

AESTHETICS AND DEPRESSION IN LARS VON TRIER'S CINEMA

CARLOS RUIZ CARMONA

MARCO PEREIRA CAMPOS

FROM ART AND DEPRESSION TO LARS VON TRIER'S EXPERIENCE AND MOTIFS

According to Alain Ehrenberg (2009: 8), depression is a very serious medical illness that negatively affects how you feel, think and act. Depression causes feelings of sadness, pain, and a general loss of interest or pleasure in activities you once enjoyed. It can also lead to feelings of worthlessness or guilt and can trigger a tendency towards self-punishment and provoke suicidal thoughts. During the 1960s and 1970s, self-liberation gained currency as a countercultural movement and it was in this period that public awareness about depression and other mental illnesses began to spread. Since the 1960s, the popularity of psychoanalysis has grown exponentially and depression has come to be recognised as part of the modern individual's constant struggle to achieve self-understanding (Callahan

& Berrios, 2004). Modern society offers the individual freedom of choice, but "internal insecurity [is] the price of this liberation" (Ehrenberg, 2009: 12). Depression is one of the most widespread illnesses of the new millennium, affecting millions of people of all ages and genders all over the world.

Depression has become a key theme in many works of art, from paintings of renowned artists such as Francis Bacon or Paula Rego to music like Chopin's *Prelude in E Minor (Op. 28, No. 4, I)*, and literature such as Jean Paul Sartre's *Nausea* (1938). Recent years have seen a proliferation of art works dealing with, exploring or motivated by depression. The aesthetics of depression has also been explored by numerous scholars. In *The Aesthetics of Disengagement*, Christine Ross points to performance and video art where "subjects are imprisoned in time; unable to learn from their failures, self-absorbed, and disengaged

from the other” (Ross, 2006: xvi) and analyses works by artists like Ken Lum, Ugo Rondinone, Vanessa Beecroft and Douglas Gordon. Cinema is no exception, and the representation of the condition in film has varied according to its perception and evolution in the psychiatric field. After the end of World War II in 1945, the need for better diagnoses and treatments became urgent due to the exponential rise in the number of patients suffering from depression (Callahan & Berrios, 2004). The war had devastated Europe and plunged its society into a pessimistic existential crisis. This post-war trauma is in fact a subject in the early films of von Trier, whose academic short films include the despicable Nazi as a recurring motif.

VON TRIER’S FILMS SUBVERT THE CONVENTIONS OF THE MELODRAMA GENRE, WITH AN EMOTIONAL CHARGE ALWAYS ON THE VERGE OF A MENTAL BREAKDOWN

Lars von Trier has frequently spoken openly about several traumatic episodes in his life that influenced his interest in depression. It is no secret that the director has wrestled with anxiety, phobias and bouts of depression from a very young age. In several interviews he has blamed his socialist mother for a lack of parental guidance, leaving him to make his own decisions and create his own rules (Björkman, 2005). Peter Schepelern (2015), a former professor of von Trier’s, suggests in an interview with the filmmaker that just as Flaubert was *Madame Bovary*, it could be said that von Trier is his female characters. For instance, Justine’s vulnerability and depression in *Melancholia* (Lars von Trier, 2011) are clearly a reflection of the director’s own struggles. In that same interview, von Trier himself shares that throughout his childhood he be-

lieved that when he grew up all his fears would go away, but he was wrong. “It exploded even more,” he explains. “That was such a disappointment. An enormous disappointment” (Schepelern, 2015). After this realisation, the director spent many years in therapy and on medication for his anxiety and depression, but in 2007 he sank even deeper. “I was just lying, crying, for a week, just staring at the wall. I couldn’t get up. I was so afraid. Fear is hell. It’s really hell. The worst” (Heath, 2011). A slow recovery followed and while still very fragile he made the film *Antichrist* (Lars von Trier, 2009). To deal with his condition, the director has often resorted to psychotherapy and medication, maintaining an intimate relationship with them that is expressed in his films in both the narrative and the aesthetics; the hypnosis scenes in *Epidemic* (Lars von Trier, 1987), *Antichrist* and *Melancholia* are reflections of his experience with depression.

Trauma is a recurring motif in von Trier’s films, and while the trauma/depression relationship is not linear, it is clear that the traumatic event is a catalyst for the character’s depressive episodes. This happens to She in *Antichrist*, after her son’s death, while in *Melancholia*, Justine suffers from depression but there is no specific reference to a particular traumatic event. The reactive depression of She contrasts with the existential depression of Justine.

Von Trier’s films subvert the conventions of the melodrama genre, with an emotional charge always on the verge of a mental breakdown. In *Antichrist*, a psychological break with reality is suggested in She’s violent psychotic episodes. Similarly, social and cultural conventions are deconstructed, inviting debate and, above all, interrogating our perception of the world. Von Trier places his characters in a game between those who accept suffering as their natural fate—the immediate reality of their lives—and those who suffer existentially, alienated from the everyday world.

