Films: the Politics of the Singular', in *Nothing Happens: Chantal Akerman's Hyperrealist Everyday* (Durham, London: Duke University Press, 1996), pp.1-20.
- , 'John Cassavetes: Amateur Director', in *The New American Cinema*, ed. by John Lewis (Durham, London: Duke University Press, 1998), pp.275-306.
- Marx Karl and Engels Friedrich, *The German Ideology*, trans. by W. Lough, ed. by C.J. Arthur (London: Lawrence and Wishart, 1970).
- Metz, Christian, 'The Impersonal Enunciation, or the Site of Film (In the Margin of Recent Works on Enunciation in Cinema)', trans. by Béatrice Durand-Sendrail and Kristen Brookes, in *New Literary History*, 22:3 (1991), pp.747-772.

- Mulvey, Laura, 'Passing Time: Reflections on Cinema from a New Technological Age', in *Screen*, 45:2 (2004), pp.141-155.
- Naremore, James, 'American Film Noir: The History of an Idea', in *Film Quarterly*, 49:2 (1995), pp.12-28.
- , 'Film and the Performance Frame', in *Film Quarterly*, 38:2 (1984), pp.8-15.
- Petric, Vlada, 'Dziga Vertov as a Theorist', in *Cinema Journal*, 18:1 (1978), pp.29- 44.
- Peucker, Brigitte, 'Violence and Affect: Haneke's Modernist Melodramas', in *The Material Image: Art and the Real in Film* (Stanford, California: Stanford University Press, 2007), pp.129-158.
- , Chapter 3 'Incorporation: Images and the Real', in *Incorporating Images: Film and the Rival Arts* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1995), pp.104-167.
- Phelan, Peggy, *Unmarked: The Politics of Performance* (London: Routledge, 1993).
- Rancière, Jacques, *The Politics of Aesthetics*, trans. by Gabriel Rockhill (London, New York: Continuum, 2004).
- , *The Emancipated Spectator*, trans. by Gregory Elliott (London: Verso, 2009).
- , *The Future of the Image*, trans. by Gregory Elliott (London, New York: Verso, 2007).
- Renov, Michael, 'History And/As Autobiography: The Essayistic in Film and Video', in *Framework: A Journal of Images and Culture*, 2:3 (1989), pp. 6-13.
- Rodowick, David Norman, *The Crisis of Political Modernism* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press).
- Schneider, Rebecca, *The Explicit Body in Performance* (London: Routledge, 1997).
- Schrader, Paul, 'Notes on Film Noir', in *Movies and Mass Culture*, ed. by John Belton, (London: Athlone, 1996), pp.153-170.
- Standing, Guy, *The Precariat: The New Dangerous Class* (London: Bloomsbury, 2011).
- Vertov, Dziga, *Kino-Eye: The Writings of Dziga Vertov*, trans. by Kevin O'Brien, ed. by Annette Michelson, (Berkeley, Los Angeles, London: University of California Press: 1984).
- Wayne, Mike, 'Introduction', in *Understanding Film: Marxist Perspectives*, ed. by Mike Wayne (London: Pluto Press, 2005), pp.1-33.
- Weber, Samuel, *Theatricality as Medium* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2004).
- Wheeler, Britta B, 'Negotiating Deviance and Normativity: Performance Art, Boundary Transgressions and Social Change', in *Performance: Critical Concepts in Literary and Cultural Studies*, ed. by Philip Auslander (London, New York: Routledge, 2009), pp.269-288.

White, Hayden, 'The Modernist Event', in *The Persistence of History: Cinema, Television, and the Modern Event*, ed. by Vivian Sobchack (New York, London: Routledge, 1996), pp.17-38.

### **Unpublished Works**

Koutsourakis, Angelos, 'Interview with Lars von Trier' 12 November 2010.

—, 'Interview with Alexander Kluge' 29 March 2011.

Lubecker, Nikolaj, 'Lars von Trier's *Dogville*: A Feel-Bad Film'. This article appears in the forthcoming collection of essays *The New Extremism in Cinema: From France to Europe*, ed. by Tanya C Horeck and Tina Kendall (in press).

Redvall, Eva Novrup, 'Encouraging Artistic Risk-taking Through Film Policy: The Case of New Danish Screen', in *Film and Risk*, ed. by Mette Hjort (in press).