THE AESTHETICS OF DEPRESSION IN LARS VON TRIER'S CINEMA

Depression as a central and pan-filmic theme in Trier's career has been studied and analysed not from an aesthetic point of view but from a philosophical perspective, focusing on ethical and moral issues, and from a narrative point of view through a cultural and social contextualisation of the disease. It is for this reason that we need to understand how von Trier represents depression through filmic discourse. Can we in fact assume that von Trier's own personal experience with depression informs his films' aesthetics? Is it possible to identify a specific style to represent depression? Does this audiovisual treatment vary in each film or has it remained consistent throughout his career?

Although we have in fact conducted a stylistic and thematic review of his entire filmography, for the purpose of this paper we have selected three films, focusing specifically on two scenes from each film, to argue that von Trier's cinematic discourse is marked by a representation of depression. The three films chosen are: *Breaking the Waves* (Lars von Trier, 1996), *Antichrist* and *Dogville* (Lars von Trier, 2003). According to our analysis, *Antichrist* and *Breaking the Waves* are the two films that contain most of von Trier's essential cinematic elements for the representation of depression. *Dogville*, however, although it also includes recurrent elements from previous films, constitutes an exception in its representation of depression because it introduces new stylistic elements never seen before in his filmography. This exception reinforces the suggestion of a particular stylistic pattern in von Trier's filmmaking.

Our analysis includes a detailed discussion of how the filmmaker uses light, composition, colour, diegetic and non-diegetic sound, and editing to represent depression. The scenes analysed highlight moments of fragility in a character dealing with an oppressive and above all incomprehen-

sible context. In this sense, each scene evokes a psychological failure of the character to deal with the situation within the limits of her abilities in some moments and a reaction of exasperated rebellion against the surrounding world in others. The scenes are analysed by contextualising their place in the narrative, identifying elements of the *mise-en-scène*, and examining the characters' emotional reactions.

BREAKING THE WAVES: THE EMOTIONAL PROXIMITY OF DEPRESSION

The first scene analysed, Jan's departure (00:34:20 to 00:37:30), concludes the second chapter of *Breaking the Waves*. It is the moment showing the couple Jan and Bess's first farewell, when Jan leaves by helicopter to go work on an offshore oil rig. The scene demonstrates Bess's emotional fragility, as she panics and faints in the arms of her sister-in-law Dodo. Her reaction hints at something that she seems to know already—that without Jan, her life will not be happy again. Jan's departure prompts Bess to keep a calendar to mark his return; this calendar is the subject of the second scene analysed, which takes place between 00:46:20 and 00:48:20 in the third chapter. Bess's depression, which worsens over time, triggers another impulsive reaction: her panic over Jan's departure gives way to rebellion in reaction to the lack of understanding of those around her. Bess is at her mother's house when Dodo arrives from work and is promptly confronted with the disappearance of the calendar. Jan's departure takes place outside, in broad daylight, where the helicopter takes off. This large, empty space is marked by the presence of the cars of the people who, like Bess, are saying goodbye to the departing workers. The scene uses natural lighting that accentuates the greyness of the day, blended in the *mise-en-scène* with neutral, unsaturated colours of brown, beige and black. The images have a low contrast, resulting in a washed-out



Figure 1. Jan's departure frame sequence II, *Breaking the Waves* (Lars von Trier, 1996) © Zentropa

appearance. There is an extensive use of medium shots and closeups, which vary between subjective and objective angles, and there are no static shots as the scene is filmed entirely with a hand-held camera. The editing of this scene uses jump cuts, which intensify Bess's psychological confusion and convey a feeling of extreme unease. The scene uses only diegetic sound and it is important to note the increasing intensity of the helicopter's rotors, whose whirring accompanies Bess's panic; Jan's departure is thus given special significance (Figure 1).

The scene dealing with Bess's calendar, in contrast, takes place almost entirely indoors, at Bess's house, where she lives with her mother and Dodo. The mise-en-scène conveys a sense of discomfort and disharmony, as metaphors for her depressed state. The limited natural light in the scene, which enters through the living room window necessitates artificial lighting, provided by small lamps; yet the house is still dark. Neutral

tones, like beige, brown and black predominate, although there are also some red elements, such as the lamp and the plastic flowers on the windowsill that stand out in the image. However, similarly to the previous scene, the colour saturation is low. The contrast is more balanced despite the low clarity of the image. The frame sequence reinforces both the claustrophobic atmosphere and the discomfort and colourlessness resulting from the art direction (Figure 2).

In both scenes analysed, the stark mise-en-scène conveys a sense of realism and reflects the film's naturalistic, documentary aesthetic quality—in contrast to the frames dividing each chapter, in which the landscapes feature extremely saturated colours and a high contrast. The documentary aesthetic is also evident in the use of natural light, conveying the idea of a grey and dull world through the manipulation of the image quality. As shown in the scene of Jan's departure, the day is foggy, given the outdoor environment itself a neutral quality.

Figure 2. Bess's Calendar frame sequence II, *Breaking the Waves* (Lars von Trier, 1996) © Zentropa



THE APPARENT LACK OF AESTHETIC CONCERN LAYS VON TRIER'S FILMIC WORLD BARE AND FOREGROUNDS HUMAN FRAILTY

The interior spotlights are discreet, accentuating the realistic look of places such as Bess's mother's house and the village hospital. The colours are practically devoid of saturation and with few contrasting shades which, combined with the lack of image definition and excessive graininess, create a pastel appearance of faded neutral tones ranging from brown to beige and black. This is clear in both scenes, as in the first Jan's and Bess's beige and black jackets dominate the frame while in the second Dodo's black jacket stands out against the washed-out, almost empty beige walls (Figure 3).

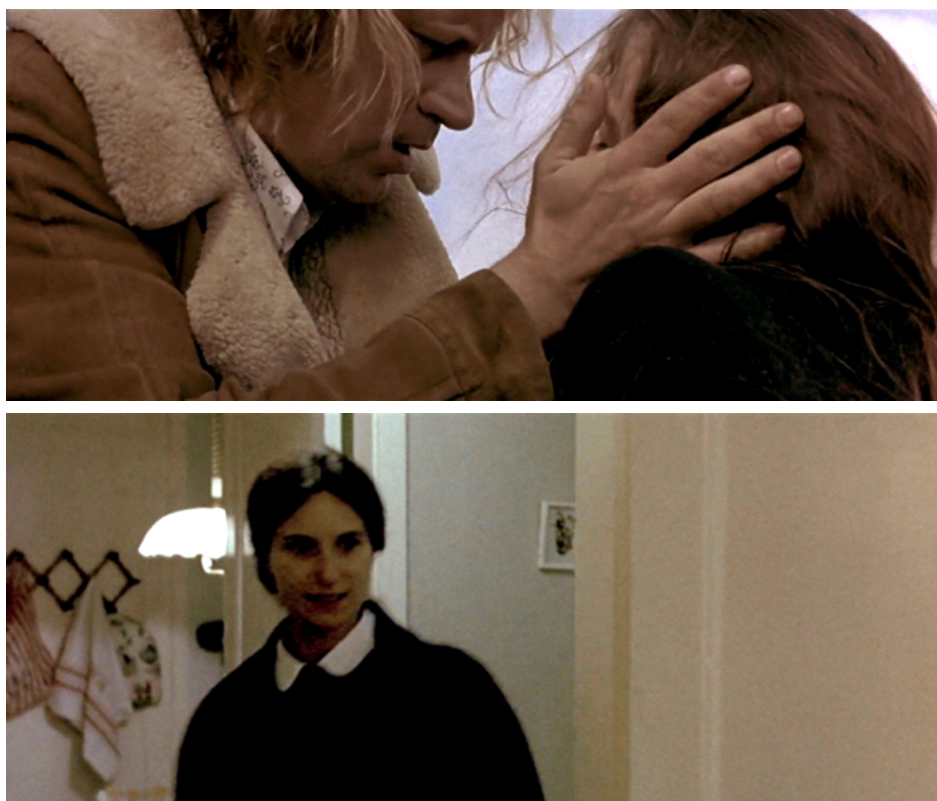
The apparent lack of aesthetic concern lays von Trier's filmic world bare and foregrounds human frailty, focusing entirely on the characters' emotions. Medium shots and closeups convey a sense of enclosure, a literal expression of what is not translatable into words, most prominently in the interior scenes. Conversely, the constant variation in the first shots of the scene and the continuous movement of the handheld camera track the performance of each character, so that the action of one character leads to the reaction of the other. Like the first scene, in the calendar scene von Trier constructs the narrative using jump cuts and it is in this change between continuous action and ruptured action that the idea of illusion is constantly deconstructed.

Paradoxically, this immerses the spectator much more in the emotional world of his characters, especially Bess. In Jan's departure, the crescendo created by the deafening sound of the propellers is abruptly cut off by the vibrant music that accompanies each chapter. The music contrasts with the dramatic intensity of each scene and evokes a world that is distant and even forbidden to Bess. The aesthetic intimacy and harshness establish a new context representative of depression by highlighting the humanity of the characters; as such, these aesthetic qualities exemplify how von Trier represents depression.

ANTICHRIST: THE EXPRESSIONIST REPRESENTATION OF DEPRESSION

The aesthetic of depression in *Antichrist* is substantially different from the one in *Breaking the Waves*, and these differences are quite evident

Figure 3. Jan's departure and Bess's Calendar frame sequence comparison, *Breaking the Waves* (Lars von Trier, 1996) © Zentropa



in the stylised slow-motion black and white prologue. The first scene analysed, in the hospital (00:06:28 to 00:11:16), takes place during the first chapter, entitled “Grief (Mourning)”, and follows the tragedy of the death of She’s son. She lies in bed at a mental hospital recovering from the traumatic event. Her slow, slurred speech shows that she is under the influence of heavy sedatives while discussing the details of her treatment with her husband, He, who marks out a position of domination when he declares that he will be treating She outside the hospital. Thus, two important aspects of depression are established: the traumatic impact on She, expressed by her physical and mental devastation, and her self-blame for what has happened. This idea of guilt is taken to the extreme in the story, especially in the second scene analysed, “Self-mutilation” (01:27:33 to 01:29:07), which takes place during the fourth chapter, titled “The Three Beggars”. In a cabin in Eden, where She worked on her doctoral dissertation, He is passed out and She picks up a pair of scissors and cuts her clitoris, a visceral representation of her depression, which transforms psychological distress into self-inflicted physical pain.

In the hospital, the set is a room with only one bed with white sheets and a small bedside table.

The minimalism of the art direction makes it possible to highlight the bottles of pills, the glass of water and the flower vase. The lighting is artificial, combining the warm light of the lamp, and the cold light of the ceiling illumination. The intensity of this lighting enhances the high contrast of the image together with the saturated colours, very different from the faded tones in *Breaking the Waves*. The image has shades of blue and grey, giving the black that represents the darkness of depression a more intense appearance. Figure 4 contrasts two scenes of extreme suffering for the female characters in *Antichrist* and *Breaking the Waves*, highlighting the differences in the visual representations of depression described above. She’s grief can arguably be compared to Bess’s traumatised reaction to her husband’s departure (Figure 4). As in *Breaking the Waves*, von Trier focuses on the characters’ emotions, using medium shots and closeups filmed with a hand-held camera. The only exception is in the slow and steady tracking shot of the background, showing plant stems in water, which conveys a supernatural aura of suffering. At the same time, jump cuts compress the action, limiting our view of the emotional reactions of the characters. The scene’s final shots are marked by overlapping images: the stems of the plants blend with the letter and all

Figure 4. In the hospital bed and Jan’s departure frame comparison, *Antichrist* (2009) and *Breaking the Waves* (Lars von Trier, 1996)
© Zentropa



of this is accompanied by a non-diegetic, droning bass sound that drowns out the diegetic noises of the room.

In “Self-mutilation”, similar to the hospital scene, the setting, which is revealed to be the floor of the cabin, is stripped of any decorative elements, underscoring the emptiness of the space. The artificial lighting is characterised by warm tones and low colour saturation. The prologue’s monochrome flashbacks, which are intercut with scenes in the film’s present, have a high contrast. The closeups of She’s expression are intercut with her actions in a cropped frame. The handheld camera moves wildly, blurring the image with multiple zooms in and out. In contrast, the slow-motion closeups of the flashbacks are completely stable. Presented together in the montage, the rapid and abrupt shots of chaotic action in the present contrast with the slow pace of the flashbacks in black and white, which convey a certain stillness (Figure 5). The diegetic sound of the scene underscores the hardness of some objects, such as the scissors or the wood of the cabin, and intensifies the character’s screams. However, there is very little diegetic sound and, again, it is the non-diegetic sound of droning bass that conveys the dark, abstract atmosphere of the suffering inherent in depression.

While in *Breaking the Waves* von Trier approaches depression through scenic realism, in *Antichrist* he resorts to a metaphorical and expressionist treatment. As noted above, the objects on the bedside table in the hospital scene evoke the central themes of the narrative: depression and nature. Similarly, in “Self-mutilation”, the virtual emptiness of the cabin in Eden, combined with the high contrast and colour saturation, enhances the climactic symbolism of the scene. The film’s prologue stands out for its stylised imagery, with the use of fixed black and white shots and slow motion, and it contrasts with the following chapters, which show traces of the naturalistic aesthetic adopted in *Breaking the Waves*.



Figure 5. Self-mutilation frame sequence, *Antichrist* (Lars von Trier, 2009) © Zentropa

An aura of depression is created with the use of blue and green tones framed in black. The colours are quite saturated, in contrast to the pastel effect of *Breaking the Waves*, evoking an expressionist quality reminiscent of the Europa trilogy—*The Element of Crime* (Forbrydelsens element, Lars von Trier, 1984), *Epidemic* and *Eu-*

**MORE THAN A FICTIONAL REALITY,
ANTICHRIST IS A METAPHOR, AS THE
USE OF COLOUR CREATES THE SETTING
FOR A PESSIMISTIC FABLE IN WHICH
DEPRESSION IS LYRICALLY EXPRESSED**

ropa (Lars von Trier, 1991)—or the miniseries *The Kingdom* (Riget, Lars von Trier, 1994).

More than a fictional reality, *Antichrist* is a metaphor, as the use of colour creates the setting for a pessimistic fable in which depression is lyrically expressed. Trier's fascination with cinematic hypnosis comes into evidence again in an important transition in *Antichrist*, where He puts She into a trancelike state to prepare her for the trip to the cabin. This technique is reminiscent of such films as *The Element of Crime*, where the protagonist himself is under hypnosis, and *Europa*, in which a voiceover "hypnotises" the protagonist and the audience. In *Antichrist* von Trier uses hypnosis to take us into a world that collides with reality. Closeups and the handheld camera convey the character's anxiety, while the saturated static images create an oneiric feeling, especially during the slow-motion sequences. This dreamlike quality evokes a sensory element of the unconscious; von Trier claims that he literally "dreamed up" various images in the film, many of which came to him in Shamanistic trances (von Trier, 2009).

The fluctuation of colour tones in the "Self-mutilation" scene, in which warm tones predominated by brown and beige shift to sepia, stands in contrast to the cold, grey blues in the hospital scene. Flashbacks of the child falling out of the window in the prologue perpetuate the memory of that event with the intensity of black and white. This chromatic duality evokes a feeling of deep sadness that pervades the narrative. The handheld camera's uneven movements and the disorienting jump cuts used in *Breaking the Waves* reflect an approach that is markedly different

from *Antichrist*'s abstract style: the hypnosis of stable shots depicts depression as something beyond the comprehensible.

The humanism evident in *Breaking the Waves*, and in *Dancer in the Dark* (Lars von Trier, 2000) or even *Dogville*, seems overshadowed in *Antichrist* by a hostile world where the characters become puppets of their own fate. The slowing down of the action breaks the real time of the image and forces the viewer to experience She's suffering over the death of her son in agonising slow motion. There are still metaphorical images, almost frozen, which stand out because of the artificial light and the saturated and contrasted colours, combining with droning sounds to create a dismal atmosphere. Sound in the film alludes to human nature, like the organic functions of the human body, and to earthly phenomena, like the wind or falling acorns, sounds that are purposefully intensified to evoke alarm and hostility. Similarly, the bass tones convey urgency and anxiety, while vesting *Antichrist* with a supernatural aura.

**DOGVILLE: THE AESTHETICS OF ILLUSION
IN THE DEPRESSION SCENARIO**

Dogville is the first film in the incomplete USA-Land of Opportunities trilogy, also including *Manderlay* (Lars von Trier, 2005). With the main female character, Grace, von Trier breaks the martyr pattern to present a kind-hearted person tested by extreme situations of abuse that will culminate in her sadistic revenge. Throughout the narrative, Grace appears as a self-sacrificing, rather naive and innocent individual. Yet the sadistic vengeful finale reveals a character who takes pleasure in the suffering of others, and who even takes pride in taking part in a kind of primal retributive justice. Even so, the motifs of sacrifice, guilt, and the traumatic experience of the female character, as in previous narratives, are still present in this film.

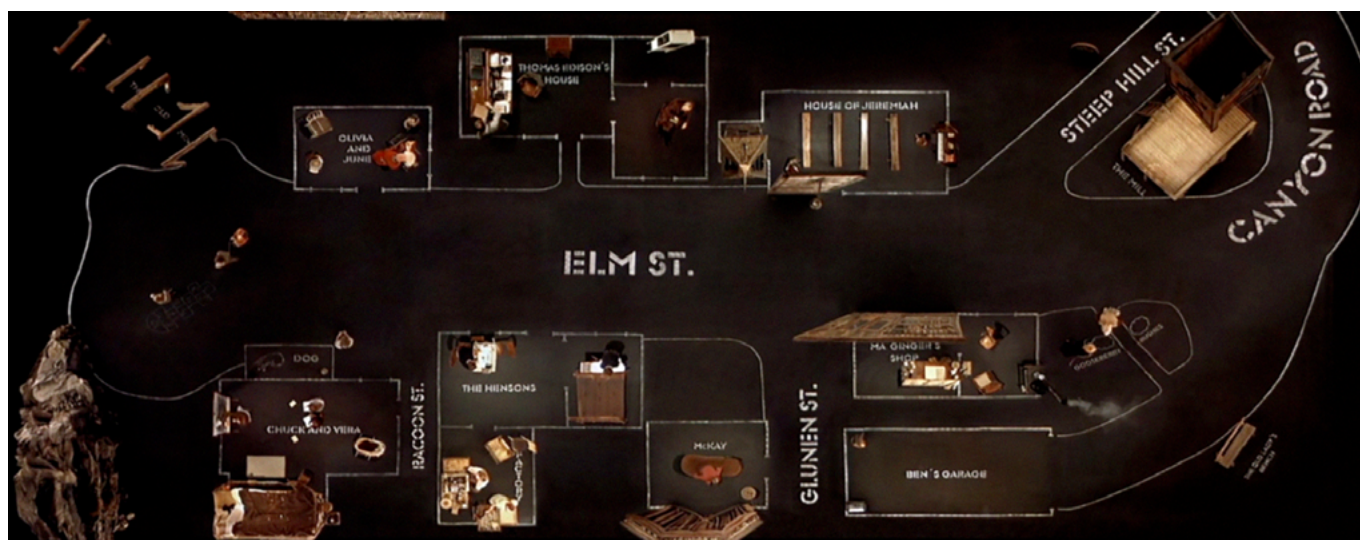


Figure 6. The town of Dogville, *Dogville* (Lars von Trier, 2003) © Zentropa

Grace finds a refuge in the town of Dogville, an unreal, anachronistic, archetypal space represented by a stage setting. Surrounded by black curtains to simulate night-time and white cloths to indicate daytime, the stage has a black floor marked by thick white lines instead of walls to allow the viewer to see all the actions (Figure 6). The idea of a privacy-deprived community is conveyed in a claustrophobic environment where Grace, who had sought freedom away from her father's abuse, confronts her psychological weakness. Her kindness and willingness to help the community, along with her self-blaming attitude, delay the psychological and physical abuse that will ultimately be inflicted on her by the apparently good and honest folks of the town. It is when Grace is mistaken for a crimi-

THE IDEA OF A PRIVACY-DEPRIVED COMMUNITY IS CONVEYED IN A CLAUSTROPHOBIC ENVIRONMENT WHERE GRACE, WHO HAD SOUGHT FREEDOM AWAY FROM HER FATHER'S ABUSE, CONFRONTS HER PSYCHOLOGICAL WEAKNESS. HER KINDNESS AND WILLINGNESS TO HELP THE COMMUNITY, ALONG WITH HER SELF-BLAMING ATTITUDE, DELAY THE PSYCHOLOGICAL AND PHYSICAL ABUSE THAT WILL ULTIMATELY BE INFLICTED ON HER BY THE APPARENTLY GOOD AND HONEST FOLKS OF THE TOWN

nal that the townspeople turn voracious and take advantage of her vulnerable situation. This vulnerability contrasts with that of the narratives of the other two films analysed above, however, as in *Dogville* the woman becomes submissive to social oppression.

In this way, depression is expressed in the character's inaction in response to her hostile environment, as seen in the first scene analysed, "The Violation of Grace" (01:31:58 and 01:36:33) in "Chapter 6: In which Dogville bares its teeth". Grace is sexually assaulted by one of the townspeople, Chuck, while the police question her whereabouts in the town. Grace refrains from screaming for fear of being arrested, and her fear gives Chuck strength and power. The setting contains a few objects related to the room, such as the beds and the crib (Fig-

ure 7). In the second scene analysed, “Grace’s Weight” (02:04:46 and 02:06:44), in Chapter 8, the stage represents Grace’s depression as a result of the physical and mental suffering caused by the community’s mistreatment of her. Grace’s impotence facilitates a routine of harassment, sexual assault, and physical and psychological torture, culminating in the construction by the townspeople of an anti-escape mechanism, an iron wheel made of elements belonging to each of them, such as the shop bell, the garden chains, and a small iron dog collar. Clearly influenced by Bertolt Brecht, the settings in *Dogville* have an extremely theatrical look in their representation of a 1920s American town. The physical world of this narrative is inside a studio, a place that is strange to the viewer but accepted as normal by the characters. The same setting serves as interior and exterior and it is the lines painted on the floor that clarify which is which. Elements such as the dog and the plants, both non-rational, are simply painted there but take on some importance at certain times in the narrative. The dog, whose name is simply DOG,

is the one that raises the alarm when Grace arrives in the village. In a symbolic moment at the end of the narrative, it becomes physically real, as if symbolising Grace’s own revival. The film’s aesthetics hearken back to the naturalism of *Breaking the Waves*, similar in purpose and concept but very different in formal terms. Stripped of cinematic spectacle, it also aims to focus the viewer’s attention on the characters and their emotions. While in *Breaking the Waves* the absence of props foregrounds the performance of the actors, *Dogville* takes this idea to more radical extremes. In Bess’s inner world, the director found a realm already in conflict with itself ; in contrast, in the small, secluded world of *Dogville* lurks a larger and more disturbing secret: human beings’ true characters, their perverse inclinations and twisted thoughts, hidden behind invisible walls. This is *Dogville*’s grand visual metaphor. The dramatic linearity characteristic of *Breaking the Waves* and *Antichrist* gives way to irony and irreverent sarcasm in this narrative, which confronts us with the true essence of human beings in von Trier’s eyes.

Figure 7. The violation of Grace frame sequence, *Dogville* (Lars von Trier, 2003) © Zentropa



In a fully controlled environment, artificial lighting is used literally and objectively: spotlights illuminate the action while simulating the town's electric lights or sunlight. The colour range, from brown to beige and white, is slightly more contrasted than in *Breaking the Waves*, but more balanced than the high contrast in *Antichrist*. In contrast to the interludes of *Breaking the Waves* and the hypnotic, slow-motion moments of *Antichrist*, *Dogville's* image saturation is low. Indeed, the film's various chapters reflect the lack of chromatic harmonisation in its aesthetic treatment. The handheld camera switches between mid-shots and closeups and includes wide shots with occasional zoom-ins and zoom-outs. The aesthetic and narrative construction of the film offers the viewer a sensory experience with natural elements present through sound or image manipulation (as in the case of fog). The influence of the Dogma 95 movement remains evident in the way of capturing the action and in the narrative editing. The aesthetic treatment of depression is somewhat different in *Dogville* but the same traumatic experience involving pain and suffering of a female body remains a recurrent theme throughout Lars von Trier's filmography. In other words, his cinema is characterised by the narrative representation of a cause or consequence of depression, although with aesthetic variations. Figure 8 shows an image of Grace lying after being raped, compared to an image of

She, also lying, moments before she cuts her own clitoris in *Antichrist* (Figure 8).

As in *Breaking the Waves* and *Antichrist*, the constant jump cuts reflect von Trier's interest in the emotions of his characters, exacerbating the emotional discomfort and violence of the actions and underlining *Dogville's* fragmented reality. The feeling of naturalism and realism provided by the handheld camera and the use of focus and blurring are in keeping with the aesthetic principles of Dogma 95. It could be argued that the camera reflects the emotional confusion and haziness of the characters through this blurring technique, as shown in the frame comparison in figure 9, where Grace's panic and stupefaction at the unpredictable, malevolent intentions of the townspeople in *Dogville* is contrasted with the moment of Bess's first sexual encounter with Jan in *Breaking the Waves* (Figure 9).

DOGVILLE'S UNIQUENESS LIES IN ITS CONSTANT ALLUSION TO THE FALSENESS OF CINEMA

In addition to lighting, sound is also used to represent the non-visible elements of the town. However, the aim of the realistic and naturalistic aesthetics is contradicted by the use of non-diegetic sound like narration to point out the hypocrisy

Figure 8. Frame comparison, *Dogville* (Lars von Trier, 2003) and *Antichrist* (Lars von Trier, 2009) © Zentropa





Figure 9. Frame comparison, *Dogville* (Lars von Trier, 2003) and *Breaking the Waves* (Lars von Trier, 1996) © Zentropa

of the people in the village. The film's setting becomes even more confusing and disturbing—with the sound of slamming doors, creaking hinges or the barking of the dog—when it conflicts with the notions of truth and deception that inform the characters' actions in this narrative. Viewers are torn between what they see (Grace's suffering), and what they hear, in a narration that takes apart the moral values of the townspeople. The physical and emotional violence gains more impact with the intensity of classical music. The dichotomy between what is real and what is imagined is evident, but it is the truth of events and the faithful portrayal of a sadistic and depraved society that brings the viewers closer to this world. Von Trier subverts his own pessimism, graphically simplifying the representation of depression: the lines that delimit spaces are the visual representation of the boundaries of goodness, truth, exploitation, or justice, changeable and adaptable to both literal

and metaphorical interpretation. *Dogville's* uniqueness lies in its constant allusion to the falseness of cinema through von Trier's choice of a studio as the only setting for the story.

LARS VON TRIER'S INTIMATE ARTISTIC APPROACH TO DEPRESSION

Von Trier's transgressive filmography presents a series of characters who have been ostracised by tyranny or by a misunderstanding of the world around them, which in a sense outlines his pessimistic view of the world—a representation that takes shape in a nihilistic discourse exploring new ways to objectify the subjective.

Breaking the Waves breaks with the expressionist form of von Trier's previous films and introduces a naturalistic aesthetic in keeping with the notion

of purity of cinema advocated in the Dogma 95 Manifesto (1995). This documentary style lays bare the filmic world of the narrative and highlights the emotions of its characters, favouring improvisation by the actors. Von Trier promotes a notion of technical recklessness by exploring the more human side of his characters, which highlights their frailty and brings the viewer closer to them. It is, however, a more positive and perhaps more sympathetic representation. In *Antichrist*, where the characters almost become puppets of fate in the face of the hostility of their world, the representation of depression is raised to a whole new level of pessimism, making it one of his darkest and most violent films. *Antichrist* raises metaphysical questions that challenge our understanding of the relationship between mental illness and a hostile universe and portrays the character's apparent inability to cope with sociocultural circumstances and suffering. The

expressionist aesthetic, which consists of black tones, saturated colours and metaphorical and surreal images, creates a symbolic context for the characters' depressing reality. This aesthetic brings the visuals of the Europa trilogy close to those of the television series *The Kingdom* or even his first short films *Nocturne* (Nyhterino, Lars von Trier, 1980) and *Image of Relief* (Befrielsesbilleder, Lars von Trier, 1982), in which the over-saturation and the use of colour filters, as well as the high contrasts and metaphorical images enhance the lyricism of the representation of depression. *Antichrist's* return to expressionism reveals a fluctuation in the aesthetics of depression throughout von Trier's filmography, which supports the idea that his depiction of depression is directly influenced by his personal experience with the condition. In both *Antichrist* and *Melancholia*, the action is marked by scenes with a naturalistic tone, although steeped in a clearly expressionist aesthetic, a hybrid state that is present in his subsequent films, *Nymphomaniac: Vol. I* (Lars von Trier, 2013) and *Nymphomaniac: Vol. II* (Lars von Trier, 2013), and more recently *The House that Jack Built* (Lars von Trier, 2018), despite the introduction of new stylistic approaches, such as archival footage or digital animation. The representation of depression in von Trier's cinema is therefore based on two primordial aesthetics, which occur either independently or in hybrid form. *Dogville* and *Manderlay* stand out for their aesthetic uniqueness, like the exception that confirms the rule. In a hypothetical setting, without divisions between spaces or a horizon, Lars von Trier represents depression by embracing the illusion of cinema, challenging viewers to immerse themselves in the falseness of the filmic world.

The ideological ambivalences explored in von Trier's trilogies operate not only as reflections of his own traumas but also as indicators of his emotional state. The two aesthetic poles of the representation of depression offer different un-

derstandings of the impact of the disease on the director, as a personal artistic expression, and on the viewer, as an integral part of the cinematic experience. Naturalistic aesthetics offer a more positive side, an optimism on the part of the filmmaker that perhaps suggests hope; in contrast, expressionist aesthetics represent the inevitability of suffering, the useless struggle of pure goodness that is overwhelmed by inherent cruelty, cynicism, and human futility: it is a dark depiction of human existence and a condemnation of humanity.

THE IDEOLOGICAL AMBIVALENCES EXPLORED IN LARS VON TRIER'S TRILOGIES OPERATE NOT ONLY AS REFLECTIONS OF HIS OWN TRAUMAS BUT ALSO AS INDICATORS OF HIS EMOTIONAL STATE

Lars von Trier, born in 1956, is one the great artists whose work is in part an inheritance of the chaos and suffering caused by the Second World War. This tragic event influenced and shaped the pessimistic world view of painters, writers and, most notably perhaps, filmmakers, whose work expresses the social, economic and individual impact of such horrors. Von Trier has maintained a consistent representation of depression throughout his career and his unique approach to the condition constitutes a coherent expression of his experience with the illness that seems to reflect many traumatic events in his life. This close relationship with the mental illness and its cinematic expression makes Lars von Trier one of the most important contemporary directors in the aesthetics of depression in cinema and in art, standing out for his profound, visceral analysis of the human psyche. ■

REFERENCES

- Björkman, S. (2005). *Trier on von Trier*. London: Faber & Faber.
- Callahan, C. M., Berrios, G. E. (2004). *Reinventing Depression: a History of the Treatment of Depression in Primary Care, 1940-2004*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Ehrenberg, A. (2009). *The Weariness of the Self: Diagnosing the History of Depression in the Contemporary age*. Montreal: University of McGill-Queen.
- Heath, C. (2011, September 19). Lars Attacks! GQ. Retrieved from <https://www.gq.com/story/lars-von-trier-gq-interview-october-2011?currentPage=1>.
- Ross, C. (2006). *The Aesthetics of Disengagement: Contemporary Art and Depression*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.
- Schepelern, P. (2015, April 22). *Lars von Trier temadag*. Copenhagen: Kobenhavns Universitet. Retrieved from <https://video.ku.dk/video/11501436/lars-von-trier-temadag>.
- Von Trier, L. (2009, July 22). Personal communication.

AESTHETICS AND DEPRESSION IN LARS VON TRIER'S CINEMA

Abstract

Depression in Lars von Trier's cinema has been studied from a philosophical perspective, focusing on ethical and moral issues, and from a narrative point of view through a cultural and social contextualisation of the disease. This paper explores how von Trier represents depression through his filmic discourse. Is it possible to identify a specific stylistic pattern in his representation of depression? Is his treatment of the theme different in each film or has it remained consistent throughout his career? Can we assume that von Trier's personal experience with depression informs his films' aesthetics?

Key words

Lars von Trier; Art and Depression; Cinema and Aesthetics; Naturalism; Expressionism.

Authors

Carlos Ruiz Carmona is a filmmaker, researcher and professor, with a PhD in Science and Technology of the Arts, specializing in Cinema and Audiovisual (documentary). He is an assistant Professor at Universidade Católica Portuguesa, Escola das Artes do Porto, a researcher for CITAR (Centre for Research in Science and Technology of the Arts), and AIM Coordinator of the group Cinema, Música, Som e Linguagem. Contact: ccarmona@porto.ucp.pt.

Marco Pereira Campos is a Portuguese filmmaker and researcher, with a BA Hons. in Foreign Language and Culture from the School of Education at Politécnico de Oporto, and a Masters in Sound and Image from Universidade Católica Portuguesa, Escola das Artes do Porto. Contact: marcoapereiracampos@gmail.com.

Article reference

Ruiz Carmona, C., Pereira Campos, M. (2021). Aesthetics and Depression in Lars von Trier's Cinema. *L'Atalante. Revista de estudios cinematográficos*, 32, 177-192.

ESTÉTICA Y DEPRESIÓN EN EL CINE DE LARS VON TRIER

Resumen

La depresión en el cine de Lars von Trier se ha estudiado desde una perspectiva filosófica, centrándose en cuestiones éticas y morales, y desde un punto de vista narrativo a través de una contextualización cultural y social de la enfermedad. Este trabajo pretende analizar cómo von Trier representa la depresión a través de su discurso fílmico. ¿Es posible identificar un patrón específico en su estilo cinematográfico para representar la depresión? ¿Varía su tratamiento en cada película o se mantiene constante a lo largo de su carrera? ¿Podemos suponer que la experiencia personal de Trier con la depresión influye en la estética de sus películas?

Palabras clave

Lars von Trier; Arte y Depresión; Cine y Estética; Naturalismo; Expresionismo

Autores

Carlos Ruiz Carmona (Barcelona, 1968) es realizador, investigador y profesor. Doctor en Ciencias y Tecnología de las Artes, con especialización en Cine y Audiovisual (documental). Profesor Auxiliar de la Universidad Católica Portuguesa, Escola das Artes do Porto e investigador integrado de CITAR (Centro de Investigación en Ciencia y Tecnología de las Artes), coordina en AIM el grupo Cine, Música, Sonido y Lenguaje. Contacto: ccarmona@porto.ucp.pt.

Marco Pereira Campos (Viseu, 1989) es un cineasta e investigador portugués, licenciado en Lenguas y Culturas Extranjeras por la Escuela de Educación del Politécnico de Oporto, Máster en Imagen y Sonido de la Escuela de Artes de la Universidad Católica Portuguesa de Oporto. Contacto: marcoapereiracampos@gmail.com.

Referencia de este artículo

Ruiz Carmona, C., Pereira Campos, M. (2021). Estética y depresión en el cine de Lars von Trier. *L'Atalante. Revista de estudios cinematográficos*, 32, 177-192.

Edita / Published by



Licencia / License



ISSN 1885-3730 (print) / 2340-6992 (digital) DL V-5340-2003 WEB www.revistaatalante.com MAIL info@revistaatalante.com
